UNICEF’s input to the Special Rapporteur on the right to education’s thematic report to the Human Rights Council in June 2023

13 January 2023

# Assessing the achievements made by the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education over the last 25 years

1. In the past two decades, the global out-of-school rate decreased by 10 percentage points, with the largest improvements observed in West and Central Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa.[[1]](#footnote-2)
2. In the past 20 years, the number of out-of-school children of primary education age fell by 35 per cent, from 99 million in 2000 to 64 million in 2020.[[2]](#footnote-3)
3. The number of out-of-school girls worldwide dropped by 79 million between 1998 and 2018.[[3]](#footnote-4)Since 2000, some 75 million more children have been enrolled in pre-primary education, 89 million more children are enrolled in primary education and 138 million more in secondary education.[[4]](#footnote-5) However, enrollment does not guarantee learning.
4. Nearly two in three girls are enrolled in secondary school compared to one in two in 1998.[[5]](#footnote-6)

# Main challenges and crucial issues for the future

## Main challenges

### Learning Poverty

1. While globally nearly 90 per cent of children attend primary school, hundreds of millions are still not gaining basic skills by the end of their time there.
2. The latest estimates suggest nearly two-thirds of 10-year-olds (64.3 per cent) globally are unable to read and understand a simple text – a figure known as learning poverty. The world is in the depths of a learning crisis.
3. This learning crisis existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, with 2019 estimates suggesting over half of children globally were in learning poverty. Pandemic-related school closures exacerbated inequalities in education, worsening an already disastrous situation.
4. In 2019, before the pandemic hit, the learning poverty rate was already estimated at 57 per cent in low- and middle-income countries, and that in Sub-Saharan Africa it was 86 per cent. Since the onset of COVID-19, the school closures and disruptions caused by the pandemic have likely driven learning poverty rate much higher still. The 2022 simulations suggest global learning poverty in low- and middle-income countries has surged to an estimated 70 per cent.*[[6]](#footnote-7)*
5. This generation of students now risks losing $17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14 per cent of today’s global GDP, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures.
6. The [new estimates](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382577) by the GEM Report and the UIS show that 244 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 worldwide were still missing out on school in 2021. [[7]](#footnote-8)

### Global Disruptions (Conflict, Protracted crises)

1. Wars, epidemics and natural disasters spare no children. More countries are gripped by conflict today than at any time in the past thirty years. Many of these crises span entire childhoods.
2. An estimated 35 million children around the world have been forcibly displaced. Nearly half of school-age refugee children are out of school.
3. Girls are nearly 2.5 times more likely to be out of school in conflict-affected countries compared to girls in other places.
4. For children in emergencies, education is about more than the right to learn.
5. Schools protect children from the physical dangers around them – including abuse, exploitation and recruitment into armed groups. They provide children with lifesaving food, water, health care and hygiene supplies. And they offer psychosocial support, giving children stability and structure to help them cope with the trauma they experience every day.

### Equitable Education Financing

1. Delivering on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education for all means leaving no child behind. A key element to achieving this is to transform education financing, making it more equitable so that resources are targeted to reach the poorest and most marginalized.
2. Despite the need for equitable education financing, our latest analysis finds that in far too many countries, children and youth from the poorest households benefit the least from public education resources.
3. For education to be equitable, [at least 15 per cent](https://www.unicef.org/documents/unicef-financing-education-recovery-and-transformation) of public education resources should go to the poorest 20 per cent of learners, a milestone benchmark UNICEF has adopted for its programme countries.
4. In 1 out of every 10 countries, learners from the richest 20 per cent of households receive four or more times the amount of public education spending than the poorest.

## Crucial issues for the future

### Climate change

1. UNICEF’s Children’s Climate Risk Index reveals that 1 billion children are at ‘extremely high risk’ of the impacts of climate change. That is nearly half of all children. And it is happening today.
2. Children bear the greatest burden of climate change. Not only are they more vulnerable than adults to the extreme weather, toxic hazards and diseases it causes, but the planet is becoming a more dangerous place to live. Increasingly catastrophic droughts, fires and storms are forecast to become even worse as our planet continues to warm. Important food and water systems will fail and entire cities are expected to succumb to destructive floods. Climate change is the greatest threat facing the world’s children and young people. And so we too are rising.[[8]](#footnote-9)

### Evidenced-based policy solutions

1. To address the learning crisis, governments must focus efforts on ensuring children acquire foundational skills by age 10, implement evidence-based policy solutions[[9]](#footnote-10), and increase and improve the efficiency of education financing.
2. Worryingly, few countries appear to be investing in proven measures to mitigate learning loss: Only 39 per cent reported implementing measures on increased instructional time, 29 per cent on tutoring programmes, and 16 per cent on targeted instruction.
3. Instead of ad hoc programmes or fragmented policy interventions, countries must implement multi-year, evidence-based interventions and provide extensive support to teachers, who are on the frontlines of driving recovery in classrooms.

### Bridging the digital divide

1. Digital connectivity plays an increasingly vital role in our everyday lives and has fundamentally changed the way people exchange and acquire information.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlights that well-established digital networks and supportive remote learning policies provide flexibility and resilience to the education system. However, the pandemic also brought attention to the digital divide – the gap between those who have computers and online access and those who do not – and its resulting impact on equity.
3. While most countries implemented remote learning solutions during the COVID19 pandemic, nearly 500 million learners could not be reached by any of them, out of a total of 1.6 billion learners affected by school closure at the peak of the pandemic.

1. https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/primary-education/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/primary-education/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-new-era-for-girls-taking-stock-of-25-years-of-progress/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. https://www.unicef.org/media/59856/file/UNICEF-education-strategy-2019-2030.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-new-era-for-girls-taking-stock-of-25-years-of-progress/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/state-of-global-learning-poverty [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382577 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See UNICEF and partners’ RAPID agenda: <https://www.unicef.org/media/117626/file/Where%20are%20we%20in%20Education%20Recovery?.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)