

ASPBAE Key Messages for HLPF 2020

Protect Education Budgets for Resilient Public Education Systems Advancing SDG4



The Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) welcomes the 2020 High-Level Political Forum with renewed optimism and commitment, continuing its engagement in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its advocacy work for stronger public education systems and increased and better financing for the education agenda in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The year 2020 marks the start of the final decade for meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and this year's HLPF will take up the theme 'Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.'

ASPBAE, along with its members, and affiliated national education coalitions, has actively followed and engaged in the SDG processes from its inception in 2015. Last year, ASPBAE launched a Regional Report and Civil Society Spotlight Reports on SDG 4 that it had prepared with national education coalitions in 16 countries in the Asia-Pacific Region in time for the 2019 HLPF.

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The reports present the civil society analysis and perspective in the SDG/SDG 4 progress, placing particular focus on the concerns and aspirations of the most marginalised and excluded groups. It was revealed that, while progress has been achieved towards SDG 4 and the SDGs, challenges in equity, inclusion and quality persist. Progress has largely been uneven, and deepening inequality is eroding social cohesion in countries across the region.

ASPBAE continues its active engagement in this year's HLPF and the Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes. Education coalitions in seven countries that will report on their respective VNRs have actively participated in drafting the collective CSO positions that will be delivered after the presentations of their respective governments. Planning and strategy sessions were likewise organised at the regional level to facilitate the meaningful contribution of CSOs in the HLPF and VNR presentations.

As we participate in this year's HLPF, we witness the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the spheres of health and well-being, education and learning, livelihood, and the economy, which amplified existing challenges that are often felt more severely by the most marginalised and vulnerable groups. Education is one of the worst-hit sectors by the pandemic, causing the closure of schools in 194 countries and affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners globally. In Asia and the Pacific alone, over 1.09 billion learners were affected, representing over 62.3 per cent of the world's total enrolled student population.

The poorest and most vulnerable groups face higher risk of disengaging completely from education. Girls and women, in particular, endure multiple burdens as they deal with unpaid domestic work, bigger care giving responsibilities, and increased risk of domestic and sexual violence. Persons with disabilities are further immobilised, facing significant challenges in accessing education, health services, and social support. Racial, ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities, as well as those living in rural and remote areas, are also disproportionately affected by the impacts of the crisis.

ASPBAE notes with concern the renewed push towards further commercialisation of education given the rush among the private Information and Communications Technology (ICT) firms to aggressively promote and market their digital learning technologies. This situation may further widen the digital divide and hasten the corporate capture of education technologies. Documented lessons under the pre-COVID-19 period

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show that privatisation exacerbates inequities in education as it discriminates against the poor, widens gender disparities, and undermines the public education system.

ASPBAE commends the efforts of education ministries and related agencies for their efforts to promptly respond to the demands of the situation, putting together learning continuity plans with the closure of schools and ensuring safety as they prepare to reopen schools. We commend the initiatives taken by UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, and other UN agencies in supporting the efforts of the education sector to strengthen their capacities to continue education and learning amidst the health emergency.

ASPBAE, however, expresses its concern over the de-prioritisation of education in recovery plans initiated by most governments. Apart from COVID19-related funding and emergency social assistance, much of the stimulus packages have gone or will go to the corporate sector, with less priority given to education and other essential social services. This type of stimulus may widen inequalities and leave people even more vulnerable to future emergencies.

Tremendous pressure is exerted on the education budgets in most countries as the sector competes for dwindling resources given the expected contraction of the economy, the reduction of government revenues, and the huge spending to combat COVID-19. Generous support is extended to distressed industries with provisions of equity infusion, interest-free loans, subsidies, and reduced or deferred corporate income taxes, thereby drastically reducing government revenues. In the process, education is crowded out and relegated to a lower budget priority. Tax incentives and subsidies accorded to local and foreign businesses constitute huge revenue losses that could cover the financing gaps in education, health care, and social protection.

ASPBAE asserts that a sustainable and transformative recovery will rely on prioritising significant investments in building human capabilities and well-being, and on strengthening public institutions to deliver better quality services. ASPBAE further asserts that education is a basic human right and a key component to achieving sustainable recovery from the global pandemic. We must invest in the long-term transformation of education systems based on the lessons learned and innovations emerging from this crisis.

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ASPBAE highlights the following key messages consistent with SDG4 and all the SDGs:

- **Build stronger, better and safer public education systems** that are equitable, inclusive, gender-responsive, resilient, and capable of advancing the broad SDG4 agenda within a lifelong learning framework.
- **Develop free, inclusive and appropriate learning continuity plans** in a safe environment, using multiple and flexible learning platforms with adaptive learning materials suitable to the local context and the learners' needs, and prioritising investment to the most marginalised and vulnerable children, youth and adults.
- **Ensure provision of quality, transformative and empowering education** that promotes social awareness, creativity, critical thinking, and innovations, capable of meeting the challenges of emergencies and crises.
- **Protect public education budgets**, ensuring that education is not de-prioritised in the budgets of governments and that education is included as an essential and priority component of stimulus packages.
- **Increase and sustain international funding support for education**, particularly for low and lower-middle income countries, including debt cancelation and moratorium on debt servicing in favour of education, health care, social protection and other social services.
- **Remove all barriers that restrict civil society participation** and provide greater spaces for more meaningful CSO engagement in SDG and VNR processes at national, regional, and global platforms.