

ASPBAE Key Messages for HLPF 2022

Towards More Urgent Actions for Transformative Education



The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2022 continues to galvanise global political will towards resilience and sustainability with the theme “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” This year’s HLPF will take stock of the progress of Goal 4 on “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all,” three years since it was last reviewed in 2019.

The education sector, however, has taken steps to build *forward* better. Within the year, it has already made concrete commitments towards transforming education and education systems. Important regional and global events for education have taken and will take place this year, such as the 2nd Asia Pacific Regional Education Ministers’ Conference (APREMC II), Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII), and the upcoming Transforming Education Summit (TES).

Realising these commitments requires acting with a sense of urgency. The inequalities in education have deepened. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only upended lives and magnified

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inequalities, but it has also threatened or reversed what modest progress has been made towards achieving the SDGs and SDG 4. The impacts of the pandemic have resulted in multiple obstacles that impede the access to education of many learners, especially those who are made vulnerable due to their socio-economic status, location, disability, race, ethnicity, language, religion, identity, and gender. The region is also witnessing increasing cases of child abuse, early marriage, child labour, and drop-out partly due to the lack of safety nets to keep learners in education as well as the lack of safe, inclusive and equitable online and distance learning solutions.

School and educational institutions' closures forced governments to adopt alternative learning modalities, often employing online learning, in an attempt to continue learning. ASPBAE and national education coalitions' 2021 and 2022 Spotlight Reports cited the adverse effects on the access to and quality of education facilitated through online learning platforms, which widened the digital and even gender divide. Some national coalitions report that with online education modalities, the motivation to learn decreased, mental and psychosocial issues heightened, and it subjected learners to risky and dangerous situations online. Stark gender disparities in access to digital devices are evident in the region. This gender digital gap compounded by increased domestic responsibilities hinder women and girls, including those with disabilities, from enjoying the same opportunities as their counterparts. The aggressive penetration of Information Technology (IT) firms in online education delivery and even decision-making spaces in education are also greatly contributing to the further commercialisation of education. It is crucial that expanding digitalisation be harnessed with the direct intention to serve and benefit those who are furthest behind and with careful attention not to further marginalise those who do not have digital access.

It is also worrying that in the Asia Pacific region, 27 million youth remain illiterate, of which 95% live in South Asia.¹ There remains a gender gap despite the increase in literacy rates. Prolonged closures of non-formal learning centres and suspension of adult learning and education (ALE) provisioning, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), affected youth and adult learners. Those who are based in remote rural areas and belong to low-income households, have little to no access to devices and could not continue their education. ALE is also plagued by other persistent challenges and by far some of the greatest ones lie in the poor understanding and awareness of ALE, scant attention to non-formal and informal ALE in comparison to formal education leading to its de-prioritisation, the dearth of diverse and inclusive strategies for ALE to reach out to marginalised groups, the gaps in integrated and reliable data, the low domestic and external financing support, and for some countries, the lack of a legal framework and coherent

¹ UNESCO and UNICEF. (2021). 5-Year Progress Review of SDG 4 – Education 2030 in Asia-Pacific.

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policies for ALE. The pandemic underscored the importance of ALE, intergenerational learning, as well as the continuity of learning and skills development but during the pandemic, it was not given attention in many countries.

Public financing for education has decreased and remains threatened. Even before the pandemic, education financing has been a major challenge in Asia and the Pacific, a region that has consistently been the lowest education spender in comparison to other global regions. Most countries spend way below the global benchmarks of 4% to 6% of the GDP and 15% to 20% of the total public expenditure on education. On regional average, Asia did not meet the two public education expenditure benchmarks.² Education spending averaged 3.5% of the gross domestic product (GDP) for low-income countries and 4.3% of GDP for middle-income countries prior to the spread of COVID-19. A March 2022 survey of 122 countries found that only one-third of countries increased public resources for education and among countries with more than 20 weeks of full school closures, a quarter decreased their budget.³

The pandemic compounded this issue, with the contraction of the economy, sharp falls in government revenues, narrowing fiscal space, huge spending for response and recovery, increasing debt servicing, and declining ODA piling on further strain on national education budgets and highlighting the urgency of filling the education financing gap. Cuts in education spending on top of the costs of learning platforms and commercialised education disproportionately affect the poorest and most disadvantaged learners.

All these pose significant challenges to the full achievement of SDG 4 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We must uphold and protect education as a human right of all, not a privilege of a few. This has been enshrined in numerous international human rights laws and treaties. Outcome documents of the recently held APREMC II (Bangkok Statement 2022- Towards an effective learning recovery for all and transforming education in Asia-Pacific) and CONFINTEA VII (Marrakech Framework for Action- “Harnessing the transformational power of Adult Learning and Education- ALE”) also clearly brought to the fore education, including ALE, as a fundamental human right.

SDG 4 puts forth free, publicly funded primary and secondary education, principles of equity, inclusion, non-discrimination, and quality in education, and gender equality. It is also set within a

²UNESCO Bangkok. (2021). Regional Model on Costing SDG4 Asia and the Pacific. Retrieved from https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Early%20Childhood%20Care%20and%20Education/files/Costing%20and%20Financing%20SDG%204.2%20Webinar/1.2_%20Masaya%20Noguchi%20-%20costing%20model.pdf

³ World Bank and UNESCO Global Monitoring Report. (2021). Education Finance Watch. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375577>

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lifelong learning framework that recognises the importance of youth and adult literacy, non-formal and informal learning, and ALE. Education- whether in formal, nonformal, and informal settings- is indispensable to the fulfilment of other human rights. SDG 4 is imperative for an equitable and sustainable recovery from the pandemic and from current and future crises and emergencies.

Education is also an empowering tool to address and solve global challenges that threaten humanity, such as poverty, intolerance and discrimination, gender inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, war and conflict, human rights violations, authoritarian regimes, and economic and political shocks, among many others. It is high time to transform the public education system into one that is gender-transformative, equitable, resilient and sustainable, revisit pedagogies and the curricula, and reimagine learning in the 21st century that will contribute to protecting the people and the planet.

Confronted by these challenges and amplifying the unities forged in regional and global education policy processes, ASPBAE urgently calls on governments, development partners, and international organisations to deliver on their commitments to transform education and education systems:

1. Reaffirm commitments and reinforce greater political and financing will to advance the full 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially Sustainable Development Goal 4 to strengthen education as a fundamental human right of all. As the Final Decade of Action rolls on, governments must focus on the principles of equity, inclusion, access, and non-discrimination in the development and implementation of education plans and programmes, prioritising the most marginalised learners, such as women and girls, learners with disabilities, migrants and refugees, learners from rural and remote areas, learners from gender, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, adults who are illiterate, among others. Comprehensive regulatory and accountability measures must be strictly implemented to protect quality education as a human right, with States, as duty-bearers, having the primary responsibility to ensure that the right to education is enjoyed by all children, youth, and adults.
2. Develop and mainstream multiple flexible learning modalities within formal, informal, and non-formal education systems that are context-responsive, effective, inclusive, and engaging and made available in no-tech and low-tech solutions, such as through the media, radio and television, self-learning and paper-based modules. This will also require providing free and open access to appropriate technologies, tools, and materials that promote mother tongue-based multilingual education. Ultimately, online learning is no

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silver bullet. Governments must ensure the full and safe reopening of schools and educational institutions and improve education's resilience to shocks and emergencies. It is important to go beyond recovering learning losses and place more attention on addressing existing disparities, improving the quality of and access to blended learning approaches that reach the most marginalised.

3. Progressively increase public financing for the provision of inclusive, equitable, quality, resilient, and gender-transformative public education systems through stronger domestic resource mobilisation, progressive taxation and widened tax base, and debt cancellation, ensuring equity, accountability, transparency, and efficiency in education budget utilisation in adherence to international spending benchmarks. Education, along with health, social protection, and nutrition, must be prioritised in recovery plans and stimulus packages. Neglected SDG 4 targets, such as functional literacy, disability-inclusive education, adult learning and education, global citizenship education, and education for sustainable development, must also be resourced with increased financing allocations. Developed countries must meet commitments to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) for ODA to developing countries.
4. Transform education systems into lifelong and life-wide learning systems and ensure the quality of education at all levels, from formal to non-formal and informal education, including youth and adult learning and education, by transforming the current curricula into one that equips and empowers learners with skills not only for decent and dignified work but also for life, adapts to their changing and diverse learning needs, and promotes concepts of sustainable development. Learners can co-design the curricula in educational institutions to promote higher and more active engagement as well as ensure the relevance of the curricula. Learners, parents, family members, and communities must have access to community-based learning, gender-just skills education, family literacy programmes, reading centres, and other programmes that foster intergenerational learning and support the continuity of learning, especially on mental health, food and nutrition and community resilience efforts.
5. Members States that have adopted the Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA) must strongly implement the Framework through a rights-based, learner-centred, interdisciplinary, culturally responsive, and gender-transformative approach and commit to redoubling policy and financing support to strengthen ALE as an integral part of the right to education and a key component of lifelong learning. ALE policy development, plans, and programmes should address the specific learning needs of marginalised youth and adult

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learners and equip them with the knowledge, skills, and values to live healthy and fulfilling lives, and build just, peaceful, and sustainable societies.

6. Enhance the capacities of teachers, community educators, parents, and guardians in facilitating distance and blended learning through the provision of the required technologies, quality training on digital skills development and delivery of blended learning solutions, mental health and psychosocial support, and professional development materials and resources to support learners' education during and after crises and emergencies. This will require the provision of pre-service and in-service training that must systematically provide knowledge and skills for the education needs of all teachers, including non-formal and mobile teachers, and educators, such as community educators and health workers.
7. The whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach must be put in place, recognising the many advantages that come with cross-sectoral sharing of resources and commitments, especially to education. Aside from establishing disaggregated data and monitoring systems in schools, education institutions, and communities to ensure that the most marginalised are reached, inter-agency planning and synergy for educational delivery, as well as disaster preparedness and management, health and safety and free access to inclusive online education and blended learning must also be established.
8. Ensure sustained institutionalised spaces for the meaningful participation and engagement of civil society, youth, and all stakeholders in education policy and decision-making processes, including the implementation, monitoring, follow-up, and review of the SDGs and SDG 4 at local, national, regional, and global levels.