



Population, education and sustainable development

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The following key messages are based on the report of the Secretary-General on Population, education and sustainable development (E/CN.9/2023/2).

Ten key messages

1. Globally, the primary-level school-age population will peak at 820 million in 2023

The global population aged 6-11 years, corresponding to those in primary education, is expected to reach an all-time high of 820 million in 2023. Thereafter, it is projected to drop to 774 million in 2032, then to reach a secondary peak of around 806 million in the early 2050s and to decline continuously thereafter. Whereas some regions are already experiencing a decline in the school-age population at the primary level, in sub-Saharan Africa, it is projected to increase by 86 million between 2022 and 2050. The global population aged 12-17 years, corresponding to those in secondary education, is projected to reach its peak of nearly 816 million in 2029. These trends will require significant investment in education and skills training in the coming years.

2. A declining school-age population will facilitate investment in quality education

As a proportion of the total population, the school-age population aged 6-23 years, corresponding to primary, secondary and tertiary levels, is projected to decline in all regions over the coming decades. This will provide an opportunity for countries to invest in quality education and to increase expenditure per student without necessarily increasing total spending on the school-age population.

3. Progress towards universal completion of primary and secondary education has been uneven

In 2020, the completion rate for primary education was 87 per cent globally, but only 63 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. At the lower- and upper-secondary levels, completion rates worldwide in 2020 were 77 and 58 per cent, respectively. Low-income countries have much lower completion rates: just over half for primary school and slightly more than one third for lower-secondary education. For these countries, achieving target 4.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains a distant reality. In 2020, fewer than half of enrolled students worldwide reached minimum proficiency in reading at the lower-secondary level. In sub-Saharan Africa, only about 10 per cent of children who completed lower-secondary school had achieved minimum proficiency in reading.

4. The gender gap in school enrolment and attendance has narrowed, but challenges remain

Globally in 2020, the gender gap in out-of-school rates for primary, lower and upper-secondary levels of education was less than 2 per cent. However, larger gender gaps remained at each level in sub-Saharan Africa and in Northern Africa and Western Asia. Likewise, in low-income countries, enrolment rates for young women in lower-secondary education were still 5 percentage points lower than for young men; at the upper-secondary level, the female disadvantage was 9 percentage points. Worldwide, timely completion rates for girls and young women were 2 percentage points higher than for boys and young men for all education levels combined in 2020, even though female completion rates lagged behind in Central and Southern Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa at the upper-secondary level.

5. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the global learning crisis

Prolonged school closures and disruptions to instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected learning outcomes, especially in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, exacerbating inequalities in access to and in the quality of education. The pandemic unveiled inequalities in access to digital technologies, with 27 per

continues

cent of the population in least developed countries using the Internet in 2021, compared with close to 90 per cent in developed countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to significant cuts in public spending on education in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, which face extraordinary challenges in recovering from learning losses associated with the pandemic.

6. More highly educated women tend to marry and have children later

The expansion of primary and secondary education in developing countries, together with the increased availability of family planning services, has been closely associated with the global decline in fertility. Women with higher education levels generally bear fewer children than those who are less educated, with differences especially marked in low- and middle-income countries. More highly educated women have greater autonomy in reproductive decision making and more knowledge about and access to family planning services. The decline of fertility rates in sub-Saharan Africa started later than other regions; it stalled in the early 2000s due in part to stagnation in the enrolment of girls in primary school from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

7. Sexuality education helps youth to adopt healthy behaviours and reduces school dropout

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality, which can help in achieving development objectives in the areas of health, education and gender equality. When it is age-appropriate and culturally sensitive, CSE helps young people to adopt safe and healthy behaviours, including by avoiding unprotected sexual activity and through use of contraception. Sexuality education increases knowledge of the behaviours and risks associated with sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. It also helps to reduce the incidence of early or unintended pregnancies, lowers school dropout rates and promotes gender-equitable attitudes.

8. Lifelong learning and re-skilling of workers are more important now than ever

Globally, over 770 million adults are illiterate, and most of them are women. With unprecedented numbers of people now surviving to advanced ages, lifelong learning and the re-skilling of workers are more important than ever. There has been significant progress in access to adult learning and education, notably in the participation of women and other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups with limited access to learning opportunities, including Indigenous Peoples, rural populations, migrants, older persons, persons with disabilities and prisoners. Community learning centres can offer formal and informal learning opportunities to adults of all ages to make up for shortfalls in childhood education, improve literacy, provide new skills and promote participation in work and community.

9. Education and recognition of skills and qualifications strengthen the benefits of migration

Immigrants and their children, sometimes including those born in the host country, face barriers in accessing quality education and other learning opportunities. Overcoming these barriers is critical to improving educational outcomes and promoting migrants' integration into host societies. Remittances can help to improve educational outcomes in countries of origin by allowing households to reduce their reliance on child labour and to send their children to school. The mutual recognition of skills and qualifications of migrant workers enhances the benefits of migration at all stages. For countries of origin, however, the emigration of individuals with high levels of human capital and skills can have negative consequences in terms of productivity, provision of services and tax revenues.

10. Effective planning of education services requires data disaggregated by age, sex and geography

Population data from national censuses, population registers and other sources, with disaggregation by age, sex and geographic unit, together with administrative data on school enrolment, attendance and completion, are essential for planning educational services and monitoring progress towards the education-related targets of the SDGs.



Prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. More work of the Population Division is available at www.un.org/development/desa/pd/.