
Learning in the Sustainable Development Goals

BRIEF 1

Education and development

The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize that global efforts in education must give central importance to quality and learning.

The education targets under SDG 4 refer to 'quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education' and 'quality primary and secondary education' that helps students attain 'relevant and effective learning outcomes' (UNESCO, 2016a). Countries are called upon to demonstrate that young people are attaining 'literacy and numeracy', 'relevant skills ... for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship', as well as 'the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development' (UNESCO, 2016a).

The means of implementation for SDG 4 also focus on issues related to learning and quality education. Countries are encouraged to build or upgrade their education facilities so that they are 'effective learning environments for all', whereas international collaboration is encouraged to 'substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers' (UNESCO, 2016a).

Beyond SDG 4, all of the Sustainable Development Goals depend on quality education and learning. A good education can: lift people out of poverty and reduce inequalities; promote employment and economic growth; empower women; build peaceful and inclusive societies; support good nutrition and health; and help communities improve their management of water and sanitation, as well as infrastructure, clean energy, and environmental resources, along with other elements of a sustainable lifestyle.

SDG 4 targets and means of implementation

Targets:

- 4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
- 4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
- 4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
- 4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
- 4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

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- 4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
 - 4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Means of implementation:

- 4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
- 4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries
- 4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states

As the lead agency for SDG 4, UNESCO has developed an [action plan](#) to coordinate global efforts towards the education targets. The plan's first steps have been to establish a dedicated Steering Committee with Member State representation from every region of the world and a series of regional consultations dedicated to discussing education priority areas and coordination mechanisms. Parallel to this, global indicators to monitor progress in education have been finalized, along with the development of thematic indicators that countries may choose from to track educational issues of particular relevance to them.

The ten SDG 4 [education targets and means of implementation](#) cover a comprehensive array of educational issues. Woven throughout them is a concern with the quality of the educational experience – ensuring the relevance of what is being taught and ensuring that children, young people, and adults are enabled to learn. Learning is thus taking on a central role in regional and national discussions regarding how to implement the global education goals.

Focusing on learning in regional consultations

Consultations during the regional meetings have reaffirmed the SDG 4/Education 2030 emphasis on education quality and learning for all. In the Asia-Pacific region, where both the Education for All and the Education 2030 agendas were launched, participating countries recognized their 'unique responsibility to carry the torch for this new global education agenda towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all'. (Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030, 2015)

In the Arab region, consultations focused particularly on the importance of 'mitigating the impact of conflict in order to ensure access to quality education for internally displaced persons and refugee communities', and requested assistance from partners to 'map available data and data sources' including 'administrative data, household surveys, learning assessments and data collected by civil society' (Arab Regional Roadmap for Education 2030, 2015)

Consultations in the Europe and North America region highlighted that 'SDG4-Education 2030

requires a renewed focus on ensuring equity in learning opportunities paying attention to a more equitable social distribution of effective learning outcomes', and a 'comprehensive and balanced approach to learning assessment' (UNESCO, 2016b). They also placed focus on a lifelong learning approach.

Member States from West and Central Africa also highlighted the importance of data on learning, remarking that 'uncoordinated data collection, management and low use of available data are a challenge', and that there is a need for 'construction of new indicators related primarily to the quality and value [of education]' (UNESCO, 2015).

Making learning a priority in national education sector plans

UNESCO has also pledged to offer '[strategic support and guidance to countries as they review education sector and national development plans to ensure alignment with SDG4-Education 2030](#)'.

At the same time, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is also supporting this process, as it [aims to mobilize increased financing to strengthen national education systems that deliver quality education, especially in the poorest countries](#). By early 2016, some countries had already begun using the mid-term review of their ongoing education sector plans to reconsider national strategies because of SDG 4 and its focus on improving learning outcomes.

In Viet Nam, funds from the GPE were used to conduct an in-depth analysis of implementing the first phase of the country's Education Development Strategic Plan (spanning 2011–2020). At the [mid-term review meeting](#), 60 participants from the government and education sector partners reviewed the Education Sector Analysis report and discussed its implications for the process of achieving the SDG 4 targets. Participants focused on topics such as putting into place 'qualification standards for teachers and the need to address the decentralization and implementation of education policies in place', as well as the need for 'more in-depth analysis regarding the barriers children with disabilities face in accessing quality education'.

Rwanda's mid-term review of the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), spanning 2013–2014 to 2017–2018, focused closely on the quality and relevance of primary and secondary education. Detailed analysis of the primary repetition rates in each grade helped to identify the causes of repetition, and discussions also focused on the means for improving primary completion rates and transition rates to lower secondary school. In addition to the analysis of this existing data, the mid-term review emphasized the importance of strengthening the scope of data collected on education quality and learning, and proposed a revised monitoring framework that would incorporate the SDG 4 indicators. (C. Honeyman, personal communication, 2016)

As more and more countries engage in the process of aligning their national education plans with SDG 4, a crucial question will be how to ensure a strong focus on improving learning outcomes.

References and sources

[Arab Regional Roadmap for Education 2030.](#)

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