



BSRS POLICY BRIEF | JUNE 2021

# Promoting sustainable development through equal access to quality education



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**The Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7 aims to ‘ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development’. In order to do this, we need to foster equal access to quality education including in global citizenship and human rights, life-long learning opportunities, and intergenerational solidarity.**

### 3 key points

- Universal access to quality education, including on global citizenship, gender equality, and human rights, is key to sustainable development.
- Such education empowers responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels, including the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance.
- It also enhances the integration of diverse values in decision-making, including protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, and social equality, well-being, and resilience in the face of climate change.

### Introduction

According to the data from the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) (n.d.), in 65 out of 115 countries, more than 50% of young people have not completed upper secondary school. Less than 25% of rural children in 23 out of 50 countries have the opportunity to attend a pre-primary education programme ever since 2010. The number of females completing lower secondary school drops below 90 for every 100 men, in 30 out of 116 countries. At least 25% of young women living in poverty are illiterate in 35 of 75 countries. Despite universal provisions for education in more developed countries are provided, some children still perform worse than others due to factors beyond their control, including the language they speak, where they were born, or the professions of their parents.

These statistics reflect the unsatisfactory persistence of education inequalities worldwide. These observed inequalities also manifest in the unequal access and availability of social services, educational resources, industries, and infrastructures. Further, educational inequalities are linked to the problem of inadequate or unequal participation and representation in decision-making at all levels (Briscoe, 2005).

This Policy Brief proposes that equal access to quality education as articulated by the Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7 must be enhanced for sustainable development to progress.

### Analysis

Universal access to quality education is crucial to global social equality and sustainable development. One of UNESCO's missions is to eliminate discrimination and exclusion. Also, education is fundamental to the development of and in industries, institutions, and infrastructures.

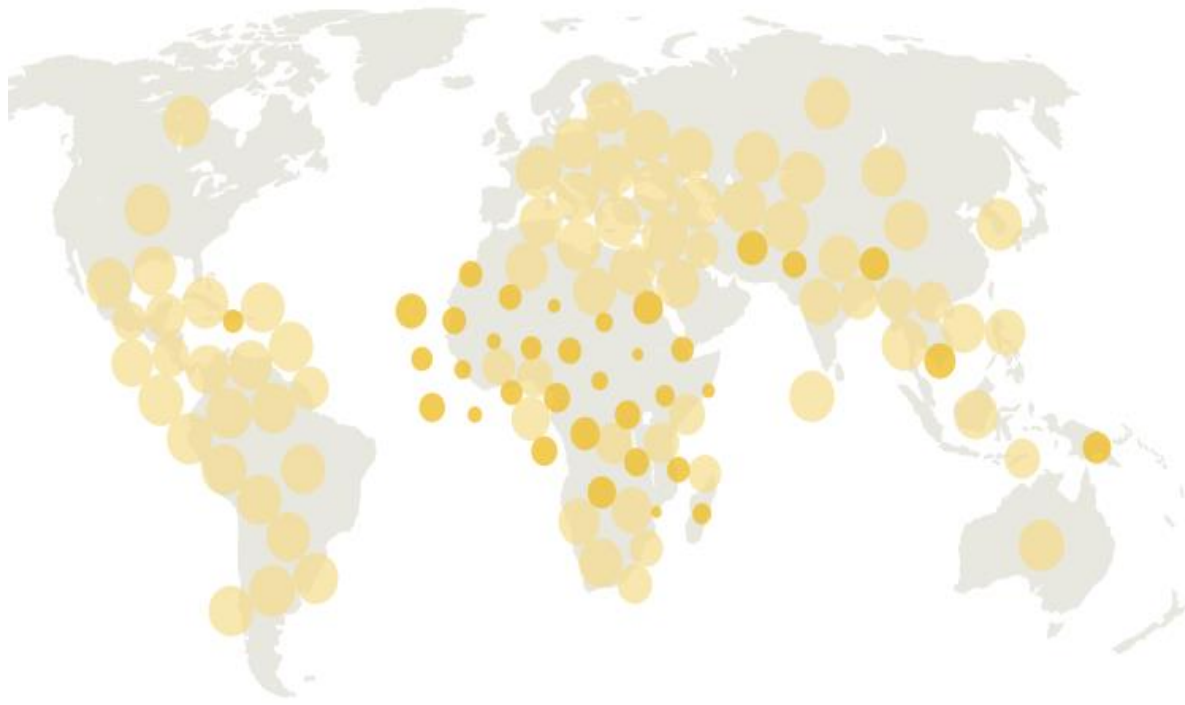
World demographics are continuously changing. However, despite rapid improvements in information technologies, inequalities in education continue to exist.

Intergenerational solidarity--that is, engagement among different generations--enables dialogue, collaboration and partnerships between younger and older generations toward attaining SDGs (UN Sec Gen, 2013).

Lifelong learning is also a key strategy under SDG 4 for eliminating inequalities in social and economic development. It is thus variously conceptualized for different types of education (Webb et al. 2019). It is considered a holistic goal to promote education rights to universal education, the Education for All (EFA), as the Millennium Development Goal (Elfert, 2019). It is also the key concept to promote adult learning for sustained capacities of having good living conditions in communities (Waller et al. 2019).

Good living conditions both necessitate and lead to good industries and infrastructure. Good living conditions also include societal inclusion and participation in decision-making. Broad representation, diversity, and equality (including by gender) in decision-making at all levels are key for sustainable development (Arctic Council, 2012). This speaks not only to social justice but also to the causal connections between human activities, such as resource exploitation and trade, and planetary systems, such as oceans, ecosystems, biodiversity, and climate change (Hey, 2021). Education in global citizenship and human rights is a key to participation and to incorporating these understandings into decision-making.

This can be seen, for example, within the interlinkages between SDG 4 (Quality education) and SDG 14 (Life below water). Knowledge and capacity building, training and awareness programs on ocean and marine services will have a positive outcome on the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources. Consequently, the early incorporation of ocean literacy into educational programs at all levels of schooling is important to build a global understanding of the ocean. Similarly, educated and skilled people are needed to support and contribute to sustainable ocean development in all sectors, including education, spanning the political, social, economic, and environmental spheres (ICSU, 2017).



In 35 out of 114 countries, fewer than 50% of the poorest children have completed primary school which reflects inequalities in education opportunities and the urging need to develop a sustainable education. (Indicator: primary completion rate. Circle size corresponds to %, more heavily shaded are the 25 countries where < 50%.)

Source: <https://www.education-inequalities.org>

## Conclusions

Equal access to quality education, including gender equality and education in global citizenship and human rights, is crucial to sustainable development. Opportunities for lifelong learning and inter-generational engagement are also key.

While this Policy Brief focuses on SDG 4 on quality education, its analysis and recommendations aim to illuminate and enhance connections between SDG 4 and other SDGs. In particular, to SDGs 5 and 10 on enhancing gender equality and the related goals of reducing inequalities; SDG 16 on inclusive and more representative decision-making at all levels, including by way of participation of developing countries in global governance; SDG 3 on social well-being; and SDGs 14 and 15 on the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, below water and on land.

## Recommendations

- Support and reform institutions and systems toward the goal of universal equal access to quality education, including by gender and family incomes (poverty).
- Integrate education on global citizenship and human rights into curricula at all levels.
- Enhance opportunities for lifelong learning and inter-generational engagement.

**Further relevant SDGs:**

SDG Bergen Science Advice in collaboration with Bergen Summer Research School's 2021 PhD course holders professor Birgit Kopainsky, Dr. Hiwa Målen and Dr. Ingunn Johanne Ness.

**Relevance to the 2030 Agenda**

SDG 4.7 is one of the ten targets under SDG 4: inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, building towards the 2030 Agenda for education to empower people with knowledge, skills and values to live in dignity, build their lives and contribute to their societies.

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