

EASG

Education & Academia
Stakeholder Group

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SECTORAL PAPER

2026



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EASG Sectoral Paper for the High-Level Political Forum 2026

As 2030 draws near to take stock of the commitments to people and the planet, and as the UN prepares to negotiate the post-2030 Agenda, the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) calls on Member States and the international community to fast-track urgent policy actions for SDG 4 and the right to quality education for all.

Education is fundamental to building lasting peace, realising sustainable development and driving innovations for the future. Yet, the global and national commitments to education have remained stagnant. The Sustainable Development Goals [Report 2025](#) shows that SDG 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities” by 2030 will be missed if urgent actions are not accelerated. The report says that most countries are off track in their education targets for access, completion and learning outcomes.”

The EASG believes that education systems must be positioned as a priority social sector and as a central delivery mechanism for the entire 2030 Agenda. Without integrated investments in education, progress across water, energy, infrastructure, and sustainable cities will remain fragmented and inequitable.

Towards 2030: Urgent Policy Actions for SDG 4

In the remaining four years, urgent actions for SDG 4 must centre on addressing systemic crises in inequalities, financing, infrastructure and governance.

Strengthen system governance, leadership and workforce: Strengthening leadership capacities is essential for moving SDG 4 from policy to lived practice. This includes institutional leadership, educator leadership, student unions, and representative student organisations, and shared responsibility across communities with changemakers taking the lead.

The structural capacity of education systems is under significant strain due to teacher shortages and devaluation. There is an urgent need to **invest in teachers and address the global teacher shortage** by acting on the root causes of the shortage: low salaries, lack of benefits, work overload, high attrition and lack of continuing professional development or support for increasingly complex classroom realities.

Address system-wide disparities. The past decade has seen real progress on SDG 4 digital learning, skills-based education and multi-stakeholder partnerships but progress has been uneven. Deepening inequalities, fragmented policies and a growing skills mismatch and weak data systems continue to hold back meaningful impact. Closing these gaps by 2030 requires treating education not as a standalone sector but as a system-wide driver of sustainable development backed by sustainable financing, strong partnerships, future-ready curricula and accountability systems.

Close the global financing gap: The most urgent issue is closing the annual financing gap of \$97 billion that is preventing low- and lower-middle-income countries from meeting SDG 4. Concrete actions must be taken to address persisting problems that widen the financing gap, such as tax abuse, illicit financial flows, massive and unabated corruption, and declining development assistance. Member States must support the ongoing negotiations for a binding UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation to ensure that wealth serves the common good and not private profit, and to increase fiscal space to enable countries to invest in quality public education for all.

The declining official development assistance (ODA) to education and the shifting priorities towards defence and military expenditures significantly affect education in least developed countries and the Leave No One Behind agenda. On the one hand, the "commodification" of education through unregulated public-private partnerships are serious threats to education as a public good. Member States must increase public financing to at least 6% of GDP and regulate PPPs to guarantee quality education and prohibit student selection, fee charging, and profit extraction.

Debt distress and austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have constrained developing countries' fiscal space and deepened inequalities. According to UNESCO, in low-income countries, government debt averages 72% of GDP—an 18-year high—and many spend more on debt repayments than on their education budgets. Debt, austerity, and underfunded public systems disproportionately affect women, girls, black and indigenous people, persons with disabilities and marginalised populations

Education systems transformation

Education systems support is very much needed for increasingly multilingual, mobile and culturally diverse learning environments. There is also an urgent need to strengthen teacher education and school-community partnerships that support culturally responsive and sustainable educational practices. Greater investment in teacher development, multilingual education, and locally grounded educational leadership is essential to advancing inclusive and equitable quality education.

Similarly, the under-appreciation of the importance of arts and culture in education, both as a topic designed to build creativity and resilience and as fundamental cultural rights, must be addressed.

Ensure that informal and nonformal education benefit from the same advantages as education more broadly in legislation (for example, under copyright laws in many countries). There is a need to ensure that all infrastructure and stakeholders are mobilised to prepare and deliver on education and related strategies.

Invest in global education and programming for hands-on SDG inclusion at all levels of schooling and ensure qualified teachers with the capacity to integrate SDGs. Expand education to include project-based learning, trade skills, job outcomes and continued learning mechanisms in community development projects for youth.

The lack of gender-transformative education keeps the debate around gender equity in education limited to equal access to educational institutions. However, to transform the challenges faced by women and girls in our societies, it is important to promote a gender-transformative education, empowering women and girls and promoting alternative masculinities for men and boys.

Bridging the digital gap is fundamental to advancing SDG4, but this should go beyond providing universal access to digital technologies. It is equally relevant to provide meaningful and rights-based connectivity, safeguarding the rights of the educational community in the digital space.

Good practices advancing SDG 4

While progress has been uneven across the world, there are successful initiatives that have advanced SDG 4 implementation through the efforts of Member States and civil society organisations.

- **Groundbreaking CAQ (Brazil):** In the face of persistent underfunding, Brazil's civil society has advanced a groundbreaking, evidence-based model to secure the right to quality public education: the Custo Aluno-Qualidade (CAQ) / Cost of Quality Education per Student. Developed by the Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education, comprising grassroots movements, researchers, educators, and students, the CAQ shifts the policy debate from abstract budget discussions to a clear, legally enforceable standard of quality. This transformative approach, with official UN recognition, is now setting a powerful precedent for educational funding across Latin America, Africa, and the world.

Translated as "Cost of Quality Education per Student," the CAQ is a legal instrument that calculates the minimum annual public investment per student needed to guarantee a quality education, considering factors like local contexts. It ensures essential conditions like adequate teacher-student ratios, fair pay, dignified infrastructure, water, sanitation, and digital resources. Crucially, it creates transparent, auditable standards, empowering civil society and legal bodies to hold the government accountable for its financial duties. After over 24 years of advocacy, the CAQ was enshrined in the 2020 constitutional amendment that established the permanent Fundeb.

- **Social protection (Bangladesh):** With recurrent climate disasters, regional conflicts, increasing debt distress, and inflation on the rise, low-income families are faced with the choice between survival and education. For low-income families, the government's conditional cash transfers for education play an instrumental role in ensuring enrolment and retention of at-risk students. The Benazir Taleemi Wazaif, despite questions, is an excellent scalable success.
- **Reaching out to marginalised groups (CSOs -Jordan):** Civil society organisations play a key role in reaching marginalised groups, piloting innovative approaches, and complementing formal education systems. Key examples include the reintegration of girls at risk of dropout in Karak by the Arab Women Association, which supported 120 girls, reintegrated 38 into school, prevented dropout for 64 others, and improved learning outcomes for 72% of beneficiaries. Similarly, flexible education pathways by Mawarid Association supported out-of-school youth through second-chance learning models, while Athar Association's remedial education helped 200 children, with 60 returning to formal schooling. Other initiatives include robotics programs reaching 700 girls, early childhood

play-based learning for 80 children, and digital learning initiatives in the Southern Badia benefiting 300 children.

- **Multilingual and intercultural education:** One important success in advancing SDG 4 has been the growing recognition of multilingual and intercultural education as central to inclusive and equitable learning. School-university partnerships and teacher education initiatives have supported the development of more culturally responsive teaching practices and stronger support systems for multilingual learners. Cross-border collaboration between educational institutions in Canada, France, Burkina Faso, and Bahrain has also demonstrated the value of sharing locally grounded educational practices across diverse contexts. These approaches can be scaled through sustained investment in teacher education, community-based partnerships, and professional learning models that connect research with classroom practice.
- **Experiential learning (Solar Energy Project):** Experiential learning increases student participation and knowledge transfer by allowing students to apply concepts in real-world settings through classroom instruction, after-school programs, summer camps, library partnerships, and community workshops. The combination of SDG additions to the curriculum, aligned with STEM project-based instruction, allows students to apply classroom learning directly to real-world challenges facing their communities across the globe. The foundation must be built using local understanding of cultural relevance, teacher support, and community ownership. Education can help communities involve youth in local problem-solving and implementation with the next generation of environmental stewards educated within their own regions.
- **Leadership as a System Enabler (Canada):** A key success in advancing SDG 4 is strengthening leadership as a system-wide enabler of educational change. Through initiatives such as PEARL, LoLE, and LEAP-FAST, the York UNESCO Chair supports leadership across schools and higher education, linking sustainability, agency, and institutional transformation.
- **Whole-system approach - International Association of Universities (IAU)** supports its members to build and maintain partnerships, advance sustainable development and digital transformation, and to take a strategic approach using a whole-institution approach to bring institutional change, with staff and students as drivers for this action. For example, the IAU is part of the UNESCO 'Transforming Futures' Project for Education for Sustainable Development, which included action research in 10 countries and over 40 educational institutions. The tested guidance tools (on WIA, competencies, assessment) will be published in June 2026:
<https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education/transforming-futures>

Intersections of SDG 4 in the Focus SDGs

Good practices in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals increasingly recognise education as a cross-cutting foundation for community resilience, inclusion, sustainability, and long-term social development. Effective approaches often include strong school-community partnerships, teacher education initiatives, multilingual and culturally responsive learning environments, and collaborative engagement between schools, universities, civil society organizations, and local governments. Community-based learning, sustainability education, digital literacy initiatives, and inclusive educational practices can help connect local realities with broader global challenges and sustainable development priorities.

SDG 4 (education) is a key enabler of progress across the focus SDGs — Sustainable Development Goal 6, Sustainable Development Goal 7, Sustainable Development Goal 9, Sustainable Development Goal 11, and Sustainable Development Goal 17 — by building the knowledge, skills, values, and capacities needed for sustainable development across all stages of life.

Quality education and lifelong learning support improved WASH practices in schools and communities (SDG 6), enable awareness and adoption of clean energy solutions (SDG 7), strengthen innovation, critical thinking, and digital capacities (SDG 9), promote inclusive and resilient communities (SDG 11), and underpin effective multi-stakeholder collaboration (SDG 17). At the same time, progress in these sectors directly enhances learning environments and outcomes. Achieving meaningful impact requires integrated, cross-sector approaches where education systems are designed and funded as platforms that connect infrastructure, innovation, equity, and partnerships.

SDG 4 and SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation)

Access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in schools is a fundamental prerequisite for quality education, yet significant gaps remain in Brazil and across Latin America. The most recent data from Brazil's School Census 2025 revealed that approximately 5% of public schools still lack potable water and 4% have no wastewater treatment. While these percentages may appear modest, they translate into over 1.4 million students who attend schools without potable water, and nearly 1.1 million who attend schools without sewage treatment – disproportionately affecting rural, Indigenous, and peri-urban communities.

In Nigeria, the serious problem with water, toilets, and hygiene in its schools directly stops children, especially girls, from learning. While about three-quarters of Nigerian households have

access to basic water at home, the situation in schools is worse: nearly six in ten schools have no reliable drinking water. Sanitation is similarly poor, which is particularly damaging for girls. With no clean, private toilets and no support for managing their periods, more than half of school-age girls miss school every month. Many eventually drop out altogether. An estimated 10 million children have left school partly because of this, most of them girls. In the north of the country, where education levels are already the lowest in Nigeria, an estimated 47% of girls regularly attend primary school. This isn't just a health issue; it's a structural barrier to education.

Access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in schools in Bangladesh has improved over time, but significant gaps remain, particularly in ensuring quality, equity, and gender responsiveness. Around 30% of adolescent girls miss an average of 2.5 days of school per month due to menstruation, largely due to inadequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities and social stigma.

In countries such as Timor-Leste, Nepal, and the Solomon Islands, gender-responsive, disability-inclusive, and climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, including proper menstrual hygiene management, are insufficient, which leads to high absenteeism and dropout rates among girls and those with disabilities (NCE Nepal, CSEP Timor-Leste, & COESI, 2023; PCE, 2025). In the Philippines, the linkage between SDG 4 and SDG 6 is significant when addressing the issue of stunting and its connection to unsafe water, sanitation, and unhygienic practices in young children. Child stunting is a pressing concern, affecting 27% of Filipino children under five.

Globally, inadequate access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities continues to affect attendance, health, dignity, and learning conditions. This is particularly significant for girls, whose continued education may be disrupted when schools lack safe, private, and appropriate sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities. Improving WASH in educational and community learning settings is therefore not only a health issue, but also an education equity issue directly connected to participation, dignity, well-being, and learning outcomes under SDG 4.

SDG 4 and SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)

Beyond expanding electricity access in schools, broader policy actions under SDG 7 can significantly improve education quality, equity, and resilience by strengthening learning environments and reducing inequalities. Advancing SDG 7 is not only about electrification but about ensuring clean, reliable, affordable, and climate-resilient energy systems for education institutions. When effectively integrated, SDG 7 becomes a powerful enabler of digital learning, safe schools, equity, and climate-resilient education systems under SDG 4.

Bangladesh has made strong progress toward near-universal school electrification, demonstrating clear alignment between SDG 7 and SDG 4. However, the next challenge is not only access but also a reliable, sustainable, and climate-resilient energy supply, particularly through renewable solutions such as solar-powered schools. This is essential to ensure safe, inclusive, and future-ready learning environments for all learners.

According to Economic survey, only 67% schools in Pakistan have access to electricity, while underlying disparities reflect inequitable access and serious infrastructure deficit. Punjab and ICT lead in electricity access while Balochistan consistently lags, with only 33% of Balochistan's primary schools having toilet access — an indicator strongly correlated with electricity access gaps in the same districts (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2024–25). The impact on learning quality is direct and multi-dimensional. Without electricity, schools cannot use digital learning tools, overhead fans in extreme heat, or adequate lighting in winter months, all of which depress attendance and concentration. Reliable and climate-resilient educational infrastructure is equally important for lifelong and community-based learning opportunities beyond formal schooling. Reliable and climate-resilient educational infrastructure is equally important for lifelong and community-based learning opportunities beyond formal schooling.

While access to electricity has improved in Armenia over recent years, some schools, particularly in rural and remote communities, still face serious energy and heating challenges. Until recently, a number of schools continued to rely on wood or coal stoves for heating, reflecting broader inequalities in school infrastructure and public investment. Insufficient access to reliable and clean energy negatively affects the learning environment, especially during winter months, creating unsafe and unhealthy conditions for learners and teachers.

One critical and underexplored intersection between SDG 4 and SDG 7 is the thermal conditions of school buildings. Access to affordable, clean energy must include ensuring that educational facilities are energy-efficient and climate-adapted, because without adequate thermal comfort, the right to quality education cannot be guaranteed.

A recent report by Equitat.org on Catalonia's school infrastructure illustrates this urgently: over half of schools cannot guarantee adequate thermal comfort, and under current climate projections, a quarter of the school year could see temperatures exceeding 27°C by 2030. The academic impact is stark — heat stress could translate into a 7-point PISA score decrease per school year under new climate scenarios.

Yet the solution is financially within reach. Retrofitting all public schools -through energy rehabilitation, improved ventilation, natural shading and strategic cooling would cost less than €200 per student per year over 10 years. Policy actions under SDG 7 that can advance SDG 4 include:

- Mandatory climate adaptation plans for school buildings, combining energy retrofitting and renaturalisation of school grounds
- Immediate heat emergency measures (ceiling fans, natural shade, water access, strategic cooling spaces)
- A national regulatory framework setting clear temperature limits in schools to protect children's health and learning.

In Jordan, while most schools are connected to the electricity grid, strengthening the reliability and continuity of energy supply remains important to fully support digital learning, classroom technologies, and safe school operations, particularly during periods of high demand or extreme weather conditions.

Policy actions under SDG 7 can advance SDG 4 by ensuring that schools, adult learning centres, libraries, and community education spaces have reliable, affordable, and sustainable access to electricity, internet connectivity, and digital learning infrastructure. In many educational contexts, unequal access to energy continues to reinforce broader educational inequalities, particularly for rural, displaced, and under-resourced communities. Investments in renewable energy and resilient educational infrastructure can help support safer and more stable learning environments while reducing long-term operational vulnerabilities. Education systems also play an important role in advancing energy sustainability through climate literacy, environmental education, and teacher and facilitator preparation that help learners understand the relationship between sustainable energy, community resilience, and sustainable development.

SDG 4 and SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure)

Digital technologies are rapidly reshaping societies. However, there is a question over whether it does so for better or worse. Persisting issues of gender inequality are just as present in the fields of education digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) as in other fields. In an era where there is an intense push for the integration of digital technologies and AI into education and beyond, it is essential that marginalised and vulnerable learners, including women and girls, are not left behind in the transition.

Digital divides mirror social and economic gaps, accentuating the harsh realities that many learners from disadvantaged and marginalised groups are facing, particularly for women and girls, learners from low-income households, rural and remote areas, and learners with disabilities. Globally, one in three people are still offline— 70 per cent of men use the internet compared to 65 per cent of women, with 244 million more men than women online in 2023. In the Asia Pacific region, 61 per cent of women use the Internet, compared to 67 per cent of men (UNESCAP, 2023).

The discussions affirmed the findings of the UNESCO-UNEVOC Youth Survey Report on AI and Digital Skills (2025), which revealed that youth continue to face challenges with the rise of AI and digital skills learning, such as “limited reliable access,” “gaps in ethical AI use, media literacy or digital responsibility,” and “overreliance on AI technologies,” like large language models (LLM) OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Google’s Gemini, among others. These may affect one’s agency, safety and security, as well as cognitive abilities, including critical and analytical thinking, creativity, and decision-making. Youth who responded to the survey also worried about “misleading information,” “academic dishonesty”, “over-reliance” and “job displacement.”

Youth voiced their concerns about their vulnerabilities to the growing AI-driven workforce transformation and its impacts on livelihood and employment opportunities. A report revealed how 164 million workers are expected to experience disruptions from generative AI (East Asia Forum, 2025; Asia Pacific Institute & LinkedIn, 2025). ASEAN economies are vulnerable, with over 60 per cent of the region’s population considered youth, under the age of 35. There is a large number of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in the region.

The digital divide goes beyond the lack of access to digital education and learning for disadvantaged groups. The increasing and continued use of ICT in education and learning means that learners and teachers need to enhance their digital literacy, ICT skills, and critical understanding of the digital environment. This includes not only the ability to use technologies, but also the capacity to navigate misinformation, algorithmic biases, data privacy concerns, online manipulation, and the unequal power relations embedded in digital spaces. Unfortunately, not all learners are able to do so and keep up with the rapidly changing digital landscape. In the gender parity analysis of digital skills of youth, only a few countries, including Vietnam and Mongolia, have demonstrated gender parity in digital skills (UNICEF, 2023). Women in the region are 25 per cent less likely than men to have foundational digital skills and literacy (UNESCAP, 2023). In South Asia, adolescent girls are 35 per cent less likely than adolescent boys to have basic digital skills, such as sending emails or managing files.

Older learners are often largely absent from digital transition policies, despite being among the groups most affected by rapid digitalisation. As public services, communication, healthcare, banking, and learning increasingly move online, insufficient digital support for older adults risks reinforcing social exclusion, dependency, and civic marginalisation. Lifelong learning policies must therefore treat digital inclusion not only as a labour.

Formal and non-formal education play a crucial role in developing not only digital, technical, and green skills, but also critical thinking, adaptability, and the capacity to navigate complexity in an ever-evolving world. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes are increasingly aligned with industrial demand to ensure learners acquire the competencies required by evolving labor markets. Lifelong learning policies must also respond to the needs

and potentials of ageing populations, supporting continued participation in social, civic, cultural, and economic life. The transformation of the economy required to achieve carbon neutrality and protect the environment will create an urgent need to reskill and upskill adults who are already in the labour market.

Pakistan's youth bulge skills mismatch is causing lower employment chances, and the overall landscape is constrained due to weak coordination between industry, academia, and policymakers, the stigma associated with technical professions, lower access as TVET is a separate stream, and high gender disparity in access and low women's participation in STEM professions. Although several initiatives have been undertaken to promote skill-based education at national and provincial levels, the number of TVET institutions has remained almost stagnant since 2021, and 18,375 TVET institutions were reported in 2022-23 (PCE, 2025).

In Indonesia, the dominant portion of unemployment among vocational school graduates could be attributed to a failure in "connection" or linkage between industry and education in general. Furthermore, there is a factor of failure in creating job opportunities that align with the general labor conditions in Indonesia. National vocational policies still need improvement. The linkage between vocational education and training and its respective industries needs to be enhanced. National vocational policies still need improvement. The linkage between vocational education and training and its respective industries needs to be enhanced (NEW Indonesia, 2025).

In Papua New Guinea, 80% of youth are pushed out of the school system annually before completing their secondary education, with a few going on to post-secondary education. Many young people leave school without the necessary skills to find employment and need formal government support, recognition, and more pathways and opportunities for employment. TVET is thus essential for enhancing the skills and employability of young people, particularly in reducing the number of out-of-school youth. However, educational institutions do not have sufficient capacities to accommodate the whole bulge of youth in the country. The number of unemployed youths has increased with limited or no job creation by the government (PEAN, 2025).

There are emerging and evolving skill requirements, including green skills for green jobs, digital skills and digital literacies, and it will be a challenge to ensure that youth's skills development is on pace with these demands. There is a growing push for AI, digital technologies, and automation, and the way these technologies are being integrated into education is not inclusive, and so marginalised youth fall behind once again.

Catalonia offers important lessons for advancing SDG 9.c and 9.2 globally:

- Equity-first digital skills: ensuring ICT competencies reach the most marginalised learners, not just those already advantaged

- Participatory governance: involving educators, families, institutions, and international expertise in shaping digital education policy
- Rights-based frameworks: governing digitalisation in ways that protect children's wellbeing alongside promoting innovation

Meaningful progress on digital skills for all requires broad societal coalitions, and that education systems must be active shapers, not passive recipients, of digital transformation.

SDG 4 and SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities)

Access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for marginalized groups in urban settings remains uneven across many contexts. Migrant families, displaced learners, informal settlers, and other vulnerable populations often face barriers related to language, legal status, economic insecurity, housing instability, digital access, and social exclusion. In multilingual and culturally diverse cities, schools are increasingly required to support learners with varied educational backgrounds and complex social needs, often without sufficient institutional resources or specialised support.

In Jordan, access to education for marginalised urban groups has improved, particularly for registered refugees, who can enrol in public schools free of charge with UNHCR support. However, challenges remain for unregistered refugees and other vulnerable groups, who may face financial barriers, limited services, and socio-economic hardship that increase the risk of irregular attendance and dropout. Gender and protection-related factors—such as early marriage for girls and child labour for boys further affect equitable participation.

In Catalonia, civil society organisations, public authorities and schools have collectively identified significant levels of school segregation, with marginalised groups — including migrant families and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds — being disproportionately concentrated in certain schools. This unequal distribution undermines equitable access to quality education and risks entrenching cycles of social exclusion.

To address this challenge, the Government of Catalonia and the Ombudsman of Catalonia established the National Pact Against School Segregation in Catalonia in 2019, a landmark national commitment to tackling educational segregation. The Pact reaffirms the resolve of Catalan institutions to uphold an inclusive and integrative education system that guarantees equal opportunities for success for all students, irrespective of their social background or individual circumstances.

City and local governments play an important role in strengthening lifelong learning through community-based education, public libraries, vocational and technical education (TVET), adult learning programs, digital literacy initiatives, and partnerships with schools, universities, and local organisations. In Bangladesh, city and local governments are increasingly contributing to lifelong learning for all through a mix of non-formal education (NFE), technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and community-based learning initiatives.

In increasingly diverse and multilingual communities, lifelong learning pathways are also important for social inclusion, workforce participation, intercultural understanding, and community resilience. Lifelong learning is equally important for maintaining social participation, civic engagement, well-being, and meaningful community connections throughout different stages of life. However, access to these opportunities remains uneven, particularly for newcomers, displaced populations, low-income communities, and multilingual learners. Strengthening inclusive and locally responsive lifelong learning systems requires sustained investment in accessible community education, digital access, teacher and facilitator preparation, and partnerships that connect learning with local social, cultural, and economic realities.

Education is at the core of sustainable development and social inclusion. Many local governments have transformed their cities into learning cities to provide quality education in schools, community learning centres and informal settings such as libraries or cafes. Education and learning are grounded on the development plan of the city to promote people's economic, social and cultural well-being and encourage citizens' participation in development.

Education for sustainable development (ESD) provides essential competencies for urban planning, community management and climate resilience – while urban learning ecosystems strengthen innovation, civic engagement and community resilience. Education can address persistent urban-rural disparities, whilst promoting links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas, thereby contributing to more inclusive and resilient communities.

SDG 4 and SDG 17 (Partnerships)

The annual financing gap to achieve sustainable development in developing countries is estimated to range from \$2.5 trillion to \$4 trillion. This huge funding gap leaves developing countries with very few resources to invest in priority development programmes for education, healthcare, social protection, and climate action, among others. Specifically for Education, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report estimates that between 2023 and 2030, the average annual financing gap for low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve their national SDG 4 targets is placed at \$97 billion.

Globally, approximately 41% of these countries fail to meet the benchmarks of spending at least 4-6% of GDP or 15-20% of public expenditure on education. Public education expenditure actually fell by 0.4 percentage points of GDP between 2015 and 2022 - from a median spending level of 4.4% to 4%. The share of education in total public expenditure decreased by 0.6 percentage points from 13.2% in 2015 to 12.6% in 2022. (GEMR, 2024).

Libraries in many countries are facing cuts or freezes in spending, with notable examples being efforts to defund or restrict libraries in the US at the moment.

Addressing the financing gap is crucial for ensuring equitable, inclusive and quality education for all. The costs of not investing in education are colossal: each year, governments stand to lose out on US\$1.1 trillion in foregone revenue for early school leavers and US\$3.3 trillion for children without basic skills (UNESCO, 2025). With education playing a critical role in enabling progress across the SDGs, its ability to drive transformative and inclusive outcomes depends on sustained support to education systems across diverse contexts.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, a report of the Latin American Campaign on the Right to Education (CLADE) shows that, on average, countries invest 3.9% of their GDP on education, representing 16.3% of the national budget. However, the situation at the national level is very diverse in the region. While countries such as Cuba (9.4% of GDP), Bolivia (7.8%), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (7.2%), and Costa Rica (6.2%) are above the regional average, countries like Haiti (1.2%), Bermudas (1.9%) and Bahamas (2.9%) are below the average and below the international parameters.

Public education budgets are limited due to regressive taxation systems and debt services. According to a report published by CLADE, the income tax in LAC represents only 30% of what is raised with consumption tax. The same report shows that 39 billion dollars are lost annually due to tax evasion and tax avoidance in LAC. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of LAC countries who spend more on debt services than on education has doubled, caused both by an increase of debt and a decrease of public education expenditures.

A progressive taxation system, allied with international frameworks to break tax evasion and tax avoidance, as well as the fair renegotiation of debts are possible solutions to raise the adequate amount to achieve every SDG.

Education financing in countries

In **Jordan**, public spending on education increased from 1,332 million JOD in 2024 to a projected 1,560 million JOD in 2026, with its share of total public expenditure rising slightly from 11.6% to 11.95%. The sector ranks fourth in government spending, and public investment remains around 3.5% of GDP, below international benchmarks. Despite higher allocations, most funding is absorbed by salaries and operational costs (over 85%), leaving limited room for capital investment and system reform. As a result, improvements in learning outcomes, equity, and inclusion remain limited, indicating that financing has mainly sustained system continuity rather than driven transformation. Gender-responsive and equity-based financing is still weak, with no dedicated budget lines for addressing gender gaps, disability inclusion, or targeted psychosocial support. In addition, stronger financial governance, better integration of donor funding, and improved alignment with national plans are needed.

Despite constitutional protections, education financing in **Brazil** is under strain due to deep austerity budgets. The government's fiscal framework imposes a restrictive ceiling on primary spending, leading to direct cuts and creative accounting practices that effectively reduce resources for public education.

In a concerning trend, the number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that fail to meet international investment commitments (4-6% of GDP for education) doubled between 2015 and 2022.

While Brazil's total education % spending is roughly on par with the OECD average, the per-student investment tells a different story. The country spends only 31% of what wealthy OECD countries invest. This disparity is exacerbated by a unique financing model where the federal government's mandatory contribution to the main education fund is set at a minimum 23%, but experts estimate the actual need based on quality indicators is much higher.

This funding gap is quantified by the CAQ, a cost-per-student indicator developed by civil society (Brazilian Campaign) and now embedded in the constitution to ensure a minimum quality standard in public schools. A 2025 technical note revealed that an additional R\$61.3 billion is needed to meet this minimum quality standard for all Brazilian students. Alarmingly, this amount is equivalent to only 0.52% of the country's GDP, making it a feasible investment, yet it remains unmet.

In the face of these challenges, civil society and government institutions are employing a range of strategies to safeguard and protect education financing. A major success was the recent approval of the new National Education Plan (PNE 2026-2035). This 10-year plan, developed with civil society input, strategically mandates the gradual increase of public education spending

from current levels to 10% of GDP by the end of the decade. This presents a clear, long-term political target for advocacy. The Campanha Nacional pelo Direito à Educação (Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education) has been at the forefront of protecting the CAQ mechanism. The CAQ is a critical tool because it shifts the financing debate from "how much can we spend" to "how much do we need to guarantee quality," making it more difficult for the government to underfund education without clear evidence.

In **Bangladesh**, education financing has shown gradual nominal increases over time, but it remains structurally inadequate relative to SDG 4 requirements, particularly in the context of rising fiscal pressure, inflation, and competing development priorities.

While Bangladesh has maintained steady investment in education, financing remains insufficient, heavily consumption-oriented, and vulnerable to fiscal constraints. Strengthening SDG 17 partnerships, increasing domestic resource mobilization, and prioritizing equity- and quality-focused education investments are essential to protect and accelerate SDG 4 progress in the face of ongoing economic pressures.

Pakistan's education financing situation is among the most precarious in the world and is deteriorating rather than stabilizing. At just 1.9% of GDP allocated to education in FY 2024–25 — far below the UNESCO benchmark of 4–6% and the 15–20% of public expenditure benchmark — Pakistan ranks among the lowest education investors globally (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2024–25). This is not solely a resource scarcity problem; it reflects a consistent political choice to prioritize debt servicing, defence, and energy subsidies over human capital investment under successive IMF fiscal consolidation frameworks. Only 47% of public schools possess all five essential facilities simultaneously (Pakistan Education Statistics 2023–24), a direct consequence of chronic infrastructure underinvestment that no single budget cycle can rapidly reverse.

In **Catalonia**, trade unions and teacher organisations have for years denounced a chronic underfunding of the public education system. At present, thousands of teachers are engaged in a sustained wave of strikes, demanding improved working conditions, salary recovery, and greater resources for schools. Catalonia currently invests approximately 3.82% of its GDP in the sector — falling significantly short of the global benchmark. Notably, the 6% target is not merely an international aspiration; it was enshrined as a legal commitment in Catalonia's own Education Law (LEC) as far back as 2009, yet it has never been met.

In **Armenia**, education financing still remains below internationally recommended benchmarks, which particularly affects rural communities, vulnerable groups and school infrastructure. Civil

society coalitions and education movements continue to advocate for stronger public investment, fair taxation policies and the protection of education budgets as a priority for sustainable development and social justice.

Participation and Partnerships

The integration of diverse CSOs, student unions, youth, and teachers into education governance varies significantly across contexts and educational systems. In some regions, participatory approaches such as stakeholder consultations, advisory committees, school-community partnerships, youth and student engagement initiatives, and collaborative curriculum development processes are increasingly being used to inform educational planning and decision-making.

Teachers and community organisations can provide important insights into local educational realities, multilingual learners' needs, student well-being, and implementation challenges that may not always be visible within centralised policy structures. However, participation often remains consultative rather than fully collaborative.

By fostering intergenerational dialogue among learners, education professionals, civil society and decision-makers, education stimulates cooperation and partnerships that generate ideas and actions for sustainable development. Education enables diverse stakeholders to engage in cross-border collaborations, coordinate policies, support evidence-informed decision-making and mobilise resources for the SDGs.

Strengthening inclusive education governance requires sustained mechanisms for meaningful engagement, transparent decision-making processes, and greater recognition of practitioner, student unions, youth, and diverse community perspectives in educational policy, planning, budgeting and evaluation.

The responses regarding the "Leave No One Behind" (LNOB) agenda highlight a significant gap between policy intentions and practical implementation across various regions. While most respondents acknowledge the existence of policy frameworks aligned with LNOB, they identify critical barriers to their success.

Leave No One Behind Agenda in SDG 4

While many education systems have adopted policies aligned with the “Leave No One Behind” agenda, significant gaps remain between policy commitments and effective implementation. Marginalized learners, including multilingual students, displaced populations, students with disabilities, low-income communities, and other vulnerable groups, continue to experience unequal access to educational support and opportunities. In many contexts, schools and educators are expected to address increasingly complex social and educational realities without sufficient funding, staffing, or institutional resources. Although disaggregated educational data is increasingly collected in some regions, important gaps remain in how learner diversity, language backgrounds, well-being, and educational outcomes are measured and monitored. Strengthening accountability requires sustained investment, transparent monitoring systems, community participation, and locally responsive implementation strategies that move beyond policy commitments toward meaningful educational inclusion.

The LNOB is a commitment of the Agenda 2030. The EASG calls on Member States and the international community to act urgently on the LNOB gaps in SDG 4:

- **Policy vs. Implementation Gap:** Most countries have established policies targeting vulnerable groups—such as girls, learners with disabilities, and displaced populations—but these often fail to translate into meaningful inclusion due to a lack of resources and institutional capacity.
- **Chronic Underfunding:** A recurring theme is the inadequacy of education financing. Many LNOB initiatives are project-based or heavily dependent on donor support (e.g., in Nigeria, Jordan, and Armenia), which compromises their long-term sustainability.
- **Data and Accountability Weaknesses:** While disaggregated data collection is improving, it remains incomplete or underutilized for equity-focused decision-making. Accountability mechanisms are often output-focused (counting numbers) rather than impact-oriented (measuring actual inclusion and learning outcomes).

Based on the EASG survey, the following country examples provide entry points for addressing the LNOB gaps:

- **Nigeria:** Policies exist for girls' education and conflict-affected populations, but funding is inconsistent and relies on donor support. Data systems are improving but are not yet consistently used for subnational planning and there is weak coordination for accountability.
- **Pakistan:** Education financing is noted as being among the lowest in South Asia. There is a strong demand from civil society for ring-fenced budgets and gender-specific allocations. There is also a lack of disaggregated and digitised education data.

- **Jordan:** Many LNOB initiatives are project-based rather than national budget priorities. Targeted interventions for refugees and children at risk of dropout are primarily donor-funded, raising concerns about their integration into national budgets.
- **Bangladesh:** Financing and accountability systems remain "partial and uneven."
- **Latin America:** Rural and indigenous communities continue to face the greatest challenges, particularly regarding the lack of basic infrastructure like WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities.
- **USA, Haiti, and Kenya:** A stark contrast was noted; while LNOB is often publicly and privately funded in the US, students in Haiti and Kenya face arduous physical barriers just to reach school, such as long distances and river crossings.
- **Armenia:** While policies for displaced communities exist, implementation remains insufficient.

Key Recommendations for HLPF 2026

EASG's recommendations for SDG 4 and its intersection with the focus SDGs (6, 7, 9, 11, and 17) are centered on shifting education from a standalone sector to a cross-cutting engine for sustainable development.

- ***SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation):***
 - **Mandatory Standards:** Establish binding national standards for WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) in all schools, including gender-separated toilets and menstrual hygiene facilities.
 - **Infrastructure Investment:** Integrate WASH costs directly into school construction and renovation budgets, prioritizing rural and Indigenous communities.
- ***SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy):***
 - **Solar Electrification:** Scale solar-powered solutions for schools to enable digital learning and ensure safety for students and teachers, particularly in off-grid rural areas.
 - **Energy Planning:** Include energy access as a fundamental component of education infrastructure planning.
- ***SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure):***
 - **Bridging the Digital Divide:** Focus on "meaningful connectivity" that includes access, digital literacy, and safety/sovereignty, rather than just providing hardware.

- **Green Skills:** Align Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) with the needs of green and digital economies to provide equitable re-skilling opportunities.
- **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities):**
 - **Lifelong Learning:** Strengthen non-formal education and TVET pathways within cities to support marginalized groups, such as migrants and informal settlers.
- **SDG 17 (Partnerships):**
 - **Public investment to strengthen public education:** Allocate at least 4–6% of GDP and/or 15–20% of national budgets to education, guaranteeing adequate financing per learner from ECCD to adult education.
 - **Global Cooperation:** Support the UN Tax Convention to close tax havens and redirect resources to public services like education.
 - **Protect and increase aid to education, reverse recent cuts, and reaffirm education as a priority sector.** International aid must be safeguarded as a matter of global justice and cooperation to ensure that every child, youth, and adult can exercise their right to education and lifelong learning.
 - **Ensure education financing is gender transformative** and prioritises historically marginalised and underserved learners in budget allocations.
 - **Data Accountability:** Use disaggregated data (by gender, disability, and location) to ensure the "Leave No One Behind" agenda is adequately funded and tracked.
 - **Enact robust public regulation of private actors involved in essential services such as education,** ensuring strong transparency and accountability frameworks.

Transformative Actions to Accelerate the 2030 Agenda

To meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, the EASG emphasises moving beyond incremental changes toward systemic transformation:

- **Integration as a Development Engine:** Education should no longer be treated as a standalone sector. Instead, it must be the "engine" driving progress across all other SDGs, such as water, energy, and climate action.
- **Financing and Fiscal Protection:** A strategic decision that Member States must take is to protect education budgets from austerity measures.
- **Meaningful Governance and Participation:** Institutionalise the participation of civil society, teachers, student unions, and youth in policy-making and budgeting. This includes moving from simple "consultation" to "meaningful participation" where these groups have a real seat at the decision-making table.

- **Ethical Digital and AI Transformation:** Rather than seeing AI as a separate issue, it should be positioned as a sustainability and human rights issue. The **Fortaleza Declaration** is cited as a framework for ensuring that digital technology in education is rights-based and inclusive.
- **Focus on the "Furthest Behind":** Actions must prioritise marginalised groups, including girls, women, indigenous peoples, rural communities, and displaced persons. This requires using disaggregated data to make these "invisible" populations visible in national planning.

Vision for the Post 2030 Agenda

Looking beyond 2030, education is the foundational enabler of all future sustainability frameworks:

- **ESD as the Core Organizing Principle:** Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) should transition from a peripheral topic to the "backbone" of every education system.
- **Gender-Transformative Education:** The post-2030 agenda must move beyond "gender parity" in enrollment to "gender-transformative" education that actively challenges social roles and fosters equality within and through the education process.
- **Climate Justice and Resilience:** Curricula should be overhauled to include climate literacy and "systems thinking." Schools are envisioned as resilient hubs that prepare communities for environmental pressures and social fragmentation.
- **Shift in Accountability Metrics:** Future frameworks should move away from simply counting school enrollments. Instead, they should measure whether learners are developing the competencies needed for green economies and whether these translate into real-world societal impact.
- **Strengthening Democracy and Peace:** In response to rising polarisation and conflict, education must advance values of peace, human rights, and democratic participation to ensure long-term social cohesion.
- **Co-Creation:** Sustainable development requires stronger collaboration between students, teachers, researchers, academics, governments, civil society, and communities. Education systems should be shaped through inclusive co-creation and participatory governance, recognizing education as a shared foundation for achieving all dimensions of sustainable development.

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