



UNIVERSAL SECONDARY EDUCATION
IN THE ASIA PACIFIC



BARRIERS TO SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION: A SCOPING REVIEW OF FOUR COUNTRIES

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This scoping report is the final outcome of the Scottish Funding Council Global Challenge Research Fund supported **Universal Secondary Education in the Asia Pacific Region** project. The project brought together academic and non-academic partners, including international organizations and civil society networks, to explore how countries and communities in the Asia Pacific region can best respond to the Sustainable Development Goal 4 requirement of universal secondary education. The final scoping report drew from case studies in Bangladesh, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Mongolia, and the Philippines to address three research questions:

1. How are countries in the Asia Pacific region adapting to ensure that universal education is met?
2. What are the political, cultural, structural, and economic barriers to universal secondary education in the Asia Pacific region?
3. How do the barriers to secondary education intersect to further disadvantage marginalized groups in the Asia Pacific region?

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Executive Summary

The 2015 Sustainable Development Goal for education (SDG 4) sets out ambitious targets to achieve universal secondary education by 2030. While some significant progress has been made, in 2019, 91 million and 137 million children were still out of lower and upper secondary education worldwide (UNESCO, 2021). The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS, 2019) estimates that in the Asia Pacific region alone, every tenth child was out of lower secondary and every third out of upper secondary. Most of these come from a handful of lower income economies, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Pakistan, and Tuvalu, which have stubbornly high out-of-school (OOS) rates. It is unlikely that the Asia Pacific region is going to achieve universal secondary education by 2030 as complex and intersecting political, economic, structural, and cultural barriers at the individual, community and national levels marginalize some groups of children and prevent them from accessing and completing secondary education. Through the analysis of four Asia Pacific countries – Bangladesh, Lao PDR, Mongolia, and the Philippines, this report identifies key barriers (*Table 1*), that hamper national progress toward universal secondary education.

Table 1 Barriers to accessing and participating in secondary education in Bangladesh, Lao PDR, Mongolia, and the Philippines

Barriers	Bangladesh	Lao PDR	Mongolia	The Philippines
Corruption (Nepotism and Bribery)				
Geographic Remoteness & Natural Hazards				
Embedded cultural beliefs and stereotypes prejudicing some groups over others (children with disabilities, ethnolinguistic or religious minorities, males, females, and LGBTQIA+)				
Lack of Interest in and Relevance of Curriculum				
Poverty & Child Labor				
Public Spending on Education				
Registry Requirements for Internal Migrants				
School Exams				
School Infrastructure				
Teacher Development and Capacity				

While **Bangladesh** has achieved near universal primary education, secondary education is struggling significantly. The largely private secondary education system is not free, not compulsory, and progress is dependent on the successful completion of exams every two years. In addition, the lack of coordination and resources limit the outreach and effectiveness of the secondary education sector.

Initiatives which could help to address the identified barriers include greater political, economic, and structural commitment to disentangle the education sector from political interests, to make secondary education free, to update the curriculum to align more with skills required for the workforce, to provide opportunities for teacher development capacity, and

the creation of a stipend programs to help boys, similarly to the stipend program for girls, get and stay in secondary school.

Lao PDR's secondary education system is moving slowly towards attaining universal access: yet low transition to and in secondary schools, low completion rates, low net enrollment rates and low literacy rates indicate major challenges ahead. Motivation and the limited relevance of education suppresses demand. Similar to Bangladesh, parts of secondary education are not free and not compulsory.

Recommendations include, similarly to Bangladesh, to make compulsory secondary education free until grade 9, not only until grade 5, and to enhance teachers and education officials' capacity. Further, the government needs to review the curriculum to enable equality between the four main ethno-linguistic groups and it needs to raise awareness of the personal and social return to education among students, families, and communities.

Mongolia's secondary education system is rooted in its experience with socialism during the 20th century, which emphasized equal access and literacy. Building on that, the extensive legal and structural foundation of the education sector enable access to secondary education through initiatives such as free boarding schools for nomadic populations and financial incentives. Compared to the other case studies, Mongolia is closer to achieving SDG 4 targets as it has relatively higher net enrollment rates and lower OOS rates, yet barriers similar to those in the other case studies continue to persist.

To bring the last children into secondary school better data and monitoring is needed. Inconsistency in definitions and estimates decreases confidence in OOS numbers and makes identifying areas of inequity difficult. Increasing transparency and accountability can help reduce demands for informal fees and school donations which disproportionately harm poor families. Finally, boarding schools need to be regularly reviewed to ensure they are appropriate for all students and well maintained.

The Philippines also has an elaborate legal and policy framework of mainstream and alternative secondary education opportunities to fulfil its constitutional mandate to provide free and inclusive secondary education for all children and youth. Furthermore, the government has enacted laws to expand the education delivery to marginalized groups like child domestic workers, children from indigenous backgrounds or the LGBTQIA+ community, or with disabilities.

The challenges going forward are to calibrate budget expenditures and develop effective inclusion programs to reach out to all learners: those who have not made it into the system, those who have fallen out of the system and those who are struggling to stay in it. As part of those efforts, a more efficient data collection and tracking system of at-risk youth and universalizing social protection programs are required.

In **conclusion**, while an education system fully funded at identified international benchmarks and with legal protections that provide a clear right to education, compulsory education extending into the secondary level, and access granted free from formal or informal fees is essential, many of the barriers included in *Table 1* are intersecting and seemingly intractable. To address such challenges, efforts need to be collective, unwavering, and over time, with incremental progress building to long term success.

Chapter 1: Access and Barriers to Secondary Education in the Asia Pacific Region: An Introduction

William C. Smith¹ & Antonia Voigt²

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goal for education (SDG 4) laid out an ambitious plan for lifelong learning that would expand access to the earlier and later years. Prior to that, global initiatives for education had almost exclusively focused on basic or primary education (King, 2011; Wulff, 2020). Activities at UNESCO throughout the 20th century focused on basic education (Mundy, 1999), while the World Bank used their rate of return analysis to justify investments in primary education (Heyneman, 2003).

SDG 4 changed the global narrative. It recognizes that secondary education is a key gateway to higher education and additional opportunities (Tilak, 2020) and that despite gains in primary education, conversion rates to secondary education remain low (Rolleston & Iyer, 2019). With the establishment of SDG 4, countries are now encouraged to drive beyond primary education toward universal secondary by 2030. SDG targets 4.1.2 and 4.1.4 prioritize lower and upper secondary completion and out-of-school (OOS) rates, beside those of primary education. Although aid to secondary education globally saw a sharp increase between 2015 and 2018, relative to 2010 levels, it is unclear whether the support is targeting those most in need, with aid to secondary education as percent of total education aid stagnating for low-income countries, declining in Sub-Saharan Africa, and rescinding from its peak in 2014 in Central and South Asia (UNESCO, 2020a). Given the current trajectory, universal lower secondary completion is not expected to be reached in lower income countries until 2096, with upper secondary education waiting until well into the 22nd century (UNESCO, 2016).

This report explores progress toward universal secondary education, and related barriers, in the Asia Pacific region. Case studies from Bangladesh, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Mongolia, and the Philippines provide insights into the complex, context-dependent barriers that are stymying access in the region. The conclusion chapter provides a synthesis of challenges, highlighting similarities and differences across case studies, and pointing to potential areas for mitigation and action. The remainder of this chapter provides a global illustration and regional overview of the scope of the challenge through an analysis of OOS rates, before highlighting some common barriers to access.

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Secondary Access Globally and in the Asia Pacific Region

There are two key stages involved in widening access: firstly, getting children into the classroom, measured through enrollment and OOS rates, and secondly, ensuring they complete the school cycle, measured using completion rates. Data from UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics (UIS) suggests that enrollment and OOS rates usually have a strong inverse relationship, however, OOS rates show more obviously the gap that still needs to close to achieve SDG 4 targets. Therefore, we are using OOS rates as an indicator for the state of access to secondary schooling globally, regionally, and within the Asia Pacific region.

In the past two decades, the world made some progress to get children into secondary schools. OOS numbers fell by almost 40% from 99 million to 61 million for lower secondary school-aged children, and by 22% from 177 million to 137 million for upper secondary school-aged children (UNICEF, 2021). However, an overwhelming number of children are still out of school. These global totals are heavily skewed toward lesser developed and economically poorer geographic regions. The UIS estimates that in 2019, one in three children in Sub-Saharan Africa were out of lower secondary, compared to one in 100 in Northern America (Figure 1.1). The Asia Pacific region sits in the middle of these extremes with about 10% and 30% of lower and upper school-aged children out of school.

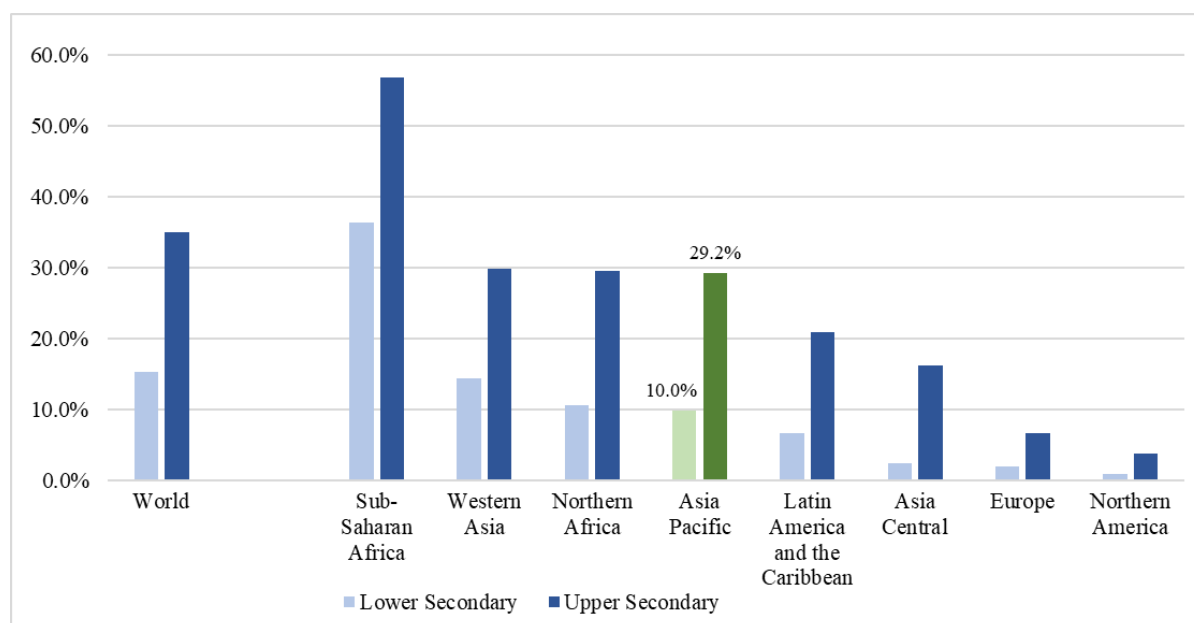


Figure 1.1 Lower and Upper Secondary OOS Rates for the World and Regions.

Overall, OOS rates in the Asia Pacific region have been dropping (Table 1.1). In lower secondary, they dropped in 64% of countries while they rose in only 29%. In two upper-middle- and high-income economies, the male and female OOS rates moved in opposite directions. In Thailand, from 2007 to 2009, the *female* rate rose from 2.0% to 3.1% while the *male* rate fell from 5.8% to 4.0%. Contrary, in Nauru, from 2014 to 2019, the *male* rate rose from 7.6% to 13.5% while the *female* rate fell from 9.1% to 3.5%. In upper secondary, most countries (83%) experienced a decrease in OOS rates. Only five upper-middle- and high-income economies – Australia, Brunei, Nauru, Marshall Islands and Tonga – experienced minor rises.

Table 1.1 Patterns of OOS Rates and Income Economies across Lower and Upper Secondary (out of 45 countries)

Economy \ Trend	Dropping	Rising	Opposite	Total
<i>Lower Secondary</i>	18	8	2	28
Low and Lower-Middle Income Economies	12	1		13
Upper-Middle and High Income Economies	6	7	2	15
<i>Upper Secondary</i>	25	5		30
Low and Lower-Middle Income Economies	14			14
Upper-Middle and High Income Economies	11	5		16

Notes: Data not available for lower secondary in 17 countries and for upper secondary in 15 countries.

While OOS rates were largely falling, gender gaps and parities were more resistant to change (Table 1.2). In lower secondary, the gender gap was closing in 43% of cases, while it was widening in 29%. However, in upper secondary, the gender gap widened in every second country and only narrowed in one of four. In lower and upper secondary, the gender parity has a 1:2:4 ratio: for every country with equal gender parity, two had higher females OOS rates and four had higher male OOS rates.

Table 1.2 Gender Gap and Gender Parity Trends in OOS Rates across Lower and Upper Secondary (out of 45 countries)

Parity \ Gap	Widening	Closing	Steady/None	Inconclusive	Total
<i>Lower Secondary</i>	8	12	4	4	28
Female	1	3	2	2	8
Male	7	6	1	2	16
Same		3	1		4
<i>Upper Secondary</i>	15	8	5	2	30
Female	3	3		2	8
Male	10	4	4		18
Same	2	1	1		4

Notes: Data not available for lower secondary in 17 countries and for upper secondary in 15 countries.

Based on their historic annual rates of change between 2000 and 2020, most Asia Pacific countries will have OOS rates above 1% in 2030 (Figure 1.2). Six countries – Afghanistan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Tuvalu – could still have upper secondary OOS rates above 30%.

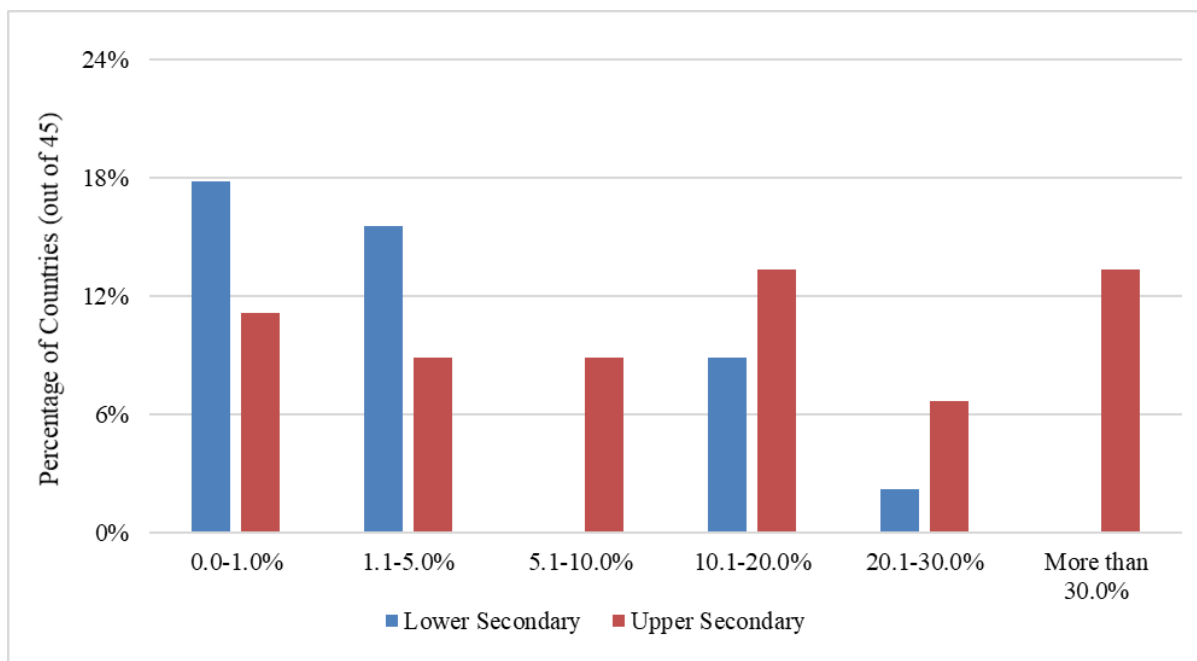


Figure 1.2 Projected OOS Rates in the Asia Pacific Region by 2030

The 2016 Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2016) projected that globally universal lower and upper secondary *completion* could be achieved by 2059 and 2084, respectively. However, if Asia Pacific countries continue their historic annual rates of decline, Bangladesh and Lao PDR would not even achieve universal lower secondary *enrollment* by 2059, nonetheless completion. Similarly, one in four Asia Pacific countries would not be able to achieve universal upper secondary *enrollment* by 2084.

Barriers to Access

A range of obstacles persist that prevent universal access to secondary education. Barriers are factors which “inhibit agentic opportunities” (Hague, 2014, p. 21). In this report barriers include any factors or obstacles which constrain or bar access to formal educational opportunities. As an initial framework to guide this report, barriers can roughly be situated into four categories: political, economic, structural, and cultural.

Political Barriers to Access

Political barriers include barriers present due to political tensions or government action or inaction as reflected in the political environment and national laws. Multiple subcategories are included as political barriers, including legal, regulatory, administrative, and bureaucratic obstacles. The legal right to education is an important first step in any country. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child “state parties recognize the right of the child to education...on the basis of equal opportunity” (article 28). This includes making primary education free and available to all and progressively making the different forms of secondary education available and accessible to all.

Yet, while all countries have signed onto an international declaration in support of the right to education, within countries issues of justiciability, legal standing, and awareness remain. The

Right to Education Project's (2017) analysis of 196 country constitutions found that 82% of countries had included the right to education in their constitution, but only 55% of countries have a justiciable right to education, permitting citizens to take the government to court for rights violations.

The construction of the law and its implementation may still exclude “targeted segments of the population from full participation” (UNDP, 2012, p. 192), including migrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups (Sobane et al., 2018). This is done at times through procedural barriers which prohibit some children from enrolling in schools. Requiring proof of residency and the presentation of a birth certificate for enrollment are common practices that often act as barriers. Examining the presence of birth certificates across 94 countries, Bhatia and colleagues (2017) found that less than half of children under the age of 5 had birth certificates in 36 countries. Birth certificate coverage varied by region with 65% of births in East Asia and the Pacific registered with a certificate, but only 50% in South Asia and 27% in Eastern and Southern Africa.

The right to education in countries is also reflected in compulsory education laws. Historically, when compulsory education laws are present, they tend to focus on the lower levels of education. Globally, by the end of the 20th century, 170 out of 186 countries with available information had a compulsory education law in place with 43% limited to primary education and only 24% extending to ten or more years of education (UNESCO, 1998). At the beginning of the SDGs in 2015 the percentage of countries making at least ten years of education compulsory had increased to 47% (UNESCO, 2016).

Unfortunately, the existence of a law can be undermined by a political environment that does not adequately invest in education or that fosters or dismisses acts of corruption. Across 141 countries with data from 2014 to 2018, approximately one-third failed to reach either international benchmark for spending on education (at least 4% of GDP and at least 15% of total public expenditure, UNESCO, 2020b). Regionally, Eastern and South-East Asia dedicate less to education, spending, on average, 3.6% of GDP and allocating 11% of total public expenditure to education (UNESCO, 2020b). Tax revenue is the major source of domestic financing. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and others suggests that a tax-to-GDP ratio of 20% is a minimum requirement for reaching universal education (Archer & Muntasim, 2020). Unfortunately, while the ratio sat at 25.5% in developed countries in 2015, many developing regions remain well below that benchmark. For instance, the South Asian and Western Asian region have the lowest tax-to-GDP ratio, with the latter's rate staying well below 10% with no change since 2000 (UN, 2019). Corruption can diminish the impact of available funds by reducing government capacity and efficiency and can be found throughout the education delivery cycle (Shayan, 2015). Efficiency in expenditure has been associated with improved access, especially for girls, with enrollment increasing when corruption is low and the rule of law is present (Sommer & Fallon, 2020).

Economic Barriers to Access

Economic barriers include those present due to the direct and indirect costs associated with accessing education. School fees have been rightly focused on as a key barrier to accessing education. Fees can include both formal, direct costs such as those associated with tuition, exams, and books and more informal fees associated with activities such as transportation and meals (Sobane et al., 2018). While many countries claim to be fee-free during most of the

compulsory years of schooling, in practice families often have to pay. This can be reflected, in part, by examining household expenditure on education. Countries that fail to invest sufficiently in education tend to shift the responsibility to families. In countries such as Guatemala, Jamaica, Benin, Gambia, Uganda, and Tajikistan, household expenditure accounts for over half of all education spending in the country (UNESCO, n.d.).

Although informal fees often remain, the removal of formal fees associated with tuition can have a large impact on expanding access. In looking historically across seven countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Iscan and colleagues (2015) found that the presence of school fees was associated with a 17% reduction in primary school enrollment with especially large effects found in Malawi (64% reduction) and Uganda (60% reduction).

Total school fees can be part of a family's cost-benefit analysis with the calculus ultimately deciding whether attending school is worth it. Travel costs, including distance to school and safety en route to school can play a part (UNDP, 2012), as can the overall perceived quality of education (Sunal et al., 2003) and access to sufficient employment (Hedges et al., 2016). When the personal or family benefits to education are low, the opportunity costs – the costs associated with the time it takes to attend education instead of pursuing other activities – may be high. In such situations families may feel it is best to keep children home to help financially support the household, as is the case in some families in Bangladesh and India (Nesterova & Young, 2020).

Structural Barriers to Access

Structural barriers include those that result from the structure and processes of the education system. These are often closely tied to the national investment in education which can limit available resources. In some areas schools may be missing or not constructed to meet the needs of potential students. For example, a lack of mobile schools may limit access for more nomadic populations (Derrington & Kendall, 2007), while a lack of universal design can make schools inaccessible for students with disabilities (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Lack of teachers can also dissuade attendance. Teacher salaries and compensation make up the largest share of national budgets on education, with over 80% allocated toward teacher salaries in some countries (World Bank, 2017). Still, in many countries a lack of teachers leads to overcrowded classrooms. And just because a teacher is present does not mean they have been trained, effecting the quality of education available. Across available data only 58% of lower secondary teachers and 43% of upper secondary teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa were trained in 2018. Percentages in Central and South Asia were better at 78% and 81%, but still below the global average (UNESCO, 2020b). The difference between pupil-teacher ratio and pupil-trained teacher ratio can be substantial. In Bangladesh, the secondary school pupil-teacher ratio of 35 to 1 balloons to 53 to 1 as only 66% of teachers are trained (UNESCO, 2020b).

Absence of representation in the classroom, through limited diversity of teachers and curriculum, can be a barrier to access, as some children may not feel welcomed at school. In parts of Afghanistan less than 5% of teachers are female (Shayan, 2015) and in India teachers from scheduled castes are below the 16% share in the national population (UNESCO, 2020b). Textbooks can also reinforce stereotypes and limit opportunity. Children with disabilities are rarely discussed or represented in textbooks (UNESCO, 2020b) and females only represent

24.4% and 37.3% of characters in English textbooks in Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectfully (Islam & Asadullah, 2018).

Exit exams are a structural barrier that is often tied to the compulsory education law of the country. Exit exams in many countries have high stakes, dictating who can proceed to the next level of education or limiting options for further education. In a 2013 review by Hill of 21 education systems in the Asia Pacific region, 1 in 3 had an exit exam at the end of primary education and 3 in 4 had an exit exam at the end of lower secondary. While Cambodia has eliminated some of their exit or leaving exams (Bredenburg, 2018), many countries, such as Vietnam, maintain exams that decide places in upper secondary (Rolleston & Iyer, 2019). In Uganda, 55% of students in 2014 were excluded from government secondary schools following results of the primary school leaving exam (Smith, 2018).

Cultural Barriers to Access

Cultural barriers to access include barriers resulting from societal norms, values, and beliefs. They tend to be deeply engrained in a community and can be reflected in linguistic and religious preferences. Language of instruction can dissuade attendance as those taught in a language other than their mother tongue may find it difficult to continue (Momo et al., 2019). Religious practices can direct appropriate behavior, including who should be educated and what education should be available. For example, in parts of Afghanistan, girls are only allowed to attend Madrasa and learn religious subjects (Shayan, 2015).

Discrimination in education, and the broader community, is often an expression of stereotypical expectations of different groups. While gender roles differ by context, in many situations females are expected to be caregivers and responsible for the home while males are expected to help provide financially. In India, this may explain part of the bias in spending money to send boys to school (Kaul, 2018), while girls are more likely to have increased domestic chores (Nesterova & Young, 2020). The presence of dowries and prevalence of teenage marriage intersects with gender expectations. The amount of the dowry may be greater for parents than the perceived return for educating their daughter (Tanye, 2008). Overall, teen marriage is not rare. Globally, more than one in five women between the age of 20 and 24 were married before age 18 (UNESCO, 2020b). If teen marriage results in teen pregnancy, it can further reinforce the stereotype that the women's place is in the home, not school.

Cultural biases and discrimination can make the school grounds a dangerous and violent place for some students. Across 144 countries, 32% of school going youth reported being bullied at least once in the past month with those perceived to be 'different' more likely to be bullied (UNESCO, 2019). In most regions – including Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Americas, and the Western Pacific – boys aged 12 to 17 are slightly more likely to be bullied than girls (Biswas et al., 2020). In Asia 30.3% of the same age group reported being bullied and 32.8% reported being physically attacked. In the Pacific, the associated percentages were 36.8% and 46.4% (UNESCO Bangkok, 2018).

Other Considerations

The barriers to secondary education do not occur in isolation but are complex and intersecting. While the above framework tries to lay out a useful typology to start an initial

conversation, in reality, barriers bleed across category borders. Family preference for sending boys to school in some context can represent both a cultural and economic barrier. Lack of female teachers in the school creates structural problems that may result from political barriers, lack of investment, and reinforce cultural barriers, gender expectations for girls.

Barriers can exist at the macro (national, international), meso (school, community), or micro (households, individuals) level. Compulsory education laws that only support education through primary are an important macro level barrier to secondary education. Local politicians requesting informal school fees would be a meso level barrier. Again, the latter example demonstrates how difficult it is to single out and disentangle barriers, as local corrupt practices are likely to be emboldened in a permissive political environment (macro level).

Heading into our case studies three things are clear. First, the world, and the Asia Pacific region, are a long way away from reaching universal secondary education. Second, this is likely due, in part, to a range of formal and informal political, economic, structural, and cultural barriers. And lastly, the presence, impact, and interaction of such barriers are shaped by the context in which the education system is placed.

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Chapter 2: Barriers to Secondary Education in Bangladesh

Manjuma Akhtar Mousumi³

Bangladesh Data Summary

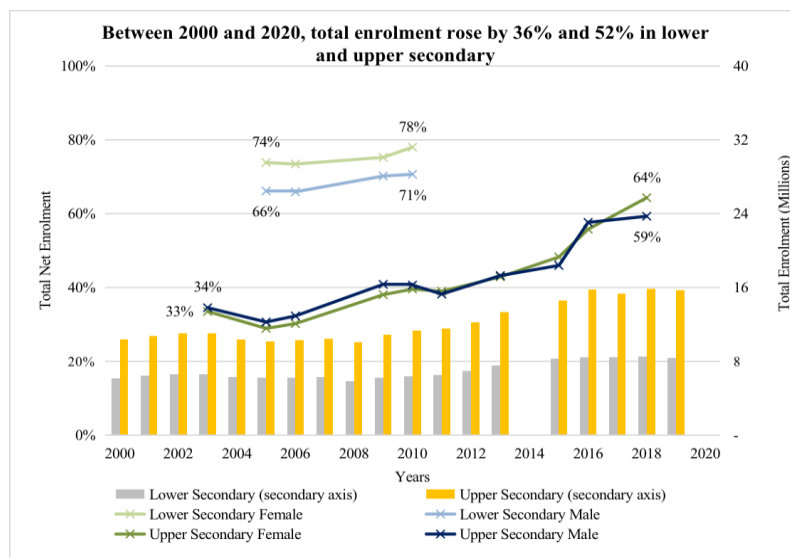


Figure 2.1 Total and Total Net Enrolment Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

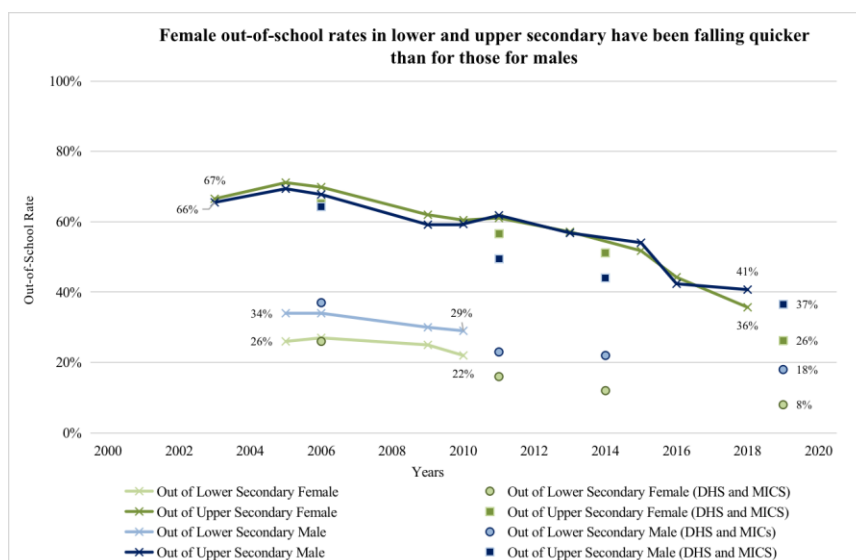


Figure 2.2 Out-of-School Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

Highlights

- Minimal investment in education, globally above only the Central African Republic in % of GDP dedicated to education
- Less than one-third of students that start secondary complete the grade 10 exam
- Rural areas are less likely to contain government or private schools
- Lack of trained teachers undermines parents' confidence
- Traditional values and social norms increase the vulnerability of girls, raising the likelihood of sexual abuse and early marriage

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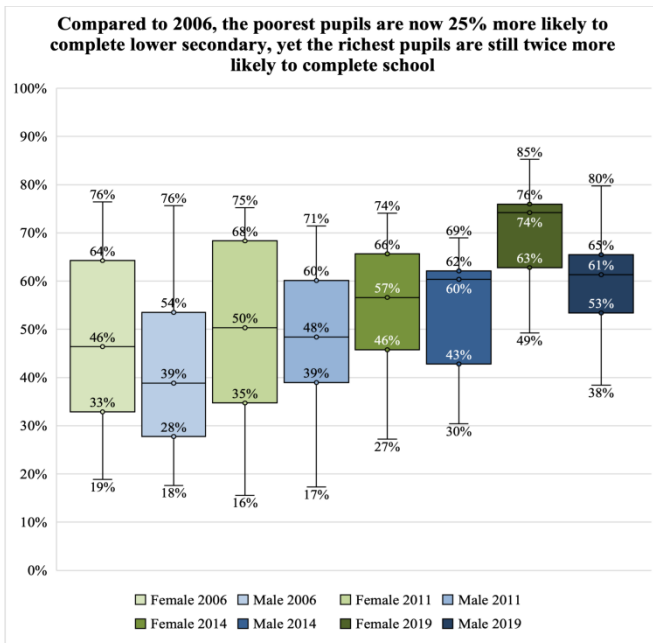


Figure 2.3 Lower Secondary Completion Rates by Wealth and Gender: 2006-2019.

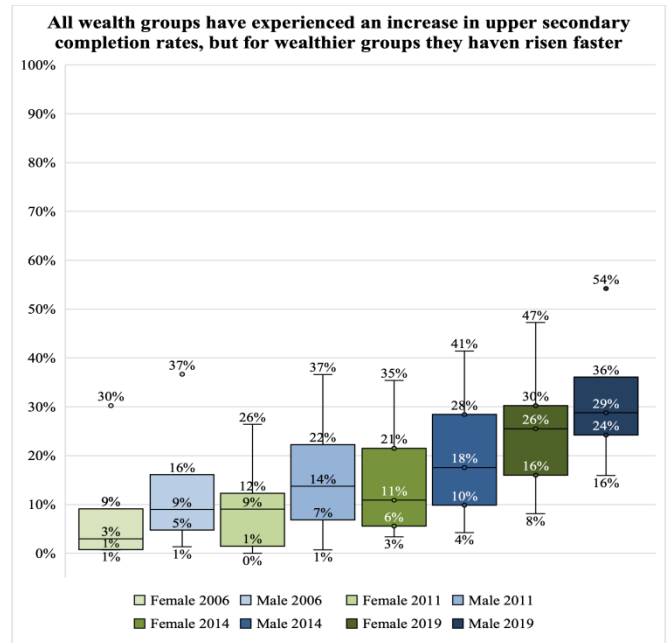


Figure 2.4 Upper Secondary Completion Rates by Wealth and Gender: 2006-2019.

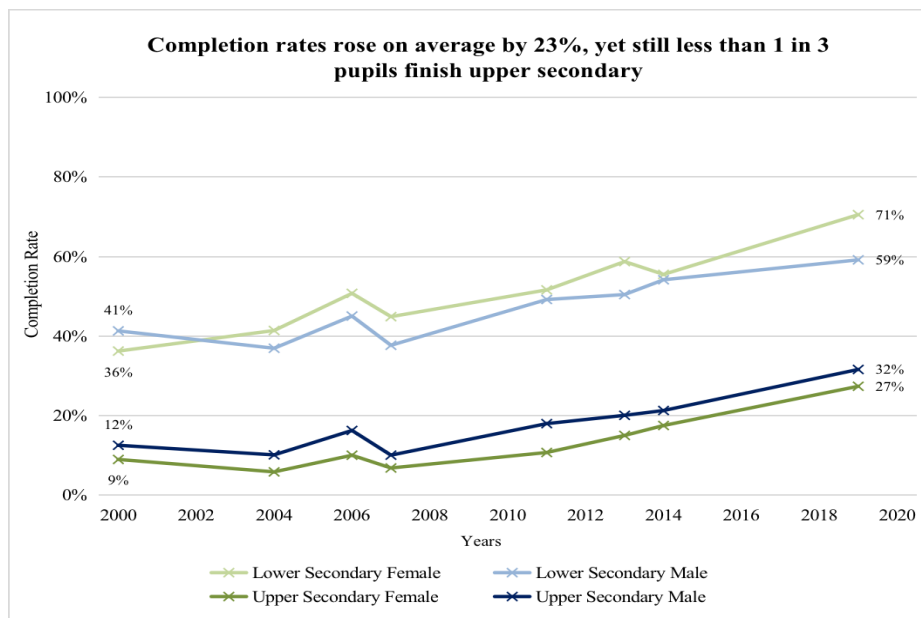


Figure 2.5 Completion Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

Recommendations

- Expand free, compulsory education to grade 8, as stated in the 2010 National Education Policy
- Provide time-bound, specific targets to meet national goals on inclusion and equity
- Make the teacher recruitment process more transparent to reduce nepotism
- Create a stipend program for boys, modeled after the Female Stipend Program

Historical Context of Secondary Education in Bangladesh

Present-day Bangladesh was part of greater Bengal in Northeast India until 1947. It inherited its education system from British-India (1612-1947) and schools in Bangladesh are shaped by the complex mix of colonial heritage, traditional Bengali culture, global changes, and Islamic influence (Thornton, 2006). Between 1832 and 1855, the British established 12 Zila schools and three collegiate schools (public schools) in present-day Bangladesh. However, the beginning of mass education and the first initiative to establish an education system in Bengal began only with “Wood’s Education Despatch” written by Charles Wood of the East India Company in 1854. The pedagogical content of secondary schools was prescribed by the British Crown and the schools were strict to follow learning exercises and schedules, or regulations directed by the British rulers (Rahman et al., 2010).

After independence from British rule, Bangladesh became the eastern provincial wing of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Historically, East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) enjoyed higher rates of gross enrollment in primary and secondary education compared to West Pakistan (present-day Islamic Republic of Pakistan). In 1961, the literacy rate (for the population aged 5 years and older) of East Pakistan was 19.9%, whereas West Pakistan’s literacy rate was 14.4% (Asadullah, 2010). However, East Pakistan’s share of central government development expenditure remained as low as 20% despite having 60% of the population during the said period and generating internal revenues. Thus, schools in East Pakistan remained poorly resourced, and there was a regional divide in school facilities between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. After proclaiming independence in 1971, Bangladesh briefly adopted a policy of nationalization of private schools to better align with the national constitution that mandated provision of basic education to its citizens. In the early 1980s, Bangladesh opened the primary and secondary education sectors to private participation again to promote school-based management and teacher empowerment. Moreover, due to the government’s limited resource capacity, it encouraged and continues to encourage the private sector to cooperate with the government to play an active role in providing secondary education (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2021; Rahman et al., 2010). Since the 1990s, primary education has grown steadily, which has resulted in a concomitant expansion in the number of schools, teachers, and enrollment at the secondary level. As of 2016, the majority (92.54%) of secondary schools are privately managed, with 7.46% government managed (BANBEIS, 2016). Most private schools at the secondary level are highly dependent on government aid for teacher salaries, and to receive support for capital and some operational expenditures. In such schools, teachers receive monthly pay orders (MPO), which amount to 90% of their salaries, with schools providing the remaining 10%. As a result, the government holds substantial control over teacher recruitment in private schools.

Secondary education consists of grades 6 to 12 for children aged 11 to 17 years. The substages of secondary education are divided into a 3 + 2 + 2 format, starting with junior secondary from grades 6 to 8, secondary stage comprises of grades 9 and 10, and higher secondary or college consists of grades 11 and 12. Secondary education and higher education are offered in three streams – general, technical-vocational, and madrasa. Within general education, students in grades 9 and 10, choose subjects from science, humanities, or business studies and take compulsory subjects from these clusters. Students choosing the business studies or humanities cluster are not allowed to pursue science subjects later in their course of studies. However, counterparts from science are free to move to any cluster to further their education.

At the secondary level, students need to pass three national examinations, which allow transition to the next substage: the Junior School Examination at the end grade 8, Secondary School Certificate examinations at the end of grade 10, and Higher Secondary Certificate examinations at the end of grade 12.

Legal Context of Secondary Education

Since the 1972 constitution, Bangladesh has a legal foundation which guarantees some rights to education. The three key articles are Article 17 (free and compulsory education for all children), Article 19 (equality of opportunity for all), and Article 28 (no discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, birthplace, or disability). In addition, recent international and national policies and plans aim to develop the state of education further. Bangladesh is a signatory to the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Education 2030 Framework for Action, which set out targets and seek to enable countries to provide lifelong learning opportunities for all, children and adults. Similarly, in the 2010 National Education Policy, Vision 2021 and Vision 2041, Bangladesh aims to achieve universal access to education, improve gender equality at all levels of education, and increase the adult literacy rate to 100% by 2031.

Yet, unlike primary education, which is free and compulsory, secondary education is not. Most government-aided private institutions collect tuition similar to public institutions. Fully private institutions, however, set their rates independently, and, while the rates vary, the amount tends to be very high (UNESCO, 2007).

Access to Secondary Education: Recent History

At the secondary level, about two-thirds of all enrolled students are in Bangla-medium schools (general education provided by both state and non-state actors); some 30% are in Alia (government supported) and Quomi (unregistered, unsupported, and autonomous) madrasas, and around 5% are in English schools (private, using both national and international curricula). Bangladesh has near universal enrollment in primary schools with approximately 95% of children aged 6 to 11 enrolled. However, not all complete this stage, and only about 70% of secondary school aged children are in education (Ahmed, 2018b). Transition from primary to secondary education is based on satisfactory examination results. From 2011 to 2017, the transition rate from primary to secondary school improved from 95.5% to 96.2%. Similarly, from 2009 to 2018, the total number of students enrolled in secondary level steadily increased from 7.4 million to 10.4 million. Yet, a gradual dropout pattern is also seen across grades 6 to 10 of secondary schooling, particularly between grades 6 and 8 (Habib and S. Hossain, 2018). Due to high dropout, less than a third of secondary pupils originally enrolled complete their grade 10 Secondary School Certificate (Ahmed et al., 2016).

Initiatives to Improve Access to Secondary Education

Since the 1980s, the government of Bangladesh has taken a series of initiative to address a range of quality, access, and equity issues in secondary education. This section briefly discusses some of these in order of importance including the Female Stipend Programme (FSP), the Secondary Education Development Program, the Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project (SEQAEP), the two Teaching Quality Improvement in

Secondary Education Projects (TQI-SEP), exams reforms, and fiscal incentives to modernize the madrasa education system.

Female Stipend Programme

In 1994, the government of Bangladesh, with the help of donor agencies, started the FSP at the junior secondary and secondary level that emphasized raising the female literacy rate and ensuring female participation for social and economic development. It was seen as a way to achieve gender parity in enrollment and retention of girls, delaying their marriage and motherhood, and increasing their income-earning potential (Ahmed et al., 2007). As a conditional cash transfer program, FSP introduced a uniform stipend and tuition subsidy for each girl attending a secondary school in rural areas who satisfied the following eligibility criteria: (i) attended 75% of school days, (ii) attained some level of measured academic proficiency (45% in class-level test scores), and (iii) remained unmarried until completion of the grade 10 Secondary School Certificate Examination. Once a school participates in the program, all female students satisfying these criteria are eligible to receive a specified stipend amount and other allowances as prescribed for each grade, and cash is transferred directly to a bank account in the name of girls who attend school (Khandker et al., 2021). In addition to the FSP, there are tuition fee waiver for female students and merit-based scholarships provided to both boys and girls.

Secondary Education Development Program

The Secondary Education Development Program was developed in 1998 and extended in 2013. The two projects under this program, the Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (1998-2006) and Secondary Education Sector Development Program (2007-2013), aimed at improving and strengthening the secondary education system and was funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). They concentrated on widening access and equity, reducing dropout rate, enhancing quality, improving the curriculum, and strengthening management of secondary education (ADB, 2011). Between 2013 and 2023, the Secondary Education Sector Investment Program is being undertaken to achieve a more relevant secondary education in terms of quality, efficiency, and equity through developing the secondary education sector as a whole.

The Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project

The SEQAEP (2008-2017) was conceived in response to mounting pressure on the government to expand and improve post-primary education to enhance labor productivity and accelerate economic growth. This project worked on a range of areas including education quality, improving equity and access, strengthening institutional capacity, and monitoring and evaluation (World Bank, 2018).

Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project

The first and second Teaching Quality Improvement (TQI) projects, TQI (2005-2012) and TQI II (2012-2017), were part of the overall Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP) program, which was also funded by the ADB. The purpose was for teachers to be trained on various aspects of inclusive education including pedagogical knowledge, curriculum flexibility, and disability and diverse learning needs of secondary school students.

Exam Reforms: School Based Assessment System

In 2007, the government implemented the School Based Assessment System to improve the quality of education. Students are assessed in attendance and interest in learning, evaluation, assignment (individual and in group), manners, values and honesty, presentation (individual and group discussion), leadership quality, discipline, participation in cultural activities, competency in sports, and on their practical class in science.

Fiscal Incentives for Modernizing Madrasa Education System

In 1980, the government introduced programs to modernize the madrasa education system through a curriculum reform. The modernization scheme introduced secular subjects, such as English, Bangla, science, and math, along with religion-related subjects. Madrasas that accepted these changes in the curriculum received government recognition and were qualified for public subsidies that financed teacher salaries similar to secular schools (Asadullah and Choudhury, 2009). Previously madrasas used to serve only male students; however, after the government introduced fiscal incentives for modernizing the curriculum and increasing the share of female students, madrasas started enrolling female students. Thanks to these initiatives, madrasas have become a significant component of Bangladesh's secondary education sector, comparable to the vocational/technical stream (Global Partnership for Education, 2020). However, madrasas at the primary and secondary levels are less endowed with physical facilities and teachers. Student attendance, continuation, and completion rates are also lower compared to rates found in non-madrasa schools (Ahmed, 2018a).

Effects of the Initiatives

The three projects, namely the Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project, the Secondary Education Development Program, and TQI-SEP, have led to significant improvements in secondary education, particularly in the field of curriculum, assessment (through introduction of creative questions), training of teachers, the introduction of an Educational Management Information System and school performance monitoring (Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, 2017). FSP also accelerated girls' participation in secondary education. However, from a policy perspective it is worth noting that the Secondary Education Development Program does not directly address some major national policy objectives, such as providing universal quality secondary education for all by 2030, a stated target of SDG 4, or instituting a common core curriculum for all secondary level institutions, as anticipated in the 2010 National Education Policy.

Remaining Barriers to Secondary Education

Political Barriers

Education in Bangladesh is underfunded. Within South Asia, the country has the second lowest education budget and the lowest allocation for education as a share of the gross domestic product (GDP) and of the national budget. In 1990, the education budget was 1.6% of GDP. Since 2000, government spending on education accounts for 14.4% of the national budget, which corresponds to a share of around 2% of GDP (World Bank, 2016). Yet, in 2019, only 1.3% of GDP was dedicated to education, placing Bangladesh only above the

Central African Republic globally, based on most recent data, in spending on education (World Bank, 2020). In addition to the small budget, a lack of strong political commitment to provide equitable education, hinders progress on a uniform curriculum and common standards. The Education Law, which was prepared to act as a legal basis for education related work, is still in the form of a draft paper. A number of national education commission and committee reports go unnoticed by the party in power as each commission report was prepared in alignment with the party's election manifesto. For instance, sometimes the alliance parties, especially the hardline Islamist party, discourage girls from attending the general education stream and promote madrasa education or no education at all (The Daily Star, 2019). Although all institutions at the secondary level are under the responsibility of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, responsibility for actual implementation and management lies with the division, district and sub-district local government offices at junior and higher secondary levels. There is a lack of coordination among these governmental bodies. Thus, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education is often unable to ensure quality education and a common framework is unavailable. For example, the 2010 National Education Policy states that education should be free and compulsory until grade 8. However, this has yet to be realized.

Corruption can also shape which schools have access to resources and who can pursue an education. Sometimes non-government schools receive MPO status based on personal choice, political connection and for political gain, which results in schools being included on the MPO list based on politics instead of performance (Deabnath, 2008). This has adverse effects on better performing schools as they are often ignored and may not receive sufficient attention for access, retention, and ensuring quality education. Furthermore, as the 2017/2018 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2017) noted, "about 40% of district and sub-district primary education officers admitted to making 'speed payments' to accounts officers to be repaid for certain types of expenditure. These illicit payments were not visible in expenditure records or identifiable in institution audits" (p. 270). A Transparency International Bangladesh study conducted by Mulcahy (2015) found that nepotism and political affiliations are common factors influencing the recruitment and training of teachers in Bangladesh and one of the main sources of corruption in the education sector. The potential of teachers coercing parents into paying for private tutoring may dissuade parents from sending their children to secondary school. Similarly, during the admission to secondary schools, students may be asked for a bribe for admissions, which exacerbates the access issue (Choe et al., 2013; Haider, 2018).

Structural Barriers

Children living in geographically remote and isolated places such as char (river islands), haor (wetlands), slums, disaster prone areas (Ahmed et al., 2007), specific areas dedicated for brothel operation, and tea gardens often face difficulties in accessing education. These disadvantaged areas are deprived of government health care and education facilities and private sector alternatives are limited. Other significant structural barriers, especially for girls, are: a lack of cooperation from local communities, non-cooperation from the School Management Committee, inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and menstrual hygiene facilities, lack of separate toilets, and an un-safe school environment. Altaf Hossain & Zeitlyn (2010) found that due to poverty and the absence of a comparable program, like the FSP, boys generally have difficulties accessing secondary education or discontinue to provide financial support for their families. Moreover, most government and private schools are in urban areas with better facilities hence, rural or disadvantaged areas are deprived of resources

which may disinterest parents from sending their children to schools. In addition, Bangladesh's education system suffers from a lack of teachers with professional training, adequate knowledge in their subjects and pedagogical skills in secondary schools (General Economics Division, 2020). As a result, parents who can afford it, send their children to private tutoring (Pallegedara & Mottaleb, 2018), as students and parents have little faith in what goes on in schools (Ahmad et al., 2006).

Cultural Barriers

There are quite a few cultural barriers faced by boys and girls. However, girls face disproportionately more challenges than boys to get and stay in school. Girls' participation in school is at its highest in primary school and declines thereafter as they hit puberty (Banu et al., 2018). Despite incentives such as free tuition and stipends, a large proportion of girls drop out from grade 5, due to cultural and economic barriers including distance from home to a secondary school (Ahmed et al., 2007). According to a study conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) in 2015, early marriage, teasing, negligence of girls' education from community leaders, social superstitions, religious misconceptions, social security, and disinterest of parents educating their girl child are some of the present challenges to girls' secondary education. Other barriers include, traditional values and social norms, lack of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health (Sosale et al., 2019), and school-based violence. For instance, in the first three months of 2019, the Bangladesh Children's Rights Forum reported that at least 15 students had been raped in schools by teachers or staff members (Hasan, 2019).

Economic Barriers

While the political, cultural, and structural barriers are significant, poverty is the main barrier to accessing secondary education. As boys from poor households need to engage in income-generating activities at an early age, it is often difficult for them to access secondary education and those who are enrolled are more likely to eventually dropout (Ahmed et al., 2007). Similarly, although the government has taken several initiatives to eliminate child-marriage, it is still a long-standing challenge. Marrying off girls at an early age is a way poor households reduce the family's education expenses (Bajracharya et al., 2019). Furthermore, economically disadvantaged households face difficulties in accessing private tutoring (Pallegedara & Mottaleb, 2018) commonly required for the national examinations, due to the lack of adequately trained teachers (Ahasan, 2017), and hence may discontinue or experience difficulty in getting their children enrolled in secondary education.

Intersection of Barriers: Who is Marginalized and Left Behind?

Most of the groups mentioned in the structural, cultural, and economic barrier sections above experience similar as well as unique stereotyping based on gender, identity, and ethnicity. Children who face consistent and concerning patterns of exclusion are first-generation learners, children with disabilities and other special needs, street children, transgender, ethnic minorities, children living in slums and in tea gardens, and children of sex workers and nomadic populations (Ahmed et al., 2007; Nath 2010). It is also not uncommon for children to face a double disadvantage. For instance, a girl child with a disability from a poor socio-economic background is most likely to live in precarious conditions and to face heightened

risk of being deprived of education and other basic services. The issue of transgender is also significant as despite the official recognition as a third gender (Adnan Hossain, 2017), they are faced with extreme discrimination, are doubly disadvantaged, and still find it very hard to access any type of education.

However, when in school, some of the aforementioned groups of children face greater barriers to continue than others. Due to the dominance of Bangla in schools, children from ethnic minority communities often lag behind and usually dropout due to the language disadvantage. Unsurprisingly, ethnic minority communities have the lowest literacy rate in Bangladesh (Relief Web, 2011). Likewise, children, especially girls, who drop out after grade 9, usually enter formal or informal employment markets with just a minimum ability to read or write (ADB, 2015; Banu et al., 2018). Despite increases in enrollment, girls in Bangladesh are less likely to complete secondary school, gain an academic qualification, study subjects that have a good marketable value, or move on to paid employment (Altaf Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010).

Recommendations

With regard to SDG 4 targets of universal and free secondary education, Bangladesh has broad objectives to expand access, quality and equity (Global Partnership for Education, 2020). However, the education sector has not been guided by specific and time-bound targets regarding inclusion and equity. Bangladesh needs to focus on eradicating gender discrimination, and the rural-urban and income disparities in secondary access to achieve SDG 4. Although the net enrollment rate in primary school is 97.97%, the dropout rate is high (18.8%), and a large proportion of the primary students cannot make the transition to secondary schools. Further, the link between education and the labor market is weak (ADB, 2015). Secondary education graduates have difficulty finding jobs relevant to their qualifications because they lack the cognitive and behavioral skills required by employers. Specific recommendations are:

Free and Compulsory Secondary Education

The government should take immediate action to extended free and compulsory education until grade 8 as stated in the 2010 National Education Policy.

Updating the Curriculum

There is a need to review and revise the curriculum for secondary education and incorporate skills that are required for present and future work. A wide range of skills are needed, particularly experiential learning. There is a need to embrace technology and other soft skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration.

Transparency in Teacher Recruitment and Professional Development Training for Teachers

The teacher recruitment process should be made transparent to reduce nepotism and provide quality, relevant professional development to increase teacher content knowledge and skills that will enhance the teaching-learning process. Since the traditional model of schooling is changing, teachers will need to be prepared in a range of areas such as online pedagogy and

upskilling digital competence. Trainings should pay attention to teachers' resilience, agency, and adaptability.

Stipend Program for Boys

Financial incentives such as stipend and/or tuition fee waiver provisions need to be created to ensure access and retention of boys. This should be modeled after the successful FSP.

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Chapter 3: Barriers to Secondary Education in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR)

Phenwilai Chaiyaporn & Mark Manns⁴

Lao PDR Data Summary

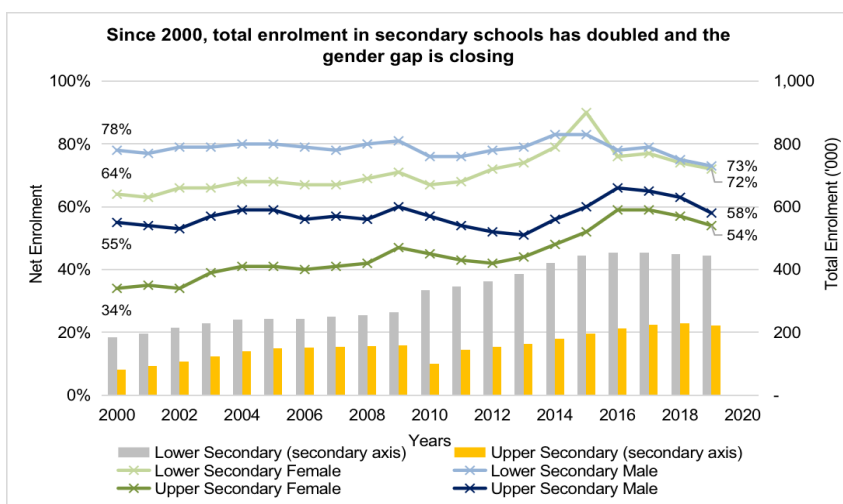


Figure 3.1 Total and Net Enrolment Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

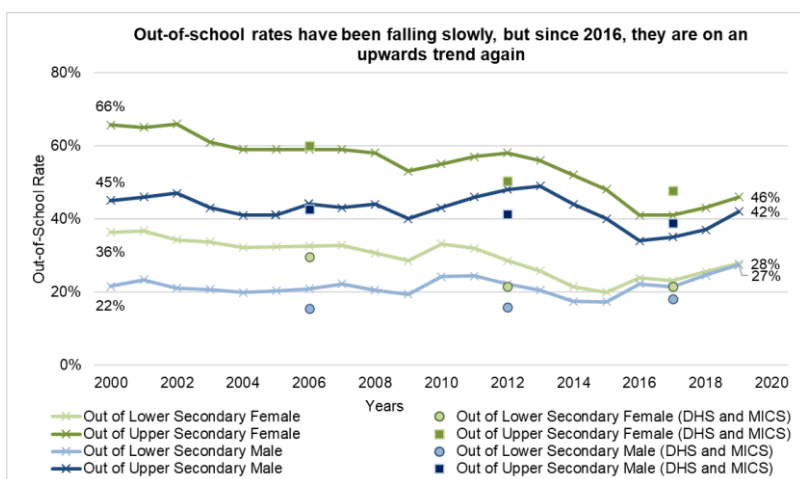


Figure 3.2 Out-of-School Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

Highlights

- More than 2 in 5 secondary age children are out of school
- Almost 70% of those that start secondary do not complete a full cycle
- The perceived value of education is low: 41% of 10 to 14 year-olds identify a lack of interest as the reason for never attending
- Incomplete primary schools (i.e. those that do not offer a full five grades) stall rural progress at the secondary level
- Non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups suffer from intersecting obstacles including, ethnolinguistic barriers, high poverty, and remote locations

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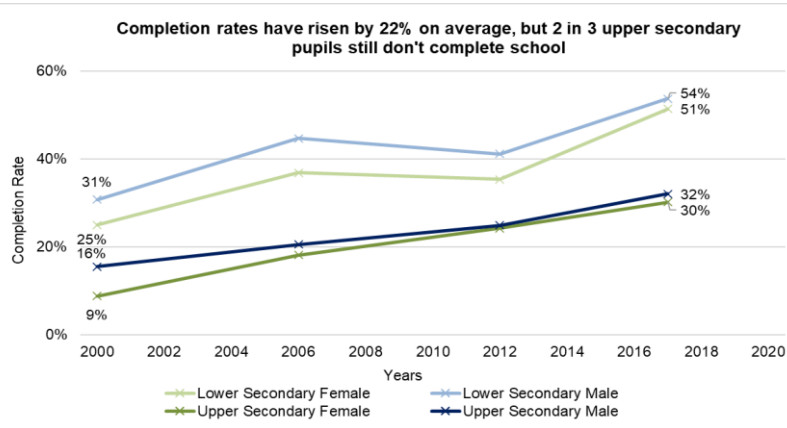


Figure 3.3 Completion Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

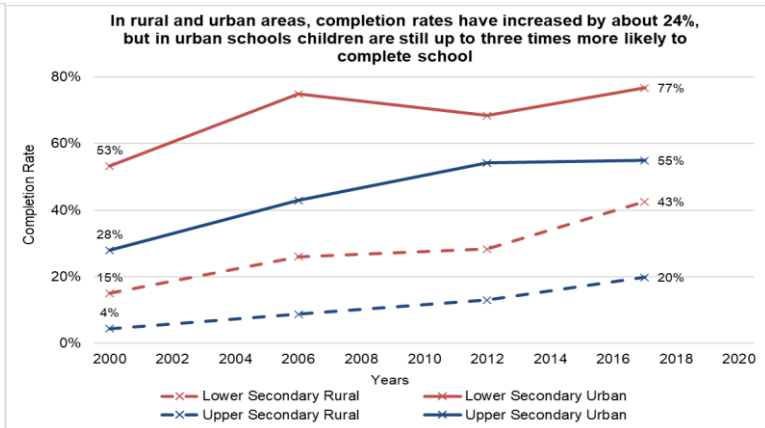


Figure 3.4 Completion Rates by Location (Urban and Rural): 2000-2020.

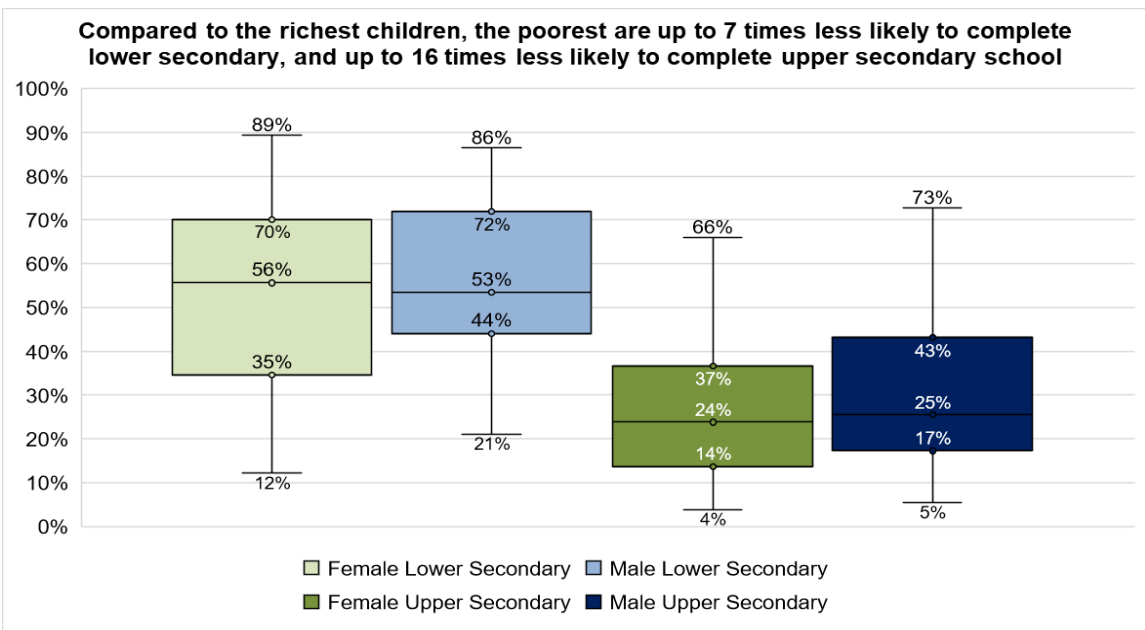


Figure 3.5 Completion Rates by Wealth and Gender: 2017.

Recommendations

- Expand free, compulsory education to grade 9.
- Improve teacher professional development and support, as well as capacity to provide quality education and instruction at all levels.
- Review teaching and learning materials to reduce disadvantages across ethnolinguistic groups.
- Improve the perceived values of education by raising awareness and advocating the personal and social returns to education among students, families, and communities.

Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was one of the early signatories to the global commitment on Education for All (EFA) in the 1990s. Despite making considerable progress towards the Millennium Development Goal for education and achieving universal basic primary education of 98% in 2015, Lao PDR still faces challenges in access to and quality secondary education. Low net enrollment rates (NER), low completion rates, high dropout rates, including low literacy and numeracy attainment, show signs that there are some significant barriers to the progress of secondary education.

This case study examines contextual barriers to secondary education progress through the review of evidence and analysis of research, reports, policy documents, including available national information and statistical data. It explores implications based on key national education indicators and international standards, and discusses crosscutting issues such as gender, language and ethnicity, disability, poverty and social exclusion, geographical location, and equity. It concludes by suggesting recommendations to lessen gaps in the identified barriers, in line with the broader national and global commitments.

Background

Country Overview

Lao PDR was established in 1975. It is an ethnically diverse country with 49 identified ethnic groups⁵ (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). These various ethnic groups have deep roots in the natural environment and mostly live in rural areas. Compared to its neighboring countries, Lao PDR is considered a relatively small country with a total population of 7.1 million (UIS, 2019) and a young society with almost 60% of the population under the age of 25 (EFA 2015 Review Group and Secretariat Group, Lao PDR, 2014; MOPI, 2018a).

The country is in the midst of a fast-growing region. Analysis of the most recent household survey shows that the national poverty headcount dropped significantly from 46% in 1993 to 18.3% in 2019. Yet, Lao PDR is still one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia with the poverty rate in rural areas (23.8%) measuring almost three times higher than in urban areas (7%) (Lao Statistics Bureau and World Bank, 2020).

Education Policy

EFA, adopted in 2000, set goals and aimed at achieving universal primary education, ensuring inclusive and equitable access to quality education, eliminating gender disparities, and improving adult literacy by 2015. As part of this commitment, in 1996, the Lao PDR constitution guaranteed the right to free and compulsory education without discrimination from grades 1 to 5. In 2000, the Education Law was enacted and later amended in 2007 to ensure that educational opportunities were available for all children, including those from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as children with disabilities. In 2015, the country again updated the Education Law to endorse compulsory education until

⁵ There are 4 main ethno-linguistic groups consisted of 62% of Lao-Tai, 23% Mon-Khmer, 9% Hmong-Mien and 2% Chinese-Tibetan, according to the Lao Statistics Bureau (2015).

the end of lower secondary school. However, this revision did not extend the guarantee of free education beyond primary education.

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goal for education (SDG 4) of the 2030 Agenda came into effect, urging countries to promote inclusive quality education. As part of their renewed commitment, Lao’s National Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2016-2020 emphasized the role of education in enabling the country’s goal of graduating from the least developed countries by 2020 (MOPI, 2016). The key goals in improving access to, and quality of, education centered around achieving SDG 4 for quality education and SDG 5 for gender equity. These goals were integrated into the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2016-2020, which served as the overarching framework for both the education sector’s and the government’s policy guidelines and programs. The current ESDP 2021-2025 continues to focus on ensuring access and inclusive and equitable quality education for all (MOES, 2020).

Education System

Lao PDR’s education system is structured by four components: 1) early childhood education, 2) general education, 3) technical and vocational education, and 4) higher education (*Figure 3.6*).

General education consists of 12 years and begins at age six with entry to primary school (grades 1 to 5). Lower secondary starts at age 12 and covers grade 6 to 9 while upper secondary school covers grades 10 to 12. In parallel to upper secondary, Lao PDR offers technical and vocational education for those 15 years and older.

Education level	Ages	Grades
1. Early Childhood Education: <input type="checkbox"/> Child Care <input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten	0.3-2 3-5	
2. General Education: <input type="checkbox"/> Primary Education <input type="checkbox"/> Lower Secondary Education <input type="checkbox"/> Upper Secondary Education	6-10 11-14 15-17	1-5 6-9 10-12
3. Technical and Vocational Education <input type="checkbox"/> Certificate <input type="checkbox"/> Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced Diploma	15+ 18+ 18+	
4. Higher Education <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/> Master's <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate	18+ 18+	

Figure 3.6 Lao PDR Education System Structure, Source: Lao National Assembly, Education Law, revised version (2015)

Education System Performance and Key Education Indicators

Low Net Enrollment Rate

In the 2020 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) report, which provides comparable data among ASEAN country members, it is observed that Lao PDR has the second lowest NER in secondary education (*Figure 3.7*). The 34.7% NER at the secondary education level, it shows that over 65% of primary students did not make the transition to secondary education. While key performance indicators for the ESDP 2016-2020 expected the transition rates in lower and upper secondary to reach 96% and 91% in 2018, the actual transition rate to lower secondary level was 87% in 2018 with an 82% NER, and only a 54% NER at the upper secondary level (MOES, 2020). These indicators demonstrate a concerning trend that requires attention and tremendous efforts to be addressed.

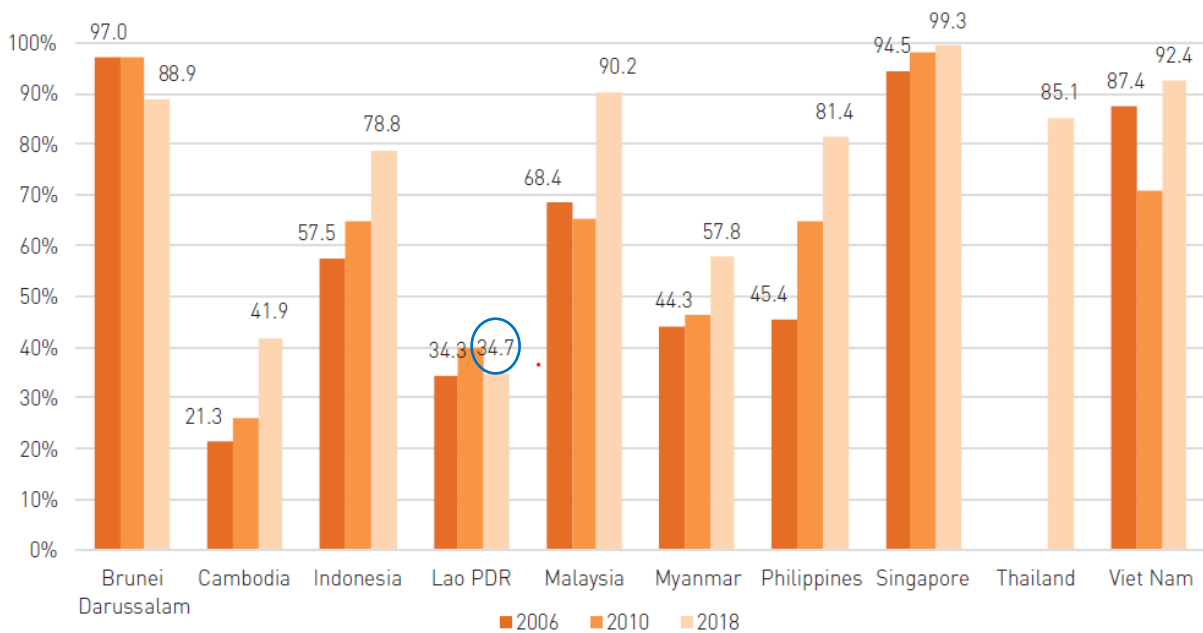


Figure 3.7 Net Enrolment Rates in Secondary Education (%) by ASEAN Member States, Source: ASEAN Secretariat (2020, p. 15).

Low Completion Rate

According to the UNESCO Institutes of Statistics (UIS), only half of Lao male and female students at lower secondary level completed education and less than one third of Lao students completed upper secondary education (see *Figure 3.3*). This also means that almost 70% of upper secondary students did not survive the full cycle of secondary education, a continued gap from the primary transition rate of 65%.

High Out-of-School Rates

In line with the sharp decline of NER in *Figure 3.7*, *Figure 3.2* (see above) shows the concerning out-of-school rates in Lao PDR among the secondary school-age children in that almost half (46%) of the female students did not participate in the upper secondary schools and similarly 42% of male students were out of school.

Low literacy rates and learning outcomes

The ESDP 2021-2025 national literacy rate target for people aged 15 and over was 95% by 2020. Yet, recent data from the 2017 Lao Social Indicator Survey II indicates the literacy rate of this group was 75% (*Figure 3.8*). Interestingly, of the 25% who were reported to be illiterate, almost 60% reportedly completed primary education. This suggests a significant challenge in foundational learning at the primary level is impacting advancement to the secondary level, as well as providing challenges for lifelong learning opportunities.

In addition, the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM)⁶ reveals only 2% of grade 5 students had achieved the highest Band 6⁷ and above in reading skills (Figure 3.9) (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020). Lao PDR grade 5 students ranked the lowest among other Southeast Asia countries. According to SEA-PLM, children who did *not* meet the minimum proficiency, Band 2 and below by grade 5, would likely struggle to transition to secondary school. This also explains the low NERs in secondary education. Further, the results from the 2019 national assessment showed overall low learning outcomes, with 90% of grade 9 students not meeting basic levels in science and mathematics (MOES, 2020).

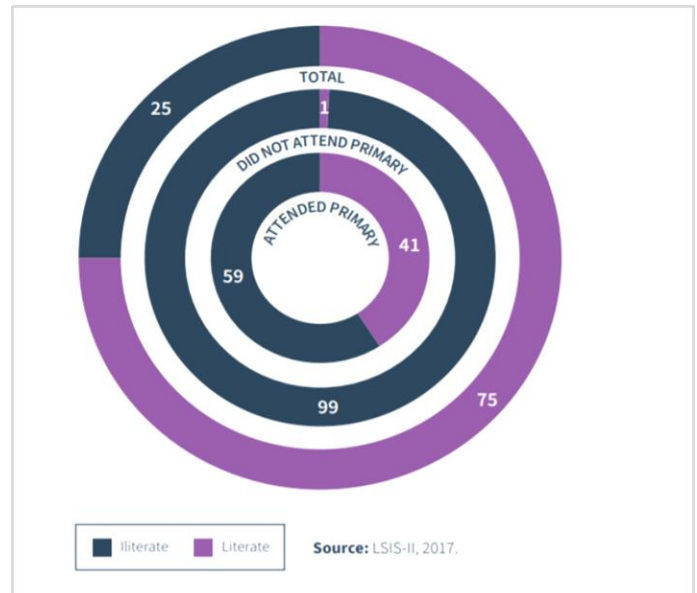


Figure 3.8 Literacy and Education of Adults aged 15 to 30 years, Source: Lao Statistics Bureau (2018, p. 48).

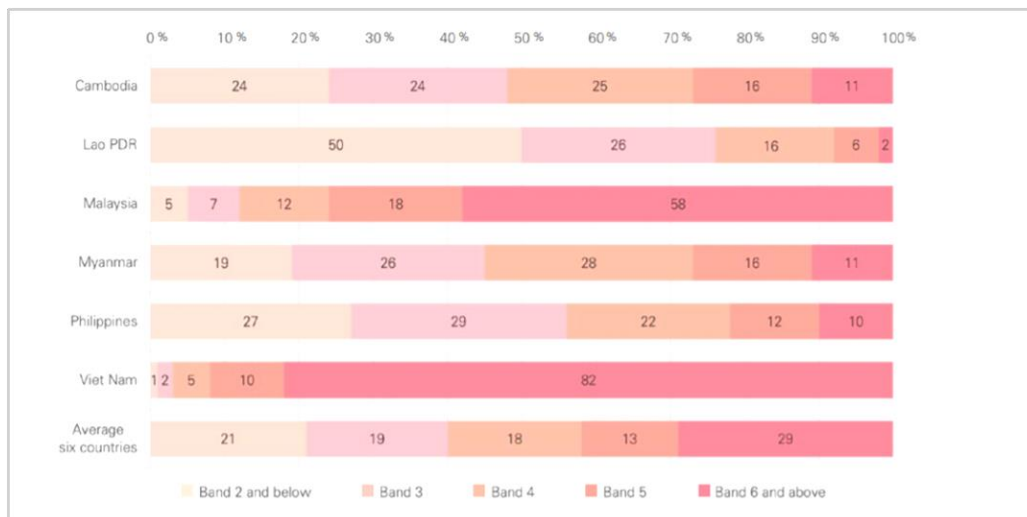


Figure 3.9 Grade 5 Student Performance in Reading at the End of Primary, Source: UNICEF and SEAMEO (2020, p. 44).

All education indicators above imply concerning gaps and challenges that impede achievement of the education goal in ensuring equitable access and inclusive quality education, in particular the overarching goal in developing a skilled workforce to meet the demands and support the socio-economic development in Lao PDR. The following section will identify contextual barriers to the progression of secondary education in Lao PDR. The barriers identified are often interdependent and multi-dimensional, spanning structural, political, economic, and sociocultural issues.

⁶ SEA-PLM Assessment was launched in 2014 to measure learning outcomes for children enrolled in grade 5 and there are six participating countries: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Viet Nam.
⁷ SEA-PLM scale for reading proficiency ranges from Band 2 and below being the minimum proficiency and Band 6 and above being the highest proficiency level.

Barriers to Secondary Education in Lao PDR

Investment in Education

The current ESDP 2021-2025 highlights major issues in the education sector, particularly on under-financing and overall education efficiency and management, including a lack of systemic implementation of inclusive education policies at all levels (MOES, 2020). Article 57 of the Education Law in 2007 mentioned that the government must consider the sector a ‘first priority’ and gradually increase its share of the state budget to ‘18% and more’, which is in line with the international standard of education expenditure between 15 to 20% of the total government expenditure. Yet, despite the government of Lao PDR’s commitment, according to the budget figures in *Figure 3.10*, spending fell short of this target at 14.6%.

Public Expenditure on Education (2014–15)	
As % of GDP	3.6
As % of total government expenditure	14.6
Distribution of Public Expenditure per Level (%) (2013–14)*	
Pre-primary	2.56
Primary	31.56
Secondary (including TVET)	29.57
Tertiary and other	36.3
Teacher/Pupil ratio in primary	1:34
Percentage of repeaters in primary	5.8
Primary to secondary transition rate	91.7
Source: MoES, Department of Finance 2016.	
*Budget allocation by subsectors and types of expenditure approved by National Assembly, FY 2013–14.	

Figure 3.10 Education Expenditure in Lao PDR.

This financing gap in education investment, coupled with the lack of free secondary education, provide important political and structural barriers that impede the achievement of national education policy goals and the quality of teaching and learning. This also presents organizational and operational constraints at central, provincial and district level between policy and practices.

At the same time, studies also show the positive impact and returns to education on wages and career opportunities, for individuals that have completed secondary education (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020; Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018; UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office 2019). *Figure 3.11* demonstrates the return of education in the form of monthly income (in million Kip) by education attained, gender, and geographical areas. Higher levels of education are associated with higher income for both males and females, which should provide a strong incentive, not only for individuals to continue with education, but for the government to strengthen its commitment and investment to provide higher education.

Education level	Total	Male	Female	Urban	Rural
1. Not enrolled	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.8	1.3
2. Less than primary	1.9	2.2	1.6	2.1	1.8
3. Primary	2.2	2.4	1.9	2.3	2.1
4. Lower Secondary	2.7	3.0	2.1	3.0	2.2
5. Upper Secondary	2.1	2.2	2.0	2.4	1.7
6. TVET	2.7	2.9	2.3	2.6	2.8
7. University & Upper	3.4	3.6	3.0	3.5	2.7

Figure 3.11 Monthly Income (in million Kip) by Education Attained, Gender and Geographical Areas, Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment (MOPI), (2018b, p. 61).

In order to achieve the larger goal of graduating from the least-developed country status by 2020, increased investment in secondary education is necessary to strengthen the country's transformation, as it will help supply the skilled labor needed to support Lao PDR's economy and competitiveness.

Teacher professional development and support

A shortage of qualified teachers has been identified as one of the main constraints to the provision of quality of secondary education (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018; MOES, 2015a). Teachers, especially at primary education level, have to deal with multi-grade teaching and this has been widely recognized as one of the key challenges for teachers in Lao PDR (MOES, 2015a). Although classes at the secondary level are more subject specific compared to primary education, teachers still face multi-grade teaching due to low enrollment rates at secondary education. In addition, insufficient numbers of secondary school teachers to cover all subjects of the curriculum and lack of adequate training in pre-service curricula for teachers at the secondary level also contribute to lack of teaching competency and experience in managing multiple-grade classes. As a result, these combined conditions contribute to poor teacher motivation and retention, which in turn may influence student learning performance and completion rates at secondary level (MOES, 2015b).

Teacher absence was one of the main issues impacting school attendance, according to the Lao Social Indicator Survey II (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). Over 82% of Lao students across primary, lower and upper secondary levels reported teacher absenteeism as the primary reason they would not attend a class (Figure 3.12). The distribution of teachers also needs to be more equitable as it is a challenge to place and retain qualified teachers in remote areas (MOES, 2015a). Addressing these significant challenges for the teaching profession will be needed to strengthen secondary education.

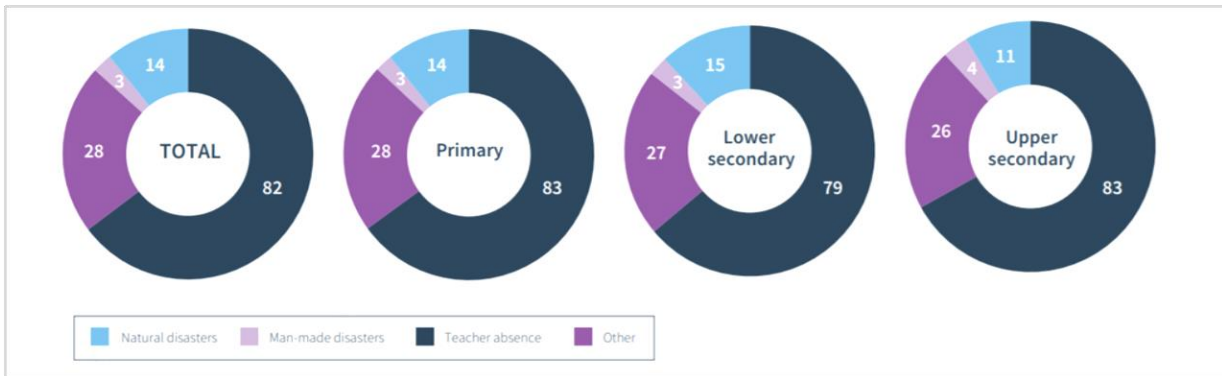


Figure 3.12 Percentage of Children Unable to Attend Class Due to Various Reasons in Lao PDR, Source: Lao Social Indicator Survey II (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018, p. 39).

Location and wealth vs. access and participation

Children from poor and rural communities tend to be educationally disadvantaged in Lao PDR. Economic barriers persist, with income generating activities limited in rural areas, and families with socio-economic challenges finding that secondary schools are too expensive (Patrinos et al., 2016). According to the Lao Statistics Bureau in 2015, the majority (67%) of the Lao population live in rural areas with 59% having road access and 8% still without road access. Providing improved quality education in rural areas was mentioned in the ESDP 2016-2020 as one of the challenges that needed to be addressed to increase participation and completion rates in lower secondary. While there has been a slight improvement in rural completion rates in lower secondary, the gap between rural (43%) and urban (77%) completion rates is significant (see Figure 3.4).

In 2015, the national survival rate to grade 5 was 78% and primary level completion rate was 76%. These rates are significantly affected by primary schools classified as ‘incomplete schools’ that include poor physical conditions of classrooms and schools not offering the full five grades of the primary school cycle (MOES, 2015a). Figure 3.13 shows that relative to the national average and urban areas, schools in rural areas – and particularly those in remote areas – struggle to provide classes for all grades of elementary.

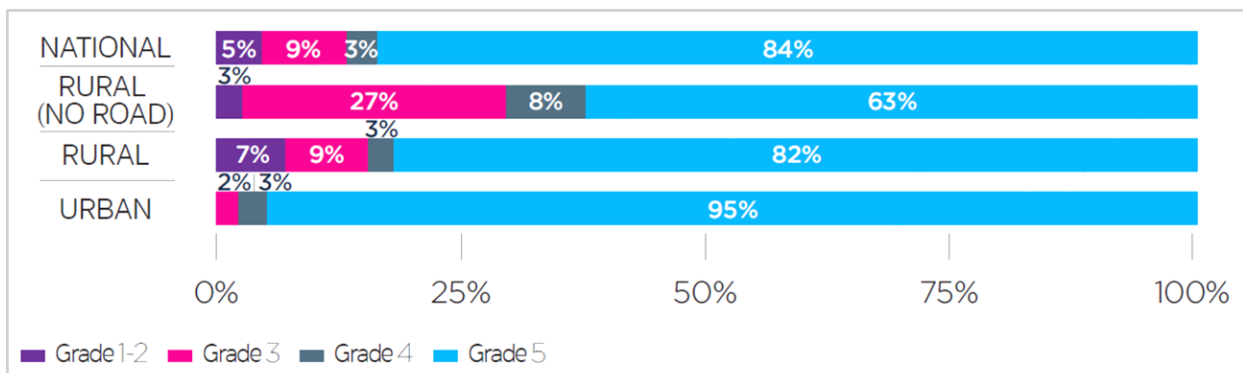


Figure 3.13 Percentage of Schools that Offer a Particular Grade by Location, Source: Education Management Information System (2015) as cited in Patrinos et al. (2016, p. 21).

Student participation is also associated with wealth and socio-economic status. Figure 3.14 shows the percentage of NER and average year of schooling by wealth. In both 2013 and

2019, non-poor students had higher NER across all three age groups. Particularly, the disparity grows in the ages associated with lower and upper secondary education. The trend clearly indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in education, particularly as they grow older.

	Net enrollment rate (%) (Age 6-10)		Net enrollment rate (%) (Age 11-14)		Average years of schooling (Age 15+)	
	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019
Poor	65.0	72.9	20.0	32.5	3.5	3.7
Non-poor	82.7	86.7	45.3	66.2	5.8	6.5

Figure 3.14 Net Enrolment Rate (%) and Average Year of Schooling by Poverty Status, 2013 and 2019, Source: Lao Statistics Bureau and World Bank, (2020, p. 48).

These barriers in participation and completion ultimately affect learning outcomes. The issues of access, participation and quality of education persist. The current ESDP 2021-2025 reiterates the priority to accelerate the achievement of the SDG 4 target by improving learning quality, access, participation and reducing disparity.

Perceived value and relevance of secondary education

The economic barriers to education are significant. Since lower secondary education has become compulsory until grade 9 (aged 15), but only free until grade 5 (aged 11), it has become more challenging for poorer families to send their children to school. This is a serious constraint for poor families as they do not have resources to afford the direct and indirect costs of schooling (Patrinos et al., 2016). According to Patrinos et al. (2016), at least 8% of students aged 10 to 14 did not attend school because they could not afford it, with another 8% not attending because they had to work (Figure 3.15). In addition, 61% of children aged six to nine did not attend school as they are still considered too young. 41% of children aged six to nine did not attend school as they are still considered too young. 41% of children aged 10 to 14 stated that they are not interested in attending schools, while 12% cited the family reason and 2% cited that school is not worth it. The combination of reasons such as not interested, family does not allow and school not worth it can explain relevance of low perception to the value of participation in education.

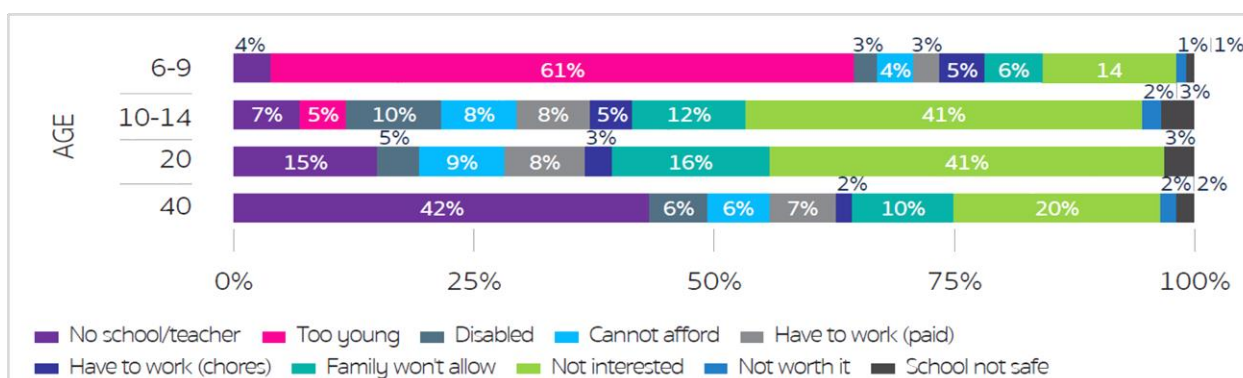


Figure 3.15 Reasons for Never Attending School by Age Group, Source: Lao Labour Force Survey (2010) as cited in Patrinos et al. (2016, p. 22).

Inclusion and equity

Most of the non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups⁸ live in remote and mountainous areas with limited access to schools, educational materials and resources. These groups tend to make up the bulk of out-of-school children and youth in Lao PDR. In many cases this is due to ethnolinguistic barriers, as the official language of curricula and instruction is different from their mother-tongue (MOES, 2015a). In addition, most non-Lao-Tai live in poverty (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). A third of rural non-Lao-Tai girls have never attended school compared with under a tenth of Lao-Tai girls. Disparities also persist between different minority groups. For instance, 56% of rural Mon-Khmer boys and 53% of girls aged six to 10 were enrolled in primary school, compared to only 36% of rural Chinese-Tibetan boys, and 30% of girls (MOES, 2015a). *Figure 3.16* shows reasons for never attending school by gender and ethnicity. Many of the respondents cited the reason ‘not interested’ when indicating why they do not attend schools. This reason was particularly strong in Mon-Khmer (female) and Chinese-Tibet (male), where over 70% of these respondents indicated they were not interested in school.

The demand for education among these ethnolinguistic minorities may require more empirical data and evidence to further explain. The lack of participation in education among these groups can be a result of many of the structural, social, and economic barriers indicated previously. For example: families may not see much value or a need in sending their children to school, or families may expect their children to help with household tasks and support with the earnings or work in the fields. In addition, families from ethnic minority groups may have concerns about relevance and quality of the education system to address their specific needs including issues of language.

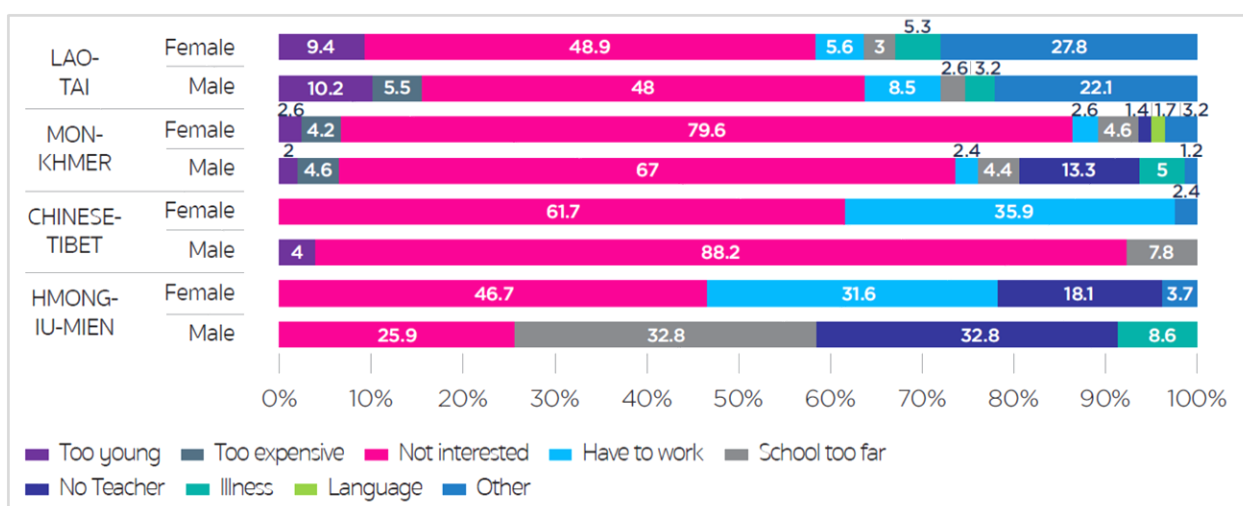


Figure 3.116 Reasons for Never Attending School by Ethnicity and Gender, Source: Lao Expenditure Consumption Survey V as cited in Patrinos et al. (2016, p. 23).

⁸ The non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups consist of ethnic minority groups such as Mon-Khmer, Chinese-Tibet and Hmong-mien and others (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Conclusion

Despite decades of committing to education improvement, Lao PDR still faces challenging issues around providing universal access and quality secondary education to all, especially among the most disadvantaged children and youth who are mostly non-Lao-Tai ethnic, poor, and live in remote areas. This chapter has explored and identified social, economic and structural barriers that prevent Lao children and youth from completing secondary education. These barriers included: i) challenges with system capacity, primarily financing and budgeting gaps, which hinder the management and implementation of inclusive quality education services; ii) the lack of qualified teachers and teacher professional support, that impact the delivery or quality education; iii) geographic and wealth barriers, which significantly impact access, student participation and dropout rates; iv) perceived value and relevance of engagement in education; and v) issues of inclusion and equity, including gender and ethnolinguistic minorities. These interconnected barriers contribute significantly to the vulnerability of the most disadvantaged Lao children and youth. It is vital to connect these challenges and implications with key education indicators to minimize the gaps.

Recommendations

The following recommendations support policy and practices that will promote greater participation of Lao learners in secondary education.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that compulsory education is free until grade 9, not only until grade 5. This commitment to ensure free and compulsory education to the end of lower secondary must also be supported with continued investment in education, in line with international standards. These political and financial commitments lay the groundwork in addressing some of the ensuing structural barriers that hinder quality and inclusive education.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen teacher training and professional support to deliver quality and relevant teaching and learning. In addition, capacity building for all line education authorities in charge of research and policy, curriculum, teaching and assessment at state, provincial and district levels will help ensure alignment across all learning components. These efforts will go a long way to enhance teaching capacity in managing multi-grade classes, reduce teacher absenteeism, and engage student participation and increase student learning outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Address geographic and socioeconomic barriers that impact participation in secondary education. This includes improving school infrastructures and facilities to ensure learners are provided with safe and secure learning environments. It can also include providing financial incentives or contributions to alleviate the burden on families, such as providing student grants, allowances, or scholarships. Teaching and learning materials should be reviewed and adapted to be more inclusive, relevant and respond to low engagement and participation among disadvantaged ethnolinguistic groups, whose mother-tongue languages are different from the language of instruction and curriculum. The targeted strategies will help reduce gaps and disparities among children with geographical and socioeconomic challenges, and in particular the ethnic minority groups who tend to be left out of the system.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen the perception on the value and relevance of education by building awareness and advocacy among students, families and communities. This should include strengthening relationships between schools, communities and the labor market. Raising awareness, particularly of families in poor and remote communities, should include a communication strategy that emphasizes the gains and returns in education for quality of life of Lao individuals, and to the wider society of Lao PDR in achieving sustainable development.

Annex

Current initiatives led by UNESCO in promoting quality basic education in the context of SDG 4-Education 2030

IBE-UNESCO, in collaboration with the MOES, Lao PDR, has developed a national holistic early childhood care and education system to support the general education reform in line with the SDG 4 inclusive quality education goal.

Happy Schools Project promotes quality and holistic education in schools through enhanced learner well-being, happiness, and social emotional learning. The project supports the development and implementation of SDG target 4.7, teaching and learning the skills and competencies that help cultivate sustainable, inclusive and peaceful societies. Pilots were implemented in Japan, Lao PDR and Thailand from 2018 to 2020.

Capacity Development for Education 2030 (CapED) is a UNESCO program that provides support to achieve SDG 4.c, teacher education and professional development. Done in collaboration with MOES, Lao PDR, CapED is developing a comprehensive national teacher policy that serves as an integrated component of the education sector plan (ESSDP 2021-2025).

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Chapter 4: Barriers to Secondary Education in Mongolia

Batjargal Batkhuyag⁹ & Zhang Yuxin¹⁰

Mongolia Data Summary

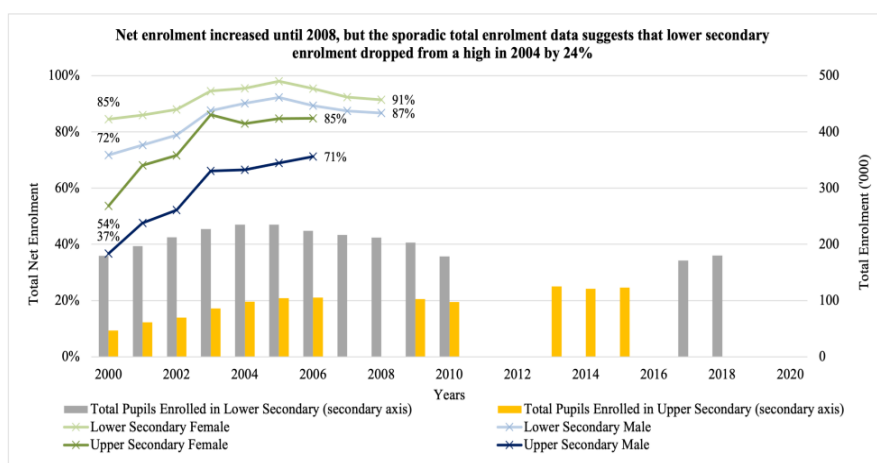


Figure 4.1 Total and Net Enrolment Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

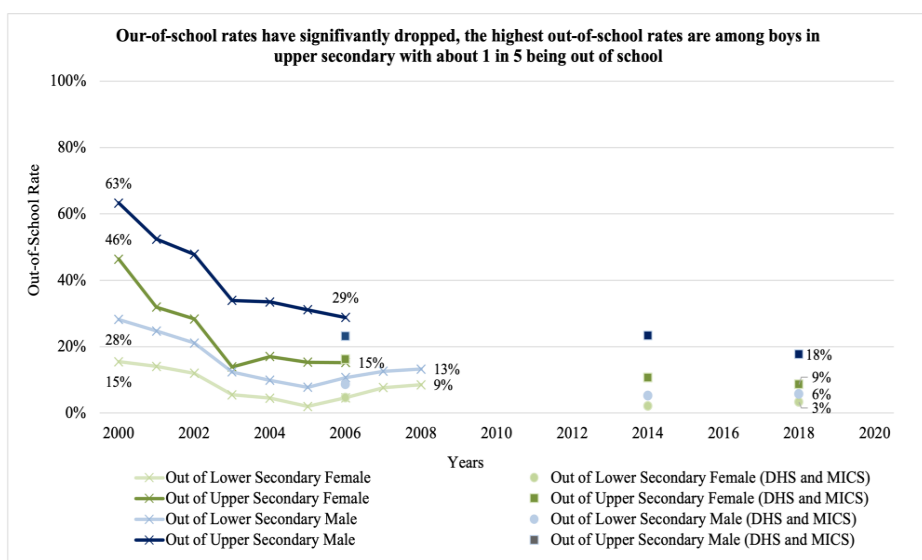


Figure 4.2 Out-of-School Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

Highlights

- 68% of out-of-school children are from herder families.
- Four out of five families with school age children report paying informal fees or donations to schools.
- Half of internal migrants lack the residency registration needed to attend school.
- Textbooks and other non-tuition expenses are prohibitive for poor families.
- Access for children with disabilities decreases over education levels with only 14% of children with disabilities enrolled in secondary education.

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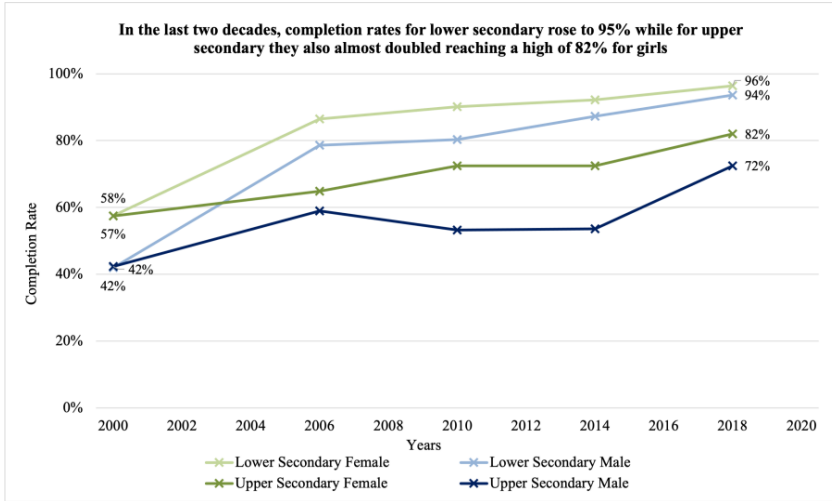


Figure 4.3 Completion Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

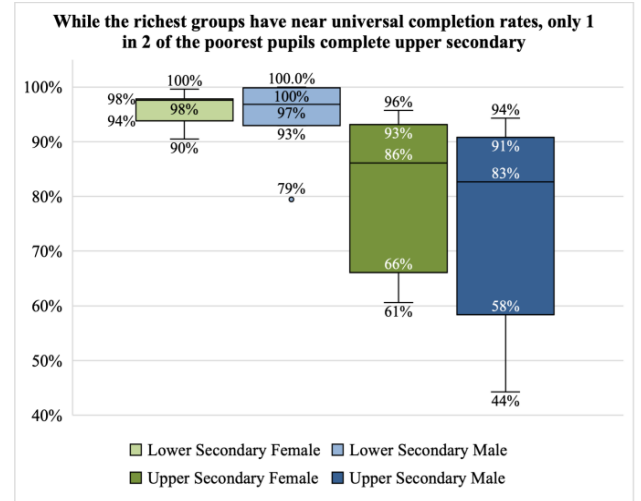


Figure 4.4 Completion Rates by Location (Urban and Rural): 2000-2020.

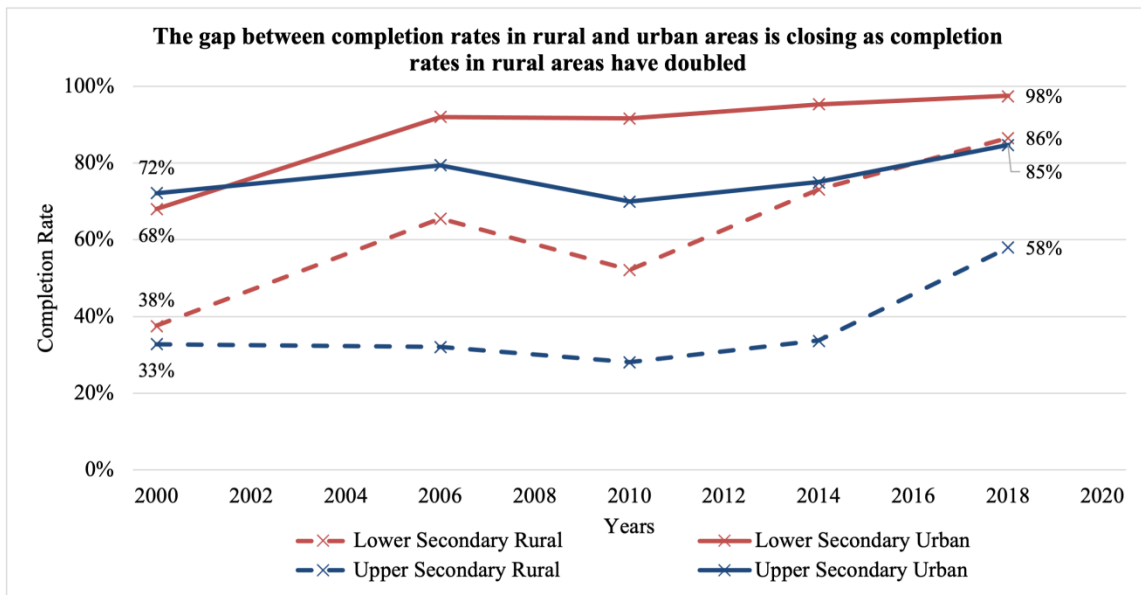


Figure 4.5 Completion Rates by Wealth and Gender: 2017.

Recommendations

- Improve data and monitoring with agreed upon definitions for drop-out and out-of-school children.
- Complete a regular review of boarding schools to ensure facilities are appropriate and well maintained.
- Have schools report annually the donations and informal fees they have collected.
- Make additional efforts to reach children from herder families, including reviewing education content and material to better align with the needs of nomadic families.

Historical Context of Secondary Education in Mongolia

Mongolia is a landlocked country bordering the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, with a population of 3.5 million. It is a nation of youth with approximately 60% of the population under the age of 35.

Mongolia’s current education system was well established during the socialist regime (1924-1990) with at least a public school and kindergarten in every settlement ensuring access to education. When the Mongolian People's Republic was established in 1924, it had no formal education system and only roughly 3% of the population aged 15 or above were literate i.e. able to read a short, simple statement (Sharav, 2003, as cited in Yembuu & Munkh-erdene, 2006). However, only half a century later by 1970, the literacy rate had reached a high of 82.1% and UNESCO awarded the Prize of Nadejda Krupskaya to the Science Academy of Mongolia for their efforts to eradicate illiteracy (National Statistics Office, 1997, as cited in Yembuu & Munkh-erdene, 2006). In 1990, Mongolia began the transition into a representative democracy with the new constitution passed by the newly formed democratic Parliament in 1992.

In Mongolia the majority of schools (so-called General Secondary Schools) cater for children from grade 1 through to grade 9 or 12. In the 2020-2021 school year, out of the 729,175 students enrolled in 839 schools, 680,837 (93%) were in 672 (80%) public schools, while the remaining 7%, or 48,338 students, were catered for in 167 (20%) private schools (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021). As part of two education sector reforms to extend primary and secondary (lower and upper) education, the entry age for primary was lowered from 8 to 7 in 2004 and then again, in line with international standards, from 7 to 6 in 2014 (*Table 4.1*).

Table 4.1 Overview of Mongolian Education System

Level	Length/Duration	Age
Pre-primary	Up to 4 years	2-5-year-olds
Primary	5 years	6-10-year-olds
Lower secondary	4 years	11-15-year-olds
Upper secondary	3 years or 1,5 years in Technical and Vocational Education and Training Schools	16-18-year-olds

Legal Context of Secondary Education

Mongolia is committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education 2030. To this end, the Constitution of Mongolia (Article 16.7) guarantees twelve years of general education free of charge (Parliament of Mongolia, 1992) and the 2002 Law on Education states that basic education (grades 1 to 9) is compulsory (Parliament of Mongolia, 2002). In addition, long-term national development policy documents, such as the Education National Program 2010-2021, the State Policy on Education 2014-2024, the Sustainable Development Vision 2030, and Mongolia’s Long-Term Development Policy: Vision 2050, affirm commitment to universal secondary education. However, a civil society shadow report on the alignment of major education policy documents with SDG 4 (the SDG

for education) indicates that these policies have a limited and increasing focus on access whereas important concepts and principles such as lifelong learning, inclusive education, and broader perspectives on quality of education and equity in education are inadequately addressed (All for Education National Civil Society Coalition, 2019).

Access to Secondary Education: Recent History

Mongolia stands high in terms of enrollment in general secondary education. Between the mid-1990 and early 2000s, there was a decline in enrollment due to political, economic, and social transitions away from the socialist regime to a market economy, but since then the rate has increased again. In the 2018-19 school year, the gross enrollment rate (GER) was at 97.7% at the lower secondary level and 86.1% at upper secondary, whereas the net enrollment rate (NER) was at 96.4% at lower secondary and 81.2% at upper secondary (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports & Asian Development Bank, 2019). The trends in GER and NER are illustrated in *Figure 4.6* and *Figure 4.7*.

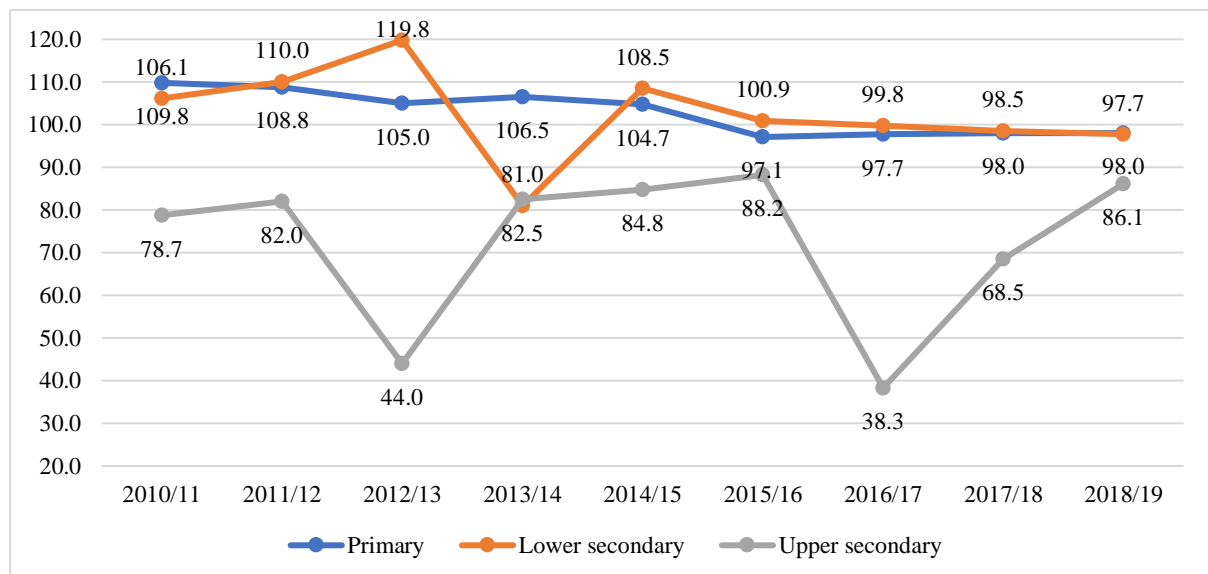


Figure 4.6 GER by education level, 2010/11 to 2018/19, Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports & Asian Development Bank (2019).

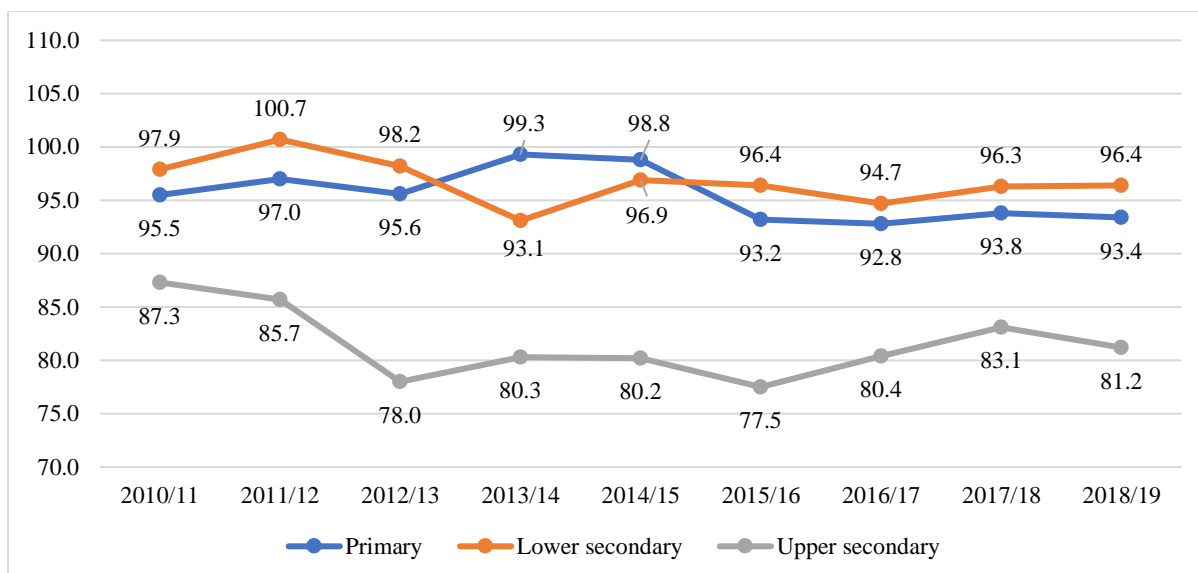


Figure 4.7 NER by education level, 2010/11 to 2018/19, Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports & Asian Development Bank, 2019.

Over time, the Government of Mongolia has taken numerous measures to enable access to education. These include the provision of boarding schools, free textbooks, and strengthening the legal framework to support children with disabilities. Children from nomadic herder families are offered free boarding schools. The first public school with a dormitory was reported to have opened in 1921. A century later in the 2020-2021 school year, 35,000 students (92% of those who applied to stay in dormitories) are living in 540 dormitories (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021). Some reports suggest that two out of three students in dormitories are from herder families (Mongolian Institute for Education Research, 2019), indicating that dormitories continue to play an important role in providing access to children from nomadic herder families.

First implemented between 2010 and 2014, the Textbook Rental Scheme provides free textbooks to qualifying students. All primary school students and approximately 30% of lower and upper secondary school students (based on the Proxy Means Testing, methodology used for measuring income and poverty) are entitled to receive free textbooks. In the 2018-2019 school year, 43% of textbooks were provided free to children from various vulnerable groups through school libraries (All for Education National Civil Society Coalition, 2020). Additional financial support for all children under the age of 18 years is provided through the Child Money Program. First introduced by the Government of Mongolia in 2005 to alleviate child poverty, children are entitled to monthly cash transfers (so-called Child Money) (UNICEF, 2019).

The Law on the Rights of People with Disabilities, adopted in 2016, highlights Mongolia's move toward more inclusive education. As the first rights-based law, it enables children with disabilities to be enrollment in mainstream schools and provides necessary support for mainstream schools by tripling the funding allocation for students with disabilities enrolled in such schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports, 2019). Previously this funding provision was in effect for students in special schools only. Finally, the law introduced the use of individualized education plans (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports, 2018)

Remaining Barriers to Secondary Education in Mongolia

Economic Barriers

Poverty is the major barrier to access to education. Although the proportion of the population under the poverty line has decreased from 38% in 2010 to just over 28% in 2018 (National Statistical Information Service, n.d.), school related costs such as uniform, textbooks, and transportation remain substantial impediments for many children and their families. In a 2005 study (del Rosario et al., 2005), most of the children from families below the poverty line reported dropping out of school due to being embarrassed to go to school without proper clothes or having to work to support their family. A key problem area is the cost of textbooks. Students from vulnerable groups (orphans and children from households that are below the poverty line), totaling 43% of lower and upper secondary school children, received free textbooks through their school library. Approximately 16% of this population purchased textbooks, leaving more than 40% of children with no textbooks (All for Education National Civil Society Coalition, 2020).

Although general education is free under the Constitution, parents are still expected to make informal payments in forms of donations and fees (15 different types of fees are listed in Batkhuyag et al., 2020) for their children's education, affecting disproportionately poorer families and leading to numerous issues including discrimination against those who cannot afford to pay (Batkhuyag et al., 2020). Similarly, the Asia Foundation (2016) found that 80% of households with kindergarten or school-age children reported making donations or payments to education settings and that there is little information on how much is collected and how the money is spent.

Political Barriers

Government investment in education is another barrier to achieving universal secondary education in Mongolia. According to the 2013 education sector budget review, education provisions are expensive for the following three reasons: (1) Mongolia has a scarcely populated, vast territory, (2) school facilities require high costs to heat due to long, harsh winters, and (3) the education sector has large labor capacity and input, thus has high salary costs, which are greater for provision in rural areas (Mongolian Education Alliance & Economic Research Institute, 2013). In 2002, Mongolia demonstrated its commitment to education by legislating that at least 20% of public spending be directed to education. However, less than a decade later, in 2011, it was removed by a political decision (Mongolian Education Alliance & Economic Research Institute, 2013). Although it was stated as the goal, education spending never reached the 20% threshold. As *Figure 4.8* illustrates, the share of education expenditure in budget income and expenditure declined between 2000 and 2012 (Mongolian Education Alliance & Economic Research Institute, 2013).

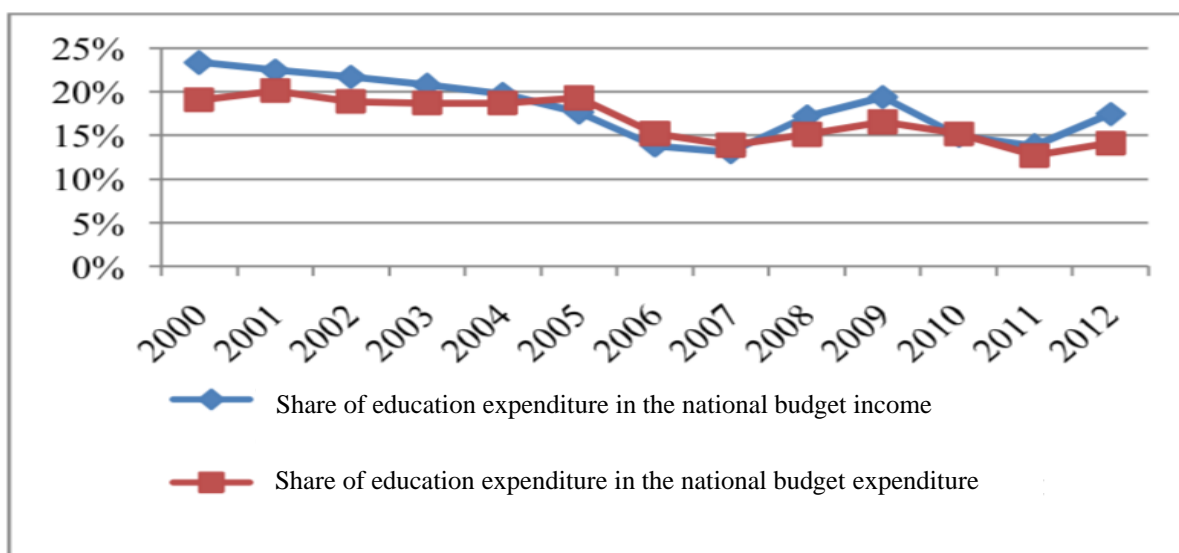


Figure 4.8 Share of education expenditure in budget, 2000 to 2012, Source: Mongolian Education Alliance & Economic Research Institute, 2013.

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers create substantial challenges for many families, most notably those in rural areas and for internal migrants. Due to distance and severe weather conditions, providing education services in rural areas has been and is not easy: 80% of Mongolia’s soums¹¹ are located over 100 km from province centers and herder families live even further away, around 10-55 km from soum centers (Mongolian Institute for Education Research, 2019). Significant progress to widen access to secondary education was made during the Soviet regime; yet post-1990 the situation radically changed due to a lack of financing. In an effort to fix the fiscal deficit, dormitory fees were introduced in 1995, but the decision was quickly reversed in 2000 as enrollment decreased and dropout rate increased (Batkhuuag & Dondogdulam, 2018).

These boarding schools are crucial to get children from nomadic herder families into school. While enrollment rates in boarding schools have recovered since 2000, in the 2013-14 school year, 68% of out-of-school children were from herder families (Batkhuuag & Dondogdulam, 2018) and most of the boys drop out of school to help with the herding of livestock (National Statistics Office & World Bank, 2020). There are a few reasons why herder families may be trying to access education for their children away from boarding school, notably in urban centers (UNESCO, 2019). In addition to the shortage of number of places needed to accommodate the demand, the conditions of dormitories need urgent attention as approximately 20% of dormitory facilities have inadequate heating and lack water, sanitation, and health facilities despite legal requirements (Mongolian Institute for Educational Research, 2019).

Due to political, economic, and social transitions in the 1990s, internal migration patterns, initially mostly urban to rural, have shifted to rural to urban with the main destination being the capital city, Ulaanbaatar (International Organization of Migration, 2018). Even though the research concluded that rural to urban migration brings overall positive impacts on employment, education opportunities, living condition, income, and health, there are

¹¹ A smaller administrative unit in rural areas with population of around 3000-5000 population.

households that do not benefit. Poverty and a lack of residency registration (approximately half of internal migrants are not registered) remain key reasons for migrants' children not attending school.

The All for Education National Civil Society Coalition (2020) indicated that even though schools and local authorities are accountable for enrolling all school-aged children into school and report doing so, unregistered children are still outside the school system. In 2017, in Bayanzurkh, one of the two major districts for rural to urban migrants in Ulaanbaatar, the District Lifelong Learning Center surveyed four of the twenty subdistricts and identified a total of 96 unregistered children outside the school system within those four subdistricts (UNICEF & National Lifelong Learning Center, 2018). Enrolling unregistered children into school adds burden to already overcrowded and underfunded urban schools, with some schools needing to work in three shifts (UNESCO, 2019) or increase class sizes to accommodate the increase. The Mongolian Institute for Educational Research (2019) reported that in the 2017-18 school year, out of 134 public schools in Ulaanbaatar, 46 (34%) had class sizes larger than the norm of 30-35 students per class.

Cultural Barriers

The 2011 Law on Gender Equality as well as the 2017 National Program on Gender state the national commitment to gender equality in education. Even though increasing attention has been given to achieving gender equality in education, most efforts focused on addressing gender parity (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports et al., 2019). Based on data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, UNESCO (2019) reported that Mongolia has high rates of education participation and near gender equity, with the exception of higher education. Pre-primary education is close to gender parity with a GER for boys of 86.7%, with girls marginally lower at 86.4%. However, at the primary school level, GER – which rose from 95.5% in 2009 to 97.9% in 2017 – has consistently favored boys in relative and absolute terms. Male GER rose by 2.7% from 95.9% to 98.6%, while female GER rose by only 2.1% from 95.0% to 97.1%. However, by the lower secondary school level, the gender ratio inverts in favor of girls – the gender ratio among girls and boys enrolled in general education is at 1.07 (Mongolian Institute for Education Research, 2019). *Figure 4.9* illustrates how across all provinces apart from one location girls are underrepresented in grades 1 to 5, in grades 6 to 9 the gender gap closes, and in grades 10 to 12 they outnumber boys (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports et al., 2019).

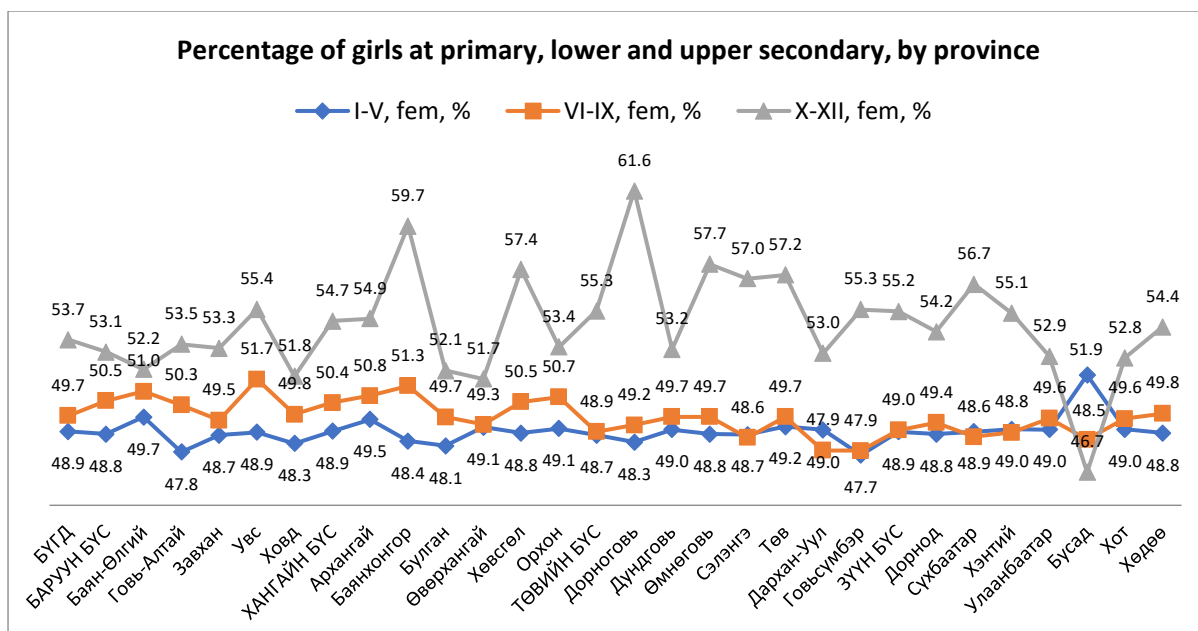


Figure 4.9 Percentage of girls by education level and province, 2018-19 school year, Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports et al., 2019.

As stated in the 2018 Mongolia Poverty Update, girls are more likely to continue education than boys. This pattern is perhaps most clearly illustrated in rural areas where boys are more likely to drop out of school to engage in labor market activities (National Statistics Office & World Bank, 2018). In the 2018-2019 school year, 13,800 of 11 to 14-year-old children, representing 7.4% of that age group, were out of school and the number of 6 to 14-year-old boys who were outside the school system were 1.3 times higher than that of girls (National Statistics Office & National Gender Committee, 2020).

Intersection of Barriers: Who is Marginalized and Left Behind?

While Mongolia has a high NER and GER, three groups of children are most often left out of secondary education: children with disabilities, rural children, especially those (boys) from the herder families, and children from poor households both in urban (most of whom are internal migrants) and rural (most of whom are poor herder families) areas.

Children with disabilities experience greater marginalization as they sit at the intersection of multiple barriers. UNICEF Mongolia (2015) estimated that there are about 32,000 children with disabilities in Mongolia. Based on 2018 Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports statistics, there are more than 23,000 children with disabilities who are outside the education system (All for Education National Civil Society Coalition, 2019). This suggests that about 70% of children with disabilities are out of school. In 2017, Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports reported that approximately 40% of children with disabilities are enrolled in kindergarten and primary grades but that percentage drops significantly to only 14% in lower and upper secondary school (Government of Mongolia, 2017).

This population faces a combination of political, structural, and cultural barriers. Firstly, the special education system that has set roots from 1964 interdicting new inclusive policies is limiting access to mainstream schools. Despite the aforementioned recent policies to

mainstream inclusive education, the implementation at the school level varies greatly. Studies reveal that the support for inclusive education is sporadic. Most schools in urban and semi-urban areas, who reported being ready to a certain degree to enroll children with disabilities, barely meet the physical access requirements (All for Education National Civil Society Coalition, 2020; JICA Research Institute, 2017; Mongolian Education Alliance, 2019; UNESCO, 2019). However, remote rural schools are slow to implement the policies, with the majority yet to set up school level support teams to enable access to children with disabilities (All for Education National Civil Society Coalition, 2020). Further, with vast territory with sparsely populated rural areas, distance to school and the absence of early identification and intervention system make it more difficult for children with disabilities to get into a classroom. However, once children with disabilities make it into the classroom, they often face further barriers. In a 2017 study, the majority of teachers in mainstream schools listed lack of facilities and equipment, insufficient monetary incentives for teachers, and lack of experience with children with disabilities as barriers to providing adequate education (JICA Research Institute, 2017).

Unfortunately, due to the constant and alarming issue related to the data on out-of-school children in Mongolia, confidence in understanding the reality of secondary access for children in the country is limited. For example, in 2005, four estimates provided different dropout numbers at the general education level. The lowest estimate was reported by the National Statistics Office and Ministry of Education, Science and Technology with 11,953 dropouts. In contrast, the largest estimate, provided by the National Human Rights Commission, was more than five times higher with 68,115 children dropping out (del Rosario et al., 2005). Similarly, in 2017, the National Statistics Office reported 682 children were outside general education, but the same source also reported in the same year that the children outside the school system to be 24 times higher at 16,509 (National Statistics Office & National Gender Committee, 2020). The variance seems to be caused by the methodology through which the data is collected as well as confusion in distinguishing between dropouts and out-of-school children.

Recommendations

In the light of the above barriers regarding access to secondary education, some recommendations to solve the problems and to promote the development of secondary education in Mongolia include:

Recommendation 1: Develop effective data collection and use policies to clearly identify and help support dropouts and out-of-school children. Effective data collection is needed to monitor every citizen's right to education in Mongolia. Improving data and using data properly according to the policy will help to further address the specific problems in Mongolia's secondary education system.

Recommendation 2: Improve the dormitory accommodation. Sufficient heating equipment, and water and sanitation facilities need to be provided in each school and properly maintained. Meanwhile, an in-depth exploration of the situation in dormitories, the facilities, and terms of their learning should be conducted. These efforts will help to increase children's enrollment and effectively reduce dropouts.

Recommendation 3: The amount and specific use of funds raised in donation activities should be transparent to the public. Specifically, the school can establish a donation ledger. Donations from each student should be registered and filed. Schools have to publicly report the annual amount and use of donations and informal fees collected each year. This measure helps ensure that donations are used correctly and makes donation activities more objective, transparent, and credible.

Recommendation 4: Provide economic assistance to disadvantaged groups and adapt teaching materials to local lifestyles. Financially, schools can offer compensation systems such as "special hardship grants" and "green lanes" for disadvantaged groups. Mongolia can provide scholarships for outstanding poor students to cover their education-related and living expenses. Meanwhile, schools should make appropriate adjustments to the teaching content and materials to ensure education and nomadic lifestyle converge and better address nomadic families' needs. All these measures will help to reduce the number of poor students dropping out of school due to family financial difficulties or low interest in teaching content.

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Chapter 5: Barriers to Secondary Education in the Philippines

Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE)¹²

The Philippines Data Summary

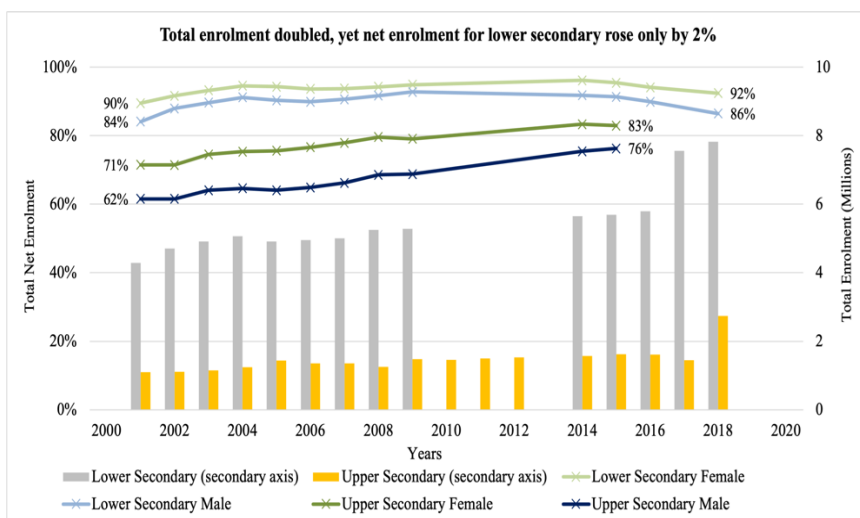


Figure 5.1 Total and Total Net Enrolment Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

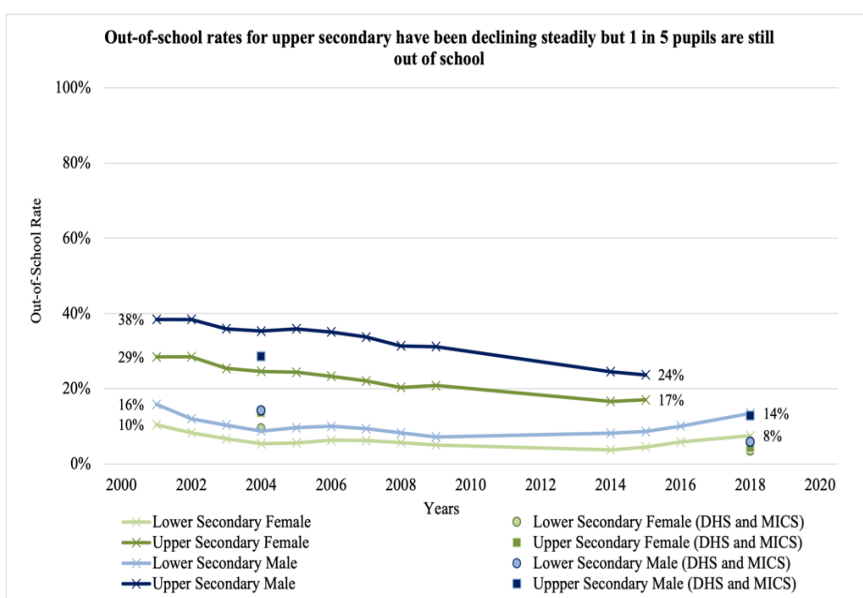


Figure 5.2 Out-of-School Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

Highlights

- Funding for education is stagnant and below international standards
- Archipelagic nature of country creates challenges from remoteness and natural disasters
- Early marriage and teen pregnancy are common and increase likelihood of dropout
- Nearly half of the 1.48 children working in the labor force do not attend school
- 65% of high school students report being bullied in school

¹² ASPBAE acknowledges the support of Chona S. Sandoval as associate researcher and writer, and Lae Santiago as research assistant.

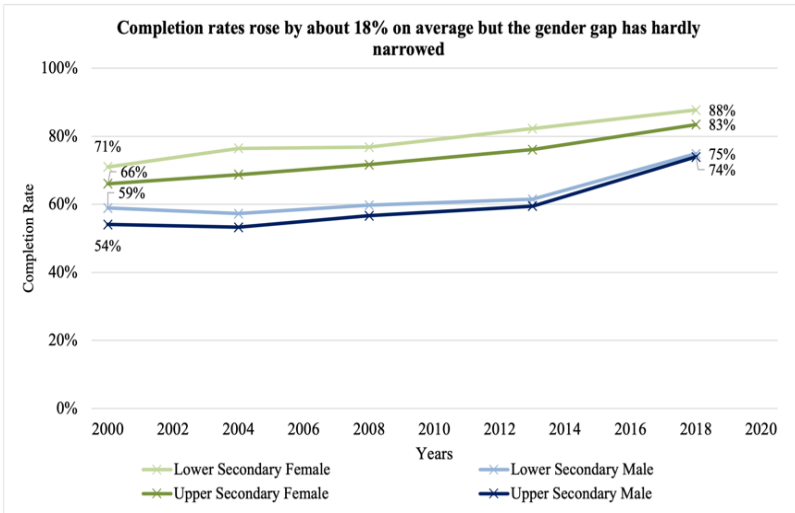


Figure 5.3 Completion Rates by Gender: 2000-2020.

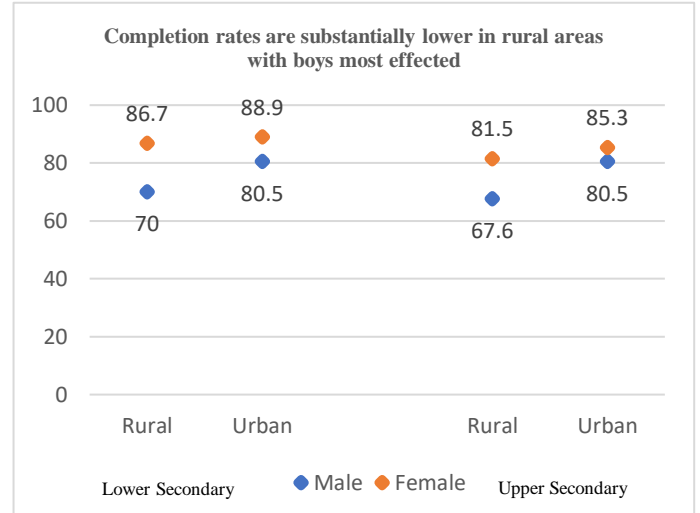


Figure 5.4 Lower and Upper Secondary Completion Rates by Location: 2018

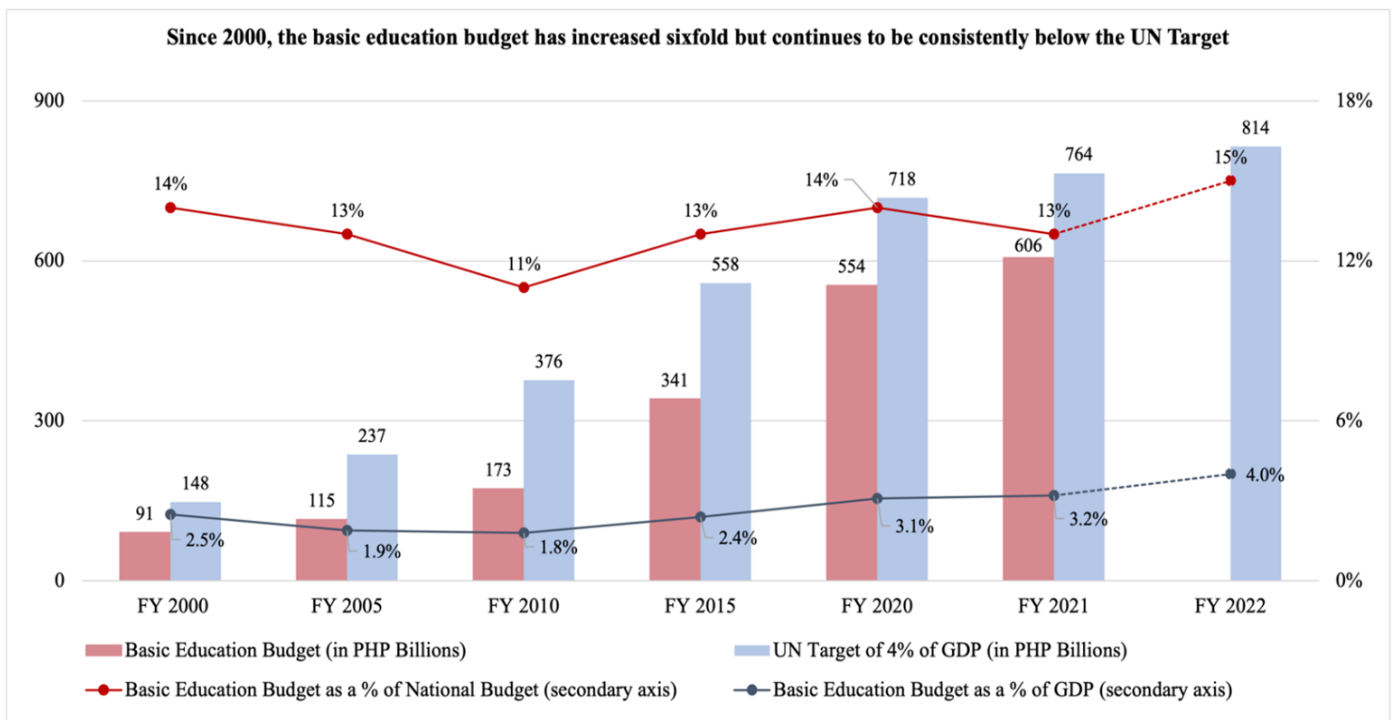


Figure 5.5 Basic Education Budget and UN Target in Philippines: 2000-2022, Source: DBM, DepEd, PSA as cited in Gatchalian (2021).

Recommendations

- Strengthen remote learning modalities with a focus on marginalized groups such as pregnant teens and learners with disabilities
- Conduct regular, effective data collection to highlight and address inequalities
- Strengthen Child Protection Committees to combat school violence
- Equitably distribute resources to support those in remote areas and affected by conflict

Historical Context of Secondary Education in the Philippines

The 1987 Philippine Constitution guarantees every citizen’s right to free, relevant, inclusive, equitable, and quality basic education. Pertinent laws enacted following the ratification of the Constitution sought to ensure that these rights are enjoyed by all Filipinos. Regarding secondary education, the Free Secondary Public Education Act of 1988 (RA 6655) mandates free access to four years of schooling in all public secondary schools. Further, the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001 (RA 9155) reiterates the policy of the state to provide free and quality education, covering the full 10 years of basic, pre-tertiary education specified under the constitution. This Act also promotes relevant alternative learning systems for out-of-school youth and adult learners. Finally, the Expanded Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education Act of 1998 (E-GASTPE) (RA 8545) addresses widening access to secondary schools by enabling a greater number of students to study in private schools through a voucher program.

Between 1971, prior to the 1987 constitution, to 2016, the gross enrollment rate (GER) in secondary education improved steadily but rather slowly by 41 percentage points over 45 years, from 47.50% to 88.46% (Index Mundi, 2019). Growth in the completion rate was comparatively slower, registering 71% in 2010 and 81% in 2018 (see *Figure 5.3*). This indicates that the above mentioned education policies have made incremental differences, but not immediate, substantial impact in terms of access to formal secondary schooling.

The K-12 Program

Until 2013, the Philippines was the last Southeast Asian country with only four years of secondary education. In an effort to rectify this, the Philippines passed the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (RA 10533). The law provides for at least one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary, four years of junior high school (JHS), and two years of senior high school (SHS). To ensure greater access to SHS, the coverage of E-GASTPE was extended to students enrolling in SHS (by virtue of RA 10533). The decree also assures learners that the 12-year basic education program will equip students with competencies that are essential for employment. *Table 5.1* illustrates the effect of the K-12 program on secondary education enrollment rates in the first four years of its implementation, 2016/17 to 2019/20.

Table 5.1 Enrollment in Secondary Education: School Years 2016-2020 (in %).

	2016/17 (start of SHS)	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
JHS – GER	92	95	100	102
JHS – NER	71	76	81	83
SHS – GER	71	67	74	78
SHS - NER	37	46	51	48

Source: LIS/BEIS SY 2017-2018, SY 2018-2019 and SY 2019-2020 as cited in the DepEd presentation (2020a), section on the GER and NER data

The relatively high net enrollment rates (NER) in JHS, coupled with the low NERs in SHS indicate that a high number of JHS students are not continuing to SHS. However, the relatively high GERs for SHS (despite the low NERs) reveal that there are new entrants to

SHS. These are young people who are 17 years and older who did not complete their education but are now re-entering formal schooling under the new set-up (E-Net Philippines, 2019). Secondary school returnees doubled in number during the first two years of the K-12 implementation, from 158,000 to almost 303,000 learners. These young people had three possible reasons for returning: (1) the opportunity to study in private schools for the 5th and 6th years of senior high school (under the E-GASTPE program), (2) the prospects of entering the university, and (3) qualifying for free complete/full tertiary education in state colleges and universities, as mandated under the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act of 2016 (RA 10931). Additionally, many pupils recognize the possibility of obtaining better employment after completing SHS (Montemayor, 2018).

Out-of-School Youth

While formal secondary schooling has been expanded, the Philippine Statistics Authority (2017) estimates the number of out-of-school children and youth at 3.6 million in 2016. Of this number, 11.2% are aged 12-15 years old (JHS level), and 83.1% are 16-24 years old (SHS level and older). In parallel to the formal secondary school system, the Department of Education (DepEd) offers the Alternative Learning System (ALS), a foundational component of the Philippine education system that has existed for many decades. The ALS provides non-formal and informal learning opportunities to out-of-school children and youth, with corresponding accreditation and equivalency exams for both elementary and secondary level completers. The Alternative Learning Systems Act of 2020 (RA 11510) seeks to strengthen the ALS by guaranteeing “equitable access for all learners” (p. 2) and providing “adequate, timely, and quality attention” (p. 2) to meet their learning needs. In addition, in 2015, the Open High School System Act (RA 10665) was legislated to widen access to secondary education by encouraging various forms and systems of learning, and different types of programs that respond to specific learner needs. Depending on the assessment conducted by the school, learners may be placed on school-based, teacher-guided learning, and self-paced learning program; independent, homeschooling program; or a blended learning program.

Consistent with the Alternative Learning System and Open High School System, DepEd continues to implement existing programs as well as develop new policies and programs that address the needs of disadvantaged groups (DepEd, 2020b). The targeted disadvantaged groups include Indigenous and Moro youth, learners with disabilities, pregnant teens, internally displaced learners, and out-of-school youth, particularly those residing in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas.

Remaining Barriers to Secondary Education

While the government has undertaken numerous measures to expand access to secondary education, significant barriers persist.

Political Barriers

The country has many of the policies in place to improve access to and inclusion in education, but financing remains a major limitation (see *Figure 5.5*). In the last twenty years (2000 to 2021), the basic education budget, as a percentage of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), increased only from 2.5% to 3.2% (Global Economy, n.d.). As a percentage

of the national budget, the country's allocation for basic education decreased from 14% in 2000 to 13% in 2021, even dipping to 11% in 2010. This percentage is below the 15-20% benchmark, as recommended by the UNESCO Education 2030 Framework of Action (UNESCO, n.d.). While budget utilization has improved in the last five years, the spending level is low compared to the public education spending of other Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam, which was 4.48% and 4.17% of GDP, respectively, in 2018 (Global Economy, n.d.).¹³

Economic Barriers

Economic barriers to secondary education in the Philippines center around poverty and related issues. In a 2016 nationwide survey, two key reasons given by youth for being out of school were marriage/family matters (37%), and the high cost of education (17.9%) (Department of Education, n.d.). It is well known that poverty and early marriage are correlated, with women from more disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to get married and have children earlier, often resulting in a failure to finish secondary schooling (Philippine Statistics Authority and ICF, 2018). The 2012 National Demographics Health Survey revealed that teenage mothers have a 66% chance of dropping out of school (Ruta-Canayong, 2012).

Similarly, for students from low-income households, cost considerations include indirect costs like school supplies, uniform, meals, and transportation. For voucher or E-GASTPE beneficiaries, top-up or miscellaneous fees imposed by some private secondary schools also serve to discriminate against poorer pupils (ASPBAE, 2016). Thus, despite the voucher program covering the tuition and basic fees charged by the private schools, there is still a high probability that learners will drop-out of school due to economic reasons.

Related to poverty is the issue of child labor. In the 2011 survey on child laborers, the Philippine National Statistics Office and the International Labor Organization estimated the number of child laborers (aged 15-17 years old) at 1.48 million (Ericta, 2011). The majority (68%) are males and are engaged in hazardous work (93%). Almost 50% of them - approximately 700,000 youth - do not attend school. Not fully accounted in the child labor data are the estimated one million child domestic workers, of which 90% are female. A study commissioned by the International Labor Organization noted the failure of the current education system to "absorb and retain child domestic workers" (Pacis, 2002, p. iv). The opportunity cost of education is a major factor for parents wanting their children to work and earn, rather than continue schooling, which reflects the persistent economic challenges and poverty in the country.

Structural Barriers

Uneven development and significant inequality in Philippine society have produced many structural barriers to education, including remote schools, armed conflict, and natural hazards.

A key element of "remoteness" is isolation due to "geographic distance, terrain, or travel time" (Andres et al., 2018, p. iii). These areas, considered as geographically isolated and

¹³ The Philippines have made some progress; however, it still sits below the average public education spending in Asia of 3.4%, based on the data of 14 countries.

disadvantaged areas, suffer from high incidence of poverty and peace and order problems. Because of the archipelagic nature of the Philippines and the lack of infrastructure development, many families live in remote villages. About 10,875 villages, representing close to 26% of all villages in the country, are considered remote (DOH, 2019). The DepEd's two-year Last Mile Schools Program (2019) seeks to address the gaps in resources and facilities in around 7,144 village schools and help more than one million pupils (Somejo, 2021). The main resources to be provided are classrooms, tables and chairs, textbooks, computers, electricity, and additional teachers. DepEd set out 24 targets to be accomplished by the end of the 2020/21 school year.

Further, in terms of armed conflict, the Philippine government has been dealing with one of the longest-running communist insurgencies in the world (Francisco, 2016),¹⁴ and has also recently come to a political settlement with a Muslim secessionist movement in the southern part of the country.¹⁵ These conflicts have resulted in considerable internal forced displacement of children and youth through the years, as fighting breaks out in various parts of the countryside. Inter-clan conflicts, land disputes and commercial resource extraction can also cause displacement.

Natural hazards are another structural barrier, especially since the Philippines ranked third in the 2018 World Risk Index of most disaster-prone countries (UNFPA, 2020). Typhoons and other calamities often cause pupils to miss a significant amount of school time, as rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts drag on, leaving students in camps and evacuation centers for months or even years. In addition, when calamities befall families, their spending for education and health can be cut by as much as 25% (Jha et al., 2018).

Cultural Barriers

Social stigma is also a major cause for pupils to drop out of school. The prevalence of bullying and gender-based violence in Philippine schools are a manifestation of social stigma as a cultural barrier. Despite the passage of the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (RA 10627), the 2018 PISA study revealed that 65% of Filipino high school students are still frequently bullied in school. This figure is almost three times higher than the 23% average among OECD countries that participated in the study (OECD, 2020).

Members of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community, persons with disabilities (PWDs), children coming from Indigenous background, and pregnant teens fail to finish schooling as school environments are sometimes intolerant of differences in sexual orientation, gender, age, ability, intelligence, and wealth. For example, research conducted by Rainbow Rights Project (2014) found that some teachers in schools appeared to impose their own personal values and wielded institutional rules to suppress pupil's gender expression, such as giving students lower grades than they deserved. In the study, many of the LBT respondents reported pressure to alter their preferred gender

¹⁴ The rebellion led by the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) has been festering since the 1960s and is rooted in failed land reform programs and underdevelopment in the rural areas. All Philippine Presidents since the 1980s have attempted some form of peace negotiations with the insurgent movement, but none have succeeded thus far.

¹⁵ This armed movement was led by the Moro National Liberation Front from the 1960s to the 1980s, and then by the Moro Islamic Liberation from the 1990s until 2019. The Bangsamoro Organic Law or BOL (RA 11054) was signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on July 23, 2018, providing for the expanded autonomy long sought by the Moro revolutionaries, and raising the hope that lasting peace will be achieved in the southern Philippines.

expression while at school. The proposed Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity or Expression bill seeks to address the crucial issues of different treatment of employees, denial of admission or expulsion from an educational institution, and other forms of discrimination on the basis of people's sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression.

Intersection of Barriers: Who is Marginalized and Left Behind?

Major population groups in the country are adversely affected by the tragic interplay of various barriers and are left behind. Between 10-20% of the Philippine population belong to Indigenous and Moro communities, most of whom suffer from discrimination already, but also often reside in remote areas which are vulnerable to conflict (IWGIA, n.d.). With conflict comes internal forced displacement, putting education even further beyond their reach. Based on the UNHCR Mindanao Displacement Dashboard (2020), there are currently 351,000 displaced individuals in Mindanao. Likewise, forced evacuations affected close to 22,000 individuals among Indigenous people communities since President Duterte assumed power in July 2016 (IWGIA, n.d.). Militarization, persecution, and dispossession of land have pushed Moros and Indigenous people further into geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, resulting in their systematic exclusion from accessing basic services such as health, education, and livelihood. Forced displacement also caused their separation from their ancestral land, which is deeply tied to their identity as a group. Essentially, this is the same narrative for Muslims residing in remote, underserved areas – areas also vulnerable to conflict and the corresponding displacement. It should also be noted that many remote areas where the marginalized reside are also hazard prone areas – beside rivers, near volcanoes or along mountainsides. Presently, there are 10,875 geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas nationwide. Many of these *barangays*, the smallest administrative division in the country, have peace and order problems, and some are located in conflict-afflicted areas in Mindanao (UNHCR, n.d.).

The second key group of disadvantaged secondary school learners are children who do not fit into mainstream categories but come from impoverished backgrounds. This includes child laborers and child domestic workers who have been forced to contribute to the family income and also those with specific needs such as PWDs and pregnant teens. The 2010 Census of Population and Housing estimates the number of PWDs at 1.4 million. The same study indicates that 6.9% of the PWDs belong to school-aged adolescents 15-19 years old, which is equivalent to more than 100,000 learners (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2013). For teen pregnancies, the Philippines has one of the highest birth rates among the ASEAN member states, with 47 births annually per 1,000 women aged 15-19 (UNFPA, 2020). Alternative learning modalities complemented with appropriate infrastructure, curricula, and resources are needed to address the challenges faced by these pupils.

Future Plans and Upcoming Initiatives

As the problem of COVID-19 lingers with no clear end in sight, blended, modular, and distance learning will continue to be the main learning modalities. The Philippines got somewhat of a head start with the implementation of the DepEd's 2018 Digital Rise Program. The program includes the provision of both hardware and software to teachers and learners starting from grade 4 to 12. A Basic Education – Learning Continuity Plan was also

developed by DepEd to respond to the challenges brought about by the pandemic. However, there is work that remains to be done.

Between school years 2019/20 and 2020/21 total enrollment in the Philippines dropped by 20% from 27.7 million to 22.2 million enrollees because of the pandemic. This figure covers kindergarten up to grade 12 and includes Alternative Learning System students and non-graded learners with disabilities (New Worlds, 2020). The main challenge is how to reach out to learners, not only those who have fallen out of the system but even those struggling to stay in it. For 2021, the national government has allocated PHP 4 billion (USD 83 million) for Information and Communications Technology development and the printing of self-learning modules. Although there has been a 9.54% increase in the DepEd budget for 2021, allocations for key education programs have to be realigned and used for the production of modules, textbooks, and other instructional materials. Affected programs include the Last Mile Schools Program, the Voucher Program, Special Education Program, and School-based Feeding Program, among others (Gatchalian, 2021).

Recommendations

The existing inequities in education have been aggravated by the pandemic. Thus, the current situation is an opportune time to build a stronger, more inclusive, and resilient education system. Given the country's education scenario, the following short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations are proposed.

In the short-term, given the pandemic, it is important for the government to strengthen remote learning modalities, while ensuring adequate support for marginalized learners outside the formal education system. The implementation of the Alternative Learning System and Open High School System laws are crucial at this time. Adequate funding, appropriate curriculum, and the corresponding human resource complement must be provided to support the implementation of alternative learning modalities and inclusion programs. There are also good policies and programs that need sustained funding and competent human resources to ensure their full implementation. The passage of legislative measures pertaining to learners with disabilities and pregnant teens must also be pursued to ensure that funding and learning infrastructure for these sectors are given the same attention as the other marginalized groups.

In the medium term, more effective data gathering and tracking systems need to be put in place. First, the availability of valid and reliable data on children and youth-at-risk (e.g. Moros, Indigenous people, PWDs, and those residing in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas) is important to be able to design appropriate learning interventions, and to accurately monitor the country's progress towards fulfilling every citizen's right to education. Second, a more efficient tracking system is vital to ensure that the basic needs of at-risk youth (e.g. laborers and domestic workers, pregnant teens, etc.) are addressed. Third, strengthening the Child Protection Committees at all levels to address issues of bullying, gender-based violence, teen pregnancy, and other child protection concerns is recommended. The key to this is the monitoring of implementation, given that the policy for this structure is already in place (DepEd Order 40 s. 2012).

Over the long term, it is imperative for the government to create a balance in addressing different learner needs. It must invest more resources in public JHS and SHS to equalize access in different geographical locations. It must also expand budget support for learners in

the marginalized and excluded populations. Judicious and calibrated budget allocation is the key to ensuring that the government's limited resources fulfill the country's varied education objectives.

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Chapter 6: Complex and Intersecting Barriers to Access: Some Concluding Thoughts

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The ‘Universal Secondary Education in the Asia Pacific Region’ project focused on four country cases to explore the challenges and opportunities facing education systems in the region. More specifically, the cases of Bangladesh, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Mongolia, and the Philippines were examined in relation to access, quality, and equity issues in secondary schooling. This report brings together these perspectives, to use a comparative lens of enquiry to cross-examine and establish the main challenges facing these systems and how policy makers in the countries and beyond can work to ameliorate persistent problems. It has demonstrated that the barriers to secondary education do not occur in isolation but are complex and intersecting and efforts to mitigate them must engage with this complexity and seeming intractability. These barriers overlap considerably across a range of structural, cultural, political, and economic factors, almost fully in some cases. Hence change will take time and involve a willingness to engage across the multiple fields that contribute to enabling access to secondary education.

However, the multifaceted relationship between historical time, place, and access to secondary schooling should not be underestimated. The differences between urban and rural populations and the intersection of geography and the history of each country inform the future of access to secondary education. The Asia Pacific region is still a long way away from reaching universal secondary education with one in four countries in the region not expected to reach universal enrollment in secondary education by 2084.

This conclusion is meant to surface some of the findings emerging from these case studies before providing a brief discussion on measured, and ultimately steady, ways forward.

History and Geography

We begin by first turning our lens to an examination of the history of education and schooling in these contexts. This is not a new analytical perspective: education policy, the established purposes and pedagogies of education, as well as the ways it is valued (or not) in particular country contexts are imbued in the traditions, politics, and histories of specific country contexts in unique ways.

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Our cases show a high degree of dependency on their past. Both Bangladesh and Lao PDR continue to suffer from persisting features of the past such as considerable inequity and a low interest in education and its value, either by the political class (Bangladesh) or the population (this is the case in Lao PDR, where many ethnolinguistic minorities appear to have ‘no interest’ in attending school). Examining both countries’ histories, it becomes clear that education had been the privilege of select, elite sections of society, with the vast population excluded due to their religion, class, or social status, or because of the language of instruction. Despite persistent efforts to change, it appears that both in Bangladesh and Lao PDR, secondary education is still approached as an institution that is destined for those that can either afford it or those that need it: in Bangladesh, access to secondary schooling is not free (unlike the majority of the other cases). In Lao PDR education is seen by most of the rural population as largely irrelevant to their needs and lifestyle. Given this history, the ‘generational’ nature of traditional, rural community life, and the current political context it is therefore not a surprise that many feel disenfranchised from and disinterested in schooling. The Philippines presents quite a different picture. Despite the vast challenges facing the system, education is established in the country as a valued institution by both politicians and citizens alike.

Finally, while historic decisions appear to hinder access to secondary education in Bangladesh and Lao PDR, in Mongolia historical present seems to aid inclusion. The Mongolian People’s Republic’s (1921-1992) decision to establish free boarding schools for rural and remote nomadic hard-to-reach communities has helped, even after the end of the People’s Republic, to promote access to secondary education: enrollment and retention rates are higher than in the other cases examined suggesting that education is appreciated by decision makers and its citizens.

Perhaps the two characteristics that all the countries under examination share are clear challenges in ensuring access for their rural populations and those with lower socio-economic status. These often overlap with rural, poor communities living far away from urban centers and less prone to attending secondary schooling. Across case studies a variety of reasons are identified to help understand this phenomenon. Two common explanations include student non-completion of primary school and the increased need for children in poverty to work to support their family. The latter may also suggest that families perceive school as an expensive luxury that they cannot afford. Geography and history intersect here, of course, and the Mongolian example of the boarding schools, as well as the provision of stipends for all children, mean that rurality should not necessarily lead to a lack of schooling. The Mongolian case – with all its own challenges, including high levels of poverty and inequity for children with disabilities – shows that when rural communities cannot go to school, schools can and should be going to them.

It is evident that significant investments in secondary education, securing the provision of free, relevant, and proximate schooling to rural communities is needed to start slowly reversing long-held ideas about education as the privilege of a select few.

Discrepancy between Set Targets and Local Realities

Another consistent finding across our cases was the significant gap between the aspirational nature of the Sustainability Development Goal (SDG) 4 targets and the national and local realities that inform their implementation. Education becomes a contested space of promises

and ambitious plans presented in a time-cyclical manner, often following electoral politics and political party declarations; once elections are over, many of these commitments and promises remain unfulfilled.

Across all our cases, we found significant discrepancy between the promise of an increased budget in education and the realities of secondary schooling. Apart from the significant lack of investment, however, there is also often an absence of political capital; in several instances, our case studies tell stories of the unwillingness to listen to civil society and the teaching profession and to push for reforms that address the needs of educators. A telling example of the repercussions of the combined effects of the lack of investment and political will is the problem of teacher absences in Lao PDR; enrollment and retention rates are very low in areas where teachers fail to appear in the classroom. However, most of these schools are incomplete: they are either structurally unfinished or they do not offer the full range of grades and curriculum topics. Although lack of investment is partly the cause, this is also an indication of a lack of valuing the teaching profession, as well as a lack of clear accountability structures, where teachers feel their work is acknowledged, appreciated, and that they are confident they can contribute to the topic of their expertise.

Although the SDG 4 agenda is broad enough to be adaptable to local needs and can be translated to measures that might reverse the tide of low enrollment and completion rates, especially for the most disadvantaged, it lacks clear accountability mechanism. Many declarations therefore remain at the level of political discourse and do not translate into specific plans and reforms. Telling is the fact that in all the countries we examined there are plenty of specific targeted initiatives, funded by either national governments or international organizations. These initiatives do appear to be making some degree of difference, albeit incrementally and slowly. However, they also have the potential to be easily reversed in the context of fragile and impoverished communities living in harsh and hazardous environments. Although there is a degree of differentiation across the cases, we have seen a lack of a holistic plan on education improvement that would tackle the problems of lack of access, quality, and educational performance from early childhood education all the way to the end of secondary school. For example, a key reason for high drop-out rates or out-of-school children in secondary schooling seems to be rooted much earlier in their educational trajectory: in the later years of primary school, or even earlier. Although many children might drop out because they need to work, many of them also leave school because they are not equipped with the levels of literacy and numeracy that are necessary to move on successfully to secondary education. Addressing these discrepancies between targets and local realities involves longer timelines for committed and budgeted action, a focus on engaged, valued, properly remunerated, and supported teachers, and a view of education along the trajectory of early childhood to secondary schools.

Poverty, Disadvantage and Their Devastating Effects

Across all the case studies, it is difficult to identify the single dimension with the greatest impact on access to secondary education. Furthermore, it was evident early on that the intersection of multiple barriers (cultural, structural, political, and economic) anticipated at the start of the project was far more complex in reality. Poverty, disability, gender, ethnicity, religion, and geographic remoteness combine and intersect in multiple ways in different country contexts but the fact that groups already marginalized in their respective countries were often further marginalized by the education system, was startlingly clear.

Poverty persists as a key economic barrier even if access to education is ‘free’. In many countries the hidden costs of schooling – uniforms and textbooks, for example – are often prohibitive. In both Mongolia and Bangladesh, there were reports of bribery and corruption: informal payments, ‘donations’ or fees to schools mean that poorer families are left out. Similarly, those living in remote or rural areas, who are also amongst the poorest, are doubly disadvantaged by the lack of access to quality schooling. Rural schools are less likely to be offering education in all grades or attracting enough and qualified teachers. In Bangladesh, children living on the fringes of society, for example in river and wetland areas, slums, disaster prone areas, or areas designated for brothel operation and tea gardens, have little practical access to schools. Practical access is also an issue for three other marginalized groups: students from ethnic minorities, those with disabilities, and transgender.

The Lao PDR and Philippines cases in particular, highlighted the low participation of ethnolinguistic minorities and Indigenous communities in secondary education. As well as being more likely to be living in rural or poor areas of the country, these students are further alienated from the education system because of the lack of instruction in local and minority languages; culturally irrelevant curricular content; and very few teachers drawn from these minority groups. In Mongolia, where we saw the highest enrollment rates in secondary education in the region, we also noted the large number of disabled students excluded from education. Indeed, it is notable that rights (2016) and school enrollment (2018) legislation for this group are relatively recent, but they have not been followed by logistical or school level support to actualize access to education.

Gender equality issues in the various country contexts can complicate and exacerbate disadvantage even further. In most cases it is girls’ access to, and successful completion of, secondary schooling that is most affected. In Bangladesh, for example, household responsibilities and early marriage often mean declining participation by girls as school progresses; in the Philippines teenage pregnancy is a significant factor in girls’ access to the later stages of education. By contrast, amongst Mongolian herder families, it is girls who are encouraged to attend school whilst boys tend to drop out to help with livestock and labor market activities.

So far, the focus has been on broader societal factors, but aspects of in-school culture also play a part in students’ willingness to engage in education. For example, bullying – a manifestation of social stigma and discrimination – is a significant issue in Philippines; sexual harassment and violence in school were noted in the case studies on Mongolia and Bangladesh. The fact that teachers are difficult to recruit and retain, or ill equipped to deliver curricula – particularly at the more specialized secondary level – continues to be problematic. Indeed, teachers themselves are subject to the same barriers and disadvantages as their students.

Concluding Thoughts: Slow Change, Committed Action, Learning from Each Other

The discussion presents us with a complex weave of issues that are difficult to unpack and challenging to tackle within a short time frame. In this final section we attempt to outline what these case countries might learn from each other as well as where change might be

possible. To begin with, however, we wish to emphasize the complexity of these barriers. As presented in each of these cases, barriers bleed across categorical definitions, intersect, and, at times, confound access to secondary education. Family preference for sending boys to school in some contexts can represent both a cultural and economic barrier. Lack of female teachers in the school creates structural problems that may result from political barriers, lack of investment, and reinforce cultural barriers and gender expectations for girls. Teachers' absenteeism creates structural barriers to students' engagement in secondary education yet emerges itself from structural, political, and economic barriers.

Immediate action points to increase access are difficult to identify. They tend to be formal in nature and limited to a single dimension. However, many of the barriers identified in these case studies are informal and ingrained and not easily susceptible to change. Not all barriers are addressed or sit within government commitments and electoral cycles; many also include local, national, and global efforts. Ideally reforms would need to be holistically engaging with a range of these areas simultaneously. Secondary education cannot be lifted out of this complex structure; it is firmly embedded in larger systems. While changes are needed in many countries to fully invest in secondary education or expand free, compulsory education into the secondary level, these adjustments provide for the basic parameters in which access may be possible, however, without addressing the underlying social and cultural issues, any gains are likely to be inequitable and short-lived.

The challenges of overlapping, deeply embedded barriers suggest a need for committed action across longer timelines rather than being tied to incremental advances in the short-term; this conclusion has repeatedly drawn attention to the need for positive, slow, and largely irreversible change. This slow change is an indication of the complexity of the task at hand in our efforts at reducing these barriers. It requires sustained effort across levels: in the public financing and political will of the macro, in the accountability structures and community engagements of the meso level, and in reducing the economic and cultural barriers of the micro level. Positive gains in access to secondary education occur across and within these levels; in this context, change becomes a long-term activity requiring extended timelines to identify and encourage both steadfast commitment and meaningful, even if incremental, change.

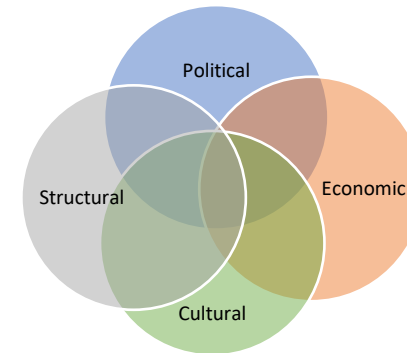
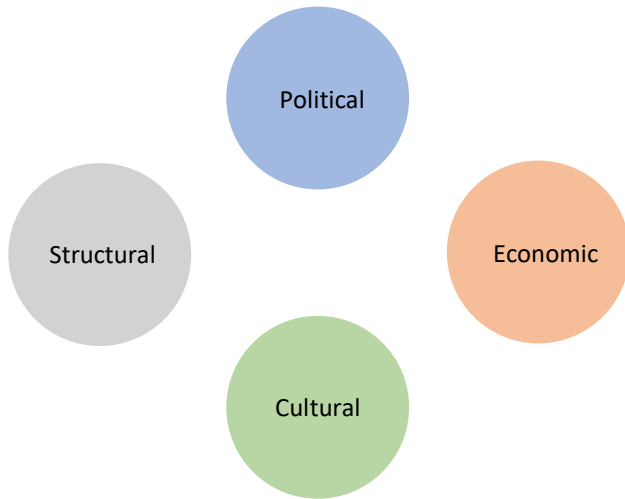
We might learn from each other in this process. The case studies presented here contain within them examples of context-specific initiatives that might serve as inspirations or springboards for rethinking how we might solve the problems and barriers to access. While they manifest differently in many contexts, there are also shared roots to many of them. In the *Appendix*, we highlight some specific initiatives that might be considered in other countries and further discuss the challenge of addressing overlapping barriers, suggesting steps to build a coordinated campaign toward sustainable change.

To bookend this report, the Asia Pacific region is a long way away from reaching universal secondary education, a situation likely due to a complex range of formal and informal political, economic, structural, and cultural barriers present in the specific contexts of these countries. Addressing these barriers requires a considered appreciation of how they intersect to construct impediments to access, how a long-term commitment is needed to address them, and how we might use past and current regional examples as mechanisms to rethink universal access to secondary education in the Asia Pacific region.

Appendix: Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Education

#1: Recognizing the Reality

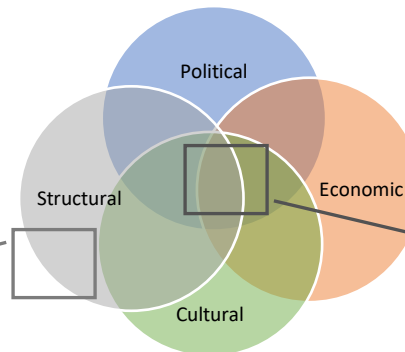
While we often like to believe barriers to education are independent and can be addressed swiftly, one at a time, the reality is most barriers are likely to be overlapping. In removing barriers and increasing access there are few quick wins. The amount, or density, of the overlap is driven by the specific context being explored and has implications on the time and resources needed for change.



Barriers at the Margin

Tend to:

- Be more formal
- Occur at a single level
- Require less time and resources
- Be necessary but not sufficient for sustainable change



Overlapping Barriers

Tend to:

- Be a combination of formal & informal
- Occur at micro, meso & macro levels
- Require more time and resources
- Be necessary and more likely to lead to sustainable change

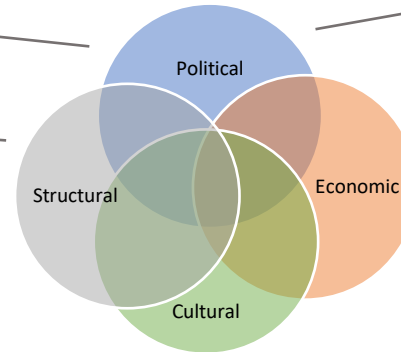
#2: Where to Start?

#3: Addressing Barriers at the Margin

Examples of necessary or effective remediation from case studies

Extend compulsory education into secondary and make it free from fees.

Ensure all children can physically access school facilities. For example, Mongolia has a history of free boarding schools that are used to help meet the needs of herder families.

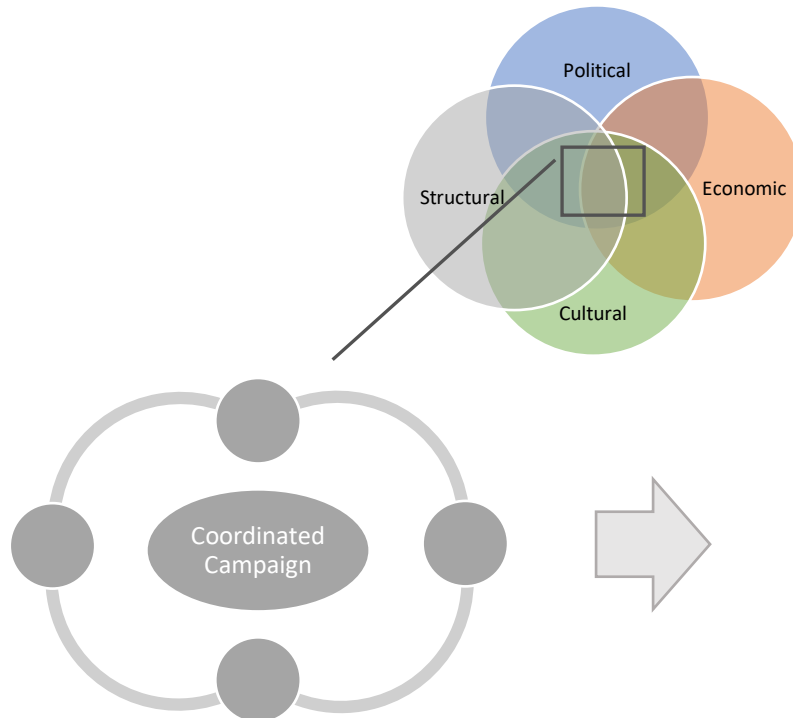


Fully fund education at the international benchmarks of 4-6% of GDP and 15-20% of government spending.

Financially support marginalized groups. For example, Bangladesh has implemented a successful Female Stipend Programme to increase enrollment for girls by eliminating fees and reducing opportunity costs.

#4: Addressing Overlapping Barriers

Suggested steps to start. Path is dependent on and driven by local context, and requires more comprehensive action, with sustained effort.



Align policy and practice by working toward inclusive pedagogy and curriculum that is relevant to all groups & provided in a safe environment.

Review existing legal frameworks and policies to identify any impediments & omissions that prohibit access.

Raise awareness of needs, barriers, and benefits of education to community members & policymakers.

Bring together stakeholders from the community to collectively identify barriers & community needs.



UNIVERSAL SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

