

# YOUTH AND EDUCATION



## HIGHLIGHTS

- 10.6% of the world's youth (15-24 years old) are non-literate<sup>i</sup>.
- Data from 2011 indicates that in developing countries, the percentage of non-literate youth is 12.1%, with Sub-Saharan Africa's percentage standing at 29.6%, and South and West Asia standing at 18.5%<sup>ii</sup>.
- In 2013, about 225 million youth, or 20% of all youth in the developing world, are "idle" – not in education, employment or training<sup>iii</sup>
- By 2015, youth non-literacy rates are projected to fall to 8% for the world and to 11% in developing countries as a whole. Youth non-literacy rates in sub-Saharan Africa are projected to decline to 25%<sup>iv</sup>.
- In 2010, almost 71 million adolescents (10-19 years old) were not in school of any type<sup>v</sup>, out of which around 3 in 4 live in South and West Asia (approximately 13 million students) and in sub-Saharan Africa (approximately 30 million students).
- As of 2010, an estimated 61 million students of primary school age – 9% of the world total - are out of school<sup>vi</sup>.
- Commitments made at the international level, including the World Programme of Action for Youth, the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All goals as well as the Global Education First Initiative, identify education as a key priority area for action.

Education is central to development and to the improvement of the lives of young people globally, and as such has been identified as a priority area in internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals and the World Programme of Action for Youth. Education is important in eradicating poverty and hunger and in promoting sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development. Increased efforts towards education accessibility, quality and affordability are central to global development efforts.

Despite significant improvements in increasing primary school enrolment in some regions, the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary level education by 2015 is unlikely to be met. Moreover, such improvements have not necessarily been followed by an equivalent transition to secondary education, vocational training, non-formal education or entry into the labour market, especially for girls and young women.

Worldwide 10.6% of young people are non-literate, lacking basic numerical and reading skills, and as such lack the means to be able to sustain a living through full and decent employment. With youth unemployment and

underemployment at persistently high levels worldwide, and with many young working poor lacking even primary-level education, such youth unemployment and underemployment rates act to jeopardize social inclusion, cohesion and stability.





There is a need to align education policies, curricula and training programmes, in a people-centric way, with national development priorities and needs, international development strategies and labour market requirements. Doing so will promote the situation of young people, fight extreme poverty, and allow for a maximization of the benefits of globalization for youth.

The persistent gender gap in education hinders youth development. Gender inequity in education is characterized by, among other things, lack of access to and availability of gender sensitive educational infrastructure, materials and training programmes, as well as a high dropout rate amongst secondary school aged girls.

Knowledge and education are key factors to the full and effective participation of youth in the processes of social, economic and political development. Increased attention to improving participation rates of young people, particularly marginalized youth, is needed to ensure that they acquire the knowledge, capacities, skills and ethical values needed to fulfil their role as agents of development, good governance, social inclusion, tolerance and peace.

Greater focus on universal access to education, quality education, human rights education and learning, as well as increased access to the complementary nature of vocational, formal, informal, and non-formal educational practices in a non-discriminatory manner - particularly for young women - is key for young people to be able to address their aspirations and challenges, fulfil their potential, and influence current and future social and economic conditions and opportunities.

## United Nations and Education

Obtaining universal education is a priority for the United Nations system. In 1995 governments committed to the World Programme of Action for Youth and identified education among its 15 priorities. In doing so, they highlighted the need for 'improving the level of basic education, skill training and literacy among all youth, including young women and youth in distressed circumstances.'

In addition, at the World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal, 2000), 164 governments pledged to achieve "Education for All" (EFA) by launching a world movement to meet the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults. Participants at the Forum identified six goals to be met by 2015, with young people being the focus of Goal 3: 'Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults'.

The goal commits countries to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes. However, the realization of all six goals provides the best opportunity and environment for youth to benefit from education.

At the 62nd session of the General Assembly in 2007, the critical role of both formal and non-formal education in the achievement of poverty eradication and other development goals was reiterated. Also emphasized was the need for basic education and training for eradicating illiteracy; the importance of commitment in striving for expanded secondary and higher education, especially for girls and young women; and the creation of human resources and infrastructure capabilities and the empowerment of those living in poverty.





The United Nations primarily concentrates its efforts in education in five key areas: promoting policy dialogue, monitoring progress, carrying out advocacy, developing capacities and mobilizing funding. To achieve its aims, the United Nations promotes education through many instruments, agencies and funds, including through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank. These agencies are co-convenors of the EFA movement, which is led by UNESCO, and work together with governments as well as with entities such as nongovernmental organizations, research organizations and the private sector. In addition, the UN has adopted a range of measures to further education, such as the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012), the UN Girls' Education Initiative, and the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).

## Progress

Primary school enrolment has increased significantly worldwide and has led to rising demand for secondary schooling. Sub-Saharan Africa's secondary school enrolment rates have increased by 40% from 1999 to 2008, and the number of out-of-school children decreased by about 13 million between 1999 and 2009. Despite this, the uptake in secondary and tertiary education remains low, particularly in developing regions, where many young people receive little or no education after primary level as a result of inadequate infrastructure, lack of opportunities, affordability and accessibility.

In terms of tertiary education, much of the growth in enrolment has occurred in East Asia and the Pacific, and not in sub-Saharan Africa or South and West Asia. These regional inequalities can be demonstrated also by the estimates of literacy rates. Between 1994 and 2010, the number of non-literate youth (15-24 years) declined from almost 170 million to 122 million, and is projected to fall to 96 million by 2015 – more than half of these will be young women. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage of non-literate young people stood at 29.6% in 2011.

It is clear that many education and training systems are not adequately preparing students to meet the demands of a globalized world. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011 indicates that despite progress towards the EFA goals, millions of children are graduating from primary school with reading, writing and numeracy skills far below expected levels. Too often, the quality of secondary education is weak and the content is not relevant for young people and is not connected with the world of work.

The persistence of youth unemployment and under-employment suggests that mechanisms for anticipating and developing skills relevant to the world of work are not functioning to the level necessary.

## The Way Forward

### Enhancing the Quality of Education and Training

Although there has been progress in reaching universal primary education and an expansion of equitable access to education, this progress has often not been accompanied by necessary provisions for ensuring quality, resulting in minimal impact on the lives of learners and decreased





opportunities for social participation. Poor quality education is more common among disadvantaged segments of societies, with education being poorly adapted to the cultural and linguistic contexts of particular groups. Equally important, poor quality education and training deny young people employment opportunities as well as the resultant earnings and improved quality of life. Ultimately, poor quality education risks reinforcing inequalities and sustaining inter-generational poverty and marginalization.

Increased efforts are needed to ensure that education at primary, secondary and tertiary level is respondent to the needs of young people and the realities in which they live, so as to adequately equip them for participation in social and economic life. Scaled up efforts to ensure quality teacher training, the development of appropriate and gender sensitive learning materials, safe educational environments, including efforts to eliminate bullying, and delivery of education in an equitable, gender sensitive and violent free manner are the cornerstones of providing an education for all.

The development of policies and programmes to increase the use of ICT in education should be strengthened and recognized for its importance in the provision and evaluation of education, as well as an invaluable skill for young people.

### **Promoting Non Formal and Informal Education**

Many education and training systems do not provide young people with the basic skills needed to escape poverty and unemployment, even when they continue to receive formal education. Non-formal education programmes seek to fill this gap by providing learning and skills development opportunities that are relevant to the context in which young people live and seek their livelihoods. Often provided through youth and community based organizations, non-formal education facilitates the learning of life-relevant knowledge and skills, especially for disadvantaged and marginalized groups.

Non-formal education should not be seen as an alternative to formal education, but rather recognized for its complementariness in providing a more fully rounded and skills based approach, equipping youth to meet the competing demands of work and personal life.

There is also an increasing awareness about the importance of informal learning in different settings including in the workplace. The recognition of informal learning is one of a cluster of educational responses to the need to widen participation in education and training for reasons of social inclusion and economic advancement. In many countries new and innovative schemes of recognition of non-formal and informal learning have been introduced.

### **Transforming and Expanding Skills Acquisition for the World of Work**

Programmes to equip young people with the skills for the world of work must provide technical and vocational education and training (TVET), combining classroom education with workplace training, and technical training with communication, problem solving and entrepreneurship awareness. Otherwise, young people will find it difficult to find a job, to stay in employment, to move on in the workplace, and, more broadly, to succeed in lifelong learning.

TVET programmes frequently provide training for a specific job, yet employment opportunities and the fast changing technology require adaptability and permanent skills development. Hence, increasing employability requires consideration of both short- and long-term perspectives, enabling young people to seize immediate employment opportunities while also equipping them with the





ability to continue learning and be able to adjust to changes in the workplace and career opportunities. There is an urgent need to transform TVET so that more young people and adults have opportunities to develop the skills they need for work and life.

This transformation calls for putting TVET in a lifelong learning perspective and supporting deeper linkages between different policy areas such as youth policies, rural development, industrial development, poverty reduction, etc. At the same time, it emphasizes the need for broad partnerships which involves national stakeholders. The past twenty years have been marked by the emergence of new and innovative forms of collaboration between public and private actors in the area of education. For instance, the private sector has both a key role to play, and a great interest, in providing youth with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes they need, for example through work-based learning including apprenticeships, alternance training<sup>1</sup> and internships.

### Providing Alternative Learning Opportunities to Vulnerable Youth

Sustainable and shared economic development increasingly depends on the capacity of governments to implement targeted policies to reach marginalized groups and remove barriers to ongoing learning and entry into the labour market. Notwithstanding the significant achievements over the past decade, women and girls still have less access to education and training, and specific policies are urgently needed to address these challenges.

Young people who drop out of school early are vulnerable to unemployment, poverty, teen marriage, pregnancy, and partaking in risky behaviours. In addition to preventing young people from dropping out of school, alternative learning opportunities that take into account the reasons why they are not in school are needed. These reasons usually include income poverty, gender, disability, family catastrophes, social conflicts and wars, as well as perceived low market returns to education. The challenge is to give these young people appropriate opportunities to consolidate their basic knowledge and competencies, and equip them with the relevant skills needed to find a job, set up a business or engage in other productive work.

### For Further Reading

- World Programme of Action for Youth:  
<http://social.un.org/index/Youth/WorldProgrammeofActionforYouth.aspx>
- UNESCO education website:  
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/>
- UNESCO youth website:  
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/>

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<sup>1</sup> Alternance training is a type of work-based learning that combines education and work for certain period in an educational or training institute and in the workplace. For more about definition, please check:  
<http://www.eqavet.eu/qa/gns/glossary/a/alternance-training.aspx>





- The Recommendations of the Third International Congress on TVET:  
<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/concensus-en.pdf>

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<sup>i</sup> UNESCO, (2013) UIS Fact Sheet “Adult and Youth Literacy”  
<http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Documents/fs26-2013-literacy-en.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> UNESCO, (2013) UIS Fact Sheet “Adult and Youth Literacy”  
<http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Documents/fs26-2013-literacy-en.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Feature%20Story/Education/900-YouthJobs-Infographic-English.png>

<sup>iv</sup> UNESCO, (2013) UIS Fact Sheet “Adult and Youth Literacy”  
<http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Documents/fs26-2013-literacy-en.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/media/files/PFC2012\\_A\\_report\\_card\\_on\\_adolescents.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/files/PFC2012_A_report_card_on_adolescents.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/out-of-school-children.aspx>

This Fact Sheet was prepared by United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) and the Focal Point on Youth, UNDESA. This is part of a collaborative effort of the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, coordinated by the Focal Point on Youth, UNDESA.

