



United Nations

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PRESS RELEASE

UN CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION TO ADDRESS EDUCATION CRISIS AS GLOBAL PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGE POPULATION PEAKS IN 2023

New York, 10 April 2023 – The global population of primary-school-aged children is expected to reach an all-time high of 820 million in 2023. The number of secondary school children is also on the rise, but the education sector, shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, is struggling to meet the rising demand. Against this challenging backdrop, the United Nations Commission on Population and Development convenes this week, from 10 to 14 April, to discuss the vital impact that investing in quality education has on promoting opportunity and prosperity, advancing gender equality and ensuring environmental sustainability.

“School closures and teaching disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened existing inequalities in access to and quality of education,” said Mr. Li Junhua, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. “Low-income and lower-middle-income countries face extraordinary challenges in recovering from the resulting learning losses and in resuming progress towards the universal completion of primary and secondary education by 2030.”

These challenges are felt most sharply in sub-Saharan Africa, where the primary-school-aged population is projected to increase by 86 million between 2022 and 2050 and where education systems were hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondary schools in the region can only accommodate 36 per cent of qualifying students. These trends require significant investments in education and skills training in the coming years.

“Investing in quality education today is essential to transform lives, economies and societies tomorrow,” stressed Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. “Education is game-changing, especially for girls. When girls can finish their schooling, avoid early marriage and childbearing, and make a safe, healthy transition to adulthood, they can chart their own path and contribute to a healthier, more equitable and prosperous future for themselves and their communities.”

Deliberations at the Commission on Population and Development will inform the High-level Political Forum in July, as well as the upcoming SDG Summit to be convened by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023.

Five focus areas of this year's Commission on Population and Development

The adverse impacts of COVID-19 on education

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep-seated flaws in education systems and highlighted pre-existing inequalities in access to education. Enrolment shortfalls were compounded by profound deficiencies in infrastructure, digital access, modern teaching methods and qualified teachers. Low-income and lower-middle-income countries experienced significant cuts in public spending on education making it all the more difficult to recover from learning losses.

Digital inclusion: key to reducing inequalities

Digital inclusion is a necessity of modern life. The pandemic also brought digital inequalities to the fore. In 2021, some 90 per cent of the population in developed countries used the Internet, compared with only 27 per cent in the least developed countries. The digital divide is especially pronounced for women and girls. Globally, women are 21 per cent less likely to be online compared with men, rising to half as likely in the least developed countries.

Education: key to realizing the demographic dividend and empowering women

Education is a key determinant of development. It is among the most powerful predictors of both economic productivity and income growth as well as population health and well-being. Evidence suggests that a substantial portion of the demographic dividend (a boost in per capita economic growth derived from an increase in the relative size of the working-age population during a particular stage of the demographic transition) may in fact be an education dividend. The education of women and girls contributes significantly to the health and survival of children and the eradication of child marriage, early childbearing and unplanned pregnancy. Combined with family planning services, the expansion of primary and secondary education has afforded women greater autonomy in reproductive decision-making. Education also increases women's access to jobs in the formal sector, reduces vulnerable employment and lowers gender wage inequality.

Sexuality education: key to empowering young people

Sexuality education is a crucial and cost-effective means to protect the health and rights of people at all stages of their lives. Well-designed curricula to deliver comprehensive education on sexuality, gender, relationships and rights in participatory, learner centred, age-appropriate and culturally relevant ways can help to foster positive social norms, promote gender equality and reduce gender-based violence.

Lifelong learning: key to sustained, inclusive economic growth

Globally, over 770 million adults, most of whom are women, are illiterate. Moreover, with unprecedented numbers of people living longer, lifelong learning and the re-skilling of workers are more important than ever. Nevertheless, in nearly half of all countries, lifelong learning accounts for less than 2 per cent of education budgets. Empowering workers of all ages can lower the burden on health and pension systems and support inclusive economic growth.

Find out more about the 56th session of the Commission on Population and Development and follow the plenary session via [UN Web TV](#).

For more information about the Commission on Population and Development, visit:
www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/CPD

Available for interviews:

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