





SDG 4

**Ensure inclusive
and equitable
quality education
and promote
lifelong learning
opportunities for all**

A. Introduction

Arab countries have progressively expanded access to schooling and reduced gender gaps in education since 2000. Inequalities and uneven quality in instruction, however, continue to hinder progress on the SDGs and impact students from all walks of life. Many education systems struggle to adequately serve poor students, rural communities, girls and women, refugees, internally displaced persons and persons with disabilities, thereby deepening inequalities and constraining social and economic development.

To get on track to achieve SDG 4, Arab countries need holistic, clear and well-resourced policies to improve the quality and relevance of learning outcomes through curriculum reforms at all stages of education. Policies to enhance critical thinking and skills acquisition are required to achieve SDG 4 and equip students for success in school, work and life, based on foundational literacy and numeracy, problem-solving, technical and vocational competencies, and other key life skills.

The COVID-19 crisis has deepened learning poverty in the region and introduced new obstacles that threaten long-term consequences if they are not adequately addressed. The pandemic led to widespread school closures; on average, Arab countries fully closed schools for 25.2 weeks between 2020 and 2022, and at least partially closed schools for 45.4 weeks. This cost students estimated losses of between 0.5 and 1.1 learning-adjusted years of schooling, and put millions of students at an increased risk of dropping out. Learners from disadvantaged groups have been disproportionately affected. Without remedial action, the region could lose \$800 billion in income over the course of these students' lives.

Sources: UNESCO online dashboard, *Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19*; UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2021.

What the data say

Data included in this section are from the *ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor*, unless otherwise indicated (accessed in December 2023).

Available SDG 4 data present a mixed picture of regional progress in ensuring a quality education for all.



Primary school completion rates increased from 75 per cent in 2000 to 82 per cent in 2022, including 81 per cent for girls and 84 per cent for boys. **Lower secondary completion rates** grew from 55.2 to 67.5 per cent during this same period, although this remains well behind the global average of 76.6 per cent.¹



Since 2000, **net secondary school enrolment** has increased from 51.9 to 63.5 per cent. Despite this progress, the region remains below the global average of 66.3 per cent. It still has a gender gap, with 61.3 per cent net enrolment of girls compared to 65.6 per cent of boys.



Enrolment in pre-primary education has been steadily expanding in the region, rising from 27.2 per cent in 2002 to 46.1 per cent in 2020. While this rate of increase has allowed the region to close the gap somewhat with the global average, it remains significant. Worldwide, the participation rate in pre-primary education is 74.6 per cent.



In 2020, 13.9 per cent of **primary school-aged children were out of school**, including 15.5 per cent of girls and 12.4 per cent of boys. This figure is much greater than the global average of 8.8 per cent.



In terms of school infrastructure, the region exceeds global averages in the **number of schools with access to electricity, computers, schools, Internet, handwashing facilities, single-sex sanitation facilities and drinking water.**



Adult literacy rates improved from 64 per cent in 2000 to 74 per cent in 2020 but remain well behind the global average of 87 per cent. Although the gender gap has decreased substantially since 2000, women are still more likely to be illiterate than men, with a total literacy rate of 66 per cent.



The proportion of primary teachers with required qualifications declined from 2005 to 2020, falling from 93.8 to 83.6 per cent. The region is now slightly behind the global average of 86.2 per cent. In contrast, **the proportion of secondary teachers with the required credentials** was 88.3 per cent, exceeding the global average of 83.8 per cent.



According to international standardized test data compiled between 2011 and 2015, approximately 57 per cent of the region's students did not achieve **minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.** While this is comparable to global averages, it is below the proficiency levels achieved in Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Oceania, and Europe and North America.²

Regionally, more data are needed for a full picture of SDG 4 progress. Incomplete data render it difficult to fully understand enrolment and completion trends in some levels of education. Indicators of student performance are often outdated and incomplete. Beyond the SDG framework, disaggregated data on funding for education by level and location are frequently unavailable, as is information related to groups at risk of being left behind. Improving the environment for generating and using education data should be of critical importance to policymakers, as improved collection and reporting can facilitate real-time monitoring of education systems, improve the efficiency of resource allocation and inform effective policy decisions.

For an up-to-date view of SDG 4 data at the national and regional levels and an analysis of data availability, please refer to the [ESCWA Arab SDG Monitor](#).



On the road to 2030 – suggested policy approaches to accelerate progress on SDG 4

- Accelerate curriculum reforms that emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities for students, and facilitate their learning, employability, individual empowerment and active citizenship.
- Integrate values related to gender equality, human rights, tolerance and engaged citizenship into curricula to create a cultural shift towards sustainable development.
- Evaluate continued shortcomings in education systems and schooling facilities that discourage or prevent female students and students with disabilities from accessing their right to quality education.
- Prioritize education spending by using benchmarks such as the 4 to 6 per cent of GDP or 15 to 20 per cent of government expenditure targets established by the Education 2030 Framework for Action.
- Elevate equity considerations in spending decisions to ensure no one is left behind, including by prioritizing resources for underserved regions and vulnerable groups.
- Strengthen monitoring frameworks and data collection to allow real-time analysis of education system performance and the efficiency of spending choices.
- Invest in bridging digital divides and training teachers on effectively using e-learning tools to increase the reach and flexibility of education systems and their resilience to crises.
- Establish policies for remedial and catch-up learning and for the recognition of non-formal learning to enable the integration or reintegration of students with disruptions in their education into formal educational systems.



B. The policy landscape for SDG 4

The success of efforts to achieve SDG 4 is closely tied to progress on other SDGs; investments in education can accelerate achievement of the 2030 Agenda as a whole. For example, quality education and continuous learning can prepare individuals with skills to find gainful employment and earn livelihoods for themselves and their families, contributing to SDGs 1 and 8. Education is a key enabler of social mobility, with the potential to reduce inequalities in line with SDG 10. Ensuring equitable access to quality education for women and girls is a necessary condition for realizing gender equality and advancing SDG 5. As recognized in SDG target 4.7, education offers opportunities to instil values and knowledge to promote sustainable lifestyles and advocate for social justice, tolerance, a culture of peace and quality institutions, which can positively impact SDGs 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16. Given these interlinkages, Arab Governments frequently feature educational initiatives in plans to advance in different policy areas.

The region is far from realizing education's transformative potential. A failure to address inequities in education systems reinforces inequality and poverty. The following section presents common trends in approaches to education across country income levels and geographic subgroupings.

◆ **Nearly all countries have established the legal right to education, with public provision of free and compulsory schooling.** Nineteen Arab country constitutions identify education as a State responsibility, although not all frame this obligation in terms of rights. Compulsory schooling requirements range from 6 years in the **Comoros** and **Iraq** to 12 years in **Egypt** and the **United Arab Emirates**.³

◆ **To improve the quality of education, countries have reformed curricula and increased teacher qualifications.** A recent analysis of 18 national education plans in the Arab region⁴ found that 15 plans include an emphasis on improving the quality of instruction, and 17 plans contain provisions for improving teacher qualifications and skills, expanding professional development opportunities for instructors or reducing pupil-to-teacher ratios. Curriculum reforms have encompassed a range of measures to strengthen learning outcomes, such as unifying national standards, emphasizing subjects deemed important for student success (such as science and technology, with fewer reforms targeting fields in the humanities and the arts), and introducing a focus on important life skills such as creativity and problem solving. Tools such as qualification frameworks have been used to strengthen the consistency of education quality and student outcomes.

◆ **Countries have increased the use of technology in education.** A growing emphasis on technological literacy and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education is part of an effort to ensure that students are adequately equipped with skills to succeed in the twenty-first century economy. Accordingly, many countries are introducing new programmes in STEM disciplines, dedicating more time to these subjects in the ordinary curriculum, and strengthening technical and vocational institutions specialized in such topics. This increased focus on technology has included the expansion of e-learning programmes and tools to improve the flexibility, reach and resilience of education systems, a process accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to implement such solutions are vulnerable to the risks posed by persistent digital divides, however. The shift to e-learning during the pandemic allowed learning continuity but left millions of students behind. An estimated 40 per cent of students in the Middle East and North Africa were unable to take advantage of distance education programmes due to the unavailability of programming or a lack of tools to access alternative learning modalities (for example, electricity, Internet or a home computer).⁵ This experience illustrates the importance of further investment in digital infrastructure to strengthen the resilience of education systems to crisis. For further analysis of the risks of digital divides, see the chapter on SDG 17.

◆ **Gender equality and disability inclusion in education are priorities in most countries, but inequalities persist.** At the regional level, the gross gender enrolment gap for primary and secondary education fell from 12 to 5 per cent between 2000 and 2020, representing major progress, although the disparity is still higher than the global average of 1 per cent.⁶ Despite progress in expanding girls' enrolment in schools, sociocultural norms continue to hinder their access to education. Gaps widen at higher levels of education, particularly affecting rural and poor women and girls. Threats to girls' education often include parents prioritizing male children's eventual

Despite broad legal guarantees of access, millions of school-age children do not participate in formal education due to difficulties accessing schools, conflict, household poverty or other barriers. In some countries, the right to education is defined as only applying to nationals, excluding migrant and refugee populations.

Economic challenges hinder efforts to scale up education and make well-targeted investments to improve the quality of instruction. Within countries, further obstacles comprise an uneven distribution of qualified teaching staff and other essential resources, contributing to inequalities in learning opportunities. Professional development frameworks for teachers are not present in all countries. In many cases, education systems face challenges attracting talent to the teaching profession.

Source: World Bank, 2015.



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economic prospects, a lack of female teachers, safety concerns around travelling to school and early marriage. These problems are most severe in countries experiencing conflict, where girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.⁷

At least 17 Arab countries⁸ have established protections for the rights of students with disabilities to access education, with many also taking steps to enhance the physical accessibility of learning environments to facilitate the inclusion of such students in the general educational system. A variety of barriers, however, continue to impede access to and the quality of education for students with disabilities. These obstacles include negative attitudes among teachers, parents and other students towards disability; difficulties accessing transportation; continued shortfalls in accessibility in many learning environments; low levels of funding for inclusion initiatives; and insufficient training on disability for teaching and support staff.⁹ Further policy attention and resources are needed to ensure that students with disabilities are not left behind and enjoy equitable access to quality education.

◆ **Countries are increasing attention to early childhood education.** Although the rate of participation has risen rapidly to 46.1 per cent, the region continues to underperform compared to others. Examples of the prioritization of early childhood education include:

- ◆ The development of a pre-primary curriculum in **Palestine**.
- ◆ The establishment of dedicated departments within the ministry of education in **Qatar** and the **United Arab Emirates**.
- ◆ Strategies to encourage enrolment in **Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, the Sudan** and **Tunisia**.

Investments in early childhood education have larger impacts than those targeting later years of education. They boost children's school readiness and provide strong foundations for future learning. Early childhood education investments have also been shown to reduce gaps between socially advantaged and disadvantaged children at the start of primary schooling. Achieving universal early childhood education would improve the efficiency of Arab education systems and long-term student outcomes, with potential to promote economic growth. Returns as high as 10 per cent have been estimated for early childhood education spending targeting disadvantaged children.

Sources: UNESCO, 2022c; UNICEF, 2019.

Pre-primary education is not compulsory in any Arab country, however. Only **Algeria** offers a year of pre-primary education free of charge.¹⁰ The lack of freely available early childhood education is a significant barrier to access, particularly in areas with high rates of poverty.

◆ **Higher education is a policy focus, with an emphasis on both the accessibility and quality of learning.** In several Arab countries, access to public universities is free or nearly free of charge for national students. Governments offer a range of scholarships and housing and meal stipends to support students in accessing post-secondary education. Higher education systems are diversifying through public and private, technical and transnational university offerings in a number of countries.

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of higher education institutions have focused on establishing standards, facilitating strategic planning and governing accreditation.¹¹ Quality assurance institutions have still not been introduced in many countries, however.¹² Those that exist often lack full transparency and independence, and tend to focus on "inputs", such as credit hours, rather than "outputs", such as student achievements and learning gains.¹³ With high youth unemployment rates impacting job prospects for university graduates, more efforts are needed to align learning outcomes and graduate skills with labour market needs.

Since 2010, the region has seen a steady increase in its gross enrolment rate for tertiary education, climbing from 25 to 33 per cent in 2020. But this rate remains below the global average gross enrolment rate of 40 per cent, and has increased at a slower pace than in the rest of the world.

◆ **Many countries have responded to persistently high youth unemployment rates with a focus on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and partnerships with the private sector, seeking to ensure that skills acquired in school match employers' needs.** Such policies can play a major role in facilitating learning-to-earning transitions that enable young graduates to obtain decent work, and in reducing the sizeable population of youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). In 2022, 30.7 per cent of all youth and 42.9 per cent of female youth in the region were in the NEET category, underscoring the urgent need to ensure opportunities for young people (for additional information, see the chapter on SDG 8).

To address this problem, countries have reinforced TVET learning pathways through a variety of measures, including modernizing curricula, diversifying programmes to meet labour market demands and enhancing cooperation with the private sector to better anticipate skills needed by employers. Further efforts have comprised strengthening quality assurance mechanisms and extending professional development options for instructional staff.

The pace of TVET reforms has varied across the region. Most systems continue to suffer from insufficient funding, short-term skill anticipation, limited opportunities for students to gain hands-on experiences and rigid access criteria. Additionally, limited opportunities to transition between TVET and higher education, social stigma around TVET and the perception that it is a second-class education track have limited its attractiveness to prospective students. Accordingly, TVET enrolment is significantly below that of other education channels, accounting for roughly 12 per cent of enrolments at the secondary level.

Sources: European Training Foundation, 2021; ILO, UNICEF and European Training Foundation, 2023; ESCWA, 2020.

Initiatives to improve alignment between TVET educational outcomes and labour market needs also encompass national qualifications frameworks to ensure consistent learning outcomes for graduates. Seven countries (**Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates**) have adopted these frameworks, and another seven (**Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Lebanon, the State of Palestine** and the **Sudan**) are at various stages of developing them. Governments have endeavoured to improve such systems in collaboration with the private sector to boost student employability.¹⁴

◆ **Non-formal education is an increasingly significant part of the region's educational landscape.** This refers to structured programming outside the formal educational system that is organized by an educational provider, which might be a non-governmental organization, private organization or community group. Non-formal education can complement formal education by offering opportunities to develop professional and life skills. Within the region, a growing share of people use such programmes. A survey of seven countries has found that the most popular offerings are those seen as improving employment prospects, including languages, computer skills and mathematics.¹⁵ Other non-formal education

programmes launched with State support include courses in communities to combat adult illiteracy. Examples of such programmes are common in the region, and are mentioned in the Voluntary National Reviews of **Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia** and **Tunisia**. Religious institutions play a significant role in delivery, frequently supporting literacy education and sometimes offering instruction in other subjects.

In some cases, non-formal education programmes serve not as complements to but as replacements for formal education, particularly in environments where conflict and displacement have made formal education inaccessible. Non-formal education programmes have supported out-of-school children to maintain learning and eventually to transition into formal education systems. Such approaches are of great significance in the region, which despite having around 5.8 per cent of the world's population hosts more than one quarter of the world's refugees and more than one third of internally displaced persons.¹⁶ Many students have seen their access to schooling disrupted; non-formal education programmes often offer the only option for them to continue their schooling. Programmes aiming at remedial instruction for out-of-school students have been launched in countries including **Iraq, Lebanon** and the **Syrian Arab Republic**, where government and humanitarian partners have implemented initiatives to develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills, to provide streamlined versions of curricula to help students who have missed two or more years of school in reintegrating into their classes, and to offer vocational training.^{17,18}

Most countries in the region lack sufficient procedures to recognize non-formal learning and ensure reintegration into formal education. Given the important role that non-formal education systems play, developing such procedures can help guarantee that students relying on such programmes are not excluded from other learning and employment opportunities.

Source: Cacich and Aboudan, 2022.



C. Policy trends by subregion

1. Gulf Cooperation Council countries

The relative wealth of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and higher levels of education spending compared with the rest of the region have allowed more rapid progress on many SDG 4 indicators. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have achieved the region's highest mean and expected years of schooling, the lowest pupil-to-teacher ratios and the highest per student education spending. These countries face challenges related to the efficiency of expenditure, however.¹⁹ Despite their achievements, they lag behind global averages on outcomes such as those measured by standardized test scores.^{20,21} To address these shortcomings, Gulf Cooperation Council countries have made efforts to improve student learning outcomes, enhance international competitiveness, and lay foundations for increased innovation and participation in the global knowledge economy.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries are reforming curricula and teaching methods to improve student skill acquisition and learning outcomes.** In all these countries, education is central to key policy and vision documents to accelerate the nationalization of workforces and use the knowledge economy to drive economic diversification. Reforms have included the introduction or reinforcement of standards for skills-based curricula (as in **Kuwait**,²² **Oman**,²³ **Qatar**,²⁴ **Saudi Arabia**²⁵ and the **United Arab Emirates**²⁶), strengthening accountability and quality control systems (as in **Kuwait**, **Oman**, **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**) and adopting new recruitment and professional development systems for teaching staff (steps taken in **Kuwait**, **Oman**, **Qatar**, **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**).

Gulf Cooperation Council countries have used educational reforms to spur innovation, in particular through an emphasis on STEM education. This has included modernizing STEM curricula and increasing learning time dedicated to these subjects. Countries have prioritized the availability of information and communications technologies and infrastructure in schools, and have emphasized developing students' digital literacy. This has included the introduction of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence into classrooms, with **Oman**, for example, integrating AI competencies into the national curriculum.²⁷ Several countries have also introduced

competitions and awards to incentivize innovation and increase youth interest in science and technology. Examples include the Skills Competition and Innovation Award in **Oman**, the National Scientific Creativity Olympiad in **Saudi Arabia** and the hosting of the UN Youth Hackathon 2021 in the **United Arab Emirates**.

◆ **Gulf Cooperation Council countries lead in developing digital learning platforms, a trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.** The Madrasati platform of **Saudi Arabia** has received international recognition as a top system for distance learning. Initiatives such as the Madrasa platform and The Digital School in the **United Arab Emirates** are making free e-learning resources available for students throughout the region, with an emphasis on mathematics, sciences and computer programming.



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◆ **The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have launched several initiatives to better integrate their education sectors, particularly in higher education.** Steps include mutual recognition of credentials, the establishment of the Arabian Gulf University, support for student and teacher exchange programmes, and joint research and development initiatives to spur innovation and strengthen cooperation among institutions of higher learning.²⁸

◆ **Migrant student education in the Gulf Cooperation Council subregion is largely delivered by private institutions, with varying levels of quality.** A massive migrant population constitutes an estimated 52 per cent of the total population of these countries.²⁹ Migrant children comprise an estimated 25 per cent of all children, with the proportion rising each year. Whereas most Gulf Cooperation Council countries charge enrolment fees or impose admission quotas that limit migrant student access to the public education system, **Bahrain** and **Saudi Arabia** offer free access to public schools for expatriate children who are able to study in Arabic and meet other requirements. In practice, most migrant children in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries attend private schools following international curricula.

As a result of high demand, **the private education sector has expanded rapidly in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries**, predominately through for-profit schools. The prevalence of for-profit institutions risks deepening inequalities among students in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, as student access to quality education depends in large part on parents' ability to pay. Further, while authorities regulate private schools, there have been cases of such schools being declared unfit for national students yet acceptable for migrant students, suggesting a lower concern for learning outcomes for the latter.³⁰

2. Arab middle-income countries

Although the Arab middle-income countries³¹ have successfully increased enrolment rates and the average length of education, they face continuing challenges in improving the quality of education delivered by school systems and reducing deep inequalities in access. Rapidly growing student populations combine with high levels of youth unemployment, averaging 23 per cent and exceeding 40 per cent in some countries. These factors have driven countries to enact reforms to increase focus on learning outcomes and student employability.

◆ **Many middle-income countries have focused on modernizing curricula and upgrading teacher training to improve student learning outcomes.** Common objectives of curriculum reforms include increasing the emphasis on communications, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and information and communications technology; enhancing vocational education; and developing life skills (as in the Education 2.0 policy of **Egypt** and the education strategy of **Algeria**, *L'école algérienne*). **Jordan** established the National Centre for Curricula Development in 2017 to continuously evaluate and develop educational materials to improve student learning outcomes.

Teacher qualification and training has been another focus area for many middle-income countries, with continuous professional development programmes and increased use of digital resources comprising key elements. In **Egypt**, for example, the 2018 education strategy foresees an expansion of digital learning resources, with virtual resources gradually replacing traditional textbooks. The GENIE programme of **Morocco** has stressed increasing teacher training and the use of information and communications technology in education, resulting in a greater integration of these tools in the classroom.

◆ **Middle-income countries have introduced initiatives to extend education access to underserved regions and populations, with a focus on rural areas and groups at risk of being left behind.** The efforts of **Morocco** to address urban-rural inequalities include the *Écoles Communautaires* programme, which creates education centres for rural students that offer qualified teaching staff, Internet access and transportation. Further support comes from the *Programme de l'impulsion du capital humain des générations montantes*, which supports early childhood education in rural areas by creating places for some 15,000 children. To tackle high dropout rates, **Tunisia** has elaborated a "second chance" education pathway that reintegrates students into classes after a period away from school and supports those at high risk to complete their education.

Some countries have offered support to low-income households to allow students to complete their education, including through social protection systems. The *Takaful* programme in **Egypt**, the National Aid Fund cash assistance programmes in **Jordan** and the *Tayssir* programme in **Morocco** offer cash transfers to poor families and include conditionalities tied to school attendance. Conditionalities are not

universal, however. The *Programme National d'Aide aux Familles Nécessiteuses* in **Tunisia** benefits more than 90,000 school-aged children from low-income families without monitoring school attendance rates. Other measures, such as school meal programmes, support healthy learning environments and promote school attendance for students from poor households.

◆ **Governments are increasing efforts to align educational outcomes with labour market needs to improve youth employment prospects, including through improved TVET systems.** The *Assurance Qualité* programme in **Algeria** measures universities according to the employment rates of their graduates, and universities increasingly have liaison offices that seek to connect students with employers. In **Jordan**, a new TVET strategy has sought to encourage the development of employment-ready skills, while the sustainable development strategy of **Egypt** underscores the role of technical education in meeting labour market needs. In **Palestine**, TVET is being integrated into the curriculum for grades 7 to 9 to provide students with stronger life skills foundations and support employability. Additionally, all middle-income countries have either adopted or begun developing a national qualifications framework, except those experiencing conflict or crisis. Such measures help standardize learning outcomes. When developed in cooperation with the private sector, they help to ensure that learning outcomes better align with employers' needs.



Jordan: engaging the private sector in aligning training and the job market

In a region with high youth unemployment, estimated at 27.3 per cent, Jordan has among the highest rates for people aged 15 to 24, at 40.3 per cent. As part of its National Strategy for Human Resource Development (2016–2020), Jordan committed to addressing this problem through increased attention to TVET and reforms to improve the alignment of education outcomes with the needs of the economy.

Jordan took important steps in this direction in 2019 by adopting a national qualifications framework and a Technical and Vocational Skills Development Law. The latter established the Technical and Vocational Skills Development Council to bridge the gap between training and skills required by the labour market. The Council includes representatives from the private sector, comprising key industries such as tourism, manufacturing, commerce, construction, communications and health.

This approach has deepened public-private collaboration in elaborating qualifications systems. It has allowed employers to steer the content of curricula and participate in the development of national and sector education standards.

Sources: ILO, 2020; UNESCO, [TVET Country Profiles: Jordan](#).

◆ **To enhance the quality of education, some middle-income countries are working to improve the management of schooling systems through enhanced annual reporting processes, data portals and reforms of evaluation.** For example:

- ◆ **Algeria** launched a national information system in 2017 to support the management of the education system, with modules on evaluation, human resources, infrastructure, distance learning and more.
- ◆ **Tunisia** launched a new evaluation system in 2021 to collect information on student learning outcomes in the second, fourth and sixth grades.
- ◆ **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Tunisia** are among the few countries in the region to regularly publish a national education monitoring report.³²

◆ Arab middle-income countries host more than 8 million refugees and asylum seekers, over 85 per cent of the total in the region and nearly one fourth of the global total. **They have launched a variety of responses to the educational needs of school-aged refugee children.** **Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia** have each adopted policies to allow refugee students in specified age ranges to enrol in public schools free of charge. In **Egypt**, refugee students from South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen are permitted to attend public schools on an equal footing with local students. Despite these legal rights to education, some refugees continue to have difficulties accessing services, however, typically due to administrative barriers and procedures or the inability to study in Arabic. In **Jordan**, which hosts more than 3 million Palestinian and Syrian refugees, school-aged refugee children are entitled to education through a variety of channels, including schools for Palestinians run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), public schools in host communities (sometimes through double-shift programming) and schools established in refugee camps.³³ **Lebanon** has not ratified the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the status of refugees, and separate systems govern education access for Palestinian and other (predominantly Syrian) refugees. The majority of Palestinian students are educated in UNRWA schools, as the Lebanese law does not guarantee their right to a publicly provided education. For those unable to access UNRWA schools, annual circulars establish the conditions under which Palestinian students may enrol in public schools. About half of Syrian students have been enrolled in formal education, with many schools operating a second shift in the afternoon for about 65 per cent of this population.



3. Arab least developed countries

Arab least developed countries face additional challenges in enacting transformative education policies. In the five countries with available data, the mean years of schooling is just 4.8. These countries generally have education systems marked by high dropout rates, substantial geographic and gender disparities, and high pupil-to-teacher ratios. Increasing access and completion rates are major priorities, with all least developed countries identifying SDG 4 targets as key policy objectives.

◆ **Several least developed countries have integrated education into their social protection systems.** For instance, the National Programme for Family Solidarity in **Djibouti** and the *Tekavoul* National Social Transfer Programme in **Mauritania** both include provisions that condition support to recipients on the health and school attendance of children within the household. Other examples include the Shamel programme in the **Sudan**, which provides a variety of benefits to eligible communities, including a school feeding programme for eligible students. Both **Djibouti** and **Mauritania** also maintain school feeding programmes to encourage access to education.

◆ **In most cases, the least developed countries have tried to increase the efficiency of spending by using geographic targeting to focus on areas that have traditionally been underserved by national education systems.** The social protection schemes mentioned above have prioritized regions and communities with higher levels of poverty. The Priority Education Areas initiative of **Mauritania** aims to strengthen support in areas with high poverty rates and low school completion, covering meal programmes, teacher training and incentive systems, parental education campaigns and capacity development.

◆ **Countries have focused on increasing teacher training standards as part of a broader effort to enhance the quality of education.** **Somalia** introduced a new teacher policy in 2021 to regulate registration, licensing, recruitment, deployment and instructor conduct. In **Mauritania**, a professional development support fund encourages continued skill acquisition, and in the **Sudan** the National Institute for Teacher Training offers continuing education programmes to improve the qualifications of in-service teachers. **Djibouti** has emphasized teacher training and reports that, above the pre-kindergarten level, all public teachers hold all required qualifications.

◆ **Standardization and reporting are weak. None of the least developed countries surveyed had a national monitoring and reporting framework for their educational**

systems. As a result, they lack the disaggregated data necessary to inform evidence-based policy reforms and maximize the efficiency of resource allocation. Some efforts to address this gap include the Transitional Education Project of the **Comoros** to improve the national use of data through the development of statistical yearbooks involving 50 pilot schools. Overhauls of information management systems in **Mauritania** and **Somalia** aim to boost data collection.³⁴

4. Arab countries experiencing conflict and fragility

Arab countries experiencing conflict and fragility³⁵ suffer from many of the same problems faced by the least developed countries, with added difficulties posed by the destruction of educational facilities and high levels of displacement. Conflicts in **Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen** have resulted in the destruction of some 9,000 schools³⁶ and displaced millions of children, severely hindering the ability of many to access their right to education. Countries experiencing conflict or fragility are further hindered by deep deficits in available data on education, challenging efforts by policymakers and development partners to design evidence-based interventions.

◆ **Some countries experiencing conflict have transitional education plans that attempt to directly address the legacies of conflict and recover from deep disruptions.**

They include the need to repair infrastructure, re-establish or strengthen the administration and management of education systems, find solutions to provide remedial education opportunities and reintegration pathways for large numbers of out-of-school children, address shortages of qualified teaching staff, and provide additional support (including social and emotional learning) to ensure safe learning environments. Examples of such policies include the National Education Strategy of **Iraq** (2022–2031), the National Education Sector Plan of **Somalia** (2022–2026), the General Education Sector Strategic Plan of the **Sudan** (2018–2023) and the Transitional Education Sector Plan of **Yemen** (2019–2022).

◆ **Most countries experiencing conflict or fragility in the region have launched plans to reintegrate internally displaced persons into the education system and provide social and emotional learning programmes to address conflict-related stress and trauma. In some cases, resource constraints have limited the implementation of post-conflict education plans. Iraq** prioritized the integration and education of children of internally displaced families

in its 2018-2022 Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Ministry of Education in **Libya** established a committee dedicated to the affairs of displaced and migrant persons to develop solutions specific to the conditions of affected students, teachers and ministry employees. The National Policy on Refugee-Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons of **Somalia** affirms the right to education and outlines steps to establish or expand services to accommodate returned or integrated internally displaced persons. In both the **Syrian Arab Republic** and **Yemen**, education ministries participated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Capacity Development for Education programme, which provides training on social and emotional learning to help children overcome conflict-related stress and trauma. Similar initiatives have been undertaken by other organizations in parts of **Libya**.

◆ **More than in other country groupings, non-State actors are major players in the education systems of countries experiencing conflict or fragility, as capacity limitations create demand for alternative forms of service delivery.**

This can pose challenges to implementing coherent education policies in line with long-term development goals, however. In **Somalia**, weak institutions have led to the privatization of the education sector amid protracted insecurity. This resulted in nearly half of children and youth being denied their right to education due to an inability to pay. Private institutions remain predominant and serve 87.5 per cent of primary and 91.5 per cent of secondary school students, although the Government is seeking to reestablish public management of the sector. “Mixed-management schools” have been one result. Another has been the contested ownership of many institutions.

International institutions and donors offer invaluable support to students, teachers, responsible ministries and other stakeholders in countries experiencing conflict.

Such bodies provide capacity-building and funding for specific programmes. Examples include the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) paying teacher salaries in some parts of **Yemen** and UNESCO supporting the development of an Education Management Information System.³⁷ Likewise, the League of Arab States has worked with civil society to establish schools for displaced children in the **Sudan**.³⁸ Education interventions can be valuable in operationalizing the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Alignment of education initiatives with development and peacebuilding objectives can improve social cohesion, education system resilience and psychosocial support while fostering the continuity of learning. Realizing this ideal has proven difficult, however. It is important for humanitarian actors and government counterparts to increase coordination and anchor operations within long-term strategies.^{39,40}

D. Policies to leave no one behind

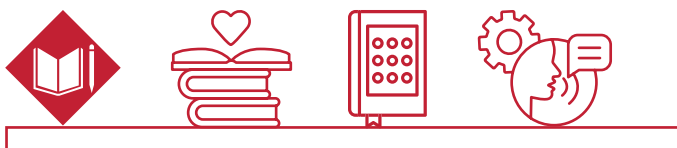
Education can be a powerful tool for promoting social mobility, fostering values of tolerance and equality and preparing students for quality employment. Yet education systems may also exacerbate inequalities if they lack a focus on equity and inclusion. While Arab countries have introduced measures to address the needs of marginalized groups, systemic inequalities continue to affect target populations and reduce the efficacy of policy interventions. The following section considers some systemic inequalities and examples of education policies to address them.

Female students continue to be at a distinct disadvantage in many parts of the region, as social norms and practices lead to girls not attending school or dropping out at higher rates than male students.



◆ In **Palestine**, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education’s Education Sector Strategic Plan for 2017–2022 sought to rid teacher training of harmful gender stereotypes and called for reviewing the gender sensitivity of curricula and teaching materials.⁴¹

Students with disabilities face disadvantages related to the inaccessibility of learning environments as well as teaching staff who are not trained to accommodate their educational needs.



◆ The **United Arab Emirates** has established regulations to improve the accessibility of education for persons with disabilities, including by renovating school buildings and classrooms, providing educational diagnostic services and assistive technologies to support integration into the general educational system, offering classes with sign language and braille, and committing to providing equal opportunities for students with learning disabilities in the institution closest to their residence.⁴²

The poorest children confront multiple barriers to accessing education, including the cost of supplies and school fees, and are at a relatively high risk of being pulled out of school to work and support their families.



◆ In **Egypt**, the community school model has helped extend the umbrella of the general education system to out-of-school children in deprived areas lacking access to public schools. Community schools follow a flexible multi-grade approach and are managed through partnerships between the Ministry of Education, non-governmental organizations and local communities.⁴³ The strategic plan for pre-university education of Egypt seeks to extend this model further, including by applying it to technical schools.⁴⁴

Children in areas experiencing conflict encounter barriers including the destruction of educational infrastructure, displacement and trauma.



◆ In **Libya**, the Ministry of Education sought to increase access to schooling by obliging institutions at all levels to allow displaced students to enrol and complete their academic year. Counselling and psychosocial support services have benefited more than 30,000 children.



Refugees and internally displaced people often experience difficulties in registering for school or accessing public services in general. Many countries do not guarantee their right to education.



◆ In **Morocco**, recent policy reforms have allowed refugees to enrol in the national school and training systems. The children of refugees and immigrants are eligible for food programmes, school transportation services and student pensions.

Students in rural and remote regions often struggle to gain quality education due to the absence of schools or long distances required to access schools.



◆ To overcome disadvantages in rural communities, **Algeria** has programmes such as scholarships for day- or full-time boarding students (particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds). Remote learning through the National Bureau for Distance Education and Training offers education to students unable to attend schools in person, from preschool through secondary levels.⁴⁵

E. The financing landscape

Financing for education in the Arab region is challenged on two fronts:

- Spending has generally fallen short of the levels of investment needed to ensure universal access to high-quality education.
- Spending is generally inefficient, with learning outcomes regularly lagging behind those in countries with similar levels of expenditure.⁴⁶

Arab countries must revamp education financing to overcome these challenges, particularly in light of the urgent need to close learning deficits exacerbated by conflicts and the COVID-19 crisis. Many countries have young populations, which will increase future education financing needs.

In 2015, UNESCO member countries adopted the [Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action](#) as a roadmap for achieving inclusive, equitable and quality education. While recognizing the diversity of national contexts, the declaration includes two financing benchmarks:

- Allocating at least 4 to 6 per cent of GDP to education and/or
- Allocating at least 15 to 20 per cent of total public expenditure to education.

Within the Arab region, most countries are falling short on these benchmarks. Table 4.1 summarizes spending allocations according to the latest data.



Egypt is unique in the Arab region in having a constitutional provision requiring that the Government spend at least 4 per cent of GDP on education, although recent budgets have fallen short of this benchmark.

Table 4.1
Expenditure on education

	Percentage of GDP spent on education	Percentage of government expenditure on education
Saudi Arabia	7.8 (2020)	18.8 (2021)
Tunisia	7.3 (2016)	22.7 (2015)
Algeria	7.0 (2020)	15.4 (2022)
Morocco	6.8 (2020)	16.9 (2021)
Kuwait	6.6 (2020)	11.9 (2020)
Oman	5.4 (2019)	12.2 (2020)
State of Palestine	5.3 (2018)	17.7 (2019)
Iraq	4.7 (2016)	14.0 (2016)
United Arab Emirates	3.9 (2020)	11.7 (2020)
Jordan	3.2 (2021)	9.7 (2021)
Djibouti	3.6 (2018)	14.0 (2018)
Qatar	3.2 (2020)	8.9 (2021)
Egypt	2.5 (2020)	12.3 (2020)
Comoros	2.5 (2015)	13.4 (2015)
Bahrain	2.2 (2020)	9.3 (2022)
Mauritania	1.9 (2020)	10.4 (2022)
Lebanon	1.7 (2020)	9.9 (2020)
Somalia	0.3 (2019)	4.4 (2021)
Sudan	NA	12.5 (2021)

Source: UNESCO UIS data reported by the World Bank, [Government expenditure on education, total \(percentage of government expenditure\)](#), and [Government expenditure on education, total \(percentage of GDP\)](#), accessed in April 2023.

Collectively, countries with available data spend an estimated 5 per cent of GDP on education. At least 10 countries fall below the international benchmark of 4 per cent. They collectively require **\$11.8 billion** to close the funding gap, with **Egypt** alone accounting for \$7.2 billion of the total. To achieve the more ambitious level of 6 per cent of GDP for education funding, these countries would need an infusion estimated at **\$43.3 billion**.^a

^a Figures are indicative and derived by applying the latest available data on the percentage of GDP spent on education to the latest available data on GDP (2022 for all countries except Lebanon, where the latest GDP data are for 2021). Note that actual education spending shortfalls are higher than indicated, as data are unavailable for Libya, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

While levels of public education investment are insufficient in the Arab region, household expenditure on education is above global averages. This risks deepening inequalities by tying access to quality education to the ability to pay. Globally, households account for 29.7 per cent of education spending. In the Arab region, this figure is around 36 per cent, and is close to or greater than 50 per cent in **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania** and the **United Arab Emirates**.⁴⁷

In addition to increasing the size of investments in education, countries have significant room to boost efficiency and the equity of education spending. In general, achievements are underwhelming, with most countries attaining lower expected years of schooling and lower harmonized test scores than countries with similar levels of expenditure.⁴⁸

Improving the equity of educational expenditures can support the accomplishment of national educational objectives while strengthening equality of opportunity and social mobility. Equitable education financing requires

Governments to make informed and effective decisions on the allocation of resources across geographic areas, levels of education, and targeted populations or groups.⁴⁹ Examples of reallocations that can improve overall outcomes include investing more in early childhood education or directing funds to students from poorer regions and households. Research suggests that a 1 per cent increase in the share of public education resources directed to the poorest 20 per cent of students would be associated with a 2.6 to 4.7 per cent reduction in learning poverty rates.⁵⁰

Alongside curriculum and pedagogical reforms, enhancing the efficiency and equity of education spending will require countries to invest in quality education management systems, and collect and make policy choices based on detailed, real-time data on spending, the characteristics of students and communities, and the results of expenditures.



F. Regional dimensions

Regional cooperation in education policy can deepen ties among Arab countries, improve the quality of education and training, and improve the region's competitiveness by cultivating skills needed for the twenty-first century economy. The components of such efforts could include:

- Developing common frameworks for skills development and credential recognition.** One notable effort, the MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative,⁵¹ provides a regional framework for reimagining education around four dimensions: learning, employability, individual empowerment and active citizenship. The framework includes 12 core life skills to operationalize at the country level and integrate into curricula to ensure that students are equipped for success in school and work and can make active and positive contributions to society. All countries in the region have endorsed the initiative; implementation is ongoing.

Regional cooperation could also be enhanced by assuring the mutual compatibility of National Qualification Frameworks or developing a regional qualification framework to serve as a point of reference for assessing international experiences and credentials. National Qualification Frameworks offer a quality assurance tool by clearly defining learning outcomes at various levels. They encourage transparency and accountability in learning institutions, and can help resolve skills mismatches by aligning learning outcomes with the needs of the private sector.⁵² As mentioned earlier, only seven Arab countries have adopted such frameworks (**Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia** and the **United Arab Emirates**). Systematizing qualification standards and credential recognition at the regional level could also facilitate labour mobility. Experiences of such alignment in other parts of the world include the Caribbean Vocational Qualifications System of CARICOM and Europe's Bologna Process. These could offer models for developing a common Arab qualifications framework.

- Strengthening cooperation across educational institutions through regional networks for student exchanges, joint research and partnerships** could facilitate exchanges of ideas and knowledge; boost trade, investment and entrepreneurship; and



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enhance cultural awareness through deeper people-to-people ties among participating countries. The Erasmus+ Programme in the European Union is a particularly powerful example of a successful educational exchange initiative, one with positive impacts on employment, skills development, entrepreneurship and participants' sense of regional identity.⁵³

- **Increasing technical and financial assistance for education, particularly to support the region's least developed countries**, is an effective investment in development given the high returns of education and significant financing needs in these countries. Maximizing the results of such aid requires a focus on quality and ownership by the beneficiary country and capacity development within recipient educational institutions.⁵⁴ The Gulf Cooperation Council countries are already active in supporting least developed countries and countries experiencing conflict to strengthen their education systems and in funding higher education scholarships for students wishing to study at universities in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.



Gulf Cooperation Council countries are active development partners, funding education initiatives throughout the region and around the world. Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are major providers of official development assistance, contributing more than \$420 million in non-humanitarian bilateral education funding in 2020. The majority of such funds go to Arab countries. Egypt, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen are the top recipients. In addition, Gulf Cooperation Council countries extend scholarships to students from developing countries to pursue their studies in Gulf universities.

Source: See OECD's, Development Co-operation Profiles.

Endnotes

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2. United Nations, 2019. The regional grouping used for this statistic is “North Africa and Western Asia” as defined in the [Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use \(M49\)](#).
3. See UNESCO UIS data reported by the World Bank, [Compulsory education, duration \(years\)](#), accessed on 29 March 2023.
4. UNESCO (2023b). Analysis is based on education plans or similar documents from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
5. See the UNESCO online dashboard, [Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19](#); UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2021. The regional grouping used in this study “Middle East and North Africa” includes Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
6. See UNESCO UIS data reported by the World Bank, [School enrollment, primary and secondary \(gross\), gender parity index \(GPI\) – Arab World, World](#), accessed in March 2023.
7. ESCWA, 2019.
8. Analysis conducted on the basis of the UNESCO [education policy profiles](#) on the theme of inclusion, accessed on 4 April 2023.
9. UNESCO, 2022b.
10. UNESCO, 2021.
11. Waterbury, 2019.
12. Karakhanyan, 2019.
13. Ibid.
14. Analysis conducted on the basis of the UNESCO [TVET country profiles](#), accessed on 30 March 2023.
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16. Based on 2022 data on refugees under United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and UNRWA mandates and internally displaced persons of concern to UNHCR reported in the [UNHCR refugee data finder](#).
17. UNESCO, 2019a.
18. Haqqi Consortium, 2023.
19. ESCWA, 2021.
20. A comparison of test scores is available in ESCWA, 2022, p. 101.
21. ESCWA, 2021.
22. Alhashem and Alhouti, 2020.
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24. Al-Fadala, n.d.
25. Ibid.
26. United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Education, [Raising the standard of education](#).
27. UNESCO, 2023.
28. See the Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council on [Cooperation in Education](#), accessed on 4 April 2023.
29. See the Gulf Research Centre on the [Percentage of nationals and non-nationals in Gulf populations \(2020\)](#).
30. UNESCO, 2019b.
31. In this analysis, middle-income countries include Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the State of Palestine and Tunisia.
32. According to the UNESCO [education policy profiles](#), accessed on 5 April 2023.
33. See UNHCR “Help” page, [Information for Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and Stateless People](#).
34. According to the UNESCO [education policy profiles](#), accessed on 5 April 2023.
35. In this analysis, countries experiencing conflict and fragility include Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
36. UNICEF, 2015.
37. UNESCO, 2022d.
38. See the UNESCO education policy profile, the [Sudan](#), accessed on 5 April 2023.
39. See the United Nations MPTF Office Partner Gateway, [A Triple Nexus Approach in Syria](#).
40. Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2022.
41. UNICEF, 2021.
42. See the UNESCO education policy profile, the [United Arab Emirates](#), accessed 5 April 2023.
43. See UNICEF on [Education Programmes in Egypt](#), accessed on 5 April 2023.

44. See Egypt's, [Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education 2014–2030](#).
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54. Riddell, 2012.

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