

Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education: A Pillar of Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Alarmingly, 258 million children and youth are denied access to education, and approximately 773 million adults remain illiterate, highlighting a critical need for improved educational opportunities worldwide (UIS 2021a). When individuals are deprived of adequate education and struggle with literacy, they are often constrained in their ability to seek out and obtain essential information. This ultimately results in widespread disadvantages that impact daily activities and overall well-being. Gaining education can have a transformative impact on these individuals, enriching their daily experience and career prospects.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen also states that “widening the coverage and effectiveness of basic education can have a powerful preventive role in reducing human insecurity of nearly every kind” (Sen 2003). Consequently, education plays a vital role in achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), encompassing aspects such as knowledge acquisition, skill development, and human capital formation which will be explored in more detail later. This chapter begins with an examination of global trends in educational cooperation (Sect.4.2). It then delves into the concept of inclusive and equitable quality education, a central tenet of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), the primary education-focused SDG (Sect.4.3). Additionally, this chapter provides a brief overview of education for children with disabilities in Ethiopia, highlighting issues of equity, inclusion and educational quality.

International Trends in Educational Cooperation (Educational Cooperation in the Postwar Era)-

This section provides a comprehensive Elementary overview of international trends in educational corporation since the post-World War 2 Era. A landmark moment in this narrative was the UN General Assembly’s adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which formally recognized the right to education. As stated in Article 26, this right entails free education at the elementary and fundamental levels, emphasizing its importance as a cornerstone of human development (UN n.d.). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights further emphasizes that ‘elementary education shall be compulsory’ (UN n.d.), establishing a global consensus that education is a fundamental human right, as noted by Yoshikawa (2010). The early 1960s saw a significant turning point with UNESCO’s first International Conference on Education, attended by education ministers from around the world, who collaborated to establish a unified education agenda (Kuroda 2016a,b). Among the conference’s primary

objectives were several key targets. The conference established three main goals: eliminating illiteracy, providing free compulsory education, and achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE). Notably, research highlights the economic benefits of education investment, where the value of lifetime earnings exceeds the costs of education (Psacharopoulos and Patorinos 2018). The World Bank's emphasis on efficient education investment during the 1960s also led to increased funding for education initiative. The 1980s marked a pivotal moment in the prioritization of education aid, as the World Bank's research demonstrated the high returns on primary education investments for society as a whole (Kitamura 2016). This revelation galvanized the international community, prompting a surge in support for primary education in low-income countries seeking economic development.

International bodies like the United Nations have consistently strengthened their resolve to address issues of inequality, with member states reaffirming their commitment to empowering marginalized groups and fostering a more equitable society. To solidify its commitment, the international community declared education a fundamental human right in 1948, sending a clear message that education is not only essential for individual development but also crucial for the socio-economic progress of nations.

The international community recognizes education as both a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development, essential for fostering individual and societal growth. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) focuses on ensuring that all people have access to quality education that is inclusive, equitable, and available throughout their lives. 3. "Successfully achieving this goal will have far-reaching benefits, including reduced inequality, accelerated economic growth, and increased empowerment for individuals around the world. Successfully achieving this goal will have far-reaching benefits, including reduced inequality, accelerated economic growth, and increased empowerment for individuals around the world.

Comparative Analysis: Inclusion and Equity in Education

The United Nations has maintained a strong commitment to inclusive and equitable education. Following the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, setting an ambitious target of universal access to quality education by 2030. Key objectives include:

- a. Ensuring all girls and boys complete quality primary education with relevant learning outcomes.
- b. Providing universal access to quality early childhood education and care.
- c. Promoting equal access to education for women and men.
- d. Addressing disparities in education, including those affecting persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and vulnerable children.

e. Achieving universal literacy and numeracy among youth and a substantial proportion of adults. The UN member states' acceptance of this goal creates a binding obligation for countries to establish policies and programs aimed at achieving it. A UNESCO report (2005) highlighted a concerning statistic: approximately 30 million children in sub-Saharan Africa were not attending school between 2007 and 2012. As a member of the United Nations, Ghana has a responsibility to uphold the UN's principles and goals. This includes ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ghana must establish measures to support the achievement of these goals, which will require a concerted effort to develop and implement effective education policies and programs. According to UNESCO's 2005 findings, numerous children are deprived of education due to lack of access to nearby schools, insufficient classrooms, or unaffordable school fees. Moreover, UNESCO noted that rural areas are disproportionately affected, with 30% of out-of-school children residing in these areas, compared to 18% in urban settings.

However, access to education is only part of the issue; poor educational quality also hinders learning for those who do attend school. To address these challenges, the Ghanaian government, through the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service (GES), introduced social interventions aimed at improving affordability and availability of education. The GES was mandated to make education accessible and affordable for all Ghanaians. Key initiatives included the school feeding program and the capitation grant, designed to reduce financial barriers and increase access to quality education. The Ghanaian government introduced two key initiatives to improve education accessibility. The School Feeding Programme aimed to provide students with a daily balanced meal, targeting schools with low enrollment and high poverty rates ¹. Meanwhile, the Capitation Grant abolished school fees, demonstrating the government's commitment to free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE). Ghana demonstrated its commitment to universal basic education by formulating a policy in 1995, with a target completion date of 2015. To achieve this goal, the government introduced several targeted initiatives, including:

- ❖ The Capitation Grant
- ❖ Free school feeding programs
- ❖ Free school uniforms
- ❖ Free school sandals

A teacher training module under the National Youth Employment program, aimed at addressing teacher shortages, improving teacher-student ratios, and increasing access to education. These policies aimed to remove barriers to education and ensure that all students had equal opportunities to learn and succeed. The capitation grant eliminated tuition fees at the basic education level (Akyeampong, 2009), making education more accessible. Additionally, the school feeding programme provided free lunch for each student at school (Iddrisu, 2018). The government also supplied free school uniforms and sandals, ensuring students had essential clothing and footwear for attending school. This research paper focuses on exploring the challenges related to access to basic education in poverty-stricken areas and how these issues might impact the attainment of global goal number 4. Despite the

significant and persistent efforts made by governments over the years, the pressing and unresolved question remains: Have the barriers to accessing basic education in impoverished rural areas been overcome? This study's theoretical foundation rests on two key frameworks: the incremental model of policy formulation and social justice theory. Aligning with the incremental model's proponents, this research emphasizes the importance of building upon existing government policies and programs, with the expectation that these incremental adjustments will lead to improvements in current and future initiatives. Proponents of incrementalism, as noted by Lindblom (1979), believe that addressing complex, interconnected problems requires a flexible and adaptable approach. Incrementalism, as a theoretical framework, is characterized by caution and conservatism, as it builds upon existing policies and programs, focusing on gradual modifications or additions rather than radical changes (Lindblom, 1959). Building upon the foundation laid by the Millennium Development Goals, which also prioritized access, equity, and inclusivity in education, Sustainable Development Goal 4 continues and expands these efforts as a subsequent policy. Even before Ghana's independence in 1957, plans were in place to boost education. The Accelerated Development Plan and the 1961 Education Act significantly expanded primary school enrollment, making primary and middle school free and compulsory. This policy remained in effect until 1966, when cost-sharing for textbooks and stationery was implemented.

Following public demand, the government implemented free and compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE) after the 1992 constitution was enacted. While some criticized the program for not representing a significant policy shift, it's important to recognize that incremental policy changes often focus on addressing existing social problems and inequalities rather than proactively pursuing future social goals. Within the context of incremental model practices, decision-makers accept the legitimacy of previous policies and programmes. On the other breadth, central to the ideologies of the Social Justice theory, and inextricably tied to its doctrines include the principle of equity, inclusiveness, equality and fairness to all social groupings irrespective of circumstances of birth, race, gender, etc. Social Justice literature is widespread with conceptual definitions and tenets of the theory (Bogotch, 2002; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gewirtz, 1998; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002). Gewirtz (1998) provides a meaning of social justice centred on the ideas of disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes. Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) define social justice “as the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions”. However, Bogotch (2002) asserts that social justice is a social construction and that “there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices”. The definition of social justice for this study was informed by the work of Gewirtz (1998) as well as Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) who concentrate issues of social justice on the ultimate concern for situations of marginalization. Bogotch (2002) also puts forward a treatise that interlocks social justice with education. In commensuration with the definitions of the scholars adduced, the definition of social justice for this study is steeped in daily realities of barriers to basic education access in Ghana. For the purposes of this study, social justice is conceptualized to mean fairness, inclusiveness, equity and the extension of a level playing field for all without discrimination or favour. This definition is pivoted on addressing and redressing

issues of clearing inequity and marginalization related to basic education access, thus, inclusive schooling practices for all students. Sapon-Shevin (2003) minces no word in stating that, “Inclusion is about social justice. ... By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us”.

Inclusive education aims to provide equal learning opportunities for everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances, by integrating marginalized groups into regular classrooms. Equitable education, on the other hand, focuses on dismantling systemic barriers and providing customized support to disadvantaged students, ensuring a fair chance for success. Essentially, inclusion is about access, while equity is about fairness and distributing resources based on individual needs.

While inclusion emphasizes making education accessible to everyone, such as by accommodating students with disabilities to foster belonging, equity goes further. It addresses the underlying causes of exclusion through targeted support, like scholarships for girls or improved infrastructure in rural areas, to create a level playing field.

What is “Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education?”

This review has covered international cooperation in education related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The focus now shifts to exploring the core of SDG 4: "inclusive and equitable quality education." This examination is structured around three key aspects: equity, inclusion, and quality of education. Additionally, this section includes a brief case study on education for children with disabilities in Ethiopia, illustrating the concepts of equity, inclusion, and quality in practice. 4.3.1 Before the Sustainable Development Goals, efforts to address gender disparities in education primarily focused on increasing enrollment numbers, prioritizing quantity over true equity (Kuroda 2014; Nishimura and Sasaoka 2016). As explained by Nishimura and Sasaoka (2016), equality in education means everyone is treated the same, while equity means providing different levels of educational support based on individual circumstances to ultimately achieve equal outcomes. To achieve educational equity, it's fair to provide greater support to disadvantaged groups (Miwa 2005). UNESCO (2017) examined educational equity through factors like gender, location, income, language, and disability. Schleicher (2014) further breaks down educational equity into two aspects: fairness and inclusion. Fairness means that education shouldn't be limited by factors like gender, ethnicity, family background, or socioeconomic status. In turn, equity from an inclusion perspective relates to how all students should acquire at least basic academic skills (Schleicher 2014). In other words, equitable education is concerned with helping students develop their potential learning abilities without experiencing any barriers. The interpretation of equity based on these two perspectives is also consistent with the concept of inclusive education, which is discussed in more detail later.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, promoting lifelong learning opportunities. The specific targets include:

1. Universal access to free, quality primary and secondary education for all girls and boys by 2030.
2. Universal access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030.
3. Equal access to affordable, quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university, for all women and men by 2030.
4. Substantial increase in youth and adults acquiring relevant skills for employment, entrepreneurship, and decent work by 2030.
5. Elimination of disparities in education, ensuring equal opportunities for all, with a focus on vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situation. o achieve quality education by 2030, the targets include:
 1. Significantly increasing the number of youth and adults with relevant technical and vocational skills for employment and entrepreneurship.
 2. Eliminating gender disparities in education, ensuring equal access for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.
 3. Achieving literacy and numeracy for all youth and a substantial proportion of adults.
 4. Ensuring all learners acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, including education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, and global citizenship.
 5. Building and upgrading education facilities to provide safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments, sensitive to the needs of children, persons with disabilities, and gender equality.

To achieve quality education, the targets include:

1. By 2020, significantly increasing the number of scholarships available for students from developing countries, particularly those from least developed countries, small island nations, and African countries, to pursue higher education, vocational training, and specialized programs in developed and other developing countries.
2. By 2030, substantially increasing the number of qualified teachers, especially in developing countries, through international cooperation and teacher training programs, with a focus on least developed countries and small island developing states.

Research by Nishimura and Sasaoka (2016) revealed that four major international organizations (World Bank, OECD, FTI, and UNESCO) have differing definitions of equity, highlighting the need for a unified global understanding. Achieving consensus on the best approach to equity remains an ongoing challenge. Nonetheless, it is clear that equity is deeply connected to both the quality and inclusivity of education. Therefore, considering these aspects comprehensively is

crucial when developing educational approaches. In relation to inclusion, SDG4 emphasizes the importance of inclusive education. The concept of inclusion can be defined in various ways, and its meaning can differ depending on the context. According to UNESCO (2003), inclusive education is defined as a process that acknowledges and addresses the diverse needs of all learners. This approach aims to increase participation in learning, cultural, and community activities, while reducing exclusion within and from education. In essence, inclusive education values the process of responding to diverse needs, promoting a culture of acceptance and equal opportunities for all learners. The concept of inclusive education gained international recognition with the Salamanca Statement, adopted at the 1994 World Congress on Special Needs Education. This statement asserts that every child has the right to education and that regular schools should provide opportunities tailored to each child's unique needs (UNESCO and Ministry of Education and Science in Spain, 1994). In contrast, the earlier approach of integrated education required children with special needs to adapt to traditional schooling, whereas inclusive education seeks to accommodate and support diverse learners within regular class. Inclusive education diverges from integrated education by emphasizing that teachers and schools should cater to the unique needs of children (Kawaguchi and Kuroda, 2013). Despite efforts to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015, vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, from minority groups, or from low-income families, continued to face barriers in accessing education (Kawaguchi and Kuroda, 2013; Hayashi, 2016). To address these disparities, education methods that accommodate diverse needs and promote equity are essential for improving education quality.

The Dakar Framework for Action highlights the importance of quality learning, incorporating a quality of education perspective in Goals 2 and 6 (Table 4.1). However, the global focus has primarily been on increasing access to education, partly due to the influence of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), rather than prioritizing education quality. Building on the progress made towards increasing access to education under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) now shifts the focus to improving the quality of education. However, the concept of quality education is open to interpretation. A more comprehensive definition, as outlined in the "EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005," emphasizes that quality education is rooted in educational objectives that are socially contextualized (UNESCO, 2004). This perspective aligns with the previously discussed concepts of equity and inclusive education.

Nishimura (2018) notes that traditional educational cooperation has been based on a "theory of defects," which highlights the shortcomings of low-income countries compared to developed nations. Instead, Nishimura advocates for a "theory of context," which prioritizes education that is tailored to each country's unique context and society. Given these differences in approach, measuring the quality of education poses challenges. This section explores the quality of education through four key lenses: school environment, educational attainment, learning achievement, and non-cognitive skills.

NEP 2020 & Sustainable Development goal 4.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India places significant importance on inclusion and equity in education. Here's why:

- **Social Justice:**
 - NEP 2020 aims to create an equitable and inclusive education system that provides equal opportunities to all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, gender, caste, religion, or disability.
 - It recognizes that historical and systemic inequalities have created significant disparities in access to quality education and seeks to address these disparities.
- **Human Capital Development:**
 - An inclusive and equitable education system ensures that all individuals, including those from marginalized communities, have the opportunity to develop their full potential.
 - This leads to a more skilled and productive workforce, which is crucial for economic growth and development.
- **National Unity and Integration:**
 - By providing quality education to all students, regardless of their background, NEP 2020 aims to foster a sense of national unity and integration.
 - It promotes a shared understanding of Indian values and culture while respecting and celebrating diversity.
- **Ethical and Moral Development:**
 - NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of ethical and moral development in education.
 - An inclusive and equitable education system helps to inculcate values such as empathy, compassion, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their background.

Key Provisions in NEP 2020 related to Inclusion and Equity:

- **Focus on marginalized groups:** The policy specifically focuses on providing support to marginalized groups such as students with disabilities, girls, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Multilingual education:** NEP 2020 promotes the use of mother tongues as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling, which can significantly improve learning outcomes for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.
- **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE):** The policy emphasizes the importance of high-quality ECCE for all children, which can help to reduce disparities in learning outcomes later in life.
- **Teacher training:** NEP 2020 calls for the training of teachers on inclusive education practices, so that they can effectively cater to the diverse needs of their students.

Challenges in Balancing Inclusion and Equity

1. **Economic Disparities:** Families in poverty struggle to afford educational resources, creating gaps in both inclusion and equity.
2. **Gender Barriers:** While inclusion policies aim to enroll more girls in schools, equity measures such as safe school environments and menstrual hygiene facilities are necessary for sustained attendance.

3. **Teacher Quality:** Inclusive education demands a sufficient number of trained teachers to accommodate diverse learners. Equity requires specialized training to address unique challenges faced by disadvantaged groups.
4. **Technology Access:** Digital inclusion ensures that all students have devices and connectivity, whereas equity requires content and tools tailored to various linguistic and cultural needs.

Pathways to Achieve Both Goals

1. **Policy Integration:** Governments must ensure that inclusion and equity are complementary in education policies, addressing systemic barriers while expanding access.
2. **Resource Allocation:** Adequate funding for rural schools, teacher training programs, and targeted scholarships can bridge both inclusion and equity gaps.
3. **Community Involvement:** Inclusive practices must involve local communities to identify specific needs, fostering equitable education solutions.
4. **Technological Solutions:** Equipping underprivileged schools with internet access and localized digital content can align inclusive and equitable goals.

This SDG focuses on providing quality education for all, regardless of their background, abilities, or location. It emphasizes the importance of reducing disparities in education and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to learn and grow throughout their lives.

Key Targets:

To achieve quality education, the goals include:

- Ensuring all girls and boys have access to free, equal, and high-quality primary and secondary education that leads to meaningful learning outcomes.
- Providing equal access to affordable and quality higher education, including university, for all women and men.
- Significantly increasing the number of young people and adults with relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, to secure employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to education and vocational training for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in difficult situations.

Comparative Overview:

Challenges: Four key challenges hinder the provision of quality education:

1. Limited access: Millions of children, particularly in developing countries, are denied basic education due to poverty, conflict, and discrimination.
2. Unequal opportunities: Even when children attend school, they often face disparities in education quality based on factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and disability.
3. Teacher shortages: A global scarcity of qualified teachers undermines education quality, exacerbating existing inequalities.
4. Insufficient funding: Many countries struggle to allocate adequate resources to support their education systems, perpetuating these challenges.

Progress:

Despite ongoing challenges, there are positive trends in education:

1. Expanded primary education access: Globally, significant strides have been made in increasing access to primary education, although efforts continue to ensure all children complete this level.
2. Focus on quality education: There is a growing emphasis on the importance of quality education, prompting many countries to enhance their education systems.
3. Innovative education solutions: The development of new technologies and innovative approaches is transforming education, improving access, and making learning more engaging and effective.

Opportunities:

Three key factors can help improve access to quality education:

1. Technology: Leveraging technology, such as online learning platforms and mobile apps, can increase access to quality education, particularly in remote or underserved areas.
2. Collaborative Partnerships: Strategic partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector can help address education challenges and ensure quality education for all.
3. Innovative Approaches: Implementing innovative education methods, such as personalized learning and competency-based education, can enhance learning outcomes and provide more effective education.

Conclusion:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 prioritizes inclusion and equity, envisioning an education system that offers equal opportunities to all students. By achieving this goal, the policy seeks to foster a more just, equitable, and thriving India.

Realizing inclusive and equitable quality education demands a holistic approach that balances two key elements: inclusion, which ensures everyone participates, and equity, which addresses the diverse needs of learners. By combining these principles, we can fulfill the vision of SDG 4, empowering individuals and driving societal progress. Ultimately, this integrated approach will help create a world where education is genuinely accessible, fair, and inclusive for all.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) plays a vital role in achieving overall sustainable development. By guaranteeing universal access to quality education, we can foster a more equitable and just society. Although significant obstacles remain, there are also numerous opportunities for advancement, offering a promising path forward.

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