

# Education 2030: Equity and quality with a lifelong learning perspective

*Insights from the EFA Global Monitoring Report's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)*

## POLICY PAPER 20

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*This paper is a contribution of the EFA Global Monitoring Report team to the World Education Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea. It mostly draws on information from the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE). Its aim is to inform a debate on inequality in education opportunities and outcomes, which is a central part of the new agenda.*

## Introduction

Education holds the key to achieving most of the sustainable development goals by 2030: from gender equality, healthy families and reducing poverty to sustainable consumption, resilient cities and peaceful societies. The broad vision of sustainable development will not be achieved unless we make more substantial progress on the proposed seven education targets to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

Addressing inequity should be central to education post-2015. In recent years, the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* has looked beyond national averages, which often hide pockets of persistent inequalities. We know that children and youth who belong to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups receive the least public support. And we know that disaggregated data can make the challenges confronting such children more visible. Through the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE), the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* draws attention to disparities at the expense of marginalized groups and underscores the extent to which governments and other stakeholders need to better target their policies and resources to those most in need.

An equitable and quality lifelong learning approach would require at least:

1. 12 years of publicly-funded quality primary and secondary schooling for all;
2. Equal opportunities for all to access education and to learn, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups who are disadvantaged by factors such as gender, poverty, conflict or disaster, geographical location, ethnicity, language, age or disability; and
3. Relevant and effective learning outcomes, including, at a minimum, foundational literacy and numeracy skills that provide the building blocks for further flexible lifelong learning opportunities.

This paper looks at the story WIDE tells us about the ground we have to cover to achieve equitable lifelong learning for all in low and middle income countries. It looks at select measures of lifelong learning opportunities, including the number of years of education currently completed by young adults, completion rates in primary and secondary education, levels of learning, and literacy rates for youth and adults. This is only an indicative, and by no means exhaustive, list. A fuller picture of equality and quality in lifelong learning would require more information on a range of education opportunities, from early childhood education to adult education and skill acquisition outside formal systems, which is only gradually emerging.



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Throughout, this paper looks behind country averages, and focuses on the gaps between the richest and poorest, girls and boys, and those living in urban and rural areas. The extent of these socio-economic inequalities highlights how far we are from reaching the vision laid out in the proposed new education goal for 2030 – and the importance of focusing on the needs of the marginalized.

## How far are countries from providing at least 12 years of education for all?

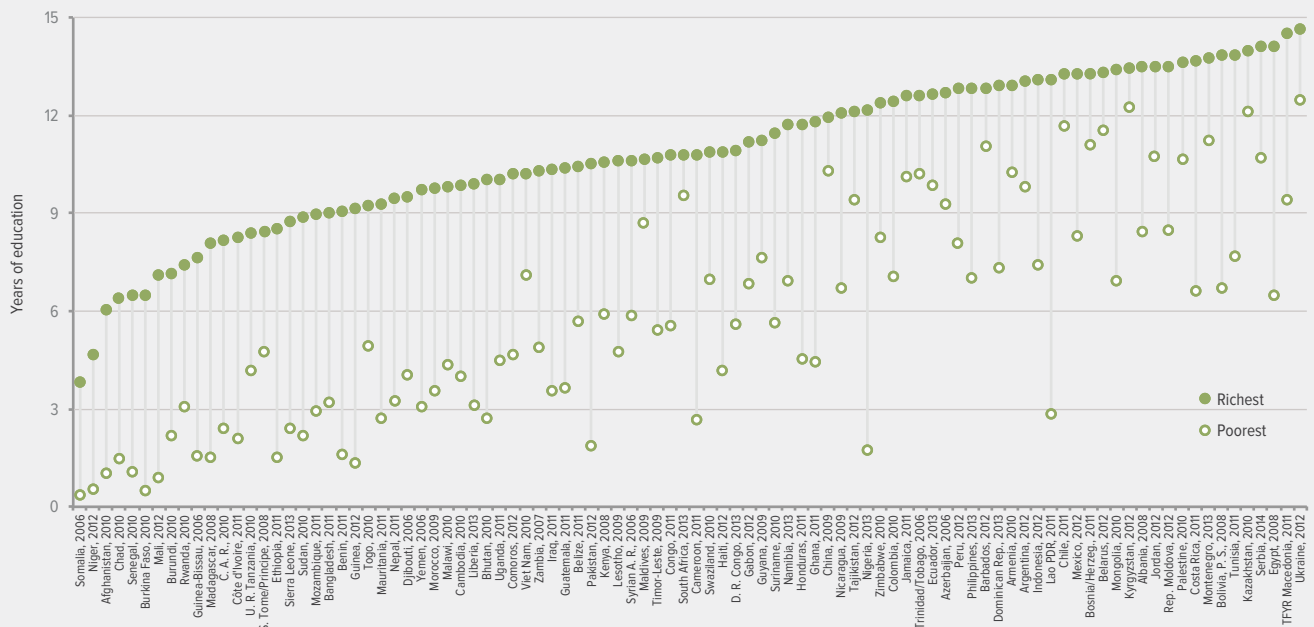
The WIDE database includes an estimate of the years of education completed by 20-24 year olds – and sheds light on the gap in education attainment between different groups. For example, in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the richest complete on average 10 more years of education than the poorest. Across 94 countries, the richest had completed at least 12 years in 36 countries; the poorest had completed at least 12 years in only 3 countries; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine (Figure 1).

Looking at each level separately helps demonstrate how far different countries are from ensuring all children and youth complete each education cycle. The 2015 *EFA Global Monitoring Report* estimated that the primary completion rate in low and middle income countries is 84% in 2015. At least one in five 15 year-olds has not even completed primary school in half of the countries with data in the period 2008-2014 included in Figure 2. In 14 countries, at least one in two 15 year-olds has not done so. And in 39 countries at least one in two 18 year-olds has not completed lower secondary school.

**FIGURE 1**

### The poorest are very far from the target of at least 12 years of education

Years of education completed, low and middle income countries, 20-24 year olds, 2006-2014



Countries differ in the way they have prioritised the stages of development of their education systems. For example, in Egypt in 2008, 87% completed primary school, 78% completed lower secondary school and 68% completed upper secondary school. By contrast, in the United Republic of Tanzania in 2010, 76% completed primary school, 13% completed lower secondary school and just 2% completed upper secondary school.

## Does everyone have equal chance to complete primary education?

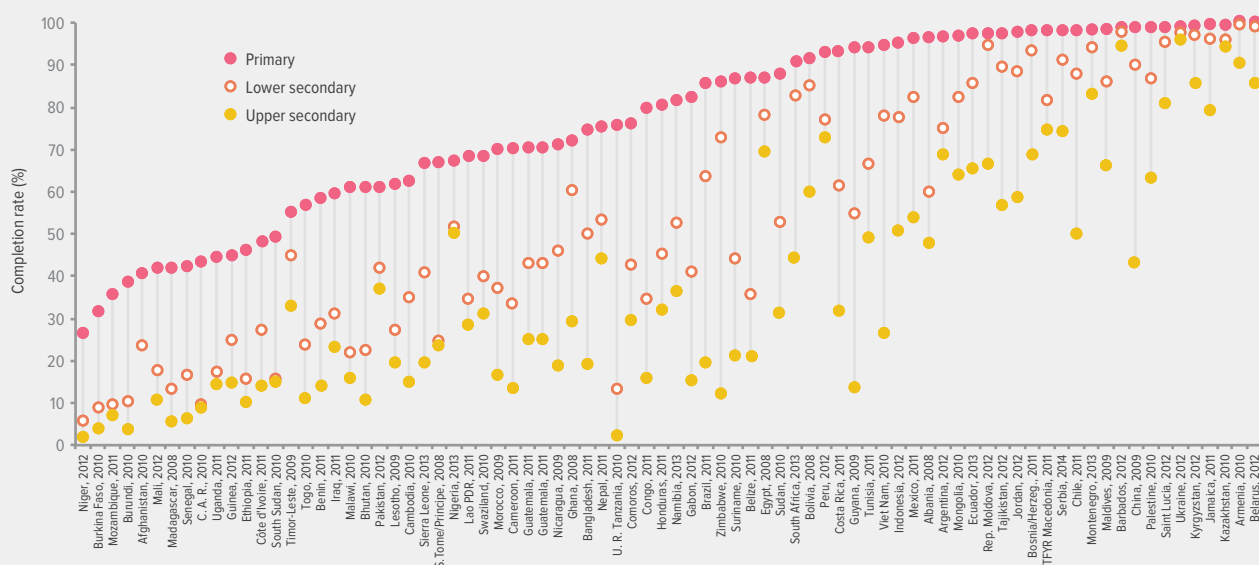
Typically it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, whose right to primary education is being denied. The final report of the Global Out of School Children Initiative estimated that those from the poorest 20% of households are four times as likely not to be in school as those from the richest 20% of households. The 2015 *EFA Global Monitoring Report* estimated further that those from the poorest 20% of households are five times as likely not to complete primary school as those from the richest 20% of households. These disparities are even higher in some countries. **Figure 3** shows twenty countries with some of the largest gaps in recent years in primary completion rates between the poorest and the richest. In Cameroon in 2011, where 70% of 15-year olds completed primary school, as few as 21% of the poorest reached that target compared with 95% of the richest. By contrast, in Sierra Leone with a similar average completion rate in 2013, 44% of the poorest completed primary school compared with 88% of the richest.

Residence and gender also matter. For example, in Ethiopia in 2011, 82% of those in urban areas completed primary school compared to 35% of those in rural areas. Gender disparities can also be large. In Afghanistan in 2010, 54% of males completed primary school compared with 27% of females. In Lesotho in 2009, the reverse was observed: 78% of females completed primary school compared with 46% of males.

**FIGURE 2**

### Many countries are very far from the target of universal secondary completion

*Primary, lower secondary and upper secondary completion rates, low and middle income countries, 2008-2014*



**FIGURE 3**

**In some countries, there are vast disparities between the poor and the rich in primary school completion**

*Primary school completion rate, countries with highest disparity by wealth, 2006-2013*



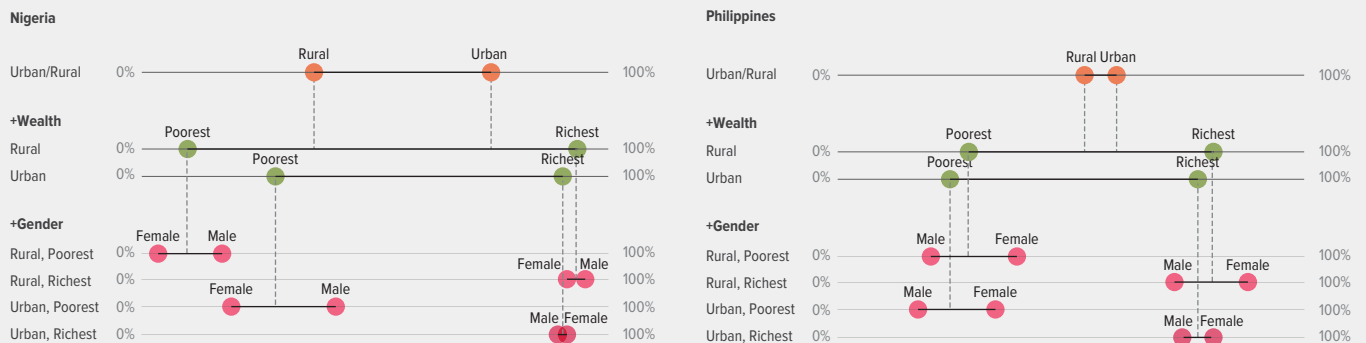
## How do young people's circumstances affect their chances of completing lower secondary school?

The WIDE database illustrates how different circumstances – for example, gender, wealth, ethnicity and residence – play an important role in shaping opportunities for education. Overlapping disadvantages can compound education disparities, as shown in **Figure 4**. For example, in Nigeria in 2013, the lower secondary completion rate was 75% in urban areas and 37% in rural areas. Within rural areas, there were large wealth gaps as well: only 10% of the poorest were completing lower secondary school compared with 93% of the richest. And, while there was near gender parity among the rural rich, the poorest rural males (17%) were more than five times as likely to complete lower secondary school as the poorest rural females (3%).

**FIGURE 4**

**Overlapping characteristics can compound education disadvantage**

*Lower secondary school completion rate by location, wealth and sex, Nigeria and the Philippines, 2013*



In the Philippines in 2013, the gender gap was in the opposite direction. The probability that the poorest rural males would complete lower secondary school was only 20% compared with 38% for the poorest rural females. By contrast the gender gap among the urban rich was much smaller with 80% of females completing school compared with 74% of males.

## How fast are countries addressing entrenched socio-economic inequalities?

The WIDE database not only provides a single country snapshot of inequality of education outcomes but also provides information on change over time. Indications of progress can help initiate a discussion over persistent obstacles and possibly effective policies when comparing countries.

**Figure 5** shows that over the course of ten years, the primary completion rate in Nepal increased from 45% in 2001 to 75% in 2011. The poorest almost reached the level of educational attainment that the richest enjoyed only ten years earlier – a relatively short period of time for closing such wide wealth gaps, which also coincided with the end of conflict.

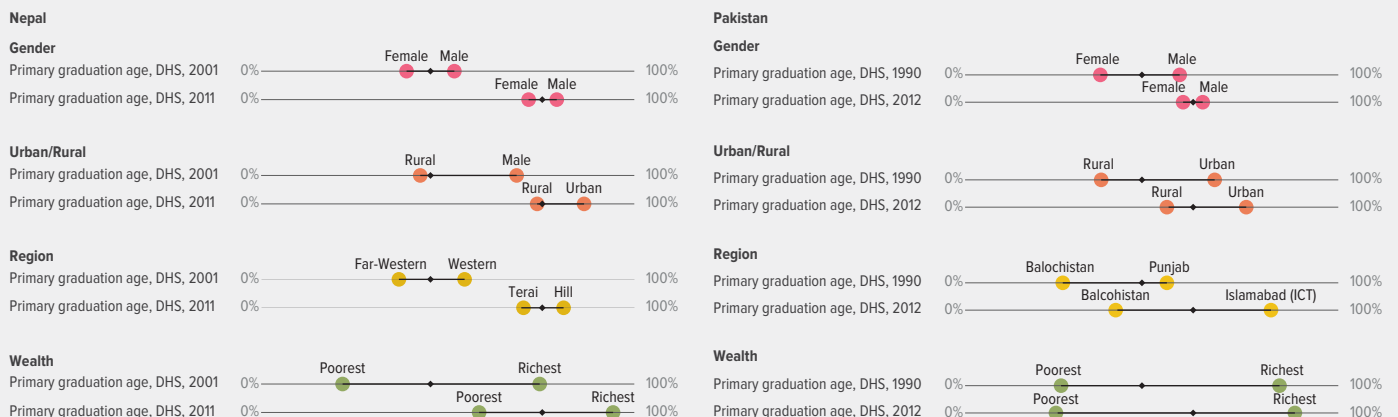
In Pakistan, by contrast, less progress was achieved over more than double that time period: the primary completion rate increased from 47% in 1990 to 61% in 2012. Whereas a wide gender gap was almost closed, the wealth gap remained the same. Children from the poorest households barely saw any progress: only one in four were completing primary education.

The WIDE database also serves as a reminder of how the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations are the last in line to acquire access to education. This pattern is also apparent in many middle income countries, such as those in Latin America. **Figure 6** provides three examples.

**FIGURE 5**

### Some countries can make fast progress in education in a short period of time

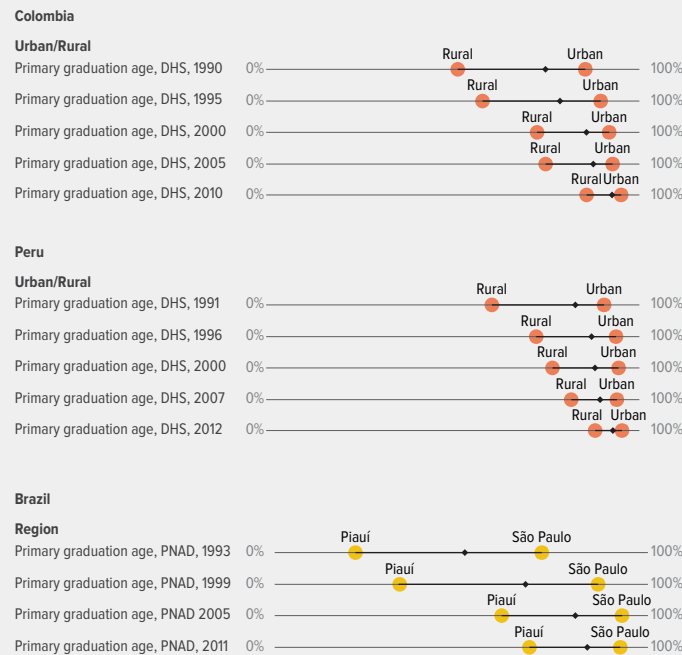
Primary school completion rate by individual characteristics, Nepal (2001-2011) and Pakistan (1990-2012)



**FIGURE 6**

**The most disadvantaged are the last to enjoy the right to universal primary completion**

Primary school completion rate by location, Colombia (1990-2010), Peru (1991-2012), and Brazil (1993-2011)



In Colombia and Peru, the rural populations have suffered the effects of conflict over much of the last 35 years. As a result, they have lagged behind urban populations in terms of educational attainment. The percentage of rural 15-year olds who had completed primary school was only 51% in Colombia in 1990 and 61% in Peru in 1991. Over the next 20 years, they have gradually caught up but the most recent figures suggest that still one in eight 15-year olds do not complete primary school in rural areas.

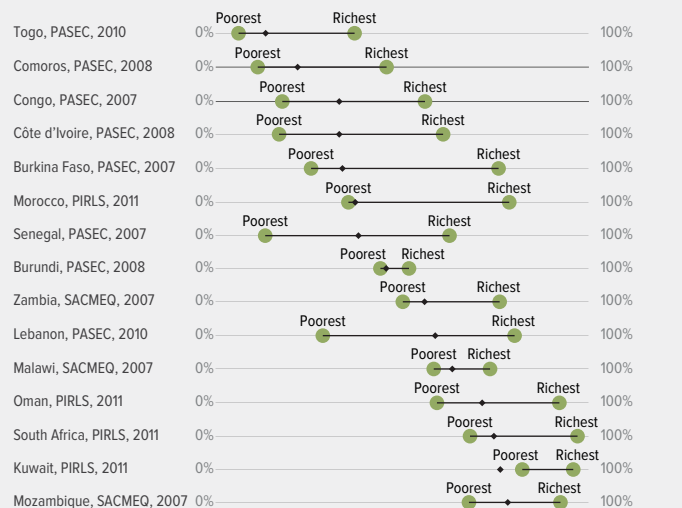
In Brazil, the per capita income in the state of Piauí is one quarter of that of the state of São Paulo, even though in the latter there remain significant pockets of urban poverty and deprivation in slum areas. These differences are reflected in the large gaps in primary completion rates that have persisted over the last 20 years.

**How many children learn the basics?**

**FIGURE 7**

**There are large disparities in learning outcomes by wealth**

Percentage of students in grades 4-6 who achieved minimum learning standard in reading by wealth, selected countries, 2007-2011



Note: The definition of achievement of a minimum learning standard is based on an anchoring process that transforms the results from different surveys to a common scale. See Altinok, N. (2013) A new international database on education quality: 1965-2011, Background paper for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/4.

Since 2000, many more countries are assessing student learning outcomes, which is vital as we move to a lifelong learning approach. The WIDE database builds on school based assessments to highlight student differences in learning levels. Large disparities in student performance by wealth are evident. For example, in Morocco in 2011, among grade 4 students who took part in the PIRLS assessment, 36% of students from the poorest households achieved the minimum learning standard compared with 78% from the richest ones (Figure 7).

In Senegal in 2007, 38% of Grade 5 students achieved the minimum learning standard in reading. However, this ignores those students who did not reach grade 5. If we assume that those who leave primary school before they reach grade 5 do not achieve

the minimum learning standard, then the percentage of all children of primary school age who can be assumed to have met the minimum learning standard falls to 16%.

WIDE enables a closer look at differences in learning outcomes also by other background characteristics. For example, the large and, in recent years, growing gender gap in reading scores in the PISA assessment has not only been a feature of high income countries. In Jordan in 2006, 63% of 15-year old girls reached the minimum learning standard in reading compared with 39% of boys. By 2012, performance disparities by gender had increased (**Figure 8a**).

In Bulgaria, the minority of students not speaking the national language at home lag well behind in terms of reading scores, while their situation has not improved between 2000 and 2012: only 22% of 15-year olds achieved the minimum standard compared to 66% of those speaking the national language at home (**Figure 8b**).

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, 87% of the richest students in grade 8 achieved the minimum learning standard in mathematics in lower secondary education in 2011 in the TIMSS assessment compared to only 36% of the poorest students. Among the poorest, chances of learning also varied depending on gender and location: 42% of boys in urban areas achieved the minimum standard compared to 26% of girls in rural areas (**Figure 9**).

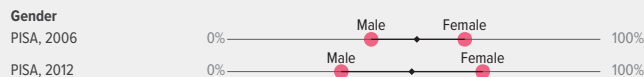
## The widest disparities are found in literacy rates for youth and adults

A greater emphasis on direct assessments of literacy has contributed to a better understanding of inequalities in literacy acquisition among youth – a vital development for any lifelong learning agenda. **Figure 10** shows that there are wide disparities in literacy rates among the poorest and richest young women in different countries. New estimates for this paper show that, on average, those from the poorest 20% of households are almost six times as likely to be unable to read as those from the richest 20% of households. In Burkina Faso,

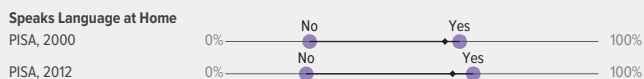
**FIGURE 8**

### Gender and ethnicity can have a large and growing impact on learning outcomes

a. Percentage of 15-year olds who achieved the minimum learning standard in reading, by sex, Jordan, 2006-2012



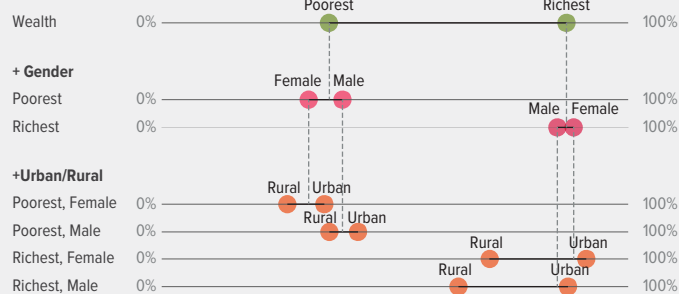
b. Percentage of 15-year olds who achieved the minimum learning standard in reading, by language spoken at home, Bulgaria, 2000-2012

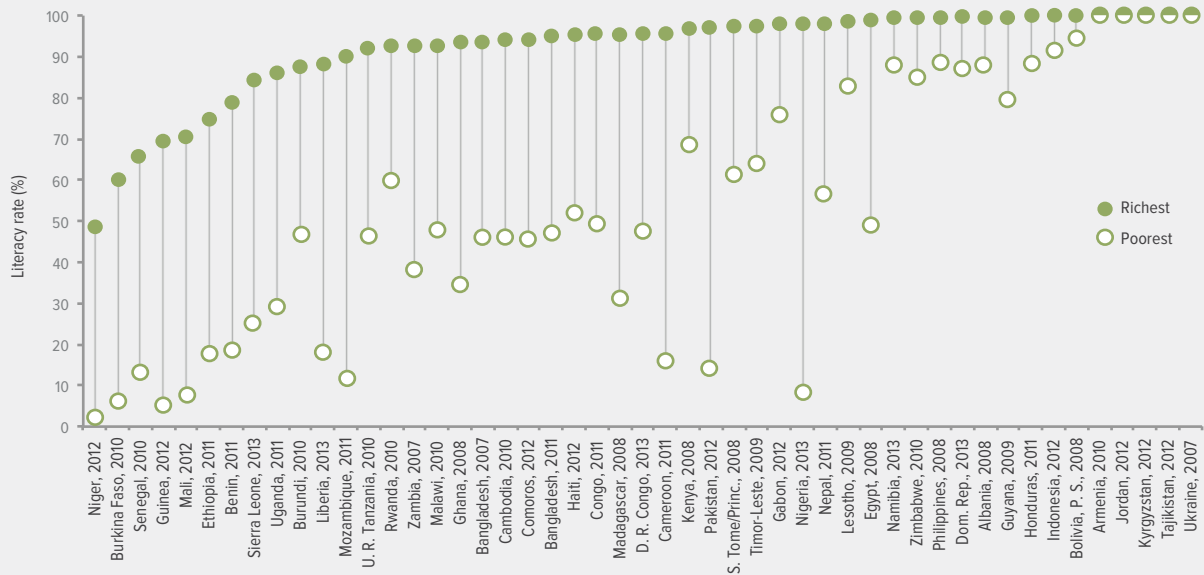


**FIGURE 9**

### Combinations of wealth, location and gender can have negative impact on learning outcomes

Percentage of adolescents who learned the basics in mathematics, Islamic Republic of Iran, 2011



**FIGURE 10****Disparities in youth literacy can be even wider than in participation and completion***Female youth literacy rate, by wealth, 2007-2013*

for example, 60% of the richest young women aged 15-24 years could read in 2010 compared to only 6% of the poorest young women. The poorest face hurdles in accessing and completing school, and in benefiting from their school experience.

In addition, there is a concern that disadvantaged young people and adults are not being sufficiently supported to access further learning opportunities – for example, through second chance or adult education programmes. Globally, the adult illiteracy rate has fallen by 23% between 2000 and 2015. However, most of this progress is the result of younger, more educated children reaching adulthood and replacing older, less educated people, rather than effective adult literacy programmes having been rolled out on a large scale.

One way to better understand this pattern is by following literacy rates among a particular group of people as they age. In Malawi, for example, the literacy rate of women aged 20-34 years increased from 49% in 2000 to 63% in 2010, an increase of 14 percentage points. But the literacy rate of women who were 20-34 years old in 2000 had not changed at all when they were 30-44 years old ten years later in 2010. Typically the literacy rate of a group of youth or adults slightly decreased in most countries over time because of a weak literate environment in which to practice their literacy skills. For example, in Uganda it fell for this group from 53% in 2000 to 41% in 2011. Among a group of 30 low and middle income countries with data, very few countries appeared to have managed to improve the skills of illiterate women, with Nepal being a notable exception: the literacy rate of the group of young women who were 20-34 years old in 2001 increased by nine percentage points by 2011, from 34% to 43%, an increase of 9 percentage points (Figure 11).



## Conclusion

How children and youth fare in formal education is a direct predictor of literacy acquisition and the future shape of the communities in which they reside. As this paper shows, we have a long road to travel before we achieve the lifelong learning vision we have set for ourselves by 2030. More poignantly, the World Inequality Database on Education shows us that the distance to be covered is even longer for the most disadvantaged. And let us not forget that the analysis may well exclude some of these most disadvantaged populations that are hardest to reach in some countries. For example, the samples of household surveys may typically exclude nomads, street children, those with disabilities or internally displaced populations.

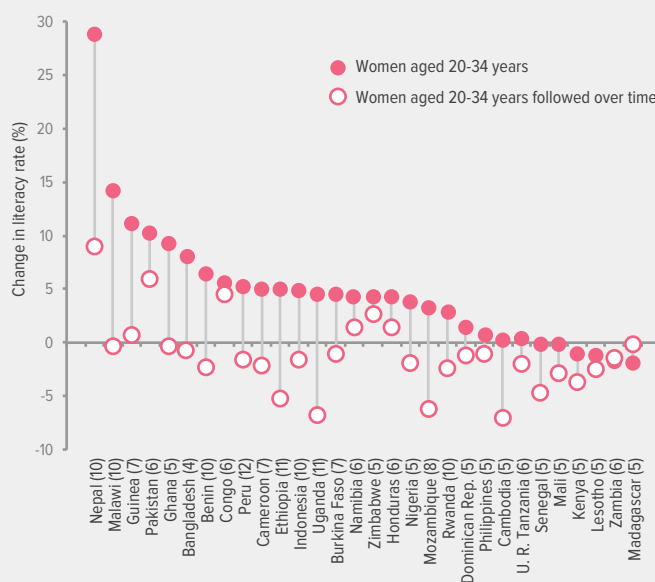
Closing these large gaps in opportunity is fundamental to inclusive and sustained progress for all countries around the world. Not only should inequalities be addressed head-on, but all government ministries should prioritise equity and inclusion in education in their plans. In addition to the injustice to those who are being left furthest behind, such persistent inequalities are major barriers to reducing extreme poverty and achieving the broad sustainable development agenda.

For that reason, the draft Framework for Action Education 2030 urges efforts “to extend the ability of governments to report education indicators disaggregated by characteristics such as sex, wealth, location, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status or disability (and their combinations)”. It also quotes the WIDE database as “an example of how such information could be made available to inform action”. All monitoring efforts - from local, national, regional and international authorities - should aim to shed light on the extent to which equitable and inclusive education opportunities are being provided.

**FIGURE 11**

### In many developing countries, adults not only do not improve but may even lose their literacy skills over time

Change in the literacy rate between two points in time for (i) women aged 20-34 years and (ii) women aged 20-34 years at the beginning of the period followed through, selected countries, 2000-2012



Note: The number in brackets represents the number of years over which a group was followed, e.g. in Nepal the women were observed over a period of 10 years. See Barakat, B. (2015) Improving adult literacy without improving the literacy of adults? A cross-national analysis of adult literacy from a cohort perspective, Background paper for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015.

## About the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)



The World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) brings together data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), national household surveys and learning achievement surveys from over 160 countries. The tool enables users to compare education outcomes between countries, and between groups within countries, according to factors that are associated with inequality, including wealth, gender, ethnicity and location. Users can create charts, infographics and tables from the data, and download, print or share them online.

The database was first created as the Deprivation and Marginalization in Education (DME) dataset for the 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report. Since then, the following updates and extensions have been introduced.

- For the 2012 EFA GMR, the DME was re-launched as WIDE with interactive online features.
- For the 2013/4 EFA GMR, learning achievement surveys and completion rates for primary and lower secondary education were added.
- For the 2015 EFA GMR, upper secondary completion, transition rates to secondary education, and youth literacy rates were added, and national household surveys were analysed and included in WIDE for countries not covered by DHS and MICS.

[www.education-inequalities.org](http://www.education-inequalities.org)

The website hosting the database and visualizations were designed by Interactive Things.

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