



AZMUN Foundation

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Bridging Inequalities in Learning: The Youth Led Path to SDG 4

By: Ansh Dutta

Introduction

Education is the backbone of human development and one of the most powerful tools for social and economic transformation. Recognized as a fundamental human right, it is also at the core of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. While significant progress has been made in expanding access to schools, deep challenges persist. Globally, more than 250 million children and adolescents remain out of school, and an estimated 617 million are unable to meet minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. This shows that access does not always translate into meaningful learning. The youth, as both direct beneficiaries and future leaders, hold a central role in bridging this gap and ensuring that education systems evolve to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Quantitative Overview of Education

The global education landscape reveals stark disparities that demand urgent redress, some figures help illustrate the scale of progress and remaining challenges. Primary school enrollment worldwide stands at around 89 percent, yet more than 58 million children of primary school age are still out of classrooms. Literacy has improved to a global rate of 87 percent, but in Sub Saharan Africa it remains much lower at approximately 65 percent. Gender parity in education has advanced, but girls in many regions are still 1.5 times more likely to be excluded from school than boys.



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Quality of learning outcomes also remains a concern. Over half of children in low income countries do not achieve basic proficiency in reading by the end of primary school, while more than 53 percent of 10 year olds in low and middle income countries cannot read and understand a simple text. UNESCO estimates that closing the education gap and ensuring universal primary and secondary education by 2030 will require an additional 148 billion US dollars in annual funding. Furthermore, in least developed countries, over half of schools lack basic sanitation and handwashing facilities, which has a direct impact on both attendance and health. The digital divide adds another dimension, as only about 54 percent of the global population has access to reliable internet, leaving millions of students unable to benefit from online learning resources.

Current Ground Reality

Despite years of investment, the reality of achieving SDG 4 is far more complex than enrollment statistics alone suggest. Regional disparities remain stark. In Sub Saharan Africa, approximately 32 million children of primary school age are not enrolled, while in conflict affected areas such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria, education has been severely disrupted by violence and political instability. Refugee children remain five times more likely to be out of school compared to non refugees, underscoring the vulnerabilities of displaced populations.

The COVID 19 pandemic further worsened the situation. At its peak, more than 1.6 billion learners across 190 countries faced school closures, pushing education systems to adopt remote learning on an unprecedented scale. Yet this transition highlighted inequalities, as in high income countries nearly 80 percent of learners could access online education, while in low income nations the figure was closer to 20 percent. This “learning loss” has been immense. The World Bank estimates that learning poverty in low and middle income countries rose from 53 percent before the pandemic to almost 70 percent after prolonged closures.

Inclusivity is another persistent challenge. In many developing countries, as many as 90 percent of children with disabilities are not in school at all. Rural populations also lag behind urban peers, as schools in remote areas often lack trained teachers, proper infrastructure, or access to technology. Without addressing these inequalities, progress towards SDG 4 risks leaving behind the very populations it aims to uplift.

Youth Engagement in Education

Young people today are not only recipients of education but also active stakeholders in shaping its future. They have been central to advocacy efforts, innovation, and peer to peer engagement in education. Youth



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led organizations such as A World at School or the Malala Fund's Girl Advocates have successfully pressured governments to increase education budgets and prioritize girls' schooling. In many countries, student unions and youth parliaments campaign for equitable access to education, better mental health support in schools, and affordable higher education.

Innovation at the grassroots level is another powerful way youth contribute. Young entrepreneurs and activists have launched low cost learning tools, digital platforms, and mobile libraries that extend education to marginalized communities. In Bangladesh, for instance, a youth driven startup called Shikho delivers affordable digital lessons to thousands of students otherwise excluded from quality education. Across the world, young graduates participate in initiatives such as Teach For All, volunteering to teach in under-resourced schools and mentoring students in science, technology, and digital literacy. Peer to peer networks also play a vital role, as older students often help mentor younger learners, thereby fostering leadership skills alongside academic outcomes.

How Youth Can Further Contribute

Looking ahead, youth involvement must go beyond symbolic participation and transition into leadership roles within education reform. One key area is digital transformation. Young innovators can create open source platforms with free, multilingual, and localized learning materials to bridge the gaps left by traditional systems. Coding clubs, AI driven personalized learning, and low cost solar powered learning kits could all be designed and scaled by young people.

Another important contribution lies in advocacy for equitable funding. Through online campaigns and social movements, youth can demand that governments meet the UNESCO recommended target of allocating between 4 to 6 percent of GDP or 15 to 20 percent of total public expenditure to education. On the ground, youth can help close rural urban gaps by organizing community based initiatives such as mobile libraries, tutoring networks, and pop up classrooms in underserved regions. This is particularly effective in developing countries where state infrastructure is often stretched thin.

Promoting inclusivity is another responsibility. Young activists and NGOs can raise awareness about the need for disability inclusive curricula, gender sensitive teaching methods, and mental health resources in schools. Furthermore, through global networking platforms like the UN Youth Education Forum, young leaders can share best practices, collaborate across borders, and amplify their demands on an international stage.

Case Studies



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Several case studies demonstrate the transformative potential of youth led engagement. In Kenya, a group of young activists distributed solar powered tablets preloaded with educational content to children in rural villages. Within just two years, literacy rates among participants rose by 20 percent. In India, university students launched the Youth for Education campaign, adopting government schools and offering weekend classes in STEM and English subjects, positively impacting more than 50,000 learners. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, young women activists continue to defy restrictions by running underground schools for girls, ensuring hundreds continue their education despite official bans. These examples highlight both the creativity and courage of youth in advancing education under challenging conditions.

Challenges Ahead

Despite youth led efforts, achieving SDG 4 is fraught with challenges. Political instability remains a recurring barrier, as conflicts and authoritarian regimes often dismantle progress. The issue of brain drain also looms large, with educated young people migrating abroad in search of better opportunities, leaving education systems in their home countries weakened. The growing dependence on technology risks widening the digital divide unless access to affordable devices and reliable internet is expanded. Finally, while many governments have made public commitments to improving education, implementation often falls short due to underfunding or corruption. Too often, governments announce education reforms with great fanfare but fail to deliver meaningful change on the ground. Young people are tired of promises; what we want is action. Education budgets are frequently the first to be cut during crises, sometimes even when there isn't any crisis, like how the USA's ministry of education no longer exists when in reality they should be the last

Recommendations

To overcome these barriers, a multi stakeholder approach is required. Governments must commit to closing the financing gap through innovative mechanisms such as education bonds and public private partnerships. At the same time, however, governments must realize that empty promises are no longer enough. Too often, reforms are announced without real follow-through, and it is the young generation who pays the price. Education should never be treated as optional especially during crises, when it is often the first budget line to face cuts. International organizations should prioritize scholarships, teacher training programs, and support for conflict affected regions. The private sector has a role to play in investing in affordable ed tech solutions tailored to local needs. Most importantly, youth should continue to organize themselves into education coalitions, amplifying their voices collectively rather than individually. Schools and communities must also build resilience strategies to protect education during crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, or wars.



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Conclusion

Quality education is the foundation upon which all other Sustainable Development Goals can be achieved. It empowers individuals, strengthens economies, fosters gender equality, and builds democratic societies. However, with just a few years left until 2030, achieving SDG 4 will require unprecedented effort. Youth, with their energy, creativity, and determination, represent the most critical driving force behind this change.

From lobbying governments to innovating digital solutions and volunteering in underserved communities, young people are already proving that they are not passive beneficiaries but active architects of educational transformation. Yet the scale of the challenge demands even more. For SDG 4 to be realized, youth must rise as changemakers, innovators, and advocates, ensuring that education is truly inclusive, equitable, and transformative. In doing so, they will not only shape their own futures but also secure the future of entire generations to come.

Letter from the Editor

Writing this report on SDG 4 has been more than an exercise in research—it has been a reminder of why we at the AZMUN Foundation began this journey in the first place. Across every conference, debate, and initiative we've been part of, one message has always stood out: **youth are not the leaders of tomorrow, they are the leaders of today.**

Education is the thread that ties all of our aspirations together. Whether we sit in an MUN committee discussing policy or on the ground volunteering in our communities, we see how deeply the lack of access to quality education shapes inequality, frustration, and lost potential. We also see how quickly things change when a young person is given the tools to learn, create, and lead.

The truth is that the ground reality is tough. Millions of children remain outside classrooms, digital divides keep knowledge out of reach, and conflict continues to shut doors to learning. But every one of these challenges is also a call to action—and it is young people who are answering that call with creativity, courage, and persistence.

Before I close, I want to express my gratitude to **Atharv Singh, the founder of the AZMUN Foundation**, without whom I would not be writing this report. His vision and drive have been the spark behind everything we do, and his belief in empowering young people continues to inspire me personally.



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This report is not meant to sit on a shelf. It is an invitation—to reflect, to act, and to dream bigger about what education can be.

— *Ansh Dutta*

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