



EASG

Education & Academia Stakeholder Group

SECTORAL PAPER

EDUCATION & ACADEMIA STAKEHOLDER GROUP

2025

Executive Summary

As the world grapples with overlapping crises from geopolitical conflict, economic instability, widening inequality, and the escalating climate emergency, education must be recognised as a foundational human right and a strategic lever to advance the 2030 Agenda. The Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) calls on governments and international institutions to reaffirm their commitments to SDG 4 and ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and lifelong learning for all.

This sectoral paper outlines the critical interlinkages between education (SDG 4) and the thematic focus of the 2025 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), covering SDGs 3, 5, 8, 14, and 17. It presents the impacts of multiple and intersecting crises on education and proposes cross-cutting, evidence-based policy recommendations to accelerate progress.

Key Findings

- **SDG 3 (Health and Well-being):** Education is essential for promoting mental health, sexual and reproductive rights, and public health literacy. Yet access to comprehensive sexual education remains restricted, especially for girls, youth in rural areas, and displaced populations.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality):** Gender disparities in education persist due to discriminatory norms, unpaid care burdens, and unsafe learning environments. The regression of girls' rights in countries like Afghanistan and the digital divide disproportionately affects girls and gender-diverse youth.
- **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth):** Youth and adult learners face severe barriers in acquiring skills for decent employment. High NEET (not in education, employment, or training) rates, especially among women, underscore the urgent need for inclusive and gender-just skill development.

- **SDG 14 (Life Below Water):** Despite formal commitments to climate education, ocean literacy and environmental education remain marginal. Education must foster sustainability changemakers, including through community-based and intergenerational learning approaches.
- **SDG 17 (Partnerships):** The global financing gap for education threatens the achievement of SDG 4. Public education must be shielded from austerity, debt burdens, and aid volatility. Teacher shortages and digital infrastructure gaps exacerbate inequalities.

Key Recommendations

- **Increase and Protect Public Education Financing:** Close the \$97 billion annual gap for low- and lower-middle-income countries and meet international benchmarks for domestic and donor funding.
- **Advance Gender-Transformative Education:** Implement inclusive curricula, comprehensive sexuality education, and gender-responsive planning across education systems.
- **Promote Education for Decent Work:** Prioritise lifelong learning, vocational training, and equitable access to employment for youth, women, and marginalised communities.
- **Integrate Climate and Ocean Literacy:** Make environmental education core to curricula to empower communities as stewards of the planet.
- **Safeguard Civic Space and Youth Participation:** Institutionalise civil society and youth engagement in SDG implementation, especially in national review processes.

Our Call to Action

To realise the transformative power of education and ensure no one is left behind, the EASG urges Member States to embed these recommendations in the 2025 Ministerial Declaration and subsequent work. Education must be positioned not only as a goal in itself but as a cross-cutting solution to our most pressing global challenges.

Assessing SDG Implementation Through the Lens of Education

Assessment of the impacts of the multiple and interconnected crises on the implementation of SDGs 3, 5, 8, 14 and 17 and integral links to SDG 4: Ensuring equitable, inclusive and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all

SDG 3

The SDG 3.7 target states that “By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services” with explicit reference to information and education. However, the painful reality is that complications linked to pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for 15 to 19-year-old girls globally. There is limited access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education due to cultural barriers, stigma, political and ideological resistance and limited financial resources. More efforts are needed for women in rural populations, the lowest quintiles and individuals with limited education (SDG Report 2025).

Many women, girls and gender-diverse youth face barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health care and fulfilling their sexual and reproductive rights and agency. The rising anti-rights movements in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have an impact on their access to comprehensive sexual education (CSE). Further, campaigns such as the #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (#Donotmesswithmychildren) that oppose the incorporation of the gender perspective in the national curriculum could undermine the efforts for gender transformative education and access to CSE.

In refugee camps in the Arab region, economic hardships have made menstrual health products unaffordable for many women and girls in the refugee camps, leading to the use of unhygienic alternatives and increased health risks. Organisations have initiated programs to distribute sanitary products and provide menstrual health education, but challenges persist. and future state of the world, including climate change, worsening their mental state and severely affecting their quality of life and education.

SDG 5

Progress has stalled and even regressed in several countries and contexts, especially in SDG 4.5 on eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable groups, including women and girls, and LGBTQI+. According to UNESCO (2023), 250 million children and youth are out of school globally, of which 122 million are girls (largely due to the exclusion of girls and the resulting education crisis in Afghanistan) and 128 million are boys.

In different regions across the world, the declining enrolment rates for girls are due to economic crises, safety concerns, period poverty, restrictive gender norms, and inadequate infrastructure, hindering girls' access to education. Girls and women continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, which affects access to education and underpins women's significantly lower labor force participation rates compared to men.

Countries such as those in South Asia continue to perpetuate gender norms and stereotypes, particularly in learning materials and attitudes. In Afghanistan, there have been systemic violations of the rights of women and girls, including the right to education, freedom of speech and movement, and political participation.

It is troubling to note that women and girls continue to experience gender-based violence and discrimination and harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). Many countries have yet to implement legal protections, and survivors not only lack access to justice but also continue to face stigma.

Further, the push for digital education leaves girls and women behind because of the lack of digital and literacy skills required to navigate the new learning tools and platforms effectively. UNESCO reported that women and girls are 25% less likely to know how to leverage digital technology for basic purposes.

SDG 8

SDG 8.5 on full and productive employment for women and youth and persons with disabilities and SDG 8.6 “by 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET)” are directly connected to SDG 4.4 target “By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults with relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.”

The challenges faced by adult and youth populations in accessing education and skills continue to be alarming: in 23% of the 159 countries that submitted data for GRALE 5, fewer than 1% of youth and adults aged 15 and above participate in education and learning programs, therefore, youth and adult education does not reach those who need it most.

The Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024 noted that “too many young people across the globe are NEET, and opportunities to access decent jobs remain limited in emerging and developing economies. One in five young people, or 20.4 per cent, globally, were NEET in 2023. Two in three of these NEETs were female.

The transition from education to the labor market is a challenge for young people. They face multiple barriers to securing decent employment and opportunities, including the significant skills gap, skills shortages, and skills mismatch. Marginalised youth find it difficult to access formal job markets without well-connected networks, leaving them unemployed or employed in informal and precarious work. Youth are also vulnerable to labour exploitation, as well as violence, sexual abuse, drug abuse, and even the trafficking of young girls.

Failures in funding social policies and protecting workers exacerbate educational inequalities, particularly affecting historically marginalised population groups, such as women and girls, especially those who are of African descent (1). Policies of labor flexibilization tend to predominantly affect women, and even more so, African descent women, because women's remuneration, both in the public sector and in the private sector, is still lower than that of men. This makes them more susceptible to occupying precarious jobs. The indiscriminate advancement of technology replacing education professionals further exacerbates the situation. Further, the increase in own-account workers, temporary contracts and freelance work due to digital labor platforms has resulted in little employment security, limited access to social protection and protection of workers' rights.

The World Social Report 2025 stated that the “growing power asymmetries between workers and employers are a root cause of persistently high levels of inequality around the globe.” This will have huge impacts on families and their abilities to access education, thus it is important to secure quality public education, skills development and learning opportunities for all while working on policies that will ensure decent work for all.

1. The study "It's Not a Crisis, It's a Project," produced by the Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education (BCRE) with the support of ActionAid International, shows how this lack of funding, combined with austerity policies, affects both students and education professionals.

SDG 14

Education for sustainable development and climate change education are at the heart of “life below water”, creating awareness and actions to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources as well as mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The Greening Education Partnership reported that a vast majority (87%) of countries have laws, policies or plans supporting the integration of climate change in primary and secondary education curricula. Despite this, ocean literacy in education curricula and environment education remain marginalised, with little emphasis on marine ecosystems.

Science-based education and community awareness efforts face challenges due to financing. Ocean conservation, research, and sustainable development are alarmingly underfunded, and the recent shutdown of USAID programs has affected marine conservation programs worldwide. In Brazil, marine sciences in public universities also experienced funding cuts that limited their outreach and impact.

Climate change education experiences the same financing problems. “The [Global Partnership for Education](#)’s Nonstate actors in education report reveals a steady increase in the proportion of official development assistance (ODA) going towards climate change, but education, including climate change learning, has not kept the same pace.”

SDG 17

Education is the soundest long-term investment a country can make. It contributes to stimulating economic growth, reducing inequality, ending gender injustice, boosting health, enhancing social cohesion, building resilience to climate change and driving the fulfilment of human rights.(2)

The annual financing gap to achieve sustainable development in developing countries is estimated to range from \$2.5 trillion to \$4 trillion. This huge funding gap leaves developing countries with very little resources to invest in priority development programmes for education, healthcare, social protection, and climate action, among others. Specifically, for education, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report estimates that between 2023 and 2030, the average annual financing gap for low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve their national SDG4 targets is placed at \$97 billion. This amount represents 21% of the total cost of education for these countries. Addressing this financing gap is crucial for ensuring equitable, inclusive and quality education for all.

Teacher shortages and professional development challenges are primary obstacles to achieving SDG 4. The High-Level Political Panel on the Teaching Profession reported that 44 million primary and secondary teachers are needed globally to meet SDG 4. Further, digital divides and access to reliable internet connectivity and professional support for teachers are crucial for the appropriate use of technology in teaching and learning.

Despite efforts towards reforming education systems towards inclusion and equity, segregated school system persists such as in Catalonia where 33% of primary students and 28% of secondary students would need to be reassigned to achieve balanced social diversity within schools. This reflects the broader trend across the European Union.

Sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for achieving the SDGs

SDG 3

Education is essential for enabling knowledge, skills and decision-making to promote healthy lives that includes physical, mental and socio-emotional well-being. Linking SDG 4 to SDG 3, the areas for coordination between education and health are:

- Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Education: Implement comprehensive programs addressing period poverty and reproductive health, especially in refugee camps, rural populations and marginalized communities
- Teacher training in sexual education: Provide teachers with ongoing professional development in sexual education is essential to ensure that they can create inclusive,
- respectful, and age-appropriate learning environments.
- Developing social advocacy strategies for families: Develop awareness campaigns, workshops, and resources that highlight how sexual education promotes safety, well-being, and healthy relationships for young people.
- Funding for health education, health support such as school meals, and science-based health literacy will improve reproductive health and public health.
- Coordinated efforts from the government agencies, international donors and NGOs are crucial most especially in times of conflict and disaster affected situations. Collaboration must ensure that women and girls can manage their health with dignity.

SDG 5

Gender Transformative Education, from early childhood to adulthood, is a key driver of gender equality by improving the economic and social status of girls and women and members of LGTBQ+ communities. It empowers individuals of all ages with knowledge, skills and resources to participate fully in society, exercise human rights, including body autonomy, freedom from violence, reproductive health and equal participation. Governments and other duty-bearers need to:

- Implement SDG 4.7 includes education to promote gender equality and governments must deliver on this target – providing education, training and public awareness beyond the schools and into communities.
- Put in place comprehensive Support Programs with multifaceted strategies that address economic, social, and systemic barriers is crucial to ensure quality education for all genders.
- Integrate gender perspectives into public school curricula, aiming to promote gender equality and address stereotypes.
- Provide affirmative actions are such as activities beyond school hours and summer programs offer children crucial opportunities for personal and social development and have increasingly become associated with the right to education within a framework of equality of opportunities.
- Institute gender-responsive planning and budgeting in education and across all Ministries.

SDG 8

The CONFINTEA VII raised the importance of comprehensive, evidence-based, gender-transformative, cross-sectoral, and inclusive literacy policies and implementation strategies, especially in the post-pandemic context, for which new education methods and strategies must be explored. Community learning centers and effective blended learning approaches alongside face-to-face teaching are crucial in reaching out to marginalised women and youth, adults in remote areas and learners with disabilities.

Establishing a culture of lifelong learning at work is important to help workers to secure and maintain decent work, adapt to new job requirements, and achieve personal development. Furthermore, financial literacy education is important because it fosters critical thinking and empower learners to explore alternative economic models. Finally, education empowers individuals to advocate for decent pay, working conditions and labour association.

The SDG 8.6 target envisaged reducing substantially youth NEET in 2020. Five years hence, governments must:

- Strengthen Educational Engagement: Implement targeted programs to re-engage youth in education by offering flexible learning options, vocational training, and financial support to alleviate economic barriers.
- Enhance Employment Opportunities: Develop initiatives that connect youth with job markets, such as apprenticeships, internships, and partnerships with private sectors to create entry-level positions.
- Support Youth not in employment, education or training: Establish outreach programs to identify NEET individuals and provide tailored support, including career counseling, mentorship, and skills development workshops.

Governments must adopt and make available to marginalized women gender-just skill education that enables access to transformative education and training for meaningful employment, economic and social empowerment and a life of dignity (6).

SDG 14

The education sector holds a profound responsibility to utilise the transformational potential of education in the pursuit of learners to aid the development of more sustainable and inclusive societies (5). Learners must become sustainability-change makers with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development (Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives, UNESCO, 2017), including the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources.

Education must shift away from the industrial school model and market-driven orientation that is still present in most schools to a competency-based education system that empowers individuals to reflect on their actions, taking into account their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts.

Towards meeting the targets of SDG 14, ocean literacy and education must be integrated into the education curricula in both schools and community education. “Educating the younger generation about the importance of marine and coastal environments is integral to raising a community of ocean stewards who act sustainably, and who can participate in effective decision-making regarding the ocean and its complex and dynamic issues.” (Fauville et al., 2019). An intergenerational and community approach to ocean literacy can harness diverse perspectives and community solutions for protecting marine resources.

For example, in the United States, there is a great effort to reduce plastics in open waters. The plastic pollution initiatives such as the [NOAAS](#) ocean debris program, are locally led beach clean-ups and public awareness. This is a comprehensive approach that includes funding for policy reform and community engagement can ensure a healthier planet for future generations.

SDG 17

The 4th International Conference on Financing for Development, while deliberating reforms in the international financial architecture, must step up its negotiations and agreements on how to fast-track financing towards development. It is disheartening to note that financing education is absent in the draft Outcome Document of the FFD4. The present and the future are at risk if education financing is not addressed.

Therefore, in HLPF 2025, the EASG reiterates its calls for:

- Progressively increase public funding for the provision of equitable, quality, resilient, and gender-transformative public education systems, ensuring accountability and transparency in public finance. This means enhancing domestic resource mobilization, promoting progressive taxation, increasing ODA for education, and negotiating for debt cancellation. The education movements also call for an increase of the share of public expenditure on education towards the international benchmarks of at least 4-6% of GDP and/or 15-20% of public expenditure.
- Prioritize equity and inclusion in education systems by identifying and addressing barriers to access to quality education and implementing anti-discrimination policies that protect all learners from bullying and harassment. Education systems must also ensure contextualized pedagogies and curricula that go beyond literacy and numeracy, equip learners with skills for life, cater to their learning needs, and promote concepts of sustainable development.

- Develop gender-transformative education systems that address gender stereotypes and discrimination, and promote gender equality, anti-racist education and integrate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) into the curricula, in both formal and non-formal education settings. Marginalized women and girls should be encouraged, supported, and empowered to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), leadership roles, and fields that are traditionally male-dominated.
- Moreover, pedagogies must be based on the principles of cooperation and solidarity against the obsolete aim of education systems of preparing students for the labour world. Pedagogies of solidarity must also recognize and redress the systematic exclusions and erasures imposed by racism, sexism, colonialism and authoritarian regimes around the world.
- Adequately invest in higher education, science, and technology, considering regional, socioeconomic, racial, and gender inequalities, ensuring the expansion and democratization of higher education through increasing the availability of courses in rural areas within the public network and developing initial, continuing, and postgraduate teacher training programs in public universities.
- In conflict-affected countries, governments and multilateral organisations must protect education from attacks and demilitarize educational institutions. The governments must prioritise rebuilding schools and ensuring they are safe and accessible for all students. Governments and international partners should implement targeted programs to integrate displaced children into the education system, which is essential to prevent long-term educational gaps.

Our action

The EASG and the broader education movement have been proactive in the follow-up actions and measures to support the implementation of the 2023 SDG Summit Political Declaration and the outcomes of the 2024 Summit of the Future and the Transforming Education Summit to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The civil society networks have been at the forefront of social accountability actions, monitoring and advocacy at the country level to ensure implementation of international commitments in:

- SDG 4 and Agenda 2030
- Transforming Education Summit
- Summit of the Future
- Participation in Voluntary National Review processes before and during the HLPF
- Follow-up Marrakesh Framework for Action

The EASG members work with their respective networks in mobilising the education stakeholders and communities to hold national and local governments accountable for the international agreements they have signed. These advocacy and campaigns include but are not limited to [GAWE](#), [Marrakesh Follow-up](#), and youth advocating for [climate action post COP 29](#).

Through the production of [Spotlight Reports for SDG 4](#) the education movements generate data, case stories and analyses, working with marginalised communities and the youth in putting forward recommendations from the ground to inform the Leave No One Behind Agenda. Education coalitions also organise policy dialogues with governments and actively participate in the education sector plans and reviews to ensure that SDG 4 and related education.

Financing and Budget advocacy for SDG 4 and related education in focus SDGs

The national education coalitions and education movements across the world are participating in budget advocacy by scrutinizing the country's budgets, putting forward budget proposals that to address equity and inclusion and lobbying their Parliament in the national budget deliberations.

Building on the Transforming Education Summit, the education movements ensure that the transformative finance agenda, which includes action on tax, debt, austerity and public sector wage, is addressed in country, regional and global policy intergovernmental meetings such as the FFD4 and HLPF.

Empowering youth leadership

The EASG member organisations have also been encouraged to include meaningful engagement of adolescents and young people progressively and structurally in their organisational decision-making processes including through representation on governance bodies. Member organisations are equally encouraged to facilitate children and young people to meaningfully engage in the planning, implementation and monitoring of their work according to their interests, needs and age.

While the youth have the power and agency to create transformative changes, it is ultimately those in power and authority- governments and decision-makers- who should bear the responsibility of translating commitments into reality and concrete plans and programs, and ensuring that youth are meaningfully engaged in from the start of the processes and even and especially in the follow-up and monitoring.

Recommendations to be considered for inclusion in the Ministerial Declaration of the 2025 HLPF

Education financing

Member States must deliver on their commitment to funding SDG 4. Without urgent systemic actions to address the SDG 4 funding gap and to increase the volume, effectiveness, and equity of financing for education, millions of children, youth, and adults, particularly in low and lower-middle-income countries, will be denied their right to quality education, perpetuating cycles of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. At the same time, international aid for education must be reaffirmed. A decline in aid predominantly impacts people in regions experiencing conflict, critical emergencies, and displacement, as well as those facing the most severe forms of exclusion. Women and girls are especially at risk, as they often face additional barriers to accessing their rights (7).

Member States must abide by their agreement to invest in education as stated in the Fortaleza Declaration to *“align international aid to education with national education sector plans and apply consistently the aid effectiveness principles; meet the benchmark of 0.7% of donor gross national income (GNI) for official development assistance (ODA) to developing countries; increase the share of ODA to education and allocate such aid to the countries furthest behind on reaching SDG 4”*.

Gender transformative education from a lifelong learning perspective

GTE is essential for achieving gender justice, addressing the root causes of inequality by challenging harmful stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices.

Promoting Inclusive Curricula and Pedagogies: Engaging communities in challenging harmful stereotypes, attitudes, and norms. Inclusive curricula also mean challenging patriarchal narratives and recognizing women's participation in history, science, politics and all aspects of our social life. One of the ideal ways of transforming education for equality is implementing comprehensive sexual education, which is especially important in ensuring the enjoyment of women's right to live free of violence and gender discrimination. In order to be comprehensive, sexuality education must pay special attention to diversity, since everyone has the right to deal with his or her sexuality without being discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Civil Society and youth participation

Civil society engagements inside and outside the government even for education CSOs are shrinking as civic space is shutting down. CIVICUS Monitor 2023 reported that the "proportion of people living in countries with closed civic space, 30.6 per cent, is the highest in years." Further, it noted that "Some 118 countries now have serious civic space restrictions and only 2.1 per cent of people live in countries with open civic space. In December 2023, two more countries – Bangladesh and Venezuela – were downgraded to the worst civic space category, closed."

Member States and civil society must ensure that policies and practices secure and sustain institutionalized mechanisms for civil society and youth participation in the SDGs at the country, regional and global levels. The United Nations must guarantee and protect the participation of diverse CSO in the deliberations within the UN spaces.

References

1. The study "It's Not a Crisis, It's a Project," produced by the Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education (BCRE) with the support of ActionAid International, shows how this lack of funding, combined with austerity policies, affects both students and education professionals.
2. Lifted from the letter to Ministers drafted by Action Aid
3. GCE Policy Brief on Adult Learning and Education 2024
4. Building on the experience of Azad Foundation
5. GCE Policy Brief on Climate Change Education
6. GCE Policy Brief on Youth and Students Participation 2024
7. GCE Statement 2025 urging governments to protect and increase their commitment to education and global justice.

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