LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: TRANSFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS, EQUITABLY AND INCLUSIVELY

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GPE Transforming Education

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ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	civil society organization
ECCE	early childhood care and education
EMIS	education management information systems
GEA	Girls' Education Accelerator
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

SUMMARY

The principle of "leaving no one behind" in education is central to the mission and goals of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and international agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet many children in GPE partner countries remain out of school or are unable to complete even primary education. This working paper aims to bring attention to the ongoing challenges of reaching universal access to education and completion of at least primary education in many GPE partner countries. It argues that countries and their development partners will need to address *both* low completion and low learning outcomes to achieve the common goal of all children learning, with none left behind, as well as to meet obligations under human rights instruments. Although the principle of leaving no one behind is widely recognized, it is not always understood how to translate it into practice. This paper provides initial guidance on what it means for policy and donor-supported programs.

Section 1 introduces what "leaving no one behind" means and explains why it is important in GPE's 2025 strategic plan and the SDGs.

Section 2 provides background on the large numbers of children who are still left behind in GPE partner countries because they are out of school or unable to complete primary education. Out of 83 partner countries at the time of the analysis, some 25 have more than 20 percent of children out of school at the primary and lower secondary levels, and a further 25 have fewer than 20 percent of children completing even primary education. There remain large inequalities in access and completion by gender, wealth and other dimensions. The section also outlines the right to education in human rights instruments and political commitments such as the SDGs, and what these say about access to different levels of education, inequalities, discrimination and marginalized groups.

Section 3 provides a framework of policies and interventions for access, equity and inclusion in education.

Approaches addressing equity and inclusion in education can be placed in six broad, overlapping categories:

1. Those that deliberately target disadvantaged groups
2. Systemwide reforms that are not targeted but have progressive effects
3. Policies that allocate more resources to more disadvantaged groups, schools or areas
4. Inclusion of children with disabilities
5. Making the education system inclusive and desegregated for all girls and boys
6. Improvements in data, monitoring and evidence.

Section 4 explains how GPE 2025—GPE's strategic plan for 2021–2025—works toward the goal of all children learning through a system transformation approach. The approach involves aligning partners around "catalytic" reforms that can unblock bottlenecks to wider system transformation. Each element of GPE's new operating model includes mechanisms to ensure that these reforms leave no one behind. Within this approach, systemwide reforms that improve efficiency, enrollment at an appropriate age, school readiness and the flow of learners through the system are likely to be important options for addressing access and completion. When countries prioritize school quality reforms, it is important to apply a holistic systems lens that understands the links between access, equity and learning, and is driven by an inclusive policy dialogue in which the voices of different groups, including the most marginalized, are heard.

Section 5 concludes with four recommendations for how countries and development partners can work toward the common goal of *all children learning, with no one left behind*:

1. Retain a strong focus on access and completion, at least in the majority of GPE partner countries that have either low access or low completion (or both).

2. As education systems expand toward universal enrollment, they will need to adapt to the needs of an increasingly diverse body of learners. This will require fundamental changes in how schools and teachers work as they adapt to the needs of a wider range of learners.

3. Focus on all children learning—not just those who are currently completing school. This means understanding potential unintended consequences when activities and indicators focus only on in-school children, and how these can be avoided or offset. It also means considering the effects of learning interventions may differ between learners, and the implications for equity.

4. Focus public resources where the needs are greatest—in particular, by carefully considering trade-offs when support is directed to higher levels of education, such as upper secondary, when there remain large numbers of children not completing primary education.

It is hoped that the framing of the issues presented in this paper, and the growing evidence base around policies and approaches on equity and inclusion, can be applied to support dialogue both in education policy and planning broadly and in the design of programs and interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The principle of "leaving no one behind" is central to the mission and goals of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). According to the GPE 2025 strategic plan (GPE 2022c), GPE's mission is "to mobilize partnerships and investments that transform education systems in developing countries, *leaving no one behind*" [emphasis added] (p. 7). The aim of transforming education systems is to "create strong, resilient education systems that achieve education outcomes at scale and address systemic inequities" (p. 10). The strategy emphasizes the right to education, and it commits to focusing GPE financing on "the poor and the most marginalized, prioritizing at least one year of preprimary education and 12 years of education and training" (p. 14), and to putting gender equality "at the heart of planning and implementation" (p. 17).

This emphasis on leaving no one behind, and the specific commitments, reflects the partnership's alignment with human rights frameworks and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ensuring access to primary education, in particular, is considered a minimum core obligation that countries and their partners should realize immediately. In the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO et al. 2015), countries committed to ensuring 12 years of free, quality, primary and secondary education, of which at least nine years are compulsory; the addition of at least one year of pre-primary education is encouraged.

Despite these commitments, it is clear that many boys and girls are being left behind in GPE partner countries. Only about a quarter of the poorest children in low-income countries complete primary school (Rose and GPE

2019). Poverty and gender—among other dimensions—interact to widen gaps in access and learning. Disadvantage starts early in the education system, where girls and boys facing multiple disadvantages are at risk of falling behind in learning, leading them to drop out before completing primary school. Yet domestic and aid resources are often skewed toward higher levels of education.

Although the principle of leaving no one behind is widely recognized, it is not always obvious how that translates into action. Two questions arise in particular:

❯ How can countries focus on persistent low learning outcomes among school-going children—often called a "learning crisis"—while also ensuring all school-age girls and boys are in school and complete it?

❯ How can GPE, together with other development partners, balance support for quality of learning and access as part of transforming education systems?

This paper describes how many girls and boys in GPE partner countries are currently left behind in access to school. It sets out a framework for the types of policy and intervention that can improve access, equity and inclusion. It describes the GPE 2025 strategic plan and operating model, and how a holistic systems approach that understands the links between access, equity, inclusion and learning can be used to align partners around priority reforms in countries where many children are currently out of school. Finally, the paper recommends four overarching principles that countries and their development partners can take into account to ensure that no one is left behind in the process of prioritizing and designing reforms.

BOX 1. EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATION: A GLOSSARY

Equity in education means a system that is fair to all children. Equity involves making political and moral judgments about what distribution or policy is fair. Human rights instruments, and agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals, with their focus on leaving no one behind and all children learning, help to establish a consensus on basic aspects of fairness. Equity includes a recognition that unequal inputs—such as funding—are sometimes needed to address historical disadvantage or differences in needs, and to move toward more equal outcomes—such as learning or future livelihoods.

Inclusion means all children learning together, in a safe and healthy environment, free of discrimination. This requires a system that can understand and address their individual needs and well-being, ensuring not just their presence in schools but their participation and achievement (GPE 2022d). Inclusion is often used in relation to children with disabilities, but some similar principles can be applied for all children who are at risk of exclusion.

Marginalization in education refers to acute and persistent inequality in the extent to which different groups can claim their right to education. Marginalization is not random. It is rooted in underlying social inequalities that are built and perpetuated through policies, processes and social norms (UNESCO 2010). Marginalized groups in education can be identified as those who are most likely to be out of school, have low education attainment or low learning outcomes. Statistical analysis that disaggregates by dimensions such as gender, wealth and disability allows us to identify these groups and describe their situation. Understanding the root causes of marginalization is more complex, encompassing social, economic and political factors.

Ultimately, marginalized communities continue to be excluded from or disadvantaged within education—as in other spheres of life—because they lack the political voice to influence resource allocations and social arrangements (Kabeer 2005). Marginalized communities commonly include girls and boys from the poorest households, from remote, rural areas, from historically neglected regions or states, from disenfranchised ethnic and linguistic groups; Indigenous peoples; pastoralists; internally displaced persons and refugees; people who live in slum settings, in institutions or are homeless; and children with disabilities. But the groups that are marginalized differ between countries, and the situation of different groups also varies greatly within and across each context.

Intersectionality refers to the complex and cumulative way in which multiple forms of discrimination "combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (Crenshaw 1989). Dimensions of inequality, such as by gender, race, class, sexual orientation or disability, are not independent and mutually exclusive. Instead, an individual boy or girl may belong to multiple groups that are excluded or treated unfairly in education in different ways, which build on each other and work together (Unterhalter, Robinson, and Balsera 2020).

The implications of intersectionality for education policy and programs include the following:
  (i)   Analyses, diagnostics, monitoring and evaluation need to use disaggregated data to understand how overlapping group membership affects outcomes.
  (ii) Policies and programs that ignore intersectionality may not work as intended, because by focusing on one group identity (for example, children with disabilities), they ignore others (girls and boys with disabilities, in richer and poorer areas), and the diversity of experiences in these groups.
  (iii) Members of intersecting marginalized groups may be particularly lacking in political voice, because political discussion focuses only on one aspect of their identity at a time. Representatives of a marginalized group may not be able to represent the diverse interests of all members of that group. This affects advocacy and accountability mechanisms for more inclusive education policy.

2. MANY CHILDREN ARE LEFT BEHIND

In many GPE partner countries, more than 20 percent of children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary age are out of school. Furthermore, many of those who do attend school will not complete primary education, let alone the full cycle of 12 years of education recommended in the SDGs. In the majority of GPE partner countries, fewer than 80 percent of children complete primary education, and in 11 of those, fewer than 50 percent of children complete primary education.[1]

These education challenges in GPE partner countries reflect a *global stalling of progress since 2010*. Dramatic progress was made in expanding educational opportunities between the 1990s and 2010, but since then progress on access has slowed to a halt. Globally, some 240 million children, adolescents and youth remain out of school (GEMR Team and UIS 2022). This statistic is based on data mostly gathered before the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the education of millions more children and left many at risk of dropping out even when schools reopened (UNICEF 2022). In addition, national statistics may under-represent marginalized groups such as refugee children (UIS and UNHCR 2021). Almost half of all refugee children are thought to be out of school (Mawhinney, Hafedh, and Warren 2023). The true number of out-of-school children may therefore be significantly higher.

It is no coincidence that many of these children are in GPE partner countries. By design, GPE partners with lower-income countries, which have some of the greatest challenges in granting access to and completion of basic education, and allocates more financing to countries with the greatest challenges in relation to access and learning (GPE 2020).

In many partner countries, the stalling of progress on access partly reflects continued rapid growth of the population of school-age children. While some regions are experiencing a decline in the primary school-age population, in sub-Saharan Africa it is projected to grow by 86 million between 2022 and 2050 (UN-DESA 2023). Even rapidly growing school systems may struggle to keep pace.

Nevertheless, there is considerable variation across the partnership in the extent to which challenges in accessing basic education remain. In 25 partner countries (figure 1, left-hand side), access to basic education remains low, with more than 20 percent of children out of school. Most of these countries also have very low completion rates.[2]

A further 25 countries have relatively good access but low completion: more than 20 percent of children do

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1. Analysis in this paper is based on the 83 GPE partner countries at the start of 2022, using SDG 4 March 2023 data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (database), Montreal, http://www.uis.unesco.org. Five additional countries (Angola, Belize, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Ukraine) have since joined GPE. Statistics on access and completion exclude non-formal and informal education (education that is "an addition, alternative and/or complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals" or that is not recognized). Non-formal education, including certain religious schools, nongovernmental organization schools and community-based education, accounts for a significant proportion of enrollment in some countries (UNESCO 2021).
2. Some exceptions, such as the Republic of Congo and Honduras, have relatively high primary completion, though much lower enrollment and completion at the lower secondary level.

not complete even primary education, even though relatively few school-age children are out of school (figure 1, right-hand side). In these countries, learners are typically dropping out before they complete primary school, but the problem is to some extent masked by grade repetition; that is, the out-of-school children rate is relatively low because children are spending years in primary school but repeating grades and ultimately dropping out before they can complete.

In the remaining GPE partner countries, a large majority of boys and girls enroll in school and complete at least primary education.[3] Even within this group, countries have significant exclusion problems, although these can potentially be addressed with targeted approaches focusing on the most marginalized groups. Furthermore, many remain far from the aspiration of the SDGs of all children completing 12 years of high-quality education with relevant learning outcomes.

Most of the countries with low access (15 out of 25) are low-income countries, and most (17 out of 25) are affected by fragility or conflict. Of the countries with low completion, many are also low-income (11 out of 25) or affected by fragility or conflict (9 out of 25). Countries affected by fragility or conflict are often severely limited in their capacity to deliver basic services, especially where conflict or crises are ongoing, where there is no legitimate or recognized government, or where a government does not have authority over sections of its territory.

In a large majority of the partner countries with low access or completion, large gender gaps remain (figure 2). In Afghanistan, there were many more boys than girls in school even before the reversal of policy allowing girls to go to secondary school in 2022. Some countries, such as Nigeria, have gender parity at the national level, but this hides large gender gaps in states. In many countries, more girls than boys complete primary school, but again, this hides substantial regional variation. In

Ethiopia, boys are more likely than girls to be enrolled in primary, yet they are less likely to complete primary, and in several regions girls remain disadvantaged in both access and completion. Moreover, gender equality means boys and girls learning without the threat of violence, allowed to thrive irrespective of their gender, able to understand their rights, and to play their part in shifting damaging and restrictive norms in the wider community (GPE, forthcoming). Even where parity in access and completion has been achieved, there remains a long way to go in achieving the wider goal of gender equality in most countries.

Those most likely to be left behind in access and completion are children from poor households, children from rural areas, children with disabilities, and children from ethnic and linguistic minorities. In most partner countries, the primary completion rate among the poorest households is under 70 percent; in 20 countries, it is under 30 percent. Socioeconomic status intersects with gender and other dimensions to compound disadvantage; for example, for the poorest girls in Niger and the poorest boys in Liberia, only around 6 percent complete primary (figure 3). Intersecting barriers including economic and institutional barriers, discrimination and the inequitable allocation of resources continue to exclude children.

The typology of countries with low access and low completion presented here is no substitute for a detailed analysis of individual contexts. More nuanced classifications (for example, Lewin 2017) can be used for a fuller understanding of the patterns of enrollment, progression and dropout. The purpose here is simply to illustrate the scale of the problem across many GPE partner countries.

Children continue to be left behind on a very large scale despite long-standing international agreements that aim to prevent this. GPE, in common with all of its partners and partner countries, is guided by its obligations

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3.   These include Albania, Bangladesh, Cabo Verde, Dominica, El Salvador, Fiji, Georgia, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Kiribati, Kyrgyz Republic, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Maldives, the Federated States of Micronesia, Moldova, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, São Tomé and Príncipe, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Tajikistan, Togo, Tonga, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Zimbabwe.

under human rights instruments and political commitments. Provision of free primary education to all children is an obligation under rights instruments including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly 1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly 1989), and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO 1960). These instruments also commit signatories to progressively introducing free secondary education; to using maximum available resources, including both domestic and international resources, to facilitate the progressive realization of the right to education; and to avoiding retrogression in the realization of this right.
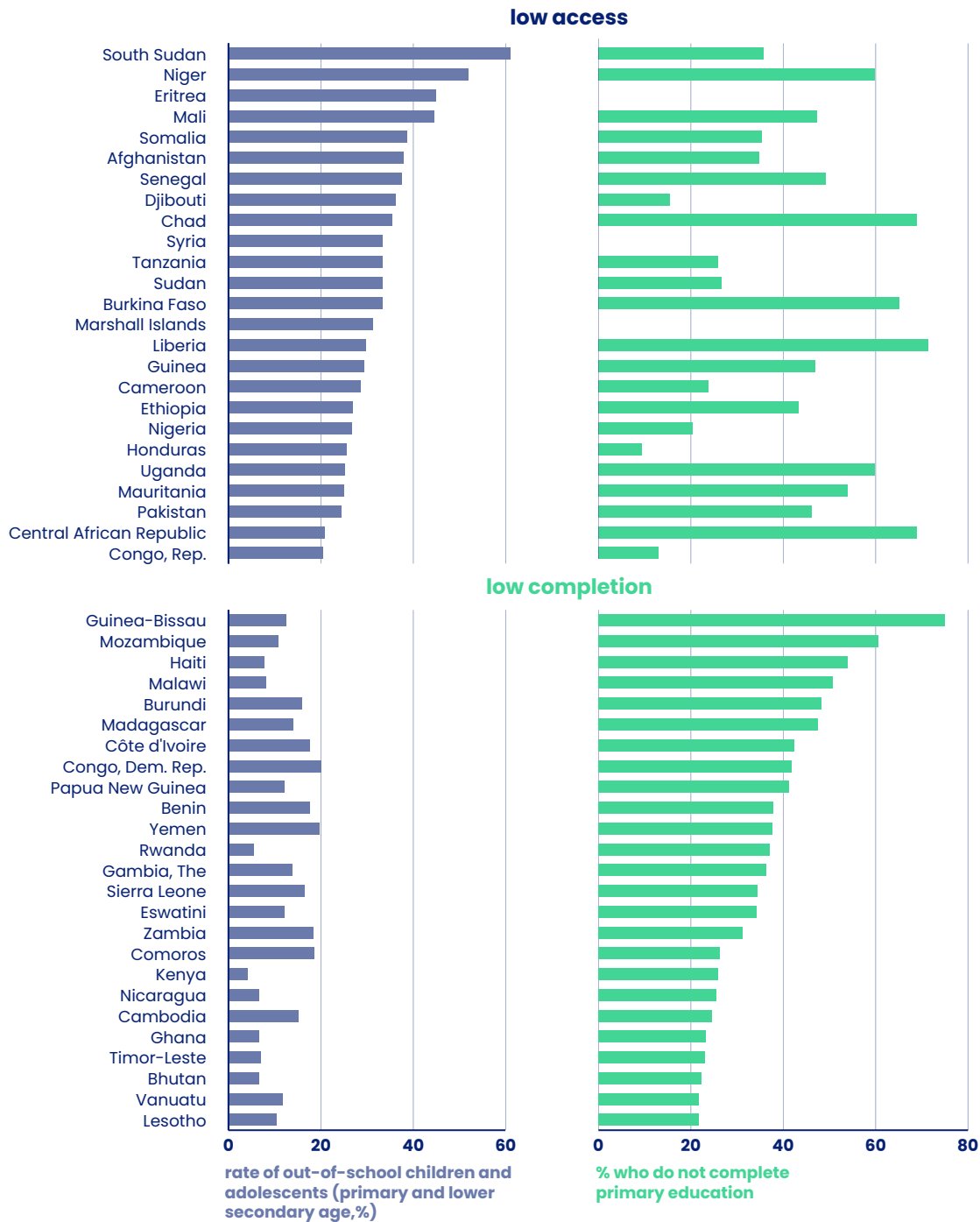
These instruments protect the right to education for marginalized groups, and additional treaties cover the rights of specific groups, including women and girls (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, United Nations 1979), children with disabilities (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations 2006), all races and ethnicities (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, United Nations 1965), and Indigenous peoples (Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, United Nations 2007). International rights instruments also establish the rights of refugee children and international migrants to an education in their host country (United Nations 1951, 1967, 2017).

The rights instruments provide some guidance about how to prioritize competing demands between, for example, primary and secondary education. Ensuring access to primary education is considered a minimum core obligation that countries and their partners should realize immediately. Access to secondary education can be realized progressively, as resources become available; however, this does not mean it can be deferred indefinitely, and countries and their partners are also obliged to commit the maximum available resources to ensure this happens. Countries have committed not to allow discrimination—against girls or women, children with disabilities, or ethnic minorities—at any level of education. The Incheon Declaration (UNESCO et al. 2015) commits countries to provide 12 years of free primary and secondary education and encourages the addition of at least one year of pre-primary education.

Being in school is only one aspect of children being left behind. Many children stay in school for several years yet do not reach even minimum learning standards. In the following sections, this paper outlines the types of policy and program that can improve equity and inclusion in both access and learning, and how they can be integrated into a system transformation approach, and makes some recommendations on how adequate priority can be given to both access and learning.

Figure 1. Many children remain out of school or unable to complete primary education in GPE partner countries

Rate of out-of-school children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary age (left) and proportion of children who do not complete primary school (right), for countries where either is above 20%

Figure 2. Gender gaps remain large in both enrollment and completion

Gender gaps (percentage points) in the rate of out-of-school children and adolescents of primary and lower second-ary age, and in the primary completion rate, in GPE partner countries where 10% or more are out-of-school and/or 90% or less complete primary
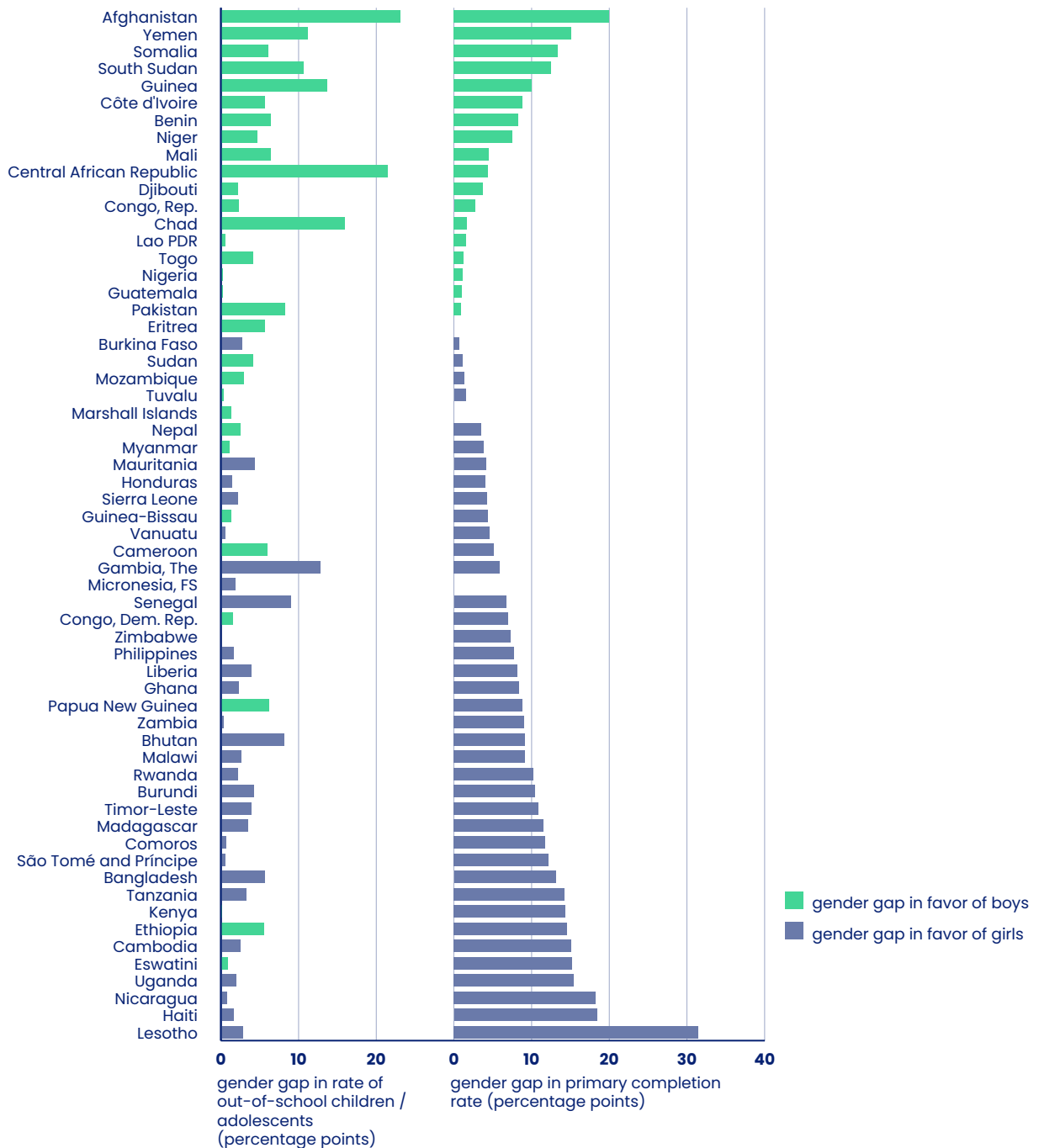
gender gap in rate of out-of-school children / adolescents (percentage points)

gender gap in primary completion rate (percentage points)

gender gap in favor of boys

gender gap in favor of girls

Figure 3. Wealth and gender intersect to compound disadvantage

Proportion of children who do not complete primary school, by gender and wealth (poorest vs. richest quintile)
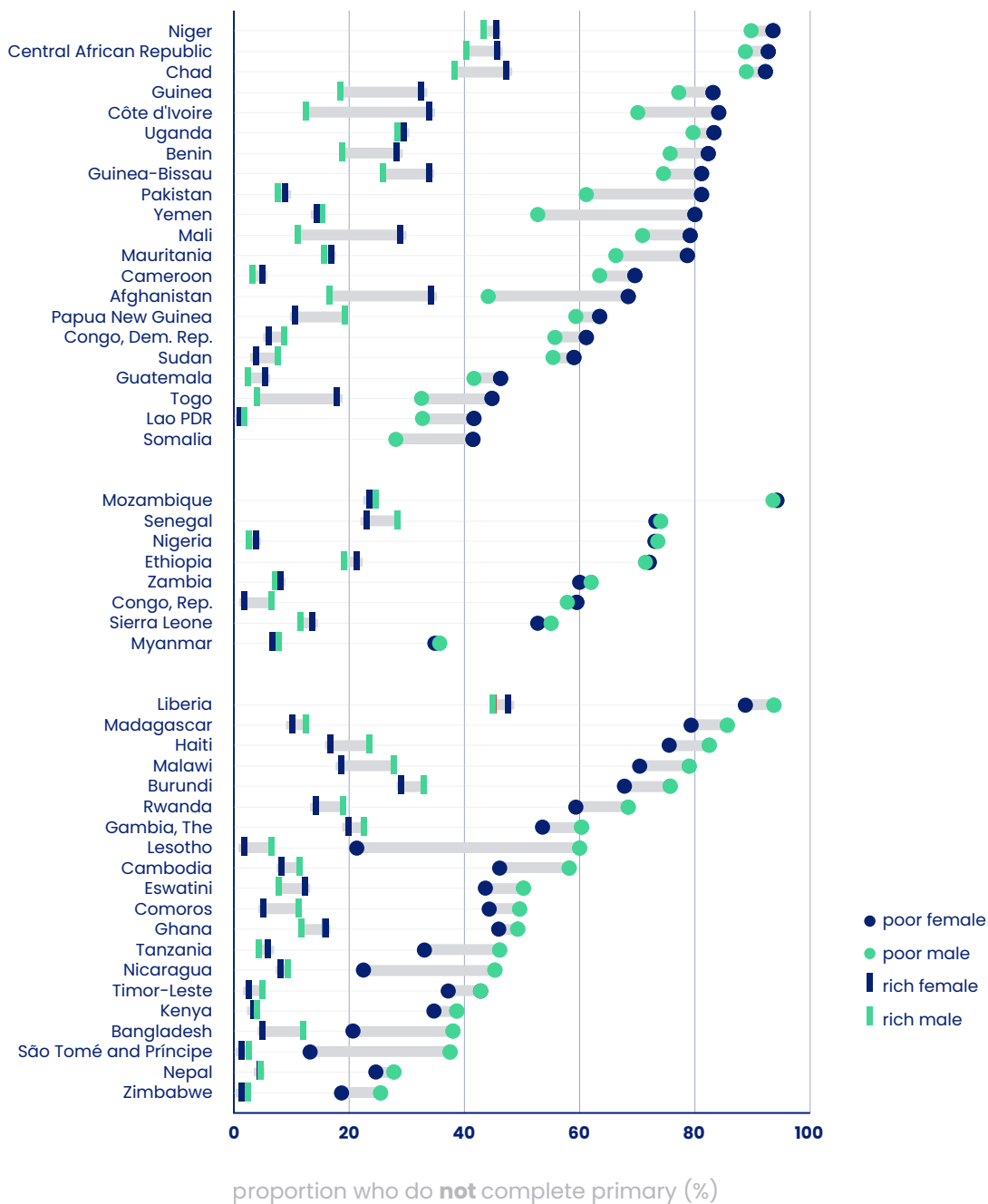
proportion who do **not** complete primary (%)

Note: Data shown are the most recent UIS estimates available for the period 2012–2020. Disaggregated data was not available in the UIS database for Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Djibouti, Madagascar, South Sudan, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The countries shown are those in which the overall completion rate is under 90 percent. The countries are grouped according to gender gap among the poorest quintile: gap in favor of boys at the top; gap smaller than 3 percentage points in the middle; gap in favor of girls at the bottom.

3. POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Approaches addressing equity and inclusion in education can be placed into six broad, overlapping categories: (1) those that deliberately target disadvantaged groups; (2) those that are not targeted but disproportionately benefit disadvantaged groups; (3) policies that allocate more resources to more disadvantaged groups, schools or areas; (4) inclusion of children with disabilities; (5) making the education system inclusive and desegregated for all girls and boys; and (6) improvements in data, monitoring and evidence.

3.1. Targeted Interventions

Progress on equity and inclusion is likely to require a mixture of systemwide policy reform and targeted interventions for marginalized groups (Rose and GPE 2019; Rose and Yorke 2019). Targeted interventions are needed because (a) marginalized groups each face distinct sets of challenges that need to be understood and addressed in programs, and (b) for a given expenditure, more of the marginalized group can in theory be reached with a targeted as opposed to a universal program. However, there are risks associated with targeting. These include the potential to create tensions between groups who are excluded and those who are included; programs becoming instruments for political patronage; the potential for stigma from being included in such programs; administrative costs; and lack of capacity to obtain and analyze the information needed for accurate targeting (Desai 2017; Kidd 2013). Better poverty targeting, for example, does not necessarily translate into more impact on the poorest (Ravallion 2009). Targeted interventions usually target specific named groups, such as poor households or girls in specific districts, but some target according to educational status (for example, out of school, overage, dropout). Interventions targeting out-of-school children commonly include catch-up and alternative learning programs (AfC, CSEA, and Dalan Development Consultants 2022). Systems that track girls and boys at risk of dropout, and hold schools and local and national governments to account for addressing the problems they are facing, could help improve primary completion (UNICEF ECARO 2018; Booth 2020).

Donor-funded targeted interventions are often small-scale and separate from government systems, and so unlikely to have a large impact on equity and inclusion in the country as a whole. They may meet an essential need in the medium term, and they may provide lessons and evidence that can inform system policy in the longer term. But in countries with 20 percent or more children not completing primary school, many such programs are insufficient in scale to resolve exclusion. They will have to be combined with larger-scale action, ultimately with sustainable domestic financing (Lewin 2022).

GPE's Girls' Education Accelerator (GEA) is an example of how targeted funding can be linked to a broader system transformation perspective. GEA grants are made available to countries where girls' education has been identified as a main challenge, for activities targeting girls' education. Rather than standalone projects, however, they are integrated into a wider grant with activities that can sustainably transform the whole education system—and can be used to address factors beyond the education sector, such as gender-based violence and child marriage (see section 4).

3.2. Systemwide Reforms That Reach the Marginalized

Some interventions may not be deliberately targeted toward disadvantaged groups yet benefit disadvantaged groups more than better-off groups, therefore reducing inequalities.

Among the most common pro-equity interventions are those that increase the supply of schools, classrooms and trained teachers. Where there is a large proportion of primary-age children out of school, it is likely that supply constraints are at least part of the problem, and increasing the supply of primary education will make the system as a whole more equitable.

The supply of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is particularly limited in many countries. Increasing access to ECCE has well-documented effects, increasing the likelihood of primary school completion and of achieving basic learning outcomes while in primary school (Earle, Milovantseva, and Heymann 2018).

A second way that interventions can disproportionately benefit disadvantaged groups is by addressing barriers that affect those groups more than other groups, such as costs of schooling or nutrition. Such interventions can be delivered to the entire school-age population, but by focusing on the barriers that are most relevant to the disadvantaged, they make the whole system fairer. Reducing out-of-pocket costs of primary school and ECCE, by removing fees and other hidden costs, in particular, can greatly increase access and equity (Taylor and Spaull 2015; Kremer and Holla 2009).

It remains rare for impact evaluations in education to provide disaggregated impact by wealth, which limits our confidence in knowing which universal education interventions can reduce educational inequalities between rich and poor students. By contrast, impact is usually disaggregated by gender, revealing that general interventions such as cash transfers can have large effects on reducing gender inequalities in education (Evans and Yuan 2019). Gendered norms around child work or spending on education may leave more boys than girls able to attend school in some contexts; cash transfers could blunt the impact of this discrimination.

Many countries have relatively high enrollment rates yet low rates of completion of primary education (see section 2). A common pattern is for children to enter school but repeat grades, becoming increasingly overage for their grade, and ultimately drop out without completing. This is both an equity and an efficiency issue for the school system; reducing grade repetition would free resources that could be used to expand capacity and quality. Grade repetition sometimes creates high pupil-teacher ratios, and produces large costs, with little evidence that it is an appropriate remedial strategy for children who have not reached the expected learning level (Lewin 2022). Children from marginalized backgrounds are the most likely to be adversely affected by grade repetition policies. Changes to policy that make grade promotion automatic, and reforms to high-stakes examinations, may improve the flow of children through the grades and completion rates. In some cases, however, a lack of capacity in secondary schools is the real barrier for ensuring all children complete primary; children are held back because there are no places for them in the secondary system. In these cases, reforms to examinations or grade repetition will have limited effects in the long run unless accompanied by expansion of secondary school places.

Particularly when combined with grade repetition, late enrollment increases the proportion of children who are overage for their grade, which is a risk factor for dropout and poorer learning outcomes. Addressing the gender norms and other barriers that prevent parents from enrolling their young children at the expected age could address these. Pre-primary and other early childhood provision can also improve on-time enrollment as well as learners' preparedness for school, increasing their chances of completing with better learning outcomes (Earle, Milovantseva, and Heymann 2018).

As the challenges facing disadvantaged groups in completing education are often social, cultural and economic in origin, pro-equity interventions are often outside of the education sector, including in social

protection, nutrition, health, child labor and addressing social norms and stigma. Advocacy campaigns are a common response to perceived low demand for education among some communities, and specific demand-side interventions such as provision of role models from similar backgrounds and provision of information on returns to education have been found to increase school participation (Jensen 2010; Kremer and Holla 2009; Masino and Niño-Zarazúa 2015; Nguyen 2008).

By contrast, some interventions can have unanticipated negative effects on equity (see section 5.3). A balanced approach carefully considers how such interventions can be inclusive of the worse-off and perhaps combined with other interventions to offset any unintended unequalizing effects.

3.3. Changes in Resource Allocation

How governments allocate resources—funding, teachers and other staff, learning materials—can favor disadvantaged groups, but in most cases it instead favors the already well-off. As described below (section 5.4), the allocation of funding to different levels of education is perhaps the most important policy instrument affecting which groups benefit most from education spending. In most developing countries, overall education spending is pro-rich as a result of this allocation (Ilie and Rose 2018; UNICEF 2015).

The allocation of funds between states, provinces, districts and schools is also important. In countries with decentralized administration of education funding, governments can ensure that poorer or otherwise more disadvantaged areas receive higher funding allocations, but they rarely do so (UNICEF 2015). Funding formulas for schools can also take into account the socioeconomic status of the learners, and an assessment of additional needs due to disability (Chimier and Harang 2018; Myers 2016). Pupil-teacher ratios often vary greatly between schools, often to the advantage of richer and urban areas, and teacher allocation mechanisms could explicitly seek to allocate more teachers to schools or areas that currently have too few teachers.

3.4. Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

Making education inclusive of boys and girls with disabilities is a necessary step for ensuring that system change leaves no one behind—and it is a key commitment across the partnership. Nearly all GPE partner countries have ratified or acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which calls for inclusive, quality, and free primary and secondary education for children with disabilities, on an equal basis with others in their community. This rights instrument and subsequent agreements commit countries to "mainstreaming" children with disabilities, meaning that the children should be able to "attend the local neighborhood school, that is the school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability" (UNESCO and Spain, MOES 1994; Grimes, Stevens, and Kumar 2015). Yet many children with disabilities remain either excluded altogether or educated in separate, segregated environments, and girls with disabilities are often the most disadvantaged (UNGEI and Leonard Cheshire 2021).

A "twin-track" approach is often identified (Myers 2016; Croft 2010; Grimes, Stevens, and Kumar 2015) as an appropriate route to providing inclusive education for learners with disabilities. The first track involves systemwide reforms: making the system as a whole more inclusive and less segregated through changes in policy, practices and attitudes, and through reforming pedagogy and making the curriculum more accessible. The second track involves targeted interventions: specialized support for learners who have additional needs—for example, by giving assistive devices to individuals.

Accepting that systemwide change is required in an inclusive approach means that it can include a very wide range of reforms. Commonly, these would include changes to mainstream teacher training; mechanisms for supporting schools to assist children with specific needs, such as through resource centers or hubs; and reducing discrimination against children with disabilities through advocacy campaigns, training and changes in law. Stigma and misunderstandings about disability need to be tackled at all levels, including policy makers, teachers and parents. Building blocks of inclusive edu-

cation also include reviewing materials, equipment, curricula, assessments and school infrastructure to identify and remove barriers to the participation and learning of all children (Grimes, Stevens, and Kumar 2015, 15).

In many cases, governments instead ring-fence small amounts of money for "special" education with little attention to systemwide reform (Myers 2016). Aid-financed programs sometimes develop separate "inclusion" workstreams without considering the inclusiveness of activities in other areas. Better policy for inclusive education is likely to involve taking into account the rights of people with disabilities to be included in society, the views and preferences of different groups of people with disabilities, and what environment children with disabilities can best learn in.

3.5. Inclusion of *All* Children

Inclusive education is often used to refer primarily to children with disabilities, but inclusive approaches can be applied equally to all groups of children, and especially for marginalized and historically disadvantaged groups. This means making education welcoming, participatory and achievement oriented for all students; identifying and removing barriers that exclude learners within each context; and addressing the needs of all girls and boys, irrespective of their range of abilities (GPE 2018). As systems approach universal enrollment, they will need to accommodate a wider range of learners from different backgrounds. Inclusive education also means reducing the segregation of learners from different backgrounds into separate classes or schools, which risks widening inequalities and social distance (see for example, OECD 2012; Day Ashley et al. 2014; Aslam 2009).

Policies relevant to the inclusion of all children include nondiscrimination and inclusivity in teacher training; working on social norms to address stigma and discrimination at community, school and government levels; a language policy that promotes learning in the mother tongue, at least in the early years; and curriculum and materials that represent different groups equally and avoid stereotypes. Protecting boys and girls from violence in and around schools is important both as an end in itself—as one aspect of schools being inclusive environments—and because violence is detrimental to a wide range of outcomes, hindering learning and increasing the likelihood of dropout (Kangas et al. 2019).

Inflexible school timetables and term times often create barriers for regular attendance among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Flexible learning arrangements can dramatically reduce dropout (Jukes, Jere, and Pridmore 2014). Boys and girls from agricultural and pastoralist communities may require seasonally adaptable timetables. Such adaptations are also a key part of the capacity that needs to be built to respond to increasing enrollment of more diverse types of learners. Complementary, non-formal and community-based education often play an important role in reaching underserved populations through a more flexible model, often with quality similar to or better than government schools (DeStefano et al. 2007).

Curricula and pedagogy are similarly critical for schools to be inclusive as they accommodate a wider range of learners. Learning inequalities often result from curricula and textbooks that are highly ambitious in the amount of content to be covered in each grade, combined with pedagogy that focuses on covering all of the content to schedule (Pritchett and Beatty 2012). Children who cannot keep up may be unable to progress to the next grade. Reforms to pedagogy so that it focuses more on children's current level and what can feasibly be achieved, and rationalizing curricula so that they focus on the most important learning outcomes, could help reduce such inequalities, and consequently improve completion as well as learning levels. Multigrade pedagogies and curricula could ease the transition toward a more linear progression of students through education systems (Little 2004; Pridmore 2007), as could embedding better formative assessment into pedagogy and systems for managing learning on schedule (Muskin 2017; OECD 2005).

Policies may also seek to counterbalance potential negative impacts of segregation of students from different backgrounds into different types of school—for example, through incentives to schools to admit disadvantaged students, and by delaying early tracking and selection

into vocational streams (OECD 2012). Entrance to higher stages of education, and to more elite schools, is typically governed by high-stakes examinations (Bashir et al. 2018; Rossiter and Konate 2022). When administered at a young age, these are likely to reinforce already existing inequalities in learning outcomes (and in examination preparation). Some countries have removed high-stakes examinations for entry to lower secondary, but there is currently little research on the effects of this policy.

Refugees, internally displaced persons, international migrants and rural-urban migrants are particularly likely to be excluded (UNESCO 2019). Refugees and unofficial migrants may be considered outside the scope of national education planning and so not even considered in education sector plans or education management information systems (UIS and UNHCR 2021). Separate refugee education may be needed in the short term, but as many refugee crises are protracted, refugees will need to be integrated into national systems in the longer term, and countries should plan for this from the outset (Brugha et al. 2021; Mawhinney, Hafedh, and Warren 2023).

3.6. Data, Monitoring and Evidence

Better data, monitoring and evidence are essential for equity and inclusion. In particular, there is a need for disaggregated quantitative data that can track progress by gender and for different disadvantaged groups; forms of monitoring and evaluation that can show how policy and programs affect different groups; and other research evidence on the challenges facing disadvantaged populations (Rose and GPE 2019). Qualitative evidence—especially using participatory methodologies that can promote the perspectives and voices of marginalized communities, including children themselves—has an important role in understanding the varied needs and challenges affecting these communities. Other interventions in this area that can advance equity and inclusion include decentralization of data systems so that a feedback loop is available at the subnational level, allowing more targeted interventions and adaptive implementation, and co-creating research with policy

makers and marginalized groups themselves, to ensure a common understanding of the issues these groups face. Ensuring that marginalized groups are counted in education management information systems (EMIS) and other data collection is an important step toward their inclusion in the national education system. This is particularly relevant for refugees, who often remain excluded from national systems (Brugha et al. 2021; UIS and UNHCR 2021).

Developing EMIS and collecting data from schools that allow for gender disaggregation is essential; however, data from schools alone are generally insufficient to capture the status of children who are out of school. Nationally representative household surveys that include well-designed questions on disability (Cameron 2022) as well as on gender, wealth, location and other indicators of marginalization are needed. Inclusive learning assessments, enabling the participation of children with disabilities, are also needed to understand inequalities in learning.

As noted below (section 5), data and evidence are central to GPE's operating model, and they are seen as key enabling factors for countries to set about transforming their education systems.

4. SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION THAT LEAVES NO ONE BEHIND

GPE 2025 is GPE's strategic plan for 2021–2025. It is aligned with SDG 4 and describes GPE's mission: to mobilize partnerships and investments that transform education systems in developing countries, leaving no one behind (GPE 2022d). This section explains the system transformation approach and focus on aligning partners around "catalytic" reforms, and how each of the elements in GPE's new operating model work to ensure that no one is left behind. It then considers what types of reform might be able to unblock bottlenecks to more equitable and inclusive systems in which all children can learn. Finally, it considers how reforms focused on learning can be developed within a holistic systems approach so that links between access, equity and learning are understood and educational inequalities are not unintentionally widened.

4.1. The GPE 2025 Operating Model

Education systems are composed of multiple actors and components that must work together to facilitate change. Reforms often fail when actors, actions and resources do not sufficiently align with reform agendas and policies. GPE has adopted a system transformation approach to align forces, strengthen mutual accountability among partners, sharpen the focus of policy dialogue and mobilize partners' collective capabilities in support of partner countries (GPE 2022c). This approach involves the following:

❯ Diagnosing key bottlenecks within the education system that if unblocked can have a transformative effect

❯ Discussing and agreeing on a priority reform that has the potential to catalyze system change

❯ Aligning partners and resources to support the policy reform

❯ Learning and adapting to make sure the intervention bears expected results.

The operating model of GPE 2025 seeks to work with partner countries to identify priority reforms with the potential to transform education systems (GPE 2022c), and around which governments and development partners can align. "Business as usual"—the range of interventions commonly financed with donor support, such as school building and teacher training—is insufficient to bring about sustained and systemwide change.

The emphasis in GPE 2025 on "leaving no one behind" is reflected in each element of GPE's operating model:

(a) Inclusive Policy Dialogue and Prioritization
- **Inclusive and evidence-informed dialogue around policy** is central to the operating model, including through local education groups[4]—collaborative forums led by partner country governments that include donors, civil society, teachers, philanthropy and the private sector. Civil society organizations, in particular, play a key role in defending the interests of marginalized children, youth, women, displaced persons and people with disabilities.

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4. www.globalpartnership.org/content/principles-toward-effective-local-education-groups.

- **Enabling factors screening questionnaire and analysis templates**[5] are designed to facilitate country dialogue around the factors that can enable system transformation. The template prompts countries to consider whether they have in place a legislative framework assuring 12 years of free, quality, public primary and secondary education, without discrimination, and whether they apply this in their planning and policy documents. It also includes questions on plans to address gender disparities and inequalities, and to realize rights; on the availability of statistics disaggregated by gender and disability; and on whether domestic finance is equitable and sufficient, particularly at the primary level, to address barriers to access.

- The **partnership compact**[6] articulates how a partner country intends to work with GPE and other partners around a priority reform with the potential to catalyze systemwide change. The compact sets out how a priority reform fits within a wider vision for system transformation, and it describes a "theory of change" for how goals can be reached. It should describe how the reform—in the context of a comprehensive sector plan or policy framework, and other policies and programs already in place or planned—will address gaps in the right to education, how those currently left behind will benefit, and how the impact on the most marginalized will be monitored. The compact should also be based on a robust gender analysis and evidence, with task teams including gender expertise, and policy dialogue that is inclusive of key actors who can speak to gender and inclusion challenges and solutions.

(b) GPE Financing Instruments

- **System transformation grants**[7] support partner countries to transform their education systems by making focused, evidence-based investments in programs that unblock system bottlenecks. In applying for the grants,[8] countries are asked to project how many boys and girls from several marginalized groups—such as those who were out of school—will benefit. They are also asked to consider how each activity has been designed to be inclusive of children with disabilities.

- **System capacity grants**[9] provide funding for countries to conduct gender-responsive planning and policy development, to mobilize coordinated action and financing, and to strengthen capacity for use of data and evidence. Activities that can be funded include gender analysis, identifying and addressing forms of exclusion, and improving the availability of sex-disaggregated data on the most marginalized children.

- The **Girls' Education Accelerator**[10] provides funding to support gender equality in countries and regions where girls' education has been identified as a main challenge. The countries eligible for the GEA are mostly countries with widespread exclusion and large gender gaps in access disadvantaging girls (see section 1).

- **Accelerated funding**[11] provides flexible support when a crisis emerges or escalates. It aims to support governments and partners in sustaining continuity of the education system, building back better and institutionalizing response capacities, resulting in more effective, responsive and inclusive education systems. The mechanism priori-

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5. www.globalpartnership.org/content/enabling-factors-screening-questionnaire-and-analysis.
6. www.globalpartnership.org/content/partnership-compact-guidelines.
7. www.globalpartnership.org/content/guidelines-system-transformation-grant-draft.
8. www.globalpartnership.org/content/system-transformation-grants-application-template.
9. www.globalpartnership.org/content/guidelines-system-capacity-grant-draft.
10. www.globalpartnership.org/funding/girls-education-accelerator.
11. www.globalpartnership.org/content/guidelines-accelerated-support-emergency-and-early-recovery-situations.

tizes vulnerable populations, including girls, and promotes the inclusion of crisis-affected children into national systems.

- **Strategic capabilities**[12] reinforce ministries' capacity to address education and cross-sectoral challenges, through partnerships with other organizations. Existing strategic capabilities support monitoring, evaluation and learning; climate smart education systems; and education data leadership. Additional strategic capabilities are being piloted on gender equality, school health and nutrition, school safety and education technology.

(c) Learning and Accountability

- **Education Out Loud**[13] supports civil society to be active and influential in shaping education policy to better meet the needs of communities, especially of vulnerable and marginalized populations, including through policy dialogue, monitoring, and promoting transparency and accountability of national educational policy.

- The **Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX)**[14] is a fund dedicated to bridging knowledge gaps that undermine education systems, through exchange of knowledge and applied research projects. KIX has supported several projects relating to gender equality, inclusion, and out-of-school children and youth.

- The GPE 2025 **results framework**[15] monitors a number of indicators relating to equity and inclusion in the new operating model. These include countries' responses to the enabling factors analysis; the proportion of countries where domestic expenditure on education is increasing or is at least 20 percent of total government expenditure; and the numbers of beneficiaries of system transformation grants who are out-of-school children

and other marginalized groups. The framework also tracks the out-of-school rate, disaggregated by sex, socioeconomic status and location; the gross intake ratio to the last grade of primary and lower secondary education, disaggregated by sex; and the proportion of programs meeting objectives relating to access. Wherever applicable, results are disaggregated by gender, and the extent to which countries are planning in monitoring in gender-sensitive ways is also assessed.

As noted in section 2, many of the countries with low access or completion are affected by fragility or conflict, including some that are in crisis situations. GPE's role in crises is to sustain support to the government and partners to plan, respond and recover by promoting alignment and coordination, strengthening capacity, sustaining continuity of education services, and building back better in terms of effective, responsive and inclusive education system delivery. It does this in close partnership with humanitarian actors and coordination mechanisms (GPE 2022f).

These aspects of the GPE operating model are intended to support partner countries in leaving no one behind, without determining the specific content of policy, reforms or activities, which should remain owned and driven by the countries' governments. Box 2 describes how some countries are working on leaving no one behind within the process of working with GPE.

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12. www.globalpartnership.org/content/strategic-capabilities-june-2023.
13. www.educationoutloud.org.
14. www.gpekix.org.
15. www.globalpartnership.org/content/gpe-2025-results-framework.

BOX 2. HOW COUNTRIES WORK ON LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND IN CONJUNCTION WITH GPE'S OPERATING MODEL

Enabling factors analysis in **Nepal** describes how the right to education is enshrined in the country's constitution and education policy. It also noted that the country routinely disaggregates access and learning data by gender, and it is piloting additional questions in its education management information system, which will allow disaggregation of enrollment statistics by disability (ITAP 2022).

In **Cabo Verde**, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been central in pushing the policy environment toward more rights-based policy design and service delivery. Measures to subsidize tuition fees for students with physical or learning disabilities, for example, are a response to the combined efforts of the Federation of Associations of People with Disabilities, teacher organizations and a national CSO coalition. CSOs have successfully lobbied for adjustments to policy through participation in the local education group, and they are now engaged in a variety of partnership arrangements underpinning the government's drive for inclusive education (GPE 2023a; Lopes 2021).

Uganda's partnership compact focuses on "quality foundations for learning" as the priority reform to transform the country's education system. The compact recognizes that persistent issues with enrollment and completion are among the barriers to all children learning. The planned reform will therefore focus on both access and quality of primary education, including for vulnerable groups such as girls, refugees, learners with disabilities and learners from socioeconomically marginalized areas (Uganda, MoES 2022).

In **Tajikistan**, the government plans to use a system capacity grant to address evidence gaps including on out-of-school children, attendance, adequacy and quality of school infrastructure, and systematic collection of gender- and disability-disaggregated statistics (Tajikistan, MoES 2022).

The system transformation grant approved in 2023 for **Tanzania (Mainland)** will focus on improving student-based learning while ensuring gender equality and inclusion. The grant will support a national program to make primary schools more inclusive, as set out in the country's inclusive education strategy, and disability inclusion is also being advanced within each of the program's other components (Tanzania, MEST 2023).

In **Ethiopia**, the government is using GPE funds to improve equitable access, including for refugees, and to support the extension of key services to refugee schools, with the long-term goal of integrating refugee education into the national system, serving both refugee and host communities in the same schools (GPE 2022a).

In **Afghanistan**, GPE works closely with Education Cannot Wait to promote alignment with the country's multiyear resilience program and the transitional framework that was developed to guide education support following the ouster of the elected government in 2021. Preventing the education system from collapsing and safeguarding the right to education for all Afghan children—particularly girls, who have been excluded from secondary school—is a priority for all partners. Recent GPE grants have focused on community-based education as a means to keep children in school (GPE 2023c).

4.2. Unblocking Bottlenecks to a More Equitable and Inclusive Education System

The priority reform that countries articulate in their GPE partnership compact should be one that has the potential to catalyze systemwide change (GPE 2023b). Countries then develop "focused, evidence-based investments in programs that can unblock system bottlenecks" in line with that reform (GPE 2022e, 3).

Which approaches to improving equity and inclusion in education are likely to be "catalytic"—reforms that can be undertaken with additional grant aid, in a relatively short period of time, yet unblock bottlenecks to wider system transformation? Specifically, which have the potential to move toward systems that ensure full inclusion of all girls and boys in progress toward better learning outcomes?

Targeted interventions focused on disadvantaged children, as noted in section 3, may fulfill an important immediate need, but they are often insufficient in scale or sustainability to play this catalytic role in bringing longer term change to the whole system. That said, they may be important in gathering evidence on the specific needs of disadvantaged groups in each context, and the types of interventions that can work at different scales to include them. Pilots of innovative approaches targeting marginalized groups, combined with well-designed gender-sensitive evaluations and research, can play a catalytic role by helping governments understand what will work, at scale, in specific contexts.

Similarly, donor-financed programs may need to include separate actions and indicators focused on inclusion—of girls, children with disabilities or other marginalized groups. However, these will be insufficient by themselves to achieve meaningful inclusion. To do so, programs also need to consider the needs of these groups within "mainstream" activities such as building infrastructure, training teachers, reforming curricula and addressing violence. The twin-track approach advocated as part of disability inclusion (section 3.4)—combining systemwide reforms with targeted interventions to support those with specific needs or circumstances—is relevant to educational inclusion more broadly.

When targeted interventions are used, they are likely to have larger impact as part of a large-scale, sustained and adaptable system—for example, a system of early childhood identification and assessment of disabilities through which support plans can be created, or an early warning system to reduce dropout (section 3.1)—rather than through ad hoc projects targeting specific groups. Such systems are part of building capacity to manage challenges resulting from increased and more diverse enrollment, a theme that is explored further in section 5.2. The types of reform that are appropriate depend on context and have to be designed to take account of intersectional inequalities and the different barriers affecting the most marginalized groups.

For countries that have low completion rates, systemwide reforms that improve efficiency and the flow of learners through the system are likely to be important. As set out in section 3, these can include policies around grade repetition and high-stakes examinations, reforms to pedagogy and curricula so that children are not left behind in learning, ensuring children enroll in school at an appropriate age and ready to learn, and flexibility and adaptation to children's different needs and circumstances. Reforms also need to take account of social norms, in relation to gender and discrimination or stigma against marginalized groups, and which impede progress toward more equitable and inclusive policy implementation. Social norms need to be addressed at all levels, including policy makers, schools, teachers, communities, parents and children themselves.

4.3. Linking Access, Equity and Learning through a Systems Lens

In many GPE partner countries, large numbers of children who complete primary education still do not acquire basic learning outcomes. Understandably, such countries may choose to prioritize reforms relating to learning and quality of education. But if such reforms focus only on children who are in school, there is a risk

of children who are out of school being left even further behind, and widening educational inequalities. How can this risk be managed and offset?

The answer lies in taking a holistic systems approach that understands the links between access, equity and learning, and that is driven by an inclusive policy dialogue in which the voices of different groups, including the most marginalized, are heard. Most GPE partner countries already have extensive policies and programs—funded both with domestic and donor financing—that attempt to address access, completion and equity. New reforms focused chiefly on quality of learning within schools may be able to build on these so that both access and learning are addressed. There are three prerequisites for this to work in practice.

First, there needs to be a *clearly articulated vision and theory of change*, setting out how a new reform can complement existing policy and programs to transform the education system in a way that leaves no one behind.

The articulation of this wider vision and theory of change is important for actors to understand whether the proposed reforms will work in a way that leaves no one behind. For example, a country that is already building large numbers of schools, removing school fees and supporting households with other costs of education might seek GPE funding for a reform focused on curriculum or pedagogy. This would help ensure that as the system reaches universal access, learning improves too. But the assumptions behind this theory of change need to be made explicit as part of the policy dialogue: Are the activities on access and completion sufficient in scale and ambition? Do they address real barriers? Have the equity effects of the learning reform been considered? Are the activities aligned with the countries' human rights and political commitments?

The theory of change can also consider how reforms to access and learning complement each other, recognizing that they are in any case closely interconnected issues. Learning-focused interventions may help address completion; better learning outcomes can

reduce the pattern in which children repeat grades until they are overage, and ultimately drop out because they are considered too old to continue their education (Kaffenberger, Sobol, and Spindelman 2021).

In addition, some types of reform can advance both learning and access. School feeding, for example, has been shown to improve learning outcomes both through encouraging students to attend school and through direct effects on cognition and health (Aurino et al. 2019, 2023; Bedasso 2022). Reforms that improve enrollment at an appropriate age and the flow of learners through the grades (see section 3) have the potential to improve both learning and completion—for example, through improvements to curriculum and assessment.

The second prerequisite is that the existing policies are *sufficient in scale and address the real barriers* that keep marginalized boys and girls from completing education. In countries with severe access or completion problems, this means designing systemwide reform based on evidence about the scale of exclusion. A holistic and gender-sensitive framework needs to be applied in order to analyze all the barriers that keep children out of school in a specific context (UIS and UNICEF 2015). However, countries and their partners also need to arrive at a shared understanding, through inclusive policy dialogue, of the barriers that have the most impact so that efforts can be focused on the most important ones. In countries with a large number of out-of-school children, the supply of schooling—the availability of a place in a functioning school within a reasonable distance of each school-age child—and the costs of education borne by households will likely be among the key bottlenecks.

Targeted interventions focused on the most marginalized groups may be needed, but in countries with low access, they will not be sufficient in themselves. In countries where the population of school-age children continues to grow, school places and the supply of qualified teachers will also need to expand rapidly. If these policies are not implemented in countries where large numbers do not access or complete primary school, then these children will not benefit from new reforms focused on learning quality.

A third prerequisite for both access and learning to be addressed is that sufficient domestic financing needs to be allocated to ensure the sustainable implementation of existing policies around access and completion (Lewin 2020, 2022). This also reflects countries' commitments under rights instruments to making the maximum available resources, including both domestic and international resources, to facilitate the progressive realization of the right to education (section 2).

Maintaining universal access even at the primary level, at reasonable pupil-teacher and pupil-classroom ratios, will involve increases in domestic resources in many countries, and it cannot be achieved only through grant aid. Grant aid needs to shift toward catalytic support for system-level change that can be sustained from domestic resources (Lewin 2022). As the next section explores, one source of more resources for basic education may be the redistribution of financing that currently goes toward higher levels of education.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In countries where large numbers of children are out of school, or not completing even primary education, policies and programs that focus on school-going learners are likely to leave the former groups of children behind unless steps are taken to improve access at the same time. Educational inequalities will be widened by such policies because better-off groups benefit while the most disadvantaged—those currently not in school—do not. Worse, some approaches focusing on learning outcomes can have unintended consequences that worsen exclusion.

As the previous section has argued, these issues can be addressed through applying a systems approach that considers the links between access, attainment, equity, gender equality and learning. In countries affected by crises, this systems approach has to be applied as part of a "humanitarian-development nexus" that aligns humanitarian resources with long-term development objectives (UIS and UNHCR 2021; Holland et al. 2022; GPE 2022f).

More specifically, this section argues that the systems approach needs to align actors around the common goal of *all children learning, with no one left behind*. This means giving adequate priority to completion of basic education, especially in countries with low access or completion; adapting the education system to the needs of all children; focusing on all children learning, not just those currently in school; and focusing public resources where they are most needed. The following subsections consider each of these four recommendations.

5.1. Give Sufficient Priority to Completion of Basic Education

It is now widely recognized that focusing solely on access to school is not enough to ensure that children learn while they are there. This understanding is reflected in the SDGs, which measure the proportion of students reaching minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, as well as out-of-school children rates and completion rates, and in the GPE 2025 strategy, which argues for transformation of education systems so that all children can learn (UN General Assembly 2023).

Some sources argue that near-universal access to education has been achieved, at least in primary education, because global statistics are dominated by large countries such as China and India, which have made great progress in enrollment. However, as noted in section 2, it is not true for all GPE partner countries, which include many countries with rates of out-of-school children above 20 percent.

It is also sometimes argued that the drive to universal access—central to the Millennium Development Goal on education and the widespread abolition of primary school fees in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere—contributed to a worsening in quality and the current "learning crisis" (Bennell 2021), particularly where the increase in enrollment was not matched by increased funding and teachers. Profiles of learning by age have sometimes remained flat or even worsened as enrollment increased (Pritchett, Newman, and Silberstein

2022). When countries made primary education free, they do not appear to have anticipated or planned for the pattern that emerged of over-enrollment in early grades followed by repetition and dropout in later grades (Lewin 2022).

However, the evidence that widening access itself has led to worsening learning outcomes remains limited (Crawfurd and Ali 2022). Even when pupil-teacher ratios worsen and learning outcomes decline among *school-going* children, learning can increase among the population as a whole, simply because more children are in school than before. This appears to have been the case, for example, following the removal of fees in East and southern Africa (Taylor and Spaull 2015). Low learning outcomes remain a serious problem in low-income countries, but in many cases, it is a yearslong problem that predates expansions in access (UNESCO 2017).

Moreover, the focus on enrollment rates (or the out-of-school children rate) can obscure that many children are not completing primary education. High enrollment but low completion indicates that children are entering school at approximately the expected age but may attend erratically, repeat grades, and ultimately drop out without having completed a full cycle. Inequalities in completion are often large. In countries such as Afghanistan and Yemen, much fewer girls than boys complete school, while in Lesotho and Haiti, for example, the gender gap is in favor of girls (figure 2). In several partner countries, hardly any boys or girls from poor households complete primary school (figure 3).

The need to focus on *all children learning* as the end goal is essential. However, to do this, many GPE partner countries will need to undertake activities on *both* access and quality of learning. In particular, the countries with large numbers of children out of school (section 2) will need to undertake significant efforts to ensure that all children have a primary school within reach, and that fees and other costs of schooling are eliminated. Once achieved, careful analysis of any remaining barriers is needed in order to remove these. School feeding, cash transfers, addressing social norms and improving safety in schools (particularly in con-

flict-affected areas) are some of the interventions that are likely to be needed (UIS and UNICEF 2015).

Most GPE partner countries have been undertaking such activities for many years, with both domestic and donor (including GPE) financing. For example, a review of education sector plans of countries with active GPE grants in 2018 found that nearly all included activities on building or maintaining schools, and the vast majority of these were partly funded by GPE grants. Even before the GEA (see section 4.1), many GPE grants gave targeted support to girls from marginalized communities. In Nigeria, GPE supported a project that gave scholarships to girls from low-income families to attend integrated religious schools (GPE 2022b). Nearly all countries have abolished fees for primary education, and only 24 countries in the world now charge fees for lower secondary education (Crawfurd and Ali 2022). Around 18 percent of children in low-income countries receive school meals (World Food Programme 2022).

Progress on access and completion has nonetheless been insufficient, especially when considered in relation to ambitious goals such as the SDGs. In some cases, the task has been made more difficult by continued rapid increases in the school-age population. Ongoing attention to access will be needed, and development partners will need to continue supporting this.

5.2. Adapt the Education System to Include and Meet the Needs of All Boys and Girls

As section 3 explained, when school systems expand toward universal enrollment, they increasingly draw in learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who in previous generations would have been left out. The new cohorts of learners are more equally divided by gender, and they include more children from poor families, whose parents did not themselves go to school, and who live in challenging environments. Children with disabilities will increasingly be integrated into mainstream schools. This shift—from an elite to a universal system—requires fundamental changes in how schools operate and how teachers work.

In many countries, schools' and teachers' attitudes about disadvantaged students, and their ability to respond to their specific needs and their current level of learning, are among the most important obstacles to all children learning (Sabarwal, Abu-Jawdeh, and Kapoor 2022; Banerjee et al. 2016). But this ability will become even more important as the range of learners from different backgrounds, and with different types of need, widens. Gender-sensitive and inclusive pedagogies, and work around social norms, discrimination and stigma, will be needed to make schools welcoming for all students and to change the attitudes of teachers and officials. Marginalized learners are at most risk from violence, including school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), and making schools safe to learn in will be an essential part of this transformation.

Other reforms that may be relevant to making schools accommodate all learners include flexibility in term times and school timetables; school feeding; availability of safe and accessible water and sanitation facilities; language of instruction policy; curricula that represent different groups equally; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that accommodate all learners; avoiding segregation of students into different types of school; and inclusion of refugees in national systems (section 3).

5.3. Focus on All Children Learning—Not Just Those Who Are in School

Instead of seeing access and learning as competing goals, they can be seen as contributing to a single goal of *all children learning, with no one left behind*. This type of thinking underlies measurement efforts such as the World Bank's learning poverty indicator, which combines the share of children in schools who have not achieved minimum reading proficiency and the share of children who are out of school (World Bank 2019).

In practice, it is common for policy and programs that aim to increase learning outcomes to end up focusing exclusively on children who are currently in formal schools, even in contexts where many are not. For

example, local government or schools may be incentivized with additional funding in return for increasing the percentage of students who achieve a set learning outcome benchmark. This type of incentive has sometimes been associated with increased exclusions of children seen as less likely to perform well (Graham et al. 2019; Holden and Patch 2017).

Ensuring that all girls and boys in a community access the school—including those from the poorest households, those from marginalized groups and those with special educational needs—is extremely difficult for resource-constrained schools and local governments. Unintentionally providing incentives *not to* include such children carries a real risk of setting back progress and leaving more children behind. Such consequences can be avoided, for example, by ensuring that learning levels among the population as a whole are considered in monitoring and accountability mechanisms, or by tracking exclusions and holding schools to account for them, or by tracking both school attendance and learning outcomes.

The use of learning benchmarks that each student either achieves or does not carries further risks when the benchmarks are incorporated into monitoring, accountability and funding mechanisms. These incentivize schools and governments to focus resources on students who are just below the benchmark, because they will be able to show the greatest progress in the short term by bringing these students just above it. Learning inequalities, and even the average learning level, may actually be worsened by the sole use of such benchmarks (UIS et al. 2018). Measures such as learning poverty severity can help understand the needs of children below the lowest benchmark (World Bank et al. 2022), although some international assessments are set at too difficult a level to be able to differentiate the lowest performing learners (Gustafsson and Barakat 2023).

Any intervention improving learning outcomes has the potential to widen gaps—most obviously, between those who are in school and those who never enroll, but also between learners who are struggling to begin with and those who are doing well. For example, textbook distribution has been found in some contexts only to increase

performance among the strongest, and often better-off, students (Glewwe, Kremer, and Moulin 2009). Learning interventions are often piloted in better-off areas, where capacity is already stronger. To leave no one behind, interventions focused on learning will need to plan for reaching all boys and girls, including those currently out of school and those at risk of dropping out.

As argued in section 5.2, schools and education systems will need to change the way they work and teach when enrollment expands to include the most disadvantaged. Careful consideration is needed of how the effects of an intervention may vary between groups and regions, worsening or closing inequalities in learning, and whether a learning intervention that is effective at 80 percent enrollment, for example, will remain so at 100 percent enrollment. Both possible equity effects and possible unintended consequences of the program need to be identified and monitored.

5.4. Focus Public Resources Where They Are Most Needed

To leave no one behind in contexts where funding and other public resources are limited, it is important to focus these resources on the most disadvantaged, who are left behind because of poverty, disability or other forms of marginalization, and are least able to pay for education themselves. This approach to financing decisions has been called "progressive universalism" (Rose and GPE 2019, Education Commission 2016).

Progressive universalism typically involves focusing public resources on the lowest levels of the education ladder—early childhood and primary school—because these are where the poorest and most disadvantaged are concentrated. Making primary education free of fees—as nearly all countries have done (section 5.1)—was an important first step toward this aim, yet it has been insufficient to ensure that all children complete primary, let alone achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. Unofficial fees and other costs continue to impose a financial barrier for many families.

In countries where many do not complete primary school, the most disadvantaged children will not be able to enter secondary education even if it is made free and other barriers are removed simply because they have not completed primary. Therefore, public resources spent on secondary education tend to benefit richer groups and not the most disadvantaged. Spending on tertiary education is even more disproportionately beneficial to better-off groups. Investment in early childhood and primary education has the most potential to reach the poorest.

Proponents of progressive universalism therefore argue for *targeted* spending on secondary and higher education—for example, in the form of stipends for disadvantaged groups—rather than immediately making it universally free in the lowest resource contexts. Arguably, this approach is consistent with rights frameworks that emphasize the immediate obligation for states to provide free primary education, while secondary education can be introduced progressively, as resources become available. A strong focus on achieving universal primary schooling before making higher levels free can, in principle, be combined with targeted funding for disadvantaged groups at higher levels of the education system so that children from these groups are still able to progress through the system (Rose and GPE 2019). On the other hand, it is more difficult to reconcile with the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action and the SDGs, which commit countries to providing 12 years of free and publicly funded primary and secondary education by 2030.

There are a number of arguments against focusing resources solely on primary education. First, the finding that spending on secondary education predominantly reaches richer groups is based on a "static" analysis of the children who are currently enrolled in each level. But the main benefit of free secondary education is that more children, including those from poorer backgrounds, will enroll in secondary (Crawfurd and Ali 2022). The weight of this argument depends on how many children will enroll in response to the fee removal. For example, making upper secondary education free is unlikely to attract many of the children who are currently not completing even primary education. Children might

be more motivated to complete primary school if their parents know that secondary school is free—as reported in Tanzania (Sandholtz 2021, cited in Crawfurd and Ali 2022)—but the scale of such spillover effects would have to be large to radically alter the composition of upper secondary students. The argument is perhaps more persuasive for lower secondary education, and where inequalities in primary completion are relatively muted.

An additional argument for secondary as well as primary education to be made free is that it is a powerful political commitment, signaling the will to support education, to increase overall funding and to remove the unfair barriers to access and learning that affect disadvantaged groups. Countries have committed to achieving this goal by 2030 as part of the SDGs, and in some countries fee removal has been an electoral pledge. Even if the most disadvantaged children do not currently benefit from secondary fee removal, they may at a later stage. GPE partner countries are likely to continue removing secondary school fees. Development partners including GPE can perhaps best support equity in these countries by focusing on complementary activities that remove other barriers to completing primary education, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged.

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