



# SDG 4

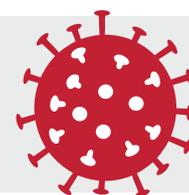
## QUALITY EDUCATION

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Arab region was facing a learning crisis. Despite trends towards increased investment and enrolment, and progress in school access and reducing gender gaps, education is falling short of its transformative potential in the Arab region. Long-standing challenges, including the continued use of outdated teaching and learning methods, variable levels of education quality, and inequitable access and infrastructure, continue to hamper progress in Arab countries.

To harness the transformative potential of education articulated in SDG 4, the region must re-envision education as a societal project aimed at producing critical thinkers, innovators and engaged citizens. This new vision is critical to achieving the SDGs, disseminating values of equality, justice and peace, and enhancing the employability of young people. Although Arab Governments have adapted to the COVID-19 crisis by adopting new education strategies meant to minimize disruptions to schooling, millions of learners were not equipped to engage with new learning modalities, resulting in learning losses and the risk of deepening inequalities in the long term.

## Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 4 in the Arab region



The COVID-19 crisis has further strained the Arab region's efforts to achieve SDG 4 by exacerbating challenges such as learning poverty,<sup>1</sup> uneven quality of education, unequal access to schooling, and high levels of children and young people not attending school.

**Many students struggled to continue their studies amid school closures. Approximately 40 per cent of students in the region were unable to participate in distance education programmes in 2020.**<sup>2</sup> School closures occurred in every Arab country, impacting an estimated 110 million learners.<sup>3</sup> As education systems adopted distance learning, many households lacked the necessary assets and access to infrastructure needed to allow students to effectively engage with home-based studies, such as computers and the Internet. Other obstacles to effective distance learning included inadequate parental support, unprepared teaching staff and the unavailability of coursework for specific grade levels. As a result, some 37 million students in the region were not reached by any remote learning initiative,<sup>4</sup> with those in rural areas, from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, or with disabilities

facing heightened risks of exclusion. These challenges were further amplified in humanitarian contexts, where education systems were already suffering the effects of conflict, displacement, poverty, social marginalization and economic crisis. Even before the pandemic, these factors kept an estimated 15 million children from attending school.<sup>5</sup>

**An estimated 1.31 million children were at risk of dropping out of school as a result of the crisis in 2020.**<sup>6</sup> Prior to the pandemic, enrolment rates in the region were climbing, and gender gaps were shrinking. Between 2000 and 2019, gross primary school enrolment grew from 88.7 to 96.1 per cent, while gross secondary education enrolment increased from 60.1 to 72.4 per cent, with the gender gaps for both levels falling by more than 50 per cent during this period. Enrolment in non-compulsory levels of education, however, lagged behind, with a gross enrolment in pre-primary education of only 28 per cent in 2020.<sup>7</sup> Much of this progress is expected to be lost as a result of the pandemic, as the disconnection of vulnerable children from education systems, deepening poverty and

1 Learning poverty is defined by UNESCO as the percentage of 10-year-old children who cannot read and understand a simple story.

2 UNICEF, COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? 2020. The referenced study uses a definition of the Arab region comprising Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

3 UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, COVID-19 learning losses: Rebuilding quality learning for all in MENA, 2021. This study uses the same definition of the Arab region set out in footnote 2.

4 UNICEF, COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? 2020.

5 UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, COVID-19 learning losses: Rebuilding quality learning for all in MENA, 2021.

6 UNESCO, COVID-19 education response: How many students are at risk of not returning to school? 2020. This study uses the same definition of the Arab region set out in footnote 2.

7 World Bank Open Data reporting UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicators for school enrolment, primary (gross percentage), school enrolment, secondary (gross percentage), school enrolment, pre-primary (gross percentage), and gender-disaggregated figures for the Arab region.

negative coping strategies, such as putting out-of-school children to work or forcing them to marry early, make it unlikely for many children to return to school.<sup>8</sup>

**The pandemic deepened the region's deficits in educational attainment.** Before COVID-19 shocked the region's education systems, an estimated 59 per cent of 10-year-old children in the region were not able to read and understand simple texts, with boys at a higher risk of learning deprivation.<sup>9</sup> By age 15, 60 per cent of students in the region fell short of reaching international benchmarks for reading proficiency. A simulation exercise of potential learning losses in the region found that owing to the pandemic, age 10 learning poverty could increase from 60 to 70 per cent in the absence of effective interventions, and that the regional learning-adjusted life-time years of schooling could decline from 7 to 6 years.<sup>10</sup>

**COVID-19 exposed weaknesses in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions and systems in the Arab region and around the world.** Prior to the crisis, TVET providers in most countries had little experience in offering remote learning opportunities. In the face of suspensions of in-person instruction, many institutions struggled to identify solutions to facilitate the switch to distance education and to provide support for students and teachers. As a result, many students had their training interrupted, with hands-on learning opportunities often rendered unavailable during lockdown periods.<sup>11</sup>

**The impact of COVID-19 on higher education enrolment varied by country and income level.** Although teaching and research activities were temporarily suspended in most countries, institutions that were able to adapt hybrid and online learning were more likely to maintain student enrolment at previous levels. For many students, the pandemic complicated the transition from higher education to the labour market, as employers placed even more emphasis on the technology skills of their applicants.<sup>12</sup>

**The crisis has deeply affected households, teachers and students, with interlinked socioeconomic consequences impacting other SDGs.** In response to the COVID-19 crisis, many families were forced to adopt adverse coping strategies, such as reduced food consumption and dietary diversity, and decreased spending on education.<sup>13</sup> School closures eliminated access to meal programmes for many children in the region, resulting in nutrition losses and economic strains on low-income households, with progress implications for SDGs 1, 2 and 8.<sup>14</sup> The crisis has had negative psychological impacts on teachers, families and students, who have faced economic stress, concerns over personal safety and wellness, and difficulties adapting to remote education. With limited resources dedicated to counselling and mental health services, these issues directly challenge the region's progress on SDG 3. Furthermore, school closures can create additional care burdens that most often fall on women, with implications for SDG 5.<sup>15</sup>



8 UNESCO, COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school? 2020.

9 UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, COVID-19 learning losses: Rebuilding Quality learning for all in MENA, 2021.

10 Ibid.

11 ILO, Skills development in the time of COVID-19: Taking stock of the initial responses in technical and vocational education and training, 2021.

12 UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, COVID-19 learning losses: Rebuilding quality learning for all in MENA, 2021.

13 UNICEF, The impact of COVID-19 on children in the Middle East and North Africa, 2020.

14 World Food Programme, State of school feeding worldwide, 2020.

15 United Nations, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on the Arab region – an opportunity to build back better, 2020.



**1. Many Arab countries sought to mitigate the impact of school closures by expanding the use of educational technology to facilitate online and hybrid learning.** Every Arab country ordered school closures for a period of time, averaging 24.5 weeks or nearly two-thirds of an academic year.<sup>16</sup> In an effort to minimize disruptions to learning, nearly all Arab countries launched distance-learning programmes<sup>17</sup> utilizing a wide range of media to reach students according to national capacity and the needs of targeted student groups, including the Internet, hybrid courses and material distributed over broadcast media. Examples of online learning platforms include Darsak in Jordan, Madrasati in Saudi Arabia, Hesas Masr in Egypt, and the Qatari Ministry of Education and Higher Education's online learning portal, which provided multimedia learning solutions to students and allowed teachers to conduct virtual class sessions.

Furthermore, several countries in the region leveraged partnerships with telecommunications companies to offer free access to educational platforms for students and teachers alike. To ensure that instructional staff members were prepared to facilitate learning through new modalities and adequately support students transition with distance education, many countries offered additional training for teachers to help them effectively manage the transition to distance education.<sup>18</sup>

**2. Arab countries utilized targeted strategies to maintain learning continuity, based on local contexts and the age of learners.** This included face-to-face learning for early grades and hybrid or fully remote learning using mixed delivery modalities as appropriate for targeted students. Catch-up learning programmes, including accelerated learning programmes, summer sessions and after-school learning hours, were introduced or expanded in many areas in an effort to compensate for progress lost during the crisis. In eight Arab countries, schools reinforced guidance to parents on supporting learning at home through regular follow-up phone calls; however, very few countries provided parents with tips and materials for continued stimulation and play for young children.<sup>19</sup>

**3. Some Arab countries utilized online platforms to promote the upskilling of their labour forces, including programmes targeting those who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, or who needed training to adapt to teleworking and the digital economy.** Initiatives such as the *Doroob* platform in Saudi Arabia and the Emirati Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority Virtual Academy offered free continuous learning opportunities related to the needs of the labour market, with particular focus on information and communication technology (ICT) and innovation. Many new workforce entrants began their careers online rather than face-to-face, highlighting the need to integrate digital skills in learning design as an essential component of young people's entry into the workforce.<sup>20</sup>

## Arab countries in the School Meals Coalition

Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Somalia were founding members of the School Meals Coalition, an international initiative launched to scale up school meal programmes, so as to bolster recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. School meal programmes have been identified as highly effective interventions to support children, and play a key role in fulfilling several SDGs.

The Coalition, established in 2021 through negotiations involving Governments, civil society, academia and international organizations, seeks to support Governments in developing national school meal plans focused on reaching those left behind, sharing best practices, and working collaboratively with stakeholders to build programmes tailored to local contexts. Other Arab countries are actively exploring membership in this emerging initiative that can help re-establish, improve and scale up food and education systems, support pandemic recovery and drive action to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

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Source: <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/>.

16 UNESCO, Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19, accessed 3 December 2021.

17 UNESCO, National Learning Platforms and Tools, accessed 3 December 2021.

18 UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, COVID-19 learning losses: Rebuilding quality learning for all in MENA, 2021.

19 Ibid.

20 UNESCO, COVID-19 reopening and reimagining universities, survey on higher education via UNESCO National Commissions, 2021.

# Most at risk of being left behind



Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the achievement of SDG 4 targets was not on track to be met by 2030 for a number of groups in the Arab region, whose vulnerability has only been amplified by the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> Uneven access to quality education in the region is frequently compounded by intersecting inequalities, which often pose additional barriers to students' ability to adapt to learning modalities introduced during periods of school closures, particularly in the region's LDCs and conflict and crisis-affected countries. Many children and young people who were forced to withdraw from school during the crisis have had their education permanently disrupted. Learners in the following groups are notably at risk of being left behind.



The **poorest children** in the Arab region are significantly more likely not to attend or complete school than children in higher income groups, contributing to intergenerational poverty as households headed by people with no education are eight times more likely to be poor than those headed by individuals with the highest levels of educational attainment.<sup>22</sup> During the COVID-19 crisis, the transition to distance learning led students to interrupt their schooling owing to their inability to afford supplies, tuition or devices needed to access coursework remotely. The poorest children are less likely to return to education, as many were forced to work because of their households' deteriorating economic situations.



**Women and girls** in the Arab region are much less likely than men to have digital access, with nearly half of the female population not connected to the Internet.<sup>23</sup> Owing to historical gender gaps in access to education, the region has high rates of illiteracy among women at 34.14 per cent, compared with the world's average of 16.98 per cent.<sup>24</sup> As learning moved online, many female students (and especially those from poor households) faced difficulty accessing classes due to unpaid work responsibilities and discriminatory norms prioritizing male access to the family computer.



**Refugees and internally displaced children** face multiple challenges in acquiring education, including access issues caused by poverty, discrimination, lack of official documentation and difficulty adapting to unfamiliar curriculums and languages. The suspension of school meal programmes and inadequate home learning environments added to the barriers faced by refugee and internally displaced children.



**Persons with disabilities** are at a heightened risk of being excluded from education at all levels, owing to discriminatory social norms, inaccessible educational facilities and teachers that lack training on how to accommodate diverse needs, particularly those of children with cognitive disabilities. During the pandemic, distance learning tools in the region were generally not sufficiently adapted to the needs of such learners.



**Rural communities** often lack the infrastructure needed to extend quality, inclusive and equitable education to their residents, and lag behind urban communities in learning attainment. School closures have aggravated these inequalities, as lower levels of Internet connectivity, electricity and alternative learning solutions impacted rural students more heavily than their urban counterparts.

21 For a comprehensive analysis of SDG 4 in the region, see ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

22 ESCWA and others, Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report, 2017.

23 ITU Statistics.

24 ESCWA SDG Monitor.

# Policy recommendations for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving SDG 4 by 2030



The Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 offers recommendations to accelerate the achievement of SDG 4 in the region and support action on other SDGs.<sup>25</sup> These recommendations, along with the ones below, provide a road map for COVID-19 recovery and enhance resilience to future shocks and crises.

Rethink the role and value of education to drive transformative change, including by empowering and engaging students, teachers and parents in reform processes, protecting freedom of thought and expression, and ensuring access to lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Invest in and continuously upgrade education systems by securing sustainable funding, implementing curriculum reforms, developing innovative learning and assessment methods that encourage critical thinking and problem solving, prioritizing linkages across disciplines, and promoting early childhood education and teacher training.

Guarantee the right to equitable and quality education, with special attention to addressing the needs of marginalized groups, equipping schools to meet the needs of learners with disabilities and linking education with social protection programmes to ensure children remain in school.

Improve the collection of disaggregated data, notably on the quality of education, and deploy modern technologies for more timely evidence.

Strengthen policies, frameworks and standards related to early childhood care and development, TVET, ICT skill benchmarks for young adults, national curriculum frameworks and teacher standards frameworks.

Strengthen coordination and participation between ministries and departments, and between stakeholders in the education system.

## Road map to recovery

		
<p><b>Pandemic period:</b> <b>Ensure continuity and engagement</b></p>	<p><b>Early recovery period:</b> <b>Ensure safe school reopening and remediating</b></p>	<p><b>Post-pandemic period:</b> <b>Accelerate and improve</b></p>
<p>Ensure that children and young people have continuous access to quality education, with a robust support system that engages learners, teachers, parents and caregivers. Focus on foundational skills, and ensure health and psycho-emotional wellbeing for all stakeholders.</p>	<p>Ensure schools are reopened safely, and conduct comprehensive assessments of education services to verify that learning losses are being recovered and that results are being attained for all learners, starting from the early years.</p>	<p>Accelerate learning, enhance the quality of education and establish enabling learning systems that are equitable, adaptive and resilient for all learners, with special attention to the nutrition, health and wellbeing of students.</p>

25 For a comprehensive analysis of these recommendations, see ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2020.

# Key facts on SDG 4

## Arab region

## World

### School enrolment, secondary (net percentage)



**63.5** per cent (2018)  
+1 per cent since 2000

Female: **65.6** per cent Male: **61.3** per cent

**66.3** per cent (2018)  
+1 per cent since 2000

Female: **66.3** per cent Male: **66.3** per cent

### Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex (percentage)



**47.0** per cent (2019)  
+3 per cent since 2000

Female: **46.5** per cent Male: **47.5** per cent

**73.0** per cent (2019)  
+1 per cent since 2007

Female: **72.8** per cent Male: **73.1** per cent

### Children out of school (percentage of primary school age children)



**14.7** per cent (2019)  
-2 per cent since 2000

Female: **13.4** per cent Male: **16.1** per cent

**8.0** per cent (2019)  
-3 per cent since 2000

Female: **7.1** per cent Male: **9.0** per cent

### Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications in lower secondary education, both sexes (percentage)



**85.8** per cent (2019)  
+0.4 per cent since 2012

Female: **85.7** per cent Male: **86.0** per cent

World data not available

### Proportion of teachers with the minimum required qualifications in primary education, both sexes (percentage)



**85.0** per cent (2019)  
-0.8 per cent since 2005

Female: **83.4** per cent Male: **87.8** per cent

**81.1** per cent (2019)  
-0.8 per cent since 2015

Female: **81.5** per cent Male: **80.2** per cent

Source: ESCWA, Arab SDG Monitor (figures have been rounded).

