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Access to Quality Education in Low-Income Countries

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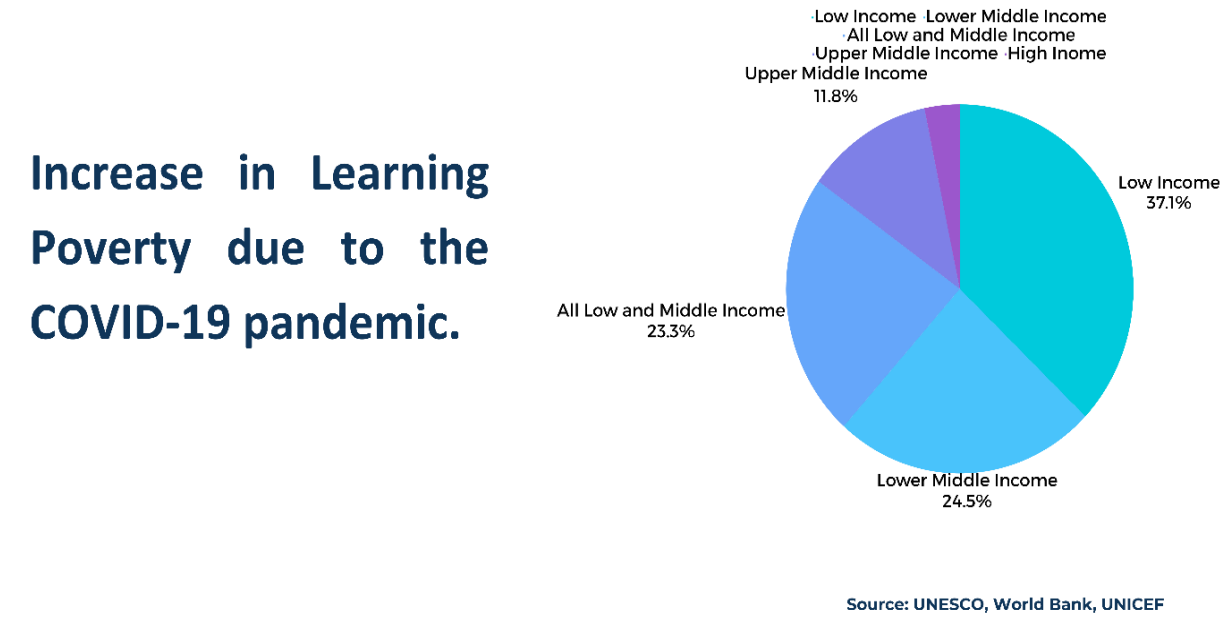
Introduction:

Ensuring access to quality education in low-income countries is an essential barrier to eradicating the cycle of poverty and promoting long-term economic growth. Disconcerting data suggests that only 78% of girls in these countries attend primary school, which is lower than the global average of 88%. Furthermore, only 31% of girls enroll in secondary school, lower than the worldwide average of 66% (World Bank, 2023). Gender disparity worsens societal divisions, sustains poverty, and delays economic development. Further, health outcomes are inseparably linked to education, as evidenced by the prevalence of preventable diseases and inadequate health literacy in low-income nations. An economically competitive workforce is predicated on a highly educated labor force; conversely, inequitable education contributes to increased unemployment and income inequality. Limited access to education, gender inequality, and social stratification are just a few of the many social implications of access to quality education in low-income countries. There are also significant economic implications, such as slowing economic growth, widening income gaps, and decreasing global competitiveness. Education has the potential to be a driving force behind positive social and economic change in these countries, but only if policymakers, investors, and governments work together to solve these problems.

Fig. 1. Increase in Learning Poverty due to Covid-19:



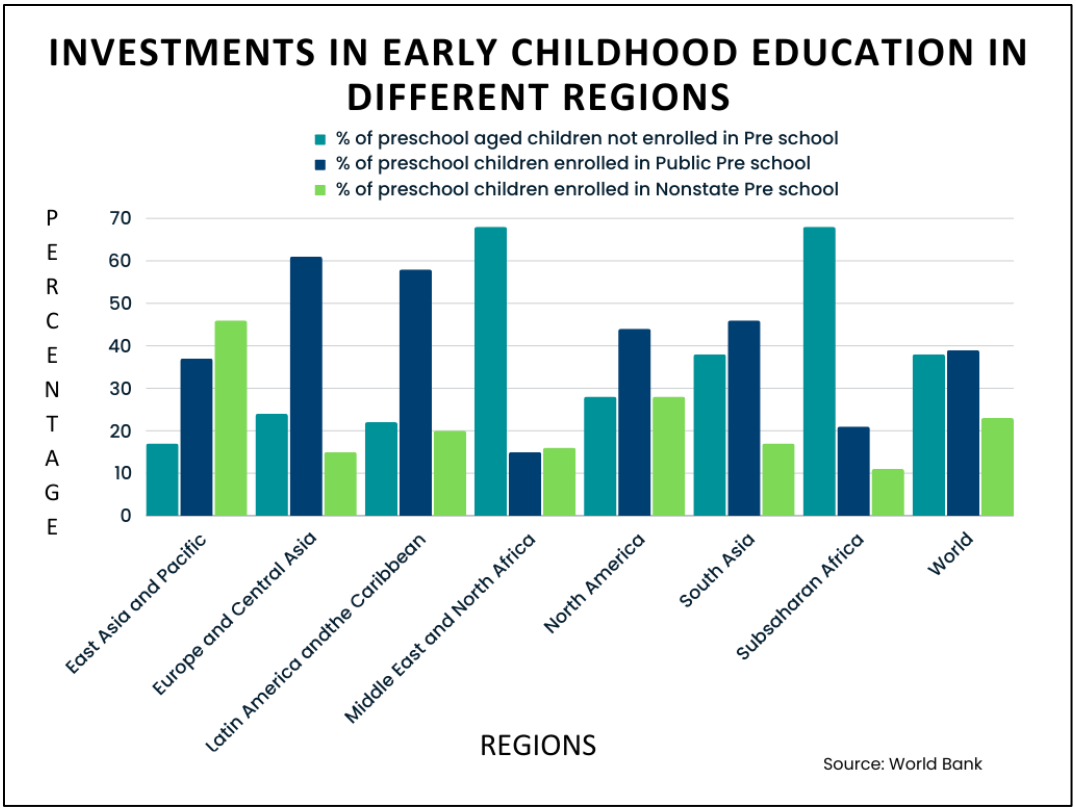
The COVID-19 pandemic has increased learning poverty [1] in low- and high-income countries. Economic hardships, school closures, and limited technology in lower-income nations exacerbated learning poverty. From 2019 to 2022, learning poverty rates in different income groups of countries rose alarmingly. Lower-income nations saw learning poverty rise from 91% to 92%. In contrast, higher-income nations saw a smaller increase from 8% to 14%. This period saw a widening gap between low- and high-income countries, highlighting global educational disparities.

[1] The failure of people to gain the skills and information they need to fully participate in society is called "learning poverty."

Quality Education:

The UN defines quality education as a standard and equal education that supports lifelong learning and knowledge acquisition. Inclusiveness and justice are crucial in quality education. Quality Education is crucial for long-term economic growth. It encourages innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion while promoting health, employment, wealth, and poverty reduction. The global learning crisis was already severe prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A substantial loss of learning occurred among children and youth across most nations amidst the pandemic; this cohort of children may experience a cumulative lifetime earnings loss of US$21 trillion. Disruptions in education have increased child mortality, forced child labor, untimely marriage, and denial of vital social protection and psychosocial services. The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations include high-quality education as a crucial objective for the 'transformation of the world' by 2030. Access to schools alone does not ensure quality education in low-income countries. Challenges such as inadequately trained teachers, outdated curricula, and a lack of instructional materials can impede students' academic progress. Similarly, conflict and political instability frequently disrupt education systems in low-income nations, leading to displacement of children and damage or repurposing of schools. Limited Access to Early Childhood Education: Access to early childhood education, crucial for a child's development, is often limited in low-income countries, leaving many children unprepared for primary school.



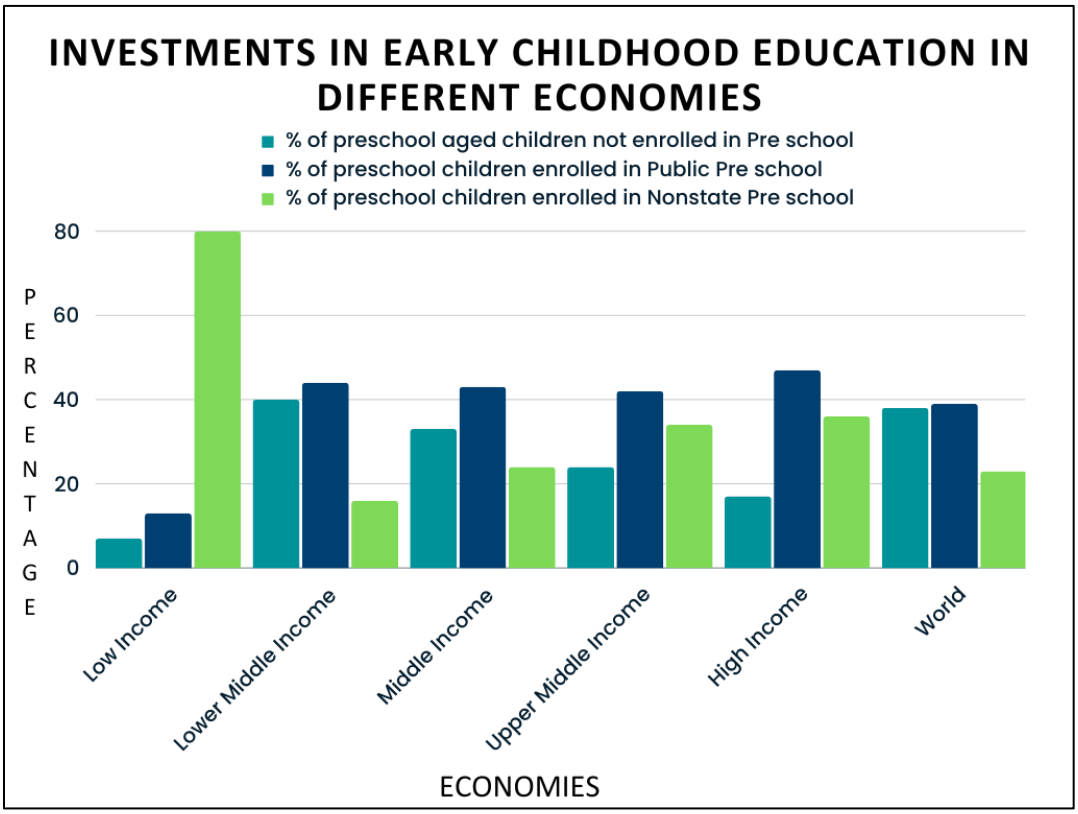


Fig. 2 & 2.1 Investments in Early Childhood Education by Regions and Economies.

The graphs show a large difference in early childhood education investment between low- and high-income countries. Lower-income countries invest less in early childhood education than [2]***higher-income countries*.*** *The funding gap leaves many low-income children unprepared for primary school. This highlights the urgency of funding and assistance to close this educational gap.*

Barriers to Education:

Education systems worldwide were significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in extensive school closures and posed obstacles to students' access to and participation in information. Although multiple nations implemented remote learning approaches to mitigate the consequences of these closures, substantial obstacles surfaced that further compounded disparities in education.

The digital gap:

The digital gap was one of the most significant educational obstacles during the pandemic. Unbelievably, 1.3 billion children of school age did not have access to the internet at home. This appalling digital disparity disproportionately impacted Eastern and Southern Africa, East Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America (World Bank, 2021). Access to digital devices such as computers and tablets was restricted in low-income countries. Students residing in rural areas encountered a substantial obstacle due to limited access to these devices. Furthermore, the lack of these resources impeded their capacity to participate in remote learning productively.

*The 2024 fiscal year defines low-income economies as those with a per capita gross national product (GNP) of $1,135 or less in 2022, lower middle-income economies as $1,136 to $4,465 and upper middle-income economies as $4,466 to $13,845 and high-income economies as $13,846 or more according to The World Bank.

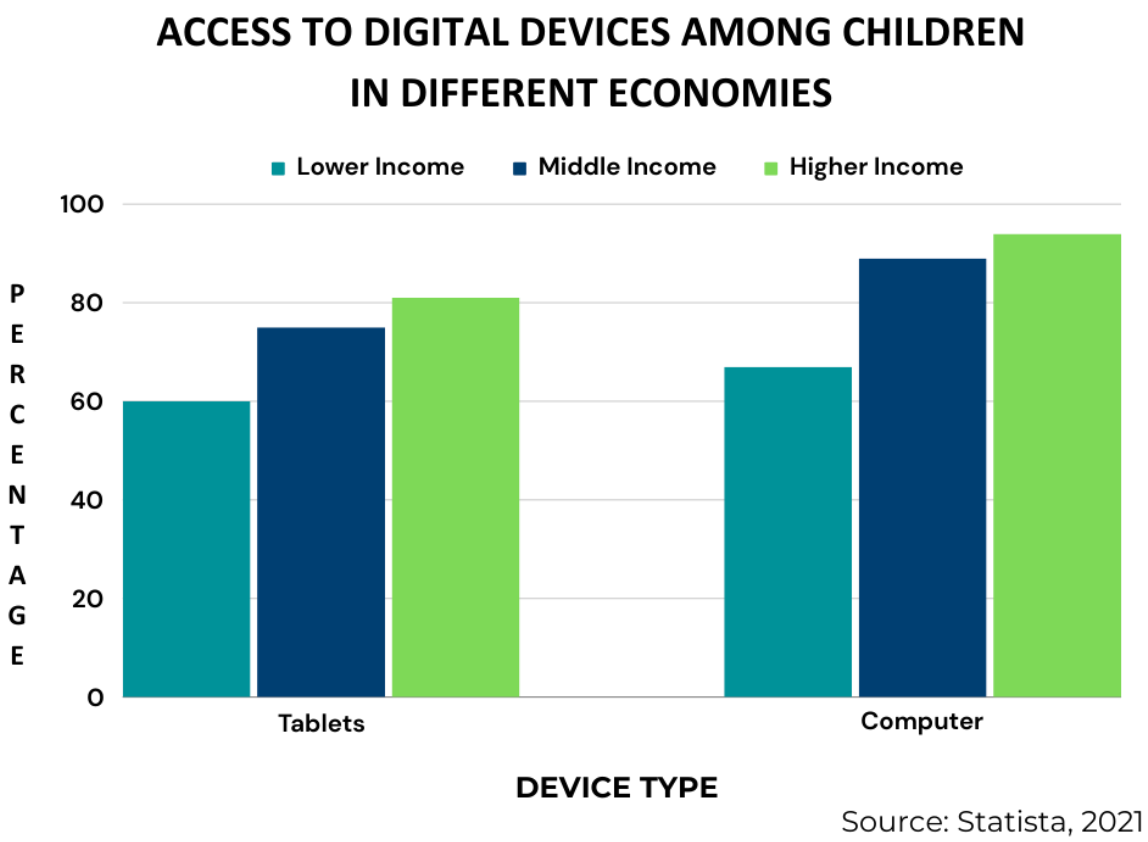


Fig. 3 Digital Learning Poverty in Different Global Economies

This bar graph shows the difference in digital learning poverty between high- and low-income countries from ages 8 to 18 in 2021. Due to improved technology and digital resources, nations with higher incomes have less digital learning poverty. However, lower income countries have a much higher rate of digital learning poverty due to limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills. As the world becomes more digital, this graph emphasizes the need to bridge the digital divide, especially in low-income countries, to ensure equitable access to high-quality education.

A Neglected Obstacle:

The lack of electricity became a significant obstacle in numerous lower-income countries, impeding students' ability to participate in remote learning opportunities. Specifically, only 47% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa had access to electricity (UNESCO, 2021). The absence of electrical power caused consequential consequences, hindering students' capacity to employ digital materials and engage in online education.

Addressing the Gender Gap:

Gender inequality constituted an additional substantial obstacle. More specifically, girls encountered limited availability of digital devices and internet connectivity. In addition, their information and communication technology (ICT) knowledge and proficiency were inferior to those of their male counterparts, which decreased their likelihood of participating in remote learning. Amid the pandemic, these gender disparities prompted concerns regarding equal access to and participation in education. The persistence of gender inequality continues to hinder academic progress despite the progress made. The prospects for girls from poorer backgrounds to pursue higher education are exceedingly low, with one in every 250 opportunities (UNESO, 2021). A prevalent issue that compromises the prospects of girls is the unequal distribution of educational opportunities. It casts doubt on the effectiveness of the education systems in these regions, as the World Bank estimates that 125 million children do not attain functional literacy or numeracy skills by the end of their fourth year of schooling. The potential of technology to create a more equitable educational environment is cause for optimism. Being up to 300 times more cost-effective than conventional education, mobile technology, or m-learning facilitates literacy, especially among marginalized groups. Nonetheless, the differences in technological accessibility continue to exist, giving rise to a digital divide that necessitates a resolution to guarantee fair and impartial educational opportunities.

Transformative Approaches for Lower Income Countries to Adopt

Diverse countries worldwide have adopted unique policies and undertakings to enhance their educational systems. Every nation's strategy is specific due to its circumstances concerning infrastructure development and early childhood education. Some best practices lower-income nations can adopt include:

I. Funding for Early Childhood Education (ECE): Priority is given to early childhood education (ECE) in developed nations since it establishes the groundwork for lifelong learning. Developed nations like Sweden have successful early childhood development policies. According to a 2017 UNICEF report, Sweden is one of 15 countries with three key brain development policies for young children. New mothers receive six months of paid breastfeeding breaks, two years of free pre-primary education, and adequate paid parental leave. Such policies' success in developed countries shows their importance in improving children's nutrition, play, and early learning during their crucial formative years. This underscores the criticality of investing in accessible and high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs for low-income countries such as Rwanda. The significance of this investment is supported by statistical evidence demonstrating that early education not only fosters cognitive growth but also generates enduring socioeconomic advantages. Strategic approaches, such as the ECE programs implemented in Rwanda, can advance low-income nations toward a more promising future in education. A USAID report suggests that Rwanda's education system expanded significantly in 2009, with a Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) of 128% and a Net Enrollment Rate (NER) of 93% (92% for boys, 94% for girls) due to the 2006 Nine-Year Basic Education Policy ("9YBE"), the 2003 abolition of primary school fees, and the 2007 reduction of secondary fee.

II. Universal Access to Comprehensive Primary Education: Ensuring equitable primary education for all children constitutes the fundamental pillar of a resilient education system. Effective educational practices have produced remarkable outcomes in Canada, Estonia, Finland, and Ireland. An OECD report shows that with students from the highest and lowest socioeconomic backgrounds across all OECD countries having PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores that differ by a maximum of 89 points, these nations, for example, show a significant narrowing of the socioeconomic gap in student performance. In comparison to countries such as Israel and Luxembourg, where the difference is over 120 points, this accomplishment is especially noteworthy. Due to their excellent student outcomes and reduced socioeconomic disparities, these nations'

achievements highlight the significance of putting policies in place to guarantee equitable access to primary education, fund teacher preparation, and create rigorous curricula.

III. Professional Development and Teacher Training: Developed countries like Finland have historically acknowledged the value of comprehensive teacher training and ongoing professional development to improve education quality. Student outcomes are undeniably enhanced when the teaching staff is well-trained and motivated. The approach taken by Finland is a source of inspiration for countries that wish to foster the professional development of their educators A holistic approach to graduates that emphasizes localized transversal skills makes the Finnish education system successful. Teacher recruitment, training, and autonomy make their work respectable. A successful and equitable education system in nations requires student rights, agency, and school-social support service alignment.

IV. Universal Education: An integral component of quality education is inclusion. For example, policies implemented in South Africa aim to eradicate discriminatory practices and guarantee educational opportunities for children who are disabled or belong to marginalized communities. The South African education policy changed to require 9 years of compulsory schooling from 7 to 15. The education system includes pre-primary, a 6-year General Education and Training phase with three phases, and a 3-year Further Education and Training phase. A 2024 Statista report outlines that with a gross enrollment rate of 97.4 percent in 2020—a slight decrease from 98.4 percent in 2019—primary enrollment was higher. These policies demonstrate how they enhance opportunities and accessibility for populations that were previously neglected. The commitment of South Africa to universal education serves as a prime example of how inclusive policies can bring about significant advancements.

V. Adoption of Newer Technology: Developed countries successfully incorporate technology into educational settings to augment the quality of learning. India and other low-income countries acknowledge the potential of affordable technological alternatives in narrowing the digital divide. Technology can significantly improve learning outcomes, particularly in settings with limited resources. Technology has transformed Indian education, improving learning experiences. Interactive whiteboards, online resources, adaptive learning software, and the rise of online education platforms reflect a paradigm shift in traditional education and India's move toward becoming a knowledge powerhouse, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

VI. School Infrastructure: Investing in school infrastructure, such as well-appointed and secure classrooms, is essential to fostering an environment conducive to learning. Vietnam's dedication to

these enhancements is substantiated by empirical evidence demonstrating the tangible effects on student attendance and academic achievements. Vietnam's education system confronted challenges such as theoretical emphasis, equity issues, fragmentation, outdated methods, and a teacher shortage. The 2013 education reform, Resolution 29, intended to address these problems through measures like enhancing innovation, promoting teacher development, and improving assessment methods. While cultural support for education was strong, challenges like exam-related stress and dishonesty persisted, prompting reforms to enhance transparency and restore trust. Their endeavor serves as evidence of the critical significance that infrastructure plays in delivering high-quality education.

VII. Updated Curriculum: The curriculum must be adapted to local requirements and labor market trends. Curriculum design in Singapore is consistent with empirical evidence demonstrating the advantages of such pertinence. Five policy phases (1965–2022) in Singapore focused on human capital development, shifting from economic demands to holistic student development. For continual improvement, the Compulsory Education Act 2000 consolidated policy control and decentralized school systems. Diversification, autonomy, and learner-centric pedagogies focused on holistic outcomes and student well-being. From 2020, "Learn for Life" emphasizes adaptation, teamwork, and resilience. A shadow education system is driven by parental emphasis on restricted academic performance through tuition and enrichment centers, despite official narratives.

VIII. Partnerships between the Government and the Private Sector: Germany has demonstrated, partnerships with private sector organizations (businesses and industries) can provide education systems with additional resources and knowledge as reported by OECD. These types of collaborations have the potential to improve the standard of education. The educational advancement that Germany has achieved is a prime example of how collaboration can be utilized to propel development.

Different policies for different contexts and needs characterize the global education landscape. Some of these initiatives demonstrate the transformative power of access, quality, and inclusion policies. We can move toward a future where education is accessible and equitable by learning from nations implementing these policies. Although small steps, these measures have the potential to innovate the inaccessibility of education in lower-income nations to zero.