

Regional fact sheet: South and West Asia

Overall, South and West Asia still lags behind other regions in terms of distance from reaching the EFA goals. Over 390 million adults in the region are considered illiterate; 18 million children are out-of-school. Despite progress in reducing gender disparities, girls and women remain at a distinct disadvantage in attending school and acquiring literacy skills.

EFA progress and challenges

- Each year in South and West Asia over 3 million children--about one-third of the global total--die before the age of five. On average, 83 of every 1,000 children born do not reach age 5, a figure that rises to 235 per 1000 in Afghanistan.
- Malnutrition is one of the biggest barriers to achieving UPE. In Afghanistan, India and Nepal almost half of all children under 5 suffer from moderate or severe stunting. High stunting rates are also found in other countries.
- Between 1999 and 2006, the number of children enrolled in pre-primary schools increased from some 21 to 39 million; the gross enrolment ratio rose correspondingly from 21% to 39%. There were significant improvements in pre-primary enrolments in India, Maldives and the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- There were 192 million children enrolled in primary education in 2006, 35 million more than in 1999. The net enrolment ratio (NER) in primary education increased steadily from 75% to 86%. Nepal is a striking success story: amidst a destabilizing civil conflict, the country increased its NER from 65% (1999) to 79% (2004) thanks to governance reforms and incentives for girls and low-caste children.
- The region halved its number of out-of-school children between 1999 and 2006 from 37 million to around 18 million. It is still home to about one-quarter of the world's out-of-school population. India and Pakistan together count 14 million out-of-school children, with another 2 million in Bangladesh and Nepal.
- Socio-economic inequalities are evident throughout the region. In India, while children from poor households are often almost as likely to start school as their richer counterparts, they are far more likely to dropout, with inequality widening as children progress through the system.
- In 2006, nearly 123 million students were enrolled in secondary education and the average secondary GER rose from 45% in 1999 to 51%. The highest secondary GERs in the region are in Sri Lanka (87%), the Maldives (83%) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (81%). The lowest are in Pakistan (30%) and Afghanistan (19%).
- Access to higher education remains very limited, with a regional average GER of 11% in 2006, up from 7% in 1999. Participation in higher education are highest in the Islamic Republic of Iran (27%) and, to a lesser extent, in India (12%). Despite growing numbers of women participating in tertiary education, large gender disparities still exist in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (70 women

per 100 men enrolled). More women than men are enrolled in tertiary institutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

- In 2000-2006 there were some 393 million illiterate adults in the region—or more than half of the global total. Almost two-thirds are women. The absolute numbers of adult illiterates are highest in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.
- Between 1985-1994 and 2000-2006, the regional adult literacy rate rose from 48% to 64%. Adult literacy rates vary from less than 30% in Afghanistan to about 50-55% in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan, to 65% in India and more than 90% in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.
- In the region, good progress has been made towards gender parity in primary and secondary education since 1999, but only Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had achieved the EFA gender parity goal in 2006.
- National learning assessments reveal that many children in the region leave school with only the most basic skills. In India, a 2007 survey found that fewer than half the children in grade 3 could read a text designed for grade 1 students.
- South and West Asia was struggling with an average of 40 primary pupils per teacher in 2006, up from 37 in 1999. Afghanistan and Bangladesh are suffering from an acute shortage of teachers. An estimated 3.6 million primary teachers will be needed by 2015 just in this region, mainly to fill posts left by retirement and other departures.
- The EFA Development Index was calculated for six of the nine countries in the region. Only one country—Maldives--was close to achieving EDI, and five out of the six countries covered in the region -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan -- are far from achieving EFA (EDI values below 0.80).

National education finance

- In South and West Asia, countries' median public expenditure on education was only 3.3% of their national income in 2006, the lowest level of all developing regions. The share of GNP devoted to education ranged from 2.7% or less in Pakistan and Bangladesh to 7.2% in Bhutan and 8.3% in the Maldives.
- In 2006, average per-student expenditure in primary school was US\$ 5,100 in developed countries (in constant dollars), compared to about US\$120 in Bangladesh and Nepal and about US\$925 in the Islamic Republic of Iran. South and West Asia was home to 28% of 5-to 25-year-olds but accounted for just 7% of global spending on public education.

International aid for education

- Countries received an annual average of almost US\$1.1 billion in aid to education over 2005 and 2006, with about half (US\$526 million) allocated to basic education.
- In 2005-06 about 11% of total aid to education worldwide went to South and West Asia, slightly less than in 1999 (12%).
- On average, aid to basic education per primary school-age child in South and West Asia amounted to only US\$3 in 2005-2006. Aid allocations to individual low income countries varied considerably: while India and the Islamic Republic of Iran and Nepal received less than US\$1 of aid to basic education per primary school-age child, it was above US\$20 in Afghanistan, Bhutan and the Maldives.