

ALL CHILDREN IN SCHOOL BY 2015

# Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children



## SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL STUDY

Covering Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

January 2014

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Cover Photo:

Children on the left walk to fetch water as school girls walk back to their homes at Amarpur village near Udaipur, Rajasthan, India in this photograph from September 2013. © UNICEF/INDA2013-00490/Altaf Qadri

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## Foreword

If South Asia is going to be part of a world where all children can lead productive lives and be responsible citizens when they grow up, it is important to focus not only on children attending school but also on those who are out of school.

Much has been achieved in South Asia in getting more children to school. National legislation and policies are in place in line with international frameworks like the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). Governments have shown strong commitment to upholding the right to education for all children.

Yet, the unfortunate reality is that the numbers of out-of-school children in South Asia are simply staggering. The latest UIS data indicate there are 7.57 million children between the ages 5 to 10 who are not attending school in the South Asia region. Another 25.29 million children between the ages 11 to 13 should be in secondary education but are not in school at all. These numbers make South Asia the region with the second highest number of children not getting an education, after Sub-Saharan Africa.

This study is primarily based on the country reports from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The first three countries are the most populous in South Asia and home to the majority of out-of-school children in the region. The South Asia study and the country studies aim to understand the scale of the problem of exclusion of children in the four countries as well as in the region. This study shows there are a total of 27 million children out of school in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, of whom 17 million are of primary school-age and 9.9 million of lower secondary school-age.


Children not attending school are in most cases unaccounted for in school records. They are therefore “invisible” and often not considered in policy and decision-making. The lack of data and information on children who are the most excluded from education are making it even more difficult to reach these children. In addition there is a lack of tools and methodologies needed to identify children who are not attending school.

We hope that this study, which is part of the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children, will equip countries with a methodology to better understand who are the children excluded from education, and come up with better solutions. This study highlights individual and household characteristics of out-of-school children - information that are crucial to make informed policy responses targeted at barriers facing specific groups of children not in school.

Profiles of children attending school who are at the greatest risk of dropping out have also been reviewed. If pushed out from the education system, these children are likely to become the out-of-school children of tomorrow. Prevention is better than cure. If policy responses can target at-risk children, and prevent them from dropping out, the scale of exclusion will diminish over time.

In order to realize the rights of ALL children to education, political commitment and adequate policy responses are needed to address exclusion from education. This study looks at some noteworthy policy responses in the four countries with the aim of documenting and sharing these practices to all South Asian countries and beyond. More importantly, this study identifies a set of recommendations and areas for further research to address exclusion in education. We highly encourage all education stakeholders to take note of these recommendations and the new insights into the characteristics of excluded groups of children in South Asia.

We hope that this study and the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children will be instrumental in ensuring that ALL children in South Asia have a chance for a better future through quality education.



Karin Hulshof  
Regional Director  
UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia

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# Acknowledgements

Many people and organizations have provided inputs, support and feedback in the process of drafting the South Asia OOSCI Regional Study, demonstrating genuine motivation to shed more light into the numbers, profiles and characteristics of the millions of South Asian children currently out of school.

First of all, the dedicated efforts of the country teams of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka resulted in the four OOSCI country studies which formed the bases of the South Asia study. We would like to explicitly thank the authors of the country studies: Manos Antoninis and Ahmadullah Mia (Bangladesh); Anuradha De, Tanuka Endow and colleagues at Collaborative Research and Dissemination (India); Dr Abid Aman Burki, Usman Khan, Hina Sheikh and Abubakar Memon all from the Lahore University of Management Sciences (Pakistan); Swara Jayaweera and her colleagues at the Centre for Women's Research (Sri Lanka) and our UNICEF colleagues who led the initiative at the country level.

A special thank goes to Sheena Bell, Friedrich Huebler, Albert Motivans and Shailendra Sigdel of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) who have been true champions throughout the implementation of the Out-of-School Children Initiative phase I, in addition to providing extremely useful feedback on the statistical aspects of this report.

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Since the study used a multi-sectoral angle to look at the situation of out-of-school children, special thanks go to the colleagues at the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia who guided the report conceptually: Genevieve Begkoyian, Henk van Norden, Ron Pouwels, and Andrea Rossi. Support from Rhiannon James, Pradeep Rajbhandari, and Jean Jacques Simone has been very helpful as well.

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**Lieke van de Wiel**  
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Kathmandu, January 2014

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## Executive summary

South Asia has seen significant achievements in strengthening education systems and getting more children to school. Enrolment rates in primary education have reached 90 per cent in 2011 for the region, up from 75 per cent in 2000. More importantly, this growth has been accompanied by a sizeable progress in enrolling girls, with net enrolment rates for the region indicating 88 per cent of the total primary school-going age girls are now in school, up from 68 per cent in 2000 (UIS Database accessed January 2014). National laws and policies have been introduced in line with the CRC and other international frameworks. Countries have committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) goals. Across the region, strategies for a more equitable development, including in education, have been developed. Education has also been identified as a major priority area in the Post 2015 development agenda discussions.

Yet, the unfortunate reality is that millions of children in South Asia are still out of school. This study will contribute to efforts of offering these children education opportunities by making them visible and providing evidence-based recommendations on how to reach out to this excluded group across the region, and in particular the four participating countries: Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

This South Asia study has been prepared as part of the Global Initiative on Out-of-School-Children (OOSCI) initiated by UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) in 2010. The initiative's goal is to make a significant and sustained reduction in the number of children out of school around the world by:

- Developing comprehensive profiles of excluded children based on standardized and innovative statistical methods;
- Linking quantitative data with the socio-cultural barriers and bottlenecks that lead to exclusion;
- Identifying sound policies which address exclusion from education with a multi-sectorial perspective.

This South Asia study is primarily based on findings from four OOSCI country studies on Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These four countries have strong national legislation and expressed commitment to the international frameworks to provide all children with basic education. Impressive achievements in improving basic school enrolment rates have been seen in these countries over the past decade. However, staggering numbers of children remain out of school, particularly in the three most populous countries: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. It is clear that without further action, including some new and innovative strategies, inequity in school participation and ultimately opportunities in life will persist.

### Conceptual framework

The South Asia study and the country studies follow the Conceptual and Methodological Framework (CMF) of the initiative. Analyses is based on the 'Five Dimensions of Exclusion' (5DE) which covers five target groups:

- Dimensions 1, 2 and 3 cover children who are not participating in formal schooling in three age groups: pre-primary, primary and lower secondary school age;
- Dimensions 4 and 5 cover children who are attending primary or lower secondary school, respectively but are at risk of dropping out.

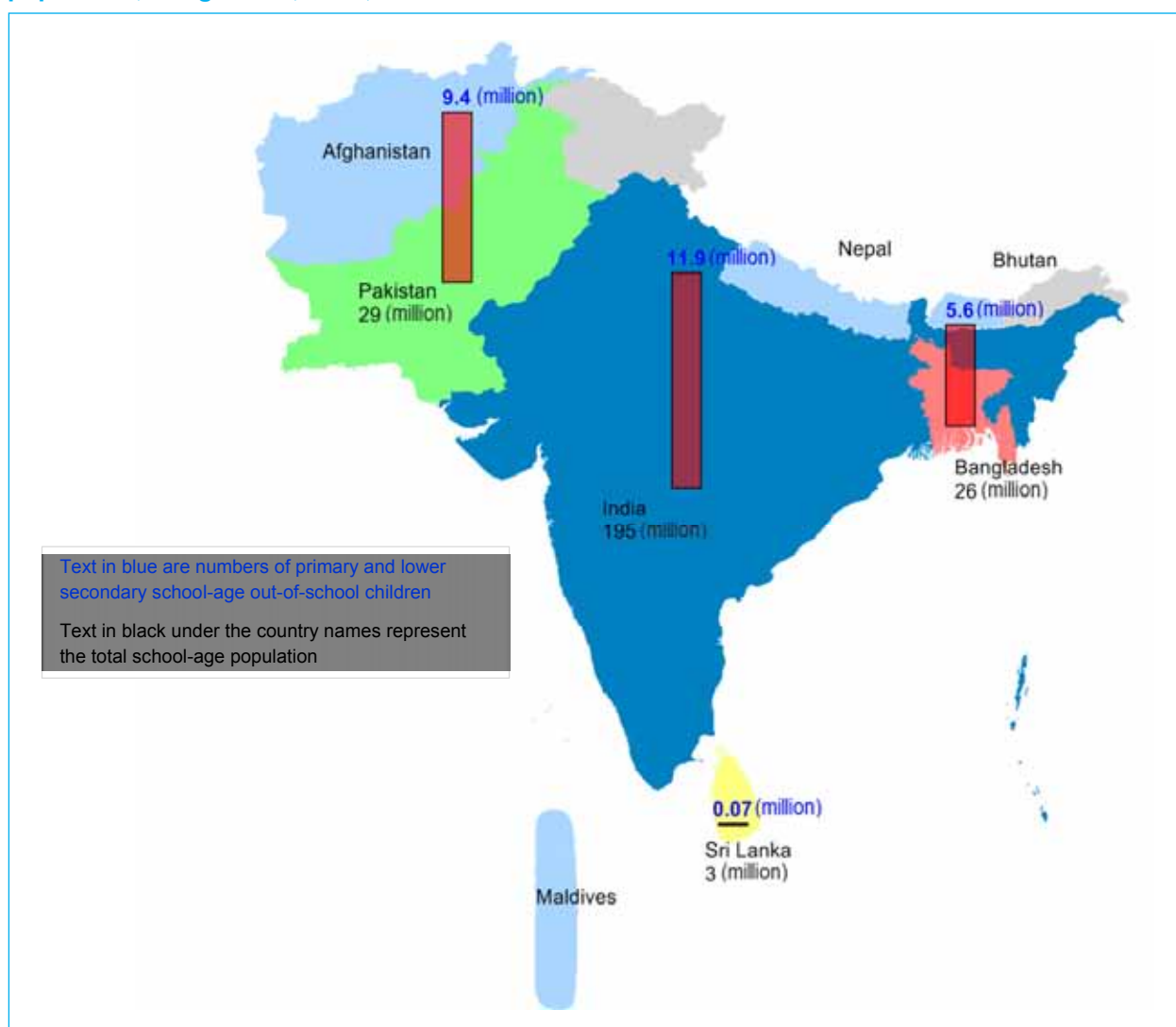
Household survey data and administrative data were analysed to get a deeper understanding of out-of-school children and their characteristics, and to get a better insight into enrolment and other trends in education in the countries covered. This is one of the key contributions of this study to existing literature.

## Number of out-of-school children, their profiles and characteristics

South Asia is facing challenges with the high number of children being denied schooling. The magnitude of the numbers of out-of-school children (OOSC) in the region remain staggering despite efforts towards universal primary and basic education. An analysis of household surveys show that a total of **27 million children between the ages 5 to 13 are out of school** in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This comprises 17 million children of primary school-age (ages 5-9 in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and ages 6-10 in Bangladesh and India) and 9.9 million children of lower secondary school-age (ages 10-12 in Pakistan, 10-13 in Sri Lanka, and 11-13 in Bangladesh and India). The vast majority of out-of-school children live in India mainly because of its large school-age population; very few live in Sri Lanka because of its relatively small population and high rates of school attendance. The majority of excluded children in each of the three largest countries live in rural areas.

UIS data which is sourced from administrative data in countries also show an estimated 26.6 million children not in school in the four countries. Of this, 1.5 million are primary school-age children and 25.1 million are lower secondary school-age. India has the highest number of OOSC at 17.8 million followed by Pakistan with 6.5 million. For the eight South Asian countries, UIS estimates a total of 7.57 million children between the ages 5 to 10 are not in school. Another 25.29 million children ages 11 to 13 should be in secondary education but are not in school.

### Number of primary and lower-secondary school-age out-of-school children, and total school-age population, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka



Note: This map is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.



It should be noted that there are challenges when trying to calculate numbers of out-of-school children. Discrepancies arise when comparing participation rates in education and the number of out-of-school children generated from administrative and household survey data. The figures from the different data sources indicate the range of numbers of out-of-school children in a country. In countries with large populations, reaching the most accurate and exact number of out-of-school children would be very challenging. Having estimates from both administrative data and household surveys is thus crucial to get a better indication of school exclusion. This is important for policy and decision-making to be more evidence-based, nuanced and effective.

School exclusion is a significant problem in the three largest countries of the region:

- Pakistan has the highest rate of school exclusion for pre-school age children (51 per cent) and for primary school-age children (34.4 per cent). This indicator falls to 30.1 per cent for lower secondary school-age children largely due to late entry in school.
- In Bangladesh, around a third (34 per cent) of pre-school age children are not in school. The rate of exclusion is lower for primary school-age children at 16.2 per cent but rises sharply for lower secondary school-age children at 30.7 per cent.
- For India, rates of non-participation in schooling for pre-school age children is 12.4 per cent and for primary school-age children, 6.4 per cent. The rate of exclusion for lower secondary school-age children is 5.7 per cent. Given its large population size, India has the highest number of OOSC among the four countries with 11.9 million children not in school (ages 6 to 13).
- Sri Lanka has close to universal participation in primary and lower secondary schooling (with the caveat that the data does not cover some of the districts where conflict took place), and a small minority of pre-school age children who are out of school.

#### Number and percentage of out-of-school primary and lower secondary school-age children, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

	Dimension 2: Primary school-age children		Dimension 3: Lower Secondary school-age children		Dimensions 2 and 3
	Out-of-school primary school-age children as a percentage of the total primary school-age population (%)	Number of primary school-age out-of-school children (Million)	Out-of-school lower secondary school-age children as a percentage of the total lower secondary school-age population (%)	Number of lower secondary school-age out-of-school children (Million)	Total number of primary and lower secondary school-age children not in school (Million)
Bangladesh	16.2%	2.6	30.7%	3.0	5.6
India*	6.4%	7.8	5.7%	4.0	11.9
Pakistan	34.4%	6.6	30.1%	2.8	9.4
Sri Lanka	1.9%	0.03	3.2%	0.04	0.07
Total		17.0		9.9	27.0

Sources: Bangladesh MICS 2006 & UNPD 2010 revision, India SRI-IMRB 2009 unit level data and UNPD 2012 revision, Pakistan PSLM -HIES 2007-08 & UNPD 2010 revision, Sri Lanka DHS 2006-07 & UNPD 2010 revision (excludes 5 conflict-affected districts in the north), as cited in the country OOSCI studies. Note: \* For India, there are different estimates of OOSC as discussed in chapter 2. The total numbers for all four countries have been rounded off.

#### Profiles of out-of-school children

The profiles of out-of-school children show considerable heterogeneity across countries, with household wealth being the exception. Some of the key characteristics associated with school exclusion in the four countries are:

- *Household wealth*: low economic status is very clearly negatively correlated with school exclusion in the three largest countries across Dimensions 1 to 3. This wealth disparity in school attendance is particularly marked in Pakistan across the dimensions, and for lower secondary school-age children in all four countries.

- *Gender:* gender gaps are largest for the poorest families and for lower secondary school-age children. School attendance rates are lower for girls in Pakistan throughout the basic education cycle. In rural India, older girls are more likely to be excluded than older boys. Girls in rural areas, particularly those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India also have higher rates of exclusion. In Bangladesh, boys are more excluded in both levels of education.
- *Urban-rural location:* across the four countries children living in rural areas and in urban slums have a higher chance to be out of school. The urban-rural gap is highest in Pakistan. In metropolitan slums in Bangladesh, children are 2.5 times more likely to be excluded from school than the national average. In India, rural children also face a schooling disadvantage, but the urban-rural gap is smaller. Research from India also notes that deprivation in urban areas tends to be highly concentrated in specific groups, mainly slum dwellers and street children whose schooling situation is similar to the most disadvantaged in rural areas. Sri Lanka too has pockets of high exclusion: older children living in tea estates have markedly higher rates of school exclusion than the average.
- *Geographical location:* children living in Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in India have significantly higher rates of exclusion compared with the national average. This is the same for children in Sylhet in Bangladesh, and Balochistan in Pakistan. In Sri Lanka, about 10 per cent of lower secondary school-age children living in tea estates are out of school compared with the 3 per cent proportion in rural and urban areas. In Bangladesh, access to education is lowest in areas with high concentrations of poor and vulnerable people due to a combination of geographic, climatic and socio-economic factors.
- *Social groups:* in India, school exclusion is considerably more prevalent among Muslim children, and among older children from socially disadvantaged groups. The average rate of exclusion for primary school-age children from Scheduled Castes is 5.6 per cent and Scheduled Tribes 5.3 per cent compared to the national average of 3.6 per cent. Girls from Scheduled Castes have the highest rates of exclusion at 6.1 per cent. Various research has also shown that children with a minority language as mother tongue are disproportionately excluded. In Bangladesh, children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts which is home to ethno-linguistic minorities have lower enrolment rates than their counterparts in Khulna, Rajshahi and Barisal.
- *Child labourers:* the incidence of child labour varies from 3 per cent in Sri Lanka to 16 per cent in Pakistan. In India and Bangladesh, an estimated 12 per cent and 9 per cent of children are engaged in child labour. In all four countries, school attendance rates for child labourers are lower than for other children of the same age. Generally, this disparity is much greater for children living in Pakistan and for older children across the countries. As children age, they are much less likely to combine school and work. More than 90 per cent of child labourers in Pakistan are out of school.
- *Children with disabilities:* children with disabilities are less likely to enrol and complete a full cycle of basic education. An estimated 90 per cent of children with disabilities in the developing world do not go to school. In India, 38 per cent of children ages 6 to 13 who have disabilities were found to be out of school.
- *Children in emergency settings:* children that live in areas where regular life and hence education systems are disrupted by emergencies are often excluded from schooling. All four countries are facing such challenges: (i) children living in conflict-affected northern and eastern areas of Sri Lanka have lower school participation than the national average, particularly in lower secondary education (data from 2007); (ii) cyclones in Bangladesh in 2007 and 2009 meant that more than 1.5 million children could not attend schools; (iii) widespread violence in the Swat valley in Pakistan in 2007 led to mass fleeing of internally displaced people (IDPs) and a marked drop in school attendance; (iv) some schools in India have been closed due to civil strife related causes; (v) school attendance rates for refugee children are comparatively low, and access to secondary education is particularly low for urban refugees.

## Patterns of exclusion

It is also crucial to examine the patterns of exclusion to understand better the underlying causes keeping children out of school. Below are some patterns observed in the four countries based on the OOSCI studies.

Amongst children who are out of school, there is a group that is likely to never enter primary school. This is affecting a strikingly high proportion of excluded children in Pakistan (51 per cent) and in India (39 per cent). At the same time, India and Pakistan have issues with late entry to school: 39 per cent of OOSC in Pakistan and 31 per cent in India are expected to enrol at a later stage. They will enter school “older” than their peers putting them at risk of dropping out. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the significant portion of out-of-school children are those who have dropped out from school at 68 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively. A better understanding of these patterns will help tailor policies and interventions to each group of children: those who have dropped out from school, those who are likely to enter late, and those who will never see the inside of a classroom.

The problem of children enrolling at an older age than the grade-appropriate age, along with repetition and dropout is leading to a major age-grade discrepancy in school attendance in the three largest countries in the region. The situation is most acute for Pakistan, and appears to be driven largely by children entering primary school late. In Bangladesh, repetition is the major cause of overage attendance. Studies show that being overage is a risk factor for dropping out. Late enrolment and repetition are phenomena that demonstrate a sub-optimal efficiency of the education system and reflect inappropriate use of resources. To have the right to education of all eligible children fulfilled, these challenges need to be addressed.

Survival rates are alarmingly low at the primary education level in Bangladesh, such that 40 per cent of children who enter the cycle drop out before they reach the final grade; the comparable figure is 20 per cent in India. Dropout rates by grade are high in Pakistan which also points to low survival rates. Transition between the primary and lower secondary education level is also a point of high dropout in the three largest countries: in India and Bangladesh, about 20 per cent of students in the last grade of primary schooling are lost by the education system and do not transition to lower secondary education. In Pakistan, the dropout rate in the last grade of primary education is 43 per cent. In Sri Lanka, 3 per cent of primary school students do not transition to the next level.


With respect to children in primary education who are at risk of dropping out (Dimension 4), the characteristics of exclusion vary somewhat across the four countries. In India, students in rural areas have markedly lower primary education survival prospects than urban students. It should be noted that the primary education survival rate for urban areas masks disparities between children in urban slum areas and other urban children. The survival rate for urban areas could also be overestimated if children from rural areas move to urban schools during the primary education cycle. There is not much variation in primary schooling survival rates by gender or urban-rural residence in Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. In Pakistan, primary education dropout rates for rural children are considerably higher. Some disparities are also evident in the transition rate from primary education to lower secondary education. Indian rural students have far lower transition rates than their peers in urban areas. In Bangladesh, the gender gap in transition rates is evident with boys having lower rates than girls.




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At the same time, in Bangladesh, girls are more likely to drop out from lower secondary grades than boys. This suggests that although fewer boys than girls reach lower secondary education, those that do make it are more likely to be retained. There are some similarities in the four countries in relation to characteristics of children attending lower secondary education who are at risk of dropping out (Dimension 5): rural children are more likely to drop out. India's rural children are at a disadvantage over those in urban areas (except urban slums) in terms of lower secondary education survival rates. In Pakistan, children living in rural areas have markedly higher dropout rates by grade.

### Profiles and characteristics of excluded children in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

 Out of school	<b>Dimension 1:</b> Pre-school age children	low income families; rural families (Bangladesh, India & Pakistan); girls (Pakistan); girls in the tea estate sector (Sri Lanka); families living in Balochistan (Pakistan) and Tripura (India)
	<b>Dimension 2:</b> Primary school-age children	low income families (India, Pakistan, & Bangladesh boys in particular); girls (India & Pakistan); boys (Bangladesh); rural families (Pakistan); metropolitan slums (Bangladesh); urban low income families (India); children in tea estates (Sri Lanka); families living in Balochistan (Pakistan) and Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (India); Muslim families, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, particularly girls (India); families where mother has low level of education (Bangladesh); child labourers (Bangladesh & Pakistan)
	<b>Dimension 3:</b> Lower-secondary school-age children	low income families (all 4 countries; Bangladeshi boys & Pakistani girls in particular); girls (Pakistan & rural India); boys (Bangladesh: all income quintiles except top); rural families (Pakistan); metropolitan slums (Bangladesh); tea estates (Sri Lanka); Sylhet (Bangladesh); Balochistan (Pakistan); Rajasthan, Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (India); Muslim families, Scheduled Tribes (India); families where mother has low level of education (Bangladesh); child labourers, particularly boys in the four countries

 In school	<b>Dimension 4:</b> Children in primary education at risk of dropping out	rural families (India & Pakistan); children with no pre-school experience in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are at risk of repeating the early grades of primary education and eventually dropping out; boys in Bangladesh and children from rural families in India are at risk of not making the transition to lower secondary education
	<b>Dimension 5:</b> Children in lower secondary education at risk of dropping out	rural families (India & Pakistan); girls (Bangladesh); boys (Pakistan)

### Barriers to school participation and policy responses

Efforts to improve school participation in the four countries over the past decade have mainly focused on easing quantitative supply-side barriers (e.g. building schools) and mitigating economic demand-side barriers (e.g. school-fee abolition). These approaches have generated a large influx of children enrolling in schools since the late 1990s. Furthermore, the impact of the mix of programmes, such as school fee abolition and concerted community based efforts around the UN Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI), increased enrolment rates in South Asia, reaching 89 per cent in 2011 from 75 per cent in 2000. At the same time, policies and programmes to address socio-cultural demand-side barriers such as those related to early marriage and child labour have scope for improvement. In reference to the interventions addressing supply-side barriers, systemic quality education sector reforms which impact classroom level

have remained elusive. This could be related to disappointing progress in learning achievements and high level of drop-out in the South Asia region. Reforms to governance and management systems have been partial, and critical system-level bottlenecks remain, especially in the rural and other marginalized areas which experience most challenges with out-of-school children.

Drawn from this study's Chapter 4, below is a summary of some of the noteworthy policy responses to the main categories of barriers to schooling facing different profiles of excluded children. It should be noted that although the link between barriers and profiles seem somewhat simplified: in reality, profiles of out-of-school children usually consist of multiple characteristics each with a reduced likelihood of attendance. The barriers related to these multiple characteristics reinforce each other and lead to exclusion.

#### *Supply-side barriers*

Improving the capacity of the schooling system has been a high priority of South Asian governments and societies overall. Large-scale construction programmes and public-private partnerships in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, have delivered a considerable number of additional classrooms in regular formal schools. At the same time, private sector provision in Pakistan and India (to a large extent unregulated) has driven much of the growth in capacity. Alternative models of formal schooling have proved to be an important way of reaching some groups of vulnerable out-of-school children such as lower secondary school-age girls from marginalised social and religious groups in India, and children in remote areas in Bangladesh. Non-formal basic education programmes are widespread in some countries, and provide innovative and flexible learning opportunities for OOSC. Increasingly, non-formal education programmes have equivalency with the formal system. For instance, learning centres in Bangladesh under the Basic Education for Hard-To-Reach Urban Working Children (BEHTRUWC) project provide life skills-based non-formal basic education in the six largest cities for working children aged 10-14 years who have either never been to or have dropped out of school.

While there are many attempts in creating alternative pathways to basic education for children who dropped out and tend to be overage or for children who will never be reached by formal schooling, investment in these programmes is not sufficient to cover all eligible children. Second chance education, therefore is not a reality for the millions of children currently out of school. Even for children participating in non-formal education, the investment per child is much lower than for children in formal schools. This makes it much less likely for OOSC to return to school or enrol in school for the first time and obtain the same learning as their non-excluded peers.

Interventions to improve the quality of schooling have been numerous and some show positive results, but generally these have not been on a scale to make an impact on the majority of learners, especially the most vulnerable children. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions in the four countries vary, from improving infrastructure to school-based programmes on child health and hygiene education. Some are integrated into a holistic set of school improvement measures. Such health-promoting interventions aim to benefit all students, including adolescent girls who need sanitation facilities like separate functioning toilets. The education component of WASH interventions have proven to be particularly important for children from families where parental education levels are low.

#### *Economic demand-side barriers*

Commitment to 'free education' has resulted in fee abolition in all four countries and the provision of a wide range of programmes, such as incentives in the form of free uniforms, stationery, waiving of exam fees, and scholarship schemes. Large-scale conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes have been introduced to offset the remaining direct costs of schooling, particularly in Bangladesh and Pakistan. There are also large-scale poverty alleviation programmes in place in all four countries. Noting the poor health and nutritional status of young children, particularly from poorer families, large-scale school feeding programmes have been introduced. This is also an incentive to households to send their young children to school. These interventions will largely benefit children from poorer households, rural areas, and also, for some of the CCT programmes, older girls.

#### *Socio-cultural demand-side barriers*

There have been relatively few effective interventions to tackle prominent socio-cultural barriers to school attendance. Community mobilisation campaigns have been successful to some extent in fostering positive attitudes to education and changing socio-cultural norms in Bangladesh and Pakistan (related to gender roles and tolerance of child labour). The physical and social restrictions placed on older girls in some

communities has been alleviated in some cases by provision of more single-sex school places closer to home, and single-sex residential facilities (supply-side responses). Efforts to delay the age of marriage for girls via conditions set in some CCT programmes (as already mentioned), have had, at most, a modest effect in the short-term as seen in Bangladesh. Some reproductive health programmes have had spin-off benefits related to combatting child marriage. Some relatively small-scale child protection programmes provide care and welfare for children deprived of a safe family environment, such as children living and working on the streets, though there is no significant evidence that these have directly improved school enrolment or attendance beyond the limited target group.

### *System bottlenecks*

The main programmes in place to mitigate bottlenecks are governance reforms, often in the context of decentralisation. The aim has been to promote decision-making and resource allocation based on local needs - a thinking pushed as part of the formulation of Education Sector Plans or Sector Wide Approaches. The delegation of authority to lower levels of the education administration, and to school-based management bodies has been partial: sometimes initiatives have positive impacts, especially on reasonably performing schools. But these positive impacts have been offset by unwanted effects in terms of weak administrative bodies (e.g. districts, blocks, upazillas, etc.) and schools not able to take charge and make use of the transferred responsibility in a constructive manner. The provision of direct grants to schools in Bangladesh to support school-level improvement plans has demonstrated that this funding mechanism can work well under certain circumstances. Sri Lanka is applying an equity-based decentralised funding mechanism which invests more in under-performing schools in provinces. Systems for delivering textbooks on a vast scale in Bangladesh and India have become much more efficient over the decade.

### *Barriers to schooling in emergency situations*

Since emergency situations are characterized by providing basic services in systems that are temporarily non-functioning or breaking down, education responses in this setting are often initiated in parallel to the more traditional systems. In this context, some flexible and innovative programmes in the four countries include delivering schooling to children and youth in affected populations. These include interventions to support accelerated learning for children who have missed many years of schooling, some with equivalence to the formal education system. To promote early response to emergencies, ministries of education with the support of UN agencies and INGOs have developed and applied/implemented a range of standardised responses focusing on education provision, such as school-in-a-box kits, child-friendly spaces, and school feeding. Emergency preparedness is also increasingly integrated into education sector planning.

## **Key recommendations**

This study provides important new insights into the characteristics of excluded groups of children in South Asia, the barriers they face in attending school and the major gaps in current education policy and programming on school participation across the four countries. This forms a rich evidence base for immediate policy action, and highlights areas where further research is warranted.

The profiles provide a rich picture of the characteristics of out-of-school children. However, due to data limitations the analysis did not pick up some specific groups of marginalised children which other studies suggest are disproportionately excluded from school. Such groups include: children living in urban slums and on the street, children from families who migrate seasonally for work, child refugees and internally displaced children, children with disabilities, and children who do not speak the national or official language(s). These groups merit further research to understand the multitude of barriers they face in attending school so that they can be effectively targeted with interventions.

Taking stock of the profiles of excluded children, related patterns of exclusion and the existing range of interventions to address the barriers to school participation, there are some noticeable gaps and opportunities for strengthening existing programmes. Three general recommendations arise:

- 1. Increase public spending on basic education.** Public expenditure on education in the four countries is low by international standards, with total public spending on education as a percentage of GDP only between 2-3 per cent. More importantly, budget priority for education seems to have

stagnated in Bangladesh and India, and is falling in Pakistan. This is of particular concern in Pakistan, which has the highest rate of school exclusion in the region, and the largest wealth disparity in school participation. Although Sri Lanka does not face the same challenges, if the country were to make the shift to a knowledge society, the current levels of public spending on education would not be sufficient to make the required leap in quality and learning outcomes. Given the enormous challenge of mitigating the barriers keeping the 27 million children in the four countries out of school, it is clear that additional public financing along with more efficient allocation of resources is critical.

2. **Continue to strengthen education sector-wide planning approaches and reflect increased opportunities for alternative pathways to basic education.** Sector-wide planning approaches should promote explicit objectives, coordinated action and large-scale integrated programming and financing mechanisms, in line with the type of holistic interventions needed. Sector plans should include appropriate strategies and resource provision that improve equitable education opportunities. This means significant scale up in the number and quality of alternative pathways to basic education, including for children affected by emergencies, increased emergency preparedness, and targeted and realistic interventions for excluded children, in particular children with disabilities and ethnic and religious minorities.
3. **Implement more large-scale holistic interventions that address multiple barriers to schooling simultaneously.** Out-of-school children often face numerous and reinforcing barriers which single interventions cannot address effectively. For example, the high priority to measures to tackle economic barriers in the past decade seems appropriate in view of the strong negative association between school participation and household wealth. Yet almost all the other barriers disproportionately affect poor children too. This study has shown that excluded children from minority groups who are poor and come from rural areas often face multiple deprivations due to systemic bottlenecks, opportunity costs, and socio-cultural expectations. Barriers preventing some children going to school cannot be dealt with by the education sector alone. Policy responses need to address these overlapping barriers and must be cross-sectoral to be effective.

At a more detailed level, the policy and thematic Chapters 4 to 6 identified some critical gaps in current strategies to mitigate the different types of barriers to school exclusion. Proposals to improve the impact of some existing programmes have also been discussed. The key recommendations are categorized according to the below focus areas:

I. **Progressive investment on excluded children, weak schools and under-performing areas**

- **Target children who are likely to never enter school** and improve equitable distribution of resources within the education system. An estimated 9.7 million Indian children and 4.8 million Pakistani children are not likely to ever go to school unless specific interventions are in place. The expansion across the region of alternative pathways to education is crucial to reach children who could not access or are pushed out by the traditional schooling system. By increasing investment in these programmes, including increasing the amount invested per pupil and ensuring equivalency, outreach to out-of-school children will be more



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equitable. Scaling-up some of the alternative models of education which are tailored to attract particular groups of marginalized children (e.g. child labourers, migrant children, and older adolescents) is also necessary so these children are equipped with basic literacy, numeracy and relevant life skills.

- **Increase transition rates between the primary and lower secondary education cycle** in the three largest countries. Possible supply-side strategies include: delivering lower secondary education on the same site as primary schools (this has implications for infrastructure but also for teachers and is probably only feasible for primary schools above a certain size). On the demand-side, costs for schooling rise substantially as the education level increases, so measures to offset these costs are needed for poorer children. Girls are less likely to transition to lower secondary education hence specific measures to improve their completion of the basic education cycle is crucial. There is also a need to address dropout and repetition in primary schooling so children can transition to lower secondary education.
- **Continue to expand public provision of school (and pre-school) infrastructure targeted at areas where need is greatest**, taking into account demand-side factors. For example there is an acute shortage of schools for girls in rural Pakistan; and many primary schools in Bangladesh operate double shifts (and restricted learning hours) due to insufficient classrooms. To match rapidly increasing pre-school enrolment of children from urban and middle-income families, governments have to prioritize pre-primary provision in marginalized rural areas in order to provide equitable opportunities.
- **Provide schools and districts that perform below average in terms of retention and learning achievements with appropriate support and resources** in a needs-based manner. This might imply that some of the performance-based incentives schemes, such as per capita grants, matching grants for community contributions, and social audits as condition for additional cash transfers are not the best fitted programmatic response for under-performing schools. For example, experience in India has shown that under-performing schools improve more rapidly when they receive stronger personalized guidance, capacity building and on-location support from educational authorities and civil society organizations.
- **Invest in rural areas and urban slums** in terms of coverage and quality improvement, especially in the rational distribution of trained teachers to address the disparities in these areas and ensure the gaps do not worsen.

## II. Inclusive and equitable education sector-wide approaches

- **Translate ambitious political commitment and progressive objectives of education plans into specific and equitable results to overcome disparities** in terms of gender, educational opportunities for children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and geographic discrepancies. Set targets that take into account the agreed results to be achieved through doable time-bound programmes with appropriate budget.
- **Ensure gender-sensitive, equitable and responsive budget allocations and utilization** by tracking expenditures and assessing planned versus utilized budget across urban-rural disaggregation, level of schooling, and geographic location. Identify bottlenecks that hinder implementation and limit absorption capacity. Address these bottlenecks starting with those that affect mostly marginalized groups and areas.
- **Make direct cash grants more beneficial for schools.** School grants need to be predictable, timely, transparent, flexible and of appropriate value, to be effective and avoid a perverse impact such as increased risk of corruption. Varying the level of public subsidy according to community poverty levels as done in Sri Lanka, is an approach that should be considered as a means of narrowing differences in total spending on education (public and private) per student.
- **Explore ways to capitalize on public–private partnerships to expand provision, particularly of lower secondary education for disadvantaged students.** If public provision for secondary schooling does not match the demand, alternative (temporary) scenarios need to be explored taking into account that the government has primary responsibility to ensure the right to education. For example, provide incentives to private schools that receive public subsidies to expand enrolment and to serve disadvantaged students. This can be done by having a transparent, competitive and open bidding process, and clear contracts which detail outputs and responsibilities for both parties.





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### III. Child-centered approach

- **Concerted action is necessary to eliminate corporal punishment**, which many children in the region are subjected to, making schools far from child-friendly environments conducive to learning. Laws prohibiting corporal punishment look likely to be in place in all four countries in the near future, which is a strong signal of intent, but this needs further attention, to ensure that social norms and practices are adjusted accordingly.
- **Improving teaching and learning processes at scale must be at the core of reform efforts.** There are many ways to start this process, but it is worth considering some of the successful models of child-centered pedagogy in the region as the basis for reform. Achieving change at scale in this area almost certainly requires interventions in curricula, learning materials, formative and continuous assessments, teacher education and management (including addressing high levels of teacher absenteeism). All of these reforms need to be carefully sequenced.

### IV. Well-functioning, well-managed and accountable education systems

- **Promote age-appropriate enrolment and reduce age-grade disparity** in the three largest countries. Possible strategies include making pre-primary education a part of the basic education cycle so children are more likely enrol in Grade 1 at the appropriate age and are more 'school-ready'; undertaking campaigns at the community level at the start of the school year to encourage parents to enrol children at the correct age; work with parents and communities to raise demand of quality education; changing the policy on repetition in Bangladesh in line with competency-based assessment and automatic promotion to vastly reduce the need for children to repeat grades.
- **Reduce dropout rates in the primary cycle**, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh. To ensure that enrolled children stay in school and complete the full primary education cycle, schools, resource centres, district education and social welfare authorities should be empowered, supported and held responsible for minimizing drop-out in their schools. Practices that reduce the risk of drop-out should be promoted in parallel fashion: systematically at policy and at school level. Immediate results should be achieved in the areas of grade repetition (by continuous assessment instead of examination), remedial teaching (children falling behind receive additional in- and out-of classroom support), multi-lingual education in the early grades of primary education (teachers from the community who speak the language should be recruited; children speaking their mother tongues when in school should not be penalized), encourage age-appropriate enrolment, zero tolerance for teacher absenteeism, make schools child-seeking schools (teachers visit family when child does not go to school for a prolonged time).

- **Improve key aspects of teacher management**, so that teachers have clear incentives to perform well in the classrooms; school-management committees have the capacity to reward and sanction as appropriate. The politicization of teacher recruitment and deployment also needs to be tackled if the wide disparities in class sizes, which favor urban areas, are to be reduced.
- **Ensure conducive environment for education programmes in emergency situations.** Flexible and innovative programmes exist to attract children and youth to schooling or alternative learning spaces among affected populations, but low levels and unpredictable funding undermine effective and continued responses. In addition, existing policies need to be reformed in order to address better the needs of emergency response such as the ability to print textbooks locally (with the textbook curriculum on the MOE website), equivalency given to NFE programmes, flexibility for enrolment in schools in host communities, etc.
- **Improve use of resources by increasing efficiency and effectiveness of programmes**, particularly those targeted at disadvantaged groups. The efficiency of some of the existing targeting mechanisms of large-scale CCTs could be improved considerably using measures such as targeting based on poverty or geographic location. Consideration should also be given to the level of the cash transfer, in light of high opportunity costs (as well as direct schooling costs). An innovative approach might be to target child laborers with a CCT. The profiles analysis could help refine profiles of child laborers for effective targeting: for example amongst out-of-school children in Bangladesh older boys are particularly likely to be engaged in child labor. From an equity perspective, consideration should be given to include in the education cash transfers schemes children attending NFE or flexible programmes.

#### V. Accelerate efforts to mitigate socio-cultural barriers to schooling

- **Give higher priority to interventions mitigating socio-cultural barriers to schooling** since there are relatively few effective programmes in place. Some of the key barriers are child marriage (and early childbearing) for girls, restricted physical and social mobility for older girls, discriminatory employment practices affecting minority communities, lack of information on the likely returns to education, social norms related to schooling and child labor, and social neglect and abuse of particular groups of marginalized children (e.g. children with disabilities). To mitigate gender gaps related to socio-cultural barriers, the profiles data suggest that it would be appropriate to target poor families with primary school-age children in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and older children in Pakistan, Bangladesh and rural India.
- **Invest vigorously in increased access for specific groups of marginalised children who do not show up in the aggregate OOSC profiles** (partly because of data constraints) but are disproportionately excluded from school as other data sources suggest. Such groups include: children with disabilities; children from ethnic minorities often with different languages; children from religious minorities; children living in urban slums, and on the street; children from families who migrate seasonally for work; and refugee and internally displaced children. Aside from targeting these groups with education that takes into account their needs and specific circumstances, it also includes addressing discriminatory socio-cultural practices in the education system and society at large.
- **More cross-sectoral efforts at scale are needed, between education, health, child protection and welfare.** It is clear that the barriers keeping children from school or pushing them out of school cannot be dealt with by the education sector alone. The involvement of central ministries (e.g. Planning, Finance, Prime Minister's office), which set country-level performance frameworks including targets on education participation, is critical in ensuring appropriate cross-sectoral incentives.

### Some priorities for further research

This study raises a number of research questions related to school participation in the four countries and the region at large. Some priority areas for research, grouped into three focus areas, are mentioned below. The findings from this research should help to inform the policy debate on how best to mitigate school exclusion in the region, by filling important information gaps.

#### I. Focus on early childhood development (ECD) and early grades of primary education

- A systematic review of the main types of ECD programmes available will be important to make informed policy decisions. Numerous different models of ECD operate in the region - from provision of pre-school education in primary school facilities to fully integrated ECD programmes which have education components.

- Research on the impact of ECD/pre-primary education exposure of children on their retention and performance in primary education;
- Late entry to school is common, particularly in Pakistan. It would be useful to understand the main reasons behind this, and whether the comparatively early entry age of 5 years is relevant;
- Studies on how and what type of multi-lingual education in the early grades of primary education improves enrolment, retention and learning achievements of children.

## II. Focus on enhancing inclusion and learning

- Research on how and what quality improvements in schooling impacts enrolment, retention and learning achievements, and on how parents perceive the quality of education.
- Noteworthy practices related to alternative pathways to basic education (e.g. NFE, flexible learning or accelerated programmes, etc.) for primary and lower secondary school-age out-of-school children, including information on what is required to scale them up and/or expand these programmes.
- Noteworthy practices on mainstreaming primary school-age children to formal education.
- Noteworthy practices to meet the learning needs of children with disabilities, including on scaling up or expansion.
- Schooling and work decisions for children who drop in and out of schooling, including seasonal migrants. These children are comparatively difficult to track, and so some basic research is needed to establish their profiles, the scale of this pattern of schooling, and the factors which prevent these children spending sustained periods in school.

## III. Focus on sector coordination and other issues

- Noteworthy practices in addressing public investment and alignment regarding different streams of schooling (e.g. secular and religious; formal and non-formal; public and private) for improved sector planning and resource prioritization with a focus on disadvantaged groups.
- The actual and perceived connection between school, work and future income. This could be much better understood, particularly for marginalised groups who do not have the same professional opportunities in the labour market.
- More data and research on the characteristics and barriers keeping children out of school (see data recommendations below).

## Data recommendations

Section 2.2 in Chapter 2 highlighted some of the limitations of the data sources used in the study. Some recommendations for strengthening data sources on school participation and exclusion are:

- a) Ministries of education should use and analyse household survey data on education to complement administrative (EMIS) data, particularly in designing policies, programmes and interventions for disadvantaged groups.
- b) Improve the quality of the data collected on pre-school programmes: establish an administrative data collection system which covers all service providers; use standardized definitions in both household surveys and administrative data collection.
- c) Use standard definitions on dropout, OOSC, and school types in administrative data collection systems and in household surveys to improve comparability, and enable better monitoring.
- d) In household surveys covering health and nutrition (and school attendance), collect additional data on selected health and nutrition indicators (anthropometrics) and on disabilities for children of school age (or a subset of children of school age).
- e) In the administrative data collection system, make efforts to tag schools located in urban slum areas.
- f) Integrate the fragmented administrative data collection systems covering basic education in Bangladesh (see country OOSCI study for details).
- g) Improve the coverage of the administrative data collection system in countries, particularly in Pakistan to systematically include all types of public and private providers.
- h) When possible, administrative data collection, particularly in India, should try to collect data on children's age including in pre-primary education (see country OOSCI study for details).
- i) Where there are concerns about the quality of the school census data for particular reasons (e.g. potential inflation of enrolment data in response to incentives), conduct carefully designed sample surveys to validate the data.
- j) Improve the data collection system, coverage and reliability of data on non-formal and flexible education programmes and use these for informed policy making, including increased investment.

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