

## Regional fact sheet – South and West Asia

South and West Asia has made significant progress since the Education for All goals were adopted in 2000. Enrolment has risen at the primary level, especially in India, and most countries have made great strides towards gender parity. However, many of these gains, as well as other human development goals, are under threat from the global economic downturn. Conflict also affects education systems in Afghanistan and several other countries of the region.

### EFA progress and challenges

- Children who suffer nutritional deprivation in the womb or malnutrition during the early years of life are at risk of developmental delays that impede later learning. Six of the nine countries in the region have stunting prevalence rates of 30% or more. In South Asia, over one in four children are delivered with low birth weight.
- On average 36% of the children of pre-primary school age in the region were enrolled in pre-primary education in 2007, which is close to the developing-country average. This represented more than 36 million young children, up by 69% since 1999.
- Between 1999 and 2007, the average *net enrolment ratio* (NER) in primary education in South and West Asia increased from 74% to 86%. Country NERs range from 66% in Pakistan to 96% in the Maldives.
- South and West Asia has achieved remarkable progress since 1999 in reducing its *out-of-school population* by more than a half – a decline of 21 million. Much of the decline took place in India. Nepal and the Islamic Republic of Iran also reduced their out-of-school numbers by 31% and 76%, respectively. However, the region still has 18 million out-of-school children and accounts for a quarter of the global out-of-school population.
- The expansion of primary education has gone hand in hand with progress towards *gender parity*. The regional gender parity index (GPI) of the gross enrolment ratio (GER) was 0.95 in 2007, compared with 0.84 in 1999. Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka have achieved gender parity in primary education, and Bangladesh and the Islamic Republic of Iran have higher female than male enrolment. Afghanistan and Pakistan are the only two countries in the region to have major disparities at the expense of girls.
- In South and West Asia there were almost 30 million *out-of-school adolescents* in 2007, equivalent to 28% of the lower secondary school age group.
- The average secondary GER for the region (including both lower and upper secondary education) had reached 52% in 2007. Country GERs ranged from 28% in Afghanistan to 83% in the Maldives. In Afghanistan only 26% of all secondary school students are girls.
- In South and West Asia, the regional adult literacy rate increased by 17 percentage points between 1985-1994 and 2000-2007 to reach 64%. However, the region still accounts for more than half the 759 million illiterate adults in the world: an estimated 391 million adults, lack the *basic literacy and numeracy skills* needed in everyday life.
- India has the largest number of adult illiterates in the world, with 270 million.

- Gender disparities contribute to high adult illiteracy rates, with women accounting for 63% of the region's adult illiterate population. In India, Nepal and Pakistan, women are about twice as likely as men to be illiterate.
- South and West Asia is poorly covered by *international assessments* that measure disparities in student learning achievements among countries. In rural Pakistan, a recent survey found that only two-thirds of students in grade 3 could subtract single digit numbers, and only a small proportion could tell the time or carry out simple multiplication and division.
- For the six countries with data, none has achieved the four most easily quantifiable EFA goals, and only one, the Maldives, is close to doing so. The remaining five countries are far from achieving EFA.

### **Marginalization in education**

Absolute deprivation in education remains at extraordinarily high levels throughout South and West Asia, despite the progress of the past decade. A new data set on education marginalization reveals that factors leading to marginalization do not operate in isolation: wealth and gender intersect with language, ethnicity, region and rural-urban differences to create mutually reinforcing disadvantages.

- In India, a child spends over seven years in school on average. Wealthy urban boys and girls average more than eleven years in school, compared with less than six for poor rural boys and just three for poor rural girls. Girls from poor households living in the state of Bihar are further disadvantaged, and receive less than 2 years of education on average.
- Policies to combat marginalization are making a difference: A stipend programme in Bangladesh is helping keep girls in school. A new law in India now legally requires states to provide free education to children aged 6 to 14.

### **National education finance**

- The share of GNP devoted to education increased between 1999 and 2007 in four of the five countries with data, especially in the Isl. Rep. of Iran (from 4.5% to 5.6%) and Nepal (from 2.9% to 3.8%). However, it decreased in India (from 4.5% to 3.2%). Overall, the share of public spending on education ranged from 2.4% to 3.8% in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, well below the developing country median (4.5%).
- The regional median share of education in government budgets was below 20% – a figure commonly used as the benchmark for minimally adequate funding in low-income countries – in all the countries with data. In 2007 it hovered from about 11% in Pakistan and the Maldives to 19.5% in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **International aid for education**

- Averaged over 2006 and 2007, total annual aid to education to South and West Asia amounted to US\$1.3 billion, up from US\$0.9 billion a year in 1999 and 2000. However, although education accounted for 13% of total aid flows to the region in 1999 and 2000, the share was only 8% in 2006 and 2007.
- Aid distribution within the group of conflict-affected countries is highly concentrated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which, together with Ethiopia, accounted for more than half of total aid to basic education in conflict-affected countries in 2006–2007.