

The right to education:

What's at stake in Afghanistan?

A 20-year review



UNESCO – a global leader in education

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.

The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



Published in 2021 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2021



This document is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this document, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Cover photo: [timsimages.uk/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/timsimages)

Graphic design: ADV Design

Infographic on page 5: Svenja Greenwood

Icons on page 35: Hand ([Guaxinim/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/Guaxinim)), Displaced persons ([Nsit/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/Nsit)),

Gender equality ([RedKoala/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/RedKoala)), Disabled population ([Leremy/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/Leremy)),

Children ([Julia Khimich/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/JuliaKhimich))

The right to education:

What's at stake in Afghanistan?

A 20-year review

Contents

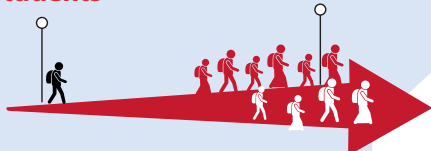
20 years of education progress in Afghanistan	5
Key figures	7
Report highlights	8
Introduction	9
Section 1. Human development and economic trends	11
Section 2. Evolution of education system performance	15
2.1. Human development : significant progress in education, yet lagging behind neighbouring countries	16
2.2. Significant progress in literacy, but the rate is still low especially among women	17
2.3. Participation in education expanded substantially, especially among girls	17
2.4. TVET attracts growing numbers of students	20
2.5. Sharp rise in tertiary education enrolments and international mobility	21
2.6. Students in Afghanistan stay in school longer, but disparities remain	22
2.7. Education quality has improved, but many challenges persist	22
2.8. Education financing has been volatile, with high dependency on aid	27
Section 3. Progress in ensuring the right to education for all	31
3.1. The Right to Education was reinforced	32
3.2. Protecting girls and women's right to education remained a high priority	34
3.3. Child protection has been an important concern	35
3.4. Inclusion and equality in education strengthened	35
Section 4. What future for education development and cooperation?	37
4.1. Issues at stake	39
4.2. Immediate actions to meet urgent educational needs	40
4.3. Actions to continue building an inclusive and equitable education system	41

20 Years of Education Progress in Afghanistan



10X
increase in enrolments

2001: **1 million students**
2018: **10 million students**



- Primary school: 773,000 → 6.5 million
- Lower secondary: 202,000 → 2 million
- Upper secondary: 160,000 → 1 million
- Higher education: 26,000 → 0.4 million

*of whom 7.6% study abroad



Strong gains for girls and women

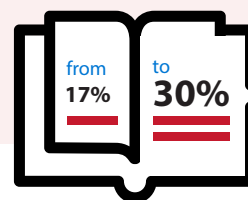
Primary education



2001: Almost 0 out of 10 students are girls
Today: **4 out of 10 students are girls***

* Lower secondary: 35.7% students; Upper secondary: 34% students; Higher education: 24.6% of students

The female literacy rate almost doubled from 2011 to 2018



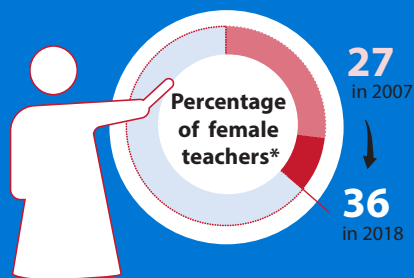
Steady expansion of the teaching force



Increase in number of teachers from 2007 to 2018:

58%

143,000 in 2007 → 226,000 in 2018



*The number of female teachers increased by 105% from 2007 to 2018

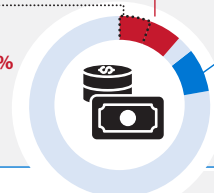
Education financing is highly dependent on aid

Afghanistan total government expenditure on Education:

12%

External aid represents 49% of education expenditure

International benchmark: 15-20%



Expenditure on education in the last decade compared within the region:

- Bhutan and Nepal above
- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka below



Key figures

Access

- Since 2001, there has been enormous progress in enrolment at all education levels reaching a ten-fold increment, **from around 1 million students in 2001 to around 10 million in 2018**"
- The number of girls in primary school has increased from almost zero in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2018. **Today 4 out of 10 students in primary education are girls**
- About **380,000 students were enrolled in higher education** in 2018 compared to around 26,000 in 2003
- The number of girls in higher education increased **from around 5,000 in 2001 to around 90,000** in 2018
- The number of higher education students going abroad has increased thirteen-fold from 2001 to reach **more than 30,000** in 2018

Quality

- The teaching workforce increased to around **226,000 teachers** in 2018 including around **81,000 women** serving all levels of education
- The percentage of **qualified teachers**, according to national standards, steadily increased at all levels of school education reaching around **80% in 2018**

Finance

- Government **expenditure on education** increased regularly to reach **3.9% of GDP** in 2019
- **External aid** represents a large proportion of education expenditure, standing at around **49% in 2020**

Human development status

- Afghanistan has the youngest population in South and West Asia and is one of the poorest countries in the world. The **Human Development Index (HDI) value increased from 0.35 in 2001 to 0.511 in 2019** while the mean years of schooling increased by 2.4 years¹ and the expected years of schooling² increased to 7.5 years
- Significant progress in literacy has been made, with the **literacy rate increasing from 32% in 2011 to 43% in 2018**, but still remaining among the lowest in the world
- The female literacy rate almost doubled in a decade, **from 17% in 2011 to 30% in 2018**
- The **total unemployment** rate stood at **8.84%** in 2018, while the rate for **youth was higher at 17.5%, and 21.8% for women**. Employment remains heavily reliant on agriculture

¹ Average number of completed years of education of a country's population aged 25 years and older, excluding years spent repeating individual grades.

² The number of years during which a 2-year-old child can expect to spend in schooling.

Report highlights

- **Afghanistan has achieved appreciable progress over the past two decades yet the task of building an inclusive and equitable education system remains colossal and fears of regression run high since August 2021 and a looming humanitarian catastrophe.** From a very low level of enrolment, the number of students has increased steadily at all levels of education. Gender disparities have narrowed, and the proportion of female teachers continues to increase. The literacy rate has improved through continued support from development partners. Steady efforts have been made to expand the school network across the country.
- **A strong constitutional, legal and policy commitment to ensure the right to education is in place but it is in peril.** Afghanistan's constitution (2004) guarantees the right to education for all citizens. The country legally guarantees 9 years of compulsory education and has ratified major international normative instruments, including the Convention against Discrimination in Education. Numerous legal and policy actions were undertaken over the last 20 years to increase access to, and improve the quality of education, while reducing disparities between girls and boys, women and men, rural and urban areas, as well as between ethnic population groups. Now there is rising fear that the right to education and lifelong learning opportunities, in particular for girls and women, may be curtailed. The introduction of policies and actions that may be instituted limiting girls' and women's access to education and training opportunities, threatens to reverse the main gains on gender equality made in education over the past 20 years.
- **Learning poverty and illiteracy jeopardize the future:** Literacy rates are the lowest in the subregion and among the lowest in the world. Fifty per cent of primary school-aged children are not enrolled in school while 93% of children in Afghanistan at late primary age today are not proficient in reading.
- **Despite notable progress, weighty challenges remain on the fronts of access, quality and learning outcomes.** The reasons behind the low performance of Afghanistan's education system are complex, but evidence indicates that insufficient attention to the holistic development of the child, including through the provision of early learning opportunities, as well as underqualified teaching staff, are among them. Initial qualifications and training of trainers have improved since 2001 but remain inadequate to ensure quality learning opportunities for all Afghan children.
- **Public expenditure on education is inadequate and highly dependent on international aid:** A significant portion of the core budget expenditures during the last five years was funded through donor aid, reaching 49% in 2020. Estimates calculated before the current situation suggest that the total budget would need to double between 2020 and 2025 if the country was to increase student enrolment by 2.5%
- **The reduction of financial resources will jeopardize progress** at a time when learners, educators and displaced people need not only substantial but also predictable and effective financial support from the international community. With the deep political changes in Afghanistan in 2021 and the risk of being cut off from the monetary reserves of the Afghan state, such a heavy dependence on aid in running the education system raises several serious questions on how to sustain past progress in education and ensure learning continuity. The new administration faces severe constraints in disbursing teacher salaries and requires donor assistance to reopen primary schools.
- **The right to education should be ensured for all, including internally displaced persons most at risk of missing learning opportunities.** There were an estimated 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of 31 December 2020, a number that is expected to increase with the current crisis (UNHCR). Actions from governments and the international community are required where there is a large population of displaced persons or returnees.
- All relevant actors in Afghanistan should provide **necessary support that directly benefits all learners** in Afghanistan and promotes increased participation in quality education opportunities. The international community **should ensure that international commitments to the right to education** for all children, youth and adults, regardless of their gender, ethnicity and location are safeguarded **with particular attention to decisions impacting girls and women.**

Introduction

This report takes stock of the achievements in education made by Afghanistan over the past 20 years and of the remaining challenges and gaps that need addressing urgently against the backdrop of deep political change in the country. The analysis is based on selected information and education indicators from the public domain, comparing Afghanistan's development trajectory in education with that of seven other countries in South Asia.³

From the outset, this report acknowledges that Afghanistan lags far behind all its neighbouring countries on most development indicators, especially those in education. Despite these shortcomings, an analysis of Afghanistan's education trajectory over the past two decades reveals that, relatively speaking, its pace of progress has been faster than that of most other countries in the South Asia subregion.

This fact leads us to believe that rapid progress, with the right breakthrough rather than breakdown intervention, is still possible. Afghanistan can develop still further by building on its past achievements, drawing lessons from both its own and other countries' experiences, by committing to state obligations on the right to education and by removing bottlenecks that impede further progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and especially SDG 4 on education.

This report starts with a brief analysis of the broader development context within which education progress has been made. Considering the relative abundance of studies and analyses of Afghanistan's economic, social and security situations, **Section 1** deliberately focuses on some of those socio-economic sectors that have immediate bearing on education development, such as demographic, economic and employment trends.

Section 2 assesses the evolution in a range of education indicators over the past two decades and the persistent challenges that Afghanistan has been facing and needs to address in the future. While the pace of progress, as reflected by some indicators, has been faster in Afghanistan than in other countries in the subregion, sustained efforts are needed to address the root causes of educational underdevelopment and to create a better performing education system for the Afghan people.

Section 3 analyses Afghanistan's legal and policy frameworks in the context of relevant international instruments and in comparison to countries in the subregion. The section highlights some critical areas that directly impact efforts to ensure the right to education for all, especially girls and women, as well as vulnerable populations, such as internally displaced persons, disadvantaged population groups and people in disadvantaged areas.

Section 4 concludes with prospects for the future as regards state obligations, conditions, measures and actions that Afghanistan, together with the international community, may consider with a view to achieving internationally agreed upon education development targets.

³The eight countries considered as South Asia in this report are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Iran often included in Southern Asia is excluded from this report.



درس : ص

ص - ص

صالحون - صنفون

Section 1

Human development
and economic trends

This section examines human development, demographic economic trends and labour market indicators, including employment. Afghanistan has the youngest population in the sub-region and has made gains over the past 20 years in human development. But child malnutrition, stunting and child mortality remain high. Child labour is pervasive. Economic growth has been volatile and the labour market remains dysfunctional with high youth unemployment, particularly among women.

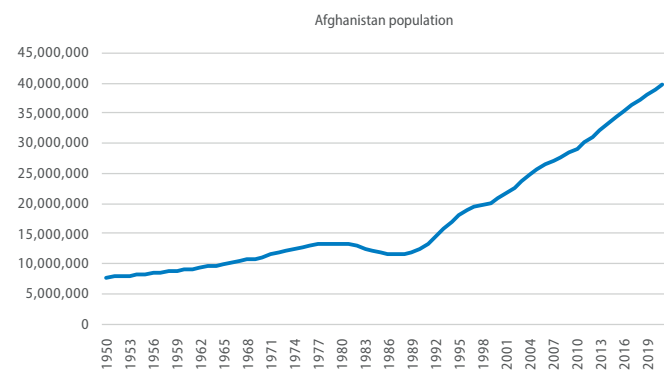
A young and growing population

The population of Afghanistan has increased rapidly over the past two decades from 21.6 million in 2001 to 39.6 million in 2021 (Figure 1.1). From 2000-05, the population grew by 4.2 per cent annually and was still increasing by 2.5 per cent from 2015-20. At nearly 40 million inhabitants, the population of the country seems small when compared to other South Asian countries such as Bangladesh (165 million), India (1.4 billion) and Pakistan (225 million), yet it is growing much more rapidly than other countries (1 to 1.5 per cent annually in most other countries and 2.0 in Pakistan).⁴

Declines in fertility rates observed in other contexts are less evident in Afghanistan and (to some extent) Pakistan. Women in other countries in the region have 1.9 to 2.2 children on average, leading national populations to stabilize within a couple of generations, while Afghan women have 4.6 children on average and those in Pakistan have 3.6. High fertility rates are linked to high rates of early marriage; 1 in 3 Afghan girls (35%) is married before 18 and nearly 1 in 5 (17%) is married before turning 15.

Afghanistan has by far the youngest population in the region with 63.8% under 25 compared to 45.6% of the South Asian subregion. Afghanistan has notably low levels of human development and urbanization. Only 26% of Afghanistan's population resides in cities, ranking 7th out of 8 South Asian countries. The child mortality rate is high at 68 deaths per thousand live births, with only Pakistan ranking higher at 75. Afghanistan has one of the world's highest rates of stunting in children under five: 41%; in India, it is 35.5% and the average for the South Asia region is 31.7%. The rate of wasting, the extreme manifestation of severe acute malnutrition, in Afghanistan is extremely high at 9.5%. Life expectancy at birth is also distinctly lower than in the rest of the region. Afghan girls can expect to live 66 years, compared with 80 years in Sri Lanka; while boys can expect to live 63 years, compared with 75 in Iran. On the other hand, Afghanistan's unbalanced sex ratio of 105 men per 100 women is a feature shared with most other countries in the region.

Figure 1.1: Population growth in Afghanistan



Source: NSIA, Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2018-19

⁴United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>)

If leveraged properly, these population dynamics can bring about a demographic dividend. If left unaddressed, they can strain the education system and act as a bottleneck in regard to the formation of human capital, as has been the case in past decades.

A weak economy dependent on development aid

Economic growth has been extremely volatile since the early 2000s and has slowed considerably since 2013. In constant purchasing power parity terms, per capita income increased by 74% from 2002 to 2012 but stagnated from 2012 to 2017 and has declined by nearly 10% since then. Inflation was high in the 2000s, but due to economic malaise it has been relatively low since 2014. The nation's fiscal deficit and public debts have stabilized since the late 2000s, yet most of the State budget has been relying on official development assistance (ODA). In fact, over the past decade government revenue made up only one-quarter of GDP.

Afghanistan is by far the poorest country in South Asia. At PPP \$2,226 in 2020, GDP per capita in Afghanistan is only 59% of the GDP in Nepal, about 45% of the level in Bangladesh or Pakistan, 37% of the level in India, and less than one fifth of the GDP per capita in neighbouring Iran. Growth in 2019 was slower and recession in 2020 deeper than in most other countries of the region.

A dysfunctional and unfair labour market

Labour market indicators reflect landlocked Afghanistan's isolation, the impact of conflict and the lack of economic modernization under such circumstances. Agriculture dominated the labour market in the early 2000s, employing

four-fifths of working women and nearly two-thirds of working men. Since then, industry and services have expanded considerably, employing 17 and 47% of working men respectively in 2019. Working women have remained largely excluded from these new job opportunities; in 2019 nearly two thirds were still employed in agriculture.

Indeed, women are largely excluded from the labour force all together. Labour force participation rates for men remained high throughout 2005-19, averaging above 85% for adults over 25 and around 50% for young people between 15 and 25 in urban areas. The youth employment rate decreased from 71 to 61% in rural areas, reflecting either declining employment opportunities or expanding education opportunities. Meanwhile, female labour force participation decreased in the late 2000s before increasing during the 2010s to 22%. In urban areas, 17 per cent of women work while in rural areas it is less than a quarter. Women remain, by and large, excluded from managerial positions and only 10% of working women are employed in services, far lower than in neighbouring countries. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, women represent only around 5-6% of persons in managerial positions, compared with 10 to 20% in most other countries in the region. Overall, 74% of young women are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Child labour is pervasive; in 2014 17% of girls aged 5-11 were engaged in economic activity as were 20 to 25% of boys aged 5-17.

Economic underdevelopment translates into levels of working poverty of an order of magnitude above those in other countries of the region – 41.0% among young people and 31.5% among adults in 2019, compared with less than 5% in all other countries of the region except Bangladesh (6.3 and 5.4%, respectively) and India (10.4 and 7.3%). Output per worker regressed from 2017-19 in Afghanistan while rising in most countries of the region during the same period.



Section 2

Evolution of education

system performance

This section provides insights on how Afghanistan's education system performance has evolved over the past 20 years in select dimensions, namely access to and participation in education, equity, quality, and education financing. Wherever possible, an attempt has been made to compare national achievement in these areas with other countries. The assessment of the achievements against the reference criteria is obviously constrained by the limited resources and availability of internationally comparable data.

2.1. Human development: significant progress in education, yet lagging behind neighbouring countries

Table 2.1. Human Development Index 2020

GNI per capita (constant 2017 PPP\$)		Human Development Index		Human Development Index, female	Education index	Gender Development Index
Country	Value	Rank (/189)	Value	Value	Value	Value
Afghanistan	2,229	169	0.511	0.391	0.414	0.66
Bangladesh	4,976	133	0.632	0.596	0.529	0.904
Bhutan	10,746	129	0.654	0.626	0.496	0.921
India	6,681	131	0.645	0.573	0.555	0.82
Maldives	17,417	95	0.74	0.698	0.573	0.923
Nepal	3,457	142	0.602	0.581	0.521	0.933
Pakistan	5,005	154	0.557	0.456	0.402	0.745
Sri Lanka	12,707	72	0.782	0.759	0.746	0.955
World	16,734	n/a	0.737	0.714	0.637	0.943

Source: UN HDI 2020

As indicated in Table 2.1, Afghanistan is behind its neighbouring countries in all key human development indicators. But even though it lags behind countries in the subregion, it **has achieved some positive progress on several areas of social and education development**. Between 2000 and 2019, Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) value increased from 0.35 to 0.511, while mean years of schooling increased by 2.4 years and expected years of schooling increased by 7.5 years.

2.2 Significant progress in literacy, but the rate is still low especially among women

Literacy is one of the basic skills that enables people to participate fully in society and in the labour market, improves child and family health and nutrition, reduces poverty, and expands life opportunities.

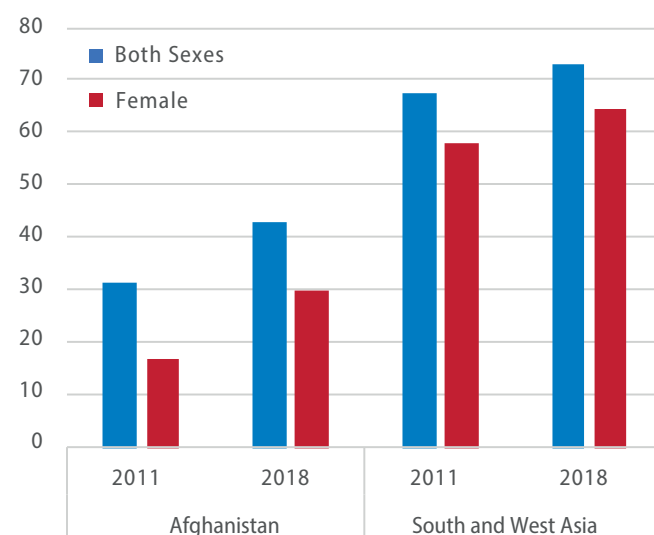
Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. In 2018, more than half (57%) of the adult population (15 years and above) could not read and write. The rate is more than double the average share of 27% of illiterate adults in South Asia. Moreover, the gender gap is large: 80% of women are illiterate and 51% of men. Disparities in the literacy rate also depend on the socio-economic status of the family or whether they live in urban or rural regions. They are cumulative, e.g. in 2011, among women living in rural areas, 90% were illiterate compared to 31% among men living in urban areas.

Despite this dramatic situation, Afghanistan has made significant progress over the last decade: The adult literacy (15 years and above) rate increased from 32% in 2011 to 43% in 2018, representing an increase in 11.6 percent points. At the same time, the increment of female's literacy rate increased by 12.8 percent points from 17% to 30%.

2.3. Participation in education expanded substantially, especially among girls

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Afghanistan was very low at 21% in 2001 with negligible participation of girls. Over the last 20 years, it has substantially increased, with more than 9% average annual growth rate, in 18 years and reaching 104% in 2018. The GER of females reached 83% within 18 years. The base of GER at upper secondary level was only 12% in 2001 and reached 41% with 29% GER of females in 2018. While a significant gender gap remains at all education levels, it is narrowing slowly. The gap is higher in tertiary level and lower at primary level (Table 2.2).

Figure 2.1: Changes in adult literacy rates 2011-2018, Afghanistan and South and West Asia



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

Table 2.2: Gross enrolment ratio by level of education and Gender Parity Index in Afghanistan, 2001-2018

Year	Primary			Lower secondary			Upper Secondary		
	Both Sexes (%)	Female (%)	GPI	Both Sexes (%)	Female (%)	GPI	Both Sexes (%)	Female (%)	GPI
2001	20.9	..	..	13.0	..	..	11.6	..	..
2005	98.1	71.8	0.58	25.2	12.7	0.35	11.4	4.9	0.28
2010	96.9	80.6	0.68	67.4	46.4	0.53	30.6	17.8	0.42
2015	103.5	83.5	0.68	62.1	45.5	0.58	40.2	27.1	0.52
2018	104.0	82.9	0.67	68.9	50.6	0.59	40.8	28.5	0.54

Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

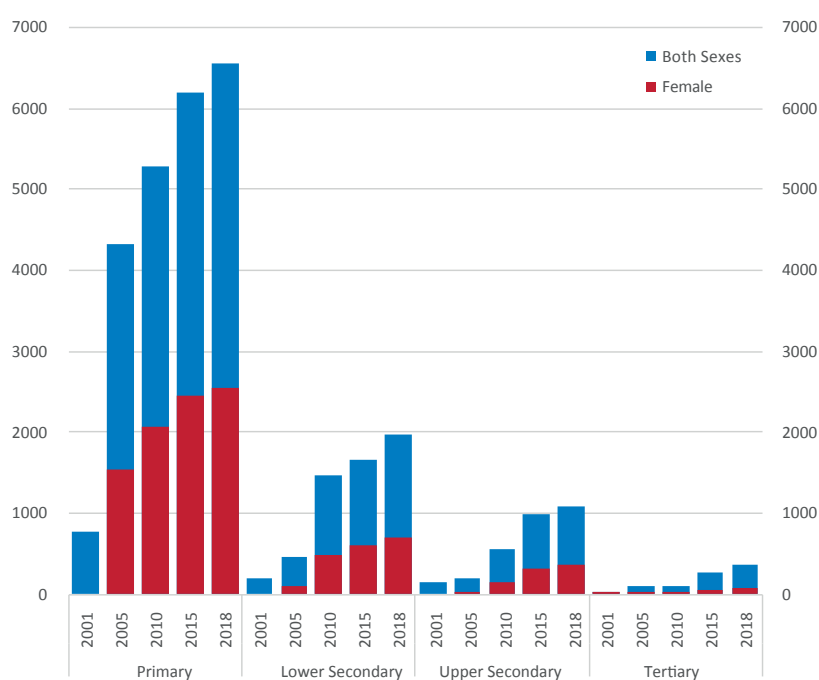
This positive change in access to education, combined with rapid population growth, resulted in a near 10-fold increase of the number of students with a 12.6% average annual growth rate, especially between 2001 and 2005 and notably in primary education. During this period, the share of girls among all students increased from 0% to 39% at primary level and the number reached 3.6 million in primary and secondary education (Table 2.3 & Figure 2.2).

Table 2.3: Number of students in Afghanistan, 2001-2018 by level and sex (thousands)

Year	Primary			Lower secondary			Upper Secondary		
	Both Sexes	Female	% of Female	Both Sexes	Female	% of Female	Both Sexes	Female	% of Female
2001	773.6	..	..	202.5	..	..	160.0	..	..
2005	4,318.8	1,541.3	35.7	461.3	113.1	24.5	190.1	39.1	20.6
2010	5,279.3	2,076.9	39.3	1,476.8	494.9	33.5	567.3	159.4	28.1
2015	6,199.3	2,441.9	39.4	1,669.2	596.5	35.7	982.3	323.4	32.9
2018	6,544.9	2,549.6	39.0	1,982.9	708.6	35.7	1,081.0	367.5	34.0

Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

Figure 2.2: Number of students in Afghanistan by level of education, 2011 - 2018



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

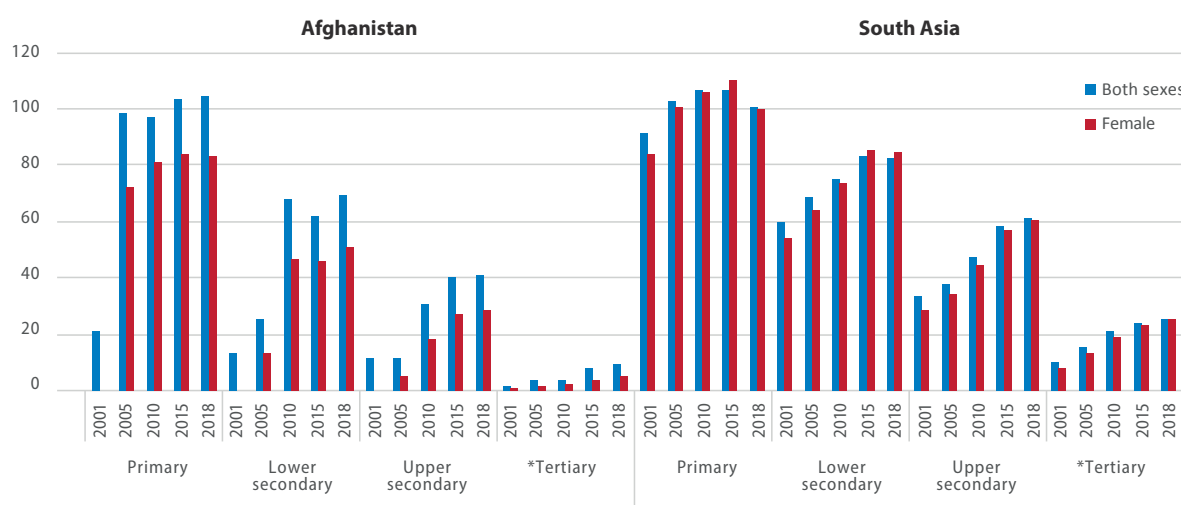
* Tertiary data is from 2003, 2009, 2011, 2014 and 2018

Community-based education (CBE) is one of the strategies employed to expand access to education in remote rural communities which are beyond the reach of the official Ministry of Education system. Supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CBE has offered primary education (grades 1-3) to about 200,000 children over the last six years. In 2018, the total number of CBE students was 355,050 (202,152 boys, 152,907 girls)⁵.

Despite this progress, Afghanistan still lags behind the regional average, especially at higher levels of education. At the same time, the pace of improvement, especially among girls, is faster in Afghanistan than at the regional level, except for in tertiary education (Figure 2.3).

While gender parity was achieved at all levels of education in the majority of countries of the South Asia region, a substantial gender gap remains in Afghanistan and the improvement has stagnated in recent years (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) by level and sex, 2001-2018



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

* Tertiary data is from 2003, 2009, 2011, 2014 and 2018

Table 2.4: Latest Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) by level and by sex in South Asian countries (2018/2020)

Row Labels	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Primary								
Both sexes	104.0	116.5	105.8	96.8	98.0	142.1	95.4	100.2
Female	82.9	120.8	106.6	97.8	99.3	143.5	87.9	99.6
Lower secondary								
Both sexes	68.9	91.4	95.7	83.9	108.1	104.7	55.4	100.4
Female	50.6	102.6	101.7	85.8	99.3	106.1	51.8	100.0
Upper secondary								
Both sexes	40.8	58.8	72.9	66.1	38.8	62.9	34.8	100.3
Female	28.5	60.5	75.0	65.9	43.5	66.7	31.9	105.3
Tertiary education								
Both sexes	9.7	24.0	16.4	28.6	31.2	13.3	9.0	21.1
Female	4.9	20.0	17.0	30.2	59.8	13.7	8.3	26.0

Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

⁵ 2020 Education Sector Analysis (ESA) of Afghanistan, October 2021

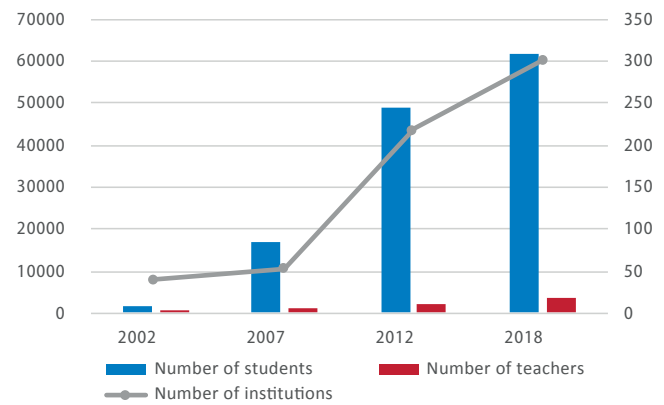
Despite the progress, as many as 3.7 million children (or almost 50% of primary school-aged children) in Afghanistan are estimated to be out of school⁶. Girls are significantly less likely to be in school, so are the poor and rural populations⁷. Reasons for non-attendance in education are multi-faceted involving specifically, among others, economic, cultural, security, health, and distance considerations as well as overall gender inequality.

In Afghanistan, in 2015/16, 37% of primary school-aged children and 39% of lower-secondary school-aged children were not enrolled in school. This is the highest share of out-of-school children in the region. Except for Pakistan (23%), the share of children at primary-school age who are out-of-school, and thus excluded from learning, is less than 7% in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Girls of primary school-age are almost twice as much out-of-school as boys (47% compared to 28%). Most out-of-school children at primary- and secondary-school age (90% and 84% respectively) live in rural regions, so that efforts focused on these areas could reduce out-of-school populations significantly.

2.4. TVET attracts growing numbers of students

Afghanistan currently has in place the the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Strategy (2020-2024) to guide equitable access to quality TVET aligned with the world of work as well as the National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS) to promote competency-based training. In the meantime, the total number of students in formal TVET has grown significantly from 1,510 in 2002 to 61,663 in 2018 while the number of TVET instructors increased from 550 in 2002 to 3824 in 2018. There is no data at present for gender.

Figure 2.4: Number of students, instructors and institutions in formal TVET (2002-2018)



Source: Compiled by UNESCO Kabul Office based on TVETA-MIS
 Note: The number of students and teachers follow the left axis while the number of institutions follows the right axis.

⁶Global Initiative on Out-Of-School Children: Afghanistan Country Study, MoE and UNICEF (2018)

⁷Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-2017. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization (2018)

2.5. Sharp rise in tertiary education enrolments and international mobility

Tertiary education enrolment has increased 14-fold from 26,000 in 2003 to 380,000 with a 25% share of females and a 10% Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5: Expansion of tertiary level enrolment by year and sex, number and GER, 2003-2018

Year	Number of students			Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and GPI		
	Both Sex	Female	% of Female	Both Sex	Female	GPI
2003	26,211	5,344	20.4	1.2	0.5	0.28
2009	95,185	17,163	18.0	3.8	1.4	0.24
2011	97,504	23,662	24.3	3.6	1.8	0.35
2014	262,874	53,613	20.4	8.2	3.5	0.28
2018	370,610	91,217	24.6	9.7	4.9	0.35

Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

International mobility in tertiary education increased substantially since 2001. The growth rate of outbound students from Afghanistan is much higher than in the rest of the region. The average annual growth rate of Afghan outbound student is 15.2% whereas the growth rate for the region is 9.2% (Table 2.6). In 2018, the number exceeded 30,000, which is one third of the total tertiary education enrolment.

Table 2.6: Number of tertiary students going abroad from Afghanistan for tertiary education study by year

Year	Outbound tertiary level student by region and Afghanistan					Average annual growth rate (2001-2018)
	2001	2005	2010	2015	2018	
Number of outbound Afghan student	2,389	2,893	7,759	24,426	30,380	15.20%
Number of outbound South and West Asian student	139,961	235,654	372,694	501,643	684,217	9.20%

Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

2.6. Students in Afghanistan stay in school longer, but disparities remain

Between 2000 and 2019, Afghanistan's mean years of schooling increased by 1.7 years and expected years of schooling increased by 4.3 years⁸. The improvement is more significant among girls and women from near-zero in 2000 to 7.7 years in 2019. However, it is still far shorter than that of boys and men and progress stagnated in recent years (Figure 2.5).

School life expectancy varies by location and is much higher for urban students than rural and Kuchi people (pastoral nomads). For every ten students who start in grade one, eight make it to the end of grade six and less than three make it to the end of grade 12⁹.

2.7. Education quality has improved, but many challenges persist

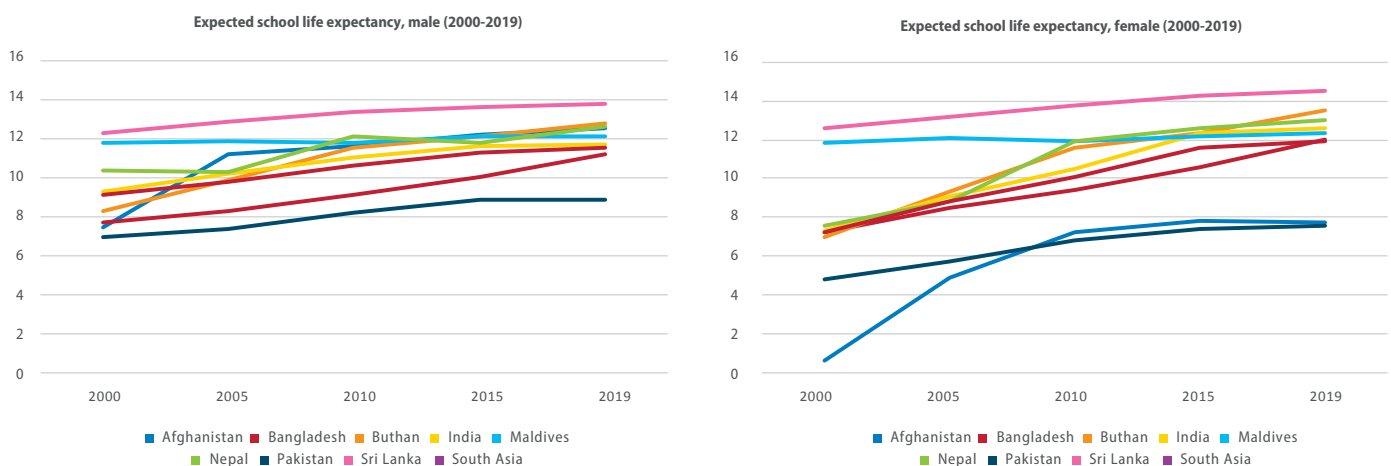
There is no internationally agreed upon definition of what constitutes a good quality of education and how to measure it. What exists are two different, albeit complementary, approaches: equating quality of education with the actual conditions that shape teaching and learning (e.g. school facilities, school resources or the qualifications of teachers) or with the educational processes (e.g. curriculum, pedagogy, assessment), or considering student performance the best proxy for education quality. The fact that Afghanistan does

not yet have standardized performance tests or national examinations at the primary or secondary school levels makes it difficult to make any analysis in terms of student learning achievement and learning outcomes.

Student learning performance: Afghanistan administered two National Large-Scale Assessments (NLSA) from 2001 covering Grade 6 in 2013 and Grade 3 in 2016. These are related to SDG4.1a and SDG4.b indicators- Proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex.

The Minimum Proficiency Level (MPL) at Grade 3 is 22% which is much lower than any other country in the South and West Asia region. The highest MPL of Grade 2/3 are from Bangladesh and India which is 47%. The MPL is also on the lower side with 24.5% for Mathematics for Afghanistan which is also the lowest in the region, except for Pakistan. The MPL at the end of primary level in reading is 13% in 2013, which is lowest among the South and West Asian region. Similarly, the MPL in mathematics at 11% is also the lowest in the region. The highest is 73% from Sri Lanka on mathematics. Both grades' (Grade 3 and Grade 6) data shows that the country is far from achieving SDG4 in the near future. The MPL refers to the minimum set of skills a student need to have by the end of each level to acquire meaningful learning outcomes (e.g. at the end of primary to read and understand basic text).

Figure 2.5: Expected school life expectancy for male and female, South Asia (2000-2019)



Source: Human Development Report Data Center, accessed on 3 September 2021

⁸ Human Development Report Data Center, accessed on 3 September 2021

⁹ 2020 Education Sector Analysis (ESA) of Afghanistan, October 2020

Quality of teaching: The quality of student learning strongly depends on high quality teaching. Therefore, a sufficient number of qualified teachers, with at least the minimum required academic qualifications, is crucial for quality learning outcomes. In addition, the ratio of pupils per teacher substantially impacts learning outcomes, as it determines the time a teacher can dedicate to each student. The situation in Afghanistan is challenging as its primary education system has a ratio of 62 pupils per teacher, almost double South Asia's regional average of 33 pupils per teacher. Class sizes may be even larger as several teachers are often responsible for a single class. The situation is better at lower secondary and upper secondary levels of education, which have ratios of 43 and 41 pupils per teacher respectively. However, when compared to the regional average of 25 pupils per teacher in lower secondary education and 31 pupils per teachers in upper secondary education, it becomes apparent that Afghanistan's ratio could be significantly improved. As the

country is characterized by continued budget constraints and a severe shortage of qualified teachers, more investment in education is necessary to ensure sufficient teaching resources for Afghan students.

The share of qualified teachers is increasing especially at the higher levels of education, but the increase may not be sufficient to keep up with the increasing number of students. As access to education expands, the number of teachers is increasing in all levels of education from 2007. The number of teachers increased by 58% from 2007 to 2018, rising from 143,000 to 226,000. The increment of female teachers during the same period is 105%, much higher than that for the total number of teachers. The proportion of female teachers is almost the same in all levels of education starting from 28% in 2007 and reaching 36% in 2018, an 8 percent point increment in 11 years (Table 2.7).

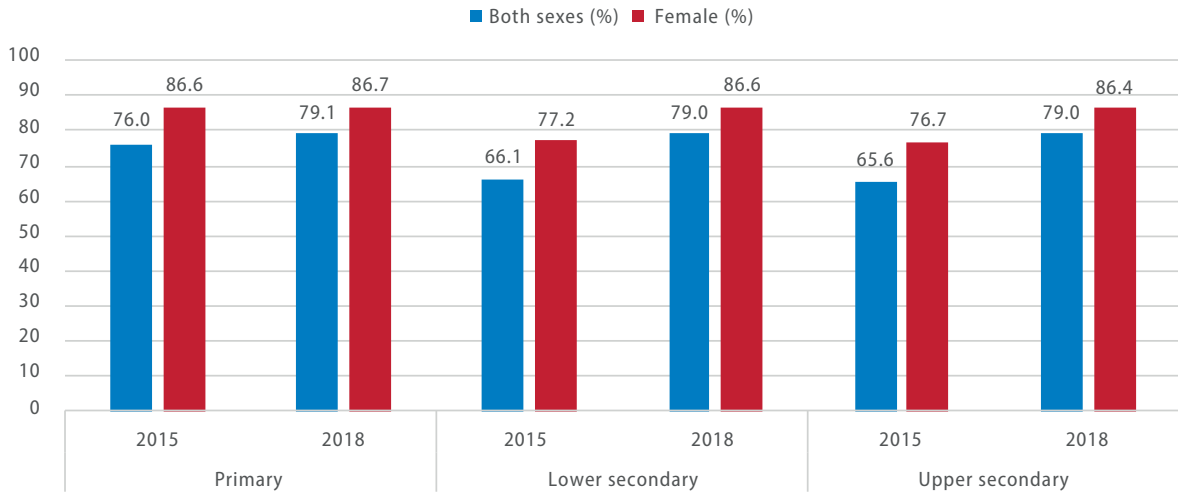
Table 2.7: Number of teachers by level of education in Afghanistan, year and sex

Year	Primary Level			Lower Secondary level			Upper Secondary Level		
	Both Sexes	Female	% of Female	Both Sexes	Female	% of Female	Both Sexes	Female	% of Female
2007	110,312	30,546	27.7	23,539	6,518	27.7	9,278	2,535	27.3
2010	118,858	36,846	31.0	33,856	10,495	31.0	NA	NA	NA
2015	142,880	49,358	34.5	52,359	17,368	33.2	30,567	10,019	32.8
2018	134,145	48,362	36.1	58,539	21,084	36.0	33,600	11,745	35.0

Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

The data on qualified teachers, only available since 2015, is limited. However, in this short period of time, the percentage of qualified teachers steadily increased in all levels of school education and more female than male teachers are qualified (Figure 2.6).

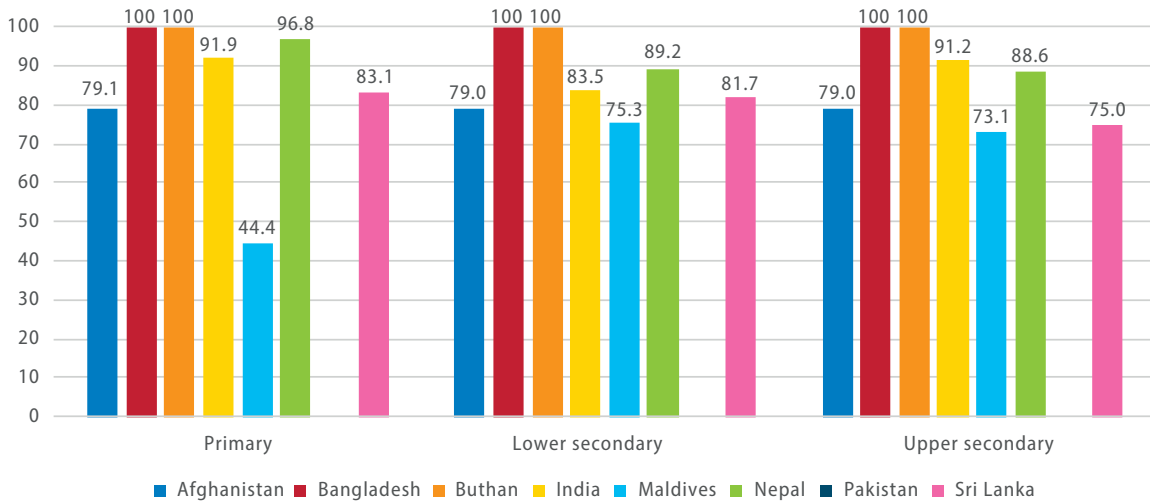
Figure 2.6: Percentage of qualified teachers in Afghanistan, 2015-2018



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

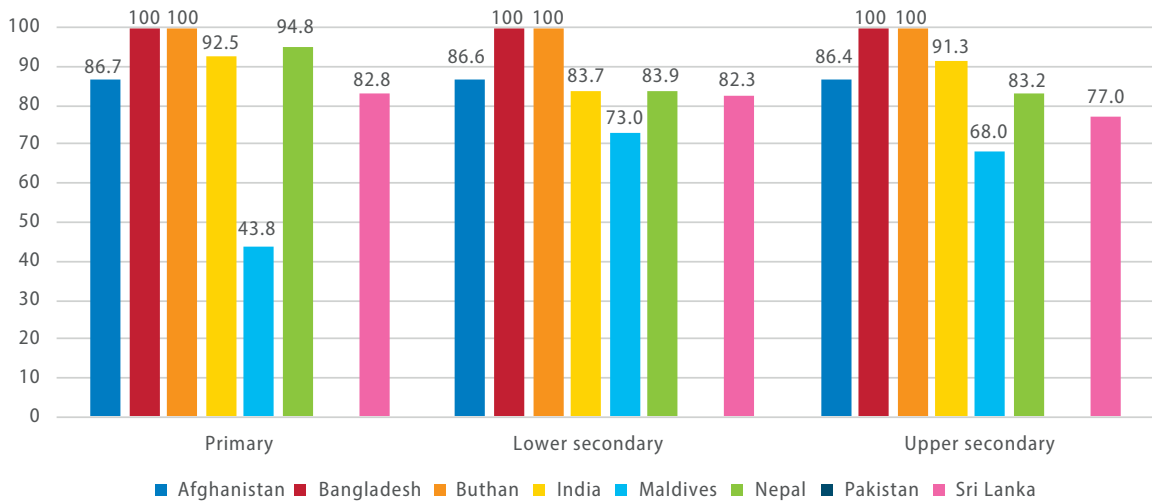
The share of qualified teachers in Afghanistan is has steadily improved, but the situation still needs improvement in order to catch up other countries in the region (Figures 2.7 & 2.8).

Figure 2.7: Percentage of qualified teachers in South Asia, both sexes, latest data between 2018-2020



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

Figure 2.8: Percentage of qualified female teachers in South Asia, latest data between 2018-2020

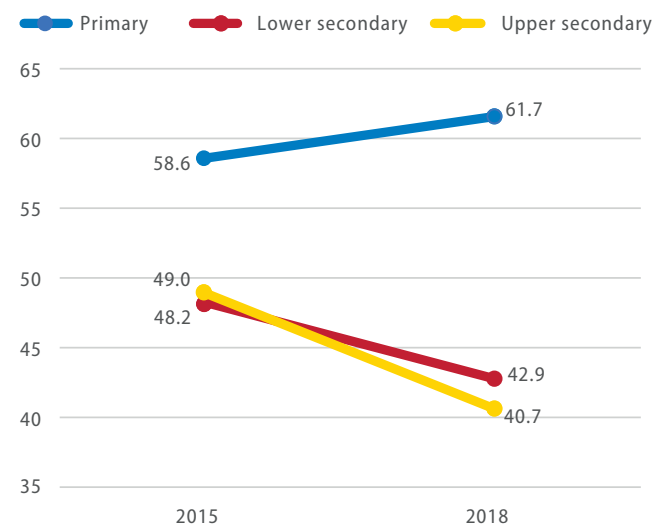


Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

There is a positive relationship between smaller class sizes, better working conditions for teachers and better learning outcomes for students. Benefits include greater flexibility to innovate in the classroom, improved teacher morale and greater job satisfaction (OECD 2011). In Afghanistan, excepting primary education, the pupil - qualified teacher ratio tended to decrease between 2015 and 2018 (Figure 2.9), but remained proportionately higher at all levels than those countries in South and West Asia (Figure 2.10).

During this time, the number of primary students increased by 7%¹⁰ and the increase of qualified teachers may not have been sufficient to keep up with the growing needs.

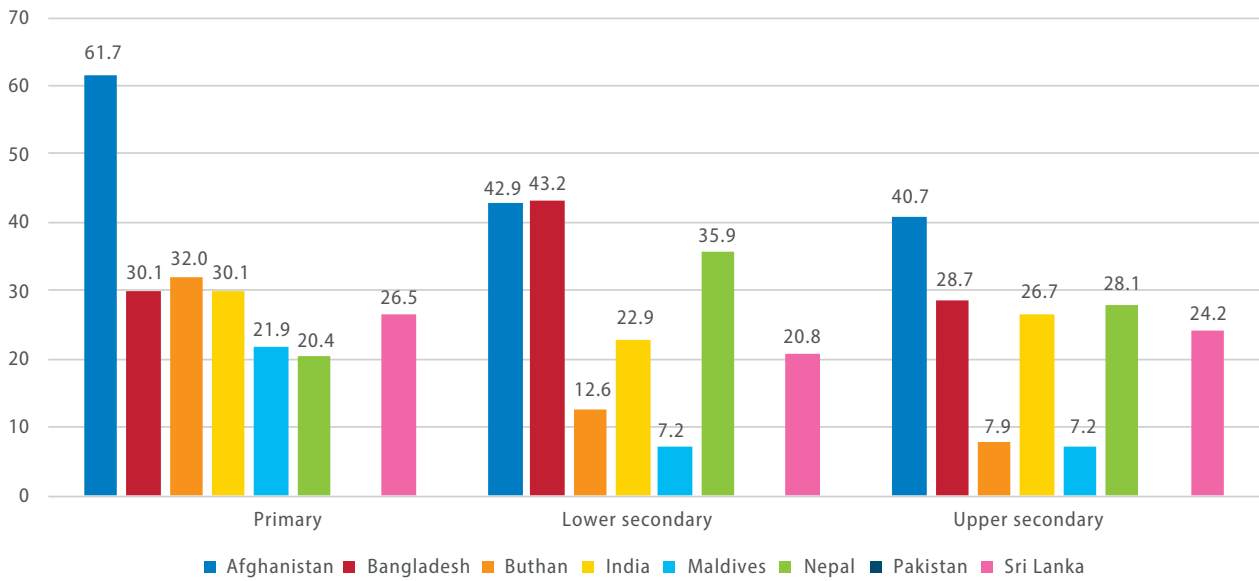
Figure 2.9: Pupil-qualified teacher ratio in Afghanistan, 2015-2018



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)
 * Data for primary level is from 2016 and 2018

¹⁰UIS Database accessed on 3 September 2021

Figure 2.10: Pupil-qualified teacher ratio in South Asia, latest data between 2018-2020

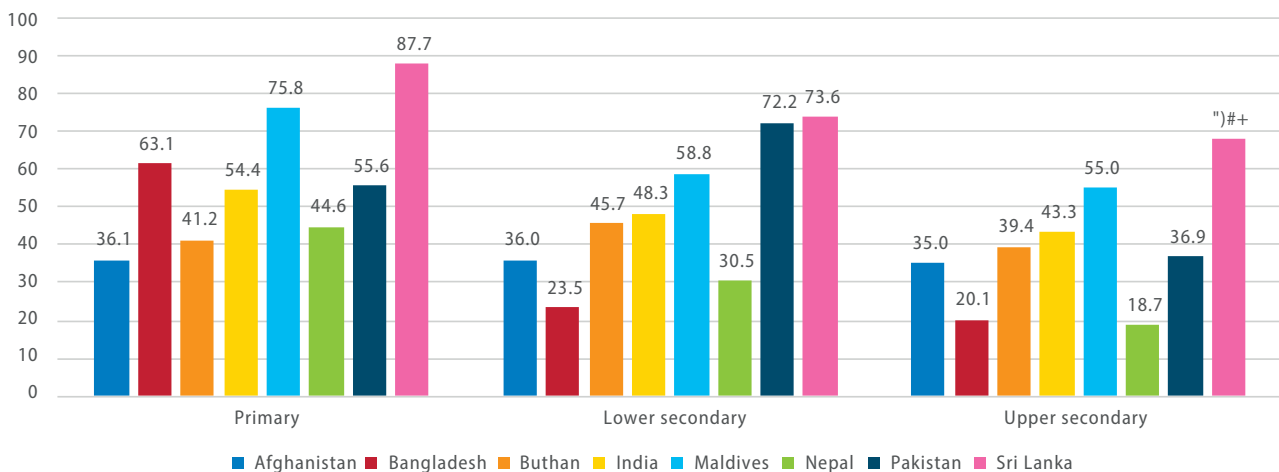


Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

* Data for primary level is from 2016 and 2018

The number of female teachers in Afghanistan is increasing but the share is lower compared to other countries in the region: Research suggests that exposure to female teachers can have a positive impact on girls’ education¹¹. The proportion of female teachers is increasing in all levels of education. For instance, at the primary education level it increased from 28% in 2007 to 36% in 2018, 8 percentage points in 11 years. However, these figures are still among the lowest in the South Asia region (Figure 2.11).

Figure 2.11: Percentage of female teachers in South Asia, latest data between 2018 and 2020



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

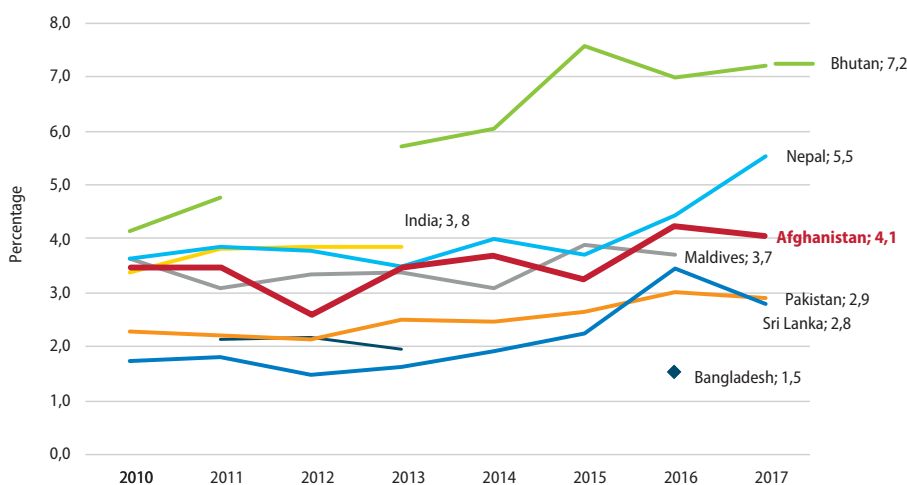
¹¹ For instance, see Elaine Unterhalter, et al. 2014. Interventions to enhance girls’ education and gender equality. Education Rigorous Literature Review. London, Department for International Development

2.8. Education financing has been volatile, with high dependency on aid

In 2017 (the latest year with available data), **government expenditure on education** amounted to 3,321 million in constant PPP\$ (UIS dataset). Since 2010, the earliest year with comparable data available, the government increased the budget by 53%. Although the change is considerable for such a short period of time, the extent of the priority given to education is better understood when spending is placed in the context of the country's economy and its public sector.

As a **percentage of gross domestic product (GDP)**, government expenditure on education was 4.1% in 2017 and 3.9% in 2019, below the recommended international benchmark of 6%, although above that of some countries in the sub-region such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (the latter for 2016). The country's increase in education expenditures lags behind countries in South Asia, except for Bangladesh and the Maldives, which show annual changes of -6% and 0% respectively in about the same period.

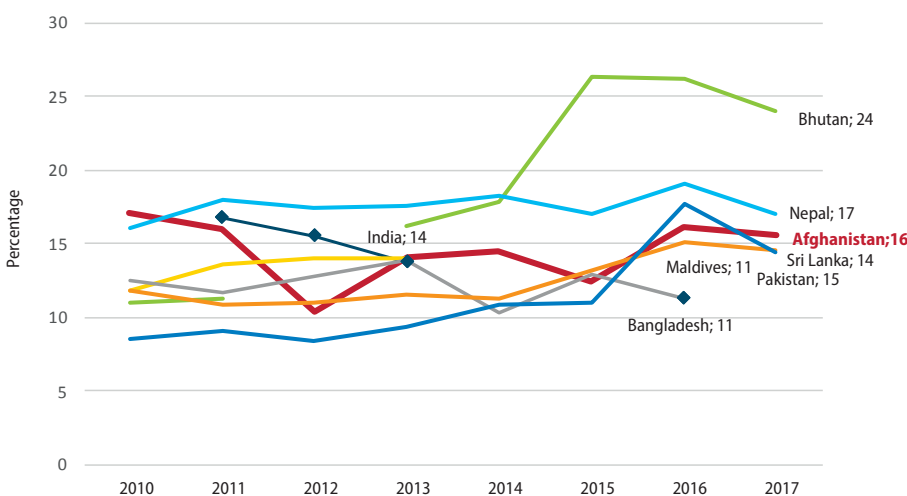
Figure 2.12: Government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2010-2017 in South Asia



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021).

In 2017, about 16%* of **total government expenditures are allocated to education** which exceeds that of other countries in the region. However, this is in a context where government revenues are a minimal share of GDP. This share of government expenditures further declined to 12% in 2019.

Figure 2.13: Education expenditure as a percentage of total government expenditure in South Asia



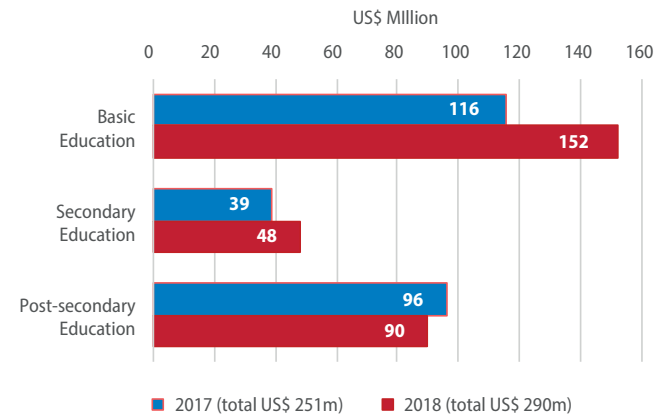
Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

* Finance-related data are being reviewed and updated.

Afghanistan has been highly dependent on **official development assistance** (ODA), amounting to 49% of total education expenditures in 2019. Due to lack of internal resources, the government of Afghanistan has not been able to cover education costs through its ordinary budget. Hence, external contributions are considered preconditions for success in achieving the country's education strategy and, eventually, SDG 4 (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2016, 2020).¹² The **regular operating budget** (93% of the total in 2020) includes staff compensation and other non-salary costs with part of this budget drawn from ODA. In addition, the country accounts maintain a **development budget**, also drawing from ODA. This budget line contributes to financing cost categories, mainly learning environments (e.g. school construction) and, to a lesser extent, students. It represented 7% of the total in the same year.

ODA directed towards Afghanistan amounted to US\$ 290 million in 2018, increasing from US\$ 251 million in 2017. The highest share goes to basic education, rising from 46% to 52% (US\$ 152 million) in the same two years. Aid to secondary and post-secondary education is also important. The country is among the top three recipients of development assistance for basic education of three bilateral donors: Denmark (US\$ 25.2 million in 2018), Sweden (US\$ 22.7 million) and Canada (US\$ 9.4 million). Lastly, Afghanistan also received assistance from multilateral organizations such as USD 117.1 million from EU institutions and USD 6.6 million from UNICEF (UNESCO, 2020).¹³

Figure 2.14: Distribution of ODA flows towards Afghanistan's education sector by education level



Source: UNESCO, 2019, based on OECD CRS 2019 database.¹⁴

In addition to international development aid, delivering core and additional learning services also involves a substantial contribution from **communities, civil society and NGOs**, particularly for areas where the Ministry of Education has difficulty accessing, e.g. street children, or sustaining services (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2016).¹⁵ Community-based schools, for instance, are managed by village councils (shuras) and can be dependent on parents' support for teacher salaries and other in-kind contributions (UNESCO, 2019).¹⁶ However, some of these programmes and other institutions of civil society and NGOs also rely on external funding¹⁷. Finally, the private sector contribution to education financing is most noticeable in training, particularly the investment and provision of the most extensive apprenticeship system in the country.

¹² Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education. (2016). *National Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021*. Kabul: Ministry of Education. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Strategic Plan-IV 2021-2030 (draft)*. Kabul: Ministry of Education.

¹³ UNESCO. (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Inclusion and Education: All Means All*.

https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GEMR_2020-Full_Report-v0.2.pdf

¹⁴ UNESCO. (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Inclusion and Education: All Means All*.

https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GEMR_2020-Full_Report-v0.2.pdf

¹⁵ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education. (2016). *National Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021*. Kabul: Ministry of Education.

¹⁶ UNESCO. (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Inclusion and Education: All Means All*.

https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GEMR_2020-Full_Report-v0.2.pdf

¹⁷ In 2017/18, for example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) operated about 8,440 community-based classes and accelerated learning programmes (UNESCO, 2019).

Like other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the resilience and coping capacities of Afghanistan's most vulnerable communities (UNICEF, 2020).¹⁸ The Ministry of Education engaged in developing a comprehensive COVID-19 response plan to address the pandemic's immediate, medium and long-term impact on the education system (GPE, 2021).¹⁹ In March 2020, The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) allocated a grant to UNICEF to support the ministry in the response plan to prepare and re-open basic education public schools.

Overall, it is unclear how education financing trends reflect in per-pupil expenditures or unit costs. On the one hand, the financial efforts of the last years seem to be laudable, at least in real terms and considering the investment in education as a percentage of GDP. Yet, at all levels of education, enrolments have increased at much higher rates than expenditures, possibly obscuring the investment.

Nevertheless, the demand for schooling and learning is not yet fully satisfied, implying that even more resources are needed if some accelerated progress towards SDG 4 is to be made. Estimates calculated before deep political changes suggest that the total budget would need to double between 2020 and 2025 if the country was to increase student enrolment by 2.5% (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2020).²⁰ Simulations show that the operating budget was estimated to grow by 59% under the same enrolment scenario, although its share in the total would decline from 93% to 72%. In addition, the development budget was calculated to grow a lot more (around 700%) resulting also in a higher share on the total (from 7 to 28%).

The deep political change in 2021 may add even further challenges to financing and threatens a reversal of the observed gains. The mobilization of domestic resources is the most significant limitation to self-sustainable financing of education. Expenditures on security are much higher than on education, and the internal revenue base continues to be low (UNESCO-UIS, 2021).²¹ Recent updates suggest that the new administration faces severe constraints in disbursing the teacher salary and requires donor or multilateral assistance to reopen primary schools.

At the same time, international aid has halted. The World Bank, for instance, has been a key partner. Very recently, in April 2021, it had approved an allocation of an additional \$25 million with funding from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), geared to build 100 schools, improve learning and access to education for girls, support teacher training and promote community-based education (World Bank, 2021)²², which it recently decided to suspend following the advent of the new administration. A withdrawal of external support will worsen an already vulnerable and dependent financial situation, certainly harming learners' possibilities, particularly those of girls. There are preliminary discussions among bilateral donors, like Japan and Sweden, of extending their contribution and support to education projects (UNESCO, 2021).²³

In addition, the humanitarian situation will require consideration of the resources needed to address recent population movements, particularly health, nutrition and other protection needs of refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan, the majority of which are estimated to be of the school-age population. This situation will further increase the financial needs for education.

Learners, educators and displaced populations will need the financial support of the international community. The pace of the development and implementation of an educational and humanitarian response plan will rely both on the Afghan people and the extension of current contributions and an eventual reorientation of resources towards new actions. Promoting and supporting an inclusive sector dialogue to develop a response plan and build a resilient national education system²⁴ starts with a sharper focus on mobilizing and securing current and new financial resources.

¹⁸ UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office. (2020). *Access to Education for COVID-19 Emergency-affected Children in Afghanistan*.

<https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2020%2007%20COVID-19%20AFF%20Request%20Afghanistan%20-%20Verified.pdf>

¹⁹ GPE. (2021). Afghanistan. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/where-we-work/afghanistan>

²⁰ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Strategic Plan-IV 2021-2030 (draft)*. Kabul: Ministry of Education.

²¹ UNESCO-UIS. (2021). *Brief of Afghanistan Expenditure in Education*. Montreal, Qué.: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

²² World Bank. (2021). *New Grant to Improve Primary, Secondary Education in Afghanistan, Especially for Girls* [Press release].

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/04/01/new-grant-to-improve-primary-secondary-education-in-afghanistan-especially-for-girls>

²³ UNESCO. (2021). *Education for Afghanistan People: Briefing for CAB*. Paris: UNESCO.

²⁴ UNESCO. (2021). *Afghanistan Situation: Multi-Country Education Response*. Paris: UNESCO.



Section 3

Progress in ensuring
the right to
education for all

This section reviews the status of the right to education and its evolution over the past two decades analysing the policy and legal frameworks, including from a comparative perspective, considering the international human rights obligations. Legal and policy measures taken over the past 20 years have served as an important enabler to the progress analyzed in the previous section.

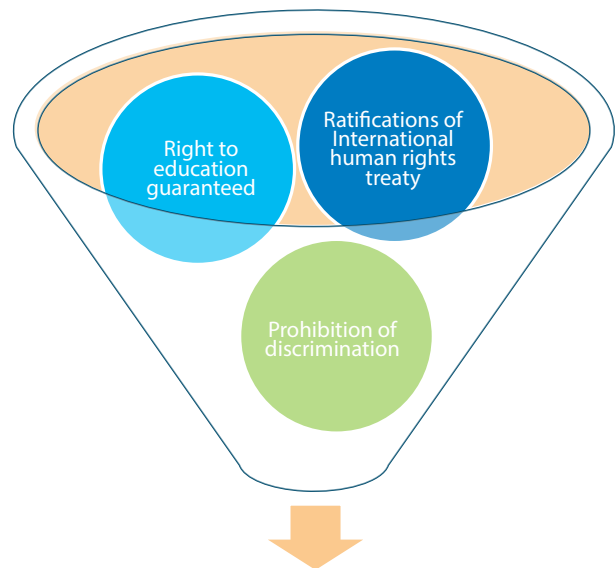
Key facts on the right to education in Afghanistan

- The Constitution of Afghanistan and the 2008 Education Law guarantee the right to education for all citizens without discrimination.
- Afghanistan guarantees 9 years of compulsory education and 12 years of free education for all boys and girls starting from the age of 6.
- Legislation states that the prohibition of women's right to education is deemed as violence against women, however, the legal protection of women and girls could be further strengthened, including through the alignment of the minimum age for marriage of women with that of men.
- Various laws and policies protect children by criminalizing child recruitment, prohibiting corporal punishment in schools, and ensuring internally displaced children retain the right to education. Such efforts should be continued and strengthened.
- National policy promotes community-based education to reach children who are unable to attend formal schools and efforts to end all forms of discrimination against disadvantaged groups should be pursued.

3.1. The right to education was reinforced

Recognizing the challenges to ensuring the right to education for all, particularly inclusive education and education for girls, the government of Afghanistan elaborated numerous legislations and policies since 2001 to improve and strengthen the right to education.

In terms of adherence to the international legal framework, although in 2001, Afghanistan was not a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women nor the Convention against Discrimination in Education, it then ratified both, respectively in 2003 and 2010.



© UNESCO

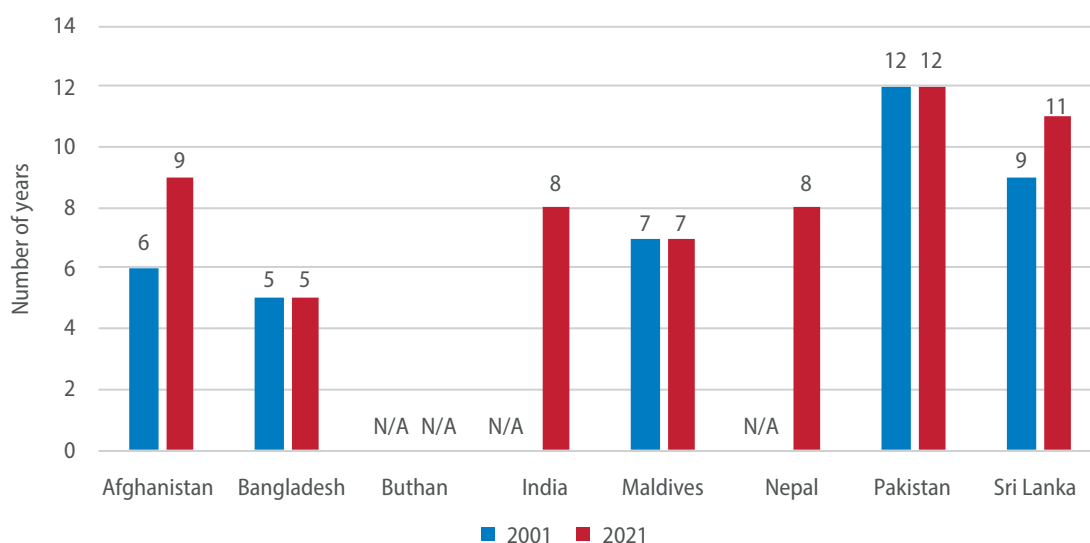
The Constitution of Afghanistan, adopted in 2004, guarantees the right to education for all citizens and gives importance to women's education by providing that the State shall devise and implement programmes to ensure the promotion of their education, as well as improving the education of nomads and eliminating illiteracy. In addition, the Constitution forbids any kind of discrimination and has established that men and women have equal rights and duties before the law.

In 2008, the Education Law was adopted, providing the main legal framework for the right to education in Afghanistan. The law states that citizens of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan have equal rights to education without any kind of discrimination. At policy level, the Ministry of Education has developed its third National Education Strategic Plan (2017–2021). While progress since 2001 has been remarkable, this plan aims to address the significant remaining challenges in its education sector through three main components: quality and relevance, equitable access, and efficient and transparent management, with the common goal 'to prepare skilled and competent citizens through the education system to sustain Afghanistan's socioeconomic development and social cohesion'.

Countries in the sub-region have made progress over the last 20 years to legally guarantee at least 9 years of compulsory education. This evolution is particularly true in Afghanistan: in 2001, the legislation provided 6 years of compulsory education, limited to boys only, whereas with the adoption of the Education Law of 2008, 9 years of compulsory education for both boys and girls are now guaranteed. Nevertheless, girls were able to go back to school from 2002 onwards. Among the neighbouring countries, the data shows that between 2001 and 2021, the number of years of compulsory education has either remained the same or increased. For example, Nepal and India have both guaranteed 8 years of compulsory education since 2001, while Sri Lanka has extended the length of compulsory schooling from 9 years in 2001 to 11 years today.



Figure 3.1 Compulsory primary and secondary education legally enshrined: situation in South Asia



Data Source: UIS Database (accessed on 31 August 2021)

The right to free education is strongly enshrined in states' legislation in the sub-region. Since 2004, Afghanistan's Constitution enshrines free education, a provision reinforced in 2008 with the adoption of the Education Law which notably specifies that this applies from pre-school education to higher education. As such, Afghanistan ranks alongside Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Pakistan, all of which guarantee at least 12 years of free education. Regarding pre-school education, while it is free in Afghanistan, there is no legal ground for it being compulsory. Nepal goes beyond and makes this level of education compulsory. Efforts have been made by Afghanistan to strengthen higher education through a law adopted in 2015 and the Gender Strategy for Higher Education Institutions of 2016. However, the rising demand for tertiary education has repercussions on the capacity of higher education to accommodate all students leaving secondary education.

3.2. Protecting girls and women's right to education remained a high priority

The first step in guaranteeing girls' and women's right to education, is to combat discrimination. While the Constitution and other legislation guarantee the right to non-discrimination and equality to all citizens, there is no reference to specific grounds of gender and sex. Incorporating guarantees in the national legal framework to protect girls' and women's education is crucial, as they are often victims of discrimination, harmful practices, violence and abuse, and as a result their education is severely impaired. The adoption of the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 2009 and more recently, the Law on the Prohibition of Harassment against Women and Children in 2016, is a positive step forward. In the former, references to the right to education reveal the desire to further protect the right to education by including that the prohibition of this right is deemed as violence against women. However, certain provisions require legal clarification.

To further implement the protections for girls and women outlined in the Constitution and various pieces of legislation, the Ministry of Education adopted the Girls Education Policy in 2019. The policy aims to eliminate the most prominent barriers to education for girls and its implementation began with the hiring of 30,000 female teachers with the goal of increasing the number of female students enrolled in school.

Regarding marriage, the difference in the minimum legal age between women and men remains a matter of concern. As set out by the Civil Code, the legal minimum age for marriage is 16 for women and can even be lowered to 15 with the permission of the father or a judge, while it is 18 for men, creating a discrimination based on gender. In addition, as a mixed legal system of civil, customary and religious laws prevails in Afghanistan, there may be diverging provisions on child marriage within the legal system. At the subregional level, for example, in Pakistan, the legal age of marriage is also set at 16 girls and 18 for boys. Yet, early marriages often have direct and adverse impact on girls' education, compromising their education opportunities and resulting in higher dropout rates. Addressing early marriage will be decisive in ensuring that all girls can access education on an equal basis with men.

Towards gender equality



Gender protections laws and education policy focused on girls' education



Prohibition of discrimination in education but no explicit reference to sex and/or gender



Girls' legal age of marriage below 18 and different to boys' minimum legal age

3.3. Child protection has been an important concern

The continued conflict in Afghanistan placed children in situations where they faced increased risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation and has resulted in a growing number of out-of-school children. By endorsing the Safe School Declaration in 2015, Afghanistan demonstrated its desire to provide a safe learning environment for its population. The UN condemns the attacks by armed groups on schools and education personnel as well as the military use of schools, which puts students at high risk of becoming a target, risking their lives or being deprived of an education because of the absence of safe school facilities. The enactment of a law criminalizing child recruitment and use in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in 2015, the adoption of the 2017 revised Penal Code, which explicitly criminalizes recruitment and use of children and falsification of tazkeras (Afghan Identity Document), and the promulgation of two directives by the Ministry of Education to better protect schools, are all positive advancements. Nevertheless, efforts to strengthen laws and policies to prevent the military use of schools and end and prevent the perpetration of all forms of violence, should continue.

In Afghanistan, there was an estimated 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of 31 December 2020 (UNHCR). In an attempt to eliminate barriers to their right to education, the National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons, adopted in 2013, stipulated that the Ministry of Education is charged with ensuring that all displaced children- both girls and boys- have access to free and compulsory education, and that no child may be denied access to education due to a lack of school records or identification. It also commits the Ministry to building more schools and classrooms where there is a large population of displaced persons or returnees.

Ensuring the alignment of the end of compulsory education with the minimum age of employment ensures that no child either drops out of school to go work or is at risk of economic exploitation. In Afghanistan, compulsory education starts at age 6 for a minimum of nine years, yet the minimum age of employment is 14, which not aligned with the end of compulsory education. Among other concerns is the prohibition of corporal punishment within educational institutions. Compared to the other countries, Afghanistan provides an explicit protection in its Education Law of 2008, while the legislation of both Bhutan and Sri Lanka do not mention any such prohibition; and Pakistan even allows for its justification when considered legitimate.

EDUCATION POLICIES PROTECT



© UNESCO

3.4. Inclusion and equality in education strengthened

In Afghanistan, some minority groups, including the Shia population, are subject to specific provisions, which may be discriminatory in some respects, in particular, in the enjoyment of human rights. Reviewing and repealing all discriminatory provisions is therefore needed to ensure all children, including those belonging to minority groups, can have access to education on an equal footing with others. There is a necessity to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes and to focus efforts on the most disadvantaged to ensure that no one is left behind.

To further efforts towards full inclusion, the National Education Strategic Plan for 2017-2021 aspires to implement comprehensively inclusive education targeting students with special needs, people living in rural areas, internally displaced persons and other disadvantaged groups including minorities.

Many children were unable to access or complete education due to war, conflict, and insecurity, and are now older than the formal requirements for public schooling. To bridge this gap and leave no one behind, the Policy Guidelines for Community-Based Education in 2012 were issued to ensure that disadvantaged groups can attain the same literacy skills and education as their counterparts in formal education- using alternative means outside of the formal education system- and subsequently granting them the qualifications necessary to proceed with higher levels of education in the formal sector.



Section 4

What future

for education

development and

cooperation?

This section highlights the issues at stake that future actions in Afghanistan should take into account, starting with a commitment to ensuring the right to education, especially of girls and women. and to inclusive and flexible learning opportunities. De facto authorities will need financial and technical assistance to manage the education system, preserve and sustain achievements, and such external aid has to be conditional on human rights principles. Immediate and urgent action for all relevant actors in Afghanistan and the international are set out to continue building an inclusive and equitable education system that benefits all learners.

As the data and information of the previous sections have shown, Afghanistan has made significant progress over the past two decades. From a very low level of enrolment, the number of students has steadily increased at all levels of education. The gender gap has narrowed, and the proportion of female teachers has continued to increase. Literacy rates have improved with continued support from development partners. Efforts were made to expand the school network throughout the country.

Numerous legal and policy actions have been taken to establish organizational and institutional conditions and arrangements for increased access to and quality of education, while reducing disparities between girls and boys, women and men, rural and urban areas, and ethnic groups of the population.

However, Afghanistan still lags far behind other countries in the subregion on most fronts of educational development.

The pace of progress has slowed, especially in recent years. Literacy rates are the lowest in the subregion and among the lowest in the world. More than half of adults cannot read or write. In addition, 50% of elementary school age children are not enrolled in school.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put additional strain on education development with millions of learners who were pushed away from their school and other educational institutions. The prevailing security situation in the context of the shift in governing bodies risks bringing about complex challenges for the routine operation and the future development of the education system in Afghanistan, jeopardizing the perspective of the whole generation for its future lifelong journey. This calls for urgent actions while devising on resolute programmes and initiatives towards building an inclusive and equitable quality education system.

4.1. Issues at stake

Future action in Afghanistan following deep political changes should take into account three key issues:

1 Commitment to the right to education especially for girls and women

Education is a fundamental human right indispensable for the exercise of other human rights and for the development of Afghanistan. It is even more so at this critical time. The international community should ensure that international commitments to the right to education for all children, youth and adults, regardless of their gender, ethnicity and location must be safeguarded. Particular attention should be given to decisions impacting girls and women.

It is thus crucial that the right to education for all children, youth and adults, regardless of their gender, ethnicity and location must be safeguarded. There is an arsenal of international and regional conventions and recommendations that govern the right to education for all in light of which the international community has monitored the state obligation to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. The international community will continue to monitor the observance of these conventions and recommendations in Afghanistan with a view to the prosperity of all its people, particularly girls and women, and the peaceful, inclusive and sustainable development of the country.

2 Commitment to inclusive and flexible learning opportunities

The education system in Afghanistan covers different learning settings and target groups. The commitment and support to education should target students not only in public schools but also students with special needs, people living in rural areas, internally displaced persons and other disadvantaged groups including minorities. Outbound students should be allowed to travel, while new learning opportunities, particularly in neighbouring countries, should be encouraged.

3 Sustain conditional external aid financing of education

De facto authorities will need financial and technical assistance to manage the education system, preserve and sustain achievements. This leverage must be used for the benefit of the Afghan people. This will mean sustaining conditional external aid financing and technical assistance, depending on the respect for the principles of human rights mentioned above. This should include humanitarian aid to Afghans including IDPs.

At present, there is a need for collective action by all, including the international community, to address the immediate need to ensure continuity of learning with a view to avoiding a generational catastrophe. It is also important to continue building an inclusive and equitable education system to sustain the educational achievements gained over the past two decades and to contribute to economic development, improved security, human rights and women's empowerment.

4.2. Immediate actions to meet urgent educational needs

Bring all learners back to learning: All relevant actors in Afghanistan and the international community should act to keep all education opportunities open and available for equitable access by all learners. This includes all levels of education including early childhood education, basic education, TVET, higher education, community-based classes and literacy programmes. Any further delay in bringing all learners back to learning will result in further loss of much needed learning time and put learners at risk of dropping out.

Ensure safe and protective learning environment: All actors should cultivate a safe and protective learning environment for teachers and learners in line with the Safe School Declaration. They should neither use education spaces, particularly those for girls, for military purposes nor conscript any child for military purposes. Priority should be given to restore and construct educational infrastructure and provide necessary materials and equipment so that learning can continue in all conditions.

Mobilize and support teachers with their salary paid in a timely manner: The educational disruptions and school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict have confirmed the crucial role of teachers in maintaining learning continuity. Teachers need to be get paid in a timely manner to ensure their return to work and recognition of their efforts. All relevant actors in Afghanistan and the international community should also ensure opportunities for professional development for teachers, including female, to ensure enough supply of qualified teachers.

Clear barriers to female participation in education: While continued access to quality education for girls and women is crucial, it is necessary to practically clear any barriers which may directly or indirectly exclude girls and women from education. In particular, the past increase of female teachers proved a conducive factor in increased participation of girls and women in learning opportunities. If de facto authorities enact a reported ban on co-education and the prohibition of male teachers' instruction of female learners, there are far-reaching implications for women's participation in higher education and for girls' education more broadly. There are insufficient human and financial resources in Afghanistan to

ensure parallel education systems, and the inability to ensure equal access to quality education for girls and boys will have a significant impact for generations to come. Efforts need to be made to ensure the sustainable supply of female teachers, particularly in rural areas, at all levels of education so that female learners can continue learning in a safe environment.

Provide education service for IDP learners: The number of IDPs is on the rise, and it will take some time for this situation to stabilize, with the risk of loss of learning opportunities for a sizeable number of children and youth. All relevant actors in Afghanistan and the international community should take the required emergency education service delivery actions for the displaced learners, who are often the most marginalized. This implies the provision of resources to address the basic needs of the displaced learners including the social and emotional fallout of the crisis and the issuance of clear guidelines to the provincial authorities to remain flexible and allow displaced learners to register and enrol in educational institutions, even without documentation at hand. In addition, permission should be granted to run multiple shifts to provide the necessary space to accommodate additional learners.

Strengthen curriculum to focus on essential knowledge and skills: To address the impact of the loss of learning time, de facto authorities, with appropriate support from curriculum experts, is advised to develop strategies that provide targeted and personalized instruction and support, such as condensed curriculum, micro teaching, and supplemental and/or differentiated instruction to allow teachers to teach more effectively and learners to acquire essential grade-level knowledge and skills with an adjusted timetable. The curriculum should be inclusive, relevant and competency-based, reflecting national priorities while ensuring that principles of effective and relevant teaching and learning in line with quality standards are adhered to. The curriculum should also prepare learners for life and work, including life skills, cultural awareness, respect for diversity, social cohesion and tolerance, and sustainable development. Tailored resources and pedagogical support to teachers should be provided alongside with adapted assessments to monitor student learning and facilitate their progression in learning.

4.3. Actions to continue building an inclusive and equitable education system

Engage in inclusive policy dialogue and education sector planning process:

Afghanistan has been finalizing the education sector analysis in order to develop an education sector plan for implementation in the coming years. This analysis needs to be reviewed in light of the new environment created by the advent of deep political change, and taking into account the need to address both humanitarian and development challenges. Such an analysis of the education sector and the development of a plan will require board consultation with representatives of all Afghan stakeholders on the conditions and future of education development in Afghanistan. The international community should be prepared to provide the necessary technical support for the development and implementation of an inclusive education sector plan.

Reinforce efforts to develop skills for youth: With the demographic dividend, all relevant actors in Afghanistan and the international community should enhance opportunities for all young people, including former militants and IDPs, to improve their skills for the world of work through increasing access to quality formal and non-formal education programmes with the focus on skills development and with a view to economic development and rebuilding of the nation. More balanced opportunities should be given to both men and women in the labour market.

Facilitate alternative learning opportunities and pathways: All relevant actors in Afghanistan and the international community should provide necessary support that directly benefits the learners in Afghanistan and promotes an increase in access and participation to quality education opportunities through delivery of multiple pathways and building flexible education systems. Community-based education, accelerated learning programmes and literacy classes should continue to complement the formal education system to ensure no learners are left behind. Blended teaching and learning with alternate offline remote and online strategies, with consideration of inclusion and equity, should be considered. Focused attention should be given to early grade classes both through greater support for regular schools and through early childhood education provision in community-based education classes to minimize foundational learning loss.

Strengthen data collection and management for planning and monitoring:

Timely collection of data through a reliable management information system is essential for system-wide evidence-based decision-making and monitoring of the needs on the ground and the progress of achieving national objectives and global commitments under SDG 4. In particular, data on the status of school reopening, teacher supply, student enrolment and student learning achievement should be collected and analyzed on a more regular basis through the existing Education Management Information System or other alternative ways. Learning assessment reports should be prepared and used to monitor trends in educational outcomes.

Sustain education financing through (re)mobilization of current and new financial resources:

The humanitarian situation will require consideration of the resources needed to address recent population movements, particularly health, nutrition and other protection needs of refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan, the majority of which are estimated to be of the school-age population. Learners, educators and displaced populations will need the financial support of the international community. The pace of the development and implementation of an educational and humanitarian response plan will rely on the extension of current contributions and an eventual reorientation of resources towards new actions. Promoting and supporting an inclusive sector dialogue to develop a response plan and build a resilient national education system in a longer term starts with a sharper focus on mobilizing and securing current and new financial resources.

Enhance coordination among education stakeholders:

To ensure every learner in Afghanistan has equitable and inclusive quality learning opportunities, the international community should strengthen its coordination, coherence and synergies with relevant education stakeholders to focus on improving education through the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Clear guidelines on engagement with de facto authorities must be developed in the context of the overall UN approach to Afghanistan."

The right to education:

What's at stake in Afghanistan?

A 20-year review

This report takes stock of the achievements in education made by Afghanistan over the past 20 years and sets out immediate action to safeguard the right to education for all learners following deep political change in the country in 2021.

Although Afghanistan lags far behind countries across South and West Asia on most development indicators, it has made impressive progress in education over two decades. Enrolment has increased ten-fold, with substantial gains for girls and female literacy. Female teachers have been hired. Steady efforts have been made to expand the school network across the country.

The country has ratified key international normative instruments relating to the right to education; enshrined this right in the Constitution and adopted a wide range of policy measures to increase access, improve education quality and reduce gender, socio-economic and rural/urban disparities.

But the challenges remain colossal, with half the primary school-aged children not enrolled in school and very low learning outcomes. The country is highly dependent on external aid to sustain its education system. It needs to uphold state obligations on the right to education without any discrimination and continue removing barriers that impede progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal on education to build the country's future.