ESTABLISHING REGIONAL BENCHMARKS FOR SDG4 AND THE AGENDA 2063

Discussion Paper (DRAFT)

Prepared by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics jointly with the African Union Commission.

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1. Benchmarking SDG 4 and UIS's proposed approach

The Education 2030 Framework for Action called on countries to establish "*appropriate intermediate benchmarks (e.g. for 2020 and 2025)*" for the SDG indicators, seeing them as "indispensable for addressing the accountability deficit associated with longer-term targets" (§28), a request that remains unrealized. The extraordinary session Global Education Meeting in October 2020 reminded countries of this commitment. Its Declaration called on "*UNESCO and its partners, together with the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, to … accelerate the progress and propose relevant and realistic benchmarks of key SDG 4 indicators for subsequent monitoring*" (§10).

Fulfilling this neglected commitment to set benchmarks would help renew emphasis on achieving SDG 4. Countries have started from different points and move at different speeds. Unless there is a clearer and shared understanding of where countries started from in 2015, what minimum levels they should achieve and how fast, there is a risk that lack of progress will go unnoticed. But to be effective, benchmarks must be designed to mobilize action and communicated in a transparent and informative way.

The effectiveness of benchmarking SDG 4 rests primarily on two factors.

First, political commitment is needed. Setting benchmarks as requested by the Framework for Action cannot be done at the global level, given the very large differences in starting points between countries. Benchmarks need to be feasible, reflecting countries' realities but also be owned nationally. A global process that ignores countries' own starting points, contexts or aspirations may undermine the effectiveness of benchmarking. Defining benchmarks regionally offers a balance between globally and nationally defined benchmarks, particularly when countries in a region share many of the same challenges, and a regional approach in conjunction with a national benchmark-setting process enables engagement across countries to better understand common challenges and opportunities and to learn from each other.

Second, technical challenges of measurement need to be overcome. A set of indicators to benchmark was adopted by the Technical Cooperation Group (TCG)[1] in August 2019. The proposal was based on a review of proposals by TCG members, which concluded that it would be possible to set benchmarks for 6 of the 43 SDG 4 indicators – plus the Framework for Action expenditure indicators – based on past trends, country coverage, frequency of data and policy relevance (see ***Table 1***).

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[1] Technical Cooperation Group (TCG) on the Indicators for SDG 4. Retrieved from http://tcg.uis.unesco.org

Table 1. Proposed benchmark indicators

No.	Benchmark Indicators	Level
1	**indicator 4.1.1** Minimum learning proficiency in reading and mathematics	Global
2	**indicator 4.1.2** Completion rate	
3	**indicator 4.1.4** Out-of-school rate	Thematic
4	**indicator 4.2.2** Participation rate one year before primary	Global
5	**indicator 4.c.1** Percentage of trained teachers	Global
6	**Indicator:** Education expenditure as share of budget and GDP	Education 2030 benchmarks
7	**indicator 4.5.1** [Equity indicator]	Global

UIS has developed a proposed approach[2] to benchmarking SDG 4 to help guide regional entities and national governments in setting SDG 4 benchmarks. The proposed approach is based on the following **FERST** principles.

- **Fairness**: Countries accept the value of benchmarks and that their values are set in a fair way taking SDG 4 aspirations, their initial conditions and feasible past progress into account.

- **Efficiency**: The data that need to support the benchmarks are available for the largest possible number of countries, on a regular basis and in a timely way.

- **Relevance**: The indicators are selected to correspond to national and regional agendas, and the assessment of whether the benchmark has been met can be linked to policy responses.

- **Simplicity**: Benchmarks need to be understood by all countries, while striking a balance between the three objectives outlined above.

- **Transparency**: The process by which benchmarks were developed needs to be verifiable and, to the extent possible, systematic, while it needs to be communicated clearly.

The proposed benchmarking approach establishes interim regional and national benchmarks for 2025 and 2030 that balance meaningful progress with what is feasible based on historical trends. Interim national benchmarks are based on three reference points for 2025 and 2030 for each indicator: (1) a country-specific minimum benchmark, (2) a region-specific minimum benchmark, and (3) a country-specific projection (see **Box 1** for details). The country-specific minimum benchmark for 2025 and 2030 is based on the country's latest indicator value for the indicator and the rate of progress that at least half of countries with the same indicator value have achieved since 2010. The region-specific minimum benchmark is defined as the average of country-specific minimum benchmarks for the lowest third of countries in the region. Finally, the country-specific projection for 2025 and 2030 is based on the country's own historical rate of progress. A country's interim national benchmark is defined as the highest of these three reference points. For example, if a country's historical trend indicates that it will exceed both its country-specific minimum benchmark and the regional minimum benchmark, then its own projection is used as a benchmark. By contrast, if a country's historical performance on an indicator has been slow, its projected value may fall below its own country-specific minimum benchmark; in which case, because most countries with the same

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[2] here: cite the TCG paper on benchmarking, UIS (2020). BENCHMARKS FOR SDG 4 INDICATORS: A POLITICAL AND TECHNICAL BASIS FOR DISCUSSION. Background paper for the 2020 TCG. UNESCO

starting point have achieved a rate of growth leading to its country-specific minimum benchmark, the country-specific minimum benchmark offers a feasible target for the country. The regional minimum benchmark offers an interim benchmark for the region that all countries, particularly those furthest behind, should aim to meet or exceed. **Countries and regional entities can either adopt these interim benchmarks or use these three reference points as guidance in establishing their own benchmarks.**

As the regional benchmarks should reflect the regional and national situations and be relevant for regional and national educational policies, the (sub) regional organization has a critical role to play in coordinating and establishing the benchmarks. Therefore, as part of the process, a sub-regional organization will need to:

- **confirm** that it is willing to support a benchmarking process among its member states (with whatever adaptations they feel are needed);
- **coordinate** with other organizations where memberships overlap;
- **identify** a timeline of consultation and other steps that will lead to benchmarks being approved;
- **communicate** these steps to the TCG to develop a global roadmap;
- **request** technical support, where necessary, to facilitate a regional benchmarking process.

Additional regional and sub-regional indicators benchmarks

Thus far, the discussion is about establishing common global indicators using common methodologies at different levels for the region/subregions. One possibility is that countries and regional/sub-regional organizations take advantage of the process and include additional indicators to the benchmark's indicator set which are of special interest to the region (e.g. global citizenship, TVET and tertiary education).

Box 1. Core concepts used in the proposed benchmark approaches

Country-specific projection for 2030[3]: This is the value that a country is expected to achieve by 2030 based on its historical trend from 2000 to the latest available year. For most indicators, countries with higher levels tend to have lower progress, and this is accounted for in the projection model by using the country's progress relative to other countries with the same starting point.

Country-specific minimum benchmark for 2030: This is the value that a country could feasibly achieve by 2030, given the progress made by other countries historically with the same starting point. Note that that the minimum benchmark for 2030 differs from the country's projection for 2030: the latter is what the country *is expected to achieve*, while the former is based on what *other countries with the same starting point have actually achieved*.

Regional minimum benchmark for 2030: This is the minimum acceptable level that all countries in a region should achieve. Because many regions have a diverse range of countries with both high and low performers, this benchmark may not apply to countries that are expected to or could feasibly achieve a higher level—in these cases, countries are expected to set their own more ambitious benchmarks or use

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[3] These are described for 2030 but are applicable to any reference year.

the feasible national benchmarks. For the examples presented in Annex 2, the minimum regional benchmark for 2030 is the average[4] of the country-specific minimum benchmarks for the lowest third of countries.

Nationally set benchmarks for 2030: Countries are expected to set their own national benchmarks reflecting national priorities and goals. The above three reference points are provided to assist in deriving their own benchmarks.

Proposed interim national benchmark for 2030: This is the highest of (1) the regional minimum benchmark, (2) country-specific minimum benchmark, or (3) country-specific projection for 2030.

2. Agenda 2063 in education and the relevance of establishing benchmarks

Agenda 2063 "The Africa We Want" was adopted at the January 2013 African Union Summit. It reflects the aspirations of the African continent for the post-2015 development agenda. To fast-track its implementation over the 50-year period, the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan was developed.

The Continental education strategy for Africa 2016-2025 underlines the priorities in the education sector until 2025. In addition, a TVET strategy was developed to stress the importance that the continent places on the development of adequate skills to transform Africa. The strategy's call for a paradigm shift in TVET- that is, transforming TVET to prepare young people to become job creators rather than job seekers and ensuring the relevance of TVET programs by aligning them to the market demand.

The continental education strategy for Africa (CESA 2016-2025) outlines 12 strategic objectives. The table 2 provides a mapping between the SDG targets and the CESA strategic objectives. CESA Strategic objectives 1-10 correspond to SDG 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." CESA Strategic objectives 1-10 cover 8 of the 10 SDG4 targets, from the provision of free primary and secondary education (4.1) to the increase in the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries (4.c). These strategic objectives ensure the fulfilment of SDG4, enabling upward socioeconomic mobility and providing key to escaping poverty.

The CESA Strategic objectives 11 and 12 correspond to SDG 17, which aims to "Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development". The SDGs can only be realized with strong global partnerships and cooperation. The successful development agenda in the SO11-12 focuses on inclusive partnerships in the fields of technology and capacity building (17.8).

This mapping between CESA strategic objectives to SDG 17 also underscores the need of strong international cooperation in systemic issues such as policy and institutional coherence, multi-stakeholder partnerships (17.16) and data, monitoring and accountability (17.18; 17.19) at the global, regional, national, and local levels.

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[4] A school-aged weighted average was used.

Table 2. CESA Strategic Objectives and SDG Targets

CESA Strategic objectives	SDG4 targets
SO 1: Revitalize the teaching profession to ensure quality and relevance at all levels of education	4.c – Increase the supply of qualified teachers
SO 2: Build, rehabilitate, preserve education infrastructure, and develop policies that ensure a permanent, healthy, and conducive learning environment in all sub- sectors and for all, so as to expand access to quality education	4.a - Build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools
SO 3: Harness the capacity of ICT to improve access, quality and management of education and training systems	
SO 4: Ensure acquisition of requisite knowledge and skills as well as improved completion rates at all levels and groups through harmonization processes across all levels for national and regional integration	4.1 – Completion and learning; 4.3- Affordable technical, vocational, and higher education; 4.6 – Universal literacy and numeracy
SO 5: Accelerate processes leading to gender parity and equity	4.5 – Eliminate disparities
SO 6: Launch comprehensive and effective literacy programmes across the continent to eradicate the scourge of illiteracy	4.6 – Universal literacy and numeracy
SO 7: Strengthen the science and math curricula in youth training and disseminate scientific knowledge and culture in society	
SO 8: Expand TVET opportunities at both secondary and tertiary levels and strengthen linkages between the world of work and education and training systems	4.3 Affordable technical, vocational, and higher education; 4.4 - Increase the number of people with relevant skills for labour market
SO 9: Revitalize and expand tertiary education, research, and innovation to address continental challenges and promote global competitiveness	4.3 - Affordable technical, vocational, and higher education
SO 10: Promote peace education and conflict prevention and resolution at all levels of education and for all age groups	4.7 - Education for sustainable development and global citizenship
SO 11: Improve management of education system as well build and enhance capacity for data collection, management, analysis, communication, and use	SDG 17 - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
SO 12: Set up a coalition of stakeholders to facilitate and support activities resulting from the implementation of CESA 16-25.	

Despite the existence of an indicator framework and a governance framework for monitoring the strategy, its operationalization has not been effective. In an effort to avoid parallel monitoring frameworks with the SDG4, Member States recommended at the Pan African Conference on Education (Nairobi, 2018) that UIS and the AUC work together to ensure a joint monitoring and reporting framework for CESA and SDG4 is in place.

Both CESA and the SDG4 frameworks have a number of common indicators. About 47% of CESA indicators are currently produced by UIS as part of indicators required for the global monitoring of the SDG4. Therefore, increasing the coverage of CESA specific indicators necessitates to develop a complementary data collection tool considering the need to avoid parallel data collection mechanism and reduce the burden to the respondents.

The joint reporting of achievements towards objectives of both agenda 2030 and 2063 requires the definition of intermediate benchmarks. So far, there has been no report at all levels (national, sub-regional and continental) since the adoption of the two agendas. It is therefore imperative to put in place a functional mechanism that will report countries achievements on both agendas.

It is in this context that a baselines continental report for both CESA and SDG4 is planned in 2021[5], future comprehensive reports are scheduled for 2025 and 2030 with thematic reports in between.

The benchmarking of key indicators that include the seven global indicators as identified at the TCG6, and indicators specific to the CESA 2016-2025 is most relevant in this context. TVET related indicators are missing among the seven global indicators, therefore the need to identify relevant ones that align with the CESA and TVET strategy and meet the selection criteria.

Although there are similar indicators present in the CESA and the SDG 4 and Education 2030 framework, definitions are different. For African member states to be able to effectively respond and report on the two frameworks, and for national data management processes to be positioned for the same, a common platform for definitions and monitoring and evaluation must be established. Table 3 below presents the preliminary assessments of the selected global indicators to be benchmarked and the corresponding strategic objectives and indicators of CESA.

Table 3. Benchmark Indicators SDG and CESA framework

S/N	SDG	CESA
1	**Global indicator 4.1.1** Minimum learning proficiency in reading and mathematics (a) in grade 3; (b) at the end of primary education; and (c) at the end of lower secondary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading (ii) mathematics and (iii) science, by sex	**SO 4: 4.5** Proportion of children and young people (a) in grade 3; (b) at the end of primary education; and (c) at the end of lower secondary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading (ii) mathematics and (iii) science, by sex.
2	**Global indicator 4.1.2 Completion rate by sex**	**SO1: 4.1** Gross intake ratio for the final year of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary **(Thematic Indicator 4.1.3)** **SO4: 4.7** Percentage of girls who complete secondary education (under development)
3	**Thematic indicator 4.1.4 Out-of-school rate by sex**	SO5: 5.4 Girls' dropout rate per reason of drop out
4	**Global indicator 4.2.2** Participation rate one year before primary	
5	**Global indicator 4..c.1** Percentage of trained teachers	**SO1: 1.1** Percentage of Teachers Qualified to Teach According to National Standards

[5] UIS (2021). Continental Overview: Bridging CESA and SDG 4 in Africa. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Retrieved from http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/01/UNESCO_UIS_Africa-Report-2021.pdf

		SO1: 1.2 Percentage of teachers qualified in Science or Technology or Engineering or Mathematics by Sex **SO1: 1.4** Percentage of Teachers who have undergone In-Service Training (under development)
6	**Education expenditure as share of budget and GDP** i) Public Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of Total Government Expenditure **(SDG 1.a.2)** iii) **Public Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of GDP**	**F.1** Public Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of Total Government Expenditure F.2 Public Current Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of Total Education Expenditure by level **F.3** Public Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of GDP
7	**Global indicator 4.5.1 [Equity indicator to be defined]**	SO5: 5.1 Gender Parity Index for Gross Enrolment Ratio SO5: 5.2 Percentage of Female Teachers SO5: 5.3 Percentage of Female Head Teachers SO5: 5.4 Girls' dropout rate per reason of drop out SO5: 5.5 Percentage of girls enrolled to STEM

3. Roadmap to establishing Regional benchmarks for Africa

The regional benchmarking process in the African continent integrates additional indicators that reflect the Agenda 2063 aspiration. In addition, considering the large disparities between countries, the benchmarking exercise could be conducted at the level of regional economic commissions as defined by the AUC[6]. Unfortunately, some countries belong to more than one Regional Economic Communities (RECs), meaning that they will face different benchmarks but also may influence the benchmarks of different RECs. It could be advised to focus on the geography, splitting countries into five big groups of which: Central, Eastern, Northern, Southern and Western. The AUC, as the lead of the regional benchmarking process in Africa, will make a decision on this issue.
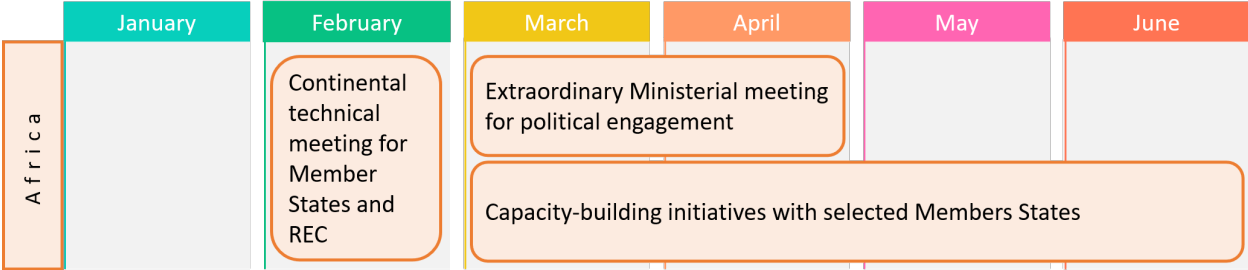
A consultation between UIS and the AUC was organized in October 2020 to share the same understanding of the rationale for regional benchmarking and agree on the overall adoption process and the role of each institution in the process. The three-step benchmarking process in Africa includes:

- The experts meeting is planned for February 25-26. Experts are from member states, RECs, and partners involved in strengthening African Education Systems.

    o The overall objective of the meeting is to discuss the relevance of the selected global indicators to be benchmarked and consult on additional ones that could contribute to better reflect African priorities- issue on TVET and skills is necessary amongst stakeholders.

- Political meeting in March/April to endorse the defined intermediate benchmarks and commit the AUC, RECs, and countries to ensure their achievements by 2025 and 2030.

- Capacity building initiatives with selected member states.

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[6] African Union (AU) - Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Retrieved from https://au.int/en/organs/recs

For future continental, sub-regional or country-level reports, the education community will ensure that the adopted benchmarks constitute a minimum to elaborate their content.

Figure 1. Road map to establishing regional benchmarks (Africa)

	January	February	March	April	May	June
Africa		Continental technical meeting for Member States and REC	Extraordinary Ministerial meeting for political engagement			
			Capacity-building initiatives with selected Members States			

4. Interim benchmarks for guidance on establishing benchmarks for the region

The UIS has estimated interim benchmarks to help support regions, including Africa to develop regional and national benchmarks. As an example, **Table 5** presents these interim benchmarks for SDG4 global indicator 4.1.2. Completion rate for Primary and lower secondary. As described previously, the regional minimum benchmark for 2030 (column 7) is the average of the country-specific benchmarks for the lowest third of countries in the region. This offers a regional benchmark that all countries in the region should achieve **at minimum** or exceed in order to promote equity within the region. Table 5 also presents the projected value of the indicators if all countries in the region achieve their country interim benchmarks (columns 3 & 5). This presents a more ambitious goal for the region and offers an alternative benchmark for which to measure progress. **Note that the regional minimum benchmark was used in specifying the country interim benchmarks, as discussed previously (see Box 1).**

The interim benchmarks estimated by the UIS are intended as technical assistance or guidance to the region and countries within the region in establishing their own benchmarks. After establishing its own minimum regional benchmark and national benchmarks, Table 5 would be completed by filling in columns (4) and (6) based on the benchmarks established by countries within the region. Note that the interim country benchmarks and the methodology used to establish them are meant for guidance only. All countries in the region may choose to set a common benchmark, or they may choose different benchmarks depending on their own aspirations. Annex 1 includes interim benchmarks for all countries by sub-region or political grouping except for the equity indicator, which the UIS has yet to develop benchmarks for.

Table 5. Africa: Sub-regional Benchmarks - Completion rate for Primary and Lower secondary levels

Sub-regions	2015 (+/- 2 years)	2025 Projection		2030 Projection		2030
	Baseline	If interim national benchmarks achieved	If nationally set benchmarks achieved	If interim national benchmarks achieved2	If nationally set benchmarks achieved2	Minimum regional benchmark
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Primary Completion						
Central Africa	64	85		90		67
Eastern Africa	59	74		81		64
Northern Africa	89	93		95		82
Southern Africa	72	86		90		77
Western Africa	66	75		81		61
Lower secondary Completion						
Central Africa	46	68		76		37
Eastern Africa	33	50		60		38
Northern Africa	75	79		84		72
Southern Africa	54	68		76		51
Western Africa	49	63		70		32

⬜ = Optional, will be calculated by collecting countries' more ambitious benchmarks, if there is an interest and need

5. Regional and national consultations to agree on the benchmarks

As presented in the roadmap (Figure1), the proposed benchmarks for the indicators need to be widely discussed among different stakeholders. The technical consultations will be organized at two levels and will focus on discussion on methodological clarity and approaches and to agree on the benchmarks :

1. *Subregional consultations*: From February to April, technical consultations will be organized to discuss the methodologies, relevance of CESA specific indicators and proposed benchmarks.

2. *National Consultations*: As a follow-up of sub-regional technical consultations, countries will be consulted to get further inputs on benchmarks, including national set benchmarks if available to finalize the regional benchmarks.

6. Commitment to achieving Regional benchmarks

- Setting regional benchmarks would be very useful for regional partners and member States to develop appropriate policies and strategies to achieve the target. The achievement of the regional benchmarks largely depends on the national implementation of the CESA and the SDG 4 frameworks.

- The adoption of regional benchmarks requires the commitment and responsibility of the national governments, African Union Commission, and the Regional economic commissions.

- Sub-regional bodies should be working with countries in each region in monitoring the progress towards achieving regional benchmarks region, in partnership with UIS, and could play a key role in monitoring the progress.

- To enable the measurement of regional benchmarks, countries need to provide regular and quality national education statistics to regional and international partners. Specifically, Ministries of Education are responsible for collecting, analysing, and reporting education statistics, to the UIS that generates global and the indicators on an annual basis.

- Regional benchmarks should clearly identify the standard by which progress will be measured and align with the expected outcomes from Agenda 2063 actions. In this way, benchmarks can be used to promote policy dialogue between countries with development partners and education stakeholders, including schools, teachers, and parents.

7. Conclusion

The setting up of Regional benchmarks has been a long overdue country commitment in the Education 2030 Framework of Action. The joint reporting of achievements towards objectives of both agenda 2030 and 2063 requires the definition of intermediate benchmarks. So far, there has been no report at all levels (national, sub-regional and continental) since the adoption of the two agendas. It is therefore imperative to put in place a functional mechanism that will report countries' achievements on both agendas.

The setting up of regional benchmarks will be very instrumental in bridging the national and global processes in monitoring and reporting of SDG4. It will help to harmonize methodologies, tools, and periodicity of reporting on the progress of SDG4. The process will also help to develop regional policies and strategies to achieve education goals in the respective regions. Therefore, a strong cooperation and coordination among regional partners is required in setting up of regional benchmarks without further delay and with full support and commitments from regional bodies, partners, and Member states.

Annex 1. SDG4- Levels for proposed Benchmark indicators for Africa (ECA)

Benchmarks Indicators	2015 (+/- 2 years)	2025 Projection		2030 Projection		2030
	Baseline	If default national benchmarks achieved	If nationally set benchmarks achieved	If default national benchmarks achieved2	If nationally set benchmarks achieved2	Minimum regional benchmark
4.1.1. math grades 2/3	48	64		72		56
4.1.1. math lower sec.	11	20		24		16
4.1.1. math primary	23	37		43		27
4.1.1. reading grades 2/3	37	62		70		60
4.1.1. reading lower sec.	22	35		40		29
4.1.1. reading primary	30	46		50		22
4.1.2 completion rate primary	67	79		85		65
4.1.2 completion rate lower secondary	48	63		70		38
4.1.2 completion rate upper secondary	33	44		52		20
4.1.2 completion rate primary (GEMR)	74	83		87		68
4.1.2 completion rate lower secondary (GEMR)	54	64		70		40
4.1.2 completion rate upper secondary (GEMR)	34	42		47		15
4.1.4 out-of-school rate primary	11	8		6		14
4.1.4 out-of-school rate lower secondary	28	18		14		32
4.1.4 out-of-school rate upper secondary	47	39		34		54
4.2.2 pre-primary participation rate	54	67		72		46
4.c.1 percent of teachers with minimum qualification pre-primary	58	80		87		66
4.c.1 percent of teachers with minimum qualification primary	82	88		91		72
4.c.1 percent of teachers with minimum qualification lower secondary	69	88		91		68
4.c.1 percent of teachers with minimum qualification upper secondary	70	81		85		73
1.a.2 Percent of government expenditure on education	17	15		15		15

| Government expenditure on education (% of GDP) | 4 | 4 | | 4 | | 4 |

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