Forum: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Issue #2: Measures to address educational initiatives to combat poverty

Student Officer: Maya Michal Laila

Position: Chair of the United Nations Development Programme

"Education and Poverty." Educational Sociolinguistics, 27 Oct. 2020, bild-lida.ca/educationalsociolinguistics/fall2020/education-and-poverty/. Accessed 21 June 2025.

Introduction

Our world is advancing rapidly, with scientific and technological developments and global connections marking a new era. With all of this progress, a bitter truth must be

faced: millions of people remain trapped in the cycle of poverty. In this worldwide issue, the biggest initiative that has productively addressed the problem is access to education.

For developing nations with citizens living in vulnerable conditions, education serves as a beacon of hope. Education is more than just a right; it's a key factor in overall development. It helps individuals gain the skills they need for their future, strengthens communities, and supports the overall growth of a country. Despite all of that, access to quality education remains unequal. From underpaid teachers and overcrowded classrooms to digital divisions and systemic barriers, countless obstacles prevent education from reaching those who need it the most. Over 244 million children and youth around the world were out of school in 2022, with the majority living in regions affected by poverty, conflict, or inequality (UNESCO).

However, this is not just a regional problem, but a global emergency. The economic consequences of educational inequality extend across many borders, showing the repeating cycle of unemployment, which leads to poverty, instability, and inequality. According to the World Bank, countries lose over $129 billion annually in potential earnings due to the disparities in education access, particularly among girls in low-income areas. For countless refugee children, especially girls in marginalized communities, the denial of education is not just a missed opportunity to leave the cycle of poverty, but a stolen future.

Thus, the significance of this issue can be demonstrated not only by the statistics but through the experiences of millions of people around the world. In every child whose education was denied lies the potential loss of a doctor, a teacher, or even a leader. Education's power to combat poverty lies in its ability to empower people and equalize

them in today's society. Nevertheless, the reality of implementing inclusive and effective educational initiatives is complicated, calling out for thoughtful collaboration, innovation, and long-term commitment. Lack of funding, weak infrastructure, conflicts, inequality, and the tough job of beating child labour make it extremely hard to ensure every child gets quality education. Even when access does improve, ensuring that education is effective, equitable, and sustainable requires collaboration, innovation, and long-term commitment across all levels of society.

Approaching this issue requires a united international effort to dismantle the systems that perpetuate inequality and to empower those who have historically been left behind. As we open this pressing issue, delegates must recognise education as a fundamental right, but to reimagine it as a strategic pathway toward sustainable development. In doing so, we lay the preparations for a world where opportunity is no longer a privilege for some but a fulfilled promise for all.

Definition of Key Terms

Poverty Cycle: A self-sustaining loop where poverty is transmitted from one generation to the following due to various factors such as lack of education, limited access to healthcare, and restricted access to economic opportunities.

Inclusive Education: A general approach that ensures that all children, no matter their religion, skin colour, emotional, physical, intellectual, and social conditions, learn together in one shared classroom. UNICEF believes that inclusive education systems will involve transforming the entire education system to ensure that all learners are included and have access to quality education.

Multilateral Aid: Financial support that is provided by multiple countries or international institutions and/or organisations to support development in receiving countries. Multilateral support is most of the time coordinated and delivered by international organizations.

Social Mobility: The ability of individuals to move up or down in the social ladder depending on their socioeconomic status. This refers to the changes in the social position or status in their current location within a society.

Digital divide: The gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not.

General Overview

The Main Idea

Access to quality education remains one of the most important tools in breaking the cycle of poverty, yet millions of people around the world are still denied this right. Educational inequality is not only affected by poverty, but it also deepens it even further. Excluded communities often face structural barriers such as a lack of funding, geographic isolation, gender discrimination, and conflict-related disruptions that prevent full participation in educational systems (UNICEF). These challenges obstruct social mobility and limit long-term development.

Education is both an outcome and a factor of poverty. When children grow up without access to primary or secondary education, their opportunities for stable employment and economic security shrink drastically. According to the World Bank, 70% of 10-year-olds in low and middle-income countries cannot read a simple passage, which

allows us to highlight the learning poverty crisis (World Bank). In some regions affected by conflict or instability, like Syria and Yemen, these blockades are worsened by constant displacement, trauma, and destroyed infrastructure (UNESCO).

The Cycle of Educational Inequality

The relationship between poverty and education is recurrent. Poor households often cannot afford school-related expenses even when education is supposedly free. Children may be obligated to work or care for their siblings, forcing them to drop out early. In rural and underserved areas, families may have to travel long distances to reach the nearest school, if one even exists. This cycle reinforces inequality and limits generational progress, which does not allow their families to progress in the social ladder.

Besides all of this, gender remains a critical factor. In most of the regions, especially in South Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa, girls are excluded from education due to early marriage, safety concerns, or cultural norms. Children with disabilities, refugees, and indigenous people also face many challenges in accessing inclusive education.

These patterns of inequality are often worsened or sustained by the structure of government systems and the ideologies they promote. In countries with centralized or authoritarian governments, education may be controlled thoroughly, with limited investment in rural areas, leading to unequal access and repression. Moreover, ideologies that prioritize economic growth over social development may underfund or shift responsibility to the private sector, leaving behind low-income families. In various cases, cultural or religious ideologies influence curriculum content and gender roles, reinforcing exclusion rather than inclusion. As a result, these government-driven factors can directly or indirectly sustain the cycle of educational inequality across generations.

Impact of Conflicts and Emergencies

Education systems are one of the most vulnerable during times of crisis. Armed conflict, displacement, and natural disasters can damage infrastructure and displace educators, teachers, and students. In conflict zones such as Ukraine or Afghanistan, attacks on schools are not uncommon, and many generations risk missing critical years of learning (Global Partnership for Education).

In response to these crises, many international initiatives have emerged, such as Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education, which have been established to provide emergency educational support to children affected by conflict, displacement, and natural disasters. These programs aim to ensure learning flow through temporary classrooms, learning materials, and teacher support. (Education Cannot Wait) However, their impact is often constrained due to poor funding and many political barriers. In more fragile or conflict-affected states, limited resources, weak governance, and lack of access can prevent these efforts from reaching the communities most in need, creating questions about the sustainable and scalable emergency education responses (From ECW, GPE).

Technological Gaps and Post-Pandemic Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and worsened educational disparities. Over 463 million children globally were unable to access remote learning due to a lack of devices, internet, or electricity (UNICEF). This digital divide affected especially students in rural areas, fragile states, and low-income households. As education systems rebuild, the integration of technology is increasingly prioritized, but either way, unequal access to technology still threatens to widen the gap even further from what it is.

In developing countries, these challenges are even more noticeable. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, less than 20% of households have access to the internet, and in many fragile states, the infrastructure needed to support digital learning simply does not exist (UNICEF). Furthermore, schools in poorer regions may lack access to the internet and basic classroom materials, making it even more difficult to cross over to remote learning during the pandemic. The inability to participate in online learning caused millions of students to fall behind or permanently drop out of school, worsening the already existing cycles of poverty and exclusion.

As nations still try to rebuild their education systems post-pandemic era, the integration of technology is often seen as a pathway to resilience and modernization; however, for many low-income countries, digital education remains an unreachable dream rather than an achievable one. The high costs of hardware, software, and maintenance, combined with limited national budgets, make it difficult to provide fair access. Additionally, teachers in these underprivileged countries frequently lack the training needed to use these digital tools correctly, further deepening the digital divide between wealthier and poorer students.

Global Initiatives and Policy Responses

Many governments and multilateral agencies have attempted to introduce targeted policies aimed at improving educational access among low-income populations. In various countries, conditional cash transfer programs and salary schemes have helped increase school enrollment by offering monetary benefits to families who keep their children in school (Break Poverty Foundation). As an example, nations like Kenya and Rwanda have adapted nationwide school feeding programs to address hunger and reduce dropout rates, particularly in rural regions (UN World Food Programme). Other nations like the Philippines and South Africa have invested in vocational training and skill

development for kids out of school (UNESCO - UNEVOC). However, many criticize that while these can help mitigate immediate barriers, they often fail to help deal with the issue due to major issues such as undertrained teachers, lack of infrastructure, and poor funding disparities.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

USA

For a long time, the US has dominated worldwide development, especially in the field of education. The US has provided funding for initiatives that promote girls' education, expand access to elementary education, and enhance learning results in low-income areas through organizations like USAID. It impacts areas across Latin America, Asia, and Africa. But the US has come under fire for linking aid to political outcomes, which has raised questions about its sovereignty and the long-term viability of its initiatives. Despite all of this, it is a major player in the worldwide effort to combat poverty via education because of its economic strength and global presence.

China

China's growing presence in global development has been noticeable through a large-scale investment in infrastructure, including educational facilities. Through South-South (a resource exchange organisation including Brazil, India, South Africa, and China), and its Belt and Road Initiative, China has funded the construction of schools, vocational centers, and has a lot of scholarship programs for students from developing countries. While all of these efforts have expanded access to education, many critics say that China's approach prioritizes political influence and economic ties over long-term educational reform.

India

India stands out both as a recipient and a provider of education development assistance. India has made a lot of efforts to universalize basic education through many programs. Internationally, it provides its expertise through the ITEC program (part of the South-South organization), which offers training and education resources to countries across Africa and Asia. India advocates for low-cost solutions, specializing in digital learning.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a role model for community-led education in low-resource areas. It has introduced non-formal education programs that have reached millions of children living in poverty. All of these models have been replicated across underdeveloped southern countries. Bangladesh advocates for inclusive gender responsive education policies and calls attention to the link between common development and national progress. Despite having made progress, there are persistent resource gaps, and overcrowded classrooms continue to burden the formal education system.

Timeline of Events, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of Event
1948	The Human Rights Declaration was adopted on December 10. Article 26 states that education is a basic human right, and that primary education should be free and accessible for everyone. (United Nations)
	The UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education

1960	was adopted on December 14, calling all states to eliminate exclusion based on race, gender, or poverty.
1990	The World Declaration on Education for All was adopted on March 5. The global community commits ot universal access to basic education. This laid the groundwork for the MDGs and SDGs.
2000	The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were launched on September 8. Goal 2 seeks to ensure that children everywhere can complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015.
2013	Malala Yousafzai addresses the UN Youth Assembly on July 12, calling for worldwide access to education, emphasizing the power of education in combating poverty and oppression. Her advocacy sparked a global impulse on educational inequality.
2015	The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted on September 25. Goal 4 aims for inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. Goal 1 targets ending poverty in all forms.
2016	The Education Cannot Wait Fund was launched on May 24 at the World Humanitarian Summit, targeting education access in crisis and post-conflict zones.
	The UN Secretary General launches the Policy Brief on July 9, on Education during COVID-19, warning that the pandemic

2020	has worsened learning inequality and could push millions into deeper poverty.
2022	The UN Transforming Education Summit is held on September 19. In this summit, post-COVID learning loss was addressed, digital inequality, and the need for financing education systems to fight poverty and exclusion.
2023	UNESCO reports in October that 244 million children and youth are still out of school, drawing attention to widening disparities in education access and persistent poverty.

United Nations Involvement

United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a comprehensive global plan aimed at addressing urgent challenges, including education inequality and poverty. Sustainable Development Goal 1 seeks to end poverty in all its forms, while Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all human beings by 2030 (United Nations Sustainable Development). These goals, which were agreed upon by 193 UN Member States, have driven global initiatives to enhance access to education as a key tool for breaking the cycle of poverty, especially in low-income regions. As a result, millions of children have gained access to schooling, literacy rates have improved in various developing countries, and targeted initiatives have helped reduce gender disparities in education. These outcomes demonstrate the potential of coordinated international action to generate measurable progress, although gaps still exist and remain in fragile and underserved areas (United Nations).

Treaties and Resolutions

One of the basic legal bases addressing education and poverty is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted in 1966, and began its work in 1976. This treaty legally binds 171 countries to uphold the right to education and take steps to realise it progressively. Articles 13 and 14 of the ICESCR explicitly emphasize free and compulsory primary education and the progressive availability of secondary and higher education as essential to combating poverty.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Global Education Initiatives

Many programs, like Education for All and UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, have aimed to provide inclusive and equitable quality education to reduce long-term poverty. Education for All, which was launched by UNESCO in 1990, set out ambitious goals such as achieving universal primary education, improving adult literacy, and eliminating gender disparities. However, although these programs brought attention to educational access, many of these efforts fell short in implementation due to inadequate funding, weak governance, and failure to reach marginalized communities, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas (UNESCO). In the case of Education for All, the lack of coordination among international donors and insufficient national infrastructure made it difficult to translate policy into practice. According to the World Bank, 70% of 10-year-olds in low and middle-income countries can not read or write a basic sentence (World Bank).

Government Education Reforms and Public Investment

Many national governments have attempted to break the cycle of poverty by investing in public education systems through policy reforms. These reforms have included expanding free primary education, reducing fees for secondary education, and increasing funding for rural schools. While these policies have increased enrollment and attendance rates in many nations, challenges remain in ensuring education quality. In most cases, classrooms are overcrowded, learning materials are outdated, and teachers lack proper training. As a result, even when children attend school, they may not acquire the basic skills needed to break the cycle of poverty. Continued investment in both access and quality remains essential for long-term impact.

Possible Solutions

Although this issue is recognized as one of the most urgent and impactful challenges of our century, it continues to be overlooked in political agendas and under-prioritized in national development plans. Due to its deeply rooted and intersectional nature, finding a solution that could fit all is difficult. However, global cooperation and inclusive policy-making can pave the way towards real progress. As a starting point, Member States should work together to define what qualifies as educational inequality and determine minimum standards for access to quality education regardless of income, gender, or geography.

Nations should also reach a consensus on what percentage of their annual budget should be given to public education systems, particularly in rural and impoverished areas. Countries could agree to introduce standardized tools to measure "learning poverty" and commit to publicly sharing their progress. In addition, a set of guidelines could be drafted to ensure that vulnerable students receive consistent support, including free meals, access to digital tools, and trained educators. Furthermore,

governments should collaborate with international NGO's and private tech firms to create mobile or digital education programs for displaced, remote, or conflict-affected communities. These programs should be done to each country's specific needs and overseen by non-biased UN agencies.

Countries could also agree to establish a Global Education Emergency Fund, financed by wealthier nations and international organizations, to immediately respond to educational crises caused by poverty, war, or natural disasters. By doing so, the international community would be taking a proactive step toward making education a universal right, and not a privilege.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

SDG 4, Quality Education for All

The 4th SDG, "Quality Education," directly targets the root of the issue by promoting inclusive and equitable learning for all. This SDG focuses on removing barriers like poverty, gender inequality, and lack of infrastructure. Advancing this goal empowers individuals, improves social mobility, and helps break the cycle of poverty through access to lifelong learning (UN.org, Goal 4).

Additionally, quality education plays a crucial role in building sustainable and peaceful societies. It provides individuals with critical thinking skills, civic values, and the ability to participate fully in economic and social life. In some conflict-affected regions, education can work as a counterbalance to what's going on in the conflict, reducing the likelihood of youth involvement in violence.

The global community recognizes that progress in education accelerates development across all other SDGs. For example, better education leads to increased gender equality (SDG 5), decent work opportunities (SDG 8), and innovation (SDG 9). Investing in education for all individuals worldwide is not just a separate goal, but an essential step for sustainable development for all.

Appendix

This section is dedicated to providing significant data and information that you can and should utilize in your research to help you better understand the topic.
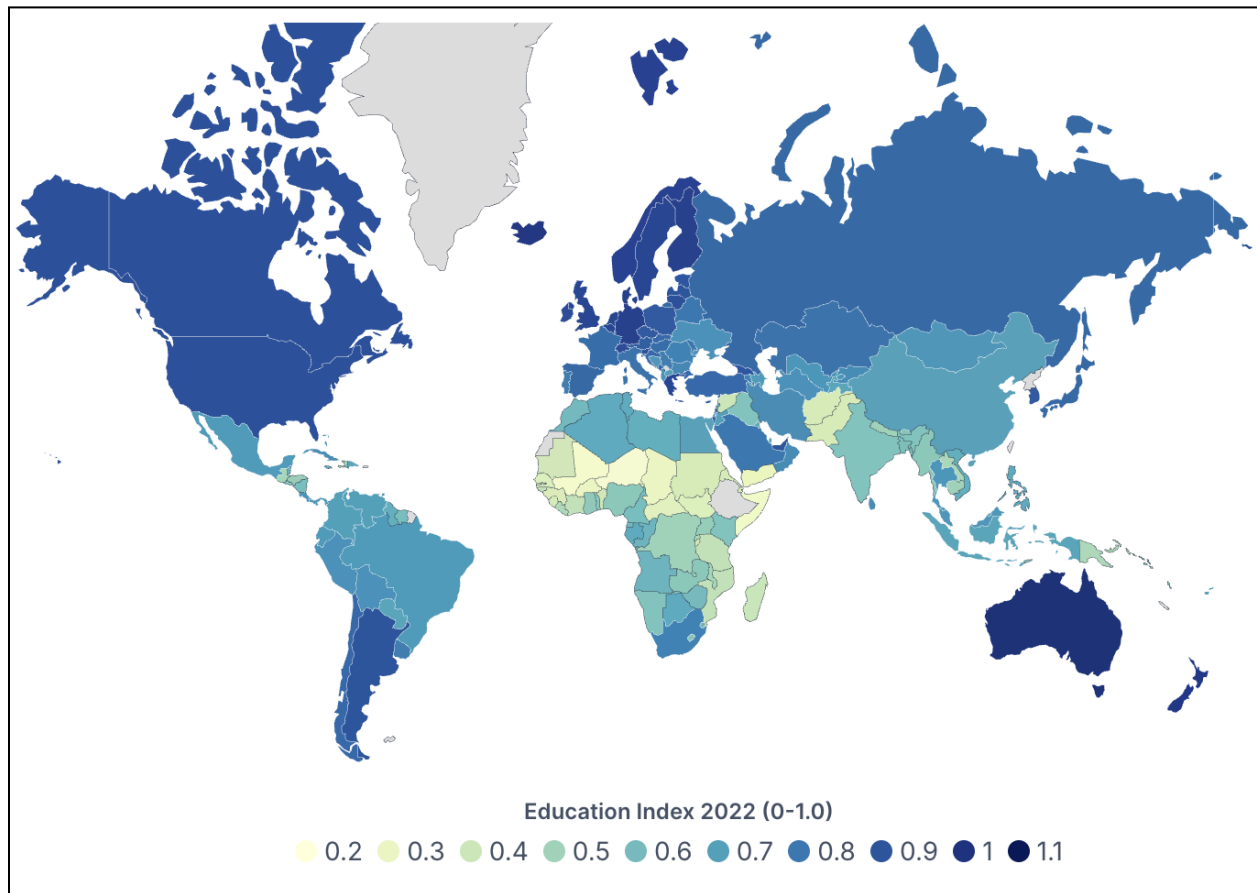
"Education Index by Country 2025." *Worldpopulationreview.com*, 2025, worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/education-index-by-country.

Accessed 22 June 2025.

Source A: The image above displays the Education Index by country as of 2022. The education index measures a country's average years of schooling and expected years of schooling, both of which are essential indicators of access to education. Countries shaded in dark blue have the highest education index scores (closer to 1.0), indicating strong and accessible education systems, while countries in lighter colours reflect weaker educational infrastructure. The map highlights a concerning global disparity, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia, where access to quality education remains limited. These regions often coincide with higher levels of poverty, suggesting a strong correlation between educational underdevelopment and economic hardship.
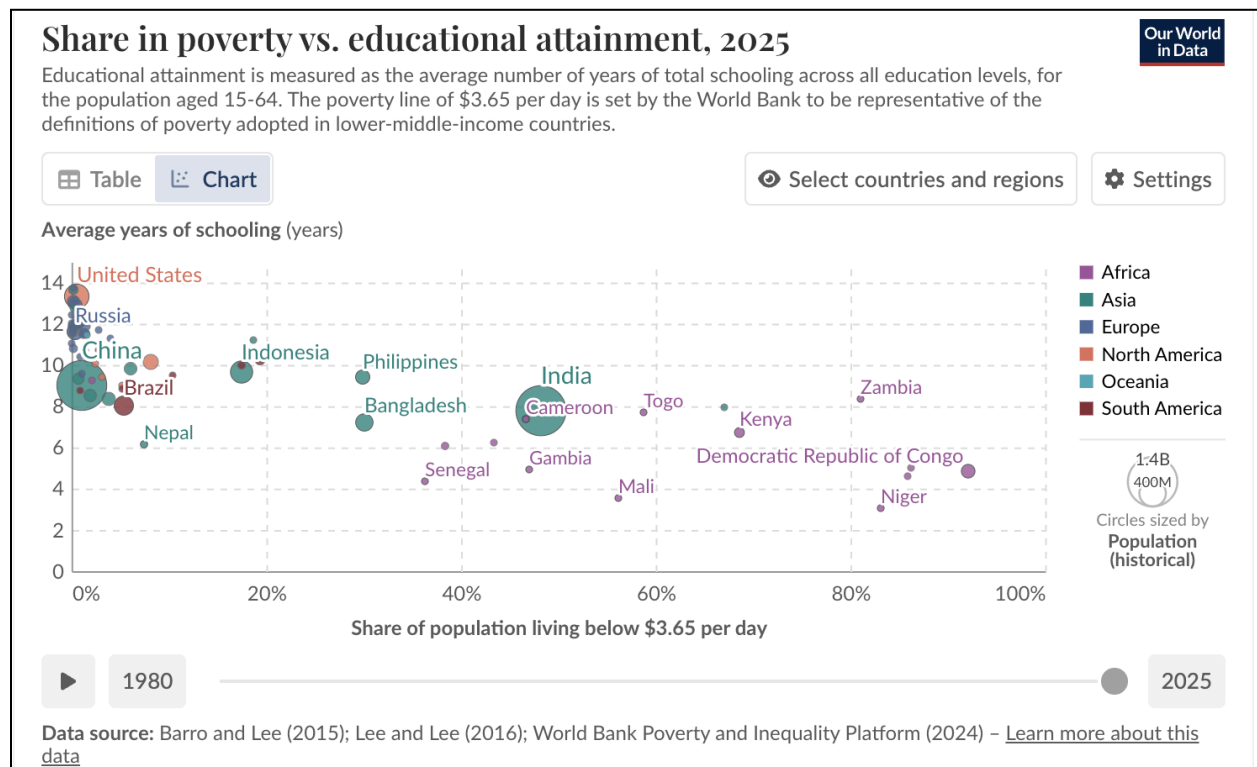
"Share in Poverty vs. Educational Attainment." *Our World in Data*, 2021, ourworldindata.org/grapher/poverty-vs-mean-schooling. Accessed 22 June 2025.

Source B: The graph from Our World in Data shows a correlation between a country's average years of schooling and its poverty headcount ratio. Each dot represents a country, showing how higher average years of schooling tend to be associated with lower poverty rates. Countries with low mean schooling years often face extreme poverty, reinforcing how educational attainment plays a direct role in economic development. This graphic shows the importance of investing in education as a long-term solution to poverty reduction, especially in low-income nations. It also highlights the need for equitable access to schooling to connect the educational divide that keeps vulnerable populations trapped in poverty.

www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education

Source C: The following link leads to the official UN page for SDG 4: Quality Education. It outlines the global commitment to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. The page includes targets, indicators, and progress reports, which can help you understand the scope of international efforts and where gaps remain.

www.educationcannotwait.org

Source D: Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is the UN's global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and crises. This website provides data, country-specific responses, and emergency funding programs. It's particularly relevant when

considering how poverty, displacement, and conflict disrupt education for millions of children worldwide.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=T15u9ZiPwvU

Source E: This video from the World Bank explains the concept of learning poverty, which is defined as the percentage of 10-year-olds who cannot read and understand a simple story. The video highlights that over half of children in low and middle-income countries are affected by learning poverty, a crisis worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasizes the urgent need for foundational learning, teacher support, and investment in early education systems. This source is valuable in understanding how access alone is not enough; quality and outcomes of education must and should be prioritized to effectively combat poverty.

Bibliography

"Education and Poverty." *Educational Sociolinguistics*, 27 Oct. 2020, bild-lida.ca/educationalsociolinguistics/fall2020/education-and-poverty/. Accessed 9 May 2025.

UNESCO. "244M Children Won't Start the New School Year." *Unesco.org*, 2022, www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/articles/244m-children-wont-start-new-school-year.

"Quoting Nelson Mandela on His Centenary, Secretary-General Says Overcoming Poverty 'Is Not an Act of Charity, It Is an Act of Justice' | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." *Un.org*, 18 July 2018, press.un.org/en/2018/sgsm19138.doc.htm. Accessed 10 Apr. 2025.

"Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: The Impact of Education – Flexisaf." *Flexisaf.org*, 2023, flexisaf.org/breaking-the-cycle-of-poverty-the-impact-of-education/. Accessed 9 Apr. 2025.

"Education." *Unicef.org*, 2024, www.unicef.org/education. Accessed 9 Apr. 2025.

Martin. "Education - United Nations Sustainable Development." *United Nations Sustainable Development*, 19 Oct. 2023, www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/. Accessed 9 Apr. 2025.

WPAB. "The Role of Education in Poverty Reduction Project Proposals - FundsforNGOs - Grants and Resources for Sustainability." *FundsforNGOs - Grants and Resources for Sustainability - Grants and Resources for Sustainability*, 4 Feb. 2025,

"The Transformative Power of Education in the Fight against Poverty." *UNDP*, 2023, www.undp.org/blog/transformative-power-education-fight-against-poverty. Accessed 9 Apr. 2025.

UNESCO. "Education Transforms Lives | UNESCO." *Www.unesco.org*, 2023, www.unesco.org/en/education.

UNESCO. "World Poverty Could Be Cut in Half If All Adults Completed Secondary Education." *Unesco.org*, 2023,

www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/articles/world-poverty-could-be-cut-half-if-all-adults-completed-secondary-education.

"How Does Education Affect Poverty? It Can Help End It." *Concernusa.org*, 2023, concernusa.org/news/how-does-education-affect-poverty/. Accessed 8 May 2025.

UNESCO. "251M Children and Youth Still out of School, despite Decades of Progress (UNESCO Report)." *Unesco.org*, 2024, www.unesco.org/en/articles/251m-children-and-youth-still-out-school-despite-decades-progress-unesco-report.

WPAB. "The Many Faces of USAID: Addressing Poverty, Crisis, and Inequality Worldwide - FundsforNGOs." *FundsforNGOs - Grants and Resources for Sustainability*, 7 Jan. 2025, www2.fundsforngos.org/articles/the-many-faces-of-usaid-addressing-poverty-crisis-and-inequality-worldwide-2/. Accessed 12 May 2025.

"Education Cannot Wait 2022 Annual Results Report." *Educationcannotwait.org*, 2022, www.educationcannotwait.org/annual-report-2022/. Accessed 16 May 2025.

"Education in Crisis Situations | Global Partnership for Education." *Global Partnership for Education*, 2024, www.globalpartnership.org/what-we-do/education-crisis. Accessed 16 May 2025.

Crisis-Affected Children and Adolescents in Need of Education Support: New Global Estimates and Thematic Deep Dives. 2023,

www.educationcannotwait.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/f_ecw1022_globa

lestimates_paper_mech.pdf. Accessed 16 May 2025.

"Break Poverty's Programs." *Break Poverty Foundation*, 24 July 2024,

breakpoverty.com/en/ourprograms/. Accessed 16 May 2025.

"UNESCO-UNEVOC." *Unesco.org*, 2025, unevoc.unesco.org/home/. Accessed 16

May 2025.

"UN World Food Programme (WFP)." *Wfp.org*, 27 Mar. 2025,

www.wfp.org/countries/kenya. Accessed 16 May 2025.

"How Many Children and Young People Have Internet Access at Home?"

Unicef.org, 2 Dec. 2020,

www.unicef.org/reports/how-many-children-and-young-people-have-intern

et-access-home-2020. Accessed 16 May 2025.

Group, World Bank. "Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls."

World Bank, World Bank Group, 17 July 2018,

www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/missed-opportunities-t

he-high-cost-of-not-educating-girls. Accessed 16 May 2025.

Nations, United. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations." *United

Nations*, 2023,

www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights. Accessed

20 May 2025.

"THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development." *Un.org*, 2020, sdgs.un.org/goals. Accessed

26 May 2025.

"Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs." *Un.org*, 2022, sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4. Accessed 26 May 2025.

"SDG Goal 4: Quality Education - UNICEF DATA." *UNICEF DATA*, 20 Sept. 2023, data.unicef.org/sdgs/goal-4-quality-education/. Accessed 26 May 2025.

"How Does Education Affect Poverty? It Can Help End It." *Concernusa.org*, 2023, concernusa.org/news/how-does-education-affect-poverty/. Accessed 27 May 2025.