



# THE POWER OF EDUCATION TO FIGHT INEQUALITY

How increasing educational equality and quality is crucial to fighting economic and gender inequality

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A good-quality public education is liberating for individuals. It can also be an equalizer within society. This report shows the unparalleled power of public education to tackle growing inequality and bring us closer together. To achieve this, education must be both of good quality and equitable; it should be free, universal, adequately funded, with well-supported teachers, and accountable public oversight. Fairer taxation of the wealthiest can help pay for it.

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The paper is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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Front cover photo: A young student at a school in Santa Cruz Estelí, Nicaragua.

Back cover photo: Students at St Andrea Primary School in Lologo, Juba, South Sudan.

Both photos by: William Vest-Lillesoe.

# SUMMARY

Inequality is reaching new extremes. Significant increases in inequality of both income and wealth are leading to larger gaps between rich and poor, men and women.<sup>1</sup> This is creating serious obstacles to overcoming poverty and exclusion,<sup>2</sup> and stopping us from beating poverty.<sup>3</sup> With women substantially over-represented in the ranks of the poorest, this is also reinforcing gender inequality, blocking progress on women's rights.<sup>4</sup> These inequalities threaten to pull our societies apart, and unravel the social contract between state and citizen, by undermining social cohesion and eroding democratic institutions.<sup>5</sup>

But inequality is not inevitable. It is a political choice. It is the result of deliberate policy choices made by governments and international organizations. Conversely, it is now broadly agreed by most global policy makers that extreme inequality is also avoidable, and that concrete steps can be taken to reduce inequality.<sup>6</sup>

*Inequality is not inevitable.  
It is a political choice.*

Good-quality education can be liberating for individuals, and it can act as a leveller and equalizer within society. This report will show the unparalleled power of education to level the playing field, to help close the growing divides, and bring us closer together.

*'There can be no contentment for any of us when there are children, millions of children, who do not receive an education that provides them with dignity and honour and allows them to live their lives to the full.'*

**Nelson Mandela<sup>7</sup>**

## EDUCATION THAT PULLS US APART

A highly unequal education system can also pull us further apart.

In most countries, children born into rich families will go to the best possible schools, very often being privately educated. They will have small class sizes, good teachers and get good results. These students will be given multiple opportunities to grow their inherited privilege.

Girls and boys born into poverty, suffering from ill health and malnutrition, arrive at the school gates already disadvantaged – if they arrive there at all. They will then struggle with overcrowded facilities that lack trained and qualified teachers, textbooks and toilets.

Pulled out of school before their brothers, millions more of the world's poorest girls will continue to have their life chances stymied by an education that is all too brief.

New analysis by Oxfam, using data from UNESCO, shows that in developing countries, a child from a poor family is seven times less likely to finish secondary school than a child from a rich family.<sup>8</sup>

In developing countries, children from **rich families are 7 times more likely** to complete secondary school than children from **poor families**.



Even in rich countries, only three-quarters of children from the poorest families complete secondary education, compared to 90% of children from the richest families.<sup>9</sup>

Inequalities of income are compounded with other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, disability and geography to form a suffocating web of exclusion. In a poor rural area of Pakistan, girls are three times as likely as poor boys to have never attended school.<sup>10</sup> In India, the median number of years of education girls from the poorest families receive is zero, compared to 9.1 years for girls from the richest families.<sup>11</sup> Educational inequalities are also driven by policies that encourage commercialization of education and expand private provision of schooling through public-private partnerships (PPPs), which can deepen segregation and stratification in education systems.<sup>12</sup>

When good education can only be accessed by families with money, it undermines social mobility; it ensures that if you are born poor, you and your children will die poor, no matter how hard you work. It also undermines our societies, as the children of the wealthy are segregated from the children of ordinary families from an early age.

*'I have seen so many clever girls and boys who score highly despite coming from poor backgrounds. I remember Chimwemwe Gabisa – she was brilliant at mathematics, the best I have taught. She finished secondary school but could not proceed to college for lack of funds.'*

**Nellie Kumambala, secondary school teacher, Lumbadzi, Malawi<sup>13</sup>**

While schooling remains segregated by class, wealth, ethnicity, gender or other signifiers of privilege and exclusion, this cements inequality. Segregated patterns of schooling build segregated communities, driving a wedge between the haves and the have-nots, right at the start of life.

# EDUCATION CAN CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

Conversely, good-quality public education for all can be a powerful engine for greater equality.

Governments can take the cost of a good education away from families, with an immediate impact on the income gap between rich and poor, as the cash benefit is proportionately far greater for families on lower incomes.

To find out more about these positive effects, Oxfam looked at available public spending data for primary education across 78 low-, middle- and high-income countries. The cash value of public education often exceeds the total income of the poorest families by a wide margin. For a single mother with two children both in primary school, for example, public spending on her children's schooling exceeds her family income by three times in Colombia.<sup>14</sup>

Yet beyond this boost to incomes, good education is an engine of equality in other important ways, by:

- **Reducing poverty.** A good education makes the likelihood of higher incomes and lower poverty much greater. It is estimated extreme poverty could be halved if universal primary and secondary education were achieved.<sup>15</sup> UNESCO estimates that each year of schooling raises earnings by around 10% for men<sup>16</sup> and up to 20% for women.<sup>17</sup>
- **Boosting opportunity for all.** Social mobility, i.e. the possibility for children from poor families to end up better off than their parents, is intimately tied to the availability of education.
- **Bringing society together.** Schools can be places where the children of rich and poor families can become friends, and the barriers of inequality are broken down. They can challenge the rules that perpetuate economic inequality in broader society, and give young people the tools to go into the world and build more equitable societies.
- **Supporting democratic societies.** Education offers individuals the tools to exercise their right to an equal say over the structures and policies that govern their lives, which boosts democracy.<sup>18</sup> Extensive research shows that increased education leads to greater political and civic engagement.<sup>19</sup>

# EDUCATION CAN CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

Good education has considerable power to increase equality between women and men. Education can help tackle gender disparities in wages, poverty, reproductive autonomy and political power. It can dramatically improve the health outcomes for women and their children.



The more educated women are, the closer their earnings are to those of men. In Pakistan, women with only a primary education earn around 50% of men's wages. Women with a secondary education earn 70% of men's wages – still unacceptable, but a far narrower gap.<sup>20</sup>

The more educated women are, the more power they have over their lives, particularly over when they marry and how many children they have. If all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia completed secondary education, there would be a 64% drop in child marriages.<sup>21</sup>

The more educated mothers are, the healthier they and their children are.<sup>22</sup> UNESCO estimates that if all women had completed primary education, there would be a 66% reduction in maternal deaths globally, and a 15% reduction in child deaths.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, good quality education has the power to challenge traditional social attitudes and ensure that girls and boys know that they are equal.

## FREE, PUBLIC AND HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

The way that education is delivered is key to ensuring its positive impact on reducing inequality can be maximized. To do this, education needs to be:

- **Universal.** In recent decades, there has been huge progress. Primary school enrolment is now almost universal, with nearly as many girls enrolling as boys – a huge challenge only a generation or so ago.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, at current rates, it could be another 100 years before all girls in sub-Saharan Africa have the opportunity to complete a full 12 years of education, which is a commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).<sup>25</sup>
- **Free.** Government investment in free education is crucial for building equality because it gives every child a fair chance, not just those who can afford to pay. Fees of any kind at pre-primary, primary and secondary level exclude the poorest, and especially girls. In Ghana, after fees for senior high school (upper secondary) were dropped in September 2017, 90,000 more students came through the school doors at the start of the new academic year.<sup>26</sup>
- **Public.** When publicly delivered education works, the scale and speed of its impact cannot be matched. Many public education systems face challenges in terms of learning outcomes, but the answer is adequate investment, not turning to the private sector, as donors like the World Bank are increasingly advocating.<sup>27</sup> Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and for-profit schools are a dangerous diversion from what is needed to deliver education for all.

### Box 1: PPPs in Pakistan are a dangerous diversion from public education

Pakistan has 24 million children out of school. To tackle this, Punjab State is no longer building any new public schools, but instead investing in a PPP. The key aim is to get more of the 5.5 million out-of-school children in Punjab into education.<sup>28</sup>

However, Oxfam's research<sup>29</sup> found that only 1.3% of children in the private schools surveyed had previously been out of school. The following are quotes from private school principals interviewed during the research:

*'We don't have any out-of-school children in this school. The ones in the community don't want to study and can be a waste of our time.'*

*'The poor go to government schools in the area. They cannot afford any expenditure on education. We as school owners cannot include the poorest of the poor in this school with other kids. It's not like a charity, we have limited funds from [the PPP], and I also need to earn a livelihood from this.'*

*'In [the PPP] it is the teachers who suffer the most. I cannot pay a decent salary to my teachers. I cannot hire male teachers, as they demand a higher salary. Females have fewer options for work.'*

- **Investment in teachers.** An empowered and professionally trained teacher has been shown to be the biggest contributor to ensuring quality education.<sup>30</sup> Public school teachers, the majority of whom are women in most regions, are often underpaid, under-supported and portrayed as part of the problem.<sup>31</sup> Yet they are the backbone of every school system.
- **Inclusive.** Education and teaching have to address the unique learning needs of all students and be designed to meet the needs of those left out and left behind, including children with disabilities, minorities, marginalized groups, the poorest and out-of-school children.
- **Relevant.** The curriculum, or what is taught in school, is vital to ensuring the maximum impact of education on reducing inequality. Teaching needs to be in the local language and done at a pace that benefits all children, not just the top performers. Curricula need to challenge traditional attitudes to gender equality and inspire critical thinking in children.
- **Accountable to families and citizens.** Good education systems have good public oversight mechanisms. These ensure that every school is properly scrutinized and accountable to those it serves.

## INVESTING IN FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL

Delivering universal public education for all is an investment. As the World Bank and others have noted, investment in human capital is integral to driving sustainable and equitable economic growth.<sup>32</sup> Many governments recognize this and have dramatically increased their funding of education.

## Box 2: Progress in education in Ethiopia

Many developing countries today operate public services on a scale impossible to conceive in the history of rich nations when at comparable income levels.

Ethiopia is a poor country, with around the same per capita income as Canada in 1840.<sup>33</sup> However, it is the fifth largest spender on education in the world as a proportion of its budget:

- It employs over 400,000 primary school teachers;<sup>34</sup> and
- Between 2005 and 2015, it has brought an additional 15 million children into school – from 10 to 25 million.<sup>35</sup>

Ethiopia still faces serious challenges with learning outcomes and improving the quality of education,<sup>36</sup> but the scale of its commitment and effort to educate girls and boys is dramatic.

Sadly, many others have not. Nigeria has more than 10 million children out of school, yet some of the lowest education spending in the world.<sup>37</sup>

Most of the increased spending can be covered by increased tax collection from rich individuals and corporations. For example, Ecuador tripled its education spending from 2003 to 2010 through effective tax mobilization policies and prioritizing education in its budget.<sup>38</sup>

However, tax alone is not enough. The poorest countries need significantly increased levels of aid from rich nations for education. Of the \$340bn needed, \$40bn will need to come from increases in donor aid. Aid to education, after falling, is now stagnant, and being diverted away from those countries that need it most.<sup>39</sup>

## EDUCATION TO FIGHT INEQUALITY

*'Education is not a way to escape poverty. It is a way of fighting it.'*

**Julius Nyerere, founding president of Tanzania<sup>40</sup>**

Economic inequality is growing. The kind of education system a country has will have a major impact on the capacity to respond to this. Access to good quality education for individual children offers a pathway to liberation from poverty and illness, towards the fulfilment of basic rights. It can transform lives and bring children out of the shadows of poverty and marginalization. For societies, it acts as a leveller, and as an agent for greater equality. Rapidly investing in quality public education for all should be a priority for all nations.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

To build equitable and good-quality public education that can help fight economic and gender inequality, policy makers must focus on the following actions:

## **1. Deliver universal, fee-free education from pre-primary to secondary**

- Set out plans to ensure free, equitable and high-quality primary and secondary education for 12 full years, as agreed in SDG 4 on education.
- Eliminate fees at all levels, including informal fees, progressively achieving fee-free secondary education. This must be carefully planned so as not to jeopardize quality. Progressively expand access to at least one year of fee-free, quality pre-primary education.
- Support the poorest, minorities and children with disabilities with extra help to redress disadvantage, so that they stay in school and learning.
- Support poor and vulnerable girls to go to school and stay in school.

## **2. Focus on policies that can help to deliver quality for all**

- Develop a fully costed and funded strategy to deliver a trained, qualified and well-supported professional workforce, with enough teachers and other personnel to deliver education for all up to secondary school.
- Invest in relevant and non-discriminatory teaching materials, taking into account mother tongues; the changing needs of the majority; and the need for schools to be places where sexist and patriarchal rules are challenged, not learned.
- Develop local accountability mechanisms between schools and their communities, parents and children; build better safeguarding and accountability mechanisms from national to local levels, including ensuring budgets and other information is available publicly and transparently for citizen scrutiny.
- Use appropriate assessments that encourage a feedback loop for curriculum development and classroom adaptations at the local level; do not simply equate higher test scores with improved quality.

## **3. Deliver more equal education systems**

- Develop national education plans that focus coherently and comprehensively on identifying pre-existing inequalities in education, producing data on gaps and needs, and developing appropriate strategies.
- Ensure equitable teacher deployment, coupled with equitable spending on school infrastructure and learning inputs, to help redress disadvantage. This may require affirmative action in poorer or more marginalized districts or regions.
- Ensure additional spending targeted at redressing disadvantage for marginalized or poor children in ways with proven impact.

- Ensure schools and teachers are supported to address the unique learning needs of all students, including children with disabilities. This will require training teachers on differentiated instruction as well as proper data collection and diagnosis.

#### **4. Focus on building public systems first; stop supporting privatization**

- Devote the maximum available resources to public education provision, to ensure adequately and equitably financed public schools; do not direct public funds to commercial or for-profit private schools, or market-oriented PPPs. Avoid diverting scarce public resources and attention away from the essential task of building good-quality, inclusive public schools that are free and accessible for all students.
- Ensure adequate regulation of private education providers, especially commercial schools, to ensure educational quality and standards are being upheld.
- Safeguard the labour rights of teachers, especially female teachers, in the public sector and the private sector as well.
- Donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank should support the improvement and expansion of public education delivery, and should not direct public aid funds to commercial or for-profit private schools, or market-oriented PPPs.

#### **5. Ensure education works to strengthen equality for girls and women**

- Address the particular barriers that keep girls out of school or learning, such as providing separate bathrooms for boys and girls, addressing the non-fee related costs of schooling, and ensuring curricula and teacher training promote positive gender roles and avoid stereotypes.
- Invest in early childhood care and education programmes that take account of the needs of women (i.e. fit around typical working hours), and young girls who are expected to care for children: this can free up women's time by easing the millions of unpaid hours they spend every day caring for their families and homes.

#### **6. Fully fund public education systems to deliver quality and equality for all**

- Governments must scale up spending to deliver quality and equity in education; in low- and middle-income countries this will require at least 20% of government budgets, or 6% of GDP allocated to education. Those with the furthest to go, and large youth populations, may need to invest more than this in the short term.
- Government spending must proactively redress disadvantage, including by adopting equity-of-funding approaches to address the historical disadvantage faced by the poorest groups.
- Invest in building robust structures, from school to local to national levels, for the effective oversight and accountability of education budgets.

- Tax wealth and capital at fairer levels. Stop the race to the bottom on personal income and corporate taxes. Eliminate tax avoidance and evasion by corporations and the super-rich. Agree a new set of global rules and institutions to fundamentally redesign the tax system to make it fair, with developing countries having an equal seat at the table.
- Donors should substantially increase their official development assistance (ODA) commitments to education, especially to basic education and in countries with the greatest needs, in order to ensure developing countries are able to devote adequate resources to build quality public education provision.



Three students at Project School in Bajarial, South Sudan. Photo credit: William Vest-Lillesoe.

# NOTES

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- 3 Lawson, M et al. (2019). *Public good or private wealth?* Op. cit.
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- 9 Ibid, see: [https://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/comp\\_upsec\\_v2#?sort=mean&dimension=all&group=all&age\\_group=comp\\_upsec\\_v2&countries=all](https://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/comp_upsec_v2#?sort=mean&dimension=all&group=all&age_group=comp_upsec_v2&countries=all). This is for children from the richest quintile and the poorest quintile.
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- 11 National Family Health Survey India. <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-4Report.shtml>
- 12 K.M. Bous and J. Farr (2019) *False Promises: How delivering education through public-private partnerships risks fueling inequality instead of achieving quality education for all*. Oxfam International Briefing Paper <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/false-promises-how-delivering-education-through-public-private-partnerships-ris-620720>
- 13 Taken from the foreword by Nellie Kumambala in: Lawson, M et al. (2019). *Public good or private wealth?* Op. cit.
- 14 These figures were calculated by Oxfam by comparing education spending per pupil data and per capita income. The education data was from: UNESCO Institute of Statistics from the following indicator: 'Initial government funding per primary student, constant \$PPP'. See: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. We used the most recent data available (2013 or later in all cases). Per capita income was taken from the Global Consumption and Income Project. See: <http://gcip.info/>. The mean per capita income in 2014 for poorest decile of the population was used (US\$ in 2005 PPP terms).
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- 24 For instance, in assessing the achievements of the Education for All (EFA) goals between 2000–2015, the EFA Monitoring Report notes that: the number of primary school age out-of-school children dropped by 42% between 2000 and 2015; 50 million more children are enrolled in school; and more than half of countries and regions worldwide have met or are close to achieving universal primary education, with a 95% enrolment rate, overall. Moreover, the EFA goal for meeting gender parity in primary education has been met. However, the challenges in some countries should not be overlooked. For instance, an estimated 57 million children, mainly the poorest and most marginalized – remained out of primary school in 2015. See: Education for All Global Monitoring Report. (2015). *Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and Challenges*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232205>
- 25 In September 2015, at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, Member States formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. SDG 4 aims to ensure 'inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' and has seven targets. This includes a commitment to 'the provision of 12 years of free, publicly-funded, inclusive, equitable, quality primary and secondary education'. See: Sustainable Development Goal 4. <https://www.sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>
- 26 See speech given by Ghanaian President Akufo Addo, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNJjpW-Qb4>. Accessed, 21st February 2018.
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- 28 It is an explicit goal of this World Bank-funded programme 'to expand outreach of the Punjab Education Fund to 2.8 million out-of-school children'. World Bank (2016). *Third Punjab Education Sector Project. Project Appraisal Document*. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/967701468198234577/pdf/PAD1641-PAD-P154524-R2016-0090-1-Box394887B-OUO-9.pdf>
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<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/human-capital>
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- 38 Education for All Global Education Monitoring Report. (2014). *Teaching and Learning: Achieving quality education for all*, p.18 and p.120. UNESCO.  
<https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2014/teaching-and-learning-achieving-quality-all>. This edition of the Report has a useful discussion of country efforts to improve tax mobilization and increase expenditure on education.
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<https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/op/2001/12/04/stories/2001120400060100.htm>







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