

ASPBAE Key Messages for HLPF 2021

A Call for Equitable, Resilient, and Transformative Education



The Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) extends its greetings of peace and solidarity with participants from civil society organisations (CSOs) and people's movements across the globe to this year's High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). We, likewise, extend our greetings to all government delegations and the representatives of international organisations participating in this event. We join CSOs and movements engaging in the HLPF to demand Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the framework of development justice.

We note the urgency for decisive action as reflected in this year's HLPF theme on "*Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.*" This calls for recalibrating strategies and firming up the roadmap towards accelerated actions to meet all the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including SDG 4 on education.



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ASPBAE welcomed the renewed optimism and commitment towards the final Decade of Action in the 2020 HLPF. However, we have yet to see strategic actions to translate these promises into meaningful and transformative changes. And as commitments to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda amidst the COVID-19 pandemic were reaffirmed by member states, we call for greater political and financing will to address the structural barriers to the achievement of the full SDGs, ensuring no one is left behind in development.

The past year-and-a-half has been extremely difficult for all. The COVID-19 pandemic upended lives and brought unprecedented setbacks to the economic, health, and education systems of governments. To date, close to 4 million lives were lost due to the virus. The COVID-19 global recession will be the deepest since the end of World War II, with the global economy contracting by 3.5 per cent in 2021 ([IMF, 2021](#)). Global extreme poverty is expected to increase significantly for the first time since 1999.

According to estimates, between 119 million to 124 million people will be pushed back into extreme poverty ([UNESCAP, 2021](#)). The Asia Pacific region is foreseen to experience the profound impact of the crisis on poverty than any other region. It is projected that 60 per cent of the new poor will be in South Asia ([UNESCAP, 2021](#)). The region has also seen high levels of working hour losses, which lead to labour income losses. The enormous loss of livelihoods and income in a region that has 122 million children ages 5 to 14 years already working will only drastically widen the gap between the rich and the poor and further entrench the inequality of outcome and opportunity, thereby trapping many families and individuals in poverty for years to come, hampering progress towards poverty reduction, and undermine social cohesion and development ([CSIS, 2021](#)).

By far the worst-hit sector, aside from health and economy, is education. In an effort to curb the spread of the virus, many countries implemented wide-scale lockdowns and nationwide or local school closures, which affected nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries, or 94 per cent of the world's student population, at the peak of the crisis ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). Asia was the first region to be hit by the pandemic and feel its array of consequent impacts, with the education of more than 760 million learners disrupted. Now, a year and a half into the crisis, more than 800 million learners or half of the world's student population are still affected by full and partial school closures ([UNESCO, 2021a](#)).

As the pandemic continues to take hold, education disruptions and school closures are prolonged, resulting in massive learning losses that have far-reaching consequences not only on the economy but also on the well-being, development, and empowerment of all students and learners, especially the most marginalised. In Asia and the Pacific alone, it was reported that at least 850 million students have lost almost half of the academic year by September 2020 ([UNESCAP,](#)

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[2021](#)). Over 100 million children will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading due to prolonged school closures ([UNESCO, 2021b](#)).

The shift to online and distance learning also posed a multitude of obstacles that impede the access to education of many, such as girls and women, learners with disabilities, underprivileged learners, learners from rural and remote areas, *Dalits*, adult learners, religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, migrants and refugees, LGBTQI learners, and other disadvantaged groups. These are the same groups that are likely to drop out of school altogether due to the absence of inclusive and equitable online learning policies and the lack of access to devices and a stable internet connection necessary to be able to continue learning.

The pervasive inequalities and vulnerabilities that plague health, economic, and education systems stand exposed and are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Well before the crisis, the world was not on track to achieve the Goals by 2030, and its progress and hard-won gains towards the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, particularly Goal 4 on quality education and lifelong learning for all, are now at risk of being derailed.

Unless urgent and decisive actions are taken to drive the necessary changes in education that are in line with principles of inclusion, equity, gender transformation, and quality, the crisis will continue to lay bare and further magnify pre-existing inequities in education, leaving the most marginalised and vulnerable learners even further behind. Further inequalities will have immense intergenerational impacts not only on human development but ultimately on the socio-cultural, economic, and political development of countries. The severe inequality in education will strategically exacerbate inequalities within countries and between countries.

After the sharp fall of Asian economies in 2020, the Asian Development Bank projected a massive rebound in the 46 economies across the Asia-Pacific region, excluding Japan and Australia, which is expected to grow by 7.3% in 2021. Such a rapid recovery was helped by the generous support extended to distressed industries with provisions of equity infusion, interest-free loans, subsidies, and reduced corporate income taxes, as well as the budget cuts and austerity packages that adversely affected key social services including education and social protection.

Most governments, aided by financial institutions, opted for rapid, yet narrow recovery that focuses more on stimulating businesses and less on developing human capabilities, building resilient health and education systems, and securing people's livelihoods. Governments are racing back to the same old and broken system that has in fact reduced human capabilities and weakened institutions to respond to and cope with emergencies. ASPBAE believes that recovery, to be sustainable and resilient, must effectively address poverty, inequity, and exclusion, and prioritise the most marginalised groups, particularly girls and women.



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ASPBAE recognises and highly appreciates the strong solidarity among CSOs and peoples' movements as we continue to work together to find solutions and reach out to communities that have been hit hard by the pandemic. We acknowledge the heroic acts of our health workers and teachers as they stood their ground, unmindful of the risks they face, often with inadequate support. We likewise commend the efforts of well-meaning officials in government and international agencies for their persistent efforts to respond to the crisis, even as they face barriers set by the prevailing structures.

Taking this opportunity to reach out to the global community gathered in this year's HLPF, ASPBAE calls on governments, development partners, and international organisations to translate their SDG commitments into concrete actions, substantiated by clear policies, actionable programmes, and substantially larger financing. Now is the time for bold and urgent strategies to address the challenges facing all sectors, particularly education.

In relation to SDG 4, ASPBAE calls for immediate and sustained actions on the following RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Prioritise education, along with human capabilities and the environment, to build equitable, resilient and sustainable societies.** ASPBAE asserts that sustainable and transformative recovery will require significant and sustained investment in building human capabilities and well-being, and in strengthening public institutions to deliver better quality services. Affirming that education is a human right and key to achieving sustainable recovery, governments must fully finance the long-term transformation of education systems based on the lessons learned and innovations emerging from this crisis.
- **Provide policy and financing support for equity, inclusion, and gender transformation in education, prioritising the most marginalised groups, particularly girls and women.** ASPBAE asserts that prioritising does not mean simply reaching out and offering the last mile, but ensuring that the most excluded and those left behind get the largest funding share, the best teachers and learning resources, and the most secure and conducive facilities for effective learning. This is one way by which they can catch up from the long years of neglect and deprivation.

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- **Develop, innovate, and mainstream learning modalities that are most appropriate to the context of the majority and the learners who are furthest behind.** ASPBAE recognises the need to employ flexible learning options and digital technologies to ensure learning continuity amidst crises, emergencies, and beyond. However, the lessons from this pandemic show that the introduction of new technologies without ample preparation and universal coverage has further widened inequality in education access and learning, thus, the need to exercise care and caution to ensure the best and most effective strategies for delivering quality education for all.
- **Institute education system reforms towards the realisation of lifelong learning through formal, non-formal and informal education.** The pandemic has shown the urgent need to make education, learning, and information accessible to all children, youth, and adults to enable them to take action in their lives and communities, as well as combat misinformation and fake news.
- **Education systems must take urgent actions and play the crucial role of addressing the heightened human rights violations during the pandemic,** the most urgent of which are violence against children and women, including the surge in early marriages, restriction of democratic rights and spaces, and discrimination against ethnic communities. The education sector must work with other sectors to support marginalised and vulnerable groups, especially women in the informal sector, towards economic recovery, which entails, for example, working with the labour sector to invest in gender-just skills education and provide adequate financial support.
- Finally, **we call on the global community to ensure greater and more secured spaces for the meaningful participation and engagement of civil society and all stakeholders** in planning, budgeting, and decision processes in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs at local, national, and global levels.



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