



SDG 4. Rural communities: Promoting rural development through education

by the
ODU Model United Nations Society

Preliminary note: Meet the SDGs

UN General Assembly special sessions are an opportunity for the UN's 193 Member States to evaluate their progress and re-commit to achieve important goals. For the General Assembly, no set of goals surpasses the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*.

In September 2015 UN member states adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

This replaced the Millennium Development Goals (the MDGs of 2000-15), with a set of 17 new *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* and 169 specific targets.

While reaffirming core aims, such as poverty reduction and the promotion of health care and education, the SDGs tackle a much broader range of factors driving underdevelopment, and clearly connect development with peace, security, and arms control.



Building on the principle of 'leaving no one behind', more than previous UN development efforts, the SDGs are truly global. They are not

directed only at developing countries, but at all countries and all 7.8 people on Earth and all 7.8 people on Earth.¹ The shock of the coronavirus

¹ Somini Sengupta, 'U.N. adopts ambitious global goals after years of negotiations', *New York Times*,

25 September 2015,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/26/world/africa/u>



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pandemic makes it harder to succeed on the Sustainable Development Goals, now a third of their way to their finish in 2030. This Special Session is an opportunity to overcome such hurdles and restore a path to global success in 2030.

Millions of people among the world's 7.8 billion people still live in shocking conditions. That includes the 785 million people without basic drinking water services and three billion people still lacking clean cooking fuels, contributing to poor health. Fewer than half of the people in the world have access to safe sanitation, and 673 million are forced to defecate in the open, according to the latest statistics from 2017.²

The estimated price tag for achieving all 17 SGDs and 169 targets is USD 2 to 3 trillion. Few people think it will be easy to achieve all the goals or find all the money. 'The low-hanging fruit have almost all been picked,' said Jim Kim, then-president of the World Bank.³

There is considerable momentum and good will. Though the goals are not legally binding on any country, they gain moral force from having been adopted by consensus after three years of lengthy negotiations. The sticking points along the way included objections from Qatar, the Vatican and others over access to sexual and reproductive health services, and pushback from the United States and others over requirements to reduce inequality. There were, and still are, fierce disagreements over tax loopholes (incentives) used by firms in rich and poor countries, and on how best to eliminate corruption.

[n-adopts-ambitious-global-goals-after-years-of-negotiations.html](#)

² Barbara Crossette, 'The UN development goals are 'seriously off track,' an expert says', *PassBlue*, 10 August 2020, <https://www.passblue.com/2020/08/10/the-un-development-goals-are-seriously-off-track-an-expert-says/>

The 17 goals, with links to the [United Nations' website](#) that list the specific targets for each goal:⁴

1. End [poverty](#) in all its forms everywhere.
2. End [hunger](#), achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote [well-being](#) for all at all ages.
4. Ensure inclusive and quality [education](#) for all and promote lifelong learning.
5. Achieve [gender equality](#) and empower all women and girls.
6. Ensure access to [water and sanitation](#) for all.
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern [energy](#) for all.
8. Promote inclusive and sustainable [economic growth](#), employment and decent work for all.
9. Build resilient [infrastructure](#), promote sustainable [industrialization](#) and foster innovation.
10. Reduce [inequality](#) within and among countries.
11. Make [cities](#) inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. Ensure [sustainable](#) consumption and production patterns.
13. Take urgent action to combat [climate change](#) and its impacts.
14. Conserve and sustainably use the [oceans](#), seas and marine resources.
15. Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt [biodiversity](#) loss.
16. Promote [just, peaceful and inclusive](#) societies.

³ Sengupta, 'U.N. adopts ambitious global goals', op.cit.

⁴ Somini Sengupta, 'Breakdown of U.N. Sustainable Development Goals', *New York Times*, 25 September 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/26/world/breakdown-of-un-sustainable-development-goals.html>



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17. Revitalize the [global partnership](#) for sustainable development.

The SDGs and Agenda 2030 are not without criticism. Many observers are convinced that 169 targets are too many, describing them as ‘sprawling’, ‘misconceived’ and ‘a mess’. Every lobby group, critics say, pitched in for its own special interest. They also protest the cost, roughly 15 percent of annual global savings, or 4 percent of world GDP.⁵

Governments and other actors promoting the Sustainable Development Goals have a habit of missing important opportunities to push for their fulfillment. Most heads of state and foreign ministers speaking at the UN’s annual opening

of the General Assembly, every September-October, fail to mention them. Even among committed governments, rhetoric tends to be more generous than funding. And countries that receive development aid tend to be better at ask for more than putting it to effective use.⁶

Attention slips over time. It was greatest at the 2015 summit, which brought together innumerable heads of state, heads of government and celebrities. Today they require reassertion, recommitment, and many new ideas to ensure their success.⁷ Keeping international attention focused on these priorities is a major task, and a major reason for this *Special Session of the UN General Assembly*.⁸

⁵ ‘Development: The 169 commandments’, *The Economist*, 26 March 2015, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/03/26/the-169-commandments>

⁶ A. Edward Elmendorf, ‘Global leaders missed a crucial chance to propel the SDGs, especially on good governance’, *PassBlue*, 7 October 2019, <https://www.passblue.com/2019/10/07/global-leaders-missed-a-crucial-chance-to-propel-the-sdgs-especially-on-good-governance/>

⁷ John McArthur and Christine Zhang, ‘Who is talking about the UN Sustainable Development Goals?’, *Brookings Institutions*, 14 June 2018,

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/06/14/who-is-talking-about-the-un-sustainable-development-goals/> and by Barbara Crossette, ‘Salvaging the SDGs: New Thinking to Spur Action Takes Shape’, *PassBlue*, 30 September 2019, <https://www.passblue.com/2019/09/30/salvaging-the-sdgs-new-thinking-to-spur-action-takes-shape/>

⁸ Barbara Crossette, ‘As the SDGs falter, the un turns to the rich and famous’, *PassBlue*, 23 July 2019, <https://www.passblue.com/2019/07/23/as-the-sdgs-falter-the-un-turns-to-the-rich-and-famous/>

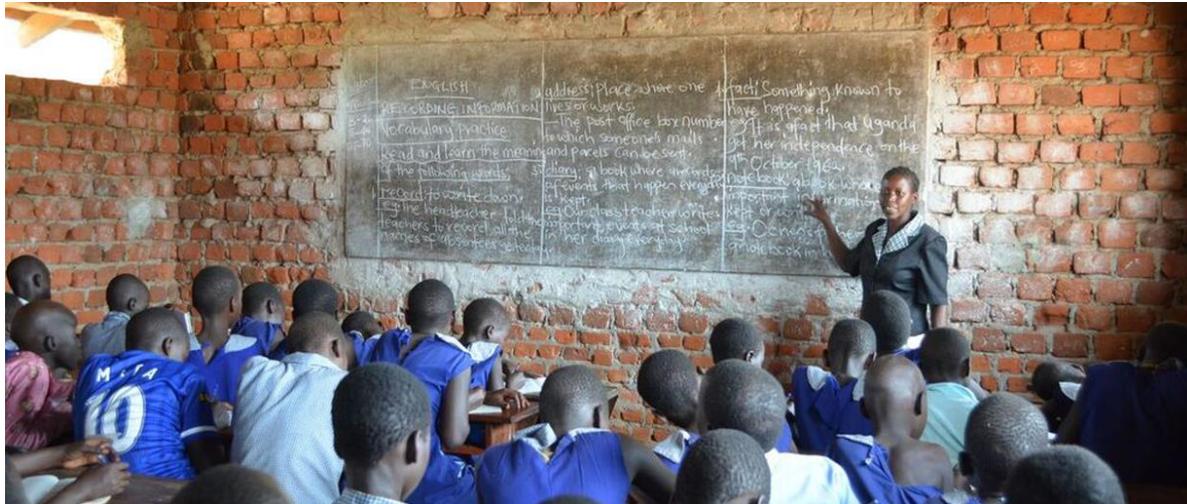


Photo source: UNESCO

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As SGD 4 stresses, education is the key to development everywhere. Educated people achieve more and contribute more. They are better equipped to deal with all of life's challenges, to participate in democratic political processes, to take advantage of opportunities for economic development, and assure the availability of health and welfare services for themselves and their neighbors.⁹

But educational opportunities are easiest to assure in urban areas, where there is greater wealth and density of teachers and students. Getting educational opportunity in rural regions, where it often is badly needed is tough everywhere.¹⁰

Rural education is an issue that unites all countries. All countries—in all regions, rich and poor, industrial and agricultural_ struggle to assure equal quality of education in urban and rural areas. Where countries differ most is the scale of their need. In rich and middle-income countries, the main challenge of rural duction is quality. While most assure equal access to education, school and universities in rural areas tend to be small, offering fewer opportunities and choices, and quality can be a serious problem.

In poorer countries, however, the problem is much deeper, with simple availability of education being a problem in rural areas; the teachers, schools and universities do not exist, or their capacities are low.

Never before have so many children been out of school at the same time, disrupting learning and upending lives, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. The global pandemic has far-

⁹ 'Goal 4, Quality Education', United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals, n.d., <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

¹⁰ Beckman, Paula J. and Jessica Gallo, 'A Global View of Rural Education: Teacher Preparation,

Recruitment, and Retention', *Global Education Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2016), <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=wNtcObkA AAAJ&hl=en>



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reaching consequences that may jeopardize hard won gains made in improving global education.

- Before the coronavirus crisis, projections showed that [more than 200 million children would be out of school](#), and only 60 per cent of young people would be completing upper secondary education in 2030.
- Before the coronavirus crisis, the proportion of children and youth out of primary and secondary school had [declined from 26 per cent in 2000 to 19 per cent in 2010 and 17 per cent in 2018](#).
- More [than half of children that have not enrolled](#) in school live in sub-Saharan Africa, and [more than 85 per cent of children](#) in sub-Saharan Africa are not learning the minimum
- [617 million youth](#) worldwide lack basic mathematics and literacy skills.
- Some [750 million adults](#) – two thirds of them women – were illiterate in 2016. Half of the global illiterate population lives in South Asia, and a quarter live in sub-Saharan Africa.
- In 10 low- and middle-income countries, [children with disabilities were 19 per cent less likely](#) to achieve minimum proficiency in reading than those without disabilities.
- [4 million refugee children](#) were out of school in 2017.¹¹

An illuminating example comes from a study of northeast Kenya, where ‘lack of development, distance, political isolation, language barriers and cultural practices (such as early marriage and female genital mutilation) block rural

primary education and make higher education impossible, contributing to the marginalization of Kenya’s nomadic peoples. Violence and conflict in the region worsen the barriers to providing educational opportunities for the people of this region.¹²

The problem also can be found in wealthy countries. Linguistic diversity is an issue uncovered a study of rural school districts in Wisconsin, United States. While school policies there are designed to support immigrant English language learners, systemic inequities and challenges of access students and staff make genuine equality impossible. While these districts are relatively wealthy and resource-rich in comparison others the difficulties of professional isolation that the teachers experience in these rural communities compound the challenges to equitable support for this particular population of rural students.¹³

Education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty. Over the past decade, major progress was made towards increasing access to education and school enrollment rates at all levels, particularly for girls. Nevertheless, about 260 million children were still out of school in 2018 — nearly one fifth of the global population in that age group. And more than half of all children and adolescents worldwide are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics.

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, a majority of countries announced the temporary closure of schools, impacting more than 91 per cent of students worldwide. By April 2020, close to 1.6 billion

¹¹ UNESCO. *Education transforms lives*, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d., <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education>

¹² Beckman, Paula J. and Jessica Gallo, ‘Rural education in a global context’, *Global Education*

Review, vol. 2, no. 4 (2015), pp. 1-4, <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=wNtcObkA AAAJ&hl=en>

¹³ Ibid.



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children and youth were out of school. And nearly 369 million children who rely on school meals needed to look to other sources for daily nutrition.

SDG 4 in the UN system

The pivotal resolution on this topic was *Education for sustainable development in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/74/223*, passed in 2019.¹⁴ Passed by consensus (without a vote), showing complete support among all Member States. But consensus usually comes at the cost of stripping the resolution of devise or controversial recommendations. In this case the controversy focused on an amendment to encourage all states to work on these goals with UNESCO. Voting against the amendment were Australia, Canada, Israel, United States) with 2 abstentions, from Georgia, Japan. The controversy reflected America's recent decision to quit UNESCO, as a show of support for Israel. In the end, though, none of these countries opposed the consensus on the final resolution. UN.¹⁵

Resolution 74/223 makes a crucial statement:

Noting with concern that, despite the considerable progress on education access and participation over the past years, 262 million children and youth aged 6 to 17 were still out of school in 2017, more than half of children and adolescents are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics and, while rapid technological changes present opportunities and challenges,

the learning environment, the capacities of teachers and the quality of education have not kept pace, and refocused efforts are needed to improve learning outcomes for the full life cycle, especially for women, girls and people in vulnerable situations.

Most impressive, perhaps, the Resolution went beyond the usual focus on primary education to stress life-long learning. In the resolution, the Assembly called on the international community to provide inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels so that people may have access to lifelong learning opportunities that help them acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities to participate fully in society and contribute to sustainable development.

The most recent UN General Assembly resolution on the topic, *A/RES/74/237*, notes the scale of the problem of poverty generally, and rural poverty especially. Most relevant here the resolution '*Emphasizes* that economic growth continues to leave rural dwellers behind, that in 2015, 79 per cent of the people living in extreme poverty lived in rural areas...'¹⁶

The resolution notes that that when it comes to education:

...annual financing gap for reaching universal pre-primary, primary and secondary education of good quality in low-income and lower middle-income countries of \$39 billion over the period 2015–2030, and that at least \$80 billion in annual investment will be needed to meet the demand for food that is projected to

¹⁴ UNGA. *Education for sustainable development in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/74/223*, New York: United Nations, 19 December 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/223>

¹⁵ UN. *Taking Up Second Committee Reports, General Assembly Adopts 47 Resolutions, including Texts to Combat Protectionism, Unilateral Economic*

Measures. New York: United Nations, 19 December 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12233.doc.htm>

¹⁶ UNGA. *Eradicating rural poverty to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/74/237*, New York: United Nations, 20 January 2020, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/237>



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increase by 70 per cent by 2050, and that the investments that are needed for climate change mitigation and adaptation also remain underfunded,¹⁷

The resolution passed 126 for, 49 against, and 2 abstention (Palau and Turkey). The level of opposition, with 49 no votes, mostly from Asian, European and North American donor Member States, was exceptional for a General Assembly resolution. Those usually pass by consensus.

The opposition showed how controversial are the problems surrounding SDG 4. Many poorer countries want more development assistance from wealthier donor countries. Most Member States voting in opposition were registering their discontent with the refusal of Non-Aligned Movement countries to accept language in the resolution urging greater oversight over how aid money is spent, to assure less corruption and more effective program implementation. Above all, the resolution did not show any agreement on how to meet the financing gap it emphasized.¹⁸

Implementing agencies: UNESCO and UNDP

In the United Nations system, the lead organization for implementing SDG 4 is UNESCO, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Based in Paris, UNESCO has an annual budget USD 600 million and roughly 2,000 staff members. It was founded with an educational mission. UNESCO

is dedicated to the belief that education is a human right for all throughout life and that access must be matched by quality. The organization is the only United Nations agency with a mandate to cover all aspects of education. With its mandate from directly from its Member States, it has unique support in the UN system.

Not surprisingly, UNESCO was entrusted to lead the Global Education 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goal 4. UNESCO provides global and regional leadership in education, strengthens education systems worldwide and responds to contemporary global challenges through education with gender equality an underlying principle.¹⁹

But UNESCO is a weak agency, with limited support and resources. It has only a limited ability to manage large programs. Instead it sets global norms and relies on the Member States to implement them.

The other UN agencies prominently working on Education issues is UNDP, the United Nations Development Programme. Unlike UNESCO, it cannot set global policy, principles and goals, but it has field offices throughout most of the world's poorer countries, enabling it to actually implement programs. The organization operates in 177 countries, where it works with local governments to meet development challenges and develop local capacity. It has an annual budget of USD 5 billion from donor governments, and a staff of 17,000. In educational matters, UNDP relies on cooperation with national organizations and agencies.²⁰ UNDP programs have a strong

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ UN. *Taking Up Second Committee Reports, General Assembly Adopts 47 Resolutions, including Texts to Combat Protectionism, Unilateral Economic Measures*. New York: United Nations, 19 December 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12233.doc.htm>

¹⁹ UNESCO. *Education transforms lives*, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d., <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education>

²⁰ A list of participating governments and non-governmental organizations can be found at UN, 'Education for Rural People (ERP)', United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.,



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record for increasing primary school attendance, raising literacy, and increasing education for girls and women especially.²¹

Country and Bloc Positions

African Union (AU): promoting quality education in rural and developing communities is important for all African countries. There is growing recognition that only through wider access to quality education can rural development slow migration to the cities or emigration out of their home country.

African Member States welcome coordinated assistance for education, but they are divided on how to channel it. Some welcome aid and donor government oversight to ensure the highest possible effectiveness. Others demand that aid first be coordinated with their domestic policies and goals; they want to maintain their own national oversight. And a few African Union states face difficult domestic political problems, and face pressure to allocate foreign aid through supportive individuals and groups, even at the risk of corrupt activity, or giving unfair advantages to privileged groups.

China: has expanded its foreign educational aid program and welcomes opportunities to invest in promotion of quality education in rural and developing communities, as well as projects that support rural women and children. Most Chinese foreign assistance takes the form of long-term loans, not grants. It's foreign aid loaning appears to be roughly equal to the United States.²² While

China sees itself as a developing country—with hundreds of millions of people still in rural poverty—and prefers that other countries show more generosity, it is willing to act globally, under some circumstances. China often expects commercial advantages for its development assistance, which some accuse of viewing aid as an investment tool above all. But China is willing to invest and accepts some degree of international coordination and supervision.

European Union (EU): the 28 Member States of the EU are supportive of the SGD process and coordination of development assistance. With an annual aid budget of EUR 75 billion (USD 86 billion), it is by far the largest single donor of direct assistance (not counting loans).²³ They are especially sensitive to the need to promote quality education in rural and developing communities. Generous with their development budgets, with strong public support at home, they also demand high standards of accountability, making sure that programs in recipient states are effective and that benefits reach their intended targets. They are willing to sacrifice control to assure results, but insist on careful oversight and careful measures of effective implementation. They are less enthusiastic about new funding, however, and may insist that new programs be funded by cutting old ones.

Latin America: receives less foreign assistance than it used to, as its economies have developed. In Central America, a special problem is promoting security, so that investment will be effective. This means first finding way to reduce

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=1518>

²¹ UNDP. 'Goal 4: Quality education'. United Nations Development Programme, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-4-quality-education.html>

²² Tom Murphy, 'Find Out Some (But Not All) The Secrets Of China's Foreign Aid', *NPR*, 31 October 2017,

<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/10/31/560278615/find-out-some-but-not-all-the-secrets-of-chinas-foreign-aid>

²³ 'EU remains the world's leading donor of development assistance: €75.7 billion in 2017', *European Commission*, 4 October 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/eu-remains-worlds-leading-donor-development-assistance-eu757-billion-2017_en



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crime and corruption. Other parts of Latin America are highly supportive of coordinated assistance, including help to promote quality education in rural and developing communities. But politically these areas and groups are weaker and less likely to get the help they need. Overcoming those hurdles remains a widespread regional issue.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): the 120 Member States of UN's largest voting bloc, which includes most countries of Africa and Latin America, as well as Asia, expect the world's richer countries to contribute to global development goals, including promotion of quality education in rural and developing communities. They welcome foreign assistance, but ask that new projects not endanger old ones. They often resist foreign oversight over the way aid is spent, preferring to maximize their national control—ostensibly in defense of sovereignty—when possible. There is disagreement among the NAM member states on these important issues.

Russia: fully accepts the SDGs in its domestic planning and foreign assistance. But Russia stresses that education is a domestic issue, and each country is its own ultimate sovereign authority, with unique sovereign responsibility and freedom from foreign interference. Russia, like many Non-Aligned Movement countries and some other major donors including China, is suspicious of UN efforts to promote education that can be used to promote democratic values or criticism of the state and government.

The United States: is reducing its foreign aid investments, dealing with global inequality by strengthening its borders and military action abroad. It still invests in development assistance and supports quality education in rural and developing communities, so long as assistance

does not increase spending. Under President Trump, the United States was especially concerned that any resolution not criticize Israel, that other countries pay their fair share, that no resolution can be interpreted to encourage radical Islam, and that no country is forced to sacrifice national sovereign freedom. Policy under President Biden is less clear, at this writing.

Regarding the United States, most assistance is in the form of long-term loans. Grants are channeled through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the most prominent instrument for development policy. Established by President George W. Bush in 2004, it works under State Department and USAID to help achieve the SDGs. The MCC annual budget, which reached USD 3 billion in 2007, currently is down to USD 800 million.²⁴ By selecting country partners who perform well and leveraging continued domestic policy reform to support growth, good governance, and an enabling environment for trade and investment, MCC aims to create incentives to improve performance on the SDGs, including girls' primary school completion.

Possible proposals for action

For UN Member States, it is easiest to agree on *principles*, especially if they are diluted to permit each country to interpret and apply them as they will. Stressing principles is a natural path when promoting the SDGs. What is tougher is finding agreement for more binding commitments. *Active measures* are the great untried area for rural primary and secondary educational reform.

Possibilities include:

²⁴ FY 2019 Congressional Budget Justification - Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Washington, D.C.: U.S.

Department of State, 12 February 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277155.pdf>



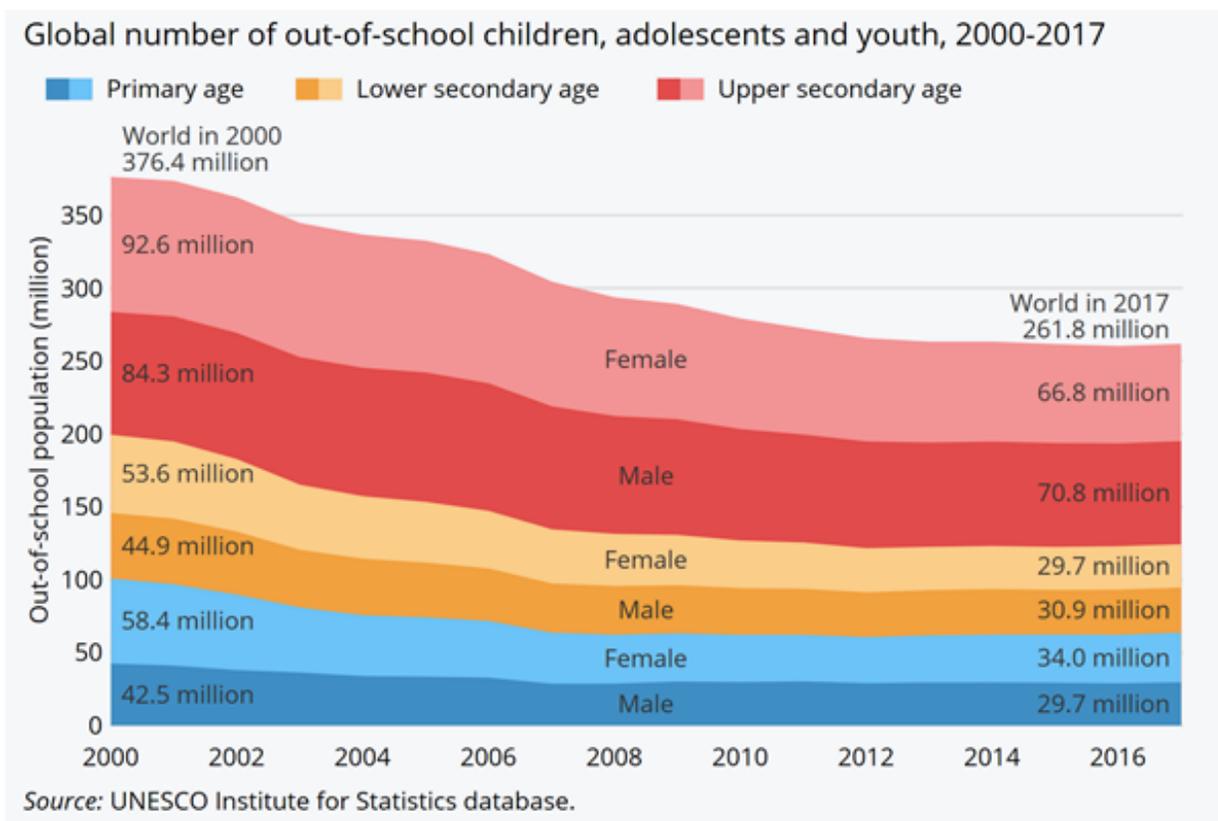
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- **Create financial rewards** for countries that prioritize rural education.
- **Establish a global testing system** to evaluate and compare primary and secondary education in all countries and regions of the world.
- **Establish aid programs** to fund equal levels of primary and secondary education in developing countries, or all countries.
- **Require uniform standards for primary and secondary education in all countries.** To be effective, such a mandate would have to include plans for funding.
- **Encourage political centralization,** running rural education everywhere through each country's central governments, to better assure effective educational programming and proper use of educational assistance funding.
- **Encourage political devolution,** such as regional self-rule, for rural areas to permit local groups and leaders to channel educational assistance funding as they see fit.
- **Call for a global conference** inviting all heads of state and leaders of major international organizations to promote this essential goal. Ideally the heads of state of all 193 UN Member States would be involved. Governments will be encouraged to pledge, as donors and recipients, showing their ability and enthusiasm for offering support, and their efficiency and competence applying it. A host country for the conference would have to be found, and funding for the events, which is likely to cost many million US dollars. The resolutions should specify the agenda for the conference, its duration in days (no more than 3 usually), and specific proposals or criteria to measure success. Practical problems like the coronavirus pandemic must be addressed.
- **Ask the UN Security Council to take up the issue of SDG Goal 4 targets.** Unlike the UN General Assembly, the Security Council sets mandatory international law. While the General Assembly can only request and recommend state action, the Security Council can demand actions. Enforcement depends on the willingness of the Security Council's 15 Member States to enforce their decision on other countries. However, Security Council Member States are careful to apply their powers and hesitant to sue it where it does not advance their own policies. The Security Council might refuse to do anything.
- **Create a High-Level Group** of global leaders, celebrities and the wealthy to draw attention and recommend specific action to achieve SDG 4. The resolution would have to clarify specific goals for the High-Level Group. What is it supposed to do? Which countries does it reach to? Only donors, or also aid recipients? The group probably would be convened by the UN Secretary-General, who would schedule meetings.
- **Establish a new UN agency** specifically to implement educational mandates, such as SDG 4. This agency would need greater funding than UNESCO, and more authority than UNDO. All this would have to be arranged in a resolution establishing the new organ. Some governments might oppose giving so much authority to an organization they cannot control.
- **Establish specific development and education goals,** measures of progress, including funding for each goal and measures of accomplishments.

- Focus on problems in specific countries.**
 This will be controversial; a major element of the SDGs is ensuring all boats rise

together. But there is no denying some countries have less means than others, greater needs, and less resources to work with.





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UN. *Taking Up Second Committee Reports, General Assembly Adopts 47 Resolutions, including Texts to Combat Protectionism, Unilateral Economic Measures*. New York: United Nations, 19 December 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12233.doc.htm>

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