

Language Equality & Schooling: Global Challenges & Unmet Promises

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In this essay, I examine unmet promises and global challenges for achieving language equality in schooling, with special focus on one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4), which aims to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all. Language of instruction is a key determinant of student success, but there is limited recognition of the vital role language plays as an intervening variable. Most languages continue to be excluded from education and 60 percent of out-of-school children live in regions where their own languages are not used at school. Inequities arising from unjust language policies combine to trap the poorest in a cluster of disadvantages persisting across generations. Underinvesting in education jeopardizes a range of social benefits. A well-educated population will increase the overall economic prosperity of a nation. I call for first language-based multilingual education as a pathway to schooling equality and sustainable development.

Education is both the lynchpin of sustainable development and a fundamental human right guaranteed in numerous international covenants and declarations, but it is not equally accessible to all. The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action adopted at the 2015 World Education Forum recognized inclusion and equity in and through education as the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda to be implemented in the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030.¹ The fourth goal (SDG4) pledges to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all. Countries committed to "making the necessary changes in education policies" are required to address exclusion, marginalization, and inequities. To ensure that no one is left behind, they promised that "no education target should be considered met unless met for all."²

However, we are already more than halfway to the 2030 deadline, and approximately 244 million children and youth worldwide between the ages of six and eighteen were still missing out on school in 2021. This includes 67 million children of primary school age (about six to eleven years old), 57 million adolescents of lower-secondary school age (about twelve to fourteen years old), and 121 million youth of upper-secondary school age (about fifteen to seventeen years old). Being in school, however, is not the same as learning. Over 600 million children and

adolescents worldwide did not attain minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics due to the poor quality of schooling, even though two-thirds of them were in school.³ Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic compromised the quality of education for all learners across all countries and magnified existing challenges.

In this essay, I examine unmet promises and global challenges for achieving language equality in schooling. Although virtually everyone acknowledges clear links between good education and a broad range of benefits impacting poverty, health, and gender inequality, limited recognition of the seminal role language plays as an intervening variable prevents these advantages from reaching the most marginalized.⁴ With over seven thousand one hundred languages worldwide but only about two hundred countries, there are about thirty-five times as many languages as countries. Bilingualism or multilingualism is present in practically every nation, whether officially recognized or not. Nevertheless, national policies remain radically out of line with the realities of multilingualism in today's globalized world. Most countries operate as monolingual either *de facto* (unofficially)

economic, social, and health risks because ethnolinguistic minorities constitute a large proportion of the bottom 20 percent still living in extreme poverty and suffering from poor health, lack of education, and deteriorating environments.

Language is the missing link in the global debate on equality and inclusion. Language and education inequalities intersect with socioeconomic status, sex, gender, location, religion, ethnicity, and migration, and accumulate through life and compound over time. As long as education relies mainly on international languages at the expense of local vernaculars, education will reproduce rather than reduce these inequalities, making sustainable and equitable development difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. I argue first language–based multilingual education (L1-based MLE) could be a pathway to schooling equality and sustainable development.

Language diversity is a critical but overlooked variable in understanding

UNESCO in 2019 as a measure reflecting the number of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten.¹² With “business as usual” progress, it would take a century or more for many low-income countries to reach current means set by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in international assessments like the Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems, Program for International Student Assessment, and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Some countries would never catch up.

There is a substantial geographic overlap between poverty, educational disadvantage, and language diversity. Table 1 shows the ten countries with the highest numbers of out-of-school youth between ages six and eighteen alongside the number of languages spoken and mean years of schooling. Altogether, these countries host 60 percent of the 244 million out-of-school children, including some of the world’s most linguistically diverse countries such as India, Nigeria, and Indonesia. In Nigeria, Africa’s most populous and ethnolinguistically diverse country, the out-of-school rate has increased among adolescents and youth of secondary school age by 61 percent (from 6.3 to 10.1 million) over the past twenty years. Among primary school–age children, it has increased by 50 percent (from 6.4 to 9.7 million) since 2010. Were more accurate data available, the figures would probably be much worse for countries like Chad (112 languages), Central African Republic (66 languages), Equatorial Guinea (12 languages), Eritrea (9 languages), and South Sudan (62 languages), where estimates suggest that more than 50 percent of primary school–age children are out of school.¹³ In 2019, for instance, 79 percent of the poorest, 60 percent of girls, and 61 percent of rural children in Chad were out of primary school.¹⁴ These countries would add 261 languages, increasing the total to 2,863, or 40 percent of the world’s languages.

Mean years of schooling is one of three basic dimensions (along with life expectancy and income) in the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure of average achievement used to rank countries. These ten countries show a range from 3.2 (Ethiopia) to 8.6 (Indonesia). However, disaggregated national data obscure systematic patterns of discrimination and marginalization for some groups based on sex, wealth, location, and other characteristics that intersect with language. This is true especially for the poorest, for girls, for ethnolinguistic minorities, and for those in rural areas. Indigenous peoples, who make up less than 6 percent of the global population but about 19 percent of the extreme poor and speak up to 60 percent of the world’s languages (many at risk of extinction) are also particularly vulnerable.¹⁵

Gender parity in education has long been regarded as a crucial indicator of overall gender equality. Nevertheless, gender disparities are still among the most entrenched inequalities. The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-5) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,

Table 1

Country	Out-of-School Students (millions)	Languages Spoken	Mean Years of Schooling
India	56.4	424	6.7
Pakistan	20.7	69	4.5
Nigeria	19.7	520	7.2
Ethiopia	10.3	87	3.2
China	10.5	281	7.6
Indonesia	6.9	704	8.6
Tanzania	6.9	201	6.4
Bangladesh	6.0	36	7.4
Democratic Republic of Congo	5.8	210	7.0
Sudan	5.0	70	3.8
Total	148.2 (60.7 percent of world total)	2,602 (36 percent of world total)	6

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "New Estimation Confirms Out-of-School Popula-

teen years of age account for more than the total number of out-of-school girls of any other region. Women still account for almost two-thirds (515 million) of adults unable to read, a legacy of inequalities and restricted educational opportunities beginning in childhood. If all children entering school after 2000 had achieved basic literacy, adult illiteracy rates would have fallen. Instead, the share

its own numerous linguistic minorities. Over four hundred thousand school-aged Rohingya children urgently need education; in 2019, at least one-third were not in any kind of school program. The Rohingya language lacks a widely accepted written standard and Rohingya people have low levels of literacy. In Myanmar, before arriving in Bangladesh, Rohingya people faced virulent education discrimination: Myanmar restricted primary and secondary education for Rohingya people and

tions. The other half is the continued failure of English to achieve the promises and hopes held out for it as a language of opportunity. The global rush to adopt English as a medium of education at increasingly earlier ages virtually guarantees that most children in the poorest countries, especially in Africa and South Asia, will be left behind.³⁸ Even in multilingual countries in the Global South currently implementing some form of multilingual education, early exit is the most common choice.³⁹ Although even a few years can give some students an advantage, programs most likely to facilitate successful transition to learning in a second language in secondary school require a minimum of six years of instruction through the first language.⁴⁰ In sub-Saharan Africa, with school conditions far from optimal, as many as eight years of instruction in African languages may be needed. English falls short of being the

Just and socially inclusive language policies will generate economic benefits. One year of schooling increases earnings by 10 percent on average. In sub-Saharan Africa, returns are highest on average (12.5 percent) and even more for girls (nearly 14 percent).⁴³ Educating girls and women is one of the best investments a country can make to break the intergenerational poverty cycle. Indeed, developing countries can gain the largest economic and social advantages. Where income and school levels are lower, girls and women potentially reap greater benefits, especially from completing secondary education. Conversely, failure to educate girls can lead to substantial losses between

Overall, aid to education has been declining and is far too low to meet SDG targets. Donors do not give enough; nor do they allocate funds to those needing

affected by the new policy should have finished primary school.⁵¹ The quality of schooling has also suffered, with 85 percent of students ranked “below compre-

model, providing only three years from pre-primary level until grade 2. Meanwhile, a recent World Bank policy paper recommended actively championing and leading the way on good language-of-instruction policies because they promote human capital accumulation and are therefore of acute concern to national policymakers and development partners.⁵⁸ As the largest funder of education in the developing world, the World Bank could prioritize allocation of resources for LI-based MLE and put pressure on ministries of education to adopt sound language policies.

In 2015, countries pledged to make changes in education policies to address exclusion, marginalization, and inequities as part of a transformative education agenda to be implemented in the United Nations' **SDGs**. Despite encouraging developments in some countries, education in many parts of the world still operates in ways that contradict best practices recognized more than seventy years ago by UNESCO supported by a substantial body of research on the benefits of LI-based MLE. I have provided empirical evidence in support of a significant geographic overlap between poverty, educational disadvantage, and language diversity. There can be no true development without linguistic development. Use of local languages is inseparable from participatory development. Exclusionary policies, no matter how well funded, will not work. The continuation of educational policies favoring international languages at the expense of local ones is part of the development fiasco. The social and economic costs of inequities in differential access to good-quality education are high indeed, with the heaviest burden falling on the poorest, girls, ethnolinguistic minorities, and those living in rural areas. Achieving equality and inclusion will not be possible so long as development agendas continue to ignore language of instruction.

author's note

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endnotes

- ¹ United Nations, "The 17 Goals," <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> (accessed June 21, 2023).
- ² UNESCO Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2015), iv.
- ³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "New Estimation Confirms Out-of-School Population Is Growing in Sub-Saharan Africa," Fact Sheet No. 62/Policy Paper 48 (UNESCO, 2022), 3.
- ⁴ Suzanne Romaine, "Keeping the Promise of the Millennium Development Goals: Why Language Matters," *Applied Linguistics Review* (2013): 1–21; and Suzanne Romaine, "Global Language Justice Inside the Doughnut: A Planetary Perspective," in *Global Language Justice*, edited by Lidia L. Liu, Anupama Rao, and Charlotte A. Silverman (Columbia University Press, 2023), 68–95.
- ⁵ Stephen L. Walter, "The Language of Instruction Issue: Framing an Empirical Perspec-

- ⁵² The World Bank, *Future Drivers of Growth in Rwanda: Innovation, Integration, Agglomeration, and Competition* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and The World Bank, 2020), 24.
- ⁵³ From Article 350-A: "It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups." The Constitution of India, Article 350-A, "Facilities for Instruction in Mother-Tongue at Primary Stage," <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india> (accessed February 10, 2024).
- ⁵⁴ The National Education Policy Provision 4.11 Multilingualism and the power of language states: "Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language. Thereafter, the home/local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible. This will be followed by both public and private schools. High-quality textbooks, including in science, will be made available in home languages/mother tongue. All efforts will be made early on to ensure that any gaps that exist between the language spoken by the child and the medium of teaching are bridged." *The National Education Policy 2020* (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020), 13.
- ⁵⁵ For a discussion of Indian language policies, see Ajit K. Mohanty, *The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages* (Multilingual Matters, 2018).
- ⁵⁶ UNESCO/EFAGlobal Monitoring Report 2011, *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education* (UNESCO 2011), 148–149.
- ⁵⁷ UNICEF, *Every Child Learns: Global Annual Results Report 2019* (UNICEF 2019), 38; and UNICEF, *Nigeria: Every Child Learns: UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030* (UNICEF 2019).
- ⁵⁸ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and The World Bank, *LOUD AND CLEAR*