

Measuring Equitable Access to Early Childhood Education in Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar

Providing quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) to all children by 2030 is one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. More than one-third of the world's under-5s live in the corridor created by the populous countries of Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. Nirmala Rao, Yi Yang and Namita Rangnathan provide data showing the current state of provision of ECE in these countries and the steps required for improvement.

Global recognition of the importance of the early childhood period for human and societal development is reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.2 (by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education). To measure progress towards SDG Target 4.2, two globally comparable indicators have been selected:

- 1) whether children under 5 years of age are developmentally on-track in the areas of health, learning and psychosocial well-being (Indicator 4.2.1); and
- 2) national participation rates in organised learning (one year before the official primary entry age) (Indicator 4.2.2).

We considered how four populous countries in Asia – Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar – fare in terms of progress towards SDG Target Indicator 4.2.2. China–Myanmar–Bangladesh–India formed one of the original economic corridors of China's Belt and Road Initiative and together have 34% of the world's children below the age of 5.

We compiled data on equitable access to early childhood education (ECE) in these four countries. Relevant data were not always easy to collate. We relied on data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics and nationally representative household surveys such as UNICEF'S Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey and the Demographic and Health Surveys. National governments provide data to UNESCO but some countries do not enumerate participation in non-governmental (private) programmes. Furthermore, there are discrepancies in the administrative data that governments report to UNESCO and those collected through household surveys.

Access

The gross enrolment ratio (GER) in pre-primary education in China increased from 53.67% in 2010 to 88.09% in 2018; and in Bangladesh it increased from 13.12% in 2010 to 40.82% in 2018.

India (based on data before September 2020 when figures were adjusted) and Myanmar, on the other hand, appear to struggle with not only a low enrolment ratio but also a slow pace of increase.

The ANER1P, a measure that indicates pre-primary education levels, is used to monitor SDG Indicator 4.2.2. The figure was 11.17 for Myanmar in 2018, 77.5 for Bangladesh in 2019 and 85.24 for India in 2020. The ratio overestimates enrolment in pre-primary education because the [ANER1P includes underage children in primary education](#).

Equity

Gender. Skewed sex ratios at birth provide evidence of son-preference in China and India. That stated China has gender parity in pre-primary GER. India shows distinct boy preference. In Bangladesh, the GER shows a slight advantage for girls. In Myanmar, there is more gender parity.

Children with disabilities. We did not find information about access to ECE for children with disabilities in any of the four countries. Clearly, there is a need to enhance data management and reporting systems to ensure their inclusion/representation in national data.

Socioeconomic and place-based disparities.

Across the four countries, children from wealthier families were more likely to attend ECE than those from socially disadvantaged families, and those from urban areas were more likely to attend ECE than those from rural areas.

[In Bangladesh](#), the GER for children from the poorest quintiles was 14.6% and 26.4% for those from the richest quintile. [In Myanmar](#), there are higher enrolments for children living in urban areas than for those living in rural areas. [In China](#), the national GER in 2010 was 59.34% but the urban and rural enrolment rates were 76.36% and 48.76%, respectively. Notably, however, the gap in enrolment between urban (69.45%) and rural (64.03%) areas decreased in China by 2016. This may be due to the Chinese government's policy priority to economically disadvantaged rural areas and giving subsidies to meet the kindergarten fees for children from disadvantaged families.

The difference in attendance rates in Bangladesh, India and Myanmar indicated a larger disparity for children from different socioeconomic backgrounds than that brought by urbanicity. Among the four countries, the urban–rural and socioeconomic status gap in accessing pre-primary education was the most marked in India. [The Rapid Survey of Children \(2013–14\) in India](#) showed that older, wealthier children from non-scheduled castes in urban areas tended to attend private pre-schools while younger, poorer children in rural areas attended the government-funded Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) pre-schools.

Quality

SDG Target 4.2 specifies that children have access to quality early childhood development. The emphasis on the quality of ECE services in all four countries is evident in their national policies, competence frameworks for teachers and curriculum guidelines. However, there are weaknesses in the regulation of ECE quality.

Quality standards may exist but they are not implemented.

To illustrate, in Bangladesh, 17 standards related to management, supervision, and child assessment in ECE centres exist. However, these standards “are not actually in use” (Islam et al., 2016), resulting in inadequate physical environments for learning. [In Myanmar](#), a baseline study indicated that only 2% of 181 ECCD facilities attained the criteria of 15 quality indicators. [China](#) has unqualified rural teachers. In India, there are no licensing requirements or monitoring of programmes offered by NGOs or the private sector, although the ICDS has a well-established monitoring system.

Next Steps

Improving equitable access to ECE. Ensuring that all children receive quality ECE is an enormous task in high population countries characterised by diversity. Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar have to demonstrate political commitment, allocate public funding and ensure collaboration among ministries to make this a reality. The ECE workforce is critical for quality ECE and concerted efforts should be made to attract, retain, support ECE teachers. Partnerships among stakeholders are essential to ensure that high-quality care and education are provided for all children and can compensate for the lack of home-based stimulation experienced by children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, our analyses underscored the need to enhance processes for quality improvement and monitoring.

Enhancing data quality.

Our analyses highlighted the need to allocate more attention to data quality in the monitoring of progress towards SDG Target 4.2.2.

It is also necessary to disaggregate national-level data on access to ECE to get a more nuanced understanding of ECE participation. All four countries can use more technology to monitor access to quality ECE services thereby improving the monitoring of progress towards SDG Target 4.2.2.

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