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FINANCING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING, LEAST DEVELOPED, AND DEVELOPED COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH, INDIA, NEPAL, AND JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Although technology and innovation have transformed almost every sphere of modern life, education systems in much of the world continue to operate on largely traditional lines. In many low- and middle-income countries, the cost of schooling discourages poor families from enrolling their children, even though additional years of education remain one of the most reliable routes out of income insecurity. This study examines how primary education is financed in four Asian countries at different stages of development: Bangladesh and India (developing, lower-middle-income economies), Nepal (a least developed, low-income economy at the time of study), and Japan (a developed, high-income economy that serves as a comparator). Using secondary data from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the OECD, and national ministries, the analysis takes 2018 as its benchmark year, since the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019 severely disrupted both education systems and the comparability of subsequent data. The findings indicate that external financing from the World Bank and the ADB has produced satisfactory to moderately satisfactory progress in enrollment, gender parity, and infrastructure, but that learning outcomes and long-term retention still fall short of targets. The study concludes that national governments and the international development community must not only invest more in primary education but also strengthen the link between spending and learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS*:* *Education Finance; Primary Education; Development Assistance; World Bank; Asian Development Bank; Bangladesh; India; Nepal; Japan*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of all human beings. It equips people with the knowledge and reasoning needed to improve their lives, creates opportunities for better employment and earnings, and reduces poverty and social instability. From a socio-economic perspective, education is among the strongest drivers of national development: it builds the human capital that sustains long-term innovation and institutional development for the next generation. According to the World Bank (2018), there is a “10% increase in hourly earnings for every extra year of schooling.” Investment in education, therefore, develops society not only through knowledge but also by building the skills that protect households against earning crises. Primary education is the foundation on which the entire education system rests and ensuring it is a basic public priority of every country.

Despite this, an enormous share of the population in developing and least developed countries still does not benefit effectively from educational opportunities. Many families continue to prefer that children earn income at an early age rather than attend school. Smart and efficient investment in education is essential for developing human resources, ending poverty and illiteracy, and enabling young people to acquire the skills required to compete in a modern economy. Managing that investment requires cost-effective strategic policies that genuinely serve the poor.

This study examines the significance of investment in primary education using 2018 as its benchmark year because the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019 created severe and uneven disruptions to education systems and to the comparability of education finance data worldwide. One supplementary post-pandemic indicator, the 2023 OECD Survey of Adult Skills, is included in the analysis of Japan to illustrate the long-run outcomes of sustained investment in basic education. The analysis focuses on primary education financing in developing and least developed countries undertaken in collaboration with the world’s largest development financing institutions.

2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Different countries apply distinct strategies to achieve the goal of educating their populations, and international organizations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank work alongside national governments to bring educational benefits to households. Yet access remains uneven, and the poorest families remain the least likely to keep children in school. Because higher education requires substantial private costs, families that cannot foresee completing the full educational cycle often withdraw their children early or never enroll them at all.

The rationale for this study is that although public education expenditure has increased in recent years in most of the countries examined, this spending has been associated with

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relatively small and disproportionate improvements in education outcomes (World Bank, 2018). Understanding how primary education is financed — by whom, at what scale, and with what results — is therefore a prerequisite for designing more effective and cost-efficient education policy.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To describe and compare the level and composition of public expenditure on primary education in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Japan up to the benchmark year 2018;
- To assess the scale and performance of external financing for primary education, particularly by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, in the three South Asian countries; and
- To identify policy measures through which national governments and development partners can strengthen the link between education spending and learning outcomes.

The broader motivation is the persistence of educational exclusion. Large numbers of students remain at risk of never entering or dropping out of the school system. Risks of child labor and early marriage rise when children leave school, and the situation is more difficult for girls, who are less likely to return to school after dropping out. Vulnerable groups — children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, refugees, and displaced populations — face additional barriers. Early childhood education remains under-resourced in many countries. When a country plans to educate its population, it must therefore think in terms of long-term programs that give poor families a realistic prospect of higher education and higher income for their children. Governments in developing and least developed countries have undertaken several such programs with foreign investment; this study asks whether that investment is producing the targeted level of achievement.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DATA OVERVIEW

The financial management of education in developing and least developed countries faces a dual challenge: mobilizing sufficient resources for education, and enhancing the effectiveness of the funding actually allocated to education budgets. The World Development Report 2018 documented that schooling without learning is a widespread phenomenon, and that increases in public education expenditure are frequently associated with only small improvements in measured outcomes (World Bank, 2018).

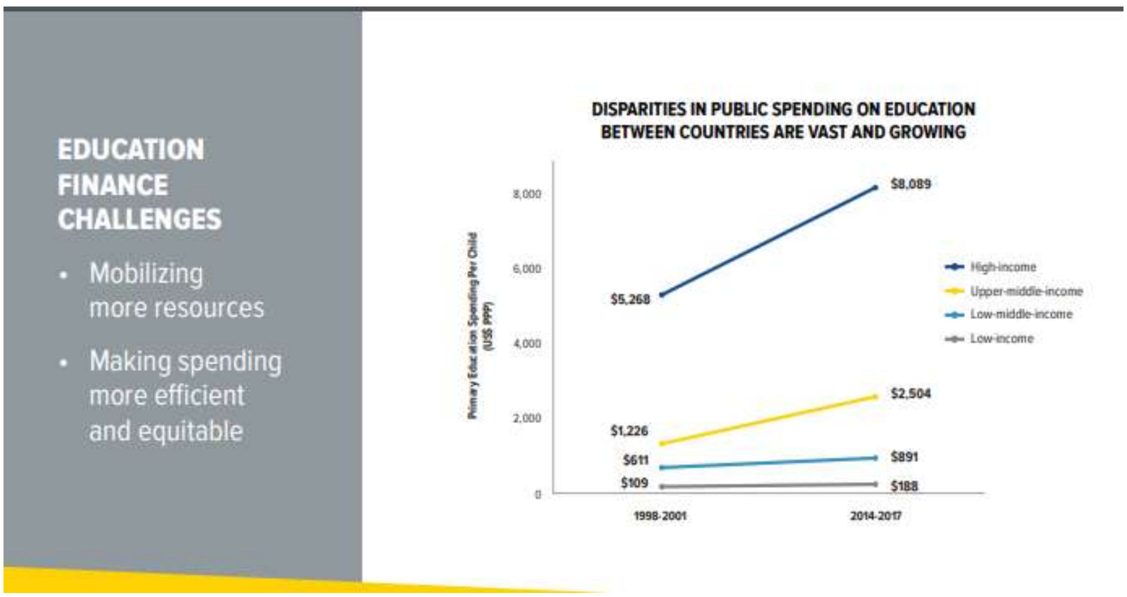

Figure 1. Public spending on education. Source: World Bank (2018).

Data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022) on total expenditure in primary public institutions illustrates the divergent trajectories of the four countries studied. In Bangladesh, the indicator rose from 78% in 2007 to 100% in 2012. India recorded 97% in 1999, declining to 94% by 2005. Nepal's figure stood at about 88% in 2010 and rose steadily to 90% by 2015. Japan, by contrast, recorded 89% in 1998 and declined gradually to 85% by 2014.

Figure 2. Total expenditure in primary public institutions — Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Japan. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022).

5. METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive, comparative study based entirely on secondary data. Four countries were purposively selected to represent different levels of development: Bangladesh and India as developing (lower-middle-income) economies, Nepal as a least developed (low-income) economy, and Japan as a developed (high-income) economy whose long-established primary education system serves as a reference point. Data were drawn from publicly available sources: World Bank project documents and the World Development Report 2018; Asian Development Bank project and completion reports; the UNESCO Institute for Statistics database; OECD publications, including Education at a Glance and the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC); and reports and budget documents of the national education and finance ministries of the four countries. The benchmark year for comparison is 2018, chosen to precede the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators examined include public expenditure on education, budget allocations to education ministries, enrollment and participation rates, external financing volumes, and project performance ratings. Because the analysis is descriptive, no causal claims are made; the aim is to characterize financing patterns and their association with observed outcomes.

6. COUNTRY ANALYSES

6.1 Bangladesh

The Asian Development Bank launched the first phase of the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) in 1990, financing the upgrading of primary education in Bangladesh single-handedly. Second and third phases followed in 2003 and 2011, respectively, in collaboration with co-financiers including Australia, Canada, the European Union, the Global Partnership for Education, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, UNICEF, and the World Bank (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

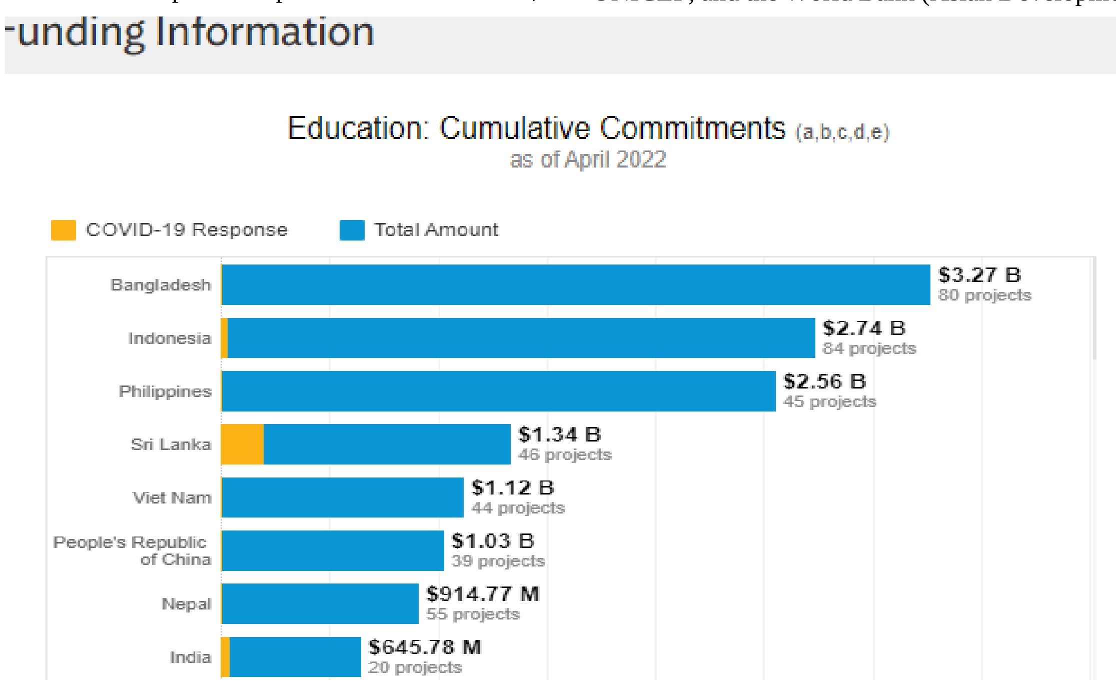

Figure 3. ADB financing of the Primary Education Development Program by phase. Source: Asian Development Bank (2022).

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In 2018, the World Bank reported on its investment in the Bangladesh Primary Education Development Program III (P113435), co-financed with other development partners, borrowed by the People's Republic of Bangladesh and implemented by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Actual disbursements grew from US$44.60 million in 2012 to US$488.68 million by the restructuring of 29 December 2017, and the program's implementation performance over fiscal years 2012–2017 was rated satisfactory to moderately satisfactory (World Bank, 2018a).

World Bank Financing			
IDA-49990	300,000,000	291,540,657	269,603,370
IDA-55520	400,000,000	368,165,399	349,515,376
TF-A0977	100,000,000	90,833,333	90,833,333
Total	**800,000,000**	**750,539,389**	**709,952,079**
Non-World Bank Financing			
Borrower	4,950,600,000	6,200,000,000	5,222,649,150
Asian Development Bank	320,000,000	440,000,000	411,630,000
AUSTRALIA: Australian Agency for International Development	28,000,000	28,000,000	33,727,500
CANADA: Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)	48,000,000	48,000,000	49,920,000
UK: British Department for International Development (DFID)	110,000,000	110,000,000	146,475,000
EC: European Commission	55,000,000	100,000,000	104,430,000
JAPAN: Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)	24,000,000	24,000,000	22,406,000
SWEDEN: Swedish Intl. Dev. Cooperation Agency (SIDA)	24,000,000	24,000,000	27,743,210
UN Children's Fund	400,000	600,000	600,000
Total	**5,560,000,000**	**6,974,600,000**	**6,019,580,860**
Total Project Cost	**6,360,000,000**	**7,725,139,389**	**6,729,532,939**

Figure 4. World Bank PEDP III (P113435): original amount, revised amount, and actual disbursement. Source: World Bank (2018a).

Domestic budget data show that children aged 0–18 years account for about two-fifths of Bangladesh's population, yet the allocation directed to them was only 14.1% of the total national budget in FY2018–19 and 15.3% in FY2019–20, against a government target of 20% by 2020–21; the child-focused budget for FY2019–20 amounted to only 2.78% of GDP (Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh, 2018). Primary-level stipend programs covered 13.0 million students under the FY2017–18 budget, with 14.4 million expected under FY2018–19; the corresponding program expenditure rose from BDT 1,450 crore to BDT 1,550 crore (1 crore = 10 million).

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Demands for Grants and Appropriations 2021-22

Grant No. 21

124-Ministry of Primary and Mass Education

(Taka in Thousand)

Charged	0	Operating	18291,47,82	Recurrent	21387,09,33
Others	26313,96,82	Development	8022,49,00	Capital	4926,59,49
				Financial Asset	28,00
				Liability	0
Total :	26313,96,82	**Total :**	26313,96,82	**Total :**	26313,96,82

(Taka in Thousand)

Economic Code	Description	Budget 2021-22	Revised 2020-21	Budget 2020-21

Figure 5. Child-focused budget allocation as a share of the national budget, Bangladesh. Source: Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Bangladesh.

Economic Classification

Recurrent Expenditure

3111	Wages and salaries in cash	14264,73,94	13857,19,64	14062,22,19
3211	Administrative expenses	1010,89,91	790,42,86	962,32,48
3221	Fees, charges and commissions	70,31,71	137,73,93	92,91,44
3231	Training	798,61,49	335,19,47	851,32,81
3241	Domestic travel and transfer	0	7,50	2,00
3243	Petrol, oil and lubricants	14,07,87	12,76,07	16,92,46
3244	Travel and Transfer	33,81,37	18,54,25	34,92,45
3253	Public order and safety supplies	1,10,10	93,00	1,06,00
3254	Food supplies	0	527,39,94	245,38,70
3255	Printing and stationery	367,68,31	435,07,30	347,70,36
3256	General supplies and materials	2,25,40	2,23,60	1,91,59
3257	Professional services, honorariums and specia	684,48,34	632,92,90	470,57,33
3258	Repairs and maintenance	772,59,82	616,48,66	718,02,49
3512	To financial public corporations	0	4,00	0
3631	Current grants	452,85,05	553,01,72	529,20,54
3632	Capital grants	25,96	16,28	26,46
3722	Social assistance benefits in kind	35,35,44	33,18,46	34,52,92
3821	Current transfers not elsewhere classified	2036,27,92	2359,49,04	951,82,95
3911	Reserve	841,76,70	1,00	342,77,10
	Total - Recurrent Expenditure :	**21387,09,33**	**20312,89,62**	**19663,92,27**

Figure 6. Primary education stipend program: coverage and expenditure, Bangladesh. Source: Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Bangladesh.

Education system

School type	No. of school	Total students
Govt. Primary School	**38033**	**51.6**
New Nationalized PS	25008	50.8
Total government school	63041	51.32
Regd. NGPS	193	51.2

Figure 7. Selected primary education budget indicators, Bangladesh. Source: Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Bangladesh.

6.2 India

India has made significant progress in expanding education. Between 2004–05 and 2018–19, the number of children attending school increased from 219 million to 248 million. In 2018–19, the Department of School Education and Literacy was allocated Rs 50,000 crore, a 6.4% increase over the revised estimates of 2017–18; in 2017–18 the Department spent Rs 650 crore more than its budgeted Rs 46,356 crore (PRS Legislative Research, 2018). Over the preceding decade the highest allocation was Rs 55,115 crore in 2014–15; the 25% reduction in 2015–16 largely reflected greater devolution of funds to the states following the recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission. Allocations have followed an upward trajectory since then, with a compound annual growth rate of about 4%.

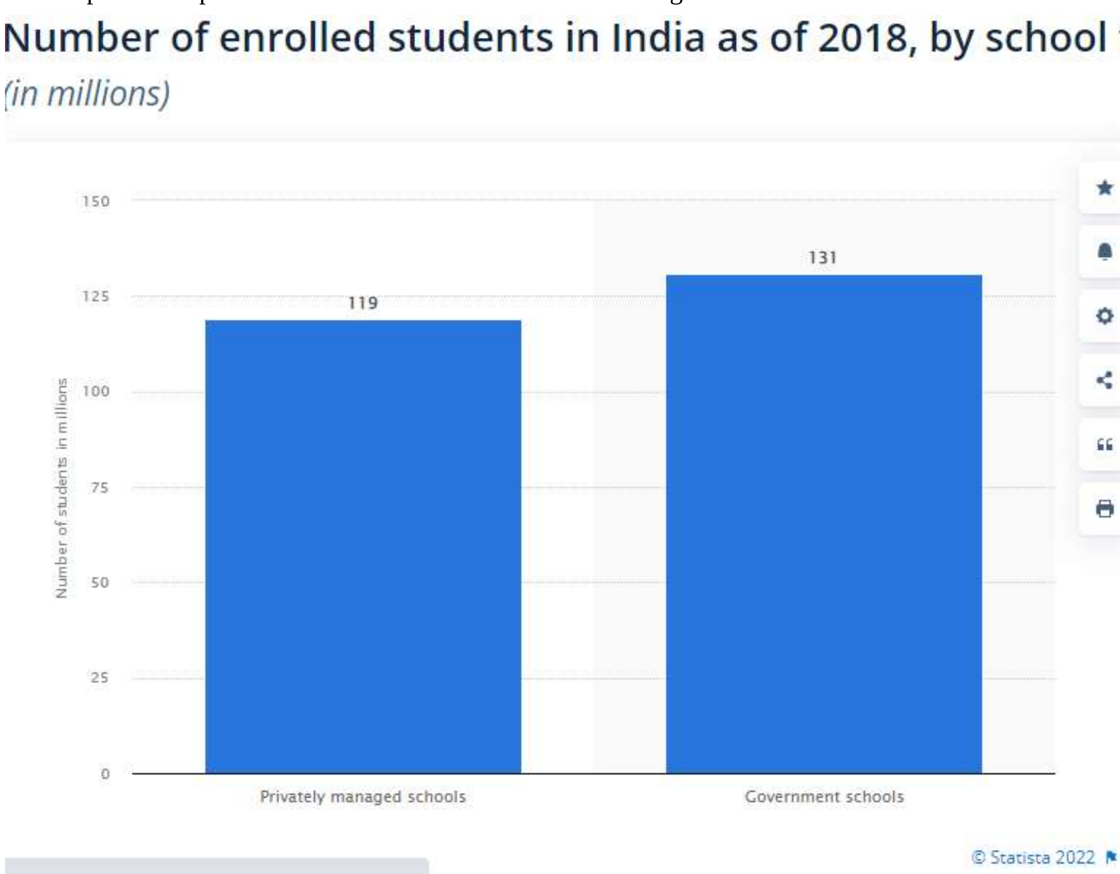

Figure 8. Allocation to the Department of School Education and Literacy, India, 2008–18. Sources: Union Budgets 2008–18; PRS Legislative Research (2018); chart as compiled by Kanwal (2021).

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The Ministry of Education's expenditure heads include the mid-day meal program, which provides food to students; autonomous bodies engaged in research and training; teacher training; and infrastructure and other expenses.

Table 3: Allocation to the Department of School Education and Literacy in 2018-19 (in Rs crore)

Major Head	Actuals 2016-17	RE 2017-18	BE 2018-19	% change (RE to BE)
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan	21,685	23,500	26,129	11.2%
National Programme of Mid-Day Meal in Schools	9,475	10,000	10,500	5.0%
Autonomous bodies	6,902	7,952	7,548	-5.1%
Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan	3,698	3,915	4,213	7.6%
Teachers Training and Adult Education	817	841	871	3.6%
Scholarships	84	602	556	-7.7%
Others	328	196	183	-6.4%
Total	**42,989**	**47,006**	**50,000**	**6.4%**

Figure 9. Expenditure heads under the Ministry of Education, India, 2018–19. Source: Ministry of Education, India (2019).

Assessments of India's primary education sector describe enrollment as a success story: enrollment has stood at 96% or above since 2009, girls constituted 56% of new students between 2007 and 2013, and sustained infrastructure investment has produced about 1.4 million schools and 7.7 million teachers, such that 98% of habitations have a primary school (classes I–V) within one kilometer and 92% have an upper primary school (classes VI–VIII) within three kilometers' walking distance (Sahni, 2015). At the same time, commentators caution that nominal year-on-year increases of around 4%, before adjusting for inflation, carry little socio-economic significance: matching the developed-country norm of spending 6% of GDP on education (roughly Rs 10 lakh crore) would consume close to 40% of a total union budget outlay of Rs 24.42 lakh crore, underscoring how far current allocations remain from that benchmark.

6.3 Nepal

Nepal has expanded early childhood and primary education substantially over the past two decades. According to the Department of Education in Santorini, Bhaktapur, and World Bank diagnostic data, the number of early childhood development and pre-primary (ECD/PPC) centers grew from roughly 24,000 school- and community-based centers in 2009 to more than 36,000 centers of all types by 2017, serving nearly one million children annually (World Bank, 2020). Enrollment in these programs — approximately 639,000 children in community and institutional ECD centers by 2018 — nevertheless still leaves a large share of pre-primary-age children outside the system.

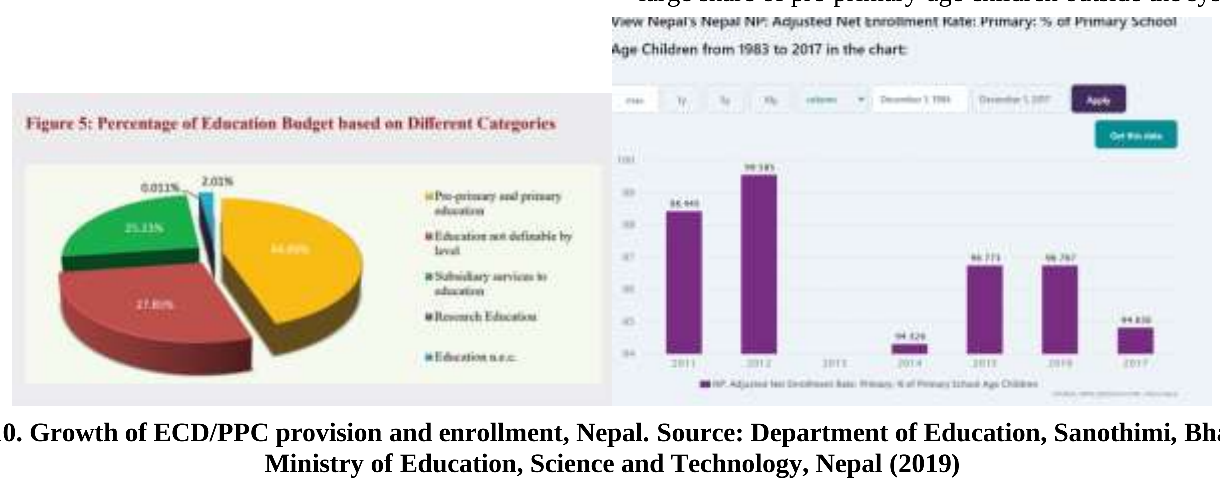

Figure 10. Growth of ECD/PPC provision and enrollment, Nepal. Source: Department of Education, Sanothimi, Bhaktapur; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Nepal (2019)

On the financing side, the Government of Nepal announced a vision of a "Literate Nepal" to be achieved within two years in collaboration with the provincial and local levels, together with reform measures intended to narrow the quality gap between public and private schools. To support these programs, NPR 134.51 billion — 10.23% of the total national budget — was allocated to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology; excluding the portion earmarked for science and technology, the amount expected to serve the education sector alone was NPR

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134.19 billion, or 10.20% of the national budget (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Nepal, 2019).

6.4 Japan

Japan, the developed-country comparator in this study, presents a different financing profile. The Japanese government spent 7.8% of its total public expenditure on primary-to-tertiary education in 2016, below the OECD average, and public expenditure on education fell between 2010 and 2016 even as total government expenditure rose (OECD, 2019). Enrollment of children under age 3 in early childhood education and care (ECEC) increased from 19% in 2010 to 30% in 2017, still below the OECD average of 36%; by contrast, 91% of 3–5-year-olds were enrolled in ECEC in 2017, above the OECD average of 87%.

Participation in compulsory education is essentially universal. OECD country data indicate that the enrollment rate of 6–14-year-olds in Japan, at 100% in 2019, was the highest among OECD and partner countries with available data (rank 1 of 44), and that 99% of four-year-olds were enrolled in early childhood or primary education (rank 4 of 41), while enrollment of children under 3 remained among the lowest at 2.4% (rank 33 of 39) (OECD, 2021; Kato, n.d.).

Japan's long-run returns to this system are visible in adult skills data. The most recent Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), conducted in 2023 and published by the OECD in 2025, shows that adult literacy proficiency in Japan is the highest among participating OECD countries (OECD, 2025). Although this indicator postdates the study's 2018 benchmark, it is included here as supplementary evidence: it illustrates the cumulative outcome of decades of universal, high-quality basic education, and suggests a model whose practices developing countries may usefully study.

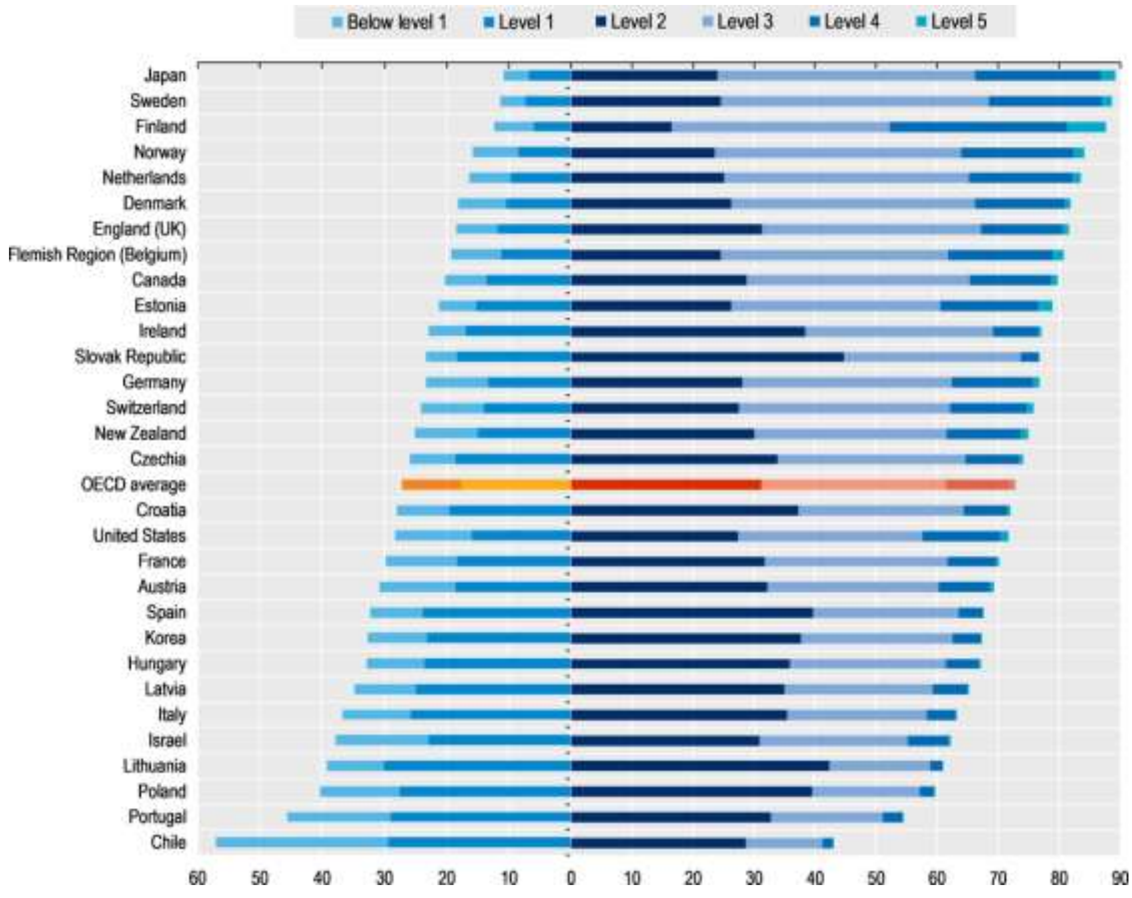

Figure 11. Proficiency in literacy among adults (PIAAC, 2023): share of 25–64-year-olds at each proficiency level. Source: OECD (2025).

7. THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FINANCING

The World Bank is the largest external financier of education in developing countries, supporting education programs in about 90 countries with a commitment to helping them provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4. In the programs examined here, the Bank's stated objectives were threefold: to increase participation and reduce social disparities in primary education; to increase the number of children completing primary education while improving the quality of the learning environment and the measurement of student learning; and to improve the effectiveness of resource use for primary education (World Bank, 2018a).

KEY RATINGS

Outcome	Bank Performance	M&E Quality
Satisfactory	Satisfactory	High

RATINGS OF PROJECT PERFORMANCE IN ISRs

No.	Date ISR Archived	DO Rating	IP Rating	Actual Disbursements (US$M)
01	03-Mar-2012	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	44.60
02	12-Oct-2012	Moderately Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	87.49
03	18-May-2013	Moderately Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	95.49
04	01-Jan-2014	Moderately Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	166.98
05	01-Aug-2014	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	183.05
06	02-Mar-2015	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	183.05
07	21-Oct-2015	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	246.20
08	17-Jun-2016	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	316.95
09	31-Dec-2016	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	348.84
10	22-Jun-2017	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	348.84
11	28-Dec-2017	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	488.71

Figure 12. World Bank project performance ratings, FY2012–2017. Source: World Bank (2018a).

Project ratings over fiscal years 2012–2017 show achievements assessed as satisfactory to moderately satisfactory. Actual disbursements grew from US$44.60 million in 2012 to US$488.71 million, indicating a very large investment aimed at educating people to the greatest possible extent while reducing extreme poverty.

The Asian Development Bank's approach under the PEDP projects has centered on raising enrollment and participation. Program activities have included multimedia-supported classroom teaching, reward schemes that encourage parents and students to keep children in school, and debate competitions to develop students' skills. The projects financed the construction of new classrooms and the repair of deteriorated ones, promoted a move from double-shift to single-shift schooling so that teachers can devote more time to each pupil, and provided persistent in-service training to develop teachers' basic proficiency. The ADB program is expected to benefit directly 18.6 million students, about 340,000 teachers, and more than 65,000 schools under the management of Bangladesh's Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (Asian Development Bank, 2018).

8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The financing programs reviewed above converge on a set of core policies that developing and least developed countries are pursuing:

- Establishment of new schools and extension, reconstruction, repair, or renovation of existing ones in accordance with necessity and demand;
- Introduction of school feeding programs, including mid-day meals in poverty-stricken areas;
- Initiation of pre-primary education in all primary schools;
- Construction of WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) blocks and arrangement of safe drinking water in all schools;
- Recruitment of the necessary number of teachers and support staff, together with their training; and
- Arrangement of continuous skill-development training for serving teachers.

According to the World Bank (2018), developing countries have achieved immense progress in raising classroom attendance. Mid-day meal systems attract poor children to school, and in some cases monthly stipends are paid to maintain regularity and reduce dropout, which has encouraged enrollment. Gender parity in the primary cycle has been achieved in several of the countries studied, and school feeding in poverty-stricken areas has produced high enrollment and low dropout. Yet, as the World Development Report 2018 stressed, schooling does not guarantee learning: attendance gains have not been matched by commensurate gains in measured learning outcomes.

The most significant emerging challenge is macroeconomics. Global economic contraction depresses family incomes, raising the risk of dropouts, while simultaneously shrinking government budgets and straining public education spending. Where governments cannot credibly offer a path to higher education, poor households rationally choose early earnings over schooling for their children — and those children, especially the most disadvantaged, may never achieve their full education and earnings potential. Policy must therefore protect education budgets counter-cyclically and keep the promise of continued, affordable education credible for poor families.

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from institutional and government sources, whose indicator definitions and reference years are not always fully harmonized across countries. The four-country sample was selected purposively rather than randomly, and the analysis is descriptive, so the associations reported here should not be read as causal effects. Finally, the 2018 benchmark deliberately excludes the pandemic period; post-2019 developments in education financing, apart from the supplementary PIAAC 2023 indicator for Japan, fall outside the scope of the analysis.

10. CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed here shows that developing and least developed countries, working with external financiers, are making determined efforts to educate their populations and are pursuing ambitious targets through a range of strategies. World Bank evaluations, however, indicate that investment in the education sector has not yet produced highly satisfactory progress: results have generally been rated satisfactory or, in part, moderately satisfactory. The target of educating the entire population is not being reached, and inadequate and inefficient financing is among the principal reasons. Most developing and least developed countries need more investment to develop infrastructure, to pay teachers satisfactory remuneration, to make the next level of education affordable or free, and to monitor programs intensively. National governments and the international development community must therefore invest not only more, but better, in education systems — strengthening the link between spending, learning, and other human capital outcomes.

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