Flexible
Learning
Strategies
Making Learning a Reality for All Children and Youth

Summary • More than 120 million children and youth1 are being kept out of school and many more are at risk of dropping out, despite global EFA and MDG commitments to improve access to schools. Given the impact of education on individuals, economies and countries, there is urgency for governments to establish alternative and flexible routes for these marginalized children and youth to attain basic education and training outside the conventional school system.

In close consultation and partnership with local communities, NGOs, donors and international agencies, Ministries of Education and local education authorities need to adopt Flexible Learning Strategies (FLS) as an integral part of the education system by: (1) prioritizing the needs of marginalized children in the education agenda via political and financial commitment; (2) developing a common enabling framework of learning outcomes, quality criteria, and assessment and certification for both the formal education system and flexible learning systems – to enable out-of-school children and youth alternative

access routes to national qualifications and re-entry into formal education systems; (3) providing rigorous monitoring of the profiles and data of marginalized and at-risk groups; and (4) effectively monitoring and evaluating FLS-related learning activities.

Current Problem 1
Lack of Sustainable Access to Education Among Marginalized Children and Youth

Education features prominently in most national development agendas, as it is one of the most effective ways to generate economic growth, alleviate poverty, improve health and wellbeing, and promote responsible citizenship. More than that, the right to education is a fundamental human right that everyone should enjoy. However, in the Asia-Pacific region, more than 18 million children of primary school age and 36 million youth of lower secondary age are currently out of school.2 At least one-fifth of the children who entered school are not expected to reach the last grade. The economic price of such exclusion is prohibitively high – costing up to a few percentage points or billions of dollars in GDP loss in some Asian economies.3

The Educationally Excluded: Profile and Barriers
The patterns for non-enrolment, drop-out, low attendance and low achievement of children and youth are complex, with poverty and vulnerable livelihoods being overarching, crosscutting factors in exclusion. Factors jeopardizing school access and attendance include conflict and disasters, geography, gender, displacement and marginalization, with the following groups being particularly at-risk of being educationally excluded.4

1 UNESCO Institute of Statistics (last accessed 17 July 2014)
2 UNESCO Institute of Statistics (last accessed 17 July 2014)
3 Macroeconomic cost estimations by the Results for Development Institute show that the economic costs in terms of forgone GDP are as high as 5.45% of GDP in Pakistan, 2.85% in Thailand and 1.45% in Bangladesh. (Thomas, M., Burnett, N. 2014. Exclusion from Education: The Economic Cost of Out-of-School Children in 20 Countries, Results for Development.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITIES</th>
<th>SOME FACTORS RESULTING IN UNEQUAL ACCESS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Girls, especially from rural/ethnic communities</td>
<td>Schooling for girls undervalued, lower expectations, early marriage, no schools in close proximity, no female teachers, no separate toilets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children from remote &amp; rural communities</td>
<td>Geographically remote areas are usually the last to benefit from economic development &amp; service provision. No schools in close proximity. Lack of trained teachers. Fear of encountering violence en route to schools located far away. Children working in family.</td>
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<td>Children from religious, linguistic &amp; ethnic minorities as well as indigenous peoples</td>
<td>Caste- &amp; religious-based discrimination. Minority language underrepresented in majority-language medium schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children from migrant families</td>
<td>Settlements in urban slum areas without local government provision or part-year attendance only in home village or schools near work-site.</td>
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<td>Children with disabilities or with special needs</td>
<td>Non-inclusive practices at formal school, teachers with no training in/awareness of special education needs. No out-of-school provision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Street children, working children</td>
<td>Food &amp; money priorities, chaotic lives, child labour, discrimination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children in difficult circumstances (conflict or disaster areas)</td>
<td>Long term disrupted education provision where poor are disproportionately affected. Cross-border refugees with no access to own national schooling system. Child soldiers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orphans &amp; abandoned children</td>
<td>Traumatised children with chaotic lives, child labour, and discrimination.</td>
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Barriers to education are related to school supply, school quality as well as the inappropriate and inflexible nature of the formal school model in relation to the needs and circumstances of out-of-school children and youth – and can be categorized into:

- **Capacity barriers** lack of schools (including situations where schools have been closed or destroyed), lack of school places, large class size, lack of trained teachers, teaching not available in mother tongue, poor teaching quality;
- **Access barriers** children are physically unable to get close to schools (e.g. distance, schools destroyed or used for other purposes in a conflict or emergency situation, danger in travelling), children not permitted to attend school for cultural and/or social reasons;
- **Financial barriers** family unable to afford school fees and participation costs, opportunity costs of child’s school participation deemed to be too high an economic price for family.

**Current Problem 2**

**Commitment Gap Towards The Educationally Marginalized**

Donor aid to education has been declining since 2010, and the funds allocated are not necessarily going to low-income countries most in need, where the prevalence of out-of-school children and youth tend to be higher. Moreover, within each country, the resources earmarked to improving educational opportunities for the most marginalized children and youth are vastly insufficient, with public expenditure on education often skewed towards urban areas, even in countries where the majority of school age populations reside in the poorer rural areas. As a result, the most excluded children and youth – the hardest to reach – are often the last to benefit from education spending. The issue is further compounded by the fact that the unit cost of educating these groups is far higher than the average cost per student because of the expenses involved in mitigating the multiple disadvantages the marginalized groups face.

Also, flexible learning systems take place without any social or institutional recognition in many countries currently, due to the lack of any equivalency system for FLS graduates that provides accreditation to allow primary and secondary school drop-outs and working children to (1) re-enter into the formal education system or (2) be recognized for their acquired literacy and vocational skills by prospective employers. There is hence a need to move from this piecemeal approach towards more systematic, flexible and rights-based interventions, appropriately designed to match the needs and circumstances of out-of-school children and youth.
Policy Recommendations: Developing a Framework for Flexible Learning Strategies

About Flexible Learning Strategies (FLS) Programmes
With the aim of allowing out-of-school children and youth to acquire nationally recognized basic literacy and numeracy skills as well as life competencies required to live safe and dignified lives, FLS aim to provide a return route to conventional schooling at age-appropriate points or offer schooling of recognized equivalence to it.

There are 5 key characteristics to successful FLS frameworks:

1. **Reaching the unreached**
   FLS are adapted specifically for excluded learners where access or the return to formal schooling is either difficult or not viable presently. Such learners include children in poverty, girls, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, refugees, children living in post-conflict settings, immigrant children and internally displaced children.

2. **Flexible methodologies**
   Guided by the principle of “bringing schooling to the students” (rather than getting students to the school), FLS reach unreached children and youth via the use of flexible and alternative methods designed to remove barriers and to respond to the specific contexts and needs of the excluded. FLS are often managed and owned by local communities with external support from governments and NGOs.

Examples of these methods include:
- Home-based learning, community learning centres (especially in remote or deprived communities where the next school is at a far distance away), mobile teaching, weekend and night schooling, tutoring, schools in camps, use of ICT and mobile devices,
- flexible hours appropriate to the student’s living or work conditions and designed to maximize contact time between teachers and learners, mother-tongue instruction, and the adoption of different teaching methodologies (e.g. multi-grade teaching, activity-based learning, specific approaches for people with a disability or special needs children).

3. **Intensive quality learning for literacy and numeracy**
   FLS are usually conducted over a shorter and more intensive time period than formal education programmes, as they are designed to help children who dropped out of school or have never enrolled to catch-up with age-appropriate learning. Through intensive lessons with instructional scaffolding, children can be helped to achieve their full potential in literacy and numeracy, and thereby given a chance to reenter age-specific formal education.

4. **Equivalency to formal education**
   Basic education delivered under FLS is formally recognized and supported as equivalent to formal education under national education policies, under a common framework of learning outcomes, assessment and certification, and a range of basic quality criteria. When children and youth successfully complete FLS programmes, they should be qualified and eligible to enter age-specific formal schools alongside their formally educated peers. All FLS graduates should have the opportunity to take existing national examinations or have an equivalent system of assessment created for them under a national system of certification that applies to both FLS and formal education programmes.

5. **Global citizenship and lifelong learning**
   FLS aim to develop learners to become effective lifelong learners and global citizens who make positive changes in their societies. To this end, while a majority of curriculum should be the same as that of formal education, the remaining curriculum should be allocated for contextualized and practical activities that equip learners with basic competencies especially those values, knowledge and skills that are based on and instil respect for human rights, social justice, diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability and that empower learners to be responsible global citizens (e.g. topics on living together, environmental issues and innovative thinking for problem solving).
The Role of Government in Successful FLS Implementation

Policy and planning for widespread, effective FLS implementation needs to be built on a careful analysis of needs, capacity, barriers to access and the availability of financial resources:

1. Deepen political and financial commitment for FLS

The educational needs of out-of-school children and youth must be mainstreamed in national education agendas, considering that millions are educationally excluded as a direct result of inadequate funding in FLS. Furthermore, education budgets cannot continue to assume equal unit costs for all children, because the estimated unit costs of reaching the last 10% of out-of-school children and youth are much higher, as additional resources are needed to counter the multiple disadvantages that educationally marginalized children face. Governments must also realize that educational exclusion is more than an equity issue: the economic price of educational exclusion – costing countries several percentage points and billions of dollars of GDP losses – is several times higher than the incremental public spending required to reach out to these marginalized groups.

2. Develop a common enabling framework within the national education system

a. Measurable quality in education is a key concern. The government should clearly define the concept of meaningful and quality basic education, via the development of parameters for minimal conditions and criteria for high quality basic education, whether developed in the formal or non-formal system. These parameters include quality of the teaching workforce, the availability of adequate educational resources, a supportive learning environment, and suitable access to basic services in instructional settings.

b. The government should also develop a sector-wide education system with diversified provision and an expanded multiplicity of providers, both formal and non-formal, for out-of-school children and youth, working towards a common framework of learning outcomes, quality criteria, assessment and certification. In particular, the development of an open national framework for certification should be based on a national framework for equivalence, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) for formal and non-formal education.

c. In order to establish these frameworks effectively, the relevant authorities should consider how best to (i) manage a range of learning opportunities, (ii) divide responsibilities between the state and other partners, (iii) between national and decentralized levels, and (iv) facilitate transitions and negotiate articulation between the formal and non-formal sectors and where to manage accreditation.

3. Improve education statistical monitoring

a. Strengthen monitoring of the educationally excluded: Rigorous systems designed to capture data on the profile of out-of-school children and youth should be developed, so as to measure the scope of exclusion and multiple disparities, to assess the reasons for exclusion, and to monitor progress towards universal primary education. Improved monitoring is achieved by upgrading the quality, use and scope of both supply-side data collected through Education Information Management Systems (to monitor the access and integration of out-of-school children and youth into mainstream schools) as well as demand-side data collected through household surveys, including disaggregated data (to increase the visibility of marginalized children for the development of policies targeting disadvantaged groups).

b. Strengthen monitoring of FLS learning activities:

Criteria for equivalency in terms of both content and qualifications for the classification of non-formal Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) programmes should be established. Governments should also develop data collection exercises and systems to capture ALS data – which should go beyond enrolment figures to include survival rates, completion rates, educational quality and process, as well as educational outcomes in terms of competencies and capabilities performance, equivalency, progress and transition to formal education or work.

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http://www.unicef.org/education/files/OOSCI_flyer_FINAL.pdf
(last accessed 17 July 2014)

In terms of percentage of GDP, the incremental public spending required to reach out to marginalized groups is only a fraction of the cost of exclusion, as evinced in the cases of Bangladesh (0.15% vs 1.45%), Thailand (0.19% vs 2.60%) and Indonesia (0.01% vs 0.27%); (Thomas, M., Burnett, N. 2014. Exclusion from Education: The Economic Cost of Out-of-school Children in 26 Countries, Results for Development.)