Youth are more than four times as likely to be out of school as children and more than twice as likely to be out of school as adolescents. The high out-of-school rates for older cohorts can be explained by poverty and a variety of other reasons: many youth never had a chance to enter school when they were younger, upper secondary education is often not compulsory, and youth have a right to employment in most countries. The decline in out-of-school rates and numbers between 2000 and 2015 was accompanied by a reduction in gender disparity at the global level. The male and female out-of-school rates for the lower secondary- and upper secondary-age populations are now nearly identical, while the gender gap among primary-age children dropped from more than five percentage points to less than two.

A new adjusted gender parity index (GPIA) showed a primary out-of-school drop from 1.31 in 2000 to a low of 1.11 in 2011 meaning that girls of primary age are still more likely to be out of school than boys. For the lower secondary and upper secondary out-of-school a change from 0.97 and 1.03 was recorded, meaning a shared probability of being out of school. Nevertheless, while global averages show progress, they also mask disparities at the regional and country levels where girls of all ages face considerable barriers to education.

The number of children, adolescents and youth who are excluded from education fell steadily in the decade following 2000, but UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) data show that this progress essentially stopped in recent years. The total number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth has remained nearly the same at around 264 million for the past three years (See figure 1).

Some 61 million, or 23% of the total, are children of primary school age (about 6 to 11 years), 62 million, or 23% of the total, are adolescents of lower secondary school age (about 12 to 14 years), and 141 million, or 53% of the total, are youth of upper secondary school age (about 15 to 17 years) (herein children, adolescents and youth, respectively).

Regional and national out-of-school figures

The global out-of-school figures hide large regional differences. As in previous years, sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest out-of-school rates for all age groups. Of the 61 million out-of-school children, 33 million, or more than half, live in sub-Saharan Africa and 11 million live in Central and Southern Asia. Three regions are home to nine out of ten out-of-school adolescents: sub-Saharan Africa (26 million), Central and Southern Asia (20 million) and Eastern and South-eastern Asia (8.5 million). Sub-Saharan Africa is also the region with the highest rate of out-of-school adolescents (36%), followed by Central and Southern Asia (28%), and Western and Northern Africa (15%). In all regions, out-of-school rates and numbers are far higher among youth of upper secondary age than among younger cohorts. In total, 141 million youth were not in school in 2015. The largest proportion lives in Central and Southern Asia (69 million), followed by sub-Saharan Africa (34 million), and Eastern and South-eastern Asia (18 million). More than half of all youth are out of school in sub-Saharan Africa (57%), and nearly half of all youth in Central Asia and Southern Asia (49%).

Turning to national data, more than one out of five children of primary age are out of school in several countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Western and Southern Asia. The countries with the highest out-of-school rates include South Sudan (69%), Liberia (62%), Eritrea (61%), Sudan (45%), Equatorial Guinea (43%), and Djibouti (43%). The United States is one of the rare countries in Northern America and Europe with a relatively high rate of out-of-school children (5.5%), but the majority of these children are being home-schooled (Redford et al., 2017).

There are six countries with very large out-of-school population: Nigeria (8.7 million), Pakistan (5.6 million), India (2.9 million), Sudan (2.7 million), Indonesia (2.6 million) and Ethiopia (2.2 million). But, it is important to keep in mind that not all out-of-school children are permanently excluded from education. Globally, 28%, or 17 million, of all out-of-school children have never attended school and will probably never start. About 38% of all out-of-school children attended school in the past but did not continue their education, and 34% are likely to enter school late and will be over-age for their grade (UIS). One out of three out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa, Western Asia and Northern Africa and one out of four in Central and Southern Asia will probably never receive any formal education. In Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean, most out-of-school children will start school late. In Central and Southern Asia more than one in every two out-of-school children started primary school but did not make it to the last grade.

Implementing a family perspective in legislation is important due to the classification of out-of-school children by past and possible future school attendance. To be effective, policies must be tailored to address the different situations facing out-of-school children and their families. If the majority of out-of-school children in a country attended but left school, interventions should focus on reducing the dropout rate by developing preventive measures with parents and caregivers at home. For children who are likely to attend in the future, the goal is to ensure earlier entry into the education system that is mainly ensured by their families. The most challenging group of out-of-school children are those who are unlikely ever to attend school, often because of a perpetuating cycle of lack of education and poverty that their families share.

Poverty and education

Various studies have shown a strong link at the country and individual level between poverty and education regarding both school attendance and learning
outcomes. The World Bank assigns countries to four groups according to their gross national income (GNI) per capita [2]. In low-income countries, out-of-school rates are systematically higher than in lower-middle-income, upper-middle-income and high-income countries (see Figure 2). As a group, low-income countries combined have higher out-of-school rates than all individual SDG regions, except for sub-Saharan Africa, which has a marginally higher primary out-of-school rate.

Several studies have demonstrated that low levels of education and poor skill acquisition hamper economic growth, which in turn slows down poverty reduction. Poverty is defined in two ways. First, it is increasingly recognized as a multi-dimensional concept, and the lack of education is itself a dimension of poverty. Second, it is defined traditionally with reference to the monetary dimension, i.e. income or consumption.

New evidence, based on the average effects of education on growth and poverty reduction over the period 1965–2010 in developing countries, suggests that increasing the years of schooling among adults (15 years old and over) by two years would help to lift nearly 60 million people out of poverty. Achieving universal primary and secondary attainment in the adult population would help to lift more than 420 million out of poverty (See Figure 12). The effects would be particularly large in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, where almost two-thirds of the reduction are expected.

Three distinct channels link growth, inequality and poverty. First, economic growth is a major determinant of poverty reduction, although the same rate of growth can have different poverty impacts [4]. Households increase their likelihood of escaping poverty when growth increases their income through employment, transfers and the returns on their assets. Of those, employment creation has proven to be the most effective in pro-poor growth [5]. Second, in the short term, a more equal distribution of income means that the same growth rate will have a stronger impact on poverty reduction. The income of the poor will grow faster if there are complementary policies that re-distribute income to reduce inequality [6].

Third, in the long term, there is the mutual interaction between growth and inequality. Historically, there was a perception that growth increases inequality at the early stages of development but then reduces inequality later on. What has been gaining more ground is the belief that a more equal distribution of income will lead to faster economic growth [7]. This includes the establishment of fair and robust institutions, which protect the rights of the poor. Education contributes to these growth, equality and poverty reduction interactions in two main ways: education provides people with knowledge and skills and, if it expands along an equitable path, reduces income inequalities.

![Figure 2. Out-of-school rate by income level and age group, 2015](Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database)

Low-income and upper-middle countries are home to a disproportionately large share of the global out-of-school population such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan along with Brazil and China. Low-income countries (including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and the United Republic of Tanzania) account for a disproportionately large share of the global number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth. They are home to 13% of the world’s school-age population but 24% of the global population out of school. By contrast, high-income countries account for 11% of the global school-age population and only 2% of the global number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth. The correlation between national income and out-of-school rates can also be observed at the level of individual countries.

**Education policy and poverty reduction**

Education is key to the development of individuals, families, communities and societies. However, there are about 264 million children, adolescents and youth out-of-school in the world, with those in low-income countries far less likely to enroll than those in middle- and high-income ones. Completion rates are even lower than enrolment rates. For example, in low-income countries, while 62% of adolescents were enrolled in 2015, only 27% of them finished lower secondary education in the period 2008–2014 [3].
Effect on growth, inequality and poverty

Different policy levers targeting access and inclusion as dimensions of education quality have distinct effects on the effectiveness of the channels linking education with growth, inequality and poverty. The extent to which education policies reach and integrate poor people is key for leveraging poverty reduction through economic growth.

Figure 3. Estimated effect of universal secondary education completion on poverty headcount
(Source: Global Education Monitoring Report team estimates (2017))

It is mainly the poor who miss out on schooling. Estimates from the World Inequality Database on Education suggest that, in lower-middle-income countries, children from the poorest 20% are eight times as likely to be out of school as children from the richest 20% [8]. The direct costs of education to families are crucial in this respect and need to be eliminated. In South Africa, fees were abolished in the poorest 40% of schools. An evaluation found that this increased enrolment in grades 8 to 10 by more than three percentage points in the poorest 20% of schools, despite the fact that the fees amounted to only about 1.5% of household income [9]. Examples such as, Andhra Pradesh (India) with the Midday Meals Scheme contribute to reduce the effects of severe drought on height and weight loss while increasing learning achievement in mathematics and reading by 9% and 18%, respectively [10].

Reducing the indirect cost of education to families is also critical, including through cash transfers to families, scholarships and incentives to students. A meta-analysis of 42 impact evaluation studies for 19 conditional cash transfer programmes in 15 countries showed that attendance increased by 2.5% in primary schools and by 8% in secondary schools. These programmes have a stronger impact when they are combined with grants, infrastructure or other resources for schools, as in the ‘Oportunidades’ programme in Mexico or ‘Bono de Desarrollo Humano’ programme in Ecuador [11].

Some complementary health interventions are also necessary to ensure children do not lose school time due to illness. The national school-based deworming programme in Kenya, which began in 2008, not only increased school attendance at the time of its implementation but, 10 years after the treatment, women are still 25% more likely to have attended secondary school, halving the gender gap [12].

Conclusion

Far too many children, adolescents and youth are still out of school for multiple reasons relating to their living conditions, financial constraints, family situation and social adversities. Education can play a transformative role to help them escape poverty, but education policies need to do far more to improve access and inclusion.

While it is very challenging to bring out-of-school youth back into education, there is also a disquieting slowdown in the pace at which the world’s children and adolescents are being integrated into national education systems. The global primary out-of-school rate has remained stubbornly at 9% for eight years in a row. As education and poverty are dynamic phenomena with strong inter-generational effects, failure to act now jeopardizes the future of several generations. Global poverty could be more than halved almost within a generation if all adults completed secondary school.

It may be the time to focus on a better environment for children, adolescents and youth educational process. There is a need to address these challenges from a family perspective while developing policies. A family perspective not only fosters scholarization but also promotes a completion of studies. Focusing on families and especially in the parents and their education, the children, adolescents and youth are raised in a supportive environment to increase their capacity and confidence [13].