

Equitable Access to Education: A Key to Inclusive Economic Growth

Introduction

High-quality equitable access to education is more crucial than ever. Education is widely recognised as a key driver of economic competition in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy ([Jemeli & Fakandu, 2019](#)). [Education](#) is one of the most powerful tools for reducing inequality and fostering inclusive economic growth. Ensuring that individuals, regardless of their background or location, have access to quality education is essential for unlocking economic opportunities and addressing systemic inequalities. However, barriers such as [poverty](#), gender bias, and inadequate resources often prevent equitable access, leaving many communities unable to reach their full potential.

Definitions

Equitable Access to Education

Education is considered equitable when educational practices, policies, curricula, and resources represent all students worldwide. This means every student, regardless of race, socio-economic status, gender, ability, religion, nationality, or linguistic diversity, has access to, can participate in, and advance through high-quality learning experiences ([UNESCO, 2017](#)). Thus, equity in education refers to fairness and inclusion, and it encompasses all people regardless of differences in the objectives of educational advancement, participation, and access ([Parveen & Awan, 2019](#)).

Inclusive Economic Growth

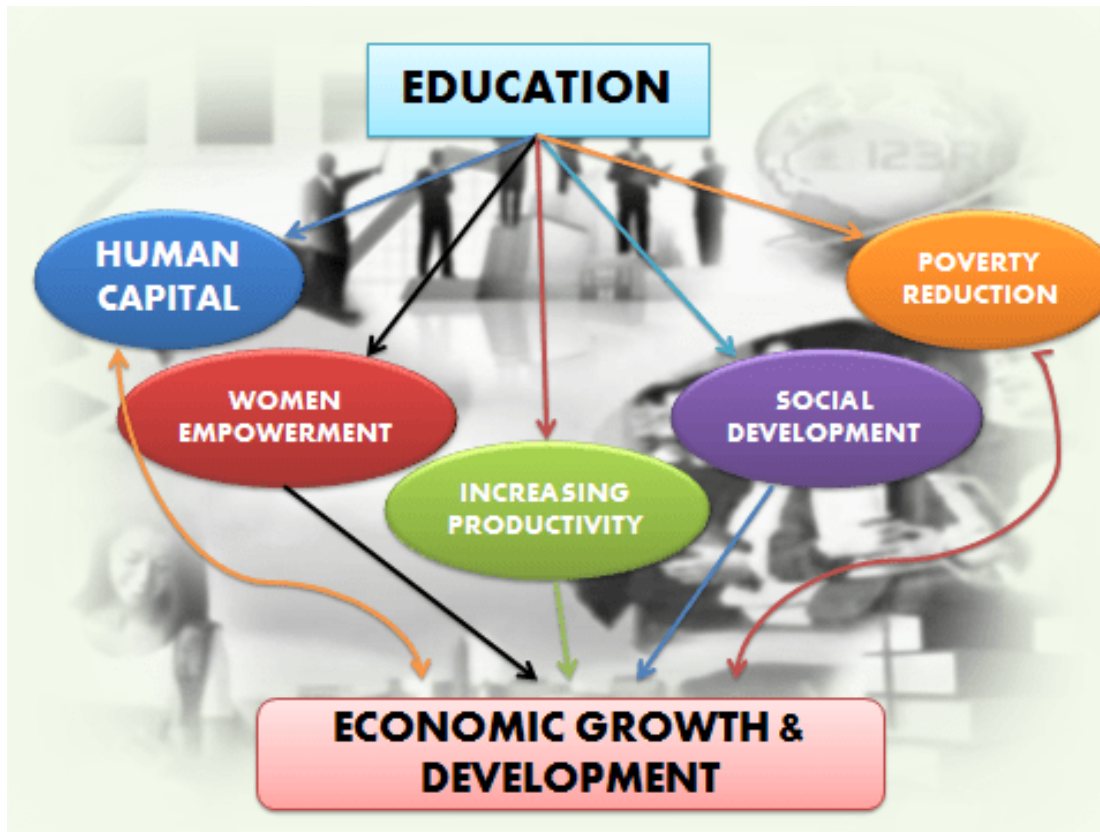
Inclusive economic growth is defined as development that is built on social engagement (by providing jobs, public safety, and social infrastructure). Additionally, it seeks to balance economic growth with minimising environmental damage ([Angulo-Bustinza et al., 2022](#)). It is dependent on a wide array of factors

including income inequality, quality of human resources, environmental degradation, social development, poverty levels, and industrialisation ([Rini & Tambunan, 2021](#)).

An inclusive economy aims to ensure equitable access to economic independence as well as unrestricted engagement among a population's diverse social groups ([Krysovatty et al., 2023](#)). To achieve inclusive economic growth, inequalities must be reduced while also providing for the country's economic progress ([Kwilinski et al., 2023](#)).

the Link between Education and economic growth

Education boosts the human capital already in a nation's labour force and is a major factor in determining economic well-being ([Marquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2019](#)). In other words, education is an investment in human capital. Additionally, studies reveal that nations with higher rates of educational attainment experience faster economic growth than those with lower levels of educated labour. Therefore, a nation's economy increases when money is invested in educational institutions ([Brooks, 2023](#)). In 2012, UNESCO discovered that investing in education can result in \$10-\$15 of economic growth in United States dollars (USD) for every dollar invested. ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). Equitable education contributes to poverty reduction, social inclusion, and economic prosperity by increasing productivity. It fosters gender equality through women's empowerment and promotes widespread social development. It assures that every student, regardless of background has a chance to excel ([Latif, 2024](#)).



Role of education in economic growth and development.

Source: [Phukan et al., 2017](#)

barriers to Equitable Access to Education

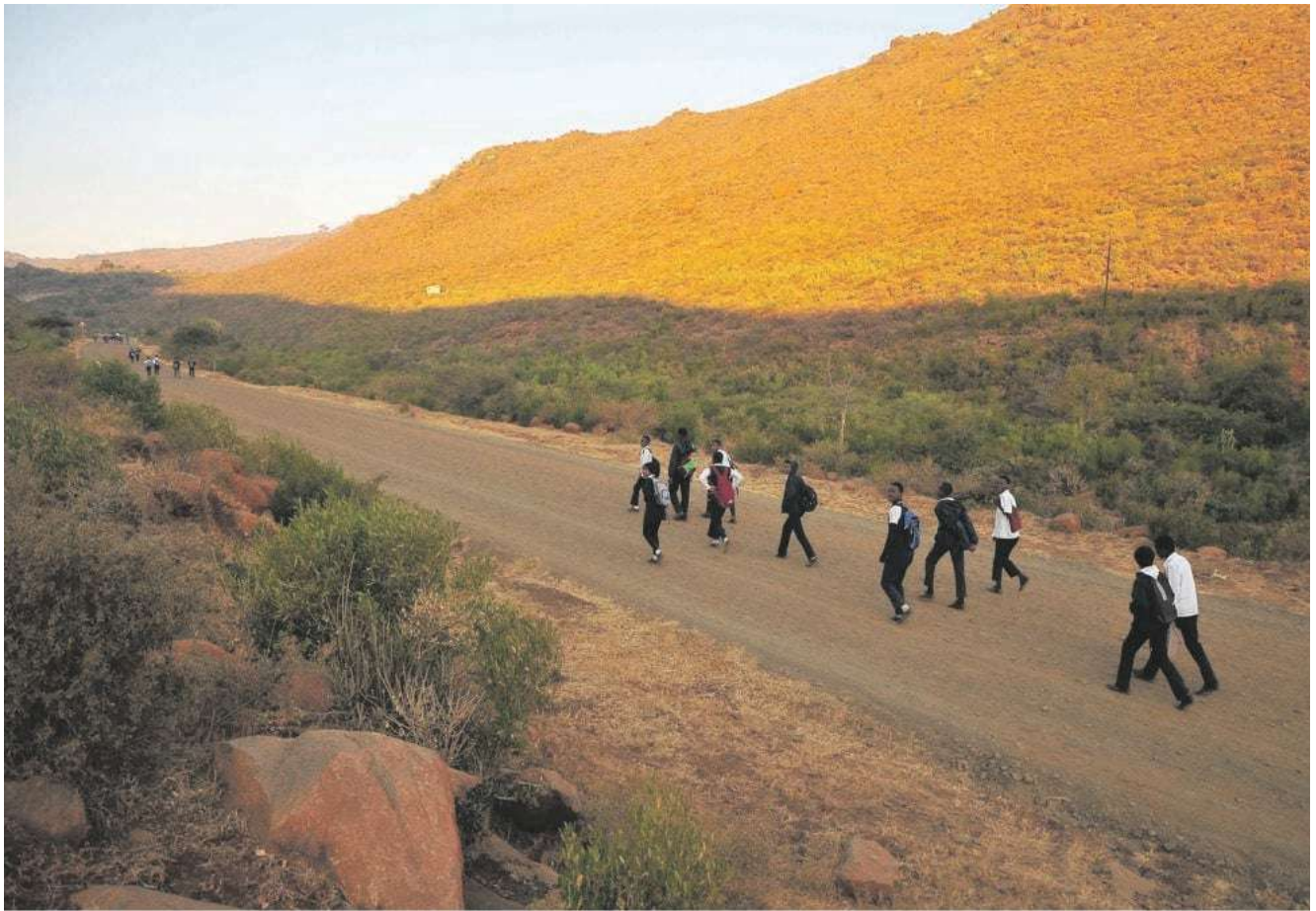
Education is a human right and a key tool for sustainable human capacity development, which boosts economic progress ([Zickafoose et al., 2024](#)). However, around the world, many barriers stand in the way of ensuring equal access to quality learning opportunities. These barriers hinder progress and limit opportunities for countless individuals.

Common Barriers to Equitable Access to Education

- **Lack of Funding for Education:** Many developing countries face a significant funding gap for education, often relying on foreign aid to bridge the shortfall. Currently, there is a \$39 billion (USD) funding deficit to ensure quality education for all children by 2030 ([Rueckert, 2019](#)).
- **Poverty and Inequality:** Poverty and inequality, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, prevent many families from affording school fees,

uniforms, and supplies, further excluding children from education ([Action Education, n.d](#)).

- **Violence and Conflict:** Violence and [conflict](#) disrupt education by displacing students and teachers. As well as, destroying infrastructure, increasing illiteracy, and creating unsafe environments that hinder learning.
- **Disabilities:** Limited resources, inadequate policies, and social stigma hinder the inclusion of children with disabilities, therefore, leading to poor enrolment, high dropout rates, and reduced learning outcomes ([Zickafoose et al., 2024](#)).
- **Non-availability of teachers and a shortage of trained teachers:** The global teacher crisis is marked by a significant shortage of qualified educators. 130 million children lack basic skills, requiring the recruitment of 69 million new teachers by 2030 to achieve universal education ([Rueckert, 2019](#)).
- **Lack of Resources:** The cost of education can be high, and governments often lack the funds to make the necessary investments to acquire resources. Education is occasionally given lower priority than other sectors such as infrastructure or healthcare ([Aghenitei, 2023](#)).
- **Disadvantaged by gender:** [Gender inequality in education](#) remains a major challenge in many developing countries. Cultural, economic, and societal barriers often limit girls' access to education and opportunities.
- **Distance from home to school:** For many children, particularly girls and those with disabilities, the long and hazardous walk to school can take up to three hours each day. In turn, these unrealistic journeys expose them to dangers such as hunger, violence, and exhaustion ([Rueckert, 2019](#)).



Pupils from GaSekele and surrounding villages in the Leolo and Schoonoord areas of Sekhukhune in Limpopo, South Africa walk for at least two hours to get to school on time.

Source: [Ledwaba, 2019](#)

The combination of these barriers creates significant inequalities in educational opportunities. Furthermore, they prevent millions of children from receiving the quality education they deserve. Overcoming these challenges requires coordinated efforts from governments, communities, and international organisations ([Schmelkes, 2020](#)). This will ensure equitable access to education for all which in turn promotes inclusive economic growth.

Removing Barriers to Equitable Access to Education

To overcome the barriers in education, there is a need to reinvent educational systems with a focus on equity ([Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024](#)). This includes revising funding to reduce inequalities, directing resources to underserved

schools, and ensuring adequate support for all students. Additionally, prioritising teacher development, modernising curricula, and addressing socio-economic factors can create a more inclusive learning environment. Moreover, investing in upgraded infrastructure, technology integration, and policy reforms further bridge educational gaps. A coordinated effort among stakeholders is essential to transform these systems and provide equitable opportunities for every learner ([Southworth, 2024](#)).

Benefits of Equitable access to education

One of the most significant investments a nation can make in its future is education ([Global Partnership for Education, n.d](#)). Equitable access to education offers numerous benefits globally and locally.

- **Social Benefits:** It promotes gender equality, social inclusion, and cohesion ([UNESCO, n.d](#)).
- **Economic Benefits:** It increases productivity, reduces inequality, and drives sustainable growth by enhancing the skills of the workforce ([OECD, n.d](#)).
- **Environmental Benefits:** [Educated](#) individuals are more likely to adopt sustainable practices, thereby contributing to environmental conservation.
- **Global Benefits:** Access to education fosters peace and stability, while locally, it addresses specific community needs and improves individual well-being ([World Bank, 2020](#)).

These benefits collectively enhance the quality of life and contribute to sustainable development at multiple levels.

policies on Equitable access to education

International efforts to promote equitable access to education have laid the foundation for inclusive economic growth. UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) framework and the Incheon Declaration (2015) emphasise universal access to quality education, focusing on marginalised groups and fostering equity ([UNESCO, n.d](#)). The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)

reinforces these objectives by calling for lifelong learning opportunities and reducing inequalities in education ([United Nations, n.d.](#)).

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) supports low-income countries with funding and technical assistance to strengthen education systems ([Global Partnership for Education, n.d.](#)). The OECD's Education Policy Outlook provides evidence-based recommendations for equitable reforms. These include needs-based funding and teacher training programmes ([OECD, 2024](#)). Together, these initiatives aim to eliminate barriers to learning and address socio-economic challenges. They equip individuals with the skills necessary to contribute to economic growth. By fostering inclusive and equitable education globally, these policies ensure that education serves as a pathway to sustainable development ([Vindigni, 2024](#)).

successful examples

Around the world, there are many successful examples of policies promoting equitable access to education, ensuring the right to learn. One example is South Korea's education reform, particularly the Free Semester Program and the SMART Education Initiative. These reforms align with the needs of the 4th Industrial Revolution and promote economic growth. The government involved diverse stakeholders, including schools, public sectors, and industries. They worked together to create a shared agenda for skill development. These efforts aim to equip students with skills to thrive in a fast-changing economy ([Isaacs & Mishra, 2022](#)).

These reforms enhanced access to education and promoted school autonomy, allowing tailored education programmes that addressed local and industrial needs. Teacher training played a crucial role, with tailored programs and pedagogical support to enhance teaching competencies. These initiatives have improved education infrastructure and expanded access to quality education. Consequently, they have also fostered a skilled workforce. This workforce contributes to economic growth. The initiatives offer valuable lessons for countries adapting to changing economies ([Jeong, 2020](#)).

Another noteworthy example is Germany's Vocational Education and Training (VET) System. Germany's VET system, which integrates education and practical

work experience, ensures equitable access to high-quality education and skills development. Furthermore, this system meets the workforce's and the economy's needs. It provides young people from all backgrounds with essential tools. These tools help them thrive in the labour market. This, in turn, supports sustainable economic growth ([Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, n.d.](#)).



Germany's Vocational Education and Training.

Source: [Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, n.d.](#)

Conclusion

All in all, education is a transformative force that enhances health and well-being, fosters social stability, and promotes sustained economic growth ([Brooks, 2023](#)). By ensuring equitable access to quality education, societies can reduce inequality and empower individuals to reach their full potential. Moreover, investing in education creates a skilled and adaptable workforce, capable of driving innovation and responding to global challenges. As countries continue to prioritise education, they lay the foundation for long-term prosperity and a more inclusive future for all.

Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) are a global plan adopted by UN member states in 2015. These 17 goals aim to ensure Earth's longevity by 2030. Moreover, they call for collective action from all nations to promote prosperity and protect the environment. Thus, the SDGs seek to create a better future for people and the planet.

This article aligns with the United Nations' [SDG4](#) (Quality Education) and [SDG8](#) (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Equitable access to education is essential for advancing quality learning and fostering economic growth. By prioritising inclusive education and skill development, societies drive innovation, create decent work opportunities, and build resilient communities.

A Thrivable Framework

[THRIVE Project](#) envisions a future where humanity moves beyond mere survival towards a thriving future. Focused on the lasting well-being of all species on Earth, its mission emphasises promoting thriving. Through The [THRIVE Framework](#), we examine critical challenges and evaluate potential solutions, providing valuable insights into advancing environmental and social sustainability.

To support these ideals, engage with THRIVE's [clusters](#) and resources, including [podcasts](#), [webinars](#), [whitepapers](#), and the [blog](#). Advocate for thriving by supporting aligned organisations and leaders prioritising sustainability.