SDG 4
Quality Education

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Increasing levels of urbanization and education are key drivers for economic development. Research has consistently indicated that one critical correlates of students' academic achievement is their level of academic aspiration, with this link being strongly rooted in the fact that aspirations trigger the motivation to excel in school to attain the targeted academic accomplishment in life[1]. But academic aspiration is also related to school location in terms of whether the school is in an urban or rural setting[2], and school type regarding whether the school is boarding, day or partly day and boarding.

Urbanization remains a factor influencing both education access and quality, and this often attracts debate in terms of whether there are consistent rural and urban differentials in students' academic outcomes. Many urban schools are often better in the sense that they are more resourced, and closer to occupational opportunities such as industries and business enterprises which have the potential to trigger students' desire to achieve and take advantage of the potentially promising career opportunities. In addition, students in urban areas are not only closer to institutions of higher learning such as universities and colleges, but they are also more exposed to a richer curriculum and a wide range of co-curricular activities. While this urban-rural gap has consistently existed for many years, with emerging patterns of unplanned urbanization, we are beginning to see a narrowing of the gap on many education measures especially in the developing countries where the slum household prevalence is high. Such spatial and differential income disparities within urban and urban versus rural households do affect education outcomes. For example, slum dwellers are usually disadvantaged in terms of income as well as characterized by low levels of education access, retention and performance compared to their other wealthier households in urban areas.

Gender disparities related to access to education have been on the decline for the last

20 years

with the majority of the countries in favor of females catching up with males

Primary school enrolment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa in urban areas are up at

75%

compared to

57%

in rural areas.

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Beyond the impacts of slum prevalence, globally, growing urban populations in many countries have shifted the average urban schools' sizes upwards, while at the same time decreasing the number of school options available per urban district or locality within many cities. These shifting student-to-teacher ratios are also partly accountable for the narrowing of the gaps between rural and urban education outcomes. There are numerous studies that show that when school conditions such as congestion or lack of a roof or window on a classroom worsen, this increases the probability of dropping out and non-attendance. But class sizes such as those being witnessed in urban areas in many developing countries contribute to not only increased dropout but also impacts on learners' achievement scores. For example, a 2011 World Bank Report highlights that half of primary school children in urban areas in Kenya and Zambia still experience challenges of lack of books and school supplies. According to the report, children from rural areas are much more satisfied in terms of scholastic supplies compared to those from urban areas, 51% against 32 % respectively.

To date, it is not farfetched to argue that investment in primary education in terms of the number of schools, classrooms, desks and teaching and learning resources has not been commensurate with the demands of an increasing urban population in many developing countries. Given that many poor urban residents live on the out-skirts of the cities or hard to reach areas of the cities, the equitable distribution of such educational facilities around urban centers is also a major concern.

Urban land management challenges have also equally impacted the spaces and land for urban schools especially in cities and towns where security of tenure is poor. The high prices of land in urban areas, means that urban schools usually do not expand easily to create additional spaces that offer adequate buildings or facilities for recreational, games and sports due to increasing numbers of students.

Globally, data collected by Global Urban Observatory (GUO) shows that there are substantial disparities between rural and urban children when it comes to education enrollment (Table 1).

Table 1. Education enrollment rates by regions, and urban versus rural (ENROLMENT rate in Primary Education)

Enrolment rate in primary by Wealth index and locations.							
	Poorest	Poorer	Middle	Richer	Richest	Urban	Rural
Sub-Saharan Africa	55.7	62.4	68.1	75.1	84.5	75.1	57.2
Western Asia & Northern Africa	72.0	76.8	79.8	82.1	84.7	80.0	71.6
Central Asia & Southern Asia	63.0	71.1	74.8	77.8	84.2	79.6	70.3
Eastern & South-eastern Asia	78.7	86.2	88.2	87.8	88.1	74.6	66.3
LAC	73.4	75.1	81.3	86.3	88.1	78.2	68.4

Among all regions (excluding North America and Europe), there is a clear urban advantage in primary school enrolment rates. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa the rates in urban areas are up at 75 compared to 57 in rural areas. Enrolment rates are also consistently higher among the wealthier groups and much lower among the children from poor household.

With more than half of the world's population living in urban areas, students going to school in urban areas continue to have an urban advantage in performance. This "urban advantage" in student enrollment and performance is evident in most country data sets that we have examined as well as across many regions. However, gender disparities related to access to education have been on the decline for the last 20 years with the majority of the countries in favor of females catching up with males. Additional analysis shows that education performance and outcomes of migrant children within the last 2-3 years is significantly worse than that of local urban residents' children, which raises some concerns in terms of inclusive and accessible quality education delivery for urban newcomers.

Urbanization makes education problems more noticeable and, in most cases, allows for contextually designed cost-effective ways of tackling some of the problems because of economies of agglomeration. As urban birth rates continue to decline globally, and more rural migrants move into cities, rural children are becoming an important part of the urban labor supply. Improving education performance of all students including that of urban migrants' children, especially those migrating into cities with their parents, is not only in the interest of migrants but also crucial for human capital accumulation and the long-term economic growth of many countries.

Since there is a large gap in education performance of children in rural and urban areas, which is consistent for majority of the countries, further reforms are needed, especially by ensuring that such reforms are implemented in a participatory and inclusive manner with no one left behind. Inclusive and equitable education may help slum dwellers have adequate skills for decent jobs, which in turn will contribute to improving their living conditions. Quality education for all, including urban, rural and migrant children, while ending all forms of discrimination in terms of education access is crucial to the achievement of targets that cover inclusive cities for sustainable development.

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Endnotes

1 (See: Alfaro, Umana-Tylor & Bamaca, 2006; Gutman & Schoon 2012; Yala & Wanjohi, 2011)
2 (See Barcinas & McCracken, 1991; Bajema, Miller & Williams, 2002; Park, Behrman & Choi, 2017)