Philippines

Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2023

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E-Net Philippines

■ *E-Net Philippines' member teacher organisations gather in a Leaders' Forum and Press Conference, calling for the need to reflect on teachers' issues and challenges and highlighting the crucial role teachers play in education and society (October 2023)*

I. Country Context

The Philippine Constitution mandates that the state shall protect and promote the right of all Filipinos to accessible and quality education. Despite this, the country still faces significant challenges related to out-of-school youth (OSY) with more than three million OSY, according to the latest data from the Philippine Statistics Authority. Many of these young people come from low-income families and are forced to work instead of attending school, with 53% of the **3.4 million** OSY, who should already be in senior high school or college, coming from the poorest families. They are between the ages of 16 and 24. Learners from marginalised groups and communities– persons with disabilities, indigenous people, and those living in remote or economically disadvantaged areas– have limited access to quality education. The dropout rate for indigenous children in the Philippines is almost three times higher than the national average (UNICEF, 2020). There is a decline in the enrolment of learners with disabilities in SY 2021-2022 and SY 2020-2021 compared to SY 2019-2020. The DepEd also reported a decline in the number of schools where learners with disabilities are enrolled.

In terms of quality, the term "learning crisis" had been used to describe the situation. A World Bank study released in July 2022 found that **9 out of 10 Filipino children are still struggling to read simple texts by age 10**, making the Philippines one of the countries with the highest rates of learning poverty in the East Asia and Pacific region. The study defines learning poverty as being unable to read and understand short, simple texts. The study attributes the high learning poverty rate to several factors, including the lack of access to computers and the internet, the poor quality of distance learning, and the socio-economic conditions of many Filipino families.[1] Learning poverty is higher for boys than for girls. The share of out-of-school children is higher for boys (5.1%) than for girls (4.8%). And boys are less likely to achieve minimum proficiency at the end of primary school (91.7%) than girls (89.2%) in the Philippines. The enrolment rate for girls is slightly higher than for boys. More males cited employment as a reason for not attending school in comparison to females who cited early marriage as a reason.

The Philippine government's **outstanding debt stood at PHP 14.15 trillion** (USD 252 billion) as of end-June 2023.[2] For 2023, the government will settle PHP 1.35 trillion (USD 24 billion) in domestic debts and PHP 253.8 billion (USD 4.5 billion) in foreign obligations.[3] This will cause a heavy drain on the economy, which is still struggling from the multiple crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The rising food and fuel prices will exacerbate even more the poverty situation in the country. Poverty is a major barrier to education. Children from low-income families face higher dropout rates and lower educational attainment because they often cannot afford school fees, uniforms, and other expenses. Poverty is worsening due to the high inflation rate, reaching a 4-year high of 6.1% in May 2023.[4]

1   Worldbank, Years of remote schooling exacerbate "learning poverty" among Filipino children. (2022, July 23). Years of Remote Schooling Exacerbate "Learning Poverty" Among Filipino Children, The Straits Times. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/years-of-remote-schooling-exacerbate-learning-poverty-among-filipino-children

2   https://www.treasury.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/NG-Debt-Press-Release-June-2023.pdf

3   The currency converter used for the PHP figures in this document was XE Philippine Peso to US Dollar conversion, Retrieved Nov 3, 2023, 11:32 UTC, from https://www.xe.com/ currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=530000000000&From=PHP&To=USD

4   https://www.dbm.gov.ph/index.php/secretary-s-corner/ press-releases/list-of-press-releases/

There are challenges in ensuring that all Filipinos, especially children, have access to affordable and nutritious food, as the Global Food Security Index 2022 ranks the Philippines at 64th out of 113 countries.[5] The population groups most vulnerable to malnutrition include pregnant and lactating mothers, infants, young children, adolescent girls, children with disabilities, and older persons.

The Philippines has about 20 million young people (ages 15-24) in January 2021. Among them, an estimated **3.9 million youth, or 19%, were not in employment, education, or training (NEET)**.[6] NEET are young people who are not accumulating human capital through education and employment as they transition to adulthood. The country has the third highest proportion of NEET in Southeast Asia (after Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam), and the second highest among ASEAN-5 countries.

II. *Progress towards the Achievement of SDG 4*

The Philippine government has undertaken Voluntary National Reviews in 2016, 2019, and 2022 to assess SDG progress. In 2022, it was revealed that while the government had completed its VNR and established a coordination unit for SDG implementation, no official public endorsement of the SDGs was issued.[7] Although the SDGs were integrated into overarching strategies like the Philippine Development Plan and Ambisyon Natin 2030, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network found that the latest central budget document did not mention the SDGs.[8] Despite identifying 155 indicators for monitoring SDG progress, over half (56.8%) lack progress estimates due to data limitations. Availability of up-to-date data is challenging, with the latest data on SDG 4 accessible only until 2020-2021. Moreover, disaggregated data for Persons with Disabilities and Indigenous People regarding education, employment, nutrition, and healthcare, categorised by gender and age, remains inadequate, warranting further data collection efforts.

The Philippines, like many other countries, faced challenges and reversals in its efforts to achieve SDG 4 due to the pandemic.

2774-ph-inflation-rate-eases-for- 4th-straight-month-at-6-1-in-may-2023

5   Is Food Supply Accessible, Affordable, and Stable? The State of Food Security in the Philippines. (n.d.). SERP-P: Socio-economic Research Portal for the Philippines. https://serp-p.pids.gov.ph/publication/public/view? slug=is-food-supply- accessible-affordable-and-stable- the-state-of-food-security-in-the-philippines

6   Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021.

7   Sustainable Development Report 2023. (n.d.). https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/philippines

8   Ibid

The increase in the average dropout rate among elementary and high school students by about 2% is a concerning outcome of the pandemic's disruption of education. Education agencies, particularly the Department of Education (DepEd) have been working on various initiatives to address education issues, mitigate the impact of the pandemic on education and accelerate progress toward achieving SDG 4. The Basic Education Report 2023 (BER) presented by DepEd Secretary Sara Duterte identified the following as the pressing issues pounding the Philippine basic education - lack of school infrastructure and facilities, congested curriculum, and weak teaching methods of teachers.
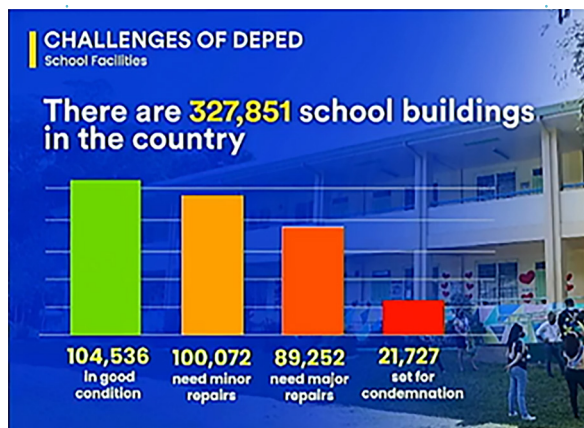
According to the BER 2023, there are 28.4 million learners enrolled in School Year 2022-2023. However, there are only 327,851 school buildings in the country.[9] Our schools are also not calamity-proof. The curriculum content is congested with 14,171 Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCS) in the K-12 curriculum. The assessment of the K-12 Curriculum revealed the weak teaching methods of our teachers in addressing 21st-century skills. The education system burdens them with backbreaking and time-consuming administrative tasks. Teachers and students struggled with having too many subjects to study.

DepEd's new agenda to resolve the identified issues is the MATATAG Agenda, which features reforms to **MA**ke the curriculum relevant; **TA**ke steps to accelerate the delivery of basic education services and provision of facilities; **TA**ke good care of learners by promoting learner well-being, and inclusive education and a positive learning environment; and **G**ive support for teachers to teach better

Addressing access, equity, and inclusion in education requires not only an agenda but also sufficient education investments and a specific focus on marginalised sectors. **Funding for marginalised, excluded, and vulnerable sectors (MEVS) and Inclusive Education Programs remain minimal**. Less than 2% is allocated for Inclusive Education Programs of the DepEd, with

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9   Basic Education Report 2023

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seven (7) programs under it. Disability-specific appropriation is estimated to be only 0.44% of the DepEd budget. The Alternative Learning System (ALS), which is supposed to cater to OSY and adults who missed out on basic education, account for less than 1% of the education budget.

In terms of policy, the Philippines has made some progress in promoting inclusive education. The legal framework for institutionalising the Alternative Learning System was passed into law in December 2020 (Republic Act 11510 or the ALS Act). In March 2022, Republic Act No. (RA) 11650 "Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education, Establishing Learning Resource Centres in All Schools Districts, Municipalities and Cities, Providing for Standards, Appropriating Funds Therefor, and for Other Purposes," was enacted. This mandates that Filipino children with disabilities have access to free, appropriate, quality inclusive education.

In addressing teacher quality by upgrading teacher education and training towards education quality in the country, the government enacted Republic Act 11713, or the Excellence in Teacher Education Act in April 2022. **The big challenge will be translating these policies into actions**. Implementation of the ALS law has been slow and no significant changes have been made in terms of increasing the budget for ALS. There is no issuance still of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of RA 11650 more than a year after its enactment.

More challenges need to be addressed, specifically in the following indicators:

* A youth-led research project facilitated by Indigenous Peoples (IP) youth leaders from the LAKAS community collected data on Ayta learners' experiences through a youth camp. The analysis of this data highlighted significant barriers for IP learners, including their experience of verbal bullying that targets their race and appearance, causing trauma, stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem, potentially leading to school dropout and reluctance to wear traditional clothing. Financial difficulties hinder many IP learners from completing their education, with unexpected contributions causing discomfort.[10]

* The increasing incidence of teenage pregnancy raised alarms within the education sector. In 2020, 56,428 cases of live births occurred among girls aged

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10   2023 Lubos na Alyansa ng mga Katutubong Ayta ng Sambales (LAKAS) Youth-led Action Research – E-Net Philippines. (n.d.). 2023 Lubos Na Alyansa Ng Mga Katutubong Ayta Ng Sambales (LAKAS) Youth-led Action Research – E-Net Philippines. https://enetphil.org.ph/?p=2242

10 to 17, disrupting their education due to early parenthood.

✤ The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) has been a subject of debate with Congress deliberating on whether to suspend its implementation until implementation issues are resolved or revert back to English as the medium of instruction.

III. Civil Society Engagement in the SDG 4 Implemen- ation, Follow-up, and Monitoring

The Philippines has taken steps to create platforms for civil society organisations (CSOs) and other education stakeholders to engage and participate in the education sector planning and monitoring. Specifically on the SDGs, the **NEDA Stakeholders Chamber on SDGs** serves as the platform of engagement between government and non-government actors for better resource management and coordination of the SDGs and targets.

Platforms specific to education include the **Education Forum**, which is the Local (National) Education Group recognised by the Global Partnership on Education (GPE). The Forum is composed of DepEd and education partners including CSOs, education sector organisations, private organisations and foundations, bilateral agencies, and multilateral organisations. Through the Educ Forum, DepEd aims to institutionalise a platform for consultation and collaborative research in strategic basic education policy, planning, and programming to address critical issues in the implementation of quality education.

There is also the **Philippine Open Government Partnership (OGP)** where E-Net Philippines is the lead organisation for the OGP-Education CSO Group. OGP education commitments adopted by both governments represented by DepEd and CSOs include increased budgets for Last Mile Schools, Inclusive Learning Resource Centres, and the Alternative Learning System (ALS).

A new development is the creation of the **Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM 2)** which is a national commission tasked to undertake a comprehensive national assessment and evaluation of the performance of the Philippine education sector for the purpose of recommending concrete and targeted reforms in the sector in the next three years, from 2023 to 2025. E-Net Philippines sits as one of the two

CSO Representatives in the Advisory Committee. It also has representations in the Standing Committee on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and Basic Education and the Standing Committee on Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Lifelong Learning.

While these platforms exist, CSOs engaging in these spaces still view that the level of participation allowed by the government is still limited and appears to be tokenistic rather than substantive. There are opportunities for discussion wherein CSOs are allowed to provide insights but very limited when it comes

to decision-making and having issues addressed. The government should consider regular evaluations and feedback mechanisms to assess the impact and effectiveness of these engagement platforms.

IV. SDG 4 Interlinkages with Other SDGs

SDG 4 and SDG 11

The "learning city" concept, defined by UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities involves efficiently mobilising resources across sectors to promote lifelong learning and education at all levels. The Philippines' sole UNESCO Learning City - Balanga City, is at the forefront of this community literacy development providing innovative learning spaces for its citizens of all ages. The City has been implementing blended learning delivery by using television, radio, internet connection, printed modules, offline games and applications, and other platforms. To address learning and digital gaps, the City continuously improves its Barangay and School Community Hubs by distributing Information and Communications Technology (ICT) equipment with offline literacy applications to barangays, schools, teachers, and students. This allows them to utilise the applications despite the challenges of connecting to the internet. The City also continuously

upgrades its internet connectivity in public places in barangays for online classes, work, and business. Moreover, the City's Library facilitates learning for children by providing reading and writing materials, and some of the educational materials were digitised. The concept aligns well with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). It supports the achievement of these goals by creating inclusive learning environments that contribute to quality education and sustainable urban development.

SDG 4 and SDG 6

The linkage between SDG 4 and SDG 6 is significant when addressing the issue of stunting and its connection to unsafe water, sanitation, and unhygienic practices in young children. Child stunting is a pressing concern, affecting 27% of Filipino children under five. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) faces a stunting rate of 45.25%, and stunting disproportionately impacts girls and children from poor households. Stunting impairs growth, learning, and adult life outcomes, hindering schooling and productivity.

To mitigate the impact of unsafe water, sanitation, and unhygienic practices on stunting, the DepEd partnered with the World Bank to implement Project WASH, enhancing water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions in over 10,000 schools, especially in marginalised communities, along with efforts to enhance nutrition and promote quality education.[11]

Unfortunately, although a majority of schools (85.2%) are practising sanitation activities such as handwashing, only half (44.4%) do so on a daily basis and 14.8% of schools do not practice handwashing at all. Around 20% of schools or around 9,000 public schools still need to augment their facilities to ensure that learners can wash their hands effectively.[12]

SDG 4 and Financing

Public education financing in the Philippines has never reached the 4% minimum benchmark recommended in the Education 2030 Agenda and Framework for Action. The highest budgets were allocated in 2017, with 3.8% and 2019 with 3.9%, respectively, marginally below the recommended 4%. The country reported its lowest expenditure in 2020 with 2.3% of GDP. This will have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.[13]

11   DepEd WinS monitoring data (SY2017-2018 to SY 2019-2020)
12   DepEd WinS monitoring data (SY2017-2018 to SY 2019-2020)
13   Tenazas, N. 2022. The Financing of Education in Philippines. Paper commissioned for Costing and Financing SDG4-Education 2030 in the Asia-Pacific Region Project. UNESCO 2022

The Philippine government has allocated a significant amount of funding for basic education in recent years. General Appropriations Act (GAA)-approved DepEd budget amounted to PHP 594.11 billion in 2021 (USD 10.6 billion); PHP 631.77 billion in 2022 (USD 11.27 billion); and PHP 676.14 billion in 2023 (USD 12 billion). The Basic Education Development Plan (BEDP) 2030 which outlines a comprehensive roadmap for achieving SDG 4 will require additional funding beyond what is currently allocated for basic education. It is not just about the quantity of the budget allocated to education but also how these funds are utilised. Proper utilisation of budgets is essential for ensuring that the money is spent effectively to improve the quality of education. This includes prioritising the marginalised, establishing Inclusive Learning Resource Centres and Community Learning Centres, investing in qualified teachers, up-to-date educational resources, safe and conducive learning environments, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

A large amount of funding support for learners in Junior High School and Senior High School is the Education Service Contracting (ESC) and the SHS Voucher System under Dep-Ed's Government Assistance and Subsidies (GAS). ESC aims to make quality junior high school education accessible by providing financial assistance to deserving elementary graduates who wish to study junior high school in private schools while SHS Voucher is a government subsidy given to JHS completers to enable them to enrol in a private school of their choice. Funding for ESC and the Voucher System has become the single largest budget item of DepEd annually since 2016 averaging at PHP 36.75 billion (USD 655.65 million). The amount allotted for GAS in 2023 is PHP 53 billion (USD 945 million). The primary importance is given to Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), such as ESC and SHS Voucher, which enjoy support from and are institutionalised by government policies and programs. This clearly indicates a general bias for the private sector.

The Republic Act No. 10931, also known as the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, was enacted in the Philippines to provide free tuition and other fees in public higher education institutions. While the Act has noble intentions, it has faced several challenges in its implementation. The government has struggled to secure enough resources to cover the costs of providing free tuition and other fees, leading to budget shortfalls. While the Act aims to provide universal access to tertiary education, there have been concerns about inequity in access. Some students still face barriers related to transportation costs, living expenses, and other incidental fees not covered by the Act.

V. Key Messages and Recommendations

1. **Inclusive Education for All:** Prioritise policies and programs that ensure quality education for marginalised and vulnerable groups, including Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those in conflict-affected areas. The Alternative Learning System (ALS) must be considered as a critical strategy both as a transitional as well as long-term complement of formal education service delivery.

2. **Local Policy Alignment and Advocacy:** The DepEd's Basic Education Development Plan 2030 must be disseminated to school divisions, districts, and individual schools. This action would guide DepEd to create, execute, and oversee rights-based plans and programs in formal and non-formal primary education over the next decade.

3. **Data Disaggregation and Monitoring:** Collect and analyse comprehensive data, disaggregated by demographics, gender, disability, and ethnicity to identify education disparities and design targeted interventions.

4. **Equitable Financing:** Increase education spending to meet the global benchmark of 6% of GDP. Allocate adequate educational resources, focusing on equitable distribution to reach disadvantaged learners.

5. **Gender Equality in Education:** Implement gender-responsive education policies that promote equal opportunities for all genders, eliminate gender-based violence, and address barriers to education for people with diverse SOGIESC. Enact the SOGIESC Equality Bill.

6. **Empower Teachers:** Prioritise professional development for teachers, especially those working in challenging and remote areas, to enhance their skills and adaptability to diverse learning needs.

7. **Meaningful Civil Society Engagement:** Create platforms for civil society and community participation in education planning, implementation, and monitoring to ensure that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of diverse learners.

LAKAS Youth Researchers' Recommendations.[14]

❍ Strengthen anti-bullying policies at all levels to combat racial discrimination and raise awareness about IP culture and rights.

❍ Conduct seminars for IP learners to boost self-concept, self-worth, and confidence, addressing negative self-perceptions.

❍ Improve the implementation of the mother tongue in instruction and make it a strong foundation for learning other languages, alongside local contexts and needs.

❍ Train teachers to understand IP learners' preferences for tailored teaching strategies in challenging subjects.

❍ Establish scholarships for IP students, especially at the college level.

❍ Upgrade infrastructure for conducive learning environments, including ventilation and WASH facilities.

❍ Provide mental health and psychosocial support to alleviate stress on both teachers and learners.

❍ Ensure school uniforms for all IP learners.

❍ Initiate dialogues between LAKAS elders and community leaders to modify traditional clothing norms that respect and preserve cultural heritage.

❍ Support facilitators of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) through funding for salaries and materials.

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14   2023 Lubos Na Alyansa Ng Mga Katutubong Ayta Ng Sambales (LAKAS) Youth-led Action Research – E-Net Philippines.