

Policy Brief

Population Groups Not Keeping Up with National Education Trends*

National averages in school attendance rates mask large sub-national inequality in many countries. This policy brief focuses on inequality between the sub-national states or provinces within each country. School attendance (the portion of children who attended school at some point in the present school year) is used in this brief to analyze which children are out of school.

INEQUALITIES IN ATTENDANCE LEVELS WITHIN COUNTRIES

Figure 1 presents the distribution by urban and rural areas within sub-regions of net attendance for 63 developing countries for which data was available. The net attendance rate is found on the horizontal axis and the red dots represent urban areas and blue dots rural areas within states or provinces. The black line shows the national average. The figure shows that regional inequality is a serious problem in many countries. Particularly in those countries where the national level is low, the spread of the attendance rates is large.

Three trends are evident from this chart. One, attendance inequality is characteristic of low national attendance rates – the lower the national attendance rates, the larger the spread of attendance rates. In countries with high national attendance rates, there is uniformly good access to schools. Conversely, those countries with low national attendance levels have dots spread widely, indicating regional inequality in school

attendance. The largest differential was found in Ethiopia, where 96% of children in the urban areas of Tigray region go to school compared to only 8% of those in the rural areas of Somalia region.

Two, in almost all countries, including those with the lowest attendance levels, there are at least some regions with high attendance rates, generally in large urban areas. Even within the neediest countries there are certain areas where a high proportion of citizens have access to primary education. The education for all challenge is to reach the underserved areas, not necessarily the entire country.

Three, as the vast majority of red dots are above the national trend line and of blue dots are below the line, it is clear that there is significant inequity between urban and rural attendance rates.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between national net attendance rate and inequality (where inequality is represented as the difference between the highest and lowest regional net attendance rates). The top twenty countries with the highest national net attendance rates have an average spread of 14 percentage points, while the bottom twenty have an average spread of 55 percentage points. It is clear that the path to national EFA requires the fastest growth in the below-average regions.

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FIGURE 1. SUBNATIONAL NET ATTENDANCE:
National net attendance rates compared with subnational urban and rural net attendance rates for 63 countries.

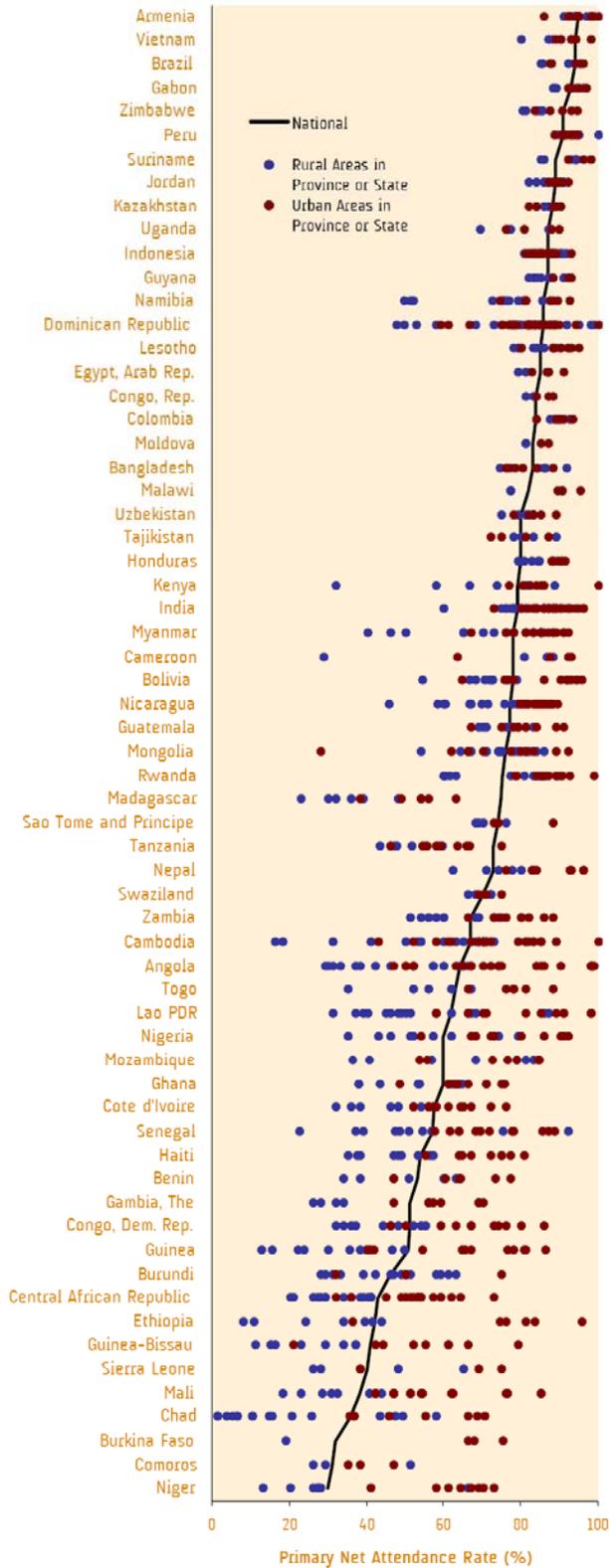
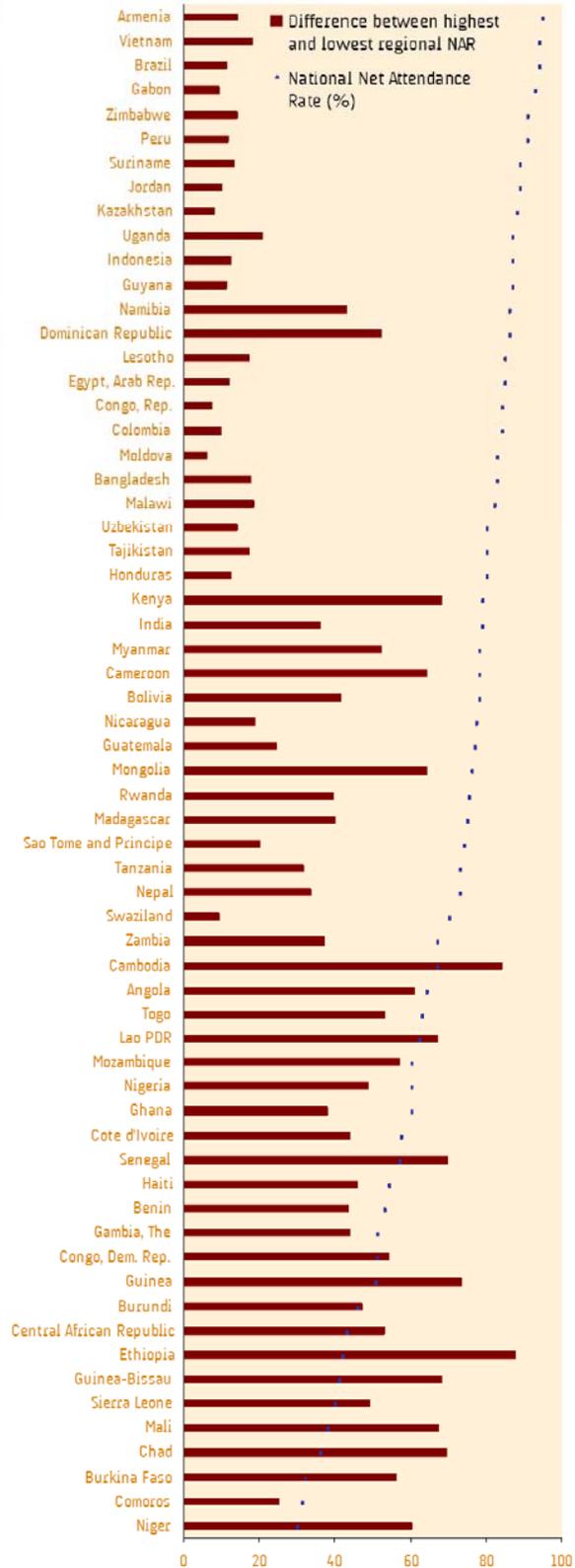


FIGURE 2. SUBNATIONAL DISPARITIES:
National net attendance rates compared with subnational NAR disparities for 63 countries.



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These regional disparities, and their relationship to national attendance levels, have received insufficient attention in international education discussions. What is causing children in one part of the country to stay out of school in greater numbers than those in another part of the same country? What policies and strategies can address the development and education conditions in underserved areas?

MAKING PROGRESS BY TARGETING UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

One can hypothesize that the figures can be looked at as proxies for the pattern towards EFA over time – those countries with the highest national averages are at the end of that path, and those with the lowest are at the beginning. If that is so, then the pattern followed by countries on the path to EFA is for different subgroups to reach high net attendance rates one after the other, rather than for the whole population to move as a whole towards EFA. In the 63 countries studied, Swaziland is the only real anomaly, with a national net attendance rate of 70%, and regional rates clustered over a relatively small range from 66 to 75%.

Theoretically, Education for All can be reached on a path of uniformity, or one of (temporary) disparity. On the first path, net attendance rates for all demographics rise at the same rate; there are no advantaged or disadvantaged groups. On the second path, easy-to-reach populations (such as urban children or those of higher socio-economic status) make progress earlier and faster than other populations, with the more disadvantaged groups eventually catching up. The second path is the one actually followed by most countries. This pattern is well-illustrated by Burkina Faso (Figure 3). The past several decades have seen a steady rise in national educational attainment, but the two advantaged groups, urban males and females, are now approaching 100% primary entry. To continue making national gains, access for rural children has to rise.

Figure 3 also illustrates the characteristic narrowing of the educational attainment gap as Bangladesh approaches EFA. Faced with the challenge of reaching large, poor, inaccessible rural populations, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in increasing access to primary school and closing the attendance gap during the 1990s. In 1985 the primary net enrollment rate was

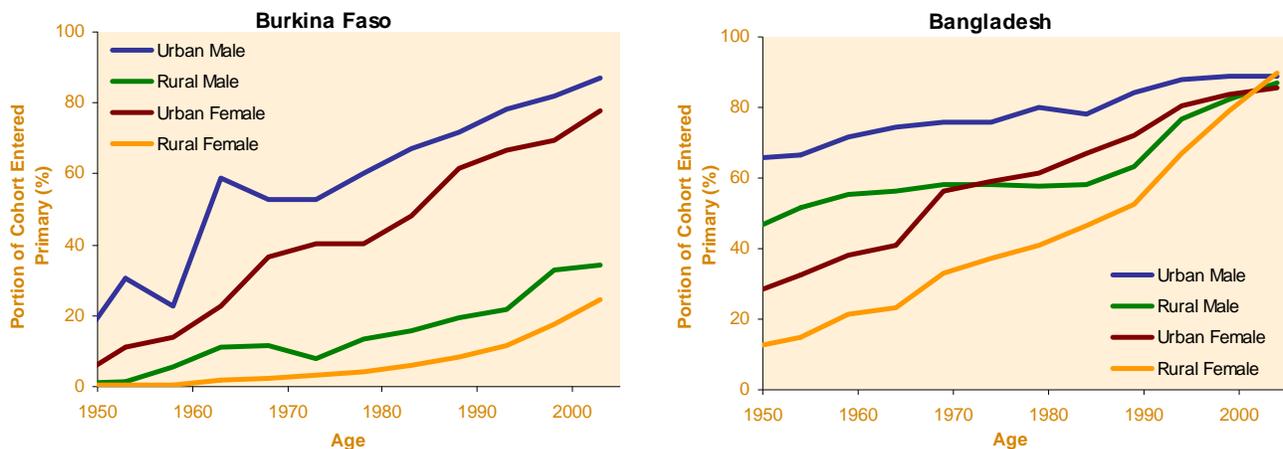


FIGURE 3. UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS: School entry trends for different populations shown for Burkina Faso and Bangladesh. Data extracted by EPDC from DHS 2003 / DHS 2004 dataset

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56%; by 2004 it had increased to 94%. Bangladesh achieved these significant improvements in the net attendance rates by targeting programs to children in rural areas, and in particular, girls: Over the same time period, the female net enrollment rate rose from 47% to 95%. The rapid gains of a marginalized demographic translate into gains for the whole country. Note the rapid gains made by females, especially rural females, in the last few decades in Figure 3.

In Bangladesh, NGOs like BRAC[†] have played a crucial role in targeting rural poor and girls. The BRAC education program emerged in response to the needs of rural communities, starting in 1985 with only 22 schools and expanding to over 31,000 by 2005. BRAC has strict eligibility requirements (such as 70% of the enrolled students must be girls) to ensure that target populations are reached.

BRAC and other successful programs have certain characteristics in common. They draw on community resources and seem to benefit from decentralization[‡]. In particular, it can be difficult to attract teachers to work in rural areas, so these programs recruit less-educated teachers locally and then provide pre-service and continuing training. With ongoing support, these teachers are able to be effective as facilitators of learning. In addition, successful programs focus on learning outcomes and to use whatever resources are available and adapt their methods as needed in order to support learning. The other principle noted as important is the partnership of government with NGOs. NGOs may understand and respond to local conditions better than the central government is able to.

* This policy brief is adapted by Sarah Oliver from: Wils, Annababette, and Carrol, Bidemi. *Educating the World's Children: Patterns of Growth and Inequality* (Washington, DC: Education Policy and Data Center, 2005).

[†] The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee was founded in 1972 as a relief organization and later transitioned to development work.

[‡] Hartwell, Ash and Joseph DeStephano. EQUIP2 Issues Brief: The Challenge of Achieving Education For All: Quality Basic Education for Underserved Children, 2004