FROM OUT-OF-SCHOOL TO OUT-OF-EDUCATION CHILDREN
WHAT AFGHANISTAN TEACHES US ABOUT MEASURING EDUCATION EXCLUSION

GHULAM OMAR QARGHA

Afghanistan's ban on girls' secondary education (O'Donnell, 2022) highlights the limitations of the "out-of-school children" (OOSC) indicator[1] in capturing the complexities of educational access and exclusion. While Afghanistan represents an extreme case, the limitations of the OOSC indicator are globally relevant. Reliance on narrow indicators like OOSC provides inadequate insights to address educational exclusion and limits policymakers' ability to draw upon the multiple pathways of learning opportunities within their educational ecosystems to meet the needs of their student population (Chiaha & Nane-Ejeh, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 1992; Hāk et al., 2016; Oakes, 1989).

Using Afghanistan as a case study, this policy brief advocates for replacing the OOSC indicator with a more inclusive out-of-education children (OOEC) indicator that incorporates formal, informal, and non-formal

educational pathways. It is designed for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to transform education systems to ensure they are relevant to local needs and respond to global challenges.

The OOSC indicator focuses solely on formal school enrollment and fails to account for the broader geopolitical, cultural, and social realities driving educational exclusion. This narrow approach privileges formal schooling as the sole legitimate educational pathway and implicitly delegitimizes alternative and indigenous systems like madrasas, community-based programs, or the growing technology-based systems. In communities where formal schooling is viewed as a tool of foreign influence or cultural imposition, such biases exacerbate long-standing sociocultural and geopolitical tensions surrounding education.

Transitioning to an OOEC indicator addresses the limitations of the OOSC indicator by redefining education as an activity rather than solely as attendance in formal schooling. This shift in the indicator, while it may seem small, is significant because, as the saying goes, "What gets measured gets managed" (Burekli, 2019).

---

[1] The OOSC indicator is designed to be a measurable variable that provides information about the scale, characteristics, and factors related to school-aged children (ages 6-17) not attending formal schools. Its purpose is to monitor the progress of children's enrollment in schools and inform policy and educational programming to reduce educational exclusion (UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

If we only measure school attendance, we will focus solely on that one institution and overlook the multiple pathways and educational actors that could collaborate to tackle the challenge of educational exclusion in each local context.

Unless we evolve our perspective from an institutional lens to one that sees education as an interconnected ecosystem with multiple complementary pathways, we will be unable to meet the diverse needs of learners and prepare them for the growing global challenges. Additionally, we will continue to fall short of responding to the call to transform our education systems (United Nations, 2023). This transformation requires rethinking how we define the purposes, places, and avenues of education and how we measure education exclusion.

As the world faces more complex and interconnected challenges, there are increasing calls to reimagine education to address these challenges. As an educational community – policymakers, educators, and researchers - we must reevaluate how we understand educational access and consider cultural differences in educational pathways, the need to master specific competencies that are both locally and globally relevant for students and the growing importance of virtual learning environments, including those powered by artificial intelligence (Kearney et al., 2019b; Kearney et al., 2022; Winthrop & Sengeh, 2022).

The OOSC relies on a single unidimensional data source and neglects alternative pathways and contextual factors that shape access to education and the broader learning landscape. Simplistic quantitative metrics, such as the OOSC indicator, may seem attractive due to their perceived ease of data collection and interpretation. However, they do not capture the complexity of education exclusion that can inform meaningful system redesign, reform, and transformation.

This shift from OOSC to OOEC offers three key advantages. First, it broadens our perspective on addressing the educational challenges of a complex, interconnected world. Second, it fosters transformation by focusing on sustainable, culturally relevant solutions that tackle the root causes of exclusion. Finally, it encour-

ages us to reimagine education as an interconnected ecosystem composed of multiple pathways and actors who can collaborate to prepare students better to thrive as individuals, contribute to their society, and support their families and communities. This shift can catalyze local and global discussions on the purposes and pathways of meaningful education and refocus education on what truly matters to children, their families, and communities. Collaborative research, like the initiative that the SPARKS project at the Brookings Institution is leading, can play a crucial role in driving these discussions.

The current out-of-school indicator is inadequate at capturing all educational pathways

Over the past decade, the number of out-of-school children worldwide has risen by 7 million, reaching 251 million children not attending school. The Taliban's ban on secondary education for girls in Afghanistan has played a significant role in this rise in recent years (UNESCO, 2023). The proportion of out-of-school children is particularly high in developing nations, where systemic factors like poverty, insecurity, gender disparities, nomadic lifestyles, disabilities, and weak institutions significantly impede school attendance (Aluko et al., 2022; Inui, 2020; Latchem, 2018; Ndanusa et al., 2021; Olaniyi, 2019;). Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest concentration of out-of-school children, with nearly 30% not attending school, followed by Central and Southern Asia with 20% (Olaniyi, 2019; UNESCO, 2023). These figures, while alarming, likely underestimate the scale of the problem. Calculations of OOSC often fail to account for the most marginalized groups, such as displaced populations and children in pastoralist or agricultural settings. Additionally, it is difficult to get accurate data on the population of school-aged children in many places, especially in fragile and conflict-affected nations. Usually, the data underestimates

the number of children left out of school (numerator) and the total school-age population (denominator), making it difficult to understand the true extent of education exclusion as measured by the OOSC indicator (Carr-Hill, 2012; Cochrane & Vercillo, 2019).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the out-of-school challenges and disrupted school attendance for over 1.7 billion students worldwide, further widening existing disparities and underscoring the urgent need for global strategies to withstand system shocks (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Campbell et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021).

THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN INDICATOR NEEDS TO EVOLVE

The official definition of out-of-school children, adopted by UNESCO in 2011, states that "children out of school are the percentage of school-age children who are not enrolled in primary or secondary school" (UNESCO, 2011; World Bank, 2024). The purpose of the OOSC indicator is to track access to formal schooling and identify gaps in enrollment, particularly in developing nations. The indicator became a tool to monitor progress towards universal primary education as part of the global efforts to achieve the Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Understanding the nuances of why children are excluded from school in Afghanistan—a location where education and schooling encounter systemic barriers and are a contested terrain and source of conflict—highlights the shortcomings of the OOSC indicator globally. While school enrollment has increased significantly in Afghanistan over the past two decades, millions of children remain excluded from attending schools due to systemic issues such as inadequate instructional quality, a growing divide between madrasa and formal school graduates, and a lack of alignment between schooling and the sociocultural realities many children encounter (Burde, 2014; Intili et al., 2006; Qargha et al., 2016).

The narrow focus on school enrollment overlooks alternative pathways and spaces essential for many children. For instance, in 2023, UNICEF reported a 30% increase in CBE classes across 31 provinces in Afghanistan, with 60% of participants being girls (SIGAR, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Similarly, madrasa enrollments have recently increased (CIR, 2023; Sirat, 1969; Wahaj, 2024). Additionally, there has been a notable shift from traditional classrooms to online learning and other media-based education, such as television and radio (Dastgeer & Obaidi, 2025). Despite their significance, these pathways continue to be overlooked under the OOSC indicator, reinforcing a narrow perspective on education that excludes informal and non-formal systems.

Additionally, a child being enrolled in school does not necessarily mean they are attending and learning. A growing body of literature emphasizes how chronic absenteeism is linked to negative consequences for learning (Kearney et al., 2019a). Various reasons exist for students being counted as enrolled while still absent from school, including a lack of systems to capture attendance, health and safety issues, school climate concerns, administrative errors, and data misreporting (Patnode et al., 2018).

In Afghanistan, as in many other parts of the world, the reported number of students and schools is contested. Some students on the registers have been chronically absent for up to three years. Students in Afghanistan are absent for long periods due to insecurity as well as social, cultural, and financial problems. The lack of female teachers, forced marriages, long distances to schools, and community attitudes impact girls' attendance and contribute to their absenteeism. Reports estimate that almost 20% of all students and 22% of female students are absent for most or all of the year (Totakhail, 2014). Additionally, ghost schools and ghost students—students and schools that were reported but could not be found—present significant challenges in Afghanistan. (Khan 2015, Qargha et al., 2017).

Globally, there are growing calls to reassess what enrollment, absenteeism, and education exclusion signify in a rapidly evolving world. Demographic changes, climate issues, social justice and equity concerns, and technological advancements are compelling education actors to rethink inclusion and exclusion in education.

There are demands for a shift toward more competency-based education frameworks that emphasize mastery of knowledge, skills, and attitudes instead of merely focusing on traditional classroom attendance and school enrollment (Kearney et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2019b).

A shift to the OOEC indicator is urgently needed. Unlike OOSC, OOEC can capture all forms of learning—formal, informal, and non-formal—thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of educational access and attainment. This shift acknowledges the complexity of education systems in contexts like Afghanistan, where education has historically been contested, reflecting struggles over ideological control, national identity, and equity. The following section highlights some of these challenges.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF AFGHANISTAN'S EDUCATION LANDSCAPE HIGHLIGHT THE LIMITATIONS OF THE OOSC INDICATOR

Education systems globally, including in Afghanistan, are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including societal context, geography, culture, values, and economic activities. Indicators like OOSC often oversimplify these diverse educational landscapes, reducing them to a single, reductionist measure of children reported in schools. A more comprehensive approach would capture learning outcomes across formal education systems, alternative pathways, and the informal learning experiences of out-of-school children, who often gain essential life skills through apprenticeships, daily work, and other non-formal avenues.

Afghanistan is a mountainous country that has been historically difficult to govern. It is home to diverse groups of people who speak approximately fifty languages. Accurate demographic data does not exist for Afghanistan; the last census was conducted in 1979. Since then, estimates have been pieced together to generate population data (Pinney, 2012). In 2020, the Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook estimated a population of 32.9 million, with 65% under the age of 25. Approximately 71% of the population resides in rural areas, 24% in urban areas, and 5% lead a nomadic lifestyle (Central Statistics Organization, 1996, 2016, 2018; NSIA, 2021).

War, instability, and reliance on foreign aid have shaped the population's experiences and made Afghanistan among the most fragile states in the world (Fontdevila et al., 2017; Goodson, 2011). Over the years, Afghan people have endured conflicts with the British, Soviets, and the United States while internally grappling with political instability and violent power transitions (Lee, 2018; Library of Congress, 2008).

Afghanistan's education system reflects these broader struggles, with its development shaped and often disrupted by these conflicts and the ideological contestations they brought. While traditional education systems like masjid teaching programs and madrasas have deep historical roots in Afghanistan, formal schooling only emerged in the late 19th century (Makdisi, 1981; Mirbabaev et al., 2000). The siloed existence of the madrasa system and modern schools has fueled divisions, with each system serving different demographics and competing for ideological legitimacy (Burde, 2014; Saavedra et al., 2022; Sirat, 1969).

SCHOOLING IS AN IMPORTANT, BUT NOT THE ONLY, PLACE FOR EDUCATION

The history of Afghanistan's conflict over multiple education systems offers important insights into the development and complexities of learning opportunities in countries where education has traditionally been a contentious issue. Each phase of the country's educational evolution, influenced by political, cultural, and societal changes, has affected access to schooling, the content being taught, and how alternative pathways serve as both sites of opportunity and conflict. Understanding these historical factors is essential for assessing the needs of Afghanistan's diverse educational goals and the reasons behind educational exclusion. Simplistic indicators like OOSC do not effectively inform education reform and transformation, as they neglect the complexities of access, curriculum, and equity. Tackling Afghanistan's educational challenges requires a deeper examination of how policies, funding distribution, and curricular priorities align with the country's developmental needs, whether in fostering

workforce skills, civic engagement, or cultural preservation.

Modern schooling in Afghanistan emerged in the late 19th century, starting with the exclusive Military and Royal Schools for the elite. After gaining independence in 1919, King Amanullah aimed to broaden access to schooling as part of his modernization efforts. He established primary schools across the country and opened four secondary schools in Kabul. The royal treasury financed the creation of these modern schools with technical support from Turkey and India. Records indicate that between 26,000 and 51,000 boys and 300 to 800 girls were enrolled in 322 primary and four secondary schools (Baiza, 2013).

Resistance to King Amanullah's modernization agenda, which included expanding schooling as a key component, was led by madrasa graduates and backed by a significant portion of the population, resulting in his overthrow in 1929. The opposition viewed schooling as a colonial instrument that threatened Islamic identity and Afghan culture (Baiza, 2013; Lee, 2018; Samady, 2001; Wyatt & Gulzari, 2021). During King Zahir Shah's reign (1933–1979), access to schooling expanded more cautiously to better align with modern, Islamic, and cultural values. By the late 1970s, 650,000 students were enrolled in 1,200 primary and 542 secondary schools, with girls accounting for 10% of the total enrollment (Baiza, 2013; Karlsson & Mansory, 2004; Samady, 2001).

The Soviet invasion in 1979 heightened the role of schooling as a battleground for ideological influence. The Soviet-backed government used schooling to disseminate communist ideology. While enrollments in primary and secondary schools reached 1.2 million by 1989, access to schools in rural areas declined as the conflict intensified. During this period, alternative education systems such as CBE, accelerated learning programs, and refugee-run schools emerged for Afghans in Pakistan and Iran. These alternative pathways integrated Afghanistan's 1960s curriculum with additional religious subjects and teachings focused on resistance against the Soviet army and the communist government in Kabul (Baiza, 2013; Nijssen, 2010; Samady, 2001).

The Mujahideen[2] and the first Taliban regimes sought to reshape Afghanistan's education system to align with their ideological priorities, primarily through changes to the curriculum. Based on the 1960s framework, the Mujahideen-era curriculum was adapted to foster ideological resistance against the Soviets by focusing on Islamic values, Afghan nationalism, and a strong emphasis on armed resistance. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supported the curriculum developed by the University of Nebraska-Omaha. The Taliban maintained the Mujahideen-era curriculum but added more elements from the madrasa system (Burde, 2014; Karlsson & Mansory, 2004; Samady, 2001).

Between 1992 and 1996, the civil war devastated the education infrastructure, leaving 60% of schools in Kabul and 70% in rural areas damaged or destroyed. Despite reports of one million students, actual schooling was minimal (Baiza, 2013; Samady, 2001). During the Taliban's first rule (1996–2001), between 500,000 and 900,000 students—mostly boys—attended formal schools, while NGOs played a vital role in offering CBE to girls as an alternative pathway to education (Povey, 2003).

Following the U.S.-led invasion in 2002, Afghanistan saw an exponential increase in primary and secondary school enrollment. School enrollment rose from approximately 500,000 in 2000 to an estimated 10 million in 2021, with girls making up about 39% of the student body. By 2021, the country had approximately 16,000 to 18,000 schools (Educational Management Information System, 2021; Pouras Consult Aps, 2016; UNICEF, 2022). During this period, schooling was utilized to promote "democratic" ideologies and as a tool for counterinsurgency efforts (Qargha, 2022). However, despite these gains, there were systemic challenges such as political instability, resource shortages, issues with quality, and persistent inequalities that kept many students out of schools (Lumley et al., 2015; Qargha et al., 2016; World Bank, 2017, 2018).

---

2   Literally "Mujahideen" means those who struggle [for justice, right conduct, in the path of God]. The term is usually used in English to reference the resistance groups that fought against the USSR invasion.

There is no accurate data on the number of students who attended masjid programs or madrasas during these phases, partly because these institutions were not registered with the central government. As a result, the OOSC data does not capture these students.

Since the introduction of modern schooling in 1919, education as an institution has been a contested terrain in Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan's experience is not unique. Many countries around the world have faced similar situations where education has served as an ideological divide and where multiple pathways to education are not captured in the OOSC data. In many areas, access to education faces supply-side challenges, such as a lack of schools and resources, and demand-side challenges, like sociocultural and geopolitical dynamics that have turned schools, madrasas, and CBE programs into ideological battlegrounds. The following section discusses four specific factors that contribute to children not being enrolled in schools in Afghanistan to illustrate further how the OOSC indicator needs to evolve into the OOEC indicator.

Children remain out of school for many reasons[3]

Addressing the issue of out-of-school children in Afghanistan, as in other countries, requires more than simply counting the number of children on school rosters. It requires understanding the underlying barriers that prevent children from accessing formal schooling and considering how to leverage the educational opportunities within the entire ecosystem to make education accessible for all children. While the OOSC indicator highlights enrollment gaps, it fails to reveal the systemic inequities that determine who can attend school and under what conditions. Understanding these barriers in Afghanistan not only sheds light on the country's challenges but also offers insights into

similar contexts worldwide. Transitioning from an out-of-school to an out-of-education indicator for children is the first step toward designing policies, allocating resources, and building an educational ecosystem that offers multiple flexible learning pathways, all of which are credentialed and work together in a complementary way to meet the educational needs of everyone in the country.

Despite significant progress in school enrollment between 2002 and 2021, millions of Afghan children remained excluded from formal schooling systems. By 2016, an estimated 3.5 million children—30% of the school-age population—were not enrolled in schools. At the primary level, 20% of boys and 47% of girls were out of school, a disparity that widened at the secondary level to 55% of boys and 75% of girls (GPE, 2018). Before the Taliban's return in 2021, 61% of school-age girls were already not attending school (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2014; World Bank & UNESCO, 2016).

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 drastically worsened the situation. Their ban on secondary education for girls left 80% of school-aged girls out of school, affecting approximately 1.4 million students (Essar, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). However, these statistics fail to capture the broader educational landscape and the role of alternative pathways in education opportunity and exclusion.

Table 1 lists some significant systematic barriers that have kept millions of children from attending school (Mansory, 2023; UNICEF, 2018).

The prevalence of out-of-school children in Afghanistan reflects the country's complex interplay of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural challenges (Burde, 2014; Khwajamir, 2016). For many children, the reasons for non-enrollment in formal schools go beyond government policies and encompass cultural dynamics, economic constraints, persistent inequalities, and limited infrastructure (Guimbert et al., 2008). These challenges are exacerbated by multidimensional poverty and conflict, which disproportionately affect young children, those in rural areas, girls, and children

---

3 This section is adapted from Mansory's 2023 study on out-of-school children in Afghanistan.

TABLE 1

Some systematic factors prevent children from attending school in Afghanistan

Group	Contributing Factors
Geographic disparity	Insecurity, lack of services
Pastoralist nomad population	Nomadic lifestyle
Seasonal and migrant workers	Semi-nomadic lifestyle
Non-pastoralist nomads	Semi-nomadic lifestyle
Children with disabilities	Lack of accessible schools
Child laborers	Poverty, need to work

SOURCE: Mansory, 2023; UNICEF, 2018

with disabilities (Essar et al., 2022; Intili et al., 2006; Trani et al., 2013).

Understanding the prevalence of out-of-school children requires a deeper examination of the multidimensional factors driving exclusion. The following section explores four specific factors—geographic disparities, nomadic lifestyles, child labor, and disabilities—to highlight the structural inequities and systemic barriers that make OOSC an insufficient indicator of children's access to education.

ACCESSING SCHOOLS IS MORE CHALLENGING FOR CHILDREN IN CERTAIN GEOGRAPHIES

Geographic disparities are a significant barrier to school enrollment in Afghanistan, where both supply and demand-side factors contribute to high rates of out-of-school children. On the supply side, limited transportation, insufficient local schools, and unequal resource distribution, shaped by conflict and geopolitical dynamics, leave many rural children without access to formal schooling.

On the demand side, politicization has eroded trust in schooling as an institution, with a significant portion of the population perceiving schools as tools of foreign influence. Additionally, in rural provinces, the perceived utility of formal schooling often differs from that in more urban and developed contexts. These demand factors are not always true in less economically developed and rural areas. In these contexts, alternative education pathways align more closely with the contextual realities. Recognizing the role of these pathways in addressing educational gaps can help create a more inclusive and equitable education system that meets the diverse needs of all learners.

Geographic disparities represent one of Afghanistan's most significant barriers to school enrollment and intersect with the other three dimensions in this section. Research on education access in Afghanistan, like studies from Nepal (Shaym, 2007), England (Odell, 2017), and Tajikistan (Whitsel, 2014), highlights how the distance from home to school affects enrollment, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Burde & Linden, 2009). For children in remote villages and mountainous regions, the absence of infrastructure, such as public transportation, makes reaching schools particularly challenging.

Before the 1979 Soviet invasion, the Afghan government sought to tackle educational disparities in rural areas through a hub-and-spoke model, a precursor to CBE programs. Central schools functioned as hubs for smaller village schools. Although resources were distributed unevenly, the centralized system managed by the Ministry of Education aimed to reach all localities. However, after 1979, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged as the primary education providers in rural areas. NGOs operated independently without a

coordinating central authority and focused on specific regions based on security, access, organizational priorities, and political factors. This fragmentation exacerbated the uneven distribution of CBE programs and heightened existing disparities between rural and urban areas (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007).

Over the past four decades, continuous conflict has worsened educational exclusion. Several provinces (Badghis, Ghor, Helmand, Zabul, Urozgan, Farah, Kandahar, and Paktika) have stark disparities in school enrollment and completion rates (see Figure 1). For example, while the national average for school attendance and completion was around 30%, these provinces consistently report rates below 15% (Central Statistics Organization, 2016; Mansory, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2020; UNICEF, 2018).

Additionally, geopolitical dynamics have significantly influenced the unequal distribution of resources in Afghanistan, often reflecting internal power dynamics and international interests (Cochrane & Rao, 2019; Steinberg, 1997). Regions aligned with dominant political factions or geopolitical priorities received disproportionate development aid (Erfan, 2021; Mohapatra, 2020). Foreign military forces used educational

projects to support counterinsurgency strategies. The unequal distribution of resources fostered community resentment toward the government, and linking schooling with counterinsurgency reinforced perceptions of schooling as a means of foreign imposition and further marginalized specific population groups (Bazia, 2013; Burde, 2014; Mansory, 2012; Qargha, 2022).

NOMADIC CHILDREN HAVE AN ESPECIALLY HARD TIME ATTENDING SCHOOL

Nomadic children encounter unique barriers to accessing schools, including their mobile lifestyle, poverty, and family work obligations. These challenges are compounded by the rigidity of the formal schooling system (McLachlan, 2007). The OOSC indicator overlooks the complexity of these challenges and neglects the role of alternative pathways that offer valuable opportunities for nomadic communities.

Estimating Afghanistan's nomadic population is difficult due to limited data, but some estimates place the number between 1.5 and 2.5 million (Central Statistics Organization, 1996; De Wejjer, 2007; Dupree, 1979).

Average attendance and completion rates (percentage) by province
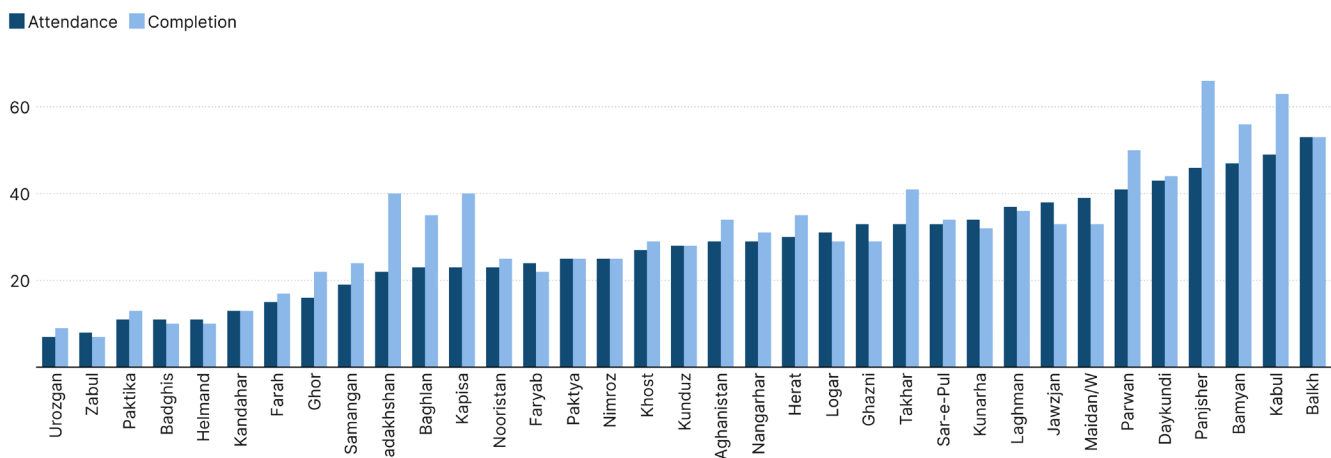
SOURCE: Central Statistics Organization, 2016; Mansory, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2020; UNICEF, 2018

Traditionally, the pastoralist Kuchis, who are livestock herders, migrate up to 500 kilometers each year (Institute for State Effectiveness, 2020) and are among the most excluded populations from schooling. Of the 600,000 school-age Kuchi children, only about 7% are enrolled in primary school, and roughly 2% in secondary school. Non-pastoralist nomads involved in temporary occupations such as vending, entertainment, and craftsmanship are another group that struggles to send their children to school. It is estimated that 50,000 kids from these communities are considered out of school. ("Jogi and Chori," 2017).

Seasonal migrants represent another category of nomadic populations. These landless families move between regions out of economic necessity, often settling temporarily in makeshift housing or tents on the outskirts of urban areas. Their frequent relocations during the school year prevent their children from consistently attending school, and the education system is ill-equipped to accommodate their mobility. No reliable data exists on the number of out-of-school children from this group, but estimates based on anecdotal evidence suggest that the numbers exceed 250,000 children.

While programs tailored for nomadic lifestyles—such as Pastoralist Field Schools and mobile education technologies like radio—have shown potential (Aderinoye et al., 2007; Dyer, 2016), their impact remains limited due to the absence of mechanisms to effectively capture and integrate these alternative pathways into the broader education system (Dyer, 2018; Ngugi, 2016). A transition to the OOEC indicator will help legitimize these alternative pathways.

SOME CHILDREN HAVE TO WORK

Afghanistan's long-standing poverty, characterized by 36% of the population living in extreme poverty in 1990 and two-thirds of households facing food shortages in recent years has forced many children to enter the labor force to support their families (Arguelles, 2019; World Bank, 2022). Factors such as parental education, household income, and family dependency ratios further impact the prevalence of child labor (Lutf et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the

situation, placing additional pressure on young earners to make up for family income losses (Yosufi & Kaur, 2021). Children work as street vendors, water carriers, recyclers, shoe shiners, shop assistants, or porters in urban areas in bazaars. In rural regions, girls perform household chores while boys tend to livestock, gather firewood, or engage in other outdoor tasks (Mansory, 2022; Ministry of Education, UNICEF, 2018).

In 2018, approximately one million Afghan children under 18 were engaged in child labor, with some starting as young as seven. Half of these children had never attended school, while the other half faced high dropout rates due to work demands (Global Initiative, 2018; Nassiry & Samim, 2020). Although many express a desire to attend school, the opportunity costs and inflexibility of formal schooling make it difficult for them to do so (Catani et al., 2009; Kofol & Ciarli, 2017). Factors such as gender norms, community dynamics, and the distance to schools further exacerbate these challenges, disproportionately impacting enrollment and learning outcomes for children who are compelled to work (Burde, 2009; Guimbert et al., 2008; Nabavi et al., 2021).

The relationship between child labor and school attendance is complex, as many children balance work and schooling (Orazem & Gunnarsson, 2004). Some children learn on the job, and many pursue alternative educational pathways like madrasas, community-based education programs, and online classes. The OOSC indicator fails to capture this complexity, disregarding how alternative education options can accommodate the realities of child labor. Recognizing and supporting these alternative pathways is essential for reducing exclusion, and ensuring meaningful learning opportunities for all children. A shift to the out-of-education indicator can pave the way to legitimizing these alternative pathways to make education more inclusive.

SCHOOLS ARE NOT EQUIPPED TO ACCOMMODATE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Children with disabilities encounter significant obstacles to accessing education, as schools frequently lack the physical infrastructure, trained staff, and

adaptive learning materials to support these students. Estimates indicate that over half a million children in the country have moderate to severe disabilities, and roughly 75% of these children—approximately 375,000—have never attended school (Asia Foundation, 2020; Grimes et al., 2021; Central Statistics Organization, 2018).

While some children with physical disabilities do manage to attend school, those with visual or hearing impairments, as well as severe learning disabilities, are far less likely to access formal education. Many of the students with disabilities who are able to access formal education experience poor learning outcomes, high dropout rates, and limited personal and academic growth opportunities because the rigid structure, bureaucratic procedures, and lack of resources within the formal schooling system make it ill-equipped to serve children with disabilities.

It is clear that children from all four highlighted groups—those in rural areas, nomads, child laborers, and children with disabilities—face significant systemic, cultural, and access challenges in attending formal schools. There is a pressing need to think about education access and inclusion beyond the traditional formal schooling model. To meet the needs of all children, we must work towards legitimizing multiple educational pathways.

Switching to the OOEC indicator is a first step toward transforming education systems

The multifaceted challenges contributing to Afghanistan's out-of-school children crisis highlight the critical shortcomings of the OOSC indicator, not only for Afghanistan but globally. The OOSC indicator privileges formal schooling as the only legitimate educational pathway, implicitly undermines alternative systems,

and overlooks the broader geopolitical, cultural, and social realities that drive educational exclusion. In communities where formal schooling is perceived as a tool of foreign influence or cultural imposition, such biases aggravate long-standing sociocultural and geopolitical tensions surrounding education. Transitioning to an OOEC indicator addresses the above limitations by redefining education as an activity rather than as an institution. More specifically, the OOEC indicator tackles these challenges in three specific ways.

THE OOEC INDICATOR BROADENS OUR LENS TO MEET THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF A COMPLEX WORLD

The OOEC indicator broadens our understanding of educational inclusion and exclusion to include non-formal and informal pathways, legitimizing these as essential components of a more extensive learning ecosystem. This inclusive perspective better reflects the realities of marginalized groups and provides policymakers with insights to balance and optimize the roles of each pathway within the education ecosystem.

Part of the value of the OOEC indicator lies in helping education actors understand the unique contributions each pathway makes to a child's development and the opportunities they provide for expanding education access. These systems, often rooted in a country's historical and cultural context, have evolved to meet local needs, though not uniformly. Therefore, the OOEC indicator must be designed to both integrate locally rooted learning pathways and capture the richness of these contributions while also helping these systems adapt and evolve to help prepare children for the complexities of a rapidly changing future. If done correctly, the OOEC indicator can formalize alternative educational pathways and catalyze change in those systems to make them more inclusive and responsive to local and global challenges.

By broadening the lens to encompass multiple educational pathways, the OOEC indicator also addresses the ideological conflicts that arise when one system, such as formal schooling, is privileged over others. By capturing these diverse educational experiences and promoting inclusivity, the indicator fosters greater

social cohesion and reduces conflicts stemming from inequities in educational legitimacy.

THE OOEC INDICATOR IS A TOOL FOR CATALYZING EDUCATION SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

The OOEC indicator provides a more comprehensive understanding of structural inequities and systemic barriers that hinder access to education. By viewing education as an interconnected ecosystem, the OOEC indicator acknowledges the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that contribute to exclusion. The OOEC indicator expands the scope of what is measured and valued, allowing education systems to embrace diverse pathways while aligning with global goals.

Adopting the OOEC indicator is an important step towards addressing the United Nations' call to transform education systems in order to achieve SDG 4. Systems inherently evolve when what we measure changes. By focusing solely on formal school enrollment, the OOSC indicator perpetuates the status quo and restricts our ability to envision new possibilities. The OOEC indicator empowers systems to transcend outdated paradigms, recognizing education as a dynamic and inclusive process that can adapt to meet the diverse needs of learners in an increasingly complex world. By changing what we measure, we unlock the potential for systemic change that values all learners and all pathways to education.

Collaborative research approaches, such as those used by the SPARKS Project at Brookings Institution, can inform the design of systems that respect cultural contexts while preparing learners to navigate global challenges.

THE OOEC INDICATOR HELPS US MOVE TOWARDS REIMAGINING EDUCATION AS AN ECOSYSTEM

Adopting the OOEC indicator paves the way for education to be viewed as an ecosystem rather than as a singular institution. Education happens in many places and forms—formal schools, community-based pro-

grams, madrasas, online platforms, and more.

The rate and speed of technological, social, and economic transformations require a connected yet resilient education system that does not rely solely on a single institution and its bureaucratic limitations. By integrating technological innovations—such as AI-powered adaptive learning platforms and mobile education solutions—the OOEC framework creates flexible pathways that adjust to learners' evolving needs. These innovations, along with recognizing and legitimizing alternative systems, promote resilience, inclusivity, and adaptability in education ecosystems.

By adopting the OOEC indicator, policymakers gain the tools necessary to address the realities faced by marginalized populations, build resilient and inclusive ecosystems, and ensure that no learner is left behind. The OOEC indicator not only aligns with the promise of SDG 4 but also positions education systems to thrive in a rapidly changing world, providing learners with the skills and opportunities they need to navigate the complexities of the future.

CHANGING TO THE OOEC INDICATOR WILL REQUIRE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES IN MEASURING, VALUING, AND CREDENTIALING EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Transitioning from the OOSC to the OOEC indicator represents a transformative step toward creating inclusive, adaptive, and resilient education systems. However, implementing this change comes with challenges. Overcoming these challenges will require sustained commitment, innovation, and collaboration among all actors. To achieve this, we need to change some of the fundamental ways that we design and manage our educational systems. Below are some illustrative examples of critical areas that need to change with the shift to the OOEC indicator.

Data systems need to capture all educational pathways. A critical barrier to adopting the OOEC indicator is the lack of robust mechanisms to collect and report on diverse educational experiences across formal, informal, non-formal, and technology-driven systems. Current data systems, represented by the

various education management information systems, are designed primarily to track formal school enrollment and often fail to capture the richness and variety of alternative education pathways. To fully realize the potential of the OOEC indicator, it is essential to develop data collection tools and processes that reflect the complexity of education as an ecosystem.

Data systems must be designed to capture key aspects of each educational pathway, such as the activities learners participate in, the time spent on various interactions or learning pursuits, and the overall curriculum objectives within that pathway. Additionally, these systems should incorporate observations of the competencies required of educators, mentors, aides, and school directors to facilitate learning within diverse pathways effectively. For example, in a CBE program, data might include the frequency and duration of teacher-student interactions, incorporating life skills or vocational training into the curriculum, and aligning learning objectives with broader developmental goals, such as health or livelihoods. In madrasa programs, the data might also include the range of subjects in the curriculum, the number of female teachers and students, and the type of facilities available. Similarly, for technology-driven systems, data could track student engagement in online modules, the types of digital tools utilized, and the adaptability of content to meet diverse learning needs. By capturing learner experiences and the competencies of those facilitating these pathways, data systems can provide a holistic view of education ecosystems, supporting more informed and targeted policymaking.

By integrating these dimensions into data systems, policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of how various pathways support children's intellectual, technical, moral, and personal development. This, in turn, facilitates the design of interventions that embrace the diversity of learning experiences and leverage their strengths to create an inclusive and equitable education ecosystem. Capturing and analyzing such data will be critical to ensuring that education systems evolve to meet the needs of all learners while addressing both local circumstances and global trends.

Our credentialing systems need to evolve with the shift to OOEC. Even with improved data collection, there must be systems to validate and credential diverse learning experiences. These systems should assess and find ways to compare the value of non-formal and informal education, ensuring that such pathways are legitimate and comparable to formal schooling. Without this, alternative systems will remain undervalued and excluded from broader educational planning. The shift in credentialing systems will also mean that higher education and job pathways must trust that the alternative pathways are preparing students to meet their demands.

The primary purpose of a revised credentialing system should be to serve as a tool for ensuring the quality of learning experiences across various pathways within the education ecosystem. A robust, flexible, and well-thought-out credentialing system will enable policymakers, parents, students, employers, and education providers to understand what is expected from each educational pathway, ensuring that students receive inclusive, equitable, and quality education. A comprehensive credentialing system built around the OOEC indicator should guarantee the quality of educational experiences in the following ways (Kissam & Qargha, 2007):

- Creating a shared understanding of what education pathways need to achieve in order to support the desired outcomes from education in each country context.

- Explaining the types of support that educational institutions require, including with their curriculum, pedagogy, teacher preparation, and resource distribution, to achieve the necessary outcomes across various educational pathways for all learners.

- To assist policymakers, communities, families, students, higher education institutions, and employers in evaluating whether a specific educational pathway is meeting expectations.

- To guide and support ongoing efforts to transform education, including resource allocation, formal training, peer support, and adequate supervision of education provision.

There needs to be more collaboration among all education actors. Integrating various education systems requires active collaboration among policymakers, educators, technology providers, higher education institutions, business leaders, and the wider community. Education is a societal endeavor, and everyone needs to be included in the conversation. Resistance to change, entrenched institutional practices, and existing digital divides—especially in low-resource settings like Afghanistan—can hinder this process. Building trust, fostering partnerships, creating spaces for dialogue, and aligning goals among all actors will be crucial to navigating these challenges and ensuring effective implementation.

Collaborative research approaches can play a critical role in achieving mutual understanding about how to incorporate various educational pathways within a single ecosystem. This approach involves intentionally bringing together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, employers, and other educational actors with different expertise to explore how the various educational pathways can come together in a complementary manner to meet the educational goals in each context. For a more comprehensive discussion on how this strategy can enhance collaboration among all education stakeholders, please refer to "Linking Research to Policy to Practice: Collaborative Research for Evidence-Informed Policymaking in Education."

Educational resources need to be allocated differently. Adopting the OOEC indicator requires significant financial and technical investments. Resources must be allocated equitably to ensure that changes benefit all learners and all pathways, including those in underserved and marginalized communities. Strategic prioritization of resources and sustained international support will be essential for scaling and sustaining this effort.

Part of the OOEC data collection must focus on the cost of educational delivery across the multiple educational pathways within the overall ecosystem and the allocation of resources to the various pathways. However, obtaining accurate cost data is challenging for a single institution, let alone multiple institutions within the ecosystem. These challenges include difficulties in obtaining sufficient cost data for educational services; the method of calculating this data is complex, and tools for capturing it are often lacking. Moreover, it generally is not a top priority for governments, and there tends to be an aversion to cost and resource allocation transparency for political and competitive reasons.

Tools like the Brookings Childhood Cost Calculator can help alleviate some of these issues. Additionally, resource allocation can be prioritized as a key indicator regarding how much funding flows from the government and donor-funded projects into the different pathways, as well as the cost per student for providing education within each pathway. The distribution of resources can be incorporated into data systems, reporting mechanisms, credentialing, and the collaborative spaces necessary for all educational actors to transition from OOSC to OOEC possible.

Conclusion

The examination of various factors contributing to educational exclusion in Afghanistan highlights the limitations of the out-of-school children (OOSC) indicator. While these limitations are illustrated through the example of Afghanistan, the challenges presented are relevant globally. The OOSC indicator focuses on a single institution and does not capture the complexity of educational exclusion. It overlooks the opportunities that alternative pathways offer for educational inclusion, and it fails to promote educational transformation since it does not act as a catalyst to reimagine education as an activity that occurs within an ecosystem. We need an indicator that acknowledges the complexity and multi-dimensionality of educational inclusion and exclusion.

Transitioning to the out-of-education children (OOEC) indicator is a crucial first step and catalyst for transforming our education systems to ensure inclusive, equitable, high-quality education for all children. The OOEC indicator has significant potential to reshape education systems and create inclusive ecosystems. It provides a mechanism to capture a more diverse and richer data set that can be utilized to address systemic

barriers, recognize diverse educational pathways, and equip learners for success in an ever-changing and complex world.

Policymakers, educators, and other education actors must view this transition not merely as a technical adjustment but as a fundamental reimagining of education. This shift is essential for realizing the promise of SDG 4 and ensuring that no learner is left behind.

End notes

ACAPS. (2023). Afghanistan: Analysis of localization challenges. ReliefWeb. https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/acaps-thematic-report-afghanistan-analysis-localisation-challenges-7-february-2023

Aderinoye, R. A., Ojokheta, K. O., & Olojede, A. A. (2007). Integrating mobile learning into nomadic education programme in Nigeria: Issues and perspectives. International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 8(2), 1–17.

Aluko, F. R., Omidire, M. F., & Mampane, M. R. (2022). Reconceptualising education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Realising equity and social justice. African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning, 6(2), 79–95.

Asia Foundation. (2020). Model disability survey of Afghanistan. USAID. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z3TKR.pdf

Baiza, Y. (2013). Education in Afghanistan: Developments, influences, and legacies since 1901. Routledge.

Buerkli, D. (2019, April 8). "What gets measured gets managed" — It's wrong and Drucker never said it. Medium. https://medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/what-gets-measured-gets-managed-its-wrong-and-drucker-never-said-it-fe95886d3df6

Burde, D. (2014). Schools for conflict or for peace in Afghanistan. Columbia University Press.

Burde, D., & Linden, L. L. (2009). The effect of proximity on school enrollment: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial in Afghanistan. IZA and BREAD.

Campbell, K., Weingart, R., Ashta, J., Cronin, T., & Gazmararian, J. (2021). COVID-19 knowledge and behavior change among high school students in semi-rural Georgia. Journal of School Health, 91(7), 526–534.

Carr-Hill, R. (2012). Finding and then counting out-of-school children. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 42(2), 187–212.

Catani, C., Schauer, E., Elbert, T., Missmahl, I., Bette, J. P., & Neuner, F. (2009). War trauma, child labor, and family violence: Life adversities and PTSD in a sample of school children in Kabul. Journal of Traumatic Stress: Official Publication of The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, 22(3), 163–171.

Central Intelligence Agency. (2019). The CIA World Factbook: Afghanistan. CIA. https://www.cia.gov

Central Statistics Organization. (1996). Afghanistan living conditions survey. Kabul, Afghanistan.

Central Statistics Organization. (2016). Afghanistan living conditions survey 2013–2014: National risk and vulnerability assessment. Kabul, Afghanistan.

Central Statistics Organization. (2018). Afghanistan living conditions survey 2016–2017. Kabul, Afghanistan.

Chiaha, G. T. U., & Nane-Ejeh, S. O. (2014). Quality assurance indicators for school transformation: A paradigm shift. International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences, 42, 72–81.

Center for Information Resilience. (2023). Afghanistan's madrasa system under the Taliban. https://www.info-res.org/afghan-witness/articles/afghanistans-madrasa-system-under-the-taliban/

Cochrane, L., & Rao, N. (2019). Is the push for gender-sensitive research advancing the SDG agenda of leaving no one behind? Forum for Development Studies, 46(1), 45–65.

Cochrane, L., & Vercillo, S. (2019). Youth perspectives: Migration, poverty, and the future of farming in rural Ethiopia. In Global youth migration and gendered modalities (pp. 277–296). Policy Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1992). Educational indicators and enlightened policy. Educational Policy, 6(3), 235–265.

Dastgeer, S., & Obaidi, H. (2025). Evolution of Media Education in Afghanistan: Before, during, and after the Covid-19 Pandemic. In Digital Inequalities in Media Education in South Asia (pp. 97-115). Routledge.

De Weijer, F. (2007). Afghanistan's Kuchi pastoralists: Change and adaptation. Nomadic Peoples, 11(1), 9–37.

Dupree, L. (1979). Afghanistan under the Khalq. Problems of Communism, 28, 34.

Dyer, C. (2016). Evolving approaches to educating children from nomadic communities. Prospects, 46, 39–54.

Dyer, C. (2018). Does mobility have to mean being hard to reach? Mobile pastoralists and education's 'terms of inclusion'. In Education, mobilities and migration (pp. 47–67). Routledge.

Educational Management Information System. (2021). EMIS private and public school trends 2012–2020. Ministry of Education, Afghanistan.

Erfan, A. H. (2021). The geopolitical influential components in the Afghan crisis. Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies, 3(7), 36–43.

Essar, M. Y., Ashworth, H. C., Hunain, R., Kokash, D. M., Islam, Z., Ahmad, S., & Zil-E-Ali, A. (2022). Unraveling the jeopardy: Child health in Afghanistan. The International Journal of Health Planning and Management, 37(6), 3372–3376.

Fontdevila, C., Verger, A., & Zancajo, A. (2017). Taking advantage of catastrophes: Education privatization reforms in contexts of emergency. In Private schools and school choice in compulsory education (pp. 223–244). Springer VS.

Goodson, L. P. (2011). Afghanistan's endless war: State failure, regional politics, and the rise of the Taliban. University of Washington Press.

GPE. (2018). Afghanistan education sector analysis 2018. Global Partnership for Education. https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/afghanistan-education-sector-analysis-2018

Grimes, P., et al. (2021). Disability-inclusive education practices in Afghanistan. United Nations Children's Fund Regional Office for South Asia.

Guimbert, S., Miwa, K., & Nguyen, D. T. (2008). Back to school in Afghanistan: Determinants of school enrollment. International Journal of Educational Development, 28(4), 419–434.

Institute for State Effectiveness. (2020). Nomads of Afghanistan. https://effectivestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ise-dpn-nomads.pdf

Intili, J. A., Kissam, E., & St George, E. (2006). Fostering education for female, out-of-school youth in Afghanistan. Journal of Education for International Development, 2(1), 1–21.

Jogi and Chori Frosh in Afghanistan. (2017, November). https://minorityrights.org/communities/jogi-and-chori-frosh/

Karlsson, P., & Mansory, A. (2004). Islamic and Western-style education in Afghanistan—Conflictual or complementary? In Educational strategies among Muslims in the context of globalization (pp. 81–101). Brill.

Karlsson, P., & Mansory, A. (2007). An Afghan dilemma: Education, gender, and globalization in an Islamic context (Doctoral dissertation). Stockholm University.

Kearney, C.A., Gonzaleves, C., Graczyck, P.A., & Fomander, M.J. (2019a). Reconciling contemporary approaches to school attendance and school absenteeism: Toward promotion and nimble response, global policy review and implementation, and future adaptability (Part1). Frontiers in Psychology, 10, 2605.

Kearney, C.A., Gonzaleves, C., Graczyck, P.A., & Fomander, M.J. (2019b). Reconciling contemporary approaches to school attendance and school absenteeism: Toward promotion and nimble response, global policy review and implementation, and future adaptability (Part2). Frontiers in Psychology, 10, 2605.

Khan, A. (2015, July 9). Ghost students, ghost teachers, ghost schools. BuzzFeedNews.

Khwajamir, M. (2016). History and problems of education in Afghanistan. In SHS Web of Conferences (Vol. 26, p. 01124). EDP Sciences.

Kissam, E. & Qargha, G. O. (2007). Proposal for a Process for Teacher Credentialing: A 3 Tiered System based on Assessed Competency Level. Ministry of Education, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. USAID.

Latchem, C. (2018). Out-of-school children and youth. In Open and distance non-formal education in developing countries (pp. 63–75). Springer.

Lee, J. L. (2018). Afghanistan: A history from 1260 to the present. Reaktion Books.

Library of Congress. (2008). Country profile: Afghanistan. Library of Congress Federal Research Division. https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Afghanistan.pdf

Lumley, T., Mendelovits, J., Stanyon, R., Turner, R., & Walker, M. (2015). Class 6 proficiency in Afghanistan 2013: Outcomes of a learning assessment of mathematical, reading, and writing literacy.

Lutfullah, L., & Yasini, S. I. H. (2018). Factors contributing to child labor in Afghanistan: A case study in Jalalabad City. Economic Alternatives, 3, 348–372.

Makdisi, G. (1981). The rise of colleges: Institutions of learning in Islam and the West. Edinburgh University Press.

Mohapatra, N. K. (2020). Afghanistan's political insecurity and the emerging geopolitical calculus in Eurasia. International Studies, 57(3), 259–278.

Mansory, A. (2023). A landscape of out-of-school children in Afghanistan: Nature, features, status, and alternative schooling facilities. SCA.

Mansory, A. (2007). Drop out study in basic education level of schools in Afghanistan. Swedish Committee for Afghanistan.

Mansory, A. (2009). Alternative schooling strategies for nomad and working children [Unpublished paper].

Mansory, A. (2012). Situation analysis of education. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

McLachlan, D. A. (2007). Global nomads in an international school: Families in transition. Journal of Research in International Education, 6(2), 233–249.

Ministry of Education. (2014). Afghanistan National Education for All (EFA) review report, 2015. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (2017). National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2017–2021. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Ministry of Education & UNICEF. (2018). All in school and learning: Global initiative on out-of-school children – Afghanistan country study. UNICEF and USAID.

Ministry of Education. (2019). Statistical report of Ministry of Education, 2018/1397. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Ministry of Education. (2020). Annual progress report. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Mirbabaev, A. K., Zieme, P., & Furen, W. (2000). The development of education: Maktab, madrasa, science, and pedagogy. History of Civilizations of Central Asia, 4(Pt 2), 33–58.

Morris, E. M., Qargha, G. O., & Winthrop, R. (2023). Elevating the purpose of education to achieve the spirit of SDG 4. International Journal of Educational Development, 103, Article 102926.

Nabavi, S. A., Mohammadi, A., Achak, J., & Sail, E. (2021). Child laborers' access to education in Kandahar City. American International Journal of Social Science Research, 6(2), 39–48.

Nassiry, E., & Samim, S. D. (2020). Part-time and full-time child labour: Evidence from Afghanistan. Asian Journal of Behavioural Sciences, 2(1), 12–19.

Ndanusa, M. M. N., Abayomi, K. Q., & Harada, Y. (2021). Examining the fragments and causes of increasing out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Ngugi, M. (2016). Challenges facing mobile schools among nomadic pastoralists: A case study of Turkana County, Kenya. American Journal of Educational Research, 4(1), 22–32.

Nijssen, S. (2010). The Afghan economy: A brief history. Special Report on Economic Development in Afghanistan. Civil-Military Fusion Centre.

NSIA. (2021). Afghanistan statistical yearbook 2020. National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Oakes, J. (1989). What educational indicators? The case for assessing the school context. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11(2), 181–199.

Odell, E. (2017). Lonely schools: The relationship between geographic isolation and academic attainment. Educational Research, 59(3), 257–272.

O'Donnell, L. (2022, March 29). Taliban reversal on girls' education ignites world's anger. Foreign Policy. https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/29/taliban-girls-education-ban-reversal-afghanistan-schools/

Olaniyi, O. A. (2019). Comparative studies of out-of-school children in three African countries. SSRN.

Orazem, P. F., & Gunnarsson, L. V. (2004). Child labor, school attendance, and performance: A review. The World Bank. https

Patnode, A.H., Gibbons, K., & Edmunds, R. (2018). Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism: Literature

Review. Saint Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, College of Education and Human Development. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement.

Pinney, A. (2012). An Afghan population estimation. Snapshots of an intervention: The unlearned lessons of Afghanistan's decade of assistance (p. 11).

Pouras Consult Aps. (2016). Afghanistan education sector analysis (ESA). Global Partnership for Education. https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/education-sector-analysis-afghanistan.pdf

Povey, E. R. (2003). Women in Afghanistan: Passive victims of the burqa or active social participants? Development in Practice, 13(2), 266–277.

Qargha, G. O., Alemi, A., & Royesh, A. (2016). EMIS verification report. Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Afghanistan Holding Group.

Qargha, G. O. (2022). Privatization of primary and secondary schools in Afghanistan (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park).

Reyes-Guerra, D., Maslin-Ostrowski, P., Barakat, M. Y., & Stefanovic, M. A. (2021). Confronting a compound crisis: The school principal's role during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Frontiers in Education, 6, Article 617875.

Saavedra, J., Miwa, K., & Holland, P. (2022, March 15). Education and fragility, conflict, and violence: How to keep children safe and learning. World Bank Blogs. https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/education-fragility-conflict-and-violence-how-keep-children-safe-and-learning

Samady, S. R. (2001). Education and Afghan society in the twentieth century. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Shyam, K. C. (2007). Society and infrastructure: Geographical accessibility and its effects on school enrollment in Nepal (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park).

SIGAR. (2023). Status of education in Afghanistan: Taliban policies have resulted in restricted access to education and a decline in quality. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-24-01-IP.pdf

Sirat, A. S. (1969). Sharia and Islamic education in modern Afghanistan. The Middle East Journal, 23(2), 217–219.

Steinberg, P. E. (1997). Political geography and the environment. Journal of Geography, 96(2), 113–118.

Totakhail, J.G. (2014). Students' Absenteeism in Afghan Schools: Parents' and teachers' views about the causes of student's absenteeism and strategies used to tackle absenteeism in higher secondary classes of Kabul city schools.

Trani, J. F., Biggeri, M., & Mauro, V. (2013). The multidimensionality of child poverty: Evidence from Afghanistan. Social Indicators Research, 112(2), 391–416.

United Nations. (2023). Report on the 2022 Transforming Education Summit. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/report_on_the_2022_transforming_education_summit.pdf

UNESCO. (2011). All children in school by 2015: Global initiative on out-of-school children. UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000217147

UNESCO. (2016). Education: Enrollment by level of education. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. http://data.uis.unesco.org

UNESCO. (2021). The right to education: What is at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review. Paris, France: UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2023). 250 million children out-of-school: What you need to know about UNESCO's latest education data. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/250-million-children-out-school-what-you-need-know-about-unescos-latest-education-data

UNESCO. (2024). Afghanistan: 1.4 million girls still banned from school by de facto authorities. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/250-million-children-out-school-what-you-need-know-about-unescos-latest-education-data

UNICEF. (2018). All children in school and learning: Global initiative on out-of-school children Afghanistan country study. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and United Nations Children's Fund.

UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office. (2022). School and teacher census: A study conducted by UNICEF. Kabul, Afghanistan: UNICEF.

UNICEF. (2023a). Afghanistan humanitarian situation report #6, January–June 2023. https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unicef-afghanistan-humanitarian-situation-report-january-2023-no1-1-31-january-2023

UNICEF. (2023b). Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2022–2023. Afghanistan Country Office.

Wahaj, H. (2024, October 8). Religious education surges under Taliban as secular schooling languishes. VOA News. https://www.voanews.com/a/religious-education-surges-under-taliban-as-secular-schooling-languishes/7815283.html

Walters, G. D., Runell, L., & Kremser, J. (2021). Social and psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on middle-school students: Attendance options and changes over time. School Psychology, 36(5), 277–287.

Whitsel, C. (2014). Parental choices in the primary and secondary school market in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. European Education, 46(2), 53–73.

World Bank & UNESCO. (2016). Fragility and population movement in Afghanistan. http://documents.worldbank.org

World Bank. (2017). The learning crisis in Afghanistan. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/588881536147087211/AUS0000428-REVISED-SABER-SD-Afghanistan-digital-9-27.pdf

World Bank. (2018). Afghanistan: Promoting education during times of increased fragility. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/Afghanistan/publication/afghanistan-promoting-education-during-times-of-increased-fragility

World Bank. (2022). Afghanistan welfare monitoring survey, round 2. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank. (2024). Metadata glossary: Children out of school. DataBank, World Bank. https://databank.worldbank.org/metadataglossary/world-development-indicators/series/SE.PRM.UNER.ZS

Wyatt, C. M., & Gulzari, M. J. (2021). Afghanistan: The failure to integrate in, Daulat, watan , and millet and the fall of King Amanullah. Asian Affairs, 52(1), 79–109.

Yosufi, A., & Kaur, K. (2021). The burden of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour in Afghanistan. Razi International Medical Journal, 1(2), 50–57.

About the Program

The Global Economy and Development program at Brookings generates actionable insights and tools that address shared economic and social challenges. We collaborate with local, national, and global policy actors and communities to achieve a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMERS

BROOKINGS