

RECOVERING LEARNING:

Are children and
youth on track in
skills development?

Executive Summary

To thrive in today's world, children and youth will need a full range of skills for success in school, work and life. In addition to *foundational skills* such as basic literacy and numeracy, young people will need *transferable skills*, also known as 'life skills' or 'socio-emotional skills'; *digital skills*, which allow them to use and understand technology; *job-specific skills*, which support their transition into the workforce; and *entrepreneurial skills*, which support business and social entrepreneurship. Recognizing the need for comprehensive skills development, UNICEF's [Reimagine](#)

[Education](#) initiative, in partnership with [Generation Unlimited](#) (GenU) and [Giga](#), aims to connect every child and young person – some 3.5 billion by 2030 – to world-class digital learning solutions that help build this breadth of skills. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, substantial losses and widening inequalities in learning driven by school closures have further highlighted the urgency of recovering learning and skills development – a joint endeavor led by UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank through [Mission: Recovering Education in 2021](#).

Skills development is a cumulative process: early childhood development sets the stage for future learning and skills attainment; for children of primary school age, the acquisition of various skills, but most especially foundational skills, is critical; and for youth, the full range of skills is needed, including those required for active citizenship and decent work. Drawing on the latest available data within the past decade from various large-scale assessments and household surveys, this report provides a baseline on skills development as it relates to children aged 36-59 months, children at approximately age 10, and youth aged 15-24 years. It is important to note that the figures presented in this report do not yet account for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has likely significantly worsened the picture.

Based on 77 countries with data, less than three-quarters of children aged 36-59 months are developmentally on track. These children have met developmental milestones in at least three of the following four domains: literacy-numeracy, physical, social-emotional and learning. Wealth disparities are observed, with children in wealthier countries more likely to be developmentally on track than those in lower-income countries. Providing all children – especially the most vulnerable – with the best start in life sets them on positive trajectories in learning and skills development.

At approximately age 10, only about half of children have developed foundational reading skills. Wealth continues to have a substantial effect on child development outcomes: about one in 10 children in low-income countries, compared to about nine in 10 in high-income countries, have acquired foundational reading skills. It is critical that no child is left behind in attaining these basic skills, which are the building blocks for further learning and skills development.

Less than half of youth are on track to attain the full range of skills needed to thrive in school, work and life. Only about two-fifths of youth are on track to attain secondary-level reading and math skills, transferable skills concerning global citizenship and competence (based on 38 countries with data), and digital skills to perform simple computer-based activities. A little over a quarter of youth are on track to acquire job-specific skills (as proxied by the proportion of youth who are in education, employment and training and who have secondary-level skills), while about a third are on track to attain entrepreneurial skills (as proxied by financial literacy rates). Youth in wealthier countries are more likely than their counterparts in lower-income countries to develop this range of skills. Among countries with data, gender gaps are observed

for transferable skills in favor of females, and for digital and entrepreneurial skills in favor of males.

Evidence suggests poor skills attainment among youth, but particularly so among those in low-income countries where the share of youth on track in skills acquisition is lowest. This report assigns five progressive levels of skills attainment corresponding to the proportion of youth on track to attain each skill: Marginal (0-15 per cent), Emerging (16-35 per cent), Developing (36-55 per cent), Advanced (56-75 per cent) and Leading (76-100 per cent). Based on countries with data, the attainment of the full range of skills has only reached Emerging or Developing Levels overall (*see Figure 1*). Among low-income countries, skills attainment has reached only Marginal or Emerging Levels, with large shares of youth off-track to acquire each skill. It is important to note, however, that while the proportion of youth off-track in skills attainment is highest in low-income countries, their numbers may be greater in lower-middle-income countries, where the largest population of youth live.

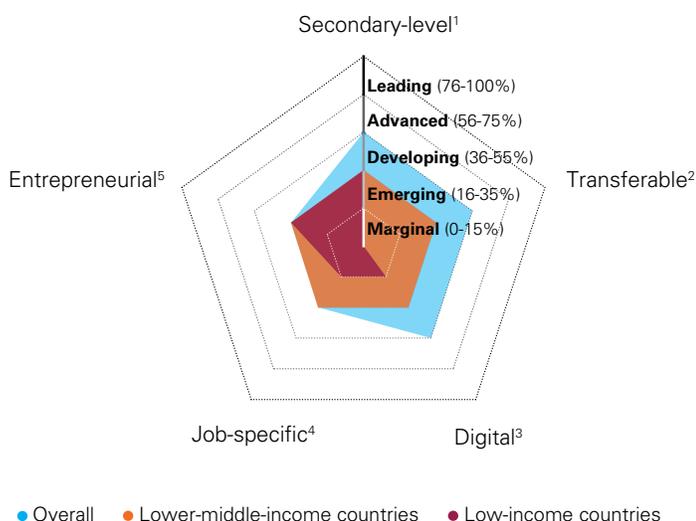
Among those with data, many countries are still at Marginal or Emerging Levels:

- **Over a third in secondary-level skills attainment.** Half of low-income countries and about a third of lower-middle-income countries with data are at the Marginal Level, with at least 85 per cent of their youth off-track in secondary-level skills attainment.
- **Over a fifth in transferable skills attainment.** That only 38 countries – none of which are low-income – are represented by the data on transferable skills underscores the need for more comprehensive and comparable data on this skills type.
- **Two-fifths in digital skills attainment.** Nearly every low-income country and about a third of lower-middle-income countries with data are at the Marginal Level, with at least 85 per cent of their youth off-track in digital skills attainment.
- **Nearly half in job-specific skills attainment.** Over two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries with data are at Marginal or Emerging Levels, with at least 65 per cent of their youth off-track in job-specific skills attainment.
- **Two-fifths in entrepreneurial skills attainment.** Nearly three-quarters of low-income countries and over half of lower-middle-income countries with data are at Marginal or Emerging Levels, with at least 65 per cent of their youth off-track in entrepreneurial skills attainment.

Figure 1. Proportion of youth with the full range of skills

Source: ¹UIS database for the reporting of Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 4.1.1(c) on minimum reading and math proficiency at the end of lower secondary; ²International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 and Programme for International Student Assessment 2018; ³UIS, UNICEF Global Databases on information and communications technology (ICT) skills and various national reports on ICT skills; ⁴UNESCO Institute for Statistics database and International Labour Organization Department of Statistics (ILOSTAT) database; ⁵Standard & Poor's Ratings Services Global Financial Literacy Survey 2014. See Methodology for full details on data sources and methods of calculation.

Note: Data for transferable skills are available for only 38 countries and should not be interpreted as a global estimate. Data on transferable skills are not available for low-income countries.



Prolonged school closures brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have likely caused disruptions to skills development – especially for those already lagging behind and lower-middle-income countries where the largest number of youth is concentrated. Countries with the longest school closures often had the lowest levels of skills attainment even before the pandemic, which may have resulted in further widening of gaps in skills development. The longer schools remain closed, the more likely children could fall further behind in developing foundational skills and other essential skills.

We cannot recover what we do not measure. It is important to note that these estimates on skills attainment are limited by issues in data availability, comparability and irregularity in collection. Data on early childhood development from the Early Childhood Development Index are available for only 77 countries. Foundational skills attainment is primarily measured using learning poverty data, which include reading but not math skills. Secondary-level skills are estimated using data from large-scale assessments, mainly the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which only cover students in school. To estimate transferable skills attainment, data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016 and the Global Competence test of the PISA 2018 are used – representing only 38 countries, only students in schools and a limited subset of transferable skills. For secondary-level, transferable, and digital skills, there

is a lack of internationally comparable data for the youth age group. Lastly, in the absence of comprehensive assessments on job-specific and entrepreneurial skills, proxy measures are used for these skills types. Improving data availability is critical to supporting the development of the full range of skills, including recovering losses in skills attainment during school closures.

In response to these challenges, UNICEF, GenU and its partners are actively working towards more comprehensive and inclusive measures of skills development. Efforts include the [COVID-19: Monitoring the Impacts on Learning Outcomes \(MILO\)](#) project to measure learning outcomes in six countries in Africa; the introduction of the [MICS Foundational Learning Skills](#) module, which covers both in- and out-of-school children aged 7-14 years, and the Mass Media and ICT module, which collects data on ICT skills among youth; the [Learning Data Compact](#), which aims to increase the availability of learning assessment data in lower-income countries; the [World Skills Clock](#), which provides estimations, projections and visualizations of skills development among youth; and the [Life Skills and Citizenship Education](#) instrument in the Middle East and North Africa region and the [Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics](#), both of which introduce standardized approaches to measuring transferable skills. Committed to improving data and assessment, UNICEF strives to realize the vision of the Reimagine Education initiative – that every child and young person develops the full range of skills needed for success in school, work and life.