

# Policy Brief

## Education Deprivation in the Arab States





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Cover photo: Syrian School children at Al Shyah second intermediate public school Beirut, Lebanon  
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## Key Points

- While overall education and information deprivation in the countries studied shows modest levels of incidence, there is **pronounced inequality in the education dimension** both between and within the 11 Arab States examined. Children who live in countries with higher overall levels of poverty are more likely to face deprivation in education. Within countries, wealth status, the educational attainment of the head of household and geographical location are main contributors to inequality in the education and information dimensions.
- For the vast majority of children who face deprivation in education, **retention and the quality of education** are the major issues. Still, **a significant percentage of children is out of school altogether** and face issues with access to education.
- The evidence shows that poor access to quality education is an **engine of intergenerational poverty transmission**. Children living in households whose head has incomplete primary education are significantly more likely to be multidimensionally poor and to be deprived in the education and information dimensions.

## Introduction

**This policy brief summarizes key findings and recommendations relating to education from the report, 'Child Poverty in the Arab States'**<sup>i</sup> The report examined multidimensional child poverty in Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. Education deprivation stood out as a key issue for children in the region and as a major contributor to the incidence of childhood poverty. Additionally, a strong correlation was found between the educational attainment of the head of the household and the incidence of poverty amongst children growing up in that household. This indicates that incomplete or poor quality education is a crucial link in the chain of intergenerational transmission of poverty.

**In all of the 11 countries examined, the under-18 population represents a large share of the total country population**, from 27.7 per cent in Tunisia to 47.4 per cent in Iraq. The educational attainment of these children will therefore have a considerable effect not only on these children themselves, but on the future prosperity of the region. Therefore, close attention to the evidence on education deprivation emerging from the analysis is required.

**The report 'Child Poverty in the Arab States' used a cross-country MODA<sup>ii</sup> (CC-MODA) methodology, adapted to the Arab States, to analyse and compare the 11 selected countries. The analysis was based on comparable survey data sets across the 11 countries.** It looked at five dimensions of child well-being for each of two age categories (0-4 and 5-17), selected in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For children 0-4, the dimensions examined were water, sanitation, housing, health and nutrition. For children 5-17, the dimensions considered were water, sanitation, housing, information, and education. This application of the MODA methodology defines two measures of poverty. The first measure,

'acute poverty', defined in the original CC-MODA methodology<sup>iii</sup>, has been applied mostly to low-income countries. The second measure, 'moderate poverty', was established taking into consideration specific characteristics and experiences of the Arab States. For purposes of the analysis, a child is considered poor if he or she is deprived in two or more dimensions (for example, if a primary school-aged child travels for more than 30 minutes round trip to fetch water and is not enrolled in primary school, then he or she will be deemed acutely poor).

**To facilitate the child poverty analysis, the countries examined were grouped into clusters** by considering the distance between each country's child poverty level and the 11-country average, weighted by population size. This process yielded the following three groups:

- Cluster 1: Countries with low acute poverty and low moderate poverty, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Tunisia
- Cluster 2: Countries with low to medium acute poverty and medium to high moderate poverty, which include Iraq and Morocco
- Cluster 3: Countries with high acute poverty and high moderate poverty, including Comoros, Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen

**In addition to providing a thorough examination of the seven dimensions mentioned above, the report looked at relative gaps** or inequality between disadvantaged and advantaged groups of children in terms of:

- Area (Rural/Urban)
- Sex (Female/Male)
- Education of the household head (No education/Primary or higher)
- Wealth (Poorest - Bottom quintile, Q1/Richest - Top quintile, Q5)

**Detailed Definitions of Deprivation Indicators in the Education and Information Dimensions**

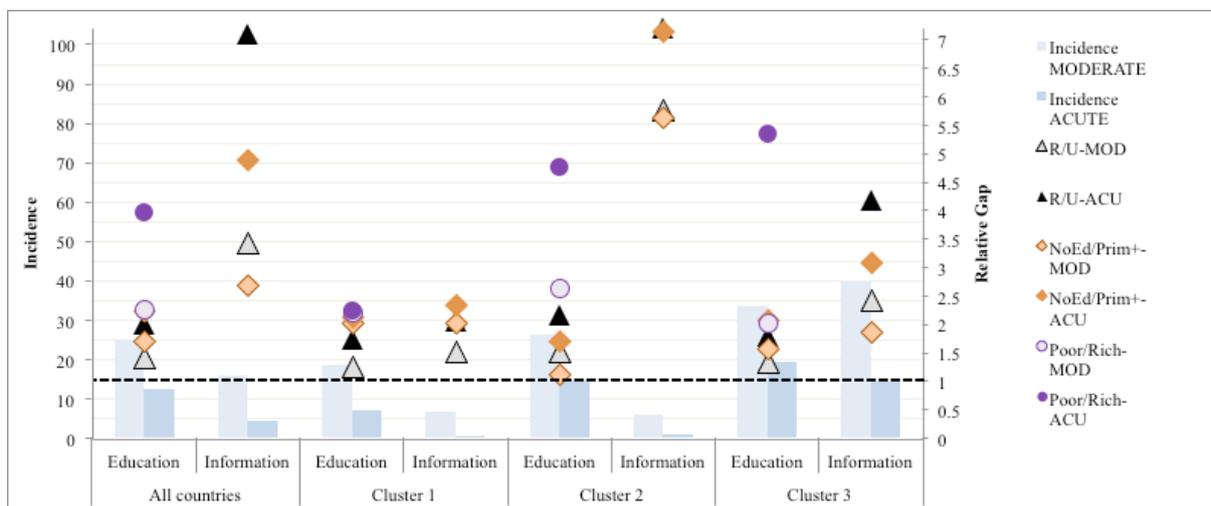
Dimensions	Acute Deprivation	Moderate Deprivation	Age
Education	Not enrolled in primary school (children of primary age)	Not enrolled in school (all ages)	Children 5-17
	Did not finish primary (from age of end of primary to 17)	Or: Enrolled, but two or more grades behind (all ages)	
		Or: Enrolled but did not finish primary (from age of end of primary to 17)	
Information	No access to any information or communication device (communication device: phone, mobile, smartphone; information device : radio, tv, computer, internet).	Either: No access to any information device (i.e.: radio, tv, computer, internet).	Children 5-17
		Or: No access to any communication device (i.e.: phone, mobile, smartphone)	

## Relatively modest incidence levels but considerable inequality within and between countries

Figure 1 examines the education and information dimensions of child poverty, as defined above. Acute education deprivation affects 12.4 per cent of the children in the countries studied. This means that about one in eight children either are not enrolled in primary school, or are above primary school age and did not finish primary school. Children in Cluster 3 countries are more frequently acutely deprived in the education dimension (19.4 per cent) than children in Clusters 2 (14.7 per cent) and 1 (7.1 per cent). Moderate deprivation, which also considers enrolment beyond primary school and whether children are falling behind in education, shows a similar pattern. Overall, 24.5 per cent of children are moderately deprived in the education dimension, while this ranges from 18.4 per cent in Cluster 1 countries to 33.3 per cent in Cluster 3 countries. Deprivation in the information dimension, which looks at access to information and communication devices, is low on average (15.8 per cent of children are moderately deprived and 4.4 per cent are acutely deprived). But deprivation levels are significantly higher in Cluster 3 countries (39.7 per cent moderate deprivation and 14.2 per cent acute deprivation).

In addition to differences between countries, figure 1 shows considerable inequality within countries. The wealth status of the household is strongly correlated with education deprivation. For the eleven countries together, children in the bottom quintile are four times more likely to be acutely deprived in the education dimension than those from the top quintile. This inequality is even more pronounced in Cluster 2 and 3 countries. In addition, rural children and those living in a household in which the head has no or incomplete primary education are more likely to be deprived in the education dimension. There is also pronounced inequality in the information dimension. Here, rural children are more than seven times as likely to be acutely deprived in the information dimension than urban children. Education of the household head also contributes to inequality in the information dimension.

**Figure 1: Education and Information Inequality by Cluster**



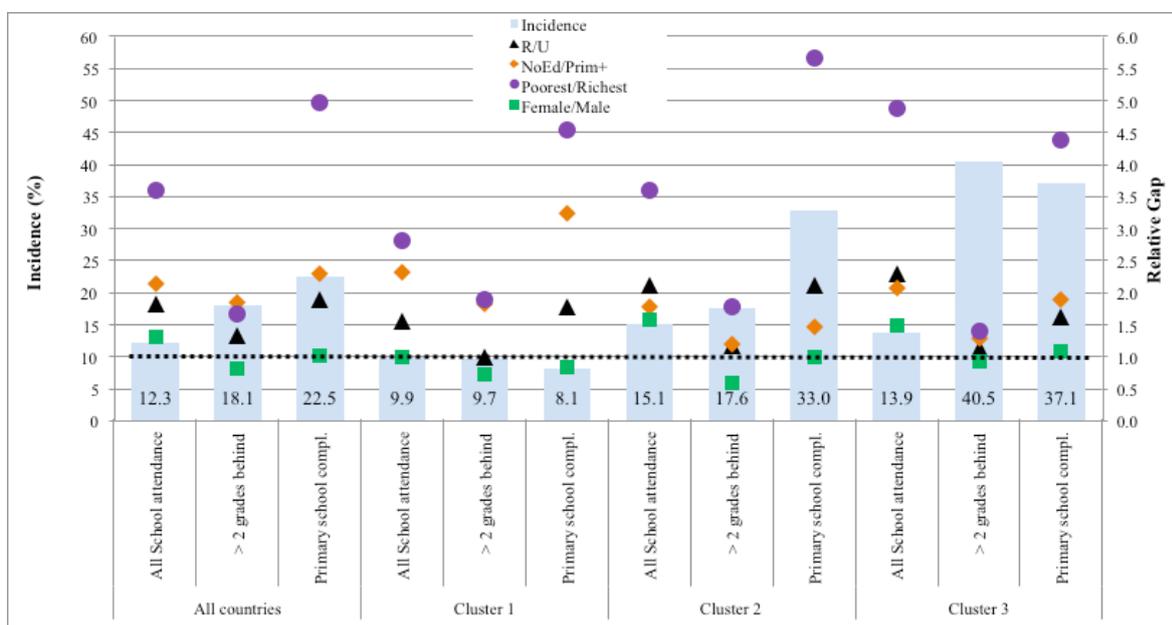
## A lack of access to quality education

Figure 2 further unpacks the education dimension by examining the individual indicators within this dimension: school attendance, children who are 2 or more grades behind in school, and primary school completion for children beyond primary age, for each cluster and on average for the 11 countries. The all-country averages show that 12.3 per cent of all children are not attending school, while 18.1 per cent are more than 2 grades behind and 22.5 per cent have not completed primary school. In terms of incidence, children in cluster 1 fare much better than children in clusters 2 and 3. Incidence in cluster 1 is less than 10 per cent in all three indicators, while in cluster 3 countries, 40.5 per cent of children are falling behind and 37.1 per cent have not completed primary school. It is important to note that enrolment per se is less of a concern, as even in cluster 3 countries, incidence of non-enrolment is at 13.9 per cent. This seems to indicate that for the vast majority of children, access to education per se is a less pressing concern than retention and the quality of education. Still, a significant percentage of children is out of school altogether.

Figure 2 also shows the drivers of inequality for each of the indicators within the education dimension. The wealth status of the household has a major impact both on attendance and completion. For the 11 countries overall, children from the poorest quintile are 3.6 times as likely to be out of school and five times as likely not to complete school compared to children from the wealthiest quintile. School attendance and primary school completion are also affected by the education of the household head, with children living in households where the head is uneducated being 2.3 times more likely not to complete primary school than children in households where the head has at least a primary school education.

Interestingly, the issue of children over-age for their grades is not very strongly correlated with any background variables. Children from households in which the head has no or incomplete primary education, those from poor households, living in urban areas and boys are relatively disadvantaged, but the levels of inequality are less pronounced than for other indicators. This further underlines the existence of quality issues in education that affect large numbers of children equally.

**Figure 2: Education Inequality by Cluster (Ages 5-17)**



## Poor education of the household head: an engine of intergenerational poverty transmission

The literature is full of evidence about the positive impact of education on poverty reduction<sup>iv</sup>. The evidence in the 'Arab Poverty Report' shows a strong correlation between the education level of the household head and poverty incidence at the household level. In most countries studied, the deprivation headcount decreases as the education of the household head increases. On average, households whose head has no education are 8 times more likely to be multidimensionally poor compared to those whose head has the highest level of education<sup>v</sup>. This seems to indicate that higher education does greatly affect deprivation reduction in these countries.

The correlation is also strong at the level of the child. Across the 11 countries, children whose household head did not receive any education are more than twice as likely to suffer from acute deprivation than children living in families where the household head received a primary education or higher. In terms of moderate deprivation, the former are 1.58 times as likely to suffer from deprivation as the latter. In cluster 3, children living in households where the head is uneducated are 2.3 times more likely to be acutely poor than those in households where the head has the highest level of education<sup>vi</sup>.

The most worrying finding is that, in countries with relatively higher levels of multidimensional deprivation, even those with higher educational attainment have an elevated chance of being poor. This means that the returns on education are not always as high as expected. This underlines the need to improve the quality and relevance of education for the job market<sup>vii</sup>.

## Policy Recommendations

A significant percentage of children (12.3 per cent in the countries studied) is not attending school. A comprehensive approach is required to ensure that all children can exercise their right to education. Given that school attendance shows a strong correlation with the wealth status of the household, financial barriers to accessing education may still play a role. Children may be out of school as result of the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of education. Therefore, **integrated social protection solutions** should be explored to resolve the residual problem of out-of-school children, which would include cash assistance as well as complementary measures to ease access to education.

The region faces many conflicts, humanitarian crises and mass displacement. Children's education is often disrupted as a result of these regrettable circumstances. Education makes a major contribution to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Therefore, it is clear that **continued education for children affected by crises needs to be a top priority for the region**. Education infrastructure, teachers and students need to be spared in conflict settings. Where children are displaced or take refuge in neighbouring countries, all efforts need to be made to ensure they receive quality education that fosters social cohesion and equips them for social inclusion in the societies in which they are hosted. The education they receive should allow them to mainstream back into the education process in their area of origin and provide them with certification that is equivalent to what they would receive there.

The analysis in this report shows that education quality remains a major concern in the region. Overall, nearly one in five children are falling two or more grades behind in their education. In Cluster 3 countries, this affects two in five children. Within countries there is little variation in this indicator by background variables, indicating widespread quality issues in education. In addition, the analysis shows that returns on education are less pronounced as they should be, which is another indicator of limited education quality. Children in Cluster 3 countries living in a household where the head has the highest level of education still have a high probability of being poor, indicating that if a household head attains a high level of education, this may not suffice to prevent their children from experiencing multidimensional poverty in these countries. **Thus, it is imperative to invest in enhancing the quality of education, to ensure that the education system equips children fully for their future adult role in society and in the economy.**

In order to ensure that the access and quality issues in education in the region are addressed, **governments need to enhance the adequacy, effectiveness, efficiency and equity of their public expenditure on education**. The level of public expenditure on education is generally at an acceptable level in the region. The issue is therefore not necessarily to spend more, but rather to spend better on education. Further investment is required in the quality of education, ensuring that the education process provides a set of hard as well as soft skills that equip young people to play a fulfilling role as economic agents, as husbands and wives, as parents, as community members, as citizens. This, above all, will ensure a better return on the investment governments are already making in education.

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- i. UNICEF, "Child poverty in the Arab States: Analytical Report of Eleven Countries", December 2017.
  - ii. MODA – Multiple and Overlapping Deprivation Analysis
  - iii. de Neubourg, C., Chai, J., de Milliano, M., Plavgo, I., and Wei, Z. "Step-by-step guidelines to the multiple overlapping deprivation analysis." UNICEF Office of Research Working Paper WP-2012-10. 2012.
  - iv. LAS, ESCWA, UNICEF, OPHI, "Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report," 2017, 45-46.
  - v. Ibid., 25.
  - vi. Ibid., 89-90.
  - vii. Ibid., 35.



**Policy Brief**  
**Nutrition Deprivation**  
**in the Arab States**