

Rich economies not a promise of education equality, new report finds

High national wealth does not guarantee equal access to a quality education, a new report released on Tuesday by the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) suggests.

The report incorporates new data from 41, wealthy, member countries of the European Union and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Countries were assessed on their children's access to quality education, and differences in performance among children from preschool to primary school levels.

According to the report, some of the poorest countries surveyed, such as Latvia and Lithuania, demonstrate higher preschool enrollment and more compatible reading performance among its students than wealthier countries.

The survey was conducted by the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, established by UNICEF to gather data in support of its advocacy for children worldwide.

Countries can offer their children the best of both worlds: They can achieve standards of excellence in education and have relatively low inequality—UNICEF research centre director

Director for the research centre, Dr. Priscilla Idele said, "Countries can offer their children the best of both worlds: They can achieve standards of excellence in education and have relatively low inequality."

She added that rich countries "can and must" ramp up their efforts to ensure children from disadvantaged families are meeting education standards, as they are most likely to fall behind.

Circumstances beyond children's' control, the report says, are driving some students to outperform others. The poorest households, for example, show lower preschool attendance rates, while first-generation immigrant children struggle more than non-immigrant children.

The report advises modifications to early education programs, aid to low income families to reduce socio-economic disparities, and production of more data on the subject via longer, in-depth studies, to improve overall education accessibility and performance.

This report is part of the Innocenti Report Card initiative, designed to monitor and compare the performance of wealthy countries in securing the rights of children.

This research is intended to help ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education by 2030, a central focus of [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#) one of 17 global goals set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015.

[Halt death sentences on children, UN rights expert urge Saudi authorities](#)

Saudi Arabia has been urged by United Nations human rights experts to immediately halt the execution of six people sentenced to death for crimes allegedly committed when they were under the age of 18.

The experts warned that carrying out the sentences could amount to “arbitrary executions.”

The six who face imminent execution, were sentenced for charges that the experts said criminalize fundamental human rights, including the freedom of assembly and expression.

The six individuals, all male, – Ali al-Nimr; Dawood al-Marhoon; Abdullah al-Zaher; Mujtaba al-Sweikat; Salman Qureish; and Abdulkarim al-Hawaj – were allegedly tortured and ill-treated, forced to confess, denied adequate legal assistance during trial and never had access to an effective complaint mechanism, the experts said.

“As a State Party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Saudi Arabia is under an obligation to treat everyone under the age of 18 as a child,” the group said in a [news release](#) issued by the UN human rights office, OHCHR, on Monday.

“Children should never be subject to the death penalty, this practice violates an existing norm of customary international law and renders the punishment tantamount to torture [...] In these circumstances, the execution of these six individuals would constitute arbitrary executions,” they stressed.

“Saudi Arabia must ensure that children who have not benefited from a fair trial be immediately released and that those among them who were sentenced to death have their sentence commuted in line with international juvenile justice standards and the Committee of the Rights of the Child’s recommendations in 2016,” the experts said.

The experts acknowledged the recent review initiated by Saudi Arabia of juvenile law but expressed “regret” that the amendments introduced in the legislation “continue to fail to adequately protect children.”

The law still allows for the death penalty to be imposed on child offenders aged between 15 and 18, said the release.

“Saudi Arabia should promptly amend its legislation with a view to unambiguously prohibiting the imposition of the death sentence on children,” urged the UN rights experts.

The experts voicing their concern include Agnes Callamard, [Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions](#); Renate Winter, Chair of the [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#); Nils Melzer, [Special Rapporteur on torture](#); David Kaye, [Special Rapporteur on protection of the rights of expression](#); and Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, [Special Rapporteur on the freedom of peaceful assembly](#).

The experts said they are in contact with the Government regarding the case.

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary, and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

FROM THE FIELD: 10,000 Indonesia quake survivors to receive UN tents

More than 2,000 emergency tents have been delivered by the UN to the people worst affected by the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Sulawesi in Indonesia in September, 2018.

Around 2,000 people were killed in the disaster and some 200,000 were displaced.

Survivors have used old plastic sheeting to build tents on empty land, but the makeshift shelters are not withstanding the constant rainfall.

With the help of the UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)), 10,000 of those most in need will receive shelter.

[Read more here](#), for the stories from survivors of the catastrophe.

Aid convoy for north-east Syria postponed over security concerns – UN relief chief

A humanitarian convoy carrying relief aid for tens of thousands of “desperate” civilians in north-eastern Syria who have not received aid since January this year, has been postponed owing to security concerns along its route, the United Nations top humanitarian official said on Monday.

The UN-Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy from Damascus to Rukban, on the Syria-Jordan border, would have delivered assistance on Saturday to some 50,000 people.

About 10,000 children would also have been vaccinated and other needs in the region assessed.

“The population at Rukban has not received assistance since January this year, and they are increasingly desperate,” Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, told a Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The population at Rukban has not received assistance since January this year, and they are increasingly desperate – *Mark Lowcock*

“There are continuing reports of children dying due to poor sanitary conditions and a lack of healthcare. This dire humanitarian situation cannot be allowed to continue,” he said.

Idlib

Turning to Idlib – where a demilitarization agreement was reached between Russia and Turkey in September – Mr. Lowcock called on all actors to protect the “glimmer of hope” offered by the lull in fighting.

“[The stakes are high](#),” he told the Council, “as the alternative is humanitarian suffering on a scale that would overwhelm all ability to respond, devastating a population that is already weakened through years of conflict, displacement and deprivation.”

More than seven years of fighting has left hundreds of thousands of Syrians dead, uprooted millions more and enmeshed the interests of several foreign powers.

Across Syria, over 13 million people continue to depend on humanitarian assistance, of which more than 6 million are internally displaced people who are food-insecure.



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock briefs the Security Council on the situation in Syria

Humanitarian access remains a challenge

In his briefing, Mr. Lowcock informed the Council that although the UN and humanitarian partners continue to reach over five million civilians with life-saving assistance each month, sustained access remains a major problem, especially in areas that recently changed control.

In discussions, Syrian authorities have provided assurances of humanitarian access, he added.

“We look forward to rapid implementation,” he continued, noting that it would allow relief teams on the ground to undertake “essential independent assessments of the situation and see more of who is being helped and how.”

‘Critical’ that cross-border relief deliveries are sustained

In his briefing, the Mr. Lowcock, also spoke of the UN cross-border operation from Turkey, which continues to reach hundreds of thousands of people in need each month.

“[The deliveries] have been scaled up in recent weeks to ensure prepositioning of assistance as a contingency measure for the event of a military escalation, as well as to provide support for winter.”

Sustaining the cross-border lifeline is critical, he added, calling for an extension of the provisions of the Security Council resolutions [2165](#) and [2393](#) which established the delivery mechanisms.

Some US\$1.7 billion has been raised in 2018 for the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan, but it remains less than 50 per cent funded.

More than nine in ten children exposed to deadly air pollution

Air pollution is “stunting children’s brains” and affecting their health in more ways than was previously suspected, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) said on Monday.

In a call for concrete policy pledges from governments across the world to tackle the problem, the UN health agency [reports](#) that more than nine in 10 youngsters breathe air that is so polluted, “it puts their health and development at serious risk”.

The WHO findings – launched on the eve of the agency’s first [Global Conference](#) on Air Pollution and Health in Geneva – include the estimate that 600,000 children died from acute lower respiratory infections caused by polluted air in 2016.

Polluted air is poisoning millions of children and ruining their lives – *WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus*

“The enormous toll of disease and death revealed by these new data should result in an urgent call to action for the global community, and especially for those in the health sector,” the WHO report says, noting that the impact of air pollution both inside and outside the home is worst in low and middle-income countries.

Among the WHO report’s other findings are data indicating that pregnant women are more likely to give birth prematurely when they are exposed to dirty air.

Their babies are also prone to be underweight and small, according to WHO, which also highlights how air pollution can trigger asthma and childhood cancer, while also hampering neuro-development.

“Polluted air is poisoning millions of children and ruining their lives,” said WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. “Every child should be able to breathe clean air so they can grow and fulfil their full potential.”

One reason why children are especially vulnerable to polluted air is that they breathe more rapidly than adults, absorbing more toxins, WHO says.

Youngsters are also more exposed to pollutants that stay closer to the ground at a time when their bodies and brains are still developing, the UN agency report continues, adding that newborns and young children are more

susceptible to household air pollution in homes that use polluting fuels for cooking, heating and lighting.

As part of its call for action from the international community, WHO is recommending a series of “straightforward” measures to reduce the health risk from ambient fine particulate matter, or PM2.5.

These include accelerating the switch to clean cooking and heating fuels and technologies, promoting the use of cleaner transport, energy-efficient housing and urban planning.

“Air pollution is stunting our children’s brains, affecting their health in more ways than we suspected,” said Dr Maria Neira, Director, Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health at WHO. “But there are many straight-forward ways to reduce emissions of dangerous pollutants.”

WHO is also supporting low emission power generation, cleaner, safer industrial technologies and better municipal waste management” to reduce community air pollution, Dr Neira added.