



**EROSION OF EDUCATION EQUITY
AND VIOLATION OF THE RIGHT TO
EDUCATION DUE TO INTEGRITY
DEFICIT OF THE EDUCATION
SYSTEM IN ARMENIA**

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ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ATC	Assessment and Testing Center
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
EU	European Union
MoESCS	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports
NPED	National Plan for Education Development
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSF	Open Society Foundations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UNCEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WB	World Bank

ABSTRACT

Equity of education and right to education have been systematically eroded in the course of the last decades. Such long-standing erosion of the system led to unprecedented increase of learning poverty. Thus, as per the WB 2019 report, 35% of 10 years-old cannot read and understand a short age-appropriate text and 10% of 19-21 years-old have functional illiteracy.

Independent research based on official statistical data and international test results show that many children have limited access to quality education based on their social background, residential status, and gender.

This is primary caused by the lack of integrity of the education system that totaled to the system capture for political and financial gains before the Velvet revolution and since has not been addressed adequately.

The analysis, presented below draws heavily from a number of research works on integrity of the education system in Armenia, the social dimension of education, and the equity of education conducted by independent experts. The main findings of these studies regarding the systematic problems of education are discussed in the context of current data and the newly adopted large-scale reform agenda.

Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) [1] between the EU and Armenia does not include education as a specific target area for the reform and its Roadmap does not specify actions or concrete deliverables pertaining secondary education as such. However, good governance, institutional integrity, child's rights, equity, antidiscrimination, and human security are all essential part of the Agreement and the Roadmap and in that sense, the problems, touched below are of direct relevance to CEPA¹ implementation. In

¹ See Articles 4 (a), (b), (f); Article 24 of the Agreement

addition, in its support of democratic reform in Armenia, the EU has prioritized child's rights and the ongoing education reform, assisting and investing in the development of a strategic vision and the education itself. It is also to be noted that equity and the right to education have long been part of the civil society's advocacy agenda in the EU-Armenia Human Rights Dialogue.

BACKGROUND. INTEGRITY OF THE SYSTEM

Since early 2000 and until the Velvet Revolution in 2018 Armenia's corruption indicators had deteriorated in view of consolidating control by the ruling regime that had led to oligarchic and increasingly autocratic capture of the democratic institutions and the economy.² Corruption and control permeated all spheres, judiciary, law enforcement, and the executive power.³ It is even more remarkable that in such an atmosphere education was singled out as the most corrupt area in the ratings of the Global Corruption Barometer of the Transparency International. Indeed, as the largest employer in the country and as the area that had been in a permanent large-scale reform, heavily funded by international donors (e.g., EU, USAID) and international finance institutions (e.g., WB, ADB)⁴, it was the area that came under a comprehensive control, executed through governance, management, and financing. In the result the system was abused not only for financial but also for political gains since the regime used it as a political instrument for its reproduction.

² Corruption Perception Index fell to 94 in 2013, 2014. [2]

³ In 2012, 60% of respondents considered the governance and police to be extremely corrupt. [3]

⁴ Aggregate amount of education loans and grants over the last 20 years total to more than \$100 million and 45million Euro.

Decades of administrative and financial abuse, nepotism, and explicit conflict of interests have resulted in dramatic deterioration of quality of education and the right to education. Hence, the GCB rating reflecting deep dissatisfaction of public education.

In 2012, pressured by international donors to curb corruption, the government adopted an anti-corruption strategy [4] with education and public health as its target areas. However, according to the same Transparency International's (TI) survey, only 20% of respondents thought the enacted measures had been successful.

With respect to the reforms the consolidated control over the system meant manipulated reform agendas, by which the authorities got to institutionalize the corrupt practices and undermine the newly established integrity mechanisms. Consequently, such manipulation of their objectives and undermining of integrity have had deep negative impact on the system's integrity and equity, and the quality of education. These far-fetching reforms were often conducted in cycles, with little coherence between them and the cycles being launched on top of each other without evaluating the previous ones. As part of the reforms, such institutional shifts as detachment of lower secondary education and establishment of high school were conducted. It was carried out with obvious violation of the principles of equity and universal access with 103 out of 106 high schools being established in cities, undermining access to higher education of the children from smaller communities, since the schools they were left with, while giving the same certificate, did not have the same curricula.⁵ Simultaneously, the authorities subscribed to elitist education adopting the Excellence Program based on the flawed notion that few (less than 1% of all schools) well-equipped schools with exceptional teaching staff and merit-based admission of students would lift the quality of education in the other 99%.

⁵ Education quality and relevance loan of the WB 2009. Since the high schools did not live to the expectation and funneled more need for private tutoring, further eroding equity.

Noteworthy, that the civil society as well as some area practitioners had repeatedly voiced their concerns both with the reform agendas and their flawed implementation. Numerous studies by the civil society pointed at mimicking and window-dressing nature of the reforms [5] as well as pure damage that had been undertaken in the course of design and implementation. However, they had been largely ignored or even denied and fought against by the area practitioners and government officials. Remarkably, in some instances this happened even when the donor itself would find manipulations of the purpose of a particular reform [6] – there would be no follow up and/or accountability for such violations. The compromised structure would continue functioning.

The impact of protracted integrity deficit resulted not only in deteriorated quality and equity of education but also in rampant growth of learning poverty and illiteracy. Thus, as per the WB's 2019 Learning Poverty Brief [7], 35% of children in Armenia at late primary age were unable to read and understand a short age-appropriate text. It also stated that learning poverty in Armenia is 21.7% worse than the average for the Europe and Central Asia region and 6.1% worse than the average for upper middle-income countries. According to the WB's 2019 World development Report [8], 10% of young people at age 19-21 have a lack of functional literacy.

Admittedly, some of the above-presented data and outline of the systemic violations that we will largely draw from below [9] refer to a regime that ceased and, hence, can be considered outdated. Indeed, the political corruption when the education system was used as a tool to win elections, is wiped out. However, despite the fact that the Velvet Revolution was largely instigated by the quest

for justice and good governance in large measure also with respect to public education, the post-revolutionary government failed to address the problem of integrity deficit in the education system directly and mitigate the eroding quality and equity. It has been deemed that with the absence of grand corruption and not-exploiting the system flaws, the issue would resolve itself. Consequently, no measures have been undertaken to restore these children's right to education. The comprehensive capture, enacted both at policy and legislative level, could have not been eradicated by mere change of political power, even if the new authorities refused to abuse the existing unaccountable control mechanisms. To achieve discernable quality and equity improvement, the compromised policies and practices should be identified and eradicated and effective accountability mechanisms must be enacted to secure its academic and governance integrity and restore quality and equity. Unfortunately, such dismantling happened at best on superficial and selective basis. The channels through which the ruling authorities had been trading preferential treatment with loyalty had not been systematically closed and in case the political power chooses to use them and to capture the system anew, they can be put to work.

The education systems have admittedly high inertia - social economic changes or reforms play out long after they happened or have been implemented. This is true in the case of negative changes and, particularly, corruption that had not been timely identified and adequately addressed. In this way, the public education system in Armenia is still suffering from and, what is worse, being shaped by the rampant and systemic corruption, in fact, capture that took hold during two decades before the 2018 revolution. Hence, we believe that in order to understand the much troubling state of public

education now and recommend course of action and immediate measure to mitigate the harm, it is warranted to consider the past devastating tendencies and examine how they are still harming the quality and equity of education system and thus case massive violation of education rights of nowadays students.

Not only has there not been any strategic approach to restoration of education integrity or education rights but also such intervention is not targeted in the newly-adopted education policy documents of the government. From what we can conclude from studying the latest reviews and studies of the education sector, the education system integrity or the restoring of the rights of those who had been put through the system without gaining due knowledge and skills were not articulated as research topics in any of the large-scale multi-facet studies of the main international partners of the government in education. Below we discuss these studies and the main strategic documents for the education sector.

REVIEW OF CURRENT POLICIES VIS-À-VIS CORRUPTION CHALLENGES

Armenia's education development has historically been governed by the strategic documents called the National Plan for Education Development (NPED) [10]. The latest National Plan covers the period from 2022 to 2030. It is essential that this is the first such plan that the post revolution government adopted while the previous one expired in 2015. Hence, there was no guiding document for education development for seven years (2015- 2022), and the critical post-revolutionary period,

where the gist of the transformation and integrity restoration should have happened, there was no vision of or an agenda for change. In many ways the window of opportunity, when both the system actors themselves and the public were ready and demanded change, was lost while the old ways of doing business adapted to the new reality. This is not to say that nothing changed, it is just mere constation of the fact that the changes were not strategically devised to target the key problems of education – integrity and equity.

The integrity violations or corruption in education have not been identified as a problem in either the NPED 2022-2030 or the recently adopted Anti-Corruption Strategy of the Republic of Armenia. The NPED gives a fair assessment of the quality of education and elaborates on eroded access to education, albeit not touching upon all the aspect of undermined equity. However, it fails to recognize the systemic deficit of integrity as the source of the problems. Thus, the measures to improve the situation remain symptomatic and cannot provide a systemic improvement. The dynamic of the detected improvements in student performance (TIMSS 2019) [11] and the wide margin of fluctuation of other test results [12] do indirectly prove such observation. However, there are also direct proves to this.

Thus, it is only in paragraph 78 of the NPED Point 3 that there is reference to integrity. Namely, the Plan proposes that *balanced self-governing* education institutions shall be established, principles of integrity and ethics shall be adopted and anti-corruption mechanisms shall be improved. No further elaboration of a cryptic “balanced self-governing” is provided; nor is it specified which particular anti-corruption mechanisms and to what end shall be improved and to what end.

However, the Action Plan of the NPED does not include any targeted anti-corruption or integrity strengthening chapter/sub-chapter or an action beyond development of documentation.

Regretfully, it is to be noted that the main international partners of the government in the education area have not prioritized integrity as either an area of intervention of even a research topic. Thus, the main research initiatives conducted in the years after the 2018 revolution was commissioned by the UNCEF [13] in the framework of the Education Sector Plan Development Grant (ESPDG) to the Republic of Armenia (RA) from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has not had any of the integrity violation issues as its research questions. In the meantime, some of the findings of these studies point at unresolved integrity problems as we discuss below.

Lack of integrity of the education system was studied independently by different researchers using different scientific methods. While the studies are not recent and moreover, had been done during the political regime that is no more, the findings are unfortunately still relevant today, since, as presented above, the problems have not been and are not targeted to be addressed in the major policy documents. Moreover, in December 2018, right after the new authorities came to power, the civil society developed and submitted a policy brief on exact and urgent measures to curb corruption in education, summarized in the civil society roadmap to restoration of governance integrity and advancing the democratic transformation of Armenia⁶.

In the result, as shown below, unabating, if not growing, learning poverty and inequity persist and the rights of children to education

⁶ The part related to education is summarized on the policy brief https://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/MoES_Anti-CorAP_OSFA_suggestions_Jan-18.pdf

are not fulfilled, nor have they been restored for those who were made to sail through the system not being properly educated.

Failure to acknowledge and face the integrity deficit as a precursor of the system ills is particularly astonishing given the huge public demand and the fact that the problem was repeatedly flagged and researched by the civil society and independent experts, in the OECD reports [5], [9], [14].

MAJOR FORMS OF CORRUPTION MANIFESTATION AND THE THREATS THEY POSE TO QUALITY AND EQUITY OF EDUCATION

The findings, presented below, are taken largely from the study conducted with Integrity of Education System (INTES)⁷ methodology in 2016 by a group of international and local experts with the support of the Open Society Foundations (OSF). According to the research, the four main integrity violations in secondary education were: supplementary private tutoring by class teachers; politicization; abuse of procedures for appointment and dismissal of staff; and undue recognition of learning achievements [9].

SUPPLEMENTARY PRIVATE TUTORING BY CLASS TEACHERS

Supplementary private tutoring has been wide-spread in Armenia as it is in many other countries with quite advanced education systems and good quality of education. In the past, private classes were primarily taken to pass the university admission examinations. Currently, as stated in the NPED 22-30, it is estimated that 60% of those admitted into universities have had private tutoring. While

⁷The methodology was first developed for the OECD and implemented in different countries with OECD and respective governments' support

not a violation per se, it does have proven negative effect on equity of the system. However, it becomes an integrity violation when conducted by class teachers to their own students or by those who the teachers direct the students to. Nowadays, the predominant portion of it is conducted by the school teachers and almost quarter is conducted by the class teachers to their own students as it was shown in the earlier study on integrity violations. Furthermore, the mentioned study concluded that in the teachers purposefully lowered the effectiveness of their teaching in the class to encourage taking of the private classes. Anecdotal and yet wide-spread opinion is that now this is happening in earlier grades and students as young as 12-13 systematically take private classes with their teachers.

The damage of such malpractice is deep and multi-faucet: the teachers' underteaching deliberately lowers the quality of class learning, it deprives the students, who cannot afford private tutoring, of the best efforts of their teachers, it greatly contributes to already existing teacher bias and discriminatory atmosphere in the classroom, since the students taking classes from their teachers or from those, who the latter recommended, enjoy preferential treatment and often receive undue recognition of their education achievements.

Thus, on one hand this integrity violation directly contributes to education quality degradation, social injustice, and on the other, it propels other forms of corruption, such as preferential treatment.

In view of such profound damage, the phenomenon of private tutoring by class teachers is not regulated through any regulatory act. In February 2023, the Code of Conduct for Education Practitioners was added as an Addendum to the Law on Education of the Republic of

Armenia [14]⁸. This particular violation and, for that matter, any other integrity violations except for accepting and giving gifts⁹. In the part of compliance to the Code, it does not articulate any mechanism, or a measure to prevent, identify, and moreover, punish the violator.

The school inspection, that shall guard the integrity of the system, has detailed and elaborate methodology and instruments for the inspection procedures. However, it is obvious that while the private tutoring violation is not targeted by the inspection procedure and the mechanisms are not conducive to identifying the negative impacts of the violation, namely under-teaching or preferential treatment.

The response that HCAV received from the MoESCS [15] regarding the inspections during 2022-2023 it is stated that there were 115 inspections into public and 6 into private educational institutions of all types all over Armenia. Among the recorded violations, private tutoring by class teachers, or any of its negative effects were mentioned. This suggests that either the violation is not targeted by the inspections or the inspections are not capable/suited for identifying this violation.

⁸ Deliberations on a Code of Conduct for teaching professionals started after the Revolution and in January 2019 a draft was published for public discussions. In the draft, private tutoring to own students for pay was articulated as ethics violation. As the current Code it did not have mechanisms to confront it in any way.

⁹ The language used in the Code allows subjective judgement even for gift-taking: it is only forbidden if it might be “reasonably” perceived as relevant to execution of duties.

POLITICIZATION OF EDUCATION IN ARMENIA

Consecutive national elections have proven that the practice of massive administrative abuse of the education system for political gains has been abandoned after Velvet Revolution. While there are no recent studies on the topic, there are no reports of preferential treatment traded versus political loyalty. However, despite the regulatory ban, the culture of in-class propaganda gets more reassured. There are reported instances of secondary school teachers engaging in political discussion of issues that are far from educational content and curricula. The school that is charged primarily with the task to develop critical thinking and equip the students with skills to navigate in the torrents of propaganda, becomes a place of propaganda.

If in pre-revolutionary period the political alignment and propaganda was with the ruling party and the administrative abuse of the system had reached a reported grotesque level, then now there are two competing propaganda narratives that have nothing to do with a credible fact-based, research-, and policy-based political discourse. The latter is true about the higher education institutions as it was detected and documented during the last local government elections [16]. Thus, the school that is charged primarily with the task to develop critical thinking and equip the students with skills to navigate in the torrents of propaganda, becomes a place of propaganda.

The Code of Conduct [14], refers to this violation by stipulating that the teacher refrain from religious preaching and political propaganda. As mentioned above the Code does not provide any mechanism for accountability and responsibility for incompliance.

UNDUE RECOGNITION OF EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENTS

This is probably the most troubling instance of all integrity violations in view of the situation with growing learning poverty of those who are “being transported” through the system without having utilized it adding to growing learning poverty and preventing individuals from realization of their learning potential; eventually, violating their right to education. These children, while being present in the class, are “invisible”. The violation, its manifestations, and spread, the factors that had made it so prevalent, as well as the measures to fight it were thoroughly researched as early as 2013, 2015 and onward by different researchers and methodologies [5], [9]. The nature of the problems appears to be systemic, pointing at more than mere implementation flaws. In the case of secondary education, it was found that the undue recognition of learning achievements is as wide- spread as it is dramatic, meaning that the discrepancies between the real achievement and the assessed result are large. Thus, 58% of surveyed teachers admitted to having participated in the practice, 60% of whom stated that they had no choice; meanwhile the share of students with excellent assessment results whose achievements had not been justified varied from 50% to 21% for Grade 8 students [9]. The study revealed distinct

patterns of marking bias, both grade inflation as well as grade deflation. The first is an indicator of an external pressure on teachers and the second is to create artificial demand for tutoring.

Despite the abundance of research data and growing learning poverty, neither in the past nor now this integrity violation was detected and reported as a violation by the Education Inspection Body.

One of the four studies, commissioned by UNICEF in 2022 as part of a multi-faucet comprehensive system research, supported by the GPE, refers to assessment system, namely and is called “Analysis of National Large-Scale Learning Assessment System in Armenia” [17]. As follows from the Executive Summary of this study, none of the 3 main research questions or their sub-questions targeted integrity of the assessment system. Nevertheless, from the recommendations presented in the Summary of the study, it is clear that learning assessment continues to pose multiple systemic and methodological challenges, undermining the capacity of the education system to gain insight in the quality of student learning and formulate ways to improve it.

Particularly, the Analysis points at unreliability of the assessment when it is administered by the schools and not the Assessment and Testing Center (ATC) as the “Schools are inclined to help students during the test administration, trying to make them achieve scores. ATC does not have reliable mechanisms for controlling these actions.” [17] Surprisingly, while the Summary states that nothing that could have jeopardized the assessment has been observed, it also concludes that: “From the data collected during the document review and stakeholder consultations it was concluded that the only reliable and technically sound data that can help make inferences regarding the progress of students comes from TIMSS. The reason for this is the absence of clearly defined, communicated and operationalized assessment frameworks and procedures”. [17]

In view of this finding, the decision of the Armenian government to terminate participation of Grade 8 students in TIMSS since 2019,

seems irrational, particularly for the reason of increased participation costs of the TIMSS as stated in the communication of the MoECSC in response to HCAV inquiry [18].

As shown in [9], undue recognition of learning achievements is wide-spread and dramatic. Thus, some 58% of surveyed teachers admitted to having participated in the practice, 60% of whom stated that they had no choice; simultaneously, the share of students with excellent results, whose achievements had not been justified varied from 21% to 50% for Grade 8 students.

The NPED 2022-2030 and its Action Plan in this regard propose preparation and enacting of proper documentation in accordance with international standards. However, already in 2015, it was mentioned that on paper Armenia had introduced the assessment reform with an assessment policy framework that specified the procedures and objective criteria, however the extent of utilizing it was too low and there was no mechanism to ensure that the classroom assessment complied with the new framework.

The recent change of the education assessment policy according to which numerical grading for primary school students (up until Grade 5) has been eliminated as part of the assessment process makes this violation go undetected and unaccounted for until it is too late. This was done without proper assessment of an alternative and corresponding teachers' proficiency to identify unsatisfactory learning and address it timely and at an individual level.

The fact that in 2022-2023 the Inspection Body has not detected any such violations as undue recognition of education achievements, preferential treatment, or inadequate level of teaching points at

inadequacy of the inspection body rather than at absence of such violations, even if the number of inspections was low (under 10% of all schools according to [15]) of the schools.

The Code of Conduct [14] urges the teachers to be “objective” in grading the students and refraining from undue recognition of achievements. It does not stipulate that the teachers' judgement be guided by assessment policy framework that specifies the procedures and objective criteria of assessment.

DETERIORATING QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND FALLING LITERACY RATES

Corruption of and control over the education system have taken heavy toll of the students' achievements and skills and have led to a new phenomenon in Armenia – growing illiteracy. Thus, overall, 21% of Grade 8 students in Armenia performed below the lowest proficiency level established by TIMSS in 2015, whereas only 5% and 2% did not reach this level in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, respectively [19]. There was a discernible improvement in the performance of Grade 4 students in 2019. The number of students performing under 400 mark (the bottom threshold), contracted from 30% in 2015 to 20% in 2019. Nonetheless, the number of students not meeting the lower threshold in math and, particularly, science is very high. The percentage of students reaching the highest threshold is unchanged from 2015 and stands at mere 3% in math [10], [11]. In 2019 and in 2023 Grade 8 students did not participate in TIMSS, hence there are no results for Grade 8 students in 2019 so there is no comparison to draw from.

As already mentioned above, the data from the same year's WB Learning Poverty Brief

[7] indicate that 35% of children at late elementary education have learning poverty, i.e., are not able to read and understand short age-appropriate text by age 10. The most recent data of the 2022 WB Learning Poverty Brief [20] stand at 27%. The data from the year before, i.e., 2021, however, stood at only 26% [21]. While the improvement is visible compared to 2015, such oscillation between the years in the last 3 years point at stagnation or absence of a

steady trend that is a result of a targeted approach. This supposition is confirmed by the recent test administered locally showing that the positive trend that was observed in the TIMSS results in 2019, has not carried on. The test conducted in by the **state education inspection body** in 40 schools in 2022 revealed that the number of students failing in Armenian language and math reached 27,8% and 44, 5% respectively. It is worth noting that the advanced result in math was recorded only with 4,7% of students. Admittedly, as mentioned above the TIMSS results are the most reliable and the locally administered test might have some inaccuracy and not be compatible with the TIMSS. However, the almost double percentage of failing students is too high a margin to ignore.

Unfortunately, there are no results for Grade 8 students in 2019 so there is no comparison to draw from.

EQUITY¹⁰ AND RIGHT TO EDUCATION¹⁰

An independent study by international experts based on the official data show that children have limited access to quality education depending on their social background and residential status [19]. This research particularly found that students from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in Armenia performed better in mathematics and science than students coming from lower SES families. The SES gap in student achievement has increased from 2003 to 2011-2015. The differences existed both between wealthier and less affluent and also those living in poverty (30%). Students living below the poverty line performed worse academically in

¹⁰ | We consider the system to be equitable when (1) there is verifiable minimal level of education/ skills attainment for all and (2) the social status of the family does not prevent the student from full realization of educational potential.

secondary school, which would have long-lasting consequences on their educational and economic opportunities as adults. With that, inequalities and poverty are reproduced across generations. The study found that the education system in Armenia is relatively ineffective for serving students from different SES backgrounds in comparison with other countries in the region. For example, if we compare two students with similar SES backgrounds but living in different countries, the one living in Armenia tends to perform worse in mathematics and science than his/her counterpart living in the Russian Federation, Turkey, or Kazakhstan. It was also found that the students from lower SES attending schools with lower SES are in double-jeopardy: they performed worse than the students from lower SES attending higher SES schools.

Simultaneously, students in schools located in rural areas performed worse in mathematics and science than students in urban areas in Armenia. The urban-rural gap in student achievement has remained relatively stable between 2011 and 2015 [19].

While this might be true for many countries, in Armenia, as we have already indicated, there have been policy provisions that are not conducive with equity of education at the minimum. These policies have been mainly propelled to offset depletion of resources due to rampant corruption. Thus, to camouflage corruption – lack of essential resources, underqualified teachers, poorly maintained schools, the authorities turned to re- distribution of resources – from smaller communities to larger, from the regions to the capital. This was done not only at the practical level through exercising political, financial and managerial control, but starting from some point, even at a policy level. In this manner the high schools that aimed at preparing students

for continuing their education in higher education institutions, were established almost exclusively in the cities, further hampering access to education of the children from rural areas. Notoriously, the funds, earmarked for transportation of rural students to/from high schools have never been used for that purpose.

As the disparity became too large to ignore, instead of facing and addressing it, the government decided to turn to elitist model of education, to the so-called National Education Excellence Program, by which few exclusively equipped schools with best teachers would lift up the neighboring schools to their level, a so-called trickle-down model. Despite its obvious discriminatory nature and unsustainable, if not anti-scientific philosophy, a loan for such a model was duly approved by the WB [24] at the amount of USD 37,5 million, 60% of which was earmarked for 0,8% of all schools in Armenia (located in the regional centers).

In the results of such disproportionate and discriminatory policies access to quality education was skewed so that children from poor, particularly extremely poor, and rural families were falling behind in every aspect – educational attainment, enrollment in educational institutions, aspiration for continued education. Specifically, non-poor spent twice as much as poor families on the child's general education in 2019. At the same time the proportion spent on private tutoring was 1:4 for poor and non-poor families respectively. Considering that taking private classes are almost mandatory to get into higher education, this means a four-fold disadvantage for a poor family child compared to his/her non-poor peer.

Enrolment in high schools from non-poor households was 39% compared to 12,7% of that from poor and 0% from extremely poor

households. Same picture was true for pre- school enrolment. At the same time, the higher education enrollment is skewed in favor of children from non-poor families, thus hampering social advancement of poor kids.

Thus, in 2018, non-poor family enrolment totaled to 49%, while poor and extremely poor were 26% and 0% respectively. In fact, as it is obvious, the extremely poor have been discriminated against from the early age which results in their actual exclusion from the process. These results, which the civil society published yet in 2019, are in accord with those presented in the NPED 2023-2030.

GENDER BIAS

Multiple studies by the civil society both on curricula and teachers' attitude, conducted repeatedly since early 2000, showed strong bias of both in favor of boys. By 2013 it reached the level when there was derogatory content in one of the new textbooks developed and published in the framework of a loan project. This was acknowledged by the lender, the WB, in response to several CSO's submission Inspection Panel. The following research of the entire curricula, commissioned by the WB [25] came to reaffirm the previously reported discrimination, i.e., that gender inequalities are interwoven into pedagogy, hidden curricula, stereotypical manifestation of gender roles in the textbooks and learning materials. This is reinforced by the teachers' bias that has been surveyed and reported extensively as early as 2004. A sizeable number of teachers (varying from 20% to 50% in different surveys) believe that boys have superior physical and mental abilities and they strive to instill docility and obedience in girls, while stressing leadership in boys, reinforcing the existing inequalities and reproduces the current patriarchal system [25].

The government's response to the wealth of research demonstrating skewed inclusion and participation based on gender has been minimal: gender equality principle has not been translated into educational standards and textbooks, no targeted capacity building of teachers has been designed and implemented, the issue is not part of inspection agenda of the education inspection [25].

The NPED has not identified the gender equity as a target area and the Action Plan does not specify actions and benchmarks for change in this regard.

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

The COVID pandemic has posed multiple challenges on education systems all around the world. It distorted all aspects of education but primarily affected equity of education [26], [27]. In Armenia, mobilization of donor community and the government agencies to meet the need, could not objectively bridge the wide digital gap. This exacerbated the inequity of access to education of children from lower SES families. Early results, collected and summarized in the UNICEF study of the education sector indicate to such dynamics.

SUMMARY

Years of political corruption and misuse of public resources have undermined the integrity and vitality of institutions that has had a devastating impact on quality and equity of education and violated the right of thousands of children to education. The system, that is called to drive social mobility and address the source of inequity at its origin, has acquired a capacity for tolerating inequity and disguising illiteracy.

The government and some donors view the issue of inclusion as primarily from the point of view of the children with special education needs and those not enrolled in formal schooling. However, as is obvious from the above, many children are enrolled but are not participants and beneficiaries of the education process. Enrollment and attendance shall not be only the only parameters to measure and report on access to education.

Integrity of the system cannot be restored by mere refraining from the vicious practices by the authorities on top. Nor can it be restored by adding new, less compromised institutions and mechanisms on top of the compromised ones with similar/duplicating mandates.

To break the current high tolerance to inequity and violation of education rights the system integrity must be restored through a targeted and urgent measures of high quality professional and efficient audit of integrity violations and instituting accountability and inspection measures the outcome of which are tied to administrative consequences.

Remnant policies from earlier reform agendas and particularly the National Education Excellence Program that are not conducive with active promotion of equity shall be eradicated and offset by countermeasures.

Decade-long violation of education rights by undue recognition of education attainment shall be stopped and the education rights of the “invisible” children shall be restored through urgent and targeted methods to identify the children not meeting mandatory minimal threshold and educating them in supplementary classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

INTEGRITY

LONG-TERM

Conduct corruption risk assessment of the system to identify main pervasive forms of integrity violations, duplication and inefficiency of integrity mechanisms, explicit conflict of interests. Through extensive public discussions and expert consultations raise awareness of the identified problems; build consensus on urgent need to restore integrity of the system. Amend the NPED and its Action Plan with urgent steps and concrete deliverables restoring accountability and trustworthiness of the system.

SHORT-TERM

1. Make the Education Inspectorate a highly independent and professionally strong institution charged with and capable of identifying integrity violations and their negative impact, including supplemental private tutoring to their own students, undue recognition of education achievements. Conduct regular inspections at least with the frequency prescribed by the law.
2. Define supplementary private tutoring to their own students, as well as referral to a fellow teacher as a violation and an administrative offense. Adopt binding regulations, provisions of which are tied to administrative consequences for teaching professionals. Make principals responsible for the violation in their schools.
3. Adopt both summative and formative assessment mechanisms for systematic assessment of the needs of students to ensure the provision of basic minimum and targeted support within the classroom.
4. Ensure Armenia’s participation in international assessments PISA and TIMSS, guarantee the integrity of the process. Restore participation of Grade 8 students’ cohort in TIMSS.

EQUITY AND RIGHT TO QUALITY EDUCATION

1. Assess and identify the students who do not possess minimal math and language skills for their respective level. Design and implement immediate targeted measures to close the literacy gap at all levels by instituting minimal learning outcome standard and by means of supplementary tutoring of these students. Set annual learning improvement parameters for each cohort and each subject and assess them regularly.
2. Increase Education share in GDP; apply funding mechanisms that will offset gaps in school SES.
3. Revise policies adopted in the framework of the National Education Excellence Program that promote elitist education at the expense of equity and universal access to quality education.
4. Adopt parameters that measure participation in the education process other than enrollment and attendance.

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