



EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Asia-Pacific Regional Fact Sheet

In November 2022, 155 Member States unanimously adopted the [Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education](#) at the 2nd UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education and. Endorsed by 38 countries from the Asia-Pacific region, the Declaration affirms a collective commitment to transform ECCE over the next decade through strengthened policies, inclusive and equitable service provision, professional support for the ECCE workforce, innovation, and sustainable financing. At the heart of this commitment are concrete actions to ensure at least one year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education, strengthen the qualifications and support for ECCE personnel, and increase investment, with the goal of allocating at least 10% of national education budgets to pre-primary education, in pursuit of SDG Target 4.2.

This regional fact sheet provides an overview of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Asia-Pacific, highlights key challenges facing the subsector, and outlines a call to action to strengthen ECCE systems across the region.

Early Childhood
 Education attendance
 declined from
84% in 2015 to
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 further decline to
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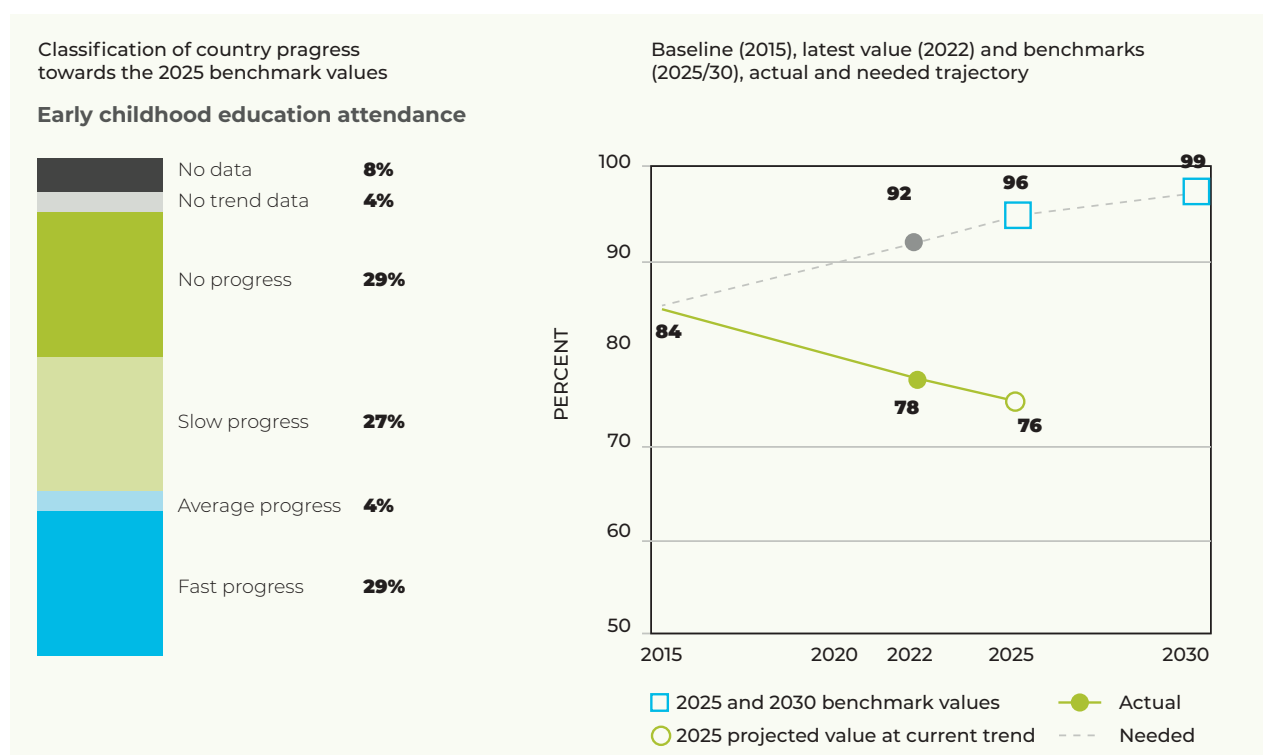


Overview of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Asia-Pacific

- The Asia-Pacific region is home to a diverse range of countries, and with this diversity comes wide disparities in access to quality ECCE. As shown in Figure 1, while some countries have made notable strides in improving ECCE enrollment, 56% of countries in the region are making slow or no progress toward the 2025 and 2030 benchmarks. Alarming, recent available data shows a reversal in progress, with the percentage of children who participate in organized learning one year before primary school declining from 84% in 2015 to 78% in 2022 and projected to fall further to 76% by 2025 if current efforts are not intensified.
- Compounding this challenge, 8% of countries in the region lack reliable ECCE data (both administrative and household data), which significantly impacts the ability to assess trends, measure progress, and develop effective policies. When combined with the overall slow or stagnant progress toward ECCE benchmarks, the absence of quality data puts many children at risk of missing out on early learning opportunities, which are crucial for school readiness and long-term educational outcomes.

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Figure 1: Classification of country progress towards the 2025 and 2030 benchmark values*



* Participation rate in organized learning one year before primary.

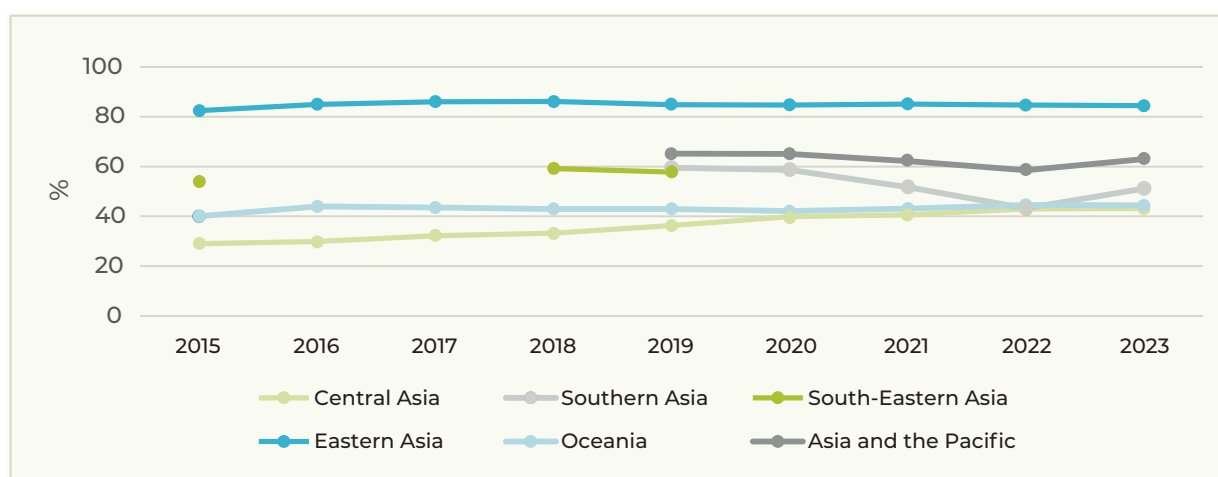
Source: SDG 4 scorecard: progress report on national benchmarks in Asia and the Pacific, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391174>



- A closer look at sub-regional trends reveals an uneven landscape. While Eastern Asia leads the region with near-universal pre-primary education, net enrolment rates in South-Eastern Asia, Oceania, and Central Asia have declined in recent years, signaling a reversal rather than stagnation. The decline was most pronounced at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), when at least seven million children were unable to continue pre-primary education, and 70% of ECCE centers in the Asia-Pacific were closed.¹ However, Southern Asia has shown signs of a modest recovery between 2022 and 2023, following earlier declines. The Asia-Pacific regional average now stands at 63% in 2023, leaving over one-third of children without access to any form of pre-primary education. This highlights the urgent need for robust policy reforms and significant investments to expand access, particularly in underserved areas, in order to meet the region's commitment to SDG Target 4.2.

The Asia-Pacific regional average for pre-primary enrolment now stands at **63%** in 2023, leaving over one-third of children without access to any form of pre-primary education

Figure 2: Net enrolment rate, pre-primary education, both sexes* (%): 2015–2023



*Total number of students of the official age group for pre-primary education, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population.

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Data Browser, data release February 2025. Available at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

- When it comes to the legal framework of ECCE, only six out of 46 countries in the Asia-Pacific have adopted at least one year of both free and compulsory pre-primary education, in line with SDG commitments. This limited policy adoption undermines the right to ECCE and restricts access to early learning opportunities—particularly for children from low-income and marginalized communities—perpetuating disparities and slowing progress toward inclusive and equitable education for all.

¹ UNESCO, 2022. Policy brief. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Asia-Pacific. Prepared for the 2nd Asia-Pacific Regional Education Minister's Conference (APREMC II) in 2022. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381973>

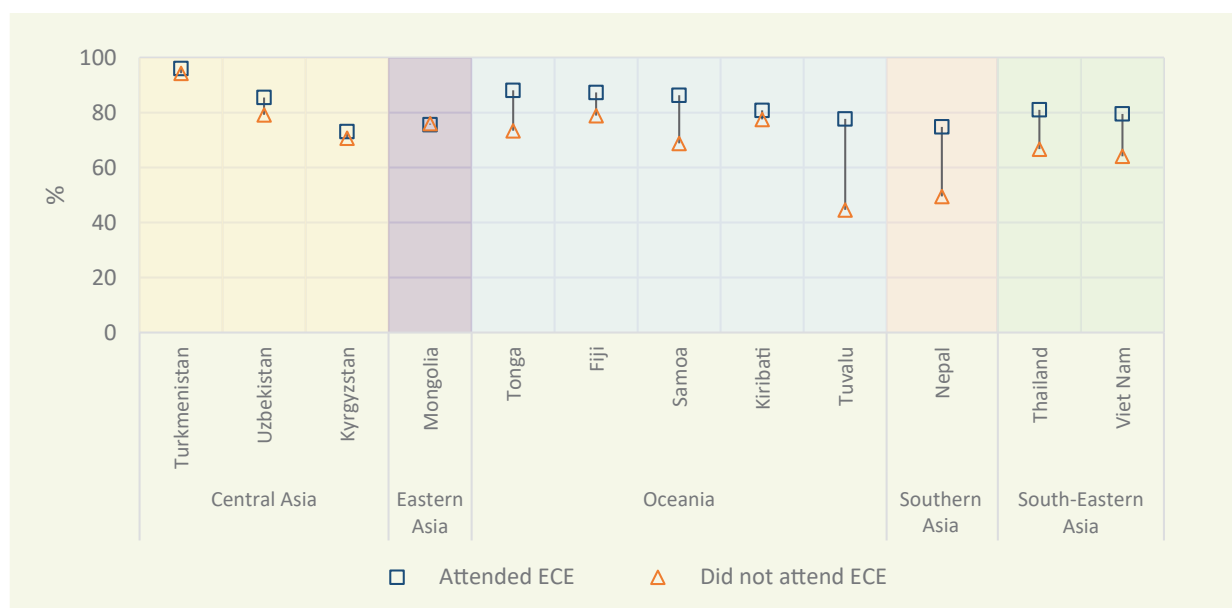
Free and Compulsory (6)	Free (12)	Compulsory (2)	Neither free nor compulsory (25)	
DPR Korea Kyrgyzstan Marshall Islands Nauru Nepal Philippines	Australia Cook Islands Japan Kazakhstan Mongolia New Zealand Niue Republic of Korea Tajikistan Thailand Turkmenistan Uzbekistan	Tonga Viet Nam	Bangladesh Bhutan Brunei Cambodia China Fiji India Indonesia Iran Kiribati Lao PDR Malaysia Maldives	Micronesia Myanmar Pakistan Palau Papua New Guinea Samoa Singapore Solomon Islands Sri Lanka Timor-Leste Tuvalu Vanuatu

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Data Browser, data release September 2024. Available at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

Positive Trends of ECCE

- The region has demonstrated that investing in ECCE lays the foundation for lifelong success by enhancing cognitive and socio-emotional development in young children, leading to better primary education performance and lifelong skills. As shown in Figure 3, children who attended ECCE consistently show a higher proportion of developmental readiness across countries, compared to those who did not attend. This underscores the critical role of early learning in supporting children's growth and success. However, while ECCE attendance has a positive impact, it must be understood in the broader context of socio-economic factors, as well as parental involvement and support, which also play a significant role in shaping children's learning and developmental outcomes.

Figure 3: Proportion of children who are developmentally on track (%)*: 2018-2023



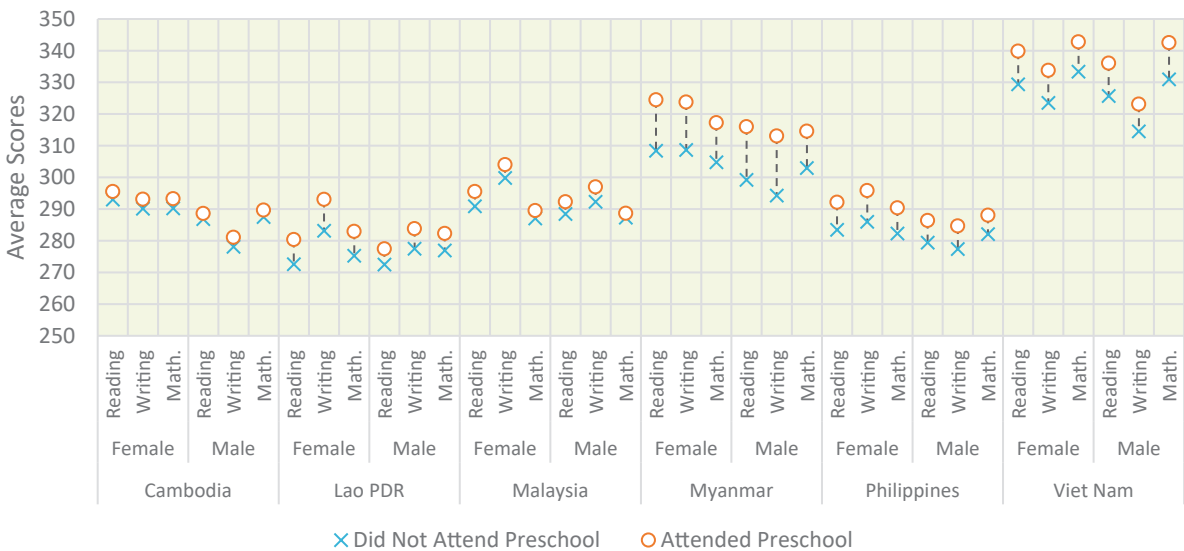
*Number of children aged 24 to 59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being divided by the total number of children aged 24 to 59 months in the population multiplied by 100.

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Data Browser, data release February 2025. Available at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

- Evidence from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) participant countries shows that investing in early childhood education significantly improves school readiness for both boys and girls. As highlighted in the Figure 4, Grade 5 students—regardless of sex—who attended preschool consistently achieve higher reading, writing, and mathematics scores than those who did not, with performance gaps widening at higher proficiency levels.

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Figure 4: Average reading, writing and mathematics scores for Grade 5 students, by preschool attendance and sex (2019)



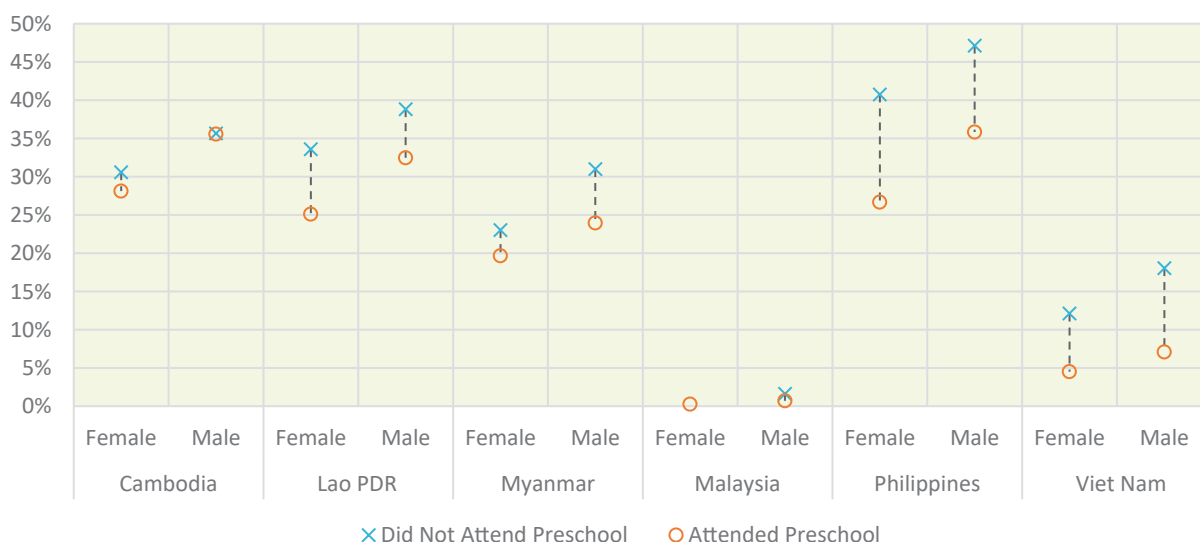
Source: SEA-PLM 2019 datasets. Available at <https://www.seapl原因.org/> (Data retrieved on 24 March 2025)



- In most Southeast Asian countries (Figure 5), students—regardless of sex—who attended at least one year of ECCE were less likely to repeat a grade during primary education. This demonstrates the critical impact of ECCE on long-term educational outcomes and enhancing education system efficiency. On average, the grade repetition rate is 15% higher among students who did not attend preschool compared to those who did, underscoring the lasting benefits of ECCE.



Figure 5: Percentage of primary school students who have repeated a grade at least once, by preschool attendance and sex (2019)



Source: SEA-PLM 2019 datasets. Available at <https://www.seaplrm.org/> (Data retrieved on 24 March 2025)

- Holistic, multisectoral, and inclusive ECCE programmes that provide targeted support for children from vulnerable and marginalized groups demonstrate the potential of ECCE to bridge social inequities and narrow learning gaps. These programmes provide support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, as exemplified by government initiatives such as: an initiative in Maldives² that addressed limited reading materials, while the Philippines introduced the Prevention, Early Identification, Referral and Intervention of Delays, Disorders and Disabilities in Early Childhood (PEIRIDDDDEC) system to support children aged 0-4 years.³ In Uzbekistan, mobile kindergartens serve children aged 3-7 years living in remote rural areas with no access to preschool education facilities.⁴ These examples highlight how context-responsive ECCE interventions can promote equity and inclusion, ensuring that no child is left behind.

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² UNESCO ECCE Compendium: <https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education/addressing-limited-reading-materials-maldivian-schools-improve-literacy-rates?hub=70242>

³ ECCD Council, Republic of the Philippines: <https://eccdcouncil.gov.ph/human-resource-development-programs/>

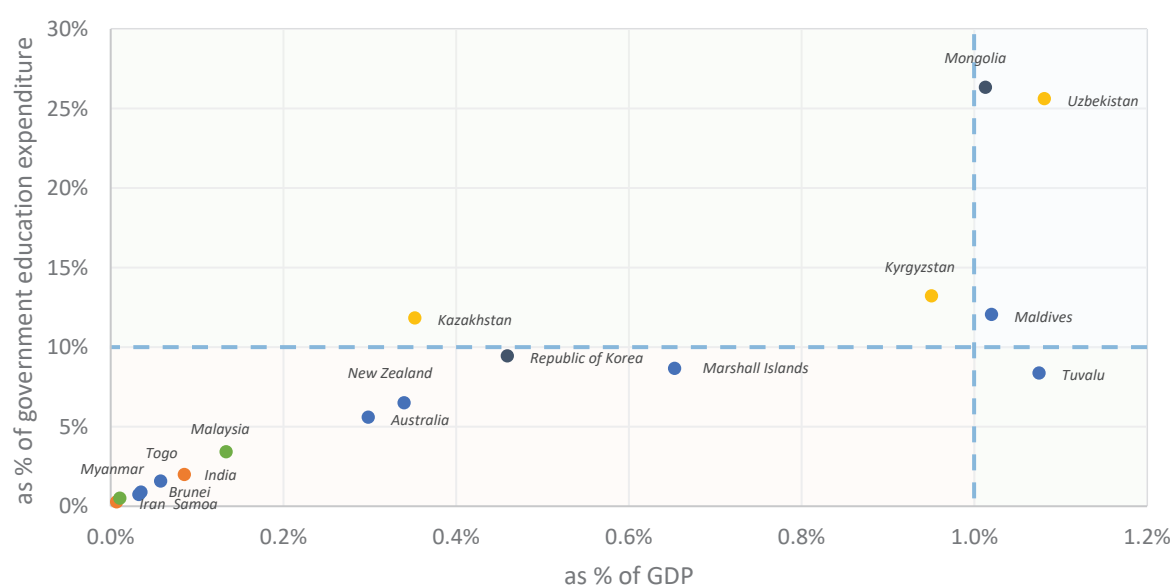
⁴ UNESCO ECCE Compendium: <https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education/bridging-gap-expanding-quality-preschool-education-remote-rural-areas?hub=70242>

Key Challenges for ECCE in Asia-Pacific

Low Public Investment in the ECCE Sector

The ECCE sector is often neglected in public budgets. Most countries in the Asia-Pacific region spend below the global benchmark of allocating 10% of total government education expenditure or 1% of GDP to pre-primary education. As shown in Figure 6, only Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mongolia, Tuvalu, and Uzbekistan currently meet one or both of the global benchmarks. This chronic underinvestment has resulted in inadequate facilities, a shortage of trained personnel and limited resources, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Figure 6: Government expenditure on pre-primary education*: 2023 or latest year available

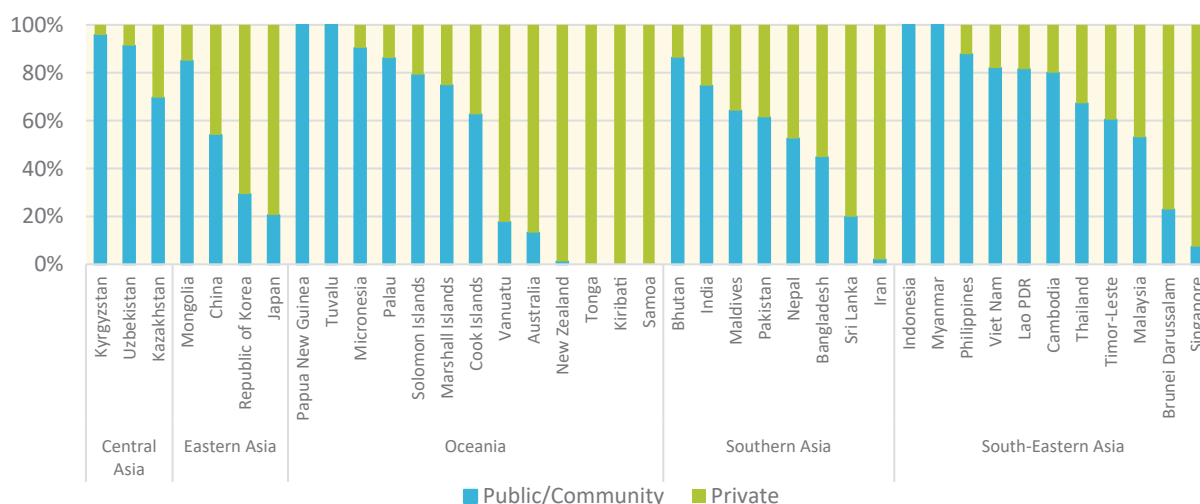


*Total general (local, regional and central) government expenditure on pre-primary education (current, capital, and transfers), expressed as a percentage of total government expenditure and GDP. Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Data Browser, data release February 2025. Available at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

In Asia and the Pacific, around 43% of children in pre-primary education are enrolled in private institutions, with some countries seeing over 80% of students attending private schools. This heavy reliance on private providers, combined with insufficient public funding, exacerbates disparities in access and quality. Public underinvestment results in fewer affordable options, limited inclusive services, and inconsistent quality standards across ECCE programmes.



Figure 7: Share of enrolment in pre-primary education in private institutions (%)*: 2023 or latest year available



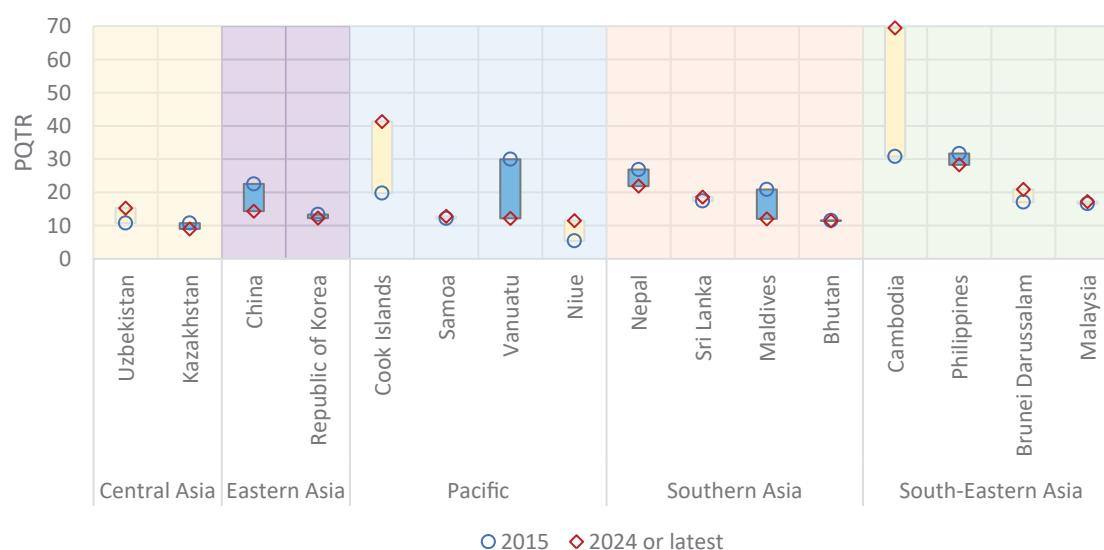
*Total number of students in pre-primary education enrolled in institutions that are not operated by a public authority but controlled and managed, whether for profit or not, by a private, expressed as a percentage of total number of students enrolled in pre-primary education.

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Data Browser, data release February 2025. Available at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

Qualified Teacher Shortages

The region is experiencing a severe shortage of qualified ECCE teachers, with countries such as Cambodia, Cook Islands, and the Philippines reporting pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratios as high as 70, 41, and 29 respectively. Many ECCE staff are honorarium-based workers, who are not always recognized, may lack job security, face challenging working conditions, and have limited access to professional development—all of which undermines the quality of early learning. The shortage of qualified teachers is particularly acute in South-Eastern Asia, where the need for a qualified and trained ECCE workforce with adequate opportunities for support and professional development is most urgent.

Figure 8: Pupil-qualified teacher ratio (PQTR) in pre-primary education*: 2015 and 2024 /latest year available



*Average number of pupils per qualified teacher in pre-primary education, based on headcounts of both pupils and teachers.

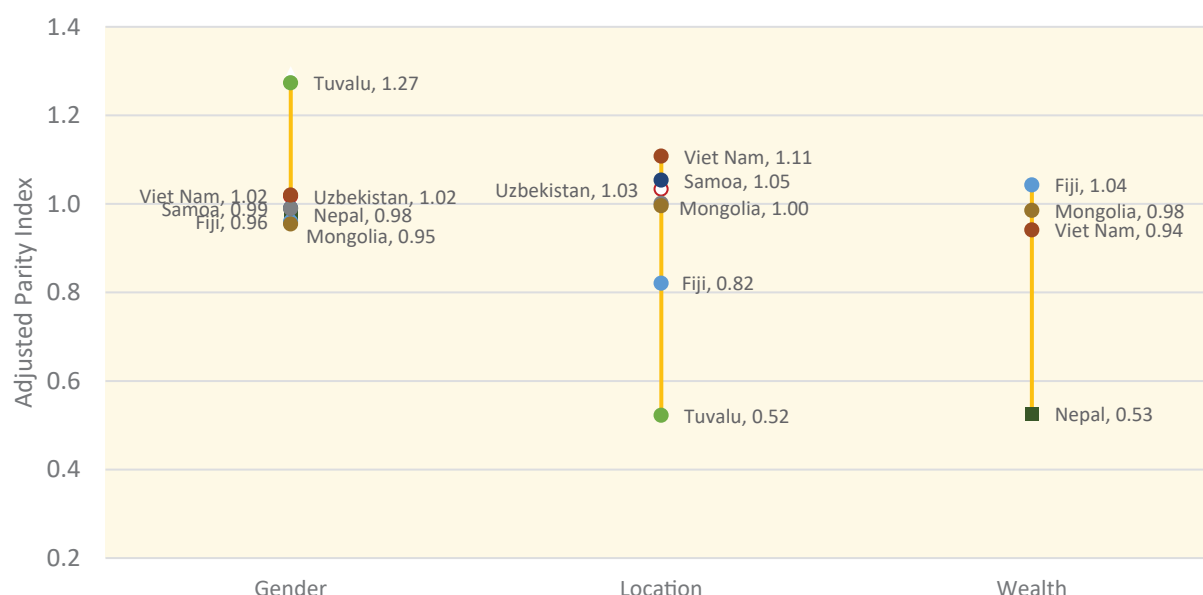
Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Data Browser, data release February 2025. Available at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

Disparities in Access

Many children, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, continue to face limited access to ECCE programmes. Children from ethnic minority groups, refugee backgrounds, and those with disabilities encounter even greater barriers, further deepening inequalities in their developmental outcomes. As shown in Figure 9, significant disparities persist across gender, location, and wealth. For instance, Tuvalu exhibits high disparities by location (parity index below 0.80), while Nepal shows particularly low parity in access by wealth, with a parity index of 0.53 – highlighting a pronounced disadvantage for the poorest children. These gaps underscore the urgent need for investing in accessible and inclusive infrastructure, providing learning resources, and offering professional training on inclusive education approaches to ensure all children have a fair chance at developmental success.

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Figure 9: Parity Index of Pre-Primary Education Attendance*: One Year Before the Official Entrance Age to Primary School, 2018-2022



* The parity indices are calculated based on the percentage of children attending any type of pre-primary education programme one year before the official entrance age to primary school.

** Values above 1.03 indicate a disparity favoring girls, rural children, or lower-income groups, while values below 0.97 indicate a disparity favoring boys, urban children, or higher-income groups. Values between 0.97 and 1.03 are considered to reflect parity, meaning there is no significant disparity in access.

*** Data from 10 countries in the Asia-Pacific region was available in WIDE data for this analysis.

Source: UNESCO Bangkok Analysis based on UNESCO WIDE data. Available at <https://www.education-inequalities.org/> (Data retrieved on 25 April 2025)

ECCE Systems Under Pressure from Climate Vulnerabilities

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the Asia-Pacific region remained the world's most disaster-affected region from weather, climate and water-related hazards in 2023.⁵ Approximately 538 million children aged 0 to 8⁶ in the region live in countries facing extremely high or high climate risks, with countries like Pakistan (7.7), Afghanistan (7.6), Bangladesh (7.6),

⁵ WMO, 2024, State of the Climate in Asia 2023. Available at <https://wmo.int/publication-series/state-of-climate-asia-2023>

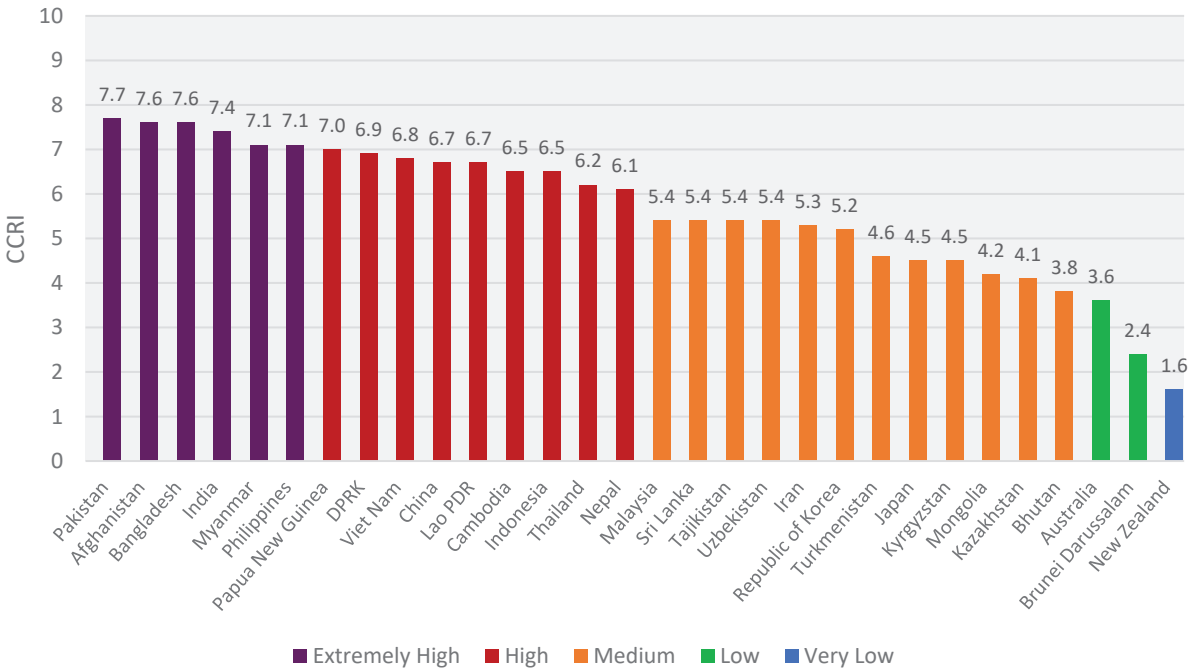
⁶ Estimated by UNESCO based on UNICEF the Children's Climate Risk Index (2021) and United Nations. World Population Prospects (2024). Total number of population aged 0 to 8 in the countries at extremely high and high risk of climate change (CCRI), including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, DPRK, Viet Nam, China, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, and Pacific countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palu, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu). Although Small Island Developing States were not included in the CCRI analysis due to data availability limitations, these countries are counted for this analysis, considering scenarios and existential threats of climate change.

and Myanmar (7.1) ranking among the highest on the Children’s Climate Risk Index (CCRI).⁷ These children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, experiencing poverty, diseases, displacement, trauma, and disruption to education at all levels, including ECCE, due to frequent natural disasters such as air pollution,⁸ floods,⁹ and cyclones. There is an urgent need in this region, particularly high climate risk countries, to build climate-resilient ECCE systems to protect the well-being and development of young children.

The climate shocks during early childhood can have profound and lasting impacts on physical and cognitive development, hindering children from reaching their full potential. In Indonesia, delayed arrival of monsoons during pregnancy were associated with malnutrition and stunted growth in children aged 2 to 4.¹⁰ In India, rainfall disruptions during early life impacted vocabulary skills at age 5 and math and non-cognitive abilities at age 15, particularly affecting boys and children from less-educated families.¹¹ Across seven Asian countries, exposure to early-life disasters was linked to lower school enrollment among boys and weaker math performance among girls.¹² Similarly, the 1997 wildfires in Indonesia resulted in fewer years of schooling completed.¹³

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Figure 10. Children’s Climate Risk Index in the Asia-Pacific region (2021)



*The CCRI is composed of many indicators across climate and environmental hazards, shocks and stresses, as well as child vulnerability.
Source: UNICEF the Children’s Climate Risk Index. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis> (Data retrieved on 24 March 2025)

7 The CCRI provides the first comprehensive assessment of children’s exposure and vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. It ranks countries based on the degree to which children are exposed to climate and environmental shocks, such as cyclones and heatwaves, and their vulnerability, determined by access to essential services like education, health, and clean water. Children living in countries with higher CCRI scores are more likely to be exposed to these shocks and have fewer resources to cope, making them especially vulnerable to the disruptive effects of climate change on their development and education.

8 ARNEC, 2023, A Call to Action: Air Pollution in Early Childhood. Available at <https://arnec.net/node/466>

9 ARNEC, 2023, A Call to Action: Flooding and Early Childhood Development. Available at <https://arnec.net/node/465>

10 Thiede and Gray, 2020

11 Chang et al., 2022

12 Zhang et al., 2024

13 Lo Bue, 2019

Call to Action for ECCE in Asia-Pacific

Increase Investment

Governments in the region need to strengthen their capacity to plan, project and mobilize sustainable financial resources for ECCE, with a commitment to gradually increasing investment in pre-primary education to the global benchmark of at least 10% of national education budgets or 1% of GDP. These funds must be strategically allocated—whether to expand public ECCE services, address teacher shortage, or better reach underserved populations. Exploring innovative financing mechanisms will also be key to improve resource mobilization and ensuring that financial resources are used efficiently and equitably, expanding access to quality ECCE for all children, especially those from marginalized communities.

Address Teacher Shortage by Building a Skilled and Empowered ECCE Workforce with Decent Working Conditions

Investing in the ECCE workforce is critical to improving the quality of ECCE. Efforts must focus on enhancing teachers' skills and capacity through comprehensive training programmes, with an emphasis on inclusive practices, social-emotional learning, and innovative teaching methods to attract the best teacher candidates. Governments must ensure that ECCE staff have decent working conditions, including fair wages, job security, and access to benefits. Recognizing ECCE professionals as formal educators and providing them with opportunities for career growth and leadership development will elevate their status and motivation. This holistic approach will not only attract skilled professionals to the field but also retain a qualified and dedicated workforce, ensuring better care and education for young children.

Strengthen Multisectoral Coordination and Expand Access for Vulnerable Populations

A multisectoral approach is crucial to ensuring equitable access to ECCE, particularly for children in conflict or disaster-affected areas, indigenous communities, and children with disabilities. There is a need to scale up integrated approaches that combine education, healthcare, and nutrition to provide holistic early childhood services. To bridge equity gaps, investments should focus on inclusive and climate resilient infrastructure, adaptive learning resources, and professional training for educators to effectively address the unique needs of these populations. Tailored programmes, such as those emphasizing trauma-informed care and multilingual education, are essential to ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has access to quality early childhood education and the opportunity to thrive. This approach lays groundwork for lifelong learning and development for vulnerable children.



Bridge the Data Gap

Reliable and comprehensive data on ECCE indicators—especially for children aged 0–3—is urgently needed. Addressing critical data gaps is essential to better understand early childhood development and inform effective policy responses. Robust data systems will empower policymakers to make evidence-based decisions, track progress, and design targeted interventions. Monitoring key indicators such as access and quality will help ensure that resources are reaching the children who need them most. Strengthening regional and national collaboration on data sharing and capacity-building will further enhance efforts to bridge this gap and advance ECCE development.

Promote Climate-Sensitive ECCE Policies, Planning, Programmes

Integrating ECCE into national climate policies, adaptation strategies, and disaster risk reduction (DRR) plans is essential to safeguard early learning systems amid escalating climate threats. This includes prioritizing ECCE in climate financing, strengthening child-centered emergency preparedness and response, embedding climate education and sustainability practices in early learning curricula, and providing teacher training on how to integrate climate change and sustainability into teaching and learning.



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