



Social Dimension of General Education

Background

Since early 1990s, Armenia has been going through major reforms as a country in transition, which have been largely implemented with the financial and professional guidance of international financial institutions (including World Bank). Education was one of the fields where major changes were introduced, including decentralization and governance models, per-capita funding mechanism, democratized education content. However, they did not bring the intended outcomes.¹ Specifically, the donor-driven policies, which aimed to assure accessible and quality education, have ended up creating a system with major problems concerning accountability, quality, and accessibility. They also resulted in substantial public distrust towards the system. Therefore, it is not surprising that 58% of respondents of Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer survey ranked the Armenian education sector as one of the most corrupt sectors in the country in 2013.

The outcome of these developments is an education system in crisis, where one of the pressing issues is inequity in general education. Social polarization and inequity is growing due to unfair distribution of public good, disproportionate regional development, and lack of fulfillment of the right to education. Particularly, children have limited access to quality general education mostly due to their 1) socio-economic background of families (poor/ non-poor), 2) residential status (living in rural areas), and 3) gender.

Such inequity in general education is a major drawback for Armenia, as recent studies have found that prioritizing equity in national education strategies is one of the key factor for improving socio-economic conditions of a country.² In spite of considering the mentioned conditions and making substantial improvements, the government of Armenia has adopted an elitist approach that is exacerbating the equity-related problems in the education system.

This paper presents the key aspects of the mentioned urgent issues and provides respective recommendations for tackling them and establishing more equitable general education system.

Socio-Economic Background and Equity in General Education

In Armenia, quality of education is directly linked with poverty status. In 2015, only 16% of people who had higher education were poor, while the rate for those who had only elementary education was 61.3%. Compared to the situation in 2010, the poverty rate among people with higher education dropped by 3%, while it increased by 16.8% among people with elementary education (see Diagram 1).

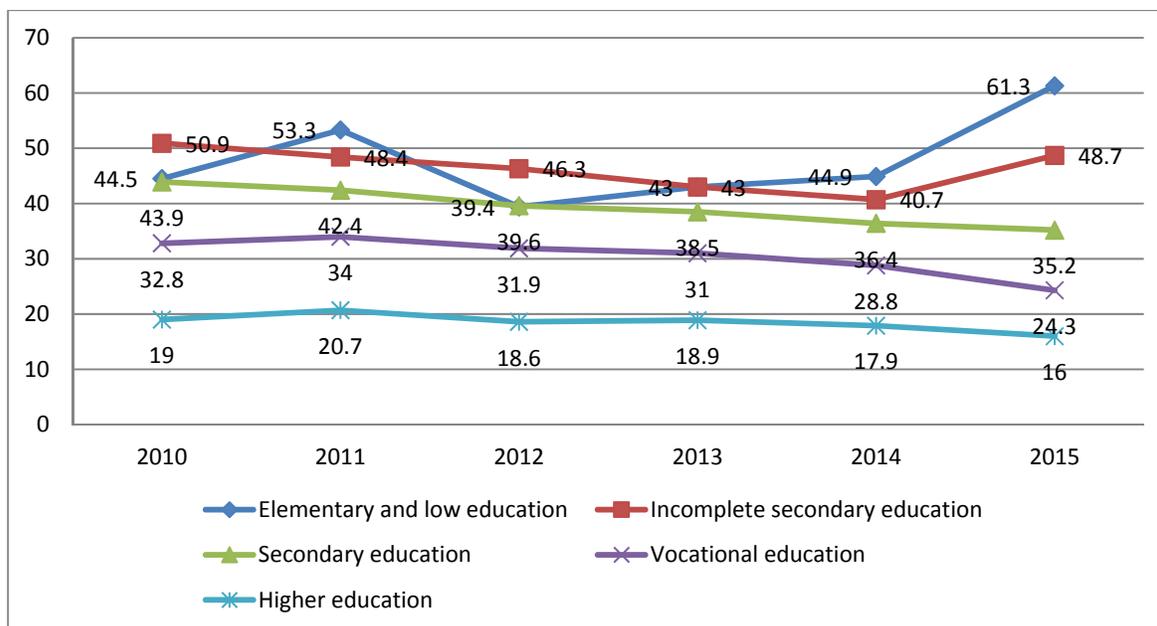
The grades that students receive at school are also directly related to the socio-economic background of their families. If 42.8% of students from non-poor families receive excellent marks (9 or 10), only 34.3% of children from poor family background get such grades. At the same time, 8.7% of the students in the latter category get marks in the range of 0-5, while those from non-poor families do not receive such low grades.³

¹ Milovanovitch, M. & Lapham, K., Good intentions cast long shadows: Donors, governments and education reform in Armenia and Ukraine in Silova, I., & Chankseliani, M. (Eds.). (forthcoming). Comparing Post-Socialist Transformations: Education in Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union. Oxford: Symposium Books.

² Ten Steps to Equity in Education. OECD. 2008. Retrieved from: <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf>.

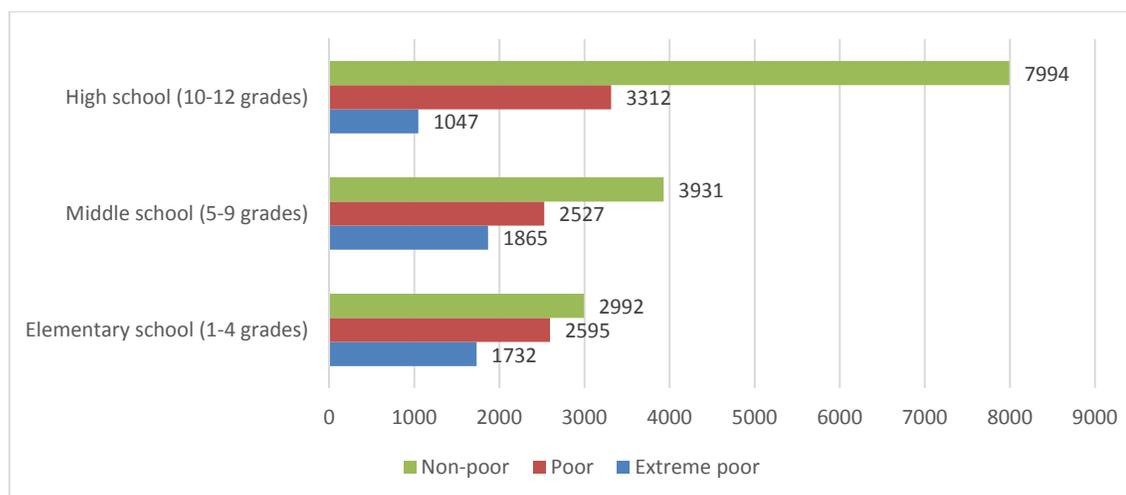
³ Report on Equity and Access to Quality Education in General Education in Armenia. OSFA. 2017. (forthcoming).

Diagram 1. Rate of poverty, including extreme poverty, according to level of education during 2010-2015 (%)⁴



Non-poor families spend two to three times more on the general education of their children than poor families. The average monthly expenditure for general education increases dramatically from 1548AMD in elementary school to 4972AMD in high school. In the latter's case, in average 52.7% of these expenses are spent on private tutoring. In Armenia, taking paid private lessons in high school is a necessity for getting into a university. In 2013, 97% of students admitted to a university had taken private classes, whereas the acceptance rate for those, who did not take any such lessons, was only 53%.

Diagram 2. Average monthly family expenditure on general education per one child during the 2014/2015 academic year (AMD)⁵



Students from poor family background cannot afford to take such lessons, therefore, only a small number of them get accepted into a university. While high school students from non-poor families spend 60.1% percent of their expenses on private tutoring, those with poor background use only 19% expenditures for that purpose. As for students from extremely poor families, they do not spend anything on private lessons.⁶

⁴ Social Snapshot and Poverty in Armenia, 2015. Part 3. Armenia: non-income dimensions of poverty. National Statistics Service of the Republic of Armenia. 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.armstat.am/file/article/7.poverty_2015a_4.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The illustrated expenses result into lower level of enrolment among children from poor families especially in higher levels of education. For instance, in 2015, the difference between the enrolment rates of children from poor and non-poor families in primary school, high school, and higher education institutions were 3%, 5% and 12% respectively.⁷

The fact that poverty makes it extremely difficult for students to access high quality education is also seen in the TIMSS-2011 analysis. The latter shows that there is a correlation between students' social-economic background and their achievements at school. Their study underlines that there is a difference of almost 100 points in school achievements between students from non-poor families (502) and children with poor background (416).⁸

Residential Status and Access to Quality Education

For the last ten years, reforms related to general education in Armenia have mainly concentrated on establishing and developing a three-level general education system and a network of high schools. These processes have mostly disregarded the issues of 12-year comprehensive schools, most of which (91%) are located in rural areas.

Though high schools and 12-year comprehensive ones provide the same certificates of qualification, they have major differences in terms of the financial resources they receive from the state budget and the quality of education they provide. In particular, high schools receive proportionally more funding, and consequently, manage to hire teachers with relatively better qualifications. More financial resources also make it possible for them to provide more enhanced education by introducing diversified streaming in their programs. Comprehensive schools do not have these opportunities. Being located in rural areas, they often cannot recruit highly qualified teachers. In addition, they do not have necessary financial resources in order to improve the quality of their education.

The above-mentioned differences result in inequitable access to quality education, which can be displayed by referring to different observations and data outputs. One of them is the TIMSS-2011 assessment of students' achievements, which shows that 4th and 9th grade students in rural schools have scored in average 30 points less than those in urban areas. Their data illustrates that the farther a school is from large urban areas, the lower academic aptitudes of its students are. Another indicator of such a gap in the quality of general education is the results of national school Olympiads. From 2014 to 2016, no student from rural schools has achieved any of the top three awards of the 9th and 12th grade competitions in the following subjects: English, math, and physics.

It is noteworthy that students from rural and urban schools have different plans regarding continuing their education. Specifically, 77.6% of high school students apply for higher education institutions, and 76.3% of them are accepted. As for students from rural comprehensive schools, 47.6% of them plan to study at a university, and 42.9% are accepted. Currently, 56.2% of university students come from high schools, and only 30.6% are from comprehensive schools.

Gender-Based Discrimination

The last major component regarding equity in general schools refers to gender-based discrimination. The 2016 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index shows that girls are not in a disadvantaged position when it comes to enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education, however, this does not mean that there are no issues regarding gender-related inequity. In this case, problems have a more qualitative nature. In particular, they refer to the content of school textbooks and the attitude of teachers.

Various research studies display that there is gender disparity in Armenian textbooks. One of the most evident examples is the way female roles are presented in them. Particularly, they are portrayed cooking, sewing, washing, nurturing, and cleaning the house. In these texts, adjectives attached to women are introverted, timorous, submissive, gentle, and beautiful, whereas for men they are heroic, assertive, handsome and muscular. Accordingly, females are generally underrepresented in important matters.

⁷ Report on monitoring of financing mechanisms and financial efficiency of high schools. CFOA&OSFA. 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Eng_CFOA-brief.pdf.

⁸ International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements. 2011. "Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) 2011." Retrieved from: <https://timss.bc.edu/timss2011/index.html>.

Such discriminatory norms are further intensified by teachers' attitudes. Most of the teachers agrees that women and men are not treated equally in our society especially in workplace and in the processes of choosing one's profession. It is worth mentioning that 20% of teachers believe that boys have superior physical and mental abilities, which in turn result into the existing inequalities.⁹ This is why a majority of teachers strive to instill docility and modesty in girls. On the other hand, they stress leadership and courage as vital characteristics for boys. Moreover, teachers put higher educational benchmarks for boys than their female classmates.¹⁰

Both textbooks and the attitude of teachers show that in general education gender is presented as an essential defining factor of social life. Children are introduced with the stereotype of a stratified system. Hence, in Armenian schools, gender insensitive content reproduces the current patriarchal system making students identify themselves in traditional gender roles.

Government Policies

Inequity and lack of social justice in education put a large number of students in a disadvantaged position. Today, the situation is even more worrisome, as the current strategy of the government in the field of education runs the risk of exacerbating inequity in general education. The government of Armenia has recently approved the Program of Midterm Expenditures for the period of 2018-2022. In the framework of this program, the government is going to gradually decrease the share of state expenditures on education to 2.18% in 2018, 1.99% in 2019 and 1.85% in 2020.¹¹

While immediate systemic changes are needed for addressing inequity problems, the government chooses to implement the National Program for Educational Excellence (NPEE) that will amplify these issues. NPEE is a major obstacle to reinforcement of equity and social justice in education. Until 2019 it aims to establish excellence centers in 21 high schools, which are mostly located in urban areas (only two of 21 selected schools are located in rural communities). The government plans to make large investments in these high schools, including full renovation and equipment. Within each of the schools, the program targets only the students with excellent achievements in education, leaving behind those with lower performance. The government representatives claim that the program does not just serve the interests of a few, but it is going to bring benefits for the whole education sector in the long run.¹² However, in short-term and mid-term prospective the only beneficiaries of this excellence program will be the students of excellence classes of these 21 high schools. Such an approach will result in stratification within the schools and students, which creates a major risk of grossly violating the principles of equity and inclusion.

Finally, yet importantly, the program is financed from very limited and gradually declining budgetary resources allocated to education system cutting down the possibility of investments into the initiatives and actions tackling the existing equity issues. This will result in widening the gap between urban and rural schools, poor and non-poor students. While immediate investment is needed to ensure safety of the environment (crashed buildings and furniture, lack of minimum heating and sanitary conditions, etc.) and quality operation of rural schools, development of the content of general education, providing schools with quality education materials, etc., during the course of 2014-2017 about 2.2bn AMD (about 4.5mln USD) was provided from the state budget to the implementation of the Excellence program.¹³ In addition, more than half of the World Bank's recent Education Improvement Project loan to Armenian (about 18mln USD from total 30mln USD loan budget) is being spent on renovating and refurbishing 17 high schools, most of which will be used for establishment of the 21 excellence centers.¹⁴ These 17 high schools constitute only 1.2% of all public schools and 16% of all public high schools of Armenia.

The repercussions of these policies are significant deterioration of the quality of general education for a large number of children. However, the government has shown reluctance towards comprehensively assessing the existing problems by choosing not to publish the latest TIMSS results and be excluded from PISA reviews. Having such an approach and funding the mentioned elitist programs raises major concerns regarding the transparency and accountability of the government concerning its strategies in the

⁹ Report on Equity and Access to Quality Education in General Education in Armenia. OSFA. 2017. (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ It shall be noted that the international average of GDP share of education expenditures constitutes about 4%. For example, Democratic Republic of Congo allocates 2.2% of GDP to education, and Benin and Burkina Faso allocate 4%.

¹² Such an approach, however, is not justified by any scientific research and evidence-based arguments.

¹³ About 30% of this money was spent on equipment and operation of the office of implementing agency.

¹⁴ Meanwhile, only 0.6 million USD of the Loan is allocated for improving the National Curriculum Framework, where investments are needed for generating more gender-sensitive and high quality content.

field. Such expenses and policies are not properly justified. Hence, it is highly possible that the current budgeting strategy, which is a major cause of the discussed equity issue, is a result of corruption and politicization in the field of education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The evidence collected through comprehensive research and assessment initiatives, as well as above-mentioned official statistics illustrate that many children have limited access to quality education because of their residential status, family background, and gender. Injustice and inequity in general education is widening year by year leaving behind children from marginalized and vulnerable segments of population.

Current international trends as well as numerous studies conducted by specialized organizations restate that universal improvement of the quality of education can be achieved only through building up the education system based on the principles of equity, inclusion and social justice.¹⁵ However, the government of Armenia does not share this approach. Despite being in such a critical situation, the government adopts an elitist approach and implements programs that contribute to social polarization and reproduction of the poverty and do not promote gender-sensitive, tolerant and non-discriminative education environment and content in schools.

The evidence presented here also show the urgency of the identified problems. Immediate measures are needed for guaranteeing better education for all children irrespective of their place of living, family background, and gender. The government should be held accountable for such a situation and pushed to make systemic changes in its respective policies from human rights perspective and in accordance with its commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The following actions should be taken immediately to address inequity and social injustice challenges in general education:

- Ensure Armenia's participation in PISA¹⁶ and TIMSS reviews, as well as timely and complete publication and analysis of their results.
- Increase education share in GDP.
- Develop and introduce a new mechanism for the financing of public schools, which will make equal and fair distribution of state budget allocations between all state schools in Armenia and ensure the full and quality inclusion of children from rural areas and poor families into the general education system.
- Suspend the Education Excellence Program (EEP) and revise its premise of elite education in Armenia in view of skewed rights to education for all social groups; suspend funding of EEP from public finances.
- Explicitly articulate gender equity principles in all education legislation and policies, including in the 2016-2025 State Program on Education Development.
- Revise the national Curriculum Framework and school education subject standards in accordance with international human rights and gender equality standards prioritizing provisions and state obligations under the UN and other international treaties and conventions.
- Conduct crash courses for teachers in order to develop gender-sensitive approach in their teaching; monitor teaching in schools to ensure gender mainstreaming in general education.
- Periodically carry out the evaluation of government's activities and state-funded educational initiatives in terms of social cohesion and equality, anti-discrimination and gender sensitive environment.

Questions and details can be sought with Education Team of the Open Society Foundations -Armenia by writing to Lilit Nazaryan at nlilit@osi.am

¹⁵ OECD. 2016. "PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education." OECD Publishing, Paris. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>. International Association of Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA). "TIMSS & PIRLS Publications." Retrieved from: <https://timss.bc.edu/about.html>.

¹⁶ PISA assessment has become a tool for monitoring the progress towards achieving United Nations Sustainable Development goals in the education sector, so participation in PISA now at utmost need.