



### **Beyond access: The mission to build truly inclusive education systems**

In Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, a teacher sets up a tablet on her desk and begins an interactive lesson with all her students. This classroom is part a project supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), helping schools replace an old approach to special education with one where quality learning is equally accessible to all. With a focus on flexible teaching and adaptable environments, students of all abilities are supported with technology, creativity and empathy to ensure they learn at their pace. This innovation in teaching methods removes the barriers that once kept children with disabilities out of mainstream schools and often, out of education entirely.

It's one of many examples across Asia and the Pacific where ADB is reimagining what inclusive education really means. Beyond simply opening the doors to classrooms, the focus is on ensuring all learners have the chance to thrive once inside them.

### **Inclusion as a system, not a side project**

As outlined in ADB's [Strategy 2030](#), inclusion lies at the heart of its vision for education of the future, not as an after-thought but as a foundation of equality and resilience. The [Support for Inclusive Education Project](#) in Mongolia is an example of that vision in action. With the introduction of accessible infrastructure, teachers trained in inclusive methods, and classrooms equipped with assistive technologies, the initiative has ensured that children with disabilities are able to learn alongside their peers, and not separately.

The project allowed for flexible teaching methods so that educators could respond to different learning needs while still keeping students learning together as a group. This helped to build friendship, compassion and understanding among the children. The results have been striking. Teachers reported increased confidence in learners as well as their increased participation in class activities. The positive impact was also felt by the wider community as initiatives to increase awareness of disability and inclusive education reached nearly 6,000 people. Nationwide, enrolment rates of children with disabilities into mainstream schools increased by 21.8% between 2020 and 2023.

### **Harnessing innovation for inclusion**

In Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, ADB-supported [Makethons](#) are giving young creators a unique chance to design inclusive learning tools for students with disabilities. With disabled learners, or 'Need Knowers', at the heart of these technology-driven innovation events, teams use 3D printing to explore ways to turn educational materials into tactile models and personalised aids. The teamwork and creativity that go into developing these assistive devices is a great example of how technology can close the learning gap and remove the academic limits that people with disabilities often face, thereby improving their career prospects.



Despite such progress, learners with disabilities still face stigma and exclusion. Many families of children with disabilities don't send them to school, concerned they will not be able to learn or that they will not be safe. This contributes to lower literacy and a life of disadvantage, including unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. Girls with disabilities face even greater barriers; as adults, their illiteracy rate is three times higher than that of men with disabilities, and their unemployment rate is double.

### **Tackling intersectional disadvantage**

ADB's inclusion work increasingly spans multiple forms of disadvantage, which experts refer to as 'intersectional exclusion'. When issues such as poverty, gender inequality, disability, and geography often overlap, the consequences of exclusion multiply. ADB's education programs aim to address these combined challenges so that people at the margin of more than one system can be reached.

In Bangladesh, ADB's long-term support to the [Secondary School Stipend Program](#) has significantly improved girls' access to education, adding an average of two and a half years of schooling. The number of girls who successfully completed their secondary education increased by 10%. Overall, the project was seen to be a significant factor in girls marrying later and having more prosperous marriages. This intersectional lens enables ADB to develop projects that not only expand access to education but also foster long-term social and economic empowerment.

### **Bridging the digital divide**

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a huge evolution in education, underscoring the pivotal role of technology in education delivery in times of challenge. During the early stages of the pandemic, millions of learners across the region, particularly girls, rural students, and people with disabilities, were unable to access learning online. ADB's 2024 report, [Digital Transformation for Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Asia](#), warns that while progress in digitalisation can reduce inequality, it can just as easily deepen it, if issues of access are not addressed.

To close these gaps, ADB's [Digital Education Readiness Framework \(DERF\)](#) helps governments identify barriers such as infrastructure, affordability and teacher capacity. Digital equity has become one of ADB's priority dimensions of inclusion, with the aim of ensuring that the benefits of online learning and digital jobs can be shared across all segments of society.

ADB is also committed to designing digital policies that close gender gaps. Programs directly targeting women and girls – from digital literacy and entrepreneurship, to equal access to STEM education (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and ICT careers – are helping to challenge gender stereotypes and create new pathways into the green and digital economies. The ADB-supported project, [STEM secondary education in Tajikistan](#) will benefit 11,500 students, including 5,600 girls, and is expected to



encourage women and girls to pursue studies and careers in STEM fields. By focusing on skills development, access, and affordability, ADB ensures that technology can serve as a bridge to learning rather than a barrier.

### **Reaching the unreachable: Education in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**

In countries like Afghanistan and Myanmar, conflict and disaster exacerbate exclusion. In these challenging contexts, ADB combines humanitarian support with innovative education delivery. In Afghanistan, community-based education has reached over one million children, half of them girls, while more than 21,000 girls have had the opportunity to access on-site secondary education through alternative and accelerated learning programs. Television and multimedia tools and devices are being used to deliver lessons and vocational training, giving girls the greatest possibility to be included in some level of learning. In Myanmar, ADB helps communities to redevelop spaces so they can be used as suitable classrooms. It also provides learning materials and teacher training, and prioritises skills development programs in key sectors such as agriculture and business. These targeted and context-specific interventions contribute to the development of sustainable and inclusive livelihoods, as well as strengthening local resilience.

### **Climate and displacement: new frontiers of exclusion**

Exclusion is not only social, it's also environmental. Across Asia and the Pacific, climate change and conflict are displacing millions of people, disrupting schooling, destroying livelihoods, and uprooting communities. The loss of learning caused by forced displacement underscores the importance for education systems to adapt to meet the very specific needs of mobile and vulnerable populations.

In the Solomon Islands, one of the world's most climate-exposed nations, ADB is supporting the [Senior Secondary Education Improvement Project](#) to embed climate resilience in schools, both through improved green infrastructure and curriculum reform. The project also aims to improve gender equality in education, which will help ensure the transition to a sustainable and climate-resilient economy is also an inclusive one.

Beyond this, ADB is also working with key partner organisations to ensure that even the most vulnerable children in ten developing member countries have the opportunity to learn. [Targeting out-of-school, refugee and internally-displaced communities](#), this program aims to reach at least 320,000 children with access to quality primary education, helping them continue their studies, despite the odds.

### **From inclusion to empowerment**





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For ADB, inclusion is not just about removing barriers. It's about making sure that everyone has an equal chance to participate fully in learning, work, and society. By investing in inclusive design, digital readiness, and targeted intersectional policies, ADB is helping build societies across Asia and the Pacific where difference is not a disadvantage, but a source of strength. Whether it's a child with a disability in Mongolia or a student in Afghanistan accessing multimedia lessons, ADB's goal is to build education systems that empower every learner and ensure no one is left behind.

## Case study details

Project	US\$	Status	Link to project data sheet
Support for Inclusive Education Project, <b>Mongolia</b>	2 million	Closed	<a href="https://www.adb.org/projects/52103-001/main">https://www.adb.org/projects/52103-001/main</a>
Makethons, <b>Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka</b> <b>Part of TA</b>	2 million	Active	<a href="https://blogs.adb.org/blog/touching-future-how-3d-printing-can-empower-asia-s-visually-impaired-students">https://blogs.adb.org/blog/touching-future-how-3d-printing-can-empower-asia-s-visually-impaired-students</a>  <a href="#">57070-001: Accessible Assistive Technology for Promoting Health, Well-being, and Gender Equality in South Asia   Asian Development Bank</a>
Secondary School Stipend Program, <b>Bangladesh – part of SESIP T1-T3</b>	500 million*	Closed (2023)	<a href="https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/678776/sawp-081-female-secondary-stipend-assistance-program-bangladesh.pdf">https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/678776/sawp-081-female-secondary-stipend-assistance-program-bangladesh.pdf</a>
STEM Secondary Education in <b>Tajikistan</b>	40 million	Active	<a href="https://www.adb.org/projects/54299-001/main">https://www.adb.org/projects/54299-001/main</a>
Senior Secondary Education Improvement Project, <b>Solomon Islands</b>	35 million	Active	<a href="https://www.adb.org/projects/55050-002/main">https://www.adb.org/projects/55050-002/main</a>

\*The Stipend Program was one of the interventions under ADB's 10-year MFF from 2013 to 2023 (SESIP T1-T3). The amount mentioned is the total allocation of the MFF, a part of which was utilized for the Stipend Program. The program was funded also by other Development Partners and the Government of Bangladesh.