

The Impact of International Aid on Equity and Inclusion in Education a Systematic Review of the Evidence

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Abstract

This paper examined the extent to which international aid contributes to inclusive education systems in low- and middle-income countries. Drawing from published contemporary peer reviewed resources published during the period between 2010-2024, evidence on the extent to which donor-supported interventions, including education programs and policies targeted at specific marginalized groups, capacity building for teachers, and the use of assistive technologies, have helped to improve access to education in regions of the world where there are many challenges associated with meeting the educational needs of children who need it the most. The findings reveal mixed outcomes of aid efforts. Highlighting successes in some areas, and persistent challenges that must be tackled if the United Nations Millennium Goals related to the achievement of universal primary education are to be fully achieved. More specifically, some of the key findings include issues of over dependency on aid, insufficient, and in most cases inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems, and aid-related policies which are often not aligned with local context. The findings highlight the need for strategies that are responsive to the local context and greater cooperation between donors and national stakeholders to make sure that everyone can get a fair and inclusive education.

Keywords

International Aid, Equity in Education, Inclusive Education, Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), Donor Intervention

1. Introduction

Education systems in low- and middle-income countries have received and continue to receive various forms of international aid from donor organizations such

as the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, and other related agencies (Benavot, 2010; Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). International aid is provided in many forms. This includes technical assistance, educational policy review and strengthening, curriculum development, professional development and training for teachers, policy makers at different levels in the education systems, and volunteer teaching—all with the aim to expand access, improve the quality of education and by extension promote equity and inclusion at all levels in the education systems (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016).

Further, national and international agendas focused on improving access to education have been supported by global educational initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which emphasized equitable and inclusive education as important foundations of social and economic development. As a result, goals and scope of foreign aid have slowly changed from concentrating on access to including aspects of equity and inclusion (Knutsson & Lindberg, 2017; Niño-Zarazúa, 2016).

This systematic review examines the extent to which international aid contributed to promoting equity and inclusion in education systems in low- and middle-income countries, and the strategies that have been most effective in improving access for marginalized groups through international aid.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Framing Equity and Inclusion in Educational Contexts

The terms equity and inclusion often appear together in education literature, but they do not mean the same thing. While equity is concerned with addressing imbalances in access, resources, and outcomes, inclusion is more about participation—making sure that all learners feel they belong and can contribute meaningfully. Scholars like Ainscow (2020) and Barnett (2020) have highlighted that achieving equity requires proactive strategies that consider the specific barriers learners face, including poverty, gender norms, and disability.

Inclusion, meanwhile, goes a step further. It challenges the structures and assumptions of the education system itself. As Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) explain, it's not just about putting diverse students in the same classroom—it's about changing the way teaching and learning happen so that every learner is genuinely supported. UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca Statement was one of the first global documents to clearly push for this kind of transformation, calling for schools to adapt to learners, not the other way around.

2.2. Shifts in the Nature of Education Aid

Over time, the way donors approach international education assistance has shifted. Earlier efforts often emphasized access—simply getting more children into schools. But recent aid strategies are more nuanced, trying to tackle quality, equity, and inclusion simultaneously (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). Hares et al. (2023) noted that although funding rose significantly after 2000, especially around

the Education for All movement, it has since plateaued or declined, especially during COVID-19. This stagnation happened even though education systems in many low- and middle-income countries were struggling more than ever.

Interestingly, aid priorities vary widely depending on the donor. For instance, U.S. support often targets basic education and school feeding programs, whereas Japan and France tend to fund scholarships for international study. These priorities reflect national interests and historical ties as much as educational needs. Germany has increased its funding to basic education, especially as other donors like the UK have scaled back (Hares et al., 2023). This variability can be both a strength and a challenge; while diverse approaches allow for experimentation, it also means some areas are better supported than others.

2.3. What the Evidence Shows about Aid's Impact

The literature points to a few recurring strategies through which aid aims to promote equity and inclusion. One common approach is supporting policy reforms. Agencies like UNESCO and the World Bank often work alongside ministries of education to revise legislation, adjust curricula, or promote teacher training that addresses diverse needs (UNESCO, 2017). In many cases, these efforts lead to better planning and more inclusive policies on paper. The real challenge, however, is implementation—especially when policies are adopted from other contexts and don't match local realities (Knutsson & Lindberg, 2017).

Another major focus is on programs that directly target disadvantaged groups. UNICEF's Child-Friendly Schools, for instance, have shown promise in making school environments more supportive for all learners—not just those who already have access (UNICEF, 2015). Other interventions include scholarships, community-based schools, and flexible learning arrangements. These are particularly important in rural areas or conflict zones, where traditional schooling models often don't work (Lloyd et al., 2000; Benavot, 2010).

Teacher development is also a recurring theme. Donor-backed training programs aim to equip educators with strategies for managing diverse classrooms and supporting students with special needs. But training tends to be short-term and disconnected from broader teacher education systems. Without sustained follow-up, teachers often revert to familiar practices, even after receiving inclusive teaching training (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016).

Finally, the literature increasingly discusses the role of technology. Programs like the EdTech Hub are helping to pilot digital solutions for inclusive education, especially in remote settings. But here too, success depends on more than funding—it requires infrastructure, local adaptation, and teachers who feel confident using the tools (Trucano, 2020; Steer & Wathne, 2010). Without these ingredients, even well-designed tech interventions risk falling short.

3. Methodology

This review employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to examine

the extent to which international aid has influenced equity and inclusion in education across low- and middle-income countries. The choice of an SLR was informed by the need to critically synthesize findings across diverse contexts and frameworks while maintaining methodological transparency and consistency (Denscombe, 2014). This design also allows for the identification of patterns in donor practices and outcomes relevant to equity and inclusion, themes which are often explored through case-specific or region-specific studies.

3.1. Selection Criteria and Search Strategy

The selection of literature followed an intentional process designed to ensure both relevance and rigor. Peer-reviewed journal articles, international organization reports, and policy evaluations were included if they explicitly addressed the relationship between international aid and equity or inclusion in education. To maintain focus, only studies published in English between 2010 and 2024 were considered. The databases consulted included ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search terms used combined concepts such as “international aid”, “inclusive education”, “equity in education”, and “low-income countries”, utilizing Boolean operators to refine results.

In addition to academic sources, publications from agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education were reviewed. These sources were included not only for their empirical value but also for the insights they offer into aid implementation frameworks, donor motivations, and evolving international education agendas.

3.2. Data Extraction and Thematic Coding

A structured framework was used to extract data from the selected sources. The framework included indicators such as the geographical context of the study, type of aid intervention, target beneficiary group (e.g., girls, students with disabilities, displaced learners), stated objectives, and reported outcomes. Each study was then coded for recurring themes using inductive techniques. While thematic saturation was not statistically quantified, recurring patterns emerged in the areas of policy support, teacher capacity-building, access-enhancement interventions, and technology integration.

During analysis, attention was paid not only to the outcomes but also to the underlying assumptions embedded in the aid strategies. This was necessary to determine whether interventions framed as inclusive were genuinely transformative or primarily instrumental in expanding access. Where possible, comparisons were drawn across contexts to examine how local conditions mediated the impact of aid.

3.3. Appraisal of Sources

Although formal meta-analysis was not conducted, the quality and credibility of the included studies were evaluated using a simplified adaptation of the Critical

Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool as shown in **Table 1**. The assessment focused on clarity of research aims, transparency of methodology, coherence of findings, and the extent to which studies considered contextual variables. Conceptual papers were retained when they contributed meaningfully to the understanding of donor logic, systemic barriers, or normative framings of inclusion.

Table 1. CASP appraisal summary for included references.

Reference#	Author(s) and Year	CASP Summary	Judgment
1	Ainscow (2020)	Conceptual and policy analysis on inclusion; strong theoretical value; not empirical.	Theoretical
2	Ainscow, Slee & Best (2019)	Editorial reflection on Salamanca Statement; lacks empirical data but has reflective depth.	Editorial
3	Benavot (2010)	Critical review of aid policy; descriptive and analytical, not primary research.	Conceptual
4	Cochran-Smith et al. (2016)	Empirical study using teacher ed case data; rigorous and relevant to equity.	Empirical
5	GPE (2020)	Programmatic report; not a primary study, descriptive and resource-based.	Descriptive
6	Knutsson & Lindberg (2017)	Theoretical paper on methodology in aid studies; insightful but not empirical.	Theoretical
7	Lloyd, Mete & Eriksen (2000)	Literature review; synthesis of findings, not primary data collection.	Literature Review
8	Niño-Zarazúa (2016)	Policy-focused conceptual paper; theoretical insights, not empirical research.	Theoretical
9	Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa (2016)	Analytical review with empirical grounding; strong in synthesis and policy link.	Analytical
10	Trucano (2020)	Guidance-based World Bank review; valuable insights, not a primary study.	Descriptive
11	UNESCO (1994)	Policy declaration; foundational but not research-based.	Policy
12	UNESCO (2017)	Global monitoring report; policy-driven, uses secondary data, not research-led.	Descriptive
13	UNICEF (2015)	Program framework; practical focus, not empirical study.	Programmatic
14	World Bank (2018a)	Extensive program review with results and lessons; mixed methods insights.	Mixed Methods
15	World Bank (2018b)	Descriptive report on inclusive education; based on case practices, not empirical.	Descriptive

In addition to using the CASP tool for appraising source quality, this review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to enhance transparency in the study selection process. The PRISMA framework was used to document the identification, screening, and inclusion of relevant studies. This structured approach supports replicability and ensures clarity regarding how the final body of literature was derived—an important consideration for future researchers who may wish to examine related topics, such as aid-driven interventions in inclusive education or green construction practices (Denscombe, 2014).

The PRISMA flow diagram presented in **Figure 1** summarizes each stage of the selection process: the initial pool of studies identified through database searches, the number excluded during abstract and full-text screening, and the final set of studies included in the synthesis. By presenting the screening pathway explicitly, the review maintains methodological integrity and invites scholarly scrutiny.

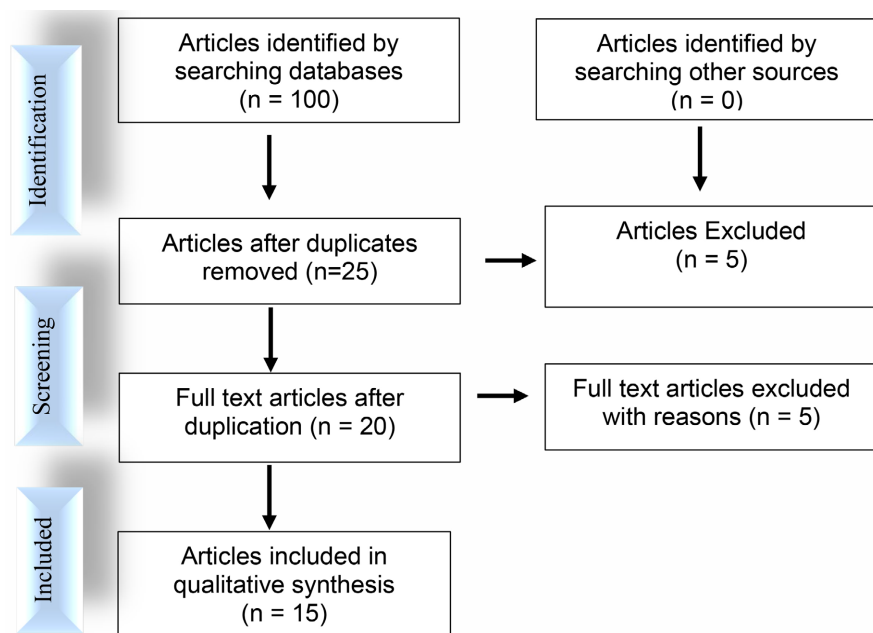


Figure 1. PRISMA chart adopted from Denscombe (2014) and modified with search data for this research.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

4.1. Results

The systematic review yielded a diverse set of studies that examined the intersection of international aid, equity, and inclusion in education across a range of low- and middle-income country contexts. Several recurrent themes were identified through the analysis, each reflecting a different mode by which aid is delivered and interpreted within national systems. While the specific impact of aid varied across contexts, four dominant themes emerged consistently: policy alignment and reform, targeted support for marginalized groups, capacity building through

teacher training, and the integration of digital and assistive technologies.

4.1.1. Policy Reform and Institutional Alignment

One of the most common forms of aid engagement observed in the reviewed literature was technical assistance for educational policy reform. Donor agencies—most notably the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO—have played an instrumental role in supporting national governments to adopt inclusion-oriented policies. These reforms often aim to realign education laws, budgetary priorities, or curriculum frameworks with principles of universal access and non-discrimination (UNESCO, 2017; Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). In countries where such reforms were accompanied by coordinated implementation strategies, improvements in gender parity and access for students with disabilities were documented. However, studies also highlighted that top-down policy changes, when not adequately localized, often result in limited or symbolic impact.

4.1.2. Direct Support for Vulnerable Learners

A second theme concerns aid projects that specifically target underserved populations. Donor-funded interventions aimed at girls, rural learners, refugees, and children with disabilities featured prominently. These included initiatives such as school meal programs, community-based education models, cash transfers to families, and transportation subsidies. Programs such as UNICEF's Child-Friendly Schools were noted for improving school environments, enhancing psychosocial support, and promoting safety and dignity (UNICEF, 2015). While many of these interventions were positively evaluated in terms of access and short-term retention, evidence of their long-term scalability or systemic integration was less frequently discussed.

4.1.3. Capacity Building and Inclusive Pedagogies

Several studies emphasized the importance of teacher training in advancing inclusive education. Donor support has facilitated workshops and training modules focused on differentiated instruction, disability awareness, gender sensitivity, and classroom management in diverse settings. These efforts have contributed to greater teacher confidence in some contexts and the emergence of more inclusive classroom practices (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). Nonetheless, findings also reveal that such training is often delivered as stand-alone interventions, with limited follow-up or connection to national teacher development pathways. As a result, their effects can diminish over time without institutional reinforcement.

4.1.4. Technology and Digital Inclusion

An emerging area of aid-supported intervention involves the use of digital and assistive technologies to reach learners in remote or under-resourced areas. Projects under the EdTech Hub and related initiatives have introduced low-cost devices, accessible digital content, and radio-based learning, particularly in response to pandemic-related disruptions (Escueta et al., 2017; Khlaif et al., 2020). In theory, these technologies offer scalable solutions for inclusive education; in practice,

however, their success is uneven. Challenges identified include limited infrastructure, inconsistent connectivity, lack of training for educators, and minimal integration with national curricula (Trucano, 2020).

4.2. Discussion

The findings from this review offered quite a mixed picture. On one hand, donor support has clearly made a difference in areas like access and teacher training. But it's hard to ignore how uneven those impacts are when you look more closely at how things play out in different countries. For instance, it's encouraging to see that several governments have been able to reform their policies with the help of aid (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016; Hares et al., 2023).

Those reforms often look impressive on paper. Still, whether they actually change what happens in schools depends a lot on local conditions. Some policies never really get off the ground because they don't match the realities on the ground or aren't supported with resources. This disconnect between policy and practice came up repeatedly across the literature.

Then there are the programs aimed at specific groups—girls, students with disabilities, and learners in rural or conflict-affected areas. Many of these interventions, especially those facilitated by organizations such as UNICEF (2015), had good short-term results. But questions remain about what happens when the funding ends. Few studies showed whether these programs were absorbed into the national system or scaled sustainably. This is a significant gap.

Teacher training is another area where donors have been active. There's no doubt that inclusive education depends on skilled teachers. Some studies reported positive changes after short-term training programs (Chimbunde, 2023) but the lack of follow-up and weak connections to ongoing professional development make it hard to gauge the long-term impact. In some cases, teachers just went back to old routines once the training ended.

Training in technology has been more prominent in the recent literature. There are examples of aid funding helping with distance learning, digital tools, and radio-based teaching, especially during COVID-19 (Pandey et al., 2021).

That said, using technology effectively requires more than just providing equipment. Many regions lack stable internet, trained teachers, or digital content that fits the curriculum. So, while there's potential, the practical challenges are substantial.

5. Conclusion

This review sets out to understand how international aid has shaped efforts to make education more equitable and inclusive. What emerged was a story of partial success—real improvements in some areas, but also a number of missed opportunities.

Donors have helped governments think differently about inclusion, and in some cases, they have supported policy changes that put marginalized learners on

the agenda. They have also funded programs that helped students who might otherwise be left behind. But much of this progress seems tied to the presence of external funding, and there's less clarity about what remains when the aid ends. Perhaps one of the clearest takeaways is the importance of context. Interventions that work well in one place do not always translate to another. There's also a growing awareness that change has to happen within systems, not just around them. That includes making sure teachers have the support they need, and that schools are equipped to serve diverse learners every day—not just during a donor project.

Going forward, it may be less about creating new programs and more about embedding inclusive values into how education is planned, funded, and delivered. That kind of shift takes time, local leadership, and a willingness from donors to play a supportive—not dominant—role.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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