Despite recent unprecedented economic growth, India still faces a big challenge in fighting poverty. Its population of 1.2 billion has a per-person income of less than US$1,000. About two-thirds of the population depends on rural employment to make a living, yet educational opportunities and access are uneven at best and marked by wide regional disparities. By 2000, some 39 million of 200 million children aged 6–14—or almost 20 percent—were not being schooled.

In 2002, India unveiled its national flagship program, the IDA-financed Elementary Education Project (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, SSA), to enroll all 6–14-year-olds in school by 2010. It also aimed to bridge gender and social gaps, avoid dropouts, and provide quality education until at least grade eight—a much tougher requirement by 2015 than called for by the Millennium Development Goals. Primary school facilities were to be located within one kilometer of all habitations, including provision of alternative education programs and “bridge courses” for out-of-school children and dropouts. The program supported teacher recruitment and training, helped develop teaching materials, and monitored learning outcomes. Villages were to identify out-of-school children and get them enrolled, and organize to manage school resources and construct classrooms and school buildings. Direct grants to each district helped spur context-specific innovations.

Since 2001, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has supported Government efforts to bring 20 million out-of-school children into elementary education. This includes first-generation learners from long-deprived communities and minority communities, and children with special needs.

Highlights:
- Universal access is almost achieved, with more than 98 percent of children having a primary school within one kilometer of home and many states either approaching universal primary enrollment or having already achieved it.

- The gender gap continues to shrink, with 93 girls enrolled for every 100 boys in primary school in 2008, compared to 90 in the early 2000s.
- **Real progress has been made on inclusion.** Public school enrollment of children from long-deprived communities—Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—now exceeds their shares in the general population. Of the 2.7 million children identified with special needs, 2.5 million were enrolled by 2008.

- **Higher quality yielded better transition rates** between school levels. In 2007, 84 percent of primary school graduates went on to upper-primary school, compared with 75 percent in 2002.

- **Retaining first-generation learners** in school is a major challenge, but annual dropout rates fell from 10 percent in 2004 to 8.6 percent in 2008.

- **A paradigm shift in teaching methods** was pioneered in Tamil Nadu. In just two years, the activity-based learning (ABL) method was scaled up across the state’s 37,500 primary and 12,000 upper-primary schools. Several states now are adapting the innovations. Activity-based learning lets children learn at their own pace by working together in small groups to complete a “ladder” of highly structured and sequenced tasks, helping each other construct their knowledge rather than memorizing and reciting lessons by rote.

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**IDA CONTRIBUTION**

The Indian government–led program is supported by a multidonor effort. IDA is the single largest donor, contributing US$500 million of the US$3.5 billion total cost for the project’s first phase (SSA I, from 2004 to 2007). During the second phase (SSA II, from 2008 to 2010), IDA is providing US$600 million of the approximately US$7.2 billion total cost. A further IDA commitment of US$500 million in Additional Financing is planned for 2010. In addition, the World Bank Group is committed to efforts to improve learning outcomes and ensure strong independent monitoring and evaluation of educational projects worldwide, sharing lessons from other efforts with this one and bringing lessons from SSA to other interested parties.

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**PARTNERS**

The European Commission (EC) and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) together contributed over US$500 million to the first phase, while India’s central and state governments contributed the lion’s share—some US$2.5 billion. In phase two, the Indian government is investing more than US$6 billion, while the EC and DFID together are contributing almost $400 million. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is also very active in some of the poorest Indian states, helping education departments implement the Elementary Education Project at state and district levels. IDA, the DFID, the European Commission, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF also collaborate in major fora to share best practices from other countries and India that support improved educational quality and teacher effectiveness.

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**NEXT STEPS**

With SSA having made great strides in increasing access to primary education, the focus is now on bringing the remaining 10 million out-of-school children into school, boosting provision of upper-primary educational facilities, and improving learning outcomes. And now that greater numbers of children are completing elementary school, the number of secondary schools urgently needs expanding and their educational quality raised.