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Global lessons from the 2026 GEM report for Indonesia's Zonasi access policy

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ABSTRACT

The 2026 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, Access and Equity: Countdown to 2030, and its companion SDG 4 Scorecard report that 273 million children and youth remain out of school and that completion-rate growth has been uneven across countries, shaped less by resource levels than by policy coherence and sustained commitment to equity. This study examines what these findings imply for zonasi (school zoning), Indonesia's national education policy on public-school admission. Using descriptive-comparative document analysis of secondary sources, it reviews the 2026 GEM Report, the SDG 4 Scorecard, the UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE), and peer-reviewed studies on education-access policy in Indonesia, East Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Pakistan. The results show that within-country gaps of up to 70 percentage points by household wealth and 62 points by rural-urban location persist where formal access mechanisms exist, and that only about one in ten countries combines SDG 4 target-setting with equity-focused financing. Decentralization, targeted financing, and infrastructure investment narrow these gaps only under specific complementary conditions. Zonasi therefore functions as a formal access instrument whose equity effect depends on facility distribution, assessment reliability, admission-pathway coherence, and subsidy targeting. The study derives contextual policy recommendations for Indonesia ahead of 2030.

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ABSTRAK

Laporan Global Education Monitoring (GEM) 2026, Access and Equity: Countdown to 2030, beserta SDG 4 Scorecard 2026 mencatat bahwa 273 juta anak dan remaja masih belum bersekolah dan bahwa pertumbuhan angka penyelesaian pendidikan yang timpang antarnegara lebih ditentukan oleh koherensi kebijakan dan komitmen jangka panjang terhadap pemerataan daripada oleh tingkat sumber daya. Penelitian ini mengkaji implikasi temuan tersebut bagi zonasi, yakni kebijakan pendidikan nasional Indonesia dalam penerimaan peserta didik di sekolah negeri. Dengan analisis dokumen deskriptif-komparatif terhadap sumber sekunder, penelitian ini menelaah Laporan GEM 2026, SDG 4 Scorecard, UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE), serta studi ilmiah tentang kebijakan akses pendidikan di Indonesia, Afrika Timur, Afrika Sub-Sahara, dan Pakistan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kesenjangan di dalam negara hingga 70 poin persentase berdasarkan kesejahteraan rumah tangga dan 62 poin berdasarkan lokasi desa-kota tetap bertahan meskipun mekanisme akses formal tersedia, dan hanya sekitar satu dari sepuluh negara yang memadukan penetapan target SDG 4 dengan pembiayaan yang berorientasi pada pemerataan. Desentralisasi, pembiayaan terarah, dan investasi infrastruktur hanya akan mempersempit kesenjangan jika disertai dengan kondisi pendukung tertentu. Zonasi merupakan instrumen akses formal yang dampaknya terhadap pemerataan bergantung pada sebaran fasilitas, keandalan asesmen, koherensi jalur penerimaan, dan ketepatan sasaran subsidi. Penelitian ini merumuskan rekomendasi kebijakan yang kontekstual bagi Indonesia menjelang tahun 2030.

Kata Kunci: *desentralisasi pendidikan; kebijakan pendidikan komparatif; pemerataan pendidikan; zonasi sekolah*

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INTRODUCTION

Every two seconds, another child needs to enter school to keep the world on track for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) by 2030 (See: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/equity-and-access). In January 2026, the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report team released Access and Equity: Countdown to 2030, the first installment of a three-part UNESCO series designed to track SDG 4 as its deadline approaches. Alongside the companion 2026 SDG 4 Scorecard, the report finds that 273 million children and youth remain out of school worldwide, even as 327 million more children are enrolled compared with 2000, and that 83 percent of countries have now set a national SDG 4 target. The report's central and, for policy purposes, most consequential finding is that completion-rate growth has been markedly uneven across countries over the past 25 years, and that this unevenness is explained less by the level of national income than by the coherence of domestic policy choices, a country's responsiveness to external circumstances, and a sustained, long-term commitment to equity.

The report's new Equitable Financing in Education (EFE) Index finds that only about one in ten countries combine broad access mechanisms with financing systems that genuinely prioritize disadvantaged learners, meaning that formal coverage and formal targets have, in most countries, outpaced the substantive policy commitment needed to close within-country gaps. This problem is not confined to low-income settings or to any single region. The UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) documents, for example, that in Sub-Saharan Africa 0 percent of the poorest quintile complete lower secondary school compared with 70 percent of the richest, and that in low-income countries only around 29 percent of rural children transition to lower secondary education compared with 91 percent of urban children (See: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/equity-and-access).

Independently of the 2026 GEM Report, a body of recent (2025-2026) scholarship documents closely related domestic policy debates: decentralization reforms in East Africa (Adan & Ahmed, 2026), conditional cash transfers in Pakistan (Hamza & Cochrane, 2026), digital-access investment in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kipkosgei, 2026), and in Indonesia, the zonasi (school-zoning) system used to allocate places in public schools (Andayani & Lourensius, 2026; Anggitasari et al., 2025; Iscahyono et al., 2026). In Indonesia, zonasi is an education policy in the formal sense: it is a national regulation on new student admission, first introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2017 and reaffirmed through successive ministerial regulations, that requires public schools to admit a large share of their new students based on residential distance rather than examination scores (Syakarofath et al., 2020). Its current successor, the domicile pathway of the new student admission system (Sistem Penerimaan Murid Baru/SPMB), likewise sits within the national education-policy framework.

As an education policy, zonasi was designed to reduce the historic concentration of high-performing students in a small number of "*favorite*" schools and to widen equitable access to public schooling, which places it within the same family of education-access and equity policies that the 2026 GEM Report evaluates globally. Recent studies, however, find that the policy's equalizing effect depends heavily on conditions the policy itself does not control: the physical distribution of school facilities relative to residential areas (Iscahyono et al., 2026), the availability of a reliable regional assessment instrument to complement zoning (Andayani & Lourensius, 2026), and the coherence between zoning, affirmation, and merit-based admission tracks (Anggitasari et al., 2025). This pattern closely mirrors the GEM Report's global finding: a formal access mechanism exists, but its substantive equity effect is uneven.

Despite this parallel, no published academic work has yet systematically read Indonesia's zonasi debate against the 2026 GEM Report's global comparative findings or the broader 2025-2026 literature on decentralization and targeting reviewed in this article. Because the report was released only months before this review, situating its findings within an established comparative-policy literature is both timely and, to

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the authors' knowledge, novel. This study therefore analyzes, through a purely document-based comparative literature review, which policy factors are associated with faster or slower progress toward equitable access to education globally, and examines their relevance for Indonesia's zonasi policy. The remainder of this article presents the comparative document-analysis method used, reports the global and within-country access and completion-rate patterns documented in the 2026 GEM Report and the WIDE database, discusses these patterns against recent comparative and Indonesian policy literature, and concludes with contextual recommendations for strengthening equitable access to education ahead of the 2030 deadline.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2026 GEM Report and the Countdown to 2030 Agenda

Access and Equity: Countdown to 2030 is the first of three planned UNESCO GEM reports tracking progress toward SDG 4 as the 2030 deadline nears, and it is explicitly framed as a stock-take of the 25 years of participation data available since the Education for All movement of the early 2000s. Its headline figures, 273 million children and youth out of school and 327 million more enrolled than in 2000, describe a system that has expanded substantially in absolute terms while still leaving a very large residual population unreached (See: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/equity-and-access). Two analytical instruments distinguish the 2026 report from earlier GEM reports. The 2026 SDG 4 Scorecard disaggregates completion-rate growth by country and education level, letting readers see which countries improved fastest relative to their starting point, rather than only which countries have the highest absolute completion rates.

The Equitable Financing in Education (EFE) Index, meanwhile, evaluates whether a country's financing system is designed to reach disadvantaged learners, based on program availability, spending levels, and population reach, rather than on financing volume alone. The GEM Report team reports that only around one in ten countries score as having a sufficiently strong equity focus on this index (See: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/equity-and-access). This distinction between formal and substantive equity is not new. Coleman had already reframed "*equality of educational opportunity*" away from equal inputs, such as school availability or per-pupil spending, toward equal educational impact. This reframing anticipated precisely the access-versus-outcome distinction the 2026 GEM Report now operationalizes through indicators such as the Equitable Financing in Education Index (Coleman, 1968).

Cross-National Disparities in Completion-Rate Growth

The 2026 GEM Report attributes uneven completion-rate growth to three interacting factors: the coherence of a country's domestic education and social-protection policies, its responsiveness to external shocks, and the durability of its equity commitments over time, and it notes specifically that countries have often advanced by reallocating education and social-protection resources to subnational governments and schools, and by adopting inclusive education laws (See: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/equity-and-access). This shifts attention to decentralization, financing design, and targeting as the proximate policy levers behind the global pattern, rather than aggregate spending alone.

Recent comparative literature illustrates each lever with country evidence published in 2025 and 2026. Previous research has examined decentralization reforms in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to extract lessons for Somalia's federal system, finding that devolution improves access and accountability where subnational authorities receive clear mandates and predictable intergovernmental transfers. However, weak oversight and capacity gaps can instead deepen inequities (Adan & Ahmed, 2026). Kipsosgei's research quantifies a rural-urban digital-access divide of 0.312 index points across Kenya, Tanzania,

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Uganda, Ghana, and Nigeria and links improved digital infrastructure to better examination performance, with effects that vary by geography and gender (Kipkosgei, 2026). Another study evaluated Pakistan's Zewar-e-Taleem conditional cash transfer program and found that it raises female enrollment. However, financial constraints, sociocultural norms, and child labor still keep many children, especially girls, out of school even where the transfer operates (Hamza & Cochrane, 2026).

Comparative evidence beyond these three countries reinforces the same conditionality. Insufficient domestic financing constrains SDG 4 progress across sub-Saharan Africa even where access targets are nominally in place (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2020). Pandemic-driven investment in learning management systems narrowed some, but not all, quality-education gaps in Nigeria (Biliaminu et al., 2026). A national universal-access law in the Philippines illustrates the persistent tension between expanding access, sustaining quality, and maintaining coherent governance (Manrique, 2026). Household and infrastructure factors, not just proximity to schools, determine school participation in Somalia (Abukar & Warsame, 2026).

Policy Levers for Equitable Access: Decentralization, Financing, and Targeting

Read together, the 2025-2026 comparative literature converges on a conditional view of these three levers rather than a universal endorsement of any one of them. Decentralization narrows access gaps only when paired with predictable fiscal transfers and functioning accountability mechanisms (Adan & Ahmed, 2026). Targeted cash transfers raise enrollment by addressing the specific barrier they target (the direct cost of schooling) but leave other, non-financial barriers largely untouched (Hamza & Cochrane, 2026). Infrastructure investment, including digital access, narrows outcome gaps only when it addresses underlying rural-urban or gender disparities rather than assuming them away through aggregate rollout (Kipkosgei, 2026).

This conditionality is precisely what the GEM Report's Equitable Financing in Education Index is designed to detect: a country can score well on access indicators, such as school construction or a formally decentralized administration, while still scoring poorly on whether its financing and targeting design actually reaches disadvantaged learners (See: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/equity-and-access). For a comparative review, this suggests that a policy instrument should be evaluated not only by whether it formally exists, but by whether it is designed, financed, and governed in a way that converts formal coverage into substantive equity, a distinction taken up again in the Discussion in relation to Indonesia's zonasi system.

A wider evidence base confirms the conditional effectiveness of targeting. A systematic review across developing countries finds that both conditional and unconditional cash transfers improve school enrollment and attendance, with larger effects where conditions are explicitly monitored and enforced (Baird et al., 2013). Country-specific evaluations report a similar pattern: Mexico's PROGRESA grants significantly increase reenrollment, particularly among adolescent girls, and a multisectoral cash-plus trial in Kenya raises school enrollment and grade attainment among rural adolescent girls specifically when the transfer is paired with complementary social support (Austrian et al., 2021; Valdés, 2026).

Indonesia's Zonasi System in Comparative Perspective

Indonesia's zonasi policy for Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru (PPDB/new student admission) allocates most public-school places based on a student's residential distance from the school, replacing an examination-score-dominated system that concentrated high-performing students in a small number of favored schools. Recent (2025-2026) Indonesian literature evaluates the policy less as a question of whether zoning exists than of whether the conditions around it allow zoning actually to equalize access. Since the 2025/2026 admission cycle, PPDB has been replaced by SPMB, in which the zoning pathway

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was renamed the domicile pathway (jalur domisili) while residence remains the main basis of allocation. This article therefore uses the term zonasi to refer to residence-based admission under both regimes. Iscahyono mapped the spatial distribution of public junior secondary schools in Bandung using GIS and space-syntax analysis and found that school facilities remain unevenly distributed relative to residential areas, so distance-based zoning can still leave some neighborhoods structurally underserved regardless of the admission rule itself (Iscahyono et al., 2026).

Andayani and Lourensius examined Yogyakarta's move toward a regional standardized assessment (Asesmen Standar Pendidikan Daerah/ASPD) to complement zoning, motivated by "*blank spot*" areas that lack a nearby public school and by the inconsistency of prior selection instruments, arguing that a locally calibrated assessment can make admission more objective and more responsive to local conditions (Andayani & Lourensius, 2026). Another study surveying 144 grade-10 students in Purworejo across zoning, affirmation, and merit-based admission pathways finds no statistically significant relationship between admission pathway and student learning motivation, suggesting that the admission mechanism alone does not determine downstream educational engagement (Anggitasari et al., 2025).

METHODS

This study is a pure literature and document analysis (kajian pustaka komparatif) and involves no human participants. The unit of analysis is published reports, regulatory documents, and peer-reviewed studies, not individuals. This design was chosen because the research problem, whether and how formal access mechanisms translate into substantive completion-rate equity, is best examined by systematically comparing the global evidence the 2026 GEM Report already provides against recent country-level policy literature, rather than by collecting new primary data that would duplicate what the report's own government and household surveys already cover. The primary subjects of analysis are the 2026 GEM Report, Access and Equity: Countdown to 2030, and its companion 2026 SDG 4 Scorecard. Its companion 2026 SDG 4 Scorecard. The UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) and the Indonesian regulation currently governing new-student admission. We supplemented these primary sources with secondary literature identified through structured searches of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and publisher platforms, using combinations of the terms education access, completion rate, decentralization, targeting, and zonasi.

We retained secondary sources published in peer-reviewed journals that addressed education-access or education-equity policy directly and were independently verifiable. Of the 34 sources in the final reference list, 32 (94%) are peer-reviewed journal articles, 2 (6%) are non-journal documents (the GEM Report and the admission regulation), and 30 (88%) were published between 2021 and 2026. The four older sources were retained deliberately: they supply the theoretical lens (Coleman, 1968), provide systematic evidence on targeting (Baird et al., 2013), and provide, respectively, a systematic review of education financing in sub-Saharan Africa and a review of the zonasi policy debate (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2020; Syakarofath et al., 2020). None of them is used as evidence of current policy effects. Data analysis followed a descriptive-comparative procedure. We extracted and descriptively organized quantitative indicators reported in the 2026 GEM Report, the SDG 4 Scorecard, and the WIDE database, including national target-setting rates, the Equitable Financing in Education Index, and within-country wealth- and location-based completion gaps. We performed no new statistical computations, and all figures reported in this article are reproduced directly from these published sources.

We then read the secondary policy literature thematically against these patterns to identify recurring policy levers, decentralization, targeted financing, and infrastructure investment, and their reported conditions for success or failure, before comparing them with the Indonesian zonasi literature to derive contextual implications. Throughout, the analysis used a distinction between equality of educational inputs and

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equality of educational effects as the interpretive lens to classify each policy instrument as either a formal-access mechanism or a substantive-equity mechanism (Coleman, 1968). **Figure 1** summarizes this analytical procedure.

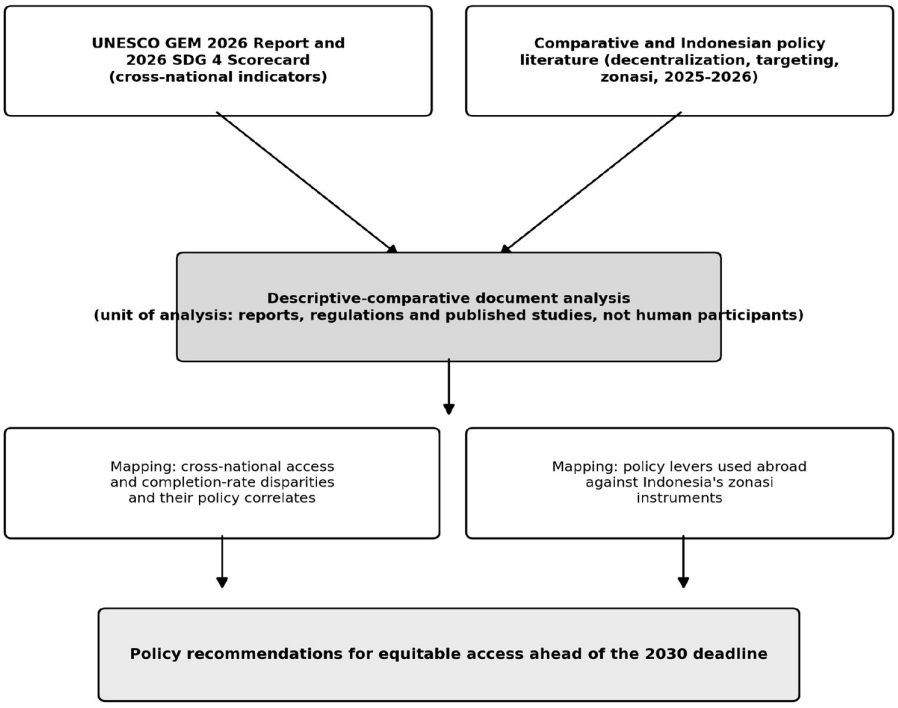


Figure 1. Analytical Framework for the Descriptive-Comparative Document Analysis
Source: Authors' Elaboration of the Research Procedure (2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 reports the headline global indicators from the 2026 GEM Report and SDG 4 Scorecard.

Table 1. Headline Global Indicators of Access and Equity 2026

No	Indicator	Value	Source
1	Children and youth out of school, globally	273 million	UNESCO GEM Report (2026)
2	Additional children enrolled compared with 2000	+327 million	UNESCO GEM Report (2026)
3	Countries with a national SDG 4 target	83%	UNESCO GEM Report (2026)
4	Countries with a strong equity focus in financing (EFE Index)	~10% (about 1 in 10)	UNESCO GEM Report (2026)

Source: UNESCO GEM Report (2026)

Table 1 shows that formal policy uptake is already broad: most countries (83%) have set a national SDG 4 target, and the global system has absorbed 327 million more children than in 2000. However, the remaining 273 million children and youth still out of school remains large in absolute terms, and the Equitable Financing in Education (EFE) Index indicates that only about one in ten countries combine this broad formal uptake with a financing system designed to reach disadvantaged learners. In other words, formal target-setting has outpaced equity-oriented financing design in the large majority of countries.

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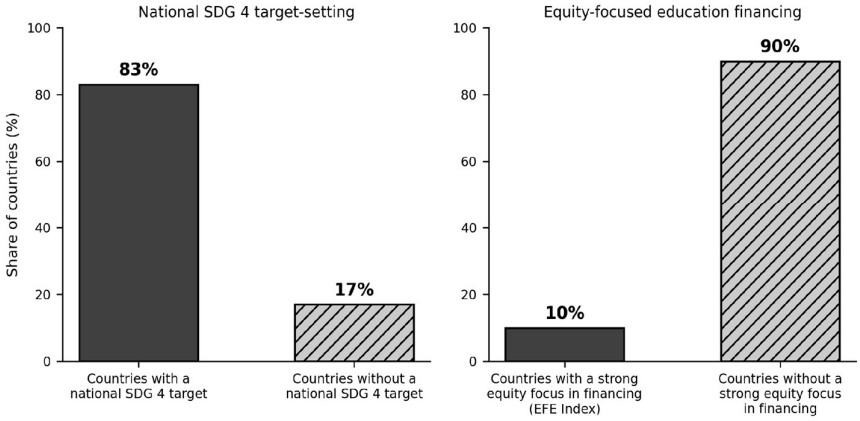


Figure 2. Global uptake of SDG 4 targets and of equity-focused financing
Source: Authors' Visualization of Data from UNESCO GEM Report (2026)

Figure 2 shows the same asymmetry: national SDG 4 target-setting is now nearly universal (83%), while a strong equity focus in financing remains the exception (about 10%). Within-country patterns, summarized in **Table 2**, tell a complementary story.

Table 2. Within-country Equity Gaps in Access to Lower Secondary Education

No	Dimension	Comparison Groups	Rate	Gap
1	Household wealth (Sub-Saharan Africa, lower secondary completion)	Poorest quintile vs. richest quintile	0% vs. 70%	70 percentage points
2	Location (low-income countries, transition to lower secondary)	Rural vs. urban	29% vs. 91%	62 percentage points

Source: UNESCO GEM Report (2026), citing the WIDE database.

Table 2 shows that the between-country pattern in **Table 1** recurs, often more starkly, within countries: wealth and location-based gaps of 70 and 62 percentage points persist in systems where schooling is nominally open to all children. Neither gap is explained by the absence of a formal access mechanism, which is precisely the coverage-versus-substance distinction the 2026 GEM Report treats as its central concern.

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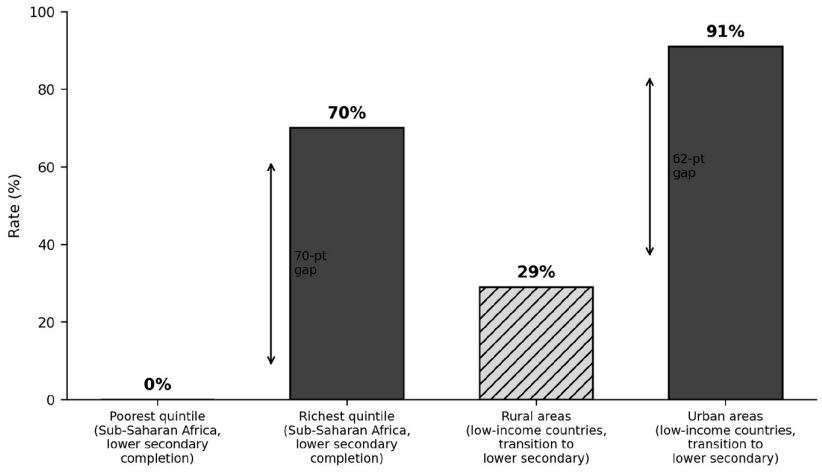


Figure 3. Within-country Equity Gaps by Household Wealth and by Rural-Urban Location
Source: Authors' Visualization of WIDE Data Reported in UNESCO GEM Report (2026)

Tables 1 & 2 and **Figures 2 & 3** thus describe a single global pattern at two scales: formal access and target-setting are now widespread, but the financing and within-country conditions needed to convert that formal access into equitably distributed completion are not. A policy can therefore satisfy the letter of SDG 4 (a national target, a zoning rule, a school within reach) while the financing, accountability, and targeting design around it determines whether disadvantaged learners actually complete their education. The GEM Report's Equitable Financing in Education Index formalizes this distinction at the country level, and the literature reviewed below shows it recurring at the level of individual policy instruments.

Decentralization and Fiscal Transfer Lessons from East Africa

East Africa's decentralization experience offers the clearest comparative analog to Indonesia's administrative devolution of education governance. Previous research finds that Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania improved access and accountability where devolution came with clear mandates and predictable intergovernmental transfers, but that Somalia's federal system, still building this institutional infrastructure, risks reproducing the same capacity and oversight gaps that limited devolution's benefits elsewhere (Adan & Ahmed, 2026). The lesson for any decentralized access policy, including zoning, is that the fiscal and administrative architecture around it matters as much as the access rule itself. This lesson maps directly onto Iscahyono's research finding that Bandung's zonasi policy is constrained by the uneven spatial distribution of school facilities: if the underlying distribution of schools is not addressed through facility investment, decentralizing the admission rule alone cannot correct a structural supply imbalance, echoing the East African finding that devolution without complementary investment can leave, or even widen, access gaps (Iscahyono et al., 2026).

Targeting, Financing, and Digital Investment as Complementary Levers

Targeting and financing instruments offer a complementary lesson. Hamza & Cochrane find that Pakistan's Zewar-e-Taleem conditional cash transfer raises female enrollment by addressing the direct cost of schooling. However, financial constraints are only one of several barriers. Sociocultural norms and child labor continue to keep children out of school even where the transfer operates (Hamza & Cochrane, 2026). Indonesia has reached a structurally similar conclusion about the KIP: a targeted subsidy exists. However,

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its socialization and targeting accuracy remain suboptimal, so the instrument's formal availability again outpaces its substantive reach. Digital-access investment adds a third, complementary lever rather than a substitute for the first two: closing the rural-urban digital divide improves examination performance across five Sub-Saharan African countries, but its effects still vary by geography and gender (Kipkosgei, 2026). No single lever is therefore sufficient on its own, which is consistent with the GEM Report's finding that only about one in ten countries combine multiple equity-focused design features.

Zonasi as Indonesia's Domestic Equity Instrument: Achievements and Limits

Set against this comparative background, Indonesia's zonasi policy is best read not as a single success or failure but as a formal access instrument whose substantive equity effect depends on exactly the surrounding conditions the international literature identifies: facility distribution, assessment reliability, coherence across admission pathways, and financing accuracy (Andayani & Lourensius, 2026; Anggitasari et al., 2025; Iscahyono et al., 2026). None of these Indonesian studies finds that zoning itself is the problem. Instead, each identifies a specific complementary condition, as do the GEM Report and the East African, Pakistani, and Sub-Saharan African literature, that determines whether the policy converts formal access into substantive equity. **Table 3** summarizes these policy levers, the context in which each was studied, and the equity outcome each source reports.

Table 3. Comparative Policy Levers for Converting Formal Access into Substantive Equity, by Context

No	Policy Lever	Country / Context	Source	Equity Outcome Reported
1	Fiscal decentralization with intergovernmental transfers	Somalia and East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania)	Adan & Ahmed (2026)	Improves access/accountability when transfers are predictable, and oversight functions are in place; otherwise, it risks deepening inequity.
2	Conditional cash transfer / targeted subsidy	Pakistan	Hamza & Cochrane (2026)	Raises female enrollment; non-financial barriers (sociocultural norms, child labor) persist.
3	Digital infrastructure investment	Sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria)	Kipkosgei (2026)	Improves learning outcomes; rural-urban digital divide (0.312 index points) still shapes the effect.
4	School-zoning (PPDB Zonasi) tied to facility distribution	Indonesia - Bandung	Iscahyono et al. (2026)	Uneven school distribution limits zoning's equalizing effect in underserved neighborhoods
5	Regional standardized assessment (ASPD) complementing zoning	Indonesia - Yogyakarta	Andayani & Lourensius (2026)	Proposed to reduce "blank spot" access gaps and improve selection objectivity
6	Combined zoning, affirmation, and merit admission tracks	Indonesia - Purworejo	Anggitasari et al. (2025)	No significant relationship found between admission pathway and student learning motivation
7	PPDB zoning and student composition / academic competition	Indonesia - Jakarta (SMPN 107)	Kasiati et al. (2021)	Technically functional zoning diversified student intake but reduced academic competition and motivation.

Source: Authors' Synthesis of the Sources Cited in Column 4

Read down **Table 3**, the eight instruments cluster into three lever types (fiscal/decentralization, targeting/financing, and infrastructure) that recur across very different contexts, and the five Indonesian studies place zonasi within this same comparative space. The relevant policy question is therefore not

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whether to keep or abandon zoning. However, which complementary conditions identified abroad (predictable financing, facility investment, reliable assessment instruments, and coherent admission-pathway design) are still missing domestically? Beyond the instruments summarized in **Table 3**, a broader body of Indonesian evaluations reaches the same conclusion. GIS analysis in Temanggung again finds public senior-high facilities unevenly distributed relative to zoning boundaries. Sleman case study links zoning to the distribution of junior-secondary school quality. A comparatively more favorable case in Narmada, where internal quality assurance was sustained alongside a more diverse intake, shows that this outcome is not predetermined (Asananjaya et al., 2022; Kutbi, 2023; Sidik, 2024).

At the national level, admission reform has reshaped, but not eliminated, the perceived hierarchy of "favorite" schools that zoning was meant to dismantle (Arlinwibowo et al., 2024). Legal-rights and governance-actor analyses add complementary perspectives, and a review of the pro-and-contra literature reaches the same conclusion drawn here: zoning's equity effect is contingent, not automatic (Putri et al., 2021; Sihombing & Hadita, 2021; Syakarofath et al., 2020). Curriculum authority has progressively devolved to schools and regions, including in madrasah-based education management. However, two decades of curriculum decentralization have not produced consistent achievement gains, echoing this review's conclusion that devolution requires complementary conditions to become substantively equitable (Dewi, 2021; Nurdiansyah & Hudriyah, 2021).

Recent evaluations in this journal reinforce this point at the school level: a CIPP-framework review finds persistent gaps in resources, facilities, and teacher readiness in Kurikulum Merdeka implementation (Gifari & Arifin, 2024). Over-centralization constrains the delivery of local content in urban Makassar schools (Kasman & Firdaus, 2025). Researchers have proposed an SDG-4-aligned adaptive curriculum model to extend inclusive, technology-supported learning to isolated populations (Puspitasari, 2025). Individualized programming for special-needs students depends on targeted teacher assistance rather than facility access alone (Homdijah et al., 2026). Service delivery inside juvenile detention centers remains largely formalistic despite nominal access (Meggy et al., 2026). Student perceptions of the prior and current national curricula (Tarbiyah et al., 2025) and the relevance, flexibility, and continuity principles that should guide curriculum development (Azalia et al., 2023) round out the same pattern: a policy's formal existence does not by itself guarantee that disadvantaged learners experience its substantive benefit.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings reported here support three conclusions. First, the 2026 GEM Report's central claim, that completion-rate growth depends more on policy coherence and equity commitment than on resource levels alone, is corroborated by within-country evidence **(Tables 1 & 2)** and by country-level policy studies published in the same period (2025-2026), giving the report's headline argument independent, converging support rather than resting on the report alone. Second, this pattern is conditional rather than deterministic: decentralization, targeted financing, and infrastructure investment each narrow access gaps only under specific, identifiable conditions (predictable transfers, accurate targeting, and attention to the underlying disparity, respectively), which is precisely why only about one in ten countries combine broad access with genuinely equity-focused design. Third, Indonesia's zonasi debate reflects this same conditional pattern rather than a separate national problem. Hence, lessons from East Africa, Pakistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa are directly relevant, not merely analogical.

Through the theoretical lens adopted in this review, we should judge equality of educational opportunity by its effects rather than by inputs such as school availability or per-pupil spending. In these terms, zonasi equalizes an input: it gives each child a residence-based claim on a nearby public-school place (Coleman, 1968). The Indonesian evidence reviewed here shows that equalizing this input does not by itself equalize effects. Admission pathway is unrelated to students' learning motivation, a more diverse intake has

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coincided with weaker academic competition in at least one Jakarta school, and the perceived hierarchy of "favorite" schools has been reshaped rather than removed (Anggitasari et al., 2025; Arlinwibowo et al., 2024; Kasiati et al., 2021). The GEM Report's Equitable Financing in Education Index can therefore be understood as a contemporary operationalization of Coleman's distinction at the level of national financing systems, and zonasi as a case in which an input-equalizing rule has been adopted without all of the complementary conditions needed to equalize effects.

The findings are also consistent with the implementation literature on decentralized reform. Previous research found that two decades of curriculum decentralization in Indonesia did not by themselves produce consistent achievement gains (Dewi, 2021). Zonasi follows a similar pattern: the national admission rule is operationalized through regional technical guidelines, spatial analysis documents an uneven supply of public schools relative to zoning boundaries, and actor-level analysis shows that implementation depends on coordination among local government, schools, and other stakeholders (Asananjaya et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2021). Consistent with Adan and Ahmed's research, this suggests that the equity effect of a devolved access rule depends on the fiscal and administrative capacity of the implementing level of government (Adan & Ahmed, 2026). Finally, the targeting literature helps explain why the financing-side complement to zonasi has underperformed. Baird found that conditional transfers, particularly those with explicitly monitored conditions, produce larger schooling gains than unconditional ones, and the Kenyan cash-plus trial showed stronger educational effects when transfers were paired with complementary social support (Austrian et al., 2021; Baird et al., 2013).

By contrast, the KIP still suffers from weak socialization and targeting accuracy. Although its holders are eligible for the affirmation admission pathway, this review found no evaluation of whether the two instruments are coordinated in practice. Against this evidence, the comparative literature (Kipkosgei, 2026) most directly suggests two complementary conditions: closer coordination between subsidy targeting and admission pathways, and low-cost digital learning support for learners in "blank spot" areas. This review makes that connection explicit: to the authors' knowledge, no published academic work has yet read the 2026 GEM Report's global findings against Indonesia's 2025-2026 zonasi literature through a shared comparative-policy lens. Because the report was released only months before this review, this reading was not previously possible; that timing, rather than any claim to be exhaustive, is what makes this review one of the first systematic academic readings of the report's implications for Indonesian education policy.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, as a document-based review, it produces no new primary evidence; it reproduces the figures in Tables 1 & 2 from the 2026 GEM Report and the WIDE database, and reports causal claims as stated in the original studies rather than independently re-testing them. Second, the WIDE indicators used here are regional and income-group aggregates rather than Indonesia-specific estimates, so they establish the global pattern against which zonasi is read but do not measure Indonesia's own gaps. Third, we identified the literature through structured searches of DOAJ and publisher platforms rather than a registered systematic-review protocol, and most Indonesian zonasi studies are single-site case studies with heterogeneous designs, which limits generalizability across Indonesia's diverse regions. Finally, the 2026 GEM Report is only the first of three Countdown to 2030 volumes, and the replacement of PPDB with SPMB in 2025 postdates most of the evidence reviewed. The conclusions should therefore be read as a structured comparative interpretation of currently available evidence rather than a definitive evaluation of the policy.

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CONCLUSION

This review examined, through purely document-based comparative analysis, which policy factors are associated with faster or slower progress toward equitable access to education globally, and their relevance for Indonesia's zonasi policy. It finds that formal access mechanisms and national SDG 4 targets are now widespread (83% of countries). However, completion gaps within countries persist, up to 70 percentage points by wealth and 62 points by location, and only about one in ten countries combine broad access with genuinely equity-focused financing. Indonesia's zonasi system fits this global pattern closely: recent (2025-2026) studies find that its equity effect depends on facility distribution, assessment reliability, admission-pathway coherence, and subsidy targeting, not on the zoning rule in isolation.

Building on Table 3, this review recommends that Indonesian education authorities pair zonasi with explicit facility-distribution planning so that zoning boundaries reflect, rather than assume, an even supply of schools. Regional assessment instruments such as ASPD should be extended and standardized to complement zoning where school distribution is uneven. Admission pathways (zoning, affirmation, and merit) should be evaluated for coherence rather than expanded independently. Targeted subsidies such as the KIP should be paired with improved socialization and targeting accuracy. Internationally, this review's reading of the 2026 GEM Report suggests that monitoring ahead of the 2030 deadline should track substantive indicators, such as whether financing and targeting actually reach disadvantaged learners, and not only the existence of formal access mechanisms.

Future research should extend this document-based mapping with primary and quantitative evidence, particularly multi-site, mixed-methods studies testing whether the equity effect of residence-based admission varies with school-facility supply; analyses of Indonesian household-survey and WIDE microdata estimating Indonesia's own wealth and location-based completion gaps before and after zoning. Evaluations of the SPMB domicile pathway and its coordination with affirmation-pathway subsidies such as the KIP. Curriculum-oriented studies of how schools adapt Kurikulum Merdeka instruction to the more heterogeneous intakes that residence-based admission produces. Revisiting this reading as the second and third Countdown to 2030 volumes are published would further test the conditional pattern identified here.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this article and confirm that its data and content are free from plagiarism. The authors used AI-assisted tools (Claude by Anthropic, QuillBot, Grammarly, and GPTZero) to support literature searching, comparative synthesis drafting, and language editing, based on sources the authors identified and reviewed. The authors reviewed all AI-assisted content, independently verified the cited sources, data, and quotations against their original publications, and take full responsibility for the final manuscript's accuracy and integrity.

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