

# Aid to Higher Education During the SDGs: Donor Interests Trump Recipients' Access Needs

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# Research focus

Driving the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals are two key objectives: leaving no one behind and prioritising those furthest behind.

These are also the key stated goals of overseas development assistance (ODA), and particularly the developed countries grouped under the Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

Given this rhetoric, it is expected that DAC donors would be sensitive to and informed by the needs in least developed and other fragile countries when providing ODA.

In our research (under review), we use higher education as an entry point for analysis of foreign aid allocation to critically explore if DAC donors follow their commitment to support countries in need, which also aligns with the key objectives of the SDGs.

Foreign aid is a key mechanism for provision of support for strengthening the sector and expanding access to higher education in many least developed, fragile and conflict-affected contexts that require assistance.

# Literature and key assumptions

There is no consensus in the literature on foreign aid about the key factors influencing bilateral donors' choices of recipients of aid, or about the motivations for the provision of aid.

Some scholars argue that most donors are driven and informed by the needs in recipient countries. Others find evidence that some donors provide ODA based on needs, while others provide aid based on both the needs in recipient countries and strategic and geopolitical considerations of the donors.

**The key assumption of our research** is that if DAC donors follow their own rhetoric and are acting on the objectives of the SDGs to support those most in need as a priority, this would be reflected in aid flows to higher education.

On the other hand, if donors are driven by their own strategic, geopolitical, economic, security and other interests, this would be reflected in the aid going to the countries important to the donors, instead of the countries that need the aid the most.

# Methodology

Using the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) aid flows data from DAC countries, we analyse aid flows to higher education in 92 developing countries targeted by SDG 4, Target 4b, which aims to expand access to higher education in these countries through the provision of international scholarships.

Our focus is on the the first seven years of the implementation of the SDGs (2016-2022).

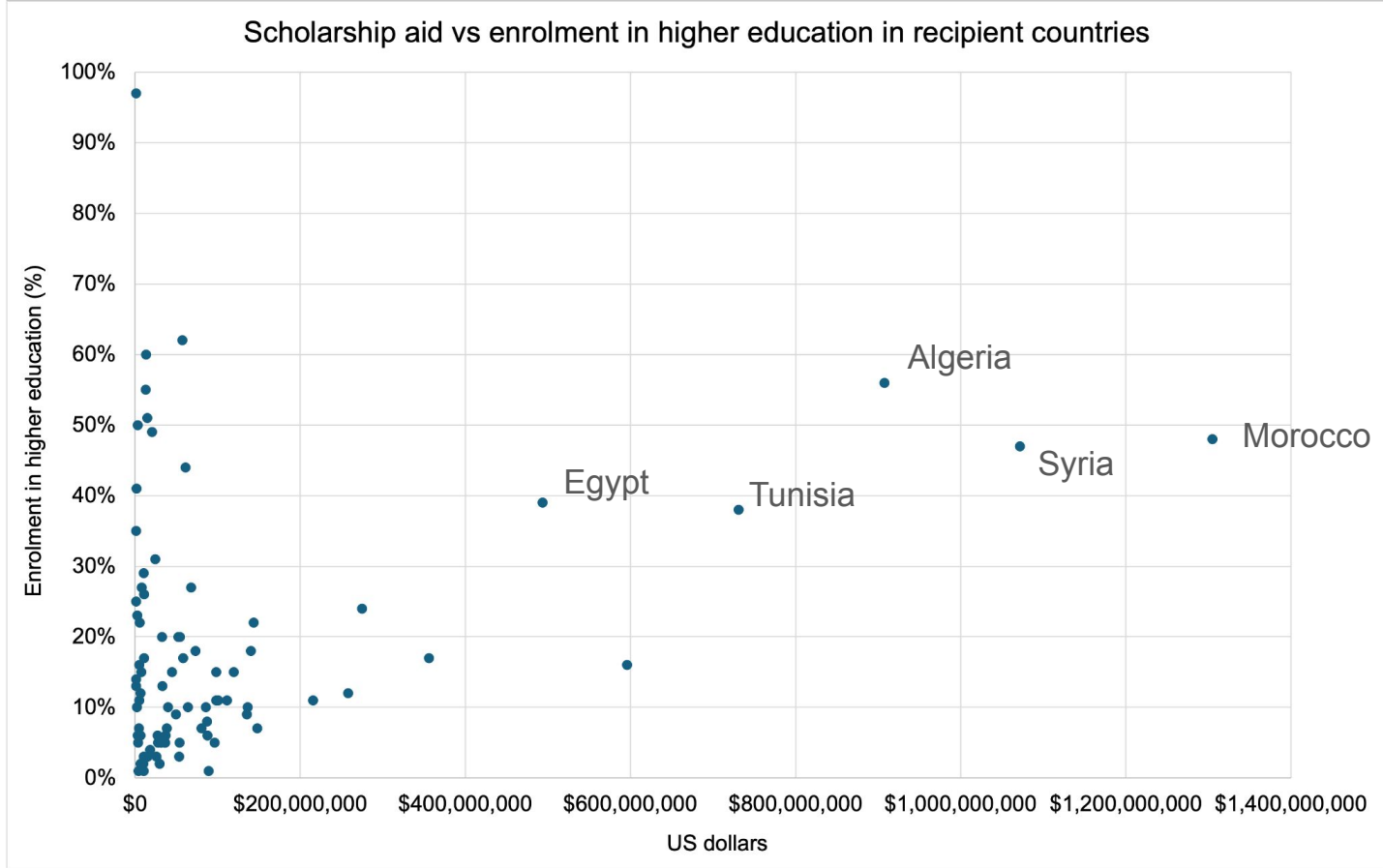
We unpack aid flows by two types of aid to higher education provided by donors: international scholarships for study in donor countries, and the aid provided to local higher education in recipient countries.

To assess whether donors' provision of aid is based on needs in recipient countries, we analyse aid flows in reference to the OECD's classification of countries in need of ODA, the World Bank's data on enrolments in higher education, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), and the gross national income (GNI) per capita in recipient countries.

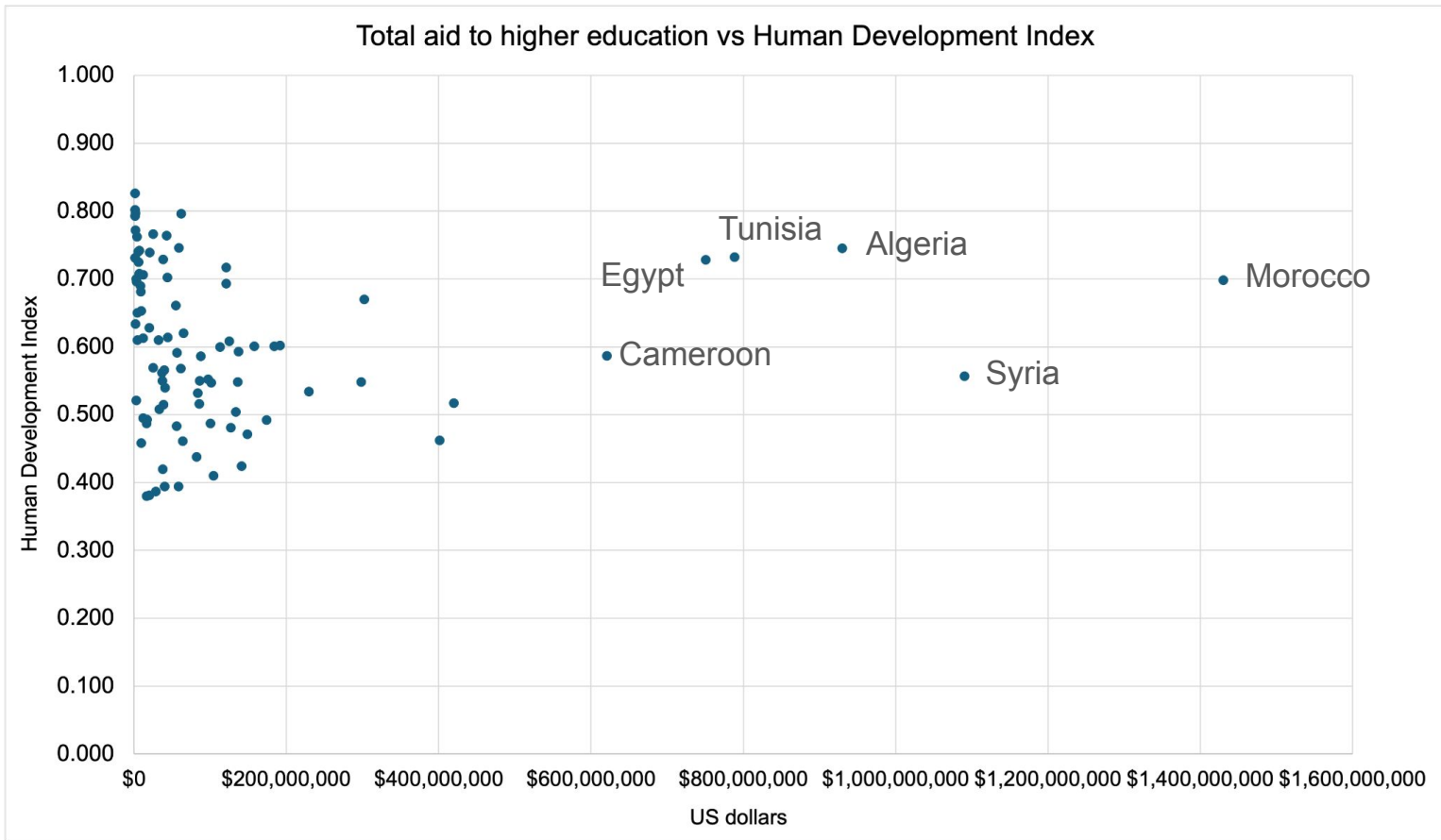
# Key findings

Aid flows to higher education in reference to the OECD's classification of countries most in need of ODA:

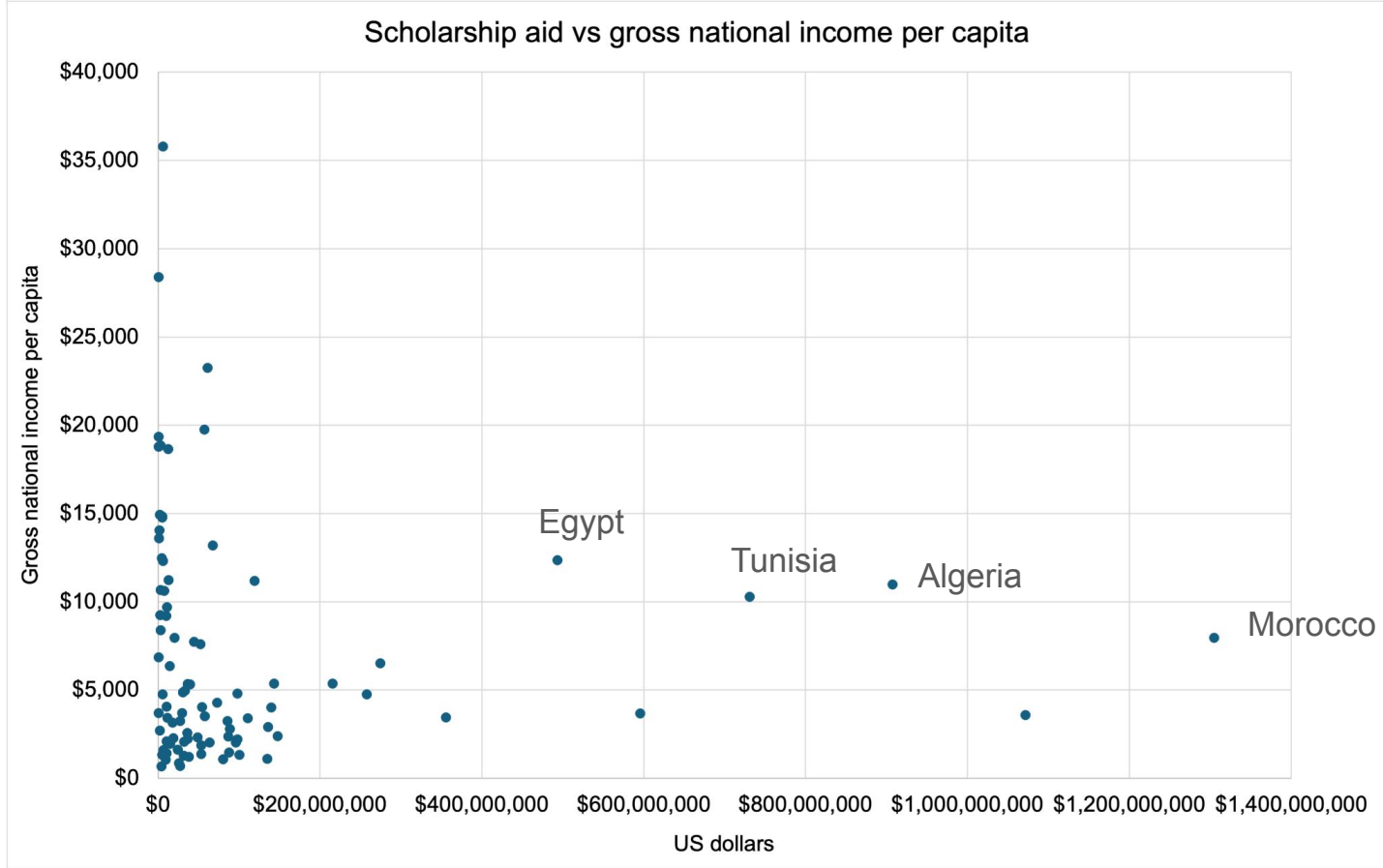
- In terms of the **scholarship aid**, 11 countries that are not classified as countries most in need of ODA by DAC have received 40.35% of all scholarship aid during 2016-2022.
- 39 recipients categorized by the OECD as both the least developed and fragile countries in need of ODA have combined received 23.57% of the overall scholarship aid provided to the countries in our sample.
- When it comes to the **aid to local higher education**, 28.42% of this type of aid was provided to 10 developing countries which are not classified as the countries in need of ODA by the OECD.
- 39 countries categorized as both least developed and fragile have combined received 46.17% of aid to local systems and institutions.



The top 4 recipients with enrolment ranging from 38-56% have combined received 43.05% of all scholarship aid provided to the countries in our sample. In comparison, 36 countries with enrolments at 10% or below have combined received only 17.30% of scholarship aid provided by DAC donors.



Two countries with very high HDI and 22 countries with high HDI in our sample have combined received 25.59% of all aid to higher education from DAC countries during 2016-2022. 33 countries with medium HDI have received 46.01% of all aid, while 32 countries with low HDI have received 28.40%.



26.82% of scholarship aid went to 23 countries with GNI over \$10,000. 31 countries with GNI of less than \$3,000 received only 17.19% of scholarship aid provided by DAC donors.



# Key findings and implications

Our findings indicate that for the most part, needs in recipient countries were not the most important factors guiding DAC donors' choices of recipients of aid to higher education during 2016-2022, particularly when it comes to the scholarship aid, which represents 74% of all aid to higher education DAC donors provided to the countries in our sample.

**Countries in our sample with the higher HDI, higher enrolment percentage, and higher GNI per capita have received more scholarship aid than the countries with lower HDI, low higher education enrolments, and lower GNI.**

DAC donors, despite their own rhetoric about the importance of supporting countries in need of the ODA, and the rhetoric of the SDGs calling to support countries further behind first, have not been driven by the recipients' needs but other factors and considerations.

If needs in recipient countries are not informing donors' aid provision decisions, this is likely to undermine the potential impact of aid to support development in countries in need.

When countries with the greatest need of assistance are neglected, this further deepens regional and global inequalities.

# Key findings and implications

An important finding that emerged in our research is the problematic selection and grouping of countries in the Target 4b in the SDGs.

Instead of targeting countries with greatest needs, in line with the broader SDG rhetoric, Target 4b groups least developed countries with several upper-middle income and high-income countries, as well as the countries with low HDI, one side, and countries with high, and even very high HDI, on the other side.

- Similarly, countries with relatively high enrolment in higher education were grouped with countries with very low enrolment rates.

Our findings point to the importance of selecting countries in need of assistance for the global development plans that will replace the SDGs after 2030 based on observable indicators of needs, and not based on their geography and assumed fragility.