TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN AFRICA

An evidence-based overview and recommendations for long-term improvements

African Union

A Report by UNICEF and the African Union Commission

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FOREWORD

This report is the result of a successful collaboration between UNICEF and the African Union Commission. The report intends to contribute to the facilitation of high-level policy discussions between national education authorities, regional and continental bodies on possible strategic shifts and interventions to boost access to education and improve the quality of teaching and learning in Africa. The report provides evidence-based analysis of the situation of education in Africa while putting into perspective the Sustainable Development Goals and the objectives of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25) in line with the African Union Agenda 2063. It highlights the progress made in the continent's education sector over the past decade (2010–2020) while pointing out the challenges that remain, particularly in the area of equity.

This report comes at a time when the global context (health, education, financial systems) is severely challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, from which Africa is not exempted. While much of the data presented in the report predates the pandemic, it also describes how some African countries have responded to the COVID-19 crisis in innovative ways, such as by offering distance education to children, combining high-tech and low-cost solutions to ensure the safe continuity of learning while schools were closed. The pandemic can be seen as an opportunity to reimagine education in Africa, including safe, healthy and inclusive schools, greater use of digital technologies, and teachers who are well trained to bring these technologies to life to help children learn.

With such a young population (3 out of 5 Africans are under 25 years old), it is now time for African governments to boost their investment in education in order not to miss the current window of opportunity. Harnessing the continent's demographic dividend and investing in human capital can deliver huge impact and results in and for Africa.

UNICEF and the African Union Commission hope that all African governments can act now to improve their education systems by allocating funds more fairly and efficiently despite the additional fiscal pressure that the COVID-19 pandemic has created. Eliue Kipcho, the Kenyan Marathon world record holder, once said, "The best time to plant a tree was 25 years ago. The second-best time to plant a tree is today."

UNICEF and the African Union Commission appeal to all African governments to seize the opportunity and renew their commitments to enhance the governance and efficiency of education services through digital transformation, reimagining education systems and skills acquisition to meet the needs of a growing digital economy.

Robert Jenkins,
Global Director, Education
UNICEF

H.E. Prof. Sarah Anyang Agbor,
Commissioner for Education, Science, Technology and Innovation
African Union Commission

KEY MESSAGES

The progress of Africa's children is the progress of the world

✔ By the middle of this century, Africa will be home to a billion children and adolescents under 18 years of age, almost 40 per cent of all children and adolescents in the 0-18 age group worldwide.

✔ This young population can be a powerful source of growth and progress in Africa, as well as the world, if children and adolescents receive the right opportunities to thrive and develop their full potential.

The time is right to seize opportunities offered by a young and fast-growing population

✔ The potential is great for African countries to leverage their human capital, but efforts must be made now, in the present, to invest in the education and training of children and young people. Only then can African countries position themselves to reap the benefits of a "demographic dividend" of increased economic productivity – which occurs when there is a large working population relative to the number of dependents – well into the future.

✔ The opportunity to reap a demographic dividend is time sensitive. In 2020, 3 out of 5 Africans are under the age of 25. By 2050 it will be 1 out of 2 Africans in this age group. This high proportion of a young and active population will not last forever.

✔ Education is a critical means by which Africa's human capital can be developed. Investments in education help break inter-generational cycles of poverty and aid socio-economic development. Investments in education could lead to a qualified and employable work force which meets the demands of the labor markets for skills and competencies.

✔ Education empowers people and is associated with more peaceful communities, greater civic engagement, and stronger democracies.

Africa has made substantial progress in getting children into school

✔ Since the early 2000s, African countries have made efforts to improve access to education -- with stunning results. The proportion of primary school-

age children who are not in school has halved – from 35 per cent in 2000 to 17 per cent in 2019.

✔ The proportion of children of lower secondary school age who are not in school dropped from 43 per cent to 33 per cent in the past two decades; for children of upper secondary school age, it dropped from 63 per cent to 53 per cent.

Despite the progress, there are still too many children on the margins of education

✔ In 2019, there were approximately 105 million children of primary and secondary school age who were out of school in Africa – this represents 41 per cent of the global number.

✔ In addition, many children leave school without completion. One in three children in a cohort does not complete primary school. Only 41 per cent of a cohort completes lower secondary education and only 23 per cent completes upper secondary education.

Poor learning outcomes remain a key challenge

✔ In Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 87 per cent of children are learning poor, unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10.

✔ This stems from the combined effect of a large proportion of out-of-school children along with poor quality learning outcomes for those in school.

✔ On average, the proportion of children reaching the minimum level of competency at the end of primary school is only 35 per cent in reading and 22 per cent in mathematics.

There is a pressing need for qualified teachers

✔ Africa is facing a serious deficit in qualified teachers. The continent will need 17 million additional teachers in order to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030.

✔ To meet the growing demand for education, many countries are turning to the recruitment of unqualified and often untrained teachers. In 2019, the average proportion of qualified teachers per country in Africa was 78 per cent at the pre-primary level, 89 per cent at the primary level, and 80 per cent at the secondary level. This poses a serious threat to the quality of learning overall, especially when not accompanied by in-service training for teachers.

The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sub-sector requires more investment

✔ Many African governments remain committed to technical and vocational education and training, but the sector remains under-developed. In 2019, the average number of TVET enrollees per 100,000 people in Africa was 762, compared to 801 globally.

✔ On average, the percentage of young people between 15 and 24 years old who are enrolled in vocational education is 3 per cent.

Serious equity challenges in education: children from the poorest families are the most excluded

✔ Poverty remains one of the main dimensions of exclusion from education. A child from the richest quintile of households is 8 times more likely to complete primary education than a child from the poorest quintile of households. This ratio rises to 12 if one considers secondary education.

✔ Abolition of school fees alone is often not enough to guarantee school attendance of children from the poorest households. Other factors, including opportunity costs, lack of schools or learning centers in their environment, and prevailing social norms must be taken into consideration.

Education under attack: conflicts and security issues prevent many children from following a normal educational curriculum

✔ Conflicts and insecurity cause population displacement, including children who are in school. In West and Central Africa, deliberate attacks on students, teachers, and schools and, more generally, the deteriorating security environment, have led to an increase in school closures. By the end of 2020, nearly 9,600 schools were closed due to conflict, interrupting the education of nearly two million students in this region.

✔ Moreover, increased security challenges are likely to create a shift in public funding away from education to competing priorities related to peace and security.

Hard-learned lessons in education from the COVID-19 pandemic

✔ At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, more than 90 per cent of students in Africa had their learning disrupted by school closures. Some African countries responded to the COVID-19 education crisis in innovative ways, including offering remote learning through a combination of low-cost and/ or high-tech solutions, ranging from paper-based take-home learning materials to broadcast media lessons, mainly using TV, radio and digital platforms.

✔ However, overall, African education systems are not sufficiently prepared to ensure continuity of learning outside of educational facilities. An estimated 121 million students, i.e. about half of the students, in Sub-Saharan Africa were de facto excluded from digital or broadcast distance learning due to either a lack of policies supporting digital and broadcast remote learning, or a lack of the household assets needed to receive digital or broadcast instruction.

✔ In addition, many countries lack adequate infrastructure and equipment for water, hygiene, and sanitation. Nearly half of the primary schools in Africa, for example, do not have hand-washing facilities or drinking water supply. Such gaps make it difficult to resume in-person classroom teaching in compliance with the recommendations of the WHO and health authorities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The time is right for 'reimagining education' in Africa based on the perspective that going back to the 'normal' that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic will not suffice. Rededicating ourselves to an Africa we want must involve implementing recovery measures in education that go above and beyond a 'business as usual' scenario.

This Report presents the following recommendations for transforming education systems in Africa towards 2030 and beyond:

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1 **More inclusion in schools, with special attention to groups that drop out** The time is opportune for African countries to investigate the underlying reasons why individuals in certain groups (such as those of secondary school age) fail to participate in education. Specific policies need to be designed to reduce major barriers that young people face in accessing secondary education. Creating policies that expand compulsory secondary education is one measure, as well as making curricula more relevant to the jobs market. Governments can also implement measures to motivate more adolescents to stay in school, such as social protection programmes that include cash transfers or child allowances.

2 **Focus on foundational learning from an early stage to raise learning levels** African countries can raise the overall quality of education by emphasizing teaching focused on basic reading and mathematics in preschool and primary school. The earlier that learning takes place the better. Governments can make a big push for literacy and numeracy and encourage schools to find innovative ways to improve foundational learning skills, even if it means devoting a few hours weekly to teaching children how to read and do maths at appropriate levels.

3 **Prioritize digital connectivity for learning and skills development** For Ministries of Education, developing strategic partnerships with telecommunications companies and internet providers (to bring down the cost of airtime, mobile data and broadband services) is critical for implementing innovative teaching and

learning approaches that expand access to online learning resources to all children, including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Inter-ministerial collaboration between Ministries of Education and Telecommunications is a key enabling factor towards this goal. It will also require investment in ICT infrastructure and strategic partnerships, which are best made with a clear road map and inter-ministerial collaboration platform, supported by national ICT and Education policy frameworks.

Education budgets also need to support changes in the curriculum to make it appropriate for children and young people growing up in a digital world. School curricula can also be designed to further encourage non-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, cooperation and emotional intelligence. Governments must recognize that special attention is needed to enhance TVET programmes – currently, the provision of technical and vocational education and training is almost non-existent at the lower secondary level. Unless this changes, the skills of young people will not align with market needs to nurture the future workforce.

4 **Schools should be safe and healthy havens for students** In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing health and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) guidelines and protocols for schools have become a must. Currently, half of all African primary schools do

not have access to basic handwashing facilities, and a similar pattern is seen in secondary schools. In order to better prepare for future crises, African countries need to increase investment in WASH infrastructure, develop detailed protocols on hygiene measures in schools (including handwashing, use of protective equipment, and safe food preparation practices), and develop easy-to-understand protocols on physical distancing measures.

5 **Prioritize teacher training, including digital skills for pedagogy** Qualified teachers are integral to robust education systems, and schools across Africa faced a chronic shortage of qualified teachers. African countries need to prioritize redesigning their teacher development programmes at all levels, including digital and pedagogical skills for learner-centered, inclusive quality education. As the COVID-19 school closures have shown, it is now critical for teachers to possess skills as learning facilitators and instructional designers, using a wide range of technologies to meet students' varying needs. Providing pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes is integral to realizing this goal.

6 **Develop efficient and innovative education funding mechanisms** In the wake of the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is expected that education spending will stagnate in many countries. Improving efficiency is key to using limited financial resources. To avoid detrimental impacts on educational outcomes resulting from cuts in government expenditure, African governments can review their fiscal policies and reallocate resources in the education sector more strategically. Transparent education expenditure audits and reviews can provide insights and allow budgets to be allocated more efficiently.

It is important for governments to have balanced sectoral investment at all levels of education. African policymakers could benefit from allocating more funding to neglected but critical sectors, such as early childhood education, where early investments pay off in the long run. Given the growing role of private

sector partners in education funding – which can bring in financial contributions and make education systems more efficient – African governments can consider diversifying the types of partnership they have with the private sector. These approaches must however be supported by clear measures to ensure good governance.

7 **Invest in developing more resilient education systems** African countries need to develop costed national education plans, supported by a robust results framework, to develop more resilient education systems – so that quality and inclusive education can continue under any circumstances, without interruption. A comprehensive approach to education management, which integrates assessment, teaching and learning, management, and monitoring and evaluation within the same framework, is needed for strong education systems.

African governments should also aim to strengthen communication channels and coordination systems, so that education stakeholders can share feedback and suggest improvements. This means that key players at the municipal, subnational and national levels need to work together in a streamlined process.

8 **Invest in improving education data and education management information systems** Having evidence-based information is key to progress. Significant obstacles to measuring progress can arise due to a lack of critical data, such as data on learning outcomes indicators. Producing quality data helps to support evidence-based programming, informs policy, and allows a country's progress to be monitored against national, regional, and continental goals. There is an urgent need for African countries to invest in financial and human resources on data management infrastructure, so that they can capture evidence and measure progress. At a continental level, it is also important to ensure that there is harmonization between different education data producers and sources, by establishing effective coordination mechanisms and functional data repositories at the levels of the Regional Economic Community (REC) and African Union.

KEY FIGURES

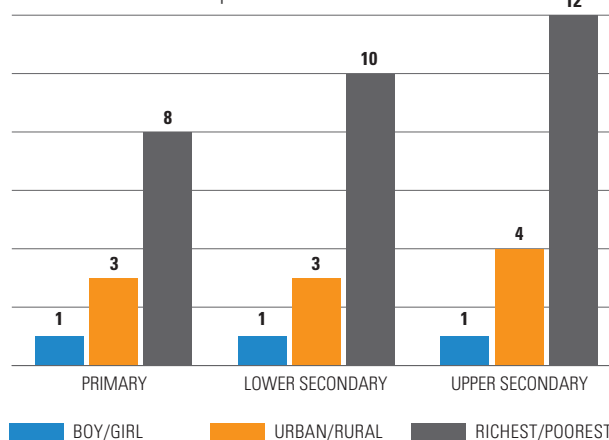## A young and fast-growing population: 3 out of 5 Africans are under 25

In 2020, 60% of the African population were under 25 years old.

Source: Calculations based on UN World Population Prospect, 2019 revision

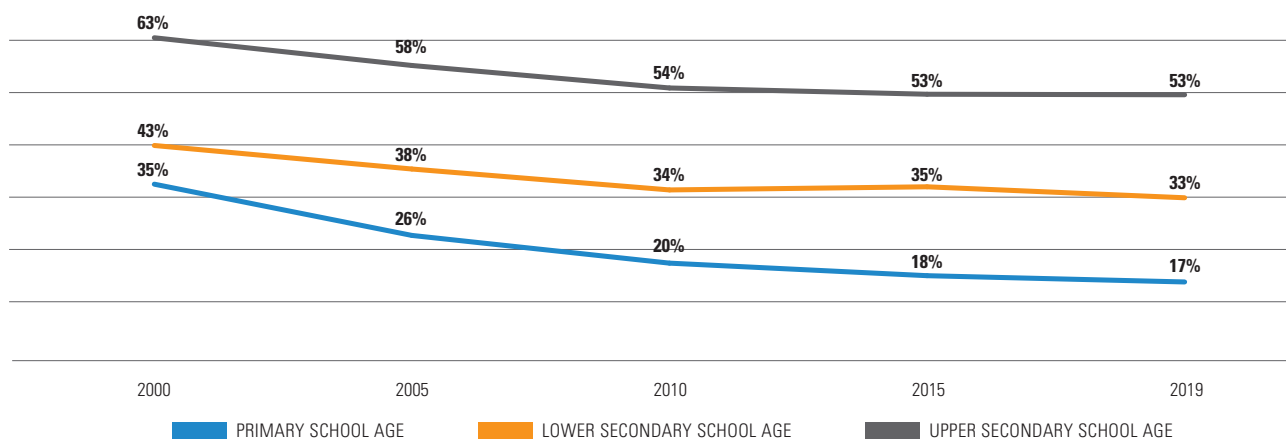## Children from the poorest families are the most excluded in education

Odds ratios on completion rates in Africa

	BOY/GIRL	URBAN/RURAL	RICHEST/POOREST
PRIMARY	1	3	8
LOWER SECONDARY	1	3	10
UPPER SECONDARY	1	4	12

Source: Calculations based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics

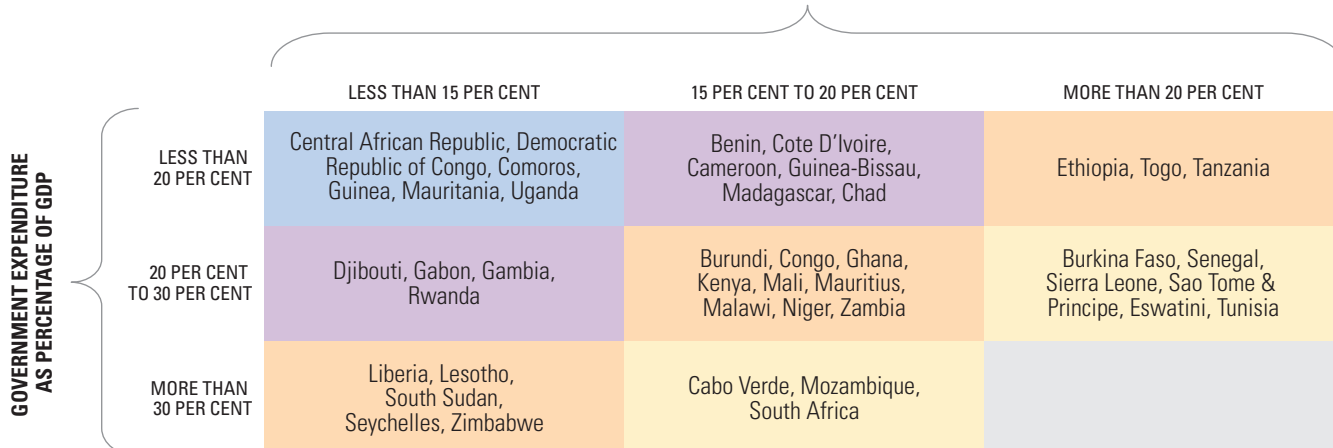## Despite progress in school inclusion, large proportions of children are still out of school

Share of out-of-school children in Africa, by age group

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE	35%	26%	20%	18%	17%
LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL AGE	43%	38%	34%	35%	33%
UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL AGE	63%	58%	54%	53%	53%

Source: Calculations based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Most African countries dedicate less than 20 per cent of their national budget to education. About one in three country dedicates less than 15 per cent.

		SHARE OF EDUCATION IN GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE		
		LESS THAN 15 PER CENT	15 PER CENT TO 20 PER CENT	MORE THAN 20 PER CENT
GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE AS PERCENTAGE OF GDP	LESS THAN 20 PER CENT	Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Comoros, Guinea, Mauritania, Uganda	Benin, Cote D'Ivoire, Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Chad	Ethiopia, Togo, Tanzania
	20 PER CENT TO 30 PER CENT	Djibouti, Gabon, Gambia, Rwanda	Burundi, Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mauritius, Malawi, Niger, Zambia	Burkina Faso, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sao Tome & Principe, Eswatini, Tunisia
	MORE THAN 30 PER CENT	Liberia, Lesotho, South Sudan, Seychelles, Zimbabwe	Cabo Verde, Mozambique, South Africa	

Source: Calculations based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the IMF