

# Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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This article examines current trends in education in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, high enrolment rates after the introduction of free basic education, the challenges of retaining pupils in the system, poor levels of attainment, and prevailing factors in the region that affect the teaching process and profession.

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This article examines current trends in education in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, high enrolment rates after the introduction of free basic education, the challenges of retaining pupils in the system, poor levels of attainment, and prevailing factors in the region that affect the teaching process and profession.

- Education has many benefits, such as improved health, increased per capita income, and sustained democracies.
- Inasmuch as education is a human right, only some people in Sub-Saharan Africa have the privilege of being educated.

- Most children (especially girls) are still deprived of the right to education.

## **Background**

- The 1960s and early 1970s marked a post-independence era for most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, which were characterised by economic boom.
- Later, due to economic crises, governments were forced to make choices that restricted public education.
- As a result, developing countries experienced a sharp decline in the quality of education provided in institutions of learning from the 1980s onwards.
- The World Bank (2009) emphasised the need for good quality, free primary education, stating it as the basis of governments' poverty reduction strategies.

## **Pre-primary schooling**

- Preschools play an important role in preparing the student for primary education by imparting the emotional, intellectual, and social skills necessary to succeed at school.
- Despite this positive outlook, pre-primary education is still considered a luxury for nearly all children.
- In 2006, nearly 9 million children were enrolled in pre-primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Despite this, the average gross enrolment ratio remained low (at 14% in 2006) with significant regional disparities.

## **Primary education**

- In Sub-Saharan Africa, primary education usually spans a period of 6–7 years.
- For most children, this is the first time they set foot in a classroom and enrolment age across the region varies between 6 and 7 years.

- In some countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, and Madagascar, the average primary net enrolment between 1999 and 2006 increased from 56% to 70%.
- Successful strategies noted in several countries have included ambitious school construction programmes in rural areas, the abolition of school tuition fees, and targeting disadvantaged groups such as orphans and vulnerable children.
- In some West African countries, the enrolment results have been less positive, especially for girls.
- Nonetheless, enrolment disparities within countries are also very pronounced and sometimes even greater than between countries.
- In general, children living in urban areas are enrolled at higher rates than their rural counterparts and gaps tend to increase as they progress through their educational career.
- In 2006, almost one-third of the school age population in Sub-Saharan Africa, (approximately 35 million children) were not enrolled in schools.
- Compared to other regions in the world, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have low enrolment rates and strong gender disparities and inequalities.
- In addition, Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest primary completion rates compared to other regions of the world.
- Factors such as disease, hunger, child labour, and distant schools result in children being absent from school and eventually dropping out.
- However, over the past 30 years, the percentage of both boys and girls completing primary school in the Sub-Saharan region has increased.
- Primary completion rates in the region vary from as low as 8% for girls and 19% for boys in Niger to as high as 90% for girls and 86% for boys in South Africa.

## **Secondary education**

- Depending on the country, young people are generally expected to enrol into secondary school from the age of 12 or 14 and are expected to be in the system for 6 or 5 years, respectively.
- While participation in primary education is expanding, access to secondary education remains limited for most young people in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Despite of the increasing number of enrolments in secondary education, 78 million of the region's secondary school age children were not enrolled in secondary school in 2006.
- On average, countries with extremely low secondary enrolment also have a relatively low primary enrolment as well as a significant gender imbalance.
- Transition from lower to higher secondary is a critical dropout point in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Like primary education, within-country inequalities in secondary education are even more marked than those between countries.
- Rates for secondary school attendance and survival to the final grade are marked by disparities related to household wealth and language.

## **Learning achievement/educational quality**

- High enrolment because of the abolition of school tuition fees in Sub-Saharan Africa have compromised the quality of basic education.
- Student competency in numeracy and literacy as well as national examinations have provided good indicators of quality regarding school attainment.
- While literacy improves with schooling, the correlation between the two is far from perfect in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- For example, in Tanzania, 1 in 5 (20%) pupils who finish

primary education cannot read at 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level in Kiswahili and only 5 in 10 (50%) children can read in English on completion of primary school.

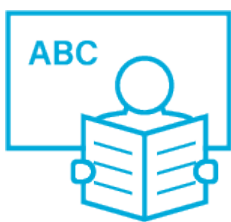
- Results from regional assessments have highlighted poor learning outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- In general, it has been observed that large numbers of children who reach the final grade in primary school have weak literacy and numeracy skills.
- Factors that may explain poor attainment levels in the Sub-Saharan region include teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, poor teaching, primary language interference, lack of printed material in local languages, illiterate parents, and lack of parental support in the learning process.

### **Teachers and factors affecting the teaching process**

- The way teachers are recruited, trained, and deployed across schools is vital for improving learning outcomes.
- The introduction of free basic education in Sub-Saharan Africa automatically resulted in more children in classrooms thereby increasing the pupil–teacher ratio.
- This situation is compounded by significant teacher shortages, especially in rural areas.
- Trained teachers are in short supply in many countries in the region and the teacher shortage is often an indication of inadequate investment in education.
- At the primary level, teacher education is often fragmented, incomplete, and in some cases non-existent.
- For many countries in the region, investment in education is inadequate because governments depend heavily on external funding to support basic education policy and practice.
- Due to financial constraints, some countries in the region cannot deploy teachers straight out of colleges and universities for a long time.
- The use of unqualified teachers brings severe

deficiencies that outweigh the financial advantages.

- Those with limited professional education are likely to provide lower quality education, and the fact that they are deployed in rural, understaffed schools means that children's attainment levels are adversely affected, further emphasising rural–urban inequalities.
- However, several countries are making progress toward having and recruiting well-trained teachers in primary schools.
- However, many educated teachers do not demonstrate the desired teaching approaches.
- Possible reasons for this could be the poor teaching conditions that teachers are exposed to, such as lack of accommodation, physically inadequate classrooms, a lack of furniture and teaching materials, and a high pupil–teacher ratio, all of which make it impossible to apply their newly learned teaching skills.
- Due to low salaries and poor conditions of service in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the status of the teaching profession is declining.
- This ultimately leads to severe retention problems coupled with high rates of absenteeism.



## Conclusions

- The abolition of primary school tuition fees in the mid-1990s has had a positive effect on allowing more children access to basic education.
- The increased number of pupils leads to challenges such as a lack of classrooms and appropriate furniture, a lack of resources such as student books and teachers'

manuals, and lack of trained teachers all of which ultimately lead to questions about the quality of the education offered.

- A further issue identified was the lack of morale experienced by teachers due to low salaries, lack of incentives for progression in the profession, and generally poor working conditions.
- This led to high rates of attrition and absenteeism, and to fill the gap governments resorted to cheap labour in the form of volunteers and contract teachers.
- To fully achieve universal primary education, it is cardinal for governments in the Sub-Saharan region to establish good collective bargaining structures and ultimately to allocate more funding for the construction of new classrooms.
- Teacher training also requires enhancing to ensure the presence of qualified teaching personnel who can teach not only academic but also vocational subjects to prepare those who drop out with some life skills.
- The general working conditions of teachers (including salaries, housing, and other incentives) needed to attract teachers to rural areas should be improved.
- The in-service component of the upgrading programme should be closely monitored and consistently evaluated to allow for adequate mentoring of students.