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Education in Africa Placing equity at the heart of policy

Executive Summary

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UNESCO – a global leader in education

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.



The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



The African Union (AU) is a continental body consisting of the 55 member states that make up the countries of the African Continent. Guided by its vision of *“An Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena,”* AU promotes Africa's growth and economic development by championing citizen inclusion and increased cooperation and integration of African states. In Education, the AU contributes to development of human resources and intellectual capital through facilitating access to revitalized,

quality, relevant, harmonized education and training systems, whilst ensuring gender equality, safe and healthy learning environments. The AU is implementing the Continental Education Strategy (CESA 16-25) that capitalizes on education actors, Member States, Regional Economic Communities and Development Partners among others to collectively transform the education systems in Africa, focusing on Early Childhood Education, Higher Education, TVET, Teacher Development, Curriculum Development, among other CESA strategic objectives.

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The Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25) was adopted by African Union heads of state and government, during its 26th Ordinary Session held in Addis Ababa on 31 January 2016, as the framework for transforming the continent's education and training systems. CESA concretized the vision set out in its Agenda 2063 for enabling citizens to be effective agents of change to achieve the 'Africa We Want'. It also localized the global Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goal on education (SDG 4) within the context of Africa-specific priorities and challenges.

At the 2018 Pan-African High-level Conference on Education (PACE), Member States asked the African Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to produce, on a regular basis, a continental report monitoring progress towards achieving the implementation of CESA 16-25 and SDG 4. The two organizations entrusted UNESCO's International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) to produce this first report, which aims to contribute to efforts to accelerate the achievement by African countries of the strategic objectives and targets set out in both agendas. It presents a baseline situation analysis covering the first five years of implementation. The report is aligned with the ongoing benchmarking process conducted by the African Union Commission (AUC) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and anchors its conceptual and analytic frameworks to the agreed benchmark indicators.

Placing equity at the heart of education policy



A focus on equity underpins the analysis in this report, reflecting the commitment in Agenda 2030, CESA 16-25, and the 2018 Nairobi Declaration and Call for Action on Education, to leave no child behind.

Using a multidimensional approach to examine disparities in education, it discusses the links and intersections between household wealth, location, gender, home language, crisis and displacement, disability, and a child's access to quality education and learning. It presents both the patterns of disparities in education along these dimensions and the ongoing efforts by African governments for equitable and inclusive education. Equity must be placed at the centre of political prioritization, policy planning, and investment decisions in order to provide access to quality education at all levels and ensure learning opportunities that will enable children to thrive.

Although there may be no 'silver bullet' solution to inequality in broader society, equitable access to quality education has been identified as a particularly effective way to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. While over the past two decades, some countries have succeeded in coupling economic growth with greater equality, for others this has resulted in increased income inequality (UNDP, 2017).

Efforts to expand access to and improve the quality of education need to prioritize equity in learning so that the most vulnerable children are placed at the centre of policy decisions and investments. Most education systems experience segregation between the more able children and those who need the extra support. In addition to working around the more visible dimensions of equity (gender, location, poverty), it is important to delve into the invisible barriers¹ that prevent many children from benefiting from the educational experience (Banerji, 2014).

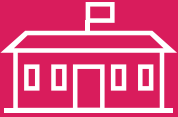
The negative effect that crises, conflicts, natural disasters, and unexpected events have on the most vulnerable children cannot be ignored. The analysis draws attention to the disproportionately negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on disadvantaged and marginalized children, which is likely to widen existing disparities both in access and learning (UNESCO, 2021; UNFPA and UNICEF, 2020).



Equity-related analyses are presented as a cross-cutting issue in all chapters of the report. Chapter 2 summarizes the findings and provides the conceptual framework.

1. Those that prevent children from not being enrolled in school, not attending regularly, attending but not following the average learning pathway, or not even appearing in official databases.

Early childhood education and school readiness



CESA describes early childhood education (ECE) as the next frontier for Africa in order to realize sustained quality education.

Its assertion about the importance of ECE finds parallels

in Agenda 2030 and is captured concretely in SDG Target 4.2 which commits governments to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and education.

In their efforts to expand ECE services, African governments have adopted many different approaches (e.g. progressive universalization approach, community-based age-indifferent expansion approach), and used a broad range of service delivery models that vary in terms of their intensity (e.g. half-day versus full-day programmes, once per week versus five days per week programmes), location (institution-based, community based versus home-based services), and timing (year-long versus seasonal programmes using accelerated school readiness model). While this diversity is indicative of ECE's adaptability to needs and context, it also raises questions about the quality of education offered as implementation of the varying delivery models may not be uniform and may produce different results across contexts. There is clear evidence of the importance of quality in ECE for young children's learning and development (UNICEF, 2019; Adeniran, Ishaku and Akanni, 2020). The negative effects of low-quality programmes may go beyond unfulfilled promises of learning and developmental progress. They could place children's safety, health, and emotional well-being at risk (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, a focus on quality should be central to policy discussions around expanding access to ECE, not only with regards to the structural elements of the services, but also in terms of process-related (e.g. pedagogy, adult-child interactions) and system-level elements (e.g. standards and monitoring, financing, and management) (Rossiter, 2016). Inclusion also matters. For children with disabilities, access to ECE services can facilitate earlier identification of special needs and risk factors for developmental delay, enable the provision of integrated support, and complement ongoing early interventions (UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

The role ECE has in supporting a child's readiness for primary school also makes it a potential tool for mitigating the widening of inequalities in developmental outcomes in her/his early years of schooling, and a 'powerful opportunity to break intergenerational cycles of inequality' (UNICEF, 2019: 39). However, taking advantage of ECE's potential to increase equity will require 'bold measures that benefit disadvantaged children at least as much as their better-off peers' in each policy and investment decision, while at the same time expanding access to ECE (UNICEF, 2019: 39). For this, targeted early learning programmes and multisectoral intervention models with a focus on children facing adverse experiences are important building blocks. In this respect, providing ECE services during crises, such as conflicts, natural disasters, and pandemics, gains particular importance given its potential to mitigate their negative effects on young children's development. It is therefore important that governments give priority to quality, inclusion, and equity in their efforts to expand access to ECE.

In Africa, access to ECE varies much more than at other education levels. Within countries, disparities related to both wealth and location are pervasive, but the size of these gaps is different from one country to another. It is estimated that current public spending on pre-primary education in low-income countries covers only 10% of the total needed to provide universal access. Addressing this may require both an increase in the allocation of the education budget to ECE, and policy changes to use existing funds more efficiently (IIEP-UNESCO, 2021). Such changes could include adjusting the duration and intensity of ECE programmes, enhancing the effectiveness of the curriculum and teacher capabilities, improving the equitable allocation of teachers, and developing complementary low-cost early learning opportunities, such as initiatives on radio and television. It could also include the promotion of private sector involvement in the provision of ECE services in wealthier areas so that public funding can focus more on disadvantaged communities (IIEP-UNESCO, 2021).



These findings are presented in greater detail in *Chapter 3* of the report.

Access to quality primary and secondary education



Access to quality primary and secondary education is at the heart of SDG 4 and is captured in SDG Target 4.1 which commits governments to ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education. Similarly, in CESA 16-25, African governments commit to ensuring 'improved completion rates at all levels'. This is critically important since sub-Saharan Africa has the largest out-of-school population globally. It

also has the highest out-of-school rate estimated at one in five of primary school-age children (18.8%), one in three for lower secondary school-age adolescents (36.7%), and one in two of upper school-age youth (57.5%) (UNESCO, 2020a: 210). An analysis of the total number (instead of rate) of out-of-school children shows that they are heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of countries.

African countries are at different stages of their journeys to universal access at primary and secondary levels. In some, like Egypt, Tunisia, and South Africa, universal primary education appears within reach by 2030 and efforts for lower secondary education have had notable success. However, in other countries, including Chad and Guinea-Bissau, more than two-thirds of children do not complete primary education, suggesting that access even at primary level calls for urgent and intense policy attention.

Children from the poorest quintiles are far less likely to complete primary, lower, and upper secondary schooling than children from the wealthiest quintiles, and the size of this gap increases at higher levels of education. Gender disparities in completion rates vary across nations and regions, highlighting the diversity of factors that keep boys and girls from attending school, and their variability across countries and age groups. The report highlights various government initiatives to address the wealth gap, including through targeted efforts like the elimination of school fees, conditional cash transfers (CCTs) to increase enrolment and retention, the inclusion of pre-primary education in capitation grants, and accelerated readiness programme for children who have not benefitted from ECE prior to entering Grade 1.



These findings are presented in greater detail in *Chapter 4* of the report.

Quality and learning in primary and secondary schools



Agenda 2030 puts forward a two-pronged commitment that links the completion of free, equitable, and quality education to relevant and effective learning outcomes for all. Several SDG 4 targets spell

out the scope of these goals, including the achievement of literacy and numeracy, relevant skills for employment, and knowledge and skills for sustainable development. CESA presents an even broader range of learning targets with a stronger focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), information and communications technology (ICT), and peace and conflict resolution. It also puts forward a learning objective related to nurturing African core values and sustainable development (African Union, 2016). However, there seems to be little consensus across stakeholders as to which goals should be prioritized (Evans and Hares, 2021)², which may create competing demands for learning time and resources. Improving learning outcomes requires the prioritization of children at the bottom of the class in terms of learning, through the alignment of various components of quality education, such as curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, teaching and learning materials, student assessments, and even a series of factors external to the school system (Cambridge Assessment, 2017; Kim, Care and Vista, 2019).

While much attention has been paid to investments in basic literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills, less has been given to addressing the causes of disparities in their acquisition. FLN skills are necessary for progressing to further learning and thus a 'precondition' for achieving SDG 4 goals (Beeharry, 2021). Investing in FLN for children at the bottom is vital to tackling education segregation and ensuring that poor, marginalized, and disadvantaged learners have real opportunities to progress (Beeharry, 2020).

Efforts to improve learning processes and outcomes need to go hand-in-hand with curricular and pedagogical

interventions. Patchwork reforms of only some of the building blocks (i.e., curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, teaching/learning materials, learning assessments) may not deliver the expected improvements in learning outcomes. A streamlined, competency-based curriculum that ensures that pacing is responsive to student needs should be one of the pillars of these reforms. The 3R curriculum standards reform of the United Republic of Tanzania introducing a new curriculum aligned with teaching objectives, materials, and teacher training (RISE, 2020), and the work of South Africa's National Institute for Curriculum and Professional Development which offers advanced professional and support capacity to improve curriculum delivery (Sayed and Bulgrin, 2020: 47), are some examples in this direction. Likewise, it is also crucial to ensure that teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, as well as access to teaching and learning materials aligned with the curriculum and the desired pedagogy (Cambridge Assessment, 2017; Kim, Care and Vista, 2019).

A look at changes in learning outcomes since 2015 reveals mixed results. On the positive side, in most countries where data is available, the number of children who have achieved at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics and reading at Grade 2 and 3, or at the end of primary school, has increased. However, it appears that overall learning levels in reading and mathematics remain low. Vast wealth disparities are observed across countries, subjects, and education levels. Broadly speaking, children from poor families fall behind more in reading than they do in mathematics. This gap in skill level widens as they progress on to other grades. Moreover, 80% of children in sub-Saharan Africa are not taught in their home language (World Bank, 2021) which may also have negative consequences for learning outcomes.

Diverse approaches have been taken to ensure more equitable learning outcomes with some countries emphasising learning processes inside schools, while others have focused on non-formal institutions. The second chance model, for instance, provides education programmes to young people who did

2. Learning objectives include a wide array of skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes, such as foundational literacy skills, transferable skills, digital skills, job-specific technical skills, and being a dutiful community member and citizen.

not complete primary or secondary education, offering them the opportunity to catch up on their schooling and learning (UNICEF, 2017). In some African countries, out-of-school youth (OOSY) are offered the possibility of catching up on their learning or reintegrating into formal education. Programmes include the Malawi Adolescent Girls' Learning Partnership which helps girls get back into the formal education system (Mastercard Foundation, 2018).

Non-formal schools, which includes community-based learning opportunities, have also been used to help provide equitable access to marginalized learners. One such example is in Mali, where over 51,000 out-of-school primary school age-children were reached through community learning centres and temporary learning spaces, in addition to through formal schools (UNICEF, 2020). Instructional coaching has also been recognized as potentially effective in improving learning outcomes in the global South where formal education and in-service professional development opportunities for teachers are often limited (Piper and Zuilkowski, 2015). In Kenya, for instance, there is evidence that coaching can help improve literacy in both public and non-formal schools.

Since 2020, ICT has become a vital component of efforts to enhance learning outcomes. Evidence from Kenya suggests that ICT interventions can help improve literacy outcomes, but that their impact is often shaped by the context in which they take place. Thus the results may not be solely dependent on the use of ICT (Piper et al., 2016). In response to COVID-19, many countries have turned to ICT as a way to help prevent learning losses, with evidence from Botswana suggesting that low-tech solutions (SMS messages, phone calls) can result in learning gains (Angrist et al., 2020). While these are important steps, governments continue to face the challenge of delivering equitable and quality education remotely when access to ICT infrastructure is unequal.



These findings are presented in greater detail in Chapter 4 of the report.

Skills for work: TVET and tertiary education



Many African governments have intensified their efforts to build the skills of school-age children and youth to prepare them for a highly competitive global labour market, and to strengthen the

link between this market and education and training in a bid to help young people find productive employment (Barlet and d'Aiglepierre, 2017).

In Agenda 2030, governments commit to ensuring equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education to increase the number of young people and adults who have the relevant skills needed to find employment, decent jobs, or become entrepreneurs, and to reduce the proportion of youth that are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). CESA also has a strong emphasis on skills for work. It highlights the paradigm shift promoted by the continental strategy to rethink TVET as the preparation of youth to become job creators rather than job seekers, and for the transformation of TVET from a simple amalgamation of technical and professional institutions into a coherent system for building quality skilled human resources. CESA similarly frames tertiary education in terms of 'meaningful and sustainable economic growth', and 'national development and global competitiveness' (African Union, 2016: 7).

Yet in nearly all African countries, the reality is that most young people will need to find or create employment in the informal sector, which is responsible for 86% of jobs across the continent (ILO, 2018). This calls for seeing the interaction between education, training, and work as non-linear, and therefore to contribute to the identification of alternative processes and mechanisms to formal schooling, that are facilitated, regulated, and enhanced by governments. If formalized through diplomas, they could better reflect the dual reality of the low completion rate in formal schooling and its impact on the acquisition of foundational skills and skills for work.

At present, skills mismatch is prevalent in the labour market. This implies a need to move beyond job-specific expertise and to focus also on a broader set of skills that include digital skills, foundational literacy-numeracy skills, and increasingly, soft skills (a set of intangible personal qualities, traits, attributes, habits, and attitudes that can be used in many different types of jobs) (IBE UNESCO, 2013). Institutional bottlenecks (i.e., concerns related to budget allocation, policy coordination, and information flows) are a major factor limiting the effectiveness of education and training in producing the skills needed in the labour market. More particularly, budget allocation decisions may be detached from the performance of TVET service providers (as measured by internal efficiency, outputs, and impact on beneficiaries), aggregate levels of funding may not reflect the importance of TVET for economic growth (World Bank, 2013), and institutional weaknesses may hinder the possibility of effective collaboration and coordination across ministries and between public and private sector actors (World Bank, 2015). To reduce the skills mismatch, several governments have undertaken system-level reforms (e.g. competency-based training approach to TVET) and programme-level interventions (e.g. complementary training to strengthen soft skills).

Low levels of investment in tertiary education institutions are also of concern. In some countries, the growing demand for post-secondary education has led to the diversification of the landscape for tertiary education, marked by the emergence of widespread and disparate private education provision (Lebeau and Oanda, 2020: 1). To address the variation in quality across these institutions, attention is being paid to the regulatory framework, and to accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms, while continuing to provide enabling operating environments for private providers. The Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF), championed by the AUC, seeks to harmonize higher education programmes to create a revitalized and globally competitive African higher education space, through intra-African collaboration (HAQAA, 2016). Wealth-related disparities in accessing quality tertiary education are another challenge in this space.

An analysis of youth employment, as captured by the benchmarking indicator 'proportion of youth aged 15-24 years not in education, employment or training' (NEET), also points to some of these challenges. Data from 11 countries on the proportion of NEET youth show notable differences. In some, one in eight young people are NEET while in others, the proportion is as high as one in three. In almost all of the countries, most of these are young women. However, this is a global phenomenon and the gender disparities in NEET in Africa are actually below the global average (ILO, 2020: 27). In almost all of the 25 countries with available data, enrolment in vocational education is less than 5%, and is below 1% in many of them. Government expenditure on TVET is similarly low as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP). There is almost no information available about other potential disparities in TVET access, based on household wealth, disability, and rural-urban location.

In most countries where data is available, the gross attendance ratio in tertiary education is below 10%. Moreover, wealth-based disparities in accessing tertiary education are sizable and pervasive, though the size of the gap varies across countries. In only a few countries, women and men have equal opportunity to attend tertiary education. For most of the remaining countries, men have disproportionate access to tertiary education, with more women enrolled in health-welfare, education, arts and humanities, and social sciences, and a much higher proportion of men enrolled in engineering-manufacturing and ICT-related programmes (Arias, Evans and Santos, 2019).



These findings are presented in greater detail in Chapter 5 of the report.

Teachers



Governments in Africa face a three-pronged challenge: expanding the education workforce, increasing the proportion of qualified teachers, and ensuring that labour policies

enhance equity in education. Both in Agenda 2030 and CESA, governments make clear and consistent commitments to invest in teachers in recognition of the vital role they play in children's access to quality education. CESA positions teachers at the centre of the continental strategy, with the revitalization of the profession noted as its first strategic objective (African Union, 2016). It highlights recruitment, training, deployment, and professional development, along with working and living conditions and the rewarding of dedication and innovation, as the key elements of effective education workforce policy (African Union, 2016).

Several governments have introduced modifications to their education workforce management policies and systems. These include efforts to increase the motivation and willingness of teachers to work in hard-to-staff schools, revisions to recruitment and allocation policies to advance equity and diversity, and new models of delivery and content for teacher training. Programmes combining teacher professional development strategies, teaching organograms, and textbook provision have also been developed, showing remarkable contributions to improved learning outcomes (Piper et al., 2018). Recently, educational coaching and teacher mentoring programmes have been making inroads, generating positive impacts on learning. Of particular note are the Gambian and Kenyan programmes targeting poor and remote areas (Eble et al., 2019; Piper and Zuilkowski, 2016). School leadership is also recognized as vital for improving learning and overall education outcomes (Bush, 2013; Bush and Glover, 2016).

In 2015, it was estimated that achieving universal primary and secondary education by 2030 would require recruiting around 17 million teachers in sub-Saharan Africa (UIS,

2017). This is both an immense challenge and a potential opportunity. If governments improve initial teacher education programmes (Education Commission, 2019) and introduce more effective and equitable recruitment and allocation policies, the insertion of these new cohorts of qualified and highly motivated teachers into the system could serve as a real boost for revitalizing the workforce. However, seizing this opportunity may require changes to the financing status quo. Teacher salaries already represent a significant share of recurrent education budgets in most countries (Education Commission, 2019), and the ongoing expansion of the workforce will require broader conversations about the financing priorities of both governments and development partners.

A growing body of research shows teacher quality to be a major determinant of children's learning and well-being. Improving this necessitates a multipronged approach, with education workforce policy at its core. However, the most effective policies are those that also consider the elements of recruitment, training, motivation, follow-up, and support, and succeed in aligning with curricula, teaching materials, and assessment policies (Education Commission, 2019).

In addition, analyses of teacher quality conducted in and around 2016, as measured by SDG 4.c indicators, showed variations between different countries in the number of teachers pedagogically trained at the primary education level. It was found that some countries in eastern and northern Africa had a remarkably high proportion of teachers who had received pedagogical training, while in others, less than half were trained. Variations also exist with regards to the number of teachers who have received pedagogical training since 2016, with a sizable positive change in several countries and only limited change in others.

Research also suggests that the impact teachers have on children's lives goes beyond short-term academic achievement, extending to longer-term social, and labour market outcomes (Beteille and Evans, 2019; Blazer and Kraft, 2017; Chetty, Friedman and Rockoff, 2017; Jackson, 2019). In contexts where schools serve as contact points for a wide range of services deemed critical for a child's overall well-being (including nutrition, health, psychosocial support, social assistance), teachers often facilitate the delivery of these services. More broadly, teachers and effective workforce policies are critical not only for quality education but also for it to be more equitable through personnel diversity, teacher allocation, and inclusive teaching practices:

- Diversity in the education workforce may have implications for disadvantaged children's access to and learning in school. Research suggests that teachers with similar backgrounds to their students can serve as powerful role models and potentially motivate them further (OECD, 2012). Female teachers can help contribute to girl students' learning outcomes and school completion (Haugen et al., 2014), teachers speaking the same language as their students are generally more effective as they can better support children whose home language is different from the language of instruction (van Ginkel et al., 2015), and teachers born in the school district are more likely to show up to work (Chaudhury et al., 2006). These examples highlight the importance of reflecting a country's geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in the teaching workforce. While limited data availability constrains the scope of the diversity analysis, gender disparities in the teacher workforce, particularly in post-primary levels, are observed in most countries. In about half of the countries where data is available, female teachers constitute less than a quarter of the workforce at both lower and upper secondary education levels.

- Teacher allocation and deployment also presents major equity concerns. In many countries, teacher shortages are a problem mainly in rural, remote, low-resourced, difficult-to-access, and conflict-affected areas, and this varies also by subject expertise and education level (Education Commission, 2019). Considerable cross-country differences exist with regards to the degree of randomness values, an indicator showing the extent to which teacher allocation is related to factors other than the number of students. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) specifies 0.20 and below as an acceptable value for equitable allocation (meaning that 80% or more of teacher postings are directly based on the number of students to be taught). Only 3 out of the 16 countries surveyed meet this benchmark value (Nkengne and Marin, 2018).
- A related aspect concerns inclusive teaching practices. Although teachers' knowledge on and use of inclusive teaching practices is important for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the learning process, there is a shortage of special education teachers and only a limited number of them seem to benefit from in-service training on inclusive education (Chitiyo et al., 2015).



These findings are presented in greater detail in Chapter 6 of the report.

Education facilities



Agenda 2030 identifies education facilities as a means of implementation for SDG 4 and SDG 4.a, which mandate that governments commit to building and upgrading education

facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive, and to providing safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all. CESA also describes education facilities as a strategic factor for expanding access to quality education. It identifies major disparities in the availability and quality of these facilities across the rich/poor and rural/urban divides (African Union, 2016), and highlights the need to invest in education facilities in hard-to-reach and marginalized areas (African Union, 2016). CESA also laments attacks on and military use of schools resulting in the few available infrastructures being damaged or destroyed (African Union, 2016). It further notes that the expansion of secondary education will mean there will be additional need for modern infrastructure at the tertiary level. It identifies ICTs as holding the potential for effective and lasting solutions to some of these challenges (African Union, 2016). Similarly, the 2018 Nairobi Declaration, focusing on transforming education to meet the 2063 Agenda for the 'Africa We Want' and the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, includes a commitment by governments and other stakeholders to make the learning and teaching environment safer, healthier, and more inclusive (UNESCO, 2018: 2).

Evidence from studies in Africa suggests that where school availability is a constraint, the construction of schools is associated with increased access and completion rates, and improved learning (Evans and Acosta, 2021). Insufficient availability of schools also leads to overcrowded classrooms and double shift schools, both of which are associated with lower learning outcomes and higher dropout rates (UIS, 2012). The particularly large class sizes in the early grades poses a significant challenge to the acquisition of foundational reading and numeracy and limits the potential adoption of more child-centred instructional practices that could help improve learning outcomes (Bashir et al., 2018).

Particularly in rural areas, teachers and students tend to face terrain and climate-related barriers in accessing school, which are aggravated by the growing trend of more destructive climate disasters (UNESCO, 2020b; Godfrey and Tunhuma, 2020). Thus, investing in preparedness and early response, and strengthening school infrastructure against disasters seems more urgent than ever.

More broadly, the school environment is linked to children's well-being through multiple channels, including health. Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities are particularly relevant in this respect. Yet, in about half of the countries where data is available, more than 50% of primary schools do not have access to basic WASH facilities. Major differences exist across countries in terms of availability. In most countries where disaggregated data is available, a higher proportion of urban schools have access to WASH facilities compared to rural.

There is also an association between the quality of the school environment and learning. Having spaces and resources adapted to the needs and educational processes of children has proven to be a determining element in the learning process. Play-based learning programmes, implemented through new infrastructure or the improvement of existing facilities, have shown positive results in the cognitive and socio-emotional development, health outcomes, and school readiness of the youngest learners in rural Ghana (Attanasio and Krutikova, 2019), Liberia (Luminos Fund, 2019) and Uganda (Right to Play, n.d.), among other countries.

The school environment is also linked to children's well-being in terms of accessibility and inclusion. Infrastructure and learning materials adapted to the needs of children with disabilities are important for an inclusive environment. In the nine countries where data is available, sizable differences exist across countries, pointing to a concerning situation characterized by limitations in the provision of a nurturing

learning environment for these children. However, data from some low-income countries show that progress can be made when inclusion is prioritized in investment decisions, even in resource-constrained environments.

Another link between the school environment and children's well-being is the issue of safety. Data is particularly limited within the school environment and reflects the prevalence of bullying, gender-based violence, and the targeting of school buildings during conflict. Available data suggests a disconcerting situation, especially in areas affected by armed conflict. In this respect, the Safe Schools Declaration of 2015, endorsed by 32 African governments, promising to take measures to prevent attacks on education and the military use of schools, is significant.

In addition, ICT infrastructure in schools is important both for its potential contribution to learning outcomes through ICT-supported pedagogical practices and for the acquisition of digital skills. The lack of this infrastructure in schools limits the possibility of narrowing the vast digital divide within and across countries (Montoya, 2018). Large variations are observed across the different countries with regards to the number of schools that have access to electricity, computers, and the internet. For example, in 25 of the 38 countries where data is available, fewer than half the schools at the primary level have access to electricity. More than 90% of schools have access to electricity in just 7 countries. Looking at the 20 countries where data is available for access to the internet at secondary schools, in 8 of these, fewer than 20% have access, in contrast to 5 countries where more than 80% of schools have internet access. The lack of ICT-related infrastructure in some countries is particularly concerning as this means most children complete primary and secondary education without accessing a computer or the internet at school.



These findings are presented in greater detail in *Chapter 7* of the report.

Means of education policy implementation at the system level



Both CESA and Agenda 2030 recognize the enormity of the task of achieving their targets and strategic objectives, and address means of education policy implementation at the system level as a core area of action. They highlight, among

other components, education planning, data availability and utilization, the mobilization of financial resources, the enactment of necessary legislation, the strengthening of partnerships, the establishment of institutional arrangements and coordination mechanisms, communication, and advocacy as vital to implementation. Of these, this report focuses on policy planning, education data, education financing, and enabling legal frameworks.

Effective and sustainable policy planning: System-based policy planning can play an important role in government efforts for inclusive and equitable education. The route to significant progress towards parity in education is often not via the aggregation of single, discrete interventions, but rather requires system-wide reforms laid out in sector plans. The ongoing efforts of many African governments in formulating medium- and long-term sectoral plans are commendable.

Education data availability and usage: Data is important both for a sound diagnosis and effective policy implementation. Most governments in Africa have invested significant resources in producing education data to support sector planning and inform policies. With respect to implementation, data plays a dual role. It is a key element of monitoring efforts, review processes and revision considerations, and decisions around intensifying and tailoring efforts. It is also imperative for the accountability of all implementers, including the national government (UNESCO, 2015). A functional education management information system (EMIS) is critical for the collection and dissemination of data, and for facilitating its conversion

into policy-relevant statistics (World Bank, 2014). Many governments in Africa now have EMIS in place, but additional efforts are needed to improve data quality and production timelines.

Governments continue to face challenges in producing reliable and timely education statistics (Bonaventure, Assad and Derbala, 2018). For the benchmark indicators selected by AUC and UIS, for instance, some countries stand out as ‘data deserts’ or ‘near data deserts’ with limited information since 2015 for some benchmark indicators and none for others. Thus, targeted investments for institutional capacity building and innovative approaches to data collection in fragile contexts are needed in these countries. Moreover, data collection with an explicit focus on disparities in education may be a powerful tool for identifying and addressing inequalities in the system (LMTF, 2013). In this respect, the ability of EMIS to match data on access and learning with data on child and school characteristics is invaluable.

Just as important as the timely collection of disaggregated data is the effective use of such data at all stages of the education policy cycles.

Financing for quality education: Securing adequate and sustainable financing for equitable, quality education remains arguably the greatest impediment, particularly for low-income countries. Without additional financial resources, many countries, especially those that are furthest left behind, may not achieve the strategic objectives set out in CESA and the education targets of Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2021), especially in the COVID-19 context which has further exacerbated availability of resources (Heitzig, Ordu and Senbet, 2021). In addition, international aid often cannot constitute a stable source of funding because of its fluctuating nature, at times politicized motives, and uneven distribution across education levels (Dalrymple, 2016).

African governments face growing pressure to increase funding to deliver a higher quality of education across all levels, with a surging demand particularly for post-primary education (IIEP-UNESCO, 2018). In response, some have intensified their efforts to diversify funding sources, mobilize resources domestically, and explore innovative financing mechanisms. However, for many countries, these efforts are impeded by the shrinking fiscal space, especially in the face of the rapidly expanding debt-to-GDP ratio since the COVID-19 pandemic (Heitzig, Ordu and Senbet, 2021). In addition, sizable differences exist in terms of public spending on education as a share of GDP and total government expenditure, as well as in the allocation across education levels and in preferences given to private sector engagement. This variation is most notable for early childhood education and tertiary education.



These findings are presented in greater detail in *Chapter 8* of the report.

Key findings



There is cause for optimism, as well as reasons to be concerned about progress towards achieving universal access to quality education and learning with equity across Africa, as outlined

in the SDG 4 and CESA agendas. This report provides a practical and globally comparable set of indicators and data, mostly from UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics), sourced from a large number of countries covering the past few years. It also documents the most salient policies and initiatives that African countries have been developing in recent years to address these challenges.

The analysis reveals important trends that are summarized in the following five key messages:

- Many policies have been tried out and much is already known about what works and what does not. To build on existing policy experiences, pan-African efforts facilitating mutual learning across countries, especially more opportunities to share their experiences, deserve more attention and investment.
- Planning and progress are hampered by limited data, particularly on disparities. Ongoing efforts to improve the quality, coverage, and frequency of data collection and analysis are invaluable and deserve further investment. Data are crucial for defining priorities, targeting resources, strengthening accountability, and ensuring effective delivery of service in education systems (Read and Atinc, 2017). The challenge is twofold: to support countries in improving the availability and quality of data, and to promote strategies for its continuous use in decision-making and implementation.
- A rising tide does not lift all boats. Equity needs to be at the heart of policy planning and investment decisions at all levels of education so that no child is left behind.
- Timely and accurate information on the state of education provision, with a focus on the challenges facing implementers and available resources and capabilities, is crucial to formulating ambitious yet realistic strategic plans.
- The disruption created by the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a real threat to hard-earned progress. African governments now face the dual challenge of investing in system-level components to build resilience into the foundations of their education systems, and investing in the capabilities and motivations of key stakeholders (particularly teachers) so that they are willing and able to adapt to future challenges.

Given how important the collection, coverage, and quality of data is to informing sound analysis and rigorous education policy planning, it is hoped that future studies and reports will have access to more quality evidence. Beyond the snapshot that this report offers of ongoing challenges in the sector, further clarification of the link between education quality and economic development would be useful to highlight its importance for the fulfilment of Africa's aspirations for a better future³ for all its citizens.

3. <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

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Education in Africa

Placing equity at the heart of policy

Executive Summary

This executive summary outlines the main points made in the report, *Education in Africa: Placing equity at the heart of policy*. It was produced following a request by Member States at the Pan-African High-level Conference on Education (PACE 2018). They invited the African Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to conduct an analysis of education on a regular basis. The two organizations entrusted UNESCO's International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) to produce the first of these reports. The partnership allowed the acquisition of knowledge that will be used to achieve our goals. A central point made in the report is the importance of focusing on equity. Without it, efforts to improve educational access and quality may inadvertently widen existing disparities. Therefore, equity must be at the heart of policy decisions and investments in order to break intergenerational cycles of inequality.

The elements presented are a starting point for the quest for universal access to quality education. The African continent must be at the centre of our concerns to provide its countries with a solid foundation for sustainable development. The task is not simple, but with determination, motivation, and commitment it will be possible to lead these initiatives successfully. The adoption of positive policies, the deployment of functional programmes, and the concrete realization of different objectives should be sources of inspiration to us. The quest for knowledge, thinking, exchange, and cooperation are the guiding lights that will lead us to success.