

Educational reform in Sub-Saharan Africa

Despite [impressive progress towards providing universal access](#) to basic education, Sub-Saharan African countries are struggling to absorb bulging youth populations in their education systems and face a growing [mismatch between labour market demands and the supply of skilled workers](#). In addition, [large discrepancies in learning](#) opportunities and outcomes exist between population groups and regions. Strong linkages with other sectors, combined with the role education plays in shaping norms and behaviours, make inclusive education critical for creating inclusive and well-performing societies in general and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Tackling the learning crisis requires a holistic systems approach that uses key areas and lenses to strategically identify issues and foster effective change, as outlined in the table below.

Area/lens	Social and spatial equity (SSE) lens	Inclusive governance and financing
Low proficiency in numeracy and literacy (basic education)	(1) Early childhood development driving learning gaps which persist (2) Low quality and insufficient inputs contributing to poor learning conditions (3) High rates of school drop-out preventing completion	(6) Ineffective identification of vulnerable children (7) Improper coordination with wider social policies (8) Inadequate budgets and misallocated spending
The skills mismatch (higher education)	(4) Systematic exclusion of those without basic education, and insufficient coverage of alternative forms of learning (5) Deficits in soft, vocational and technical skills due to outdated curricula	(6) Lack of standardised assessment and programme evaluation (7) Poor private sector engagement and labour market linkages (8) Spending in higher education not always progressive
Note: Numbers in the right-hand column are repeated in both boxes to reflect the fact that certain governance issues pertain to both areas.		

Completing the agenda for basic education

1. Early childhood development and preparation for learning

[Deficits in cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional skills](#) prior to school have been shown to negatively affect the learning trajectory and cumulative development of children. [Children from disadvantaged backgrounds](#), particularly children living in extreme poverty and conflict and disaster affected areas, are more likely to be delayed in starting school, repeat grades, and reap lower returns from education. The learning gap is shown to widen with age and prevent mobility, contributing to cycles of poverty.

2. Low quality and insufficient inputs

Despite a concerted effort to build more classrooms, [up to 95% of primary schools](#) in certain Sub-Saharan African countries lack basic amenities such as electricity, proper toilets and drinkable water, creating poor environments for learning. [A severe shortage of qualified teachers](#), plus weak support and training of existing teachers, have added to overcrowding in classrooms and decreased the rate and level of skill transfer. Learning materials and human resources are unevenly distributed, with the worst conditions found in rural and peri-urban areas, driving spatial disparities in learning outcomes.

3. High rates of school drop-out

An estimated [52.3 million children](#) of primary and lower-secondary school age are currently out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa, depriving them of opportunities to learn and progress to higher

education. The highest rates of attrition are observed among [female learners](#) and children in poverty, generating socioeconomic disparities in attainment. Focusing narrowly on free tuition has ignored important [factors affecting the decision to stay in school](#), including learner pregnancy, child marriage, poor health, child labour and hidden transport or material costs.

Broadening the reach, quality and adaptability of higher education

4. Exclusion from higher education

[Fewer than 10% of young people](#) in Africa enrol in higher education (compared to the global average of 26%). Traditional tertiary education remains unaffordable for most people, while alternative forms of [TVET learning and apprenticeships](#) that suit diverse needs and capabilities have not been effectively scaled up or integrated into formal education systems, restricting opportunities for talent development, entrepreneurship and employment.

5. A decoupling between skills and credentials

School curricula often fail to incorporate [soft, vocational and technical skills](#) and updated technologies that satisfy modern labour market requirements, meaning that even students who do graduate are often unable to access opportunities for decent work and income. The region requires a shift from systems based on rote learning and years of schooling to [systems based on competence and human capital](#) and aligning with wider socioeconomic trends in order to facilitate smoother transitions from school to work.

Cross-cutting issues around inclusive governance and finance

6. Incomplete information systems

[A lack of reliable data](#) on critical indicators and improper sharing of local information has made it challenging to monitor progress (related to SDG4), evaluate reform processes, and identify vulnerable and out-of-school children. In addition, few countries have implemented [standardised and updated assessment tools](#) that capture skill acquisition and work-readiness, weakening feedback loops which support knowledge-based decision making and improve policy targeting.

7. Uncoordinated governance and low institutional capacity

A lack of [engagement and cooperation between public, private and civil society actors](#) has diluted local leadership and accountability around education, and contributed to the skills mismatch by preventing demand-driven approaches to reform. Issues with transparency and communication, along with varied local governance capacity, have [inhibited effective decentralisation and slowed policy implementation](#). Improper coordination of education and social protection policies (such as cash transfers and nutrition programmes) has prevented many children from accessing and maximising opportunities for schooling and development.

8. Financing education

Although spending on education has become a regional priority, expenditure in many low- and middle-income countries remains significantly below international targets, limiting the scope for reform and forcing trade-offs between service expansion and quality. The explosion in enrolment and strained public sector have resulted in a [decline in per capita resources](#); national governments finance the majority of education programmes alone, while households still cover up to one third of the cost of basic education. Regarding allocation, [budgets have often favoured crude inputs](#) (teacher remuneration and classrooms) over quality (training and technology), and expenditure varies according to the location and level of education in ways that are not always pro-poor and inclusive.