

Education system in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This paper looks closely at the education system of the Sub-Sahara African countries. Education systems in this region were inherited from their colonial masters (Great Britain, France etc.). Unlike Britain, all the Francophone countries adopted free education from France (Education For All). Only few Anglophone countries such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Swaziland etc. with free primary and secondary education. In general the compulsory education is from 5 to 14 years; a process which helps to maximize the enrollment rate of African school age children.

Despite the severe challenges ranging between the shortage of instructional materials and the unqualified teaching staff, more students (60%) are currently enrolled in schools across Africa than ever before.

Introduction

When the issue of African education is raised, the first things that come to mind are the drastic deterioration of academic standards and facilities. However as Africa stands to be the most youthful continent, the quality of education needs to be improved at all levels in order to give the next generation an opportunity to create a better future for themselves and their communities. The sub-Saharan governments need to embark on developing the educational sector which is perceived to be inadequate. The governments are expected to acquire and adapt global knowledge and create local knowledge in the improvement of human resources and invest in technologies to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

However, this article will address the current situation of the education system from the pre-primary to university levels. The main challenges will be mentioned with a brief suggestions of ways to overcome them.

Participation in education

The education system is divided into pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Duration in each of the levels varies from country to country.

Pre-primary education

Actually kindergarten education forms the stage of learning process. The goal is to prepare the child for success in primary schools. But many parents in Africa cannot afford to send their children to kindergarten because of the high cost of fees. Only 20% of young children were enrolled in pre-primary education by 2012. Unfortunately though, most countries with pre-primary education programs have untrained teachers, less materials and ineffective curriculum.

Primary education

Sub-Saharan Africa has manifested the greatest improvement in primary education enrollment compared to other regions in the world. Committed to the Millennium Development Goals, from 62-149 million students enrolled in primary schools across Africa between 1990-2012.

In most parts of Africa, children start primary education when they are 6 or 7 years and they spend the next six years in primary (in Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal etc.), 7 years in the case of Zambia, Swaziland Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and 8 years in Ethiopia. As many as 15 countries in 2012 eliminated school fees in primary school level, a way to encourage parents to send their children to school. Yet no country in the region has achieved the Universal Primary Education which is subsequently replaced by the *Universal Basic Education* in countries like Guinea, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia etc.

The main subjects of instruction are mathematics, languages of instruction (English, French etc.), science and social studies. Pupils must wear uniforms to school. Classrooms are congested with insufficient seats and teachers; especially those in rural or remote areas have little or no experience in teaching. Completing primary education lay foundation for building knowledge for secondary education.

Secondary education

Children who graduate in primary schools proceed with the secondary education usually at the age of 12 or 13 depending on the country. The first part of secondary education known as middle or junior high school lasts for four (4) years in all Francophone countries, three (3) years in the Anglophone and other countries except for Zambia which is two (2) years. The subjects of middle school are: Mathematics, science, social studies, religious and moral education, physical education, native language studies, and foreign languages like English, Portuguese, Spanish or French.

At the end of that phase, the child sits to a junior secondary school examination to be promoted to high school, which also lasts for 2 years in Mozambique and Ethiopia, 3 years in Francophone countries, and 4 years in many Anglophone countries. Subjects are divided into three streams or branches namely: Science, Commercial and Arts. Compulsory subjects at high school are : mathematics , biology or health science, and English, French or Portuguese etc.

There are equally technical secondary schools for both academic (formal) and specialized skills (informal education). Students who graduate from higher vocational institutes acquire technical skills (like welding, plumber, architecture etc.) that enable them to be attractive to informal jobs and contribute to the economic growth of their communities.

Tertiary education

Institutions of higher education provide the last stage of formal education which takes a minimum of 3 years in many francophone countries including Guinea, 4 years in other countries, except for courses like medicine which last longer. Higher education is significant for African young people and society as it creates better employment opportunities, improved quality of life and greater economic growth. To enhance these opportunities, school curriculum need to involve the right education and training in today's workforce.

Unfortunately, only 5% -3 million of African young people are enrolled in higher education. The three degree programs are Bachelor's, Masters and PhD in various faculties of studies. Colleges of education across the continent train teachers for a duration of 3-4 years. And holders of teachers' certificates often seek admission into universities to obtain Bachelor's degree in education which could increase their chances to teach at secondary levels or become principals, headmasters/headmistresses.

Challenges of the education system in sub-Saharan Africa

The main challenges facing the African education are as follows:

1. Language barriers

Although UNESCO recommended that children in their early education should be taught in their native languages, almost all African schools use Foreign languages (English, French, Spanish or Portuguese) at schools which makes it difficult for the children to understand the lessons and acquire knowledge and skills.

2. Lack of proper facilities or infrastructure

Another problem in the education system is the lack of schooling facilities or materials. The government schools are very few and classrooms are too congested with about 60 -70 students in primary schools and over 80 students in secondary school classrooms. This can be difficult for the teacher to use a better approach for actual learning to occur. At the same time, only few public schools across sub-Saharan Africa possess enough textbooks or libraries, laboratories and good toilet facilities. The lack of these essential facilities lead students to not reading or doing effective research and learning will only be more of theory than practical.

3. Lack of qualified teaching staff

One of the key reasons for the low education rates in sub-Saharan Africa is the lack of competent or qualified instructors. And most of the schools in the rural areas for example loose good teachers to the urban centers. This is because they live in a poor condition, poor career advancement, they are even neglected. So they come to big cities looking for better paid schools and jobs. This creates inequality of education opportunities between students in the rural areas and those in the cities as well as between those who go to public and private schools

4. Resignation and Emigration

Many qualified and skilled educators in African schools often resign from their posts due to low salaries and poor living condition. Some even migrate overseas seeking for green a pastures. This leads to the shortage of qualified or experienced educators in African academic institutions.

5. Conflicts

Many sub-Saharan African governments spend more on military development than education because armed conflict is the biggest threats on education. Most of the drop out children consequently remain jobless and poor-a situation that drives them into criminal acts like armed robbery, terrorism and civil wars. Conflict and fragile human conditions can also lead to the displacement of school going children into refugee or displaced camps where there is little or no access to education. Congo, Soudan, Somali, Angola, Nigeria Burundi Ethiopia etc. are good examples of this situation.

6. Corruption in education

In government funded schools, parents are obliged to pay illegal or extra fees which go into the pockets of school administrators. Most school administrators and financial directors also embezzle and mismanage school funds due to lack of experience in the job. Some teachers and administrators are also fun of sexual abuse, alcoholism, and absenteeism.

7. Politics

Political instability and influences are at the forefront of education in Africa. In more populated countries like Nigeria, there is a tug of war between the federal and local government as to who is to run education. Admissions in universities and colleges are done by politicians and not by educators. Even the recruitment of teachers is influenced by politicians. These practices are very common in Nigeria and South Africa.

8. Poverty and diseases like HIV/AIDS

As poverty rate gets higher in Africa, most parents with many children cannot take care of or provide basic needs and services for their kids. As a result, many of them drop out of schools, some run small businesses, whilst others become thieves, prostitutes, or do odd jobs in the society. Generally parents are so much busy (in making money) that they can no longer have time to monitor their children academic evolution or progress.

Moreover, Over 40% of African families live in slums where children are exposed to unhygienic environments. This affects their health conditions, as many fall sick and die of sicknesses like malaria and fever every year. Another disease that causes disaster in the education system is HIV/AIDS. In countries like Zambia, Lesotho and other southern African countries, 3-4 out of 10 teachers and students die of HIV/AIDS which reduces the population of educated elites in those countries.

9. Weakness of NGOs

Although NGOs are seriously contributing to the improvement of education by delivering academic services, their work is often threaten by governments who feel disturbed by the NGOs activities that view themselves as separate entities fulfilling moral responsibilities.

10. Gender disparity in education

The main factor reducing female education is poverty. For example in families with many children, when the cost of schooling is more expensive, girls are usually deprived of their right to education which can subsequently lead to their early marriages and/or unwanted pregnancies. Gender roles of the African culture is also affecting girls who manage to be at schools; they should do the house works (washing clothes, cleaning, cooking, fetching water etc.) which minimizes their time to study at school and at home. The large number of girls outside formal education is a major cause to the challenges on the development of Africa.

Proposed solutions

In order to overcome the challenges in the education system of Africa, the following steps or decisions need to be taken or followed.

1. There should be an effective and regular teacher training programs with efficient provision of resources as teaching aids.
2. Regular training for administrators in charge of studies and finance is essential. (as teachers' professional development)
3. More schools are to be built in order to reduce the enrollment rate in classes and recruitment of more qualified teachers with more instructional materials and support.
4. There should be regular and efficient inspection and feedback for teachers and administrators of schools across Africa. That will help to reinforce their abilities of teaching.
5. Government should reform and/or review the academic curricular for promoting, meaningful learning

outcomes matching to the skills of global labor market or workforce.

6. The recruitment of teachers, admissions of students to schools and universities should be done by educators (based on merit) and not by politicians.
7. Governments should empower and mobilize local committees like parents-teachers associations to fight against all forms of corruption in school communities.
8. Governments should empower teachers by compensating very competent and hardworking teachers and increase teachers' salaries for better living conditions, especially for those in the rural areas.
9. There should be equal number of boys and girls at schools in order to limit or eradicate gender inequality poverty, hunger and disease.
10. NGOs must effect policies and create policy changes that support their projects.

Foreign aid to support African education focusing on Japan

With regards to the severe problems which lead to the deterioration of the quality of African education, foreign governments and NGOs took the lead to collaborate with African governments in order to strengthen its education system. The well-known donor countries are: Japan, through the Japanese ministry of education, culture, sports, science and technology (MEXT), JICA, and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), America (USAID), Great Britain, Germany, France etc. UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, IMF, APEC etc. are among the most popular international donor organizations supporting African education.

More precisely, for the past four decades now, the Japanese government through MEXT and TICAD have been a good friend assisting African countries like Guinea, Uganda, Senegal, Mozambique etc. in building schools and providing appropriate schooling materials as well as grants and internships for their teachers. It aims at contributing to the capacity building and development of African educators and schools.

Moreover, during the Tokyo International Conference on African Development held in Yokohama in 2013, the Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced a new African Business and Education policy known as ABE initiatives. These new initiatives aim at providing as many as 1.000 scholarships and internships to youths of Africa to study in Japanese universities. The ABE master's degree and internships programs actually provide opportunities for young African personnel to develop the required and effective knowledge and skills for the development of African education and their industries or economies at large. These programs will also enhance or reinforce the Japanese-African business partnerships in the future.

References

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