

**The South African Institute  
of International Affairs**

**Nepad Policy Focus Series**

**Back to the Blackboard**

**Looking Beyond Universal  
Primary Education in Africa**

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SAIIA's Nepad and Governance Project is funded by the  
Royal Netherlands Embassy, Pretoria.

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THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

ISBN: 1-919969-16-0

Nepad Policy Focus

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## Executive Summary

Education is the driving force behind any strong economy and a prerequisite for social and economic growth. It creates opportunities and provides societies with a better educated and skilled workforce which is necessary for stimulating development.

But in sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the highest levels of illiteracy in the world, many pupils are still being denied their fundamental right to quality education. According to the United Nations more than 40 million children - almost half of the continent's primary school-age-pupils - are not in school. About two-thirds of these children are female. Fewer than half of Africa's children get a chance to finish primary school.

Africa should be commended for moving, albeit modestly, toward the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of Universal Primary Education (UPE). But at the current slow pace of enrolment growth, Africa will not achieve UPE until at least 2150 and even then it may not acquire the skills it needs to truly develop.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (Unesco) global monitoring report released in 2004 which tracks countries' progress in achieving UPE found that 22 countries in sub-Saharan Africa were far from achieving the Education for All goals. Primary enrolments are low, gender ratios highly unequal, illiteracy is widespread and educational quality is poor, leading to high drop outs which means that many pupils never complete primary school.

Many African countries have well-intended plans to implement the MDGs but not the resources to implement them. The lack of dramatically increased aid and debt relief has hamstrung progress. Development aid to basic education in Africa needs to increase significantly to achieve universal primary completion. Africa's poorest countries are still spending an average of 15% of revenue on debt servicing. Donors have promised to deliver increased support to countries whose policies meet tough standards of quality, equity and efficiency, but an extra \$1 billion to \$2 billion in upfront commitments is needed now to support education.

Africa needs a two-prong strategy. Firstly, African governments need to ensure that money currently received from donors and allocated in

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budgets are spent efficiently. Secondly, African governments need to negotiate harder and hold the developed world to their promises.

In some countries UPE drives are compromising educational quality. Cash-strapped governments are raising enrolments drastically without significantly more teachers and resources.

Increases in primary enrolment necessitate an expanded secondary education sector; an area sorely neglected in Africa's schooling system. For education to deliver the economic spin-offs the continent desperately needs, primary schooling has to be complemented by secondary education that provides pupils with the skills and knowledge needed to propel development. What will become of the millions of primary school graduates in 2016, or even 2151, if we do not plan for their secondary schooling and what value will they add to development in their countries?

The report's five chapters examine the state of play of education on the continent and highlight the challenges which need to be addressed. This report seeks to get governments, donors and policy makers to start thinking and planning ahead to cope with the expected successes of UPE.

Some of the key findings include:

***Teacher quality and quantity must be improved.*** UPE has increased the demand for teachers, but they are in short supply and are often not adequately trained. Unesco predicts that the continent needs at least three million more teachers to cope with increasing enrolments. Therefore, Africa needs to radically expand recruitment of new teachers and attract the brightest school leavers to the profession. And Africa must upgrade the competencies of existing teachers through on-the-job training.

***Teacher salaries must be raised.*** Teachers are paid extremely poorly and therefore it is no surprise that the continent fails to attract the brightest and best school leavers to the profession. Highly competent educators often leave teaching for better paying positions and many school leavers choose teaching for a lack of anything better. Countries therefore need to raise teacher salaries, offer incentives and seek to improve working conditions.

***Measuring results is a prerequisite of progress.*** Less than a third of the pupils on the continent acquire the basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills necessary for the successful completion of primary school. African

pupils lag behind their Asian and Latin American counterparts. Improving outdated assessment methods and curricula can improve results.

***Maths and science education need dramatic improvement.*** These crucial subjects are neglected in African education and there are not enough trained teachers, infrastructure and equipment to teach the subjects. Few pupils pursue these subjects at secondary school and even fewer pass. In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study Repeat in 1998, which measured student performance in 41 countries across the world, South Africa's average score (of 275 out of 800) placed the continent's technology leader well below the international average of 487 and behind economic competitors Indonesia, Chile and Malaysia.

***Secondary education is as important as UPE.*** Educational opportunities beyond primary school are limited in Africa. Secondary school is where students gain skills of significant economic value. But the World Bank estimates that about 25% of primary school graduates enrol at secondary level and only about 10% of them complete their education. Expanding and increasing spending is essential but government reform must ensure that quality is improved. The challenge is for expanded secondary education to complement UPE, not compromise it.

***Educating girls deserves more attention.*** Most governments are neglecting their immediate target of balancing the number of girls and boys by 2005. The UN International Children's Fund (Unicef) predicted that some 24 million or 60% of girls in sub-Saharan Africa were not in school in 2002. Educating girls will have economic benefits and will help reduce soaring HIV/Aids levels but countries are failing to translate their commitment into budgetary allocations. Female enrolment rates must double if the region expects to attain universal primary education by 2015.

***HIV/Aids is aggravating attempts to achieve UPE,*** as more children have to abandon their studies to care for ailing parents, support orphaned siblings and run households. Aids is decreasing the opportunity for children to become educated. Less education deepens poverty, which in turn increases the vulnerability to infection. Studies by UNAids in 17 African countries show that receiving at least a primary school education can halve the risk of young people contracting HIV, even if they are never exposed to specific Aids-related programmes. UNAids predicts that by 2005 up to 20% of educators in sub-Saharan Africa will have died from

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Aids and countless more will be infected or affected. Governments cannot afford to ignore the impact of Aids on education. When allocating more money to basic education, finance ministers need to increase expenditure for primary health care, Aids prevention and care.

***Corruption robs children of their fundamental right to education.*** In some countries it is so widespread that it extends from the embezzlement of school funds to the buying of tertiary diplomas. To address corruption, departments, principals and school governing bodies must adopt a zero tolerance approach to corrupt practices.

***Curriculum reform is urgently needed.*** Schools must teach more than reading and writing. They must empower people to become independent and critical thinkers. But in many sub-Saharan schools, pupils do not learn how to learn, solve problems or take initiative.

***Africa can learn from East Asia.*** The East Asians revolutionised their education system through careful planning, financial commitment and by making education non-negotiable.

All these reforms will cost money and may appear impossible. It is therefore imperative that African governments and civil society employ new and creative methods to influence the developed world to follow through on their pledges. Governments also need to start doing more with existing resources in the event that the funding floodgates do not open. South Africa's former president Nelson Mandela sums it up best:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that a son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that the child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation.

Africa is at the bottom of the global pecking order on practically whatever index one uses. UPE, while noble and equitable, will simply not move Africa off its mediocre developmental trajectory. We face a skills gap that is much larger than the MDGs even suggest, and even if we achieve them, Africa will continue to lag behind its competitors. UPE alone is no quick fix.