

Conceptualizing Access to Education in sub-Saharan Africa: Critical Issues to Consider

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Abstract

Access to education is an inescapable pathway to a country's development. Education is not only a right, but it enlightens and empowers citizens with knowledge and skills, and provides a critical mass of human capital and manpower which are pre-requisites for a country's take-off to development. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Dakar Education for All (EFA) framework are leading advocates of education access for all children worldwide. Although most countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have heeded to their call and substantially raised school enrolments, many school going children are still left out of schools in millions. The impact of this to national development of countries in SSA is slow and even retarded development and in fact non competitiveness in the global economy. Uganda, one of the SSA countries has leveraged on Universal Primary Education and expanded significantly school enrolments from primary through secondary and tertiary levels. If handled discreetly and appropriately, this move will augur well for her manpower development and the national development agenda. This paper analyzes the ramifications and implications of access to education in sub-Saharan Africa and makes a brief comparison with access in the American education system. Education remains a significant player and determinant of development which African countries need to handle with the right policies and adequate investment.

Keywords: Africa, Education Access, National Development, Uganda

Résumé

L'accès à l'éducation est une voie incontournable pour le développement d'un pays. L'éducation n'est pas seulement un droit, mais elle éclaire et habilite les citoyens avec des connaissances et des compétences, fournissant une masse critique de capital humain et de main-d'œuvre, qui sont des prérequis pour le décollage d'un pays vers le développement. Les Objectifs du Millénaire pour le Développement (OMD) des Nations Unies et le cadre de l'Éducation pour Tous (EPT) de Dakar sont des promoteurs majeurs de l'accès à l'éducation pour tous les enfants dans le monde. Bien que la plupart des pays de l'Afrique subsaharienne (ASS) aient répondu à leur appel et augmenté substantiellement leurs taux inscriptions scolaires, des millions d'enfants en âge scolaire sont encore laissés hors des écoles. L'impact que cela a sur les pays de l'ASS est un développement lent, voire retardé, et un manque compétitivité dans l'économie mondiale. L'Ouganda, l'un des pays de l'ASS, a misé sur l'Éducation Primaire Universelle et a considérablement élargi les inscriptions scolaires du primaire au secondaire et au

tertiaire. Si cette initiative est gérée intelligemment et de manière appropriée, elle favorisera le développement de sa main-d'œuvre et son agenda de développement national. Cet article analyse les ramifications et les implications de l'accès à l'éducation en Afrique subsaharienne et fait une brève comparaison avec le système éducatif américain. L'éducation reste un acteur et un déterminant significatif du développement que les pays africains doivent gérer avec les bonnes politiques et des investissements adéquats.

Keywords: Afrique, Accès à l'éducation, développement national, Ouganda

Background

Conventional logic holds that official entry into the school system begins when a child is enrolled into primary one (grade 1). This is the first ladder of formal education journey. Enrolment means being given opportunity and acquiring space to start an education journey whose trajectory may be unpredictable and fraught with unforeseen frustrations. Entry into schools is being advocated for and championed by two famous international organizations.

The UN uses its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to advocate for development and a better world through MDG 2 which advocates for achievement of universal primary education (UN, 2000). For its part, the World Education Forum meeting in Dakar, Senegal in April, 2000 declared: "We the participants in the World Education Forum, commit ourselves to the achievement of education for all (EFA) goals and targets for every citizen and for every society (UNESCO, 2008).

Following the commitments advocated for by the UN MDGs and the Dakar EFA, countries heeded the call and enrolments in primary schools went up exponentially. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Malawi implemented universal primary education in 1994, Uganda in 1997, Tanzania in 2000 and Cameroon, Burundi, Rwanda, Ghana and Kenya jumped on the bandwagon in 2003 (Grogan, 2008). A survey that was conducted thereafter indicated that gross enrolment rates (GERs) significantly went up. The GER rose from 2.5 million pupils in 1996 to 8.2 million in 2005. Even the disabled and orphans' GERs rose from 39% in 1997 to 50% in 2015 (Grogan, 2008; Musika, 2019).

MDGs and Dakar EFA Impact on Enrolment. Implementing compliance with the MDGs and the Dakar EFA, most SSA countries are committed to fee-free primary school but many retain official and unofficial charges and levies that can sometimes discourage attendance. In contrast, at secondary level, most SSA education systems have always charged fees and continue to do so, though several have announced fee-free secondary schooling in the recent. This is more problematic than fee-free primary schooling since costs per child are often four or more times greater.

Although the number of children who have access to basic education in sub-Saharan Africa has increased substantially over the last two decades, many still remain out of school. Moreover, some fail to enroll at all, especially those in fragile states. Others may start school but do not complete the basic primary school cycle (Lewin, 2009). The MDGs and SDGs have generated global commitments to improve greatly access to education.

Indeed access to primary schools has grown substantially in SSA countries in the last two decades and Gross Enrolment Rates (GERs) now average 97%. In spite of this phenomenal growth, over 32 million children remain out of school and only two thirds reach the last grade of primary.

Although the majority of primary age African children are now enrolled, many are not in the appropriate grade for their age (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2007; Motala *et al.*, 2007; Lewin 2008b; Chimombo, 2009). Those who are substantially overage, either because of late entry or because of repetition and interrupted schooling are at risk of losing access as a result of premature dropout (Hunt, 2008). Daily attendance rates can be below 70% and in some schools below 50% at certain times of the year (e.g harvest), resulting in substantial loss of learning time (Ampiah, 2008). Indicators of achievement (eg Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Measuring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) shows that many fail to reach acceptable level of achievement, often by wide margins.

In SSA fewer than 30% of all children successfully complete secondary schooling. Transition rates from primary to secondary are below 50% in the majority of low-income countries and in some cases rates are falling as expanded cohorts reach secondary entrance levels. Although access to primary schooling has become more equitably distributed, as primary enrolment rates have increased, sharp differences persist in access to secondary level and above with those in the top quintile of the household income six or more times more likely to complete secondary school than those from the poorest households Lewin, (2008a).

Uganda grapples with Universal Primary Education. Uganda opened avenues for Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997. Articles 30 and 34 of the 1995 Uganda Constitution entitle primary education to all children of Uganda as a human right. Tuition fees and PTA charges were abolished in government primary schools from primary to primary seven (Grogan, 2008; Musika, 2019). This constitutional decision made a dramatic impact on the gross enrolment rates (GERs) in the primary school system (Behrman, 2015). Notably, gender inequality and access to schooling improved significantly. Enrolment more than doubled from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2003 (Bategeka *et al.*, 2004). Public primary school registration rose from 57% in 1996 to 85% in 1997, just one year later (Essama-Nssah, 2011). By 2005, there were over 8.2 million pupils in universal primary education schools (Sewamala *et al.*, 2011). Agaba (2014) reported that in 2013 GERs in primary schools had reached 8.4 million pupils; while Namirembe *et al.* (2017) reported that by 2016 GERs had peaked at 8.7 million pupils.

Amidst this flourishing scenario in UPE bonanza enrolments, researchers found UPE education system to be encumbered with multitudes of challenges. Soaring enrolment numbers threatened to undermine the good intentions of the Ministry of Education and Sports. Classroom numbers burst as there were unmanageable numbers to handle and the teacher-student ratio became untenable. School infrastructure was a mockery because some schools conducted classes under trees (Musika, 2019). This compromised the quality of education as pupils' literacy rates drastically dropped.

The bigger picture in the country's universal primary education system continued to post negative stories such widespread corruption, ghost teachers, ghost students made worse by lack of scholastic materials

(pens, pencils, books). Dropout rates, repetitions and non-completion of the education cycle up to primary seven became worrying features in the system (Sewamala *et al.*, 2011; Mugerwa, 2016).

As a developing country beset by a multiplicity of development challenges, Uganda needs to put right its education system because it is from education that it will create a critical mass of human capital and manpower to trigger it on the right development pathway. Granted Government has so far made some bold and deliberate decisions to promote science education over the arts. That is not enough because the issues of quality assurance persist even in the science education sector. A holistic, consistent, fair and transparent approach in the entire education system could make the desired difference.

Conceptualizing access to education. But what exactly is meant by “access to education?” Is it simply enrolling a pupil in primary one? It is more than that as indicated by different educationists and scholars works reviewed hereunder. In their attempt to explain access to education, education scholars have made the case for an expanded vision of access that extends beyond higher enrolment rates to include attendance achievement, and progression and completion at appropriate ages so as to get a holistic perspective.

In the education circles, the term **access** typically refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. Increasing *access* generally requires schools to provide additional services or remove any actual or potential barriers that might prevent some students from equitable participation in certain courses or academic programs.

Factors such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, perceived intellectual ability, past academic performance, special-education status, English-language ability, and family income or educational-attainment levels—in addition to factors such as relative community affluence, geographical location, or school facilities - may contribute to certain students having less “access” to educational opportunities than other students- *The Glossary of Education Reform*

Lewin (2015), who has extensive education experience in sub-Saharan Africa argues that access to education includes: on-schedule enrolment and progression at an appropriate age, regular attendance, learning consistent with national achievement norms, a learning environment that is safe enough to allow learning to take place, and opportunities to learn that are equitably distributed. Lewin (2015) goes on to observe that where the quality of learning and teaching varies widely and where it is rationed by price or by other factors that constrain access, it is important to ensure that improvements in access to education are equitable and do not increase learning opportunity for some at the expense of others. Enhanced equity is an essential condition of an expanded vision of access.

Agreeing with the expanded vision, the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transition and Equity (CREATE) definition of access includes admission and progression on schedule for age in grade, regular attendance, achievement related to national curriculum norms, appropriate access to post-primary opportunities, and more equal opportunities to learn (Lewin, 2007a). This expanded vision is needed because there are several factors which affect access and education institutions, parents and pupils are not uniform but from heterogeneous backgrounds. Lewin (2008a) further observes that access to education within Dakar’s Education for All framework has little meaning and even less development impact if it is not defined broadly. Therefore, at a minimum,

he recommends an expanded vision to include:

- Local access to safe schools with acceptable levels of staffing, learning materials, and other facilities.
- Admissions to and progression through primary school or its equivalent at the appropriate age for the grade.
- Consistent and continuous attendance throughout the school year.
- Reasonable access to post-primary education and training.
- Learning outcomes that achieve national norms for successful completion of the education cycle.

Zonal Models of Access Exclusion and Inclusion. To enhance understanding of inclusion and exclusion of access to education in sub-Saharan Africa, the CREATE program developed a model to describe education access for children of school age (Lewin, 2007a). The model identifies zones of exclusion within which there are likely to be different patterns of exclusion and inclusion. The six zone categories are:

Zone 0 covers pre-school participation. This is very poorly documented in SSA though it is clear that in low-enrolment countries large majorities experience little or no access to organized pre-school. Those that do are often enrolled in high-cost private facilities. This pattern certainly disadvantages the poor who miss out on the head start in basic learning skills that pre-school can provide.

Zone1 captures those who never attend school. It includes at least two different sub-populations. First there are those who could and should be enrolled in existing or planned conventional schools. For them the best strategy is likely to be extending the reach of the existing formal system. Second there are those whose locations (e.g. low population density, fragile states), livelihood styles (e.g. nomadic) health status (e.g. disability, HIV/AIDS), or social and civil identity (e.g. excluded castes, ethnic minorities), may preclude conventional school solutions.

Zone 2 includes the great majority of children who are excluded after initial entry. Typically, dropout is greater in the early grades, with a substantial subsequent pushout at the transition to secondary school. Precursors to dropouts include repetition, low achievement, temporary withdrawals, low attendance, overage enrolment, poor teaching, degraded facilities, very large classes, household poverty, child labour and poor health nutrition. Those dropping out usually become permanently excluded with no pathway back to re-enter. The zone includes disproportionate numbers of girls, HIV/AIDS orphans, and others in vulnerable circumstances.

Zone 4 contains those excluded from lower secondary school as a result of failing to be selected, being unable to afford costs, or dropping out before successful completion of primary. This exclusion is important for EFA since transition rates into secondary affect demand for primary schooling, primary teacher supply depends on having enough secondary graduates, and gender equity at the secondary level in an MDG. Access to secondary schooling promotes the social mobility needed to give poor households more access to higher income employment.

Zone 5 includes those children who enter lower secondary school but fail to progress to the end of the cycle.

Many who fail to complete the cycle are likely to be below the legal working-age if they are in the appropriate grade for their age. The reasons for dropout include poor performance, affordability, loss of motivation, and early pregnancy. Demand to remain in school may not weaken as a result of high opportunity costs where paid work is available, and where there is pressure to contribute to household economic activity. Zone 6 contains lower secondary children at risk of dropout. As with Zone 3 some will be silently excluded though enrolled, and at risk as a result of poor attendance and low achievement, costs and affordability are likely to be.

Comparison between SSA access and the USA access

Excerpts from Darling-Hammond (1997):.

- Access to assistive technologies, accommodations, or modified school facilities and transportation vehicles that make full participation in school programs possible for students with various forms of disability (the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, for example, establish minimum compliance requirements for schools).
- Access to equal opportunities in educational programs and activities regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation, including extracurricular activities and sports (Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972 and the Student Nondiscrimination Act of 2010 are examples of policies that establish minimum compliance requirements for schools).
- Access to adequate health care and nutritional services, including free or reduced-price school breakfasts and lunches to ensure that children living in poverty are not attending school sick or hungry.
- Access to adequate public transportation to attend public schools and charter schools that may or may not be located near student homes.
- Access to preschool or kindergarten so that students enter school prepared to learn and succeed academically regardless of income level or a family's ability to pay for early childhood education.
- Access to intensive instruction in the English language or **academic language** for students who cannot read, write, or speak English, and access to interpreters and translated documents for **non-English-speaking students**, parents, and families, including multilingual translations of school policies, academic materials, parent communications, event announcements, website content, etc.
- Access to counseling, social services, **academic support**, and other resources that can help students who are **at risk** of failure or dropping out remain in school, succeed academically, graduate with a diploma, and pursue postsecondary education.
- Access to individualized education programs (IEPs) for special-education students, access to mainstream classrooms and academically challenging content through inclusion strategies, which includes access to any trained professionals or specialized educational resources that may be needed to ensure that the needs of special-education students are being met.
- Access to advanced-level learning opportunities such as **honors courses** or Advanced Placement courses, **dual-enrollment opportunities**, or other programs that historically required students to meet prerequisites before being allowed to enroll in a course or participate in a program. (By eliminating certain

prerequisites or other barriers, schools can increase access to more challenging academic content, stronger preparation for postsecondary success, and college-level learning.

- Access to technology, including high-speed internet connections and adequate hardware (computers, laptops, tablets) and software (particularly learning applications) so that students have equitable access to the same digital and online learning opportunities regardless of their family's income level or ability to pay for these technologies significant.

Conclusion

There is no shortcut to quality education. African countries including Uganda must put in place policies that not only promote universal primary education enrolment, but must ensure that the education systems are of the right quality and standards to produce the right human power for development. Short of such deliberate and well-intended policies, real development will remain elusive. As for Uganda, it will not be able to compete and cope with the vagaries of the globalized interconnected world if it cannot put its education house in order.

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