

What Hinders Children in sub-Saharan Africa from getting Secondary Education?

Introduction

The majority of children in sub-Saharan Africa do not make it to secondary school. Analysis of Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) by Lewin and Caillods (2001) shows that two-thirds of all countries with secondary GER of 40% and below are in Africa. Current statistics demonstrate that in SSA, only a small minority participates in and finishes secondary schooling. This brief identifies major reasons that prevent children in sub-Saharan Africa from effectively transitioning to secondary school. It goes further to discuss possible options for policy and programs that could see more children in Africa attain secondary education.

Factors Influencing Transition from Primary School to Secondary School in Africa

Four 'critical' factors have been identified by TRANSE-Group (2005) as influencing transition from primary school to secondary school in Africa:

Financing - Financing secondary education is a great challenge to both governments and households. Secondary education in most African countries tends to be the most neglected, receiving on average 15-20% of state resources (World Bank, 2005). Household burden in financing secondary education is also high. In Kenya, whereas households meet only 20% of primary and 8% of university education costs, they shoulder 60% of secondary education costs. Thus, cost is a key barrier to transitioning to secondary school for the poor, who form the majority in sub-Saharan Africa.

Family Networks and Household Composition – In poor households in sub-Saharan Africa, family networks are important since the burden of educating children is shared by extended family members where these networks are strong (Lloyd & Blank, 1996). Household composition is important because studies have shown that the chances that a child will access secondary schooling decrease with the number of children in the secondary age cohort in the household (Onsomu, et.al., 2006b).

Quality and Relevance - Perceptions of curricula inadequacies and low quality of education across many nations has given rise to apathy, school disaffection, and antisocial behavior on the part of students, often leading to low transition (World Bank, 2005; Abelmann 2001; Levy and Murnane, 2001). Such students tend to focus on other forms of economic investments that are likely to give them and their families immediate economic returns (World Bank, 2005). Mugisha (2003) points out that one of the reasons why the 'urban advantage' does not seem to work for the slum children include the perceived low quality of primary education being offered.

Inequitable Distribution of Secondary School Opportunities across different Communities – Many studies have observed the existence of uneven distribution of educational opportunities between poor and non-poor regions, both in urban and rural areas (Otieno and Wesonga, 2003; Onsomu et al., 2006a; and Mugisha, 2003). These studies have shown that the poor tend to have limited access to educational opportunities than the non-poor.

Other Factors affecting Transition to Secondary School include:

- Inadequacy of interventions and ineffective safety nets
- The gender specific factors that mostly affect girls
- Parents' low levels of educational attainment
- Early marriages and pregnancies
- The impact of HIV/AIDS and other population dynamics
- Long distances to schools especially in underdeveloped remote areas
- Political factors – including political instability, lack of political commitment, etc
- Lack of capacity to monitor and regulate providers
- Elitist secondary school entry policies
- Limited private sector provision
- National education and human resource policy frameworks
- The disconnect between research and policy

What can Countries in sub-Saharan Africa learn from Policies Implemented in Sister Countries and Elsewhere to address Similar Problems ?

Korea's Tremendous Expansion of Primary and Secondary Education

The Republic of Korea, which in the 1950s was among the world's poorest countries, managed to achieve nearly 100% coverage in primary and secondary education in just four decades. This rapid expansion is attributable to:

- A pragmatic policy framework emphasizing different levels of education overtime. In the 1960s, the plan's top priority was universal primary education; in the 1970s policy emphasis shifted to secondary education, and in 1980s, to the tertiary level.
- Equity considerations were important for a balanced expansion of the education system. In 1968, the government abolished the entrance examination for middle schools.
- Increased government spending in education.
- Encouraging private provision of education at all levels.

Korea's success provides a vital lesson for African governments on how political commitment and pragmatic education planning can turn around an education system. Access and equity can be achieved simultaneously if the government resolutely addresses potential trade-offs between the two goals in the planning and implementation stages.

How Zimbabwe Achieved its High Rates of School Participation

Zimbabwe is one of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa with high school participation rates. After independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government embarked on the process of redressing the disparities and inequalities created by successive colonial governments (Moyo, 2001). To achieve this, the government committed to, among others:

- Providing free and universal primary education
- Ensuring access to secondary schools consistent with financial constraints
- Automatic grade promotion through to grade 11
- More equitable access
- Curriculum development to stress relevance to occupations and livelihoods
- Building at least one government school in each of the 59 administrative districts and to paying building grants-in-aid to all approved non-government secondary schools to cover 5% of the costs.
- Building secondary schools in urban centers, and a limited number of rural day secondary schools. This left the local authorities and communities with the task of building primary and non-government day secondary schools in rural areas.

The Zimbabwean example demonstrates that immense gains can be achieved when responsibility for system expansion and achieving equity is shared between the central government, local authorities and private sector.

Botswana's Successful Planning for Expanded Secondary School Education

Botswana's transition rate to secondary education is over 75%. In 1973, in response to rising enrolments in secondary education and an influx of inexperienced teachers, Botswana began a process of restructuring the education system to address emerging challenges (Botswana Ministry of Education, 1993). A department on secondary education was created to assist, advice and guide teachers in preparing students for examinations. A specific centralized structure for secondary education was thus created. Four years later, at the first National Commission on Education, the government committed itself to universal access to nine years of schooling, making Botswana one of the first countries in the region to extend basic education by encompassing junior secondary education. Senior secondary education enrolments were held to limits that reflected the human resources in higher education, further training and the labor market. The expansion of basic education inevitably increased the demand for senior secondary education.

Botswana epitomizes a case of early recognition of system challenges and deficiencies, and institution of corrective measures to stem further slide. It challenges other African countries that have not integrated secondary level in basic education, as part of the international drive to make the first 12 years of schooling compulsory.

Malawi's Response to Secondary School Expansion Challenges

Like most African countries, Malawi has faced the challenge of expanding public secondary school system. To address the challenges, the government drafted the Policy and Investment Framework in which it committed to, among others (Malawi 2001):

- Increase the number of secondary schools to improve transition rates from primary to secondary to 30%;
- Encourage the development of private secondary schools;
- Undertake a curriculum review to support more equitable access and improve quality;
- Train more secondary school teachers;
- Establish a textbook fund to improve the supply of books.

Malawi shows that it is possible to effect modest sustainable growth in secondary schools of reasonable quality, financed by a mixture of increased public contributions, efficiency gains, and strategic donor assistance.

Financing Options for Expanding Secondary Education in sub-Saharan Africa

There are various funding options that have been embraced by different countries worldwide to enable them expand secondary education. Some of these include:

- Cost sharing
- Traditional loan
- Human capital contract
- Income-contingent loan
- Graduate tax
- Voucher and other demand-side financing mechanisms
- Entitlement
- Individual learning account
- Education savings account
- Learning tax credit

Notably, not many African countries have embraced some of the most innovative funding options listed above in financing secondary education. Yet, notably, some of the countries with innovative funding instrument like vouchers – Bangladesh, Chile, Pakistan - have some of the best transition rates to secondary school. Clearly, the need for African countries to embrace some innovative options in expanding access to secondary education is urgent.

Conclusion

Because sub-Saharan Africa is very diverse, it is not possible to conclude that the factors influencing transition to secondary school apply uniformly across the continent. Hence, there exist major research gaps to relate specific factors to specific regions and/or to intensify factors in impeding transition to secondary school within a specific context. Nonetheless, lack of schools within a reasonable distance is a serious problem in rural, often marginal and remote parts of countries. This limitation is shared with urban slums that are often neglected in the provision of basic infrastructure. The rural and urban poor also share another common characteristic in constituting a majority of the poor that cannot afford good secondary schooling because of high fees. For policies and programs to significantly improve transition to secondary school in the region, they must target these segments of the population.

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For details, please read the full paper: "Factors Affecting Transition to Secondary Education in Africa" by Wycliffe Otieno and Daniel K'Oliech. This paper is available from APHRC. This brief was written by Rose N. Oronje.

African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)
Shelter Afrique Center, Longonot Road, Upper Hill,
P.O. Box 10787, 00100 – GPO, Nairobi, Kenya
Tel: +254-20-2720400/1/2; Cell: +254-722-205933/720-098388/733-410102; Fax: +254-20-2720380
Email: info@aphrc.org; Website: www.aphrc.org