NARROWING AFRICA'S EDUCATION DEFICIT

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"Our progress as a nation," U.S. President John F. Kennedy once remarked, "can be no faster than our progress in education." This observation has a special resonance for sub-Saharan Africa today. In the midst of the region's economic resurgence, underperforming education systems continue to blight prospects for sustained and inclusive development, trapping millions of children and young people in a cycle of poverty, insecurity and thwarted ambition.

Looking back over the past decade, there has been some good news. Out-of-school numbers have been falling, gender gaps are narrowing, and more children are making it beyond primary education. Secondary school numbers have doubled in a decade. These are real achievements. Ten years ago, countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Senegal and Zambia were treading water or slipping backwards in enrollment. Today they are heading toward universal primary schooling and beyond.

Unfortunately, the bad news comes in a double dose. When it comes to education, Africa is running a twin deficit in *access to* school and *learning in* school. Far too many children are out of school, and far too many of those in school are not learning. This education deficit does not make media headlines. Maybe that's because we don't see children going hungry for want of classrooms, teachers and textbooks. But what is happening in education merits the description of a regional emergency. That emergency is fueling poverty and inequality, compromising economic growth and setting Africa on course for a potentially destabilizing crisis of youth unemployment.

Accessing Opportunities for Education in Africa

The numbers on access tell their own story. In the midst of an increasingly knowledge-based global economy, 30 million primary school-age children in Africa—one in every four—are out of school, along with 20 million adolescents (UIS, 2012). Despite its vast oil wealth, Nigeria has 10 million children out of school. That shocking figure puts the country in the invidious position of topping the world rankings for out-of-school children. Many of Africa's children are denied an education because they are working as child laborers. According to the International Labor Organization, sub-Saharan Africa is now the only region in which the proportion of children defined as "economically active" is rising (2010). Alarmingly, around one in three children around primary school age in Africa are involved in hazardous employment, working in dangerous

environments for pitifully low wages instead of nourishing their minds at school.

When it comes to enrollment and years in school, Africa is a world apart. Only around one-third of children make it to secondary school, compared to over half in South Asia. Just 6 percent make it through to university, and 38 percent of young adults age 20-25 have less than four years of education (Van Fleet et al., 2012). At the risk of understating this problem, this is an insecure foundation for sustained growth. In today's world, countries that are unable to generate skills face the prospect of growing marginalization in the global economy.

Sadly, the bad news on access does not end there. Enrollment trends should set alarm bells ringing across the continent. Over the past few years, there has been a discernible slowdown in the rate at which primary school enrollment is increasing. In fact, the most recent data from UNESCO points to an uptick in out-of-school numbers. If current trends continue, there will be 2 million more children out of school in 2015 than there were in 2010.

Why the slowdown? In large measure, governments across the region have systematically failed to put in place the policies needed to reach the most marginalized children—the rural poor, young girls from disadvantaged homes, slum dwellers, pastoralists and others. Today, a child born into the richest 20 percent of Ghana's families can expect to receive five more years of education than a child born into the poorest 20 percent. And being born a girl to a poor rural household in northern Nigeria is a ticket to less than one year of schooling, compared to over nine years for wealthy urban males (UNESCO, 2010).

Public spending should play a role in mitigating social inequalities in education. Yet all too often governments pay insufficient attention to the pressing need for more equitable spending. In Ghana, schools in the most disadvantaged northern rural regions receive less support than those in wealthier areas. The arid and semi-arid northern regions of northern Kenya account for just 9 percent of the country's primary school-age population but around 50 percent of the out-of-school population; yet they receive less public spending per child than the wealthiest parts of the country (Watkins & Alemayehu, 2012).

In School, but Not Learning

Learning outcomes are similarly bleak. Millions of children across the region are suffering from what amounts to a "zero-value-added" education. They are spending several years in school and progressing across grades without acquiring even the most basic learning competencies.

Research at the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education (CUE) has helped to provide a window to the learning deficit. Covering 28 countries that are home to over three-quarters of Africa's primary school-age population, CUE reviewed a range of regional learning assessments, national surveys and examination results. The aim was to develop a new policy tool—the Africa Learning Barometer—to identify the proportion of children falling below an absolute minimum level of competency for literacy and numeracy (Van Fleet et al., 2012). The bar was set at a very low level. Most of those falling below the threshold were unable to read a simple sentence or successfully complete basic addition.

The Africa Learning Barometer points unequivocally to an education and learning crisis. Over one-third of the pupils covered in the survey—23 million in total—fell below the minimum learning threshold. In the cases of Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zambia, the share was over 50 percent. The results for South Africa were particularly shocking. Over 30 percent of children fell below the minimum learning threshold, reflecting the large number of failing schools in areas dominated by low-income households.

If the aim of education systems is to enable children to realize their potential, escape poverty and gain the skills that they and their countries need to build shared prosperity, much of Africa scores an "F-minus." Today, there are 127 million children of primary school age in sub-Saharan Africa. The cumulative effect of a large out-of-school population, high dropout rates and low levels of learning is that some 61 million of these children—almost half of the total—will reach their adolescent years without having gained basic literacy and numeracy skills, let alone 21st century learning skills.

It is difficult to overstate the consequences of this twin deficit in education. Expanding access and raising the quality of schooling has the potential to increase long-run growth

by around 2 percent annually per capita, creating a powerful impetus for poverty reduction (Hanushek & Woessman, 2011). There is also evidence that gains in education—especially the education of girls—can act as a powerful catalyst for progress in other areas, including child survival, nutrition and maternal health. By one estimate, universal secondary school enrollment for girls in sub-Saharan Africa would be associated with 1.8 million fewer deaths among children aged less than five years old (UNESCO, 2010).

Nowhere is the education imperative more apparent than in meeting the challenge posed by youth employment. The demographic arithmetic is compelling. Over the last 10 years, the number of 15- to 24-year-olds in Africa has increased from 133 million to 172 million. By 2020, that figure will rise to 246 million (UNDESA, 2010). Providing good quality education for all would enable Africa to reap a demographic dividend, harnessing the energy, drive and talents of the region's youth to the skills that could drive inclusive growth. As Kofi Annan and the Africa Progress Panel have warned, without an improved education performance, Africa will fail the job creation challenge with potentially disastrous consequences for the region's youth, as well as for political stability and economic growth (Africa Progress Panel, 2012).

Addressing Africa's Education and Learning Crisis in 2013 and Beyond

So, what needs to happen to close the twin deficit in education? There are no easy answers and no blueprints. Every country faces its own set of distinctive challenges and opportunities, yet five core requirements for successful reform stand out.

The first is political leadership. Graça Machel recently commented, "I wonder if Africa's political leaders really understand the critical importance of education for the future of our countries—and for the hopes of our children" (2012). She was right to raise the question. Far too often presidents, prime ministers and finance ministers view education as a second- or third-order priority. It is tough to think of a more misplaced perspective. Education holds the key to more inclusive and dynamic growth, innovation, and success in global markets, as well as human development in the broader sense. Political leaders need to take responsibility for driving the reforms that are needed.

Second, governments have to look beyond getting children into school to the broader challenge of improving learning outcomes. There are opportunities to deliver quick wins in this area. Ensuring that teachers are equipped with the skills and the curriculum they need to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills does not take rocket science. It takes sensible planning, innovation and a willingness to learn from what has worked in other countries. Similarly, far more could be done to create school environments that are more conducive to learning, not least by lowering class sizes and providing textbooks.

Tackling the systemic learning crisis will require deeper institutional reforms sustained over many years. No education system is better than its teachers—and nowhere is this more evident than in Africa. Many countries are facing an epidemic of teacher absenteeism, depriving children of their most valuable learning resource. Part of the problem can be traced to low morale and legitimate grievances over pay and conditions. But weak accountability of parents and the indifference of education administrators are contributing factors, pointing to the need for urgent governance reforms. The bigger problem is that systems for teacher recruitment, training and support are hopelessly out of touch with national learning needs. Studies in countries such as Uganda, Nigeria and Mozambique have found that fewer than half of their teachers are able to score in the top band on a test designed for 12-year-olds (Africa Progress Panel, 2012). Training and classroom delivery is geared toward mind-numbing rote learning, rather than problem-solving. To make matters worse, few countries in Africa have functioning national learning assessment systems, depriving policymakers of the flow of information needed to guide reform.

Addressing these issues is tougher than building schools or supplying them with textbooks, and the political pay-off is lower. Raising learning achievement levels is a long haul, not a sprint. But delayed action is not an option. While governments face tough reform challenges, there is a growing body of evidence on what works. A growing network of policymakers across Africa and around the world are looking beyond school access to learning. Many of these issues are set out in the Center for Universal Education's *Global Compact on Learning* (2011).

The third requirement is for governments to recognize the lethal interaction between early childhood disadvantage

and failure in education. This year, 40 percent of Africa's children will reach primary school age having experienced acute malnutrition, which has devastating and largely irreversible consequences for cognitive development and later learning. We know from recent studies in Mozambique that successful preschool programs pay high dividends in terms of learning achievement in later years (Martinez et al., 2012). Yet few children in Africa, especially those from the poorest homes, have the opportunity to benefit from early childhood provision.

Fourth, it is time for African governments and international donors to tackle head-on the deep inequalities in education opportunity—inequalities that reinforce wider disparities and hold back progress in education. Currently, most public spending systems invest more per capita on higher income students and better performing schools than on poor students and failing schools. The inverse rule should apply. More generally, African governments should be using the increased revenue flows from natural resources to finance education interventions targeting the poor. Is there any sphere of public investment with a higher return than well-designed programs that keep girls in school and out of early marriage, that enable children to escape exploitative employment and make the transition to education, or that prevent hunger? I doubt it.

Last, but not least, Africa's aid partners have to step up to the plate. Over the past decade, they have promised much but delivered little. Development assistance flows for basic education in sub-Saharan Africa have stagnated at around $1.7 billion annually (UNESCO, 2011). When it comes to support for basic education in sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank's International Development Association has been a conspicuous underperformer. And, in contrast to the health sector, education still lacks a dynamic, innovative and well-resourced global fund to galvanize action and deliver results. No country better illustrates the human cost of donor indifference than South Sudan. Seven years after the peace agreement, aid agencies have failed to put in a structured plan for the construction of an education system. This in a country with over 1 million children out of school, and in which fewer than 1 in 50 girls makes it to secondary school (Brown, 2012).

The U.N. special envoy for global education, former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, has called on donors to deliver on a promise they made over a decade ago to ensure that no country committed to achieve the Education for All Goals would be allowed to fail for want of finance. As donors reflect with some intensity on the post-2015 international development targets, perhaps they could take some time out to reflect on the costs to their own credibility of breaking that promise.

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