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# Research for Effective Education Programming – Africa (REEP)

## Education Data Trend Snap Shot

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Produced by Dexis Consulting Group for the United States Agency for International Development

## Education Data Trend Snapshot: The current state of education in Sub-Saharan Africa

Access to education in sub-Saharan Africa has improved dramatically over recent years. Net enrollment rates<sup>i</sup> for primary education have grown from 63.5 percent in 2002 to 78.3 percent in 2016.<sup>ii</sup> Over the same period, net enrollment at the lower secondary level increased from 17 percent to 28 percent.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite significant progress, sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag behind other regions. Though the ratio of girls to boys improved from a Gender Parity Index (GPI) of .90 in 2002 to .94 in 2015 at the primary level, gender parity for primary and lower secondary enrollment remains the lowest of any region. The effective rate of transition from primary to secondary school was 75 percent in sub-Saharan Africa in 2015, an increase from 68 percent in 2002. However, transition rates in the other regions were a minimum of 86 percent in 2015.<sup>iv</sup> While gross enrollment<sup>v</sup> for upper secondary schooling was 34 percent in 2015, an increase from 22 percent in 2002, this remains far below the global average of 68 percent.<sup>vi</sup>

Though greater numbers of children and youth are attending school, on-time enrollment and student retention remain a serious challenge in the region. For instance, in Malawi, around 51 percent of primary students are at least two years older than the official age for the grade, growing to 61 percent for the poorest population quintile.<sup>vii</sup> Once in school, the rate of survival to the last grade of primary school is estimated to be just 56 percent, as of 2015, in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with over 80 percent in the other regions. The cumulative primary school drop-out rate in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to be 44 percent as of 2015, an increase from 37 percent in 2002. In comparison, the drop-out rate in 2015 was 19.5 percent in Arab states and 16 percent in South and West Asia.<sup>viii</sup>

Sub-Saharan Africa has both the highest number of out-of-school children and youth, as well as the highest rates of exclusion across schooling levels. While 61 million primary-age children are estimated to be out-of-school globally as of 2015, close to 33 million - or 53 percent - reside in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>ix</sup> Across schooling levels, out-of-school populations are disproportionately female. Girls are more likely to be out of school than boys at the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels, with the highest disparity among primary-age children.<sup>x</sup> As a proportion, approximately 21 percent of children in sub-Saharan Africa are out of school, compared with 8 percent globally. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of primary school exclusion by far, followed by 11 percent in Western Asia and Northern Africa.<sup>xi</sup> Despite a decline in overall numbers, the global share of out-of-school children living in sub-Saharan Africa has grown from 44 percent in 2002 to 53 percent in 2015.<sup>xii</sup> At the country level, 8 of the 10 countries globally with the highest out-of-school rates for primary-age children are in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Sudan (69 percent), Liberia (62 percent), and Eritrea (61 percent).<sup>xiii</sup>

Sub-Saharan Africa also has the highest regional rate of out-of-school adolescents – 36.1 percent – more than double the global rate of 16.4 percent. This translates to approximately 25.7 million out-of-school adolescents that should be enrolled in lower secondary school, or 41.5 percent of the global total. At the upper secondary level, the out-of-school rate in the region increases to 57.4 percent, compared with 37 percent globally.<sup>xiv</sup> Presenting an additional challenge, around half of children and adolescents living in conflict-affected environments who are not in school reside in sub-Saharan Africa, based on data from 2012.<sup>xv</sup> Globally, refugee children and youth are five times more likely to be excluded from school. Girls are disproportionately impacted in conflict areas and, on average, are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.<sup>xvi</sup>

There are substantial disparities and inequality in education attainment, including by sex, income and living location. On average, the mean number of years of schooling in sub-Saharan Africa is 6.6 years

among 20- to 24-year-olds. However, this figure jumps to 9.9 years of schooling for the richest population quintile and falls to a mere 3.4 years for the poorest quintile.<sup>xvii</sup> In Nigeria, just 3 percent of the primary-age children from the wealthiest households have never been to school, compared to 71 percent for the poorest quintile.<sup>xviii</sup>

Youth living in rural locations in sub-Saharan Africa have an estimated four fewer years of education than their counterparts in urban areas. On average in the region, men aged 20 to 24 have 1.6 more years of education than women in the same age group. The rate of extreme education poverty, defined by less than two years of education among 20- to 24-year-olds, is 26 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, the highest of all regions, followed by 16 percent in Southern Asia.<sup>xix</sup> Extreme education poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, on average, reaches more than 50 percent among the poorest population quintile.<sup>xx</sup>

Recently released data highlights the extent of the crisis of learning across the world. Of the 617 million children not reaching minimum reading proficiency globally, 202 million – or 33 percent – reside in sub-Saharan Africa. The region has the highest proportion of children and youth failing to reach basic learning levels. For primary and lower-secondary aged children and adolescents in the region, 88 percent will not meet basic reading proficiency levels, and 84 percent will not meet basic mathematics proficiency levels. This figure is even more alarming for girls, as 90 percent – equivalent to 70 million – will not meet basic reading levels upon completing primary school.<sup>xxi</sup>

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is critical to the success of the education system. At the primary level, only 61 percent of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa are trained, compared with 86 percent globally in 2016.<sup>xxii</sup> For female teachers at the primary level, this figure is 66 percent. The ratio of pupils to teachers at the primary level in 2016 was 39, which has fallen from 44 in 2002.<sup>xxiii</sup> Despite this improvement, the ratio is still quite high compared with the global average of 23, which could have implications for education quality. While regional data is not available, attrition rates among primary teachers in Togo in 2014 was 14.5 percent, which is one of the highest rates globally.<sup>xxiv</sup> The share of primary school teachers who are female in sub-Saharan Africa, in 2016, was 43.5 percent, and has remained relatively stable over time. However, this figure is relatively low compared with the global average of 64.1 percent.<sup>xxv</sup>

An estimated 750 million adults in 2016 did not have basic reading and writing abilities globally, with close to half of the illiterate population living in South Asia, and 27 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the literacy rate among youth aged 20 to 24 in sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 68 percent in 2002 to 75.5 percent in 2015. Though growing, this remains well below the global youth literacy average of 91 percent in 2015. Youth literacy in sub-Saharan Africa for men was 79 percent compared with 72 percent for women in 2016.<sup>xxvi</sup> While sub-Saharan Africa has experienced one of the most substantial increases in female literacy among youth over the past several decades, many of the countries with low youth literacy rates globally are located in the region.

Lastly, engagement in tertiary education is at a level far below other regions. In 2015, the average tertiary gross enrollment ratio in sub-Saharan Africa was 8.5 percent, compared with the global average of 36 percent. The ability of education systems to equip the workforce with relevant skills is critical, particularly with the growing number of youth in sub-Saharan Africa. Based on population trends, the working-age population in Africa will be 1 billion by 2040, the world's largest.<sup>xxvii</sup> While the total unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 7 percent in 2013, this unemployment rate doubles to 14 percent for youth age 15 to 24.<sup>xxviii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> UIS defines *net enrollment rate* as the total number of children of the official school age for a given education level that are enrolled in that education level, as a percentage of the total number of children of the official school age. *Gross enrollment ratio* is defined as the number of students enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education. See: <http://uis.unesco.org/glossary>.

<sup>ii</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). No date. Education statistics database. Available at: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>iv</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>v</sup> Gross enrollment ratios are used for upper secondary education, as net enrollment rates are not available as a regional aggregate.

<sup>vi</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>vii</sup> UNESCO. No date. World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE). Available at <https://www.education-inequalities.org>

<sup>viii</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>ix</sup> UNESCO. 2017. "Reducing poverty through universal primary and secondary education." Global Monitoring Report (GMR) and UIS Policy Paper 32/Fact Sheet 44. June 2017. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002503/250392E.pdf>

<sup>x</sup>Based on recently updated adjusted gender parity index (GPIA) data from 2015, which indicates the female to male out-of-school rate. GPIA figures are 1.19 for primary-age, 1.05 for lower secondary-age, and 1.12 for upper secondary-age. A GPIA above 1.03 indicates female disadvantage. UIS developed the GPIA to address challenges with the gender parity index, such that the indicator is now symmetrical around 1, and limited to a range between 0 and 2 (see UNESCO 2017 for further information).

<sup>xi</sup> UNESCO. 2017.

<sup>xii</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>xiii</sup> UNESCO. 2017.

<sup>xiv</sup> UNESCO. 2017.

<sup>xv</sup> UNESCO. 2015. "Humanitarian Aid for Education: Why it Matters and Why More is Needed." UNESCO GMR Policy Paper 21. June 2015. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002335/233557E.pdf>

<sup>xvi</sup> Overseas Development Institute (ODI). 2016. "Education Cannot Wait: Proposing a Fund for Education in Emergencies" <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10497.pdf>

<sup>xvii</sup> UNESCO. WIDE.

<sup>xviii</sup> UNESCO. WIDE. Figures are 2013 data, and indicate rates for children 3 to 6 years above primary entrance age.

<sup>xix</sup> UNESCO. WIDE.

<sup>xx</sup> UNESCO WIDE.

<sup>xxi</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). 2017b. "More than one-half of children and adolescents are not learning worldwide" Fact Sheet No. 46 September 2017.

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<sup>xxii</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>xxiii</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>xxiv</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

<sup>xxv</sup> UIS. Education Statistics database.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> African Development Bank (AfBD), OECD, UNDP, UNECA. 2012. *African Economic Outlook 2012: Promoting Youth Employment*. Available at: <https://youtheconomicopportunities.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resource/African%20Economic%20Outlook%202012.pdf>

<sup>xxviii</sup> World Bank. No date. World Development Indicators (WDI) database. Available at:  
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