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## **Access to Education in the Commonwealth: What Needs to be Done to Give All Children a Chance?**

**Keith M Lewin**

Commonwealth Ministers are meeting at their Sixteenth meeting in Cape Town in December. The theme this time is Access to Quality Education: For the Good of All. The backdrop is the commitments all governments have made to the Millennium Development Goals, which include achieving universal primary education (UPE) and gender equity at all educational levels, and to the Dakar Framework for Education for All (EFA) which includes other goals including the extension of access to early childhood education, more equitable access learning opportunities and life skills for young adults, a 50% improvement in literacy rates, and enhanced educational quality and learning achievement.

This is not the first time ambitious goals have been set by countries and the international community to end educational exclusion and live up to the UN Charter on Human Rights pledges. At the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien, Thailand a similar but more restricted agenda was set. In the 1960s UNESCO held regional conferences with the goal of achieving universal primary education. Progress has always fallen behind expectations, but that of course in no reason not to persist. It is a reason why Ministers should reflect on why progress has been uneven, and has sometimes stalled.

There are about 45 million children of primary school age who are not enrolled in low income Commonwealth countries (LICCS). By far the greatest numbers out of primary school are in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Table 1). India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Tanzania account for about 80% of children unenrolled in the world. Over 70% of the unschooled in Africa are found in Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, and Mozambique.

Many more school age children are excluded from secondary schools. At least 140 million are out of school, of whom over 107 million are in South Asia and nearly 32 million in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Where UPE is now within reach, priorities are shifting to secondary schooling, not least to meet the needs and aspirations of rapidly growing numbers of primary completers. Secondary schooling is very unequally distributed where enrolment rates are low. Household income is a very strong predictor of participation to the extent that in SSA children from the richest 20% may be 10 times more likely to be enrolled in secondary school than those from the poorest 40% of households.

**Table 1. Children Out of School in the Low Income Commonwealth Countries**

	<b>Primary Enrolled</b>	<b>Primary Out of School</b>	<b>Secondary Enrolled</b>	<b>Secondary Out of School</b>
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)</b>	<b>61332</b>	<b>13219</b>	<b>17385</b>	<b>31758</b>
<b>South Asia</b>	<b>148082</b>	<b>31132</b>	<b>95068</b>	<b>107136</b>

South East Asia	3069	154	2505	985
Caribbean +Central America	786	34	529	97
Pacific	861	196	303	601
Overall	233116	44832	131097	140577

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2005

There are some successes. In most LICCS there have been large improvements in girls enrolments to the extent that the Commonwealth average female enrolment is 48% of the total at primary and 49% at secondary. However gender disparities at primary remain high in parts of India and Pakistan, and in Mozambique and Nigeria where less than 45% are female. At secondary level nine countries have fewer than 45% girls. Gender disparities at secondary are closely associated with low overall enrolment rates. Thus nearly 90% of countries with secondary Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) below 50% have more boys than girls enrolled; all countries with secondary GERs above 50% have at least 48% enrolment female. Gender parity is also associated strongly with overage enrolment – if girls schooling is delayed by late entry or repetition they are more likely to drop out than boys.

There is now great willingness to mobilize resources internationally. The Dakar meeting offered the commitment that no country with credible plans would fail to make progress as a result of lack of financial resources. At Gleneagles the G8 meeting in July 2005 pledged an additional \$50 billion in aid by 2010, with half of this being directed towards SSA. Much of this was intended for educational investment. Eighteen of the poorest countries have now had their debt cancelled which frees up additional resources. The Fast Track Initiative (FTI) promises purposeful action and additional support.

The magnitude of the financial resources needed to make progress is substantial but imaginable. It represents a tiny proportion of some countries military expenditure, reminding us that where there are more soldiers than teachers the impediments to EFA are more than educational. Globally it is estimated that up to \$10 billion a year of external support will be needed to universalise primary education and complement the efforts of LICCS. At least as much again in additional expenditure is likely to be needed to raise access to lower secondary schooling towards universal levels. Post compulsory and tertiary education also have substantial needs for investment, especially where levels of support have been low and infrastructure has degraded. Commonwealth countries account for between 30% and 40% of the global totals.

The challenge Ministers of Education face is four fold.

- First, to maintain progress towards universalising equitable access to primary schooling and extend public support to pre-schooling where this is feasible
- Second, to expand access to secondary schooling in more equitable ways since this remains at a level at which most are excluded in LICCS, but it is where access to jobs and livelihoods is determined.
- Third, to generate balanced public investment for post-compulsory education and training, including teacher training and for tertiary level institutions, that recognises development needs and the need to share costs with beneficiaries
- Fourth, to improve quality and valued learning outcomes at all levels

What should Ministers now do? Seven ideas could make a difference and reflect recent analyses.

First, priority has to be given to improved access and completion through primary school where primary enrolments and achievement levels remain low (e.g. in different ways in the Gambia, Ghana, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, Zambia, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique and in parts of India and Pakistan). This is the most socially efficient way to raise literacy and numeracy levels, and consolidate basic learning skills. It is likely to mean that more than 50% of the education budget needs to be allocated to primary schooling in these countries and that the public cost per child should not fall below about 12% of GDP per capita – the lowest levels found in effective systems. Including the “last 20%” must be approached through fee free primary schools that relieve households of all the direct costs of schooling.

Second, investment in expanded secondary education is a priority where UPE is in sight, in order to increase and redistribute opportunity, provide enough teachers to sustain UPE, and improve the knowledge, skill and capability of the labour force. Not only are existing patterns of access very regressive (the relatively rich participate and benefit from public subsidy disproportionately), but the gaps between SSA and other regions in participation have been growing. This must have adverse consequences for economic growth and competitiveness.

Third, the costs per student at secondary level relative to GDP per capita must fall. Secondary schooling is very expensive in much of SSA and parts of South Asia costing five or more times as much per student as primary. All high enrolment systems operate at ratios of primary to secondary costs per student of less than 2:1 and rarely exceed about 30% of GDP per capita per student. At higher ratios the arithmetic is inescapable. It leads to the conclusion that mass access to secondary schooling would require most if not all of the education budget, leaving little for other levels. Without serious reform in working practices and teacher deployment mass participation at secondary is, and will remain, unaffordable in many LICCS.

Fourth, recognise that non-government and private providers will not provide a substitute for publicly financed mass provision in LICCS. In most of SSA, families below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile of household income cannot afford unsubsidised private schooling. Private providers lack incentives and capacity to reach out to those who are income poor. Not-for-profit providers have to be financed somehow and have their own limitations of reach and capacity. Neither will ever be “providers of last resort” on the scale needed. In the long run only States will make a reality of commitments to EFA.

Fifth, improve gender equity by increasing enrolment rates and encouraging enrolment and progression on-schedule for age. These two actions alone would greatly reduce differences in enrolment rates between boys and girls. Higher overall secondary enrolment rates are gender equitable and have a positive impact on HIV/AIDS since clear associations between educational level and infection.

Sixth, accept that there are trade-offs in public investment in education that are unavoidable. Some LICCS spend less on all secondary schools than on higher

education. In others as much as 70% of the education budget is spent on primary schools alone. Balanced growth is needed that extends access more equitably, and recognises that subsidies should be progressive, not regressive, and more pro-poor.

Finally, it is essential to develop the credible plans that mobilise the external finance that is available. This can have pitfalls – several SSA governments are now more than 50% externally financed, and further support will increase this dependence. But without such support, even with serious educational reform, universal access through to the end of a basic education cycle (e.g. grade 9) will not happen, and more than half of Africa's children will not experience anything beyond primary schooling. There never were good reasons why so many children were denied access to literacy and numeracy, and to higher level knowledge and skill that would reduce poverty. Maybe this time the problems can finally be resolved if all the partners in the process play their roles with trust and commitment, and have the courage to keep asking why has it not happened?

Keith Lewin is Director of the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, and of the Consortium for Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE).