

Making rights realities

How much longer before all children in Africa go to school?

Keith M Lewin

This is the first of three articles by members of the Create research consortium the Mail & Guardian is publishing in the run-up to “Making Rights Realities”, a conference to be hosted by Wits University and the University of Johannesburg on July 25, 26 and 27. The conference will include a presentation of the Create findings from South Africa, Ghana, India and Bangladesh and the launch of the consortium’s publications.

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In 1990 African leaders and international development agencies met in Jomtien in Thailand and committed themselves to universalising access to primary schooling across the continent by 2000. In 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, they met again, reviewed progress that had fallen short of expectations, and began to include completion of lower secondary school as part of a universal right to basic education.

Education for All” has become the flagship umbrella for educational development with a new target date of 2015 because the original deadline of 2000 was missed by a wide margin. That new target date is now only four years away. For that target to be met, all school-age children would now have to be securely enrolled in school and on track to graduate from primary schooling successfully by 2015. But this remains far from the truth for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and in some parts of South Asia.

The Consortium for Research on Access, Transitions and Equity (Create) consists of researchers from South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom exploring what has been achieved and what is needed to make rights to education realities.

Encouragingly, enrolment rates in primary schools have improved and the estimated numbers of children out of school in sub-Saharan Africa have fallen from about 42-million in 1999 to about 29-million in 2010. Gross enrolment rates across the region now average 102%, suggesting that more children are enrolled than there are in the six- to 11-year-old age group but that many are overage. Net enrolment rates, which exclude the overage, are less, averaging 76%. This

confirms that only about three-quarters of primary school age children are enrolled across the continent.

Girls are participating much more than in the past. On average across sub-Saharan Africa, for every 100 boys enrolled in the age range there are now 95 girls. But some countries are making slow progress and there are places where boys in school outnumber girls by 20%.

South Africa and some other Southern African countries are the exception – they often have more girls than boys, especially in the higher grades. Having more boys than girls in school is strongly associated with low overall enrolment rates, high rates of repetition and many overage children in school.

But the estimate of 29-million primary age children out of school in sub-Saharan Africa is too low. It takes no account of poor attendance, overage enrolment, excessive repetition and low levels of achievement, all of which seriously compromise educational outcomes.

The Create research consortium has developed an [ITALS]expanded vision of access[ITALS]. This vision includes entry to school at six years old, progression through grades within a year of the correct age, 95% attendance in class, achievement within a year of the age grade norm, and a range of conditions for infrastructure, learning materials and provision of teachers that should ensure an effective learning environment.

If this definition is applied then in sub-Saharan Africa the number of children excluded from an effective primary schooling is not 29-million but well over 65-million, or at least half of all children in the region.

For instance, in our sample of low-performing schools in Ghana, attendance averages less than 60% and more than half of children are overage by two years or more. Though South Africa has the most developed education system in sub-Saharan Africa, a third of all children are overage by two years or more in grade 4 (according to the National School Effectiveness Study).

Being over age is a good predictor of dropout and is associated with low achievement. Many children in Ghana and in South Africa are performing at levels two or more years below the norms for their grade, and alarming numbers appear to complete the first cycle of schooling without secure literacy and numeracy.

Many who are enrolled are “silently excluded” because they learn little and fail to progress at the appropriate age. Nominally high rates of participation conceal endemic problems of quality and vastly unequal probabilities of successfully completing a full cycle of primary education

The record on educational participation at secondary school in sub-Saharan Africa is even worse than at primary. Less than 40% of all African children enrol at secondary level. Of these fewer than half will complete a full cycle of secondary schooling. And those who succeed will be overwhelmingly from richer rather than poorer households. The chances of the poorest 20% completing secondary school can be as little as an eighth of the richest. In contrast, China succeeds in enrolling almost all its children in secondary school. So do most south Indian states and almost all countries in South America.

Not surprisingly, the later children enter grade 1 the less likely they will ever go to secondary school, and late entry is strongly associated with poverty. In many sub-Saharan countries the great majority of university entrants come from fewer than 10% of all secondary schools, and increasingly those selected have attended high-cost, high-quality private schools to which access is rationed by price.

In a little more than two decades, governments and development agencies have twice fallen short of aspirations to ensure all children complete schooling successfully. This is a tragedy. It betrays the promises made in 1990 and 2000 to those who were children then, and who are now young adults.

Too many of these children either failed to enrol, or more likely enrolled but dropped out before completing their schooling. The reasons include cost, lack of interest, large distances to school, poor-quality teaching and lack of facilities and learning material. Their exclusion from basic education almost guarantees low incomes and marginalisation from modern sector employment.

The commitments to Education For All should have resulted in a more equitable participation in basic education; lower levels of gendered inequity; smaller variations in enrolment rates between rich and poor and urban and rural areas; and a smaller spread of achievement between the best and worst performing schools. It should also have reduced the proportions of children who are significantly overage for their grade.

But our research shows that this has often not been the case and that sub-Saharan Africa remains by far the most undereducated part of the world despite allocating proportionally as much or more finance than other regions to education.

If all children are to attend school regularly at the right ages and reach levels of achievement that national norms identify, then consistent action is needed tailored to different national systems. Create has generated a 12-point plan that identifies actions critical to making the right to education a reality across the region. These are

- i) improving early childhood health to reduce undernutrition, stunting, parasitic infections and avoidable causes of disability;
- ii) ensuring that all children enter school during their sixth year;
- iii) acting on the causes of dropout on both the supply and demand sides;
- iv) diagnosing the silent exclusions that result in enrolment with little learning achievement and tracking children's progress systematically;
- v) managing increased access to secondary schooling at affordable costs;
- vi) promoting effective pedagogies suited to teacher capabilities and the realities of school and class size;
- vii) building adequate numbers of school buildings and classrooms with basic services;
- viii) providing enough learning materials fit for purpose;
- ix) training and deploying sufficient teachers to provide opportunities to learn which do not vary greatly from school to school;
- x) using assessment to monitor and improve learning;
- xi) making available adequate financing for balanced pro-poor educational growth;
- xii) developing indicators of progress that monitor equity and efficiency and widening access to all levels of education.

The targets to universalise access to education in the region will not be achieved and will be revised at some point before 2015. Any new targets, which will probably be set for 2025, need to recognise that access is more than enrolment, and that quality, equity and valued outcomes are inseparable if meaningful access is to be achieved.

Most of what needs to be known to universalise access is known but is often not applied in practice. The most powerful reasons why many African children miss out on their right to a basic education lie with the political economy of commitments to widen access to opportunity, mobilise domestic resources and manage public services effectively towards clear goals.

There are no good reasons why all Africa's children will not attend and complete basic education successfully in 2015. If it does not happen it will be testimony to the failure of one generation of adults to believe in the futures of the next.

Keith M Lewin is professor of international education and development at the University of Sussex in the Centre for International Education. He has worked in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia since the 1970s for many development agencies and governments, and was a presenter at both the Jomtien and Dakar Education For All World Conferences. His interests include educational policy, planning and finance, science education, teacher education, and aid effectiveness and he has published 18 books and over 100 journal articles. He is a former president of the

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