The Global Monitoring Report 2008 – Eleven Reasons to Revisit the EFA Agenda

Keith M Lewin
Centre for International Education
University of Sussex

The GMR 2008 provides and extensive and comprehensive review of progress towards EFA and a wealth of data and analysis of progress and lack of it across the world. It adds to the portfolio of insight generated in previous GMRs. Several points stand out as inviting comment half way towards the 2015 targets enshrined in the EFA Goals and the Dakar Framework and Millennium Development Goals.

Sooner or later the MDGs and EFA Goals will need revisiting. I suggest the time is now. I offer eleven reasons.

First, it should be remembered the MDGs and EFA Goals are lists rather than a recipe. Achieving all the MDGs may indeed make the world a better place and there is a broad consensus that most of the outcomes they flag are desirable. However, all the Goals taken together are no guarantee that development will take place, and are not in themselves the basis for a development strategy. Collectively they do not necessarily provide a recipe for growth on which the sustained delivery of rights almost certainly depends. They are context blind, and insensitive to the prioritisation that all real world governments have to confront. The Goals are not distributional in character – a major omission if poverty is partly the product of wealth and its distribution. Relative as well as absolute poverty are at the centre of development.

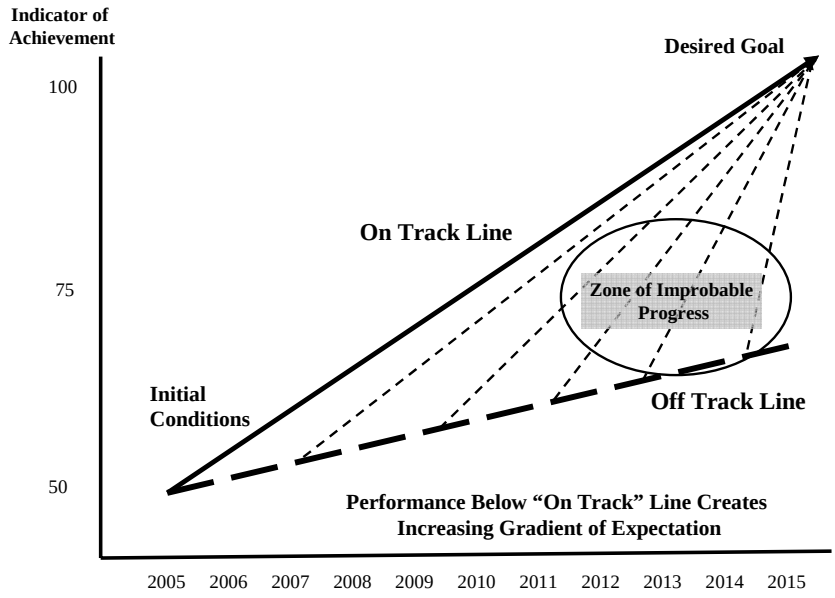
Second, though there is merit in steadfastly persisting in purpose towards desired goals, an over rigid approach which fails to iterate goals against changing realities is likely sooner or later to lose relevance or at least ignore the unanticipated. Thus for example an exaggerated emphasis on external support for investment at the primary level in low enrolment countries, and pursuit of enrolment targets at the margin at the expense of other investment, may prove a flawed strategy. Full primary completion will not be achievable where transition rates into secondary fall, teacher supply will be problematic if secondary output remains small, and there are tradeoffs between rapid enrolment growth and quality that have to be addressed.

Third, the GMR recognises that global and national environments have changed since 2000. Environment issues have taken on new significance; labour markets have become more globalised; India, China, Brazil and Russia and South Africa have developed rapidly and changed the topography of global development; migration and fragile states have new dynamics. It has become clear that for some countries achieving the MDGs in the timescale specified is unlikely if not impossible. And polemic on equity and

redistribution has rarely been matched by actions likely to result in these outcomes. For these and other reasons the GMR should start the process of revisiting goals and targets that relate to education and development, adopt a more differentiated approach to achievable goals, introduce more distributional measures of progress that recognise equity, and close the gap between target setters and target getters (Lewin 2005).

Fourth, another compelling reason for revisiting the MDGs and EFA Goals, and the targets they generate, is that as 2015 approaches aspirational planning based on unattainable targets may fail.

Figure 1 Gradients of Goal Achievement



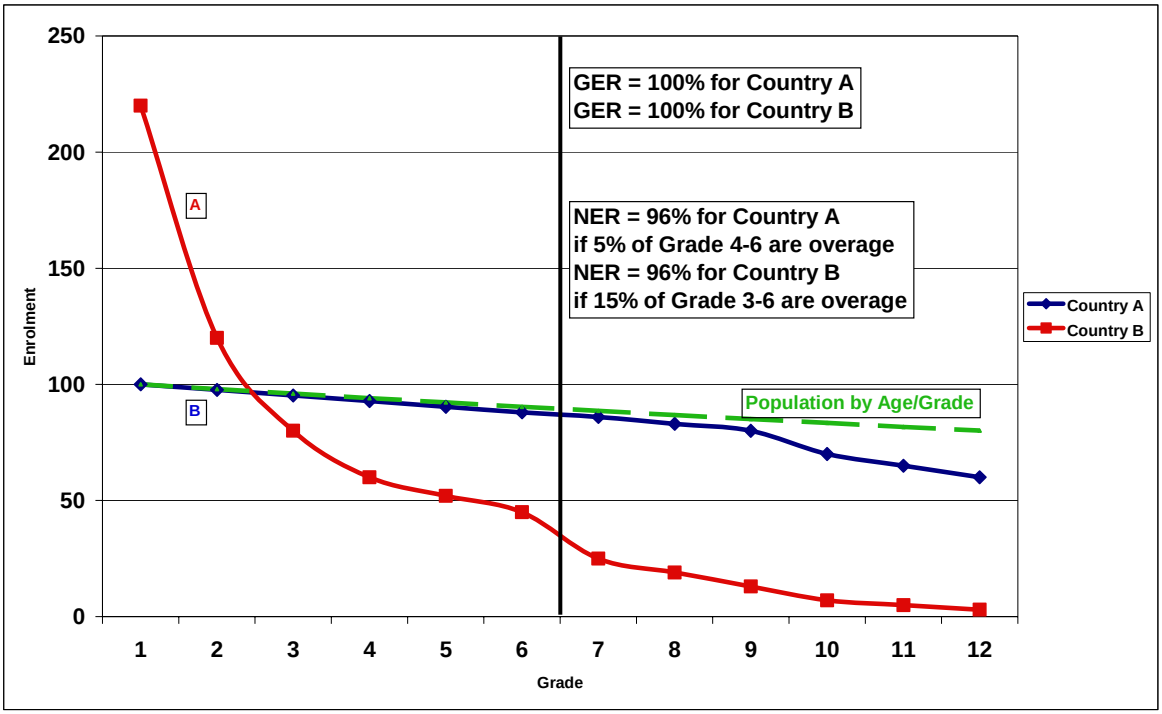
Source: Lewin (2007a)

As Figure 1 illustrates aspirational planning sets desired goals in the future (e.g. Net Enrolment Rate (NER) = 100%, gender parity, 100% primary completion etc.). Most projection models then draw back a pathway to the present which indicates what needs to be achieved each year to stay on track. The pathway is often linear. What often happens in practice is that financial constraints (time slippage related to agreeing plans, signing off agreements, disbursing tranches of funding etc) and non financial constraints (lead times on construction, teacher training, agreement to appoint and post new teachers, softening of demand to enrol etc.) lead to under achievement below the on-track line. The gradient of what needs to be achieved then steepens progressively to the point where the planning and implementation system enters a Zone of Improbable Progress (ZIP). Either the targets and related goals fall into disrepute because they are unachievable and there is no confidence in the modalities of making more and more rapid progress, or the targets and goals are redefined and time shifted (as happened with the gender parity goals for 2005).

Target generating planning is an alternative (Lewin 2007a). This is based on estimates of the highest sustainable rate of expansion that does not degrade quality to unacceptable levels. It offers a better basis for operational plans and mobilizing assets efficiently and effectively at a pace which is imaginable. It allows different time scale for different starting points and contexts. It depends on forward projections which draw attention to critical limitations of capacity, infrastructure and finance, and identifies forward commitments and liabilities generated by present actions.

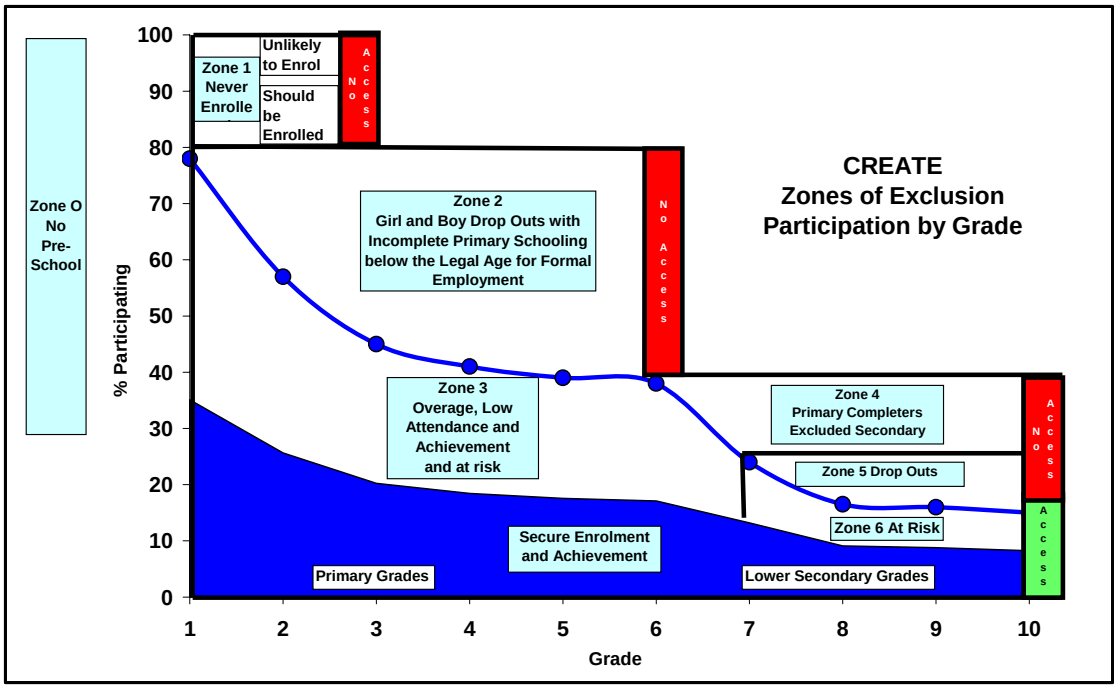
Fifth, some of the pitfalls of poorly specified Goals and Targets are evident from the experience of EFA in practice. The most commonly used indicators of progress on universalizing primary schooling are gross and net enrolment rates (GERs and NERs). Since these are calculated on the basis of participation across the whole cycle, not grade by grade, they can lead to misleading conclusions. Figure 4 shows the enrolment curve for country A and country B by Grade. Both have GERs close to 100% for grades 1-6. However, country A greatly over enrolls in grade 1 and has high attrition through the primary cycle. In country B most of those who enter grade 1 complete primary. They are very different situations. Net Enrolment Ratios are thought a better indicator and have been widely adopted. However with only modestly different assumptions about over age enrolment Country A and country B can have similar NERs. This leads to the misleading conclusion that Country A with an NER of 96% across the primary cycle is close to achieving universal enrolment when in fact most who enter grade 1 do not complete grade 6. Better indicators are needed.

Figure 2 Gross and Net Enrolment Rates by Cycle – A Problem



A sixth reason to revisit EFA and education related MDGs is that problems of educational access and inclusion need unpacking in new ways. The CREATE project (www.create-rpc.org) identifies six zones of exclusion (Figure 3) to differentiate aspects of inclusion and crossing thresholds into exclusion (Lewin 2007b).

Figure 3 CREATE Zones of Exclusion



Source: Lewin (2007b)

Zone 1 contains those denied any access. Expansion of conventional schooling can enrol a proportion of these children, but is unlikely to embrace all by 2015. More research is needed of the circumstances that surround those without access to orthodox schooling, for example, nomadic groups; those in low population density areas; and those in extreme poverty, to establish how their basic education needs might best be met. It is likely that the best solution for most of those currently excluded from grade 1 is extending the reach of the existing formal system. Analysis is needed of the gaps in provision (both rural and urban) and of feasible, pro-poor and affordable strategies. These should recognise the growing attention being given to pre-school.

Zone 2 includes the great majority of children who are excluded *after* initial entry. Typically, drop out is greatest in the early grades, with a substantial subsequent push-out at the transition to secondary school. Pre-cursors to drop out include repetition, low achievement, previous temporary withdrawals, low attendance, late enrolment, poor teaching, degraded facilities, very large classes, household poverty, child labour and poor health and nutrition. Those dropping out usually become permanently excluded with no

pathway back to re-enter. The zone includes disproportionate numbers of girls, HIV/AIDS orphans, and others in vulnerable circumstances. It may be influenced by child labour practices.

Zone 3 includes those in school but at risk of dropping out. These children might be low-attenders, repeaters and low-achievers. Children who remain formally enrolled in school may be silently excluded if their attendance is sporadic, their achievement so low that they cannot follow the curriculum, or if they are discriminated against for socio-cultural reasons. Nutritional deficiencies and sickness can compound these problems. Too little is known of how the range of influential factors is changing as EFA evolves, how they result in decisions to enrol and attend at different grade/age levels, and how they have an impact on different disadvantaged groups.

Zone 4 contains those excluded from lower secondary school as a result of failing to be selected, being unable to afford costs, or dropping out before successful completion of primary. This exclusion is important for EFA since transition rates into secondary affect demand for primary schooling, primary teacher supply depends on secondary graduates, and gender equity at the secondary level is an MDG. Access to secondary schooling promotes the social mobility needed to give poor households more access to higher income employment.

Zone 5 includes those children who have entered lower secondary school but who fail to progress to the end of the cycle. In most countries lower secondary is now considered part of basic education. Many who fail to complete the cycle are likely to be below the legal working-age if they are in the appropriate grade for their age. The reasons for drop out include poor performance, affordability, and loss of interest. Demand to remain in school may weaken as a result of high opportunity costs where work is available.

Zone 6 contains lower secondary children at risk of drop out. As with Zone 3 some will be silently excluded though enrolled and at risk as a result of poor attendance and low achievement. Costs and affordability are also likely to be significant.

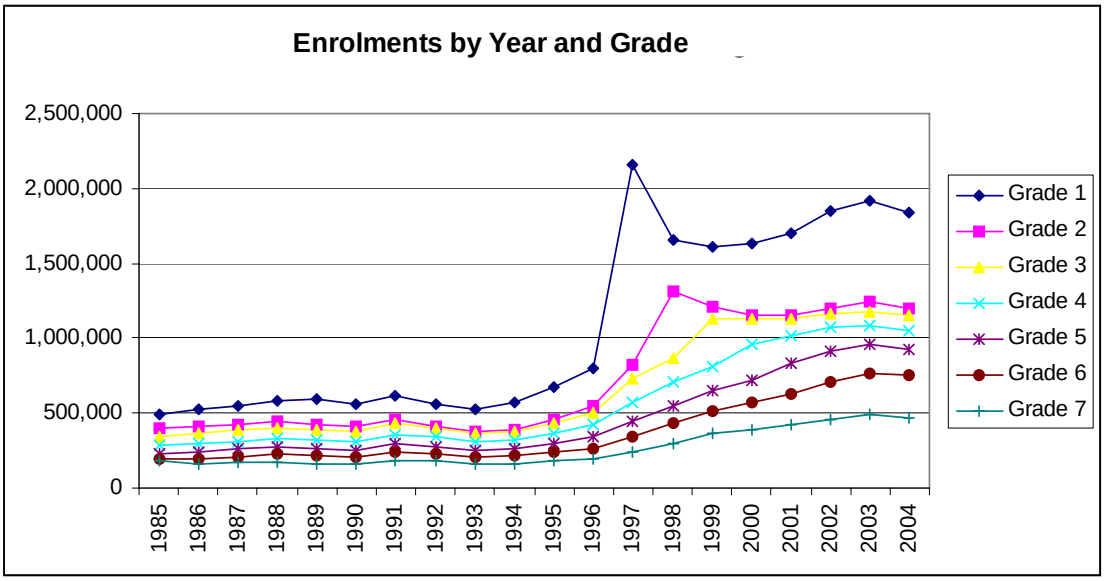
Zone 0 refers to pre school participation. This is very poorly detailed though it is clear that in low enrolment countries large majorities experience little or no access to organised pre-school, and those that do are often enrolled in high cost private facilities. This almost certainly disadvantages this population in relation to those that do attend preschool and achieve a head start in basic learning. Several countries are developing policy to extend the reach of pre-schooling and provide public finance to support its development.

Those who are not enrolled and who will never enrol are a minority of those out of school, especially if basic education includes lower secondary grades. The exceptions may be in fragile states and in remote areas where conventional schools are unable to operate. By far the largest numbers of school age children who are out of school have enrolled at some time but have failed to persist. Moreover it is likely that most who are unenroled are in households where some siblings have enrolled and may still be enrolled. The “silent exclusion” of children attending but learning little is a useful concept.

Children who are at risk of drop out because they achieve at levels that almost guarantee that they will not complete primary school successfully, should be included in those whose access is compromised.

A seventh issue is grounded in the dynamics of EFA programmes. This is complex but there is now data which indicates some of the things which have happened since Universal Primary Education programmes were launched after the Jomtien and Dakar conferences. In some cases large increases in enrolments in a year or two have been impressive but these have been concentrated in grades 1 and 2 and not reflected in subsequent years in higher grades. If this pattern persists over time then it suggests that attrition rates remain very high and real cohort completion rates improve only slowly. Figure 4 shows how enrolments have changed in one African country with a large scale EFA programme. Grade 7 enrolments failed to grow in ways that reflected the UPE bulge after the announcement of free universal access in 1997. Thus the 2,000,000 enrolled in grade 1 in 1997 failed to reach grade 7 seven years later. In 2004 less than 500,000 were in grade 7. The spike of enrolments failed to ripple through much beyond grade 3.

Figure 4 Enrolments by Grade over time in an African Country

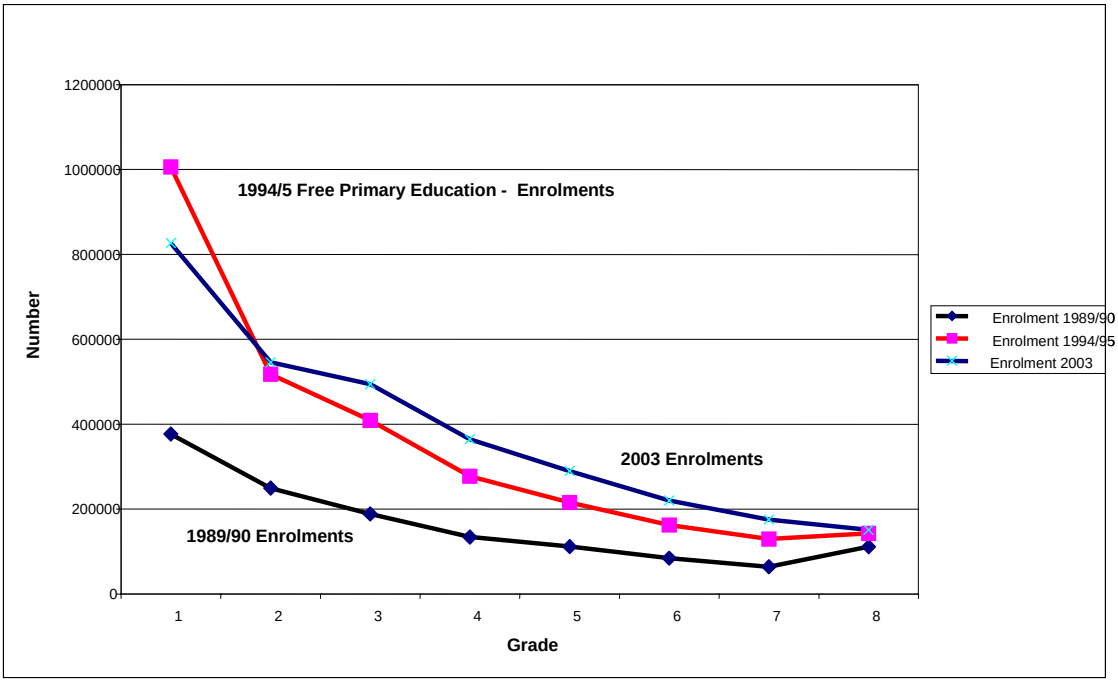


Source: Author's Chart

Eighth, patterns of enrolments and attrition by grade may be static over long periods if educational reforms do not take place that change entry, promotion and retention practices, especially if quality fails to improve such that learners progress through to higher grades. Enrolments in another Africa country between 1990 and 2003 make the point. The shape of the overall enrolment curve has not changed much (Figure 5) once universal primary education was announced. However, attrition remains high especially

in grade 1 and the numbers graduating from grade 8 are almost the same in 2003 as they were in 1995 (Figure 5). Though it may be that grade 1 enrolments are inflated by underage as well as overage enrolments, and some may remain in grade 1 for two years or more, this is hardly a state of affairs that should persist over ten year

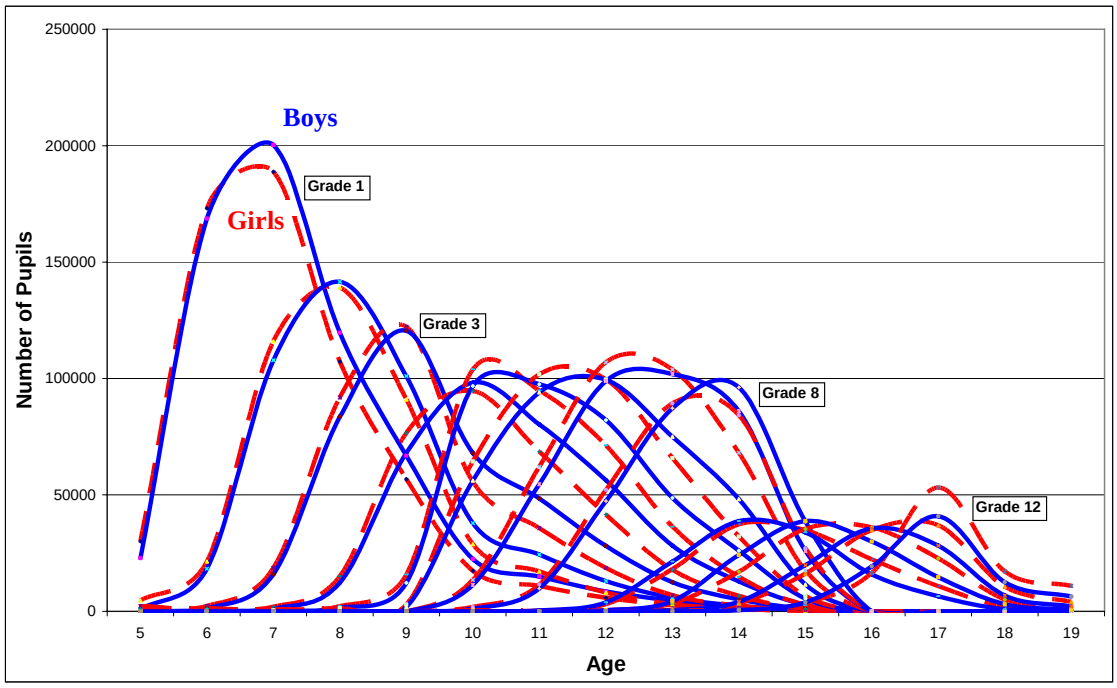
Figure 5 Enrolments by Grade in an African Country



Source: Ezme Kadzimire; Personal Communication

Ninth, age in grade patterns can also be disturbing. Figure 8 shows how wide the age in grade enrolment patterns are in yet another African country. Here grade 1 includes children between the ages of 5 and 12 who may well be in the same classroom. These patterns persist and may even widen in higher grades. The first year of secondary includes children between 12 and over 20 years old. Without multigrade pedagogies and differentiated classroom strategies that cope with cognitive and social development at different ages this almost guarantees many over age children will fail to complete the primary cycle.

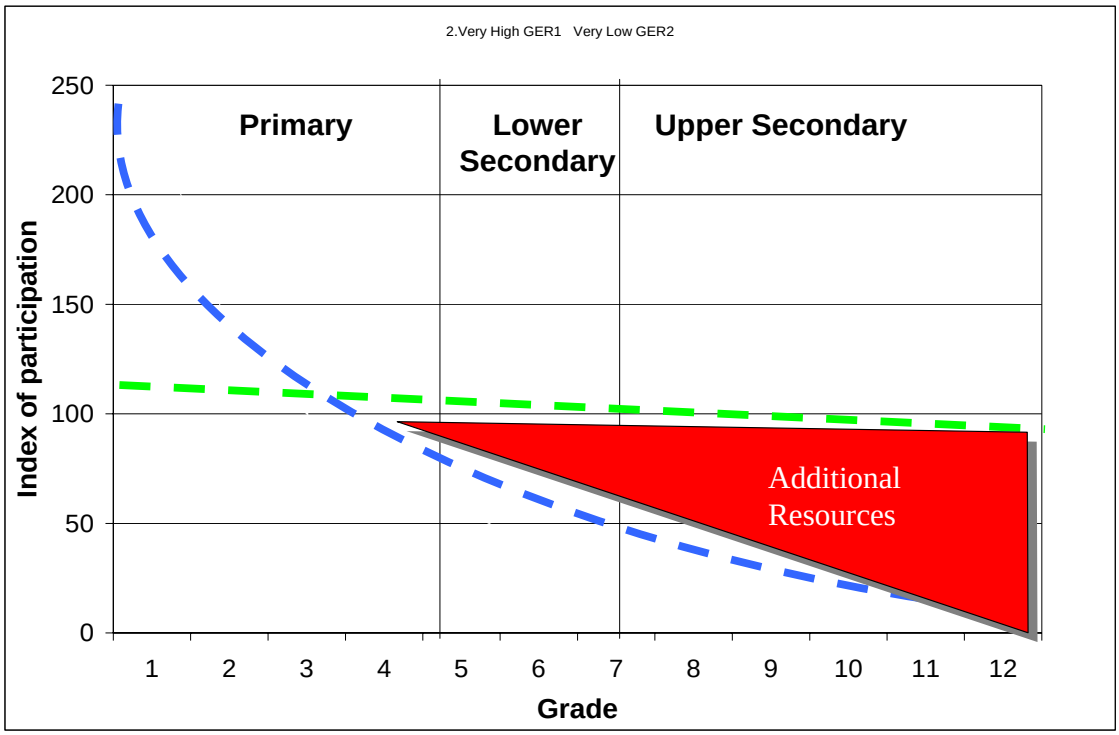
Figure 6 Age in Grade in an African Country



Source: Author's Chart

Tenth, the implications of successful progress towards higher levels of access through into secondary schools are self evident. Investment patterns will have to shift towards higher levels of schooling if mass access is to be extended up to and beyond grade 9 which increasingly is regarded as the end of the basic education cycle. Where secondary schooling is much more than twice as expensive per child as primary, which is the case in most of Sub Saharan Africa, mass access will be unaffordable without reforms that increase efficiency and effectiveness. All high enrolment countries have these low ratios of the cost per student at secondary of less than twice that at primary for inescapable demographic and financial reasons. Cost per student at secondary will have to fall to less than 30% of GDP per capita at secondary for similar sets of reasons. If participation curves are to be transformed from high attrition in early grades to universal access through the secondary grades then shifts will have to take place in investment by cycle and costs per student. Whatever savings there are from regularising flows through primary school and reducing over enrolment and repetition, these will not be sufficient to finance mass participation at higher levels (Figure 7). Private providers are unlikely to fill the gap since in most poor countries those below the 20th percentile of household income will not be able to afford private school fees, especially at secondary level.

Figure 7 Shifting Resources



Source: Author's Chart

Eleventh and finally, the GMR needs in future to revisit the agenda set by the MDGs and Dakar Framework both for the reasons given above and because "more of the same" may be a poor recipe for future development. Investment in education need to continue to balance a rights-based approach with the realities of patterns of development that recognise the dynamics of expansion and both the successes and disappointments of progress to date. It should re-establish firm links with educational investment patterns that support economic growth not least because financial sustainability depends on this. External assistance can help if it really is tailored to circumstance, and does not invoke high levels of dependence with no clear exit routes. External advice and advocacy can be both good or bad depending on its evidential base. The GMR need to take stock and challenge some of the orthodoxies related to EFA and the MDGs, expand its vision and provoke a debate which rebalances the agenda for investment in education for development that it projects.

See www.create-rpc.org for more discussion of the issues raised in this commentary.

Other material in this commentary is drawn from:

Lewin, K.M. (2007a) *Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education: Creating a Research Agenda.* CREATE Research Monograph No 1. Falmer: Centre for International Education, University of Sussex.

Lewin K.M. (2007b) Long *Term Planning for EFA and the MDGs: Modes and Mechanisms.* CREATE Research Monograph No 7. Falmer: Centre for International Education, University of Sussex.

Lewin K.M. (2005) 'Taking Targets to Task: Planning Post Primary Education'. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25(4): 408-422.