



Consortium for Research on  
Education, Access, Transitions & Equity

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## RECONCEPTUALISING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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### RECONCEPTUALISING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Access to education lies at the core of poverty reduction and is part of the definition of development. An expanded vision of access moves policy dialogue beyond discourse based on enrolment rates. Unpacking access into seven zones of exclusion helps reshape the dialogue, as does recognising the interactions between schools, local authorities, communities, households and individuals. This policy brief is based on the CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph, *Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education: Creating a Research Agenda* (Lewin, 2007).

#### Why is Access to Education Important?

Access to education is at the heart of development, and is central to the Millennium Development Goals. A lack of education is both a part of the definition of poverty and a means to reduce it. The achievement of universal primary schooling, greater levels of participation in post-primary education and training, and improved access for girls and other vulnerable children are essential to reduce poverty. Access to meaningful basic education is an established Human Right. It is also critical to long term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women and reductions in inequality. Knowledge and skill most often, but not always, acquired through education systems can and do transform the developmental prospects of individuals and nation states.

Over 75 million children in the developing world are not enrolled in primary school and many more fail to attend regularly or achieve at levels that indicate they have acquired basic skills. At least 250 million fail to participate in secondary schooling or its equivalent through to grade 9. Unknown but large numbers are excluded from preschool opportunities

despite the evidence that early disadvantage has lasting effects that may compromise subsequent progress and attainment.

Problems of access are particularly acute for children living in poor households (both rural and increasingly urban) with little prior educational history, those from marginalised social groups, those living with disease and disability, and those in fragile states. Their need is greatest but their access is least.

#### An Expanded Vision of Access

Access to education is often conceived in terms of school enrolment and key indicators used by development partners and governments highlight Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) and Net Enrolment Rates (NER). Other common indicators of participation include survival rates to grade 5 and completion rates for primary.

But access to education is far more than physical presence imperfectly indicated by these enrolment indicators. It has to include judgements of educational quality and process (what children have access to); and of educational outcomes (what competencies and capabilities are acquired and how they are valued).

The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity has developed an **Expanded Vision of Access**. This includes:

- Access to preschool at appropriate levels
- Local access to safe schools with acceptable levels of staffing, learning materials, and other facilities
- Admission to and progression through primary school or its equivalent within a year of the nominal age-in-grade
- Consistent attendance throughout the school year
- Reasonable access to post primary education and training related to context
- Learning outcomes that meet national norms for successful completion of an educational cycle
- Equitable access to publicly funded educational services

This expanded vision has to be interpreted in relation to national contexts. These determine starting points, the nature of excluded groups, the resources available and the policy environment.

### Different Starting Points

Access to basic education is highly correlated with household income in all poor countries. In Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), children from the richest 20% of households have on average more than 11 times the chance of reaching grade 9 than those from the poorest 40% of households. Gender is less important in explaining differences in enrolment amongst the richest 20%, where on average boys are more likely to be enrolled in the ratio of 53% to 47%. Amongst the poorest 40% the ratio of boys to girls can exceed 3:1 in the worst cases. Urban children have about 10 times more chance of being enrolled in grade 9 than rural children although the reason is more household income than location.

Partly as a result of the commitments made by countries and development partners at Jomtien and Dakar to Education for All there are now very different patterns of participation across SSA and South Asia. Simply put there are three main patterns of participation by grade. In the first group of countries (Figure 1 – blue) virtually all children enter grade 1 and GERs by grade remain around 100% through into secondary school. In the second group of countries (Figure 1 – red) many more are enrolled in grades 1-3 than there are children of the nominal age group for the grade. GER for grade 1

can and does exceed 200%. High attrition means that by grade 6 the number enrolled may be less than less than 50% of the age group, and may fall below 25% in the secondary grades. In the third group of countries (Figure 1 – green) the numbers in grade 1 remain less than the number of 6 year olds in the population.

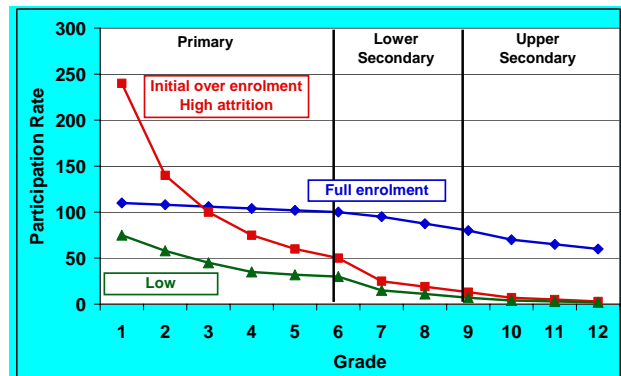


Figure 1: Patterns of Participation

The different patterns of participation by grade carry different implications for improving access. In brief, Type 1 countries have largely achieved physical access and have the opportunity to prioritise improved quality. Type 2 countries may have GERs over 100% across the primary cycle but have over enrolment in grade 1 and high drop out with low primary completion rates. Many of these countries have had large scale programmes to universalise primary under Education for All initiatives. Though their enrolment curves should have evolved to resemble Type 1, in many cases progress has been slow. In these countries if all children who enter were to transit to secondary school the demand for new secondary places would quickly outstrip the capacity to expand access at affordable costs. Type 3 countries remain far from universalising access even to grade 1. Often they have the highest disparities in participation in terms of household income, urban rural location and gender. Many of the countries in this category are fragile states with weak infrastructure to delivery public services.

### Conceptualising Zones of Exclusion

CREATE has identified seven **Zones of Exclusion** from basic education to shape policy dialogue.

**Zone 0** covers 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



Supply side aspects of inputs – qualified and motivated teachers, learning materials, adequate facilities – are important. So also are demand side factors that reflect valuation of what schools offer. Demand may weaken if learning is seen to have little relevance, even if material inputs are sufficient.

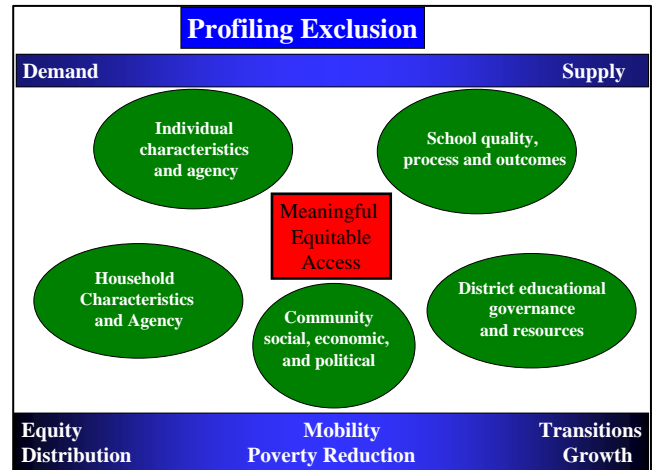
Second, local and district level educational administration and governance provides the infrastructure to support basic education. This has strong supply side characteristics. The locus of responsibility to act in public systems is found in zonal/district/provincial education offices, school governing bodies, and local educational councils. The actions of those involved as agents of the state shape access and its enhancement.

Third, community level social, economic and political factors surround educational provision. Aspiration and expectation, leadership, and role models shape educational access and provide material and non-material support for sustained enrolment and improved quality. The economic base of local communities constrains or facilitates the resources that can be mobilised and locates constraints on participation arising from livelihoods and employment opportunities. Both supply and demand are affected by community level actions.

Fourth, household characteristics and the agency that family members bring to participation in basic education influence choices. Household decision making on school attendance and family strategies to benefit from the knowledge and skills that schooling can provide are important influences on enrolment, persistence and drop out before completion. The cultural capital of households and the preferences households express influence demand for schooling.

Fifth, characteristics of individual learners are important. Their dispositions, capabilities and agency affect motivation to learn, application to learning activities, and learning outcomes. The more child centred basic education is, the more important it will be to understand what learners bring to schools, and how school processes address learning needs that may take very different forms. Sustained participation depends on realistic accommodations of learners characteristics. Older children in particular acquire individual agency which shapes demand, participation and the extent to which meaningful learning takes place.

Equity and better distribution of participation and learning outcomes are essential to achieve more meaningful access, social mobility and poverty reduction, and transitions to higher levels of capability that can support the realisation of human potentials and economic growth.



**Figure 3 Profiling Exclusion**

### Some Policy Implications

- An expanded vision of access is needed to discourage narrow concentration on enrolment targets independent of quality or outcomes.
- Starting points vary widely between countries and determine which aspects of improved access are likely to be most important.
- Poverty remains the most important correlate of exclusion in most low enrolment countries. It is mediated by other factors which may be at least as important in different local circumstances.
- At least seven different Zones of Exclusion can be identified with different characteristics.
- The strategies needed to overcome exclusion and promote meaningful access are different in each Zone of Exclusion. Each Zone requires different policy dialogue linked to context.
- Improved access requires actions on both the supply and demand side, and must recognise inter relationships between schools, local education authorities, communities, households and the agency of individuals.

### For more detailed discussion, see:

Lewin K.M. (2007) *Improving Access, Equity and Transitions in Education; Creating a Research Agenda*. CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No 1. Available at [www.create-rpc.org](http://www.create-rpc.org).