

# Strategies for Universalizing Primary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

## Universal Primary Education: A Longstanding Dream

In 1948, basic education was declared a fundamental human right by the international community and in 1989 the Convention on the Rights of the Child re-emphasised the right of the world's children to relevant and good quality education. At the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, the international community agreed to universalise primary education by 2000, a target date that was later shifted to 2015 by the Dakar Framework for Action. The 2015 target date for attaining universal primary education was later echoed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second of the MDGs is 'Achieve universal primary education', with the specific target of ensuring that 'by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'. All these declarations, efforts and commitments notwithstanding, education for all remains a mirage.

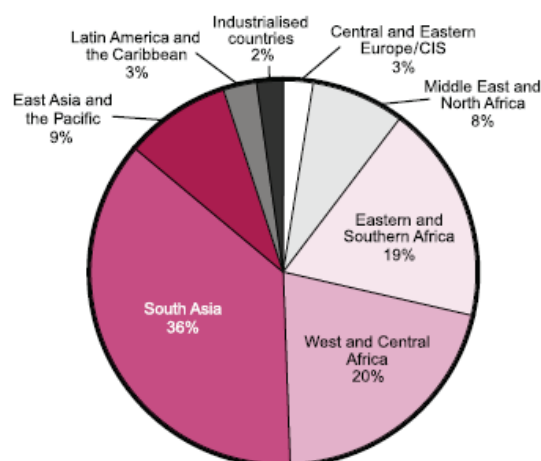
The paper identifies major reasons for non-participation of children in primary school especially in sub-Saharan African countries with free primary education policy. It also provides an inventory of programs implemented across the developing world to improve access to primary school among groups traditionally excluded from free primary education and assesses the impacts of such programs.

## Who are Out-of-School Children?

The phrase 'out-of-school children' refers to children of primary school age (which varies by country) who, for various reasons, do not attend primary school. These children include those who have never attended primary school, those who enter school late and are of primary school going age, and those who have dropped out (or been pushed out) of primary school before completing primary education. While there is a good chance that many children who have never been to school will start at some point in the future, some will also never attend.

## Sub-Saharan Africa worst hit by the 'Out-of-School Children' Phenomenon

*Distribution of out-of-school children of primary school age by region, 2001/02*



In a number of sub-Saharan African countries, the majority of school-age children are not in school, reaching as high as two-thirds of the relevant age group. More than one-third of all primary school-age children in the region are not in school. Somalia has the world's highest proportion of primary school-age children not in school – 90%. Out-of-school rates exceed 50% in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Burundi, Comoros, Mozambique and Tanzania have out-of-school rates greater than 40%. The number of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa is rising, and the region may not realize the MDG goal of attaining universal primary education by 2015. Around 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with a total out-of-school population of 17 million have either gone backwards since 1990, or are off-track by more than a generation. By 2015, approximately 19 million children in sub-Saharan Africa will still be out of school if current trends continue.

## Who is at Risk of being Out of School in sub-Saharan Africa?

Particular groups of children are more likely to be out of school; these include: street children, child labourers, child soldiers, children from poor household, children living in rural, remote and marginalized areas, and children orphaned by or infected with HIV and AIDS.

## Addressing the Out-of-School Phenomenon

Interventions implemented to address the issue of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa include free primary education policies, alternative education delivery, strategic interventions such as school feeding programs, and programs targeting orphaned and vulnerable children. Programs aimed at improving educational quality such as improving the relevance of school curriculum, and supplementing teachers with trained volunteers, among others, have also been tried.

Each of these interventions has its potential and problems. For instance, although free primary education programs may increase school enrolment, they are often constrained by overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teachers, inadequate funding, and issues of quality. Non-Formal Education programs which are organized or systematic learning activities outside the framework of the formal education are also useful. However, they are often challenged by issues of sustainability and may also respond very slowly to change.

### Proposal for Progress

Addressing the problem of out-school-children requires a multi-pronged intervention approach. The success of this approach will however depend on the following:

- Clarity and consensus on policy issues, program objectives, and related interventions among all stakeholders.
- Integration and linkage between complementary interventions.
- Concerted effort to target and reach vulnerable and high-risk families and children.
- Deliberate attempt to develop local capacity for supporting quality education programs through increased multi-level and multi-sectoral participation in schools.
- An efficient monitoring and evaluation system that is clearly linked to program

objectives.

- The use of research evidence in the formulation of policies and programs.

For details and references, please read the full paper: "Strategies for Universalizing Primary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa" by Frederick Q. Gravenir & Gerald Wangenge-Ouma. This paper is available from APHRC. This brief was written by Chimaraoke Izugbara.