

Sub-Saharan Africa, 1 May 2011 - Sub-Saharan African countries increased their real expenditure on education by more than 6% each year over the past decade, according to a new report published by UNESCO. Yet despite these investments, many countries in the region are still a long way from providing every child with a good quality primary education.

The report entitled, *Financing Education in sub-Saharan Africa – Meeting the Challenges of Expansion, Equity and Quality*, presents comprehensive and timely data on the financing of education in 45 African countries. Published by UNESCO's Montreal-based Institute for Statistics (UIS), it also includes historical data to track financing trends since the World Education Forum in 2000.

“This report shows very clearly how committed African nations and their partners are to achieving Education for All,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. “It also shows that their efforts are paying dividends, with more children going to school than ever before. This is very encouraging and should spur all of Africa’s partners to provide the support that will help fill the remaining gaps.”

“The Education for All message has not fallen on deaf ears,” said UIS Director Hendrik van der Pol. “Now we need to protect these investments from the current economic storms. Strategic decisions will have to be made based on the facts – not assumptions.”

Overall, the increase in investments has been accompanied by some spectacular results. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of children in primary schooling increased by 48% – from 87 million to 129 million. Enrolment in pre-primary, secondary and tertiary education has also grown by more than 60% during the same period.

In Burundi and Mozambique, for example, expenditure levels rose by an average of 12% each year. Out of 26 countries with available data, only one country – the Central African Republic – reduced spending on education since the start of the decade.

It is often assumed that increased investments were used to absorb the costs associated with the abolition of primary school fees, which dramatically increased enrolment but also led to

over-crowded classrooms in many African countries. Yet according to the report, public spending on primary education grew at a faster rate than primary enrolment. Many governments not only expanded access to schooling but also sought to improve the quality of education provision.

On average, education accounts for more than 18% of all public spending in sub-Saharan Africa compared to 15% in other regions. Overall, the region devotes 5% of its gross domestic product (GDP) to education, which is the second highest regional proportion after North America and Europe at 5.3%.

Yet despite these investments, many countries in the region are still a long way from providing every child with a good quality primary education. The most recent data show that in one-third of the countries, half of all children do not complete primary education. Thirty-two million children of primary school age are still out of school in the region. The report forecasts that this number will rise as the population of 5 to 14 year-olds is expected to grow by more than 34% over the next 20 years.

Given the recent economic crises, most African governments will have to make strategic decisions on how to serve their growing populations of students. The UIS report presents new data to examine some of the key policy trade-offs. For example, where should governments invest more -- in primary, secondary or tertiary level?

Lesotho, for example, spends 50 times more for each tertiary student than per primary pupil. Most countries in the region are investing at least 10 times the amount in each tertiary student compared to each pupil in primary school. In Madagascar, only 9% of the school population goes on to university education. Yet this group consumes 27% of all public funding for education (see box on Burundi).

According to the report, governments should consider shifting more resources to lower levels of education if they are still far from the goal of universal primary education.

Across the region, families are the largest private financiers of education and provide 30% of all primary education resources. This proportion rises to 49% and 44% respectively for upper and lower secondary education. Yet at the tertiary level, the figure falls to 22%. This means that almost 8 out of every 10 dollars spent on tertiary education is subsidised by the government. This raises a serious question of equity.

Should a country that cannot provide every child with a primary education cover almost 80% of the costs for tertiary students, who tend to come from wealthier backgrounds? By shifting more resources to lower levels of education, governments might stimulate more household spending for higher education, without threatening the growth of the tertiary sector.

Another major source of funding for education is the international community, which provided \$US 2.6 billion for education in sub-Saharan Africa in 2008. Across the region, loans and grants as part of official development assistance (ODA) amount to a small part (5.6%) of all education spending. But in countries such as Guinea, Mali, Rwanda and Zambia, ODA represents about 50% of public education budgets.

A significant rise in ODA for education appears to be unlikely in the immediate future. But as the report points out, there is a gap between the actual commitment and disbursement of funds. Between 2002 and 2008, the international community was ready to provide a total of US\$15.86 billion for education in sub-Saharan Africa but 9% was never disbursed mostly because countries didn't have the programmes and structures in place to absorb the funds. As a result, on average US\$221 million went unspent each year - money that could have been used to fund all of the primary schools in five countries: Burundi, Cape Verde, Comoros, Guinea and Rwanda.

Source: [Web Relief](#)