Regional Overview

Sub-Saharan Africa

EFA remains a great challenge in this region. Despite commitment to international treaties and declarations by most of its countries, all education indicators are below world and developing country averages. Most children, more often girls, are still deprived of the right to education.

Early childhood care and education (ECCE): still a luxury for nearly all children

More than a third of the world’s countries with available data (56 out of 152) have very low pre-primary enrolment (GERs of below 30%). Nearly half of them are in sub-Saharan Africa, where GER ranges from less than 1% in the Democratic Republic of Congo to 90% in Mauritius [see table].

ECCE is often provided by private institutions and is concentrated in urban and wealthy areas where parents tend to be more aware of its benefits and sensitive to the gender issue than rural ones. As a result, girls’ access to ECCE is much better than to other levels of education. In some countries (Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Comoros, Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and Zimbabwe) more girls are enrolled than boys.

Universal primary education: still a long way to go, especially for girls

Gender parity is closely tied to universalising primary education. But only 58% of children of the official primary school age were enrolled in 2000. This NER was the lowest of all regions and far below the 84% world average. It meant 44 million children were not enrolled (more than 40% of the world total of out-of-school children), more than half of them girls.

Sub-Saharan Africa has low enrolments rates and strong gender disparities and inequalities. A third of the countries have GPIs of under 0.76 – Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, the Central African Republic, Mozambique and Liberia.

Gender disparities concern not only access to school but also participation in the learning process. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest repetition rate – more than 15% in half the countries with data. Unlike elsewhere, girls repeat more often than boys and the region is home to almost all the world’s countries where this happens.

Survival rates to grade 5 in sub-Saharan Africa are lower than elsewhere, and it is the only region where they are higher for boys than girls, notably in Guinea-Bissau, Malawi and Mozambique.

An education pyramid much narrower at higher levels with bigger gender disparities

Access to secondary and tertiary education is still limited to a minority and half the countries show gross enrolment rates of no more than 26% for secondary and 2.5% for tertiary. Participation is often the privilege of boys and young men. Gender disparities in primary

---

1 This is the EFA classification of regions. The countries in sub-Saharan Africa are listed in the Table.

2 The first was the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which acknowledged the right of all to education and stated that elementary education would be free and compulsory and higher levels of education accessible to all on the basis of merit.
education increase with the level of education although girls’ participation in secondary rose during the 1990s, as in all developing countries, with strong gains in Malawi, Niger, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

In tertiary education, girls are not only much less represented (fewer than five girls to 10 boys) but often confined to so-called “feminine” fields, such as social sciences, humanities, services and health-related courses, that do not boost their chances of equal job opportunities with men. What men and women choose to study is a key issue in the debate about gender equality. In this region the first step towards it is to guarantee gender parity in access to and participation at all levels of education.

The right to education: also a concern for adult women

Sub-Saharan Africa has one of the world’s lowest adult literacy rates, with only 60% of the population of 15 and over able to read and to write in 2000, well below the world average of 80%. The figure was below 40% in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger and Senegal. Women account for nearly two-thirds of the illiterates, a figure not expected to change much by 2015. Most countries show substantial gender gaps, with female literacy no more than half that of males in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mozambique and Niger.

Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education

Achieving this goal involves understanding what holds girls and boys back so that policies can be designed to overcome these obstacles and improve access to and participation in education.

Urgent action is needed in countries where the gender gap is still large in primary and secondary education. An overriding priority is to tackle poverty constraints by reducing the direct and indirect cost of schooling to families and addressing the incidence of child labour. The school environment requires equal attention. Sexual violence and harassment within schools, particularly where HIV/AIDS is prevalent, needs to be confronted vigorously. Revising biases in teaching materials, training teachers to be gender aware and working with them and parents to break taboos are essential ingredients of an “engendered” strategy.

As elsewhere, girls’ enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa increased during the 1990s and with it gender parity – from 0.83 to 0.88 in 2000 in primary education and from 0.83 to 0.87 at secondary level. The gender parity index at primary level increased by at least 30% in Benin, Gambia and Guinea. Despite this general progress, a number of countries risk not achieving parity either by 2005 or 2015 unless appropriate policies are put in place. Prospects for countries achieving it are based on past rates of change in the gender parity index in primary and secondary enrolment.

Eliminating gender disparities and inequality while achieving all the other EFA goals is costly. Countries will need to allocate more of their own resources and use them more effectively. Half the countries with data were spending less than 3.4% of national income on education in 2000 – lower than the 4.1% average for developing countries.

The least developed among them, with the lowest education indicators, will need more external aid to achieve EFA. Yet overall bilateral and multilateral aid to education fell between 1998/99 and 2000/01, though it increased for basic education. Even if high priority is given to sub-Saharan Africa, which receives 27% of all bilateral aid to education, current problems of turning aid commitments, especially the FTI,3 into reality do not augur well for international assistance to countries at risk or serious risk of not achieving the EFA goals, particularly the gender targets.

These are forecasts based on recent trends. While more than 90% of the countries (25 out of 27) are likely to miss reaching gender parity at either primary or secondary level or both by 2005, policies (in the region or elsewhere) are available to many of them to achieve it within a few years.

### Resources and aid

Elminating gender disparities and inequality while achieving all the other EFA goals is costly. Countries will need to allocate more of their own resources and use them more effectively. Half the countries with data were spending less than 3.4% of national income on education in 2000 – lower than the 4.1% average for developing countries.

The least developed among them, with the lowest education indicators, will need more external aid to achieve EFA. Yet overall bilateral and multilateral aid to education fell between 1998/99 and 2000/01, though it increased for basic education. Even if high priority is given to sub-Saharan Africa, which receives 27% of all bilateral aid to education, current problems of turning aid commitments, especially the FTI,3 into reality do not augur well for international assistance to countries at risk or serious risk of not achieving the EFA goals, particularly the gender targets.

3. Of the 18 countries initially invited to participate in the Fast-Track Initiative, 10 are from sub-Saharan Africa – Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mozambique, Niger, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.