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## GIRLS' EDUCATION, MAKING INVESTMENTS COUNT

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For every child  
Health, Education, Equality, Protection  
ADVANCE HUMANITY





## GIRLS' EDUCATION, MAKING INVESTMENTS COUNT

While many countries are already devoting a good share of their budgets to education, much of that investment is often misdirected. With the same levels of investment, much more could be achieved.

That was the main message of a June 2003 workshop entitled 'Investment Options in Education for All: Addressing gender and other disparities', organized by UNICEF and the World Bank with Norwegian support.

The workshop, held in Burkina Faso, attracted ministers of education, finance and social affairs from 24 countries in central and west Africa, along with senior technical officials. It was the first

in a series of workshops to be held in regions around the world to strengthen policies and practices aimed at improving access to and quality of education and reducing drop-out rates. It was also part of a broader effort to help countries achieve the Millennium Development Goal of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and providing quality basic education to all by 2015.

While the focus of this report is on Africa, its conclusions can be applied to other regions of the world where education, as a right, is still an issue. What is true in Africa in terms of investment is often true elsewhere: Investments in education can be better directed and more effectively and efficiently used.

# 1

## RETHINKING INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

Only 59 per cent of children in sub-Saharan Africa are in school, and the majority of them are boys. Over a third of these students drop out before the fifth grade. What are the reasons behind such an enormous waste of potential? And how can girls and other children who are excluded be given a fair chance?

An analysis of household surveys from 21 African countries, carried out by the World Bank, revealed that the children who are not in school are usually from poor households. Thus, wealth – or rather the lack of it – is a major source of disparities in education, in addition to gender and proximity to urban areas.

Disparities in education are also the result of poor management. Evidence shows that it is not necessarily the better-off schools that do a better job of teaching students. A more important factor is

how resources – and the teaching and learning processes in the classroom – are managed. For example, teachers are a primary resource. But teachers must be equitably deployed throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas, if disparities are to be reduced.

So where should our priorities be placed?

On poor, rural girls. The logic is this: If we invest time, resources and energy in all children, without paying attention to gender issues, girls are likely to fall through the cracks. Experience has repeatedly shown that investments in girls' education – particularly those directed to the quality of education – benefit all children, including boys. But the reverse does not necessarily hold true.

In any investment decision, trade-offs are required. Investing in the

following areas can have the greatest impact in providing a quality education for all:

- **Early childhood development and pre-primary education**, to give every child the best start in life;
- **A positive learning environment**, especially one that addresses safety and security, which can pose big problems for girls;
- **The learning process**, which includes a steady supply of textbooks and instructional materials in the local language, along with teacher training;
- **Health, nutrition, life skills and protection from exploitation and violence**, all of which help children learn and stay in school. Measures to safeguard children, especially girls, should be prioritized. Policies on sexual harassment and violence should be developed and enforced.

A number of African countries are leading the way in finding innovative solutions to providing all children with a quality education.

Burkina Faso has set up over 225 satellite schools so that children in remote, rural areas can attend class closer to home and in a more secure environment. In addition, the country has set up more than two dozen centres for early childhood development and more than 50 non-formal education centres, focusing on basic literacy and functional skills for older children who may have dropped out or slipped behind. The challenge now is to take these efforts to scale.

Côte d'Ivoire has set up emergency schools for 135,000 children affected by the country's civil war. To encourage enrolment, the Government is easing the requirement for school uniforms and abolishing school fees for girls in conflict zones. Life skills programmes and AIDS-prevention education is making learning more relevant to young people's needs.

## 2

## WHERE TO PUT RESOURCES

Why are some countries succeeding in getting children to enrol in and finish school? To determine what the high-achieving countries had in common, the World Bank studied 33 countries in Africa. Here's a sampling of what they found out:

- The pupil-teacher ratio varied from 24:1 to 79:1 in the countries studied. But for high achievers it stood at around 40:1.
- When looking at teachers' salaries as a percentage of gross domestic product, the range varied from 1.5 per cent to 9.6 per cent. Among high achievers, it averaged 3.6 per cent.

Resources can be distributed in different ways within different countries. But what appears to distinguish high achievers is a balance in the distribution of resources, which leads to an efficient and sustainable education system. In terms of teachers' salaries, for instance, the high achievers appear to have arrived at an equilibrium between the amount of money available and the amount needed to ensure an adequate level of service.

“Since only two thirds of those who start primary school complete the cycle, radical improvements in education quality are indispensable to reach ‘education for all’. Some countries have shown that it is possible to achieve significant gains in outcomes without large cost increases.”

Birger Fredriksen, Senior Education Advisor,  
Africa Region, The World Bank

## 3

### INVESTING IN QUALITY

While access to education has climbed slowly in African countries, completion rates have remained stagnant. Over a third of students never reach the fifth grade. Even when they do, standardized tests show that many do not learn very much. The key lies in the quality of education provided.

Quality is measured by the extent to which students attain the knowledge, skills and behaviours specified in the national curriculum. It includes cognitive, affective and social outcomes, with an expectation of positive results.

In African countries, however, the essential ingredients for quality in education are often lacking. Supplies of textbooks are uneven, and those that are available are typically shared. In a third of these countries, only half the teachers are trained. An average of 70 pupils to a classroom is commonplace.

Part of the solution lies in ensuring essential supplies and equipment. But just as important, says the World Bank, is building up the head teacher as an instructional leader, providing continuous teacher development in a decentralized way, offering effective supervision and support, and carrying out increasingly ambitious curricular reforms that reflect teachers’ own development.

In terms of financing and management, the Bank has found the following to be effective in making the most of scarce resources:

- Separating financing functions from the delivery of services;
- Decentralizing decisions about how funding is allocated and used;
- Letting schools manage discretionary resources;
- Involving school committees in the management of resources;

- Ensuring public accountability in the use of those resources.

The good news is that a number of countries are making progress on the quality front. Mali and Zambia are going to scale with local-language instruction in the early grades. Guinea and Uganda are carrying out reforms in pre- and in-service teacher training. The United Republic of Tanzania is decentralizing the management of discretionary resources. Benin is

moving towards an education system driven by the attainment of specific educational standards. And the Gambia is creating girl-friendly schools in hard-to-reach areas, where girls' net enrolment in just one year has jumped from 15 per cent to 40 per cent.

## 4

# INVESTMENT OPTIONS THAT IMPROVE QUALITY

## FOCUSING ON THE WHOLE CHILD

In the Gambia, Ghana and Mauritania, investments in education are focusing on the 'whole child'. The approach starts from the premise that every child has certain rights, including the right to safety, security, equal opportunity and education, which must be addressed in a holistic manner. Moreover, it recognizes that the root causes of poverty are manifold. Any response must also be multisectoral, addressing issues such as health, nutrition, food security and education. Among these, education is considered pivotal, with girls' education seen as a central strategy for poverty eradication.

In the Gambia, early childhood development is being supported through a community-based programme that combines awareness-raising with a parent-

training manual. Emphasis is placed on the psychosocial dimensions of childcare, along with child protection, health, hygiene and nutrition.

In Ghana, Koranic schools are being used as an entry point for early childhood development. Education for older children is incorporating health education, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and human rights-based programmes for both teachers and students.

Mauritania has adopted a multi-sectoral approach, oriented to the various stages of a child's life. Women's associations and *Mahadras* (Koranic schools) are supporting child development in the earliest years. The 'clean, green and healthy community school' is being promoted at the primary level. And later education is focusing on adolescent girls and their specific needs.

“Research findings and experiential evidence indicate that investments in the early years of children’s lives pay off in terms of greater readiness for school, likelihood of starting school at the right age, more regular and consistent school attendance, lower rates of repetition and dropout, as well as better learning achievement levels.”

Cream Wright, UNICEF’s Education Chief

## ENHANCING THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The whole child learns and thrives in a comfortable physical environment.

In fact, evidence shows that the availability of safe water and separate latrines is a major factor in getting children – especially girls – to enter and complete school.

This was borne out in Guinea, where enrolment rates for girls increased 17 per cent and retention rates increased 20 per cent from 1997 to 2002, following improvements in environmental sanitation, which included the construction of separate latrines for boys and girls.

The same thing happened in north-eastern Nigeria, where over 70 per cent of all schools lacked adequate water and sanitation. School enrolment and completion rates rose when a programme supported by UNICEF and the British Government installed 5,000 water and sanitation facilities, trained 7,000 teachers and established environmental health clubs for children.

## CREATING A POSITIVE SPACE FOR LEARNING

Dreary, dilapidated schools can be breeding grounds for illiteracy, violence and disease. If education is to contribute to a better quality of life, then the learning environment must be attractive, healthy, safe and inclusive. Involving communities and children themselves in the design of positive learning spaces is one option for encouraging ownership.

Educational facilities do not have to be expensive or complex to be conducive to learning. One way of conserving resources is to integrate other community services, such as dispensaries or kindergartens, into school buildings. Using appropriate architectural designs and local building materials can also help to reduce costs, increase a building’s lifespan and reduce maintenance problems.

## IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES

The more traditional aspects of education are fundamental. Every child should have a textbook and it should be free of charge. But for resource-poor countries, this can be problematic. The World Bank is working with

countries to review the minimum standards for each grade and to help identify and overcome barriers for achieving this seemingly straightforward goal.

Textbooks should also be in the local language, particularly in the early grades. Children often have learning problems because they cannot understand or relate to the language in which they are being taught. Children who receive lessons in their mother tongue tend to complete more grades and drop out less often than other children. There are psychosocial and financial benefits as well.

The quality of teaching, however, is the single most important factor in a student's academic success. This holds true regardless of the child's social or economic status.

What makes a good teacher? Someone who knows the subject, conveys knowledge effectively and communicates in a language that children can understand. Decisions on the duration of teacher training can be crucial, and must be balanced by the need to get more and better-trained teachers into the classroom as quickly as possible to meet rising demand.

## 5

# MAKING TOUGH CHOICES

Difficult decisions are inevitable as policy makers seek to improve educational systems. For example, trade-offs will have to be made when attempting to balance coverage with the quality of educational services. The World Bank's simulation models can be an important tool in enabling policy makers to see, in terms of cost and coverage, the consequences of various policy options they are considering.

Three different levels of decision-making are important. At the macroeconomic level, the amount of taxation and the percentage of public resources allocated to the education sector should be considered. At the sectoral level, one should look at the way the budget is distributed among the various subsectors and levels of the education system. And within school systems themselves, decisions must be made between quantity

and quality, and among the various factors that contribute to quality. Do you pay teachers better and allow fewer children in class, or enable more students to attend while reducing teachers' salaries? Each choice has budgetary implications. And policy makers need to make decisions by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each policy according to local realities, available choices and chosen objectives.

But are some choices better than others? For the same expenditure per student, achievement levels can vary enormously and some combinations are better than others. But if the system is efficient, the more you spend, the better the results.

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"We can do it! In Burkina Faso, we will bring the gender gap to zero by 2005. We are reducing the distance between schools and children through satellite schools. We are recruiting more women teachers. We are reinforcing school feeding and distributing free training materials. Most importantly, we are engaging communities."

H.E. Mr. Mathieu Ouedraogo,  
Minister of Basic Education and Literacy, Burkina Faso

## 6

### A POSITIVE EMERGENCY

Options to make education equally available to all include mainstreaming of innovations that have worked. Investing in education as a 'positive emergency' and concentrating resources there is another way to overcome inertia and get results in countries where educational disparities are severe or in countries primed to make rapid progress. This is the thrust of UNICEF's acceleration campaign, known as '25 by 2005', in which resources and political will are being focused on achieving countries' commitments to education for all.

In every case, partnerships are crucial if the goal is to be achieved. The need for greater support from the international community is widely recognized. But the most important lesson from countries that have attained education for all is that strong political will is the key prerequisite for success.

The consequences of not succeeding are clear. No country in the world has achieved sustained economic growth without first achieving at least an average of five to six years of basic education among adults. African countries will be no exception.

In the words of one World Bank official: "Development aid to help reduce poverty makes no sense if we cannot provide all African children with good-quality basic education. We are talking about the future of our countries' most important resource: the children. We must not fail them this time around."

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