



Analysis of education spending in the West and Central Africa region

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**A Policy Brief for Ministers
of Education and Finance**

OCTOBER 2021

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Brief outline

The purpose of this Policy Brief is to provide

- i. a snapshot of the situation in the education sector in the West and Central Africa region (WCAR), focusing on key challenges that countries are facing to improve learning outcomes for children;
- ii. an overview of government spending in the education sector across the region, looking at trends, size, composition and type of public spending; and
- iii. key recommendations for consideration by ministries of Education and Finance aimed at accelerating education outcomes through better use of public resources allocated to the education sector.

The brief also highlights the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning outcomes and education sector financing across the region.



Highlights

More children in WCAR are not attending school than was the case 10 years ago, representing one out of every five out-of-school children worldwide.¹

Despite progress in school enrolment, a significant portion of children are not learning the basics in reading and mathematics, thus limiting their ability to live productive lives as adults.

High levels of teacher absenteeism lead to significant learning and economic losses.

Most countries in WCAR are falling short of meeting the regional target² of allocating 20 percent of government resources to education.

The disconnect between education financing and education performance raises serious concerns about value-for-money³ in education spending. Poor education performance is as much related to low investment in the sector as to the inefficient use of existing resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further undermined children's learning outcomes across the region, in part due to the economic contraction, which is projected to have led to a decline in total education spending during 2020.

Education spending is projected to rebound to pre-pandemic level in 2021 but remains grossly insufficient to reach the performance targets in the region required to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

1. UNICEF and African Union Commission, Opportunities for education in a post-COVID era: An overview of education in Africa, with recommendations for long-term improvements, New York, UNICEF, 2021.

2. World Education Forum, Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, 2000.

3. According to the Collaborative Africa Budget Reform Initiative (CABRI), value for money requires all participants in the budget process to think differently about each decision within this complex cycle. Essentially, governments achieve value for money when they have the right policies (given specific needs), choose the most cost-effective interventions, and implement these interventions efficiently, fairly and with moral considerations. Key within this flow of decisions is also the accountability of each practitioner for the decisions and choices made.

02

Education performance under pressure in the West and Central Africa region

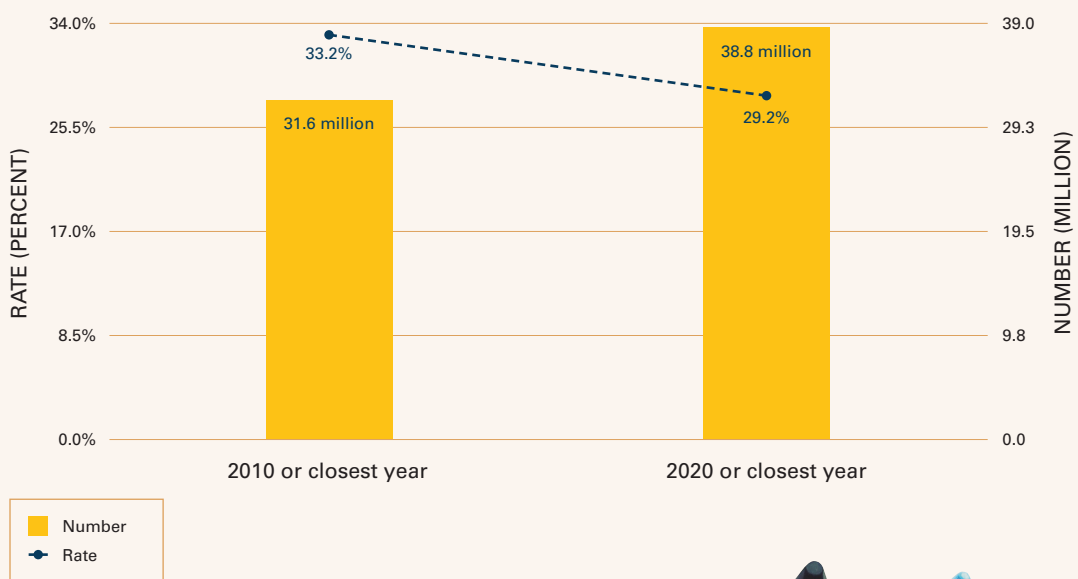


Performance in education equity and inclusion

More children are out of school today than 10 years ago

ago. Although the number of out-of-school primary and lower secondary school-age children in WCAR has declined over the past decade, today 38.8 million children are not in school compared to 31.6 million 10 years ago (see Figure 1). Today one of every five out-of-school children in the world live in WCAR.⁴

Figure 1: Evolution of the rate and number of out of school children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age



Source: Author's calculation based on data from household surveys and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division World Prospects, 2019 revision.

More than 75 percent of the 38.8 million not in school are found in Burkina Faso, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Niger or Nigeria – all conflict-affected countries. In Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger more than half (52 percent) of all children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age are not in school.

Girls account for 52 percent of the 38.8 million out-of-school children (51 percent primary school age; 53 percent lower-secondary school age).



Photo by Taru Huhkio on Unsplash

4. Ibid.

Primary and lower secondary education completion rates remain very low. In 12 of the 24 countries in the region, more than one of every three children do not complete primary education. Chad, Equatorial Guinea and Mali have primary completion rates below 50 percent. Overall in the region, only 47 percent of adolescents completed lower secondary education in 2019.⁵

Most children do not receive pre-primary education.

In 2019 the gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education was low, at 19.2 percent. This means that some 29 million children of pre-primary school age lack sufficient preparation for learning in school.

Highly inequitable access to learning opportunities.

Access to education remains highly inequitable in WCAR, especially for vulnerable and marginalized girls, children from the poorest wealth quintile, children living in conflict areas and children with functional difficulties. Eighty-nine percent of adolescents (91 percent of girls) from the poorest quintile never attended school, dropped out at the primary level or were still in primary school in 2018.⁶ School access is further complicated by recurrent teachers' strikes and natural disasters (floods, earthquakes etc.), leading to learning losses.



of adolescents (91 percent of girls) from the poorest quintile never attended school, dropped out at the primary level or were still in primary school in 2018.

Children with functional difficulties are left behind.

For nine countries with available data, rates of out-of-school children range on average from 27 percent for children with no functional difficulty to 38 percent for children with multiple functional difficulties.⁷ Lower secondary-age children with functional difficulties are more likely than those without functional difficulties to be out of school or to still be in primary school instead of progressing to lower secondary.⁸

Barriers to education access are increasing.

Key barriers to access include the high direct and indirect costs of schooling; social norms (often not conducive for girls' education); the limited offer of education opportunities, availability and geographic distribution; as well as contextual barriers – particularly growing conflict in the region. Attacks on schools continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism verified 278 attacks in 2020 alone.

National curricula are mostly outdated and do not adequately respond to the skills development needs of young people.

Many alternative learning pathways servicing out-of-school children, including for children in Koranic schools, are not recognized by governments. Therefore, the qualifications that these alternative learning pathways provide their learners at not officially recognized in national qualifications frameworks, which tend to exclude out-of-school populations.

5. Author calculation based on 2019 or most recently available data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS): <https://data.uis.unesco.org/>. Last retrieved in September 2021.

6. UNICEF Education Strategy 2019-2030, Data and Analytic Compendium, UNICEF, September 2019.

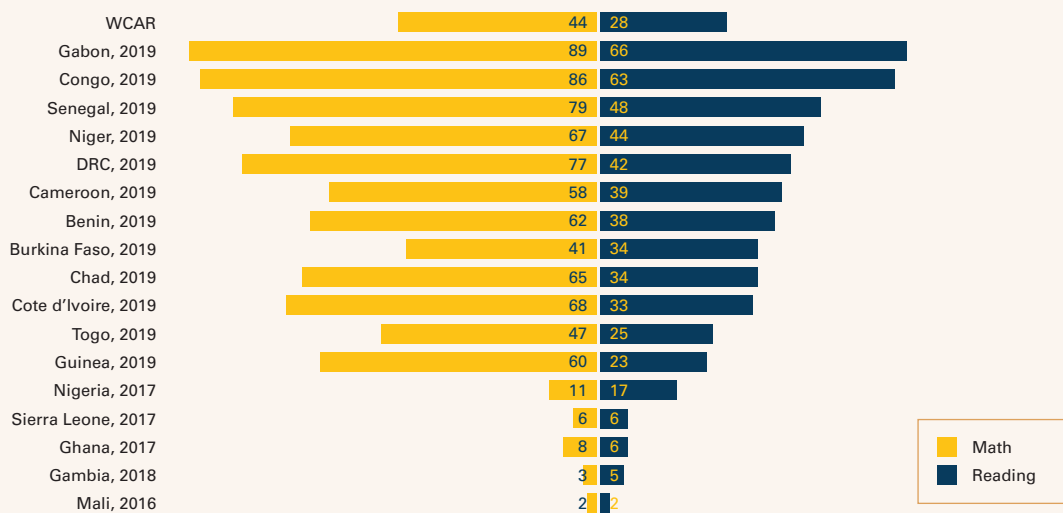
7. MICS 6 database for Central Africa, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone and Togo.

8. Ibid.

Performance in early learning and education quality

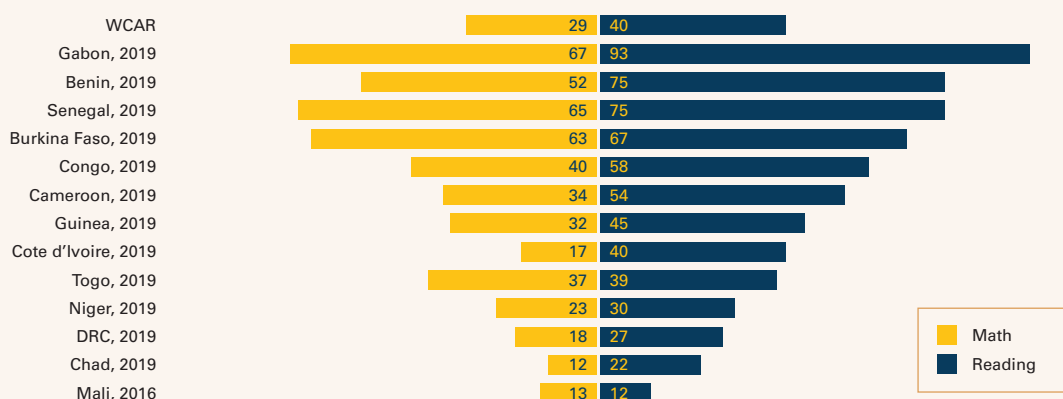
Fewer than one third of children in early primary grades have minimum reading and mathematics proficiency. The percentage of children in early primary grades achieving minimum proficiency in reading rose from 17 percent in 2017 to 28 percent in 2019. In 10 countries in WCAR with verifiable data, more than half of all grade 2 students did not meet the minimum requirements in mathematics (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Proportion of grade 2-3 students achieving the minimum level of proficiency in reading and Math



Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).

Figure 3: Proportion of end of primary education students achieving the minimum level of proficiency in reading and Math



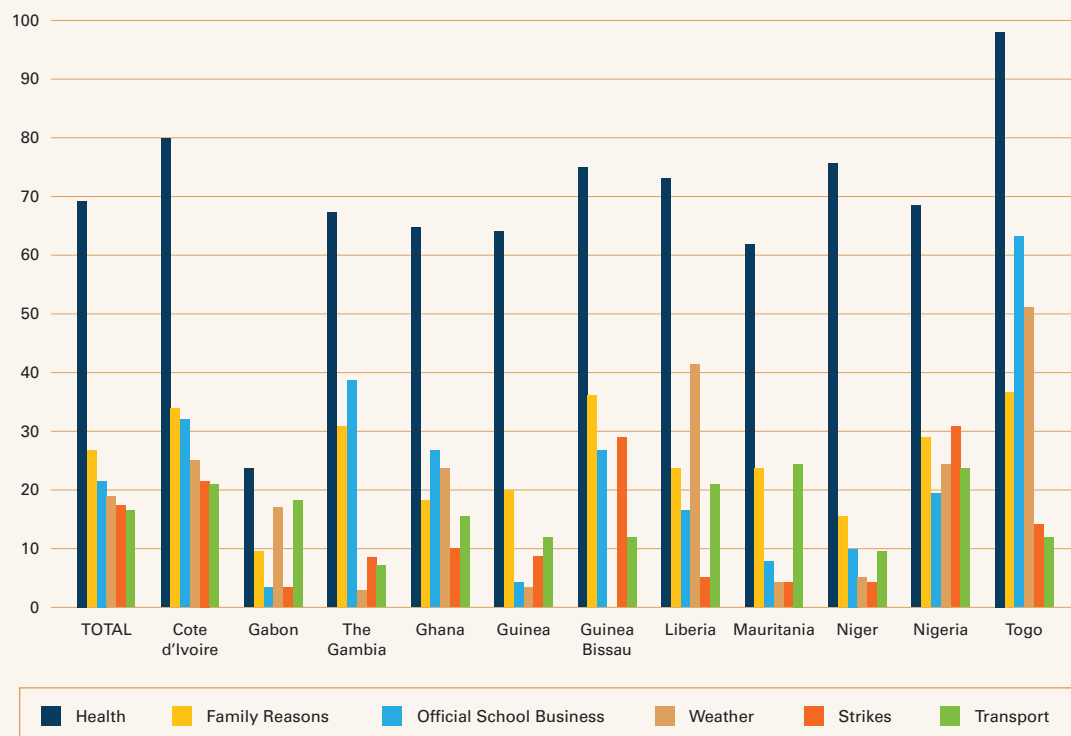
Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).

Performance of the Education System and Education Budgeting⁹

High levels of teacher absenteeism lead to significant learning and economic losses. In Senegal and Togo, teacher absenteeism and related learning time loss have been estimated to translate into an annual wastage of 2.6 and 2 percent of GDP, respectively.¹⁰

Health is the leading reason for school absenteeism. Even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, health was identified by teachers as the most frequent non-system driver for all forms of absenteeism of teachers across the region (see Figure 4). This situation is further aggravated in conflict areas, where insecurity and the mental and psychosocial effects of attacks on schools compound physical illnesses.

Figure 4: Primary reasons for school absenteeism among teachers



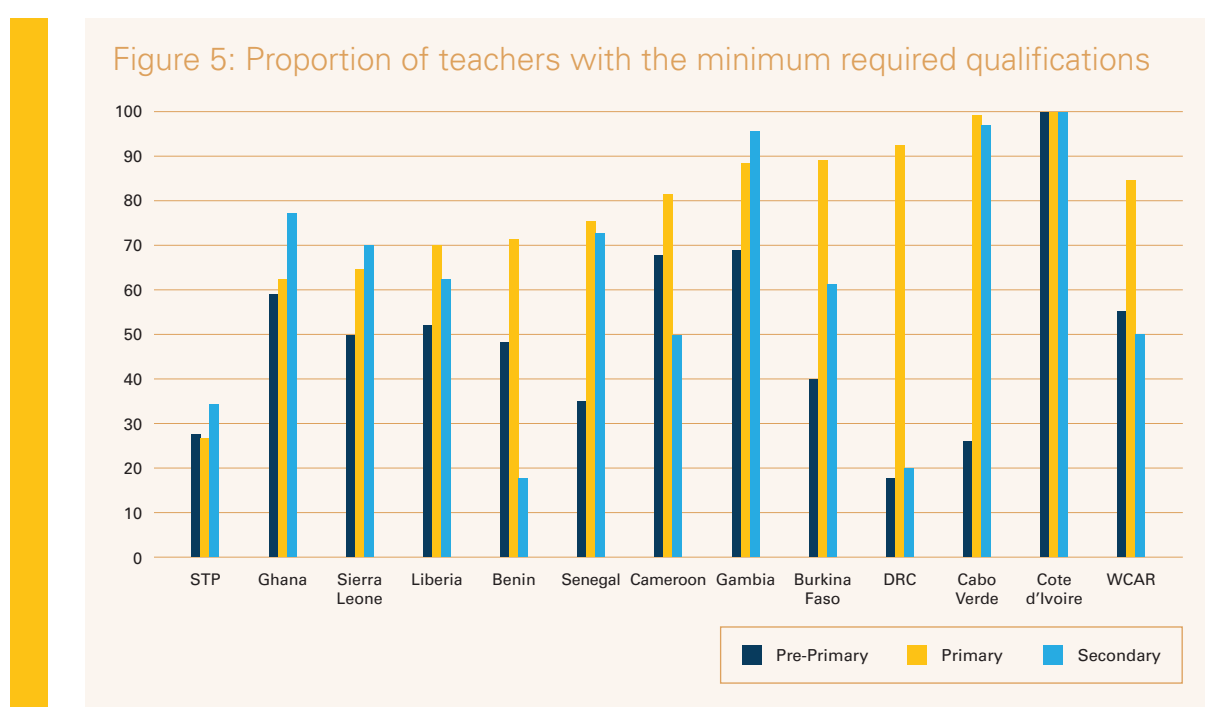
Source: Time to Teach Study, 2020.

9. Selected issues, modified from the Collaborative Africa Budget Reform Initiative (CABRI), *Value for Money in Education Spending in Africa*, briefing paper 6, 2013, which identified the following education finance issues: 1) teacher absenteeism is high with significant losses and teachers are not always allocated according to established pupil-teacher ratios; 2) the allocation of qualified teachers across and within schools is often inequitable; 3) textbooks and materials are inadequate and not in the languages that children can learn most effectively; 4) grants to schools are not always disbursed on time, and the purpose of grants is often not known (further problems are experienced in the management and audit of the grants); and 5) school buildings are not equitably distributed and not maintained according to plan.

10. Estimates carried out within the framework of the Time to Teach study (UNICEF, 2020), based on Service Delivery Indicators (2015) and World Development Indicators (2015). Karamperidou, D., Brossard, M., Peirolo, S., and Richardson, D. Time to Teach – Teacher attendance and time on task in Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, Florence, 2020.

Highly inequitable allocation of teachers with basic qualifications across levels of learning.

The inequitable allocation of qualified teachers implies that more and better-qualified teachers are allocated to secondary schools, putting pre-primary and primary schools at a disadvantage (see Figure 5). The allocation differences between countries can be explained by education governance and the absence of incentives at the national level to deploy teachers where they are most needed.



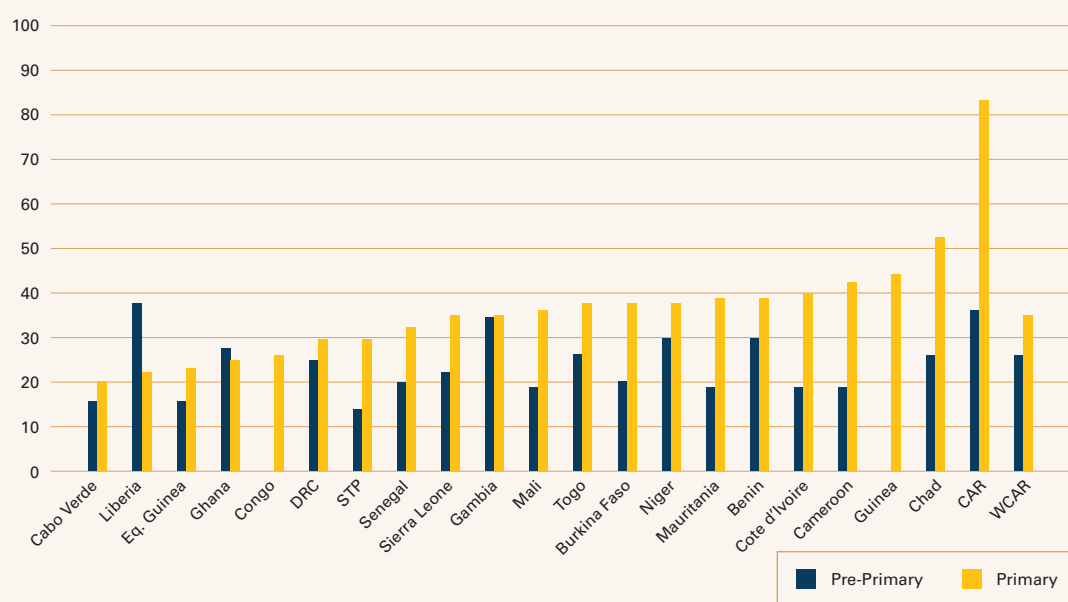
Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).

Wide variation of student-teacher ratios across the region.

On average in WCAR there are 26 pupils per teacher in pre-primary education and 35 pupils per teacher in primary education. The ratio varies greatly, from 21 in Cabo Verde to 83 in the Central African Republic (CAR) (see Figure 6). The average ratio in primary education in the region is lower than the average for sub-Saharan Africa (37.3).¹¹ Student-teacher ratios are often higher at the primary level, further adding to teacher workload and reducing time on task. This is counter-productive because learning gaps that develop at the lower levels tend to worsen over time, and students are less likely to catch up in later grades.

11. World Bank, STR in Primary SSA: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRL.TC.ZS?locations=ZG>; STR in Secondary SSA: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRL.TC.ZS?locations=ZG>; STR in Primary global: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRL.TC.ZS>; STR in Secondary global: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRL.TC.ZS>

Figure 6: Student-Teacher ratio



Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).

Education data are not collected on time, analysed and used consistently to guide policy decision-making and programming. Data on learning outcomes, education expenditures, vulnerable and marginalized children, non-formal education and the integration of school leavers into the labour market are often patchy and irregular.

Many countries struggle with data quality, timely availability and weak policies and legal frameworks. While 12 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, Gabon, Guinea, Niger, Senegal and Togo) now have more up-to-date data on learning outcomes in primary education,¹² the other 12 are less able to effectively monitor and report on learning achievement in primary education due to lack of data. Most countries continue to lack investment in affordable and sustainable learning assessment systems. Population data in many countries are based on old censuses and often fail to consider population displacements, making it difficult to accurately measure out-of-school rates and learning achievement.

The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated children's learning. The 2020 closure of schools disrupted learning for all 128 million school children in WCAR over a period of three to six months. Consequently, children lost significant hours of learning time.

Given early World Health Organization findings that children are at lower risk of COVID-19 infection than adults, schools in WCAR were re-opened from as early as September/October 2020. The African Union introduced a digital learning strategy (DOTSS).¹³ However, most countries in WCAR do not have coherent policies on digital learning. Only 27 percent of low- and lower-middle-income countries that responded to a survey monitoring the education sector's COVID-19 response reported having a fully operational digital learning policy.¹⁴

12. PASEC, *Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN*, 2019.

13. DOTSS is an acronym for 'digital connectivity, online and offline learning', teachers as facilitators and motivators of learning, safety online and in schools and skills-focused learning.

14. United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, UNICEF, World Bank, 'Lessons on education recovery: Findings from a survey of ministries of education amid the COVID-19 pandemic,' June 2021.

Lessons from the COVID-19 experience indicate that at the outset, few countries were prepared to respond to the COVID pandemic. Governments faced numerous challenges as they transitioned to distance learning, including limited institutional capacity to support teachers, poor access for vulnerable populations and a lack of coherent policies and funds to support remote learning. Only 25 percent of low-income countries called on all their teachers to engage in remote/online teaching. Although many countries in WCAR supported safety measures (handwashing facilities, double shift systems to reduce class sizes etc.), available global data on low-income countries show that fewer than 10 percent reported having sufficient soap, clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and masks to ensure the safety of all learners and staff, compared to 96 percent of high-income countries.¹⁵

While national Disaster Risk Reduction guidelines are available in most countries, they were not adapted for use in the education response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the necessary capacities to develop response plans were not in place and needed rapid reinforcement.



My dream for Sierra Leone's education is to see a better educational system. For example there are some people who cannot afford but they want to join us in school.

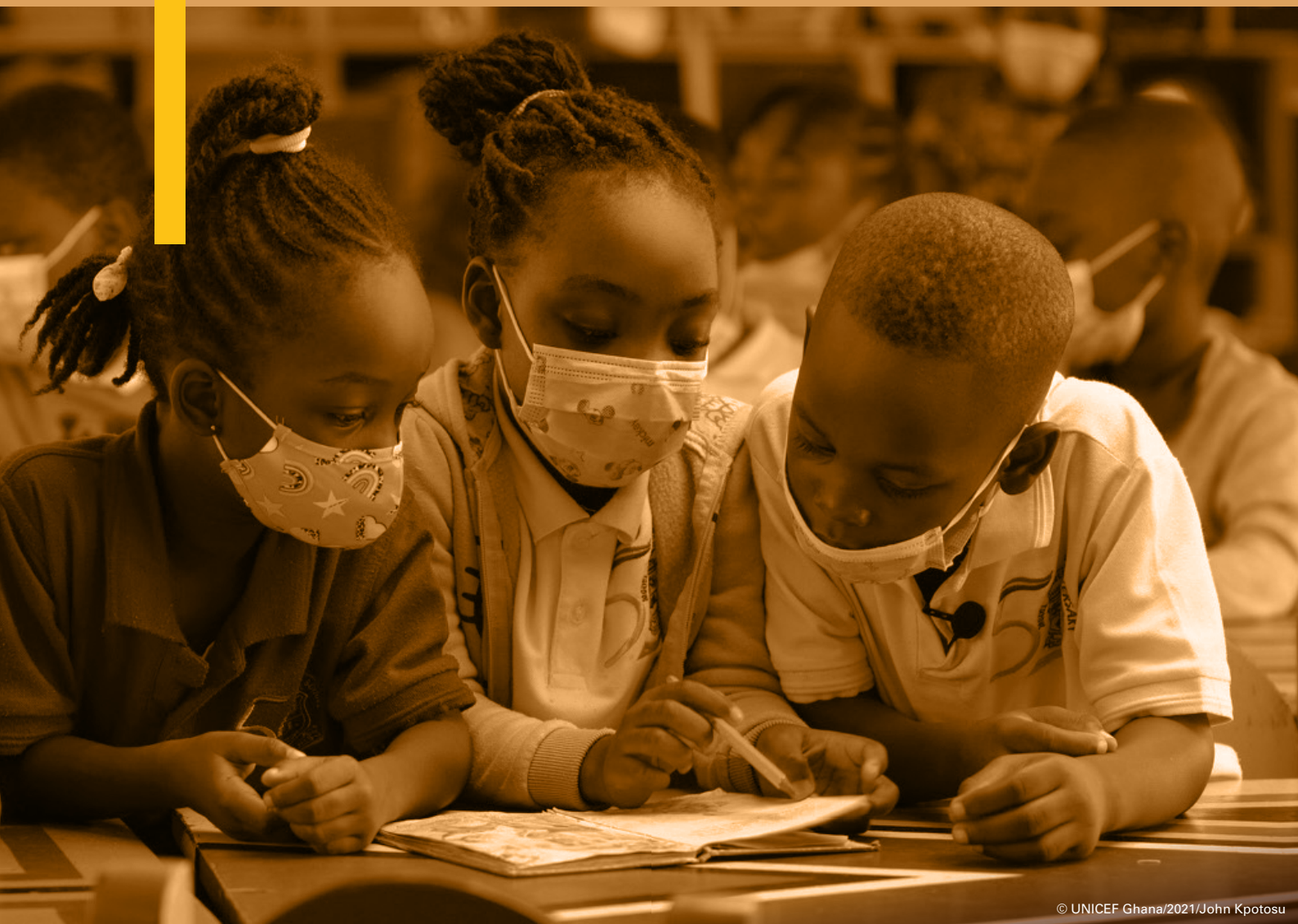
Aminata Kamara

Student, 13 years old
Kagbungbe Village, Sierra Leone

15. Ibid.

03

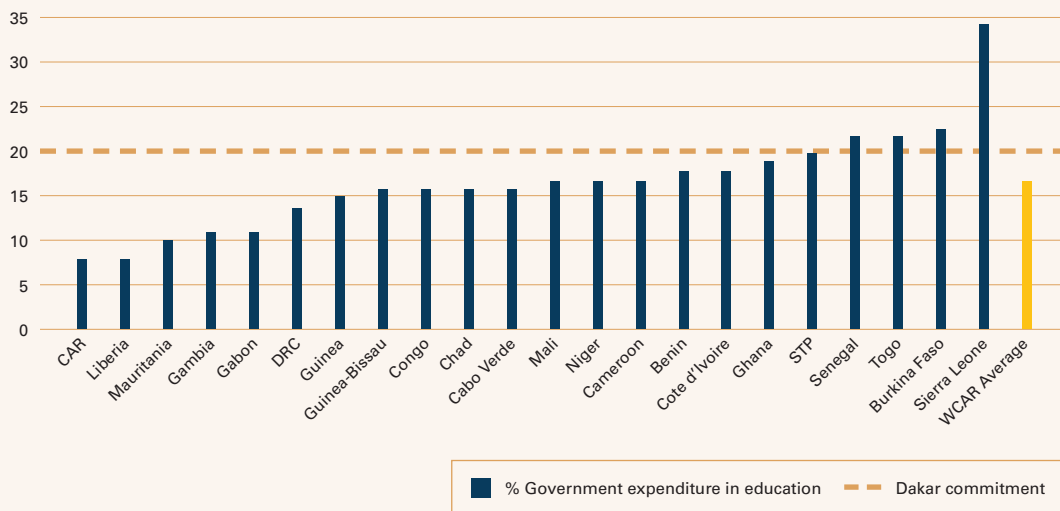
Education spending in the West and Central Africa region



Education spending before COVID-19

Most countries in West and Central Africa (WCA) are falling short of meeting the Dakar target of allocating 20 percent of government resources to education. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in the region allocated an average of 17 percent of their total budgets to education (see Figure 7). Of the 22 countries for which data are available, only Burkina Faso, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo allocated at least 20 percent of their national budgets to education, as required under the African Union's Dakar Commitment on Education for All. As a percentage of GDP, education spending varies from 1.1 percent in CAR to 7.7 percent in Sierra Leone.

Figure 7: Total government expenditure on education in West and Central Africa countries, 2019 or latest available, (% of government expenditure)

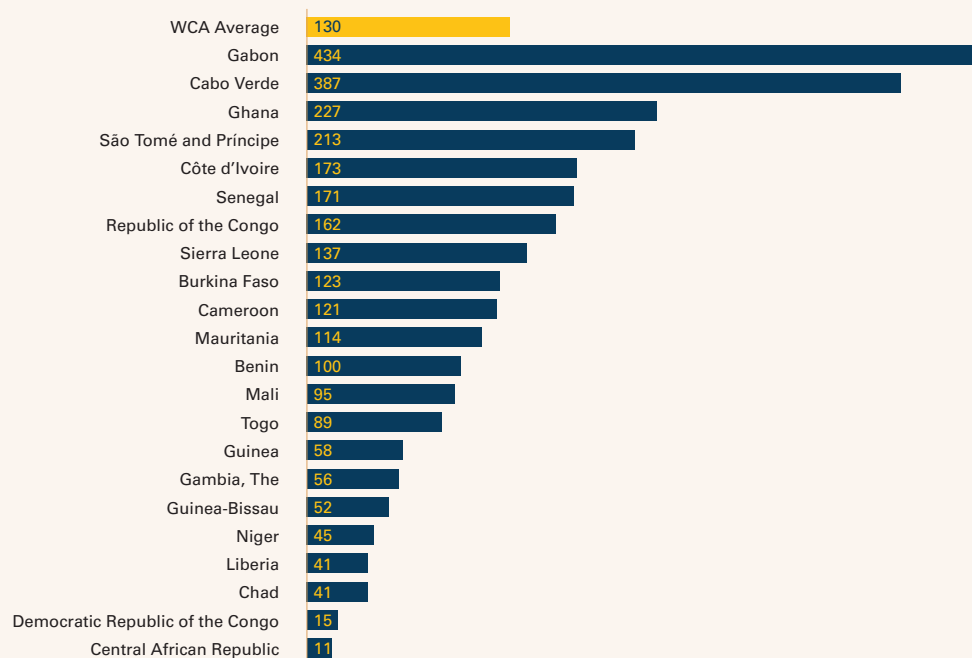


Source: UNESCO UIS (2020).

Note: Data were lacking for Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.

Prior to COVID-19, education spending per capita in WCAR varied sharply across countries, from just US\$11 in CAR to US\$434 in Gabon. Figure 8 reveals that, on average, governments in WCA spent US\$130 per capita on education (compared to US\$240 in Eastern and Southern Africa). Education budgets were inadequate to achieve education performance outcomes prior to COVID-19, further limiting the ability of most countries to provide education during a time of crisis.

Figure 8: Estimated per capita government expenditure on education, 2019 (in US\$ 2017 constant prices)



Source: UNESCO UIS (2020).

Note: Data were lacking for Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.

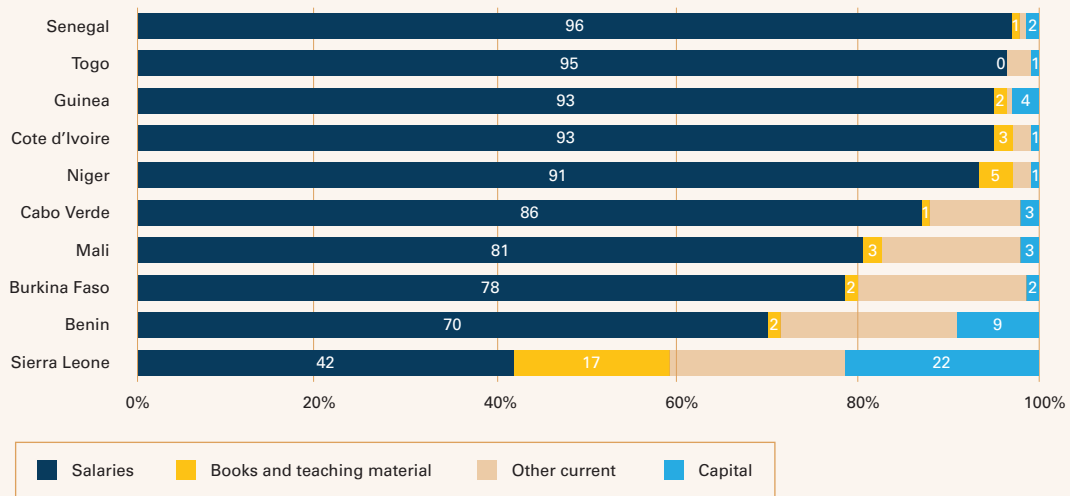
130

The US\$ amount governments in West and Central Africa spent on average per capita on education.

Salaries consume the vast majority of education budgets, leaving scarce resources for teaching material and capital expenditures needed to improve performance outcomes.

Research and learning assessments have demonstrated a positive correlation between the availability of books and learning achievement. However, analysis of available data shows that with the exception of Sierra Leone, WCAR countries spend very limited resources on books and learning materials (see Figure 9). In some countries, almost all of education expenditures go to salaries, leaving little room for investing in classrooms and other infrastructure needed to increase access to education and achieve learning objectives.

Figure 9: Distribution of education expenditure in public primary institution by nature of spending in select WCAR for which data are available

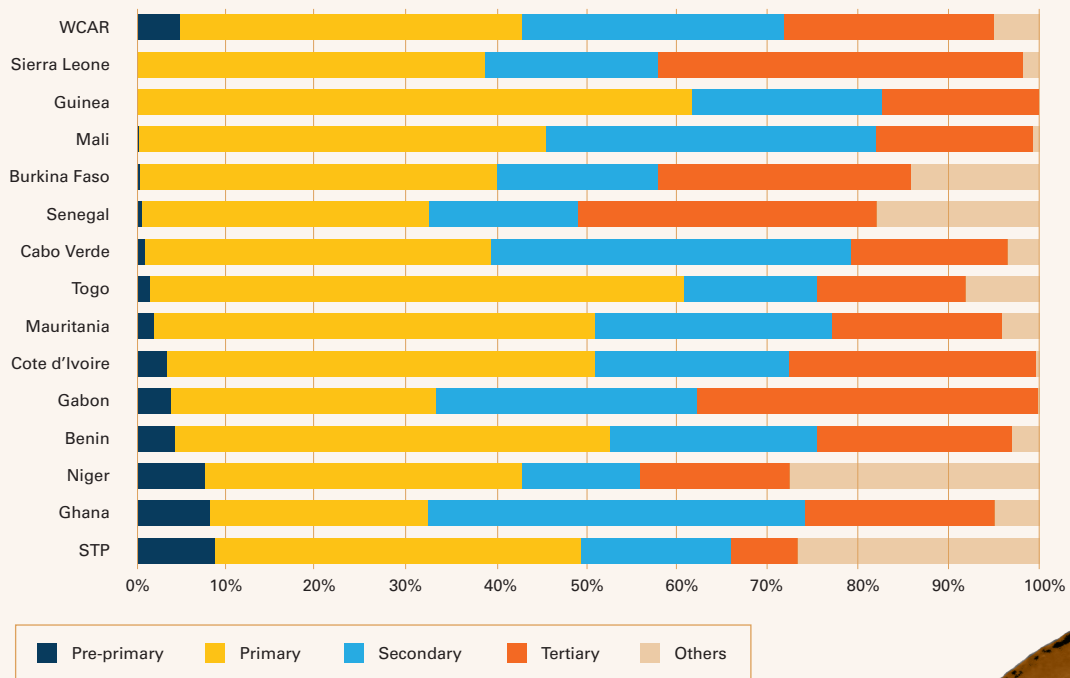


Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).

In some countries, almost all education expenditures go to salaries, leaving very little room for investing in classrooms and other infrastructure.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries spent very little on pre-primary education: Despite evidence demonstrating the positive effects of high-quality preschool, few countries in WCAR devote resources to pre-primary education. Among the 14 countries with available data, the average spending on pre-primary education was only 4 percent of total education expenditures, with sharp variation among countries (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Distribution of government expenditure on education by education level in select WCAR countries for which data are available



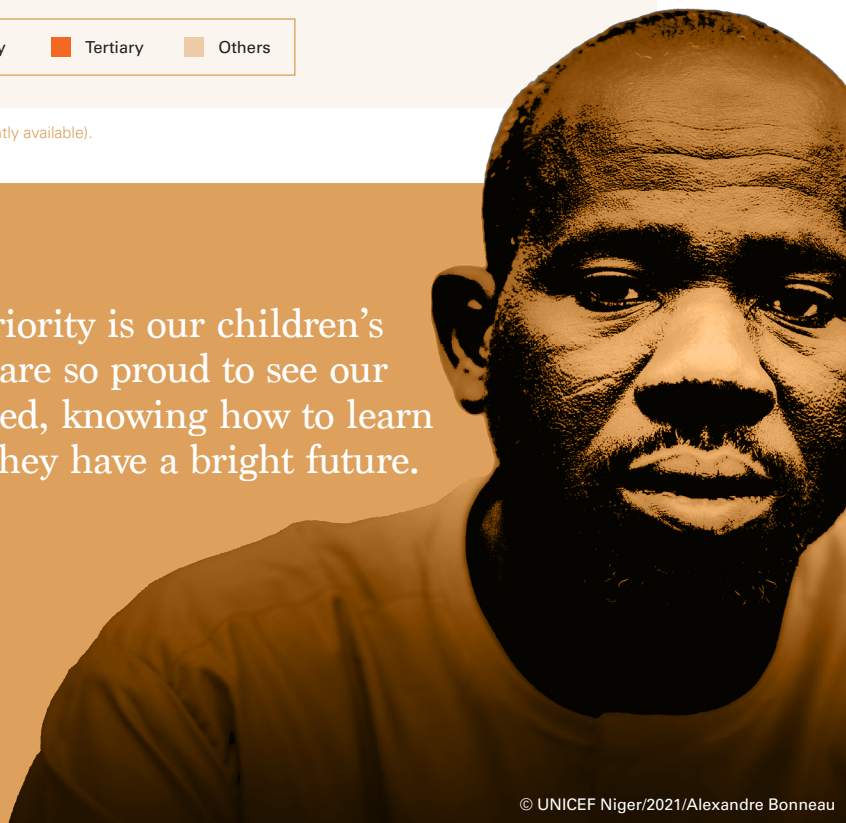
Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).



As a parent, our priority is our children's education. But we are so proud to see our children well-trained, knowing how to learn and read. So that they have a bright future.

Mr Mounkaila

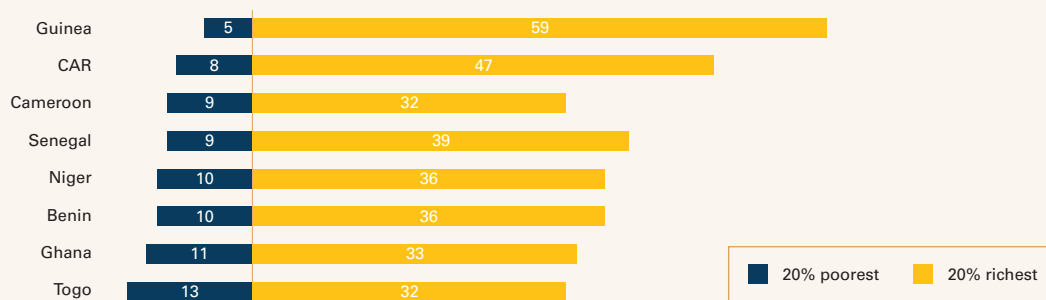
Teacher and parent
Agadez, Niger



Inequality in the allocation of education budgets.

A child from the 20 percent wealthiest households can benefit as much as 12 times more government resources than a child from the 20 poorest households, and the former is most likely to complete higher levels of education where unit costs are greater (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Percentage of public education resources going to children from the poorest households and richest households



Source: Author's calculation based on UIS data (2019 or most recently available).

The inefficient use of education resources drives poor education performance.

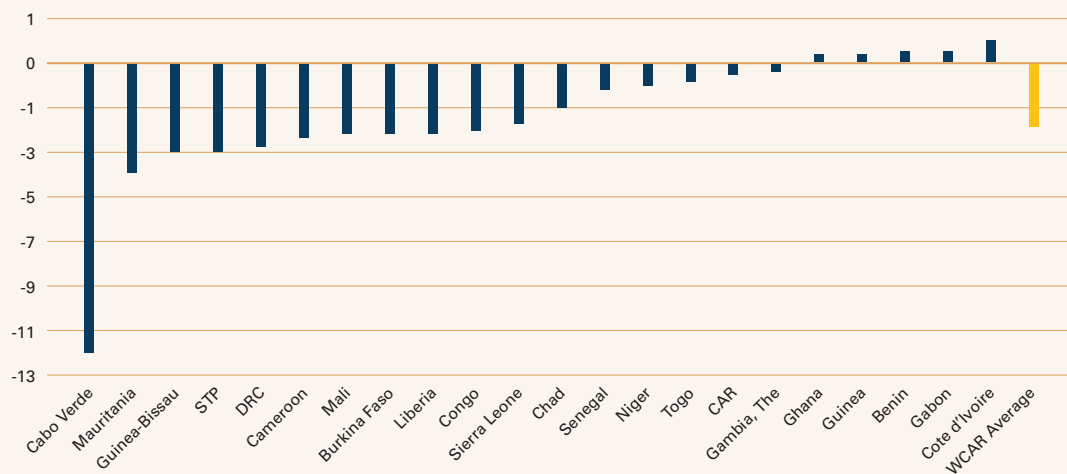
Africa remains the world's least efficient region in the use of education funding. African countries could improve their primary education completion rate by 42 percent and secondary education completion rate by 41 percent with their current levels of spending, just by improving the efficiency of education financing. The causes of this lack of efficiency are mainly high repetition rates (10 percent in primary and 13 percent in lower secondary, compared to 2 and 3 percent, respectively, for the rest of the world) and high dropout rates. If efficiency levels in Africa met those in Asia or Latin America, the completion rate for primary education could rise 98 percent, suggesting that many African countries could achieve universal primary enrolment by improving the efficiency of their education spending.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the limited resources available are not being spent in the most effective way possible due to high repetition and drop-out rates.

Education spending, 2019–2021

Economic contraction in the region due to the global COVID-19 pandemic is projected to have led to a decline in total education spending in 2020. It is estimated that domestic government expenditure on education in WCA shrank by an average of almost 2 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 (see Figure 12). The highest drop in spending is projected to have taken place in Cabo Verde and Mauritania. Education spending in 2020 is projected to have remained unchanged from 2019 in only five countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana and Guinea).

Figure 12: Projected change in education spending in select West and Central Africa countries in 2020 compared to 2019 (as a %)



Source: UNESCO UIS (2020).

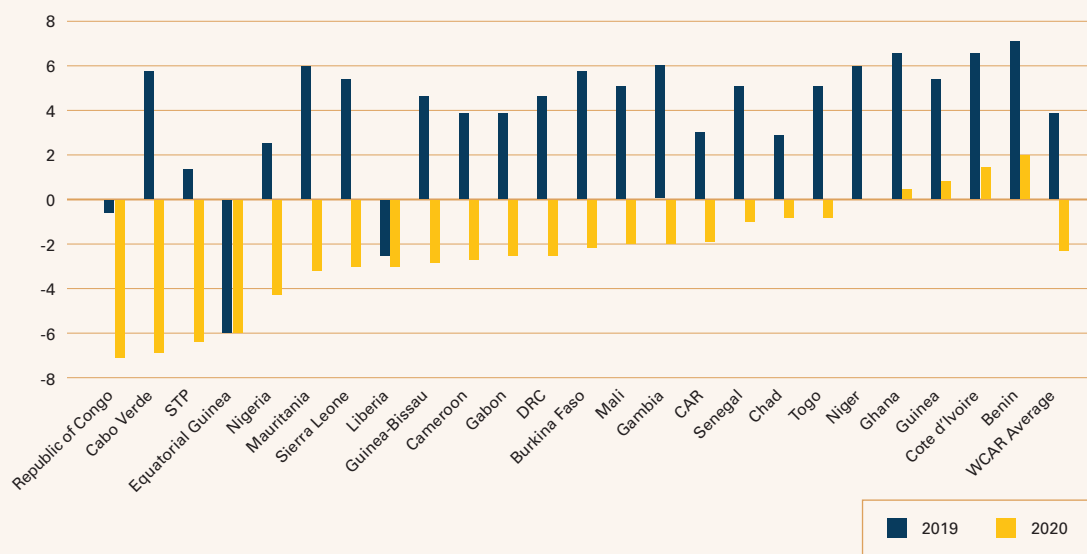
Note: Data were lacking for Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.

2%

The estimated contraction in 2020 domestic government expenditure on education in West Central Africa compared to 2019.

Spending during 2020 is estimated to be in line with the GDP growth rates observed in the region, projected at an average negative rate of -2 percent (see Figure 13), although Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Niger all experienced positive growth in 2020.

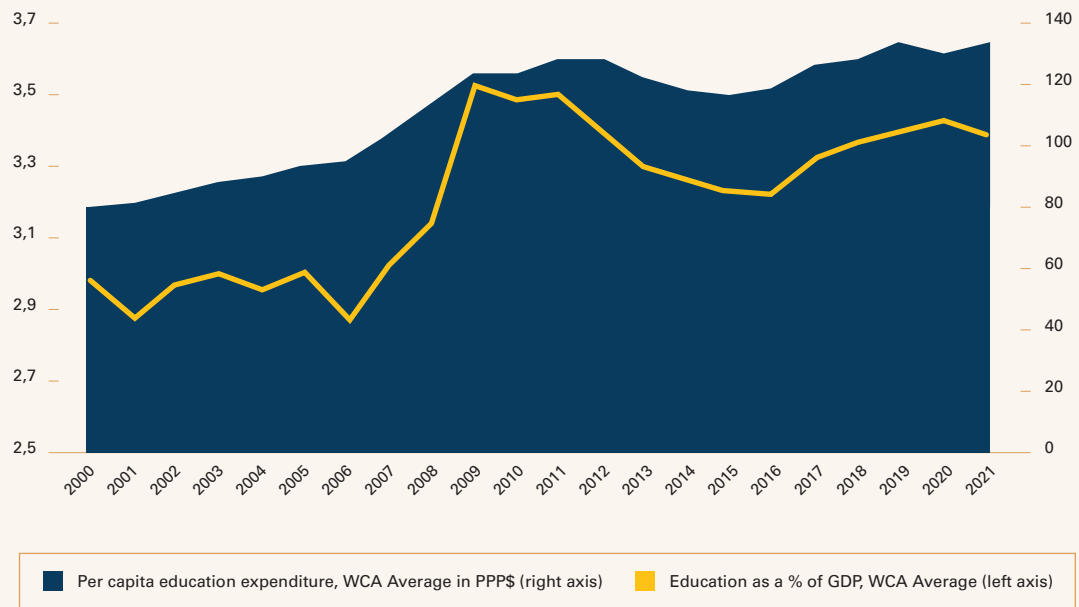
Figure 13: GDP growth rate (%) 2019 and 2020



Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook, IMF, Washington, D.C., October 2020.

Education spending is projected to rebound to pre-pandemic levels in 2021, but remains grossly insufficient to achieve SDG4 performance targets in the region. Total education spending per capita in 2021 is expected to rebound to 2019 levels of US\$130 per capita (see Figure 14). This rebound is in line with the projected average 2021 rebound in GDP growth of 3.8 percent in WCA countries; similar to pre-pandemic levels. This increase will be grossly insufficient to achieve the SDG4 targets.

Figure 14: Average government expenditure on education in West and Central Africa, 2000-2021 (in per capita PPP\$ and as a % of GDP)



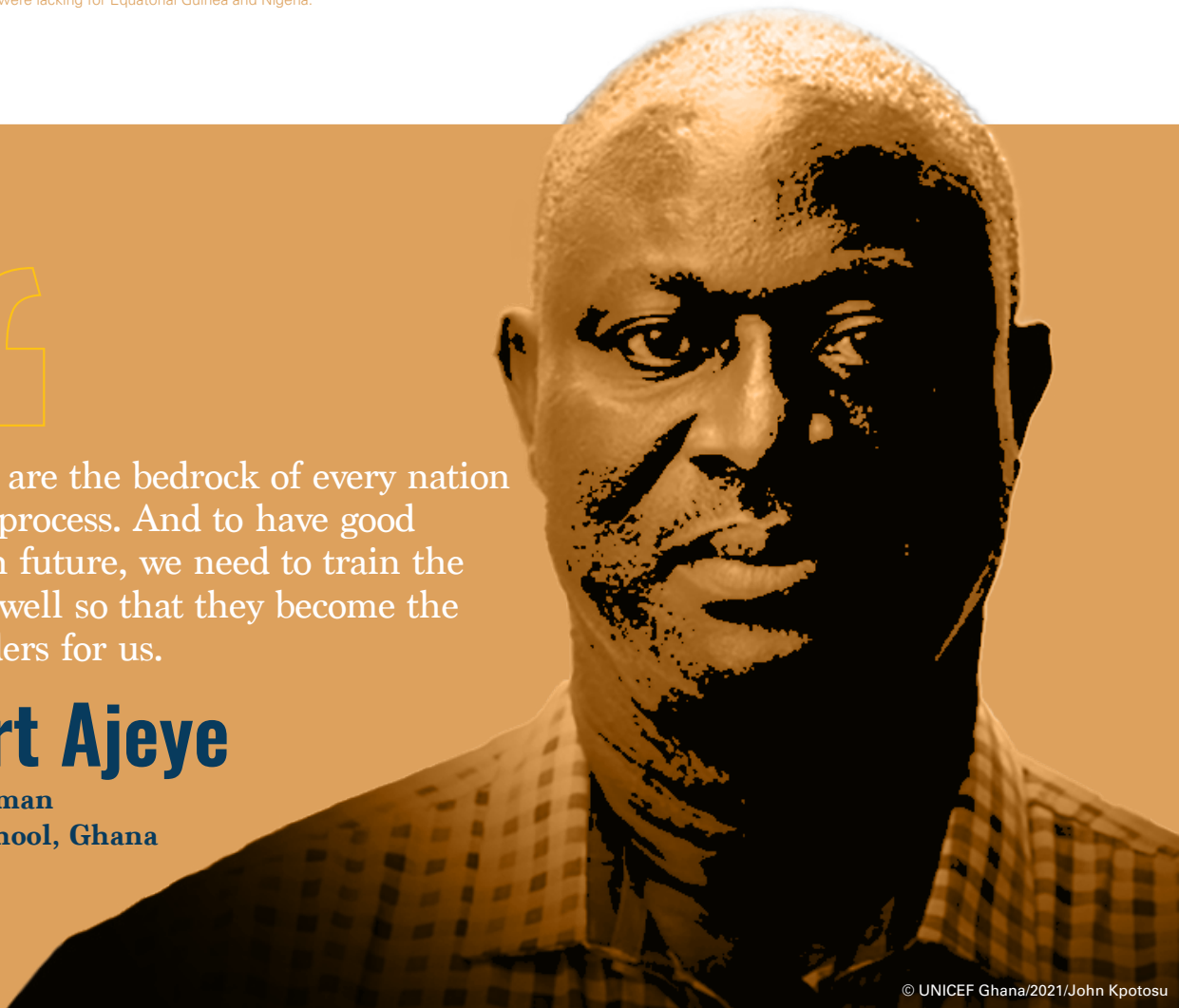
Source: Author's calculation based on UNESCO UIS (2020).
 Note: Data were lacking for Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.



Children are the bedrock of every nation building process. And to have good leaders in future, we need to train the children well so that they become the good leaders for us.

Albert Ajeye

PTA Chairman
 Nursery School, Ghana



04

Recommendations

The disconnect between education financing and education performance raises serious questions about the capacity of countries in the region to achieve value for money in education.

The recommendations below focus on building resilient public finance management (PFM) systems for efficient and cost-effective education financing to improve education performance.



1 Make education a budget priority by allocating 20 percent of government expenditure to education in line with the African Union-Dakar Commitment on Education for All

Greater investment in education is critical to equitable economic growth, improving health outcomes and improving access to quality education to meet the demands of the future. These investments need to be targeted to teaching and learning materials and capital expenditures as part of efforts to achieve education performance outcomes by increasing the number of schools and related infrastructure; increasing access to pre-primary education and addressing equity issues to ensure that children from low-income households can access quality education.

a. Invest in strong education data systems to set clear priorities, implement robust national education programmes and monitor and evaluate the performance of education systems on a regular basis. Capitalizing on the UNICEF/UNESCO (UIS) and World Bank Learning Data Compact initiative will enable governments to progressively address the inadequate use of data and evidence in policy decision-making. In addition to budget execution data, education performance is critical to allowing stakeholders such as parliaments and civil society to seek accountability.

b. Align the levels of ambition of education sector plans with the capacity and resources to implement them. To address the learning crisis, it is critical for policy-makers to place qualified teachers in the lower grades, especially because these grades have larger pupil teacher ratios than higher grades. If governments and partners make it an obligation for all partners to adopt, harmonize and align their approaches with results-based programming approaches, then the current disconnect can begin to dissipate.

2 Improve the effectiveness, efficiency and costing of education finance to achieve Value for Money in education, with a focus on PFM reforms.

To do this there is need to:

a. Improve the functionality of PFM systems through increased coordination between the planning and budgeting functions of government. Existing country reforms such as programme-based budgeting are meant to ensure data-driven, evidence-based decision making on education finance. Economic communities such as the West Africa Economic and Monetary Union and Central African Economic and Monetary Community (covering half of all WCAR countries) have issued directives to their member countries to transition from traditional line-item based budgeting to programme-based budgeting. Complex public financial management reforms require much more than a legal framework for successful implementation. Change management approaches – such as establishing a policy dialogue between the ministries of education, planning and finance, possibly through inter-ministerial working groups – are essential to identifying challenges and solutions.

b. Improve budget credibility to improve the absorptive capacity of education ministries to improve capital expenditure execution. Budget credibility remains a challenge in the region since the budgets that are approved by parliaments rarely coincide with actual execution. Low capital expenditure execution rates for ministries of education is a result of unrealistic cash spending plans that, for example, call for expenditure in the first quarter of the year when the government has no funds in the treasury. Unplanned in-year commitments to increase the number of teachers lead to arrears, which ultimately reduce education ministries' budget for the following fiscal year, add to domestic debt and can ultimately crowd out

spending in the education sector. Rigid procurement policies and procedures sometimes hamper the provision of teaching materials. Sound cash management systems are integral to ensuring that resources are available when needed. Improving the capacity of education ministries to formulate realistic investment/capital expenditure budgets and to execute budgets is critical to achieving the education performance outputs outlined in the Education for All commitment.

c. Improve budget transparency, accountability and participation to improve education finance and oversight of education spending. Lack of data on education spending is a major challenge in WCAR. To improve the adequacy of education financing, investments in education should be based on how education budgets were previously spent to develop more realistic projections based on need. Without data on education spending, both state and non-state actors are unable to fulfil their roles in the budget accountability ecosystem and to provide evidence-based suggestions on how to improve budget allocation and execution within the sector. Poor accountability for the limited resources in education leads to inefficient spending, teacher absenteeism etc., limiting a country's ability to improve education performance and outcomes. Public participation is critical to achieving allocative efficiency and ensuring that education ministry budgets reflect children's needs.

3 Increase domestic resource mobilization including innovative financing to increase fiscal space to accommodate increased investment in the education sector.

To do this:

a. Improve revenue administration to increase tax compliance:

Revenue targets in the region are never fully met due to poor capabilities of revenue administration agencies, poor coordination between budget departments and these agencies and the failure of citizens and corporations to pay taxes on time or at all. Improving budget transparency, accountability and participation could increase revenues through tax payments.

b. Expand the tax base: The limited fiscal space of governments in the region suggests a need to expand the tax base and generate additional revenue.

c. Diversify the economy: Diversified economies are better able to absorb external shocks, and thus reduce the impact on spending for education and other social sector needs. Agriculture-led growth is critical to WCA countries capacity to manage fiscal pressures, establishing value chains such as productive farming cycles and ensuring food security. In addition to agriculture, services and manufacturing are critical to shield these countries in the future.

d. Co-finance with local governments to meet demand: The role of local governments is crucial to achieving SDG4 and other related goals. New fiscal decentralization reforms and technical support to local governments are needed to allow local governments to focus on domestic resource mobilization by focusing on property taxes, business registration fees, etc. Several UNICEF offices in WCA are providing support to countries to implement these reforms.

THIS IS OUR FUTURE

Reimagining Financing
for Education in Africa
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for every child

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Regional Office for West and Central Africa
Dakar, Senegal

Design: Rooftop

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