

Promise not kept: universal primary education for all children in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines why Universal Primary Education (UPE) has shifted from being a *developing country challenge* more broadly in the last half of the 20th century to become largely a *sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) challenge* today. It discusses a number of *national and education sector system-wide challenges* that have constrained the implementation of UPE in SSA more so than in other developing regions.

Design/methodology/approach – This article reviews the literature and policy documents on a wide range of developing country issues, and discusses why most SSA countries have faced unparalleled challenges in achieving UPE.

Findings – SSA governments should take the opportunity offered by their post-pandemic “build back better” efforts to fundamentally *reset education policies* to address the key causes of this major development failure. The overarching objective must be to develop education systems that are more *inclusive, equitable and responsive to national development needs* by better serving the large population groups, parts of society and economic sectors that currently derive little benefit from public education spending. This article highlights the urgency and challenges associated with achieving this objective.

Originality/value – Although the main responsibility lies with SSA governments, this paper stresses that the global community will be affected in many ways by how effectively this crisis is addressed. Therefore, this effort merits sustained global support including through more catalytic use of aid.

Keywords Sub-Saharan Africa, Prioritizing basic education, SDG4 targets

Paper type Research paper

1. A development failure threatening the future of African children and youth

Few, if any, policies have done more for the advancement of human conditions than the provision of basic literacy and numeracy. And – since modern-time international cooperation in education started one hundred years ago [1] – much attention has been given to universalizing access to such fundamental basic skills. Article 26 of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* represents a milestone in this regard, stating that: *Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.*

Since its creation in 1945, achieving this goal has been central to UNESCO’s education mission, especially following the decolonization and independence movement in Africa around 1960. The four regional conferences convened in the early 1960s to agree on target years for reaching Universal Primary Education (UPE) were an important instrument in mobilizing global political commitment to this goal. The conferences were organized in Karachi, Pakistan, for Asia (1960); Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (1961); Santiago, Chile, for Latin America (1962); and Tripoli, Libya, for Arab States (1966),



see [Fredriksen \(1981, 1983\)](#). The target years were 1970 for Latin America, and 1980 for Asia, SSA and Arab states.

However, UPE was not achieved by 1980 and has become especially elusive for SSA, the focus of this article. The target year was postponed to 2000 at the 1990 *World Conference on Education for All* (Jomtien, Thailand), and to 2015 at the 2000 *World Education Forum* (Dakar, Senegal). Following the latter conference, SSA countries and their development partners, including the World Bank, worked actively to ensure that the 2015 target would be reached. Reflecting these efforts, I wrote in 2005 an article titled: “Keeping the Promise: What is holding up achieving primary education for all African Children”? ([Fredriksen, 2005](#)). Unfortunately, the inability to keep the promise continued, and, in 2015, the target was postponed to 2030 as part of the education Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4). But even prior to COVID-19, it was clear that most SSA countries would not meet the 2030 target ([UNESCO, 2019](#)), and the impact of the pandemic will cause further serious delay.

The challenge of providing good quality basic education to all is not unique to SSA. In particular, as observed by [Richards, Ahmed and Islam \(2022\)](#), since the 1990s, there has been a major expansion of education in South Asia, but the region is still offtrack to achieving the 2030 SDG4 goal of equitable, inclusive and quality primary and secondary education for all. Still, other developing regions have been more successful. Why has achieving UPE evolved from being a *developing country challenge* in the last half of the 20th century to become largely a *SSA challenge* today? What needed to be done has been studied extensively over the last several decades and will not be discussed in any detail here. After all, there is little mystery about what it takes to teach children basic literacy and numeracy skills. The main constraint is *not lack of knowledge or ambitious plans but their successful implementation*. Why has it proven so difficult to translate the rich global knowledge into policies and actions that could be *effectively implemented* in the SSA context?

The answer to that question is complex. SSA is a very diverse region, and some countries have done very well. But the fact that UPE has become a moving target for most countries shows both the *unexpected complexity of implementation* and the need for *stronger commitment* and *more effective strategies*. The responsibility for achieving UPE lies with SSA governments, and experience shows that successful implementation requires *strong political commitment*. Therefore, given that COVID-19 has severely aggravated SSA’s well-recognized pre-pandemic learning crisis, countries must use post-pandemic “build back better” programs as a vehicle to fundamentally *reset education policies to address these implementation barriers*.

There is much solid research on school- and family-related factors that contribute to the UPE failure. While crucial for the design of a reset policy, this article does not directly discuss these factors. Rather, it focuses on five *system-wide factors* that have impacted families’ demand for, and public supply of, basic education. These include three *national system-wide factors*: colonial legacy, slow demographic transition and slow economic growth. The other two are *education system-wide factors*: severe underfunding of education, and slow progress in building strong core education institutions for leadership, accountability and innovation.

While the effect of each of these factors varies over time and by country in this diverse region, together they have played a critical role in slowing down SSA’s UPE journey over the 1960-2020 period. Based on experience derived from close association with the “UPE-movement” for more than 50 years, I believe these factors have been greater barriers to achieving UPE in SSA than in other regions. The success of implementing the type of major policy reset called for in this article will depend on how effectively they are addressed.

[Section 2](#) highlights the impact of the three national system-wide factors; [Section 3](#) discusses the urgency, content and challenges of resetting education policies, including

addressing education system-wide barriers to implementation; and [Section 4](#) calls for making development aid more effective in supporting SSA countries achieving this.

Finally, the reader should be aware that the arguments in this article are heavily influenced by my personal experience during my more than 50 years' association with the "UPE-movement," including being part of the UNESCO team monitoring progress toward the UPE targets during the 1970s and early 1980s ([Fredriksen, 1978, 1981, 1983](#)), at the World Bank, including participating in the Jomtien and Dakar conferences (see above), and as a writer after retirement ([Fredriksen, 2005, 2020](#)).

2. SSA's unparalleled challenges in reaching UPE

Compared to most other developing countries, over the last 60 years, most SSA countries have faced *unparalleled challenges* in reaching UPE. This section focuses on the above-mentioned three national system-wide factors: *colonial legacy*, *slow demographic transition* and *slow economic growth*. The slow progress toward UPE has reinforced the negative impact of the two last factors which are, in turn, interrelated in many ways. In particular, low female education slows down the demographic transition, and a poorly educated labor force negatively impacts the level and inclusivity of economic growth. In turn, slow and unequal growth constrains public and private education financing, reducing progress toward UPE and lower birthrates.

2.1 Colonial legacy

At independence, most SSA countries had a larger education backlog than other developing regions [\[2\]](#). In 1960, SSA's gross enrollment ratio (GER) in primary education was 35% compared to 50% in North Africa, 63% in South Asia, 72% in Latin America and 77% in South East Asia ([UNESCO, 1993](#)) [\[3\]](#). Six countries – Burkina, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Somalia – had GERs of less than 10%. At an average GER of 3%, secondary education was practically nonexistent. Some countries did not have any secondary school, and most did not have any higher education institutions. The secondary GER was 10% in North Africa and South East Asia, and 15% in South Asia and Latin America.

The low primary GER and limited access to adult literacy programs left a legacy of low levels of youth and workforce literacy. Due to periods of stalled progress toward UPE over the last four decades (see below), and the neglect of youth and adult literacy programs, this legacy still plays a role in SSA's present-day low human capital development. In 1970, the adult literacy rate was 23% in SSA, compared to the average of 55% in developing countries. In 2015, the corresponding figures were 63% and 83%, respectively.

Importantly, the colonial education legacy goes well beyond low access to more broadly affect fundamental aspects of learning such as content, language of instruction, pedagogy and culture. In what is referred to as "...the well-known and persistent challenges" SSA faces in addressing the weaknesses in basic education, [ADEA \(2017\)](#) emphasizes two such areas where change is particularly important (pp. 14-15):

- (1) "Reversing the strong extroversion of education: linguistic and cultural heritage, endogenous development needs and problems are barely present in learning," and
- (2) "The pedagogic revolution necessary to put back on track teaching and learning processes that now prioritize memory at the expense of the observation, experimentation, analysis, logical thought, the critical mind, etc."

This article will only touch upon these complex issues ([Section 3](#)), primarily by highlighting the importance of making education content more relevant to today's labor market needs, and that many countries have not sufficiently reformed the elitist pedagogy of the

pre-independence system to develop an inclusive, mass education system reflecting national realities.

Rigidity in adjusting content to better fit the needs of evolving societies is a worldwide concern. For example, [OECD \(2012\)](#) argues that the curricula worldwide are overdue for a major redesign similar to that made in the late 1800s in response to the Industrial Revolution. Since then, education content worldwide has remained relatively unchanged. And the report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education calls for a new social contract for education ([UNESCO, 2021b](#)). But it is particularly damaging in the dual economies of most of SSA where 80-90% of the labor force is in the informal economy. As discussed in [Section 3](#), changing content and pedagogy may be the most challenging tasks in implementing an education policy reset to better serve the majority of youth, society and economy.

2.2 *Slow demographic transition*

SSA's *high total fertility rate* and its *slow decline* are both unparalleled. As a result, most SSA countries will need to continue to massively increase primary enrollment just to keep up with population growth, while other developing regions can shift resources to expanding post-basic education and improving quality at all levels.

In 1950, the fertility rate was high in all developing regions: 6.8 in North Africa, 6.5 in SSA, 6.0 in South Asia, 5.8 in Latin America and 5.6 in East Asia. By 2000, SSA's rate remained high (5.6), but it had dropped markedly in all other regions. While SSA's rate is projected to decline to 3.8 by 2030, this would still be twice that of the other regions ([UN Population Projections, accessed June 2022](#)).

As a result, the SSA population of school age is projected to increase by 18% between 2020 and 2030, and by 52% between 2020 and 2050, while that of Asia and Latin America will start to decline during the 2020s. North Africa is the only other region that will see growth between 2020 and 2050, by 19%. This means that all the growth will be in Africa, whose share of the world's children of primary school age will increase from 27% in 2020 to 39% in 2050. And SSA's share of Africa's school age children will increase to 88%.

2.3 *Slow transition to sustainable growth economies*

Economic growth is a key determinant of a country's capacity to generate public and household education financing as well as jobs. Economically, Africa has diverged from the rest of the world for the last three centuries. "Whatever the reason – foreign conquest, societal disruption from the slave trade, extractive economic institutions of colonial rule – Africa did not benefit from the huge surge in productivity and, hence, in per capita incomes of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. As a result, its share of world GDP in 2012 was less than half of what it was in 1700" ([Ahlers, Kato, Kohli, Madavo, & Sood, 2014, p. 25](#)).

While growth picked up in most SSA countries between 1960 and 2020, it has been uneven both over time and across countries. In *per capita* terms, some countries are poorer now than in 1960. And 24 of the 27 countries classified as "low-income" are in SSA, accounting for about half of SSA's population. In summary, strong growth in the 1960s was followed by a *per capita* GDP decline of 36%, or 1.1% annually, between 1970 and 1997 ([World Bank, 2000](#)). This was followed by 2.7% annual per capita growth between 2000 and 2014, stagnation from 2015 to 2019 and a decline of 4.3% in 2020. A modest recovery is projected for 2022 and 2023 ([IMF, 2022](#)). While not as severe as the decline in the 1980s, this means that GDP per capita in 2023 would remain at the 2014 level, that is, another lost decade in *per capita* income growth. Overall, as noted in [ACET \(2021\)](#), over the past two decades, growth has been "... less than transformative – far less" (p. viii).

As shown below, this fluctuation in growth has been associated with similar major fluctuations in public and household education financing and, subsequently, in the progress toward UPE. In fact, since SSA, on average, already spends a higher share of the government budget on education than other regions, and the dominance of the informal economy constrains the level of tax revenues, the *growth of public education spending* depends crucially on the level of economic growth. The same dependency applies for households' spending on education, which accounts for 39% of total education spending in low- and lower-middle income countries as compared to 16% in high-income countries (EFW, 2022). As shown by Lewin (2022), on average, SSA countries have been in a "low financing trap" over the last two decades, with relatively unchanged levels of public investment in education as a share of government budgets and of GDP. This means that continued slow per capita growth makes reaching all the SDG4 targets by 2030 "mission impossible," and strengthens the need to prioritize basic education in order to achieve UPE (Section 3.3).

2.4 Combined impact of slow demographic and economic transition on progress toward UPE

- (1) *1960-1980: Progress.* During this period, most SSA countries made great efforts to address their basic education backlog through the provision of both primary education and adult literacy programs. However, the outcomes of the latter were often disappointing, so provision of such programs was sharply reduced in the 1980s. Key factors causing poor outcomes included poorly trained instructors, little use of local languages and content of low relevance to adults (Lauglo, 2001). Thus, UPE became even more critical to building basic human capital, and most countries made great strides. Total enrollment increased by a factor of four, and the GER doubled to reach about 80% in 1980.

The key reason for not attaining a GER of 100% was that the school-age population grew by 93% from 1960 to 1980 for the 35 countries covered by the 1961 Addis Ababa Plan, that is, more than four times faster than the 18% foreseen by the plan. This illustrates the paucity of reliable demographic information for SSA countries at that time. In fact, enrollment in 1980 in these countries exceeded by some 24% the enrollment projected by the plan as needed to reach a GER of 100% (Fredriksen, 1983). The definition of UPE as reaching a GER of 100% also ignores the high level of grade repetition in many SSA countries. In the 1970s, repeaters accounted for 14% of primary school enrollment in SSA, meaning that to reach UPE, the GER would need to be at least 114% to accommodate repeaters and late entrants, assuming no dropout. In fact, at that time as now, one in three students dropped out prior to reaching grade 6 (UNESCO, 1980).

While rapid population growth was the primary impediment to achieving the 1980 UPE target, sustained increase in education financing was likely the most important factor facilitating the enrollment growth. Total government education budgets grew by 4.4% annually from 1970 to 1980 as compared to 3.0% annual growth of the school-age population. Growth in the share of GDP devoted to education was an important factor in determining the budget growth; the share increased from around 2% in 1960, to 3.5% in 1970, to 4.5% in 1980 (World Bank, 1988, median for 29 countries).

- (2) *1980-2000: Stagnation.* Enrollment growth slowed significantly by the end of the 1970s. The GER declined from about 80% in 1980, to 73% in 1992, then slowly regained its 1980 level in 1999 [3]. Despite an enrollment growth of some 70% from 1980 to 2000, this was just enough to keep pace with population growth. The resumed progress during the 1990s was just sufficient to recover from the "lost decade" of the 1980s. Thus, SSA entered the 21st century with far lower coverage of primary

education than other developing regions, which all continued their progress during this period.

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The main culprit was economic decline. As noted, between 1970 and 1997, real *per capita* GDP fell by 36% in SSA (excluding South Africa), while it increased by 55% in Latin America, 88% in South Asia and 355% in East Asia (World Bank, 2000). Education budgets in SSA grew by only 1% annually between 1980 and 2000 compared to 2.7 % annual growth in the school-age population. This major decline in public funding per student was partly compensated for by increase in school fees, leading to growing inequity in access. Some countries that had abolished school fees during the 1960s and early 1970s to stimulate admission reintroduced them during this period, but abolishing them once again in the early 2000s (Fredriksen, 2009).

- (3) *2000-2020: Rapid growth followed by new stagnation:* The GER grew from about 83% in 2000, to 98% in 2010, and remained at that level in 2020. Enrollment grew by 4.4% annually between 2000 and 2010 compared to 2.6% for the school-age population. The corresponding figures for 2010-2020 were 2.8% and 2.4%, that is, similar to the period from 1980 to 2000, enrollment barely kept pace with population growth. While this occurred partly because intake was approaching universal admission, there continues to be some way to go. First, enrollment includes approximately 10% repeaters and a considerable number of late entrants. Second, as noted in UNESCO (2021a, p. 216): “. . . primary completion rates are approaching or exceeding 90% in all regions except Sub-Saharan Africa where only two of three children complete primary school.”

Again, education financing was likely a key determinant of the difference in enrollment growth during these two decades. During the period 1999-2007, in real terms, public education budgets grew by about 9% annually, approximately two-third of which was attributed to solid GDP per capita growth. As shown above, that growth has stagnated since 2014.

3. Call for a major education policy reset: urgency, objectives and challenges

The fact that most SSA countries will not reach UPE even by 2030 must be recognized – by SSA governments and their development partners – as a *major development failure* that calls for urgent actions to address the causes. In 1961, UPE was rightly considered a top development priority to be reached in 20 years. It cannot be acceptable that, 60 years later when education is recognized as even more crucial to individual, national and global development, many Africa children still do not enter primary school, that only two-third of those entering complete the cycle (as in the 1970s) and that less than half of those who do complete have acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. The impact of COVID-19 has further aggravated this poor performance record.

This section discusses why SSA governments must take the opportunities of the post-pandemic “build back better” effort to fundamentally reset education policies to address the key causes of the UPE failure. The discussion highlights the urgency and objectives of such a reset as well as the challenges to achieving success.

3.1 The urgency for a “reset”

If SSA countries’ basic skills deficit is not addressed with urgency, it will continue to severely hamper their ability to address pressing national development challenges. The urgency of progress is illustrated by sad facts such as that, even before COVID-19, it was likely that one-third of SSA’s labor force would remain illiterate in the 2030s, and more than one-third of children would be born to illiterate mothers.

Low workforce literacy severely impedes productivity growth and the urgently needed transformation of the informal economy to accelerate economic growth, youth employment and poverty reduction. This, in turn, negatively impacts progress toward most SDGs. Persistent low female literacy would reinforce the intergenerational vicious cycle of poverty, low health and education status, and slow demographic transition. Added to this is the importance of basic education to strengthen peoples' ability to adapt to the growing negative impact of climate change on food security and rural peoples' livelihoods.

While catching up on providing UPE, SSA must also deal with the fact that the basic skills considered essential to thrive and adapt in today's rapidly changing knowledge and technology-based society have evolved beyond those provided by traditional primary education. But reaching UPE is an indispensable first step in universalizing a basic education cycle of at least 8-10 years.

Further, while still not achieved in most countries, universal *access* has proven to be the easier part of the UPE challenge. The benefits of major progress in access are greatly diminished by high early dropout and low learning outcomes. As a result, the World Bank estimates that "learning poverty" – the proportion of 10-year-olds unable to read and understand a simple text – has risen to become as high as 80% following COVID-19. And, while the average SSA child can now expect about 8 years of education by the age of 18, this is cut in half when adjusted for low learning outcomes (World Bank, 2022c). Finally, despite SSA's growth in access since 2000, about 18% of children of primary and 36% of children of lower secondary school age were out of school in 2019 (UNESCO, 2021a).

In short, to provide their citizens with the skills needed to thrive and adapt in today's society, countries need to start by equipping them with the basic "tools of learning" – literacy and numeracy – needed to become self-reliant learners. This is a development stage that *no country can leapfrog*, even less today than when UPE was made a priority in 1961. Such "progressive universalization" of education would be in line with the approach followed by all other world regions and as called for by the 2016 Education Commission Report (Education Commission, 2016). More broadly, equipping everybody with these basic learning tools remains an indispensable first step of the *new social contract for education* called for by the 2021 Report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education (UNESCO, 2021b).

3.2 Objectives

The overarching objective of a policy reset must be to develop basic education and training systems that are more *inclusive, equitable and responsive to national development needs* by better serving the large population groups, parts of society and economic sectors that now derive little benefit from public education spending. To achieve this will be a massive undertaking, requiring huge changes in both *education content* and *mode of delivery*. And, to be effective, such supply measures must be accompanied by actions to attract children and youth who presently are not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy, as well as workers in both the *informal* and *formal* economy who need basic skills upgrading. Three priority areas for change are highlighted below.

- (1) *Improve the relevance of content to the evolving skill needs.* Traditionally, public education policy in most SSA countries has largely aimed at qualifying students enrolled in primary and secondary education for entry to the next level and, eventually, for jobs in the *formal* economy, dominated by the public sector. As noted in Section 2.1, education systems have been slow in adjusting both content and pedagogy from systems designed to serve a *small elite* to systems charged with helping *all* children gain the basic learning tools needed to adjust in today's rapidly changing societies.

The small size of the formal economic sector in terms of employment creation has changed little, especially in low-income countries. For example, a study covering 23 SSA countries found that the formal sector, on average, accounted for about 10% of total employment, half of which was in the public sector (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012, p. 174). Filmer and Fox (2014, pp. 45) estimate that, for SSA as a whole, "...over the next 10 years, at best only one in four of Sub-Saharan Africa's youth will find a wage job, and only a small fraction of those jobs will be 'formal' jobs in modern enterprises. Most young people will end up working ... in family farms and household enterprises," that is, in the two main parts of the informal economy which accounted for, respectively, 62% and 22% of total employment.

Beyond the failure to universalize primary education, SSA also lags in secondary school enrollment compared to other regions. But, compared to the skills that the present economic structure can effectively employ, this lag is more serious in terms of *relevance of content* to labor market needs than in terms of *coverage*. As regards the latter, historically SSA's GER for secondary education (44% in 2020) compares favorably to that of leading industrialized countries when their economies were much more advanced than those of SSA today, with the large majority of their labor force already in manufacturing or service sector jobs. For example, in 1960, the GER was 23% in Spain, 35% in Ireland, 46% in France, 51% in Australia, 57% in Norway, 58% in the Netherlands, 66% in the UK and 86% in the USA (Briseid & Caillods, 2004). Already in 1900, less than 45% of the labor force in France, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK was in the primary economic sectors (agriculture, fishery and forestry), but secondary enrollment was only 6 students per 1000 inhabitants in France, 9 in Norway and the Netherlands and 18 in the UK (Kaser, 1966). In 2020, with 80-90% of the labor force in the informal economy, SSA had 59 secondary students per 1,000 inhabitants.

However, as already noted, in terms of relevance to labor market needs, the curricula and examination systems of formal secondary education have changed remarkably little since independence in most countries, and the colonial legacy is still clearly visible (Verspoor with the Secondary Education in Africa Team, 2008). In many cases, this reflects poor implementation of decreed curricula reform policies rather than lack of such policies. Countries that in the early decades after independence adapted quite ambitious curricula reforms include Botswana (Weeks, 2005), Ghana (Akyeampong, 2005), Kenya (Mwiria, 2005) and Zimbabwe (Verspoor with the Secondary Education in Africa Team, 2008). However, effective implementation was hampered by many factors including that the quite ambitious reforms were not matched by the resources and time required for proper preparation and implementation, poor stakeholder acceptance due to lack of consultation and unrealistic expectations about what education alone could do to improve school-to-work transition in economies with very few modern sector jobs.

Thus, effective *curriculum reform* remains an indispensable part of what is required to transition to systems that better respond to the needs of children with different learning needs, capabilities and career aspirations as well as to labor markets beyond the formal economy. Further, as discussed below, secondary education systems must become more *flexible*, offering *different pathways* to gaining the skills needed to adapt to today's rapidly evolving labor markets. And the skills gained through such alternative pathways must be accredited to allow for reentry into formal schooling rather than considered dead-end choices (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

Making lower secondary education an integral part of basic education with a common curriculum for all would help give all children an equal chance of consolidating foundational skills, thus avoiding the present situation where a large share of each youth cohort enters the labor market without such skills. Experience shows that there are some prerequisites for success, including (1) providing students with solid language, math and science skills *before* they move to specialized training institutions or on-the-job training, (2) developing close cooperation between employers and training providers to ensure relevance of programs and

facilitate the school-to-work transition, (3) ensuring that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs are not “dead-end” options but are instead pathways to further education and (4) establishing sustainable financing mechanisms (Fredriksen and Helgø Fossberg, 2014).

In upper general secondary education, a diversified curriculum “. . . that balances technical, vocational and general education is crucial in order to offer students from all backgrounds more choice, and avoid perceptions of the vocational track as second best and a dead end that does not lead to further education” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 239). Further, SSA countries need to revamp their formal and informal TVET systems so that they serve the *whole* economy and are integrated as an essential part of their education and training systems (point (c) below). However, developing a high-quality TVET system is a complex task, especially for countries where the system needs to cater to a large informal economy. Even for the modern sector, there is no single blueprint: successful “old” and “newly” industrialized countries have followed quite different paths. Much can be learned from how Singapore transformed its technical and vocational education system to become world class (Law, 2008, 2015).

Diversifying the curriculum in SSA countries is more relevant now than when the “vocationalization” debate started in the 1960s, a debate that has been revisited at regular intervals over the last decades (Lauglo and Lillis 1988; King and Martin, 2002; Lauglo, 2005; Wilson, 2005). The main objective of vocationalization was to improve the labor market relevance of education by including vocational subject matters in the curricula of general education, typically ranging from one-tenth to one-fifth of total curriculum time (Lauglo, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 4). Foster (1965) is often considered the starting point for this debate. Drawing on research from Ghana, his article challenged the argument that curriculum in general school education should give much more emphasis to vocational subjects. But, at that time, SSA’s secondary education GER was only 3% and the content focused on qualifying a small elite for public sector jobs.

In OECD countries, the diversification trend started in the 1970s and has helped to better align education content to the evolving knowledge and skill needs of the economy (Briseid & Caillods, 2004). And the content of a 21st-century diversified curriculum is different from that debated during last decades of the 20th century. Also, as noted in Section 3.3, while most SSA countries urgently also need investments in higher education, in most cases they should focus on improving the quality and the relevance of programs to evolving labor markets, rather than on massive expansion.

Finally, pre-employment training must be based on a *realistic assessment of future employment prospects*. Focusing on training for the modern, largely public sector was justified during the first couple of decades after independence, given the urgent need to build and staff national institutions. But since then, such jobs have become increasingly scarce. For example, in Ghana, only 10% of the approximately 200,000 people who entered the labor market annually obtained such jobs (ACET, 2017). Rwanda has as many youths turning 18 years every two years as there are formal sector jobs in the economy (about 500,000 in 2017), and Kenya had about 2.8 million formal sector jobs in 2017 (out of 16.9 million jobs in total), compared to almost one million youth turning 18 each year. As a region, SSA creates only about three million formal sector jobs annually compared to the 18-20 million entering the workforce each year (ACET, 2021). Over the past three decades, manufacturing’s share of employment has stagnated at around 6%, and the informal sector remains the employer of last resort for three out of four young people, whatever their level of education.

- (2) *Provide skill upgrading opportunities for workers in both the formal and informal economy.* SSA has a very young workforce, two-thirds of which has not completed primary education. Massive skills upgrading programs are an absolute necessity in order to accelerate the transformation from economies where 80-90% of workers are

engaged in low productivity informal sector activities, to economies where growth is driven by rising productivity in such activities, as well as growth in the manufacturing and modern service sectors.

In terms of employment, the informal economy is dominated by farm and farm-related businesses. As argued in recent reports (ACET, 2017, 2021; AGRA, 2018), correcting decades of neglect of agriculture is essential for SSA to reduce *poverty* and provide *employment opportunities* for young Africans. While accounting for the majority of workers, farm and farm-related businesses typically have not been seen as part of either *youth employment* or *education strategies* in SSA. A 2018 FAO report notes that “The agri-food sector has a huge potential to offer attractive employment opportunities for Africa’s burgeoning youth” (FAO, 2018, p. 9). And, as regards the key role of agriculture in *poverty reduction*, research based on data from 55 countries, including African countries, for varying periods from 1980 to 2000, shows that GDP growth originating from agriculture reduced poverty by 2.9 times that originating from manufacturing, and by 1.8 times that originating from construction (Loayza & Raddatz, 2010). China’s dramatic success in poverty reduction is especially noteworthy, with some estimates putting agriculture’s contribution to the fall in poverty between 1978 and 2001 at four times that of industry or services (Ravallion, 2009). In addition to research and training, policies and investments in many other areas of the agricultural sector contributed to China’s success (World Bank, 2022a).

All parts of the education and training sector – formal, informal, extension services – have important roles to play in supporting the transformation of farm and farm-related businesses. In particular:

- transformation requires improved farm productivity. This entails major investments, including in skills upgrading, given that the majority of farmers in most countries are illiterate, and
- rising farm productivity has traditionally meant transferring farm labor to mainly low-skilled, non-farm jobs. But, as illustrated in a study of South-East Asian countries, farming is a high-risk sector for job elimination because automation/technology is eliminating many such jobs (Chang & Huyuh, 2016). Thus, the skills needed by farm workers seeking non-farm jobs will be higher than for countries that went through this process even in the recent past.

In fact, while the discussion of the “changing nature of work” caused by technology and the “4th Industrial Revolution” (4IR) generally focuses on the modern sector, in terms of job creation/elimination and economic transformation, the principal impact in most of SSA will be in the *informal farm and non-farm sectors*.

- (3) *Develop inclusive policies covering both formal and informal education and training.* As discussed above, the massive skills upgrading that is needed will require strengthening the quality and relevance of programs provided by both the formal and informal training sectors, as well as cooperation to draw maximally on the comparative advantage of each sector. Measures to achieve this must be an integral part of a policy reset. As noted, the content of *general* secondary education pays little attention to the fact that most students will need to join the labor market, rather than progressing to the next level of education. And formal TVET responds especially poorly to the special needs of informal sector workers, most of whom have not completed primary education and, in order to gain a living, need to combine training with work (Adams, de Silva, & Razmara, 2013). Therefore, these workers rely heavily on informal training providers.

There is a variety of such providers, ranging from NGOs to enterprise training and, especially, *traditional apprenticeships* which are the most common type of training for informal sector workers. One study found that, for countries for which data were available, 20% of youth had been apprentices (Filmer & Fox, 2014). The figure is as high as 35% in Ghana where 10 times as many students were involved in traditional apprenticeships as in formal TVET (Brown & Slater, 2018). Studies cited in Adams *et al.* (2013) estimate that up to 70% of urban informal sector workers have been trained through this traditional system.

Provision of alternatives to formal secondary education in gaining skills needed to adapt to labor market demands must be given much higher priority in national education policies. There are also very few *second chance possibilities* for those who do not enter school or drop out early. And systematic evaluation and upscaling of successful programs is scarce (Bashir, Lockheed, Ninan, & Tan, 2018). To become sustainable, their outcomes must be evaluated, and funding for successful programs must become an integral part of domestic education budgets (UNESCO, 2021a). In addition, such programs require effective partnerships among providers, parents and employers to ensure relevant content, ownership and adequate funding. Thus far, second chance programs have largely relied on external funding.

The growing access to modern technology and distance learning offers great opportunities for progress in this area (ACET, 2021; World Bank, 2022b). And anecdotal evidence shows that many literate workers in the informal economy are already honing their specialized skills via Internet access. This ranges from farmers learning how to conserve water and use more fertilizer and drought-resistant seeds to increase yields and fight climate change, to non-farm workers learning the skills needed to create their own businesses (The Economist, June 4th to 10th 2022, pp. 52–54).

Finally, students in formal TVET often have great difficulty in getting apprenticeships in the formal economy. Without “formalizing” traditional apprenticeships, governments must do more to improve their quality, access and attractiveness to formal TVET students, and the accountability of the providers. Senegal provides an example of an attempt to integrate traditional apprenticeship into the formal TVET system to provide 300,000 TVET students with the opportunity to get on-the-job, practical experience (Brown & Slater, 2018). Further, much of the training received by agricultural workers is provided by agricultural extension services. The externalities of farmer skills upgrading, combined with well-executed agricultural extension, make a strong case for public intervention (Arias, Evans, & Santos, 2019).

3.3 Challenges in implementing a major public education policy reset

The past has been rich on good plans and intentions, but often poor on effective implementation. How can a major education policy reset do better? The discussion below highlights two interrelated and major implementation barriers: severe education *financing constraints* and *poor institutional capacity*.

- (1) *Education financing.* To universalize 8-10 years of good quality basic education and significantly improve the opportunities for work force skills upgrading will have huge financing implications. The former will require major improvements in access, content and learning outcomes as well as proactive outreach to children who are more difficult and costly to reach than those already enrolled, for example, those who reside in rural/remoter areas, come from poor families and/or are handicapped and/or marginalized in various ways. And provision of life-long training opportunities is now woefully underfunded and largely left to the informal training sector, or to external funding. While most SSA countries have a special budget line for adult education, mainly managed by ministries of education, the share of the education budget allocation is normally well below 4%, and programs are heavily dependent on

unpredictable external funding (UNESCO, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the funding crisis by forcing school closures, decreasing household incomes and straining national budgets (World Bank, 2020).

This article will not assess the *magnitude* of funding needed but will highlight why the funding largely needs to be derived from a combination of *sustained per capita economic growth* and *major improvements in efficiency and effectiveness* of resource use.

First, the share of GDP that governments spend on education is determined by the tax revenues raised and the share of these revenues allocated to education. Over the past decade, while varying between countries, on average for SSA, both of these shares have remained fairly constant: education has been allocated around 3.8% of GDP and around 16-17% of government budgets (Lewin, 2022). While there is room for increases for some countries, most have reached an upper limit that has proven difficult to exceed, given their low tax base, young population and many other competing basic demands on public budgets.

Thus, as discussed in Section 2.3, sustained growth in education financing will depend crucially on countries' ability to achieve *sustained per capita economic growth*. In fact, since independence, SSA's public spending on education in terms of share of GDP has compared favorably to that of successful newly industrialized East Asian countries. However, because these countries had strong sustained economic growth as compared to SSA, especially during the last two–three decades of the 20th century, these comparable levels of commitment to education translated into very different trajectories in public education financing (Fredriksen & Tan, 2008). This difference is particularly important when measured in terms of public spending per student, given the rapid demographic transition in East Asia.

Second, in terms of *efficiency in resource use*, on average, SSA spends relatively more on education and gets relatively less in terms of access and, especially, learning outcomes than most other parts of the world. As emphasized in the World Bank's new education strategy for Western and Central Africa, education systems in most SSA countries "...suffer from chronic underperformance" (World Bank, 2022b, p. 14). Therefore, while necessary, as underscored in Lewin (2022), mobilizing more resources will not alone be sufficient to address the severe underfunding of education; it must be accompanied with sustained actions to promote more efficient resource use.

Third, as regards *effectiveness in resource use*, this article focuses on how well the *public education system* universalizes provision of the basic skills needed to thrive and adapt in today's society. To achieve this, in addition to reforming content and pedagogy as discussed above, governments must significantly enhance the inclusiveness of public education spending by increasing the share devoted to the large population groups, parts of society and economic sectors that now benefit little from such spending. For most countries, this will mean less priority for universalizing *upper* secondary and access to tertiary education than required by the SDG4 targets. In fact, there have been many calls for adjusting these targets in favor of basic education (Bashir *et al.*, 2018; Burnett, 2019, 2020; Fredriksen, 2020; Beeharry, 2021; Lewin, 2022). The impact of COVID-19 has significantly increased the necessity of such a budget trade-off in favor of basic education.

Clearly, SSA countries must develop the post-basic education skills needed to support national development. But the labor market for such skills is very narrow in countries where economic transformation remains very slow and 80-90% of workers are in the informal farm and non-farm sectors (AfDB, 2018; ACET, 2021). Thus, as noted in Section 3.2, the initial priority in most countries must be improving quality and relevance of programs to evolving labor markets, rather than massive expansion. In countries where low levels of youth and adult literacy coexist with rapidly growing graduate unemployment, prioritizing universal basic education with more labor-market relevant content *and* skills upgrading programs for

basic education graduates and those already in the labor force *is warranted on both equity and economic grounds*. This fact must guide budget trade-offs.

- (2) *Building institutions for leadership, accountability and innovation.* To successfully implement this type of education policy reset will require major changes in policies, programs and budget trade-offs that are complex, knowledge- and capacity-intensive and politically sensitive. Few African countries have the institutional capacity required to handle this effectively. As noted in [UNESCO \(2007, p. 27\)](#) "... extraordinary limited attention has been paid to strengthening national capacity" and, in particular, "... countries need much stronger capacity to deal with the political economy of reforms and with technical constraints on implementation."

Capacity-building in the education sector has been given much attention over the past decades, including by donors. While progress has been elusive, the single-most important constraint in most countries is no longer severe shortage of *technical* expertise in education planning and management but low institutional capacity to *mobilize, utilize and retain existing expertise; to monitor performance; and to hold managers and teachers accountable for outcomes*. That capacity depends crucially on factors such as the dynamics of political power in a country, and the bargaining and negotiations among key interest groups ([Bennell, 2021](#)).

It is a paradoxical feature of the "learning sector" that it often shows a low capacity to learn and to innovate, be it to improve management and accountability, pilot and innovate to develop education policies and programs adapted to local conditions or harness the possibilities of new technologies to improve the access and quality of learning. Education systems' ability to address today's challenges depends more than ever on their ability to learn and embrace change, and to be more inclusive and less characterized by "silo" thinking. Even more so than for most sectors, education policies must be developed through broad-based participation, and implementation needs to be closely monitored with continuous feedback to improve outcomes. A host of players inside and outside the sector are essential to its performance and need to be an integral part of the capacity-building effort, with interventions tailor-made to the role they play in the national education enterprise. This often requires development of new systems of data collection and norms as well as the technical and political capacity to use this information and norms to improve system accountability and performance.

Part of the capacity challenge is explained by the rising demand on core education management institutions resulting from education systems that are growing in size and complexity. The number of stakeholders has increased along with the growing impact of education on citizens' social and economic well-being. In SSA, the education sector also accounts for a higher share of civil servants and public budgets than any other sector, and system management is increasingly decentralized. Further, despite its high budget share, education is generally severely underfunded compared to the needs of the huge young population.

But complexity and underfunding aside, the *administrative culture* of core education institutions is often characterized by *low accountability*, in the context of a *high degree of patronage, corruption and politicization*. The severe shortage of basic textbooks in most SSA countries is a sad illustration of both the difficulty of building *basic* national systems and the poor outcome of the huge amount of aid provided over the past five decades for this purpose ([Fredriksen, Brarwith, & Trucano, 2015](#)).

Thus, a major reset of education policies to implement more efficient and effective resource use will be confronted by entrenched interests, which have the advantage of inertia, history and organizational capability. Consequently, the responsibility for successful

implementation goes well beyond the ministries of education: it requires *strong political leadership* through a “*whole-of-government approach*” (World Bank, 2022b). This is even more critical now than in the past due to major new challenges including the impact of COVID-19, rising levels of insecurity in many countries and the need to equip populations whose livelihood is vulnerable to climate change with basic education to facilitate their adaptation. To operate schools safely through robust security protection and/or to continue lessons through remote learning during disruptions caused by pandemics, natural disasters and/or insecurity has become a major challenge for many governments. These factors have added to the major challenges faced by many countries in developing more inclusive education systems (UNESCO, 2020).

4. The need for more catalytic external support

SSA governments and their development partners must reflect on how to better adapt the use of aid to its evolving comparative advantage in a context where aid is a small and declining part of total education funding, and where practically the whole domestic budget is used for teacher salaries (Fredriksen, 2010; Burnett, 2020; Lewin, 2020, 2022). This will require more effective global coordination to ensure that the sum of aid allocation decisions made by individual donors makes sense in the aggregate in terms of maximizing the impact of overall aid on education outcomes, and that aid is better targeted on the poorest countries and populations.

The existing aid distribution is the outcome of complex processes within donor countries and agencies as well as within recipient countries, each responding to many constituencies, including parliaments, civil society organizations and global goals such as SDG4. In 2019, SSA received 24% of all education aid, down from 37% as an average for 2002-03, and only 45% of the aid was for basic education, down from 53% in 2002-03 (UNESCO, 2016; 2021a). Further, the aid for SSA is concentrated on a few countries: in 2019, six countries received one-third of the total aid.

As noted, SSA governments bear the responsibility for addressing the factors that have caused the UPE failure. Why then the importance of aid? First, aid can still be very valuable if used more strategically to help countries mobilize and make more effective use of total government, household and external education funding. This suggests the need to prioritize the type of high-impact investments that are often not adequately funded in the absence of aid. This includes areas such as innovations, technical cooperation between countries to promote peer learning and capacity-building, consensus-building on difficult reforms and poverty-focused programs. Second, the issues related to human rights and development that were originally considered core for supporting UPE still apply for most SSA countries. The evidence regarding the vital importance of basic education for individual, national and global development is even stronger now than when education was declared a basic human right in 1948, or when the 1980 UPE target was agreed in 1961.

Third, the extent to which SSA countries can provide a more hopeful future for their youth through education will be felt beyond national borders. In 1960, SSA accounted for 8% of the world population aged 15-29 years. The share increased to 17% in 2020, and is projected to reach 29% in 2050. The size of this age-group is projected to increase by some 90% in SSA between 2020 and 2050 (UN Population Projections, accessed June 2022). Apart from North Africa, all other major world regions are expected to see a decline. The skill level of this huge young population will have major impacts well beyond the African continent, including on economic growth, migration and security. And the extent to which this huge, young workforce becomes a “demographic dividend” for SSA countries depends on whether its members have the basic skills as well as opportunities to become productively employed. This is a massive challenge, one that merits *collective global action*.

5. Concluding remarks

Over the past 60 years, most SSA countries have faced huge challenges in achieving the UPE goal agreed on in 1961 for 1980. Many of these challenges will continue, and some major new concerns have emerged. Is it too optimistic to hope, in 2022, that the goal will be reached within the next 20 years? The answer depends on the success of SSA governments in prioritizing basic education, extended in duration and improved in content compared to the original UPE goal.

Further, while the main responsibility lies with SSA governments, this is a massive challenge with global implications, one that merits strong sustained global support. This is emphasized by the 2021 report from the *International Commission on the Futures of Education* (UNESCO, 2021b): while during the 20th century, compulsory public education was essentially aimed at supporting national citizenship and development efforts, in today's interdependent world, we must urgently reinvent education to help us address a number of common global challenges that no single nation can address alone. In this new multipolar world, education must help provide the knowledge and innovation needed to shape sustainable and peaceful futures for all, anchored in social, economic and environmental justice.

Notes

1. Prior to UNESCO, two small forerunners promoted such cooperation: the *International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation* (1922-1946), created by the League of Nations in 1921, located in Geneva with its executing agency in Paris; and the *International Bureau of Education* (IBE), located in Geneva. The IBE, initially a small NGO created in 1925 by prominent psychologists and pedagogues, became the first intergovernmental organization in education in 1929, and organized the first *International Conference on Education* in 1934. Since 1946, this biennial event has been held jointly with UNESCO. IBE helped develop UNESCO's education programs, and became an autonomous UNESCO institute in 1969.
2. At independence in 1960, Belgium Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC) did not have sufficient national staff to run a single government department. There were only 30 university graduates, no doctors and secondary-school teachers or army officers. In 1960, only 136 students completed secondary school. Kenya had its first African lawyer in 1956. In Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), only 35 Africans had pursued higher education by 1959, and in Nyasaland (now Malawi), the figure was just 28. At Tanganyika's (Tanzania) independence in 1961, every senior civil servant in Dar-es-Salaam, every provincial commissioner and 55 out of 57 district commissioners were still British expatriates (Fredriksen & Kagia, 2013, p. 33. Adapted from Meredith, 2011).
3. If not otherwise stated, all averages quoted for SSA are weighted averages, and all education data are derived by the author from the database of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

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