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Almadies, Route de la plage de Ngor, BP 3311 Dakar, Senegal
and
the African Union Commission (AUC), Department of
Education Science Technology and Innovation,
P.O. Box 3243, Roosevelt Street W21K19, Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia

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The Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25) was adopted by African Union heads of state and government, during its 26th Ordinary Session held in Addis Ababa on 31 January 2016, as the framework for transforming the continent's education and training systems. CESA concretized the vision set out in its Agenda 2063 for enabling citizens to be effective agents of change to achieve the 'Africa We Want'. It also localized the global Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goal on education (SDG 4) within the context of Africa-specific priorities and challenges.

At the 2018 Pan-African High-level Conference on Education (PACE), Member States asked the African Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to produce, on a regular basis, a continental report monitoring progress towards achieving the implementation of CESA 16-25 and SDG 4. The two organizations entrusted UNESCO's International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) to produce this

Placing equity at the heart of education policy



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Using a multidimensional approach to examine disparities in education, it discusses the links and intersections between household wealth, location, gender, home language, crisis and displacement, disability, and a child's access to quality education and learning. It presents both the patterns of disparities in education along these dimensions and the ongoing efforts by African governments for equitable and inclusive education. Equity must be placed at the centre of political prioritization, policy planning, and investment decisions in order to provide access to quality education at all levels and ensure learning opportunities that will enable children to thrive.

Although there may be no 'silver bullet' solution to inequality in broader society, equitable access to quality education has been identified as a particularly effective way to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. While over the past two decades, some countries have succeeded in coupling economic growth with greater equality, for others this has resulted in increased income inequality (UNDP, 2017).

Efforts to expand access to and improve the quality of education need to prioritize equity in learning so that the most vulnerable children are placed at the centre of policy decisions and investments. Most education systems experience segregation between the more able children and those who need the extra support. In addition to working around the more visible dimensions of equity (gender, location, poverty), it is important to delve into the invisible barriers¹ that prevent many children from benefiting from the educational experience (Banerji, 2014).

The negative effect that crises, conflicts, natural disasters, and unexpected events have on the most vulnerable children cannot be ignored. The analysis draws attention to the disproportionately negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on disadvantaged and marginalized children, which is likely to widen existing disparities both in access and learning (UNESCO, 2021; UNFPA and UNICEF, 2020).



Equity-related analyses are presented as a cross-cutting issue in all chapters of the report. **Chapter 2** summarizes the findings and provides the conceptual framework.



Early childhood education and school readiness

CESA ... **(ECE)** ... **A...** ... **a...** ... **a...** ... **a...** ... **a...** ... Its assertion about the importance of ECE ...

in Agenda 2030 and is captured concretely in SDG Target 4.2 which commits governments to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and education.

In their efforts to expand ECE services, African governments have adopted many different approaches (e.g. progressive universalization approach, community-based age-independent expansion approach), and used a broad range of service delivery models that vary in terms of their intensity (e.g. half-day versus full-day programmes, once per week versus five days per week programmes), location (institution-based, community based versus home-based services), and timing (year-long versus seasonal programmes using accelerated school readiness model). While this diversity is indicative of ECE's adaptability to needs and context, it also raises questions about the quality of education offered as implementation of the varying delivery models may not be uniform and may produce different results across contexts. There is clear evidence of the importance of quality in ECE for young children's learning and development (UNICEF, 2019; Adeniran, Ishaku and Akanni, 2020). The negative effects of low-quality programmes may go beyond unfulfilled promises of learning and developmental progress. They could place children's safety, health, and emotional well-being at risk (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, a focus on quality should be central to policy discussions around expanding access to ECE, not only with regards to the structural elements of the services, but also in terms of process-related (e.g. pedagogy, adult-child interactions) and system-level elements (e.g. standards and monitoring, financing, and management) (Rossiter, 2016). Inclusion also matters. For children with disabilities, access to ECE services can facilitate earlier identification of special needs and risk factors for developmental delay, enable the provision of integrated support, and complement ongoing early interventions (UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

The role ECE has in supporting a child's readiness for primary school also makes it a potential tool for mitigating the widening of inequalities in developmental outcomes in her/his early years of schooling, and a 'powerful opportunity to break intergenerational cycles of inequality' (UNICEF, 2019: 39). However, taking advantage of ECE's potential to increase equity will require 'bold measures that benefit disadvantaged children at least as much as their better-off peers' in each policy and investment decision, while at the same time expanding access to ECE (UNICEF, 2019: 39). For this, targeted early learning programmes and multisectoral intervention models with a focus on children facing adverse experiences are important building blocks. In this respect, providing ECE services during crises, such as conflicts, natural disasters, and pandemics, gains particular importance given its potential to mitigate their negative effects on young children's development. It is therefore important that governments give priority to quality, inclusion, and equity in their efforts to expand access to ECE.

In Africa, access to ECE varies much more than at other education levels. Within countries, disparities related to both wealth and location are pervasive, but the size of these gaps is different from one country to another. It is estimated that current public spending on pre-primary education in low-income countries covers only 10% of the total needed to provide universal access. Addressing this may require both an increase in the allocation of the education budget to ECE, and policy changes to use existing funds more efficiently (IIEP-UNESCO, 2021). Such changes (IIEP)17 (tion of t



not complete primary or secondary education, offering them the opportunity to catch up on their schooling and learning (UNICEF, 2017). In some African countries, out-of-school youth (OOSY) are offered the possibility of catching up on their learning or reintegrating into formal education. Programmes include the Malawi Adolescent Girls' Learning Partnership which helps girls get back into the formal education system (Mastercard Foundation, 2018).

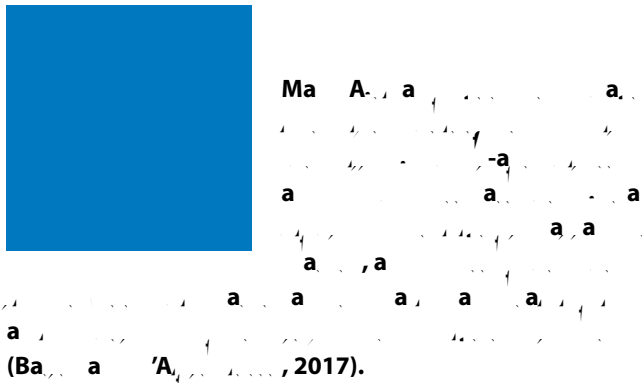
Non-formal schools, which includes community-based learning opportunities, have also been used to help provide equitable access to marginalized learners. One such example is in Mali, where over 51,000 out-of-school primary school age-children were reached through community learning centres and temporary learning spaces, in addition to through formal schools (UNICEF, 2020). Instructional coaching has also been recognized as potentially effective in improving learning outcomes in the global South where formal education and in-service professional development opportunities for teachers are often limited (Piper and Zuilkowski, 2015). In Kenya, for instance, there is evidence that coaching can help improve literacy in both public and non-formal schools.

Since 2020, ICT has become a vital component of efforts to enhance learning outcomes. Evidence from Kenya suggests that ICT interventions can help improve literacy outcomes, but that their impact is often shaped by the context in which they take place. Thus the results may not be solely dependent on the use of ICT (Piper et al., 2016). In response to COVID-19, many countries have turned to ICT as a way to help prevent learning losses, with evidence from Botswana suggesting that low-tech solutions (SMS messages, phone calls) can result in learning gains (Angrist et al., 2020). While these are important steps, governments continue to face the challenge of delivering equitable and quality education remotely when access to ICT infrastructure is unequal.



These findings are presented in greater detail in **Chapter 4** of the report.

Skills for work: TVET and tertiary education



In Agenda 2030, governments commit to ensuring equal access to a 'ordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education to increase the number of young people and adults who have the relevant skills needed to find employment, decent jobs, or become entrepreneurs, and to reduce the proportion of youth that are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). CESA also has a strong emphasis on skills for work. It highlights the paradigm shift promoted by the continental strategy to rethink TVET as the preparation of youth to become job creators rather than job seekers, and for the transformation of TVET from a simple amalgamation of technical and professional institutions into a coherent system for building quality skilled human resources. CESA similarly frames tertiary education in terms of 'meaningful and sustainable economic growth', and 'national development and global competitiveness' (African Union, 2016: 7).

Yet in nearly all African countries, the reality is that most young people will need to find or create employment in the informal sector, which is responsible for 86% of jobs across the continent (ILO, 2018). This calls for seeing the interaction between education, training, and work as non-linear, and therefore to contribute to the identification of alternative processes and mechanisms to formal schooling, that are facilitated, regulated, and enhanced by governments. If formalized through diplomas, they could better reflect the dual reality of the low completion rate in formal schooling and its impact on the acquisition of foundational skills and skills for work.

At present, skills mismatch is prevalent in the labour market. This implies a need to move beyond job-specific expertise and to focus also on a broader set of skills that include digital skills, foundational literacy-numeracy skills, and increasingly, soft skills (a set of intangible personal qualities, traits, attributes, habits, and attitudes that can be used in many different types of jobs) (IBE UNESCO, 2013). Institutional bottlenecks (i.e., concerns related to budget allocation, policy coordination, and information flows) are a major factor limiting the effectiveness of education and training in producing the skills needed in the labour market. More particularly, budget allocation decisions may be detached from the performance of TVET service providers (as measured by internal efficiency, outputs, and impact on beneficiaries), aggregate levels of funding may not reflect the importance of TVET for economic growth (World Bank, 2013), and institutional weaknesses may hinder the possibility of effective collaboration and coordination across ministries and between public and private sector actors (World Bank, 2015). To reduce the skills mismatch, several governments have undertaken system-level reforms (e.g. competency-based training approach to TVET) and programme-level interventions (e.g. complementary training to strengthen soft skills).

Low levels of investment in tertiary education institutions are also of concern. In some countries, the growing demand for post-secondary education has led to the diversification of the landscape for tertiary education, marked by the emergence of widespread and disparate private education provision (Lebeau and Oanda, 2020: 1). To address the variation in quality across these institutions, attention is being paid to the regulatory framework, and to accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms, while continuing to provide enabling operating environments for private providers. The Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF), championed by the AUC, seeks to harmonize higher education programmes to create a revitalized and globally competitive African higher education space, through intra-African collaboration (HAQAA, 2016). Wealth-related disparities in accessing quality tertiary education are another challenge in this space.

An analysis of youth employment, as captured by the benchmarking indicator 'proportion of youth aged 15-24 years not in education, employment or training' (NEET), also points to some of these challenges. Data from 11 countries on the proportion of NEET youth show notable differences. In some, one in eight young people are NEET while in others, the proportion is as high as one in three. In almost all of the countries, most of these are young women. However, this is a global phenomenon and the gender disparities in NEET in Africa are actually below the global average (ILO, 2020: 27). In almost all of the 25 countries with available data, enrolment in vocational education is less than 5%, and is below 1% in many of them. Government expenditure on TVET is similarly low as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP). There is almost no information available about other potential disparities in TVET access, based on household wealth, disability, and rural-urban location.

In most countries where data is available, the gross attendance ratio in tertiary education is below 10%. Moreover, wealth-based disparities in accessing tertiary education are sizable and pervasive, though the size of the gap varies across countries. In only a few countries, women and men have equal opportunity to attend tertiary education. For most of the remaining countries, men have disproportionate access to tertiary education, with more women enrolled in health-welfare, education, arts and humanities, and social sciences, and a much higher proportion of men enrolled in engineering-manufacturing and ICT-related programmes (Arias, Evans and Santos, 2019).



These findings are presented in greater detail in *Chapter 5* of the report.

Teachers

Governments in Africa are committed to **A**genda 2030 and **S**ustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Both in Agenda 2030 and

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CESA also describes education facilities as a strategic factor for expanding access to quality education. It identifies major disparities in the availability and quality of these facilities across the rich/poor and rural/urban divides (African Union, 2016), and highlights the need to invest in education facilities in hard-to-reach and marginalized areas (African Union, 2016). CESA also laments attacks on and military use of schools resulting in the few available infrastructures being damaged or destroyed (African Union, 2016). It further notes that the expansion of secondary education will mean there will be additional need for modern infrastructure at the tertiary level. It identifies ICTs as holding the potential for effective and lasting solutions to some of these challenges (African Union, 2016). Similarly, the 2018 Nairobi Declaration, focusing on transforming education to meet the 2063 Agenda for the 'Africa We Want' and the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, includes a commitment by governments and other stakeholders to make

Means of education policy implementation at the system level



B. CESA and Agenda 2030

Education planning, data availability and utilization, the mobilization of financial resources, the enactment of necessary legislation, the strengthening of partnerships, the establishment of institutional arrangements and coordination mechanisms, communication, and advocacy as vital to implementation. Of these, this report focuses on policy planning, education data, education financing, and enabling legal frameworks.

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Education planning: System-based policy planning can play an important role in government efforts for inclusive and equitable education. The route to significant progress towards parity in education is often not via the aggregation of single, discrete interventions, but rather requires system-wide reforms laid out in sector plans. The ongoing efforts of many African governments in formulating medium- and long-term sectoral plans are commendable.

Data: Data is important both for a sound diagnosis and effective policy implementation. Most governments in Africa have invested significant resources in producing education data to support sector planning and inform policies. With respect to implementation, data plays a dual role. It is a key element of monitoring efforts, review processes and revision considerations, and decisions around intensifying and tailoring efforts. It is also imperative for the accountability of all implementers, including the national government (UNESCO, 2015). A functional education management information system (EMIS) is critical for the collection and dissemination of data, and for facilitating its conversion

into policy-relevant statistics (World Bank, 2014). Many governments in Africa now have EMIS in place, but additional efforts are needed to improve data quality and production timelines.

Governments continue to face challenges in producing reliable and timely education statistics (Bonaventure, Assad and Derbala, 2018). For the benchmark indicators selected by AUC and UIS, for instance, some countries stand out as ‘data deserts’ or ‘near data deserts’ with limited information since 2015 for some benchmark indicators and none for others. Thus, targeted investments for institutional capacity building and innovative approaches to data collection in fragile contexts are needed in these countries. Moreover, data collection with an explicit focus on disparities in education may be a powerful tool for identifying and addressing inequalities in the system (LMTF, 2013). In this respect, the ability of EMIS to match data on access and learning with data on child and school characteristics is invaluable.

Just as important as the timely collection of disaggregated data is the effective use of such data at all stages of the education policy cycles.

Financing: Securing adequate and sustainable financing for equitable, quality education remains arguably the greatest impediment, particularly for low-income countries. Without additional financial resources, many countries, especially those that are furthest left behind, may not achieve the strategic objectives set out in CESA and the education targets of Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2021), especially in the COVID-19 context which has further exacerbated availability of resources (Heitzig, Ordu and Senbet, 2021). In addition, international aid often cannot constitute a stable source of funding because of its fluctuating nature, at times politicized motives, and uneven distribution across education levels (Dalrymple, 2016).

African governments face growing pressure to increase funding to deliver a higher quality of education across all levels, with a surging demand particularly for post-primary education (IIEP-UNESCO, 2018). In response, some have intensified their efforts to diversify funding sources, mobilize resources domestically, and explore innovative financing mechanisms. However, for many countries, these efforts are impeded by the shrinking fiscal space, especially in the face of the rapidly expanding debt-to-GDP ratio since the COVID-19 pandemic (Heitzig, Ordu and Senbet, 2021). In addition, sizable differences exist in terms of public spending on education as a share of GDP and total government expenditure, as well as in the allocation across education levels and in preferences given to private sector engagement. This variation is most notable for early childhood education and tertiary education.



These findings are presented in greater detail in *Chapter 8* of the report.

Key findings



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SDG 4 a CESA a . This report provides a practical and globally comparable set of indicators and data, mostly from UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics), sourced from a large number of countries covering the past few years. It also documents the most salient policies and initiatives that African countries have been developing in recent years to address these challenges.

The analysis reveals important trends that are summarized in the following five key messages:

- Many policies have been tried out and much is already known about what works and what does not. To build on existing policy experiences, pan-African efforts facilitating mutual learning across countries, especially more opportunities to share their experiences, deserve more attention and investment.
- Planning and progress are hampered by limited data, particularly on disparities. Ongoing efforts to improve the quality, coverage, and frequency of data collection and analysis are invaluable and deserve further investment. Data are crucial for defining priorities, targeting resources, strengthening accountability, and ensuring effective delivery of service in education systems (Read and Atinc, 2017). The challenge is twofold: to support countries in improving the availability and quality of data, and to promote strategies for its continuous use in decision-making and implementation.
- A rising tide does not lift all boats. Equity needs to be at the heart of policy planning and investment decisions at all levels of education so that no child is left behind.
- Timely and accurate information on the state of education provision, with a focus on the challenges facing implementers and available resources and capabilities, is crucial to formulating ambitious yet realistic strategic plans.
- The disruption created by the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a real threat to hard-earned progress. African governments now face the dual challenge of investing in system-level components to build resilience into the foundations of their education systems, and investing in the capabilities and motivations of key stakeholders (particularly teachers) so that they are willing and able to adapt to future challenges.

Given how important the collection, coverage, and quality of data is to informing sound analysis and rigorous education policy planning, it is hoped that future studies and reports will have access to more quality evidence. Beyond the snapshot that this report offers of ongoing challenges in the sector, further clarification of the link between education quality and economic development would be useful to highlight its importance for the fulfilment of Africa's aspirations for a better future³ for all its citizens.

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This executive summary outlines the main points made in the report, *Education in Africa: Placing equity at the heart of policy*. It was produced following a request by Member States at the Pan-African High-level Conference on Education (PACE 2018). They invited the African Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to conduct an analysis of education on a regular basis. The two organizations entrusted UNESCO's International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) to produce the first of these reports. The partnership allowed the acquisition of knowledge that will be used to achieve our goals. A central point made in the report is the importance of focusing on equity. Without it, efforts to improve educational access and quality may inadvertently widen existing disparities. Therefore, equity must be at the heart of policy decisions and investments in order to break intergenerational cycles of inequality.

The elements presented are a starting point for the quest for universal access to quality education. The African continent must be at the centre of our concerns to provide its countries with a solid foundation for sustainable development. The task is not simple, but with determination, motivation, and commitment it will be possible to lead these initiatives successfully. The adoption of positive policies, the deployment