

Challenges and approaches

Expanding learning opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa



Wim Hoppers and Steven Obeegadoo

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Focus on post-primary education

The expansion of post-primary education (PPE) cannot be conceived of as a policy option for African ministries of education for it is already unfolding across the region, although the pace and precise pattern may vary according to specific country realities. The Average Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in secondary education as a whole rose from 24% in 1999 to 32% (38% in lower secondary education) in 2005 (UNESCO, 2007). The 'spill-over' effects of the drive for Universal Primary Education (UPE) since the late 1990s are plain to see. Of the total number of children completing primary schooling, an average of 80% entered secondary education, compared to only 60% in 1990 (UNESCO/BREDA, 2007).

Against this backdrop and within a context marked by socio-political instability, runaway population growth, financial constraints and limited technical and managerial expertise in ministries, the actual choice for decision-makers is either one of making educational history or of being subjected to history in the making. In other words, the expansion of PPE, especially at lower and upper secondary levels, cannot be stopped but it can be better planned and regulated to ensure equitable access to relevant and effective learning opportunities in a sustainable manner. In selecting PPE as the theme for both the 2008 ADEA Biennale and the 2008 Conference of Francophone Education Ministers (CONFEMEN), African ministers of education have clearly indicated where their immediate policy concerns lie, next only to UPE.

Why post-primary education?

Since the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All, and more so since the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum, a considerable body of educational research on Africa has produced empirical data testifying to the added value of PPE, both in terms of its economic and social incidence (Amelewonou and Brossard, 2005; Hanushek and Wobmann, 2007; SEIA, 2007; UNESCO/BREDA, 2007).

Demand and supply factors in PPE expansion

There are two forces at play in the accelerated development of African PPE in recent years. On the one hand, there has been a vast increase in the social demand for access to secondary and tertiary learning opportunities. On the other hand, governments have sought to expand public provision of PPE to promote economic and social development. As and when demand has outstripped public supply of educational services, local communities have taken matters into their own hands – with or without initial government support – to open community schools, and profit and non-profit private providers have intervened to launch new schools and universities. The two main drives for boosting the demand for PPE are outlined below.

- 1 Social aspirations and expectations.** Education and, increasingly, extended education, is considered by parents and youth alike to be the prime determinant of life chances and the great social equaliser. In particular, the perception of returns (in terms of projected earnings) to continuing education beyond primary school has evolved significantly over the last decade as a result of the spread of information and means of communication (World Development Report, 2007).
- 2 Economic rationale and social development requirements.** Global competition for investment, access to technology and a share in commodity markets and international trade are making governments throughout Africa painfully aware of the crucial importance of human capital as a driver of economic growth. The key challenge is therefore to explore the ways and means of aligning national educational systems with the economy, especially at post-primary level, where the necessary higher order skills are acquired.

Governments also increasingly consider that in order to fight poverty and promote social development there is no more effective weapon than education, especially in conjunction with economic growth. Extending the school life expectancy of young Africans beyond primary education impacts directly upon the permanency of literacy, HIV/AIDS awareness, fertility rates and childbearing patterns, childcare, and the school attendance of future generations. (UNESCO/BREDA, 2005; Rakotomalala, 2008).

Convinced of the significant added value of post-primary and especially lower-secondary education, some African governments have been committing a significant volume of resources to expansion of access to learning opportunities beyond five or six years. Public expenditure on education in Africa is on average



4.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as compared to 3.2% in Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and 5.6% in North America and Europe (UIS 2007). In 2005, on average, 27% of public spending on education in Africa went to secondary education, ranging from 10% in Burkina Faso to 41% in Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mauritius (UNESCO, 2007).

During the last decade, SSA made a great leap forward in terms of primary schooling coverage but according to latest data, 33m children still have no schooling. Repetition continues to plague the system, whereas less than two thirds of children complete primary-level schooling. Overall quality appears to have declined as a direct result of rapid expansion, and regional assessments (PASEC and SACMEQ) suggest that the level of competencies of primary students in maths and languages are inadequate (World Development Report, 2007).

As a direct consequence of rapid expansion, secondary education enrolments have increased by 55% within six years. Between 1999 and 2005, GER increased from 15% to 31% in Ethiopia, from 5% to 13% in Mozambique, and from 14% to 31% in Guinea. Yet inter-country variations in secondary GER are very wide, extending from 10% in Niger to 105% in the Seychelles. Moreover, a lower secondary GER of 38% still compares very unfavourably with that of 66% in South and West Asia and 51% in the Arab states (UIS).

Towards a holistic response

The concept of post-primary education used to frame the analytical work for the Biennale is an integrated one. It focuses on learning opportunities made available to children and young people who have completed primary schooling or equivalent. Thus it is in principle on all education and training beyond primary education. In this context, PPE also includes higher education, involving both universities and higher professional training institutions, and is thus taken to be open-ended. As regards the beneficiary side, the target age group starts at 11–12 years; but in the perspective of the Biennale, no restrictive upper limit to the age group focus is applicable.

Holistic perspective

The above means that PPE is approached from a holistic and comprehensive view of the totality of learning opportunities at post-primary level. These include those generally ascribed to particular 'sub-sectors', such as lower and upper secondary education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), non-formal education, non-formal skills development, tertiary education and distance education. It also extends to opportunities beyond the confines of the conventional education system, such as faith-based education, informal sector apprenticeships, work-based training, life skills development and e-learning.

Such a holistic view is considered essential, not only because young people who have access to PPE find themselves learning through

different programmes, but also because it is unlikely that at any time soon one type of post-primary institution will be able to absorb the entire eligible age group. Policy-making and planning must, therefore, take cognisance of a diversity of inter-related pathways that cater for learning needs at PPE level, in a manner that suits prevailing circumstances of the intended beneficiaries.

According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), basic education encompasses primary and lower secondary grades (1–9). In this classification, non-formal education (NFE) is an entirely separate category. In the majority of countries in Africa, however, basic education consists of a cycle of less than nine years of schooling, while forms of NFE effectively contribute to the expansion of formal education. Thus the Biennale aims at moving the education debate on policy and practice from a focus on primary education to one on an extended and integrated approach to basic education.

For the purpose of the Biennale, it is recognised that the starting point for reflection and policy formation in PPE should lie with the current realities of education and training on the ground, and the demands and needs of children, young people and their

Schoolchildren at play in Africa

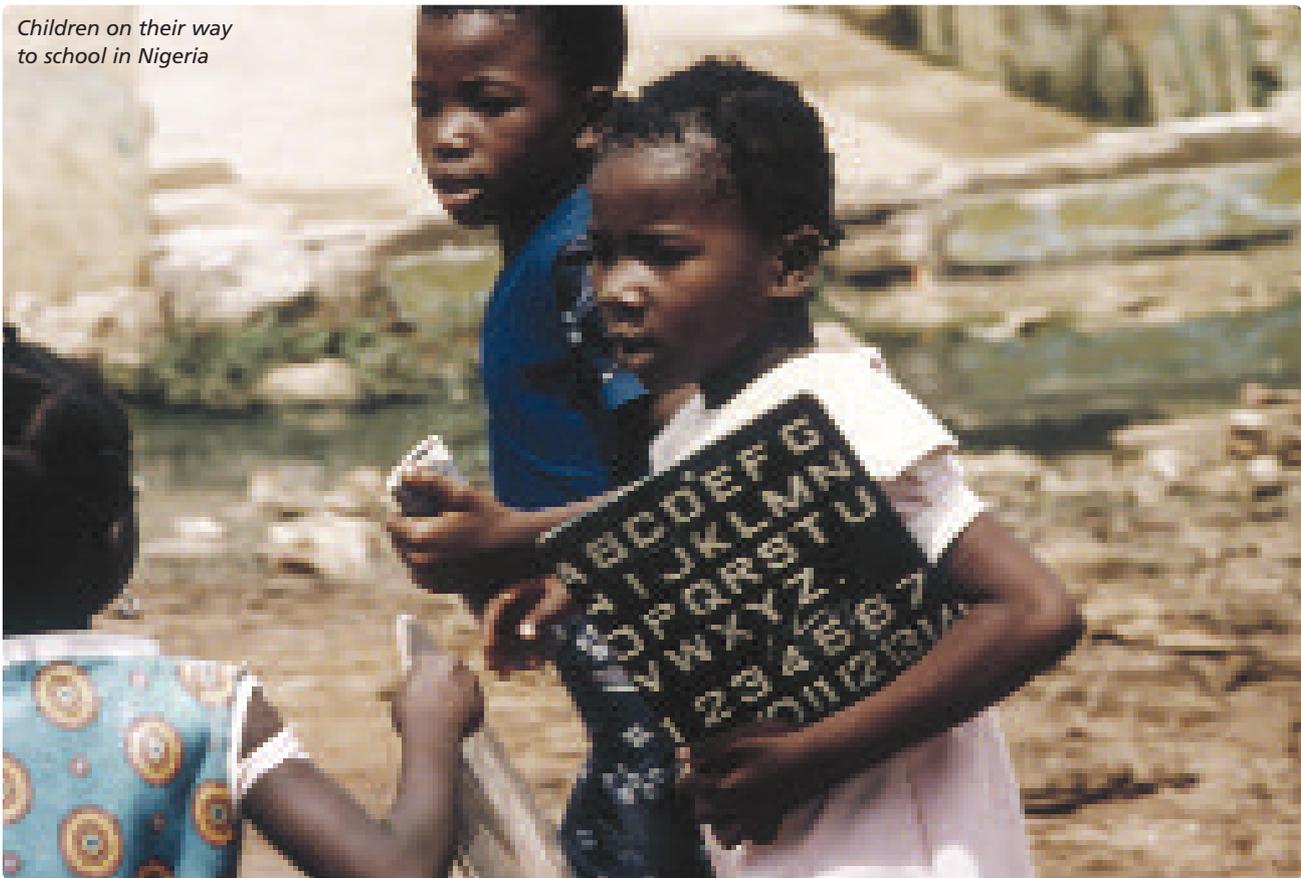


communities for high-quality, relevant and responsive learning opportunities that provide equal opportunity in life for all. Other starting points include a shared vision associated with accepted common principles like democracy, equity, human rights and non-discrimination. Beyond these, there are also principles associated with relations between inputs and results: costs in relation to affordability and fiscal sustainability; learning outcomes in relation to quality of inputs and process; and external efficiency.

While it is recognised that, ideally, all children should have access to nine years of formal schooling following the current models of provision, the reality is that most young people have had to make do with a wide variety of other learning opportunities (of informal and non-formal type) to receive basic education, much of which focuses more on skills training than on cognitive development. In spite of great efforts through EFA, in many countries, only a minority reaches the point that according to official regulations they can start benefiting from formal PPE opportunities. There is



Children on their way to school in Nigeria



much unfinished business in the current EFA agenda that cannot be ignored in the effort to expand PPE. Thus the expansion of secondary education supply will have to go hand in hand with targeting specific groups that still lack access to primary education (SEIA, 2007; UNESCO, 2005).

This expansion also needs to acknowledge that large numbers of young people in their adolescent years who should be benefiting from upper-basic education (at secondary level) are, in reality, still struggling to complete lower-basic education (primary school) or receive only a minimal amount of attention through incomplete skills development programmes of one type or another.

At a higher level, post-basic education and training starts with forms of upper secondary education, referring to all types of education and training beyond lower secondary (or upper-basic education). This definition is problematic, as the notion of upper secondary tends to vary from country to country. Thus it is more convenient to speak of upper secondary being the final segment of secondary education before entry into employment, into higher-level technical or professional training, or into higher education.

It should also be acknowledged that, although upper secondary refers in the first instance to formal schooling, access to university and other institutions of higher education is not confined to students from formal education, as it is increasingly widening to include those with non-formal, technical and informal learning and experiences.

Higher education consists of all types of post-upper secondary school education and training offered by universities and non-university tertiary institutions such as polytechnics, professional

training institutions and colleges of further education (Kinyanjui and Afeti, 2008). In the same way that at tertiary level a greater diversity of learning opportunities has been achieved, so it is the case at secondary level; however, inter-linkages between these levels is absent, thus emphasising the need for a holistic approach with attention to efficiency and complementarity.

Diversity

The Biennale faces two major challenges of transition in PPE. One concerns how the transition from a conventional primary cycle into a continued upper level of basic education can be managed in such way that all children benefit from a high-quality and complete cycle of basic education. The other is about how opportunities for higher education can be shaped in such way that they can optimally respond to the cognitive and social profiles of graduates from upper secondary education and training, while remaining true to their own mission and the intellectual demands of their programmes.

Consequently, there is the challenge of how other forms of delivery can assist in providing multiple learning pathways and mixtures of general education and skills development that offer cost-effective transitions from one level to the next. Ironically, as regards the transition from lower-basic to upper-basic education, a significant result of its improvement would be the very demise of the term 'post-primary education' and of its use as a policy category.

Diversity in basic and post-basic education is essential, partly in order to enable learners to have as complete an education as possible, and partly in order to cater for the wide variation in



children's and young people's life circumstances. It is recognised that for a long time to come conditions of cultural practices, widespread poverty, geographical distribution, ill health and disability will prevent many young men and women from attending conventional full-time schooling or further studies. They will thus depend on flexible modes of delivery, as well as on adjustments in the total mix of competencies that constitute desirable outcomes for education.

In the context of the challenge to manage a diversified system there two major principles that can be regarded as giving critical significance: equity and cost-effectiveness. Equity as regards access to resources and access to the outcomes/benefits of an education cycle is vital in order to adhere to the imperatives of democracy and human rights (World Development Report, 2007). Both aspects do not assume that institutions of all types and in all situations receive the same support; it points to the need to implement measures to ensure that learners, irrespective of background and circumstances, have the same chances of achieving a successful outcome (Scott and Yeld, 2008).

Changing perspectives on the substance of education

Perspectives underlying new initiatives

Current developments in Africa and at the global level have suggested that major changes are required in the very nature, orientation, methodologies, and assessment of learning in PPE. The following are increasingly becoming regarded as essential.

- 1 **A move from an elitist system to a mass/democratic system.** This implies the removal of institutional, pedagogical, curricular and teaching barriers between early childhood, lower-basic and upper-basic education for young people. Such approach opens the possibility to develop an integrated and inclusive curriculum framework for basic education as a whole, irrespective of modality for delivery. This allows for recognition of multiple, but equivalent, pathways to learning (cf. Bhuwanee, 2008; Kigali Call for Action, 2007).
- 2 **A shift from teaching to learning.** The key organisational principle in education is learning, as this is the purpose of all education and training. Good-quality education ensures relevant and meaningful learning, motivation for learning, and competencies to continue learning. Rather than de-emphasising teaching, it underscores the relationship between quality learning and quality teaching. Moreover, it acknowledges the blurred boundaries and complementarities between different forms of education (Torres, 2003).
- 3 **From the maintenance of historical disciplinary areas and knowledge barriers to inter-disciplinary approaches addressing real-life problem situations.** Relevant education that is student-centred takes everyday situations as the starting point for constructing programmes of learning. Such programmes draw on different resources from various subject areas to construct learning situations in order to develop appropriate competencies as outcomes of the education process. Because it facilitates self-paced learning, the competency-based approach is regarded as a valid instrument to reduce school

drop-out and contribute to the attainment of an inclusive curriculum, thus working towards the effective democratisation of education (Opertti, 2008).

- 4 **From curriculum as product – i.e., knowledge to be acquired – to curriculum as integrated process and product – i.e., the development of a range of skills, values and attitudes as well as knowledge.** This implies a significant broadening of the variety of learning areas and types of learning. It invites attention to, for example, life and health-related skills, work-related skills, entrepreneurship, use of ICTs and citizenship education (Bhuwanee *et al.*, 2008). Approaches to this include in-school and out-of-school arrangements (Allemano and Nzioka, 2008; Diop *et al.*, 2008).
- 5 **From knowledge and skills to competencies as products of learning.** The notion of competencies has moved from vocational education into curriculum development in general. Competencies are defined as articulation of knowledge, skills values, attitudes, behaviours, routines and patterns of thinking, which individuals or groups can mobilise efficiently and autonomously in order to solve problems and successfully face challenges and opportunities. Competencies do not exist in the abstract, but are constructed within specific socio-political situations, reflecting a vision of humanity and society (Stabback *et al.*, 2008).
- 6 **New perspectives on 'vocationalised' education.** While scepticism about vocational subjects in schools has remained, new perspectives have emerged based on a reconceptualisation of vocationalisation. This focuses on the need to overcome the general-vocational divide and move from occupation-related skills to building a range of basic skills and core competencies (including thinking, practical and communication skills) needed to produce flexible, adaptable, multi-skilled and trainable youth destined for employment in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy, and facilitate access to further and higher education and training (UNESCO, 2005; Wilson, in Lauglo and Maclean, 2005).
- 7 **From formal TVET to a diversity of learning arrangements for skills development.** A distinction can be made between TVET as the formal component of vocational education, located in the formal education system at the post-basic level, on the one hand, and the notion of vocational 'skills development' as a more generic component of learning across all basic education, on the other. In the latter meaning, skills development at various levels can and does take place in a wide variety of arrangements and settings, including combinations with formal cognitive learning, work-based learning and enterprise-based training. In reality, formal TVET tends to cover only a fraction of all skills development in African society (UNESCO, 2005).
- 8 **From single mode to multiple modes of delivery, using different technologies including ICTs.** Learning can be done using different modes and technologies. Their development, usage and appreciation by different categories of learners is not only determined by costs in relation to benefits, but also by socio-historical factors influencing the 'image' of such variations. Much effort is made to experiment with alternative technologies and increase their visibility as equivalent pathways to learning (Mhlanga, 2008).



Enabling teachers, managers and support personnel to be up to these tasks requires good management and governance, including incentives for in-service training and higher performance, and participation in decision-making in professional matters. Above this would require an integrated approach to teacher training and development across the totality of basic education, along with an integrated teacher career and remuneration system, something that is thoroughly lacking at present (Webb, 2008).

Policy implications

Such moves towards integrated yet diversified education and training have major implications for policy-making. These include:

- Ensuring major gains in cost-efficiency combined with a controlled and targeted increase of public and private expenditures across the system.
- Promoting equity and responsiveness to social and economic needs in all education and training, including the provision of remedial and second chance education for those who have been excluded or who have dropped out due to poor quality of provision.
- Paying significant attention to systemic articulation, i.e., the creation of effective bridges and ladders across education and training provisions.
- Placing emphasis on the development of system-wide professional support services and equitable funding mechanisms, and approaching assessment, validation of learning, qualifications systems and quality assurance more effectively.
- Enhancing the roles of ministries of education in relation to co-ordination, policy support, supervision and quality control; and developing appropriate frames for public-private partnerships.
- Making greater effort to build institutional capabilities of ministries, civil society and private partner organisations for policy-making, planning and systems management.

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DR WIM HOPPERS is an independent education policy analyst and researcher. He is Visiting Professor at Stockholm University Institute of International Education and consultant to the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). From 1993 to 2004 he served as Regional Education Advisor to the Netherlands Government in Southern Africa, based in Pretoria. He has published widely on policy and practice related to education alternatives.

STEVEN OBEGADOO is currently Director of Education for All at UNESCO, Paris, after having served as Senior Education Consultant at the World Bank. He has had a distinguished career as a barrister and politician in Mauritius, and was Minister of Education from 2000 to 2005. He also co-ordinates the Working Group on Post-Primary Education of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).