

# Education in Ghana 2006–13: A view from the UK

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The proportion of public resources that Ghana devotes to education is amongst the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa and, at an estimated 8.4 per cent (2012) of GDP, is well above accepted benchmarks. Education consumes 29 per cent of the total government expenditure: it is the biggest and most costly sector, employing more than half of the public work force. Unit costs have risen steadily over the past eight years, far in excess of the rate of inflation (see Figure 1).

Ghana's aspirations for education are set out in the ten-year Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2010–20. The broad goals of the earlier ESP 2003–15 remain, centred around universal access, improved quality and relevance, and greater efficiency. The new ESP 2010–20 is expressed more around the organisation and structure of the education system.

Ghana has never had difficulty in articulating policy intent and the ESP 2010–20 sets out the future vision. Contained within this (under the SWOT analysis) are some of the risks that are seen to impinge upon likely success. These include:

- The inequitable distribution of resources and benefits
- Ineffective means of ensuring returns on rising costs
- Official and unofficial absences
- Diminishing public perceptions of the value of education

Where Ghana has had less success is in its resolve to implement policy, in particular to square up to the tough political decisions needed to establish a stronger basis for change.

The recent political economy analysis of education (Clarke and Smail, 2012) highlights some key concerns. Political accountability for effective service delivery is weak. This is not helped by generally weak public information on real priorities and issues, and the poor use of evidence in making policy choices. Politically, public spending on education is seen as a way to win elections rather than promote long-term development goals. Teachers are an important part of the 'client networks' essential to winning votes. Thus, election promises for reform and change often do not materialise and the key constraints, particularly around deployment and management of teachers, persist. Political preference remains for high visibility projects, namely those that provide infrastructure or limited, but appealing, 'magpie' ICT ventures.

## Access and equity

*Although spending on public basic education in Ghana has increased substantially, compared with the rich, the poorest in society appear to have made the smallest gains in terms of participation in basic education.*

– Akeampong and Rollerton, 2013

Figure 1: Annual unit cost per primary pupil 2006–13



From a short 'lessons learned' paper commissioned as part of the Project Completion Review process of DFID's Support to the Education Strategic Plan 2006–13, anticipating the new sector support programme. The Health and Education Advice and Resource Team (HEART) provides services as a consortium of leading organisations in international development, health and education: Oxford Policy Management, CfBT, FHI360, HERA, the Institute of Development Studies, IPACT, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, and the Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development at the University of Leeds.



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*Ghana has made progress towards universal basic education through the 1995 Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education programme and the 2005 Capitation Grant Scheme. Pictured: an outdoor elementary school in the Yilo Krobo District near Accra*

Ghana made strong early progress towards universal basic education, brought about through a series of policy shifts following independence, and significantly accelerated through the 1995 Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme and, a decade later, with the introduction of the Capitation Grant Scheme (2005).

The most impressive gains since 2006 have been in expanding access to kindergarten, where the gross enrolment ratio (GER) has risen from 75 per cent to 114 per cent, with more girls enrolled than boys. At primary level, GERs have risen from 86 per cent to 105 per cent, with more modest gains experienced at junior secondary, seeing the GER rise from 70 per cent to 82 per cent. Increases in access have been uneven, with a number of districts remaining where primary GERs have stayed below the 2006 average.<sup>1</sup>

Recent years have seen growing recognition of these geographical differences, with policy and programmes shifting towards closing the gap in 'deprived districts' through more targeted efforts on both the supply and demand sides. Donors and civil society organisations (CSOs) play a major role in improving services in deprived areas.

Research conducted by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) has added much to our understanding of access to education. Research on 'zones of exclusion' found that a little over a third of Primary 1 children attend school regularly and learn appropriately, but by the

end of primary level this drops to a fifth. Factors that drive non-enrolment are rooted in poverty, the need for child labour, family size and limited parental education.

Supply-side factors also influence whether children go to school and the quality of education is also important, so policies need to focus on these factors. Offering more flexible school hours that align with the economic lives of rural communities will help to overcome the conflict between school and labour.

## Teacher training and quality

There is a general consensus that Ghana is failing to deliver on education quality. A major focus has been on teacher training, but this has achieved only partial success: the proportion of trained primary teachers is 76 per cent, only eight percentage points higher than in 2006. The difference between regions is again most striking, with the north substantially worse off.

The establishment of the Untrained Teacher Diploma in Basic Education (UTDBE) programme in 2003 has allowed many teachers to gain qualifications cost-effectively, but there has been no formal assessment of the quality of graduates or comparisons with more conventional programmes. Recent work points to ways to strengthen the UTDBE model, particularly through more trainee support and continuous assessment.

An area of considerable neglect has been school leadership. Research undertaken by UCC (EdQual, 2010) showed that pupils' motivation and learning improved in schools where heads were

actively supported in school self-evaluation and focused on promoting the right conditions for learning. Ghana records very poor 'time on task' resulting from high levels of teacher absenteeism and loss of lesson time, effectively reducing instructional time to 40 per cent of that expected in a school year.

Ghana has successfully sustained its biannual National Education Assessment since 2005. Overall this has shown improvements in competency and proficiency, although proficiency levels are low and there are familiar regional variations: rural children are much less likely to achieve minimum competency and proficiency levels.

### Learning and language

A key finding from the 2003 ESP was the need to measure learning achievement effectively to help drive improvements in quality. The continuing inability to do this remains a significant problem.

The success of establishing initial literacy in a child's mother tongue is demonstrated in the School for Life programmes, with some evidence from the National Education Assessment 2011 pointing to higher achievement among pupils undertaking the National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP). The impact of language on learning is frequently overlooked, with recent research (VSO, 2013) identifying the language of instruction as the 'greatest inhibitor to learning in the classroom' and finding little evidence that NALAP is being used in schools.

Children can also be excluded from learning due to a strong tendency for teachers to focus on more able, vocal pupils and ignore the silent majority. This is noted in research, but seems to be rarely picked up on in training agendas. The use of ICT in education in Ghana is, meanwhile, largely restricted to a few high-profile, politically driven projects with limited reach.

Training and professional development opportunities for teachers in Ghana tend to be ad hoc and frequently associated with donor projects. Ghana has adopted an approach through which all

teachers are supposed to receive professional development in after-school sessions, but no robust evaluation of the model has been conducted. This is symptomatic of a wider problem in the education sector of focusing on activity rather than effectiveness.

A more productive way of improving learning achievement is associated with the Teacher Community Assistance Initiative (TCAI), under which young volunteers run remedial programmes. Research found that this had a positive effect on test scores.

### Management and governance

A well-developed process for education planning, monitoring and reporting has emerged. Actions and resource allocations are, therefore, at least notionally aligned with the Education Sector Plan. But frequent reviews have reiterated the point that operational plans can only be realised through adequate funds, with constant pressure on the non-salary recurrent budget making some of these unachievable.

Capacity for planning, monitoring and reporting have improved significantly. There are high levels of compliance with the process. Programmes such as USAID's Partnership for Accountable Governance in Education (PAGE) have been effective in building capacity, with a focus on deprived districts seen as giving them some capacity advantage over non-deprived areas. The active presence of many CSOs in northern Ghana plays a vital role in supporting service delivery.

However, a strong culture of compliance has not created an equally strong culture of enquiry after results. The National Inspectorate

### The growth of private schools

The past decade has seen steady growth in private schooling. The National Education Assessment (NEA) 2011 reports that private schools are performing better than public schools. While still predominantly an urban phenomenon, private education is becoming more widespread. Less than one per cent of the rural poor accessed private schools in 1991–92, but the figure had increased to more than ten per cent by 2005–06 (Akeampong and Rollerton, 2013). Total enrolment in government primary schools declined between 2012 and 2013, but has continued to increase in private schools.

The private sector clearly plays an important part in Ghana's progress towards the MDGs, accounting for 23 per cent of total enrolments, yet there are no formal partnership arrangements that build on its advantages. The role of the private sector in supporting government policy of universal basic education cannot be under-estimated. Simple arithmetic points to enrolment in private schools effectively 'saving' the government more than GHC850 million a year based on current public unit costs and more than 1.6 million children in private basic schools.

### Seven years of progress

The education sector looks very different in 2013 from the way it did in 2006. The major changes are:

- More than three million more children enrolled in basic education (a 70 per cent increase)
- More than 4,000 more primary schools
- Greatly improved gender parity, almost equal participation at the primary level
- Fifteen per cent more children at Primary 6 showing minimum levels of competency in English, and ten per cent more in maths
- A total education budget nearly GHC2 billion bigger

But a number of things look much the same, or worse:

- Still more than 30 per cent of primary teachers are untrained
- The number of textbooks students can access has decreased
- Wide inequalities in funding, access and quality exist between regions and between urban and rural areas

The demand for education – and good education – is as great now as it was a decade ago and some of the key challenges that existed then still remain, particularly in relation to high levels of teacher absenteeism, low levels of instructional time and an imbalance in education spending between salaries and investment, goods and services.

Board (NIB) has attempted to set out basic standards more clearly through its *Learning, not just schooling* publication, but this is not yet widely disseminated or used. There is therefore no coherent way in which basic standards are set, communicated and then used to manage schools. Sanctions are very rarely used to censor ill discipline and there are no obvious incentives to encourage, recognise and reward good performance.

Ghana has been slow in taking forward the decentralisation process and there remains lack of clarity and conviction around the future course of action. This continued ambivalence has an impact on central departments whose future roles and mandates are unclear: teacher education and inspection being two cases in point.

Ghana has long recognised the importance of communities in education. They play a vital role in determining access and are also seen as having influence over what goes on in schools.<sup>2</sup> Research in the north of Ghana (VSO, 2013) stresses the key role that communities play, but also reports ‘fatigue’ with constant demands to compensate for failures in the system (e.g. paying stipends to volunteer teachers) and not getting a response to frequently voiced concerns. Indeed the deployment and management of the teaching force is Ghana’s largest and most pervasive challenge.

According to the Ministry of Education: ‘The inequitable deployment of teachers is arguably the most regressive feature of the education sector.’<sup>3</sup>

Sector level support and general budget support by donors have failed to do more than scratch the surface. There is no shortage of analysis: all major reports produced over the past decade continue to point in the same direction. The recent political economy analysis (Clarke and Smail, 2012) highlights the need for a collective effort within Ghana involving various arms of government and, most importantly, the teachers’ unions in setting a more ‘transformational agenda’ for change.

## Concluding remarks: The role of donors

A close and cordial partnership has developed over the past two decades. The arrangement may be loosely described as a sector-wide approach (SWAP), though few donors (DFID and World Bank) have committed to financing through the sector budget. The sector is not crowded, having five key players: DFID, World Bank, USAID, UNICEF and JICA, with the Israeli Embassy also involved in kindergarten education.

Donors for the most part pursue their own projects and programmes, which respond to some extent to the priorities of the ESP. This is perhaps more a comment on the breadth of the ESP and its ability to accommodate all interests, rather than a collective agreement and pursuit of core priorities. External financing constitutes around 2.5 per cent of total annual education spending: an amount that the Ghanaian government could quite easily generate through some relatively soft efficiency reforms. However, it is the inability to direct funds to non-salary expenditures and the fact that external resources (whether on budget or through projects) provide much of the impetus for goods and services that allows donors considerable voice.

External funds therefore largely substitute those of government and as such are more palliative than catalytic or transformational, with poor prospects of eventual sustainability. Much donor activity has a restricted geographical focus, working to initiate reform or embed improved practice in a select number of districts. The assumption is that such piloting will eventually be scaled up and funded through domestic resources.

Development partners are seen therefore as being helpful and useful – relatively high transaction costs in terms of time and procedures are tolerated in return for the goods and services they bring. Ideally the relationship should combine both support, based on openness and mutual trust (which do exist), and challenge. But at present the policy dialogue often circumvents the really key challenges: binding constraints on payroll control, teacher rationalisation, performance management and budgetary imbalance.

## Endnotes

- 1 GER rates, reported in excess of 150 per cent in some districts, show substantial over-aged enrolment, which in turn is associated with subsequent drop out and low achievement. Girls are more disadvantaged than boys by being over-aged. It is estimated that 40 per cent of children in Primary 1 are aged eight years or above. Ensuring children start school at the right age has not received sufficient attention, though Ghana does not experience high repetition rates.
- 2 Recent analysis (WB, 2011) estimates that, whereas they exist in more than 80 per cent of schools, School Management Committees (SMCs) only appear to be functional in around 60 per cent. The increasing migration of better-off children and parents into the private sector, which offers a better option for meeting their educational needs, further weakens the voice of remaining communities, lessening their ability to exert influence.
- 3 AESOP (Ministry of Education, Annual Education Sector Operational Plan), 2012–14.

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