

# Schools struggling with crises

*Financial constraints hamper expansion of primary education in Africa*

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Dakar



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There is a typical image of an African school: A solitary teacher stands before 70-80 students. Perhaps there is a blackboard and chalk. The students may have desks, maybe just benches or the floor to sit on. Some may go to a school that has a few books or exercise tablets. Some may have no classrooms, but must sit outside, under a tree. Two out of every five African children are far less lucky — there is no school at all.

By virtually any standard, education in sub-Saharan Africa lags far behind most other developing regions. One obvious reason is that the continent is the poorest. Without large and growing

economies, governments have very limited tax bases to finance public school systems, while the bulk of African families cannot afford the high fees charged by private schools.

Another reason is that Africa began to develop modern schools — as distinct from traditional forms of education — much more recently, to a limited extent during the colonial era, but more seriously with the achievement of independence in the 1960s. At the start of that decade, sub-Saharan Africa's primary school gross enrolment ratio (all enrolled primary students, including those under- or over-aged, as a percentage of the primary school age-group) was just

39 per cent. That was far behind Asia's ratio of 67 per cent and Latin America's 73 per cent.

## Progress and setbacks

The next two decades were periods of remarkable improvement, as many African governments energetically sought to promote industrial development and increase the skills and health of their people. By 1982, according to World Bank data, the gross enrolment ratio for primary education across sub-Saharan Africa had risen steadily to nearly 85 per cent (see graph). A number of countries — including Angola, Botswana, Cape Verde, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania — even were able to reach

nearly universal primary education by the start of the 1980s.

The rest of that decade was one of sharp reverses, however. Much of Africa was hit by economic crisis, as rising oil import costs, high debt servicing burdens and stringent austerity measures cut deeply into government spending, including for education. As a share of gross national product (GNP), public expenditure on education in sub-Saharan Africa fell from 3.8 per cent in 1980 to 3.1 per cent in 1988 (see graph). But since African economies themselves were stagnating or shrinking, the decline in education's share translated into an even sharper drop in actual spending.

The structural adjustment programmes introduced in many African countries during the 1980s and early 1990s placed a particular constraint on educational financing, many development experts have argued. Promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), these programmes, especially in the early years, often obliged African governments to cut "non-essential" public expenditures any way they could. As a result, African education ministries found themselves without enough money to even maintain existing school systems, let alone expand them. Public sector hiring freezes made it difficult to recruit more teachers, while drastic declines in teachers' purchasing power led many to try to supplement their salaries with outside work, reducing the time they spent in classrooms.

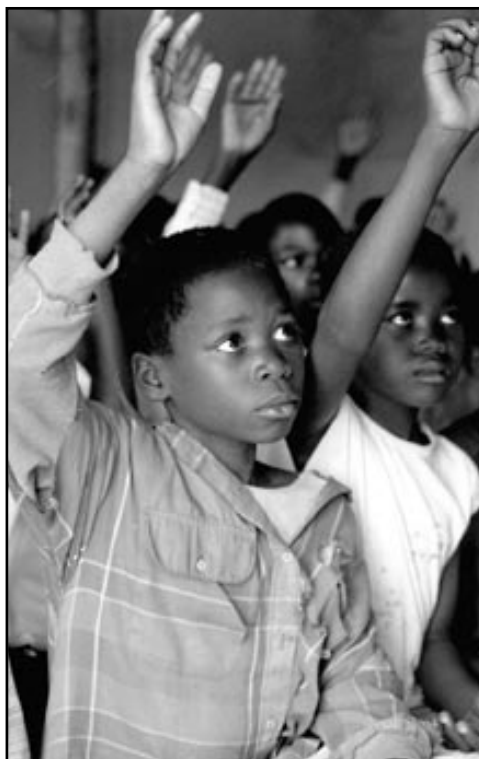
As recently as a week before the opening of the World Education Forum in Dakar, one of Burkina Faso's teachers' unions went on strike over salary and benefits issues, as well as the "catastrophic situation" in the schools. A union declaration specifically attributed the problems to structural adjustment, which had led to higher costs for students, cuts in scholarships, a tripling in the number of students per teacher, a decline in examination results, the "super-exploitation" of teachers and an overall erosion of educational quality.

## Uphill recovery

With the Education for All conference in Jomtien in 1990, donors and national governments vowed to redouble their efforts to improve educational standards in developing countries. The Jomtien emphasis on basic education subsequently was incorporated into the UN System-wide Special Initiative on Africa, which seeks to promote and coordinate all the UN's African development efforts.

Some African countries took steps to try to reverse the declines of the previous decade. Overall, public spending on education increased markedly. This was facilitated by a revival of economic growth in a number of countries, and by somewhat greater attention paid by economic policy officials to safeguarding education budgets.

As a result, in sub-Saharan Africa the primary school net enrolment ratio (the proportion of eligible school-age children who are



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enrolled, excluding those who are under- or over-age) increased from 54 per cent in 1990 to 60 per cent in 1998. Benin, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Swaziland, Togo and Uganda all registered notable improvements in primary school enrolments, some with striking advances in girls' enrolment.

In these respects, Malawi is one of Africa's qualified "success stories." In 1994, with the advent of a democratically elected government and the introduction of a policy of free primary education, the primary student population skyrocketed from 1.9 million to 3.2 million within just a year. By 1997, girls' participation had doubled, with their net enrolment ratio reaching 100 per cent, while the gross enrolment ratio (including under- and over-age girls) climbed to nearly 125 per cent.

Underpinning this rapid expansion, spending by the Malawian government on education increased, as did primary education's share of the total education budget (from 48 per cent to 60 per cent between 1990 and 1998). Donor agencies covered a hefty 46 per cent of total educational spending in 1997, but local communities also contributed significantly, mainly by providing labour and bricks for school construction.

Participants at the Dakar conference observed, however, that such campaigns to increase primary school enrolment rates in Africa, as in other regions, often have come at the expense of quality and to the neglect of other educational sectors.

In Malawi, for example, the proportion of students remaining in school until grade 5 fell by more than half between 1994 and 1997, reaching a level even below the start of the decade. More than 36,000 new teachers were hired to accommodate the expanded student population, but 20,000 of them were untrained, while the higher salary outlay for teachers often meant that books, chalk and other supplies could not be purchased. Enrolment in Malawi's adult literacy programme fell by more than half between 1990 and 1998, while the overall literacy rate declined from 50 per cent to 42 per cent, with women's literacy dropping even more sharply, from 44 per cent to 33 per cent.

### War, AIDS and adjustment

Many other African countries registered no real improvement in enrolment rates or other basic quantitative indicators. Some saw further decline. Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and a number of other countries ravaged by war have experienced the wholesale destruction of schools and the uprooting of millions of people, among them school-age children. Instead of finding a place in a classroom, some of these children were in fact conscripted to fight.

Elsewhere, high debt-servicing costs prevented many governments from increasing their education budgets. The HIV/AIDS pandemic left behind many orphans without parents to pay their

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school fees, while in some severely stricken countries the number of teachers dying of the disease is higher than the new graduates produced by teacher-training colleges. Swaziland had a large drop in its net enrolment rate between 1993 and 1996, in part because three or four teachers were dying of AIDS each week in that small country.

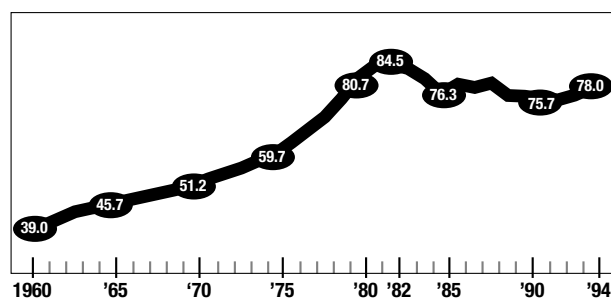
While structural adjustment programmes now formally accord a higher priority to education, in practice that may not bring real improvement. A report issued shortly before the Dakar conference by Oxfam International, a non-governmental organization that works extensively in Africa, pointed out that the macroeconomic and fiscal targets in such programmes still often contradict or undercut efforts to boost public service delivery.

In Zambia, the report notes, a "radical" adjustment programme introduced in 1991 contributed to a 25 per cent decline in actual education spending over just three years. As a percentage of gross domestic product, average expenditure on education in 1992-96 was half the level of the mid-1980s. By 1994, primary school enrolment was declining, especially of girls. "Compared with the [IMF] inflation targets drawn up in Washington," observed Oxfam, "the education targets set at Jomtien have been irrelevant. In fact, the design and implementation of structural adjustment in Zambia has destroyed any prospect of the country achieving the Jomtien goals."



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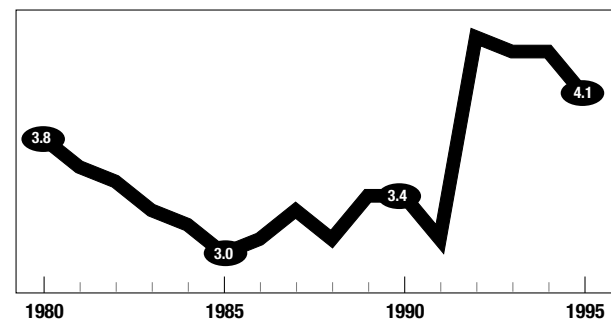
**Primary education in sub-Saharan Africa**  
Gross enrolment ratio\*



\*All enrolled students as percentage of primary-school age group (i.e., including older students).

Source: UN Africa Recovery from World Bank, World Development Indicators 2000, CD-ROM version

**Public education spending, sub-Saharan Africa**  
(as % of GNP)



Source: UN Africa Recovery from UNESCO data