AFRICA HUMAN CAPITAL HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT

Africa Human Capital Technical Briefs Series

Invest Early, Invest Wisely: Early Childhood Development for Africa's Future Prosperity

July 2023

KEY MESSAGES

- Children's early years are a critical period of development which lay the foundation for future life success. More than 90% of all brain growth occurs during the first five years.
- Investing in early childhood is one of the smartest and most cost-effective investments countries can make to build Human Capital (HC) with an incredibly high rate of return. Evidence from around the world shows that when countries invest in young children's development, the benefits are manifold and include improved health and nutrition status, better education outcomes, better employment prospects and higher earning potential. Countless studies show that quality early childhood programs pay quick dividends – in addition to longer term outcomes – including reducing repetition and drop out and boosting learning in the early grades of primary.[1]
- These advantages have implications beyond the individual's lifetime in their potential to stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty as children grow up to be more productive adults and establish families of their own. A landmark study in Jamaica found that children who benefitted from a nutrition and stimulation program were earning 25% more than their peers two decades later and their children had better outcomes (Gertler et al. 2014). A recent survey of adults in 12 lower- and middle-income countries found that those who had attended childcare and/or early childhood education programs stayed in school on average 0.9 years longer and tended to be employed in higher-skilled jobs, controlling for family background and other factors (Shafiq, Devercelli, and Valerio 2018).
- Increasing access to childcare will drive economic and social growth and can be a win-win-win-win with immediate impacts on women's labor force participation, family welfare, child development, business productivity and economic growth.
- Now is the time to invest and the solutions are clear. It is inexpensive to prevent and treat malnutrition and the systems are in place in most countries to do so. All key stakeholders must work together to optimize nutrition outcomes. The relatively low access to pre-primary education provides countries with a unique opportunity to strategically invest in early childhood education now in the right way and scale access to quality programs, avoiding the challenges that have arisen in many basic education systems in the last decade.
- Progress is possible: Senegal cut stunting in half in the last 15 years and Kenya has doubled enrollment in pre-primary school in the last 15 years.

WHY EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT MATTERS FOR AFRICA

Africa's HC challenges begin early, even before children are born. Malnutrition, limited access to healthcare, high poverty rates, and limited home and formal learning opportunities combine to result in multiple disadvantages for too many young children in Sub-Saharan Africa. This failure to invest early has profound impacts on individuals' lifetime trajectory and a country's HC as a whole.

Malnutrition, especially stunting, has lifelong health and cognitive consequences. Malnutrition is the underlying cause of 45% of all child deaths globally – and climate change and prolonged conflicts are making children even more vulnerable. Stunting is a chronic condition that inhibits a child's mental and physical development and children who experience stunting are also likely to suffer from chronic diseases, weakened immunity, lower response to vaccines, decreased physical growth, and lower educational attainment, cognition, workforce productivity and wages. In contrast, children who are not stunted are 33% more likely to escape poverty as adults. Reductions in stunting can increase GDP by up to 11% in Africa.

[1] Gertler et al. 2014; Heckman and Masterov 2007; Engle et al. 2011. Learn more at: https://heckmanequation.org/

Underinvestment in early childhood impacts education systems and learning poverty and contributes to inefficiency and wastage across education systems. When children arrive to school without the necessary preparation to succeed, they are more likely to repeat grades or dropout and to learn less during their years in school. In contrast, investments in quality early childhood programs reduce repetition and dropout, increase learning, and increase the amount of time children stay in school. The estimated lifetime earning gains are US$15-US$34 billion if preschool enrollment increased to 50% for children in low- and middle-income countries globally.

Efforts to improve early childhood development are intrinsically linked with efforts to promote women's economic empowerment. Reducing adolescent pregnancy and improving maternal health and nutrition are key to ensure more children are born healthy and ready to thrive. Providing quality, affordable childcare is an essential intervention to support women's labor force participation, productivity, and earnings, which in turn creates a virtuous cycle where women earn more, have more agency and autonomy and invest more in their children's future.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest in maternal and child health (including adolescent health). The health and wellbeing of mothers is essential to ensure children get the best possible start in life.

2. Reduce malnutrition through proven, cost-effective interventions (prenatal care and skilled attendants at delivery, childhood immunizations, well-child visits and growth-monitoring and promotion, breast feeding, salt iodization, iron fortification and micronutrients.

3. Support early learning at home and engage parents through programs such as Read@Home

4. Invest in quality, affordable childcare to support children's development and women's labor force participation.

5. Ensure all children have access to at least one year of quality preschool and invest in affordable community and family-based solutions to promote learning opportunities from birth.

6. Leverage social protection systems to provide families with young children additional financial support and information.

How to Measure Success or Failure: Relevant Data

- **Malnutrition:** One-third of all children in Africa are stunted (compared to 22% worldwide). The prevalence of stunting among children below age 5 ranges from 58% in Burundi to 7% in Seychelles.

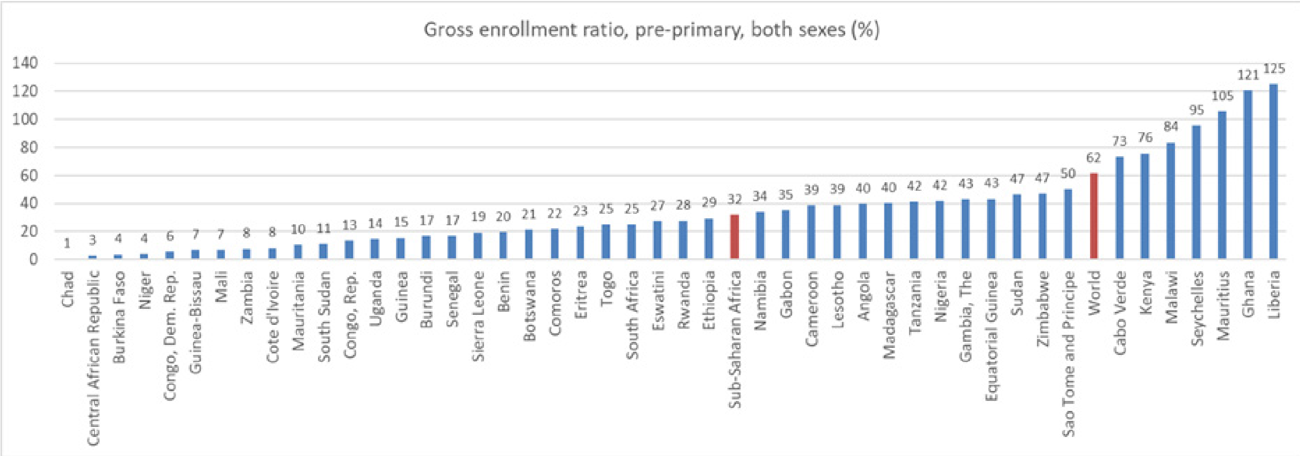
- **Preprimary education:** Less than one-third of children in Sub-Saharan African (32%) are enrolled in pre-primary education (compared to 62% worldwide). Gross enrolment in pre-primary education ranges from a low of 1% in Chad to a high of 125% in Liberia. Government expenditure on pre-primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa ranges from 0% to 0.6% of GDP and averages 0.1% (compared to just over 0.8% in OECD countries).

- **Child poverty:** The percentage of children living in households with income below the national poverty line range from 85% in South Sudan to 11% in Mauritius. Poverty disproportionately impacts young children who are much more likely to live in poverty than the general population.

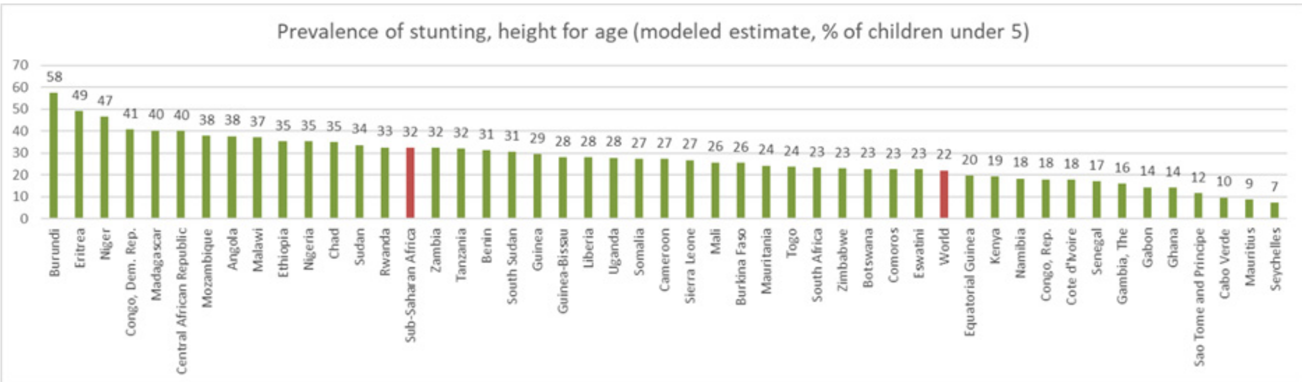
Definition

Early childhood is the period from birth to eight years when rapid development occurs across all key domains (physical, cognitive, linguistic and social-emotional). Quality nurturing care during this period – adequate nutrition, good health care, play and early education and protection from stress – is vital for children's development. Parents and other caregivers have a critical role to play to promote children's development, in addition to community and center-based efforts. Investments in early childhood relate to all three of the accelerator functions of HC investments and will contribute to build economic growth and resilience and reduce inequality.

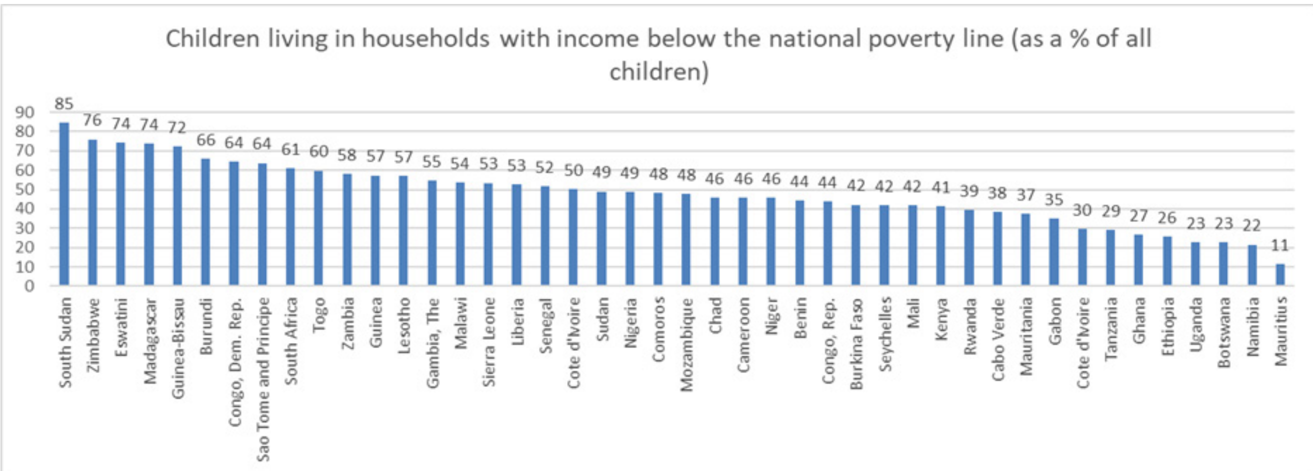
FIGURES



Key statistic: Government expenditure on pre-primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa ranges from 0% to 0.6% of GDP and averages 0.1%. For comparison, OECD countries spend on average just over 0.8% of GDP on early childhood education and care.



Key statistic: A third of children below 5 in Sub-Saharan Africa are stunted (compared to 22% worldwide). The prevalence of stunting among children below age 5 ranges from 58% in Burundi to 7% in Seychelles.



Key Statistic: The percentage of children living in households with income below the national poverty line range from 85% in South Sudan to 11% in Mauritius.

AFRICA HUMAN CAPITAL HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT

DAR ES SALAAM | JULY 25–26 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This technical brief is a part of a series compiled for the first Africa Human Capital Heads of State Summit (July 2023) focusing on the importance of investing in young people as a core driver of productivity and growth as seen in recent literature and country experience. Authors and contributors from the Summit Technical Team are: Abdo Yazbeck, Alex Twinomugisha, Amanda Devercelli, Anne Bakilana, Changha Lee, Ernest Massiah, Fanen Ade, Fatima Naqvi, Huma Kidwai, Inaam Ul Haq, Kebede Feda, Maheshwor Shrestha, Maletela Tuoane, Maria Gracheva, Martin De Simone, Meskerem Mulatu, Mohamed Jelil, Ritika Dsouza, Robert Chase, Rogers Ayiko, Samer Al-Samarrai, Sara Troiano, Shawn Powers, Somya Bajaj, Silas Udahemuka, Srividya Jagannathan, Tekabe Belay, Yared Mekonnen. Copy editing and graphic design was done by Enó Isong and William Ursenbach.

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