

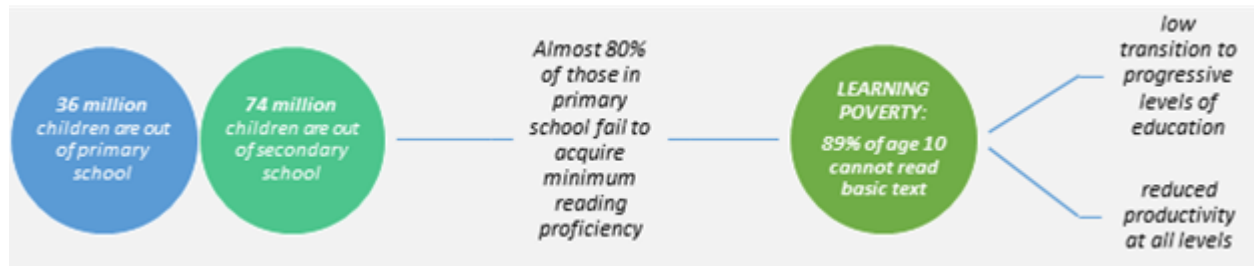


AFRICA HUMAN CAPITAL HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT

Africa Human Capital Technical Briefs Series

Ending Learning Poverty for Africa's Economic and Social Transformation

July 2023



KEY MESSAGES

- Access to and completion of schooling are critical to improving learning at scale and to promote a nation's human capital and economic development.
- Better learning outcomes and additional schooling are associated with more individual earnings, economic growth, access to better jobs, better income distribution, and improved health outcomes. One additional year of schooling is associated with substantial increase in climate change responsive behaviors and beliefs.
- Learning poverty and lack of foundational literacy skills in early grades can lead to intergenerational transmission of poverty and exacerbate inequality of opportunity.
- Improving learning at scale in the relatively short term is possible. The evidence shows that, for instance, structured pedagogy programs, access to basic learning materials, school readiness, and parent and community engagement can improve learning rapidly and in a cost-effective manner

WHY ENDING LEARNING POVERTY MATTERS FOR AFRICA

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) hosts the fastest growing school-aged population in the world. By 2050, the region will represent almost 40% of the children (0-14 years) globally, that is over 700 million children to be educated. **This challenge is an unprecedented opportunity to secure Africa's future!** A key step towards harnessing the productivity of this critical mass is to ensure they acquire foundational learning, complete school, and attain relevant skills.

The scale of challenge in SSA has a global significance. Currently, over 50 million children in the region are out of school. This implies significant deprivation in both learning and schooling, for both young and older children. Even when in school, most children of age 10 are learning poor. Primary age children that suffered from high learning poverty achieve even worse rates of minimum basic skills and competencies as youth. This prevents them from advancing to upper secondary or tertiary education and acquiring higher-order, technical, and

digital skills needed for work. In the workplace, only workers with strong core skills can take on non-routine cognitive tasks that complement technology.

Investing in foundational learning is critical to accelerate economic growth, build systems resilient to shocks, and promote social cohesion. For children to reach their full potential, it is important for each of them to learn to read well enough to be "independent readers" who "read to learn." Reading is the gateway to learning in almost every other area. Economically, literacy levels at age seven are predictive of income levels at age 40, even when controlling for many other socioeconomic variables.ⁱ Being able to read and write well is associated with access to better jobs, higher household incomes, and better rates of economic well-being. Learning is strongly related to individual earnings, the distribution of income, and economic growth.ⁱⁱ Thus, for SSA countries to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth, a focus on learning is crucial.

ⁱ Association for Psychological Science. 2013. Early Math and Reading Ability Linked to Job and Income in Adulthood.

ⁱⁱ Hanushek & Woessmann. 2008. "The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development", Journal of Economic Literature 2008, 46:3, 607-668.

Literacy is also associated with significant improvements in health. Reading is associated with a longer life spanⁱⁱⁱ and reduced cognitive decline.^{iv} Literate mothers are more likely to have their children vaccinated and provide good health care to

their children.^v In other words, the benefits of early literacy are far-reaching. A focus on foundational skills is not a detriment to the development of other skills.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A plethora of evidence shows how to enable learning and to improve learning outcomes.^{vi} Key policy and programmatic options include:

1. School readiness: Preparing children to learn must start early, which requires supporting newborns' health and nutrition, early stimulation, and protection from stress, particularly in the first 1,000 days of life. Additionally, having at least one children's book at home has shown to double a child's likelihood of being on track for literacy and numeracy skills.^{vii}

2. School access and completion: Expanding infrastructure is critical in closing gaps in access to education and offering opportunities to an increasingly large population of children projected to be out of school. By reducing the distance to schools, we can enable girls to attend and complete school, especially adolescent girls at the secondary level. But infrastructure alone will not achieve learning. Trained and qualified teachers and teaching-learning materials are critical to addressing learning poverty.

3. Structured pedagogy: Supporting teachers with structured pedagogy, a coherent package of investments that include lesson plans, learning materials, skills-based ongoing teacher training, and teacher coaching - usually supported by classroom observation tools - that are carefully coordinated to reinforce each other, has increased learning at relatively low cost. Countries such as Kenya^{viii}, Liberia^{ix}, Gambia^x, and South Africa^{xi} have demonstrated successful models on effective instructional models.

4. Parent and community engagement: Information can bridge some demand-supply gap. Evidence shows that providing information to parents and children on the income-earning benefits of education, on sources of funding available, and on the quality of local schools has increased learning at low cost.^{xii} In fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV) contexts, positive engagement and conditioning of community response can help build schools, protect educators, help girls enroll and continue education, and promote continuity.

5. Systemic reforms: An enabling systemic and political environment is critical to the success of any intervention. Systemic reforms of the education sector are complex, but successful examples show common patterns: (a.) a high level of political commitment to improve education outcomes, which should translate into sufficient financing and effective use of resources; (b.) alignment of the system as a whole - including government actors and other stakeholders - towards learning; and (c.) balance between autonomy and accountability of schools.^{xiii}

Definition

Learning poverty rate refers to the percentage of children who are not able to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10. This indicator brings together schooling and learning indicators. It begins with the share of children who have not achieved minimum reading proficiency (as measured in schools) and is adjusted by the proportion of children who are out of school (and are assumed not able to read proficiently).^{xiv}

ⁱⁱⁱ Bavishi, et al. 2016. "A Chapter a Day: Association of Book Reading with Longevity," *Social Science and Medicine* 164: 44–48.

^{iv} Yu-Hung Chang, et al. 2021. Reading Activity Prevents Long-Term Decline in Cognitive Function in Older People: Evidence from a 14-Year Longitudinal Study, *International Psychogeriatrics* 33, special issue 1 (January 2021): 63–74.

^v Ana Langer et al., "Women and Health: The Key for Sustainable Development," *Lancet* 386 (June 2015): 1165–1210, <https://celiaroberts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Women-and-Health-the-key-for-sustainable-development.pdf>.

^{vi} Global Education Advisory Panel. 2023. 2023 Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning. What does recent evidence tell us are "Smart Buys" for improving learning in low- and middle-income countries? Recommendations of the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP).

^{vii} Manu, et al. 2019. "Association between Availability of Children's Book and the Literacy-Numeracy Skills of Children Aged 36 to 59 Months: Secondary Analysis of the UNICEF Multiple-Indicator Cluster Surveys Covering 35 Countries." *Journal of Global Health* 9 (1): 010403.

^{viii} Fleisch, et al. (2016). System-wide improvement of early-grade mathematics: new evidence from the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 49, 157-174.

^{ix} Menendez, et al. (2021). READ Liberia Impact Evaluation Endline Report

^x Eble, et al, 2021. "How much can we remedy very low learning levels in rural parts of low-income countries?." *Journal of Development Economics*

^{xi} Meiring, T. (2021). Impact evaluation of Funda Wande in-service teacher coaching intervention.

^{xii} Nguyen, T. (2013). Information, role models and perceived returns to education experimental evidence from Madagascar.

^{xiii} World Bank, 2022. Western & Central Africa Education Strategy from School to Jobs: A Journey for the Young People of Western and Central Africa.

^{xiv} World Bank (2022). Ending Learning Poverty: What Will It Take (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.



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