

# SIEPR

## *policy brief*

Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

on the web: <http://siepr.stanford.edu>

## Access versus Quality: Challenges of Educational Policies in African Countries

By *Moussa P. Blimpo*

African countries are facing a serious and difficult challenge with regard to their education policies: Broaden access of education to everyone while maintaining or improving its quality. However, given the resource constraints, a tough choice had to be made, at least implicitly, between quality and access. Most countries have chosen to pursue access for two decades. Learning outcomes are currently very poor and policies toward improving learning are not succeeding. This policy brief analyses this situation and reflects on the way forward.

After two decades of remarkable efforts toward universal education, most African countries have achieved substantial progress in term of access. The number of children enrolled in primary school has increased substantially and continues to be on the rise. Many countries have seen the number of primary school

children double in just 10 years. For example, in Burkina Faso the number of primary school children increased by more than 130 percent between 1998 and 2007. The net enrollment rate increased from 35 to 64 percent during the same period. Measures of primary school completion rate have also been on the rise. Table 1 shows the expansion of primary education in selected African countries.

These achievements were made possible by a combination of political will of African governments and a large financial support from the international community. In 1990 at the world conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, 155 countries and delegations “agreed to universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy” by 2000. Though the goals were not met by the target

*continued on inside...*

### About the Author

**Moussa P. Blimpo** is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy research (SIEPR, 2010-2012) at Stanford University. He received a PhD in economics from New York University in 2010. He has been a consultant to the World Bank on various projects since 2008. His research areas include policy relevant questions in development economics, particularly in the economics of education and public economics in African countries.



**Table 1: Primary school enrollment in selected African countries**

|              | Number Of Primary School Children (Millions) |      | Net Primary Enrollment (Percent) |      |
|--------------|--|------|----------------------------------|------|
|              | 1998   | 2009 | 1998                             | 2009 |
| Burkina Faso | .82  | 1.9  | 28                               | 59   |
| Ghana        | 2.4  | 3.7  | 58                               | 76   |
| Madagascar   | 2.0  | 4.3  | 66                               | 98   |
| Mozambique   | 2.3  | 5.1  | 42                               | 88   |
| Mali         | .9   | 1.9  | 36                               | 66   |
| Senegal      | 1.0  | 1.7  | 51                               | 74   |
| Uganda       | 6.3  | 8.3  | –                                | 93   |
| Kenya        | 4.8  | 7.2  | 56                               | 82   |
| Benin        | .9   | 1.7  | 50                               | 85   |

Source: EdStats, World Bank

date, the commitments have been reaffirmed at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 along with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Programs like the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) provided the necessary support and funding to many countries in the area of primary education.

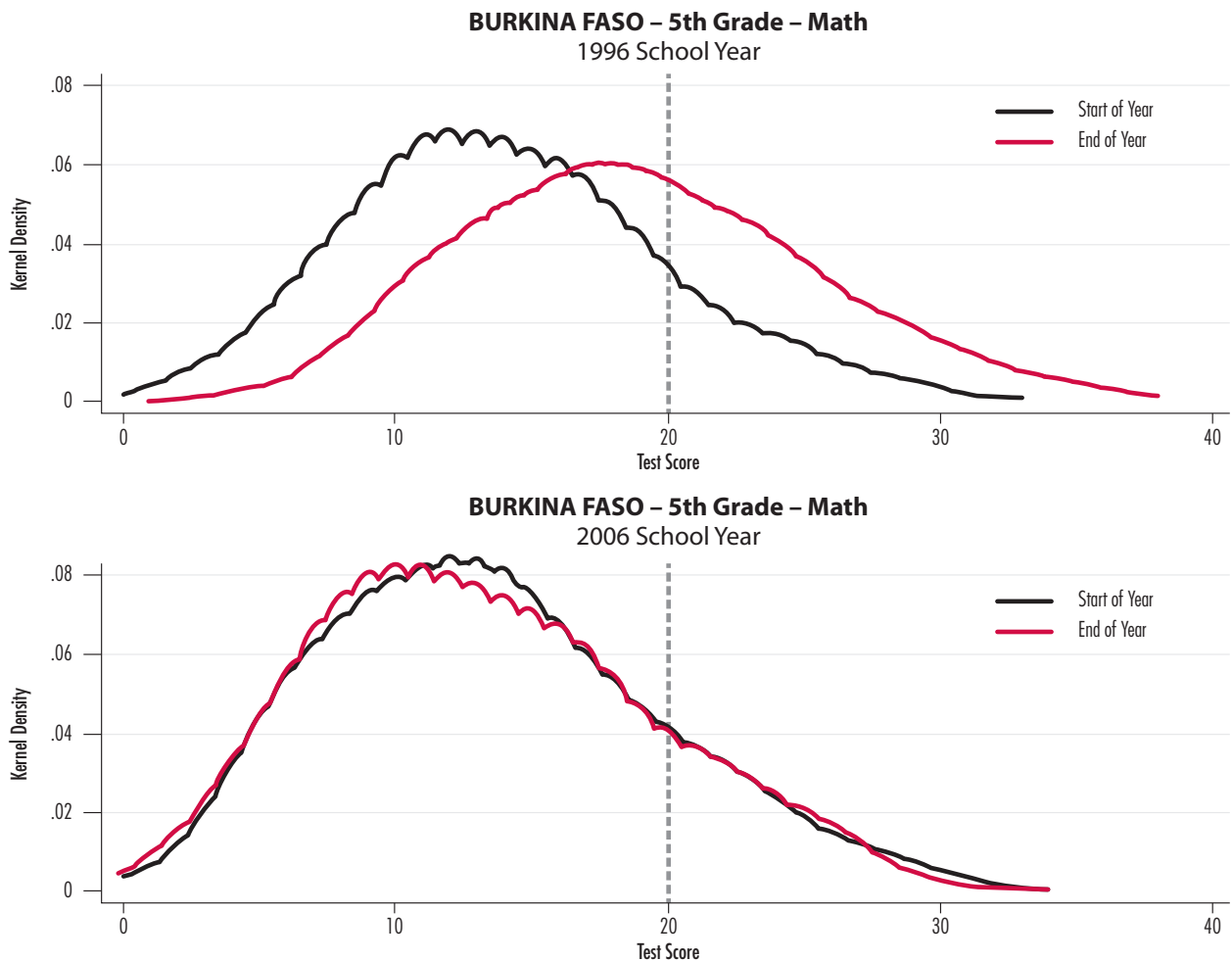
However, in recent years, measures of learning outcomes in many countries revealed poor test scores in literacy and numeracy. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) test conducted by the World Bank revealed poor learning outcomes in nearly all the countries where the test were given. A recent report states as follows:

“The results of EGRA in Africa show that the vast majority of students tested cannot read with sufficient comprehension to learn and most are simply unable to read at all. Improving the teaching and learning of early grade reading skills should therefore be an urgent priority<sup>1</sup>.” In Liberia, Mali and Uganda, less than 4 percent of the students could read with a good level of comprehension. In Senegal, only 11.2 percent of boys and 7.3 percent of girls could read and understand at the minimum level of fluency.

Over the past one to two decades, class sizes have substantially increased to the point where classrooms of 100

children are no longer unusual. In order to reduce class size, some countries have adopted a double-shift system whereby one group of students attends a morning shift and another group attends the afternoon shift with the same teacher. However, data from Gambia and anecdotal accounts from elsewhere suggest that the average instructional time is lowered, especially for the afternoon shifts. In addition, whereas it is easy to increase access from one year to the other, it might be much harder to identify and attract new good teachers or to maintain the incentive of existing teachers. The sector has also become more complex to

1 See Education Data for Decision Making (EdData ID).



Source: From the author, based on the CONFEMEN Data

manage directly by the central government. It is likely that a combination of these factors contributed to lowering the standard of learning outcomes.

The CONFEMEN<sup>2</sup> provides data that allows for some basic comparison of test scores over time. The same test was given to fifth graders in the mid-1990s and around 2006 in several Francophone African countries.

The test was given to the same students at the beginning of the year and at the end of year thus allowing us to assess the average value added on test scores.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of fifth graders math test score in Burkina Faso. It shows a rightward shift of the distribution in 1996 indicating a substantial value added for the fifth year of schooling. However, the same

exercise in 2006 no longer shows gains in test scores. The evidence is similar in all the countries where the data is available.

Whereas more research is needed to establish a causal link between access and quality, there is some evidence suggesting that the expansion of the sector could account for a great part of the deterioration of the learning outcomes.

2 The CONFEMEN is an organization in charge of monitoring and harmonizing education system of Francophone countries. It conducts regular assessment of education sectors including students' testing.

Most African countries are now facing an important challenge because outcomes are poor and might be deteriorating. But how did we get in this situation? Quality education for all has been the stated goal for the past two decades. However, It appears that under resource constraints, there are trade-offs between access and quality. The real choice that these countries faced was either quality education for some or some education for all. It appears many countries have chosen the latter, but was this a good choice? Have African countries rid themselves of one ill just to acquire another one? How much should one worry about the poor learning outcomes and the potentially failing standards?

### 1. Access versus quality

There are good reasons to prioritize access at the expense of quality and vice versa. Most studies in education have relied on test scores as the main outcomes of interest. However, this approach may present an incomplete picture.

Many believe that, at least in the perspective of states, the primary role of education is socialization. Mass education can help teach the values, beliefs and discipline that are necessary to support social stability.<sup>3</sup> If this is the primary goal, then it could make sense to pursue universal education even if it comes at the expense of quality, literacy and numeracy

outcomes. Other reasons one might not worry greatly about the failing standard include the fact that the connection between short-term test scores and long-term outcomes such as the overall well-being and labor market outcomes is not clearly established. In addition, the mere fact of attending school keeps children off the street and presumably out of trouble, in a protected environment.

However, many of the other outcomes from schooling require substantial learning that could be measured only through test scores. To the extent to which human capital is crucial for economic transformation, the country as whole could suffer economic setbacks if the quality of education remains poor overall. A recent study made this point, citing the poor macroeconomic performance in Latin America despite a large expansion of education<sup>4</sup>.

Education can also empower the poor to participate in the decision-making process and reject the status quo. This potential outcome is likely to work through quality education rather than mere participation. For example, in Kenya, a girls scholarship program raised test scores of primary school girls, and a follow-up study in their early adulthood found that they were less likely to enter arranged marriage or to accept domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> Many other documented effects of education, such as the effect of mother's education on

children's health, also operate through the quality of education and the learning outcomes.

Where there is a conflict between access and quality because of resource constraints one should weigh the different potential outcomes. Unfortunately, often no open debate *ex ante* occurs on those issues between the governments, the civil society and the different partners. Given the current situation, what is being done and what can be done?

### 2. Current policies for improving learning outcomes

There are many ongoing studies in Africa to help identify the type of policies that could help improve learning outcomes. One area gaining more interest includes the empowering of parents and communities and getting them involved in the management of schools. This could improve accountability at the local level and presumably lead to better outcomes for the children.


Over the past four years, we ran a large-scale field experiment in The Gambia to evaluate one such program called Whole School Development (WSD). The program provided grants to randomly selected schools and trained the principals, representatives of the teachers and the communities on

*continued on flap...*

3 Lant Pritchett (2003, 2008)

4 See Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann (2007)

5 See Willa Friedman, Michael Kremer, Edward Miguel and Rebecca Thornton (2011)



how to manage the schools effectively. The emphasis was on community participation in schools' affairs. Another set of schools was randomly selected to serve as comparison group.

The intervention did not improve learning outcomes even though it did increase participation on the intensive margin, lowering absenteeism for both teachers and students by more than 20 percent. There are many potential reasons for these findings, including the inadequacy of other complementary inputs such as teacher qualifications. But our analysis suggests that the human capacity at the local level is an important component. We found that the WSD worked better in areas where adult literacy is high. But it can also have a negative effect if adult literacy is too low. We conclude that the WSD could work well if parents were sufficiently literate to sit on schools' committees and to monitor the progress of their children.

Other ongoing similar studies in other African countries will inform us more in the coming years. However, our evidence indicates that places where these policies are most sought after are also the places where they are most likely not to work. This presents a great challenge that calls for sensible policies that take into account both the quest for universal education and a need for quality education.

### **3. Emergence of a two-tiered system as an alternative policy**

Where demand for quality education is high, one would expect the emergence of high-quality private schools. Brazil might be one such case. In countries where the market worked and that process took place, there needs to be an effort from governments to provide access to those schools to the poor on a merit basis. One possibility could be a voucher program similar to the Colombian PACES program. However, the market has not worked well in most countries and certainly not in most African countries. Some countries experienced an expansion of private schooling, especially in urban areas. In Benin for example, there are many more private secondary schools than public schools. But even in those instances, the quality of education is questionable in the private schools as well.

One way to get around this challenge is for governments to step in and create a small number of elite schools with adequate inputs. These schools could be accessible on merit basis only, perhaps with quotas by level of household incomes. The geographical locations, the selection criteria and other details could be worked out, including the possibility of cost sharing. However, those details are beyond the scope of this policy brief. These schools could coexist with the mass education that exists already. In that way,

the dual objective of access and quality could be pursued more pragmatically.

It is important to see that in the long run, the quest for universal education can harm the very poor it is intended to help. The few poor that were able to acquire quality education and break the cycle of poverty might no longer have that option available to them despite the fact that most poor now have access to some schooling.

### **References**

1. Moussa Blimpo and David Evans. 2011. "School-Based Management, Local Capacity, and Educational Outcomes: Lessons from a Randomized Field Experiment," Working paper.
2. Willa Friedman, Michael Kremer, Edward Miguel and Rebecca Thornton. 2011. "Education as Liberation?" NBER Working Paper No. 16939.
3. Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann. 2007. "The Role of Education Quality for Economic Growth," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4122.
4. Lant Pritchett. 2003. " 'When Will They Ever Learn?' Why All Governments Produce Schooling," BREAD Working Paper No. 031.
5. Lant Pritchett. 2008. "The Policy Irrelevance of the Economics of Education: Is 'Normative as Positive' Just Useless, or is it Worse?" Working paper.

# SIEPR *policy brief*

Stanford University  
366 Galvez Street  
Stanford, CA 94305  
MC 6015

A publication of the  
Stanford Institute for  
Economic Policy Research

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Palo Alto, CA  
Permit No. 28

# SIEPR

## **About SIEPR**

The Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR) conducts research on important economic policy issues facing the United States and other countries. SIEPR's goal is to inform policymakers and to influence their decisions with long-term policy solutions.

## **Policy Briefs**

SIEPR policy briefs are meant to inform and summarize important research by SIEPR faculty. Selecting a different economic topic each month, SIEPR will bring you up-to-date information and analysis on the issues involved.

SIEPR policy briefs reflect the views of the author. SIEPR is a non-partisan institute and does not take a stand on any issue.

## **For Additional Copies**

Please see SIEPR website at  
*<http://SIEPR.stanford.edu>*.