

"To build a country, build a schoolhouse."
—Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences

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EDUCATE AFRICANS FIT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

SEIZING THE MOMENT

GPE Transforming Education

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Transforming education systems to be fit for the 21st century is the common thread for creating inclusive and equitable societies resilient to conflict, climate change and economic crises. The African Union's Year of Education 2024 is a historic moment to put education back at the forefront of the policy agenda. Now is the time for increased investment in African education systems.

Africa's growing youth population can be a vital and transformative force if given the knowledge and skills to match their potential to the promises and perils already evident. Delivering Africa's children the education they need to foster a more peaceful, prosperous and stable future requires leaders to:

- **Finance Africa's education ambition:** Establish shared and innovative approaches to close the education financing gap. Budgets should prioritize proven, cost-effective approaches to optimize their impact.
- **Build quality, inclusive education systems that begin with crucial foundational learning skills:** Prioritizing gender equality, foundational learning, equity and inclusion for every girl and boy.
- **Invest in and collaborate with teachers:** Teachers play a crucial role in effective education strategies. Supporting them with increased training and structured pedagogy could yield substantial benefits.
- **Increase accountability and transparency:** Accountability platforms can support translating commitments into actions, track progress and share learnings and experiences across contexts.
- **Develop relevant curricula and infrastructure:** Support skills for young Africans through curricula and training aligned with job market needs for a smoother transition to the workforce.

1. A SNAPSHOT OF THE CONTINENT'S EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Recognizing the transformative power of education, African leaders have put education front and center of their policies since independence. They set the agenda during the very first Organization of Africa Unity Summit in 1963, when Emperor Haile Selassie urged the continent to launch a massive effort in education "to raise the level of literacy and provide the cadres of skilled and trained technicians requisite to (our) growth and development." The African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025) builds on this theme, setting a path for learning that will transform Africa's youth into agents of change for sustainable development as envisioned in the Agenda 2063. During the 2022 Africa Human Capital Summit and the UN Transforming Education Summit, leaders acknowledged that investment in education and in people is critical for building sustainable, resilient and inclusive growth in Africa, and they committed to increase investments in education systems.

Africa has made considerable progress in education over the last 60 years. Completion rates in Africa between 2000 and 2022 went from 52 to 69 percent in primary, 35 to 50 percent in lower secondary and 23 to 33 percent in upper secondary education, while the number of tertiary education students has risen from fewer than 800,000 in 1970 to well over 17 million today.[1] More girls are in school than ever before.

Dividends from the sustained commitment to education are growing. Africa hosts some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. From Accra to Nairobi, from Cape Town to Cairo, start-up enterprises, mostly founded and led by Africans under the age of 35,[2] are redefining African industry, technology and development. In its 2022 Technology Pioneers list, the World Economic Forum named six African start-ups that are shaping industries.[3] Cities such as Lagos, Johannesburg and Nairobi are teeming with entrepreneurs and innovators who are developing homegrown solutions to local challenges, including in education.

Education promotes resilience in the face of new challenges, including the growing threat of climate change. Education empowers people with the knowledge and tools to adapt to the impacts of climate change and to promote eco-sustainable practices, underpinning the transition to greener societies. Children need to learn about the digital economy and its essential tools, providing them with strong digital literacy as well as the guiding principles to help them construct more democratic and inclusive societies. In this way, education will remain the cornerstone for building and rebuilding peaceful nations; fostering understanding, tolerance and cooperation; and promoting social cohesion and stability.

However, these gains are insufficient to prepare Africans for the 21st century. There is still a long way to go in eliminating illiteracy and providing children the skills they need for today and tomorrow. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, 107 million children, adolescents and youth were out of school in Africa,[4] while only one in five children achieve minimum proficiency level in reading at the end of primary education.[5] Girls are particularly disadvantaged; sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world not to have achieved gender parity in enrolment at any level in the education system,[6] with 1 in 3 girls being married early.[7]

African education systems are hampered by various challenges. Teacher effectiveness is the most important predictor of student learning, yet in sub-Saharan Africa there is an average of 1 trained primary teacher per 58 students,[8] and 16.5 million additional teachers are needed to achieve quality education for all at the primary and secondary levels.[9] Violence in and around schools also affects girls' and boys' educational outcomes, causing an estimated US$11 trillion in lost lifetime earnings.[10] It is estimated that the cost of incomplete education due to child marriage across 12 African countries that make up half the continent's population was $63 billion in lost capital wealth.[11]

Today's **education systems are also poorly suited to prepare young people** for a vastly different and uncertain future disrupted by conflict, climate change, technology, globalization and a fast-changing job landscape. Traditional classroom practices need to shift to nurture a broader range of competencies such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and digital skills. Globally, nearly 25 percent of jobs will be disrupted by technology in the next five years,[12] and by 2030 about 230 million jobs in Africa will demand digital skills.[13] With globalization, knowledge and skills are at a premium and global hiring is on the increase.

This is especially critical because **the future is African**. By 2050, 1 in every 4 people will be African. In 2023, the continent recorded the largest population of young people on the planet,[14] and by 2050, 40 percent of all those below the age of 18 years (1 billion people) will be in Africa.[15]

This pivotal moment for the continent is one of promise or peril. Peril if the status quo continues, and climate change, conflict and other factors damage education systems further, leaving young people economically unproductive and uncompetitive and increasing push factors for migration. Promise if the potential of the "youth quake," technology and globalization are fully harnessed through education, skills and job opportunities.

2. FINANCING EDUCATION: A VITAL AND SMART INVESTMENT

An educated and skilled African population can be the lever that delivers more productive and greener societies, with ripples that will ensure future resources—both human and economic—will become self-sustaining and reinforcing. Globally, education has been and is a powerful engine for economic growth both directly and indirectly when the foundations of learning are strong, and the cumulative returns mean that over the long term the investment is self-financing. In Africa, this could translate into a 50 percent increase in per capita income by 2050 and nearly 120 percent by 2100.[16]

Africa already has the ideas and experience to meet the education challenge:

- The Zambia Catch Up program uses the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. Learners are assessed using a simple tool, assigned to groups based on their ability and then taught literacy and numeracy by teachers who have been trained in the TaRL methodology. Teachers receive ongoing mentorship and coaching.[17]
- Benin undertook system-wide curriculum and textbook reform that has provided explicit guidance to teachers, and significantly reduced the cost of textbooks.[18]
- In Kenya, the Tusome program, which combined school support and monitoring with effective leadership, has recorded improvements equivalent to one additional year of schooling for children.[19]
- Mozambique's recent expansion of bilingual education has demonstrated that children learning under the bilingual program are achieving 15 percent higher than those using the monolingual curriculum.[20]
- Rwanda is scaling up the school feeding program to cover all children from pre-primary to lower secondary education.[21]
- The Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project is working on a framework that includes development of national standardized assessments at grades 2 and 4.[22]

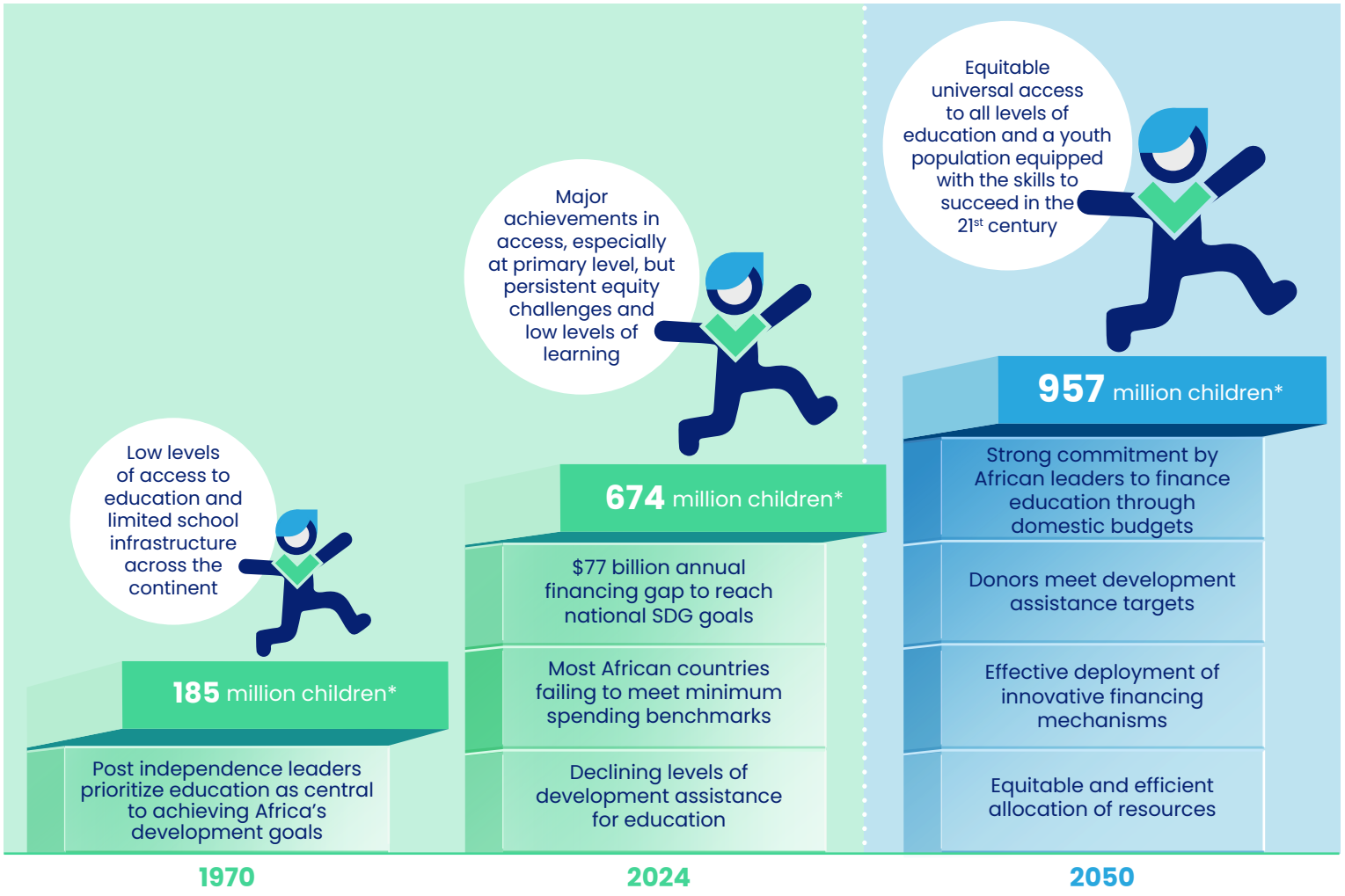
Financing needs to match Africa's ambitions for education. The financial shortfall to achieve national Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 targets on quality education is significant, with estimates of an annual gap of $77 billion for African countries.[23] While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted education budgets, even prior to this crisis only around 1 in 5 governments on the continent met international benchmarks for education spending between 2017 and 2019.[24] Alarmingly, education expenditures for most African countries today have declined to below pre-pandemic levels, and 5 out of 8 regional economic communities have fallen below the international benchmark of 4–6 percent of GDP, as outlined in the Education 2030 Framework for Action.[25]

Africa faces a unique development conundrum: It is currently the most resource-constrained continent but by the end of this century, it will comprise 42 percent of the global working age population. But the education transformation the continent needs can't happen without financing. African leaders should commit to funding the education reforms that are needed to create growing economies and stable societies.

Financing quality education for young Africans should be a priority for the international community as well. Even in more optimistic scenarios, national budgets across the continent will remain constrained due to heavy debt burdens. The amount spent on

Unlocking the enormous potential of Africa's demographic dividend means making the right investments in education

Enormous strides have been made across the continent since independence, but Africa still has enormous untapped potential that cannot be unlocked without a commitment to finance education.



**children in Africa under the age of 18*

Source: United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division. World Population Prospects 2022. https://population.un.org/wpp/.

interest payments across Africa is higher than spending on either education or health.[26] The low tax base, which on average provides only 20–25 percent of total government spending,[27] falls well short of meeting growing financing needs.

Against this backdrop, **innovative financing mechanisms** represent an opportunity for leaders to both crowd in more financing for the sector from diversified sources and increase the impact and efficiency of new and existing financing. Innovative mechanisms include social impact bonds and education impact investing, financial guarantees, debt swaps, loan buydowns, income-contingent loans, income-sharing agreements and public-private partnerships. Strategically matched with domestic resources, or grant financing when available, these mechanisms can lower the cost of credit, increase public resources for education and facilitate effective and efficient

Innovative approaches can increase education financing and maximize effectiveness

Debt Swaps: As seen during 2023 in Côte d'Ivoire,[28] some countries and their creditors are already switching debt service into funds for education, using the Debt2Ed option under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Multiplier. Debt2Ed is an innovative and collaborative model to transform debt re-payments into investments in education and secure significant new grant finance from the GPE Multi-plier. As part of a wider but coordinated approach to financing, Debt2Ed will reduce the burden of public debt in poor and vulnerable countries and enable more and better spending to get children into school and learning.

Innovative Funding: During 2024, the African Development Bank will lead the launch of the African Education Science Technology and Innovation Fund, an African government-owned initiative to enhance the quality of market-aligned skill development opportunities for African youth. It will finance critical gaps in tertiary education and support science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), technical and vocational education and training (TVET), as well as research and development.

Partnerships: Also in 2024, the Global Coalition for Foundational Learning—comprising the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), GPE, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID and the World Bank—brings together partners with a shared commitment to improving foundational learning for all and a desire to work together to drive change more quickly, with countries in the driving seat.

education spending. Recognizing that progress in areas such as health, climate, peace and security are intrinsically dependent on the advancement of education leads to unlocking new avenues for investments and leveraging innovative financing mechanisms with the potential to span not just education but vital, interconnected sectors as well.

A focus on **efficient financing and spending remains paramount**, particularly given short-term fiscal constraints. About a third of education spending is lost to inefficiencies,[29] and it has been estimated that Africa lost more than $40 billion per year in education and infrastructure spending between 2000 and 2017.[30] Several factors can drive greater efficiency, including better management and deployment of the teacher workforce, better quality inputs like textbooks, improving internal efficiency by reducing the number of children repeating classes and addressing the roots causes of dropout.

To optimize investment impacts, it is essential to strategically allocate resources to proven approaches that offer **cost-effective solutions**. Approaches such as structured pedagogy and Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) cost $8 and $20 per child,[31] comprising about 3.4 percent and 8.8 percent of current average spending per primary school child.[32] This approach could yield a transformative extra year of effective learning in Africa at a cost-effective rate. Targeted investment in early childhood education and foundational learning resources addresses critical gaps, and establishes a robust educational foundation, shaping future academic success and essential life skills.

3. AN AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

The African Union's Year of Education 2024 is a historic moment to put education back at the forefront of the policy agenda while sparking improved outcomes across the entire education spectrum. Strengthening education systems is the key to progress across most development sectors, from health to climate change to gender equality. Leaders need to seize the moment to urgently make a step change on education quality, to better leverage the continent's human capital—its greatest asset—and to expand productivity. This includes more and better education financing, evidence-based policies and spending decision making, inclusive systems that emphasize quality foundational learning, and greater investment in and collaboration with teachers.

This is a daunting task, but no more so than what Africa's foundational leaders grappled with at independence. Unlike in 1963, there is more evidence of what works to improve learning outcomes: Strong and sustained political leadership is key and systemic reform is the cornerstone of wide-scale and sustainable improvements in learning. Teachers and school leaders are critical in improving learning, and a child whose mother can read is 50 percent more likely to live past the age of five, 50 percent more likely to be immunized, and twice as likely to attend school.[33] Today, there are many tools and technology that can aid education efforts enormously.

What Can be Done?

Adequately finance Africa's education ambition: Allocating sufficient resources to education is essential. Budgets should prioritize proven, cost-effective approaches to optimize their impact and build inclusive, equitable education systems. In a constrained fiscal environment, diversifying education financing flows for increased impact and efficiency is both a necessity and an opportunity. Tools such as debt swaps, loan buydowns, social impact bonds and education impact investing, financial guarantees, income-contingent loans, income-sharing agreements and public-private partnerships can be strategically matched with domestic resources or grant financing to lower the cost of credit, increase fiscal capacity and facilitate effective and efficient education expenditure. Allocating resources judiciously, prioritizing proven, cost-effective approaches in evidence-guided policy making, is critical for optimizing the impact of investments.

Focus on learning and equity: Systemic disadvantage starts early, underscoring the importance of focusing on foundational learning and inclusion for all children, including those marginalized because of their disability, refugee status, ethnicity, race, location and gender.

- Targeting teaching instruction by learning level, not grade, proves effective in assisting students falling behind, particularly in primary grades and foundational skills.
- Interventions that improve school attendance are most impactful when implemented in parallel with those designed to improve learning in school.[34]
- Leaving no one behind means that a focus on learning can't be decoupled from ensuring gender equality in and through education, that more children access school and the needs of more vulnerable children are met.
- Go beyond access and learning, by promoting gender equality in, within and through education and taking a gender transformative systems-change approach to education.

Invest in and collaborate with teachers: Teachers are at the heart of many of the most effective education strategies,[35] highlighting their pivotal role in shaping the educational landscape and reflecting the fact that they command the lion's share of the education budget. Supporting teachers with structured

pedagogy—employing a coherent package of investments, including lesson plans and teacher training—reaps significant benefits.

Promote accountability and transparency: Commitments can't produce results until they are translated into actions and results. Existing platforms on government accountability can be used to track progress in education and share learnings, such as the Foundational Learning Action Tracker of government efforts,[36] and the SDG 4 Scorecard on national benchmarks for attendance, performance and investments.[37] African governments can also share stories of change, goals, actions, spending and achievements in education with other stakeholders, including parents and communities, to build shared ownership and buy-in.

Invest in relevant curricula and infrastructure to support the development of productive skills and employability for the youth: One major obstacle facing the trained youth in their transition to the world of work is the mismatch between their training and the requirement of the job markets. Addressing this issue requires enhancing the relevance of acquired skills through adapted curricula, aligning them with actual needs and introducing entrepreneurship skills.

The endnotes and supplemental bibliography can be found here: https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/list-references-paper-educate-africans-fit-21st-century.

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Cover photo: School teacher Thierry Gbagama, second right, stands outside of a classroom as students enter the Boyali 2 school, in the village of Boyali, Central African Republic. The GPE-funded program supports students at risk of dropping out by providing them with additional instruction to strengthen their reading and math skills and help them stay in school.

GPE/Eduardo Soteras