

THE CHALLENGE OF FINANCING MASS, HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA

Thursday, May 2, 2024

INTRODUCTION

The year 2024 has been designated as the Year of Education by the African Union. In an Africa undergoing profound transformation, education asserts itself as a strategic priority. However, in West Africa, financing mechanisms and the quality of education provision remain major challenges. The financing of quality education for all is still far from being guaranteed at the global level. In West Africa, only about 4 percent of the GDP is allocated to education, which is below the international standard of 6 percent. Today, the region's population growth is a fundamental factor to consider, as it can be an obstacle to financing education due to increased pressure on available resources and rising costs, requiring strategic planning and investment to ensure access to quality education for all.

In May 2024, the participative think tank for West Africa, WATHI organized a virtual dialogue on the theme: «The challenge of financing high-quality mass education in West Africa» in partnership with the Irish Embassy in Senegal. In this context, the discussion explored the current state of education funding, how the region's demographic dynamics affect the funding and the quality of education, and possible recommendations to address this issue.

GUEST SPEAKER

Dr. Salimata Faye Diop, Education Economist - Lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Science and Technology of Education and Training (FASTEF) at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. In 2014, she was President of the Commission of «Financing Education and Training» of the National Conference on Education and Training in Senegal.

Note : : QUICKs are short documents produced by WATHI's virtual round tables. They present key findings and courses of action and are intended to fuel public debate, collective action, and decisions by political authorities

KEY FINDINGS

- The major constraint facing West African countries in financing education is rapid population growth, combined with a very young population. Africa is now the region of the world where education needs are growing the most. According to a UNICEF report (2019), the number of children to be enrolled in school is expected to reach 619 million by 2030, including 444 million in Africa. Despite the progress made over the past two decades in improving access to education, this access remains insufficiently inclusive. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 34 million children of primary school age are not enrolled in school, as are 61 million adolescents of secondary school age.
- Difficulties in accessing education are linked to several factors. First, poverty has a significant impact on school attendance. Children from the poorest households are four times more likely to be out of school than those from the wealthiest households. Second, conflict and forced displacement: according to UNESCO, more than half of the world's refugees are under the age of 18. Disability, which is often overlooked, is also a major cause of exclusion. Between 93 and 150 million children worldwide live with a disability. In low-income countries, around 40% of these children do not attend primary school.
- West African countries lag significantly behind international targets for school enrollment. The average enrollment rate in the region is around 80%, which is below the average for developing countries. The gap is even wider when it comes to school completion, with only 50% of West African students reaching the end of their schooling, compared to 73% elsewhere.
- Beyond access, the quality of learning remains problematic. Several regional assessments reveal that the majority of students do not acquire the expected basic competencies. Furthermore, most countries do not meet their international commitments on funding. Only Togo, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Sierra Leone devote more than 20% of their public spending to education. Other countries, such as Guinea, the Gambia, and Liberia, allocate less than 15%.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation: more than half of West African countries have seen stagnation or a reduction in education spending. School closures have exacerbated inequalities, particularly for children from vulnerable households. Official development assistance for education has been declining steadily for a decade, and its distribution remains inequitable, poorly targeted, and insufficiently coordinated.
- There is also limited efficiency in the use of resources. Despite the resources injected into the sector, their effectiveness remains low, both internally (high dropout rates, low completion rates) and externally (difficulties in entering the labor market). The downgrading of young graduates into underqualified jobs is common, fueling precariousness and unemployment.
- Countries adjust their priorities according to the dynamics of the system. For example, in Senegal, the initial priority given to access to primary education required a reallocation of resources. However, teachers' salaries account for the majority of operating expenses, leaving little room for school infrastructure. There is also a poor distribution of teachers according to actual needs on the ground.

RECOMMANDATIONS

- **Conduct a rigorous assessment of education financing needs in each West African country:** This would enable better targeting of available resources, attract more external aid, and promote innovative financing mechanisms in the face of the gradual decline in official development assistance. It is also relevant to draw inspiration from proven models in other parts of the world, such as India and China, which have successfully addressed major demographic challenges.
- **Secure public funding for education through realistic and resilient planning that takes into account potential economic shocks (as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic):** This requires a better understanding of crises, increased mobilization of domestic fiscal resources, and the establishment of sustainable financing mechanisms.

- **Optimize the use of existing resources:** by drawing inspiration from schools with low unit costs but high results. It is essential to identify the factors that drive school performance in order to replicate good practices and improve the effectiveness of funding.
- **Strengthen investment in digital technology, particularly in IT equipment accessible to all students:** The efforts initiated during the pandemic must be consolidated. Training teachers and students in the use of digital tools is essential to take full advantage of technological innovations in learning.
- **Improve training and recruitment of school administrators and educators:** Some responsible persons have gaps in their reading, writing, or management skills. It is crucial to strengthen their competencies in order to ensure effective use of the resources allocated to the sector. Strengthening the competencies of school administrators and ensuring rigorous monitoring of the use of public funds are essential conditions for achieving inclusive, equitable, and quality education in West Africa.
- **Develop strong public-private partnerships as complementary sources of funding:** Businesses can invest in schools, provide equipment, or offer mentoring programs. In return, governments can offer tax incentives or develop specific partnership programs.
- **Fight corruption in the education sector vigorously, ensuring transparent and equitable management of resources:** Good governance is essential to build trust and increase the impact of investments.
- **Strengthen international cooperation in education:** through the sharing of best practices, the exchange of expertise, and the mobilization of regional and global funding.
- **Increase investment in education in innovative ways:** this involves increasing public budgets, greater private sector participation, the establishment of dedicated funds, and conditional debt relief. Rigorous and transparent management is crucial to maximize the impact of these resources.
- **Improve the quality and governance of the education system** through initial and continuing teacher training, effective school management, and an environment conducive to learning.

QUOTES FROM THE SPEAKER

Dr. Salimata Faye Diop, Education Economist

“It is necessary to assess the state of education in African countries in order to better estimate funding needs.”

“There are many funding challenges to overcome in West Africa.”

“We still face many significant challenges with regard to international funding commitments. Countries, particularly those in West Africa, are slow to honor them. It is becoming urgent to make adequate resources available to education systems.»

«It is clear that resources are still insufficient. But beyond this insufficiency, there is the issue of their effectiveness.»

«The effectiveness of resources devoted to education depends on their ability to achieve the educational objectives, which may differ from one country to another.»

«In developing countries, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are four times more likely to be out of school than those from wealthy households.»

«The decline in education spending has not affected all households equally. Children from the poorest families have been hit hardest.»

«The arrival of the pandemic has exacerbated underfunding issues, leading to stagnation or even a decline

in education budgets.»

«When we look at the last decade and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we see that official development assistance is steadily declining, particularly in the area of education. Added to this is the fact that this aid appears to be unfair due to inconsistencies in its geographic targeting.»

«Young people are experiencing professional downgrading: a degree is not synonymous with a quality job.»

«There is inconsistency in the allocation of human resources, which leads to inefficient use of resources.»

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VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION



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