

# African Problems, African Solutions

**Wars, foreign debt and the HIV/AIDS pandemic are among the daunting challenges to education systems in Africa. With the world's highest population growth rate (2.6 per cent) and fastest urban growth rate (4.3 per cent), Africa sets a very difficult agenda for education for all.**



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*11-year-old Margarida, from Angola, is lucky to be in school, not only because her country is at war but also because she is a girl.*

Only some ten African countries are on track to achieve the education goals they set after the World Conference on Education for All in 1990. The good news is that Africa is energetically pursuing those goals with innovation, optimism and courage. As Kader Asmal, the South African Minister of Education, says, "We must find African solutions to African educational problems."

The continent has made some notable advances. Countries such as Cape Verde, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe have already achieved primary enrolment rates of 90 per cent or more. Uganda more than doubled its enrolment in two years when it introduced a free education scheme. And although some 42 million primary-school-age children are out of school in sub-Saharan Africa, at least 17 million more are in school today compared to 1990. The gender gap is as wide as ever, despite the fact that many countries have now introduced girl-friendly policies: Benin exempts girls in rural areas from paying school fees and Eritrea has trained 300 female teachers to increase girls' enrolment.

One of the principal reasons education budgets suffer in Africa is a crippling foreign debt burden. No fewer than thirty of the world's forty-two heavily indebted countries are in Africa. The continent is currently serving its debts to the tune of US\$13 billion annually when all it needs is some US\$3 billion a year to fund universal primary education. Some countries have to struggle to even pay the interest on their loans.

Over 69 per cent of the world's AIDS cases occur in sub-Saharan Africa, according to Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. The HIV virus has now infected a total of 23 million Africans. Innovative care and support programmes exist, but with 13 million AIDS orphans predicted by the end of 2000, these efforts, along with traditional community care, are likely to be overwhelmed. Drastic measures are needed.



## Zoom

- ▶ At least 17 million more African primary-school-age children are in school today compared to 1990. However, some 42 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa are still out of school.
- ▶ Almost 60 per cent of out-of-school children are girls, illustrating that the gender gap is as wide as it was a decade ago.
- ▶ Up to two thirds of children are not getting an education in countries where there is armed conflict and civil strife.
- ▶ The average number of pupils per teacher is 37 in the region; in central and western African countries, such as Mali or Chad, it can reach up to 70. The pupil/teacher ratio has risen slightly in the past decade.
- ▶ Almost 40 per cent of African adults cannot read or write. Women are the most affected. In certain countries in western Africa, female illiteracy can reach 80 per cent.

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In Zambia 1,300 teachers died from AIDS in 1998 alone and teacher deaths now outnumber the output from teacher-training colleges. The psychological effect of illness and death among teachers and pupils is far-reaching: its long-term effects on education are ominous.

"The ceiling is full of bullet holes and when it rains I have to stop teaching," complains Thea Uwimbabazi, a Rwandan teacher. The escalation of conflict in the region over the last ten years has had a devastating effect on education. International or civil wars are raging in a third of the forty-five countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent is home to nearly a third of the world's refugees. Countries in the grip of civil strife, such as Somalia, Angola and the Central African Republic, have seen their formal education systems deteriorate. Displaced teachers and pupils, damaged or destroyed school buildings and the looting of educational materials and equipment are just some of the consequences.

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But it is not all gloom and doom in Africa. "In the past ten years an unprecedented number of education reforms have made education an issue discussed in buses and bars," says Gabriel Mharadze Machinga, Minister of Education of Zimbabwe. "Now Africa has to show commitment. Africa has to act." Twenty-five recent successful education initiatives, cited by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), showed both commitment, innovation and action. To build community participation, the Burundi government provided financial incentives for communities to assume part of the cost of school construction. Faced with poor results from French-language schools, Niger launched an experimental programme to improve quality, using national languages and active learning methods.

Confidence and growth are returning to the continent as a result of several factors, from better government policies to the active involvement of non-governmental organizations and local communities in education and development. African governments are showing purpose and determination to start again and put a new stamp on institutions and programmes intended to improve the daily lives of Africans. This is surely what people mean when they talk about a new Afro-optimism or even an African Renaissance, recently expressed by South African president Thabo Mbeki: "We are liberating ourselves and now reside in mental universes of our own making, for our own progress and prosperity." ■

*Grade 5, here we come!  
But many African children  
never make it that far.*

