Transition from Primary to Secondary Education in Kenya and Uganda
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The Importance of Education

Access to basic good quality education is a fundamental human right. It empowers individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to increase production and income, to create and take advantage of employment opportunities and to reduce hunger and malnutrition. Supporting education is “one of the smartest economic and human development investments that any country can make.”

Over the past two decades primary education has been the focus of a universal education system. Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 is to achieve universal primary education and this commitment is regarded as a minimum for all countries to guarantee for their children. While the likelihood that this goal will be realised by 2015 is remote, this commitment to primary education has led to significant improvements in the number of children accessing this level of schooling. In Sub-Saharan Africa the net enrolment in primary education has risen considerably from 58% in 1998/1999 to 76% in 2008/2009.

While primary education has been the principle concern of development agendas there is a mounting acceptance that secondary education also has a vital role in ensuring a country’s development. A World Bank Paper (2008) cited secondary education and training as “pre-requisites to economic growth and social development.” In order for countries to compete in a globalised economy it is important for labour markets to have high calibre school graduates with relevant skills and knowledge. Furthermore secondary education is increasingly understood as a way out of poverty for many individuals, having marked improvements on their standards of living; “who goes to school, and increasingly in many developing countries who goes to secondary school, is a major determinant of future life chances and mobility out of poverty.”

Access to quality secondary education is beneficial to more than just economic and social development. It is widely understood that secondary education promotes active citizenship as well as enhances social cohesion by increasing trust and tolerance amongst individuals. While a lack of education may not be the primary reason for conflict, countries that have seen a marked improvement in social cohesion post conflict are often those that have invested heavily across the education sector. If development goals and economic growth are to be achieved it is clear the MDG’s focus on universal primary education is important but insufficient.

Rate of Transition

Despite the overarching benefits of secondary education access, quality and relevance of this sector remains inadequate across the developing world. In Sub-Saharan Africa the proportion of children progressing to secondary school remains at less than 25%. In Kenya and Uganda where Build Africa supports quality education at primary level, as a result of the introduction of universal primary education net enrolment rates are 81.5% and 97.1% respectively while net enrolment at secondary school is 49.1% and 19.1% respectively (Table 1), with the transition from primary to secondary school persistently low at 53% and 29% respectively. Over the course of this paper key factors affecting the levels of enrolment and rate of transition to secondary education will be considered.

Table 1:
Primary School Dropouts

One obvious way of improving the number of children attending secondary school is to reduce the dropout rates of those enrolled in primary school and ensuring children are able to complete this level of education. While enrolment rates for primary school reach over 80% in both Kenya and Uganda, the level of dropout remains a problem in both countries. Uganda has one of the highest dropout rates in the world at 67.6% of all primary school cohorts, while in Kenya the dropout is around 16%\(^1\). The number of children who are out of school is largely made up of children who have enrolled but have subsequently dropped out. Those children who have never enrolled are actually a small minority\(^1\). Build Africa has observed this trend in primary schools across both countries. Despite enrolment being reasonably high and remaining steady for several years, during the last two years of primary school there is often a notable decline in the number of pupils registered and attending school.

CREATE (2009) produced a policy brief that detailed some of the major factors contributing to school dropout rates. These include:

- Financial reasons: household income/financial circumstances; direct and indirect costs of schooling; income shocks; child labour;
- Household composition and contexts; fostering; bereavement and orphan-hood;
- Attitudes towards education: education of household members; household perceived benefits of schooling; gender; age, marriage and notions of adulthood;
- Access and quality of education: rural or urban setting; supply of schools; school quality, process and practices;
- Well-being and exclusion: health; pregnancy; disability and special educational needs; other socially disadvantaged groups\(^1\).

While some of these factors may be beyond the reach of NGOs and policy intervention, many of these challenges can be tackled through a variety of practices. For example Build Africa works with School Management Committees, teachers and parents to ensure that there is an understanding amongst the school community of the value of education. It also advocates for a widespread understanding of every child’s right to education, with a particular focus on the girl child. A reduction in the dropout rate of pupils in Build Africa supported schools has occurred and consequently there has been a significant improvement in the number of pupils reaching their final year of school.

While Build Africa has been successful in increasing the numbers of children completing primary education in the schools it supports, interventions from NGOs must also be complemented by changes in national policy and practices to ensure wider reach and guaranteeing a lasting impact. One such example is the abolishment of the common practice of filtering in schools. Until 2010 in Kenya it was generally accepted that primary schools would filter out pupils who were not expected to pass their primary leavers exams, and this led to a large number of pupils dropping out before being given the opportunity to complete primary education. A change in the mode of analysis of schools’ quality and rethinking of policy has created an environment in which all children are to be given the opportunity to sit their primary leaving exam.

Despite the increasing numbers of children completing primary education many children in Sub-Saharan Africa still do not make the transition from primary to secondary school. Over the coming sections attention will be given to four key factors which have been identified by the World Bank as critical in influencing the transition from primary to secondary school in Africa\(^1\).

Financing

Financial investment in secondary education not only by households but also by governments is a critical factor which influences the rate of transition from primary to secondary education. State investment in secondary education tends to be the most neglected of the education sector, receiving on average between 15% and 20% of total education resources from the government\(^1\). Such a low investment in secondary education has direct implications for transition rates. One problem that is a consequence of a lack of funding received by the secondary education sector is the issue of access. Access to secondary school is a huge challenge for many individuals particularly in rural regions of Africa, with many children unable to attend due to the remoteness of secondary schools. In countries such as Kenya and Uganda which have introduced universal primary education there was a necessary trade off...
between implementing this policy and investing in building new schools and improving school infrastructure. It is likely that with the introduction of free secondary education similar problems have occurred in both countries. Furthermore, even in secondary schools located near primary feeder schools, there may be other problems restricting the intake of pupils. Underfinancing has led to a lack of teaching staff and classrooms, both of which pose major obstacles to many secondary schools enrolling more children. Governments need to be prepared to invest in secondary education if they want to improve transition rates and subsequently see an increase in economic growth and social progress. Without such investment it will become increasingly hard to compete in today’s knowledge based global economy.

The issue of household finances also extends to individuals’ ability to access secondary education. The burden of financing secondary education is very high. In Kenya before the abolition of secondary school fees households were expected to meet 60% of secondary education costs, compared to 20% of primary and 7% of university. In Uganda the cost of secondary school is also seen as very prohibitive. Only 6 per cent of children of the poorest 25 per cent of families complete secondary education, compared with 22 per cent from the richest 25 per cent. Even after the government moved to create a universal secondary education system, the cost to households in Kenya continues to remain too high for many to attend secondary school. A study of 109 school leavers found only 17 progressed to secondary school, while 20 of those who would have liked to attend sighted ancillary costs as the greatest hurdle.

For transition to improve it is imperative that poor families are able to afford the cost of secondary education. Programmes geared towards increasing incomes of the poor are therefore critical if access to and benefits of secondary education are to be extended more widely. Initiatives such as the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) have proved themselves as one effective method to increase incomes of some of the poorest families. An evaluation of VSLA groups in Uganda found that people were prepared to spend a significant amount of money on education if they could afford it and in fact spent more money on school fees than anything else. This observation is also supported by case studies from Build Africa's income programme indicating that as household income increases so does spending on education.

**Family Networks and Household Composition**

A further key factor influencing transition rates is family networks. In families with strong networks that can share the burden of educating children transition is likely to be higher. Families are able to rely on other relatives for support, not only in terms of financial assistance but also by reducing the need for children and especially girls to assist the family in household and income generating activities.

Household composition also has an influence on educational access, particularly in poorer communities. The chances a child will access secondary school decreases with the number of children of secondary school age in the household, with birth order and gender often impacting on access and retention in schools. Furthermore, households with mothers present are more likely to place a higher value on education and lessen the burden on children to contribute to household chores. It is important that all members of the family place a value on education and a belief in its relevance and the lasting impact it will have on poverty reduction. Consequently, measures, such as support to increase household finances and challenging attitudes towards education, which have a broader focus than on the school itself are...
likely to have a greater impact\textsuperscript{28}.

\textbf{Quality and Relevance}

Another key factor that affects transition rates is the quality and relevance of education. Low quality education across both the primary and secondary levels as well as perceptions of curricula inadequacies has led to “apathy, school disaffection and anti-social behaviour” from students in many Africa nations which has had a direct impact on the rate of transition\textsuperscript{29}. The quality of education in primary is thus essential to improve the level of transition. In Build Africa supported schools it has been observed that as a direct consequence of interventions such as teacher training, improvements in infrastructure and the creation of a supportive learning environment there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children of primary school age passing their primary leaving exams.

A lack of understanding of the relevance of secondary schooling has also led to low transition rates. Many students may choose to seek other avenues to advance their education which they consider to have more immediate economic returns for their families. The aforementioned study of school leavers in Kenya found that 43 out of 109 primary school graduates preferred to attend polytechnics rather than invest in secondary school, despite half of this group securing places in local secondary schools:

\begin{quote}
“Polytechnic takes only two years to complete and you can get a job directly after completion. But in secondary school, you go and learn there and after that, you have to go to either polytechnic to gain skills, or into higher education” (Kimuyu, age 21) \textsuperscript{30}.
\end{quote}

Ensuring that there is awareness and understanding of the benefits and relevance of secondary school is clearly important in ensuring transition into secondary education. It is also imperative that secondary schools are relevant and facilitate school to work transitions for those not able to pursue tertiary education. The gap between what is being taught in secondary schools and the knowledge and skills required in countries must be reduced if secondary education is to become more relevant\textsuperscript{31}. Ensuring that there is effective work experience and vocational training incorporated into the secondary school curriculum might be vital in achieving this outcome\textsuperscript{32}.

\textbf{Inequitable Distribution of Secondary School Opportunities}

A significant number of studies have observed the uneven distribution of educational opportunities between poor and non-poor regions, both in urban and rural environments. A lack of schools within a reasonable walking distance for those in poor regions is a serious barrier to transition, especially in rural and remote parts of countries\textsuperscript{33}. A lack of infrastructure is also a serious challenge to existing schools and as the numbers of pupils completing primary education continues to grow, teaching staff amongst other resources will become an increasing problem\textsuperscript{34}.

Furthermore, the access of secondary education for girls and boys remains inequitably distributed. In most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa boys continue to have better access to and retention in secondary school than girls. A myriad of factors may lead to this being the case. For example when young people have to walk a long distance to school, girls may be discouraged to walk by themselves for fear of their security. Furthermore, facilities and infrastructure are also important, and the absence of facilities relevant to the needs of the girl child such as provision of sanitary towels and adequate toilets may have a more direct impact on girls than on boys’ educational opportunities\textsuperscript{35}. Other barriers to girls’ education include pregnancy, early marriage, hostile learning environments and societal attitudes towards girls’ education\textsuperscript{36}.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In order for transition to be improved it is clear that a triangulated approach is needed to address the problem at three levels: 1) government and private sector; 2) schools 3) households.
**Government and Private Sector – Provision of Infrastructure and Resources:**

The government and private sector are critical to address the barriers to access many children face in entering secondary school. New schools must be built and improvements to infrastructure and facilities of existing ones must be undertaken. It is also essential these pay particular attention to the needs of the girl child. Furthermore, it is crucial that there are an adequate number of teachers and sufficient learning resources supplied to schools.

**Schools – Quality and Relevance of Education**

At both the primary and secondary school level it is imperative that the issues of quality and relevance of education are addressed. Teachers require training and support in creating a supportive learning environment. This encompasses factors from working to the national curriculum and encouraging sport and play to addressing child protection and inclusive education. While at the level of relevance it is essential that students are supported in making valid life choices post-secondary education. Helping children into vocational training and support for work experience placements while attending secondary as well as support in business development skills may be critical for those not expecting to continue into tertiary education.

**Household – Attitudes and Income**

It is vital for children who wish to access secondary education that there is support from their families and guardians. However, cultural attitudes often remain a major barrier for many children. Attitudes about the relevance of secondary education must be challenged and parents and guardians need to have an understanding about the importance of secondary education if transition is to be facilitated. Household income also remains a barrier. Households need support to access appropriate financial services if they are to be able to secure the income necessary to invest in the education of their children.

**References**

15. CREATE (2009) Dropping Out From School, Policy Brief No 8, CREATE, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK
17. Ibid.


26 Ibid.

27 CREATE (2009) Dropping Out From School, Policy Brief No 8, CREATE, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.


29 Ibid.


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