

Bridging the Gap in Educational Disparities among Youth in Africa

by Abisoye Ajose



Image source: A Female Student Participant speaking during LEAP Africa's iLEAD Programme 2023

Introduction:

Education is a fundamental human right; however, only a few young people can access quality education in Africa. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report and The UNESCO Institute for Statistics data report, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion, with over one-fifth of children between the ages of about 6 and 11 being out-of-school, while one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14, while almost 60% of youth between the ages of about 15 and 17 are not in school. This lack of access is not merely a matter of availability but is deeply rooted in broader systemic inequalities that manifest as educational disparities.

Educational Disparities refer to the differences in academic outcomes that may result from differential or biased treatment of ethnic and racial minority students within the educational system, differences in socioeconomic status, and different responses to educational systems or other educational needs.¹

Factors Contributing to Educational Disparities among Youth in Africa:

These Disparities occur due to factors such as Gender and Social Exclusion Barriers, Geographical Location, Inadequate Household Income, Literacy level of Parents/Guardians, and Insufficient Government Investment in Education.

Gender and Social Exclusion Barriers: Africa has a multiethnic geographical landscape with various deep-rooted cultural norms and gender roles that limit girls in accessing formal education and often

¹ American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities. (2012). Ethnic and racial disparities in education: Psychology's contributions to understanding and reducing disparities. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/ed/resources/racial-disparities.pdf>

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compel them to marry before the age of 18, resulting in teenage pregnancies. According to the World Bank, a lower secondary completion rate was recorded for girls in sub-Saharan Africa, which is 43%.² This rate drops further to just 25% at the upper secondary level of education.³ These data underscore a significant reduction in girls' retention rates as they progress to higher levels of education.

Furthermore, Persons with Disabilities usually experience hurdles in accessing formal education due to social exclusion within different societies that often result in stigmatisation, reduce their enrolment rate and negatively impact their academic outcomes.

Geographical Location: Africa remains a developing continent with various geographical areas, such as rural, urban, semi-urban, and peri-urban, with distinctive growth and development patterns. Young people residing in rural areas experience educational disparities, especially in terms of access to quality education, due to poor educational infrastructure, inadequate educational learning resources, and human resources compared to their urban counterparts who have unlimited access to educational learning facilities and conducive learning environment.

Inadequate Household Income: Household incomes differ across Africa. Accessing quality education in Africa comes at a cost. Education and poverty in Africa are complex issues that are deeply interconnected.⁴ Inadequate household income hinders access to quality education, and a lack of education perpetuates poverty. The cost of accessing quality education in Africa can hinder young people from low-income households from accessing Quality Education compared to those from Middle Income and High low-income households.

Literacy Level of Parent/Guardian: The literacy level of a parent or guardian influences the decision-making regarding enrollment and the level of education of young people. Young people with parents/guardians with high literacy levels tend to understand the value of education and are usually open to allowing them to enroll and complete secondary and tertiary education.

Insufficient Government Investment in Educational Infrastructure and Programmes: Despite various funds and resources invested by the Government in the Educational Sector across Africa, the ever-growing population of young people has increased demand for educational services and resources. In African countries such as Nigeria, the average percentage budgetary allocation to the education sector by the Federal Government was about 7.81% from 1999-2021 which is significantly lower than each of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) 15%, 20% and 26% recommended benchmarks compared to other countries such as Ghana (24.37%), Kenya (21.7%), Morocco (17.61%), and South Africa (19.49%).³ Although at par with UNESCO's standard, the budgetary allocation must be increased further to meet the increasing cost of accessing quality education.

Recommendations:

Prioritising Investment in Quality Education by Government: Increasing budgetary allocation and funding for the educational sector in African countries is pivotal to bridging educational disparities among African youth. The Government should make deliberate efforts to promote equitable access to education

² <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2017-march-2018/africa-grapples-huge-disparities-education>

³ Ohaegbulem, EU 2024 Comparing the Budgetary Allocations to the Education Sectors of Nigeria and Some African Countries (1999-2021) in View of UNESCO's Benchmarks American Journal of Applied Statistics and Economics (AJASE) Vol 3(1) 15-23 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajase.v3i1.2280>



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at all levels. Such efforts should include providing incentives for teachers, regular capacity building on pedagogy in line with global standards, and provision of educational infrastructure and accountability systems to ensure adequate maintenance of infrastructures.

Private-Public Sector Partnership: The growing out-of-school youth population underscores an exigent need to prioritise access to Quality Education in Africa. Partnerships between international, local, private, government institutions, ministries, and Nonprofit organisations would go a long way to bridge the gap in educational disparities among African youth. Such partnerships can provide funding to support access to quality education for young people, especially underserved populations.

Intensify Efforts on the Design and Implementation of Educational Programmes: There is a need to intensify efforts toward designing and implementing Educational programs that will enhance access to educational opportunities and promote equitable access to education at all levels. LEAP Africa, a leading Pan-African nonprofit organisation, has been at the forefront of bridging Educational Disparities in Africa through the iLEAD Program and E-learning Programs, aimed at empowering teenagers and young people from various socioeconomic backgrounds with leadership, employability, entrepreneurship, and life skills to foster their successful transition to adulthood.

Advocacy Campaigns in Grassroots Communities: Young girls in rural communities are often naive and unable to advocate for enrollment in education due to harmful sociocultural norms. Advocacy campaigns and legislation to advocate for enrollment and education access for young girls and Persons with Disabilities up to tertiary education level will go a long way to bridging educational disparities between young girls and Persons with Disabilities across the continent.

Conclusion:

The vast youth population in Africa presents a window of opportunity that can catalyse quantum leaps of development, provided educational disparities are reduced and appropriate systems are put in place to deliver a safe, high-quality, and inclusive learning environment for young people in Africa.