

# Poverty; a Major Challenge to the African Rural Educational System Development and the Way Forward (Review)

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## Abstract

Considering the significance of rural poverty across the continent of Africa, it should come as no surprise that rural school children are the most disadvantaged from a socioeconomic perspective when it comes to access to a quality education. Rural schools generally have less qualified teachers and not enough teachers for the number of children enrolled in school. This is clearly evident in the low teachers-per-school ratios and teacher-to-pupil ratios in most rural African regions. The reasons for these low numbers in rural Africa are many and very much linked to poverty and other inequalities and socioeconomic conditions. For example, teachers generally prefer urban to rural schools because urban areas offer greater opportunities and higher incomes. There is also a better quality of life in urban areas, with better access to good infrastructure, other services (such as healthcare) and general public goods. In contrast, rural areas in Africa are often characterized by poor or nonexistent infrastructure and little or no provisions for other critical social services. This in turn negatively impacts the quality of education for rural-area children since even getting to school is a more difficult challenge and illness of a pupil or a family member may force the pupil to drop out of school entirely. Students in rural regions of Africa are further disadvantaged by the fact that their parents are generally uneducated. Again, we see that other socioeconomic conditions and inequalities greatly impact the quality of education in rural areas compared to urban centers. The continent's education crisis is serious and it adversely affects rural areas more than urban ones. African governments and their development partners should not underestimate the long-term consequences of continued poverty and socioeconomic inequalities in rural areas. These conditions will only continue to exacerbate the education and learning gaps between rural and urban African schoolchildren. And in turn, poor quality education in rural areas will only continue to perpetuate long-term poverty in the region.

**Keywords:** Africa; Education; Poverty; Infrastructure; Rural

## Introduction

The importance of education in developing countries cannot be overstated. Education can be the catalyst needed to pull families and communities out of the cycle of poverty [1]. Knowledge gives children the power to dream of a better future and the confidence needed to pursue a full education, which in turn will help generations to come. Education also makes a significant difference for adults, particularly when it applies to day-to-day life, including nutrition, healthcare and gender equity [2]. When adults learn, they become role models to their children, who also wish to learn. Education in all different forms is key to breaking the cycle of poverty. It has an uplifting effect on other aspects of society that may seem totally unrelated, such as girls' education lowering the number of prenatal deaths [3]. The relationship between poverty and education is complex, but we know that education helps people make healthier and smarter decisions about their children, their livelihoods and the way they live [4].

The impact of poverty on education in Africa remains one of the biggest challenges, combined with huge structural issues such as the lack (if not absence) of employment opportunities for school and university graduates [5]. Despite progress over the last decade, 67 million children worldwide, of whom approximately 53% are girls, do not have access to basic education currently [6]. The Education Commission **projected** that if current trends continue, by 2030 just 4 out of 10 children of school age (1.4 billion children) in low- and middle-income countries will be on track to gain basic secondary-level skills [7].

Various global indices including the Social Progress Index and the Human Development Index **shows** that low educational attainment is most widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. Sub-Saharan African countries often suffer from relatively unstable economies as well as conflicts and droughts which further worsen the educational crisis and poverty levels [8].

## Causes of Poverty in Africa

The causes of poverty in Africa cannot be narrowed down to one single source. As a developing **continent**, Africa has a lengthy history of external, internal and man-made forces at work to bring about the circumstances this continent suffers from today [9]. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost 220 million people, half the population, live in poverty. Worsened by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, cultural conflict and ethnic cleansing, Africa faces many challenges that directly correlate with its impoverished status [10].

- **Poor Governance**

Poor governance, one of the major causes of poverty in Africa, involves various malpractices by the state and its workers [11]. This malpractice has led many African leaders to push away the needs of the people. Having created the “personal rule paradigm,” where they treat their offices as a form of property and personal gain, these leaders openly appoint underqualified personnel in key positions at state-owned

institutions and government departments. This type of governance affects the poorest people and leaves them vulnerable, as they are denied basic necessities such as healthcare, food and shelter [12].

- **Corruption**

Corruption has been and still is a major issue in the development of and fight against poverty in Africa, specifically sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) [13]. SSA is considered to be among the most corrupt places in the world. According to a survey conducted by World Anti-Corruption, corruption in Africa is “due to the fact that many people in Africa believe that family relations are more important than country identity. Therefore, those in power use bias and bribery for the gain of their relatives at the expense of their country” [14]

Corruption costs SSA roughly \$150 billion a year in lost revenue. While some countries in Africa, such as Ghana, Tanzania and Rwanda, have made some progress in the fight against corruption, there are still many lagging very far behind. A lack of effort to solve this issue only **worsen** the causes of poverty in Africa today [15].

- **Poor Education**

Lack of education is also a serious issue that contributes to the causes of poverty in Africa [16]. This absence is especially felt in sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest rates of educational exclusion. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of about six and 11 are out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14 [17]. Almost 60 percent of youth between the ages of about 15 and 17 are not in school. Education for girls has become a major focus of support groups like UNICEF, UNESCO and the UIS. With poor access to school, lack of sanitary facilities and social norms like female genital mutilation and child marriage, the right to women’s education is even less of a priority in impoverished communities [18].

However, education, especially girls’ education, has been proven to be one of the most cost-effective strategies for promoting economic growth. According to UNICEF, “studies have shown that educated mothers tend to have healthier, better-nourished babies and that their own children are more likely to attend school; thus helping break the vicious cycle of poverty” [19].

- **Diseases**

Another leading cause of poverty in Africa is the prevalence of diseases (such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, TB etc) [20]. When a household is affected by any of the diseases, the little resources are spent on treating the sick. In a worst case scenario where the bread winner dies, those who are left behind have no resources to support themselves, thus leading a poor lifestyle. And the situation is worsened by poor health facilities [21].

- **Healthcare**

Poor healthcare is a major cause of poverty in Africa because the poor cannot afford to purchase what is needed for good health, including sufficient quantities of quality food and healthcare itself [22]. With a lack of education on preventing infectious diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS, as well as the costs of consultations, tests and medicine, people living in poverty are at a severe disadvantage that only perpetuates the poverty cycle [23].

- **Poor Land Utilization**

In most African countries, people own large chunks of land that are underutilized or sometimes not even used at all [24]. This is partly because they are either not educated on what to do with the land, or because some people are just stuck in their rudimentary ways of doing things. Some people just use the land to grow crops which are just enough for subsistence survival. Nothing goes to the market for sale [25].

- **Civil Wars and Unending Political Conflicts**

Africa is popular for its civil wars, either between neighboring countries or within the same country. Such incidences render war zones unproductive, in addition to scaring away investment that would otherwise help foster economic development and create employment, which would help people get out poverty [26].

- **Poor Infrastructure**

Africa has a very poor infrastructure set up. They have poor roads, railways, water systems, etc, yet these are some of the major drivers of economic development. As a result, only a few areas with better facilities (such as urban areas) have developed over the other (rural) areas, which are occupied by the largest percentage of the population [27].

- **The World Bank and IMF Policies**

The loans given out by the World Bank and IMF (the International Monetary Fund) have contributed to the poverty problem in Africa. Such loans come with strict conditions, which usually required governments to adjust some of their economic decisions [28]. For instance, the requirement to reduce total government spending has affected major social sectors such as education, health and infrastructure, which are drivers of economic development [29].

## **The Need for Education**

- **Education Improves Food Security and Reduces Malnutrition**

When people learn about agriculture and farming techniques, they gain the ability to grow and maintain healthy crops, which provide vegetables for meals and additional income. Families also learn what nutrients their children need for healthy development, as well as foods pregnant women need to eat to promote their babies' growth [30].

- **Education Reduces the Spread of Communicable Diseases**

The spread of disease in developing countries is often exacerbated by a lack of public knowledge about how it is transmitted [31]. In 2014 and 2015, youth groups in West Africa helped spread the word about prevention of the Ebola virus, particularly the need to avoid traditional burial practices that spread the deadly disease. Especially when local, trusted voices convey this lifesaving information, communities are receptive to learning. Even in non-emergency situations, education about the spread of disease is important [32].

- **Education Improves Standards of Health**

Literacy is important to good health because women need to be able to read about prenatal vitamins and other health information during their pregnancies. This, in turn, reduces the rates of prenatal and maternal mortality, and improves children's health, too [33]. The ability to read also is important in educating communities about clean water and sanitation, particularly if families need to use filters or boil water before drinking it to avoid waterborne illnesses. Other examples abound, including emergency notices about the Zika virus, Ebola or HIV. Reading keeps people healthier [34].

- **Education Improves Gender Equality**

Educating women and girls about reproductive healthcare and their rights regarding marriage empowers them to make decisions about their lives. Early marriage and pregnancy cut educations short and often lead to underweight, undernourished children, as well as domestic violence [35]. When girls stay in school longer, they are less likely to marry before age 18 and have children early, and they're more likely to find rewarding work after leaving school. Approximately 39,000 under-aged girls marry each year, some as young as 8 or 9. Community-wide education helps everyone understand the harm of this practice [36].

## **Issues Facing Education in the Rural Areas**

Education itself is considered a necessity in many parts of the world, including rural areas. However, unlike many urban areas, there are a number of factors that contribute to making it more difficult for those in rural areas to receive education both of a high standard and over an extended period of time [37]. Without basic education, children and adults in rural areas can miss out on important life skills and opportunities, even from achieving a minimal level of literacy.

As the gap between urban and rural education levels grows, with 4 out of 5 of the 61 million children worldwide that are not in school living in rural areas, the issue is in danger of becoming self-perpetuating. The main challenges affecting education in rural areas are related to access, economics, and resources [38].

Access is often a key factor in determining a child's ability to gain education. Many rural children have to travel vast distances to reach their schools and often these schools are only at the primary education level [39] In order to reach schools at a secondary education level or higher, the distances travelled are often much greater.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, education in rural areas is more gendered than in urban areas due to a range of factors including cultural practices and beliefs. This is especially the case within rural areas of the African continent. This further restriction to education for girls and women highlights the complicated nature of tackling the issue on a worldwide scale [40].

Economics also plays an important role in rural education. Rural families often have to contribute to the cost of education for their children which according to one study can average at 18% of their total incomes, double the percentage paid by urban families [41]. Families in rural areas are also more likely to be living in subsistence and as a result can often not afford these contributions. Furthermore, education is frequently limited to primary level as children at an older age are considered an economic loss if they attend secondary education instead of working for the family. Girls may also marry for the economic benefit of the family instead of receiving an education. Families are thus faced with a range of economic choices with regards to education and despite research showing that "rural households value education for their children highly", often only one or even none of the families' children receive education beyond a basic level [42].

Resources are also very important in determining the level and availability of education in rural areas. In many cases there **are lack** of teachers, as they are unwilling to teach in rural areas, disconnected from their urban lives, and in cases where they are willing, they often teach classes with students of a variety of ages and education levels. The lack of teachers is matched by a lack of schools themselves to accommodate the widely dispersed rural populations. Governments are often unwilling or unable to pay for improvements that would help to facilitate improved learning conditions, such as for teachers, schools, books, computers or even larger scale infrastructure projects, such as better road networks and transportation systems. There are many factors within rural education that can be improved to help facilitate better availability and levels of education but the resources are scarce and urban areas are traditionally better served than rural ones [43].

### **Tackling Poverty**

Investing in SMEs (Small & Medium Enterprises) presents a number of advantages, including:

- Increased employment within local communities (especially for youth and vulnerable groups) – also making it interesting for the youth to study as long as possible
- Increased production capacity
- Development of local value chains and markets

By investing in job creating SME's, the aim is to create attractive post-education opportunities for young people, which can engender a virtuous cycle of progress in the future [44]. By investing in SMEs that positively affect educational outcomes for children in low-income rural communities and informal urban settlements, the idea is to target the “missing middle” (lack of SMEs in low income countries which account for 50% of GDP in developed countries) [45].

The needs of **these** demographic are under-served by the government (due to limited budgets, reach, and/or capability) and the private sector. Investments in education for low-income communities (aside from large infrastructure projects) will remain financially unattractive for the private sector over the next 15–20 years [46]. Reducing the impact of poverty on education in Africa will take every single actor in the economy: government, private sector and NGOs to ensure that all the “ingredients” are there to make the improvements needed [47].

## Conclusion

To address Africa's education crisis, African governments must implement policies that reduce poverty in rural areas, such as improving infrastructure, health and sanitation conditions, and modernizing the agricultural sector. While urbanization is certainly good for Africa's industrialization and economic growth, a synergy between rural and urban development needs to be maintained if the quality of education in rural Africa is to be improved. African governments can also provide incentives, such as an additional bonus for teachers who accept positions to teach in rural schools. For their part, Africa's development partners could support initiatives and programs that specifically target rural schools in order to help improve learning outcomes in those areas.

With a strong fight against many forces still ahead of this continent, Africa must weed out the corruption and **poor governance**, and promote strong education and efficient healthcare for all, in order to take a big leap forward in its development as a continent.

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