

# Development prospects for the Horn of Africa countries to 2040

## Education

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## Education

Before colonisation and the range of crises faced in the region, most of the countries in the Horn offered education through sheikhs and priests. After colonisation, the Horn countries all emphasised the role of education in nation building, and this has been embedded in their policies and national plans as a driver of strategic development.

Despite being a top priority for governments, many challenges persist in accessing education in the region. The annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia in 1962 and subsequent armed struggle, for example, disrupted the education systems of both countries—particularly Eritrea. The latter's educational development was pegged to that of Addis Ababa at the time. Beyond this dilemma, Eritrea is still faced with illiteracy, geographical and climatic challenges, gender inequality, poor infrastructure and inadequately qualified teachers.[1]

Although the situation has improved over the years, the Horn countries still have one of the lowest educational attainments in the world. Owing to a complex socio-political system in the region, the six Horn countries have one of the highest rates of education exclusion. According to IFs, in 2020 over 63 million adults aged 15 years and over had no education or had not attained primary education.

Apart from 2000 when the literacy rate hit a 61% mark, the rates have often fluctuated below that due to conflict and other humanitarian crises that hinder formal education. In 2018, the average literacy rate was at 56.5%, but it is estimated to have declined to about 53.7% in 2020.

When it comes to school enrolment, the rates are much lower than in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This is due to displacement of children (which affects access to schooling), disruption of teacher incentives (which affects continuity and teacher retention) and lack of funding for emergency education. This is due to recurrent droughts, conflicts and the pastoralist lifestyle of some of the communities. Additionally, children get recruited into the armed forces from schools to fight on the front lines.[2]

As a result of these challenges, the average period of education for adults aged 15 years and over, according to 2015 data, is only about 3.7 years. When disaggregated by gender, males have about four years and females 3.3 years of schooling. The average years of education are a good indicator of the stock of education in a society, and this means that most adults in the six Horn countries have barely completed primary education.

By 2040, the average years of education for adults 15+ will only be about 5.7 years, nearly 30% lower (1.6 years) than the African average and 72% (4.1 years) lower than the average for the rest of the world, i.e. the world without Africa.

The education system can be conceived as a pipeline where completion or attainment of one level affords one eligibility to the next. From the average years of education, it is clear that most learners do not proceed to the next educational level in the system. That is, the more learners one can enrol and get to complete primary school, the greater a pool of students are available to proceed to secondary and tertiary education.

Chart 19 below shows the performance of various education indicators from one level to another for the six countries. The table is colour-coded to show country and group performance ranging from good (green) to bad (red).

Note: Gross enrolment is the number of learners enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education. Rates can therefore be above 100%. Completion rate is the number of people in the relevant age group who have completed the last grade of the given level of education, as a percentage of the population at the theoretical graduation age for the given level of education.

With the exception of Ethiopia, which has made substantial progress, all the other countries in the Horn still have a bottleneck at the primary enrolment stage. This means that to begin with, there are not enough children entering the school system to proceed to subsequent educational attainment levels. The more learners a country can get into and through primary school, the greater the pool available for secondary and tertiary. Consequently, educational outcomes for secondary and tertiary levels are very poor.

Poor education environment, i.e. poor education infrastructure, water and sanitation facilities, violence and little child protection, are some of the key impeding factors. Outdated curricula, lack of skilled and adequate teaching staff and management and few mobile educational facilities to meet the nomadic lifestyle of some of the communities continue to affect the quality of education.

Gender imbalance in the education sector also affects the enrolment and educational outcomes of females in particular. These often vary by region—i.e. rural and urban areas. Nonetheless, the female enrolment numbers are often low, partly due to stereotyped gender roles in society. And when they do enrol, as they get older they drop out faster than boys. A significant portion of females who drop out leave to get married, and another portion are forced to leave to stay home and take care of siblings and house chores.

In addition to societal norms, issues like distance and transportation to and from school also contribute to the gender gap. Children from rural areas often have to travel long distances to school, which causes them to be tired and promotes absenteeism.

Coupled with the role that children are expected to play in terms of chores and helping their families earn a living, the long distances to access schools affect girls more than boys as the burden of chores lies with them. Girls also often feel insecure travelling long distances on their own.[3]

The significance of female education is well documented. It is in the interest of all countries to ensure that girls and women do not miss out on educational opportunities that carry real potential for overall human development and economic productivity.

Studies have shown that secondary education in particular enables women to make meaningful life decisions, like the number of children to have, apart from also delaying their first year of marriage. As a result, they are also able to better take care of their health and nutrition and that of their children and pursue economic activities that promote community and country cohesion and development.[4] Chart 21 shows how female education has historically affected the total fertility rate for the Horn countries and how that could develop into 2040.

Education empowers girls and women to have a voice and to participate in decision-making. It improves their capacity to

address conflict, broker peace and build sustainable communities.

Given the large number of adults without formal education in the Horn, adult education and vocational training are some of the ways that regional governments can meaningfully contribute to the economy and possibly promote greater peace and development in the region.

## Endnotes

1. SM Tedros and TT Mussie, Eritrean Education System: A Critical Analysis and Future Research Directions, *International Journal of Education* 11:1, 2019, 1.
2. UNICEF, [Fast facts on children in the Horn of Africa](#)
3. R Rena, [Gender Disparity in Education—An Eritrean Perspective](#), *The Global Child Journal*, 2:1, 2005, pp. 43–49.
4. World Bank, [Girls' Education](#)

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