



Education

The poor quality of education in Africa

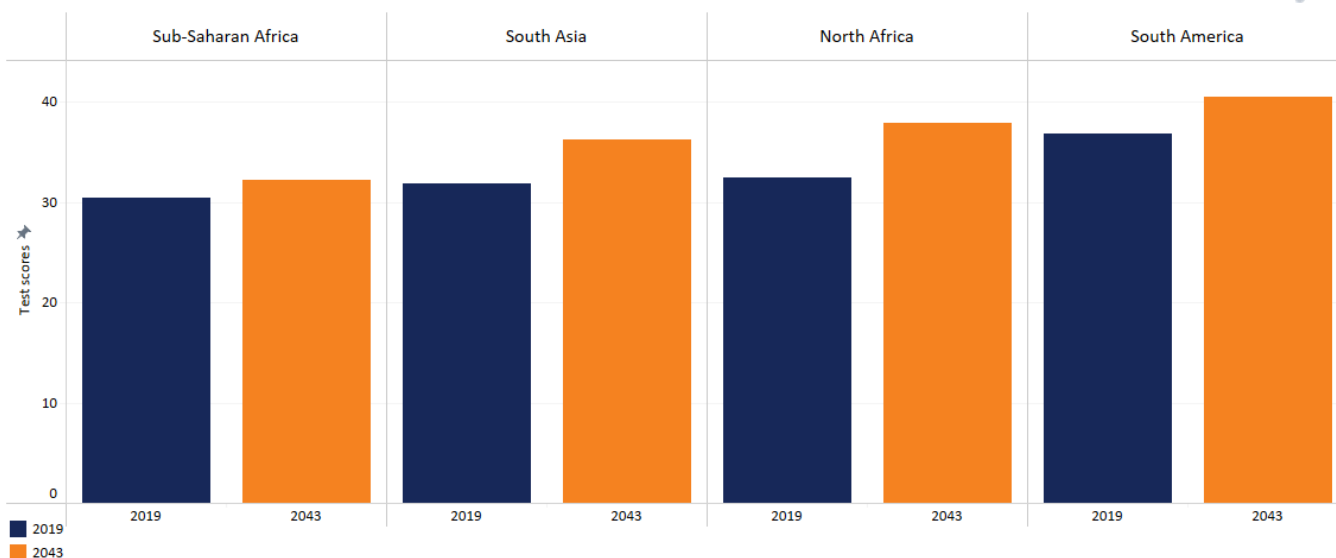
Enoch Randy Aikins and Jakkie Cilliers

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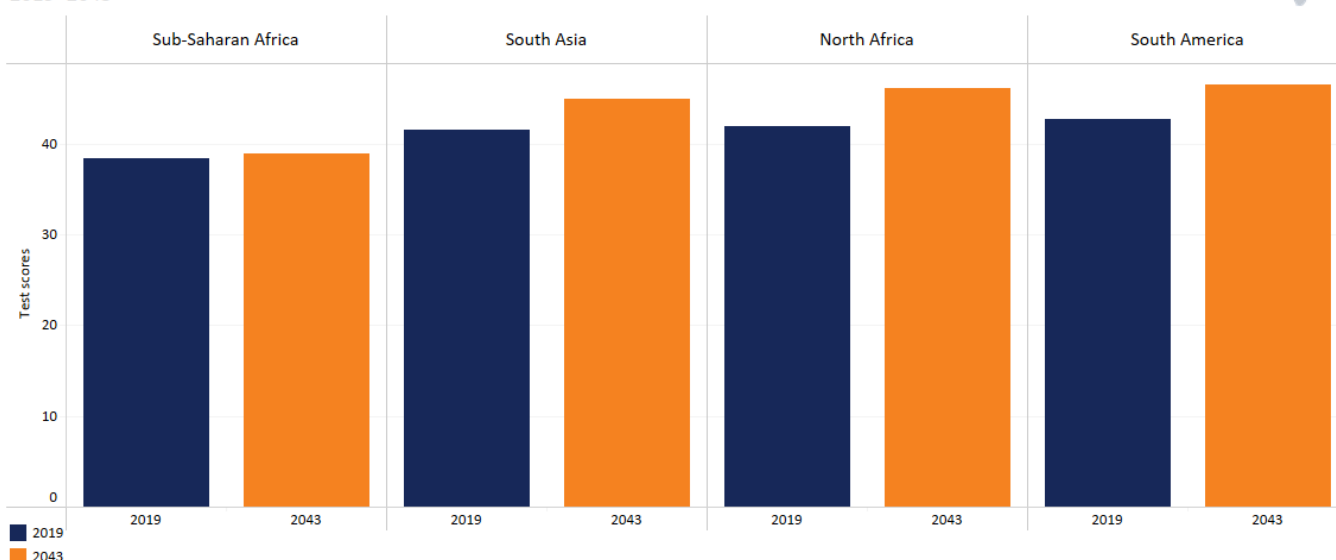
Research suggests that there is a stronger correlation between educational *quality* and economic growth than between educational *quantity* and growth.[1] Although comparisons of quality are difficult to make across different cultural, economic and linguistic contexts, a number of international standardised tests have been developed in recent years to measure systemically, albeit imperfectly, learning outcomes at the primary and secondary school levels across countries.[2]] Using the results from these scores in IFs, charts 6 and 7 show that sub-Saharan Africa is consistently performing worse than the rest of the world, with little foreseeable improvement.

Chart 6: Adult test scores for primary education in sub-Saharan and North Africa compared with regions elsewhere in the world, 2019–2043



Source: IFs 7.84 initialising from UNPD medium term forecast and Barro-Lee educational attainment data

Chart 7: Adult test scores for secondary education in sub-Saharan and North Africa compared with regions elsewhere in the world, 2019–2043



Source: IFs 7.84 initialising from UNPD medium term forecast and Barro-Lee educational attainment data

In 2019, the average test score for primary and secondary students in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 30.4 and 38.4 out of 100, respectively. In sub-Saharan Africa, primary test scores ranged from 39.1% in Madagascar to 22.6% in Burkina Faso, while secondary test scores ranged from 47.8% in Seychelles to 31.9% in Niger. In North Africa, test scores are slightly

better averaging 32.4% and 42.0% for primary and secondary students, respectively. The most comparable region, South Asia, had primary and secondary test scores of 32.4% and 42.0%, respectively, in 2019. However, in the Current Path forecast, it is likely to leave sub-Saharan Africa behind and join South America, which is closer to the world average by 2043.

It is trite that learning starts slowly in low-income countries, where pre-schooling is mostly non-existent, and even students who make it to the end of primary school often do not master basic competencies. In fact, research shows that the average primary school student from a low-income country would be singled out for remedial attention based on being below standard should they attend primary school in a high-income country.[3] Recent attention has shifted to the importance of early childhood development (ECD) in laying a foundation for cognitive functioning, physical health, and developing behavioural social and self-regulatory capacities. Proper nutrition forms part of this approach, as it supports cognitive development. At the pre-primary level, appropriate education and curricula, complemented by feeding programmes, lay the foundation for developing cognitive, behavioural, physical and social skills.

However, many young African students cannot solve mathematical or reading problems appropriate for their grades, yet complete schooling and, eventually, enter tertiary education. Children who may have received good ECD education but end up in a public school offering primary education that is largely characterised by overcrowding and a low teacher-to-student ratio (which speaks to a range of other problems in teacher training and attendance) will likely not excel. The main importance of ECD is to ensure that students get appropriate cognitive preparation to produce quality learning outcomes at each level of schooling, which is not fully captured by quantitative measures such as completion rates and test scores.

In sub-Saharan Africa, less than half of students meet the minimum proficiency threshold that is used in the standardised testing, whereas the mean for developed countries is 86%.[4] To put that in comparative context: when it comes to learning outcomes, 'the top-performing country in sub-Saharan Africa has a lower average score than the lowest-performing country in Western Europe.'[5] Similarly, the State of Global Education Update estimates that about 90% of people in Africa cannot write and understand simple text by the age of 10 compared to the global level of 70%.[6]

A 2017 report by the World Bank warned of a 'learning crisis in global education' following an analysis of reading, mathematics and science outcomes, with disheartening results for sub-Saharan Africa. According to the World Bank, the immediate causes of poor-quality education are fourfold:[7]

1. Although school attendance is generally good in sub-Saharan Africa, many children arrive unprepared to learn because of illness, malnutrition or income deprivation (generally children from poor households learn much less).
2. Teachers often lack the skills or motivation to teach effectively. Absenteeism among teachers is also widespread and even those present at school do not attend the class they are supposed to teach. Some engage in a second (or third) job to support themselves and their families. Moreover, as schools are understaffed, some teachers are inundated with administrative tasks.[8]
3. Teaching and learning materials such as books often fail to reach classrooms at the right time or to affect learning.
4. Poor management and governance often undermine schooling quality. Turning this around will require substantial effort from governments and policymakers on the continent.

Endnotes

1. EA Hanushek and L Wößmann, *Education Quality and Economic Growth*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2007.
2. A recent dataset has created a common measurement system for 163 countries, including 30 in sub-Saharan Africa. See: N Altinok, N Angrist and H Patrinos, *Global Data Set on Education Quality (1965–2015)*, World Bank Group Policy Research Working Paper 8314, Washington DC: World Bank, 2018.
3. N Altinok, N Angrist and H Patrinos, *Global Data Set on Education Quality (1965–2015)*, World Bank Group Policy Research Working Paper 8314, Washington DC: World Bank, 2018, 5. The findings from Altinok and colleagues are that ‘learning outcomes in developing countries are generally clustered at the bottom of the global scale and even the top developing country performers still often perform worse than the bottom performers in developed countries.’
4. N Altinok, N Angrist and H Patrinos, *Global Data Set on Education Quality (1965–2015)*, World Bank Group Policy Research Working Paper 8314, Washington DC: World Bank, 2018, 23.
5. E Ortiz-Ospina, *Global education quality in 4 charts*, Our World Data, 2018.
6. V Kwakwa, *What will it take for Africa to lead an education turnaround?*, World Bank Blog, 23 January 2023.
7. World Bank, *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2018, 9–11.
8. M Sow, *Figures of the week: Africa, education, and the 2018 World Development Report*, Brookings, 6 October 2018.

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About the authors

Mr Enoch Randy Aikins joined the AFI in May 2021. Before that, Enoch was a research and programmes officer at the Institute for Democratic Governance in Accra. He also worked as a research assistant (economic division) with the Institute for Statistical Social and Economic Research at the University of Ghana. Enoch's interests include African politics and governance, economic development, public sector reform, poverty and inequality. He has an MPhil in economics from the University of Ghana, Legon.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the ISS. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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