

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Most African countries have devoted considerable attention to educating the generations of people born since the independence era. Their efforts reflect the political will expressed by the Charter on Education adopted at the 1961 Conference of Addis Ababa and the 1990 Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All, and subsequently reaffirmed in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action. These international agreements have been made concrete through implementing programs aimed at reforming the education systems inherited from the colonial period. Those programs have aimed to convey a new vision of society which, while respecting African identity, would allow these countries to take an increasingly active part in the community of nations and to affirm the right of education for all.

The Educational Research Network for West and Central Africa

The Educational Research Network for West and Central Africa (ERNWACA) was created in 1988 by a group of university academics and researchers who had benefited from the Research Training Program for Western Africa, launched in 1974 in collaboration with the International Development Research Center, the United Nations Development Fund, and the Ford Foundation.

ERNWACA's primary mission is to initiate and develop a dialogue between researchers and the decision makers responsible for managing educational systems. Within this context, ERNWACA is concerned with the production—and above all the dissemination—of research findings conducted by institutions and researchers. The present publication is part of ERNWACA's effort to support the reform of Africa's education systems, with a view to meeting the new challenges of the third millennium.

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Despite their efforts, African governments continue to face rising illiteracy, grade-repetition, and drop-out rates, as well as growing numbers of expulsions. In 1993, the members of the Educational Research Network for West and Central Africa (ERNWACA) began to turn their attention to the main causes of this situation, which they identified as the following:

- ◆ schools are not equipped to address the realities of their surrounding environments. As a result, they do not meet the community's needs and parents are not motivated to invest in a system perceived as offering little hope of improving living conditions;
- ◆ demographic growth has outstripped economic growth, limiting the government's ability to respond to families' requirements in terms of schooling;
- ◆ distribution of responsibilities between the government and communities, with respect to the management of education, is not equitable;
- ◆ a severe shortage of financial and other resources for school infrastructures, poorly qualified teachers, and very low household incomes.

In the wake of this definition process, a number of research themes were selected and various joint projects conducted, with a view to supporting the development and implementation of policies designed to achieve greater social justice in education. This document represents a synthesis of the main findings of studies produced between 1995 and 1999 by seven member countries of ERNWACA, within the context of "transnational agendas." Researchers gathered information concerning the opinions, experiences, and achievements of the main actors and beneficiaries of education, such as school and district administrations, teachers, parents, and students. In doing so, they addressed the following themes:

- ◆ the factors associated with access to schooling and the retention of students within the primary sector: Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia;
- ◆ the relationships between community participation and access to and quality of education: Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, and Togo.

An international committee of teachers and researchers, convened in 1999, reviewed the studies. This synthesis offers avenues for reflection and action for decision makers in their efforts to affirm education as a basic human right.

Access and retention of students in Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia

The results of the studies conducted in Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia show that:

- ◆ *Demographic growth limits access and retention:* Growth rates in Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia are among the highest in the world. This creates pressure on the demand for education, and this pressure is intensified by reduced investment in education, due to the economic crises and structural adjustment policies. The result is that infrastructures (schools, classes, and teacher accommodation) are ill-adapted and inadequate and, as a result, communities are not free to school their children as they wish. This constraint is accentuated in rural environments and in Côte d'Ivoire, where demand for schooling is greater.

- ◆ *Religious beliefs have a negative influence on the demand for education:* Fears linked to conversion efforts by the Christian church and to delayed marriage for girls represent major constraints on the demand for education among certain social categories in conventional schools. The result is a low attendance rate. This can be due to national legislation (notably in Côte d'Ivoire, where Koranic schools are not officially recognized by the country's Ministry of Education) or unequal access, which works to the detriment of girls. This is notably the case in the Gambia, where the influence of Koranic education is stronger.
- ◆ *Parents' perception of education determines the length of children's school careers:* The most commonly held view among all categories of respondents in Côte d'Ivoire and in the Gambia was education's importance as a factor in social success. In the long term, education functions as a springboard, enabling children to gain access to employment. Parents hope that they, too, will be able to gain from that process. However, the pressure for children to perform well in the end-of primary school exams coupled with the seeming conflict of certain school subjects with families' cultural and religious practices diminishes Gambian parents' confidence in the value of education. In Côte d'Ivoire, dissatisfaction is linked to unemployment among school graduates, the image of the school as an instrument of "westernization" (leading to a disconnect with the traditional environment), and the cost of schooling, which contrasts with the impoverished state of rural populations. The result is a certain degree of disaffection among parents with regard to school.
- ◆ *The quality of education is proportionate to access and retention:* Poor quality within educational systems is reflected largely in teachers who are poorly qualified and who lack teaching skills, in poorly equipped classrooms, and in overcrowded schools. The results are high drop-out rates at the end of the primary cycle, due to grade-repetitions in sixth grade and expulsions, and low retention rates during the primary cycle itself, caused by grade-repetitions, which in themselves represent a very high additional cost for parents.

Relationships between community participation, access and quality in Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, and Togo

Do the virtues of community participation in education have any real basis? Does that participation really lead to improvements in access to and quality of education? Communities have been participating in the management of the educational system for many years. Governments recognize the need for their involvement. They support that involvement through major policy initiatives which, because they are not based on detailed knowledge of the problem, may impose constraints on the local population and backfire, notably with regard to access and quality.

Community participation is many faceted, but its impact is uneven

- ◆ In countries that have addressed this issue, community participation generally takes the form of financial, material, and/or human contributions. The predominance of one or other of these forms of contribution is strongly linked to the socio-professional activities of the community. In Benin, for example, rural communities play a more prominent role in basic education, and

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their financial contributions are significantly higher than those of urban communities. Women's share through unpaid work is just as significant. In Cameroon, communities' first responsibility is to enroll their children in school. The community's next responsibilities are to: (i) pay APE fees; (ii) purchase school supplies; (iii) work in the classroom as required; (iv) monitor students' work, especially in urban environments; and (v) monitor teachers' work. In rural environments, educational and administrative matters are regarded as responsibilities of the government.

- ◆ Communities presently participate in basic education on a partial basis. When they do organize themselves to participate, it is often, as in the case of Benin, under the impetus or at the initiative of participants from outside the community, especially the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Furthermore, in most countries, the participation of communities in the management of education and in the educational process remains very low, despite the dynamism of the Students' Parents Associations (APEs). These APEs nevertheless constitute one of the most striking features of the community's participation in basic education.
- ◆ New forms of community participation have proven very effective in terms of increasing access to and quality of education in Ghana. Communities have: (i) managed schools through school-management committees; (ii) developed curricula; (iii) intervened as teachers in areas related to culture; (iv) supervised and maintained school properties; (v) supervised and monitored students' attendance; (vi) conducted campaigns to recruit students into the schools; (vii) encouraged teachers to become more effective; and (viii) supervised students at home.

Some factors have a direct impact on community participation

- ◆ In Cameroon, the best results in terms of access to and the quality of education have been achieved in communities that have the following characteristics: (i) a positive perception of basic education; (ii) regular and stable household incomes; (iii) a history of social mobilization through organized and dynamic structures; (iv) a form of educational involvement that goes beyond mere financial contributions; (v) the presence of external support mechanisms or of a development mechanism within the community; and (vi) the presence, within the community, of role models whose social status derives from their education.
- ◆ In Benin, the main factors favoring and encouraging community participation are, in order of importance: (i) the profitability of income-generating activities (implying the availability of financial resources); (ii) the involvement of the community at each stage of the decision-making process; (iii) government aid, through abolition or regulation of school fees; (iv) good results achieved by students on completion of their studies; (v) the willingness to develop the community; and (vi) the creation of an effective institutional framework.
- ◆ In Ghana, the factors that have a positive influence on community participation include: (i) communities' perception of the usefulness of their participation; (ii) the existence of organized groups in the community and the quality of their leadership; (iii) the quality of communication between the Ministry of Education and the communities, and between members of the teaching staff and members of the community; (iv) the degree to which members of the com-

munity are made aware of their educational responsibilities; and (v) the degree of encouragement and support given to school-related community initiatives. On the other hand, community participation is seriously hampered by: (i) poverty; (ii) illiteracy; (iii) the lack of jobs for school graduates; and (iv) ignorance of the concept of free schooling.

The effect of participation on access and quality varies according to the type of school, its approach to education, and its history

- ◆ In Mali, even though high participation may show a correlation with an increase in access, this effort is most strongly felt in the community schools and literacy centers. With respect to the acquisition of knowledge, only in literacy centers does high participation show a correlation with better student performance.
- ◆ In Mali, traditional schools do not greatly influence the level of access to education. It is mainly the Muslim schools, in urban districts, and the community schools and literacy centers (which are found more in rural areas) that have managed to increase enrollment rates. With regard to the quality of teaching, community schools have shown an ability to produce good results. Forging closer links between literacy centers and community schools does improve the return on education at these two types of schools, especially if this approach is combined with efforts to provide professional development to teachers.

Communities cannot improve access and quality on their own

- ◆ In Togo, despite efforts made by parents, the students' level of knowledge and skills acquisition remains low. The school system's sole aim is to achieve success in national examinations, thereby hampering the development of practical knowledge/expertise that might be directly useful in daily life. Furthermore, management of parents' school fees does not directly benefit children, and younger parents, who invest more in the schooling of their children, are not convinced that the funds they contribute are used appropriately.
- ◆ Obstacles to improving the quality of education include: (i) failure to integrate society's values into school curricula; (ii) limited acquisition of basic knowledge and skills by the students, notably girls; (iii) multiple problems related to learning conditions, including shortage of and inappropriate textbooks, overcrowded schools, obsolete teaching methods, poorly qualified teachers; and (iv) inappropriate management of parents' school fees.
- ◆ The challenge of integrating communities into the financing and the administrative and pedagogical management of the educational system is based on the following factors: (i) schools are not managed with a long-term perspective, which involves rigorous strategic planning; (ii) people are not accustomed to integrating the school into a development project; (iii) supervisors and principals lack the managerial training that would enable them to define their actions within a development perspective; and (iv) the relationships between communities and school authorities are complicated by the authorities' reluctance to share decision-making powers and by the weight of bureaucratic tradition.

Recommendations for improving access, retention, and quality

Actions to strengthen the role of communities in education

- ◆ Begin a process of social dialogue aimed at redefining the roles and responsibilities of the different social actors with respect to basic education and initiating a process designed to ensure that basic education becomes adapted to and integrated into the surrounding environment.
- ◆ In conjunction with government central and regional authorities, develop and implement awareness-raising and mobilization programs, designed to:
 - raise people's awareness of the benefits of basic education;
 - explain the context that necessitates community participation;
 - give women responsibilities within the basic education process;
 - initiate a redefinition of the respective roles of the government and the communities;
 - promote the partnership between the government and the communities;
 - allow education officials to direct and facilitate the participation of communities in basic education;
 - make the reforms and responsibilities more acceptable to the communities.
- ◆ Strengthen and enhance people's participation through technical assistance enabling communities and APEs to increase their management capacity, play new roles, and assert their authority at the level of decision-making bodies.
- ◆ Restore the positive image of schools by involving them in large-scale community projects (sanitation and others).
- ◆ Ensure that successful examples of community participation are widely publicized.

Actions to improve access to basic education

- ◆ Conduct a broad awareness-raising campaign at the community level to encourage increased education of girls.
- ◆ Increase the number of female teachers in the primary cycle, especially in rural areas, and expand their involvement in the teaching of religion.
- ◆ Address perceptions of the status and roles of women, through awareness-raising implemented by local officials and educated women.

- ◆ Identify and combat cultural models that are hostile to educating children in general and certain children in particular (heirs apparent, eldest children), and combat child labor within agricultural and agro-industrial work.
- ◆ Reduce the financial cost to parents of their children's schooling, through:
 - increased commitment by the government, especially with respect to infrastructures;
 - analysis of schools' real equipment needs, in an effort to ensure that those needs are reflected in educational programs, to ensure that textbooks are more relevant to the curriculum, and to reduce unnecessary costs to parents.

Actions to improve the retention of students in the educational system

- ◆ Conduct an information campaign among parents regarding the functions of the school, so that they can target their contributions and expectations to those functions.
- ◆ Adjust the school year to suit specific circumstances in each region, notably in rural areas, to reduce seasonal conflicts between socio-economic activities and school.
- ◆ Have teaching staff and parents organize a universal monitoring system to supervise study time after school in the primary cycle.
- ◆ Develop a communications policy between teachers and parents, to encourage the exchange of information, resolve children's school problems, and improve the supervision of students outside school hours.
- ◆ Require schools to meet minimum standards for equipment.
- ◆ Reorganize the end of the primary cycle so children can learn job skills.

Actions to improve the quality of basic education

- ◆ Ensure that basic education content conforms to local and regional cultural, ecological, and religious realities, and develop appropriate teaching materials accordingly.
- ◆ Formulate policies to reinvigorate the practice of teaching, that create a career structure with intermediate levels (through passing competitive exams) between inspectors and ordinary teachers.
- ◆ Promote teachers' professional development by providing in-service training and refresher courses, strengthening and encouraging teaching staff, and creating "quality networks" among schools.
- ◆ Give preference to local people as teachers.

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- ◆ Emphasize communities' participation in educational interventions, and in formulating and evaluating school management processes.
- ◆ Improve supervision of teachers by school principals and school inspectors.