

Ethiopia's progress in education: A rapid and equitable expansion of access

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Key messages

1. Access to education in Ethiopia has improved significantly. Approximately 3 million pupils were in primary school in 1994/95. By 2008/09, primary enrolment had risen to 15.5 million – an increase of over 500%.
2. Progress has been enabled through a sustained government-led effort to reduce poverty and expand the public education system equitably. This has been backed by substantial increases in national education expenditure and aid to the sector, as well as improved planning and implementation capacity at all levels.
3. Increased regional and local autonomy and community participation have also had a key role in expanding access to education across the country.

Summary

Since Ethiopia emerged from 16 years of civil war in 1991, access to education has improved significantly. Approximately 3 million pupils were in primary school in 1994/95; by 2008/09, primary enrolment had risen to 15.5 million – an increase of over 500%.¹ Secondary school enrolment also grew more than fivefold during this period.

Benefiting from sustained growth, the Ethiopian government, in partnership with donors, has invested heavily in improving access to education. Key measures have included abolishing school fees, increasing expenditure on school construction and maintenance and hiring and training thousands of new teachers, administrators and officials. This has been complemented by a shift to mother tongue instruction and by the gradual decentralisation of the education system to progressively lower administrative levels. This has likely contributed to improved service delivery.

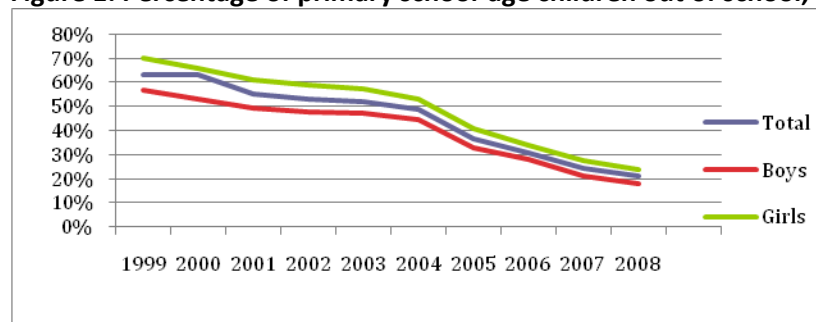
Ethiopia's progress in education demonstrates that a sustained government-led effort to reduce poverty and expand the public education system equitably, backed by sufficient resources and improved service delivery, can dramatically increase school enrolment.

What has been achieved?

Ethiopia has seen unprecedented expansion of its education system. In 1992, around four of five primary school-age children were out of school. In 1999, this figure stood at over 60%. Now, it is only one in five (Figure 1). Education outcomes have improved rapidly in all regions, although the two predominantly pastoral regions, Afar and Somali, remain far behind the rest of the country, with net enrolment ratios of 24.4% 31.6%, respectively.

¹ Ministry of Education (2010) 'Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2001 E.C./2008-09 G.C.' Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education. .

Figure 1: Percentage of primary school-age children out of school, 1999-2008²



Improvements in access to education have helped narrow the gender gap and have benefited the poorest. Traditionally, boys were more likely to attend school and less likely to drop out: in 1994/95, boys' gross enrolment ratio (GER) was more than 50% higher than girls' (31.7% and 20.4%, respectively). Since then, a number of initiatives have been implemented: encouraging women's employment in the civil service, promoting gender-sensitive teaching methods and increasing the minimum marriage age to 18. In 2008/09, almost full gender parity was achieved: the GER was 90.7% for girls and 96.7% for boys.³ Moreover, the rate of education poverty is declining at a faster rate for the poorest quintiles.⁴

Low levels of education quality remain one of the most significant challenges in improving learning outcomes. Even so, compared with other countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have abolished school fees and experienced rapid increases in enrolment, Ethiopia has been more successful at rapidly hiring and deploying additional teachers. Considering the number of students entering the system, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, the decline in quality would likely have been significantly worse had it not been for strong demand- and supply-side efforts by donors and the government.

Progress in education in Ethiopia has coincided with substantial reductions in poverty and improvements in food security, health and nutrition. Most notably, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), the government's flagship social protection and food security programme, has provided assistance to more than 7 million people since 2005.⁵ The percentage of children classified as stunted and underweight – although still disconcertingly high – has declined in recent years.⁶ However, there are still substantial inequalities limiting access to education, with almost 40% of the bottom quintile expected never to enrol in school.⁷

What has driven change?

Sustained government commitment

Government priorities in education – increasing enrolment and access in rural areas (with a goal of achieving universal primary enrolment by 2015), gender equality and curriculum reform – have been grounded in efforts to improve economic and human development outcomes.

² UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

³ Boys' and girls' net enrolment rates for 2008/09 are 84.6% and 81.3%, respectively.

⁴ Young adults who came of age following the end of the civil war and during the first years of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government have had significantly higher educational outcomes than the cohort before them. This is true for all quintiles except the wealthiest 20% (DHS data 2005).

⁵ E.g. Hoddinott, J., Gilligan, D.O. and Taffesse, A.S. (2009) 'The Impact of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program on Schooling and Child Labor.' Washington, DC: IFPRI.

⁶ Young Lives (2008) 'Young Lives: Ethiopia Round 2 Summary.' Country Report. Oxford: Young Lives.

⁷ UNESCO (2010) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the Marginalized*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Commitment to improving the education system has been matched by substantial increases in the education budget. Public spending on education, which during the 1980s remained under 10% of total spending, had increased to 23.6% of total expenditure by 2008/09 (Table 1). This constitutes 5.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), one of the highest rates on the continent.

Table 1: Education expenditure trends, 1980-2009⁸

	Education expenditure as % of total government expenditure
1985	8.2
1990	7.5
1995	13.8
2000	13.6
2005	16.7
2009	23.6

The government's prioritisation of education has translated into a number of policies aimed at increasing access to schooling for all Ethiopians, and particularly marginalised groups such as girls, the rural poor and pastoral communities:

- School fee abolition for primary and lower secondary schools;
- Supply-side measures such as school construction and teacher hiring and training, especially in rural areas;
- Alternative basic education for out-of-school children in remote areas and adult literacy programmes;
- School feeding programmes.

Increased autonomy of regional and local government

The gradual and ongoing devolution of power to the regions was initiated in 1991 as a means of giving more autonomy to Ethiopian ethnic groups. Central to this was the substantial flexibility regions received in determining the language of instruction and the curriculum content. A recent assessment of the outcomes of this shift found that the mother tongue policy was 'one of the best on the continent.'⁹ Decentralisation has also entailed a gradual devolution of responsibility for service delivery to the district (*woreda*) through block grants. Allocation priorities have focused on equalising education quality throughout the country, and particularly on those regions and *woredas* that have been lagging behind.

Increased community participation

Increased community involvement has further improved the education system. Many Ethiopians have shown an increased willingness to dedicate scarce resources – including through financial contributions and time – to further improving local schools. It is argued that the surge in school enrolment that occurred in 2004/05, when Grade 1 intake increased by 38% compared with the previous year, owed to the efforts of parent-teacher associations, local education and training boards and *woreda* education offices. These had spent the previous two years on advocacy, school construction and encouraging parents to send their children to schools,¹⁰ although concerns have been raised about the frequently coercive pressure they applied.

⁸ Data from Ministry of Education (2010) and UNICEF/World Bank (2009) *Abolishing School Fees in Africa: Lessons from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Mozambique*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁹ Heugh, K., Bogale, B., Benson, C. and Yohannes, M. (2007) 'Final Report: Study on Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools in Ethiopia.' Commissioned by the Ministry of Education.

¹⁰ UNICEF/World Bank (2009).

An effective development partnership

Donors have played a key role in supporting Ethiopia's education reforms by providing substantial amounts of aid to education, and also through an effective partnership with government. The Ethiopian government led the process of developing a sector-wide approach, then worked with donors to refine and elaborate this.¹¹ Progress has been monitored jointly. This process has allowed for long-term strategic planning, with an ability to respond to new needs as these develop.

Lessons learnt

- Ethiopian government officials and donors have found an effective balance between supply-side policies (such as the construction of schools in remote areas) and complementary policies to stimulate demand (e.g. fee abolition and mother tongue instruction). These pro-poor policies in education have coincided with social protection and poverty reduction strategies that have helped reduce food insecurity and improve health and childhood nutrition outcomes.
- The government has effectively pursued expansion by setting very ambitious targets and sustaining these through increased government and donor financing. The sector-wide planning process has allowed for effective sequencing of reforms.
- The shift to greater regional and local autonomy has helped increase participation and led to more widespread popular recognition of the importance of education for boys and girls.
- Reaching the millions of remaining out-of-school Ethiopian children will require a targeted approach to reach marginalised groups, including through continued emphasis on bringing schools closer to children, as well as social protection programmes to reduce food insecurity and child labour demands, and a focus on child and maternal health and early childhood education to ensure that children are ready for school.
- There is an inevitable trade-off between further expanding primary access and focusing on quality improvement, but the high dropout rate and the low quality of schooling remain a substantial concern.¹²
- Ensuring that the expansion of secondary school keeps pace with primary will become increasingly important. Many parents may see the prospect of secondary education as a requirement for putting children through primary.

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¹¹ Lister, S. (2007) 'Scaling Up Aid for Education in Ethiopia.' Oxford: Mokoro Limited.

¹² E.g. Ministry of Education and USAID Ethiopia (2008) 'Ethiopian Third National Learning Assessment.' Addis Ababa: National Organization for Examination.

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