

# HIGH- LEVEL CONFERENCE ON TACKLING THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHALLENGE IN WEST AFRICA: RESEARCH EVIDENCE TO DRIVE ACTION AND INVESTMENT





in Africa



**JUNE 2024** 

# Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations	iii
Introduction	1 -
Overview: The growing Out of School Problem in sub-Saharan Africa	2 -
Tackling the OOSCY Problem	3 -
Challenges confronting AEPs in the West Africa sub-region	4 -
Proposed solutions to address the OOSCY situation	5 -
Recommendations to strengthen policy and practice	7 -

# List of Abbreviations

AEPs	-	Accelerated Education Programmes
AEWG	-	Accelerated Education Working Group
CSR	-	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSOs	-	Civil Society Organisations
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
GES	-	Ghana Education Service
GPE	-	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	-	Information and Communication Technology
IDRC	-	International Development Research Centre
NGOs	-	Non-Governmental Organisations
OOSCY	-	Out of School Children and Youth
PPPs	-	Public-Private Partnerships
UNESCO	-	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	-	The United Nations International Children's Fund
SDG	-	Sustainable Development Goal
SSA	-	Sub-Saharan Africa
TPD	-	Teacher Professional Development

#### Introduction

This report was compiled by a collaborative team of researchers, educators, and policy advocates focused on addressing the Out of School Children and Youth (OOSCY) crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. With the aim of making available evidence to policymakers, educational practitioners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and stakeholders involved in educational reform and development. The insights and recommendations presented in this report are derived from various source materials, including discussions from conference workshops, focus group discussions (FGDs), and extensive literature reviews on Accelerated Education Programming (AEP) and its impact on educational access and quality. The report is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and proposed solutions related to OOSCY that covers several key areas, including: (i) an overview of the OOSCY situation that outlines the growing problem of children out of school in sub-Saharan Africa, emphasising the socio-economic factors contributing to this crisis and the urgent need for intervention; (ii) tackling the OOSCY problem; (iii) Challenges confronting AEPs in the West Africa sub-region; (iv) proposed solutions to address the OOSCY situation; and (v) Recommendations to strengthen policy and practice.

The report uses information from research evidence presentations, expert panel and thematic working group discussions, to delineates the increasing issue of children being out of school in sub-Saharan Africa. It underscores the socio-economic factors that contribute to this crisis, such as poverty and inadequate educational infrastructure, and stresses the urgent need for intervention to address these challenges. While offering actionable recommendations to enhance educational policies and practices. Key suggestions include the integration of Accelerated Education Programs (AEP) into national education systems and ensuring that there is sufficient funding allocated to educational initiatives to support these programs effectively. As well as the need for community involvement in educational initiatives, the development of innovative funding models to support education, and the necessity of training local facilitators to improve educational delivery, and effective collaboration among various stakeholders, including local communities, to ensure the successful implementation of educational programs. This is to foster ownership and accountability in educational interventions. Moreover, the need for inclusive strategies essential for ensuring equitable access to education for all children that comprise tailored approaches to support marginalised groups, particularly girls and children with disabilities are emphasised.

In sum, the report provides a comprehensive overview of the OOSCY situation, actionable recommendations, proposed solutions, and the importance of collaboration and inclusivity in addressing educational challenges in sub-Saharan Africa.

#### Overview: The growing Out of School Problem in sub-Saharan Africa

The issue of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is a pressing concern, with approximately 244 million children and youth aged 6 to 18 not enrolled in school globally, 19% are from SSA, a rate significantly higher than the global average of 9% (UNICEF, 2024). This alarming statistic highlights the urgent need for policy interventions and resource allocation to combat the educational crisis in the region. According to UNICEF (2024) 9 out of 10% of children in SSA will struggle to read and comprehend a simple paragraph by age ten, underscoring the critical state of education in the region.

The challenges contributing to high OOSCY rates in the region are multifaceted. Factors such as inadequate educational infrastructure, a lack of trained teachers, and socio-cultural barriers, including gender and equality disparities, play significant roles in perpetuating this crisis. For instance, the dropout rate in primary schools is around 52.2%, with rural areas experiencing nearly three times the dropout rate compared to urban settings. Furthermore, girls are disproportionately affected, with a 4.2% higher likelihood of being out of school compared to boys, a rate exacerbated by traditional practices such as child marriage and teenage pregnancy (UNICEF, 2021).

In a fast-paced growing world economy where knowledge and digital skills are becoming increasingly important, failing to engage millions of children and youth in productive activities could lead to social unrest, upheaval and crime, which no policymaker would want to encounter given that over 230 million jobs in Africa by 2030 may require digital skills (Kwakwa, 2023)<sup>4</sup>. OOSCY as a basis for social unrest is well summarised by UNICEF (2022)<sup>1</sup> which indicates that: "every child out of school, every day of *learning lost, is one brick fewer to build peace and prosperity in the region.*" Moreover, not being able to fully complete their schooling could also make it impossible for these children, their families and society to benefit from increased employment opportunities, better health, skills development, and risky behaviours, reduced crime, equality and an improved sense of self-worth.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these challenges, less than 20% of African countries meet the education financing benchmark, indicating a significant gap in funding that must be addressed to improve educational access and quality (UNICEF, 2022). The enormity of the OOSCY phenomenon in SSA requires immediate and concerted efforts from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations to ensure that every child has access to quality education. Prioritising educational investments and addressing the underlying socio-economic factors, would help build a future where all children in Africa are empowered through education, ultimately contributing to the continent's development and stability.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> UNICEF. (2022). Central and West Africa home to almost a quarter of out-of-school children worldwide. https://www.unicef.org/wca/press-releases/central-and-west-africa-home-almost-quarter-out-school-children-worldwide

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Desai, R., Magan, A., Ruiter, R. A. C., Reddy, P. S., & Mercken, L. A. G. (2024). Understanding Why Youth Drop Out of School in South Africa. Sage Open, 14(1), 21582440231219080. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231219080

### Tackling the OOSCY Problem

As part of enhancing collaborative efforts towards addressing the out of school situation in the west African sub-region, a two-day conference on the theme: "Tackling the Out of School Challenge in West Africa" was held in Accra, Ghana on June 11 and 12, 2024. The conference brought together diverse stakeholders: government officials and policy makers from Ministries of Education as well as other education experts, researchers, and civil society stake holders from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Burkina Faso, and representatives of private, international and local NGOs, education innovators, researchers, education practitioners and community leaders from across West Africa. Delegates from IDRC, UNESCO, UNICEF, the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) also participated.

The conference employed a diverse and multifaceted approach to address the complexities of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) and OOSCY. Stakeholders engaged in both in-person and online presentations delivered by key experts in panel discussions, and thematic working groups and presentations. These activities aimed to drive collective actions towards inclusive education for all

children in the West African sub-region. These were three core objectives: (1) foster full investment ownership and enhanced partnership for AEP integration; share key (2)evidence on the

growing numbers



Dr. Casely-Hayford and Mr. Bahago presenting research evidence on OOSCY situation in West Arica

of OOSCY, lack of sustained investment and the cost of the OOSCY challenge in West Africa along with the cost of not addressing the problem; and (3) discuss country-level legislative instruments, policies and curricula developed to support AEPs across the West African region.

The conference expanded on the results of the AEWG's first meeting in Senegal in 2022. Participants shared insights on AEP initiatives, strategies for transitioning learners to formal education after these foundational programmes, and the challenges of sustaining and scaling such programmes. Other key themes included government partnerships, funding and investment frameworks, and community-driven approaches to scaling AEPs. The media was engaged to disseminate outcomes, and question-and-answer sessions ensured active participant engagement.

#### Challenges confronting AEPs in the West Africa sub-region

Although there are successes in the education sector driven by AEPs, some challenges persist:

**Teacher related challenges.** One of the major problems confronting education is teacher related challenges. Most teachers seriously dislike being posted to deprived, remote and marginalised communities, particularly in remote rural areas. As a result, most teachers refuse such postings and aim to secure posts in urban areas. Second, specific to AEPs is the inability of facilitators and teachers in the formal sector to transition and integrate AEP beneficiaries into the formal education system. Due to skill and knowledge deficits, AEP beneficiaries are inadequately prepared for transitioning and subsequently confronts challenges when integrated into formal classrooms. Third, participation in teachers professional development (TPD) programmes is low due to a diverse range of factors including conflicting work schedules, cost of TPD programmes, lack of employer support, limited funding, insufficient time, inadequate human resources, materials and management skills, high teacher turnover, heavy workloads, language barriers and gender biases, lack of motivation due to poor incentives, limited ICT skills (for online training), and harsh weather conditions. While in conflict areas, insecurity and the absence of context-specific materials prevents TPD participation.

**Inflexible formal school system.** Empirical data evidence high rates of transition into formal schools by AEP graduates. But the significant question remains: *how long will they stay in the formal schooling process?* Several factors have been identified which threaten retention in formal schools after transitioning. In most rural and marginalised communities, children remain an important source of on-farm and household labour to their families. The 'full day' system and curricula used in the formal education sector do not allow children to provide support for household economic endeavours to generate income. This increases the probability of AEP graduates dropping out of school to support their families. For female students, physiological changes (e.g. menstruation) and sociocultural norms such as child marriage and preference for educating male children reduce their retention in the formal education system.

**Poor adaption and integration of AEP at the community level.** Most AEPs are poorly integrated into communities in which the education innovations and programmes are being implemented. Although local languages are used for instruction, AEPs are not contextualised to the needs of local communities. Most community members lack proper understanding of the AEP concept which perpetuates the idea that they will benefit from handouts or payments from AEP functioning in their community. Other community level problems include poor local infrastructure, the multiplicity of local languages in any one community, ethnic or local conflicts, local cultural norms and behaviours that hinder AEP success.

Lack of data on out of school population. The design and implementation of education innovations such as AEPs are hindered by the absence of up-to-date data on out of school populations such as student dropout rates. As a result, it is difficult to effectively design successful AEP in the sub-region or to address the problem of retention in schools of AEP graduates. A primary concern expressed is the inconsistency of data on the number of OOSCY because multiple actors including government, development partners and NGOs operate in the education sector, each collecting its own data. This inconsistency reduces AEP capacity to address the OOSCY problem holistically.

**Funding related challenges.** The funding of education innovations across the sub-region has been mainly driven by donors resulting in dependence. When donor funding ends, most education innovations come to a halt, and/or become unsustainable and ultimately fail. Without government financial commitment these innovations cannot thrive let alone be scaled to benefit more OOSCYs. Another problem identified concerning funding is the absence of accountability.

No measures or mechanisms have been put in place to effectively track how funds are used, or to address inherent mismanagement. Engaging with the private sector is seen as challenging especially because encouraging this investment in education requires a clear business case. Another significant issue is the regulatory environment surrounding funding, where policies may not be followed and where lack of data results in unknown AEP costs. This, in turn, hinders effective program design and evaluation. Also, some donors have a specific agenda that may not be in alignment with the critical needs (e.g., educational opportunities, and basic needs) the of the projects they fund.

#### Proposed solutions to address the OOSCY situation

Numerous strategies to address the problems facing AEPs across West Africa were proposed at the conference by stakeholders:

To address the problems caused by teacher deficits, education innovation implementors should be encouraged to recruit motivated, enthusiastic and literate members of the local community to be facilitators and train them in specific AEP methodologies. This is important since such facilitators are more likely to fluently speak the local language and draw on local resources (i.e., environment and culture) to enrich the teaching and learning process including the content of lessons. Facilitators and teachers need to be provided with speciality training on skills and behaviours for effective transitioning. Specific training tailored towards the transitioning of girls, students with disabilities and children in emergency and fragile is particularly important. Regular (annual or bi-annual) TPD should be provided especially on foundational learning using local languages. Ensuring that TPD materials and pedagogic materials required to deliver the AEP curriculum are sufficiently available is essential. Also, teachers need adequate funding and resources, including need-based remuneration packages, recruitment of more teachers, language training (i.e., local language), reduced teacher workloads, and incentives to encourage TPD participation. Other strategies could focus on addressing logistical problems, providing accommodation and transport allowances, providing in-person and online refresher training programmes that are practice-oriented and flexible in terms of adapting to diverse local contexts. Most importantly, a collaborative approach to stakeholder participation and involvement should be emphasised.

To enhance retention in the formal school system by AEP graduates post-transitioning, flexible approaches and schedules could be collaboratively discussed among stakeholders such as educators, parents, the Ghana Education Service (GES) and others. Possible approaches need to be tailored towards creating opportunities for children who contribute to household income to remain in school. Additionally, health workers could be better integrated into the formal school system to provide female students with free sanitary care and reproductive health education. Girl-focused curriculum could be developed to support and encourage girls to access education and schooling and to build their resilience and determination. To address the data gap on retention rates among AEP graduates, education innovators, researchers and policymakers should be encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies that help track the progress of those who have transitioned to formal schools and beyond.

Effective collaboration and communication with stakeholders, especially local community members are important. Prior community assessment and mapping should be done to thoroughly identify community needs, stakeholders and roles to identify who needs to do what to address key needs. Stakeholders at the community level need to be involved in the design and implementation of AEPs through focus group discussions (FGD) to establish and continuously maintain trust and promote transparency. To complement this, participatory learning and action platforms and varying feedback and communication mechanisms could be established to assist in the identification needs, concerns,

suggestions and how best to leverage community resources. Standards should be set to guide the design, implementation and evaluation processes as well as stakeholder participation. This would help to ensure that there is: (i) accountability from all stakeholders, (ii) impact maximisation and effectiveness, (iii) a sense of ownership among local communities (iv) local resources and commitments are found to reinforce education innovations, and (v) ultimately secure long-term sustainability.

The lack of consistent data concerning OOSCY could be addressed through three main strategies. First, education innovators and government should collaborate with universities so that innovative research evidence drives AEP design and implementation. By linking AEPs with tertiary institutions, there is potential to develop robust research theories that can be translated into practical applications in educational settings, such as teacher training colleges and AEP classrooms. Second, longitudinal tracer studies should be conducted to track the progress of AEP learners including their life outcomes and contributions to provide insights into the effectiveness of AEPs. Third, a culture of shared innovation should be fostered through the harmonisation of intellectual property rights to create a conducive environment for sharing innovative practices and research findings, ultimately enhancing the quality of education. In this collaboration, there is the need for all stakeholders to be engaged in the process and outcomes of research, creating a sense of ownership and developing community capacities to monitor and evaluate education interventions. Another aspect of the collaboration should focus on creating a digital infrastructure to collect, store and analyse data on the performance of education innovations. This would facilitate continuous improvement and adaptation of education strategies while providing the opportunity to integrate and align such innovations with national education objectives and systems, and the paradigms of development partners and donors. The



integration and alignment of education innovations such as AEPs will help to ensure a cohesive educational investment framework that is contextually responsive to the diverse needs of the OOSCY population.

Funding related challenges confronting AEPs could be addressed through innovative funding models including: (i) public-private partnerships (PPPs); (ii) match funding and

(iii) leveraging corporate social responsibility (CSR). An example of a PPP is the government of Ghana's work with donors who are willing to finance educational infrastructure. In Nigeria's case, match-funding is practiced where a federal fund is dedicated to basic education, and matching contributions from states are used for state projects. In addition, multinational companies could be engaged through established frameworks to devote a percentage of their CSR funding to education innovations such as AEPs. To ameliorate fund-related and enhance transparency and accountability, the following are needed: strong leadership and robust project management practices, performance-based payment that links funding to outcomes, establishment of local community-based management committees, developing and implementing a comprehensive and robust monitoring and feedback framework, regular independent financial and performance audits, and the use of electronic or digital payment systems (for example, and blockchain technology). Such initiatives should be supported by

clear legal frameworks for financial transactions and steps to ensure that the programme fits within the broader education landscape.

## Recommendations to strengthen policy and practice

The following measures were recommended:

To achieve SDG 4 targets, sub-regional governments must allocate 7-10% of basic education budgets to Accelerated Education Programming (AEP) for out-of-school children. Also, AEP should be fully integrated



**Conference Participants** 

education into national systems through policy and legislation, with each government developing roadmaps and action plans. Collaborations with research institutions, CSOs, and the private sector are crucial for AEP expansion. Governments and civil society should jointly develop and approve AEP curricula, while ensuring adequate teacher wages for especially in facilitators, rural areas.

Transitioning community facilitators to distance education programmes for certification is essential. Moreover, governments should support community-led AEP initiatives in rural, remote, and fragile areas by providing training, curriculum, and resources to local facilitators. Additionally, Existing global funds dedicated to improving basic education, girls' education, and foundational learning, such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), should devote at least 10% of their resources to complementary and accelerated education programmes as a critical strategy for combating the out-of-school crisis.

Finally, to boost these initiatives, the Accelerated Education Working Group proposes establishing a new global fund via cooperation among donors, development partners, and private sector companies. This fund will allow countries to co-finance Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs), with a special emphasis on those with the greatest percentages of out-of-school children. Furthermore, a specific resource envelope should be established to assist emergency education programmes.