

**Economic Commission for Africa****Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender**

Fifth session

Addis Ababa, 2 and 3 November 2023

**Building new social contracts: ideas and actions to fulfil African aspirations through education**

*“The new social contract between Governments, people, civil society, business and more must integrate employment, sustainable development and social protection based on equal rights and opportunities for all.”<sup>1</sup>*

António Guterres, Secretary-General

The present paper will inform deliberations at the fifth session of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender. The paper explores the concept of developing new social contracts in Africa using education as an entry point. It demonstrates how African countries can leverage the linkages between Sustainable Development Goal 4, on education, and the other Goals; increase efficiency in education spending; and, ultimately, make progress towards the other Goals. If Governments make education more affordable, accessible and applicable while responsibly managing global and regional megatrends, they can simultaneously address poverty and inequality. To achieve this, however, they will need to show inspirational leadership, create inclusive institutions and adopt policies with a view to creating a safe, healthy and stimulating learning environment, equal opportunity and intergenerational mobility.

**I. Introduction**

1. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic laid bare inequities that already existed in societies around the world, including in Africa. The inequities were evident in the fact that access to health care, education and social protection was not universal. Health-care facilities were stretched and could not meet the enormous needs to fight the pandemic. Vast digital divides meant that school closures were particularly devastating to children from poorer households, who could not attend online classes because they did not have access to the Internet. Strict lockdowns around the world left most of those working in the informal sector with no livelihood. Containment measures had a disproportionate impact on the services sector, in which more women than men were employed and in which opportunities to work from home were limited.

2. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a renewed commitment to building forward better a world that is fair for all, in which everyone has equal access to opportunities to live to their full potential. This means ensuring that Goals

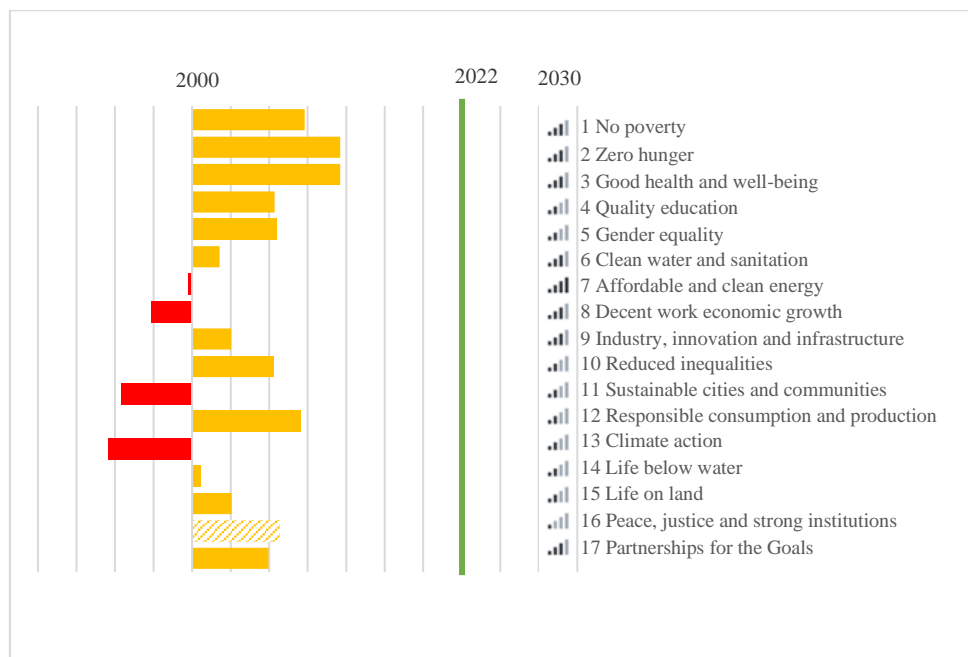
<sup>1</sup> António Guterres, “Tackling inequality: a new social contract for a new era”.



1–5 (which are related to people) are achieved by 2030. As of 2021, the progress made on these Goals had been too slow for them to be achieved by 2030 (see figure I). The time is right to rethink how policies can be made more effective. Although it can be argued that investment in social programmes could have been greater, it is clear that the investment that did take place did not have the desired effects. With many countries in debt distress, increased spending is not an option for all countries. It is therefore important to determine why economic and social spending policies to date have not had their intended impact, and what remedies can be applied to achieve greater returns as economies are rebuilt following recent shocks (the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, more frequent natural disasters and tighter global financial markets).

Figure I

### Progress by Africa towards the Sustainable Development Goals



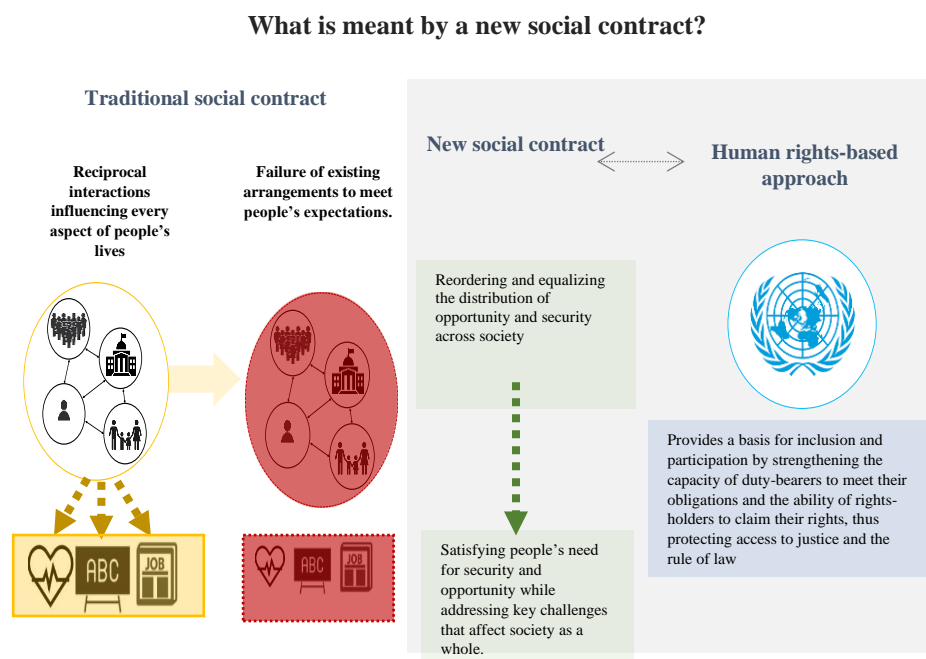
*Note:* The bars indicate the amount of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, or regress away from them, as of 2022. If Africa was exactly on schedule for a goal, the yellow bars would be at 2022.

3. In such circumstances, Governments need to step up their commitment to forge new social contracts to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all while integrating employment, sustainable development and social protection – an idea that the Secretary-General, António Guterres, supported in a speech in which he proposed a “new social contract for a new era”<sup>2</sup>(see figure II).

4. In the present issues paper, it is explained that African countries can use the education sector to foster more inclusive development and manage global and regional megatrends. The present paper also contains a discussion of how a focus on affordability, accessibility and applicability (known as the “3 A’s”) in the education sector can serve as the basis for defining new social contracts in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> António Guterres, “Tackling the inequality pandemic: a new social contract for a new era”, message by the Secretary-General of the United Nations at the eighteenth Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, 18 July 2020.

Figure II  
Definitions of a new social contract



Source: Economic Commission for Africa, based on Minouche Shafik, “We need a new social contract fit for the 21st century”, International Monetary Fund, April 2021; and *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (United Nations publication, 2021).

## II. Megatrends and regional dynamics in brief

5. The world can change enormously over a period of 25 years. At present, the world is at a set of crossroads, and the decisions made now will have a lasting affect over the next quarter of a century. The main megatrends and regional dynamics affecting people's lives in Africa are highlighted in the present section. Whether the trends and dynamics are beneficial or detrimental will depend on how they are managed.

### A. Demographic changes

6. Developed countries and many emerging and developing countries are experiencing declining fertility rates and extended life expectancy. Worldwide, the population 60 years of age or more is expected to double from 1 billion in 2020 to 2.1 billion by 2050, when 80 per cent of older people will be living in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>3</sup>

7. Given its high fertility rates, Africa will provide more than half of the world's population growth between 2022 and 2050, according to projections. By 2050, more than half of the population of Africa will be below the age of 25. The region will thus have a large working-aged population that can help to support the ageing population in the rest of the world. However, given that, in 2020, one young person in five in Africa was not in employment, education or training,<sup>4</sup> policymakers need to prepare young people for the jobs of the future if Africa is to take advantage of the youth bulge within a new social contract. A proper focus on education for all (Goal 4) is

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, “Ageing and health”, 1 October 2022.

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization, “Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022: Africa”.

therefore needed, and new jobs need to be created for the millions of young people entering the labour force each year.

## **B. Urbanization**

8. By 2050, the global population is projected to increase to about 9.8 billion, with more than twice as many people living in urban areas (6.7 billion) as in rural areas (3.1 billion). In Africa, six in 10 people will live in urban areas. In 50 years' time, the number of African cities with a population of at least 1 million will have increased from 60 to 134, while the number with a population of at least 5 million will have increased from 6 to 28. Preparations for the growing urban population need to start immediately. African countries need to adopt a new social contract in which they build adequate infrastructure, provide public goods and services and respond to the growing demand for employment.<sup>5</sup>

9. Cities can act as engines of sustainable development. In many African countries, however, urbanization is occurring among people with lower income levels, which means that additional or supplementary public services are needed for people who are less self-sufficient. Urbanization in Africa is also taking place amid rising unemployment, increasing poverty and inequality, the proliferation of slums and other forms of vulnerability, financially weak municipal authorities and weak systems of governance. Given the situation, preparing young people for future jobs means not only providing education for all, but also ensuring equal accessibility to schools under a new social contract.

## **C. Digital transformation**

10. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace at which digital technology, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things are being adopted and has shown that such technological developments are essential and have great potential. Lockdowns would have been unbearable for many if the Internet had not allowed them to work, shop and attend school lessons from home.

11. At the same time, however, the pandemic highlighted the huge digital divide. In 2021, 2.9 billion people in the world were still offline – about 37 per cent of the world's population. In Africa, only 33 per cent of the population were Internet users in 2021, leaving 871 million people who were not realizing digital dividends.<sup>6</sup>

12. To benefit from digitalization in the future, Africa needs to leverage the great potential of its skills and human capacity. The region should pay more attention to digital opportunities for women. According to recent estimates, 47 per cent of science, technology, engineering and mathematics undergraduate and postgraduate students at African universities in 2021 were women,<sup>7</sup> but they are kept out of the labour market by structural barriers, and in the technology and information and communications technology sectors, women are severely underrepresented. A new social contract should address this mismatch between skills and employment.

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities* (Nairobi, 2022); United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, *Snapshot of Global and Regional Urban Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Inequalities* (New York, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Jane Munga, "To Close Africa's Digital Divide, Policy Must Address the Usage Gap", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 26 April 2022.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, "Gender equality: how global universities are performing" (2022). Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380987>.

## D. Climate change

13. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase owing to anthropogenic activities, extreme weather patterns will continue to beset the world, with Africa being the largest victim. According to the International Rescue Committee,<sup>8</sup> seven of the 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change are in Africa. In the past 50 years, drought-related hazards in Africa have claimed the lives of over half a million people and led to economic losses of more than \$70 billion. Up to 118 million extremely poor Africans could be exposed to drought, floods and extreme heat by 2030. Furthermore, many African countries remain locked in conflict, adding to the complexity of compounding risks. Such events often disrupt education. For instance, in June 2022, 2.9 million children in Ethiopia were out of school (17 per cent of the school-age population) owing to conflict, drought, flooding and other natural emergencies.<sup>9</sup>

14. The effects of climate change, the increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters and the drivers of conflict can be addressed through education. Education improves one's understanding of risk, thereby increasing the likelihood of climate adaptation and mitigation and encouraging dialogue towards peace, both of which require transboundary negotiations with a view to addressing shared risks. Climate change literacy<sup>10</sup> remains much lower in Africa (37 per cent) than in Europe and North America (80 per cent).<sup>11</sup> Education that emphasizes shared responsibility within a new social contract can raise awareness of the nexus between climate change, disasters and conflict, which will, in turn, influence individual and collective behaviours and inform development-related decision-making. Some African countries are already doing this, such as by including climate change in school, college and university syllabuses.<sup>12</sup>

## E. Bottlenecks in social spending

15. Fiscal situations have worsened since the pandemic, but social spending on health and education have historically been below the levels prescribed by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in their guidelines (see figures III and IV). Furthermore, only 17 per cent of the African population is effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit (see figure V). Large inefficiencies in taxation and spending in Africa constrain the fiscal space. For instance, illicit financial flows deprive Africa of more than 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) per year, while inefficient tax incentives take away 2.6 per cent of GDP.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there are large inefficiencies in spending that cost Africa more than 2.5 per cent of its collective GDP per year, which also affects socioeconomic outcomes. Between 2000 and 2017, Africa lost more than \$40 billion per year in education and infrastructure spending and \$28 billion in health spending.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> International Rescue Committee, "10 countries at risk of climate disaster", 6 April 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Ethiopia Education Cluster, "Quarterly Newsletter #2: June 2022". Available at [www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia\\_education\\_cluster\\_2nd\\_quarterly\\_newsletter\\_08052022.pdf](http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia_education_cluster_2nd_quarterly_newsletter_08052022.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "What is Climate Science Literacy?". Available at [www.climate.gov/teaching/what-is-climate-science-literacy](http://www.climate.gov/teaching/what-is-climate-science-literacy). Accessed on 5 August 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Julie D. Johnston, "Climate change literacy to combat climate change and its impacts", in *Climate Action: Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, Walter Leal Filho and others, eds. (Cham, Springer, 2020).

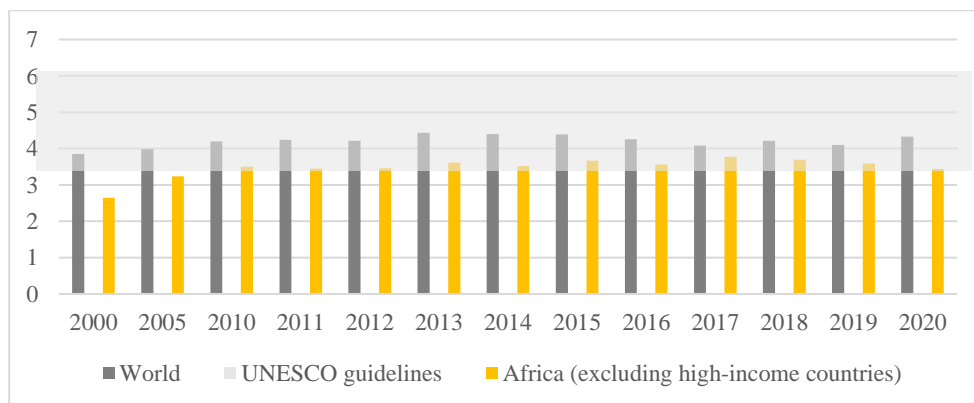
<sup>12</sup> Several countries have already introduced climate change modules in the education system, including Benin, Cameroon, Egypt, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Seychelles, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

<sup>13</sup> *Tackling Illicit Financial Flows for Sustainable Development in Africa* (United Nations publication, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Inefficiencies in health spending lowered life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa by more than 10 years. See United Nations, "STEM education and inequality in Africa", Policy Brief (July 2022).

16. Given the current financial climate (public debt is increasing, additional investment of \$850 billion is needed to achieve the goals related to people, global financial markets are tightening and official development aid is dwindling), policymakers need to improve policy coherence by leveraging synergies between various Sustainable Development Goals to enhance the effectiveness of their socioeconomic policies.

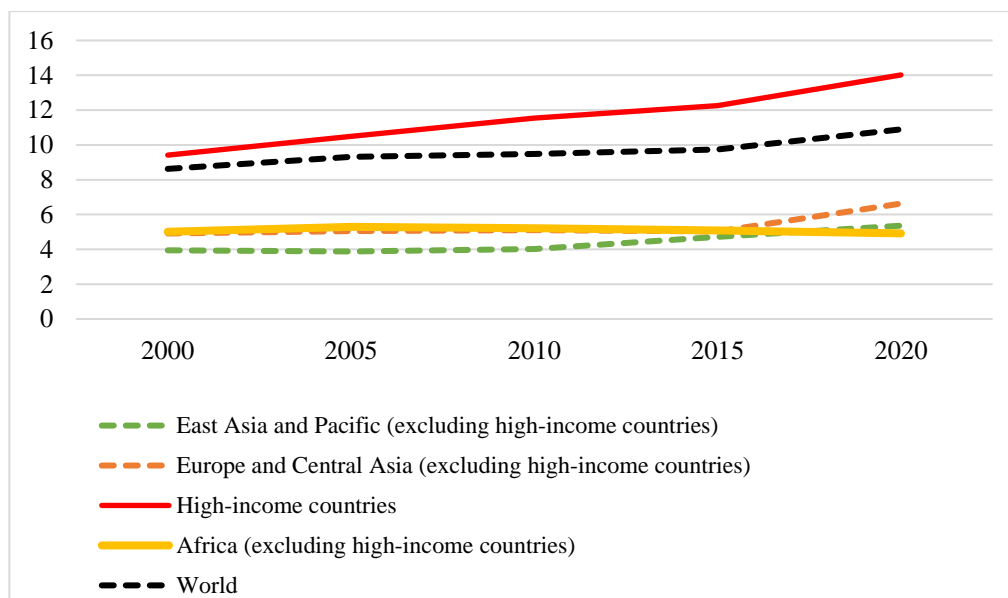
Figure III  
**Public spending on education in Africa and the world**  
 (Percentage of gross domestic product)



Source: Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) estimates based on World Bank data.<sup>15</sup>

Note: Expenditure on education in Africa remains below the global target.

Figure IV  
**Spending on health in Africa**  
 (Percentage of gross domestic product)



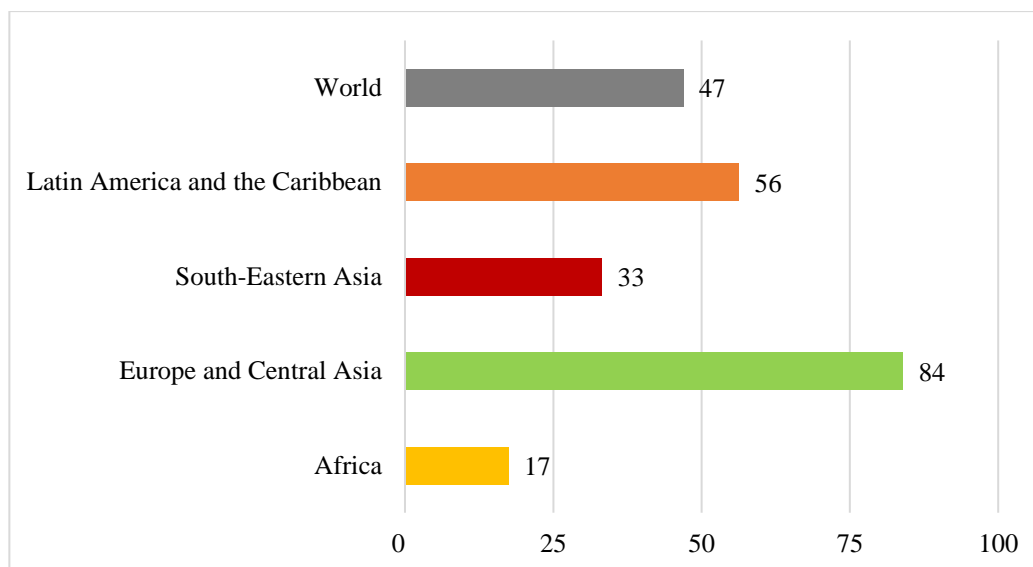
Source: ECA estimates based on World Bank data.<sup>16</sup>

Note: The figure shows that health expenditures remain much below the averages for the world and for high-income countries.

<sup>15</sup> World Bank, World Bank open data. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 15 August 2023).

<sup>16</sup> World Bank, World Bank open data.

Figure V  
**Social protection coverage by area**  
 (Percentage)



Source: ECA estimates based on International Labour Organization (2020).<sup>17</sup>

Note: Social protection coverage rates vary considerably across the globe.

### III. Why education matters in building a new social contract

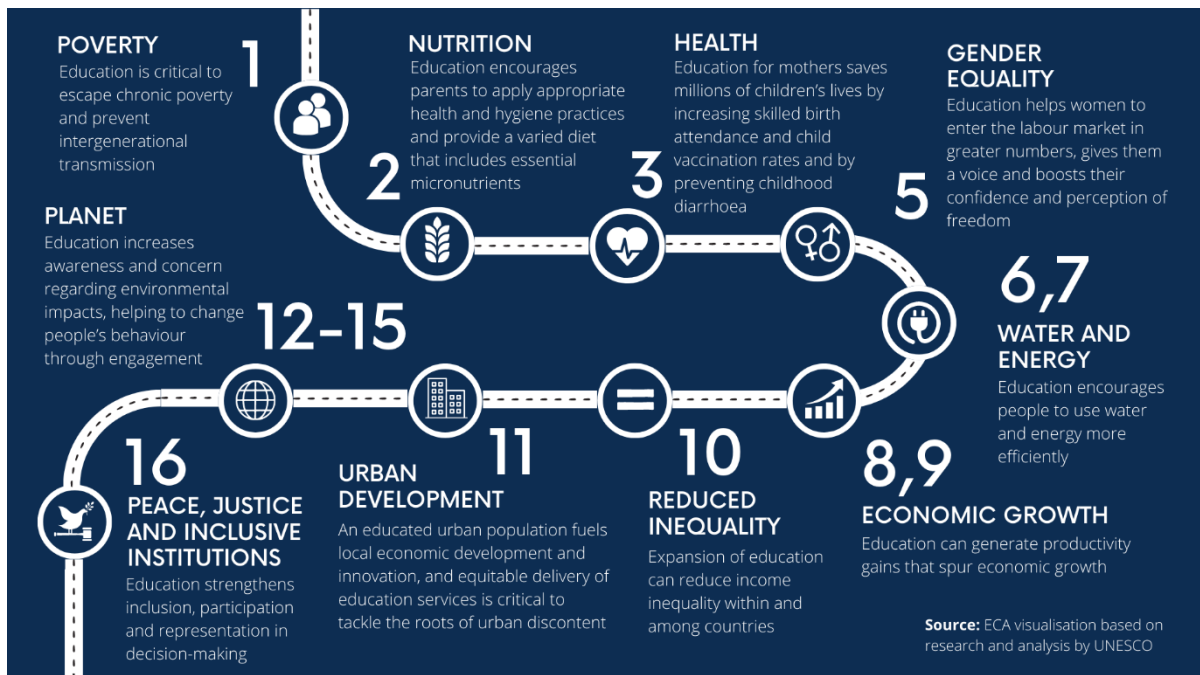
#### A. Education as a catalyst for sustainable development

17. Goal 4, on access to high-quality education and lifelong learning, can be a catalyst in advancing other Goals. Equipped with the right knowledge and skills, people can make informed decisions, pursue healthy lives and respond to national and global development challenges.<sup>18</sup> Education is therefore a smart entry point for tackling other Goals, as is made clear in figure VI.

<sup>17</sup> International Labour Organization. Statistics on social protection. Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/social-protection/> (accessed on 15 August 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Report on the 2022 Transforming Education Summit Convened by the UN Secretary-General, January 2023.

Figure VI  
**Education as an anchor for other Sustainable Development Goals**



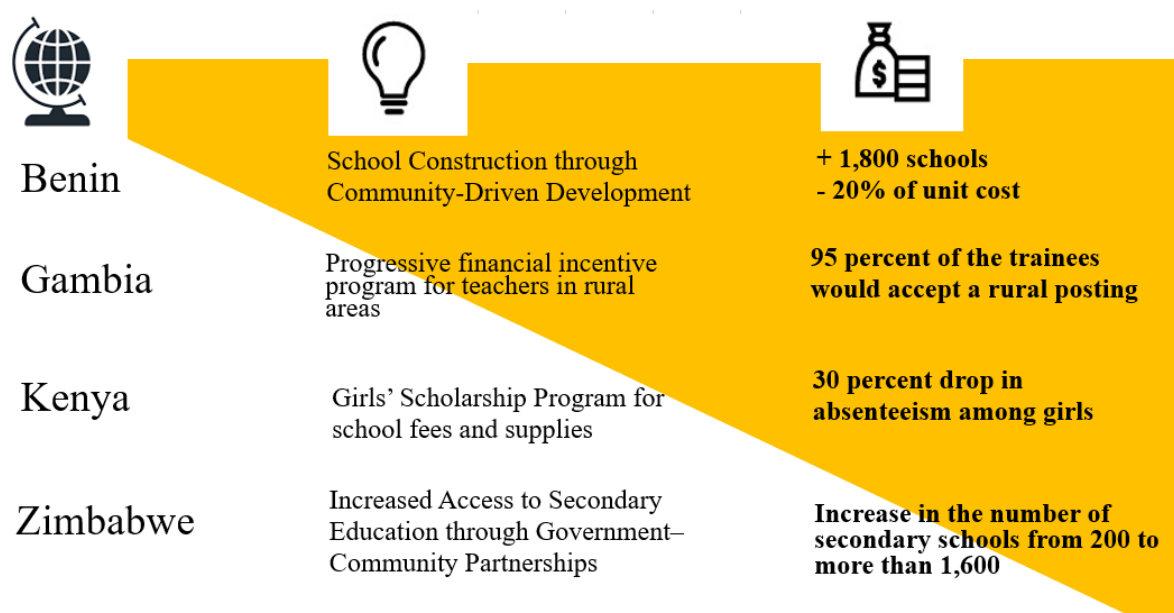
Source: ECA, adapted from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “Sustainable development begins with education: how education can contribute to the proposed post-2015 goals”, 2014.



## B. Increasing the efficiency of education spending should be the goal

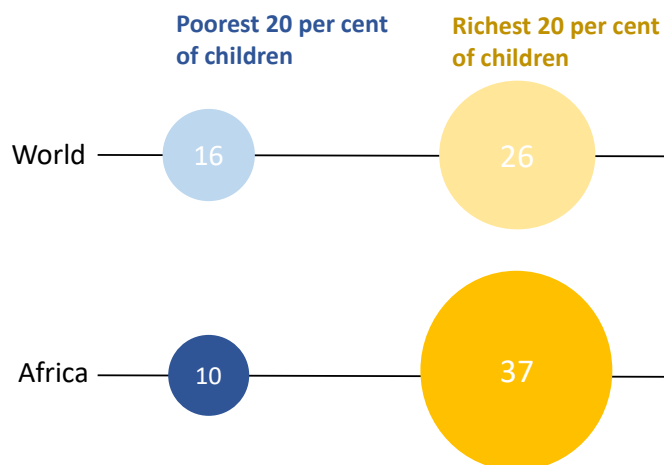
18. Given the catalytic role of education in enabling attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is imperative to ensure that government spending is efficient, inclusive and equitable. Affordability, accessibility and applicability are being addressed in some African countries, as shown in the examples in figure VII. Nevertheless, in most African countries, spending on education is lower than the levels prescribed by UNESCO (figure III), and the money that is spent does not reach the right people. For instance, according to UNESCO data on public spending, 37 per cent of educational resources reach the richest 20 per cent of children, while only 10 per cent reaches the poorest 20 per cent (figure VIII). In addition, many geographic and socioeconomic inequities prevent the full potential of many people from being harnessed. For instance, the odds of completing any of the three levels of education are stacked rural dwellers and the poor (figure IX). There is room to design inclusive—and equitable high-quality education policies that can improve the efficiency of these limited resources and help bridge the gap between rich and poor by ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all. If directed correctly, education spending can also improve intergenerational mobility (figure X).

Figure VII  
Efficiency of spending on education in African countries



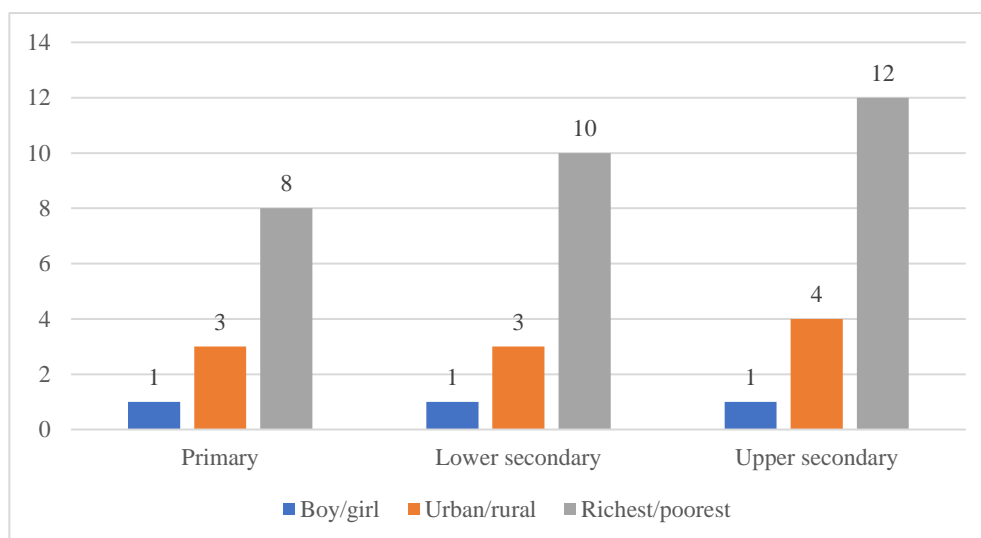
Source: ECA visualization based on Kirsten Majgaard and Alain Mingat, *Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Comparative Analysis*, (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2012).

Figure VIII  
**Percentage of public education resources reaching the richest and poorest children, 2019**



Source: ECA, adapted from the World Inequality Database on Education and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

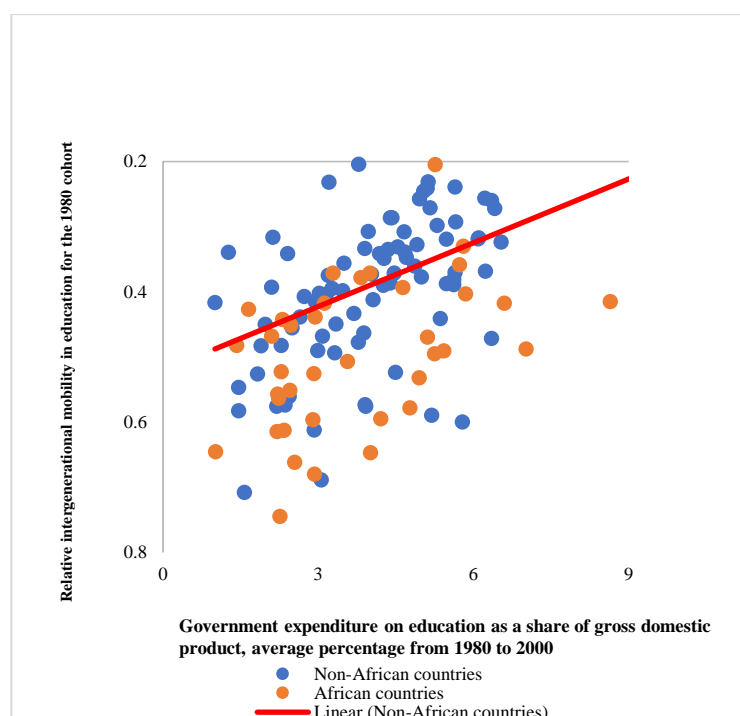
Figure IX  
**School completion likelihood ratios in Africa**



Source: United Nations Children's Fund, "Transforming education in Africa: an evidence-based overview and recommendations for long-term improvements", 2021.

Note: The bars show how many times more likely boys, urban dwellers and the richest quintile of schoolchildren are to complete each of three stages of schooling than girls, rural dwellers and the poorest quintile, respectively.

Figure X  
**Relative intergenerational mobility in education and government expenditure on education as a share of gross domestic product**



Source: ECA estimates based on World Bank (2018a)<sup>19</sup> and the Global Database on Intergenerational Mobility.

Note: The red line is the line of best fit.

### C. Social spending on education should be informed by policy goals

19. While there is evidence that education spending can have positive social impacts, not all spending is equally impactful. Policymakers should therefore target spending towards their intended goals. Research shows that if the goal is to reduce poverty and inequality, spending should be geared towards access to preschool and primary education because of its formative role and lifelong benefits (see box). These early experiences shape childhood development, including cognition, comprehension and socialization. In addition, inclusive primary education aids secondary and tertiary education.<sup>20</sup> Finally, given that most African countries have a primary school enrolment rate of 90 per cent, the focus should be on the quality of education and the causes of high dropout rates, especially for girls.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> World Bank, Global database on intergenerational mobility. Available at: [https://data\\_catalog.worldbank.org/search/dataset/0050771/Global-Database-on-Intergenerational-Mobility](https://data_catalog.worldbank.org/search/dataset/0050771/Global-Database-on-Intergenerational-Mobility) (accessed on 15 August 2023).

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO, “Right from the start: build inclusive societies through inclusive early childhood education”, Global Education Monitoring Report, Policy Paper, No. 46 (Paris, UNESCO, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> African Development Bank, “Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education”. Available at: [www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/topics/millennium-development-goals-mdgs/goal-2-achieve-universal-primary-education](http://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/topics/millennium-development-goals-mdgs/goal-2-achieve-universal-primary-education).

### Selected examples of how education policy can reduce poverty and inequality

Research suggests that spending on education can reduce poverty and inequality in the following ways:

- An increase in the proportion of gross national product allocated to education (1 per cent), such as basic social infrastructure, reduces the proportion of people living below the national poverty line by 2.54 per cent and the international poverty line by 3.89 per cent.
- Spending on primary education tends to be pro-poor, whereas tertiary education spending tends to have an equalizing impact (Tunisia). Social spending on education includes in-kind transfers (universal free public education), cash transfer programmes for families in need, scholarship assistance for students (0.3 per cent of GDP in 2010), youth activities, grants to local communities and non-governmental organizations, and special treasury funds (0.5 per cent of GDP).
- An increase in public expenditure on primary education was linked to the largest reduction in income inequality. This occurred in Egypt, where targeted policies enhanced the affordability of education, with about a quarter of public spending directed to the poorest quintile of the population.
- The largest decline in inequality, in Ghana, was driven by primary education. Increases in schooling attainment (at primary and secondary level) not only increased wages, but also improved attainment at higher levels of education.

Source: ECA, based on various research projects.<sup>22</sup>

20. Policymakers also need to assess the importance of building their labour force for future jobs. Since the Fourth Industrial Revolution is already under way, policymakers should emphasize equipping the labour force with the requisite skills. Alternative forms of education or skills acquisition can play a vital role in bypassing structural barriers faced by disadvantaged groups and can strengthen the social capital of those groups and help to expand their social networks beyond poorer neighbourhoods.

21. Initiatives to enhance skills are needed to help a new generation of young people to navigate structural, spatial and temporal challenges and gain employable skills and certification in new and emerging areas, such as digitalization. Retraining is needed for graduates whose skills are no longer in demand. By adopting a purpose-driven approach involving technical and vocational education and training, countries can enhance people's skills, retrain workers in new functions, which traditional education often fails to do, and help workers to find decent employment. In Eswatini, 73 per cent of students who graduated from one specialized technical and vocational education and training programme between 1995 and 2015 found productive employment immediately after graduating, with 48 per cent employed formally.<sup>23</sup> An additional advantage of technical and vocational education and training is that it supports lifelong learning. Although lifelong learning is deeply rooted in many African cultures, through education and apprenticeships, opportunities for formal adult learning and education opportunities need to be further developed, especially given their unique capacity to empower the most vulnerable people.

<sup>22</sup> Ben C. Arimah, "Poverty reduction and human development in Africa", *Journal of Human Development*, vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 399–415 (November 2004); Nizer Jouini and others, "Fiscal policy, income redistribution, and poverty reduction: evidence from Tunisia", *Review of Income and Wealth*, vol. 64, No. S1 (2018); Gabriel Lara Ibarra and others, "Impact of fiscal policy on inequality and poverty in the Arab Republic of Egypt", Policy Research Working Paper, No. 8824 (World Bank, April 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Swaziland Economic Policy Analysis and Research Centre, "The economic benefits of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in the Kingdom of Swaziland: a case of the National Handicraft Training Centre (NHTC)", Policy Brief (2019).

22. Finally, policymakers need to be cognizant of spatial dimensions and ensure that where somebody lives does not determine their future. Research shows that living in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of poverty can have negative effects on individual outcomes in education, income, health and well-being.<sup>24</sup> In one study, children who moved from a high poverty hotspot to a low poverty hotspot before the age of 13 earned 31 per cent more as adults than those who did not move to the wealthier neighbourhood.<sup>25</sup> In another study, in South Africa, significant relationships were found between housing conditions (type of building and number of rooms) and home duties on the one hand and academic achievement on the other.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. **How to rethink education policy to build a new social contract: the 3 A's approach**

*“Behavioural science is a critical tool for the UN [United Nations] to progress on its mandate. It can contribute to combating poverty, improving public health and safety, promoting gender equality, strengthening peacebuilding and all the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals].”*

Source: [António Guterres](#), Secretary-General

23. The effectiveness of education in building new social contracts will depend on the intended outcomes (deliverables by the Government that benefit society overall), scope (key players and geographic scope) and temporal dimensions (start, dynamic and duration) of the contracts. In the present paper, affordability, accessibility and applicability are explored as the main factors that can influence people's behaviours and make education policy more efficient, equitable and inclusive so that it addresses the structural barriers posed by poverty and inequality.

##### A. **Affordability: the impact of hidden costs and high burden for households**

24. More than 1 in 5 children in Africa between the ages of 6 and 11 do not attend school and 3 in 5 children between the ages of 15 and 17 are not enrolled. The onus is therefore on policymakers not just to build schools but to institute policies that increase enrolment, attendance and completion rates.

25. Social and economic factors are linked to school dropout rates. Even though many African countries have made primary and secondary education free, other constraints keep children from poor families at home. The constraints include the costs of meals, uniforms, books and menstrual hygiene supplies, which make school unaffordable for many poorer households. Household and other private spending contribute 40 per cent to education expenditure.<sup>27</sup> Such prohibitive costs and the perceived poor quality of education are the main reasons for school dropout in West Africa.<sup>28</sup>

26. The opportunity costs of attending school also affect people's behaviour. For

<sup>24</sup> Maarten van Ham and others, eds., *Neighbourhood Effects Research: New Perspectives* (Dordrecht, Springer, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren and Lawrence F. Katz, “The effects of exposure to better neighborhoods on children: new evidence from the moving to opportunity experiment”, *American Economic Review*, vol. 106, No. 4 (April 2016), pp. 855–902.

<sup>26</sup> Jace Pillay, “The relationship between housing and children's literacy achievement: implications for supporting vulnerable children”, *South African Journal of Education*, vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2017), pp. 1–10.

<sup>27</sup> Emilie Maddison and Angela E. Micah, “The steep price of education in Africa”, *ThinkGlobalHealth*, 4 August 2022.

<sup>28</sup> World Bank and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Education Finance Watch 2022*, (Washington, D.C., 2022); United Nations Children's Fund, “Transforming education in Africa”, 2021.

example, they may decide to work, because of the immediate and short-term gains, rather than to invest in schooling for long-term gains. This can be a particularly difficult decision for poorer families that rely on income for their sustenance and day-to-day expenditure, families who live from hand to mouth, families in which school-age children are the only potential earners, and child-headed households.

27. To overcome the barriers, Governments can make education more affordable by abolishing tuition fees, providing free school meals, uniforms, books and laptops, and offering scholarships to encourage attendance and increase completion rates. The introduction of free primary education in Kenya in 2003 increased school enrolment rates, and the introduction of free school uniforms and sanitary and other hygiene supplies<sup>29</sup> reduced school dropout rates and absenteeism among girls.<sup>30</sup>

28. Other interventions include providing cash transfers to poorer households to send children to school. In a study in Cameroon, a 1 per cent increase in household income led to a 30 per cent increase in the likelihood of children enrolling in school, suggesting that a higher income reduces the burden of education costs for poor families.<sup>31</sup>

## **B. Accessibility: the effect of school location and travel mode options**

29. Researchers have found that children's school enrolment, education attainment rates and their ability to read and write are correlated with factors such as distance to school and travel mode options. The location of schools (urban versus rural), travel time and travel mode options affect access to education and quality of education, in particular in developing countries where schools are not easily accessible and transportation options are limited or costly.<sup>32</sup>

30. Location influences quality of education. Urban schools have more resources (number of schools, quality of teachers, access to electricity, water, health care, school-based support and leisure activities) and better facilities (building conditions, teaching equipment, books and learning materials). Additional efforts should therefore be dedicated to closing urban-rural learning gaps to ensure a high-quality education for all.<sup>33</sup>

31. In two studies, in urban areas in Mozambique and Nigeria, it was found that distance travelled had a direct relationship with school attendance rates, with lower attendance rates observed among primary and secondary school students who lived further away from their school. In the Mozambique study, reducing the travel time to the nearest school led to a 17–20 per cent increase in enrolment rates.<sup>34</sup>

32. The ability to read and write is also correlated with the distance travelled to school. For instance, in both rural and urban areas in Ghana, it was found that a longer

<sup>29</sup> Akinyi Owuor and others, "The impact of free primary education inputs on educational outcomes in Kenya (2003 to 2013): the rate of enrolment and retention at primary school level as a factor", *European Journal of Educational Sciences*, vol.5, No. 1 (March 2018); Lynet Igadwah, "Uhuru signs law on free sanitary towels for schoolgirls", *Business Daily*, 21 June 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Emilie Maddison and Angela E. Micah, "The steep price of education".

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Mutisya, John Munyui Muchira and Benta A. Abuya, "Understanding wealth inequalities in education access in urbanizing sub-Saharan Africa", *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 6 (2021).

<sup>32</sup> World Bank, *Lifelong Learning in the Global Knowledge Economy: Challenges for Developing Countries*, (Washington, D.C., 2003); Jessica de Armas, Helena Ramalhinho and Marta Reynal-Querol, "Improving the accessibility to public schools in urban areas of developing countries through a location model and an analytical framework", *PLoS ONE*, vol.17, No. 1 (2022).

<sup>33</sup> Sugata Sumida and Keisuke Kawata, "An analysis of the learning performance gap between urban and rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa", *South African Journal of Education*, vol. 41, No. 2 (May 2021).

<sup>34</sup> C.O. Duze, "Average distance travelled to school by primary and secondary school students in Nigeria and its effect on attendance", *African Research Review*, vol. 4, No. 4 (2010), pp. 378–388; Sudhanshu Handa, "Raising primary school enrolment in developing countries: the relative importance of supply and demand", *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 69, No. 1 (October 2002), pp. 103–128..

travel time had a negative impact on children's ability to read and write and their ability to perform written calculations. It was also found that children who walked longer distances to and from school were more likely to arrive late to school and more likely to miss class owing to illness. Specifically, a one-minute increase in a student's travel time to school was associated with 3 minutes of missed lesson time per month, a 0.30 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a student visiting a health practitioner, and 0.4 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a student being hospitalized. School travel time started to have an impact on learning outcomes from 17 minutes. The negative effect increased substantially for children who travelled more than 30 minutes to school.<sup>35</sup> This threshold was also found in research in the United Republic of Tanzania.<sup>36</sup>

33. The above research provides four key lessons that policymakers can use to improve the accessibility of schools. First, distance to school and travel mode may affect enrolment and attainment and reduce children's acquisition of reading and writing skills. Second, although children living in both urban and rural areas are negatively affected by school travel time, the effect on learning outcomes is more pronounced among those in urban areas. Third, children whose travel time to school is more than 30 minutes have poorer learning outcomes. Fourth, the channels through which travel time affects children's learning outcomes are missed class hours and health issues. School locations should therefore be chosen that minimize travel time for children, or where there is good access to transport to reduce travel time, or where a means of transport is provided to reduce school commuting time.

### C. **Applicability: improved credibility of African educational institutions to meet demands and match aspirations**

34. UNESCO describes the right to education as a basic human right designed to lift people out of poverty, reduce inequality and ensure sustainable development.<sup>37</sup> The purpose of education, therefore, is to prepare people for employment, enterprise and other income-generating activities and to make them cognizant of their individual and collective history.

35. The skills of most young Africans do not match the local jobs market. In surveys conducted in 11 African countries, 35 per cent of young graduates reported that they felt overqualified for their job, while 6 per cent felt underqualified.<sup>38</sup> Although 47 per cent of science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates in Africa are women,<sup>39</sup> in sub-Saharan Africa only about 30 per cent of employees in the tech sector are women.<sup>40</sup> This might explain why more than three quarters of young graduates (between the ages of 15 and 29) across Africa are forced to begin their careers in informal activities,<sup>41</sup> either by starting their own businesses or by working in fields unrelated to their formal education or certification (out of necessity rather than by choice). With such high numbers engaged in informal business and

<sup>35</sup> Clifford Afoakwa and Isaac Koomson, "How does school travel time impact children's learning outcomes in a developing country?", *Review of Economics of the Households*, vol. 19 (2021), pp. 1,077–1,097.

<sup>36</sup> Carla Pezzulo and others, "Understanding factors associated with attending secondary school in Tanzania using household survey data", *PLoS ONE*, vol. 17, No. 2 (2022).

<sup>37</sup> UNESCO, "The right to education: every human being has the right to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities". Accessed on 24 June 2023 (available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-education>).

<sup>38</sup> African Union Commission and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Africa's Development Dynamics 2021: Digital Transformation for Quality Jobs* (Addis Ababa and Paris, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Ellie Bothwell, ed., "Gender equality: how global universities are performing" (UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean and Times Higher Education, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Creating a level playing field for women in technology in Africa", 31 January 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Youth Aspirations and the Reality of Jobs in Developing Countries: Mind the Gap*, Development Centre Studies (Paris, OECD Publishing).

enterprise, Governments should ask whether provisions are in place to retrain people in new functions or formalize their entrepreneurial endeavours through recognized management and business administration courses and certification.

36. This mismatch between the education systems and economic activity across African countries is one of the many reasons why African students choose to pursue tertiary education abroad. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, the number of tertiary education students studying abroad has increased sharply since 2011. Between 2016 and 2021, it increased by 62 per cent in Ghana and 87 per cent in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>42</sup> Many African students are successfully completing overseas education programmes, but many cannot because of structural barriers, a lack of funding and discrimination and racism towards Africans.

37. Another reason for the low esteem in which African educational institutions are held is the perception that domestic education is of poor quality, especially in rural areas, with irrelevant syllabuses and poorly qualified teachers. Students prefer the credibility of foreign institutions, many of which, in addition to traditional education, have moved towards profit-based business models and even operate like businesses, focusing on soft skills, personal development and social skills as a parallel form of education, which African educational institutions often overlook. Despite such business-like operations and real-world applications, educational institutions still lack the purpose-driven approach in business that is needed to make societies more sustainable, as they remain siloed and traditionally conservative at their core, rather than agile and responsive to trends, the economy and people's needs.

38. Twinning strategies have been found to help increase the credibility of domestic institutions. Under such strategies, institutions affiliate themselves with well-established foreign entities and begin to adopt the foreign entity's working procedures and administration to bring their own standards up to those of the foreign entity.<sup>43</sup> This can include strategies to promote the cross-pollination of people and ideas through secondments, itinerant lecturers, well-established student exchange programmes and joint research.

39. Clustering is another industrial development strategy that can be adopted to align education with industry. This includes the colocation of various educational institutions in industrial and technology parks to strengthen the value chain as well as the labour and skills supply pipeline. For example, tertiary and specialized educational institutions can be co-located with research and development facilities, incubators and commercial companies so that ideas, skills and people have a more organic route to market and a link with industry. While some countries, such as Ethiopia, are making headway in developing industrial and technology parks to create jobs,<sup>44</sup> many are yet to incorporate education and training facilities into such clusters.

40. Another option is to offer more vocational or hybrid programmes, in which time is allocated for students to work in industry, often in paid jobs. Such programmes are known as industrial placement programmes or as sandwich courses or degrees. Students are expected to work during part of their course and bring back industrial knowledge and skills to complement the remainder of their academic studies. The placements give students valuable experience in the workplace. They also strengthen links between academia and industry and help students to find a job once they graduate. This differs from technical and vocational education and training in that the focus of placements is on highly specialized sectors and involves highly skilled programmes, often linked directly with industrial and economic demand.

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<sup>42</sup> Campus France, "France: the world's top destination for sub-Saharan African students", 16 December 2022.

<sup>43</sup> One such example is the University Twinning and Networking Programme. Established by UNESCO, the programme promotes international cooperation and networking to enhance institutional capacity among universities through collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

<sup>44</sup> World Bank, "Ethiopia's industrial parks are making jobs a reality", 13 November 2019.






41. These strategies are all worth exploring to make African institutions credible and equivalent to their foreign counterparts. The strategies give students early exposure to higher standards of quality and to professional and commercial environments, helping them to see the links between theory, practice and career progression more clearly, and they ensure a more demand- and purpose-driven approach to education.

42. Figure XI shows a summary of evidence on the drivers of behaviours and expected outcomes, as identified in the literature.

Figure XI

**Selected drivers of behaviours and expected outcomes from the 3 A's approach**

3AS	 Variable	 Metrics	 Outcomes
Affordability	The cost of airtime, mobile data and broadband services	Currency	Expanded access to online learning resources for all children, including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children <sup>a</sup>
	Provision of borrowing options for education	Currency	Lower financial burdens and obligations and higher enrolment rates at various levels <sup>b</sup>
Accessibility	Reduced walking time to and from school – below 30 minutes	Km	Improved enrolment and attainment rates Less illness <sup>c</sup>
	Investments to improve travel mode options (school bus, public transport, bicycle lane)	Currency	Improved literacy and numeracy performance <sup>d</sup>
Applicability	Education on puberty and on sanitation and menstrual hygiene products for girls	Number of products	Lower absenteeism among girls <sup>d</sup>
	Developing scholarship and outreach and mentorship programmes for women to stimulate participation in growth sectors <sup>b</sup>	Number of activities	More women working in the information and communications technology sector <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> United Nations Children's Fund and African Union Commission, "Transforming education in Africa: an evidence-based overview and recommendations for long-term improvements".

<sup>b</sup> Jaime Saavedra and Hana Bixi, "Empowering adolescent girls in Africa through education", World Bank, 7 March 2023.

<sup>c</sup> Clifford Afoakwa and Isaac Koomson, "How does school travel time impact children's learning".

<sup>d</sup> Jesica de Armas, Helena Ramalinho and Marta Reynal-Querol, "Improving the accessibility".

<sup>e</sup> Montgomery and others, "Sanitary pad interventions for girls' education in Ghana: a pilot study", *PLoS One*, vol. 7, No. 10, 2023.

Source: ECA, based on various research projects.

## **V. Reflections on education as the foundation for a new social contract**

### **A. Revitalizing the education system and unlocking the potential of curricula**

43. In considering education as a lever to reduce poverty and inequality, it is essential to consider whether education curricula are fit for the jobs market of the future. A United Nations policy brief stated that another structural challenge is to ensure that education curricula are “responsive to the national development vision, relevant to the times and in line with the needs of the population”.<sup>45</sup> The policy brief then notes that “African countries have been conscious of the need to significantly change their curricula since the beginning of African unity”. This has been recalled again in the African Union road map and in the theme of education for the thirty-seventh session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, which will be held in 2024.

44. The policy brief also notes that at the first pan-African conference on education, in 1960, African leaders questioned whether colonial education was relevant for the development needs of Africa and called for action to be taken to ensure that education produced “human-level expertise” and graduates that could use technology “for social economic development and wealth creation”. To achieve this, the teaching and learning of the sciences would need to be strengthened and mindsets would need to be developed for social economic development.<sup>46</sup> The policy brief acknowledges the difficulty of the task, noting that it required investment in teacher development programmes, the review of school curricula at all levels, and new school infrastructure, including Internet access.

45. The time is right for policymakers to overhaul education and re-evaluate education policies. As discussed earlier, inclusive preschool and primary school education can set children up for success, improving social outcomes and reducing poverty and inequality. In addition, with the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it is imperative that Governments provide lifelong learning programmes to enhance workers’ skills and retrain workers for the jobs of the future. This is being done through technical and vocational education and training. It is also time to change curricula so that they match skills with future job profiles and improve education quality through twinning strategies that enhance the credibility and quality of domestic institutions, with education centres located in industrial towns to increase on-the-job training.

46. For greater policy coherence and systems thinking, more attention should be paid to the kind of jobs that will be created through the structural transformation of Africa. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement will generate 10 million new jobs by 2035. The sectors with high development and job-rich potential are agrifood, services and industry, and energy and mining. National strategies for education, skills development and training should therefore be tailored to ensure an adequate labour supply in the coming decades. The required skills will range from job-neutral digital skills (for example, data analysis) and job-specific digital skills (for example, robotics) to “soft skills” such as managerial, collaboration, communication and analytical skills. Demographic changes in Africa will mean that more jobs will be needed than are projected to be created. Innovative approaches will therefore be necessary. For example, smart urban planning will be needed in which the accessibility of public services and barriers to affordability and the applicability of skills and labour match economic demand; highly skilled labour will need to be exported from African countries while foreign direct investment will be needed to connect African businesses to global markets and global demand for labour and skills.

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<sup>45</sup> United Nations, “STEM education and inequality in Africa”, Policy Brief (2022).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

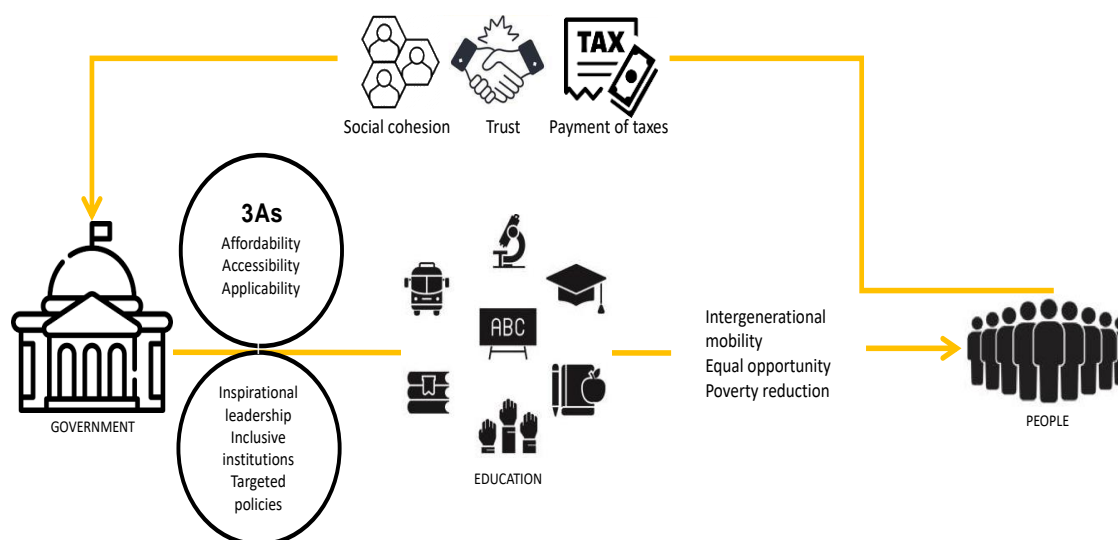
## B. Rethinking education under a new social contract

47. Although there is no one-size-fits-all blueprint on how to build a new social contract through the education sector, it is quite clear that a symbiotic relationship is needed between Government and people. Governments are responsible for ensuring that people have the requisite skills for jobs. People, for their part, should pay their taxes to provide their Government with the means to deliver the services that enhance their well-being. Such a social contract would hinge on inspirational leadership, inclusive institutions and targeted policies. A robust social contract would involve all sectors of society, from children and young people to parents, from employers to teachers and researchers, and from activists to cultural and religious leaders. A whole-of-society approach will ensure a virtuous cycle of trust between each Government and people, resulting in policies that deliver equal opportunities, create intergenerational mobility and reduce poverty.

48. To ensure success, policymakers need to account for people's behaviours when designing policies (see figure XII). For instance, education policies should be formulated in a way that gives due attention to affordability, accessibility and applicability. This will ensure synergies in the management of the megatrends discussed above. In essence, a well-educated, young workforce will help African countries to reap the potential benefits of their growing working population while harnessing the opportunities afforded by the megatrends.

Figure XII

### Examples of dynamics for the redesign of the social contract in the education sector



Source: ECA visualization of key elements, based on the present issues paper.

## VI. Conclusion: issues for consideration by the Committee

49. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate disasters have reversed the development gains of recent decades and created millions more poor people and millions more migrants. It is vital to provide stability, protection, opportunities and social mobility to all and to do so immediately. This can be achieved if Governments and people work together to jointly develop new social contracts that can unlock their full potential. In the present issues paper, it has been demonstrated that education is a lever for attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. The three strategic drivers that are recognized are:

- Better affordability: education subsidies and cash transfers reduce the financial burden on the poor

- Greater accessibility: better urban planning and transport can improve schools and school services
- Applicability: education programmes can be redesigned in a way that improves quality, strengthens institutional credibility and matches education to employable skills

**Based on the above observations, the Committee is encouraged to discuss the following questions:**

- What are the key elements of a new social contract that can create a symbiotic relationship between Governments and people in Africa?
  - How can government spending in Africa be made more efficient so that it reaches the right people?
  - How can policy coherence and systems thinking be improved to ensure that the 2030 Agenda is delivered on time for Africa?
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