

Promoting equity and inclusion: The dire state of Out-of-School-Children in African Commonwealth countries

Abstract

As part of Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) strategic plan from 2021 to 2027, its open schooling portfolio focuses on children/youths in need of schooling opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa. This category of children is referred to as Out-of-School-Children (OOSC), depicting children/youth excluded from education, which makes up about one-sixth of the global population of this age group. This study reports on COL's commissioned project in the African Commonwealth countries, with a special emphasis on girls to help it to better focus its efforts. The study was undertaken in two phases. Data analysis involved simple descriptive statistics and transcription of recorded interviews, the identification of themes and sub-themes and coding. Both findings were triangulated. Generally, the findings show common threads, for instance, gender inequality that pervades the data, with the female gender being at a disadvantage in most of the countries. Given the multi-layered challenge of OOSC, recommendations were made on school enrolments and persistence among primary and secondary school children, ICT-in-education, disabilities, the marginalised, teenage pregnancy, and climate change education. In collaboration with education experts, COL looks forward to developing interventions to address the matter of OOSC in member countries.

Key words: Out-of-School-Children (OOSC), African Commonwealth countries, school enrolment and persistence

1. Introduction and background

In 2020, according to recent statistics, 260 million children adolescents and youth were out of school. UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) (2019) paints a dismal picture with a '59 million children of primary schoolage, 62 million of lower secondary schoolage and 138 million of uppersecondary age' not in school. This represents "one-sixth of the global population of this age group" (UIS, 2019). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the current crisis in education.

More and more, countries are turning to open, flexible, and distance learning modalities and opportunities to reach those who are most at risk of dropping out or to provide a second chance. For out of school youth, open schooling can be an equalizer for educational opportunities (Commonwealth of Learning [COL], 2017 brochure).

2. Open schooling

Open schooling (OS) seeks to obviate barriers to access such as cost, age, competing commitments, disability or other challenges. It then uses a range of flexible approaches, based on open and distance learning, to provide structured teaching and learning opportunities. Openness and flexibility are the core features of open schooling and not the physical separation of teacher and learners. (COL, 2017). Open schooling has been successfully introduced in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific to complement, or as an alternative to, the conventional school system. The mode can be provided by standalone, independent distance education institutions, or be managed as part of the education ministry within a specific directorate or even be part of a university.

Open Schooling is one of the means of building a more resilient education system that has the potential to open the doors of learning to all, even in difficult circumstances, just like the ongoing COVID-19 world pandemic (COL, 2020; Mays & Singh, 2020).

COL is currently supporting open schooling initiatives in Botswana, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia and the research reported here will help prioritise OS activities in member countries to address the challenge of OOSC, particularly girls, young women and other marginalised persons such as people with disabilities.

3. Purpose of the Study

This report analyses the issues and challenges facing out-of-school children and youths, with a special emphasis on girls and young women in African Commonwealth countries (Deleted for peer review). The objective was to

identify opportunities for strengthening interventions in Open Schooling and provide valuable insights for Education Ministries, NGOs/CSOs, funders and education practitioners into the status of out-of-school children and youth in Commonwealth member states in Africa.

4. Research Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design in which both qualitative and quantitative research instruments were used. The study was conducted in two phases.

4.1 Phase 1

Phase 1 included an exploratory desktop study on out-of-school youth in Commonwealth Africa, by reviewing the current state of pre-primary, primary and secondary levels of education, the population of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), OOSC, teenage pregnancy, ICT in education, disabilities in education and the marginalised. Given that climate change is increasingly an issue across many countries, the review also looked at the impact climate change has on schooling and countries' efforts to include climate change education in their curriculum. Literature review a literature review is an excellent way of synthesizing research findings to show evidence on a meta-level and to uncover areas in which more research is needed (Snyder, 2019).

4.2 Phase 2

Phase 2 of the study included a survey and data verification distributed to Commonwealth of Learning's country representatives in the African Commonwealth Ministries of Education (or relevant entity) as well as follow-up interviews conducted with selected country representatives (targeted at the five countries with the most out-of-school girls).

4.2.1 Survey

Twelve responses representing nine countries were received from the 19 member states. Of the twelve respondents, most were from government parastatals, while 4 were from public education/training institutions. In addition, only two were rural-based. Lastly, the respondents work in technical and vocational skills development, formal education and non-formal education sectors.

4.2.2 Data verification

These country representatives were asked to verify the data collected in the review stage. Of the 19 countries, only eight (42.105%) countries responded to the data verification request. The purpose of the data verification process was to provide all African Commonwealth Member States an opportunity to verify the desktop data COL has collected; provide COL with updated data in instances where the collected data is out-dated; and to assist COL to probe what interventions are needed to support Out-of-School Children in Africa Commonwealth countries. Eight countries (Eswatini, Gambia, The, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria and Rwanda) responded to the data verification request.

4.2.3 Interviews

Based on the literature review and responses to the initial survey and data verification, five countries with the greatest needs in OOSC were selected for further interviews with country representatives to get a more in-depth picture of the issues and challenges. The countries were Cameroon, Eswatini, Lesotho, Nigeria, and Rwanda. Four interviews were conducted on Zoom, while one was conducted on WhatsApp due to internet connectivity challenges after several attempts. Some of the country representatives participated in the session with their team members.

4.2.4 Limitations

The data collected is not an exhaustive representation of the issues on OOSC in the selected countries. However, a detailed profile was developed for each country, including contextual issues, as well as trends in the quantitative data. It was not possible to find contemporary data in all the same fields for each country. It should be noted that the availability of data covering all the indicators is not on par in all countries. Some available data dates back as early as 2006 in some instances.

Finally, the total number of respondents to the surveys and interviews is quite low, which provides caution to reach generalisable conclusions. Yet, the information provided is a useful resource and starting point for COL and member states to understand the challenges, barriers and opportunities moving forward.

5. Findings

5.1 Analyses of Education and OOSC

Most Commonwealth member countries in Africa have made significant progress on improving access and success in pre-primary and primary schooling. However, there is still quite a wide variation between countries and some countries with a large and growing youth population are finding it difficult to provide access to quality schooling opportunities using traditional brick and mortar approaches. This challenge is exacerbated where conflict or climate change or other factors, such as the recent pandemic, result in school closures. Consequently, there are still children of school-going age unable to access or not successfully completing primary schooling. In addition, many countries experience challenges in the transition from primary schooling to secondary schooling and from junior secondary to senior secondary schooling. This has resulted in large and growing numbers of not in employment nor in education and training youth in many countries.

5.2 Enrolment and Completion rates by level of education

5.2.1 Pre-primary education

According to UNICEF (2021a), although access to pre-primary education has increased globally, many children still have no access to early education. Research findings (Pholphirul, 2017; Needham & Ülküer, 2020) have stressed the importance of this level of education due to its foundation for the success of all other forms of education coupled with its ability to stem the tide of children dropping out of school. Statistics by UNICEF (2021b) shows that “more than 175 million children – nearly half of all pre-primary-age children globally – are not enrolled in pre-primary education”. The situation is direr for children in the developing world.

There are relatively low rates of enrolment in pre-primary education (with the notable exception of Ghana, Mauritius, Seychelles, and to a lesser extent Malawi – all above 80%). Most countries show rates below 50%, with Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia all below 25%. This means that many learners may not be optimally prepared for formal schooling at the primary level, which might negatively affect retention and success. Challenges with this level of education include lack of proper budgeting and planning, lack of infrastructure, education level of parents, and well-trained teachers, to mention but a few (UNICEF, 2021b).

5.2.2 Primary Education

All Member States reviewed are working towards attaining the SDG 4 - Education 2030 goals, with some having put in place free primary education and, others introducing feeding schemes also to keep children in school. However, many challenges still remain. Mukuninge et al (2019) highlighted that despite the efforts to strengthen education provision, poor infrastructure, overcrowding, poor availability and quality of teaching and learning resources all hinder efforts to provide quality education.

As per data collected from UIS (2022), gross enrolment at the primary level is high in most countries. All but one surveyed country has reported GER at or above 100% in the last several years, indicating the enrolment of children older than the typical primary school age and/or children repeating years. The only country reporting significantly below 100% GER at primary level was Nigeria (GER female 86%, male 88% - 2018).

Although findings from this study show that member states have made massive gains in primary school enrolment, nearly one in three children still does not complete primary school (Evans and Acosta, 2021). This is indicative of a problem to provide free and compulsory education for all. Evidence from UIS, 2022 indicates that in many countries there has been slow but sustained improvement over time, but some countries have seen a decline in recent years.

With the exception of South Africa, Mauritius and Botswana, most countries struggle to ensure that learners complete primary school. Particularly, the estimates from UIS indicate that both male and female learners in Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda struggle to complete primary education. Further, the remaining countries still have significant numbers of girls and boys (up to 40%) that do not complete primary school (2020 data). Further, the data suggests that boys in several countries have a more difficult time than their female counterparts.

However, children of primary school age will be unlikely to have the necessary literacy, numeracy and study skills for independent learning, so any intervention needs to make explicit provision for the development of these foundational skills as well as for support and assessment strategies which bridge school and home environments. Any open schooling intervention targeted at the primary level must consider the fact that many learners may be under-prepared for formal learning and appropriate bridging interventions put in place. Provision of access to quality learning resources and provision of guidelines and support for parents and caregivers may be one way in which an open school or open schooling system can help improve retention and success rates in the longer term.

5.2.3 Secondary Education

In addition, even in instances where children get into primary school, many fail to transition from primary to secondary school. Transitioning at this level of education is problematic for children because they are beginning to move from childhood into adulthood (Spernes, 2020); therefore, the challenges at school will only compound their problems and inevitably lead to school dropout. Trends in enrolment rates in lower secondary are much lower than the enrolment in primary schooling for most countries.

Only a few countries can report high levels of enrolment (both male and female), namely Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa all with 100% enrolment at this level. At the other end of the scale, countries that have around 50% or lower enrolment at this level (regardless of sex) include Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Tanzania.

Most countries struggle to have learners (both male and female) complete lower secondary education indicating that the transition from lower to senior secondary education is a second key exit point, after the transition from primary to secondary. Only five countries consistently have more than 50% of boys completing lower secondary (Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria and South Africa). Girls seem more likely to complete than boys in several countries if given the opportunity (e.g. Eswatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Rwanda). The relatively low rates of enrolment and completion at the secondary level in most countries indicates the need to develop or strengthen existing open schooling interventions at this level, especially in Cameroon, Ghana, The Gambia, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

5.2.4 Out-of-school children (OOSC)

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, 2015b) defines out-of-school children as “children of primary or lower secondary school age who are not enrolled in primary or secondary education” (p. 21), including “a small number of children in pre-primary education and in non-formal education (NFE)” (p. 21). According to Shanker et al. (2015: 3), out-of-school children are also categorised into those who have never been to school, despite having the appropriate age to enrol or those who dropped out for various reasons.

A report by UIS (2020) on progress towards achievement of SDG4 indicates that Africa has among the lowest proportions of children achieving minimum proficiency reading levels at the end of primary schooling, the lowest primary completion rates regardless of socio-economic status and, perhaps not surprisingly, the lowest proportion of primary schools with access to electricity and drinking water and the lowest percentage of trained teachers at both primary and secondary level.

Currently, UNESCO UIS reports in 2022 on *Education in Africa* as follows:

Over one-fifth of children between the ages of about 6 and 11 are out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14. According to UIS data, almost 60% of youth between the ages of about 15 and 17 are not in school ...

Girls' education is a major priority. Across the region, 9 million girls between the ages of about 6 and 11 will never go to school at all, compared to 6 million boys, according to UIS data. Their disadvantage starts early: 23% of girls are out of primary school compared to 19% of boys. By the time they become adolescents, the exclusion rate for girls is 36% compared to 32% for boys. (UIS, 2022a)

Data on out-of-school children typically focuses on children of primary school-going age who are not in school. Of course, there will also be older learners who have not accessed or not completed primary schooling. An estimate, based on most recent data compiled, shows that there are more than 15 million children at the primary school level who are out of school (see Table 1).

Table 1: Out-of-school children (gross numbers)

| Country | Most recent data | Female | Male |
|-----------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Botswana | 2014 | 16,996 | 19,288 |
| Cameroon | 2019 | 262,532 | 83,981 |
| eSwatini | 2019/2020 | 16,301 | 15,101 |
| The Gambia | 2020 | 13,922 | 34,840 |
| Ghana | 2020 | 110,013 | 155,175 |
| Kenya | 2012 | 620,422 | 1,381,464 |
| Lesotho | 2017 | 3,109 | 4,299 |
| Malawi* | 2007 | 26,603 | 87,040 |
| Mauritius | 2013 | 491 | 1,814 |
| Mozambique | 2019 | 110,861 | 32,478 |
| Namibia | 2012 | 4,258 | 8,490 |
| Nigeria | 2010 | 4,969,385 | 3,646,385 |
| Rwanda | 2019 | 59,284 | 62,064 |
| Seychelles | 2002 | 69 | 43 |
| Sierra Leone | 2015 | 9,053 | 10,200 |
| South Africa | 2019 | 379,344 | 463,709 |
| Tanzania | 2020 | 808,847 | 1,003,880 |
| Uganda | 2013 | 109,769 | 219,128 |
| Zambia | 2017 | 214,262 | 281,430 |
| Estimated Total OOSC | | 7,735,521 | 7,510,809 |

Source: World Bank, 2021.

The data currently available for some countries is very dated. However, there are significant numbers of out-of-school children in the following countries: Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Three of the countries show significantly higher number of girls than boys out of primary school (e.g., Cameroon, Mozambique and Nigeria).

The numbers are staggering. Nigeria had and may still have one of the highest primary school out-of-school rates in the world (34% as per UIS data in 2010). Many of the countries have primary level OOSC rates over 10%, including: Eswatini (15% - 2019), Gambia (13% - 2021), Kenya (19% - 2012), South Africa (11% - 2019), Tanzania (16% - 2020), Uganda (14% - 2017) and Zambia (15% - 2017) (all data UIS, 2022b). And looking at secondary education, the rate of OOSC grows much higher. When compounded with the low completion and enrolment rates for secondary level, the rates of out-of-school children grow much higher (See Table 2) where countries such as Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda have very high rates of OOSC in lower secondary, and the problem persists into upper secondary for even more countries.

Table 2: OOSC rates

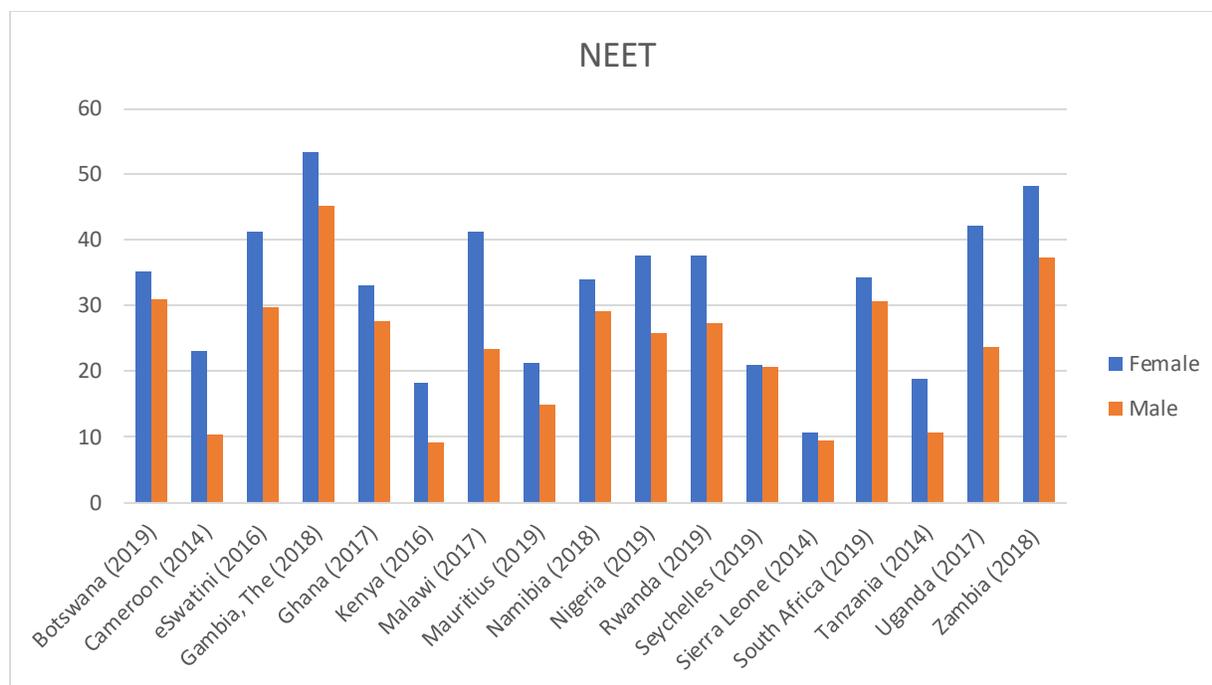
| Country | OOSC rate primary | | OOSC rate low secondary | | OOSC rate upper secondary | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------|-------------------------|------|---------------------------|------|
| | female | male | female | male | female | male |
| Botswana (2017) | 8 | 10 | 9 | 11 | 18 | 21 |
| Cameroon (2019, 2016, 2015) | 13 | 4 | 40 | 33 | 58 | 49 |
| Eswatini (2019, 2015) | 16 | 15 | 3 | 3 | 18 | 14 |
| Gambia (2021) | 8 | 19 | 7 | 22 | 37 | 48 |
| Ghana (2020) | 5 | 7 | 6 | 9 | 25 | 25 |
| Kenya | | | | | | |
| Lesotho (2018, 2016) | 6 | 8 | 11 | 17 | 29 | 38 |
| Malawi (2019) | | | 18 | 19 | 78 | 62 |
| Mauritius (2021) | | | 2 | 5 | 17 | 26 |
| Mozambique (2020) | 4 | 1 | 41 | 35 | 66 | 56 |
| Namibia (2018) | | | 0.5 | 3 | 23 | 22 |
| Nigeria | | | | | | |
| Rwanda (2019) | 6 | 6 | 2 | 6 | 49 | 50 |
| Seychelles (2019) | 14 | 2 | 7 | 9 | 9 | 20 |
| Sierra Leone (2015, 2018) | 2 | 2 | 49 | 49 | 67 | 64 |
| South Africa (2019) | 10 | 12 | 10 | 11 | 20 | 21 |
| Tanzania (2020, 2016) | 15 | 18 | 64 | 66 | 88 | 84 |
| Uganda (2017) | 12 | 16 | 49 | 48 | 78 | 72 |
| Zambia (2017) | 13 | 17 | | | | |

Source: UIS, 2022. No data for Kenya, Nigeria.

5.2.5 Not-in-Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

First used in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, the term NEET has also been widely adopted also in Africa (Khuluvhe & Negogogo, 2021). NEET refers to people who are “not in employment, education or training” and could fall under two categories: inactive or unemployed due to diverse reasons. In most Commonwealth Africa member states, the number is quite high (and recent literature suggests that official figures might be underestimated, (StatsSa, 2021). Unfortunately, literature (Cieslik, Barford & Vira, 2021) confirms this trend in Sub-Saharan Africa more generally. In addition, the majority of those in the category are female, a fact also confirmed by Lannoy and Gibson (2019).

Most education systems lose learners in the transition from primary to secondary and then again in the transition from lower to senior secondary. This, along with learners who complete secondary schooling with poor or incomplete grades, together with slow economic growth, leads to large and growing numbers of young people unable to access either entry-level employment or to register for further education and training (NEETs). Current data on the number of NEET is captured in Figure 1.



Source: ILO, 2022. [Population and labour force - ILOSTAT](#), SDG indicator 8.6.1 - proportion of youth 15-24 NEET

Figure 1: Comparative NEET rates

As indicated in Figure 1, most countries have large proportions of youth who are not in employment nor in education and training. Particularly, for Botswana, eSwatini, Gambia, Namibia, Rwanda, Nigeria, Mauritius, Seychelles, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia, efforts to bring these young people back into education or training is vital. The data also shows young women and girls are disproportionately impacted. All countries report higher rates of NEET females than males. And in countries that have significantly higher rates of young women not in education and training (Cameroon, Gambia, The, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia), gender-specific interventions and strategies may be needed. Open schooling provision for young people who are not in education or training typically needs to be more flexible and more vocationally-oriented to help them to transition into employment and lifelong learning.

6. Recommendations

Based on the data collected and the conversations with country representatives in the African commonwealth, the study presents the following recommendations for countries of the African commonwealth. Ministries of Education and governments should

1. Strengthen Early Childhood Care and Education.
2. Strengthen and support open schooling and alternative learning strategies at primary and secondary levels to mitigate the learning loss of children and youth who are out of school, or who may need additional training and support.
3. Strengthen the delivery of foundational skills at the early ages.
4. Strengthen the use of ICT. This includes further development of ICT infrastructure, but in parallel strengthening teachers' and learners' skills and competencies to utilise these technologies.

Although there are many ways in which COL might help address the challenges, the study highlights the following opportunities for COL to support the African Commonwealth countries:

1. Continue to support quality enhancement and expansion of open schooling in countries where it already exists, for example Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria and Zambia.
2. Initiate open schooling discussions in countries where there is great need but currently no open schooling engagement, for example Cameroon and Uganda.
3. Prioritise open schooling interventions at the lower secondary level including alternative, more vocationally-oriented offerings for the large and growing number of NEETs in most countries.
4. Develop an advocacy and outreach strategy for 12 years of schooling for girls.

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