



Ushirika wa Maendeleo ya Elimu Barani Afrika
الرابطة لأجل تطوير التربية في إفريقيا
Association for the Development of Education in Africa
Association pour le développement de l'éducation en Afrique
Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação em África

ADEA High-Level Policy Dialogue Forum on Foundational Learning Transforming Commitments into Concrete Actions

Theme: *Crafting a new Africa by rethinking foundational learning*

31st October to 1st November 2023, Taj Pamodzi Hotel, Lusaka

CONCEPT NOTE

Introduction

African governments are committed to improving the quality of foundational learning (FL) (literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 emphasizes the importance of providing quality education, that is equitable and inclusive. Africa's strategic frameworks echo this commitment to education. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25)¹ support this goal by advocating for the expansion of education and training systems to drive economic growth.

During the Transforming Education Summit (TES) in September 2022 and the 2022 Triennale organized by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), African leaders pledged to improving the quality of FL. In February 2023, ADEA and Human Capital Africa (HCA) jointly launched a Ministerial Coalition with an aim of improving the quality of FL in Africa. The Coalition has since held virtual meetings, with the last one on 7th September.

Despite these commitments, primary school children in Africa continue to struggle with low reading and mathematics skills. Education policymakers are confronted with an immense challenge in reversing the current trends in FL. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures interrupted some of the gains that have been made. Effective, scalable, and sustainable approaches are needed if quality FL is to become the norm rather than the exception in Africa. How countries revise their policies and budgets in response to commitments is an ongoing process, but there are encouraging signs of policy efforts to achieve meaningful gains in FL.

The **2023 ADEA High-Level Policy Dialogue on Foundational Learning** aims to build upon existing mechanisms for cross-country exchange, which are already supported by ADEA, African governments, and other education stakeholders. The objective of the dialogue is to assess the progress made since the 2022 Triennale and deepen efforts in knowledge sharing, focusing on actionable recommendations. The outcomes of these discussions will contribute to the overarching theme of prioritizing improvements in FL throughout Africa.

¹ African Union. *Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016 - 2025*.

The recommendations generated from this event will also play a pivotal role in shaping the preparations for the 2024 African Union Year of Education, which aims to generate stronger political commitment towards FL.

State of FL in Africa

Foundational skills form the basis of all learning and are crucial to breaking cycles of poverty. Children who are unable to attain basic literacy and numeracy skills, and who lack the ability to strengthen their socio-emotional development, risk exclusion from education and employment opportunities in later years. A recent study revealed that 94% of children in sub-Saharan Africa lack the necessary skills needed to contribute to a modern economy.²

Two years of COVID-19-related school closures have been detrimental to FL outcomes. Learning poverty (the ability to read and understand a simple story) is as high as 70% in low- and middle-income countries.³ Children who were already vulnerable before the pandemic (children from the poorest households, girls, children in rural areas, children with disabilities) have borne the brunt of these consequences.⁴ Another setback is that only one quarter of children aged between 36 and 59 months attend an early childhood education programme in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵

Most African education systems have developed strategic plans and it is within these documents that a strategic vision for FL is documented, along with indicators to monitor progress. Only a handful of countries either have a dedicated plan to steer FL activities or are in the process of developing one.

We are continually expanding our knowledge on achieving improvements in FL within African primary schools, focusing on approaches that are both age-appropriate and effective. Undoubtedly, supporting teachers is the common denominator and the principles of structured pedagogy are proving to be particularly impactful. There is clearly potential for targeted interventions and active involvement of education authorities in shaping improvements in FL. Transitioning from pilot programmes to sustainable models on a larger scale while maintaining implementation quality, remains a challenge.

A shortage of trained teachers in many education systems threatens the sustainability of successful FL teacher development initiatives. The Born to Learn report estimates that sub-Saharan African countries must recruit 2.3 million teachers (and replace a further 3.8 million) if the SDG4 and CESA 16-25 goals are to be achieved by 2030.⁶ The causes of teacher shortages are multifaceted but there are some common threads across countries. Concerns about the supply of teachers are more prominent in rural areas, where teacher shortages are more severe, and attrition rates are higher. In response, governments are implementing various short- and long-term measures to recruit teachers, with mixed outcomes.

² S. Gust, E.A. Hanushek, & L. Woessmann (2022). Global Universal Basic Skills: Current Deficits and Implications for World Development. *National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 30566*.

³ The World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, & BMGF (2022). *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*.

⁴ The World Bank, UNESCO, & UNICEF. (2021). *The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery*. Washington D.C., Paris, New York: The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF.

⁵ UNICEF. (2022). *Too few children are attending pre-school programmes*. UNICEF. Retrieved 03.03.2023 from <https://data.unicef.org/topic/early-childhood-development/early-childhood-education/>

⁶ UNESCO. (2022). *Spotlight Report on Basic Education Completion and Foundational Learning in Africa*, Paris, UNESCO.

The role of ADEA in improving FL in Africa

As part of its mandate and strategic focus, ADEA is leading policy dialogue about FL and promoting knowledge-sharing at the local, national, and regional levels on the continent within four focus areas.

1. Promoting national ownership of FL goals.
2. Transitioning from crisis discussions to concrete actions that improve FL outcomes.
3. Sharing lessons learned about teacher recruitment, deployment, and retention.
4. Discussing successful approaches to improve instructional quality and consistency (structured pedagogy, teacher proficiency and learning assessment).

Objectives

Against this background, ADEA, in partnership with the Zambia Ministry of Education will hold a high-level policy dialogue on FL from **31st October to 1st November 2023 at the Taj Pamodzi Hotel Lusaka**. We are consulting with the African Union and with key partners supporting FL in Zambia, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), GEM Report, GPE, USAID, UNICEF, TaRL Africa and VVOB, in the planning and organization of the event. This process ensures that insights about improving FL from countries like Zambia will be shared widely. This event will also share information on the outcome of the African Foundational Learning Coalition of Ministers virtual meeting held on 7th September 2023.

The forum has three main objectives:

1. Share best practices for adopting long-term national strategies for FL.
2. Discuss policy-level experiences aimed at improving teaching for FL.
3. Extract long- and short-term policy lessons about teacher recruitment, deployment, and retention.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of the policy dialogue are as follows:

1. Agreement about how to adopt strategies and consolidate activities for delivering quality FL in the future.
2. Clarity about effective approaches to strengthen in- and pre-service teacher education, support teacher well-being and improve the professional status of teachers.
3. Recognition of the immediate and long-term steps to recruit and retain an optimal supply of FL teachers.

Conclusion

There has been a growing global and regional commitment to improving FL outcomes in Africa. One effective approach to drive progress in this area is the development of national FL strategies. Policy discussions are increasingly focusing on strengthening the capacity of the teaching workforce, enabling them to educate children consistently and effectively in the early grades. Teacher recruitment, deployment and retention will continue to be closely linked to sustained improvements in FL across Africa. It is essential to address the challenge of teacher shortages because without a sufficient supply of qualified teachers, no FL strategies or policies can achieve the desired long-term impact.