



African Population and  
Health Research Center

## POLICY BRIEF

# KEEPING THE EDUCATION PROMISE IN AFRICA: THE NUMBER OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN SURPASSES THE 100 MILLION MARK!

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*... in the current world, a nation that does not educate **ALL** its children cannot achieve its desired development ...*  
(authors)

### The Promise of Universal Basic Education for All

Over 100 million children and adolescents in Africa are out of school. This threatens Africa's development promise and human capital gains made since Dakar 2000.

In the late 1990s, leading up to Dakar 2000, many African countries espoused and implemented universal basic education policies, such as Universal Primary Education. These policies led to a significant rise in enrollment, provided learning opportunities to disadvantaged populations (such as girls, children from poor neighborhoods who were previously not attending school), delayed age at marriage and/or childbearing, among adolescent girls, and narrowed gender gaps in education. Of course, the ensuing demand for education came with quality concerns, as education systems were not adequately resourced to handle the huge numbers, while the economies and those completing schooling could not create enough jobs or cope with the demand for employment (Delesalle, 2021).

Nevertheless, data from multiple sources (African Union, UNESCO, Unicef, World Bank, Global Educa-

tion APPG, etc) show that by 2024, primary school completion rate was at about 68% down from about 79% in 2010; with a small growth in net enrollment ratio of 3% (from 77% to 80%) (UIS, 2024). Since the school-age population continues to increase, these statistics indicate that the number of out-of-school children remains high, as we shall see in the next section.

Recent reports indicate that the number of out-of-school children and youth aged 5–19 years is now approaching 100 million (UNESCO, African Union, & UNICEF, 2025). It is therefore imperative for African countries to keep the promise of universal basic education for all. Achieving this has the potential to reduce this number significantly. In the last 10 years, the proportion of out-of-school children and adolescents (age 5-19) stagnated around 20-22%, with reversals driven by COVID-19 disruptions, economic fragility, displacement, and conflict (World Bank, 2025;UIS, 2024). It is worth noting that COVID-19 exposed education systems to innovative and underutilized alternative learning frameworks that have remained relevant to date (Ngware, et al 2018; Ochieng & Ngware, 2023).

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Therefore, it is important to address the plight of out-of-school children as this continues to deny Africa the benefits that come with education, including a knowledge-driven, productive economy anchored on human capital and leveraging on technology, including recent advances in science such as AI-driven innovations. Furthermore, the gains made on closing gender gaps will be eroded, while we are likely to start seeing a drop in age at marriage and/or child bearing among female adolescents.

## The Situation of Out-of-School Children and Adolescents in Africa

The heat map in Figure 1 shows that the proportion of out-of-school children and adolescents varies by country. Patterns of out-of-school rates among children and adolescents are consistent across levels of education. **For instance, countries in the north and southern Africa have low to medium rates, while those in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and part of East Africa have medium to high rates.**

Countries such as the DRC have missing data in our source, though there is free primary education, and commendable gains have been seen in enrollments. However, literature posits that over 3.5 million primary school-age children were out of school by 2020 (GPE, 2020).

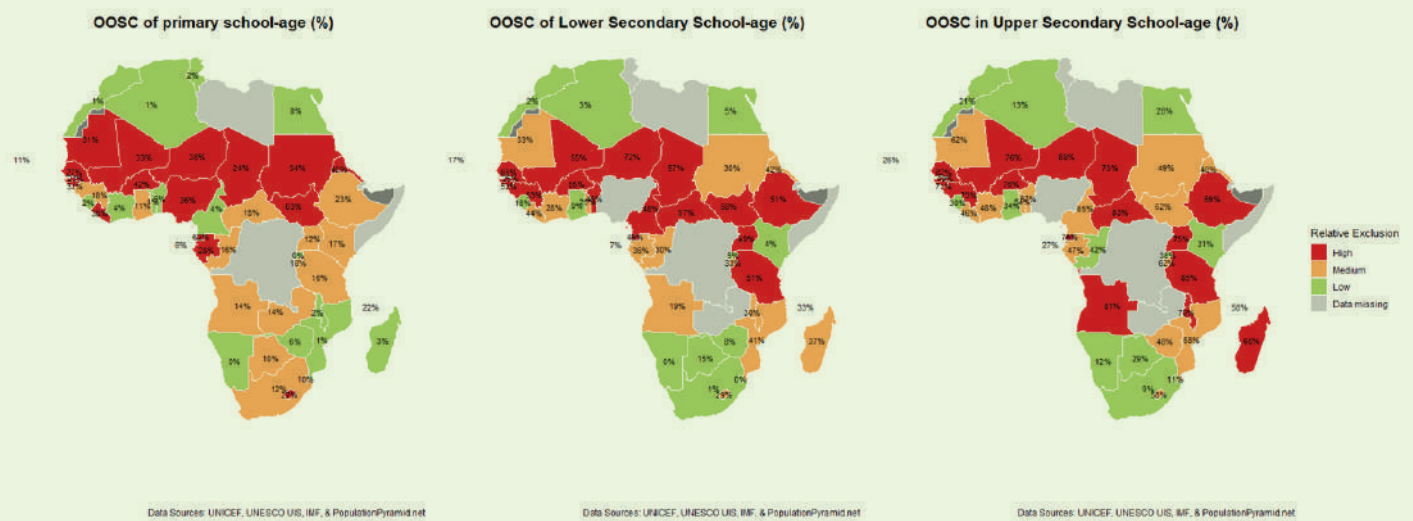


Figure 1: Proportion of out-of-school<sup>2</sup> children and adolescents by level of schooling

Figure 2 uses data from UIS (2024) to show a **12.5% increase in the number of out-of-school children and adolescents over the last 10 years**. The numbers have skyrocketed, and if the trend is to be contained, then it cannot be business as usual. The **steepest growth occurred during the 2017-2021 period, suggesting that COVID-19 disruptions are not the only cause of out-of-school status.**



Figure 2: Number of out-of-school children and adolescents in Africa, 2014 - 2025

<sup>2</sup> Using the most recent year data is accessible.

Using available data, Figure 3 shows variations by gender since 2014 for school-age children and adolescents at the primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels. Three stark observations are evident: **For both boys and girls, the number of out-of-school are on the rise; in the last ten years, the number of out-of-school males has been consistently higher than that of females; and for the period under consideration, growth in number of out-of-school females is faster than that of males.**

If this **faster growth** continues, then the proportion of out-of-school females will overtake that of males in the coming years, and this will compound the vulnerabilities disadvantaged girls face in their schooling journey and transition to work.

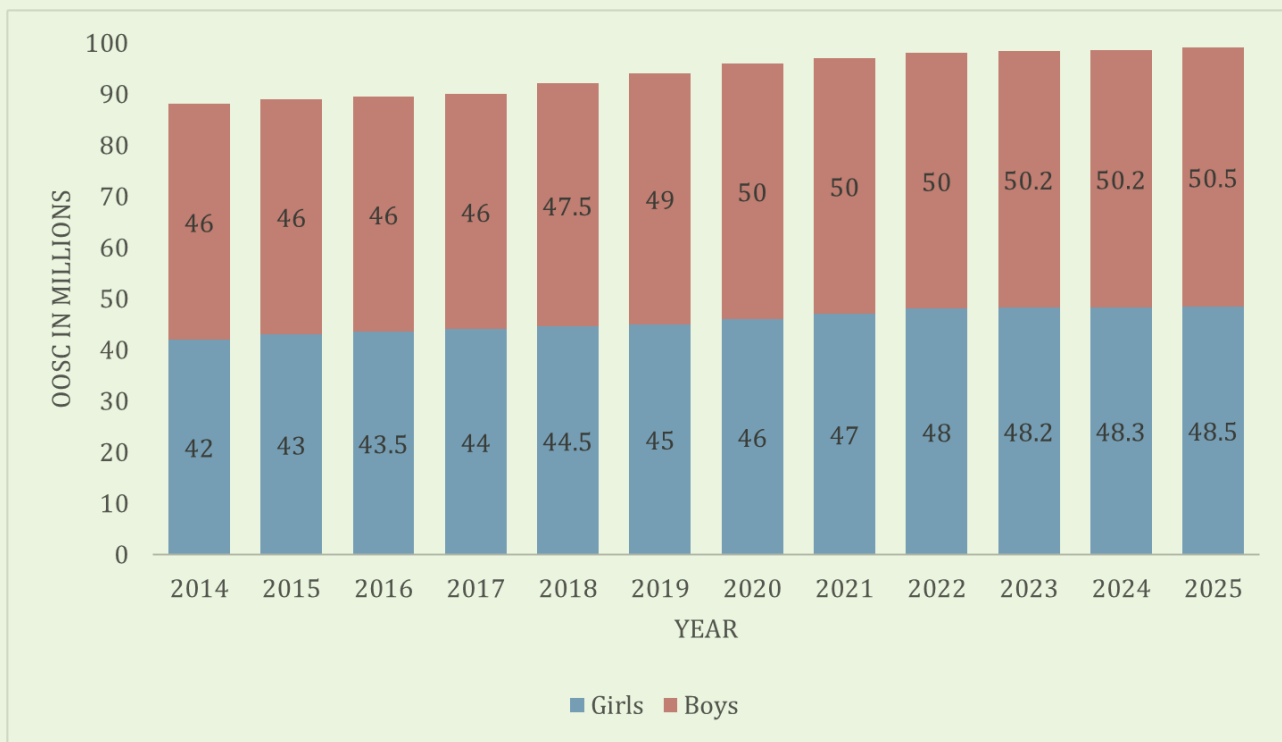


Figure 3: Out-of-school children and adolescents in Africa, 2014 - 2025

Figure 4 shows the proportion of out-of-school children and adolescents by level of schooling and gender. Countries with high proportions of out-of-school individuals in one schooling level tend to be the same countries with high out-of-school individuals in other levels. This is an indication of systemic issues that need addressing.

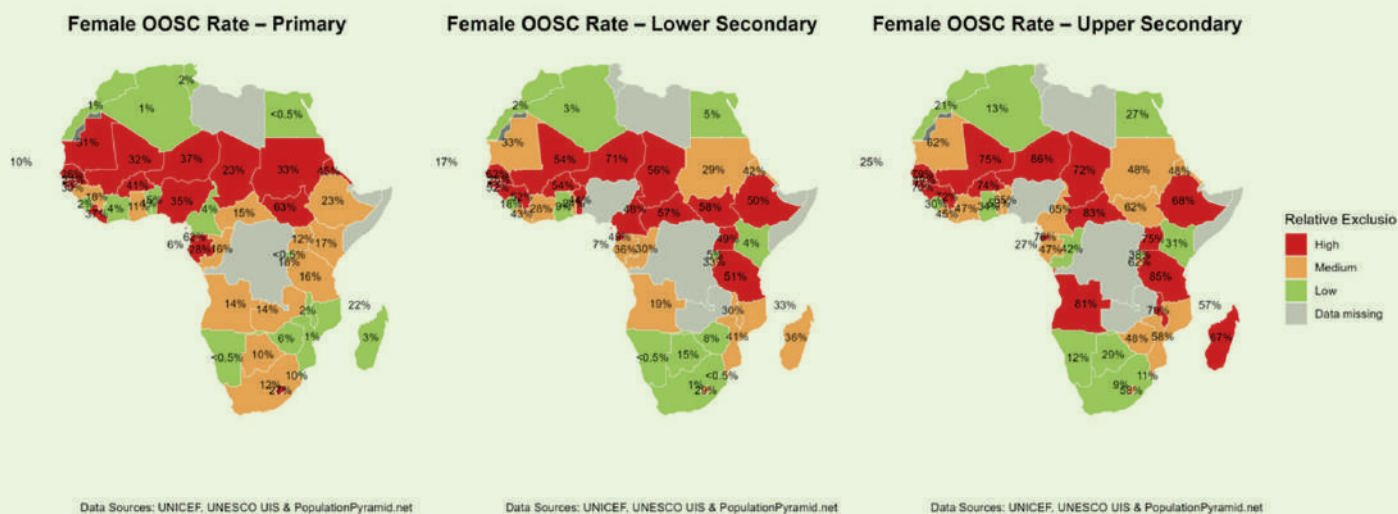


Figure 4: Proportion of out-of-school children and adolescents by level of schooling and gender

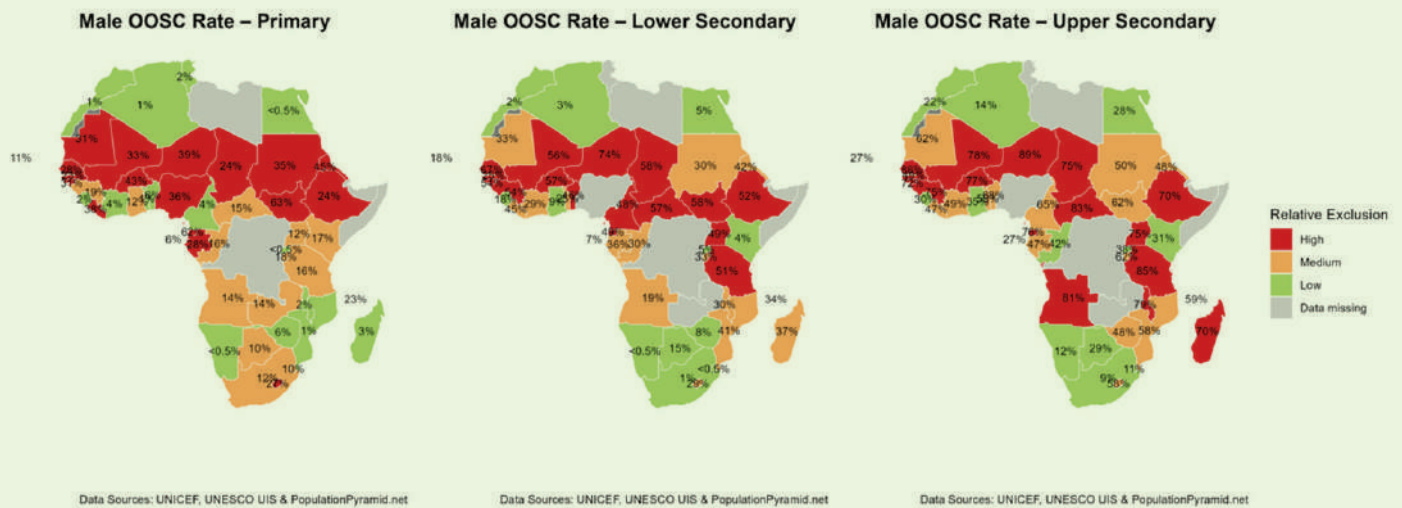


Figure 4: Proportion of out-of-school children and adolescents by level of schooling and gender

## An Overview of Selected Policy and Programmatic Responses

In countries with high proportions (38% and above) of out-of-school children and adolescents e.g. Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, and Sudan, we witness concerted efforts to slow down the numbers of out-of-school children and adolescents. Though their effectiveness is yet to be established, programs such as free primary education, accelerated learning, speed schools, temporary learning spaces, community schools, school feeding, conditional cash transfers, and school re-entry policies are among the policy responses though the population they have to deal with is huge.

Lessons learnt on these interventions include the need for:

- i. A multi-sectoral response,
- ii. Medium to long-term plans,
- iii. Community mobilization to support the initiatives, and (iv) ring-fencing national budget, in practice and not on paper, to support these initiatives.

These, among other measures, have been shown to have the potential to reverse the trend.

For the countries with medium rates (21% - 37%) of out-of-school children and adolescents, (Angola, Cameroon, Mauritania, and Tanzania), they have similar programs and policy responses like those in high-incidence countries. However, there seem to be variations in implementation. In these countries, policy and programmatic responses are characterized by:

- i. Paired demand incentives with supply planning;
- ii. Re-entry policy are operationalized with practical school based and local support;
- iii. School feeding budgets are ring-fenced, and linked to local procurement and communities;
- iv. Deliberate linkages with wider social protection measures conditional of desired schooling outcomes; and,
- v. Target the last mile or hardest to reach, with high-intensity outreach.

Similarly, for countries with low proportions (20% and below) of out-of-school children and adolescents, (Algeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda) their responses are characterized by:

- i. Strong national policy frameworks backed by political good will, high-level central coordination and donor-partner support;
- ii. Targeted social support such as school feeding, conditional cash-transfers with close evaluations using data;
- iii. Elimination of significant direct fees/levies at basic education level with timely financial disbursements and/or supplies;
- iv. Affirmative action for vulnerable populations – disadvantaged girls, children from remote rural areas, children with disabilities, and children from poor households; and,
- v. A host of other interventions such as catch-up programs, reducing travel distance through expanding infrastructure, and flexible school entry such as late entry.

Overall, the responses show that there is no one-size-fits-all. From all these interventions and trends, for a country to succeed, three actions seem to be a prerequisite:

- i. Implementation strength of the policy and programmatic responses;
- ii. Political commitment to support the implementation of the plans; and
- iii. A multi-faceted approach to implementing the responses.

## Economic and Social Implications: The Cost of Out-of-School Children and Adolescents

To estimate the productivity loss associated with out-of-school children and adolescents, we apply a simplified version of the microeconomic human capital approach developed by Thomas and Burnett (2013) to estimate the minimum cost. This approach estimates the foregone future productivity associated with educational exclusion, expressed as a share of total national output, that is, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Using the various data sources, and for each education level of interest (primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary), we use the number out of school, the country's GDP per capita, the lifetime earnings gain from completing a given level (completion premium), and the GDP. The completion premium is a function of rate of return on investment in a given level of schooling. Using the above procedure, an African population of about 1.5 billion, a GDP per capita of \$2,080 as estimated by the IMF (2025), and a GDP of \$3.15 trillion we estimate that Africa will lose **3.21% of GDP or about \$101.1 billion annually**. This loss represents 86.7% of the estimated national education budgets for African countries (\$116.6 billion).

**This implies that the loss is large enough to fund more than 80% of Africa's education budget.** The proportion of GDP loss is highest for primary school-age children (1.9%) and lowest for children of lower secondary school-age (0.49%). Figure 5 shows the variations on GDP losses across Africa and also defines the loss in the context of national and education budgets.



**Figure 5:** Contextualizing the GDP loss due to being out-of-school in Africa



## Call to Action

From our analysis, three key observations that call for immediate actions by African heads of state, their ministers of education, and development partners are:

- i. The number of out-of-school children and adolescents is steadily growing, and if this remain unchecked, national development interests will be compromised;
- ii. Success in containing incidence of out-of-school children and adolescents lays in **strong political good will**, adequate planning and resourcing, and
- iii. There is no one-size-fits-all hence a multisectoral approach in addressing the issue, and context specific mix of responses have a better potential for success.

African countries should therefore invest in alternative learning frameworks and back-to-school initiatives. The following are some action points that, if addressed, could see a reversal of growing rates of out-of-school children and adolescents:

1. Jointly **renew and revitalize commitments** to the Universal Basic Education policies – under the auspices of the AU, and other sub-regional economic blocks.
2. In the medium term, deliberately **set targets and ring-fence national budgets** to achieve a reversal of out-of-school rates among children and adolescents.
3. In the short term, **mobilize regional, national, and sub-national campaigns on back-to-school** for children and adolescents. Champions, including leaders and influential personalities, should lead such campaigns at various levels.
4. Countries are at various levels of development, and some may experience difficulties in resourcing the back-to-school initiatives. Development partners, multilaterals and African philanthropy have a role to play in supporting such countries to achieve their goals in human capital development through **back-to-school initiatives**.
5. Use **alternative learning frameworks** embedded within **digital technologies and platforms**, and riding on lessons learnt and resources developed during COVID-19 related school closures. This will **diversify learning pathways** and allow individuals unable to fit into the formal education system to have a second chance to complete basic education and acquire relevant skills for life and for transition to work. Such an initiative should be spearheaded by a national multisectoral team with support from development partners - the benefits of education are felt far and wide.
6. Last but not least, government data systems should invest in **complete, accurate, and timely granulated data** and evidence of out-of-school children and adolescents, including assessing the effectiveness of policy and programmatic responses. This will not only track progress but also inform decisions on the effectiveness of actions, adaptations, and scaling of impact.



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