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## A snapshot of educational challenges and opportunities for recovery in Africa

This paper provides an overview of the African context in view of the recent COVID-19 crisis and its impacts on education. In particular, it highlights the challenges experienced and responses made based on sub-regional data. It further analyses the African pandemic experience within the general regional education context and provides shorter- to longer-term recommendations for future planning to mitigate the crisis and strengthen efforts towards the achievement of the continent's educational, social and economic aspirations.

### Introduction: African Countries Face Multiple Disruptions

The sanitary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa has been limited so far: the continent accounts for a minor share of reported COVID-19 cases and related deaths. Only South Africa (16th), Ethiopia (65th), Kenya (74th) and the five countries of Northern Africa bordering the Mediterranean were among the 75 countries with the largest numbers of deaths by 18 May 2021. According to Johns Hopkins University (2021), most countries on the continent registered fewer than 100 deaths per

million inhabitants, with the exception of two countries: South Africa, with 956 deaths per million and Tunisia, which holds the highest rate on the continent (1,029).

Until now, the COVID-19 pandemic might be less severe in Africa than on other continents, owing to, among other hypotheses, the small numbers of elderly people, a more rural, less dense, and less mobile population. However, the scale of the pandemic is likely underestimated, given current gaps in health and statistical infrastructure. The current situation in South Asia, where the spread of new variants and the relaxation of sanitary prevention measures have led to an explosion of COVID-19 cases and deaths, inspires caution. Africa could be ill-equipped to deal with such a development, given structural weaknesses in national health care systems – especially as most African countries will not be able to vaccinate their populations rapidly.

The socio-economic impact of the pandemic is already felt. The unprecedented recession of 2020-2021 and an uncertain recovery are affecting African economies and reducing the fiscal space for governments. According to the International Monetary Fund (2021), Sub-Saharan Africa went through a recession of -1.93% of GDP in 2020, compared with annual growth by more than 3% through 2017-2019. A direct consequence of this will be a rise in extreme poverty, reversing the continuous trend that had been observed for more than 20 years. Based on recent estimates, the COVID-19 crisis pushed 34 million Africans into extreme poverty in 2020 (Lakner, et al., 2020).

Labour markets and livelihoods also endured these impacts. Lockdown measures led to the loss of 7.7% of working hours in Africa in 2020, the equivalent of 29 full-time jobs at 48 hours per week, and to a loss of 9.4 % of labour income. The impact was most severe in Southern Africa (loss of 12.6% of working hours) and Northern Africa (10.4%), where the strictest lockdown measures were taken. In the rest of the continent, working hours losses ranged between 6 and 7%. Youth suffered the brunt of the crisis. The number of people in employment fell by 4 million in 2020 compared with 2019, out of which 3.6 million were young people. As a consequence, the ratio of youth labour force participation fell by 2.4 percentage points within a year (ILO, 2021). Facilitating a job-intensive recovery will be vital to alleviating the impact of the pandemic on young people's livelihoods.

## Impacts of COVID-19 on African Education Systems

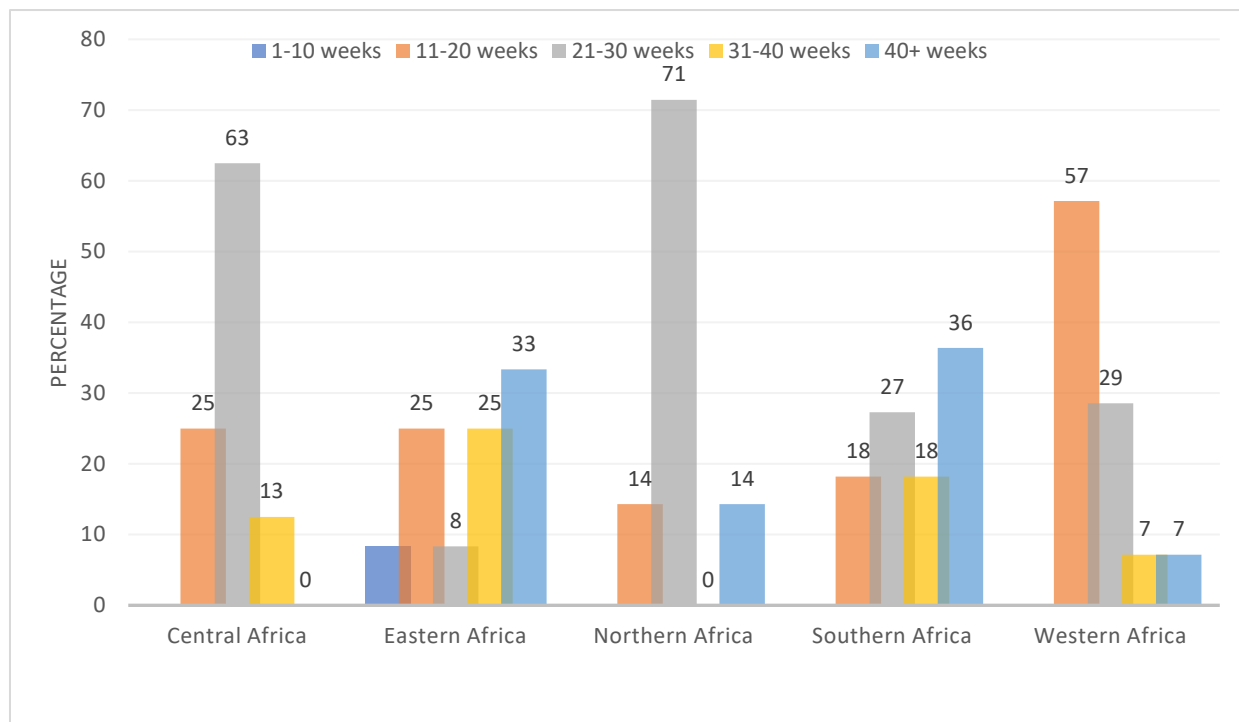
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Lockdown measures and school closures resulted in large educational disruptions. By mid-May 2021, schools were entirely open in most African countries, but full school closures affected the totality of the continent during the second quarter of 2020, significantly affecting the education sector across all regions in Africa. The closing of schools has interrupted the functioning of education systems, reducing student learning, and restricting the activities of education authorities, parents, and decision-makers, but also disrupting many vital functions that schools fulfil. In many localities, schools provide meals for underprivileged learners and function as shelters from violence, providing safe spaces for socialization and interaction. As the pandemic progresses, many important decisions need to be made based on a systematic understanding of what is at stake when schools close, beyond learning. For example, 48% of countries in Africa supported the continuity of meal services as schools shut down.

School closures risk reversing the trend toward higher school participation and better learning outcomes observed over the past two decades in the continent, and they can exacerbate already significant challenges, like the disengagement of children and youth from education. Dropout rates due to COVID-19 threaten to increase already high levels of out-of-school children across the region. Learners may not return to classrooms upon reopening, as they may need to enter the labor market due to family needs, and because of early pregnancy, care and domestic responsibilities, among other causes. Moreover, the longer the duration of school closures, the less likely a return to school might occur. School closures were longest in Eastern and Southern Africa where a third of countries closed

schools for 40 or more weeks. School closures lasted for nearly a full year in some countries in this sub-region between March 2020 and March 2021.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by Central and Northern Africa where about two in three countries closed for 21-30 weeks. School closures were shortest in Western Africa where more than half of countries (57%) closed for 11-20 weeks (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1: Duration of school closures in Africa, 2020-2021**



Source: UNESCO, 2020.

### Increased Dropout Rates

UNESCO’s preliminary estimates show that, in 2021, 4.3 million learners, from pre-primary to tertiary education, will face the risk of dropping out or not enrolling at all (**Table 1**) due to economic shocks brought by COVID-19. The number is lower than the 2020 estimate of 6.3 million, yet still significant and would require concerted efforts to ensure the re-enrolment of those dropping out and the continued enrolment of learners as they come of age. Eastern Africa will continue to face the largest number of at-risk learners, while Southern Africa may face increased numbers of learners at risk due to slower economic recovery (in terms of constant GDP per capita) compared to other sub-regions.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO. Education: From disruption to recovery. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> (Accessed 19/05/2021)

**Table 1: Number and % of learners at risk of dropping out or non-enrolment ('000s), females and males, 2020-2021**

<i>Both sexes</i>	<b>2020</b>		<b>2021</b>	
	<i>(000s)</i>		<i>(000s)</i>	
<i>Western Africa</i>	1,779	1.89%	1161	1.18%
<i>Eastern Africa</i>	2,600	2.23%	1693	1.60%
<i>Central Africa</i>	807	1.71%	732	1.48%
<i>Southern Africa</i>	140	0.85%	197	1.17%
<i>Northern Africa</i>	989	1.59%	523	0.79%
<i>Total</i>	6,315	1.88%	4,305	1.28%

Source: UNESCO, 2021. Based on UIS (2019) UN DESA (2020) and IMF (2021).

As in other world regions, school disengagement follows gender patterns that disadvantage female learners. In Africa, more boys than girls are expected to be at risk of dropping out or non-enrolment. However, this simply reflects the situation that more boys were in schools and tertiary education institutions prior to the crisis, and it does not suggest that girls' education is less affected by the economic downturn. **Table 2**, below, summarizes the changes in the numbers of boys and girls at risk between 2020 and 2021. Across the region, the reduction of at-risk learners among girls is smaller than that of boys. In Southern Africa, the increase of at-risk learners is higher for girls. This is in line with the existing evidence that girls' education is more affected by economic factors. In other words, boys are more likely to benefit from the economic recovery than girls. Thus, appropriate, gender-sensitive policies and programmes will be needed to ensure equitable enrolment, retention and re-enrolment for both boys and girls.

**Table 2: Number and % of learners at risk of dropping out or non-enrolment ('000), by sex, 2020-2021**

<b>MALE</b>	<b>2020</b>		<b>2021</b>		<b>CHANGE</b>
<b>CENTRAL AFRICA</b>	415	1.61%	370	1.39%	-11%
<b>EASTERN AFRICA</b>	1351	2.23%	874	1.60%	-35%
<b>NORTHERN AFRICA</b>	741	2.27%	322	0.94%	-57%
<b>SOUTHERN AFRICA</b>	71	0.86%	100	1.19%	41%
<b>WESTERN AFRICA</b>	925	1.84%	595	1.15%	-36%
<b>TOTAL</b>	3502	1.97%	2260	1.29%	-35%

<b>FEMALE</b>	<b>2020</b>		<b>2021</b>		<b>CHANGE</b>
<b>CENTRAL AFRICA</b>	393	1.84%	362	1.60%	-8%

<b>EASTERN AFRICA</b>	1249	2.24%	819	1.60%	-34%
<b>NORTHERN AFRICA</b>	249	0.84%	201	0.63%	-19%
<b>SOUTHERN AFRICA</b>	69	0.83%	97	1.14%	41%
<b>WESTERN AFRICA</b>	854	1.95%	567	1.23%	-34%
<b>TOTAL</b>	2812	1.77%	2045	1.27%	-27%

Source: UNESCO, 2021. Based on UIS (2019) UN DESA (2020) and IMF (2021).

### Transition to distance learning and the digital divide

The COVID-19 crisis and the sudden closure of schools resulted in rapid national shifts to replace in-person teaching with various forms of ICT-based, remote and distance education. Both at the peak of the pandemic and in September 2020, online learning was provided as an effective solution for all the countries globally (84-86%) (UNESCO-UIS, 2021).

Household data show that sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, Northern Africa lacked sufficient devices and internet to sustain online and other remote forms of teaching and learning for all students. In sub-Saharan Africa, the great majority of students had no access to computers and Internet, while about 4 – 5 out of 10 students in Northern Africa also lacked access (**Table 3**).

**Table 3: Percentage of households lacking computer devices and internet to support teaching and learning during the height of school closures during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis**

	<b>% WITHOUT COMPUTERS (2019)</b>	<b>STUDENTS WITHOUT A COMPUTER (MILLIONS)</b>	<b>% WITHOUT INTERNET (2019)</b>	<b>STUDENTS WITHOUT INTERNET (MILLIONS)</b>
<b>WORLD</b>	53	826	43	706
<b>SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA</b>	92	216	86	199
<b>NORTHERN AFRICA</b>	47	29	41	25

Sources: Teacher Task Force/ UNESCO-UIS, 2020 and ITU database, 2021.

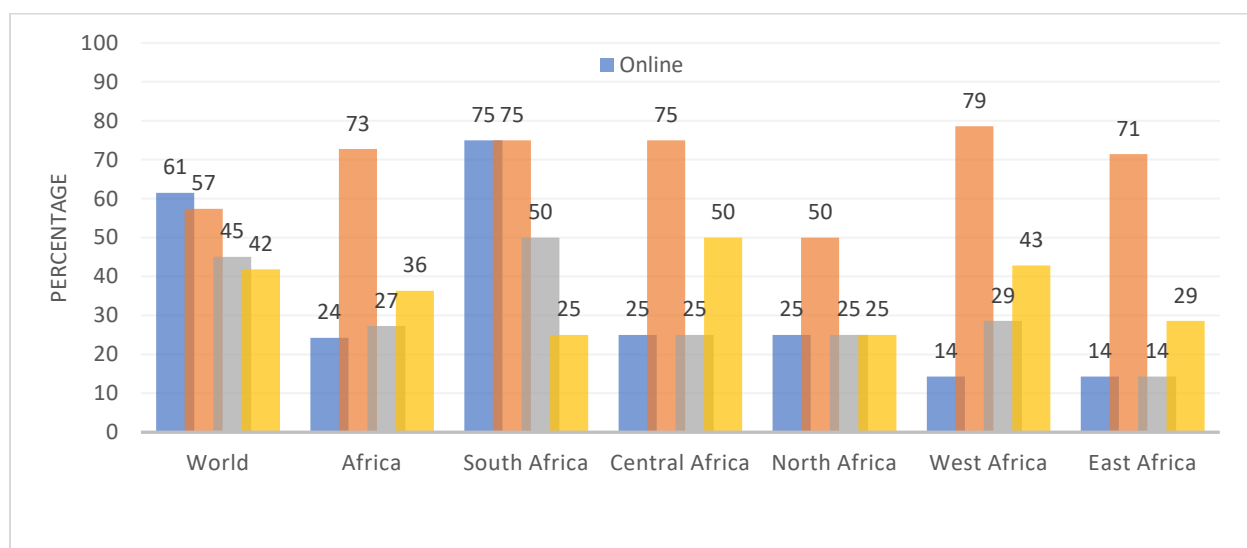
Note: Estimates based on data from the International Telecommunication Unions, 2019 data. Students are defined as an aggregation of pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

Teachers were required to shift to various types of remote teaching each requiring a different set of skills, pedagogical knowledge and expertise. **Figure 2** shows that while across the world skills to use online remote tools were required of 61% of teachers, this decreased to just 1 in 4 of the teachers in Africa. The only African sub-region where most countries required teaching using online remote technology was Southern Africa (75% of countries). Moreover, just 1 in 4 countries or less required

teachers to teach online in all other subregions. As countries work towards developing their ICT capacity, 73% of African countries reported using some online remote learning strategies by September 2020. However, less than half of African countries have taken measures to ensure the inclusion of populations at risk of being excluded from distance learning platforms, like learners with disabilities that have been supported in only 39% of countries on the continent, or those in remote areas where only 24% of countries have provided support (UNESCO-UIS, 2020).

Across Africa, the most common form of remote teaching required of teachers was support to radio and television-based learning (3 in 4 countries) both during the peak of the pandemic and by September 2020. Requirements by teachers to support radio and television was highest in West Africa reported by 8 in 10 countries, compared to just half of countries in North Africa (50%).

**Figure 2: Percentage of countries where primary teachers were required to continue teaching, by type of distance education and region, 2020**

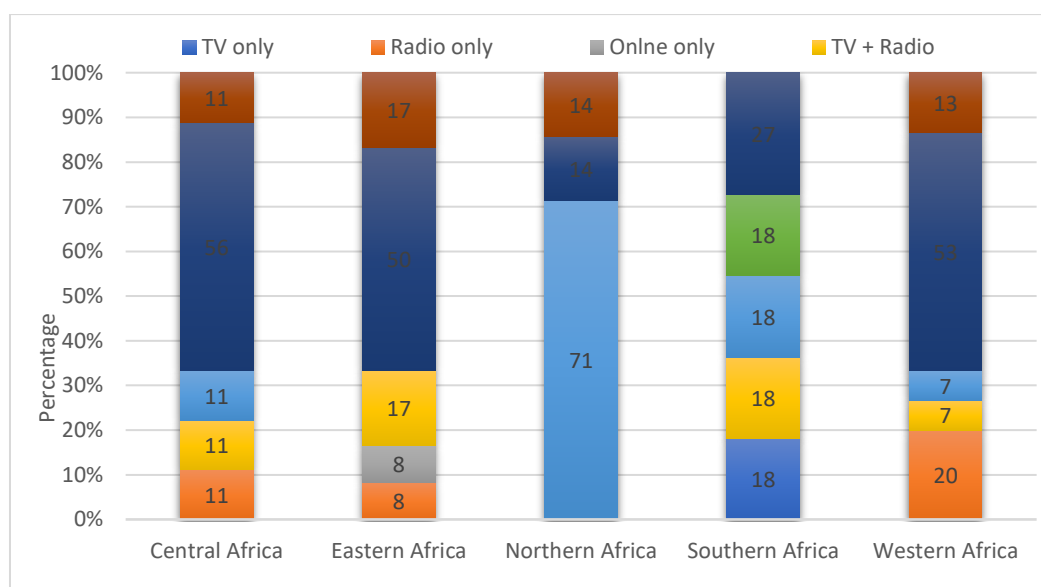


Source: UNESCO/UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

### Distance platforms used in Africa

Substantial differences were put into practice between regions and countries regarding the combination of platforms used in distance education. Across the four different regions of sub-Saharan Africa, about one half of countries used a combination of all three online, TV and radio modalities, while remaining countries implemented variations of the three. Radio only platforms were most common in Western Africa being reported by 1 in 5 countries. Meanwhile in Southern Africa, where radio-only modalities were not used, about 1 in 5 used a television only platform. Northern Africa demonstrated a different pattern than the regions of sub-Saharan Africa as about 71% of countries implemented platforms combining TV and online tools (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Platforms used for distance education in countries in Africa, by region, 2021**



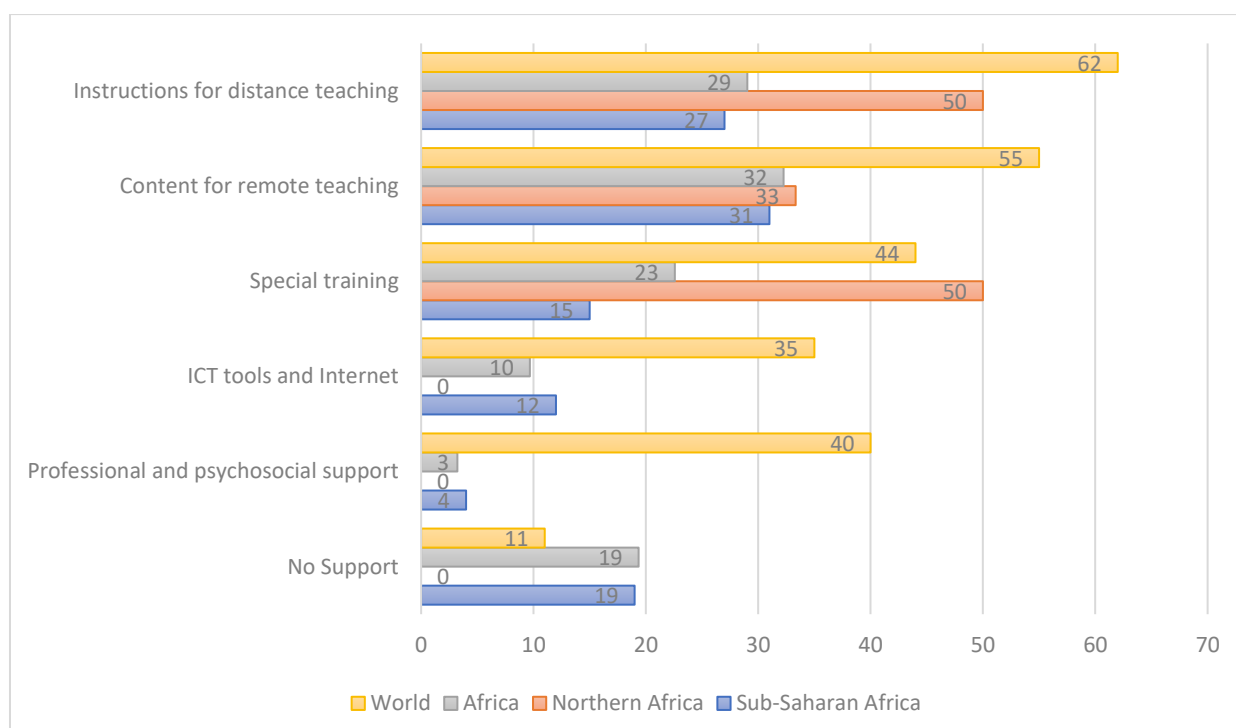
Source: UNESCO/UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

### Teachers' readiness and status

As the single most significant school level input to ensure educational quality, teachers require a minimum level of qualifications to teach. This includes not only the pedagogical skills, but subject-matter knowledge and where this knowledge intersects with pedagogy. Increasingly, and in particular during the recent COVID-19 crisis, teachers are recognized to require a number of other skills related to ICTs and digital skills, distance teaching, socio-emotional perspectives, classroom management and other competencies. Initial teacher education does not usually include these areas of work, and continuing professional development tends to target specific skills to improve classroom teaching according to standards and curricular demands, but less emphasis is usually placed on other professionally oriented knowledge to adapt teaching practices to the realities and needs of specific groups. This will be increasingly important during the aftermath and slow recovery from the current crisis, but in general to promote sustainable lifestyles, social participation and civic engagement among learners.

Instructions on distance education were provided to teachers in 62% of all countries. In Africa, this proportion was reduced to 50% of countries in Northern Africa, and to only 27% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Content for remote teaching was offered to just one in three countries in the continent. ICT tools and Internet as well as professional and psychosocial support were least frequently provided; these kinds of support were offered to 12% and 4% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, but to none in Northern Africa. One in five countries in sub-Saharan Africa reported providing no additional support to teachers (**Figure 4**).

**Figure 4: Percentage of countries that offered support to teachers by type, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

Support to teachers as they adopt remote education is critical, but also as they return to in-person education or adopt hybrid methods. Teachers require detailed guidance to successfully use and support mass media such as radio and television, and online learning platforms. They also need content for remote teaching, such as open educational resources (OERs), digitized materials and sample lesson plans. In addition to this, teachers require basic ICT tools and Internet connectivity.

### Teachers’ contractual status and working conditions

Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on contract teachers is essential as they represent a high proportion of the teacher workforce in many countries. They represented 71% of all pre-primary to secondary level teachers in Niger in 2017, while in Chad 64% of primary teachers were contracted community teachers in 2014. Contract teachers increased as a proportion of all teachers in primary education in Burkina Faso from being negligible in 2002 to 81% in 2015. In contrast, contract teachers decreased as a proportion of the workforce in Mali from 79% in 2009 to 29% in 2014 – as a result of a government decision under pressure from teacher unions to grant civil service status to more than 40,000 contract and community teachers (Teacher Task Force, 2020). Given the reduced costs associated with contract teachers who earn smaller salaries and do not receive in-service training, there will be pressures to increase the use of contract teachers, in particular due to smaller education budgets. The link between contract status and educational quality is complicated, but data show mixed evidence for its impacts on educational quality and achievement.

Future sustainability of the teaching profession will require measures to ensure the retention of qualified teachers. Current and future shocks to the system could result in higher levels of attrition of teachers as they leave to find better conditions and remuneration. It could also drive the most qualified



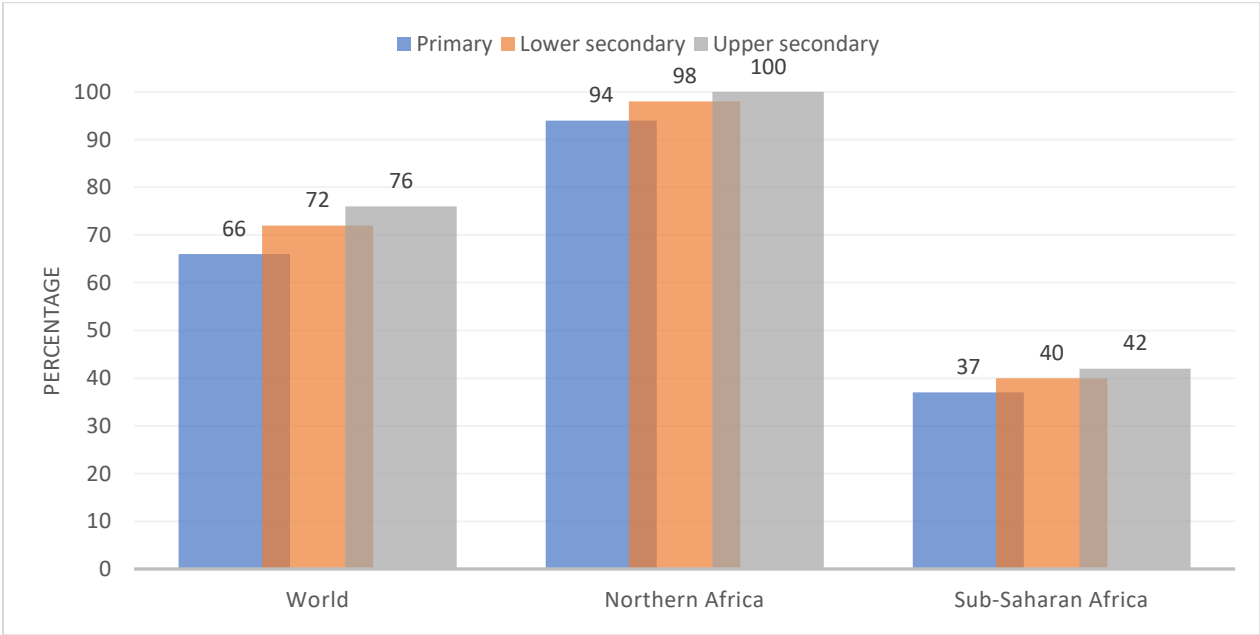
further away from the teaching profession. The COVID-19 crisis showed that, in many contexts, numerous teachers, particularly those under contract or working in the private sector, did not receive payments during much of the crisis and school closures. Globally, about 20% of countries declared that ‘contract teachers’ were not paid in full after school closures, this proportion increased to 30% in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Ensuring teacher and student safety**

In order to reopen schools safely, one important policy measure has been to identify teachers as a priority group in national COVID-19 vaccination rollout plans to ensure their health and safety and reduce community spread. Globally, teachers have been prioritized in 57% of countries, and the proportion of countries prioritizing teachers in Africa is comparable: 30 out of 54 countries. Across Africa, 21 countries, 39% of the total, do not prioritize teachers suggesting teachers will be vaccinated within the general population. Teachers are most frequently prioritized in Southern Africa as reported by 90% of countries and least often prioritized (less than half of countries per region) in Western, Central and Northern African regions.

Another significant challenges for the proper return to in-person teaching is the lack of resources to curb the spread of illness among communities. For example, the lack of basic handwashing facilities remains a problem for ensuring health and safety for both students and teachers. This is especially the case for sub-Saharan Africa, where just 37% of schools have basic handwashing facilities compared to 66% globally. In Northern Africa, 94% of primary schools provide basic handwashing facilities. Secondary schools more often have basic handwashing facilities compared to lower levels. Globally, three quarters of upper secondary schools had basic handwashing facilities compared to 42% in sub-Saharan Africa and 100% in Northern Africa (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Percentage of schools with basic handwashing facilities, 2019**

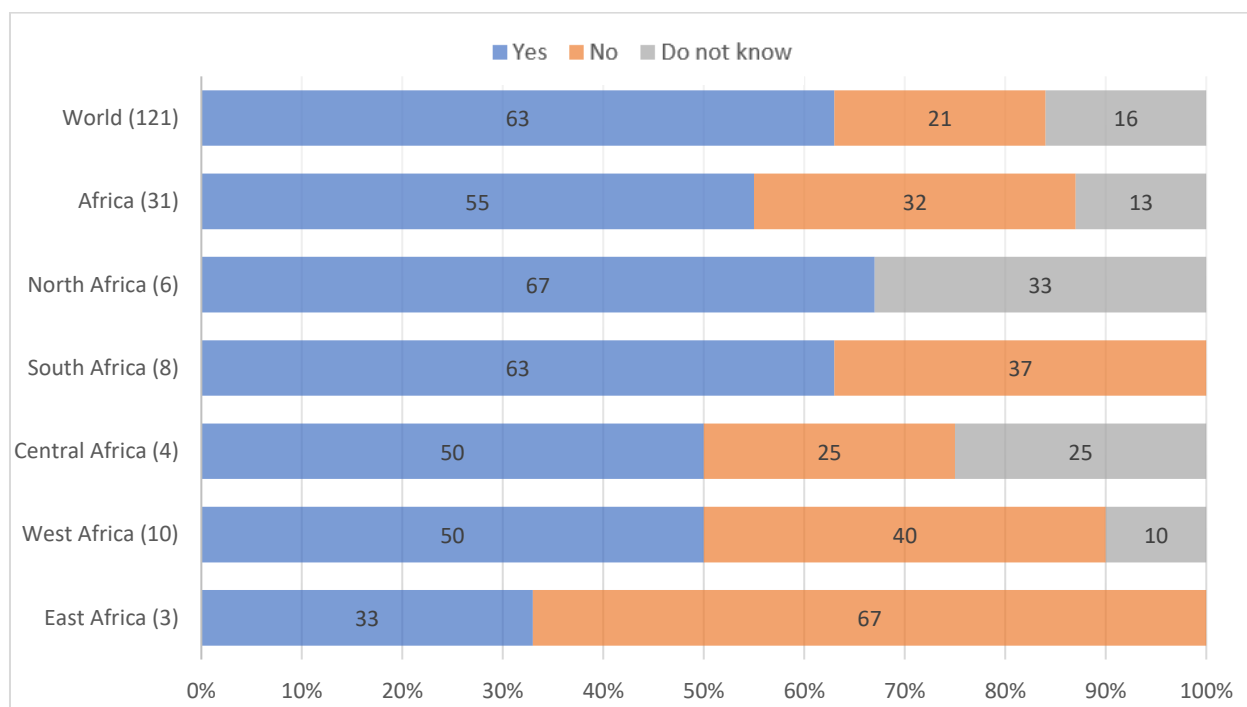


Source: UIS database, 2021.

More recently, a survey collecting data on national responses across the world shows some regional differences regarding the preparation of countries' schools with adequate resources including personal protective equipment and masks, and infrastructure to ensure teacher and student safety. **Figure 6** shows that, compared to 63% of all countries reporting adequate resources, just 55% in Africa reported the same. Differences emerge also according to African subregions with higher proportions of countries reporting adequate resources in North Africa (67%) and Southern Africa (63%) compared to Central- (50%), Western- (50%) and Eastern Africa (33%).

Furthermore, the data for access to electricity show large differences between regions and no clear progress over the past five years. In 2019, an average of 14% of primary schools in Central African countries had access to electricity. In the same year, the average for Northern African countries was 70%.

**Figure 6: Percentage of countries with adequate resources, commodities, and infrastructure to ensure teacher and student safety, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

## Recovery and opportunities for Africa's ambitious agenda

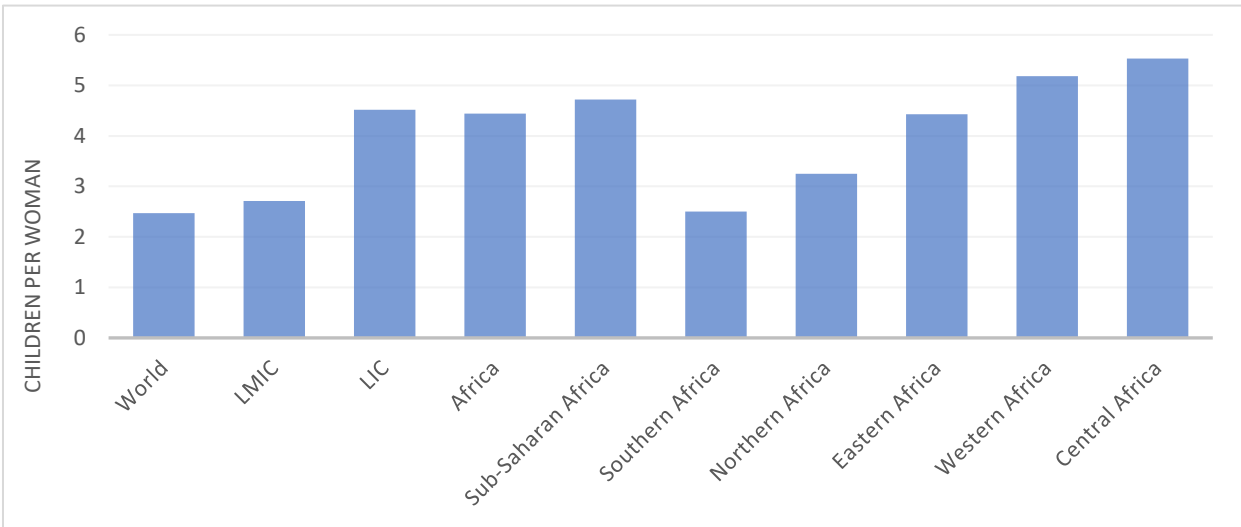
In *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, the African Union shares its vision for the future of the continent based on seven aspirations that capture the desire for shared prosperity and well-being, for unity and integration, for a continent of free citizens and expanded horizons, where the full potential of women and youth are realised, and with freedom from fear, disease and want (African Union Commission, 2015).

Education plays a key role in realizing these aspirations, especially as the continent's population is young and rapidly increasing. According to the UN, the median age of the population was 19.7 years in

2020 and the number of 6 to 15-year-olds is projected to increase by 60% over the next 30 years, from just over 280 million in 2020 to approximately 450 million in 2050 (UNESCO, 2021). In the same period, Africa’s general population is projected to increase by 85%, from 1.34 billion in 2020 to 2.48 billion in 2050 – 59% of the global increase (UN DESA, 2019).

This is related to a delayed demographic transition towards low fertility levels in tropical Africa, with a total fertility rate of 4.4 children per woman in 2015-2020, ranging from 2.5 in Southern Africa to 5.5 in Central Africa (Figure 7). Forty countries in the world have fertility rates above 4.0 and 37 of them are in (sub-Saharan) Africa, including the highest rate, in Niger, where women have an average of almost 7 children. This sets Africa apart from other continents where fertility has declined, and the child population or even the total population has stabilized or started decreasing.

**Figure 7: Total fertility rates, global and by African region, 2015-2020**



Source: UN DESA, 2019.  
 Note: LMIC = Lower-middle income countries; LIC = lower income countries.

While demographic change and the renewal of youth and vibrant societies hold great promise for the continent, it entails even greater challenges, like ensuring access to education for all. It is estimated that Africa will see a 33% increase of its primary school-aged population by 2030 and that, in order to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030, sub-Saharan Africa will need about 17 million teachers. (UNESCO, 2018)

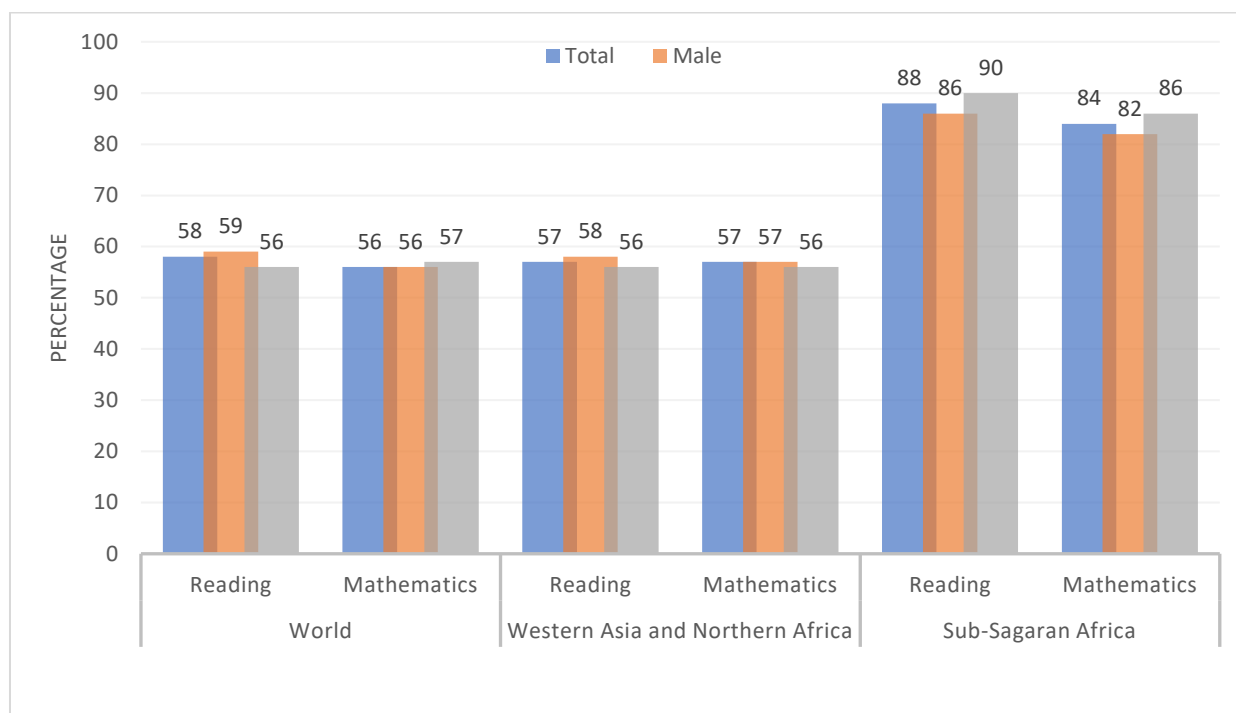
**Pre-pandemic challenges in education**

Before COVID-19, many students did not meet minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. Globally, 58% of primary and secondary age learners did not meet minimum proficiency in reading, while 56% do not meet minimum levels in mathematics. Whereas student outcomes in Western Asia and Northern Asia were on average similar to those globally, the majority (more than 8 out of 10 students) did not meet minimum proficiency levels in reading (88%) and mathematics (84%) in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender differences in student achievement continued to present challenges. For instance, in reading, boys perform worse than girls in Northern Africa, while the opposite was true in

sub-Saharan Africa. In mathematics, gender parity or similar outcomes have been achieved between boys and girls; however, in sub-Saharan Africa, girls again perform worse than boys (**Figure 8**).

More recently, evidence shows that the share of primary and lower secondary students reaching reading proficiency decreased by 13% to 16% respectively in 2020 and the return to the previous trend might not happen before 2030 in the worst-case scenario (Gustafsson, 2021).

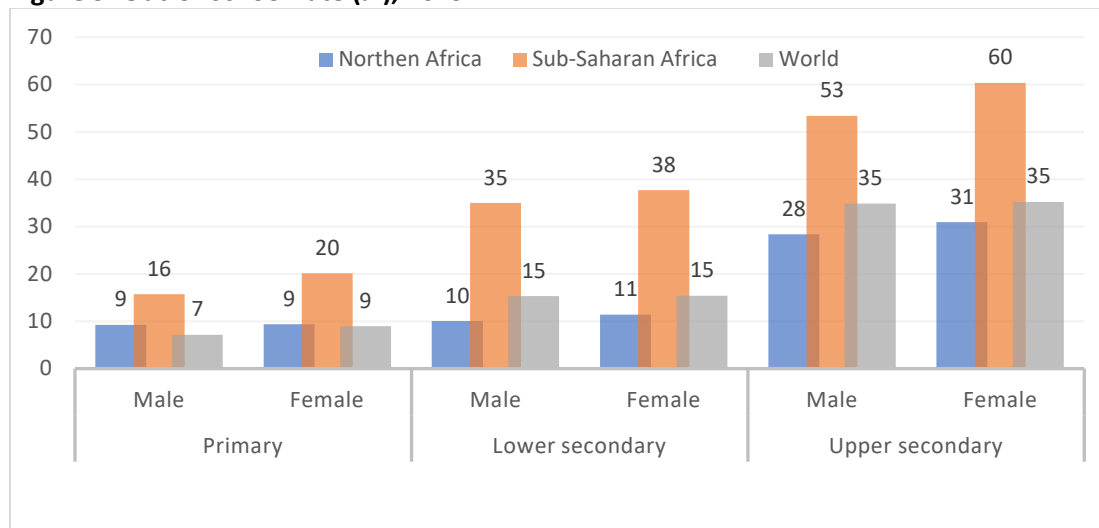
**Figure 8: Children not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, by region, 2015**



Source: UIS, 2017.

In addition to learning outcomes, a major challenge in the continent is access to education services. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 32 million primary-school aged children were deemed out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa. This represents more than half the global number (59 million) of children who are deprived of the right to education (UIS, 2019). As shown in **Figure 9**, below, 20% of primary school age girls are not in school, and the percentage grows dramatically at the upper secondary level where it reaches 60%. This is almost twice as high as the world average (35%).

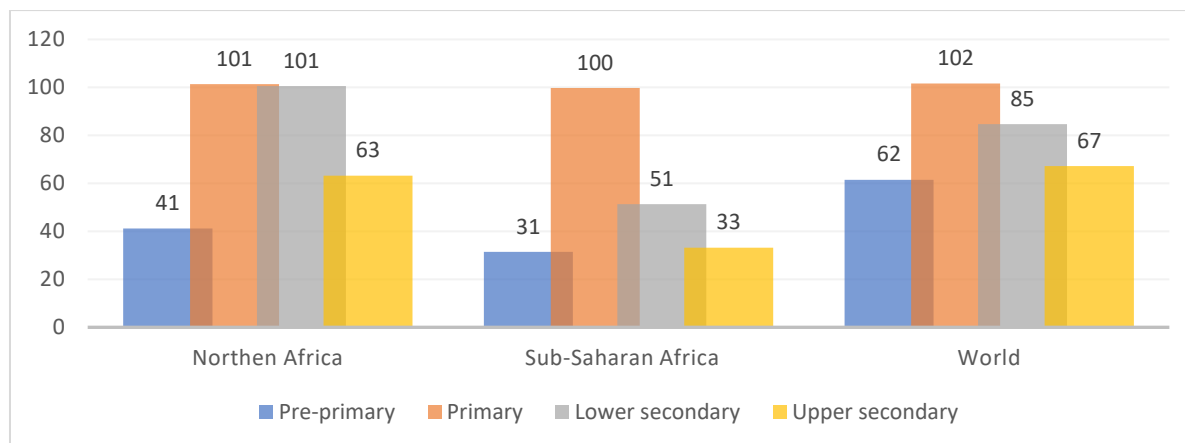
**Figure 9: Out-of-school rate (%), 2019**



Source: UNESCO-UIS database (accessed on 17 May 2021).

Even before the pandemic, Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, was lagging behind in terms of participation in education as shown in the below **Figure 10**. While primary education gross enrolment ratio reached 100% in Africa (while understanding there is a significant number of overage children enrolled in primary), participation in pre-primary education is lower than the world average for both Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa. The picture is different in higher levels of education. In lower secondary education, Northern African countries have higher participation than the world average, while Sub-Saharan African countries have much lower participation rates in both lower and upper secondary education.

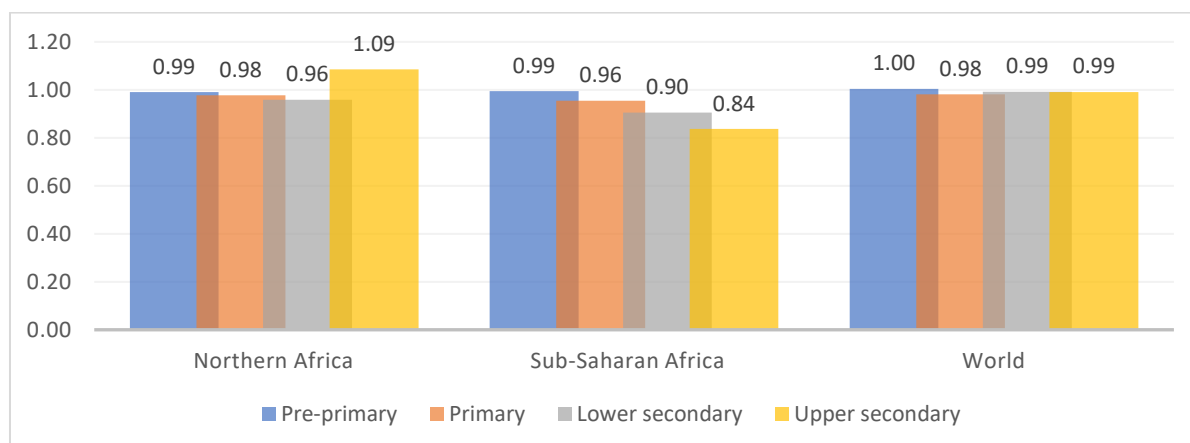
**Figure 10: Gross enrolment ratio, both sexes (%), 2019 or latest year available**



Source: UNESCO-UIS database, 2021.

Persisting gender disparity in education participation is one of the major challenges faced by many of the countries in Africa (**Figure 11**). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the gender parity index is below 1, showing that less girls are enrolled across all levels compared to boys. The gender disparity grows at higher levels of education – in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 84 girls to every 100 boys are attending upper secondary schools, while the world average shows the near gender parity at this level. On the other hand, more girls are attending upper secondary schools compared to boys in Northern Africa.

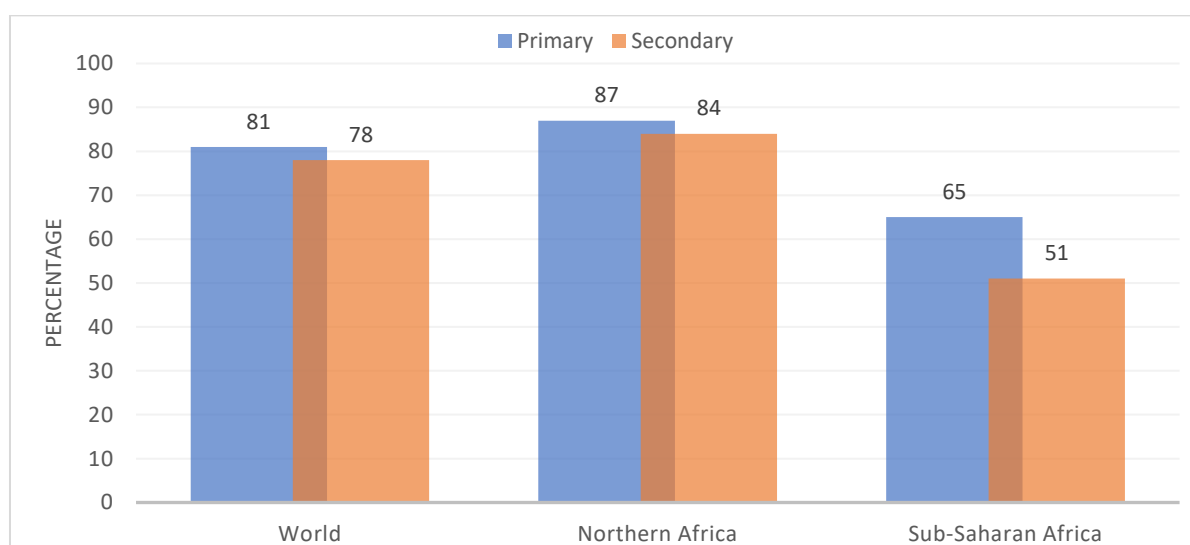
**Figure 11: Gender parity index, gross enrolment ratio, 2019 or latest year available**



Source: UNESCO-UIS database (accessed on 17 May 2021)

In addition to access, the quality of education remains a cause for concern in the continent as the quality of education cannot exceed that of its teachers. Over 200 million children and adolescents who were in school in 2018 were not achieving minimum proficiency levels according to the UIS (UNESCO, 2018). This is not surprising, considering that sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the lowest proportions of teachers with minimum required qualifications to teach. In 2019, Just 65% of primary and 51% of secondary teachers were trained to the required level (Figure 12). These average figures hide wide disparities within sub-Saharan Africa. For example, while all primary teachers had the minimum required qualifications in Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, and Mauritius, only 37% had minimum qualifications in Equatorial Guinea, 27% in Sao Tome and Principe, and 15% in Madagascar. Western Africa is the subregion where the challenge is more acute, while in Northern Africa almost 90% of primary teachers have minimum qualifications. Compared to the world average, the quality challenge faced by sub-Saharan African countries is vast.

**Figure 12: Percentage of teachers with minimum required qualifications, by level (%), 2019**

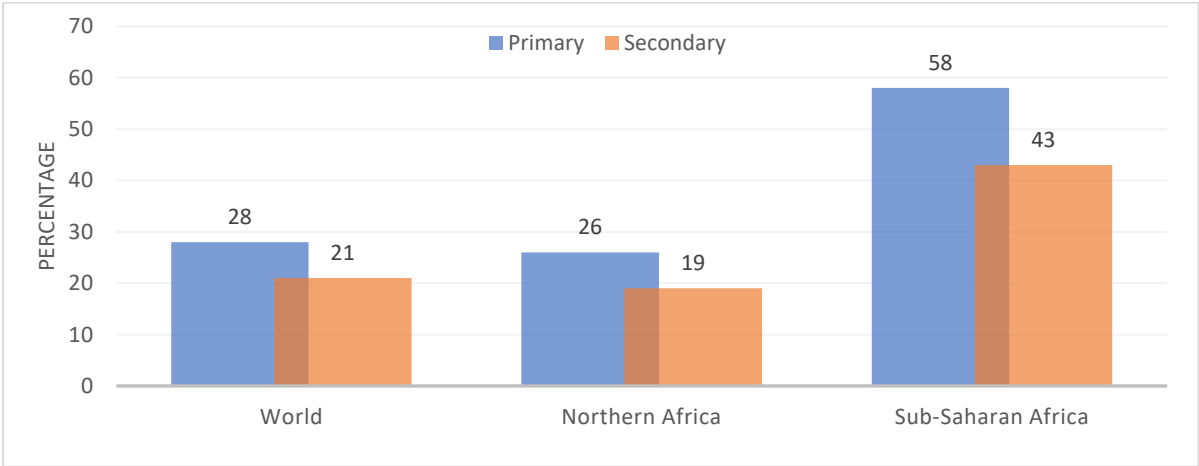


Source: UNESCO-UIS database (accessed on 17 May 2021).

There is a worrying trend that the proportion of teachers with minimum required qualifications has been decreasing globally, but especially in Africa. In 2005, 98% and 71% of primary teachers had minimum qualifications in Northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, respectively. In 2019, the figures decreased to 87% for Northern Africa and 65% for sub-Saharan Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, the decrease slowed and there have been some positive changes over the last 3 years, but the number is far from its highest value (84%), reported in 2000 (UNESCO-UIS database). This could be explained by the fact that some countries in the region have responded to teacher shortages and to the growth of educational demands by recruiting contract teachers, who tend to have lower academic qualifications and less pedagogical training, and who do not always benefit from in-service training. In Niger, for example, 71% of pre-primary to secondary teachers were on contract in 2017 (Teacher Task Force, 2020).

The issue of lack of qualifications is compounded by high pupil-teacher ratios that result in large classroom sizes and have a negative effect on educational quality. The pupil-qualified teacher ratios (**Figure 13**) show a major gap in the availability of qualified teachers across all education levels in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in primary education.

**Figure 13: Pupil-qualified teacher ratio (headcount basis, %), 2019 or latest**



Source: UNESCO-UIS database (accessed on 17 May 2021).

The gaps in the number of trained, qualified, and motivated teachers relate to several factors, including policy, resources and capacity of teacher education institutions to train sufficient numbers of teachers, and effective management structures and strategies to support and retain them in the profession. These issues need particular attention given the crucial role teachers play in the provision of quality of education. Overall, in sub-Saharan Africa, 70% of countries face acute shortages of primary teachers, rising to 90% at secondary level (UNESCO-UIS, 2016). Given the fact that it is the region with the fastest growing school-age population, urgent action is needed to mitigate the teacher gap, which could widen due to impacts of the global health crisis.

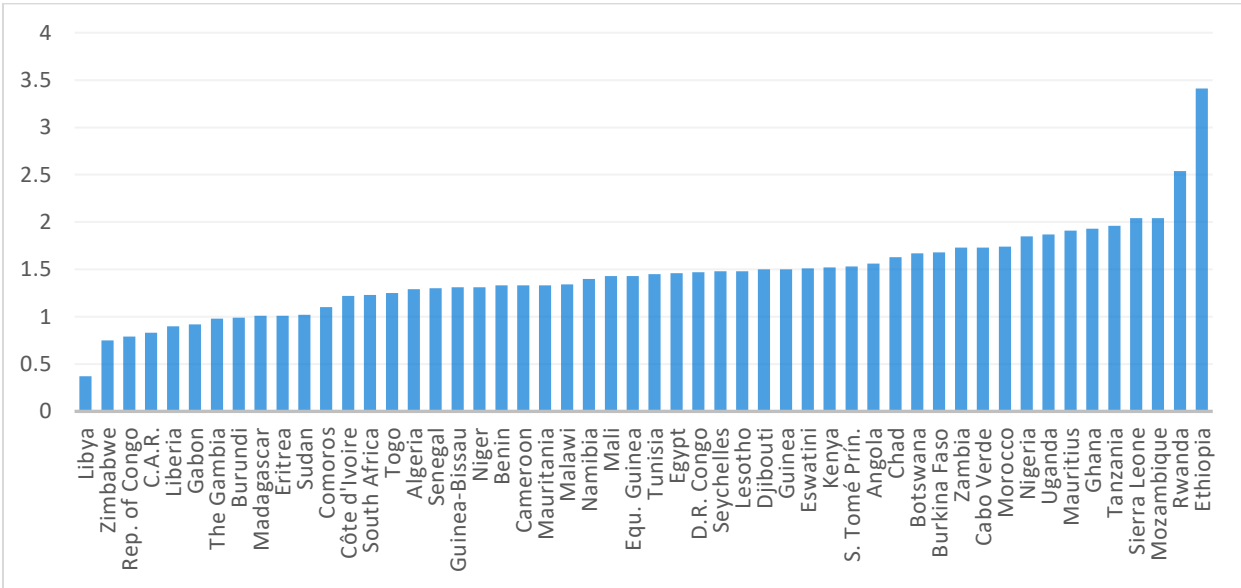
Before the pandemic, well-trained and experienced teachers were already unequally distributed at subnational levels with remarkable differences between urban and rural settings and socioeconomic strata. This poses great challenges for the teaching profession as has been revealed and exacerbated during the current emergency context.

To enable learning, all teachers need quality pre-service training and continuous professional development, a decent status and working conditions as well as professional support. Both SDG4 and the African Union Continental Education Strategy (CESA 2016-2025) have specific targets for addressing the teacher challenge: SDG target 4.c calls to increase substantially the supply of qualified teachers by 2030 and to enhance their working conditions, while AU/CESA Strategic Objective 1 calls African countries to revitalize the teaching profession to ensure quality and relevance at all levels of education by 2025.

### A bustling economy is needed to finance education

Africa is undergoing dramatic transformations that will shape the not only the continent but have global ripple effects during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Africa went through two decades of rapid economic growth. Average annual GDP growth was above 4.8% in sub-Saharan Africa between 2000 and 2019, and the share of the region in global GDP went from 2.4 to 3% during the same time (IMF 2021). Economic growth was somewhat slower in Northern Africa. This growth was unevenly distributed across countries – per capita income did more than double in four countries but declined in eight (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Ratio of GDP per capita 2019 relative to GDP per capita 2000, in constant values



Note: No data for Sudan and Somalia.

Source: IMF, 2021.

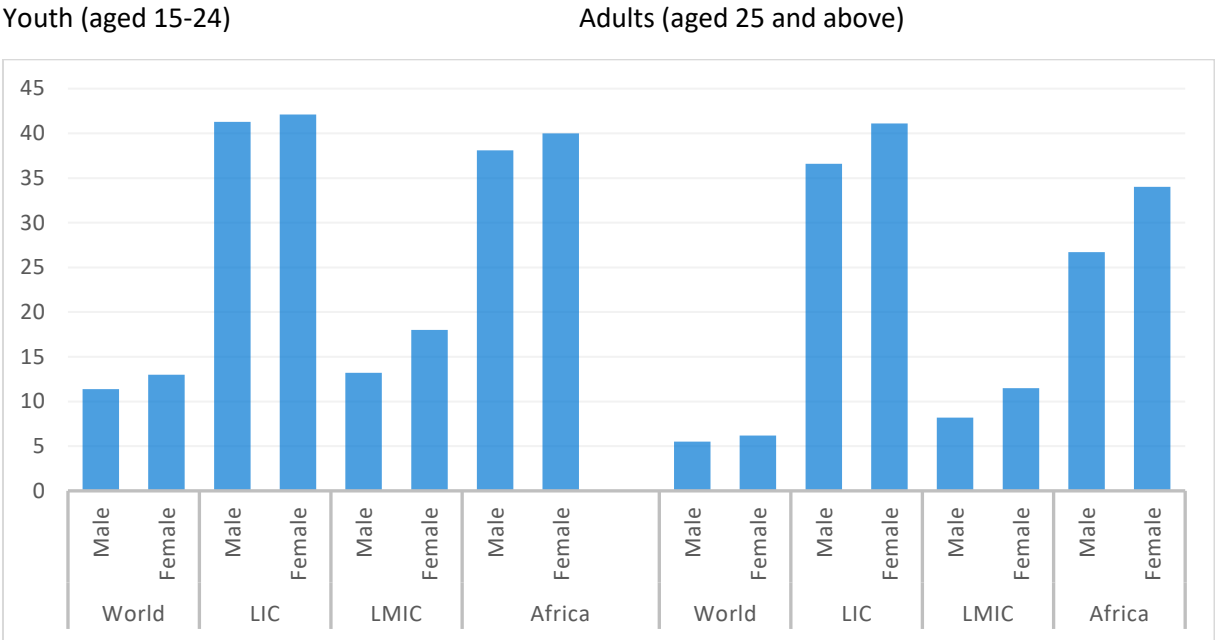
Before COVID-19, the African economy was expected to continue its robust growth; however, this perspective changed completely in 2020. According to the International Monetary Fund’s latest World Economic Outlook (April 2021), the world economy is recovering but uncertainty remains and the speed of recover varies significantly. Among the regions, Africa’s economic recovery is anticipated to be slower than others.

Indeed, African economies are struggling to generate skilled, formal jobs in industrial or service activities. Informal jobs in agriculture, construction or retail trade represent the bulk of employment.



Vulnerable employment is thus the norm rather than the exception – 80% of women and 67% of men were in vulnerable employment in 2019 (ILO, 2021). Working poverty is pervasive – affecting one-quarter of male and one-third of female adult workers on the continent, and nearly 40% of young adult workers (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Working poverty rate, 2019**



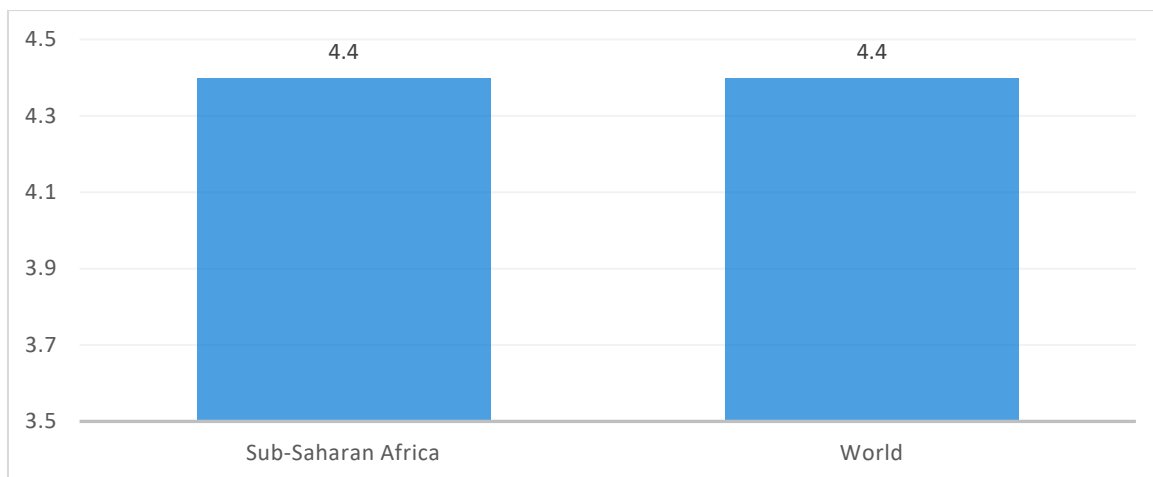
Source: ILO, 2021.

The challenge related to these trends is that the economic situation does not seem to allow for the investments needed in education, and, without this, the skills to boost and transform economies into knowledge-based societies are lacking, despite country efforts.

### Education expenditures

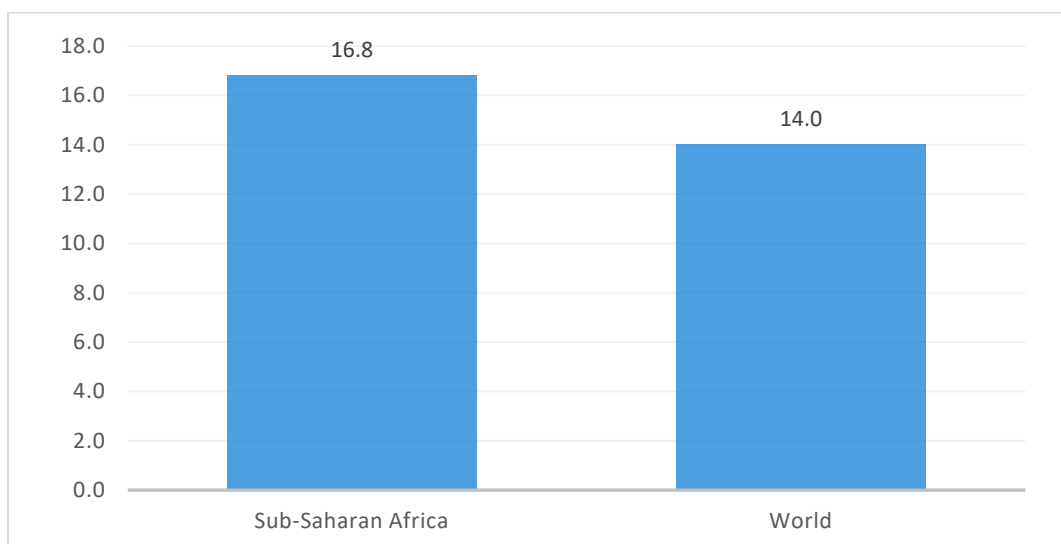
Sub-Saharan African countries allocate considerable resources to education, both in terms of GDP (i.e., the size of the economy, (Figure 16) and the total government expenditures (Figure 17). In particular, countries in the region allocate a larger share of their government budget to education than the world average, indicating the governments’ strong commitment to education.

**Figure 16: Government education expenditures as % of GDP**



Source: Global Education Monitoring Report database (2020), accessed on 17 May 2021.

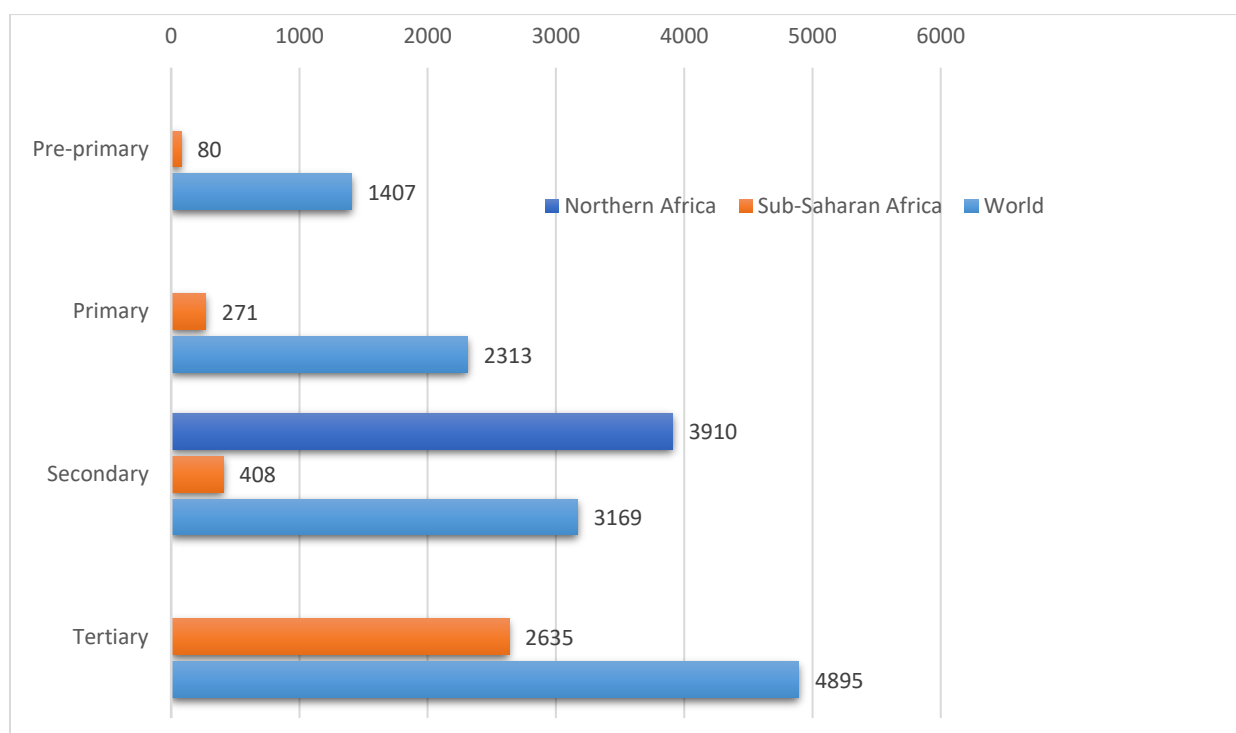
**Figure 17: Government education expenditures as % of total government expenditures**



Source: Global Education Monitoring Report statistical table (2020), accessed on 17 May 2021.

However, the picture looks very different when the actual per-pupil spending is compared (**Figure 18**). With its large and young population, combined with the smaller economies, per-pupil expenditures in sub-Saharan Africa are but a fraction of those of the world average. The figures below also show that more financial resources are allocated to tertiary education in sub-Saharan African countries than to lower levels of education, potentially further exacerbating the challenges faced by the school level education mentioned above.

**Figure 18: Government education expenditures per pupil (in 2016 PPP \$USD, 2018)**



Source: Global Education Monitoring Report statistical table (2020), accessed on 17 May 2021.

Inequality has become a central concern in Africa, along with the persistent extreme poverty. Based on household surveys conducted in the past decade, the Gini index<sup>2</sup> ranged from 0.31 (Niger and São Tomé and Príncipe) to 0.63 (South Africa) in 2016. Most African countries had Gini indices above the global median, and Southern African countries were the most unequal in the world, with Gini indices above 0.50 in Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia, as well as in the Central African Republic and Comoros (Beegle et al., 2016). Extreme poverty receded rapidly as a result of rapid growth over the past couple of decades but remained pervasive – 40 per cent of sub-Saharan Africans were living in extreme poverty in 2018, down from 58 per cent in 2000 (World Bank, 2021).

The African continent is particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change. Rapid population growth and the expansion of extractive industries (fisheries, forestry, mining, etc.) are leading to a reduction in forest cover and soil degradation, causing a loss of biodiversity and threatening agricultural yields. Climate change will translate into higher temperatures through the continent and modified rainfall patterns – with recurring droughts particularly likely in Northern African and in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup> Sea level rise will be a major threat for coastal cities, e.g. in the Gulf of Guinea. Climate change alone is expected to push between 14 and 40 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa into extreme poverty by 2030.

<sup>2</sup> The Gini index, or Gini coefficient, is a measure of the distribution of income across a population developed by the Italian statistician Corrado Gini in 1912. It is often used as a gauge of economic inequality, measuring income distribution or, less commonly, wealth distribution among a population.

## Key recommendations/final remarks

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In the past two decades, Africa had made important progress in social development, economic growth and education, all of which have been jeopardized by the global pandemic of COVID-19. As this report has shown, poverty and inequality might be exacerbated in the near future unless bold action is taken to promote equity and inclusion. Africa should also leverage its innovation and creativity potential, including education initiatives designed and implemented during the crisis. In so doing, education -as the greatest equalizer of society- is best placed to help curb disparities, but also to promote environmental sustainability and to address violence and discrimination. In order for education to play a key role in the continent's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the following priorities for action can be identified in the short and long run. These recommendations build on the analysis above and the global priorities set by the 2020 Global Education Meeting<sup>4</sup> and the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Mission Recovery<sup>5</sup>.

### Priorities emerging for the short- to medium-term

- **Bring learners back to schools-** All children and youth should be back in school and receive the tailored services needed to meet their learning, health, psychosocial well-being, and other needs. African countries should support the design and implementation of school reopening strategies that include comprehensive services to support children's education, health, psycho-social wellbeing, and other needs.
- **Organize catch-up programmes-** support should be available for all children to access opportunities to catch up on lost learning. African countries should design and implement remedial learning at different levels of education.
- **Empower teachers-** All teachers should be prepared and supported to address learning losses among their students and to incorporate digital technology into their teaching. African countries should provide capacity-development on pedagogies for remedial learning and digital and blended teaching approaches.
- **Support education demand-** All families harmed by the socio-economic crisis need to be supported. African countries should guarantee free education, reinforce cash transfers and other social services to disadvantaged families and children.
- **Implement upskilling and reskilling programmes** - All workers who lost their jobs or lost working hours should be supported. African countries should organise and implement upskilling and reskilling programmes, and support youth in school-to-work transitions.
- **Protect public expenditure on education** – All countries should make public expenditure on education a priority and mobilize international partners.

### Priorities emerging for the longer-term include:

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<sup>4</sup> An extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting "Education post-COVID-19" was convened by UNESCO on 29 March 2021. This high-level ministerial meeting concluded with a Declaration to take stock of lessons learnt, the greatest risks facing education today and strategies to leave no learner behind. The Declaration can be consulted here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374704>

<sup>5</sup> Mission: Recovering Education 2021 is a joint initiative by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank focused on three priorities: bringing all children back to schools, recovering learning losses, and preparing and supporting teachers. To learn more from the partners' commitments: <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2021/03/30/mission-recovering-education-2021/>

- **Long-term priorities remain unchanged**- give all young children and their families access to early childhood care and education associating pre-primary education, nutrition and healthcare, sustaining a rapid expansion of primary and secondary education, improving the quality of education, developing technical and vocational education and training (TVET) aligned with labour market changes, reforming and expanding tertiary education.
- **More domestic resources to education are needed**- Make public expenditure on education a priority in COVID-19 recovery plans and, more generally, ensure adequate public funding for the sector over the long-term and efficient and equitable use of resources.
- **Investment in Infrastructure** - Invest more in infrastructure including the electrification of schools, their digital equipment and their connectivity.
- **Digital transformation** - Design and implement digital transformation plans to leverage technologies for advancing quality and equity of education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- **Equity for all**: Advocate for and reinforce calls for girls and marginalized children, who stand to lose the most from the crisis.

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