

Op-ed for Day of the African Child

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On June 16th, we commemorate the Day of the African Child, a day that honours the resilience and potential of our young ones while also spotlighting the urgent issues they face. This year, the theme, "Education for all children in Africa: the time is now," resonates deeply with the African Union's broader goal for 2024: "Educate an African fit for the 21st Century: Building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong, quality, and relevant learning in Africa." A resolve that must be met with concrete, evidence based action.

Getting the Foundations Right is Critical to unlock the potential of the African child

Foundational learning is the bedrock of all educational reform. It is a predictor of individual academic success and a critical driver of our continent's economic development. When we invest in foundational learning, the returns are immense, cascading benefits across all levels of education and fostering a more skilled and capable workforce.

Our children on the continent are full of potential. Their innovation and creativity are clear evidence of their raw talent. When combined with their resilience and commitment to work hard they have a platform to achieve anything. Quality education has the power to unleash the full potential of the African child.

However, the current reality is stark. Nearly nine out of ten African children struggle with basic literacy and numeracy at age 10. They are not being equipped with the basic technical skills to supplement their natural attributes, and thus effectively reducing the quality of human capital within our continent. Due to this educational shortfall, the World Bank projects a potential \$300 billion annual loss for Africa. The inability of our children to read and write with comprehension by age ten signals a profound threat to both individual empowerment and Africa's growth. Low learning levels threaten not just education, but our shared economic progress, healthcare, social mobility, and gender equality.

On the Day of the African Child, let us not only celebrate but commit ourselves to their future. We are encouraged by the commitments made by Ministers of Education across Africa to address the critical Foundational Learning crisis head-on. In Ghana, we commit to increase the number of students proficient by Primary 4 by 90%. In Malawi, we remain steadfast in our commitment to improving foundational learning, aiming to boost learning outcomes from 13% to 79% by 2030. Together, we are taking decisive steps to ensure every African child has the opportunity to thrive.

Assessing Our Progress and Challenges

An assessment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and the AU Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) reveals significant efforts and achievements, while highlighting enduring challenges. Despite increased school enrolments and measures to provide free primary education and bridge gender gaps, many African states still grapple with high dropout rates, poor quality education, and insufficient funding.

Statistics from UNESCO show that 20% of children between 6 and 11, 30% of children between 12 and 14, and 60% of children between 15 and 17 years are out of school in Africa. The barriers are multifaceted—child poverty, gender-based discrimination and violence, conflict and crisis, disability, inequality, and displacement, all contribute to this troubling picture.

But while access remains a concern, we know that the statistics demonstrate the long term impact of poor quality education. Out of school rates increase as children move through the education system, and one of the reasons is that they are not equipped with the basic skills they need for future learning between the ages of 6 and 11. When students have a solid grasp of basic skills early on, they're more likely to stay engaged and succeed in their studies as they progress through school. This can lead to higher rates of retention and ultimately better outcomes in terms of educational attainment.

The Urgency of Now

The theme of the African Union year of education clearly sets out the urgency required to address Africa's learning crisis. The time is most definitely now. It recognises the critical role of education in addressing emerging challenges and fostering development. Education is not only a right in itself but also a means to achieve other rights and eliminate discrimination against children.

We are at a crucial juncture. The future of Africa's children—and by extension, the future of Africa—depends on the actions we take today. Investing in education is investing in the continent's resilience, stability, and growth. The time for decisive, coordinated action is now.

African innovations such as Malawi's 5-Strand Foundational Education Strategy (5-SaFES) and Ghana's Differentiated Learning (DL) methodology demonstrate the continent's commitment to ensuring quality education for all, regardless of age. There are numerous other examples of progress across the continent including the "Teaching at the Right Level" (TARL) methodology in Zambia. Although African governments have taken the lead, we must accelerate our efforts by learning from one another and understanding how to scale up for achievement.

Call to Action

As Ministers of Education for Malawi and Ghana, we urge our fellow African leaders, policymakers, and development partners to prioritise foundational learning. We must allocate adequate resources, implement inclusive policies, and ensure that no child is left behind. Our collective efforts must aim to prioritise the foundations by:

- **Embedding data driven approaches:** We must better collect and utilise data to inform policy, measurement, and accountability across the education sector ensuring that we can measure early and measure well.
- **Enhancing Teacher Training:** Ensure that teachers are equipped with the skills and resources necessary to deliver quality education.
- **Improving Educational Infrastructure:** Build and maintain safe, accessible, and well-equipped schools.

- **Utilising existing resources:** Integrate cost efficient solutions like Structured Pedagogy and Differentiated Learning that can improve learning outcomes within existing capitation grants and in-service training budgets.
- **Fostering Community Engagement:** Involve local communities in the educational process to ensure sustainability and relevance.

To maximise our impact, we call upon all stakeholders and leaders alike to:

- **Fostering Collaboration:** Promote collaboration between policymakers, development partners, and stakeholders to deliver comprehensive Foundational Learning programs that are cost-effective and impactful.
- **Scaling Up Successes:** Identify and replicate successful Foundational Learning initiatives like Structured Pedagogy (SP), Differentiated Learning (DL) and Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) to maximise their positive impact.

By addressing these critical areas, we can make significant strides towards achieving universal education and unlocking the potential of every African child. The time for decisive action is now, and together, we can build a brighter, more equitable future for all.

The Day of the African Child serves as a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility to ensure every child receives quality education. Foundational learning is the bedrock upon which we must build resilient education systems. By investing in our children today, we are investing in Africa's future. The time is now to act, to commit, and to transform our education systems for the benefit of all.