

A rocky road to more educational equality in sub-Saharan Africa

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What are the chances of going to and completing primary school for children in sub-Saharan countries? A current study by Professor Dr. Ilze Plavgo, Professor of Sociology at the University of Mannheim, shows

that educational attainment in these countries is characterized by low social mobility.

Children's chances to attend school have equalized, but chances to complete six or more years of [education](#) are persistently unequal in most countries in the region. Parents' level of education still has considerable influence on children's educational opportunities. Factors such as malnutrition, large number of children, and low public spending on education and teachers impair educational equality.

The millennium marked a significant change in the African educational sector. Between 2000 and 2015, most sub-Saharan African countries had [sustainable economic growth](#) with GDP growth rates of more than 5% per annum. At the same time, the [international community](#) put more focus on providing all children with at least basic education.

In the study, recently [published](#) in *Sociology of Education*, Dr. Ilze Plavgo, Professor of Sociology of the Welfare State at the University of Mannheim, and her colleague Professor Fabrizio Bernardi of UNED Madrid analyzed if and where the educational expansion of the early 21st century has indeed contributed to educational equality.

The researchers analyzed data from 153 household surveys of 40 countries between 1990 and 2017. Their results show that [inequality](#) has decreased when it comes to primary school attendance since more children from lower social groups went to school. However, inequality in completing at least six years of primary school persisted and remained mostly unchanged.

For most countries under investigation, there is no indication of increased social mobility in [educational attainment](#) (apart from notable exceptions such as Ethiopia, Namibia and Sierra Leone). Children of parents with a higher level of education are more likely to finish primary

school, compared to children of parents with a lower level of education.

Analyses show major differences across countries in the inequality levels and trends. "We looked at the role different national contextual factors play in explaining variation in educational inequality across sub-Saharan African countries. It can be concluded that malnutrition prevalence, fertility rates, school fees, public expenditures on education, and the number of pupils per teacher systematically explain these country differences," Plavgo explains.

During the period analyzed, the financial obstacles for accessing primary schools were partly eliminated and [fertility rates](#) slightly declined, leading to moderate improvements of educational affordability. Health and nutritional outcomes improved on average. However, trend analyses indicate that inequality was reduced when it comes to accessing schools but that the demographic and institutional changes were not sufficient in most countries to significantly reduce inequality in completing six or more years of primary school.

"A key policy conclusion from our analyses is that tackling material deprivation and increasing public investment in school and teaching resources are key to reducing inequality in [primary school](#) completion in this region," says Plavgo.

More information: Ilze Plavgo et al, Trends and Determinants of Intergenerational Educational Inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa for Birth Cohorts 1974 to 2003, *Sociology of Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00380407231210279](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407231210279)

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