Education in Africa 50 years after independence
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In our second post for francophone readers, Nicole Bella, policy analyst on the Education for All Global Monitoring Report team, looks at the progress of education in Africa since 17 countries gained their independence in 1960, and the challenges that remain.

The year 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of independence in African countries, which was widely commemorated on the continent. In 1960, 17 sub-Saharan countries – 16 French-speaking countries and Nigeria – gained sovereignty. The celebrations of this anniversary, or jubilee for some, were somewhat toned down, perhaps to avoid too much introspection. For many observers, the past 50 years of independence have been unconvincing, even catastrophic for the most ardent critics who condemn the perpetuation of relations of dependence such as those characterized by Françafrique. We shall simply focus on the state of education in Africa, 50 years on. It must be acknowledged that significant progress has been made since 1960. Once a luxury reserved to an elite minority working in colonial administration and subsequently that of the newly-independent countries, education has become a public good that is more widely accessible in societies that saw human capital as the road to development.

While progress was slower during the 1990s owing to the structural adjustment policies that characterized this period, African governments renewed their commitments to making education a reality for all their citizens in the drive towards education for all following the World Education Forum in 2000 in Dakar. This resulted in significantly greater access to and participation in education at all levels as of 1999. To cite but one example, the number of children enrolled in primary schools rose 57% on average since 1999 throughout sub-Saharan Africa, reaching 128 million in 2008. This, in turn, was reflected in a spectacular increase in the net enrolment rate from 58% to 76% over that period. Progress has been impressive in a number of countries such as Burkina Faso, Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and the United Republic of Tanzania, most of which had relatively low levels to begin with. This promotion of education is the fruit of a series of policies that have been implemented, including the abolition of school fees, ambitious school-building programmes in rural areas in particular, and targeted proactive measures for reducing inequalities.

Despite these remarkable advances, sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag behind other regions in terms of what remains to be done to attain education for all (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Clearly, education for all will not be achieved by the 2015 target. As the 2010 Global
Monitoring Report showed, persistent disparities and inequalities based on gender, wealth, place of residence, ethnicity and disabilities slow down, and even impede progress towards EFA and MDGs at the regional and national levels. Most countries on the continent must ensure that the excluded and marginalized are, at long last, taken into account with more focused policies and funding.

In general, neither EFA nor MDGs can be attained in Africa without a more all-encompassing and holistic and inclusive strategic approach that factors in the links and synergy between:

- All the EFA goals. Progress made towards reaching the goals has been uneven. However, universal primary education itself cannot be attained if equal attention is not given to: expanding early childhood care and education programmes which improve children's health and nutrition, facilitate their cognitive development and prepare them for school; devising adult literacy programmes in light of the proven link between parents' education, particularly mothers, and that of their children; and raising the quality of education through better school retention and completion, addressing the problems of teacher shortage and the lack of qualification and training of teachers.

- The various sectors and levels of education. The fact that more attention has been given in Africa to enhancing primary education is certainly justified, given the still-low enrolment rates in a number of countries in the continent. Nonetheless, advancement towards universal primary education adds to the pressure on higher levels, generating legitimate demands for post-primary education that must be met. In an increasingly knowledge-based world, we cannot wait for universal primary education to become a reality to begin to consider developing the post-primary levels. Not only does it give remarkable leverage for universal primary education, but there is not a country on the planet that has achieved economic and social development by focusing only on primary education, despite its return on investment. Fortunately, a number of countries and the African Union, through its Second Decade of Education for Africa, have decided to take up the challenge, setting ambitious political objectives with the view that universal basic education is not a long-term perspective but an attainable goal.

Education and other sectors, particularly the economic, social and cultural sectors. Given the interlinkages between education and the rest of society, all educational planning and policy must be thought out with the broader development context in mind. African countries must strengthen the links between educational planning, poverty reduction strategies and other development tools. For EFA to become a reality, education has to be included in wider strategies for reducing poverty and inequality. More importantly, education policies must be backed with sufficient financial and human resources, which is the best indication of countries' real political commitment to achieving EFA and MDGs. It is this message of hope that should be borne, because 50 years after African countries gained their independence, the continent is still standing at the crossroads and must face the many challenges that continue to come its way. This inevitably calls for recognition of the right to education for all, especially for the still too many individuals who are refused it even now.