

WITH AFRICA FOR AFRICA

Towards...

*Quality  
Education  
for All*



1999 MLA Project  
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## FOREWORD

Empowering Africa and African educators towards Quality Education for All is no more a wish but a present living reality, which needs to be known and shared from within and outside Africa as a whole. This report is a march towards this end. The Joint International UNESCO-UNICEF Monitoring Learning Achievement [MLA] Project not only has a record of its own worldwide but also a particular one on the African continent. With Africa For Africa has turned the far-reaching dream of African expertise into action through their participation in the MLA Project.

Capacity Building and Capacity Sharing are now preparing the road towards Africa's recognition of its sustainable human development and mobilisation possibilities. Imperative enough, this process allows expression of what African education should be in terms of its context, quality, content, coverage and effectiveness so as to reach all and the so-called "predicted unreachables", in particular.

This report demonstrates that access to quality education for all is a fundamental human right that can be achieved if there is full commitment towards the learner as she/he is, from the teacher in what she/he can do in enhancing the teaching and learning process; from the family for what support they can provide; from the school if it reaches its targeted "clientele"; and from the decision-makers if there is real will and conviction.

Providing mastery level of education to all African children is a necessity in all its meaning. The empirical evidence from the 1999 MLA project countries provides both a diagnosis and the possible actions to be taken in terms of policy, curriculum, teaching and learning. The criterion-reference approach used serves to examine what is learnt and taught, and under which conditions. Tedious but fruitful procedures were also used to design and to validate the common-core instruments and their results across markedly different countries and contexts assuring comparability.

With Africa and For Africa, a movement towards quality education for all, could not start without the strong support of African governments; African policy-makers, educators and front-line implementers; African learners - their parents, teachers and school managers; bilateral and multilateral partners of Education for All [EFA], and the hardworking national, regional, and international MLA Project teams.

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UNESCO, Paris  
March 2000

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# MONITORING LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Monitoring Learning Achievement [MLA] project is a joint UNESCO/UNICEF international educational assessment initiative which began in 1992. It aims at obtaining information on the “effectiveness of basic education provision in terms of actual learning achievement” [EFA, 1998]. The project forms part of the Education for All [EFA] 2000 Assessment which aims to construct a comprehensive picture of the progress of participating countries towards their own EFA goals since the 1990 world conference in Jomtien. In particular, the results of this MLA project may be used to answer Indicator 15 of the EFA 2000 Assessment which is: “The percentage of learners having reached at least grade 4 primary schooling who master a set of nationally defined basic learning competencies” [p. 20, EFA, 1998].

To this end, the core aims of the MLA project were:

- to establish a set of measurable indicators and a methodological approach for monitoring the quality of basic educational programmes.
- to undertake periodic assessment of learning outcomes, to provide up to date information for decision makers at national and sub-national level, and to formulate interventions to reduce observed disparities [e.g. regional, gender, socio-economic],
- to establish common levels of learning outcomes,
- to support long-term monitoring in order to track progress towards the improvement of quality in basic educational programmes,
- to build national/sub-national capacity, skills and technical expertise needed in monitoring the quality of basic educational programmes through providing training and capacity building workshops, seminars, and through actual implementation of project activities, and
- to strengthen information exchange and dissemination, and facilitate the extension of networks in the field of basic education.

Key characteristics of the MLA project approach are its learner-centred orientation, its emphasis on participation, broad based partnerships and co-operation, its adoption of country specific approaches, and most important of all, its focus on capacity building and sharing.

Around 50 countries all over the world have participated in the MLA project to date. Eighteen African countries have participated in the 1999 cycle of this ongoing project. A regional approach to the project has been adopted as a strategy for pooling local expertise as well as developing the capacity of representatives from participating countries. The two regional initiatives are: an Eastern and Southern and a Northern, Central and Western region.

The MLA project comprise the development of tests to measure the learning achievement of Grade 4 learners in respect of basic learning competencies which entail the minimum basic knowledge and analytical skills that learners should be expected to have in the Life Skills, Literacy and Numeracy learning areas. A criterion-reference approach was used to assess the minimum [MML] and desired [OML] mastery levels in each learning area, using tests developed in the region by representatives of the participating countries and local resource persons. Through questionnaires completed by parents, teachers, school heads and the learners themselves, essential background information is elicited to form a thorough overview of the learning

and social environments that influence the performance of learners. This is a unique and historic event in African education and an ideal opportunity for identifying areas for improvement of national education systems so as to ensure that the specific needs of all learners are addressed.

The methodology employed for administering the instruments, as well as for conducting the analysis was agreed to jointly by representatives of participating countries in the course of a series of instrument development and training workshops convened in the Anglophone and Francophone regions. Implementation, however, was the responsibility of the participating ministries of education and related national authorities and institutions. Resource centres were established in Morocco and in South Africa to provide technical or logistical assistance to participating countries.

In this report, results from the data collected in 1999 for the following 11 African countries are presented: Botswana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mauritius, Niger, Senegal, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia. It should be noted that more than 50 000 African Grade 4 learners and their parents as well as over 1400 teachers and schools participated in the 1999 MLA surveys in Africa to promote the movement towards attaining quality education for all. The results from other participating countries have not yet been completely processed. They are: Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Comoros, South Africa and The Gambia.

Since the results contained in this report comprise only those variables common to both Anglophone and Francophone country groups, information on a number of other variables has been excluded. It is expected that the sub-regional and national MLA reports will provide a much more detailed analysis than that undertaken in the Africa regional report.

The analysis of the data undertaken in this report has produced a number of observations and recommendations for the African region, which are summarised below:

## **ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT: EQUITY QUALITY TRADE-OFFS**

- Only four countries met their Jomtien learning achievement targets [that is where at least 80% of learners should attain the defined minimal learning competencies] in Life Skills; while only two met the Literacy target. No country met the Numeracy target. There are wide variations between countries in respect to their progress towards achieving the Minimum Mastery Learning [MML] targets.
- With the exception of three countries, 9 out of 10 learners surveyed have not yet reached the desired mastery learning [DML] targets.
- Countries where the mother tongue/lingua-franca is the same as the medium of instruction, out-performed others in most learning areas.
- In terms of gender disparities, the data showed that gender differences are either small or non-significant, while comparisons of the between-country differences show as large as 37 mean-point score differences. Gender parity in learner performance at the lower grades of basic education is an easily achievable goal provided this issue is accorded high priority by education ministries and by the education family at large.

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- With regard to urban-rural disparities, in all participating countries, urban school learners outperformed rural school learners in all learning areas.
- In all participating countries, except Mauritius, learners from private schools fared significantly better than learners from public schools in all three learning areas.

The findings presented above with reference to differences in learner performance between boys and girls, between urban and rural schools, and between public and private schools followed the same patterns as the ones observed in earlier African MLA surveys conducted between 1992 and 1998. Gender differences are in most cases statistically non-significant, while statistically significant differences in learner performance are observed between urban and rural and between private and public school learner groups.

## SCHOOLING AND LEARNING CONDITONS

### Learner profile

- There is acceptable gender representation of boys and girls in all participating countries with the average age of learners ranging between 9 and 13 years. In almost all countries, at least 95% of learners have one or more meals a day. However, a range of between 0.4% and 4.7% of learners do not have any meals on a regular basis.
- The majority of learners have a very positive attitude towards school and the teacher, so differences in performance cannot be attributed to differences in learner attitude. The pattern in learner participation in sport and cultural activities suggests generally higher activity levels in the Anglophone group of countries.
- While homework is given by over 85% of all teachers, in six countries at least 40% of learners do not have anybody at home to help them with their homework.
- In more than half of the countries [7 out of 111], less than 50% of learners attended pre-school classes.
- In the majority of countries, over 80% of learners walk to school. For many learners the time-distance factor produces high difficulty levels in accessing school.
- For more than 70% of all learners, the language of learning and teaching was not their mother tongue. In most countries, the first time pass rate for learners in Grades 1 to 4 ranges between 80% to 99%.

### Home environment

- In most countries, the majority of learners live with both parents. However, a significant minority of learners lives with only one parent which means that possible adult supervision is reduced.
- In all countries, the most common reason given by learners for not doing homework was because they had to help their parents.
- Most parents surveyed had some education, at least to completion of primary school. There was limited home reading materials and very limited access to information in terms of printed or electronic media or library access. Parents manifested a very positive opinion about the value of schooling for their children, but household support for school activities could be improved.

## **Teachers' background and teaching conditions**

- There is a wide variation between countries in terms of gender balance as well as age of the teaching force. Teachers in the majority of the participating countries have considerable experience, varying between 10 and 20 years.
- Some observation by a supervisor was evident in most participating countries. Further improvement in this respect is important to ensure acceptable levels of quality and accountability.
- The indication that a high percentage of teachers would like to change to another career if they had the opportunity is alarming.
- Results indicated that chalkboards, chalk and learning materials are not fully available in most countries, and only one country indicated adequate availability of teacher guides. The availability of additional resources to enable teachers to engage in professional development is noted as being limited in the majority of countries.
- It is encouraging to note that many teachers spend a considerable time on schoolwork after school hours, with the most common activities being the preparation for teaching lessons and marking learners' work. A high percentage of teachers [over 30%], however, indicated that travel time to and from school affects their work.

## **School and school head background**

- In every participating country, except Madagascar and Botswana, the percentage of female school heads is far lower than the percentage of male school heads.
- In most schools surveyed, the issue of teacher absenteeism was not considered a problem. However, many school heads noted that the issue of school safety is a concern.
- Schools differed in terms of the amenities and facilities available on the school property to support learner activities especially extra-mural activities.

## **Determinants of Learner Performance**

The use of LISREL path analysis to examine the 1999 MLA survey data clearly demonstrated how so many factors [personal, home, school, and teacher and classroom] may interchangeably affect learner performance in different country-settings

In the majority of the countries surveyed, the location and type of school that the learner is exposed to, strongly contribute to variations in learner performance as do the family background characteristics and home learning processes. The ability of parents to assist learners in doing schoolwork has been identified as a major contributing factor to learner performance in most countries.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations contained in this report include the following:

- Quality of education for all in Africa is attainable provided that the problems of educational access are adequately addressed.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on sustaining a minimum level of mastery in all learning areas and all grades as a preliminary step towards attaining the desired level of mastery.
- More attention should be given to curriculum planning and the provision of adequate materials and resources for improving the teaching and learning process.
- Special attention should be accorded to teacher working conditions, as well as in-service training needs and support for teachers.
- Systematic and continuous learning assessment schemes are needed in most educational systems in order to understand the *dynamics* of the teaching and learning context. This will empower ministries to develop relevant strategies so as to guarantee that a learner's potential and attributes can be optimised.
- Redressing urban-rural disparities in learner performance can enhance education growth in both quantitative and qualitative terms' and should be the cornerstone of national, regional and international educational policy-making.
- School effectiveness can be improved through developing 'soft resources' such as discipline, working in a reinforcing collective milieu, partnership a commitment to excellence and conducive managerial leadership.
- The presence of someone at home to assist learners with schoolwork was identified as a key determinant of learner performance in many of the countries surveyed. This implies that greater attention needs to be allocated to improving levels of adult and lifelong education.

For African education to succeed in meeting the demands of its people as well as the challenges posed by globalisation and the technological age, schools need to adapt to the needs of all learners. Only by providing quality education for all as a fundamental human right and striving towards attaining desired levels of mastery for all African children, can the African continent meet the challenges of the next century and take its rightful place in the international arena. Any success in ensuring and in sustaining quality of education for all in Africa will require collective support and full commitment of all stakeholders to the challenges of the learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.