

# BENIN'S STORY:

Benin's progress in  
education:  
Expanding access  
and narrowing the  
gender gap

Jakob Engel with Edmond Magloire Cossou  
and Pauline Rose



## Development Progress



## Benin's progress in education:

### Expanding access and narrowing the gender gap

#### Key messages

1. Having had one of the world's lowest primary school enrolment rates and enormous gender disparities in 1990, today almost all Beninese boys and girls can access school. A growing number is graduating from primary and enrolling in secondary school.
2. Key factors in this have included the political support to prioritise improved access to education, supported by substantial increases in government and donor funding, and highly effective outreach campaigns to increase public perceptions of the value of education.
3. Benin may reach universal primary enrolment in the coming decade; however, priorities should increasingly focus on ensuring that all Beninese children can receive a higher quality of basic education. This will require addressing low teaching quality, institutional capacity constraints and growing concerns about ownership and sustainability.

“Benin’s basic education system has expanded rapidly, and almost all Beninese children now have access to school.”

## Summary

In 1990, Benin had one of the world’s lowest primary and secondary school enrolment rates, with enormous gender, socioeconomic and regional disparities in access to education. Since then, initial access to primary education has been approaching universality. The gender gap has narrowed substantially, and has in some regions been eliminated.

Successive governments since 1990 have placed a higher priority on addressing the education sector’s many deficiencies and making access for all children a constitutional right and a key policy objective. Development partners have provided substantial funding and technical expertise. Finally, outreach campaigns by Benin’s government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been instrumental in addressing demand-side constraints and fostering normative changes in the value of education for boys and girls.

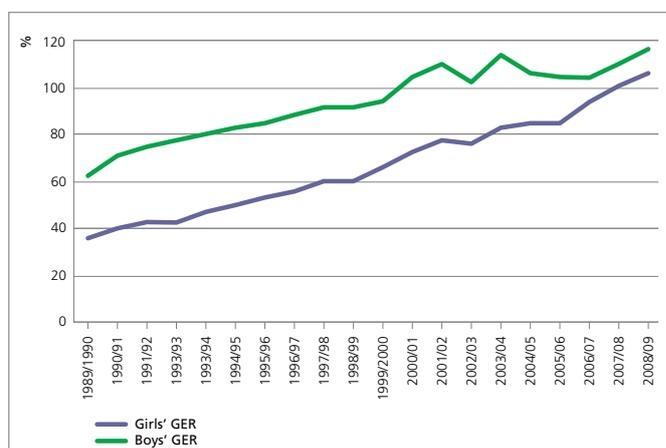
A central lesson from Benin’s education reform process is that it is possible to achieve substantial improvements in access and equity in low-income countries with limited institutional capacity if there is sufficient political support, financial support and engagement at local levels. However, many challenges remain. The expansion of the system, a lack of trained teachers, high rates of population growth and substantial existing institutional and political constraints have overextended the government’s capacity to meet demand for education.

## What has been achieved?

Following declining enrolment rates in the late 1980s, Benin’s basic education system has expanded rapidly, and almost all Beninese children now have access (Figure 1). Student enrolment in primary schools increased fourfold between 1989/90 and 2008/09, and the improvement in the primary gross enrolment rate (GER) represents one of the world’s fastest rates of progress over this time period. During the 1989/90 school year, the GER stood at 50% (only 36% for girls). By 2008/09, the GER was 109%.<sup>1</sup> Enrolment rates are correlated with improvements in health and in infant mortality and morbidity rates, and particularly on malnutrition, and many key indicators in this area have also improved significantly since the early 1990s.

In addition to getting more children into school, Benin has also achieved success in keeping them there. Fewer children are dropping out or repeating grades – and more are completing a full primary cycle. The gross primary completion rate was 65% in 2008/09, from below 20% in the early 1990s. However, the gender gap widens as students progress through primary and into secondary school, with girls in rural and remote regions most likely to drop out.

**Figure 1: Primary GERs between 1989/90 and 2008/09<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> The GER in Benin is over 100% owing to the large number of overage and underage students. The net enrolment rate (NER), which expresses the rate of coverage only for the official school-age population, increased from 38% in 1989/90 to 89% in 2008/09 (92% for boys and 85% for girls).

<sup>2</sup> MEPS data in Attanasso, M.-O. (2010) 'Benin: Prestation Efficace des Services Publics de l'Education.' AfriMAP an Open Society Initiative for West Africa.



Socioeconomic disparities – while still substantial – have also narrowed in recent years, with access to education increasingly democratised. In 2000/01, poor children were five times less likely to finish primary school and start secondary school than their wealthier counterparts; in 2005/06, this was between 2.5-2.8.<sup>3</sup> Access to education has improved throughout the country, although progress has been uneven, with the poorer north facing substantial deprivation: in the Alibori, a northern province, the GER was 62% in 2008/09 – over 40% below the national average.

Quality remains low, in large part because of a lack of qualified teachers following a 20-year closure of teacher training colleges starting in the late 1980s. Owing to financial constraints in light of growing student numbers, the bulk of new teachers in the past two decades have been poorly trained contractual and community-financed ones. Quality problems, while not uncommon in low-income countries with rapidly expanding student numbers, constitute a substantial barrier to improving learning outcomes.

## What has driven change?

### Political support

The change in government following an economic and political crisis in the 1980s created an opportunity to address the failures and deficiencies of the education system. A widespread recognition of its importance for the 'New Benin' led to the *Etats Généraux de l'Éducation* – a congress of all education stakeholders – which provided a framework for the development and gradual implementation of education reforms since 1990.

The country's new constitution made primary education compulsory and promised the gradual elimination of school fees. Meanwhile, expressed in 2006 prices, total public expenditure on education between 1992 and 2006 more than doubled, aided by substantially improved revenue collection and Benin's qualification for debt cancellation under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative. As a result, expenditure per primary student (as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita) increased slightly between 1996 and 2006, from 11.8% to 13.1%.

Most significant has been the successive abolition of start-of-year school fees, beginning in 1997 with girls in low-access rural areas. In 2006, fees were abolished for all students in primary and pre-primary school, leading to a surge in first grade enrolment. Fees were replaced by block grants paid to schools. However, these are frequently insufficient to cover costs: parents must pay for schoolbooks and uniforms, and frequently contribute to school-related construction projects.

### Substantial donor involvement

Donors have played a decisive role in Benin's education reform, with aid to the sector increasing steadily, from an annual average of \$49 million per year in 1999 and 2000 to \$83 million per year in 2006 and 2007.<sup>4</sup> With donors' role in the sector increasing, there has been a move towards greater aid effectiveness, including through pooled funding by five large development partners and the establishment of a donor coordination group.

Planning and implementation capacity, as well as the ability to use resources efficiently, is a major obstacle area, with significant sums – frequently up to half the capital budget – not disbursed. This has been particularly problematic in the case of the \$70 million grant through the Education for All (EFA) Fast Track Initiative. Meanwhile, some commentators are concerned that the substantial role development partners play – while financially vital – is turning Benin into a 'playground' for donor-led reforms and leading to the steady disengagement of the government from developing and implementing plans.<sup>5</sup>

### Effective outreach in rural areas

Benin's improvements in education have also been the product of a sustained effort by the government and international and local NGOs to engage the population on the importance of education and to respond to local socioeconomic and cultural concerns constraining enrolment.

<sup>3</sup> See World Bank (2009) *Le Système Éducatif Béninois: Analyse Sectorielle pour une Politique Éducative Plus Équilibrée et Plus Efficace*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO data.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Fichner, S. (2009) 'A Playground for Education Reform or a Battlefield of Donor Intervention? Local Debates on Primary Education – The New Study Programmes in Benin.' Working Paper 95, Mainz: Department for Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University.

“Improvements in education have been the product of a sustained effort by the government and international and local NGOs to engage the population on the importance of education.”

The strong emphasis on girls' education – by both the Beninese government and donors – aimed to address cultural norms that placed a higher social and economic premium on the education of boys and promoted marriage at very young ages. Efforts included prioritisation of girls during the successive abolition of fees, mentorship programmes in which older girls support younger girls' education, prizes awarded to the highest-achieving girls and secondary school scholarships. Secondary school boarding houses have been constructed to combat the threat of sexual violence towards girls on the way to school, complemented by an increase in the marriage age and stronger penalties for sexual assault, though enforcement of these laws has thus far been insufficient.

A central aspect has been the increased involvement of local communities in the system. NGOs, frequently with financial support from development partners, have been highly influential in increasing parental participation in schooling. One such initiative, Mothers' Associations (AMEs), piloted by World Education, have been established in hundreds of villages to complement existing, generally male-led, Parent-Teacher Associations and to focus particularly on specific socio-cultural and demand-side constraints entailed in enrolling boys and girls. AMEs have helped collect funds for schools and created an opening for women to take a more active role in school management.

### Lessons learnt

- The expansion of access to basic education in Benin is an impressive example of what can be achieved in a resource-constrained country with relatively low levels of institutional and planning capacity, if there is sufficient political support to prioritise and resource a sector, as well as substantial donor and NGO input. Impressive quantitative strides have exacerbated severe quality deficits, though. The reopening of teacher training colleges is an important first step, but low teacher morale and frequent strikes, teacher absenteeism and the continued reliance on poorly trained contract teachers constrain progress.
- There has been growing recognition among all stakeholders, and increasingly among parents, that girls' education not only is a moral issue of equity and fairness but also plays a central role in the country's development prospects. As a result of efforts to prioritise girls' education, hundreds of thousands of girls have now had the opportunity to complete primary school and advance to higher levels of education. Sustained efforts to reach vulnerable communities and address the role of socioeconomic and regional disparities in exacerbating gender inequality will be key to achieving EFA and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.
- Donor funding and technical expertise has been central to Benin's improvements. This partnership has been most effective when key actors within government have shared donor priorities (as in the expansion of girls' education). Creating an acceptable level of basic education for all will be a long process and will require sustained momentum and increased resource commitments beyond 2015. Greater willingness on the part of the government to develop and sustain effective sector planning and implementation processes and a better understanding among donors of institutional constraints will be key to further progress.
- High fertility rates mean the education system needs to keep growing rapidly. Along with an increasing teacher wage bill, this will put substantial pressure on the national budget. It will be vital to expand government and donor expenditure, while also making more efficient use of these resources.
- There is still an inadequate focus on the growing demand for secondary education and on ensuring education meets the country's long-term development and labour market needs. A greater focus on this is integral to the current 10-year sector plan (2006-2015), but implementation has been under-resourced and is running behind schedule.



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#### **Overseas Development Institute**

111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London SE1 7JD  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399

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