



## Chronic Poverty and Education: A guide to what works in policy and practice

- Education offers some of the best policy options available for tackling long-term poverty, and is the single best means of preventing the transmission of intergenerational poverty.
- Children from chronically poor backgrounds are typically the hardest to reach and teach.
- Successful education policies are associated with faster and more equitable economic growth, more inclusive societies, and social transformations, such as greater gender equity.
- Policy interventions can be strategic, cost-effective and sustainable and when applied at key stages in the life cycle, can greatly improve the lives of chronically poor children.

This policy brief is based on a CPAN Policy Guide: [Chronic Poverty and Education: A guide to what works in policy and practice](#)

Education is the single most important factor in stopping the transmission of poverty from parents to children.

This policy brief makes the case that smart interventions can make rapid, permanent inroads on poverty and inequality reduction, boosting upward mobility and social inclusion. Given that children from chronically poor backgrounds are more likely to comprise the 'hard-to-reach', 'hard-to-teach' group, that never enrol, drop out, or gain low levels of educational attainment, education policies should be tailored so that chronically poor people can benefit.

A growing body of evidence suggests that it is education quality and skills acquired, rather than years in school that deliver pro-poor growth and therefore poverty reduction. Intervention areas include; early childhood nutritional care and pre-school programmes; education quality improvements; positive action to promote girls education and tackle social and institutional constraints to girls learning; and making education more accessible and affordable. Investments in early childhood provide the foundations that make later educational and skills attainments possible.

Well-designed policies that are applied at several key stages in the life cycle can successfully enable young people living in poverty to progress through education systems into the adult worlds of work and citizenship. Innovative forms of direct support, financial and other means, for poor young people have also been shown to sustain them through the often difficult transitions through education and into work. Conditional cash transfers, school feeding schemes and scholarships can all play important roles. 'Second chance' schemes that reconnect young people to education and training along with skills development programmes can also be particularly important in rerouting young people back onto positive pathways to adulthood.

### Understanding the links between chronic poverty and education

Evidence from recent decades shows that it is not only low incomes that keep children from education, often it is a multi-dimensional set of deprivations and disadvantages that overlap, keeping people poor over long periods, transmitting poverty through generations, and excluding them from educational attainment.

The Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN) ensures that chronically poor people are not overlooked by policy-makers and disseminates evidence to improve the effectiveness of policies and programmes at reducing the poverty of the poorest people.

CPAN has partners in 10 countries and builds on the work of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC).



Education has clear and strong potential to impact positively on all dimensions of chronic poverty: by increasing skills for better jobs and livelihoods; reducing vulnerability to ill-health and malnutrition; eliminating stigma, combating discrimination and empowering people to claim rights; and increasing resilience to shocks and conflict, and reducing the prevalence of violence. Yet it is also precisely the conditions of chronic poverty that ensure policymakers fail to develop appropriate policies to reach and teach the children of poor and marginalised households.

The links between education and chronic poverty are significant determinants of policy and practice outcomes, yet sectoral and disciplinary distinctions mean the two are often understood, researched and evaluated in different ways. Policy makers should look to identify sound evidence that explores the relationship between the two in order to tailor policy towards reaching and teaching the chronically poor with cultural and contextual specificities in mind.

### Early Childhood Development

The single most important advance in tackling the intersection between chronic poverty and education is in understanding the importance of early childhood care and development (ECCD) and the scope for effective interventions. ECCD comprises nutrition, care, and cognitive development or learning in the pre-school period of childhood, including nutrition during pregnancy.

Early action has the potential to reverse or significantly curb the disadvantages of chronic poverty, and so lead to upward social mobility and more equitable societies. One study found that globally, early childhood stunting and absolute poverty levels are closely associated with poor cognitive and educational performance in children, and that 200 million children under 5 were not fulfilling their potential (Box 1).

ECCD interventions can cut straight into the cycle of deprivation by providing all children with strong developmental foundations, and act as an effective means for reducing inequalities.

Studies suggest approaches like complementary feeding, micronutrients and breastfeeding could reduce total stunting globally, while effective pre-primary education programmes can help develop cognitive and social skills and improve school performance in the long-term. Interventions such as these are cost effective since addressing the causes of cognitive under-development is cheaper and easier than attempting to remedy it later in life and ultimately brings high returns to investment. Interventions to improve school performance through interventions to address micronutrient deficiency, parasites or infectious diseases have also had significant successes for young

school-aged children. In India, an experiment in the Delhi slums with a group of children of whom 69% had anaemia and 30% worms found that treatment significantly increased children's weight, pre-school participation rose by nearly 6%, and school absenteeism dropped by one-fifth; these gains were highest in the poorest areas.

#### Box 1: Indicators of early childhood under-development

While much is known of the value of intervening early to boost children's cognitive development, globally, poor children have a number of disadvantages which start early and stay with them through their lives:

- More than a quarter of all children under 5 in the developing world – 171 million children are stunted; 40% of them live in South-Central Asia, while 45% of Eastern African children are stunted.
- Global enrolment in pre-primary schools increased by 40% up to 2009, but 46% of children still lack access.
- Poorer children are far less likely to attend pre-primary school than their richer counterparts: in Ghana, rich children are nearly four times more likely to attend school than poor children.
- Some 200 million developing country children under 5 are not meeting their full developmental potential.

### Reducing Social Exclusion in Education

Chronic poverty is closely associated with marginalisation and social exclusion, with marginalised groups often lacking the political power to challenge their treatment by wider society and to secure their rights. Measures such as instruction in mother tongue languages have had positive effects on a large and measurable scale by making education systems more inclusive of entire, otherwise disadvantaged groups of children. However, for more effective inclusive education policies to be developed, policy makers will need to view excluded groups as citizens with valid cultures, lifestyles and livelihoods, and equal rights to education. Efforts such as increasing community participation in establishing and supporting inclusive schools, and training teachers to deliver more inclusive curricula can be advantageous as long as these approaches are rooted in local and contextual needs.

Socially excluded and geographically marginalised groups often lack physical access to education. School expansion programmes have been important in increasing access in developing countries, particularly in countries with large gender disparities. However, policy makers need to focus on innovations in education for geographically isolated people. For example in Ethiopia, the government increased spending on education and policy focused on the underserved areas, introducing a programme of rural school building and teacher recruitment and training.



Particularly vulnerable groups were targeted through non-formal schemes for hard-to-reach groups and school feeding programmes.

Positive action can reduce discrimination against girls in schools and at home. Education is also proven to strengthen women's social, economic and political rights, so that investments in educating poor girls can set in motion a virtuous cycle of gains including increased women's employment prospects, citizenship and participation and improved early childhood development as educated mothers are more likely to invest in girls.

A particularly direct effect of policies to advance gender equity in education provision has been the recruitment of large numbers of female teachers, creating new role models for women while also increasing demand for educated girls. The most effective measure however, remains governmental efforts to signal that girls' education is valued through legal or policy reforms, communications and public statements, and direct material support through girls' scholarships, stipends and cash transfer schemes.

### Improving Quality

A crucial development in thinking about the relationship between education, poverty and economic growth is the acknowledgement that it is less the quantity than the quality of schooling and the skills acquired that delivers pro-poor growth and therefore poverty reduction.

The very nature of chronically poor households means children are often required to work. Schooling must be seen to be particularly worthwhile if poor families are going to invest. Low quality education has higher opportunity costs for poorer children than it does for children from more wealthy backgrounds.

Better education is the most effective means of strengthening demand for school. Examples from countries that have managed to raise quality while expanding access, show that strong political will backed by good working partnerships between governments, donors and civil society are the foundation for sustainable, properly resourced policies. Improving textbook quality and supply, teacher training and support, keeping class sizes to a conducive level, and teaching in an appropriate language are also key elements.

Social and economic power inequalities make it harder for poor parents to hold school authorities to account to demand improvements in education provision. Governance failures are increasingly accepted as the main source of problems with public service delivery, ensuring accountability initiatives are therefore key for improvements. The biggest advances in school reform in the past decade are efforts to make schools and education systems more accountable to parents and communities. For example, increasing parental choice has succeeded in raising quality in high income countries those with

strong egalitarian traditions, however, more research is needed to evaluate whether this would also be the case for lower to middle income countries. In Brazil for example, increased finance for poorer areas through federal top-ups, and increased teachers' salaries, particularly in poorer regions where there was a scarcity, all helped raise the standard of teaching. In addition, policy reforms such as investment in high quality teacher training, policies encouraging innovations like school-level planning and multigrade teaching, and capacity building for education managers, are all factors behind the successes in improving teacher quality in poor regions in Brazil, and can provide valuable lessons for other middle income countries.

Another approach has been to decentralise, bringing management of core school functions, increasing control and bringing them closer to their primary users. Private schools have emerged in large numbers in some developing countries, often providing low-cost options where state schools are absent or of very low quality. As a result, the school-based management reform agenda along with the growth of private schools are seen to have the potential to improve educational access and quality for poor children.

#### Box 2: What does poor quality education mean in practice?

Findings from the *Early Grade Reading Assessment* in Northern Nigeria after three years of school found that most students did not have the basic reading skills necessary for later learning, including:

- More than half of pupils in Bauchi state and nearly three quarters of pupils in Sokoto state in Northern Nigeria could not identify a single letter sound;
- More than 70% of pupils in both states could not correctly read any syllables;
- Seven out of 10 pupils in Bauchi and more than 8 pupils out of 10 in Sokoto could not read any words correctly in one minute.

These findings indicate that by the end of primary, a large majority of children in this region will be unable to read, and therefore progress with their learning. This demonstrates clearly that failure in the early years sets children up for failure in later years.

### Progress for Young People

The direct costs of school is a major deterrent for chronically poor families, this can be due to a number of reasons including: vulnerability to livelihood shocks that disrupt school careers; the increasing costs incurred as learners move up levels of education; and girls and young women from poorer households are likely to face strong pressures to leave education and contribute to household domestic, care and subsistence work, particularly where adult women are in paid work.



A large number of innovative financial and other means of support have been shown to sustain poor young people through the often difficult transitions through education and into work. Conditional cash transfers (CCTs), school feeding schemes and scholarships can all play important roles, particularly in the present era of global economic volatility. Cash transfers have worked well in low and middle income countries such as Brazil and Mexico, including with chronically poor groups in rich countries such as the USA. Scholarships and stipends have also proven successful in lower income countries, in Bangladesh for example, greater gender parity was achieved by reducing the cost of schooling through the use of CCTs, scholarships and stipends, while in Cambodia 31% more girls transitioned from primary into lower secondary education due to the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR) programme.

People from chronically poor backgrounds are at greater risk of early dropout from education and associated risks of low paid or risky work. Interventions to provide an education safety net, to catch dropouts and early school-leavers and enable them to return to learning, have been emerging as a response to problems of interrupted transitions. Other schemes focus on rehabilitating youth who have fallen into crime, equipping them with life skills and other resources. For low income countries, second chance schemes can focus on enabling working children to continue basic education, as well as on enabling youth to connect to vocational and life skills learning. While in middle income countries, they could focus on at-risk groups and on returning them to education and training programmes.

The chronically poor can often also lack access to the broader life and social skills that are increasingly important in 21st century job markets, in addition to lacking the social networks through which jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities may arise. Youth from poor backgrounds are concentrated in the informal sector where the key source of training is through informal apprenticeships, but the poorest are often excluded from apprenticeships and other relevant vocational training opportunities altogether. As a result, the new generation of Technical and Vocational Education and Training programmes (TVETs), including 'second-chance' programmes are increasingly recognised as an effective mechanism to ensure the poorest more opportunities for advancement in education and employment. Programmes such as Jóvenes in Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay have shown a strong potential for smoothing the transitions into work of poor and disadvantaged youth in particular. One of the reasons for this success was that Jóvenes combined good targeting methods— 60% of participants are from low income families - with programmes designed to link training to wider skills with work experience in firms, and strong central management and financing with decentralised delivery.

## Focusing on Pro-Poor Growth

A number of policies and programmes specifically geared towards reaching and teaching the long-term poor have demonstrated success in the past decade. Interventions better tailored to educating children from chronically poor backgrounds emerged partly out of better understanding of why some children are 'hard-to-reach', vulnerable to dropout, or gain little learning while in school. These in turn reflect recent advances in thinking about and measuring poverty as a multi-dimensional, social, economic and political condition, these have brought some positive changes, but these are still not enough.

Closely associated with the challenge of addressing chronic poverty through education is the growing emphasis in global public policy on tackling inequality, both as a problem in its own right, but also as an obstacle to faster social progress, including on education. A better understanding of the intersections between education and chronic poverty will provide the necessary foundations for the creation of adequate policies. In the meantime, learning from recent initiatives in education, replicating their lessons, and scaling up where possible are the challenges for the remaining period of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

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## Resources

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