Ghana: Leveraging limited resources for change

Africa’s standout performer can teach policymakers around the world how to prioritise education

A dearth of financial resources need not shackle educators seeking to adapt their education systems to meet future needs. The best example of that is Ghana, a newcomer in the 2018 Worldwide Educating For the Future Index, developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit and commissioned by the Yidan Prize Foundation. It is the strongest performer among low-income economies and the highest ranked of the seven in Africa.

When comparing its overall index rank (25th) with where it stands in terms of GDP per head (46th)—a difference of 21 places—it is not a stretch to call Ghana the top overachiever in the index.

Its education system, to be sure, has clear weaknesses in its capacity to prepare students for the future. Teacher remuneration, for example, compares poorly with other index economies, and there is little evidence of collaboration between universities and business. The need to protect the environment—one of several criteria that contribute to a positive socio-economic environment for future-skills education—is not viewed as a national priority. Its strengths, however—particularly in the policy environment—compare favourably with wealthier education systems.

| Figure I. Top underdog Ghana, ranks and scores (out of 100) |
|-------------|-----|-----|
|             | RANK | SCORE |
| Overall     | 25   | 53.9 |
| Policy environment | 14 | 71.4 |
| Teaching environment | 32 | 42.7 |
| Socio-economic environment | 31 | 55.5 |

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

Paying close attention to policy

Ghana’s government has pursued a relatively consistent approach to education policy development over the past few decades. Policy objectives have been advanced in a series of long-term “education strategic plans” that, from the 1980s onward, have prioritised expanding the population’s access to basic education (particularly in rural areas) and eliminating illiteracy. Since the turn of the century, policymakers have also emphasised improving the quality of teaching. Progress has been made in both these areas, according to Ama Serwah Nerquaye-Tetteh, secretary-general of the Ghana National Commission for UNESCO. She notes, for example, that access to upper secondary education has improved markedly since it was made free across the country in 2017.1

Improving access and teacher quality will remain core objectives of the 2020-30 plan, which is currently being finalised.

1 On improving access to education, see also Ghana - School enrolment, Index Mundi; on reducing illiteracy, see Ghana - Adult (15+) literacy rate, Knoema
2 Unless indicated otherwise, this and other qualitative assessments about Ghana’s capacity to provide training in future skills are based mainly on interviews with experts on its education system conducted as part of index development

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and will reportedly also advance goals of introducing new pedagogical methods and forms of learning. These early, tentative moves to address the challenges of future-skills education are not yet supported by curriculum changes, however. Some upper-secondary schools are beginning to adopt problem-based learning, but policymakers have yet to mandate a concerted shift in this direction.

Ms Nerquaye-Tetteh maintains that students often gain such skills in out-of-school activities, but she believes that schools must do better at teaching students how to think for themselves. Assessment frameworks, on the other hand, are being revised along with education strategy, with a view toward supporting a gradual adoption of problem-based learning approaches. The index rewards education systems that have conducted recent reviews of strategy, curriculum and assessment frameworks that at least partially address the needs of future-skills education. Ghana’s work on its next education strategic plan involved such reviews over the course of 2018.

**Future-focused teaching: an uphill struggle**

Ghana’s performance in the teaching environment category is its weakest in the index, and underscores many of the challenges low-income economies face in implementing education reform. Ms Nerquaye-Tetteh acknowledges criticism that weak implementation often limits the benefits of good policy. “We have done well ‘on paper’ with many of our reforms,” she says, “but too often they remain just that—on paper.” She cites as a

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3 For an example of such criticism, see “New Education Reforms Stumble Because of Old Problems in Ghana”, World Politics Review, November 22nd 2017
recent example a 2016 policy on inclusion of students with disabilities that has yet to be put into practice. Enforcement of national standards for upper-secondary teachers is also weak; school administrators receive government-organised training in leadership and management, but not in areas such as delivering feedback to teachers.

Teaching is, however, a respected profession in Ghana, and the government has invested in teacher education to attract more young people to the field. According to UNESCO, 29% of university-level students are enrolled in advanced education programmes designed to nurture teachers—a higher figure than in any other index economy.

Indeed, the government has not skimped on education investment at primary, secondary or tertiary levels. Government spending per upper-secondary student in 2014, the most recent year data are available, was 45%—and spending per university-level student 75%—of GDP per head, according to UNESCO. These figures are considerably higher than most high- and middle-income economies, and they underscore the importance the government attaches to education amid many other public funding priorities.

Opening minds, shaping attitudes

A central premise of the index is that open, tolerant societies breed inquisitive and creative minds and provide fertile ground for young people to develop future-oriented skills. On the set of measures used to assess this (the socio-economic environment category), Ghana falls in the lower half of the index table. Global values are not on display, for example, in the low scores the country receives on environmental stewardship and attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups.

In other areas, however, Ghana compares credibly with other middle- and even high-income economies. High press freedom, for example, helped Ghana reach 11th place in this indicator. Ghana also ranks 13th on religious freedom, based on research conducted by the Pew Research Center. Ms Nerquaye-Tetteh points out that children learn tolerance of religious and ethnic diversity early on, and this is reinforced at all levels of education. “In a country such as ours with many different tribes and languages, and different religious beliefs, young people must learn to live with diversity.”

4 UIS.stat website, UNESCO
5 Government Restrictions Index, Pew Research Center, 2018