

Opinion

Improving learning in Ghana: Right approach matters

By Dr Bjorn Lomborg

GHANA has made great strides to improve its education system in the past decades, with near-universal primary school enrolment and equal access to schooling between boys and girls.

However, as in many other developing countries, the quality of education is still a critical challenge. In a 2016 assessment, 45 per cent and 30 per cent of 4th graders could not meet minimum standards in mathematics and English.

Better-quality learning in schools can increase equality and have a major effect on the country's overall development but decision makers need quality evidence for discussions on how to spend the limited resources at their disposal.

With many areas competing for public investment, which policies would do the most good for every cedi?

Ghana Priorities

Ghana Priorities, a collaboration between the National Development Planning Commission and the award-winning think tank Copenhagen Consensus, united 28 teams of economists around the common goal of examining over 80 initiatives to identify the most cost-effective solutions for the country.

Over the last year, the researchers have been examining initiatives in a variety of areas ranging from

health care to sanitation to find which would do the most good for each cedi spent in economic, social and environmental terms.

As a part of this project, Festus Ebo Turkson and Priscilla Twumasi Baffour from the University of Ghana and Brad Wong of Copenhagen Consensus studied two interventions designed to improve learning levels in Ghanaian schools: an expansion of Ghana's School Feeding Programme (GSFP) and a pedagogical approach called 'Teaching at the Right Level'.

School feeding

The GSFP was first implemented in 10 schools in 2005 but has since then expanded significantly and today provides one hot meal to 2.8 million children or 61 per cent of students in public basic school.

Children in communities

with school feeding have experienced improvements in learning levels and test scores, as well as increased height and weight.

The researchers studied an expansion of the program to 70 per cent of students, approximately 383,000 more children.

This expansion would have a total cost of GHe110 million per year, including the cost of food, preparation and logistics, and increased time at school for students and teachers.

They found that the intervention wouldn't have a high impact on overall school enrolment, thanks to Ghana's already near-universal levels of enrolment.

However, it would increase learning, especially for two vulnerable sub-groups:

children from households below the poverty line and girls.

Improved nutrition would lead to increased lifetime productivity and wages and an improvement in nutritional status and health beyond learning impacts.

Overall, the intervention could increase incomes among the beneficiary population by roughly GHe 2,300 per student over their lifetimes.

The total benefits of this intervention equal GHe 526 million per year, nearly five times the original investment.

Right level

'Teaching at the Right Level' (TaRL) targets instruction to the specific learning needs of children by splitting them into class groups based on learning levels rather than age, for one or two hours per day.

Two forms of TaRL were assessed in this study, one involving all students in grades 1-3 and another focused only on weaker students.

The first option could be delivered by public school teachers to 50 per cent of students in grades 1-3 for a total social cost of GHe7 million per year, consisting mainly of training for teachers, materials and monitoring.

As a result, the intervention would provide a modest learning boost to all students worth 1.5 per cent of earnings over their lives, or roughly GHe1040.

The total social benefits of TaRL for all students are over GHe700 million per year, and every cedi spent on this intervention would generate social benefits worth eight cedis.

Option

Another option is to perform the same intervention with a greater focus on weaker students, using teaching community assistants to assist regular teachers.

This would be costlier per student — at the same price, it

would reach 520,000 students in grades 1-3, nearly covering all of those who did not meet minimum learning standards.

However, the intervention would provide a larger learning improvement for weaker students and increase their earnings by 2.6 per cent over their lifetime, worth GHe1,775.

In total, this intervention would generate social benefits worth GHe520 million each year, six times more than the original investment.

Out of these interventions, broad-based TaRL provides the largest benefits to society but the alternative targeted at

weaker students results in higher average gains and could help reduce wage inequality in the future.

With school feeding, in turn, a disproportionate share of the benefits are experienced by girls and children from poor households.

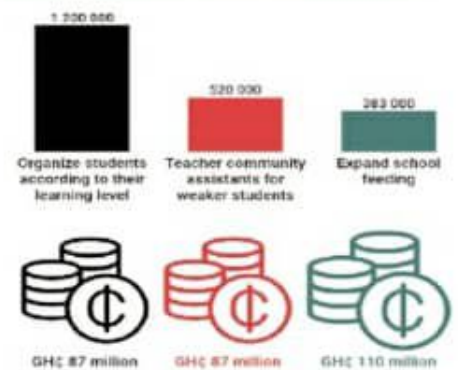
Adopting this intervention would make Ghanaian society lose out on GHe200 million of potential benefits per year but policy makers may deem the equity gains for vulnerable populations to be worth it.

The writer is the President of the Copenhagen Consensus

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Improved learning in primary school

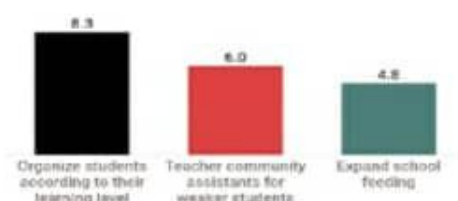
Students reached in grades 1-3 and total annual costs



Average increase in future earnings



Social and economic benefits for each Cedi spent



Source: Authors' paper assuming 8% discount rate