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## **Corruption and Access to Education: Evidence from African Regions**

### **Corruption, Gender and Sustainable Development (COGS), Policy Brief No.5.**

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Corruption, the abuse of public power for private gain can take different forms in the educational system, the most direct and immediate of which is bribery. Corruption occurs at the policy, central ministry, school and administrative as well as classroom levels. It plays an important role in determining access to education.

Corruption in education may act as an additional tax or a financial barrier to access to education, putting poor students at a disadvantage and reducing equal access to education. Bribes can be taken by teachers to facilitate admission to education or to inflate grades and scores on high-stakes exams.

Corruption results in lower spending in education. Public officials may misappropriate or pocket funds, which reduces educational system funding overall. Consequently, this leads to fewer resources to purchase necessary school equipment, hire qualified educational workers, or make improvements to education facilities, which all ultimately impact access to quality education.

There are two competing views on how corruption could affect education: grease the wheels versus sand-the-wheels. In the sand-the-wheels view, in countries that are highly regulated but lack effective institutions and systems of governance, corruption can compensate for institutional weaknesses, cumbersome bureaucracy and greases the wheels in the economy. In this case, the non-poor may use corruption to circumvent bureaucratic barriers and speed up processes to their advantage. However, while corruption may be beneficial for the non-poor, it may still be detrimental to the poor. Public goods and services are essential for the poor, who do not have readily available market alternatives. In addition, corrupt civil servants may leverage this situation and impose illegal demands in exchange for those public goods and services.

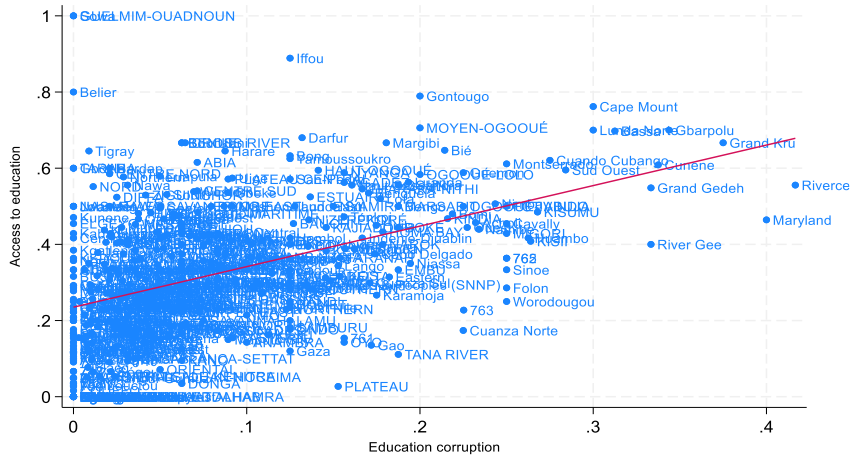
In the grease-the-wheels view, corruption can cause misallocation of resources and increases the difficulty and cost of accessing public services. Bribe demands can increase school fees and restrict access to education, especially for students from the poorest strata of society. Corruption can result in a higher loss of revenue for the state, which will be unable to increase the supply and quality of education in the long run (construction of new classrooms, library, computer centre, recruitment of qualified teachers, etc.). In addition, in a corrupt environment characterized by the lure of easy gain, students may lose interest in pursuing higher education through a pure mimicry effect. Furthermore, corruption can also reduce access to higher education by increasing uncertainty in the labour market which adversely affects individuals' decisions to invest in higher education.

By increasing the cost of education, it can exacerbate the gender gap in education enrolment. When parents have no financial capacity to send all children to school, it is often the case that boys are preferred due to cultural entrenched attitudes that place a higher premium on male education. They choose to keep their girls at home and, this in turn, increases the gender gap in education.

As part of our Irish Research Council funded project “*Corruption, Gender and Sustainable Development*”, we used Afrobarometer Survey data on people’s experiences of access to education in 457 regions of 34 African countries over the period 2019-2022 to examine whether in those regions, corruption in the education sector makes people more likely to report difficulty in obtaining public school services. As corruption in developing countries is also prevalent in other sectors outside education (e.g.: health, identity document, police), we also examine their multisectoral spill-over effects on access to education at the regional level in Africa. Understanding the effects of corruption on education in these regions can help policy makers to provide targeted solutions in this sector, thus making way to achieved SDG4 and the Agenda 2063 in education.

As shown in Figure 1, corruption in the education sector is positively associated with difficulty to obtain public school services. Further findings show that:

- African regions in which education corruption is more prevalent tend to be regions in which people face greater difficulty obtaining public school services.
- An increase in the education corruption of one percentage point is associated with an increase of difficulty to obtain public school services of between 0.65-0.99 percentage point.
- The incidence of corruption in other contexts is not significantly associated with access to education in African regions.



Our findings add to the existing literature that has shown how corruption is a serious threat to SDG4, thus rejecting the notion of corruption as “grease in the wheels” in favour of the “sands in the wheels”. To foster universal access to education in African regions, mitigating corruption in the education sector is of primary importance. Therefore, African governments should:

- increase efforts to measure and track education sector-specific corruption;
- make strong efforts to control corruption when increasing education expenditures to avoid waste of money;
- move away from direct payments through digital and automated payment to eliminate the direct exchange of money at the point of access to education;
- increase transparency in the educational system particularly around allocation and management of resources and information on user charges and exemptions;
- put in place strong institutions that are willing to proactively collect people complaints, investigate corruption allegations, and punish corruption;
- enhance mainstreaming of anti-corruption in the education sector and independent auditing and inspection in the education system.

You can find links to the full paper and all COGS’s work at the DCU ARC Website: <https://www.dcu.ie/arc>

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