



POLICY RELEVANCE SUMMARY



Access to Schooling and Employment in Cameroon: New Inequalities and Opportunities

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Cameroon entered the new century after a storied decade during which the country's economic crisis, adjustment policies, and continued growth in population combined to modify access to schooling and employment. These transformations raised concern about growing inequalities in schooling and employment despite continued public support to primary schooling. This study examines recent inequalities in schooling and employment, as well as the existing opportunities to address these inequalities.

THE STUDY

This study used data from multiple sources, including (1) two schooling surveys fielded by the first author in 1995 and 1999, respectively, (2) survey and administrative data from the Ministry of Education, and (3) data from the 1998 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey. Together, these data were used to examine trends in schooling inequality and in the patterns of employment. The study also used qualitative information (focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews of key informants) to understand some of the employment strategies used by recent graduates.

KEY FINDINGS

- *How much and why students drop out?* Among recent cohorts of school entrants, about 58 percent enter secondary school and 25 percent overall reach the final grade of secondary school. Dropout rates are higher around the key education milestones (6th, 10th, 12th and 13th grades notably). The lack of money remains the leading cause of school dropout (up to 46 percent of dropouts) but pregnancies are an important factor among females in junior high school. Cameroon could narrow its gender gap in education attainment, if pregnancy-related dropouts were reduced.
- *How have enrollments changed historically?* The historical growth in enrollment ratios in Cameroon since the 1970s has stalled during crisis years but there has been a rebound in the late 1990s. On the other hand, the growing competition for employment and the rising costs of schooling are fostering schooling inequality in both the levels and quality of schooling received by children from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- *Access to employment:* The freeze in public sector hiring in the early 1990s has raised the levels of graduate unemployment. While the more educated still have better access to formal-sector

employment, they now face *higher* levels of unemployment. Informal-sector employment accounts for an increasing share of urban employment.

- *Demand for education.* The demand for schooling remains strong, in spite of the high levels of graduate unemployment and despite public perception that formal employment is no longer the prime avenue for economic mobility. Many adults (especially urban and higher SES families) are willing to trade large families for educated progenies.

MAJOR POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The two policy challenges at the moment within this sector involve (a) continue to reduce educational inequities, and (b) help new graduates manage the transition from school to employment.

Educational inequities. Recent policies to make public education free at the primary level can help reduce inequality but more must be done at higher levels of schooling and about schooling quality. Different types of inequality call for different measures.

1. Rural-urban inequalities can be addressed by improved access to secondary schools.
2. Gender inequality can be addressed by increased advocacy of female education, gender-specific initiatives, and policy efforts to avert pregnancy-related dropouts at the secondary level.
3. Inequalities associated with family income can be addressed by some support to extended family systems that have traditionally buffered schooling inequality but that seem to be weakening. Tax and other incentives to host families may be considered. Village-level associations other NGOs are active in promoting schooling and reducing schooling inequalities but they could also --in the process-- increase regional disparities. Selective support to NGOs must be considered.
4. Inequalities associated with large family size could rise during this decade, as fertility begins to decline among the urban middle classes. These inequalities can be addressed by investment in population programs to reduce unintended fertility among rural populations.

Transition from school to work. Managing the transition from school to work must be a priority today. The window of time during which new graduates look for employment is crucial for the remaining of their life course and it has macroeconomic and political implications as well. This period is critical at a personal level because (1) youth make life-altering decisions about marriage, fertility, migration, (2) they are at risk of losing the skills achieved during their education, (3) they still have the energy and motivation to contribute to national development. At the macro-level, recent graduates are also an important constituency because this group is a large constituency, because its choices will matter for a longer time span (until they retire) and because their choices will greatly affect the next generation of Cameroonian children. Channeling the energy of this demographic group is the single most important factor in the future socioeconomic vitality of this country. There are several avenues and opportunities to do so. One is to foster self-employment and to improve the absorption capacity of the private and informal sectors. A second is to create opportunities for personal development, investment, and life planning for recent graduates. A third is to increase opportunities for public service. In all these efforts, Cameroon can draw from the experience of other nations while also building on its traditions. Several US institutions (National Academy of Sciences, Teach America, Personal Development Centers, High School All Stars, college athletics) are a source of selective insight. Additional programs can draw from traditional institutions such as savings groups, village associations, NGO activity, or traditional forms of apprenticeship.

Cameroon has several favorable opportunities. In addition to being politically steady over recent years, Cameroon can rely on its diaspora to support a remittance economy but also on a slowly emerging middle and political class to fund and support youth involvement in public service. Cameroon's very active civil society can also be brought to bear, as can the efforts of selected institutions that have begun to offer training and development opportunities for new graduates.