

POLICY BRIEF

13 January, 2026

LEAVING NO LEARNER BEHIND:

Evidence from DRC, Ghana, Madagascar, Rwanda
and Zimbabwe on Tackling Corruption Risks to Advance Education Access for
Women, Girls & Persons with Disability in Africa

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POLICY BRIEF

LEAVING NO LEARNER BEHIND:

TACKLING CORRUPTION AND DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION ACROSS AFRICA

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corruption in Africa's education systems undermines the right to education, reinforces social exclusion, and weakens institutional trust. Drawing on evidence from Corruption Risk Assessments (CRAs) conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Madagascar, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe under the Inclusive Service Delivery in Africa (ISDA) project, this policy brief will be used by all ISDA project partners for advocacy work. Though manifestations differ across countries, patterns of discriminatory and gendered corruption are continent-wide. Core risks include sextortion, bribery, patronage-based recruitment, and misuse of procurement processes, disproportionately affecting women, girls, children with disabilities, and rural

learners. As per the CRAs, corruption appears at the point of service delivery, where service providers interact and demands for bribes or additional unlawful payments. CRAs exposed instances of corruption, such as extra- registration fees for school enrollment, misuse of organizational resources presents other visible corruption risks, nepotism undermining the fair hiring of teachers, conflicts of interest and favoritism skewing fair public procurement procedures, "ghost workers" receiving state payments despite their absence; and employees pilfering school supplies from storage facilities.

This policy brief is structured to provide a clear roadmap from problem identification and evidence to actionable policy solutions. It includes: (i) an overview of corruption and exclusion in Africa's education systems, (ii) evidence and its implications, (iii) shared corruption risks and cross-cutting challenges, and (iv) a pan-African action agenda. The brief is tailored for policymakers, regional bodies, civil society, and development partners committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. THE CHALLENGE: CORRUPTION AND EXCLUSION IN AFRICA'S EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Across the continent, systemic corruption distorts the delivery of public education and reinforces inequality. Hidden school fees, sexual exploitation, nepotistic hiring, ghost workers, and diversion of school resources impact learners at every level. Girls are often pressured into exchanging sexual favors for grades or school admission. Children with disabilities face exclusion due to inaccessible infrastructure and negative social attitudes. Rural and poor learners are priced out through informal fees and favoritism in bursary allocation. Tackling this challenge is both a development necessity and a human rights obligation.

3. EVIDENCE BASE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

This policy brief is based on Corruption Risk Assessments (CRAs) conducted under the ISDA project in DRC, Ghana, Madagascar,

Rwanda, and Zimbabwe. The assessment used a mixed-methods approach to examine corruption in education across Africa. Surveys with over 5,000 students, parents, and teachers captured widespread experiences of malpractice and exclusion. In-depth interviews focused on victims - particularly girls, young women, and learners with disabilities - revealing how sextortion and bribery persist. Focus Group Discussions with students, parents, teachers, and community members highlighted the broader social impacts. Key Informant Interviews with education officials and oversight bodies uncovered systemic gaps, while document reviews of audits, budgets, payroll data, and policies supported institutional analysis. This multi-layered methodology ensured inclusive, credible, and actionable evidence.

The evidence reveals a troubling and deeply entrenched pattern of corruption that obstructs the path to inclusive, equitable education. It demonstrates that education systems are vulnerable to abuse, particularly at key decision points: admissions, grading, recruitment, payroll, and procurement. This vulnerability is compounded by the normalization of informal practices, weak accountability,

and lack of targeted interventions to protect groups at risk.

In the DRC, over 56% of respondents reported paying or witnessing bribes just to secure school admission. In Madagascar, more than 60% of parents of children with disabilities said their children were excluded from school due to illicit fees or discriminatory practices. Ghana's education system is plagued by systemic payroll fraud and ghost workers, draining resources away from underserved schools. Rwanda faces integrity risks in exam grading, internships, and school feeding programs, with female students particularly vulnerable to sextortion. Zimbabwe reports one of the highest levels of education-related corruption, with 72% acknowledging bribery in admissions and alarming levels of sexual coercion¹.

Collectively, these trends are not just administrative failings - they represent gross violations of fundamental rights, erode public confidence, and significantly undermine progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 on Quality Education,

SDG 5 on Gender Equality, and SDG 16 on Justice and Strong Institutions. The costs - social, economic, and human - are immense, and the urgency for transformative, cross-border action has never been clearer.

4. SHARED CORRUPTION RISKS AND CROSS-CUTTING CHALLENGES

Across African education systems, several interconnected risks recur:

- **Gendered corruption:** Sextortion is widespread yet underreported due to stigma, fear, and lack of redress. Female learners are disproportionately affected, particularly at decision points like grading, admission, and internships.
- **Discrimination and exclusion:** Learners with disabilities, pregnant girls, and children from low-income or rural households face systemic barriers to enrollment and retention. Exclusion often stems from informal fees,

¹ For more detailed country-specific findings, please follow this link [https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/left-](https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/left-behind-corruption-in-education-health-services-africa-2)

[behind-corruption-in-education-health-services-africa-2](https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/left-behind-corruption-in-education-health-services-africa-2) ,

inaccessible infrastructure, and institutional bias.

- **Payroll and recruitment irregularities:** Ghost workers, bribery, and nepotism in hiring divert funds from genuine service delivery. This undermines professional standards and morale in the teaching workforce.
- **Weak oversight and social accountability:** Existing community-based oversight mechanisms such as Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), anti-corruption committees, often lack statutory authority, financial independence, or safeguards against intimidation or retaliation.

These bodies are frequently sidelined, underfunded, and poorly protected, making it difficult to hold school authorities accountable or report wrongdoing.

These issues cut across the continent and reinforce each other, demanding a strategic, gender-transformative, and pan-African response that prioritizes inclusion and transparency. The following are key policy

- **Procurement and resource mismanagement:** Malpractices in school feeding programs, textbook distribution, and infrastructure contracts reduce service quality. Political interference in procurement decisions breeds impunity.

recommendations to address this challenge.

5. KEY MESSAGES ON THE POLICY BRIEF ON EDUCATION IN AFRICA

- A. While inclusive access to education is recognised as a fundamental human right and a shared development aspiration across Africa, its full realisation—both continentally and at individual country level—continues to be undermined by persistent corruption.** This is what is shown by recent Corruption Risk Assessments (CRAs) conducted by national chapters of Transparency International Rwanda in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Madagascar, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe, under the implementation framework of the

Inclusive Service Delivery in Africa (ISDA) project. The above is ISDA target countries.

- B. Lessons from the CRAs show that no ISDA target intervention country is immune to let alone free from corruption. There are widely different levels of corruption in the education sectors across countries, even though **corruption is generally experienced** by education service seekers and other stakeholders both **as a form of discrimination** and **as a persistent risk**. It occurs at key decision points in service delivery, with **gender, poverty, disability, and rural location** acting as major vulnerability factors for the victims.
- C. **Corruption risks** in education service delivery **vary across contexts**, but **several patterns are widespread** and therefore tend to be more or less **shared** across the continent. These include **payroll and recruitment irregularities, undue influence in procurement processes, and mismanagement of institutional**

resources—human, financial, and logistical. Additional risks stem from **weak performance of anti-corruption oversight** and social accountability **bodies**, reluctance to adopt and embrace the use of digital tools and systems, and inadequate legal frameworks.

- D. Despite differences in country-specific contexts, **corruption in Africa** undermines the right to education, **reinforces discrimination and social exclusion**: it most adversely **affects those already furthest behind in accessing education** and achieving learning outcomes, **particularly women, girls, children and learners with disabilities from poor and rural communities**.
- E. **Corruption** in the education sector **exacerbates existing inequalities**, which are already among the highest globally. It **threatens inclusive prosperity** and undermines **social cohesion**. It also **erodes public trust in state institutions, weakens**

political participation, and **results in the misappropriation of scarce public resources**. This **compromises education quality** and learning pathways and outcomes for the vulnerable, substantially reducing the return on public investment.

- F. Weak and inconsistent enforcement** of sanctions against service providers (offenders) who behave unethically by abusing power in pursuit of private gains remains a key driver of persistent corruption malpractices in the education sector.

- G.** Despite varying patterns and manifestations of corruption across countries, bold and decisive action to remove the multi-faceted barriers laying on the path towards inclusive education for all is needed. Overall, African **governments** -acting individually or collectively- **must prioritise comprehensive yet innovative policy and collaborative implementation practice reforms to address the leading root causes of corruption in the education service delivery** if inclusive and quality education for all is to be achieved.

6. KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: NATIONAL AND PAN-AFRICAN ACTION AGENDA

Policy issue	Policy Actions	National /Regional Responsibility to address the issue
Gendered corruption: sextortion, where sexual favors are demanded in exchange for grades, scholarships, or admission; gender-biased favoritism, denies girls equal access to learning materials, facilities. Such practices perpetuate inequality, undermine merit-based education, discourage girls from pursuing higher education, and silence victims due to stigma and fear of retaliation.	Strengthen Legal and Institutional Frameworks, enforce zero-tolerance policies on sexual exploitation and abuse in education systems, with explicit recognition of sextortion as a form of corruption;	National governments
	Build Gender-Sensitive Reporting Mechanisms by establishing confidential, safe, and accessible platforms for reporting cases of sexual harassment and sextortion in schools and universities;	National governments
	Empower Students and Communities to conduct awareness campaigns to educate students, parents, and communities about gendered corruption, its impacts, and available remedies	National governments
	Integrate Gender Accountability into Education Governance by ensuring that school audits, inspectorates, and anti-	National governments

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	corruption monitoring frameworks include gendered risks and track gender-based disparities;	
	Capacity Building for Educators and Administrators through training of teachers, administrators, and oversight officials on gender-sensitive ethics and professional conduct.	National governments
	Mainstream gender-sensitive mechanisms into continental anti-corruption frameworks and monitor how countries address gendered corruption.	The African Union Advisory Board Against Corruption (AUABC)
	Guide education ministries to integrate anti-sextortion and gender accountability policies within national education systems, ensuring that Women and girls' right to education is protected across Africa.	African Union's International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA)
Discrimination and exclusion: Female learners, children with disabilities, or linguistic minorities, learners from poor households often face barriers to enrollment, classroom participation and equitable access to learning resources. These inequities reduce educational outcomes and limit opportunities for social and economic advancement	Enforce inclusive education laws and anti-discrimination policies to protect all learners' rights.	National governments
	Integrate inclusive curricula addressing gender equality, disability rights, and provide assistive technologies and inclusive school infrastructure	National governments
	Conduct awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes and discriminatory practices; engage communities in dialogue to foster inclusive school environments.	National governments
	Develop scorecards and digital platforms to track equity and inclusion indicators; ensure accountability for schools and education authorities in implementing inclusive policies.	National governments
	Monitors member states' compliance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in the education sector.	The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)
	Provides technical guidance for inclusive education policies.	The African Union's Department of Education,

		Science, Technology and Innovation (ESTI)
	Ensure protection and equitable access for children in schools.	The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC)
	Engage civil society organizations in advocacy, oversight, and promoting inclusive education practices across Africa.	The African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), Civil society organisations.
<p>Payroll and recruitment irregularities:</p> <p>Payroll and recruitment irregularities occur during the hiring process and manipulation of salary management systems. Ghost teachers on payrolls, nepotistic recruitment, favoritism in promotions, and falsified salary payments reduce staff morale, misallocate resources, and undermine the quality and</p>	Implement transparent, merit-based recruitment and promotion systems.	National government
	Conduct regular payroll audits, including biometric verification of staff.	National governments
	Strengthen whistleblower protections for reporting irregularities.	National governments
	Train human resource officers and school administrators on ethical recruitment practices and financial management.	National governments
	Integrate payroll and recruitment monitoring into national education governance frameworks.	National governments
	Provide guidance on best practices in recruitment and payroll integrity.	The African Union Advisory Board Against Corruption (AUABC)
	Support capacity building and standardization of education sector HR policies.	The African Union's Department of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (ESTI)

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<p>Procurement and resource mismanagement: Procurement and resource mismanagement in education such as irregular contract awards, inflated pricing, diversion of school funds, and provision of low-quality learning materials reduce educational quality, increase costs particularly affecting marginalized learners.</p>	Enforce transparent, competitive, and digitized procurement procedures.	National governments
	Conduct regular audits and quality assessments of procured goods and services.	National governments
	Train school leaders and procurement officers on financial management and ethical practices.	National governments
	Establish mechanisms for community oversight and reporting of procurement irregularities.	National governments
	Align national procurement policies for education with anti-corruption standards.	National governments
	Provide guidelines for procurement integrity.	The African Union Advisory Board Against Corruption (AUABC)
<p>Weak oversight and social accountability Weak oversight happens when parents teachers Associations (PTAs) , school boards, and anti-corruption committees lack statutory authority, funding, or <i>protection from intimidation</i>. <i>Communities struggle to hold schools accountable</i>, resulting in unaddressed mismanagement, inequities, and corruption in education governance.</p>	Support digital procurement systems, training, and technical assistance.	The African Union's Department of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (ESTI) & AfDB
	Provide legal recognition and statutory authority for community oversight bodies.	National governments
	Allocate sustainable funding and protection mechanisms for PTAs and school committees.	National governments
	Build capacity in governance, financial oversight, and reporting processes.	National governments
	Promote active community and citizen engagement in monitoring school management.	National governments
	Promote standardized oversight guidelines.	The African Union Advisory Board Against Corruption (AUABC)

	Engage civil society in monitoring and reporting on education governance.	The African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)
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CONCLUSION

Corruption in Africa's education systems remains a systemic barrier to realizing inclusive, equitable, and quality education. Gendered and discriminatory practices perpetuate exclusion, particularly for those already furthest behind - girls, rural children, and learners with disabilities. The findings from the ISDA project reinforce the need for urgent, coordinated, and gender-sensitive reforms.

With clear evidence, shared risks, and existing regional frameworks, Africa is well-positioned to lead a transformation in education integrity. By strengthening laws, digitizing systems, empowering communities, and investing in youth, we can dismantle barriers and uphold every learner's right to education.

To truly leave no learner behind, Africa must act collectively and decisively - reclaiming education systems for equity, dignity, and development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is high time for African leaders, civil society, and development partners to act decisively - because educational integrity is not a luxury, but a human right and a cornerstone of Africa's future.

