

# ERF Policy Brief

## The Pitfalls of the Education System in Sudan: The Challenges of Transition, Transformation, Inclusivity, and Future of Work

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### About the author

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### In a nutshell

- *Inspired by the popular protests that swept autocrat Omar al-Bashir from power and drawing and reflecting on the revolution's slogans of "freedom, justice, and peace" in regards to the development agenda, this paper discusses the real risk that the education system in Sudan is widening inequality, disparity, and instability in the country.*
- *The education system in Sudan falls short of reaching its full potential and is a reflection of policymakers' poor foresight and failed leadership to develop an education system that not only meets the aspiration of the young generation but also serves as a precondition to transforming the Sudanese economy to the next level.*
- *The findings of the analysis advocate for the use of technology in education as an enabler and transformer to hasten the catching-up process. Key policy recommendations include that education models in Sudan need to reflect the demand for lifelong learning to cope and catch up with the technological and social changes brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution.*
- *Leveraging technology in the education sector is an important development for the transformation of the sector and to make sure that current and future generations are not left behind in the national efforts to build innovation capacities.*
- *The German vocational skills development model offers a great opportunity to change the course of higher education training as it ensures that the skills developed match those required by the labor market. It also offers an opportunity for lost talents in conflict zones and beyond. The negative perception and stigma with respect to vocational education in Sudan as "education for dropouts" must change as it is not in sync with the realities and needs of the 21st century.*

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**Introduction**

As a country in transition, Sudan is going through a relatively long process of social mobilization. Among other political and development achievements, fulfilling the iconic slogan of the youth-dominated Sudanese revolution of December 2018 (freedom, justice, and peace) hinges on closing education disparities and the underdevelopment status of many communities in Sudan while building an inspirational education system that meets the SDG agenda and the future of work associated with the emerging digital revolution.

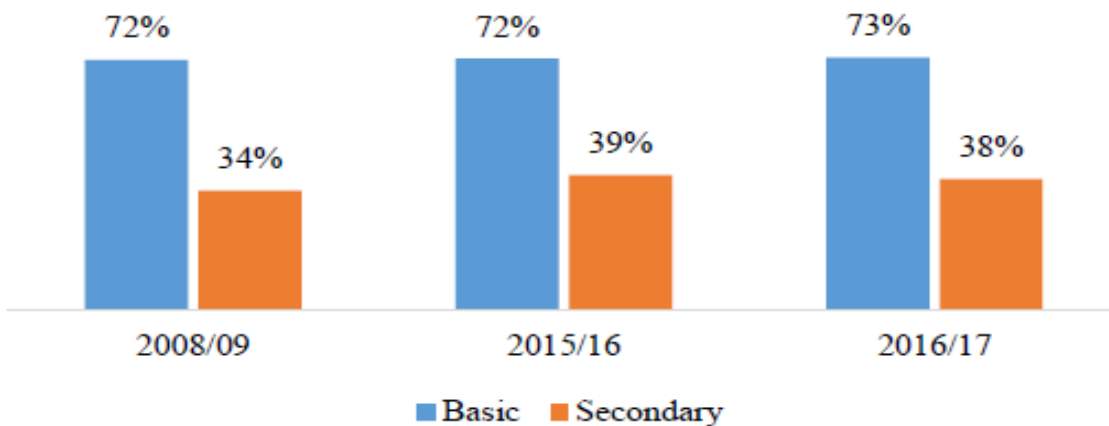
However, achieving universal primary education in Sudan – much less catching up with the standards of higher education ratios commensurate with the Fourth Industrial Revolution labor market requirements – is a profoundly challenging task (see Figures 1 and 2).

Therefore, the Sudanese educational system is in dire need of a drastic overhaul. In this context, the country must significantly increase public investment in the educational sector and enhance the quality of service delivery in order to eliminate the prevailing enrollment inequities and begin to adopt the educational sustainable development goals (SDGs) as a strategic framework for policy and overall resource allocation. Education should be seen as the centerpiece of the response to the Fourth Industrial Revolution in order to reap the benefits of the rapid pace of advancement in technology and the job-creating opportunities associated with the emerging knowledge economy.

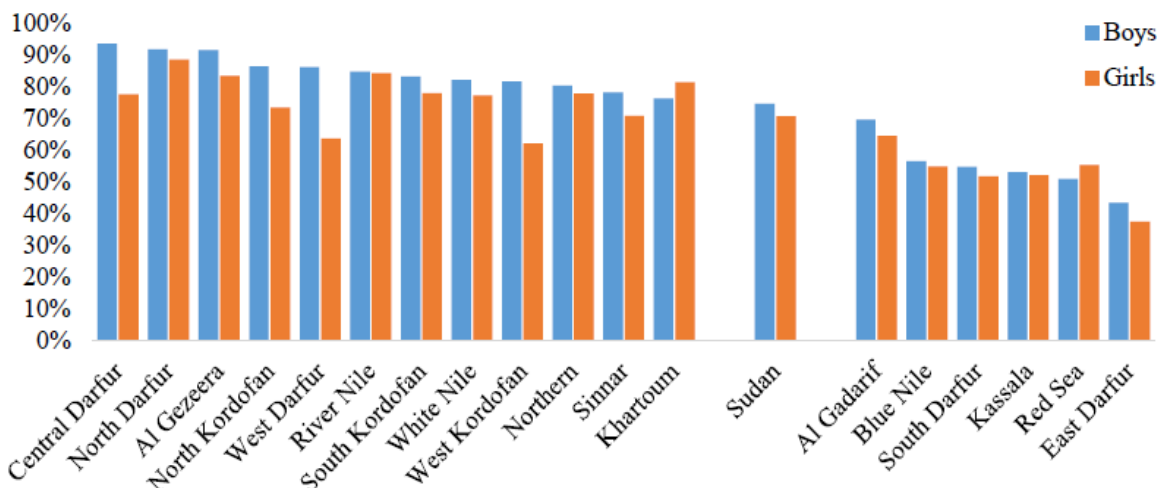
*Status of education in Sudan: Gross enrollment rate*

Notwithstanding the increase in the number of schools,

*Figure 1. Gross enrollment ratios in general education*



*Figure 2. Stark disparities in public education enrollment ratios between Sudanese states*



the existing capacity in basic and secondary schools is far from adequate to accommodate the population eligible for school. The gross enrollment rate (GER) in basic education remained stable at 72 percent between 2009 and 2016 before increasing by a single point to 73 percent in 2017. In secondary schools, the GER increased by five percentage points from 34 percent in 2009 to 39 percent in 2016 before dropping a point in 2017 to settle at 38 percent.

There is a consensus among all respondents in short interviews that envisioning the sector to catch up with the Fourth Industrial Revolution is a prerequisite even for economic growth, job creation, and filling the gap between labor market needs and the current skills mismatch. The policy adopted by the first revolutionary budget of 2020 was regarded as a milestone in itself by focusing on the social sector, and, for the first time, teachers received a jump in their salaries by almost 100 percent. Other findings are reported as drawn from both desk reviews and the perception survey with respect to two key questions: (1) the future of education and (2) what needs to be done for the sector. The key findings include:

- The supply-side dominating education policies of the 1990s did not change the enrollment ratio. The traditional analysis dominated the education sector for a long time and emphasized either public spending or curriculum while ignoring the facilitation of other infrastructures, such as communication methods that facilitate virtual education.
- This emphasizes that education system innovation goes beyond just a misleading notion or looking to it from increasing government expenditure; pro-poor spending will translate into better educational outcomes. Increasing the supply of schools in Sudan during the 1990s was the dominant policy practice as a policy instrument to promote schooling.

### *Education in Sudan and the catch-up game: Challenges and opportunities*

Due to war and other social and cultural factors, there are places in Sudan where it is hardest to catch up in education due to a lack of infrastructure provision, conflicts, or lack of infrastructure. In this case, the policy response should be commensurately comprehensive through the bundling of service delivery and technological advancement interventions that can bring about change and inclusivity. It is important to note that the great advantage of technology is affordability and the possibility to bring inclusivity once the model of traditional thinking changed. The analysis in this paper is underpinned by the four stylized facts below:

- Policy failure, ad-hoc emergency approaches to development, and lack of appropriate theoretical underpinning guiding the transformation of the current crisis in the education system in Sudan will eventually lead to more institutional and aspiration failure for the generations of Sudanese youth who are supposed to guide the renaissance project of the country.
- Such failure to catch up with the pace of technology will result in serious implications for the future of work and employability in a country characterized by a population dividend where youth constitute the majority.
- Moreover, the structure of Sudan's economy has not shown any change since its independence with respect to the composition of sectors' contributions. Leading education is responsible for such a structure as growth very much depends on more education sophistication.
- Increasing the social spending budget through targeted public spending or development partners' assistance to the sector is not always necessarily associated with better outcomes in social indicators. The practices of decentralization of the budget have shown different findings in Sudan.

### *Higher education, automation, and the future of work in Sudan*

The rapid pace of today's advances in technology and artificial intelligence (AI) requires a more comprehensive workforce and education strategy across a spectrum of measures, including policy, access, programs, and outreach. Higher education is unique in its power to catalyze social mobility, serving to bridge social, economic, racial, and geographic divides like no other force. As job markets constantly evolve, the future demands a system of higher education that is as dynamic and adaptable as the technologies around which our society now revolves.

While the degree still rules, by and large, we are slowly moving toward a reality with more focus on acquiring skills rather than degrees: namely the German model. Conventional wisdom dictates that the surest route to success in one's professional life lies at the end of a higher education degree and, not surprisingly, that holding a degree correlates with improved chances of employment as well as higher income (OECD, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> OECD Library (2019), Education at Glance OECD iLibrary | Education at a Glance 2019: [OECD Indicators \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](https://oecd-ilibrary.org)



The quality of higher education in Sudan has deteriorated markedly under the previous regime. Higher education in Sudan needs a serious review to meet current global trends in technology, the labor market, and the national development agenda.

Adopting the German vocational model and drawing practical lessons and domesticating them in the sector will stimulate a much-needed discussion on the desirability of combining both traditional academic approaches with an equally important vocational model to absorb the significant out-of-school numbers instead of simply recruiting them in the military. Such thinking will point the way toward more inclusive and sustainable development. The German vocational skills model offers a great opportunity to change the course of higher education training that matches the skills required for the labor market. It also offers an opportunity for lost talents in conflict zones and beyond. The negative perception and stigma with respect to vocational education in Sudan as “education for dropouts” must change.

### *Decentralization and education policies in Sudan: A general perception versus reality in the education sector*

Success on the basis of decentralization can be great and small. If decentralization is understood as political power and preferment, then the success will be small. For this reason, decentralization should be understood as a political commitment to delivering public services and political backing at the State level for the achievement of the goals, as well as performance improvement toward satisfying both national and international objectives. Whether decentralization helps or hinders the education policies in Sudan depends to a large extent on whether people have been oriented on “why” they have to decentralize before they know “how” they are going to decentralize and benefit from the decentralization as a means of devolution of power and policies.

To date, research indicates that decentralization in reform has largely fallen short in creating these conditions. Given the current nature of decentralization, there is no magic formula available for the Ministry of Education in Sudan from a macro perspective or micro at the state level. While some states like Eastern Sudan suffer from the demand side for education, other states in Greater Darfur lack enough supply side. It is evident that decentralization has not helped in bringing different policy perspectives in dealing with both the supply and demand of specific local contexts. The genuine efforts of governance to make a difference with the existing

### *How the ‘gig economy’ is changing the world of work*

- Automation and the gig economy are radically changing how we work.
- How we learn must keep up with these new technologies.
- We need learning to be cross-disciplinary, personalized, and focused on human skills.
- Together, the government and the private sector can future-fit education.

#### **What is platform work?**

Platform work is an employment model where individuals provide specific services organized through a digital platform that connects them with clients.

This can be a location-based app (allocating jobs such as food delivery, taxi, or plumbing services) or a web-based platform (outsourcing work like translation or graphic design). Platform work has increased fivefold in the last decade.

#### **What is the gig economy?**

Platform work is also known as ‘the gig economy’ as workers are paid by the ‘gig’ or task rather than by the hour.

Adopted from How the ‘gig economy’ is changing the world of work: <https://www.euronews.com/next/2021/04/07/the-gig-economy-a-crash-course>

pattern of local leadership are illusionary and still trickle down the national policies without enough consideration of their own local dynamic. Even in the case of appropriate policies, committed governance is more important than result-oriented policies.

### *Conclusion*

This policy brief argues that a comprehensive education policy framework is needed. Adopting digital platforms and learning programs can transform the current conventional education system in Sudan.

Finally, unless positive changes in policies and attitudes are made toward technology and there are efforts to “reinvigorate State capability” in terms of governance – thereby resulting in planning the education system and reconsidering an evaluative State – the desire to transform Sudan’s education system during the transition to meet both the national development agenda and international commitment (for example) will likely be an “illusory quest for results.”

The key challenges facing Sudan under the current transition and beyond are the urgent need to reverse the steady deterioration of the public service, stabilize the economy, enhance productivity, and improve the capacity of social service delivery in health and education, especially for conflict-affected regions and communities of internally displaced people. Although some of the



problems have technical solutions, the real challenge is to motivate the public to demand the economic legitimacy of the political system, and not to be content with electoral political legitimacy. This requires an agile and determined public that demands transparency and accountability by the government in the allocation of public resources and the delivery of services.

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**ERF at a Glance:** *The Economic Research Forum (ERF) is a regional network dedicated to promoting high-quality economic research for sustainable development in the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey. Established in 1993, ERF's core objectives are to build a strong research capacity in the region; to encourage the production of independent, high-quality research; and to disseminate research output to a wide and diverse audience. To achieve these objectives, ERF's portfolio of activities includes managing carefully selected regional research initiatives; providing training and mentoring to junior researchers; and disseminating the research findings through seminars, conferences and a variety of publications. The network is headquartered in Egypt but its affiliates come primarily from different countries in the region.*

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