Introduction

Every Namibian child has the right to education. This right is enshrined in the Namibian Constitution and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Education Act (Act No 16 of 2001) also emphasizes the right to education for all children.

However, many children from marginalized and vulnerable communities, in particular the San, Ovahimba, and children from poor and remote rural communities do not have access to quality education. The ongoing rollout of Universal Primary Education (UPE), from 2013, and Universal Secondary Education (USE), from 2016, aims to address this.

Educationally marginalized children are children who may not have access to formal education because of many forms of deprivation, including the socio-economic, political and cultural. The high levels of non-attendance at school mean that individuals do not reach their full potential. As adults, they are not able to contribute positively to the economy or society, leading to cycles of inter-generational poverty in these communities.

The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC) is developing and implementing policies to include more educationally marginalized children. Key among these are the Education Sector Policy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2013), and the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2013). The overarching aim is to increase access; provide inclusive, quality education; and support learners with a wide range of individual abilities and needs at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels.

About this brief

This brief:
- looks at the different categories of educationally marginalized children
- presents the numbers of educationally marginalized children who are not attending school
- analyses the implications of the lack of educational opportunities for the individuals and society
- looks at current programmes that support educationally marginalized children
- makes recommendations for ways to ensure better access to education for marginalized children.
The Sector Policy on Inclusive Education has identified several groups of children as being educationally marginalized. These include:

- children of farmworkers
- children from remote areas (such as the San, Ovahimba, Ovazemba and Ovetue)
- children who live and work on the street
- children in squatter camps
- children in resettlement and refugee camps
- children with disabilities and impairments
- children who are considered ‘over-aged’ in the current education policies (both inside and outside the education system)
- children of families living in extreme poverty
- children who head households
- child labourers
- children with learning difficulties
- orphans and vulnerable children
- the girl-child
- the learner-parent
- children with extreme severe conditions or chronic illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS
- children who are gifted/talented
- children with emotional and behavioural challenges

While there are many categories of educationally marginalized children, common to all is that they are likely to be similar socio-economically and to come from low-income households. This is also reflected on a regional basis, with low levels of attendance among children from the poorer and more remote regions.
The positive relationship between education, economic growth and development has been well established. There is thus a link between inequality of schooling and income inequality, especially in emerging and developing economies. More affluent income groups are able to supplement any deficiencies at public schools with other resources as well as cover all hidden costs; they are also able to afford well-resourced private schooling, which in many cases produces better educational outcomes than public schools. Children from wealthier families are thus better prepared for tertiary education and for formal employment than children from more disadvantaged communities.

Limited access to education negatively impacts economic growth, and contributes to socio-economic challenges, such as: high levels of illiteracy, unemployment and income inequalities; low economic productivity; poor health; and increased social division. All these factors perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

In Namibia, socio-economic status has a major impact on school attendance due to the additional costs that accompany education. Although school fees in primary and secondary schools have been abolished, there are still considerable hidden costs, such as school uniform, stationery, sanitary products, transportation and school meals. For rural and remote communities with little formal income, the cost of transport to and from school is a significant barrier, as is the cost of hostel fees. Because of the migratory and mobile nature of communities such as the San or the Ovahimba, attending school year-round is an additional challenge.

Orphans and vulnerable children are more at risk of being caught in cycles of poverty and inequality. They are more likely to start sexual relations at an early age, which runs the risk of unwanted pregnancy and the contraction of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The limited education of these children will continue to pose a socio-economic burden on Namibian society. According to the National Review on School Drop-out and Out-of-School Children in Namibia of 2015, factors contributing to high drop-out rates include poverty, high unemployment rates, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, long distances between learners’ homes and school, social and economic exclusion, and child marriage.
The high rates of non-attendance among educationally marginalized children are alarming. Due to insufficient data covering all categories of marginalized or at-risk children, the following groups are covered in this discussion, as figures for their school attendance are more easily available: the San, Ovahimba, Ovazemba and Ovatue; orphans and vulnerable children; and children with disabilities.

Language as an indicator

Due to the legacy of the ‘race classification’ system during apartheid, home language continues to be a rough socio-economic indicator, especially for the most marginalized communities like the San.

As Figure 1 shows, most learners who reach the end of secondary school come from higher-income households, predominantly English- and Afrikaans-speaking.

Low attendance rates among orphans and vulnerable children, and children with disabilities

Orphans and vulnerable children

According to the Namibia Inter-censal Demographic Survey 2016 Report, there were 129,920 orphaned children aged 18 years and below. Of this number, 116,916 orphaned children aged 19 and below attended school in 2016. This means that 13,004 orphaned children were not in school. There are a number of orphans in the school system aged 19 and above due to high repetition rates and late starting of school. Even though they are not yet able to support themselves, they are not officially classified as orphans. In terms of financial support, only 38 per cent of orphaned children, and 22 per cent of vulnerable children receive government grants. This is an indication of how the system as a whole is not reaching these children.

Children with disabilities

The results of the Namibia 2011 Census Disability Report show that the proportion of persons aged 5 years and above who never attended school has decreased from 30.4 per cent (2001) to 28.9 per cent (2011). The report further indicated that these children are less likely to start school than their peers without disabilities and have lower rates of staying and being promoted in schools. A significant number of children with disabilities aged 5 years and above had left school, while about 29 per cent had never attended school (2011). These figures suggest that efforts should be made to ensure access to education for children with disabilities, starting as soon as early childhood and pre-primary education, to prepare them better for primary and later, secondary education.
A number of programmes aim to support educationally marginalized children.

These include the provision of food, financial grants and upliftment programmes.

More extensive, cost-efficient and focused forms of support are necessary.

Some programmes are dedicated to supporting educationally marginalized children and facilitate their attendance at school. While these programmes are having an impact, it is clear that educationally marginalized children will need wider, better-coordinated and more focused forms of support to get them to school and to keep them in school for longer.

The Namibian School Feeding Programme

The Namibian School Feeding Programme (NSFP) was established in 1992 by the then Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture in cooperation with the United Nations World Food Programme. Through the provision of a fortified maize blend meal, the NSFP helps to relieve hunger and improve concentration and school attendance. The long-term objective of the programme is to support the government’s policy of assuring adequate primary education for the whole population.7

The programme has expanded to support more primary school children, particularly in rural areas. In 2011, 270,772 learners benefited from the NSFP, and of these 183,348 (68 per cent) were orphans and vulnerable children.8

Social grants to orphans and vulnerable children

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare provides social grants to orphans and vulnerable children. These include the maintenance grant, the foster care grant, the place of safety allowance, and the special maintenance grant for children with disabilities under the age of 16. These grants aim to improve the socio-economic situation of children and thus increase their school attendance. However, only an average of 30 per cent of all eligible children who are in school received this support in 2016.

The Integrated School Health Programme

The Integrated School Health Programme is a joint collaborative programme between the Ministry of Health and Social Services, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and other stakeholders. Inadequate levels of care, early stimulation, proper nutrition and a clean and healthy environment, can undermine the children’s physical, psychosocial and cognitive capacities. Equitable access to basic quality care services is critical to ensure the realization of children’s well-being and mitigate, and where possible remove, health- and safety-related barriers to education. The challenge is for the programme to reach the most marginalized of the more than 750,000 children that make up the Namibian school-going population.9

Upliftment programmes in marginalized communities

Through the Office of the Prime Minister, the government has undertaken a number of development initiatives aimed at uplifting the lives of marginalized communities, in particular the San and Ovahimba. These targeted initiatives include access to early childhood development, literacy programmes and scholarships.
All eligible children receive government grants:
The MoEAC, in co-operation with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare and the Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, should establish a targeted and well-coordinated mechanism by which government grants are rolled out to all eligible children.

Address the hidden costs of education:
Eliminating school fees alone has not been enough to guarantee attendance. This is because of the many other expenses that parents/learners have to cover. Government could consider introducing zero-rated items for VAT to make it easier for marginalized children to cover costs such as uniforms, stationery and transport.

Strengthen collaboration with other ministries:
To minimise risks faced by marginalized children, including orphans and vulnerable children, and children with disabilities, the MoEAC, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Social Services and other line ministries, should strengthen the Integrated School Health Programme through community engagement and awareness campaigns. The programme should contribute to minimising health-related barriers to education, and reducing the risk of teenage pregnancies and exposure to substance abuse among school children.

Engage and support civil society stakeholders:
The MoEAC should engage key stakeholders, including NGOs, to devise innovative ways to reach out to educationally marginalized children. There are currently a number of organizations working with vulnerable children to provide them with scholarship money to cover some of the related costs to education. Other NGOs are working to help keep San children in schools. These programmes could be scaled up and mainstreamed.

Endnotes
1 The education policy for orphans and vulnerable children defines an orphan as a child under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents due to death. A vulnerable child is a child who needs care and protection.