

# Trends of Primary Education Wastage in Ethiopia: The Challenges for Sustainable Development Goals

**Teklu Tafase Olkaba PhD.**  
**College of Education,**  
**Jimma University, Ethiopia**

## **Abstract**

*The objectives of the study was to delineate the status of primary education wastage in Ethiopia in line with the target set for education in the documents of sustainable development goals ( 2016-2030). The study was conducted in Gambella region, one of the Federal states of Ethiopia with exclusive primary education (1-8) data for five consecutive years (2013-2017). Moreover, serious discussion conducted with regional education experts to solicit the realities on ground that substantiate the quantitative data of primary education wastage. The study confirms that the cumulative primary wastage for (2013-2017) rated as 58 % and the trends of wastage exacerbated starting from grade 5 and the worst at grade 8 where wastage recorded as 80% at turning point of primary education. The study deduced that primary education wastage is still the bottle-neck in Ethiopia and difficulty to achieve the goal set at the end of sustainable development goal (2030). Strong intervention should be implemented to mitigate factors associated with primary education wastage in Gambella region of Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** Ethiopian Primary education; education wastage; sustainable development goals

## **Introduction**

In today's global knowledge convergence, the economic development of any country depends on its citizen knowledge development that contributes to economic and political landscape reforms. It is evident that countries with enhanced education are rendering broad social and economic benefits at large scale. In this regard the quality and equity of education outcomes leads to improved productivity, increases and powers economic development by improving human capital. Therefore it is important for developing Countries like Ethiopia to invest in primary education, as a basis for secondary school for improving middle level human capital (UNDP, 2016).

Since the endorsement of 1994 Education and training policy, Ethiopia has made significant improvements across the education sector especially on increased enrollment in primary education even though nearly 20% lower than in the rest of low-income countries of Africa (UN,2014; USAID ,2010). However, the primary education efficiency (defined here as the percentage of students that enroll in primary school that reach the final year of primary school) remains a significant challenge in Ethiopia (MOE, 2016). This depicts that education wastage challenges persist with respect to efficiency in the ongoing sustainable development goal of (2016 – 2030).

The Post Millennium Development Goals or Sustainable Development Goals of (2016-2030), especially the 4<sup>th</sup> goal of the document aim at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all. The 4<sup>th</sup> goal further claims to ensure for all girls and boys complete in free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030. However, since the endorsement of the sustainable development goal (2016-2030), there is no fresh data for regions to monitor their primary education efficiency that helps to closely monitor the ongoing process of primary education learning process. Therefore, this

study is timely to investigate the real status of primary education wastage within the transition periods of sustainable development goal (2013-2017) of primary education.

### **The Ethiopian Education Policy Frameworks**

The framework of the 1994 Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia developed different strategies and reform tools that sustain equity and access of education to its citizens. Among others, five Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) were endorsed since 1996/97 with a long-range rolling plan focused on the comprehensive development of the education sector over a 20-year period (MOE, 2016).

The ESDP translates the policy statement into action by providing sector-wide implementation framework. ESDP I covered the first five years, 1997/98–2001/02. ESDP II 2002/03–2004/05 and ESDP III covered the respective periods 2005/06–2009/10, ESDP IV covered a periods of 2010/11 -2014/15; and ESDP V to cover a periods of 2015/16 - 2019/20 (Ethiopian Ministry of Education Sector Development Programs: 1998, 2002, 2005a, 2010b, 2011, 2015 & 2016). The first millennium development goals (2000-2015) endorsement overlapped with the Ethiopian education sector development program, ESDPII, III and IV. These periods were highly remarked with the success in access and equity especially in primary education. As the main target for MDG 2 was to “ensure children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015 ( MOE, 2002). For instance, the government of Ethiopia’s expenditure on education has climbed from 2.3% of GDP in the early 1990s to nearly 4.5% in 2015 (World Bank , 2015). This shows that Ethiopia has been exerting a lot of efforts in ensuring enrollment rate ( MOE, 2016).

Different official documents and several studies confirms that the first four ESDPs in Ethiopia remarked as a successful strategy in expanding access and moving primary education towards the goal of universal primary education by 2014/15 in accordance with the government’s commitment to meet the education for all targets and millennium development goals (MOE,2015). Among others ESDP III endorsed in 2005/06–2009/10, came up with General Education Quality Improvement Program, GEQIP, (World Bank, 2005 & 2013, MOE, 2017, Olkaba, 2015). GEQIP constitutes six packages namely: Teacher development program, curriculum improvement, school Improvement, Education planning and management, ICT and civics and ethical education (MOE, 2010). From the six GEQIP packages, School Improvement is more comprehensive packages that promotes good learning environment for students that accesses all educational facilities expected in reducing education wastage and promoting retention rate ( MOE, 2010).

However, there are still challenges in Ethiopian primary education efficiency. The main reasons for the low completion rates are associated with children dropping out from school and repetition in the same grade. The dropout rate is very high in Ethiopia (MoE, 2013a; MoE, 2015). The recent years studies (Woldehanna, 2011; Woldehanna & Adiam Hagos, 2015) confirm that the dropout rate and repetition rate were exacerbating from 2010 to 2013 at rate of 8% at national level. This finding remarks that, in Ethiopia, primary education wastage is still a challenge in the ongoing sustainable development goals.

### **The Analytical Framework of the Study**

The study was framed with in the theoretical framework of post millennium development goals (Post-MDG) or the sustainable development goals (2016-2030). One of the post- MDGs or sustainable development goals of 2016-2030 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. It further explain that all girls and boys complete free and equitable primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes ( Goal4.1) by 2030 (UN,2015). From the post-MDGs theoretical framework, one can ask a question: are

students enrolled in grade one completing their primary education (1-8) in Ethiopia? If not how comes to secondary school? The post- MDGs or the sustainable development goals of (2016-2030), explicitly remarked goal 4.7 as:

*By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (Goal 4.7 ,p.21)*

Theoretical premises of post MDG Goal 4.7 explicitly remarked that all learners must acquire the knowledge and skill needed for sustainable development and equitable life style. However, this hypothetical premise becomes true if and only if students' primary education completion rate or efficiency improved across the board. If education wastage, particularly, primary education wastage exacerbates, it is difficult to achieve Goal 4.1 and 4.7 of post MDGs respectively. Therefore, the framework of this study is to illustrate primary education wastage in Ethiopia in line with the post MDGs or the sustainable development goals of (2016-2030).

According to the Ethiopian Ministry of education (MOE, 2017) education statistics abstract, the national level primary education (Grades 1-8) dropout rate by 2016 was 11.65%; whereas the national repetition rate in the same year was 7.2%. The other question here to be raised is which region of Ethiopia suffers from high disparity in primary education wastage compared to the national primary education efficiency? This could need policy attention to reduce disparity in education efficiency across the board at regional level of one country.

According to the base line projection of Ethiopian, primary education efficiency for sustainable development goal in 2016 was 42.9 % (MOE, 2016; Donnenfeld; Porter; Cilliers; Jonathan & ,2017). That means the baseline for Ethiopian primary education during the incoming sustainable development goal in the year 2016 was 42.9% (Donnenfeld et.al,2017). The Ethiopian government planned to reach the primary education efficiency to be 73. 7% by 2030. Compared to African low income countries, where the primary education survival rate / efficiency at the year 2016 was 63.8% and planned to reach their primary education efficiency rate at 77.5% by 2030 (Donnenfeld et.al, 2017). One can understand that Ethiopia is suffering from primary education wastage compared to African low income countries which still makes it difficult to project the standard set for 2030 target of primary education efficiency. In general terms, the document of sustainable development (2016-2030) puts the linkage of education with any development dimension as follows:

*Enhancing education can render broad social and economic benefits. Improved education outcomes leads to improved productivity, increases wages, and powers economic development by improving human capital. Economic downturns are less likely to occur in countries with high levels of quality and equitable education. In the case of middle-income countries, individuals who complete primary and secondary education are more likely to find formal employment and less likely to commit crimes or place strain on public healthcare systems. Improving education can also improve health outcomes, lowering infant mortality and fertility rates (UNDP, 2016, p.107).*

In order to make the real sustainable development goal in delivering quality and equitable primary education, primary school students must stay in the school and complete their primary education (1-8) in the case of Ethiopia. Otherwise, the sustainable development goal (2016-2030) would be of narrative decoration statements for the countries like Ethiopia. This is why the study was designed to confirm the status of primary education wastage compared to the national level status that contributes goal 4 of to the sustainable development goal by 2030.

For instance the standards were set for low-income counties in Africa for primary education in the strategy documents of sustainable development goal by 2030. Accordingly, the study conducted on Ethiopia development trends assessment of education sector (2011-2015), Donnenfeld; et.al (2016) explicitly revealed the realities of primary education wastage in Ethiopia.

During the Post Millennium Development Goal(2001-2015) the implementation of the Ethiopian education and training policy committed to realize universalization of primary education. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Education report, the number of primary schools has increased from 12,089 in 2001/2 to 33, 373 in 2015 while the students’ enrolment has shown drastic increment over the same period. Net enrollment rate was raised from 54% in 2002/03 to 94.3% in 2015(MOE, 2015). However, regarding efficiency of primary education, previous huge regional, urban-rural and gender gaps were observed in the past MDG (MOE, 2016).

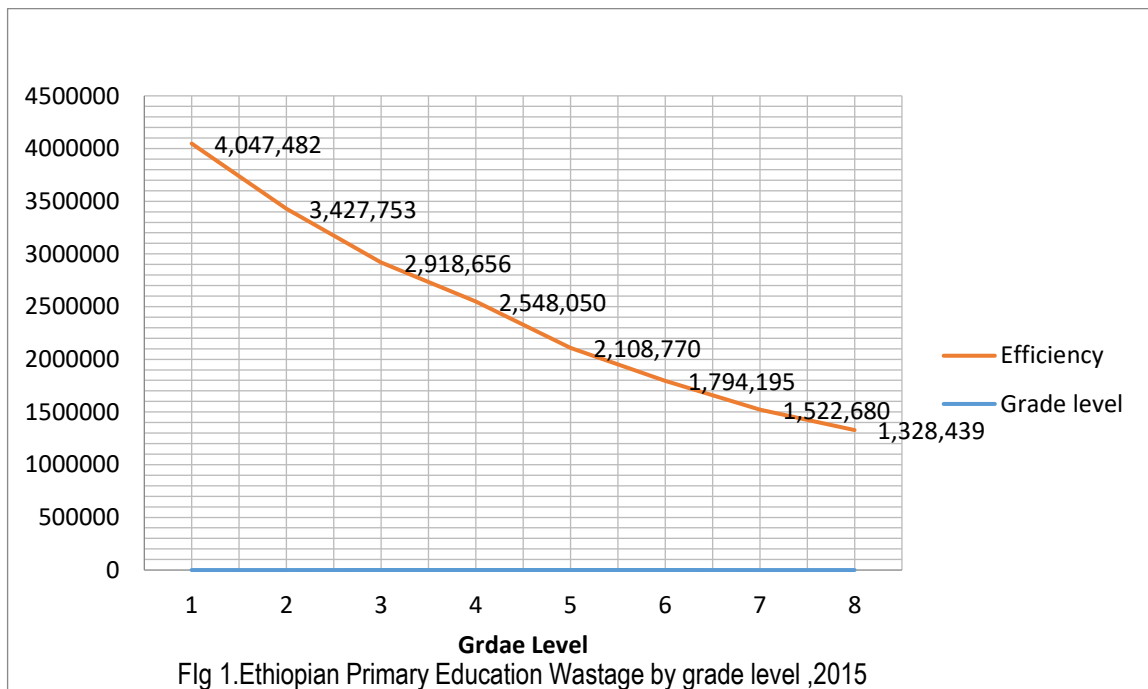


Figure 1 portrays that from the total enrollment of 4,047,482 at grade 1 level, only 1,328,439(32.82%) completed grade 8 at the end of the past MDG, 2015. This shows how Ethiopian primary education wastage increased during the past MDG and needs close investigation for the ongoing sustainable development goal (2015-2030).

As Figure 1 depicts, 67.18% of the students were not completing their primary education and the figure only shows the national level data. On the other hand there are still regional disparities in primary education wastage, as there are different regions with different geographical and socio- economical patterns in Ethiopia. Therefore, the research question of this study was formulated as ‘what is the current trend of primary education wastage in Gambella region of Ethiopia in response to the 4<sup>th</sup> goal of Sustainable Development Goals 2016-2030). From the nine regions and two city administrations in Ethiopia, this study particularly depends on data of one region, Gambella Region, one of the fertile regions in the South West of Ethiopia.

### **Method and Design of the Study**

The study was conducted in Gambella Region, one of the federal regions in Ethiopia, found in South West of the Country. The study totally depends on primary education (1-8) enrollment, dropout and repetition rate that affirms the regional primary education efficiencies.

- The study employed quantitative data generation from Gambella Region Education Bureau statistical data and qualitative data from regional senior education experts that substantiate the quantitative data for informed reason of education wastage.
- The five years consecutive data derived from Gambella Regional Education Bureau annual statistical abstracts and Ethiopian ministry of education abstract as secondary data sources to consolidate the regional disparity from the national education efficiency management were pillars of analysis that demarcates the current primary education wastage of Gambella region, Ethiopia.
- Descriptive quantitative analysis was made to describe with figures and facts of primary education enrollment rate, dropout and repetition rate of five consecutive years (2013-2017).
- After the quantitative data collection and analysis were completed the researcher conducted series of focus group discussions with seven Gambella region senior education experts and four regional education leaders to recapture realities on the ground that stipulate primary education wastage in Gambella region.

### **Results**

This section presents the result of the study showing and analyses of empirical data pertaining to primary education wastage trends in Gambella Region, Ethiopia

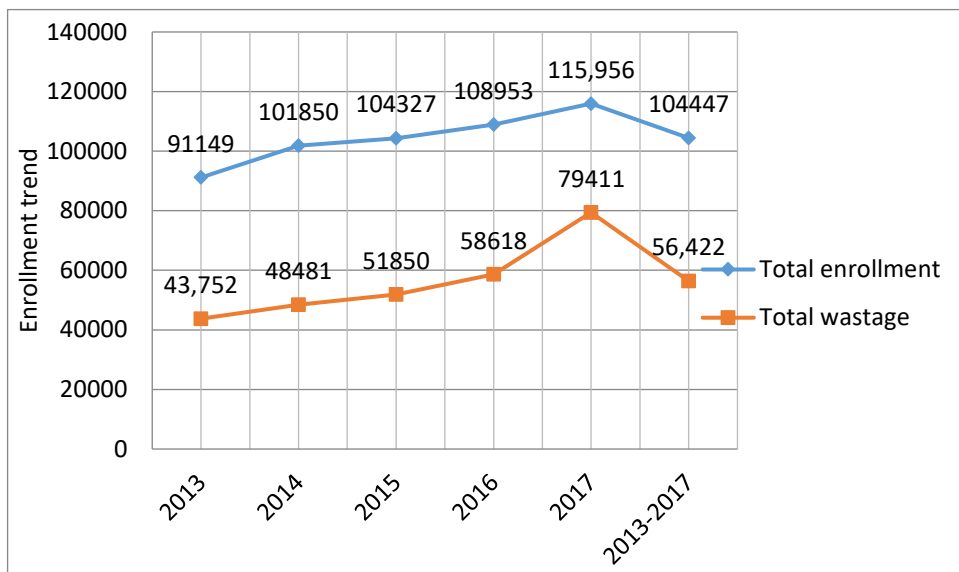


Fig 2. Trends of enrollment and wastage in primary education in Gambella Region (2013-2017)

Figure 2 depicts that both enrollment and wastage of primary education (2013-2017) in Gambella region in similar phase of increment. The five year trends confirm that in every year almost half (50%) primary education wastage recorded. Especially high primary education wastage was recorded in 2017. The trend of primary education wastage is above the standard set for low income countries to meet primary education goal of sustainable development by 2030 which is 63.8 % at the base line year of 2016.

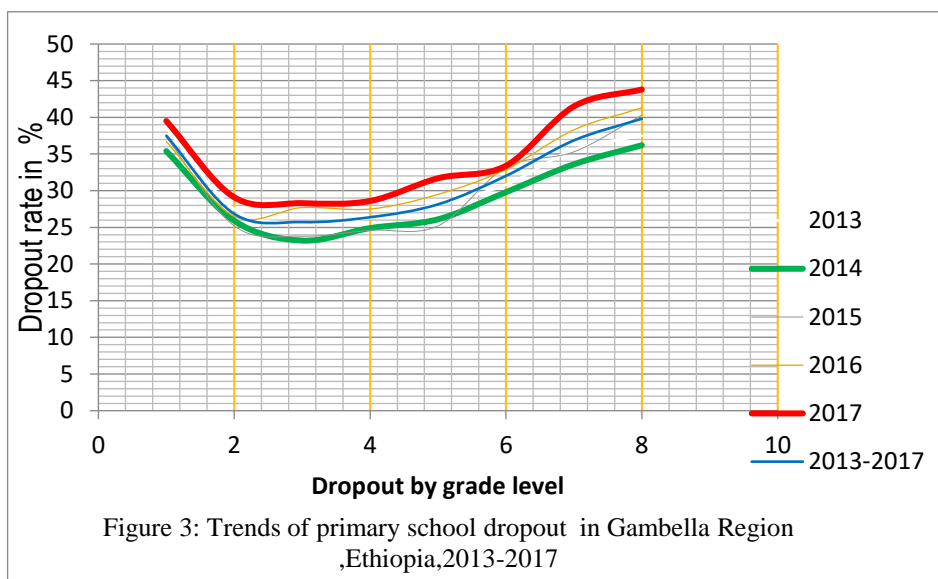
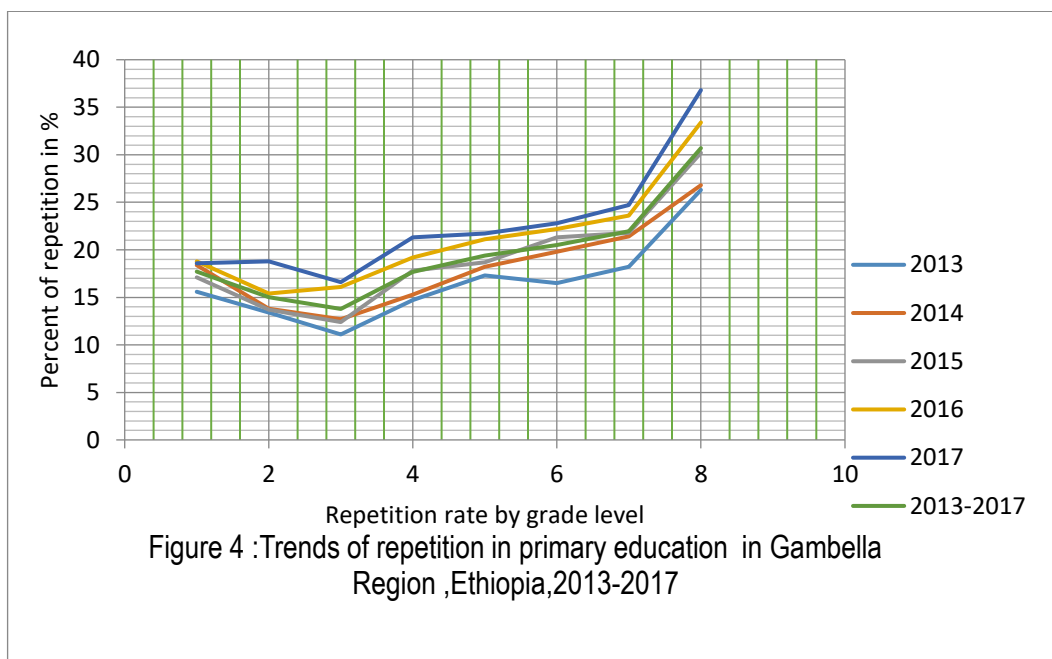


Figure 3: Trends of primary school dropout in Gambella Region ,Ethiopia,2013-2017

As observed in Figure 3, the trends of dropout in primary education sharply increased in the last four year (2014 – 2017). In terms of grade level high dropout recorded in grade 1, and again sharp dropout recorded starting from grade 4 and becomes a worst at grade 8. For instance about 43% dropout recorded in grade 8 in 2017. Medium retention rate is observed only in grade 2 and 3 in the last five year (2013-2017).

According to the Ethiopian Ministry of education (MOE, 2017) education statistics abstract, the national level primary education (Grades 1-8) dropout rate by 2016 was 11.65%; whereas the national repetition rate in the same year was 7.2%. Contrary to National level primary education wastage data, in Gambella region high disparity rate of dropout and repetition was observed compared to the national level primary education wastage.



Regarding trends of primary education repetition rate of Gambella region, high repetition rate is recorded in grade 1 and continuously sharp increment of primary education repetition from grade 4 to 8 in the last five years (2013-2017). From both Figure 3 and 4 above, it can be concluded that both dropout and repetition rate of primary education are exacerbating primary education wastage of Gambella region in Ethiopia.

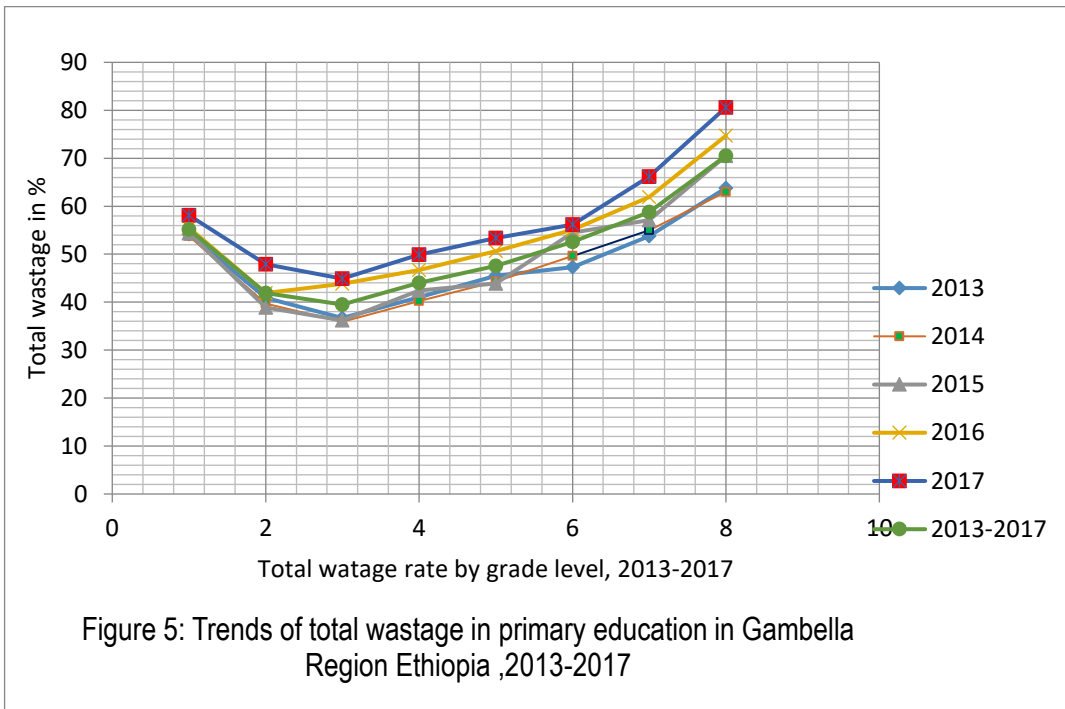


Figure 5 portrays the total wastage of primary education, dropout and repetition rate as whole. The Figure reveals that the cumulative effect of both dropout and repetition rate makes total primary education wastage of Gambella region, which is the Worst from (5 -8) grade levels, where more than 50% of students were not completing the grade in which they were enrolled. It is surprising that about 80% wastage was recorded at grade 8. Grade 8 in Ethiopian education structure is where primary education leaving certificate is concluded. From this primary education wastage projection, one can come to a conclusion that, it is difficult to make equitable quality primary education, especially to meet goal 4 of sustainable development by 2030.



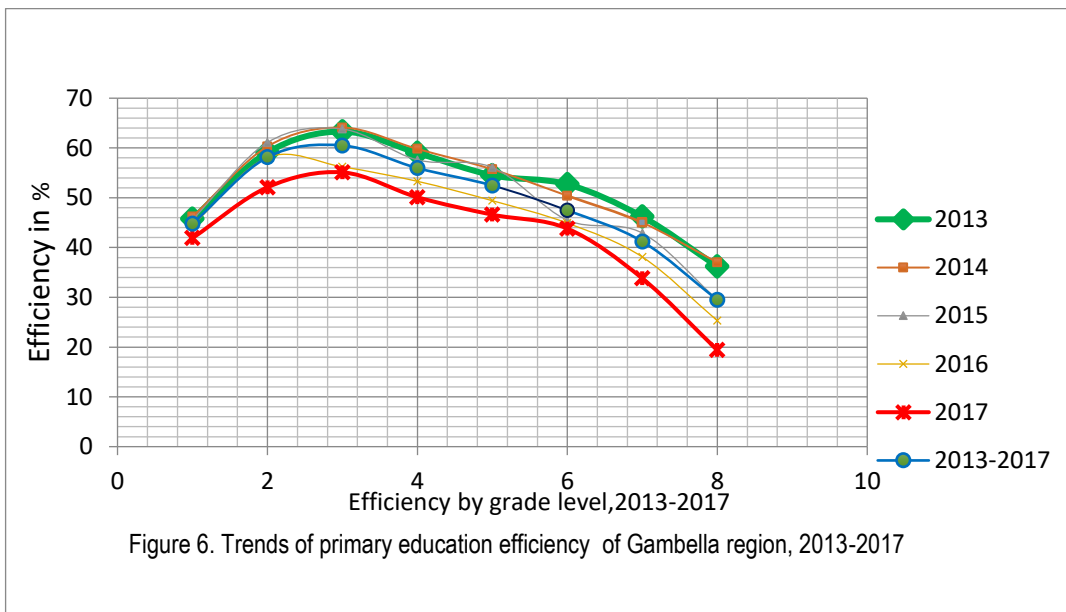


Figure 6, contrary to Figure 5, depicts sharp decrease of primary education efficiency from grades (5-8), with moderate efficiency at grades 2 and 3. Therefore, in order to reverse the trends of primary education efficiency, it is better to make pertinent efforts to avert the impact on primary education success. Otherwise, it is impossible to meet the goal set for primary education to succeed by 2030.

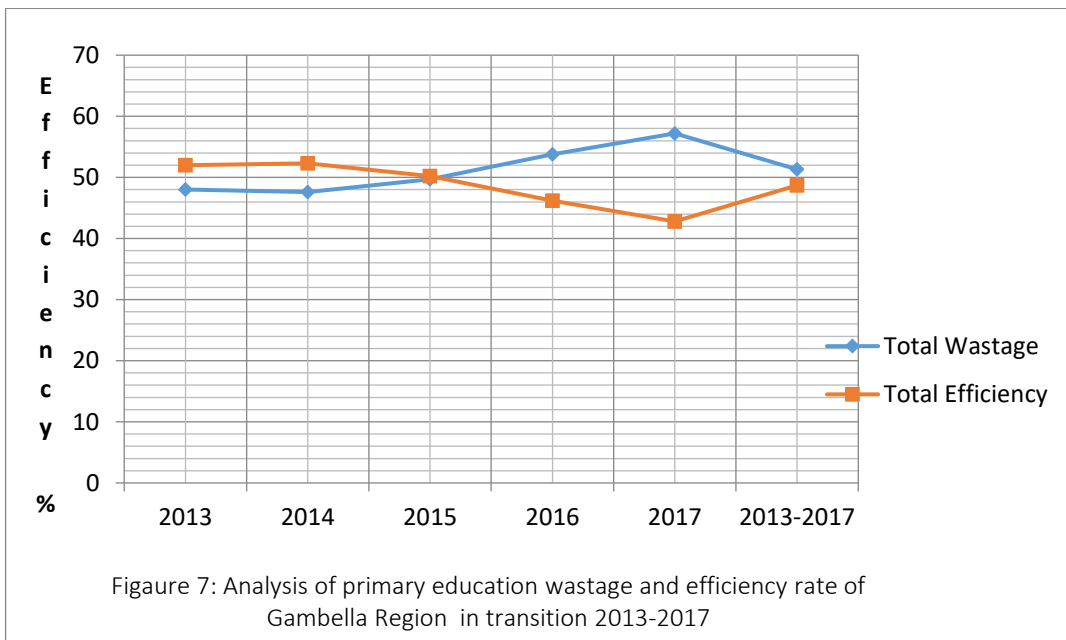


Figure 7 reveals the transition periods of primary education efficiency trends of Gambella region. The trends of the Figure depicts that both primary education wastage and efficiency are on equal range (about 50% record was observed, at transitional period, 2015). However, from 2016-2017, primary education wastage is gaining an upper hand, which is against the Ethiopian government education policy, especially, Education Sector Development Program V (ESDPV) and also against the goal 4 set for education in the sustainable development goal by 2030.

In order to substantiate the quantitative data, a series of focus group discussions made with Gambella region education experts and educational leaders revealed the realities on ground in different dimensions. Concerning the primary education wastage in Gambella region, the discussants portrayed that:

*The structure of primary education itself had an impact on completion rate; it takes 8 years stay in school for completing primary education. As most of our primary school students are aver-aged, they do not want to stay for eight years in primary school as they get older and older, and search for jobs to meet their daily basic needs*

From the discussants' point of view, the current structure (1-8) of primary education in Ethiopia is another factor that facilitate student dropout. Similar finding (Derbssa,2004) portrayed that the length of primary education is affecting the completion rate of primary education in Ethiopia. By the same token, it will have an impact on the undergoing post MDGs(2016-2030).

Moreover, the Gambella education bureau experts claimed that the dropout at primary education was the major challenge during the former Universal Primary Education, UPE, and still the same trends observed, even more exacerbating dropout trends observed at the begging of post MDGs (2016-2030). The discussants summarized their views as:

*During registration, both school age and above school age children are registered. Immediately within the first quarter of a semester dropout of students starts. In some cases there is a time when about 45% of primary school dropout was recorded in a semester. School distance is another challenge for primary school. It is known that most of our rural primary school is directly related with the poor life of students' families to support their students with daily basic needs. In Gambella region, most of the community settlement is too scarcely. Because of this reality the distance between schools is far from each other and the school establishment in unevenly distributed.*

From the discussants point of view, the inability of the families to support their children with basic needs, the unevenly distribution of primary school and school distance are other factors. These realities can be recorded as the major challenges in addition to the length structure of primary education in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the discussants from Gambella region education experts had portrayed realities on grounds regarding repetition rate in primary education in the Gambella region:

*The repetition rate of primary education become exacerbating after grade 4 completion. Especially in upper primary (5-8) most students repeat the same class twice. The reality is linked with free promotion and self-contained teaching methods for the lower grades (1-4). It is also associated with the*

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*quality of teachers engaged in self-contained teaching for lower classes. For instance primary education teachers are letting their students pass from grade to grade without critical assessment. This happened as a result of poor teachers' efficiency evaluation. As the first primary cycle (1-4) is a basis for the second cycle primary (5-8), the poor quality education continues and repetition rate increases from time to time from grade 5-8 and eventually the worst at grade 8 where regional assessment is conducted for primary school leaving certificate.*

The above observation puts different paradoxical scenario regarding repetition rate of primary education in Gambella region which is difficult to mitigate within the short periods of time. The issues of self-contained and poor quality of teachers, teachers' poor student assessment at lower grades are the main problems that have direct impact on upper grade completion rate.

## **Discussions**

Primary education wastage in Ethiopian is still as a major challenge towards actualizing the plan of sustainable development goal 4 of education by 2030. The region where this study conducted, Gambella region, low primary efficiency is recorded in the last five years (2013-2017). As objectively portrayed in the statistical graph in all figures of the previous sections, high repetition and dropout rates were recorded in upper primary level.

Gambella education bureau experts identified factors associated with primary education wastage as structure of primary education, inability of families to let their children to stay and complete 8 years of primary education. Similar finding by Derbsa (2004) portrayed that the length structure of Ethiopian primary education was an impediment for Ethiopian to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015. On the same vein it is difficult for Ethiopia to achieve the primary targeted goals of sustainable development by 2030. Other economics researchers, Waldhanna, et.al (2011) remarked that the wastage rates of upper primary education in Ethiopia (5-8) are a function of different ranges of factors linked significant distances between homes and schools, limited transportation infrastructure, inability of families to afford school fees and material costs, a demand for labor among Ethiopia's largely subsistence agriculture population and low levels of parental education (Waldhanna, et.al, 2011).

Moreover this study confirms high disparity of primary education efficiency between region and national level projections. Both the national level education statistics and the literature review confirms that Ethiopian primary education (Grades 1-8) dropout rate by 2016 was 11.65%; whereas repetition rate in the same year was 7.2%. Contrary to the national level, this study confirms that dropout and repetition rate of Gambella region primary education in 2016 was 41.3 % and 33.4 %, respectively. At national level the completion rate for grade 8 is 54.1%, where as that of Gambella region completion rate is 19.8 %. On the other hand the completion rate of grade 5 at national level is 85.2% while that of Gambella region is 47.54%

Furthermore , the worst record of primary educational wastage in Gambella region was recorded in 2017 in grade 8, where the total wastage reached 80% or efficiency rate dropped to 20% , and the cumulative range of wastage of primary education (1-8) recorded as 58% in the year (2013- 2017). It can be concluded that unless the regional primary education is improved, it is difficult to reach the target set for primary education in in sustainable development goal by 2030 at national level. It can be claimed that the length of primary education structure, school distance, students family economic status, over-

aged student enrollment at primary school are factors affecting the completion rate of primary education in Ethiopia that directly affects the goal set for sustainable development goal 4 of education sector by 2030.

### **Conclusions**

Ethiopia as a low-income country in Africa operating below the standard set for primary education in the strategy documents of sustainable development goal (2016- 2030. For instance African low income countries, where the primary education survival rate / efficiency/ in the year 2016 was 63.8% and planned to reach their primary education efficiency rate at 77.5% by 2030. The Ethiopian primary education during the incoming Sustainable development goal in year 2016 was 42.9 and planned to reach the primary education efficiency to be 73. 7% by 2030. This depicts that Ethiopia is suffering from primary education wastage compared to African low income countries. In this particular study high dropout and repletion rate recorded in starting from grade 5 and become the worst at grade 8.

The study revealed the realities on ground regarding primary education wastage in one of the federally stated region, Gambella region, in Ethiopia. Even though significant improvements has been recorded since the 1994 education and training policy endorsement, the current path of primary education wastage is becoming a bottle neck for the Country in general and of Gambella region where this study conducted in particular.

### **Recommendations**

In order to reduce primary education wastage in Ethiopia in general and that of Gambella region in particular, the following recommendations are forwarded that could materialize the primary education target set in sustainable development goal by 2030.

1. Revisiting the structure of primary school
2. Strengthening School feeding practices that reduces dropout rate of primary school students
3. Improving the quality teacher training system for primary education-especially it pertains to the assessment and evaluations by teachers
4. Reducing school distance
5. Revisiting the current school improvement program

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