



Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 51st Session

Right to Education

Country Review: São Tomé and Príncipe

Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK

June 2025

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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I. Introduction

1. Broken Chalk has drafted the following report as a stakeholder in contribution to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for São Tomé and Príncipe. As Broken Chalk's focus is on combating human rights violations within the educational sphere, the contents of this report and the following recommendations will primarily focus on the Right to Education.

2. São Tomé and Príncipe is a small island republic off the coast of Central Africa with a population of approximately 220,000. The country faces several obstacles in ensuring that all of its residents have access to education. The nation's formal education system comprises pre-primary, elementary, secondary, and limited tertiary levels. Children between the ages of 6 and 14 are required to attend school. Still, many children, particularly those living in rural and isolated areas, face obstacles to attending and finishing formal education due to poverty, poor infrastructure, and a lack of transportation options. ⁱ

3. In recent decades, there has been progress in enrolment rates as pre-primary gross enrolment tripled from 21.4% to 71.4%, while secondary enrolment increased from 20.3% to 62.6% between 2000 and the early 2020s. ⁱⁱ However, the quality of education is still a significant concern. Learning outcomes are poor, despite São Tomé and Príncipe achieving universal access to primary education in 2010. According to national evaluations, one in four students at the end of grade 4 and two out of three at the end of grade 2 lack fundamental reading abilities. With 14% of students repeating a grade in 2017, the primary education repetition rate is high and significantly higher than the average in sub-Saharan Africa. ⁱⁱⁱ

4. Poor educational outcomes are caused by issues such as underqualified teachers, outdated curricula, and a lack of funding. Additionally, there are persisting linguistic difficulties as Portuguese, the official language of instruction, is not the first language of many children, who speak local dialects at home. There are still gender disparities, with girls encountering more barriers to education as a result of cultural expectations, early marriage, and traditional gender roles. ^{iv} Furthermore, children from low-income families are twice as likely to be absent from school as their more affluent peers, and nearly one-fifth of these families have been forced to withdraw children from school due to financial difficulties. ^v

5. The RGUES project, which aims to increase quality, equity, and inclusion through teacher training, digital learning resources, and strengthened institutional capacity, is one recent initiative that is part of a continuous effort to reform the country's education system. ^{vi} However, ongoing issues with governance, such as corruption and ineffective bureaucracy, impede development and equitable access to quality education. ^{vii}

II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

6. São Tomé and Príncipe was last reviewed in January 2021. The country received 17 recommendations regarding the Right to Education, 13 of which were supported. ^{viii}

7. The inclusion of people with disabilities in health care and education, as well as continued efforts to strengthen advanced programmes in both sectors, were among the

most prevalent and supported recommendations in the last Universal Periodic Review cycle. By Sustainable Development Goal 4, states have committed to ensuring free, quality public education for all children, with a particular focus on equal access for boys and girls. The recommendations also emphasised the necessity of reducing dropout and repetition rates, especially among girls, improving the quality of education at all levels, and employing more qualified teachers while providing continual professional development. There was strong support for extending compulsory education, supporting young people, particularly girls, in returning to school, and hastening the transition of school dropouts into professional life. A recurring theme was the call for São Tomé and Príncipe to ratify the Convention against Discrimination in Education, so that all children, especially pregnant girls and those with special needs, can get inclusive, gender-responsive education. Together, these recommendations highlight the international community's dedication to promoting inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all citizens of São Tomé and Príncipe.^{ix}

8. The 2021 National Report of São Tomé and Príncipe emphasises continuous efforts to improve human rights, especially in the areas of health and education. In addition to lowering dropout and repetition rates, the government has prioritised expanding access to and the quality of public education, supporting teacher training, and encouraging inclusive education for girls and children with disabilities. There is a focus on initiatives to extend the years of compulsory education and guarantee free public education for all.^x

9. The report also outlines the country's commitment to ratifying international conventions like the Convention against Discrimination in Education and integrating people with disabilities into health and educational services. Despite economic limitations, São Tomé and Príncipe continues to seek international support to further its development and human rights goals, demonstrating a clear intention to protect and expand the right to education for all citizens.^{xi}

10. The 2021 UN Compilation Report emphasises that São Tomé and Príncipe has made progress in expanding access to education, with a gross primary school enrolment rate of 110% and significant improvements in social indicators. However, there are still issues with high rates of repetition and dropout, continuing inequalities associated with household wealth, and the quality of education. São Tomé and Príncipe should ratify the Convention against Discrimination in Education and fully implement inclusive policies, especially for vulnerable groups, girls, and children with disabilities, according to recommendations from UNESCO and other UN bodies.^{xii}

11. Along with specific actions to address gender disparities, support out-of-school youth, and guarantee that all children, including those from the poorest families and rural areas, can access quality education on an equal basis, the report also emphasises the need for improved data collection to inform education policy. The international community's emphasis on promoting inclusive, equitable, quality education as a fundamental human right in São Tomé and Príncipe is reflected in these recommendations.^{xiii}

12. The 2021 Summary of Stakeholder submissions acknowledged São Tomé and Príncipe's progress in increasing school enrolment rates. Still, they also expressed concern about ongoing issues in the education sector, such as inadequate data collection, a lack of funding for monitoring bodies, and the lack of an independent institution to investigate human rights violations, especially those affecting children. The alignment of national legislation with

international child rights standards, improved recordkeeping on child rights violations, and increased funding for child protection organisations were all recommended by civil society actors.^{xiv}

13. Increased efforts to address issues, including early marriage, physical punishment, child abuse, and the need for inclusive education for children with disabilities, were also demanded by stakeholders. Providing birth certificates to all children, ensuring all births are registered, and raising public knowledge of children's rights were among the recommendations. To protect and promote the right to education for all children in São Tomé and Príncipe, stakeholders emphasised the importance of aligning domestic laws with international conventions and enhancing government accountability and resources.^{xv}

III. Persistent Shortage of Qualified Teachers and Low Retention Rates

14. One major and persistent challenge in the educational system of São Tomé and Príncipe is the lack of qualified teachers. Even with recent improvements, a significant percentage of teachers, especially in rural and isolated areas, remain underqualified or lack formal training. According to recent data, about 60% of teachers in the country have not received formal teacher training, which directly affects the quality of education and student learning outcomes.^{xvi} High student-teacher ratios and a lack of resources for professional development and teacher education in São Tomé and Príncipe exacerbate the situation.

15. People are further discouraged from entering or staying in the teaching profession by low salaries, difficult working conditions, and insufficient support. Due to high attrition rates and the ongoing need for recruitment, many qualified teachers leave for better opportunities abroad or in other fields.^{xvii} Because of this teacher turnover, classrooms are frequently staffed by temporary or inexperienced educators, which compromises the consistency and quality of education. The issue is exacerbated by the lack of continuous professional development and mentoring, which leaves teachers unprepared to meet the various needs of their students.

16. Government initiatives (e.g., Quality Education for All Project, Educational Policy Charter, and Teacher Mentoring Programs) and international partnerships (e.g., World Bank and Global Partnership to Education (GPE)) to improve teacher training and certification procedures have been part of the efforts to address this issue.^{xviii} These efforts have, however, encountered many challenges, such as limited funding, logistical challenges, and the slow pace of systemic change. Therefore, the lack of qualified teachers remains a significant challenge to improving educational outcomes and ensuring that all children, regardless of their location, have access to quality education.

17. Education must be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable to fulfil the right to education guaranteed by international human rights law. The lack of qualified teachers directly harms the acceptability and adaptability of education. Without enough trained teachers, schools struggle to adapt their teaching methods to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. As a result, students do not receive the quality instruction necessary to develop foundational skills. This violates the principle of equitable access to quality

education by creating unequal learning opportunities and sustaining cycles of underachievement, especially for the most disadvantaged students.

IV. Inadequate Infrastructure and Resource Constraints

18. There are significant deficiencies in the educational infrastructure in São Tomé and Príncipe's educational system, especially outside the city. Basic utilities, such as reliable electricity, clean water, and proper sanitation facilities, are often lacking in many schools, particularly those located in rural and remote areas. Furthermore, classrooms are usually overcrowded, and there is limited availability of textbooks, digital equipment, and other essential learning materials.

Students find it challenging to regularly attend school due to the country's geographic spread across several islands and isolated rural regions, which further complicates access to education.^{xix}

19. Children in remote areas frequently struggle to get to school safely and on time due to underdeveloped transportation networks and poor road conditions. High absenteeism and dropout rates result from this, especially for children from low-income families who could also feel pressured to take care of younger siblings or contribute to the household income. Due to the government's limited financial resources (only 5.16% of GDP was spent in education in 2022) and heavy reliance on foreign aid (including a \$24 million World Bank grant in 2024 and a total of \$13.4 million in Global Partnership for Education support), funding for school resources and infrastructure is sometimes unpredictable and insufficient.^{xx}

20. Due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and conflicting priorities for scarce resources, progress in school construction and repair has been slow despite some investments. The lack of infrastructure not only affects students' physical well-being but also undermines the quality of teaching and learning. For many children in São Tomé and Príncipe, the cycle of poverty persists, and efforts to improve educational outcomes are severely impeded in the absence of safe, well-equipped schools.^{xxi}

21. All children, regardless of where they live, must have physical access to education as part of their right to an education. Significant obstacles to school attendance and participation are caused by inadequate infrastructure and resource limitations, particularly for children living in rural and remote areas. Without safe, well-equipped schools, children are denied the opportunity to learn in a comfortable environment, which compromises the accessibility and availability of education. This situation perpetuates educational inequality by disproportionately affecting marginalised groups, such as children from low-income families and those residing in remote areas.

V. Low Learning Outcomes and Persistent Learning Poverty

22. São Tomé and Príncipe is still dealing with a learning crisis despite improvements in enrolment and primary school completion rates. According to national assessments, a significant percentage of children fail to acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills. For example, one in four students at the end of grade 4 and two out of three at the end of grade 2 lack basic reading skills. Numerous interconnected challenges, such as a lack of qualified teachers, insufficient funding, and outdated curricula, contribute to these poor learning outcomes. ^{xxii}

23. Since most children speak local dialects, such as Forro, Angolar, and Cape Verdean Creoles, at home, and Portuguese is not their first language, the language of instruction is an additional challenge for many students. Low academic achievement is further exacerbated by this

linguistic mismatch, making it more difficult for students to understand lessons and participate fully in class activities. Girls and children with special needs face more barriers to accessing and succeeding in school, and gender inequality and the exclusion of children with special needs continue to exist. ^{xxiii}

24. Similar to trends across sub-Saharan Africa, learning poverty – defined as the inability to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10 – remains a significant challenge in São Tomé and Príncipe. Targeted interventions are needed to address this issue, improving the quality of education by adapting curricula to local needs and providing additional support for at-risk students. There is still more to be done to guarantee that every child receives the quality education they are entitled to, even if the government and its international partners have launched initiatives to improve teacher capacity and foundational learning. ^{xxiv}

25. The quality and outcomes of learning are just as crucial as access when it comes to the right to education. Many children complete years of school without acquiring essential skills due to persistently low learning outcomes and learning poverty, which compromises the adaptability and acceptability of education. This failure to provide meaningful learning outcomes violates the core principle that education should enable people to reach their full potential and participate effectively in society. Therefore, addressing learning poverty is crucial to achieving the full promise of the right to education for all children in São Tomé and Príncipe.

VI. Recommendations

26. To address the issue of teacher shortages and low retention, Broken Chalk recommends that São Tomé and Príncipe continue their efforts in expanding in-service teacher training programs. Using hybrid (in-person + digital) training methodologies that have been proven to be successful in 2014-2024, scale the World Bank's Quality Education for All project to certify all remaining unqualified primary teachers by 2026.

27. Furthermore, Broken Chalk recommends that São Tomé and Príncipe introduce financial incentives for teachers in rural areas, for example, housing subsidies and transportation allowances, funded through reallocated education budgets and World Bank grants.

- 28.** São Tomé and Príncipe should also maintain and increase partnerships with international organisations for teacher professional development, building on the nation's Education Sector Plan's participatory approach.
- 29.** To strengthen teacher retention, Broken Chalk recommends launching a national teacher mentorship program that matches new teachers with experienced mentors. Reduce workloads by utilising the digital literacy training framework developed by the Akelius Foundation, which was successfully piloted in 2022.
- 30.** To address the second challenge of inadequate infrastructure and resources, Broken Chalk encourages São Tomé and Príncipe to continue prioritising rural school upgrades and infrastructure repair, focusing on electricity, sanitation and disability access as mandated by Law 38/2003, and highlighted in the Education Policy Charter and supported by international donors.
- 31.** São Tomé and Príncipe should also continue efforts to distribute textbooks and learning materials to all primary students by 2026, utilising current partnerships with UNICEF and other organisations.
- 32.** Broken Chalk recommends that São Tomé and Príncipe install solar panels in all schools by 2030 using World Bank climate financing and expand UNICEF's 2022 tablet distribution program.
- 33.** Furthermore, Broken Chalk recommends that São Tomé and Príncipe implement double-shift schooling in urban centres to reduce overcrowding by using Príncipe Island's 2022 pilot as a template.
- 34.** To address the third challenge of low learning outcomes and learning poverty, Broken Chalk encourages São Tomé and Príncipe to continue implementing early-grade literacy interventions and expand the use of digital learning tools, as demonstrated by the Akelius digital literacy program and UNICEF tablet distribution.
- 35.** Broken Chalk also encourages the country to strengthen and expand inclusive education policies for girls and children with disabilities, and build on the removal of discriminatory regulations and continuous gender-sensitive programming.
- 36.** Broken Chalk recommends that São Tomé and Príncipe ratify the Convention against Discrimination in Education.
- 37.** Furthermore, Broken Chalk recommends that São Tomé and Príncipe adopt a mother-tongue transitional education model for grades 1-3 by using local dialects before transitioning to Portuguese, and train teachers in bilingual teaching methods.
- 38.** Broken Chalk recommends that the country connect school funding to the achievement of literacy and numeracy goals by providing additional resources to schools that demonstrate enhanced learning outcomes, as measured by biennial national assessments. For example, schools that achieve 80% proficiency in grade 2 assessments receive 10% budget increases funded by GPE grants.
- 39.** Finally, Broken Chalk recommends São Tomé and Príncipe to establish a National Education Monitoring Unit (2026-2030) to monitor progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4, led by the Ministry of Education and assisted by UNESCO. Furthermore, publish annual reports on learning outcomes, infrastructure improvements, and teacher training.

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