From Global to Local: UNESCO's Role in Africa's Educational Development

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of UNESCO in Africa's Educational development and Africa's present and future socio-economic prosperity. It delves into the question: does multilateralism really matter in promoting educational development in Africa? Our findings are that UNESCO has had a positive impact on Africa's educational development through various programmes that have influenced the States' policy direction, education financing through partnerships and collaborations with Member States and other organizations such as the GPE. The international liberal theory and its variants were adopted as the theoretical perspective and its assumptions affirmed by the evidence supplied herein. UNESCO's various norms, principles and policies in educational development, have triggered corresponding behavioral change among African states. Thus, the activities of UNESCO have shaped the Continent's pace in educational development and toward the creation of sustainable futures. This paper equally discusses the various sources of educational development financing and identifies some of the challenges African States are facing in funding education and ensuring universal access to quality, and equitable education for Africa's children and youth, who constitute about 77% of the population. One of the challenges is national underfunding of the education sector and an increasing reliance on contributions from the private sector. However, many African States have complied with UNESCO's basic national education financing norm of allocating a minimum of 20% of national budgets to education. This paper proposes a number of recommendations to improve education outcomes and sustainable futures for all.

Introduction

The Post World War II period saw the emergence of non-state actors as key players in the international system with the goal of promoting peace and development. There were a number of multilateral institutions formed to realize these ends. This is born from the realization that there are certain issues that transcend national boundaries hence the need for international cooperation. Under the United Nations (UN) system, there was emergence of programmes and specialized agencies aimed at addressing pressing global concerns. One such agency is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which was created in 1945. The agency's main objective is the use of education to realize peace, poverty eradication, lasting development, and intellectual dialogue (UNESCO, 2011). It also aims at facilitating international communication and scientific collaboration through education, science, and culture (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2020). As an agency, some of its objectives include (1) supporting the achievement of education for all, (2) provision of global and regional leadership in education, (3) building of effective education systems worldwide for early childhood to the adult years, and (4) responding to contemporary global challenges through education (UNESCO, 2011).

Most African states attained their independence and were thrust into an international system that already had established International Organizations (IOs). Most of the post-independence African governments considered education to be a key catalyst for their rapid social, political and economic development and to achieve these goals they had to engage UNESCO to help in spearheading African educational development (Parker, 1971). Some of the earliest conferences that aimed at addressing independent Africa's educational needs and goals included the Addis Ababa Conference of 1961, and the Nairobi Assessment (1960-65) of 1968 with the latter aimed at reviewing Africa's educational accomplishments up to 1965 (Ibid).

Research has shown that an average of 55% of adults in most African states have secondary, or post-secondary education (18%), 27% have primary schooling, and 18% have no formal education (Adjadeh, 2024). The UNESCO estimates the enrolment rate in higher education in Africa to be at 9% which is below the global average of 42% (UNESCO, 2024). In addition, less than 15% of students are enrolled in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) at the upper secondary level, falling short of the global average of 22% (Ibid). This low enrolment is viewed as a bottleneck to meaningful employment and economic inclusion, thus hindering development, especially in countries where TVETs play a key role in equipping the youth with job-ready skills (Ibid).

Most of the work of UNESCO has been concentrated in the global South that is characterized by general underdevelopment and poverty. The african continent has received lots of emphasis in UNESCO's works since the post-colonial period. Access to education in most african states is still a challenge and UNESCO partners with national governments, and other stakeholders with the aim of promoting educational attainment for the african populace. In 1989, UNESCO initiated the Priority Africa programme to support Africa's development. Its flagship programmes, as stipulated in the Operational Strategy for Priority Africa 2022-2029, were aimed at achieving SDGs of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the Africa Uion Agenda 2063. The first flagship programme is Campus Africa: Reinforcing Higher Education in Africa; flagship two is the General History of Africa (GHA) as a catalyst for achieving agenda 2063 and the UN 2030 agenda; the third is Fostering Cultural Heritage and Capacity Development; fourth is Harnessing new and emerging technologies for sustainable development in Africa, including through the implementation of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence; and fifth is to Enhance Open Science, reinforce

capacity building in Basic and Applied Sciences and Scientific Research to strengthen innovation and technology development and use of ocean science, climate change resilience and water resource management in Africa (UNESCO 2022).

UNESCO's mandate also encompases the implementation of sustainable development goal number 4 (SDG 4), whose main goal to improve education outcomes throughout the world for sustainable futures for all in all facets of life. SDG4's objective is to: "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN, 2010). This is foundational not just to Africa's development, in its various dimensions, but to sustainable development for all and future generations.

Some of UNESCO's implementation targets by 2030 include; ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes; ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education; ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university; substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship; 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 non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development; eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations, among others (UNESCO, 2023)

Literature Review

Over the years, a number of studies have been conducted in the African continent with a focus on the education sector. Some of these focus on the areas of education infrastructure, access to education, gender equality in education, and disability-inclusion in education, STEM skills for youth and economic prosperity, among other areas.

One study focusing on the educational access and attainment of people with disabilities shows that most developing countries, especially in Africa, still lag behind in regards to the provision of the needed accommodations for people with disabilities which has the effect of excluding them from mainstream classes (Chitiyo, 2021). The study highlights the nexus between disability and poverty, which can be attributed to the low completion rates as well as low levels of academic achievement for people with disabilities (Ibid).

Others examine the complex world in which UNESCO operates, acknowledging that it is also prone to the world of *realpolitik* and thus it is bound to come across challenges in performing its mandate (Comparative and International Education Society, 2007). The moderated discussion on the role of UNESCO highlights the power inequalities when it comes to making decisions on questions of education and development (Ibid). It also highlights the complexities that arise where interactions between funding agencies and technical agencies like UNESCO, where the former compromises the agenda of these agencies as well as changing the goals, paradigms of action, and the construction of results (Ibid). Hence, there is a need to

ensure the development agenda is not set by the funding agencies since they might not be aligned with the national realities of target programme beneficiaries.

Ansell (2015) focuses on the shifts in global education patterns, preoccupation with, and influences on education systems in the Global South. The study highlights the complex realities of education in the Global South that are shaped and influenced by neoliberal ideals of the developed world. Focusing on previous studies, the author notes how Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which are dominated by economic goals rather than educational theory created equity issues in education in the global south. This restricted the ability of governments in most African states from developing their own ideas since they were unable to fund them. While the study focused on the 1980s and 1990s, this reality is still present today as both multilateral and bilateral donors dictate how funds are to be used and the priority sectors.

Other studies look at the transmission of modernization models to the African continent during the Cold War era of competitiveness and economic globalization and how new foreign powers sought to invest in Africa's development. One such study focuses on the role of UNESCO in organizing a meeting in Addis Ababa for African countries that had gained independence to discuss the evolution of post-decolonization African education (Raedt, 2014). The study highlights the complexities involved between UNESCO's approach and those of independent architects in the design of educational facilities in Africa. In addition, it highlights the important role played by UNESCO in organizing seminars for African architects, government officials, and planners in taking up the school-building repsonsibilities in their home countries (Ibid).

STEM education is critical to Africa's development, and its adoption and implementation is urgent now than ever before and African states should commit to improving STEM education to prepare for the current and future knowledge and skills demand in the Continent and globally. The AU Agenda 2063's success is hinged on this reality. From UNESCO's perspective, Member States should equip learners with knowledge and skills needed for the 21st century, including the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, and integrating STEM knowledge with real-world applications and sustainable development goals, while promoting gender equality and ensuring equitable access to all learners (UNESCO, 2024). Further, the UN notes that STEM education "can enable Africa to fully benefit from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) by leapfrogging traditional development pathways and opening up avenues for trade, investment, entrepreneurship, and cooperation" (UN, 2024: 3). Thus, AU's Vision 2063 underscores the vitality of STEM in the realization of the 'Africa We Want':

Agenda 2063 requires capacity in the new frontiers of science, such as biotechnology, genetic engineering, space exploration and deep-sea mining. A critical mass of trained engineers, doctors, technicians in a wide range of skill areas is required to build Africa's infrastructure, man her factories, health centres and hospitals and power the continent's development in all fields (AU, 2015: 127).

UNESCO's norms and principles on the education and science sectors have significantly contributed to Africa's development. These multilateral relations are likely to make even greater impact on Africa's future development.

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes the liberalism theory of international relations to address the linkage between education and development in Africa and the role of multilateral agencies, in this case UNESCO. Liberal international relations theory assumes that the "relationship of states to the domestic and transnational social context in

which they are embedded have a fundamental impact on state behavior in world politics" (Moravcsik, 1999: 246). Moravcsik further argues that societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behavior by determining state preferences and their strategic calculations in international politics (Ibid.). Thus, most often states collaborate with other actors in the global arena to deliver public goods to their citizens. In addressing this collective goods problem in international relations, the theory emphasizes on the need for cooperation among state and non-state actors (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2020). The theory emphasizes on the need for states to work together through organs of global governance such as the United Nations (UN) so as to make progress on liberal priorities such as democracy, safety, health and universal education (Verger, Novelli, & Attinyelken, 2012).

Two variants of neo-liberalism are important in highlighting the role of IOs in the current international system. One is the neo-liberal institutionalism which has its roots in functionalism. The argument here is on the need of states to pool resources together to create integrated communities with the goal of promoting economic growth and respond to regional problems (Lamy, 2014). Seen in this context, the work of UNESCO in addressing underdevelopment by promoting education in the Global South would be instrumental in the creation of peaceful and sustainable societies. The formation of UNESCO was predicated on the need to use education as a tool for realization of peace, poverty eradication, lasting development and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2011).

The second variant is the neo-liberal institutionalism which encompasses the complex interdependence theory. According to this version, there was emergence of a new agenda of international issues with no distinction between low and high politics, and increased linkages between states and non-state actors (Lamy, 2014). Tied to this is the phenomenon of globalization which has led to increased interdependence and interconnectedness between people, states and organizations in the economic, cultural and political domains (Verger, Novelli, & Attinyelken, 2012). Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that interdependence involves reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries. This is because managing interdependent relations may involve the crafting of sets of rules, norms, procedures and institutions or international organizations to govern interactions among actors on various issue areas (Viotti and Kauppi, 1999: 215). Furthermore, globalization has led to increased prominence in the role of IOs in addressing common problems across different states. In this case, it creates a new impetus for the enactment of global education policies and priority areas for education policies (Verger, Novelli, & Attinyelken, 2012). IOs are, thus, playing a greater role in the making of global education policies. UNESCO has emerged as the most important agency of the UN in shaping global education policies and goals, with UN member states as well as regional organizations incorporating and adopting them into national and regional educational policies.

Neoliberal ideals also focus on the role of economic development in addressing peace and security issues (Lamy, 2014). They emphasize the utility of education systems in promoting economic growth and development. They focus on the creation of knowledge-based economies, shifting from the focus on manufacturing (Verger, Novelli, & Attinyelken, 2012). UNESCO's focus on pedagogy and curriculum is on enquiry-based learning approaches that are consistent with neoliberal ideals of individual autonomy in a free-market system (Ansell, 2015). Schools are also seen as having the potential to promote independent thinking and delivering a range of interventions to a large number of children (Ibid).

In addition, liberal thinking emphasizes on the universality of human rights, tracing its roots in the enlightenment period (Dunne, 2014). In 1994, education was recognized as one of the basic human rights through the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Liberal thinking envisages a link between education and development. Education is seen as a catalyst for promoting socio-political and economic development by equipping individuals with skills they can utilize to realize their socio-economic pursuits. Seen in this context, UNESCO places emphasis on the utility of education in eradicating poverty. Through the EFA programme, it aims to increase educational attainment in underdeveloped countries, improving the quality of education institutions and training as well as facilitating teacher training (UNESCO, 2011). Also, by placing equity in education policy, it aims to improve educational attainment of girls who usually face challenges in accessing education due to cultural norms, especially in rural settings (UNESCO, 2023). In addition, child-centred learning approaches championed by multilateral organizations are rooted in neoliberal ideals of democratizing learning environments (Ansell, 2015).

The post-Cold War period marked a shift in international relations with states focusing on global governance issues. Multilateral organizations are now seen as actors in their own right, behaving as distinct components of global power relations, not just as functional extensions of the system that gave rise to them (Ibid). From this perspective, the work of UNESCO can be seen through the lens of addressing educational issues across the globe with the ultimate goal of addressing educational gaps across different states, more so in the global south which experiences challenges in education (Ibid).

In the area of global governance, social policy has now become a global phenomenon. In the era of globalization, it is generally accepted that in an increasingly interconnected world, social policy implementation is done at the national level but is influenced by international developments and relations (Martens & Windzio, 2022). Hence, UNESCO influences global policies which are then implemented by governments at the national and sub-national levels.

The emergence of global governance has also been influenced by neoliberal traditions. This is due to the power dynamics of the international system and the influence the developed world has over the technical agencies tackling development issues. An example is the push towards the liberalization and privatization of the education sector as well as the importation of management techniques from the corporate sector (Verger, Novelli, & Attinyelken, 2012). The neo-liberal traditions of the developed world also influence the educational policy ideals championed by UNESCO that are adopted by third world countries (Ibid). National education policies are influenced by legally binding agreements such as the UNESCO conventions. The UNESCO Conventions that promote education and sustainable futures include the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. This convention was crafted with the intent to establish universal principles for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications, giving access to higher education and offering opportunities for further study and employment across the globe. This facilitates labor migration and sustainable utilization of the outcomes of global efforts toward equal access to quality education. The Convention was approved at the 40th UNESCO General Conference, held in November 2019 in Paris.

Another convention is the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, which was approved on December 14th, 1960, by the General Conference of UNESCO and entered into force on May 22nd 1962. This Convention's central goal was and still is to ensure that education is a fundamental human right and that all individuals, regardless of their characteristics, have equal access to quality education. It prohibits

discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, economic condition, or birth. This Convention sets the stage for creation of inclusive and equitable educational systems that ensure all individuals have the opportunity to reach their full potential through education. The Convention has been ratified by 106 state parties. Ratifying states must promote equality of opportunity and treatment in education, including making primary education free and compulsory. About half of African states are state parties to this Convention with fifteen ratifications. However, there are states that are not parties to the Convention that are implementing the various principles of the Convention, such as Kenya. But it is critically important that African states increase their ratifications due the fact that Africa stands to benefit more through the conventions to realize sustainable development through education as enshrined in its Vision 2063, the 'Africa We Want'.

The Convention on Technical and Vocational Education was adopted on November 10th, 1989, and entered into force in August 1991. Its main aim is to promote the development and enhancement of technical and vocational education and training. Its central focus is on ensuring adequate knowledge and skills for teachers in the field, providing opportunities for continuous professional development, and promoting equal opportunities for all in accessing and participating in technical and vocational education. Although there is a low rate of ratification of this Convention, all UNESCO member states have embraced TVETs as a means toward sustainable development and the route for tackling youth unemployment, and breaching the skills deficit in technical jobs (UNESCO, 2022). The UNESCO norms and principles on TVET emphasize the necessity of connecting education with the world of work, equipping the youth and adults with skills for employment, decent work, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning. UNESCO focuses majorly on enhancing the quality of TVET, promoting equity and access, and supporting the development of skills for inclusive and sustainable economies (UNESCO, 2022). Africa needs these skills for the intra-Africa labor market and global firms and economies to realize inclusive and sustainable growth in a rapidly changing technoscape and labor markets. To realize the African Union Vision 2063, TVET is a crucial pillar for achieving long-term sustainable development goals, including effective participation in digital, green and blue economies, and achieving Africa's integration (AU, 2015). The liberal theory of international relations is, thus, the most appropriate to guide this study.

Assessment of UNESCO'S Performance in Africa

UNESCO's Educational Programmes and Initiatives in Africa

The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is one of the areas in which UNESCO has placed great emphasis in its work in the African continent. A number of programmes have been implemented in this area. One such flagship project is the Campus Africa programme which is geared towards the transformation of the higher education landscape by equipping the youth with relevant skills to meet the socio-economic demands of the continent (UNESCO, 2024). Launched under UNESCO's Operational Strategy for Priority Africa 2022-2029, it aligns with regional development strategies (Ibid). It focuses on bridging gaps in access to education, skill development, and employability with the goal of fostering inclusive growth and preparing the youth for the future of work, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning. (Ibid).

In enhancing teacher training and development, UNESCO has the Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISSA) which is aimed at improving national teacher policy and strengthening teacher education in the African region (UNESCO, 2011). Its International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa

(IICBA), which is based in Addis Ababa, is tasked with assisting member states with open and distance learning and face-to-face training of teachers (Ibid).

Another area where UNESCO is playing a key role is in research and innovation. Research and innovation play a key role in promoting socio-economic development. UNESCO highlights the importance of research and innovation in higher education as essential in attainment of sustainable development and enhancement of global competitiveness in critical sectors like health, agriculture, and technology (UNESCO, 2024). However, majority of the African states have challenges in funding research and innovation. Statistics show that most African states invest on average 0.78% of their GDP in research and development, which is below the global average of 1.93% (UNESCO, 2024). In this area, UNESCO initiatives such as UNESCO Chairs and University Twinning and Networking (UNITWIN) Programme provide critical frameworks for research collaboration, capacity-building and innovation (Ibid). UNESCO Chairs act as innovation hubs while the UNITWIN Networks complement the work of UNESCO Chairs through creation of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional frameworks for addressing shared challenges (Ibid). Examples of specific programmes include the African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) that is aimed at supporting women scientists, help in the building of a more inclusive and diverse research ecosystem which is crucial for advancing the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields across Africa (Ibid).

To address the issues of gender equality in education in Sub-Saharan Africa, UNESCO has launched strategies to redress the gaps in gender equality. One such strategy is the UNESCO Medium-term Strategy (34 c/4) which is in synergy with AU goals and focused on two main priority areas for Africa: (1) building of peace through peaceful, resilient, gender-inclusive societies, and (2) building institutional capacities for sustainable development and poverty eradication (UNESCO, 2017).

In supporting the realization of EFA in Africa, UNESCO came up with two key projects. One is the Basic Education in Africa Programme that supports the holistic and comprehensive reform of basic education and uninterrupted nine to ten years of quality basic education which includes Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) (UNESCO, 2011). In addition to this, there is the Pole de Dakar program that supports African countries with sectoral diagnoses, the development of educational strategies, facilitation of external technical and financial support, and the implementation of education policies.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Under the auspices of south-south cooperation, a number of collaborative initiatives have been launched in partnership with UNESCO to promote education and skills development in the global south. One such partnership is the UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust Phase II (CFIT III) Project in Africa. The project focuses on strengthening higher technical education in Africa so as to equip the youth with skills that are aligned with the needs of the labor market (UNESCO, 2024). The project aims at addressing issues of youth unemployment, fostering gender equity, and building a skilled workforce to drive Africa's socio-economic development by enhancing the capacity of HEIs and has been implemented in countries such as Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Gabon, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda (Ibid).

Another partnership is in the area of promoting work skills. The agency helps member states with the development of long-term strategies and solutions based on inclusive and rights-based approaches (UNESCO, 2011). In Africa, one such partnership is seen in The Inter-Agency Task Team (IATT) for the

realization of TVET in ECOWAS that was established in 2009 (IATT). UNESCO is utilizing the IATT in partnership with other agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) to support skills development for youth employment in Africa (Ibid).

In addition, UNESCO has partnered with the South Korean government to launch capacity building programes for countries in the Southern Africa Development Cooperation (SADC) region in 2011.The five countries targeted are Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNESCO, 2024). The project is based on comprehensive research that has been carried out on the status of TVETs in the five countries (Ibid).

Another area of collaboration with African governments is in the area of monitoring learning achievement with the goal of strengthening education systems. Here, UNESCO has worked with several partners to improve the capacity of monitoring quality and learning achievement in Africa (Ibid). An example of such partnership is that with the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) which involved ministries of education of fifteen countriess and produces cross-national studies on the quality of education and schooling (Ibid).

In addressing the challenge of intra-Africa mobility, UNESCO has been instrumental in the development of quality assurance and accreditation systems in Africa. One such initiative is the Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA3) which aims at harmonizing accreditation practices and establishing cohesive quality assurance framework across the African continent (UNESCO, 2024).

At the continental level, there was the adoption of the Addis Convention aimed at strengthening higher education in Africa. The convention entered into force in 2019, and it aims at establishing a framework for the recognition of academic qualifications across Africa (Ibid). Some of its goals include the promotion of academic mobility, strengthening quality assurance, and harmonizing qualification recognition practices which align with Africa's Agenda 2063, and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) (Ibid). In collaboration with the African Union (AU), UNESCO helps in providing technical support to countries that are implementing the Convention (Ibid). The areas of support include capacity-building workshops, policy guidance, and advocacy with a view of encouraging wider ratification and adoption (UNESCO, 2024).

The era of globalization has been marked with a rapid transformation in the area of information and communication technologies (ICT). ICTs have emerged as a dominant force in guaranteeing socio-economic development. However, majority of African countries still lag behind in this area which hinders their economic development. One such area of technological integration is in Artificial Intelligence (AI), whose penetration remains uneven across the continent, with many educational institutions struggling with outdated equipment and limited digital pedagogy training (Ibid). To address these concerns, African universities have entered into partnerships with organizations, UNESCO being one, and global tech firms which are helping them align with global digital trends (Ibid). They facilitate this through provision of funding, training, and technical expertise with a view of enhancing digital infrastructure and AI integration (Ibid). When it comes to digital infrastructure, UNESCO offers support in the areas of quality assurance, digital literacy, and research collaboration (Ibid). UNESCO also came up with the Recommendation on the

Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, the first ever global standards on AI in 2021. These principles and norms will be the basis for regulating the use of AI in education and research, globally.

Funding and Resources

Funding for educational projects in Africa remains a challenge. The rapid rate of population growth strains the little resources governments have in financing education in Africa which hinders the realization of global education goals. Towards this end, UNESCO has helped some of the most affected countries to help achieve Education for All (EFA) goals. One way they've done this is through provision of targeted support to countries considered least likely to achieve EFA (UNESCO, 2011). In the 2010-2011 biennium, twenty countries, thirteen of them being from Africa, were provided with special support in the areas of literacy, teachers, TVET or sector-wide policy and planning with a view of speeding up progress towards EFA (Ibid). In addition to this, there has been establishment of centres in Africa funded by member states under the auspices of UNESCO. These include the Guidance, Counseling and Youth Development Centre for Africa (GCYDCA) based in Lilongwe, Malawi, and the International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (CIEFFA) based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (Ibid).

The Bretton Woods Institutions, specifically the World Bank, have also been instrumental in providing funds to support global education policy. One of the areas they have provided funding is in Free Primary Education that was adopted in favor of the cost-sharing policies (Ansell, 2015). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and EFA goals are supported to support the growth of knowledge-based economies and the significance of human capital in promoting economic development (Ibid).

UNESCO, in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Korea, has since 2011 been implementing the Better Education for Africa's Rise (BEAR) project which is a flagship project dedicated to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Africa (UNESCO, 2017). This project was implemented in phases: BEAR I, which was implemented in five SADC states between 2011 and 2016; BEAR II, which supported five Eastern African countries between 2017 and 2022; and BEAR III which promotes and supports West African states in the period 2023 to 2027. BEAR III covers Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, focusing mainly on Agriculture (agro-processing and post-harvest management) (UNESCO, 2024b).

UNESCO also works with the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) in financing education in more than 67 countries with the highest vulnerability, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, across the world. GPE leverages its grants to catalyze additional financing from public and private sources to support education development in eighteen African Member States (GPE, 2020). These include Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe (GPE, 2020). In addition to this, UNESCO is also a member of the Task Force on Innovative Financing for Education which explores new and creative ways of financing development and meeting global objectives. UNESCO also partners with the International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd), which aims to leverage significantly increased education financing for low- and middle-income countries. In 2024, the UN recognized the IFFEd for investment amounting to US$ 1.5 billion to boost education and skills development for millions of the world's children and youth most in need in low- and middle-income countries across the world (UN, 2024).

Impact Assessment

UNESCO's initiatives have had a significant impact on the levels of educational attainment and improvement in quality of education in the African continent. There has been an increase in primary net enrolment ratios by almost one-third despite a larger increase in the school-age population (UNESCO, 2011). In addition, there has been a narrowing in the gender gaps at the primary level with more children moving from primary to secondary school and an increase in real expenditure in education by six percentage points each year (Ibid). Most African countries continue to increase education budgets to meet the UNESCO threshold of 20%. Although some states are still running below, there is consensus that Member States should surpass this basic requirement.

One of the goals of EFA was the realization of universal education for all children. Towards this, there was the enactment of Free Primary Education (FPE) that was supported by the Bretton Woods institutions and other multilateral donors (Ansell, 2015). This led to increased enrolment in primary schools across the global south. In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that the average gross enrolment ratios in primary schools rose from 78% in 1990 to 97% by 2005, although progress in this facet has since stagnated (UNESCO, 2014).

Role of African Governments

African governments play a key role in the success or failure to attain EFA targets. Their role is in the enactment of policies at the national and sub-national levels that ensure the educational goals and objectives set by international and regional institutions are realized. In addition, the AU CESA also highlights some of the priority areas where member states ought to focus on with the goal of attaining educational development (African Union (AU), 2017). The development goals of implementing the UNESCO norms on education are to facilitate transformation in Africa's economies, enhance innovation in science and technology, environmental sustainability and youth employment, which goals are well-captured in 'The Africa We Want'. Over the years, there have been mixed cases of success and failure, which slows down the work of UNESCO.

Success Stories

In the area of financing education, there is emergence of Public-Private Partnerships which help alleviate the resource constraints in HEIs. An example is South Africa where universities have collaborated with companies such as the International Business Machine (IBM) to establish technology centres which provide students with access to cutting-edge resources and skills development opportunities (UNESCO, 2024).

To address research funding gaps, a number of African countries have enacted programmes aimed at fostering research and innovation. In Tunisia, for instance, there was the establishment of innovation hubs such as Techno parks and specialized research centres that are focused on ICT and biotechnology which has helped to foster job-relevant skills and enhancing research capacity (Ibid).

One of the challenges facing HEIs in most African states is the lack of integration of environmental science and sustainability principles in STEM curricula. To address these challenges, there has been a number of pioneering initiatives by some of the African universities, in partnership with IOs like the World Bank, which seek to integrate sustainability into education and training. One example is Morocco's Institute for Research in Solar Energy and New Energies (IRESEN) that plays a key role in training and research for

renewable energy thus positioning Morocco as a regional leader in green energy education (UNESCO, 2024). Another example is the launching of an interdisciplinary programme that focuses on renewable energy and sustainable engineering at the University of Nairobi (Ibid).

In addressing challenges related to digital transformation, African countries have began leveraging digital technology to enhance higher education. Some of the examples of these incllude Egypt's National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 which prioritizes STEM education, digital infrastructure, and online learning (Ibid). Another one is the integration of digital skills in higher education curriculum in Cameroon, in partnerships that give students hands-on experience in ICT (Ibid). Rwanda has also entered into partnerships and reforms to integrate digital literacy and AI skills into curricula and establishing e-learning platforms (Ibid).

Challenges To the Realization of Education Goals

One of the main challenges that hinder the realization of educational goals in Africa is that of resource constraints, particularly financial resources. There is an underfunding of the education sector and an increasing reliance on contributions from the private sector. The growing demand for university education and insufficient government funding for HEIs hinders the realization of educational goals (UNESCO, 2024). Challenges in financing models for students also hinders the educational attainment of youthful population which in turn affects economic development of most African states. Tied to this is the limited portion of GDPs that African governments spend which affects research and innovation that are crucial for economic development.

There is also the underdevelopment of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) systems, thus limiting opportunities for people with informal skills to formalize their qualifications (Ibid). Cultural and financial barriers in the rural settings exacerbate the issue leading to gender disparities (Ibid).

The political will of most African governments to adopt and implement international and regional educational policies also affects the realization of educational goals for their populations. Areas that are greatly affected are those touching on gender equality especially in STEM fields where there is limited infrastructure in rural areas (Ibid).

The continent still lags behind in pre-primary enrolment. Despite improvements in pre-primary enrolment, data shows that this has been stagnant in Africa has been stagnant over the years when compared with the rest of the world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). This poses a challenge to the realization of basic education as some segments of the population are left out, and also leads to bottlenecks in realizing development objectives. Additionally, the increase in enrolment rate has led to increased teacher-student ratio which affects the overall quality of education that students receive.

Statistics also indicate that there is a high rate of repetition in most African states when compared with other regions (Ibid). This presents a challenge in the sense that it gives rise to additional strains to countries that are already grappling with funding challenges in the education sector. It exterts a high cost on the education system and is argued to be the main driver in the lack of efficiency in education spending in the continent (Ibid). Additionally, students also bear the cost of repetititon as some of them tend to drop out of school (Ibid).

Recommendations

Some of the recommendations that would lead to better education prospects in Africa based on the study include:

- In conducting research on education in Africa, in general, there is need to adopt ethnographic approaches, rather than the predominantly western-based approaches of using quantitative and econometric approaches that dominate global education research. This would allow for the adoption of evidence-based solutions based on country-specific dynamics thus improving overall education policy;

- There is a need to de-link the technical agencies from the Bretton Woods Institutions that fund and to exert influence over global education policy. Some of their neoliberal proposals like privatization, liberalization, and deregulation tend to have some negative impacts in African countries.

- To address the 'covert' pressures on national education policies that comes with external funding, African governments need to increase the percentage of their GDP that is allocated to the education sector. This will allow them to have some form of control over the formulation of policies that resonates with country-specific realities so as to achieve educational goals;

- African governments need to focus on targeted approaches that reduce repetition rates among school going children. This would not only reduce the strains that repetition puts on education resources, but also lead to improved completion rates;

- There is a need to focus on measurement and enhancing quality in access to education. This is to ensure there is focus from statistics on growth in enrolment rates to measures of basic skills attainment by students;

- There is need for increased integration of ICT in the education systems. In the modern world, Information Technologies drive economic development hence countries that fail to develop ICT skills among the population will lag behind in development. Also, the integration of ICT will lead to local expertise that can come up with ICT innovations that address country-specific challenges in education and other sectors;

- African governments should endeavor to meet UNESCO targets and norms on national budgets for education and ensure improved remuneration for teachers, retooling and recognition, and improvement of infrastructure for quality education for sustainable futures.

Conclusion

This study on the role of UNESCO in education in the African continent highlights the complexities that surround education policies and educational attainment in majority of the African states. It has highlighted the emergence of UNESCO as an important non-state actor in global education policy, with most African states joining it after the attainment of independence. Over the years, partnerships with UNESCO as well as collaboration with other bilateral and multilateral actors have led to general improvements in the status of education in Africa. This can be seen in metrics like increased enrolment in primary school, programmes aimed at supporting skill-based training and lifelong learning, and support for research and innovation initiatives in HEIs. Despite these positive stories, there are challenges in the areas of financing education in Africa, and gaps in integration of ICTs in the education systems. The funding issues lead to lack of independence in formulation of country-specific educational policies as the funding agencies exert pressure

on the goals and priorities areas that policies should focus on. To address these, there is need to increase spending on education so as to have a stronger say in enactment of policies that align with national development goals and economic realities. Partnerships with UNESCO will play a key role in enhancing the technical capacity of education administrators in African countries, as well as the creation of ICT innovation hubs that are critical in promoting development in the era of globalization.

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