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African Union's Youth Education Challenge: A Critical Review of Agenda 2063

Abstract

It is no easy feat for the African Union to mobilize 55 countries of various political, tribal, and economic demographics, yet the problem remains that nearly 34 million children are out of school, and the continent is not graduating the secondary students needed for the 1.25-billion-member workforce expected by 2050 (ISS Africa, 2017). The paper aims to assess African Union strategies and make recommendations for member countries to utilize to solve educational challenges facing the continent's growing population and market. We assess the educational challenge and contributing factors followed by suggesting four strategic directions, grounded in Agenda 2063, that the African Union should follow. We believe that the African Union and its partners can create accountability through incremental implementation of its education by piloting programs that aim to improve accessibility and quality learning using technology.

Keywords - Africa, STEM, online learning, access, education, African Union

I. Introduction

The youth population and the educational challenges facing the African Union

The population of Africa is the fastest growing in the world with a 50% increase expected by 2035, growing from 1.2 billion to 1.8 billion (Institute for Security Studies Africa, 2017). The continent, particularly South Saharan Africa, is lagging in education with 34.1 million children out of school compared to South Asia's 11.3 million and Europe and Central Asia's 1.1 million (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2013). By 2050, there will be a billion children and adolescents under 18 years old in Africa—almost 40% worldwide (UNICEF, 2021). South Saharan Africa and South Asia possess half of the world's illiterate population with nearly 617 million youth lacking basic mathematics and literacy skills (United Nations, 2015). These numbers are alarming, particularly for Africa, because it is estimated that by 2050, two of every five children in the world will be born on the African continent (Bandar, 2020).

The African Union (AU) has undergone institutional reforms as a result of changes on the continent in the last 20 years (Chekol, 2020). The AU was established in 2002 as a successor to the Organization of African Unity (1963–1999). It consists of 55 member states that make up the countries of Africa. It has gained significant support because of their framework that promotes regional integration and collective action of the nations on the continent (Chekol, 2020).

Agenda 2063 is the AU's strategic and master plan for creating a new future for Africa (AU, n.d.). The AU seeks a peaceful, prosperous, and integrated Africa that is driven by its citizens and represents a dynamic force internationally. The goal of Agenda 2063 is to show how the AU's vision and objectives will be achieved from 2013 to 2063. Even though the organization prioritizes education and wants the continent to have well-educated citizens with science, technology, and innovation skills to build a prosperous Africa, it appears to be falling short of achieving this goal. A recent study revealed that only 17.8% of households in Africa had internet access, and the continent accounts for only 21% of worldwide internet users (United Nations Economic Commission, 2020).

Lack of access to technological advancements such as the internet pales to the twin challenges of how to increase equitable access while strengthening quality, relevance, and effective learning for development (Macdonald, 1999; UNESCO-IBE, 2014). Equally, countries across Africa seem to be in a perpetual state of chaos resulting from diseases, war, poverty, or COVID-19, making it difficult for children who are enrolled in school to stay in school. Student engagement and the quality of learning might also be affected by curriculums that are not culturally relevant to the diverse cultures, such as language, practices, and environmental needs of nations, resulting in students leaving school without quality education (Akumbu, 2022; Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

The AU in alignment with Agenda 2063 has created a list of 15 flagship projects, but the only project related to education is a virtual e-university, which aims to increase access to higher education using information, communication, and technology (ICT) programs concurrently. The AU does not clearly state how these projects will be accomplished, nor is there any accountability for the implementation of the goals. The creation of a list of projects is a step in the right direction but does not address the larger issue of basic education, inequalities, and the high dropout rates in secondary education.

Educational inequities have increased around the globe due to COVID, but in Africa the inequities have become even greater. Prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that half of children ages six to 11, nine million girls and six million boys, would never attend school (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019). Post pandemic, girls' education gaps have increased particularly due to early pregnancies (Bissoonauth, 2020; Yoshida, 2023). Due to COVID, the AU's International Centre for Girls and Women's Education department has emphasized access and retention for girls and women with a focus on innovation and creativity, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and STEM, at the highest level of education (African Union, 2021).

The AU, governments, and organizations across Africa must address youth education issues and prioritize efforts that will improve not only the youth education issues but also the development of the continent through a competent workforce ready to meet future challenges. The development of a competent labor market that will be able to meet the needs of the growing population is not fully addressed by the AU in Agenda 2063. Fred Swaniker of the African Leadership Network noted that in Africa, often it is hard to catch up if one is very far behind, and Africa has the tendency to import best practices as strategies for success. He suggested that new practices are required, and the purpose of education must be addressed rather than continue an education system that was created for 18th century Europe (Skoll, 2022). The AU can be a powerful governing body for reimagining the purpose of education in Africa.

The AU met in 2015 to reassess its goals for a post-Millennium development framework. It issued a plan that entails 29 goals (AU, 2014). According to the Center for International Governance Innovation (Carin, 2014), these goals are too many and immeasurable. Of those 29 goals, there is not one specific goal related to education. Even though the AU's reforms are gaining traction through promoting regional integration and collective action, reform is urgently needed to deliver on priorities amidst current challenges (Chekol, 2020).

II. Analysis

SPELIT Analysis

Our analysis utilized the SPELIT model. This model accesses and outlines the social, political, economic, legal, intercultural, and technological strengths and weaknesses (Schmieder-Ramirez

& Mallette, 2006). The findings from the analysis comprise the recommended strategic directions.

Social Factors

Most developing regions reached a 95% enrollment rate in primary schools as of 2015, and South Saharan Africa recorded an enrollment increase of 52% in 1990 and 78% in 2012 (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). While enrollment rates have been increasing, there are still 288 million school-age children not enrolled, particularly in conflict-affected countries. (United Nations Development Programme, 2022) It is important to note that although access to schooling has improved in Africa, there are still problems of quality related to teachers, facilities, teaching and learning materials, and relevance of educational content (Yamada, 2019). Despite the significant expansion of basic education, learning outcomes of primary school graduates in Africa have not improved (Gruijters, & Behrman, 2020; Jones, et al., 2014; Yamada, 2019). Even with relatively fast educational attainment in Africa, the gap between the continent and other parts of the world has widened (Gyimah-Brempong, 2011). School enrollment has not directly led to poverty reduction or decent employment (Yamada, 2019), suggesting the quality of learning is below acceptable standards, and there is a need for better curricula as students may not be learning and acquiring competencies up to their potential.

Students are also not learning while in school because developing countries are plagued by high rates of teacher absenteeism (Mbiti, 2016). Teachers' absenteeism means that curriculums are not being delivered with fidelity or by a professional, thus lowering the quality of education. The behavior persists even though the United Nations Development Programme (2021) reported a shortage of teachers, at a ratio of 1:53 students in Africa. Schools are left to fend for themselves by employing underqualified teachers to fill the gap. Little seems to be done by the government to hold absentee teachers accountable.

Political Factors

The AU is composed of nations that are influenced by political factors that dictate the type of educational system and policies of those countries (Mackatiani et al., 2016). The AU's strategic and master plan for creating a new future for Africa is called Agenda 2063 (AU, n.d.). This master plan has the following goals: inclusion and sustainable development, unity, progress, and collective prosperity. Agenda 2063 is the concrete manifestation of how the continent intends to achieve this vision within 50 years, from 2013 to 2063. The one goal in the agenda related to education is underpinned by science, technology, and innovation. AU hopes that seven of ten of its graduates without access to tertiary education will be enrolled in TVET. This goal requires investment strategies that can improve current member states' education budgets. The AU could address this education issue, but it can only be truly addressed in collaboration with the ministries of education, the private sector, and nonprofit organizations in each country.

Economic Factors

Education holds a critical role in the development of individuals, communities, and countries around the world. Fagerlind and Saha (1989) agreed that investment in education has traditionally been justified by optimistic assumptions—the first being that an educated population contributes to the socioeconomic development of society as a whole, and the second being that education contributes to the wellbeing of individuals within the society. It is this optimistic assumption that motivates people in all regions of the world to send their children to school.

Education across Africa is not adequately funded, resulting in poor school infrastructure (Besong, 2014). Ajayi (2006) noted that less than 10% of national budgets go to education in Africa, which is 16% below the UNESCO-recommended annual level of 26%. The most recent data (AU & UNESCO, 2021) noted that countries in Africa dedicate less than 20% of their national budget to education. This is an improvement from 2006 but is still below the recommended level.

At least 15 African countries allocate less than 20% of GDP and government expenses while 21 countries fall between 20% and 30%, and only nine countries exceed 20% of government spending on education (AU & UNESCO, 2021). This difference between recommendations and practice reveals that education funding is nowhere near enough to provide adequate infrastructure and resources to innovate education in Africa as suggested in the Agenda 2063. It is equally insufficient because of the lack of qualified teachers and irregular payment of teachers' salaries in some regions (Besong, 2014). The AU, in collaboration with member governments, will need to address education funding issues to successfully create a prosperous Africa as stated in their vision.

In many African nations, high levels of poverty, war, and national disasters continue to create disparities between rural and urban communities (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Despite progress in school enrollment, large proportions of children remain unenrolled. Primary enrollment has dropped from 35% to 17%, lower secondary from 43% to 33%, and upper secondary from 63% to 53%. Forty-seven percent of children in upper school, 33% of lower secondary school children, and 20% of primary children remain unenrolled (UNICEF, 2020). UNICEF noted that in comparison, a child from the richest quintile of households is eight times more likely to complete primary school and 12 times more likely to complete upper secondary level than a child from the poorest quintile. It further states that on average 40% of African children from the poorest families complete primary school, compared to 80% from the richest families. This means that at the secondary level, only 6% of the poorest children complete upper secondary school, compared to 46% of the richest, while by location, only 12% of children living in rural areas complete upper secondary education, compared to 34% living in urban areas.

The primary school graduation rate in cities is 91% for the richest and 40% for the poorest. In the rural areas, graduation rates are only 68%, with 65% and 79% sign-up rates for girls and boys, respectively (World Bank, 2014). A significant challenge in the educational system in South Saharan Africa is how to broaden access and quality learning opportunities to hard-to-reach students, such as remote rural or village populations, nomadic populations, and children with special needs (Dembélé & Oviawe, 2007). Many see ICT as the way forward.

Legal Factors

The legal environment addresses the laws, customs, and ethics of the continent (Schmieder-Ramirez & Mallette, 2006). African countries join the world in following global regulations, such as the Covenant on the Rights of Child/United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF); the 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, which advocates for free and compulsory primary school education for children; and the Dakar Framework for Action, which advocates the National Education for All action plan (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013). Some nations also abide by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for Right to Education and Article 17 of the African

Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights recognizing the Right to Education (United Nations, n.d.).

Education systems are complex because they include other microsystems or a network of systems made complex by the formation of new structures, relationships and social systems, hierarchies and rules, and culture (Cordon, 2013). In some nations, the education system has subsystems, whether officially recognized by the state or not, such as Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese (Ngalim, 2014). These schools are usually structured as nursery, primary, secondary, and university. Those who complete the secondary and university levels receive a certificate that is accepted within and sometimes outside the nations' education systems.

Intercultural Factors

Intercultural sensitivity allows the AU and member nations to appreciate different perspectives as they collaborate in solving education issues (Schmieder-Ramirez & Mallette, 2006). The ethnic diversity can vary by country as seen in the case of Cameroon. People groups can be found in the coastal region, Savannah, and Sahelian belt with diverse languages and cultures that could be leveraged for education (Gwanfogbe, 2018). Africa has an estimated 2,143 living languages, of which 198 are institutional (Amfo & Anderson, 2019).

The complexity of modern societies in terms of ethnic identities and culture presents challenges in addressing the needs of individual groups; nonetheless, culture, such as practices and language, is considered a significant part of learning (Akumbu, 2022; Hammond, 2015). Nations can create value from their cultural and linguistic diversity by creating and communicating a clear intercultural vision for the AU, as well as the stakeholders within its own education system (Kotter, 2012). This can also accelerate the process of decolonization of curricula, including the development of educational products and resources that are grounded in African culture or cultures in individual nations represented at the AU.

Technological Factors

Today, ICT applications using tools such as computers, internet, and mobile devices are making it possible for countries to increase access, quality, and equity in education (Alemnge, 2018). Education during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020–2021 proved that this concept is not far-fetched, even for Africa and its infrastructure challenges. ICT is a critical element of communication, collaboration, education, technological innovation, and access to information (Bon, 2007). Some of the countries in Africa are trailing behind the rest of the world in ICT—often referred to as the “digital divide”—because of poverty and lack of public investment capital. Only 21% of the population is internet users (Economic Commission for Africa, 2020). Equally, the lack of basic understanding of the mechanisms of the implementation, the role of ICT in the local environment, and contexts in which it is applied are very important.

For new technology to be applied effectively, users must be trained properly. There needs to be a clear framework for adopting technology, such as modernization theory—the social evolution and its impact of technology as relates to education (Conley & Udry, 2010; Poumanyong & Kaneko, 2010; Temblay, 2011). This calls for the AU and its members to clearly communicate technology goals and create a process to measure small wins during implementation (Kotter, 2012). Member states could also create accountability structures using committees composed of government representatives, independent project managers, and leaders from the local context to ensure that education technology projects are properly evaluated for learning outcomes (Hodell, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The AU will not be

effective in its work unless member nations are more proactive with education budgets that can provide teacher training, accountability, resources, and infrastructure to bridge existing education gaps and issues.

III. Strategies

Suggested strategies for repurposing education for African youth

The Common African Position specifically calls out the demographic trends that show a youth bulge that require education, public, and socioeconomic strategies and policies (AU, 2014). It also recognizes the need for a shift from reactive policies to (a) proactive and inclusive global humanitarian approaches, (b) the adoption of actionable recommendations, and (c) an implementation mechanism that reflects the CAP. The AU argues these are necessary for an effective humanitarian response.

The AU (2021) moved from being reactive to being proactive with specific strategies in mind. The advantage of these efforts is that they unite the African countries around a common position and goal, but the implementation challenge is very real. There are 55 member states in the AU. Getting full agreement on specific recommendations can be a challenge, suggesting why most goals remain aspirational. The European Union, for example, consists of 27 nations with separate education policies. Whichever strategies the AU commits to addressing the youth educational challenges of Africa must therefore be realistic, measurable, and practical. Using the SPELIT analysis, four strategies were suggested that offer the most opportunities and strengths for achieving quality education for all within the AU. We encourage the AU to leverage its convening power to prioritize these four strategies:

- Increase investment in education and create incentives for learning with detailed implementation plans and timelines.
- Adapt innovation and technology to learning in the African context.
- Promote culturally relevant content in curricula and the education system to support a pan-African identity.
- Leverage interest and initiate education funding by requesting contributions from members and pursuing public and private partnerships between governments and technology firms.

These strategies emphasize technology for educational solutions at the secondary school level which can be tested through pilot programs. Pilot programs should emphasize collaborations among member nations and public/private partnerships to empower Afro-centric solutions for African educational challenges and provide access to technology and apprenticeships.

IV. Conclusion

The AU can be a powerful governing body to mobilize countries to work together toward a common purpose. It has the structure, mechanisms, and even financing to achieve measurable goals. Mobilizing 55 countries of various political, tribal, and economic demographics might be daunting but the problem remains that nearly 34 million children are out of school, and the continent is not graduating the secondary students needed for the 1.25-billion-member workforce expected by 2050 (ISS Africa, 2017). The 2063 AU plan requires implantation plans with

incremental yet tangible results. We agree with the current discourse that to achieve this AU should increase investments followed by implementation of programs aimed at increasing enrollments and better learning outcomes. It should also leverage innovative technologies, culturally relevant curricula, and public-private partnerships to increase accessibility and improve quality education. The AU can leverage its convening power to pilot programs that encapsulate its goals and the suggested strategies to ensure a model of learning that can be replicated throughout the continent.

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