Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education in the post-COVID-19 Africa

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on critical areas that sub-Saharan African countries should focus on to improve their progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 for inclusive and equitable quality education, lifelong learning and to strengthen educational resilience in the post-COVID-19 era. The commentary argues that there is a need to develop relevant strategies and implement robust policies to improve teacher professional development, educational infrastructure, access to information and communications technology, a safe learning environment, and the fight against corruption and embezzlement of education resources.

Introduction

Education is key to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all is founded on the principle that education is a fundamental human right and an enabling right. To achieve this right, countries must ensure universal equal access to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, which should be free and mandatory, leaving no one behind, regardless of gender, disability, or social and economic status UNESCO (2017b). Nelson Mandela asserted that education is the most powerful weapon for changing the world. Ensuring all individuals have equitable access to high-quality education is essential for tackling social and economic issues such as inequality, unemployment, and poverty (Mauti, Pacho and Nyatuka, 2023). While many African countries have made

significant strides towards quality education for all, many children are still out of school due to several interrelated factors, including but not limited to geography, gender, extreme poverty, disability, crises, conflict, and displacement (UNESCO and the African Union Commission, 2023). In sub-Saharan Africa, 58% of children of upper secondary school age do not attend school (UNESCO and the African Union Commission, 2023). Implementing Sustainable Development Goal 4 presents significant hurdles for many sub-Saharan African countries, as the region still has the world's highest out-of-school population (UNESCO, 2024).

The progress towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all as envisioned by the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 has been hugely impacted by the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), leading to learning losses in many countries (United Nations, 2023). The pandemic led to the closure of schools and disrupted the traditional face-to-face learner-teacher interaction. Learners were forced to abandon their studies with no definite plans for resumption. Educators had to assume new roles and instructional strategies that were foreign to them and the learners. Many educators and students lost interest in teaching and learning, resulting in poor educational outcomes due to insufficient skills in the application of technology and inadequate funding and facilities (Mahona and Mkulu 2020).

The suspension of physical classes in educational institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic brought unique challenges to students and educators in delivering curriculum content and achieving inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning across sub-Saharan Africa (Mahona, Pacho, and Adewoyin 2022). Learners from sub-Saharan African countries suffered the most due to inadequate technological development and financing in the education sector, worsening inequality in inclusive and equitable access to quality education. The COVID-19 situation challenged educators and policymakers to evaluate their level of preparedness to provide education during a crisis and enhance educational resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic also provided unprecedented potential for the education sector to integrate technology in education and distance and online learning. It necessitated the development of innovative approaches to education to enhance uninterrupted learning. To mitigate the challenges brought about by the pandemic, there is a need to build a more resilient education system that can endure future crises. Education in the post-

COVID-19 era in sub-Saharan Africa requires a paradigm shift and a reinvention.

Leading the way in promoting sustainable development goals should be one of the key responsibilities of education. Experience, however, indicates that many educational institutions in sub-Saharan Africa do not give education for sustainable development the importance it deserves. There is less formal emphasis on teaching young people about their obligations to promote sustainable development. The transformative role of education can be realised by fulfilling the right to quality education and lifelong learning more inclusively and equitably, which is a catalyst for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Benavot, Williams, and Naidoo, 2024).

The important question to address is: How can sub-Saharan African countries achieve SDG 4? Addressing this question requires a paradigm shift in education in terms of improving education financing, making education free and compulsory, increasing the number of teachers, improving basic school infrastructure, and embracing digital transformation (United Nations, 2023). This commentary explores critical areas that sub-Saharan African countries should focus on to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning and strengthen educational resilience in the post-COVID-19 era. These include improving teacher professional development, educational infrastructure, access to information and information technology, establishing a safe learning environment, and curbing corruption.

Teacher Professional Development

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls for a substantial increase in the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least-developed countries and small island developing states (UNESCO, 2017b). While teachers are the key to achieving the SDG 4 targets, the scarcity and unequal distribution of properly qualified teachers, particularly in poor regions, exacerbates the equity gap in schooling (Saini, Sengupta, Singh, *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2017b).

Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have committed to implementing the competency-based curriculum (CBC) in their education

systems. The governments of these countries consider the competency-based curriculum to be instrumental for development. The competency-based curriculum differs from a knowledge-based, content-driven, and teacher-centric curriculum. According to UNESCO (2017a), a competency-based curriculum emphasises what learners are expected to do rather than what they are expected to know. In the CBC, competency is viewed as the ability to apply knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes appropriately in specific contexts. The new CBC educational dispensation requires competent and high-quality teachers equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to effectively implement the CBC. However, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are grappling with a shortage of qualified and motivated teachers, negatively impacting the quality of education due to a lack of continuous professional development opportunities for teachers.

Teachers are the main agents of change in the implementation of a competency-based curriculum (CBC), yet many of them in sub-Saharan Africa often lack the requisite skills to be effective. Although most teachers are familiar with technology, for instance, the inadequate training given to them needs to be upgraded to reduce the digital gap (Fernadez-Cruz and Fernades-Diaz, 2016). According to Momanyi and Rop (2019), there is inadequate preparation among teachers to facilitate the development of digital competence among students since they have not been sufficiently prepared to implement the curriculum. Additionally, there are complications in the implementation of CBC because teachers face a variety of challenges, including a lack of in-service training, insufficient teaching and learning resources, overcrowded classrooms, and students' readiness to accept the learner-centred approach (Nyoni, 2018).

The implementation of a competency-based curriculum (CBC), especially in schools within marginalised communities in sub-Saharan Africa, has had myriad challenges on how best to support teachers and other stakeholders to facilitate this approach. Teachers face many challenges ranging from lesson planning, teaching methods, managing learning, and assessment in implementing the CBC. There is also a lack of a coherent, sustainable policy framework to support in-service teachers through continuing professional development. Competency-based education in sub-Saharan Africa will only succeed by putting the teacher at the centre of implementation with a focus on pedagogy (Ngaruiya, 2023). To enhance teaching quality and keep teachers up-to-date with innovative pedagogical

approaches, there is a need to improve investment in teacher training and continuous professional development, specifically in marginalised areas.

One of the most cost-effective approaches to teacher professional development is through school-based professional learning communities (SBPLCs). This approach is widely recognised for developing teachers' competence and student outcomes (Antinluoma, Ilomäki, and Toom, 2021). The professional learning communities' strategy is founded on organisational learning theories, where teachers learn and develop their capacities through collaborative practices, sharing expertise and knowledge, developing new approaches, and investigating other practices. There is a general agreement that professional learning communities can improve instruction by offering teachers opportunities to reflect on their instructional strategies to improve student learning outcomes and become agents of change (Antinluoma, Ilomäki, and Toom, 2021; Chuang and Ting, 2021). School-based professional learning communities' practices can effectively update teachers' knowledge, skills, and abilities to implement a competency-based curriculum. Since teachers are fundamental agents for guaranteeing quality education, they should be empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient, and effectively governed systems (UNESCO, 2017b).

Educational Infrastructure

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls for the construction and improvement of educational facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all (UNESCO, 2017b). This implies the need for adequate physical infrastructure and safe, inclusive environments that nurture learning for all, regardless of background or disability status (Saini, Sengupta, Singh, *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2017b).

The availability of educational facilities has improved significantly over the years due to government capitation in sub-Saharan Africa. However, many educational institutions still lack or have inadequate and poor basic infrastructure and requisite physical facilities like ramps to support learning for physically challenged learners. Braille machines for visually impaired learners are also lacking in most educational institutions. A survey of children with disabilities in 42 countries, including 19 sub-

Saharan African countries, indicated that children with functional disabilities were more likely to drop out of school and that girls were more likely than boys to be out of school (Jones, 2019). This slows down the achievement of SDG 4, which encourages the building and upgrading of education facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all. Inclusive education should therefore be accorded serious consideration so that physical facilities can be made user-friendly for the diverse categories of learners.

A deliberate change of mindset by all educational stakeholders is necessary to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of the educational infrastructure required for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Actions in this regard would include increased funding to the education sector, effective supervision by the school educational officers and boards of management, and holding those in charge of managing educational institutions accountable for the funds they receive for educational infrastructural development. In his book, *Not Yet Uhuru*, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga (1968) asserts that there is an additional danger that money would be spent not on essential administration and services but on politics and prestige spending. It is unfortunate that in the 21st century, some educational institutions in sub-Saharan Africa still lack essential facilities like well-equipped laboratories, libraries, classrooms, workshops, and sports facilities. Therefore, sub-Saharan African countries must give SDG 4 the priority it deserves by improving investment in quality infrastructure.

Information and Communications Technology

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 requires a considerable increase in the number of youth and adults with information and communications technology (ICT) skills, by type of skill (UNESCO, 2017b). Information and communications technology infrastructure in educational institutions in sub-Saharan African countries is critical for improving learning outcomes through ICT-supported pedagogical techniques and developing digital skills necessary for the rising role of digital technologies in the labour market (UNESCO and the African Union Commission, 2023). On the contrary, a lack of ICT infrastructure restricts the ability to gain digital skills in educational institutions and to close the enormous digital divide within and across countries (UNESCO and the African Union Commission, 2023). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrating African countries have demonstrated resilience and adaptation in implementing digital

learning through radio, television, and online channels, the limited availability of digital devices, internet connections, power supplies, and distant learning programs hampered students' learning capacity, particularly in marginalised areas. While 73% of African countries reported employing ICT learning methodologies, only 39% helped students with disabilities, and 24% supported students living in rural regions (UNESCO and the African Union Commission, 2023). Even though internet connectivity has increased by 65% since 2015, post-COVID-19 progress in closing the digital gap has slowed down (United Nations, 2023).

Teaching and learning during a crisis would not be complicated if information and communications technology (ICT) were readily accessible to teachers and learners. Many educational institutions in sub-Saharan African countries, especially in marginalised areas, are characterised by inadequate access to ICT and the internet. Poor access to technological devices and the internet hinders learners from effectively participating in the learning process. Many educational institutions in marginalised areas have little or no access to the internet, thus hampering access to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. Yet, broadband technology and instant messaging have the potential to provide remote communities with unparalleled access to educational resources (Basye, 2014). The internet, for instance, has the potential to eliminate the disadvantage of vast distances. Therefore, there should be a deliberate effort to guarantee that everyone has fair access to the internet.

Global challenges such as COVID-19 call for investing in ICT infrastructure. Open and distance learning (ODL) models can enhance educational resilience by allowing uninterrupted teaching and learning. Open and distance learning involves access to education devoid of constraints of time and place and offers flexible learning opportunities (Ghosh, Nath, Agarwal, and Nath 2012). ODL can enhance equity in education by promoting uninterrupted learning. The justification for ODL is that it is flexible and can easily be adopted in schools within marginalised communities. Additionally, ODL allows teachers to grow professionally wherever they are and at their own pace and context. Finally, UNESCO and the African Union Commission (2023) recommend innovative reforms to improve ICT in education through investments by ministries of education to support access and connectivity for learners, collaborating with mobile phone companies and broadband service providers to expand ICT infrastructure, and installing solar panels in educational institutions in rural

areas to offset the digital divide and allow learners to learn both at home and at school.

Safe Learning Environment

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls for ensuring safe and inclusive learning environments (UNESCO, 17b). The right to education necessitates access to safe, inclusive, and supportive learning (Global Protection Cluster, n.d.). Any attempt to the contrary is tantamount to a violation of the right to education, thereby hindering efforts towards access to education. All learners and educators have the right to attend educational institutions that are safe and conducive to learning. Nevertheless, some educational institutions in sub-Saharan Africa continue to face occurrences that have long-term, catastrophic consequences for learners, parents, educators, and the community.

Many sub-Saharan African countries are facing the challenge of political instability and conflict, accompanied by human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Since independence, African countries, one after another, have become immersed in political unrest, which has often brought about conflict, violence, and civil wars. When the African continent is closely examined, it becomes clear that many of the following nations—Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Chad, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa—have either experienced or are currently experiencing intra-state conflicts (Pacho, 2013). Conflicts have become pervasive, and civil strife is a tragic and persistent plight for the population. The common effect of conflicts is their destabilising character, so far as the political life, the economy, and the social progress of the people are concerned. In addition, there are psycho-social effects associated with conflict. These include trauma, rapes, torture, distrust, people being maimed or killed, populations being displaced, and family lives being disrupted as close kin are lost or separated.

Despite the emphasis given to the attainment of SDG 4 on the provision of quality education that is equitable and inclusive, refugee and displaced children are being left behind. Conflicts have a disturbing effect on education, including the destruction of infrastructure, the closure of educational institutions, school dropouts, a loss of interest in education, and

poor educational outcomes. Learners who are exposed to conflict situations are not only affected physically and mentally but also disrupted in their learning, which contributes to high dropout rates and a general feeling of insecurity among learners and educators. In 2022, there were 2.17 million school-aged refugee children in the East, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes regions, of which 1.11 million (51%) were out of school (UNHCR, 2023). Conflict, therefore, is one of the major challenges sub-Saharan Africa faces. There is a need to find enduring solutions to the problem of conflict to achieve the peace necessary for sustainable development and the achievement of inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Sub-Saharan African countries must provide safe and secure learning environments to achieve SDG 4. Improving the quality of education in emergencies is one of the ways that can contribute to equitable and inclusive education. The term "education in emergencies" refers to quality, inclusive learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocational, higher, and adult education. Education in emergencies should provide physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection that saves and sustains lives. (INEE, 2018). Education in emergencies aims to safeguard children's right to education. Therefore, all parties to a conflict must adhere to the Safe Schools Declaration, which is an inter-governmental political commitment and agreement that outlines a set of commitments to strengthen the protection of education from attack and restrict the use of schools and other learning institutions. The purpose of the Safe Schools Declaration is to protect students, teachers, schools, and other learning institutions from some of the worst effects of armed conflicts (Save the Children, 2022).

Corruption

Corruption has become a cancerous growth in many sub-Saharan African countries (Pacho, 2013). Some of the identified corrupt practices in education include fraud in tendering, syphoning of school supplies, ghost deliveries, fraud in the appointment and deployment of teachers (favouritism, bribes, gifts), ghost teachers, absenteeism, illegal fees (for school entrance, exams, assessment, private tutoring), manipulating data to misrepresent, and bribes or favours during inspectors and auditors' visits (United Nations Development Programme, 2011). Once corruption is extensive in a country, development goals are impaired. Corruption hampers

efforts to achieve SDG 4 by diverting resources meant for educational development and improvement to serve a few individuals at the expense of educational infrastructure. According to Kirya (2019), corruption hurts the quality of education, robs schools of resources, increases the cost of education, and contributes to service delivery, low-quality infrastructure, and poor education outcomes.

Given its devastating effects on education, unless sub-Saharan countries commit themselves to the fight against corruption, progress towards achieving inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning will not be realised. The United Nations Development Programme (2011) suggests the following measures to tackle corruption and financial misconduct in the education sector: a robust legislative framework, criminal sanctions, stricter penalties and disciplinary action, and codes of conduct for education personnel (including head teachers, inspectors, education authority staff, teachers, and ancillary staff) to enhance professional behaviour and performance.

Conclusion

Sub-Saharan African countries face several challenges that hinder their ability to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities to all learners. These include inadequate teacher professional development, poor educational infrastructure, inadequate access to information and communications technology, unsafe learning environments, and corruption. Addressing these challenges to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for an urgent multi-faceted approach and collective effort from every person, the government, the private sector, civil society, educators, communities, and society at large. Implementing the call for a global partnership for sustainable development as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 17 can enhance the mobilisation of the means required to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity. By investing in teacher professional development, educational infrastructure, advanced technology, creating a safe learning environment, and robust anti-corruption legislation, sub-Saharan African countries can strive towards promoting inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning and strengthen educational resilience in the post-COVID-19 era. Finally, in the words of António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, "Unless we act now, the

2030 Agenda will become an epitaph for a world that might have been" (United Nations, 2023).

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