Inclusive Education Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa a Pathway to Educational Access for All

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Abstract: Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are struggling to meet the educational needs of those children and youth who are relatively easy to reach. This raises concerns about how the region will ensure that the most disadvantaged can complete primary education. Inclusive Education is designed to ensure that every child has access to quality education, irrespective of gender, language, ability, religion, nationality or other characteristics. This is to support meaningful participation and learning alongside their peers in order to develop their full potential. (Save the Children 2016:6). The stipulation that students ‘learn alongside’ their peers, ‘within their community’ alludes to the historical practice of providing segregated, ‘special’ education for Children with Disabilities. The paper confirms that failures to prioritize primary enrolment leave millions of teenagers out of school later on. The out-of-school rate in sub-Saharan Africa is 21% for children of primary school age (about 6-11 years), 34% for youth of lower secondary school age (12-14 years) and 58% for youth of upper secondary school age (15-17 years), according to UIS data. Provisions within the national educational systems have demonstrated the difficulties educators face to guarantee inclusive education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Some of these challenges include, but not limited to, creating activities that includes all learners, inadequate teachers’ aid for learners with special needs, lacking experience in an inclusive setting, lacking experience with severe and profound disabilities etc.

Keywords: Inclusive, Education, Policies, Sub-Saharan Africa, Pathway to Educational Access, All

Introduction

Half of the world’s out-of-school-children are in sub-Saharan Africa, totaling ninety-seven million children and youth growing up with poverty being the main constraint to access. Without improvement, more than one in ten adults in the region will not have completed primary school by 2050 (UNESCO, 2020). The data released in a paper entitled “Leaving no one behind: How far on the way to universal primary and secondary education?” from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) and the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, show that in Nigeria alone, 8.7 million children who should be in primary school are simply not there. In Ethiopia it’s 2.1 million. These are vast numbers that are hard to grasp, but each one represents a massive loss of potential (UNESCO, 2016).

The paper confirms that failures to prioritize primary enrolment leave millions of teenagers out of school later on. The out-of-school rate in sub-Saharan Africa is 21% for children of primary school age (about 6-11 years), 34% for youth of lower secondary school age (12-14 years) and 58% for youth of upper secondary school age (15-17 years), according to UIS data.

We see that conflict continue to rob millions of their right to education. Across the region, about one-third of all those out of school live in areas plagued by conflict. We also see the severe impact of poverty: only 65 of the poorest children for every 100 of the richest go to primary school in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNESCO GEM Report analysis. Once again, girls
face the most extreme barriers, with fewer than seven of the poorest girls attending at the upper secondary level for every ten of the poorest boys. The data above confirm that, in global terms, Sub-Saharan Africa has to be at the top of the list for investment in education. The success – or not – of policies behind this data show us where countries in the region should be emphasizing their efforts.

High-stakes exams at the end of primary and lower secondary education can prevent or discourage students from making the transition to the next level. In Tanzania, for example, less than half of children passed the primary school leaving exam in 2010: only 41% of those who reached the end of primary school went on to secondary. Meanwhile, The Gambia abolished exams at the end of primary school and saw enrolment in lower secondary increase from 44% to 63%. Also, making education compulsory for at least nine years can encourage children to go to school. Yet for many countries in the region, education is compulsory for less than six years, as in the case of Angola, Benin, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

UNICEF released a report in 2016 on The State of the World’s Children, showing that even children in school for at least four years are not learning the skills and knowledge that are vital for their intellectual and social development. Because of inaccessibility to quality education, the same report states that about 130 million children of primary school age in Sub-Saharan Africa lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. According to the World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest adult literacy rate worldwide, with 60 percent of their population of 15 and over unable to read and write, which is far below the 80 percent world rate (Soutoul, 2017).

Right now, many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are struggling to meet the educational needs of those children and youth who are relatively easy to reach. This raises concerns about how the region will ensure that the most disadvantaged can complete primary education. The task seems daunting but it is essential. There is need to be a far sharper focus on the wider challenges facing the children and teenagers who are missing out across the region – the poorest, the girls, children with disabilities, those caught up in conflict. It is not enough to just build more classrooms or hire more teachers. Only by reaching out to them, and by drawing them into the classroom, can the region hope to fulfil its enormous potential.

Countries throughout Sub-Saharan Africa have made a commitment to inclusive education by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child (with the exception of Somalia) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In many cases, countries have gone further, with their own legislation and/or constitutional provisions. The goal is for all children to fully exercise their right to an education that meets their needs and prepares them for full participation in society. But despite commitments to achieving inclusive education by 2030, only 2% of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have an education law that is inclusive of all learners, no matter their background, identity or ability.

**Global Movement towards Inclusive Education**

Inclusive Education is a ‘global education policy’ (Verger, Novelli, & Altinyelken, 2012) advanced by UNESCO and other hegemonic Western policy actors such as UNICEF, USAID, UK’s Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank, and accepted by national governments across Sub-Saharan Africa (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011). The international policy context could hardly be more conducive for Inclusive Education. Most countries around the World are legally obliged to provide Inclusive Education as a result of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which tied Inclusive Education to the Education For All agenda. The Statement enjoins governments around the world to:

“Adopt as a matter of law and legislation the policy of inclusive education, Enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise”

The state parties that took part in the Salamanca Conference and the subsequent signatories of UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) are thus accountable to the UN and their citizens to implement policies for Inclusive Education (Mittler, 2000 in Mariga,
McConkey, & Myezwa, 2014). These commitments not only include the rights of all children to attend a regular or mainstream school, but also to access a “child-centered” pedagogy capable of meeting their needs’ (UNESCO 1994). Nevertheless, despite the clear legal imperative, and more than 25 years after the Salamanca Statement in most part of Sub-Saharan Africa, Inclusive Education is legislated rather than planned for. For example, in Uganda the Inclusive Education Policy is still awaiting confirmation despite the countries successes in Universal Primary Education, thereby, making Inclusive Education a statement of aspiration rather than a tangible plan for Action.

Having established the legal basis for the global movement for Inclusive Education, let us consider what is meant by Inclusive Education and why it is and approach whose time has come.

**What is Inclusive Education?**

There are so many definitions of Inclusive education brought forward by many scholars, researchers, and organizations, but what has caught my attention is the definition that Inclusive Education stress the process of extending meaningful educational opportunities to all:

The term Inclusive Education refers not only to the process of ensuring that all children and adults—regardless of their gender, age, ability, ethnicity, impairment, HIV status, and so on—have access to education within their community, but that the education they receive is appropriate and enables them to participate and achieve, both within their education system and more widely. (Kaplan, Miles, & Howes, 2011: 23).

Inclusive Education is designed to ensure that every child has access to quality education, irrespective of gender, language, ability, religion, nationality or other characteristics. This is to support meaningful participation and learning alongside their peers in other to develop their full potential. (Save the Children 2016:6). The stipulation that students ‘learn alongside’ their peers, ‘within their community’ alludes to the historical practice of providing segregated, ‘special’ education for Children with Disabilities.

For much of the 20th century there was a widespread belief in the need for ‘separate kinds of education for different kinds of children’ (Armstrong et al. 2011:29). Such a view is grounded in a ‘deficit or ‘medical’ model of disability, which locates children differences and disabilities as individual pathologies (Thomas and Loxley 2007:3). For example, the 1944 Education Act in Britain identified eleven categories of ‘handicap’ (including ‘blind’, ‘deaf’ and ‘educationally subnormal’) requiring special provision, while children with Down’s syndrome were categorized as ‘ineducable’ (Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009).

Since the 1980s unproblematic assumptions about the categorical distinctions between different types of children have been challenged. According to the ‘social’ model of disability a person’s impairment is not the cause of disability, but rather disability is the result of the way society is organised, which disadvantages and excludes people with impairments (Armstrong et al. 2011:30). For example, a student with a visual impairment may become “disabled” if he/she is made to sit too far from the board; a student with a mobility impairment may become “disabled” if the design of the classroom prevents him from entering the room or reaching a desk. It is this social model of disability which underlies the global movement for Inclusive Education, marking a move from an ‘exclusionary to an inclusive understanding of educational difficulties’ (Veck, 2009). Inclusive Education is a question of rights and social integration, is an educational aim in itself (Armstrong et al. 2011; Srivastava et al. 2015).

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child asserts the obligation of the state to: “ensure that the child with a disability has effective access to training, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child achieving the fullest possible social integration, individual development and his/her cultural and normal development.” Clearly, schooling which segregates some young people on the basis of disability is inconsistent with ‘the fullest possible social integration’, and unconducive to
promoting broader social values of equity and respect for all.

According to research conducted by Apie, (2020), Sub-Saharan Africa paints a picture of the way Africans understand and respond to inclusion as an Education for All movement. Also, work from African authors and researchers demonstrate critical analyses of the concept taking into account the prevailing cultural milieu across the region. For instance, writing on the challenges of inclusive schooling in Africa, using a case study of Ghana, Dei (2005:268), conceived inclusive education as an ‘educational system that responds to the concerns, aspirations and interests of a diverse body, and draws on the accumulated knowledge, creativity and resourcefulness of local peoples. Commenting further, he pointed out that a school is inclusive to the extent that every learner is able to identify and connect with his/her social environment, culture, population and history.

These definitions according to Eleweke & Rodda (2002) and Ajuwon (2008), shared similar views to affirm that of Dei’s, particularly as Dei’s, already carried out research in Europe and America on the issue. It also aligned with the popular principle that educational systems have to be restructured to welcome all children in a general school. The variation in the opinions, however, is that it considered the ways in which the local people manufactured identity in the manner they conducted their affairs. This simply means that the people try to guard against mindless application of inclusivity within local contexts. Rather, they keep in check the colonizing influence of inclusion so that it does not completely distort indigenous cultures and practices (Ewa, 2015). A vague allusion inherent in the argument is in the sense that this form of education varies from community to community and the differences are partly due to geophysical environment, history, economy, social mores and interaction with neighbours (Kisanji, 1998).

The differences in approach shows that certain aspects of particular communities are resistant to or unable to cope with the inclusive banner. Even though there are some concerns about the relevance of inclusive education to local cultures, the presumption is that this model of education requires fundamental changes. These changes would have to be made in local customs, belief systems, values and norms relating to the accumulated education of children in other to attenuate existing social order. It is however painful to compromise local cultures and traditions, which cannot be equated with the way the disposition can exert negative effects on the entitlements of all children to education. Many children are deprived of their rights to education and some exposed to the risk of exclusion and marginalization in order to save the face of local cultures. Inclusive education, on the other hand, does not entail the erosion of valued customs and norms, but an articulation of thoughts and actions in ways that promote practices to genuinely support engagement of all children through the process of schooling (Ewa, 2015).

Inclusive and Exclusive Educational Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa

Looking at the Sub-Saharan Africa fact sheet as indicated by the 2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, it can be noticed that only 23% of countries in the region have laws calling for children with disabilities to be educated in separate settings.

- Most countries combine mainstreaming with separate setting arrangements, usually for learners with severe disabilities. But lack of definition of severe disabilities can lead to arbitrary decisions. For example, South Africa’s 1996 schools law stated that the right to education of children with special needs was to be fulfilled in mainstream public schools through support services and measures ‘where reasonably practicable’

- Among the countries whose laws emphasize inclusion, Ghana’s 2008 education law defined inclusive education as a ‘value system’ that ‘holds that all persons … are entitled to equal access to learning’ and that ‘transcends the idea of physical location, but incorporates the basic values that promote participation, friendship and interaction’ (Article 5.4).

- In 34% of countries, disability law also regulates inclusion in education.
In Burkina Faso, a 2010 law on protection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities noted that inclusive education was guaranteed at all education levels and that ‘any institution of initial and in-service training of teachers/literacy educators … shall take into account inclusive education in its training programmes’ (Article 12).

Senegal’s 2010 law on people with disabilities guaranteed children and adolescents with disabilities free education in mainstream schools as close as possible to their homes.

As of December 2019, only seven countries out of 55 in the region had signed Article 16 of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with a Disability, which allows for segregation to continue for persons with disabilities, but none had ratified it. Cameroon did so in 2021.

Despite commitments to achieving inclusive education by 2030, only 2% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have an education law that is inclusive of all learners, no matter their background, identity or ability.

Ghana’s 2015 policy defines it as an approach that accommodates all children in schools ‘regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions’.

Nigeria’s 2017 policy endorses the UNESCO definition, calling it the ‘process of addressing all barriers and providing access to quality education to meet the diverse needs of all learners in the same learning environment’.

In the region, 83% of countries have laws referring to people with disabilities, 23% referring to gender, 42% to ethnicity and indigeneity and 65% on language.

Kenya’s 2015 Policy Framework for Nomadic Education paid special attention to inclusion and vulnerability within nomadic communities, especially for girls and children with special needs. To facilitate access to and participation in education, the policy called for establishing more mobile schools, introducing open and distance learning and introducing innovative and flexible community-based education interventions.

Exclusion can be very blatant (very bad) and seen as shameful:

Equatorial Guinea and the United Republic of Tanzania enforce a total ban on pregnant girls and young mothers in public schools.

Some countries do not specify a minimum age for marriage (this can keep very young girls out of school) but South Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Somalia. Tanzania raised its minimum age to 18 years in October 2019.

Two (Somalia and Liberia) countries have not yet ratified the Convention on the minimum age to prevent child labour.

Refugees are often taught in parallel education systems.

Legislation can reinforce discriminatory behaviour or make it impossible to address issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation in education. In May 2019, the Kenyan High Court upheld a colonial-era law that criminalized same-sex intercourse. Nigeria outlawed discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression in positive or neutral terms, either in public or in the presence of minors.

Curriculum and textbooks can exclude too:

A 2011 review of curricula in 10 Eastern and Southern African countries found that none addressed sexual diversity appropriately. Namibia life skills curriculum in grades 8 and 12 at least refers to the issue of diversity in sexual orientation.

In South Africa, a government review found that people with physical disabilities accounted for 2% of visuals and 1% of text mentions in secondary school social science books, and that intellectual disabilities were not represented.
More human and material resources are needed for inclusion

- Human and material resources are critical for implementing inclusive education laws and policies in mainstream schools. Yet they were found lacking in a review carried out in 13 Sub-Saharan African countries. For instance, itinerant teachers face heavy workloads that impede their fulfillment of their role. Sign language is not being used in the classroom, and teachers lack skills in Braille.

- An analysis in Accra, Ghana, argues that, despite steady progress and a comprehensive legislation and policy framework, students with disabilities must perform the same tasks within the same time frame as their peers without disabilities, occupy desks placed far from teachers and are often physically punished by teachers for behavioural challenges; moreover, teaching is not differentiated.

- Malawi increasingly encourages learners with special needs to enrol in mainstream schools, yet lack of facilities forces many to transfer to special schools, for example, learners with visual impairment moved to schools for the blind.

- In evaluating the national inclusive education policy, the Namibian government noted a shortage of resource schools in rural areas, lack of accessible infrastructure, inadequate awareness and unfavourable attitudes towards disability.

Teachers need training to teach all students

- Fewer than 1 in 10 primary school teachers in 10 Francophone countries in Sub-Saharan Africa had any training in inclusive education. In Niger, for instance, only 10 of the 162 teachers working in special needs and inclusive schools were trained to work with children with disabilities.

- In South Africa, the Ministry of Education aimed to ensure each school had at least one teacher trained to screen and support students, although this target was not met.

- South Africa has anti-discrimination legislation and racial desegregation in schools, but head teachers have autonomy to determine catchment boundaries. In Johannesburg, this is a factor that increases exclusion of poor suburban children from better-performing schools.

- The pupil/desk ratio in the United Republic of Tanzania in 2016 was 5:1 vs the recommended 3:1. Moreover, averages tend to hide wide discrepancies at the expense of disadvantaged areas: The ratio was 7:1 in the Geita, Rukwa and Simiyu regions. In Uganda, among the Karamoja sub-region’s four districts with data, the ratio ranged from 5:1 to 124:1.

- There is a clear case for school-based screening to enable some straightforward interventions. Short-sightedness is not generally considered a disabling impairment because it is easy and cheap to treat with glasses. Yet school-based screening is not yet common. An analysis of 10 countries in francophone African countries, showed that, in 4 countries, less than 3% of grade 2 teachers reported that eye tests took place.

Education systems often assume that all children are the same.

- Only four countries in the region (Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe) recognize sign language as an official language and schools are more likely to have internet access than to be adapted for learners with disabilities. The Kenyan Constitution promotes development and use of Kenyan Sign Language, Braille and other communication formats and technology accessible to people with disabilities. Since most children who are totally deaf in low-resource settings start primary school with little or no language, the role of local sign languages as mother tongues is essential in introducing them to basic expression and communication skills and opening the pathway for progression in formal education.

- Students with disabilities often need adapted infrastructure and materials, but Burundi and Niger reported not having any in primary or secondary schools.
In many countries, including Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, most primary schools lack separate toilets for girls. This is recognized as an important factor in attendance of girls who have begun menstruating, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where a high percentage of students are overage.

**Concluding Remarks**

There are a number of difficulties faced by educators to guarantee inclusive education in Sub-Saharan Africa. The provisions within the national educational systems demonstrates the need to preserve local cultures and standard agenda which raises contentions against the inclusive banner. Researchers who perceive education differently, tend to look at inclusion as an idea that presumably has the capacity to displace local norms, values and belief systems in relation to the way children are allowed to engage in school. Such uncompromising position limits the rights of all children to have quality education in general settings. The implication of this has become manifest following the extent to which every child accesses, participates and achieves in school in the region. Inclusive education, is known to be the core philosophy for educating all children in general schools in the region. This therefore requires educators to adopt a curriculum that can differentially serve the diverse needs of children in other to enable equal access to education for all. Thereby achieving the dream to inclusive education opportunity which will go a long way to enable every child to develop their full potentials in Sub-Sahara Africa.

**References**


