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Basic Education: A pre-requisite for skills development in Africa's mineral resource sector

by

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Introduction

- Many African countries have development deficit not only due to lack of capital but equally because of lack of adequate knowledge and skills to enhance productivity and increase national output.
- Although attempts have been made to introduce free basic education, the quality of skills acquired in schools in relation to the demands of the economies is still wanting. Yet basic education is a foundation for technical, vocational, polytechnic and university training.

Introduction cont'

- This paper argues that African countries must of necessity review the curriculum of basic education (primary, secondary) to prepare the pupils and students for meaningful skills development at post primary and secondary levels.
- This is possible when the governments and other stakeholders address issues of infrastructure, supervision, motivation of teachers and mind-set of pupils and students in schools and their parents

What is basic education?

- In most African countries basic education includes kindergarten training for infants, primary and secondary education.
- This basic education is designed to “expose children to a wide variety of ideas, skills and attitudes that should help them cope creatively with the environment and stimulate them to be an asset to their communities and countries”
- Quality basic education should pay attention to capabilities such as numeracy, literacy, practical lessons (agribusiness, IT, handiwork) and widely spoken languages such as Spanish, English, French, and Arabic

What is Africa's experience?

- In the last decades towards 2015, African countries were motivated to achieve Millennium development goals. Investment was made in primary and secondary education.
- Evidence in the literature on Basic education (e.g. cases of Angola, DRC, Republic of Congo, Ghana, Uganda) show that majority of the working age with basic education find it difficult to get employment in the formal sector.
- This shows that the quality of basic education is not sufficient to obtain formal employment.

Africa's Experience cont'

- Although, the alternative is the informal sector, the working age would be performing better in terms of productivity if better skills were imparted at the level of basic training. Little attention is paid to handiwork in primary schools, and agribusiness in secondary schools.
- As a result basic education system is producing more products that are biased towards arts subjects.

Continued

- The implication of this training is that there is less enrolment in polytechnics, paramedical and agricultural institutes.
- In such systems one observes shortages of high and semi-skilled labour.
- You find supply deficits in medical and health, engineering and technical, and agribusiness graduates yet there is oversupply of graduates in humanities and social sciences.

Cont'

- While developing local content policies in mineral resource sector in Africa, the tendency has been to emphasise employment as strategy of implementation.
- This is perhaps because of the pressures from the youth who are widely unemployed yet they are wanting in skills and competences.
- Unfortunately, those policies geared to generation of jobs have not contributed to decrease the countries dependence on mineral revenues (e.g. Angola and Nigeria). This is why it is important to emphasise skills development and national industry participation as main strategies for local content development.

Experiences in Africa cont'

- In Latin America, countries like Brazil and Mexico where local content policies are more focused on the procurement of goods and services (national industry participation) and skills development, they have managed to develop their manufacturing sector and reduce their dependence on oil revenues.
- Good practices are observable in Chad and Angola where enterprise centres have been established to build capacities of SMEs.

What challenges do African states and governments face to promote quality basic education?

- There are a number of challenges confronting African states to have quality basic education. These challenges vary from one country to another but there are common ones related to conditions in schools, management of systems and perceptions to career development
- First, is the existence of poor quality of infrastructure in educational institutions.
- Schools lack modern equipment and tools, quality classrooms, libraries and sanitation facilities to enable effective teaching and learning.
- Sanitation has been found to be responsible among other factors to the girl child dropout rates in primary schools.

Challenges Cont'

- Second, is the reality of poor motivated teachers. As enrolments increase, African countries are unable to supply sufficient numbers of qualified teachers particularly science subjects due to inadequate budgets, poor pay etc. leading to the crisis in the quality of teaching
- Third, is the factor of inadequate school supervision. Increasingly the supervision role by the education inspectors has fundamentally reduced in schools.
- Teacher supervision is critical for good performance of students.

Challenges Cont'

- The absenteeism of teachers is also linked to school dropout particularly at the primary level.
- Unfortunately, school dropouts find their way to the agricultural sector, yet there is a positive relation between educated farmers, agricultural productivity, improved production techniques and a consequent reduction of poverty in rural areas.

Challenges cont'

- Fourth, the mind-set of pupils, students and parents is a factor in choice of career. Several students and their parents are focusing on white collar jobs. There is less interest in taking science subjects that would propel the students to join vocational and technical training.
- This is responsible for more production of labour in humanities and social sciences. Yet the labour market is demand driven.

Cont'

- The industrial sector we would like to have in Africa through local content policies by encouraging forward and backward linkages demands scientific skills.
- For instance in the oil and gas sub-sector, specific types of skilled workers are unavoidable such as engineers, drillers, production and operational workers, chemists, and IT personnel

What should be our response as scholars/policy makers in terms of recommendations?

- The crisis in providing quality basic education demands urgent response from all stakeholders.
- In particular the role of scholars (action research), policy makers and implementers (sound policies, mobilisation of resources and practice zero tolerance to corruption) are critical.
- There is need to realise that basic education followed by technical education or training may have a stronger relation to productivity growth. The starting point is to understand the problem, locate the challenges and mobilise the various stakeholders to appreciate the problem at hand and the need to tackle it.

Response

- African countries are facing different but related challenges and barriers. Some are related to poverty, conflict and displacement, sexual violence, high cost of schooling, poor infrastructure, poorly motivated teachers and school supervision, perceptions as already articulated.
- Domestic resource mobilisation – African states should focus more on domestic resource mobilisation for capacity building. Relying on external development partners at times encourage corruption and lavish spending by public officers.

Responses cont'

- Hard earned resources and collected through taxes might be an incentive to jealously protect and spend it wisely for basic education and others programmes in identified and agreed upon sectors in national development plans and visions.
- Introduction of practical lessons (handiworks), agribusiness and IT at primary levels

Response cont'

- Sensitization of parents to appreciate the role of science and technology in the transformation of society. This would change the mind-set and encourage pupils and students to take more science subjects right from primary and secondary schools
- Encourage graduates of humanities and social sciences who have not secured formal employment to take on more other market demanded skills and competences from courses such as IT, Accounting, Machine operations etc.

Conclusion

- Basic education is the foundation for all other levels in education systems of our countries. States rely on educational systems to produce skills and competences for economic transformation. In higher time African states mobilised their domestic resources to invest in basic and technical education for their nascent industries particularly in the mineral resource sectors.
- Fortunately the common challenges we face are manageable. If we stick to the fundamental principles of good governance. With domestic resources, we can solve infrastructural demands, managerial deficits and attitudinal/perception shortcomings.
- Ultimately our people need skills to increase production of goods and services and have a better quality of life.