CHAPTER 2

Unpacking the Rhetorical Equity for Development: Is Equity Achievable in an Unequal Society?

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Discourses around education in Africa raise a broad range of questions and issues. What is disturbing is that there is a lot of talking and very little action: is it not time to move away from the descriptions of issues to actions, toward alternative solutions needed and to the implementation of those recommendations? This chapter seeks to address equity issues and what it means to strive to reach equity in an unequal world. My focus is higher education in Africa, with some reference to other aspects of the education system. Some of the issues I raise are also applicable in the other sectors of education.

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Global Inequity

The starting point should be the acknowledgment of existing global inequities, and inequities between African countries and within individual societies.

We live in a world where disparities are continuously widening in all spheres of life—education, health, wealth, and human rights—at both a continental and national level. The global disparities experienced today among countries have a deep-rooted history, as illustrated in studies such as that by Shahid Alam (2006), who examined the pattern of global inequities alongside their timing and evolution among regions of the world. He explained global inequity as linked to the historical loss of sovereignty, imperialistic control of economies, and historical reduction to colonies and near colonies during the first decades of the nineteenth century. He further explained that leading to the global dominance during the Industrial Revolution was the discovery of alternative energy technology. This history fuels the current global dominance and widens the gaps in wealth and income today, both across and within national borders. Given this historical context, do regions that were dominated and colonized stand a chance to catch up and be equal players in the global economy? Is there global redress to those past injustices that created global inequities?

Studies have shown that education drives and supports economic development (Drèze and Sen 1995; Klasen 2002). Therefore, the question is how can education in the developing world help those countries catch up, despite disparities in education systems of the world and disparities within countries in terms of educational access and opportunity? Education is not merely for economic development, it is a basic human right. Many declarations have been made at the global level about the need for universal access to education, with the not so recent Education for All (EFA) call first made in 1990 at the UNESCO conference held in Jomtiem, Thailand. This call later metamorphosed to become part of the United Nations agenda for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were set to be achieved by and expired in 2015. Currently the call is for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The report of the 15-year MDG project indicates that, despite some progress toward achieving the goals, they were not fully realized. For example, MDG2 aimed to achieve universal primary education, particularly for girls, ethnic minorities, and marginalized children. However, by the time the MDGs expired, progress toward this goal indicated that 52 percent of the

countries achieved the goal, while 38 percent remained far from achieving it. This translates to 100 million children in 2015, a disturbing fact in light of the goal's mission for universal education (UNESCO 2015). MDG3 sought to ensure equal access to learning and life skills for youth and adults. Similar to the outcome previously stated, only 46 percent of countries reached universal lower secondary enrollment. What about those millions that are still not accessing education? What about their potential contribution to sustainable development that will be lost without education? Whose responsibility is it for them to access education? The budget for bridging that gap was estimated to be $22 billion USD in additional funding from the international community and donors. With commitment to development and assistance from the donor world, the goals of providing education to the majority could be realized.

In a globalizing economy, the purpose of education has shifted from the individual to the system, signaled by a shift in focus from education for personal development to education for supporting national economic growth. Today, education is viewed as necessary to support development agendas. Education reform efforts often have the main goal of strengthening economic development to more effectively compete in the global economy. As Manuel Castells put it, we are all in, part of, or aspire to be part of the global economy (Muller et al. 2001). The MDGs listed education as a tool for development and poverty alleviation. In Africa, policymakers hope that reforming their education systems can drive development to make their nations competitive in the global economy. This is happening despite the fact that the region is lagging behind others in offering education to all. The problem is that the role of education is often expressed mainly in economic development terms and less in terms of social development, a major issue on the African continent. Would improved access to education in Africa contribute to social development and help improve Africa's chance of competing with other regions whose economies are further advanced? If so, how do African nations begin to address inequities within the continent, when countries with more advanced economics still struggle with the attainment of equity? For example, a country like the United States, regarded as advanced economically, still grapples with inequity issues in education and in providing access to quality education opportunities to all members of society.

Referred to in the past as "global apartheid," inequities among countries are a major concern (Moja 2003). Power and control are concentrated in the hands of a powerful few, with their actions having

disproportionate effects on the world. In higher education, for instance, global rankings dominate the perceived worth of an institution of higher learning. The rankings are loved by those who appear at the top and despised by those who feature at the bottom. For instance, one measure for the rankings is international publications. At the same time, we know that ownership of databases and publishing houses, among other necessary parts of the publication process, are concentrated in Europe and the United States. The powerful few are not located in Africa or in the developing world, meaning research by African scholars or about the African continent is often published by Western scholars, jointly with Western Scholars in Western journals.

Attaining equity in education is becoming more and more elusive in an unequal world. As a result, education is being commodified in ways rife with current and potential exploitation. The fastest growing businesses in Africa at the current moment are religion and education. Ironically, the two go hand in hand, as Western forms of education were brought to the continent alongside religion to enable the converted to read the scriptures while serving as future bureaucrats.

The systems of higher education have been impacted by globalization in similar ways as other social and economic systems. However, it is their ability to respond to the impact of globalization that sets them apart from other world systems. One area of impact is in internationalization processes as countries respond to globalization trends. In this regard, for instance, higher education systems in Africa have become a market: global partners compete with each other and African universities to attract the best students and faculty. Many offer students with financial means, opportunities to access education, where spaces are limited. Although this increases access opportunities for students who did not have such opportunities previously, it comes at the price of taking away the best teaching staff from public universities and systems. Offering higher salaries than those given by the government or public universities often leads to this practice. Furthermore, cash-strapped institutions also tend to add income generating programs in public institutions and place their best teaching staff in those programs, so that they can remain attractive and generate income for the institution. This represents another form of stratification happening among those with access to higher education. There is increased access but not equity in those practices.

Higher Education in Africa

Higher education in Africa as a continent has gone through a massive revolution since the beginning of the twenty-first century. There has been enormous expansion in the numbers and diversity of students and universities. However, the numbers pale compared to other larger countries; for example, India has over 38,000 degree-granting institutions while the United States has over 7000 institutions. Africa, as a continent has only about 1800 public and private higher education institutions. Despite the revolution that has taken place, the continent is still far from achieving equity goals, however defined. Issues in accessing higher education remain arguably the largest obstacle in this discussion.

Africa has a very young population in need of education. It is estimated that more than half the population is less than 25 years old in some African states.[1] In South Africa, for example, youth (15–34 years) who are the "not in education, employment, or any form of training" (NEET) increased by 466,000 from about 7.4 million in 2013 to about 7.8 million in 2017 DHET 2018). They are in the streets and are like ticking time bombs, if they continue to be discontent with life and future prospects of economic independence. The reported figure for youth unemployment in Africa is 27.2 percent. Among the unemployed, youth make up 60 percent. Using South Africa again as an example, youth unemployment sits around 48 percent. Given changes to world demographics and low birth rates in Western countries, there is a clear and pressing need for providing greater education and skills to African youth to achieve national and global equity, ensure the continuation of the global economy, and address the growing disparities between African and non-African youth. The responsibility of providing the youth with education is a global in order to advance global development.

The UN reports give figures of demographic shifts that indicate that 40 percent of the world population will be African by the end of the century (UNICEF 2014). This is a major shift, given that in 1950, the African population was only 9 percent of the world's population. The figures are based on UNICEF projections that almost 1.8 billion babies will be born in Africa over a 35-year period, with a high survival rate and longer life span averaging 65 years. The population boom has implications for education

[1] See http://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/africa-population/; accessed April 2, 2015.

and development for the continent, especially when thinking about how to include the large masses of youth in education programs, given the currently limited infrastructure and resources of many African nations.

Ignoring access to education and employment for youth or failing to addressing equity issues in society has the potential to be dangerous. In South Africa, for instance, periodic flares of xenophobic attacks emerge due to frustration with the unchanging socioeconomic problems in the communities: lack of access to education or skills training, high unemployment, high poverty rates, and more. The report on progress on Millennium Development Goals in 2014 addresses this issue and makes a case for investing in youth through education, training, and skills development as a strategy to eradicate poverty, as has been done in other countries (UN Secretariat 2014). Additional credence to the strategy and commitment to these interventions must also take on poverty to fight social and economic inequality.

It is important to note that access to institutions of quality higher education is highly competitive, and therefore, available to those with resources to obtain quality high school education as part of their earlier preparation, and in some instances, access is available to the offspring of those who have political connections to influence to admissions into higher education institutions. This is problematic, given the numerous students who are motivated, qualified, and ready to perform in the higher education setting, but are not given opportunities to earn the qualifications from such an education that will increase their employment opportunities. Instead, institutions of higher education are closing their doors and not offering them other choices. The alternatives offered, if any, are not attractive enough, because they are designed, and perceived, to offer qualifications that are inferior to those offered by universities. There are ways to address these perceptions and to use alternative routes, not as dead-end routes without opportunities for further advancement, but rather as stepping stones to other opportunities.

A twin issue to access is quality. In the schooling sector, the EFA Global Monitoring Report stated that, even though access to education had improved, there were still major issues relating to the quality of education received by students within different areas of each country (UNESCO 2015). Quality problems are a result of, among other issues, underfunding, lack of infrastructure, and poorly or untrained teachers.

The problems continue in the higher education sector, because some of those who gain access to colleges or universities are provided with low-

quality educations. Opening access to the majority of students has unfortunately come with a drop in standards, because access is sometimes offered at the expense of quality. In desperation, students are finding themselves attending unaccredited institutions or institutions that are more interested in obtaining higher profit margins than in offering quality education. Some countries attempt to combat these predatory educational practices. For instance, in India, the Ministry of Higher Education provides a list of what are called "fake" universities on its website, so as to help the general public make informed choices about the quality of school they are choosing to attend. However, this does not stop students from registering at these institutions due to increasing competitive pressures in various professional sectors. As already mentioned, the elite members of society have better access to preparatory programs through private high schools, private tutoring, and personal connections. Governments have attempted to equalize opportunities by increasing access to learning opportunities. For example, Ethiopia has recently undergone a major transformation of its engineering programs, as part of its development strategy, including increasing access to historically underrepresented and marginalized groups within the country. This is commendable even though the government now needs to make sure that the programs offered are of high quality and meet international standards.

In the school sector, campaigns for universal primary education projects have had some success in expanding access. There are more children in schools now than in 1990, when EFA 2000 was adopted. The educational trajectories have interesting implications, as it is reasonable to assume many will continue into secondary school before moving into higher education. However, statistics show enrollment in school starts tapering off, as students start to reach secondary education levels. Who among them will have access to higher levels of learning and who will not? What kind of access will that be? Tracking in some systems begins at this point. The students' future career paths are set for them. Some students get placed in tracks that would prepare them for academic studies in universities and colleges, while others are prepared for vocational education, with no future opportunities to enter higher education institutions. Is tracking fair at this early stage of life, given the different learning styles and paces? What factors come into play in determining the future of children? Their home background and socioeconomic status are major factors in determining success and future careers. This calls into question whether the opportunities for success are equitable for all students who have at least some access to education.

Is equity a reality or a myth given the situation just outlined? Equity in an unequal society is problematic. The very basic structure of education systems impacts equity. Traditionally, education systems have sorted students according to attainment. Evidence from studies of secondary and primary schools suggests that such sorting can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process. This prompts two conclusions: early tracking and streaming need to be justified in terms of proven benefits; and school systems using early tracking should postpone it to a later stage to reduce inequities and improve outcomes.

Education and Development

There are clear tensions inherent in addressing access, equity, and development goals simultaneously in the context of developing countries. The issue on one hand relates to promoting access to higher education for the masses of people who never had it in the past. In doing so, the intervention is undertaken purely for meeting social justice and equity goals and does not necessarily translate into access for human development. This is done mainly through access to undergraduate degrees and access to a diverse range of qualifications that are likely to increase postgraduation employability levels. The benefit of such interventions has increased political stability through the development of citizenship and promotion of democracy and sustainability in many developing countries. There are studies that indicate a link between education attainment and participation in democratic political processes in Africa (Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2015).

On the other hand, interventions for access that promote development refer to higher education, mainly at the graduate level, and especially, at the doctoral level, where the graduates are more likely to be connected to the innovation systems that drive the country's development and economic sustainability. Africa's development and sustainability need to be addressed from this perspective as well. There are a number of foundations supporting postgraduate studies in Africa, such as the Carnegie Corporation, the Mellon Foundation, and national governments like South Africa that have prioritized postgraduate support as part of their strategy for development. This is done in recognition that higher education plays a role in development. The challenge lies in ensuring that it does play that role.

In the past, the function of doctoral education was narrowly defined as playing a role in preparing the next generation of academics for institutions of higher education and other high-level professionals for the other

sectors of society, especially the economy. The debate has now shifted to focusing on linking qualified academics to knowledge production for economic development. Three of the BRICS countries, namely, China, Brazil and South Africa, are setting high targets for the conferral of doctoral degrees and research output along with supporting those efforts with huge investments. In South Africa, the National Planning Commission and the Department of Science and Technology have put forward proposals on doctoral education in South Africa with specific targets supported by arguments linking qualified academics with positive knowledge contributions for development, as well as improving education quality at the higher education level. The targets sets aim at increasing the numbers of qualified higher education academics from 39 to 75 percent in institutions and to produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million by 2030, compared to the current 28 per million. To reach these targets, South Africa plans to substantially increase the current production from about 1800 to 5000 doctorates per year. The target for South Africa is to increase overall graduate enrollments in higher education to 25 percent by 2030 (NPC 2012, 318–20).

There is a sense of urgency throughout Africa for the production of the next generation of academics. However, plans are not clear on how those goals will be achieved. Examples of initiatives include the 2012 discussions on doctoral education, which took place at the International Association of Universities (IAU) and Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) international seminar entitled Innovative Approaches to Doctoral Education and Research Training in Sub-Saharan Africa (IAU-ACUP 2012); the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) leadership dialogue, Doctoral Education: Renewing the Academy (SARUA 2012); and finally the IAU's Changing Nature of Doctoral Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa report (IAU 2012; Cloete et al. 2015). These developments and initiatives represent interventions in Africa that potentially can expand the quality of higher education and open access opportunities.

Conclusion: Does Access Really Translate to Equity in School and Society?

Addressing inequities in education has been on the education reform agenda for many decades. and as some predict, will remain so for the foreseeable future. In 1982, Coombs listed equity as one of the critical four

reform agenda items that was predicted to continue into the next century (Coombs 1982). Indeed, three decades later, education practitioners and policymakers are still struggling with ways to ensure meaningful equity in education beyond creating equal practices, in principle, which become unequal in practice.

Increasing or creating educational access is often treated as a first step toward creating a more equitable society. This is often followed by questions relating to the quality of education offered, as more members of society gain access. The call for expansion of access is rarely accompanied by a meaningful increase in educational resources. Zajda (2010) argues that equity and quality are two contradictory policy imperatives. He indicates that quality points to some form of elitism and excellence while equity points to increased access, equality of opportunity, and social justice. According to Zajda (2010), it is difficult to bring the two policy imperatives together in a complementary way.

Numerous scholars have looked at the complexity of achieving equity in schools in both South Africa and the United States. The problems are embedded in each society and spill over into the education systems. Policies alone can never change the situation and must be accompanied by a change in attitude and rigid systems to allow for more flexibility in the cultural context within which education exists.

A challenge exists in providing access that is equitable and offers quality education. Studies have shown the connection between education and social upward mobility, better job opportunities, and higher earnings and quality of life. They point to the need to continue to explore ways of narrowing the gap in accessing educational opportunities. Making quality education accessible to all is a step towards creating an equitable society. The benefits that accrue are not only for the individual, but also for the broader society. However, it should be cautioned that education in itself does not close the gap or fix inequality in society. This is confirmed by a recent analysis by Lawrence Summers and colleagues; Summers, the former president of Harvard University and former US Secretary of the Treasury cautioned us not to conflate educational opportunities that increase individual financial security with the reduction of inequities in society (Hershbein et al. 2015). Addressing social inequities is a constant and multifaceted process that includes, but is not limited to education.

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