

Research on Education and Economic Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract: This study investigates the crucial roles of education in fostering economic mobility in the region of Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on three countries. The countries that are the focus of this study include Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. While education is becoming more accessible, there are still numerous problems: inequality in the quality of education between the cities and the villages, the gender gap, and the lack of opportunities for children from low-income families to receive proper education. This study looks at the effects of these challenges on the economic aspect and also aims to establish the role played by different levels of education, the primary, secondary, and vocational, in social mobility. Special attention is given to vocational and technical education since these systems are important in linking education to the labor market and enhancing the employment status of youths. Also, the study captures how specific strategies can be used to ensure that special attention is given to vulnerable groups like girls and families with low incomes to ensure that they get quality education. Thus, based on the mixed methods approach, this research identifies the ways to increase access to education, decrease inequalities, and increase the quality of education with the purpose of making education a more powerful weapon against poverty and for inclusive growth in the region.

Keywords: Education, Economic Mobility, Sub-Saharan Africa, Gender Inequality, Vocational Training.

1. Introduction

Education has been deemed as one of the most important factors that propel the growth of the economy, especially in areas that have been stricken with social and economic problems, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. This area is known for having one of the highest levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, which consequently restricts the economic prospects for the majority of people living in this area. However, education is a way to escape poverty, which means that such people will get the opportunity to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to change their status. In the last two decades, many of the Sub-Saharan African countries have tried to build on access to education. For instance, the net enrollment rate in primary education was 58% in the year 2000 while the same was 78% in the year 2018, which shows that there is a high concern about enhancing education enrollment [1]. Nevertheless, the region has a number of challenges in the sphere of education quality and equity, as well as severe consequences for future economic development.

This research aims to seek how education can be used to improve economic mobility within the sub-region of Sub-Saharan Africa. This region is very diverse in terms of economic development, and therefore, it is a perfect place to analyze the role of education in economic performance. The present research will also discuss the level of education, analyzing the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education and their impact on economic mobility in three selected countries: Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. The countries selected are different in terms of their education systems and level of economic development in an effort to get a comprehensive view of the problem. By analyzing these cases, the study shall seek to find the best practices and strategies that can be used in the whole region to increase the role of education in economic development.

There is a rather extensive body of literature that indicates that education is important for the process of moving up the economic ladder. For example, Vanessa revealed that education plays a significant role in enhancing inclusive economic development in African countries, as evidenced by the fact that levels of education are negatively correlated with income inequality across African countries [2]. Furthermore, Bennell highlighted vocational training as a way of enhancing youths' employability and fighting against unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa [3]. These studies thus confirm that education has the ability to create change in people's economic prospects. However, it also reveals major issues, especially in the area of art.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of literature is dedicated to the general impact of education on economic well-being, the link between education and economic mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa remains under-examined, especially regarding the specific channels of this impact. For instance, Filmer and Pritchett (Lant) established that children from affluent families achieve higher levels of education and get better-paid employment, a factor that affirms that the economic standing of a family influences educational success [4]. This is because there is a need to have policies that address the various issues of inequality in education so that education can be the most potent and non-biased means of improving one's economic status.

Although the literature on education and economic mobility has been quite expansive, little attention has been paid to how various levels and forms of education, which include vocational training and tertiary education, as well as informal education, have an impact on the economic status in Sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of the studies focus on primary and secondary schools, while informative and analytical research on tertiary education and vocational training is scarce. Also, even though gender is recognized as one of the primary drivers of educational disadvantage, there is limited understanding of how gender interacts with other aspects, including ethnicity, geographical location, and socio-economic status, to affect economic prospects. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining how various forms of education can enhance economic mobility with an emphasis on breaking the barriers that vulnerable groups encounter.

In order to solve the problem, this study will use several mixed-method approaches to analyze the effects of education on economic mobility in the area. The study will then proceed with a comparative analysis of the Kenyan, Nigerian, and South African systems with the aim of identifying the changes that have been made in the policies and their effects on the education system in regard to access and quality. The study will then proceed to explore the link between education and economic results through quantitative data as well as qualitative case studies in an effort to describe and account for the findings. Lastly, the study will recommend measures for increasing the importance of education in enhancing the economic opportunities of the region with a special focus on policies that can benefit the excluded groups, including the girl child, the rural population, and the low-income families.

2. Case Description

First section will start by examining the educational and economic contexts of the three Sub-Saharan African countries: Some of the countries are Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. These countries were

selected given the difference in their economic development and educational systems in order to gain an understanding of the opportunities and challenges that exist for the enhancement of economic mobility through education.

Kenya, a country with a lower middle-income economy, has made notable progress in expanding access to education, particularly with the introduction of free primary education in 2003. This policy led to a significant increase in enrollment, with the number of students rising from 5.9 million in 2002 to 7.6 million in 2003 [5]. According to WHO, there were 6 million cases in the year 2003. This has, however, come with several challenges, including the continued inequality in education standards, where many rural schools still lack the right facilities and resources and have inadequate teachers. On the other hand, Nigeria, a country blessed with oil resources, still has high rates of poverty, and it has a lot of challenges as far as education is concerned especially in the northern part of the country where poverty and conflicts are high. South Africa, being the wealthiest among the three, has an upper middle-income economy and a better-developed education system as a result of its history. Nonetheless, it still has extreme poverty and inequality, which affects the education system, especially for the black population.

In Kenya, efforts made by the government towards the expansion of education have seen an increased enrolment in both primary and secondary education. However, challenges that are associated with the quality of education have not been completely eradicated; crowded classrooms and lack of adequate learning materials are some of the reasons that hamper effective learning. Another measure that the government has also initiated recently in order to fight youth unemployment is technical and vocational education and training, yet these programs are still new. Some of the measures that have been taken by the government of Nigeria to enhance enrolment in education, especially in the northern part of the country, include the construction of more schools and the provision of scholarships to families. However, these efforts are usually marred by conflict and cultural barriers. For instance, South Africa, which has made an agenda of expanding enrolment in higher education, utilized such schemes as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to offer financial assistance to needy students. Though these efforts have been made, students from low-income families continue to struggle with the various challenges that make them drop out of college, and hence, they have a low graduation rate [6].

3. Analysis of the Problem

3.1. Problems Analysis of Case

3.1.1. Disparities in Educational Access and Quality

One of the biggest issues in the Sub-Saharan African regions is the inequality in education, where the quality of education is still poor in rural areas and in low-income households. Though the number of students registering in schools, especially at the primary level, has risen, the quality of education that learners get is still poor. There are few facilities available in rural schools, including proper classrooms, libraries, and sanitation facilities, which affect the learning of the students [7]. Also, these schools are often under-resourced. That is, they have a shortage of professional teachers, which in turn affects the student's performance in school. On the other hand, urban schools, especially those that are in affluent neighborhoods, are likely to have better facilities and resources, which will enhance the student's chances of doing well in their academics and the future labor market. The problem of lack of quality education for the people who live in rural areas is that they continue to be poor. In these regions, students drop out of their education at a younger age, and even if they do finish their education, they are not adequately equipped for university or employment. This difference in educational quality not only harms the future of people but also increases the existing economic gap

as people from the rural areas have less chance of improving their status in society than those from the cities.

3.1.2. Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is still a big problem in Sub-Saharan Africa, where girls and women have limited access to education and the means to improve their status. Some of the cultural values that work against girl child education include early marriage and the belief that a girl's role is to take care of the home. In most parts of the region, girls have little or no access to primary and secondary education compared to boys, and this denies them chances of education beyond primary level and also good-paying jobs. For example, UNESCO's data for the year 2021 indicates that in Sub-Saharan Africa, girls have lower completion rates than boys, which will impact their economic opportunities and social status in the future [8]. The effects of gender inequality on education are felt most acutely in rural areas owing to the fact that the traditional gender norms prevail in such areas rather than in urban areas. In addition, there are other challenges like long distances to school, insecurity, and lack of proper sanitation facilities, which cause the girls to drop out of school. Consequently, from what was observed, women in Sub-Saharan Africa are likely to be employed in low-paying jobs or the informal sector and thus be unable to participate actively or benefit from economic development.

3.1.3. Socio-Economic Barriers

Other factors that include poverty, child labor, health, and socio-economic factors also greatly influence the inability of Sub-Saharan Africa to access education. Children in families with low incomes are expected to contribute towards their families' income, which in turn hampers their chances of attending school or attending school regularly. For instance, child labor is rife in Nigeria, especially in the northern areas of the country where rates of poverty are also highest. These children rarely attend school because they are required to work, and this hampers their chances of acquiring education as well as hinders their chances of having a brighter future as far as the economic aspect is concerned [9]. In totality, health problems like malnutrition and diseases affect the health of students; hence, they cannot concentrate on learning, and this worsens the cycle of poverty. This is because children of low-income families are not even permitted to attend school and those who are allowed to are provided with poor-quality education. This, in turn, restricts their economic prospects, which leads to the continuing cycle of poverty. In order to break this cycle, measures must be taken that address both the economic constraints to education and the quality of education received by the disadvantaged groups.

3.2. Reasons for Analysis of the Problem

3.2.1. Inadequate Funding and Resource Allocation

The main cause of the poor quality of education in the area is poor funding. These governments have inadequate funding for education; hence, there are few resources used in hiring and training teachers, poor infrastructure in schools, and scarce learning materials available to the learners. For instance, in Kenya, the government introduced free primary education, which resulted in increased enrollment, but the government did not match the increase in enrollment with an increase in funding. Consequently, many schools became overpopulated, and the standard of education was reduced [10]. This is because the shortage of resources not only leads to poor quality of education but also hampers the capacity of schools to create a favorable environment for learning of students, which in turn hampers their chances of upward social and economic mobility. The problems of funding are complicated further by a lack of proper resource management. Unfortunately, funding for education

is often mishandled, and only a small part of the released money is actually directed to education, and much of it is embezzled or misused. This is not only a decrease in the effect of education spending but also affects the confidence of people in the country's education system. Hence, it is vital that the governments not just raise expenditures on education but also guarantee that the expenditures are well planned for and well utilized.

3.2.2. Policy Implementation Challenges

However, it is important to note that even when educational policies are set, various challenges are likely to occur during their implementation. The following factors can hinder the implementation of these policies: corruption, weak political will, and poor infrastructure. This is especially the case in rural regions because getting resources to these areas is quite a challenge. For instance, the Nigerian government has been working towards increasing access to education in the northern part of the country, but this has been hampered by ongoing conflict and cultural barriers. Hence, the government cannot achieve the intended objectives [11]. This means that no matter how noble the objectives of the policies are, these cannot work unless they are well implemented. The problem of coordination between the different levels of government, as well as between the government and other stakeholders such as NGOs, also poses a challenge to the implementation of educational policies. Many times, policies are crafted at the national level, and yet the locals are not well represented; hence, policies may not meet their needs. Therefore, one has to look at the various challenges that face the education systems in various societies and ensure that the policies that are being made are aimed at solving the problems that are evident in the different regions.

3.2.3. Socio-Cultural Factors

Socio-cultural factors, beliefs, and practices also play a very important role in determining enrollment and achievement in Sub-Saharan Africa. In many societies where education is not considered very important, especially for girls because cultural beliefs may require them to get married and be homemakers, such beliefs do not only affect education but also reinforce gender as well as socio-economic differences and thus hinder people who belong to disadvantaged groups from attaining a better economic status. These concerns can be addressed by a comprehensive approach that entails the modification of policies but also attempts to change the perception of people in the general population, especially in rural setups [12]. Transforming cultural perceptions about education is a delicate and slow process that has to be done at different levels over time. This is an important role of community engagement, and local leaders and opinion makers can help change attitudes towards education. Also, awareness campaigns that stress the importance of education, especially for girls, can go a long way in changing people's perceptions and making them enroll their children in schools.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Enhancing Educational Access and Quality

In order to reduce inequalities in education and its quality, especially in rural areas, governments should consider increasing the budget allocated to schools and other learning facilities. This includes constructing more schools in remote areas, enhancing the existing infrastructures, and availing better learning tools such as textbooks. However, there is a need to expand teacher training so that rural schools can get teachers with skills and commitment. One of the ways through which Governments can encourage teachers to work in areas with little or no teaching personnel is by providing good salaries and other incentives like affordable houses and career progression. For instance, public investments that are directed towards rural Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the education sector,

have been seen to enhance productive employment, especially in the non-farm sector, whereby the marginalized groups are benefited [13]. However, there is a need to put in place measures that address the issue of large class sizes, which are undesirable in the learning process. For instance, in Kenya, class sizes increased after the implementation of free primary education, which in turn negatively impacted the quality of teaching and learning due to crowding and the lack of enough learning materials and teachers [10]. Introducing community-based monitoring mechanisms may assist in preventing resources from being misappropriated or misused, thus addressing issues of corruption and inefficient management of resources [14]. These strategies will, therefore, guarantee that every child, regardless of their social status or location, gets the best education that they deserve with the aim of improving their economic status.

4.2. Addressing Gender Inequality in Education

This means that specific measures have to be taken to ensure girls get education as much as boys in order to address gender imbalance. Governments should ensure that there are measures that prevent early marriage and put emphasis on girls' education. Public enlightenment can be quite helpful in changing the perception of people in society, especially those in rural settings, where people still hold on to cultural values of gender equality. Such campaigns should focus on the sustainable economic and social returns of educating girls as this will benefit not only the girl child but also the whole community [15]. Also, schools should have gender-sensitive facilities like transport and toilets, among others. It is important to note that there is evidence that when policies are put in place to empower mothers to reduce gender inequality in education, it leads to better education of girls and, hence, inclusive economic development [16]. Offering scholarships or other means of financial support to girls can only go a long way in reducing the costs of educating girls and, hence, helping families keep more girls in school. In Ghana, there was the challenge of a lack of female role models, and the cost of materials for vocational education was also very expensive for female students [17]. These barriers will be addressed with the aim of increasing girls' access to education and, hence, their chances of escaping poverty.

4.3. Reducing Socio-Economic Barriers

To tackle the social and economic hurdles to learning, more than just funding must be employed, such as sponsoring needy families, healthcare, and other social services. Governments should increase social protection by implementing the CCT program to give money to families who enroll their children in schools [9]. Such financial assistance may go a long way in addressing child labor, which is rife in most areas and more so in Nigeria, where children have to work to earn income for their families and, therefore, miss out on school [9]. Besides, school feeding programs should be developed or extended because malnutrition affects children's learning process. This implies that by providing students with at least one meal a day, the governments can enhance the attendance rate in schools and the academic performance of the children [13]. Other services such as medical checks and vaccinations should also be offered to the students through the education system to avoid the effect of diseases on the learners' academic performance. These policies will help children from needy families be offered education and hence increase their chances of employment.

4.4. Strengthening Vocational and Technical Education

To this end, it is noteworthy that vocational and technical education should be enhanced in order to meet educational and work-related needs. Governments should ensure that they foster close relationships with the private sector in order to develop vocational training programs that suit the demands of the economy now and in the future. Inclusive vocational education has been proven to

increase labor market opportunities for women and thus decrease unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa [17]. It is also important to increase the availability of vocational training, especially for people who are excluded from the education system, by offering scholarships, convenient timetables for learning, and special packages suitable for rural and other marginalized populations [17]. This way, the youth who may not be lucky enough to get into college or university will be able to acquire skills that will make them self-reliant and help them earn a decent income. TVET, if well embraced and integrated into the national economic development agendas, can offer hope for change in youth employment and the general development of Sub-Saharan Africa [3].

5. Conclusion

This study has sought to establish education as a key factor in the process of economic mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa, with particular reference to Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Based on the assessment of each of the regions, it is possible to conclude that despite the fact that the overall enrolment rates have improved especially at the primary level, many issues concerning quality, equity, social justice, and other socio-economic factors remain. These problems persist in hindering the possibility of people to improve their economic status, especially in the rural sector and other disadvantaged groups. One of the biggest challenges that still exist is the inequality in access and quality of education between the urban and the rural areas, where the majority of the students in the rural areas are still deprived of basic facilities like proper schools, teachers, and even books and other reading materials. This inequality in education keeps on compounding more cycles of poverty through which many people cannot gain the opportunities that education is supposed to offer. In addition, there is no vocational and technical training to prepare youth for jobs within the economy of the country.

Gender inequality is also another factor that has a great effect on the economic mobility in the region. Cultural practices, child marriage, and domestic work limit the chances of girls attaining education, especially in rural regions. These gendered barriers not only constrain the economic prospects of an individual but also hinder the overall socio-economic progress. It is therefore important to eliminate gender disparities through community mobilization, policy changes, and providing financial assistance to girls so as to enable education to become a powerful instrument for both men and women. In light of these challenges, the following strategies are recommended in this study: enhance the investment in education facilities, especially in the rural areas that are not well developed, enhance the training of teachers, and ensure that resources are well distributed. Another area that needs to be developed is vocational and technical education since it can assist in closing the gap between the education system and the labor market and equip young people with skills needed in the labor market.

In conclusion, the efforts that have been made in the area of education in Sub-Saharan African countries have not been ineffective, but the challenge remains of whether education can lead to economic mobility in the region. Thus, it can be stated that education can become a real driver of economic development when it comes to quality, gender concerns, and socio-economic differences, which will help to eliminate poverty and ensure sustainable development in the region.

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