

Educational Research and Policy Analysis Capacity for Educational Change in sub-Saharan Africa

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Résumé: La capacité des pays de l'Afrique au Sud du Sahara de formuler et d'exécuter des politiques judicieuses pour un développement à long terme et durable est un des moyens de sortie de la crise sociale, économique et politique que le continent traverse. Malheureusement, cette capacité est limitée, et là où elle existe, son impact est également très limité, comme on peut le constater dans le secteur de l'éducation. L'auteur analyse les différentes actions internes et externes prises par les gouvernements nationaux, les chercheurs et les organismes de financement pour améliorer ou changer les conditions actuelles. Il accorde une attention particulière aux voies et moyens de renforcer et de maintenir les capacités de recherche et d'élaboration de politique dans chaque pays et dans la région.

Introduction

The existence of a capacity to formulate sound policies and implement them in each of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa is now well recognised as an essential ingredient to the process of rehabilitation and recovery from the current social, economic and political decline and stagnation, and a necessary condition for short and long-term sustained development. Unfortunately in the last fifteen years Africa's capability to formulate realistic, well thought out and implement able policies and programmes has seriously been eroded. In countries where this capacity has been retained, its utilisation has been severely constrained to make maximum impact on the needs of the society.

The consequences of this constrained and unfavourable environment have been that the policies are formulated without meaningful debates and within narrow parameters, often impelled by expediency, short-term considerations and crisis management, rather than overall needs and long-term development perspectives. While this phenomenon is widespread in all sectors of African development, the education sector has been particularly affected. This largely stems from the strong social demand for education leading to high growth rates in enrolment at all levels, and the rising public and private expenditure. Educational policies and decisions are therefore formulated in an environment which is highly politicised and in the arena of conflicts and struggles of vested interests. This is to be noted in

many countries in Eastern and Southern Africa where formulation and implementation of education policies and decisions has been taken up by politicians, and educational professionals, researchers, policy analysts, curriculum experts, teachers and administrators are sidelined. Their expertise in most cases is disregarded.

At the same time, there has been noticeable decline in research capacity of African universities and the planning units of the Ministries of Education. Hence policy-making and related strategies for implementation of reform and improvement in educational practices have become almost the exclusive territory for politicians and donor agencies. This has further marginalised indigenous research institutions and professionals. In many instances where available educational research capability is utilised, and professionals involved, it is often to legitimise decisions already taken and finalised, rather than to provide alternatives for policy debates and decision-making. This mode of operation has been justified as necessary in conditions where research capacity is lacking, weak and quality of the research output has not attained very high standards. In some countries a vicious circle however prevails in that the existing capacity is not utilised and thereby measures to strengthen it are ignored and decline allowed to set in. This then is used to justify the disregard which national governments show towards it, and legitimise continued dependency on donor funded foreign expertise.

This paper discusses factors which have led to the prevailing situation with regard to building and strengthening indigenous research capacity and its utilisation in generating, disseminating and using research knowledge for educational change. The focus is on actions which local institutions and researchers have taken to strengthen research capacity and its utilisation in the education sector. The role of donors in this process is then discussed and its implications indicated. The paper then underlines the need for an interactive process in education research involving national governments, research institutions, researchers, policy-makers, change agents and donors in search for ways and means of building, maintaining and sustaining a conducive research environment and the necessary capacity for production, dissemination and utilisation of research results and data to enriching educational processes. In conclusion suggestions are made for creating an enabling research environment and establishing linkages between research activities to various actors in the education sector.

Research Environment in sub-Saharan Africa

Efforts of the last fifteen years at capacity-building in research and policy analysis in Africa have clearly demonstrated the pervasive impact which the social, economic and political environment has on research enterprise. The consequences have been institutional decay, overall decline in quality of education, constant disruptions and discontinuities in research activities and

loss of professional staff. The economic situation prevailing in most African countries have led to the deterioration of working conditions leading to serious brain-drain, while those who remain behind attempt to survive by engaging in consultancy work, or other forms of supplementing their incomes. The economic situation has been coupled by repressive circumstances which researchers have faced, and especially those engaged in institutions of higher education.

The overall picture is that of institutions which can hardly attract or retain research personnel, intolerant of diversity of views, libraries that are neglected, current books and journals are not available, and teaching workload has increased to such extent that the research mission expected of higher education has become weak or non-existent. In these circumstances research competency and quality output are viewed as luxuries which can hardly be afforded, left alone aspired to.

The political instability and internal conflicts plaguing many African countries, coupled with economic crisis referred to above, have, and continue, to inflict serious damage to the research environment, perhaps more than is often conceded. Unless these circumstances change, and the prospects do not seem that great, even with the emerging tide for democratisation, we are likely to witness continued decline of national capacities and increased utilisation of foreign experts and consultants.

The consequences of the prevailing social and political upheavals need increased attention as they directly impinge on the approaches and modalities for building and sustaining research capacity. As long as these circumstances prevail, it must be accepted, indigenous research institutions will remain fragile and their research output negligible.

Potential users of research will then tend to disregard local institutions and their research output, and to resort to outside experts, with all economic and political implications which go with it.

But conflicts and the instability prevailing in some countries are not the only factors which have constrained research capacity in Africa. State repression and denial of basic freedoms have robbed the continent the use of its most creative minds and researchers, and imposed a curtain of self-censorship on those who remain in the universities and research institutions. Research activities and creativity rather than being rewarded, have remained dangerous pre-occupation. To survive in the midst of state repression researchers have confined themselves to innocuous research projects and epiphenomenal issues in the development process.

African governments have however, a major task and indeed primary responsibility to create, maintain and sustain freedom, space, conducive climate, and the overall enabling environment for research institutions to thrive and individual researchers to engage in creative intellectual production. In this way innovation, relevant and quality research can thrive

and flourish, thereby increasing the quality and quantity of output. In such context research networking and exchange of information which has become a critical need in the region can be firmly established, and a dynamic research community and culture emerge. Creation of an enabling environment at national level is a prerequisite for the emergence of a vibrant and creative research community producing knowledge and information for utilisation in the advancement of the society. Unless these conditions are met, efforts at capacity-building by both national governments and donor agencies will remain endangered, disjointed and short-term endeavours with limited impact on policy or educational practice. The expected impact of these efforts will be extremely difficult to come by and their sustainability will be virtually impossible.

While the required space and freedom has to be struggled for, national governments have to be constantly reminded of the political prerequisites for strengthening, maintenance and sustaining research capacity and its effective utilisation in the development process. In short, issues of governance and democratisation which have recently surfaced in the development debates in Africa, cannot be ignored in any attempt to create credible and sustainable research capacities.

Building National Research Capacity

Educational development and reform require many kinds of expertise and skills to implement. These skills range from management and supervision of personnel and education institutions, planners and curriculum developers, to skills to undertake research and analyse policy options. It is also recognised that demand for expertise in the various educational tasks is not limited to ministries of education, but are required by communities, non-governmental organisations, professional bodies and private sector institutions involved in provision of education.

The primary responsibility of planning how these capacities are to be built, strengthened and sustained lie with the national governments of sub-Saharan Africa. Plans to build and provide these capacities need to be seen as part and parcel of the development of quality and relevant and equitable education system. Building and strengthening research and policy analysis capability whether in the ministries, universities, public research institutions, or among non-governmental organisations and civil society, should be perceived as a critical input in strengthening the educational function of the whole society.

While it is accepted that donor agencies have contributed a great deal in the process of building and strengthening research capacity, and are likely to continue to do so, it remains the primary responsibility of national governments to rehabilitate and revitalise their universities, research institutes and planning units in order to provide the required expertise in this

field. The task of donors in this respect is to supplement national efforts and to foster creativity and innovations where local resources are scarce or overstretched. It is within this assumption, and in the social, economic and political context prevailing in sub-Saharan Africa that we should evaluate the activities and contribution of research networks, professional organisations, donor and international organisations in the field of educational research and policy analysis.

Donor Driven Research and Policy

With decline of African universities and research institutions, donor and international organisations have become critical actors in production of research knowledge, and dissemination of policy related research intended to influence policy formulation and implementation. The dominance of the World Bank in this respect is widely felt in many academic and research institutions. Although this dominance is detested no credible alternatives have so far emerged.

In the last five years donor and international organisations have taken a number of initiatives which while highlighting the critical role educational research and policy analysis can play in policy formation, have nevertheless, emphasised their dominance in the field of production of knowledge and its utilisation in the development process. The publication of the World Bank Report on Education in sub-Saharan Africa: *Policies for Adjustments Revitalisation and Expansion* (1988) followed by the establishment of the Task Force of Donors to African Education (DAE) initially with a secretariat at the World Bank, and bringing together about forty donors agencies operating in sub-Saharan Africa to co-operate and share information on education change, is by itself an indication of the current and potential influence these agencies have on African education. The DAE tasks are carried out through a dozen working groups each led by a donor agency, and concentrating on a priority issue in education. Working groups have therefore been established to deal with issues of examinations, women education, higher education, education statistics, teaching profession, vocational and technical education, and educational research and policy analysis, among others.

The Task Force of DAE since inception in 1988 has provided for participation of African ministers in discussions related to critical education issues and policies in sub-Saharan Africa. While researchers have also participated in these deliberations, their effective representation and voice is provided for in the Working Group activities. On the whole DAE initiative has emphasised the critical role indigenous capacity in research and policy analysis can play in revitalising educational systems in Africa. Although the Working Groups are led by donors, the concerns of African researchers, policy makers and institutions have been given an opportunity to be

expressed and guide the activities of the Working Groups. In essence they have emphasised the critical role education research, policy analysis, policy dialogue and sharing of information can play in the process of change.

With the publication of the World Bank report entitled *sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (1989) there was added momentum to build and strengthen capacity in all fields to facilitate recovery and long-term development. The report recommended capacity-building through 'institutional reforms at every level of government, and measures to foster private sector and non-governmental organisations' as strategic agenda for the 1990s (p.14). The emphasis given to capacity-building as the main concern of development found clear expression in the emergence of the African Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI) in 1990 and subsequently the establishment of African Capacity-Building Foundation in Harare, 1991.

These multilateral donor initiatives should be recognised as an outcome of the dominant role the donor community has assumed in guiding development agenda and its implementation in Africa. Implicit in all these are assumptions about African reality, and theoretical frameworks for changing that reality and overall development process. Within this general approach capacity for research and policy analysis is viewed as critical input into the development process.

In basic education, the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990, highlighted the urgent need for building and strengthening national capacities for management, supervision, analysis and research geared towards provision of basic education to various groups in the society. Thus the WCEFA Framework for Action argued:

Ultimate responsibility rests within each nation to design and manage its own programmes to meet the learning needs of all its population. International support could include training and institutional development in data collection, analysis and research, technological innovation and educational methodologies. These capabilities will be even more in demand to support quality improvements in primary education, and to introduce innovative out-of school programmes (p.61).

The dominance of donor and international agencies in the production of knowledge, its dissemination and influence on the development agenda, has thrived in the midst of the decline of African research institutions, especially the universities. The decline has been particularly observable in the faculties and institutes of education, where increased student population, coupled with budgetary constraints has thrust heavy teaching responsibilities, (narrowly focused on production of teachers) and supervision of graduate students on

existing faculty, thereby seriously curtailing research output. Added to this are serious shortcomings with local training at masters and doctors levels, compounded by non-existence of training in policy-analysis. Confronted with this reality, one can then understand the impatience of donor agencies eager to have data for policy interventions. The recent IDRC study on the Status of Capacity-Building in Educational Research and Policy in sub-Saharan Africa (1993) has underlined the pervasive nature of this phenomenon in many countries in the region.

The dominant donor response to this situation has been to establish parallel institutions, or to utilise with increasing frequency foreign researchers to meet the existing research demand and gaps. The establishment of donor driven institutions like the African Capacity Building Foundation, the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), and in the education field, the Task Force of Donors to African Education (DAE) must be seen in this light. At the country and indeed, ministries levels, the establishment of expatriate enclaves in the planning units, manifests this phenomenon at work, as the foreign advisers perform various functions and roles in policy formation, co-ordination and management of donor projects and provide specialist and technical advice for implementation of policies.

While these alternative arrangements and institutions provide the required research and policy analysis for innovation and change in African development, they are not firmly linked to local institutions (universities, research institutes or even planning units of the ministries they are supposed to serve). Hence their operations are not fully rooted into the local reality, and their likelihood of being sustained when donor funding dries up limited. In most cases, rather than strengthening indigenous research capacity, they have tended to undermine local contributions and alienate the existing capacity.

Credit must however go to some donors who have spent substantial funds in the last ten years or so, promoting research and building the necessary capacity. Institutions such as the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Swedish Agency for Research in Developing Countries (SAREC) have been in the forefront in carrying out these tasks in sub-Saharan Africa.

The main focus of these efforts has been: funding research projects, institutions, researchers and building of research networks. These efforts have been critical in strengthening and sustaining indigenous research capacity within universities, research institutes and non-governmental research institutions. Notable in this respect, are IDRC's efforts in establishing the Educational Research Network in Eastern and Southern Africa (ERNESA), and the Educational Research Network for Western and Central Africa (ERNWACA), formed in 1987 and 1989 respectively. Recent efforts to link capacity building in educational research to policy dialogue

and policy-making in some countries in Eastern and Southern Africa is a step in the right direction. While this process is painfully slow, it nevertheless requires long-term support and encouragement by both national governments and donors, for it to mature and have the required impact on policy formation and decision making in education.

Capacity Availability and Utilisation

The role of educational research in policy formulation and implementation of educational changes is increasingly receiving a high profile in international development agenda and issues of capacity-building have come into the fore front. However, less analytical focus is being given to questions of how demand for research emerges or can be stimulated among the various change agents and users. For it is not enough to build capacity for research and policy analysis unless the output of researchers and analysts are put to use. Equally, it is not enough for governments to declare the importance of having inputs of educational researchers in policy debates and policy formation, while ignoring the available research findings or failing to utilise the existing capacity to generate the required data for policy, planning and management. We would like to argue that energies of donors, research networks and research institutions have tended to concentrate on the supply, training, and improvement of the quality and relevance of research output, while not giving adequate attention to the demand side. Attention should therefore be shifted to the needs of various actors and partners in the education process. Where these needs are not articulated, building capacity for it to occur should be given priority. In the past the national governments have been viewed as the main actors and users of educational research findings, while other potential actors were ignored. The World Conference on Education for All, March 1990 underscored the importance of mobilising and building partnerships of community groups, nongovernmental organisations, professional organisations and religious bodies with local and national authorities in the realisation of the goals of basic education. For these partners to play this crucial role, they need data and information which research can provide. Hence the need not only to build the capacities of these organisations and actors to utilise research, but perhaps more critical, the capacity to demand and solicit research to enable them to participate fully and effectively in the education process.

Another critical concern should be how to build communication channels and mechanisms between these actors and researchers on the one hand, and the policy makers on the other. In this way their inputs into policies and education changes are well articulated. Donor agencies are very good at stimulating demand for research in the ministries of education, and have been equally effective in providing for the production of the research required. This has been a common phenomenon of development assistance in sub-Saharan Africa. However this situation has not catered for the needs

of other actors in the education sector. As indicated earlier, this situation has prevailed in the context of state domination and in circumstances which the civil society was disabled and silenced.

It is hoped the process of democratisation which is evident in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, will bring into the forefront the creative voices of many actors in education, who have hardly been heard.

A number of strategies can be adopted to simulate demand for research among potential users. These strategies will differ from country to country and will depend on the level of development of the civil society. The strategies adopted should aim at first educating the users of their role in influencing educational change, and the available sources of data and information to carry out this role effectively. The second aspect of this is to build capacity to demand, interpret and utilise research knowledge and data. Workshops and seminars to educate potential users should therefore be given attention, as well as dissemination of information on concrete examples of what educational research can do in the process of change. Researchers in turn should build linkages with potential users of research, thereby making the results of their analytical studies on education the basis for education debates and policy formulation. Research institutions and donor agencies should as a matter of priority support capacity-building for utilisation in these organisations as well as other change agents.

While in the past attention and resources have been geared primarily towards building and strengthening research capacity, the critical concern in the nineties should not only be production of research knowledge but its utilisation in the process of change. This presupposes the full utilisation of existing national capacities in production of knowledge and information required for educational change, and in the implementation of that change. The recent study (Namuddu and Tapsoba 1991) commissioned by IDRC highlighted this concern by arguing that:

A sufficiently well-trained cadre needed to undertake educational research and policy analysis, and contribute to capacity-building is available in all countries, But this capacity is usually unrecognised [and under-utilised]. It is scattered across a wide range of teaching, research, advisory, administrative and developmental tasks within and across institutions. There is little evidence that expertise is matched with nature of tasks or consolidated into sections within adequate resources for purposes of planning research and policy analysis.

In thinking about the use of research for educational policy, attention should be shifted to some extent from the supply side, the quantity or quality of research, important as they are, to the issues of utilisation of existing indigenous capacity. This will inevitably focus on policies of national governments and donors in regard to utilisation of local capacity and

technical assistance made available to African countries. There is a widespread feeling among researchers that their governments have tended to ignore the skills and knowledge they have, or can provide in the process of policy formation, while donors in these circumstances have not pushed far enough for utilisation of local talents, but have easily fallen to the temptation of bringing in outside expertise.

Another critical constraint to utilisation of local research and policy output has been lack of serious strategies for dissemination and dialogue geared towards reaching policy makers. The tendency has been for African researchers to undertake their research, write them up and publish locally or overseas and expect the policy makers to discover this scholarly endeavour, study the findings and then utilise the recommendations given in policy-making. This has hardly occurred. This approach to dissemination has been attenuated by the critical distance which scholars within African universities have maintained in relation to their national governments. The lack of free and informed debates in the universities has also made serious policy research an endangered undertaking. The prevailing attitudes between researchers and policy makers have been at best that of avoidance.

This gap must be addressed and bridged. Dissemination strategies must at the same time be seen to be part and parcel of the total research process. Publication of research results should be viewed as one method of dissemination, while other means should be tried to reach users and interested groups.

For researchers to have an impact on policy, they must work out effective strategies to disseminate their research findings as well as reach out to policy makers and other users. On the other hand, it should be recognised that capacity to appreciate and utilise research in the policy process, cannot be taken for granted but must be built, improved and sustained. The experience, mode of operation and impact of expatriate advisers and researchers in government ministries should be studied closely, and the lessons learnt utilised in building local capability needed for influencing policy-making and practice in the education sector.

The IDRC study (Namussu and Tapsoba 1993) we have referred to above has identified the increased utilisation of existing indigenous research capacity as a critical factor in building and sustaining credible research capacity in sub-Saharan Africa. There are many factors mitigating against this, which nonetheless must be overcome. Among these, being the prevailing suspicion within government circles against universities and scholars thereof, the lack of academic freedom and respect for diversity of ideas and views, coupled with nature and mode of delivery of technical assistance. In addition, the loss of indigenous talent and skills resulting from hostile political, economic and institutional environment has made the problem complex and at times discouraging.

It is however necessary to focus on the mode of utilisation of the available capacity, for it is here where future possibilities exist. The dominant mode of utilisation of indigenous capacity by donors has been the consultancy and project mode. This approach thrives well where the donor interests are dominant in funding research and policy oriented studies, and economic and political realities have propelled researchers to seek survival strategies. David Court (1991) has captured this phenomenon fairly well where he argues:

Perhaps the single most harmful aspect of donor behaviour in relation to capacity building has been the increasing tendency to shape aid in the form of relatively short-term projects rather than longer-term programmes. Recourse to the project mode places the emphasis upon a product and on individuals who can produce that product wherever they might be housed. This inhibits the ability of university departments and research units to establish their own priorities and mount their own research programmes.

The consequences of this trend are perverse. Research becomes commercialised, commoditised, individualised and externalised. Virtually all work which is not being done for a post-graduate degree is commissioned by an outside agency, carried out by an individual or group within a specified time period for a contracted fee... The desire for high quality evaluations leads donor agencies to draw upon established familiar and reliable researchers who inevitably become overburdened and, more important, are distracted from their teaching role, so that research skills and the research ethos are not being adequately passed to the next generation.

Apart from the 'contract labour' described above, donors have also encouraged the perception that useful research is only that which contributes to policy, and have tended to ignore the need to create vibrant intellectual communities to carry out both basic and applied research.

Quality research based on empirical data and strong theoretical underpinnings, it must be accepted, can only emerge where basic and policy-oriented research are rigorously pursued in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and debates. Theoretical work, which is hardly developed, policy formation and evaluation stand to benefit from revitalised intellectual and scholarly life in Africa. The rehabilitation and revitalisation of African universities and research institutions it must be emphasised, is a crucial element in this process and can only be ignored at enormous cost.

In the recent past capacity-building has focused much more on individual researchers and research networks, and hardly linked to institutions. Attention should now be given to building and strengthening research institutions through long-term support of research infrastructure, research

programmes and linkages for dissemination and utilisation. Where support for individual researchers and research networks is continued, it should be within the framework of strengthening the institutions which these researchers and networks are expected to serve. Institution building referred here, applies to both public and non-governmental institutions. A vital element in the new approach should be to build linkages and bridges between the researchers and potential users. Linkages between research institutions with communities, non-governmental organisations, parents, advocacy groups and policy makers should be viewed as a vital requirement in ensuring utilisation of research results in the development process.

Conclusion

The challenges facing educational researchers and policy analysts and indeed research institutions are many but not insurmountable. We have indicated the research environment and institutional framework under which research is undertaken and the difficulties encountered in utilisation of the available capacity and output. Despite these problems, educational research seems to have reached the stage of acceptance as an essential input into policy formation, decision making and the whole process of educational change. The challenge is nevertheless how this window of opportunity can be utilised to the maximum to enhance both research enterprise and the utilisation of research results in policy debates, policy formation and implementation in sub-Saharan Africa.

We need however to emphasise that production of research knowledge and its utilisation for policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa, cannot thrive or have the desired impact unless basic freedoms and civil liberties are assured, public debates are encouraged and key stake holders participate in the process. Educational policies and strategies in Africa in the last thirty years have been formulated and implemented by politicians and state institutions with limited critical inputs by communities, parents, teachers and researchers. If new partnerships and collaboration required by the democratisation process, and recommended at the World Conference on Education for All is to be realised, then all participants in the educational sector should be effectively involved. Democratisation of all aspects of education has then to be taken seriously. The current wave of democratisation and pluralism in Africa should therefore not be seen as limited to the political sphere, but critical to the realisation of the changes required in the education sector. The participation and involvement of key stake holders in formulation of education policy and its implementation is key to bringing about the required innovations and reforms. The challenge is then to build, strengthen, utilise and sustain this capacity in sub-Saharan Africa.

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