



# Education

Conclusion and recommendations: Education can be Africa's development leveller

Enoch Randy Aikins and Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 08 July 2024 using IFs 7.84

## Conclusion and recommendations: Education can be Africa's development leveller

Education can provide improved opportunities to poor people and the relationship between better education and improved income levels is strong. The Education scenario would have a transformative impact on African economies and societies, but the results will not be achieved without great effort and new ways of thinking. Africa not only needs to get the basics right but should also ensure very rapid uptake of modern technology to help compensate for deficits in teaching capacity and for governments to invest appropriately.

Beyond basic levels of (primary) education and literacy, an education system must evolve to respond to many requirements, including changing education demands to help prepare students for the job requirements of the future. By 2030, about 230 million jobs in Africa will require [digital skills](#). The world of work requires more skilled and fewer semi- and unskilled workers.

There is clearly a powerful relationship between citizens' level of education and the prosperity of nations, but it is also quite complicated, as the example by [Ricardo Hausmann](#) shows:

In 1998, Ghana's workforce had an average of about seven years of education and its per capita income was about \$1 000. When Mexico's workforce first achieved an average of seven years of education—in 1993—its income was over \$10 000, while France's per capita income when its workforce first got to an average of seven years of education (in 1985), was over \$20 000. These figures tell us that rich countries are rich not just because of education, and, conversely, that investing in education alone won't make you rich.

Hausmann attributes the ability to translate education and technology into growth to the ability to *apply* knowledge. That, he argues, comes through imitation and repetition of tasks—learning by doing. For a country to develop and grow, it needs to provide the opportunity for learning while doing. What he does not examine, however, is the matter of the quality of the education provided in Ghana, Mexico and France, pointing to the need to dig deep when considering key relationships.

Because of colonialism, most African countries still adhere to the outdated Prussian model of rote education. It has often, and rightly so, been criticised for being overly rigid and inflexible. In Africa, overcrowded classrooms, poorly educated teachers and limited educational facilities are the norm. Many children are poor, undernourished and have to walk far to attend school every day. Looking at the rather dismal state of education in Africa, the continent could clearly do with much greater order and a sense of educational purpose. This is particularly important when it comes to improving children's reading, writing and arithmetic skills, ensuring teachers' attendance, and in finding ways to manage the large classes that are typical in so many schools.

Effective education requires students who are sufficiently nourished, stimulated and cared for, capable teaching, skilled management and a government and education system that pulls all of this together. Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa do not have these four key components in place and face a crisis in education that the [World Bank](#) describes as a low-learning trap. It is possible to escape this trap, as is demonstrated by the advances made in South Korea, China and Vietnam, but it requires a tremendous effort, political leadership, societal engagement and the use of modern [technology](#).

With the right kind of education and skills formation, the large young population can be a powerful contributor to growth in Africa. However, it can also be a drag on growth and cause social and political upheaval if the continent does not create the right opportunities to realise their potential. By 2050, 40% of all children (one billion people) and adolescents below the age of 18 years will be in [Africa](#). This is an opportunity for Africa to build the largest human capital in the world and leverage it for growth. Achieving this requires significant investment in the education and training of children and adolescents on the continent to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills that can drive the development agenda of the continent and achieve a demographic dividend.

As a starter, governments need to fix education systematically, working their way through the education funnel from the starting point: by investing in ECD, ensuring primary school enrolment and completion, developing literacy and using modern technology in the process. Once progress is achieved in primary education, the priority should shift to improving enrolment and completion in lower secondary schools, then to fixing upper secondary and, eventually, tertiary education.

Specifically, the government must pay special attention to pre-schools to improve foundational learning for basic reading and mathematics at early stages of pre-primary and primary levels. In this regard, school authorities can dedicate extra hours to numeracy and literacy at pre-primary and primary levels. Also, there is the need for greater inclusion of and critical attention paid to dropouts in the educational funnel. Governments need to eliminate barriers to higher education starting from secondary school levels. Policies such as free secondary education and school feeding programmes targeting needy and vulnerable households can increase enrolments and survival rates among school children.

The quality of education is important, together with offering vocational and technical training as opposed to the singular focus on academic teaching so evident across many African countries. Simply pushing children through school is not a solution if their education does not comprehensively and fundamentally address the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, and then allowing them to build the skills required for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Thus, governments need to recognise and prioritise technical and vocational education especially at the lower secondary levels. This is to ensure that students who choose technical and vocational lines of education at higher levels have the sufficient grounding to excel. It is also imperative to find ways to channel many more students towards vocational training programmes that benefit from broader integration into the educational system and enable informal, virtual self-empowerment.

African states cannot abdicate their responsibility to provide an essential public good to millions of poor citizens in favour of a profit-seeking private sector. However, this is not to say that private schools should not play a role. The development of carefully crafted regulations to prevent predatory practices by the private sector, as well as the continued need for states to properly fund, manage and regulate their public education systems, are needed in **parallel**. With the decline in donor support coupled with governments' competing spending priorities, there is a need to raise additional funding through innovative financing. Particularly, governments need to rope in the private sector to finance technical, vocational and higher education that has a direct link with industries and private sector growth.

As discussed earlier, digital connectivity is critical for learning and skills development. New teaching technologies and methods must be exploited to help meet the challenges of the future, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is the need to partner with telecommunication firms and Internet service providers to bring down the cost of broadband services and mobile data that impede virtual learning. This will facilitate innovation in teaching and learning methods and expand virtual learning platforms. Furthermore, capacity building, skills upgrading and further training for teachers is essential to building a quality educational system. Accordingly, countries need to periodically redesign their teacher development programmes to cater for new teaching and learning skills including digital education.

Each African country faces different challenges, but more parental involvement, upskilling teachers and designing teaching and learning methods that are sensitive to local conditions are central to creating functioning education systems throughout Africa. Not all of this requires sophisticated technology,<sup>[1]</sup> but once the basics are in place, technology in the forms of 5G and AR could be a key facilitator to drive the progress modelled in the Education scenario. Clearly, strategic planning, innovation, investment and, most of all, leadership are required to address the continent's education backlog. Africa's likely prospects in the Current Path forecast are depressing. If the continent fails in this dimension it will fail in all others.



## Recommendations

- Governments must improve foundational learning for reading and mathematics by dedicating extra hours to numeracy and literacy at pre-primary and primary levels.
- Implementation of policies such as free secondary education and targeted school feeding programmes can increase enrolments and survival rates.
- Governments need to recognise and prioritise technical and vocational education starting from lower secondary levels to build 4IR skills.
- Innovating financing of education such as roping in the private sector to finance technical, vocational and higher education that has a direct link with industries and private sector growth.
- Partnering with telecommunications firms and internet services providers to bring down the cost of broadband services and mobile data to improve virtual learning.
- Periodic capacity building, skills upgrading and further training for teachers is essential to building a quality educational system.

## Endnotes

1. Already a number of schooling projects require teachers to post a selfie by 8 a.m. every day to prove they are in class and teaching.

## Donors and sponsors



### Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts [can be embedded](#) in any site.

### Cite this research

Enoch Randy Aikins and Jakkie Cilliers (2025) Education. Published online at [futures.issafrica.org](https://futures.issafrica.org). Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/06-education/> [Online Resource] Updated 08 July 2024.

## About the authors

**Mr Enoch Randy Aikins** joined the AFI in May 2021 as a Researcher. Before that, Enoch was a research and programmes officer at the Institute for Democratic Governance in Accra in charge of local governance reforms, poverty and inequality and public sector reforms. He also worked as a research assistant (economic division) with the Institute for Statistical Social and Economic Research at the University of Ghana. Enoch's interests include African politics and governance, economic development, public sector reform, poverty and inequality. Enoch is a Young African Fellow at the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute in Florence and has an MPhil in economics from the University of Ghana, Legon.

**Dr Jakkie Cilliers** is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, [Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution](#) (March 2020), [The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities](#) (April 2021), and [Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity](#) (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

## About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.