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Neoliberalism and University Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This article reviews the history of university development in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and discusses the impact of neoliberal policies. This will be followed by an examination of the problems facing universities in the region. The following questions will be explored: (a) Are the existing universities in SSA serving the development needs of the region? (b) Are these universities up to the task of moving SSA out of the predicaments it faces such as famine, HIV/AIDS, poverty, diseases, debt, and human rights abuses? Finally, the article argues that for universities to play a role in the development of the region, a new paradigm that makes university education a public good should be established.

Keywords

history of university development, Sub-Saharan Africa, neoliberalism, public good, higher education, reformulating higher education in SSA

Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) continue to struggle economically since the massive decline of the 1980s. For instance, according to Gilbert (2004), 315 million people in SSA lived on a dollar a day in 1999. In addition, the World Bank (2011) indicates that SSA had an external debt of US\$195,999 million in 2008. In the quest to resolve the crisis, governments in the region sought financial assistance from developed nations and international financial institutions, principally the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As part of the conditions for borrowing money, the financial institutions laid out a set of policies (“structural adjustments”) that the governments had to follow. The policies were based on neoliberal principles, which call for state withdrawal from administering public resources to promote social justice and replacing it with market-based solutions (Apple, 2000).

This phenomenon will be discussed in detail below. In the area of education, it sought cost sharing in university education, private provision of schooling at all levels, and diversification of funding to primary education. Due to these neoliberal policies, university education in the region has faced and continues to face major challenges (Lulat, 2005).

First, I will review the history of university education and its overall evolution and discuss the impact of neoliberal policies. This will be followed by an examination of the problems facing universities in the region. The following questions will be explored:

Research Question 1: Are the existing universities in SSA serving the development needs of the region?

Research Question 2: Are these universities up to the task of moving SSA out of the predicaments it faces such

as famine, HIV/AIDS, poverty, diseases, debt, and human rights abuses?

Finally, I argue that for universities to play a role in the development of the region, a new paradigm, which makes university education a public good, should be constituted.

The History of University Development in SSA

Except for a few that were established during the colonial period, the overwhelming majority of universities in SSA were created after 1960, when most African countries achieved independence. It is thus imperative to assess the development of universities in the region from the colonial period through the postcolonial period and its reforms.

Colonial Period

The creation of universities during the colonial period should be seen in the context of decolonization, which occurred between the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 and 1960. In the absence of a credible indigenous bureaucratic elite who could have ensured that the newly independent nations would continue to remain within the West’s sphere of influence, the colonial powers turned to

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university education as a method for creating such an elite. However, they did not have indigenous models of university education within the colonies, so they turned to models from their respective countries (Betts, 2004; Duara, 2004).

University development was thus shaped by the policies of each colonial power. For instance, the British policy was based on a metropolis/satellite or dominant/subordinate relationship. Colonial subjects were meant to serve the interests of the mother country and university education was geared toward the goal of producing graduates who would do just that. Conversely, French policy was based on assimilation. This policy aimed to leave the masses uneducated and to groom a select few as *évolués*, who were co-opted as upholders of French culture and colonial rule, and encouraged to complete their education—and to feel more at home—in Paris rather than Africa. In essence, the French colonial territories in Africa were considered an extension of France in every sphere of society including education. Belgian policy differed from the French and British and concentrated on basic education, that is, primary education, with no provision for university education except for males preparing for the priesthood (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996).

The model of university education used by colonial powers emerged out of a model heavily influenced by religious institutions, specifically medieval European Christian churches. During the Middle Ages, Western Europe was confronted with problems of underdevelopment and social fragmentation. Even so, the religious groups that founded and shaped European universities did not articulate a clear societal mission to address these problems. Hence, there was a social disconnect between the universities and their social environment, which led to the notion of the university as an “ivory tower” wherein reflection becomes an end in itself (Craig & Spear, 1982). This feature was transferred to the universities established in SSA by the colonial powers, and is one of the reasons why universities have not played a prominent role in the development of SSA.

The term *development* as used here implies poverty reduction as well as an improvement in the standard of living for the majority of the population of a country in seven key areas: nutrition, health, housing, sanitation, environment, employment, and education. Development is different from economic growth, which may only benefit a minority of the population (see Seligson & Passé-Smith, 2008, for further discussion of development).

Postcolonial Period

The second phase of SSA university development occurred during the postcolonial period. The wave of independence movements in the 1960s brought with it the establishment of the majority of African universities that survive to the present day. By the time the Association of African Universities was founded in 1967, there were 34 new universities in SSA (N'Daw, 1969).

Development of universities during the postcolonial period was undertaken as part of an overall process of state building in SSA. University education had become the responsibility of the newly established African governments. The governments became the sole agent of subsidy by: providing full scholarships, travel expenses, local transportation, health care, boarding, lodging, and monthly living expenses to all students who were qualified to attend. The mission of universities was to go beyond simply serving as a factory for the production of certified personnel to fulfill the manpower needs of SSA. Universities also had to undertake an active role in development efforts by helping to articulate the national development agenda and determining ways by which it could help implement that agenda (Ajayi et al., 1996). However, one can argue that SSA universities contributed little to the region's development. Part of this failure can be attributed to features inherited from European universities, such as social disconnect mentioned above.

Postcolonial Reforms

After attaining independence, governments in SSA realized that the type of education they had inherited from the colonial powers was not adequate for addressing the region's development needs. Thus, they embarked on major educational reforms.

The First Wave of Reforms

The first wave of reforms following independence attempted to address problems within countries' entire educational systems, especially university education, which was in its infancy in most countries. These early reforms were intended to end the dependence of the universities on external models, to Africanize the curriculum in terms of its relevance, and to include indigenous knowledge. Africanization also attempted to address the issue of faculty at a time when a large proportion of the teaching staff was composed of expatriates from former colonial powers (Yesufu, 1973).

Prominent among the early reforms were those undertaken by the governments of Mali, Guinea, and Tanzania. Mali attained independence from France in 1960 and opted for an educational system different from the French one. In 1962, a new educational system was adopted with the stated objective of quality education for the masses, the decolonization of the minds, and the rehabilitation of African cultural values. The system was expected to be the instrument for the development of Mali as an independent African nation (Yena, 1978).

Guinea, like Mali, was a French colony. It attained independence in 1958 and President Amadou Toumani Toure' made a commitment to achieve socioeconomic development, social change, and progress for the people of Guinea. The educational system that Guinea inherited from the French did not fit this plan and had to be replaced. Reform was thus

initiated with the goal of constructing an African-centered educational system. According to the plan, universities were to be integrated in the social milieu to serve the people better (Touré, 1961).

Tanzania's postindependence president, Julius Nyerere, was one of the most prominent thinkers on education in Africa. His educational philosophy is best outlined in "Education for Self-Reliance." In it, he stressed that education in Africa at any level must inculcate a sense of commitment to the total community and help students to "accept the values appropriate to our kind of future, not those of our colonial past" (Nyerere, 1968, p. 52). Nyerere (1973) further argues that higher education acquired by a few was to be used to serve the majority of the populace. He stated,

The only true justification is that it is needed by the few for the service to the many. The teacher in a seven-year primary school system needs an education which goes beyond seven years; the extension officer who will help a population with a seven years education needs a lot more himself. Others who provide essential services such as doctors and engineers need long and careful training. (Nyerere, 1968, p. 17)

The Failure of the Reforms

The first waves of reforms were not successful. I believe that the failures occurred mainly because the countries hoped for financial support from the former colonial powers and the financial institutions they control. However, in most cases, the provision of such financial support came with conditions that did not give African leaders the freedom to formulate and implement policies they considered appropriate for their countries. They therefore had to choose between submitting their reforms to the conditions of international organizations such as the World Bank or refusing to submit the reforms. Most chose not to submit the reforms to colonial institutions, but, lacking the means to support them, the reforms failed.

Neoliberalism

The World Bank has dominated development assistance to SSA throughout the postcolonial period, and it was the principal architect of structural adjustment policies. To put these policies in context, a brief overview of the neoliberal perspective is necessary.

Neoliberalism is a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be served by freeing individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills. It also emphasizes strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to facilitate and create an environment appropriate to such practices. For instance, the state has to guarantee the quality and integrity of money, establish the military, defense, police, legal structures, and functions required to secure private property rights, and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets (Ball, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Morrow & Torres, 2000).

Neoliberalism thus offers a market view of citizenship that is generally antithetical to rights, especially to state-guaranteed rights in education, welfare, health, and other public goods. It defines the citizen as an economic maximizer, governed by self-interest, and glorifies the consumer citizen as willing, and capable of making market-led choices. The individual rather than the state is held responsible for his or her well-being. The state's role is one of facilitator and enabler of the market-led consumer (Rutherford, 2005; Suzy, 2007).

According to Giroux (2002), the neoliberal model has serious implications when applied to education, because it treats education as just another service to be delivered to those who can afford to buy it. The rationalization is that it provides people with choice, yet there is overwhelming evidence that in economically unequal societies only those with sufficient resources can make choices; those who are poor have no choices at all. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) also assert that the model ignores the fact that what people may want is not a choice of universities but access to a high-quality, affordable, and accessible university education. Choice is a luxury and a secondary value for those with limited resources, taking its place behind quality, affordability, and access.

The neoliberal model also ignores the reality that only the state can guarantee individuals the right to education. If the state absolves itself of the responsibility to educate, rights become contingent on the ability to pay (Angus, 2004). It is this neoliberal model that guided World Bank policies on university education in SSA.

World Bank and University Education in SSA

Starting in the 1960s, World Bank lending to SSA was mostly for economic infrastructural development such as roads and bridges. The World Bank did not provide loans for university education for several years during the postcolonial period. Lulat (2005) writes that "the World Bank's decision was based on thinking within the institution that university education was more of a hindrance than a help to the national development effort" (p. 385). According to this line of thought, universities were generally considered as impediments for three main reasons. First, they drained a disproportionate amount of scarce educational resources. Second, they were considered inefficient, internally and externally. Third, they existed mainly for the benefits of the elites, rather than the vast majority of poverty stricken, illiterate masses (Girdwood, 1995; Lulat, 2005). How and where the World Bank acquired this view is not clear, but it is certain that the World Bank's marginalization of university education started when most SSA countries first attained independence.

From the late 1960s and to the early 1980s, the World Bank greatly expanded its lending to the education sector, especially to primary, secondary, and vocational sectors. However, university education did not benefit from the

expansion in lending (Ilon, 2003). This policy was justified by what McNamara (1981) terms a “basic needs approach” (p. 4). The World Bank (1980) formulates this approach as follows: “appropriate basic education enables the majority of the poor, in both rural and urban areas to lead productive lives and to benefit from social and economic development of the community” (p. 88). It suffices to say that the basic needs approach as espoused by the World Bank ended up remaining in the rhetorical realm by the time it came to actual policy implementation.

Structural Adjustment

In the face of the massive economic decline in SSA countries in the mid- to late 1980s, the World Bank replaced its basic needs rhetoric with the policy of structural adjustment. The policy arose out of a misguided characterization of a number of SSA economies as socialist. Socialism was perceived as not only inherently inefficient but also denounced because of the large economic role accorded to the state and parastatal corporations (Surin, 2003).

Through the policy of structural adjustment, the World Bank continued its marginalization of university education. For instance, in “Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Adjustment, Revitalization and Expansion,” the World Bank called for retrenchment in the area of university education. Arguing that in light of budgetary constraints, the first order of business was to institute reforms toward three simultaneous ends: transfer some of the burden of financing university education to parents and students, reduce unit costs, and shrink public sector participation in favor of the private sector (World Bank, 1988).

Six years later, the World Bank issued its “Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience” (World Bank, 1994), in which it reaffirmed its 1988 policy recommendations with greater emphasis on the neoliberal agenda. The main goal of the document was the marginalization of university education relative to other educational sectors.

Implications of Structural Adjustment

Structural adjustment had a negative effect on university education in the region due to budget cuts in SSA states. In addition, privatization and the elimination of subsidies for books, food, and housing led to inequities in university education in the region: Universities became places of learning only for students from wealthy families. The natural outcome was—and continues to be—a continued decrease in enrollments and an increase in dropout rates among students from poorer families. For instance, according to Mazrui (1997), in 1996, more than 2,000 students were deregistered from Egerton and Moi universities in Kenya due to nonpayment of tuition. Most of the tuition “defaulters” were from lower class families (p. 40). Likewise, a study by Musisi and

Muwanga (2003) carried out at Makerere university in Uganda confirmed the trend. Sixty-five percent of students surveyed stated that the introduction of fees because of the neoliberal agenda had an adverse impact on equity.

In addition, the reliance on the neoliberal model led SSA countries to face what Sawyerr (2004) called the “Makerere miracle.” This is a situation in which the privatization of sections of a public university (in this case Makerere University in Uganda) led to increased enrollment as well as an improvement in the finances of the university, which, in turn, led to increased salaries for staff and faculty. The circumstances appeared to have changed the fortunes of an institution that was in decline, hence the “miracle” (p. 48). However, the improvements were not matched by a development plan that would have prepared the university for the increased number of students. The priority was on market forces that considered education a “commodity” that could be sold to individual consumers rather than serving the interests of the nation or its citizens; thus, the “miracle” turned out not to be real. According to the findings of a study by Musisi and Muwanga (2003),

the increased enrollment that occurred as a result of the privatization was not matched by corresponding increases in facilities such as lecture halls, seminar rooms, laboratories and equipment’s for science based subjects. As a result, more than half the registered students in some courses did not attend lectures due to lack of seats and poor audibility. Such insufficient facilities and a high student-lecturer ratio compromise academic quality. (p. 43)

The study concluded that “if the problem was not addressed, the large number of students and resulting decline in standards posed a real danger to quantitative achievements and innovations in admissions and programming by Makerere since the early 1990s” (p. 45).

Closely linked to the quality debate is the issue of the profit motive, which the neoliberal agenda injected into the market. This led to the mushrooming of “universities,” some of which pretend to be serious educational institutions (by charging high tuition) when in fact they are not. By the time students realize that they have received little educational value from such institutions it is too late and there is nothing they can do about it.

The question is, “Why did the World Bank take such a biased view of university education relative to other educational sectors?” One can propose several reasons. However, this article will only include reasons pertinent to the discussion of university education, such as the flawed theories of development that have been the hallmark of development assistance to SSA and the role the World Bank plays as a capitalist institution (see Surin, 2003).

In investigating flawed development theories related to education, Caffentzis (2000), in the course of scrutinizing a report produced for the World Bank, “Education in a

Declining Economy: The Case of Zambia, 1975-1985” (1991), writes,

This reduction [of higher education] is advocated in the name of higher efficiency and a more egalitarian distribution of educational resources. However, the evidence provided raises doubts about the motives behind the policy. It's most likely that these cuts were made because of the World Bank's bleak view of Africa's economic failures and its belief that African workers are destined for a long time to remain unskilled laborers (pp. 3-4)

World Bank officials thus seem to have relegated Africa's role in the international economy as a producer of natural resources for the West, and, therefore, there was/is no need for university education.

In examining the role of the World Bank as a capitalist economic institution, one finds that its overall policy decisions are based on neoliberal economic theory. Case in point: When it first started making loans to the education sector in SSA, it did so under the pretense of human capital theory. The theory of human capital was developed by neoclassical economists who were trying to answer the question about how to promote economic growth. The theory postulated that educational systems provided inputs essential to economic growth such as skills and knowledge necessary for technological advancement. It further illustrated that developing countries had low economic growth because they lacked trained individuals due to low levels of education (Schultz, 1961). This advocacy of the theory led to the emergence of the economics of education as a discipline that would explain the complex connections between the economy and education. As the discipline developed, three types of studies emerged—correlation, manpower planning, and rates of return—and they became the basis of educational planning in developing countries (Psacharopoulos, 1987). Due to the scope of this article, only rates of return will be examined.

Rates of Return

The study of rates of return are important in the discussion here because it has been one of the bases on which the World Bank provided loans for university education in SSA under its structural adjustment policy. The rates of return for investment in education involves estimation of social costs, which includes the true cost of providing education, the cost of lost production while the student is absent from the workplace, and the social benefit, which occurs between graduates of the educational level for which the analysis is being made and graduates from levels below it (Carnoy & Thias, 1969).

Psacharopoulos (1994) asserts that rates of return are generally higher in developing countries. He further claims that primary education tends to yield the highest returns, exceeding the other sectors such as technical, vocational, and scientific training. World Bank lending to the educational sector in

Africa was therefore influenced by these views. Resources were directed to primary schooling and away from university education.

Critical scholars, however, challenge the use of the rate of return techniques as the basis for lending to the educational sector. They consider education to be too complex a phenomenon to approach with such quantitative techniques. For instance, they argue that the relationship between general education and the economy is a very tenuous one because the basic function of general education is sociological and not economical. That is a means for social differentiation (educational qualifications enable society to differentiate between different classes of occupations such as low wage manual labor occupations and high wage mental labor occupations).

Thus, the rate of return does not show what the proponents claim to show. Rather all that it demonstrates is that some occupations carry with them high income than others. Conversely, the difference in income between different occupations is not a function of the levels of education demanded for entry into them, but rather a social differentiation. Consequently certain classes of jobs will always have low wages/status attached to them, regardless of the level of educational qualifications of those performing the jobs. Hence, to demonstrate positive correlation between income and lengths of education, as the rate of return studies does, cannot be taken to imply that educational qualifications are the sources of income. If this was true then there would be no unemployment among the educated (Hussain, 1976).

Although there has been some reconsideration within the World Bank on the importance of university education in SSA, this reconsideration has remained apparently declamatory. For instance, the 1999 educational sector report states,

World Bank staff now looks more at education as an integrated system, one part of which cannot function well if another is ailing. The emphasis on basic education for instance, does not mean that nothing should be done in tertiary education. The role of tertiary institutions as centers of excellence, research hubs and training ground for tomorrow's teachers and leaders is critical. (World Bank, 1999, p. 24)

However, when one examines the World Bank's "Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education," one realizes that the World Bank has not changed its neoliberal agenda or its belief that, ultimately, economic growth will reduce poverty (World Bank, 2002).

I contend that international donor agencies such as the World Bank are too heavily invested in human capital theory (as expressed by rates of return) to easily renounce it as the principle determinant of their educational assistance policies. As a result, they will continue to use it as the basis for educational planning and assistance. Thus, the World Bank remains a capitalist institution that is fully committed to the neoliberal agenda.

Reformulating University Education in SSA

The university education inherited by SSA governments in the postcolonial period failed to propel the citizens of the continent toward a better future. The situation has been aggravated by the negative impact of decades of structural adjustment policies along with the privatization of university education, which made it a private good. Nonetheless, societies that aspire toward political, economic, and social progress cannot do without universities; thus, it is important to continue the struggle for university development in SSA.

At this point, it is important to revisit our research questions: (1) Are the existing universities in SSA serving the development needs of the region? (2) Are these universities up to the task of moving SSA out of the predicaments it faces such as famine, HIV/AIDS, poverty, diseases, debt, and human rights abuses? Although the answers to these questions are complex and multifaceted, this article contends that the existing universities are not responding or serving the needs of SSA due to the nature of their foundation. Furthermore, they are not equipped for the task of moving the region out of the predicaments it faces.

Hence, to make university education relevant to the task of moving the region out of its current predicament, a new paradigm (one that makes university education a public good) needs to be formulated, so that universities have a role to play in the development of SSA. For this paradigm shift to occur, structural changes, in terms of governance, partnerships with international donors, curriculum, and relationships with rural communities and the Diaspora, are needed.

Governance

Governance as used here is defined as a set of rules, institutions, and values that are used to manage society; state and social institutions; and political institutions such as political parties, parliaments, governments, and their interactions with society (Hyden & Bratton, 1992). The constitutive elements of governance include the legitimacy of power and authority, trust, responsibility, institutional power, and accountability. Most of these elements are missing in most African countries (see Adedeji, 1999; Deng, 1998).

It is important for governments on the continent to set up rules for the conduct of politics, because the crisis in the region and continent at large has been identified as lack of good governance. Good governance is needed if governments are to fulfill their basic duties. The management of university education should be left to educators without interference by political or governmental officials (as is mostly the case today).

Partnership

Assistance to SSA university education by Western governments, development agencies, and other international financial

institutions has not done much for SSA development. Samoff and Carrol (2002) note that it has been a partnership in name only with no substance given that major decisions are made unilaterally under the assumptions that the donors know best what SSA needs or that SSA institutions face such dire needs that they must accept any assistance that comes their way regardless of what strings may be attached. It is important that international cooperation is redefined and located in a new relationship of genuine partnership in which Africans and non-Africans play complementary roles, and Africans are allowed to define their development needs and process.

In the area of university education, SSA should be allowed to work out its own policies instead of being forced to adopt policies prescribed by the World Bank or other international financial institutions. These policies should be guided by a national agenda that is understood and accepted by the populace it is supposed to serve.

Curriculum

A curriculum developed under the new paradigm should relate to SSA social context, with courses, research, and publications more suited to SSA development needs. Mazrui (1975) proposes three strategies for development of African university education: domestication, diversification, and counterpenetration. In domestication, he suggests that the initial task of decolonizing modernity must be to balance the influence of the West on university policy through local participation. Second, diversification requires that the cultural content is diverse, because reliance on a single external reference group (as has been the case till now) leads to outright dependence. Reliance on a diversity of external civilizations may be the beginning of autonomy. Finally, counterpenetration (which is where Africans take charge of constructing the new paradigm for African development) is essential for the successful refining of modernity, so that it is grounded in the local cultures and allows for the inclusion of African cultural content.

Assié-Lumumba (2005) suggests the idea of borrowing knowledge from outside Africa to help reformulate university education. She proposes the idea of fusion as one way to take stock of Africa's reservoirs of knowledge and frames of reference. The notion of fusion advocates a deliberate choice by Africans to select elements of higher education institutions, values, and ways of doing things from the colonial systems, and then the chosen elements are mixed with African institutional, cultural, and other realities to create an enriched original. The argument is that although Africa did not initiate the coming of the Europeans and the transfer of their institutions to the region, to make a new paradigm work, Africa must embrace this inheritance, and make use of what is most relevant for the continent's development (e.g., science and technology) and ground it firmly to its culture to have a sense of direction.

Rural Communities

There is a missing link between university education as it currently exists in Africa and the masses of people on the continent. There is a lack of what I call “people’s bridges.” To fulfill its social mission, a reformulated university education needs to adapt to local needs. It should also locate and link academic teaching and research to the society it is expected to serve. Juma (2005) argues that “[m]any of these universities will need to change from being conventional sources of graduates to becoming engines of community development by working directly in the communities they are located in” (pp. 6-8). The link to the community could be in the form of extension services in such areas as agriculture, animal husbandry, health care, HIV/AIDS education, organizing cooperative movements, fisheries, and food security.

Diaspora

The continent should also seek the contribution of those who are part of what Mazrui referred to as “Global Africa” in its quest to reformulate university education for SSA development. These Africans have skills and expertise that can contribute to the reformulation of university education, and yet to date none of these resources have been tapped systematically. In advocating a role for the Diaspora, Mazrui (2005) argues that as the origins of modern Black intellectual traditions and those of Pan-Africanism intertwine, African intellectuals should be the ones to conceive and construct an alternative social paradigm.

Conclusion

The university education inherited from the European model has done little for the development and improvement of the majority of SSA because the curriculum and research were not contextualized to meet the social needs of the people, specifically, improving the quality of their lives and provision of services. Furthermore, the imposition of the neoliberal agenda, which treats university education as a “commodity” to be purchased by those who can afford it, has reduced the universities in SSA to serving the needs of the market rather than the public interest. It is therefore imperative that university education be reformulated as a public good that can contribute to the development of the region and the well-being of its populace. The region also needs to challenge and question the existing principles underlying the neoliberal agenda that sees university education as a mechanism to achieve economic growth and not development, as well as a private good for a privileged few.

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