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UN Economic Commission for Africa

Promoting Education in Africa

By: Tiana Bailey



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Issue Brief for the UN Economic Commission for Africa



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Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society

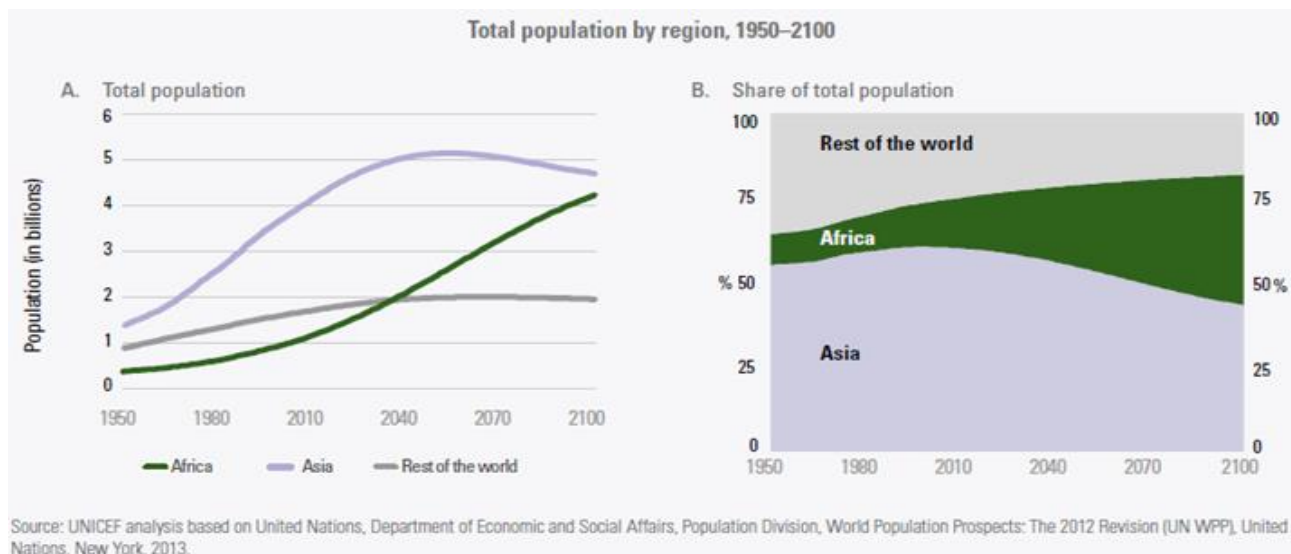
I. Introduction

The migration crisis that affected the Middle East and Europe in 2015 was an event of enormous seriousness, but just a small hint of the population pressures to come. Some regions are affected more than others, but the pressure on Africa will be especially severe. These problems make education in Africa a global issue.

A report from UNICEF shows how Africa, already the world's second most populous continent with over 1 billion inhabitants, is experiencing a demographic shift unprecedented in its scale and swiftness. According to this analysis, in the next 35 years, 1.8 billion babies will be born in Africa, the continent's population will double in size, and its under-eighteen population will increase by two thirds to reach almost 1 billion.¹

All other continents will see relatively smaller increases, if any. Today, more than 7 billion people are living in the world, almost a tripling of the population in 1950. Even as population growth rates continue to slow in recent projections, by the end of the century 11 billion people will live on earth.

By 2050, Africa's population will double, to 2.4 billion, eventually reaching 4.2 billion by the end of the century. By the end of the century, on current trends, Africa will have almost quadrupled its population to over 4 billion, and will be home to almost 40 per cent of humanity.



¹ *Generation 2030 / AFRICA*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund, August 2014.



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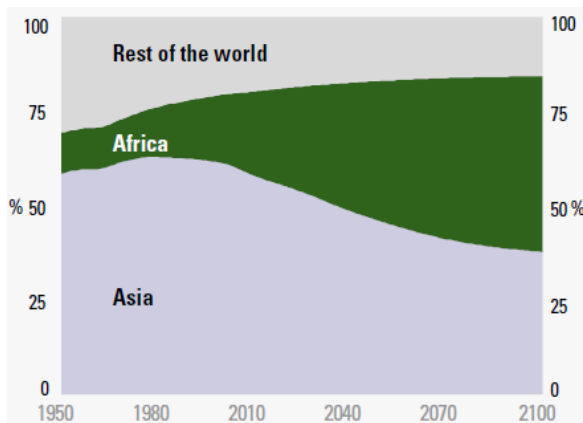
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These trends create great pressure on the continent and the entire international community. Major issues to be addressed include environmental sustainability, economic growth, education, health and migration. Because none of these problems are confined with any country's borders, they can only be addressed effectively by the International community. Global engagement will be essential. But special responsibilities fall upon African governments themselves and especially African organizations, including the ECOSOC UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN ECA).

Figure 2. Share of the world's under-18 population



Source: UNICEF, 2014

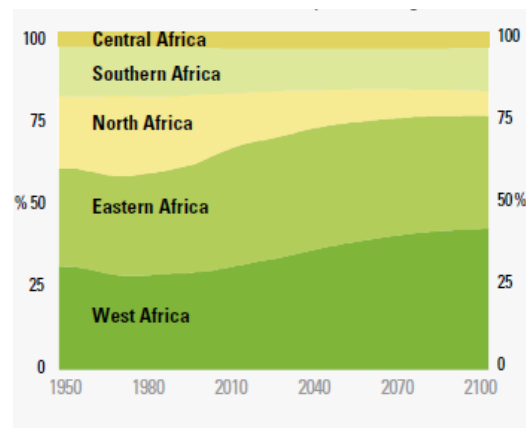
Education is one issue where the international community and the ECA have substantial possibilities for effective intervention. Education is one area where official policy can have major effects. But education is neither cheap or uncontroversial. How to pay for it, especially when the countries that need the most can afford the least? Who to include in education? How to make it available to all ethnicities? Should

education be compulsory or voluntary? How aggressive should measures be to facilitate education of girls? These are difficult issues for the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the principle body for resolution of such issues.

II. Background

Education in Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, was a target for the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000-15, which were especially important rationalizing and organizing global development assistance, including aid by donor governments to African countries. Since the MDGs were established, Sub-Saharan Africa has shown the most progress in primary education than any other region. Between the years of 2000 and 2005 there has been a 20 per cent increase of net enrollment in primary schools, revealing successful efforts to promote education for young children.

Figure 3. The most growth: East and West Africa



Source: UNICEF, 2014



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These important accomplishments show what can be achieved with careful planning. But Africa stills faces issues major with access to education, enrollment in secondary and higher education, and quality of education.² There are many factors that affect enrollment in higher levels of education that also affect the states of Africa. The struggles of the indigenous people still linger from post-colonialism causing many countries to face extreme poverty, infrastructure issues and inequality. All of these struggles have a profound effect on enrollment in secondary and higher education, from causing failed access to education and resources to facing a cultural identity crisis. Six general issues are especially pressing:

- *North-South split:* The countries of southern Africa are less affected by these problems than east and western Africa, where population growth is much faster. Southern African countries face serious issues of access to education and quality, but lower population growth means they face less pressure. They are affected also, in the long run, by pressure of migration from the north. South African countries are less enthusiastic about development priorities that do less for them, as less supportive of aggressive reform and spending on these issues than governments of east and west Africa.
- *Financing education:* Sub-Saharan African governments lack the finances to provide the quality and quantity of education all their people require. Even oil exporters like Angola and Nigeria

lack adequate resources. As a result, state-financed education tends to be limited to primary education (through the age of 12 or less). State-financed education also is low quality; teachers are poorly paid, often below subsistence, and require other jobs or work as tutors to survive. Education in Sub-Saharan Africa often is the same as problems of finance. Where will the money come from?

- *Western versus indigenous culture:* A lot of governments resist anything that might disrupt the social order. That is to say, upset their supporters. Everyone talks good now, but they resist spending anything on anything but their supporters and supporter's pet projects. Ignore the rest, throw them a crumb. Instead they promote local, national or indigenous solutions, a way of justifying to hell with meddling outsiders.
- *Ethnicity issues.* Always the barely concealed agenda in Africa, where all anyone cares about is who benefits? State leaders have to worry about maintaining support among their ethnic supporters, directing aid and investment where they can get to it, versus national goals that might mean dividing public wealth, sharing with political adversaries and antagonistic groups. Basic problem is leaders do not benefit from helping their enemies. And if enemy groups are slum dwellers, so be it. Slum eradication usually is 'punish your enemies'. Very sticky stuff. Often international engagement is the only way to give domestic political leaders the cover they need to engage everyone, even adversarial ethnicities.

² Justin W. van Fleet, 'Africa's Education Crisis: In School but not Learning', *Brookings Institution*, 17 September 2012.



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- *Educating girls:* with limited resources available, families often must choose which of their children are to be educated. Girls are the typical losers in such decisions. In other regions there are prejudices against educating women, which can be seen as socially disruptive, making women less likely to support local customs, and thus less marriage. There is widespread fear that educated daughters will become burdens for their families, a source of social stigma. On the other hand, female education is widely understood to be essential to smaller families and lower population growth, since educated women tend to have smaller families. In many regions this tendency is another barrier to allow education of girls.³
- *After education:* Critics note that education alone achieves little if there is no high quality employment for recent school graduates. Education reforms without economic development are likely to result in nothing but frustration, potentially increasing revolutionary dangers and pressure for migration. Education reforms, these critics argue, cannot come at the expense of greater economic development.⁴

The importance of addressing ethnic diversity and favoritism is a serious one for many African states. Education in South Africa, for example, is not often viewed as inadequate when

³ "Why Don't Africa's Girls Go to School?" *BBC News*, 4 July 2003.

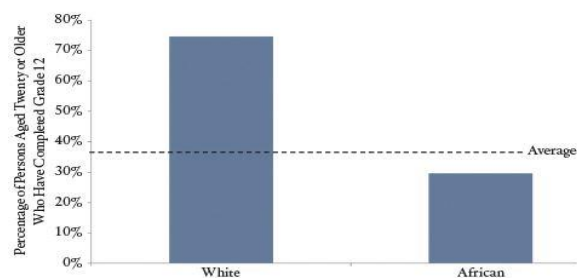
⁴ Wachira Kigotho, "Producing unemployable graduates wastes time and money". *University World News*. 20 March 2015.

reviewing the national standards, considering its economic state it is relatively easy to promote adequate education. But white South African students are exposed to greater educational opportunities as opposed to their black African counterparts. The initial expansion of education in South Africa after the end of the racist division of the country in 1991 lacked sensitivity towards the highly diverse and complicated ethnic environment, and achieved much less than initially hoped.

Racist implementation put black residents of South Africa at a disadvantage in the new system, a disadvantage that continues to play a role in the disparity. Today South Africa has 11 official languages, IsiZulu being the most widely spoken with 22.7% of the country speaking it.

The English language is the language predominantly used in schools despite it only being spoken by 9.6% of the population. Delegates from South Africa should also consider the idea of 'African consciousness' or the African identity and how it can be reintroduced to the westernized schooling system. Other African countries face similar, often much greater problems of ethnic diversity and equality.

EDUCATION AND RACE IN SOUTH AFRICA



Source: South African Institute of Race Relations, *South Africa Survey 2010/2011*. Data from 2010. "Average" includes more racial groups than those listed.

III. United Nations Involvement



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Since its initial establishment in 1945 the United Nations has heavily focused on the promotion and importance of education. The United Nations has given special attention to nations in Africa concerning this issue in hopes of reducing poverty and promoting peace. Along with attempting to end poverty and promote peace the United Nations must also adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, according to article 26; everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. With help from NGO's the United Nations, namely UNESCO, has launch several programs that send aid to African education programs. Initiatives of UNESCO for education in Africa include Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) and Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa and the largest being Education for All, introduced at the World Education Forum in Dakar 2000.

A major problem for efforts by the UN is ensuring that targeted spending goes where it is intended. With the pressures of greater poverty, ethnic and social demands, there is pressure on local administrators to shift resources to their own priorities.⁵ These might be as simple as personal enrichment, family sharing and improvement, ethnic patronage, or payoffs to employers and chiefs. UN programs must be designed with incentives to minimize corruption, but excessive attention to corruption makes delivery of aid impossible, especially in cultures where side-payment often are essential to

⁵ "Corruption Stifles Learning in Africa, Report Finds", *Deutsche Welle*, April 2011.

effective implementation. Corruption is the problem, but sometimes the mean to getting things done. UN administrators have to find a balance between the desirable and the feasible.

The United Nations may become even more important to educational reform in Africa as a result of the Supplemental Development Goals (SDGs). These will guide most international development and assistance spending and program design for the years 2016-2030. Education and Africa are both high priorities under the SDGs. There has been pressure to make these priorities even clearer and more heavily emphasized under SDG drafting implementation.⁶

⁶ 'Sustainable development goals: all you need to know', *Guardian*, 19 January 2015; and 'The economics of optimism: The debate heats up about what goals the world should set for 2030', *The Economist*, 22 January 2015.



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