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Higher Education Expansion and Social Inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa:

Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives

Yann Lebeau

Ibrahim Ogachi Oanda

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UNRISD, Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0)22 9173020
info.unrisd@un.org
www.unrisd.org

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Introduction to Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

This paper is part of a project which explores what role universities play in overcoming persistent and rising inequalities. Participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, in parallel with heightened social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities stemming from a university degree. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth. The project asks: What potential does higher education have today to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can the transformative potential of such institutions be fully harnessed for overcoming inequality?

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List of Acronyms

| | |
|--------|--|
| ANSD | National Agency for Statistics and Demography (Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie), Senegal |
| CUE | Commission for University Education |
| EPDC | Education Policy and Data Centre |
| FGN | Federal Government of Nigeria |
| FRN | Federal Republic of Nigeria |
| GER | Gross Enrolment Ratio |
| HE | Higher education |
| HEIs | Higher education institutions |
| HEIPR | Higher Education Initial Participation Rate |
| IDS | Institute of Development Studies |
| IIE | Institute of International Education |
| IFIs | International financial institutions |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| ISSC | International Social Science Council |
| KNSB | Kenya National Bureau of Statistics |
| KUCCPS | Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service |
| MESRI | Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation), Senegal |
| NBS | Kenya National Bureau of Statistics |
| NISER | Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SSCE | Senior School Certificate Examination |
| STEM | Science, technology, engineering and mathematics |
| UIS | UNESCO Institute for Statistics |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |

Abstract

The development of higher education (HE) in sub-Saharan Africa has presented contradictory features and outcomes over the past two decades. On the one hand, the number of public and private HE institutions has increased in the present era of massification (where HE environments have reached almost universal access). This led to a diversification of academic programmes on offer, and enrolments surged to the point that sub-Saharan Africa experienced the fastest growth of all UNESCO world regions over the period. Yet on the other hand, gross enrolment rates (less than 10 percent on average in the region) remain by far the lowest and show slower progression than in other parts of the global South, as the rise in the number of institutions and in enrolment has not kept pace with population growth and increased social

demand for higher education. These contradictions between dynamics typically associated with massified HE environments and features of highly elitist systems beg a closer examination of this process of expansion and diversification, and more specifically of how it has affected different socio-economic groups. Drawing on secondary data and policy material, and using three national contexts as case studies (Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal), the paper highlights how issues of inequalities and inequity in access to and participation in higher education were addressed by national policies in contexts of expansion and diversification. It then examines how the HE opportunities resulting from the expansion generated new inequalities at the levels of access to HE institutions and programmes, in student experience and in access to labour markets and social recognition. The case study perspective reveals how the relationship between growth and other dimensions of national HE developments are both context-contingent and shaped, or exacerbated by, international pressures. It allows a better understanding of the common challenges of African HE systems in terms of access “for whom?” “to what?” and “what for?” while avoiding excessive generalizations in conclusions and suggestions.

Keywords

Access to higher education; inequalities; Kenya; massification; Nigeria; Senegal

Bio

Yann Lebeau is Professor of Higher Education Research in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia (UK). He has previously held teaching and research positions in France, in Nigeria and at the UK’s Open University. His research interests are in the sociology of higher education communities and where higher education policy and practice intersect. He has done extensive empirical research and comparative analysis in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe, and is a member of several international education and development research networks.

Ibrahim Ogachi Oanda is a Senior Program officer and head of the Training, Grants and Fellowship program at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). He was previously Associate Professor at Kenyatta University (Kenya), teaching Higher Education, Sociology and Philosophy of Education in the Department of Educational Foundations. His research interests are in the areas of higher education access, inequalities and knowledge production in Africa. He has published extensively on these issues and co-authored a book on privatization and private higher education in Africa.

1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) participation in sub-Saharan Africa has risen at a higher pace over the past three decades, but enrolment rates remain modest by comparison with other parts of the developing world. Significantly, the rise in the number of institutions and in enrolment has not kept pace with population growth and increased demand for HE. Data on participation by social or ethnic groups is not readily available everywhere on the continent to reveal whether this expansion is equally distributed, correcting existing inequalities, or is rather exacerbating them by generating new forms of exclusion. However, studies drawing on various comparative material reveal that what has been referred to in some literature as massification of HE in sub-Saharan Africa has effectively yet to happen anywhere in the region, and that what is being experienced in HE varies a great deal according to gender, geography and ethnicity.¹ The increased resistance from students to tuition fee hikes or to other HE reforms may also be indicative of tensions between “new” groups seeking access to HE as a passport to social mobility, and elites who are bent on controlling the transformation of HE to consolidate their ascendancy (Luescher et al. 2016).

The pressure for access has also resulted in a diversification of HE landscapes, notably marked by the elevation of often poorly resourced public institutions to university status, and by the consolidation almost everywhere of a vast and disparate private HE provision, therefore raising issues of quality of “epistemological access” (Muller 2014). The social recognition and market value of qualifications obtained varies considerably in these circumstances, generating new inequalities, a feature usually associated with high participation systems (Marginson 2016b). Such trends, along with the persistence of structural inequalities affecting access to higher education, remain poorly documented in the region, and too often hidden by aggregates, comparators and typologies linking HE growth and economic development without attention to equity and social justice (Ilie and Rose 2016).

Drawing on secondary data and on debates from three national contexts of sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal), the paper seeks to address the following sets of questions: How do inequalities manifest themselves at the levels of access to HE institutions and programmes, in student experience, and in access to labour markets and social recognition in contexts of unevenly distributed expansion of HE opportunities? How have issues of inequalities and equity in access and participation been addressed in national policies on HE? How have these policies evolved in contexts of expansion and diversification of HE systems? A historical perspective is brought to each case, to reveal the relationship between growth of enrolment and other dimensions of national HE developments. Linking questions of “access for whom?”, “to what?” and “what for?” through national illustrations also allows to consider more context-relevant options for greater inclusion.

¹ See Mohamedbhai (2014), Ilie and Rose (2016) and Darvas et al. (2017).

Section 2 of the paper discusses the various ways in which expansion and equity in HE have been conceptualized and measured. The section also discusses the limitations of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and commonly associated features as descriptors of the historical development of HE in sub-Saharan Africa. Section 3 discusses trends in access and enrolment in the three countries under focus, highlighting points at which inequalities in access are generated. Section 4 discusses institutional-level manifestations of inequalities in contexts of diversification of subjects and qualifications. Section 5 reviews what is known of the relationship between the expansion and transformation of HE and the employment prospects of graduates from various socio-economic backgrounds in the three case countries. In section 6 we return to some of the contradictions and paradoxes accompanying the expansion of HE in sub-Saharan Africa with a view to emphasize how understanding the role played by HE in generating and perpetuating inequalities should be part of broader considerations of economic and human development.

2. Conceptualizing Higher Education Development and Inequalities in Developing Contexts

While the HE landscapes of most countries have changed and expanded, the extent to which this expansion benefits societies is subject to interpretation based on models, typologies and measures that do not always reflect adequately the specific trajectories of national HE systems. These models have themselves stimulated policies applied across the developing world which continue to affect current patterns of participation in HE.

2.1 Measuring equity and inequities in access and participation in higher education

Tools to measure the accessibility, availability and attainability of HE around the world have changed over time, in a reflection of the expansion and diversification of systems (Carpentier et al. 2018). While datasets of the post-war era were focused on numbers of entrants, the GER in particular, as a proxy for democratization of access, more refined statistical information is used today in high participation systems of East Asia, North America and Europe to address the questions of “access to what?” and “for whom?”. Indicators such as the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) estimating the “likelihood of a young person participating in

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