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EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

George S. Vilakazi

In Africa, stories are usually told at night around a fire. Often anyone in the audience — man, woman or child — who has a tale to tell will volunteer or be asked to tell it. I have a tale to tell. It is on the hopelessness, frustration and despair of the African people. It is on the lack of development their continent has experienced for so long before and, still, after independence. The following fable illustrates the gravity of the task of development in Africa. And so the fable goes... God spoke with four men from four different continents: America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. These four men were concerned with the lack of development on their respective continents. They wanted to find out from God Himself how long it would take before their continents developed economically. The first man to speak to God was the American. He asked, "God, how long is it going to take you to develop America?" God replied, "Twenty years." The man wept for he thought that twenty years was too long. Next, the European man asked God, "How long will it take for you to develop Europe?" God answered, "Thirty years." The man wept and went away. Next the Asian man questioned God. He asked, "God, how long will it take to develop Asia?" God replied, "Fifty years." Needless to say, the man wept bitterly. Finally, the African man stood before God. He asked, "Lord how long shall it take to develop the continent of Africa?" There was silence, then God wept. Thus is the plight of the African continent.

After independence, many Africans had hopes for a brighter future for their children, but after experiencing a rise in poverty, deteriorating social conditions and high unemployment rates for more than thirty years, it is no wonder that pessimism regarding the development of Africa is widespread. In fact, among the 48 poorest countries in the world, 33 of them are African.¹ Will the African continent ever develop? If the answer is yes, which I know it must be, then what are the challenges we as Africans face in the 21st century, and what politics and policies do we need to change in order to make

¹ *The World Bank Annual Report* (Washington: World Bank, 1996) p. 53.

development a reality? In the above fable, even the Omnipotent finds the development of Africa distressing. What then can we, as mere mortals, do to develop Africa if even the Creator sees it as a formidable challenge?

This paper outlines some of the challenges to development that Southern Africa faces in the 21st century. It asserts that if the Southern region (as well as the entire continent of Africa) wants to be strong economically in the 21st century, it must emphasize the need for quality educational systems because education and economic development go hand-in-hand. No country in this technological age can compete in world markets if it neglects education.² Education is a particularly important investment because it affects the health and life expectancy of people and equips them with the knowledge and the means to live healthier lives. Although the focus of this paper is the Southern region of Africa, the analysis is equally applicable to other regions of Africa.

The Southern Region of Africa includes the ten states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). It is comprised of the following countries: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Southern region contributes a consistent 25 percent of the total population of Africa.³ The estimated population of the region is 125 million. And with the annual population growth rate of about 3 percent, the population in the region will be about 200 million in fifteen years. Of the 200 million about 55 percent will be children under 15 years old. This undoubtedly adds a great burden on the public expenditure for education. In fact, the African continent is the region in the world where the proportion of the population under 15 years old is the greatest — estimated at 50 percent. In contrast, Mexico, according to Unesco, shows about 40 percent in this age group; the United States, 20 percent.⁴

Education in Africa came mainly through missionaries who introduced missionary schools in several communities. At first,

² *Ibid.*

³ Jan Smuts House News, *Southern African Institute of International Affairs*, 3.1 (May 1995), p. 17.

⁴ G. Vilakazi, *Contributors to Student Academic Performance in Government Urban High Schools in Swaziland*, Dissertation (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1991), p. 1.

missionaries were not accepted, but as time went on, their schools gave them an acceptable role in the African community. Missionaries were convinced that European values and civilization were superior to African values, and that it was their Christian calling to impart Western culture.⁵ It was obvious from the beginning that missionaries preferred preaching to teaching. In Namibia during the 1850s, a missionary by the name of Hoeflich summarized the objectives of missionary education as follows: "For its development ... the country does not need 'educated Negroes,' but competent, intelligent workers (for domestic service). The main emphasis will therefore be on education, for obedience, order, punctuality, sobriety, honesty, diligence, and moderation, rather than academic learning."⁶

The missionaries and the colonists set up most of their schools in urban areas and the colonial administration in rural areas never intended to spend a penny to develop schools. When people in rural areas made efforts to build their own schools, the colonial administration rejected the idea and said such efforts posed a serious threat to the government because of political implications linked to "self-reliant Africans." For example, in Zimbabwe in the 1950s, Chief Mangwende, with both his council and people, had already raised \$22,000 to build a primary school.⁷ After being denied a building permit by local administrators, the chief himself went to Harare to meet with the colonial administrators in order to request a building permit for the school. His request was not successful and he could not build a school in his area without permission. He and his council decided to spend the money they had collected on sinking bore holes to improve the supply of water in the villages. He also operated his own ambulance service to provide better medical care for the sick. The colonists wanted to keep control of African lives by controlling the education system.

⁵ Justin Ellis, *Education, Repression & Liberation: Namibia* (London: World University Service, 1984), p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Dickson Mungazi, *Education and Government Control in Zimbabwe* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 83

Surprisingly, not much has changed in our education system since the British left more than thirty years ago. In each of the SADC countries, except Angola and Mozambique, their educational system is based on the British system. British colony schools have the same structure, cover the same sorts of subject matter, and the teaching method is more or less the same style as that of British schools. In comparing the British colonies with the Portuguese colonies (Angola and Mozambique), Bray, Clarke and Stephens found that even in schools of Portuguese-speaking Africa, the patterns of the subject matter taught and the style of teaching was largely the same as in English schools.⁸

Another hazard of the British education system is that it did not include preschool. Children entered primary school at 7 years of age and were unfamiliar with a school setting and ill-prepared to begin constructive learning. Because the British and Portuguese treated preschool as a luxury, the lack of emphasis on preschool is one of the legacies plaguing our educational system. Even today, many African governments and education ministries do not treat preschool seriously. Preschool is still left to the will of the very few well-to-do parents who can afford to pay the high fees required in the few existing preschools. For example, in Japan, which has the highest quality of living, as measured by the human development index (see Table 3 and discussion), 75% of children from the ages of 3 to 5 attend preschool. There are approximately 15,000 preschools which accommodate 3 million children.⁹

There is no question that the structure of the education system we inherited was, and still is, unfit for the masses. It was meant to serve only a few individuals needed by the colonists to help run the colonies. It would appear, by the unwillingness to make necessary educational changes after independence, that the "African Independence" leaders in the 1960s and 1970s, in most cases, excelled at perfecting colonial systems. It is unfortunate that when these politicians, and African educationists in particular, inherited this education system they did not

⁸ Mark Bray, Peter B. Clarke, and David Stephens, *Education and Society in Africa* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), pp. 146-7.

⁹ Gerald L. Gutek, *American Education in a Global Society* (New York: Longman, 1993), p. 166.

realize that the system lacked "the educational foundation" known as preschool. Funds were not allocated for preschools and no new policies were formulated on preschool education.

It is evident that educational opportunities in Southern Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, are neither equitably distributed between different regions, nor are they evenly utilized. In all parts of Africa the rural masses lag behind town dwellers. Even after several decades of independence, equal access of educational opportunity is not in sight. What is more troubling about this situation is that the majority of the African population — about 80% — still live in the rural areas. In addition, it is in the rural areas where poor children from lower income families live, and it is also where the highest percentage of illiteracy is concentrated. In fact, in all the SADC countries, except South Africa, the rural population totals about 70%. In Malawi it is 88% and in Lesotho it is 79%.¹⁰ Unfortunately, rural areas also have the highest drop-out rates.

Rural areas tend to have fewer schools and receive much poorer quality teachers, so that pupils are more likely to get bored with schooling. Also pupils in villages do not have extra-curricular activities as do those in towns. One study conducted in small rural areas in Nigeria found that the drop-out rate was close to 80 percent.¹¹ There are weaker incentives to remain in school in such areas. Also in rural schools, many teachers and pupils work under serious handicaps such as the lack of classrooms and school supplies. However, African leaders must share part of the blame for the condition of the educational system; they did not spend more money on developing rural areas and improving rural schools after independence. Even today, most schools in rural areas are neglected. In the case of secondary schools, there is no reason current African governments continue with the colonial education policy that secondary education is only for the few. In some African countries only about 10 percent of the secondary school-age population is enrolled in school and there are very few secondary schools in rural areas. In Zambia, for example, before

¹⁰ *Human and Development Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 162.

¹¹ Bray et al, p. 62.

independence, there was only one senior secondary school for African boys and one for African girls, for a total African population of approximately three million.¹² The government has since built more schools but, as is the case in most African countries, too few of these schools are in rural areas.

Against this background, it is not surprising then to find such a low literacy rate in the Southern region of Africa, as elsewhere in Africa. Throughout Africa there are millions of people who have no schooling at all. Table 1 illustrates the percentage of people in five countries in Southern Africa who have little to no schooling. These literacy rates are compared to that of the United States.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Education Attainment for 15-19 Year Olds

Country	% with no schooling	% with no primary school certification
Botswana	25	28
Malawi	38	47
Mozambique	50	48
South Africa	8	49
Zambia	17	61
USA	.4	10

Source: *Unesco Statistical Yearbook 1995*.¹³

The percentages in Table 1 reflect the education attainment of persons 15-19 years old by select country or region. The estimated population of the five SADC states represented will be about 100 million by the year 2000. These are young people who are expected to contribute to the economic development of their country and region. Mozambique is the poorest country in the region, and has the highest percentage of people lacking primary education. Half of the school-age population did not complete the primary school level. Obviously, this country of about 20 million has a long way to go in developing

¹² Ann Datta, *Education and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), pp. 145-6.

¹³ *Unesco Statistical Yearbook* (Paris: Pergamon Press, 1995).

education and the economy. In stark contrast, most Americans between 15 and 19 years of age have at least some primary school education. 90 percent of American youth in this age group have at least completed their primary education. Will Africa ever reach such a high percentage of school completion?

Table 2 shows the education index for the SADC states which is a composite of the percent of literate adults within the population and percent of the population that has completed primary school or higher. This inclusive index therefore takes into account various educational levels of schooling (primary school, secondary school and college/university). Column two depicts the enrollment ratio for all levels in percentages from age 6 to 23 for the ten SADC countries.

Table 2: Education Index and Enrollment Ratio

Country	% of Education Index	Enrollment Ratio % age 6-23
Angola	24.3	32
Botswana	47.3	64
Lesotho	49.3	58
Malawi	28.4	38
Mozambique	18.9	24
Namibia	49.2	*
South Africa	57.9	*
Swaziland	46.3	64
Zambia	45.8	47
Zimbabwe	42.2	66
USA	70.1	86

Sources: *Human Development Report 1995*¹⁴ and *The Global Economy in the 90s*.¹⁵

Mozambique, Angola and Malawi have the lowest literacy attainment as well as the lowest enrollment rates. Literacy attainment

¹⁴ *Human Development Report*, p. 166.

¹⁵ Bill Orr, *The Global Economy in the 90s: A User's Guide* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 152.

and school enrollment rates go hand-in-hand such that the larger the enrollment ratio, the higher literacy attainment is. Table 3 shows the estimated population in the Southern region. It is projected that the population in this region may double in 25 years. Studies have shown that a literate population tends to have more control over the population growth rate.¹⁶

Table 3: Human Development Index For SADC

Country	Population in Millions	Per-capita income in US\$	HDI
Angola	13	410	0.150
Botswana	2	2,800	0.524
Lesotho	3	400	0.432
Malawi	12	160	0.179
Mozambique	20	100	0.155
Namibia	2	2,030	0.440
South Africa	46	3,010	0.766
Swaziland	1	810	0.462
Zambia	11	350	0.351
Zimbabwe	13	590	0.413

Sources: *Africa at a Glance 1995/6*, *Human Development Report 1995* and *The Global Economy in the 90*.¹⁷

Table 3 shows the region's population, each country's per capita income (GNP) in dollars and what is called the "index of quality of human life," or the 'human development index' (HDI). The HDI is a composite of three factors: life expectancy, education and real per-capita income. These three factors give a general picture of how well people are doing economically. Currently, the most affluent country in the world is Japan with an HDI of 0.993. The United States of America is ranked 7th, with an HDI of 0.976. The only African country that has HDI higher than 0.750 is South Africa. Libya is next with the HDI of

¹⁶ See H.S. Bhola, "A Policy Analysis of Adult Literacy Promotion in the Third World" *International Review of Education* 30.3 (1984), pp. 249-64; also Saroy Yadav, *Population Education* (New Delhi: Shree Publishing House, 1988), p. 100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

0.665.¹⁸ South Africa, Botswana and Namibia have relatively high HDI's compared to Malawi, Angola and Mozambique, which have the lowest HDI's. The quality of human life in these countries is the lowest in the region, and unfortunately, the outlook for Mozambique and Malawi is unfavorable since investors do not like to invest in countries which have weak economic performance and an uneducated, unskilled work force. Countries which fit the middle income category are Namibia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Lesotho and Zambia are low income countries. They are struggling states and need assistance from region member states. Note that if we compare Tables 2 and 3, the countries with a higher HDI also have a higher percentage of the population who are literate. The region cannot let over 30 million people continue living in extreme poverty

Table 4: Education as Percent of Government Expenditure

Country	% of Total Government Expenditure	% spent on Primary/ Secondary Education	% spent on Higher Education
Angola	11	96	4
Botswana	20	80	12
Lesotho	16	76	18
Malawi	10	55	30
Mozambique	12	66	10
Namibia	18	57	10
South Africa	23	*	*
Swaziland	25	62	21
Zambia	10	66	17
Zimbabwe	17	85	10

Sources: *Human Development Report 1995* and *Unesco, Statistical Yearbook 1996*.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Human Development Report 1995* and *Unesco Statistical Yearbook 1995*.

Table 4 shows how much of the total government budget was spent on education. Columns 2 and 3 show the percentage of the education budget that was spent on primary/secondary education versus higher education, respectively.

According to Table 4, there are six countries which spent over 15 percent of the total government expenditure on education, the other four spent about 10 percent. Notice that those countries with the lowest HDI's are also the same countries which allocate the least amount of funds of the total government budget to education — namely Angola, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia.

It is time for governments in the region to serve the real developmental needs of the people. We must keep our budget in check. Africa has so much debt that long-range planning for economic development is difficult. In the Southern region, for example, Mozambique in 1993 had a debt of US\$5 billion, Zambia US\$7 billion, Zimbabwe US\$4 billion and Malawi US\$2 billion. Between 1990 and 1993, Zambia allocated US\$37 million to primary education compared to US\$1.3 billion that went to foreign creditors. Uganda spends US\$175 million on debt services while only \$120 million goes to education and social services.²⁰ This behavior must change in the coming century. The whole of Africa has US\$13 billion flowing out on debt servicing and principal repayments annually. These payment services for these debts take a higher share of resources than the amounts devoted to social services such as education and health. Unicef estimates that in order for Africa to meet the educational challenges outlined in this paper for the Southern region, it needs US\$9 billion to provide education to 21 million children and about 100 million young women.²¹

African states tend to respond to immediate political and economic pressures coming from outside of Africa instead of focusing on long-range developmental plans. Frequently, political conditionalities for aid from foreign governments detract from long-range plans of African governments. And as we know, what is done today in the interest of placating the political interests of creditors, does not always contain the developmental seed for tomorrow. As a result,

²⁰ *Southern: Political & Economic Monthly*, 9.9 (June 1996), p. 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*

the long-range developmental goals that we all desire for Africa are never reached.²²

African countries are politically independent but economically still very dependent on the US, Europe and Asia. As the saying goes, "whoever pays calls the shots." Maybe now is the time for change; African people should call the shots. As A.R. Thompson writes;

Africans have one thing in common, the wish to direct and control the processes of change to create the kind of society which they wish to see. In a word, they are concerned with development. The Western world may have certain characteristics which it uses to measure or compare an underdeveloped society and a developed one. But Africans must find and choose models. Africans should analyze and examine these characteristics which the industrial societies have been advocating for years as true measures of development. Africans should follow their own path towards the creation of a modern society which will be authentically African and adopt development characteristics that will be most appropriate for their conditions.²³

The Director General of Unesco in 1977 could not have been more clear when he said, "Development can only come from within. It must be endogenous, thought out by people for themselves, springing from the soil on which they live and attuned to their aspirations, the conditions of their natural environment, the resources at their disposal and the particular genius of their culture."²⁴ He went on to say that education should contribute to the promotion of such endogenous development. Every African country should first seek a balanced and sustainable economic growth. This can be done by considering new

²² *Overseas Development Administration* (London: University of London, 1986), p. 48.

²³ A. R. Thompson, *Education and Development in Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), pp. 13-14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

African approaches to the continent's educational needs. The first task is diagnosis by Africans themselves, and only then should "medicine" be prescribed.

Fortunately, the Southern region is blessed with rich mineral resources. It is the leading trader in Africa with an estimated 30 billion dollars in exports, or about 40 percent of the continent's total export.²⁵ Because of that I am optimistic that the region will be able to solve some of the educational challenges it faces in the 21st century. I expect the region to register some economic growth in the 2010s if it educates the majority of its people as I have suggested in this paper. The region member states who seem to be doing a little better than the other countries can not afford to ignore them and not offer assistance if the whole region's economic growth is to be realized.

The region needs a coordinated approach which focuses on development strategies in education. There are five countries in the region which are not doing well economically and educationally. These countries are just too poor to be left on their own to come out with enough resources for education and social services for their people. There is hope for the region to assist financially the other member states with weak economies. SADC must embark on a serious dialogue with all ten member states on development possibilities to be tackled now. Health and education conditions are getting worse in these countries every day. The region must first invest in education. If the richer countries of the region do not aide the less fortunate ones, sooner or later the richer states will be flooded with millions of refugees.

This paper shows that education is a critical factor in a country's economic growth. Africa still has a long way to go before it is fully developed. Before colonization, the continent was underdeveloped, and it certainly did not develop during colonization. We know all colonies were intended to promote the interests of the colonial establishments rather than to advance the African people. Indeed, in Africa, any benefit that the Africans may have derived from colonialism was a result of their own effort to make the best of an exploitative system. However, almost thirty five years after independence, under African political leaders, the education system has not been remodeled to accommodate

²⁵ Orr, p. 152.

the necessary changes needed to educate Africa's rural population. For three decades, the economic growth rate and wages in Africa have been excessively low, and unemployment and poverty rates have remained high.²⁶ And the population is increasing rapidly, estimated to be 900 million by the year 2000, which only compounds the problem.²⁷ I propose that we, as Africans, question the foundation of the inadequate colonial education system. Research has also shown that improvements in education do contribute to raising the standards of health, nutrition and life expectancy.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Africa at a Glance*, p. 12.

²⁸ Unesco, *Investing in the Future* (Paris: Pergamon, 1990), p. 22.