

Community Empowerment through Education in Africa: Utilising Traditional Knowledge for Inclusion, Resilience and Sustainable Development

Kariuki Muigua

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how the ideal of quality, inclusive, responsive and resilient education can be achieved in Africa for Sustainable Development. The paper posits that education is a powerful tool that can unlock Sustainable Development in Africa and drive societies and nations to greater prosperity. However, despite the role of education in promoting development in Africa, the paper notes that failure to embrace inclusive, responsive and resilient education systems in Africa undermines Sustainable Development. In particular, the paper notes that exclusion and marginalization of indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, values, philosophies and languages in education systems in Africa affects the role of education in unlocking Sustainable Development in the continent. In light of these concerns, the paper suggests how individuals, communities and nations in Africa can be empowered by utilising traditional knowledge systems, values, philosophies and languages for inclusion, equity, resilience and Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Education is a powerful tool that plays a key role in unlocking Sustainable Development across all its dimensions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) observes that education empowers people with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours to live in a way that is good for the environment, economy, and society towards fostering sustainability¹. In addition, it has been argued that at the heart of creating a quality, inclusive and sustainable future lies education². Education is vital in the Sustainable Development discourse since it not only enlightens individuals and societies about pressing environmental, economic, and social issues but it also equips them with the skills, values, attitudes and positive behaviour to drive meaningful change³. Education is therefore a prerequisite for achieving Sustainable

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¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Education for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

² Role of Education in Sustainable Development., Available at <https://icecd.org/blog/role-of-education-in-sustainable-development/> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

³ Ibid

Development since quality and inclusive education and learning is linked to progress in the economic, social, environmental, cultural and political spheres of life⁴. It has been correctly observed that education enables individuals and societies to make informed decisions and take action, both individually and collectively, to change society and protect the planet towards Sustainable Development⁵.

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁶ recognises the fundamental role of education in fostering development. In particular, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all in order to promote Sustainable Development⁷. It has been observed that SDG 4 places education at the centre of Sustainable Development since it recognises that education is the key that will allow many other SDGs to be achieved⁸. In addition, African Union's *Agenda 2063*⁹ acknowledges the importance of education in fostering development and sustainability in Africa. Agenda 2063 notes that a key driver of Africa's development agenda will be its world class human capital developed through *quality education* focused on achieving 100 per cent literacy and numeracy, and clear emphasis on science, technology and engineering¹⁰. It requires African countries to invest in education across all levels including early childhood education to primary, secondary, technical, vocational and higher education for sustainability¹¹.

Education therefore plays a key role in unlocking Sustainable Development both globally and in Africa. However, it has been observed that education systems all over the world are not fully inclusive with marginalized groups and minorities including the poor, girls,

⁴ The Role of Education in Human Growth and Development., Available at <https://aithor.com/essay-examples/the-role-of-education-in-human-growth-and-development> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'What is Education for Sustainable Development?' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education/need-know> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

⁶ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ United Nations., 'Goal 4: Quality Education' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/#:~:text=Education%20is%20the%20key%20that,and%20to%20reach%20gender%20equality> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁹ African Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

the youth, indigenous and local communities, persons with disabilities, and people of colour facing discrimination in access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities¹². In particular, it has been argued that failure to incorporate indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, philosophies, values and languages in education systems undermines the pursuit of quality, inclusive, responsive and resilient education for sustainability¹³. Consequently, it is imperative to reform global education systems in order to ensure inclusion, equity, resilience and responsiveness towards Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how the ideal of quality, inclusive, responsive and resilient education can be achieved in Africa for Sustainable Development. The paper posits that education is a powerful tool that can unlock Sustainable Development in Africa and drive societies and nations to greater prosperity. However, despite the role of education in promoting development in Africa, the paper notes that failure to embrace inclusive, responsive and resilient education systems in Africa undermines Sustainable Development. In particular, the paper notes that exclusion and marginalization of indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, values, philosophies and languages in education systems in Africa affects the role of education in unlocking Sustainable Development in the continent. In light of these concerns, the paper suggests how individuals, communities and nations in Africa can be empowered by utilising traditional knowledge systems, values, philosophies and languages for inclusion, equity, resilience and Sustainable Development.

2.0 Education as an Enabler of Sustainable Development in Africa: Status and Challenges

Promoting quality, inclusive, responsive and resilient education in Africa is a prerequisite towards unlocking the Sustainable Development agenda and the goals and aspirations of the continent's development blueprint, Agenda 2063. For example, UNESCO observes that by improving access to inclusive, equitable and quality education, enhancing the quality of teaching, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, it is possible empower learners and support teachers, and build a foundation for Sustainable

¹² United Nations., 'Goal 4: Quality Education' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/#:~:text=Education%20is%20the%20key%20to%20hat,and%20to%20reach%20gender%20equality> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

¹³ Nwauwa. A.O., 'Western Education and the Rise of a New African Elite in West Africa' Available at <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-282?p=emailAULjLfSAAt2ouM&d=/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-282> (Accessed on 20/09/2026)

Development and social transformation across Africa¹⁴. In particular, it has been pointed out that quality, inclusive and equitable education in Africa is key towards empowering learners to become responsible citizens who are capable of making informed decisions that can create a sustainable future in Africa¹⁵. In addition, education empowers learners with positive attitudes, values and critical thinking skills necessary to participate in real-world problem solving as Africa faces numerous economic, social and environmental challenges that undermine progress towards Sustainable Development. Further, quality, inclusive, equitable and responsive education is key towards empowering communities and societies in Africa towards embracing sustainable practices across the environmental, social and economic spheres for community resilience¹⁶.

Enhancing access to quality, inclusive and equitable education in Africa is therefore necessary towards empowering individuals, communities and nations in Africa towards Sustainable Development. Education has been described as a beacon of hope and an engine of progress towards catalysing Africa's development agenda¹⁷. According to the African Union, achieving the dream of a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and Sustainable Development as envisaged under Agenda 2063 requires that Africa makes significant investments in education with the aim of developing human and social capital through an education and skills revolution emphasizing innovation, science and technology¹⁸. Further, it has been correctly observed that through quality, equitable, inclusive and resilient policies and systems, education can catalyse socio-economic development, empowering individuals, societies and nations to realize their full potential thus unlocking Sustainable Development across Africa¹⁹.

Due to its vital role in unlocking Sustainable Development, education has been embraced as a fundamental human right in Africa. For instance, the *African Charter on Human and*

¹⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Education in Africa' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/africa/education> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

¹⁵ Why Education for Sustainable Development Should be a Priority in African Schools., Available at <https://tdsafrica.org/esd-in-african-schools/> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ African Union., 'Investing in Tomorrow: The African Union Year of Education Catalyzing Progress for Africa and the World: Commemorating the African Union's Year of Education' Available at <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20240925/investing-tomorrow-african-union-year-education-catalyzing-progress-africa> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Zhang. X., 'Sustainable Development in African countries: evidence from the impacts of education and poverty ratio' *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications.*, Volume 11, No. 1386 (2024)

*Peoples' Rights*²⁰ seeks to foster the right to education in Africa towards peace, prosperity and development. The Charter states that every individual in Africa has the right to quality education²¹. Further, at a national level, the *Constitution of Kenya*²² enshrines the human right to education²³. The Constitution requires the state to foster the right to education for specific groups including children who have the right to free and compulsory basic education²⁴; persons with disabilities who are entitled to access educational institutions and facilities that are integrated into society to the extent compatible with their interests²⁵; the youth who the right to access relevant education and training for their development²⁶; and minorities and marginalised groups who are entitled to special opportunities in educational and economic fields²⁷.

Despite the role of education in driving Sustainable Development in Africa, achieving quality, equitable, inclusive, affordable and resilient education remains a challenge for Africa. For example, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights vide its *Resolution*²⁸ on the Right to Education in Africa notes that despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks on the protection of the right to education in Africa, many children and learners, particularly girls, vulnerable children such as children with disabilities, refugee children, migrant children, street children, internally displaced children, girls who abandon school as a result of pregnancy, and children from marginalised communities have not been given equal and inclusive opportunity to access quality education²⁹. It is estimated that Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion among the six developing regions of the world with over one-fifth of primary-age children and almost 60 percent of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 being out of school³⁰. Inadequate access to quality, inclusive and equitable education in Africa has been attributed to challenges such as poverty, inadequate investments, gender

²⁰ Organization of African Unity (OAU), *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* ("Banjul Charter"), CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), 27 June 1981

²¹ Ibid, article 17 (1)

²² Constitution of Kenya., 2010., Government Printer, Nairobi

²³ Ibid, article 43 (1) (f)

²⁴ Ibid, article 53 (1) (b)

²⁵ Ibid, article 54 (1) (b)

²⁶ Ibid, article 55 (a)

²⁷ Ibid, article 56 (b)

²⁸ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights., 'Resolution on the Right to Education in Africa - ACHPR/Res.346(LVIII)2016' Available at <https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/346-resolution-right-education-africa-achprres346lviii2016> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Klapper. L., & Panchamia. MV., 'The high price of education in Sub-Saharan Africa' Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/high-price-education-sub-saharan-africa> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

inequalities and disparities, inadequate educational infrastructure and frequent and prolonged armed conflicts with disproportionate impacts on vulnerable groups including the youth, girls, persons with disabilities, and indigenous and local communities³¹.

In particular, failure to embrace indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, languages and philosophies is a major challenges that undermines inclusion, resilience and responsiveness in education systems in Africa. For example, it has been observed that the use of Western education systems in Africa has undermined traditional and indigenous African education systems and philosophies which have been practiced in the continent for many centuries³². Most education policies, curricula, and school systems in Africa and the Global South reflect Euro-centric knowledge systems, philosophies and values which alienate indigenous cultures and knowledge systems in the continent³³. In addition, due to the use of Euro-centric education systems in Africa, millions of children and learners are taught in European languages including English, French, Spanish and Portuguese³⁴. The United Nations notes that due to westernization of education in Africa and the Global South, many learners are taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively, express themselves and reach their full potential³⁵. Consequently, there is need for education systems, policies and practices that embed multilingual education at their core in order to promote inclusion, equity, and effective learning for all in Africa and the Global South³⁶.

³¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Q&A: What you need to know about the state of education in Africa' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/qa-what-you-need-know-about-state-education-africa> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

³² Mart. C.T., 'British colonial Education Policy in Africa' *Internal journal of English and literature* Vol. 2(9), pp. 190-194, December 2011

³³ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Available at <https://www.msingiafrikamagazine.com/2022/01/the-history-and-development-of-education-in-afrika/> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

³⁴ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Available at <https://www.msingiafrikamagazine.com/2022/01/the-history-and-development-of-education-in-afrika/> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

³⁵ United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/mother-language-day#:~:text=Ensuring%20that%20education%20systems%20support,engagement%2C%20and%20critical%20thinking%20skills> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

³⁶ Ibid

3.0 Utilising Traditional Knowledge for Inclusion, Resilience and Equity in Education towards Sustainable Development

Due to current challenges, there is need to reform education policies and systems in Africa with emphasis on inclusion, resilience, equity and responsiveness in order to promote Sustainable Development. In particular, there is need to embrace Africa's indigenous and traditional knowledge towards quality, inclusive, equitable and resilient education systems in the continent. It has been observed that indigenous and traditional knowledge systems in Africa provide a source of lifelong and community-oriented approach to education with focus on practical skills, positive moral values, philosophies and cultural identity thus playing a key role in unlocking Sustainable Development³⁷. For many centuries before the introduction of western education systems in the continent, communities in Africa had developed their own lifelong processes of learning, with well-defined goals, structures, content and methods, through which cultural values, skills, morals, norms and heritage were transmitted by the older and more experienced members of society to the younger generations³⁸.

It has been observed that traditional African knowledge systems and philosophies emphasize core values including cooperation, critical thinking, a sense of community, tolerance and coexistence³⁹. Communities in Africa developed education systems that are based on oral literature that took various forms including folktales, myths, proverbs and songs⁴⁰. This ensured that core values, morals, skills and philosophies that guide African communities were preserved and transmitted from generation to generation this fostering quality, inclusive and lifelong learning⁴¹. Throughout Africa, education was intertwined with the social fabric of daily life with its core purpose being to teach, preserve and transmit cultural values, skills, norms and morals from one generation to the next⁴². In particular, it has been observed that unlike western education systems which do not take into account different societal contexts, traditional and indigenous education in Africa is relevant, responsive and resilient since it addresses the specific needs of its context and is effectively adapted to the environment it exists⁴³.

³⁷ Achi. A.N., 'African Indigenous Education' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357050398_African_Indigenous_Education (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Indigenous African Education Methods., Available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/860749302/ef1> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

⁴³ Ibid

It is therefore necessary to utilise traditional knowledge in education systems in Africa towards empowering communities for inclusion, resilience and Sustainable Development. For many centuries, communities in Africa have had their own unique and rich indigenous education systems, philosophies, values and practices which play a key role in unlocking Sustainable Development across all its dimensions: economic, social and environmental⁴⁴. For example, from an economic perspective, indigenous and traditional knowledge in Africa has supported livelihoods and community well-being for many centuries in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, traditional medicine, and fisheries among others⁴⁵. In addition, it has been observed that socially, indigenous and traditional knowledge in Africa affirms the individual and community's distinctiveness, its beliefs and practices thus fostering individual well-being and social cohesion⁴⁶. In particular, it has been observed that traditional knowledge emphasizes African values and philosophies including *Ubuntu* thus promoting interconnectedness, harmony, community and collective growth towards social equity⁴⁷. In the environmental context, traditional knowledge in Africa is rooted in the deep connection that indigenous peoples and local communities have with their land, resources, ecosystems and environment⁴⁸. For instance, communities all over Africa have utilised Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) including traditional and sustainable approaches to agriculture, hunting, fishing, water management, forestry and ecosystem management thus promoting sound environmental governance throughout history⁴⁹.

In light of the foregoing, there is need to reform education policies and systems in Africa by utilising traditional knowledge for inclusion, equity, resilience and Sustainable

⁴⁴ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

⁴⁵ World Bank Group., 'Indigenous knowledge for development : opportunities and challenges' Available at <https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/574381468765625385/indigenous-knowledge-for-development-opportunities-and-challenges> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

⁴⁶ Sergon. P.J., 'The role of Indigenous knowledge: practices and values in promoting socio-economic well-being and equity among Endorois community of Kenya' Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/11771801221086724> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

⁴⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Ubuntu in education: Special issue of IRE explores the philosophy of connectedness' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ubuntu-education-special-issue-ire-explores-philosophy-connectedness> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

⁴⁸ Filho. W et al., 'The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Climate Change Adaptation in Africa' Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2022.06.004> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

⁴⁹ International Fund for Agricultural Development., 'Indigenous Peoples' Available at <https://www.ifad.org/en/indigenous-peoples#:~:text=Indigenous%20Peoples%20are%20the%20custodians,investments%20based%20on%20their%20perspectives> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

Development. Through this approach, it is possible to ensure that education systems in Africa promote African values, philosophies, knowledge systems and norms towards empowering individuals and communities all over the continent. In addition, it has been correctly observed that teaching in indigenous and local languages in Africa can enhance quality, inclusion, equity and resilience in education by ensuring that learners are taught in languages they fully understand and comprehend while also ensuring that education fits to local needs and circumstances in the continent⁵⁰.

4.0 Conclusion

Promoting quality, inclusive, equitable and resilient education in Africa is necessary towards achieving the Sustainable Development agenda. However, due to the use of western-oriented education policies and systems in Africa, traditional knowledge, values, philosophies and languages are excluded and marginalized undermining inclusion, resilience and Sustainable Development⁵¹. Consequently, it is imperative to utilise traditional knowledge by teaching indigenous African values, norms, skills and philosophies and embracing local languages towards ensuring inclusion, equity, resilience and responsiveness in education for Sustainable Development.

⁵⁰ United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security., '5 Ways Languages Contribute to a Safer and More Inclusive World' Available at <https://unu.edu/ehs/series/5-ways-languages-contribute-safer-and-more-inclusive-world#:~:text=Languages%20are%20libraries%20of%20information,adaptive%20capacity%20as%20a%20species> (Accessed on 21/09/2026)

⁵¹ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

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