Education as a Human Right: Incorporating Culture and Indigenous Knowledge into School Systems in Africa

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how the right to education can be realised in Africa. The paper argues that education is a key human right in Africa whose attainment is vital in the quest towards Sustainable Development. The paper discusses how education can accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development in Africa. Despite its role in ensuring development, the paper notes that the right to education is yet to be attained in Africa. It argues that the continent faces several barriers that hinder the achievement of the right to education. In particular, the paper notes that culture and indigenous knowledge have been sidelined from education systems in Africa thus undermining the quality and appropriateness of education in the continent. In light of these concerns, the paper examines how culture and indigenous knowledge can be incorporated into school systems in Africa towards fostering the right to education for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

It has been argued that education is a basic human right that is key in lifting people out of poverty, ensuring equality within and among nations and promoting Sustainable Development[1]. Further, it has been pointed out that education is a fundamental human right and not a privilege[2]. Consequently, states have an obligation to protect, respect, and fulfil the right to education for all without any form of discrimination[3]. It has been argued that every child has the right to quality education and every individual is entitled to be

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[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'The Right to Education' Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/right-education (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[2] Understanding Education as a Right., Available at https://www.right-to-education.org/page/understanding-education-right (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[3] Ibid

able to satisfy his or her learning needs through lifelong learning[4]. By fostering the right to education, it is possible to unlock other human rights and freedoms. For instance, the right to health, right to employment, freedom of expression and freedom of association among others are all inextricably linked to the attainment of the right to education[5].

The right to education has been recognised both globally and in Africa. For instance, the human right to education is set out under key international human rights instruments including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)[6]*; the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[7]*; the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)[8]*; and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child[9]*. These instruments require all states to ensure free, compulsory primary education for all children; develop secondary education, supported by measures to render it accessible to all children; ensure equitable access to higher education; eliminate discrimination against women and girls in access to education; and provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education[10].

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[4] Education- A Human Right., Available at https://www.bmz.de/en/issues/education-a-human-right (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[5] Education Is a Fundamental Human Right and the Priority of the 21st Century., Available at https://www.educationcannotwait.org/news-stories/directors-corner/education-fundamental-human-right-and-the-priority-the-21st-century-0 (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[6] United Nations General Assembly. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1948

[7] United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3, 16 December 1966

[8] United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, p. 13, 18 December 1979

[9] United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, 20 November 1989

[10] United Nation's Children Fund., 'A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All' Available at https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/A%20Human%20Rights-based%20Approach%20to%20Education%20for%20All_0.pdf (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

In addition, the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*[11] seeks to foster the right to education in Africa. The Charter stipulates that every individual in Africa has the right to quality education[12]. The *Constitution of Kenya*[13] also recognises the human right to education[14]. It requires the state to foster the right to education for specific groups including children who have the right to free and compulsory basic education[15]; persons with disabilities who are entitled to access educational institutions and facilities that are integrated into society to the extent compatible with their interests[16]; the youth who the right to access relevant education and training for their development[17]; and minorities and marginalised groups who are entitled to special opportunities in educational and economic fields[18].

Education has therefore been recognised as a core human right both globally and at continental and national levels. Attaining this right is key in achieving Sustainable Development. It has been argued that education empowers people with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors that are vital for economic development, social cohesion and environmental conservation towards Sustainable Development[19]. Education is beneficial for both individuals, societies and nations. For individuals, education enhances access to employment, decent livelihoods, health, and poverty reduction[20]. In addition, for nations and societies, education drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion towards

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[11] 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

[12] Ibid, article 17 (1)

[13] Constitution of Kenya., 2010., Government Printer, Nairobi

[14] Ibid, article 43 (1) (f)

[15] Ibid, article 53 (1) (b)

[16] Ibid, article 54 (1) (b)

[17] Ibid, article 55 (a)

[18] Ibid, article 56 (b)

[19] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Education for Sustainable Development' Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[20] World Bank Group., 'Education' Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

peace and prosperity[21]. Education is therefore vital in the quest towards Sustainable Development since it empowers people with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors to live in a sustainable manner for the benefit of the environment, economy, and society[22]. The United Nation's *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*[23] recognises the fundamental role of education in fostering development. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all towards sustainability[24].

Despite its fundamental role in the quest towards Sustainable Development, attaining the human right to education remains a major global challenge. It has been argued that there are prevailing gaps in education all over the world with many children and the youth lacking access to quality education[25]. Further, there are several financial, gender, capacity, and technical among other barriers that prevent many people including vulnerable and marginalized populations from accessing quality education[26]. For example, it has been pointed out that global education systems are not fully inclusive with marginalized groups and minorities including the poor, girls, indigenous communities, persons with disabilities, and people of colour facing discrimination in access to quality education[27]. In addition, millions of learners all over the world are being taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively, express themselves and

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[21] Ibid

[22] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Education for Sustainable Development' Op Cit

[23] 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 08/11/2025)

[24] Ibid

[25] Kuppens. L., 'Quality Education Means Empowerment' Available at https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/quality-education-means-empowerment (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[26] Ibid

[27] 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 08/11/2025)

reach their full potential[28]. Addressing these challenges is crucial towards attaining the human right to education for Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how the right to education can be realised in Africa. The paper argues that education is a key human right in Africa whose attainment is vital in the quest towards Sustainable Development. The paper discusses how education can accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development in Africa. Despite its role in ensuring development, the paper notes that the right to education is yet to be attained in Africa. It argues that the continent faces several barriers that hinder the achievement of the right to education. In particular, the paper notes that culture and indigenous knowledge have been sidelined from education systems in Africa thus undermining the quality and appropriateness of education in the continent. In light of these concerns, the paper examines how culture and indigenous knowledge can be incorporated into school systems in Africa towards fostering the right to education for Sustainable Development.

2.0 The Human Right to Education in Africa: Progress and Challenges

Attaining the human right to education is vital in unlocking Sustainable Development in Africa. According to African Union's *Agenda 2063[29]*, education is a powerful tool and driver in the quest towards development in Africa. Agenda 2063 notes that a key driver of Africa's prosperity 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 engineering[30]. It requires African countries to invest in

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[28] 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 08/11/2025)

[29] 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 08/11/2025)

[30] Ibid

education across all levels including early childhood education to primary, secondary, technical, vocational and higher education for Sustainable Development[31].

Strengthening the right to education is therefore key in achieving the vision of a prosperous Africa as set out under Agenda 2063. Education has been described as a beacon of hope and an engine of progress towards catalysing Africa's development[32]. 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 technology[33]. In the quest towards sustainability in Africa, education provides opportunities for inclusive development and transformative change[34]. If harnessed effectively, education can catalyse socio-economic development, empowering individuals, societies and nations to realize their full potential thus unlocking Sustainable Development in Africa[35]. It has been argued that education empowers individuals, strengthens communities, builds nations, breaks the chains of poverty and lays the foundation for prosperous and equitable societies[36].

From the foregoing, it is evident that fostering the human right to education is crucial in ensuring Sustainable Development in Africa. There has been progress towards promoting the right to education in Africa. For example, it has been observed that Africa has made significant strides the past decades in expanding access to education, with

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[31] Ibid

[32] 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 08/11/2025)

[33] Ibid

[34] 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)

[35] Ibid

[36] 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' Op Cit

primary school completion rates increasing[37]. Further, there has been progress towards empowering girls through education demonstrating the continent's commitment to gender equality[38]. The number of students being enrolled in tertiary institutions is also increasing all over Africa indicating progress towards fostering higher learning opportunities in the continent[39].

However, despite the foregoing efforts, access to quality education remains a challenge in Africa. For example, 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 school[40]. It has been pointed out that poverty is preventing millions of children in Africa from accessing quality education[41]. Further, gender disparities and inequalities are also preventing girls and marginalised groups including indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities from accessing quality education in the continent[42]. In addition, it has been argued that the quality of education in most African countries is still poor when measured in terms of basic infrastructure and learning outcomes[43]. Prevalent and ongoing armed conflicts in Africa are also hindering access to education by forcing children to drop out of school[44].

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[37] Zhang. X., 'Sustainable Development in African countries: evidence from the impacts of education and poverty ratio' Op Cit

[38] Ibid

[39] Ibid

[40] 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 08/11/2025)

[41] Ibid

[42] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/daressalaam/expertise/educationandlifelonglearning#:~:text= Embracing%20lifelong%20learning%2C%20empowers%20individuals,%2C%20innovative%2C%20and%2 0sustainable%20society (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[43] 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 08/11/2025)

[44] United Nations Development Programme., 'Goal 4: Quality Education' Available at https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals/quality-education (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

From the foregoing, it emerges that many educational systems in Africa are struggling with several challenges including inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, and disparities in access, particularly for girls and rural and marginalized communities[45]. In addition to these challenges, African cultures and indigenous knowledge systems are usually excluded from education policies undermining quality education in the continent. It has been argued that the introduction of western education in Africa has undermined traditional African education systems and philosophies which have been practiced in the continent for many centuries[46]. Further, the introduction of western education in Africa has also fueled the idea that western cultures are superior contributing to the deterioration of African cultures and knowledge systems[47]. Most school systems in Africa reflect Euro-centric curricula which alienates African cultures and knowledge systems[48]. Further, millions of students in Africa are taught in European languages including English, French, Spanish and Portuguese[49]. The United Nations notes that due to westernization of education, many learners are taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively, express themselves and reach their full potential[50]. It is estimated that approximately 37 per cent of learners in low- and middle-income countries are not taught in the language that they best speak and understand with this figure rising up to 90 cent of learners in some countries[51].

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[45] Zhang. X., 'Sustainable Development in African countries: evidence from the impacts of education and poverty ratio' Op Cit

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

[47] Ibid

[48] 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 08/11/2025)

[49] Ibid

[50] United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Op Cit

[51] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Make languages count for Sustainable Development' Available at https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/12/imld-2025-cn-en_0.pdf (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

Addressing the foregoing challenges is crucial in fostering the right to education in Africa. In particular, it is imperative to incorporate culture and indigenous knowledge into school systems in Africa towards attaining quality education for Sustainable Development.

3.0 Incorporating Culture and Indigenous Knowledge into School Systems in Africa

Education is a powerful tool that can drive Sustainable Development in Africa. Despite progress being made towards fostering the right to education in Africa, the continent still faces several challenges that undermine the quest towards quality education. Challenges such poverty, poor infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, and marginalization and exclusion of vulnerable populations perpetuate inequalities and hinder the full realization of the right to education as a driver of Sustainable Development in Africa[52]. In addition, westernization of education in Africa has led to the exclusion of African culture and indigenous knowledge systems undermining the quest towards quality, inclusive and appropriate education in Africa[53].

In light of the foregoing, it is imperative to strengthen the right to education in Africa. Governments have been urged to enhance investments in education with emphasis on innovation, science and technology in order to spur Sustainable Development in Africa[54]. Further, there is need to address inequalities and marginalisation which prevent the poor, girls, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and other minorities from accessing quality education in Africa and the rest of the world[55]. Strengthening human, technical, and institutional capacities is also key in promoting the right to education in Africa[56].

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[52] Zhang. X., 'Sustainable Development in African countries: evidence from the impacts of education and poverty ratio' Op Cit

[53] Mart. C.T., 'British colonial Education Policy in Africa' Op Cit

[54] African Union., 'Education, Science & Technology' Available at https://au.int/en/education-science-technology (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[55] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' Op Cit

[56] Ibid

In addition to the foregoing efforts, it is imperative to incorporate culture and indigenous knowledge into school systems in Africa. It has been argued that culture enriches education systems by making their content and context relevant[57]. By incorporating culture into school systems, it is possible to connect learners to their history and heritage, thus giving them a sense of meaning and self-confidence, and nurturing qualities of empathy and critical thinking[58]. Culture is therefore important in fostering the right to education since it instils a sense of belonging, values, ideologies and customs in learners[59]. Incorporating African cultures into school systems is therefore key in strengthening learning outcomes in the continent.

Further, it is imperative to harness indigenous knowledge into school systems in Africa. Before the introduction of western education in the continent, Africa societies had their own indigenous knowledge systems and practices. It has been argued that traditional African education systems and philosophies emphasize core values including cooperation, critical thinking, a sense of community, tolerance and coexistence[60]. It is therefore necessary to reform education systems in Africa and teach Africa's philosophies and promote indigenous knowledge systems towards true and quality education in the continent[61]. There is also need to utilise African languages on school systems. Due to the use of foreign languages, many learners in Africa and all over the world are taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively,

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[57] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Cutting Edge | Culture & Education: A Strategic Investment for Inclusive and Sustainable Development' Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-culture-education-strategic-investment-inclusive-and-sustainable-development#:~:text=Culture%20enriches%20the%20education%20system,notably%20with%20regard%20to%20sustainability. (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[58] Ibid

[59] The Impact of Culture on Education., Available at https://lcps.org.uk/impact-of-culture-on-education/ (Accessed on 08/11/2025)

[60] 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 08/11/2025)

[61] Ibid

express themselves and reach their full potential[62]. Teaching in indigenous and local languages can therefore enhance the quality of education while also ensuring that it fits to local needs and circumstances[63]. Utilising African languages in school systems can therefore strengthen the quality of education in the continent towards realising the human right to education.

4.0 Conclusion

Education is fundamental human right. Fostering the right to education in Africa can spur the continent towards Sustainable Development. It is therefore necessary to address financial, technical, gender, capacity and other barriers which hinder the right to education in Africa[64]. In addition, it is imperative to incorporate culture and indigenous knowledge into school systems in Africa towards quality education[65]. Attaining the human right to education in Africa is therefore a practical dream that must be pursued in the quest towards Sustainable Development.

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[62] United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Op Cit

[63] 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 08/11/2025)

[64] Zhang. X., 'Sustainable Development in African countries: evidence from the impacts of education and poverty ratio' Op Cit

[65] The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

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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

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

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