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Lifelong Learning in Africa - a Contribution to Development

Abstract: The purpose of this short paper is to both highlight Africa's tradition of lifelong learning and comment on the way lifelong learning appears to be positioned in contemporary development discourses for Africa. The argument is that lifelong learning in its current form has failed to capture the imagination of policy-makers in the way required by the multi-dimensional development needs of a continent that is rich in culture and diversity but ravaged by poverty and inequality. The paper starts by reiterating some traditional values attached to African age-related learning, reviews some of the global development agendas for lifelong learning on the continent and refers to selective policy documents to illustrate some tensions between global and local agendas. It concludes with a suggestion that more Africa-centric policies are required, perhaps incorporating a 'capabilities' approach towards lifelong learning.

Key words: African nations, lifelong learning, development, holistic approach.

Introduction

Africa is a vast continent. It is impossible to do justice to its diversity and different histories by reducing it to one generalised description. Nevertheless, in relation to lifelong learning, one can reflect on some general tendencies and practices that have been recorded by a number of African writers (for example Omolewa, 2009), particularly in relation to its Anglophone speaking countries. One of these tendencies is that African nations have a long tradition of practising lifelong learning. This was essentially an oral tradition and dates back to pre-colonial times. But it was nevertheless organised and tied to the levels of responsibility that village communities would associate with the stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood in terms of knowledge and wisdoms required for social cohesion and productivity. Different communities or ethnic groups would foster these values

according to custom and need but learning would be lifelong and life wide. It was holistic in nature but both practical and philosophical.

Learning was often gender specific but prepared participants through apprenticeships for a range of social and professional roles in society, including artisans, philosophers, astronomers, doctors or herbalists. Their learning required not only skilled practical knowledge but also involved understanding the community's history and beliefs and social protocols. There is evidence that such learning produced scientific innovations such as the wheel in Mesopotamia, medicinal herbs and even an observatory in Kenya (Teffo, 2000). It has also been argued that this learning was embedded in value systems that were more likely to privilege the notion of collectivity, rather than individualism which underpins much of western thought. The responsibility towards the collective would encourage commitment to the community, both in terms of the living, the dead and the yet to be born (Ntseane, 2011). Various concepts such as *ubuntu* in South Africa and *botho* in Botswana (roughly translated as humanism, caring and respect for others) are said to reflect the more spiritual nature of learning and living in traditional African contexts. Much of this holistic learning was recorded orally in the form of proverbs, riddles, folk tales and stories and handed down from generation to generation (Preece, 2009). It retains its value today in the form of indigenous knowledge, though such knowledge rarely receives recognition within formal lifelong learning policy literature. Hoppers and Yekhlef (2012) for example, in a recent policy information paper for sustainable development argue for a broader perspective on lifelong learning in Africa which is life-long (relating to different stages of life), life-wide (referring to its multi-dimensional and non-linear nature) and also life-deep (as a spiritual experience) which encompasses "local wisdom and experience" (p. 8). Such advice, however, is overshadowed by an international development agenda that is controlled by agencies external to Africa.

International Development Agendas

African nations, and other states which depend on international development aid, are rarely in control of their own spending plans. Externally imposed conditions for aid distort internal visions for national identity and purpose. Some of the key international players in lifelong learning for Africa are the World Bank, UNESCO and the OECD. The World Bank and OECD tend to favour an economic perspective for lifelong learning, understood primarily in terms of competencies and skills for economic competitiveness. It has, for instance, firm-

ly positioned lifelong learning for developing countries as preparation for the knowledge economy (WB, 2003). UNESCO, underpinned in 1996 by the De Lors Report, promotes a more holistic vision, to emphasise values of democracy and social purpose. Many of its Africa based conferences focus on building a learning society for democratic citizenship and “the valuing of local knowledge talent and wisdom” (UNESCO and MINEDAF, 2002, p. 1).

But for Africa the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) dominate the context in which these key players present their arguments for lifelong learning. The Millennium Development Goals, ratified in 2000 and signed up to by heads of state and international development agencies provided an educational focus on literacy and schooling. Adult education was not a goal. Lifelong learning in subsequent national policy documents, such as the Lesotho Education Sector Strategic Plan (GOL, 2005) thus interpreted lifelong learning simply as ‘post literacy’. Although the draft post-MDG targets, currently under construction, do include the words lifelong learning it is premature to anticipate how the new targets will impact on African development. Nevertheless, much has been written about both the continent’s challenges and opportunities for using a lifelong learning discourse to address those challenges.

African Challenges

Africa has some of the highest levels of poverty, illiteracy and premature mortality rates in the world. Diseases such as HIV and AIDS, TB and malaria are at epidemic proportions with large areas of ecological and political instability (UNESCO, 2006). There have been consistent efforts by academics and policy informants on the continent to broaden the vision for lifelong learning in the context of Africa’s multiple challenges. Economic competitiveness is not the only or highest priority. It has been argued, for instance, that in a context of high mortality, crime, conflict, vast inequalities, environmental degradation and corruption we need learning that promotes peace, ethical responsibility, tolerance and understanding (Torres, 2003; Odora Hoppers, 2006). Poverty, as argued by Sen (1999), for instance can only be addressed through a social perspective that develops capabilities as freedoms to live the life people have reason to value. In other words, capabilities are more than learned skills; they include attitudes and levels of awareness that support the capacity to envision social equality and co-existence. In order to maximise scarce resources and connect policy to the broader social realities of many lives in Africa, it has been argued that the goal of education and lifelong learning should be to develop critical thinkers who can

also draw on traditional culture and values where appropriate (UNESCO, 2006; Hoppers & Yekhlef, 2012).

Lifelong Learning for Africa's Development

There have been various suggestions for linking the concept of lifelong learning more closely to African perspectives and contexts. Mbigi (2005, pp. 141-145), for instance, suggested the four De Lors (1996) pillars could be 'africanised' in order to more closely reflect African value systems so that learning to know can be promoted as 'the capacity to reflect on one's life experiences and use the lessons to create and manage opportunities'; learning to do reflects the notion of apprenticeship while learning to live together could be interpreted through the humanistic notion of *ubuntu*. The fourth pillar, learning to be, relates to the 'multiple intelligences of a given individual' thus reflecting the holistic nature of traditional African ontology. Other ideas have included linking lifelong learning to sustainable development, as proposed by Hoppers and Yekhlef (2012). They argue for a pedagogical approach that facilitates "the convergence of academic knowledge, local wisdom and experience" through "participatory decision making ...[and] community focused learning" (p. 8), once more taking us beyond a purely economic focus for lifelong learning.

The concern for a more holistic approach to lifelong learning, along with the promotion of a spiritual dimension is not solely confined to Africa of course and is increasingly being argued for from around the globe (Torres, 2003; Jarvis, 2007; Arkonada, 2009). An extension of these two ideas was offered by Preece (2014) at a recent ESREA conference on adult education and sustainable development whereby she suggested that the injection of a capabilities perspective might provide a suitable 'steer' for the above debates. Capabilities, defined as educational goals have frequently been promoted in different contexts (for example, Nussbaum, 2006; Walker, 2006), and space does not permit an exposition of these in this short paper. But capabilities, understood as freedoms to function, provide a dimension of learning that enables us to take an ethical stance that also reflects African perspectives for *ubuntu*, spirituality and connectedness in the context of development. Such a capabilities list, for instance, might include the freedom of voice – the freedom to be heard and avoid marginalisation. A second capability would be that of association – the ability to interact with others as interdependent beings. Other capabilities might include that of spirituality or sense of belonging to the earth and beyond and that of critical awareness in order to reflect our ability to deal with the unknowable.

Concluding Remarks

This short paper has argued that African development concerns reflect the need for a lifelong learning agenda that is holistic, broad based and reflects African identities in terms of philosophical tradition but which is realistically embedded in the challenges of today's contemporary world. The continent has broader needs than a purely economic focus, but cannot avoid the challenge of economic competitiveness if it is to be a part of world society. A more ethical developmental stance which looks at the individual in relation to his or her interdependence would support African revivalist perspectives while at the same time equipping the continent with the essential skills, knowledge and understanding for living in a globalised world.

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Celoživotno učenje u Africi: doprinos razvoju

Apstrakt: Svrha ovog rada je da istakne tradiciju celoživotnog učenja u Africi, ali i da se osvrne na poziciju koja mu je namenjena u savremenom diskursu o razvoju Afrike. Iznosi se argument da je celoživotno učenje u svom sadašnjem obliku propustilo da zaintrigira tvorce programa na način kako su to zahtevale višedimenzionalne razvojne potrebe jednog kontinenta sa bogatom kulturom i raznolikošću, a sa druge strane opustošenog siromaštvom i nejednakošću. Rad počinje ponovnim isticanjem nekih tradicionalnih vrednosti koje se vezuju za učenje i starosno doba u Africi, razmatra neke od globalnih razvojnih programa za celoživotno učenje na tom kontinentu i upućuje na određene strateške dokumente sa ciljem prikazivanja izvesnih tenzija između globalnih i lokalnih agendi. Rad se završava sugestijom da su potrebni programi koji se više fokusiraju na Afriku, a eventualno i da se u celoživotno učenje inkorporira pristup kojim se naglašavaju sposobnosti pojedinca.

Ključne reči: afričke nacije, celoživotno učenje, razvoj, holistički pristup.

