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Education for sustainable development in Africa: a critique of regional agendas

Leon Tikly^{1,2}

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Abstract

Education is often perceived in policy agendas as playing a transformative role in realising sustainable development and the SDGs on the continent. The assumption is based, however, on an insufficiently critical understanding of the historical role of education in supporting unsustainable development. The article provides a critical account of the relationship between education policy and sustainable development in Africa as an aspect of the postcolonial condition, i.e. as an aspect of the colonial legacy and of Africa's position in relation to contemporary processes of globalisation. It is argued that if education is to play a transformative role in relation to sustainable development then education policy needs to be fundamentally re-oriented and harnessed to wider processes of economic, cultural and political transformation in the interests of social and environmental justice.

Keywords Sustainable development · Education for sustainable development · Africa · Postcolonial condition

Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
AU	African Union
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
ESD	Education for sustainable development
NEPAD	New Economic Plan for African Development
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
SD	Sustainable development

Introduction

The paper provides a critical analysis of African regional policy agendas relating to education on the continent. Specifically, it will consider the African Union's *Agenda 2063* document (e.g. AUC 2015) which sets out a pan-African vision of transformative sustainable development and the *Continental Education Strategy for Africa* (CESA) (AU 2015) which aims to transform education systems so that they are commensurate with this wider vision. The aim of

this article is to critically consider this strategy. It will do this by analysing regional agendas in relation to the 'post-colonial condition' on the continent. This requires giving consideration to the *longue durée* of development on the continent since colonial times as well as Africa's position on the margins of contemporary processes of globalisation. It is also argued that the postcolonial condition itself needs to be understood both discursively, i.e. in terms of the constitutive effects of different discourses of development on the way that social reality and postcolonial identities are constructed but also materially, as an aspect of the cultural political economy of globalisation.

The view of education policy builds on recent work within the critical tradition (Mundy et al. 2017). At a global scale, this involves drawing attention to 'meta-discourses', or in Carney's (Carney 2008) terms, 'policyscapes' that help to frame regional agendas. In this respect as mentioned, a key point of reference for *Agenda 2063* and CESA is the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regional policy agendas then serve to mediate and reinterpret global policy in relation to regional interests and priorities which are then mediated and reinterpreted at a national level. Following Ball et al. (2012), policy can therefore be understood as a series of socially constructed enactments that span text and practice. This draws attention to the gap between policy intentions on the one hand and what actually goes on at the level of practice on the other hand. It

✉ Leon Tikly
Leon.Tikly@Bristol.ac.uk

¹ University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

² Centre for Education Rights and Transformations, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

also underlines the importance of the agency of policy makers at different scales in enacting policy and the extent to which policy simultaneously shapes and is shaped by social relations including those based on class, race, ethnicity and gender. The article will commence by sketching the main features of regional education policy. It will then critically analyse regional agendas in relation to three overlapping domains of the economy, culture and of the polity.

In developing a critique of *Agenda 2063* and CESA, it is important to be explicit about the normative position on which the critique is based, namely a view of social and environmental justice. This has been set out at length elsewhere (Tikly 2019). In this view, following Sen (2013) and Tikly and Barrett (2011), the role of education systems is to develop the capabilities (opportunity freedoms) of existing and future generations to achieve sustainable livelihoods and well-being within peaceful and democratic societies. This requires taking account of the institutional barriers facing disadvantaged groups in realising valued capabilities and functionings. By institutionalised obstacles, Fraser (2008) draws attention to economic structures that deny access to resources that people need in order to interact with others as peers; institutionalised hierarchies of cultural value that may deny them the requisite standing; and exclusion from the community that is entitled to make justice claims on one another and the procedures that structure public processes of contestation. Recognising issues of environmental justice also requires extending the view of parity of participation to include a consideration of the rights and capabilities of other species and of environmental systems.

Fraser draws attention to three dimensions of social justice, each related to one of the institutional barriers. The first, redistribution, relates to access to different kinds of material resources or to services such as education and health. From the point of view of SD, distributive justice would also need to take account of the way that environmental benefits (in the form of access to natural resources) as well as risks (in the form of the effects of global warming, droughts, famines, pollution, etc.) are distributed. The second of Fraser's dimensions, recognition, means first identifying and then acknowledging the claims of historically marginalised groups in the African context including, for example, women, rural dwellers, victims of HIV/AIDS orphans and vulnerable children, refugees, cultural, linguistic, religious, racial and sexual minorities and indigenous groups. In the context of a transformative SD and ESD, this also means recognising the integrity and the right to flourish other species and ecosystems, a view that is in keeping with many indigenous knowledge systems in Africa that have posited a more organic, symbiotic and custodial relationship between human beings and the natural world (Maware and

Mubaye 2016).¹ Participatory justice includes the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and injustice and to actively participate in decision-making. Importantly, for Fraser, this is a prerequisite for realising issues of redistribution and recognition.²

Education for sustainable development as it is set out in regional agendas

This section provides a brief overview of the two key policy texts to be considered, namely, the *Agenda 2063 Framework Document: The Africa we want* (*Agenda 2063* for short) (AUC 2015) and the *Continental Education Strategy for Africa* (CESA). The documents set out a transformative vision for Sustainable Development (SD) and for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), respectively, linked to a pan-African vision of a united and prosperous Africa. SD and ESD have achieved a hegemonic status as global discourses, thanks to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The two documents can be seen as regional responses to the SDGs. Adopted by the African Union in 2015, *Agenda 2063* sets out an aspirational 50-year programme of action for the continent framed within an over-arching commitment to pan-Africanism, inclusive growth, sustainable development and a vision of an African Renaissance.³ The vision is for 'an integrated, prosperous

¹ For Schlosberg (2007), it is this aspect of recognitional justice that sets his view of environmental justice apart for that of Nussbaum's in that the focus is on the flourishing of whole ecosystems rather than on the rights of individual animals. This also leads to a non-romanticised view of environmental flourishing in that, for example, being food for other living beings might form the part of essence of functioning for some living things.

² It also ties in with Sen's insistence on public participation and informed public dialogue as the basis for adjudication between justice claims. Schlosberg (2007) noting the obvious point that other species or natural systems do not have the same reasoning or communicative capacities to participate in processes of democratic deliberation, nonetheless argues that the capabilities and flourishing of other species and natural systems can and ought to be the subject of public deliberation.

³ The origins of *Agenda 2063* lie in the Golden Jubilee of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) now the African Union (AU). The AU summit tasked the African Union Commission (AUC), supported but the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Planning and Coordinating Agency (NPCA), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to prepare a 50-year continental agenda. This was to be achieved through an extensive consultative process involving a series of meetings across the continent with stakeholders spanning many areas of African society including youth, women, civil society organisations, the diaspora, African think tanks and research institutes, planners, the private sector, religious organisations, the Forum for Former African Heads of State and others. This gave rise to the Aspirations of the African People, the driver of *Agenda 2063*.

and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena' (iv). It is based on a recognition of the enormous wealth of the continent in natural resources and the resilience and cultural resourcefulness of African peoples.

In economic terms, *Agenda 2063* revolves around the vision of a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development. Key to this priority is the eradication of poverty in one generation and building; sharing prosperity through social and economic transformation and with the means and resources to drive its own development; and an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children. This includes sustainable and long-term stewardship of its natural resources. In political terms, *Agenda 2063* calls for an integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism. It also sets out a vision of an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law and a peaceful and secure Africa and Africa as a strong, united and influential global player and partner. In cultural terms, the document aspires towards an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics (AUC 2015).

The *Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025* (CESA) (AU 2015) was developed under the auspices of the African Union. It provides continuity on the central role accorded to education in *Agenda 2063*. Developing the priorities identified by African Ministers of Education set out in the *Kigali Declaration* that fed into the SDG consultation process can also be seen as a regional response to the education SDG. As such it presents an overall vision of African-led ESD and a set of regional priorities for implementing ESD in a way that is consistent with the Pan-African vision of an African Renaissance. Like the *Agenda 2063*, the CESA sets out a series of challenges facing education and these are discussed in more detail in later sections. In tackling these challenges, CESA sets out 12 strategic objectives aimed at revitalization of the teaching profession; expanding access to quality education for all; harnessing the capacity of ICT; encouraging processes of national and regional integration; accelerating gender parity and equity; improving adult and youth literacy; strengthening science and mathematics education; expanding technical and vocational and higher education; promoting peace education; improving the management of education systems; and setting up a coalition of stakeholders to implement policy.

It is instructive to consider how the priorities contained in *Agenda 2063* and in CESA relate to global discourses about sustainable development (SD) and education for sustainable development, respectively. As Blewitt (2018) has noted, global debates about the meaning of SD involve sometimes contradictory discourses linked to differing

starting assumptions and normative frameworks. In this regard, SD can best be understood as an example of a 'floating signifier' (Laclau 2005; Kogl and Kurze 2013). That is to say that what the term has come to signify has shifted over time and in relation to context and is slippery to define. It is also something of a 'metafix' (Lélé 1991) in that it has been perceived to mean 'all things to all people' and has been used to quilt together disparate interests in the field of international development. In the context of *Agenda 2063*, the most obvious discourse is that of pan-Africanism. Here, SD is presented principally in terms of an *African Renaissance* drawing on a long history of pan-Africanism on the continent. ESD is principally understood as a vehicle for promoting African cultures, values and languages. However, the dominant version of SD in *Agenda 2063* is organised around the idea of 'inclusive growth'.

This discourse presents SD principally in economic terms and centres on an ideal of growth that has the effect of reducing absolute poverty and that is achieved through the use of green technologies. The discourse follows a trajectory from previous hegemonic development discourses including modernisation theory and neoliberalism and includes ideas from environmental economics. The dominant view of ESD linked to this discourse is one that sees education principally in terms of producing human capital. *Agenda 2063* also alludes to discourses on human rights in which SD is seen mainly in relation to social development and the protection and advancement of human rights. ESD in this discourse is principally concerned with expanding the right to a good quality education and linked to the realisation of the education SDG (SDG4). Finally, there is evidence of the impact of environmentalism and this finds expression in concerns about 'environmental protection'. Globally, these are often associated with forms of environmental education (Wals and Geke 2010) although as we will see, references to environmental education are not evident in the CESA.

Interpreting regional policy in relation to the postcolonial condition

In this section, an attempt will be made to explore education's role in relation to the three inter-related institutional domains of the economy, culture and the polity. Following Walby (2009), these are conceived as complex institutional domains. Development is seen as a consequence of the co-evolution of these domains—there is no simple causal impact on one domain over the rest (e.g. the economic domain over the other two) and change is multi-rather than unidirectional in nature. These three domains have been identified as being particularly relevant for capturing the complexity of the postcolonial condition in education. Importantly, for our purposes whilst the environmental

domain is also highly significant this is not included as a distinct focus for analysis in its own right. This is not to elide the importance of the environmental domain. Rather, it is to acknowledge that for the purposes of the analysis below, environmental concerns are considered to permeate each of the three identified domains and that the influence of the education policy—and indeed of all areas of policy on the environmental domain is mediated via its impact on the economic, cultural and political domains. Cutting across each domain are regimes of inequality including those around class, race, gender, urban/rural location, etc. Like domains, these are conceived as complex, intersecting systems (Walby 2009).

Each of the following sections begins with an overview of how each domain is conceptualised in relation to the wider understanding of the postcolonial condition. Attention will then turn to sketching out in broad terms how each domain has developed since colonial times and how education has been implicated in these developments. This will provide a basis for critically considering how regional agendas conceive of sustainable development in relation to each domain including the role of education. The key argument advanced is that the dominant development trajectory has been along the lines of unsustainable development when considered in relation to social and environmental justice and that education has been deeply implicated in this trajectory. It will also be argued that whilst the *Agenda 2063* and CESA go some way towards setting out transformative, Africa-led agenda for SD and ESD, they are limited by the predominance of narrow instrumentalist concerns linked to global and indigent elite interests.

Education and the economic domain

The economic domain is conceived as a system of relations, institutions and processes concerned with the production, consumption, distribution, and circulation of goods and services to support human life whilst protecting the planet. It therefore includes not only marketized activities, but also domestic labour, state welfare and predominantly ‘social’ institutions like education. It is also an institutional domain that is implicated in multiple regimes of inequality including not only class but inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity and urban/rural location. Space does not allow for anything other than a brief sketch of how the economic domain has developed since colonial times. It is argued that the current path dependency of African economies is based largely on the extraction of raw materials and that this path dependency is deeply entrenched and linked to economic interests that can be traced back to colonial times. European colonialism from the sixteenth century onwards was based largely on the extraction of raw materials including agricultural products and minerals from the global South

which were then converted into commodities in the global North and sold back to the global South often at a profit (see for example Rodney 1973; Hoogvelt 1997; Akyeampong et al. 2014). A key motive for European colonisation of Africa was economic and political competition between the European powers which became known as the ‘scramble for Africa’. The colonial economy was also based on the extraction of an estimated 12 to 15 million Africans in the form of the transatlantic slave trade. Whilst the slave trade benefitted development in the America’s it led to a huge loss of people and skills and played a significant role in holding back development on the African continent (Akyeampong et al. 2014; Eltis and Richardson 2008).

Even after independence, as Nkrumah (1966) pointed out in his seminal account of neo-colonialism, economic relationships between Africa and the countries of the former metropole continued to be based on the extraction of raw materials to support industrialisation in the global North. The emergence of neoliberalism as a global wave from the late 1970s had a major re-territorialising effect on Africa’s relations with the global economy. The introduction of Stabilisation and Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) by the major financial institutions were a response to the debt crisis of the 1970s (Robertson et al. 2007). They included a range of measures related to fiscal austerity, deregulating the economy and opening it up to international competition, rolling back the ambit of the state in financing public services and encouraging privatisation. The impact of SAPS were devastating in terms of human development and led to the so-called lost decades of development. The call for ‘adjustment with a human face’ (Robertson et al. 2007) represented a challenge to the international financial institutions whose policies, despite never calling explicitly for budget cuts to health and education, had nonetheless pushed many low-income countries (as well as those in the ‘north’) into prioritising debt repayments over social spending.

As Harvey (2011) has argued, the development of neo-liberalism since the 1970s was a consequence of capitalist over-accumulation in the global North and the need to restore the profitability of capital. The major political transformations in the former Soviet Union and in China also served to release hitherto unavailable assets into the global economy as has unprecedented growth in South East Asia in the wake of the 2007 shock. These developments are associated with changes in the locus of power and influence within the global economy. Over-accumulation of capital has contributed to a ‘revitalisation of primitive accumulation’ (Harvey 2003) (that is accumulation that is based on the extraction of primary commodities and on cheap labour) as a way of increasing the profitability of capital. It is this turn to primitive accumulation together with concerns about energy and food security in China, the US and elsewhere that lies behind the ‘new scramble for Africa’ (Ayers 2013; Mohan

2013). This has involved investing Western based capital and to a lesser extent capital linked to China and the other rising powers in extractive mining industries and agriculture.

Thus whilst as is suggested in the *Agenda 2063*, the new scramble for Africa has coincided with a period of economic growth especially following the 2007 financial crisis, it has not led to sizeable gains for ordinary Africans because as Ferguson (2006) has pointed out, the vast majority of this growth has been through foreign investment and has occurred in enclaves and have remained shut off from local communities who have not benefited directly. It has also happened in the form of land grabs in which vast areas of land have been effectively privatised and sold off to foreign interests (see also Ayers 2013) and which has had dire consequences for human and environmental development as noted in the *Agenda 2063*. China has also exported large numbers of labourers to work on agricultural and infrastructure projects in Africa such that in many cases, new projects have often not led to increased opportunities for the employment of Africans themselves (Mohan 2013).

The devastating social and environmental consequences of extractive economic practices noted in the *Agenda 2063* can also be traced back to colonial times. The introduction of mining under colonialism and the migratory system resulted in long periods of absence for African men. This in turn had the effect of disrupting family and kinship arrangements, diminishing men's roles in resource management and hugely increasing the workload of African women. As economic historians have argued (see for example Akyeampong et al. 2014; Ghai 1992), changes in the economy brought about by colonialism had a significant impact on environmental degradation and disrupted the long-established systems of resource management which had relied on shifting cultivation and nomadic pastoralism. As noted in the *Agenda 2063*, the continent continues to face huge environmental challenges from drought to deforestation to soil erosion, desertification, pollution and toxic waste dumping. A very real manifestation of the impact of the new scramble for Africa coupled with processes of global warming has been the speeding up of processes of environmental degradation on the continent (Ayers 2013). Furthermore, in spite of agreements made in the UN Stockholm Declaration or at the Basel Convention, practices such as the dumping of over five hundred tons of toxic waste in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire in 2006—coined as 'toxic colonialism' by Greenpeace—assumes disproportionate risks between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries (Pratt 2011). For some exponents of neoliberalism, environmental degradation is seen as a form of collateral damage (Shiva 2000, p. 65). In the meantime, a lack of investment in renewable sources of energy in which Africa is abundant (from solar power to biofuel) has increased dependency on fossil fuels which is contributing heavily to processes of deforestation.

To some extent, *Agenda 2063* acknowledges many of the tensions and contradictions identified above. It acknowledges, for example, that whilst there has been unprecedented growth on the continent, this growth has been linked to the prevalence of extractive economic policies and has been distributed unevenly within and between countries (AUC 2015, p. 31). It also notes the damaging environmental consequences of untrammelled growth based on extractive practices. In setting out a vision for inclusive green growth, *Agenda 2063* argues for a fairer distribution of the benefits of economic growth and a greening of the economy. In order to achieve these goals, it proposes a raft of measures including mobilising domestic resource as a means to reduce poverty and to improve people's livelihoods, modernise the agricultural sector whilst diversifying the economy including developing the service sector and encouraging industrialization based on science, technology and innovation. Education is implicated as playing a crucial role in this respect although as we will see, this has contradictory implications.

There is little mention in the document, however, of the practical means by which these policies will be achieved and by which leaders may be held to account. Missing from the analysis contained in the *Agenda 2063* is a recognition of the indigenous as well as foreign interests that have been served through the predominance of different kinds of extractive practices. Thus, whilst under colonialism it was the mercantile classes within the colonial powers that benefited most from the extraction of raw materials from Africa, in the post-independence period indigenous elites have also benefitted through their access to state power and capital. In brief, there are key tensions in *Agenda 2063* between the idea of inclusive, green growth as postulated in the document on the one hand and the predominance of practices and related interests linked to neoliberal policies and the maintenance of extractive practices on the other hand.

In this respect, it is important to recognise that the idea of inclusive growth is itself contested between more market-led, neoliberal approaches such as postulated by the World Bank (e.g. Ianchovichina and Lundstrom 2009) in which poverty alleviation is seen as a consequence of the trickle-down effect and ideas in which the state has greater role in redistributing wealth (UNDP 2017). This tension is present in *Agenda 2063* although it is arguably the neo-liberal version that predominates and this is reflected, for example, in the advocacy for privatisation in education (below). Also missing from *Agenda 2063* is reference to the critique of the very idea of growth by environmentalists who have instead argued for ideas of degrowth (Latouche 2010) to prosperity without growth (Jackson 2016) or post-growth (Blewitt 2018) on the basis that natural resources are limited and the damage that growth under has historically wrought on natural systems.

Regional education policy and the economic domain

There are two main ways in which education can be said to relate to the economic domain, namely the links between education and the skills and competencies required for economic development on the one hand and in the way that education is provided and funded on the other hand. Starting with the former, colonial education policy on the African continent was driven by a complex mixture of differing colonial interests and motives, as historians have made clear (see for example Mangan 1988; Altbach and Kelly 1978). It is also important to take account of differences between the colonial powers in the way that colonial education was conceived in relation to the broader ‘civilising mission’ (White 1996). A key rationale, for the introduction of forms of mass education under colonialism, however, was economic. In all cases, access to education was not universal and was for most learners limited to a few years of basic education with very limited access indeed to secondary education. In both cases too there was limited access to secondary education as a means to develop a small cadre of Africans who could staff the colonial administrations and provide a point of contact with ordinary Africans.

Colonial education can be said to have had both a positive and a negative correspondence with the economic domain under colonialism. For example, whilst colonial education policy was geared towards supporting the rural economy, the reality was a loss of rural livelihoods for Africans in the context of mass urbanisation. In the run-up to independence, there was also increasing resentment on the part of Africans towards an agriculturally and vocationally oriented education and growing demands for an expansion of secondary education which was associated with an elite position in the colonial administration. The elitist nature of education has persisted in the postcolonial period. Indeed, it has been a defining characteristic of the path dependency adopted by African education systems that until relatively recently they have been characterised by low levels of access for the poorest, outmoded, content-driven curricula and assessment systems that are both cognitively and linguistically demanding and that have played a strong filtering role in limiting access to higher levels of education.

Two key discourses were key in defining education policy across the postcolonial world in the immediate post-independence period. Besides modernisation theory (above) which identified education as a key institution for developing the skills required for a modern economy, the other was human capital theory originally developed by Theodore Schultz (1961). The latter has proved durable although it has changed in form and emphasis over the years (Robertson et al. 2007) and is still evident in regional agendas. During the 1960s and 1970s it was associated with modernisation

theory, in the 1980s with the development of rates of return analysis (below) and from the 1990s with the role of education in poverty reduction and subsequently in promoting inclusive growth and the knowledge economy. Regional policy continues to be heavily influenced by both of these discourses. As noted, education is principally seen in terms of providing the human capital required to modernise the economy and to develop knowledge economies.

This belief, although still very popular amongst mainstream economists and policy makers has been subject to sustained criticism. Further, as has been extensively argued elsewhere (e.g. Tikly 2003; Robertson et al. 2007), human capital theory is based on an idealised view of the role of education as a panacea for economic development. A linear relationship between the development of skills and economic growth is often assumed. This fails to take account of the effects of economic crisis in shaping the ability of education systems to function effectively and to provide the skills actually required by economies (for example, as discussed, neoliberal responses to economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s led to a reduction in investments in social institutions such as education). Similar arguments can be made about the possibility of education systems to produce the so-called ‘green skills’ that can transform economies as the greening of the economy relies fundamentally on changes in the nature of production processes themselves (McGrath and Powell 2016).

Closely linked to human capital theory is the ideas that education can contribute to the development of knowledge economies. Ideas about the knowledge economy which are not new to the continent have also been subject to critique. Resting on the four pillars of education and training, the development of an information infrastructure, providing an economic and institutional regime to support knowledge flows and supporting innovation systems, the idea of the knowledge economy has been advocated by the World Bank since the 1990s (Robertson et al. 2007). Policies linked to the idea of the knowledge economy find prominent expression in the education and training policies of several African countries including, for instance, Rwanda and Tanzania (Tikly et al. 2003). However, the ideal of a knowledge economy stands in stark contrast to the realities faced by millions of Africans relying on meagre incomes obtained from subsistence agriculture and the informal economy. As has been argued elsewhere, whilst the idea of a knowledge economy is intuitively appealing to policy makers, it can often operate rhetorically as a panacea for solving economic crisis that has its roots in Africa’s position in relation to the global economy and unequal social relations of production.

Ideas about the knowledge economy lead to the emphasis in CESA on the instrumental aspects of schooling and especially science and mathematics education, the development of higher order technical and vocational skills and the role

of higher education in supporting innovation and enterprise. However, as has been recently argued with respect to STEM education in Africa, developing creativity, problem-solving and other kinds of skills necessary for innovation and enterprise also involves an emphasis on the creative arts and humanities as well as science and mathematics (Tikly et al. 2018). At a more fundamental level, only emphasising those skills that are needed to promote economic growth leads to a narrow instrumental view of education. For economists such as Amartya Sen for example, growth, whilst important, is a means to achieving well-being and realising human freedom rather than an end in itself (Sen 1999). In this case, the role of education is perceived more broadly as developing capabilities (opportunity freedoms) that lead to valued functionings (beings and doings) (Tikly and Barrett 2011). This in turn requires exposure to a full and balanced curriculum that can lead to the development of a full range of cognitive, affective and creative capabilities required to support sustainable livelihoods and well-being. Importantly, given the recognition of environmental crisis in Agenda 2063, there is a need to develop the capabilities of learners through environmental education and forms of transformative learning to engage in transformational change in their communities (e.g. Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2017). These concerns are totally absent from CESA.

In relation to the second main aspect of the education/economy relationship, namely how education should be funded, CESA contains ambitious targets for the education sector. The document argues for an expansion of access at all levels of schooling including for historically marginalised groups such as rural dwellers and girls as a means for tackling poverty and inequality. CESA argues for an increase in the basic education cycle from 6 to 9 years so as to encompass lower secondary school.⁴ The expansion envisaged has major implications for the funding of education. UNESCO estimates that an additional 17 million teachers will need to be recruited across the continent by 2030 to meet the envisaged expansion in learner numbers. There is a need also to focus on the professional development of teachers and the provision of teaching and learning materials including textbooks. Research has also revealed the shortage of basic lab equipment for the teaching of science in secondary schools which is a major barrier to learning STEM-related skills (see below). Expanding education will also involve a large investment in infrastructure including building tens of thousands of additional classrooms and investing in sanitary facilities

⁴ Only a third of countries in sub-Saharan Africa currently guarantee this compared to 64% of countries globally. Currently, 21% of primary school age children, 36% of lower secondary school age adolescents and 57% of upper secondary school age youth in Africa are not enrolled (UNESCO 2017).

(UNESCO 2017).⁵ Another factor affecting health is the lack of drinking water with over half of all primary schools in Africa not having access to any drinking water. A key priority in CESA is the greater use of ICT to support learning in schools. However, the majority of schools in the region report no access to electricity with more than 95% of schools not having access in many countries. Unsurprisingly, this limits the possibilities for using ICTs in education except for in the most advantaged state and private schools. This includes computers but also older ICTs such as radios and televisions (see Footnote 4). The vast majority of schools are also without reliable internet connectivity, specially at primary school level and in the rural areas (see Footnote 5) (UNESCO 2017). At present, patterns of government funding for schools are highly unequal with implications for distributive justice and for the principle of inclusion.⁶

Although the objectives for CESA have not been costed (see Footnote 6), UNESCO's costing estimates and spending projections to 2030 for the achievement of education targets suggest that, on average, countries will need to have increased spending on pre-primary, primary and secondary education from 3.5 to 6.3% of GDP between 2012 and 2030 (UNESCO 2013). In the majority of countries in SSA, the costs will need to triple as a percentage of GDP in order to expand access of education to all including the most marginalised groups. This means that funding the proposals in CESA is likely to remain heavily dependent on donors.⁷ The reliance of African governments on donor funding, however, provides a source of contradiction and tension in regional agendas. This is partly on account of the vagaries of levels of donor funding which can fluctuate, making it difficult for governments to plan ahead. Further, funding is linked to diverse donor priorities with implications for the coherence of the system as a whole. Part of the reason for this is that the aid regime as a whole reflects in large measure the geopolitical interests of donors and tends to be concentrated in countries that serve these interests.

In meeting the above challenges, CESA also advocates the use of public private partnerships in the provision of schooling it will be suggested that CESA contains contradictory messages concerning the role of the state in the

⁵ In many cases, girls have to share toilets with boys which has implications for the safety, health and dignity of girls, especially after the onset of puberty and is one cause of girls dropping out from schools (UNESCO 2017).

⁶ One aspect of this is the skewing of education budgets towards secondary and higher education.

⁷ Approximately 20% of total public expenditure on education came from donors although there has been a decline in donor funding, particularly for primary education (Steer and Smith 2015). UNESCO has estimated that donor financing for basic and secondary education will need to increase seven fold in order to fill the funding gap left by shortfalls in government expenditure.

provision of schooling. Parents/communities have historically had to contribute to the costs of schooling. It is estimated that across SSA, households currently contribute 33% of total domestic public spending on education at primary and 68% at the lower secondary level. The amount of household expenditure on schooling increases in countries with higher numbers of private schools which also has implications for equity (below). Private schools were present under colonialism, often serving the children of European settlers and indigenous elites. They were often allowed to flourish in the postcolonial era, providing a key institution for the reproduction of the class privilege enjoyed by indigenous elites. As Ilon (1994) points out, as part of structural adjustment lending, policies supporting private schools and the introduction of user fees were introduced by many governments as part of a hollowing out of state provision.

This led to middle class ‘flight’ from the system which in turn led to an increasing reluctance on the part of this group to pay taxes to support state schools. The consequence was a decline in the quality of government schools which in turn impacted negatively on enrolments. More recently, the privatisation agenda with the active backing of Western governments has led to the proliferation of low-fee private schools targeted at low-income families. Virtually, the entire basic education system in Liberia, for example, has been outsourced to chains of foreign owned private providers. Available evidence is mixed concerning the impact of low-fee private schools on learning outcomes in Africa and elsewhere (Day et al. 2014; Verger et al. 2016) and these schools often remain out of reach for the poorest. The unregulated expansion in the number of private providers has exacerbated the already fragmented and incoherent nature of many African education systems.

According to Ilon’s writing as she was in the 1990s and in the aftermath of the introduction of SAPs policies, ‘a national system of schooling is likely to give way to local systems for the poor and global systems for the rich’ (p. 99). Within this highly differentiated environment, a top tier will benefit from a private education that will make them globally competitive; a middle tier will receive a ‘good’ but not ‘world class’ education, whilst the majority, third tier, will have a local, state education that will make them ‘marginally competitive for low-skill jobs’ (p. 102). In very large measure, Ilon’s predictions have been realised although with the caveat that millions of children on the continent still have no access to any form of education at all. It can be argued that this educational scenario, whilst having a negative correspondence with the longer-term aspirations for SD contained in *Agenda 2063*, actually enjoys a positive correspondence with the existing system of global capitalism in which African elites have limited access to economic opportunities and resources but the majority can expect a lifetime of poverty in the rural and urban areas with limited opportunities on

the margins of the economy punctuated by long period of unemployment.

An alternative to privatisation, as Lewin has argued, is financing schooling through progressive forms of taxation which remains one of the surest ways to ensure access to a good quality education in highly unequal societies (Lewin 2018) although this in turn relies on reforms to the tax system and improvements in the efficiency of tax collection. There are, however, other areas of the budget such as military spending which has increased in many African countries over the past 10 years. As Lewin (2018) has argued, reduction in military spending and a subsequent increase in educational spending could be seen in terms of a peace dividend and could make a significant contribution to educational finance if governments chose to deploy resources in this way. Further, the cost for donors to meet their obligations for funding SDG4 whilst appearing large overall is equal to just 8 days of annual global military expenditure, which totalled US \$1.75 trillion in 2013 (UNESCO 2019).

Education and the cultural domain

The cultural domain is concerned primarily with institutions that are responsible for producing and reproducing systems of signification and meaning including those of language, religion/morality and knowledge itself including western and indigenous forms of knowledge. These include organisations in civil society including the mass media, religious organisations, museums and traditional authorities. Educational institutions are deeply implicated in the cultural domain. Taken together, cultural systems of signification and meaning are constitutive of individual and group identities. The cultural domain is also deeply implicated it will be argued in pedagogy both in terms of the relationship between the content of the curriculum and the cultural backgrounds of learners and the role of language in the classroom as a way of mediating the teaching and learning process.

The cultural basis of colonial rule

At a discursive level, a key rationale for colonialism was in terms of the so-called ‘civilising mission’ of the white man (sic). Underpinning this view, however, lays different explanations. Some of these were founded on a reading of the bible and particularly the old testament in which Africans are portrayed as heathens and as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’. This particular reading of the old testament was influential, for example, in legitimising apartheid in South Africa (Tikly 1994). Also influential were changing discourses around race, nation and culture that assumed the biological and cultural inferiority of the non-European ‘other’. In the context of the growth of the Eugenics movement in the late nineteenth century, the inferiority

of Africans was underpinned by a virulent scientific racism that posited a hierarchy between the races with white, aristocratic Europeans at the top and Africans at the bottom of the hierarchy (Gould 1996; Loomba 2005). As Williams and Young (2009) have argued, in the lead up to independence, the civilising mission of whites was increasingly articulated with a modernist view of progress in which educated, African elites were seen as indigenous agents of modernity.

This view of progress provided a source of contradiction with the virulent forms of religious, racial and cultural racism with which it co-evolved. As Franz Fanon along with many other anti-colonial activists and advocates of Pan-Africanism have pointed out, this has had a long-lasting, negative effect on the African psyche, leading to a situation where Africans have at times rejected their own cultural values in favour of European ones and, so it is argued, have been complicit in their own subjugation (see for example Fanon 1961, 1986). Discourses about ‘race’ were also central to emerging ideas about ‘development’. Whereas classical colonialism was premised on the view that although the ‘natives’ could be ‘civilised’ to some degree, they could never achieve equality with the West, in ‘development’ discourse, it became possible for underdeveloped regions and populations to evolve into developed ones. This did not mean, however, that the previously colonised were now seen as cultural ‘equals’ with the West, at least until they had become more ‘westernised’ (Rist 1997).

Regional agendas, education and the possibilities for an African cultural renaissance

The pan-African influence in the *Agenda 2063* is perhaps most evident in relation to discussions about the cultural domain. As the *Agenda 2063* notes, education has historically been a key institution for the imposition of Western cultural hegemony. Thus, overall the colonial curriculum introduced a Western *episteme* (ground base of knowledge) which differed considerably from indigenous knowledge systems but also from other forms of education in Africa such as Qur’anic education (Launey 2016). Similarly, in relation to assessment, the introduction of competitive examinations in the context of a highly selective education system stood in contrast to the role of assessment in traditional African education which focused on demonstrating relevant knowledge and skills on the job to one’s elders and peers (Rodney 1973). In brief, at a cultural level, education was complicit in the spreading of a Western views of modernity that were seen as superior both to African cultures and religions and to Islam which had been long established on the continent thanks to earlier waves of globalisation.

Where the *Agenda 2063* is less explicit is in identifying the role of Western education in the process of elite formation. As noted above, the French approach was more

assimilationist in its orientation towards education. A key component of the approach was the use of French as the medium of instruction at all levels of the education system. Whilst there was an emphasis on a curriculum more suited to the rural areas at primary level, there existed a stronger emphasis on the ‘formation’ of African elites into French culture through secondary and latterly tertiary education (from the turn of the twentieth century up to independence this policy became one of ‘association’ aimed explicitly at developing modern African elites who could assume leadership roles albeit in the French image). The British by way of contrast, explicitly pursued a policy of ‘adapted education’. This meant teaching in the mother tongue at primary level and a curriculum ‘adapted to the mentality, aptitudes, occupations and traditions of the various peoples’ and particularly focused on developing agricultural and other skills suited to life in the rural areas (White 1996, p. 19) but promoting English at secondary and tertiary level.

The Eurocentric and elitist nature of colonial schooling has proved remarkably enduring. The advent of modernisation theory continued to equate good quality education with a Western view of modernity and this continued to imply a Western curriculum. Interestingly, the *Agenda 2063* advocates a target that ‘at least 80 per cent of content in educational curriculum is on indigenous African culture, values and language targeting primary and secondary schools by 2030’ (AUC 2015, p. 157). This is not reflected in the more conservative CESA document, however, where, as we have seen, the emphasis is on science and mathematics with no mention of the development of indigenous knowledge in the strategic objectives.

The above discussion suggests a potentially pivotal role for education in developing contemporary understanding of African cultures and languages in a way that recognises the enormous cultural resources of the continent without falling into a naïve relativism about the effects of different cultural traditions and the constantly emergent and hybrid nature of African cultural forms and identities. It is also useful for framing contemporary debates including those around ‘decolonising the curriculum’. Further, the discussion suggests an important role for universities in re-orienting research on the continent to focus on African development which it has been suggested elsewhere should lie at the heart of the African Renaissance project (Tikly 2003). Rather, the emphasis in CESA is on the role of universities in supporting economic development through promoting science and mathematics, innovation and enterprise without problematising the cultural basis of the curriculum.

CESA is also silent on the language question except in relation to the early years. The pattern of early exit from the mother tongue (i.e. a subtractive bilingual approach) is very widespread. It reflects the view amongst many parents and policy makers that a good quality education means

learning in a European language and the association particularly between competence in English and access to elite jobs (Trudell 2009). This is despite the evidence that learning in the mother tongue for at least eight years and learning a global language as a second language (i.e. an additive bilingual model) is far more effective for conceptual and linguistic development, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. Heugh, 2005). A key effect of these omissions is to continue to reinforce a separation between predominantly Western-oriented elites, fluent in European languages who reside largely in the urban areas and the urban and rural poor who have not been Westernised to the same extent.

Education and the political domain

The understanding of the political domain is more expansive than is usually the case in the educational literature in which the political domain is often reduced to a consideration of the role of the state in education policy. Rather, the present account starts from a broader view of ‘polity’ as including not just a consideration of the institutions that comprise the postcolonial state in Africa but those that comprise civil society. Included in the understanding of civil society are organisations and individuals that represent distinct economic, political and religious/cultural interests that lie outside of the gambit of the state and at times have a contradictory relationship with the state. In the African context, these include religious organisations, the private sector and NGOs for example. Also central to an understanding of the polity is the role of violence. The importance of violence for people’s well-being, for regimes of inequality, and for other institutional domains, is much underestimated in social theory and is frequently rendered invisible. This is despite the regulation and deployment of violence ‘being part of the constitution of social order, complex inequalities and globalisation’ (Walby 2009, p. 190).

Colonialism, education and the polity

Global discourses relating to politics and good governance often fail to take account of the relative newness of African states and their difficult birth as part of the ‘scramble for Africa’ (above). At a political level, European colonialism resulted in the introduction of highly centralised and authoritarian state structures which were intended to serve the interests of the colonisers and did not acknowledge some of the complexities of incorporating into one territory of diverse ethnic groups and in some instances the challenges involved in governing vast, sparsely populated swathes of land given limited governmental capacities (Herbst 2000).

Indigenous elites were assimilated into these existing structures. As Mamdani (1996) has cogently argued, this led to an increasing bifurcation between urban elites subject to the power of the colonial state and rural dwellers who were still subject to traditional forms of authority—a bifurcation that is still evident in the postcolonial era between ‘citizens’ of the modern state and ‘subjects’ of more traditional forms of authority. The difficulties in instituting democratic rule and the use of the state to advance the interests of some ethnic groups at the expense of others can, according to Mamdani, be traced back to this dynamic.

Although the use of violence pre-dates the colonial encounter, colonialism was itself premised on violence, whether it was the violent acquisition of territories, the forced removal of communities from their lands and livelihoods, the violence of slavery and of indentured servitude, the violent suppression of rebellion or the psychological trauma caused by the effects of institutionalised racism. The cold war fermented state-sponsored violence through its role in propping up corrupt and often ethnically exclusive regimes promoting inter-ethnic conflict over land and resources. Neoliberalism has fueled inequalities and in turn contributed to conflict through the hollowing out of the state which has reduced the capacity of the state to prevent violence. It is in this context that the *Agenda 2063* proposes a stronger role for the state in dealing with violence. However, this role is, in accordance with the good governance agenda, seen principally in terms of managing community-based conflict through sound institutional frameworks. It does not address the fundamentally political nature of violence and the extent to which in the postcolonial world, violence is embedded in the nature of the state and linked to processes of globalisation.

Once again, education policy can be seen as being complicit at a number of levels in the development of contemporary forms of the state but has been contradictory in its effects. Highly centralised, bureaucratic and undemocratic systems of education were introduced under colonial rule. For religious bodies, having influence over the education system was considered key for achieving their proselytising aims. They played a powerful role in spreading Christian and Islamic beliefs, often operating in antagonism with indigenous belief systems. Islamic and Christian-run schools also operated quite different forms of pedagogy and at a cultural level projected alternative views of modernity. The churches, often vied with each other for control over the education system. They sometimes took differing positions either in support of the colonial administration or against it in the context of struggles for national independence and in their relationship to postcolonial governments. In the period following independence, churches were often allowed to maintain their role as a provider of education and comprise a significant

proportion of state-aided and independent secondary and primary schools in many African countries.

Nonetheless, at a general level, education under colonial education acted as a socialisation mechanism with the aim of rendering the colonised economically useful and politically docile (Rodney 1973). In this respect, the expansion of secondary and tertiary education opportunities whilst important for providing the skills required to run the colonial administration was also contradictory for the wider colonial project because it had the unintended consequence of developing a cadre of Africans some of whom would go on to lead national struggles for independence. During the struggles for national liberation from colonial rule on the continent, liberation movements emerged from within civil society as a direct political and military challenge to White supremacy. In some instances, they had an explicit educational agenda.⁸ For the most part, however, once national liberation was achieved, the education systems often reverted back to the path dependency of elitist models of education established under colonialism. For those with access, education has continued to play a socialising role in the post-independence era. Education systems have remained highly centralised until relatively recently. Schools are also highly authoritarian places in Africa as elsewhere. This is demonstrated in the prevalence of formalistic, teacher-centred approaches to delivering the curriculum, the often conservative nature of the curriculum itself and the lack of opportunity for student and teacher voice at an organisational level (Davies 2008).

In relation to the vision of social and environmental justice offered earlier, there is an important role for education in promoting democratic citizenship. CESA also makes a call for an expansion of citizenship education (although there is little indication on what the content of such an education might entail). Neither does the *Agenda 2063* or CESA acknowledge the role of institutions such as the education system in perpetuating violence. Colonial education was complicit in perpetrating violence through a number of mechanisms that have remained remarkably obdurate. For example, the use of corporal punishment which was a

hallmark of colonial education remains widespread despite the efforts of some governments driven by human rights concerns to outlaw its use. Gendered, sexualised violence is also widespread in many education systems (Leach 2004). From the colonial period, the implicit denigration and belittling of indigenous cultures, languages and forms of knowledge can be seen as a form of epistemic violence. Education since colonial times has also fueled ethnically based violence through restricting access to education for some groups.

As commentators have noted, education has a Janus face with respect to conflict (Davies 2004; Bush and Salterelli 2000). It is complicit in perpetuating inequalities in access that can fuel violence and has been used by governments and civil society political projects to further their political ends. The other face is education's potential role in peace building through forms of peace education. Peace education has long been advocated as part of a rights-based approach to education. The CESA specifically mentions peace education as a means for preventing conflict. However, as Bush and Salterelli and others have noted, whilst peace education can play a positive effect in preventing violence it can only be part of a wider set of initiatives aimed at addressing the roots of conflict. It also needs to be linked to efforts to transform education systems themselves away from incubators of different forms of violence including corporal punishment, sexualised violence and epistemic violence.

There are other silences too linked to the social domain such as the increasing mobility of youth as a consequence of poverty and conflict. It might be expected for example, from a rights-based perspective, that a regional agenda would be well placed to tackle issues of transnational migration but there is a silence around these issues. Rather, the focus is on the development of continental and sub-regional integration schemes as a means to promote the mobility of students and workers, i.e. as a contribution to the mobility of human capital. Whilst this is important in its own right, the emphasis is on economic factors rather than on finding regional solutions to tackling the humanitarian crisis brought on by war, conflict and poverty.

Western-inspired neo-liberal reforms have also been deeply implicated in changing patterns of governance of education. A major implication of neo-liberal inspired reform has been a 'hollowing out' (Ferguson 2006) of the state in Africa. That is to say that whereas states in the post-independence era were seen as the main vehicles for development and were often characterised by assertive Africa-led leadership, this has been increasingly challenged under neoliberalism. One has been the increasing fragmentation of education systems as a consequence of an increasing role for non-state actors and a lack of regulation and the other has been an increasing dependency on donors at the expense of indigenously driven policy agendas. This process of hollowing out has also exacerbated rather than easing the problems

⁸ The African National Congress (ANC) and Black Consciousness movements in South Africa along with the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), for instance had strong educational agendas (Tikly 1994). The ANC, for example, organised its own school on land donated by the Tanzanian government in the early 1980s based on a vision of an alternative to Bantu education whilst Steve Biko as a figurehead of the Black Consciousness movement wrote extensively about education as a means to liberate the Black mind from the effects of apartheid and racism (Biko 1978). The Tanzania African National Union (later Chama Cha Mapinduzi) in Tanzania launched an ambitious adult literacy programme linked to a vision of Ujaama (African socialism) that was highly successful in eradicating illiteracy in the early years following independence. The relationship between literacy and rural development is noted in CESA.

of the so-called ‘failed states’ in which warlords and bandits often assumed the role of governing hard to govern areas (Herbst 2000).

Within this historical context of the 1990s the ‘good governance’ agenda also emerged, as both an explanation of, and solution to, the deficiencies of the Washington Consensus development model (Robertson et al. 2007). Like neo-liberal prescriptions for the economy, the good governance agenda continues to play a major role in shaping how Western governments and multilateral organisations ‘do business’ with Africa and it is therefore not surprising that the good governance agenda features so prominently in the *Agenda 2063* and CESA as part of the wider inclusive growth agenda. As is well documented, however, Chinese economic investment in Africa has been accompanied by the provision of infrastructure in exchange for favourable access to natural resources and land (Mohan 2013). In education it has also involved the exercise of soft power through the role of Confucius institutes on the continent and making available large numbers of scholarships in China for African students (King and Palmer 2013).

A characteristic of Chinese development assistance is that it has been based on strict adherence to the principles of non-interference, a key touchstone of the so-called ‘Beijing consensus’ (Ayers 2013). This has led some Western powers and institutions such as the World Bank to raise concerns about how Chinese development assistance is ‘undermining’ Western reform efforts in African economies.⁹ The implication for many African countries is the need to deal with an increasingly fragmented development assistance architecture that comprises not only different kinds of models of ‘partnership’ but also engaging with different underlying conceptions of modernity and development, in this case Chinese and Western.

One way in which the good governance agenda has impacted education is in relation to the changing role of NGOs. A key feature of the changing educational landscape in Africa and other parts of the postcolonial world has been the emergence of NGOs as a major player in education and other areas of development. The rise of neoliberalism, and the good governance agenda, however, saw a change in attitude towards NGOs in which NGOs and other civil society organisations were often co-opted by international development agencies to a re-packaged programme of welfare

provision. Increasing amounts of development assistance were channelled through NGOs. This provided a safety net that served to legitimise the neoliberal state in which economic policies focused on austerity were increasingly determined by international financial institutions. This period saw a mushrooming of NGOs in Africa. According to Pinkney (2009), NGOs nowadays are concerned either with service delivery or with ‘advocacy’. This dual function is evident in education with NGOs often making up some of the shortfall in educational provision, and increasingly with NGOs such as UWEZO¹⁰ in East Africa that enjoy significant donor support in holding governments to account for the quality of education. This dual function places NGOs in an ambiguous position vis a vis the state, legitimation on the one hand and antagonistic on the other.

A further feature of the educational landscape in Africa in the past 20 years or so has been a proliferation of philanthropic private foundations. Foundations such as the Phelps-Stokes and Carnegie Foundations have had a role in providing education and on influencing policy on the continent since colonial times in the early part of the twentieth century. More recently and driven by diverse philanthropic and ideological motives, Foundations including the Hewlett Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Mastercard Foundation have played an increasingly prominent role in funding education and in shaping policy at a global scale, e.g. through their involvement in the Global Partnership for Education. Besides advocating a role for the private sector in the provision of education, CESA is silent on the role of civil society in the education sector which given the history and scale of involvement can be seen as an omission. From a complex systems perspective such as that underlying the present analysis, the role of civil society can also be seen to have contributed to the increasing fragmentation and lack of coherence in education systems. In many African countries, for example, private schools remain largely unregulated and therefore outside of the ambit of national education policy (Verger et al. 2018; Day et al. 2014). This poses a real challenge for regional and national policy agendas.

⁹ As commentators such as Ayers and Mohan point out, however, such concerns smack of hypocrisy in that Chinese investments in Africa fall far short of Western interests and that raising such concerns elides the role of the West since colonial times in supporting undemocratic practices on the continent. In this regard, as Ferguson notes, a perverse effect of neo-liberal policies has been that economic growth has often occurred in enclaves within highly dysfunctional states.

¹⁰ UWEZO means ‘capability’ in Kiswahili. It aims to improve literacy and numeracy amongst children in the basic education cycle through what it claims are citizen-driven approaches to accountability. UWEZO produces the results of a literacy and numeracy test that it administers annually so as to draw attention to poor learning outcomes in schools (see <http://www.uwezo.net/>). UWEZO often operates in an antagonistic relationship with Ministries of Education in the countries concerned.

Conclusion: towards a transformative agenda?

The visions of SD and of ESD in regional agendas hold out an ambitious, pan-African vision of transformative change. As such they represent the antithesis of much contemporary development thinking about Africa. However, whilst it is important to avoid falling into a new kind of afro pessimism, it is also important to be realistic about the possibilities for change. It is argued that although education has enjoyed contradictory relations with the domains of the economy, culture and the policy, for the most part education systems have been implicated in processes of unsustainable development in relation to each. In economic terms, education has been implicated in the reproduction of extractive economic policies that have favoured global interests and those of indigenous elites and have had destructive effects on the natural environment. In cultural terms, education has been implicated in what de Sousa Santos (2012; Santos 2017) describes as processes of cultural and linguistic ‘epistemicide’. Finally, in political terms, education has contributed to the perpetuation of violence and processes of undemocratic governance in the context of the postcolonial polity.

In this respect, regional agendas do not go far enough in identifying the underlying causal mechanisms that give rise to unsustainable development that have their roots in the colonial encounter and the nature of contemporary globalisation or in acknowledging the extent to which education systems have been complicit in reproducing the interests of colonial and postcolonial elites and in processes of unsustainable development. They also prioritise instrumentalist concerns that despite the rhetoric, do too little to advance the interests of the poor and marginalised on the continent or contribute to environmental protection.

If education is to play a role in transformative change then it will need to be fundamentally re-oriented away from its current path dependency which it has inherited since colonial times and which has proved remarkably resilient to change. Understanding the tensions and contradictions inherent in regional policy in relation to an analysis of wider processes of change can assist in comprehending the nature and scale of the challenges and possibilities for implementing transformative education for sustainable development. However, whereas dominant theories of the role of education in relation to development including human capital and modernization theory and ideas like the knowledge economy often assume education can act as a panacea for development, the analysis presented above suggests a more complex relationship. If education is to play a genuinely transformative role then it cannot do this alone but must be linked to processes of wider structural change across each of these three domains of the economy, culture and polity.

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