

The Political Economy of African Higher Education

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Abstract

This essay examines how the IMF, the World Bank and Globalisation have shaped and influenced the structure and the content of education that universities in Africa offer. The findings suggest that the IMF and the World Bank are establishing their own higher learning institutions in Africa to produce a subservient elite class that supports the free-market system ideology, which, through structural adjustment programmes, has in effect rolled out a neo-colonial project. The study concludes that globalisation, as a vehicle for a free-market system, has had a negative effect on African education.

Introduction

The debate about university education originates from ancient Greece. Our arguments on this topic are even couched in the terms that Greek philosophers used when they debated educational issues. Stabile (2007) argues that the discussions within and outside of academia about the way in which universities ought to respond to the forces of the free-market has been couched in the terms of two competing ideologies – sophism and virtue.

Stabile (2007) explains that when these two ideologies arose with the origins of academia in ancient Greece, the sophist held that university education ought to be designed so that it focuses on practical subjects that enable teachers to earn fees from teaching. Plato and Aristotle, on the other hand, argued that education should aim at building virtue.

Plato and Aristotle criticised the sophists on the grounds that their commercial activities were a negative influence on Greek higher education. The sophists defended themselves; and their defence of market techniques to develop a system of higher education encountered more criticism, and, consequently, set off a dispute over the role of markets in higher education that continues today, writes Stabile.

In the twenty-first century that debate explores the effects of globalisation on education. The central assumption that drives globalisation is that scarcity is a fundamental human problem. Based on that premise, it is argued that because resources are scarce “in relationship to human wants; individuals, organisations and societies must make choices as to how to use the resources that are available to them (Stabile, 2007, p. 3).” It is then concluded that the free-market system is a superior way for making choices about what to produce with our limited

resources. "If priorities must be set, what better way to set them than using economic incentives and letting each individual's or organisation's willingness and ability to buy or sell determine those priorities? (Stabile, 2007, p. 3)."

Thus, it is argued that the type of higher learning that is available to the general members of the public must be decided by the markets. It is believed that the markets ought to determine which courses are socially useful and relevant; and that the markets are capable of fairly sorting out the individuals who are willing and have the ability to buy the education that is available from those who do not have the buying power. It is from this standpoint that one ought to understand the World Bank's studies that advocated for the reduction of higher education in Africa in the 1980s.

The World Bank's Effort to Reduce Higher Education in Africa: A literature review.

Caffentzis (2000) explains that the World Bank's attempt to cut higher education in Africa stems from the pessimistic view of Africa's economic future and its beliefs that African workers are destined to remain unskilled labourers. According to Caffentzis, the structural adjustment programmes that were imposed by the World Bank and the IMF on African governments had a negative impact on African education. He argues that the structural adjustment programmes' conditionalities included the removal of subsidies to students and a currency devaluation that inflated the cost of educational materials and cuts in government funding of education.

Consequently, many teachers and other academics staff were retrenched, and after a while, what had been one of the "main conquests of the anti-colonial struggle – the development of an African educational system – was seriously undermined (Federici, Caffentzis & Alidou, 2000, p. xi)." According to Caffentzis, between 1980 and 1985, university enrolment rates declined in many African countries for the first time in their history.

Amidst all of this, the World Bank revealed that its plans included introducing a new educational system, which would restructure African education within one generation, writes Caffentzis. "During this period the present university system would be replaced by 'programs or centers of excellence' concentrating staff and resources on a regional basis, and producing small cadres of 'high quality' academics and researchers (Caffentzis, 2000, p. 7)."

These regional centres of excellence are sponsored, financed and managed to the specifications of the World Bank and foreign donors, according to Caffentzis. Federici (2000) argues that the virtual take-over of African education by international financial institutions and its restructuring into a costly commodity reserved for the privileged few is intended to devalue African life and labour, and to further lower social expectations and to in effect kill any tradition of independent and critical thinking on the continent.

Before 1960, colonialists in Africa designed an education for Africans that was meant to create a subservient elite class that supported and took care of the interests of the colonialists

and the empire. In post-colonial Africa, the IMF and the World Bank are setting up their own training regional centres to produce a subservient elite class that supports the free-market system ideology, which, through structural adjustment programmes, has in effect rolled out a neo-colonial project. Just as the colonial education did not exist to produce graduates who were ideologically oriented toward the colonised, the IMF/World Bank neo-colonial education aims to produce graduates who subscribe to the IMF/World Bank economic agenda.

The effects of globalisation on African education

Globalisation, understood as a vehicle for a free-market system, constitutes one of the most significant challenges to face higher educational systems in Africa since independence, to paraphrase Olukoshi and Zeleza (2004). According to Caffentzis (2000), the World Bank's vision for African education by 2020 consists mostly of primary schools, a middle-level system immediately shaped by the needs of the labour market, and a selective higher education system – operating at the lowest possible public cost.

Alidou (2000) writes that the rationale behind the World Bank's vision is the belief that Africa should promote vocational training. Federici (2000) explains that the long-term goal is to create a situation whereby Africans participate in the world economy only as providers of cheap labour. Also, Olukoshi and Zeleza (2004) point out that 'powerful international forces' promoting a free-market system – led by the World Bank, have suggested that Africa has no need for universities because the return on investment which it received from its investment on Africa was both too low and unjustifiable. Thus, various disciplines in the Humanities and the Social Sciences were seen as being 'market unfriendly' and therefore labelled irrelevant and so deserved to be either downgraded or completely abolished.

The IMF/WORLD Bank Education Programmes

In 1991, the World Bank launched the African Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI) to remedy the education crisis in Africa, which it had created through structural adjustment programmes to begin with. The ACBI's basic purpose is to build a 'critical mass of professional African policy analysts and economic managers who will be able to better manage the development process', according to the World Bank ACBI document. The document points out that the principal objectives of ACBI are to place investment in human capital and institutions high on the agenda of African government, international financial institutions and donors.

The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) was established to coordinate ACBI actions and to manage the Initiative's Fund. Among other things, the ACBF plans to intervene through improving selected national institutions – i.e. already existing departments of economics or public administration in universities or colleges, or research and management institutes; and

building or strengthening a small number of regional institutions for policy analysis and development management.

According to the ACBI document, these regional centres are principally training institutions in policy analysis and development management skills, and sources of policy analysis and advice. These institutions are supposed to offer “new or refresher training courses on issues critical to development management – for example, the exchange rate, agricultural pricing, industry tariffs, privatisation, social sector financing, and decision-making processes in general.”

One such centre is the Macroeconomic Financial Management Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa (MEFMI). The MEFMI is a think-tank concentrating on macroeconomics management, microfinance and resources or sovereign debt management. It is based in Zimbabwe, and it is funded by the ACBF. Thanks to this institution, the heads of reserve banks in Uganda and Zambia are now MEFMI-trained fellows (Price, 2006). The MEFMI has a ‘Fellows Development Programme’ which aims to develop ‘promising young professionals’ to develop into credible experts in macroeconomic and financial management. According to the MEFMI website (<http://www.mefmi.org/>), candidates who are accepted into the programme go through a rigorous training before being accredited as fully-fledged MEFMI Fellows

The West African Institute for Financial and Economic Management (WAIFE) (<http://www.waifem.org/>) is another institution that is part of the ‘capacity building initiative’ in Africa. The Institute focuses on debt management as its core area. According to the institute website, the debt management programme is designed to help strengthen the capacity of several West African countries to develop, present and negotiate a case for debt relief through the HIPC CBP Initiative. HIPC CBP stands for ‘The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Debt Strategy and Analysis Capacity Building Programme’ (see: <http://www.hipc-cbp.org/index.php>). The main objective of the HIPC CBP is to enable “HIPC Governments to develop the full independent capacity to design and execute their own national debt strategies, and to maintain a high level of overall debt management, during and after the HIPC Initiative.”

Under the HIPC CBP programme, each HIPC has to apply for the CBP initiative and engage in ‘tripartite analysis with the Bretton Woods Institution on the sustainability of its external debt’ (Martin, Perales & Johnson, 2001). To qualify for debt relief, HIPC have to demonstrate to the Bretton Woods Institution that it has a coherent debt strategy to reduce debt to all creditors with equal burden sharing, and a high level of debt management, according to Martin et al.

Another international financial institution that funds the ACBF is the IMF. In 2002, the IMF and the ACBF signed a memorandum of understanding. According to that memorandum, the IMF and the ACBF work closely primarily on capacity building-related training activities and

strengthening knowledge networking in Africa in the areas of the Fund's core competencies. Consequently, the IMF has its own training schools in Africa. To be precise, the IMF has established three regional technical assistance centres in Africa; namely: the East AFRITAC, the West AFRITAC and the Central AFRITAC.

Economics Departments and the ACBF

One of the main aims of the ACBF is to help 'develop first-rate university programmes' in Africa. Among other things, it does this by providing funds to the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC). The AERC is also funded by the World Bank, the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundation, the USAID and the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation.

According to the AERC website (<http://www.aercafrica.org/home/index.asp>), the Consortium has a training programme that is designed to increase the pool of economic researchers in sub-Saharan Africa by supporting postgraduate studies in economics and by enhancing the capacities of departments of economics in local public universities. For example, AERC supports the Collaborative master's Programme in Economics (CMAP) for Anglophone Africa. The AERC website states that CMAP builds the capacity of mid-level economic managers and policy analysts and produces first class students interested in careers in academia. Twenty-one universities in 16 countries participate in the programme.

In 2002, the AERC launched a Collaborative PhD Programme in Economics. The PhD Programme has its own Academic Board, which is based at four host universities – namely; University of Cape Town, University of Dar es Salaam, University of Ibadan and University of Yaoundé II. According to the website, four other participating institutions, i.e. the Universities of Cocody, Nairobi, Benin and the University of Witwatersrand, will also admit and award degrees in the programme. Each region has a host university that offers the core courses and a degree awarding university. The programme supports 21 students from sub-Sahara Africa every year. The AERC website points out that the Academic Boards for CMAP and CPP consists of members drawn from participating universities, and are largely responsible for the academic substance of the two programmes. AERC facilitates curriculum development and joint enforcement of standards, and it also builds the capacity of participating economics departments and supports library facilities.

Another way that the ACBF achieves its objectives is by funding certain university economics departments directly. The Moi University economics department is one such department. The department has even introduced a new course on banking and finance. The new Masters degree in Banking and Finance with a focus in Microfinance is funded by the ACBF.

The ACBF has programmes in over 30 African countries. The Foundation has worked with the Rwanda School of Finance and Banking (Price, 2006). Recently, the ACBF made a grant of US\$800 000 to Africa University, a private university based in Zimbabwe.

Analysis

The goal of the ACBI funded education programmes is to produce intellectual workers who are not opposed to the free-market system. Teachers at these schools are likely to reward those who do not question the free-market system ideology with higher grades and approval, and punish those who challenge the legitimacy of the ideology that informs the curriculum with lower grades and eventually by forcing them out of these schools (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). To paraphrase Macedo (2004), the main objective of a neo-colonial education is to 'de-skill' students to walk unreflectively through a labyrinth of procedures and techniques. In short, the ACBI funded education programmes are not there to produce independent and critical thinkers. This is because, in general, educational institutions require people who are willing to adjust to the institution's power structure and accept the code of their discipline without asking too many questions (Chomsky, 2004). According to Schmidt (2001), it is no surprise that developing a critical view of the field is an extracurricular activity, one that the training institutions discourage not only through the test's exclusive focus on the technical details of specialised applications, but also through their coverage of a large number of such applications. Schmidt argues that the graduates who are hired by corporations or the government to do research or development work or by universities to do normal paradigm work do not need such critical ability, "and in fact will work more harmoniously without it."

Viewed from this angle, it becomes clear that recruits to the ACBI funded education programmes must be prepared to carry out assigned functions, pay attention to designated responsibilities and ignore distractions, to paraphrase Albert (2006). The product will be highly educated people who do their assigned work without questioning its goals (Schmidt, 2001). In other words, the goal is to produce obedient and ideological disciplined thinkers. An egalitarian education programme would aim to prepare students to fully participate in social life and to be self-confident enough to claim the fruits of economic activity (Bowles & Gintis, 1971). In his book 'Disciplined Minds', Schmidt (2001) argues that real critical thinking means questioning social, political and moral assumptions; applying and refining a personally created developed worldview; "and calling for action that advances a personally created agenda. An approach that backs away from any of these three components lacks the critical spirit (p. 41)."

The ACBF funded programmes are not there to promote the type of critical thinking described by Schmidt. Instead, the graduates of the ACBF funded programmes are the kind of people that the IMF, the World Bank, the Bretton Woods Institution and the UN are going to assign to monitor the economic policies that African countries adopt. In addition, these

graduates exist to advocate and to maintain the free-market system that these global financial institutions believe should guide African economic policies.

This analysis is consistent with Chomsky's argument that schools are, by and large, designed to support the interests of the dominant segment of society, those people who have wealth and power. This is achieved through a propaganda framework that has the effect of distorting or suppressing unwanted ideas and information, according to Chomsky (2004). And, so, to graduate from these programmes, students learn early on that one is not supposed to challenge the global social structure that the programmes advocate and the IMF economic policies that these courses are based on. Students concentrate on how best to carry out their assignments, and it is only here that they use their creativity and then only within the limits of the free-market system paradigm, to paraphrase Schmidt.

Based on this analysis, one can conclude that the educational experience at these programmes is suited to nurturing attitudes and behaviour that is consistent with participation in the labour force, to echo Bowles and Gintis (1976). In their study of American schools, Bowles and Gintis found that there is a statistically verifiable congruence between the personality traits conducive to proper work performance on the job and those which are rewarded with high grades in the classroom. According to Gintis (1971), one study found that 'over-achievers' were described by their teachers as 'appreciative', 'cooperative', 'reasonable', while 'under-achievers' were deemed 'dissatisfied', 'pre-occupied', 'rebellious' and 'unpredictable'.

Conclusion

Olukoshi and Zeleza (2004) ask if the concept of the public university has a future in Africa.

Is there a place for a socially responsible and responsive African university in the twenty-first century? Given the range of problems confronting state and nation in Africa, how might the mission of the university be defined to enable it to contribute in a critical and autonomous manner to democratic change and social progress on the continent? (p. 4).

It seems to me that for us to get to the root of the problem we need to formulate different questions than the ones above. The root of the problem is the economy. The class and race biases in education do not produce, but rather, reflect the structure of privilege in society at large, to paraphrase Bowles and Gintis (1976). The education system is one of several institutions which serve to perpetuate the status quo. Universities exist to produce people who will staff and perpetuate the country's social and economic system, explains Schmidt (2001).

Therefore, as Bowles and Gintis (1976) suggest, our debates about African universities in the twenty-first century ought to begin by asking questions that are related to economic activities. For example, as a start, we could ask the following questions: What economic relationships do we want for African societies? Do we prefer social ownership to private

ownership? Must workers participate in the decision-making process regarding the production of goods? Do we desire an equalisation of incomes and a destruction of hierarchical economic relationships? As Bowles and Gintis explain, this is because education is best understood as an institution which serves to perpetuate the social relationships of economic life. Furthermore, schools and universities in general “create and reinforce patterns of social class... [and] racial identification among students which allow them to relate ‘properly’ to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. (p. 11).”

Thus, it is fair to conclude that as long as the international financial institutions impose structural adjustment programmes on African governments, a socially responsible African university will forever be an elusive dream. The free-market system makes it almost impossible for African universities to contribute in a critical and autonomous manner to democratic change and social progress on the continent. For our universities to change, we first have to deal with the free-market system. And that is the task facing us.

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