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Reforming the TVET Sector for Improved Productivity in Africa

TVET has come a long way in Africa

At the dawn of independence in Africa in the 1960s, countries had grandiose plans on how to fight poverty, disease and ignorance. Fifty years later, many of these challenges remain unresolved, especially in the rural areas and other challenges have emerged, including high youth unemployment, failure to industrialize and failure to utilize available natural resources for the benefit of the people, among others. Creating economic prosperity in the continent has been constrained by Africa's lack of critical skills and lack of technology in the production of goods and services essential for meeting such basic needs as food, shelter, water, clothing, energy and infrastructure.

Fifty years down the road of political emancipation, reality has dawned on us that while Education is the key to our development, Technical and Vocational education and Training (TVET) is the master key to unlock our potential in meeting our needs and wants. Nobody can tell why it took so long for this to happen. TVET has all along been the missing critical link in Africa's development agenda and priorities. It is imperative to appreciate that the labour market both in Africa has changed rapidly in the last 10 years, mostly owing to the emergence of information technology and globalization. There is now increasing demand for high skilled labour that possess tertiary and higher education. Those with lower skills are finding it more difficult to find jobs with good remuneration and decent work environments. Also, the era of "white collar" jobs where learned people sat back and directed less educated ones in their jobs is slowly dying. We all must sweat for it and having the right skills is crucial. This thought piece analyses the evolution of the TVET sector in Africa, the challenges that the sector faces and proposes the way forward.

Tracing our roots

Many studies have concluded that educational systems in many African countries are flawed and the neglect of technical education is an obstacle to continental development. It has further been observed that technical qualifications and degrees are regarded as inferior to regular academic degrees. As part of our colonial past, Africans came to appreciate and place more premium on white collar jobs which some scholars think have been responsible for the stagnation of African economies.

Over the years, TVET has taken a more central position when it comes to imparting critical skills that produce goods and services in Africa. It has become the proverbial rejected stone that has now

become a corner stone in nation building. Indeed, it has now been found that a country's social economic development directly correlates with the amount of resources that it invests in the TVET sector.

With burgeoning challenge of youth unemployment, TVET training holds the giving young people the skills to enable them find employment and even start their own businesses. Employability studies in many countries has found that TVET graduates have much better employability when compared with people with academic qualifications. But much of the continent is still trapped with an educational system that still looks at learning as a cognitive process that entails acquiring of knowledge and conceptualization of ideas without much application. This is the system that has brought us to the stagnation that we now find ourselves in, and it is sad that we are still broadcasting it to millions of young people, who are ending up with *"lots of academic papers, but no skills"*. This phenomenon has continued to fuel the "paper chase" as a rite of passage to non-existent employment. This calls for an urgent need for a paradigm shift in Africa's approach to human resource development in order to respond to changing market needs.

In the recent past there has been rising consciousness among African Leaders and policy makers on the role that the TVET sector can play in providing the much-needed skills for industrializing the Continent. The increasing importance that Africa is attaching to TVET is reflected in the policies and strategies that the African Union has recently rolled out to promote TVET training. The TVET sector has attractive features of having clear orientation towards the world of work and its emphasis on meeting employer needs. The TVET sector is hence well placed to deliver skills, knowledge and expertise that is urgently needed to take the continent to the next level of development and meet the goals of Africa's Vision 2063.

Additionally, TVET training can take place at different levels of sophistication; both in the classroom, at the place of work, in informal settings and even in industry. Because of this, TVET training is relevant to students from many social economic backgrounds, thereby holding the key to the Continent's quest to wrestle poverty and create prosperity for all. Consequently, the youth, old, the poor, men, women and even the vulnerable can benefit from participating in TVET training.

The Continent is dreaming again

In its Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education (2006 – 2015), the African Union recognised the importance of TVET as a means of empowering individuals to take control of their lives and recommended the integration of TVET training into the general education system. The African Union also recognised the fact that vast numbers of young people were outside the formal school system, and consequently recommended the integration of non-formal learning methodologies and literacy programmes into national TVET programmes.

It is within this framework that the African Union Commission spearheaded the development of a new strategy to revitalize TVET in Africa with the following objectives;

- i. To revitalize, modernize and harmonize TVET in Africa in order to transform it into a mainstream activity for African youth development, youth employment and human capacity building in Africa;

- ii. To position TVET programs and TVET institutions in Africa as vehicles for regional cooperation and integration as well as socio-economic development as it relates to improvements in infrastructure, technological progress, energy, trade, tourism, agriculture and good governance; and
- iii. To mobilize all stakeholders in a concerted effort to create synergies and share responsibilities for the renewal and harmonization of TVET policies, programmes and strategies in Africa.

Re-looking at the policy environment

Many national TVET policies and strategies have been contemplated, discussed and published in Africa. Thanks to UNESCO's support and promotion of TVET through its international project-UNEVOC. However, implementation of these policies and strategies is wanting. Some of the key factors hindering the exploitation of the full potential of Africa include;

- i. The lack of commitment to the full implementation of TVET by governments due to its prerequisite considerable financial commitments;
- ii. Lack of participation in curriculum review and training by business and industry;
- iii. Low wages and poor work environments that have discouraged bright youth from pursuing vocationally oriented careers;
- iv. Lack of clear pathways of progression to higher levels of education and training for those with ability and interest;
- v. Lack of clearly articulated national qualifications frameworks that can harmonize and promote quality training and certification; and
- vi. Lack of an articulated national policy for the determination and award of salaries/wages commensurate with the qualifications, experience, work environment and the demand for services given in the public and private sectors.

Looking forward

In order to maximize TVET's contribution to the growth and prosperity of Africa, the following needs to be done;

Implement TVET policies and strategies

We need to go beyond making "beautiful" policies and strategies that just gather dust. There is need to fund and intensify implementation of reform policies within the TVET sector, so that we go beyond just talk.

Review and revise curricular

TVET Curricular in many countries is outdated, irrelevant and out of sync with market needs. There is need to develop new curricular in partnership with employers and the private sector, to ensure that the sector produces skills and competences that are being sought for in the market.

Mind who is teaching

In many countries, training and capacity building of TVET trainers has been neglected. In line with the old adage that you can only pass on what you know, it is important to address the issue of skilling TVET trainers, giving them industry practice and ensuring there is continuous and lifelong learning.

Industry must play a role

Successful TVET programmes cannot operate outside or without the support and contributions of business and industry. Linkages between TVET institutions and the employment sector are important for imparting experience and providing feedback to improve training. Since TVET graduates look forward to working in industry, field attachment and industry-based training is an important part of the training.

Move beyond good talk

The cost of TVET programs is comparatively much higher than that of academic programs because of heavy investment in equipment and tools required for training. If well planned, the TVET sub-sector has many opportunities for income generation to augment government and donor financing. Successful automotive shops, bakeries, building construction units and smart farming entrepreneurs have been implemented in many countries. But the bottom line is that each African Government must move beyond talk and do real and serious investment in the TVET sector, for it to bear the required fruits.

Keep an eye on the market

We must move beyond producing TVET graduates for the sake of doing it. This calls for a comprehensive labour market information system that provides both trainers and industry with accurate information and data on labour demand and supply. This is useful for educational planners, employers and students in making decisions about training, employment and career choices and occupations.

Make TVET attractive

Addressing the concerns raised above cannot make TVET an attractive career choice for many youths. There is need for clear planning to ensure that planned skills are acquired, and that having TVET training leads to truly rewarding careers and lifelong learning. To effectively do this the concerns of parents, employers and others about the TVET sector need to be put into consideration.

Current initiatives

Current strategies of the RUFORUM recognize that there is need for more investment into the TVET sector and better integration of the TVET and University education sectors. This will lead to accumulation and transfer of credits and easier progression of learners. The university sector also stands to learn a great deal from the TVET sector's approach to practical and work relevant and work-based training. Hence the organization is placing increasing emphasis on universities collaborating and working with TVET institutions.

Conclusion

National efforts must be expended to popularise TVET amongst youth and parents and to ensure that graduates of TVET institutions secure decent employment and remunerated to afford a reasonable quality of life.

The guiding principles that are considered the major drivers of a TVET strategy for Africa are: access and equity, quality, proficiency, and relevance. It is also important that increasing focus be put on employability, entrepreneurship, efficiency, and sustainability. The aim should be to promote linkages and partnerships and responsible citizenship in the utilization and management of natural resources using TVET skills. There is increasing need to promote skills acquisition through competency-based training with proficiency testing for employment, sustainable livelihoods and responsible citizenship. Africa needs to position TVET as a tool for empowering the peoples of Africa, especially the youth, for sustainable livelihoods and the socioeconomic development of the continent.

This is our fourth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM AGM 2019 Digests. You can get more details about the meeting at <http://www.ruforum.org/AGM2019/> and more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also join us online using Social Media for real time updates. Our Official hashtag is #AGMGhana2019.

About the Author:

Dr Eusebius J. Mukhwana holds a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in Veterinary Medicine from the University of Nairobi and PhD in Soil Science from the University of Wyoming in the USA. He is an experienced Team Leader and Manager with a demonstrated history of working in the Agriculture and Higher Education Sectors in Africa. He has worked as a Professor in Soil Science at several Kenyan Universities and has been a Deputy Chief Executive Officer at the Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya. He currently serves as the founding CEO of the Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA) where he has been involved extensively in reforming the TVET sector in Kenya and establishment of the Kenya National Qualifications Framework (KNQF). Dr Mukhwana serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), representing non-university actors.