



SOLVING AFRICA'S SOCIOECONOMIC COMPLEX PROBLEMS VS. THE STATUS OF THE CONTINENT MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of multidisciplinary education in addressing Africa's socioeconomic challenges, focusing on the contributions of Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) in preparing graduates for real-world problem-solving. Africa faces complex issues, including poverty, unemployment, and health disparities, which require innovative solutions grounded in diverse knowledge areas such as economics, public health, and social sciences.

The current reliance on top-down, system-dependent solutions in Africa overlooks the essential role of field-based research and local community engagement. This paper reviews the literature on Africa's socioeconomic development, educational frameworks, and the impact of multidisciplinary approaches in building resilient leaders capable of handling complex, interrelated problems.

Using a needs assessment methodology, the study highlights the gap between Africa's HLI's curricula and the skills needed for effective socioeconomic interventions. Through case studies and secondary data, the paper explores Africa's community-based models, top-down versus bottom-up approaches, and the role of HLIs in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fostering sustainable, localized growth. The findings suggest that a multidisciplinary education approach equips African graduates with the adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving skills necessary to address the continent's evolving challenges, offering pathways for HLIs to integrate these elements into their curricula to bridge existing skill gaps and support socioeconomic transformation.

Keywords: Multidisciplinary Education, Socioeconomic Challenges, Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs), Africa, Solving Complex Problems, Poverty Elimination, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Community Engagement, Resilience, Bottom-up Approaches, Skill Gap, Sustainable Growth.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Solving socioeconomic problems has been a focal concern for developing communities and countries. However, with the rise of the waves that raise economic instability, the spread of fast solutions using Artificial Intelligence to solve complex socioeconomic problems is making governments and communities lose focus on how to approach problems with less dependency on systems and artificial enablers. These claimed approaches are only shifting the focus of the main tool for poverty elimination, that real field research that should be led by Africa's Higher Education Institutes (HLI's), which are so far are not living the reality of the complexity of the problems in the region. Ajaj et al. (2024), Buheji (2021)

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Status of Status of Socioeconomic Development in Africa (Achievements vs. Challenges)

As African communities strive to break the chain of socioeconomic problems around, one has to give credit to the amazing work done by certain Governments, such as the Governments of Africa, Kenya, Ghana and both the international and local Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) who are working to create more sustainable socioeconomic models for the rest of the region. This can be experienced by the many programs that link the field need with a higher education qualification framework that demands more focus on realized community developments through projects linked to the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. However, many leading socioeconomic programs, such as agriculture development, women empowerment, family stability, malnutrition in villages, etc., are still considered to be financially dependent models where impact can happen if funds are available, Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024). Therefore, one of the main targets of this study is to realize the levels and types of socioeconomic demand essential for raising the capacity of the people or communities in Africa in order to eliminate complex problems, including wicked problems such as poverty and youth migration. Ajaj et al. (2024)

2.2 Role of Education in Africa

Africa needs to deal with similarly complex and chronic problems, starting by realizing how higher education can play a role towards that, Bird et al. (2019). This might require focusing on prerequisites that would improve the level of independence of the communities, including how their business models are currently working and whether they are enabled through top-down or supported by bottom-up approaches that lead to more progressive and sustainable change by the graduating generations. Buheji (2021)

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In order to address the real socioeconomic needs of Africa, one has to appreciate that we are talking about a model of steady economic growth, in the most stable countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The real GDP has multiplied by more than 7 in the last 20 years; the growth is coupled with its high stability, which also brings to mind that this is tremendously combined with socioeconomic success throughout the country. Despite all this success, the collective efforts of both Sub-Saharan Africa's governments and the international organizations collaborating with these governments to eradicate complex socioeconomic issues such as poverty still fill short of addressing the inequality gap within the country between the different provinces. This may be due to this rapid transition in Sub-African countries, Mushimiyimana and Buheji (2024). Africa, both the HDI UNDP Index and Innovation Index, also do not reflect this emerging economic improvement, which is highly related again due to the low pick of socioeconomic development. This fact is starting to be an obstacle in ultimately promoting Africa's social and economic development. IPA (2022), Barghamadi (2020), UNDP (2020a).

2.3 Defining African Communities Socioeconomic Needs

Among all East African countries, Africa offers one of the strongest sources of hope and resilience when it comes to linking its emerging economy with its communities' socioeconomic needs. Since 1994, half of the population still live in or near the poverty line, and many children still drop out early from school due to their families' socioeconomic conditions and overall community environment, Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024). According to the World Bank, Africa is a poor country with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US\$748, as referenced in 2017. Five years later, one can observe clear regional differences in poverty reduction rates, with much of the poverty reduction occurring in Kigali. In contrast, the poverty headcount has risen in the Western Province, and extreme poverty has risen in the Southern Province. Beegle and Christiaensen (2019), Buheji (2022a).

Communities in Africa need to learn how to create socioeconomic problem interrupters, which comes only through the engagement and involvement of all the major sectors in Africa. In the case of poverty, the example is taken to represent socioeconomic issues in this study, Bird et al. (2019) mentioned that overcoming poverty interrupters means one needs to ensure there are comprehensive structured and unstructured approaches to solve socioeconomic issues such as migration, family instability, etc., Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024). which leads to enhancing livelihood diversification and improving the community's capacity to be healthy (it has a strong communication system) and profitable (it creates value-added products and services), regardless of its challenges. This would enhance the availability of community-focused social entrepreneurship programs that enhance the social assets and improve the community network and its capacity to diversify its projects. Buheji (2019)

The intensity of deprivation in Africa, the average deprivation score among people living in multidimensional poverty index (MPI) is 47.3 per cent. The MPI value, which is the share of the population that is multidimensionally poor adjusted by the intensity of the deprivations, is 0.231.

Recent survey data 2019/2020 publicly available for Africa's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) estimates it affects 48.8 per cent of the population in Africa (6,418 thousand people in 2020). An additional 22.7 per cent (2,984 thousand people in 2020) are classified as vulnerable to MPI. The intensity of deprivation score in Africa among people living in multidimensional poverty is 47.3 per cent. The MPI value, which is the share of the population that is multidimensionally poor adjusted by the intensity of the deprivations, is 0.231. UNDP (2022a), UNDP (2021).

2.4 Reviewing the Community Development and Problem-Solving Programs Offered by African Universities

Wao et al. (2022) conducted a study to understand the impact of postgraduate students' community-based competency programs and how they contribute to combating poverty in East Africa. The Wao team saw that once students are engaged in their community development, their participation helps them improve the outcome of their theses.

Mphahlele and Wabwile (2020) argue that an educational approach that includes technology, business, and social sciences would help prepare African students for various roles, thereby boosting economic empowerment and reducing youth unemployment. Hence, the provision of new postgraduate higher education programs is becoming a necessity, especially if these programs provide students with a platform to collaborate with stakeholders of the different communities and create more responsive HLI's that react to the contemporary and future foresighted socioeconomic challenges in more creative ways.

2.5 Status of Africa in SDGs

One cannot judge the quality of the socioeconomic conditions of any country without gauging its performance towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) which were announced in 2015. The latest report by Beegle and Christiaensen released by the World Bank (2019) suggests that Africa will not succeed in eradicating extreme poverty with its current performance. The authors and the World Bank suggest in order to accelerate the eradication of poverty, governments and community stakeholders need to follow new approaches that are based on intervention designs; otherwise, they won't achieve SDG-1 in the foreseen future and even their capacity to fight back poverty would worsen with the idiosyncratic and transient shocks that are hitting the world in general. UN (2023), Buheji (2022b)

According to the report World Bank (2019), Africa is doing better in translating its growth into poverty reduction and enhancing the citizens' access to public services; however, it is still low in agricultural productivity, especially for food crops. The report emphasizes that the country needs to increase domestic resource mobilization to improve the poor's livelihood and welfare. In short, the report calls for a focus on projects that transform the communities' livelihoods and enhance the frequency of intervention projects in rural areas.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methods of Observations

The study deploys several methods in reviewing and gathering the data about African community socioeconomic needs and what the current higher education learning institutions (HLI's) programs are offering and then considers how to use that information for bringing in new modules and program designs that address the gap on the postgraduate level.

The outcome of this exercise could help to update the principles that translate and integrate Africa's socioeconomic development into a fit-for-purpose curriculum design that meets the national and international labour market and communities' current and future needs. Wao et al. (2022)

Since the socioeconomic issues are so wide and beyond one study, the researcher conducted a quantitative needs assessment study focusing on the complex issue of poverty and related input and spillovers in Africa. Finally, besides studying the current profound need for qualified socioeconomic problem-solving programs, the study would briefly see how the HLI's and their academic institution could play a vital role in improving Africa's performance in SDGs and the Global Innovation Index in the future. Buheji et al. (2021)

3.2 Observations and Secondary Data

The secondary data and the researcher's observation collected from visiting the different African countries show the amount of work that comes from the top-down approach led by the government and its partners in creating positive quality-of-life changes in the community. However, it is clear from both the secondary published data and the researcher's observation in East and West African countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Africa, Ghana, and Mauritania that this effort, whatever is vast and fast, still cannot cope with the demand of the fast-growing population and the instability of the labour market, especially after the COVID-19 Pandemic and its spillovers that almost all these countries won't be capable in meeting the 10 SDG's easily. Therefore, this study focuses more on how African higher education programs are doing in relevance to pushing bottom-up socioeconomic project approaches so that the top-down socioeconomic development efforts are complemented by change led from within the community.

4.0 APPLICATION & ANALYSIS

4.1 Needs Assessment of the Actual Role of HLI's in Africa in Raising Students Capacity to Deal with Complex Socioeconomic Problems

Brown (1995) mentioned that one of the most important pillars of a successful needs assessment is the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the learning purpose.

Since needs assessment would help to address the requirements of the type of outcome expected from the students, in time, it would define the context in which HLI need to create that influence in the intended learning outcome, i.e. to deal with complex socioeconomic problems in Africa. Barghamadi (2020).

The process of any needs assessment study, as per Graves (2000), is about the involvement of the right people who would help create the right questions through the early piloting stage, if the right instruments were used. Once this is done, academic programs will become viable when the information coming from the study is analyzed and interpreted.

4.2 Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Approach in Socioeconomic Development Programs – taking Poverty Elimination in Africa as an Example

Poverty remains the most significant, challenging, and complex socioeconomic problem in the world that is driving other socioeconomic issues. In Africa and the African region, in general, millions of people still live near poverty and/or extreme poverty line, despite the high economic growth of many African countries. Ajaj et al. (2024)

Africa has the highest extreme poverty rates globally, with 23 of the world's 28 poorest countries, which have extreme poverty rates above 30%. Using the poverty line of \$1.90 per day, Africa's extreme poverty rate was recently estimated to be about 35.5%. This rate is 6.8 times higher than the average for the rest of the world. This rate will increase if the poverty line is set to be \$2.5 per day as the rest of the world. Outreach (2023)

The poverty rate in East Africa reached above 50% by the early of 2020. In Rwanda, it was above 40%; in Burundi, it was 75%; in Uganda, it was 21%; in Tanzania, it was 26%; and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it was 70%. These statistics demonstrate the urgent need for poverty elimination programs in the region. Finally, a survey by the African Development Bank found that the top three factors contributing to poverty in Africa were inadequate access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, underscoring the importance of addressing these issues in any poverty elimination program. Borgen Project (2020), Buheji (2022b)

Tchamyou and Asongu. (2018) see that education with a multidisciplinary focus would help address socioeconomic disparities and facilitate financial access, which is crucial for economic growth in African countries. Today, even mobile banking is also playing a role in eliminating poverty, which is also a top-down approach as it needs continuous government support and continuous mobile companies' investments. Borgen Project (2020)

While efforts have been made to address poverty through various programs, studies show a need for a comprehensive and sustainable approach to poverty elimination, Buheji and Korze (2020). An innovative postgraduate program in poverty elimination can play a crucial role in developing the next generation of leaders who will drive change in their communities and beyond, IPA (2022). If well designed and linked to reality, such programs can provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to design and implement effective poverty elimination programs that address the immediate needs of vulnerable communities and the root causes of poverty. Borgen Project (2020)

4.3 The Gap in Problem-Solving Skills in Africa & EAC

One of the roles of HLI's is to build bridges of community-based programs that bring changes to the country. Having students prepared for their local market and addressing their countries needs is one of the utmost roles of any academic institution. Iradukunda (2022), after BAG Innovation (2020) mentioned that the soft skills gap among African graduates is still a massive challenge. BAG Innovation (2020) pointed out that recent graduates struggle to enter the job market and find decent employment upon graduation due to a lack of practical exposure and experiences, including the capacity for addressing market demands as skills of confident communication, time management, public speaking, and problem-solving. This means that the intended learning outcome is not yet well addressed in relation to the reality of life or the market. Buheji and Ahmed (2024), African Union (2023).

Reviewing all the types of African Higher Education Academic Programs, one could find that there are three levels of programs that link 'intended learning outcomes' in relevance to creating change in the community:

Level 1- Programs that enhance the competency of the students so that they later contribute to their community

Level 2- Programs that make it compulsory and as part of the students' graduation requirement to study and try to address a specific issue within the community.

Level 3-Program that engages the community in creating sustainable socioeconomic change.

Level 4- Program that aims to create models that bring learning and inspire the communities to create socioeconomic development with minimal resources or within the resource available.

Despite that the African Ministry of Education adopted and commenced the implementation of a new curriculum focused on competency-based learning (CBL) in 2016. The literature review shows that 'Problem Solving' seems to be the most repeated Africa HLI's graduates' skill gap till today. This might also be the leading cause of the high unemployment rate among these graduates. Iradukunda (2022).

4.4 Role of Focused Academic Programs in Creating Model Villages

The literature review of model villages created by field projects was found to be rare. The only reference for an African model village is found in the Belgian Red Cross, which focuses on producing charcoal briquettes in the village of Gihombo, Nyamasheke District in Rwanda. While it is growing in its undergraduate and postgraduate academic programs, there seems not to be any correlation between Africa's current poverty, other socioeconomic challenges, and the development of many 'community development' based academic programs. This claim is supported by the UNDP (2021) Human Development Index, which still ranks Africa in 156th place out of 191 countries.

Creating model villages that eradicate complex and socioeconomic issues would complement African governments' efforts to overcome, for example, chronic malnutrition, improve the capacity of the community to be self-sufficient, and even strengthen community resilience. Mushimiyimana and Buheji (2024)

Africa's Vision 2063 for development focused on the advancement of socioeconomics in the sub-Saharan African country. AFDB (2015) sees higher education as the core of building a stronger and more competent African society. More efforts will be ensured to maintain a high enrolment rate for both boys and girls up to tertiary education. Investments in Higher Learning Education will be increased to build capacity in Research and Development and increase attainment levels. A concerted effort will be undertaken to strengthen linkages between academia and the international industry. AFDB (2015)

Determined to overcome the challenges facing the reconstruction of its education system, the Government of Africa has called upon UNDP and UNESCO. These two agencies, which are part of the United Nations system, have joined forces to support the process launched by national authorities such as the Ministry of Education and other ministries responsible for education and training. This sector study is the fruit of their reflection and efforts for education, driving out negative socioeconomic results.

4.5 Importance of Multidisciplinary Education for Solving Africa's Education

OECD (2019) saw from experience that multidisciplinary education trends can address socioeconomic challenges by equipping students with diverse skill sets, adaptability, and problem-solving capabilities. This is particularly relevant for developing countries like those in Africa.

Multidisciplinary education is crucial for addressing Africa's socioeconomic challenges, as it provides a framework for tackling complex issues that cannot be solved within single disciplines. Africa faces unique social and economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, healthcare disparities, and infrastructure deficits, all compounded by cultural diversity and rapid urbanization. A multidisciplinary educational approach is essential for creating leaders, thinkers, and innovators capable of addressing these interrelated issues effectively.

Socioeconomic problems are interconnected, spanning areas like economics, health, education, and politics. Multidisciplinary education allows students to see these interconnections, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of challenges. For example, addressing poverty requires insights from economics, public health, and social policy, as each field contributes to a sustainable solution. UNESCO (2017) has seen that multidisciplinary education can help Africa accelerate the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly in developing countries. It outlined specific learning objectives encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

Khan and Ali (2021) emphasized the role of multidisciplinary education in creating resilient and adaptable graduates who can tackle the Sub-Saharan region's socioeconomic issues, particularly those related to healthcare, employment, and public policy. Multidisciplinary education encourages students to draw on diverse knowledge areas to create innovative solutions tailored to Africa's unique challenges. By integrating perspectives from technology, design, economics, and social sciences, students are better equipped to devise practical and locally relevant solutions, such as using mobile technology for financial inclusion or developing renewable energy sources suited to rural areas.

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Ndlovu and Sifuna (2019) believe that multidisciplinary education would have an even greater impact on African policy development, focusing on how cross-disciplinary learning can holistically address healthcare, economic, and social issues.

Leaders educated in multidisciplinary environments tend to be more adaptable and resilient, essential in Africa's rapidly changing social and economic landscape. They can pivot across sectors and respond more effectively to crises, such as economic downturns or public health emergencies, as they are trained to view problems through multiple lenses. Robinson and Golec (2021).

Africa has a young population and high unemployment rates. A multidisciplinary education can help bridge the skills gap by equipping students with diverse digital technology, business, and environmental science competencies. African Development Bank (2019) realized the relationship between education and socioeconomic development in Africa, stressing the need for diverse skills and cross-disciplinary learning to meet the continent's evolving economic demands. This prepares them for a range of job opportunities and fosters an entrepreneurial mindset, enabling them to create employment opportunities within their communities.

Multidisciplinary education is essential for developing sustainable public health solutions. Health problems in Africa often intersect with economic issues, such as poverty and lack of access to clean water. Students trained across disciplines—such as healthcare, economics, and environmental studies—can design more comprehensive public health interventions that address root causes rather than merely treating symptoms.

Global Partnership for Education (2021) has seen that innovative, cross-disciplinary education models can help address various barriers to education in Africa and other developing regions. It explores case studies where multidisciplinary education has led to successful interventions. Through multidisciplinary education, more understanding of cultural and social contexts is critical to creating sustainable socioeconomic solutions in Africa. Solutions that work in one region may not be effective in another due to cultural or geographical differences. By teaching students about sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies alongside economic and technical skills, they are better equipped to craft locally relevant and culturally sensitive solutions.

Sustainability is central to Africa's development. Therefore, multidisciplinary education allows for such development since integrating environmental science, engineering, economics, and policy studies is crucial for developing sustainable resource management strategies. Students trained in these areas can address deforestation, water scarcity, and waste management issues with innovative, long-term solutions that balance economic growth and environmental protection. UNESCO (2017), Robinson and Golec (2021).

Africa's socioeconomic development depends on its ability to compete in the global economy. Again, this needs multidisciplinary education that aligns with global trends, providing students with the skills and perspectives needed to work in a diverse, interconnected world. Knowledge in multiple fields allows students to adapt to global standards, engage in international business, and attract foreign investment, all of which contribute to economic growth and stability.

Good governance is crucial for socioeconomic development, and multidisciplinary education is essential for training policy-makers to create inclusive, equitable policies. By studying political science, economics, and social sciences, students learn to design policies that address the needs of all citizens, reduce inequality, and promote social cohesion. Therefore, more than ever today UNDP (2019) emphasizes the importance of a well-rounded education for sustainable socioeconomic growth and highlights multidisciplinary approaches to bridge inequalities in developing regions, including Africa.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Clarity of Multidisciplinary Education Role vs. Addressing Africa's socioeconomic challenges.

Multidisciplinary education is pivotal for addressing Africa's socioeconomic challenges. It fosters innovative, adaptable, and culturally aware individuals who can approach problems from multiple angles and develop sustainable solutions. By equipping Africa's youth with a comprehensive, interdisciplinary education, the continent can cultivate leaders and change-makers capable of driving lasting socioeconomic transformation across diverse communities and sectors. Such programs would help to boost the mindset of the community to look for the best techniques for opportunity exploitation and optimizing the use of the non-financial resources within such communities to create an impact, i.e. on poverty elimination, youth migration, or women's development, etc., Bird et al. (2019). This means we need to analyze in this study whether there are programs that would or could bring socioeconomic thinkers, experts, multidisciplinary holistic field specialists, or mentors with the capacity, besides the profound knowledge, to lead the change in the field. Such a type of competence would also be part of the focus of this needs assessment study.

The demographic analysis shows that age distribution, population growth trends, educational attainment levels, African postgraduate education status, and the region's socioeconomic characteristics are dominating factors. This information will help you understand the potential pool of students that needs to be targeted and their competency needs.

5.2 Implications of the Study

This study underscores the critical role of multidisciplinary education in equipping African graduates with the skills necessary to address complex and interconnected socioeconomic challenges. While Africa has made strides in economic growth and poverty reduction, substantial gaps remain in achieving sustainable and inclusive development, with issues such as unemployment, health disparities, and resource scarcity persisting across the continent. Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) have a unique responsibility to bridge these gaps by adopting curricula that promote diverse knowledge integration and problem-solving skills aligned with real-world community needs.

The findings reveal that multidisciplinary education, with its holistic perspective, prepares graduates to tackle Africa's pressing issues through innovative, adaptable, and culturally relevant solutions. By cultivating leaders capable of thinking across traditional academic boundaries, HLIs can produce graduates who are resilient and capable of spearheading transformative initiatives within their communities.

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A stronger focus on community engagement, combined with bottom-up approaches, empowers students to create sustainable impact, thus complementing government-led development efforts.

For Africa to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and close the skill gap, HLIs must prioritize cross-disciplinary learning models. These approaches not only align educational outcomes with the labor market's evolving demands but also foster social cohesion and economic resilience across African communities. Through this commitment, Africa's educational institutions can become key drivers in the journey toward sustainable, inclusive socioeconomic transformation.

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