

Article

Linking-In through Education? Exploring the Educational Question in Africa from the Perspective of Flows and (dis) Connections

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Abstract: Education is the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and considered an important gateway to many other SDGs being achieved. Education is, however, frequently interpreted in terms of its technical aspects, i.e., furthering skills and knowledge and strengthening human capital for promoting development. By contrast, this paper focuses less on this technical aspect and instead analyses the current educational landscape in Africa as a field in which flows of investment, ideas, and people influence connections between Africans and the rest of the world. As an effect of the structural adjustment programs in the 1980s, public spending on education in many African countries went down, allowing private education initiatives to spring up. These were, for a large part, financed by Western and Arab countries. Over the last fifteen years, investment flows in education from emerging global powers like China, Brazil, Malaysia, and Turkey have contributed to an increasingly diversified educational landscape in Africa. This paper argues that these investments not only allow Africans to improve their educational levels but that these diverse forms of education also have an influence on connections and social orientations in African societies. Educational programs go together with specific worldviews. In addition, people develop their social networks through educational trajectories. Both orientations and connections influence people's choices and opportunities in their further lives, and thus individual and societal development. Interestingly, often investments in education by external parties are not isolated endeavors, but also used as a means to get linked-in in local societies for such diverse purposes as religion or business interests. Illustrating my argument with examples taken from my research on Gulf charities and on Turkish schools in Africa, I will explore how the new connectivities that come with the changing educational landscape in Africa shape (possible) local development trajectories in the current era of intensified globalization characterized by intensified flows of capital, people, and ideas.

Keywords: education; Africa; global connections; flows; Senegal; Turkey

1. Introduction: Education and Development—Beyond a Technical Approach

In recent decades, education has emerged as one of the main pillars in international development thinking. Important milestones were set by the World Declaration on Education for All, adopted during the Education for All conference in Jomtien, Thailand, 1990, which was organized, among others, by UNESCO and the World Bank, and the subsequent Dakar Declaration, adopted during the follow-up conference ten years later. The agenda formulated in Dakar called for expanded and improved early childhood care and education, and stipulated that school attendance for children should be compulsory, free of charge, and of good quality. It also promoted lifelong learning, adult literacy, gender equality and an all-round improvement in education quality. However, the Education for All initiative was overshadowed by the launch of the Millennium Development Goals that same year, with a rather restrained focus on primary education as one of the key targets [1]. This seems to

have been rectified to a certain extent in the current Sustainable Development Goals, as SDG 4 reads as follows: “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning”.

In general, education is considered a key area that will allow many other sustainable development goals to be achieved, as educated people are considered to be more productive, to use the environment more sustainably, and to be better equipped to care for their health. Education is, however often mainly interpreted in its rather straightforward ‘technical’ capacity of furthering skills and knowledge and strengthening human capital for promoting development. This is important beyond doubt but seems to be rather restricted a perspective in the sense that it considers skills and knowledge, and the values that underpin them, as objective and universal parameters to be planted in individuals detached from context. However, knowledge also carries cultural and political meanings, while education is a social endeavor, taking place through at least some form of interaction. I contend that a mere technical approach leaves many questions concerning the possible relationship between education and sustainable development unanswered and that exactly these cultural and relational aspects offer interesting points of departure for thinking about inclusive development in the current world.

Therefore, in this paper, I will focus less on the technical aspects of education, and, instead, take a more relational view and analyze the current educational landscape in Africa as a field in which flows of investment, ideas, and people influence connections between Africa (ns) and the rest of the world. With this, I aim to provide a follow up to, and an elaboration of, my earlier plea [2] to shift, in development studies, from a centripetal perspective focusing on how development initiatives contribute to locally bounded development, to an outward-looking perspective that focuses on how localities are embedded in networks and connections and the implications of this, and to investigate how new connectivity that comes with development interventions change the local target group or locality in relation to the world.

In the following, I will explore what can be observed when the aforementioned perspective is applied to the field of education in Africa. I begin by arguing why this perspective is particularly important and interesting in the current era of global restructuring, which, for Africa, not only has implications in the economic and political sphere, but also in the domain of education. I will then illustrate my argument by some preliminary findings of my research on Turkish schools in Senegal. The case shows how these schools, set up by the Gülen movement, offer possibilities to different stakeholders at various levels to access networks and opportunities. It also shows how changing geopolitical conditions (in this case, the crackdown on the Gülen movement following the failed coup d’état in Turkey in 2016), lead to shifting chances for networks and individuals, having an influence on who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, and thus on prospects for prosperity and development. In the conclusion, I will reflect on the analytical potential of this case for gaining advanced insights into the relation between education and inclusive development in Africa in the current era and present the contours of a research agenda. The aim of this paper is thus not so much to share final research results or to propose policy solutions, but rather to stimulate thinking on the important topic of education in relation to questions of inclusive development and to contribute to the advancement of the research agenda on this matter.

The paper has a thematic connection to the field of ‘education for sustainability’ studies, especially to those explicitly recognizing the importance of values in education for sustainability [3,4]. The outlook of these studies differs from my approach though, in the sense that the former are based in the educational sciences and generally adopt an applied, rather technical, approach with the aim to achieve (affective) change in order to further sustainability. By contrast, and as outlined in the foregoing, my analytical perspective derives from the social sciences: I focus on social processes and consider values as context-specific and culturally informed.

This social science perspective also implies that I concentrate on inclusive development rather than on sustainable development or sustainability. Inclusive development can be defined as ‘development that includes marginalized people, sectors, and countries in social, political and economic processes for increased human wellbeing, social and environmental sustainability, and empowerment’ [2].

Following this definition, inclusive development is a prerequisite for attaining the larger goal of sustainable development.

2. Africa's Changing Educational Landscape in an Era of Global Restructuring

Applying a perspective of flows and connections to the educational landscape in Africa is all the more interesting and important in the current historical moment, which is experiencing a global restructuring. The West is increasingly losing its hegemonic position while other global powers are taking the stage, having their effects on Africa's linkages with the world.

Africa's relations with the so-called emerging powers, the new poles in the current multipolar world, like China, India, and Brazil, have mostly been analyzed in their economic and/or political aspects. However, the emergence of new global players is not only affecting the economic and political domain in Africa but is also influencing its educational landscape. Thus, one can observe Islamic schools funded by Islamic charities from the Gulf countries, Korean educational projects, Turkish private schools as well as an increasing number of African students receiving scholarships to study in Malaysia, China, or Brazil. It should be noted that enrolment numbers in primary, secondary, and tertiary education are available for most of Africa, but that it is much harder to get a reliable and complete overview of the providers of this education, including where they are from. Some rather disparate information is available, for instance on the number and spread of Confucius institutes in Africa [5], or on the presence of international branch campuses on the continent [6]; however, the data are often incomplete, and especially in the case of transnational private education providers not originating from the West, data are often scarce or non-existent. Country-level and case studies [7–10] indicate, however, that an increasing privatization and liberalization of the educational sector as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s has facilitated the entrance of an increasingly diverse field of education providers and funding sources throughout Africa, a process that has intensified over the last decade by the emergence of new global powers coupled to the renewed interest in Africa and its economic and political potential.

In our volume "African Engagements: On whose terms?" [11], we already underlined the importance of developing an African perspective on these current processes of global restructuring, in which the West has increasingly lost its hegemony with other emerging and emerged global powers taking the stage. The volume contained chapters on a diversity of topics that are relevant to Africa's changing position in the world. Education was not included as a theme, but I would like to argue that education is indeed an important research field if one aims to better understand Africa's changing global connections, their impact on the ground, and what this may yield for Africa's future. The first reason is rather straightforward, and also mentioned in the introduction: education is generally considered as a prerequisite for development [12,13], and it should be underlined that this not only holds true for economic development, as educated people tend to perform better, but also for political development and democracy, as educated and literate citizens are better able to hold their rulers to account [14].

Secondly, education is important as it influences one's worldview. We need only look to African history for evidence of this: education has been an instrument in the hands of competing powers and a battlefield where representatives of different world views have fought each other since colonial times [15,16]. At Independence, many African countries inherited the school system from the colonial powers and, until today, pupils in Francophone West Africa still have to learn a lot about France in terms of history, geography, culture, and literature, and—if they are lucky—pursue their studies in France. The same holds true for Anglophone African countries. In general, it can safely be stated that these educational legacies have contributed to an orientation towards the West. This was understood quite early by Islamic charities from the Gulf countries that often fund educational projects, where pupils learn Arabic, but also learn history from the viewpoint of the Islamic world, rather than from Europe. Children in such schools in Chad, for instance, become acquainted with another worldview, with no longer the West but the Arab World as the center [17,18].

Thirdly, precisely because education influences one's worldview, it also influences linkages between individuals-and societies-and the rest of the world. Let me illustrate this with some examples. The first concerns a Senegalese public intellectual who is currently in his sixties. He received qur'anic schooling and pursued his education in a Franco-Arabic medersa, before studying Arabic and going on to teach Arabic in a Franco-Arabic school. So-called arabisants (people who have followed the Arabic rather than the French education system) struggle to enter public service, which, certainly in his time, was one of the most important providers of skilled jobs. Luckily, at that time, the first transnational Islamic NGOs from the Gulf countries started to work in West Africa [19], and having done some translation work for them, in 1984 he became the first Senegalese country director of a transnational Islamic charity in Dakar. In 1987, he became the regional director of one of the largest Saudi charities, and subsequently worked in Riyadh and Dubai for other Islamic charities, before returning to Senegal in the early 2000s.

My second example concerns a Senegalese sociologist who followed the francophone public education system. In his final university year, he met a Dutch Africanist who suggested that he could do a PhD in the Netherlands. He gladly accepted this opportunity and now, some twenty years later he is a professor at Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University, and continues to build on his Dutch connections via consultancies and projects funded by Dutch agencies and through collaborations with Dutch colleagues. My last example concerns the son of one of my Senegalese friends. She sent her 12-year-old son to a Turkish school in Dakar for his secondary education. From the very first day, the boy has learned Turkish, he interacts with Turkish teachers, and goes to Turkey for a summer school. It is highly likely that he will go to Turkey for further studies, and I can imagine that, in ten to fifteen years' time, he will have become a Senegalese businessman trading with Turkey.

These examples can be supplemented by many others. African students, for instance, also increasingly go to China for their education. They learn the language and get to know people and Chinese ways of doing. From this perspective, Africa's changing educational landscape is extremely interesting, also with an eye on Africa's future and its (political and economic) connections to the rest of the World.

The preceding observations have been partly developed on the basis of my research on the work of Islamic charities from the Gulf region in Africa, for which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Chad (2004, 2012) and Senegal (2009, 2011), and paid a visit to Qatar (2015). Attempts to think my findings through from the broader perspective of 'Africa in the World' triggered my interest in the phenomenon of Turkish schools in Africa. During my fieldwork, I occasionally heard people referring to these schools, but once I started to pay attention to them, I realized that it is a rather recent, but nevertheless widespread trend, as I encountered them in every West-African country that I visited.

So-called Turkish schools have popped up in many African countries (and elsewhere in the world) over the last one or two decades. These schools are linked to the Gülen movement. Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish Muslim intellectual, who developed a philosophy of education that aims to reconcile religion with science [20]. He distinguishes between teaching and education, the latter being more than just transferring knowledge. By contrast, his understanding of education is "the illumination of the mind in science and knowledge, and the light of the heart in faith and virtue" (Gülen quoted in [20]). The Gülen schools are private, secular schools. While Gülen's inspiration is clearly in Islam, the Gülen schools do not offer Islamic education, but a kind of universalistic moral education focused on values. The strategy is not da'wa, proselytizing, but setting the good example [21]. These good examples are provided by the teachers who are followers of Gülen. Their commitment to the educational cause is called *hizmet*, a religiously inspired service to the community.

A large part of the Gülen schools are financially supported by wealthy followers of Gülen, mainly Turkish entrepreneurs. One of the interesting aspects of the Gülen movement is that these entrepreneurs help the global spread of the schools, while the schools also facilitate the soft landing of Turkish entrepreneurs in several African countries [20].

In March 2016, I started a research project into these Turkish schools in Senegal, from which I will present some preliminary findings in the following sections. I follow a grounded theory approach, in this exploratory phase mainly using qualitative data collection techniques such as open and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by secondary data analysis.

3. Turkish Schools in Senegal

For a long time, Senegal's educational landscape was characterized by the dichotomy between a public school system that was secular, and a diverse range of private schools that, for the most part, had a religious affiliation. The latter category included Catholic and Protestant schools (originating from colonial missions) but, importantly, also Islamic schools, ranging from traditional daaras (Quranic schools) to medersas (French-Arabic schools) for primary and secondary education. In terms of tertiary education in Senegal, for a long time the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar was the only option. Depending on their educational background, some students were able to further their studies in Europe or the Middle East. During the Cold War, a scholarship for studying in the Soviet Union was also an option taken up by a substantial number of Senegalese students.

This educational landscape has diversified over the last few decades, as result of, among other things, a national educational reform in the early 2000s, which ended the strict secular character of public education by the introduction of religion in the curriculum of primary schools in 2002 and the opening of the first public medersas in 2003 [22]. At the tertiary level, alongside the establishment of public universities in different parts of the country (such as in Saint-Louis in 1990, and in Ziguinchor in 2007), private universities have also been established. Examples include the Dakar American University of Technology, but also the Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba University in Touba, which was founded in 2008 by the Senegalese Mouride sufi order as part of its long-standing Al-Azhar School Network [23]. Options for studying abroad have also diversified, with an increasing number of Senegalese students being able to pursue their studies in, for instance, Morocco, China, or South Africa. In this increasingly diverse landscape of educational options, the Turkish Gülen schools for primary and secondary education have come to stand out as a particularly attractive option for some categories of the Senegalese population, as we will see below.

Senegal was one of the first West African countries where the Gülen movement started to establish schools. The one in Dakar dates from 1994. More recently, Gülen schools opened their doors in Kaolack, Thies, Ziguinchor, and Saint-Louis. The schools in Dakar cover pre-school, primary and secondary education for boys and girls separately; in the other towns, education up to now covers the pre-school and primary level for boys only. The schools offer high-quality education, but as the fees are quite high they mainly attract an aspiring middle class and well-off elites, although there are also scholarships available for poor children with excellent school results.

When I visited the collège Yavuz Selim in Dakar in March 2016, I was quite surprised by the outlook of the school, so different from other Senegalese schools and in stark contrast with the neighborhood where it is situated. As one of the parents stated: "When you enter the school it is as if you enter Turkey." The large building, painted in bright yellow, is very well kept and tidy, with bright posters visualizing scientific topics on the walls. The main courses are taught by Turkish teachers, other courses can also be taught by Senegalese teachers. Teaching is done in Turkish and in English. Every class has a Turkish tutor, who has an important task as a role model, offering an example of moral education. In this way, scientific and moral education go hand in hand. The idea is that these pupils can become the new generation of leaders, who will then not only have an excellent intellectual training but also an excellent moral education (see also [20]).

The first alumni of the school in Dakar have already started their professional careers. Some of them have integrated as teachers in the school. When asked about possible collaboration with Turkish entrepreneurs, one of the Turkish teachers told me that some of the alumni have indeed started to work with a group of female Turkish entrepreneurs working with Senegal.

Despite the excellent results of the schools, I encountered mixed feelings among the parents. Firstly, language barriers and cultural differences were causing communication problems and irritation, for instance about the school fees. Despite the fact that these were mentioned on the school's website, there was a considerable lack of understanding concerning the school fees among the parents. They complained about the fact that the fees have increased over the past few years, but that they did not know the reason for this. In addition, it appears that there are many exceptions concerning the fees to pay, for instance for excellent pupils and for pupils from the countryside, but the reasons and rules were unclear to the parents. It is not entirely clear to me whether this was mainly a language problem or mainly a cultural one, Turkish and Senegalese possibly having a different attitude when it comes to speaking about financial issues.

There is a clear language issue in the communication between the class tutors and the parents. One of the Turkish class tutors told me that in order to get connected to the home environment of his pupils, he visits them at home to meet the parents. This is related to the educational philosophy of the Gülen movement, i.e., that education is a broad undertaking that has to start at home, is taken up in school, and ultimately also in society. However, given that the tutor did not speak French or Wolof (Senegal's main local language), I was wondering how he would fulfill this task.

Clear cultural differences do also not help the smooth connection between the schools and the Senegalese: the separate boys' and girls' schools, not shaking hands, and so on, as promoted by the Turkish, do not sit well with many of the parents, who often adhere to one of the Islamic Sufi orders dominant in Senegal. In addition, these, in their view, conservative cultural habits, do not fit their aspirations of being modern and economically successful elites.

Interestingly, the members of the parent's committee told me that they had no idea about Gülen and his philosophy when they sent their children to the school, and that they only got information about that when they went on a trip to Turkey organized for them by the school. They had mainly chosen to register their children at Yavuz Selim because of the outstanding results of the school (which the schools also use as their main selling point).

After my initial steps in this new research field in March 2016, developments in Turkey in the summer of 2016 greatly changed the fate and prospects of my research object. An unsuccessful coup d'état against Turkey's President Erdogan led him to accuse Fethullah Gülen of being the instigator. A real witch hunt against Gülen's followers in Turkey and beyond ensued, including a request to the United States to extradite Gülen to Turkey. While pressure had already slowly started in the years before when the once close relationship between Gülen and Erdogan started to deteriorate, Turkey now put increased pressure on many governments to close the Gülen schools in their countries [24]. In Senegal, the Turkish teachers started the new school year by keeping a low profile, not speaking out and waiting to see what would happen. At some point, there were rumors that the Gülen schools in Senegal would be closed, but in December 2016, the government announced that the schools would remain open. However, the management of the schools would be taken from the Gülen leadership and passed to the Turkish association Maarif, which is linked to the Erdogan government. This led to strong protests by Senegalese political and entrepreneurial elites who had their children in the schools. One of the most vocal was the director of one of Senegal's main national newspapers who was also the president of the Gülen schools' administrative council, and who took the matter to court. It appeared that, in order to prevent the confiscation of the schools by the Senegalese government, in November 2016 he had sold the buildings, which till then had been in the hands of a Turkish association of the Gülen movement, to a new Senegalese holding. This party claimed that their buildings could not rightfully be seized by the Senegalese state [24]. When I met with the Turkish Gülen school administrators in Dakar in August 2017, they still seemed confident that this would work out. However, just some days before the court verdict, on 2 October 2017, the Senegalese government closed the schools by having the police blocking their premises. Up till now the outcome of the affair remains unclear. The Yavuz Selim website looks remarkably similar to what it looked like before, but appears not to have been updated since August 2017.

4. Conclusions: Linking-In through Education? Contours of a Research Agenda

The foregoing presentation of some preliminary research results has shown that Turkish schools in Africa are a promising field of investigation in view of Africa's changing global connections, and how these take shape in, and through, education. The case has shown how both the quality of education (the technical aspect), the worldview transmitted (cultural and social values, a specific interpretation of Islam, an accent on the importance of Turkey) and access to networks (by virtue of specific language and cultural skills, understanding social codes, and personal contacts) are important elements for assessing the impact of the Gülen schools. The case has however also shown that the processes involved are not unilinear but influenced by such varied factors as the cultural values of the receiving population and shifting (geopolitical) contexts. I am currently developing a research methodology to flesh out the processes and dynamics involved, both at the individual level, the institutional level, and the national/international level, starting in Senegal but with a view to extending it to other African countries in order to analyze differences and similarities and to identify larger trends. Thus, it will be extremely insightful to follow the alumni of these schools: what does their education path mean to individuals? Do these alumni indeed become a new generation of Senegalese leaders? If so, what are the consequences for the national level and for Senegalese international relations-and thus for Senegal's development trajectory?

Secondly, the school can be studied as a focal point of connections: connections between pupils and teachers, connections between parents and members of the Gülen movement (such as Turkish entrepreneurs, Turkish charities), connections between the school and the neighborhood. What do these connections bring in terms of opportunities/constraints for different parties?

Finally, it will be important to include the national and international level and to investigate how the Gülen schools are being used in geopolitical strategies, those of the Erdogan government, the Gülen movement, and the Senegalese government. The latter has a great interest in having good relationships with the Turkish government, but also with the Turkish business communities (in April 2016, two Turkish companies won the bid for finishing Senegal's national airport) and with its own elites.

Returning to the larger perspective of Africa's changing educational landscape in relation to opportunities for development, as outlined in the beginning of this paper, one of the main aims of the proposed research would be to contribute to answering the following question: Does the diversification of educational options lead to polarization in Senegalese society (such as the already existing arabophone/francophone divide), or to more diversified connections leading to better economic, social and political opportunities for Senegalese society as a whole?

In this respect, this research directly links to the central objective of this special issue of considering opportunities for inclusive development from the perspective of flows and connections. This paper has argued that people's educational trajectories influence their opportunities to be part of certain networks, while sometimes also blocking access to other networks and livelihood opportunities. Interestingly, it appears that the fluid configurations of today's world sometimes make it difficult to 'jump on the right train', as is shown by the students who went to Russia for their studies during the Cold War, but whose network and language skills became rather defunct after the Soviet era ended. In the same vein, one could ask whether the (former) pupils of the Turkish schools, instead of being globally connected, are disconnected from the right networks to further their career, now that the Gülen movement has been banned and routed by the Erdogan government. It seems that, in this globalized world, inclusive development may not be the stable state of affairs that it is often conceptualized as, but rather dependent on shifting power constellations regulating flows of various kinds.

Turning to the content of flows in education, the theme links to related questions concerning the need for a 'decolonization of the mind' [25]; see also [26–28]. One only has to think of the current struggle at South African universities to get rid of Apartheid legacies in higher education, or the debate in African Studies concerning the role of African scholars in the academic debate and the African Studies curriculum. These questions are quite complex and not so easy to answer, but they are

important if one aims to reflect on the role of connections and connectedness for inclusive development, including what it means ‘to be in’ and ‘to be out’.

The question of ‘African engagements: on whose terms?’ also remains topical in the sphere of education. A more diversified educational landscape at least offers the (theoretical) opportunity to choose between systems and worldviews. African bottom-up approaches to knowledge formation, also beyond academia, such as those tried by some West African colleagues in the framework of the IIAS Mellon-funded project ‘Humanities without Borders’ (See [29]), but also PADev (Participatory Assessment of Development) approaches of community learning [30], are important as a counterweight to external influences and add to the landscape. These raise the question of whether strong grass-roots connections make people better equipped to deal with global influences-bringing the local back in as an important focus point, however not in isolation but as positioned at the global crossroads.

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