

# Competing imperatives in Rwanda's education system

Everyone has their aha! moment at some point! If it has never happened to you, it's because you haven't been curious enough about something; or something hasn't mattered enough for you to be curious about it for a prolonged manner, even in an on and off fashion. Like many Africans, I have been curious about the state of education on our continent. But proximity – and paying paid to the proverb that charity begins at home – has allowed me to pay closer attention to the education system in Rwanda. For Rwanda, the question that many have had on their mind for quite some time is why the constant reforms in the sector. I have asked myself the same and I think I stumbled upon my aha! moment and I'm either wrong or I may have confirmed my fears on education.

I had always felt that the education system in Rwanda – as is true in much of Africa – is yet to define what education means. What, for instance, would our education officials say if one were to ask them what characteristics, beyond the diploma and degree, distinguish someone who has successfully passed through our education system? How would that person defer, beyond the diploma and degree, from another who has failed to successfully make that journey? In other words, how to tell an educated person from one who isn't.

In Rwanda, two broad schools of thought exist on what education is and what it ought to do. One says that is teaching for the market; another says teaching is for human development. These competing definitions have significant implications. As you read you will notice how this explains the need constant reforms – The aha! moment.

The view that education consists teaching for the market is most dominant. It is held by most of the top officials in the

sector, the overall Minister, his deputy in charge of primary and secondary education, as well as the head of Rwanda Education Board (REB). This perspective holds that the economy ought to be at the centre of education, in the curriculum, teaching, and learning. Indeed, they have pursued this aim by establishing requirements for licencing institutions of learning that include, among other things, proof that the curriculum they intend to provide is aligned to the labour market, whether a labour market analysis has been conducted to assess whether the programs in the curriculum are needed in the industry, and how the university curriculum fills that gap. One official said, "We insist on the role of industry and private sector." In other words, market-oriented.

On the other hand, the subordinate view holds that education means teaching for human development. It is held by a passionate but lone-ranger, Prof. Phil Cotton of the University of Rwanda, whose conviction is not only self-evident when he speaks on the subject, it betrays this loneliness, if not frustration.

For Prof Cotton, what is happening at every level of education – primary, secondary, and tertiary – should ensure that learning transforms the individual Rwandan citizen. "We need access to education that transforms lives, not just access, but to what kind of education," Cotton often observes. It is beyond access and certainly beyond the market. If access takes place, what is the kind of education that is being accessed? "Does it truly transform the individual?" is the central question as opposed to "does it align the individual to the market?," he once asked, rather rhetorically or astonishingly.

By way of recap. In one view, the market is at the centre of decision making in the sector because education is market oriented. In another, the people – or rather the individual human being – are at the centre and their transformation matters most.

Practically, the fact that registration of institutions of learning must meet the market-oriented requirements implies the triumph of this view over the human development perspective.

Significantly – and this explains the need for constant reforms – this dominant view neglects the fact that the economy is nebulous, not static. In other words, as the economy changes so does the need to reform the education sector. Would it surprise anyone, then, that in a rapidly changing economy like Rwanda's there is a need to reform the education sector every 5 years or so?

And beyond the diploma or degree, how resilient would such an education be in such a fast changing economy? Imagine spending four years getting an education that will become obsolete a year after graduation. Or the idea that over a five year horizon two people who studied in the same education system have the same degree but only in name because the curriculums were different.

## **Consequences**

However, the instinct to peg education to the economy has brought with it unintended consequences, the constant reforms is just one of them. The other, and possibly more pernicious, is that graduates aren't getting what education is supposed to give them. This is true across all fields, in the natural and social sciences as well as the professional fields.

For instance, people to find it bizarre that students who studied in English cannot express – in written and spoken forms – in it even at the very basic levels. But this is not a problem that's only in language.

While the paucity of basic skills is relatively more recognizable within graduates in the social sciences, for instance, the apparent lack of critical thinking skills demobilizes one's ability to apply knowledge in those fields.

But imagine graduates in professional fields— health, law, engineering – that teach practical skills unable to demonstrate practical know-how in the respective fields of study. This is no different from a graduate who cannot command the language that was the medium of instruction for the diploma or degree in his or her possession. It is akin to owning a building but being unable to account for the source of funds for it. Even when you don't know for a fact, the suggestion that something fraudulent is going on is inescapable.

Effectively, there is no substantive difference between graduates in the social sciences and those in the professional fields. A historian might – for all intents and purposes – embark on bridge construction!

Teaching for the economy has predisposed educators to preoccupy themselves with administering tests and learners to regurgitating in order to pass the test, Prof. Cotton once said. This implies a sophisticated game that is played at both ends, rather astutely it seems. But who is defrauding whom?

### **Why we must fix pre-university education**

The human development paradigm – as is the case for education planning in stable traditions – conceives education planning, not as a reflexive reaction to the economy; it is considered a generational endeavour.

This does not imply neglecting the socioeconomic environment, like the economy. On the contrary, such needs are addressed through specialization with departments empowered to respond to peculiar needs of the field. However, these needs, important as they are, are not an end in themselves: they don't replace the human development aims of education.

A generational view of education imbues in the learner with a value system from the point of entry at the pre-primary stage to the point of exit at the higher learning institutions.

According to Prof. Cotton, the focus is to transform a learner who is: written, literate, numerate, critical thinker, empathy, self-driven, confident, has command of the mother tongue, and fluent in at least one foreign language.

It forms a learner who understands the value of creating social bonds, as well as the importance of sleep and hygiene; it moulds a learner fluent in the generic IT skills, such as keyboard and the internet; it is an education that inspires the learners that aspire for excellence in different sectors of society: politics, civil society, academia, public and private sector, according to Prof. Cotton.

However, to get that kind of transformed learner, the style of learning must change in a number of ways. First, change from learning to pass – cram and regurgitate – to preparing an introspective learner.

Second, the method of assessment must of teachers and students must deeply reflect on how “performance” is defined, to answer the question: what do we value and why?

The result will likely be a shift from the credentialism that is tied to market oriented education to introspective learning that is intended for human development so that at the point of exit an individual who has gone through the education system has the values – and skills – they need for life, including empathy, patriotism, and a sense of belonging to a greater purpose beyond the self.

The greatest challenge to such an education is the structural contradiction between a market oriented perspective and education for human development, especially the domination of the former at the lower level of education where formative learning that stays with the individual for much of their lifetime takes shape. By the time they get to tertiary education where they prepare to exit back to society, it is too little too late. “Igiti kigororwa gikiri gito,” the

proverb says.

How to fix this disconnect is the most urgent imperative for our education. Otherwise, the disconnect will continue to manifest in terms that Jenerali Ulimwengu, the Tanzanian intellectual and weekly columnist for the East African, has observed: A crisis, borne out of credentialism and fascination with the market, where the byproduct are graduates in history, sociology, biology, chemistry, engineering, but without historians, sociologists, biologists, chemists, or engineers, and so on.

And another reform will be around the corner because the structural contradiction demands so. Aha!