

## **Sustainable Dreams and Unsustainable Development: Dishonest Discourses on Kenyan Education Researches**

Osabwa Wycliffe

School of Education, Kenyatta University

E-mail: [wycliffe.ayieko@yahoo.com](mailto:wycliffe.ayieko@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*The term 'development' has many referents. Often times, it has been employed in a sense that captures the traditional trichotomy: social, political and economic. Whereas a great number of individuals regard development in terms of physical structures, the truth is that the axis of real development lies in human resource. From here flows ideas; ideas that are crystalized to give rise to all other forms of development. It is an understatement to assert that human resource development is the most progressive, the most sustainable form of development. And this is founded upon education. Such education must be qualified based on its proclivity to address current needs; its employment of appropriate means of transmission; and its accessibility to those who require it. Above all, it must be one that can be sustained so that it equally guarantees sustainability of its outcomes. This paper addresses not how research and innovation in education can lead to sustainable development, but rather, why the prevailing researches in education – specifically in Kenya – have failed to produce innovations, leave alone sustainable development. One can only sustain that which is present in the first place. The paper will make reference to some Kenyan educational research practices and orientations, and employ the philosophical reflection method to critically provide an insight into the vanity that passes for education research. This will in essence explain why innovation and development have remained a mirage such that citizens now cast doubts on the necessity of education. The paper will be a candid discourse that sums up the thesis statement: deficient educational researches lead to deficient education systems which in turn produce deficient human resource that can never realize any meaningful development.*

**Key words:** research, innovation, big data, honesty, development

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first ever Postgraduate Students Research Conference by The University of Eldoret could not have captured a better theme than 'Research, Science and Innovation for Sustainable Development in Kenya' as it appeared in the Call of Papers. Whereas the term 'Science' sounded amorphous, the theme seemed to suggest that development comes around as a result of innovation which itself is a child of research? At least this was the author's understanding of the otherwise broad theme, an understanding that triggered his response to the Call.

The response of this paper's author was restricted to a particular sub-theme – Research and Innovation in Education. The author wanted to enquire how research and innovation in education could lead to sustainable development in Kenya (Limiting the discourse to Kenya was a step in the right direction, contrary to previous calls from elsewhere which seemed obsessed with Africa – forgetting that

the continent had many countries, each with unique circumstances). This was at the outset. However, his approach changed following further assumptions that he made concerning the general interpretation of the theme. And so he decided to address the reasons as to why the country could never register sustainable development by way of research, at least from the prevailing research practices. In as much as the country dreamt of sustainable development, whatever that meant such would only remain dreams unless honest discourses were carried out with regard to the way researches in education and other fields were done.

The paper was born following a conceptual analysis and philosophical reflection on some of the practices that were often carried out in the name of research, more so in the field of education. The critical enquiry was also extended to the use which the research outcomes were put to, assuming that such studies were done in the right manner. On this, the answer was somehow straightforward: research outcomes were rarely utilized. The reasons for this are another issue altogether. Owing to this, the author could not afford to engage in a rhetoric that purported to address the role played by educational research and innovation in realizing sustainable development, for such had never happened, even though it was supposed to have been the case.

Being a philosophical reflection, the paper kept citations at minimum since most of the questions raised arose from commonplace lived experiences that many individuals often conveniently ignore. And such negligence was reflected in those who believed that researches automatically result to 'development', regardless of the manner in which they were conducted. Further, the philosophical reflection did not necessitate the use of massive data (some individuals are impressed with lots of data which to them is an indication that the researcher worked!). And so the questions began to flow: What is research? What is educational research? What is innovation? What is development? What is the nexus between research and development? Why is development erratic despite the many researches carried out? Are universities serious with the issue of research? What are their criteria of a good research? How often do policy makers refer to various research outcomes? Assuming such is not the case, why? Such and kindred questions guided the thoughts brought out in this paper, buttressing the fact that not all 'research' leads to development; for some are mere exercises in futility.

## **RESEARCH**

The meaning of any concept, more so one that denotes a practice, is of great essence to the practitioners. If one has a fuzzy, crazy idea about a certain practice, for example, he or she is likely to do fuzzy and crazy things in the name of that practice. This is common knowledge. Being clear on what a particular practice involves will help one in knowing the kind of activities that will be entertained under that practice (Peters and Hirst, 1970). Ideally, a research is an investigation, an enquiry into some issue. Of course the exercise involves a definite rigorous procedure. Nevertheless, the main problem – the issue – comes first. This issue is so by virtue of the uncharitable consequences that may result if it is not addressed. Once the issue is identified, one then thinks of how to go about the investigation. In any case, the issue should be one that has troubled a number of individuals, who have responded by casually 'searching' for a solution through assumptions, wild

guesses and mere wonder. It might as well be one that affects individuals, who are unfortunately oblivious of its existence. The researcher then comes in to deliberately and procedurally raise it, search deeper, and hence research.

Whereas it is in order for students to be taught research methods and procedures, this paper finds it out of order for them to casually pick on a non-existent issue and fit it into the research procedure. This is better exemplified by duplicated studies, most of which never make a remarkable improvement on previous studies – leave alone the fact that the later studies have been featured in literature reviews of the researchers. This results to a ritualistic affair, cyclic, meaningless, unworthy (Osabwa, 2017). Clearly, no innovation can come from such. Development, leave alone a sustainable one, is a pipe dream in such a situation. This is why the author talks of ‘sustainable dreams’.

### **RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

Just how is research connected to development? It is simple. Development – whether in the social, economic or political sphere – involves an aspect of value addition. It predicates a change that tends towards positive progress. It may involve the manner of carrying out some exercise, for instance the invention of better and cost-effective means. It may also manifest itself through realization of better quality products and services; a rise in quantity of requisite facilities; an improvement in human relations and such like. In short, such development is a function of innovation. Here, things are done in new ways; not necessarily different but better than before. Innovation calls for a stretch in imagination that culminates into creativity. And this requires individuals to sit down and review their current sets of knowledge and practices (more so where there is lack of contentment), an endeavour that is tantamount to research.

This paper was specific to research in education. It saw it as an enquiry into some problem that is related to or affects education. Such an enquiry must not just be on any education matter, but on that which has a direct link on either the processes of education or the achievement of a society’s aims of whatever it regards as education. The research then must have a definite import; one that is likely to result to practical solutions and not just a mere wish list. This resonates with the principles of action research (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

At this point, one may want to justify educational researches. Pray, what is it that makes them ‘educational’ so that they stand apart from other researches? The answer is simple. Educational researches will often times revolve around three aspects: access, acquisition and utility. On access, a researcher may want to find out factors that contribute to one’s ability or inability to come in contact with educational experience. Such may be socio-cultural, economic, personal (either mental or physical) among others. The factors may either be ones that promote inclusivity or lead to exclusivity. On acquisition, the researcher assumes that the learner has accessed the learning environment but then finds it hard to learn. The variables may include those listed under access, and many others such as the nature of the teacher, content and method. About utility, one may want to investigate the relevance of the education so provided.

This paper advances that the said educational researches must be rationally defensible; not mere jig-saw-fit ones that serve personal and formalistic interests. Cases abound where education researchers, more so students, simply pick on any topic and fit it into some research model. This is usually meant to facilitate them in meeting graduation requirements. In such cases, the ‘researchers’ have no conviction whatsoever concerning their studies. The purpose of their study is not what they state in their report; instead it is the fulfilment of requirements for graduation. Granted, of what value is such a research? This paper contends that if researches will be of any use, they must address real problems. That is the only sure way of arriving at innovation and by extension development. The practice of asking false questions and purporting to provide answers will not yield the much desired progress.

One of the expected outcomes of the education process is liberation of the mind. A good education, which happens to be a product of quality research, will lead to this. On the contrary, an education that is never objectively reviewed can only lead to stagnation of the society. And such stagnation is likely to prevail, given the lethargic approaches to educational research that effectively militate against development of whatever kind. In education is our beginning. In education, equally, is our progression. A researcher who engages in plagiarism (and such cases are legion!) is antithetical to innovation. A researcher who asks a false question and goes ahead to answer the same is akin to one who digs a hole to fill another. A researcher who hurriedly picks on a topic, mostly a non-issue, and goes ahead to weave a proposal with the intention of securing funding is the devil’s incarnation. Sadly for our country, the few cases that have been mentioned represent a larger portion of the so-called researchers. And these are the individuals who are expected to incubate innovative ideas that will spark development!

This paper insists that before we talk of how research leads to innovation and development, we must first agree on the modus operandi of most of the latter day researchers. We must first of all carry out a *research* on how they conduct their researches. This will lead us to the table of honest discourses where we shall agree on the way forward. The argument is simple. The bone of contention here is not about whether research can result to innovation and by extension development. This is a given. The elephant in the room is *pseudo-researches*. And unless we address it candidly (universities should be on the forefront since they receive some government funding, however limited) in conferences such as this, we shall continue to harbour outlandish dreams of sustainable development only to realize underdevelopment.

Researchers must be impressed upon to answer a few questions before they embark on their otherwise fishing expeditions: What is research? Is it necessary? What makes it so? How should it proceed? Such questions must be responded to reasonably to warrant an investigation. The connection between researches and their propensity to trigger innovation lies more in the true purpose of the research than the method employed. This statement is not in any way meant to undermine method. On the contrary, method is the vehicle. This vehicle must not be used to transport worthless cargo. Most often, the true purpose of many researches are exigent. And our universities know this. Equally, policy makers are awake to the same fact and that may partly explain their reluctance to adopt recommendations

from these cosmetic researches. In this country for example, a keen observer will note that most researches are duplicated as herein intimated. University students, mostly at degree and masters level, are often heard wondering loudly why they should take the trouble of identifying a research problem and working on the same, when they have an option of modifying previous studies and conveniently appending their names on them! Some will even pay proxies to work for them, thus becoming twice removed from the study.

Whereas there are those who try, they do so following queer patterns. For instance, most of the students will be seen retreating to their backyards to carry out their researches. Those from pastoral communities will research on something akin to cattle rustling and its effects on learning outcomes. Those from fishing communities, for instance, will investigate the influence of fish-eating habits on the level of one's intelligent quotient. And those from coastal areas will often times study the effects of tourist activities on school attendance by local children. A closer scrutiny will reveal that these 'researchers' ask questions whose answers are safely tucked in their bosoms; the rest of the work being a superficial exercise of confirming the obvious. As the fake student researchers engage in mischief enveloped in procedure, their good supervisors get busy correcting trivialities such as the length of chapters, pagination, fonts, alignments, titles of supervisors, table of contents, labelling of figures and what not. All these are commonplace practices which need no citation but candid acknowledgement and reflection. We should then ask ourselves whether such researches are the ones that somebody wants us to believe that their outcomes can spur development.

This paper opines that research proper unquestionably leads to innovation, and hence, development. This is by any means an ideal position. As such, anyone echoing such a position must first of all ask themselves if there is any meaningful research being undertaken. If the answer is in the negative, the logical thing for them to do is to engage in sincere discourses that will cure the disease. That done the only thing (maybe) will be to enquire on how best we can mitigate barriers to effective researches. This is because some researchers are likely to encounter challenges beyond their control. Finding ways of assisting them surmount the challenges will be advantageous to all.

### **Big Data**

The world is on the move. Be it business, medicine, military science and the likes, decisions are made from available data and information. It is imperative to note here that technological advancement especially in information and communication has made things easier than before. On the click of a button, one is able to access massive data hosted on various platforms. Accordingly, technology has made it easy to mine such large-scale datasets and conveniently sort them out to fit one's needs. Locally, most universities have developed repositories that store their research reports. Such repositories must not be ornamental. This paper holds that if such databases will be used to store substandard research reports, then they will make nonsense of the big data invention. Similarly, it will be unsettling if we keep on crying for more researches yet we have never made use of the few good ones that lie in the repositories. Most innovations are conceived through reflections on secondary data. It is instructive that such data be of utmost good quality, and be put to use, since they serve as recipes for innovative ideas.

Unlike the voluminous big data which is complex, unstructured and ever-flowing (nevertheless still mined altogether!), educational research repositories contain highly structured information that is ready for consumption. The recommendations in such reports simply need to be assessed in terms of their truthfulness and viability, and thereafter implemented if they are progressive.

### **Sustainable Development**

The term ‘development’ is one of those that often times get bandied around by individuals who dwell in the world of assumptions. This paper is in no way refuting that assumptions are good. Far be it from this. Essentially, there are different types of development. A cautious mind would want to be specific. Of recent times, North Korea under Kim Jong Un is working hard to develop nuclear weapons that are capable of neutralizing any progressive ones. It would be naïve for anyone to imagine that this move was not informed by any research. Should they succeed, such success will count as development for them, the country’s food insecurity situation notwithstanding. And this is why we must define what we mean by development.

Most individuals who have lived in this country for a while should be having an idea of what the term ‘development’ means – at least from streetwise discourse. ‘Development’ in our case refers to massive outlay of infrastructure – great buildings, many industrial plants, magnificent emporiums, electrified homes, tarmacked roads et cetera. This is the common man’s definition of development, which has inadvertently been adopted by some scholars. And that is why they will not care much to specify the kind of development they refer to in their daily transactions, often embracing common parlance. And this serves them well since it leaves them with less work to do especially in a conference such as this where amid glasses of water they will casually talk about how their unqualified ‘research’ leads to the grandiloquent, hope-inspiring condition of ‘sustainable development’. It is akin to the old and tired metaphor in sub-Saharan Africa which holds that ‘Education is the key’, without necessarily defining this ‘education’ and accounting for the many padlocks that have for ages remained unopened by this master key.

This paper holds that one cannot talk of ‘sustainable development’ without first establishing the ‘development’ that has to be sustained. One can only sustain that which there is. At this juncture, the author of this paper would like to front his own view on this stultifying term ‘sustainable’. Clearly, it is a mainstream term. It has even secured a slot in international circles so that we now have the widely acclaimed ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (UNDP, 2015) from the previous ‘Millennium Development Goals’. This makes the term trendy and authoritative, whichever way you look at it. Nevertheless, he will beg to differ. To ‘sustain’ basically means to ‘keep’ something ‘going’. For instance, to sustain a particular invention such as a drug means to keep its production flowing (which in this case implies that the disease has to be equally sustained, lest the drug becomes useless!) Whereas the term implies other positive qualities such as affordability, it seems to restrict researchers so that they only venture in studies that lead to innovations which are friendly to government budgets. If the author were to rule on this, he would suggest that researchers go for innovations that are not only sustainable (seemingly he cannot convince them against this) but also versatile. The term

'sustainability' reeks of permanence, rigidity. It is actually an antithesis of innovation.

Which way for education? This paper contends that research in education should be aimed at one form of development: human resource. Researchers must work on the best forms of education, and how to best transmit the same. There must be found ways where schools can best prepare learners to be their best; to be pliable and ready to venture into different fields at college level. The colleges should then pick from there and prepare versatile resource persons.

Human resource is the genesis of all development: social, economic and political. From human capital, ideas necessary for any development flow. From the same we get soft skills and the requisite character that promote sustainability. Tales abound of so many projects that have been unable to sustain themselves owing to malpractices such as fraud. A story goes concerning the Chinese who built a border wall but forgot to build the character of the soldiers who stood guard. These guards would then make nonsense of the wall by allowing in enemies who paid a little bribe. What is my point? Whereas the significance of research and innovation in education is indubitable, the nexus between educational research and sustainable development must be followed through with specific interventions. The researches have to be deliberately mapped so that they target catalytic nodes; those areas that are have potential for incubation of practically innovative ideas. Not all researches will lead to innovation. Some are merely superfluous. Similarly, not all development has to be physical as often believed. This false belief has led to the neglect of the most important development, the human resource, leading to short cuts where physical development is often aimed at. In the end, the development becomes literally unsustainable since the people who are supposed to sustain it have no idea of what sustainability is. In retrospect, the genesis of all these finds home in education. A great education translates to great people who harbour great and hence innovative ideas. With these, development becomes a mere by-product that will not even be a subject of discussion. A conference such as this will not belabour itself with amorphous terms such as 'science' and 'sustainable' for it to look sophisticated since those terms are subordinate to education.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing critique, a few thoughts are summed up. One, it has clearly been argued that all development result from an education that is relevant and accessible. Such an education will produce human capital that is endowed with innovative ideas. Two, it has equally been argued that a country that values development will first invest in quality educational researches; for the outcomes of such will facilitate appraisal of the prevailing education system and practice. This implies that research outcomes must be utilized accordingly.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has identified universities as critical players in matters education; for through their research, they are better placed to proffer guidance concerning the best education that a country needs. Accordingly, the study recommends that such research by universities must be conducted properly with the main aim of solving

real problems. Similarly, university students must be initiated into best research practices to guarantee the future of research in the country. Research should not be presented to students as a very complex affair for this will scare them away, and even lead them into committing malpractices such as plagiarism.

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