Elun is a nonprofit providing free teacher education to schools in the developing world with a number of ongoing projects in Rwanda, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Tanzania. This article presents Elun’s ideas about education, focusing mainly on Sub-Saharan Africa. It pinpoints a number of basic failings and provides some pointers for moving forward, mainly in the area of teacher training, making teaching programs more relevant and leveraging PPPs and the private sector to enhance investment allocation.

No one needs reminding of the critical importance of education in economic development or the debilitating impacts of teacher shortages. UNESCO has reported that at least 93 countries have “an acute teacher shortage”¹ and that Sub-Saharan Africa is top of the list, with 18 million teachers needed by 2030. World Bank data indicates a pupil to teacher ratio in primary schools of roughly 43:1 for Sub-Saharan Africa and other studies have shown specific countries with ratios as high as 76:1². When less qualified³ teachers are used to fill this gap, many students leave school without even a basic education. In East Africa for example⁴, “less than one third of pupils enrolled in Standard 3 possess basic literacy and numeracy skills.”⁵

These pressures have led to increasing interest in other solutions such as public-private partnerships (PPP). Elun was formed in 2012 with a specific focus on providing well-trained teachers and devising dynamic training modules to “teach the teachers”. While building up its network of East African schools, it has become familiar with the obstacles to developing quality education. What follows is Elun’s diagnosis of existing problems and some key recommendations for moving forward.
Systemic Failure in Education

Many of the most glaring shortcomings in Sub-Saharan Africa’s schools can be traced back to broken or non-existent policies or frameworks or completely outdated or ill-adapted practices.

**Corruption, misdirection, and misuse of resources**: As Transparency International’s data reveals, misappropriation of educational funding is an enormous problem. Schools frequently never see funds promised to them. For example, between 2005-2009, approximately 48 million USD earmarked for the Kenyan Education Sector Support Programme were misappropriated. Even when funds do reach schools, they are often misdirected. Basic items may be in surplus in one school and totally lacking in another, while unpaved roads and broken transportation prevent children from even arriving at school. Textbooks and clean water may also be in short supply. Without much better frameworks for tackling corruption, millions of dollars will continue to disappear. Slack regulations – or outright regulatory failure – also lead to teacher absenteeism and demotivation.

**Curricular and methodological incoherence**: Current education systems are often woefully outdated and poorly aligned with economic necessities and skills requirements. Other countries such as Taiwan have harnessed education to turn out skilled workers and deliver rapid economic growth, while most African children are simply taught to listen and repeat. This practice dates from the Industrial Revolution and was designed to create factory workers with basic literacy skills and very little innovative ability. There is also a basic lack of understanding of educational best practices or dynamic classroom management, all of which culminates in a disjointed, “directionless” system.

**Professional development and training**: Research shows that well-educated teachers with a high degree of autonomy and a strong understanding of the links between curricula and methodology generally produce better students. Take Finland and Singapore, where competitive salaries, a respected profession and coherent government recruitment and training policy combine to produce and retain quality teachers and successful students. Contrast this with Sub Saharan Africa’s poor pay and infrastructure, excessive bureaucracy, insufficient or misdirected funding, lack of training, outdated or nonexistent curriculum, and – most seriously – huge classes. There is virtually no understanding of how to foster innovation or entrepreneurship in the classroom and the emergence of low-fee private schools frequently highlights poor teacher training.

Teachers struggle to implement or even understand reforms couched in formal language. Individual and special needs are neglected in huge classes and discipline and parental support may be a problem. Teachers struggle to encourage children to ask questions, look for answers or come up with solutions. A child may be considered “slow” or “unable” to perform at the same level as its peers whereas in other countries, children are seen as processing at different speeds, and sometimes in need of additional support. Unsurprisingly, teachers often resort to repetition or call-and-response. Students are often seen simply in terms of numbers rather than groups of distinct, talented individuals. A colonial era system cannot produce the employees needed for a tech-based economy or the leaders needed to lead Africa into a new more politically stable future.

**Boosting teacher quality for better quality education**

US studies show that teachers who are highly rated for effectiveness have a positive impact on overall student achievements. In developing countries, better quality teachers can help to offset economic and social disadvantages. Properly trained teachers are also needed to use resources such as technology and books effectively, to implement reforms and to handle disparities among students in terms of learning, disability, ethnic background, etc. In Sub Saharan Africa, a supply-side focus and better remuneration could attract young graduates into teaching and a more autonomous profession may be able trigger systemic reform. More inclusive training could also help change paradigms and devise more practical strategies.
Incremental change – impressive results: A relatively short period of training can be sufficient to boost teacher motivation and professionalization, teach new learning strategies and highlight notions of accountability to both the students and the community. It is important to stress that different methodologies are not optional but optimal for enhancing learning practices and resetting mindsets. For example, during teacher training in rural Tanzania, Elun stresses the importance of “wait time” (i.e., between when a teacher asks a question and when a student answers). This not only gives students “thinking space” and enhances their confidence, it also frequently allows them time to translate from Kiswahili back to English. Such small changes can have a massive impact on the children’s ability to be problem solvers and thinkers.

In Tanzania, initial teacher feedback from two training sessions highlights enthusiasm for new learning strategies and questioning techniques and a new awareness of how to foster creativity in students. Student feedback points to greater confidence based on more classroom discussion and less reluctance to criticize teacher authority.

Using public-private partnerships to improve quality

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) frequently possess the flexibility and agility to strengthen schools and improve teaching and teacher quality.

Regulation: Private regulatory frameworks can eliminate a great deal of waste, free up investment and cut useless red tape. For example, third party auditing in schools could be used to tackle bribery and disappearing funds. Initial government reticence may be overcome by tying funding to transparent accounting procedures and by incentives to reduce bribery and absenteeism in the form of additional grants, bonuses and resources. By engaging teachers, it may also be possible to get teaching unions on board as advocates of change.

Skills development: Business school partnerships could be used to align countries’ needs more closely with educational goals and to harness young talent. Such partnerships already exist at third level and many business schools and companies such as IBM have invested in Sub Saharan Africa. A World Bank Report has emphasized this idea as a means of promoting entrepreneurship skills and creating jobs. Extending such partnerships from high-income to all types of schools would provide opportunities for a greater number of students. The increasing focus on entrepreneurship and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) deploys similar strategies. External partnerships would forge more robust school-to-employment links. Educating children without due regard to the job market is a poor investment, especially for parents with limited resources.

Tailored micro-investment: Treating schools and communities from an organic and holistic perspective is an effective basis for using PPPs to supplement public offerings. Micro-investment and even allowing schools to manage their own funds on condition they can be held accountable, can provide an ideal solution for educational investment. This idea is similar to community-based school management but requires both internal and external regulation and input. Teacher training and community-specific adaptation measures can overcome the lack of understanding and coherence that sometimes afflicts community-based programs.

Although attempts to develop this type of action-research approach are still ongoing, micro investment strategies clearly encourage greater equity, autonomy, and cost-effectiveness than blanket investment strategies that neglect complex local issues.

Teacher training can be aligned with a differentiated investment strategy and adjusted to specific environments: depending on the school, teachers need help with questioning techniques or computer literacy or basic classroom management. Some schools require desks, others extra books or better toilets. Either way, a differentiated investment strategy provides a more focused, low-cost and grassroots approach for both governments and business alike.
At classroom level, changing teacher mindsets and practices can deliver better quality at a lower cost. At a higher strategic level, more coherent and progressive social policies are more conducive to micro-investment, job market alignment, economic growth and ultimately, better education. For Sub-Saharan Africa to succeed, a more nuanced, coherent, and “quality-centric” approach is needed to grow schools rather than simply “fixing” them.

1° *Filling classrooms with poorly trained teachers undercuts education gains, warns UN.* UN News Centre, October 2014


3° *Quality education needs qualified teachers.* UNESCO, October, 2014

4° *Are our children learning? Literacy and numeracy across East Africa 2013.* Uwezo

5° However, in an average developing country, even nine years of schooling does not necessarily mean that students are functionally literate (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008). In: *Linking Education Policy to Labor Market Outcomes*, by Tazeen Fasi, World Bank, 2008


9° *Valuing Teachers: How Much is a Good Teacher Worth?* By Eric Hanushek. Stanford, 2011

10° *Feedbacks from Teach Elun Website*


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