

# Social Dynamics: Exploring the Structural Barriers to Education for Good Governance in Africa

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<p><b>Corresponding Author</b> <b>Terfa Jato</b></p> <p>Department of Educational Foundations, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria</p> <p><b>Article History</b></p> <p>Received: 01 / 03 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 16 / 03 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 19 / 03 / 2025</p>	<p><b>Abstract:</b> Africa's monumental challenges in its quest to reform education systems capable of fostering good governance on the continent appear to be rooted in social dynamics, with an operational centre on economic, cultural and power dynamics. Though recent decades have seen improvements in enrolment rates, issues of quality, relevance and equity are still out there. Conceptually, social dynamics encompass multifaceted sociological elements shaping and directing human behaviour and societal operations. In Africa, economic, cultural and power dynamics interact in ways that minimise educational advancement. Economically, funding shortfalls stymie infrastructure and teacher development, while volatile landscapes constrain skills alignment. Disparities also abound, with poverty exacerbating inequities. Cultural dynamics manifest in diverse cultural values, resistance to Western models and gender disparities. Power dynamics manifest through patrimonial interference by political elites seeking personal agendas, relegating meritocracy. Within educational institutions, administrators and other officials engage in counterproductive power plays. Recommendations include unified educational policies, increased funding, culturally relevant curricula, prioritising girls' education, promoting indigenous languages, ensuring institutional autonomy and evidence-based policymaking.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Social Dynamics, Education, Good Governance, Economic Dynamics, Cultural Dynamics and Power Dynamics.</p>
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## Introduction

Africa, often regarded as a continent with the most underdeveloped nations, stands at a historical point, looking to combat historical challenges in order to usher in an era of sustainable development and good governance. The educational system – regarded as the bedrock for developing an informed, socially conscious and empowered citizenry (Lee, 2022), fostering critical thinking (Gibbons & Kupe, 2018), solidifying socio-economic progress (UNESCO, 2016) and fostering good governance (Ambler, 2005) – emerges as a critical factor in the dynamics of this ambitious vision. Although the path to educational reforms for good governance in Africa appears fraught with a complex web of challenges, none are perhaps more significant than those rooted in the social dynamics of African societies.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, theoretical approach, extensively reviewing and analysing existing literature and research on education, governance and social dynamics in Africa. Drawing from numerous citations and references to reports from organisations like UNESCO, World Bank and academic sources, the study develops and applies a conceptual framework with an operational centre on three key dimensions of social dynamics: economic dynamics, cultural dynamics and power dynamics. This interdisciplinary approach, drawing from sociology, education, politics and economics, allows

for a descriptive and analytical examination of the complex interplay between these dynamics.

The paper derives its background from the recognition that comprehending the unique social contexts in Africa is imperative for the optimal operation of educational systems, ultimately fostering good governance in countries across the continent. Through an explanatory approach, the study elucidates how different social dynamics interact to impact education and governance in Africa, explaining causal relationships between social forces and educational outcomes. Historically, the continent has had to contend with multi-dimensional challenges in its quest for effective educational systems that foster social environments friendly to good governance (Luckett, 2024; Duncan, 2022; Adeyemo, 2021). The study incorporates historical analysis, particularly examining the legacy of colonialism on educational systems and governance structures. The rationale for this study is grounded in the conviction that addressing the complex challenges of African educational systems requires a holistic perspective that goes beyond traditional academic analyses. While numerous studies have centralised focus on educational reforms and governance structures in isolation (e.g. Bold, Kimenyi, Mwabu, Ng'ang'a & Sandefur, 2017; Sayed & Motala, 2012), this paper synthesises various theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing education reform in Africa.

This policy-oriented paper seeks to achieve four interrelated objectives. Firstly, it aims to provide a conceptual clarification of social dynamics to comprehend their impact on educational systems in Africa. Second, it seeks to offer a bird's eye view of the current states of education and governance on the continent. Third, it aims to provide key dimensions of social dynamics that pose crucial challenges to positive change in educational systems for good governance on the continent. Lastly, it seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations derived from the analysis of social dynamics and the assessment of educational systems to contribute to positive change and foster good governance on the continent.

### The Concept of Social Dynamics

Rooted in sociology and social psychology, social dynamics is a complex concept with a focus on the patterns, processes and transformations that shape human behaviour and societal operations. According to Jones (2010), "[the] concept of social dynamics refers to the patterns, processes, and mechanisms through which individuals and groups interact, influence one another, and collectively shape their social environment" (p. 32). It is a multifaceted concept that involves various components of social life: communication patterns, group dynamics, cultural norms and power relations.

The study of social dynamics relies on diverse theoretical frameworks, each providing distinct insights into human behaviour and social relations. **Symbolic interactionism**, developed by George Herbert Mead, is a perspective that relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction (Gephart, 2002). As a perspective in the parent field of sociology, symbolic interactionism addresses how society is created and maintained through repeated interactions among individuals. **Social exchange theory**, another prominent theory, posits that individuals engage in relationships to maximise rewards while minimising costs (Emerson, 1976). This perspective directs emphasis on the role of reciprocity, trust and commitment in shaping human interactions in society. Along similar lines, **the social capital theory** emphasises the beneficial accruals from social connections, relationships and networks in the form of access to valuable resources and helpful opportunities (Putnam, 2000).

Social dynamics, as earlier observed, encompasses several interrelated elements that shape human behaviour and societal operations. **Group dynamics**, a subset of social dynamics, for instance, explores the behaviours of individuals' in-group or collective settings setting (Moreland & Levine, 2001). **Power dynamics**, another critical subset, comes with a centre on the distribution and exercise of power within a social system, shaping social hierarchies and contributing to inequality (Foucault, 1980). Similarly, **cultural dynamics** provide a lens for a valuable comprehension of social dynamics. Different cultures may demonstrate distinctive patterns of social interactions, communication styles, cultural beliefs, practices, norms and values as they evolve and impact social behaviours (Boyd & Richerson, 2005). In the contemporary era, **technological proliferation** has fostered new dimensions to social dynamics. Social networking technologies, for example, have altered the way individuals connect, share information and engage in social relations (Johnson, 2017). These changes are a testament to the dynamic nature of social dynamics and the constant evolution of the nature of social relations

### The State of Education in Africa

In recent decades, there have been notable quantitative improvements in educational access across Africa, though qualitative challenges persist. Statistical evidence from authoritative sources demonstrates significant progress in enrolment rates across various educational levels. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020) reported a substantial increase in primary school enrolment rates, rising from 60% in 2000 to 78% in 2018, representing an additional 56 million children accessing primary education. At the secondary level, the World Bank (2020) documented that gross enrolment rates in sub-Saharan Africa more than doubled, escalating from 24% in 1991 to 45% in 2018. Perhaps most notably, tertiary education experienced a fourfold increase, with gross enrolment rates advancing from 1.8% in 1991 to 8.1% in 2018 (World Bank, 2020). Despite these quantitative gains, African educational systems continue to reckon with multifaceted challenges, resulting in what many scholars characterise as a systemic crisis in educational quality and equity (Mwesigwa, 2021; Oyebola, 2021; UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF & African Union Commission, 2020).

A comprehensive meta-analysis of 145 recent empirical studies reveals persistent structural challenges across African educational systems. The research synthesis indicates that despite half a century of targeted interventions and policy reforms, approximately 33% of children fail to complete primary education. This alarming statistic has prompted the international development community to designate the situation as a "learning crisis", emphasising the urgency of addressing not just access to education, but the quality and outcomes of educational experiences (Evans & Acosta, 2020). The severity of this crisis is further illuminated by the 2020 joint report from UNICEF and the African Union Commission, which, while acknowledging progress over the 2010-2020 decade, emphasises significant equity gaps. This report provides a rigorous empirical evaluation of African education, contextualising current challenges within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25), aligned with the ambitious African Union Agenda 2063.

A critical examination reveals that beyond access, the quality of education remains a paramount concern. The continent faces what might be termed a "quality paradox" - an increasing number of graduates coupled with a dearth of skilled professionals capable of applying theoretical knowledge to practical challenges. As Oyebola (2021) astutely observes, the proliferation of degree holders has not corresponded with an equivalent increase in problem-solving capabilities or practical competencies. This qualitative deficit is exacerbated by a complex web of interconnected challenges. Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers, manifesting as persistent scepticism towards Western educational models (Mwesigwa, 2021), create resistance to formal education in some communities. Resource constraints, reflected in low average government expenditure on education (World Bank, 2021), act against infrastructure development and teacher training. Pedagogical challenges, notably the prevalence of low teacher quality (Adera, Ananga & Agajie, 2018), compromise instructional effectiveness and learning outcomes. Gender disparities, stemming from entrenched beliefs minimising the importance of girls' education (Mwesigwa, 2021), perpetuate inequalities in educational access and attainment. Systemic corruption in educational administration and resource allocation (Nyangara & Sagini, 2021) undermines institutional efficiency and effectiveness.

These challenges are further compounded by regional instability, creating an environment un conducive to sustainable educational development.

To fully comprehend the current educational landscape in Africa, it is imperative to situate these challenges within their historical context. The enduring legacies of colonisation have profoundly shaped, and in many cases distorted, the developmental trajectory of African educational systems. Smith (2018) provides a compelling analysis of how the imposition of foreign languages and curricula has created persistent obstacles to the development and integration of indigenous knowledge systems and skills. This colonial legacy continues to influence educational policies, pedagogical approaches, and the fundamental structure of educational institutions across the continent.

### **The State of Governance in Africa**

developmental trajectory. This was emphasised in a report released in 2019 by African Union, stating that good governance is an integral aspect of sustainable development and poverty reduction on the continent (African Peer Review Mechanism & African Governance Architecture, 2019). According to Fosu (2018), governance has become increasingly important in economic development, and there has been a yearning for Africa to step up to the plate.

In recent years, there have been positive changes in governance practices on the continent. Several nations have made remarkable strides in leveraging technology to enhance governance practices and public service delivery. Kenya, for instance, has implemented the e-Citizen portal, which has digitised over 90% of government services, significantly reducing bureaucracy and corruption opportunities. Nigeria's implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) system was reported in 2020 to have revolutionised government financial management, leading to the recovery of over \$9 billion in previously unaccounted funds (African Union, 2020). Similarly, several of the countries – e.g. Ghana and Tanzania – have experienced peaceful transitions of power in recent years, reflecting an increasing commitment towards democratic governance. A particularly noteworthy development in African governance emerged recently in Liberia. As Edds-Reitman and Todd (2024) report for the United States Institute of Peace, Liberia's recent presidential inauguration represented a peaceful transfer of power between opposed political parties, reinforcing its post-war democracy – an achievement that stands as an instructive counterpoint to West Africa's military coups and other erosions of democracy. Despite facing significant challenges, including poverty, corruption, and poor infrastructure, Liberia's progress in stabilising from decades of war offers valuable lessons. The country demonstrated remarkable democratic resilience in its recent elections, the first without direct international election assistance or peacekeeping forces since the end of its civil war in 2003. The elections saw record turnouts – as high as 78% – and when opposition candidate Joseph Boakai won by a margin of 1.3%, then incumbent President George Weah gracefully conceded, declaring that "Liberia has won" (Ndebele, 2023).

However, many other countries on the continent have continued with their complex relationship with governance, facing numerous challenges that have endured for decades. These challenges are essentially those generated by corruption, weak institutions, inadequate public services and political instability, and have compromised the continent's socio-economic progress and

undermined public trust in governments in countries across the continent (Transparency International, 2021). According to the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index 2021, sub-Saharan Africa continues to face significant challenges having to do with corruption, lack of regulatory enforcement and limited access to justice (World Justice Project, 2021). In their study on the state of democracy in Africa, Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis (2020) noted that while democratic institutions were comparatively more mature than they were a few decades earlier, many countries still face challenges having to do with factionalism, weak checks and balances and limited civil society engagement.

Even in Liberia, significant challenges persist. Edds-Reitman and Todd (2024) note that Liberians' poverty is so extreme that 83% live on less than \$1.25 per day and 16% of families lack regular enough access to food to avoid malnutrition in their children. The United Nations' global index of human development ranks Liberia 178th among 191 countries. While political and religious activity are fairly free, deep corruption and the impunity of the wealthy and powerful are dangerous weaknesses in governance.

Across the continent, citizens of various countries continue to face issues related to inadequate service delivery, particularly in healthcare, education and infrastructure. Insufficient investment, mismanagement and bureaucratic inefficiencies contribute to these issues (World Bank, 2019). A survey conducted in 34 countries in 2018 found that 78% of respondents expressed a yearning for more accountability and transparency in their government's operations, indicating a perceived deficiency in governance (Afrobarometer, 2018).

Political instabilities and conflicts persist in many African nations, constraining good governance and socio-economic development. These challenges are often those arising from long-standing ethnic, political and resource-driven conflicts (Wimmer, 2018). An important manifestation of governance challenges has been the military coup spree that has seen democratically elected governments overthrown in seven countries on the continent over the past four years. According to AfricaNews (2023), there have been seven military coups in Africa since August 2020, with the most recent one taking place in Gabon on the 30th of August, 2023. The countries that have experienced military coups in the past four years include Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan Guinea and Mali.

### **Principal Dimensions of Social Dynamics Posing Challenges to Positive Change in African Educational System for Good Governance**

#### ***Economic Dynamics***

Economic dynamics refer to the constant changes and fluctuations in economic conditions, including factors such as inflation, unemployment and economic growth (Shone, 2012). These dynamics exert profound effects on various aspects of society, with education being a crucial arena of impact. In Africa, economic challenges often translate into obstacles for educational systems, affecting access, quality and relevance. According to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (n.d.), economic and social dimensions of sustainable development are interdependent and reciprocally reinforcing. The changing economic and social dynamics, advancements in technology, and trends towards environmental deterioration have made it necessary to understand the linkages among these trends and the associated

changes in economic, social, and environmental conditions (World Economic and Social Survey, 2013).

In Africa, the educational system is facing challenges arising from economic dynamics, which are characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality (African Development Bank Group, 2019). These factors have led to a lack of resources for education. Limited financial resources complicate the development of educational infrastructure, the recruitment of qualified teachers and the provision of necessary learning materials. As noted by Smith (2018), inadequate funding stifles the standard educational environments, compromising the attainment of quality education and, consequently, complicating issues for good governance. Additionally, economic dynamics have a significant impact on the availability of opportunities for skill development and vocational training (Thakur, 2020). During periods of economic downturn, job opportunities may be scarce, making it imperative for educational systems to adapt and provide skills that align with emerging economic trends. Failure to do so can result in a workforce ill-equipped to address contemporary challenges, putting at great risk the potential for effective governance (Jones & Brown, 2017).

Another significant operation of economic dynamics in Africa is in shaping socio-economic disparities in education. Economic disparities, for example, contribute significantly to educational inequities in Africa (UNICEF, 2019). According to a report released by UNESCO in 2019, sub-Saharan Africa had the highest rates of education exclusion in the world. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of about 6 and 11 were out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14. Almost 60% of youth between the ages of about 15 and 17 were reported as not attending school (UNESCO, 2019). This was due to the fact that a good percentage of families on the continent are those with lower socio-economic status, who often lack the financial resources to invest in education, including school fees, uniforms and books. This limits the educational opportunities available to a great percentage of children because they are from disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting in educational disparities that pose a significant challenge to good governance in Africa (World Economic Forum, 2022). One of the primary ways in which educational disparities have been linked to poor governance is limited political participation (UNESCO, 2023). Ultimately, a well-educated populace is more likely to engage actively in civic and political processes, contributing to democratic practices and holding leaders accountable and enhancing governance practices (Mbaku, 2020).

### ***Cultural Dynamics***

Cultural dynamics are an important dimension of social dynamics that poses challenges to positive change in African educational systems for good governance. The continent is home to a diverse range of cultures, each with its own unique set of values and beliefs. These cultural differences have made it difficult to implement educational policies that are effective across the board. For example, in some African cultures, education is not seen as a priority, and children are expected to work and contribute to the family's income. In other cultures, education is highly valued, as a result of which children are expected to excel academically (Aikman, 2007).

Cultural dynamics on the continent also play out in resistance to the Western educational models, which are based on the principles of individualism, competition and meritocracy. The

African educational system is more community-oriented, emphasising the importance of social relationships and collective responsibility. Therefore, the imposition of Western educational models has led to resistance from some African communities, who view it as alien to their cultural identity, values and traditions, leading to scepticism and opposition (Adeyemi, 2015). This resistance usually prevails against the adoption of progressive educational practices necessary for fostering good governance.

Cultural dynamics shape gender disparities in African educational system. Deeply entrenched cultural norms may prioritise male education over female education, constraining opportunities for women and perpetuating gender inequality (World Economic Forum, 2022). On the continent, the gender-based educational gap is reducing, but girls still remain behind boys at lower and upper secondary levels of education (World Economic Forum, 2022; Global Partnership for Education). Moreover, socio-cultural factors such as poverty, early marriages, and teen pregnancies contribute to higher school dropout rates among girls (Mail & Guardian, 2023). When girls are blocked from access to education, their opportunities to participate in the workforce, earn a living and contribute to the economy, become significantly constrained. This, in turn, undermines the overall economic growth and development of the country (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Moreover, gender disparities in education can generate significant diversities in leadership positions, which, turn, can undermine good governance (United Nations, 2015).

Language is a crucial aspect of cultural dynamics that presents a complex challenge to positive change in educational systems, particularly in the context of good governance (Heugh, 2009). With an estimated 1250 to 2000 languages spoken across the continent, the linguistic landscape is intricate and diverse, compounding issues having to do with the establishment of standardised educational practices (Heugh, 2009). The cultural dynamics surrounding language choice are deeply rooted in historical legacies and societal norms, influencing decision-making processes and solidifying inequalities (Makalela, 2015). The forced adoption of dominant or colonial languages can lead to cultural alienation, hinder effective learning and perpetuate cultural stereotypes (Brock-Utne, 2007). This cultural barrier not only affects education but also generates far-reaching implications for good governance, undermining social cohesion, adding fuel to the generator of disparities and clogging the wheels of the development of an informed and empowered citizenry essential for effective governance (Bamgbose, 2000).

### ***Power Dynamics***

African educational systems are often characterised by deeply entrenched power structures that operate with direct impacts on educational policies, resource allocation and curriculum development. Political leaders often wield significant influence within these power structures, leading to a lack of inclusivity and the marginalisation of certain groups within the educational system (Ezumah, 2020). In many cases, political leaders on the continent use their influence to advance personal or political agendas rather than prioritising the needs of the broader population. Political interference in educational matters is also a common challenge in many African countries, affecting the autonomy of educational institutions. Patronage networks often dictate the course that appointments, resource distribution and policy decisions take, undermining the meritocratic principles necessary for fostering

academic excellence for good governance on the continent (Motala & Pampallis, 2005). This interference can lead to a focus on short-term political gains in a manner prejudicial to long-term educational development.

Power dynamics also operate at lower levels of hierarchy within educational systems (Ezumah, 2020). School administrators, teachers and local education officials may engage in power struggles at the expense of the implementation of positive changes. Nepotism and corruption can further create compounding effects on these challenges, creating a system that ranks merit second to personal connections in advancement (Motala & Pampallis, 2005).

**All things considered**, political dynamics heavily direct political actions in the formulation and implementation of educational policies in African nations. Changes in government, be they through a military takeover or a democratic transition, often lead to shifts in educational priorities and approaches. These changes can disrupt long-term educational plans, leading to a lack of continuity and consistency in educational programmes (Diamond, 2019).

The operation of power dynamics with significant impact on African educational systems generates significant implications for positive change. Efforts to introduce progressive educational reforms may face resistance from those who benefit from the existing power structures, potentially undermining good governance on the continent.

## Conclusion

Sustainable education, a critical foundation for good governance in Africa, faces significant challenges due to a complex outworking of social dynamics. Among these are economic barriers, cultural complexities and imbalances in the power structure, all of which clog the wheels of the effective operation and advancement of educational systems. The economic dimension of social dynamics is a central force, as it directly influences resource allocation, infrastructure development and the cultivation of skills necessary for a knowledge-based society. Limited financial resources, inadequate investments in education, and the failure to align curricula with evolving economic demands further exacerbate disparities in educational access and quality. Without addressing these economic constraints, Africa's education systems struggle to adapt to the rapidly changing global economic system, thus limiting the continent's capacity to foster innovation and competitiveness. Cultural complexities also play a significant role, manifesting in deep-seated traditions and values that often resist educational reforms. In many African societies, cultural norms may perpetuate gender inequalities, discourage critical thinking or prioritise conventional knowledge over modern, progressive practices. This resistance can obstruct the inclusion of marginalised groups and hamper efforts to create an inclusive, dynamic, and forward-thinking educational environment. Education systems must, therefore, engage in cultural dialogue, fostering a balance between preserving cultural identity and embracing the transformative power of modern education. Unequal power dynamics further complicate the path to sustainable education. In many African nations, political structures are often characterized by hierarchical power relations that may prioritise vested interests over widespread educational reform. This imbalance can result in policies that favour certain groups, perpetuate corruption or hinder the implementation of far-reaching educational changes that would benefit the broader population. **Recommendations**

To chart the course for sustainable education, a collective, multidimensional approach is essential. Governments, civil society, educational institutions and the private sector must collaborate to address economic barriers, engage with cultural dynamics, and recalibrate power relations. This unified effort will foster an educational system that is not only resilient but also adaptive, capable of producing informed, socially conscious, and empowered citizens. The following measures are thus recommended:

- The African Union and regional bodies should join and co-ordinate efforts to create a unified educational policy framework for addressing economic, cultural and power dynamics. This framework should be adaptable to the diverse contexts found within different regions of the continent.
- National governments should make resource mobilization for adequate funding for infrastructure, teacher training and the provision of learning materials a top subject for priority. This is particularly important in regions facing economic challenges.
- International development partners, including donor agencies and philanthropic organisations, need to augment funding through development assistance and grants.
- Ministries of education in collaboration with curriculum bodies, educationists, linguists, community representatives and other experts should formulate culturally relevant, context-specific curriculums, pedagogical approaches and educational policies that integrate values and indigenous knowledge systems within local contexts. These should be implemented across educational institutions with sensitivity to cultural diversity.
- Governments need to make girls' education a national priority. This can be achieved through special programmes, incentives and community mobilisation initiatives carried out in partnership with civil society organisations, community leaders and women's empowerment groups to enrol and retain girls, thus bridging the gender gap in education.
- Linguists should be commissioned by ministries of education and curriculum institutes to develop teaching and reading materials for early education in traditional African languages and mother tongues. These should be integrated in the curriculum mandated across early stages of teaching and learning in schools by education administrators.
- Laws need to be enacted by governments to ensure complete institutional autonomy and minimise interference from partisan interests in the operation of educational governing bodies and university senates, which themselves should adopt processes driven by merit-based, transparent systems.
- Governments using longitudinal surveys and open data need to continuously evaluate the outcomes of educational initiatives using robust metrics to guide evidence-based policymaking and reforms in the sector.

By overcoming these social, economic and political challenges, Africa can cultivate an educational framework that supports sustainable development and promotes good governance. Such an approach will unlock the continent's vast potential, enabling it to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. The



future of Africa's development depends on its ability to transform its educational systems, ensuring that they are inclusive, equitable, and conducive to the emergence of a new generation of leaders and innovators. Through sustained commitment and reform, Africa can chart a course towards a prosperous and just future.

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