Achieving SDG 4: A Challenge of Education Justice

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Abstract

The main point in this chapter is that SDG 4 targets cannot be achieved without education justice, which entails that every child, young person and adult benefit from quality education and lifelong learning. There is no justification for the injustices arising from poor-quality education and exclusion as they exist today. Accordingly, tackling the problem of social, political and economic exclusion that emerges from the education sector, and the limitations they impose on the prospects of some individuals, must be prioritised to expedite the realisation of SDG 4. That entails, among other things, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Drawing a nexus between education justice in basic education and higher education, the chapter exposes the nature of the challenges that sustain the injustices of educational exclusion and poor-quality education. These include the knock-on effects that injustices in basic education have on higher education, especially for students from marginalised schools. Interventions that seek to advance education justice towards attaining SDG 4 are also discussed.

Keywords: Basic education, education justice, education injustice, higher education, quality education, SDG 4

Introduction

All societies, regardless of their prevailing political dispensations, face the problem of inequality in one form or another (Scanlon, 1996). Inequalities in society are sometimes a product of deep-

seated historical structures and must be addressed if a society is to make meaningful progress without leaving anyone behind. Poverty, disadvantage, socioeconomic exclusion, and other forms of inequality, are all examples of what needs to be addressed to advance equitable human progress and the realisation of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Broadly, quality education serves as an important, if not the most important, leveller in modern society. Achieving the outcomes of SDG 4, which broadly aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, is an essential part of tackling these inequalities and realising global social justice. Yet, equal access to quality education remains out of reach for many of those who need it most (Azevedo *et al*, 2021; Gust, Hanushek & Woessmann, 2024; UNICF and AUC, 2021).

This chapter frames the challenge of achieving SDG 4 outcomes as a challenge of education justice. The underlying aim of SDG 4 is to expand opportunities across all phases in the education system. In this sense, education justice is a focal area in SDG 4. The goal's targeted outcomes reinforce this focus as they seek to ensure, among other things, access to quality education across all phases of education. In essence, this means that education is equally distributed to all children, young people and adults across demographics, including people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and those from vulnerable groups. Unterhalter (2019) describes SDG 4 as a 'victory for proponents of a vision of quality education that was orientated to … equalities' (p. 40). Focusing on the higher education phase, this chapter examines the advancement of SDG 4 through the lens of education justice.

Education justice is necessary for any modern society to attain meaningful development. Its prevalence guarantees an adequate quality of life for its people. However, a lack of education justice may be framed as a problem of human development (Sen, 1999). This translates to a struggle for 'a fully adequate quality of life and for minimal justice' among socially and culturally excluded, economically disadvantaged and politically marginalised people (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 16). In this sense, education justice, which guarantees the 'human minimum' of a decent standard of living for the world's poor and excluded, becomes a catalyst for global justice and collective human development (Oruka, 1997).

This chapter examines the idea of education justice within the broader movement of equality. As we argue that education justice is a precursor for achieving the SDG 4 outcomes, we highlight challenges that sustain the injustices of educational exclusion and poor-quality education, and some interventions that have been implemented to speed up change, advance education justice and, ultimately, SDG 4.

What is education justice?

Education justice could be understood as an expansive concept with divergent and contextually-driven understandings. It often has similar objectives to goals that are set for achieving academic inclusion and economic redistribution, among other opportunities, for those in marginalised groups. To Nieuwenhuis (2010), the notion of educational equality, or equity, is based on the idea that 'the state must guarantee a set of liberties, implying that [everyone] shall have the right to equally good education', irrespective of their social, economic, political, cultural or family background (p. 273). To Cazden (2012), education justice includes 'ensuring access … to an intellectually rich curriculum for all students, especially those whose families and communities have been denied that access in the past' (p. 182). This is based on the common understanding that good quality education is part of the answer to poverty alleviation (Connell, 1991).

For Tan (2020), social justice is generally conceived to be concerned with the provision of social arrangements that allow everyone to participate fully and equally in the affairs of society. To guarantee equally good education and its associated liberties to every child, young person and adult, the state must ensure, among other things, that more resources are allocated, and be involved in the process of dismantling the barriers that prevent marginalised people from participating equally with others as full members of society. The latter makes equity central to the notion of education justice. In unequal societies, education justice has become a necessity for the same reasons we care about gender equality/justice, economic justice and climate justice, among others.

Conceptually, the notion of education justice suggests two distinct but interrelated concepts— that is, education and justice. Education is a fundamental human right. Access to it enables

individuals to realise their full potential, and take advantage of opportunities that offer development and expanded economic activities. (Nussbaum 2011), (Sen, 1983, 1985, 1992).

Education justice may also be understood from the perspective of its conceptual opposite—that is, education injustice. This is because claims about the need for social, political and economic justice, in any form, are mostly discussed in relation to injustices, marginalisation and disadvantages, which are often the outcome of social exclusion (Daniels, Porter & Thompson, 2022). In this analysis, we conceive of education justice as a state of affairs where the provision of and participation in quality education prevails. That is, when guarantees for every child, young person and adult to benefit from quality education, including lifelong learning, are in place. However, accessibility is not the only condition for good quality education. The availability of resources that are required by the different groups of learners (for example, those with disabilities) should also be ensured.

A casual stroll through our streets and institutions today reveals an abundance of injustices in all forms. Particularly worrisome are injustices in the education sector, which threaten not just our ability to achieve SDG outcomes, but the future of our societies and planet. As Chimakonam (2019) states: '[A] badly educated citizenry is the first enemy of the state' (p. 181). This means that the lack of access to quality education for all citizens has the potential to breed poorly educated, sometimes miseducated, citizens who endanger society. As such, access to quality and equitable education for all becomes a matter of justice.

The idea of education justice is suggestive of, among other things, education as a tool for ensuring full and meaningful participation in economic, social, political and cultural life. It is a pathway for socioeconomic mobility, and a tool for providing substantive opportunities for all people to develop the capabilities needed to lead a life of value and to participate fully in the social, economic and political life of one's community. These ideas present quality education as one of the 'primary goods' – to use Rawls's (1971) term – that every rational person is not just presumed to want but should be entitled to as a member of the human community. The elimination of injustice and the achievement of SDG 4 in this sense becomes what philosophers such as

Scanlon (1996) call 'a political objective of the first importance' (p. 1). Consequently, this is a constitutional responsibility of all states and a moral imperative in general.

While for many years, after the declaration of education as a human right in 1948, education justice has focused mainly on basic education, as highlighted by Sabzlieva *et al* (2022), the right to higher education continues to receive increased attention. This has been driven by, among other things, the widespread acknowledgement of the value of higher education in socioeconomic advancement towards a common good for society.

Significant strides have been made in advancing access to higher education. However, many young people, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, remain excluded. Examining higher education in relation to SDG 4, particularly from a social justice perspective, highlights persisting challenges. For example, inequitable access based on geography and socioeconomic backgrounds, and the changes that need to be made to address the different needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

What is education injustice?

An analysis of education injustice in higher education would be incomplete without highlighting its existence in basic education. Broadly, students who are excluded from basic education would automatically be excluded from higher education. Similarly, students who receive poor-quality basic education have a lower chance of gaining access to higher education, and those who make it are often not adequately prepared for higher education. In other words, achieving justice in higher education would be a challenge if injustice persists in basic education. This section exposes various challenges that sustain education injustice in basic education as a lead-in for highlighting education injustice in higher education.

In 2021, UNICEF and the African Union Commission (AUC) reported that access to basic education in Africa has improved significantly. The proportion of children of primary school age who are not in school has reduced by more than 50%, from 35% in 2000 to 17% in 2019. Similarly, the proportion of children of upper secondary school age who are not in school decreased from 63% to 53% over the past two decades. However, significant challenges remain. The report estimates

that in 2019, there were 105 million children of primary and secondary school age who were not enrolled in school. In the same year, on average, one in three children in a cohort does not complete primary school (UNICEF & AUC, 2021). These excluded children do not stand a chance of participating in higher education.

One problem is the number of unqualified teachers in primary and secondary schools in many poor and developing countries. For example, according to Adeyeye (2020), as much as 38% of primary school teachers and 24% of junior secondary school teachers in Nigeria are unqualified. Recruiting unqualified teachers to address teacher shortages in rural schools, as a way of achieving education for all, in countries like Zimbabwe has been reported to result in 'lower quality education and student achievements' (Mukeredzi, 2016, p. 1).

Many studies have highlighted the phenomenon of 'exclusion from learning'. An assessment of learning in Kenya's basic education system that was conducted by the Uwezo Kenya in 2015 revealed low learning levels, especially among learners in rural areas, and an inequitable distribution of teachers. Similarly, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which assesses reading comprehension and monitors trends and indicators of growth in reading literacy, has consistently shown gaps in the reading achievement of grade 4 learners in South Africa. Results of a study conducted in 2021 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, which was released in 2023, show that 81% of grade 4 pupils in South Africa could not read for meaning.

While significant strides have been made to advance equity in education and gender equality, intractable challenges persist. These challenges arise from, among other things, structural factors such as the inequitable distribution of educational and other resources, as well as gender norms and cultural beliefs, which skew the parity of participation, especially for girls. An understanding of the intersectionality of gender with other drivers of inequality is critical in advancing gender equality in education. As such, to address barriers to gender equality in education effectively, a gender transformative approach must concern itself with the various interacting drivers of gender inequality. These include cultural norms; beliefs and practices; discriminatory gender stereotypes; poverty; safety; and disability.

While enrolments in higher education have increased significantly, entrenched inequalities that mirror those in basic education persist. Learners who are subjected to poor basic education have a limited chance of participating and succeeding in higher education. Generally, higher education in sub-Saharan Africa is only accessible to a small elite. The proportion of each cohort that gets access to higher education yearly ranges from 9% to 10% in the region. As described by Darvas *et al* (2017), this is a consequence of deeply entrenched patterns of inequitable access to higher education, indicating that the sector has failed to address the challenges brought on by the inequalities it is meant to dismantle. As the authors further observe, 'patterns of access to tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa have generally reinforced and reproduced social inequality rather than eroding its pernicious social and economic effects' (2017, p. xv).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted some of the systemic challenges that hinder the realisation of both equitable access and outcomes in higher education in Africa. A study by Mtawa *et al* (in press) concluded that while the adoption of digital technologies and pedagogies during the pandemic was well-intentioned, it increased inequality of access. This is because it disproportionately benefited universities and students who had adequate access to ICT and connectivity, and the knowledge to use them, at the institutional and household levels. Of equal importance to access is the question of quality. Wangenge-Ouma and Langa (2014) have highlighted the phenomenon of 'exclusion from within' in higher education institutions, where students gain access to university but are excluded from a meaningful relationship with knowledge. In this sense, they acquire credentials but do not learn sufficiently.

Financial resources are among the most critical assets that universities depend on to enhance access and offer high-quality education. This makes it essential for universities to sustain their financial health. However, all university systems across the world are facing financial challenges in varying degrees. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed widespread differences and inequalities in terms of institutional resource capacities to manage the crisis and its costs. For this reason, many higher education institutions were unable to embody changes and put strategies in place that dealt with providing grants, reducing tuition fees and providing digital learning resources. These measures were commonly adopted in upper-income countries to ensure access for students (Mtawa *et al*, in press).

Although universities across the world experienced funding-related challenges during COVID-19, these were deeper in sub-Saharan Africa, given the region's history of underfunding. In Kenya, for instance, university funding for the 2021/22 financial year was cut by 9%. Kenya's public universities were allocated KES 99.9 billion compared to KES 109.3 billion in the previous financial year. Audit reports of public universities in Kenya show that many of them are financially insolvent. In South Africa, funding for universities was cut by R7.7 billion in 2021/2022 (National Treasury, 2021). The cuts also affected student financial aid, which had implications for student access and participation.

Some of the responses by universities to funding cuts have had negative implications for accessibility. In 2021, the University of Nairobi increased tuition and other fees significantly to address funding challenges. The university's enrolment data for 2022 show a decline in enrolments by 7 795 students (from 55 488 students in 2020/21 to 47 693 in 2021/22). This decrease in enrolment is attributed to the university's significant increase in tuition and other fees (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022).

Another manifestation of education injustice takes the form of epistemic oppression, defined by Dotson (2014) as the "persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilise persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinder one's contributions to knowledge production' p. 116). This hindrance according to Dotson often takes the form of an "unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers' (p. 115), or the deliberate epistemic exclusion of a particular group of knowers, for example, women in patriarchal societies, minority groups in multicultural societies and indigenous populations in settler-colonial societies.

Broadly, epistemic oppression may be understood to encapsulate the unjust exercise of authority in the conception, production, structuring, justification, and dissemination of knowledge and ways of knowing by one group – with dominant powers and advantages – over another. In other words, it is a form of oppression related to knowledge and knowing subjects. To Fricker (1999), this form of oppression is best captured when society is organised in a way that accords unfair advantages to the powerful, who then use these advantages to 'structure' people's perception of the social world to their advantage (p. 191).

The epistemic oppression of women is a form of gender-based injustice that systematically excludes women from knowledge-making practices. It involves the structuring of epistemology in a way that silences women's perspectives in the production, legitimisation and dissemination of knowledge and ways of knowing. This could happen when: an unfair advantage (or more epistemic credibility) is given to the ideas and opinions of men over women in the production and justification of knowledge; the overall value of women's education and the quality of their intellectual contributions is called into question; and there are unfriendly academic environments that are insensitive to the epistemic needs of women in the knowledge production process (Muhanguzi, 2019). Overall, epistemic oppression manifests in ways such as curriculums that perpetuate harmful stereotypes against women and marginalised communities, pedagogical approaches that engender passive learning, language and communication patterns that limit the participation of learners in the classroom, and assessment practices that prioritise a narrow set of knowledge and skills (Omodan, 2023).

As injustices in basic education have a direct bearing on injustices in higher education, interventions to enhance education justice in higher education are necessary to address the challenges in basic education. The right to higher education cannot be achieved when millions of children are excluded from basic education or are subjected to poor-quality basic education.

Advancing SDG 4 through education justice interventions

Several studies have been carried out on education justice across the world. Most of these have focused on basic education, perhaps because of its foundational role. However, such studies have important lessons for higher education. In East Asia, China specifically, Tan (2020) offers an interesting empirical perspective of social justice education with Chinese characteristics. According to Tan, Shanghai's Municipal Education Commission developed a social justice education model that attends primarily to 'educational equity between schools rather than between students' (Pp. 1 393-1 398). What this means is that the policy prioritises the inclusion of weak schools, rather than students, in the high-quality index.

This shift in focus offers an insightful perspective on redistributing resources in a way that reduces the gap not just between particular individuals, but between groups and societies. Perhaps the most important lesson from this approach is that when inclusion is directed at individuals instead of groups, achieving community economic mobility becomes difficult. This is due to the limited compound effect of individual progress. Inequalities between educational institutions are equally pronounced within higher education systems. In South Africa, for example, the higher education landscape is broadly characterised by two types of universities: historically advantaged institutions and historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). The former are relatively well-resourced and are located mainly in major urban areas. During apartheid, these universities were for white students only. HDIs, however, were reserved for Black population groups, and are still generally under-resourced and located in marginalised areas.

The South African government has implemented various initiatives to address the plight of HDIs to ensure that they provide quality education to the many poor students who attend these institutions. Initiatives include the HDI Development Grant, which was renamed the Sibusiso Bengu Development Programme in 2022. Objectives of the grant include: strengthening institutional management and governance structures; improving infrastructure for learning and teaching, research, student housing and ICT; enabling effective staff recruitment, retention and progression; and enhancing student life and success. Overall, the grant seeks to address the inequalities that negatively impact the development and sustainability of HDIs.

Cuba's example offers one of the most renowned success stories of a state-sponsored education justice programme. In 2008, the Latin American country channeled as much as 14% of its GDP to education investments, substantially higher than most other countries across the world. This government policy was motivated by the common understanding that 'only good-quality, empowering education could conquer Cuba's acute poverty, ignorance and underdevelopment' (Kronenberg, 2015).

Inadequate infrastructure is often cited as one of the problems that developing countries face in their attempt to provide quality education to all. However, due to the rigorous combination of formal and informal learning, inadequate facilities in Cuba do not seem to impinge on the

educational outcomes of Cuban students. In fact, according to Bearman (2020), 'Cuba's students in the worst state schools test similarly on most academic tests as some of the best private schools elsewhere in Latin America'. This is attributed to 'an emphasis on teacher quality, receiving education from a young age, consistent teacher training and assistance, and a strong national curriculum, which is lacking in many other states' (p. xx).

Based on Cuba's example, it can be deduced that the advancement of education justice on a large scale, where equity and excellence are pursued, is an achievable goal. Initiatives in this respect include affirmative action, engagement with communities, and innovation in teaching and learning, as illustrated below.

Kenya offers a good example of affirmative action in higher education. The country's university placement policy provides for affirmative action in terms of gender, people with disabilities and those from marginalised/minority communities. As part of the policy, university entry requirements are lowered by two points for women where the entry requirement is higher than C+ (C+ is the minimum overall grade required for university admission), and specific programme requirements are lowered for the benefit of the underrepresented groups. As the figure below illustrates, this has resulted in the gender gap being narrowed in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and public higher education institutions, from 50% before 2000 to 10% in 2000 (Muraguri, 2020).

Figure 1. Gender representation in TVET and university placement in Kenya
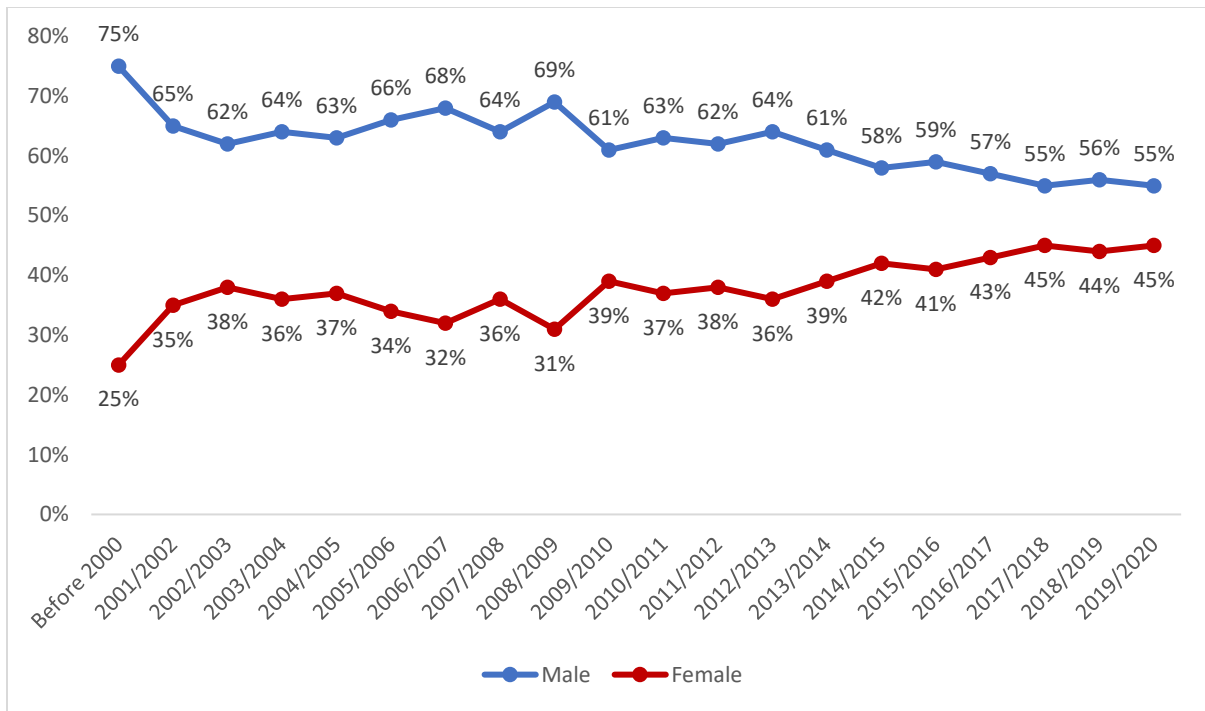
Source: Muraguri (2020)

Gender representation has also improved in a number of programmes. For example, the percentage of women in the health sciences (medicine, nursing and pharmacy) has increased from 34% in 2014/15 to 41% in 2019/20 and in engineering from 18% to 24% over the same period (Muraguri, 2020).

Community engagement programmes constitute a critical pathway through which universities and other higher education institutions support the enrolment of students from especially marginalised communities. The University of Pretoria (UP) in South Africa offers a good example. To ensure that a greater number of students from marginalised communities can participate in higher education, some of the university's programmes are aimed at building stronger connections with schools that serve these communities.

Through its JuniorTukkie programme, UP carries out initiatives that seek to enhance the academic preparation of students in grades 9-12, and encourage their attendance at UP. The university's Tuks Leadership and Individual Programme (dubbed TULIP), which was founded in 2016, is a student-led initiative whereby UP students voluntarily tutor promising high school learners in marginalised areas. The initiative has five components: leadership development and mentorship,

academic support and tutoring, financial education and bursary support, human development, and application support.

An equally important initiative is the university's Pre-University Academy (PUA), which aims to broaden university access to students from marginalised communities in STEM (science, engineering, technology and mathematics) programmes. Within the suite of PUA programmes is a Saturday school programme that presents seven courses (mathematics, physical science, natural science, creative writing, language and literacy skills, computer literacy, and examination preparation) for learners in grades 8-12, which is aimed at complementing their school work. PUA aims to eventually reach 30,000 learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning a necessity. The closure of universities and the consequent inability to continue with face-to-face teaching and learning, led to the adoption of large-scale online teaching and learning. As such, the pandemic offered universities the opportunity to rethink new digital, online and pedagogical possibilities. Blended learning provides opportunities for universities to address some of the limitations of the residential educational model. The various blended learning models provide multiple possibilities for innovation. For example, the flex model, where the majority of instruction takes place online with contact sessions as needed, is ideal for students who can only study on a part-time basis, with contact sessions being organised in blocks (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe, 2020). The flexibility provided by blended learning makes it possible for universities to broaden access to diverse student groups.

Online and blended learning are also important enablers for lifelong learning, reskilling and upskilling. Various studies have emphasised the need for this in the context of the rapid changes in the skills landscape (Azhar, 2021; Smith and Browne, 2021; Wangenge-Ouma, 2022). This requires a shift in the delivery of education towards the provision of flexible lifelong learning opportunities. The ultimate aim is to enable people to continuously improve their knowledge, acquire new skills, enhance their working possibilities and improve their overall quality of life.

Many African universities offer various opportunities for lifelong learning through, among other things, evening and weekend programmes, massive open online courses (MOOCs), e-learning

and short courses/capacity-building programmes (mainly provided by business schools, campus companies and, increasingly, private companies), and web-based learning resources on platforms such as Udemy. However, the development of MOOCs and web-based learning in Africa is in the nascent stage. This is mainly due to a lack of access to requisite technological infrastructure and facilities, and inadequate internet connectivity (Wangenge-Ouma, 2022; Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe, 2020; Zeleza and Okanda, 2021). Nevertheless, sustained adoption, expansion and investment in these approaches hold immense promise for reducing education inequalities and ensuring the attainment of inclusive and equitable quality education opportunities for all, from primary to higher education.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have demonstrated that SDG 4 cannot be attained without education justice. As quality education is a human right, there is no justification for the education injustices (exclusion and poor-quality education) that exist today. For this reason, tackling the problem of social, political, and economic exclusion perpetuated by regimes of injustice that arise in the education sector must be prioritised to expedite the attainment of SDG 4, which targets inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. This has some policy implications for approaches to education justice. First, in the area of improving quality, some lessons can be drawn from the Chinese approach. The latter would entail increased state investments in balancing the resource inequity that exists between rural/public underfunded schools in underserved communities to enable them to compete favourably with urban/private schools. This will demand investments in quality and modern learning infrastructures, regular teacher training programmes, and innovative and state-of-the-art learning technologies, among others. Most importantly, teacher training must be prioritised to improve the quality of learning that students receive, no matter the location of their educational institutions, whether in the city or the rural area. Cuba's example is instructive here.

Second, measures must be put in place to ensure that marginalised and underrepresented groups are not left behind through society and group-sensitive initiatives like affirmative action programmes when and where necessary. This will ensure that underrepresented groups,

especially in the higher education sector, have a platform to mobilise for economic and general human development. Collectively, states must prioritise and contextualise continental and regional policies to the needs of their societies. In other words, policies must be designed to be responsive to the needs of individual communities to maximise outcomes as they affect specific groups. By way of conclusion, we contend that for states to achieve SDG 4 targets and comprehensive quality education justice for every child, young person and adult, these recommendations, amongst others, must be translated into action plans at all levels of education.

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