



EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PLANNING IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

African educational policy and planning are essential in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 4 and overall sustainable development across the continent. This paper examines the numerous obstacles faced in African educational policy development and implementation. These include persistent underfunding, a lack of physical and technological infrastructure, inequities in provision and outcomes, ineffective governance, scarcity of trained teachers, and vulnerability to external shocks like climate change, conflict and economic crises. Using data from secondary and recent sources (reports, empirical research, from 2023-2026), the study explores the detrimental impacts of these impediments on educational access, equity, quality and relevance, thereby perpetuating inequality and impeding human development. It then offers viable prospects for moving forward, including: scaling up domestic resource mobilization, adoption of inclusive and participatory approaches to policy-making, leveraging technological innovations to overcome infrastructural challenges, and investing in human capital. Additionally, it stresses the imperative of policy alignment with continental and international strategies (e.g., Continental Education Strategy for Africa-CESA), and incorporation of sustainability education and building resilience. Finally, it outlines specific measures to address risks, including fiscal volatility, the digital divide and implementation gaps. This work ultimately emphasizes that transparency, inclusive and equitable reform processes, collaborative approaches to policy-making, and agile governance structures will enable African countries to develop robust, resilient education systems to facilitate development and the well-being of their people.

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1. Introduction

Educational policy and planning encompass the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies that determine the accessibility, quality, equity, relevance, and sustainability of education systems (UNESCO, 2023). In Africa, these processes are shaped by complex political, economic, social, technological, and environmental conditions that influence educational outcomes and broader development trajectories (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2025). As education remains a critical driver of human capital development, poverty reduction, innovation, social inclusion, and economic transformation, effective educational policy and planning have become indispensable for achieving sustainable development across the continent.

The African Union and UNESCO recognize education as a strategic instrument for realizing Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seek to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2025; UNESCO & AU, 2016). Despite these commitments, progress has remained uneven across many African countries. Recent evidence highlights persistent challenges, including low learning proficiency,

poor school completion rates, inadequate educational financing, widening digital inequalities, shortages of qualified teachers, weak governance systems, and disparities in educational access among rural populations, girls, and learners with disabilities (García-Martín & Fernández, 2025; UNESCO Office Dakar & African Union, 2023). These challenges continue to undermine educational quality, equity, and relevance despite successive policy reforms.

Recent empirical evidence further suggests that the principal challenge lies not in policy formulation but in policy implementation. UNESCO Office Dakar and the African Union (2023) report that inequitable resource allocation, limited institutional capacity, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, and disparities in educational provision continue to weaken policy effectiveness across the continent. Likewise, Zickafoose et al. (2023) identify inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, governance deficiencies, conflict, and socio-economic inequalities as major barriers to achieving SDG 4 in Sub-Saharan Africa. Zhang (2024) also demonstrates that although investment in education contributes significantly to sustainable development, the benefits are substantially reduced where implementation capacity remains weak and policy execution is inconsistent.

Although previous studies have examined challenges such as inadequate financing, infrastructure deficits, governance weaknesses, digital exclusion, and educational inequalities, these issues have largely been investigated independently or from broader global perspectives. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to developing an integrated understanding of how these interconnected challenges collectively influence educational policy and planning within the African context. Similarly, relatively few studies have combined recent African empirical evidence with practical implementation strategies and contingency measures capable of strengthening policy execution under the frameworks of Agenda 2063, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), and SDG 4. This gap limits the availability of context-specific policy guidance required for building resilient and sustainable education systems across diverse African settings.

Educational policy and planning therefore remain problematic despite the adoption of Agenda 2063 and SDG 4 because ambitious policy commitments have frequently exceeded institutional and implementation capacities. Persistent underinvestment in education, fragmented governance structures, inadequate stakeholder participation, political instability, climate-related disruptions, armed conflicts, rapid technological changes, and growing digital inequalities continue to constrain effective policy implementation across many African countries (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2025; UNESCO

Office Dakar & African Union, 2023; Zickafoose et al., 2023). These structural challenges have slowed progress towards achieving inclusive, equitable, and quality education while widening existing disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

Against this background, this study addresses the persistent gap between educational policy aspirations and implementation outcomes in Africa. It examines the major challenges affecting educational policy formulation and implementation, evaluates emerging opportunities for reform, identifies potential implementation risks, and proposes practical strategies for strengthening educational planning to support sustainable development. The originality of the study lies in its integration of recent African empirical evidence (2023–2026) with continental and international policy frameworks to provide a comprehensive, context-sensitive, and implementation-oriented perspective on educational policy and planning. Overall, the paper provides a critical assessment of the challenges confronting educational policy and planning in Africa, evaluates prospects for reform, and presents strategic recommendations for enhancing resilient, inclusive, and sustainable education systems across the continent.

2. Problem Statement

Despite sustained commitments under Agenda 2063, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), educational policy and planning outcomes across many African countries remain below expected targets. Although numerous countries have developed comprehensive education policies and strategic plans, significant gaps persist between policy intentions and actual educational outcomes. Recent evidence indicates that many African education systems continue to experience inadequate financing, poor educational infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, limited access to digital technologies, and persistent inequalities associated with gender, disability, and geographical location, all of which negatively affect educational quality and learner achievement (African Union Commission et al., 2022; Zickafoose et al., 2023; Rezende, 2023).

The challenges are evident across the entire policy cycle. At the policy formulation stage, education policies are frequently developed using centralized approaches with limited stakeholder participation, resulting in strategies that inadequately reflect local educational realities and emerging development priorities. During policy implementation, inadequate financial resources, weak institutional capacity, poor governance, insufficient monitoring mechanisms, political instability, conflict, climate-related disruptions, and limited accountability constrain the effective execution of planned interventions, causing many policy objectives to remain unrealized (African Union Commission et al., 2022; Zickafoose et al., 2023). At the

policy evaluation stage, weak data management systems, irregular monitoring, inadequate performance indicators, and limited evidence-based policy reviews reduce governments' ability to assess policy effectiveness, identify implementation gaps, and make timely policy adjustments.

Consequently, the persistent disconnect between policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation continues to undermine progress toward achieving equitable, inclusive, and quality education across Africa. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of both the structural barriers limiting policy effectiveness and the practical opportunities for strengthening educational policy and planning to support sustainable development.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the major issues constraining the formulation and implementation of education policy in Africa?
2. What are the possibilities and prospects for the reform of education planning for sustained development impacts?
3. What are the risks and contingencies to the possibilities and prospects for the reform of education planning for sustained development impacts?
4. What policy strategies can strengthen educational planning for sustainable development in Africa?

4. Theoretical Perspective

Human Capital Theory provides the theoretical foundation for this study by positing that investment in education enhances individuals' knowledge, skills, competencies, and productive capacity, thereby contributing to innovation, economic growth, and sustainable development. The theory, originally advanced by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), views education as a strategic investment that increases the quality of human resources and improves both individual and national economic performance. Within the African context, this perspective is particularly relevant because education remains central to achieving Agenda 2063, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), and broader socio-economic transformation.

Recent empirical evidence supports the applicability of Human Capital Theory in Africa. Zhang (2024) demonstrates that sustained investment in education significantly improves human capital development, labour productivity, technological innovation, and long-term economic growth. Conversely, inadequate educational financing, shortages of qualified teachers, poor infrastructure, weak governance, and persistent inequalities in access to quality education reduce the capacity of education systems to produce the skilled

workforce required for sustainable development. These challenges have contributed to disparities in learning outcomes, limited innovation capacity, and slower economic transformation across many African countries.

Human Capital Theory therefore serves as the analytical lens for interpreting the findings of this study. The identified challenges including inadequate financing, governance deficiencies, infrastructure constraints, teacher shortages, and digital inequalities are examined as barriers to human capital formation, while the proposed strategies, including increased educational investment, teacher capacity development, digital transformation, inclusive educational planning, and strengthened policy implementation, are evaluated according to their potential to enhance workforce productivity, stimulate innovation, and accelerate sustainable economic development across Africa. The theory consequently provides a coherent framework for explaining the relationship between educational policy and planning, human capital development, and sustainable development outcomes throughout the study.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative narrative literature review based on document analysis to examine challenges and prospects of educational policy and planning for sustainable development in Africa. Relevant literature was retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and institutional repositories of UNESCO, the African Union (AU), and the World Bank. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, technical reports, and official publications published between 2023 and 2026.

The search strategy employed combinations of keywords, including *educational policy*, *educational planning*, *Africa*, *sustainable development*, *SDG 4*, *Agenda 2063*, *education governance*, *education financing*, and *human capital*. Included documents addressed educational policy or planning in African countries, were published in English between 2023 and 2026, and provided empirical or policy-based evidence relevant to sustainable development. Editorials, opinion articles, duplicate records, and publications lacking sufficient methodological or policy evidence were excluded.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach. Retrieved documents were first screened for relevance, after which key information was coded according to recurring themes, including policy formulation, implementation challenges, governance, financing, equity, digital transformation, teacher development, and sustainability. The coded themes were then synthesized to identify common patterns, emerging issues, and evidence-based policy strategies that informed the discussion and conclusions of the study.

6. Results

6.1 Challenges in Educational Planning in Africa

The reviewed literature shows that educational policy and planning in Africa are constrained by interconnected financial, institutional, social, and environmental challenges that continue to impede progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The empirical evidence extracted from the reviewed studies is summarized in **Table 1**, which highlights the magnitude of these challenges, their occurrence across African countries, and their implications for sustainable educational development.

Table 1. Empirical Evidence on Challenges in Educational Policy and Planning in Africa

Challenge	Empirical Evidence	Comparative African Example	Discussion
Funding and Resource Constraints	African countries are encouraged to allocate 15–20% of public expenditure to education, yet many remain below this benchmark, resulting in inadequate infrastructure, shortages of instructional materials, and limited teacher development (African Union Commission, 2022).	Namibia and Botswana illustrate the opposite pattern: Namibia allocates roughly 20.7% of its national budget (7.8% of GDP) to education, while Botswana allocates about 22.2% of its budget (7.1% of GDP); both rank among UNESCO's (2024) top African education spenders and report correspondingly higher per-student expenditure and stronger infrastructure indicators than the sub-Saharan median of 3.5% of GDP (Aikins & Cilliers, 2025; International Monetary Fund, 2024).	Adequate, sustained financing strengthens policy implementation, quality, and long-term performance.
Access, Equity and Inclusion	More than 272 million children and youth remain out of school globally, with a substantial proportion residing in Africa (UNESCO & African Union, 2023).	Rwanda has achieved gender parity in net and gross enrolment at pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels, with girls' enrolment now surpassing boys', through targeted gender-responsive curriculum revision and disability-inclusive teacher training (United States Agency for International Development, 2023; Global Partnership for Education, 2024).	Equitable policies improve participation, reduce exclusion, and support inclusive development.
Quality and Relevance	Poor learner performance continues to be associated with outdated curricula,	Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), emphasising critical thinking, digital literacy,	Curriculum modernisation and teacher development

Challenge	Empirical Evidence	Comparative African Example	Discussion
	inadequate teacher preparation, and limited integration of digital and twenty-first-century skills (Mackatiani, Mackatiani, Ejore, & Imbova, 2023).	and problem-solving, has improved instructional relevance in junior secondary schools, though implementation remains uneven due to resource and teacher-training gaps (Mackatiani et al., 2023).	improve outcomes and workforce preparedness.
Governance and Implementation Gaps	Weak institutional capacity, fragmented implementation, corruption, and limited stakeholder participation remain major constraints (Asim, Bell, Boakye-Yiadom, Nudzor, & Mundy, 2024).	Ghana's district-level decentralisation of education governance has, in districts with functioning District Education Directorates and active community structures, improved stakeholder participation and local alignment, though the same studies show implementation gaps persist where structures are under-resourced (Asim et al., 2024).	Transparent governance and stakeholder engagement enhance effectiveness and accountability.
External Shocks	Climate change, conflicts, pandemics, and economic instability have disrupted educational systems and widened existing inequalities (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] & Dalberg, 2026).	Nigeria, Seychelles, and South Africa showed differing resilience shifting education online during COVID-19; Akpan-Obong (2023) found sociocultural and institutional factors, rather than technological access alone, determined which countries sustained tertiary continuity, with Seychelles' smaller, centrally coordinated system adapting fastest.	Resilient education systems reduce disruption and improve crisis preparedness.

Inadequate financing remains one of the most persistent obstacles to educational development across Africa. Many countries continue to invest below internationally recommended funding levels, limiting quality infrastructure, teaching resources, and teacher development opportunities (African Union Commission, 2022). Comparative evidence from higher-spending systems such as Namibia and Botswana demonstrates that sustained investment is associated with stronger infrastructure and per-student resourcing (Aikins & Cilliers, 2025), underscoring the importance of adequate, efficiently managed educational financing.

Educational inequalities also remain widespread despite enrolment gains. Girls, rural learners, children with disabilities, and populations affected by conflict continue to experience disproportionately lower

participation (UNESCO & African Union, 2023). Rwanda's experience, having achieved primary and secondary gender parity through deliberate policy design, indicates that inclusive policies contribute significantly to access and social inclusion, even as dropout among learners with disabilities remains unresolved (Global Partnership for Education, 2024).

Educational quality continues to be constrained by outdated curricula, inadequate teacher preparation, and insufficient integration of digital competencies (Mackatiani et al., 2023). Kenya's CBC reform illustrates both the promise and difficulty of modernisation: it has shifted emphasis toward digital literacy and problem-solving, but implementation has been constrained by teacher shortages and uneven resourcing, particularly in remote areas (Mackatiani et al., 2023). Governance deficiencies, weak institutional capacity, fragmented implementation, limited stakeholder participation, likewise undermine reforms; Ghana's decentralised District Education Directorates show that adequately resourced local governance can improve implementation, but resourcing gaps often blunt this effect (Asim et al., 2024). Climate change, pandemics, conflicts, and economic crises have further exposed resilience weaknesses: UNICEF and Dalberg (2026) estimate climate-related disasters have already disrupted learning for 130 million children across Eastern and Southern Africa, while Akpan-Obong's (2023) comparative study of Nigeria, Seychelles, and South Africa found institutional coordination, not infrastructure alone, distinguished more resilient systems during COVID-19. These findings indicate that Africa's educational policy challenges require integrated responses addressing financing, governance, quality, equity, and resilience simultaneously.

6.2 Prospects and Strategies for Improvement

Despite these challenges, the reviewed literature identifies evidence-based strategies capable of strengthening educational policy and planning across Africa, summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Evidence-Based Strategies for Strengthening Educational Policy and Planning in Africa

Strategy	Supporting Evidence	Expected Outcome
Greater financing and domestic resource mobilisation	Increased investment improves infrastructure, teacher development, learning resources, and implementation (Aikins & Cilliers, 2025).	Enhanced quality, access, and sustainability.
Inclusive and participatory planning	Active engagement of governments, educators, communities, parents, and learners improves ownership and responsiveness, as in Rwanda's gender- and disability-responsive curriculum and stakeholder consultation (Global Partnership for Education, 2024).	Stronger implementation and equitable outcomes.
Digital	Digital infrastructure and technologies expand access and	Greater resilience

Strategy	Supporting Evidence	Expected Outcome
transformation and innovation	strengthen continuity during emergencies, though South African evidence shows infrastructure alone is insufficient without coordination and digital-literacy training (Akpan-Obong, 2023; Chomunorwa, Mashonganyika, & Marevesa, 2023).	and digital inclusion.
Teacher empowerment and capacity building	Continuous professional development improves instructional quality, as in Kenya's ongoing recruitment and training of junior-secondary teachers for CBC delivery (Mackatiani et al., 2023).	Improved teaching effectiveness and performance.
Policy coherence with regional and global frameworks	Alignment with CESA, Agenda 2063, and SDG 4 strengthens monitoring, coordination, and accountability (African Union Commission, 2022; UNESCO & African Union, 2023).	More coherent, effective planning.
Sustainability and resilience integration	Climate education, lifelong learning, and adaptive planning strengthen preparedness; UNICEF and Dalberg (2026) show pre-emptive investment in climate-resilient schools yields strong returns relative to post-disaster reconstruction.	Long-term sustainability and resilience.

Sustainable educational transformation requires coordinated interventions across financing, governance, teacher development, technological innovation, and implementation. Increased domestic investment, as in Namibia and Botswana, provides the financial foundation for improving infrastructure and human resources, while inclusive planning of the kind pursued in Rwanda strengthens ownership by ensuring reforms reflect local priorities.

Digital transformation and continuous teacher development enhance instructional quality and resilience during disruption, though South Africa's COVID-19 experience cautions that digital access without accompanying literacy training and coordination reproduces rather than resolves inequality (Chomunorwa et al., 2023). Aligning national policies with CESA, Agenda 2063, and SDG 4 promotes coordinated implementation and greater accountability, while integrating sustainability principles and adaptive planning strengthens crisis preparedness. Overall, successful educational reform in Africa depends on integrated, adequately financed, context-responsive implementation supported by effective governance and sustained investment in human capital.

6.3 Contingency Plan and Risk Management for Prospects and Strategies

The evidence reviewed indicates that the successful implementation of the proposed strategies for strengthening educational policy and planning in Africa depends not only on their adoption but also on the effective management of risks that may undermine their sustainability. While increased investment,

inclusive governance, digital transformation, teacher development, policy harmonization, and resilience-oriented reforms offer significant opportunities for improving educational outcomes, their effectiveness is contingent upon stable institutional, financial, and socio-political environments. Consequently, contingency planning should be regarded as an integral component of educational policy implementation rather than an isolated administrative activity.

Financial sustainability remains one of the most significant implementation risks. Heavy dependence on external funding, macroeconomic instability, and weak public financial management may reduce governments' capacity to sustain educational investments over time. Strengthening domestic resource mobilization, improving financial accountability, diversifying funding sources, and adopting transparent monitoring mechanisms would enhance the resilience of education financing and reduce vulnerability to external economic shocks.

Inclusive and participatory policy processes are equally susceptible to implementation challenges. Political interference, unequal stakeholder representation, conflict, and consultation fatigue may weaken policy ownership and reduce implementation effectiveness. Broadening stakeholder participation through inclusive governance structures, strengthening institutional accountability, and employing flexible consultation mechanisms can improve policy legitimacy while ensuring that educational reforms reflect diverse national and local priorities.

Digital transformation presents considerable opportunities for expanding educational access and improving system resilience; however, unequal access to digital infrastructure, cybersecurity threats, inadequate technical capacity, and rapid technological change remain substantial risks. Sustainable digital transformation therefore requires phased implementation, continuous investment in digital infrastructure, capacity building for educators, strengthened data protection frameworks, and context-sensitive technological solutions that reduce rather than widen educational inequalities.

Teacher development strategies may also be constrained by workforce shortages, limited professional development opportunities, inadequate incentives, and uneven deployment of qualified personnel across regions. Strengthening teacher welfare, expanding continuous professional development, improving recruitment and retention policies, and aligning teacher training with national educational priorities would enhance instructional quality while supporting long-term policy implementation.

Similarly, aligning national educational policies with continental and global frameworks, including Agenda 2063, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), and Sustainable Development Goal 4, may be challenged by policy fragmentation, changing political priorities, and institutional capacity limitations. These risks can be mitigated through stronger intergovernmental coordination, harmonized monitoring frameworks, periodic policy reviews, and greater adaptation of international commitments to national development contexts.

Finally, increasing climate variability, armed conflicts, pandemics, and economic crises continue to expose the vulnerability of African education systems. Integrating resilience and sustainability considerations into educational planning, strengthening emergency preparedness, investing in climate-responsive infrastructure, and institutionalizing adaptive policy mechanisms would improve the capacity of education systems to withstand future disruptions.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective educational policy and planning require integrated risk management that combines sound governance, sustainable financing, institutional capacity, continuous monitoring, and adaptive implementation. Embedding contingency planning within educational reforms is therefore essential for translating policy aspirations into sustainable educational outcomes across Africa.

6.4 Overarching Contingency Framework

The contingency framework proposed in this study is derived from the synthesis of evidence presented throughout the reviewed literature rather than representing an independent policy prescription. Across the studies examined, recurring themes consistently demonstrate that effective educational policy and planning in Africa depend on the interaction of five complementary dimensions: continuous monitoring, sound governance, adaptive management, institutional capacity, and knowledge sharing. These components emerged repeatedly as critical determinants of successful policy implementation, particularly in contexts characterized by financial uncertainty, governance challenges, technological change, climate-related disruptions, and socio-political instability.

Monitoring and early warning systems are essential for providing timely evidence on policy performance and identifying implementation challenges before they undermine educational outcomes. Similarly, effective governance mechanisms strengthen transparency, accountability, and institutional integrity, thereby reducing implementation failures associated with weak oversight and resource mismanagement. The literature further highlights the importance of adaptive management, whereby educational policies are

periodically reviewed and adjusted in response to emerging evidence, changing national priorities, and unforeseen external shocks.

Institutional capacity also represents a fundamental requirement for resilient educational systems. Countries with stronger administrative structures, coordinated emergency response mechanisms, and adequately resourced education institutions demonstrate greater ability to sustain policy implementation during periods of crisis. Equally important is knowledge management, which enables governments and educational stakeholders to document implementation experiences, disseminate best practices, and promote continuous policy learning across national and regional contexts. Such institutional learning enhances future policy design while reducing the repetition of implementation failures.

Taken together, these five interrelated components constitute the conceptual contingency framework underpinning this study. Rather than functioning as isolated interventions, they provide an integrated approach for strengthening educational policy implementation through evidence-informed decision-making, institutional resilience, continuous learning, and adaptive governance. The framework therefore offers a practical basis for enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of educational policy and planning across Africa while improving the capacity of education systems to respond to future uncertainties and development challenges.

7. Conclusion

Educational policy and planning remain central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), Agenda 2063, and sustainable development across Africa. This study demonstrates that although substantial policy commitments have been made, persistent challenges including inadequate financing, weak governance, infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, digital inequalities, and socio-political instability continue to constrain effective policy implementation. Nevertheless, the review identifies significant opportunities to strengthen educational systems through sustainable financing, participatory governance, digital transformation, teacher capacity development, and stronger alignment between national priorities and continental education frameworks.

The findings have important practical and policy implications. Ministries of education should strengthen evidence-based planning, institutionalize continuous monitoring and evaluation, promote inclusive stakeholder participation, and integrate resilience into educational planning. Governments should reinforce policy implementation through improved financing mechanisms, stronger institutional accountability,

investment in human and digital capacity, and coordinated implementation of Agenda 2063, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), and SDG 4.

This study contributes to the literature by synthesizing recent African evidence to provide an integrated perspective on the challenges, prospects, and strategic directions for educational policy and planning. Future research should complement these findings with primary empirical studies that examine implementation experiences across different African contexts and evaluate the effectiveness of emerging policy interventions. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and published evidence, which may not fully capture country-specific implementation realities. Despite this limitation, the findings provide a useful evidence base for informing educational policy reforms and strengthening sustainable educational development across Africa.

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