

Universities and social transformation in sub-Saharan Africa: global rhetoric and local contradictions

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This paper's principal purpose is to explore the range of ways in which African universities act as public institutions – i.e. how they both are shaped by and influence the social, political and economic contexts in which they are situated. In particular, it considers the multiple dimensions, often resulting in tensions in contexts of poverty, instability and radical transformation, of African universities as actors in politics, civil society and the public sphere. Drawing on recent projects and discussions in which the author took part, the paper tries in particular to explain how the degraded state of most universities in the region which began in the late 1970s and into the 1980s should not be taken to mean that they had become irrelevant to the societies and polities in which they were embedded. Examples are offered of how higher education institutions, and especially the major public universities (often of colonial origin), have often remained key sites for upward mobility strategies, critique and mobilisation on behalf of political change even in the face of authoritarian and corrupt regimes, in contexts of weakened national economies, and even when higher education (primarily encapsulated in public universities) fell out of favour of multilateral and bilateral cooperation agencies. In conclusion, the paper discusses current initiatives by international donors and development agencies to revitalise higher education in Africa, and ensure an 'expansion of tertiary institutions constructed as sites for personal advancement and private benefit' (The World Bank 2002) and how their managerial and cost-effective orientations may thin out the crucial public good dimension of African universities.

Introduction

Recent empirical research teaches us that the degraded state of most universities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), which began in the late 1970s and into the 1980s should not be taken to mean that they had become irrelevant to the societies and polities in which they were embedded.¹ On the contrary, higher education institutions (HEIs), and especially the major public universities, have often remained key sites for debate, critique and mobilisation on behalf of political change, especially but not exclusively in

the direction of democratisation and the resolution of conflicts (Brennan, King, and Lebeau 2004). The deadly police and military responses to campus demonstrations voicing anti-structural adjustment struggles (Ahmadu Bello University in 1986) or the frustrations of muzzled societies (University of Lubumbashi 1990) are there to remind us

academic traditions. Also, and given their history of institutional and academic dependency on external support and standards, African higher education systems offer a neat illustration of the impact of changing educational priorities of international donors. Now that changing technology and a rapid increase in knowledge are seen by the World Bank and the bilateral donors as the key priorities for development, African universities are presented with revitalisation plans that are interesting reflections of current international development agendas but could put at risk the wider benefits and functions brought by universities to societies in their existing relationship.

Conceptual background

Multifunctionality and the management of contradictions

The four major functions of universities posited by Manuel Castells (2001) as applicable to a greater or lesser extent to all societies provide a suitable starting point to our analysis. First, Castells notes that universities have historically played a major role as ideological apparatuses, expressing the ideological struggles present in all societies. Second, they have always been mechanisms of selection and socialisation of dominant elites. Third, the generation of knowledge, often seen as their most important function, is actually – according to Castells – a relatively minor one, with functions of scientific research often assumed by specialised national institutes (in Europe and many developing countries) or within in-house laboratories of private firms (Japan, etc). Fourth, the most traditional – and today the most frequently emphasised – function of universities is the training of a skilled labour force (what Castells calls the ‘professional university’).

Castells suggests that universities are also subject to more implicit pressures from the host society and that this combination – of implicit and explicit pressures and of local and universal functions – results in a ‘complex and contradictory reality’ (Castells 2001, 211). The distinctive character of each higher education system therefore lies in how these contradictions are managed, but while Castells sees the ‘ability’ of higher education systems to manage those contradictions as conditioning the capacity of new countries to

become part of the 'dynamic system of the world economy' (212), I will try to illustrate how university systems can manage and generate contradictions in a dynamic way even in contexts of impoverishment and dependency.

Political restructuring and social transformation

The concept of social transformation refers here to the change of society's systemic characteristics. According to N. Genov (1999) – observing the process in Eastern and Central Europe – it firstly influences productive infrastructure which can bring about new technological changes and new patterns of participation in the international division of labour. Secondly, new structures of economic organisation are developing, which may imply a change in ownership rights, as well as in investments, production, distribution and supply. Thirdly, the distribution and use of political power take qualitatively different forms. This involves changes in the structure and performance of state institutions and other bodies of decision-making and control. Finally, a society's 'value-normative system' can change, often in a way that allows the emergence and stabilisation of pluralist institutions (Genov 1999). As recent comparative projects have shown, it is possible to discern dramatic moments of transformation in particular societies or regions within these broad features of social transformation. The collapse of communism in the late eighties in Central and Eastern Europe and the demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa a few years later are the two such cases that immediately come to mind, whose internationalization and theorisation have however contributed to de-particularise the concept of transformation, now increasingly associated with good governance, state retreat and economic liberalism. The role played by educational institutions in processes of transformation is now commonly assessed in a normative way along these criteria. But there are many contexts where schools and universities – as institutions or organisations – played a crucial role which could be studied within Genov's framework without 'forgetting their originating historical conditions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 41), for example when dictatorial or colonial powers fell, or in contexts of civil wars (Sierra Leone, Congo) or genocides (Rwanda). At more local levels, the collapse of a traditional industry and employment in parts of Europe, or the adoption of a structural adjustment plan in many developing countries may have had equally dramatic and transformative effects, but not necessarily as catalysers of more open societies (Brennan, King, and Lebeau 2004).

Universities have frequently been regarded as key institutions in these processes of social change and development. The most explicit role they have been allocated is the production of highly skilled labour and research output to meet perceived economic needs. But during periods of more radical change, universities and/or their constituencies have sometimes played no less an important role in helping to build new institutions of civil society, in encouraging and facilitating new cultural values, and in training and socializing members of new social elites.

The roles played by universities in modernisation projects are varied and a number of considerations and distinctions need to be made when examining these roles. It is important to distinguish between examples where the role of the university is largely autonomous (e.g. where a campus is harbouring proscribed unions and dissident movements) and examples where the role is set firmly within state plans and control mechanisms (in the political agenda of post-apartheid South Africa for instance). In sub-Saharan Africa, colonial traditions have had a great impact in this respect, and it is important to distinguish through empirical investigation, beyond the standardised heroic accounts of academics' and students' resistance to power abuses, where universities 'ignited' change, 'accelerated' existing change and where they 'blocked' change.

Public missions and the public good

The debate about higher education 'as a public good', serving 'the public good' in Africa, surfaced in the mid-1990s in response to multilateral donors' evaluation of the state of higher education in developing countries and the specific political context of transition outlined above in relation to the emergence of the transformation concept. A clarification is required here as to what is meant by public good in such a context. Now commonly used in research and policy circles, the expression refers interchangeably to two sides of the same coin: higher education as a public good and to the role of higher education in the achievement of the public good. Mala Singh (2001, 17) suggests that: 'The latter requires a closer identification of the different ways in which the core activities of higher activities (teaching, research and community service) could yield public good benefits', but she also warns that the 'public' is not homogenous and may well embody contesting

communities of interests. She therefore sees the 'public good' as 'constantly negotiated among different social actors with differing claims and interests' (16).

Two distinct events can be said to have sparked the debate on the public good in the African context: the publication of a World Bank report in 1994 outlining its stance on cost-sharing approaches to the revitalisation of higher education and the agenda set by the New South African regime for higher education's contribution to the 'transformation' of South Africa.

Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience goes on to identify four major directions of solution to the current state of crisis of most universities in the developing world: (1) to include universities, short-term careers, distance education, technical institutions, and polytechnics; (2) cost-sharing, with government financing pegged to performance; (3) redefining the role of government in higher education, to include adoption of policies that recognise different types of higher education institutions and inform students about these schools; and (4) decentralising universities to give them more autonomy, one of the mechanisms for which is to be block grants.

Responses to and analysis of this document often outlined its narrow focus on manpower planning and its unquestioned faith in rate of return analysis under the – then prominent in World Bank circles – human capital theories (Samoff and Carrol 2003; Kent 1996).

Taking on the issue of equity from a gender perspective, Stromquist's review of the document (1996) asks:

How is the privatization strategy – where tuition price controls are to be eliminated because they act as 'disincentives' – going to promote an egalitarian system of higher education? If higher education is to expand its private, for-profit side, what mechanisms will be in place to protect education as a public good and the existence of interventions to ensure women's access to quality and prestigious education? (18)

The social and political limits of cost-sharing with students were equally pointed out by UNESCO, which published its *Policy Paper for Change and Development in Higher*

Education (1995) stressing that given higher education's status as a public good, there is a risk 'that a radically applied policy of detachment of the State from higher education in matters of funding, influenced by a narrowly interpreted concept of the "social value" of a given level of education, may result in excessive pressure for "cost recovery" and calls for "alternative funding" and "internal efficiency gains" in teaching, research and administration' (27).

At the time when the higher education management of the World Bank is being challenged internationally in the name of the multiple social purposes and goods of higher education, the changing fortune of South Africa is introducing new perspectives for the renewal of the sector on the African continent. The vision of the public good which has animated the democratic transition in South Africa is said to be explicit and widely endorsed. Ruth Jonathan suggests that: 'the twin imperatives of equity and redress on the one hand and of economic development on the other are set out in the RDP documents, reiterated in the GEAR2 strategy and form the staple of practical politics, public policy and popular debates' (2001, 44).

The World Bank found itself in a difficult position regarding the restructuring of higher education in developing countries, when the highly symbolic South African experience explicitly called on a contribution of higher education to the public good within the framework of accountability and responsiveness. It should therefore come as little surprise that the Bank's 2002 report insists on the 'humanist and social capital building dimensions' of tertiary education, and on its role as an 'important international public good' (World Bank 2002, 4).

Generated within the framework of or in reaction to 'renewal' or 'revitalization' plans, the debate about higher education and the public good in Africa touches on the core terms of engagement of universities and societies. Despite their references to humanist and social capital theories, these plans (initiated by multilateral donors as well as international foundations) are seen by many as too narrowly about reforming human resource capacities, and ignoring the consequences of the neo-liberal reforms adopted by most states since the mid-1980s. In this respect, the public good debate takes Castell's argument about the multifunctionality of universities a step further, showing that whether public or private, universities were and are serving in Africa as elsewhere a

number of vital public missions, including equipping citizens for occupations needed by the public, advancing social mobility, contributing to the creativity and continuity of culture, and informing the public sphere and preparing citizens to participate in it (Calhoun 2006, 10). These public dimensions have however been served in specific ways according to contexts within the sub region as we will now see.

African universities in civil society and the public sphere

As an actor in the public sphere, the public university itself has a dual status in most parts of Africa. On the one hand, as an institution financed and, to varying degrees, controlled by the state, it is potentially part of the ideological apparatus of the state (thus linking it to the reproductive apparatus of society). On the other hand, it is potentially one of those social institutions of civil society that may help in holding accountable the state and the business sector while potentially providing a source of debate on current directions and visions of society's future.

Universities therefore enjoy a unique social status. Their role in the making of the political elite and their proximity to the political power circles in the immediate post independence era must be stressed here as contemporary Europe does not offer examples of such proximity (Van den Berghe 1973). At the same time, early African universities of the colonial era were set up as autonomous institutions (in British colonies), or as 'overseas campuses' of universities in the metropole (in French colonies) outside the control of emerging national leaderships (Lulat 2003). This became rapidly unacceptable to newly formed African governments called on to provide the bulk of the universities' development and recurrent needs. This situation largely explains the uneasy and often frankly hostile relationships with the political class, particularly in the context of growing state authoritarianism that marked the developmental era up to the late 1970s (Mamdani 1994).

An historical perspective on the public sphere in Africa and the place of universities within it is necessary here. Different colonial approaches of education and empowerment, and divergent applications of the developmental ideology in the early independence era, generated various forms of restrictions on (or in some few cases of promotion of) academic freedom and the autonomy of the universities.

African states and African universities

Until the fairly recent waves of diversification in the HE sector, the university in most of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was synonymous with the public university, which in many countries played a leading role in the formation and reproduction of emerging elites and in the integration of different sections of the elite.

But at the same time, the higher education sector expanded considerably, notably under the financial constraints that loomed in the late 1970s and hit public sectors across the region over the past two decades. As a result, universities lost virtually everywhere their earlier prestige and credibility and became much less of a national priority. Their fortunes have therefore been very closely tied to those of the state.

As African societies were being subjected to Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), universities came under attack for not adapting to new contexts or for being isolated (the familiar 'ivory tower' accusation). The World Bank – an institution that is one of the most influential actors in the education policy arena – paved the way to such criticism, soon followed by some national governments and most development agencies. From the mid-1970s, the World Bank started expressing reservations about higher education's role in promoting development in Africa, and expressed concerns about what it called the 'over-expansion' of education at the higher levels. Recommendations to shift funds toward basic education were then reiterated, culminating in the Bank's 1988 review which criticised higher education's contribution to development for productions

often as specific targets.

Denials of academic freedom have been widespread on the continent. Appointments to important administrative and academic positions were often highly politicised. All this had to do with the high stakes on HE and universities as institutions. The struggle for academic freedom and the autonomy of academic institutions, particularly the universities, became more consequential in the late eighties and nineties, partly as an expression of a more global push for democratisation. The push also saw the intellectuals – academics and students in particular – playing an important role in the debates over and the functioning of democracy. In Senegal for instance, they played an important, some say crucial, role in the election of president Wade in 2000, through demonstrations and sit-ins on campus and in town, but also by registering voters in rural areas (Zeilig 2002).

But in the heyday of developmentalism and monolithic ‘nation-building’, the possibilities for the emergence of what Calhoun calls ‘a public sphere adequate to a democratic polity’ (Calhoun 1992, 2; see also Habermas 1989) were structurally limited in many ways. As a result, ‘bread and butter issues’ of students and academic staff often took on political significance, linking campus-specific issues to broader debates on political priorities and policy options (see the history of Nigerian students’ unrests for instance).

However, by the time of the post-adjustment and political liberalisation years of the nineties, the rise in the numbers of civil society organisations and the spectacular increase in the numbers of newspapers and community and FM radio stations went hand in hand with a major increase in the numbers of universities, and students. This was significant for the struggles of civil society in at least two ways: the institutional base of the intelligentsia became wider and more diversified, as private academic institutions also increased in numbers; and the numbers of potential contributors to critical public debates became larger. University lecturers are in some cases routinely called upon to participate in debates on radio and TV, and to speak on current affairs in forums organised by NGOs (see Niane 2003 on the NGO government in Senegal). This, and the role played by some academics in the ‘National conferences’ organised here and there in this period, does not mean that the repression of academic freedom stopped, as exemplified by the tragic examples of Lubumbashi, in former Zaire, in 1990/91 and

Yopougon in Cote d'Ivoire in 1991, both of which were raided by security forces with a considerable amount of brutality while both countries were engaged in democratic transition programmes.

The role of the university in post-conflict transition

A word must be said here of the particular context of civil wars and post-conflict transitions which affected a number of countries in the post-colonial period, although little research has been carried out on the actual role played by universities and their constituencies in such troubled periods. Universities have been among the many victims of the armed conflicts that have been ravaging SSA. Campuses have been a theatre of confrontation, and were occasionally occupied by regular armies or rebel factions in a wide range of countries such as DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and Rwanda. In almost all war-torn societies, intellectual capital is one of the casualties of the conflicts.

Universities and research institutions have been severely affected and, in addition to those who have lost their lives, many intellectuals have gone into exile. But university lecturers and students have also taken part in formulating arguments that were later used to justify armed conflict, or even genocide, and in some cases they have been involved in actual fighting.

In the processes of reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction, certain universities have taken up projects directly or indirectly connected to the transitions but HE does not seem to be a high priority issue in the eyes of donors or transition governments. Moreover, in such contexts, individual academics who have gone into exile are often drawn into the government bureaucracy, or to work for aid agencies and NGOs. Among the general population (including demobilised combatants), access to higher education may be part of broader social expectations of a return to 'normalcy' (enrolment figures are soaring in such contexts).

Most university departments in such contexts remain understaffed for extended periods of time. The countries may still be seen as unsafe long after the end of the conflict, which often makes it difficult to arrange for external examiners and visiting

professors. When academics and researchers are called upon to participate in commissions established to look into major public issues, such as human rights, they take part as individuals rather than as representatives of the institution.

Similarly, the limited amount of research being carried out is very rarely handled at departmental or faculty level but rather through individual contracts with donors, and few research projects are collective or contribute to institutional capacity. Yet, by virtue of their complexity, post-conflict transition processes call for research and serious public debates on almost every aspect of these transitions: understanding what exactly happened – the nature of the crises/conflicts – and why, the challenge of building democratic governance systems that would address some of the issues that led to conflict in the first place, etc. In a number of cases, besides rebuilding halls and laboratories, universities have established centres for conflict and peace studies, with some even attempting to ‘mainstream’ peace studies.⁵ This often reflects an understanding of the conflict that identifies individual attitudes as a key part of the explanation for past conflicts.

The social demand and social value of HE in Africa

Despite the relative paucity of hard data on the university’s role in the public sphere, the deeply politicised nature of HE in SSA has obscured our understanding of other dimensions of HE with major public consequences and impact on the transformation of societies. I would particularly like to draw attention to the nature of the social demand or the social value of university education and degrees in Sub-Saharan Africa.

HE choices and expectations of individuals, families or larger groups also affect the universities’ provision of courses and services and beyond, thus shaping HE fields and, potentially, their role in political transformations.

The link between processes of social mobility in Africa and the social significance of university expansion has yet to be fully addressed. The result is the often misleading homogeneous picture of HE institutionalisation in sub-Saharan Africa on which cooperation programmes and reforms are based.

From 'ivory towers' to 'mass institutions': stereotypes and paradigms about African universities and their students

Higher education, I wish to argue, needs to be seen not only in its more obvious economic and political aspects, but also as a space of social positions and a factor in patterns of social mobility. There has been a tendency to imagine African universities as 'ivory towers' and 'citadels of learning' which consider students (at least until recently) as a privileged group (irrespective of their social background) and higher education as a passport to a middle class westernised standard of living and to influential positions. Consequently, the social origins of students or the solidarity networks they mobilise to gain access to HE have often been ignored. The withdrawal of welfare policies such as scholarship schemes and subsidised on-campus accommodation, and other effects on HE during the crisis years, impacted upon private strategies towards higher education. Access to universities became more and more elitist, while a range of sub-degrees institutions (public or private) emerged.

The adjustment years paradoxically created an avenue for an unprecedented diversification of the post-compulsory educational sector that is, often too simplistically, viewed as a massification of HE. The steady demand, boosted by universal primary education, expanded secondary education access, and population growth, has never been met by 'traditional' higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite the traditional images of overcrowded halls of residence and lecture theatres in African universities, social demand has largely been met by less selective non-traditional institutions, or in some cases by fee-paying programmes offered by universities alongside their more traditional modes of entry. If the student population has become a 'falsely homogeneous category' (Lebeau 2000), this is more a function of the extension of the HE market now encompassing lower ranked institutions.

This emphasises the crucial importance of the transition period from secondary to tertiary level, a period which tends to last much longer in countries where less than 10% of eligible candidates are actually offered admission to traditional HE institutions and that students try to put to good use (additional training, work experience, guidance counselling) to 'make the right choice'.

Understanding the social value of HE

We also know little about the social identities of students and their educational strategies which can provide a micro-perspective on how and why university education is highly valued and pursued. The kinds of capital (social, cultural, and economic) that the HE experience and degree provide (and are expected to provide) depends both on political and economic opportunity structures and the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of students.

On the basis of sources such as national household surveys crossed with field surveys and case study findings, research has revealed patterns of enrolment and family strategies demonstrating that economic development, in the sense of achieving growth in national income per capita, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for movement towards a steady demand for education (Colclough, Rose, and Tembon 1998).

Studies in Nigeria have shown similar patterns in higher education demand: the important regional variations in enrolment figures neither reflect exclusively the distribution of institutions or that of incentive policies by local authorities, nor do they strictly replicate the unequal delivery of secondary education. The value attributed by households and communities to higher education may well vary upon national policies on education, but it also reflects the volatility of patterns of social mobility in uncertain economic environments, as well as cultural factors affecting the expectations of a university degree.

A striking illustration of this complexity is offered by the contrast between figures of female students' enrolment and their weak integration into the labour market for workers with advanced qualifications. If the widening of social participation in HE matters so much from the perspective of knowledge-driven development (World Bank 2002), then the social and cultural backgrounds of students must be a central focus in order to capture how different social groups view higher education as an investment and to what extent family investment in higher education 'pays'.

Two dynamics have been operating in this regard in the last 15 years or so. The first one is a consequence of the economic crisis of the 1980s and the second can be interpreted as an institutional response to conditionalities and/or recommendations of international donors and financial institutions.

With the structural adjustment policies adopted in the 1980s, the sudden problem of graduate employability called into question the relevance of inherited curricula. Also, the cutbacks in support to students, coupled in some cases with the introduction of fees, generated a greater awareness of the unequal 'value for money' of degrees by families, who now had to spend more money on university education. All this led to the introduction and multiplication of pre-degree and post-graduate, professionally oriented courses in all public universities. The financial constraints of the 1980s also implied that a proportion of the urban middle class population whose children used to complete their studies abroad would now have to envisage an entirely local tertiary training.

One of the many side effects of SAPs was the development of private schools in vibrant urban centres such as Nairobi or Abidjan, offering MBA programmes to a local petty bourgeoisie suddenly dispossessed of its international access. Such private institutes have mushroomed from the late 1980s.

The key issue here is not so much whether or not various states made provision for the development of private tertiary education. More important, accreditation was largely sought elsewhere as the state was no longer considered as a reference point in this respect. What all this indicates is that weakened HE systems in Africa, despite their apparent image of high centralisation and rigidity, have allowed universities to respond to the changing nature of their market in the 1980s. Universities, in many cases public ones, have responded rather successfully to the new demands of a socially diversified student population, often seized as opportunities to compensate for the loss of State support.

Such a dynamic contradicts a common perception of reforms and changes in peripheral HE systems as shaped by changes in the global market of educational services rather than by the local needs and demands. This is not to say that the global context does not impact on the delivery of courses and the admission policies in African universities.

Finally, it is important to stress that in Africa as elsewhere in the world, the social value of HE extends beyond the professional prospects it offers to individuals and their families. Examples of a steady demand for HE are found in many places where the qualified job market is saturated because of lack of economic investment and opportunity due to political instability and civil wars.

In the few African countries – such as Nigeria – where research into these aspects is already providing some kind of historical perspective, one can see how higher education has gradually reached the status of a social need, ‘regardless of the actual functional requirements of the economy or of the institution’ (Castells 2001, 211) even if enrolment figures are far from the massification of the system as observed in the West.

The trends highlighted above are submitting universities as organisations to various kinds of demands and pressures from society. But because the national systems we are considering do not have the means (South Africa being to a certain extent an exception) to respond to excess demand by ‘downgrading some elements of the system’ (Castells 2001, 211), social segregation tends to be recreated informally within the system or outside the formal institutional system.

The multiple purposes of HE from the perspective of social demand demonstrate that the public importance of HE is not reducible to its political or policy dimensions. The ostensibly private choices and experiences of young Africans in relation to HE are central to the processes of stratification and social reproduction, the formation of social and political identities, and the expectations and often hard realities of future livelihoods. This has been the case from the very inception of HEIs in SSA. Colonial HEIs were unequally distributed and generated various expectations from populations. National policies on education then diversely followed the recommendations and conditionalities of international organisations, thus shaping HE landscapes that strongly reflect national trajectories despite some inevitable global tendencies.

In conclusion: higher education under focus in Africa. What transformation are we talking about?

The publication in November 2003 of a journal entirely dedicated to higher education in

Africa (Journal of Higher Education in Africa) and of the first handbook on higher education in Africa (Teferra and Altbach 2003) – both supported by the American foundations involved in the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa – are two small events that reflect an unprecedented attention from international donors (private foundations, multilateral and bilateral agencies) and national governments for HE in Africa in the past few years. After decades of waning attention, efforts by international institutions, such as the World Bank, to prevent the global and local effects of the so-called knowledge divide, have led to a number of policy recommendations and initiatives aimed at levelling the pace of change and development in higher education landscapes of rich and poor countries. As a result, HE in Africa and other parts of the world has been scrutinized in the past few years as perhaps never before, although the alarm bell on the state of emergency of African universities had been ringing for a while in international instances.

It is widely admitted that a turning point in international approaches of higher education in developing countries was reached in 2000 with the publication of a report by the Task force on Higher Education and Society convened by UNESCO and the World Bank. Beyond a dramatic picture of the state of the higher education landscape in these countries, the report stressed in these terms the responsibility of international and national policies of the past two decades:

Since the 1980s, many national governments and international donors have assigned higher education a relatively low priority. Narrow – and, in our view, misleading – economic analysis has contributed to the view that public investment in universities and colleges brings meager returns compared to investment in primary and secondary schools, and that higher education magnifies income inequality. As a result, higher education systems in developing countries are under great strain. They are chronically under-funded, but face escalating demand... (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000, 10)

In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, the report highlighted the specific difficulties faced by universities of the post-colonial era in trying to combine the quality of teaching inherited from highly elitist higher education systems and the necessity to widen access to higher education to ‘bridge the development gap’ and later on, to strengthen the democratic institutions. The World Bank and donor agencies subsequently revisited their policies by acknowledging the role of tertiary education in ‘building up a country’s capacity to better

integrate it with the world's increasingly knowledge-based economy' (The World Bank 2002, xviii) and its potential to enhance growth and reduce poverty.

However, after decades of neglect, very little was actually known of the internal dynamics of African HE highlighted in this paper – particularly in the volatile situations that emerged from the early 1990s wave of democratic and economic transitions. Comparative projects were therefore launched on the continental scale (including cross-continental perspectives in some cases), looking at various aspects of the state and the socio-economic relevance of HE in sub-Saharan Africa, often with the aim to redress deliquescent and derelict institutions.

Transforming what for whom?

These projects, often framed and promoted by donor agencies or non-African research units, are now being published, and tend to diffuse conceptions of the transformative potential of universities that reflect more the expectations of donors on the transformation of institutions along plans applied elsewhere in the world, than actual evidence-based conceptions of how universities engage with their environment in countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Samoff and Carrol 2002). As a result the concept of transformation is being carelessly and interchangeably applied to phenomena occurring in higher education landscapes and their environments, and to anticipated impacts of reforms (Lebeau and Mills 2007). This confusion between transformation and reform, and the paradigm shift from crisis to transformation is not fortuitous and should be seen in the policy context sketched above.

The idea that the reduction of inequalities, at global and national levels, turns in no small measure on the state of HEIs and HE systems in the developing world suggests an interesting inversion of global policy thrusts of less than a generation ago, when HE was more often discussed as an elitist luxury (Sall, Kassimir, and Lebeau 2003). However, ongoing remedial policies – seemingly influenced by the idea that the gradual domination of managerialism in the organisation of both teaching and research, the commercialization of research and the outsourcing of many services are inevitable consequences of globalisation driven by the 'knowledge explosion' – tend to result, everywhere on the continent, in reforming and restructuring processes of already

inherited systems of higher education along similar patterns to those observed in the Western world and the Pacific Rim.

Because the international donor community is in the spirit of public support for public goods, the public good dimension needs to be identified in each and every context covered by recent research to highlight possible generalisation and local specificities.

Notes

1. Yann Lebeau is co-editor of the Journal of Higher Education in Africa, and an advisor on the CODESRIA multinational working group on Higher Education in Africa. He also played advisory and reviewing roles on the recently completed project of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) on The Public Roles of African Universities: Higher Education during Socio-Political Transitions (http://www.ssrc.org/programs/africa/african_higher_education/), took part in the review of the Association of African Universities Study Program (Higher Education Management in Africa), and was the co-ordinator of a large case-study-based project on the Role of Universities in the Transformation of Societies for the Open University and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (see Brennan, King, and Lebeau 2004).
2. RDP stands for Reconstruction and Development Program (ANC policy document, Pretoria, 1994), and GEAR for Growth, Employment and Redistribution: A macroeconomic strategy (Pretoria, June 1996).
3. This section draws largely on the reflections developed in Sall, Kassimir and Lebeau (2003).
4. On Sierra Leone, see Richards 1996 and Abdullah and Bangura 1997. On Rwanda, see African Rights 1994; DesForges 1999; and OAU 2000.
5. See Hoffmann 2002, in the SSRC's Global Security and Cooperation Program's

7. That such aspects have been relatively ignored partly reflects the late and still marginal interest of sociology in African studies (Copans 1990) and the poor performance of this discipline within the African social sciences themselves (Hendricks 2000).

8. Although this section deliberately focuses on the demand for HE, I believe that the social value of universities extends far beyond the determining factors of students' enrolment and experience and encompasses issues related to staff status and careers which we have addressed in more detail elsewhere. For instance, we have shown in the case of Nigeria that despite the severe 'devalorisation' of their economic status during the structural adjustment days, marked by the unprecedented brain drain of the late 1980s and early 1990s, university careers remain attractive and universities remain a valuable source from which more and more governments draw their staff.

9. Even if data on the socio-economic origin of students are not systematically gathered, a combination of census and household survey data with limited surveys can help in mapping the unequal institutionalisation of HE, and highlight the role of social and educational background in promoting or constraining access to higher education. An example of such quantitative survey is offered by M.K. Mayanja's case study of Makerere students (Mayanja 1998).

10. Student populations tend to rise in immediate post-conflict situations, as if the young people of university-going age want to 'catch-up'. Interviews with child combatants and ex-child combatants in Sierra Leone show the strength of their desire to continue their education (Richards 1996; Peters and Richards 1998). The National University of Rwanda (NUR), after being closed from the onset of the genocide and political killings on April 7, 1994, re-opened in 1995 with 3000 students. By the end of 2002, NUR had 7000 students. Two other HEIs, the Kigali Institute of Technology (KIST), established as an independent institute in 1997, and the Kigali Institute of Education have also begun operations. The Rwandan government plans to establish other, specialised universities in various regions of the country.

11. See the Dakar Declaration and Action Plan on Higher Education in Africa (UNESCO 1997), the World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (UNESCO 1998) and the Declaration on the African University in the Third Millennium (Association of African Universities 2001).

12. The following projects are just examples of this trend:

- 1) The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, The Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. Macarthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation
- 2) The Role of Universities in the Transformation of Societies (CHERI, Open University and Association of Commonwealth Universities with support from the Ford, STINT, Rockefeller and Soros foundations (three case studies in Africa)
- 3) The Public Role of African Universities, Social Science Research Council (SSRC) with support from Rockefeller and Ford. Four case-studies
- 4) The Study Programme on Higher Education Management in Africa (phase 2), the Association of African Universities (AAU), with support from the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SIDA/SAREC) and the Government of the Netherlands. (Relevant case studies to be selected among the 52 projects completed)
- 5) The ADEA/Working Group on Higher Education.

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