



**SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE**  
CREATE MEANINGFUL CHANGE



ENHANCING  
**EDUCATION**  
**RESEARCH**  
IN AFRICA (EERA)

**Introduction:**

Concept notes for enhancing education research  
in Africa

NOVEMBER 2024

This note introduces and frames the eight interventions to enhance education research in Africa<sup>1</sup> that have emerged from the EERA process. We give some background to the process and then highlight how the interventions fit together as part of a system. Understanding the holistic and interdependent nature of this set of interventions will be critical to effective

funding, whether a particular funder chooses to invest in a single intervention or to take on a cluster of interventions. The notes ends with a call for collective action that mirrors the ambition and vision of the inspiring African researchers who co-designed these interventions.

## Why education research from Africa matters

Education research is instrumental in improving the quality of the educational system, particularly in developing settings. It is the most useful tool for assessing the spectrum of learning challenges and outcomes from early childhood to adult education. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where around 70% of populations are under 30 years of age (United Nations, 2023), providing young people with inclusive and equitable quality education (Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4) has been among governments' priorities over the last two decades.

Pursuing these development priorities has led to a rapid growth of education provision on the continent (see WDI, 2023). In this context and to ensure a quality educational system and evidence-based policy formulation and practices, there is an urgent need for data and research about all aspects and phases of education. Rightly, researchers have identified the urgent needs for education research in Africa. The [report of the Forum for Education Research](#) (the forum) emphasised that "Evidence and research are essential tools to tackle the most complex educational issues and improve the lives of children and communities. From young children to adult learners, evidence is needed to understand the full breadth of why and how people learn, and what impact learning (or failing to learn) has on life inside and beyond the classroom. **Yet, to unleash the power of research across the education sector in Africa, we must advance how we identify, support, engage with and cultivate research from Africa.**

The mandate for this for these concept notes comes from the African education researchers who participated in the forum. The primary call to action was to strengthen the education research field in Africa.

Historically, education research in Africa has been largely driven by Northern institutions, which often set agendas based on external priorities rather than local needs. This has left African researchers in roles of data collection or implementation rather than leadership, limiting their influence on research questions and solutions that directly impact their communities.

When Africans are not centred in education research, policies and programs may fail to address Africa's unique challenges, leading to less effective outcomes. Without locally led research, insights lack contextual relevance, diminishing their impact on improving education quality, equity, and accessibility across the continent.

Elevating African voices in research is critical to surface locally relevant solutions and innovations that align with African educational, cultural, and social contexts. African-led research enables sustainable, impactful approaches rooted in a deep understanding of local needs and strengths.

Strengthening African education research opens pathways for south-south learning and global South-to-North learning, where African innovations, insights, and approaches contribute valuable perspectives to global education, enriching the collective understanding and addressing shared challenges in diverse contexts.

Building the field of African education research is important because it empowers African researchers to generate insights and solutions tailored to the continent's unique educational challenges, fostering evidence-based policies that improve learning outcomes. A strong African education research field also promotes local expertise, reduces reliance on foreign-led studies, and builds a sustainable foundation for educational innovation, equity, and long-term development across the continent.

A substantial body of research in education targeting Africa already exists and is growing. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that education research in Africa still encounters numerous persisting challenges. These are well defined in the [situational analysis](#) conducted by EERA on the State of Education Research in Africa. This set of concept notes presents an opportunity for education research funders to tackle these challenges in a systemic and holistic way.

<sup>1</sup> We are referring to East, West and Southern Africa

# How did these notes come about?

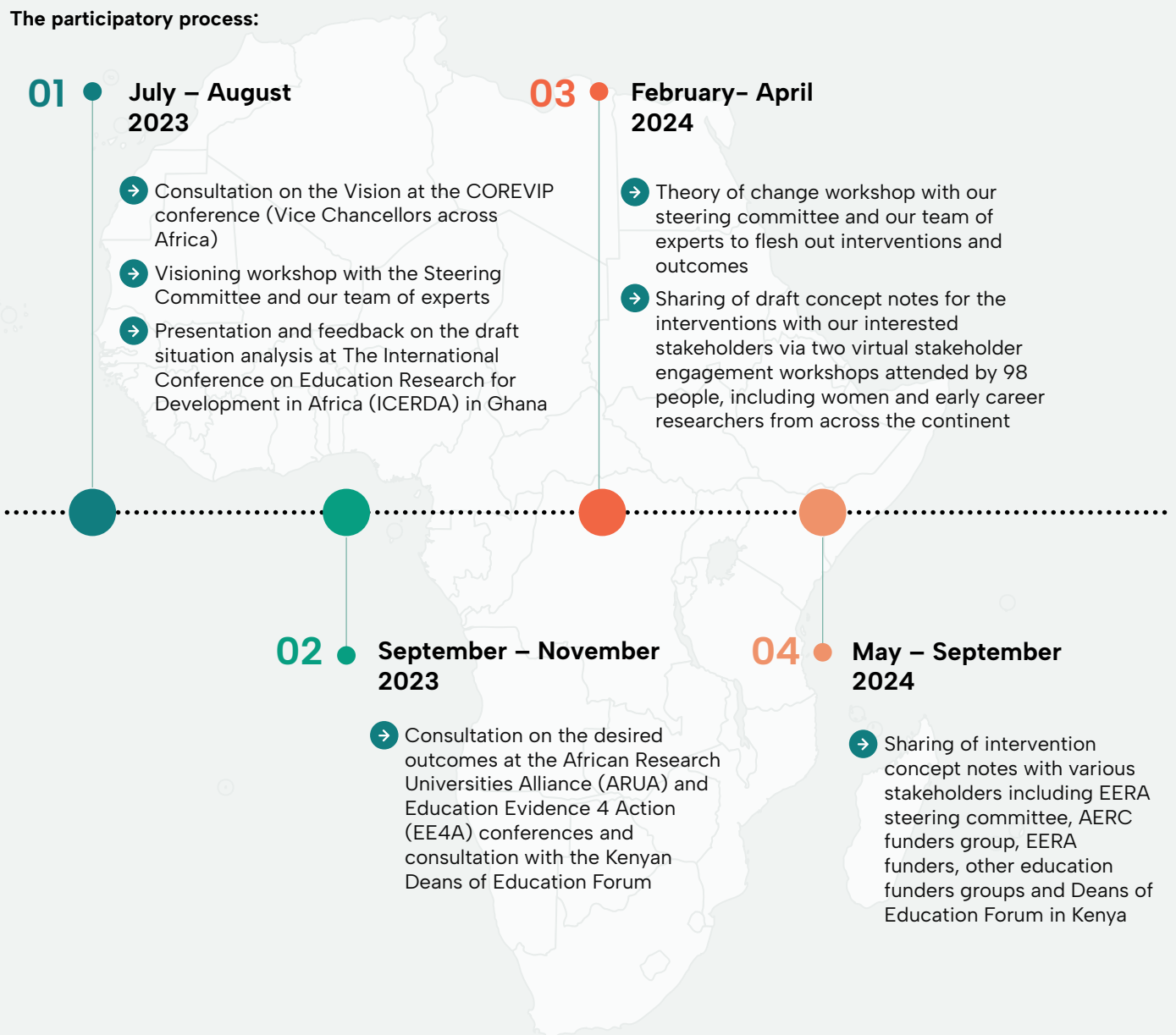
The [Enhancing Education Research in Africa](#) (EERA) project took up the challenge from the forum to put African voices in the lead to address these challenges. We consulted with African stakeholders to identify the interventions that would be the most impactful to strengthen locally led research. The 8 interventions proposed here are informed by our consultations with African education researchers, in all our diversity.

This has been an inclusive and participatory process. With support from Echidna Giving, Jacobs Foundation and Imaginable Future, we listened to African researchers about what would help them deliver more, and better, research. We conducted the [situation analysis](#) on the state

of research in Africa and held multiple virtual and in-person consultations with a broad range of African education research stakeholders including early career researchers, women researchers, policy actors, academics and think tanks.

We consulted over 200 people across sub-saharan Africa. A theory of change design process was followed over 18 months to produce these concept notes. We met African education research stakeholders in spaces where they were already convening. Through our communications about EERA we built up a data base of 600 people who were interested in participating in the process. We invited people from this data base and via social media to attend the online events.

## The participatory process:



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The African education researchers in these forums told us what would pave the way for a stronger field of education research in Africa, and this is what we are presenting in this set of interventions. Our analysis and design has been underpinned by a field building framework influenced by Bridgespan's *Strong Field Framework*.

Our brief was to identify system changing, investment options – not to design a programme or a project that will have little impact on the overall system. Rather, African education actors called for a long-term view of change and find access points in the system that would really help to ensure that African-led research strengthens education outcomes on the continent. This is especially important as real change in the sector is a long-term endeavour often in competition with short-term funding cycles. To give some

perspective, it is said that it can take 15 years to build a field, but it takes 9 years for someone to enter tertiary education and graduate with a PhD. A short-term project cycle of 2–3 years wouldn't even cover half the time it takes to develop an early career researcher from when they enter tertiary education.

The theory of change (see below) that has emerged from this process provides a wholistic view of how change could, and should, happen in the education research system. The interventions described in this series respond to this logic. These interventions will ensure that African Education Researchers are in the lead in driving education innovation. It is timely that they are released in 2024, which is the *African Union's Year of Education*.

## The EERA interventions

This set of interventions present a systemic and holistic approach to changing the face of education research in Africa. They do not cover every intervention possible to strengthen education research in Africa – these are the priorities identified and amplified by our Steering Committee and the researchers who attend our consultations.

The collective impact of this set of interventions is **“An African education research system that is evolving and sustaining cutting-edge, impactful education research at scale.”** No single intervention, or focus, would be sufficient to achieve this vision. What is needed to facilitate the significant shifts in the African education research field is a combination of interventions, consisting of different levels of cost, complexity and time frames, supported by African education research ecosystem actors, from both Africa and beyond.

The interventions are:

1. Developing African-led Education Research Agendas.
2. Catalysing African funding for education research.
3. Strengthening research and leadership capacity through Research Chairs.
4. Strengthening administrative capacities of research institutions.
5. Training and professional development for Education Researchers.
6. Collaborative research projects.
7. Research communications platforms.
8. Research Communications training and knowledge exchange.

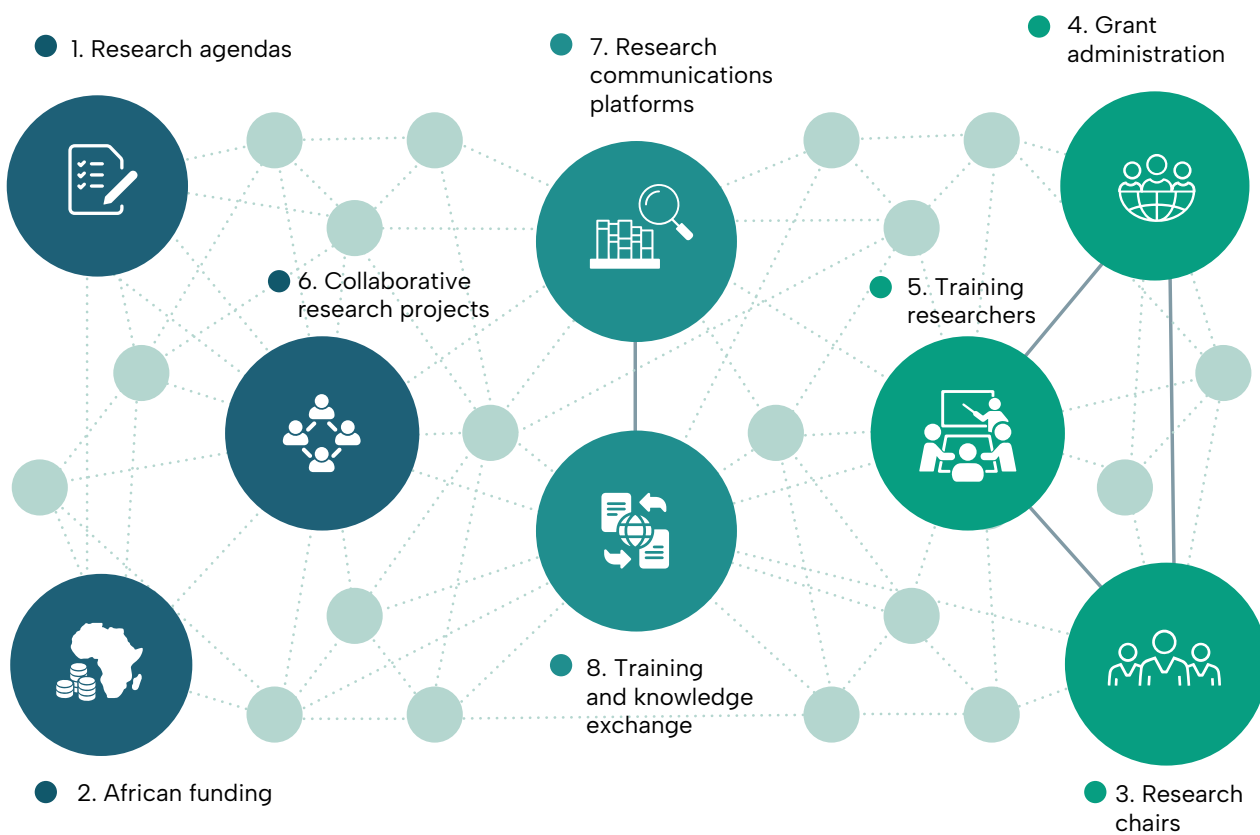
[This is a call to action for African Education Research Funders to fulfil their commitment at the 2022 Transforming Education Summit to support the transformation of education systems.](#)

We are confident that the interventions proposed in these concept notes are feasible for investment and support because they are informed by evidence from the EERA situation analysis and from evaluations of other similar initiatives; they are designed to be integrated into larger systems, as indicated in the Theory of Change diagram below, and they have wide support from the African education research sector.

These are represented as a systems diagram below – to emphasise that they are all connected. There are many ways to intervene in the system to strengthen the field of education research in Africa. However, these interventions represent the levers that will create the most sustainable change in the field. The connections between interventions will, and should, change depending on your starting point and partnerships –

it represents a set of dynamic relationships. Interventions 3, 4 and 5 are a cluster related to research capacity strengthening and leadership at HEIs, as are interventions 7 and 8, that relate to research communications and interventions 2 and 6 both involve convening similar stakeholders to identify and seek to answer priority research questions.

### → The EERA interventions



Cross cutting issues: Early-career researchers; gender equity; African-led

INTERVENTION AREAS →

**African education research agenda**

- Research agendas for example at National, regional and institutional levels

**Catalysing African funding**

- Science granting councils
- Variety of funding mechanisms for all aspects of education research

**Strengthening research leadership and capacities**

- **Strengthening research capacity of higher education institutions** (career and professional development, through Chairs of Education Research in HEIs)
- **Strengthening administrative capacity of research institutions** (through research management offices in Education faculties)
- **Training researchers** (including leadership development and support)

**Partnerships, networks and research collaboration**

- Collaborative research funding, networks and hubs
- Community oriented research

**Research communications and access**

- Research communication platform(s)
- Capacity building and strengthening for research communications for all stakeholders
- Community engagement

CHANGES IN CAPACITIES, ACCESS, INFRASTRUCTURE →

- **Clarity on priority research questions** for Africa, by Africa
- African education researchers are **thought leaders** in educational development

- **Science granting councils** design, attract and manage grant funding for education research
- Education Researchers in Africa have access to funding for a variety of needs -research, publication, conferences, uptake etc.
- More funding is available for African-led education research agendas

- Ability of HEIs to **build capacities of education researchers** is strengthened
- Education researchers strengthen their skills in all aspects - fundraising, research, publications, communications, stakeholder engagement, ethics

- **Robust and efficient institutional systems** are in place to:
  - support research production, intellectual leadership & continuity
  - reduce teaching loads
  - support the use of technology to enhance collaboration and communication
  - attract and manage grant funding and partnerships

- Education researchers and research institutions strengthen quality and productivity through **collaborative research & capacity exchange**
- Country-based research institutions are networked to increase efficiency and stimulate / attract pooled funding

- Excellent and functional **knowledge management** systems ensure access to quality education research from Africa
- Education researchers strengthen quality and productivity of research through **sharing of research results**
- There are more accessible, respected avenues for researchers to communicate their findings, including in local languages
- The capacity of **education research users** to support and use research is enhanced

CHANGES IN THE RESEARCH ECO-SYSTEM

- Researchers are **connected & collaborate** within the continent, amongst each other with other actors
- Users of education research have **improved access** to education research results produced in Africa
- **Users value** African led and generated evidence, and know how to use it
- **Improved use** of African research and evidence by stakeholders to improve education outcomes on the continent
- **Long-term research agenda** supported by and for African education researchers



An African education research system that is evolving and sustaining cutting-edge, impactful education research at scale.



Logic Model

As these interventions are interlinked, there is no particular intervention that should come 'first'. For example, while a strong local research agenda would inspire more African funding, an African funding base would in itself enable an emerging agenda to be truly African-led. Similarly the existence of Research Chairs could be a great focal point for training of researchers and strengthening of university administration, however in the absence of strong administrative capacity Research Chairs will have their

impact limited. As a consequence, we now go on to present an approach to prioritising interventions that is based on the remit of different funding organisations. Each funder should identify where their particular mandate and risk appetite allows them to contribute most effectively. Above all, funders should identify ways to enter into coalitions or coordination groups so that interventions across the system are funded. This is critical for achieving system-wide change.

**Speed Read – important aspects funders should keep in mind as you consider supporting education research in Africa through the outlined interventions.**

**1 Importance of Education Research:** Education research is essential for improving educational systems, addressing learning challenges, and ensuring evidence-based policies across Africa.

**2 Youth Dividend:** Africa has the youngest population globally, and its growing, increasingly educated youth will play a critical role in the future global workforce, making education investments timely and urgent.

**3 Current Challenges:** Despite progress in access to education, learning outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa remain poor, with 90% of children unable to read by age 10. Marginalized groups, including girls, rural communities, and children with disabilities, face additional barriers.

**4 Fragmented Education Research:** Education research in Africa is often fragmented, underfunded, and heavily reliant on international donors. There is a need for coherent, locally led research agendas that align with African policy priorities.

**5 Holistic, Systemic Approach:** The eight proposed interventions aim to address these challenges through a systemic, long-term approach. These interventions are interconnected and are designed to build a strong education research ecosystem in Africa.

**6 Locally Led Solutions:** The interventions emphasise African-led research, which ensures that local voices, contexts, and priorities shape the research agenda, reducing reliance on external funders.

**7 Long-Term Vision:** Real change in the education sector requires a long-term commitment—building a field can take up to 15 years, so funders are urged to consider patient, sustained investments.

**8 Interventions for Funders:** Funders can choose from eight different interventions, ranging from short-term capacity building to long-term systemic investments, such as funding Research Chairs or collaborative research projects. Building a field and changing the education research system is a long game, but it can be done. There are opportunities for short wins, as the field develops. There is something for everyone.

**9 Call to Action:** Funders are encouraged to pool resources and invest directly in the African education research ecosystem. The focus should be on fostering collaborations between African institutions and stakeholders.

**10 Scalability and Flexibility:** These interventions are not blue-prints. They contain important design considerations and principles. They should be adapted based on the needs of different countries and contexts, with the goal of creating scalable models that can be applied across Africa.

## Which intervention is for you?

We are putting these interventions out in the world to attract funders that will, collectively, contribute to a strong education research field in Africa. We hope that you will be inspired to join this movement to change the face of education research in Africa, and find the intervention that suits your mission.

If you are an African researcher or research institution, we hope you will use these notes to inform and strengthen your fundraising.

While each of these interventions could be tackled independently, they reinforce each other and will have a far bigger impact if implemented together. However we recognise that no one single funder can do everything. If you only have funds for relatively short-term interventions – then perhaps funding capacity building will be for you, but recognise that it will be most successful if linked to interventions which will give researchers the chance to

implement what they have learned and work together in research hubs, hence the research chairs and research partnerships interventions would be good to partner interventions. For example, the [CARTA programme](#) was initially designed to support early career researchers through training. However, they soon realised that it was necessary to strengthen the institutions where these researchers worked, so that they could practice the skills they had learned. Training on its own was not enough to move beyond individual-level change.

If you are a patient investor – then support systems changing interventions like strengthening the capacity of HEIs in Africa to attract and manage grants for education research. We know that in the menu of options we are providing, you will find the match for you.

## Where should we start for collective action?

If each of us has different requirements, how could we start to work together? A good place to start would be for education funders to collaborate on funding African education research (for example through pooled funding with shared governance, or through strategically aligned investments) or to fund directly into the African education research eco-system – not via international intermediaries, and which also includes an investment from Government. What is critical, is that the interventions are locally led. We firmly believe that African – education researchers and

other stakeholders – must drive the design and shape of the interventions. [Agenda 2063](#)—a blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into a global powerhouse—emphasises the potential of Africa's people in driving the continent's sustainable development. The funds would be administered by local entities, as described in the note on African funding. The funds should be flexible, to respond to local needs and build on existing strengths. Funding at the right level will require a knowledge of the strength of the education research field in each country.

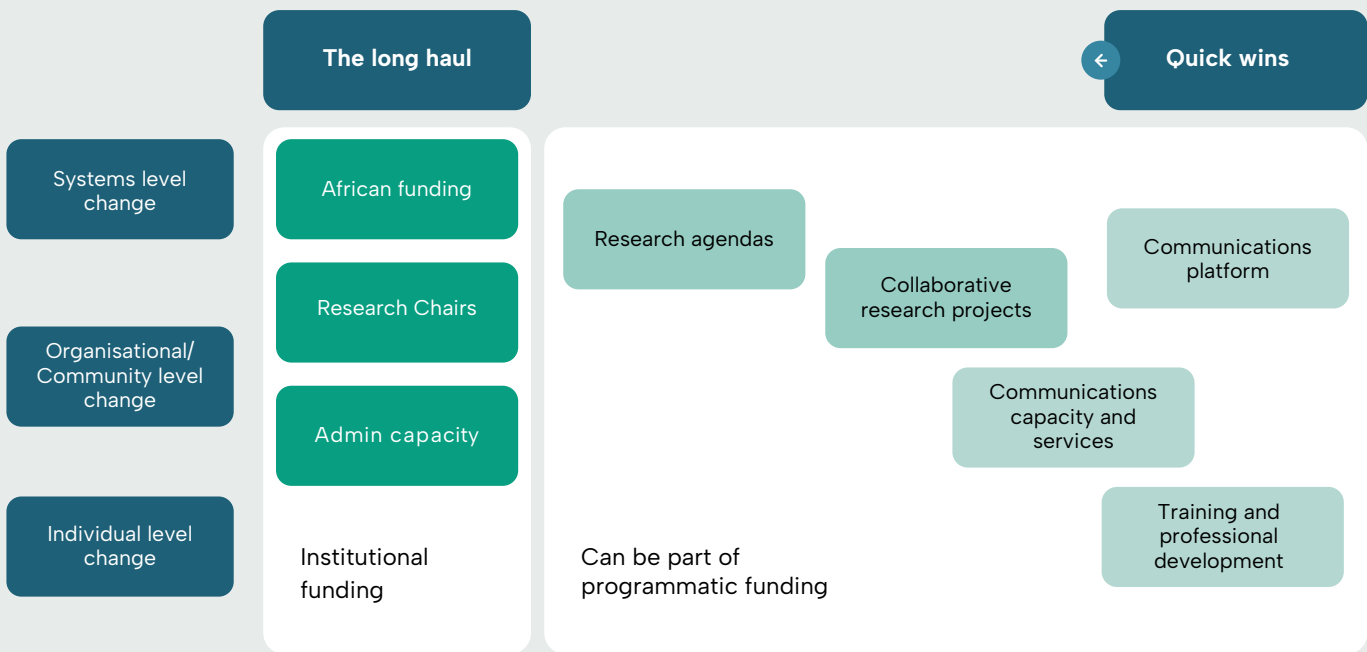
## Funding at the right level

Here are some of the ways that interventions can be classified, which can help determine at what level of the field you want to fund:

This is depicted in the diagram below.







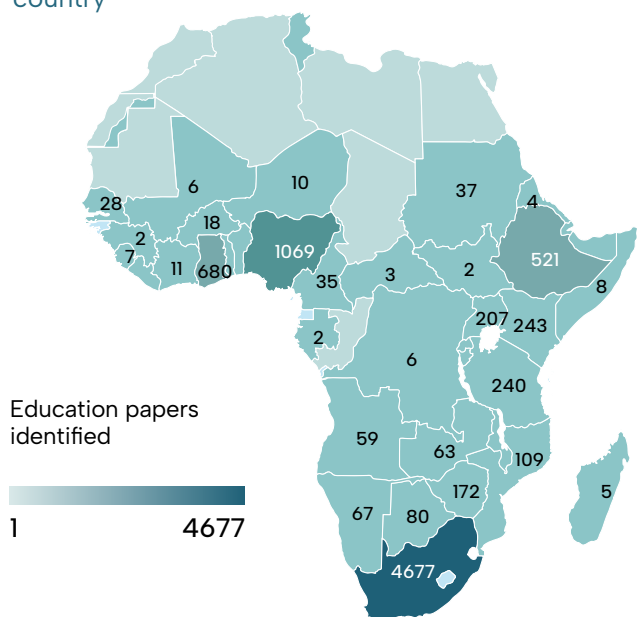
## Where should we fund?

A rapid mapping of the [African Education Research Database](#) highlights disparities in the maturity of the education research field across the continent, with significant variations between regions and countries. You can select a country or region to work in depending on the state of maturity of its field. The analysis of the number of publications per country

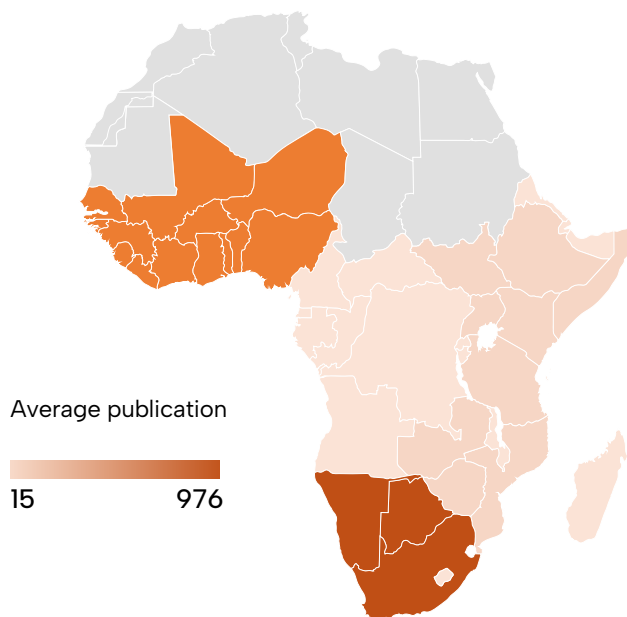
is presented in the maps below. Overall, the data reveals a heterogenous landscape for education research across SSA with countries at different stages of development in the field. South Africa stands out as a clear leader followed by countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania.

### Mapping of research results in education

Number of education research output identified by country



Regional assessment of education research outputs



## Next steps for EERA

Each intervention note sets out at the end a series of next steps specific to that intervention. In each note we give the specific example of what those next steps might look like in Kenya right now (in the absence of other interventions), where already much is known about the current situation, to give sense of tangibility though certainly these interventions could be applied in any country.

Every note includes a step to conduct a country-specific situational analysis relevant to that intervention due the enormous variation between countries (see Situation Analysis for more details). Through this process, you will build up a stakeholder database of contacts, and identify good entry points for each intervention. This difference across countries also means that it will be necessary to do detailed program design, based on the situation and the strength of the field building elements in each country. This will also inform the scaling strategy, which should be considered from the start.

Beyond the individual interventions there is an opportunity for funders to build on their increasing collaboration in the area and set up mechanisms that can provide funding across all eight interventions. The next steps towards this ambitious goal would be to:

1. Create a mechanism for collaborative funding for investment by identifying potential funding partners from the Forum for Education Research and other funding networks, including African funding.
2. Ideally, the partners should be willing to cover the full spectrum of the interventions and to work towards collective impact. However, interventions could also be clustered based on related concepts and funded in an integrated manner.
3. Make space for partnerships with funders who are not able to pool funds, but you still want to support the EERA 'model'.
4. Convene the relevant stakeholders and build a collective vision of change – this must include a local entity who will be able to manage the funds, and which has convening power. This entity could also support implementation of the EERA 'model' in that country. If there is an existing network, you could start there. This can be achieved at the national, regional or pan-African level.
5. We call it 'model' but it is highly dynamic, as we realise that it will look different in each context. What is important, is that the aim is to fund as many of the interventions in each country as possible.
6. Develop collective KPIs for the pooled funds that will track the evolution and strength of the field of education research in the focus countries and across Africa over time.
7. Use the collective voice of the funding agencies to raise the profile and status of African-led education research, champion the successes achieved by the fund and inspire further investment.

## Overview of the interventions

### Intervention 1: Developing African-led education research agendas

The proposed intervention is to support the development of education research agendas rooted in African policy priorities and local development goals, led by African education researchers and policy makers. A research agenda is a framework that guides enquiry. It is fundamental to ensuring that research projects are designed to address critical gaps in existing knowledge and shed light on real problems being experienced in practice. Research agendas determine what gets funded and ultimately, how society benefits (or fails to benefit) from the research being undertaken. A sound, strategically-informed and collaborative research agenda is the golden thread that links research to social impact.

### Intervention 2: Catalysing African funding for education research

This concept note describes a proposed intervention to increase funding for education research in Africa, focussing specifically on African sources of funding. This requires that funders adopt a long-term vision of strengthening the education research field in Africa, by helping to reduce dependency on international donors. Catalysing local funding for education research could involve various different mechanisms and channels, including partnerships with governments, independent research bodies such as think tanks, African philanthropies and the private sector. The success of this intervention depends largely on influencing these funders to invest more in education research, and to provide a vehicle for them to do so.

### **Intervention 3: Strengthening research and leadership capacity through Research Chairs**

This is about funding Research Chairs in the field of education research at higher education institutions in Africa. Research Chairs are funded academic positions that support academic institutions to advance research. Typically, the roles and responsibilities of Research Chairs include activities such as conducting research within their field, teaching, mentoring students, managing research grants and building general research capacity within their host institutions

### **Intervention 4: Strengthening administrative capacities of research institutions**

This concept note describes a proposed intervention to strengthen administrative capacity of research institutions in Africa. Strengthening administrative capacity of research institutions includes activities such as mentoring and training aimed at bolstering the capacity of individuals and systems to better respond to the administrative research responsibilities.

### **Intervention 5: Training and professional development for education researchers**

This concept paper describes a proposed intervention to fund training<sup>2</sup> and professional development of African researchers in the field of education research, with a particular focus on early career researchers<sup>3</sup> (ECRs). We propose holistic training and skills development in essential technical and complementary skills, including research methodologies, grant writing, project leadership and management; and the provision of structured mentorship and networking opportunities.

### **Intervention 6: Grants for collaborative research projects**

This document describes a proposed intervention to fund participatory action research projects and collaborative projects that involve multiple organisations or institutions coming together to conduct research on a shared interest or topic. We propose a funding mechanism that will allow

for the establishment or strengthening of research consortia and networks. This model employs a hub-and-spoke structure where a lead institution (hub) collaborates with various other institutions (spokes) across different countries to foster intra-African collaborations, align research efforts with regional needs and enhance research capacity.

### **Intervention 7: Research communications platforms**

This concept note describes a proposed intervention to strengthen or establish a communications platform and infrastructure to support the dissemination of education research conducted by African scholars, research teams and institutions. While there is a growing and diverse body of African education research being undertaken on the continent, the knowledge and insights emerging from this work are often left obscured or invisible. Existing systems for publication and dissemination are not designed to advance African expertise and thought leadership. The purpose of this intervention is to transform the ways in which education knowledge is brokered in Africa and ensure that research findings and knowledge products are accessible to those who can benefit from them.

### **Intervention 8: Enhancing communications and community engagement in African education research**

This concept note describes a proposed intervention to equip the African education research sector with skills and knowledge in research communication and community engagement. Research communication is a blanket term that refers to a range of activities, from conceptualising research outputs, translating research findings into appropriate language and visuals for diverse audiences, to developing communications strategies and monitoring communications uptake, amongst others. Community engagement is used here to denote all the ways in which researchers interact with the users of their research and with those who are intended to benefit from their research. This is sometimes also referred to in this note as 'knowledge exchange'.

<sup>2</sup> Some refer to training as capacity strengthening. Both terms emphasise a broader, ongoing process of enhancing skills, knowledge and abilities to support sustainable development and growth.

<sup>3</sup> There is no general consensus on what defines an ECR. Different interventions use different terms and criteria differ from context to context. Each funding organisation tends to establish a particular definition according to its own agenda and areas of interest (Nicolle, 2024). However, it is clear that gender plays a significant role in career progression, particularly for women, who often experience delays in their research trajectories due to family responsibilities. These factors should be considered when defining and supporting ECRs.

# Structure of the concept notes

Each concept notes are structured according to the following sections.

- Why is this a crucial intervention for education research in Africa?
- Aims and objectives of the intervention
- Expected outcomes
- Relevant examples of initiatives to support research collaboration (not in all)
- Who will benefit most from this intervention?
- Designing this intervention: Important considerations
- Next steps for funding this intervention. This includes a brief guide of what the next steps could be in one country – for the purposes of this exercise we have selected Kenya.

## Acknowledgements

Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA) and Southern Hemisphere prepared this set of intervention concept notes with the input from many different stakeholders and sources. The Enhancing Education Research in Africa (EERA) Project Team expresses its gratitude to all participants involved in our interviews and stakeholder engagements during the 2023 conferences organised by the AAU, ARUA, EE4A (and the Kenya Deans of Education Forum), and ICERDA, and the 2024 virtual convenings hosted by us that were attended by 98 African education research stakeholders, predominantly education researchers themselves. We would also like to thank OTT and the [Africa Education Funders Consortium](#) for their ongoing engagement and consultations, and other education groups who provided a sounding board for these ideas – The Kenya Deans Education Forum, the TEFN Equity in Evidence Partnerships Working, Building Evidence in Education (BE2).

We would also like to express our profound appreciation to the Steering Committee of this project for their invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this document. The steering committee comprises a diverse set of education research actors from Africa. We are grateful for the funding and support for this initiative provided by Imaginable Futures, Echidna Giving, and the Jacobs Foundation.

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