SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE
CREATE MEANINGFUL CHANGE

ESSA
Education Sub Saharan Africa

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

A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE FIELD OF EDUCATION RESEARCH IN AFRICA

Authors: Cathy Chames, Pauline Essah, Lucy Heady, Izel Kipruto, Laté Lawson and Dena Lomofsky

About Enhancing Education Research in Africa (EERA)

Recognising the unique challenges faced by Africa-based researchers and institutions in accessing funding, in June 2021, ESSA and the REAL Centre at the University of Cambridge jointly organised a conference focusing on 'Action on Funding for Africa-led Education Research'. A consortium of funders (Echidna Giving, Imaginable Futures, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Porticus) then collaborated to host the inaugural Forum for Education Research in/for/by Africa. This forum provided a platform for the African education research community to engage in discussions, share ideas, and exchange insights.

The Enhancing Education Research in Africa (EERA) aims to build upon the outcomes of the Forum and initiate discussions about concrete steps to nurture a vibrant, high-impact, and sustainable education research community.

Executive Summary

This executive summary offers education stakeholders the key findings resulting from an analysis of the education research field in Africa. This study, conducted by ESSA and Southern Hemisphere, incorporates data collected in East, West, Southern and Central African countries through a literature review, key informant interviews, and in-person consultations in different education research events on the continent.

This document provides insights into the African education research landscape, contributing to the EERA project through a situational analysis that uses the Field-Building Framework (Bridgespan 2020). In so doing, the document covers five aspects, namely the Knowledge Base, Funding, Field-level Research Agenda, Actors, and Infrastructure. It offers lessons from existing literature, insights from qualitative data, and an assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

Key Components of the Field of Education Research in Africa

1. Knowledge Base in the Field of Education Research

Despite substantial growth in the field over the last two decades, Africa's contribution to education research is estimated to be around 2.13%, where 95% of the publications emerged after the year 2000. Predominant research areas include language and curriculum, teachers and teaching, institutional leadership, culture and facilities, and equitable and inclusive education. Weaker knowledge bases exist in areas such as policy and financing, access to education, students' learning and assessment, and information and communication technologies.

In Africa, researchers produce a substantial amount of education research driven by funding, collaboration, and career objectives, but variations in quality persist. The challenge lies in making these publications more relevant to local policy and practice due to unclear research agendas, limited resources, and insufficient communication between researchers and decision-makers.

"I can tell you that endogenous scientific production, even more in the field of education, is not being considered and used by our decision-makers." (University Rector)

	Positive	Negative
Internal	**Strengths** Growing output aligned with emerging priorities, supported by high-quality publications and international collaborations enhancing the credibility and visibility of local research.	**Weaknesses** Resource constraints that lead to disparities in quality, unclear research questions, poor coordination, and underrepresentation in global discussions, especially in underexplored areas.
External	**Opportunities** To meet the rising demand for education research, tap into local organisations' untapped knowledge by conducting demand-led studies, bridging researcher-decision maker gaps, and using diverse communication channels.	**Threats** Severe funding limitations that impact research quality and utility for decision-makers. Limited engagement with decision-makers, driven by funding and academic promotion pressures, threatens local research autonomy and credibility.

2. Funding and non-financial support in education research

Funding plays a crucial role in advancing education research, enabling programme development for improving educational quality. Approximately 10% of African education research studies secure funding, with up to 90% of these funds coming from external sources. These include bilateral and multilateral bodies, NGOs, and foundations, with a focus on primary education and the imposition of conditions that often exceed the capacities of African universities.

Additionally, early career researchers require enhanced access to training, mentorship, infrastructure, and collaboration opportunities to hone their skills. The availability of funding significantly affects the quality and scale of research, but persistent resource constraints in Africa pose a serious threat to research depth and quality, hindering the field's capacity to provide solutions to pressing educational challenges.

"Quality of research outputs – doing research in a particular area you need funds, but this is not forthcoming. This may hinder the sample size and once this is limited you may not generate the data that can be generalised to the larger population because you confined to size of sample to the size of your pocket." (Researcher & University lecturer)

	Positive	Negative
Internal	**Strengths** International organisations, development partners, and non–profit organisations play a pivotal role in funding education research and present valuable South–South models for knowledge sharing and growth.	**Weaknesses** Inadequate funding opportunities, heavy reliance on project–specific and self–funded research, limited coordination among researchers, and researchers resorting to consultancies hinder the long–term sustainability, alignment with national priorities, and academic research in the field of education.
External	**Opportunities** The utilisation of public funding, engagement with local private funders, coordinated efforts among funding organisations, and researchers' unwavering commitment have the potential to enhance the quality of education research and shape policies for informed decision–making in Africa.	**Threats** Education research in Africa faces multiple challenges, including low prioritisation by decision–makers, dependence on funders outside Africa with conflicting priorities, and limited government funding due to economic and political challenges.

3. Field–level research agenda

Establishing a well–defined research agenda at the country level within the education research landscape is essential for conducting valuable research and making evidence–based decisions and plans in education.

However, in cases where research is funded from outside Africa, the resulting research outputs are less likely to align with local priorities, due to the significant dependence on international donors' agenda. Analyses focusing on education research priorities or agendas pursued by African education researchers and the factors influencing them are scarce, representing a notable knowledge gap from a research perspective.

"I think, we lack communication opportunity to discuss research needed by decision–makers." (Education Policy Analyst)

	Positive	Negative
Internal	**Strengths** Emerging initiatives and increasing calls for partnerships in African countries, along with government-led research agendas like those in Kenya, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire, demonstrate a commitment to aligning education research with local challenges, national priorities, and global goals such as SDG–4, addressing education challenges at various levels.	**Weaknesses** The absence of a coherent education research agenda in many countries leads to fragmented research efforts, limited alignment with national priorities, and short–term thinking among researchers, reducing the overall impact and usefulness of education research.
External	**Opportunities** Opportunity lies in aligning research with national priorities, promoting government-led education research agendas, funding relevant research, and facilitating cross–country peer learning to address critical education challenges in African countries.	**Threats** Research agendas in education are threatened by potential shifts caused by political changes, the influence of external donors, and limited resources, which can all divert focus away from long–term, locally relevant issues.

A Situational Analysis of the **Field of Education Research in Africa**

4. Key actors and their Role in Education Research

Co-creation is gaining prominence in social sciences and education research, involving stakeholders like civil society, decision-makers, school-level actors, and development partners to ensure broad dissemination and utilisation of research outputs. Key actors in the education research landscape encompass researchers, funders, and decision-makers, while various other research actors involve diverse groups of institutions, regional cooperation, international collaboration, and dissemination bodies.

However, there are weaknesses such as fragmentation within the research community, limited interest from decision-makers, a restricted research culture, and funding constraints. Research underscores the importance of both academic and non-academic individuals and institutions, but gender disparities persist, affecting demographics and research outputs.

"There is a huge discrepancy that I see and is very obvious from where I sit. What researchers do does not count if it does not get to the table where decisions are being made. This needs to be sorted out." (Principal Education Officer)

	Positive	Negative
Internal	**Strengths** Strength lies in the diversity of actors engaged in education research in Africa, including government agencies, NGOs, universities, think tanks, and international organisations, fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Impactful public intellectuals and committed actors further enhance the field.	**Weaknesses** Weaknesses encompass a fragmented education research community, characterised by a lack of a shared vision and communication, insufficient collaboration among stakeholders, the absence of a strong research culture within academic institutions and decision-makers, and significant gender disparities among researchers.
External	**Opportunities** Opportunity is in government support through bodies like national research funds with the potential for increased government commitment. Regional cooperation through organizations like the Association of African Universities and capacity-building initiatives for early career researchers offer avenues for improvement.	**Threats** Lack of support, political will, competing agendas, and inadequate dissemination can hinder research activities and the commitment of actors.

5. Research infrastructure in the field of education research

A research infrastructure is the connective tissue that strengthens each of the other four elements (knowledge base, funding, agenda, stakeholders) as well as complementarity between them by making stakeholders' efforts more coordinated, connected, and effective. Education research in Africa centres around a handful of universities, primarily situated in South Africa and Nigeria, with Botswana, Kenya, and Ghana following suit. Beyond national education networks, emerging regional and continental education research networks such as the Association for the Development of Education in Africa and African Network for Internationalization of Education.
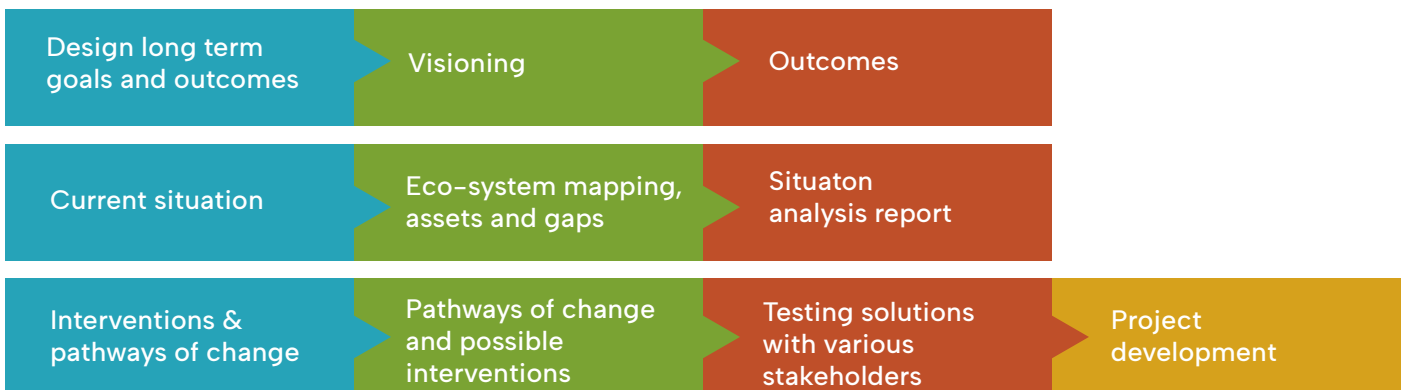
Notably, there are promising continental education research repositories, including the African Education Research Database and the African Journals Online. However, a shortage of cross-country comparative data hampers the assessment of other important aspects of the education ecosystem, such as Ethical Review Boards, Research Support Services, and Education Research Technology, among others.

"Institutional support for us as researchers to do our work on the ground. If I am not given a platform to do research, then I will stop doing research." (Professor)

	Positive	Negative
Internal	**Strengths** Emerging networks and groups of education research organisations actively strengthen the field, local higher education institutions host data repositories and dissemination platforms, and regional initiatives offer networking opportunities.	**Weaknesses** Weaknesses include limited support for building research infrastructures, inconsistent institutional support for researchers, lack of coordination at the country level, inadequate physical infrastructures, difficulties in data accessibility, and the need for better research collaboration tools.
External	**Opportunities** Opportunities include mentoring and capacity building for early-career researchers, South-South peer learning, and the potential for a continental education research consortium.	**Threats** Threats include difficulties in accessing data, poor dissemination infrastructure with predatory journals, and inadequate institutional support for emerging research infrastructure efforts.

Next steps

Following this situational analysis, ESSA and Southern Hemisphere will develop long-term outcomes by harnessing the visions and expectations shared by stakeholders to improve the field of education research in Africa. Next, a process of Pathways of Change involving a steering committee and other education research stakeholders will be initiated to propose tailored interventions and projects to enhance education research on the continent.

Design long term goals and outcomes	Visioning	Outcomes	
Current situation	Eco-system mapping, assets and gaps	Situaton analysis report	
Interventions & pathways of change	Pathways of change and possible interventions	Testing solutions with various stakeholders	Project development

A Situational Analysis of the **Field of Education Research in Africa**

About **ESSA**

ESSA is an NGO registered in both Ghana and the UK. We have a proven record of connecting data and evidence from Africa with decision-makers who can improve the system. ESSA also focuses on enhancing the profile of Africa-based researchers and their work. ESSA's efforts, particularly in the development of the African Education Research Database (in collaboration with the REAL Centre at the University of Cambridge) and direct engagement with researchers, have successfully increased the visibility and accessibility of education research conducted by scholars in Africa. These initiatives serve to promote the utilisation of local research evidence to inform educational policies, practices, investments, and decision-making across the continent.

About **Southern Hemisphere**

Southern Hemisphere is an African, women-owned socio-economic development consultancy with the single-minded focus of creating meaningful social change. Southern Hemisphere's participatory approach involves collaborating with its clients to achieve a shared end vision for beneficiaries.