

Economic and Ecological Benefits of Equitable Access to Quality Education

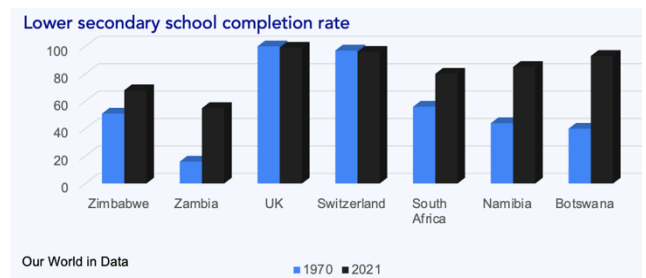
Looking at the SDGs defined by the UN¹, we recognize not only that they are intertwined, but that they place a profound emphasis on the role of education in achieving social progress, equality, sustainability, and peace as well as economic progress and innovation. Education in a socially responsible, democratic society is a right rather than a privilege. By providing access to education to every individual regardless of their socioeconomic status, we can counteract lack of a skilled workforce and bring economic growth, innovation and progress to local economies, counteracting effects of climate change, brain-drain and xenophobia created by migration. empowermefirst focuses on community development and social responsibility through education and how it can lead to equitable access and quality education.

Inclusive Education for All

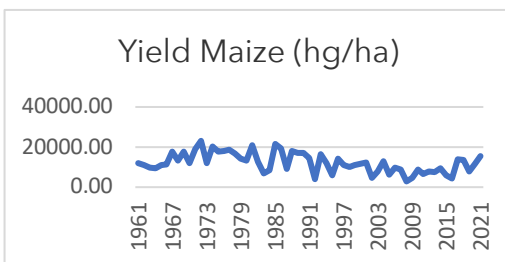
We embrace the philosophy of an inclusive education system that caters to every individual, regardless of their background. This implies that no one should face any obstacle or barrier to education, including financial limitations, cultural stigmas, or any other factors that might hinder access to education.

In emerging and developing countries, young people from vulnerable backgrounds are left behind. The communities are oriented in such a way, that girls are given fewer opportunities in education compared to their male counterparts which is against basic human rights and disadvantages them for future opportunities. It is our responsibility as change leaders to see that everyone is treated the same and given access to the same opportunities and be proportionally represented (by race, class, gender...) in education and leadership.

In most countries, for example in Southern Africa, completion rate of lower secondary is widely given². In Zimbabwe for example most youths have 8 to 9 years of school, yet only 40% reach university entry level, the majority of the school dropouts are vulnerable girls. While lower secondary education is a human right and thus supported and widely provided by governments that have signed the Human Rights Charta, it does not yet offer youths employment. Traditional skills such as farming and tailoring also don't offer income security.



Globalisation has made it more economical for many African countries to import mass-produced clothes from Asia



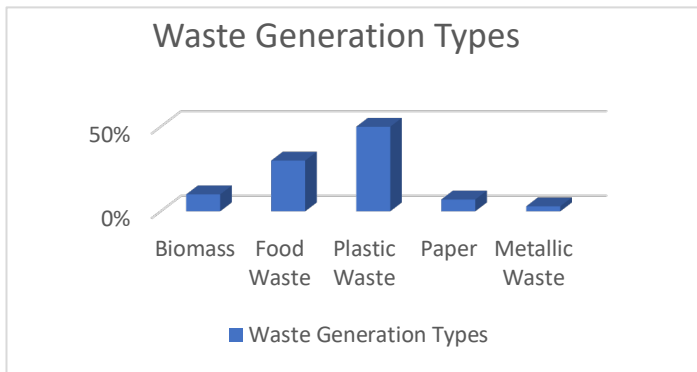
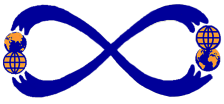
and grains from Ukraine, which has led to the recent food security crises. Communities have lost their knowledge on sustainable farming. They have ceased to use crop rotation, organic waste is rotting outside of markets leading to smells and causing diseases rather than being used for composting, whoever has a small plot plants maize or sweet potatoes, using an abundance of chemical fertilizers, while yield is decreasing due to soil degradation³.

As part of our methodology, we coach students to identify problems and come up with simple solutions. In interdisciplinary semester projects, they tackle these problems, for example by collecting organic waste, creating compost and bokashi for sale and their own horticulture projects using permaculture, swales, and agro-forestry to counteract soil degradation, low water retention and improve soil quality without any need to use harmful and costly chemicals.

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

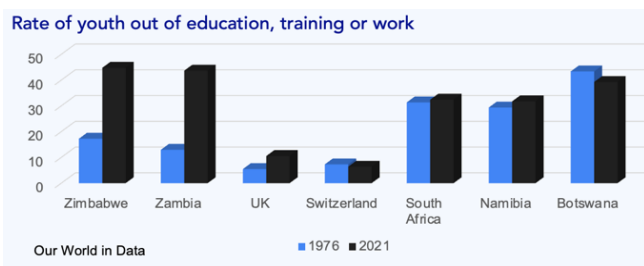
² <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/completion-rate-of-lower-secondary-education>

³ Deprived from FAO (2022). FAOSTAT Online Statistical Service.



Another problem we identified is poor waste management⁴. While most waste is organic or plastic, it is not usually recycled nor disposed of in a safe way leading to pollution, smells, and diseases. Students collect plastic for resale and organic waste for mentioned horticultural products, thus not only learning how economy, ecology and education are interlinked, but also creating a livelihood for themselves, their families, and communities. Other products include solid shampoos and shower products or sustainable tourism.

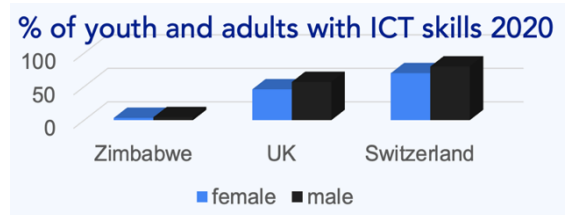
The pandemic and a rise in school and examination fees have enhanced this learning crisis.



The majority who are not in school also cannot find jobs. Youth unemployment is at 45%⁵, meaning that nearly every youth not at school is also without training or job. Many girls end up getting married and becoming mothers, which makes it even more difficult for them to return to school. Others emigrate to countries such as South Africa where they face extreme xenophobia⁶. It also leads to a brain drain in the country, as many

talented youths are left with no other alternatives but to leave their country.

Yet, there are skills which are highly sought after. With less than 5% of the population having general ICT skills⁷, computer skills training makes them already employable. Private educational institutions often provide a higher quality of education, including training ICT-skills, but students from vulnerable backgrounds cannot afford them.



This results not only in a significant inequality gap in education, and ultimately, socio-economic, class disparities and brain-drain, migration, and its resulting xenophobia, it is a waste of great potential. This is even more striking when looking at the demand for skilled workforce in Switzerland alone⁸.

At the same time a majority even of vulnerable youths have smartphones⁹, a great source for student-driven learning, if students are coached into using them for learning and provided engaging learning content within their scopes. These youths, while they lack self-confidence and self-belief, often had been eager learners and excellent students before they were forced to drop out of school due to lack of resources.

empowermefirst not only widens opportunities for vulnerable youth within their countries and ensuring that everyone has a chance to succeed based on their individual abilities rather than their background, by doing so is also building a strong body of young and eager change leaders in their countries as well as globally successful researchers, innovators, and workers, especially in IT and STEM.

⁴ Deprived from Mudzengerere, F.H. and Chigwenya, A. (2012) Waste Management in Bulawayo City Council in Zimbabwe: In Search of Sustainable Waste Management in the City. Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa. 14 (1)

⁵ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/youth-not-in-education-employment-training>

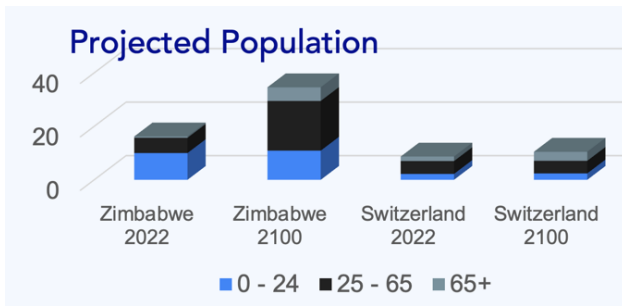
⁶ <https://scholars.wlu.ca/samp/21/>

<https://www.semafor.com/article/04/06/2023/zimbabwe-immigration-south-africa-xenophobia>

⁷ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/proportion-with-ict-skills-by-sex>

⁸ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/demographic-shifts-cause-swiss-labour-market-crunch/48250862>

⁹ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-individuals-who-own-a-mobile-telephone-by-sex>



In today's world, where remote working has become a norm, they can fill the demands of local and international companies, counteracting lack of workforce caused by demographic changes making Zimbabwe with a projected majority of the population between 25 to 65 an attractive partner for skilled workforce¹⁰, especially as we are basing our learning environment on the Swiss dual education system and tailor our content to the specific needs of companies thus allowing them to have a say in

the education their trainees receive.

Quality Education for the vulnerable

We consider education as a vital aspect of progress and focus on providing quality education and training of our coaches, ensuring their continued commitment, dedication, and quality output. Furthermore, our education system focuses on the best interests of society, meaning, that curriculum development and content reflect the needs of the people. This includes education that fosters personal growth and empowerment concerning political awareness and social responsibility. We also place an emphasis on vocational and technical skills, as well as the arts, literature, and global citizenship. We believe that a well-rounded education system can create truly holistic individuals who are not just well-equipped for the job market, but also have a deep understanding of their community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a student-driven methodology using today's technology to best benefit student and workplace needs, to foster crosslinked critical thinking, innovation and entrepreneurship provides a unique approach to education, one that centres on equitable access and quality education. We consider education an essential right as well as an important contribution to economic and ecological development, ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, has equal access to education. We also focus on creating well-rounded individuals and nurturing an inclusive learning environment, equipping individuals with the skills to navigate life as adults. Overall, we believe that education provides the necessary tools to build a society that is equitable, peaceful, innovative and flexible to tackle challenges and create economic growth. As always, progress requires a holistic approach, and it is only by acknowledging that education is key to social development that we can build a better world.

The author



Conium Nyathi, Head of Countries at empowermefirst.college, is also the founder of his own school offering education to vulnerable school dropouts. He's furthermore a member of different regional, national, and international economic and environmental organisations, which focus on social responsibility, economic and environmentally sustainable community development, such as Hwange District Youth Development Coalition, Greenline Africa, Alliance of Hope, Enabled Association.

He has been a co-author for the preparatory conference for COP22 on Climate Change and participated in an EESA conference, where Southern African countries deliberated on climate change and other environmental issues and he presented a brick making project to address the land degradation in Hwange district.

¹⁰ <https://ourworldindata.org/future-population-growth>