

Review

The social status perception of technical and vocational education and training in Africa: a critical review

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Accepted 09 August, 2012

In the wake of recent advances in scientific and technological innovations, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions have emerged as one of the key players in advancing scientific and technological literacy. Many countries around the world have invested a lot in TVET and Africa countries are not an exception. This is mainly because TVET has been viewed as a key to unlock human resource potentials with an aim of harnessing industrial and economic development. Support for TVET in Africa is clearly seen by increase in the number of TVET institutions offering various TVET courses, upgrading of TVET institutions in terms of infrastructure and human resources and linking education and the world of work through curriculum design, implementation and evaluation. However, some countries in Africa have not fully embraced the contribution of TVET in economic development because of the low social status perception from the general public on TVET. This means that any attempt made to improve TVET may be futile if the perception held by the general public on TVET is doomed. This paper explores some of the negative perceptions on TVET with an aim of identifying why TVET has a low social perception in most developing countries in Africa and recommend possible ways of enhancing the status and attractiveness of TVET.

Keywords: Africa, Developing Countries, Low Social Status, Perception, TVET.

INTRODUCTION

Industrialization in Africa is a means of realizing economic development. For this to be achieved, employees must have been equipped adequately with the relevant technical and other complementary (generic) skills (Hunsaker 2001). Equipping people with the desired skills is the task of Technical Institutes (TI) and Technical Training Colleges (TTCs) that provide the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). According to COMEDAF (2007), the TVET in most of the developing countries is expected to play two crucial roles in the national sustainable development (social, economical & environmental development). The first role is to provide training opportunities and career advancement avenues for the increased school leavers. The second role is to provide skilled manpower that is needed at all levels of the economy. The skills so developed should be able to lead to self-reliance in the absence of salaried employment and enhance the industrialization process. Although TVET has been used by several developing countries as an instrument of sustainable development, TVET has been still left to the

periphery and its significance has not really been embraced. TVET has been generally associated to a “poor school achievers” undertaking whereby general public perceive that it leads to producing graduates who will be working in “dirty” blue collar jobs. This has triggered the low social status and negative perception of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Africa. The negative attitude of trainees in Technical Institutes and the general public towards technical education is a great disservice to quality skills of technical institute graduates. Secondary school graduates who “fail” to join university, some end up in Technical Training Institutions. The tag “fail to join University” becomes a condemnation of the Technical Institute graduates. These graduates develop a poor self-image and lack self-confidence, consequently their performance at places of work is poor. The authors of this paper are trainers in TVET institutions and have made observations that the significance of TVET in contributing to awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes acquisition in developing countries is often ignored due to its “low status

syndrome” perception. This paper, thus, aims at reviewing some of the negative perception of TVET with an aim of answering the following objective questions:

- Why does TVET have a low social perception in most developing countries in Africa?
- What can be done to subjugate this perception?
- In what ways/role can key stakeholders in TVET play to improve on the perception?

In order to answer these questions, the paper will review some issues related to TVET, and particular concerns will be biased on the current status, the need and role/objectives of TVET in any developing country; why TVET is experiencing a negative/Low Social Status Perception in Africa; and possible ways of improving the image of TVET.

TVET in Africa: current status, need and its role

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is broadly defined as education which is mainly to lead participants to acquire the practical skills, know how and understanding necessary for employment in a particular occupation, trade or group of occupations (Atchoarena O& Delluc 2001). Such practical skills or know how can be provided in a wide range of settings by multiple providers both in the public and private sector. The conceptual definition of TVET cuts across educational levels (post-primary, secondary, and even tertiary) and sectors (formal or school-based, non-formal or enterprise-based, and informal or traditional apprenticeship). The role of TVET in furnishing skills required to improve productivity, raise income levels and improve access to employment opportunities has been widely recognized (Bennell, 1999). Skills development encompasses a broad range of core skills (entrepreneurial, communication, financial and leadership) so that individuals are equipped for productive activities and employment opportunities (wage employment, self-employment and income generation activities). TVET programs are designed to impart practical and theoretical skills in: Building and construction (including bricklaying and concreting); Carpentry and joinery; Welding and fabrication (including manufacturing of simple agricultural implements and tools); Agriculture (crop production and animal husbandry); Electrical installation and electronic equipment repair; Car repair and maintenance; Water supply and sanitation systems maintenance, including domestic plumbing works; Handicrafts and traditional skills; Basic ICT skills (word processing, data management, internet, etc.); Tourism-related skills (hotel management, tour guides, cooks, waiters) and Business entrepreneurial skills and attitudes (including time management, marketing, basic accounting, micro-business management; joint ventures).

Interests in TVET in Africa are lower than in other regions

(DANIDA 2002c). TVET systems in Africa differ from country to country and are delivered at different levels in different types of institutions, including technical and vocational schools (both public and private), polytechnics, enterprises, and apprenticeship training centers (COMEDAF 2007). In all of Sub-Saharan Africa, formal TVET programs are school-based while in some countries, training models follow those of the colonial rule. Except for a few countries (notably, South Africa, Botswana, Mauritius, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, and Namibia), TVET provision in Africa is spread over different ministries and organizations, including NGOs and church-based organizations (COMEDAF 2007).

Low social status perception of TVET in Africa: insight from previous research

TVET in Africa has, for many years, been considered as a career path for the low academic achievers. This perception has been fuelled by the low academic requirements for admission into TVET programs and the limited prospects for further education and professional development (COMEDAF 2007). Governments sometimes create worse impression that the primary objective of the vocational education track is to keep dropouts and “lockouts” from the basic and secondary school system off the streets, rather than project this type of training as an effective strategy to train skilled workers for the employment market (ibid). The term “lockouts” refers to students who are unable to move up the educational ladder, not because of poor grades but because of lack of places at the higher level (ibid). The public and even parents consider the vocational education track as fit for only the academically less endowed.

Over the years, a number of researches have been conducted in Africa on low social status perception of technical and vocational education and training According to one study carried out by Omulando and Shiundu (1992) in Kenya, for example, there is evidence of negative attitudes towards TVET among a large section of the Kenyan community. There has been a claim that the negative attitude was bred and crystallized with the advent of colonial rule in Africa and the discriminative approach of the colonial administration to the education of the African in relation to that of children of the white colonialists (ibid). This negative attitude has been cascaded to the general public due to low prestige attached to TVET.

A study research has further showed that people in society including learners, parents, politicians, educators, and administrators do not fully appreciate the significance of TVET (Kerre, 1996; Tum, 1996). Some studies have suggested that the major reason for this negative attitude is the long-term low status of TVET compared to general education (Simiyu, 2009). This attitude can be a reaction

to colonial times when Africans were expected to be manual workers and, therefore, were provided with technical and vocational education, while general academic education was reserved for Europeans who filled white-collar jobs (ibid). Research carried out by UNESCO-UNEVOC (2000) revealed that the community exerts a great deal of influence on one's choice of career. According to Kerre (2001), parents want their children to be either teachers or nurses and very few encourage their children to enter blue-collar jobs. Compared to general education, only small proportions of students are in TVET programs in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the main reasons for low number of TVET students is that TVET is not much appreciated. It is often viewed with a certain disdain as it regarded to lead to menial "dirty" work which has low social status (Haan, 2006). The best and bright students prefer "white collar jobs" especially in government offices. However, this attitude is slowing because nowadays such jobs are few with limited opportunities and therefore TVET courses seem to be alternative for many.

Okocha (2009) conducted a survey research involving 200 parents in Udu Local Government Area of Delta State in Nigeria on societal attitudes towards vocational education. The result of the survey showed that although parents recognize the employment value inherent in vocational education, they are still prepared to accept the superiority of socially prestigious and white-collar professions over technical related occupations. This was reflected in the parents' inclination to perceive vocational education in terms of material and employment opportunities (Okocha, 2009). A sizeable majority of parents preferred white-collar jobs for their children when it comes to actual career choices and aspirations. Although parents were aware of the employment value in vocational education, they were still prepared to accept the superiority of socially prestigious professions like Law, Medicine and Accountancy over technical oriented jobs. This is a reflection of the deeper societal prejudice against TVET (Okocha, 2009). The study further suggested that there is pressing need to link schools to the employment market, and thereby make education functionally relevant by narrowing the gap between theoretical study and practical work.

Another aspect involving negative perception of TVET is on gender. Girls and women are still underrepresented as far as TVET is concerned. A closer examination of girls' enrolment in TVET reveals a heavy traditional bias in favor of agriculture and home science, with very few enrolments in the traditionally male-dominated technical areas, such as building construction, power mechanics, metalwork and woodwork (Simiyu, 2009). This bias could be influencing the enrolment and participation of women in TVET programs which will in turn influence the perception that TVET is for male students. The suspicion that vocational education provides "a second-class level education may drive TVET to a dead-end.

Ways of improving the status of TVET in Africa

Enhancing status and attractiveness of TVET will involve changing perceptions and attitudes of the public about technical and vocational education. For this to happen, the use of role models in TVET and the involvement of successful entrepreneurs in motivation campaigns, especially in schools, will be necessary. An embarrassing shortage of role models is one of the banes of TVET. Technical and vocational education should be seen as a valid passport to a good job and not as a second best choice or the only educational route for the academically less endowed.

The status of technical and vocational education can also be enhanced by upgrading polytechnics and polytechnic-type non-university institutions to offer technical or "skills" degrees. The trend world-wide is to strengthen polytechnic institutions and their role in industrial and technological development, re-engineer their training programs for greater relevance and higher quality, and generally raise their status and attractiveness as higher institutions of choice for senior secondary school leavers. The quality of "skills" in TVET graduates is dependent on the quality of the trainers, equipment for training and Teaching/Learning resources. Japan, Korea and Singapore have been awarding "skills" degrees for many years now. Australia has constructed a TVET system that tightly links these elements into a comprehensive and pervasive national infrastructure. The result is a rigid system that narrowly focuses on work-related competences to the exclusion of broader education that is able to equip graduates to respond to rapidly changing technological, economic and social development (Wheelahan and Carter 2001).

Enhancing the status and attractiveness of TVET will call for all TVET stakeholders' participation and to play some of the roles as suggested in table 1 below. Changing perceptions and attitudes of the public about technical and vocational education will involve the use of role models in TVET and the involvement of successful entrepreneurs in motivation campaigns. The use of the electronic media to promote TVET may be particularly effective, as has been shown in Uganda through the TV soap opera "*Hand in Hand*" and the film "*The Other Choice*" in Ghana (COMEDAF 2007).

There is need to change the public perception of technical and vocational education in order to reduce the social stigma attached to the sector. To achieve this, TVET requires improvement to make their graduates compliant to industries' skill needs. In other words, the general public should be convinced that TVET helps solve immediate problems in the society. Of particular significance is that more emphasis and resources should be availed to train TVET graduates in relevant technical areas in order to improve their effectiveness in production performance. This way, TVET will be relevant in the world of work and will be supported by many people. As

Table 1. Some of the TVET stakeholders' role(s) in enhancing the status and attractiveness of TVET

TVET STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE (S) TO PLAY TO ENHANCE THE STATUS OF TVET
Government	Increase funding support to the TVET sector to upgrade TVET institutions and increase number of bursaries and scholarships allocated to students pursuing studies TVET courses. More bursaries and scholarships to be available to female students to subjugate gender inequality in students pursuing studies TVET courses.
Donors and Development Partners	Support post-training employment support services for TVET graduates, including business start-ups; sponsor excellent innovations and inventions by TVET students/graduates.
Educational Institutions and Training Providers	Involve community, parents and guardians in training activities. In addition, training institutions to conduct regular TVET trade show to showcase various innovations that can help the community.
Parents and Guardians	Support children and wards to choose the vocational education track; Reject perception that TVET is for the less academically endowed; Lobby politicians in favor of TVET; Support activities of educational institutions and training providers (COMEDAF 2007).
Employers	Provide opportunities in industry for TVET teachers to regularly update their workplace experience; Provide opportunities for industrial attachment and internships for TVET trainees (COMEDAF 2007).

industry and commerce are significant stakeholders in the outcomes of TVET system, they need to take a key role in the specifications of competences and quality standards in education and training. What is perhaps lacking in TVET but needed in the new approach is a genuine accommodation to the need, necessity and inevitability of lifelong learning education and training.

TVET has consistently faced problems stemming from the negative image commonly held by students, parents and many sectors of societies. This is also related to the lack of student motivation to enroll in TVET programs. These difficulties must be met with a renewed effort to raise the public perception of TVET. To counter negative public perceptions of TVET schools, a public awareness promotional campaign is necessary through role models in TVET and through media radio, television, newspapers and other social channels like the internet. The campaign should focus on providing information to the community and highlighting the benefits of technical and vocational education. To make TVET more attractive to the public, TVET agencies must continuously find out on the emerging better training techniques and training delivery mechanisms from the rest of the world and expedite their transfer and adaptation in their training programs. This will ensure that the TVET graduates remain relevant to industry skill needs, and this will enhance the attractiveness of TVET. In addition, setting high standards for preparation and continuous upgrading of teachers in their disciplinary fields, development of responsive teacher education curriculum, educational

delivery methodologies and learning outcome assessment should be enhanced. Further suggestions declare that, in order to comprehend pupils' attitudes towards technology in Africa, it is necessary to be aware of different circumstances, such as rural/urban settings and school types (Simiyu, 2009). Developing career advisers and guidance in TVET system is another way of improving the status of TVET in Africa

Further research

Further research needs to be undertaken to incorporate students, technical education trainers, employers, business, community, curriculum developers and examination council in the TVET sector in order to compare perceptions and experiences to enable TVET providers remain at the cutting edge in promoting TVET.

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