Education for peace, wellbeing and sustainability in Africa: Marking the Parameters

Obijiofor Aginam takes us on a journey of the linkage between education peace and wellbeing and elaborates on the proposal from UNESCO on how this can be done.

Leadership Education and Advancement Program (LEAP) at a school in Kenya

The health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent on the fullest co-operation of individuals and States – Constitution of the World Health Organization

Prologue:

The world is facing a plethora of interlinked crises: full-blown civil wars between countries with far-reaching global social and economic repercussions; internecine conflicts and social tensions among groups and communities within countries; rising polarization and socio-economic inequalities in and between countries; climate-induced extreme weather events (floods, tsunamis, cyclones, tornadoes); hunger and food insecurity; emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases; energy crisis, and increasing digital divide between the global North and South, and within countries. Often described as a polycrisis because of their simultaneous occurrence across time and space in different regions of the world, these multiple emergencies coalesce into a massive disruptive force impacting peace, wellbeing, and sustainability disproportionately across the world. These rapid and interconnected emergencies have placed populations in Africa, and other developing regions of the world in a state of accelerated and heightened mental, social, and physical uncertainties and anxieties, requiring renewed cooperation, inclusive policy frameworks, community-driven and holistic approaches to promote peace and nurture a sustainable future for all. Given the integrated and interdependent nature of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Agenda 2030, what role might education, broadly defined, play in nurturing peace, wellbeing and sustainability in African societies?

Issue-linkages for peace, wellbeing and sustainability

COVID-19, the most recent global pandemic since the 2009 H1N1 influenza, as of 22 February 2026, was estimated by the World Health Organization to have killed over 7 million people globally.[1] COVID rolled back the gains made by countries towards achieving the 169 targets of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Agenda 2030 including SDG 4.7 that aims to ensure,

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among others, that all learners acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, global citizenship, and a culture of peace and non-violence by 2030. As argued by Beaumont, "two decades of progress in the reduction of extreme poverty, the elimination of which is one of the sustainable development goals, have been pushed into a sharp reverse by a combination of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the growing climate emergency and increasing debt"[2]. COVID disrupted education and learning systems and exposed the fault lines between the rich and poor countries on vaccine equity and access to life saving medical countermeasures during emergency.[3]

Climate change, one of the most serious existential threats of our time, has unleashed extreme weather events and natural disasters in different regions: floods, hurricanes, heatwaves, forest fires, tsunamis, tornadoes and cyclones. In the latest Synthesis Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), stated that "human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe", leading to "widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people".[4] Inspired by the pioneering work of the IPCC on the categories of extreme events and disasters, some scholars argue that "the number of recorded natural disasters has more than doubled in number, from around 200 a year to over 400" over the past three decades.

Emerging digital technologies driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) are transforming multiple sectors of human endeavor, offering gains but also paradoxically sparking ethical and regulatory dilemmas around digital divide, data privacy, digital saturation, mental and emotional wellbeing, and job displacement.[6]

Can education for peace drive wellbeing and sustainability?

In Reimagining Our Futures Together: A new social contract for education, UNESCO proposed redefining the purposes of education to steer education systems away from emphasizing values of individual success and national competition towards "solidarity, understanding of our interdependencies, and caring for each other and the planet".[7] In recent decades, an influential school of thought (scholars, educationists, and practitioners) has argued that education is not just literacy and numeracy but a lifelong endeavor that offers a foundation for peace and harmonious coexistence. Education policies must ensure good quality education "integrated with skill acquisition, and along with that promise, comprehensive growth and personality development for every individual".[8] To address the multi-faceted and holistic development that an individual deserves in all five domains of human personality: physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and spiritual,[9] UNESCO has elaborated norms to promote education for peace, human rights, and sustainable development in the 21st century.

UNESCO's Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development (unanimously adopted UNESCO 193-member states in 2023) focuses on how education should evolve in the 21st century to bring about lasting peace, reaffirm human rights and promote sustainable development in the face of contemporary threats and challenges facing communities in different regions. The Recommendation outlines **14 guiding principles, concrete learning outcomes and priority action areas** for holistically reshaping all aspects of education systems. Beyond critical literacy and numeracy skills, learners should acquire competencies like empathy, critical thinking, intercultural understanding and environmental stewardship. The highlights of the Recommendation include: (i) a new understanding of peace (not just the absence of war and conflict but a dynamic process that nurtures the values of human dignity, and taking care of ourselves, and the planet we share), (ii) Education for sustainable development (fostering knowledge about the root causes of climate change, its impact, and ways to adapt and mitigate), (iii) Global citizenship education (preparing learners that value human dignity, cooperation, and dialogue that nurtures empathy and respect for the diversity of cultures and opinions), (iv) Gender equality and education (promoting gender equality and acknowledging its importance for realizing the right to education), and (v) Education in the digital era (the opportunities of new technologies for teaching and learning highlighting the importance of critical thinking, empathy, and understanding of key principles of digital security, privacy, and ethical online interactions).

Because peace has always been construed as not just the absence of war, "education for peace" goes beyond the narrow confines of "peace education" by looking at the formal and informal education systems including lifelong learning opportunities for all. In doing so, education for peace encompasses a holistic approach that addresses the competencies and variables for positive and negative peace towards promoting peaceful, sustainable, and inclusive societies. Given these complex challenges, formal and informal education systems must be reimagined to build peace, wellbeing, and sustainability.

Epilogue: locating education and health at the centre of sustainability

The quest to promote just, inclusive, and sustainable societies through education for peace is consistent with the foundational pillars and principles of inclusivity and solidarity codified in the Constitution of the World Health organization:

1. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.
2. The health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest co-operation of individuals and States.
3. The achievement of any State in the promotion and protection of health is of value to all.
4. Unequal development in different countries in the promotion of health and control of disease, especially communicable disease, is a common danger.

5. Healthy development of the child is of basic importance; the ability to live harmoniously in a changing total environment is essential to such development.
6. The extension to all peoples of the benefits of medical, psychological, and related knowledge is essential to the fullest attainment of health.
7. Informed opinion and active co-operation on the part of the public are of the utmost importance in the improvement of the health of the people
8. Governments have a responsibility for the health of their peoples which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures.

Adopted in 1946, these foundational principles of inclusivity and solidarity were recognized as "basic to the happiness, harmonious relations and security of all peoples". The synergy between education for peace, wellbeing and sustainability is a reinforcing relationship where health is a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'; peace is not just the absence of war'; and education goes beyond literacy, numeracy, and the cognitive mastery of academic knowledge. In this endeavor, education emerges as a key social determinant of health. UNESCO has, for decades, promoted a range of programmes under the broad umbrella of education for peace, including Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), education for sustainable development, and education for health and wellbeing. These programmes reflect a holistic, and human-centered approach to wellbeing and sustainability. In the realm of peace, wellbeing and sustainability, the synergy of education and health in Africa can lead to positive and measurable outcomes scaling back the morbidity and mortality burdens of newly emerging and reemerging infectious diseases; the prevalent non-communicable diseases and unhealthy lifestyles; the health-related impact of climate change, and a cluster of social determinants of health. The integrated nature of the 17 SDGs in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development underscores the importance of a holistic conception of health beyond disease, peace beyond war, and education beyond tests and examinations. This holistic paradigm offers a pragmatic anchorage for the "right of everyone" to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, and the 'promotion of just, peaceful, and inclusive societies' in Africa and elsewhere.

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