

Review

Soft skills in developing economies: An African view on the hidden linkage between indigenous knowledge and business perspectives

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Although, the soft skills theme has been covered from many angles, there remains a scarcity of research on the linkage between indigenous knowledge and advances of business in developing countries. In addition, there is a gap between the theoretical approaches to the soft skills theme and the practical realities that ask not only which capabilities job seekers need to have but also where to acquire them. While it has been acknowledged that this gap exists, there is a scarcity of research and reports on the topic, and it is often overlooked that, in developing countries, the medium skilled employees and the small scale entrepreneurs are those who need the most support in acquiring knowledge. This fact was highlighted during the COVID pandemic. This paper shows that the provision of soft skills can meet both the requirements and capabilities in developing countries if people are given the chance to learn and master both professional knowledge and soft skills. The authors exhibit a conceptual base and showcase a range of examples, mainly on Africa, where improvement of soft skills has not only helped individuals and businesses but entire sectors of the economy. In the opinion of the authors, a documental presentation with “life stories” often provides more benefit to the readers than an anonymous statistical analysis.

Key words: Soft skills, developing countries, entrepreneurship, poverty alleviation, education, employment.

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills cover a broad range of skills: communication, professionalism, reliability, work ethics, etc., that are essential for job success and for the performance of businesses. They are particularly important as our world increasingly becomes more technological and automated and the competition for jobs becomes more competitive worldwide.

These trends are further accelerated by the presence of reoccurring economic downturns and world changing events like Covid-19 pandemic (Comme et al., 2019). Although it is recognized that these trends impact growth and that new types of skills are needed for jobs in the “tech world” and to rebuild after the pandemic, soft skills development is sometimes not linked to these phenomena

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and not fully nurtured. This perspective applies to both the developed and the developing world; thus, the authors are seeing more deficits in soft skills deployment in those places where they would potentially contribute the most to eradicate or at least alleviate poverty by improving the conditions for job opportunities (Omoniyi, 2013). Additionally, numerical analyses measuring the specific impact of soft skills on economic development are almost non-existent¹. However, what we do find in the literature are numerous studies that exhibit which skills are to be employed in which professional setting – like the public sector, the health sector, manufacturing, the service industry, and IT (Massaro et al., 2015). In the following, the paper will show how soft skills in developing countries adds clarity about which skills are really considered most necessary for reducing the exposed gap and improve business development in Africa.

However, one point of departure for studying the phenomenon of soft skills deployment in a developing country has been the notion that foreign investment not only transfers technical know-how and knowledge but also non-technical skills (Mirvis and Googins, 2018). The effect, whether produced by institutionalized procedures like employee training or through mere human contact, spreads beyond the immediate investment target through spillovers that enhance the capabilities of its suppliers, customers, and other stakeholders (Bardy et al., 2012). Moreover, what was brought in through the foreign venture into, an African business and social community will meet and mix with capabilities that these communities possess on their own. They are rooted in indigenous knowledge and indigenous management practices. There is an array of specifics of indigenous influence on management that per se, may produce a competitive advantage and have done so on even an international scale for quite a few African firms (Dia, 1996). Furthermore, substantial research has been published on this issue of “autochthonous management” (Zoogah, 2020; Zoogah et al., 2015) to which this paper cannot add new insight. Instead, it wishes to complement the findings of that research providing two other perspectives. One entails, the question whether an indigenous African background shapes the mindset regarding management skills, whether this mindset is preserved when Africans work abroad and if it may provide an advantage to them in their workplace. The other perspective is whether a good command of soft skills may present an advantage in an environment of technological change and in economic crises.

The “mindset perspective” has been researched by the authors of this paper in a study with African nationals who live, study and work in Germany (Bardy et al., 2017). The participants in this study were asked to give a ranking of management soft skills by the order of their impact on business performance. This was contrasted with the authors of this paper, in an extensive search through the

literature, only found one work that was published to that effect: Mamabolo et al. (2017) have performed a factor analysis which confirmed that social and interpersonal, personality and leadership skills form a cluster which impacts on business success.

Results of a similar survey performed with students of Latin American descent in a U.S. university and with a large European survey of migrants’ soft skills conducted with companies’ heads, personnel managers and business associations. The following Table shows the comparison. It shall also serve here to give a definition of the soft skills that help to improve business performance (Table 1).

The outcome of the study revealed that the African migrants appear to be quite aware of the specific soft skills that are derived from their cultural background, which ultimately might make them well equipped for better job opportunities when they actively apply them in their work environment.

The second perspective that will be dealt with before concluding this introductory section regards the challenge of technological change and the economic downturn that was caused by COVID-19 which both have had a strong effect on Africa. Even though the continent has some of the fastest growing economies in the world (African Development Bank, 2017), and advances in technology deployment are continuously made (Rotberg, 2020), its fullest potential is far from being realized which is often due to poor and sometimes failed government performance. Mistrust between African governments and their citizenry have become even more visible in the COVID-19 pandemic (Ojiagu et al., 2020). On the other hand, as technological advances place the main responsibility on individuals in the form of ‘upskilling’, some traits of indigenous African wisdom are quite helpful in coping with those challenges as will be shown later in the paper (Schlogl et al., 2021). On the other hand, many talented youths in Africa, with high level of soft skills, feel that they have no future in their home countries. They have become part of a new “AfricanDiaspora”, migrating to other countries for more opportunities. In order to forestall or at least slow this exodus, opportunities must be created in the home countries through the creation of local enterprise that promises favorable prospects for the future. The very large informal sectors in Africa’s economies may become a driving force in this effort, and it can also, at least in part, compensate the loss of jobs through closures of larger formal businesses in the COVID-19 crisis (Gumede et al., 2020). The effect of the informal sector/the household industries on local economic development can be largely enhanced by skills deployment, of which soft skills are a key force as they connect to the indigenous background of the people (Tripath and Singh, 2017). So, the process of developing soft skills and entrepreneurship capacity can become the foremost catalyst for many young Africans by improving their competency and their

Table 1. Comparative ranking of soft skills with greatest impact on business performance (Bardy et al., 2017).

Soft skills	U.S. Int. students	Africans in Germany	European employers
	Rank No.	Rank No.	Rank No.
Identifying work goals	10	2	5
Learning to learn	2	2	6
Adaptability and flexibility	6	3	8
Motivation	4	7	7
Recognizing/ applying work protocols	1	1	5
Values	2	1	n.a.
Respecting hierarchical levels and rules	4	4	4
Managing responsibilities	9	7	7
Time management	8	6	10
Managing the digital process	2	3	3
Communication skills	8	4	7
Managing the communication circle	2	6	6
Personal effectiveness and integrity	1	3	6
Team working	9	5	9
Service skills (understanding of others' needs)	1	6	n.a.
Leadership	10	1	4
Conflict management	2	5	6
Cross-cultural awareness	2	5	4
Decision making	5	3	6
Problem solving	4	3	8
Creativity and innovation	5	5	10
Critical and structured thinking	4	4	6

N.a: Not available

entrepreneurial spirit, and by bringing hope.

REFLECTING ON SPECIFIC CONTEXTS OF CAPACITY BUILDING IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

As with any other issue that relates to development, learning soft skills requires specific competencies to address local realities of distinct regions and countries (Alon and McIntyre, 2004). *Development* is a term which is often applied with an over-emphasis on the economic sphere. Karl Polanyi's statement was that, the economy is essentially embedded in society (Stanfield, 1986) depicts the structures of developed countries, while in developing countries the traditional and indigenous culture is entrenched within the society with the economy being surrounded by these traditional forces and not embedded within (Onda, 2001). Also, societies in emerging economies are frequently going through various processes of transformation, and their economic and intellectual base is still too fragile for outright attempts to maximizing productivity. Soft skills training can strengthen that base when it is grounded in a wider societal context. In the African environment this context includes the notion that businesses and government officials need to deal with chiefs of (remote)

tribal communities, with representatives from religious communities and some inter-regional power groups. So, in training soft skills, best results are achieved when sociological and philosophical elements are engrained that combine the social, the economic and the ethical content of what is taught with indigenous traditions – and vice versa. The concept must also reach out to the vast number of people who operate in varied cottage industries in the informal economic sector. In many African states, the informal sector ranges from 50% of employment in Ethiopia to up to 90% in Tanzania (Henderson, 1999). In addition, many of the people who work in the informal sector may possess the qualities that can be associated with softskills.

SOFT SKILLS EMBEDDED IN INDIGENOUS TRADITION

The concept of soft skills is compatible with many of the principles which African societal interaction is founded. A fundamental principle is that of balance – the balance between mind and body; between different dimensions of individual bodily functioning and need; between individual and community, individual community and environment; and individual and the universe (Bodeker, 2010). These practices and beliefs highlight the populace's sense of

ethics where many people have a deep sense of right and wrong, and any breach of this code is considered evil: “for it is an injury or destruction to the accepted social order and peace” (Mbiti, 1969:205).

“As in all societies of the world, social order and peace are recognized by African people as essential and sacred; where the sense of life is so deep, it is inevitable that the solidarity (and stability) of the community must be maintained, otherwise there is disintegration and destruction” (Mbiti, 1969:205). Compliance to the rules of social order is required in all levels of society. In Nigeria for example the traditional Ibo society enforces conformity by “*omenala*” (customs). Culturally speaking, *Omenala* is the means by which the values of the society and the process of socialization are continued from one generation, so every member of the society will know what to expect from his neighbor and what to give to them (Ilogu, 1974:23).

The African tradition of bottom-up decision-making and development of common ideas stems from the quest for harmony and balance. In Botswana, for example, the ‘*Kgotla*’ is the central decision-making agency of a village and serves as the village’s administrative and judicial center. It is presided over by the local chief, and all adult community members are expected to attend to discuss public affairs (Silitshena, 1992). The Zulu and Xhosa, as well as the Swazi use ‘*Indaba*’ or ‘*Indzaba*’ - which means ‘business’, or ‘matter’ (Newenham-Kahindi, 2009), for bringing people together to resolve problems that affect the village, where everyone has a voice, and a common resolution is sought. Another concept is *Kanju*, a term that describes a specific creativity born from African difficulty. *Kanju* is “the rule-bending ethos that makes it possible to get things done, even when obstacles stand in their way, like crumbling infrastructure, corrupt bureaucracy and tightfisted banks who might be unwilling to make loans to people without political connections” (Olopade, 2015:20). Other indigenous concepts are *Ubuntu* from Zimbabwe (*Hunhu/Kuntu/Munhu* in other African languages), which refers to “the ability to overpowering urges in one’s own physical being” (Chivaura, 2007:232), and *shemsw*, the ancient traditional principle from the Nile Valley which denominates organized action, based on an equal or companionate companionship (Zoogah et al., 2020). The emphasis of both is on coexistence, built on harmony, peace and justice – the “African way to connect with people” (Newenham-Kahindi, 2009:90). This, in the words of modern African women’s rights activists means to secure trust and a “level playing field” (Elbeshbishi, 2018).

SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CONCEPTS FOR AFRICA

Africa is a continent of “the young” - 19 of the world’s 20 youngest countries are located in Africa (Myers, 2019),

and it produces one of the fastest-growing labor forces. However, the continent has one of the lowest levels of human capital, especially with respect to access to quality education, stunting, and maternal and child mortality (World Bank, 2019) which ultimately results in an ill-equipped workforce. Between 2017 and 2030, the labor supply in Africa will increase by an estimated 198 million, with 11 million young women and men expected to enter the labor market each year for the next decade (Choi et al., 2020:65). But this workforce will generally remain in poverty unless the qualification level can be raised. In contrast, on the more positive side, family ties are very strong throughout Africa which are often much stronger than what might be seen in other parts of the world. It is these ties that bind families together and where many Africans learn skills from parents and grandparents; these skills are often cognitive and emotional which are the essence of soft skills (Figure 1).

Yet, a limitation is that many parents and grandparents, as well as other family members often do not possess literacy skills and hence cannot transfer these skills to the youth. This is especially true for rural women with vulnerable backgrounds. They may have soft skills like confidence and the ability to develop personal strengths which can help them to build a business but overcoming the lack of basic literacy to further success can be a challenge (Gavigan et al., 2020). In pursuit of acquiring these skills, equipping illiterate adults with basic communication skills is one priority in adult learning and education (ALE) programs in Africa. ALE programs remain a major priority of most countries in much of Africa, but especially in the sub-Saharan region where 26 countries in this region have laws, regulations, or other public policy initiatives that primarily focus on supporting adult literacy (UIL, 2013). In a study conducted by Dekker et al. (2018) for INCLUDE, an international knowledge platform on inclusive development policies (<https://includeplatform.net>), there is an emphasis on context in the type of skills needed whether they come from rural or urban environments. But, irrespective of context, the study found that in both of these environments (rural or urban) the young need entrepreneurial skills to successfully start and grow a new business, a farm or non-profit venture (Dekker et al., 2018).

In Africa, the concept of “entrepreneurship” starts at the family level. In a well-managed family unit, where scarcity often rules, prioritization is essential. In such family settings, the young will acquire early on what Peter Drucker has called “the ability to recognize changing trends and respond to these as opportunities” (Drucker, 1985:12). One of the major factors that contribute to soft skills development in Africa is enabling young people to react accordingly when they see trends in the current economic and technological courses. While business schools provide economic knowledge, entrepreneurs need skills that allow individuals to adapt to changing,

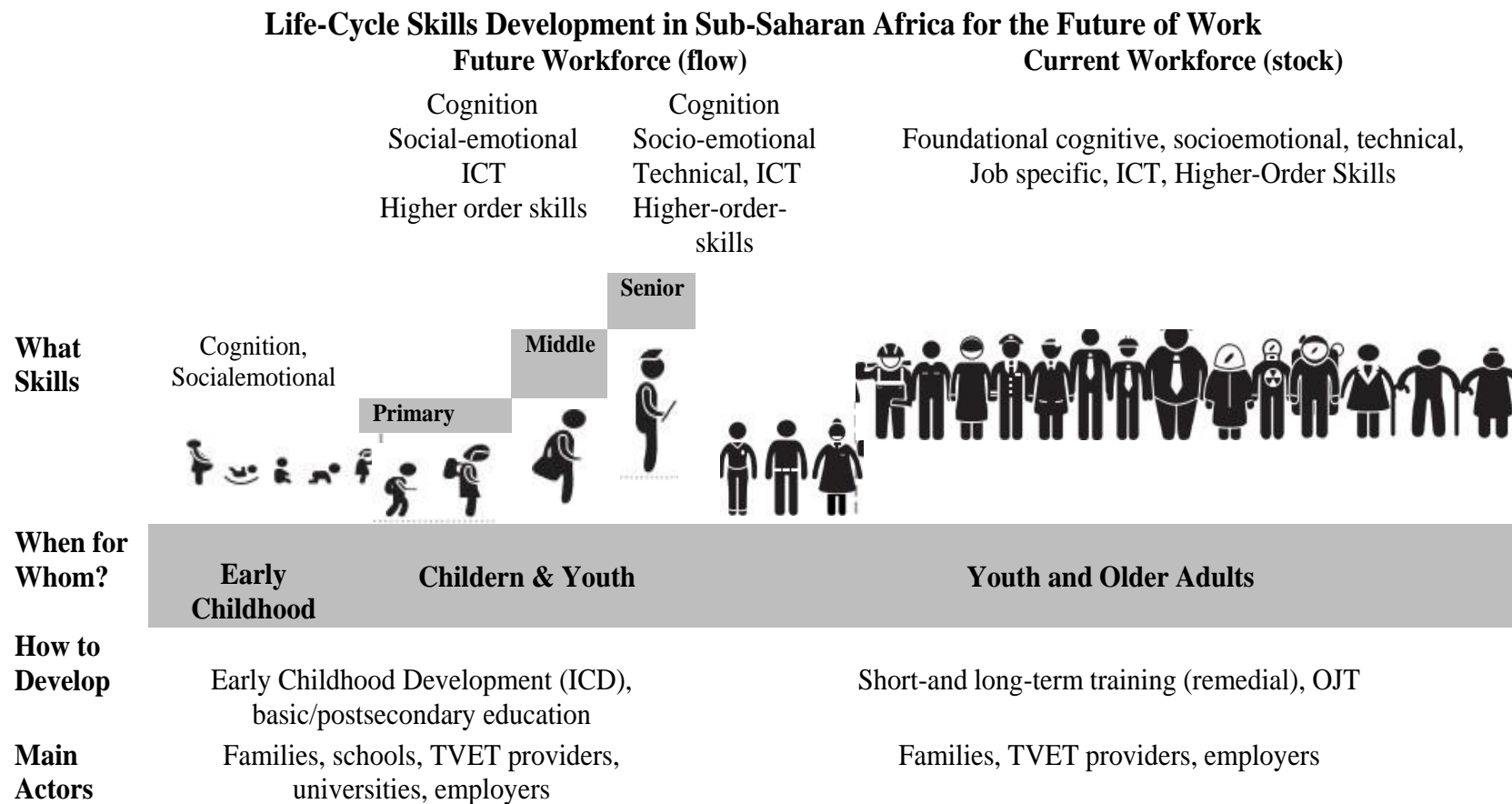


Figure 1. Life-cycle skills development in Sub-Saharan Africa for the future of work. ICT=information and communication technology; OJT=On the Job training, TVET=technical/vocational education/training
 Source: Adapted from Arias et al. (2019).

uncertain environments. Although, there is no shortage of entrepreneurial spirit in Africa, aspiring entrepreneurs further need to gain skills that help them overcome weaknesses in the policy environment (Bello, 2019) and to navigate bureaucratic barriers. Negotiation skills will help here, as will effective communication and planning skills. In the institutional environment of

African government agencies, communication, that is persistent dialogue and building trust in relationships, are needed to overcome the ever-present bias towards corruptive practices and other long established yet often outdated government policies.

Building entrepreneurs is one area for applying soft skills development concepts, but there are

more sectors where innovative skills and capacity building are needed. Templates must be developed to bring soft skills to teachers, scientific personnel, healthcare officials and government officials. Frequently, many of these individuals have not had the opportunity for self-development or were not allowed to freely exercise independent decision-making. But in their professional life

these individuals are exposed to diverse public and private interest groups whose representatives are skilled at communicating their objectives. Hence, they must learn to interact fluidly and dynamically. In addition, they must respond to situations that require skills like emotional intelligence, empathy, active listening, problem solving, creative thinking and the ability to solve conflict. Teachers and government officials, in particular, need to have these intuitive skills. With teachers for example, this includes the ability to observe quickly and sharply and respond to the mixed group of individuals and variant situations in the classroom. The pertinent skill of elocution may often come from what an individual has learned within the family group where the elders speak out frankly in any occasion (Bhatnagar, 2011). Similarly, government officials are often tasked with working in mixed teams together with representatives of the tribal leadership. If there is mutual understanding (built, again on empathy, active listening and creative thinking that both sides should have learned when observing family tradition), the outcomes will be rewarding for all. This has been called the “*chieftaincy paradox*”: Empowering unelected traditional leaders often improves the responsiveness of democratic governments” (Baldwin, 2016:5).

In some cases, collaboration that starts on the local level can even shape the overall political landscape. In a case from Liberia, international peacekeeping missions succeeded in building cross-sector teams of civil society organizations and government representatives. The public authorities which had not been found trustworthy by the people of Liberia regained acceptance and were therefore able to gain undisputed ownership of the election process in 2005 and 2008 (Pietz and Carlowitz, 2011).

The concepts on which a foremost focus should be given are those that refer to the groups which suffer from notable gaps in the dominion of soft skills and where this gap prevents effective performance: teachers, scientific personnel, and government officials. The three sectors bear similarities with regard to the interaction between tribal tradition and the official institutions. Other than in the private sector, this interplay is very often not employed to advance communal solutions (Bardy et al., 2018). However, since all businesses are embedded in a societal environment, there is a huge potential for cross-fertilization of ideas and practices among these three sectors. It is this potential which seems to be the most promising for Africa.

FROM CONCEPTS TO PRACTICE

African people often stay connected to indigenous wisdom when entering formal training (Morrison, 2018). Upholding the societal nexus can contribute to maintaining a balance between the cultural, the political,

and the racial spheres. Therefore, developmental plans which make use of this nexus can stimulate enterprising African youth, strengthen the self-reliance of young people and promote a cognitive shift to perceive new environments (Arogundade, 2011).

Developing a stronger enterprising attitude could also motivate young persons to move out from the informal sector and establish registered firms because they will understand that such firms create the foundation for sustained employment creation (Osuagwu, 2002). But this must be complemented by a number of legislative and social actions such as access to credit and social protection services for the families of the self-employed, and, most importantly, restoring trust in people who are in positions of privilege and power (Marinescu and Valimăreanu, 2019).

Coupling the development of soft skills with building a public entrepreneurial mindset is a positive move to promote economic activity since it provides individuals with an ability to conceive innovative ideas and the ability to convert those ideas into improving their workplace schemes into profit making ventures (Omolayo, 2006). As said earlier, entrepreneurial spirit is often engrained in what young people in Africa learn from their elders. So, the strong tribal structures and culture that are found throughout the African continent are rather an encouragement than a hindrance for job innovation. What needs to be respected in job training and execution is the nexus to tribal culture. For example, when confronting agricultural engineers with the techniques of improved distribution and usage of pesticides in Ghana, no sampling and no trials could be conducted in the field without the direct intervention of traditional land priests, the “*tindaana*” (Kwakye et al., 2019). Skills deployment, thus, becomes more effective when it takes account of the distinct social environment in which it is implemented. This can be provided by the multitude of institutions outside the educational system like business associations, civil society organizations, churches and other religious institutions. It is this intertwinement of the public and the private sector that constitutes both the challenge and the chance for making businesses, government entities and above all young people aware of the rich heritage with which their culture bestows on them. For the young, transferring this into their professional undertakings would just be one additional step since they will have seen many (good) examples of tribal leadership at home. Also, as the tribal system has shaped an edifice of special skills and knowledge, any learner should be able to build accurate judgment for the know-how that is transferred from Western countries to Africa. If Africans develop sufficient self-confidence to that regard, they will be able to merge their own skills with those imported skills and knowledge (Akolgo-Azupogo et al., 2021).

Deploying what has been learned in a tribal home can be beneficial, for example, when linking technical skills in

information technology (IT) with soft skills: A report from Zambia ranks persistence, networking and self-confidence as the most important soft skills over planning and communication (Kambone, 2017). Beyond IT, it is motivational skills, namely personal initiative, proactiveness, goal setting, planning, innovation and overcoming obstacles that count for personal and business success. Customer satisfaction and loyalty are the most visible effects as seen in a study done by McKenzie and Woodruff (2014) on training of business management in small and medium enterprises of Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tunisia. Comparable results were shown in a study in Liberia (Dammert and Nansamba, 2019). In a related study, it was found that both IT and soft skills improve professionalization in motorcycle taxi services (a vital business that can be found throughout Africa) (Inoue, 2019). Specifically, the study found that when drivers learn to connect to IT platforms offering their service, they almost automatically require/acquire soft skills connected to the use of those platforms: “problem solving, communication, teamwork, self-management, time management, interpersonal connection, ability to learn proactively, emotional intelligence, leadership, and planning and organizing, among others”(Inoue, 2019:16).

The awareness for soft skills has grown in many business areas throughout Africa. For instance, in the creative economy, which is an important source of income for the informal sector and the self-employed (Snowball et al., 2017), a combination of specific artistic skills can help to commercialize creative ideas and toraise competencies related to the use and adaptation of IT, management, entrepreneurship marketing, financial and planning skills and problem solving and interpersonal skills (Ansah and White, 2014).

In African agriculture, capacity building initiatives have been recognizing the shifts in paradigms and the ongoing transformation within the area for some time. A specific field where this is found is the livestock sector where soft skills are increasingly geared towards outcomes. These outcomes depend on the performance levels of the various actors in the system, i.e., individuals, family networks and formal organizations (el Ibrahim, 2007). One aspect here is seen with returning migrants: Their employment opportunities in agriculture significantly improve when they receive training support that also incentivizes what they have inherited from their ancestors. A recent study shows that this applies to a large number of the 35,000 plus Gambians (adults and children) who had entered Europe by varied types of ‘irregular migration’ but who later returned between 2014 and 2018 (Ceessay, 2020; Altrogge and Zanker, 2019; Pécoud, 2018).

Also with agriculture, the efforts in many African countries to mitigate the impact of climate change depend on the rural communities’ ability and willingness to acquire and implement soft skills. A study on the

Bukavu region in the Democratic Republic of Congo lists those skills that help communities respond to climate change: (a) jointly identify problems and opportunities; (b) discuss and negotiate desired future states; and (c) perceive and respond to emerging challenges and opportunities (Bele et al., 2014). There is a connection of this to the need of equipping farmers with access to timely and accurate information about prices, markets, trade opportunities and production methods. In a study from Uganda, it was found that the type of skills which is needed for the managers of the cooperatives and the coordinators of the farmer groups was the need to communicate effectively, plan in advance and network with diverse stakeholders. The study emphasized that, with these skills, a large number of participants will be able to use a direct nexus between the farmers and the commodity exchanges, with a substantial effect on the economic situation of the rural enterprises (de Jager, 2007). A similar two-level effect of introducing soft skills practices was reported from the Zanyokwe Irrigation Scheme (ZIS) in South Africa’s Eastern Cape Province (Tshuma and Monde, 2012).

In the health sector, professionals are often asked to combine their training in specialist skills with “pedagogical dimensions” and to align capacity building procedures with learning about recognizing the situational (Carvalho et al., 2019). Pedagogy is certainly needed to both prepare individuals for a service in healthcare facilities and to make this service attractive. If applied outside the urban environment, this potential can benefit development in rural communities and the families of the respective trainees; it would encourage them to remain in their jobs, thus providing regular health services where such services are underdeveloped (<https://>; Gumede et al., 2020). Another approach to increase the skill set of healthcare providers involves business incubators and the process of incubating new businesses. For example, the U.K. based Acorn Medical Centre launched a virtual new venture in South Africa where they identified entrepreneurs with promising health-related technologies that had growth potential and provided them with varied support during their early stage of development, with a focus on soft skills and a strong emphasis on the importance of social impact (Chakma et al., 2010).

The need for soft skills training in the continent is present across industries. In the South African logistics, when students with tertiary degrees and professional certificates were taught the ‘hard’ skills for day-to-day supply chain work without relation to ‘soft’ skills and practical exposure, the outcome was found to be “poor” (State of Logistics Survey, 2014:83). Similarly, the hospitality industry in Ghana has noticed that graduates do not meet the expectations from employers because their training does not recognize that soft skills, behavioral skills and generic attributes are the core competencies needed (Comme et al., 2019). A study from South Africa concludes that it is worthwhile to enrich

job training with content that connects to their rural backgrounds: “No matter how challenging it is to recruit immigrants in the hospitality industry, they remain an attractive option for their hospitable attitudes and overt eagerness to remain in what they consider to be greener pastures” (Iwu et al., 2019, p).

EXPLICIT RECOMMENDATIONS

In Africa, and in particular in many Sub-Saharan countries, the general education system has been heavily criticized for being overly academic, theoretical and exam-oriented such that many of those who leave the system early, from primary and secondary schools, do not possess the skills to be employed or create a venture that could support them and their families (Kanyandago, 2010). These early leavers, as they are often called, would potentially be a primary sector of the population to benefit from soft skills training. In Ghana, for example, the programs overseen by the National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) specifically include entrepreneurial and other soft skills training in their curricula. With this training, graduates can support the early leavers (Boateng, 2012). In Nigeria, the government has launched micro-systems of apposite infrastructure comprised of polytechnic and vocational schools, training institutions, and apprenticeship centers. These are planned around the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), National Poverty Alleviation program (NAPAP), and Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIDS) which together represent a comprehensive poverty and unemployment reduction project (Dum and Nwafor, 2019). But it is acknowledged anywhere that the best results are attained through a mix of private and public training schemes, where non-governmental organizations step in. This is seen, for example, in the Upper East of Ghana where two private institutions have started programs: the Millar Institute for Transdisciplinary and Development Studies and Regentropfen College of Applied Sciences. These institutions’ objectives go beyond formal education in classes where one of their key function is community outreach (which per se entails access to indigenous knowledge), and this can ultimately be used to prepare higher-level university-industry collaboration.

For combining private and public training schemes, wide-ranging cross-sector collaboration is needed from the onset. The list below shows a sampling of programs with an inter-regional perspective that have been developed to that effect:

1. The African Development Forum’s initiative on investing in “*Skills for productivity, inclusivity, and adaptability*” (Arias et al., 2019). Three policy goals are given: (a) accelerate overall productivity growth, (b) promote economic inclusion and (c) ensure the

adaptability of the workforce in the 21st century. The framework connects all three policies to soft skills enhancement explicitly and emphasizes their importance for resilience and build-up, with special reference to the World Bank’s Atlas for Social Protection Indicators of Resilience and Equity (<https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/atlas-social-protection-indicators-resilience-and-equity>).

2. The International Development Coordinating Group’s (IDCG) set of “*Interventions improve the labor market outcomes of youth*” (IDCG, 2017). IDCG is a multidisciplinary network of researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funders committed to evidence-informed policies. The study’s evidence base covers 107 Interventions in 31 countries, including 55 using skills training (where soft skills are the main attention), 15 with entrepreneurship promotion and 21 using subsidized employment. Interestingly, the analysis reveals bigger program effects in low and middle income countries than in high-income countries

3. Resilience is the main topic of programs for “*Fostering technology and soft skills to bolster resistance to crises*” which addresses issues across socio-economic systems in all Africa as reported in a study released by the Indian Institute of Economic Affairs (Jain and Sasiprabhu, 2020). While the focus is laid, primarily, on the response to CoVID-19, the perspective is on the long-range effects as well. It exhibits the cross-continental strategy of the African Union which promotes skills training by championing cooperation, collaboration, coordination and communication between its 54 member’s states.

4. Final in this short catalogue is the “*Programs for women economic-empowerment*” of which the most comprehensive ones have been established in West Africa (Buvinic et al., 2020). The programs provide support and training, among others, in agriculture and off-farm work linked to agriculture, for women working in household enterprises and micro-commerce and for adolescent girls. Almost all of them are donor-related and receive funding from the World Bank, The African Development Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Also, there are various forms of knowledge and skills transfer from local business firms and through regional initiatives like “Trickle Up” (<https://trickleup.org>) which combines \$100 seed capital grants with teaching how to work together and knowledge sharing.

The focus on women has become even more important with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the virus has affected a large segment of the population, it is women who have been largely impacted since many are working in jobs that traditionally employ women and that meet the public, thus, carrying a high risk of exposure: health, education, and retail (van Barneveld et al., 2020). The slight progresses that have been made in

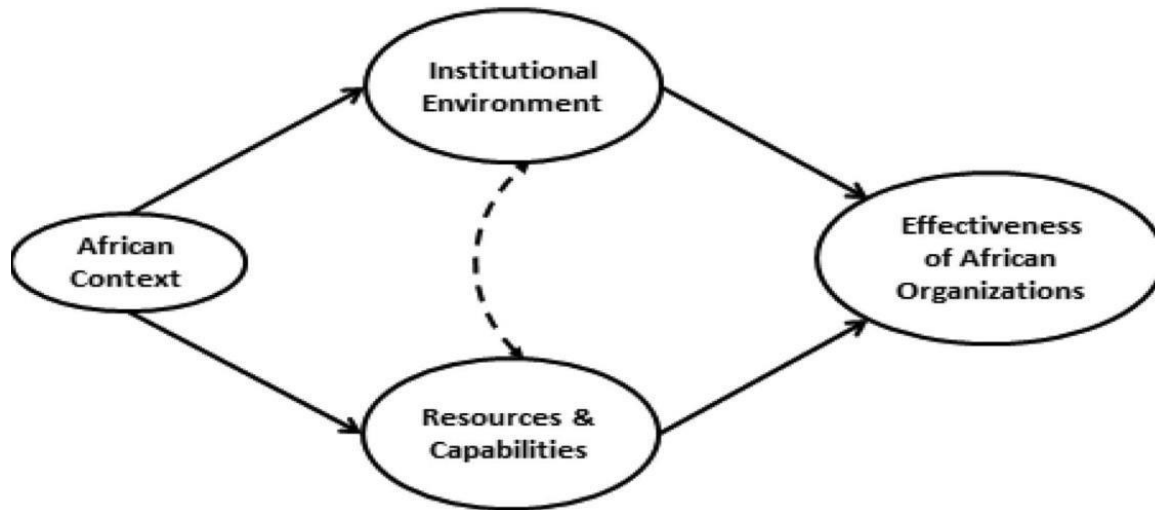


Figure 2. A conceptual model of institutional and resource dynamics behind organizational effectiveness in Africa (Source: Zoogah et al., 2015:10).

transitioning women out of agriculture through job creation/placement interventions, like, e.g., increase in low-income person's decision-making power and subjective wellbeing through new employment in Senegal's horticultural export industry (Van den Broeck et al., 2017), are threatened by the crisis. But if overcome, developments of this type will also be pivotal to mitigate risks of poverty and food insecurity, for instance, in a future recession.

There is, in all, a positive implication in the pandemic: Youth in Sub Saharan Africa can play an important role as they have the skills for being central in spreading and promoting information regarding Covid-19 and the measures to prevent it (Honwana and Honwana, 2020). In addition, the mindset and skills learned post pandemic can not only promote a stronger societal cohesion in their community, but also be used by young people to support the needy, the vulnerable, and the many precarious workers in essential sectors in the informal economy. The crisis can potentially act as an impetus to strengthen societal relationships and bring collective benefit.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Soft skills development, implementation and practice in Africa must be conjoined with the Africans' indigenous values and ethics, traditional ways of teaching and learning, of tutelage and apprenticeship. The epistemology which modern sociology uses in that context is reflective practice and appreciative enquiry. In Africa this is deeply rooted in the history and culture which societies have used to communicate and interact. Awareness of this enhances skills training. Development economics, at least when taught too independently, and

development support from the outside, when too narrowly focused on visible outcomes, have yet to grasp this complex intertwinement. For a discussion of this appeal, the authors wish to use a conceptual model exhibited in Zoogah et al. (2015) and which underlines the importance of contextual factors for organizational effectiveness (Figure 2).

As shown here, the African context influences both the institutional environment (which includes the interaction between tribal tradition and the official institutions as mentioned in our text above) and the capabilities. Many of these capabilities are embedded in the traditional characteristics of African life as exhibited in Table 2.

These characteristics impact all spheres of life, with soft skills being just one of them, but one that influences the chances of economic progress and survival. It relates to performance not only within the professional environments but within all coping with challenges, whether from new technologies, or from an economic or a health crisis. For a better understanding of this nexus, scholars and practitioners from inside and outside Africa should establish and continue inter-cultural learning on this topic. Then they will reach all the objectives of soft skills deployment. And only then will soft skills development move beyond the issues of growth and employment opportunities where it cannot get a foothold otherwise. But when administered appropriately, it will provide the means to redress inequality in its various demeanors and contribute to preparedness for changes in society.

CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interests.

Table 2. Characteristics of African tradition.

Characteristics of African tradition
Dominance of the rural sector
Subsistence economies
Capital Economic Social
Autarky
Kinship and interpersonal networks
Local development of technology
Communal and intergenerational transfers of wisdom
High illiteracy rates
Chieftaincy
Tribal councils
Collectivistic and tribal identity
Strong tribe and family coherence

Source: Adapted from Zoogah and Beugré, 2012:35.

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