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Vision Without Execution?

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[1]Evaluating the Challenges of Financing, Equity and Governance in the Implementation of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA)

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Abstract: Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) are arguably the most ambitious endogenous policy architectures in the post-colonial African governance system. As tools for transforming the continent from its status of a mere supplier of natural resources to a knowledge economy integrated in the world's global economy, both policy frameworks provide an integrated human capacity and socio-economic transformation model. However, empirical evaluations of the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014 – 2023) and CESA 16–25 show a growing gap between the normative policy design and its domestic implementation. This paper evaluates the challenges of financing, equity and governance in the implementation of the two policies using a qualitative approach based on institutional and implementation theories. It demonstrates how Agenda 2063 and CESA have great normative and strategic power but whose timelines might be exhausted owing to three structural weaknesses, namely, chronic under-financing, regional and socio-economic inequities in the distribution of resources, and lack of sequencing mechanisms for enforcing policies. The paper concludes with recommendations for institutional reform aimed at salvaging the Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024 – 2033) and CESA 2026-2035.

Keywords: *Agenda 2063, Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), African Union, Policy Implementation, Educational Financing, Pan-African Governance.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to African Union (AU) in 2002 was a game-changing moment in the process of continental governance, shifting focus from political liberation from colonialism to proactive socio-economic integration and structural transformation. Two of the policies in this regard are Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, adopted in 2013 as a 50-year master plan for inclusive growth and development, and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), which was launched initially for the 2016-2025 cycle and later renewed for 2026-2035 to give effect to the mandate of Agenda 2063 concerning human capacity.

The two policy frameworks constitute what can be termed as formidable "power documents," i.e., endogenously produced sovereign strategic blueprints meant to harmonize the 55 member states on common developmental targets and knowledge-based industrialization and integration. Nevertheless, as the continent heads into the second decade of implementation of the Agenda 2063 (2024-2033) and renewed CESA 2026-2035, empirical evaluation indicates a growing gap between the normative policy design and its implementation. This paper evaluates how the weaknesses of financing, inequities in the distribution of resources and lack of sequencing mechanisms threaten to exhaust the timelines of the two frameworks.

II. BACKGROUND

In light of several decades of external imposition of SAPs on African states during the 1980s and 1990s, which significantly reduced spending on social services and tertiary education, African leaders endeavoured to reclaim control over the continent's destiny. With the 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration of the OAU/AU in May 2013, the Heads of State and Government committed themselves to formulating an organic roadmap for Africa's future for the subsequent five decades, resulting in the adoption of Agenda 2063 in January 2015. Comprised of seven aspirations, Agenda 2063 aims to develop an Africa that is united, prosperous, and peaceful; driven by its citizens and dynamic force in the world arena.

In order to attain Aspiration 1 ("A *prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development*"), the AU acknowledged that Africa's demographic dividend would become an asset only if it radically transformed its system of education and training. Hence, in January 2016, the AU adopted CESA 16–25, moving away from the continent's traditional colonial curriculum towards Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and digital literacy. Upon completion of the first cycle and a thorough continental review in 2025, the AU adopted CESA 2026–2035 in conjunction with the Second Ten-Year

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Implementation Plan (STYIP, 2024–2033) of Agenda 2063 in order to address the lagging targets.

➢ *Problem Statement*

Despite the enormous normative and strategic potential of Agenda 2063 and CESA, their practical implementation remains gravely endangered by the failures in execution at the national and sub-regional levels. The empirical assessment of the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014–2023) and CESA 16–25 demonstrates that Africa is off course when it comes to meeting its initial goals related to the accumulation of human capital and structural transformation. In particular, three interrelated structural deficiencies may render the 2035 and 2063 timelines fruitless:

- *Insufficient Financing for Comprehensive Implementation:*

Agenda 2063 relies upon member states' ability to raise 70% to 80% of the needed development resources domestically. However, owing to growing sovereign debt crisis, limited tax collection bases, and illegal financial flows, public education spending in Africa has been stagnating, thus falling below the internationally accepted standard of 15% to 20% of government budget, rendering comprehensive reforms (from early childhood care to research and innovations) impossible.

- *Inequality in Allocation of Continental Resources:*

Although continental aggregate figures mask the reality, the disparity in fiscal capacities and resource allocation between the richer members and poorer countries, which are prone to conflict, affected by climate change, and fragile remains significant. While the former build flagship infrastructure and digital platforms, the latter face severe challenges in infrastructure development, teacher shortages, and education provision.

- *Ministerial Sequencing and Implementation Order Problems:*

Due to the fact that the African Union Commission (AUC) has no supranational enforcement powers over sovereign ministries, continental policies often get stuck in the stage of domestic implementation. As there is no mandatory administrative process and compulsory order of actions for Ministries of Education and Ministries of Finance, national ministries engage in fragmented and donor-led pilots instead of implementing a staged approach and voluntarily report data which is less than 30% of the time.

➢ *Research Objectives (Smart)*

To effectively analyse these problems and suggest relevant recommendations, this research is guided by the following Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) goals:

- To assess the fiscal achievements of Agenda 2063 and CESA 16-25 in 2015-2025 through analysis of continental education expenditure (in accordance with 15%-20% budget and 4%-6% GDP requirements).
- To measure spatial, sub-regional, and demographic disparities in the allocation of educational and infrastructure resources in at least three Regional Economic Communities (ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC) based on completion, teacher to pupil ratio, and internet penetration rate (from 2016-2025 period).
- To identify governance problems of national Ministries of Education and Finance through assessment of policy domestication and inter-ministerial cooperation issues and Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) data collection gaps within the first ten-year cycle of implementation.
- In order to develop a staged, four-pronged ministry-oriented implementation and financing strategy that will expedite compliance and help avoid timeline depletion during the Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024-2033) and CESA 2026-2035.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research, a qualitative policy evaluation framework guided by documentary analysis and comparative institutional evaluation has been chosen.

- *Data Sources:*

Qualitative and quantitative data have been obtained from official policy documents of the African Union and its evaluations, namely: the *Agenda 2063 Framework Document* (AUC, 2015), the *Second Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063* (AUDA-NEPAD, 2022), *CESA 16-25 Comprehensive Review* (UNESCO IICBA & AUC, 2025), and the *CESA 2026-2035 Framework for Action* (AUC, 2025). Macroeconomic and educational expenditures have been compared with data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and African Development Bank (AfDB).

- *Analytical Framework:*

Data were coded with the help of thematic content analysis and three deductive coding categories based on the research problem: (i) *Fiscal Mobilization and Budgetary* Allocation; *(ii) Distributive Equity and Regional* Asymmetry; and *(iii) Ministerial Sequencing and Institutional* Accountability.

- *Validity & Scope:*

By triangulating official self-assessments of AU with third-party evaluations of multilaterals such as UNESCO and AfDB, we reduce risks of reporting biases and ensure empirical soundness across 55 AU member states.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research on the institutionalization of Pan-African governance and its policy implementation is built largely around the theoretical foundations of institutionalism and public policy implementation theories.

➢ *Ideational Power and Pan-African Institutionalism*

Analysing the process of regional integration in Africa, Bach (2016) observes that after 2002, African regionalism

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changed from mere rhetorical solidarity to an ambitious development institutionalism. Relying on Schmidt's (2008) discourse *institutionalism* framework, scholars assert that Agenda 2063 and CESA have great ideational power, as they create a coherent cognitive discourse, which legitimates African agency and development from within (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The direct link established between human capital development and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) allows CESA to serve as a theoretical ground for structural economic transformation (Signé, 2020).

➢ *The Implementation Deficit in Supranational Governance*

While normative design is impeccable, the implementation literature emphasizes the existing gap or decoupling between continental treaty ratification and domestic bureaucratic practices. The implementation deficit theory elaborated by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) argues that as the number of administrative check points rises between policy formation and implementation, so does implementation difficulty. In addition, Matland (1995) introduces the ambiguity-conflict approach which claims that the adoption of high-ambition policies without adequate resource allocation or coercive mechanisms results in "symbolic implementation" which is solely dependent on political will and available resources.

➢ *Educational Financing and Equity in Sub-Saharan Africa*

The empirical literature on education system in Africa consistently states the financing and equity issues as key determinants of the viability of reforms. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) find that high social return on investment in education is possible only due to continued public investment. However, World Bank and UNESCO (2023) findings show that in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, increase in sovereign debt service costs has caused reduction in social expenditures, and regressive public finance strategies favour costly education in urban universities to the detriment of basic rural education (Lewin, 2009).

V. DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

➢ *The Normative Strength of Agenda 2063 and CESA as "Power Documents"*

A neutral assessment proves that both Agenda 2063 and CESA are unprecedented in their consistency. Contrary to the externally imposed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), now Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 2063 unites political governance, peace and security, cultural renaissance and economic integration into an organic endogenous system. This vision is put into practice by CESA through 12 strategic objectives (or 6 sharpened strategic areas in CESA 2026-2035), aimed at alignment of national educational programs with continental labour market needs, creation of the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF), and promotion of academic mobility based on Addis Convention. From a conceptual point of view, all policy instruments for continental renaissance are provided.

➢ *Inadequate Financing for Holistic Implementation*

Nevertheless, the economic architecture supporting each strategy is vulnerable to structural challenges. The ambitious vision of 70%-80% domestic financing set out in Agenda 2063 has failed to withstand macroeconomic shocks at the global level, austerity budgets in the post-pandemic period, and crises of sovereign debt. According to the *CESA 16-25 Comprehensive Review* (2025), the average continent-wide proportion of spending in the budget dedicated to education shrank to around 14.5%, falling short of the 15-20% Incheon and CESA benchmarks. For many indebted member states, annual costs of debt servicing are higher than the combined cost of education and health. As a result, holistic implementation, which demands parallel investments in early childhood development, teacher professionalization, laboratories for STEM subjects, and digital broadband network, becomes impossible and is consistently replaced with the payment of current civil servant salaries, rendering capital development dependent on external donor grants.

➢ *Inequitable Distribution of Continental Resources*

Secondly, the exhaustion of timelines is exacerbated by the existence of huge disparities in resource distribution among and inside member states. Countries in Southern and Northern Africa with upper middle-income levels, such as South Africa, Mauritius, and Morocco, have sufficient capacity for taxation in order to finance research universities, digital infrastructure, and innovation hubs. In contrast, low-income countries and areas facing protracted conflicts and climate shocks, especially in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, experience school closures, displacement of students, and teacher-to-student ratio exceeding 60:1. Moreover, within countries, resources are allocated mainly to urban regions, leading to rural marginalization and widening gender inequality in secondary and tertiary education, particularly in STEM. Without an institutional system of continental redistribution, Agenda 2063 risks making Africa a two-speed continent with aggregate statistics concealing the growing exclusion of regions.

➢ *Absence of Ministerial Sequencing and Implementation Order*

The most pressing institutional challenge arises from the disconnect between continental adoption in Addis Ababa and the implementation in national capitals. Due to its intergovernmental nature, rather than a supranational character, neither AUC nor AUDA-NEPAD has the ability to force Ministries of Finance in national capitals to secure necessary funding for CESA priorities. In addition, neither framework lacks an obligatory sequence of implementation. For a successful education reform, a strict administrative sequence is needed. Before implementing capital-intensive programs, such as digital transformation or tertiary harmonization, foundational literacy, teacher deployment, and functioning of EMIS systems must be secured. Absent an obligatory sequence of actions, national bureaucracies often take advantage of politically visible and donor-friendly initiatives, while overlooking fundamental reforms. To make matters worse, the reporting by individual countries on CESA indicators was below 30% in 2016-2025, paralysing the process of continental monitoring and peer review.

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VI. CONCLUSION

It should be noted that the African Union's Agenda 2063 and CESA are indeed "power documents" that outline a visionary, sovereign and structurally sound roadmap for the socio-economic transformation of Africa. Nevertheless, normative brilliance can hardly compensate for fiscal deficits, distributive injustice and administrative chaos. This is proven by the performance of the First Ten-Year Implementation Plan and CESA 16-25, during which a decade of available time had been lost due to chronic underfinancing, uneven resource distribution in vulnerable areas and lack of an obligatory implementation sequence.

In order to save 2035 and 2063 timelines from becoming mere deadlines, the following reforms must be institutionalized by the AU and its member states during the Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024-2033) and CESA 2026-2035:

- *Domestic Financing that is Enforceable:*

Pass laws for minimum statutory levels of domestic finance for education (15% - 20%), utilizing continental sovereign debt restructuring and debt forgiveness for education (using the African Development Bank).

- *Continental Equalization Funds:*

Create an AU Cohesive Human Capital Development Fund in order to make grants for infrastructure in technical areas specifically aimed at conflict and climate affected nations.

- *Ministerial Sequencing and Compliance Audits:*

Compel member countries to domesticate CESA 2026 – 2035 through National Implementation Matrices, focusing on foundational learning, teachers' training and EMIS in phase 1 (2026 – 2030), with mandatory peer review compliance audits under the APRM.

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