Stepping up to sustainability for Africa

The role of sustainable management education for Africa – Mark Smith, Mumbi Maria Wachira and Sherwat Elwan Ibrahim look at the opportunities and challenges
Sustainability is hard to miss in business schools. Across the world, schools regularly integrate sustainability aspects into their communications, programs and even day-to-day operations. With over 800 signatories to the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) and the associated regular reporting, there is now ample evidence of action. We seem to have come a long way since a Global Focus contribution a decade ago that found relatively little evidence of business schools walking the sustainability talk.

Business schools have a role in this arena and can influence policy and practice. Indeed, sustainability is necessary for a schools’ legitimacy among both internal and external stakeholders. There are very few schools where students are not pushing their deans to be more sustainable. Schools can play a pivotal role in shifting the paradigm for future managers towards addressing sustainability challenges.

However, what is sometimes missing from these sustainability discussions is the emerging market perspective. In 2013, there were no schools in Africa communicating about their sustainability activities or PRME membership compared to around a third of schools in Europe, US, and Australia. Today Africa has its own thriving PRME chapter. Educational institutions in these environments face both different barriers and opportunities, but these are not always recognised by those from the Global North. Here we explore these opportunities and challenges in relation to sustainability and focus on how to move the agenda forward.

Opportunities

Business schools operating in Africa are uniquely placed to deliver socially impactful and relevant management models in the region. African business leaders are continuously confronted by complex sustainability challenges in the communities in which they operate including weak institutional environments, the high costs of doing business and fragile economies. There is much potential for schools to shape society and influence social and economic development.

Most African countries have a young and ambitious populace who are tapping into impact capital to support their enterprises for scale. The entrepreneurial landscape in Africa is thriving. In East Africa for example, Kenya is viewed as an impact investing hub and the source of continental growth in the mobile banking sector. There are examples of enterprise centres and incubation hubs housed by business schools across the continent, providing diverse support mechanisms for businesses. For example, Stellenbosch Business School’s Small Business Academy has produced over 400 successful township entrepreneurs and SMEs. In the absence of large corporate sectors, SMEs are also driving growth in African economies. There are multiple programmes and initiatives led by business schools in the region that support the resilience and growth of SMEs.
Business schools in Africa also have convening power and influence. Stakeholder forums and events organised by business schools on sustainability themed areas tend to attract public officials, leaders in the private sector as well as civil society. This provides schools with leverage to influence national debates, priority areas and ideally policy. For example, the American University in Cairo hosts an annual forum for experts, business, government, NGOs, and academics to engage in dialogue focused on the region’s sustainably efforts. Similarly, Strathmore University Business School hosts an annual SME roundtable which provides a forum to share issues that affect competitiveness and influence policy.

Students also play a critical role in convening stakeholders and influencing public debate. There are multiple examples of how African students collaborate through associations to ensure their perspectives and experiences are given prominence. The COP27 summit provided one such opportunity with the Afrika Youth Caravan bringing together youth leaders to shape and lead some of the COP deliberations.

There is a growing appetite for regionally relevant management education material which lays emphasis on the relevance of management theories applied to deeply rooted social, economic, and environmental challenges in the African context. For example, Africapitalism focuses on the obligations the private sector has in securing the continent’s social and economic development. One recent publication on Responsible Management Education in Africa provides a rich discussion of cultures and traditions from Nigeria to South Africa to Uganda. Rather than received knowledge from the Global North this volume illustrates African worldviews on management and how they can be modernised for today’s business environment. By leveraging their unique experiences, African business school scholars can engage in knowledge exchange and collaboration, enriching the global conversation on business education and sustainability by Africa, with Africa, for Africa.

**Challenges**

Much of the focus on sustainability is on climate and there is indeed a looming crisis for which Africa faces many of the consequences. Yet sustainability necessarily needs a strong social agenda, particularly in developing and emerging economies. A phrase often heard in an African context is that protecting the environment is not really a priority on an empty stomach. This is not to say that the climate does not matter but rather the emerging or developing economic context underlines the need for an ‘and/both approach’ rather than climate before inclusive growth – a just transition. This is an important lesson for the rest of the world and one that African business schools are often very conscious of.
There is widespread evidence that gender equality promotes economic development, better health and educational outcomes, and reduced inequality. Yet the African continent has some of the lowest levels of gender equality. Business schools here show a greater gender imbalance than elsewhere in the world, however they can be an example for change with their graduates becoming potential change agents and role models. The Association of African Business Schools has committed to supporting women leaders and its own more gender-balanced governance. However, the challenges stretch far beyond management education and are deep rooted.

The prevalence of extractive industries in the African context illustrates the managerial complexities of the sustainability journey. In the Global North it is often easy to think ‘coal bad, solar good’ but when extractive activities provide vital, and possibly the only, economic activity for the region there may be few quick alternatives to sustaining economic, social, and community life. Furthermore, the preferred climate-friendly solution of solar panels and electric motors involve rare earths and yet more extractive practices on the African continent.
The African situation illustrates the challenges of a just transition. The continent had a marginal role in creating climate change but now bears the brunt of desertification, drought, floods, and extreme weather events. Uncertain global economic conditions are likely to lead to even more challenging economic conditions in emerging economies. Thus, there is a risk that headwinds will lead many to adopt a ‘not now’ approach to sustainability. This is a familiar story worldwide during recessionary times when governments delay or postpone legislation to protect people or the environment. In this context business schools and responsible management education face considerable challenges to motivate and drive sustainability even if the need for decisive action and leadership is immediately pressing.

Lessons for a more collaborative approach

The relative youth of management education in Africa is also characterised by a collaborative spirit, particularly within the framework of African business school organisations. This presents a unique opportunity for fostering a collective and collaborative environment where schools can work together to complement each other’s strengths, share learning, and combine resources to develop stronger offerings through partnerships.

The SDG 17, which focuses on partnerships, can serve as a valuable approach for mobilising African business schools to promote responsible management in their curricula and research. A collaborative approach can also enhance effectiveness and avoid duplication of effort. Business schools can learn from each other and leverage shared challenges, as they face similar pushbacks from sceptical societies regarding sustainability priorities.

Forums that bring together schools to foster collaboration and showcase how challenges have been addressed can serve as models, and create the necessary buy-in. Sharing lessons also enables schools to adopt and adapt best practices. By leveraging successful examples, business schools in Africa can take steps towards acknowledging the importance of sustainability and integrating it into their own curricula, research and advocacy.

Similarly bringing students from across the continent under the umbrella of advancing the SDGs agenda or the African Union’s 2063 goals is gaining momentum. Students are increasingly curious and demanding about sustainability issues and how these can be integrated into their education. Business schools can equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to apply sustainability principles in their careers.
Likewise, collaboration between business schools and employers can bridge the gap between classroom learning and practice. It is crucial for business schools to proactively engage with employers to understand sustainability requirements in the African context and align their curricula accordingly - empowering students to become champions of sustainable management practices.

There is also an opportunity for African business schools to share their learnings with counterparts in the North. They can offer valuable insights and perspectives, derived from their diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, often on the frontline of climate change. These schools can also contribute to the global discourse on responsible management and sustainable business practices from a context where these practices are very much needed.

**Looking forward**

The challenges Africa faces echo many of the challenges the world faces in terms of sustainability. They make African management education a rich place to innovate and learn about sustainability policy and practice particularly as sustainability needs are so pressing. Everywhere, and particularly at the forefront of the world’s sustainability challenges, responsible management education has to be more than business school branding – it needs to be about learning, collaboration and impact on the communities and societies that most need it.

Africa, like many other emerging economic regions of the world is at the forefront of climate change consequences it had little responsibly for creating. During the COP-27 summit there was mention of just transitions, but the conclusions for action on climate change were at best tepid if not disappointing. This weakness to provide leadership suggests that governments and established institutions cannot be relied upon to be the lead actors in a fight against climate change – a story that is familiar in many parts of Africa.

This absence of responsible leadership in sustainability perhaps creates an opening for other actors to step up with business schools and the leaders they develop demonstrating what can be achieved. Responsible management education from leading African business schools has a key sustainability role to play and, with their students and alumni, can act as a counterweight for institutions that have a lack of resources, mandate, or vision.