

Inclusive Education for sustainable development: Examining the Inclusive Education Policy of the Gambia 2016-2030 in attaining economic progress through creating Human Capital

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ABSTRACT

Education as a fundamental right is a key player in the drive for economic posterity. It is widely seen as an essential foundation for sustainable development, which could serve as an agent for economic growth, societal progress and environmental sustainability. It is against this backdrop, that the national education policy 2016-2030 was formulated to transform the Gambia into an economically sustainable country. It is a focus of global attention because for societies to thrive, education should take centre stage where individuals regardless of their physical ability or economic status will be productive persons. However, as people possess different abilities in different ways, the attention of advocates across the world has called for justice within the education setting, advocating for the right of every individual to access education in a conducive environment free from all forms of discrimination. This study aims to examine the national education policy in enhancing inclusive education policy for economic growth and sustainable development. The qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews to assess the progress of the policy in attaining economic growth amongst the youth, inclusion of persons with disabilities and its challenges. The results show that the policy has improved in terms of human capital development and mainstreaming of special needs children. However, there are challenges like unequal distribution of state funds amongst schools and special needs children not being given full attention.

Introduction

The Gambia is one the smallest countries in Africa by both land size and population. Located in the western part of the continent. It has a population of about 2 million as reported by the current recent population statistics (GBOS 2023). As a low-income country with a gross national income (GNI) per capita (Atlas method) of USD\$430(World Bank, 2018). The economy of the Gambia mainly on agriculture, tourism and the flow of remittance, and it is very open to external shocks as seen in the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic. The World Bank report in 2018 has indicated a surge in the national debt of the Gambia from 100% of the GDP at the end of 2016 to over 200% in 2023. The World Bank and IMF report on the key challenges of the Gambia in terms of economic progress are related to the lack of a diversified economy, small internal market, lack of skills that are needed to build a strong institution, higher population growth, lack of private-sector job creation and a higher rate of illegal migration of the youthful age. The Gambia is ranked 173 out of 188 countries in the world in terms of

human capital development, according to the United nation's human Development Index (2015), cited in the World Bank (2018). However, Gambia has made significant progress in developing the human capital with both school enrolment and completion increasing by 75% and 50% respectively (MoBSE, 2023). The recent data obtained from the International Labour Organisation indicates the steady progress the Gambia made in the creation of employment for youths through education. As of 2023, the employment rate is at 44.5%, out of which 46.5 are male and 42.7 are female. By these statistics, there is no doubt that more improvement has been made in bridging the gender disparity gap between men and women in terms of access to employment opportunities. However, despite the progress made in the area of employment, basic and tertiary educational attainment remains dominated by males. The report indicated that out of the 40.7% of the less educated people in the Gambia, 44.2 are female while 36.9% are male.

Research conducted by Rapp & Corral-Granados (2024), posited that the idea of inclusive education can be traced back to the international agreement, "the Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education" which was drafted in 1994 by UNESCO. This global document has its focus on normative principles for inclusion in education that recognise all individuals to have equal access to education. Inclusive education by concept, emphasises the need for institutions responsible for education to highlight diversity as an asset, give maximum support to learning and respond to individual needs (UNESCO 1994, 2020, cited in Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). As enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, 1989, and the UN Convention on the right of a person with disabilities, both of which are global agreements on the protection of the rights of the vulnerable. Since education is seen as a tool for a transformation of the society, inclusion of vulnerable groups like women, and persons with disabilities is seen as a means of reducing economic inequality and enhancing social justice. Researching inclusive education is very essential in the modern day because it focuses on social justice and democracy (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Foltz & Gajigo (2012), used the 1998 and 2002/2003 household surveys in their research to estimate the impacts of the Government policy of free education for girls from primary to secondary schools on the reduction of gender disparity in education in the Gambia. The findings of the study found that by 2003, the programme had reached about half of all the districts in the Gambia. This led to a 5% increase in the enrolment for girls across the country.

Education as a fundamental right is a key player in the drive for economic posterity. It is widely seen as an essential foundation for sustainable development, which could serve as an agent for economic growth, societal progress and environmental sustainability. the need for education has gone beyond mere rhetoric. It is a focus of global attention because for societies to thrive, education should take centre stage where individuals regardless of their physical ability or economic status will be productive persons. However, as people possess different abilities in different ways, the attention of advocates across the world has called for justice within the education setting, advocating for the right of every individual to access education in a conducive environment free from all forms of discrimination. This idea has given birth to the concept of inclusive education. in 2015, Heads of state, government leaders, representatives from the United Nations (UN) and civil society met at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly and adopted the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. This succinct agenda "of the people, by the people, and for the people," was designed with the active involvement of UNESCO, a global partner in education (*Education 2030 Framework for*

Action | Education in Asia-Pacific, n.d.) SDG4, which calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education, aim to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030". The development of the Education Policy 2016 – 2030 is an idea from The Gambia's Vision 2020 Programme for Accelerated Growth and Employment (PAGE) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), all of which are the developmental agendas of the government of The Gambia which seeks to improve the human capital capacity of the country by reducing the number of people living below the poverty line. The policy development is also in line with the global efforts on sustainable development. Thus, the theme of the policy consultations was "Accessible, Equitable and Inclusive Quality Education for Sustainable Development" (Quality, 2016).

As the world focuses on the "knowledge economy" has created competitive reforms in the educational system to increase the quality of the educational institutions and also follow the marketplace principles in education (Ball, 2006, cited in, Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024).

Worldwide, there is a unanimous call for educational access to be extended to all regardless of their physical appearance, socioeconomic status, gender, political or social structure or race (Mugambi, 2017). The call for educational inclusion has been debated in several international conventions which include recent sustainable development goals 4 by the global leaders. The call for inclusive education is very central in that document because the world leaders knew that for the world to attain sustainable economic, social and political prosperity, access to education must be inclusive for all (Wodon et al., 2018).

The Gambia government through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) has made a strong commitment to the global call for inclusive education. This is evident in the national education policy 2016-2030. "Despite the implementation of this national education policy from 2016 to date, there remains an urgent need to investigate how effectively this policy is contributing to the creation of a needed human capital, economic growth and sustainable development. Therefore, there is an urgency to evaluate the impacts of national education policy 2016-2030 on the inclusive education initiatives, skills development, social inclusion, and economic growth within the context of The Gambia's educational framework."

Examining the education policy 2016-2030, which calls for inclusive education is very essential. This study will give a comprehensive understanding of the Gambia government's readiness to make inclusive education a reality, where everyone, including children with disabilities to have equal access to education without any forms of discrimination. This will create human capital which is a key player in ushering a society's progress and economic growth, hence sustainable development. This study will explore more into how far have the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education gone in its quest to provide a conducive ground for every student in the Gambia, to have equal access to quality education, since the global target is education for all (EFA).

The movement for inclusive education stems from the global call for Education for All (EFA). This policy is anchored on the principle that every human being has a right to quality education, even though many nations especially developing nations are struggling to meet this fundamental human right. Waitoller & Artiles (2013), believe that the advocacy for inclusive education came in response to the exclusion of students who were viewed as different (students with disability, students of colour, students from low caste backgrounds, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds) by the educational system. The construction of these differences is very problematic and causes serious setbacks in the government's quest to improve socio socio-economic status of its citizens. According to

Waitoller & Artiles (2013), inclusive education could be defined differently in different societies. Take for example in the United States, inclusive education means allowing students with disability to access and share the same learning environment. Meaning school authorities should not segregate students with disability from the general students. This notion is differently understood in the Gambian context. In the Gambia, inclusive education means giving special attention to persons with disability, thus there are special schools where students with disability are enrolled. However, the Danish Institute for Human Rights asserts that, in general, inclusive education is opposed to a separate educational system for students with special needs (Jokinen, 2021). The CRPD also does not mention or define special education, but this can be interpreted to mean that inclusive education is one education system to fit the needs of all students. This contradicts the situation in many countries including the Gambia, which have a dual system: general education and special education.

Inclusive Education in the Gambia is central to the government's efforts to bridge the equality gap and create the needed human capital for sustainable development (Quality, 2016). The 1997 constitution of the Republic of the Gambia, amended in 2000, clearly states that every child in the Gambia has a right to free basic education and secondary education, which will include technical and vocational training. This aligns with the global educational target for all (*Inclusive Education Policy of the Gambia Unicef Report - Google Search*). Based on the global call for inclusive education, the Gambia government through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education has placed special needs education as the top priority of the ministry to meet the goal target of equitable, quality, and inclusive education by 2030 (SDG4) (Quality, 2016).

In line with The Gambia's Vision 2020, Programme for Accelerated Growth and Employment (PAGE), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the national education policy for 2016-2030 aims to enhance the country's human capital by reducing poverty and ensuring accessibility to quality education. The policy consultations revolved around the theme "Accessible, Equitable and Inclusive Quality Education for Sustainable Development" (Quality, 2016), reflecting the government's commitment to providing equal access to quality education, aligning with the United Nations agreement on SDG4. The policy's fundamental goal is to equip every Gambian child with skills and competence to contribute to a better society. The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education of The Gambia has developed a comprehensive policy document with a focus on inclusive education, in alignment with the national development agenda as outlined in the Vision 2020 statement.

"To transform The Gambia into a financial center, a tourist paradise, a trading, export-oriented, agricultural and manufacturing nation, thriving on free market policies and a vibrant private sector, sustained by a well-educated, trained, skilled, healthy, self-reliant and enterprising population, and guaranteeing a well-balanced eco-system and a decent standard of living for one and all, under a system of government based on the consent of the citizenry."

Furthermore, the government of the Gambia through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education has implemented a program called ESSP (Education Sector Support Programme) to improve literacy and numeracy in two vulnerable regions in the country, region 5 South and North, according to Impact evaluation conducted by the World Bank in 2014. The intervention areas of this program were infrastructure, school feeding, and family support for needy children. These projects complement the government's efforts to make education inclusive, where every Gambian, regardless of where you are, can attain quality education without discrimination (DWR, 2022; World Bank, 2018).

Method

In this study, the researcher will employ a qualitative research approach. The rationale for using qualitative research methods is to essentially provide inputs that help uncover the motives behind visible and measurable concurrences. The research will conduct semi-structured interviews to gather more insights into the information needed for the researcher to answer the research questions. It will also analyze some policy documents at the ministry level to triangulate the data to improve its validity and reliability. The participants selected for this study are 4 educators, two policymakers, 2 representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs), 3 participants from the parent-teachers association (PTA), and 2 members of Mother's Club. These selected respondents are selected based on their active participation in the education sector in the Gambia. All 11 participants were interviewed using the same research questions to elicit their thoughts on the subject matter.

For the data analysis, the study will employ a thematic analysis of the data collected through interviews. Thematic analysis is an approach that is used to examine, analyze, locate, and summarize the interviews into themes or patterns (Braun & Clark, 2006). It is very essential in analyzing qualitative data because it can give an in-depth explanation of research findings.

Results and Discussion

The findings from the respondents on the achievements of the national education policy 2016-2030 have insight information and can be used to analyze the impacts of the policy in enhancing inclusive education for economic growth and sustainable development. The findings presented illustrate both the achievements and challenges faced by the policy in recent years. The policy as per the findings has a strong commitment to enhancing inclusive education for economic growth. Moreover, the increase in the employment rate amongst the youths and the rise in the human capital index of the Gambia tells how inclusive policy has changed the narratives in the education landscape in the Gambia.

Furthermore, the findings have a strong alignment with the literature review on the relationship between inclusive education and economic growth. The World Bank report on the human capital index of the Gambia 2022 has seen an increase in human capital development and this led to an increase in per capita income. The World Labour Organisation report for 2023 shows youth employment in the Gambia has risen to 40.7%, which was a result of skills and educational attainment.

Human capital is an economic concept propounded by Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, to explain the relationship between education and economics. According to Machlup (1982), human capital theory in education was used by Schultz to explain the economic concept of the productivity of human resources. The theory focuses on examining the relationship between human capital and economics. On the other hand, the co-pioneer of the theory, Becker, further used it to evaluate the mathematical and statistical economics that explain the monetary relationship. Becker tried to compute the rate of return on the investment people make in return for their skills and efficiency through schooling and training. The Theory of Human Capital believes in the notion that investments in education and skills training will contribute to the development of human capital, which will lead to increased productivity and economic growth in any given society. This theory stresses the crucial role of education in developing individual vocational skills, knowledge, and potential,

which in turn positively impact economic progress. Therefore, to examine the context of The Gambia's national education policy 2016-2030, applying the Human Capital Theory will help in analyzing how far the investment in inclusive education programs creates a skilled workforce and contributes to sustainable economic development in the Gambia.

Many literatures discussed the relationship between human capital and economic growth. Jacob Mincer (1981), argued on the concept of human capital. He stated that “human capital analysis deals with acquired capabilities which are developed through formal and informal education at school and home, and through training, experience, and mobility in the labour market. Just as the accumulation of personal human capital produces individual economic (income) growth, so do the corresponding social or national aggregates”. (Importance of Human Capital in Economic Growth - Google Scholar, n.d.; Review & 1984, n.d.) The works of (Galor et al., n.d.; Laskowska et al., 2016; Review & 1984), all highlighted the significant correlation between human capital and economic progress. Human capital can be viewed at the national level as a factor of production coordinated with physical capital. (Appleton & Teal, 1998; Review & 1984, n.d.). In the production functions, and aggregate framework show that an increase in human capital formation is both a condition and consequence of economic progress. According to Importance of Human Capital in Economic Growth - Google Scholar, review (1984), “human being possesses different characteristics, and different in both inherent and acquired abilities, only the latter differ among countries”. This is to say, the more human capital accumulation, the greater the chances of economic growth of a particular nation. A researcher like Jacob Mincer believes that nations achieved more economic progress than each other because of their human capital quantity.

Special Needs Education

Special needs education is a top priority for the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE). It requires a comprehensive, whole-system approach that involves the entire country in promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of civic life. It's not just a problem for schools and teachers; it's a responsibility for everyone. To ensure that people with disabilities have access to high-quality education, we need a fundamental shift in attitudes and beliefs. This shift will promote embracing complementary and mutually beneficial approaches based on inclusivity, integration, and involvement of children with special needs. It aims to create school-friendly environments that support and encourage the participation of children with special needs.

While profoundly disabled students will be moved to special schools that will be strengthened to meet the needs of the students and staff, pupils with mild and moderate disabilities will continue to be mainstreamed. Nonetheless, all blind children will be integrated into the mainstream and given access to educational resources to support their education. We will continue to identify exceptional and talented pupils as well as those with special needs early on. Students with numerous disabilities will receive extra attention.

The government, through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, will continue to ensure equitable access to quality teaching and learning for all special needs children. Each regional education directorate will be provided with at least one functional resource centre to cater to the diverse needs of all special needs children. All teachers in special needs schools will receive training to better respond to the needs of children in their classes. During the policy period, MoHERST, in collaboration with partners, will vigorously encourage higher

education institutions to develop programs that are responsive to special needs (Quality, 2016).

The training of teachers at both Pre-Service and In-Service levels will be expanded to support an inclusive teaching system. There will be closer collaboration between medical and educational personnel to identify children with disabilities early and provide appropriate responses to their circumstances. Vocational and skills training will be continued to cater to people with disabilities.(Quality, 2016).

The pictorial bar chart below contains the 2023 data on the enrollment rate of children with disabilities nationwide. This illustrates the ministry's dedication to improving the lives of all Gambians through inclusive and quality education, regardless of individuals' conditions, in order to make education accessible to everyone(MoBSE,2023).

Figure 1. National data on children with special needs and classified by gender 2023

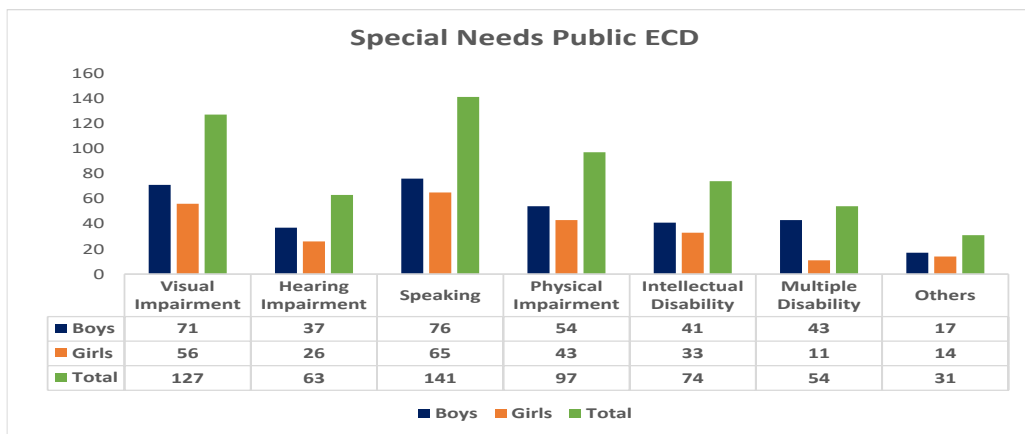
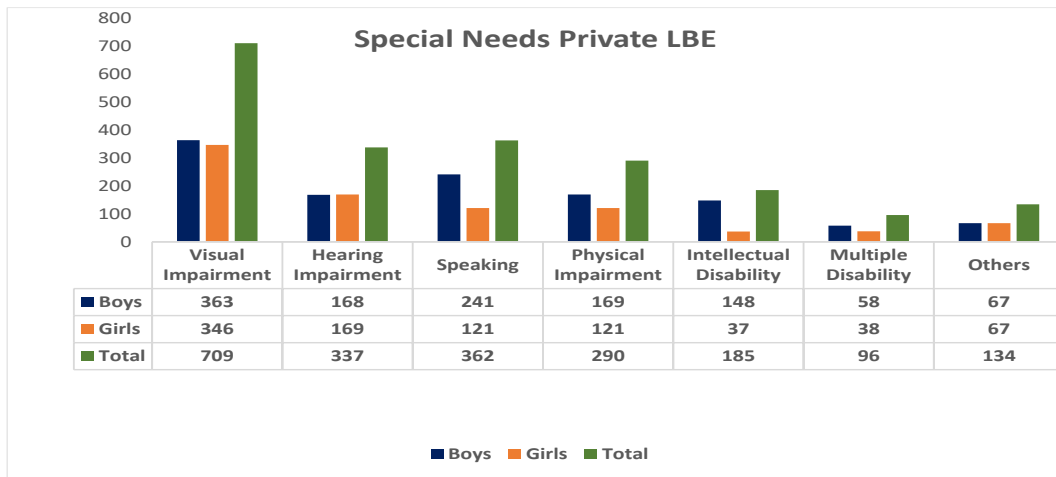


Figure 2. Special needs private LBE



However, despite the numerous efforts by the ministry to make education accessible to persons with disabilities, retention has become a serious challenge. The bar charts below show the enrolment trend from the lower basic to senior education (source, MoBSE 2023).

Social capital is based on the idea that education is the most important indicator in measuring the social and political engagement of citizens of every nation (Apfeld et al., 2022). The proponents of the social capital theory posited that education has both internal and external effects. They explained this in the context of human behaviour; that is to say, the behaviour of an individual cannot be shaped by the education he or she acquires only, but by what others around him acquire too.

The Theory of Social Capital examines the value of social networks, relationships, and community connections in the attainment of shared goals and in fostering economic progress within a given society (Apfeld et al., 2022). In the context of inclusive education, this theory enumerates the importance of inclusive education policies in strengthening social cohesion, promoting equality, and ushering in a society, where equal educational opportunities for all individuals are attained. Thus, contribute to economic progress. The relevance of this theory in this research is to explore how inclusive education initiatives in The Gambia can strengthen social bonds, reduce disparities between genders, rich and poor, and support the development of human capital for sustainable economic growth.

Special treatment for persons with disabilities

From all the interviewees, the issue of providing access to education by persons with disabilities was lamented with serious emphasis. As enshrined in the 2021 Persons with disability act “children with disability have an equal right to access all the educational facilities provided by the nation (DWR, 2022). Many interviewees especially interviewee number 5, who works for a civil society organisation.

“The government is doing extremely well in making education inclusive in recent years, and this has been witnessed in all sectors of the country where persons with disability are graduating from universities and colleges and working in key positions. To me, this will not only help them fit better in society but also improve their socioeconomic status within society. However, we still need more

improvement in giving special treatment to those with a disability to make them more productive in society”

The issue of persons with disability is very essential in the idea of inclusive education. Many of the respondents alluded that if persons with disabilities are mainstreamed into the schools without segregation, they will feel part of society and will no longer be stigmatized. Respondent 8 believes that the education policy 2016-2030 has brought lots of improvements in education but noted that there is more to be achieved in terms of inclusive education because there is little progress with regard to giving special teaching to persons with disabilities. After all, the country only has two schools that teach children with disabilities and that schools are not also decentralized.

Moving on, one of the interviewees (an educator) noted that despite the national disability act and the National Education Policy 2016-2030 emphasising the need for inclusive education, there is more to be done.

“I was selected to be an itinerant teacher (a teacher for persons with disabilities) in 2017. I have received training but, in my opinion, those trainings are not enough to handle that work effectively and also the problem is the equipment are not readily available for those children to use. I think the government should improve on the needs of persons with disabilities”

Equal distribution of resources between rural and urban schools.

Equal distribution of state resources for education in all schools across the country was another theme that emerged from the interview. Almost all the respondents interviewed have placed a strong emphasis on the need for equal distribution of funds to all schools. Interviewee 1 (policymaker) has this to say;

“Allocation of school funds has been decentralised across the country. All schools have their school accounts where their annual school budgets are transferred. However, we sometimes faced some budget constraints which might caused these funds to be delayed”

The budget issues are strongly debated amongst people in the education sector because it is determined by the so-called big and school small school concepts. Small schools are always at a disadvantage because they are always allocated small budgets, says one of the respondents. Educators and school managers highlighted that for inclusive education for economic prosperity to be realised as envisaged by the National Education Policy 2016-2030, the government must invest in education nationwide.

1. special teacher training for special needs.

All the respondents interviewed believe that there should be special teachers who are trained to handle persons with special needs because they believe that for education to be inclusive, these people have to be mainstreamed into the system. Some respondents acknowledged the efforts made by the ministry recently in giving special attention to children with disability and have expressed their gratitude. Interviewee 10 (mothers club member), believes that recently, education is so inclusive that no child is left behind regardless of their situation. According to her;

“Am happy that now our children can learn, even if they cannot talk (dump) or see (blind). This has given us joy as mothers because before if your child was having a situation like this, he or she could only be at home and nothing else”

The recent focus of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education is to achieve the target of the national education policy 2016-2030, which calls for inclusive education for

economic prosperity says a respondent who works at the Ministry of Education (MoBSE, 2024).

Conclusion

The national education policy has both achievements and challenges. The policy has made significant progress in making education in the Gambia inclusive since its implementation in 2016 to date. Some of the key developments are; infrastructural development, teacher quality improvement, improvement enrolment, special needs education and gender equity in education. The 2023 school census report shows that the gender parity in schools has closed. From elementary schools to senior secondary, gender parity has been achieved. However, there is room for improvement in the area of special needs facilities and human resources of special needs education. Overall, the national education policy 2016-2030 has significantly improved the standard of educational quality in the Gambia since its launch. The rural-urban disparity in terms of educational attainment has drastically reduced as a result of more of the policy's strive to upgrade more upper basic schools in rural Gambia to senior secondary schools and annexation of Gambia College to Basse, which makes tertiary education accessible to rural students who could not have the opportunity to attain the main Gambia college campus and the university of the Gambia. In my opinion that the national education policy 2016-2030 has since its launching, changed the educational landscape of the Gambia. Even though there is still room for improvement.

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