**KSD WORKING PAPER 9**

**PRACTISING WHAT YOU PREACH, PREACHING WHAT YOU PRACTICE:**

**WORLD BANK SUPPORT FOR TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA SINCE THE EARLY 1990s**

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1. **Introduction**

This article reviews the evolution of World Bank policy and practice with regard to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) during the last thirty years. It focuses on the following three closely related aspects of TVET policy and practice; (i) the nature and extent of the changes which have occurred with regard to the Bank’s TVET sector strategy and policy design, on the one hand, and policy practice based on the design and implementation of World Bank funded projects, on the other; (ii) the key underlying reasons for these changes in organisational policy and practice; and (iii) the degree of correspondence over time between Bank TVET policy and actual practice.

The main argument of the article is that during the 1990s and up until the mid-late 2000s, there was a fairly close correspondence between the Bank’s clearly stated TVET reform strategy for SSA and the its subsequent practice both with respect to the overall size of the its TVET project portfolio and the design of individual projects at the country level. Since then, however, not only have the fundamental characteristics of Bank TVET projects changed quite dramatically but this has been accompanied by a growing disjuncture between this practice and the Bank’s policy pronouncements on TVET in Africa.

TVET is a core component of national human resources development strategies in both developed and developing countries. Given the Bank’s continuing major substantive influence on TVET along with most other areas of development policy and practice in SSA (particularly among the most aid dependent low income countries), this is a key issue in its own right. However, the wider set of more generic issues related to organisational change and the correspondence between policy and practice is also very important.

The discussion is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the overall conceptual framework developed for this review along with how the requisite information was collected. Section 3 focuses on the World Bank’s comprehensive and ambitious TVET strategy which was published in 1991. Section 4 then discusses the emergence of a new generation of ‘national skills development’ projects in SSA from the late 2000s onwards and, in particular, the reasons for this new approach. Finally, in section 5, we examine the extent to which the goals and objectives and specific interventions of new generation of TVET projects match up to the strategic vision for skills development SSA presented in the World Bank’s latest high profile report on this subject namely ‘The Skills Balancing Act in Sub-Saharan Africa: Skills for Productivity, Inclusivity and Adaptability’ which was published in 2019

1. ***Conceptual framework and methodology***

2.1 Organisational change theory

The conceptual framework for this review broadly follows those of other studies which have investigated Bank policy and practice. These characterise the policies and practices of the Bank mainly in terms of its ideology, lending and knowledge (Beech 2009; Mundy and Ghali 2009). This has occasionally been supplemented by other research that draws on sociological theory to undertake more in-depth analysis of ‘the agentic actions, social relations of meaning, organisational structure and exogenous conditions’ which shape complex bureaucratic and internal political processes on the basis of which specific policies, projects and other interventions are ‘problematised’, elaborated, gain internal support and are eventually institutionalised (see Edwards and Moschetti, 2021). The very detailed information required for this type of micro level organisational ethnographic analysis can only be obtained from direct observation and extensive interviews with ‘policy entrepreneurs’ and other relevant staff. Unfortunately, this was beyond the scope of this review (see below).

As is commonly identified by all research in this area, the Bank’s advocacy of neo-liberal ideology has been a core driver of TVET policy and practice (see, for example, Klees et al, 2012). This has strongly influenced how the Bank has deployed its considerable financial resources to fund TVET projects in ‘client countries’ and, in its increasingly important role as a ‘knowledge bank’, how it has powerfully shaped the quintessentially neo-liberal policy prescriptions which, collectively, comprise the Bank’s market-driven global TVET reform model. Policy change is also driven by the political and organisation dynamics which characterise the principal-agent relationships between the Bank and client governments. The high degree of financial power wielded by the Bank over heavily aid-dependent countries has been a central feature of this relationship for most of the 30 year period covered by this review. However, the response of governments and other key stakeholders during project implementation fundamentally affects project outcomes and impacts.

The overall responsiveness of the Bank to major changes in the policy environment coupled with new research on key issues is another key driver of policy change.

*Policy hypocrisy, double speaking and decoupling*

Another central theme of research on the organisational behaviour of the Bank is the marked disconnect between policy and practice which has been observed across most areas of project lending. In the education sector, this includes Bank policy and practice with regard to private education, (Mundy and Menashy, 2014), school level governance and accountability (Edwards and Moschetti, 2021), teachers (Fontdevila and Verger, 2015) and higher education (Rappleye and Un, 2018). Weaver (2008) attributes this organisational ‘policy hypocrisy’ as a ‘functional response in the face of competing political expectations with the Bank having to engage with numerous stakeholder all of whom cannot be fully satisfied simultaneously.

Another obvious reason is that the more ambitious and ideologically driven policies are, the more difficult it is to implement projects on the ground. With regard to teachers, for example, Fontdevila and Verger observe that a ‘manifest disconnect between talk and action emerges within (Bank) knowledge products and lending projects’ with the former expressing ‘a certain preference for ‘managerialist or neo-bureaucratic reforms’ which seek to increase low teacher effort by improving their accountability while the latter are more supportive of ‘a professionalization agenda’ (2015: 63) and, in particular, activities which are aimed at improving teacher training. A key reason for this disconnect is that improving accountability is far more challenging both technically and politically than improving teaching skills.

It is also likely that the growing divide among Bank professional staff between, on the one hand, mainly economists who have increasingly dominated global policy analysis and design and, on the other hand, operational, often more technically specialised staff who are responsible for project design and implementation ‘on the ground’ in client countries has also exacerbated the disconnect between policy and practice. The more ‘innovative’ policies are, the more likely the infighting between these groups is likely to be.

*The hegemonic Knowledge Bank: the unreflective practitioner*

Another contributory factor which has been eloquently highlighted by Rappleye and Un’s in their account of the implementation (in Cambodia) of the Bank’s global model for research capacity development in the higher education sector is that Bank project interventions are ‘contextually blind’ which prevents Bank staff being able to respond in a sufficiently flexible and pragmatic manner when usually quite serious country-specific implementation problems arise. ‘Since the Bank cannot see its own participation in the policy environment … Flaws in World Bank thinking are turned around and blamed on the recipient allowing those in the Bank to maintain faith in Bank infallibility’ (2018:252). As this review illustrates, the reluctance of Bank staff to reflect accurately and honestly on past project performance prevents the Bank from modifying or even discarding fundamentally flawed strategies and policies.

*2.2 Review methodology*

This is an entirely desk based study which relies mainly on a detailed analysis of all publicly available Bank TVET policy and project reports and other studies along with other relevant documentation mostly notably periodic Bank education sector reviews. A very recent ‘literature review’ of VET in African development highlights just how limited academic research in this area has been during recent decades[[1]](#footnote-1) (see McGrath et. al, 2020). However, the limited available literature including my own research on Bank VET policy and practice during the last 25 years is referred where appropriate.

1. ***VETSPP policy and practice***
   1. *Broad strategic and related policy objectives*

From the early 1990s onwards, the World Bank (hereafter the Bank) took the lead in actively promoting a comprehensive reform strategy for TVET in SSA and other developing countries which sought to reduce the role of by the state in direct training provision for both school leavers and those already in work and to make national training systems more demand-driven in order to meet the skill requirements of the private sector. This strategy was closely presented in the Bank’s Vocational Education and Training Sector Policy Paper (henceforth VETSPP or ‘the Paper’)) which was published in 1991 and covered all developing countries. It was largely based on the findings of a four-year, internal Bank research project whose principal output was the substantial book, Skills for Productivity: Vocational Education and Training in Developing Countries (see Middleton et al. 1993).

The overarching policy recommendation of the VETSPP was, given that most national public training systems in developing countries are both inefficient and ineffective, they should be comprehensively reformed in order to make them primarily demand rather than supply-driven with, therefore, a much greater reliance on funding by individuals and enterprises. In doing so, the VETSPP endorsed the main conclusion of the Skills for Productivity study, namely that the key is ‘to move from policies dominated by social and supply objectives and programs and provided by governments to policies and programs that respond to market forces and promote employer and private training and establish complementary and supportive roles for the state’ (Middleton et al. 1993:253).

* 1. *The reasons for change*

*The new institutional context: knowledge products and evidence-based policy*

The publication of the VETSPP, along with other sector policy reviews both for other sub-sectors of education provision and more broadly other major sectors (agriculture, governance etc.)[[2]](#footnote-2), marked the early stages of the Bank’s overall goal of being not just a funder of (hitherto mainly infrastructure-based) projects but of becoming the leading global source of information on ‘best practices’ both respect to macro/national and sectoral development policies. Armed with this new mandate, the Bank developed the capacity to undertake not just impartial and neutral ‘evidence-based’ policy analysis but the development of (despite repeated pronouncements to the contrary) highly prescriptive reform strategies. In so doing, the Bank considerably expanded the scope of its potential funding activities, particularly with respect to the major social sectors (including education, health and social protection). This entailed a major shift in the skills profile of Bank staff with the economists increasingly taking the lead role in both overall policy analysis and project design and implementation. The old guard of engineers and other technical specialists increasingly felt left out in the cold which gave rise to often intense internal tensions and conflicts within the Bank especially during the 1990s.

*Market-driven provision: Neo-liberalism and the Washington Consensus*

The analysis and policy recommendations of VETSPP were very much in line with the central precepts of the new neo-liberalism orthodoxy which had broadly supplanted the previously heavily Keynesian, state-directed approach to economic development. Bank TVET policy had to change decisively, therefore, away from the hitherto public-sector and supply-side dominated provision and funding towards wide-ranging privatisation of national training systems as a whole. While the need for fundamental improvements in public sector TVET training systems was widely acknowledged, the proposed VETSPP strategy was suffused with this neo-liberal ideological.

The SSP argued, quite correctly, that TVET provision in developing countries and especially in SSA is dominated by the public sector which is usually poorly planned, managed and resourced resulting in low-quality but high cost provision (i.e. low internal efficiency) coupled with limited skills utilisation once in employment (i.e. limited relevance/low external efficiency). Most of this training focused on the pre-employment occupational training of relatively privileged school leavers for formal employment but, since there were so few new jobs, the SSP concluded, again quite correctly, that much of this this training effort was largely misplaced. Also, it argued that the primary concern of most employers was to recruit school leavers with good quality general education who could then be trained largely on (or near) the job in order to acquire the essential job-related skills. For both these reasons, there was an ‘over-expansion’ of pre-employment public training provision.

Based on this policy analysis, a key recommendation of the VETSPP was to re-orientate TVET provision in order that it could effectively and efficiently upgrade the skills of workers who are already employed in both the formal and informal sectors. For this system of enterprise-based training to function properly, the private sector should take the lead in both determining the necessary type and level of TVET that should be provided as well as the actual provision of this training. Thus, while there was ‘still a continuing role’ for governments to provide some of this training in the short-medium term, the overall goal was ‘to transition to full private provision in the long term’. As a general principle, the VETSPP concluded that ‘public resources are used most efficiently when training policies are designed to overcome, or to compensate for factors that constrain training in the private sector’ (p.20).

As much as possible, enterprise-based training was to be funded directly by enterprises and employees themselves (cost recovery) or more indirectly by relying on income from employee payroll levies on formal sector private enterprises. While the VETSPP noted that ‘levies on employer payrolls have been a stable and effective way to finance training’, it did caution that this maybe a less appropriate option in low-income countries where ‘mechanisms for tax collection may not be in place’. In general, 'payroll taxes should be seen as a transitional mechanism, to be dismantled as training institutions get stronger and as direct finance by trainees and employers is expanded’ (p.15-16). The long-term goal, therefore, was that enterprise-based funding should be largely privatised.

The core components of the proposed training system were (i) the creation of competitive training markets with much expanded private sector provision and semi-autonomous public training institutions; (ii) increased cost recovery from employers and trainees; (iii) the establishment or strengthening of autonomous national training agencies (with appropriate governance structures that ensure private sector ownership and control) responsible for the management of national training funds, the accreditation and monitoring of training providers, national qualification frameworks and comprehensive labour market information systems as the basis for demand-driven planning; and (iv) increased equity in training provision mainly through support for the informal sector and women.

With regard to Bank funding, the VETSPP argued (although not that explicitly) that the focus of individual Bank projects should shift away from expanding (mainly) public sector training capacity towards reforming national training systems as a whole.

*Other organisational priorities: The primacy of primary education*

The VETSPP closely complemented the Bank’s overall education reform strategy at this time which was heavily focused on maximising government and donor support for primary education. The continued heavy emphasis on TVET was seen as diverting both Bank and other donor funding away from primary education. A key reason for TVET organisational change was, in this perceived zero-sum game context, to make the case for a substantial reduction in donor funding for TVET.

To this end, the VETSPP emphasised the fundamental importance of basic education in providing the key foundational skills necessary for employment of all kinds, both unskilled and skilled. Given the allegedly wider benefits of primary education with relatively much higher private and social rates of return than TVET, the Paper argued that ‘the claim on public resources for vocational education and training is much less strong in most countries’ (p.15). While this did not necessarily mean that funding for TVET should be reduced in absolute terms, the clear implication was that the share of TVET in the overall public funding of education should be reduced. The same also applied to donor funding. The VETSPP noted that 40% of aid to education in developing countries during the 1980s[[3]](#footnote-3) was targeted at TVET and, as such, ‘it has reached a very small share of those seeking any form of education’ (p.17).

* 1. *TVET funding and project design and implementation during the 1990s*

The VETSPP was highly influential in changing Bank and other donor practice with regard to TVET practice during the 1990s and well into the 2000s. Not only was this because it highlighted widespread and serious concerns about TVET provision in developing countries and especially low-income countries in SSA but it was in full accordance with the increasingly dominant neo-liberal market-driven and privatisation policies of the Bank and other donors as well as the shift towards prioritising primary education.

*Report credibility*

The Report, supported by extensive background (i.e. mainly secondary) research, was widely regarded as being both relevant and accurate in its situational analysis and diagnosis, and thus credible. It drew heavily on three main types of evidence in order to make the case for comprehensive reform namely the generally poor outcomes of TVET in SSA during the previous decades, allegedly much lower rates of return to TVET than general and especially primary education, and the success of the High Performing Asian Economies in establishing demand-driven training systems. While the quality of the evidence presented with regard to rates of return and the HPAE was, in fact, questionable (see Author, mm, mm, dd), in general, the Report attracted surprisingly little academic criticism.

*Overall funding for TVET in SSA and elsewhere*

In line with the recommendations of the VETSPP and other Bank education sector policy reports, Bank funding for TVET projects declined appreciably during the 1990s. The shift away from supporting ‘manpower expansion’ in government training centres to the new focus on ‘policy development’ significantly reduced overall project costs. The share of TVET in total Bank funding for education and training as a whole declined very appreciably from over one-quarter in the late 1970s to less than 5% from 1995 onwards (see table 1).

After the publication of the VETSPP in 1991, only nine, mostly small (single focus) TVET projects were approved in SSA during the remainder of the 1990s. The total project value for seven of these projects amounted to only $99 million. Only two projects had budgets exceeding $20 million (Kenya and Madagascar)[[4]](#footnote-4). After 2000, Bank funding for TVET virtually ground to a halt. Only one (single focus) TVET project (in Zambia) was approved for the whole of SSA between 2001 and 2005.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1: World Bank project commitments to education by sub-sector in SSA, 1970-2020 (rounded $million) | | | | | | | |
| Year | Basic | Secondary | Tertiary | TVET/WFD | Other education' | Total |  |
| 1970-74 | 146 | 176 | 10 | 30 | 1 | 363 |  |
| 1975-79 | 176 | 44 | 22 | 108 | 49 | 399 |  |
| 1980-84 | 217 | 121 | 0 | 69 | 137 | 544 |  |
| 1985-89 | 145 | 26 | 115 | 23 | 121 | 430 |  |
| 1990-94 | 669 | 73 | 512 | 99 | 80 | 1433 |  |
| 1995-99 | 788 | 116 | 58 | 36 | 15 | 1013 |  |
| 2000-04 | 1146 | 185 | 123 | 90 | 213 | 1757 |  |
| 2005-09 | 1683 | 317 | 330 | 68 | 1141 | 3539 |  |
| 2010-14 | 1600 | 346 | 267 | 524 | 569 | 3306 |  |
| 2015-19 | 2228 | 897 | 569 | 964 | 350 | 5008 |  |
| % breakdown | |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Basic | Secondary | Tertiary | TVET/WFD | Other education |  |  |
| 1970-74 | 40 | 48 | 3 | 8 | 0 |  |  |
| 1975-79 | 44 | 11 | 6 | 27 | 12 |  |  |
| 1980-84 | 40 | 22 | 0 | 13 | 25 |  |  |
| 1985-89 | 34 | 6 | 27 | 5 | 28 |  |  |
| 1990-94 | 47 | 5 | 36 | 7 | 6 |  |  |
| 1995-99 | 78 | 11 | 6 | 4 | 1 |  |  |
| 2000-04 | 65 | 11 | 7 | 5 | 12 |  |  |
| 2005-09 | 48 | 9 | 9 | 2 | 32 |  |  |
| 2010-14 | 48 | 10 | 8 | 16 | 17 |  |  |
| 2015-19 | 44 | 18 | 11 | 19 | 7 |  |  |

Bank policy prescriptions with regard to education and training were highly influential at this time in SSA. As a result, most other aid donors followed the recommendations of the VETVETSPP and overall donor funding for TVET also fell appreciably in real terms. The near universal adoption of Universal Primary Education as the cornerstone of national education strategies from the mid-1990s onwards meant that the share of primary education in national education budgets increased rapidly mainly at the expense of the shares of TVET and higher education.

While there was a high degree of correspondence between the VETSPP strategy and overall support for TVET in SSA, this was considerably less so in Asia and Latin America. The reasons for this are not altogether clear, but certainly public sector TVET was not as inefficient and ineffective as generalised in the Paper and the political power of governments was such that they could continue to obtain major Bank and other donor funding for politically attractive TVET provision. Low-income countries with high degrees of aid dependency were not able to counter the Bank’s strong conditionality restrictions which effectively curtailed all major Bank funding of TVET during this period.

*TVET project funding and design during the 1990s*

The Bank’sown TVET projects in SSA from the early 1990s onwards were designed closely in accordance with the key recommendations of the VETSPP and its overall global TVET reform model. A detailed internal review by the Bank of its TVET lending operations during the 1990s itself concluded that ‘TVET projects in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s were highly responsive to the prescriptions of the 1991 Bank Policy. Projects shifted towards in-service training and the informal sector, used non-public delivery systems in many cases, and employed financial incentives to stimulate greater responsiveness in the public sector’ (Johanson, 2002:1).

Other key Bank education policy documents during the 1990s and early 2000s also endorsed the TVET reform strategy recommended by the VETSPP. Most notably, the Bank’s wide ranging Education Sector Review in 1995 reiterated the broad recommendations of the VETSPP and that, in particular, ‘vocational and technical skills are best imparted in the workplace’ (p.102) with primary reliance on private sector funding.

The only noticeable area of policy-practice non-correspondence was the inclusion of quite sizeable voucher programmes for informal sector training trainees in Ghana and Kenya. The potential of educational vouchers in promoting client choice and provider competition was particularly popular among the strongest adherents of neo-liberalism but this was not endorsed by the VETSPP which cautioned against the too hasty adoption of ‘innovative’ and largely untested interventions in the informal sector. The dominance and exuberance of the neo-liberalism at the end time is reflected in TVET project design especially in SSA where governments were less able to reject largely ‘experimental’ initiatives.

Other important donors (especially Danida, GTZ, and SIDA) also funded major TVET projects that sought to create demand-driven national training systems in SSA which were designed broadly along the lines advocated by the TVETSPP. These also included the introduction of payroll training levy schemes in Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia.

1. ***Project reformulation: From system reform to direct service delivery***

As discussed earlier, three main sets of change factors collectively contributed to the eventual emergence of a new generation of Bank TVET projects in the early 2010s whose design, while continuing to pay lip service to the VETSPP’s neo-liberal reform system reform model, fundamentally diverged from this reform agenda and the system reform projects of the 1990s. Firstly, by the late 2000s, the very limited success in achieving any significant TVET system reform in SSA was clearly apparent even to a powerful institution such as the World Bank. Poor implementation outcomes were the result of overly ambitious, ideologically driven and poorly conceived policies and related project design coupled with inadequate support from most key stakeholders. Secondly, the Bank increasingly recognised that changes in the global economy heightened the importance of enhanced national skills development and thus the need for increased project funding in this area. And thirdly, given its primary role as a lending institution, the Bank was concerned to increase its overall lending to the education sector.

*4.1 TVET project implementation during the 1990s*

In 2002, the Bank commissioned a quite thorough assessment of its TVET project portfolio in SSA during the 1990s. This was undertaken by Richard Johanson, who although not a Bank staff member was a respected and trusted external consultant. An obvious limitation of this de facto internal review was that the majority of the TVET projects were still being implemented or had only very recently finished. The review noted that ‘recent (ongoing) projects report surprisingly few problems of implementation’ (np) with almost all being rated ‘highly satisfactory’ or ‘satisfactory’. Two years later in 2004, Johanson co-authored (with the Bank’s most senior TVET advisor, Arvil van Adams) a high profile World Bank publication entitled ‘Skills Development in Sub-Saharan Africa’ which reviewed World Bank project activity since the publication of the VETSPP in 1991. The Report’s main conclusion was that ‘a decade later, this review reinforces many of the findings of the 1991 policy paper’ (p. xi) and that ‘the record of TVET reforms during the last decade has been promising’ (p.11). As such, the primary role of government is ‘to support the development of training markets’ and private sector provision. (p. 5). While acknowledging the paucity of good quality information, they were still able to assert that non-government are ‘more responsive to markets and have lower instructor costs, more intensive use of facilities and larger class sizes’ (p.7).

What is striking is the disjuncture between this upbeat, optimistic endorsement of the VETSPP reform model and the actual reality on the ground. By the early 2000s, the Bank itself already had ample evidence that the implementation of the VETSPP reform agenda was highly problematic with only two of the 10 completed Bank TVET projects in SSA being rated as ‘satisfactory’ in project completion reports. Furthermore, Johanson’s own internal review identified serious weaknesses in project implementation with respect to most aspects of the VETSPP reform model: These included weak analysis of the economic context, neglect of regulatory constraints on private education, unsuccessful efforts at diversifying financing for TVET, failure of most ‘observatories’ and labour market information systems, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems. In addition, he expressed key concerns about the lack of autonomy of national training agencies and individual public training institutions, the failure to develop competitive training markets, the misappropriation of national training funds and income from training levies, the limitations of individual trainee cost recovery especially in the informal sector, the high risk of individual training vouchers (especially where traditional apprenticeship is not well established and widespread) and the relatively high and unsustainable costs of conventional training in the informal sector.

*4.2 Longer-term TVET reform outcomes*

Although no systematic (internal or external) follow-up reviews have ever been undertaken, it is clear that, to date, the overall success of the VETSPP reform strategy in SSA has been generally quite limited. The precise reasons for this vary from country to country but there are three common overarching themes, namely the strategy was too ideologically driven, overly ambitious and conceptually flawed.

The fact that none of the nine TVET projects in SSA that were approved during the 1990s were ever extended was a direct result of shortcomings of the system and capacity building objectives of the VETSPP reform model. Moreover, only four of these nine countries have sought Bank funding for TVET projects since then. All four were approved after 2010 by which time the Bank had introduced an altogether different type of TVET project.

*Overly ambitious and ideologically driven*

The extent of training privatisation that was advocated in the Report, which had never before been attempted anywhere in the world, was heavily ideologically driven. This was reflected in the way in which key supporting evidence was used in the report. In particular, its repeated assertions that the TVET policies and practices of other countries strongly supported the adoption of private-sector driven training systems with limited direct government involvement was misleading and generally untrue. This was not only the case for the high-performing Asian economies but also industrialised economies in the North where most government were adopting increasingly interventionist training strategies (see Author, 1996a). The Report’s misuse of the rates of return evidence was also concerning (see Author, 1996b).

*Limited stakeholder commitment and involvement*

From a broad national political settlement perspective, political elites tend to support reform strategies which bolster their support from key political constituencies thereby ensuring their long-term political survival. The Bank’s TVET projects in SSA during the 1990s were both too small and too ambitious/controversial for political elites to commit long-term support for any serious TVET reform process.

The key TVET stakeholders in SSA, in particular political elites, employers and the staff of public training centres themselves were not sufficiently committed to what was a very ambitious TVET reform model. The failure to recognise this was due to a lack of understanding of the underlying political economy of countries in SSA which was exacerbated by the top down, technocratic, dogmatic one-size-fits-all approach adopted by the Bank with regard to project design and implementation.

Even among the nine countries with Bank funded (single focus) TVET projects, government commitment to project and post-project implementation was generally low[[5]](#footnote-5). A key reason for this is that many politicians and senior bureaucrats in SSA remained convinced of the importance of TVET in creating new jobs and modernising their economies and particularly objected, therefore, to the Bank’s attempt to downsize the pre-employment occupational training provided mainly by public training centres. This commitment grew even stronger over time as concerns mounted over the economic, social and political consequences of the youth employment crisis due to rapidly growing numbers of educated school leavers and ‘jobless growth’. Thus, rather than reducing the scale of public sector training provision, many governments in SSA sought to increase TVET in direct opposition to Bank policy.

More generally, most governments in SSA continued to resist usually donor-initiated efforts to privatise public services. Unlike Universal Primary Education, where donor policies and financial support led to a significant expansion in the provision of public primary schooling, they feared that the full implementation of VETSPP would have ultimately led to a reduction in public sector training provision with only relatively small levels of donor funding (especially compared to funding for basic education).

In most countries, the organisation of public TVET provision remained fragmented with multiple ministries and other agencies responsible for their own training institutions. Typically, this led to various kinds of organisational conflicts and other ‘turf wars’ which further undermined the efficacy of the overall training system. The failure of governments to rationalise these dysfunctional organisational structures in countries with Bank and other donor system-reform TVET projects was also symptomatic of the overall lack of political commitment to TVET reform.

Managers and instructors at public TVET training centres were also often reluctant to go along with the proposed, potentially very disruptive TVET reforms especially those that advocated increased competition with the private sector and the need for ‘rationalisation’ of training provision in order to become more efficient and demand-driven. Most centres were very poorly resourced and under-staffed with poorly trained and motivated instructors. Also, many governments were themselves not prepared to grant training centres sufficient autonomy to become demand-driven.

*Private sector commitment:* The owners and managers of most formal sector enterprises were, at best, lukewarm and, at worst, actively opposed to the VETSPP reform agenda. This was for three main reasons. Firstly, the overall (effective) demand for skills training was generally low. Most manufacturing enterprises were very small and utilised relatively simple production technologies with limited technical skill requirements which had hardly changed since the 1970s (see Author, 1999). Consequently, enterprises generally relied on the job training of new workers thereby effectively internalising the training process. Secondly, formal sector enterprises generally resisted the introduction of training levy-rebate schemes since they were costly (typically 1-3% of total payroll costs) and enterprises had relatively very limited need for formal training courses either provided internally or by external training institutions. And thirdly, the VETSPP anticipated that economic liberalisation of product and factor (especially labour markets) which was the cornerstone of structural adjustment programmes throughout SSA would encourage enterprises to increase their training activity in order to ensure that they remain competitive. However, the overall impact on training was often negative, with enterprises being too preoccupied with fighting for survival rather than prioritising training (see below).

*Conceptual shortcomings*

The main conceptual shortcomings in the design of the VETVETSPP strategy were already apparent during the early stages of the implementation of the Bank and other donor projects which were largely based on this strategy (see Author, 1998).

*Misconception of training provision:* The skills framework adopted by the VETSPP was largely based on the institutional location of training provision, namely school, training centre and enterprise. There was a failure, therefore, to distinguish clearly between the three core types of skills training namely foundational, pre-employment occupational and job-related which is the core typological framework for any robust analysis of national TVET provision. In conjunction with the VETSPP’s prioritisation of enterprise based training, this meant that pre-employment occupational training was neglected/marginalised. This was particularly the case with regard to public service delivery across all key economic and social sectors (including accountancy/finance, agriculture, education, general administration, health, judiciary, public works, security, and transport).

*Unbalanced and too market driven:* The TVETSPP emphasis on ‘skills for productivity’ resulted in its reform strategy being unbalanced with inadequate recognition of the role of training in promoting inclusion and supporting the livelihood needs of the poorest and the important role of the state in anticipating and providing for future skill requirements arising from national development strategies.

Despite recognising that countries in SSA were trapped in a ‘low skill equilibrium’ trap, the VETSPP reform strategy focused almost exclusively on meeting immediate enterprise-based training needs. Furthermore, these were generally over-estimated due to incorrect assumptions about the willingness and capacity of enterprises, in both the formal and informal sectors, to train their employees.

The failure to promote demand-driven training markets in the informal sector through the introduction of voucher schemes also highlighted the lack of effective demand, especially in rural areas and the institutional complexities of introducing such schemes which resulted in opportunistic behaviour on the part of both training providers and trainees.

The attempt to institutionalise demand-driven planning for TVET through the development of comprehensive labour market information systems (LMIS) was similarly over-ambitious and impracticable. National capacity to develop LMIS was severely limited especially given the enormous amounts of information required for it be effective. No other country in the world had succeeded in adopting such a market-driven approach with regard to the planning of national training systems.

*Narrow skill focus:* TVET in SSA has traditionally catered for a fairly limited range of artisan and technician occupations in the manufacturing, transport, construction and utility sectors. While the VETSPP recognised the need to expand vocational training systems in order to cover other sectors (especially key growth sectors such as tourism and mining), the industrial sector continued to be the main focus of nearly all Bank-funded TVET projects. As such, a comprehensive vision of national skills development was lacking.

*Ineffective skills development funds:* The role of national and sectoral skill development funds is conceptually sound and SDFs have been established in many countries, both developed and developing. However, the sustainability of these funds is limited in most countries in SSA (see Johanson, 1999). Where they are well established and properly funded (usually from the proceeds of training levy schemes), governments have often redirected this funding away from TVET and re-allocated it to other sectors in particular higher education.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Limited scope for private sector training provision*. VETSPP encouraged the development of independent private training providers just as was the case with the education sector as a whole. This was conceptually sound and, in the longer term, contributed to the liberalisation of training regulations which fuelled the rapid growth in private training centres, especially in larger countries in SSA (see Author, 2000). These centres overwhelmingly cater to the training needs of the rapidly growing service sectors (in particular ICT, finance, banking, marketing, and tourism) which public sector training providers have generally ignored. However, the capacity of the private sector to provide training in more technical areas was (implicitly) seriously over-estimated by the VETSPP.

*The informal sector*: The VETSPP argued (correctly) that ‘great caution should be exercised in considering interventions into the traditional apprenticeship training’ (p.40). However, this advice was not generally followed by the Bank’s TVET projects during the 1990s. This was especially in Ghana and Kenya where the main project focus was on the informal sector and where innovative and controversial training voucher schemes were introduced for artisan trainees. Despite positive initial outcomes in Kenya, neither of these interventions have been sustainable in the longer term (see Hallberg, 2011). The limitations of training-only interventions were already well known, but very limited project funding prevented multi-component support interventions from being widely implemented.

*4.4 Changing Bank perceptions and priorities*

Unlike during the 1990s, there was no one single ‘sector policy paper’ or similar knowledge product written by a group of policy entrepreneurs which presented a well-researched situational analysis and overall policy rationale and project design for the new generation of Bank-funded TVET projects from the early 2010s onwards. More research is needed to gain greater insight in to precisely how, organisationally, these projects did emerge. It is also much less straightforward to analyse the degree of correspondence between (a vaguely specified) set of policy goals and the design and implementation of these projects on the ground.

Nonetheless, from the early-mid 2000s, there were already some fairly clear indications that the Bank was beginning to reconsider its overall approach to skills development in Africa. Two particular concerns were highlighted in a series of Bank knowledge products namely the need to accelerate the integration of countries in SSA into an increasingly skills-driven global economy and the mounting ‘youth crisis’ which is largely driven by the lack of productive employment opportunities.

Two major education sector reviews were conducted by the Bank during the 2000s. The 2010 review, Learning For All, was particularly concerned to emphasise the importance of ‘building more skilled workforces’ and adopted a more holistic, ‘systems based’ approach which went beyond the earlier preoccupation on formal schooling of earlier education reviews. It noted that ‘the shortage of the right skills in the workforce has taken on a new urgency across the world’ (p.36) and that ‘beyond basic education, demand for tertiary education and TVET is growing in every region served by the Bank’. This was striking contrast to the Bank’s policy pronouncements and recommendations two decades earlier and, although lacking in any policy or programmatic detail, signalled strong approval for a rapid increase in banking funding for TVET and other skill development projects.

A number of other high profile research studies and reviews were conducted by Bank staff during the late 2000s and early 2010s on key areas of skill formation, most notably agriculture, higher education, youth employment, and the informal sector which were also influential in the re-setting of Bank education and training priorities and providing some shape to the basic features of this new approach.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Wider Bank organisational priorities*

During the late 2000s, the Bank also adopted a new set of core organisational ‘priorities’, namely infrastructure, climate change, private sector development and economic opportunity for women which marked a major shift away from the Bank’s previous focus on the social sectors including ‘basic education’. In part, this was driven by the failure of the promised/anticipated large and rapid impacts of social sector investments on economic and growth poverty reduction. Skills development is now seen as being critically important with respect to least three of the four priorities (in particular, enterprise development) in the context of rapid globalisation.

*Bank responsiveness to national development priorities*

The Bank has become progressively less influential with regard to policy advice in the education sector especially compared to the 1990s and, more generally, the Bank has become more responsive to government priorities and thus less dogmatic and more pragmatic.[[8]](#footnote-8) National ‘vision’ strategies all have increased productivity, international competitiveness and youth employment creation as core objectives. Some, like Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania, still aspire to become industrial societies within the next 30 years. The new Sustainable Development Goals also place more emphasis on skills development; SDG4 states that, by 2030, all countries will ‘substantially increase the number of youths and adults who have relevant skills’.

The Bank’s recently launched Africa Human Capital Development Plan is perhaps the clearest signal yet of the Bank’s new found commitment to address the human resources development needs of SSA in a more visionary and strategic manner. Bank funding of the human development sectors to set to increase from $3.8 billion in 2018 to $15 billion in 2021-23 with the share of IDA funding for human resource development projected to increase from 28% to 45% in 2023.

*4.5 Banking project funding imperatives*

Despite the importance attached to its role as a ‘knowledge Bank’, project funding remains the core organisational goal and functional area of the Bank. Increasing the value of its overall project portfolio is crucially important in maintaining its preeminent position as the leading developmental agency. Bank staff are themselves strongly motivated to design and manage successful, large and high profile projects. The systems improvement focus of the VETSPP reform strategy meant that almost all VET projects were relatively very small and difficult to implement and thus not particularly attractive for individual Bank staff.

The very success of the Bank in convincing itself and other donors to support mainly basic education meant, somewhat ironically, that the Bank reduced or at least dampened potential funding opportunities for its own education projects because client governments in SSA benefited from much increased bilateral donor support for basic education which, unlike Bank loans, was grant funded. The logical and strong government preference for bilateral grant support led to a significant reduction for IDA funding for education in SSA by the early 2000s. The extent to which this encouraged the Bank to adjust its overall policy stance to TVET and secondary and higher education is not clear but it is perhaps no coincidence that it was precisely during this period that Bank ‘talk’ became more favourably disposed to these areas of education provision.

1. *The new generation of skills development projects*
   1. *Back to the past*

These changes in Bank education policy (as encapsulated in various knowledge products) and lending imperatives and priorities during the late 2000s eventually led to the inauguration of a new generation of skills development projects over the next decade. Two features of this new policy regime stand out. Firstly, while project design continued to pay lip service to the VETSPP market-driven reform principles and the need for system reform, the main objective of most of these projects is to expand public sector training provision for specific, high priority ‘growth sectors’ including agri-business, tourism, and oil and mining. And secondly, the overall size of projects increased dramatically in order to fund the establishment or major refurbishment of government training centres. As a result, Bank funding for TVET increased exponentially from an annual average of just US$68 million in 2005-2009 to US$964 million in 2015-19 and the share of skills/workforce development projects in overall Bank education funding in SSA rose from just 2% to 19% during this period (see table 1).

Taken together, these two features represent not just a major change in TVET policy and practice but a significant policy reversal since it is the public sector which is once again primarily responsible for training delivery. While this is to done as part of ‘public-private partnerships’, the funding of these partnerships is almost totally from government. With some important changes, therefore, this new generation to national skills development bears a striking similarity to the state-driven interventionist policies and practices which were typical of ‘national manpower’ strategies and plans throughout SSA from the 1960s up until the 1980s.

*Skills for transformation*

The new skills development projects have a broader, clearer and more ambitious vision of the importance of skills in national development. Closely linked to this is a new focus on ‘capacity building’[[9]](#footnote-9) and institutional strengthening in all key productive sectors (especially agriculture, water, electricity, roads, small and medium enterprises, tourism, and mining). It is indeed quite striking just how most Bank non-infrastructure projects now have capacity building and thus skill development as key project objectives. The crisis in public services delivery (especially education and health) has also resulted in increased emphasis on improving the quality rather than expanding the quantity/scale of service provision.

*More balanced provision of skills training*

The new approach is based on a clearer conceptualisation of skills development with less emphasis on categorising skills provision by location and more on the type of skills required namely pre-vocational/foundational, pre-employment occupation and job-related. Recognition of the predominant role of pre-employment training in national skills training systems is reflected in the new emphasis on supporting post-secondary training centres especially in the public sector.

* 1. **Developing a policy framework for the new practice**

*The Skills Balancing Act in SSA Report*

Nearly ten years after the first large skills development project in SSA was first implemented, the Bank published a wide ranging, high profile report on skills development in Africa. An accompanying article provides a detailed review of this nearly 400 page document (see Author, 2020). The present discussion is limited to considering briefly the overall quality and relevance of the Report and the extent to which its main policy recommendations match up with actual Bank TVET practice during the last decade.

*A poor quality knowledge product*

The SBAR lacks conceptual clarity and evidential rigour. In particular, it seriously misinterprets the available statistics on TVET in SSA and, in so doing, excludes all of post-school, pre-employment training outside of the Ministry of Education which is where most of this type of training is undertaken, especially in Anglophone Africa. Also, the fails to make a clear distinction between TVET that is school-based (which is only commonly found in francophone Africa) and post-(mainly secondary) school TVET (which is the norm in Anglophone Africa) which leads to a confused analysis and misconceived conclusions concerning training interventions. Most notably, by wrongly assuming that most TVET in SSA is school-based (since it only has Ministry of Education statistics to rely on), it not only seriously underestimates the overall scale of public and private TVET provision in SSA but also is overly preoccupied with problems such as the premature tracking of school children into TVET specialisations when this is only likely to be an issue in a small minority of countries. This is surprising given the extent of accumulated evidence over the last 50 years that school-based TVET in SSA is both inefficient and ineffective (see, for example, Foster, 1965, Psacaropoulos and Loxley, Lewin and Lauglo).

The Report’s focus on school-based training also means that virtually no attention is given post-school pre-employment occupational training: In most countries and especially in Anglophone Africa, post-secondary school training centres which are directly part of the publically financed and managed formal education and training system comprises the bulk of TVET provision. This formal training systems not only covers nationwide networks of ‘technical and vocational’ training centres (focusing mainly on pre-employment training for secondary school leavers at both lower and middle occupational levels) but also a parallel network of training centres managed by all key sector ministries and parastatals (most notably agriculture, communications, public works, health, transport, defence, electricity and water). This is almost totally ignored by the SBAR which, again, is due to misconceptions and misunderstandings of the basic features of skills training in the region.

*Policy-practice correspondence*

In a very general sense, while the SBAR does spell out and endorse the Bank’s new more statist, resource intensive approach to skills strengthening and development in SSA, it continues to adhere to the neo liberal orthodoxy enshrined in the VETSPP’s market-driven reform model. In particular, the SBAR continues to attach the same strategic importance to the privatisation of TVET funding and provision as did the VETSPP. Despite the accumulated evidence of the last 30 years about the limitations of private sector training provision in SSSA, the Report stridently asserts that ‘the public sector does not need to provide (the) training itself. Instead, it can competitively hire centre providers from the private sector to provide the training itself’ (p.bb).

This tension or contradiction between new practice and old policy is never explicitly addressed and is effectively obscured by the Report’s high level of generality and vagueness. Rather, the Report’s principal focus is on what should be done in order to meet the future skill requirements of rapid technological development in a globalising world economy. Much of this has been said many times before in various knowledge products produced by the Bank and other institutions and individual researchers. What is completely missing in the Report is any substantive discussion of (i) the key features of TVET provision in SSA and especially key developments since the publication of the VETSPP nearly 30 years earlier; and (ii) any description and evaluation of the new generation of Bank skills development. Given the traditional role of sector policy reviews in evaluating Bank policy and practice and making comprehensive recommendations about future policy and practice, this latter omission is particularly extraordinary and effectively renders the Report of little operational value as a guide for future activity in this key area. A key reason for such a major decoupling between current Bank practice and policy analysis is precisely because the Report’s continued attachment to market-driven reform is so inconsistent with the new practice. It is simpler and less organisationally embarrassing, therefore, not to explicitly mention the new practice whatsoever.

As a high profile knowledge product, the SBAR is, therefore, a strange document and one wonders why the Bank felt the need to publish such a document when it did. While the VETSPP played a central role, ex ante, in shaping Bank TVET policy and practice, the impact of the SBAR is likely to be quite marginal not only because it is such a poor quality knowledge product and was published well after (ex post) the Bank had already adopted a new approach to skill development but because the report itself pays no attention whatsoever to assessing the Bank’s new generation of skills development projects. Interestingly, the VETSPP did review the Bank’s recent VET project as part of its overall discredit the cost-effectiveness of both domestically and externally funded provision

1. **Conclusion**

Five main conclusions can be drawn from this review of nearly 30 years of Bank TVET policy advice and practice in SSA. Firstly, certainly at an operational level, the quality and relevance of TVET/skills development of Bank projects has improved considerably especially during the last 10 years. In large part, this is because the Bank has taken on board many of the key implementation lessons from its own TVET projects during the 1990s and early 2000s. This learning process has probably been facilitated by a more pragmatic, less ideologically driven approach to TVET provision and especially the role of the public sector in still mainly low-income developing countries. It is noticeable, however, how little formal research has contributed to this improved understanding.

Secondly, given the basic conceptual weaknesses of the VETVETSPP and the close match between TVET policy and practice, the implementation of Bank TVET projects encountered major problems during the 1990s and early 2000s with the result that project outcomes and impacts were limited. Numerous shortcomings can be identified ranging from key defects in project design, over ambitious project objectives and a basic lack of understanding about how to effect system reform in the context of weak institutional capacity and seriously complex political constraints.

Thirdly, largely in response to this situation, from the mid-late 2000s onwards, the Bank developed a new approach to skills development in SSA. There has been a decisive shift away from a narrow focus on TVET and enterprise-based training to a more forward looking and proactive role of skills development as a whole with particular emphasis on public pre-occupational employment training and public-private partnerships targeted at key growth sectors. The recognition that this requires a minimum critical effort is reflected in the much larger size of projects and the much greater involvement of key stakeholders in both project design and implementation. However, further research is needed in order to establish how successful this new approach has been to date in the 15 or so countries where it has been or is currently being piloted. For most of the skills development projects it is too early to reach robust conclusions about project outcomes, let alone longer-term impacts.

Fourthly, the policy analysis and recommendations of the SBAR are broadly consistent with this new approach. However, since the report itself makes no attempt to analyse the design and implementation of the Bank’s own skill development projects in SSA during the last decade, there is no explicit endorsement of this new approach in the report. This is both surprising and unsettling.

And fifthly, significant divergences exist between the new approach which has already been extensively implemented on the ground and the narrative of the SBAR particularly with respect to private training provision and school-based training. Given the extent of these differences, the Bank is in danger of failing to preach what it practices with respect to key areas of skills development in SSA. This should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

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1. The main exception has been the quite sizeable research effort in South Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sector policy papers [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Report notes that the share of TVET funding was even higher for the World Bank and other multilateral donors. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In Cote d‘Ivoire ($17 million), Ghana ($10 million), Kenya ($22 million), Madagascar ($23 million), Mauritania ($13 million), Mauritius ($5 million) and Togo ($9 million). Budget information on the remaining two, single focus TVET projects in Benin and Mali is not available on the World Bank data website nor is it presented in the Johanson review. The other 16 projects included in the review were either approved before 1991 or were education projects which had (generally small) TVET components. Half of the 24 projects included in the Johanson review were in eight countries with populations of less than three million in the late 1990s. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nearly all the Bank project completion reports for these projects emphasise this as a key issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tanzania is the most extreme case where it was expected that all levy income would be allocated to the new national training authority (VETA) but where this has progressively declined to only one-third. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Filmer and Fox 2014, Adams et al., 2004; Adams et al. 2013, [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In many ways, therefore, the Bank itself has become more demand/client-driven. Detailed research is required in order to explore these quite tentative observations and propositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It would appear, however, that the Bank does not have a clearly elaborated capacity building strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)