

Patrick Fine: Welcome to the Deeper Look Podcast. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360. For our new listeners this year, we're looking at the sustainable development goals [SDGs], and this month, I have the pleasure of talking about education and the SDGs with Pape Sow, who I'm speaking to in Senegal.

Pape, it's great to talk with you.

Pape Sow: Thanks Patrick.

Patrick Fine: Pape Sow is currently the USAID Regional Director for the Young African Leaders Initiative, YALI, based in Accra, Ghana. He has held senior positions with the Senegal Ministry of Education, including Director of Planning, Director of Preschool and Elementary Education, Director of Adult and Youth Literacy and Inspector of Education. With over 40 years' experience advocating, designing and leading education reform across Africa, Pape is truly one of the most respected voices on issues of education and workforce development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Pape, it is just an honor to be able to have some time to talk with you and get your perspective on where we are with education development, and in particular, what kind of progress we're making toward achievement of SDG Goal 4, Quality Education.

So, I'd like to start with a question. You've worked on virtually all aspects of education development from preschool to higher education. Looking at the countries in sub-Saharan Africa and considering the objectives set by the SDGs and thinking of the trajectory of educational development starting back in Jomtien, Thailand, with the Education for All movement in 1990, what do you see as the priorities in the education sector today in 2016?

Pape Sow: Thank you Patrick.

I'm sure it's going to be very complicated to generalize in terms of priorities, because African education system[s], they are not at the same starting point. Some have just made very significant progress; others are still grappling with many, many many challenges.

But if I were to set some priorities, one would just be system strengthening. How can we make sure we have smarter systems that can allow us to work better and then reinforce this ability to

transform and change our systems? We have to work on the governance of our systems, because basically, many of our countries have very centralized management. The way education is funded and is implemented needs to be reviewed to see how we can better organize it to match our new context, situations and aspirations.

The second thing where our system needs to be strengthened is in terms of leadership. We still have many, many leadership issues, starting at the school level to the national level, so going through the districts and regions.

The third thing that seems important to me is the weak capacity of our systems to network and then re-establish very strong partnerships. It's something we need to work on because it's very, very important now to go to that direction.

The fourth thing [is] the technical capacity of the system too. I mean, we are not always recruiting the best now. We are in competition with other sectors, [the] private sector and others that are just more attractive, at least in terms of salary and incentives. We are no longer having the best in our systems, so meaning that we have to make sure that we try to improve our technical capacity to be able to do all the work we have to do.

And then finally, we have also another priority: how to improve the financing of our systems. It's growing in terms of volume. We have more and more people spreading everywhere who want to open schools. But we don't have the adequate budget to make all these new schools operate in an acceptable way.

The other priority I see is the quality of education, and at that level, we are just almost delivering the same education [as we did] 50 years ago – very, very minor changes.

The context has changed, the needs have changed for the learners, and many other things. You have a lot of types of technology that we can use. All these things are here, but we are not always very prone to just adjust or change our systems to match all these new potentials that we have.

Patrick Fine:

Let me ask you, you've laid out these five priorities, and starting with systems strengthening and then looking at your last comment about relevance and the application of technology and the changes we're seeing in the world, there's so much innovation going on

right now in education delivery systems and instructional systems, and you've got online education, you've got whole new curriculums being developed, it's all open source and available to anybody who wants to use it.

How do you see technology being applied to strengthen systems in the way that you're talking about and being applied to address this question of relevance?

Pape Sow: Yes, I mean, there is a way that we have all these huge potentials that can help change the situation, transform the systems, but still we have some sorts of resistance, that they would have always an excuse: cost, the readiness of the staff, the bandwidth or just the network doesn't go everywhere in the country because many countries have very a strong rural area and then even some urban areas are not always very well covered by the network systems. It takes now radical leadership. We have to change the governance of our systems to harness all the science technology innovations that we have seen, as you described.

Patrick Fine: You mentioned networks and partnerships as another one of the priorities. What kind of partnerships do you have mind?

Pape Sow: We have many sorts of partnerships. The one that we usually go to is the resource partners. You see that many of our African governments are organized to go to donors, but they don't try to look at other sort of technical partners that can provide, as you were saying, technology, IT, and all these things.

The other type of partners, those who have just come and imposed themselves, what we call the social partners. We have just the unions, the teachers' unions, all these that have imposed themselves. NGOs, they have imposed themselves too, because basically, they just fought to come and sit [in] on our policy dialogue.

The one missing is the private sector. The private sector is not very aggressive in coming to this partnership table, but we have to go and find them, because apart from the donors, the private sector seems to be the other very important resource that we haven't tapped into yet in all these years, and we need to try to improve our capacity to just reach out to [the] private sector and work with them, so it's still a big gap in this networking and partnership.

Patrick Fine:

You know, with respect to the private sector, I know you're referring to the role that corporations, businesses can play in supporting strong education systems in their communities. But, I've also seen across the continent this explosion of private provision of education, of private providers providing everything from preschool education up to private universities and all sorts of private vocational programs, especially in the technology area.

What's your view on that private provision of educational services? How do you see it complementing – or is it competing with public education in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and where do you see it enabling countries to meet their SDG 4 goals?

Pape Sow:

We have to build very strong and effective partners across a wide range of partners and stakeholders if you really want these transformational changes that we are talking about in our SDGs. And the public sector will never be able to provide for this education if they would just be left alone to do it.

We have to try to encourage the other educational operators like the private sector providers. For instance, in many of our countries, they have just been in our country some time before the public sector was in place. Take the case of Senegal, where just the church started its own schools, and in many other countries, the church was there with their schools...

Patrick Fine:

All across the continent, Pape.

Pape Sow:

Yeah, so it means that these are varied service providers that have the same range of experience as the public sector. And if we take the education and its mission, and in the SDGs, we stress a lot about human rights, the opportunity to know how to read and write – a need for anybody in this era.

Besides the second thing that's important is nation building, and by nation building, I have two aspects. One is providing for the resources that we need, and the other one, building the cohesion, the ideology of a nation, these values and beliefs and the priorities that we set for our humanity that everybody should fulfill through our education system.

But we have also education being what I may call a market, a market where demand for skills, for knowledge should just be backed by some providers, some supplies, that are just in the system. And I think that lifelong learning promotes many, many

types of education service providers. If I want to be a professional in basketball or soccer or anything, if I have it as my education priority, what I want to become, I should just have the opportunity to go somewhere where they can help me accomplish my dream and be who I want to be.

So, we still have this one-size-fits-all that the government is giving. I'm sure that they would like to make sure that they control nation building. It's true that we have to have a system of regulation, of course, but we have to open it to many other service providers too.

Patrick Fine: So, you're advocating that in order to make the SDGs, it's going to take both [the] public and private sectors coming together to complement each other to meet the very diverse needs of the populations.

Pape Sow: Yes, diversity, yes, but also, even when you won't address the problem of exclusion or just of inequality. For me, this is just what I may call some close proximity strategies. You need to be very close to them to see what it is, to map it correctly and then see why they are like that. It's very, very important at that level that you have some grassroots organizations.

We have the families on one side, the schools are on one side, but nothing in between, and that's where I see that NGOs can work a lot in interfacing between families and schools, and this way, they can just help address exclusion, inequalities, because I don't think the schools, with the way they are organized, could really have a deep dive in these issues.

Patrick Fine: Yeah, I like that idea of close proximity strategies, especially to address that aspect of [the] SDG education goal around inclusive and equitable quality education.

So, you're leading one of the signature initiatives right now on developing young African leaders, so it's a leadership development program to identify young people with potential to make a difference in their countries. Can you say a little bit about your experience with the Young African Leaders Initiative?

Pape Sow: Yeah. I think it's a very, very important issue, because Africa's development gap can mainly be explained by our leadership gap. So, preparing the next generation of leaders so that they can have not only the character, because yes, it's important, the character

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that they need. We have seen that the lack of integrity, the lack of ethics, the lack of compassion for the people – all these things have just been a huge issue. We have corruption and all these things that have just really threatened the development of our continent. And I'm sure that it's a leadership issue and that we want to have a better quality of leaders. Now identifying them at an early age and trying to raise their awareness about what it means to be a real leader, how can we have the best vision for changes, especially transformational changes.

And then transactional leadership too. We can see how you can work with others. We have many stakeholders, interest groups; how can we just try to make sure that you build consensus; you work effectively with your supporters as with those who are not supporting you – you don't call them your enemies but your adversaries. We are just preparing them, learning the lessons from all the mistakes we have seen in the current generation. We are just trying to expose them to many of these things, having the opportunity to have them learn from many others and many leaders – in Africa, outside of Africa. We hope, this is our assumption, that it could just prepare them for better leadership, understanding that they have to serve their community to have more responsibility.

Patrick Fine:

So Pape, let me ask, when you push the participants in the young leaders program to apply this kind of critical thinking, to look at the weaknesses in leadership in the past and the mistakes that have been made in leadership in the past, what kind of reaction do you get from your participants?

Pape Sow:

They are very passionate about making leadership something more serious. They try to analyze with others how bad leadership's impacting on the situation of Africa, and they have the opportunity to talk to people who led in a very bad way but who just came and told them what was the bad impact of what they did. So, they are really determined just to make the difference as leaders, and then they have the leadership development plan, where they just try to see how they can have growth, and then starting changes and making sure that they will just be different from the leaders that we have known that were not very positive leaders to them.

Patrick Fine:

Let me go back to the basic education system. Over the past decade, there's been this enormous progress in achieving the target of universal primary education. We've seen the total enrollment rate go up close to 100 percent, and the number of children out of school worldwide has dropped by half. There's also been a

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dramatic increase in literacy rates, and many more girls are in school than ever before.

So, as we've made progress in the basic education arena, one of the things I'm interested in is your view about the progress or the demand for secondary education and then for post-secondary education. So, if you look at the trends over the past 30 years, we've focused on basic education, but we still seem by and large to be focusing on basic education. Do you think that's where we should be targeting our efforts, or do you see increased demand for secondary, post-secondary, and higher education?

Pape Sow:

The thing is that if we neglect the other levels of education, it will just impact negatively on basic education. We have to make sure that we organize differently – secondary, post-secondary education – in a way that – I'll give the example of the German system, this Europe[an] system. I mean, you have the possibility of trying to go in-depth in the potentials of all the people going through the basic education and see now how you can have different strengths that could just take into account their potential and then help them to go as far as they want with their potential.

If one could, at that level, try to have the general education as you have in many countries, have just a technical one, and then have a more practical education one, and even see where you do your education. It may not be in a school. So for me, it's just being very innovative at that level. They don't have enough resources to do it, but if you are very innovative in the way we're funding education, going to the right partners, I'm sure that technical education, practical education could just go along with the general education and make sure that whoever wants to move forward could just have the right education that they need.

I agree on the priority of the basic education, but it doesn't mean that the other levels of education should be neglected. You have to see how we can broaden access at that level, but just do it in a different way.

Patrick Fine:

I'm worried that what will happen is we'll get an inclusive approach toward primary education, and in fact we've come close to achieving that now, but that at secondary and higher education, because of the financing or the lack of financing, that's where it will become exclusive, and it will be those who have the means that are able to get access to quality schools, many of which will be private schools, or they may be public schools, but ones that

charge a higher price of admission. And that at the higher levels of the education sector, where people are developing professional skills and real workforce-oriented skills, that the way the system is developing now will just reinforce a lack of inclusivity, it will reinforce inequality. And you mentioned financing at the very start of this conversation as one of the priorities that needs to be addressed. One, do you agree with that analysis that I've articulated, and two, what do you see as strategies for addressing that?

Pape Sow:

I agree that the system the way it is organized is one-size-fits-all, which exclude[s] many people, because we don't try to address the potentials of each child. I think that, for me, I feel that every child can succeed. Now it depends on succeeding in doing what. So, if it's just the mainstream that we have, some are just more talented in that stream, but many others could just succeed in something else.

I take the case of Senegal, where we have the number one artist Youssou N'Dour. He dropped out of school when he was just at 2nd grade primary, so he couldn't compete because he couldn't really perform well, and since it's a very high-stake[s] system. The thing is, how can you organize our education to make sure that every child is coached and supported to achieve his potential? I'm talking about proximity, but diversification is also very important to address. They are failing, yes, they are failing to match the profile with what we have identified as being our mainstream, but they may be good artists, painters, or just good athletes, or they can do some technical things, because we don't try to focus more on their potential, but we have just our own standard, this is what we want; [if] you don't meet the standard, it means that you're out.

Patrick Fine:

Pape, I'm glad you mentioned Youssou N'Dour. What a phenomenal talent he is! And that's a great example that you used of somebody who dropped out of school but then had this wonderful, God-given talent that he developed, and now he's one of the leading artists in the world in his genre.

Pape Sow:

Yes. So that's I think how we can have many other receptacles for our children so that we may just give them more opportunities just to succeed. I think we should be able to organize it so that you know you can have the highest level of knowledge and expertise. So for me, that's the way I see it.

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The system now is not doing that. It's true that what you are saying is true, that's what we have, but I want to maybe change our systems and then make sure that those we call dropouts or just failures we just try to see it differently and see now what are the areas where they have more potential and more talents.

Patrick Fine:

Pape, that's a wonderful concept to end this conversation on. Basing our education development efforts on that belief, that every child can succeed, and that our job as educators is to enable every child to develop their potential.

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your perspective on educational development in sub-Saharan Africa and on the progress we're making toward achieving SDG 4: quality, inclusive education for all.

Pape Sow:

Thank you Patrick.

Patrick Fine:

And thank you to the audience for listening in. I invite you to subscribe to The Deeper Look Podcast on iTunes and SoundCloud and join us for next month's episode.