Forum

Redefining TVET Leadership in Kenya: A Case for Transition from VNR to VLR and the Integration of Indigenous Philosophies

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Abstract

The alignment of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) with industry needs is pivotal for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Kenya. Yet, reliance on global commitment mechanisms, primarily voluntary national reviews (VNRs), has proven insufficient. This forum piece argues for a strategic transition towards voluntary local reviews (VLRs) and incorporating indigenous philosophies, such as *Harambee*, to better align TVET with SDG objectives. This transition is essential for fostering inclusive, equitable learning environments, enhancing workforce preparedness, and facilitating a community-centric educational model that effectively addresses local needs while contributing to global sustainability goals. Additionally, this forum piece underscores the need for institutional social change to resolve contradictions in current policies that hinder educational systems from reaching their goals. Drawing from a comparative study of TVET governance models in Nairobi, Kenya, and Pittsburgh, USA, this forum piece illustrates how different approaches can align TVET systems with localized

educational demands and SDG frameworks, highlighting policy innovation, leadership development, and community engagement as key strategies for redefining TVET leadership.

Keywords: TVET, SDGs, VLR, VNR, Educational Leadership, Indigenous Philosophies

Introduction

In recent years, aligning technical and vocational education and training (TVET) with industry needs has become increasingly recognized as a crucial strategy for achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Kenya, as endorsed by the United Nations in 2015 (UNESCO, 2022). Currently, TVET leadership in Kenya faces several challenges, including a mismatch between the skills provided by educational institutions and the needs of the industry, insufficient engagement with local communities, and reliance on outdated global review mechanisms such as voluntary national reviews (VNRs). These issues highlight the need to redefine TVET leadership to make it more responsive to local demands and global sustainability goals (Matu & Brennan, under review; Matu et al., under review). Drawing from a comparative study by Matu and Brennan (under review) of TVET governance models in Nairobi, Kenya, and Pittsburgh, USA, our research underscores diverse pathways through which TVET systems can adapt and respond to localized educational demands while aligning with the overarching SDG framework. Specifically, Kabete National Polytechnic in Nairobi has embraced competency-based education and training (CBET) as a means to integrate SDG-related skills and knowledge directly into its curriculum (Matu et al., under review). CBET focuses on equipping students with specific competencies essential for the workforce, as opposed to traditional time-based learning models. This method emphasizes learning outcomes directly related to job performance and allows for more personalized learning paths, where students progress at their own pace once they have demonstrated mastery of these competencies (Deißinger & Hellwig, 2005; Jwan, 2022; Tambwe, 2019; TVETA, 2019). Conversely, the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) in Pittsburgh utilizes voluntary local reviews (VLRs) to incorporate SDGs within its educational framework, exemplifying a community-driven model that emphasizes local needs and sustainability education (Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2023).

To address the present situation, it is necessary to shift from VNRs to VLRs and integrate indigenous philosophies, such as *Harambee*, a Swahili term for "all pull together," emphasizes community self-help, solidarity, and collective action. This shift will make TVET more relevant to local needs and contribute to global SDG goals. These contrasting approaches highlight the necessity of contextualizing TVET strategies to effectively align with SDG ambitions. While Kabete's initiative reflects a direct engagement with

competency-based education tailored to local industry needs, CCAC's application of VLRs illustrates a broader, community-focused strategy aimed at integrating SDG principles across educational content and practice. However, reliance on global commitment mechanisms, particularly VNRs, has been shown to be insufficient in fully leveraging TVET's potential to meet these objectives efficiently. Despite their value in fostering global accountability, VNRs often fail to adequately address specific, nuanced needs crucial for meaningful TVET reform and alignment with SDG targets, highlighting a significant gap in the current approach (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014; King, 2017; Matu & Brennan, under review; Merry, 2019). Acknowledging these challenges, it is imperative to confront potential institutional resistance and resource limitations directly. Effective strategies to navigate these barriers might include fostering a culture of continuous learning within institutions and leveraging partnerships for resource mobilization, underscoring the multifaceted nature of educational reform.

We argue that a paradigm shift towards VLRs, augmented by the integration of indigenous leadership models such as *Harambee*, is essential to transform TVET into a potent instrument of social justice and sustainable development. The concept of *Harambee* aligns well with the goals of sustainable development and presents an indigenous framework through which TVET can be reoriented to address local needs while contributing to global SDGs (Matu & Brennan, under review; Pettey, in press; Rothwell, in press; Rothwell et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this shift necessitates a conscious effort to foster institutional social change, highlighted by Rothwell (in press), who underscores the importance of aligning educational reform with organization development principles to enhance TVET institutions' effectiveness. Addressing the contradiction between existing educational agendas and the imperative for SDG-aligned TVET reforms requires an integrated approach that combines policy innovation, leadership development, and community engagement.

In transitioning towards VLRs and embracing indigenous leadership philosophies, Kenya can leverage TVET not only as a tool for skill development and economic advancement but also to achieve broader social justice outcomes. This comprehensive approach promises to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, improve workforce preparedness, and ultimately, contribute to the attainment of the SDGs in a manner that resonates with both local priorities and global standards (Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). While this analysis is deeply rooted in the Kenyan and American contexts, the insights and strategies discussed herein invite consideration of their applicability and

potential impact in diverse global settings, encouraging a broader dialogue on the universal challenges and opportunities in aligning TVET with sustainable and equitable educational practices.

The Limitation of Current Approaches

The prevailing approach to TVET within the framework of VNRs has predominantly centered on skills development and job creation (Jwan, 2022; Njuki, 2018). While these objectives are undeniably vital, this narrow focus, primarily driven by economic imperatives, has inadvertently overshadowed the broader potential of TVET as a catalyst for tackling wider societal challenges, including those related to social justice and equity. The mechanisms of VNRs, integral to the global process of monitoring progress toward the SDGs, have been critiqued for their limited economic scope, which often neglects the multifaceted needs of communities (Matu et al., under review; Vershinina et al., 2018).

Drawing upon the analytical frameworks of Schneider and Ingram (1993), it becomes evident that the formulation and execution of TVET policies are profoundly influenced by the social construction of target populations. When TVET participants are viewed primarily through an economic lens, there is a significant risk that their potential to contribute to broader societal outcomes, such as social equity and justice, is undervalued. This critical oversight accentuates the necessity for a policy design paradigm that acknowledges TVET students and communities not merely as beneficiaries or economic entities but as pivotal stakeholders in societal advancement (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Our study, particularly focused on quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), transitioning to decent work and meaningful jobs (SDG 8), diminishing inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and strengthening partnerships (SDG 17), demonstrates TVET and higher education institutions' capacity to address a broad spectrum of sustainable development challenges directly aligned with these goals, based on the data collected (Matu & Brennan, under review). The reliance on VNRs for tracking SDG progress has shown its inadequacy in capturing the local impacts and community transformations vital for authentic and lasting change (King, 2017; Merry, 2019).

In contrast, the adoption of VLRs by the CCAC in Pittsburgh presents an effective strategy for embedding SDGs within its educational programs. This approach not only showcases the potential for VLRs to facilitate a more community-centric, inclusive educational model but also underscores the broader applicability of such models in capturing local nuances without losing sight of universal SDG commitments. By prioritizing local needs alongside sustainability objectives, VLR illuminates the critical

role of localized strategies, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-driven endeavors in actualizing the SDGs, thereby reinforcing the importance of a tailored approach that respects and leverages local contexts for global objectives (Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2023).

Focusing on curricula that meet local community needs, fostering inclusive education, and promoting values of social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and global citizenship, an integrated TVET system directly supports the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 11, and SDG 17. Such a comprehensive approach can markedly empower marginalized groups, diminish societal disparities, and support sustainable community development (Pettey, in press; Rothwell, in press), aligning with the broader objectives of the SDGs for a more equitable and sustainable world (UN, 2015; UNDESA, 2015; UNGC, 2015).

Rationale for Transition to Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)

The transition from VNRs to VLRs is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of TVET in Kenya. VLRs engage deeply with local contexts, ensuring SDG strategies meet the unique needs of communities (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020; UNDESA, 2021). Kabete National Polytechnic's CBET framework, aligned with the *Harambee* principles, shows how localizing TVET under national guidelines can improve educational outcomes (Matu et al., under review). In Pittsburgh, CCAC's use of VLRs integrate sustainability goals into the curriculum highlights the importance of tailoring educational strategies to local needs (Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2023). VLRs promote inclusivity by focusing on the real-life experiences of communities and fostering local ownership and accountability (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020; UNDESA, 2021). They encourage active stakeholder involvement, leading to better acceptance and legitimacy of SDGs initiatives (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020; UNDESA, 2021). Moreover, VLRs facilitate innovation by identifying and promoting practices suited to local challenges, crucial in the rapidly changing TVET sector (Matu & Brennan, under review; Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2023; Ortiz-Moya et al., 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020; UNDESA, 2021). By adopting VLRs, TVET institutions can align global sustainability goals with local priorities, leveraging indigenous philosophies like *Harambee* to foster community-centric education and leadership. This approach ensures training programs are technically relevant and culturally resonant, supporting broader social justice and sustainable development goals.

Integrating Indigenous Philosophies

Integrating indigenous philosophies into TVET governance and pedagogy presents an invaluable opportunity to align educational outcomes with SDGs, fostering a learning environment that is not only inclusive but deeply rooted in local culture and community values. *Harambee* encapsulates a philosophy of communal effort and solidarity, offering a powerful framework for TVET institutions to promote community-centric approaches to education and leadership (Koshal & Patterson, 2008; Vershinina et al., 2018). This philosophy provides a practical framework for promoting community-centric approaches in education and leadership, thereby facilitating the strategic transition from VNRs, with their broad and often generic mandates, to VLRs that prioritize localized, contextual strategies tailored to the unique needs and aspirations of communities.

The essence of *Harambee* and related indigenous philosophies like *Ubuntu* and *Ujamaa* is captured in Table 1. These philosophies emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a community, underscoring the importance of collective well-being over individual success (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Assié-Lumumba, 2016; Fouéré, 2014; Waitherero, 2023). This ethos is particularly relevant in the context of TVET, where the aim is to equip learners not only with vocational skills but also with a sense of social responsibility and communal engagement.

Table 1. Indigenous Philosophies and their Application in TVET Education

Philosophy	Origin	Key Concept	Relevance to TVET
Harambee	Kenya	*All pull together* - emphasizes community effort and solidarity	Promotes a communal approach to learning, emphasizing teamwork and collective problem-solving skills.
Ubuntu	Southern Africa	*I am because we are* - highlights interconnectedness and mutual caring for all	Encourages a sense of belonging and responsibility towards others, fostering a supportive learning environment.
Ujamaa	Tanzania	*Familyhood or socialism* - centers on cooperative economics and mutual care	Supports the development of cooperative education models and community-based projects, integrating vocational training with social values.

By applying *Harambee* to TVET leadership and governance, we prioritize curricula responsive to the local community's needs, promoting inclusive education, and fostering values of social responsibility and environmental stewardship among learners. This approach ensures training programs impart not only technical skills but also cultivate a deep respect for cultural values and community objectives, serving as a conduit for the exchange of indigenous knowledge and practices.

The principles of *Harambee* advocate for decision-making processes that are inclusive and participatory, reflecting the collective wisdom and aspirations of the entire community (Koshal & Patterson, 2008; Vershinina et al., 2018). This approach challenges TVET institutions to democratize their education management structures, ensuring that training programs are not only technically and vocationally relevant but also culturally resonant and socially meaningful, linking directly to social justice principles that are locally focused.

Aligning TVET with *Harambee* and similar indigenous philosophies amplifies the sector's contribution to a broad spectrum of SDG targets, such as quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), decent meaningful jobs (SDG 8), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and strengthening partnerships (SDG 17) (Matu & Brennan, under review). These philosophies foster a holistic education model that prepares learners to tackle not only vocational challenges but also societal and environmental issues.

The integration of indigenous philosophies into TVET curricula extends the impact of education beyond skill acquisition, fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose (Matu & Brennan, under review). It transforms TVET institutions into catalysts for social cohesion, equality, and sustainable development, resonating with the broader educational mandate to contribute effectively to societal progress.

The case studies of CCAC and Kabete National Polytechnic, as examined in this forum piece, highlight the transformative potential of integrating culturally relevant pedagogies and indigenous philosophies in TVET (Matu & Brennan, under review). CCAC's approach, which incorporates diverse lived experiences and identities in its sustainability education, exemplifies how educational institutions can tailor their curriculum to the cultural context of their students, thereby enhancing inclusivity and equity in TVET.

Furthermore, the integration of *Harambee* and other indigenous philosophies into TVET represents a paradigm shift towards a more localized, inclusive, and equitable education system. It acknowledges the indispensability of cultural values, social cohesion, and community engagement in achieving the SDGs,

particularly within the realm of vocational and technical education (Matu et al., under review). This approach not only aligns with global sustainability objectives but also promises a more culturally attuned and socially responsive future for TVET. However, integrating these values into TVET's broader framework introduces challenges, including aligning traditional community values with contemporary educational mandates. Efforts to scale these practices should include developing adaptable models that respect cultural integrity while ensuring educational relevance and sustainability in a global context.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Developing Policy Frameworks That Reflect Local Needs and Indigenous Values

Policies within TVET institutions must transcend conventional educational paradigms to embrace local and indigenous epistemologies because such an approach is crucial for creating educational programs that are culturally relevant, socially inclusive, and directly responsive to the specific needs of the community. The success stories of CCAC and Kabete National Polytechnic demonstrate the power of policies informed by local realities and indigenous philosophies such as *Harambee* in Kenya, underscoring the necessity for educational strategies that resonate with the cultural and socio-economic context of learners (Matu et al., under review). Such policies should be co-created with input from a broad spectrum of stakeholders, ensuring alignment with the principles of social justice and equity.

Enhancing Leadership Capacities Within TVET Institutions

Effective leadership is pivotal for navigating the complexities of implementing SDGs in TVET settings. Leaders at CCAC have exemplified the role of visionary leadership in integrating sustainability goals into educational practices, showcasing the importance of adaptability and community-oriented leadership models (Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2023). Leadership development programs should thus prioritize the cultivation of skills in participatory governance, stakeholder engagement, and the integration of indigenous and local cultural philosophies into leadership practices. Such an approach not only empowers leaders to champion sustainable development initiatives but also fosters an institutional culture that values diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Fostering Community Partnerships for Sustainable Development

The collaboration between TVET institutions and their surrounding communities is a cornerstone for achieving SDGs. Both CCAC and Kabete National Polytechnic have illustrated the benefits of community partnerships in tailoring curriculum to the cultural context of students, enhancing the educational experience through the integration of lived experiences and identities (Matu & Brennan, under review). These partnerships serve as a conduit for the exchange of indigenous knowledge and practices, enriching the curriculum and facilitating the development of programs that are responsive to the socio-economic and environmental needs of the community.

Implementing Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Ongoing assessment of TVET programs and initiatives is essential for understanding their impact on learners and the broader community. The adoption of VLRs at CCAC provides a framework for local-level review, enabling continuous refinement of programs based on stakeholder feedback and evolving community needs (Matu & Brennan, under review). An effective evaluation framework should encompass both quantitative and qualitative measures, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how indigenous philosophies and sustainability goals are integrated into TVET governance and curriculum. This iterative process ensures that TVET institutions remain aligned with the dynamic landscape of sustainable development and educational equity.

Social Change and Institutional Behavior
Identifying the Barriers to Effective Educational Systems

The landscape of educational systems is often marred by contradictions between institutional policies and the broader goals of national development and societal needs. These discrepancies, arising from misaligned priorities and external pressures, highlight the fragmented nature of educational systems (Pettey, in press; Rothwell, in press; Rothwell et al., 2022). A notable advancement in reconciling these issues has been the adoption of the CBET framework by Kabete National Polytechnic. This move towards CBET represents a critical first step in aligning TVET more closely with local community needs and aspirations.

The Role of VLRs in Addressing Institutional Contradictions

The adoption of VLRs at institutions like the CCAC has showcased significant improvements in tailoring educational programs to local community needs, demonstrating the effectiveness of localized review processes in bridging policy gaps. This approach signifies a crucial argument for the transition from the broad, less localized VNRs to more contextually grounded VLRs. By focusing on local realities and encouraging stakeholder participation, VLRs foster a deeper understanding of educational needs, thus enhancing policy coherence and institutional accountability (Matu et al., under review).

In the case of Kabete National Polytechnic, the implementation of CBET within the VNR-guided framework has subtly moved the needle towards the localized, stakeholder-driven approach embodied by VLRs. This adaptation has enabled Kabete to effectively apply *Harambee* principles, despite being under a national policy framework predominantly aligned with VNRs. It illustrates how localized educational reforms, like CBET, can serve as a foundational step towards the broader adoption of VLRs, aligning educational strategies more closely with local needs and global sustainability goals.

Integrating Indigenous Philosophies for Institutional Change

The integration of indigenous philosophies such as *Harambee* into TVET leadership and governance not only underscores cultural relevance but also promotes educational practices that resonate with local values and societal objectives. Kabete National Polytechnic's embrace of CBET and *Harambee* principles within the VNR framework exemplifies a meaningful stride towards institutional change that honors local contexts. This approach has shown promise in both Nairobi and Pittsburgh, suggesting its potential applicability across diverse educational contexts.

Practical Implications for Education Systems

The shift towards policies that embrace local and indigenous values, supported by leadership development and community partnerships, requires a concerted effort to build institutional capacities for change. The journey from VNR to VLR, as illustrated by the CCAC's adoption of VLRs and Kabete National Polytechnic's implementation of CBET, represents a critical path towards educational systems that are both locally responsive and globally aligned with SDGs. These strategies advocate for continuous learning and the adaptation of educational frameworks to incorporate VLRs and indigenous values effectively (Rothwell et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The transition from VNR to VLR, alongside the integration of indigenous philosophies into the TVET framework, heralds a paradigmatic shift towards a more localized, inclusive, and equitable education system in Kenya. This profound transformation redefines educational success within the scope of global sustainability and local cultural integrity, promising to realign Kenya's TVET system with the SDGs' wider aims, particularly in enhancing quality education (SDG 4), promoting gender equality (SDG 5), transitioning to decent meaningful jobs (SDG 8), diminishing inequalities (SDG 10), and strengthening partnerships (SDG 17) (United Nations, 2015). Incorporating principles of community solidarity, collective effort, and mutual support through philosophies like *Harambee* not only enriches the educational landscape but also encapsulates the essence of sustainable development. Such principles facilitate the creation of resilient and adaptive education systems that are firmly rooted in the cultural and social fabric of Kenyan communities, ensuring the efficacy, sustainability, and equity of educational initiatives (Koshal & Patterson, 2008; Matu et al., under review).

Furthermore, the adoption of VLRs in monitoring and evaluation underscores the capacity of education systems to cater to local needs while engaging with global development narratives. VLRs enable a context-sensitive assessment of progress, guiding institutions to refine their strategies in alignment with community-specific challenges and opportunities (Matu & Brennan, under review; Rothwell, in press; Rothwell et al., 2022).

As Kenya embarks on redefining TVET leadership and governance, it sets a precedent for transforming education in service of sustainable development. This journey, grounded in a nuanced understanding of the interplay between local realities and global imperatives, calls for a steadfast commitment to fostering inclusive, equitable education systems prepared to navigate the complexities of the 21st century (Matu & Brennan, under review; Rothwell, in press; Rothwell et al., 2022). The transition from VNR to VLR, enriched by the integration of indigenous philosophies into TVET, signals a pivotal shift towards a more localized, inclusive, and equitable educational framework in Kenya. This redefinition of educational success, underpinned by Kenya's commitment to both local relevance and global sustainability goals, offers a compelling blueprint for international educational reform. Looking forward, addressing implementation challenges and exploring the scalability of these initiatives in different global settings will be crucial. Such efforts will not only refine these approaches but also illuminate their potential to

foster inclusive, equitable, and culturally resonant educational systems worldwide, preparing learners for the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century.

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