

Educated, yet unprepared: When schooling fails the real world

My baptism into the limits of "formal education" did not happen in a classroom. It happened in a matooke business that collapsed spectacularly in under a month. I had spotted what I thought was a clever hustle: buy matooke (cooking bananas) from rural Uganda and sell them in Kampala, where demand is steady and prices are higher. Simple economics, right? Except for one small detail. I could not reliably tell good cooking matooke from the variety used to make local brew, *embiire*. Farmers quickly noticed my ignorance and, unsurprisingly, sold me the cheaper brewing type. Customers noticed too. Complaints piled up, sales dipped, and the business died a quiet, embarrassing death.

That was my rude awakening. After years of schooling, certificates, and "education," I lacked basic, economically useful knowledge rooted in my own environment. I am not unique. I am a product of the formal education trap.

Across Africa, the education system we inherited was never designed to help Africans thrive within their ecosystems. It was designed to detach them from it. Even more troubling is that more than 50 years after colonialism officially ended, we are still running the same script, often with greater enthusiasm. Traditional African education was not flawless, but it worked. It taught people how to farm, build, trade, govern, heal, and live in balance with their surroundings. Knowledge was local, relevant, and immediately applicable. Children learned which trees made good timber and which rotted quickly; which plants healed and which killed; which foods nourished and which harmed. Culture was not decoration. It was a survival manual.

Colonial formal education disrupted this system deliberately. Its aim was not development but administration. Sons of chiefs and landlords were trained as clerks, interpreters, and junior administrators; useful to the colonial state but detached from productive life. The brightest minds were not taught to improve agriculture, innovate local industries, or strengthen communities. They were trained to obey, record, and replicate foreign systems.

Language became one of the most effective tools in this project. In many African schools, children were punished, sometimes brutally, for speaking their mother tongues. Local languages were labelled backward or useless. The irony is cruel: modern science now tells us that failure to properly learn a language before the age of 19 can permanently limit linguistic mastery. We were punished for speaking the very languages that could have anchored our thinking, creativity, and identity. The result is a formally literate but contextually illiterate elite. Many Africans can quote Shakespeare but cannot explain the agricultural cycles of their home areas. They can debate climate change yet cannot identify indigenous trees that protect watersheds. They can analyse economics but cannot tell good timber from bad or cooking matooke from the one for brewing.

This disconnection goes beyond economics. Social rules and taboos that once protected communities are now casually violated; not always out of rebellion, but out of ignorance. People no longer know why certain practices were forbidden or what balance they preserved. Culture was not lost because Africans rejected it. It was lost because they were trained to forget it.

Nowhere is this failure more visible than in agriculture. Agriculture remains the backbone of most African economies, yet many elite schools barely teach it or treat it as punishment for academic failure. How does a continent survive when its education system despises the activity that feeds it? Each year, thousands of graduates chase office jobs that do not exist while the land, our greatest asset, lies underused or poorly managed.

Formal education today often produces certification without competence, ambition without grounding, and knowledge without context. It trains Africans to fit into systems designed elsewhere rather than to solve problems rooted at home. This is not an argument against learning, literacy, or science. It is an argument against an education model that ignores local realities, devalues indigenous knowledge, and treats culture as an obstacle instead of a foundation. True education should expand choices, not narrow them. It should connect the mind to the land, history, and economy—not sever them.

Until Africa reclaims an education that makes economic, cultural, and ecological sense, we will keep producing graduates who are strangers in their own habitats. And like my matooke business, many grand development plans will keep failing—not for lack of intelligence, but for lack of relevant knowledge.