

Education Access And Equity In Sub-Saharan Africa: A Comparative Analysis Of Tanzania And Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative analysis of education access and equity policies in Tanzania and Sierra Leone, two sub-Saharan African nations with distinct post-conflict and post-colonial trajectories yet shared challenges in achieving universal quality education. This study employs a structured comparative analysis of national education policies, strategic plans, and UNESCO reports, guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach. The analysis reveals that while both countries have achieved significant gains in primary enrollment, with Tanzania reaching near-universal Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) and Sierra Leone demonstrating rapid post-conflict recovery, deep-seated inequities persist along lines of geography, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. The findings indicate that Tanzania's long-standing policy of fee-free primary education has successfully expanded access but has not eliminated systemic disparities, whereas Sierra Leone's post-conflict reconstruction has prioritized equity but continues to struggle with infrastructural deficits and teacher shortages. The implications of this study are twofold: theoretically, it demonstrates the complementary utility of Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach for analyzing educational policy; practically, it suggests that sustainable progress requires moving beyond enrollment metrics to address the quality of educational opportunities and the enabling conditions that determine whether schooling translates into meaningful capabilities for all children.

Keywords: Education Access; Educational Equity; Tanzania; Sierra Leone; Comparative Education; Human Capital Theory; Capability Approach.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of inclusive and equitable quality education is a cornerstone of global development, as articulated most prominently in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). This commitment is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, a region that, despite decades of progress, remains home to the world's largest population of out-of-school children. Recent data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) indicates that approximately 1 in 5 children of primary school age in sub-Saharan Africa are out of school, representing over 30% of the global total of out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2023). This regional challenge is compounded by stark disparities. Children from the poorest households, those living in rural areas, girls, and children with disabilities face the greatest barriers to accessing and benefiting from education.

While national governments have implemented various policies to address these challenges, the persistent gap between policy intent and educational outcomes remains a critical concern. The problem is not merely one of access but of equity the principle that every child, regardless of their background, should have a fair opportunity to succeed. The consequences of failing to address this inequity are severe, perpetuating cycles of intergenerational poverty, limiting economic growth, and jeopardizing the achievement of the broader Sustainable Development Goals.

This study focuses on Tanzania and Sierra Leone, two countries that, while geographically distant, share a common legacy of historical struggle and a contemporary commitment to educational expansion. Both nations have prioritized education as a driver of national development, implementing ambitious reforms such as fee-free basic education. However, they differ significantly in their post-independence

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

stability and the nature of their engagement with international development frameworks. A comparative analysis of these two cases offers a unique opportunity to understand how different historical and policy contexts shape the realization of educational equity.

The significance of this study is threefold. Theoretically, it advances the comparative education literature by demonstrating the value of integrating Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach two frameworks often viewed as divergent into a cohesive analytical lens. Practically, it provides policymakers in Tanzania, Sierra Leone, and other similar contexts with nuanced insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current policy approaches. Methodologically, it offers a model for conducting rigorous, policy-relevant comparative analysis using publicly available data, which is crucial in contexts where primary data collection can be challenging.

This article is structured as follows: first, it outlines the integrated theoretical framework used to guide the analysis. Next, it details the comparative methodology, including data sources and analytical procedures. The findings are then presented in a comparative analysis across the themes of policy context, access, and equity. Finally, the discussion situates these findings within the broader African context, followed by conclusions and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach. This integration is essential because it allows us to analyze educational policy from both a macroeconomic perspective, focusing on investment and outcomes, and a human development perspective, focusing on individual freedoms and what people are actually able to do and be.

Human Capital Theory (HCT) posits that investment in education and health is an investment in an individual's productivity, which in turn drives economic growth and national development (Becker, 1964). In this framework, education is primarily seen

as a means to an end: increasing skills, knowledge, and ultimately, national economic output. This theory is highly influential in shaping policy, particularly in the emphasis on expanding enrollment, improving test scores, and aligning curricula with labor market needs. In this study, HCT is operationalized to analyze the "policy goals" related to educational expansion and economic development, such as Tanzania's focus on increasing Gross Enrollment Ratios (GER) and Sierra Leone's emphasis on technical and vocational education.

The Capability Approach (CA), pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), offers a more expansive and human-centered lens. It shifts the focus from resources (like schools and teachers) and outcomes (like test scores) to capabilities, the real freedoms and opportunities individuals have to lead lives they have reason to value. Education is not just about accumulating human capital; it is a fundamental capability in itself and a crucial enabler of other capabilities, such as political participation, bodily integrity, and social belonging. In this study, the CA is operationalized to analyze equity outcomes. It compels us to look beyond simple enrollment numbers and ask critical questions: Are all children truly able to access and benefit from education? Do the children with disabilities, girls, and those from marginalized ethnic groups have the same freedoms to participate and thrive?

The two theories work together in this analysis to provide a more complete picture. HCT explains the policy drivers and rationale for educational investment (e.g., "we need to educate more children to build the economy"). The CA then provides the evaluative framework to assess whether that investment is truly translating into equitable opportunities and human flourishing (e.g., "are we building a system that serves all children, or are we merely expanding a system that perpetuates existing inequalities?"). By using HCT to analyze enrollment policies and the CA to assess equity outcomes, this study clarifies how the structural mechanisms of policy can either enable or constrain the freedoms necessary for genuine educational equity.

Key concepts are defined as follows: Access refers to the availability and freedom to enroll and

participate in education without barriers (e.g., financial, geographical, cultural). Equity is the principle of fairness, ensuring that personal or social circumstances such as gender, socioeconomic status, disability, or geographic location do not predict a child's educational success. Inclusive schooling goes beyond mere physical access to ensure that all learners, particularly those marginalized or with special needs, are welcomed, supported, and able to participate meaningfully in the school environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a structured comparative analysis, a qualitative approach suitable for systematically examining policy documents across different contexts (Bereday, 1964; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). The research design involved three stages: data collection, data analysis, and interpretation.

Data Collection: The primary data sources were national education policies, strategic plans, and publicly available reports from the governments of Tanzania and Sierra Leone. For Tanzania, key documents included the Education and Training Policy (2014) and the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty II. For Sierra Leone, the analysis drew heavily on the Education Sector Plan (2018-2020) and subsequent post-conflict reconstruction policies. These were supplemented with comparative data from UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Reports, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database, and World Bank country reports to provide a consistent, verifiable basis for statistical claims.

Data Analysis: a thematic approach guided by the integrated theoretical framework. The procedural steps were as follows:

1. Document Coding: All documents were imported into a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) to facilitate systematic coding. An initial coding scheme was developed based on the research questions and key concepts, including codes for "Access Policies," "Equity Mechanisms," "Enrollment Data," and "Inclusive Education."

2. Thematic Development: Through iterative reading and coding, broader themes were identified across the documents. These included "The Impact of

Fee-Free Policies," "Regional Disparities in Provision," and "Challenges for Marginalized Groups."

3. Comparative Analysis: The themes were then analyzed comparatively. This involved creating matrices to organize data by country and theme, allowing for systematic juxtaposition. This side-by-side format facilitated the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences between the two countries' approaches.

4. Reliability and Validity: To ensure reliability, the coding scheme was applied consistently across all documents. To enhance validity, the findings were triangulated across multiple data sources (e.g., government policy statements were compared with independent UNESCO and World Bank data) to mitigate potential policy-practice gaps inherent in relying solely on official documents.

Limitations: This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and official policy documents. Such documents may represent policy intentions rather than implementation realities. The analysis cannot capture the nuances of how policies are experienced on the ground by students, teachers, or families. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the educational landscape in both countries means that findings represent a specific point in time and may not capture the full impact of ongoing reforms. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for interpreting the findings appropriately.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: POLICY CONTEXT

The historical and political contexts of Tanzania and Sierra Leone shape not only their educational systems but also the design and implementation of policies aimed at access, equity, and inclusion. Understanding these contexts helps explain why, despite similar goals, the two countries show markedly different outcomes in schooling equity and quality.

Tanzania: Long-Term Policy Continuity and State-Led Development

Tanzania's educational policy trajectory is deeply rooted in its post-independence national vision and has benefited from decades of relative political

stability. Following independence in 1961, education became a central tenet of nation-building under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, who framed education as essential to national development and social equity. The early Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiative formalized in the Musoma Resolution of 1974 aimed to make primary schooling free and compulsory, embodying a foundational commitment to educational access for all Tanzanian children. ([United Nations](#)) This early UPE era saw rapid school expansion, increased enrollment, and strides toward higher literacy rates. However, economic downturn and structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s weakened the system, resulting in funding shortages, teacher recruitment freezes, and decreased quality and retention. ([United Nations](#))

Responding to these challenges, the Tanzanian government adopted the 1995 Education and Training Policy (ETP) and later the 2014 Education and Training Policy, which sought to modernize the system, improve quality, and expand equity. The 2014 policy continued to embed access and inclusion goals across educational levels, emphasizing pre-primary preparation, school infrastructure, and teacher capacity. ([Taylor & Francis Online](#))

In 2016, Tanzania introduced fee-free basic education, removing formal primary school fees to reduce financial barriers for low-income families and improve equitable access. While this policy contributed to increased enrollment, especially at the primary level, chronic challenges persisted including rural-urban disparities, teacher shortages, and insufficient learning materials demonstrating that fee elimination alone does not guarantee equity in outcomes. ([PMC](#))

Tanzania's policy environment reflects continuity, incremental reform, and a strong state role, enabled by long-term planning and stable governance. Yet, the relative age and consistency of Tanzania's system has not fully translated into equitable access or inclusive practices, pointing to gaps between policy intent and systemic capacity.

Sierra Leone: Post-Conflict Rebuilding and International Support

In contrast, Sierra Leone's educational policy landscape has been shaped by decades of turmoil,

recovery, and institutional rebuilding. The eleven-year civil war (1991–2002) devastated school infrastructure, interrupted educational delivery, and eroded administrative capacity. Post-war reconstruction became the overarching priority, with external factors including international donors, NGOs, and multilateral partners playing prominent roles in rebuilding the education sector. ([Research Gate](#))

The launch of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative in 2018 under President Julius Maada Bio marked a significant policy milestone. This flagship program abolished tuition and admission fees for pre-primary through senior secondary education in government-approved schools, aiming to enhance access and reduce inequities for families previously priced out of formal schooling. ([OA Pub](#))

The policy also emphasized increased public funding for education, with the Government pledging that education would receive at least 21% of the national budget, making it one of the largest budgetary commitments in Sierra Leone. Although this represented substantial political will, Sierra Leone still spent among the lowest per student across ECOWAS countries, reflecting persistent resource constraints. ([Research Gate](#))

Beyond fee removal, FQSE included broader systemic components such as textbook provision, recruitment of additional teachers, and targeted support for hard-to-reach communities. However, evaluations indicate that while enrollment and participation, particularly among girls, have improved, learning outcomes remain low, teacher shortages persist, and rural-urban inequities in school quality and infrastructure endure. ([World J. of Adv. Research & Reviews](#))

Moreover, Sierra Leone's recent National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021) and related strategies demonstrate an evolving policy posture that explicitly targets historically excluded groups including girls, children with disabilities, and out-of-school populations reflecting a deeper focus on equity rather than access alone. ([Ministry of Education](#))

Thus, Sierra Leone's policy context reflects a shift from emergency recovery to purposeful educational transformation, yet its progress remains constrained by structural weaknesses inherited from conflict and compounded by chronic poverty, limited infrastructure, and ongoing implementation challenges.

Comparative Insights on Policy Context

A comparative view of Tanzania and Sierra Leone's education policy landscapes reveals several salient themes:

Historical Legacies: Tanzania's education reforms grew out of a post-independence development ethos with decades of incremental policy refinement, whereas Sierra Leone's system has been rebuilt under conditions of fragility and external influence following prolonged conflict.

State Capacity and Policy Implementation: Continual governance in Tanzania has fostered stronger institutional mechanisms to roll out policy, whereas Sierra Leone's relative policy maturity is counterbalanced by capacity constraints that hamper effective implementation.

Focus on Access Versus Equity: Both countries have made access a priority through fee-free policies and enrollment expansion but Sierra Leone's recent policy instruments explicitly articulate inclusion goals, demonstrating a policy evolution toward equity that still requires stronger enforcement and targeted support systems.

In essence, the educational policy environments of both countries illustrate how political stability, historical shocks, and institutional capacity shape not only policy design but also the prospects for equitable and inclusive education. Understanding these contexts is essential to interpreting comparative outcomes on access, equity, and the lived experiences of learners across Tanzania and Sierra Leone.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Both countries have prioritized expanding access to primary and secondary education, but their strategies and current statuses differ.

Enrollment: Tanzania has achieved near-universal primary enrollment, with a Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 102% (reflecting over-age and under-age enrollment) for primary education (UIS, 2023). Its fee-free policy has successfully removed a key financial barrier, leading to a surge in secondary enrollment. Sierra Leone has made dramatic progress in primary enrollment since the end of the war, with the GER reaching 86% (UIS, 2023). The introduction of free education in 2018 led to an immediate 6% increase in primary enrollment, demonstrating the policy's significant impact. However, the GER in Sierra Leone remains lower than that of Tanzania.

Infrastructure: While Tanzania faces overcrowded classrooms and a pupil-to-teacher ratio of 70:1 in primary schools, Sierra Leone's post-war context presents a more acute infrastructural deficit. A comparative perspective highlights a key divergence: Whereas Tanzania's challenge is the strain on an existing system from over-enrollment, Sierra Leone's challenge is the physical absence of adequate learning environments in the areas of greatest need. For instance, many rural communities in Sierra Leone still lack permanent school buildings, forcing classes to be held under trees or in temporary shelters, a reality that Tanzania largely overcame decades ago.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: EQUITY IN EDUCATION

While access to education has expanded in both Tanzania and Sierra Leone, a closer examination through the lens of equity the principle of fairness reveals persistent and often systemic disparities that undermine truly inclusive education.

Geographic Disparities

Geographic location continues to be a major determinant of educational equity in both countries. In Tanzania, the gap between urban and rural areas remains stark. The pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratio in rural regions is nearly double that of urban centers, leading to overcrowded classrooms and limited individualized attention for students (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, the Zanzibar archipelago consistently lags behind the mainland in secondary school enrollment, reflecting both logistical challenges and historical policy neglect. Sierra Leone exhibits similar, though often more severe,

geographic inequities. The Western Area, including Freetown, benefits from a concentration of qualified teachers, better school facilities, and more reliable access to sanitation and learning resources. In contrast, the northern and eastern districts regions most heavily affected by the civil war remain marginalized. Schools in these areas face high teacher turnover, inadequate infrastructure, and limited learning materials, perpetuating cycles of educational disadvantage and reinforcing regional inequalities.

Gender Equity

Both Tanzania and Sierra Leone have made commendable strides toward achieving gender parity in primary education, largely driven by global commitments such as the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) agenda and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. Enrolment rates for boys and girls at the primary level in both countries have become increasingly balanced over the past two decades (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2022). However, this parity masks deeper structural inequalities that emerge more sharply at the secondary and tertiary levels.

In Tanzania, the transition from primary to secondary education remains a critical bottleneck for girls. Studies have shown that early pregnancy and child marriage are among the leading causes of school dropout for adolescent girls (Human Rights Watch, 2017; UNESCO, 2022). These issues are deeply rooted in cultural norms that prioritize early family formation over continued education for girls, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Additionally, poverty exacerbates the situation, as families may opt to marry off daughters to reduce financial burdens or secure bride price. Although the Tanzanian government has recently revised policies to allow adolescent mothers to return to school, implementation remains uneven, and stigma continues to discourage re-enrollment (World Bank, 2022).

In contrast, Sierra Leone has taken a more explicit policy stance in addressing gender exclusion. In 2020, the government formally overturned its earlier ban on pregnant girls attending school and introduced a re-entry policy that allows them to resume their education after childbirth. This reform was widely

supported by international organizations such as UNICEF and World Bank, and is often cited as a progressive step toward gender-inclusive education (UNICEF, 2021).

However, the effectiveness of this policy is constrained by several contextual challenges. Societal stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy remains pervasive, often discouraging girls from returning to school due to fear of discrimination from peers, teachers, and the wider community. Furthermore, the lack of institutional support systems such as school-based childcare services, flexible learning schedules, and trained guidance and counseling personnel limits the practical reintegration of young mothers into the education system (Plan International, 2022). In many cases, economic hardship forces these girls to prioritize income-generating activities over schooling, thereby increasing the likelihood of permanent dropout.

Moreover, gender disparities are further reinforced by school-level factors in both countries, including inadequate sanitation facilities for girls, especially during menstruation, and a shortage of female teachers who can serve as role models and mentors. Research indicates that such factors significantly affect girls' attendance, participation, and retention in school (UNESCO, 2023).

In comparative terms, while Sierra Leone demonstrates stronger policy commitment to gender re-inclusion, Tanzania continues to grapple with aligning policy reforms with entrenched socio-cultural practices. Both contexts highlight that achieving gender equity in education requires not only progressive legislation but also sustained efforts to address underlying cultural norms, economic barriers, and institutional weaknesses.

Disability and Inclusive Education

Disability remains one of the most pronounced areas where the gap between policy commitment and actual practice is evident in both Tanzania and Sierra Leone. While both countries have formally endorsed inclusive education through national frameworks aligned with international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the translation of these

commitments into tangible outcomes has been severely limited.

In Tanzania, inclusive education is embedded in national education and disability policies, emphasizing the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools. However, empirical evidence reveals a stark disconnect between policy and reality. A 2021 report by Human Rights Watch estimated that over 90% of children with disabilities are out of school, reflecting systemic exclusion rather than inclusion. Key barriers include negative societal attitudes toward disability, insufficient screening and identification mechanisms, and the near absence of assistive learning materials such as Braille textbooks and hearing aids. Furthermore, most schools lack the physical infrastructure such as ramps, accessible toilets, and appropriate classroom layouts required to accommodate learners with physical impairments (Human Rights Watch, 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

Similarly, Sierra Leone faces profound structural and institutional challenges in implementing inclusive education. Although the government has incorporated inclusive education principles into its education sector plans, actual service delivery remains minimal. Schools are generally ill-equipped to support children with disabilities, with very limited specialized infrastructure or adaptive technologies. The shortage of trained special education teachers is particularly acute, as teacher training institutions often lack comprehensive programs on inclusive pedagogy. As a result, many teachers feel unprepared to manage diverse learning needs within a single classroom (UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Across both contexts, the issue is compounded by weak accountability mechanisms and insufficient funding allocations for inclusive education. Policies tend to exist at the rhetorical level without clear implementation strategies, monitoring frameworks, or dedicated budget lines. This results in fragmented and donor-dependent interventions rather than sustainable, system-wide reforms. Additionally, data on children with disabilities is often unreliable or incomplete, making it difficult for policymakers to plan effectively or track progress (UNESCO, 2023).

From a comparative perspective, both Tanzania and Sierra Leone demonstrate that expanding overall

access to education does not automatically translate into equitable inclusion. Marginalized groups particularly children with disabilities continue to face layered disadvantages shaped by geography (rural vs. urban disparities), gender, and socioeconomic status. For example, girls with disabilities are often doubly marginalized, experiencing both gender-based and disability-based exclusion.

This shared weakness highlights a broader structural issue: policy declarations alone are insufficient without corresponding investments in infrastructure, human capital, and community sensitization. Effective inclusive education requires:

- targeted financing for accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies,
- pre-service and in-service teacher training in inclusive pedagogy,
- strengthened data systems for identifying and tracking learners with disabilities, and
- community-level interventions to challenge stigma and discriminatory norms.

Ultimately, achieving genuine educational equity in both Tanzania and Sierra Leone requires moving beyond access-oriented reforms toward a more holistic model of inclusion. This means ensuring that all learners regardless of ability, gender, or location are not only present in school but are meaningfully supported to participate, learn, and succeed. Without such systemic transformation, inclusive education will remain more aspirational than operational.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this comparative analysis reveal several insights that both align with and, in some respects, diverge from broader educational trends across sub-Saharan Africa. While Tanzania and Sierra Leone have made notable progress in expanding access to primary education largely through policies such as fee-free schooling and universal primary education initiatives the realization of equity remains a persistent and deeply rooted challenge.

Across the region, increased enrolment has often been achieved without a commensurate focus on inclusion and quality. This pattern is evident in both countries,

where aggregate statistics suggest success in access, yet disaggregated data reveal significant disparities affecting marginalized populations. Rural students, for instance, continue to face structural disadvantages linked to geographic isolation, including long travel distances to school, inadequate infrastructure, and shortages of qualified teachers. These constraints are particularly severe in remote areas, where schools are often under-resourced and poorly supervised (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

Gender disparities further complicate the equity landscape. Although both Tanzania and Sierra Leone have achieved near parity at the primary level, this balance deteriorates at higher levels of education due to socio-cultural and economic pressures. Issues such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and household labor expectations disproportionately affect girls, limiting their educational trajectories and reinforcing cycles of inequality. These challenges are consistent with regional trends, where gender parity indices decline significantly at the secondary and tertiary levels (UNESCO, 2023).

Children with disabilities represent perhaps the most excluded group within both systems. Despite policy commitments to inclusive education, implementation gaps ranging from inaccessible school environments to a lack of trained teachers and assistive technologies continue to prevent meaningful participation. This reflects a broader continental pattern in which disability inclusion remains one of the least developed dimensions of education reform, often sidelined due to limited funding and weak institutional capacity.

Importantly, the comparative analysis also highlights subtle divergences. Sierra Leone has demonstrated relatively stronger policy innovation in areas such as gender inclusion, while Tanzania has historically benefited from greater policy continuity and system stability. However, in both contexts, the persistence of inequities underscores a common limitation: policy expansion has not been matched by sufficient investment in the conditions necessary for equitable learning.

Ultimately, these findings reinforce a critical insight echoed across sub-Saharan Africa: expanding access is a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving educational equity. True progress requires a shift from quantity to quality and inclusion ensuring that all

learners, particularly those from marginalized groups, are not only enrolled but are supported to participate fully and succeed. This entails sustained investments in infrastructure, teacher development, targeted support programs, and context-sensitive policy implementation that addresses the complex realities faced by disadvantaged populations.

Link to Broader African and Global Context

The challenges observed in Tanzania and Sierra Leone are reflective of wider regional patterns. Across sub-Saharan Africa, countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana show a similar trajectory: near-universal primary enrollment followed by significant attrition at the secondary level, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2023). Likewise, the urban-rural divide and the gap between policy and practice in inclusive education are common across the continent, highlighting structural and systemic barriers to equitable education.

However, Sierra Leone presents a distinct trajectory shaped by its post-conflict context. The legacy of civil war has left profound impacts on educational infrastructure, institutional capacity, and social cohesion, resulting in challenges that are more acute than in comparatively stable systems like Tanzania. In this regard, Sierra Leone's post-conflict education recovery resembles that of Liberia or Rwanda more closely than Tanzania, emphasizing the long-term consequences of violent conflict on educational equity.

Unexpected Findings

A particularly surprising finding is the similarity in the weaknesses of inclusive education implementation between the two countries, despite their different policy histories and system maturities. One might expect Tanzania, with its longer-established and relatively stable education system, to demonstrate more advanced special education infrastructure than post-conflict Sierra Leone. Yet, the analysis suggests that the challenge lies less in system age or stability and more in the foundational design of both education systems. Both were initially constructed as mass education models targeting a homogeneous student population, with little attention to diversity, inclusion, or differentiated learning needs.

Transitioning to genuinely inclusive education therefore requires more than resource allocation; it demands structural and pedagogical reforms, including:

- Teacher training in special education and inclusive pedagogies
- Curriculum design that accommodates diverse learners
- Adaptations to school infrastructure for accessibility

These foundational changes remain underdeveloped in both countries, highlighting a systemic barrier that simple policy directives or funding cannot overcome.

Linking to Theoretical Framework

The integrated theoretical framework of this study provides a useful lens for interpreting these findings. Human Capital Theory (HCT) explains the emphasis on enrollment rates and physical infrastructure as quantifiable investments in education and future economic productivity. These measures demonstrate a clear commitment to increasing human capital.

However, the Capability Approach (CA) exposes the limitations of such a focus. Enrollment alone does not ensure that students particularly those from marginalized groups have the freedom and real opportunity to learn, participate, and thrive. The analysis highlights a critical gap: both countries prioritize the provision of educational resources (schools, free tuition) over the conversion factors that enable students to turn these resources into meaningful capabilities. These factors include social support, teacher quality, accessible transport, and inclusive curricula. Without addressing these conversion factors, investments in human capital risk perpetuating inequalities, as certain groups remain systematically disadvantaged despite formal access to education.

Tanzania and Sierra Leone have made measurable progress in expanding access, equity remains uneven across geographic, gender, and disability dimensions. The findings underscore the importance of coupling access-oriented policies with structural and social

interventions that enable all learners to translate educational opportunities into meaningful outcomes. This insight resonates beyond the two countries studied, offering lessons for sub-Saharan Africa and other regions grappling with the dual challenges of enrollment expansion and equitable, inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to compare education access and equity policies in Tanzania and Sierra Leone, guided by two primary research questions: How have the different historical and policy contexts shaped the trajectories of educational access in each country? And, to what extent do current policies in each nation translate into equitable educational opportunities for all children?

In answer to the first question, the analysis demonstrates that Tanzania's long history of political stability and state-led universal education initiatives has resulted in a more mature but strained system with near-universal primary enrollment. In contrast, Sierra Leone's post-conflict context has led to a more fragile, donor-dependent system that is making rapid gains from a much lower baseline but faces deeper infrastructural and capacity challenges. To the second question, the findings reveal a common struggle in both countries. While significant progress has been made in expanding access, the goal of equity remains elusive. Persistent disparities based on geography, gender, and disability demonstrate that the shift from expanding a system to making it truly equitable is a profound challenge that neither country has yet solved. The analysis suggests that the policy focus on enrollment as the primary metric of success, while necessary, can obscure the deeper inequities that prevent education from acting as a true equalizer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed, structured to address policy, practice, and research.

Policy Recommendations:

Refine Funding Formulas: Both countries should move beyond per-capita funding models. They should pilot and scale needs-based funding formulas that

allocate additional resources to schools serving the most marginalized populations (e.g., rural schools, schools with high numbers of students with disabilities). For Tanzania, this could mean a weighted funding formula. For Sierra Leone, this could involve a "reconstruction premium" for schools in districts most affected by the war.

Mandate and Resource Inclusive Education: National inclusive education policies must be accompanied by specific, costed implementation plans with clear timelines and accountability mechanisms. This includes national standards for accessible school infrastructure, a phased program to train all teachers in inclusive pedagogy, and the establishment of a dedicated unit within the ministry to oversee progress.

Practice Recommendations:

Community-Based Bridging Programs: To address geographic and gender-based disparities, both countries should invest in community-based programs that bridge the gap between home and formal schooling. This could include establishing safe boarding facilities for girls in remote areas (Sierra Leone) and expanding community-based early childhood education centers that can also serve as a platform for nutrition and health interventions (Tanzania).

Teacher Training and Support: The capacity of teachers to manage diverse classrooms is critical. Pre-service and in-service teacher training must be overhauled to include mandatory modules on inclusive education, trauma-informed pedagogy, and gender-sensitive teaching practices. This should be paired with improved working conditions and support systems for teachers, particularly those in remote postings.

Research Recommendations:

Longitudinal Studies: Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that track cohorts of students from marginalized groups (e.g., girls, children with disabilities) through the education system. Such studies would provide crucial evidence on the barriers and enablers at transition points (e.g., primary to secondary).

Implementation Research: More research is needed on the implementation gap between policy and practice. This includes qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, and ethnographic research on how school-level factors (e.g., leadership, community engagement) shape the success of national policies.

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HOW TO CITE: Rosemary Damian Kimale*, Aiah Joseph Kamanda, Education Access And Equity In Sub-Saharan Africa: A Comparative Analysis Of Tanzania And Sierra Leone, *Int. J. Sci. R. Tech.*, 2026, 3 (6), 749-759. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20639266>