

VET and Skills in Africa: A Historical Sociology

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Introduction

In [Chapter 1](#), we highlighted the pressing need for a new approach to vocational education and training (VET) to support wider processes of just socioeconomic and environmental transformation. In embarking on our journey towards discovering a possible new VET imaginary, we take an initial step in this chapter by offering a brief historical overview of skills development in Africa. We start with a short consideration of the powerful and multifaceted colonial legacy that continues to have major influences on current processes of skills formation in Africa. After the colonial era, we track three dominant trends in VET systems and reform. VET 1.0, immediately after independence, was seen as a limited programme of high-quality provision through a mixture of public colleges and apprenticeships in parastatals and large transnational firms that would mirror the skills formation systems of colonial masters; however, it was relatively marginal to real policy priorities. This was followed by what we characterize as VET 2.0, in which, from the late 1960s onwards, there was a focus on pushing vocational content into secondary schooling, supporting rural community skills programmes and again attempting to build apprenticeship systems. Economic crisis and structural adjustment hit VET along with every other aspect of African economies, leading to what we characterize as VET 3.0: an approach to supporting public VET by emphasizing its failings and offering a ‘fix’ through a new ‘tool kit’ focused on targets, quality assurance regimes and outcomes-based funding, reflected in governance reforms, competency-based curricula and national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). The combination of the strong presence of the colonial legacy and these three

moments of VET reform has led to the current state of VET on the continent as weak, fragmented and littered with haphazard projects and reforms.

In our imaginings of possible better VET futures, therefore, we need to be aware of both the power of path dependence and the real possibilities for transformational change of both vocational education systems and wider society. Thus, our detailed historical reading of African contexts is intended not to limit our story to those contexts but to make a theoretical and methodological point about the necessity of doing such historical work in thinking about the transformation of any national VET system.

A brief history of VET in Africa

Precolonial skills development

It is impossible to recreate an accurate picture of what precolonial skills development looked like from the fragmentary sources and the existing literature. The latter is largely a literature of education history and philosophy that tends towards an Afro-utopianist nostalgia in which there was a static and golden African communal past, destroyed by colonialism. Nonetheless, what we can see from such a literature is a strong set of claims about the holistic, relational and community-based nature of African traditional education (for instance, [Fanfunwa, 1974](#); [Adeyemi and Adeyinka, 2003](#); [Omolewa, 2007](#)). This may be rather oversimplified and too gender-blind – see for example critiques by feminist writers that point out that this has been largely constructed as a masculinist idyll (for instance, [Fynn-Bruey, 2021](#)). But it does offer a positive vision of what African education might have looked like at its best, and something that we would want to draw on in thinking about a contemporary relational account that is more consciously gender sensitive.

Strikingly, such accounts include a claim that vocational learnings and attitudes were at the heart of the vision, which saw learning, living and working as inextricably connected. For instance, writing in the early 1970s, [Ocitti \(1973\)](#) argues that Acholi education saw vocational knowledge in a broad way, such that learning to construct a house meant also learning about physical geography (for instance, climate and water availability); geology; human geography (location of and relations with other communities); and building materials, their sourcing and sustainability. This has resonance for our development of a political–economy–ecology approach in [Chapter 3](#).

Traditional apprenticeship is widely seen as a central part of historical African education. There is a large literature on this, or at least on its postcolonial form in West Africa and some less-established variants in other regions (for instance, [Callaway, 1964](#); [Hart, 1973](#); [King, 1977](#); [Lave, 1977](#); [McLaughlin, 1979](#); [Fluitman, 1989](#)). However, we need to be cautious about the inclusivity of either colonial or modern forms. In much of Africa,

they have been relatively small in scale and scarcely better at reaching the mass of youth than more formal modes of vocational learning. Moreover, although it is often seen as a space for learning opportunities of those with limited formal education, we need to remember that educational levels are actually quite varied ([Alla-Mensah, 2021](#)), and that it is also a site of exclusion on grounds of gender, ethnicity, disability and so on. While there are sites of excellent practice, there are also cases where very little learning goes on, and, more seriously, arrangements that are little more than indentured labour.

We will return to these debates in [Chapter 5](#) and highlight new dynamics in informal sector learning. While, inevitably, much precolonial learning would necessarily have been functional, there is a danger of overstressing the extrafamilial elements of this as widespread or overemphasizing its continuities with more modern African forms of apprenticeship, which are unevenly spread across the continent.

From a vocational education perspective, it is important to consider this issue from a labour market angle as well as an education one. The African economic historiography debate provides us with good insights into what African work looked like before colonialism. This literature is well summarized by [Austin \(2008a and b; 2015\)](#). As he notes, the economic debate on the colonization of Africa has tended towards two political poles: one that celebrates colonialism and one that condemns it. Behind both lurk contrasting accounts of what the precolonial economy was like. In the classic colonial account, recreated by modern apologists for empire (for instance, [Ferguson, 2003](#)), colonialism saved Africans from ignorance and brought them ‘Christianity, commerce and civilization.’ In this account, African economies were stagnant in the precolonial era. In the counternarrative, typically from dependency theory accounts (most famously, [Rodney, 1972](#)) but more recently from institutional economics ([Acemogulu et al, 2001, 2002](#); [Acemogulu and Johnson, 2010](#)), comes an argument that colonialism and the slave trade derailed African economic development (see also [Allais, 2020b](#) who explicitly links this to skills formation).

Austin adds nuance to this literature by looking in more depth into African factor endowments over time. He argues that the precolonial African norm was for small polities in which there were relatively low population densities. Land was more abundant than labour, and the usual practice was to farm extensively in the rainy season and to practise handicrafts, and some mining and quarrying where available, in the dry season. Farming was also constrained across much of the continent by endemic diseases that limited the use of draught animals. Moreover, the proportions of unfree labour appear to have been very high in some regions, at least at the start of the colonial era ([Austin, 2008a and b](#)).

There were exceptions to this general model in larger urban settlements, where the specialization of the traditional apprenticeship model was more developed, and in areas, such as the East African highlands, where combinations of highly fertile soils and large lakes encouraged more intensive agriculture. In this account, Africa was not mired in poverty but generally did not have major drivers for rapid industrial economic development. Much work was household, communal and subsistence-based, and seasonal, with some specialization.

Colonial experiences

In what follows, we will mainly reflect on the Anglophone literature on British colonies, reflecting both our case studies and our own grounding in that literature more than others. In summarizing this experience, it is important to note that while Britain had an overall attitude towards colonial development and the place of skills formation within that, this was neither static over time nor always consistently implemented across specific colonies. We must also note that all colonies were not the same. They varied according to resources (whether there were minerals or potential for large-scale agricultural exports) and climate (most notably related to the possibility of White settler populations being sustained). Settler colonies were possible in the highlands of Kenya and Zimbabwe, in South Africa and, under South African ‘protection’ from 1920, in Namibia. The British colonial approach is often characterized as extractive. While this is clearly true, [Austin \(2015\)](#) reminds us that there was a general realization that some investment in the colonies was needed to sustain this, and that colonial lobbies could be successful at times in convincing metropolitan governments to release funds.

Education under colonialism was typified by a focus on a small, elite system, often for the sons of chiefs. Some of this was in state schools, but much of the provision was through Christian missions, which also offered a more widespread elementary education in which literacy and religious instruction loomed large. Functionally, as well as supporting the development of faith communities, this system produced workers for colonial service. Most of the limited vocational education provided was initially linked to the practical needs of missions ([McGrath, 2018](#)). This legacy is still very apparent in Uganda, as we shall see later in this book.

The interwar years saw a major debate about the appropriateness of British imperial education in Africa. Drawing on their experience with education of African Americans after the civil war, several American philanthropic organizations started a movement to ‘adapt’ colonial education to the ‘needs’ of African populations ([King, 1971](#); [McGrath, 2018](#); [Kallaway, 2020](#)). At the heart of this was the Phelps Stokes Fund, which commissioned two hugely influential reports ([Phelps Stokes Fund, 1922](#) and [1925](#)) based on

visits to several African countries to explore what might be an appropriate African education. Following in Phelps Stokes' wake, the Jeanes Foundation, which had been training African American teachers in institutions such as the famous Tuskegee, established a series of schools in Africa based on the principle of 'industrial education' (King, 1971). This approach also gained some support in certain colonies. Though now elite academic institutions, Achimota School in Ghana and Makerere University in Uganda both had their origins in vocational institutions opened at this time.

In a 1926 book, *The Essentials of Education*, the secretary of the two Phelps Stokes Commissions, Thomas Jesse Jones, developed the adapted education philosophy most clearly (Jones, 1926). He argued that what Africans needed was an education 'adapted to community conditions' that focused on learning to meet the 'four simples' of what he considered to be ideal African community life:

1. health and sanitation;
2. appreciation and use of the environment, including subsistence agriculture and rural handicrafts;
3. the household and the home, including learning about appropriate house construction and the avoidance of copying Western dress; and
4. recreation, learning healthy and morally upright games and avoiding alcohol and licentiousness.

While there is much in these four areas that progressive educators could find worthwhile in contemporary conditions where issues of health, sanitation and environmental degradation are global challenges, the imposition of such an education by White outsiders (who often also were explicitly racist in their wider pronouncements, see McGrath, 2018), and its clear separation off from elite education, led this approach to be condemned by most African and African American commentators. This meant that adapted education was widely resisted (King, 1971). With the height of the independence movements in the mid-1950s, the overwhelming call was for the expansion of academic education in the interests of new postcolonial state formation objectives, a legacy that still leaves an imprint today (McGrath, 2018).

The formal African labour market under colonialism had a strong emphasis on an extractive economy, whether in mining or agriculture, and on employment by the colonial state. However, though substantial in some colonies, these were not economies for the majority of Africans, and most people were still largely engaged in subsistence agriculture, supplemented by seasonal off-farm activities. It is also worth noting that where African agriculture did start competing with White agriculture, then the state was used successfully to undermine African production (Austin, 2015).

Moreover, where local populations sought to produce crops suited to the environment and local cultural practices, this was often undermined by colonial requirements to grow cash crops for export (Bjornlund et al, 2020), a tension we will return to in Chapter 3. Relatively small numbers specialized in traditional crafts in urban settlements in continuity with the precolonial period. In settler economies, local blacksmithing was undermined by the importation of mass-produced goods.

Thus, at the heart of the colonial education–work nexus was a strong dynamic that education for public employment was the most attractive route, with there being relatively few artisan or technician opportunities in the small formal sectors, and little scope to become a successful commercial farmer. This set up many long-lasting problems with the relationship between learning, living and working, including a powerful positional sense of the importance of academic education over vocational (Zeelen et al, 2010; Allais, 2020a and b). Most African economies still have public sector employment as a considerable component of formal employment. This continued labour market context makes it very hard to change these perspectives through education.

Only in South Africa did a formal vocational system of any size develop, but its evolution was complicated by the complexities of racialized politics under both colonialism and apartheid. The ‘poor White problem’ of the early 20th century, where many Afrikaner men struggled to find an urban labour market niche between Black and British immigrant labour, was a major driver of the 1922 Apprenticeship Act (McGrath, 1996) and the subsequent growth of apprenticeships, particularly in parastatals, such as those now operating in eThekweni. However, Gamble (2021) shows how this was undermined by attitudes towards working-class schooling that made few suitably prepared for formal VET, mirroring a fundamental weakness of the British system.

Significant elements of these colonial economic and skills formation systems appear to still be exerting influence on educational, and specifically vocational, discourses and imaginaries today, as will become clear in subsequent chapters. This longstanding legacy – both structural and cultural – and related resistances to change are important considerations to return to as we seek to offer a new imaginary.

African VET since independence

Since independence, formal African VET has gone through three main phases, broadly reflecting wider developmental orthodoxies of modernization, basic needs and neoliberalism (see McGrath, 2018). Of course, such a presentation is necessarily highly stylized and tends to underplay local resistance and adaptation and the continuation and development of nonformal and

informal alternatives, an important theme of later chapters. It also ignores the overlapping nature of these three phases.

VET Africa 1.0

Our first phase begins around the point of transition to independence in the late 1950s and 1960s. As was noted earlier, there was a strong societal sense across Africa of the positional value of academic education that independence movements, already often dominated by professionals, were quick to embrace. In several countries, this led to the rapid expansion of schooling, although some, such as Malawi and Tanzania, were reluctant to increase secondary-level provision. At the same time, the new economics of education stressed the importance of higher education, as part of a wider vision of rapid African industrialization and nation-building. Thus, the UNESCO Addis Ababa conference of 1961 resulted in a commitment to six years of universal, compulsory and free primary education by 1980, while the next year the Tananarive conference on higher education projected a manpower-related need to expand tertiary education ninefold in Africa in the next 15 to 20 years (McGrath, 2018).

VET received far less attention as it was not seen as important politically in comparison to schools or universities. Nonetheless, there was some understanding from experts and politicians that industrialization would require the localization of middle as well as high skills capacity through investment in public VET. Thus, immediately after independence, formal VET was seen as a limited programme of high-quality provision through a mixture of public colleges and apprenticeships in parastatals and large transnational firms that would mirror the skills formation systems of colonial masters (though Spanish and Portuguese investments were more muted than British and, especially, French).

However, the initial optimism about nation and economy building was short-lived in the face of the challenges to Africa in integrating itself into still largely northern-dominated political and economic systems. VET responses to this challenge were to coalesce into a second phase of interventions.

VET Africa 2.0

The expansion of the supply of school leavers at primary, junior secondary and senior secondary levels, and of university graduates, grew far faster than demand for related levels of skilled workers in the formal, private sector, while expansion of the public sector increasingly came under pressure due to a limited tax base. Insufficient support to small-scale farming led to increased rural–urban migration. Despite the economic development theory of the day's assumptions, these new migrants were not quickly absorbed

into the formal economy, which grew more slowly than expected. By the late 1960s, therefore, there were growing concerns about the problem of ‘educated unemployment’ and youth migration to the cities. This led to a raft of reports and projects designed to keep rural youth in the village through teaching them a trade. Key initiatives here included the 1967 report from the National Christian Council of Kenya, which spawned the village (later, youth) polytechnics, and the work of South African exile in Botswana, Patrick van Rensburg, which generated the Botswana brigades and an adaptation of a socialist approach to ‘education with production’ (NCCCK, 1967; Van Rensburg, 1974). This mirrored a wider development shift towards a basic needs approach focusing on rural poverty and lack of access to basic health and education (Nyerere, 1979). In education, this favoured rural nonformal education, stressing community-based development and adult skills over further school expansion (Sheffield and Diejomaoh, 1972; Coombs and Ahmed, 1974). There was liberatory intent in this movement, and it is worth noting that Julius Nyerere had meetings with Paulo Freire, while the socialist orientation of ‘education with production’ has already been noted.

In the vocational space, this was complemented by the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) ‘discovery of the informal sector’ in the early 1970s (see ILO, 1976). This overturned the view that informal activities in the growing southern cities were simply transitory and reawakened interest in anthropological literature about traditional African forms of apprenticeship. Authors such as Lave (1977) and King (1977) began to map the complex world that existed in many African towns through which communities of African artisans learnt and flourished, something we revisit in Chapter 5 in particular. The ILO commissioned a range of projects designed to build both rural- and urban-appropriate skills, as did several donors and NGOs such as those from the emerging ‘appropriate technology’ movement. At the same time, many donors pushed for the insertion of vocational subjects, and sometimes streams, into regular secondary schooling (see Lauglo and Lillis, 1988, for a critical review).

While the public institutions of the earlier phase continued and expanded in scale if not in their relationships to the labour market, this new focus on pushing more vocational content into secondary schooling, supporting rural community skills programmes and supplementing urban traditional apprenticeship formed the core of VET Africa 2.0. It reflected a radically different vision: more massified, more attuned to existing community structures and cultural traditions, and less designed for a relatively high-status future labour aristocracy and more for ‘dropouts’ (Kallaway, 2001). Clearly, this was a complex shift in VET’s perceived status that had positive elements but also served to reinforce the view that academic education is of higher status.

Though VET was never the core of educational planning in the 1960s and 1970s, we have shown that there was a place for it on the policy agenda. Indeed, the moves of VET Africa 2.0 can be seen on one level as an attempt to use VET to solve problems in the school–economy relationship (Allais, 2020b). However, the 1980s and 1990s were to see VET’s status as a policy tool eroded. Strikingly, the intellectual origins for this lie in part in work done at the very beginning of the wave of African independence in Ghana. Although his seminal book chapter was published only in 1965, it was from his doctoral research in Ghana in the late 1950s that Phillip Foster developed what became the famous ‘vocational school fallacy in development planning’ thesis (Foster, 1965). He argued that current African labour markets rewarded general, not vocational education. However, it was not until the 1980s that this argument was combined with rate of return analysis within the World Bank to argue that vocational (and higher) education was a worse investment than primary schooling (Psacharopoulos, 1981, 1985). By 1990, the Bank was prioritizing primary education, a trend reinforced by Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals (McGrath, 2018). African governments were less convinced by this argument, believing that expanding schooling would reopen the educated unemployment issue. However, faced with structural adjustment and the spread of the Bank’s position to several donors (notably, not as strongly to the Germanic donors who came from the best-regarded VET tradition), African governments found it hard to maintain investment in VET. Public VET’s growing complexity also did not help good system-wide responses. A range of programmes now existed that theoretically targeted different niches of educational attainment and likely labour market destination but that were typically weak in terms of quality and attractiveness.

VET Africa 3.0

In reality, even the World Bank continued lending to VET projects to some extent, largely because this is what their clients wanted as African governments still sought to respond to youth unemployment through VET. Thus, the ideology of the Bank’s research needed to bend to the realities of its lending. This resulted in what we are calling VET Africa 3.0. By the late 1990s, the Bank had developed a new intellectual justification for its involvement in VET (Johanson and Adams, 2004) that reflected both a wider development pivoting towards stressing governance and policy reform and the rise of new public management-inspired vocational system reforms in a number of ‘Old Commonwealth’ countries. VET Africa 3.0 can be characterized as an approach to supporting public VET that highlighted its failings before offering new policy conditionalities for continued support that drew from the wider neoliberal approach of the Washington Consensus.

In VET-specific terms, this was centred on a new ‘tool kit’ that included new governance structures apparently giving institutions more autonomy but actually controlling them far more tightly through a new set of approaches. These included much clearer targets, quality assurance regimes and outcomes-based funding, which privileged the voices of the business community at local, sectoral and national levels, reflected in governance reforms; and competency-based curricula and NQFs, extended in some cases to the informal sector, though with unsurprisingly limited effects (McGrath and Lugg, 2012; Allais, 2014).

VET Africa 3.0 offered an education solution to an economic problem but has been undermined by the nature of that problem, which is not easily amenable to such an educational response. VET Africa 3.0 began in the aftermath of structural adjustment, which seriously undermined the development of African manufacturing (Allais, 2020b). Although economic growth did improve around the turn of the millennium, this was largely not driven by industrial growth, further undermining the VET Africa 3.0 strategy.

The state of contemporary African VET

Presently, VET in Africa can best be described as fragmented and under ‘immense institutional stress’ (Kraak, 2016). Public VET systems exist in all countries that hark back to the intentions of VET Africa 1.0. There are pockets of excellence within these, particularly where historical relationships with industry have proved robust. The system, if such a term is accurate, is a palimpsest of various interventions, often initially donor funded. This includes attempts to move up the skills hierarchy into technologist education through institutions such as polytechnics and institutes of technology. In South Africa, for instance, elements of the college system have been carved off and integrated into the higher education system. To give one example, the current Tshwane University of Technology has its origins in Pretoria College (a state technical college), where it was initially housed on one side of the main quadrangle. However, many African polytechnics were upgraded for political reasons and were never either adequately resourced or linked to strong sectors requiring technologists in significant numbers (King and McGrath, 2002).

As well as this upward trajectory for vocational education, there has also been a downward move in some cases into both vocational senior secondary schools and increased vocational offerings in general schools, as reflected in aspects of the VET Africa 2.0 story. However, much of formal, public VET consists of a middle ground of postschool generalist provision that has grown significantly but typically lacks the strong industry linkages of the VET Africa 1.0 model. Rather, it reflects a response of taking those focused

institutions and trying to use them to deal with the VET Africa 2.0 problem of mass youth unemployment (Allais, 2020b; Allais et al, 2022). We shall come back to the problems this creates later in the chapter.

On top of this is the further complexity of schools and colleges under other ministerial jurisdictions, such as agricultural, hospitality and nursing colleges, the former being of most relevance to our story in subsequent chapters through the Alice case. Ministries of Labour typically also have trade testing centres for practical assessment, and some training facilities.

At the most formalized end of the spectrum, South Africa has a series of sector education and training authorities underpinned by a levy-grant system. Over time, different countries have followed different routes regarding integration of some or all of these elements into the public VET system.

At the more community-focused end, other initiatives have included the Kenyan youth polytechnics (the successors to the village polytechnics set up after the National Christian Council of Kenya report); Ghana's intermediate technology training units, designed as a way of upskilling the informal sector; and Namibia's community skills development centres, envisaged as nonformal institutions open to those with lesser academic qualifications than required for public VET entry. Other examples such as Botswana's brigades and Tanzania's folk development colleges have survived on the margins of the formal system with which they poorly articulate and that is often hostile to their existence (Rogers, 2019). In later chapters, we will also explore aspects of vocational learning that sit outside even this expanded view of VET.

As we noted earlier in the chapter, churches remain important actors too, both as deliverers of formal – and often highly regarded – programmes and of shorter courses. Additionally, there are a range of NGO, and some donor, initiatives that typically focus on short courses and privilege practical skills over wider vocational knowledge.

As conventionally understood, private-for-profit vocational education and training tends to concentrate in areas of low cost and high demand. This leads it to agglomerate in urban centres and in occupational areas such as business and information technology. In the latter, its willingness to offer international industry-recognized qualifications, rather than national qualifications, gives it an attractive niche among middle-class clientele. The huge importance of such international qualifications for transnational employers too will be an important theme for us in Chapters 6 and 7. However, we also will revisit earlier accounts (for instance, King, 1977) that find pockets of small businesses that have transitioned from supplementing their activities with some training offerings to becoming primarily or solely training providers. While the profit motive is important here, there is also a discourse of community development and concerns about overreliance on international funding, as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6.

Forms of vocational learning of varying degrees of formality take place across the range of enterprises. Some large employers have their own training institutions while others partner with public institutions in classical apprenticeship models of day or block release. At the other end of scale, traditional apprenticeship remains a large-scale route for vocational learning and labour market integration, especially in West Africa, and some other small businesses offer short course training, as noted in the previous paragraph. Finally, if we see work ‘broadly to be an activity which seeks to sustain an individual or society’ (Moodie et al, 2019: 23) and VET as preparation for this broader notion of work, then it is apparent that there is a far larger world of informal vocational learning than is encompassed by a notion that public VET is the totality. This will form an important part of our story from Chapter 5 onwards.

While there are pockets of excellence in these complex and complicated systems, the overall picture is of weakness (Allais and Wedekind, 2020). Allais (2020b) argues that there are three interrelated factors outside VET that undermine it across Africa. First, the slow pace and limited spread of industrialization means that there are few formal sector jobs and large numbers of people engaged in survivalist activities. Second, this means that formal VET has almost nowhere to send its graduates. Third, the massive growth in secondary education has resulted in massified poor-quality education. This cannot adequately prepare learners for VET and formal employment but encourages many learners to stay on in academic education in the hope that this can lead to the tiny number of professional jobs available (Zeelen et al, 2010; Allais, 2020a and b). Across Africa, the lure of professional jobs has also led to massive expansions of public higher education and a rapid rise of private provision. Several countries experienced tenfold growth in higher education enrolments during the 2010s. This serves to further reinforce the message that academic education is the way to ‘real’ jobs, even though very many graduates struggle to access them. Here, the colonial legacy discussed earlier appears particularly resilient.

Moreover, African public VET systems have been undermined by two policy imperatives that are in contradiction. First, donors have encouraged African governments to reform their public VET systems using the new public management VET tool kit, referred to earlier as core to VET Africa 3.0. As Allais and Wedekind (2020: 328) note, this reform agenda has not worked well even in the countries selling these ideas: ‘Governments in wealthy liberal market economies have been trying to “fix” TVET for decades, without paying attention to the structure of the labour market, the way in which demand for skills is articulated, and the role that workplaces need to play in supporting the development of skills.’

These problems are even more acute in Africa, where such policy fixes have been largely externally driven and poorly grounded in local

coalitions for change or local economic realities. Moreover, the smallness of formal, private sector employment and weakness of economies noted earlier also undermine VET reform. As [Allais and Wedekind \(2020: 328\)](#) remark: ‘Stagnant economies and deindustrialisation, with some exceptions, make it increasingly difficult to build TVET systems.’ Now more than 25 years since these reforms began to be implemented, there is very little evidence of their success ([Allais, 2022](#)). Yet governments and donors remain committed to them and, indeed, continue to roll out elements of the programme, sometimes apparently oblivious to having done so previously ([Allais, 2014](#)).

One part of the problem these reforms are trying to solve is that vocational provision within the education system is disconnected from industry. What has emerged are new structures at national, sectoral and institutional level that are designed to bring industry and education together ([Allais, 2022](#)). However, these reforms misrecognize the problem of limited relationality within VET systems as simply being about the lack of formal structures. In contrast, as we argued in [Chapter 1](#), relationality is complex, and the formal structures that are imposed often ignore underlying economic and social structures. Crucially, we need to move away from formally enacting new relationships between employers and educational institutions to ask questions about how such relationships come into existence, are nurtured and risk collapse, and what VET can do if these are not the primary relations in a local economy structure or system. Moreover, although the sectoral level has received some attention under VET 3.0 reforms, this level of structural change has been less developed than the micro or macro levels. At the heart of our analysis in later chapters is a multilevel perspective, and the importance of both sector and place.

Second, alongside this externally driven VET reform agenda, internal political considerations have led to public VET being ever more dominated by an education logic in which expansion of supply matters far more than demand, and in which ‘demand’ is also potentially inadequately constructed for the context ([Allais, 2020b](#)). This results in the messages of the governance move being swamped by messages from ministries to grow rapidly, which have more to do with political calculations than industry needs. While public providers grow and proliferate, the key institutions of the vocational system do not significantly strengthen ([McGrath et al, 2006](#); [Kraak, 2016](#)).

This picture of the formal, public VET system finds parallels in other elements of the VET system. Part of the public policy response was to revisit attempts to vocationalize secondary education (see [Mastercard Foundation, 2020](#)) even though these had been judged a failure in the VET 2.0 era ([Lauglo and Lillis, 1988](#); [Lauglo and Maclean, 2005](#); [Oketch, 2014](#)). Many of these revived vocational secondary schemes have been abandoned again, while some limp on and new ones are developed by officials still focused on the reasons for introducing them 50 years ago rather than the negative lessons of the intervening half-century.

While there is considerable excellence in enterprise-based training in many African medium to large firms (such as those in the eThekweni case), this is uneven, and its impact constrained by the very limited number of such firms. State interventions here are limited by weaknesses in intermediary bodies and by the very limited financial leverage provided by levy-grant schemes in such settings (Ziderman, 2016; Allais, 2022). Since the era of VET Africa 2.0, attempts to intervene in the informal sector skills formation system have been recurrent. Yet, as Palmer's (2020) review for the ILO notes, there is little to show for this in terms of sustainable change. At the heart of the problem here is an incommensurability between the lifeworlds of the donor-driven interventions and that of informal sector actors. Equally, agricultural colleges have largely failed to address the realities of both small-scale agriculture and the emerging agroecology/organic sector, even though Africa has more than 200 million smallholder farmers who are the mainstay food producers for African societies and communities, an issue that we will come back to later in this book.

Towards a VET Africa 4.0

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, this account indicates that there is as yet an inadequate response to its historicity and to its current contextually emerging demands. We argue that what is required is a radically different theoretical approach and political imaginary that is grounded in both the lived experiences and material conditions of those learning vocationally, and genuine labour market and livelihood possibilities that reflect the desperate need for just transitions and inclusive sustainable development, as discussed in the next chapter (see also McGrath, 2020a; Rosenberg et al, 2020). It also requires a far greater sense of the agency of individuals and the possibilities of collective aspirations and actions while remaining aware of structural injustices and power imbalances. It sees both vocational learning and work in broad terms, avoiding narrowing the relationship to a consideration of public VET for formal sector employment.

We have grounded this historical sociological analysis and subsequent field-based empirical work in four African cases from two African countries. However, our critique is intended to be of wider relevance. Though context is always crucially important, the problems with which this book is concerned are global ones, manifested nationally and locally. It is not just in these two countries that VET faces a crisis of relevance. Many other systems experience many of the problems caused by the wider neoliberal turn and its application to the sector. What we have described as VET Africa 3.0 was largely experienced in much of the rest of the world as part of a set of policies that travelled through aid and other transmission mechanisms from origins in Australia and England (see, for instance, McGrath, 2010). Even

continental European systems have not been immune, particularly with respect to qualifications frameworks. Yet, their commitment to relationality and to balancing social and economic concerns remains an important pointer as we think about new African alternatives.

Moreover, mainstream VET, wherever and however constituted, is a child of the Anthropocene. It emerged from the process of industrialization and a realization that initial, though huge, productivity advances could not be sustained without greater attention to formalizing skills development in the industrial sector. In Europe, this led to a reforming of older guild-based apprenticeship models and the rise of forms of dual learning between formal workplace and formal, public training institutions to service factory lines and mines. This linked VET inextricably to highly carbonized sectors such as mining, metals and motors. As formal VET has spread globally, it has remained complicit in unsustainable practices that are embedded in this history. More than a decade ago, Anderson offered a critique of VET as productivist or ‘based on a restricted and instrumental view of lifeworlds which reduces people and the environment to the status of human and natural resources for economic exploitation’ (Anderson, 2009: 44). However, this critique has largely gone ignored in the VET literature. We want to follow Anderson in insisting that VET *globally* is unfit to address the challenges of a world of work. VET must address sustainability and just transitions if societies are to tackle the complexities of capitalism, which continues to exploit people and planet in ways that are destabilizing the very earth system processes (such as the stability of the climate system) that are the foundation of human existence. What we situate here in African empirical cases is not simply an issue for Africa.

Conclusion

In [Chapter 1](#), we began by mapping out our account of VET, empirically grounded in four African case studies but speaking to global theoretical issues. At the heart of this is a need to develop further a critique of the VET orthodoxy. In this chapter, we have contributed a historical sociological account that summarizes research in the political economy of skills tradition and insists on the historical depth of the issues under examination. However, as we made clear in [Chapter 1](#), we need to move beyond current understandings and historical contexts to imagine a better future for learning, working and living. In [Chapter 3](#), we address this through a political–economy–ecology perspective that helps us focus both on some of the reasons that underlie the critique that we have presented in this chapter and on alternative conceptualizations of VET that might overcome this critique.