

# Reawakening Africa's Research Power:

## *The Africa Education Research Consortium*

**Written by:**

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### **Introduction:**

Imaginable Futures (IF) is an education and social change funder that supports organizations and their collaborative efforts to advance equity in education. A venture of The Omidyar Group, we have invested over \$330 million in more than 265 partners across Brazil, Kenya, and the United States.

We know that the complex challenges we're working to address are bigger than any one organization or approach. That's why we actively seek opportunities to work alongside other peer funders. When we coordinate efforts—whether through shared funding, complementary strategies, or knowledge exchange—we strengthen our collective support for the organizations leading change. These collaborations help accelerate the kinds of systems-level shifts needed to expand opportunity and make lasting progress possible.

## Reclaiming Research Power—The Africa Education Research Consortium

The Africa Education Research Consortium — is a bold, values-driven funding partnership that recognizes Africa already holds the knowledge and solutions to its education challenges. What's required now is a redefinition of how research is funded, led, and shared — with African researchers at the center.

Africa Education Research Consortium exemplifies a collaborative model that aligns funding with local priorities, supports long-term capacity, and ensures that education research speaks directly to African realities and aspirations.

This case study explores how the initiative emerged, the outcomes it has achieved so far, and why it offers a compelling model for future philanthropy that is collaborative, equitable, and locally led.

### Background

Africa's education systems are at a pivotal moment. Home to the world's youngest population — with over 60% under the age of 25 — the continent faces an urgent choice: invest in relevant, inclusive, and future-ready education, or risk leaving an entire generation behind.

At the same time, shifts in global aid and the rapid rise of technologies like AI are transforming how knowledge is created, shared, and applied. Without intentional, sustained investment, an entire generation of potential risks being left behind — and with it, Africa's opportunity to define its education future on its own terms.

This future cannot be built without evidence, insight, and research leadership rooted in the continent itself. For decades, Africa's education research landscape has been defined by external priorities, with limited space for African-led agendas or sustainable funding. African scholars lead fewer than 3% of global education research outputs, while over 80% of locally driven studies remain chronically underfunded. This disconnect not only stifles innovation but also sidelines the solutions grounded in Africa's own contexts, communities, and cultures.

The Africa Education Research Consortium was launched in 2021 by Imaginable Futures, Echidna Giving, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Porticus to challenge this paradigm.

***The Vision:** fund and empower African researchers and institutions to lead education research that directly reflects the continent's priorities, systems, and aspirations.*

## A Collaborative Initiative

From four initial funders, the consortium has since expanded to include 12 (as of 2025): Jacobs Foundation, IDRC, FCDO, ELMA Philanthropies, Hilton Foundation, UBS Optimus Foundation, and the Hewlett Foundation. Together, we share a set of transformative objectives:

- Center African leadership in education research
- Strengthen institutional capacity of African research organizations
- Foster long-term sustainability through locally sourced funding
- Amplify collaboration and shared learning across countries and communities

Rather than create a pooled fund, Africa Education Research Consortium funders pursued a trust-based, coordinated funding approach—investing directly in mission-aligned partners, sharing insights, and streamlining processes to amplify collective impact.

## Implementation Strategy: Laying the Foundation at the 2022 Forum

A major early milestone for the Africa Education Research Consortium was the Forum for Education Research in/for/by Africa, held in April 2022. Hosted in collaboration with Imaginable Futures, Echidna Giving, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Porticus, the forum convened over 90 African researchers, professors, educators, and advocates to confront the question: What would it take to truly shift the research ecosystem to be led by, for, and with Africans?

The resulting report—[Transforming Education Through African-Led Research](#) and Solutions—outlined five key levers of change:

- Accessing sustainable funding
- Pursuing research autonomy
- Strengthening research capacity
- Improving research communication
- Increasing participation of female researchers

## Advancing the Vision: Enhancing Education Research in Africa (EERA)

Building on the momentum from the Forum, the Enhancing Education Research in Africa (EERA) initiative was launched in late 2022. Co-led by Education Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA) and Southern Hemisphere, with support from Imaginable Futures, Echidna Giving, the Gates Foundation, and Porticus, EERA engaged more than 200 African stakeholders over 18 months.

This participatory process resulted in EERA's eight high-impact interventions designed to reshape the research landscape. These include; developing African-Led Research agendas, catalyzing African funding for education research, strengthening Research Leadership through building administrative capacity of research institutions, investing in training and professional development, equipping early-career and women researchers with essential technical and leadership skills, mentorship, and networking opportunities. To read more click [here](#).

## Outcomes & Impact: Mobilizing Long-Term Commitment & Growing Community Ownership

As a result of the collective vision and collaboration across these efforts, the Africa Education Research Consortium has mobilized over \$370 million in education research funding. This funding has supported locally led institutions, expanded research capacity, and sparked new partnerships aligned with the values and goals of African leadership and equity in education research.

Researchers and institutions across the continent report a renewed sense of agency and influence. By moving away from traditional funding hierarchies and toward community-led strategy, Africa Education Research Consortium is not just resourcing research—it is reimagining how it's done, by whom, and for what purpose.

### What Worked

- A decentralized, trust-based funding model enabled responsiveness and flexibility
- Transparent communication and shared values built alignment across diverse funders
- Deep local engagement ensured strategies were grounded in reality and relevance

### Challenges Faced

- Aligning timelines, risk profiles, and decision-making processes across funders required ongoing coordination
- Sustaining a shift from short-term projects to long-term systems thinking challenged traditional grantmaking norms

## The Power of Co-Funding

The Africa Education Research Consortium exemplifies how collaborative funding, rooted in trust and local leadership, can drive systemic and sustainable change. It shows that when funders align on purpose—not just process—they can create meaningful pathways for transformation.

## Future Directions: Scaling the Vision

The Africa Education Research Consortium is now moving from strategy to action. With a convening scheduled for May, ESSA and Southern Hemisphere will work with researchers and leading organizations to launch priority interventions. Meanwhile, the ambitious “50 x 50” initiative aims to grow African-led education research funding from 3% to 50% in East Africa over the next 25 years, targeting \$10–15M in annual funding.

## An Invitation

Africa Education Research Consortium is not a one-time project—it’s a growing movement. We invite new partners to join us in building a future where African researchers drive the continent’s education agenda with strength, autonomy, and vision.

## Current Partners in 2025

