

COMMENTARY

Climate change as a catalyst for economic inequality: The failure of workplace learning in the global south

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Climate change is often discussed in terms of its environmental impacts—rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and loss of biodiversity. However, its socioeconomic consequences, particularly in the Global South, are equally profound (see Ngcamu, 2023). The intersection of climate change and economic inequality is becoming increasingly apparent, as vulnerable populations in developing countries are disproportionately affected by the environmental crisis. A crucial but often overlooked aspect of this issue is the role of workplace learning and skill development. As climate change reshapes economies and job markets, the failure of workplace learning systems in the Global South exacerbates economic inequality, leaving millions of workers ill equipped to adapt to new work realities. Although the focal article by Beier et al. (2025) effectively discusses the future of work and acknowledges the role of climate change in shaping lifelong learning, it remains heavily focused on the Global North context and fails to adequately address the unique challenges that climate change poses for the Global South, where existing workplace learning frameworks are often insufficient to tackle these emerging socioeconomic disparities. This commentary argues that current workplace learning frameworks are ill suited to address the unique challenges posed by climate change in the Global South, and that a fundamental rethinking of these systems is necessary to promote economic resilience and equity.

The impact of climate change on economies in the Global South

The Global South, broadly comprising Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia (excluding Israel, Japan, and South Korea), and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and home to 6 billion people, is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. These regions are often characterized by high levels of poverty, dependence on agriculture and natural resources, and weak institutional capacities (Singh & Ovadia, 2020). Climate change exacerbates these vulnerabilities by disrupting agricultural productivity, depleting water resources, and increasing the frequency and severity of natural disasters. For example, sub-Saharan Africa has seen significant declines in crop yields due to erratic rainfall patterns and prolonged droughts, directly threatening the livelihoods of millions who depend on farming (Lottering et al., 2021). These environmental changes moreover have profound implications for the labor market. As traditional livelihoods become less viable, workers in the Global South face the dual challenges of finding new sources of income and acquiring the skills needed for emerging job opportunities (Hanlon et al., 2012). The rapid pace of climate-induced economic transformation outstrips the capacity of existing workplace learning systems to provide relevant and timely training. The failure to equip

workers with the necessary skills to transition to new forms of employment not only perpetuates poverty but also widens the gap between the Global North and South.

The inadequacy of existing workplace learning systems

Workplace learning systems in the Global South are often underresourced, fragmented, and poorly aligned with the demands of the modern economy. These systems were primarily designed to support traditional sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and low-skilled services. However, as climate change accelerates the decline of these sectors, there is an urgent need to develop new skills in areas such as renewable energy, climate-resilient agriculture, and sustainable urban planning. Unfortunately, the existing training infrastructure is ill equipped to meet these needs (Pretorius et al., 2021; Sawchuk, 2011). More specifically, workplace learning systems in the Global South often are focused on short-term reactive training and do not address the long-term structural changes required to build a climate-resilient workforce. Many training initiatives in the Global South are donor-driven and project-based, with limited sustainability once funding ends (King, 2007). These programs often emphasize immediate job placement rather than the development of adaptive skills that can help workers navigate the changing economic landscape in the long term. Moreover, in many parts of the Global South, education systems are already struggling with issues such as inadequate infrastructure, poorly trained teachers, and high dropout rates (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019; Sing & Maringe, 2020). The additional burden of preparing students and workers for a climate-affected economy is often beyond the capacity of these systems. As a result of these issues, workers may receive training in outdated or soon-to-be obsolete skills, leaving them vulnerable to future economic shocks and further entrenching economic inequality.

The role of technology and innovation

How can we foster lifelong learning in the Global South? Although technology presents significant opportunities, it is important to consider both its potential and limitations. Digital platforms can provide education and training to remote and underserved areas, offering courses on sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and climate resilience. For instance, mobile learning initiatives have shown promise in reaching rural populations with limited access to formal education (Aker, 2011). However, the effectiveness of these platforms depends heavily on reliable internet access, digital literacy, and the availability of culturally relevant content, which are often lacking in the Global South.

A more person-centered approach must be considered here. Although technology can serve as a bridge, true lifelong learning hinges on the ability of individuals to engage meaningfully with these tools. Self-directed learning opportunities need to be accessible and adapted to the personal and cultural contexts of the learners (Gulati, 2008). Individuals must feel empowered to take ownership of their learning journey—whether it is through digital means or more localized, community-driven programs. For example, training initiatives could emphasize practical, low-tech solutions that cater to the realities of the most marginalized learners, helping them develop skills that are directly applicable to their livelihoods and environmental conditions. Furthermore, digital literacy programs can be enhanced to help individuals build the confidence to navigate these platforms effectively. This includes not only learning how to use the technology but also understanding how to identify and engage with the most relevant and beneficial content. Mentorship programs can also play a key role in helping individuals transition from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in their learning process. In short, although the focus on technology-driven solutions is necessary, it must be balanced with an emphasis on personal empowerment and individual agency. Context-specific and culturally relevant

approaches should prioritize equipping individuals with the skills and motivation needed to thrive in their unique environments (Openjuru et al., 2015; Strydom et al., 2018).

The need for a paradigm shift in workplace learning

In addressing climate change and reducing inequality, a shift toward more inclusive and adaptable workplace learning frameworks is essential. However, this shift must go beyond structural reforms and embrace person-centered learning approaches. Training systems need to be designed with flexibility in mind, enabling individuals to pursue self-directed learning paths that resonate with their personal circumstances. By integrating such approaches into the broader educational curricula, workers can acquire skills that are both immediately applicable and adaptable to the evolving demands of a climate-affected economy. Collaborations among governments, organizations, and communities should focus on creating opportunities that enhance personal agency, particularly among the most vulnerable groups. For instance, vocational training programs could be linked with microfinance opportunities, empowering individuals to both gain new skills and improve their financial independence. Additionally, local knowledge and indigenous practices should be central to these programs, helping individuals connect their learning to their cultural and environmental realities.

Policy recommendations and conclusion

To effectively reshape workplace learning systems in the Global South, person-centered strategies must be a foundational part of policy reform. Governments should prioritize long-term investments in educational programs that not only build climate resilience but also empower individuals to take ownership of their learning and professional development. For instance, providing localized, contextually relevant learning opportunities—whether through digital platforms or community-based initiatives—can equip individuals with both the skills and the autonomy they need to navigate a rapidly changing job market. Furthermore, international organizations and donors should shift their support toward initiatives that are sustainable, locally driven, and aligned with the goals of social equity and environmental sustainability (Griep et al., 2023; Hess et al., 2012) to support grassroots learning initiatives that emphasize individual empowerment and self-directed learning. Similarly, private sector investment in these regions should not just focus on organizational capacity building but also on helping workers develop personally and professionally through continuous learning and personal agency. By doing so, companies not only build a more resilient workforce but also contribute to reducing economic inequality.

In conclusion, climate change is a catalyst for economic inequality in the Global South, and the failure of workplace learning systems exacerbates this issue. To address these challenges, there is an urgent need to rethink and redesign workplace learning frameworks to be more inclusive, sustainable, and contextually appropriate. By doing so, we can empower workers in the Global South to adapt to the changing economic landscape, reduce inequality, and build a more resilient and equitable future.

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