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The 2015 Promise of Education for All in Kenya: Missed Target or New Start?

Abstract

This paper examines the current status of basic education in Kenya. First, a review of the progress made in expanding access to both primary and secondary education is made, and the access gains are evaluated against the poor quality and the persistent inequalities. Specifically, it is argued that measurement of quality in education must supersede inputs to education, to consider the learning outcomes at every level. In analysing inequality, the variables geographic regions, socio-economic status of households, gender and school type (public and private) are considered. The paper further examines evidence on what works in improving education, and the priorities set for education in Kenya after 2015 are described. Conclusion is made that while progress is being made, there is little attention to adopting interventions that have shown promise to improving learning. A call is made to align the national priorities to the rich body of evidence, while paying attention to sustaining the current donor-driven initiatives for improving education.

Keywords: *Kenya Education, Education Access, Education Quality; Education Equity*

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel wird der aktuelle Stand der Grundbildung in Kenia analysiert. Nach einem Rückblick auf erreichte Fortschritte im Ausbau des Primar- und Sekundarschulbereichs werden die Zunahme des Bildungszugangs gegenüber der niedrigen Qualität und anhaltende Ungleichheiten beschrieben.

Es wird herausgearbeitet, dass im Bildungssystem Qualitätsmessung an die Stelle bloßer Investitionen treten sollte, um die langfristigen Lernergebnisse auf allen Bildungsstufen einschätzen zu können. In der Analyse von Ungleichheiten werden die Variablen der geografischen Region, des sozioökonomischen Status des Haushalts, Geschlecht und Schultyp (staatlich oder privat) in Betracht gezogen. Daraufhin werden zu Fragen der Verbesserung von Bildung Befunde analysiert sowie die Prioritäten beschrieben, die für Bildung in Kenia nach 2015 gesetzt sind.

Abschließend wird festgehalten, dass Fortschritte gemacht werden, jedoch wenig Aufmerksamkeit jenen Maßnahmen zu Teil wird, die sich vielversprechend mit Blick auf die Verbesserung von Lernen gezeigt haben.

Schlüsselworte: *Bildung in Kenia, Zugang zu Bildung, Bildungsqualität, Bildungsgleichheit*

Introduction

The year 2015 became acquired focus at the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000, when the world set to achieve six ambitious targets within fifteen years. Among the targets was the promise that by 2015, “all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality” (UNESCO 2000, p. 17). This deadline is now at hand, and opinion as to whether this target has been achieved is highly contested.

The progress in terms of access to primary education made since 2000 is “nothing short of remarkable” (UNESCO/ UNICEF 2015, p. 13). The report celebrates that between 2000 and 2012, the number of out-of-school children globally fell by 42 per cent. While this may be true for the global average, the number of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa seems to have increased with Nigeria hosting one fifth of the world’s out-of-school children. Rwanda is among the top three best performers in the last five years and reduced their out-of-school population by at least 85 %. Many authors are in agreement that the clock arm of access ticked forward in Africa. Despite this, Africa continued to lag behind the rest of the world in pursuing the access goal (UNESCO 2014; Glewe et al. 2013; Nicolai/Prizzon/Hine 2014; Oketch/Rolleston 2007a und b; Riddell 2003).

The bigger concern, however, as confirmed by evidence, is that quality either stagnated or even fell off the hook (Mugo/Ruto 2010; Mugo et al. 2015; Sawamura/Sifuna 2008). Indeed it is posited that success ought to be assessed alongside: whether children enrol, whether they progress to upper grades and whether they record the achievements expected of each grade level (Jones et al. 2014). They term this tripod as the ‘school chain’ that must always be present in any education system. Their analysis of the large-scale Uwezo data from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania fails to confirm presence of the tripod leading to their conclusion that a ‘learning crisis’ exists.

This article assesses the progress made in attaining the international goals with a special focus on Kenya. The dynamics related to school access are first analysed, exploring the trends

and implications on equity and quality. Thereafter, practical examples are provided of on-going interventions that seek to address some persistent challenges in education, before presenting the three priorities that seem to be shaping educational focus in Kenya today. The main conclusions are finally presented.

Universal access?

Globally, it is estimated that 58 million of children aged six to eleven years and 26 million adolescents (12–15 years) are out of school (UNESCO/UNICEF 2015; UNESCO 2014). From these, 30 million children and 22 million adolescents are in sub-Saharan Africa, representing a staggering 52 % and 85 % of the worldwide sum respectively. Despite the marked expansion of education access from year 2000, evidence indicates that the ratio of out-of-school children globally has remained steady at nine percent, and thereby marking a failed promise on the EFA goal on access.

In Kenya, historical trends of access have shown big fluctuations over the decades. At first, the initial decades of post-independence delivered rapid expansion of access across all sectors – primary, secondary and even University. For instance, the growth in enrolment to secondary schools between 1963 and 1980 averaged at twelve percent per year (Kipkoech/Kyalo 2010). However, this growth slackened in the 1980s and 1990s. The 2003 free primary education thereafter delivered an ‘access shock’ to the system with enrolment to primary schools rising by 22 %, from 5.9 to 7.2 million within the year, and yielding a gross enrolment of 104 % (Avenstrup/Liang/Nellemann 2004). Though the figures vary slightly, there is consensus that the government’s initiative led both to increased access and reduced incidence of late entry (Lucas/Mbiti 2012; Bold et al. 2010; Nicolai et al. 2014). Bold et al. (2010) caution, however, that the acclaimed gains were only in gross figures, as the net enrolment rates in government primary schools only rose negligibly from 71.2 % to 71.6 % from 1997 to 2006, meaning that what flooded the system was mostly overage learners, while at the same time expanding demand for private school. Lucas/Mbiti (2012) further argue that while free primary education (introduced in 2003) increased access for the disadvantaged, it also brought around a sorting effect, in which children from wealthier households exited the public system.

The changing character of the public school system following the 2013 access explosion in Kenya is worth exploring. UNESCO/UNICEF (2015) and Lucas/Mbiti (2012) are among the authors who map out the school type preferences and note three occurrences; movement to better performing public and private schools (both high- and low-cost), low movement to fairer performing public schools and exit from low-performing private schools. In terms of dynamics in enrolment, Lucas and Mbiti (2012) argue that high performing public schools had higher gains per school compared with high performing private schools. Overall though, the trend was towards the private and away from the public school, and by 2007, eleven percent of primary schools in Kenya that administered the end of cycle examination were private, up from five percent in 2000.

The general withdrawal from public to private schools brought in another tilt to the equation, described as a refer to as “rich flight” (Lucas/Mbiti 2012, p. 241). Wealthier and more educated parents withdrew from the public school, yielding

sharp decline in the parental level of education in public primary schools. Subsequently, newer candidates in public schools came from less educated parents. Arguably, this sorting effect of free primary education may have expanded the socio-economic divide.

A recent task force set up to advise on the cost of secondary education in Kenya (MoEST 2014) reports that similar to the expansion of primary school enrolment after fees abolishment in 2003, the secondary school sector has been on steady growth, accelerated by introduction of the subsidies in 2008. The gross enrolment ratio expanded from 42.5 % in 2008 to 56.2 % in 2013. However, the net ratio grew from 28.9 % to 39.5 % over the same period, indicating high proportions of overage children still in the system. National statistics (KNBS 2014) document a 42.9 % growth in the ultimate population of Kenyans attending secondary school between 2009 and 2013, also attributing the growth to the 2008 subsidies. However, Bold et al. (2010) argue that while the subsidies helped to expand access, the effects of natural rate of expansion have often not been accounted for. For instance, they establish that net enrolment increases were in fact larger in government secondary schools where fees were maintained.

In spite of the efforts to expand access to primary and secondary education, various sources estimate that at least nine per cent of eligible children in Kenya lack access to primary school, while over a quarter of those completing primary school do not access secondary school. Indeed, more than half of age-appropriate children are not enrolled in secondary school in 2015. At the same time, the net enrolment to early childhood education stands at 46.5 % (KNBS 2014), presenting also a major gap in universal coverage of preschool education. It is estimated thus, that over 1.1 million children are out of school in Kenya, though UNESCO/UNICEF (2015) describes the lack of updated statistics thereupon. From available evidence, the access gap has many faces – geography, gender and household socio-economic status.

Achieving universal access will ultimately demand contained and continuous action to address the deterrents to schooling as school participation is sensitive to costs (Kremer/Brannen/Glennerster 2013). The ever-increasing cost of schooling remains a barrier to increased and sustained school access in Kenya. While fees abolishment in public primary schools and subsidy at public secondary schools may have been significant in cost reduction, indirect costs to education (such as uniform, school materials, teachers, examination fees, meals) remain uncontrolled and continue to have influence on enrolment (MoEST 2014; Njihia/Nderitu 2014; Ruto et al. 2009; Sifuna 2007). For instance, it was established that in 2014, 37 % of all teachers in public secondary schools were employed directly by parents, through the school boards of management (MoEST 2014). Further, with the introduction of free primary education, there was no commensurate increase in teachers resulting into high pupil/teacher ratio. This has made parents make extra contribution to employ teachers. To establish the effects of cost reduction, a randomized control trial established that reducing out-of-pocket costs, merit scholarships, and conditional cash transfers all increase school participation (Kremer et al. 2013), demonstrating that lightening the burden on family expenditure on education for the vulnerable populations

may accelerate coverage. In another study, providing a free school uniform (costing less than \$8) reduced dropout rates among girls by 3.1 percent from a base of 18.8 % (Dufflo/Dupas/Kremer 2012).

Inequity, Inequality and its impact on schooling trends

The following part explores and discusses the various dimensions of inequality as established by various studies. First, the dimension of socio-economic status is explored, based on various indicators of household wealth and well-being. Second, gender inequalities are discussed, specifically relating to enrolment, retention and completion. The part lastly explores inequalities between public and private schools, and closes with a section on inequalities of learning outcomes.

Socio-economic status

Various studies have established that while the general trend has been expansion of access at all the levels of education, this expansion is not equitably shared (Avenstrup et al. 2004; Lucas/Mbiti 2012; Muyanga et al. 2010). In a global analysis of 63 countries, Hattori (2014) established that household wealth and the level of education of the household head had significant contribution to children being out of school. Children from the poorest quintile had 22 % of the out of school children, as compared to less than six per cent of the wealthiest quintile. Similarly in Kenya significant association between household log food consumption, household head education and enrolment to public primary school were established (Bold et al. 2010). Relatedly, established similar effects of a voucher system in incentivizing access to vocational education for the poor were described (Hicks et al. 2013). Njihia/Nderitu (2014) indicate that while the school grant is able to address the issue of access, parents still contribute some money for paying teachers, specific projects, examinations as well as extra tuition. These parental contributions have created inequalities among school and within schools. Among schools due to the criteria used to allocate the grant (per capita) and within school due to the inability of some parents to make their contributions. There is mounting evidence that pupils whose parents are unable to pay are sent back home during school hours, while those whose parents are able to pay, continue learning. The per capita criteria as used in free primary education, lacks focus on equity since it does not take into account the characteristics of the school and the pupils disadvantaging less-established schools.

Gender

A different body of literature establishes that the expansion of access to education in Kenya has depicted gender inequalities over the years. Lucas/Mbiti (2012a) establish that abolishing fees in primary schools increased access for both boys and girls, though more boys than girls were enrolled, expanding the completion gender gap. The study determines that despite the boost in girls' enrolment after 2003, the share of girls (as compared to boys) completing primary school decreased from 49 % to 47 % between 2001 and 2006. The lower rates of girl completion are confirmed by official statistics (KNBS 2014), that while there are more girls in grades 6 and 7 in Kenyan primary schools (girls accounting for 50.2 and 50.4 % respectively), this

share drops by one per cent in the last grade of primary school completion (grade 8). Presenting qualitative evidence is argued that gender construction of girls (and women) is responsible for the lower persistence throughout the schooling pipeline, more so towards the higher levels (Abuya/Onsomu/Moore 2014). This is especially so when one wears a regional and socio-cultural lens which gives further visibility to age old cultural notions that educating boys has more value and returns over girls, and that boys present higher rate of success.

Public versus private schooling

The growth of private schooling that followed universalization of primary education brought in a quality differential, noted through better learning outcomes in private schools (both high- and low-cost). For instance, Bold et al. (2010) established a gap between private and public schools of 103.2 exam points, or roughly two and a half standard deviations of the school-level test scores, that was not driven by self-selection of students into private schools. The authors argue that the much-documented worsening of quality denotes no selection process of weaker pupils, but rather, children of wealthier households who exited to private schools benefited from a stronger causal effect on their examinations. This finding confirms the early call made by Armitage and Sabot (1987), cautioning that controlling quality and standards in education for the poor would be essential to any introduction of subsidy. This is because in environments where many parents are themselves uneducated, difficulties emerge in reaching informed judgment about the relative costs and benefits of quality education. This was perhaps the severest missing link in the 2003 and 2008 cost reduction interventions.

Inequalities in learning outcomes

Recent efforts to improve quality in Kenya have witnessed growing focus on learning outcomes, rather than improved inputs, as the measure of education quality. These efforts evoke the sixth goal of Education for All, that the world shall seek "improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognisable and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" (UNESCO 2000, p. 17). The major inaugural measurement of learning outcomes was done by the Southern Africa Consortium for Measuring Education Quality (SACMEQ) in 1995 – 1998, a partnership between UNESCO and the Ministries of education. This was followed by other large-scale assessments of learning outcomes, including the National Assessment System for Monitoring Learner Achievement (NASMLA) (KNEC 2010).

The Uwezo annual learning assessment (adapted from the Annual Status of Education [ASER] reports conducted in India since 2005) that was introduced in 2009 was the first national assessment of learning not conducted by government. Here Uwezo has established that high deficits of learning exists at all levels, and that close to ten per cent of learners exiting the primary school in Kenya (grade eight) lack the basic competences of literacy and numeracy of grade two level (Uwezo 2010; 2012). Supplementary analysis by varied authors (Jones et al. 2014; Mugo et al. 2015) affirm that despite the low learning outcomes, there has been little change in outcomes between

2009 and 2013, evoking Lant Pritchett's (2013) lamentation of the 'big stuck' of learning outcomes. While no major gender inequalities in attainment exist at this basic level, predictors of learning outcomes include geographical location (arid districts lagging behind), household socio-economic status (both household wealth and mother's level of education) and type of schools (higher learning levels in private schools).

Interventions to improve quality

Several efforts to improve the quality of education in Kenya, by both government and non-government actors have been documented. In their analysis, Nicolai et al. (2014) identify four dimensions of progress in Kenya's education: a rising public demand for higher levels of education; political commitment to education and accompanying bold policy moves; key financing reforms, which helped to shift the burden from households to government at all levels; and the active role of communities and the private sector in expanding the supply of post-primary education services. Indeed, the reforms introduced through the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) in 2005 brought in dimensions to expand infrastructure on the one hand, but also improve teaching and learning through school health and nutrition programs, greater supply of instructional materials, teacher capacity development and introduction of information and communication technologies (MoEST 2005). Newer dimensions, proposed through the National Education Sector Policy (NESP) (MoEST 2014a) propose to move beyond infrastructure and learning environments, to also include curriculum reform, stronger quality assurance, teacher accountability and outcomes of schooling as among the key measures of progress. Other perspectives include further reduction of the cost of secondary school and incentivizing private investment to improve both the quality and quantity of secondary schooling, as well as increased engagement of local communities to govern education (Grauwe/Lugaz 2011; MoEST 2014).

However, critics of the reforms in the Kenyan system (Mugo/Ruto 2010; Mugo et al. 2015; Kremer et al. 2013) have observed a persistent 'one size fits all' orientation in improving learning outcomes. Interventions brought in over the years have been 'doing more of the same' (more textbooks, more teachers, more classes) with scanty commitment to what works in improving learning outcomes. For instance, an intervention that halved the class size produced no commensurate improvement in learning, indicating that adding teachers with no matching pedagogical reform may be futile (Duflo et al. 2012a). In another Kenyan study, neither providing additional textbooks nor supplying instructional flip charts increased test scores (Glewwe/Kremer/Moulin 2009).

However, various interventions have shown potential to improve learning outcomes. Randomized trials have illustrated that matching teaching to the learners' levels is cost-effective to increasing learning, and so are reforms associated with improved accountability and greater incentives for teachers (Kremer et al. 2013). It has further been established that merit scholarship programs can simultaneously increase access to schooling and stimulate learning by motivating students to work harder, do more homework, and attend school more often (Kremer et al. 2009). In further evidence, deworming increased

Kenyan girls' passing rate on primary-school examinations by 25 % (Baird/Hicks/Kremer/Miguel 2012). Even though tying student test scores to teacher pay seems to have worked in India, teachers in Kenya reacted by teaching to the test, and thereby bringing no meaningful overall improvement in learning (Glewwe/Ilias/Kremer, 2010).

Even though community participation and getting parents more informed about school conditions to demand better services has been proposed as possible remedy (MoEST 2014; Grauwe/Lugaz 2011), an evaluation of this approach in India found no impact (Banerjee et al. 2010). Thus, there is clarity that in many ways, the Kenyan government falls short of utilizing existing knowledge in making strategic choices for education reform.

Kenya's education post 2015: Three Prominent Priorities?

As the negotiations for the new education goals are going on at the global level, various interventions are being adopted in Kenya for 2015 and beyond. The integration of information and technology (a laptop for every first grader) was promised by the president during the 2013 elections. Though this is yet to happen, following several procurement hitches, it is probable that increased technology integration will remain a priority. While there is unbridled faith that ICT will improve both learning and accountability in the Kenyan education system (MoEST 2014a), the direct correlation of computer access improving learning has not been proven (Gulek/Demirtas 2005; Kremer et al. 2013). This however does not negate the role of ICT in acquisition of life skills that will aid broader functioning in an increasingly technological world.

The other widely-proposed intervention, scheduled for 2014/15, is curriculum review. Investment has been earmarked to review the basic education curriculum to match learning and teaching with emerging needs of the labour market and modern-day living. There is emerging evidence that tailoring curriculum and textbooks to the level of the child is improving learning (Kremer et al. 2013; Pritchett/Beatty 2012). Thus, we can only hope that curriculum review in Kenya would be accompanied with the transitional measure to teach at the right level in accelerating learning progress for the many children already left behind by the curriculum.

The third prominent perspective is improving early grade reading and mathematics. While many small scale efforts mostly run by non-governmental agencies exist, it is the Research Triangle International (RTI) pilot studies, which have now culminated into two multi-million dollar programs propped by USAID and the Global Partnership for Education (and the World Bank) that shall be discussed. In these interventions, teachers will receive greater support from coaches, with facilities of in-classroom training and extra support to improve lesson planning and delivery. These programs will be implemented in all public schools and selected non-formal schools in Kenya, over the next four years. Arguably, improving the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy has potential to improve learning in the entire schooling pipeline and even affect lifelong learning. It is hoped however that the government of Kenya would be able to sustain the costly interventions after expiry of donor funding.

Conclusion

This paper provides evidence that education in Kenya has made strides over the last decade, but limited more to expansion of access, and less in reduction of inequalities and improvement of quality. The article demonstrates that while interventions to universalize basic education through cost reduction have improved access, this has been limited in two major ways. First, the expansion of access has benefited the wealthier section of the population, who exited the public system and thereby their children perform better and gain better chances for transition to higher levels. Still, gender inequalities have persisted in some geographical areas. Second, access and quality exist in an inverse relationship. Learning outcomes remain low, especially in public schools, demeaning the benefits of universal education. As the world re-aligns her priorities in 2015, with the likely adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (with at least one of them in education) during the September 2015 UN Summit in New York, Kenya's priorities seemed already cut out, focusing especially on curriculum review, investment in ICTs and improving literacy and numeracy at foundational levels. However, we observe that in order to make lasting progress, a holistic approach targeting all levels of education, and driven by existing evidence on what works in education, will be extremely pertinent. Rather than do more of the same and expect different results, a call is made to pay keen attention to the aspects that have greatest potential, both to reduce inequalities, and improve learning outcomes.

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