

Education and Poverty Alleviation in Kenya: Interrogating the Missing Link

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Abstract

Education is vital in the development of any nation for it acts as both a means and an end to development. In modern society, it is practically impossible to dissociate education and development. Many forums have taken place where the role of education in the development process has been widely evaluated. Since the pre-colonial period, education has taken an important role as a development stimulator. Poverty alleviation is the most basic objective of development. Most interventions in education are aimed at combating poverty in addition to improving literacy levels in society. In the millennium development goals of 2015, poverty alleviation and achievement of basic education for all are indicated as the first and second goals respectively. This is a clear indicator that these twin goals are pivotal both in the process and realization of development. The task that remains unexplored is the extent to which education acts as a driver towards poverty alleviation. This paper seeks to explore the missing link between education and the process of poverty alleviation. It seeks to analyze the extent to which the education system in Kenya has contributed positively or negatively towards poverty alleviation and what challenges it has had in the long run. Additionally, the paper looks at the impact of these challenges to the overall national development goal. The paper recommends that for education to be an effective tool that helps alleviate poverty and foster national development there is need for major reforms in the management of the education sector, through curriculum reviews and the way in which education policies are developed and implemented.

Keywords: Education, Poverty Alleviation, National Development, Curriculum Review, Education Reforms, Education policies

Introduction

According to UNESCO, it is estimated that 1.3 billion people live on less than US\$ 1.25 per day. This number is growing steadily as civil wars, loss of employment and restructuring of societies are creating newly poor groups. Respect for human rights, meeting basic human needs and more equitable distribution of wealth, are clear priorities for alleviation of poverty. The United Nations Decade for Poverty Eradication (1997-2006) was a worldwide endeavor to confront the problem of human degradation caused by abject poverty. In its context, education plays an important role in the process of poverty alleviation, however, the question arises: "What can/does education do?". In today's economy, graduating from high school college-ready and obtaining a post-secondary degree or credential can mean the difference between a lifetime of poverty and a secure economic future. (UNESCO, 2013)

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000, are the world's quantitative targets for addressing extreme human deprivation in its many dimensions which should be accomplished by 2015. Education is part of this MDG framework as goal number two. There are therefore clear linkages between education and poverty reduction. Education can contribute to sustainable management to improve livelihoods, increase economic security and create income opportunities for the poor. Education that is relevant and purposeful has the power to transform people's lives.

Education for sustainable development has the potential to equip people with skills needed to improve their livelihoods and by building a skilled workforce, education can promote a country from one economic bracket to the next. If all students in low income countries left school with basic reading skills, we could eradicate 12% of world poverty (UNESCO 2013) and as such, it is an essential investment.

Skills are the key way in which education reduces poverty. Education makes it more likely for men and women not just to be employed, but to hold jobs that are more secure and provide good working conditions and decent pay. In so doing, education can not only help lift households out of poverty, but also guard them against falling back into poverty. And, just as education plays its role in helping alleviate poverty, progress in fighting poverty is inextricably linked with progress in achieving education for all. The direct costs of sending children to school, as well as the indirect costs of losing a source of labor, can be formidable for poor parents and as a consequence, not only are poor children less likely to enroll in primary school, but those who do so are more likely to drop out. This disadvantage results in children from poor households being over three times more likely to be out of school than children from rich households. Low quality education reinforces this problem, as parents are less willing to bear those costs if they cannot see the benefits of education and there is no better moment to realize education's role in helping households escape poverty than today (UNESCO 2013).

This paper seeks to find out the relationship between education and poverty alleviation with a specific focus on Kenya as a case study using acknowledged literature and experiences from the Kenyan education institutions/scene as narrated by the authors. The authors wish to bring out the fact that there is a link between education and poverty alleviation. Education has been confirmed to work in many situations and there is empirical evidence in literature on the same, but in Kenya this link seems to be missing. This relationship in some instances does not seem to bear the required fruits and sometimes its outcomes have been blurred. For example, in Kenya poverty levels still remain high. From the HDR report of 2013, Kenya is ranked at 145 which was the same as the rank of 2012, with a HDI of 0.519 which has been rated as low human development (UNDP, 2013). This is a clear indication that despite the efforts that have been put in place to increase the rate of access to education and with over ten years of free primary school education (FPE), this is not translating to poverty reduction measures as would be expected and millions continue to suffer and live below the poverty line. We will be seeking to answer the question; what is the missing link and why? Why isn't this high rate of school enrolment especially from FPE not translating to economic growth and empowerment or poverty reduction? What went wrong, where and why?

The Education Policy

The Kenya government upon attaining independence declared war against three enemies of development which were ignorance, disease and poverty. Education and training were recognized as fundamental to the success of national development. Policy-making in the education sector in Kenya has consistently sought to link education and training with work and employment, with the aim of addressing the relationship between education and the wider economic environment. The impetus to expand education opportunities was informed by outcomes of inquiries by various commissions set up by the government. Among these were the Ominde (1964), Gachathi (1976), Mackay (1981), Kamunge (1988) and Koech (2000) commissions, all appropriately named after their respective chairmen. Alongside these commissions are relevant policy documents such as the Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005, which is a policy framework for education, training and research. Although the government has shown commitment to the education sector as reflected by the percentage of the budget allocation which accounts for almost 30 percent of total government expenditure and 6.2 percent of the country's GDP in 2007/08, it is still faced by many challenges especially in higher education, training and learning which only accounts for 3-4.2 percent (Ngolovoi, 2009).

The high premium and demand for education by Kenyans is a reflection of their expectations of the returns that can accrue from education. Competition is high in educational institutions such that students are obliged to perform best or face stigmatization that is generated from the society.

A lot of pressure is exerted on each individual because the society demands for those who have gone to school, and more so those who have excelled (Amukowa, 2013). Reimer (1971) notes that a tradition can arise from schools to perform a selection whose function will create losers and winners. He further states that the discriminated losers will shy away from any educational venture and will consider themselves as outcasts which will be an impediment towards any kind of development.

In Kenya, the losers have to bear a hard task and the burden of repeated failure which will act as a barrier for future prospects. In some cases, the discrimination or the pressure induced by the society to students and pupils will lead to mutilated individual development and unsatisfied citizens.

The pressure to perform is so much so that some of those who fail to perform have resorted to suicide, a phenomenon that is on the rise among primary school graduates, and increased examination cheating in collusion with invigilators, impersonation, leakage of examinations and buying papers. This culture has been borne of an education system that recognizes scores, and ignores non-academic talent. In the year 2002, two incidents showed how the schools are mutilating individual development and self-fulfillment of citizens. A head teacher and two former candidates committed suicide after posting poor results in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education. This reveals a lot about the flawed education system and the pressure that comes from a social system that has failed to capture the essence of education. It registers the loss of hope, self-esteem and fulfillment (Kabaji, 2012).

The Quota System and Transition to Higher Institutions of Learning

Kenya's education system has witnessed an increase in enrolment since payment of primary school fees was eliminated. However, this has been accompanied by a decrease in resources, access issues, increase of equity concerns, and students struggling to stay enrolled because of decreasing quality of education leading to high dropout rates. Even though increased primary school enrolment has affected positively the transition to secondary education and especially after the commenced implementation of the free day secondary education, the government's hope of creating an educated population by providing education universally, has not always translated to learning outcomes.

The primary school curriculum has become highly focused on passing the KCPE examination thus selection of those who will transition to secondary education is based on achieving high scores. Rather than channeling pupils to different institutions that address the students' specific needs and talents, all are subjected to a standard examination. Associated to this inflexibility is an education system that has become highly competitive and rewards a culture of cramming and low application capacity in students has been perfected. As a consequence, pupils are overworked, drilled and over loaded in a bid to raise mean scores.

The undue influence of secondary admission requirements and emphasis on testing has led to increased cramming and memory drills in order to secure places in prestigious schools. The secondary admissions quota system discourages parents from enrolling their children in private primary schools, which provide quality education because national secondary schools can only admit 25 percent from private schools. Parents thus double register their children in both private and public primary schools in order to guarantee placement in elite secondary schools thus locking out the children from poor backgrounds. The biggest concerns with secondary school access revolve around prestige and costs. The admissions system and fees perpetuates the hierarchy making it difficult for many students to attend secondary school with up to 40 percent of students failing to access secondary education (Ohba, 2011). According to Amutabi (2003), a key negative outcome of the secondary admission quota-system is failure to appreciate the important role played by high school education in nation building and national cohesion. The quota system has been criticized for perpetuating tribal and ethnic segregation rather than promoting diversity.

Transition to university is even more inaccessible due to the limited availability of university places and the high costs due to cost sharing. Only a small percentage of students are able to attend the most prestigious secondary schools which have adequate facilities to prepare students, therefore an even smaller group is eligible for university. The completion of secondary school and transition to tertiary institutions is determined by performance at the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination and availability of space at the tertiary level. For instance, out of 118,000 candidates (35%) who achieved the minimum requirements in 2012, only 41,000 (12%) got places in both public and private universities.

Kenya's Vision 2030 acknowledges the magnitude of wastage in the transition from secondary to university education despite significant growth in secondary school enrolment (MOE and MOHEST, 2012); the transition to university is still below the expected 15% target for 2012. To address the growing demand for university education, the government has converted polytechnics to university colleges. The move by the government to allow post-secondary vocational and technical institutions to acquire university Charters has made it difficult for prospective students to understand differences between technical vocational educational training systems (TVETS) and university learning.

The rush to obtain university degrees mainly in the humanities has curtailed education in essential technical disciplines. These mid-level polytechnics admitted students who did not make the grade for university admission or lacked the financial resources for university education. They provided vocational degrees in addition to professional degrees such as nursing and teaching. Given the biased gender allocation of roles, the phasing out of these technical institutes has impacted more negatively on women access to tertiary education. In addition, opportunities for affordable technical education leading to certificate and diploma granting programs have been jeopardized.

Additionally, there are few polytechnics and other institutions whereby those who fail to secure secondary school admission can acquire technical skills and crafts that make them employable. Moreover, many primary and secondary students who cannot proceed with formal education are expected to be absorbed by TIVET institutions. Kenya has evolved in the areas of science, technology and innovation. However, the current training programs have been criticized for being rigid and irrelevant to industry, creating a mismatch of skills produced by the training institutions and those demanded by the industry (Wanzala, 2013). The system is strained in resources and expertise, ill equipped, in addition to being supply driven and blind to market trends. The prevailing curricula does not serve the intended purpose but produces artisans who are either irrelevant to the job market or join an already saturated market segment. The education system in Kenya is geared towards standardized examinations as the sole assessment technique which does not test for other skills, for instance entrepreneurship, public speaking, performing arts or sports. The education system has for long only addressed children with special needs such as visual, hearing or mental impairment leaving out those with special talents and gifts like sports, performing or creative arts (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Since grades are critical indicators of success and failure in the lives of students since they ultimately determine whether or not one is able to advance to the next level of schooling or not, students have no choice but to follow the established curricula even when it does not address their needs. Kenya lacks important institutions for instance sports academies, performing arts institutions for music and drama or fine art schools that would help nurture talent from an early age.

Quality of Education

Quality in education is the degree, to which it can be said that education is of a high standard and that it satisfies basic learning needs, enriches the lives of learners and improves their living standards (UNESCO, 2000). Kenya has experienced a dramatic escalation in the demand for higher education in response to the relative success of the Education for All programme, that has resulted in considerable expansion in primary and secondary enrolment and output. According to Sifuna (2007), increased enrolment resulted in schools being unable to cope with the high influx of pupils as infrastructure became stretched beyond limits. Since there was no prior planning before the introduction of the fee changes, schools struggle to provide space, classrooms, books, and teachers. The education system lacks the infrastructure and the materials to properly support the influx of students that the elimination of fees encouraged. The enrolment increases have resulted in a reduction of quality education in Kenya and due to the large class sizes and poor teacher to student ratios.

The crisis of learning in Kenya is about an education system that has confined success to measuring inputs such as allocated budget, numbers of student enrolments, teachers and schools rather than learning outcomes so that students can become productive members of society. According to a recent survey by Uwezo (2013), the school system produces illiterate and semi-literate children who do not acquire the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy consistent with the official curricula. They are hopelessly ill-equipped for secondary education or any formal employment. According to the Commission for University Education (2012), all public universities have established departments entirely dedicated to science and technology. However, in reality these facilities have not expanded to cater for the increase from self-sponsored student population. The proliferation of universities and commercialization of higher education have created systems that produce poorly prepared graduates who cannot meet labor market demands highlighting the inadequacy of the current education system (Wanzala, 2013).

Many university graduates join the job market unprepared because of the disconnect between the education curriculum and the workforce demanded by the prevailing economic environment.

The irresistible pressure of this rising demand, in the face of inadequate resources, has posed major problems for policy makers, as well as of higher education institutions. The critical challenge is to ensure the quality and relevance of programmes and their delivery, while making higher education more widely accessible (UNESCO, 2012).

Quality has become a very important aspect in the Kenyan education system such that the Ministry of Education has put in place a Directorate of Quality Assurance and Standards under the Education Act of the Laws of Kenya to oversee issues of quality and standards through an independent inspection unit. Its mandate is to establish, maintain, and improve quality and standards in all educational and training institutions both public and private (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Quality and relevance of education is critical towards attainment of sustainable socio-economic development at all levels and learning processes that prepares the young generation for tomorrow's human resource development (Kinyanjui, 2007; Kipkebut, 2010; Mogambi, 2013).

There are multiple factors that affect the quality of education, training and learning. Some of these factors include, quality of lecturers and training facilities, state of students, teaching approaches and styles, the content of the knowledge, suitable learning environment and the visible outcomes (The Centre for Public Education, 2005; Wilson, 2009). Due to limited resources it becomes difficult to overcome these challenges because they require a broad knowledge-base of the subject matter, skills, curriculum, techniques and standards. The high number of enrolment affects negatively on teaching as the teacher is unable to create effective teacher-pupil interaction. Unavailability of sufficient physical facilities is another challenge affecting the implementation of the programme, lack of school furniture, equipment and teachers among others (Rob et al., 2004; Republic of Kenya, 2008).

The Impact of Brain Drain

Human capital is the most important asset a nation can have and tertiary institutions play an essential role in the development and provision of manpower required for the socio-economic and technological advancement of any nation. Kenya loses hundreds of her best academicians and other professionals annually through external migration. At the same time, limited access to education has encouraged brain drain where qualified and intelligent students exit the local education system and migrate overseas, often permanently. The government invests significant human resources into these students and few of them return to invest back in the Kenyan economy. Kenya is among the top five African countries suffering from brain drain (Torres & Wittchen, 2010) and the implications of this massive flight on development in the coming decades could be significant. The impacts of academic turnover are felt across many dimensions as they have repercussions on the institutions and students (Ng'ethe et al, 2012) and contribute to lowering of education quality.

Education Funding

According to Nyirenda (2013), poverty reduction through investment in education raises issues of financing and the affordability of education for the poor. He disputes the World Bank assertion that public spending on primary education generally favors the poor while arguing that public spending on education as a whole often favors the affluent because of the heavy subsidization of the upper-secondary and higher levels of education. He argues that the direct costs of schooling act as a constraint to education in poorer households and financing mechanisms such as user fees have a significant impact on access. In Kenya there are many challenges facing education such as access, regional disparities, rising educational costs and declining government funding. Even with the advent of FPE the funds provided for by the government for financing education are not enough, internal inefficiencies and school wastage notwithstanding.

Rising educational costs coupled with poverty incidences and declining government funding are to a large extent associated with the cost sharing policy introduced in 1988 that has had negative effects on primary education in terms of enrolment, quality and financing. Most of the resources are spent on recurrent expenditure items mostly dominated by teachers' remunerations, while development allocation constitutes less than 5 percent of the budget (Bwonda and Njeru, 2005). The authors further state that lack of clear policy guidelines on cost sharing, inadequate mechanisms in the identification of needy students within the school system, inefficiencies in resource mobilization, utilization and accountability, poor management of some learning institutions, over reliance on donor funding in development programmes, unsustainability of the programmes, child labor and increasing number of destitute children are other challenges to education.

Secondary and tertiary education is non-affordable to the poor as the government subsidy covers less than 10% of the actual cost of taking a child through high school or university. Even though schools receive government grants regularly, students have to bear costs such as boarding fees, extra-curricular activities costs and personal expenses (Wanja, 2014).

The challenges of the children from poor backgrounds who make it to secondary schools do not end with admission: there are low retention levels due to high secondary school fees that are above the income of the average family. Unfortunately basic education does not fully equip students with the necessary skills that they require to be self-sufficient and to be able to deal with the poverty and harsh economic situations facing them and they end up falling into the same poverty situations as their parents thus the cycle is never broken.

Commercialization of Higher Education

To address the decreased funding of higher education and the increased demand for access, the Kenyan government implemented parallel degree programs thus creating two main student groups admitted to the public universities. Self-sponsored students pay the full cost for their education and thus they subsidize other higher education areas. Consequently, for the small percentage of students who transition through the primary and secondary school systems, they face challenges in the higher education admissions process and financial barriers that create more access obstacles. The system then becomes one where it is not just the best and brightest who attend university, but often the richest or those with financial means. Commercialization of education has become popular in Kenya where institutions of higher learning are competing for student enrolment. It appears as though higher education in Kenya has been turned into a commodity rather than a human need and is being auctioned to the highest bidder. Whereas the introduction of parallel programs was to expand access to higher education, this system has mostly enabled high school graduates with minimum entry grades to gain admission because they can afford to pay the high tuition fees (Mulongo, 2013). This process tends to lock out candidates from poor families who may not be able to afford the exorbitant costs that come with the self-sponsored programmes. On the other hand, this process has led to overcrowding in the institutions due to the increase in enrolment from both the regular and the privately funded programmes.

Another potential flaw in the massification policy is the introduction or perpetuating of degree programmes that do not address the job market. There is already a surplus of graduates in certain courses especially in the arts and such programmes should be shelved in order to allow absorption of the already trained, idle and frustrated graduates who cannot find employment. University administrations compromise the quality of education by accepting students without improving facilities to absorb them, and only considering financial gains when expanding education programmes. The days when universities used to specialize in fields such as education or medicine are long gone. With these trends, there is no guaranteed quality training for learners, and employers often have to train new graduates in order to fill the skill gap.

Corruption in Educational Institutions

The government's financing of secondary education has largely been directed towards the current expenditure, mainly to meet teachers' salaries and allowances, at the expense of development expenditures, which would be essential to provide and improve the physical and instructional facilities. Njeru and Orodho (2003) state that the financing of secondary education has, however, become problematic, as parents have to shoulder an increasingly large proportion of the cost. The bursary scheme was handicapped by inadequate guidelines with regard to the amounts allocated per student; poor criteria for selection of genuinely needy; inadequate awareness creation about the scheme's existence and operations; limited funds hence limited coverage; poor co-ordination and delays in funds' disbursement; and lack of monitoring mechanisms by the ministry at the school and higher levels. This resulted in lack of transparency and accountability, nepotism, among other aspects of mismanagement. A critical issue that requires redress is awarding of the bursaries to less deserving, and sometimes completely undeserving, but well-connected applicants, at the expense of the poor and vulnerable groups (Njeru and Orodho, 2003).

To date, the bursary scheme both for the secondary school programs and university is marred with issues of corruption, nepotism and lack of transparency. This leaves poor families vulnerable and with no hope of educating their children. In a survey carried out by the ministry of education in 2008 titled, "Expenditure tracking of secondary education bursary scheme in Kenya", it was found that in 45.4 percent of the schools, there were undeserving students who received bursaries in that particular year 2007/08, while 19.8 percent of the schools surveyed indicated that funds were allocated to students no longer in school and 20.9 percent of the schools indicated that some beneficiaries received bursary from different sources.

Only ten constituencies reported data that was in line with the ministry's disbursement figures and poor book keeping at the local level was rampant in most of the schools and constituencies (MOE, 2008).

Conclusion

The former president of the United Republic of Tanzania, His Excellency Julius Nyerere once said, "Education is not a way to escape poverty. It is a way of fighting it". JC Campbell in his online article titled "Literacy in Africa as a gateway to eradicating poverty" concludes that the value of reading and writing cannot be minimized as a means to help eradicate poverty. Finding employment can be almost impossible without these basic skills and therefore has a knock-on effect by precluding some from earning the wage that would feed the family. As literacy increases in African countries, the level of employment also increases, giving communities a basis to progress economically. Creating a strong economy through increased education may not eradicate poverty completely, but it will go a long way to relieving the seriousness of the problem. It is clear that a more balanced approach to educational funding is required. Post basic education and training plays a crucial role in the realization of basic education outcomes, as well as playing a direct and indirect role in sustainable poverty reduction and the achievement of the MDGs. Consequently, the withdrawal of funding from these sectors could be counterproductive and even reduce the effectiveness of spending in the basic education and other social development sectors.

Nobody doubts that a better-educated workforce is more likely to enjoy higher earnings. But education by itself is a necessary insufficient antipoverty tool. Poor people absolutely need more education and skill training, but they also need an economic context wherein they can realize the economic returns from their improved human capital. Restoring their strength and status is essential if we want the poor to reap the benefits they deserve from educational advancement. Programs that combine general education with training specific to both the individual and his or her local labor market work better than the ones that fail to combine these activities. Education is a supply-side policy; it improves the quality of workers, not the quality or the quantity of jobs. A danger of overreliance on education in the poverty debate is that skilled workers end up all dressed up with nowhere nice to go.

Helping the poor receive more education is therefore a part of the progress towards poverty alleviation. Whatever their skill level, workers need a context wherein they can be rewarded for their skills, where the benefits of the growth they help to create flow freely their way. Through Education, individuals realize their potential to contribute to production, wealth creation and execution of various roles that make for national development. They are also able to benefit from the distribution of wealth in the economy, have a political voice and access social goods and services to enhance their living standards. These facts are well known in development circles. What is lacking is the ability to make use of the transforming power of education as one of the most important tools for alleviating poverty. It is now clear that universal basic education of the right type is a critical pre-requisite for countries to progress on the path to sustainable development. Beyond this, quality basic education for all citizens can help to lift communities out of poverty. Poverty is multi-sectoral and requires action on different fronts. Education for poverty alleviation can also be a turbulent process. The newly educated demand their rights and agitate for more egalitarian and democratic norms to replace the old inequalities and injustices that often underlie poverty. These are the tensions that democratic and progressive societies must contend with on the path to development.

Recommendations

For education to be a successful driver of poverty alleviation there is need to employ some of the factors that could accelerate this success and these would include:

- a) A serious political will to provide access to quality education for all citizens, especially those who are disadvantaged i.e. the poor and the marginalized. In most situations these groups feel left behind in the development process. If education was made readily available for these groups the transformation could be immense.
- b) Investment of a significant percentage of the public budget in education. Currently this sector is struggling to deal with the increased costs of education vis a vis the insufficient funding. Higher education is becoming impossible to sustain for all the huge numbers graduating from basic education. With sufficient funds this could help alleviate some of these problems.

- c) Reform of the education service delivery process for greater efficiency. This starts from the policy making, curriculum development, implementation of the policies and the quality of education being provided to the students with a special focus on helping them gain the necessary skills and practical knowledge as opposed to theoretical knowledge.
- d) Promoting successful innovations and taking them to scale. The country needs to realize that education alone in terms of knowing how to read and write will not be efficient in poverty alleviation. The world is changing every day and with the advent of technology and globalization, people also need to change in order to be relevant in this changing world. There is need for new and innovative ways in the content provided in the education institutions and the methods through which this is done.
- e) The country needs to strengthen its capacity to deliver quality education to all its citizens, especially the poorest. There is therefore a need to intensify partnership and cooperation with international and bi-lateral agencies as well as with NGOs and the private sector in the form of policy dialogue and programme agreement as a basis for investing and providing budget assistance to the education sector.

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