

A Process Evaluation of Free Primary Education: A Critical Analysis of Kenya's Experiences

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to make an assessment of free primary education policy in Kenya based on six identified indicators. Numerical data extracted from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and other prominent world websites was compared with the six indicators. The introduction of free primary education promoted universal primary education and access of education in a positive way. The findings of the study concluded that, the literacy for adults in Kenya has been on the decrease since the introduction of free primary education in 2003. One would have expected the literacy rate to improve, Kenya was trailing Tanzania and Uganda on literacy rates. The enrolment of primary school students has been on increase since the adoption of free primary education in 2003. Despite the free funding of education, dropout rate was on recorded because of the hidden costs charged by the primary schools. Kenya was also observed to be doing well in terms of teacher to pupil ratio at primary level and is ahead of South Africa. The government of Kenya was advised to accept the notion that what is referred to as free primary education by the government was practically not free primary education This will help the government to revise and adjust free education policy in an objective manner.

Abbreviations

DACE – Director of Adult and Continuing Education

EFA – Education For All

FPE – Free Primary Education

KNBS – Kenya National Bureau of Statistics

NCEO – National Committee on Educational Objectives

UPE – Universal Primary Education

KANU – Kenya African National Union

NARC- National Rainbow Coalition

Origin of Free Primary Education in Kenya

The NARC government under the leadership of president Mwai Kibaki is credited for coming up with FPE in Kenya. However, there were a lot of historical developments that provoked the development and implementation of free primary education in Kenya. The implementation of FPE in Kenya and across the globe is a noble idea but a lot of questions have been raised on the quality of education being provided in Kenya and other developing nations. This provoked the researcher to make a process evaluation of the FPE through literature search and critique.

According to Abuya et al (2015) & Bold et al (2010) the FPE in Kenya was started by the KANU government in 1974 as an abolition of school fees from standard 1-4. The National Committee on Educational Objectives (NCEO) sat in the month of December of 1975 under the leadership of Gachathi P.J. Among the objectives of the meeting was to make an evaluation of Universal Primary Education (abolition of fees from standard 1-4). According to the NCEO report of 1975,

despite the fact that primary education was free from standard 1-4, quite a number of challenges were observed. Parents were still struggling to pay for other uncovered costs by free primary education like school uniforms, building fund, equipment levy and activity fee.

According to NCEO (1975), a significant number of dropouts were reported because of these hidden costs. The committee made a recommendation to the government so that the free tuition fees could be extended to standard 5-7 because students from poor families were finding it difficult to progress to standard 5. Following the recommendation of the NCEO to abolish school fees for students in standard 5-7 in their report of 1975, the abolition of school fees from standard 1-7 was introduced in 1978. The NCEO (1975) called this school fees abolition Universal Primary Education (UPE). When president Kibaki came to power through NARC government, he introduced Free Primary Education from January 2003 but there were several concerns raised on the funding and planning of the policy.

Is it therefore a fair assessment that FPE started with Mwai Kibaki while the KANU government introduced abolition of primary school fees in 1970s? It is clear from the policy documents that Kibaki's free primary education policy was not different from the primary school fees abolition of the 1970s. The challenges of the abolition of school fees in 1970s are the same as the challenges of the 2003 FPE according to Ngwacho (2011). My belief is that, the FPE of 2003 was a continuation of the primary school fees abolition of 1970s and perhaps a continuum of future such policies.

There are two key historical events that shaped the development and implementation of free primary education in Kenya in 2003. The events shaped the objectives and goals of the free primary education in Kenya. There is no doubt that the FPE policy of 2003 in

Kenya was to a larger extent driven by external influences. The April 2000 Dakar and the September 2000 New York declarations set in motion the development and implementation of the FPE in Kenya.

The April 2000 Dakar Declaration

This section is based on the UNESCO (2015) process assessment report of the Dakar Education For All (EFA). The month of April of the year 2000 shall always be remembered in the history of education globally. According to UNESCO (2015), 160 governments across the globe attended a three-day conference on education for all in Senegal. United Nations press release statement SOC4543 of 2000 claimed that 1000 national leaders across the globe attended the conference.

The main aim of the conference was to discuss the education for all that was supposed to be implemented by all countries of the globe. The conference came up with six educational goals that were supposed to be implemented immediately in support of education for all policy. The educational goals were as follows:

- Goal One – Expand early childhood care and education
- Goal Two – Achieve universal education especially for marginalized children and ethnic minorities
- Goal Three – Ensure equal access to learning and life skills
- Goal Four – 50% reduction in adult illiteracy
- Goal Five – Achieve gender parity and equality in education
- Goal Six – Improve the education quality

By the end of 2015, according to UNESCO (2015) process evaluation report, only one

third of the countries managed to achieve all the six educational goals. It was also observed that, a funding gap of US\$22 billion was needed if all the six objectives were to be achieved by all countries. Interestingly, Kenya was also among the countries that ratified the Education For All goals. The goals were crafted 2 years before the NARC government came to power. The objective of the FPE in Kenya are almost similar to the six educational goals of Dakar Senegal.

The September 2000 New York Declaration

Another external influence to the FPE in Kenya was the September New York Declaration that was made by the United Nations in 2000. The national leaders met at United Nations Headquarters in September 2000 in New York. All the countries, members of the United Nations were represented. According to UNDP (2015) process evaluation report, 8 goals for development popularly known as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted by member countries. The goals were as follows:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empowerment of women
- Reduce child mortality rate
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

The member countries were given 15 years to implement the MDGs and 2015 was the

deadline for countries to fulfil the goals. The other interesting thing was that, Kenya was part of the member countries that participated during the conference in New York. The goal for achieving the universal primary education by 2015 definitely influenced the FPE in Kenya. There was no option for the government of Kenya but only to implement the FPE in order to meet the MDG on universal primary education by 2015. That was the context in which the NARC government opted for FPE implementation in Kenya.

Objectives/Goals of Free Primary Education in Kenya

Each and every policy/project is measured against its objectives. The FPE in Kenya's main objectives are not clearly stated. However, the objectives of primary school fees abolition and the Dakar Senegal declaration objectives for education for all are almost similar to the free primary education of Kenya. Otike and Kiruki (2007) claim that, the following were among the objectives of free primary education policy of January 2003:

- Improve literacy and enable citizens to participate in socio-economic development
- Improve the standards of living
- Bridging the gap between the poor and rich students
- Child's act emphasizes education of children a right
- Promotion of universal education
- Catering for poor and orphans
- Reduction of the school dropout

The objectives of FPE of 2003 in Kenya according to Otike and Kiruki (2007) are closely related to the six objectives of education for all adopted by 160 countries in

Dakar Senegal in 2003. The MDG of universal education is clearly stated as part of the target for the FPE in Kenya. The purpose of this article is to make a quick impact assessment of the FPE in Kenya based on the following indicators;

- Indicator 1 Literacy level
- Indicator 2 Universal education/education access
- Indicator 3 Dropout rates
- Indicator 4 Standards of living
- Indicator 5 Education quality
- Indicator 6 Equality in education

Indicator 1 Literacy Level

The aim of primary education is to increase the literacy numbers of any country. The education system that fails to boast the numbers of literacy is classified as useless. The simple definition of adult literacy is the ability to write and read of the adult population. The benchmark is from 15 years and above. There challenge in most of the African countries is that, they are not able to conduct national literacy surveys because of either ignorance or lack of funds. The data on literacy of most of the developing nations come from the external agents like UNESCO, UNDP, Index Mundi and KNOEMA among others. However, most of the countries in Africa have started to conduct their own national literacy surveys.

Evidence shows that that the first national literacy survey in Kenya was conducted in 2006. According to the Director of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) Irreuous Kinara as cited by the Star Online Newspaper (25 Nov. 2017), Kenya had last conducted its national literacy survey in 2006. According to the Kenya National Adults Literacy Survey (KNAS)- 2006 report, the survey was conducted by the ministry of planning and national development . The total sample size

was 15,504 households and the survey was done in English, Kiswahili and other 18 local languages.

According to KNOEMA (Retrieved on 22 Dec. 2018), the adult literacy level in 2000 was 82.2%, dropped to 72% in 2007 and increased to 78% in 2015. The results for youths literacy more impressive compared to the adult literacy figure. In 2000, the youths literacy was 92.5%, declined to 82.4% in 2007 and increased to 85.9% in 2015. On the other hand, the data from the Kenya National Literacy Survey (KNLS) of 2006 indicates that in 2006, the adult literacy rate was at 61.5% meaning to say that 38.5% of Kenyans were illiterate translating to a total population of 7.8 million people. The youths literacy level was standing at 69.1% according to the KNLS (2006). The data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics (Retrieved on 22 Dec. 2018) indicates that the adult literacy rate in Kenya was at 78.73% in 2014. The adult literacy rate was at 74.01% and 83.78% for females and males respectively.

Implication of Free Primary Education to Literacy in Kenya

The data shown above has been pointing to a negative relationship between the literacy level of 2000 and the period from 2006 plus. In 2000, the literacy level was at 82.2% and dropped to 61.5% in 2006. In 2014, the literacy level in Kenya was at 78.73% and was still below the literacy rate of 2000. This means that, the literacy level of Kenya declined despite the introduction of free primary education in Kenya in January 2003. One would expect the adult literacy rate to be above 82.2% benchmark of 2000.

The other observation is that, Tanzania (80.4%) and Uganda (78.4%) has been leading Kenya in terms of the literacy rates according to the data provided by UNESCO (2015) report. Kenya is a neighbor of Uganda and Tanzania but the data is showing that it is trailing the two countries in terms of literacy. Basing on the data available on adult and

youths literacy, there is no evidence that the free primary education in Kenya improved the literacy levels in Kenya since the introduction of the policy in 2003.

Indicator 2 Universal education/Education Access

There has been a general consensus that the enrolment of primary school students in Kenya has been on increase since the introduction of free primary education. Among the key objectives of FPE policy in Kenya was to promote universal education by increasing the enrolment. The major aim of the FPE was to absorb all the primary school aged children in school. The empirical study reviewed by this article reflects that there has been a good progress in enrolment since 2003 when the free primary education was introduced (Ngwacho, 2011; Otike & Kiruki, 2007 ; Mulinya & Orodho, 2015)

The public spending of Kenya on Education has been on increase since 2000 and the period when free primary education was introduced in 2003. According to KNOEMA data (retrieved on 20 Dec. 2018) and the data from the ministry of education on Kenya's enrolment statistics. The Kenya public spending on education by GDP was 5.2% (2001), 6.2% (2002), 6.5% (2003), 7.3% (2005), 7% (2006), 5.3% (2014) and 5.3% again in 2014.

The data from the KNOEMA and the ministry of education supports the major observation of (Ngwacho, 2011; Otike & Kiruki, 2007; Mulinya & Orodho, 2015) that the enrolment figures have been on increase since 2003 when the free primary education was introduced in Kenya. That seems to be a positive story on the success of universal education in Kenya though a lot of challenges have been observed. There is clear evidence that education budget in Kenya is leading compared to other ministries.

Though the figures on enrolment were on increase, some children within the age limit

of primary school were still out of schools. According to KNOEMA and UNESCO Institute of Statistics' latest reports, the percentages of out of school children of primary school age were declining. According to the available data, the out of school children's percentages were as follows; 24.8% (2003), 23.9% (2005), 12.9% (2007), 17.1% (2008) and 13.21% in 2012.

The overall picture is that, Kenya tried its best to promote universal education and education access. There is a positive relationship and funding of education in Kenya since 2003 when the free primary education was introduced by the Kibaki regime. The empirical research done through scientific methods has also proved that the government of Kenya has been performing well on universal education and education access though some children within the primary school age limit are still out of school.

Indicator 3 Dropouts in Kenya's Primary Schools

The dropout rate at primary schools is worrying. Since the implementation of the free primary education in Kenya in 2003, the dropout rate of pupils who have been failing to write standard 8 exams has been between 27% to 32%. It is quite sad to not that a significant number of primary school pupils are finding it harder to complete primary school education. The policy makers have a tough work to do, it is embarrassing for a country like Kenya to shoulder such a significant number. If Kenya's primary school free education is a success, where are these shocking figures coming from?

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) report of 2017, the primary school students who failed to write/complete standard 8 exams are as follows; 33% (2013), 34% (2014), 30% (2015), 29% (2016) and 32% in 2017. Ngwacho (2011) did a prominent study with 13 primary schools in Kisii Central Districts. The purpose of the

study was to correlate the link between dropout and hidden costs in primary schools in Kenya. He observed that between 2004 and 2010, at least 916 pupils dropped out of the 13 primary schools. According to Karuki (26 Oct. 2015), of the 1,3 million students who joined primary school during the start of the free primary education in 2003, 33% failed to sit for standard 8 exams in 2010.

The Implication of Free Primary Education to Dropout

The data provided above reflects that, the free primary education has not been able to eradicate the problem of dropout in primary schools of Kenya. What is shocking to not is that, the dropout rate is shifting within the range of 27%-32%. Having a percentage of above 20% dropout from school is shocking for a country like Kenya that is considered to be the powerhouse of East Africa. The conclusion that can be deduced from the data is that, the free primary education has failed to reduce dropout rates in primary schools of Kenya. Therefore a question is asked, what can be the causes of dropout? Is the free primary education policy successful?

The National Committee on Education Objective report of 1975 observed that the free primary education in Kenya has been under the threat of hidden costs like uniforms, building fund, equipment levy and activity fee. The study done by Ngwacho with 13 primary schools in Kisii Central districts observed the same. An observation was made that, primary school students are dropping out of school because of hidden costs. Parents were forking out Ksh1020 per year in order to meet the hidden costs charged by the primary schools. It was also noted that the amount was too high for the parents to pay.

It is therefore fair to conclude that the free primary education policy is under threat from the hidden costs charged by primary schools. The free primary education has not been able to control the dropout because of the hidden

costs. Policy makers should deal with the hidden costs in order for parents and students to enjoy the benefits of free primary education.

Indicator 4 Standards of Living

This indicator is very difficult to measure, countries should always try to come up with indicators that are measurable. To link the connection between free primary education and standards of living is a daunting task. Is It true that the standards of living are improved or influenced by primary education? A lot needs to be done on this area and the empirical data is still lacking.

Akande (2010) did a study in Nigeria with the aim of observing the impact of education on standards of living. The observation was that education have a long run impact on standards of living but the current impact in Nigeria was still insignificant by the time of the study. The major challenge was that, the study did not separate the impact of primary education in comparison to other levels of education. Ito (n.d) in his study in India observed that education has an insignificant impact on the standards of living. The other observation was a negative relationship between education and standards of living. It sounds like most of the studies on education and standards of living are confirming an insignificant contribution of education to standards of living.

According to Opiyo (3 Nov. 2011), the United Nations report of 2011 rated Kenya poorly in its global assessment of standards of living. The report rated Kenya as number 143 out of 187 countries. The number one position was taken by Norway while DRC was the last, at number 187. The standards of living as compared to Tanzania is 9.52 higher according to NUMBEO data. The NUMBEO data of December 2018 reported the following indexes on Kenya;

- Cost of living index 38.43 (classified as very weak)

- Purchasing power index 33.23 (classified as very weak)
- Quality of life index 96.52 (classified as moderate)

Despite the fact of having high cost of living, the quality of life in Kenya is said to be moderate and conducive but it is very difficult to link it to the free primary education. The linkage may be done in the long run but research have shown a minor contribution of primary education to the standards of living. I believe that, the government is responsible to the quality of life of citizens to a large extend but the level of education of citizens helps them to cooperate with the government. I can conclude that is insignificant relationship between the free primary education and the standards of living of those primary graduates but further research is needed in this area.

Indicator 5 Education Quality in Kenya Primary Schools in Relation to Free Primary Education

There are various ways that can be used to measure the quality of education. This article focused on the teacher-pupil ratio and provision of resources/infrastructure as measures of quality. The provision of quality education is still a challenge in most of the African countries. Developing countries have been investing a lot of money in education since time immemorial. In South Africa the teacher-pupil ratio at primary school level was 33.60 in 2014 and 16.70 for England's current ratio. The two countries will enable the readers to check the progress of Kenya since the introduction of free primary education.

According to the data from KNOEMA and Index Mundi, the Kenya's teacher-pupil ratio has been on increase since the introduction of free primary education in Kenya. The ratio

remained constant from 2000 to 2002 at 34.4. In the year 2003 the free primary education was introduced, the ratio increased to 38.0, in 2005 (42.5), 2009 (43.3), 2012 (56.6), 2014 (31.35) and 30.65 for 2015.

South Africa is second from Nigeria in terms of GDP and is considered to be the most prosperous country in Africa. If we are to compare the performance of Kenya with South Africa on teacher-pupil ratio, Kenya has been doing better because its ratio is better than that of South Africa in 2014. If we are to compare Kenya with England, its teacher-pupil ratio is not pleasing at all. However, the teacher-pupil ratio at Kenya primary school level has been increasing since the introduction of free primary education in 2003. The ratio was good before the introduction of free primary education and became worse in 2012 when it reached 56.6. From 2014 upwards, there is evidence that Kenya has been performing well in terms of teacher-pupil ratio at primary school because the ratio has started to decline and it's a positive news to Kenya. It can be concluded that, Kenya is performing well in teacher-pupil ratio.

Despite the decline of teacher-pupil ratio in Kenya, the provision of infrastructure has been a challenge since the introduction of free primary education. Ngwacho (2011), Otikey & Kiruki (2007) and Mulinya & Orodho (2015) confirmed through the studies done in Kenya that the government funding has been inadequate and led to the charging of hidden costs to parents by the primary schools in Kenya. The provision of physical infrastructure has been a challenge with cases of overcrowding being reported in most primary schools in Kenya. The textbook-pupil ratio according to the former minister of Education Mr. Matiang'i stands at 1:5 meaning to say that five pupils are sharing one textbook (Nation Newspaper, 5 Dec. 2017). The textbook ratio of 1:5 is not good for Kenya though there is still a room for improvement. It is not good for learning when 5 students are sharing a textbook. The

ratio of 1:2 is better and proper for conducive learning and there is still room for improvement.

Indicator 6 Equality in Education

I disagree with the perception that the role of education is to reduce inequality. In fact, education widens the gap between and among the students. I agree with Ngware (2015)'s publication on Conversation AFRICA that free primary education in Kenya is going to widen the inequality gap between and among the students. He noted that the free primary education cost per student has been US\$14 per year. This appears to be bad news for the success of education in Africa and Kenya.

The data above has shown that the dropout rate is between 29%-32% in Kenya primary schools. The meaning is that, between 29% and 32% of students are dropping primary school before writing standard 8 exams. This has been because of the very low cost funding of free primary education. The dropout rate has been because of the hidden costs charged by primary schools in order to supplement the low government funding. If free primary education was providing enough money, dropouts in primary school could have been avoided. The dropout is definitely causing inequality in Kenya when some drop out before completion.

The other source of inequality is the final national primary examination in Kenya. Students are selected to join bad, good and moderate schools based on their passes. This is a good example of inequality, some students will even fail to join secondary schools because of their low or poor passes. The aim number one of an examination is to grade students and that will later result in inequality. The best schools that perform better in Kenya are recruiting capable students while the low IQ students are dumbled to what we perceive to be poor schools.

It has been observed that some of the elite private schools in Kenya charge school fees from between US\$10,000 to 20,000 per student per year with the majority of average private schools covering between US\$100 to not less than US\$ 10,000. It is very difficult to talk of equality in education when the bulky of Kenyans students are getting a free education of US\$14 per student per year hardly enough to meet the bare minimal requirements. This widens provision gap and possible learning outcome disparities. There is no equality to talk about. The government should revise the cost of free education upwards in line with the economic demands and the value of education. The aim of the free primary education in Kenya was to promote equality in education but it seems as if the policy promoted inequality because the percentage of dropout increased soon after the introduction of free primary education.

Conclusion

The findings of the study concluded that, the literacy for adults in Kenya has been on the decrease since the introduction of free primary education. One would have expected the literacy rate to improve and Kenya is trailing Tanzania and Uganda on literacy rates. The introduction of free primary education promoted universal primary education and access of education in a positive way. The enrolment of primary school students has been on increase since the adoption of free primary education in 2003. Despite the free funding of education, dropout rate was on increase because of the hidden costs charged by the schools. Kenya was also observed to be doing well in terms of teacher to pupil ratio at primary level and is ahead of countries like South Africa.

Recommendations

I observed that, all the necessary recommendations were given by various studies but one recommendation. The government of Kenya should accept that what it calls free primary education is not

free primary education. This may will help to improve on this policy, proper solutions can only be found after peeling off the mask of free primary to just provision of primary education in Kenya.

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