

Improving Educational Outcomes: Youth as Poverty Experts

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Abstract

This brief draws lessons from the Youth, Gender and Citizenship (YGC) project in Kenya, which investigated, from the perspective of impoverished youth, their parents and their communities, the nature of what could be considered social and human development outcomes of education¹. Such outcomes, broadly defined, relate to a person's well-being, human dignity, health, physical and psychological empowerment as well as to the sense of belonging as active citizens to a community and nation (Chege and Wainaina, 2008; Kinyanjui, 2008). Equally central is the interest in youth as citizens and the need to elicit their voices as articulate stakeholders of national and community issues. This study suggests that youth living in poverty require considerably more support to become fully participatory citizens. They should be consulted for the contribution that they can make to the debates around poverty alleviation.

The Context

The outcomes of education, alongside the relatively better understood economic outcomes are not a new concern for African states such as Kenya which has persistently foregrounded social and national development. Since independence in 1963, the Kenya government has identified education as one of the key strategies for eradicating ignorance, ill-health and material poverty (Ominde Report, GoK, 1964).

The first post independence government prioritised *illiteracy, diseases and poverty* as the three main challenges associated with national development. Access to education was considered an essential component of these priorities. For many years the education sector received an allocation of between 24.7% and 29.6% of the nation's recurrent budget (Wainaina, 2008; Kenya Economic Surveys, 2002/2003-2006/2007). This is in addition to the financial investments that families, the private sector, philanthropists and non-governmental organizations (NGOS) continue to make in the education of children.

Since the introduction of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPS) in the mid 1980s, and the rising poverty levels of the 1990s (associated with the withholding of donor funding from the World Bank and IMF (Otieno and Colclough, 2008), the well-being of the majority of Kenyans worsened, *inter alia* with increasing numbers of people being excluded from accessing basic social services such as health and education (GoK, 2003). The 15-year National Poverty Eradication Plan 1999-2015 (GoK, 1999a) estimated that 12.6 million Kenyans (47% of the rural population and 29% of urbanites) were living below the poverty line and struggling to survive as the gap between the rich and the poor widened: 10 percent of the richest households controlled more than 42 percent of the national income, whilst the poorest 10 percent controlled only 0.76 percent (UNDP, 2005).² For most of the last forty years there has been deterioration in the three indicators of human development - *longevity, educational attainment* and *decent living standards*, resulting in significant slippage in the country's human development ranking.³

In response, the 2003-2007 Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation (GoK, 2003) underscored the need to continue increasing

access to quality primary as well as secondary education as these were key determinants of earnings that constitute an important 'exit route from poverty'. Although the 2005 Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) (GoK, 2005) promoted popular free primary education (FPE), the less educated young and older Kenyans continued to have relatively little access to material resources and so could not benefit from such schooling, let alone afford the subsidised secondary schooling introduced later, in 2008.

In 2008, the Kenyan Government produced an industrialisation and poverty reduction 'blue-print' – the so-called Kenya Vision 2030 (GoK, 2008b). It identified three development pillars, namely the social, economic and political, which would transform Kenya into a newly industrialising 'middle-income country' providing a 'high quality of life to all its citizens by year 2030'. The blue-print seeks to build 'a just and cohesive society with social equity in a clean and secure environment' while the *political pillar* aims at 'realising a democratic political system founded on issue-based politics that respects the rule of law, and protects the rights and freedoms of every individual in the Kenyan society'. The *economic pillar* focuses on 'providing prosperity of all Kenyans through an economic development programme': The three pillars are anchored, among other things, on 'enhanced equity and wealth creation opportunities for the poor'.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The Youth, Gender and Citizenship (YGC) project (2005-10) interrogated this role for education in poverty alleviation. It explored the role of schooling in the personal and communal development of young people living in poverty and how the perceived or real outcomes of education link to the nation's development agenda. The following questions guided the research:

1. At which schooling level do the relationships between education and social and human development become evident?
2. How do male and female Kenyans living in specific socio-cultural poverty contexts identify the critical benefits in education and how can they use them as turning points to exit the poverty cycle?

3. How can education respond to poor people's conditions in their specific socio-cultural contexts as well as address their varying capabilities and challenges?

The study focused on young people – aged between 18 and 26 years (regardless of their marital or child-bearing statuses) - who were categorised according to their educational 'exit' point:

- (a) those with non-completion of primary schooling;
- (b) those who were primary school graduates; and,
- (c) those with post-primary education.

The research was conducted with youth, their parents and elders in two sites, namely the Kibera slum in the capital city Nairobi, and rural Nyaribo - a sub-location in Nyeri County (formerly, Nyeri District)⁴. Sampling of the sites was guided by the Population Household Census (PHC) (GOK, 1999b⁵). The rural site comprised 5 villages with a population of 256 households while the congested Kibera site comprised only Kichinjio village with 283 households. The sample constituted 7 female and 9 male youth and their parents (10 mothers and 10 fathers) from the rural Nyaribo site as well as 12 female and 12 male youth and their parents (12 mothers and 8 fathers) from urban Kibera. The lowest female education level was 4 - 5 years of primary schooling in Kibera while the lowest education level among the male counterparts was completion of 6 years of basic schooling amongst male rural youth.

It has already been noted that policy discourse about poverty has been dominated by the perspectives and expertise of those who are not poor (Narayan et al., 2000). The YGC study purposively adapted participatory research approaches (PRA), prioritising training and incorporating groups of research subjects into the research process itself. The research subjects were able to represent themselves, to share their 'human stories' and to articulate the reality of their own life experiences through active self-construction. Whilst the research team succeeded in positioning the research subjects as the 'experts' on the connections between education and poverty, members of the research team reflected critically on 'text-book' definitions of poverty and their own authority.

Different qualitative methods were selected on the basis of their potential to recognise subject and community centredness, inclusivity and empowerment, gender and age sensitivity, as well as encourage rights-based and skills-oriented research activities to yield results. Youth, their parents, community elders and gatekeepers addressed the question of what it meant to be young, poor, educated/or not educated, and belonging to specific community settings. This approach resulted in the active participation of the community and in enhancing the subjects' confidence, trust, communication skills, sense of ownership and responsibility for the research. Some of the specific research activities designed to foreground community participation include:

- *Household census with elders:*
 - a selection of elders and gatekeepers helped in the mapping of households and their families, including the revision of the village maps to ensure accuracy.
- *Photography and community data provided by youth:*
 - volunteer youth (female and male) learned the skill of photography using digital cameras and basic computer skills and consequently steered the process of generating photographs on community development issues they were concerned about.
- *Community workshops with youth, their parents and community elders:*
 - the youth steered community discussions with their parents and elders regarding their hopes, aspirations for themselves and their community using the computerised photographic e-data that they helped to generate

KEY YGC RESEARCH FINDINGS IN URBAN KIBERA AND RURAL NYARIBO

Schooling:

The value of formal schooling for the individual and community was very high even when its economic

returns were minimally experienced by youth and their families.

- Urban male and female youth, more than their rural counterparts portrayed secondary schooling as having effects in terms of social prestige even though its graduates seemed have similar material poverty despite their high expectations.
- Many of the rural primary educated male youth appeared relatively less articulate, gregarious and more apolitical on issues regarding personal vision, community and State matters. Nonetheless, they appeared more enterprising in income generating activities, such as quarry mining, claiming that the returns were greater than those of secondary education.
- The female and male urban secondary educated youth portrayed high levels of political awareness, particularly on issues of poverty and the functioning of government because the city-based CSOs appear to have exposed them to relevant civic education.
- In rural Nyaribo, the nearest secondary school was approximately 10 kilometres away which was a major disincentive to undertake secondary education for both the rural girls and boys. The end of schooling for most of them was the completion of primary education.

Gender:

- Gender differences in expectations of educational outcomes in rural and urban sites did not emerge in striking ways as the young women and men, including their fathers and mothers sustained hope in the potential of formal education to deliver quality outcomes that would improve livelihoods and well-being for all citizens.
- All the young participants desired a chance to pursue education and/or undertake skills

training for employment. The young men and women wanted to use their education to better their lives and their communities –not just have certificates stashed away somewhere. All the research subjects criticized government on the issue of joblessness that condemned female and male youth to dependence on their aging parents.

- The majority of the young women and men portrayed secondary schooling in particular as having made a real difference to the way they understood gender relations in the family and community, thus positively influencing their responses towards the value of gender equality in society. Young urban males saw the role of formal schooling as providing them with the opportunity to encounter the capabilities of their female peers and consequently to respect them as their 'sisters'.
- While gendered divisions remained visible in some social practices and interactions in the communities; a desire to change the traditional attitudes and practices regarding gender divides was notable especially among many of the young secondary school youth.
- Secondary education (compared with the primary level) portrayed more promise in making a marked difference to:
 - engagement with topical contemporary issues
 - expressing visions, expectations, aspirations
 - demonstrating motivation for practical involvement with community issues
 - challenging abuse of human rights and traditional marginalization of girls and women
- The exit pathways out of poverty envisioned by youth revealed gender differences:
 - Urban young women, regardless of their educational levels, associated exiting out

of poverty to the physical moving out of their impoverished community into more affluent neighborhoods. This could be achieved by marrying upwards socially.

- Urban young men looked forward to improving their community environment which they defined fondly as 'home'.
- Rural young men portrayed a more individualistic outlook as they sought to improve their personal status through small-scale income generating activities
- Rural women expected at best to leave the village for a 'better life' working in lowly paying jobs either in the city or nearest towns and at worst getting married to a co-villager.

Citizenship:

- For urban youth, the core of active citizenship was often divorced from the outcomes of formal education because much of it was acquired through activities of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Instead, formal education was depicted as more oriented to examinable academic subjects and certification and less focused on the overall shaping of a fulfilled functional citizen who understood and embraced human rights and obligations.
- In Nairobi, young people demonstrated reasonable knowledge of their rights as citizens of Kenya by articulating their national and community identities, the value attached to having a birth certificate, freedom of expression and movement among others in the community. These orientations were comparatively less visible among young persons in rural setting where the activities of NGOs are less prevalent.
- An expressed dissatisfaction about the failure of the state to act decisively on reported corruption and the responsiveness of government to youth indicated a high level of disillusionment. Young people's expectations were that civic/political participation would eradicate poverty. They believed that the government needed to hear (and respond to)

their voice if any meaningful social and economic change was to be experienced in their lifetime.

- Young people expressed a yearning for the State to intervene by providing free vocational skills training that would guarantee employability, eradicate idleness and consequently curb crime rates. These factors were presented as a reason for the tendency of their peers to use crime (e.g. dealing in illicit drugs and robbery) as a source of income.
- Young men (more than young women) were problematised as idlers and trouble-makers particularly in the rural community where it was possible to observe them lazing around, while the young women were apparently busy helping out in family chores. A household activity checklist confirmed that the male children had comparatively few family responsibilities.
- A return to the learning of Social Education and Ethics in school was highly recommended by the young people arguing that it provided space for self-reflection regarding social and personal responsibilities.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF YGC FINDINGS FOR EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

Education, particularly secondary education, has been successful in raising expectations about self-reliance, and independence. Equally, its failures were concretised as it did not meet the expectations of youth when exiting from schooling. This finding should encourage reflection on the relevance of education for the next generation of adults who hope to benefit from the current development agenda articulated in the Kenya Vision 2030.

The successes of NGOs and CSOs in citizenship education represent a challenge to rethink sectoral partnerships of like-minded collaborators, particularly in re-engineering the transformation of formal and informal education where gender, citizenship and human rights interact.

As traditional gender divides continue to be challenged through schooling, it begs the question why more male youth are problematised as 'idlers', 'troublemakers' and lacking focus compared with their female peers. What is education doing or not doing to empower the two genders equally?

Young Kenyans question policy makers about the relevance of basic education (primary and secondary) which does not have targeted pro-poor objectives nor content that addresses the reality of their lives. The implication of the YGC findings is to reconsider the content of the curriculum, to improve access to secondary and vocational education as a means of improving social, human and economic outcomes and to prioritise ways of tapping the energies and aspirations of youth as actors and agents of social transformation in their own right and in their communities.

The views expressed here are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by DFID or any partner institution.

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¹ This was the first of a series of three projects under this theme; the others being the Disability, Education and Poverty Project (DEPP) and the Health and Fertility (H&F) Project.

² Kenya's Human Development Index (HDI) declined from 0.533 in 1990 to 0.520 in 2004, with the national life expectancy standing at 48 years, and infant mortality at 78 for every 1,000 live births recorded.

³ The Kenya Economic Survey (GoK, 2008a:3) confirmed that public sector employment and average earnings declined. Livelihoods depreciated with 94 persons depending on every 100 working persons among the non-poor compared with 72 persons among the non-poor (GoK, 2008a:9).