

Post-Basic Education and Training: Education and Poverty - Beyond the Basics

Post-Basic Education and Training for Growth and Poverty Reduction. Current Challenges from 40 Years of Kenya's Policy History

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Kenya's rich policy history

Kenya has had a very rich tradition of education policy, through a series of commissions, sector reviews, and sessional papers. These have been interrogated from the perspective adopted by the research team, for the light they may shed on a number of outstanding questions of contemporary concern both to researchers and policy makers. An overarching research and policy challenge for Kenya has been presented by Ruth Kagia, herself a Kenyan, but responsible for education policy in the World Bank: *'Why has the spectacular expansion of education in Kenya in the 70s and 80s clearly not led to the economic and social gains generally associated with education?'*

The relationship between education and the economy

The question of Kagia goes to the heart of our project. It addresses the common assumption of a linear relationship between investment in education and a set of positive economic and social consequences. Such a relationship has become commonplace due to the World Bank's early research which has been taken to show that so many years of education directly translate into increased agricultural productivity, or, for girls, into reduced fertility. Our analysis, by contrast, has, along with new policy work on education by the Bank, as well as the Commission for Africa and the UN's Millennium Project, pointed to a less 'edu-centric' relationship between education and development.

We argue that for there to be the many economic and social gains so widely associated with education, there needs to be a supportive environment within the education sector, as well as a positive political, macroeconomic and social environment. In other words, education cannot achieve these gains on its own. Free Primary Education, as the impressive January 2003 initiative of the Kenya Government is called, will not automatically create a series of developmental benefits, even if it responds to the rights to education of tens and hundreds of thousands of children. From a poverty perspective, similarly, our analysis does not suggest that education can, **on its own**, somehow break the cycle of poverty.

The Kenyan discourse on education and the wider context

Kenya's policy literature does not use exactly this terminology of the supportive or enabling environment. But it is clear from the frequency with which education policy and employment policy have been discussed together over the years that there is a very widespread view amongst the Kenyan policy community that the

education and employment sectors need to be in a closely interactive relationship. The same is true of the 30-year concern in Kenya to think about education in its relations with the informal economy and with self-employment. It is also the case that Kenya policy makers have traditionally thought in a holistic way about the education and training system, and have not prioritised a particular sub-sector, like primary education, just because it was an MDG or because it was a donor agency preoccupation. This comprehensive approach to the education and training environment as a whole is as evident in Kenya's first education commission of its independence period (1964) as it is in the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) of 2005.

Education and poverty reduction in Kenya

Arguably the discourse about poverty reduction in Kenya is a donor discourse, and it has become increasingly necessary to justify national policies in terms of their impact on the reduction of poverty, especially given the conditionalities linked to the production and implementation of a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Traditionally, however, the views of many Kenyan communities about the poor is that 'poverty does not have deep roots' – in other words, through effort and hard work, it has been widely believed that most individuals and communities can escape from poverty. This is very different from a donor discourse that now classifies more than half of the entire Kenyan nation as being below the poverty line. Accordingly, it is more common for the policy community – including politicians – to talk of the crucial importance of wealth and employment creation rather than poverty reduction.

The absence of an explicit pro-poor policy discourse in Kenya

Apart from the presence of the PRSP, which is externally required, Kenya's education policies are not openly pro-poor; rather they are conceptualised in terms of creating opportunities for larger numbers of Kenyans to secure opportunities for post-primary education and training. Education policy has from the very beginning had a strong dose of community self-help, on the grounds that the sheer scale of opportunities desired by parents and pupils would be unobtainable without very considerable *harambee* – self-reliance. [Intriguingly, this made for a huge contrast with its next door neighbour, Tanzania, which had a declared policy of 'Education for Self-reliance', yet was very resistant to individual or community self-reliance on grounds of equity.] There is evidence, however, of a growing research interest in Kenya in being able to determine 'who and where are the poor' at the level of the individual political constituency.

The absence of a coherent multi-sectoral development policy perspective

Though Kenya has been a leader in education policy and in the elaboration of policies for the informal (*jua kali*) sector, there has been a distinct absence of a wider science, technology and development policy in which education and the informal economy were components. In Kenya's policy history, there is no parallel to the integrated, multi-sectoral investment vision that is to be found in the Commission for Africa or in the ambitious reach of the UN's Millennium Project Report. This is not to say that Kenya does not have a policy document on how it can become an industrialised economy by 2020. But there is a major disconnect between the generation of policy and clear evidence of political commitment to its implementation.

A concern with individual examination scores rather than with quality across the system

Kenya has had the advantage for some 20 years of having had some excellent research on the improvement of examinations. At its best, during the 1980s this allowed individual schools to improve their strategies for examination success. However, this examination orientation was paradoxically able to exist without a powerful national concern with quality across the education and training system. Hence, few of the many education reviews and commissions were ready to make an evidence-based analysis of the quality of schooling, not to mention the quality of the teaching staff, even though the data for this results orientation was present. Consequently, there has been insufficient attention to the quality of education, and especially in schools attended by the children of the poor.

Failure to analyse the social composition of the education and training system

The popular focus on examination scores has confirmed the salience of private schools and academies which are very aware that the Kenya public pays a great deal of attention to which primary schools gain the greatest success in securing access to the best public secondary schools. What underlies this phenomenon in recent years, however, is a growing division within the education system that has also been insufficiently analysed. It means that deliberate investment in the highest performing primary schools – many of them private – has become a clear strategy of the elite. By contrast with a good deal of topical information on these 'successful' schools, there is a dearth of research on what happens to the children of the poor as they traverse the education system. For instance, very little is known about the 1.3 million children who are said to have entered the public system with Free Primary Education in January 2003. Were they the children of the poorest families? Or did they also include large numbers of children in the urban slums who had been paying fees in low cost primary and pre-primary schools and centres? And are these children still in the public primary system three years later?

Do the children of the poor reach secondary schools and vocational institutions?

Similarly, what can be said about the social composition of Kenya's vocational education and training (VET) system, or its secondary school system? With the contrast between the new fee-free status of the primary schools and the suddenly steep fees of even the low quality secondary

schools, or the vocational institutes, what is known about whether the children of the poor are even to be found in large numbers in the post-basic education and training system? And if they do reach there – and some do manage through substantial individual and family sacrifice – what can be said about the quality of the schools and vocational institutes that they manage to enter? And what expectations are there from these institutions that there can be successful continuation to further and higher education? There is very little adequate research on these transitions, but preliminary indications are not encouraging.

The absence of merit-based, pro-poor pathways through the education system

In this situation of increasing contrasts within the education system, there is a clear need to analyse whether there is a coherent system of merit-based pathways which can carry the most talented children from poor homes right through to the best universities. It is admitted by senior Kenyan policy makers that such pathways did exist some 30 years ago, providing bursaries right through the top national secondary schools into a university system that was still free of fees. Instead of these full bursaries, there have been in recent years moneys in each constituency to support poor children. We know very little about how these systems operate, and whether they target the poor in general, or the most talented children. But it is widely admitted that the amounts granted are insufficient to cover the costs of fees and maintenance.

Is the education and training system fair, and is access to work merit-based?

As long as secondary education or VET is not free, a key question for a project such as this on Post-Basic Education for Poverty Reduction must be – how does the system operate for talented young people coming from poorer homes? The short answer is that we do not know. No one has sought to trace the children of poor families as they seek to survive in the relatively high cost post-primary systems. Nor is there research on whether education – even at secondary or post-secondary levels – is actually sufficient to secure a formal sector job. Anecdotal evidence suggests that to be considered for many formal sector jobs – or their associated training programmes – requires further money and also influence. In other words, so far from their being an enabling environment for merit, education is actually embedded in a larger political and social environment that is still widely felt to be non-meritocratic. Greater transparency and good governance will be critical if the new bursaries associated with the KESSP are to operate effectively as pathways for poor children.

Research needed on how education and training can play roles in breaking the cycle of poverty, and contribute to growth

The evidence from this review suggests that new research will be needed if the ambitions for equitable growth and poverty reduction which are linked to the new policy papers of the present government are to be fulfilled. This will need to assess the expanded vision of the role of education against a careful analysis of whether the political, social, legal, economic and work environments are genuinely supportive, especially for bright children from poor families.

Further information sources

This Policy Brief draws on a fuller country study on 'Post-Basic Education and Training for Growth and Poverty Reduction: Towards a History of Policy 1963-2005 in Kenya'. It is part of a 6-country study coordinated by the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The Policy Brief does not, of course, represent the views of DFID. The full paper by Kenneth King is available in electronic format from www.cas.ed.ac.uk/research/projects.html.

Also relevant and available on the same site is the paper by Kenneth King and Robert Palmer on 'Education, Training and their Enabling Environments'. More information on the full project, as well as country studies for Ghana, Tanzania, Rwanda, South Africa and India can also be accessed from this address.