

“Free” primary education in Kenya: social inequalities in the making

Dr Morten Skovdal of University of Bergen and LSE says it is a matter of urgency that the Kenyan government makes sure that free primary education stays free.

When does ‘free’ mean free? In Kenya, while primary education is notionally at no cost to the child or family, there have long been additional levies and other costs charged, which mean that for the very poorest and most vulnerable, school remains out of reach.



This problem is getting worse. Kenya, like many other sub-Saharan African countries, is seeing unprecedented economic growth, giving rise to a burgeoning middle-class who are happy to spend a little extra to improve their children’s education.

This, coupled with high inflation in 2011 (last month the official inflation rate was 19.72%) and late and inadequate disbursement of government funds to schools, has meant many primary schools hiked school levies in 2012 to much higher levels. Secondary schools similarly increased their charges.

Although Kenya introduced free primary education in 2003, it has been common practice for primary schools to collect additional money or resources from parents.

While most of these levies are technically illegal, district education officers and schools leaders have had to ignore this issue as primary schools, due to inflation and demands for better quality education, need to fill the gaps left by the limited government allocations.

As children returned to school last week, parents, without prior warning, were met with additional illegal costs, sending shockwaves through communities already struggling with rising inflation – forcing poor families to send their children to primary schools which charge the least.

These ‘cheaper’ schools tend to be inadequately staffed, without electricity and computer facilities and require pupils to share books – impeding their learning and preparation for modern and formal employment.

What we are witnessing in Kenya at the moment is a divide in primary schools. On one hand, there are primary schools for the poor, who tend to perform poorly at the Kenya Certificate Primary

Education (KCPE) exams and primary schools for the growing middle-class who tend to score above average in KCPE exams and who are able to help their pupils with much needed IT skills.

This divide in educational attainment makes it difficult for orphaned and other vulnerable children to escape poverty, shattering hopes and dreams. When the KCPE results were announced earlier this month, over 55% of the graduating pupils *failed* to meet the entry grade to secondary school.

Shortly after the KCPE results were announced, Kenyan news agencies documented a wave of suicides by pupils whose dreams and hopes for a future free from poverty were shattered. The Kenyan authorities have since adjusted the pass grade, which means that ‘only’ 213,000 of the 776,214 pupils who sat the KCPE exams in 2011 will be denied entry to secondary school.

While there will always be some division between the educational opportunities of the rich and the poor, this ought not to be the case at primary school level. If Kenya is to take full advantage of its economic growth and reduce its growing social inequalities the country needs to urgently increase its funding to the Free Primary Education Programme, improve school facilities and take an active stand against illegal school levies.

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