

## Review

# The free education policy in Kenya: A critique

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**Educational reforms are crucial in a country if the reforms benefit the intended target group. One of the educational reforms in Kenya was the introduction of Free Primary Education. This was informed by the need to improve access and equity in provision of education. Informed by the need to eradicate ignorance, poverty and disease, the independent Kenya government took to finance education soon after independence with Free Primary Education being fully realized in 1978. Later following the introduction of structural adjustment programme in 1990s and the World Bank recommendations, cost sharing in education was instituted. This saw a big number of children drop out of school due to poverty and other pressures from the education managers who were charging school levies. The national rainbow coalition government which came to power in 2003 instituted Free Primary Education to actualize one of the campaign pledges. This article critically discusses the Free Primary Education policy in Kenya articulating the benefits and the challenges thereof within the policy formulation framework. Suggestions are made on the best way to develop and implement policies to tackle challenges which emanate from implementing policies in haste.**

**Key words:** Policy, primary education.

## INTRODUCTION

Investment in education is widely recognized as an important element in a country's development strategy. This is because education is the surest most powerful way to promote economic and social progress and to produce responsible and productive citizens (UNICEF, 2001). In Kenya as in many developing countries, it is seen as a magic wand to all problems of development and is regarded as a critical factor in the alleviation of individuals' ignorance, fear and servility and in helping the county move from a traditional way of life to a more modern condition (Court and Ghai, 1974).

In the last six years in Kenya, many reforms in the education sector have been undertaken in order to address the overall goals of the national economic strategy paper (ESP) as well as international development commitments including the millennium development goals, education for all (EFA) and delivery of policies set out in the sectional paper No. 1 of 2005 on policy framework for education, training and research.

The first major initiative of these reforms was the launch and implementation of free primary education (FPE) in January 2003.

Through the free primary education programme, primary school fees and levies were abolished, thus significantly reducing the burden on households in financing primary education in Kenya (MOEST, 2005). This resulted into a major increase in the enrollment for the first school term of the year 2003, as it was clear that the previous costs being charged to parents were the biggest constraints of many children to attend school (MOEST, 2005).

Significant changes were made in the curriculum, for instance, the numbers of primary school subjects were reduced, the pupil teacher ratio increased substantially from 32:1 to 45:1 and the government agreed to have multi-grade teachers in some schools. Further, the selection of teachers for primary schools was moved down to district level. While the government seemed to have made real progress in the launch of Free Primary Education, it soon became clear that most primary schools became over-crowded; books and teachers were not enough, not to mention the transitional problem that was already a problem in secondary schools would

surely spill over to universities (Kathuri, 2006).

## **BACKGROUND TO THE INTRODUCTION OF FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Free and compulsory education in Africa and indeed in the world had its international legal backing from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1989 convention of the rights of the child, the 1990 World Summit for children and the 1990 world conference on education for all held in Jomtien (Thailand). Of great interest is the 1990 convention on the rights of the child. This law translated the needs of children in 96% countries of the world to their education.

This implies that African countries that are signatories to this convention must ensure the rights of children to free compulsory basic education. Education for all puts emphasis on quality of content, subject delivery with a view to eradicating poverty, empowering women, environmental protection and promoting human rights and democracy among others (Arubayi, 2006).

Access to free and compulsory education in Africa is a very big issue against the background that over 50% of primary school children in 47 least developed countries of the world do not have access to education (OECD, 1996). Fafunwa (2001) observes that in the sub Saharan region, over 40 million pupils of primary school going age are unable to enroll. Even amongst those enrolled; about 33% of them are unable to reach primary five before dropping out of school. In the African continent, the introduction of free compulsory and universal basic education led to increased primary school enrollment of students in secondary schools (UNESCO, 2003).

A few countries such as Malawi, Uganda, Nigeria, and Cameroon among others which had implemented the free education policy before Kenya had mixed cases of success, problems and challenges. Kenya (2008) says that some countries have challenged the policy with Nigerians labeling universal primary education (UPE) in the 1980s as the 'Unfulfilled promise Education'. World Bank (2004) notes that when fees were abolished in Malawi (1994) enrollments went up by 51% and in Uganda they went up by 70% in 1996. Cameroon (1999) enrollments saw an increase from 88 to 105% while in Tanzania (2001), rates soared from 57 to 85%. In Kenya the rates went up by 90% after the new policy was introduced in 2003 (MOEST, 2005).

The idea of Free Primary Education was enshrined in the newly independent Kenya government policy. One of the major goals of the Kenya government's development strategy was the attainment of universal primary education. This was first stated in sessional paper No. 10 of 1965 on African socialism in which the government committed itself to eradicating ignorance, poverty and disease. To accelerate the attainment of UPE the government declared free primary education in 1974 from STD 1-4 and full free primary education in 1976

Because of this access to primary education increased. The world declaration of Education for All (Jomtien, 1990) and the world summit for children (1990) committed nations to achieve Education for All by 2015. After Jomtien the government set up mechanisms and a framework to realizing EFA goals. The government further set 2005 as the target year for the attainment of UPE. This goal was boosted when parliament enacted the children's Act which recognizes education as a basic right for all children. To push the agenda for attainment of UPE forward the government declared primary education free in January 2003.

Thus, the idea of free primary education in Kenya which was re-hatched in the advent of the 2002 presidential and general elections by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) politicians where they promised in their manifesto and campaigns for votes to introduce free primary education once they took over power was realized (Kenya, 2008). Indeed once elected, president Kibaki took the step of pushing for the introduction of the free primary education policy. It was finally put into practice in January 2003; a few days after the new government had been sworn to power.

## **POSITIVE EFFECTS OF THE INTRODUCTION OF FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Although the free primary education programme was implemented in the background of political overtones, it has had positive effects on many children and parents in Kenya. The government on its part argues that compulsory free primary education is the first solution to ensuring an equal chance to boys and girls to attend school. The drive to achieve universal primary education is a positive indicator of the nation's commitment to human rights in conformity with the adopted conventions (Kenya, 2008). The current education curriculum in Kenya has been formulated to enhance national unity, social, economic and cultural aspirations of Kenyans (MOEST, 2005).

Parents and citizens have in the past blamed the government for lack of control on the education system which was getting very expensive, with schools charging fees as they pleased. Free primary education is aimed at easing the burden from the parents by abolishing school levies and ensuring equity and accessibility to schools (UNESCO, 2005).

Through the free primary education programme, the government has strategically placed itself as an important stakeholder in the education sector and hopes that this will create a better relation between government representatives, school management committees and parents (Kenya, 2008). It has also been argued that the introduction of the free primary education programme was in recognition of its importance as a basic right of all Kenyan children as articulated in the children's Act of 2001. The introduction of free primary education also led

to a tremendous increase in the enrollment of students in all schools across the country. This was as a result of the abolition of school fees which hitherto had locked out students whose parents would not afford fees payments.

### **SHORTCOMINGS OF THE FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION POLICY**

A study conducted by UNESCO (2005) established that after the initial euphoria of the Free Primary Education policy, there was lack of a sustained and comprehensive communication strategy of the same. There was lack of information on the roles of the various stakeholders, that is, teachers, parents, school committee members, sponsors and local donors. This therefore had led to a situation of apathy and general lack of interest in supporting the policy that was necessary if it was to attain overall success. The study by UNESCO also found out that the implementation of the programme without prior consultation or preparation of teachers and lack of regular communication to sensitize the various stakeholders on their roles had hampered the smooth implementation of the free primary education policy.

There was general misconception about the meaning of free education, with parents taking the view that they were no longer required to participate in school activities. Political leaders on the other hand contributed to this scenario of confusion by indicating to parents and communities that their participation in form of voluntary contributions or funds drives was no longer acceptable (UNESCO, 2005). This had therefore made parents to relax and leave their other responsibilities like counseling and discipline to teachers. The politicians also gave incomplete messages about the Free Primary Education by simply referring to the Free Primary Education as 'free' without addressing the challenges or even specifying parents' or community roles.

Although the introduction of this reform had led to increase in enrollment, that in turn had led to other emerging issues, Kenya (2008) in his study had for example found out that the over enrollment had led to overcrowding of pupils in the few classrooms that were available. This in turn led to difficulties in teaching and adequate attention being given to individual learners. That therefore affected the quality of learning. According to UNESCO (2009) the demands of child friendly schools call for children to be comfortable in class and out of class to enjoy the learning environment and any other environment where the curriculum is delivered. This appeared not to be the case in some schools.

The policy also led pupils who had previously dropped out of school due to many factors related to poverty, and school levies to return. Many of them were average as compared to the class levels they were rejoining. Therefore this led to issues pertaining to lack of discipline among some of the children. This was occasioned by

the fact that some older pupils intimidated their younger colleagues and generally negatively affected them. Being average for a grade also impacts on the survival rates especially for girls, who due to some cultural practices are considered marriageable once they reach teenage though they may still be in primary school.

The increased number of pupils affected teachers since they now had to deal with increased workloads. The increased responsibilities without an equivalent raise in their remuneration had de-motivated many of them (Kenya, 2008). Teachers were not able to give individual attention to the learners especially the slow ones, hence affecting the quality of learning. There is also an acute shortage of teachers as a result of the great increase in pupil enrolments. Most classes were too large to be handled by a single teacher. On average the teacher pupil ratio in most schools was 1:70, which was a serious implication on learning and teaching (UNESCO, 2005).

Sustaining the provision of good quality education against this backdrop is a great challenge to the government. This therefore means that piloting should have been done before the introduction of this reform, since that would have helped to foresee and hence address these challenges. Up to now, a large percentage of funding for the Free Primary Education depends on external donors (UNESCO, 2003). It is inevitable that dependence is put on external donors because of the intense pressure exerted on the fragile existing systems by sudden increase in enrollment of pupils that necessitates continued increase in budgetary provisions. Reliance on donors means that once they pull out from supporting this reform, the government will find it hard to sustain and it might end up failing altogether.

The issue of the arid and semi arid areas was not addressed before the implementation of the Free Primary Education reform. In such areas, schools are far apart and pupils have to travel long distances in a hostile environment before accessing them. In some places there are no schools within walking distance. Even those that are available are poorly maintained with lack of enough classrooms and latrines. A general observation in Kenya has that the arid and semi arid areas have food and water insecurity, under nutrition, parasitic infestations, unhygienic surroundings, chronic poverty, household chores, harmful traditional beliefs and practices, domestic overcrowding and gender discrimination. It would have been proper for such areas to have been considered. If a proper feasibility study had been carried out, such circumstances would have been foreseen and addressed before implementation.

The study carried out by UNESCO (2005) in Kenya established that after an initial increase in enrollment, public schools were beginning to experience a decline in enrollment due to drop outs and to a lesser degree transfer of pupils to private schools. This was attributed to unfriendly learning environments, whereby overcrowded Classrooms and lack of basic facilities like desks and

latrines made learning difficult. Poverty also played a role in the sense that although learning was free; some pupils could not afford things like uniforms, meals and other facilities that they were supposed to avail by themselves. In some homesteads, these children were expected to work to earn so as to upkeep their families. They were depended upon to take care of family businesses like cattle rearing. In others, parents had died due to HIV/AIDS. The children therefore had no option but to fend for themselves, hence learning was not a priority. If proper planning had been done before implementation of this reform, scenarios such as this would have been foreseen and addressed. The free education grants sometimes delay in being disbursed to schools. In some cases, it has been reported even in the local dailies that the funds are disbursed either in 2nd or 3rd term implying that schools make their own plans to "survive" until they receive the funds. This hinders learning and the operations of the affected schools. Kenya (2008) observes that the government calendar year and school year differ; making delayed funding to affect procurement of goods and services. This could be an indication that the government is straining the Free Primary Education policy, since it depends largely on donor funds hence has to wait to receive them before doing the disbursement.

Enough training on school funds management and procurement procedures for school head teachers and management committees should have been carried out. Since the government did not conduct the training, there have been many cases of misappropriation of Free Primary Education funds and even corrupt practices in the procurement of goods and services for primary schools. Training programme on financial management, procurement and transition into Free Primary Education learning should have been put into place prior to the introduction of this reform. Some school head resigned in fear of handling the funds and the accounting procedures prescribed by the government. Such heads felt incompetent in financial management.

All these shortcomings then and the way the government is addressing the challenges as they occur make such a good reform as the free primary education to be in danger of failing. Yet if proper procedures had been followed before the introduction and implementation of the free primary reform, then such would have been handled easily incase they came up. Kenya (2008), notes that the effect of this unplanned and untargeted advocacy on the education reform has been translated into lack of coordination between the stakeholders and the government.

#### **FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION POLICY A CRITICAL VIEW**

The free primary education reform in Kenya was Introduced as a result of political euphoria arising from

the 2002 general elections whose results brought the National Rainbow Coalition to power, under President Mwai Kibaki. This seems to have been in line with Marshall and Peters' (1999) assertion that every major decision concerning education is a political act and an authoritative resolution of tensions between competing interests and purposes. This is necessary in order to determine a common policy and to resolve the tensions between the conflicting parties.

According to Canningham (1985 in Rose, 2004) policy making should undergo the steps of initiation, definition, deliberation, enactment and consequences. In the initiation stage a problem that needs to be resolved is identified. The problem identification leads to policy initiation. This in turn leads to problem definition. In this regard, this stage is likened to the case of a medical problem that cannot be treated until it is accurately diagnosed. In such a case, focusing on symptoms instead of the causes of the problem does not usually produce constructive treatment or action. This therefore means that the very basis of dealing with issues rests in defining them accurately. Canningham (1985) postulates that, without defining issues accurately, constructive action then is often an accident.

The third step of deliberation involves looking at issues or problems from as many aspects as possible, constructing alternative courses of action and examining the implication of each for the various reference groups. Canningham (1985) notes that this is a difficult process that at times requires the policy formulator to look at the politics and dynamics of the system vis a vis the community. This is because haste in this step can be a serious error since backing off or undoing the policy once it is formulated is somewhat more difficult than establishing one in a new area for the first time. Involvement of key public and social systems for advisory purposes is therefore useful and important. The involvement of such groups apart from providing for input also prepares them for various courses of action and generates their support for the initiative.

At the enactment stage, the implementation of the policy is left to the management or administration of the various units and sub-units for which it was meant. In the education sector, this could be the provincial directors of education, the district education officers and the head teacher of schools. At the consequences stages, the actual results of the policy are now to be perceived, digested and re-evaluated for further action. At this point, mid-course corrections become possible. Looking at stages of policy formulation, Marshall and Peters (1999) observe that the formulation of educational policies on the basis of economic and social policies is a complex operation that calls for both political sensitivity and professional understanding of the ways in which political purposes are altered when translated to the field of education. This therefore requires that governments achieve consistency in policies and encourage sectors

which can attract extra-budgetary resources.

Atkinson (1993) also argues that it is only on the basis of appropriate information and cool headed diagnosis of an education system that a government can make better choices. It is however only a first step. This is because a major educational decision is a compromise between competing factors, which makes it a generator of tensions. Unless the latter are recognized by politicians, planners and administrators and steps taken to ease them, the application of the policy may be endangered. This assertion is true given that before the implementation of the free primary education reform, the stages involved in policy formulation were not undertaken. The stakeholders were not involved extensively nor were they consulted and their views incorporated before the final implementation. This could be the reason why the increase in pupils' enrollment has led to teacher de-motivation. That is why, Eicher (1984) also adds that policy planners need to identify interest groups and assess their openness to reform. In the education sector, these interest groups would include the providers of education, that is, teachers and parents, students and communities. If teachers and communities are well organized they can be a powerful force in supporting or opposing any educational reform. A government's policy is judged by its results. Given the financial and social constraints which limit the capacities of a government to respond to its peoples expectations, clear and just priorities must be set, announced in official statements and maintained for periods of time that are sufficient for their success (Birdshall, 1989).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It will not be a misstatement to mention that the introduction of the Free Primary Education policy in Kenya was a step in the right direction. This is despite its political origin. The implementation of the programme brought a lot of relief to most poor parents who hitherto had found it difficult to sustain their children in primary school. The manner in which it was initiated and implemented however, made it to be vulnerable and liable to many challenges. These challenges are now likely to endanger this noble reform. It is however a big lesson to education reformers and politicians that when formulating such policies that have a big impact in society, care should be taken to ensure that they follow the correct stages of policy formulation.

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