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# Effects of Schooling on Social Stratification in Kenya: Focus on Inequalities in Kenya's Education System

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### ABSTRACT

Access to education is one of the basic rights of a child. This right has been hampered in Kenya by social-economic factors beyond the control of disadvantaged communities. The imbalances in resource distribution has resulted not only in limited access to education but poor transition for children from poor and marginalized communities. Although the government at independence identified poverty, ignorance, and disease as the three enemies of development, little has been done to ensure equal access to education for all children. Where attempts have been made, poor planning has negated the gains made. This paper recommends for affirmative actions to be undertaken to reduce the existing inequalities.

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### Introduction

Social stratification may be defined as an arrangement of social groups in terms of superiority and inferiority (Bilton, Bonnett, Jones, Skinner, Stanworth, & Webster, 1996) or a systematic ranking of people or groups of people based on unequal distribution of resources and access to life chances (Budowski & Tillmann, 2014). This means inequality among different social groups in one society. Ezewu's definition reveals more. He refers to social stratification as a process of categorization and the way in which members of each stratum relate to one another (Ezewu, 1983). All the scholars point to social stratification as skewed social disparities which result in social inequalities, social rankings, and social categorizations either by design or due to prevailing socio-economic conditions.

In Kenya, social stratification refers to the various social classes and groupings which exist in the country based on income, educational level, and occupation. The disparities are basically economic-based in nature but with implications on social-political standing. Max Weber identified three separate elements of social stratification that equally apply to the Kenyan context as class, status, and political power (Bray, Clarke & Stephens, 1986). Broadly, Kenya is divided into two main categories classified as the *haves* and *haves-not* or what has gained politically currency recently as *hustlers* and *dynasties* (Abraham, 2018). There are further classifications within each category.

There are three basic levels in Kenya's 8-4-4 system of education. Although a new competency-based system of education was launched recently (KICD, 2017), the 8-4-4 arrangement is still the education system in place. The first and second levels of education refer to primary and secondary schools, respectively. Social stratification here implies that a child's chance of entering any level of education depends on where he/she is brought up (Datta, 1994). This paper sought to show the effects of schooling in a stratified Kenyan society

where the *haves* and *have-nots* are competing for a common national cake that has not been equitably distributed. My approach is general in perspective though with pertinent references to both primary and secondary education in Kenya. I have concluded the paper with a call for affirmative actions

### The Manifest Versus the Ideal in Kenya's Education System: Disparities in Income and Resource Distributions

Kenya is ranked by the World Bank as one of the four *unequal* countries in the world. While the few rich controls 42% of the country's income, the bottom 10% poor of the population control less than 1% (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 23 May 2006). The level of disparity paints a very grim picture of income and resource distribution in the country. Presenting a paper entitled, *Pulling Apart, Facts and Figures on Inequality in Kenya*, Professor Anyang' Nyong'o, former minister for Planning and National Development, clarified that inequality is not just about money. He said that it also about differences in life expectancy, in the differing rate of HIV/AIDS according to where you live, about jobs, *schools*, decent housing and access to clean water (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 27 October 2004). He added that there were differences in school enrollment. Nearly every child in Central Province attended primary school compared to about one in three in North Eastern province. For secondary schools, the difference is even bigger.

Nyong'o's *Inequality Survey* clearly depicts imbalances and inequalities in Kenya in general, and in the education sector. It gives the implication that income distribution and availability of resources have a relationship with school enrollment and poverty index. Prof. Nyong'o added that 'six out of ten wage earners in Kenya are to be found in Nairobi, Central, and Rift Valley provinces.' In other words, these three provinces have 60% of the total jobs in Kenya. These are the provinces with the highest enrolment in both primary and secondary schools. Of interest is Central Province primary school enrolment which stood at 106% in 2000

compared to North Eastern Province which had 17.8% enrolment at the same time (Ibid). Prof. Eshiwani (Standard Newspaper [Nairobi], 25 May 2006) says that the 'poverty index is directly proportional to education levels.' Retired president Moi was appalled and shocked after touring some marginalized parts of the Eastern Province. He saw no sign of government even after 43 years of independence.

The above scenario is in sharp contrast with the government stated position since independence. At independence in 1963, Kenya government was faced with three evils that required to be eradicated: poverty, ignorance, and disease (Eshiwani, 1993). To combat these evils, the government set up a commission which was known as *Ominde Commission* to formulate national policies for education. Among other things, the commission came up with nine objectives of education which included a provision that stated, "Education must promote social equality and remove divisions of race, tribe and religion." But the three evils are still there with us, with poverty taking a deeper and steeper dive. Prof. Mutakha Kangu, lecturer at Moi University, asserts that the gap between the poor and the rich is a 'bomb that must be diffused before it explodes' (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 23 May 2006).

In principle, the succeeding governments have viewed education as the most effective vehicle for social equality and national development. The Moi government formed several Commissions with the intention of making education relevant and equitable. The Kamunge Report (1988), for example, defines education as a process of bringing equity in social and economic development. The report adds that "the government has embarked on a policy of providing equal education and training opportunities to all areas of Kenya in an attempt to correct imbalances and disparities which existed at independence." It went on to say that the focus of the government was to achieve universal primary education. The 8-4-4 system of education was initiated with the overriding objective of 'enhancing the development of vocational skills and impart attitudes for self-reliance and national development' (Kamunge Report 1988, 14).

The Kibaki government in its *Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation 2003- 2007*, acknowledges that 'education is a key determinant of earnings and therefore an important exit route from poverty.' The government therefore gave education a top priority in its development agenda. The Recovery Strategy paper postulates that education improves people's ability to take advantage of the opportunities that can improve their well-being as individuals and enable them to participate more effectively in the community and markets (Republic of Kenya. Office of the Minister for Planning and National Development, 2003).

The paper goes on to say that higher educational attainment for a household head significantly reduces the likelihood of a household being poor. Likewise, the education level of mothers affects the health status of the entire family. For this reason, the Kibaki government introduced free primary education with the aim of ensuring 100% enrolment in primary schools. It is evidently clear that education can lead to social and economic mobility. Datta (1994) concurs with the fact that education change the fortunes of a peasant's son and thus propel him to a higher social class. Education in this light is the most effective channel of social mobility.

#### **Effects of Education on Social Mobility: Focus on Access to Primary and Secondary Education**

As referred to above, education plays a crucial role in social mobility. Most of the elites in Kenya and Africa at

large started from 'rags', but they rose to the privileged positions they occupy today due largely to education (Bray, et al, 1986). This is especially true of the political class, the old cadre civil servants and some top businessmen. The current mobility in both the social and economic fronts however is at the individual level rather than community level.

The few individuals who achieve new social statuses through education find themselves in either the higher or the middle social classes. Some may only improve their statuses in their respective social classes without moving a notch higher. Those who land themselves in higher and privileged social standing perpetuate themselves through educating their children in high cost schools in Kenya and overseas. These include the political class, businessmen and the middle class. The Middle-class stratum includes lawyers, civil servants, and others. Their aim is to maintain their status-quo (Mundia 2005).

The poor on the other hand are going through a vicious cycle of poverty. An editorial in the Daily Nation Newspaper ([Nairobi], 24 May 2006) captured the plight of the poor in Kenya very well. It says that in a progressive manner, the number of the 'have-nots have grown to about 60% of the population. In contrast, only 10% of the population owns the nation's wealth. The poor cannot access quality education; hence they live in a vicious cycle that they cannot extricate themselves from.' The editorial concludes with a warning; "A nation of few billionaires and millions of paupers is dangerous." To imagine the poor communities in Kenya attaining vertical social mobility through education in the current socio-economic setting may be equated to "a camel going through the eye of the needle" (Matthew 19: 23).

Prewitt as reported by Ezewu (1983) carried out a study in Kenya which revealed that wealthier and better educated parents who utilize private nursery schools and who deploy resources which ultimately provide initial advantages which are difficult to match among the poor, uneducated and, rural Kenyans. In this case the poor are disadvantaged right from the initial stages of schooling. Okech Kendo (Standard Newspaper [Nairobi], 25 May 2006), paints a graphic picture of the situation in some parts of Kenya. He says, "There are 1000 locations across the country ...where classrooms are withered tree shades; where a candidate scoring D-plus in KCSE is an occasion to party, where the only university graduate is the local District Officer."

At independence, any level of education mattered. As Eshiwani (1993) observes, during this time, emphasis at all levels was on academic subjects rather than practical skills. Parents and school-goers saw education as a tool to equip the youths with certificates which would lead them to social and economic advancement. The system of education then lacked the ability to inculcate practical and technical skills on the students to make them to be self-reliant (Ibid). This resulted in learning with the sole motive of passing national examinations to acquire certificates at the expense of acquisition of technical skills. Eshiwani adds that the 8-4-4 system of education was initiated in 1985 due to the overarching need for technical skills and self-reliance. This system of education was earmarked to provide adequate education and training at every level of education.

The implication emanating from the 8-4-4 system was that each level of study was meant to be 'complete' and thus could lead to employment if transition to the higher level failed. Kamunge report (1988) show that this goal was to be achieved through training in indigenous technology, small scale industries and entrepreneurship skills. These were to be

included in the primary and secondary schools' curricula. The objective is yet to be realized. The Kamunge Report further emphasizes education, training, and research to provide skills and appropriate technology for effective development of crops, livestock, forestry, minerals, and industries in agricultural areas (Ibid).

The above view finds support in recent findings. The current stated position of the Government of Kenya espouses the view that 'higher educational attainment for a household head significantly reduces the likelihood of a household being poor' (Republic of Kenya. Office of the Minister for National Planning and Economic Development 2003, 31). This view is supported by *ActionAid's* findings (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 23 May 2006) which show that Kenya will become *wealthier* if most of its citizens acquire post-secondary education.

Post-secondary education cannot be obtained without access to both primary and secondary education. *ActionAid*, a non-governmental organization, makes very startling and interesting revelations. First, the study advises the policy makers that putting more public and community investment on educating people to higher levels would address the problem of inequality in the country. Second, the study shows that the level of poverty for individuals decreased with the increase in the level of education. Finally, the study shows that households with members with secondary education have lower poverty levels than those who do not have any education. The study therefore affirms that education influences an individual and community standing.

#### **Primary and Secondary Schools Enrolment and Transition: Implications for Social Stratification**

The *Inequality Survey* presented by Professor Nyong'o (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 27 October 2004) show that children from rich families still dominate in secondary schools, which are funded by parents. He said in 2002, 86% of children from rich families were attending primary school compared to less than 61% for those from poor homes. The report indicates that at the secondary level, only 4% of those from the poorest households enrolled in secondary schools, compared to 28.2% for those from wealthy families. Prof. Nyong'o adds that only 87.6% of eligible children were in primary school in 2002. The situation changed with the introduction of free primary education. The impact of free primary education resulted in the unprecedented enrolment of 104% in 2004.

In the 2006 *Economic Survey* of 2006, the then Minister for Planning and National Development painted a picture of unparalleled success in primary school enrollment with a historic hit of 7.6 million pupils (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 26 May 2006). The apparent success was however not matched with the number of teachers. Thus, what appeared as a milestone in enrolment resulted in a huge imbalance in teacher-pupil ratio which stood at 1:60 in 2004 (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 27 October 2004). The emerging dilemma gained credence in KCPE results of 2005 which indicated a significant drop in performance compared to the previous years. This was attributed to the disparities in teacher-pupil ratio with the added problem of overcrowding in classes. It was reported that the national best student in 2005 could not 'have made the top 100 list' in 2004 (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 30 December 2005).

Transition to the next level of education is determined by merit, available vacancies in the public schools or universities, and financial ability of the student's parent. The reality however is that most schools in the less developed regions of Kenya hardly meets the merit criteria. They need an affirmative action to advance to a higher level. This is

what Hon. Abdi Mohammed, the Minister for Regional Development, was appealing for in 2006 form one selection. He appealed for lower entry points for students from marginalized communities to qualify for provincial and national schools (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 3 January 2006). The wealthy parents have several options to consider when it comes to choosing of a school. This is not so for the poor in Kibera and other marginalized regions in Kenya!

The overall implication of the above is that the lopsided relationship existing between the rich and the poor in Kenya is far from over. It is in this light that one can safely conclude that those at the lower social stratum have very limited chances of accessing quality education and proceeding to higher education. The implication is that majority of the poor in Kenya will continue to languish in abject poverty while the few rich will continue to bite a bigger junk of the proverbial national cake. The few among the poor who manage to squeeze through make insignificant impact in their own communities even though they themselves might be propelled by the same education to a higher hierarchy. There is no denial though that education regardless of any level is significant to the individual's empowerment, community advancement, and to national socio-economic development.

#### **Bridging the Inequality 'Gaps' in Education: Affirmative Actions**

From the foregone, drastic steps need to be taken to bridge the excess imbalances. The government has not been able to translate the good intentions it has on paper into practice. The 8-4-4 system of education was earmarked to prolong primary education for many to have access and to equip the pupils with basic skills adequate to the pertinent level (Kamunge Report, 1988). Even with the current shift to the Competency-Based Curriculum (Kitur, 2020), the underlying bottlenecks need to be overhauled, otherwise the experiences of the 8.4.4 will resurface in the new system again. Below are some of the factors which can help to make education equitable in the long term.

First, the introduction of free primary education was a step in the right direction. When launching the *Economic Survey* 2006 (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 23 May 2006), the minister for Planning and National Development mentioned the free primary education as a Government strategy for attaining the Universal Primary Education (UPE). For this objective to be achieved, it was prudent for the Government to improve on the ratio between teachers and the students at all levels. This was never done. Ten years later, the problems of imbalance in student/teacher ratio and congestion were experienced at all levels of learning (Mukhanji, Ndiku and Obaki, 2016).

Second, there is need for special (informal) programs for the marginalized pastoralist communities and the urban poor who reside in the slums. Oxfam (2006) have designed an alternative system of education in Northern Kenya that is non-formal. The government has not officially recognized this system of education, yet it is helping the children of nomadic herders to access education. There is an allusion in the Government's strategic plan towards this end, but it has not yet been implemented (Republic of Kenya. Office of the Minister for Planning and National Development 2003, 31). The government should support the efforts of Oxfam for the herders to access education. The government should also enable bright children from marginalized communities to study for free up to university as an investment for future development.

Third, the government should decentralize the management of resources. The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) and the Local Government Transfer Fund (LATF) have for the first time been devolved to regional levels (Daily Nation [Nairobi], 23 May 2006). The Government needs to decentralize most if its development plans for all regions to have equitable share of the national cake. Among other things, the government has so far also decentralized the management of HIV/AIDS Funds, the bursary funds for secondary schools and rural electrification funds. These are steps in the right direction. The government should do more towards this end.

Finally, making county governments viable. According to Ngigi and Busolo (2019), the espousal of devolved system of government in Kenya was a desire of citizens who wanted access to public services closer to them. The expectation was that this could promote democracy and accountability, foster national unity by recognizing diversity, enhance people's self-governance, enable communities to manage their affairs, protect and promote interests and rights of minorities and the marginalized, and ensure equitable distribution of resources. This noble goal however has been dogged by various challenges which include disagreements between the national government and county governments on allocation of funds, delayed release of funds by the national treasury, little technical support for the implementation of functions, corruption, and lack of public participation among others. Successful devolution means shared prosperity nationally and locally. This will in turn increase access to schooling, strengthen transition rates from one level of learning to the next, improve personal development and ultimately eradicate poverty.

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