

Implementation of Universal Primary Education in Kenya: An Analysis of its Impact and Progress towards Achieving the EFA Goal in Kisii District

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Abstract

The world conference on EFA held in Jomtien – Thailand in 1990 and subsequently in Dakar-Senegal in 2000 initiated a significant global educational agenda. An agenda that not only emphasised the need for improved access to education of all school aged children but also learning and acquisition of quality basic education and skills training, thereby enabling the possessor to participate actively in the various economic activities of a nation. The Kenya Government became a partner in this great global educational agenda in 2003 through the introduction of FPE. This paper is an analysis of the impact of FPE on the chosen schools in Kisii district, in Kenya. The analysis is based on a recent small-scale study involving head teachers purposefully chosen from twenty schools, review of both relevant documents and current related studies. The analysis reveals that the implementation of FPE policy created a positive outcome evidenced by increased enrolment in schools. This was significant especially to the disadvantaged children; children who previously had no access to education. There was also evidence of significant reduction in the repetition rate. However, the increased enrolment had a number of setbacks, for instance, high teacher pupil ratio and inadequate physical facilities. It emerged that many schools did not have enough classrooms and teachers to cater for the large number of pupils enrolled. The list is endless and says something serious about the quality of FPE programme and the schools' progress towards achieving EFA goal by 2015.

Keywords: *Free primary education; Education for all; Universal primary education; Kenya*

Introduction

In January 2003 the NARC (National Rainbow Coalition) government implemented the free primary education programme with the aim of providing more opportunities to the disadvantaged school age children (Sifuna, 2005). The programme created a positive outcome because it resulted in significant increase in enrolment in a majority of the schools (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2004). The policy abolished school fees and other levies arguing that fees and levies posed a serious hindrance to children wanting to access education in schools (Sifuna, 2005). The free primary education policy has been described as laudable (Rob et al., 2004), because of its effect on gross enrolment rate (GER) which increased from 92% in 2002 to 104% in 2003 of the school age children population (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2004), resulting in more than 1.5 million children who were previously out -of -school joining primary schools (Rob et al, 2004).

However, serious challenges have bedevilled the implementation of the FPE policy. They include congested classrooms, limited physical facilities and shortage of qualified teachers, which negatively impacted on the quality of teaching and learning on one hand and contributed to indiscipline in schools on the other (Yieke, 2006). This paper therefore reviews the FPE policy highlighting its achievements and challenges. The paper also assesses the progress of the chosen schools towards achieving EFA goals.

Study Background

Kenya is among the five African countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that have abolished primary school tuition (offering FPE) in an attempt to resurrect and strengthen their education systems (Riddell, 2003). The other four are Malawi (1994); Uganda (1997); Tanzania (2001) and Zambia (2002) (Riddell, 2003). The measure increased both gross and net enrolment rate significantly.

The implementation of free primary education programme in Kenya has been recognised as one of the NARC government's pre-election pledges/promises in 2002 (Rob et al., 2004; IRIN, 2003; Riddell, 2003).

The Kenya government policy on free primary education has been recognised to be in line with the international universal primary education goals and aspirations (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2004; Rob et al., 2004). Further review of literature reveals the following trends or sequence of events within the international context (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2004; Rob et al., 2004):

- The Universal Declaration of Human rights adopted in 1948, declared that “everyone has a right to education”
- The world conference of Education For All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, sparked off a new impetus in basic education especially in the so-called vision and renewed commitment.
- In 2000 the Dakar Conference renewed the development in achieving UPE in the African continent and set the following as one of the EFA goals “Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality by 2015. This further endorsed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which among other things has set a target to “ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary school.”
- The Kenya government's policy on free primary education is also in line with Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and the Economic Recovery Strategy (ERS) for Wealth and Employment Creation goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015 (Rob et al., 2004).

The forgone events constitute significant landmarks in the development of basic education.

The EFA has been recognised as an international commitment with an intention of bringing the benefits of education to ‘every citizen in every society’ (Education Human Development Network, 2008). The commitment was launched in a meeting in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. The meeting consisted of a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, and development agencies such as UNESCO and World Bank (Education Human Development Network, 2008).

At the Jomtien meeting a framework of Action was agreed upon and the six EFA goals are enshrined within the framework. The six EFA goals include (Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2000): -

- Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;

- Ensuring that by 2015 all children particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adult are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;
- Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
- Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
- Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The implementation of free primary education

Since independence, the Kenya government has had two attempts or interventions of implementing free primary education (Sifuna, 2005). The first was in the 1970s, which was unsuccessful, and the second is the current one which was introduced in January 2003 (Sifuna, 2005). The second attempt is just what Sifuna describes as a re-introduction of the free primary education policy or rather a repeat (Sifuna, 2005).

Further review of literature reveals that since independence the Kenya government has always desired to offer free primary education programme in order to reach and support the children of the disadvantaged communities (Sifuna, 2005; Rob et al., 2004). In the 1963 election, the Kenya Africa National Union (KANU) the then ruling party committed itself in its manifesto entitled ‘What a KANU government offers you’ to provide a minimum of seven years of free primary education. Similar commitment was repeated in the 1969 general election KANU manifesto. Despite government commitment rhetoric on the provision of free primary education nothing much happened until the early 1970s (Sifuna, 2005; Rob et al., 2004).

In tackling the previous free primary education policy, the government initially used what could be described as a ‘piecemeal approach’ whereby in 1971 the first presidential declaration abolished tuition fees for the districts with unfavourable geographical conditions. They include Marsabit, Isiolo, and Samburu, in North- Eastern province; Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, Narok, Elgeyo Marakwet and Olkajuado in Rift Valley province and Tana River and Lamu in Coast province (Sifuna, 2005).

On the 12th December 1973 during the celebration of the ‘Ten Great Years of Independence’ the second presidential declaration abolished tuition fees for those in standards I- IV in all districts in the country as well as standardised fees structure for those in standard V- VII. Subsequent presidential declarations abolished school fees in all primary education (Sifuna, 2005). The subsequent presidential decrees of 1974 resulted in significant rise in enrolment by a million above the estimated figure of about 400,000. The total enrolment figure for standard I-VI increased from 1.8 million in 1973 to nearly 2.8 million in January 1974 (Sifuna, 2005).

Consequently, the schools lost revenue as a result of the abolition of tuition fees and other levies and there was significant pressure on the physical facilities and teaching staff. There was overcrowding in classrooms and the supply of teaching and learning materials underwent a severe strain. In terms of the teaching force, at the time of the pronouncement the country was already experiencing serious shortage of properly trained teachers (Sifuna, 2005).

Some school management committees introduced 'building levy' in order to raise school revenue. But the building levy was varied across districts and it was realised to be generally higher than the school fees charged prior to the presidential declaration (Sifuna, 2005). The levy caused serious frustrations to the parents with the result that many parents withdrew their children from schools. It is estimated that nearly one to two million school age children were affected. The simple argument at the time was that many of the children who had enrolled following the presidential decree dropped out following the introduction of the building levy. The high dropout was attributed to very high levies as well as the poor quality of education that was being offered following government intervention (Sifuna, 2005). Building levies made primary education much more expensive than before and became a permanent feature (Sifuna, 2005).

In the late 1970s the government introduced two policies that had significant impact on enrolment. They include abolishing all forms of levies in all public primary schools in the country in 1978 and introduction of free milk programme for primary school children in 1979. The two policy changes increased primary school enrolment by 23% compared to the previous normal annual increase of 0.67%. In 1985 the president ordered schools to stop collecting all sorts of activity fees.

However, in the late 1980s the Kenya government through the Sessional paper No.6 on Education and Training for the next Decade and Beyond, recommended the reduction of the growth rate of the education recurrent budget to sustainable levels (Republic of Kenya, 1988; UNICEF, 1992). This was followed by the introduction of the cost-sharing policy in mid-1980s. The World Bank and IMF influenced this policy through their structural adjustment programme. The policy called upon parents and the school committees to finance capital and recurrent expenditure of primary and secondary education; while the government's main responsibility remained that of payment of teachers' salary, education administration and funding limited school facilities. The cost-sharing policy greatly influenced reduced public expenditure on education, especially at the primary school level. Cost-sharing also significantly contributed to high dropout and low quality of primary education in the country (Riddell, 2003). All these measures or rather development eradicated free primary education in Kenya and marked the end of the government's first FPE attempt or intervention (Rob et al., 2004; Sifuna, 2005).

The second attempt of introducing free primary education again was initiated by the NARC government during the 2002 general election manifesto pledge (Sifuna, 2005; IRIN, 2003; Rob et al., 2004). To fulfil their election pledge, the NARC government through the ministry of Education Science and Technology (MOEST) launched the Free Primary Education on January 6, 2003 (Sifuna, 2005). The NARC Government therefore, re-introduced free primary education (Rob et al., 2004). As a result an estimated 1.5 million children who were previously out school were enrolled in primary education. The NARC government was praised because of

implementing the FPE policy, which was described as laudable (Rob et al. 2004). Provision of instructional materials especially textbooks was recognised as one of the major achievements of the FPE programme (UNESCO, 2005).

But Yieke (2006) and UNESCO (2005) note that the policy was rushed without consultation with various key stakeholders such as teachers and parents, among others. Many issues were rushed through without being addressed adequately. According to Sifuna (2005) the government did not carry out a situation analysis before implementing FPE. The result was serious confusion amongst teachers, parents, school committees, sponsors and local donors. Also there was still lack of clear guidelines on admission, resulting in the entry of over-age children (UNESCO, 2005). Also FPE disbursements were not always done on time and the procurement procedures have also been too cumbersome and time consuming. The delay in disbursement of funds by the Kenyan Government is still noticeable four to five years on (Kenya, 2008). There has also been lack of sustained and comprehensive communication strategy for FPE (Kenya, 2008). This suggests that a majority of the education stakeholders are left in limbo. Other challenges besieging the implementation of the programme include unavailability of sufficient physical facilities, school furniture, equipment and teachers among others (Rob et al., 2004; Kenya, 2008). In other words there were serious shortfalls in instructional materials, building funds and furniture (Riddell, 2003). The result is overcrowded classrooms and overburdened teachers, which are likely to negatively affect the quality of education being offered (Rob et al. 2004; Sifuna, 2005; Yieke, 2006; Kenya, 2008). The other challenge undermining the policy include, pupils being in inappropriate classes. For instance, only a quarter of the pupils are actually in a grade that is suitable for their age and 44 percent were over-age for their grade by two or more years, with the result that the learning achievement was negatively affected (UNESCO, 2005). Therefore, while the NARC government has been praised for the implementation of the FPE policy, to many it is a repeat of policy. Based on the experience of implementation of the previous FPE policy and the challenges besieging the current FPE policy, critics consider it to be a passing cloud (Sifuna, 2005).

Methodology

This investigation has the intention of firstly, gaining an insight into the achievements and challenges associated with the FPE programme in Kisii district; and secondary to be able to gauge the schools' progress towards achieving EFA goals.

The study employed a quantitative research design and used purposeful sampling technique involving twenty head teachers drawn from twenty primary schools in Kisii district (Robinson, 2002; McQueen and Knussen, 2002; De Vaus, 2002). The twenty schools were selected from rural and urban setting or contexts i.e. ten from each context.

Open-ended questionnaires were used. According to Wiersma (1991), open-ended questionnaires allow the subjects or rather respondents the freedom to construct or elaborate on their answers, thus providing them an opportunity for ideas and views to emerge. To some degree it facilitates, the flow, range and development of responses. However, one of the limitations of the open-ended questionnaire technique is that it lacks the ability to probe.

The questionnaires were posted and returned within two weeks. The response rate was 100%, which was excellent. The schools involved in the study ranged in sizes from 200 to 700 pupils on roll but within a single geographical area i.e. Kisii district.

The head teachers who participated ranged in experience of headship from a few years to over 20 years, with an age range from mid 30s to late 50s. Because of the open-ended nature of the questionnaires, the resulting data was analysed into various themes. There were 17 males and 3 females in the group.

Of course, any such study has limitations. So, for example, it should be remembered that the findings reported here are only based on the head teachers' perspectives. Indeed it would be interesting to collect views from others within and without schools i.e. other stakeholders. However, the findings do provide important insights into successes and challenges associated with the FPE and therefore give an insight into how the schools are progressing towards achieving EFA goals.

Findings

The findings are grouped into

- a) The impact of FPE policy
- b) Challenges besieging FPE policy.

On the impact of FPE policy, it emerged that the implementation of FPE programme created a positive outcome because it increased enrolment in many schools. This was significant especially to the disadvantaged children. There was also evidence of significant reduction in the repetition rate.

In terms of challenges facing the FPE programme several of them emerged, namely,

high teacher: pupil ratio, for instance, it emerged that in some schools the ratio was 1:70 which was far beyond the recommended maximum rate of 1:40. Such a high ratio has got its own challenges also. For instance, teachers found it impossible to pay attention to all learners, especially the slow ones. Also teachers were not able to give adequate assignments to the pupils, as they could not cope with the marking and teaching workload.

There was also an issue associated with teaching- learning materials as a major challenge facing the system. Under the FPE programme, every pupil is entitled to free writing materials e.g. pencils, pens and exercise books. It emerged that textbooks were being shared in the ratio of one textbook to five pupils. Sharing of textbooks affected their accessibility to the books while at home and many have to do their homework early in the morning the next day when in school. This says something about the amount of work the teachers have to give to the pupils. Shortages of supplementary reading books were also identified in the study.

There was also the issue of inadequate physical facilities. It emerged that most schools did not have adequate classroom to accommodate the large number of pupils enrolled under the FPE programmes. For instance, classrooms appeared to be generally congested and there was hardly any space for free movement during lessons. Also a number of classroom conditions were poor, for instance, lighting depended only on sunlight, which was sometimes inadequate. Also in some schools they had introduced school mats for children to sit on since there were no sufficient desks. But a majority of the teachers felt that the sitting on the mats affected the children's writing skills and general physical development.

Frequent pupils' mobility was also an issue. Teachers complained that pupils' frequent transfers from one school to another at any point of the term and in any class affected content delivery. They observed some pupils who joined a particular school may have missed out for a term or several months and were likely to find some topics that had already been covered in their new school. This suggests that the teachers had to look for ways of providing them with remedial lessons but their efforts were hampered by the large workload due to overcrowded classrooms.

Besides, there were issues with water and sanitation facilities. For instance, in urban schools, piped water was reported to be quite irregular, such that some places received water twice a week. Therefore pupils were learning under unhygienic conditions. Toilets were also reported to be in very poor conditions and there was hardly any water to flush or clean them. It is important to note that some of these toilets were meant for as many as a half the number they were now serving. They were reported to be always in a mess.

Fluid enrolment was also reported to be an issue and was attributed to the following factors: -

- i) Enrolment not restricted to the beginning of the year
- ii) Some children felt uncomfortable in the lower classes due to their size and age and therefore their parents/guardians insisted on them being enrolled in the upper primary classes.
- iii) Pupils who had moved from rural schools to urban schools often experienced certain problems in learning in class because the language of instruction was mainly English yet they were previously used to teachers speaking in their mother tongue.
- iv) Finally, financially able parents transferred their children from public to private schools and in most cases those who moved were the bright ones and the situation affected spirit of competition between pupils in class.

The study also observed that the government allocation of Kshs. 1,020 per child per year was found to be insufficient and lower and a review was necessary in order to correspond with the changing needs in schools.

The study also identified lack of sufficient manpower in many areas. For instance, there was evidence of lack of professionalism in the monitoring, evaluation and inspection of schools. The number of inspectors was noted to be low which obviously not only slowed the inspection process but also affected the quality monitoring processes.

Besides, the study observed that parents had left everything to the teachers and the government and therefore seemed not being interested in the teaching- learning of their children. This was attributed to lack of clarity in the FPE policy implementation process.

The study also revealed that head teachers were overloaded with FPE funds' responsibilities and therefore had little time to supervise or support teaching and learning process effectively (lack of instructional leadership)

The study also noted that there was poor distribution of teachers among schools, resulting in some schools having more teachers than others. Also course books were reported to be of poor quality, especially in content, thus negatively impacting on the curriculum delivery.

The other challenge was linked to nursery/pre-primary school attendance. It emerged that FPE primary education affected nursery school and pre-primary school attendance. The argument put forward is that FPE does not cover pre-primary/nursery school and therefore they have to pay fees. But a majority of them do not attend nursery school/ pre-primary level and instead join standard one directly yet they cannot read and therefore compelling teachers to teach them letter and numbers which they should have covered in nursery schools. This makes the work of the teachers difficult.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of this study agrees with the previous studies (Sifuna, 2005; Sanders, 2007; Riddell, 2003) that the FPE policy was an appropriate one in dealing with poor schools attendance and in particular offering a chance to children from disadvantaged background.

The study also agrees with other studies such as Yieke, (2006) in that that the implementation of the FPE policy was rushed without proper consultation with various key stakeholders. The result was confusion among stakeholders. Also a majority of the problem that have been identified in the study and other previous studies links them to poor or lack of planning. Some of the challenges identified in the study include, poor distribution of teachers resulting in some schools having more teachers than others therefore affecting the teachers: students ratio. Other challenges include lack of adequate classrooms, desks and teaching- learning materials. The worry is that if these problems are not addressed appropriately they are likely to undermine the FPE policy as a whole.

Conclusion

The introduction of free primary education in Kenya in the 1970s and 2003 resulted in an enormous increase in enrolment in schools beyond expectations. Many children and particularly those from disadvantaged background or circumstances were able to join schools and therefore able to access education. In both instances more than one million children were affected, which

is a positive thing about the FPE policy. The FPE policy has been described as appropriate in addressing the problem of declining primary school enrolment in the country.

However the policy is besieged with numerous challenges. A majority of the challenges facing the FPE programme are associated with lack of preparation, planning and consultation with the key stakeholders. The implementation of the policy was rushed through without carrying out situation analysis. There was neither clear strategy nor clear communication and the result is that a majority of the stakeholders were confused due to lack of clarity about the entire policy. For instance, after the political declaration of the policy, school heads were expected to implement it without prior preparations. School heads and education officers were caught unawares. The government itself was unprepared for the policy because it was started on a short notice.

Some of the challenges that have been identified include lack of adequate physical facilities, school furniture, equipment and teachers. Also classrooms are overcrowded. It is also important to note that 5-6 years on and the government still delays disbursement of funds to schools. The resulting effect is that of delay in procurement of resources. All these may have a serious negative impact on the quality of education. If the situation does not improve then it is not possible for the country to achieve the EFA goals by 2015.

Recommendations

The biggest challenges facing the FPE programme are - how to keep these children and others stay longer in education, to receive quality education and to successfully complete the primary education cycle. The way forward would involve the following:

- i) The Kshs. 1020 allocated to each child/pupil per year has been criticised as being insufficient and therefore need to be increased substantially in order to improve the teaching- learning resources in schools. This calls for a review of the current disbursement of funds policy.
- ii) Still several schools are struggling with high student: teacher ratio. This need to be reduced to the recommended levels, by improving the classroom sizes as well increase the number of teachers. This could be achieved by the government carrying out what Yieke (2006) describes as 'staff balancing exercise' in order to ensure fair distribution of teachers.
- iii) Head teachers needed some kind of training or in-service in the area of financial management to enable them deal with financial matters competently. Alternatively the government could employ accounts clerks or bookkeepers to balance schoolbooks. In this way perhaps head teachers would get extra time to pay attention to their instructional leadership role i.e. monitoring curriculum delivery.
- iv) Head teachers' teaching workload to be reduced significantly in order for them to take more charge in the management and instructional leadership of the school. This recommendation is linked to the one previous to it.
- v) Inspection of schools need to be intensified i.e. ones every term in order to improve monitoring and evaluation process and efficiency in the use of resources and thereby contributing to the quality of education.

- vi) The FPE to be implemented within the broader Education For All (EFA) framework, which provided for holistic approach to education provision (Yieke, 2006).

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