Chapter 9
What Education for All in Kenya? The School of Inequalities

Hélène Charton
Clare Rainey and Hannah Stauch

DOI: 10.4000/books.africae.2540
Publisher: Africae
Place of publication: Paris & Nairobi
Year of publication: 2021
Published on OpenEdition Books: 8 June 2021
Series: Africae Studies
Electronic EAN: 9782957305889

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference
Chapter 9
What Education for All in Kenya?  
The School of Inequalities

Hélène Charton

Translated by Clare Rainey & Hannah Stauch

Education occupies a central position in Kenya’s social and political landscape, as evident in the number of schools and academic institutions throughout the territory. Key measures have been implemented over the last 10 years to democratise education by making schools accessible to everyone, particularly the poorest in society. These measures included the introduction of free primary education in 2003, followed by the abolition of secondary education fees five years later. These decisions have strengthened public debate on education issues and have featured prominently in newspaper columns.

In 2012, with official net enrolment rates of 81.8% in primary and 50% in secondary education, as well as 11 years of school life expectancy and a survival rate in primary education of 90.7%, Kenya was at the forefront of the educational rankings in sub-Saharan Africa, according to data compiled by the Unesco Institute for Statistics. The country was then spending approximately 30% of its budget and 6.7% of its GDP on education. However acceptable this may seem, these figures, produced and compiled by the institute, were notable in what they did not reveal in terms of regional, socio-economic and gender inequalities and as such this must be borne in mind. In 2009, Kenya had more than one million children out of school. This phenomenon had been on the rise after a sharp decline in 2007 and, as in many other African countries, it has affected the poorest and most marginalised populations. In 2008, 55% of girls from the poorest households in the North-Eastern region had not attended school. The quality of education provided in schools also raises many questions. According to the annual Unesco Education for All monitoring report, 6% of young men between the ages of 15 and 29 who had left after 6 years of schooling were considered illiterate and 26% semi-literate. These figures were even more alarming for young women, with 9% considered illiterate and 30% semi-literate (Unesco 2012). With only 4% of students enrolled in universities,

access to higher education remained problematic in Kenya: only 30% of qualified baccalaureate graduates were then admitted at university.

This outcome must be viewed in the context of the global standards for educational reforms implemented worldwide since 2000 in the framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a result of the approach to education undertaken in Kenya since its independence in 1963. Some elements of this approach date as far back as the colonial period. With only 4% of its resources coming from international aid, education in Kenya is essentially a national affair, as is highlighted by the close ties between educational reform and the country’s political and electoral agenda.

This chapter aims to highlight the historical dynamics that have helped shape education in present-day Kenya. First, we will address the nature and expression of the social demand for education. Then, we will examine the way in which education has been extensively invested in by the successive political regimes. This dual dynamic has been a key element in driving forward education, yet it has also been at the root of the deep geographical and economic inequalities that characterise Kenya’s educational system.

1. The Desire to Go to School

At the beginning of the January 2003 academic year, over one million new pupils attended Kenya's government primary schools, declared as being “free of charge.” The confusion generated by the implementation of the election promise made by the then new President of the Republic, Mwai Kibaki, was widely covered in the press. Coverage focused on the chaos in schools and described long queues in front of the most popular schools. By the end of that month, 500,000 new entrants joined schools that were often already full. For the sake of clarity, these figures must be put into perspective. Almost 5% of these new entrants dropped out of school in their first year (Unesco 2005). A number of them had actually been enrolled in schools that were not recognised by the government and found in the poorest neighbourhoods, to which a few pupils returned after a while.

This phenomenon was brought to light in the poorly integrated Kibera district of Nairobi during a study carried out by the John Templeton Foundation between April 2003 and December 2005 on the existence of private educational provision for the poorest populations in Africa and Asia. It helped emphasise the importance of social demand for education in the most disadvantaged areas. Seventy-six formal private schools (not registered by the government) were identified in Kibera, which had a population of about 600,000 at that time (Tooley, Dixon & Stanfield

This finding was made in October 2003, 10 months after the introduction of the Free Primary Education program (FPE) and included the 57% enrolment increase in the five public schools in the neighbourhood (compared to the 43% increase in Nairobi), partly at the expense of private schools. The scale of enrolment in these private primary schools, which in November 2003 had 12,132 pupils compared to 9,126 in public schools, revealed the constant demand for fee-paying education among the poorest populations. Interviews held with parents and the administrators of these schools confirmed this demand. They gave two main reasons: the cost and the quality of education. All these schools, with the exception of two run by religious congregations, received tuition fees ranging from 50 to 500 KES per month. These fees were tailored to individual situations, ranging from discounts to exemptions for large families or orphans. However, these fees are lower than the hidden fees in public schools that are non-negotiable and involve compulsory purchases, such as acquiring two sets of uniforms (compared to one in the private sector) or various other contributions (activity or construction fees). The total amount can be prohibitive for the poorest households. Teaching conditions and conditions in general are also perceived as more favourable in the private sector. Private schools are generally smaller than public schools, which accommodate up to 2,000 pupils. They also benefit from a higher teacher-pupil ratio, on average 21 pupils for every one teacher compared 60 or even 67 pupils to one teacher in public schools. These facts are crucial to the perception of what constitutes a quality education, one which even the poorest are willing to pay for. As one parent put it, “If you go to the market and are given free fruit and vegetables, they are probably rotten. If you want fresh fruit and vegetables, you have to pay for them” (Tooley, Dixon & Stanfield 2008, 462).

As this study shows, the way in which the poor relate to education (although the inhabitants of Kibera are not all poor to the same extent) demonstrates the importance of school investment for the people of Kenya whose long-standing history is inseparable from the shortcomings of the educational provisions implemented by its successive governments.

In a colonial context marked by severe racial segregation, the educational system for the Africans, entrusted mainly to missionaries, was aimed primarily at providing for the colony’s labour needs. It was in response to this narrow perspective of education that the first African initiatives for education were launched.

From their creation in 1924, the Local Native Councils, established by the colonial power to provide an avenue of legal expression for African communities, made educational development one of their priorities through the creation of mission-free schools. Mission schools were accused of foregoing their pedagogic duties in favour of evangelising. In 1926, LNCs
spent an average of 20% of their budget on education (Mutua 1975, 152-153). The Western and Central provinces which were both the most populated and most exposed to European colonisation were at the top of this list (Charton 1997). The colonial government, anxious to avoid disrupting the fragile treaty established with the missions, never authorised the LNCs to open their own schools, as they had requested. It simply channelled the funds raised from local communities in the form of taxes to finance its own institutions (Government African schools) outside the sphere of missionary influence. In Kenya’s Central Province, however, LNCs found another outlet for their education-centred mobilisation by funding independent Kikuyu schools, created following the circumcision crisis and the shutdown of many schools whose teachers had been dismissed.4 In 1935, there were 34 independent schools with 2,500 students. Ten years later, these schools, which were constantly threatened with closure by the colonial authorities, had 13,500 students enrolled. At that time, 12.5% of the African population had access to education but at primary level it was 97%. The colony then had only one secondary school, Alliance High School in Kikuyu, built in 1926. The only post-secondary option was Makerere College in Uganda, which trained African administrative assistants in education, agriculture, veterinary sciences and medicine for the whole of East Africa.

The creation of the African Teachers College in Githunguri in 1939 to train teachers for independent schools and to address gaps in secondary and post-secondary education had strengthened this network, partly thanks to the investment of Chief Koinange wa Mbiyu and his eldest son, Peter Mbiyu. On his return from the United States in 1938, where he had gone to study in 1927 with the support of the Phelps-Stokes Foundation, Peter Koinange was the most educated African in the colony. Declining all job offers in the administration, he then took over the leadership of Githunguri College, which he named Teachers College, in reference to Columbia where he had obtained his master’s degree. On the eve of its closure, following the declaration of a state of emergency in November 1952, nearly 30% of students in Kiambu and Fort Hall districts attended the college.

The education level of the African people tripled over the course of the decade following the Second World War, as a result of the policies of “colonial modernisation” initiated by metropolitan authorities that

4. Kikuyu independent churches were born in 1929 with the refusal of a number of worshippers to comply with the injunctions of Reverend Arthur (Church of Scotland Mission of Kiambu, Central Province) asking them to renounce traditional practices such as clitoridectomy. The dissident Christians, many of whom were teachers or catechists, founded their own network of churches and schools.
stimulated people’s investment in their children’s education, as shown in the following graph:

![Graph showing education funding between 1957 and 1962]

Figure 1. Education funding between 1957 and 1962

It was precisely these dynamics that led to an explosion in the number of schools that marked the country’s transition to independence in 1963. At the beginning of the 1964 school year, primary schools welcomed over a million students, twice the number welcomed in 1957 and four times more than in 1948 (Bogonko 1992, 112). Expectations of school were then commensurate with the frustrations of the colonial era. During independence, education was officially identified as a lever for the country’s economic and social development, in which all populations were invited to participate within the framework of the Harambee state philosophy.

In ten years, the number of primary schools doubled and the number of secondary schools increased tenfold. This was due to the combined efforts of the government, whose budget share for education increased from 11.9% to 24.7% between 1963 and 1973 (Bogonko 1992, 112). The population directly contributed as part of Harambee fundraising campaigns for school construction and teacher recruitment. Harambee schools, which in 1973 accounted for 60% of secondary schools built since independence, charged high tuition fees for poor quality education compared to national and regional schools, which had limited capacity (Amutabi 2003, 130).

These institutions were created by communities to overcome the shortage of secondary education provided by the government, thus placing its educational responsibilities on local communities (as in the case of LNCs during the colonial era). Several politicians, such as Tom Mboya, spoke out against a system that reinforced social and regional inequalities as regards access to education, but without any real success apart from increased inspections and some additional resources. However, most Harambee schools were integrated into the national system in 1974, but in an unequal manner, since it was the central province that benefited most from these
takeovers, strengthening an already dense network of schools in the region (Hornsby 2013, 138-140).

These different stages in the long history of education in Kenya highlight the scale of the demand for schools and the extent of people’s commitment to education (Charton 2011, 219-237). The way in which this desire for education has been used politically is a second characteristic feature of the history of education in Kenya. While it can also be traced back to colonial times, it actually took effect in 1973 when free primary education was first introduced. The 2003 presidential decree included nothing new. It simply reiterated, in a very different political, economic and international context, one of the key measures by the Father of the Nation, Jomo Kenyatta. This was implemented on the country’s tenth year of independence and was approved by his successor, Daniel arap Moi, upon his arrival to power in 1978. The history of education is closely linked to the country’s political history. It can also be claimed that education has been a major instrument of political legitimisation for the various governments that have succeeded each other since independence.

2. School as an Instrument of Political Legitimacy

In 2003, as well as in 2008, the withdrawal of school fees from primary and, later, secondary schools, was in line with the election promises made by then candidate Kibaki. These latter measures benefitted from an international climate favourable to their implementation within the context of the MDGs and Education for All programmes supported by international benefactors. However, like the two previous experiences of free primary education, they occurred at significant moments in Kenya’s political life. A major political legacy driven by strong social demand, universal education was brandished by each of Kenya’s three presidents during periods of transition and political fragility in order to restore the social bond between society and its government.

Initially driven by African nationalist movements in the 1940s, universal education has always been at the centre of Kenya’s political agenda. Present in the memorandum sent by the representatives of the Kenya African Union (the first national political association) to the Colonial Office in 1945, universal education remained a social ideal enshrined in the 1960 KANU (Kenya African National Union) manifesto, which was the heir to nationalist struggles. When Kenyatta became Prime Minister on 1 June 1963, he identified education as a national priority on which all the efforts of the Kenyan people should be focused (Kenyatta 1965). On the tenth year of independence, the 1973 Presidential Decree which established free primary education for the first four stages and capped enrolment fees at 60 KES (8.5 USD) for the other three stages was in line with this
tradition. The President’s “gift” to the Nation was a concrete reaffirmation of KANU’s commitment to universal education while rewarding the efforts and sacrifices made by the population for educational development. The effects of this measure were immediate and saw the arrival of 1.8 million additional students and a 152% increase in first-year enrolment. Despite large drop-outs in the first few years (54.7% of students who entered the system in 1973 had left the system four years later) first-year enrolment stabilised at a high level (600,000 new students) and drop-out rates were “normalised” (20% of drop-outs after three years in the 1976 study: Somerset 2007, 10-11). To cope with this influx of students, the government undertook a massive recruitment drive for unqualified teachers. Their numbers rose from 22% to 37% between 1973 and 1976, thus maintaining the teacher-pupil ratio at a relatively low level (one teacher per 32 pupils: ibid., 14-15). But welcoming new entrants required additional classrooms to be built at the expense of schools and, therefore, families. Numerous rises in compulsory contributions for buildings, activities and even security (Abreu 1982) began to arise. As these schools were not governed by any legislation, there were significant disparities between schools, some charging fees ten times more than the tuition fees that existed prior to 1974 (Somerset 2007, 11). By 1978, primary education everywhere had become more expensive than it had been in 1973 (Charton 2005).

It is within this context that Daniel arap Moi, who succeeded Kenyatta in 1978, kicked off his presidency by abolishing all contributions at all primary stages. The 1978 decree provided the new president, from a minority ethnic group, with an opportunity to assert his political legitimacy by following in the footsteps and actions of his predecessor, while endorsing KANU’s legacy. As in 1973, the implementation of the presidential decree

![Figure 2. Primary and secondary school enrolment 1961–2012](source: Ministry of Planning and National Development. *Statistical Abstract* (1960 to 2012). Nairobi: Government Painter.)
in January 1979 led to a new influx of pupils into primary schools with 970,000 new enrolments in the first year. Enrolment rates remained high in the years following the adoption of the measure (900,000 pupils) but equally drop-out rates remained very high with 45.5% of pupils who entered school in 1979 still in school five years later and only 32.2% at the end of the seven-year primary cycle. Due to a lack of recruitment, the teacher-pupil ratio had increased significantly to 1:39 (Somerset 2007, 14-15). As in 1973, covert school fees soon reappeared, making free schooling obsolete. The comprehensive “8–4–4” reform of the education system, which came into effect in 1985, placed a heavy burden on households. The extension of the primary cycle by one year, from 7 to 8 years, required the construction of new classes (13,370) and additional equipment for technical and agricultural disciplines (laboratories, workshops, etc.). These costs were largely borne by parents through the reappearance of additional fees and the proliferation of Harambee for the construction of new buildings. Since 1983, school supplies had no longer been provided by schools and parents were officially responsible for equipping classrooms. The emphasis on basic education (with a specific ministry from 1979) at the expense of other educational stages has corresponded to the liberal shift taken by international organisations and the emergence of the first structural adjustment plans (applied in Kenya in the 1990s) to try to recover economies in crisis. While population growth continued at a sustained pace, weighing heavily on the education system, Kenya’s economic growth slowed with a decline in GDP from 6.5% to 3.7% between 1964 and 1984 (Ogot & Ochieng’ 1995, 151-153). School adjustment policies were defined in a 1988 World Bank report entitled Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policies for Adjustment, Revitalization and Expansion. In a context where resources are scarce, priority should be given to sectors where the social return on public investment is most significant. According to calculations by World Bank economists, this was the primary stage (Heyneman 2005).

At secondary and higher levels, where education was considered a personal investment due to its direct employment benefits, cost-sharing with beneficiaries was advocated. These recommendations were endorsed in Sessional Paper No. 6 of 1988, which introduced the principle of “Cost sharing with beneficiaries.” This was applied in Kenya from 1991, with the cost of boarding school fees for public secondary schools transferred to parents and the introduction, for the first time, of higher education fees initially set at 6,000 KES (100 USD) before being increased to 50,000 KES (833 USD) in 1998. Despite the existence of scholarships and, more especially, loans granted by the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) to the

---

5. Schooling is now divided into a 8-year primary cycle, followed by a secondary cycle and a higher cycle of 4 years each.
majority of students, these measures contributed to preventing the poorest populations from accessing university (Klopp & Orina 2002, 60). As in most African countries, students, who were almost guaranteed employment in public services and parastatal companies, hitherto enjoyed privileged conditions (free education and pensions and an allowance known as the “boom”: Eshiwani 1993, 46 & 51). This policy proved to be disastrous at all levels. In a context of increasing extreme poverty, school had never been more expensive. Between 1994 and 1997, the average annual burden for the families of a primary school pupil increased from 843 KES to 1,200 KES (12 USD to 22 USD), covering contributions for classroom construction, examination fees, the purchase of books, equipment, uniforms, cutlery and mattresses in boarding schools, etc. This excluded the most economically vulnerable populations (Koech 2000, 75). For those who managed to complete primary education, opportunities to pursue secondary education continued to decline with transition rates falling from 49% to 40% between 1992 and 1999 (ibid., 94). The crisis in the education system that began in the 1990s resulted in an unprecedented erosion of gross enrolment rates to 89% in 1998, from 105% in 1989.

For the first time in Kenya’s history, some populations were shying away from school, hence disrupting the school dynamics established since independence. The government attempted to address the school crisis, which showed similarities with the social and political crisis the country was experiencing at the time. They appointed an inquiry commission on the eve of the 1997 general elections, in a climate of extreme political tension and violence, which was to carry out a thorough reform of the education system. The announced school reforms were supposed to ease the political and social climate but President Moi quickly buried these promises as soon as he was re-elected. The Koech Commission report was published three years later, in 2000, and despite strong protests and strikes by 50 schools (including the prestigious Alliance Girls High School) the government limited itself to flashy measures, such as shortening the curriculum, instead of remodeling the system as a whole by moving from the 8–4–4 structure to a 12-year basic cycle, as recommended in the report (Charton 2003).

It is in this climate of crisis and breakdown of dialogue between state and society that the theme of universal education resurfaced at the heart of the electoral platform of the opposition coalition led by Mwai Kibaki (NARC 2002). As a key measure of the National Rainbow Coalition’s (NarRC) programme, free primary education was not only the President’s “gift” to his people, as in 1973, but the pledge of a new social agreement that the new democratically elected government intended to establish. The guarantee of equal access to education for all citizens refers to the principles of justice and equity. This forms the basis of the Nation’s rebuilding to which the
new President and his team have committed themselves. After ten years of major crisis, this measure had a very strong symbolic significance in that it marked a break with the practices and excesses of the previous regime while continuing the legacy of Kenyatta. The context in which free education was restored in primary schools in January 2003 was, however, very different from that of 1973. At an international conference held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, and more so at another international conference held in Dakar in 2000, the international community and donors committed themselves to universal primary education by 2015. This is the second “Millennium Development Goal.” Free education programmes, introduced in Malawi in 1994 and Uganda in 1997, subsequently became more widespread, thanks to the support of international donors. As in the 1973 and 1978 experiments, the abolition of school fees generated a significant influx of new pupils, whose numbers remained high. Kenya’s primary schools recorded a 32% increase in enrolment in the first year at the beginning of the 2003 school year (Oketch & Somerset 2010). The state was able to meet the direct cost of the Free Primary Education program, estimated at 62 million USD, thanks to the release of 69.5 million USD (a one-quarter increase in the education budget) to pay schools the allocations calculated in proportion to the number of enrolled students. However, the success and sustainability of the reform depended on the new team’s ability to attract external funding by restoring donor-confidence, shaken over the last ten years of the Moi era. The ERS (Economic Recovery Strategy for wealth and employment creation), endorsed by international donors in 2004 and backed by the education sector strategy, had established priorities for action in terms of economic and financial governance. The national consultation, which brought together 800 participants in November 2003, made it possible to define the orientations of the sectoral education strategy, adopted on 25 July 2005 under the title, Kenya Education Sector Support Programme 2005–2010—Delivering quality education and training to all Kenyans (KESSP). KESSP, which was 89% government-funded, received support from donors through the Education Donor Coordination Group (EDCG), including 80 million USD from the World Bank in 2006 and 121 million USD from the Fast Track Initiative.

Building on these successes, Mwai Kibaki promised to withdraw school fees in secondary public day schools if he were re-elected in December 2007. However, this policy, implemented in January 2008 during a climate of high tension following the violence that followed the disputed election results, did not keep all its promises. However, the extension of free education

---

to secondary schools made it possible, as the FPE did, to bring back to secondary schools the children of those economically weakened by the crisis, without affecting the poorest.

Yet the main effect of the high volume of pupils accessing primary education, and to a lesser extent secondary education, was the reinforcement of the hierarchies and differentiation strategies of schools and families, hence an increase in the already glaring social and geographical inequalities. In Kenya, the poor had never been to school in such numbers, yet the schools they were attending were schools for the poor.

3. What Type of Universal Education in Kenya?

Historically, with nearly ten million children enrolled in primary school compared to one million at the time of independence and a net enrolment rate of 82% in primary schools and 50% in secondary schools in 2012, according to Unesco statistics, the measures taken over the past 40 years to promote universal education seemed to have yielded some results. However, despite these proactive measures promoting access to education, poor and marginalised populations continued to be excluded from school.

Social and geographical inequalities in access to education have been, in fact, another characteristic feature of Kenya’s education system, the origins of which are old and have worsened rather than been rectified over time. Policies to increase access to education have automatically led to an increase in supply which has diversified in response to the remodeling of high social demand. The privatisation of education at all levels (from preschool to university) has portrayed, until today, both the persistent desire for education that is still strong yet not satisfied by the public authorities and the role that schools play in the process of differentiation and social stratification.

Since the colonial period, education provision has been developed locally, depending on the mobilising capacity of communities (LNC, Harambee) and the degree of investment by local political leaders, who have sometimes endowed their districts with institutions bearing their names as in the “Kenyatta High” or “Moi Girls” model (Amutabi 2003, 131). Initiatives by political elites to promote access to school capital for their citizens have further enhanced these inequalities, projecting the ethnic difficulties that structure contemporary Kenyan politics into the school setting. Thus, in 1984, President Daniel arap Moi decided to increase the quota of places reserved for primary school pupils in the region’s prestigious high schools.
from 60% to 85%. This policy, in addition to strengthening the “ethnicisation” of society, enabled the Rift Valley (President Moi’s region of origin) to catch up with the level of secondary education in the central province. When Mwai Kibaki came to power in 2003, he was quick to restore the quotas to their original proportions (Hornsbt 2013, 649).

Such features produced strong regional disparities. In 1969, the central province had gross primary school enrolment rates of 102%, while only 56% and 43% of children in Nyanza and Rift Valley provinces were enrolled (ibid., 267). Some districts, such as Nyeri, had almost achieved universal education by 2003, when the net primary school enrolment rate was only 40% in the North East region in 2010 (Oketch & Somerset 2010, 10). Regions with high school capitals were those that best resisted the 1990 crisis, further increasing geographical inequalities not yet tackled by free education programmes (apart from specific actions in arid and semi-arid areas), nor have they made it possible to solve the social inequality problem reproduced by schools.

Admittedly, free education has increased access to schools for the poor but perhaps not for the poorest because school has never been completely free. In a broad context, the hidden costs of education have made it possible to maintain distinct hierarchies between schools by practising convoluted forms of selectivity. A survey conducted between 2007 and 2008 among 17 schools (14 public and three private) in four districts (Nairobi, Nyeri, Kajiado and Kisii) revealed the differential effects of the EPF on access to education. Some public schools continued to select their students by charging twice as much as anywhere else. In Kisa (Nairobi), for example, the total amount of contributions that replaced traditional school fees reached an annual total of 143 USD, one year after the introduction of the EPF. In Kazi (Nyeri), where additional contributions were abolished, first-year places were reserved for students in the private kindergarten section (16 USD per month). These schools have thus bypassed the EPF by screening their pupil recruitment, in order maintain the reputation and level of their schools. In 2006, Kazi was ranked sixth in Nyeri District for its results on the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exam which determines access to secondary education (Oketch & Somerset 2010, 10).

Despite the scholarships introduced by the government in 1994, the poorest populations remained less likely to continue on to secondary education. The distribution of students according to family income level shows that, in 2012, 10% of the lower echelon had access to this level of education compared to 55% of boys and 42% of girls in the higher echelon (Muriithi Muhindi 2012, 34). Despite the abolition of school fees in 2008, it was not possible to address these inequalities. A study conducted in the Nyeri region in 2009 with 33 secondary schools, showed that the government’s
allocation to secondary schools of 10,625 KES per enrolled student was not sufficient to cover their actual needs, estimated at 24,590 KES by the school principals who were interviewed. Above all, however, the total cost of mandatory purchases was estimated at 9,230 KES (uniforms, dictionaries, atlases, etc.) to which was added 3,200 KES for the purchase of additional equipment required by most schools (school bags, sports equipment, school T-shirts, etc.). These additional costs remain an exclusion factor for certain population groups (ibid., 51). As with scholarships, the reduction in secondary school tuition fees has mostly affected children who are already in school.
All in all, the abolition of (partial) school fees in primary and secondary education has improved access to education for a greater number of children without changing the hierarchies and selection methods still occurring in some schools. Expanding this basis has automatically led to increased selectivity towards higher education, one of the consequences of which has been the development of private education and new forms of “privatisation” of public education.

Private primary education developed during the crisis in the 1990s to fill the gaps left by public education provision. At that time, Kenya had 290 private primary schools, mainly located in urban areas, but ten years later, 1,236 schools, and 7% of the school population, were registered. Free programmes have led to an increase in this trend, as shown in the following graphs. The proportion of pupils enrolled in private schools increased from 10% to 15% between 2004 and 2011.

From the 1990s, most private schools began to position themselves in the high-performance education niche, as shown by the results obtained in the national end-of-primary (KCPE) and secondary (KCSE—Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations. With only 1% of candidates in 1996, private schools had won the top ten positions at KCPE. Five years later, in 2001, 27 of the top 30 scoring schools were private schools. In Nairobi and Nyeri district, private schools occupied the top 57 and 45 places in the KCPE ranking in 2007 (Oketch & Somerset 2010, 24).

The results obtained in this examination are crucial because they determine the orientation of students towards the different types of secondary schools that do not offer the same conditions of study and opportunities for university access. The 18 national institutions, which are schools dating back to the colonial period, recruit the best primary school students (1%) and obtain the best results in the KCSE, whose grades determine access to university. Next come provincial schools (20%), which developed in the 1960s under a system of regional quotas. The vast majority are oriented towards district schools, most of which are former Harambee schools, “free” since 2008 (they are day schools, unlike the other two categories: Oketch & Somerset 2010, 24). This prioritisation of educational provision determines the school strategies of families who strive, when they have the means, to choose the most efficient primary (or even nursery) schools and employ private tutoring so that their children succeed in entering a national or provincial secondary school where students are most likely to go to university. Such a system helps promote social inequalities in access to education. These actions were denounced by the 1998 Koech report, whose recommendations proposed the abolition of the KCPE and the classification of primary schools (Koech 2000). The report found that the deterioration in pupil reception conditions in public
What Education for All in Kenya?

Since the introduction of free education programmes had further increased the divisions between schools and widened the inequality gap in access to education, also found at higher education levels.

The total number of students enrolled in university increased fivefold, from 44,000 to 240,000 between 1996 and 2012. Public and private provisions increased considerably during this period, after the creation of five new higher education institutions from 1984, bringing the total number of public universities to seven. After the opening of the Baraton University of East Africa in 1991, the Commission for University Education (CUE) increased the number of accredited private universities from 18 to 30 between 2005 and 2012 (and enrolment from 8,800 to 37,600 during the same period: Mwiria 2007, 21). To meet the ever-increasing demand for higher education, public universities started to offer private courses from 2006. Known as “parallel courses,” their annual cost varied between 120,000 KES for an Arts student.

Figure 5. University enrolment from 2001 to 2012

Sources: Ministry of Planning and National Development, Statistical abstracts, Nairobi Government printer.

---

9. Sources: Commission for University Education, [http://www.cue.or.ke](http://www.cue.or.ke) [archive], list updated in 2014. After the creation of Moi University in Eldoret in 1984 (President Moi’s home region), three higher education institutions were granted university status (Kenyatta University, Egerton University, and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology) and two new universities were created, Maseno University in 2001 and Masinde Muliro University of Sciences and Technology, in Kakamega (Western Province) in 2006.
and 450,000 KES for a medical student (excluding boarding fees), while the average enrolment fee for regular courses was 28,500 KES in 2008.¹⁰

Like private universities, these courses welcome baccalaureate graduates who qualified to enter university but whose KCSE grades were not enough to enter regular training. In 2006, 10,600 of the 47,000 qualified high school students had obtained a place in public education¹¹ and by 2012 it was still less than one third of the initial amount. The teaching conditions on parallel courses, whose numbers exceed those of regular courses, also attract students who can prepare the same diplomas without facing the threat of strikes and administrative bottle-necks that lengthen the duration of studies (Charton 2012). Frequently denounced as a hindrance to the quality of education and a source of inequality, the merging of these courses with regular training, recommended by a report by the Public University Inspection Board, has been constantly postponed, as the public university finds itself unable to welcome all the graduates.¹² In the meantime, the Higher Education Loans Board is offering loans to students on parallel courses and endorsing the privatisation process.

Conclusion

The educational landscape of present-day Kenya is the end result of a long process of structuring, whose roots date back to colonial times. The importance of the school experience, which has been reflected in the different forms and degrees of investment by the population throughout the country’s history, has made it a major political subject and a central point for agreement on the bond between state and society. Since independence, successive governments, aware of the challenges related to education have systematically used educational issues to assert their legitimacy in times of political tension or fragility. This dual dynamic of a social and political nature has enabled education to reach unprecedented heights over the past half-century without, however, questioning the elitist and selective nature of the education system inherited from the colonial period and reflected in strong social and regional inequalities. The latest measures taken to promote universal education in the context of educational liberalisation is a far cry from addressing these trends. Instead, it has heightened them


by confirming the existence of second-class schooling for the poorest. In this we can conclude that the education system reflects and crystallises the social, regional economic and political divisions of present-day Kenya.

Bibliography


Hélène Charton


What Education for All in Kenya?

Media


