

# Promising education

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When the Kenyan government scrapped primary school fees, it was a step toward the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of giving every child in the world a primary school education by 2015. But are Kenya's poorest still getting the short end of the stick?

] When Kenya abolished primary school fees, it tossed a lifeline to those of Peninah Adhiambo's generation living in extreme poverty. She is among the 1.5 million new children who have burst into classrooms since then.

Now 13, Adhiambo dreams education will be her passport out of Kibera, the Nairobi slum where she lives with her parents and four siblings in a mud-walled shack without water or electricity.

"I want to complete my studies and become a pilot, so I can lift my family out of here," said Adhiambo, an ambitious teenager in this poor East African nation, where the odds are against many girls getting an education at all.

Before President Mwai Kibaki cancelled school fees to honour a promise of his election campaign, for many of Kenya's 33 million people formal schooling was beyond reach. Families were just too poor to pay the tuition fees and levies of about US\$100 a year – a lot of money in a country where the majority live on less than \$1 a day.

## Benefits beyond knowledge

For most of the world's poorest one billion people who live in developing countries like Kenya, education is the only way out of poverty. Even a few years of schooling can mean the difference between life and death.

Educated teenagers, especially girls, are much less likely to contract HIV, schooled women are less likely to die in childbirth; and a child born to a literate mother is 50 per cent less likely to die before the age of five.

In Africa, a young woman's average earnings increase by up to 20 per cent with each additional year of education and just one additional year of female schooling reduces the probability of child death by eight per cent. The Global Campaign for Education has calculated that around 700 000 HIV cases could be prevented every year by educating children.

So even if Adhiambo and the other 7.7 million primary-school children in Kenya never go beyond the eight years of schooling offered under the free education programme, most can still expect to live healthier and better lives than their parents.

## Education needs investment

But President Kibaki has greater expectations of education. Last October, when he launched plans to introduce Kenya Vision 2030, his government's blueprint for achieving double digit economic growth that will transform this poorest of countries into a prosperous nation in 23 years, Kibaki said that education was the bedrock.

"We need to have this critical mass of educated youth to enhance the productivity of our economy and social mobility and cohesion in our society," said the President in a speech.

But his vision may prove no more than a mirage without greater investment in education by the government and overseas donors. In 2002, under the World Bank's Education For All Fast Track Initiative (FTI), rich countries promised to fund all poor countries with viable education plans, but few have fully honoured that promise, according to the Global Campaign for Education (GCE).

The GCE says that between US\$7 billion and US\$10 billion is needed per year to achieve free primary education worldwide, but that by 2015 Official Development Assistance for this sector is expected to total only US\$3.7 billion per year.

Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, Mozambique, Ghana and Ethiopia have also introduced free primary education to combat poverty.

Like its African neighbours, Kenya has received some funding under the FTI. But it is still straining under the burden of educating its youngest citizens.

Books are in short supply – there is one book for every two students in the city classes, and one for every three in Kenya's rural areas, according to Ole Kingi, an assistant director at the Ministry of Education. That is still an improvement, because "before, children often went to school without any textbooks at all, and sometimes only the teachers had textbooks."

There are not enough classrooms – children often sit on bare floors and use their laps for desks, and sometimes a classroom means sitting under a tree. Most classes are bursting at the seams with more than 45 students.

Teachers are in short supply – in some schools there is one teacher for every 100 students, according to Dr. Okwach Abagi, a consultant at Own & Associates Research and Development in Nairobi. Teacher employment has remained frozen since 1998, despite the influx of new children.

Francis Nganga, head of the Kenya National Union of Teachers, said another 60,000 teachers are needed in primary and secondary schools to keep standards from falling. "If falling standards in the state schools go unchecked, better-educated children from the private schools will go on to become the new elites, perpetuating class divisions and negating the entire meaning of poverty reduction through education," he said.

Only 33 per cent of Kenyan children attend state secondary schools, the World Bank estimates. Falling standards in primary schools make it harder for poorer children from these schools to gain admission to secondary school, where better-educated children from private schools are better equipped to compete for places.

## Economic development through education

The Kenya Education Fund (KEF), a non-governmental development organisation dedicated to increasing the number of high school graduates, says that more children need to finish high school for Kenya to have any chance of breaking out of poverty. "Development will occur when we raise the level of education among Kenyans by increasing the number of students who finish high school," says KEF.

On the positive side, Kingi says that most schools are run more transparently. In contrast with the past, schools keep written accounts, and decisions like ordering provisions are made jointly by administrators, school committees and parents.

## Too poor for free education

The government is also trying to raise the standards of so-called “non-formal” schools, says Kingi, where about 200 000 of the poorest children, who cannot afford even the cost of uniforms for the state schools, are taught by untrained teachers.

Kenya’s education minister, Noah Wekesa, told a UN conference in Nairobi last April that shortages and overcrowding in the state schools were eroding some of the gains from free primary education. After the initial surge in enrolments, five per cent of the children dropped out of primary schools, a trend that has continued, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Dino Kavitu, 13, who dropped out of school because he has to beg in the streets, is one of the faces behind the statistics. Benta Nyawira, 9, who helps her mother eke out a living selling vegetables, is another. Both began school when primary education was made free.

“My parents can’t keep me in school, where they still have to pay at least for a uniform,” said Kavitu, who lives in Nairobi’s Korogocho slums. “Also, it’s not possible to be in school when you have to return to a home where there is no food,” he said. “If I want to eat, I have to bring at least something home. I can only do that by begging,” he said.

Nyawira’s mother struggled to keep her daughter in school for two years. But in the end, she couldn’t manage. Married to an alcoholic who does not work, Nyawira’s mother sells vegetables in the Mathare Valley slums.

“I had to keep missing school to help my mother. In the end, I had to stop altogether because my mother needed me,” said Nyawira.

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