

Actualizing Free Primary Education in Kenya for Sustainable Development

by

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Abstract

The right to education is one of the basic human rights stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. In Kenya, this right has recently been livened through the launch of the Free Primary Education program (hence FPE) by the newly elected NARC government. The FPE program is faced with major challenges that range from lack of facilities, few teachers, over-age children, street children, no books, lack of finances and socio-cultural impediments such as HIV-AIDs. The FPE has been received with mixed feelings from different sections of the society. While some have expressed feelings of discontentment, failure, betrayal among others, many low income members of the population view it as a God sent opportunity.

While a lot of concern has been raised, little has been advanced concerning the propagation of the actual learning itself. This paper seeks to underscore some of the pertinent issues concerning actual instruction in the FPE program. A glaring gap, which poses a major challenge to the success of the FPE, exists in terms of the language of instruction. The existing language policy disregards mother tongues as tools of disseminating knowledge and does very little to promote them. The paper suggests the training of teachers to equip them with skills in mother tongue instruction, preparation of learning materials, books and other resources. Providing money for schools without providing books in itself is a failure. This paper argues that there is need to put in place structures that enhance, promote and develop mother tongues for the purposes of actualizing the FPE program.

Abbreviations: FPE-Free Primary Education; NARC-National Rainbow Coalition; MT-Mother Tongue; LOI-Language of Instruction; NACECE-National Center for Early Childhood Education; DICECEs-District Centers for Early Childhood Education; NEPAD-New Partnership for African Development.

Background Information on the FPE Program

Free and compulsory primary education for Kenyan children was one of the key pre-election promises that led the current government of President Mwai Kibaki, to ascend to power in December 2002. Since then, an estimated 1.5 million children, who were previously out-of-school, have turned up to attend classes. The minister for education who himself is a professor and an educationist has been quoted saying "We will not be content until every child of primary school age is enrolled...By educating the children we are investing in the future of this country. In the long term, educating children is one way to eradicate poverty". Parents and children alike have greeted the move with euphoria.

Major Teething Challenges to FPE: Finances and Facilities

The reality of delivering on the pre-election pledge - made before politicians had time to consider the costs and logistical challenges involved - is becoming more and more apparent. While the government and donors are scrambling to find money to pay for schools, teachers, and facilities, and local authorities are rushing to compile statistics on Kenya's hundreds of thousands of new school-goers, school classrooms are bulging like never before. Many schools are coping with a 100 percent or more increase in numbers. For instance, there are three schools close to slum areas of the capital city of Nairobi which had registered increases of 1,400 pupils. Average classroom sizes had risen from 50 to 60 and 70 pupils, with one teacher per classroom while facilities remained the same.

In many schools, teachers have been forced to do shift work with separate groups of children in the mornings and afternoons, for no extra pay.

Deployment of Teachers

Apart from finding the money to pay for extra teachers, the government also has to persuade them to take posts in "less desirable" areas. There has been a lot of resistance from teachers and head teachers to change. Moreover, many poor schools are understaffed because teachers are reluctant to go to areas where parents cannot afford to pay for private tuition after normal school hours. In the affluent areas, the same teachers could expect to earn an extra kshs.10,000 (US \$130) per month on top of their salary of kshs.10,000. Teachers often refuse to work in slum areas, sighting security concerns. One school in the Mukuru slum area of Nairobi has just been assigned three new teachers since the introduction of free education, two of whom have refused to accept the post. Poor areas have been used as dumping grounds for 'bad' teachers - it was seen as a demotion. Poor schools were inclined to get less good staff. While 232,000 teachers in Kenya are currently employed, many more need to be recruited to ease the burden. The government is currently gathering statistics on how many trained teachers are unemployed and how many are needed nationwide. Then it has to entice them to move to unfavorable areas. The government has to think of incentives for teachers in order to spread them out evenly.

Children out of School

A combination of factors including poverty, social problems, child labour, displacement, and lack of schools and teachers in slum areas, has conspired to keep Kenya's children out of classrooms. On top of this there has been little or no regulation of schools in recent years, leading to the privatization of public schools (with no procedures being followed) in order to charge higher fees. Admission fees can cost several thousand shillings on top of the kshs.500-1,000 fees paid per term, as well as money for uniforms and books. As Kenya's economy has crumbled over the last few years, many families, forced to live on incomes of about kshs.3,000 per month, simply cannot manage the costs.

In Nairobi this resulted in 48 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 13 years not attending school. Only 47 percent of those who were attending completed their primary education, while the remaining 53 percent dropped out. Since the mid 1980s there was no regulation of private schools. The situation got out of hand. Teachers were even refusing to teach children during normal school hours, whose parents could not pay for private tuition after school.

Over-age and Street Children

The tens of thousands of "over-age" children - including street children, or those who dropped out of school to work and who now wish to return to finish their primary education need to be catered for urgently. While statistics on their numbers are not yet available, preliminary figures show them to be enormous. In the Mukuru slum area of Nairobi, only about 500 of the 5,000 new pupils who enrolled in schools since the beginning of the year were of "normal" school-going age. It becomes tricky to handle them and so they had to be segregated from the younger children.

Street children, who number about 250,000 in Kenya, also pose a problem. Placing children with patchy educational backgrounds, short attention spans, dysfunctional backgrounds and glue-sniffing addictions, in a classroom of 50 or 60 "normal" children, will arguably lower standards for everyone. They need smaller classes, interesting and interactive programs, and teachers who can cope with them. On top of this, many have serious linguistic difficulties as they speak "sheng" - a blend of local languages, Kiswahili, and English.

Meanwhile, many other marginalized children are not even making it near a classroom. Some do not even get past the school gate as they are chased away by the guards. While some schools are genuinely full, others simply do not want to accept children who do not have the correct uniform, look untidy, or have the 'wrong' background. Lack of facilities is a further headache. While some rural areas have adequate school buildings, there are many others, particularly in urban areas with large slum populations, with none at all. Many rural schools also lack even the most basic amenities such as toilets and running water.

Despite the fact that an estimated two million people, or 60 percent of Nairobi's population live in slum areas, in the last 15 years almost no school building have been erected in the city. As a priority, there is need to expand the existing schools, by building new wings, and then equipping them. Another alternative may be to assist the numerous informal schools set up by parents, church groups, and NGOs in their own communities. Before rushing in to build schools, maybe the government can take over existing facilities or give them grants to improve their situation.

The Language Issue

Language is an important tool for the dissemination of knowledge and learning. In Kenya, the language policy requires that in lower primary school, MT's should be used as the LOI (up to class 3). English and Kiswahili are taught as subjects, but from class 4-8, English is adopted as the LOI (Republic of Kenya, 1976). In urban areas, however, Kiswahili is taken as the MT and is used for instruction in lower classes. Of main concern in this paper are the language problems that may impede the FPE program. This paper is of the view that there is an urgent need by the government to bridge the existing language gap in order to actualize the FPE program. The gap in question is the absence of a clear policy on MT. In this case, this paper has in mind a situation whereby MT's are considered and indeed used as LOI in pre-primary and lower primary levels especially in rural areas while nothing is being done to promote them or prepare the ground for their usage. Moreover, there has been an assumption over the years that a teacher who is a first speaker of a certain MT can teach using that MT thus no formal training is given to such teachers for purposes of equipping them to use MT's as LOI. Furthermore, after pre-primary and lower primary levels, the children are left hanging with no follow up materials in mother tongue and have to absorb the shock of abruptly adjusting to English or Kiswahili languages as the LOI.

The above sentiments have also been echoed by educationists in Kenya who are of the view that "... countries will need to make suitable policy reforms such as adopting longer and more flexible school years...as well as *expanding the use of local languages*" (Abagi, 2003 quoted in the East African Standard). *Sheng* a slang composed of vocabulary derived from Kiswahili, English and vernacular stems/extensions has also been cited as a major hindrance to language instruction especially in the urban areas (IRIN, 2003).

Many views have been advanced in support of the importance of mother tongues in providing early education.

Advantages of Mother Tongue Education

Long-term experience now seems to suggest that a vernacular medium is educationally preferable because sound teaching must, to some degree, interact with the home life of the child and must initially be based on concepts formed during the child's pre-school experiences.

No society in the world has developed in a sustained and democratic fashion on the basis of borrowed or colonial languages. Under-development in Kenya and in Africa at large can partly be associated with cultural alienation, which is structured in the context of colonial languages. The following reasons have been advanced in support of MT based education:

- ◆ It provides the basis for the child's ability to learn
- ◆ The child finds it easier to learn their second language and other school subjects
- ◆ Enhances the child's skills in singing, drawing, playing, cutting and gluing, playing games, reading nursery and primary stories
- ◆ Promotes traditional songs, dance and games
- ◆ Strengthens a child's sense of identity
- ◆ Studies have shown that if children are given a chance to develop their mother tongue skills from pre-school age, their academic performance at school will be better
- ◆ Mother tongue proficiency functions as a bridge between the language spoken at school and the language they speak at home.
- ◆ It provides more effective formal education to children, building on the language skills and aptitudes they have already developed at home.
- ◆ The mother tongue plays a very important part in a child's identity and self-esteem.
- ◆ Maintains the local language and culture through educating the children. Education must reach the urban and rural millions in ways which culturally speak to them; in forms which do not dismiss their historical and cultural heritage (Praah, 1995: ii)
- ◆ MT education helps to reduce attrition rates from local schools
- ◆ Improves on the efficiency and yield of the local education system
- ◆ It is of considerable advantage to society if many people are multilingual

Based on the arguments presented above, there is need to enhance MT education in terms of research, materials, teacher training and follow-up learning materials.

Reasons Often Advanced Against Promoting MT Education

Although mother tongues are used in pre-primary and lower primary levels of education in Kenya, various "excuses" are sighted to justify the status quo, that is, the non-promotion of the languages themselves:

- ◆ Publishers, writers and book sellers decry the poor sales associated with books written in mother tongue thus they seem not to want to invest in MT's.
- ◆ Limited readership as there are over and above 42 language groups in Kenya whose speakers are in themselves a minority compared to Kiswahili and English readers

- ◆ It is felt that it is expensive and unrealistic to develop all mother tongues and provide materials in each language due to lack of resources (Mbaabu, 1996)
- ◆ Limited vocabulary in MT's
- ◆ Some MT's do not even have a worked out orthography while others have not been reduced to writing
- ◆ Difficulties in representing some aspects of MT's in writing such as tones
- ◆ Negative attitudes by users
- ◆ Rural parents fear that their children will be left behind by children in urban contexts who use English (Muthwii, 2002: 19)
- ◆ Most MT's are "dying" in that the competent users are fewer and the existing users lack good command of the MT's. For instance, there is less use of proverbs, riddles, metaphors among speakers of these languages.
- ◆ There is the fear that there are no MT's but only varieties that are characterized by code-switching and code-mixing
- ◆ MT's are associated with spreading and promoting tribalism (This view is held by many politicians too)
- ◆ Questions such as why develop material when very soon pupils will start using English and Kiswahili have been raised to suppress MT education.
- ◆ Assumption that teachers can use mother tongues thus they do not need training.
- ◆ The idea that since no examinations are done in mother tongues, then they are not useful.
- ◆ Parents do not buy for their children the few books available in mother tongues
- ◆ Mother tongues do not determine one's future in the job market. This policy in practice favors the use of foreign languages and directly translates into the creation of a value system that rewards best those who acquire the best facility in the use of colonial languages.
- ◆ Only one lesson is reserved for MT's as subjects although the MT is used as the LOI
- ◆ Most MT's have more than two dialects thus the dilemma of settling for one for its promotion (for example, Luluyia, Kikamba, Kimeru, and Dholuo which have several dialects)
- ◆ Terminology to be used for science and mathematics has not been developed in MT
- ◆ Teachers not trained to use MT's in schools as LOI

The Way Forward

- ◆ Preparing learning materials in mother tongue and expanding the existing ones
- ◆ Research in mother tongues to be done extensively
- ◆ Preservation of mother tongues through writing and other documentation
- ◆ Setting up of TV and radio stations that use MT's (this is happening already as local entrepreneurs have discovered the economic potential inherent in MTs. Presently we have *Kameme F.M.*, *Inooro*, *Kass F..M. Radio Mang'eleete*, among others.)
- ◆ Increasing air time for mother tongue based programs on national radio and TV

- ◆ Training of nursery and primary school teachers to handle mother tongue studies
- ◆ Promoting the activities of the NACECE and DICECEs centers
- ◆ Publications in mother tongues to be enhanced (only Bibles and short readers are available)
- ◆ To develop a broad curriculum of MT education
- ◆ Consultations to be done between stakeholders (children, parents, schools, sponsors, NGO's, government and others)
- ◆ Government intervention.
- ◆ Abolition of MT as LOI in all schools bearing in mind that nothing is being done to develop them.
- ◆ Adoption of Kiswahili as the only MT to be used as a LOI for rural and urban schools

Kiswahili as an Alternative MT for Instruction

Considering the dilemma posed in the previous section, this paper further advances an alternative way forward that is workable and achievable to fill up the existing gap. This is because it is almost impossible and impractical to provide material in all the over 42 Kenyan ethnic languages. This paper proposes the adoption of Kiswahili as the preferred MT to be adopted as the LOI for pre-primary and lower primary levels in both urban and rural schools. This will also disarray fears among rural parents concerning their children receiving education in MT while urban children learn in English or Kiswahili. It will also bridge the gap between dissemination of knowledge from pre-primary, lower primary and upper primary levels. The following points are advanced in support of Kiswahili as the most suited MT for education to promote equity.

- ◆ Kiswahili is the national language of Kenya
- ◆ Kiswahili and English are the official languages of Kenya
- ◆ It is the lingua franca spoken by most members of different multilingual and multicultural backgrounds during inter-ethnic and cross-cultural encounters in Kenya.
- ◆ In Kenya and Tanzania in particular, it is accepted by people from different ethnic groups and is actually a mother tongue to many young people in the major urban centers in these countries.
- ◆ It can be used with ease in both urban and rural areas as the LOI
- ◆ It is widespread in most rural communities
- ◆ Materials are available for pre-primary, lower primary and all levels of schooling
- ◆ Follow up materials are also available in the language unlike in other ethnic languages
- ◆ Wide research has been done in the language.
- ◆ Major institutes and universities as well as individuals conduct research on Kiswahili
- ◆ It has a long history of both oral and written literature
- ◆ It is a compulsory subject from primary to secondary education

- ◆ Kiswahili is taught as a subject at university level
- ◆ In the wider sense, it is one of the languages of the African Union and has been proposed as one of the official languages to be used by NEPAD.
- ◆ Moreover, Kiswahili enjoys national, sub-regional, regional and international status unlike any other African language. This means that Kiswahili enjoys wider usage and is embraced by many Africans. Indeed, it has spread and is widely spoken in Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Seychelles and Somalia. It is also taught in some American, Japanese and German Universities and colleges abroad. This makes Kiswahili a language of its own kind.
- ◆ Moreover, in East Africa and in Africa at large, Kiswahili is not associated with any particular ethnic community numerically, politically or economically strong enough to arouse the linguistic jealousies of other groups (Mazrui and Tidy, 1984:300).
- ◆ Unlike other indigenous African languages, it does not evoke feelings of ethnicity and is indeed not viewed with ethnic feelings and prejudices by any particular ethnic community in East Africa.

Hope for the Future

In the meantime, Kenyan teachers and children are being asked to cope as best they can to actualize the FPE program. The government has set up a task force with interested parties and donors to establish how best to move forward, and money has already started coming in from donors. Most importantly, many thousands of Kenyan children are able to attend school for the very first time.

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