

## EDITORIAL

### **Interrogating access and learning in Kenyan schools: empirical analysis**

There is general consensus and empirical evidence that investment in education of good quality can reduce poverty and transform societies. Education is positively associated with improved maternal and child health, better livelihoods, increased participation in the political process, and happiness. Education's role in economic development has been sufficiently debated and the human capital of a nation depicted as the treasures a nation can nurture. Endogenous growth and development theory places investment in education decisions at the centre of development discourse. It is this faith in, and evidence of, the power of education in human development that has made the goal of universal access to basic education of good quality one of the Millennium Development Goals. Many low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where human development conditions are lowest, have placed premium commitment towards the goal of universal access to basic education. As the UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports indicate, good progress has been made in several countries, but there are also many pockets of challenges even in those countries reporting improvement in access. Many countries have implemented policies for universal access to primary education and many are eyeing provision of universal secondary education. A UNESCO Institute of Statistics assessment released in 2010 indicates that over a ten year period between 1999 and 2009, sub-Saharan Africa had made the greatest progress in improving net enrolment at the primary level, rising from under 60% in 1999 to over 75% in 2009. Expenditure allocation to education by national governments has also increased and at 2.3% of GDP was the highest allocation to education as a proportion of national resources of all regions in the world in 2009.

Kenya is one example where tremendous progress in educational investment has been made in the last decade. Indeed, Kenya is often held up as an example of a country that has valued its education. Thanks to the introduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s, education has become one of the areas of political party campaign pledges. In 2003, an incoming government implemented a free primary education policy (FPE), with the single aim of making primary education accessible to all children of all ages throughout the country. This policy was implemented only in government schools. The Kenya government considers this one of its most successful social policies as it claims to have eliminated the fees barrier and achieved universal primary education access. But there have been several challenges beyond the anticipation of the Kenyan government. Many poor children living in the slums have continued to use informal private schools where they pay fees, contradicting the government claim of universal free primary education access. Quality of education on offer under FPE has come under heavy scrutiny and there is concern that very little learning is taking place, with many children enrolled learning very little; and that the education system in Kenya under FPE perpetuates educational inequality, with some schools constantly producing better graduates while others remaining failing schools.

This issue of the *London Review of Education* publishes a collection of four papers on these challenges based on empirical evidence generated by a team of researchers at the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC). The education research at APHRC assesses the impact of Kenya's free primary education policy on the schooling of slum-residing households. It also looks at the teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms in order to address what explains differences between schools that do well and those that constantly underperform in Kenyan primary school exit examination league tables. In this regard, the paper led by Oketch et al. discusses whether poverty dynamics in the slums (that is, getting in and out of poverty) might explain the shift towards the use of private informal schools by the poor in the slums – one of the conundrums of the FPE policy in Kenya. The other three papers, led by Oketch et al. and by Ngware et al., systematically analyse factors that could offer explanations of why some schools do well and others underperform when teachers are nationally trained and randomly assigned to schools. It does this by an analysis of classroom interaction videos in 72 schools to assess how teachers teach, how much content they cover, and how this relates to pupil achievement. The aim is to understand what actually happens in classrooms between teachers and learners, with the expectation that this could offer insights to inform policy.

Together, these papers offer interesting perspectives and insights on the challenges of Kenyan universal primary education and issues around the quality of education in Kenya. The papers do not offer straightforward answers to these complex issues, but the analyses are unique in beginning to highlight how poor slum households respond to government policies and the kinds of schooling decisions they take; and what explains or does not explain why schools do well. They form a collection of unique evidence and detailed statistical analysis that can provide a platform for further research that can inform the debates on how to achieve meaningful FPE for all children in Kenya.

## References

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