

# Equity in Access to Secondary Education in Kenya: A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract

The Constitution promulgated on August 27, 2010 divides the territory of Kenya into administrative units called counties as it did away with the provinces. One of the objectives of such devolution is to promote social and economic development as well as the provision of proximate and easily accessible services, including education, throughout the country. Among others, the Constitution holds that every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education. However, historically, there has been uneven distribution of schools right from the pre-colonial, colonial period up to now. This disparity in the distribution of schools in regions has far reaching implications not only with regard to equity in access, but also quality that depended highly on the type of school, especially at the secondary level. This scenario is strikingly similar to the defunct provinces where a number of them had fewer and poorly equipped secondary schools as compared to their share of the population. Thus there is a daunting task in the planning of education in the country's 47 counties. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to critically examine the provision of secondary education in Kenya, with specific reference to equity in access, in the wake of the devolved county units as well as explore the prospects in a bid to facilitate its successful implementation. During the critical examination, the distribution of secondary schools in general, and the national ones in particular, in the country is discussed in a historical perspective. Particularly, this approach will assist not only in bringing out the stark disparities in the provision of secondary education in the country, but also help in formulating policy suggestions to attempt and surmount the attendant challenges.

**Key words:** Access, County, Equity, Secondary Education.

## Introduction

This paper delves into the provision of secondary education in Kenya in the wake of the introduction of regional administrative units known as counties, brought about by the Constitution launched in 2010 (Republic of Kenya-ROK, 2010). According to Article 53 (1) (b) of the Constitution, every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education. As per ROK (2012, 1999), basic education refers to the whole range of educational activities taking place in pre-primary, primary and secondary education levels. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) has the Bill of Rights at its core. Accordingly, basic education is a fundamental human right. This implies that citizens can hold the state accountable, that is, to ensure that every child aged 4-17 years is in school and receiving quality education. Indeed, this is consistent with the international education commitments and other conventions to which Kenya is a signatory. These include Article 11 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Article 17 of the African Charter on Human Rights, Article 13 of the United Nations' International Convention on Social and Economic Rights, the Jomtien Protocols as well as the Millennium Development Goals (ROK, 2012). It is important to reiterate that these vital documents emphasize on the right to free and compulsory education for the child as well as governments' obligations towards that right.

The national philosophy of education places education at the centre stage of the country's human as well as economic development strategies (ROK, 2012). Accordingly, education in Kenya should be geared towards the development of one's potential in a holistic and integrated manner. This will help produce individuals who are intellectually, physically and emotionally stable. Specifically, such an education should instill in a person values like patriotism, honesty, humility, mutual respect and moral status of high degree. ROK (2005, 1998) point out that there is need to develop the human resource base through expansion of secondary education if Kenya is to attain a newly industrialized status. This is also the dream envisioned in Kenya's Vision 2030 development plan. Other than facilitating the acquisition of the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for the development of self and the nation, secondary education is meant to promote harmonious co-existence among the people of Kenya, enhance understanding and respect for own and people's cultures and place in contemporary society and prepare students for global citizenship. According to ROK (2012), the importance of secondary education has grown considerably especially in developing countries with the success of Universal Primary Education. As the country's development blueprint, the Kenya Vision 2030 places great emphasis on the link between education

and the labour market and the need to create entrepreneurial skills and competences (ROK 2012, 2007). It articulates the development of a middle-income country where all citizens will embrace entrepreneurship, engage in lifelong learning, solve complex problems, assume more responsibility and have quantitative, reasoning and expository skills. Clearly, ensuring quality and equity in access to secondary school education are vital in Kenya's development endeavours.

However, there is uneven distribution of secondary schools in the country (ROK, 2012, 2007). In addition, there is inequitable distribution of teachers, teaching and learning resources between the National, County and District categories of secondary schools, with the National schools receiving the highest priority, followed by the County ones. Due to this, the trend in the performance in national examinations in these schools is better than most District schools (ROK, 2012). Among others, this scenario could mean that human resource development would be skewed in favour of the already historically advantaged regions, thereby perpetuating the glaring and persistent inequities, of all sorts, in the country's counties. Further, such a situation would contradict the national values as well as principles of governance, including equity, social justice, inclusiveness, equality, non-discrimination as well as protection of the marginalized (ROK, 2010). This paper therefore, focuses on the distribution of secondary schools, especially the national and county ones which most citizens crave for due to the quality of facilities available, government support they receive and above all, the impressive results they post at the public examinations. In an attempt to account for the disparities in the distribution and quality of secondary education, the evolution of formal education has been traced since the pre-colonial, through colonial to the present times. The outstanding challenges are highlighted and so are the prospects.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper is informed by the social justice theory as advanced by John Rawls (1971). It is upon this theory that the concept of equity was founded. The theory was however, later revised in 1999 and then restated in 2001. It elaborates on the concept of equity and focuses on the idea of justice as well as fairness in the distribution of goods and services, including education (Rawls, 1971). The theory holds that due to lack of equity in the distribution of essential needs, every society is always faced with the choice as to whether to retain the current laws and policies or to modify them so as to achieve equity. Proponents of this theory note that to ensure justice is done, the society should change its policies and laws so as to raise the status of the less privileged members of the society (Rawls 2001). Thus societies should focus on creating a system that is fair to every member of the society. This theory therefore, is particularly useful in formulating policies to enhance equity in access to secondary school education opportunities which are fair to students from different socio-economic backgrounds. This will greatly help reduce the glaring inequalities in as far as the provision of secondary education in Kenya is concerned.

### **Disparities in the development of education in pre-colonial Kenya**

Long before Kenya was colonized politically, the introduction of modern education was mainly done by Christian missionaries of different societies (Bogonko & Sifuna, 1986; Wosyanju, n.d). During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, one group of such missionaries came through the town of Mombasa and were responsible for the establishment of education along the coastal as well as central regions of the country. Other missionaries came from Uganda and occupied the now defunct Nyanza and Western provinces of Kenya. Another group of missionaries saw the arrival of missionaries Johann Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebman who arrived in 1844, interacted with locals in the coastal town of Mombasa and set up one of the earliest mission schools in the country at Rabai in 1846 (Bogonko, 1992). This event stimulated the opening of similar schools at Freretown in 1875 for freed slaves, Taita in 1882 as well as at Taveta in 1890.

However, while some communities welcomed the missionaries to settle and embark on their work, others resisted their efforts to put up schools and mission stations. For instance, the Kamba opposed the idea of the missionaries setting up a school and mission at Yatta in 1894 compelling the latter to proceed to western Kenya where they established a school at Kaimosi in 1902. Indeed, the western region of Kenya witnessed the establishment of many mission stations, many of which were offshoots of those already established in Uganda and Tanzania. In this region were also the African Institute of the Church of God mission as well as the Seventh Day Adventists, among others (Sheffield, 1973).

The establishment of the colonial rule in 1895 and the building of the Kenya – Uganda railway (1895-1901) saw the missionaries establish their schools up country. For example, while the Consolata Fathers stationed themselves at Kiambu, Limuru and Mangu, the Mill Hill Fathers split into western Kenya. It is worth to reiterate that while those communities that warmly received the missionaries got formal elementary education with more and more schools being built, those that were hostile missed the opportunity to reap fruits of western education

(Sifuna, 1986). This could partly explain the regional disparities in the distribution of learning institutions in the country.

### **The skewed provision of secondary education during the colonial period.**

Still, the provision of western education in Kenya during the colonial era was mainly the undertaking of the missionaries who had gained exclusive, vast and informed experience (Bennaars, Otiende & Boisvert, 1994). The colonial government initially had neither a policy nor a development plan to guide its participation in education. Bogonko (1992) argues that if the provision of primary education in Kenya during the colonial period was limited, then the development of secondary education was simply neglected. The main reason for this scenario was that colonialists wanted to meet the immediate and visible needs for both the middle as well as low level human resource in the colonial and political structures.

According to Wanjohi (2011), Eshiwani (1993) and Sifuna (1980), formal education was designed to serve the colonial minority. This was reflected in racial segregation and the gross imbalances, especially in educational opportunities. Notably, there were limited opportunities for secondary education for the Africans. Colonialists also feared that secondary education would make it difficult for the Africans to take orders and hence to slow down the process of industrialization as had happened in India (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). Basically, it was the Christian mission schools which provided the first secondary education for Africans in Kenya, mainly up to junior secondary level. For example, by 1940, all the four secondary schools in Kenya, including Alliance, Mangu, Maseno and Yala were of this nature. It was only after 1945 that some of the colonialists' tone changed to accommodate academic education for Africans.

The limited number of secondary school places was very dissatisfying to the Africans who now started pressing for better education. This was after realization that occupational recruitment, material well-being and social status largely depended on the acquisition of modern education. In Kenya, Africans campaigned hardest for the opening of secondary schools in every district and in 1956, the Government African schools including Kakamega, Kisii, Kagumo and Machakos had become full secondary schools.

Between 1960 and 1970, Kenya had aims, policies and practices which regarded secondary education as the level which could make Kenya solvent in personnel. Its expansion was especially emphasized in Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 (ROK, 1965). Similar arguments were put forward by the first post-independence, the Kenya Education Commission's (ROK, 1964) report that emphasis on primary education must not hinder adequate growth in secondary, commercial, technical and higher education which are more directly related to economic development, nor should expansion of primary education be allowed to affect quality.

While the number of secondary schools rose steadily in the period 1960-1970, the government also attempted to diversify the curriculum by emphasizing on mathematics and science subjects so as to produce not only professional, managerial and supervisory personnel, but also skilled workers necessary for the development of Kenya's economy. However, growth of education for girls was slower in secondary education than it was at the primary level (Otiende, 1992). Gender disparities in secondary school education remain a challenge to date. For instance, of the at least 1.18 million students registered in secondary schools in 2007, 639,393 of them were boys while 540,874 were girls (ROK, 2012). Similarly, out of the 1,701,501 students enrolled in secondary schools in 2010, 914,971 and 786, 530 were boys and girls, respectively.

### **Regional disparities in secondary education in Kenya since independence**

Although the government aimed at distributing education equitably in all areas, there still remained vast regional inequalities thereby challenging the seriousness of the education planners (Sifuna, Chege & Oanda, 2006). This trend could be justified not in terms of population growth but of political power. For example, by 1963, the former Nyanza and Central provinces were fairly provided with secondary schools while the Coast and North Eastern provinces occupied the other extreme of the spectrum (Bogonko, 1992). By 1968, Central and Nairobi became even better positioned than the rest of the provinces. The quality of secondary education which was mainly measured by public examinations was equally adversely affected by the rapid expansion of secondary education. Nevertheless, the number of secondary schools in the country increased from 151 in 1963 to 7308 in 2010 (ROK, 2012). Within the same period, 30,000 students were enrolled in secondary schools in 1963 while there were 1.7 million of them in 2010.

Regional disparities, especially those affecting rates of economic development as well as failure to address historical imbalances, particularly in the arid and semi-arid areas have led to inequitable provision of secondary education (ROK, 2007, 1999). The arid and semi-arid regions have specific problems which affect access more seriously than those experienced by more economically productive districts. These factors include a poor economic base, poor communication and infrastructure, lack of water, the nomadic way of life, insecurity and conservative socio – cultural practices. Gender disparities are also most persistent in these areas, at both the

secondary and tertiary levels. There are fewer places for girls in secondary schools than there are for boys. In addition, there are normally few and scattered schools in such areas. According to ROK (2012), the State will give priority in access to vulnerable groups or individuals including women, the old, persons with disabilities, children, youth, members of minority or marginalized communities as well as members of particular ethnic, religious and cultural communities.

### **Categorization and differential academic performance of secondary schools in Kenya**

The categorization of secondary schools after independence as Maintained, Assisted, Unaided Harambee or Unaided Private schools lowered the quality of education (Eshiwani, 1993). For instance, while the Maintained schools were fully supported in terms of paying staff, received grants, had good facilities hence posted good performance in national examinations, the Assisted ones only got government assistance in form of teachers as the community contributed funds for purchase of supplies, construction of civil work and general running of the schools. Their examination results were therefore, not very commendable and the physical structures as well as equipment rather poor. Similarly, whereas the Unaided Harambee schools were started and entirely managed by local communities, the Unaided Private ones were established by entrepreneurs with the objective of making profit. Generally, both categories of secondary schools registered dismal performance in public examinations. Eshiwani (1993) notes that to equalize educational opportunities in all regions in the future, the government should give preference to those areas which seem to be disadvantaged.

Currently, secondary schools in Kenya are broadly categorized as government funded and private. The government funded ones are divided into National, County and District schools. After taking the primary school national examination, government funded schools select students based on their scores. While students with the highest scores are admitted into the National schools, based on the quota system, those with average scores join the County and District schools. Most day schools accept students with low scores. The quota system policy was introduced in 1985 by the government with intent to enhance regional equity in access, particularly to national and county schools. However, the policy on the quota system has been changing over time and is laden in controversy. For example, with regard to selection to county schools in 2012, the policy stipulated that 60 percent of the students be selected from primary schools within the district in which the county schools are found (ROK, 2005). Another 35 percent of the places were allocated to students from other districts within the provinces, which are now defunct, while the remaining 5 percent were preserved for those from other provinces. Bulimo, Odebero and Musasia (2010) argue that since the national and county schools have better avenues for social mobility compared to the district ones, access to them should be fair.

On the other hand, private schools are run by either private organizations or individuals. They are generally high cost schools often with better or more luxurious facilities compared to the public ones. Although most of the private secondary schools offer the Kenyan system of education, others offer the British or the American system of education. Examples of the private secondary schools in Kenya include Strathmore, Braeburn, Brookhouse, Oshwal Academy, Aga Khan Academy and St. Mary's School, Nairobi. They are often preferred for prestige.

Clearly, secondary schools in Kenya differ greatly in terms of admission criteria, accessibility, physical facilities, affordability and quality which are normally gauged against results registered in national examinations. Indeed, well equipped and managed schools often post attractive results in the national exams. For instance, in the 2012 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination, three national schools posted 23 candidates among the best 100 list in the country (Siringi, 2013). Similarly, in the 2010 KCSE examination results, all the national schools were among the top 100 and so were 51 county, 21 private and a paltry two district schools in the country. The least performance index among the country's top 100 schools was an impressive 8.5921 out of a possible maximum of 12 points (KNEC, 2011). It is abundantly clear that students in national and county schools perform well hence they have high opportunities for upward mobility compared to those in district schools (Bulimo, Odebero & Amadalo, 2010). According to Ludger and Schultz (2006), unequal education implies that the human potential is being wasted as some individuals do not have the competence to perform well in a modern society. Psacharopoulos and Woodhall (1985) observe that equity in access to education requires that the costs and benefits of education be equitably distributed among region, gender, socio-economic as well as ethnic groups. Thus, establishing the extent of disparity in accessing quality secondary school education will greatly help in the successful formulation as well as implementation of equity policies in the wake of the new constitutional dispensation in Kenya.

### **The uneven distribution of national secondary schools in Kenya**

According to ROK (1999), one of the serious concerns raised by members of the public especially from the economically disadvantaged areas was the distribution of the national schools. Indeed, most guardians and

parents yawn to have children join national schools since they are well equipped, post impressive results in national exams, boast of adequate trained staff and attract learners from all over the country which is vital in sharing its rich and varied cultures hence promoting national cohesion and integration (ROK, 2012). This is in line with the Constitution which requires that national unity, spirit of nationhood, patriotism, recognition of the diversity of the people and promotion of their cultures be upheld. Thus national schools serve to promote national values, principles and goals as enshrined in the Constitution.

But, not all national schools register good results at the KCSE examination. A case in point is the KCSE results of 2012 where eight out of the 75 national schools ranked in the examination were not able to send a single student to university, based on their performance mean. Most of these schools happened to come from the northern as well as coastal regions of Kenya and posted a mean grade of D plain, meaning that a lot more needs to be done in order to reverse this scenario (Siringi, 2013). In addition, at least 10 of the national schools performed so dismally to the extent that they could not be ranked among the top 100 district schools. Also, worth noting is the fact that three of the 78 national schools as of 2012 had their results withheld by the Kenya National Examinations Council for various reasons.

In a bid to address the glaring disparity, Kenya's ministry of education has made effort to progressively increase the number of national schools. As per ROK (2012), the government is currently upgrading top performing county schools in all the 47 counties to increase equity as well as access to quality education and promote national integration. Notably, the number of national schools rose from a mere 18 in 2010 to 78 of them in 2012. The government intends to finally have a total of 105 of such schools. Each of these schools is to get Kshs 25 million for the expansion of classrooms, dormitories and laboratories so as to create more new Form One places (Siringi, 2013). However, the fact that the implementation of the programme is being done in phases, means that it will take some time before students benefit fully from this venture. Although this increase in the number of the coveted national schools is laudable, it is worth observing that up to 2010, most of the counties had none, despite various communities perennially requesting for them. The following table presents the distribution of counties and the national schools, up to 2011, in Kenya's defunct eight provinces, namely; Central, Nairobi, Rift Valley, North Eastern, Nyanza, Coast, Western and Eastern. It is important to reiterate that since then, the government has made deliberate efforts to establish at least two national schools per county.

Province	No. of counties	No. of national schools		
		As of 2010	New ones (As of 2011)	Total
Central	5	6	3	9
Nairobi	1	6	1	7
Rift Valley	14	5	6	11
North Eastern	3	-	1	1
Eastern	8	-	5	5
Nyanza	6	1	5	6
Coast	6	-	4	4
Western	4	-	5	5

Source:Ministry of Education, 2011.

The table shows that up to 2010, Nairobi and Central provinces had six national schools each, Rift Valley (5), Nyanza (1) while North Eastern, Coast, Eastern and Western provinces had none. Further, the table shows that of the 30 county schools elevated to national status in 2011, Nairobi and North Eastern provinces had one each, Central (3), Eastern (5), Coast (4), Nyanza (5), Rift Valley (6) and Western (5). Further, the table shows that with the elevation of the 30 county schools to national schools in 2011, Central province had a total of nine of them, Nairobi (7), Rift Valley (11), Coast (4), Eastern (5), Nyanza(6), North Eastern (1) and Western (5). Clearly, this scenario demonstrates the stark historical disparities in the distribution of national schools in the country, particularly, up to 2011. For instance, while the defunct Central province had five counties and nine national schools, as of 2011, Eastern, Nyanza, Western and Coast provinces, all having quite comparable number of counties and demographic features with the former, had much fewer national schools of five, six, four and five, respectively.

But, as the government strives to increase the number of national schools, it should also device other sustainable intervention measures meant to address the ever increasing demand for quality secondary education. Commendably, the government is already implementing measures to improve access to secondary education through the subsidized Day Secondary Education. For instance, such attempts have seen student enrolment leap

from 1.03 million in 2006 to over 1.9 million in 2012 (ROK, 2012). Similarly, the individual counties should adequately support the rest of the secondary schools within them to offer sound education. It is imperative to note that the schools recently elevated to national status were formerly county ones with sterling performance in the national secondary education examination. Indeed, Articles 174, 175, 176, 189 and Fourth Schedule of the Constitution have provisions on the devolution of services to the county governments, including those of education, in ensuring equity, access, quality and special attention to the minorities and marginalized groups (ROK, 2010). This will greatly help enhance access to quality education and to complement the old national schools. Indeed, similar efforts should be directed towards the numerous day schools which accommodate most of the students at the secondary cycle of education in Kenya.

### **Prospects of secondary education in Kenya.**

Given that education, training and research remain the foremost tools for accelerating social mobility, national cohesion and economic development for industrialization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (ROK, 2012, 2007, 1999), it is imperative that the provision of education receives the attention it deserves from all the concerned stakeholders. Due to the information communication technology revolution, like other parts of the world, Kenya has experienced the impact of globalization, increasing inter-dependence between states and the need for people to become responsible citizens both locally and internationally. Consequently, the government needs to strengthen the education and training sector to respond to these emerging challenges in a bid to realize its goals and aspirations (ROK, 2012, 2007). In particular, emphasis should be placed on adequately addressing the needs of the disadvantaged counties as well as groups as stipulated in the Constitution. For example, although the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) at the secondary school level increased from 28.9% (29.8% for boys and 27.9% for girls) in 2008 to 32 % (34.5% for boys and 29.6% for girls) in 2010, counties in the north eastern region of Kenya had the lowest NERs (ROK, 2012). Accordingly, a low NER of 3.5% for secondary education was recorded in Turkana County and a high of 50 % in Kiambu County against the national average of 24.2%.

Though entangled in a number of challenges (ROK, 2012), including limited facilities, the mismatch between what is taught and the needs of the world of work, an unfriendly environment in some schools, teacher absenteeism and lateness, poverty at the household level, negative effects of HIV and AIDS pandemic and rising repetition rates, the counties have the potential to provide quality, relevant and equitable education to the ever increasing number of learners so as to achieve the goals envisioned in the Kenya Vision 2030 as well as the Millennium Development Goals. The counties should especially take advantage of the autonomy or devolved powers accorded to them by the Constitution to initiate progressive resource mobilization, utilization and management practices to provide quality, accessible and affordable education in their respective areas of jurisdiction. Among others, the counties should engage in linkages and partnerships in the provision of education services, particularly with the community, private sector and the development partners. To ensure that quality is maintained, both the central as well as county governments should develop frameworks for action, including policy guidelines for their implementation as well as indicators for monitoring equity, access, quality and relevance of education. Such undertakings should however, be done in a sustainable manner to ensure their success.

On its part, the central government should ensure that resource allocation is equitably done to uphold the principles of justice and fairness in the provision of education. Notably, since categorization of secondary schools has over the years been blamed for the differential academic achievement and resource allocation, the quota system of admitting students needs to be rationalized with the view to encouraging as many learners as possible from different counties to learn and benefit together. Similarly, the existing biases in the distribution of secondary schools, budgetary allocation, equipment, qualified teachers, bursaries and other incentives need to be urgently addressed. Among others, the government needs to meet its pledges such as provision of free and compulsory education to all children, ensuring progression between grades and levels of basic education and sensitizing parents and other stakeholders to discard socio-cultural practices that prohibit effective participation of girls as well as boys in secondary school education and enforcing legislation against the violation of children's rights (ROK, 2012, 2001). In a number of occasions, there has been blatant violation of these constitutional provisions.

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