In 2000, the international community promised to provide every child with a primary education by 2015. Unfortunately this goal hasn’t been met. In Kenya, significant progress has been made toward expanding access to both primary and secondary education. These gains, however, have not been accompanied by a reduction in inequality or an improvement in the quality of learning. This paper examines the current status of education in Kenya, including the dynamics of access, equity and quality, and provides examples of on-going interventions that seek to address some of these challenges.
Impact of education

In a country where 80% of the population lives in rural areas and less than 20% of the land is suitable for farming (Langinger, 2011), basic education is critical for development. Studies have shown that in countries like Kenya where skills are scarce, investing in secondary education results in the highest rates of return (Mingat, 1996).

The individual benefits of secondary education include higher lifetime earnings, reduced infant mortality, better health, and reduced vulnerability to exploitation. At the aggregate level, greater education leads to increased productivity and national income, technology development, improved social cohesion, reduced fertility, and slower growth of expenditures.

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1 Primary education = grades 1-8
2 Secondary education = grades 9-12
for social services. The impact of increased education is greatest for girls. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted, “Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation.”

Besides meeting the educational needs of students, schools have been drivers of development within communities. Schools are often the sole community center in villages, providing the space for meetings, social services, and festivities. Through this common space, children and adults are connected, social networks are strengthened, and local communities are empowered (Unicef, 2004).

In addition to providing space, schools are in a position to reach out to their communities. In 2001, for example, Kenya launched a school-based HIV/AIDS intervention. Fifteen hundred schools were involved, taking on educational campaigns, making health facilities available to the community, and providing day care services for orphans and widows (Luginaah, 2007). This project not only highlighted schools as an effective tool in mitigating HIV, but also the potential for schools to promote development. For example, a group of Kenyan schools partnered with UNESCO on a “child-to-child” intervention designed to bring out-of-school children back to the classroom. The pilot trained students and teachers to go into their neighborhoods and identify children who were out of school and ask them why they were out of school. The most frequent responses were poverty, lack of school uniforms, domestic work, and distance from school. Solutions to these problems were found through community dialogue and support, and 7,000 of 9,000 out-of-school children—half of them girls—were brought back to school (Unicef, 2004).

**The current situation**

The Kenyan education system faces significant challenges related to school access and quality of learning. Twenty-five percent of children do not transition from primary to secondary school. Gender, place of birth and family income remain strong predictors of school enrollment at all levels (Nicolai, 2014). Even in areas with high enrollment, learning is not guaranteed. For example, upon reaching 8th grade, 11% of children cannot complete 2nd grade level mathematics and 7% cannot read a simple English or Kiswahili story.

The government has improved access to education by launching a tuition-free secondary education policy in 2008. This policy was followed by a significant increase in enrollment, which reached 67% in 2012 (The World Bank, 2014). However, this policy has done little to improve equity because schools still charge fees for operational expenses. These fees are unaffordable for poor families who must also purchase uniforms, food, textbooks, and school supplies.
In 2008, for example, the annual cost of secondary education was twelve to twenty times more than the monthly income of parents in rural areas, where more than 80% of the population lives (Ministry of Education, 2010).

In Kenya, parents who have the means will often enroll their children in private schools, which they believe offer a better education. Studies suggest that expanding access to private schools may be a viable alternative for improving quality. According to Brookings Institute’s “Africa Growth Initiative” survey in 2011, students taking the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (the test all students must take upon graduating primary school) in private schools performed consistently higher than their public school counterparts. The most recent comparison cited a 19% advantage on test scores for private school students. The study also found that fees for two-thirds of children in Kenya’s private schools are lower than the supposedly “free” state system (M. Kimani, 2013).

In addition to monetary impediments, physical access to schools in rural areas remains a serious barrier. The government is often unable to build sufficient classrooms to accommodate growing student enrollment and teachers frequently teach outdoors. When
Ongoing interventions
Given these factors affecting Kenya’s educational system, providing scholarships to deserving students is one way to give children and adolescents an education they could otherwise not afford. The School Fund (TSF) provides student scholarships that pay for tuition, uniforms, materials, exam fees, boarding, and food so that poor students can continue their education. In 2012, TSF began a partnership with Wema Children’s Centre in Bukembe Village in rural Kenya. Wema is a community-based organization founded in 2008 to give children orphaned by AIDS, political violence, and poverty a safe home and a quality education. The founders, Teresa Wati and

A Chance to Learn

When Wellington was just five years old, his father died. With Wellington’s mother out of work, the remaining family of six often went hungry. Wellington remembers going a week at a time surviving only on fruit he and his siblings picked from a nearby bush.

Within a few brief years, his mother also passed away, leaving Wellington—along with all his other siblings—to stay with an adult, married sister. Wellington knew he was bright, and fortunately, he was enrolled in primary school. But his marks began dropping, in part due to grief over his parents, but also because he was often distracted by hunger.

At the end of primary school, Wellington passed his exams and qualified for a secondary level education he knew his family couldn’t afford.

Fortunately, around this time, Wellington’s sister heard about Wema Children’s Highway Academy where, as he remembers it, “they were offering free education for people like me.” Wellington remembers tears of joy streaming down his cheeks. He says this was “the beginning of my happiness.”

The family still struggles to provide basics, and providing that education was not free for Highway Academy. But through crowdfunded scholarships provided by The School Fund, Wellington was able to remain in school and graduated last year.
Stephen Juma, provide 252 Wema children nutritious meals, access to clean water, medical care, and most important, an education at Highway Academy, one of the highest performing schools in Kenya. In 2014, TSF provided full scholarships to 24 Wema children. That number nearly doubled to 41 in 2015 and is expected to grow to 74 in 2016, representing 30% of Wema scholarships.

Highway Academy consistently places in the top 100 schools on the Kenyan national exam, and almost every graduate has gone on to either university or a trade program. Alex Breinin, Wema Children’s President, attributes Highway Academy’s success to the compassionate, tenacious, and dedicated character of its staff members. Teresa has recruited experienced and qualified teachers from some of the best schools in Kenya who dedicate their lives to their students. Children are surrounded by learning opportunities—inside and outside the classroom—at least fourteen hours a day, six days a week in the secondary school.

Most important to students’ success, however, is a sense of community between Wema and the Bukembe Village. Everyone in the community cares and is proud that Wema is a place that enables children to become smart, able, resilient adults. Villagers help by looking after the children’s safety, providing firewood, or just donating a chicken, when they can. They also sell Wema goods at the lowest cost possible. Teresa offers adult villagers vocational training and free use of the school’s computer lab. She allows community members access to water from the well and is constantly traveling around the area searching for families in need. In an area ravaged by disease, violence and poverty, cultivating a sense of community and embracing all those who are part of it is critical. Teresa notes, "You have an obligation to help the poor. The political environment in Kenya and wealthy class do not favor the poor. Unless you receive help and are educated, you will die a poor man’s death."
Bibliography


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