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PROVIDING BASIC EDUCATION FOR ALL IN AFRICA: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

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Karendi had aspired to be a cardiologist ever since her father died in his prime at the age of 33, from a heart ailment, while she was in grade 1 at primary school. By the time she was in grade 3, this dream was quickly becoming a mirage: she had spent the half of the past school year, 2002, at home because her widowed mother, Muthoni, could scarcely afford to pay her school fees while also taking care of Karendi's three siblings. A peasant farmer in central Kenya, Muthoni eked out her living from the small piece of land she lived on, combined with labouring occasionally on nearby farms. It was with extreme gratitude and overwhelming hope, therefore, that both Karendi and her mother welcomed the Kenyan government's 2003 Free Primary Education (FPE) programme in all public schools. Karendi's dream of becoming a cardiologist was again within sight.

Karendi's narrative and Kenya's FPE program mirror the journey many developing countries have taken in their quest to provide Universal Primary Education (UPE) to all school-eligible children amidst high poverty levels. Currently, primary education, or basic education as it otherwise known, represents the most open cycle of the education system as it is the part of formal education accessible to a majority of school-eligible children. It is expected to provide the building block for individual, community and national development thereby combating poverty as well as providing the foundation for further education and training.

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Notwithstanding these benefits of basic education, it is rational to expect that universal access to this education would have been at the forefront of policy initiatives by African nations immediately after independence in the 1960s. The extant enormous discrepancies between countries in the continent, some with near universal access while others lag behind, manifest a lack of urgency in strategies for universalisation immediately after independence. The urgent need to Africanise the bureaucracies and to replace the departing expatriates with qualified locals focused the attention of governments on the expansion of secondary and higher education as opposed to primary education (Sifuna & Sawamura, 2010) to the detriment of basic education. By 1960, gross primary enrolment in Africa was 36%, half of the rates in Latin America and Asia (Sifuna & Sawamura, 2010, p. 56). By 1990, while 80% of the world's school-age children overall were either enrolled in and/or attending primary school, the specific numbers for Sub-Saharan Africa were comparatively lower. These stood at a mere 60% (UNICEF, 2006), with some countries experiencing even lower ratios, such as Ethiopia at 50% (UNDP, 2011). Poverty, political instability and cultural practices were identified as the key contributing variables to poor enrolment ratios in the continent.

Accelerated policy initiatives towards UPE, within Africa and other developing countries, have been the result of international influences. The first was the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in which the right to education was designated as a fundamental human right. Further, UDHR decreed that the education "shall be free in the elementary and fundamental stages" (United Nations, 1948). To articulate the goals of UDHR within the African continent, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), in conjunction with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), in 1961 organised an African regional conference on education for the newly independent states in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The goal of the conference was to ensure six years of universal primary education in the entire continent by 1980. In 1990, the current catalyst for UPE efforts was inaugurated at the World Conference on Education For All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand under the sponsorship of the United Nations and UNICEF as well as other multilateral and bilateral donors. Key goals of EFA were to develop joint strategy between donors and developing countries in order to stem the tide of declining enrolments, the plummeting completion rates and the deplorable learning conditions in order to attain UPE by the new millennium – in the year 2000 (WCEFA, 1990).

After the 1990 EFA conference, African nations embarked on an ambitious programme of increasing primary school enrolments in order to meet the set target. Many of the governments launched their own "Education for All" plans, while others announced their renewed commitment to the goal of free universal primary education as part of their transition to democracy (Moulton, Mundy, Welmond, & Williams, 2002). By 1999, however, it was clear that Africa was not going to meet the UPE

target by the year 2000 since the enrolment ratio stood at 65%. Thus, at the follow-up 2000 World Conference on EFA held in Dakar, Senegal, another 15 year time-frame was announced for the achievement of education for all. The Dakar forum took stock of how far we were from reaching the goals established in the 1990 Jomtien EFA conference and identified six key measurable goals to be attained by 2015 in order to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults. Goal 6, *Improve the Quality of Education*, meant going beyond mere access to school and focusing critically on learning outcomes in the education system (UNESCO, 2000). Suffice it to say that, though Africa has made tremendous progress in increasing enrolments in basic education, by 2006 36% (or 44 million) of school-eligible children were still out of school (Munene, 2009).

MOVING BEYOND QUANTITATIVE ACCESS

In his presidential address at the 2014 Comparative and International Education Society Annual Conference in Toronto, Canada, Gilbert Valverde characterised the 1990 EFA movement as one championed by “global radical education advocates”, keen on counting “roofs and desks” (quantity) rather than qualitative learning outcomes (Valverde, 2014). Today’s educational policy imperative, according to Valverde, is quality, more so the quality of learning outcomes even for those countries not meeting the universal primary education target. In tandem with Valverde’s characterisation, both the 1990 and 2000 conferences on EFA and governments have placed too much emphasis on access to education and not much on learning. Equally, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Goal 2 on Universal Primary Education and Goal 3 on Gender Equality in Education by 2015 have all laid emphasis on increased access to schools rather than on learning outcomes. It is due to such policy-driven emphasis on enrolment that current data on EFA programmes by various African governments shows expanded enrolment (access) and provision of facilities (inputs such as desks, books, teachers etc.). However, there is minimal empirical evidence of what students are learning in the primary (elementary) schools. Furthermore, while there are a number of studies on policy implementation, there is a dearth of empirical investigations on learning outcomes.

This special issue has its genesis in this lacuna. It grew out of intense discussions among researchers and scholars who attended Uwezo symposiums on learning outcomes. Uwezo is an educational research and advocacy non-profit agency dedicated to quality basic education as manifested in learning outcomes (Uwezo, 2014). Uwezo is a Swahili word meaning “capability” which underscores its concern with quality of basic education as measured by learning outcomes. The aim is to improve competencies in literacy and numeracy among children aged 6-16 years old in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, by using an innovative approach to social change that is citizen-driven and accountable to the public (Uwezo, 2014). Uwezo’s

approach is a paradigm shift that eschews top-down reform and embraces citizen agency as a goal in itself and as an effective means to improve service delivery and public resource management. This organisational “Theory of Change” informs and underpins everything at Uwezo, centring citizen agency in building public pressure that will then trigger actions to improve learning and reaction from policy makers.

Uwezo reports over the last three years paint a dismal picture of educational quality in the three East African countries that have embraced UPE. In the 2013 report for instance, less than one third of grade 3 children have grade 2 literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, a significant number of students approaching the end of the primary school cycle lack foundational grade 2 level skills. An interesting finding is intra-country differences in learning achievement, with Kenya being the best performer, followed by Tanzania with Uganda fairing worst. Two articles in this special issue provide more in-depth analysis of the Uwezo studies. The overarching conclusion is that the quality of education is low.

What other studies exist, and what do they disclose about learning outcomes? As is evident from the articles included in this special issue, our focus for now is on Eastern Africa. We present studies from Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda conducted from a variety of vantage points. Since the year 2015 marks the 25th anniversary of Education for All (EFA), as well as the assessment timeline for both EFA and Millennium Development Goals, the empirical studies from this region offer valuable lessons on the progress attained towards universal primary education. This is not to say that other regions of the continent do not have similar empirical studies. Indeed, they do. However, empirical studies from the rest of the continent will be considered in the subsequent editions of the journal as part of the ongoing strategy of broadening debates on the subject.

This special issue opens with the research by Sam Jones and Youdi Schipper which looks at the role of family background in explaining differential learning outcomes among primary school children in the East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The study establishes statistically significant differences in learning outcomes between children in less advantaged and more advantaged households. However, the explanatory power of family background is muted when it comes to between-country differences in learning outcomes. The findings of this study are reminiscent of James Coleman’s 1966 *Equality of Educational Opportunity* study in the US where he found family factors were stronger predictors of students’ educational achievement than direct school-related variables.

In the article focusing on economic decline and retention in Primary school, Woldehanna and Hagos provide a quantitative analysis of the link between economic variables at the household level to the probability of dropping out of school. The article concludes with a recommendation for robust social protection programmes as a key strategy in enhancing retention and thereby improving the quality of learning outcomes. Economics, as always, remains central to the success of UPE and the

onus is on African governments to manage the economic resources so as to ensure education retention and qualitative learning outcomes.

Mugo et al. look at the East Africa experience with UPE in the context of Uwezo assessment studies. The article captures vividly the dilemmas that governments face in promoting access while neglecting qualitative learning outcomes. In all three countries, student competencies in literacy and numeracy are wanting even as enrolment surges. The article closes with strong policy recommendations on the need for broad-based multi-sectoral approach to reconfiguring the functioning of primary schools in order to enhance learning outcomes.

Like Mugo et al's article, the one by Piper, Jepkemei and Kibukho is a further exploration of qualitative learning outcomes in lower grade elementary schools, though confined to the situation in Kenya. The empirical work documents the success of the Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) Initiative in enhancing the learning outcomes of children from low-income families, thereby providing credence to the view that early literacy intervention can mitigate the ill effects of socio-economic disadvantages. The findings suggest that efforts to improve literacy outcomes for the poor should begin early in primary school. This study provides the best evidence of the impact of deliberate and strategic measures in improving the qualitative learning outcomes in UPE.

A similar country-specific study is found in the contribution by Ngwaru and Oluga who document the reasons why literacy has lagged behind in the southern region of Tanzania. The article presents the findings of a case study of the Early Literacy Development project and focuses on the association between literacy practices, literacy events and early literacy development at home and school in low-resourced communities. The central finding of the study is the absence of a conceptual link between reading and writing and societal social structures. The target institutions of the school and communities were incapacitated in this endeavour on account of historical, economic and socio-cultural conditions.

Turning to Uganda, the article by Busingye and Najjuma shows the critical link between learning and teaching materials and learning outcomes. Using Uwezo 2011 data sets, the study shows that although teaching and learning materials are available and well distributed within the country, they have had minimal impact on learning outcomes in Mathematics and English achievement in primary schools. The study recommends a deeper engagement with the diverse nature of the teaching and learning resources in order to improve learning outcomes.

The final article by Shelley Jones is also on Uganda. It is a rather unique piece for this special issue because it does not directly touch on primary or elementary education. Indeed, its focus is on post-primary education. We include it because, in the broader discussion, it does capture some of the nuances inherent in primary education in Africa. First, it pays attention to the question of gender by studying the post-primary experiences of female students. Females tend to be the most

disadvantaged in when it comes to access and retention in primary schools. Second it shows how successful primary education, including the focus on qualitative learning outcomes, has a multiplier effect in secondary education. The findings from Jones' study reveal the cardinal role of post-primary education in capabilities development and the well-being of participants lives in the areas of employment, material well-being and a whole gamut personal, emotional, psychological and emotional well-being. Without a successful primary education, the benefits of a secondary education would not be attainable.

The interesting papers in this special issue should remind us that, even as we focus on enrolment in line with the goals of EFA and Millennium Development Goals, we cannot escape the call of quality in learning outcomes. Reality is dawning upon policy makers that we may never actually achieve 100% enrolment in primary schools, given the rapid population growth coupled with increased drop out from school. While it still seems unlikely that all African nations will declare victory in UPE, the articles in this special issue send a clear message on the need to shift emphasis towards ensuring quality in the provision of primary education. The next phase of EFA should, therefore, focus on the quality of educational outcomes for all.

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