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Ethnic Inequalities in Education in Kenya

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This paper uses Kenya's survey data to explore ethnic inequalities in education in Kenya. It focuses on some ethnic groups that may have resources and opportunities as a result of their geographical location and ethnic proximity to the ruling elite. The factors examined to explain potential educational inequalities among ethnic groups include the Gross Enrolment Ratios, the number of schools, and the number of qualified teachers. The results suggest a close correspondence of differentials between inequalities in education and ethnic affiliation to the ruling elite. Relatively small, clearly defined ethnic groups have accumulated an advantage over the majority in the national population, in terms of the education infrastructure and resources. Based on these results, this paper argues that ethnicity should be placed at the forefront of analyses of educational development in Kenya, as well as in policy efforts to reduce inequalities in education.

Kenya, Ethnicity, Inequalities, Education, Ruling Elite.

INTRODUCTION

Attainment of Universal Primary Education has been a long-term objective for the Government of Kenya since independence. But declining gross enrolment rates and completion rates of less than 50 per cent over the past ten years present a considerable challenge to policy-makers (Abagi, 1997). This paper is motivated by the growing concern of various stakeholders about the declining achievement, enrolment and increasing drop out rates. The government, parents, non-governmental organizations, and donors recognize that although major strides have been made in education in quantitative terms, there are serious shortcomings in Kenya's education system. Despite the Kenyan government's heavy investment in education, enrolment at various levels of education is characterized by regional and gender disparities and declining gross enrolment ratios (Abagi, 1997; Government of Kenya, 1995; Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 1995).

The slow rate of economic growth that the country has experienced is likely to limit resources available for education (UNDP, 2001). Therefore, in order to develop education and training, the government and its partners have to ensure that the education infrastructure and resources are equally distributed and efficiently managed at both national and school levels. Because of the persistent regional disparities in access and opportunities in education, frequently acknowledged in educational analysis in Kenya (Abagi, 1997; Bakari and Yahya, 1995; Ogot and Ochieng, 1995; Oucho, 2002; Oyugi, 2000), this research focuses on the relationship between ethnicity and educational inequalities. The purpose of the study is to see whether ethnicity contributes to the educational ills of the Kenyan education system. In this way, the study contributes to the debate on identifying and addressing the causes of declining participation rates in Kenyan schools, and to

understanding why the Kenyan government has difficulties in achieving its development goals in education.

Little is known about the extent of ethnic inequalities in education in Kenya, and whether it is an important factor influencing the effectiveness of the education system. The few comparative studies of inequalities in education in Kenya stem from the 1960s and 1970s, and are mostly based on regional and socio-economic factors. These studies generally reveal large differentials but provide scant interpretation of these inequalities.

In 1974, Kinyanjui conducted a study on the pattern of regional imbalances in the distribution of educational resources and opportunities in Kenya (Kinyanjui, 1974). The study revealed significant disparities between provinces and districts, along such dimensions as the proportion of primary-age group children actually in school, the distribution of secondary-school places, the opportunity to continue with further education, and so on. These findings, however, went unexplained. According to Court (1979), Kenya's education policy emphasizes academic achievement as the criterion for advancement within the system. Court (1979) concluded that so long as access to higher quality schools is visibly related to factors other than individual ability, and regional and ethnic disparities in the provision of educational facilities are not redressed, it is difficult to accept that the Kenyan government follows an ethos of equal opportunity. Faced with these difficulties in explaining inequalities in education, and bearing in mind Noyoo's (2000) assertion, in reference to African cultures, that ethnic frameworks are most important determinants of the pattern of development projects in Africa, the question arises why ethnicity has not been considered as a factor in shaping inequalities in education.

We argue that the underlying cause of unequal access to education is the patron-client relationship between the ethnic group of the ruling elite and the government that prevails in Kenya. Political and economic power, and the wealth affiliated with it, is highly skewed to the ruling ethnic group, whose exclusionary practices have created marked inequalities in access to resources, including educational resources. Our argument is that the ruling group uses the resources of the state for the special benefit of its own ethnic community and its allies, and this would be reflected in the educational development pattern.

Kenya's administrative units were created along ethnic boundaries by the British colonial administration, and they illustrate Kenya's present ethno-geography. The British divided the Kenyan territory along ethnic lines into eight provinces; each province was subdivided into districts, often according to ethnic groups and subgroups. For example, the Luo are based mainly in Nyanza; the Luhya, in Western Province; the Kikuyu in Central Province, the Somali, in North-Eastern Province; and the Mijikenda, in the Coastal Province. The Rift Valley is dominated by the Kalenjin, but also contains the Masai and other ethnic groups (see Table 1). The post-colonial government further consolidated this ethno-political structure by aligning parliamentary constituencies with ethnic boundaries, which has remained the style of Kenyan politics and provincial administration until today. Hence, from the district to the provincial level, ethnic groups are clustered together so that regions in Kenya are ethnically distinct. An argument can be made, following Oucho (2002), that ethnicity is the fulcrum of administrative boundaries, constituencies and development pattern in Kenya.

One basic assumption of this study is that the regional infrastructure strongly influences the level of access for a provincial population to resources, and more broadly, its developmental opportunities. This occurs, for example, where physical infrastructure, like schools, is unequally distributed across areas, creating a mismatch with the clustering of communities. Given the lack of in-depth research devoted to the ethnicity factor in Kenyan society, reliable data on access to and opportunity for education for the 42 ethnic groups do not exist. We therefore focus on the

particular ethnic groups that can be broadly categorized as having, or have had, an association with the political power in the Kenyan government (such as the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin), and those ethnic groups that have not held, or been associated with, political power in the government (such as the Swahili and the Somalis).

Table 1. Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Kenya by Province

Province	Total Provincial Population	Dominant Ethnic Group		
		Name	Population Size	Percentage
Nairobi	1,324,570	Kikuyu	428,775	32.4
Central	3,112,053	Kikuyu	2,919,730	93.8
Coast	1,829,191	Mijikenda	994,098	54.4
Eastern	3,768,677	Kamba	2, 031,704	53.9
North-Eastern	371,391	Ogaden	133, 536	36.0
Nyanza	3,507,162	Luo	2,030, 278	57.9
Rift Valley	4,981,613	Kalenjin	2,309, 577	46.4
Western	2,544,329	Luhya	2,192,244	86.2

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics (1994)

The next section of the paper reviews the literature on ethnicity and inequalities in Africa, to illuminate the importance of ethnic frameworks in Africa. It will be followed by a brief discussion on the historical background of education in Kenya, and how it was shaped with regard to ethnicity. In section four we use descriptive statistics to assess the present inequalities in education in the different provinces, and the last section concludes the paper.

ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN AFRICA

Work on inequalities and education in Africa has mainly focused on gender, socio-economic status, or geographical location. The principal limitation with existing research exploring ethnic inequalities in education is that many studies fail to account for the role of political structure in the relationship between ethnicity and education, and in particular, the role of the ruling elites in African states and the impact of their exclusionary practices along ethnic lines.

Recent writing on ethnicity in Africa stresses the role of the colonial state as the architect of ethnic groups, through the creation of administrative units that were subsequently labelled in ethnic terms (Oucho, 2002). This approach has emphasised the extent to which ethnic consciousness was externally imposed in a context of unequal power relations. The colonial legacy in Africa created uneven development in agrarian commercialization, transport investment and educational opportunity, and thus the location of an ethnic group's home territory determined its access of public goods, such as education. Groups located near the colonial capital, a rail line or port, or centres of colonial commerce were well situated to take advantage of these opportunities. Members of such groups were frequently found in schools, government offices, and commercial houses established in these areas (Horowitz 1985, p.151). In other instances, colonial powers favoured ethnic groups more systematically and deliberately. The Germans clearly favoured the Ewe in Togo, the English the Baganda in Uganda, and the Belgians the Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi and the Lulua in Congo. These groups became more educated in comparison with their fellow countrymen and -women, a situation that helped build resentment and frustration among the excluded groups (Platteau, 2000). Even though ethnic groups were constructed by colonial administrations, the advantage or disadvantage of belonging to a particular ethnic group soon consolidated ethnic difference into material ethnic divides.

While theoretical debates about the definition of ethnicity continue (eg. Schildkrout, 1978; Weinreich, 1973; Banton, 1998), this paper adopts a constructionist perspective on ethnicity, which argues that ethnic identity is not primordial or fixed, but "the product of human agency, a creative social act through which such commonalities as speech code, cultural practices,

ecological adaptation, and political organization become woven into a consciousness of shared identity" (Young, 1994, pp.79-80, quoted in Yeros, 1999, p.4). Once constructed, ethnic identity appears to be natural, primordial, and essential. In this paper, however, we are less concerned with ethnic identity as such; rather, we are interested in how ethnic markers such as language, skin colour, or heritage become material as a result of political practices.

Relevant to these questions is a body of empirical work on the relationship between ethnic inequalities and social and economic opportunities and exclusions in Africa. Gurr's (1993) quantitative study, which attempts to make cross-regional global comparisons, indicates that Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the largest number of politicized communal or ethnic groups, defined as groups which "experience economic or political discrimination", according to defined criteria, or groups which "have taken political action in support of their collective interests", and that these groups comprise more than 40 per cent of the population of the region (Gurr, 1993). Another study, by Gore (1994, p.1), in Africa, lists possible forms of ethnic inequalities arising from exclusions from access to land, to production factors (labour, inputs), to formal and informal employment, and to organizations and representation. Numerous examples of ethnic tension and violence in the African countryside are rooted in severe conflicts over access to scarce resources – including the conflicts between local Nuni and Mossi immigrants in western Burkina Faso, between farmers and Masai herders in Kenya and Tanzania, and between local fishermen from Kayar and migrant fishermen from Saint-Louis in Senegal (Platteau, 2000).

Post-colonial undemocratically elected governments in Africa, often brought into power by an interest group or ethnic group, are responsible for creating inequalities among the communities through exclusionary practices. Their weak legitimacy incites them to adopt a divide and rule approach, and to create marked inequalities in access to resources, frequently manipulating and exacerbating the language of ethnicity (Sindzingre, 1999). According to Bardhan (1997), the political machinery of patronage is used in many African states to exclude certain groups from decision-making at all levels, whether local, regional or national.

An example of the material effect of preferential access to resources along ethnic lines is the study conducted by Brockerhoff and Hewett (1998). They found ethnicity to be a significant factor in explaining the pattern of child mortality in Kenya, where children of the ethnic group of the country's president, the Kalenjin, were 50 per cent less likely to die before age five years than others, despite their almost exclusively rural residence. The researchers also discovered that levels of complete childhood immunization were significantly higher among groups with high-level government representation, because such political influence gave them better access to health clinics and well-paved roads. Stewart (2002) equally observed that social and economic inequalities in Uganda were predominantly between the centre/south and the north, and between the Bantu and non-Bantu-speaking peoples.

According to Oucho (2002) and Oyugi (2000), the allocation of government resources in post-colonial Kenya has followed an ethnic pattern, in which important political and administrative individuals have favoured the home region, own tribe or clan. During President Kenyatta's regime (1963- 1978), certain parts of the Kikuyu community gained considerably, while President Moi (1978 – 2002) granted similar advantages to his tribe - the Kalenjin. These practices resulted in seriously unbalanced modern development and inequalities in the country, and contributed to ethnicity becoming an important site of identification and conflict.

This review section has shown that ethnicity is the important criterion according to which groups define and identify themselves in Africa. It is through this ethnic identification that competition for influence in the state and in the allocation of resources takes place. Our general concern with the relationship of state policy and issues of inequalities is explicit within the educational arena.

The next section focuses on education in Kenya, to explore the relationship between ethnicity and educational opportunities and access.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN KENYA

As in many other colonised countries, missionaries laid the foundation for formal education in Kenya. They introduced reading to spread Christianity and taught practical subjects such as carpentry and gardening. These early educational activities began around the mid 1800s along the Kenyan coast. Expansion inland did not occur until the country's interior was opened up by the construction of the Uganda railroad at the end of the century. Sheffield (1973), in his work in education in Kenya, observed that the educational work of the Church Missionary Society foreshadowed some of the main dichotomies of education in Kenya in the twentieth century. Several studies have since contributed to an understanding of how missionaries influenced the process whereby the education system they fostered introduced strained racial relations (Battle and Lyons, 1970, Sheffield, 1973, Ghai and Court, 1974, Bakari and Yahya, 1995).

By 1910, 35 mission schools had been founded in Kenya. A British government-sponsored study of education in East Africa, the *Frazer Report of 1909*, proposed that separate educational systems should be maintained for Europeans, Asians, and Africans. In 1924 came the establishment of separate advisory committees for the three racial groups in the colony, which formalized the means by which the colonialists shaped the education systems (Anderson, 1970). During this period the expenditure per pupil was more than five times higher for Europeans than for Africans (Table 2), but when seen in relation to the total population, the imbalances were even greater.

Table 2. Education Department Expenditure by Race, 1930

	Pupils (In State and State-aided schools only)	Total Expenditure (in US Dollars)	Expenditure per Pupil (in US Dollars)
African	6948	232,293	33.4
Asian	1900	70,329	37.0
European	776	140,041	180.5
Total	9624	442,663	46.0

Source: Kenya, Education Department Annual Report, 1930, quoted in Sheffield, 1973

After independence in 1963, the Kenyatta government made several attempts to address the ills that afflicted the education system in general. The Kenya Education Commission was set up in 1964 under Professor Ominde to promote social equality and national unity, and recommended in its first Report that educational facilities be located in underprivileged regions, and the religious convictions of all people be safeguarded and respected. The latter recommendation was aimed at curbing the evangelical activities of the Christian missionary schools the government had inherited from the colonial administration. However, despite these recommendations, inequalities in educational provision and opportunities persisted in measurable factors such as the distribution of government schools in the country, national examination performance and university admission records (Ghai and Court 1974). The Ominde Commission had recommended expansion of educational facilities for those districts and provinces that had been educationally disadvantaged in terms of numbers of schools and enrolments so that they might catch up. As Table 3 indicates, the Central Province maintained its position as the province with the highest enrolment rates during this period.

Since the quality of education depends to a large extent on the quality of teachers, it is important to ensure that qualified teachers are equally distributed throughout the country, and perhaps more highly concentrated in regions of long-standing educational disadvantage. While recent data are not available, it is clear that by the end of the Kenyatta era, professionally qualified teachers were over-represented in the Central and Nairobi areas, the regions where the Kikuyu, the ethnic group

of the President, predominate (see Table 4). Whether this is a coincidence or further proves that ethnicity, regions and politics are intertwined (Oucho, 2002) is a question awaiting further research.

Table 3. Percentage Primary School Enrolment by Province 1969

Province	Enrolment % of 5-14yr age group in primary schools
Central	64
Nairobi	61
Eastern	47
Western	40
Coast	32
Nyanza	31
R/Valley	29
N/Eastern	4
Kenya	38.5

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics: Kenya (1994)

Table 4. Professionally Qualified Teachers in Primary Schools by Province, 1979 (as a percentage of all teachers)

Province	Nairobi	Central	R/Valley	Eastern	Nyanza	N/Eastern	Coast
Percentage	99.1	90.2	70.0	69.9	67.8	66.1	64.8

Source: Republic of Kenya, 1982, cited in Uitto, 1989

We have thus seen that the development of formal education in colonial Kenya led to a regional distribution in educational facilities and opportunities which consolidated inequalities between regions and ethnic groups in the 1960s and 1970s. The colonial period in Kenya favoured White settlers (predominantly located in the Central Province) in the allocation of government resources, and in the post-colonial years between 1963 and 1978, the Kikuyu profited most, as the main ethnic group in the Central Province, and President Kenyatta's ethnic affiliation. This supports our argument that during both periods, the ruling group used the resources of the state for their own benefit.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY KENYA

While the Kenyan government's investment in education has increased since independence, both in terms of real expenditure, and the percentage of government spending allocated to education, equity is still an issue, as indicated by the *Kenya Country Report* (Government of Kenya, 1995) and the *Education For All (EFA) Assessment* Report (UNESCO, 2000). There are large regional differences in access to primary education and in the quality of primary education.

Table 5 shows the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) as a measure of the proportion of children enrolled in a schooling level (irrespective of their age), and expressed as a percentage of the total number of children (population) in the relevant age group for that level. The GER by province for 1997 shows that there are fewer school-aged children in schools in the ethnic communities in the Coast Province, as compared with other Provinces. Even though lack of disaggregated data by ethnic groups and other relevant information, make it difficult to know the exact nature and extent of the problem, it is reasonable to assume that students of the ethnic groups in this Coast Province are at a disadvantage, as compared to other ethnic communities in other Provinces. These ethno-regional inequalities are further compounded in secondary schooling and post-school education. The Secondary and Higher schooling gross enrolment for the Coast Province indicates a high dropout rate with a low proportion proceeding to higher levels of education (Government Polytechnics and Universities). This shows that students living in the Rift Valley Province have a higher likelihood of reaching secondary or a higher level of education, and thus have an advantage over students in the Coast Province.

Table 5. Percentage distribution of gross enrolment for 1997

Province	Central	R/Valley	Eastern	Western	Nyanza	Coast
Primary	100	93.4	93.7	108.5	90.0	87.6
Secondary	33.7	29.6	20.4	22.1	38.7	14.2
Post-School Education	2.8	2.3	3.7	5.7	0.5	0.7

Source: Ministry of Education, 1995

Table 6 presents the primary school pupil-teacher ratio by Province for Kenya for 1997. Despite lower enrolment rates in the Coast Province, students also have to contend with the highest primary school pupil-teacher ratio by Province with 40 primary students per teacher, a figure that is well above the national average of 31 students per teacher. This indicates that teachers in the Coast Province are more likely to be overworked and possibly unable to provide an education of the same quality as teachers in other provinces. Rift Valley Province, from which the sitting President in the 1990s came, had the best educational opportunities and resources in terms of pupils per teacher ratio.

Table 6. Primary Schools Pupil-Teacher Ratio by Province

Province	Central	Coast	Eastern	Nyanza	R/Valley	Western	**Total**
1997	33.50	40.18	28.03	30.57	27.93	35.43	30.90

Source: Ministry of Education, 1995

Regional disparities in education are closely related to, and often compounded by, other socio-economic disparities. Some provinces, like the North Eastern and Coast Provinces, have fewer schools, which are widely scattered and thus more difficult to access, and attendance is further restricted due to lack of transport facilities. It is also difficult for children to go to school if their parents cannot afford to pay their school fees, which are particularly high for secondary schooling. Education, then, acts to perpetuate economic disparities rather than bridging them, as parents in less endowed provinces, like the North Eastern and Coast Provinces, have a higher incidence of poverty than their counterparts, for example in the Rift Valley Province (Kimalu, et al, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, Kenya inherited an education system that was set up to offer unequal treatment based on racial or ethnic criteria. The greatest resources went to the so-called ‘white schools’, then the national schools, followed by provincial schools and, at the bottom of the table, district schools. This was the result of biased pupil selection, teacher posting, bursary allocation and general provision of facilities. It has been a system that encouraged social stratification among pupils and in Kenyan society more generally. Some of the specially favored national schools include the two Alliances, Mangu, Starehe, Moi Forces Academy, Kabarak, and Maseno, which are all situated in the Central and the Rift Valley Provinces. The situation has not changed 40 years later after independence. The disadvantage of students from the Swahili and Somali ethnic backgrounds is compounded by the fact that there are no national secondary schools in the Coast or NorthEastern provinces.

The analysis above has shown that the ethno-regional disparities created by the colonial and the early post-colonial periods are still significant in Kenya, and students in Provinces with little or no political power in Kenya have been disadvantaged at the expense of those where the ruling elite came from.

CONCLUSION

The paper has shown substantial difference in educational opportunity and educational resources between students from the Kenyan provinces where the ruling elite have originated, past and present. There are large differences in both access to and quality of primary education, as measured by the GER and the examination results in the different provinces. These inequities are concentrated in the North Eastern regions and the Coast Province, where the Somali and the

Swahili reside. Nairobi, the Central Province and presently the Rift Valley Province, have the highest enrolment rates in all education sectors, primary, secondary and higher. Inequalities also exist in the number of schools and higher institutions, where schools in the three better resourced provinces are more numerous than in the other provinces, and these inequities are compounded by the fact that students from other regions, like the North Eastern Province and Coast Province, are more likely to have poor parents, a poor road network, and poorly qualified teachers. The inequities in access to education between the Provinces, and hence between the ethnic groups, are reflected in the national examination performance of the students, either positively or negatively, depending on the district and Province they came from.

Kenya is ahead of many sub-Saharan African countries in terms of providing education for all. But the trends discussed in this paper show such an assessment to be incomplete or even complacent, because it rests on a tendency by the Kenya's Ministry of Education to measure progress by aggregate, quantitative indicators alone, at the expense of more disaggregated or qualitative ones. The issues of access to schools, distribution of qualified teachers and other educational resources are equity issues, which influence the persistent poor enrolment rates and educational outcomes for ethnic minority students such as the Swahili and the Somali. Inequalities in education are also likely to be a significant factor in explaining the higher levels of poverty in these ethnic communities.

The study relied on the Kenyan national surveys. While they were useful in raising questions and generating new hypothesis for testing, their results are limited by the fact that data was not gathered in ways that suit the purposes of our research. While the descriptive evidence of ethnic inequality in Kenya is conclusive, this study is exploratory with respect to understanding the determinants of education inequalities among ethnic groups in Kenya, insofar as it highlights provincial inequalities among selected groups and offers an explanation of the findings based on the limited data at its disposal. The consistent results presented here strongly support placing the notion of ethnicity at the forefront of analyses of educational policies in Kenya.

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