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## We are in the era of free education but majority of children from the urban poor are excluded

### Evidence

The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) research has shown that at least 47% of children from major urban slums in Kenya attend low-fee non-state schools, and currently, they do not benefit from FPE despite it being a pro-poor program.

The proportions vary by urban area with Nairobi at over 63%, Mombasa and Eldoret at 52%, and Kisumu at 13%, just to sample a few. In other wards, Kenya has a good FPE program but the policy has failed in targeting the vote-rich urban poor.

Anyone who does not have a deeper understanding of what is happening in slums with respect to education may be surprised to know the extent of exclusion from public services and the presence of an emerging cartel of strategically positioned commercial entities.



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## Introduction

The UN-HABITAT estimates that 60-70% of Nairobi's population reside in the slums, the first stop for young people coming to the city in search of a bright future. Population growth estimates show that in sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya included, half of their population will reside in an urban context by the year 2030. What does this mean for the education of children who form the bulk of the urban population?

Financing basic education in Kenya is a hot policy debate, and the two main sides of the political divide can now agree that any government in power should heavily subsidize the cost. Is education a public good, or can it be sold at the marketplace - using the "willing seller, willing buyer" principle? Put in a different way, did you go to a public or private school, and was it by choice? Whichever is the case, who paid for your education?

Asking ourselves these questions is important because of two things:

1. The majority of Kenyans who work pay taxes and hence expect to benefit from publicly provided services;
2. If education is "sold" in an open but monopolized market, then chances are that the consumer may be exploited either through high prices/fees or low quality.

Though Kenya has made significant steps in providing education through Free Primary Education (FPE), a considerable proportion of the urban poor still hardly benefit from FPE.



## The Exclusion Conundrum

In the case of exclusion, how would one describe a scenario where children from poor households living in urban slums pay for their primary and secondary education without getting a single dime from FPE/ Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) towards their tuition? Of course, we must all appreciate the support they receive towards their national examinations' fees. On the other hand, public FPE/FDSE funds are disbursed to subsidize education of children from working class and elite who attend high cost public schools in Nairobi city and other major urban centers in Kenya. What a misnomer! - the poor have chosen to take their children to "low fee private schools" with no FPE support, while the least poor have also chosen to take their children to "high fee public primary schools" with FPE support.

The concern here is not about the least poor receiving FPE subsidies; in fact, to the contrary - they are fully entitled to that, and as Kenyans say, 'your neighbor's child is your child.' The concern here is children living in urban slums hardly access public primary schools due to the environment in which they find themselves and the low supply of public schools. Remember, a 6-10-year-old girl or boy walking a distance of 100 meters within a slum has a very high exposure to the risk of physical harm. This said, in cities such as Nairobi, we have public schools that are largely underutilized, but their location is far away from the slum areas - maybe in the future, pool-busing could increase their utilization. Interestingly, we all expect the child who grew up in the "low fee private school system" to be patriotic and a good citizen and even cooperate with the authorities - yet all along, minimal public resources, if any, were used to support the child during his/her schooling days.

This exclusion is made worse by the quota system of admission to public secondary schools, and thanks to the current (as of 2024) leadership at the Ministry of Education (MoE) for reviewing the quota system, hopefully, it will not be re-introduced. The children from slums, such as Korogocho, Viwandani, Mukuru, Mathare, and Kibra in Nairobi, who attend low-fee private primary schools are grouped in the same category of admission to public secondary schools with children from Muthaiga, Runda, Kilimani and Lavington who attend the high-cost private schools found in up-market estates.

By so doing, their chance of admission to a good public secondary school diminishes, as the high performers from the up-market will take up most of the places for the private primary school quota or for the Nairobi quota due to the strong positive relationship between academic performance and social, economic background. However, we must all admit that the children from the up-market estates rightfully deserve it.



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## Private Education Providers in Urban Slums

On the other hand,- private providers of education in the urban slums are diverse and driven by different motives e.g. profit, philanthropy, faith and other unknown interests. The most callous of all these providers are the profiteers. Never mind that four in every five are not registered with MoE. They promise low school fees, good quality education, flexibility in school fees payment and good teachers. Unfortunately, there exists scanty data on profiteers as they operate in a closed system, perhaps to safeguard themselves against real or perceived professional malpractices such as teaching to the test, drilling, and use of over-scripted lessons.

What is amazing is the speed with which some international development partners have come in to support such profiteers in the name of supporting “models that work” and ‘freedom of choice’ in education delivery. Interestingly, such models will hardly “fail” at their trial phase, yet in real life; they are nothing more than global experiments conducted in Africa in the same way we were all made to believe that Structural Adjustments were practical strategies to improve economy of Africa. What is even more intriguing is a country that adopts such models, i.e., privatization of education in poor neighborhoods can easily pass the “good investment climate test” and, by so doing, attract international investors. This is nothing more than arm-twisting African governments to buy-in to be experimental grounds.

However, we must be careful not to taint well-intentioned MoE partners that come in to close the school supply gap or provide transparent models in collaboration with education experts at MoE.

With this in mind, plus the ever-expanding urban population, what can the MoE and its partners, and those seeking political leadership in the vote-rich urban areas do to:

- i) reduce exclusion of needy urban children from FPE; and,
- ii) reduce potential negative impacts of profiteering with the poor.

## Policy Recommendations

A number of homegrown strategies can be put in place, including:

1. Inclusive Capitation Grants: bring the so-called low-fee private schools under the close watch of MoE and provide FPE capitation targeting the child and not the school. It is now more than 2 decades since FPE was started and there cannot be any good reason why most children from urban slums should not access FPE. Failure to do this could be tantamount to breeding individuals who feel discriminated by the system.
2. Transparency and Oversight: Whether a school is registered or not registered with MoE, it is prudent to know what is going on in such a school and inform the public accordingly -as long as such a school or institution is nurturing children development. Failure to do so may lead to exploitation and/or introducing an unhealthy agenda during curriculum implementation.

## Conclusion

Addressing exclusion in urban education requires targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities. Kenya can strive towards a more inclusive and equitable education system by implementing inclusive policies and enhancing oversight of private education providers.

Nevertheless, there may be additional strategies to consider, but the suggestions presented here serve as valuable food for thought for our leaders and political parties who have pledged their commitment to free education.



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