

Abolishing fees boosts African schooling

Growing primary school enrolment accompanied by declining drop-out rates



To help cover its sudden increase in new enrolments, Kenya reassigned teachers from overstaffed areas to those in greater need of instructors.

Photograph: Alamy / Documentography

When the Kenyan government announced it would stop charging fees for primary school education — just days before the beginning of the 2003 school year — teachers, headmasters and parents scrambled to find desks, pencils and books for over a million extra students.

But the policy shift also provided a stepping stone into the record books for 84-year-old Kimani Ng'ang'a Maruge, who, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, became the oldest person ever to enroll in Standard 1 when he appeared before astonished teachers and fellow pupils in 2004. “I wanted to learn how to read the Bible,” an ambition previously frustrated by the high cost of schooling, he later told Voice of America journalist Cathy Majtenyi in 2008. “The preachers mislead people. That is why I am back in school.”

Despite economic hard times and the violence that swept parts of the country after the 2007 elections, UNICEF, the UN children’s fund, reports that the abolition of school fees has had the intended effect of vastly increasing access to education. The number of primary students in Kenya has increased by nearly 2 million.

Encouragingly, the drop-out rate, an important measurement of affordability and educational quality, has also fallen. The share of students completing primary school jumped from 62.8 per cent in 2002, the last year fees were charged, to 76.2 per cent two years later as fewer poor children were forced out for nonpayment.

These impressive numbers have led most Kenyan educators and their international partners to conclude that the abolition of school fees and the policy reforms that accompanied it have been a success, despite continuing worries about financing, class sizes and teacher quality.

Over the last 15 years, a number of other countries, including Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi and Mozambique, have also experienced explosive growth in primary school enrolment following the elimination of fees. UNESCO, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, estimates that between 2000 and 2007 overall primary school enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa rose by 42 per cent — the greatest rate of increase in the world. As a result, the percentage of African children in primary school increased from 58 to 74 per cent. A few African countries, including Botswana, Cape Verde, Togo and Mauritius, could achieve universal primary enrolment by 2015, one of the targets in the Millennium Development Goals.

But the increase in school attendance is only a start. Despite the surge in enrolment, almost half of the 72 million children out of school worldwide in 2007 lived in sub-Saharan Africa. Drop-out rates in many African countries remain high. Analysts note that global recession, combined with other urgent problems, has put additional pressure on already meager budgets.

And the abolition of formal fees did not remove all the burdens from financially strapped families. “To call it free education is misleading,” Gerald Mwangi, a father of three in central Kenya, told Inter Press Service in early 2009. “For my youngest daughter in Standard 4, I still have to pay for food, transport and uniform, which adds up to 5,000 shillings [about \$70] per term.”

Source: *Africa Renewal*, January 2010