

**OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AS KEY TO CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONFLICT REGIONS IN ACHIEVING
SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to share experience on problems and challenges emerging in two major conflict districts in Kenya and learn from others through interaction in the forum. The experience shared has been derived mainly from the voices of the people in the conflict areas, close observation and familiarization with issues and dynamics generated as a consequence of post-conflicts which has impacted negatively on children and young people.

West Pokot and Mt. Elgon districts are one of the post conflict and conflict areas in Kenya and interestingly they also border one another. The two districts are in the Western Region of Kenya and have been greatly affected by conflicts and even the post-election violence after the December 2007 elections. Most affected divisions within these regions have less than two schools as compared to other divisions in Kenya with over thirty to forty schools. A place like Masol Location has only one primary school while Sekerrot and Weiwei have only two schools just to give a few examples. Children are therefore unable to access formal education either in a conducive environment or in a proper structured system. The young people are equally affected and are unable to continue with their basic and higher education because of the conflicts. Learners with special needs are also not left behind in the difficulties experienced by other children since the two districts lack programmes for special needs education. The six goals, from the Dakar Framework for action on *Education For All*, which are to ensure that by 2015:

- all children of primary school age would have access to and complete free schooling of acceptable quality,
- gender disparities in schooling would be eliminated,
- levels of adult illiteracy would be halved,
- early childhood care and education would be expanded,
- learning opportunities for youth and adults would be greatly increased and,
- all aspects of education quality would be improved.

The above may not be realized completely in these districts.

After the post-election violence that occurred immediately after Kenya held its December, 2007 polls the few existing schools in some locations West Pokot and Mt. Elgon Districts were burnt down and most of the locations at present have no single or few existing schools in place. Most of the teachers also left the region because of insecurity reasons. It is important to note that the post-election violence fueled the already existing volatile situation in the districts.

PROBLEMS

The major problems associated with the conflicts in these districts are as follows:

Cattle rustling:

People living in the two districts are well known for cattle rustling. A man is respected as per how many herds of cattle he has raided from the neighbours and by doing so; one risks his life because chances of coming back alive are narrow. So this proves how brave one is but it retards development and to show how serious cattle rustling is, the Standard Newspaper of 16th April, 2008 quoted the Western Provincial Police Officer *“meanwhile the government will recruit 350 Police Reservists in Turkana South District to boost security following persistent cattle rustling”*. The area Member of Parliament also alleged *“that sixty thousand herders had been displaced by cattle raids at the volatile Turkana/West Pokot border”* .

Revenge

Neighbors revenge on the Pokots and vice versa for a raid that took place many years back thus causing conflict which is never ending. Once there is revenge then the children and young people are greatly affected since most are displaced from their homes and even their communities.

Tribal wars

Tribal wars also lead to conflicts. This is where the Marakwet, the Turkana, the Sabaot and the Karamajong together with the Pokots just fight with no intention of raiding but with an aim of killing other people. This as a result makes education and all development issues be postponed.

Grazing grounds

Fighting over grazing grounds also contributes to conflicts. The Pokot together with the neighbours are pastoralists and each tribe wishes its animals to feed well hence conflict over grazing land causing problems.

Border crossing

Another problem is the problem of crossing the Kenya – Uganda border by the Pokots and other tribes in the two districts. When natural disaster like drought strikes, the Kenyan Pokots and other tribes from Mt. Elgon, always cross to the other side of Uganda to seek refuge at their brothers' grazing field. As a result this brings conflict because of the international boundary crossing rules.

Infrastructure

Another problem is poor infrastructure because of insecurity. Many road constructors do have insecurity phobia thus causing poor infrastructure in the districts which causes a problem. Certain divisions have no roads totally making communication and trade quite difficult and this affect the development in the districts since people are unable to access basic services as health and education.

Instability

This has led to no cultivation /farming activities hence lack of enough food leading to poor livelihoods and health issues among children.

CHALLENGES

Challenges have risen up due to these problems in this conflict area. Some of the challenges faced by the people in conflict areas are as follows:

Broken homes

Due to attacks by the enemies during cattle rustling, homes are broken. Parents do run for their safety and same to children and never to meet again as a family. The children end up being assimilated in the rival communities for example the Sabaot after being kidnapped so that they can be interviewed on secrets of their tribe and never allowed to go back to their homes.

Orphans

Due to the wars during the cattle rustling conflicts, most parents lose their lives leaving behind orphans. The children left are therefore to run families at very young ages. The older ones are forced to fend and care for their siblings. Child labour is therefore introduced at a very early age which threatens the education of the children who opt to get the little wages offered.

Single parents

During the raids, the fathers are the ones to do the raiding leaving mothers and children at home. The fathers prepare women to be responsible for their families in case they do not return back from the raids as one's chance of coming back alive is very low. As such we find that most men lose their lives leaving women to shoulder all the responsibilities of the home sometimes at a very young age. Most families are therefore headed by women.

Curriculum and Assessment

The School Curriculum and Assessment in this region is tampered with due to these conflicts. Learners hardly learn systematically as school is generally on and off due to these conflicts. As a result we find that learners who complete for instance standard eight and form four are very few compared to other regions. Monitoring and evaluation of curriculums and assessment is not regularly done due to the conflicts. Field officers may not be able to penetrate through to different locations to monitor the education system being implemented. Lack of trained personnel has also led to untrained teachers implementing the curriculum.

Staffing

The schools are also understaffed because anyone posted to these areas would rather be scared about constant conflicts. This therefore lowers the performance of this region. The region is also considered a hardship area due to conflicts and the topography of the area compared to other regions in Kenya. The landscape does not allow the children to start school early because of steep slopes.

Child Abuse

Child abuse in the form of military training is yet another challenge. Young boys are trained by their parents on how to use the gun and how to raid thus diverting the learners from the formal curriculum to personal career of cattle rustling as they believe it is a short cut of becoming wealthy. Training for young boys starts as early as ten years old on cattle rustling and to protect the community.

A raid can make a young boy acquire as many as one hundred herds of cattle if he does not lose his life and if he succeeds. As a result the boys end up marrying very young girls because the animals are available to be paid for the dowry. As such the parents of the girls do give in their girls even though the girls are not ready as they are always in need of animals to determine how wealthy one is. Boys are also forced to marry when young to propagate early in life since they can easily be killed during raids or conflicts. Children are also used to provide cheap labour, for example, to cultivate and herd animals in the forests.

Traditions

They still hold on to strong traditions with great fear of curses if traditions are broken. Even the few educated persons in the communities fear the curses and therefore they do not provide appropriate role models to the girls. Boys within these communities are still considered more superior to girls and therefore given priorities and opportunities to education and other rights.

Abduction of Girls

At other times, the girls do get kidnapped and end up being married off prematurely by the conflicting tribes men for example the Karamajong and the Marakwet. The girls are therefore disadvantaged since their schooling has to stop and they start raising families at a tender age.

Lack of Lobby Groups

Lack of Non- Governmental Organizations, Community Based Organizations, Faith Based Organizations and Human Rights Groups in the districts due to high insecurity experienced in the region has made it quite difficult to offer appropriate help to

children and young people living in the region. Initially some operated but closed down programmes or projects in education, health and water.

Water

Lack of water sources in some division is a great challenge which affects livelihoods since women and children have to walk long distances looking for water. Children are therefore kept out of school since the water is a priority rather than education.

Circumcision

Circumcision is a threat to education in the area since once the boys and girls undergo the practice they are considered and treated as grownups who are mature and ready to start a family. Due to such treatments, boys end up dropping out of school and girl also exit from basic level of education and moves to marriage. Some teachers also support the issues of circumcision being that they are from the same region and have undergone the same rites. Other teachers also support it due to fear of the community. Girls of 12 years are given non-formal education where a lot of fear is instilled in them and they taught on the need to inherit land and animals. Trained lady teachers are also threatened not to crusade against the circumcision of girls.

Local Brews

Local brews are introduced to the school going children hence making them addicted early in life. This also leads to illicit sexual behaviours at an early age. Most of the children therefore end up suffering from emotional and behaviour problems which in turn impact negatively to their education.

Politics

Poor leadership of some politicians who are war mongers contribute to some hostilities among the different existing communities. Head teachers also experience a lot of opposition from local leaders who would want to see the status quo maintained as they themselves take only their children to high cost schools in other districts just to later come and be leaders in their conflict ridden districts.

CURRENT MEASURES IN PLACE

Kenya put Education for All at the centre of national policy by making it free in 2002 with broad objective of giving every Kenyan the right to quality education and training no matter his or her social status. This was done by developing the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP 2005 - 2010) as the overall policy goal. . All the primary school were and are still being given funds to cater for their learners but those children of school going age but not in school are not catered for.

Background Information

The Government of Kenya regards good quality education as a fundamental human right for all citizens, including those with barriers to learning and development. It aims at giving quality education to all learners in an inclusive setting. This is embraced and reflected in various policy and statutory documents such as, the Education Act, 1968 (revised in 1980 and currently under review), the Children's Act, 2001, Persons with Disabilities act, 2003 Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005.

The Children's Act, 2001 and Sessional Paper No.1 of 2005 in particular spells out the rights of all children and recognizes that education is a human right that every child irrespective of gender, race, religion, custom, tribe, or disability must enjoy and has to be protected by law.

The government is therefore committed to improving school environment, teaching/learning process, teachers' competence and learning resources for all children including those with special needs and disabilities. The government is therefore providing funds to cater for all learners in primary schools. However some children who are school going age not in school are not catered for. Some remedies to the above problems and challenges that have been done in the West Pokot and Mt. Elgon districts by some of the non-governmental organizations are also as follows:

Security

- Non-Governmental Organizations for example the World Vision and Action Aid sometimes do give donations in form of animals to compensate the looted ones.
- Action Aid has also provided desks and built toilets within the communities to assist the children. World vision has sponsored orphaned children to access education to whichever level the child wished to reach for example from preschool to University level.

Equipment

- The World Vision also built and furnished various primary schools to rehabilitate the learners especially the girls who have been forced into early marriages and the boys who have been abused to be local militants. This has therefore reduced the abuse of these children to some extent.

After the post-election violence most of the non-governmental organizations were forced to evict their members and close the centres because of security reasons and constant threats by the Militia Men. Most faith based organizations also moved away from the districts due to constant threats.

Most if not all government schools in the conflict regions of West Pokot districts have been offered tight security by the government. This has enabled teachers feel secure and do their job to the best of their expectations without fear at times. This is illustrated by the recent statement that *“the government is considering establishing a permanent military base in Mt. Elgon District. Western Provincial Commissioner said that the Army base would ensure lasting peace in the district which has been devastated by Militia killings.”* The orphaned children also have an opportunity of being accommodated in these schools throughout their lives as they do not have elsewhere to go thus giving them a ray of light and hope for their future.

The Kenya and Uganda governments have instilled tight security measures along the common boundary to check on the cattle raiding but which was affected after post-election violence

The administration officers from neighboring districts of West Pokot have also been put on alert. The chiefs and sub chiefs have also held barazas to identify parents of children who are forced into early marriages and stern punishments have been instilled on them so as to set an example to the rest.

Prominent persons in the district like Tecla Loroupe who has been an international athlete has organized intertribal sports for the tribes which are always in conflict to create peace among them, for example Marakwet, Sabaot, Turkana and Pokot.

The elites of the community do encourage the youth talented in sports to exploit their talents to international levels for example athletics hence reducing idleness and creating employment.

NEEDED INTERVENTIONS

Though Kenya has done a lot in distance education which is mainly evident at the higher levels of education within the universities and colleges, the basic level of education has been considered. Open and distance learning is increasingly becoming a powerful means of access and flexibility in initial life long education for training and empowering not only the disadvantaged and marginalized communities but all people including children and the youth. Distance learning at Kenya Institute of Special Education has proved that disadvantaged and marginalized communities can be reached and empowered. The Kenya Institute of Special Education distance learning which currently has an enrolment of 6,000 students has reached persons in semi arid and arid areas who had no hope of ever advancing in their education. Education being a key to global stability can be embraced and implemented by using open distance and learning approaches at every level. The Kenya government should have a policy in place to embrace this approach in providing education not only at the higher levels but even at the basic level in primary and secondary education. Transformation of policy framework in open and distance learning may have positive effects and play a critical role of social transformation in post conflict and conflict areas.

Use of Open and Distance learning which is flexible and entry level is open and exits are undefined would be appropriate to children and young people in these conflict areas so that they keep abreast with development issues. The idea of education is based on its definition as a knowledge-based endeavor for the progression and transfer of knowledge and scholarship for the benefit of all. More specifically, education is a continuous process of improving knowledge and skills substantially, education provides exceptional avenues and opportunities for personal communal and societal advancement. If Education For All is therefore to be achieved in post conflict and conflict areas then open and distance learning will be the key in Kenya.

To achieve social justice, reduce infrastructural inequalities and desperate levels of education in post conflict and conflict areas, then transformations rests in different approaches of teaching and learning which is based on distance and open learning approaches. Kenya has therefore much to learn from other Nations through sharing experiences and interest relating to learning at all levels. Kenya needs to forge new links to address the gaps that exists in development in different regions in the Nation. There is need for innovations and adaptation in curriculum and assessment to meet the needs of the region and therefore meeting the needs of the learners within their locations. More research to be done in the region and the findings implemented since a curriculum should interact with culture and the society to bring about social change.

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the problems and challenges faced by children and the young people in conflict and post conflict areas and discussed how open learning and distance education can be embraced and to them with an opportunity of accessing education so as to improve themselves and be able to develop their communities. Open distance and learning education provides flexible time, location and is self paced thus fitting into irregular schedules which is suitable for children and young people displaced and disadvantaged as in regions like Mt. Elgon and West Pokot.

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