

## **Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; panel 1**

**Emmanuel Manyasa**

### **Lessons on evidence-based, community, public and policy engagement to promote equitable access to quality basic education in Kenya.**

#### **Abstract**

Education has both instrumentalist and utilitarian values. For individuals, quality education offers opportunities for personal development through knowledge and skills acquisition besides enjoyment of more freedoms. For societies, socio-economic and political progress are underpinned by the quality and quantity of education their members receive. Indeed Amartya Sen underscores the role of education in development, which he defines as the process of growing out of the shackles of unfreedoms. On the other hand, Paul Romer attributes country-level variations in the levels of development to among other factors, the quality of education received by the nationals of the respective countries. The fact that personal, societal and national development depends on education makes its core value to be a public good to which everyone is entitled. Indeed Article 26 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the right of all persons to education. Articles 28 & 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) obligate the state to guarantee this right. Articles 43 (1) (f) and 53 (1) (b), of Kenya's Constitution place the obligation of providing education as a human right on the state. Against this background it is easy to discern that education is everybody's business. The important question, however, is how "everyone" participates in ensuring that quality education is received by all who need it in the light of the hierarchical systems that deliver it. This paper shares one organization's 11 years' experience of using evidence-based community, public and policy engagement and advocacy, to bridge the information as well as policy-practice gaps among the key actors in promoting equitable access to quality basic education in Kenya. The paper highlights the challenges, lessons learnt and what the organization sees as the unfinished business if equitable access to quality learning is to be guaranteed for all children in Kenya.

**KEY WORDS:** Quality education, learning outcomes, evidence-based advocacy, equity.

## Biography

Emmanuel Manyasa is the Executive Director of Usawa Agenda, a not-for-profit organization engaged in research and advocacy in education. He holds a PhD in development economics. He has 11 years' experience of teaching at the University and five years' experience in program management at Twaweza East Africa where he served as the Kenya Country Lead and Uwezo manager. He has more than 15 years of extensive experience in research, consultancy and training across Africa spanning various sectors including but not limited to: education and training; environment and climate change; program evaluation; feasibility analysis; and value chain analysis. He is also a board member of the SDGs Kenya Forum; Elimu Yetu Coalition and the PAL Network. His core research interests, however, are in education, rural development and equity.



Executive Director, Usawa Agenda

22 School Lane, Westlands

P.O. Box 13784-00800, Nairobi, Kenya

T: + 254 715 563 720; + 254 786 563 722, M: + 254 723 233 800

E: [emanyasa@usawaagenda.org](mailto:emanyasa@usawaagenda.org)

## 1. Introduction

Education has both instrumental (Becker 1964, Psacharopoulos 1984, Romer 1990) and utilitarian (Sen 1999) values. It is one of the critical ingredients in the nurture of children (Aynsley-Green 2010). Yet 30 years since the enactment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 8 percent of primary-school-age children globally remain out of school (UNICEF 2019). This fact challenges the strategies that the international community has deployed in the past – and calls for a keener focus on equity. The need to focus on equity is a call for granularity in generating the evidence that informs micro and macro decisions on education. But it even more urgently, calls for bridging of the gap in the space, between where teaching and learning happens (in the villages and hamlets) and where policy and financing decisions are made (in the national and global capitals). This gap in space generates other gaps that hinder effective delivery of education, keeping many children out of school (UNICEF 2019) and many more in school but not learning (Uwezo 2016, Bashir et al. 2018).

Over the last two decades the global community has been guided by the millennium development goals (MDGs) agenda (2000 -2015) and now the Agenda 2030 of global development frameworks for education promotion. The MDGs education agenda focused on getting all children into school (United Nations 2012). This mission was largely achieved, but in the case of many countries including Kenya, it came with increasing segmentation in the basic education sector (Glennester, et al. 2011) and diminishing quality of education for the majority of children, especially those from disadvantaged households (Manyasa 2015). This fact has been widely acknowledged. Indeed, it informed the formulation of the SDG 4. But the fight to make education a nurturing experience for all children that is “...supported by services that are accessible, based on evidence of what works, and focussed on the needs of the child and ... protection of children’s human rights.” (Layard, R and Dunn, J. 2009) continues.

For education to provide children with a nurturing experience, it ought to be everybody's business – involving: parents and families; local communities; schools; faith groups; voluntary organisations; local government; national government; and multilateral institutions. In the absence of a framework for each actor to make their fair share of contribution, it is unlikely that the desired objective can be met. Indeed five years into the SDGs framework, the learning situation in Kenya has not significantly changed (Usawa 2020), which may ominously point to the likelihood for the country to miss most of SDG 4 indicators.

## **2. What we have done and learnt over the years**

This section summarises what Usawa Agenda, previously the Uwezo program of Twaweza East Africa, has done in an effort to promote equitable access to quality education. The lessons are many, but only the main ones are presented here.

### **2.1 Initial approaches and achievements**

Our journey to promote equitable access to quality education in Kenya begun in 2009 on anecdotal evidence that the six years of implementing free and compulsory primary education had heralded a decline in the quality of learning. There wasn't however, any rigorous, independent evidence to either confirm or dispute what we thought was happening. In 2009 we adapted and implemented the citizen led assessment (CLA) methodology pioneered by ASER India, to generate largescale evidence on learning levels of children across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This involved assessing children aged 6 to 16 years (regardless of their schooling statuses), on basic literacy and numeracy skills. The assessment, which became annual in subsequent years, is conducted in the household and involves volunteers drawn from the communities as the assessors. Inbuilt in this methodology is a philosophy of silent mobilization of communities through sharing of instant feedback on the learning levels of children with their parents, and publication of the national reports on the status of learning among the assessed children.

We achieved a substantial part of what we set out to do. Using household surveys that were representative at both national and district levels, we assessed over 900,000 children aged 6 to 16 years, in over 350,000 households across 22,000 villages. We also visited over 20,000 primary schools (both public and private) across the country and assessed school-level factors that affect learning outcomes in thousands of primary schools across the country. Our surveys have exposed the gap between goals and achievements in children's learning across Kenya. We have implemented the CLA model, which is embedded with elements of advocacy in the form of instant feedback given to parents/guardians of the assessed children as well as pre- and post-assessment engagements with various cadres of community and public officials responsible for promoting learning. For instance, citizen volunteers collect data and share feedback with parents/guardians, assessment tests are designed with full participation and leadership of teachers who are subject specialists and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), while sampling is done by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS). This model embeds co-creation of evidence to enhance buy-in by the key stakeholders, especially the government. We created the largest and most solid network of sub-county-level partners (CSOs and CBOs) and an army of volunteers ever witnessed in the East African region.

Our initial theory of change, which was premised on generating rigorous evidence and sharing it widely presumed that this would stir action by parents and communities demanding improvements in the sector. And that their demands would in turn elicit response from the concerned authorities by way of making the requisite policy, program and investment changes to boost learning levels.

## 2.2 Lessons and refinements

We learnt by the end of the first strategic period, four years into our existence, that our theory of change was inadequate. That evidence does not in itself stir the kind of action required to bring about change. We had sharpened the methodology to generate robust, comprehensive and independent data, and strengthened our capacity to curate the data into evidence. But we needed to go beyond the embedded advocacy, to deliberately target policymakers with messages around the generally low and inequitable learning levels successfully. The surveys had served and continue to serve as an accountability instrument through public and policy conversations around the assessment process and learning outcomes among children in and out of school. We learnt that the media both national and local is powerful and taught ourselves how to harness its power. So we refined our approaches in our subsequent strategic periods and forged partnerships with key stakeholders including the government, CSOs, the media and development partners to further the objective of ensuring that all children attend school and learn.

In our reviewed approach, we have helped form and joined several partnerships with other CSOs at various levels. But a few are noteworthy given their contribution to the success of our work. They include the PAL Network, a membership organization bringing together organizations engaged in citizen led assessments in 14 countries across three continents constituting the global south. PAL Network has become the main global advocacy platform for CLAs. The second is the Regional Learning Initiative (RELI), which is also a membership organization with members in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is an important regional and national advocacy and peer learning platform. Third is Education Evidence for Action (EE4A) - a loose network of CSOs and select government departments from the Ministry of Education, working together to promote evidence-based decision-making in the education sector in Kenya. Finally, the SDGs Kenya Forum, which is a membership organization brings together the CSOs working on different SDGs, including SDG 4. It is an important national and global level advocacy platform, with the primary focus on monitoring national implementation of programs aimed to deliver on the Agenda 2030 commitments.

These partnerships have been instrumental in our contribution towards realising the goal of equitable access to quality learning. At the global level, we have contributed to the debate on learning outcomes and their measurement (Bashir et al 2018, UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018). We have contributed to shaping the agenda for SDG 4 on inclusive, equitable, quality education. Through the PAL Network, we have contributed to the upgrading of indicator 4.1.1 (a) of SDG 4 from Tier III to Tier I indicator by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Regionally, education policy is now more focused on learning outcomes, as opposed to enrolment rates, as a measure of success.

At the national level we have contributed to the shift in government policy from focusing on inputs into education to learning outcomes (Republic of Kenya 2019), resulting in the curriculum reforms that are currently underway. We have also contributed to initiation of two nationwide early grade learning interventions: *Tusome*, an early grade literacy program funded by DFID and USAID and implemented by RTI International, and PRIEDE, an early grade numeracy program funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Other than the government and the multinational agencies, we have also influenced Safaricom, the largest corporation in East and Central Africa, through its philanthropic arm, Safaricom Foundation, to invest in an intervention to improve learning outcomes. The three-year pilot intervention commenced in 2018 in three counties of Bungoma, Turkana and Tana River. These were selected on the basis of our data, which had ranked them among the worst performers. Indeed the Safaricom Foundation's education pillar in their current strategy (2018-2021) is informed by Uwezo findings as evidenced by its heavy reference to Uwezo data (Safaricom 2018). In its intervention, Safaricom Foundation specifies that it will use Uwezo data as a means of verification of the effectiveness or otherwise of their activities. We have also significantly contributed to the academic and public

discourses on the issues of learning outcomes through academic publications (Jones et al. 2014, Manyasa 2015), media articles and annual reports.

We have leveraged the media to promote community and public engagements around the issues of learning outcomes. Local media in particular has been handy in reaching rural communities with messages that inject new information into their surroundings. It has also been pivotal in developing the profiles of our sub-county partners (CSOs and CBOs). This is essential in growing their legitimacy in the communities, without which they are not able to complement our community outreach work. We have partnered with the national media to reach the forgotten corners of the country and highlight pertinent and unmitigated education-related problems afflicting the communities. One example was in 2016 when we partnered with a national media house to highlight the story of a village in the otherwise non-marginal part of the country that had never sent a single child to secondary school. After the story aired on radio and TV, the response by the local leaders including the area Member of Parliament was swift. Today there are several children in secondary school from that village.

Yet in spite of all these positive efforts, learning outcomes across the country as reflected in the Uwezo assessments and national examinations have not shown significant improvement over the last decade, highlighting the continuing learning crisis. As efforts intensify to address this crisis, yet another crisis continues unabated underneath it. This is the crisis of inequity in education. It is bad enough that learning outcomes are low. But it is worse that the low learning outcomes are inequitably distributed, along the traditional markers of inequity in the country. For instance, the 12 Arid and Semi-Arid (ASALs) counties disproportionately report low scores in national examinations, with research also showing a systematic relationship between county poverty level and performance in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) (Oketch 2019).

Uwezo assessments paint the same picture with children's opportunities for learning being very unequal (Uwezo 2020). The inequalities in learning outcomes are associated with among other factors, region, location (urban/rural), school type (public/private), preschool attendance, mother's level of education and household socio-economic circumstances. Disparities in learning outcomes are driven by disparities in primary school inputs, including teacher distribution, and school facilities and infrastructure (Uwezo 2016).

Drawing from Kremer's O-ring model (Kremer 1993), we understand that national-level research data, however disaggregated, the evidence therefrom may not be able to cure all the causes of inequitable access to quality learning opportunities. Therefore, we have also experimented with generation of data at the micro level for use in community and school level dialogues through a "Public Agency" project in two of the most marginalized counties (Baringo and Kilifi). The project dubbed *Husika* (get involved) had three defining components:

1. *Collaborative generation of evidence* – using Uwezo assessment tool in partnership with households and school managers to generate evidence on enrolment and learning, ascertain if children can read and comprehend, and conducting head counts to monitor school attendance;
2. *Convening conversations* – curating the data collected and using the evidence generated to promote mutual understanding and awareness, as well as identifying actions and mechanisms for mutual accountability between teachers, parents and community members. Aggregating the village conversations and transporting them to the ward and county levels;
3. *Monitoring action (and learning)* – utilizing Uwezo partners and digital platforms to monitor progress, document and learn from the emergence (or lack of it) of mutual accountability among the key stakeholders and whether or not it impacts the children's learning outcomes.

Besides *Husika*, we have engaged with parents, teachers and local administrators around the learning outcomes of children through their formal and informal institutions based on county reports generated from our surveys. We have also engaged members of the public in far to reach

areas through partnerships with local media (including vernacular radio stations). The experience of convening local conversations and amplifying the local voices to higher level conversations has been eye-opening and has thus immensely shaped our approach going forward.

### **3. Looking Forward**

Lessons from our last 11 years of hindsight and insights have greatly shaped our foresight in promoting equitable access to quality learning for all children in Kenya. We have learnt that partnerships, both vertical and horizontal are invaluable if one is to meaningfully address the myriad challenges limiting many children from accessing and benefiting from quality education. We have learnt too, that evidence-based advocacy is the most viable strategy to elicit positive response by the key actors in the education sector. And that an evidence-policy-practice chasm exists, which if not closed, all efforts to promote equitable access to quality education may be futile. More importantly, however, we have understood that at the core of growing inequity in education in Kenya are two factors:

1. Incoherent policies, practices and investments, which hinder equitable access to quality education by many children; and
2. Absence of an inclusive, locally embedded, and globally linked coalition of actors, acting in sync with each other to promote equitable access to quality education for ALL children.

Going forward therefore, we will work to strengthen the capacities of our local partners (sub-county level NGOs and CBOs) to generate evidence on learning levels, their distribution and drivers for community level consumption, to convene community and school level dialogues and to aggregate and amplify local voices to enhance their contribution to relevant policy and programs changes. We will create new linkages among the actors and strengthen the existing ones at all levels, from the village to the national and global capitals where key policy and investment decisions are made. We will continue to generate evidence at scale, while leveraging technology and refining our methods to minimise costs and make them more cost-effective and sustainable. In short, we will dedicate our energies to building a strong coalition of locally embedded and globally linked actors through research and evidence-based advocacy to promote the agenda of equitable access to quality learning.

## References

- Al Aynsley-Green (2010). Should the nurture of children be everybody's business? Al Aynsley-Green Consulting. [http://unn-mlif1.newnumyspace.co.uk/school\\_of\\_law/law\\_and\\_the\\_young\\_adult/documents/nurture\\_of\\_children.pdf](http://unn-mlif1.newnumyspace.co.uk/school_of_law/law_and_the_young_adult/documents/nurture_of_children.pdf) (Accessed on 01/09/2020).
- Bashir, S., Lockheed, M. E., Ninan, E. and Tan, J. (2018). Facing Forward: Schooling for Learning in Africa. Washington D.C.: World Bank.
- Becker, G. S. (1964). Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education. New York: NBER.
- Glennster, R., Kremer, M., Mbiti, I and Takavarasha, K. (2011). Access and quality in the Kenyan education system: a review of the progress, challenges and potential solutions, (prepared for the office of the Prime Minister of Kenya). Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Jones, S., Schipper, Y., Ruto, S. and Rajani, R. (2014). Can your child read and count? Measuring learning outcomes in East Africa. *Journal of African Economies*, 23(5), 643-672.
- Kremer, M. (1993). The O-ring theory of economic development. *The quarterly journal of economics* 108, 551-575.
- Layard, R and Dunn, J. (2009). A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 39(5), 969–971.
- Manyasa, E. (2015). Schooling without learning: the long-term implications of free primary education for income and welfare inequalities in Kenya, in Aworti, N. and Musahara, H. (Eds.). *Implementation of millennium development goals: Progresses and challenges in some African countries*. Addis Ababa: OSSREA.
- Martin G. H. and Pimhidzai, O. (2013). *Education and health services in Kenya: data for results and accountability*. New York: World Bank.
- McKnight, A. (2015). Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the 'glass floor', Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), London School of Economics.
- Oketch, M. (2019). Access, poverty and learning achievement for primary school leavers in Kenya: analysis of evidence from 47 counties, *Compare*, 49 (1), 1-15.
- Psacharopoulos, G. (1984). The contribution of education to economic growth: international comparisons, in Kendrick, J. W. (Ed.). *International comparisons of productivity and causes of the slowdown, American enterprise*, Ballinger, 335 – 355.
- Republic of Kenya (2019). *Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019*. Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Romer, P. (1990). Endogenous technological change. *Journal of political economy*, 98, 71-102.
- Safaricom (2018). *Safaricom Foundation Strategy: April 2018 to March 2021*. [https://www.safaricomfoundation.org/safaricom\\_foundation\\_strategy\\_2018\\_2021/Safaricom-Foundation-Strategy-2018-2021.pdf](https://www.safaricomfoundation.org/safaricom_foundation_strategy_2018_2021/Safaricom-Foundation-Strategy-2018-2021.pdf) (accessed on 13/06/2020).
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- UNESCO (2018) *Accountability in education: meeting our commitments; Global education monitoring report, 2017/8*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018). *Data to Nurture Learning*, <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/sdg4-data-digest-data-nurture-learning-2018-en.pdf> (accessed on 14/02/2020).
- UNICEF (2019). *For Every Child, Every Right: The Convention on the Rights of the Child at a crossroads*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

United Nations (2012). The millennium development goals report. New York: United Nations.

Uwezo (2016). Are our children learning? Uwezo Kenya sixth learning assessment report. Nairobi: Twaweza East Africa.

World Bank (2018). World Development Report: Learning to Realise Education's Promise, Washington DC: World Bank.



Annex 1: The Map of Kenya

