

# Financing education for equity and quality: A review of Kenya's free primary education policy

<sup>1</sup>Sr. Madeleine Sophie Barat Achieng, <sup>2</sup>Prof. Jane Opiri

<sup>1</sup>(PhD Candidate, Catholic University of Eastern Africa),

<sup>2</sup>(Professor at University of Louisiana, USA) & George Manasse Andayi (Research Fellow, ResearchSphere Ltd)

---

**Abstract:** In January 6<sup>th</sup> 2003, Kenyan children started the day with new vigour and hope. Primary education was free and all that was required was for every child regardless of age to walk to school next to where they lived. The introduction of the Free Primary Education policy soon resulted to a high influx of new pupils into public schools, putting pressure on existing resources. In 2010, the government implemented a new formula for disbursement of FPE funds for instructional materials. Under this new formula, schools which had fewer textbooks per pupil were to receive greater amounts of money than those that had more textbooks. This paper sought to critically examine how financing of primary education by the Kenyan government has enhanced equity and quality in all Kenyan public primary schools. Though the abolition of school levies has led to increase in numbers of students attending primary school, with it has come many challenges among them the challenge of equity and quality. The issue of quality education has become a great concern to stakeholders and the question of whether all school-age children are in school is still nagging since there is evidence of disparities in access based on gender, language, disability, special groups and region. This paper adopted a desktop review of published works on Free Primary Education in Kenya. While a lot has been written on Free Primary Education, recommendations of this paper should inform Free Primary Education policy makers and guide its implementers.

**Keywords:** Financing education, Free Primary Education, equity, quality.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background Information to the Study

Since independence in 1963, the Kenyan government has addressed the challenges of education system through commissions, committees and task forces. The most significant government reports and commissions include *The Ominde Report* of 1964, *The Gachathi Report* of 1976, *Mackey Report* of 1981, *The Kamunge Report* of 1988 and *The Koech Report* of 2000. According to Eshiwani (1990) and Kenya (2008) the initial government reports aimed at policies fostering national unity and creation of sufficient human capital and were adopted from the colonial government. The government reports in the 1980s were more focused on redefining education to foster national unity, social, economic and cultural aspirations of Kenyans. Issues concerning education financing, quality and relevance were only introduced in the 1990s. In 2000, the Commission of Inquiry into the Education System of Kenya (*The Koech Report*, 2000) recommended the Totally Integrated Quality Education and Training (TIQET). The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST, 2005) stated that the report outlined ways and means of enabling education facilitate lifelong learning, national unity, mutual social responsibility, accelerated industrial and technical development, while responding to changing circumstances. However the *Koech Report* (2000) was never adopted by the Government and according to MoEST (2014) it has since been implemented in peace-meal form. Key amongst these is curriculum rationalisation which has seen a couple of changes in the curriculum content for primary school pupils since that time. In 2010 *Prof. Douglas Odhiambo* task force proposed a review of the curriculum and recommended a 2-6-3-3 education system that would, amongst other

factors ensure that the learners acquire competencies and skills to meet the human resource aspirations of Kenya's Vision 2030 blue print for development (Republic of Kenya, 2012).

There is evidence from the aforementioned commissions and reports that the government of Kenya has had a desire to provide Free Primary Education (FPE) to Kenyan children of school going age soon after political independence in 1963 and the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA, 2010) confirmed this reality. Abuya, Onsomu, Oketch, Admasu & Ngware (2015) posited that education was first declared free for children in standard one to four in 1974 and for the entire primary cycle in 1978. With the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s, the government reneged on the free education reforms, and parents and communities were from thereon required to contribute to their children's schooling. According to Republic of Kenya (2005a) cost sharing in education was introduced in mid 1980s and parents continued paying tuition, buying books and desks because the government lacked adequate resources. The sessional paper No 1 of 2001 on Education, Training and Research (Republic of Kenya, 2005b) thereafter provided the legal framework for the implementation of education with a focus on attainment of the following key imperatives: equity, quality, access, retention, relevance and efficiency, which was realised through the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP).

In 2003, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government implemented the FPE policy once again. NARC's FPE agenda was constructed to provide a socio-economic equity by narrowing the education access gap in the country. According to Milu (n.d.) the argument was that children from economically challenged backgrounds were unable to meet schooling costs and thus the government was to overcome this hurdle by meeting operational and development costs, in addition to supplying instructional materials to all public schools. Further, the introduction of FPE in 2003 was in line with meeting the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target of universal education access by 2015.

In February 2011, the Task Force on the Realignment of the Education Sector to the Constitution of Kenya 2010 was launched by the Ministry of Education. The mandate of the taskforce was to look into the broad areas of education management, structure, policy framework and curriculum within the context of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and propose ways through which the entire education sector could be realigned to the new constitutional framework. The Basic Education Act was then enacted in 2013. It operationalized the legal, institutional and regulatory shifts created by the Constitution of Kenya (2010). The Act re-defined basic education to cover primary and secondary education, introduced the National Education Board (NEB) and County Education Boards (CEBs) in the 47 counties, established the National Council for Nomadic and Marginalised Education (NCNME) and mandated the Government to provide free and compulsory basic education (MoEST, 2014).

Since the establishment of the FPE in 2003, all public primary school have been obliged by the MoEST to open two accounts in order to receive directly grants as compensation of the users' fee abolition under the FPE implementation. One of the accounts is for school instructional materials (SIMBA) and the second account is for general purposes (GPA). The SIMBA account is basically for the teaching and learning materials, while the GPA is for other expenditures such as utilities and support staff among others (MoEST, 2014).

## **1.2 Purpose**

This paper sought to critically examine whether financing of FPE had enhanced equity and quality in Kenyan public primary schools. The main questions that guided the paper are: has financing of FPE provided equitable education in public primary schools in Kenya? Has quality of education in public primary schools in Kenya improved?

## **1.3 Main Perspective**

Despite the implementation of FPE policy, Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), 2011 indicated that 759,090 children (351,277 boys, 407,813 girls) were out of formal school system in 2010. According ADEA (2011) these out-of-school children include orphans, children affected or infected by HIV and AIDS, street children, children in urban slums, children from pockets of poverty, children with special needs in education and those from Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL). A report by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2015), is in agreement with ADEA (2011) and it states that governments need to invest in education if the future of these children has to improve. In Kenya, challenges of equity, quality and relevance in education have persisted, with regions with higher poverty index showing lowest indicators. The Ministry of education is therefore challenged to develop and implement

comprehensive frameworks for mobilisation of adequate funds and implementation of all policies that address inclusive and equitable basic education.

The sources of financial resources in Kenyan public primary schools include among others, the Constituency Development Fund, Local Government Authorities and parents. This is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Funding mechanisms of a public primary school in Kenya.

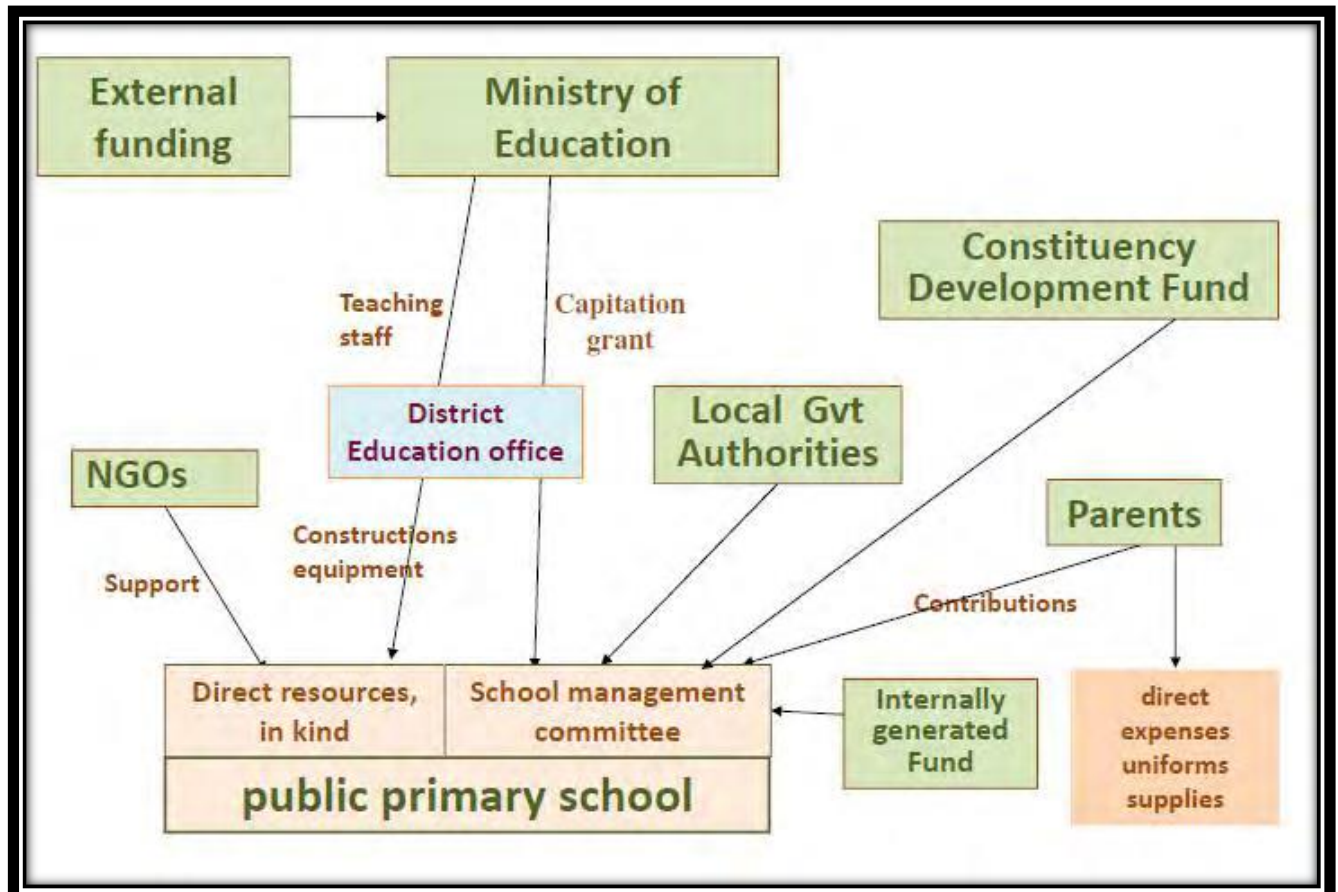


Figure 1: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology: Education for all: The 2015 national review. Republic of Kenya, 2014.

Resources in public primary schools as indicated in Figure 1 are on one side the human and physical resources put in place by the Ministry of Education and other contributors in kind. On the other hand, there are financial resources including the capitation grant received by the Government, contributions paid by families and other contributions received in cash. Internally generated income is another source of funding for the schools, like graduation ceremonies and other school festivals, sale of a number of items produced at the school level.

#### 1.4 Method

The paper is a desk review of published works from the Education Research Programme (ERP), published literature on education in the context of Kenya, policy documents from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), published documents by scholars on FPE and universal primary education (UPE) outside the ERP implementation of FPE in 2003. The documents searched had the following keywords: financing education, free primary education policy, equity and quality. Literature access to education was obtained from ERIC, JSTOR and EBSCO databases. The selection criteria were that articles were to be research articles, published reports and government documents from the MoEST since the launch of FPE in 2003. The paper examined the concepts of equity and quality of education in public primary schools in Kenya. It finally discussed the findings and subsequently offered conclusions and way forward.

## **2. CONCEPT OF EQUITABLE EDUCATION**

Equity is a concept that flows from the concern for equality and social justice in a democratic society. According to Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (NDET, 2008) equity in education means to provide equal opportunities in education regardless of abilities and aptitudes, age, gender, skin colour, sexual orientation, social background, religious or ethnic background, place of residence, family education or family finances. NDET (2008) explains that equity in education must be understood on the system level, using a national perspective based on overriding legislation, regulations and syllabuses and on an individual level, adapting the education to individual abilities and aptitudes. The Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED, 2007) is in agreement with NDET (2008) and both ascertain that pursuing equity in the process of education is quite complex.

Ainscow, Dyson & Goldrick (2011) have also noted that despite years of educational reforms in many countries, children still get into school systems from unequal backgrounds, are given access to unequal experiences and then leave the schools with unequal outcomes. This context describes three elements of equity in education systems; equity of resources, equity in process and equity of outcomes. The first form of equity is in relation to various forms of funding formulas and financial support allocation models used to disburse resources for public education. Educators according to Ainscow et al., (2011) do agree that equity in educational programming does not mean all learners should receive the same educational programming. In seeking to serve all learners, public education should be adaptive in order to meet their varying needs. Therefore, all learners should not receive the same education. Instead, there should be multiple curricula, modified curricula, adapted curricula, differentiated education, differentiated programmes and individualised education plans to meet individual learner needs. The equity of outcomes is the most difficult aspect. Since we have already observed that school programmes should be adapted to meet individual learner needs, it is not logical to seek the same outcomes for all. Arnold (2005) confirms that defining equity in outcome is a challenge because issues of skills and competences, age, grade, education attainment levels and norms of assessment skills across regions are varied and have to be given critical consideration.

### **2.1 Equitable education in Kenya**

The Government of Kenya (GoK) has over the years strived for equity in education in terms of geographical regions, gender and levels of education. This has been done by trying to ensure equitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities, process and outcomes. The main challenge in Kenya for example, when we look at equity of resources is the inequitable distribution of resources within regions and educational institutions. The GoK disburses capitation grants to all public primary schools for instructional materials and running costs under the FPE policy. Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP, 2005) indicates that although the GoK has a formula for disbursement of FPE funds, the amounts disbursed are the bare minimum for school requirement. The government has continued to provide resources for training and management of teachers in public primary schools but according to Uwezo (2016) there is acute teacher shortage in some regions such as the coastal and eastern regions. Parents and communities are still expected to meet the resources gap. Again due to disparities in income across the regions in Kenya recorded by Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), (2013) some schools are well endowed with resources while others are less endowed and this has implications on equity in education since the GoK allocates capitation grants to public primary schools irrespective of regional resource disparity.

According to MoE (2009) and Republic of Kenya (2005a) the GoK has endeavoured to address equity in the education process by establishing a national curriculum which is customised for children with special needs, non-formal education curricular, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) curricula and e-curricula that include digital and broadcasting. These curricula are geared towards addressing the education needs of all learners. However inadequate resources hamper effective delivery. Equity of outcomes is realised by the GoK through summative evaluation at the end of primary education cycle when learners sit an examination offered by the Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC). This evaluation is based on a common national curriculum developed by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). Evaluation for special needs learners is based on the adapted curriculum. To ensure effectiveness in education system, monitoring of learner achievement is carried out at standards three and six, using National Assessment System for Monitoring Learner Achievement (NASMLA) and South African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) mainly focusing on literacy and numeracy skills only. It is worth noting that the current National Education Sector Plan (NESP, 2013-2018) is building upon past accomplishments in the education sector and seeks to address some of the challenges that emerged during the implementation of KESSP 2005-2010 such as equity and inclusion. At the heart

of this sector plan is an emphasis on improving the quality of education and the governance and management of the education system.

## **2.2 Quality education in Kenya**

Kenya Vision 2030 places great emphasis on the link between qualities of education at all levels of learning and the labour market. In its vision and mission therefore, MoEST focuses on the development of an individual's personality to enable him/her fit into society as a productive and responsible citizen for Kenya's sustainable development. According to the Sessional Paper No 14 of 2012 therefore, quality in education is the degree to which education can be said to be of high standards, satisfies basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of learning.

The introduction of the FPE policy in 2003 posed a big challenge on quality of education since it resulted into a high influx of new pupils into schools, putting pressure on existing resources. Studies done by SACMEQ (2013) and Oketch and Somerset (2011) confirm that there have been concerns that the quality of school inputs in public primary schools in Kenya has declined under FPE. This is attributed to congestion in classes, high pupil-teacher ratios, and insufficient learning materials. The selected indicators of the quality of school inputs according to SACMEQ (2013) were: basic learning materials, mathematics textbooks, pupil-teacher ratios and class size. Findings by SACMEQ (2013) indicated that in 2007, only 78 per cent of the standard 6 pupils had at least one exercise book, a pencil or a pen and a ruler. In other words, around one in every five (22%) pupils did not have all the three basic learning items that were considered necessary for effective participation in classroom activities. There were no great variations among regions but Rift Valley and Eastern recorded the lowest percentages of 73 and 74 per cent, respectively.

Studies undertaken on learning outcomes over the last three years reveal low achievements attributed to underscores in literacy and numeracy. NASMLA shows that fewer than half of Class 3 pupils were able to read at level 3 (Basic Reading) or level 4 (Reading for Meaning). This is in agreement with UWEZO report (2016) that observed that even though budgets and other inputs to learning have been increasing steadily, learning outcomes have remained essentially stagnant in most counties. A study by Transparency International (2010) discovered numerous incidences of corruption involving FPE funds for the purchase of instructional materials and so it is likely that corruption issues could partly explain the low levels of textbooks among pupils and therefore low learning outcomes.

The pupil-teacher ratio is the other indicator of quality education. SACMEQ (2013) states that in 2000, the mean pupil-teacher ratio among primary schools in Kenya was 33 and was within the country's set benchmark of 40. However in 2007, the mean had risen to 43 pupils per teacher and thus was no longer within the set benchmark. Only two regions, Central and Eastern had mean values within the national benchmark of 43. The mean value was worst in North Eastern with 59 followed by Coast with 53. Although there have been challenges of high pupil-teacher ratio, MoEST (2014) clearly states that a major constraint for improvement of education quality is related to weak capacity in learning institutions, weak organisation and management structures and inefficient oversight by agencies mandated to improve service delivery. Support services such as finance, accounts, procurement, public communication and general administration are weak in most Kenyan public primary schools. A study by Ngugi, Mumiuhkha, Fedha and Ndiga (2015) asserts that issues of equity and quality have not been adequately addressed because acquisition of literacy has continued to be low in Kenyan public primary schools. This is in agreement with the report by the MoES&T (2014) that education quality is related to weak capacity in learning institutions.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

It is quite clear from reviewed literature, that the introduction of FPE policy in Kenya was indeed a step towards the right direction in making primary education universal. However several assessments done by organisations in Kenya such as SACMEQ (2013) and UWEZO (2016) reveal that learners are not mastering the skills and competencies expected at their level hence learning is not taking. A study by Ngugi et al., (2015) asserts that even with free access to educational opportunities, the question of equity still abound since not all children learn at the same pace or same way. Some children learn faster than their classmates, whereas others, some of whom have various mental, emotional and physical challenges learn more slowly. NDET (2008) also supports the fact that children are different and so may not be treated equally by stating that to ensure equity in education for all; positive discrimination is required and not equal treatment.

Republic of Kenya (2005a) indicated that MoEST had put in place a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework but reviewed literature points out that the existing monitoring and evaluation system for education intervention in MoEST is weak. There seem to be challenges with the current assessments as they tend to evaluate literacy and

numeracy skills at the expense of important basic and life skills including problem solving, innovation, adaptability and skills and values for responsible citizenship. A study on quality of primary inputs in Kenya (SACMEQ, 2013) has also showed that around one in every five pupils did not have all the three basic learning materials needed for effective participation in classroom activities. While the government offers free primary education, there are other indirect costs such as uniform and travel expenses which are posing financial challenges to poor parents. Moreover there are those socio-economic aspects within a child's family that have a bearing on their attending school. Ngugi et al., (2015) assert that factors such as family background, HIV and AIDS, household chores and wage labour greatly influence the attainment of FPE. More critical is the acute shortage of teachers due to overwhelming numbers as a result of increased enrolments. OSSREA (2010) confirms that shortage of teachers coupled with the large size of classes makes it difficult to carry out effective teaching due to minimum interaction between the teacher and the pupil.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD**

Although FPE has seen massive growth in enrolments in Kenyan public primary schools, the question of equity and quality still abound. Policies developed to address quality and equitable basic education seem not to have been effectively implemented. The MoEST should therefore enhance close partnership with other actors in the implementation and follow-up of interventions as well as in provision of adequate resources. It is also important that the MoEST, partners and stakeholders in education formulate an integrated approach to address the challenges facing children with special needs to ensure that they are included in schools irrespective of their disabilities. The government may wish to re-evaluate and streamline the current textbook acquisition system to ensure that: textbooks are actually purchased, and the purchased textbooks actually get to the pupils. The MoEST should address the infrastructure and teacher shortages as well as put in place effective quality assurance mechanisms to address gender and regional disparities. The GoK needs to review the allocation criteria for capitation grants to factor in regional disparities. It is also important for the MoEST to enhance the capacity of education managers at various levels to implement and supervise implementation of interventions such as Gender in Education, HIV and AIDs in Education, and School Health and Nutrition policies.

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Abuya, B. A., Onsomu, E. O., Oketch, M., Admassu, K., & Ngware, M. (2015). Free primary education and implementation in Kenya: The role of primary school teachers in addressing the policy gap. *Sage Open*.doi: 10.1177/2158244015571488
- [2] ADEA. (2011). *Towards inclusive and equitable basic education system: Kenya's experience*. Retrieved from <http://www.adea.org>
- [3] Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., & Goldrick, S. (2011). *Developing equitable education systems*. Routledge.
- [4] Arnold, R. (2005). *Equity in public education*. Retrieved from <http://www.mass.mb.ca>
- [5] Eshiwani, G.S. (1990). *Implementing educational policies in Kenya*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.
- [6] Kenya National Bureau of Standards. (2013). *Exploring Kenya's inequality*. Nairobi: KNBS.
- [7] Kenya, P. (2008). *The Kenya free primary education policy: An assessment on the impact and sustainability of free primary education in Migwani Division*. Unpublished master's thesis, Oxford Brookes University. U.K
- [8] Milu, E. (n.d.). *Critical perspectives on free primary education in Kenya: Towards an anti-colonial pedagogy*. Retrieved from <http://www.jceps.com>
- [9] Ministry of Education. (2009). *National special needs education policy framework*. Nairobi: Government Printer.
- [10] Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2008). *Equity in education for all: Understanding central concepts*. Retrieved from <http://www.udir.no>
- [11] Ngugi, M., Mumiukha, C., Fedha, F., & Ndiga, B. (2015). Universal primary education in Kenya. Advancement and challenges. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(14).
- [12] Oketch, M., & Somers, A. (2010). *Free primary education and after in Kenya: Enrolment impact, quality effects and the transition to secondary education*. Retrieved from <http://www.r4d.dfid.gov.uk>

- [13] OSSREA. (2010). *Free primary education in Kenya's public schools: Addressing the challenges*. Ethiopia: OSSREA.
- [14] Republic of Kenya. (2005a). *Kenya education sector support programme*. Nairobi: Government Printer.
- [15] Republic of Kenya. (2005b). *Sessional paper No.1 of 2005 on policy framework for education, training and research*. Nairobi: Government Printer
- [16] Republic of Kenya. (2010). *The Constitution of Kenya*. Nairobi. Government Printer.
- [17] Republic of Kenya. (2012). *Aligning education and training to constitution of Kenya (2010) and Kenya vision 2030 and beyond*. Nairobi: Ministry of Education Science and Technology.
- [18] Republic of Kenya. (2014). *Education for all: The 2015 national review*. Nairobi: Ministry of Education Science and Technology.
- [19] SACMEQ. (2013). *Quality of primary school inputs on Kenya*. Retrieved from <http://www.sacmeq.org>
- [20] Scottish Executive Education Department. (2007). *Review of the quality and equity of education Outcomes in Scotland*. Paris: OECD
- [21] UNICEF. (2015). *The investment case for education and equity*. New York: UNICEF.
- [22] UWEZO. (2016). *Are our children learning? Kenya sixth learning assessment report*. Nairobi: Uwezo.

#### **Profile**

Sr. Madeleine Sophie Barat Achieng': Is a PhD candidate at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. She has over 23 years of experience as Teacher and Principal of Loreto Schools. Currently she is the Education Secretary in the Eastern Africa Province of her Religious Congregation. Her academic and professional interests are in educational leadership and administration.