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Is Primary Education Heading in the Right Direction?
Thinking with Nyerere

Rakesh Rajani

HakiElimu Working Paper Series No. 2003-4
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The education provided must therefore encourage the development in each citizen of three things: an enquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do, and reject or adapt it to his own needs; and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them for what he does and not for what he obtains.

*Julius Nyerere, Education for Self Reliance*

**Introduction**

What is the situation in primary education forty years after independence? We now have the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP), which is very good news. After two decades of decline and neglect, finally something is happening!

During the 1970s Tanzania made impressive gains in expanding universal primary education. In 1980 gross enrollment rates reached 100%. The objective of everyone enjoying free primary schooling was in clear sight. Mwalimu Nyerere became well known throughout the world for his commitment to education that would liberate his people from poverty.

But the situation turned sharply in the opposite direction starting in the early 1980s. Economic crises resulting from the war with Uganda, declining commodity prices as oil prices went up, mismanagement of the local economy and breakdown of relations with the Bretton Woods institutions starved the Government of revenues and distracted its attention. Key tenets of socialist policies, such as the provision of free education, were eroded with the introduction of ‘cost sharing’.

By 2000, gross enrollment had plummeted to 77%. Cohort studies showed that less than half of all Tanzanian children were completing primary education, with the poor being the most excluded. The quality of education, never too good in the first place, deteriorated further to one of the lowest levels in the world. Efforts to reform education seemed only to produce mountains of papers written by technical consultants with no real difference on the ground.

That is why PEDP, announced in late 2001 and implemented beginning 2002, has brought about real change and hope. In one of the most important policy decisions of our times, all primary school fees and mandatory contributions were abolished to ensure that no one would be left out because of inability to pay. Its effect was immediate. In 2002, enrollment in Standard One reached 1.6 million, up from 1.1 million in the previous year. Gross enrollment shot up to just over 100% in a single year. Over 16,000 classrooms were built with the help of development grants and community labour. About 7,000 new teachers were recruited. The reform process involving Government, donors and NGOs seemed to finally be on track.

¹ The original version of this paper was presented at the Convocation of the University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, 15-16 May, 2003.
² Rakesh Rajani is the Executive Director of HakiElimu.
PEDP is cause for celebration. The Government deserves clear commendation for it.

But as we assess education 40 years after independence, we need to step back and reflect deeply. What does it mean, 40 years after independence, to celebrate that we have reached a level we had first reached 20 years back in 1980? And what is it in education that we are celebrating? That children's names are on a list, and that they are hopefully studying in rooms made of brick and mortar and a solid tin roof? No doubt these are important. But what does it mean that this is the most we can boast of 40 years after independence?

This essay is in three parts. In the first, I will outline the state of primary education today, highlighting issues of concern that linger despite the introduction of PEDP. In the second I will turn to Mwalimu Nyerere's writings on education, and use them as a mirror with which to reflect on the current situation. In the third part, the conclusion, I will suggest that sustainable progress in education needs something we do not have today, a different social politics, not just expert technocratic reforms but a movement of conscious and organized people across Tanzania who will make sure we have the education we deserve.

Two notes at the outset: First, this paper was written for a university convocation, but I will concentrate on primary education. There are many reasons for this. One of them is that the university, both its professors and students, need to be much more engaged in the struggle for basic education. In the ongoing reform process, with the exception of a few individual consultants, the university is largely absent. What is the role of the university if it is not engaged deeply in one of the greatest public policy questions of the day?

Second, perhaps I should be addressing secondary education instead. I will not, but we should all register one disturbing fact. In Tanzania today only about 7-8% of all people have access to the first four years of secondary education. This is virtually the lowest rate of all countries in the world for which there is published data. Uganda has twice and Kenya has four times as many as us. Forty years after independence, this should be a scandal. The question is what are we all, including you at the university, doing about it?

1. The State of Primary Education in Tanzania

1.1 Access

PEDP reforms are making a difference across Tanzania, but it is important to note that we live in a country of deep inequities. Our Constitution affirms our equality, but virtually every measure of education progress shows that the life chances for a child in rural, remote Tanzania are vastly different than for a child in urban Upanga, Dar es Salaam. Differences between districts are even greater. In 2000, while about 94% of school age children were enrolled in Kibaha and 87% in Ilala, the comparative figure for Lindi Rural was 28% and 37% for Ngorongoro.

Between 1995 and 2000, the primary education net enrollment ratio (NER) was 15% higher in urban areas as compared to rural areas.

Perhaps even more startling are the differences within districts. Such data is generally not published by national systems and hard to find. But school mapping studies from 1999 and 2000 reveal large disparities. In Temeke, for instance, Somangila and Kurasini wards had NER rates of 80-90%, while Tandika had 27% and Mjimwema only 15%. (What a cruel irony for the children, to live in a place called Mjimwema – “good town”, as the
wealthy drive by to enjoy the sandy beaches of South Beach). These numbers are a few years old, and PEDP will have no doubt brought improvements. But do we know whether these large disparities, and their obvious social ramifications, are being steadily reduced?

While we celebrate the children getting into school, justice demands that we pay special attention to those who are left behind. Who are these? PEDP policy, against technical advice by the way, is to enroll seven-year old children first in Standard One and others aged 8 onwards if there is space. Reports indicate that over one million children aged 9 to 13 do not have access to primary education today. Many of these are likely to be children affected by HIV/AIDS who have had to postpone or drop out of schooling to take care of their families. Children out of school have been told to have their names registered in a ‘COBET’ (Complimentary Basic Education in Tanzania) list and wait for non-formal education. But the Government’s own stocktaking exercise shows that this has become some kind of cruel hoax: “Parents have registered their children aged 11-13 for COBET program. Yet almost all councils with the exception of [3] COBET pilot districts and Temeke have not established functioning COBET centers” (MOEC 2002: 77). I know that work has been done recently on a Non-Formal Education (NFE) strategy, but on the ground the wait for these children, 40 years after independence, continues.

The wait is perhaps longest for children with disabilities. Using the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates for disability, some speculate that there are about 1.6 million children with physical and mental disabilities in Tanzania today. Back in 1974 Mwalimu Nyerere spoke passionately about ending discrimination against children with disabilities in education. But in 2003 PEDP has no provision for children with disabilities, and there appears to be no significant work on it underway. The 16,000 new classrooms built last year were not designed to be accessible. The plans for teachers and books exclude the special needs of children with disabilities. Forty years after independence, the budgets make no provision for them either. Commenting on education reforms in April 2003, a representative of Chama cha Viziwi Tanzania (CHAVITA), an organization of deaf people, said it explicitly: “for us, we do not yet have independence”.

1.2 Quality

The discussion so far has been about numbers, of who gets into school and who doesn’t. Perhaps an even more critical issue is the quality of education. The recently published Poverty and Human Development Report (2003) puts it well:

“... substantial increases in enrollment ratios can be seen over the past few years. But enrollment levels are not an aim in themselves. We expect children, once they are enrolled, to stay in school, study in a positive learning environment, do well at examinations and have an opportunity to continue into secondary education... Unless sufficient investment is made to ensure the quality of primary education is maintained and enhanced, pupils and parents might be disappointed with the education process, resulting in the loss of the gains made so far” (p.23-24).

It is widely acknowledged that pupils have very few textbooks and other learning materials. PEDP has provisions for the purchase of these, but reports from communities indicate that many schools are yet to receive books in any significant quantity. The few books that do exist are often ‘hoarded’ by cautious teachers to protect them from being damaged or lost by the pupils!
A key innovation in PEDP is to provide USD 10 per pupil per year to the school level in the form of a ‘capitation grant’. In the scale of things and in relation to actual needs, this is very little money, but it is significantly more than schools have been getting in the last several decades. Reports, however, indicate that in 2002 many schools received only about USD 2 or Tshs 2,000 per pupil. This was meant to cover quality improvements, examinations, paper, pens, chalk and blackboard paint, and virtually all costs except salaries, teacher upgrading and construction of new classrooms. All this from Tshs 2,000/-, an amount for which you can just about buy a few plates of a decent lunch on the street, or one cup of coffee at the Royal Palm hotel. Forty years after independence.

Teachers are the heart of any good school. Yet their situation is extremely disturbing. Many are ill trained and ill prepared to perform one of the most critical responsibilities in our country. At present, only about half of all teachers are adequately certified (though it must be said that certification does not necessarily connote quality teaching). Their distribution across the country is also highly uneven. In 2000, while 59% of teachers in urban areas were certified, in rural areas where the vast majority of the population lives the number was only 45%. Pupil to teacher ratios varied widely as well in the same year, from less than 30:1 in Bukoba Urban and Morogoro Urban to over 70:1 in Meatu and over 80:1 in Mafia.

Media reports commonly cite overcrowding and the lack of teachers in many schools today. A few months back we read about the school where pupils go on leave when its only teacher falls sick. In the 13th July, 2003 edition of Nipashe newspaper we read that one teacher teaches Standard One to Standard Five in a school in Arusha. Photographs of 100 or 200 children taught by one teacher are not rare. In these circumstances teaching becomes more a practice of riot control, with sticks flailing regularly, rather than a process of interaction and learning. Organizations such as Kuleana and UNICEF have alerted us to the widespread and largely illegal practice of corporal punishment in our schools, but there is no evidence that it is abating. Overcrowding may in fact have increased the incidence of corporal punishment.

Performance levels as measured by national examinations have improved somewhat in 2002. This is a positive development. But the general story is that about three out of four children who sit for examinations today fail to pass (roughly one third to one half drop out prior to this stage), even though the pass marks are set quite low. I have met pupils in Standard Seven who are unable to write one decent paragraph, let alone think creatively and critically. Gender differences in examination performance are significant, with girls doing only half as well as boys in many areas. This has led one colleague to observe that the main outcome of our primary education system today is to produce pupils who fail examinations. Forty years after independence.

2. Thinking with Nyerere: Are We Heading in the Right Direction?

The discussion above articulates some of the critical challenges in primary education today that PEDP will need to overcome. Change takes time. The magnitude of the problem is such that one cannot expect everything to improve overnight. But the key question is this: are we heading in the right direction? Some shortfalls, such as the rights of children with disabilities, have been noted above. There are other basic questions. What are the purposes of education? What is the meaning of an educated child? What do we want the experience of seven years of school to be like? What is
our vision of the role of education and educated citizens in society? We spend very little time thinking about these things, yet they are perhaps the most important to the future of our country.

As you know, Mwalimu Nyerere thought, wrote and talked a great deal about education. HakiElimu and our partners are planning to publish a book of his writings on education this year. So why not think together with Mwalimu, reflect on the reforms and try to answer the question: are we heading in the right direction?

Here I want to do something very simple. I will quote Nyerere, extensively, on five aspects of education. I will provide little commentary and let his words speak for themselves. The idea is for you to reflect and make up your own mind.

2.1 Purpose of Education

For Mwalimu, education and society were inextricably linked. For independent Tanzania, education was to be reformed to reflect particular values and build a new society. In his seminal 1967 paper “Education for Self Reliance”, Nyerere says:

“This means that the educational system of Tanzania must emphasize co-operative endeavor, not individual advancement; it must stress concepts of equality and the responsibility to give service which goes with any special ability, whether it be in carpentry, in animal husbandry, or in academic pursuits. And, in particular, our education must counteract the temptation to intellectual arrogance; for this leads to the well-educated despising those whose abilities are non-academic or who have no special abilities but are just human beings. Such arrogance has no place in a society of equal citizens.”

He further adds:

“…the free citizens of Tanzania will have to judge social issues for themselves; their neither is, nor will be, a political ‘holy book’ which purports to give all the answers to all the social, political and economic problems which will face our country in the future…Only free people conscious of their worth and their equality can build a free society.”

2.2 Teachers and Teaching

PEDP has provisions for teacher training and upgrading. Pre-service training is meant to be one year of studies and the second as an intern in a school. Attention will also be given to strengthening the skills of existing teachers. The details of these programs have not been fully developed or implemented yet. Nyerere, in “The Power of Teachers” delivered at Morogoro Teachers College in 1966, states the following:

“Our nation – any nation – is as great, as good, as fine a place to live in, and as progressive, as its citizens make it. Its leadership may be good, bad, or indifferent, but if the people are awake and aware of themselves it will not for long be completely unrepresentative of the attitudes in the society. And the truth is that it is teachers more than any other single group of people who determine these attitudes, and who shape the ideas and aspirations of the nation.”
More important still is the question of how the teacher teaches… In this I do not mean simply the techniques of transferring information, although these can encourage or stunt the ability of the child to learn skills. I mean much more than that.

When a teacher comes into a class tired, or looking tired, dispirited and without any enthusiasm for work; when the teacher demands that every bit of physical labour is done by the children while he watches; or when the teacher acts as if every pupil were a nuisance, a dullard, in such cases the children will develop the idea that work is something to be avoided, that learning is simply something which one gets through, and that the way to use authority is to get other people to work for you…

If the teacher fawns on visiting officials, and then treats a poor farmer as though he is dirt, the children will grow up believing that is the proper way to behave in our developing nation. It does not matter what the teacher says in civics classes or elsewhere; they will learn from what he does. But the man who treats everyone with respect, who discusses his position clearly, rationally, and courteously with everyone whatever their position – that teacher is inculcating a spirit of equality, of friendship, and of mutual respect. And he is teaching by being – which is the most effective teaching technique existing!

2.3 Pupil's Participation and Citizenship

What about pupils? PEDP has an annex on institutional arrangements that speaks of democratizing school governance, of the involvement of pupils in decision-making, including as full members of the school committees. The link between children's participation and democratization is often seen as a new development in our country, but Nyerere spoke of it in “Education for Self Reliance”:

“Pupils should be given an opportunity to make many of the decisions… at the beginning it is probable that a good number of mistakes will be made, and it would certainly be wrong to give complete untrammeled choice to young pupils right from the start. But although guidance must be given by the school authorities and a certain amount of disciplined exerted, the pupils must be able to participate in decisions and learn by mistakes.”

And again at a Conference of Secondary School Heads in Dar es Salaam in December, 1967:

“An essential part of the success of our attempt to build a democratic society is the combination of free discussion followed by the full implementation of joint decisions; if the children get used to this in school they will at the same time be learning about the responsibilities of citizens in a free society.”

2.4 Examinations

School leaving examinations are the main indicator used today to assess performance and progress in primary education. In his seminal 1967 paper “Education for Self Reliance”, Nyerere had this to say:

“…our primary and secondary schools must prepare young people for the realities and needs of Tanzania; to do it requires a radical change, not only in
the education system but also in many existing community attitudes. In particular, it requires that examinations should be down-graded in Government and public esteem... As a general rule they assess a person’s ability to learn facts and present them on demand within a time period. They do not always succeed in assessing a person’s power to reason, and they certainly do not assess character or willingness to serve.

Further, at the present time our curriculum and syllabus are geared to the examinations set – only to a very limited extent does the reverse situation apply. A teacher who is trying to help his pupils often studies the examination papers for past years and judges what questions are most likely to be asked next time; he then concentrates his teaching on those matters, knowing that by doing so he is giving his children the best chance of getting though to secondary school or university... What we need to do now is think first about the education we want to provide, and when that thinking is completed think about whether some form of examination is an appropriate way of closing an education phase. Then such an examination should be designed to fit the education which has been provided.”

2.5 Adult Education and Democracy

It is widely acknowledged that adult education programs across the country have generally collapsed. There are still, however, many adults who lack basic education. According to the recent *Household Budget Survey* (2001) 40% of all women in rural areas, 40 years after independence, are unable to read and write. Twenty-seven years ago, in 1976, Nyerere had this to say:

“The one unavoidable thing is that resources have to be allocated to adult education. It will not happen without them! There is a regrettable tendency in time of economic stringency – which for poor countries is all the time – for governments to economize on money for adult education ... And there is a tendency also, when trained people are in short supply, to decide that adult education must wait.

... What priority it obtains is perhaps one of the most political decisions a government will take. For if adult education is properly carried out, and therefore effective, it is the most potent force there can be for developing a free people who will insist upon determining their own future....

... Education arouses curiosity and provokes questioning – the challenging of old assumptions and established practices. An educated Ujamaa village, for example, will neither allow nor tolerate dishonesty among its accountants, or authoritarianism among its leaders. An educated population will challenge the actions of its elected representatives – including its President.”

3. Conclusion

Today I have shared two things with you. I have outlined the state of primary education in Tanzania and invited you to reflect on it with Mwalimu Nyerere. My hope is that you will find this exercise to be interesting and worthwhile, and that at least some of you will choose to become personally involved in doing something about improving the situation. I say this because I believe your involvement is vital.
The sorts of questions Nyerere raises are ones that require public involvement and debate. Experts, technocrats and bureaucrats have a key role to play, but on their own I do not think they will be able to drive and sustain the deep changes we need today. The Government with donor and NGO support is making important advances with PEDP. But it needs you, and ordinary people across the country, to be asking basic questions about the purposes, meanings and methods of education. It needs active citizens – students, parents, teachers and others – to understand and critique policies, to comment on the gaps between policy and practice and to take action that will lead to better schools. It needs honest feedback on what is going well and what is not. It needs a social movement with imagination of vision, of purpose, and of strategy.

Education reform needs this sort of democratic practice, because it is the best hope we have of keeping our Government on its toes and true to the aspirations of the people.

Let me end with one more quote from Mwalimu, who understood the value of social pressure. In preparing the book on *Nyerere on Education*, the earliest article we found was Mwalimu's address to the Legislative Council in 1954, where he spoke about “a great urge for education”. Nyerere criticized the colonial government over the pace of education reforms against a backdrop of strong displeasure from the colonial governor about ‘trouble-mongers’ who practiced such criticism. On that, in the same 1954 address, Mwalimu had this to say:

“Is government to know whether a person is actually being a trouble-monger or whether he is justified in criticizing government ... I hope that people in the country are not going to take the Governor's warning against trouble-mongers in the country to mean that... no criticism to either local government or the central government is going to be tolerated, because I think that if that happens, Sir, a large number of people are going to be without the only chance they have of either making useful suggestions to authorities as to how matters should be run, or sometimes merely airing their views however absurd they may appear to others.”

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Equity, Justice and Transformation in Education: The Challenge of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Today

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