

Primary school drop-outs and truancy are serious problems in Kilimanjaro

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The Kilimanjaro Region is often cited as an "educational beacon" in Tanzania largely because, in 2000, there were 60 secondary schools and 889 primary schools in the area. Despite these numbers, a recent study by the Mkombozi Centre for Street Children shows that Tanzania's state education system is under-performing and excludes a range of children, primarily those who are poor, those from difficult family backgrounds, and/or those who have special educational needs. Children in such circumstances are particularly at risk of non-enrolment, exclusion, truancy and dropping out from primary education.

In fact, since the abolition of school fees in 2001, the Net Enrolment Rate in Kilimanjaro has increased, but truancy and school drop-outs remain a problem for all 10 primary schools that were the subject of Mkombozi's research. For example, in 2005 alone, more than 170 students dropped out and more than 500 were truant from the target schools. These numbers are marked increases from the 54 drop-outs and 307 truants that occurred in the schools in 2004. Moreover, certain schools showed very poor performance on Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLEs) - for example, only 8 students out of 36 passed the PSLEs at Kibosho's Kombo Primary in 2002.

Importantly, Mkombozi's target schools are located in communities where there is a high incidence of social exclusion and where familial problems are multi-faceted and complex. The fact is that the social structure of rural communities in Kilimanjaro is distorted by the out-migration of productive males (who have left the region to look for work elsewhere) and the consequent predominance of children and youth, women and the elderly. Consider that, in the rural villages of Kilimanjaro, dependents constitute 52.3% of the population, but only 46.9% of people are economically active. This distortion of the social fabric has deepened income poverty, exacerbated non-income poverty (violence, family breakdown, lack of community support), and caused special emotional, behavioural and development needs among youth in the region.

In fact, within each target school, teachers reported that a disturbing number of students are demonstrating one or more of the following factors associated with being "at risk" of non-enrolment, exclusion, truancy and drop-out: poor relationship between parents and the school; child is distracted and disinterested in school; child working outside school; child is regularly punished in school; parents are drinking excessively; suspicion of domestic violence or abuse in child's home; child lacks school uniform and other costs; parent / guardian not following up on child's school progress. Notably, these risk factors tend to manifest in multiples and thus are not ranked as being more or less "risky". That is, a child suspected to be a victim of domestic violence also tends to have parents who are drinking excessively and are uninvolved in their school progress.

The schools in Mkombozi's research all stressed that a fundamental problem is the lack of clarity about the role of schools and education within Tanzania. Under the Primary Education Development Plan, the Tanzanian Government's focus is on increasing school enrolment to cover the 3 million children under the age of 7 who had not been enrolled in 2000. But, despite the focus on building classrooms, attention has not been given to equipping schools with text books, materials or funds for additional teachers. In effect, many schools throughout Kilimanjaro Region exhibit high rates of teacher absenteeism, inadequate infrastructure and poor teacher-learner transactions. Moreover, current classroom overcrowding is leading to a "one-hat-fits-all" teaching approach - particularly harmful to vulnerable children with special needs.

A related problem is that exclusion and low enrolment of students in primary school is often precipitated by the inability of families to pay school costs. Within Tanzania, approximately 3% of household expenditure goes to educational costs. Although, since January 2002, there are no longer formal school fees, "contributions" and the costs of uniforms and school materials are still compulsory. Each year, families must spend Tsh 4,000 - Tsh 5,000 (US\$4-5) per child on school contributions (for classroom maintenance, watchmen, water and school lunches), and an additional Tsh 15,000 (US\$15) per child on indirect costs (such as uniforms and exercise books). In effect, household costs for education are still a significant barrier to achievement of Universal Primary Education.

Overall, Mkombozi's research clearly shows that the increased enrolment experienced since 2001 has actually exacerbated child vulnerability and school dysfunction - assuming that all vulnerable children have the same learning needs will not address the problems that cause children to drop-out, be excluded, or play truant from school. Teachers, school committees and community leaders must be equipped to conceptualise the problems facing children and young people and they must be supported with appropriate methodologies and training. Moreover, the scarcity of teaching materials and the poor environment of many schools are infrastructural and resourcing problems that need to be addressed if education is a national priority.



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