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Article

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Education in Kenya and Tanzania

Two Countries as Development Models for the Global South?

Günther Schmid

Can Tanzania and Kenya serve as development models for the Global South? Günther Schmid analyzes the education systems of both countries and looks at indicators for educational success such as educational equality and quality. What is the idea of education behind the two systems? What was the spirit of optimism among politicians such as Julius K. Nyerere, the former president of Tanzania? In the 1990s, the report of the so-called Southern Commission formulated educational ideas for Africa that are still influential today.

The year 1990 marked the first time that the Global South found its own voice. Previously, the “North” had overseen the alleged underdevelopment of the “South,” for example in the 1980 and 1987 commissions chaired by Willy [Brandt](#) or the Norwegian politician Gro Harlem [Brundtland](#). Now the South Commission, under the chairmanship of former Tanzanian President Julius K. Nyerere, issued a self-confident report without any “Northern” involvement: [“The Challenge of the South”](#) broke with “Northern” ideas about development that had long been perceived as domination. For many years, for example, [“Asian Drama,”](#) a three-volume treatise by Swedish Nobel Prize winner Gunnar Myrdal, was considered a blueprint for development countries – but only in the “North.” Even back then, the “South” was looking more towards the Soviet Union or China, unleashing harsh criticism on [“How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.”](#)

What was remarkable about the South Commission’s report was not only the clear vision it presented in almost Kantian terms – “Development is a process which enables human beings to realize their potential, build self-confidence, and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment” – but also the emphasis on education as the foundation for the South’s liberation from the economic “immaturity” imposed by the North. According to the report, “future development policies will need to address with greater vigor the closing of the knowledge gap with the North. Knowledge is vital to the future of the South, for development will depend more and more on the benefits derived from the advances of science and technology. Progress in this field calls for the overhaul of educational systems, in order that more attention may be given to education in science and to training in engineering and technical skills.”

German and European development policy fails to acknowledge the key role of education for the [development](#) of emerging nations in Africa, as formulated in 1990. This is also true of [Kenya and Tanzania](#), whose school systems are the focus of this article. Can they serve as role models for the Global South, as Nyerere intended? What are the educational

ideals of former politicians and presidents that shaped the two African countries, and how do these ideals continue to have an impact today?

Although practically all children in Africa nowadays attend school for at least some time, the [average years of schooling](#) received by people aged 25 and older in Kenya is only 6.3 years and 5.8 years in Tanzania; in other words, only about half of the 13.2 years in Germany. The differences become even more disconcerting once [elementary school completion rates](#) are considered. In Germany, all children – at least formally – complete elementary school, and the gender gap has been eliminated. Kenya and Tanzania continue to see major differences even at this level, with only 71 percent of girls completing elementary school in Kenya and 83 percent in Tanzania.

To be sure, the way education is measured and assessed today has become much more complex. For assessing goal number four (“Quality Education”) of the 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#), for example, the United Nations uses 43 indicators, which for good reason focus more on outcomes and less on participation as such. However, despite its pretentious vocabulary, this approach no longer exudes the emphatic spirit of the 1990 South Commission. Just take a look at the latest [UNESCO](#) education report and you will quickly be reminded of the saying “failing to see the forest for the trees.”

A clearer assessment is offered by the analyses of the [Mo Ibrahim Foundation](#), which cover all 54 African countries. In the foundation’s 2023 Governance Index Report, the development of national education systems is monitored using five indicators: educational equality; educational participation; educational attainment; educational resources; educational quality. How effective are both countries measured against these indicators? Are their education systems competitive in economic terms?

Both education systems emerge almost equally strong, albeit with interesting differences. Of 100 possible points awarded in the five education indicators, Tanzania scores 56.8 points, putting it in 17th place out of 54 African countries. Furthermore, Tanzania seems to be catching up with Kenya in terms of the dynamics of its education system (7.1 vs. 1.9 points compared to the previous decade). Ranking 11th, the Kenyan education system is highly advanced and still slightly more dynamic than that of other African countries. Both countries, and Tanzania in particular, score lowest in educational participation. In Tanzania, this can be attributed primarily to the strong selection process in upward educational transitions. This selection process is probably a leftover of Nyerere’s hesitant approach to expanding the secondary and tertiary education system. For a long time, the then president insisted that an “elementary school education” was perfectly sufficient for the vast majority of a predominantly agrarian population.

In the rankings, Kenya scores the highest in the rating of its educational institutions and educational policies. With all due caution – given the time that has passed – it is reasonable to assume that former development minister Tom Mboya’s emphasis on excellence and competitiveness, inspired by the US model, continues to pay off in terms of educational quality. A large proportion of Kenya’s educational elite studied in the US with the help of the [1960 Airlift-Africa program](#), which Mboya had negotiated with [John F. Kennedy](#). Between 1959 and 1963, Airlift grants enabled almost 800 young African men

and women to study at US and Canadian universities. Among them were Kenyan Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai and Barack Obama's father.

Tanzania, on the other hand, stands out in terms of educational equality: the country ranks 7th out of 54 African states in this indicator. Here, we may legitimately conclude that Julius Nyerere, who was called Mwalimu (teacher), has left a lasting positive legacy in favor of educational equality for girls or women. Tanzania's current president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, is one of the few women heading an African government. In Kenya, while we do see women at the head of government at the regional level (e.g., Governor Gladys Wanga in Homa Bay County), they are still heavily underrepresented in the national parliament, taking only 22 percent of the seats; in contrast, women in Tanzania are guaranteed a 40 percent share through special seats.

To what extent are the two countries suitable development models for the Global South? Nyerere's speeches on education emphasized one major aspect that has largely been forgotten, not only in Africa – namely, his fierce rejection of the idea that the exclusive goal of education is to bolster the economy. This idea, which is hidden behind the term “human capital,” cannot provide the rationale for a sustainable development dynamic. Most importantly, the idea of education as an institution that creates exclusive property rights (e.g., linking wages or salaries to an employee's formal education status) runs counter to the development policy goal of creating a society that is both prosperous and just. In Nyerere's thinking, education was to be a cooperative endeavor rather than a means of serving individual advantage. To him, sharing knowledge was a prerequisite for sustainable economic and social development.

The currency of this view in modern education economics and sociology is confirmed, for example, by [Joseph Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald](#): their textbook-like study offers a compelling argument that innovation – and thus economic and social progress – is based on cooperation and knowledge sharing. Among economists, this is known as a “spillover” or positive external effect. Since these effects are particularly strong in the industrial sector, it makes sense to protect such sectors from ruinous competition in the initial stages before gradually opening them up to free trade – a strategy that has so far been denied to most African countries. In contrast, knowledge-based technology, especially in the IT sector, can only be accelerated through international cooperation.

Kenya has also made more progress than Tanzania in the areas of modern technology and social infrastructure. This is evident in a number of key indicators. Unlike Tanzania, which – aside from tourism – continues to focus heavily on exploiting its minerals and hence becomes increasingly vulnerable to the [resource curse](#), Kenya set out as early as 2008 to become a leading African industrial nation by 2030. It is a leader in the IT sector, for example in cashless payment, in mobile broadband strategies and in smart digital startups. The country is also a role model on the path towards 100 percent electricity access. Off-grid solar solutions offer a cost-effective way to provide access to electricity for the many households that are far from the grid. With an average annual growth rate of seven percent, Kenya is one of the three countries in the world that have made the [fastest progress in electrification](#) in recent years. The country is Africa's leader in geothermal energy and the production of green hydrogen, and already covers up to 90

percent of its electricity needs with renewable energy. All these facts apparently induced the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to establish a [development partnership](#) in this area.

Finally, Kenya was one of the first African countries to connect educational reforms with rigorous family planning policies. As a result, Kenya – unlike Tanzania – has created better conditions for utilizing the [demographic dividend](#): higher educational attainment leads to lower birth rates, and lower birth rates favor higher educational attainment. Between 1989 and 2014, the average age of Kenyan women at their first marriage rose by another two years, as did the average age at their first birth. Today, women in Kenya on average give birth to “only” 3.4 children; in Tanzania, that figure is almost five (4.77).

Education and family policy in Kenya have benefited enormously from the [Global Partnership for Education \(GPE\)](#), in which the governments of over 60 developing countries and more than 20 donor countries, international organizations, civil society, teachers and the private sector work together. It has only been in the last few years that Tanzania has decided to get actively involved in this partnership. Considering its relatively modest [financial contribution](#), official German development policy seems not yet fully aware of the potential of this partnership. As an appeal by the German GPE youth ambassadors in April 2022 has shown, some [young people in Germany](#) seem to be further ahead in this regard: “We [...] believe that Germany [...] has an extraordinary responsibility to counteract the global education crisis. If Germany invests heavily in global education, the transformative power of education for girls and boys in countries of the Global South can unfold and have an extremely positive impact on a wide range of areas of life.”

This insight, which remains as relevant as ever, could be reason enough for initiating a [paradigm shift in development policy](#) instead of giving in to populist demands for cuts. Despite their different development paths, Kenya and Tanzania offer instructive experiences for a realignment of this nature. For the Global South, however, their ability to serve as role models is limited. Both countries still have a lot of catching up to do, especially when it comes to the education of girls and young women.

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