

Free Primary Education In Kenya: A Systematic Review Of Enduring Inequities In Access To Quality Education In The Urban Informal Settlements

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Abstract:

Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in Kenya is intended to ensure every child accesses quality primary education. Yet, many children from the informal urban settlements remain marginalized. This study examines the challenges surrounding the provision of quality primary education in Kenya's urban informal settlements, particularly in the era of FPE. The study employed a systematic review of studies published from 2003 to 2025. A literature search was conducted across multiple databases, including JSTOR, ERIC, Web of Science, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), Research Gate, and Kenya policy documents. The search used a combination of keywords including "informal settlements," AND OR "slums," AND OR "marginalized" OR vulnerable "OR"AND" challenges "AND" opportunities "AND" "Kenya. In the urban informal settlements where resources are constrained, there were systemic barriers that hinder the realization of equitable and quality education. The barriers included inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, insecurity, and negative community attitudes that perpetuate educational marginalization among others. The study articulates that above concerns discussing their manifestation. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations made on how to improve access to quality education in the informal settlements in Kenya. Among the recommendations are; invest in expanding and modernizing school facilities, recruit and train more qualified teachers, strengthen community engagement to foster positive perceptions of education, enhance school safety and introduce targeted interventions to reduce dropout rates. By adopting these measures. This will ensure that Kenya can moves closer to fulfilling the promise of FPE and ensure that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Keywords: *Free Primary Education, inequities, education, urban informal settlements, Kenya,*

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I. Introduction

Education remains a fundamental pillar for the economic growth and development of any nation. Primary education in Kenya forms the backbone of the country's educational system. It serves as the foundation for learners who progress to secondary and tertiary education (WERK,2011; Ngware, 2007). The Kenyan government has invested significantly in ensuring that every child has access to primary education. Among the bold steps to provide Universal Primary Education (UPE) is the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) policy.

The early attempt to provide Free Primary Education (FPE) in Kenya was in 1973 through a policy that targeted children in lower grades in semi-arid and arid areas (Musungu, 2015), and later in 1979 through waiver of tuition fee and other levies (Ngware and Oketch, 2010). However, the implementation of the 1979 policy did not fully take place following the introduction of cost sharing in education, a condition of the World Bank under the infamous structural adjustment programmes (SAPs).

The next bold step to provide FPE was in 2003 when President Mwai Kibabii was elected under the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). As a campaign pledge, NARC had promised to offer universal primary education by ensuring that all school fees and any other educational levies were abolished. The reintroduction of FPE policy in 2003 came with a sigh of relief to many parents. The policy was widely expected to address the persistent challenges hampering access to quality education in the country. However, the implementation of FPE since 2003 has resulted to significant increase in enrolment, but quality continues to suffer (Oketch and Rolleston, 2007). Despite these efforts, universal access has not been fully realized.in Kenya (Limo and Muchimuti, 2022; Mayama, et.al. 2025). This study seeks review existing studies to establish the challenges hampering provision of quality education in the informal settlements.

Research Problem

Whereas Kenya has made remarkable progress in expanding education and training opportunities, local studies indicate that children in the urban informal settlements are disproportionately excluded from accessing quality education (Oketch, 2010; Mayama, et.al. 2025; Malenya, 2020). The inequity in access to education in the urban informal settlements not only undermines the right to education to all, but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, children who are excluded from quality education face limited opportunities for upward mobility. Understanding the enduring challenges in access to quality primary education in the urban informal settlements is therefore critical to ensuring that Kenya's vision of inclusive and equitable education becomes a reality.

II. Materials And Methods

Data sources and search terms

This study was a systematic review of published works on access to quality education in the informal settlements. The study focused on studies published from 2003 to 2025. Literature search was conducted across multiple databases, including: JSTOR, ERIC, Web of Science, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), and Research Gate. Additionally, relevant reports and policy documents were searched from institutional repositories of organizations such as UNESCO and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). The search used a combination of keywords including "informal settlements," AND OR "slums," AND OR marginalized OR vulnerable AND "educational planning," AND challenges AND opportunities AND "Kenya,"

Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for literature selection encompassed:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles and government reports
- Journal articles that have Digital Object Identifiers (DOI)
- Literature published in the English language
- Availability of abstracts and full-text PDF documents
- Relevance to equity in access to quality education
- Reference to education in informal sectors or comparable contexts.

Data Analysis

The initial search yielded 34 articles. Abstracts of the articles were first screened for relevance based on titles and the key words. After applying the inclusion criteria, 26 publications were selected. Again 5 journal articles were rejected for lacking DOI. The remaining 21 articles were then considered for analysis. Figure 1 shows a summary of the type of articles analyzed.

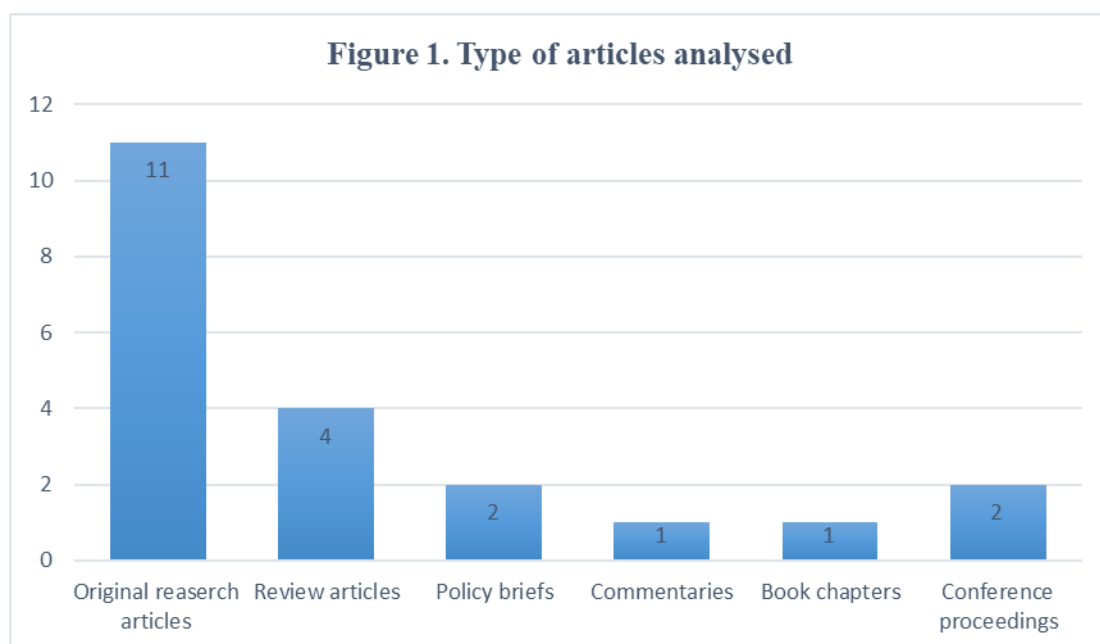


Figure 1. portrays that the majority of the articles that were used in the review were original research articles (11; 52.3%). These were followed by review articles, (4, 19.0%).

III. Results And Discussions

Analysis of the peer-reviewed literature revealed enduring challenges in access to quality primary education in the urban informal settlements.

Inadequate infrastructure

A number of local studies reviewed reported that most schools in located in urban informal settlements in Kenya suffered from inadequate physical facilities to offer quality education (Banks, 2022; Macharia, 2007; WERK, 2011; Gatundu, Kimani and Ronoh, 2023; Malenya, 2020). Overcrowded classrooms was cited as a common challenge. In many schools, the overall number of learners per class at the primary level was 100. Saya & Orodho (2014) conducted a descriptive study to examine the socio-economic factors influencing access to education in Kibera slums in Kenya, one of the largest in Africa. The study found that learning environment in majority of the schools was uncondusive to enable effective teaching and learning. Orodho (2013) had equally observed that schools in the urban informal settlements suffered from an acute shortage of classroom, books, and equipment.

Limited number of schools

Disparities in access to education between informal settlements and formal urban areas were also highlighted. For instance, Oketch et al. (2022) noted that children in informal settlements were 2.4 times more likely to be out of school compared to their counterparts in formal urban areas. This was largely linked to the limited number of schools relative to population density. In some informal settlements like Mukuru, the ratio ranged from 1 school per 5000 learners (UN-Habitat, 2023).

Some other studies reported that the average distance between schools in a typical informal sector was two kilometers compared to just a kilometer in most formal urban areas (Abuya et al., 2023; Zuilkowski et al., 2022). School enrollment in most schools in the informal settlements was generally low due to the limited number of schools (Ngware, et.al. 2007; GoK, 2024; Chiara & Chege, 2023; UNESCO (2022).

Insecurity

The literature review showed that children living in slum areas faced serious security challenges when commuting to school. Girls were particularly vulnerable. The long distances between home and school often forced them to walk through unsafe environments, exposing them to harassment and even physical or sexual assault. Many of these routes lacked proper infrastructure, such as paved roads, sidewalks, and street lighting (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2022; Saya & Orodho, 2014). Kinyanjui (2019) conducted a descriptive study involving three schools in Soweto slums in Nairobi. The study reported that high unemployment rates had led to increased crime and drug abuse. This had affected school attendance and enrolment.

Prohibitive extra educational levies

The introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in Kenya by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) in 2003 and Free Secondary Education (FSE) in 2008 was meant to cushion children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Yet two decades later, many children in the informal settlements remain excluded from accessing quality education. Multiple studies reported that a significant proportion of schools in the informal settlements continued to charge prohibitive school levies that many parents cannot afford (Saya & Orodho, 2014; Wambugu & Mokoena, 2021; Bauer & Mbithi, 2021; Buchmann & Hannum, 2021; Asim et al., 2020; Oketch et al., 2022; Abuya et al., 2023; Zuilkowski et al., 2022; Chiara & Chege,2023; Wambugu & Mokoena, 2021). These problems widen educational gaps and entrench social and economic inequities (Alwy & Schech, 2021; Chege & Arnot, 2022).

Shortage of qualified teachers

Studies reviewed suggested that majority of schools in the urban informal settlements in Kenya were private (Ngware, et.al. 2007). Such schools often attracted unqualified and unpaid or underpaid teachers or volunteers who often left when better opportunities presented themselves (Ngware, Oketch, Ezeh, & Mudege,2009; Muthwii, 2021; Zuilkowski et al., 2022). Again the teachers lacked competence and professional development to teach effectively. Even though teacher shortages at primary level still exist due to national staffing norms of assigning a teacher per classroom in primary schools, schools in the informal settlements (slums) were severely understaffed. The average student/teacher ratio was well over 100:1 compared to the national policy of 40:1 (Fox et al., 2023; Ngugi & Thinguri, 2023; UNESCO,2022). Additionally, some studies showed that these schools experienced high teacher absenteeism and turnover (Abuya et.al. 2023; Chiara & Chege, 2023). The consequences for student learning were stark- students' academic achievement in national examinations was comparably low (Bauer & Mbithi, 2021; Oketch et al., 2022; Ministry of Education, 2019).

Negative attitude towards education

Dropout rates remained alarmingly high at both primary and secondary levels (Osman, 2018; Ananga, 2020; Unterhalter, 2022; Malenya, 2020). Some of the factors that were associated with high dropout included negative attitudes towards education among children from the informal settlements.

Taken together, these findings underscore the systemic inequities facing learners in informal settlements, where structural deficits in teacher quality, professional support, and retention converge to produce persistently poor educational outcomes and limited opportunities for progression.

IV. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in Kenya had significantly expanded access to schooling. However, children in urban informal settlements continue to face systemic barriers that hinder the realization of equitable and quality education. Challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, insecurity, and negative community attitudes perpetuate educational marginalization and limit the transformative potential of FPE.

V. Recommendations

Arising from the foregoing conclusion, the study recommended that the government and stakeholders invest in expanding and modernizing school facilities, recruit and train more qualified teachers, strengthen community engagement to foster positive perceptions of education, enhance school safety, and introduce targeted interventions to reduce dropout rates. By adopting these measures, Kenya can move closer to fulfilling the promise of FPE and ensure that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, has access to quality primary education

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