

## Decentralization in Education: Overcoming challenges and achieving success – the Kenyan experience

### Overview

Many countries have embarked over the past two decades on the path of educational decentralization, with the objective of achieving quality education and a more efficient system. Decentralization entails the central government ceding some powers and functions to lower levels so as to allow them greater autonomy. The UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) has been conducting research over the last ten years on this policy in Kenya and other countries in Africa and South-East Asia, in collaboration with Ministries of Education, national research institutions, and partners like UNICEF. This research has focused on two areas: the role of the DEO, and the management of the school grant. It aims to arrive at some valuable lessons that could inform policy recommendations for better practices. This brief discusses the study's findings in Kenya and identifies key suggestions for policy improvement.

### Educational decentralization in Kenya

The Kenyan Government has embraced educational decentralization in the past decade as enunciated in the *Education Sector Strategic Plan, 2003-2007* and *Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 on a Policy Framework for Education Training and Research*. These policy documents state that local-level structures at the district and institutional levels shall be vested with authority for decision-making and expenditure of funds, in order to enhance stakeholders' participation in planning and implementation.

### Why focus on the DEO and the school grant?

The successful implementation of decentralization depends on the effectiveness of two crucial local actors, both of which face new challenges – the District Education Office (DEO) and the school staff. Traditionally, the core mandate of the DEO has been to monitor the quality of education primarily through supervisory visits. However, decentralization has led to a rapid expansion of the scope of the DEO's responsibilities. Schools in Kenya also have greater responsibilities. Most importantly, since the introduction of free primary education in 2003, they receive funds from the Government that they can use with some autonomy.

The research which this brief summarizes is the first to examine in detail how DEOs and schools handle their new responsibilities.



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School yard of one primary school visited



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## Roles and challenges of DEOs

### A key actor at local level

DEOs are in charge of the coordination of education matters in the district and implement the policies as directed by the Ministry. **Quality monitoring** remains their core task. It has changed in character, shifting its focus **from 'control' to 'support and advice'**. This has resulted in a positive change in the attitude towards the DEO: principals and teachers no longer look at QASOs (Quality Assurance and Standards Officers) as 'inspectors' whose mission is to find fault, but as 'assessors' or 'advisors'.

While keeping this core mandate, the **scope of DEOs' responsibilities has widened**: they play an essential accounting role in monitoring the use of the school grant by schools; they have responsibilities in teacher management, and organize examinations in their districts.

### Challenges

DEOs however face a number of challenges to exercise these responsibilities with success. They particularly lack adequate **human, financial, and material resources**:

Due to *staff shortages* in the DEOs, especially among QASOs, administrative tasks take precedence over the more important pedagogical work, leading to a lack of systematic follow-up of the quality monitoring visits. In this context, TAC (Teacher Advisory Centres) tutors

are required to take up QASO duties, despite not being fully qualified for the job.

The QASO and zone-level staff field visits are curtailed by a *lack of financial and material resources*. In one of the districts, the financial situation is so difficult that school principals pay the district education staff members for the upkeep of their motorbikes. The expansion of the QASO's mandate to audit the school grants, coupled with their lack of skills in that field, further compromises their role as quality monitors. The DEO also lack funds for staff development programmes, despite the expressed desire for skills training by a majority of staff.

DEOs **lack autonomy** to manage their resources, overall appearing as 'a boss without power'. While every DEO prepares an annual plan with its desired staff establishment, and indicates budget needs, final decisions on the recruitment and deployment of staff, as well as on budget amounts and use, remain decided by the central ministry, with little or no input by the DEO.

The level of involvement of the DEO in *teacher management* is also minimal. The DEO's role in the recruitment of teachers is limited to ensuring that the Teachers Service Commission criteria are adhered to. Other actors in the selection panels, especially from the political class, carry far more influence in the selection process than does the DEO. Regarding the transfers and deployment of

teachers, the DEO can only make recommendations, which are then subject to the approval of the Provincial Director of Education and the Teacher Service Commission (TSC). There is also a lack of involvement of the DEO in the professional development of principals and teachers, whose trainings and workshops are few and sporadic. The DEO is only minimally involved in appraising teachers, since its role is usually limited to the infrequent school supervision visits by QASOs. Teachers are appraised annually by the head teachers, using a form developed by the Ministry, without any input from the DEO.

Finally, the DEO **lacks authority** over the school budgets, for which it plays mostly a monitoring role. It has no say on what the schools receive from the Government, nor any influence on how schools may spend the funds.

Overall, DEOs act more as an **implementing body**, guided by strict Ministry rules, than a strategic actor, shaping policy. The DEO has built up a strong relationship with local authorities, as an advisor on education. However, their inputs into national policy are minimal, and there are few contacts between DEOs and national authorities. This leads some DEOs to argue that decentralization does not amount to much – as they only make minor decisions, whereas the major ones are still made at the central level.

## The use and usefulness of school grants

The **school grants** policy, begun in 2003, was a response to an election campaign promise. It was introduced using the so-called 'big bang approach' and marked the commencement of Free Primary Education (FPE). The policy was introduced to increase the access of all children to quality education. Schools receive funds directly on their bank accounts that they have to manage with some autonomy. One part of these funds is aimed at covering operational expenses, the other part to improve education quality improvement.

### A contribution to increased access to quality education

The research highlighted that several aspects of the design and implementation of the policy contribute to achieving its main objective:

- A **simple per-pupil allocation** (KES 1,020 – \$12) is used, which is easy to implement and should make oversight on the exact amounts received by schools easier.
- The **cash is transferred directly from central government** to the school's account, which helps eliminating leakage.
- The school's use of the FPE grant is controlled by several **Ministry of Education guidelines**, including a circular which indicates in detail what it can be used for. A majority of the school actors interviewed during the research were in favour of these guidelines, an indication that, even in a decentralized set-up, actors at the grassroots can be comfortable with guidance from the centre.

School grants have overall led to **increased access** to education. Children, who were unable to go to school because of the inability to pay fees, are now in school. With regard to **quality**, the availability of teaching/learning resources has improved. The school grant has also **enhanced the participation of local actors at school level**, especially with regard to decision-making, as parents and teachers are members of several committees involved in determining the use of the grant. It has also led to better relationships, with less focus on financial issues.

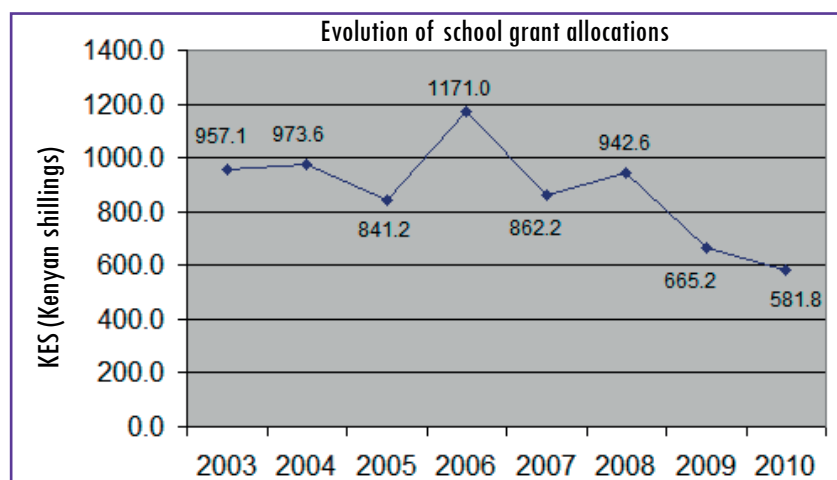
### Challenges to the successful implementation of the school grant

However, a number of challenges related to the design and implementation of this policy constrain the full achievement of its objectives.

**Criteria and mechanisms of grants' distribution:** The funding formula lacks focus on equity.

Because it does not take into account the characteristics of the school and the pupils, it has not helped decreasing disparities between schools. In addition, it puts small less-established schools at a disadvantage. Disbursements are frequently late and inconsistent. Based on a survey of some 150 schools, the grant amount has been reduced rather than increased: it stood at KES 595.1 in 2009, representing an underfunding of almost 40%.

Despite the FPE grant, **household contributions** still represent an important share of the school budget. Their contributions fall into four categories: (1) fees used to employ extra teachers, (2) contributions related to specific projects the school wishes to undertake (e.g. toilets), (3) examination fees paid every term to facilitate assessment, and (4) money paid to teachers for extra tuition given to the pupils. Parents' contributions generate both positive and negative impacts. On the positive side, schools develop infrastructure (e.g. classrooms) as well as employ teachers where there is inadequate staffing. The negative



Example of reduction in size of school grant: evolution of average per capita grant allocation for the 12 schools visited in Kenya as part of the qualitative research

impact is that pupils who are unable to pay are discriminated against – for example, they do not benefit from extra tuition.

At the same time, parents' participation in school management, including monitoring of the grant, suffers from lack of clarity about FPE: many parents assumed that the government would meet all the cost of their children's education, not only tuition fees.

This leads to conflicts between the school staff and parents. The participation of parents in the grant's management is limited to the oversight of the logistics of certain expenditures.

**Schools lack autonomy in using the grant:** Quantitative research revealed under-spending on some of the vote heads and over-spending on others. This led to some frustration among school

actors who regard the process of seeking approval for transfers of unused funds to other budget lines as overly laborious.

**The overall monitoring system is weak:** There is no structured system at school level, while external monitoring by the DEO is hampered by inadequate personnel and lack of finances.

## Policy suggestions

Decentralization succeeds best when the various roles, functions, and responsibilities of the actors are clearly defined and delineated. The MoE should further clarify the decentralization policy, especially the functions to be decentralized, the actors, their roles and the coordination mechanisms between them. If decentralization in education is to render the education system more participative, at both the DEO and school levels, the MoE should foster more consultation with stakeholders.

There may need to be a rethinking of the areas and levels of autonomy of the local actors. Giving the head of the DEO a greater role in the management of DEO staff and in teacher management could lead to more effective monitoring and support. Allowing schools more leeway in the use of the grant funds should lead to its more effective and relevant use.

The MoE should also adequately finance the DEO and the schools, as decentralization is not fully realised when the newly empowered levels are

underfunded. In the case of schools, the grant should be allocated in its full amount. The Government may also consider increasing it in line with inflation. Its implementation could benefit from a disbursement time plan in order to reduce delays.

Lastly, capacity development is key to successful decentralization. Actors at both the DEO and school level decried a lack of training and their subsequent weak efficiency. The MoE should therefore have a structured capacity development programme of actors at the level of the DEO and schools.

## Contact information

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