

Education in Kenya

In Kenya, the school year begins in January and finishes at the end of November. Children can start nursery school at the age of 4 but begin their official primary education in Class 1 when they reach 6 years old. The language of instruction is mainly English, usually the children's second or third language. They also study Kiswahili, the other official language in Kenya. There are 8 years of primary education; Class 1 to Class 8, at the end of which the children take national exams, the Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE), marked out of 500. Their KCPE grades will determine which secondary school they can get into, with the best schools requiring the highest grades (over 400/500). According to recent UNICEF figures only 37% of the poorest 20% of Kenyans achieve a secondary education. Even if some do manage to find sufficient funds to start at a school they often drop out later due to lack of money for fees.

Four years of secondary education culminate in the Kenyan Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams in 7 or 8 subjects. Passes in an appropriate range of subjects enable a student to continue onto further education. Costs vary widely depending on the institution, course or whether the establishment is government or private. Students achieving a B- or above can apply to do a degree in either a government or private university in a wide range of subjects.

In 2003 Kenya's president declared free primary education for all. This led to 1.6 million additional children enrolled in schools, resulting in serious overcrowding, often with 80 - 120 children in a classroom with 1 teacher. In Nairobi's slums, vast numbers of children do not attend school. This is primarily because the slums are "informal settlements" which means they are not officially recognised and enjoy no government services whatsoever. Kibera, the largest slum with at least a million inhabitants, is served by just a few vastly overcrowded primary schools on its outskirts. This leaves the provision of primary education to private initiatives, which can charge more than the average resident in Kibera can afford. In reality even government schooling is not completely free, parents may have to provide a uniform, text books, a desk and basic supplies and even this small amount can be beyond the ability of some families to pay.

Secondary schools are never free except for the fortunate few who manage to get a scholarship to top government schools. €45 -75/month are typical fees at a boarding school in Nairobi. Day schools in the slums are cheaper but it is difficult to study at home with the noise, lack of space and poor, or no, lighting. As a typical labourer might earn €2-3(£2) for a

day's work, a primary teacher's salary €180 (£150) a month and the rent of a single room €50-70 you can see how a family will struggle to keep their son or daughter at secondary school.

A student who runs into arrears with school fees is sent home to get the money owed. Some teenagers work as labourers or housemaids until they have sufficient funds to return to school. Others beg or drop out of education resigned to a life of casual work or, in the case of girls, possibly married to an older man for the Bride Price. 2015 data report 23% of Kenyan women marry or give birth under the age of 18 and 26% of 5-14 years are involved in child labour. Nobody knows how many people live in the slums, but estimates range from 2 –3 million and still growing, as hopefuls from the countryside arrive in the city to look for employment.

Repeated instances of serious drought in parts of the country mean that thousands in the more arid parts of Kenya have lost their livestock and crops. Under these circumstances food prices become subject to soaring inflation, which is also fuelled by the present phase of rapid development of infrastructure in and near the city. Some families move from their rural homes to the city slums specifically to find education for their children. In the slums virtually nobody has regular employment. People scrape a living doing casual work and running small businesses such as hairdressing, carpentry, or buying foodstuffs, timber or clothing and reselling them from kiosks or their home doorway in the streets of the slums. During the post-election violence of December 2007 and January 2008, many of these businesses were looted and burned, and livelihoods destroyed. But Kenyans are hard-working and resilient, and they also have strong family ties. The high unemployment rate (60% among the 18-35 age group) and large numbers of orphaned children mean that the average working Kenyan supports 10 dependents.

Living conditions in the slums are extremely basic. Families of 8 or 10 live in crowded one - roomed homes made of mud, wood and cardboard, with roofs, and sometimes walls, of corrugated metal sheets. More recently, concrete apartment blocks have been constructed in Mathare and Korogocho slums, but like the mud homes they have no running water or sanitation, and a family will typically rent a single room. They cook over wood or charcoal fires in their homes or in the streets, surrounded by rubbish and sewage. When a parent finds work for the day, there is food to eat, but with prices of basic commodities such as rice, maize, beans and cooking oil rising all the time, (inflation in 2017 -9%) their children know what it means to go to bed hungry.



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Officially 8% of Kenyans are HIV-positive, though those in the slums often do not know it until they fall ill with AIDS. Some agencies estimate the figure to be as high as 20%. Basic forms of anti-retroviral medication are available, sometimes at little or no cost, but the good nutrition and clean water essential for a patient to tolerate ARV treatment are often unaffordable to families living in the slums. TB is the number one killer of AIDS victims in Africa. Many children are orphaned in childhood or adolescence, which usually puts a halt to their education. and often leaves them begging for shelter and food from relatives or well-wishers.

Those students who families successfully manage to get them through secondary school often wish to study further but college and university fees are high and places in the popular, well known institutions very competitive. Unemployment figures, among the 18-35 age group, are quoted as being as high as 60%, resulting in young people with secondary certificates or even higher qualifications competing for low paid jobs in supermarkets. However, there are still trades and professions which can lead to a good chance of employment and it is in these directions we encourage our College students to go.

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