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Kenya's Education System: A Review of Past Policies In 1728, Kenyans had access to education, with Swahili missionaries providing evidence of this. CMS missionaries set up one of the earliest mission schools in Rabai in 1846. Before independence, primary education was based on the colonial system. The 7-4-2-3 curriculum was introduced in 1964 and lasted for 20 years. It involved seven years of primary education, four years of secondary education, two years of upper secondary, and three years of university education. This system was adopted by Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania as a single system. However, the 7-4-2-3 policy lacked flexibility to respond to changing aspirations and labor market needs. It was criticized for being too academic, not suitable for direct employment, and promoting elitist attitudes. The policy also failed to address unemployment issues, which worsened with the expansion of education. In response to these criticisms, the 8-4-4 system was introduced in 1985. This system aimed to equip pupils with employable skills, enabling them to be self-employed or secure employment in the informal sector. Emphasizing preparation for self-employment and the world of work, Kenya's 8-4-4 education system was implemented due to three key events: the 1996 Kerich conference on education in Kenya, which highlighted rural development integration; the International Labour Organization's "Employed, Incomes, and Equality" report from 1972; and the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies' recommendations in 1975. The Ministry of Education was rebranded as the Ministry of Basic Education in 1979, introducing a nine-year basic education system with a focus on numeric and literacy skills for the first six years and practical orientation for the last two years. This shift aimed to cater to the growing number of unemployed youth. The 8-4-4 structure consists of primary, secondary, and university levels, excluding preschool years. Most schools are public, operating under the Harambee system, with private schools on the rise. Primary education is partially free, making it reasonably accessible by third-world standards. Secondary school enrollment is lower due to its lack of affordability. Day secondary schools offer partial scholarships, making them more accessible but still expensive for many Kenyans. University and college education have seen the establishment of seven public universities and an estimated 17 private universities, most run by religious organizations. The implications of this system are contentious, with some viewing it as a major educational reform while others see it as devastating. Amutabi (2003) notes that the 8-4-4 system has caused long-term damage to Kenya's education sector, similar to Tanzania's failed Ujamaa program. Critics argue that the system is broad, expensive, and burdensome for pupils and parents. Kenya's education system has a history of challenges since the 2001 strikes and poor quality education. The 8-4-4 system was later changed to be more inclusive, but various commissions' reports were either rejected or partially implemented. The Kamunge Report, for instance, recommended reducing exam subjects under 8-4-4, but this was only implemented in secondary schools. Despite the transition from a colonially inclined theoretical education system to a practical-oriented 8-4-4 system, Kenya's education system still faces significant gaps. The goal of making 8-4-4 education skill-based got lost along the way. A new educational system, 2-6-3-3, might be a solution but it also has its own challenges. In 2017, the Ministry of Education launched the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which is replacing 8-4-4 and aims to reshape education in Kenya. CBC emphasizes developing skills and knowledge and applying them to real-life situations. It focuses on competencies such as communication, critical thinking, imagination, citizenship, learning to learn, self-efficacy, and digital literacy. The study period in higher learning institutions varies depending on the course. Senior school comprises three years of education for learners aged 15-17, laying the foundation for further education and training at the tertiary level and the world of work. CBC is demanding in terms of technology, which poses a challenge to learners, parents, and teachers. The development of Kenya's education system since independence has been marked by various systems, including the 7-4-2-3 and 8-4-4 systems. The transition from one system to another has been met with challenges and gaps in education quality. There was no unified nation, only separate entities coexisting on the same land, with a stratified education system based on racial lines. African education was distinct, blending European elements with local content, reflecting colonial perceptions of African capabilities. This hierarchy was dismantled as nations gained independence, leading to the creation of a single, inclusive educational system. The Ominde Commission aimed to promote national unity and identity, altering history and geography curricula to foster cohesion. The 7-4-2-3 education system, introduced between 1964 and 1985, faced criticism for lacking adaptability to changing aspirations and labor market needs. It was deemed too academic, failing to prepare students for employment, and promoted elitist attitudes that clashed with African socialist values. The Gachathi Report highlighted unemployment as a major concern, prompting calls for policy reform. The ILO suggested increasing vocational training to reduce unemployment, gaining support from the World Bank. The 8-4-4 Education System was introduced in January 1985 as a response to concerns that basic academic education might not provide sufficient skills for self-employment. The system aims to equip pupils with employable skills, enabling school dropouts to become self-employed or secure employment in the informal sector. Key events leading to its implementation include the 1966 conference on education, the International Labor Organization's 1972 report, and the National Committee's 1975 recommendation. The structure of the 8-4-4 System consists of primary, secondary, and university education, excluding pre-school years. Primary Education lasts eight years, with the first three years in mother tongue and English from standards 4 to 8. Most schools are public, run on the Harambee system, and offer free education, resulting in reasonable enrolment levels compared to third-world standards. Secondary School consists of four years, with most schools operating on the Harambee system. Government schools are available, but entrance is highly competitive. Private schools charge high fees and offer British O-levels and A-levels or International Baccalaureate. Enrolment in secondary school is lower due to its non-free nature. University and College Education has expanded since 1970, with seven public universities and 17 private universities established. Most are run by religious organizations, and only a small percentage of children attend university. One reason for the decline is the outflow of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who tend to prefer foreign universities. Additionally, there has been ongoing debate about the effectiveness of the 8-4-4 education system since its introduction in 1985. Critics argue that it has caused devastation and remains a major educational reform in Kenya's history, with some comparing it to the failed Ujamaa policy in Tanzania. The system has been criticized for being broad, expensive, and burdensome, leading to poor quality of education and even strikes at schools. Despite efforts to improve it through various commissions and reports, including the Wanjigi Report, Kamunge Report, Mungai Report, Ndegwa Report, and Kusech Report, many recommendations have been either rejected or partially implemented. The debate over the 8-4-4 system has had a lasting impact on Kenya's education policy, with some commissions making significant contributions to certain aspects of the education system, such as the introduction of technical and vocational subjects in primary schools. Kenyan educational documents reveal insights into the nation's development. The Mackey Report, released by the University and the Government Printer in 1976, offers a glimpse into the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies' (Gathachi Report) recommendations. Another presidential committee focused on unemployment was established between 1982 and 1983 (Wanjigi Report). Meanwhile, research conducted by Simiyu J.W. in 2001 examined factors affecting technical and vocational education in primary schools within the Uasin Gishu district. A more recent publication by Wanjohi A.M., posted on the KENPRO Online Papers Portal in 2011, delves into the evolution of Kenya's educational system since independence.

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