

Ethnicity and Social Inequality: A Source of Under-Development in Kenya

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Abstract: *Despite the persistent contribution of governments worldwide to ensure that there is a balanced socio-economic development in all regions in their countries, social inequality and ethnicity are still rife and embedded in all aspects of social development. However, it is worse in developing countries and in particular, Kenya. Social inequality and ethnicity are visible and noteworthy phenomena in Kenya. It is a product of ethnicity, which is a state intervention that directly affects social development of a country. It manifests itself in social welfare, health, education, social security and social institutions. It greatly affects equal distribution of national resources and provision of essential services to the people in promoting development. In most regions of the country ethnicity has brought about regional imbalance in terms of distribution of national resources, which has negatively affected socio-economic development of the country. Academic evidence from various studies done in other parts of the world and particularly in Kenya on social development, have consistently implied a dialectic connection between ethnicity and social inequality. This paper is a culmination of a critical review of various studies carried out by other researchers and the authors and seeks to specifically interrogate how social inequality is a manifestation of ethnicity in Kenya. Thus, leading to unequal distribution of the country's resources, leaving some communities marginalized for the rest of their lives. The paper also analyses how ethnicity is perceptible in politics, impacting negatively on social development. The paper recommends that the concerned stakeholders should devise ways of reducing social inequality by balancing social development in all regions in the country. This can be done by employing a macro-policy redistributive framework to improve the distribution of resources and increasing the ability of the poor to access those resources, besides capacity building and strengthening the county governments on devolution to adequately address grassroots problems affecting people.*

Keyword: Ethnicity, Social inequality, Education, Socio-economic, Health, Kenya

1. Introduction

Despite the persistent contribution of governments worldwide to ensure that there is a balanced socio-economic development in all spheres in the society, social inequality is still rife and embedded in all aspects of social development. However, it is worse in developing countries and highly manifested in ethnicity. There has been a down-sizing of governments and a marked trend toward privatization of many functions formerly within the public domain. To varying degrees, many countries have experienced a shift from centrally planned and regulated to market-dominated economies [1]. A 2010 UN report indicates that Kenya has improved in its ranking on the Human Development Index from 147 in 2009 to 128 in 2010, the highest ranking in East Africa. However, it ranks poorly on the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index that measures inequality. As a result, Kenya drops from the middle Human Development level to the lower Human Development level. The report further shows that 83% of Kenyans suffer and/or are vulnerable to multiple deprivations including education, health and access to land thus, widening the gap of social inequality [2].

According to [3], in developing countries particularly Sub-Saharan Africa they are currently confronted by many socio-political and economic maladies. Many of these negative forces have reshaped people's lives and the manner in which institutions respond to their needs. In Kenya, historical data suggests that public resources such as education facilities, health facilities and services, water, land, employment opportunities and amenities such as shelter, electricity, fuel, and physical infrastructure have tended to be distributed to

the elite and those close to political power [4]. Ethnicity and social inequality are not only recent phenomena in Kenya; it was also endemic in the colonial age in most African countries. For instance, in many occasions, African social interaction in urban colonial settings was characterized by ethnic rivalries. Reference [3:57] asserts that:

People of different ethnic groups and cultures met for the first time. Some of these contacts culminated in ethnic feuds which were 'ironically' quelled by the white settlers. White settlers also established bodies such as the tribal elders' system to enforce law and order as well as manage conflicts between the natives. For instance in colonial Zambia on the Copper belt, there was hatred and fighting between different ethnic groups and killings as gangs Ofyowig men prowled around the mining compounds making it unsafe for people to appear outside their homes after dark.

Since independence, Kenya remains a dual economy with wide disparities in economic, social and infrastructural development across regions [5]. The slow rate of economic growth that Kenya has experienced has limited resources available for development in sectors such as education among others [6]. Socio-economic predicaments have exceedingly been manifested in other aspects such as social welfare, education, health and poverty. For instance, economic growth has largely continued on the lines set by the earlier colonial structure and Kenyanisation has radically changed the racial composition of the group of people in the centre of power and many of its policies, but has had only limited effect [7]. Dragged down by extreme social inequality, differences in regional and/or geographic well-being quite often coincide with ethnic identities as ethnic

groups often reside in specified geographical regions in the country.

Since Kenya's independence in 1963, efforts were made to subordinate ethnicity to nationhood, which was cultivated in the hope that it would erode and in due course replace ethnic inclinations. This is because ethnic attachments were perceived as divisive and contrary to the nation and national building [8]. However, the state of affairs was rife with ethnic division and political games that widen inequality gap among different ethnic groups in the country. The political party Kenya African National Union (KANU) was formed by and consisted mainly of Luo and Kikuyu forces creating a network from which to gain power. To counter what many saw as a power grabbing attempt by the two most prominent ethnicities in Kenya, the minority groups formed the political group Kenyan African Democratic Union (KADU) in 1960 [9]. This group was formed on the basis of regionalism with the premise that devolution of power from the major ethnic groups to the various regions would redirect power away from the Luo and Kikuyu so other groups would have a chance to gain influence. The leaders of KADU were purposefully stoking the fears of ethnicity in order to gain power.

Majority of the land confiscated from the British was granted to the Kikuyu for resettlement. However, the then President Jomo Kenyatta seized the opportunity to strengthen his network of allies and reward them rather than benefit Kikuyu and Kenyans as a whole. As such, Kenyatta's affiliation as a Kikuyu meant that the distribution of resources focused mainly on traditionally Kikuyu regions. This asymmetric distribution of resources built resentment and created infrastructure inequalities within the country and the initial victims became the perpetuators of the structural violence [10]. Furthermore, the way in which Kenyatta formed the nation was ill equipped for national pride when Kenya had a chance to come together under the banner of independence and his policies only aggravated alienation of the members of different ethnic affiliations. Since then there have regional disparities in terms of distribution of resources, which have been further aggravated by negative ethnicity.

There is scant knowledge on the extent of social inequality among different ethnic groups in key sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure and policy institutions in Kenya. The few comparative studies on social inequalities and ethnicity do not articulate adequately the implication of negative ethnicity on social inequality and its impact on social development of the country, but give a general overview of large differentials in the sectors. It is against this background this paper interrogates how social inequality is depicted and manifested in ethnicity. The paper gives further a detailed account of aspects such as resource distribution, infrastructure development, governance, education, and healthcare system on social development. The paper begins by conceptualizing social inequality, ethnicity, and delves into an overview of social inequality and ethnicity in African countries with a particular interest in Kenya, the empirical exploration of its relevance to the Millennium Development Goals.

2. Methodology

This paper uses a desk review research design to critically review various studies on ethnicity and social inequality. The paper also analyses how ethnicity is perceptible in politics impacting negatively on social development in the country. How ethnicity causes social inequality which leads to regional imbalance in distribution of national resources to various sectors of the economy leaving some communities in Kenya marginalized for the rest of their lives.

3. Conceptualization of Social Inequality and Ethnicity

3.1. Social Inequality

The term social inequality describes a condition in which members of a society have different amounts of wealth, prestige or power. According to Davis and Moore, some degree of social inequality is found in every society. When a system of social inequality is based on a hierarchy of groups, social scientists refer to it as stratification: a structured ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal economic rewards and power in a society. Functionalists claim that inequality and stratification is functional for society and a source of social order. For Davis and Moore, stratification is a system of status positions and jobs. The society is therefore, a functional necessity. People in society work together for the common good of all, this is known as the organic analogy. All societies are unequal and inequality of whole groups in the social structure is known as stratification. They believe that stratification is good for society and the best people get the best jobs because they are more talented and work harder. Poor people are poor because they do not work hard enough for the best positions [11].

In advanced industrial societies, much rhetoric and social policy have been directed against economic and social inequality everywhere with us. The human condition has so far been a fundamentally unequal one. Undeniably, despite such efforts the brute facts of poverty and massive inequality are still in societies and have been characterized by inequalities of some kind, with the most privileged individuals or families enjoying a disproportionate share of power and prestige [12]. According to [13], the egalitarian policies of state socialism demonstrate that substantial reductions in inequality are achievable through state-mandated reform, particularly during the early periods of radical institutional restructuring. It is nonetheless possible that such reform was pressed too far and many of the internal, systemic problems of Marxist societies were the result of inadequate motivational arrangements [14].

As reference [14] notes, the socialist commitment to wage leveling made it difficult to recruit and motivate highly skilled workers, and the 'visible hand' of the socialist economy could never be attuned to mimic adequately the natural incentive of capitalist profit-taking. These results lead to the neo-functionalist conclusion that successful incentive systems involve motivating the best qualified people to seek the most important positions in the society. The key components of stratification systems are; the

institutional processes that define certain types of goods as valuable and desirable; the rules of allocation that distribute these goods across various positions or occupations in the division of labor and the mobility mechanisms that link individuals to occupations and thereby generate unequal control over valued resources. Inequality is produced by two types of matching processes, which include the social roles in society are matched to reward packages of unequal value, and individual members of society are then allocated to the positions so defined and rewarded.

According to this paper, social inequality refers to the ways in which socially defined categories of persons according to age, gender, class and ethnicity are differently positioned with regard to access to a variety of social 'goods' such as the labor market and other sources of income, education and health care systems, and form of political representation and participation. The idea that social inequality spurs conflict leading to under-development dates back at least to Thomas Hobbes and Karl Marx. For instance, the resurgence of violence and conflict in Syria, Mali, and Egypt and the obstacles that many countries of the Arab Spring face in consolidating democracy have led influential commentators to emphasize the difficulties associated with ethnic and often religious fractionalization [15]. In Kenya, social inequality is characterized by the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within various communities.

From the poverty point of view, [16] believed that social inequality produces psychosocial stress which leads to deteriorating health and higher mortality over time. People living in areas with low infrastructure investment experience poor health, resulting to higher mortality. The effects of income inequality spill over into society causing stress, frustration and family disruption which increase the rate of crime violence and homicide. Quite often, it is the poor who are exposed to dangerous environments who often have stressful, unrewarding and depersonalizing work, who lack necessities and amenities of life and who, because they are not part of mainstream of society are isolated from information and support. This is depicted in the Kenyan society, particularly in ethnic groups from the north and north-eastern region, which are marginalized and do not get a fair share when it comes to the distribution of national resources.

3.2. Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to some form of group identity. Ethnicity applies to a group of persons who accept and define themselves by a consciousness of common descent or origin, shared historical memories and connections [17]. Ethnicity can be broken into two components, which are *Instrumental ethnicity* (this emanates from material deprivation), and *symbolic ethnicity* (based on the anxiety to preserve one's cultural identity). In extreme situations, the two strands of ethnicity can combine and serve as a motive force for state formation [18].

Ref [19] perceives ethnicity as a negative force and asserts that it is utterly destructive to civil society, undermining a country's morality and flouting the rule of law. On the other hand, [20] takes a more optimistic view by linking it to

political processes. He point out that, despite the persistence of ethnic conflicts in the politics of all African states, significant liberalization and democratization are possible. One reason is that the nature of ethnicity in most African states is instrumental rather than primordial. Reference [21] points out that 'minority at risk' are a communal ethnic group that is experiencing political or economic discrimination, and also taking political action in support of collective interests. Africa has the largest share of the population consisting of 'minorities at risk' in the global sample. Indeed, a few African countries such as Burundi, Chad and South Africa are in the anomalous condition of having the whole population belonging to 'minorities at risk'.

4. The Extent of Social Inequality and Ethnicity in Kenya

Social inequality is not only the income gap between the upper and lower class. It involves differences that exist in terms of access to education, health, employment and infrastructure development, political rights and representation. In Kenya, ethnicity seems to thrive in chaotic socio-economic and political environments. This is in concurrence with [38: 80] who opines that:

'Ethnicity is a jinx in Kenyan political and economic development...the ethnic mistrust aggravated during and after independence has had severe socio-cultural, economic and physical ramifications to the Kenya society'.

As discussed earlier in this paper, many problems currently besieging the Kenya and Africa as a whole emanate from the wanton exploitation by imperial European nations of the region's human and natural resources for more than four centuries who also perpetuated ethnicity in these countries. According to [3], this exploitation and subjugation still continues today although in a more understated and refined way and even though political or 'flag independence' has been attained, there has been insignificant progress in areas of socio-economic emancipation particularly in regions where ethnic animosity is highly experienced. Many different conceptual approaches have been used to understand the diverse influence of race/ethnicity on development [22], [23], [24]. Until recently, the most common approach was to compare race/ethnic groups on such outcomes as school achievement, academic motivation, mental health, and problem behaviors [25] with little or no attention to possible mechanisms and experiences that might underlie such differences.

Studies such as [26] have shown that social inequality and ethnic diversity are particularly deleterious when wealth is unevenly distributed across ethnic or religious lines. For example, inequality in income along ethnic lines is likely to exacerbate the salience of group identity, limit social cohesion by increasing between-group animosity, impede institutional development, lead to state capture, and spur conflict. Additionally, income differences across ethnic groups in Kenya are often both the cause and the consequence of discriminatory policies including the unequal provision of public resources across regions in the country.

4.1 Education

The Kenyan government's investment in education has increased since independence, this is in terms of real expenditure, and the percentage of government spending allocated to education. However, equity is still an issue, as indicated by the Kenya Country Report [27] and the Education For All (EFA) Assessment Report [28]. Regional disparities in development have spilled over to the education sector. Available data and information on the trends of education in Kenya from the ministry of Education and other reports shows that enrollment levels have been highly influenced by colonial policy on development. There are large regional differences in access to primary education and in the quality of primary education. Unequal distribution of resources has seen certain regions in Kenya benefit more from development than others [29]. Access to infrastructure and social amenities as well as access to educational amenities were and still are distributed along colonial administrative divisions, with communities in the more endowed regions such as Nairobi and central Kenya benefiting from the proximity to these facilities.

However, access to education in Kenya has slightly improved. Enrolment in learning institutions is one measure of access to education. Pre-primary gross enrolment rate in Kenya increased from 52% in 2002 to 59% in 2007. Primary school enrolment increased from 77% to 92% during the same period, while completion rate increased from 57% to 75%. Secondary school enrolment increased from 18% in 2002 to 24% in 2007, while completion rate reduced from 92% to 88%. The transition rate from primary to secondary education improved from about 42% in 2002 to about 60% in 2007. However, the transition rate from secondary to university education declined from 6% in 2002 to 4% in 2006/2007 [30]. The authors observe that as much as there has been slight improvement of education in the country, the quality of education offered particularly in most public primary and secondary schools in most regions throughout the country is low. This is due to inadequate teachers, lack of/poor learning facilities and poor transport networks for teachers and children to attend school.

Even with the introduction of Free Primary Education, transitional rates from primary to Secondary level are still wanting. Social inequality has a colossal bearing on access to education. High social inequality levels also negatively impact on transition to secondary school and tertiary education. In higher institutions of learning cost sharing policy means that many students have had to look for income generating activities to supplement their costs of living. Unequal access to all levels of education is a manifestation of the educational system in Kenya. This has led to the deepening regional, class and gender differentiation in the country [30].

Ethnically sidelined groups in Kenya perform poorly when it comes to education. For instance, students from the north and north eastern region who qualifies to public universities are 1% combined compared to other regions like Nairobi and Central Kenya. This is attributed to poor education infrastructure in these areas, the nature of environment these children are brought up, lack of resources to sustain them in

school and exposure to the outside world. Similarly, in her study in the UK, [31] found unarguable the link between class and attainment. She studied nearly 11,000 children born from March 3 to 9, 1958. Mathematics, reading and other ability tests measured the educational attainment of the children at ages 7, 11 and 16. At the age of 33 their highest educational achievement was recorded. The study found the gap in educational attainment between children of higher and lower social classes widened as time went on and was greatest by the age of 33.

In Kenya like other countries in the world, at university level, social inequalities still have an effect on the academic performance and progress among students. The rich parents are more likely to lead to a student taking up post-graduate studies than unlike their counterparts from low class. In the UK for instance, [32] found that only 35% of candidates from semi/unskilled manual class origins applied to a Russell Group university (one of the top 100 universities in the UK), in contrast to 65% of those from rich and professional backgrounds. [33], conducted research on links between higher education and family/ethnic background, focusing particularly on the experiences of two cohorts of individuals born in 1958 and 1970. They claim that links between educational achievement and parental income/social class strengthened during this period. Despite some improvement in education sector, in Kenya, regional disparities in primary and secondary school enrolment exist. For example, marginally discriminated regions such Northern and North Eastern provinces have the lowest enrolment and completion rates of primary and secondary education.

4.2 Health and Infrastructure

Health inequalities are evident in people of different socio-economic groups/class. People in lower socio-economic groups/class are more likely to experience chronic ill-health and die earlier than those who are more advantaged. In Kenya people in rural areas are more affected due to lack of well sustained health infrastructure. Additionally, various governments that have been in power since independence have been favouring certain regions of the country on ethnic grounds. This is manifested in health infrastructure thus, increasing the social inequality gap. According to [1], social inequalities in health refers to avoidable disparities in health or its key determinants that are systematically observed between groups of people with different levels of underlying social privilege that is wealth, power, or advantage. [34] asserts that distribution of health facilities and personnel in Kenya is a major cause of the health inequalities we observe at the national level. Reference [35] observes that since independence some parts of the country have remained without healthcare facilities such as dispensaries. Until the year 2003 when the NARC government came into power and introduced Constituency Development Fund, which enabled initiation of health projects in every constituency.

Health inequalities are aggravated by unequal distribution of resources particularly in rural Kenya and other regions such as the pastoralist communities due to weak political representation in parliament and poor implementation of national policies aimed at promoting development in these regions. Most of these regions in the country have been

faced by poor infrastructure such as poor roads and health facilities. Reference [34] demonstrates that areas that have comparatively higher disease burden or higher morbidity rates are not necessarily the ones that receive higher public health spending. According to [4], besides lack of good roads, helping the community becomes more expensive and in fact, sometimes inexistent making them inaccessible to better ideas on how to give a better care to their products. The authors argue that social inequality and ethnicity can result in non-income disproportions in health outcomes, undermining efforts in poverty reduction in Kenya.

4.3 Governance, Power Resource Distribution and Insecurity

In Kenya like many other parts of the world, some minority ethnic groups dominate and control resources and economy of the country. Patterns of unequal access to resources are evident in many regions of Kenya and have widened social inequality gap. This means social inequality is produced by the society in which people live. For instance, the Gikuyu community is dominant in every sector of the economy in Kenya and control sizeable portion of resources. This concurs with [36] who found that in several parts of the world a small ethnic minority controls a sizeable portion of the economy and exerts disproportionate political influence. For example the Gikuyu in Kenya, the Igbo in Nigeria, white minorities in South Africa, Lebanese groups in many parts of Western Africa, Chinese minorities in the Philippines and other East Asian countries and small Christian communities in Arab countries.

The minority groups which have connection with those in power amass disproportionate wealth and power. They use it to alienate other communities from the mainstream society. For instance, in Kenya, as many believe that some minority groups such as the Gikuyu and the Kalenjin politically and economically hold the most power, albeit all Kenyans are supposed to have access to power through the democratic process, which according to [37], other ethnicities never have the chance to obtain power and many view the 2007-2008 elections as a time where their voices were not heard despite the existence of democratic process in the country. This is similar to [36] who studied ethnic tension in reference to minorities that are dominant in the market in countries with a democratic system. Grounded in her memories of her Chinese Filipino aunt being murdered by her chauffer, she argues that there is a connection between markets, democracy and ethnic hatred as seen by the increased episodes of protest following American attempts to open up the global market.

More important however, this paper observes that the domination of minority communities in power do not give much consideration to balanced development in all regions in the country. This has led to the manipulation of state institutions giving rise to rampant corruption, social inequality, ethnicisation of state institutions, absence of accountability and generalized impunity granted to the power elite. Thus, people from the isolated regions feel that the development is applied in a discriminatory manner and that they are abandoned and unprotected.

5. Implications of Ethnicity and Social Inequality

Growing social inequality and ethnicity is emerging as one of the biggest challenges and root causes of underdevelopment in Kenya. From the foregoing discussion, ethno-regional disproportions created by the colonial and the early post-colonial periods are still predominant in Kenya, creating social inequality and disadvantaging other regions of the country. Besides, the Kenyan government approach to social policy is not wholistic and is de-linked from socio-economic growth and development strategy. The policy has neither minimized ethnicity in sectors such as education, trade, health among others nor inequality leading to non-state actors such as Civil Society Organizations and private sector to provide some services to supplement those provided by the Government.

The social inequality and ethnicity we experience in Kenya is not beneficial to the economy but instead affects social stability, suppresses expansion of the lower and middle class and the country's economic growth and development potential. Kenya should work on a strategy (*such as devolution and embrace it and discourage nepotism*) that discourages negative ethnicity and social inequality and pursue equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity throughout the country. As UNDP report indicates, reducing social inequity is not only an ethical, but also a political and economic imperative [37].

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ethnicity is a major aspect that causes social inequality in the Kenyan society. This is manifested in patterns of social stratification which divides society into unequal strata along ethnic lines. Social inequality is a social problem that is evident in various dimensions such as in power, wealth and distribution of resources, occupations, educational attainment, policy formation, and social reforms. The effects of ethnicity on social inequality is a double-edged sword, it is epitomized with negative effects such as exacerbated corruption, marginalization and unequal distribution of national resources.

It is noteworthy to observe that Kenya has for a long time been subjected to guided democracy, that is, a democracy that borders on authoritarianism and the perpetuation of the interests of the minority [38]. Kenya's 2010 Constitution marks the end of a dark age and opens up a new conduit for Kenya's political and socio-economic development platform for social change. However, while it provides for radical changes in the running of the affairs of the country and gives greater say and participation to communities through the devolved system, new avenues for marginalization and regional disparities may emerge. Therefore, they should be discouraged through an all inclusive county governance structures and avoidance of vices such as corruption and nepotism.

A colossal glamour of a devolved system in Kenya is its promise to bring about equitable distribution of national resources to the grassroots and therefore, address socio-economic inequalities that were inherent in a centralized

system of governance for many years. Over and above, this paper recommends that the concerned stakeholders should devise ways of reducing social inequality by balancing social development in all regions in the country. This can be done by employing a macro-policy redistributive framework to improve the distribution of resources and increasing the ability of the poor to access those resources, besides capacity building and strengthening the county governments on devolution to adequately address grassroots problems affecting people.

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Author Profile



Mr Peter Oino is currently pursuing a PhD in Anthropology and Human Ecology in Moi University, Kenya and holds a Master of Arts in Sociology (Community Development & Project Management)-Egerton University, A Diploma in Project management -KIM, and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Anthropology-Moi University. He works in Ex-street Children Community Organization as a Programme Officer and has several years working with rural and urban vulnerable communities. He is currently a part-time Lecturer, in Maseno University and Kisii University and a Part-time Consultant in Centre for African Development Research Network (CADRN) and Technical Consultant for Roundlake Investment LTD. He is the founder (2011) and Programme Director of Genesis of Development Foundation. GDF is a national NGO that works with vulnerable groups (children, Women and Youths) in Kenya. Besides charity work, he also enjoys doing research and publishing.



Dr. Felix Kioli holds a Masters degree in Anthropology from the University of Nairobi, Kenya and, PhD in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Kioli was awarded PhD scholarship by the Indian Council for Cultural Studies from 2005 – 2009. Kioli has been involved in several Joint research projects including The Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (2010) on Cholera as well as involvement as a member of the working group of the BSU Platform for Stability, Democracy and Rights, collaboration between Maseno University and Universities Denmark. He worked on a Gender book project successfully with OSSREA, Ethiopia in 2012. Kioli has been a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Maseno University from 1999 to the present. Kioli is the former Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Maseno University, Kenya. He is currently a Senior Lecturer and the Dean of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in the University. He has been a consultant on Gender and Family issues for several organizations including the Family Planning Association of Kenya, and Child Fund – Kenya. He is currently a board member of The Gender Institute, Maseno University. He has successfully supervised over 10 Masters Students and is currently supervising 6 MA and 4 PhD Students. He has participated in numerous Professional Development courses.