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**Higher Education as a Catalyst  
in Attaining Millennium Development Goals in Kenya**

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# *Higher Education as a Catalyst in Attaining Millennium Development Goals in Kenya*

## **Table of Contents**

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Review of status of Millennium Development Goals in Kenya .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1. Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger .....	4
2.2 Achieve Universal Primary Education .....	5
2.3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women.....	5
2.4 Reduce Child Mortality .....	5
2.5 Improve Maternal Health.....	6
2.6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases.....	6
2.7. Ensure Environmental Sustainability .....	7
2.8 Develop a Global Partnership for Development.....	7
<b>3. The Attainment of Millennium Development Goals and their significance to Higher Education.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Higher Education Development to Attain Millennium Development Goals.....</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1 Rationale for change of strategies .....	8
4.2 Role of Higher Education Institutions .....	9
4.3 Review Political and Development Agenda .....	10
<b>5. Responses of Higher Education Institutions to Challenges Preventing Achievement of Millennium Development Goals.....</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1 Insufficient Funding.....	11
5.2 Quality Assurance.....	11
5.3 Inconsistent Development Policy .....	12
5.4 Inadequate Legislative Framework .....	13
5.5 Limited Knowledge Transfer.....	13
<b>6. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>15</b>

## 1. Introduction

In September 2000, building upon a decade of major United Nations conferences and summits, world leaders came together at United Nations Headquarters in New York to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets - with a deadline of 2015 - that have become known as the Millennium Development Goals. (United Nations, 2008b) The rationale behind the initiative was that ultimately the effects of underdevelopment of one country or a part of the world would directly or indirectly affect even the most developed or more cautious countries. The initiative has a multisectoral implementation strategy and structure executed at different levels.

The Millennium Project was commissioned by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2002 to develop a concrete action plan for the world to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people. In 2005, the independent advisory body headed by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, presented its final recommendations to the Secretary-General in a synthesis volume "Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals."

While it may be of interest to explore the various themes or goals in broader terms, this paper seeks to address the effect of the attainment or lack thereof of the goals on research in higher education and inversely the significance of higher education to the attainment of the goals. The paper will concentrate on two of the goals that are important to its conclusion. The first is the goal to attain primary education for all pupils by 2015. In order to make comparison of the current position and the possibility of attainment, we look at the case of Kenya, the ongoing initiatives, challenges and resultant implication to the quality of research in higher education. The Second key goal of interest is poverty reduction through global partnership. Poverty seems to be found as a reason for most of the challenges the MDGs are trying to address, they seem to be manifestations of poverty. At the inception of the MDGs the current UN Secretary General said the following in his speech

"Eradicating extreme poverty continues to be one of the main challenges of our time, and is a major concern of the international community. Ending this scourge will require the combined efforts of all, governments, civil society organizations and the private sector, in the context of a stronger and more effective global partnership for

development. The Millennium Development Goals set time bound targets, by which progress in reducing income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion — while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability — can be measured. They also embody basic human rights — the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter and security. The Goals are ambitious but feasible and, together with the comprehensive United Nations development agenda, set the course for the world's efforts to alleviate extreme poverty by 2015." (United Nations Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon)

In most third world countries and especially in Africa, Governments need to divert almost all of their available resources to make changes that are necessary for the attainment of even one of the goals. The developing countries' economies, for example are not strong enough to support recurrent expenditure of universal education together with further costs necessary to attain the other MDG,s without becoming permanently indebted to the so called development partners. This in turn creates a cycle of dependency and string of Countries beheld to foreign debt. In seeking to break the cycle of dependency I propose that the enthusiasm for primary education be tempered with a concomitant ratio of attention to higher education.

## **2. Review of status of Millennium Development Goals in Kenya**

### **2.1. Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger**

The main indicator used to determine eradication of poverty and hunger is employment, however, employment may not be a good indicator for eradication of poverty because most of the jobs do not pay enough to make a change in the lives of the people. According to the fact file on the MDGs on the UN site, in Sub Sahara Africa about 50% of the jobs earn less than \$1 a day.

The food prices in Kenya have increased over the last five years and have even gotten worse in the last two years. Food security remains a challenge particularly amongst the rural population with 4 Million Kenyans currently at risk of hunger. This negatively impacts the attendance of secondary and primary schools in areas that are seriously affected. In the long term this translates to bias against the marginalized communities' participation in Higher education. Furthermore this could discriminate against access by some bright students hence lowering the potential intellectual pool of students joining the higher education institutions. Kenyan has the potential to provide food security for her people however the paradox of hunger caused by both delayed rains and floods may need to be solved first.

According to the MDGs fact file, the potential of people facing hunger may have reduced based on governmental intervention, however this is only notable in Asia and specifically East Asia. In Africa little or nothing has been done to reduce the affected persons, the projected world reduction is therefore as a result of Asia. Furthermore the increase in food prices internationally has worsened the situation for Africa countries reliant on aid to feed its vulnerable population.

## **2.2 Achieve Universal Primary Education**

In 2003 the government declared free primary education that would entitle all children to primary education. Whereas this was commendable, it put such a huge strain on the facilities given the additional increase of pupils by over 120% in just under two years. All factors being equal, this would mean that the number of spaces available in the higher education needs to double, but the factors are not holding constant, it is projected that more students will qualify for admission into the university, based on the past trends. This would therefore demand for even more than double the spaces. There is also the need to consider preparation and availability of the additional academic staff.

## **2.3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women**

Kenya performs minimally in the indicators used to determine the attainment of this goal. The women representation in the parliament is 7.3% equal only to Somali in the region while Rwanda, also within the region has 48.8% women representation, which is also the highest in the world. Other neighboring countries have double or triple the Kenyan representation. However in the industries and even in middle level management positions within higher education institutions, there is a marked presence of women. However there is a lot of room for improvement with only 3 women Vice Chancellors from a total of 24 Vice Chancellors in the country.

## **2.4 Reduce Child Mortality**

The world figures on child mortality have generally reduced, however for sub Saharan Africa; the trend is still most unpredictable given the inadequate preparation of the people against the extremities of nature. More children die from conditions aggravated from natural disasters like floods, drought or manmade like political or economic conflicts. A challenge in monitoring this indicator is the cultural practices of not recording deaths of children below 5years old. Presently Kenya has about 10% mortality rate of children below 5years.

This goal remains attainable but requires political goodwill and some input on research of local inexpensive interventions by the higher education institutions in ways to mitigate against the natural disasters and inhygenic living conditions.

## **2.5 Improve Maternal Health**

Kenya experiences about 560 maternal deaths per 100,000 women annually, its reduction to a third before 2015 is well within reach, but gains made must be defended even as ways to reduce the number are sort. A key part is the availability of antenatal care which provides opportunity to forestall whatever problem that would result to death during or as a result of child bearing. Globally antenatal care is improving and so it is in Kenya but more can be done like utilizing the traditional birth attendants in situations where the people may not access healthcare, and by them monitoring the expectant mothers and referring potentially difficult cases to the hospitals.

The fertility among adolescents has also reduced over the years partly due to discouraging teenage girls from being married off to older men. This still has some challenges in areas where traditions and culture are still strong, however progress is being made to reverse the trend. By development of the higher education, to enroll more students and hence increasing the chance for the girls to be professionals provides opportunities for them to be self sufficient and not rely in traditions which exposes them to risk. The changing lifestyles from the rural to urban and the resultant demands have also lead to increased family planning hence reduced exposure for the women. While this trend has been opposed and still is opposed by conservative religious groups and some politicians, the continued increased cost of living makes it prudent to control the number of children a family gets.

## **2.6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases**

This seems a greater challenge than can be imagined within the Kenyan context. Greed and corruption has compromised the supply chain of drugs that even essential drugs once acquired by the central government agency responsible, filters through to private chemists for personal gain. Recently Kshs 100 Million funds, given by the Unites States of America meant for purchase of HIV drugs was misappropriated, while it may be the work of individuals it indicates the values representative of the government and its systems. Malaria still remains a big threat particularly for children, since to address it full requires multisectoral engagement which is a challenge in the current coalition arrangement. There is the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Public Health and Medical Services headed by different Ministers from different coalition partners who had different party manifestos.

## **2.7. Ensure Environmental Sustainability**

Presently the government has taken bold initiatives in making environment concerns a priority. The challenge is the complications arising from ill conceived historical decisions. This has presented difficulties particularly when the only decision in favor of the environment would be a total reversal but which would mean the end or total alteration of peoples life style. The higher education institutions have the opportunity to develop curriculum that incorporates environmental concerns within the various disciplines

## **2.8 Develop a Global Partnership for Development**

There are various regional and global partnerships for development on going in Kenya. Examples include Africa Trade and opportunities Act which is an initiative of the United States and which targets the agriculture sector. Agriculture is the largest foreign earner and largest employer in the Kenyan economy. Then European Union is the main supporter of the marketing of Kenya as a tourism destination and tourism is the second largest sector of the Kenyan economy. However the trade imbalance between the country and the developed counterparts is greatly in favor of the developed countries. Through joint endeavors with industrial companies with research capacity, higher education institutions could contribute in making the country a source of affordable skilled labour.

## **3. The Attainment of Millennium Development Goals and their significance to Higher Education.**

In most Kenyan families, education consume nearly a quarter of a family's income paying not only for tuition, but also indirect fees such as textbook fees, compulsory uniforms and other charges related to development of the school. Countries such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania Uganda and have abolished school fees, which has led to a surge in enrollment. In Kenya, enrollment of primary school children increased dramatically with 1.2 million extra children in school in 2003 alone; by 2004, the number had climbed to 7.2 million, drawing on the experience of African countries that have eliminated school fees, UNICEF, the World Bank, USAID and a range of partners are helping to develop a "How To" guide for countries seeking a breakthrough in universal basic education by abolishing school fees to develop educational systems that are inclusive, equitable and sustainable. But ending school fees is no magic wand: the surge in enrollment after fees abolition brings immense challenges to the entire learning infrastructure, from the physical building, the class size, to the teachers.

The interest and great development potential of the primary and secondary level of education gives an indication of the high potential of the higher education institutions that still remain untapped. We can see that development of the base that is to feed into the higher education institutions has great potential and a lot of room for improvement. Success of attaining this goal portends greatly for the growth of the higher education system. Indeed the attainment of the goals automatically attributes growth for the higher education sector. However for the attainment of Millennium Development Goals and development of Higher Education has to be simultaneously. A sum improvement of the goals will translate to improvement of the higher education sector and a sum improvement of the higher education sector would contribute to attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

In advocating for the higher education institutions and particularly the universities to be more involved with the general development of the Nation as a whole, care must be taken to maintain administrative distance from the government to ensure that the the institutions maintain autonomy to be able to pursue its academic mandate. As discussed by Derek Bok (1982) 10<sup>th</sup> Ed pp61 – 65 , the functions of a multiversity requires a comprehensive definition within the context of its operation to make it understood well, perform ultimately and utilize the full potential of collaboration with other institutions.

## **4. Higher Education Development to Attain Millennium Development Goals**

### **4.1 Rationale for change of strategies**

The development in Kenya situation is bad and intervention is necessary, however the strategy that depends on increased external intervention does not offer a comprehensive solution. The achievement of indicators of particular objectives does not necessarily mean achievement of development. (e.g. the universal primary education). Comprehensive development ensures that the country has the ability to invent and implement its own successful strategies (tools of development) which are used to achieve the objectives. What will happen to the secondary school infrastructure with the increased primary enrollment once the pupils complete? The aided form of development is similar to the celebration of procreation by animals in the zoo, while primarily they are successful in bringing forth new members of their species, the caretakers have to be on hand for their every other need to ensure their survival. However compared to the animal in the wild whose every development stage is full of uncertainty and relies on instinct in its most basic form to move from one stage to the other, once they overcome challenges, they learn from the



experience and develop the ability to face recurrence of the challenge or develop courage to face other problems. Likewise the challenges identified as the Millennium Development Goals need to be tackled and resolved through the individual country's initiatives that are home grown.

It is also my considered opinion that if the goals were to be prioritized, it would present a more focused approach and hence effective strategy. The objectives should be sequenced from the one that would positively influence the rest to the one that is most specific. The Less Developed countries LDC s in general and Kenya in particular would be able to concentrate their resources in achieving each goal and have the opportunity to develop systems, structures and values that would make attaining the others the more easier and sustainable.

#### **4.2 Role of Higher Education Institutions**

The opportunity to invent, learn, experiment and implement the tools of development cannot be logically separated from the process of determining development. An example in the case of universal primary education (goal number II), its attainment should indicate the development of systems that collect and analysis demographic data and trends to guide the planning and provision of services for the future. In Kenya there are unique parameters that need to be addressed before even the goals are considered a primary objective. From the twenty (20) targets of all the Goals, sixteen (16) are directly influenced by research and development. This provides an approximate 75% effect on the MDG,s if the higher education system and institutions were used as the implementation structure.

The attempt to find workable solutions by the countries through their higher education systems would spur research and development not only in the higher education institutions but also amongst the industry and the MDG,s would be achieved as a result. The role of industry needs to also be increased in higher education and particularly in research and development. There should be closer collaboration in research not only with local higher education institutions, but also with multinational companies with the view of developing viable solutions locally to reverse the challenges. This would not only be cheaper due to the affordable local labour but also result in greater stimulus for development. This paper strongly advocates for the focus to be on the activation of the research and development within the higher education institutions as the main strategy of achieving the goals. This would have the unstated benefit of the country having a more educated population, once the effort of rediscovering the universities role to uncover solutions for the country.

### **4.3 Review Political and Development Agenda**

To the UN credit it has appreciated the uniqueness of each region and has formed teams to deal with the regions within the parameters. Kenya falls under the Africa Steering Group which was convened in September 2007 and brings together the leaders of multilateral development organizations to identify the practical steps needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals in Africa. The Group is chaired by the United Nations Secretary-General and comprises the President of the African Development Bank Group, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, the President of the European Commission, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, the President of the Islamic Development Bank Group, the Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the President of the World Bank Group. However development is not an exact science of inputs and outputs, it involves intricate social interactions between the people and the environment. The situation sometimes seems to suggest and rightly so that MDGs though noble are really a preoccupation of the developed countries. Some of the pointers to this include but are not limited to the fact that, even after ten years of existence there are no books by independent scholars in the various fields about the MDGs phenomenon in relation to the professions. There is a lot of literature on studies carried out and presentation of data but all have or share a common source, if not directly from the UN. This presents a top bottom approach which alienates the largest a majority from the whole process. All the data from Kenya is attributed to UN reports or by teams under its employ. The Kenya government seems to have accepted and interacts with the MDGs at discursive level, as a way of engaging the development partners and not primarily to see the implementation. Indeed in 2008 the government launched the country's new blueprint for development called Vision 2030, it alludes to in passing the MDGs but has overlapping objectives. Is it that the government wants to own the process of development or it does not view the MDGs as attainable? Both could be true, the current coalition government seeks both moral and legal legitimacy and would like to be seen as the originator of the major development initiatives. This could also be said of most LDC,s governments who get to power in less than democratic processes and whose survival is dependent on perception rather than substance. The Kenyan government and her people need as an urgent matter to delink development issues from the intrigues born from political exegesis, especially the twin evils of corruption and tribalism. A case in point, would be the glossing of figures and data which would show the government in good light or create positive impressions e.g. the indication of a positive economic growth yet the situation on the ground is different (the government claims a growth rate of 6% last year yet it was one of the hardest years for Kenyans after post election violence that left about 1300 people dead and 300,000 internally displaced people)

## **5. Responses of Higher Education Institutions to Challenges Preventing Achievement of Millennium Development Goals.**

### **5.1 Insufficient Funding**

The greatest challenge facing higher education development is insufficient funding to enable increased research. However it also provides an opportunity for the growth and development of research in higher education. By seeking innovative funding approaches the higher education sector is evolving to an autonomous status compared to the traditional system where the government funded all higher education activities. The Kenyan public universities have responded to this challenge by introducing module II programmes which similar programmes are offered for the students whose tuition fees are subsidized by the state. There is also an emergence and rapid growth of private universities to cater for the high demand of higher education.

Although the funding challenges are viewed in regard to the curriculum structures that are based on the developed countries technical level, there is need for the higher education institutions to consider the local context. In order to attain the Millennium Development Goals, the higher education institutions need to research and develop solutions based on local resources and that address local problems. This is not only within the natural sciences but also the social science and humanities, need to engage in research of the countries historical identity and formulate a contemporary identity that is not defined or dependent on the developed countries identity.

The sobering concern of funding is its potential effect on accessibility of higher education, particular in the current trend where higher education is progressively being considered an individual investment and not a public good. The Kenyan higher education institutions together with the government should prudently seek the appropriate middle ground that makes higher education sustainable yet accessible to all.

### **5.2 Quality Assurance**

The high demand for higher education and the response by both public and private higher education institutions calls for mechanisms that would ensure maintenance of quality of education offered by the higher education institutions. The difficulty and ambiguity of the term quality notwithstanding, when used in its broad sense of suitability, then the higher education offered by the institutions need to be suitable to the needs and demands of the country and in this regard, the needs would be attainment of the MDGs. There is the Commission for Higher Education which grants charters and ensures quality is maintained by the institutions, However as the Commission

exists through an Act of Parliament it finds itself restricted in its limits of operation to engage with the ever changing field of higher education. It is no secret that some of the academic staff's qualifications in Kenya are below satisfaction level yet pressed with the demand for higher education the authorities are in a dilemma, of whether to institute the stringent measures of minimal qualifications and reduce the opportunities or to go on and hope that ultimately the forces of demand and supply will settle the quality concerns to an optimum level.

### **5.3 Inconsistent Development Policy**

When the country gained independence in 1963, the founding president and his government committed themselves to a development strategy that was based in fighting three issues; hunger, through increased agriculture production; disease, through improvement and increased Medicare; and illiteracy, through provision of education. Education is and has always been achieved through long term policies, the current education system in Kenya takes 16 years to complete. 8 years in primary, 4 years in secondary and 4 years undergraduate, previously there it was 7 years in primary, 4 years in secondary, 2 years in higher secondary and 3 years in undergraduate until 1988/1989. The emphasis during the previous system was on producing graduates who specialized in particular fields and the differentiation started right from secondary where the choice of school determined which area one concentrated, whether pure sciences, humanities or vocational training. The current system's hallmark is in its generality, students get to learn a little of everything with specialization coming later on in the higher education institutions. The change was meant to produce self sufficient students able to engage in income generating activities within their localities. This was upon the government's realization or rather experience with unemployment when graduates completed their studies. The thinking feeding the decision then was that the graduates had been taught and prepared for employment and were not able to therefore adapt to the challenges of unemployment. It has taken almost 20 twenty years for the higher education institutions, the various employment organizations and the whole country to settle.

The government under pressure from the development partners, specifically the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, concentrated on development of primary education at the expense of the development of higher education between 1980 and 1990. There were other institutional inconsistencies that further aggravated the situation but these systemic inconsistencies had a huge impact on the development of higher education, or lack thereof, and the development of the country as a whole.

The higher education institutions have since development Visions and Missions for their institutions and work on termed strategies to keep focus on their objectives and purposes. The

reduced financial dependency on the government has further granted institutional autonomy to the higher education institutions. Unfortunately on the systemic level, a development policy on education and higher education specifically is none existence. Whether this is appropriate for the current situation where each issue is handled as it gets urgent or whether an overall plan covering all the issues is a matter of management approach and style. A fact that remains is the frequent change of development policies of higher education or lack of any at a systemic level portends ill for the overall development of the Country as well.

#### **5.4 Inadequate Legislative Framework**

Once all the plans and strategies have been put in place, there needs to be a legal framework that ensures that they are implemented and that those that defy them bear the consequences. The legal framework needs to indicate freedoms and responsibilities of the institutions as well as the obligation and direction of the higher education system and government.

The individual universities existed and were managed according to various Acts of Parliament; however there is currently a draft legislation that will bring the universities under one Act which will give a coordinated approach to higher education. Concurrently there is increased attempt by the universities within East Africa Community to standardize regulation and requirements as a guide to the higher education institutions. This has the benefit of holding individual institutions accountable and at the same time establish traditions of best practices.

#### **5.5 Limited Knowledge Transfer**

The higher education institutions need to take advantage of the various levels of internationalization to ensure maximum knowledge transfer. It is prudent to utilize information that is already available than to engage in initiatives to produce the same. This knowledge transfer should not only be limited to academic pursuit but also on management and development principles from those institutions that are more developed or have a different experiences. Furthermore this knowledge transfer should target both institutional and system level. Presently there are initiatives between a number of universities like Daystar University in Kenya has academic interaction and exchange with Messiah College of USA, Nottingham University in UK, Kosin University in South Korea, Potchefstroom University in South Africa and Maastricht University in the Netherlands among others. It is my considered opinion that the government at a systems level should also understudy a number of economies with characteristics similar to Kenyans and learn of any worthy knowledge to guide Kenya's decision and strategies.

## 6. Conclusion

The overall objective and key achievement of the Millennium Development Goals are similar to those of higher education institutions viewed in the broad sense. The Millennium Development Goals aim at achieving better living conditions for all persons. The general functions of a university are to teach, carry out research and provide necessary knowledge to benefit the society. The functions attributed to universities provide an implementation interphase of attaining the MDG,s. However the critical challenge is in transforming the perspective of academics and administrators, to reconcile this within the operations of higher education institutions. As written by Slowey (1995, p. 23) " As an academic, the primary focus of intellectual concern is discipline – centered, but as a manager or change agent, the academic discipline becomes secondary....Charged with implementing change the academic as manager must redefine his or her role." while Slowey writes specifically about individual institutional change, the principle remains the same when the function of being change agent is projected to the entire system.

As alluded to in the above excerpt and as intended by its authors, attainment of MDG,s has to assume a multi disciplinary approach. The Kenyan government as well as all others should engage the various professionals in finding solutions to attain MDG,s within each field of specialization. The final success will not be attributed to one specific strategy or organization, yet for the goals to be attained, no sector, least of all that of higher education can be excluded. The universities have already indisputable reputation as change agents and initiators of development. Whereas the universities have in their history perpetrated mistruths in ignorance, they remain the custodians of liberty and freedom of humanity. Through their contribution the universities are far better equipped by its character to oversee true liberation of humanity from hunger, disease, poverty and oppression.

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