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Kilifi grapples with education woes

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 Residents and students of Magarini constituency during the launch of the campaign against teenage pregnancy last week. INSET: Kesho Kenya Executive Director, Evans Odhiambo. Photo/MANUEL NTOYAI

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County now tackling teenage pregnancies, holds sensitisation meetings to fight negative cultural practices that frustrate learning

Barry Silah and Murimi Mutiga @obel_barry and PeopleDailyKe

Kilifi county, which over the years has been ranked as one of the areas with the highest illiteracy levels in the country, is now addressing the causes of mediocre education standards.

Some of the challenges include negative attitudes towards schools, poverty, teenage pregnancies, the impact of quick money from tourism and unhelpful cultural practices.

As a result, while the national literacy rate is estimated at 78.7 per cent according to Unesco, Kilifi has an adult literacy rate of about 42 per cent. "Out of 10 adults in the county, half are unable to read or write because traditionally, not much value has been attached to education," says Kesho Kenya Executive Director (a non-governmental organisation) director, Evans Odhiambo.

The biggest concern is the lack of a sustainable transition plan for school leavers. About 52 per cent of Kilifi county residents have a primary level of education only. Most students abandon or abscond school mainly due to poverty.

"We have participated in many campaigns led by the government for local parents to enrol their children in secondary schools. As a result, secondary school enrolment last year rose from 12,000 in 2017 to 22,000 out of approximately 32,000 candidates," says Odhiambo.

However, transition rates from secondary level to tertiary institutions remain low because attainment grades are poor. Odhiambo bemoans the situation as dire as most students end up being jobless because of poor Form Four grades.

Since the girls are most affected, Odhiambo's organisation, through the Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu project, has a programme targeting 72,000 girls in primary school to complete their current phase of education and achieve improved learning outcomes and transiting successfully to the next phase. The project covers 556 schools in eight counties funded by UKAid under the Girls' Education Challenge fund.

Kenya Primary Schools Heads Association Kilifi branch chairperson Margaret Ngalla says the problem is mostly a mind-set issue which ought to be addressed in different light. "It is about educating our people to discard traditional practices and embrace education as a life saver," she says.

Lazy parents

Ngalla says the association is proud to witness positive steps being taken by the national and county governments as well as non-governmental organisations in tackling challenges facing the area's education sector.

"Parents know full well what it means to deny children their rights which results in poor academic performances," she says.

Emmanuel Mbaji, a scholarship beneficiary, who now runs his own green energy enterprise, believes for a poor county, more bursaries should be provided. "There needs to be a model that favours struggling counties, for example through legal amendment. We should not always depend on donors although they are doing a good job," he says.

Sensitisation workshops with parents and village elders have seen different remote spots visited all in a bid to understand the challenge afflicting the sector. NGOs also work with security teams to address vices associated with idle youth.

However, a teacher from Rabai sub-county bemoaned the laxity by parents to play effective roles. "Parental support remains low. They are not really as involved in the progress of their children which in turn affects school and individual performance. We give homework but children do not do it because of lack of supervision at home, which results in indiscipline," he says.

Meanwhile, the Kilifi county government has launched a month-long campaign against teenage pregnancies. The campaign dubbed '*No to teenage pregnancies, let me be a girl and not a mother*' targets teenagers, motorcycle riders, parents, teachers and local leaders.

Kilifi Deputy Governor Gideon Saburi says the initiative aims at finding the root cause of the menace, which has affected about 17,000 young girls. "There are people who are greedy and love minors, some of the perpetrators do it to girls who are at the age of their grand daughters," he said.

A 17-member taskforce formed by Kilifi governor Amason Kingi will be going round the villages to talk to victims and parents so as to understand the

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