RISE Political Economy Country Brief

Rationing Learning: The Politics of Denying Access to Secondary Schooling in Tanzania

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About this country brief

The RISE Programme is a seven-year research effort that seeks to understand what features make education systems coherent and effective in their context and how the complex dynamics within a system allow policies to be successful. RISE had research teams in seven countries: Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Vietnam. It also commissioned research by education specialists in Chile, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, and South Africa.

Those researchers tested ideas about how the determinants of learning lie more in the realm of politics and particularly in the interests of elites. They focused on how the political conditions have (or have not) put learning at the center of education systems while understanding the challenges of doing so.

Each country team produced a detailed study pursuing answers to two central research questions:

- Did the country prioritise learning over access, and if so, during what periods?
- What role did politics play in the key decisions and how?

The full studies detail their analytical frameworks, their data, and sources (generally interviews, government internal documents and reports, and other local and international publications), and the power of their assessments, given their caveats and limitations. Country briefs extract from the full studies how leadership, governance, teaching, and societal engagement are pertinent to student outcomes.

Introduction

The explicit and implicit policy objectives of Tanzanian policymakers have not always been supportive of universal access to education and improvements in learning outcomes. In the first 15 years of independence, Tanzania rationed access to both primary and secondary education instead opting to train a small section of the population that would provide the skills for socialist development. In the mid-1970s, political pressure and the need to orient the education system toward producing manpower for socialist agrarian development forced the government to adopt universal primary education (UPE). Yet it still rationed access to secondary and tertiary education, preferring to have the private sector meet some of the demand.

Economic crises in 1980s led the government to reconsider its commitment to UPE and ongoing expansion of access to education. The result was a stagnation of UPE gains, as the government introduced fees. The economic crises of the 1980s forced the government to liberalize the economy, opening an opportunity to reevaluate the goals of education. The government settled on a new view of education: it should be universal and of higher quality, have greater academic (as opposed to practical) content, and be open to the highest level. Multiparty politics added strength to this emerging consensus with stunning results. After four decades of rationing access to secondary education, the government committed itself in 2005 to universal secondary education and within a decade-built thousands of schools, more than quintupled enrollment, and increased the rate of transition from primary to secondary school from less than 20 percent to almost 80 percent.¹

Four phases of political settlements

Since independence in 1961, Tanzania has experienced four phases of political settlements (table 1). The first phase (1961–67) was marked by the total dominance of the ruling party, TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) under the leadership of Julius Nyerere. Within TANU, different factions jostled for power and influence along two main cleavages. The national-local cleavage was a frontier of contests between national leaders and local elites (including bureaucrats) who dominated the productive sectors of the economy and the architecture of local government.² The ideological cleavage pitted populist/modernist African nationalists against those who espoused different shades of socialism.³ The African nationalists included upwardly mobile economic elites in both urban and rural areas and the small bureaucratic cohort inherited from the colonial era.

However, residual tension existed between the ideological aims of Nyerere and the party and their practical implementation through the state bureaucracy.⁴ Consequently, Nyerere had to balance TANU's impulses of rapid and intense reforms with the realities of an increasingly flagging economy under the weight of policy missteps and a worsening global economic environment. The economic crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s would fundamentally alter Tanzania's political settlement.

Nature of political settlement	Key features of the education system	Predominant objectives of schooling
Party-based pragmatism 1961–67	Modernization: Limited expansion of primary and secondary schooling; Deracialization and curriculum reform; Swahili as the language of instruction in primary schools	Limited skill development to Africanize bureaucracy; Identity formation and molding of loyal citizens; Universal adult literacy
Nyerere-dominated (Ujamaa) socialist developmentalism 1967– 74	Education for self-reliance (ESR): Primary education as a terminal tier; universal primary education (UPE); Mitigating regional disparities in education attainment; Secondary school rationing; School self-sufficiency and integration into host rural communities; Emphasis on practical skills	Agrarian rural self-reliance; Universal literacy for socialist development; Prevention of rural- urban migration; Participatory socialist development
Early reformist era 1974– 94	Structural adjustment of education: Introduction of school fees; greater acceptance of private secondary education; Initiatives to reform the education system; Reorientation of the goals of education away from socialist developmentalism	Skill development for a liberalizing economy; Preparation for higher levels of education
Competitive authoritarian politics 1995 onward	Unrestricted mass education: Universal primary and secondary education; Competency-based curriculum; Basic education as preparation for higher levels of education	Skills development for an open economy; Improved learning outcomes; Maximum transition to higher levels of education

Table 1 Political settlements and education policy in Tanzania

In 1985, Nyerere resigned as president and was replaced by Ali Hassan Mwinyi, ushering in the third historical political settlement. The Mwinyi era was marked by both political and economic transitions. On the political front, the hold of the CCM (Chama Cha Mapinduzi, Party of the Revolution) on state policy and popular mobilization was weakened. As in much of Africa at the time, popular pressure (partially inspired by the end of the Cold War) forced CCM to reintroduce multiparty politics in 1992 ahead of the 1995 general election. These shifts were reflected in moderate improvements in democratization. On the economic front, Ujamaa policy missteps, a drought in the late 1970s, the war with Uganda in 1979, and a global economic crisis jointly precipitated a severe contraction of the economy.

While the economic crisis and declining per capita income began under Nyerere, they accelerated under Mwinyi, forcing his administration to seek external help. Tanzania's first structural adjustment program (SAP) started in 1986 in parallel with the 1986–89 Economic Recovery Program (ERP). Nyerere had successfully tried to avoid foreign help. Yet while Mwinyi prevailed on this matter and the undoing of many Ujamaa policies, he remained beholden to interest groups within CCM that opposed his liberalization agenda. The reform process stalled

during his second term in office, and it would take until the latter part of the 1990s for Tanzania to experience a full recovery from two decades of economic stagnation.⁵

The present political settlement, which began with the presidency of Benjamin Mkapa in 1995, reflects CCM's position as a hegemonic party in a competitive authoritarian system.⁶ The effects of the re-introduction of multiparty politics have been twofold. First, while the party has yet to face a credible threat of losing elections, the mere existence of contested elections and the demands of campaigns created incentives for CCM politicians to implement broad programmatic policies geared toward maintaining the party's hold on power.⁷ CCM's sensitivity to public opinion and demands for public goods and services have been important drivers of policy choices by successive governments. Second, economic liberalization in the 1990s created enormous opportunities for rent-seeking and personal enrichment among CCM elites and their allies in the private sector. Importantly, the intra-CCM distribution of power has been such that no individual or party could dominate state affairs as Nyerere did (perhaps with the exception of the brief tenure of the late President John Magufuli (2015–20). Instead, under both Mkapa (1995–2005) and his successor Jakaya Kikwete (2005–15), corruption has emerged as an important source of resources fueling intraparty factional conflicts.⁸

Education policymaking

Under colonial rule, Africans were largely restricted to a "practical/manual" curriculum (with heavy emphasis on agriculture), while non-Africans had a standard academic curriculum.⁹ This enabled a small set of Africans to access higher education, while broadly signaling a commitment to education as a means of escaping rural poverty and manual labor. The government's objective was to train a small number of highly skilled Africans who would guide Tanzania's developmental agenda. Inaugurated in 1967, Education for Self-Reliance (ESR) was a policy response to the fact that in the late 1960s Tanzania was an agrarian economy with limited prospects for formal employment in the urban areas. Therefore, to limit rural-urban migration and boost agricultural productivity, the government sought to use the education system to improve productivity in practical skills relevant to the countryside, especially agriculture and other menial jobs.

In 1974, a TANU conference in Musoma adopted the "Musoma Resolutions" which, among other things, called for the expansion of secondary education and UPE. The government ignored the former and accelerated the latter. This policy choice was partly driven by the government's recognition of the lack of wage-earning career opportunities for secondary school graduates. As part of UPE, the government categorized primary schooling as a terminal tier of education designed to produce self-reliant agrarian workers. This effectively stifled demand for secondary education, above and beyond the supply-side rationing by the government. To alleviate some of the demand for secondary education, the government allowed the growth of private schools and the potential inequalities they generated, despite having nationalized schools in 1969 to ensure equitable access. For example, by 1974 only 11 percent of primary school graduates transitioned to secondary school—with 29 percent of them attending private schools. Just over a decade later in 1986 and following the implementation of UPE, the transition rate had dropped to 7 percent, with 51 percent of students attending private secondary schools.

Political and economic reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s altered the policy landscape in the education sector, as reforms negated the ideological basis of education policymaking. The re-

introduction of multiparty electoral politics strengthened voters' potential influence on education policy. And retrenched state involvement in the economy (which began in the 1980s) removed the government's justification for rationing access to higher levels of education in the context of a planned economy. Since then, Tanzania has seen tremendous improvements in both primary and secondary school enrollments, as well as higher transition rates from primary to secondary school.

These investments have been partially driven by political elites' electoral objectives. Facing increasingly competitive elections, CCM has over the last 30 years revised its education policy, effectively ending the implicit policy of rationing access to education beyond primary school and the explicit commitment to a "practical" curriculum for rural self-reliance. In addition to the domestic dynamics, education policy in Tanzania has also been influenced by foreign ideas and actors. Bilateral and multilateral donors had funded most of the development spending in the education sector for the first 20 years of independence. And global compacts such as the Millennium Development Goals influenced the timing of the government's renewed investments in UPE in the early 2000s and universal secondary education after 2006.

The official objectives of schooling and the state's administrative capacity determined the extent to which the education system delivered on learning outcomes. Functional literacy was important, but only to the extent that it provided pupils with the means of learning how to increase their agricultural productivity. Usefulness to the local community, and not learning as a ladder to higher education, was the goal.

The emphasis on agriculture and the dim prospects of advancing beyond primary school created strong disincentives against investing in academic learning outcomes—and the effects persist to this day. In 2019, Tanzania's net enrollment ratios in O-levels and A-levels were 6.9 percent and 3.3 percent, respectively. The high pent-up demand has meant that government policy is still predominantly focused on increasing the rates of schooling—especially as electoral pressure has forced the ruling party to stop rationing access to higher education. For example, between 2005 and 2010 the government more than quintupled access to secondary education through school construction amid declining learning outcomes. And throughout this time, the government maintained a commitment to Swahili as the language of instruction in primary schools and English in secondary school and onward, despite the fact that this policy has been linked to poor learning outcomes.¹⁰ Here, too, the government subordinated learning outcomes to the overriding goal of nation-building through its use of Swahili as the language of instruction in primary schools.

Implications for schooling and learning

Different eras of political settlements in Tanzania influenced policymaking in the education sector differently.

Modernization for development

Under the first postcolonial political settlement, TANU elites under the leadership of Nyerere initially sought to advance a rapid developmentalist agenda (through modernization) while mobilizing popular support for it. The predominant objectives of the education system included limited skill development for Africanizing the state bureaucracy, deracializing schools and the

curriculum, and nation-building through the promotion of Swahili as the language of instruction in primary schools.

These policies were popular with the general public. Under colonial rule, the education system had been segregated along racial lines (Africans, Europeans, and Asians) with pupils attending different schools with different curricula. While European and Asian pupils were exposed to an academic curriculum, the colonial administration insisted that African pupils should concentrate on a more "practical" curriculum suited to rural life or menial jobs in the urban areas.¹¹ The effect was that very few Africans qualified for education beyond a few years of primary school. Consequently, there were very few qualified African professionals at independence in either the private or the public sector.

The official goal during this period was not universal access to education.¹² Instead, the education system focused on training a finite number of professionals who would enable the government to Africanize the public sector in anticipation of using the new human capital to drive its developmental and nation-building agendas. Because of the acute shortage of skilled African labor, the government abolished secondary school fees in 1964, albeit without investing in or encouraging the construction of new secondary schools. At the time, total secondary school enrollment was just 20,000 across fewer than 40 schools. In parallel to these efforts, the government boosted adult literacy through several annual literacy campaigns.

In a speech unveiling Tanzania's First Development Plan in 1964, Nyerere argued for a carefully planned expansion of education, with the goal of education being to equip Tanganyika with the skills and the knowledge which is needed if the Development of Tanganyika is to be achieved. Priority was to be given to adult education since, in his view, the returns to educating children would take long to materialize. Nyerere also signaled that he understood the need to expand secondary and technical education. But in the same part of the speech, he emphasized efficiently using Tanzania's meager resources, observing that children entering university this year will still be at university in 15 years' time! As such, there was a need to prioritize teacher training, educating an optimal number of secondary and university students, while rationing overall access.

These choices had consequences. First, both primary and secondary school enrollment increased only moderately during this period. Second, despite the structural selectivity imposed by the dearth of secondary school spots, a significant number of students failed O-Level examinations. The high failure rate was partly attributable to the quota system, which, while meant to mitigate regional disparities in education attainment, had the net effect of admitting weak students from less well-off parts of the country into secondary school.¹³ As a result, the government's struggle to find enough suitable professionals to Africanize its ranks continued into the late 1970s.¹⁴

Education for self-reliance

By the mid-1960s, it was clear that the policy of modernization for development was not working. Furthermore, following the Arusha Declaration pronouncing Tanzania as a socialist state (1967), it became necessary to re-orient the education system to meet the government's new goals. It was under these circumstances that Nyerere announced the Education for Self-

Reliance (ESR) policy in 1967. The two key educational tenets of ESR were as follows. Both primary and secondary school were to be terminal tiers of education and not viewed as preparation for higher education. And schools were to become self-sufficient and embedded in their host communities, with students spending considerable amounts of time on the development of practical vocational skills for rural development (especially in agriculture).

ESR also had explicit political objectives. Through the use of Swahili as the language of instruction and general political education, Tanzania was to avoid subnational centrifugal challenges and create loyal and self-sufficient citizens. Similarly, the emphasis on agriculture was a direct admission that the urban sector was not generating enough nonagricultural wage jobs. To have a firm control over the implementation of ESR, all schools were nationalized in 1969.

As with the earlier modernization policy, the government struggled with implementation. Its policy directives were typically general, leaving a lot of discretion to subnational authorities. Until 1972, local governments were in charge of the basic education system, had elected officials, and could raise their own revenue through taxation.¹⁵ They could thus subvert the top-down policy directives or innovate during implementation. This created the distinct possibility of reproducing existing subnational disparities in educational and economic outcomes. To avoid this, the government abolished the local government system and replaced it with regional administrations. The goal was to rationalize the allocation of scarce resources for development and to have the regions (instead of smaller sub-regional units) better coordinate the implementation of national government policies, including ESR.¹⁶

By the mid-1970s, popular pressure forced a re-think of the key planks of ESR. Following a meeting in Musoma, TANU issued the Musoma Resolutions, which were meant to strengthen the implementation of ESR. They included a call for universal primary education (UPE), a deemphasis of examinations as a means of evaluating students, a call for work-oriented education with emphasis on practical skills, and the need for A-level graduates to perform one year of national service, be gainfully employed for a number of years, and get recommendation letters from TANU (or the Afro-Shirazi Party in Zanzibar) before admission to university.¹⁷ Primary school enrollments increased considerably after 1974 before plateauing in the early 1980s. Crucially, the policies of rationing secondary schooling and maintaining primary school as a terminal tier of education remained in place. So, the rate of transition to secondary school plummeted between 1970 and 1985. Nyerere was candid about the rationing of education access beyond the primary level:

"Primary school education is indeed what we mean by education in Tanzania. Postprimary education is that which will prepare a few qualified individuals for those special kinds of service which need more training. It cannot be more than that while our National Income per head is so low."¹⁸

This was not cheap talk. Access to secondary education was restricted across the board regardless of class status—a reality that continues to this day among Tanzanian adults. On education attainment (secondary education or higher) by income quintile, Tanzania lags both Kenya and Uganda. For perspective, the share of Kenyans in the bottom quintile with a secondary education is higher than that of Tanzanians in the top quintile.¹⁹ This is suggestive

evidence of the resounding outcome of Tanzania's early post-colonial history of rationing access to secondary and higher education.

Given the government's unwillingness to invest in post-primary education, the private sector stepped in (mostly at the secondary school level), and for much of the 1970s, each year saw a larger shares of primary-school leavers attending private schools.

This was an obvious failure of the policy to limit the reproduction of subnational class-based differences in education attainment. In 1986, "Kilimanjaro Region [had] only 11 percent of all government schools in the country, but no less than 34 percent of all registered private schools."²⁰ Two leading objectives of ESR were the promotion of agriculture and rural self-sufficiency and the mitigation of uncontrolled rural-urban migration. But for much of the first three decades of independence, Tanzania's per capita agricultural production either stagnated or declined. And the 1970s saw high rates of urbanization (starting from a low base).

Structural adjustment of education

Nyerere left office amid a severe economic crisis, which impaired the government's ability to provide essential public goods and services, including education. Reflecting these realities, the government effectively accepted the role of private schools in bridging the gap to secondary education and eventually introduced school fees in primary schools in 1984.²¹ As expected, the introduction of fees eroded the enrollment gains from UPE. Crippling budget constraints meant that further expansion of public secondary education would wait for nearly two decades. In the meantime, private secondary schools accepted a majority of Form One students—thereby registering an uptick in the transition rates from primary to secondary school.

An important policy shift took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Previously, the dominant faction among Tanzanian elites had largely viewed education through a political lens. But a new conceptualization emerged with education viewed less as a mechanism for macro-social transformation and more as a technical process of exposing students to the right skills and attitudes.²² This mental shift and the increasing openness to policy influence from foreigners led the president to establish a National Task Force on Education to plan for Tanzania's education system in the 21st century. The outcome was the Education and Training Policy (ETP) published by the Ministry of Education in 1995.

The ETP acknowledged that "despite the rapid expansion of the education system over the last three decades in Tanzania, human resources remain seriously underdeveloped." The policy further noted that the economic reforms that began in 1986 necessitated restructuring the education system. The most important features of the new policy were the express acknowledgement of the need to make access to basic education a right of every child and that both primary and secondary education are supposed to prepare students for higher education. The ETP thus set the stage for the education policies of the last two decades.

Delivering mass education amid increasing electoral competition

The last 25 years have witnessed rapid increases in access to both primary and secondary education. After 2000, primary school enrollments more than doubled, while secondary school enrollments quintupled. The period also saw the end of rationing secondary school access. The

government built thousands of secondary schools after 2005, greatly improving the transition rate to O-levels.

What drove these gains? First, the advent of multiparty politics created electoral incentives for expanding access to basic education. Indeed, the secondary schools conceived as an electoral promise ahead of the 2005 elections and designed to rely on the capacity of local politicians and bureaucrats to mobilize resources for school construction.²³ Second, the emergence of global compacts such as the Millennium Development Goals created clear targets for the government and unlocked international financial support—especially for primary school access. Second, improvements in lower levels of education have had a ratchet effect on demand for higher education. Unlike the 1970s, when the government could invest in UPE while rationing access to secondary education, that strategy is politically untenable in the current political environment. Indeed, the success of UPE in the early 2000s forced the hand of the government to accelerate the expansion of secondary schooling. Similarly, increased secondary school enrollments continue to create demand for tertiary education—a fact that is reflected in the ongoing expansion of the tertiary sector.

Learning outcomes have been a casualty of the recent expansion in access to primary and secondary education. The government has found it difficult to train teachers on time and to effectively fund and monitor school operations. Between 2010 and 2014 learning outcomes plummeted. And while they have since improved, it is unclear whether this was due to an actual improvement in the quality of education or a mere reflection of the design of examinations. Second, the transition from O-levels to A-levels remains shockingly low, given the longstanding policy of having secondary school be a terminal tier of education, only a sliver of Tanzanian students are able to advance to A-levels and after that to university.

Annex 1 Indicators of learning for RISE countries

A country's learning adjusted years of school combines the quantity and quality of schooling into a single indicator by multiplying the estimated years of schooling by the ratio of the country's score on the most recent test scores harmonized to 625 (World Bank data for latest year of assessment).

Learning poverty, a combined measure of schooling and learning, is the proportion of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank data for 2019).

The Human Capital Index is the amount of human capital that children born today can expect to acquire by the age of 18 given the prevailing risks of poor health and poor education. It combines the likelihood of surviving to school age, the amount of school they will complete and the learning they'll acquire, and whether they leave school ready for further learning and work. For example, a score of 0.5 means that they will be only 50 percent as productive as they might be with complete education and full health—and that their future earning potentials will be 50 percent below what they might have been.²⁴

	Learning	Learning poverty	Human Capital
	adjusted years	(%)	Index (0–1)
	of school		
Chile	9.4	27.2	0.7
Egypt	6.5	69.6	0.5
Ethiopia	4.3	90.4	0.4
India	7.1	56.1	0.5
Indonesia	7.5	52.8	0.5
Kenya	8.5	—	0.5
Nigeria	5	—	0.4
Pakistan	5.1	77	0.4
Peru	8.6	44.4	0.6
South Africa	5.6	78.9	0.4
Tanzania	4.5	—	0.4
Vietnam	10.7	18.1	0.7

Note: - = not available.

¹ RISE Tanzania study.

⁵ Kjaer 2004.

⁷ Habyarimana, Opalo, and Schipper 2021.

¹⁰ Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004.

² Picard 1980.

³ Samoff 1994.

⁴ Kiondo 1989.

⁶ Morse 2014; Paget 2019; Collord 2021.

⁸ Gray 2015.

⁹ Coulson 2013.

¹¹ Coulson 2013.

¹² Samoff 1979b; Carnoy and Samoff 1990.

¹³ Cooksey 1986.

- ¹⁴ Block 1982.
- ¹⁵ Semboja and Terkildsen 1994.
- ¹⁶ Samoff 1979a; Mbilinyi 2003; Therkildsen 2000.
- ¹⁷ Ishumi 1984; Biswalo 1985; Carnoy and Samoff 1990.
- ¹⁸ Nyerere 1982, p. 30.
- ¹⁹ RISE Tanzania study.
- ²⁰ Cooksey 1986, p. 185.
- ²¹ Carnoy and Samoff 1990.
- ²² Samoff and Sumra 1994.
- ²³ Habyarimana, Opalo, and Schipper 2021.
- ²⁴ World Bank Human Capital Index for September 2020.

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