

Decision-making. Teachers' unions have a better understanding of what happens in schools

Teachers key in crafting of educational policies

Wilson Sossion



Many countries around the world are in lockdown, leaving schools closed.

While we now know that the impact of the coronavirus is far-reaching, what this exactly means in the longer term for education is not known. However, we have a rough idea of what effects the Covid-19 pandemic could have on the current education system.

For a while now, educators around the world have been talking about the need to rethink how we should educate future generations — post-Covid-19 education. This pandemic might be the disruption that the education sector needed to make us rethink how we should educate our children, and question what we need to teach and what we are preparing our students for.

So, as educators grapple with the reopening of schools so as to make up for the lost time, this is an opportune time to reflect on how the disruptive Covid-19 crisis can help us redefine our education system, how the process should be carried out, and more importantly, who should be involved in restructuring the antiquated system.

Admittedly, in a matter of months (six months), the new coronavirus has changed how students are educated around the world.

These changes give us a glimpse on how education in Kenya could change for the better — and the worse — in the long term.

Closing of schools, colleges and universities as a risk-control measure indeed led millions of students into temporary 'home-schooling' situations.

Innovative ways

These changes have certainly caused a degree of inconvenience, but they have also given birth to innovative ways of learning, which Kenyans should take advantage of and inculcate in its education system.

Although it is too early to judge how Covid-19 will affect education systems around the world, there are visible signs that suggest that the infernal pandemic could have a lasting impact on the trajectory of learning innovation and digitisation.

Although the ministries of Education and Health in partnership with line agencies have issued protocols on reopening of schools, I believe the issue of major concern as observed earlier is how authorities should replace our antiquated education system with an assuring one which could

guarantee an all-round holistic learning.

We need a system that is resilient to pandemics, disasters and civil strife; one that is equally sensitive to the immediate needs of learners.

Moreover, we need a system that embodies life-skills and encourages measures that improve the quality and relevance of education and learning.

We would do better with a system that will facilitate teacher policies and regulations and ensure that tutors are empowered, adequately remunerated, well-trained, professionally qualified, motivated, equitably and efficiently deployed across all public schools.

I am talking of a system that encourages and allows teachers, through their unions, to fully participate in decision-making and implementation of decisions, as the role of teachers' unions in enhancing quality education is of utmost significance.

Teachers' unions have a better understanding and knowledge of what is actually happening in schools and classrooms, thus deserve to be full partners in any education reform.

The State alone cannot achieve everything in the field of education — the support of interested stakeholders such as teachers' unions is therefore desirable.

It is desirable in the sense that teachers' unions, as organised labour or pressure groups, are legally constituted to play meaningful roles in education, especially with regard to bargaining for teachers, and ensuring quality of education is attained by engaging teachers to improve teach-

ing approaches and maintaining high standards of teaching and learning.

Teachers' unions have a better understanding and knowledge of what is actually happening in schools and classrooms, thus deserve to be full partners in any education reform.

Therefore, excluding teachers' unions from policy-making processes is dangerous because union officials have vital experience and knowledge, which they can use to enhance the quality of education.

This is, and remains the position of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in pursuit of Education Agenda 2030.

Unesco and International Labour Organisation appreciate the role that trade unions play to give teachers a voice in education policy decisions, and more so, to encourage teachers to participate fully in decision-making processes.

It should be noted that it is only through implementation of sound policies, which unions have participated in crafting, that quality education can be achieved. Teachers unions hold the key to successful teaching and learning reforms; reforms that would lead to enhanced quality education as we position to effectively replace our old education system.

To effectively do this, teachers have to be empowered. This will involve investing heavily in teachers with the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies as informed by their professional judgement.

By empowering teachers, the tutors can discover their potential and limitations. This makes teacher empowerment in the post-Covid-19 period a crucial issue.

Mr Sossion is a nominated Member of Parliament and Secretary-General of Knut



Time to fully digitise public service delivery

Florence Kajuju



The disruption of public services occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the need to make government services available through virtual platforms as opposed to our present largely analogue set-up.

This could have been what Parliament envisioned by including a requirement under the Access to Information Act, 2016 that all public entities must computerise their records three years from the time the law came into force, essentially by September 2019.

Today, public agencies, which have been offering services by requiring citizens to visit their physical offices are facing challenges delivering on their mandates owing to the measures put in place to curb the pandemic.

In essence, the rationale for being physically in offices in order to serve clients or receive a service has been turned on its head. The guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health have put a strain on the existing lean public service workforce because of the directive that public officers aged 58 and above keep off from their work stations and work from home where possible.

Considering that more than 30 per cent of public servants are aged over 50, and a good proportion of that being in top management, the negative impact of the pandemic on decision-making and ultimately service provision has been enormous.

Yet, despite this seemingly grim outlook for service delivery, there is a silver lining; changing the course for public service for the better. The history of Kenya's public service has a blot of inefficiency, unprofessional conduct, administrative injustice, mismanagement, and corruption. Over the years, policy and constitutional initiatives have been made to reform the service to better serve the citizens. Notably, the Constitution 2010 was, among other reasons, borne out of the need to infuse professionalism, patriotism, and citizen-focused public service.

The Commission on Administrative Justice (Office of the Ombudsman) was established after the promulgation of the constitution with the mandate of righting administrative injustice in the public sector.

The most prevalent administrative injustices hampering service delivery are unreasona-

ble delay, discourtesy, misconduct, incompetence, misbehaviour, improper or prejudicial conduct, manifest injustice, abuse of power, and unfair treatment.

The commission redresses such injustices through resolving complaints from members of the public. For the past eight years, the commission has received and processed more than half a million public complaints, with over 83 per cent successful resolution rate.

Past attempts at transforming public services have at times fallen short due to failure to sustain the gains made and improve on weaknesses identified. This is the gap that performance contracting has sought to fill. And the commission has been a critical player by monitoring the implementation of the indicator, 'Resolution of Public Complaints', by public agencies on a quarterly basis.

Within the performance contracting framework, agencies have the challenge to be innovative in meeting their customers' needs.

Perhaps these uncertain times provide the right opportunity for government entities to reimagine their services and upend the traditional ways of working by digitising and automating their processes. Since governments around the world are tackling the same challenges related to provision of services, it is prudent that our public service looks to those countries with near similar circumstances as ours in order to harness some useful insights on sustaining service delivery in unsettling times.

Taking government services online will mean employees can work from anywhere at any time, hence the current arrangement of working from home will be the new normal.

A well designed and executed online system of providing services is bound to be more efficient, secure, and transparent, hence saving taxpayers time and money.

Going forward then, deepening of ICT infrastructure coverage in the country, availing reliable internet connectivity and taking necessary measures to protect government systems from external attacks and protection of citizens' data will be critical in evolving the public service into a fully automated digital space.

The importance of effective communication in a time of crisis like the current one cannot be gainsaid. Clear, brief, and empathetic communication emanating from government agencies is critical in minimising negative impacts of the pandemic on service delivery and the anxiety it visits on those unable to access certain services.

Ms Kajuju is the Chairperson of the Commission on Administrative Justice