Hungry Students In Campuses.

The path to higher education in Kenya is not an easy road. Apart from high cost in tuition fee for undergraduate and post-graduate studies in universities, hunger and food insecurity among students is a major crisis and the most dehumanizing experience for any student to go through. Students are either starving or skipping meals to save money and, in such difficulties, most are dropping out of campus in search of food and survival.

Early this year on March 8th, 2021, Moi University issued an internal Memo requesting students lacking food to notify the administration for assistance. Part of the memo read, "This is to request all students to send details of anyone who is starving to the dean of students through class reps and student leaders. The details to include their names, registration numbers, telephone number, hostel name and room number."

While, we cannot ascertain what Moi university did to curb the situation or help the starving students, this is the sad reality in most public universities in Kenya. Majority of students in Public institutions being children of peasant and working-class parents depend on Higher Education loan Board (HELB) for fees and some pocket money for sustenance which is not enough for one to study comfortably without worrying when next they will have a meal. Most students have to find ways to provide for their own living expenses while also paying for their education. The hunger crisis has also worsened with most public universities banning the cooking of food in hostels. In 2016, the largest university in Kenya, University of Nairobi banned cooking inside halls of residence, the consequences of not adhering to the restriction been expulsion from the university. Before the restrictions were put students sharing halls of residence would contribute money together depending on how many students occupied a hostel room and buy food in bulk which could last them up to several weeks. Due to those regulation students now survive by buying food on nearby cafeterias which are quite expensive when one is on a shoestring budget. The only alternative provided by the university of Nairobi at the time was to reduce food prices at the student mess by 25 percent but after three years the prices went up again as the national economy dwindle. Regardless subsidized food is still unfordable to many students.
Food is our most basic need and in an unfortunate way we have reduced students to either choose to study on hungry stomachs or skip classes and search for food. Students lose focus and concentration on their studies from persistent hunger and are ashamed to tell that they are starving due to stigmatization of poverty, thus most resort to drug abuse to cope with these difficult situations. Depression, stress and mental issues are brought with the many difficulties students go through to get an education. Suicide cases among students have greatly increased with time, we have a generation of young people facing a lot of hurdles to just survive and in many cases, they are defeated by life difficulties.

However, the fact that students are going hungry for days in institutions of learning might not be surprising at all considering the outcome of any society that is modelled within the neo-liberal blueprint will always find itself in crises. In -equality, privatization of key and basic sectors such as food and education are what defines a capitalist society. A model that is led by maximizing as much profit as possible at the expense and exploitation of the working class and the poor.

When key sectors such as education is commodified, students are automatically turned to customers. The relation of students to teachers and administration changes, the purpose of education also changes, the institution is no longer a nurturer of talent, potential or looking after the interest of its own students, but a business hub whose aim is to make money from every corner available. Public universities like Nairobi, Moi and Kenyatta university have remained public by name only, while carrying out its activities in a privatized model. In other words, there is less involvement of the institutions in student’s welfare and sustenance, just like how neo-liberal philosophy calls for less involvement of governments in their national economy and allow capitalism to generate development, students become vulnerable under such system’s and are likely to starve. Under capitalism hunger is always around the corner because food is reduced to a commodity to be sold for profit and universities do not care because the relationship fostered already between students and institutions is based on money and if you don’t have money to pay fees and buy food it’s your problem and not the university’s and this is the real face of capitalism, its brutal and inhumane.
Food security for students should be a top priority in any institution of learning. It’s inhumane not to do so. But to mitigate the problem of starvation among students we must go to the root cause of the problem in order to find an action plan and long-lasting solution. As long as education is a commercial entity it will always create an alienation between the students and the institutions, no one cares about the other basically an abstract relationship. The expensive tuition students are parting with in most universities should be used to cover basic meals at least to an extent where one doesn’t have to go hungry for days. With the dire situations already in most universities’ students surely will be grateful with the assurance of at least on the availability of a meal a day. Starvation in campuses can only be addressed through deliberate efforts from Universities and the government on which they must adopt different models of addressing it. Why would campuses have private expensive restaurants for guests and lecturers which students cannot afford, as that is the case with most? Students have now made it a trend wherever there is a strike to invade these restaurant’s and eat the best food, they so wish they could eat on a daily basis but hardly can afford. At the University of Nairobi, there is the popular Ariziki restaurant unaffordable to both students and lecturers.

Universities can no longer be operated within the neo-liberal blueprint especially for our small economies in the third world. Education and persistent hunger among students and generally in the society can only be addressed through a deliberate planned economy where the people and the majority are the priority and not he markets forces.