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To cite this article: Karin Lindsjö (2018) Contextualizing the quality of primary education in urban and rural settings: The case of Iringa Region, Tanzania, Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography, 72:4, 234-247, DOI: [10.1080/00291951.2018.1492962](https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2018.1492962)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2018.1492962>



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Published online: 16 Jul 2018.



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## Contextualizing the quality of primary education in urban and rural settings: The case of Iringa Region, Tanzania

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to discuss the term ‘quality’ in relation to primary education in Tanzania, and to contextualize quality and identify the premises for obtaining quality in primary school education in rural and urban settings. To understand opinions about the quality of education and the current situation in primary schools, the author conducted interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with parents and caregivers in Iringa town and three villages in Iringa Region. The findings indicate a general consensus, regardless of geographical setting, that quality in primary education is primarily measurable through national exams. However, surrounding circumstances such as infrastructure and poverty have a great impact on the quality of education in rural primary schools. Lack of water and electricity, and poor transport networks have consequences for schooling by limiting children’s, parents’, and teachers’ access to school supplies and limiting the ability of officials to carry out monitoring activities. The author concludes that the premises for providing and receiving education vary to a great extent, depending on geographical setting, and favour urban youths with respect to their further education.



### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 December 2016

Accepted 21 June 2018

### EDITORS

Arnt Fløysand, Kerstin Potthoff

### KEYWORDS

Iringa Region, educational quality, rural–urban conditions, Tanzania, universal primary education

Lindsjö, K. 2018. Contextualizing the quality of primary education in urban and rural settings: The case of Iringa Region, Tanzania. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift–Norwegian Journal of Geography* Vol. 72, 234–247. ISSN 0029-1951.

### Introduction

The following governmental statement suggests that education is highly valued in Tanzania: ‘Education is one of the most important aspects of social and economic development. Education improves capabilities and is highly associated with various socio-economic variables such as lifestyles, incomes and fertility for both individuals and societies’ (National Bureau of Statistics 2014, 88). However, primary school education is the highest attained level of education for a vast majority of the Tanzanian population: 81.7% (National Bureau of Statistics 2014). The poor educational level of pupils who have attained Standard VII (the final year of primary education) has been recognized in an earlier study: the pass rate at primary school final examinations dropped from 70.5% in 2006 to 49.4% in 2011 (Uwezo 2011).

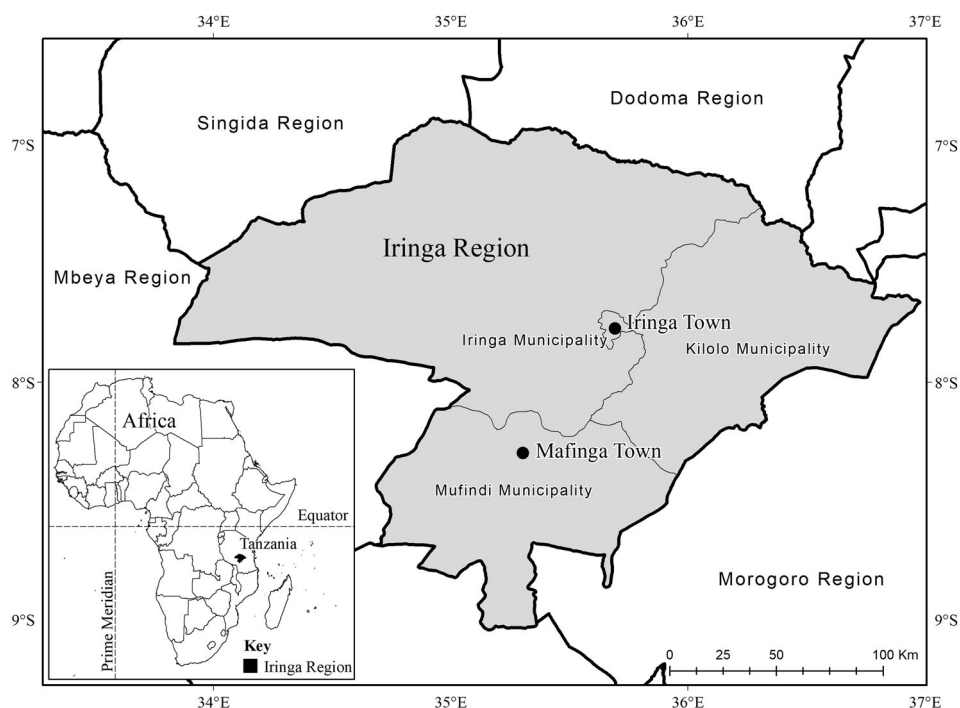
The literature on educational quality is diverse and there is no agreed-upon definition of the concept (e.g.

UNICEF 2000; Barrett et al. 2006; Kremer et al. 2013; OECD 2016). In this article, I explore the concept from a developing country context, moving beyond the earlier focus on enrolment rates and incorporating a discussion of quality in primary school education by examining the rural–urban gap in terms of living standards and access to infrastructure. Various factors, such as differences in income, access to electricity, running water, and health care, play central roles in creating rural–urban educational disparity in sub-Saharan Africa (Eloundou-Enyegue & Giroux 2012). In this article, I aim to contextualize the understanding of the concept of quality in the local setting of Iringa Region in Tanzania (Fig. 1) and I consider the conditions for providing and receiving quality in primary education by departing from current theory on educational quality. Exam performance, pupil–teacher ratios, and other quantitative metrics are frequently used as indicators of quality within a certain

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**Fig. 1.** Location of Iringa Region in Tanzania

school or area (Sherman 2008). These measurements are not ignored in this article but rather challenged: To what extent are they applicable in a development context, and are they sufficient as indicators of quality in education?

In this article, I aim to (1) clarify how quality in primary education varies in urban and rural areas, (2) incorporate a conceptual discussion of how quality of primary education is perceived by teachers and caregivers, and (3) analyse how the quality of primary education relates to structural conditions in the context of Iringa specifically and to what extent current theoretical approaches are applicable to this regional context. I draw on two periods of fieldwork in Iringa Region, the first carried out in October and November 2013 and the second in October 2014, which encompassed household interviews, interviews with primary school teachers, and focus group discussions with parents and other caregivers. Focus group discussions and interviews with teachers were the main empirical foundations.

## Framing educational quality

### Geography and education

A school is a distinct physical area, a place with specific rules, routines, and activities. It is a place where children are to some extent isolated while being prepared for adulthood, and school as an institution houses a large share of the young population. Furthermore, the importance of school is recognized worldwide and the debate

on education is ongoing from local levels to international level (Basic Education Development Committee (BEDC) 2006; Mbelle 2008; Patrinos & Psacharopoulos 2011; United Republic of Tanzania 2012; United Nations 2015). Moreover, in communities around the world, the school serves as a meeting point where parents can interact (Collins & Coleman 2008).

Rural–urban educational disparity is influenced by living standards and differences in income as well as access to services such as electricity and running water. Furthermore, rural–urban disparity is visible in the fertility transition in sub-Saharan Africa, where fertility levels initially declined in urban areas in the 1990s. As family structure affects the age-dependency ratio and consequently investments and savings, lower investments in individual education are a consequence of higher fertility in rural areas compared with in urban areas. This uneven demographic process aggravates the rural–urban education gap, as poverty is more frequent in rural areas (Eloundou-Enyegue & Giroux 2012). Urban households tend to have higher educational attainment and private returns to education are higher, especially in the formal sector (Wiggins & Proctor 2001; Eloundou-Enyegue & Giroux 2012).

Rural schools face many challenges. One of the critical challenges is the difficulty in finding qualified teachers who are willing to settle in poor and remote regions (Sherman 2008; Yusuph 2013), and one explanation for rural to urban migration is fosterage (i.e. temporary guardianship of children by relatives). Urban schooling and employment opportunities encourage families to

send their children to towns due to poor opportunities for rural education (Eloundou-Enyegue & Giroux 2012). Difficult conditions for schools situated in rural areas in developing countries are confirmed in the literature (Charema 2010; for Tanzania, see Mtahabwa & Rao 2010; Yusuph 2013).

More than being a specific place in itself, the school system is linked to geography, as it has the potential to decrease segregation and social inequality, and to increase social inclusiveness. Unequal quality of education or limited access to well-functioning schools perpetuates social inequality and gaps between various groups in society, thus reinforcing spatial differentiation (Collins & Coleman 2008; Little & Rolleston 2014).

### *Two theoretical traditions*

As noted by Barrett et al. (2006), two central traditions dominate theoretical perspectives of quality in education: (1) ‘the economist view’, also referred to as ‘the policy mechanics approach’; and (2) ‘the progressive/humanist’ or ‘the classroom culturalists’ approach. These two traditions tend to use different units of the education system to analyse quality: whereas the first one uses the national education system as a whole unit of analysis, the second tradition focuses on the school and the individual classroom or learning environment as the component to be analysed and evaluated. However, over time, the first tradition has incorporated a more multifaceted approach that includes evaluating individual schools as well as measuring the performance of different groups of pupils, such as those separated by gender (Stephens 2003). Learning outcomes within the first approach relate to cognitive outcome while the second approach is concerned with the development of the child and social change (Barrett et al. 2006).

The first tradition emphasizes universal determinants to measure quality, and various ratios are used as well as tests to indicate cognitive achievements (Barrett et al. 2006). Inputs to increase quality include teachers, teaching materials, and learning time, and as the indicators for measuring quality are universal, comparisons on an international level are possible (Stephens 2003). The pupils’ achievements are central, as are any cost-effective improvements carried out in schools. The main actor representing this tradition is the World Bank (Lockheed & Verspoor 1991; World Bank 2000; Barrett et al. 2006).

The second tradition focuses on educational processes in schools and in individual classrooms. Literacy, numeracy, and general knowledge are central, but schools may also serve as places where cultural values are obtained (Barrett et al. 2006). Various approaches have been developed within this tradition, and despite their

differences they seem to share the emphasis on local context, culture, and the relation between education and the ongoing development in the surrounding society (Barrett et al. 2006). One of the more recent approaches within this tradition is the social justice and capabilities approach developed by Leon Tikly and Angeline M. Barrett (Tikly & Barrett 2011; 2013) and inspired by Amartya Sen’s capability approach (Sen 1999), as well as Martha Nussbaum’s and Nancy Fraser’s work on social justice (Nussbaum 2000; 2003; Fraser 2008).

### *The social justice and capabilities approach: inclusion, relevance, and democracy*

The social justice and capabilities approach to ensuring educational quality acknowledges the local context and that learning outcomes must vary accordingly as long as literacy, numeracy, and life skills are included. Individuals need to be empowered with capabilities in order to sustain their livelihoods, contribute to democratic societies, and increase their well-being. Participation in social life may be prevented by institutional obstacles. The social justice and capabilities approach incorporates three dimensions in relation to educational quality: inclusion, relevance, and democracy (Tikly & Barrett 2011; 2013).

The inclusion dimension concerns individual’s and groups’ access to education as well as their possibilities of achieving their desired learning outcomes. It recognizes that learners belong to different sociocultural groups, and that this influences how valued capabilities are developed. Tikly & Barrett (2011; 2013) stress that different groups of learners have different resource inputs and therefore some groups would benefit from targeting. For example, pupils from poor family conditions and HIV/AIDS-affected children could benefit from targeted inputs such as the provision of school meals and extra tuition (Tikly & Barrett 2011). However, Tikly & Barrett (2011; 2013) note that inclusion concerns more than pupils being present in school; it also concerns the processes of changing values, attitudes, policies, and practices. The dimension concerns the inclusion of all children regardless of gender, socio-economic status, or disabilities (Tikly & Barrett 2011; 2013). Despite limited financial resources in developing countries, the main barrier to inclusive education is not poverty; instead, political will and priorities, as well as societal values and beliefs hamper inclusion (Charema 2010).

The relevance dimension concerns learning outcomes and whether these are meaningful for the learners and are valued by communities. Furthermore, learning outcomes need to be consistent with national development priorities. Therefore, developing capabilities valued not only by individuals but also by communities and

national governments is central to the dimension. The identities and needs of different groups should be reflected in the content and form of schooling they receive. Hence, the language of instruction is an important tool in converting resources into outcomes, and it has been recommended that learning, at least in the early years, should be in the pupil's mother tongue (Tikly & Barrett 2011; 2013). If instruction is given in a different language, it might limit the pupil's access to the curriculum and thus their learning outcomes (Tikly & Barrett 2011; Brock-Utne & Mercer 2014).

The third dimension, democracy, concerns the possibility for individuals and groups to participate in the public debate. Tikly & Barrett (2011) argue for the central role of NGOs and community organizations for a healthy democracy. These organizations can give a voice to particular groups and can contest norms and values. Public debate is important at local, national, and global levels (Tikly & Barrett 2011). Tikly & Barrett (2011) propose that the three dimensions of inclusion, relevance, and democracy should form the foundation of a new framework that might be used as a tool for assessing the potential of particular education environments to promote locally applicable and valued learning and outcomes (Hartwig 2013). In this article, I use both the 'economist view' and 'the progressive/humanist' traditions in my data analysis.

### The Tanzanian educational system

The Tanzanian educational structure, which was inherited from the British system,<sup>1</sup> follows a 2-7-4-2-3+ system. Following the first two years of pre-primary schooling, primary education consists of seven years of schooling, Standards I–VII, and is compulsory. Secondary education is divided into Ordinary Level (Forms I–IV), and Advanced Level (Forms V and VI). Selection to public (i.e. state) secondary schools is based on Standard VII national exam results. From secondary education, the pupil may proceed to further education, for example to vocational training or to study for a university degree. Since 2016, the Ordinary Level of secondary education has been compulsory.

Both public and private primary schools exist, but private schools charge substantial tuition fees. Private schools have existed since the mid-1990s, and 3.5% of all primary schools are private.<sup>2</sup> Within the private sector, religious schools are noticeable and the language of instruction is usually English, beginning from Standard I.

Efforts have been made to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) and one key move was the abolishment of the public primary school fee in 2001 (Wedgwood 2007). Unfortunately, public schools depend on

contributions from parents for various purposes, such as school supplies, maintenance of school buildings, lunch, and informal examination fees (Lindsjö 2016). The enrolment rates for primary schools in Tanzania have fluctuated (Davidson 2004) but according to the latest census, in 2012 Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) was 94.6% while the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) was 76.8% (National Bureau of Statistics 2014). GER is the total number of children of any age who attend school in relation to the total number of school-age children. Due to children repeating a grade or entering school late, the GER may exceed 100%. NER refers to the total number of enrolled children of school age in relation to the total number of school-age children in the population. The strive towards increasing primary enrolment rates is tied to the recognition that development of cognitive skills is linked to years of enrolment, and interrupted or late enrolment are related to poor learning (Little & Rolleston 2014). Nevertheless, Rajani (2003) criticizes the national government for having too strong a focus on achieving UPE in a short time and paying less attention to the consequences of the rapid increase in enrolment rates.

Similar to many other developing countries, Tanzania has a young population, as almost half of it, 43.9%, is below 15 years old (National Bureau of Statistics 2014). Therefore, lack of quality or any changes in the quality of primary school education will apply to many families nationwide. In 2012, 91% of children of primary school age worldwide were enrolled in schools (UNICEF 2018). However, there are major regional disparities in primary education, and sub-Saharan Africa still faces many challenges related to education. Since UPE was one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a strong focus has been placed on increasing enrolment rates, but 'Rising enrolment levels have not, however, necessarily been accompanied by improvements in the quality of schooling and the level of learning outcomes' (Little & Rolleston 2014, 2). Recently, the aspect of quality in primary education has been clearly addressed in a new set of goals, the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2015), and consequently attracted worldwide interest. Goal 4 specifically, aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations 2015, 12).

Thus, the issue of quality in primary school education has been debated at the highest governmental level for some time. As early as 1998, President Julius K. Nyerere stated that primary education should be of good quality and that it needed improvements (Yusuph 2013). In 2002, a five-year plan to ensure high-quality education in primary schools was introduced.



The Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP), which covered the time frame of 2002–2006, addresses various issues, including building new classrooms and increasing the number of teachers (Basic Education Development Committee (BEDC) 2001). Still, emphasis on enrolment rates has remained strong, and increasingly both NER and GER are described as the highest political priority (Davidson 2004). The transition rate from primary education to lower secondary education is currently 59.5%, according to the 2012 census, and from lower secondary education to advanced level is 10.6%.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

### Research setting

Tanzania (Fig. 1), is a poor country and is categorized by the UNDP as within the low human development category (UNDP 2014). Almost 70% of its population lives below the international poverty line of USD 1.25 per day (UNICEF 2013). The vast majority of the population lives in rural areas, and agriculture is the main source of income for 62% of the working population (National Bureau of Statistics 2014). Iringa Region (Fig. 1), belongs to the Southern Highlands, located in the south-western part of the country. The region has the fifth highest NER ranking in the country (out of 30 regions) with a NER of 90.7% (National Bureau of Statistics 2014). The region has 449 primary schools, of which 47 are situated in urban areas (see Note 2).

My research was carried out in three municipalities in Iringa Region: Iringa, Kilolo, and Mufindi (Fig. 1). Specifically, I studied three villages, one in Mufindi Municipality and two in Kilolo Municipality, as well as the urban area of Iringa town in Iringa Municipality. The three villages were selected with assistance from officials in the two municipalities and chosen due to their differences in distance from urban areas and access to the transport network and services. Villages B and C are located about half an hour's drive from one another. They are both located on a gravel road, but village C is inaccessible during the rainy season. The characteristics of the villages are described further in Table 1. Each village hosts one primary school. In Iringa town, three different areas for research were identified with assistance from officials in Iringa Municipality, staff at the regional administrative office, and local residents: a low-income area, a middle-income area, and a high-income area. The study areas differed in terms of housing, infrastructure, and services such as water and electricity.

This article is based mainly on qualitative data that I collected in October 2014, with the help of a field

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the case study villages in Iringa Region

| Village | Municipality | Characteristics   |
|---------|--------------|---|
| A       | Mufindi      | Village A has relatively easy access to urban centres and services as it is located along the highway between Iringa town and Mafinga town. Services within the village are somewhat limited, there are several boreholes and electricity is available. However, not all households can afford the connection costs. A shop and a market are also present, although they sell a limited range of products.  |
| B       | Kilolo       | Village B has a few small shops, a market day when the main street is crowded with market stands and people bargain over clothes, fruit, and vegetables. A dispensary is available in the village. In 2014, the electricity network was being extended, and it is still expensive for individual households to pay the connection fees. Water needs to be collected from a nearby river and public transport to urban areas is limited to once per day in each direction. |
| C       | Kilolo       | Village C has a few small shops but no electricity and no water wells. The transport network is the same as in Village B, once per day to an urban area.  |

assistant who served as a translator during interviews. The fieldwork in 2014 followed up the fieldwork and research carried out from October to November 2013 within the same three case municipalities. In 2014, semi-structured interviews were held with 20 primary school teachers in seven schools: four in Iringa town and three in rural villages. The urban schools comprised both public and private schools, and included pupils from different social classes. The selection of the schools was based on the results of household interviews carried out in 2013. Eight focus group discussions were held with parents and caregivers of children of primary school age. Additionally, I used data from fieldwork carried out in 2013. The fieldwork in 2013 comprised 37 household interviews in the three villages as well as in three different areas of Iringa town that reflected the low, middle, and upper classes (Lindsjö 2016), 22 interviews with primary school teachers, and 7 focus group discussions with caregivers. During both fieldwork sessions, the participants were informed about the research project and gave their consent to participate. In the following, I have preserved their anonymity. An overview of the data collected in 2013 and 2014 is provided in Table 2.

### Interviews with teachers

It was necessary to include primary school teachers' perceptions of the quality of education in schools in the study because the teachers represented the majority of the professionals regarding primary education. The teachers were familiar with the current school situation, knew about syllabi and learning outcomes, and were knowledgeable about the local context. The interviews

**Table 2.** Overview of data collected in 2013 and 2014

| Location                | Household interviews 2013 | Focus group discussions 2013 | Focus group discussions 2014 | Teacher interviews 2013 | Teacher interviews 2014 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Lower-class urban area* | 8                         | 2                            | 1                            | 0                       | 0                       |
| Middle-class urban area | 2                         | 1                            | 1                            | 0                       | 0                       |
| Upper-class urban area  | 5                         | 0                            | 0                            | 0                       | 0                       |
| Village A               | 5                         | 2                            | 2                            | 3                       | 3                       |
| Village B               | 8                         | 0                            | 2                            | 3                       | 3                       |
| Village C               | 9                         | 2                            | 2                            | 3                       | 3                       |
| Urban private school 1  | 0                         | 0                            | 0                            | 3                       | 3                       |
| Urban private school 2  | 0                         | 0                            | 0                            | 4                       | 2                       |
| Urban public school 1   | 0                         | 0                            | 0                            | 3                       | 2                       |
| Urban public school 2   | 0                         | 0                            | 0                            | 3                       | 4                       |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>37</b>                 | <b>7</b>                     | <b>8</b>                     | <b>22</b>               | <b>20</b>               |

Note: \*Urban area in Iringa town

were carried out in the same schools in 2013 and 2014, but not all with the same teachers. Prior to the interviews, I met with the head teacher or acting head teacher to introduce myself and the project, and to obtain permission to interview them and other teachers. The head teacher selected the teachers to be interviewed, based on my request to consider gender balance as well as a balance in the grades they were teaching; hence the selection entailed an element of sampling bias. In practice, the participants were teachers who, at the time, were engaged in administrative tasks between teaching classes, which suited my wish not to interfere with classes.

There was a slight gender imbalance in the sample, as 12 male teachers and 8 female teachers were interviewed. The interviews were held individually, without the presence of the head teacher. The interviews lasted for c.1.5 hours and they focused on themes such as their perceptions of the quality of education in primary schools, how to measure quality, how to improve quality, whether quality differs in different contexts or settings, who is responsible for quality, and the main obstacles to achieving quality. To create a more relaxed atmosphere, I took detailed notes rather than recording the interviews. As the interviews were generally held in Kiswahili, which the field assistant translated into English, there was enough time to take notes during the conversation. In Iringa Region, there are nine private schools, six of them located in Iringa town and two of these were visited. In the two private schools, teachers were comfortable conducting the interviews in English, as English is the language of instruction. In public schools, in cases when an English teacher was selected by the head teacher, I tried to conduct the interviews on my own in English. Unfortunately, in a few public schools, the teachers' poor level of understanding of English meant that it was necessary for a field assistant to act as a translator, thus indicating a problem of quality related to teachers' knowledge of a certain subject.

### Focus group discussions

To include caregivers' perceptions of the quality of primary education and to understand the local variations in collective perceptions of education quality, eight focus group discussions were held in 2014: two in Iringa town and two in each of the three villages (Table 2). The number of participants within each focus group ranged from three to six, and the groups were divided on the basis of gender and age. In total, there were 36 participants: 16 males and 20 females; 8 participants were from Iringa town and 28 from the three villages.

The focus group participants were selected with the assistance of local 'gatekeepers', who were participants I had met during earlier fieldwork. None of gatekeepers had a formal position within the community. Four of the gatekeepers had been randomly selected for household interviews during fieldwork in 2013. I met the other four gatekeepers during fieldwork in 2014. The participants were purposively selected based on gender and age (specifically, if they were a parent or grandparent). With one exception, all focus group discussions were audiotape recorded and transcribed by the field assistant. In one case, heavy rainfall made the recording impossible, and instead the field assistant took detailed notes of the discussion. The atmosphere during discussions was relaxed and open. The focus group discussion themes included the current situation in the village, perceptions of UPE, criteria for identifying the quality of education, how to measure the quality, how to improve the quality, and whether the participants perceived that their children were receiving good quality education in 2014.

### Observations

To some extent, I used observations during visits to the different research sites, schools and families, but since I was an outsider, I only used the findings to a limited extent and tried to be rather careful in my reading of the context.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was greeted with curiosity and interest in my research by the teachers and caregivers. To discuss education and, more specifically, the quality of schools, did not impose any challenges regarding the caregivers' participation in the focus groups. Although the research was initially described to participants, at times I was asked by caregivers whether I represented a Tanzanian authority. When I confirmed that was not the case, I sensed there was less tension and the focus group discussions became lively, with me positioning myself in the background. As a researcher and part of a formal education system, it could well be that the participants felt they were expected to emphasize certain issues. However, since 42 teachers from various study sites were included, I perceive that the information they gave reflected the status of primary schools at the time.

### **Data analysis**

After transcribing the interviews and focus group discussions, the collected material was coded in order to sort and structure the material into various themes for discussion. The themes related to the definition of quality with respect to primary education, measuring quality, how to improve quality, and whether quality differs depending on geographical setting or the public–private regime. In total, 10 emic codes were used (for a discussion on coding, see Cloke et al. 2004). The transcripts from 2013 were entered in Dedoose, a software programme for analysing mixed method data as well as primary interview data. The transcripts from 2014 were manually coded. Analysis of the data revealed the importance of four major aspects of education that cut across both rural and urban settings: quality (or the lack thereof), infrastructure, poverty, and school facilities.

## **Results: providing and receiving education**

### **Defining quality**

Among the teachers and caregivers, regardless of geographical context, there was consensus that quality in primary school education is measurable by indicators, as suggested by the economist tradition. Most frequently, performance in examinations and results from the Standard VII national exam are put forth as indicators of quality in education provided in Tanzania. The exam results are made official and all public and private primary schools are ranked according to results. Apart from examination performance, measurements of pupil–teacher ratios, textbook–pupil ratios, and pupil–classroom ratios are mentioned as indicators of quality

of education for certain administrative levels, such as the local school level, district school level or regional school level. As the results and ratios are official, they are comparable and easy to use in the debate on quality. It is striking that the wish to quantify the quality of primary school education was shared by the teachers and caregivers in both rural and urban settings.

Other ways of measuring the quality of education are not as easy to quantify as exam results and various ratios, but may serve as indicators of quality and adhere more closely to the perspective of relevance found in the social justice and capability approach. These indicators may be divided into two separate categories: one that relates to individual development and one that relates to the development of the local community or the nation as a whole. Within the first category, the indicators are changes in self-confidence (primary school teacher, Village A, 23 October 2014), behaviour and creativity (primary school teacher, Village B, 15 October 2014, and male focus group, Village B, 18 October 2014) and how to apply and make use of knowledge outside the school environment itself, for example in relation to keeping livestock and gardening (primary school teacher, Village C, 16 October 2014). Additional indicators in this category include engagement in business and promoting health (urban public primary school teacher, 22 October 2014) or communicating via the Internet (urban private primary school teacher, 23 October 2014). Regarding indicators related to development more generally, the participants mentioned improved environment and increases in crop production (primary school teacher, Village A, 23 October 2014), the number of pupils selected to attend secondary school (primary school teacher, Village A, 23 October 2014), and the number of Tanzanian experts sent to foreign countries (primary school teacher, Village C, 16 October 2014). All of these indicators emphasize the importance of the quality of education to generate development, not only at the individual level but also at the community, national, or even international levels.

With regard to the criterion of relevance, there was a rural–urban discrepancy in the teachers' understanding of quality in education that corresponded to the notion of relevance at the local level. While the rural teachers highlighted the quality of education as related to the fostering of useful skills in crop production, keeping livestock, and gardening, the urban teachers highlighted it as related to business and Internet communications.

### **Infrastructure**

There is a wide gap between rural and urban settings in Iringa Region in terms of infrastructure. Lack of



electricity, water, and public transport is a reality for many villages. This relates to the quality of education in several ways. Lack of electricity in school restricts teaching in certain subjects, puts limits on which equipment can be used by teachers and pupils in school, and restricts the time available for doing homework, as it is dark by about six o'clock in the evening. The use of solar power has been very limited in the area so far. However, some teachers argued that the availability of electricity in urban area had some negative consequences because pupils watched television instead of doing their homework (primary school teacher, urban public school, 22 October 2014, and primary school teacher, urban public school, 24 October 2014). Lack of electricity and water in rural areas means that children start their day by collecting firewood and water, which are brought to school (sometimes several times during the school day) for use when cooking school meals, for sanitation purposes, and for watering the school gardens.

Due to the limited public transportation networks, low level of services, and poor living conditions found in remote rural areas, the difficulties in finding teachers who are prepared to settle in such areas have been reported in the literature (Sherman 2008; Yusuph 2013), and confirmed by the results of my fieldwork in Iringa Region. The poor state of the transportation network affects access to school supplies, and poor accessibility has consequences for the official monitoring of schools, as some schools are inaccessible during the rainy season. One teacher in a primary school in Village B (15 October 2014) explained that this problem encouraged absenteeism:

Teacher: When it comes to assessors, those schools that are situated in urban area, they [the teachers] are always present [at their workplace] because there can be a control. For example, in the rainy season, teachers here know nobody will come to make controls [official monitoring activities].

Interviewer: So, teachers are not motivated to work during the rainy season. Is that true?

Teacher: Yes, when you go down to reality, they don't want to work. Most teachers know they don't get anything except [a] salary. So, if nobody is coming, they will do mainly the agriculture activities, not teaching.

Villages B and C face particular challenges, not only due to the lack of water and electricity but also due to the distance from an urban centre and lack of access to services. In this respect, Village A benefits from being located along a highway between two urban centres, with public transport running frequently. In relation to the quality of primary education, this circumstance is relevant with respect to issues of finding teachers prepared to work

in rural areas, access to school supplies, and the possibilities for official monitoring throughout the year. In Villages B and C, the length of the school day is reduced because children are expected to do non-school work during normal school hours, and the environment is not conducive to time being spent on homework after school hours. The extensive absenteeism among the rural teachers is alarming and directly affects the quality of education provided in the schools. For example, parents and caregivers frequently mentioned that classes were left unattended, held by older pupils, or were merged with other classes.

### *Amenities and provision of teaching services*

The participants in the female focus group in Village B talked about educational quality being seasonal, depending on whether the teacher was present and whether the teacher was committed to their job. The low salaries of public teachers may encourage absenteeism among teachers, since they are forced to look for other sources of income to provide for their families. In Iringa town, therefore, the teachers engaged in income-generating activities such as running small shops, driving taxis, or engaged in other business at the end of the school day (teacher, urban public primary school, 24 October). In rural areas, the situation is quite different: the school day is longer due to a longer lunch break, which means less free time for teachers, and the only income-generating activity teachers engage in is agriculture. The collected data indicated a widespread problem of absenteeism among rural teachers in the more intensive farming periods. One teacher in Village C suggested that he was not mentally present, as he was constantly thinking of how to earn extra money to provide his family with basic needs such as food and clothes. It might be easier for teachers in urban contexts to find ways of raising additional income, such as providing private tuition, but one participant in the male focus group in Iringa town (24 October, 2014) complained that 'Teachers are focused more on their personal activities and they are also using pupils to help them in their activities and, in the class, they teach hastily so that they leave to teach [elsewhere, outside school].'

Public transport links in the rural study sites were poor compared with those in Iringa town, yet the participants in the urban female focus group recognized distance from school was a problem. Although transport is available, not everyone is able to pay the cost on a daily basis and children who walk get tired and are sometimes late for class. Another issue is when children are able to pay but are denied access to the bus by the conductors during busy times, who prefer to give priority to

adults because they pay full price for their tickets, whereas children pay a reduced price.

An example of children spending time during the school day on non-learning activities due to lack of amenities was found in Village C. When I arrived at the primary school, it was very quiet, not full of activities or school children, and I learned that only pupils Standards I and II had regular classes, while those in Standards III–VI were assisting in construction of a new teacher's house.<sup>4</sup> This activity had been ongoing for three months, and the work had been divided into two phases: while the first phase was not particularly intensive and 'only' needed children to work 2–3 hours per day, the second phase had started three weeks prior to my visit together with the field assistant, and the pupils had spent c.30 hours per week on it. The teacher asked us to visit the working site, close to the school, and on that particular day the children were firing bricks, guarding the fire, and walking back and forth to a nearby river to collect water. The relevance of the construction of a teacher's house in relation to the pupils' learning outcomes may be questioned, especially because their schoolwork was ignored. It is probable that the house itself has become valued by the community because it offers a somewhat higher living standard for the teacher. Nevertheless, the extent of work demanded of the children was not reasonable; almost an entire school semester had been spent on construction, yet the house had not been completed when I visited it.

The issue of language is closely related to quality, as research has shown that instruction in the child's mother tongue during the initial school years improves their later performance at school (Watkins 2000). In Tanzania, Kiswahili is used in public primary schools, while English is the medium of instruction in private primary schools. A number of local languages are spoken in Tanzania, but since Kiswahili is the second language for many children, their ability to comprehend fully what is being taught and consequently their learning outcomes is limited. More than 120 local languages are believed to exist within the country, but the exact number of languages is unknown and may be even higher (Heilman & William 2012; Petzell 2012). There is an intense ongoing debate on the language of instruction in schools in Tanzania, and elsewhere in East Africa (for further discussions see Hartwig 2013; Brock-Utne 2015; Clegg & Simpson 2016; Trudell 2016).

### *Classroom facilities and school supplies*

The recommended pupil–teacher ratio in primary schools has been set at 45:1 by the government (Davidson 2004), and is a key quantitative measurement of

quality in primary education. However, in the schools in the case study locations, it ranges from 32 to 82 pupils in the classrooms. The problem of overcrowded classrooms was visible both in rural and urban contexts, and in public and private schools. Of 449 schools in Iringa Region, all private schools are ranked among the top 45 in the ranking list for Standard VII national examinations (see Note 2). This might throw into question to what extent the pupil–teacher ratio affects quality, as the two private schools I visited in Iringa town, which had classes of up to 82 pupils, still performed rather well, at least in terms of examination results.

The lack of school facilities and supplies is a problem throughout public schools. Limited numbers of desks and textbooks, and even of the most basic school supplies, such as chalk, are sometimes problems. One participant in the urban male focus group stated: 'there are no teaching facilities. How are the teachers going to teach? The government should avail teaching facilities to school' (24 October 2014). Although these problems are present in both rural and urban settings, the access to supplies is easier in urban areas, and if not available in Iringa town they may be ordered from elsewhere without problems. By contrast, some rural areas face difficulties with transportation and the lack of school supplies is not only due to lack of funds.

Ensuring the quality of education is challenging when school supplies are lacking and classrooms are overcrowded. When facilities and school supplies are considered, the urban public schools have more in common with their rural counterparts than with the urban private schools. Although the availability of supplies is better in urban contexts, this does not imply that the school or the caregivers will provide them.

### *Poverty among pupils*

There is widespread poverty in the case study locations, which relates to the quality of education in several ways: difficulties in participation during class due to lack of supplies, low concentration among pupils, and inability to do homework after school hours. Even if the children are present at school, they might not be equipped with the basic supplies such as pens and notebooks. In practice, raising cash for these items is the responsibility of the children themselves in poor families, as shown by the following quotations from participants in the female focus group in Village B (18 October):

Saturdays and Sundays, they [children] are more busy fetching water so that they get money to buy pen, soap and notebook. They also do that partly to help their parents because of low incomes. They fetch water when they are off from farms on Saturdays. In the

morning, they are busy with their parents in the farms and in the evening they go for casual labours.

As women, we rely mostly on agriculture, but children depend on casual labour so that they get some money to buy notebooks for school.

This is not only a rural phenomenon: the same situation of children involved in casual labour was mentioned by participants in the urban female focus group (24 October 2014). According to them, casual labour was available for primary school children in urban areas too, such as washing clothes and cleaning houses, but the payments were minimal.

In all of the cases schools, the provision of lunch was dependent on parental contributions. In one of the private schools, the cost was included in the school fee, while in the other private school there was a separate charge for school meals. Lunch was provided on a regular basis only at the private school where lunch was covered by the school fee. Unfortunately, the widespread inability to contribute to lunch fees results in irregular school lunches. Of the teachers interviewed in both urban and rural contexts in 2014, 11 were aware of children going to school without having had anything to eat. Five of these teachers added that poor concentration and even sleeping during class were consequences of malnutrition. Concerns related to lack of food and its consequences were also highlighted by the caregivers (female focus group, Village B, 18 October 2014; male focus group, Village C, 19 October 2014; female focus group in the low-income area in Iringa town, 24 October 2014). Research on early childhood nutrition has identified a positive correlation between nutrition and academic performance. Children's cognitive development is affected by early childhood nutrition and children who are better nourished perform better in terms of academic achievement (Mendez & Adair 1999; Glewwe et al. 2001; Grantham-McGregor & Ani 2001). Previous research suggests that urban children in general are less likely to be malnourished, due to more favourable socio-economic determinants (Smith et al. 2005). Furthermore, according to one teacher poverty could affect the school day directly:

In urban schools, the parents are aware of the importance of sending pupils to school, but in the villages the awareness of parents is really poor. Instead of, for example, letting them go to school, they will let them do some farm activities. ... In villages, there are more problems than in urban [areas]. Some of the children come from very poor families [and] have hard conditions, for example both parents are dead or HIV positive, and when pupils are coming to school they may think about what they are going to eat, so instead they go to farm. (primary school teacher, Village C, 21 October 2014)

Additionally, poverty relates to the demands made on children after school hours, as they collect water and firewood, do other domestic chores, farm, or take care of siblings instead of doing homework and resting: 'a big problem is when they [the pupils] go home, because most families are poor, [and] because of that they use children to move on. And because of HIV/AIDS, most parents are not able to work, so children need to help' (primary school teacher, Village B, 15 October 2014). Poverty is present in Iringa town, too. The discussions in the female urban focus group were held in a low-income area of the town and the women found the situation hard.

It has been argued that poverty is not the main barrier to inclusive education (Charema 2010). However, my findings from Iringa Region indicate that poverty hampers inclusivity. The abandonment of public primary education school fees has made primary education accessible and inclusive to everyone, at least in theory. However, in practice, the required parental contributions are difficult for families to raise. Poverty relates directly to the quality of education because lack of nutrition affects cognitive development and affects daily life for children through labour demands outside school. Not much time, if any, is left for schoolwork outside school hours.

### *Rural and urban differences*

In 2015, the United Nations launched the new framework of Sustainable Development Goals to frame the most urgent global challenges and how to address them up to the year 2030 (United Nations 2015). The goals have increased in numbers and now include 17 target areas with new subtargets. Goal 4 explicitly highlights the quality component, as it aims to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations 2016, 5). Although the MDG Goal 2 for universal primary education was not achieved by 2015, the SDG for education (Goal 4) has been expanded to include a strong focus on quality, inclusivity, and equitability (United Nations 2016).

Despite not addressing issues such as the language of instruction, quality of teachers' education, and teachers' pedagogic skills, the collective data from Iringa Region suggest a diversified and complex situation. It cannot be easy to teach under such circumstances, and it cannot be easy for children to receive education under them. Differences in quality of education between urban and rural areas may thus aggravate the rural–urban gap in primary school enrolment rates. In 2012, the urban net enrolment rate was 90.6%, while the rural enrolment

rate was 72.3%, yet the latter was still far below the urban rate from the previous census, in 2002, which was 83.7% (National Bureau of Statistics 2014).

A quantitative indicator of disparity in quality of education between urban and rural settings is the official ranking of Standard VII exam results. More than half of the urban primary schools in Iringa Region are in the top 100 in terms of Standard VII exam results, whereas among the bottom 50 schools within the region, only one is in an urban area (see Note 2). Among urban caregivers, this ranking is important when selecting schools, as it serves as an indicator of school quality. Among rural caregivers, there is no alternative to the local village school, and any other option is unaffordable.

Lack of awareness among rural parents was addressed by the interviewed teachers, according to whom, the parents were not aware of the importance of education, caregivers did not cooperate with schools and they did not provide their children with school supplies or pay their contributions on time:

For town, even if not all are educated, [the] level of understanding is different. In town, there are several schools and most [children] can go to school ... And when you talk of infrastructure, you can travel to a distant school, but here if a child is very far [away], it will stay in the farm. The other thing is on culture and tradition. In rural areas, when pupils are about to complete Standard VII, they think about marriage, but in town they think about future studies. (Primary school teacher, Village B, 15 October 2014)

Villagers ... they are not that motivated [towards] education. ... when, for example, a pupil passes, to proceed to secondary, for [us], this is something that will empty our pocket[s]. (primary school teacher, public urban school, 24 October 2014)

By contrast, the interviews with rural parents and caregivers revealed that rural parents tended to value education, as it was perceived as the only possibility for change and improvement. It is believed that education is the ticket for rural children to leave agriculture (Lindsjö 2016). Instead, the perceived lack of motivation in rural areas might reflect the widespread poverty, since parents are unable to pay the numerous contributions on time or to support their children with school supplies. Additionally, a child may be taken out of school when their family needs extra labour.

The participants in the male focus group in Iringa town identified difficulties related to primary education within their own context, such as problems that parents experience in providing financial support for their children, teachers being involved in income-generating activities outside school, and lack of teaching facilities. However, the discussion then turned to the even more

severe situation in rural areas. The participants suggested that teachers in rural areas should be provided with houses and increased salaries, and that the government should make official follow-ups.

### Discussion: applicability of theoretical framework

It is clear that both sets of theoretical traditions can contribute to an understanding of the quality of primary education in Iringa Region. When teachers and caregivers were asked to define the term 'quality', their answers first and foremost related to various ratios that were easy calculate using to quantification (e.g. the ratios of pupils to teachers or pupils to books), in which learners' achievements are in focus, as are the various ratios used as indicators of quality. Thus, at a local level, the economist tradition was reflected when quality was discussed. However, after defining the term, the teachers and caregivers highlighted a much wider perception of the quality of education in primary schools. In particular, the two questions of possible rural–urban differences in quality in primary education and possible private–public differences in the quality of primary education initiated discussions on a set of broader topics, all of which connected to a more humanistic tradition. For instance, their discussions concerning whether certain pupils were more favoured in the education system, the relevance of what was being taught in school, and the emphasis on local context in terms of being able to use the knowledge outside school, all of which relate to the humanistic tradition regarding quality in education. The collected data indicated a strong focus on the perspective of relevance. Several indicators of quality were directly in line with what was being valued locally by the learners or community, or at a higher level.

While exam results contextualize educational performance within Iringa Region as well as nationally, ratios such as pupil–teacher, pupil–desk, and pupil–textbook are comparable internationally. As suggested by the results, using the Standard VII national exam results and various ratios as the only indicators of quality is problematic because they do not capture the surrounding environment of the schools and households that may influence the quality of education from the perspective of both the provider and the recipient. For these reasons, I have focused on educational quality in the regional context, specifically in Iringa Region. Here, two central characteristics are prominent: poverty and infrastructure, such as the state of the transportation network and the poor access to electricity and water. The combination of widespread poverty and poor infrastructure has



implications for the learning process within the classroom as well as outside it. Despite Iringa Region ranking highly in terms of gross and net enrolment rates, and thus, in a sense, being inclusive, my data suggest that such school enrolment statistics are not enough, as educational performance is clearly affected by the surroundings and the inclusiveness of quality education is spatially manifested in favour of urban children.

The perspective of democracy is difficult to assess from the limited numbers of schools included in the study. However, during the course of the fieldwork, neither the teachers nor the caregivers mentioned the importance of participation in the national or regional political debate on education. At the local school level, the school committee in Village B took action and banned activities that involved pupils doing farm work on teachers' farms, washing teachers' clothes, and collecting firewood and water during school day, which were previously done on a regular basis (male focus group, Village B, 18 October 2014).

It appears that teachers as well as families connected to all of the public schools, both rural and urban, are too poor to engage in any ongoing debates on education. Caregivers and teachers are too busy in their daily lives to earn high enough incomes to meet their own basic needs. Thus, it is highly unlikely that important public debates on education at the local level, and possibly also the regional and national levels, referred to in the social justice and capability approach (Tikly & Barrett 2011), include the perspectives of teachers and caregivers. It follows that such debates, are not informed by the teachers' and caregivers' understandings of the current status in schools and how the surrounding environment affects the children's possibility to receive education. In other words, in the context of Iringa Region, poverty might not only affect the perspective of inclusion but possibly also the dimension of democracy.

While the three dimensions of relevance, democracy, and inclusion all relate to the discussion of quality of primary education, the social justice and capability approach would benefit from a stronger recognition of the local context. The studied schools were not isolated units; they were situated in a context that could either support or hinder learning activities. Iringa Region's NER suggests a high rate of school attendance by children. However, being present in school is not enough, as not all children who are enrolled are included in the ongoing learning activities, and therefore the suggestion may be misleading. The current discussion on the principle of inclusion is a matter of which groups of children are enrolled but not represented in the school system, and a broader understanding of the inclusion dimension ought to incorporate children's opportunities to

participate actively in schooling as well as their possibilities to achieve the prescribed learning outcomes. This would increase the usefulness of the dimensions and provide a more accurate understanding of the educational status in various contexts, as well as provide a better understanding of the spatial differences.

## Conclusions

This article contributes to the understanding of spatial difference of providing and receiving primary education in a developing country context. I have examined the term 'quality' in a local context, and discussed how the surrounding environment influences the quality of primary school education and thus the children's possibility to perform in their education.

Tanzania may have had a prosperous development in its primary education enrolment rates but in its strive to reach UPE, the consequences for the quality of the education have been left unattended. I conclude that the quality perspective of the economist tradition, which relies on measurable ratios, is widely used and interpreted by stakeholders in Iringa Region as an indicator of the educational quality of certain schools, regions, or even nations. Nevertheless, such ratios may not reveal the complete picture, since they do not reveal anything about teachers' education and competence or teachers' attendance rates. My data suggest there is a profound problem of teacher absenteeism in public schools, especially in rural areas.

The three dimensions of inclusion, relevance, and democracy of the social justice and capability approach were useful when I examined the quality of education within the geographical context of Iringa Region. These dimensions have broadened the debate on quality in education and created a better understanding of variation in local and spatial conditions for providing and receiving education. Nevertheless, despite the strong focus on local level relevance and on social and spatial inclusivity, the social justice and capability approach fails to take fully into consideration how the surrounding environment influences children, caregivers, and teachers, and how it limits their possibilities to participate fully in education. Based on my empirical data from Iringa Region, a broader understanding of the term 'inclusion' would provide a more accurate understanding of the situation, including spatial variances in terms of which groups of children are not only enrolled in primary education, but also active in the school activities. My findings show that the two main barriers to inclusion are a lack of infrastructure and persistent, widespread poverty.

My data suggest that, similar to the existing gap between urban and rural areas in terms of infrastructure



and access to services, an academic gap is also present. This gap not only refers to the differences in net enrolment rates, but also in the conditions in which good quality education is provided and received in primary school. The existing spatial inequality is reproduced and the division of the rural–urban gap is inherited by the next generation. While my previous research in Iringa Region has demonstrated a consistently positive perception of the value of education, irrespective of where the households reside or what their socio-economic status is (Lindsjö 2016), the study on which this article is based indicated substantial spatial differences in children’s possibilities to perform in educational terms. A general socio-economic gap between rural and urban areas is recreated in an academic gap that clearly disfavours rural youths in their educational prospects.

Without a doubt, the efforts to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Tanzania have resulted in rising enrolment rates, increasing inclusivity, and giving educational institutions a key role in contributing to broader development. If education is to play a central role in the social and economic development of Iringa Region, there is a need for stronger emphasis on enhancing quality in primary education, which in turn is connected to considerations of the local context in which education takes place.

## Notes

1. ‘The development of primary education in Tanzania’ by E.W. Siwale and M.M. Sefu, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, 1997, sourced from the Education Resources Information Center, ERIC document number ED142280.
2. Data sourced from an Excel sheet ([http://prem.necta.go.tz/BRN/PSLE/PSLE%20SCHOOLS%20RANKING/2013/PSLE2013\\_RANKING.xls](http://prem.necta.go.tz/BRN/PSLE/PSLE%20SCHOOLS%20RANKING/2013/PSLE2013_RANKING.xls)) produced by the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) in 2013.
3. Statistics accessed from government document produced by the Prime Minister’s Office, Regional Administration and Local Government in 2015, titled ‘Pre-primary, primary and secondary education statistics 2013: National data’.
4. Pupils in Standard VII had already completed their final exams and were not attending school at the time when the fieldwork was done.

## Acknowledgements

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (the Margit Althin Scholarship Fund) and The Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography are thanked for providing generous financial support for the fieldwork. Additionally, Linda Stihl is thanked for the preparation of Fig. 1.

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