

# EXPLORING UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION (UPE) POLICY: THE ROAD-MAP TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION IN UGANDA

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## ABSTRACT

Education for all is universally recognised as a contributor to socio-economic development; hence, schooling systems are part of the interventions to ensure that participation in societal development processes is made possible. Since 1997 when Universal Primary Education (UPE) was introduced in Uganda, like in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, substantial gains have been made towards increasing total enrolment and reaching gender parity. From a net Enrolment of 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 8.5 % in 2014 with a declining boy-girl gap in enrolment, Uganda would be considered as performing well by close of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. These gains, well registered and acknowledged, the staggering completion rates and quality of education under UPE consistently remain high. However, evident tendencies to downplay the relevance of UPE quality kept dominating the public policy evaluations. Post-2015, Sustainable Development Goal 4 re-emphasize inclusive and quality education by re-directing the focus from equitable enrolment, that is almost attained in a gender perspective to completion of free primary education for both girls and boys and secondary schooling by 2030. This article, through a cross-sectional descriptive qualitative approach, appreciates noticeable UPE achievements, but concludes that special needs children are still marginalized, that retention and completion levels remain slightly lower and that quality of education remains problematic. It is suggested that teacher recruitment and capacity building be stepped up, UPE capitation grant be increased that policy on parents' contribution be revised as strategies for minimising UPE politicisation devised.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Millennium Development Goals, 2030 Agenda, Universal Primary Education, Inclusivity, Equitable Quality Education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Achievement of equity is increasingly seen as an important goal of socio-economic development. Accordingly, equity is meant to offer individuals equal opportunities to pursue a life of their choices and also to structures

create huge inequalities (World Bank, 2006; UNDP, 2014). Sifuna & Sawamura (2008) and Ogawa & Nishimura (2015) also emphasise this view, arguing that purposes and aims for universal primary education are many and varied, and generally may be categorized as:

human rights, equity, and socio-economic development.

Incidentally, emerging human inequalities from overlapping political, social, cultural, and economic structures stifle the probabilities to fissure the traps disadvantaged groups and as such perpetual poverty, oppression and marginalisation persist over generations. Concerns of equity and inclusiveness remain fundamental; hence, education interventions have been aimed at redressing these imbalances. For these reasons, the paper assesses the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Uganda to determine inclusivity and equitability of quality education.

Universal Primary Education (UPE) Policy in Uganda is an outcome of the Education Review Commission (EPRC) setup in July 1987 to appraise the then existing system to recommend measures and strategies for improvement (MoES, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. The Commission's focus was on a number of aspects including curricular review, skills improvement with education programs, measures to improve the management of schools and tertiary institutions so as to maximise cost-efficiency. The EPCR report emerged with areas of policy and legal framework as well as other measures to increase access, improve quality and enhance equity at all levels of Education. The 1995 National Constitution underscoring the right to education for every Ugandan and the Local Government Act 1997 that enabled decentralisation pre-primary and primary education were some of the key legal frameworks for the EPCR

1. This was at a time when most administrative reforms were being initiated in the developing economies.

report. The report also laid a foundation for current education policies including UPE policy in Uganda.

The UPE policy was introduced in January 1997, (MoES, 1999)<sup>2</sup> with aims to: (a) establish, provide and maintain quality education as the basis for promoting the necessary human resource development; (b) transform society in a fundamental and positive way; (c) provide the minimum necessary facilities and resources to enable every child to enrol and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete; (d) make basic education accessible to the learner and relevant to his/her needs as well as meeting national goals; (e) make education equitable in order eliminate disparities and inequalities; (f) ensure that education is affordable by majority Ugandans; and, (g) eradicate poverty eradication by equipping every individual with the basic skills and knowledge with which to exploit the environment for both self and national development. Initial UPE approach was the abolition of tuition fees and parents and Teachers Association (PTA) charges for primary education<sup>3</sup> replacing it with two types of grants: *capitation (fees) grants and school facilities grants*<sup>4</sup> (MoES, 1998, 2003; Essama-Nssah, 2011). Parents continued to contribute scholastic materials for pupils. To date, Universal Pri-

2. Also see Policy Brief 10 of February 2006: on interregional inequality facility: Sharing Ideas, and policies across Africa Asia and Latin America

3. These were charges earlier introduced during the 1970s to complement the low salaries of teachers

4. Capitation grants were paid on the basis of at about US\$5 per pupil for classes P1-P3, and US\$8 per pupil for classes P4-P7, and was meant to cater for administration expenses, instructional materials, co-curricular activities; while school facility grant largely caters for projects like construction, equipment and furniture

mary Education (UPE) has dramatically increased primary school enrolment and minimized gender inequalities in access to education.

Although increased enrolment is evident in UPE however, there is growing and worrying trend of increased dropout rates and grade repetition and the completion rates remain relatively undesirable according to Ministry of finance Report of MDG progress (MFOPED, 2013). This paper therefore aims to assess the underlying realities of these trends in order to propose feasible remedies for improvement.

## **2. GUIDING THEORY**

The conceptualization of this study is guided by the human rights based approach, a human development framework that is premised on numerous key principles (UNDP, 2000; UNICEF, 2007). Among these key principles are that: (a) human rights are universal and inalienable meaning that they are entitlement of all people everywhere in the world; (b) that all individuals are equal as human beings, and by virtue of the inherent dignity of each person, are entitled to their rights without discrimination of any kind; (c) that Human rights are indivisible, they are all inherent to the dignity of every person per se thus having equal status as rights and so cannot be ranked in a hierarchy; and, (d) that the rights are related and interdependent in a way that realization of one right often depends, wholly or in part, on the realization of others.

The relevance of this approach lies in the fact that it seeks to identify groups and people whose rights are been violated, understand why certain people are unable to enjoy their rights, and redress unjust distributions of power that impede development progress. The human rights criteria focus on plan for action for availability, accessibility, quality, affordability, acceptability for all.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The paper is based on cross-sectional and descriptive qualitative study that adopted interpretive methods of analysis. The study findings were obtained from both primary and secondary data. From primary sources, the data was obtained through in-depth interviews from 30 respondents comprising of selected 10 head teachers of primary schools, 5 deputy head teachers of primary schools, 5 District education officers in government service, 3 retired education officers and 2 retired officials from the Ministry of Education and Sports. Respondents also included 5 members of school management committees.

The respondents were obtained through convenience and purposive sampling techniques. The samples of head teachers were drawn from the Eastern and Central regions of Uganda and from urban and rural settings to establish whether their views had any significant divergences.

From Secondary sources, the study reviewed reports of the ministry, including education annual reports

for the financial year 2013/2014 and 2014/2015. Further, a National Strategy on Girl Education, Education Sector Annual Monitoring report and Ministry of Education and Sports Educational Statistical Abstract of 2013 were reviewed, as well as diverse World Bank, and UNESCO reports.

#### **4. THE STUDY FINDINGS**

The data obtained from a cross-sectional group of respondents with education experience, and from variable ministerial and World Bank reports, allowed for the findings that revealed progress, challenges and strategies relating to the UPE implementation in Uganda.

##### **4.1. Access and Equity in the Education Sector**

Access and Equity in education has always been a cardinal aim of the education sector since the inauguration of the UPE policy. The ministerial policy documents, Education Sector Annual Reports and National Development Plans (NDP) have always focused on this objective throughout the period of UPE policy implementation<sup>5</sup>. The National Development Plan of 2010, for instance, underscores the importance of Special Needs Education in Primary sub-sector where a total of 6 632 (48.7% and 52.2%) females had been enrolled in schools in 2008. On the gender equity, the 2010 National Development Plan situational analysis underscores the achievements obtained by 2006 when girls enrolment

had reached 90% compared to boys at 93%. The NDP report however recognizes the lower completion rate of girls (42%) compared to boys' rates of 53% at the time (NDP, 2010/11-2014/1: 216).

In the first year of UPE, 1997, there were 5.3 million children accessing primary education in Uganda. Years following 1997 were characterized by steady increase in enrolment for both boys and girls. From 2000 to 2014, the total enrolment increased from 6 559 013 pupils (3 395 554 boys and 3 163 459 girls) to 8 772 655 (4 377 412 male; 4 395 243 female). The Uganda's net enrolment ratio (NER) improved gradually from 90.01% in 2004 (male 92.5%; female 87.6%) to 97% in 2014 (male 96%, female 98%). It is observed that the sector performance gap was only 3 percent across gender by 2014 (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2013/14-2014/15). Thus by the close of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015, the gender parity had been realized in primary school enrolment. While Uganda has scored highly on enrolment, the persistent challenge in UPE performance has been identified as retention and completion rates.

The Report by Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (September, 2013) on the Millennium Development Goals indicates some variations in primary school completion rates from 59% in 2002 to 56% in 2010 for boys. Comparatively, the girls' completion rates improved from 41% to 51% during the same period. Generally, the performance on completion and literacy rates of the UPE program

5. See the National Development Plan (NDP) 2010/11-2014/15; NDP II 2015/16-2019/20; the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) reports of 2011/12-2012/13, and of 2013/14-2014/15

indicate some improvement, although the percentage levels remained low in relation to MDGs targets. By 2012, apart from the gross completion rates for girls and boys falling short of MDG expectations, the average age at which children completed primary school had fallen. As a result of the assessment of the performance of UPE during that year, the national development plans and the primary education subsector plans subsequently re-emphasized issues of access and equity for marginalized groups in education at all levels. Interventions in education sector for access, equity, quality education to increase completion rate were made, resulting into parity by end of the 2014/15 financial year.

Gradually, there was an improvement in "primary seven" completion rate attributed to factors that include, among others, reduction in early marriages, reduced repetition rates and low teenage pregnancies. Other interventions that varied across regions included development of infrastructure; licensing and registration of private primary schools; establishment of new schools; and, provision of support to education of disadvantaged children in Karamoja. Further interventions involved the support to educate children in war affected areas (especially Northern region); provision of non-formal education; advocacy and social campaigns for primary education; and, affirmative action in support of the girl child education. With these interventions, gender parity at both pre-primary and primary levels was evident by end of 2014/2015 FY (MoES, 2014/2015: 120).

#### **4.2. Opinions on UPE Completion rates**

Efforts to validate the secondary data on enrolment and completion rates were made through interviews during this study where data was collected from experienced respondents in the field of education to augment the findings. A retired official from ministry of Education and Sports for instance noted that it was true that the completion rates were often noted in reports as poor because of a number of reasons. One of her views was that there was a difficulty in tracking of pupil progress.

She noted that because of the government emphasis of attending school under universal primary education, and also on the demands for cash economy, many pupils were enrolling when they are young (before the age of 6 year); and, as a result a number of them kept repeating making it difficult to track their comparison of enrolment and completion years. When asked whether this was not against the policy of UPE that emphasizes auto promotions of pupils, the official reiterated that it is true that there are some pupils that keep repeating classes before reaching primary seven.

Her views, therefore, suggest that the completion rates documented in most of the reports may not be due to dropouts or problems of retention as is implied at times. The pupils may still be in the same schools but are yet to finish primary seven. Therefore, data from tracking progress per class should and also on total retention in same schools

should be considered as better sources of gauging the UPE performance in some instances.

The second reason for tracking the pupils school progress and completion rates which another respondent identified was to do with the crossing of pupils from one school to another especially between government schools and private schools. The respondent who was a retired District Education officer stated *"this makes it very difficult to know the pupils who completed and those who didn't. Even if this student who crossed from a government to private school completed, he or she is counted as if the dropped out under UPE program"*. This argument appeared plausible and it may account for misinterpretation of school drop-out and completion rates if assessed in individual schools that are partially attributed to by inadequate information dissemination.

The third view of the completion rates was from a different respondent. The view of the head teacher was that while there has been almost the same enrolment rates amongst girls and boys under UPE, the dropout rates are also recognized amongst boys and girls throughout all the primary school levels. He noted that this is dependent of a number of factors including child labor in some communities like in the landing sites where boys go fishing, and in other cultures like Karamoja region where girls of adolescent age are married off in preference of cows. He stated that *"this affects completion rates differently in different regions but the national data aggregates may not*

*show these differences"* (head teacher of a school from the eastern region).

Another female head teacher respondent also had this to note on drop outs: *"the girl child has her own challenges relating to their monthly women days"*. She explained that in the school she heads there has been an NGO that has been assisting them with some funds to provide girls with facilities for those girls' monthly conditions to ensure that the irregular attendance and subsequent dropping out is minimized. *"Yes, it has worked. We managed to buy basins, lesus<sup>6</sup>, and we have trained girls from upper classes to make re-usable sanitary pads through use of local materials"* (Female head teacher from, Eastern region). She noted that this was a project in her school in the entire district which has a small coverage compared to all the schools in the locality. The suggestion for this problem would be to mobilize funding for provision of sanitary facilities.

Yet, another respondent from the central region emphasized the problem of less support from the parents. Like most of the other respondents in both regions sampled, the argument notable UPE dropouts were the reluctance of the parents to contribute towards school requirements. The respondent said that: *"the parents do not want to pay in government schools. They do not want to contribute to food (lunch), school uniform, and other requirements"* (head teacher central region). And another one had this to say *"the way this UPE was started, it was taken as a free thing .... and there has been*

<sup>6</sup>.Lesus are clothes commonly used by women to wrap around their wastes

*a lot of politicization".*

A respondent from the eastern region however, defended the parent non-contribution in some areas. He noted that for instance the parents may at times not be blamed for not packing lunch for their children at school. He argued that most of the Eastern region has severally been affected by drought leading to poor food yields in many areas. He had this to say: *"some families only survive on one meal a day and others take maize porridge for meals at times. This makes it difficult for them to contribute food or other school requirements because they do not have other sources of income"*. He observed that many of the families in the communities where their schools are dependent on crops like cassava and maize as a source of income. However, regular droughts and floods pose a big problem to the harvests in the region.

The overall views of different respondents on pupil retention, tracking, and completion rates suggest that not only the reports on UPE performance may be inaccurate but also that the factors that may be responsible for pupil drop out require serious attention from policy makers. Some of the school retention may not be solved at the parents' level as the policy may assume.

### **4.3. On the Quality of UPE**

In the course of implementation of UPE programs, the reviews continued to indicate poor quality of education in a number of ways which include among others low survival rates, low learning outcomes (*particularly numeracy and*

*literacy*), low efficiency, high absenteeism rates (i.e. for head teacher, teacher and learners); inadequate school management & supervision as well as inadequate teaching and learning materials (MoES, 2014/15), the improving the quality of pre-primary and primary education continued to be a priority in the subsector. To remedy the quality problem interventions made during the period included monitoring and support supervision of pre-primary and primary schools; delivery of instructional materials to beneficiary schools/colleges; provision of P.5-P.7 textbooks and assorted textbooks to support implementation of revised curriculum; primary teacher recruitment and deployment; and, infrastructure development. Other suggested remedies included provision of continuous professional development for nursery and primary teachers; enhancement of the thematic curriculum, and support for Early Grade Reading (EGR).

As a result of these various interventions undertaken in the pre-primary and primary sub-sector, achievements attained included improvement of pupil-teacher ratio, improved teaching and learning environment, increased number of availability of teachers, improved primary leaving examination (PLE) pass rates. However, proficient in literacy and numeracy according to the report was not assessed and therefore there were no data on it. Contrary to the intended objective also, the pupil-classroom ratio (PCR) declined from 57:1 in FY 2013/14 to 59:1 FY2014/15. The overall performance however indicates no substantial changes for both boys and girls from 2012 to 2015. The

reasons for these findings may be due to the continuing challenges in the UPE teaching environment that had not changed a lot to enable improvements as intimated in the interviews held. Problems of high pupil-teacher ratio, teaching and learning environment, sanitation, feeding, and poverty were cited in the existing reports and a number of them also featured in the respondents' opinions during this study.

Some of the respondents noted that there is a divergent way that the curriculum of the UPE and private schools are handled. They observed that "the Early Grade Reading" (EGR)<sup>7</sup> is not used in all schools which gradually becomes a disadvantage to some pupils at both primary and post primary levels. This problem was conceived to be highly associated with competence of teachers as one of the respondents noted:

"... Some of the teachers lack general competencies, fluency in both English and local language, reading and comprehension. The problem is bigger, (and) it relates to the training they [teachers] obtain from colleges. It also goes back to what kind of tutors ... tantamount to vicious cycle of education quality" (retired Education officer).

Nearly all the respondents were agreeable that lack of enough trained and competent teachers in all UPE schools posed a substantial challenge for quality teaching and pupil learning. In

addition, it was also noted that there are some teachers in government UPE schools but not on government payroll let alone that even those on the payroll express their discontentment on the meagre salary<sup>8</sup> that cannot sustain them and their families in the absence of other welfare interventions from parents or government. The common question from the respondents was how as a researcher one would imagine commitment of employees that are not on payroll to do effective teaching?

When explored further, the respondents noted that failure to follow EGR for schools creates a problem of quality as the pupils find conceptualisation from English which is a foreign language and difficult compared to a situation if they were beginning to learn from their mother languages. EGR was considered essential for a quick learning and improved quality although it was also found to face problems in some urban schools where a cross section of pupils with different mother languages were found.

#### **4.4. Financing of UPE programs**

A general consensus on matters of quality in primary and post primary education was also on the mode and amount of financing from government. It was established that talking about quality in education is unproductive without deliberate investment in it. The key argument was on irregularity of UPE funding, the fluctuating amounts in the releases and the non-alignment of financial year quotas vis-à-vis the

7.EGR is a policy requiring lower primary (p1-p3) to use local languages as a language of instruction so as to ease the learning process

8. It was noted that primary school teachers earn a salary about 150USD per month

school term set-up. Respondents pointed out that the capitation grant per primary school child per year is 7 000 Uganda shillings. This amount was considered being too small to be meaningful. A comparison of capitation grants for primary school of Universal Secondary Education (USE) students that was 47 000 Uganda shillings for those in private schools and 45 000 for government supported students under USE program.

One of the respondents had this to note: *"there is more funding for students at post primary level than the primary leaving the foundation of education marginalised"* (Retired Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports official). One Education officer indicated that to avert this problem, there had made proposals to the government to increase capitation grants for every child to at least 10 000 Uganda shillings. The proposals suggested that capitation grants could be withdrawn from fairly funded schools and granted to the poor schools that have more difficulties in mobilising their own finances and that some schools could be left to be self-financing in favour of the needy schools.

A further observation on UPE funding was on the salaries for primary teachers are still meagre, a net of about 400 000 Uganda Shillings which cannot sustain the teachers needs and their families. It was noted that like any other employees, teachers require transport, food, housing medical care, school fees for their own children for better education etc., which cannot be covered by the salary they get. Some of

the teachers therefore tend to look for alternative ways of getting another source of income lie through "bodaboda"<sup>9</sup> riding business, small kiosks etc. which they operate alongside the teaching. This causes a divided attention for concentration of teachers and at times may overlap with school time leading to late coming, or increased absenteeism that have an overall effect on the performance of learners.

A challenge of financing was also demonstrable in the nature of facilities and utilities for the primary schools. As a point of emphasis on this challenge, one of the respondents stated: *"you may find on one seat like this [pointing to a three sitter small bench near him] six children and some where no classes. I think you have heard where some pupils study under trees"*. Indeed, anecdotal records like newspapers, digital media and some assessment reports many times presented such captions indicating daunting UPE facilities in some isolated localities in Uganda.

It was noted that there is a dire need for water supplies for purposes of drinking and sanitation. A concern was for instance raised from some of the respondents on instances where government had made efforts to provide water bone toilets and changing rooms for girls in upper primary when need arises. One respondent also specifically pointed out that UNICEF as a government partner had gone further to provide some water tanks in some Northern Uganda part of western region but *"without water. What a mockery?"* one respondent noted. The re-

<sup>9</sup>. "Bodaboda" is a term for of motor-cycle transport in Uganda

spondents put an estimation of water supply coverage in primary schools to about 10% which is too small to attract and encourage retention of pupils at school as a result of good conducive environment.

#### **4.5. Views on Inclusiveness and Equality in UPE**

Most respondents were sceptical about the current approaches in UPE being capable of realising inclusiveness of all children. Some of the respondents for instance noted that to access universal Secondary Education (USE), one must have obtained an aggregate of 28 points in Primary Leaving examinations. However, most pupils in rural schools obtain more than 28 aggregate and one respondent had to emphasise: "so *who is benefiting?*" (a retired District Education Officer). The concern of the respondents here which is shared by the public is that pupils from urban schools that are presumably fairly wealthy are still the ones to benefit from the USE.

On special needs education, the views held from some respondents the government has not attentively done much towards improving the inclusiveness of the less advantaged pupils. It was noted that while the recommended teacher pupil's ratio in special needs schools is 1:10, this is not catered for in most schools in Uganda. Moreover, the children with special needs for arguments of equality are mixed amongst the rest of the classes with no specific provisions of equipment and

facilities for the pupils and teachers that handle them. Indeed, most reports seen have limited achievements and strategies to other disadvantaged children. As clearly noted, most of the data and achievements are on gender related comparisons not on equity and inclusiveness of other disadvantaged categories.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper has highlighted the performance of UPE since the policy began in 1997. It has underscored the achievements attained in enrolment and in gender parity specifically. From the documentary evidence, the findings indicate that UPE has played a great role in enabling access of boys and girls and within the last two decades, the numbers have increased three fold from about 3 million to about 9 million net enrolment.

It is however noted that in spite of increased access, some children with special needs may still be marginalised and therefore issues of full inclusiveness may not be claimed fully. It is also realised that retention and completion levels remain slightly lower than the desirable numbers meaning that even when there is increased enrolments, the pupils may not gain much if the dropout rates keep high.

The purpose for achieving objectives like numerous, literacy and also skilling the pupils for purposes of development may not be achieved. Quality of

education has been noted as remaining a big problem due to the teaching and learning challenges elaborated in the paper.

The specific recommendation therefore was that the government should focus on recruitment and capacity building of those in-service currently in order to improve their performance. The suggestions for increasing capitation grant for children under UPE was also emphasised as way to enable improved facilities and gradually to improve quality of education.

The proposals suggested include withdrawal of capitation grants from some schools that could be self-financing and this would be given to the most-needy schools. It was also suggested that policy makers should reconsider a human rights-based approach and ease actions for education for all while finding possibilities for parents' contributions as per their socio-economic circumstances. The politicisation of UPE policy should also be minimised so and stakeholder should be mobilised to contribute expected.

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