

**CRITIQUE AND ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY  
EDUCATION (UPE) IN UGANDA IN GENERAL AND  
SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN PARTICULAR  
LOCAL AREAS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamental human right. Clearly, there is no shortage of commitment to this right. However, it is a right that is routinely violated. About 50 million children of school going age in Africa are out of school. Yet, their governments have given priorities to political choices over the right to education. Education, however, has a critical bearing on one's capacity to function in every aspect of the economy.

On the other hand the international community is doing little to ensure the right to education where national governments are unable to fully fund universal basic education from their own resources.

It should be realized that the right to education cannot be realized unless primary education is made genuinely free, and adequately financed out of general taxation. This will require many countries to their tax take, and their budget allocations to basic education and to undertake steps to ensure that money is spent efficiently. This will in turn demand far-reaching changes that the money in how the International Financial Institutions operate, and the various macro economic and fiscal conditionalities they apply. However this requires genuine political commitment from all quarters- national governments, donor governments, international institutions and civil societies to achieve the desired goal of Education for all by 2015.

These successes need to be placed in context. If the government need to achieve the 2015 universal primary education goal, there is need to reduce gender disparity in primary school enrollment.

Education is an end in itself. It is something which people value because it opens new horizons, extends freedom and creates opportunities. Apart from its intrinsic values, education has a wide range of benefits for production, distribution, economic growth, health, and poverty reduction.

It also makes democracy possible by creating a demand to be heard and enhancing people's conscience and ability to influence decisions, which affect their lives. This is because literate people are better equipped to claim and defend their rights, insist on having leaders' accountability and seek to participate in the democratic process.

Therefore education is not just a fundamental human right as recognized in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of 1948 which states that:

*Everyone has a right to education shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.*

Education is also an enabling right, which unlocks a wider set of civil, political and economic rights. Despite the weakening link between primary education and labour market returns in most African countries, education still remains a necessary condition of formal sector employment and has been shown to have significant effects on agricultural productivity.

In an increasingly urbanized Africa, transactions are becoming ever more likely to be magnetized and formalized. Changes in property laws are a case in point. The inability to read and write is becoming an increasing disadvantage where people want to secure land rights, invest, sell assets and respond to market signals. Since all countries in the world are a signatory to this Declaration except Somalia. This implies that all those countries have an obligation of promoting, protecting and ensuring this right to education is attained.

In addition to that, all United Nations member states have pledged to fulfill the millennium goals that and two of them focus on education by 2015. These are:

- **Achieve Universal Primary Education**
  - Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling
- **Promote gender equality and empower women**
  - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2015  
(UNDP Report 2003)

In the same vein, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the child and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights supports the fact that education is a fundamental right. At regional level the 1990 Charter on the Right and Welfare of the African Child committed all African countries to the full realization of the right to education, with a particular reference on free primary and compulsory basic education.

This paper therefore aims at analyzing what Uganda has done in trying to provide and fulfill this fundamental right with specific reference to compulsory Universal Primary and free education.

Attention will be focused on the historical backgrounds in reference to the education systems, the UPE Policy Objectives set by the different countries, the achievements made, the interventions in place to promote elementary/ basic education, challenges faced by the different countries while implementation the policy and thereafter give recommendations.

## UGANDA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Uganda has a total area of 236,860 sq. miles (91,249 sq. km). Currently, Uganda's population is 22.1 million people with annual growth of 2.6 and 89% of the population lives in the rural areas.

Majority of the people are of school going age, 34.5% are below the poverty line. Adult illiteracy rate is 37% (Females 49% and Males 23%) Primary gross enrollment rate is 117 (Females 113.1 and Males 20.7), Primary completion rate is 61 (Females 32% and Males 48%), Secondary gross enrollment rate is 18 (Females 16 and Males 20%), and total education spending as a percentage of GDP is 4. Uganda was a British Protectorate from 1894 till 9th October 1962 when she got her independence.

Prior to independence school (formal) education, which was introduced by missionaries in 1877, was modeled along the British system of education. This heritage is still evident in the hierarchical 7-4-2-3 school system even today). That is to say, like in Britain Uganda still follows 7 years of primary, 4 years secondary (O level), 2 years higher school (A level) and a minimum of 3 years at University level. At the end of each stage, there is a national examination.

Right from the on set, this school system was not for all and it therefore grew to become highly selective and competitive with fewer and fewer pupils/ students continuing to the next level of education. As a result many Ugandans remained illiterate with literacy rates standing at only 65% with the primary education reaching only 50% of the age group.

It is against this background that in December 1996, that President Yoweri Museveni launched a policy of Universal Primary Education (UPE) sometimes referred to as the "Big Bang" Approach in accordance with the government White Paper on Education of 1992.

Under this policy, government was to provide "Free" education that is fees for up to four children maximum from each family of which two must be girls or if there is a disabled child, he/she must be given priority. This was a broad effort to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) for all children aged 6 to 12 years by 2000. The President's decision aimed at removing a key obstacle for families, also sending a signal on the importance of education. However, President Museveni has now said, "All children of school – going age should benefit from Universal Primary Education (UPE)."

**UPE OBJECTIVES:**

- Making basic education accessible to the learners and relevant to their needs as well as meeting national goals
- Making education equivalent in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities
- Establishing, providing and maintaining quality education as the basis for promoting the necessary resource development
- Initiating a fundamental positive transformation of society in the social, economic and political field
- Ensuring that education is affordable by the majority of Ugandans by providing initially the minimum necessary facilities and resources, progressively the optimal facilities.
- Enable every child to enter and remain school until they complete the primary education cycle.

**FREE COMPULSORY UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION (UPE)**

Universal Primary Education (UPE) program was launched in October 1996. It is a package of reforms designed specifically to focus on basic education (primary and Junior secondary) access and quality. The UPE is program being implemented for a ten year period (1996 to 2005) in fulfilment of the Uganda Constitution mandate which states in Chapter 6 / Section 38 Sub-section 2: “The Government shall within two years after Parliament first meets after the coming into force of this Constitution to implement the provision of Free Compulsory Universal Primary Education”. It was designed to address some of the shortcomings of the educational reforms and also to ensure that all children of school-going age have access to education, hence making basic education a right for all children.

**UPE OBJECTIVES**

- Expand access to good quality basic education.
- Promote efficient teaching and learning
- Improve teacher moral and motivation through incentives programmes
- Ensure adequate and timely supply of teaching and learning materials to schools.
- Improve teacher community relations.

## TOUTED “ACHIEVEMENTS” OF UPE

### 1. QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the years following the implementation of the UPE program everyone, especially the politicians, extravagantly touted its success and sought to be re-elected on this achievement. The local and central governments through their respective Ministries of Education, with support from different NGOs and the development partners were parted on the back for having had the vision to implement it and help to expand access, improve quality of teaching and learning through improved supply of logistics, curricula development as well as motivating teachers.

### 2. THE ENROLLMENT BALLOON

The second achievement was in the numbers. Enrollment figures after the launch of UPE short up from nearly 2.5 million in 1996 to nearly 6.8 million in 2000. Enrollment ratios also improved first rose dramatically to 123% in 1997 and then decreased to 117% in 2000.

This increase was mainly due to two reasons:

- The backlog of school age children who had not been accessing school was now able to do so.
- More children who had attained the school age but would not have afforded education prior UPE were now able to join school.

### 3. EDUCATION FOR GIRLS

Another related achievement is that this policy has also a specific focus on the education of girls, the disabled and orphans. For instance 1 million girls and 1.2 boys responded immediately; by 2001 and this is more than the 49% of girls that had been enrolled by 2000.

### 4. INCREASED CONSTRUCTION OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND SUPPLY OF FACILITIES

Increased construction of primary schools and supply of facilities was another show piece at political campaign rallies. For example, by end of 1999, 4,000 additional classrooms were constructed for primary school children while by the end of 2001; a total of 6,321 had been completed. There has also been a successful narrowing in primary enrollment gaps between the rich and the poor. The wealth bias that had characterized access to primary education prior UPE had been tremendously reduced.

## 5. DEMAND FOR TEACHERS

An increase in the number of children in school invariably led to an increase in the demand for teachers. As a result, there have been deliberate efforts to restructure Primary Teacher Education and to increase the number of trained, retrained and upgraded teachers. For instance between 1995 and 1999, 7,800 in – service teachers were trained or upgraded. In addition, 3,023 new teachers completed their training. The program also helped to bring to light the challenge of providing education for all and special challenge of providing education to children with disability

## 6. EFFICIENCY IN MANAGEMENT

In Uganda, there has been encouragement of the formation of PTAs and School Management Committees. **(information still lacking)**

## SOME REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

TABLE 1

PRESIDENT Yoweri Museveni yesterday addressed the *Busoga* Kingdom *Lukiiko* (assembly), warning that headmasters who flout his directive against charging lunch fees under the Universal Primary Education scheme would end up in jail.

At the start of his five-day tour of *Busoga*, Museveni advised rich parents, who insist that their children must have lunch at school, to take them to private schools instead of forcing poor parents to pay for meals.

Museveni said he was receiving persistent reports that pupils are forced out of school because their parents cannot afford lunch fees. Nobody is allowed to charge what he called “mandatory charges in UPE schools.”

The Government introduced UPE to ensure that all children get education, he said. Under UPE, parents and the Government have different roles. The parents provide *entanda* (meals), exercise books, uniform, pens and ensure hygienic conditions, he added. The Government pays teachers’ salaries, provides textbooks, libraries and laboratories.

He advised leaders to concentrate on problems that affect the UPE program, like addressing the performance of teachers.

Another purpose of his visit was to inform the population that the NRM believed in educating the masses, hence the introduction of UPE and Universal Secondary Education programs.

He also expressed the need to train more nurses and midwives in the region. “Poor health is a neighbor of poverty. With more nurses, the health situation can improve tremendously.”

Sources: Esther Mukyala, *New Vision*

### 1. MISALLOCATION, MISAPPROPRIATION, AND MISUNDERSTANDING

The implementation of the Universal Primary Education Policy in Uganda has faced many challenges. They range from inadequate infrastructure, irresponsible attitudes of some key stakeholders, misallocation and misappropriation of funds and materials, and misconceptions about the policy.

### 2. INADEQUATE PHYSICAL FACILITIES

Notwithstanding government commitment and donor support, input ratios for textbooks, classrooms, chairs and desks suffered with the introduction of UPE. Although the Ministry of Education has embarked on a drive to build more schools and provide instructional materials and community based construction has also contributed to achieving much higher classroom numbers than centralized construction methods had, there is still congestion. In some areas, classes are conducted under mango trees.

Though a number of new schools have been built, they still inadequate to accommodate the increasing number of school children. Counterpart funds from the Local government are not released on time; hence six months infrastructure projects are usually completed after two years. Local government officials also divert some building materials meant for specific projects. There are still number of schools that need to be rehabilitated and the government has limited funding.

Another constraint that Uganda faces in the implementation of primary education policy is the lack of sufficient funding to build schools at the reach of every child of school going age and thus, the poorer localities are left out. In addition, progress is leaving girls and the poorest, including working children behind.

Although the government has declared free primary education in the government primary schools, these schools are not built in the poorest areas of the country and that means the gap between the rural and urban areas in terms of education opportunities continues to widen.

### 3. COMPROMIZED QUALITY OF EDUCATION

With massive numbers of pupils enrolled without commensurate expansion of facilities, increased number of teachers, and adequate teaching and learning materials, the quality of education has been compromised. For instance, pupil-teacher ratio rose from 40, pre- UPE to 60 in 1999, while pupil-classroom ratio jumped from 85 to 145 over the same period. Though it has dramatically improved, the situation remains far from ideal.

Again, although direct evidence on learning is scanty, the available evidence gives cause for concern. For instance in tests administered to national random samples of primary three pupils, the number of pupils who achieved a satisfactory score declined from 48% from 1996 to 31% in 1999 on the mathematics test, and from 92% to 56% on the English oral test.

### 4. REPETITION AND DROPOUT RATES

Repetition rates at the primary level appear to have declined significantly for both boys and girls. That is 17% before UPE and 9% after UPE. However, an automatic promotion policy, which was put in place, was only partially observed. Latest data on drop out rates show similar trends for both boys and girls through grade 4.

There are still some children who are yet to attend school for the first time. Some children also drop out of school. There is a troubling combination of causative factors. These include poverty, social problems, child labor (especially in the informal sector), and lack of schools and teachers in some rural areas.

## 5. THE UPE BULGE

The UPE program has been criticized for being short-sighted. There is no explanation as to what will happen to the ten thousands of children after primary level. For instance, in 2001, 360,000 pupils sat the Primary Leaving Examinations and only 250,000 qualified for Post Primary Education. However, only 150,000 children were admitted into 734 government – aided secondary schools, 29 technical and farm schools. Therefore 100,000 pupils were not placed in any of the government schools.

The program has become too expensive to run because the government is short of funds. The result is that donors have been approached for assistance. However, some of the donors often come with their conditions, which may not wholly be in the interest of the program.

It has been observed that the scope of some of the intervention strategies by local and central government and some donor partners is limited to some selected schools in the various districts. In most cases funding is not available to expand and replicate the intervention to other schools. Here NGOs come in handy.

## 6. NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND CONSEQUENT APARTHY

Another major challenge to implementation of UPE is the incapacity of primary stakeholders to support their children with school requirements. Some parents are not providing their children with basic school needs such as uniforms, exercise books, pen/pencil, shoes and bags. This case is even more serious in the case of the girl child. Some parents would not even pay levies for school improvement until their wards are sent home from school. This is a result of the misconception people have about the policy, having the view that the government must provide even uniforms and pen/pencils for their wards.

Inter-tribal wars, political instability and cultural attitudes are also among the main contributory obstacles to increase and retain school enrolment rates in some localities in the countries under study.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

After examining the objectives, achievements and challenges in the implementation of the UPE in the country, the following recommendations can be made, it is clear that there are still some actions to be taken by the various local governments, such as those in Busoga, to optimally achieve the objectives of their education policies. The following recommendation can therefore be considered:

- There is the need to realize that basic education goes beyond literacy. It should therefore embrace both vocational and life skills. There should be opportunities for UPE graduates to continue with studies although they may not enter the mainstream or formal educational system.
- There is the need for strong political commitment backed by strategic visions and policy frameworks for the education sector with input from the key Ministries, particularly the Ministries of Finance, Local Government, Public Service and Education. Primary education should be the focus of the governments' Poverty Reduction Strategy Programs (PRSPs) and supported by sound macro economic policies, which foster the expansion of the education system and increase funding for education, particularly UPE.
- There should be the establishment of effective partnerships between governments and development partners (domestic and international) to help build a strong constituency for education. Governments should strengthen their collaboration with external financing agencies to provide significant financial support to create the resource base needed in the implementation of their Education Sector Investment Plans, if universal primary education/basic education is to become a reality by 2015 in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- Measures to improve transparency and accountability of spending at school level in combination with predictable flows of aid permitted remarkable efficiency gains in the use of sector resources. District, Local or county Directors of education must be empowered to manage their budgets.
- The Parents Teachers Association (PTAs) in conjunction School Management Committee (SMCs) members should regularly visit the school to check attendance and take necessary measures to curb indiscipline and laxity among teachers and pupils, and withdrawal of children, especially girls from school.

The PTA executives and SMC members should be trained in management; evaluation and monitoring to enable them carry out their supervisory role more effectively. These bodies should also be entrusted with the responsibilities for ensuring all school entry-age children are in schools, track all enrolled children to ensure their continuation in program, ensure that the quality of learning/teaching and the school environment are improved.

- There should be increased advocacy and awareness creation by Civil Societies, policy makers, community leaders (district and local village heads). This should target community members and parents to fulfill their responsibilities towards meeting their children's educational needs.
- Community members should be encouraged to form committees, which sometimes partially overlapped or linked with a similar body existing for health, nutrition and hygiene to promote synergy among key social services and enhance their total effectiveness
- Since the way governments and donors plan, budget and spend has a bearing in the realization of basic education, there is need for both parties to realise that basic rights including education as a starting point in planning and budgeting processes. This entails strategies to provide sufficient school facilities for all children both the un-reached and the deliberately excluded. This requires that schools become genuinely accessible and that rights within the school-‘rights in education’ are realized, alongside the right to education.

## CONCLUSION

The government's determination to adopt a holistic approach to the development of education within the framework of mobilising all available resources-human, material, and financial is gradually yielding positive results. Poverty, which has been identified as

a major barrier to education, is being addressed through the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) which seeks to provide an enabling environment that empower all Ghanaians to participate in wealth creation.

I hope that the central and local governments, in spite of severe economic constraints will remain committed to efforts aimed at putting in place an efficient, credible and sustainable education system that will make the nation competitive in today's globalize economy which is increasingly becoming knowledge-driven

The primary responsibility for realizing the right to education rests with national and local governments, which must make maximum efforts to realize the right to education progressively. However, there is also an international obligation at the level where governments operate collectively – through the UN system and the International Financial Institutions – since universal rights entail universal responsibilities.

Increasingly, civil society is also working at the national level and international level through alliances, to build popular pressure on governments to realize the right to education. The various governments must respond to the campaigns by NGOs, community groups, unions, religious groups, and the private sector.

At the international level, campaign groups, such as *Busoga Twegaite* must lobby for a new financial, planning and monitoring framework, to achieve the realization of the right to education.