Establishing Strategies Influencing UPE Policy Sustainability in Rwenzori Region Western Uganda

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ABSTRACT: *Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in the form of fee abolition has become popular in Uganda and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The current UPE policy is devoid of analytical studies on its impact and challenges beyond school enrollment. This paper is an attempt to make an establishment on the strategies that are thought to influence UPE policy sustainability in the Rwenzori region of Western Uganda. , to identify common and unique strategies of UPE sustainability and to examine them responding to the capacity and needs of the Rwenzori Region. The results show that effective policy implementation would require considerable consultation with key stakeholders and a baseline survey that will enable systematic implementation and consideration of equity. Mutual accountability and a responsibility mechanism between the government and parents/communities is also a key to the sustainability of the UPE policy.*

KEYWORDS: Strategies, Universal Primary Education, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In Uganda, the introduction of UPE in 1997 led to a great increase in gross enrolment. Enrolment in primary schools increased from a total of 3.1 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 1997, an increase of 73% in one year. This is massive compared to an increase in gross primary school enrolment in the decade preceding the introduction of UPE of just 39% (from 2.2 million in 1986). By 2003, gross enrolment in primary schools had reached 7.6 million. The national gross primary school enrolment ratio in 2003 was 127%, indicating that children beyond primary-school age had joined the primary education cycle. The equivalent net enrolment ratio was 100% (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2003). The period 1996 to 2003 also witnessed a large increase in the number of primary schools, from 8,531 in 1996 to 13,353 in 2003, an increase of just under 5,000 schools in a period of only seven years. This also compares with an increase in the ten years preceding the introduction of UPE of just over 1,000 schools (from 7,351 in 1986). The number of primary school teachers also increased rapidly, from 81,564 in 1996 to 145,587 in 2003, an increase of 78% compared to an increase in the decade preceding the introduction of UPE of just 12% (Inter-Regional Inequality Facility, 2006). There are schools both in rural and urban areas that are understaffed, with ratios of over 100 pupils per teacher. This undoubtedly compromises the teaching-learning process and subsequently the quality of education (Kakooza, 2003).

The strategies of sustainability of Universal Primary Education may vary from country to country. This study examined those strategies inherent in Uganda only. It sought to identify these strategies and examine their strengths and weaknesses as regards sustenance of the UPE programme. Experiences in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya show that the UPE programme has been affected by economic crises among other troubles that face most of the sub-Saharan African countries (Obasi, 2000; Sifuna, 2007). In Malawi, the fee abolition policy resulted in low

levels of material provision and overall low levels of pupil achievement (Chimombo, 1999; Chimombo, 2005). Even with a number of existing lessons from the past, the current UPE policy in Uganda is devoid of analytical studies on its impact and challenges beyond school enrolment (Nishimura *et al.*, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Provision of primary education in Uganda is the primary responsibility of government. The components of quality education include availability of qualified teachers, good curriculum, well supervised teaching, excellent assessment and appropriate infrastructure with management, good partnership with government, good rapport with the community (parental involvement) and adequate financial support both internally and externally (Semana, 2007)Every nation of the world today has come to an immediate and intuitive awareness of the urgency to build a sustainable future. The world may not be able to provide a precise definition of 'sustainable development' or 'sustainability' yet – indeed, even development experts still disagree over the precise definition of these terms. However, all agree that there is an urgent need for informed actions to attain sustainable development. They smell the problem in the air; they taste it in their water; they meet it in more congested living spaces and blemished landscapes; they read it in the newspapers and hear about it on radio and television (UNESCO, 1997). In the same way, sustainability of UPE is not a minor agenda; it is critical to the survival of basic education in developing countries of Africa, especially countries like Uganda that have in the past been ravaged by wars, diseases and natural calamities among other challenges.

Sustainable education is the best tool for laying a solid foundation for a nation's growth and development. It is also the tool for eradicating illiteracy and imparting knowledge and development of skills. Indeed, human resourcefulness, which is the bedrock of development, meaningful and purposeful living, can only be attained through education. Therefore, basic primary school education is the base needed to enhance economic emancipation (RADF, 2014).

The issue of educational sustainability was addressed in the Dakar Conference on Education for All held in 2000. It was emphasized that the success of the UPE project is to be measured not only in relation to whether or not it is meeting its goals but also by its sustainability. The sustainability of UPE relies upon the national political commitment to the education sector in countries. Political commitment provides an environment conducive to more support in form of financial aid and other factors like community support. UPE should be viewed as a long-term and more predictable commitment projected not just as a human right, but 'as the key to sustainable development and peace and stability' (WEF, 2000, p. 2). Moreover, beyond this much generalized ambition, there were calls for sustainability of UPE from the start, for example in the demand for UPE to be delivered within 'a sustainable and well-integrated sector framework' (WEF, 2000), and also in the emphasis on UPE plans being based on (national) sustainable financial frameworks.

It is noteworthy that discourses on educational sustainability are not aimed at determining how foreign financial aid may be sustained, but are principally about the crucial need for country resources to be available not just to support UPE in the short-term but to also sustain it in the

long-term. Equally, UPE has to be a country's responsibility, first and foremost, and as such there needs to be 'real and sustained ownership' of the UPE goals among local educational stakeholders. The emphasis on 'sustained political commitment' has also been made thus: "No countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by lack of resources" (WEF, 2000, p. 16). In fact, there is more emphasis in the Dakar Conference documentation on the crucial need for 'sustained political commitment' at the country level than at the donor level. This implies that it is up to governments like that of Uganda to find possible avenues to ensure UPE is fully sustainable in the long-term.

The WSSD Report reinforces the two Education MDGs (on Universal Primary Education and Gender Parity), and the Dakar UPE Goals. The reason for this is that "Education is critical for promoting sustainable development" (WSSD, 2002, p. 51). However, little investigation has been done on this assumed relationship. Thus, according to the Delors Report of 1996,"The notion of sustainability further complements that of human development" (UNESCO, 1996, p. 78). The discourse is no longer just about 'sustained long-term' support as was the case in Jomtien, but it includes the terms 'sustainable' and 'sustainability'. This became one of the differences between Jomtien and the World Education Forum (WEF), ten years later, in 2000. Sustainability is a crucial ingredient of stability and perpetuity of any project life.

The environmental, social, cultural and political sustainability of development efforts are essential for the security and well-being of people and the functioning of the complex, interdependent global system now emerging (OECD & DAC, 1996, p. 5). Over twenty years ago, at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien in March 1990, the term 'sustainability' was hardly used, except in respect of one of key concerns in the notion that development agencies should get involved in extended commitment to support national and regional activities in UPE. As such, the meaning of 'sustained', it is married with 'long-term' commitment to provide support for projects. Accordingly, development agencies established policies and plans in the 1990s in line with their commitments *to sustained, long-term* support for national and regional actions and increased their financial and technical assistance to basic education (WCEFA, 1990). However, this 'aid commitment' needs to be set alongside an equally strong focus on the need for 'the long-term commitment of governments and their national partners' to reach the targets they have set for themselves. In other words, Jomtien was far from being merely concerned with aid commitment only; it was also about the sustained political commitment of UPE (King, 2008).

UPE sustainability in some African countries is threatened by cultural values, practices, vices such as corruption, war among other problems. Semana (2007), in a study titled *Addressing Quality Education in Uganda: Challenges and Dilemma in Western Uganda*, observes that there is rampant cheating in examinations at all levels of education because of corruption and the culture of merely teaching and learning to pass examinations. This is evidence that sustainability of UPE is threatened by pressure to appear to perform at the expense of quality. It also means that the struggle to attain UPE sustainability should be equally marched with strategies to curb moral decadence and unprofessionalism among other vices in the educational sector. Problems of corruption, low salaries and poor career mobility have contributed to the uncertainty on sustainability of UPE programme in Uganda (Semana, 2007)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 4.27: Factors influencing Sustainability of UPE

Statement	VG	G	NS	P	VP
The general quality of education provided by schools under the education for all programmes (UPE)	27(11.1)	182(74.1)	18(7.4)	18(7.4)	
The attitudes of the pupils towards teachers and the school	12(4.9)	176(71.6)	36(14.8)	21(8.6)	
The performance of girls compared to boys in your school	15(6.2)	197(80.2)	3(1.2)	24(9.9)	6(2.5)
Classrooms (Teaching and learning environment)	9(3.7)	183(74.4)	12(4.9)	39(15.9)	3(1.2)
Staff accommodation	3(1.2)	109(44.4)	15(6.2)	106(43.2)	12(4.9)
Staff meals	0(0)	75(30.3)	13(5.3)	155(63.2)	3(1.3)
Toilet facilities	0(0)	99(40.2)	12(4.9)	135(54.9)	0(0)
Library facilities	0(0)	39(16)	12(4.9)	182(74.1)	12(4.9)
General Quality of learning	6(2.4)	177(72)	24(9.8)	33(13.4)	6(2.4)

VG = Very Good; G = Good; NS = Not Sure; P = Poor; VP = Very Poor
Of the teacher respondents, as shown in Table 4.27 above, 27(11.1%) and 182(74.1%) asserted that the quality of education was very good and good, respectively. On the other hand, 7.4% were unsure while another 7.4% said the quality of education was poor.

A majority of teachers, 176(71.6%) reported that pupils' attitudes towards UPE education was good with 12(4.9%) of the teachers saying the attitudes of learners were very good. However, 36(14.8%) teachers were unsure while 21(8.6%) of them were of the view that pupils' attitudes towards UPE were poor. It was found difficult to fully explain learners' attitudes since earlier results had indicated that drop-out levels were high and repetition levels and the general performance is quite poor.

As part of priorities of ensuring sustainability of UPE, gender sensitivity and consideration was regarded in this study as a key factor. As such, the study sought to compare the performance of girls in relation. From the research results in Table 4.27 above, 15(6.2%) and 197(80.2%) of the teachers said the performance of girls compared to boys in the Rwenzori Region was very good and good, respectively. Three (1.2%) of the teachers were not sure on this issue. However, 24(9.9%) said girls' performance was poor and 6(2.5%) said it was very poor

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the study findings, it is clear that a number of strategies have been put in place to ensure the sustainability of UPE programme in primary schools in Rwenzori Region. However, most these strategies are not enough to achieve their intended objectives. The government has endeavoured to provide well-trained teachers and the needed resources for quality teaching and

learning. However, the resources allocated to most schools are insufficient to cater for increasing enrolments. The study findings indicate that sufficiently availing the requisite teaching and learning resources in time is paramount to ensuring good teaching practices and improving pupils' performance.

Parental support of the UPE policy is highly valued by most teachers and head teachers as well as the programme supervisors such as DEOS and DISOS. Although, parental/community involvement in the UPE project has discouraged some parents who feel overburdened when asked to provide for meals, scholastic materials and school fees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study findings and conclusions, the researcher makes the following recommendations: Firstly, the findings indicated that majority of head teachers and teachers, pupils and education supervisors' were male. Therefore, the researcher recommends to the Ministry of Education and Sports to work on equally recruiting teachers of both genders and find proper strategies of enrolling an equal number of pupils in regard to gender distribution in primary schools.

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