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Inter-Regional Inequality Facility

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Universal Primary Education | Uganda

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Objectives

Universal Primary Education (UPE) is one of the Government of Uganda's main policy tools for achieving poverty reduction and human development. Broadly speaking, its main objectives are to:

- provide the facilities and resources to enable every child to enter and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete;
- make education equitable in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities;
- ensure that education is affordable by the majority of Ugandans;
- reduce poverty by equipping every individual with basic skills.

UPE was introduced in January 1997, following a political commitment by President Museveni that the Government would meet the cost of primary education of four children per family. This commitment was soon extended to allow all people that wanted to access primary education to do so.

Description

Under the UPE programme, the Government of Uganda abolished all tuition fees and Parents and Teachers Association charges for primary education. Following its introduction, gross enrolment in primary school increased from 3.1 million in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2003. This amounts to an increase of 145% (4.5 million children), compared to an increase of 39% (0.9 million children) between 1986 and 1996. This is despite the fact that primary education was not made compulsory, nor entirely free, since parents were still expected to contribute pens, exercise books, clothing, and even bricks and labour for classroom construction.

The UPE programme has required a significant increase in public expenditure devoted to primary education. Total education expenditure increased from 2.1% GDP in 1995 to 4.8% of GDP in 2000, while the share of the education sector in the national budget increased from 13.7% in 1990 to 24.7% in 1998. More importantly, under the country's Education Sector Investment Plan, at least 65% of the education budget must fund primary education. The additional expenditure has been financed largely from debt relief provided under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, channeled via the country's Poverty Action Fund.

Lessons learned

The UPE programme in Uganda demonstrates that a poor country with a committed government and donor support can fight poverty through ensuring universal access to education for its citizens. The significant increase in primary school enrolment is also an indication that the payment of school fees was a big impediment to accessing education, especially for poor families. Nevertheless, there are still ways in which the programme could be improved. These include tackling institutional constraints to the delivery of quality education services, taking advantage of opportunities offered by the liberalisation of the education sector, and reducing inequity in access to education and the quality of education across districts and between rural and urban areas.

Background

In December 1996, the President of the Republic of Uganda, Mr. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, announced that four children of school-going age per family would benefit from free primary education, starting from January 1997. This policy became known as Universal Primary Education (UPE). It was seen as the main tool for achieving the economic, social and political objectives outlined in the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports policy document of 1998. Broadly, the objectives of UPE are to:

- establish, provide and maintain quality education as the basis for promoting human resource development;
- provide the facilities and resources to enable every child to enter and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete;
- make basic education accessible to the learner and relevant to his or her needs, as well as meeting national goals;
- make education equitable in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities;
- ensure that education is affordable by the majority of Ugandans;
- meet the objective of poverty eradication by equipping every individual with basic skills and knowledge.

When the implementation of UPE started in January 1997, the registration limit of four children per family proved problematic, particularly regarding the exact definition of a family. Eventually, the Government removed this restriction, and allowed all people that wanted primary education under the UPE programme to do so.

Details

Under the UPE programme, the Government of Uganda abolished tuition fees and Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) charges for primary education. (PTA charges were introduced during the 1970s to complement the low salaries of teachers. Collections from PTA charges were used as an incentive for teachers and also for the general running of a school. Parents and teachers of respective schools would agree on the amount, which varied from school to school.)

To ensure success of the programme, the Government instituted complementary financing measures. Financing of the education sector as a whole increased significantly, from 2.1% GDP in 1995 to 4.8% of GDP in 2000, while the share of the education sector in the national budget increased from 13.7% in 1990 to 24.7% in 1998. Uganda's Education Sector Investment Plan also makes it mandatory that not less than 65% of the education budget must fund primary education. UPE was also implemented alongside the liberalisation of the provision of education services, that enabled private schools to operate. However, private primary schools are mainly concentrated in urban areas where only 12% of the population resides.

Despite the abolition of tuition and PTA charges, primary education was not made compulsory. Neither was it made entirely free, since parents were still expected to contribute pens, exercise books, clothing, and even bricks and labour for classroom construction through community work. During the implementation stage however, the Government realised that parents were not willing to contribute large amounts of bricks and labour, partly because of the many other demands on their time. The Government has therefore since provided cash for construction of more classrooms, paying of more teachers, and purchase of the requisite scholastic materials, especially textbooks.

Implementation

Key partners in the implementation of the UPE policy include the Ministry of Education and Sports, local authorities, and the school management committees elected by parents. Each of these have clear roles, which are further elaborated below.

Ministry of Education and Sports

The main roles of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in the implementation of UPE, as specified in the guidelines of 1998, are as follows:

- training and retraining of teachers;
- providing instructional materials in the form of textbooks and teachers' guides;
- contributing to the construction of basic school facilities (e.g. classrooms, libraries);
- supervising, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of UPE;
- providing curriculum, monitoring and assessment standards.

In terms of expenditure, the MoES provides two types of grants for UPE, namely capitation (fees) grants and school facilities grants. Capitation grants are paid on the basis of the number of students enrolled in a school and the level of education. The monthly grant per child was fixed at about US$5 per pupil for classes P1–P3, and US$8 per pupil for classes P4–P7, payable for a fixed period of 9 months per year. The MoES also provides guidelines for the spending of capitation grants in primary schools, which are as follows: 50% on instructional materials; 30% on co-curricular activities (sports, clubs etc.); 15% on school management (school maintenance, payment for utilities such as water and electricity); and 5% on school administration.

Local authorities

Under the leadership of the Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), local authorities are responsible for ensuring that all UPE funds released to them by the MoES reach schools and are not retained for any other purposes. UPE funds are therefore conditional grants, over which district authorities have little power of re-allocation to other uses. The CAOs are also responsible for ensuring prompt disbursement of UPE grants to schools, proper accountability of UPE grants, the formulation of the education budget and its successful fulfilment, and adequate briefing of District Councils on the implementation of UPE.

Sub-county chiefs represent the CAOs at the sub-county level. They make regular visits to schools, implement local government bye-laws on UPE, keep a record of both pupils and teachers in the sub-county, submit regular reports on education to the CAOs, ensure safe water and sanitation in schools, and in schools under their jurisdiction, enforce proper use and accountability for UPE grants and public funds.

School management committees

School management committees are statutory organs at the school level representing the government. They give overall direction to the operation of the school, ensure that schools have development plans, approve and manage school budgets, monitor school finances, and ensure transparency especially in use of UPE grants. Head-teachers of primary schools report to the District Education Officers, but also work closely with the school management committees in running UPE primary schools. They are accountable for all money disbursed to schools and for school property.

Impacts

The impact of Uganda's UPE programme can be assessed according to three criteria: access to education, quality of education, and equity.

Access to education

Following the introduction of UPE in 1997, gross 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 compares with 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 standard primary-school age had rejoined 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 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%. This compares with an increase in the decade preceding the introduction of UPE of just 12%.

There is evidence, however, of a significant drop-out rate of pupils from the primary education cycle. Although it is difficult to estimate completion rates precisely, of the 2,159,850 pupils that were enrolled in primary school level one in 1997 at the time UPE was introduced, only 485,703 (23%) reached primary seven in 2003. Pupils abandon school for different reasons, but the most common include lack of interest (46%), family responsibilities (15%) and sickness (12%).

The quality of education

The introduction of UPE in 1997 was associated with a sudden drop in education quality indicators, such as the pupil-teacher ratio, the pupil-classroom ratio, and pupil-textbook ratio. However, since 1997 Government has constructed more classrooms, trained and deployed more teachers, and bought more textbooks. This has led to a gradual improvement in those indicators.

The pupil-teacher ratio, which gives an indication of contact between pupils and teachers in classrooms, improved slightly from about 65:1 in 2000 to 54:1 in 2003 in government primary schools. The pupil-classroom ratio, which indicates the degree of congestion in a classroom, also improved slightly, from about 110 pupils per classroom in 2000 to 94 pupils per classroom in 2003. However, compared to the Poverty Eradication Action Plan target of 40:1, a pupil-classroom ratio of 94:1 still represents significant congestion in primary school classrooms. The pupil-textbook ratio for the major subjects (English and Mathematics) was about 3:1 in 2003, which was about the same as the pre-UPE ratio. Although the Government purchased a large number of textbooks as part of its UPE implementation strategy, access to the books is limited as they are often kept in stores due to a lack of space.

Analysis of teacher quality reveals that a large proportion of primary school teachers, particularly in rural areas, lack appropriate training. In 2003, there were 145,703 primary schoolteachers, of whom 54,069 (37%) had no formal teacher training. An additional 7,960 had just a teaching certificate, obtained after training on completion of primary education. Most of these had retired, but had been recalled into the teaching service due to shortage of teachers after the introduction of UPE. The majority of these unqualified teachers are deployed in UPE schools in rural areas.

Under the school facilities grants, the government has devoted a lot of resources to procure textbooks, construct classrooms and teachers' houses, and purchase furniture for pupils. The increase in education inputs explains the gradual improvement of some education quality indicators from the time UPE was introduced. Nevertheless, these improvements may not always translate into better education performance by pupils. Results of a National Assessment of Primary Education Performance taken between 1996 and 2000, for example, suggest that education performance in terms of pupils' numeric, reading, science, and social studies knowledge and skills deteriorated following the introduction of UPE.

Equity in education

As initially designed, the UPE policy had specific provisions to address gender and other inequities. For example, of the four children per family that were to benefit from UPE, at least two had to be female, if the family had female children. Furthermore, the policy accorded priority to children with disabilities over children without disabilities. In practical terms, this entailed mobilising children with disabilities to go to school and expanding school facilities for children with disabilities.

There is evidence that UPE has contributed to increased equity in education. The post-UPE period witnessed a narrowing gap between the number of girls and boys enrolled in primary schools: in 2003, enrolment of girls in primary schools was slightly over 49% of the total, compared to 45% in 1993. By 2003, the number of children with disabilities in primary school was 247,953, and the Government has continued with affirmative action to address special needs of children with disabilities. In rural areas, children that were previously missing out totally from primary education are now benefiting as a result of UPE.

These gains notwithstanding, there are threats to maintaining and improving equity in education. The high drop-out rate is the first major threat, particularly the main reason advanced for dropping out (lack of interest). Some parents of the beneficiary pupils of UPE appear not to have seen benefits of the programme. The second is that schools in urban areas (private and also UPE) perform much better in national examinations compared to UPE schools in rural areas. The differences arise partly from public expenditure per pupil, which is much higher in urban areas than in rural areas. For example, in 2000 expenditure per pupil in the capital city Kampala was US$63, compared to only US$10 in the remote and poorest northern district of Kotido. The differences also reflect parental contributions however. In rural areas where the majority of the poor reside, the contribution of parents is almost zero, introducing further inequity in terms of total resources per pupil.

Factors contributing to success

Two related factors contributed to the success of Uganda's UPE programme: the Government's commitment to the UPE policy on the one hand, and external funding on the other. Having made a political promise to the electorate that the Government would meet the cost of primary education of four children per family, President Museveni wanted to fulfill that promise. The Government subsequently prepared its Education Sector Investment Plan, which put emphasis on primary education. The plan provided for an explicit focus on primary education by making it mandatory that at least 65% of the education budget would go to funding primary education.

External donors too wanted to support a sector that could show visible results for their financial support, and hence their support to UPE. As a reward for the good economic policies that were implemented in collaboration with the World Bank and the IMF, the country benefited from debt relief in 1998 under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, and later under the enhanced HIPC initiative in 2001. Resources generated by reduced debt servicing were put into a Poverty Action Fund (PAF), from which UPE and other poverty reduction programmes were funded. Because of its focus on poverty, the PAF was attractive to bilateral donors who in turn responded by contributing to the fund, thus increasing the amount of funding for UPE and other poverty reduction programmes. A final factor explaining the success of UPE was parents' willingness to send their children to school following the abolition of school fees.

Lessons learned

The UPE programme in Uganda demonstrates that a poor country with a committed government and donor support can fight poverty through ensuring universal access to education for its citizens. The significant increase in primary school enrolment in Uganda, following the abolition of school fees, is also an indication that the payment of school fees was a big impediment to accessing education, especially for poor families. Because of government commitment, education quality has also improved since UPE was introduced. However, without debt relief under the HIPC debt initiative, funding of the UPE programme would have been an uphill task for the Uganda Government.

Three main lessons have been learned from the experience of UPE in Uganda. First, institutional constraints to the delivery of quality education services, including corruption, are big challenges. An expenditure tracking study conducted by the Economic Policy Research Centre, Kampala in 1997 found that by that time, only 35% of funds released from the central government to schools were reaching the intended beneficiaries. Corruption was adversely affecting UPE in various ways, including shoddy work in construction of primary school structures, demoralisation of teachers, and poor performance of UPE pupils in national examinations. In some districts, classrooms that were constructed by private firms were reportedly collapsing before completion of construction.

Second, community contributions of labour and building materials have generally failed to materialise. This is most likely on account of poor community mobilisation, and the engagement of parents in other income-generating activities. Members of Parliament have not played the role they were expected to play in this regard.

Third, liberalisation of the education sector has reduced the financial burden on the Government somewhat, as relatively wealthier parents have opted to send their children to private schools. However, the Government is yet to fully take advantage of the liberalisation of the education sector, so as to maximise the impact of UPE. There is scope for the Government to work more in partnership with private education service providers, to maximise the synergies between UPE and the liberalisation of education.

Finally, targeting of the poor remains a major challenge. In order to reduce inequity both in access to education and in the quality of education, the UPE programme should aim to increase expenditure per pupil in UPE schools in rural areas and for the urban poor. By so doing, the Government would have more resources at its disposal to focus on improving the quality of education and reducing drop-out rates in the areas of its operation where it is most needed.

References and further reading

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