

FREE EDUCATION GIVING EVERY CHILD A CHANCE

Uganda's school dilemma

Ten years after the launch of the Universal Primary Education Programme in 1996, President Yoweri Museveni is launching the Universal Secondary Education this February. But the sceptics are watching. *Benon Herbert Oluka reports*

WHEN THE UGANDA NATIONAL Examinations Board released the Primary Leaving Examination results in early 2004, Charles Aseun of Ngora Primary School in Kumi district scored a total aggregate of 16 points in the four subjects examined.

In a remote district such as Kumi — where first grades are hard to come by — Aseun, who scored a second grade is usually part of the star cast — and is ordinarily snapped up by secondary schools in the district.

However, Aseun could not continue to secondary school as his parents were unable to raise tuition fees. So, he was forced to abandon school altogether and turned to farming for a livelihood.

Today, at the tender age of 20 and just three years after dropping out of school, Aseun is a father of two. He now has to fend for his family from the meagre returns of his garden and the odd jobs he occasionally gets.

"Going to school did not help me much. When you look at my situation now, it is as if I never even stepped into a classroom," he told *The EastAfrican*.

The second born in a family of three boys and five girls, Aseun has seen his fate replayed in the life stories of his two young sisters. With little hope of ever making it beyond Primary Seven due to lack of fees, the two abandoned school to work as housegirls.

The family's hope now, according to their father, Athanaston Agetu, lies in the soon-to-be launched free secondary education programme, which will change the fate of the remaining "four children currently in primary school."

But while he is full of hope, a deputy head teacher in one of the primary schools in Ngora is not.

She told *The EastAfrican* that the same conditions that forced children out of school at primary level are likely to affect those earmarked to benefit from Universal Secondary Education.

"Most of these children drop out of school when their parents fail to provide books, pens and meals," she said when asked why primary school pupils still drop out even after the government is paying their tuition fees.

Despite the introduction of free primary education 10 years ago, the dropout rate in primary schools in Uganda still remains high. According to provincial statistics from the Ministry of Education and Sports, the completion rate at primary level was 48 per cent in 2006 — dropping from 51 per cent the year before. In 2004, the figure had reached an all-time high of 60 per cent, having risen from 56 per cent in 2003.

While it is expected that the introduction of free secondary education will help reduce the dropout rate, in a situation where no immediate returns are seen after secondary school, more students are still likely to drop out after a few years in school — or even not bother enrolling at all.

For the government, however, the rallying cry is that free primary education has at least provided many Ugandan children with basic skills, making them able to read and write.

"Our policies have helped the hitherto disadvantaged children get basic educa-

tion," Education Ministry spokesman Aggrey Kibenge said.

The enrolment rate has risen from 3 million in 1996 to 6.4 million in 2006; the number of primary schools has risen from 8,500 in 1996 to 126,990 in 2006. The number of classrooms built by the government has shot up from 25,676 to 85,043 in 10 years, and the percentage of the population that can access basic education has risen from 40 before UPE to 70 per cent.

For a programme that was swiftly put together in the run up to the 1996 presidential elections as a campaign tool, the statistics are indeed impressive. However, several studies done since show that it has fared poorly, especially in improving the lot of the intended beneficiaries framework.

A survey by the Independent Evaluation Group — an autonomous unit in the World Bank — says the standard of education in Uganda has been sacrificed at the altar of expansion.

"Improved learning outcomes have often been undermined by rapid expansion. Countries that have taken the 'big bang' approach to improved primary school access, such as Kenya, Malawi and Uganda, have expanded so rapidly that they have been unable to deliver basic educational services effectively," says the report titled *From Schooling Access to Learning Outcomes: An Unfinished Agenda*, and released in July 2006.

MR KIBENGE, HOWEVER, gave an entirely different spin to the World Bank's assessment. He said, "The World Bank's report generalises issues as far as our efforts are concerned. Individual countries have unique situations to deal with but some of those reports give a generalised view. It is not that we sacrificed quality at the expense of expansion. We just had unique problems to deal with."

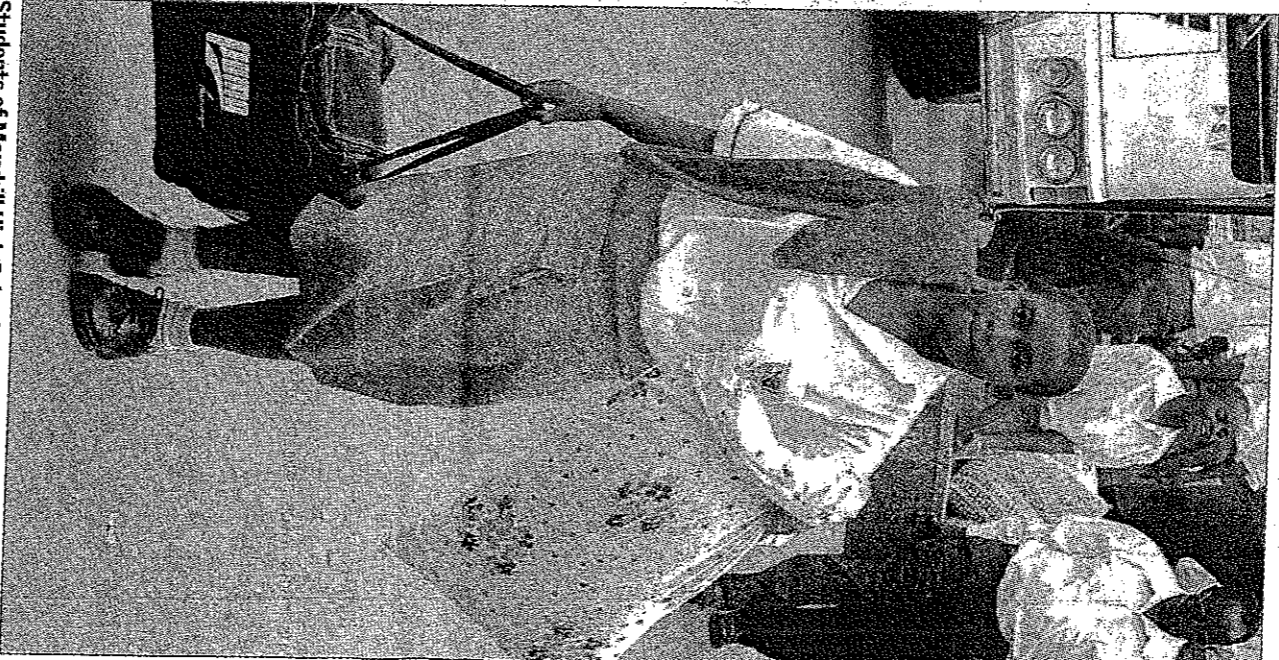
He added, "When the UPE was launched, we said let us start with the first questions first. You can't become obsessed with quality when there are no children in school. We said let them all come to school first, then we can address the other problems of quality, the state of the learning environment and relevance of what is being taught."

To illustrate its point, the World Bank's survey cites the case of Bweyale Primary School — the biggest in Masindi district — which is located about 217 km north of Kampala. The start of UPE in 1996 led to an increase in enrolment from 573 to almost 3,000 children at the time the survey was carried out in 2005.

While the number of pupils in Bweyale was rising steadily, the school facilities were not being developed at a commensurate speed. As a result, the 2,598 pupils in the school found themselves crammed in 17 classrooms, many of which had no desks the whole school had only 29 teachers.

Bweyale's situation is mirrored in many primary schools across the country. Even the government admits — in some of its confidential programme review reports — this situation is prevalent because adequate planning was not undertaken before the programme was launched.

The latest audit report on UPE, which



Students of Maryhill High School in Kampala arrive to start their first term. Picture: Morgan Mbabazi

was compiled by the Office of the Auditor General, says many of the problems dogging the programme are the result of poor planning at the programmes inception stage. "There were no time-bound performance indicators established then and there were no benchmark criteria against which their performance could be gauged."

For example, the Ministry of Education and Sports set out to achieve a classroom/pupil ratio of 1:55 without indicating when this should be achieved. Instead, medium term moving targets are set," notes the report, which covered the period July 1997 to June 2001.

Mr Kibenge acknowledged that the ministry makes medium-term targets instead of long-term performance targets, but maintained that it did not mean the ministry was turning a blind eye to long-term targets. He noted that all the ministry's plans are based on the availability of funds.

"We make annual plans," he said. "Every year, we sit with our stakeholders and agree on our undertakings."

Mr Kibenge said that while the ministry had achieved the classroom/pupil ratio target of 1:55 in 2006 (having brought it down from the 1:110 ratio of 10 years ago), the initial aim had been to achieve a ratio of 1:40.

He did not give the time-frame within which this would be achieved.

The Auditor General's report also reveals that there was no legal framework setting up the UPE programme in the first place. Instead, the programme was adopted from the 1992 government White Paper on Education. The paper was approved by parliament.

Free primary education was introduced in Uganda to fulfil President Museveni's 1996 campaign pledge to provide basic education to four children in each family. During the 2001 campaigns, he said the scheme would be extended to all children of school going age.

The scheme has since become an essential part of the government's long-term plan to achieve the second Millennium Development Goals, which aims at seeing all children completing primary school by 2015. The UPE programme is financed from the Poverty Action Fund, a comprehensive strategy for poverty alleviation in the country.

BESIDES THE GOVERNMENT, major financiers are the UK, Ireland, Belgium, the EU, the International Monetary Fund, The Canadian International Development Agency, USAid and Unicef.

In the 2005/06 financial year, UPE took 67.1 per cent of the Ush655.7 billion (\$343.6 million) allocated to the education sector.

But according to the Auditor-General, one of the major problems that has dogged the implementation of the programme has been the criteria used in disbursing the funds.

Under the government's decentralisation programme, UPE is implemented by the districts. The funds are released from the Ministry of Finance in the form of conditional grants to the implementing districts. Districts are primarily responsible for ensuring that tenders are awarded in accordance with PAF guidelines and that the completed projects are of the desired quality.

But the Auditor-General's report reveals that because there are no clear-cut guidelines governing the disbursement of funds at the district level, the release of funds to the beneficiary schools is sometimes delayed by up to three months.

"Whereas there are guidelines on the transfer of funds from the central government to the district, during this audit it was established that there are no guidelines on how districts should transfer funds to the schools."

"As a result, districts use different methods some of which are so elaborate and delay transfer of funds," the Auditor General's report says. "That weakness is there," acknowledged Mr Kibenge, "but let's not forget that primary education is a fully decentralised service. The districts don't expect you to decentralise and then they surrender control of how the funds are disbursed."

The misappropriation of UPE money, according to the Auditor-General, also takes place within the beneficiary schools, with some headteachers often inflating the number of pupils in their school so as to receive additional money — which they steal.

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