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# Research Report

## for Aidlink Placement

Primary Education in Uganda:

Assessing the successes and the failures of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) system

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Jina Sim

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Host Organization: Aidlink

Host Contact: Tom O'Connor



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN  
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE

THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF DUBLIN



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## **Executive summary**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represented a combined global effort to address extreme poverty by the end of 2015. Whilst not all Goals were met, there were a number of significant achievements, most notably that over 1 billion people were lifted out of extreme poverty as a result of this focused global effort. Introduced in 1997, Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme should have helped the country to achieve MDG2: that boys and girls alike are able to complete a full course of primary schooling. However whilst there have been some successes in the Ugandan education system, most notably improved enrolment, the overall situation remains poor with low attendance, high drop-out rates, poor literacy and numeracy levels etc., particularly for the girl child. This paper assesses the successes and challenges and offers a limited number of suggestions for how the situation could be strengthened.

**Key words:** Millennium Development Goals, Universal Primary Education, Uganda

### **1. Introduction**

The global primary school enrolment rate has increased from 84% in 1999 to 91% in 2012, and the sub-Saharan region, which is also known as the poorest region, has increased sharply from 59% in 1999 to 79%. Thus, the enormous increase in the enrolment rate of primary education was possible because the MDGs focused on primary education. Also, the percentage remaining until the final grade did not improve significantly. In sub-Saharan Africa, where development is the worst in the world, the remaining rate in primary school in 1999 and the remaining rate in 2011 are the same at 58%.

In many ways, Uganda reflects the global trends. The statistics show that drop-out rates remain unbelievably high with only 33% of students completing primary school. The goal of this study is to look at the successes and failures of the UPE system in Uganda,

examine the reasons for it, and suggest a point. Section 2 will look at the successful part of the UPE, and Section 3 will look at some of the challenges still to be solved after the UPE is implemented. In particular, we will look at the problems of female students and finally offer suggestions for how UPE might be improved. The findings outlined in this paper are based on both academic literature, and structured interviews carried out with the staff of Aidlink's Ugandan partners: Caritas MADDO, EMESCO Development Foundation and Voluntary Action for Development.

## **2. Successes of UPE**

When universal primary education began in Uganda for the first time in 1997, as part of a national policy to provide free primary education for underprivileged children, it was as if dreams were made to poor parents. Whereas previously only wealthy parents were able to send their children to primary school, education was now a possibility for everybody in Uganda.

Uganda has been commended for achieving more than 90% of its MDG2 goals for all children to enroll in primary education. UPE is highly appreciated by community members because of improvements in access, equity and quality. Community members gave reasons for their strong appreciation of UPE. These are: Improved enrolment, Improved gender equality in education, Increase in number of teachers, Some improvements in physical facilities, and Parents and community have benefitted from improved savings, children bringing home their learning, parents placing more value on education, Improved household hygiene, Improved community discipline, Reduced child labour, Reduced incidence of early marriages, and Establishment of more private schools. However, UPE was most deeply appreciated because of two major reasons. UPE has led to increased access and enrollment especially for the poor.

### **- Improved enrolment**

The number of schools where universal primary education was introduced has soared. Enrolment increased from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 8.1 million in 2013. Uganda has a total of 9,428,000 pupils enrolled in primary and secondary education. Of these pupils, about 8,098,000 (86%) are enrolled in primary education. (World Bank, 2014) This increase is widely attributed to the abolition of fees and this has that meant that poor families who could previously not afford education could now send their children to school.

- **Improved gender equality in education**

The gender gap in primary education has reduced to a point where the number of students in primary school is evenly spread between boys and girls. In 2003, the primary school enrollment rate of girl students slightly exceeded 49% of the total number of students. This is significant improvement compared to 44 percent and 44.5 percent for 1990 and 1993 respectively. (Ssekandi Ronald, 2005) The increase in enrolment primarily benefitted girls who would previously have missed out on education as Most families who do not afford to send their children to school place importance on the education of boys. Although drop out rates remain high (for all students but particularly girls), reports from Aidlink partners suggest that more girls are staying at school for longer, rather than dropping out and getting married as soon as they mature. This has been arrived at partly through the efforts of schools to encourage parents to send the girls at school, the improvement in care and counselling that older girls are given by the senior women teacher and the improved sanitation facilities in the schools. Though this is not the case for all UPE schools, the Aidlink partner-targeted school has benefited from building a girl-friendly latrines with a common room where women can continue to attend school during the menstrual cycle.

- **Increase in number of teachers**

The introduction of UPE has seen an increase in the number of teachers working in public primary schools; from 81,564 in 1996 to 145,587 in 2003 representing an increase of 64,023 or 78 percent. (Ssekandi Ronald, 2005) All teachers were trained. The Ugandan government has taken steps to improve the education level of the UPE school, in addition to

increasing the number of teachers who need to cope when the number of school enrollment increases dramatically. For example, teacher salaries are paid on time, which improves job security. There are opportunities for training and professional development and, in some circumstances, accommodation is provided to teachers at the schools. Nonetheless, teacher motivation remains a serious problem as described in Section 3. This partially led to the school's efforts to allow parents to send girls out of school and to improve and consult child care facilities provided by school sanitation facilities and improved sanitation facilities.

- **Some improvements in physical facilities**

In terms of infrastructure, more than 80% of schools in Uganda have had some classrooms constructed by government. More than 20% of schools have access to safe water in form of water tanks and /or a borehole. Also, more than 80% of the children sit on desks while the pupil – book ratio has increased to 3:1. (Stephen B Musoke, head teacher of St. Sebastian primary school) The tuition subsidy provided to the school for each student is small (7,000 UGD annually), supplemented by the construction of classrooms, textbooks and other facilities. These have allowed the school to provide better quality education for students. However, as pointed out in section 3, improvements in physical facilities or academic performance are generally inconsistent.

- **Engaging parents**

With the abolition of UPE's tuition fees, it was a realistic choice for poor parents who had not been able to afford all or their children to school in the past. This means that Uganda's parents have given more value to education, but high dropout rates still show that there is work to be done in this regard. The introduction of free education has brought more benefits to the family. In the past, it could have been used to save money on school expenses, increase savings, or improve family life.

### **3. Failures of UPE**

Despite an increase in enrolment, the number of children attending primary school in Uganda is not sustained. 68% of children entering primary schools in Uganda are likely to drop out before the end of the seven-year period that they were prescribed whilst those who do complete school often have to content with poor-quality school that leaves them ill-equipped for secondary school. A number of reasons for this phenomenon are outlined below.

#### **- Poverty**

Whilst the UPE system faces numerous problems, including gender discrimination, child labour, early marriage, lack of teacher motivation, and lack of awareness among parents, the biggest challenge is poverty. Poor parents are still struggling to meet school needs. The main obstacle to UPE is that it is not completely free, unlike the general perception that parents do not have to pay anything. In the case of poor parents, especially in rural Uganda, the cost of pens, exercise books and clothing is still beyond their reach.

The poor facilities in many UPE schools, and the low capitation fee means that schools also ask parents to contribute to other costs including the cost of classroom construction and lunch for students. Costs are not reachable for poor parents, especially rural Uganda, who live at about \$ 1 a day. Poor areas - northern and eastern Uganda. Western and central areas are considered better.

#### **- Parents**

Whilst more parents are sending their children to school, the majority of the parents do not know their roles and responsibilities with regard to education. Since the inception of the UPE programme there was a general misconception especially among the rural communities that government would provide free education including all school requirements such as uniforms, lunch and exercise books. The situation was exacerbated by politicians who persistently discouraged parents from making any contributions to the running of schools for the sake of winning their support. Some politicians have misled parents

into not participating in the UPE system claiming that it is absolutely free but the UPE scheme does not cover scholastic materials. This responsibility was left to the parents and it's clearly stipulated in the UPE policy. However, some of the parents are challenged considering their poverty levels. Consequently, parents fail to feed their children and they fail to buy uniforms for their children, and fail to put into practice what they decide during general meetings. School maintenance is not easy due to limited funding from both the government and the parents. With vigorous community sensitization by various actors, parents later realized that indeed they had an important role to play in educating their children.

There are other reasons parents are passive in their children's schooling; inability to support children in school due to pressure from other needs, negative attitudes and general mistrust towards school administration and illiteracy among parents that often leads to misunderstanding and wrong analysis of issues, High level of separation of parents which destroys the children's education, and early parenthood has led to irresponsible parents who do not value education, single parenthood especially on the side of women who have limited income or family support has led to inability to adequately support children in school. There is also a high rate of school drop outs due to the problems caused by broken families and polygamous families.

Schools are able to engage parents in various ways such as mobilizing them to make local in-kind or cash contributions towards school development projects, organizing class days to enhance interaction of teachers, parents and students with a focus on supporting their children to improve on academic performance and address any challenges, sensitizing parents to advocate for children's rights and report all cases of child abuse in their communities, investigating cases of school drop outs and counseling affected students and families, and follow up on students that complete primary 7 to check on their transition to secondary schools or vocational education institutions.

Whilst in theory the above is possible in any UPE school, most do not engage the parents in such a way. Where such interventions have taken place, as is the case in Aidlink target schools, there has been a substantial impact in terms of increased pass rates, 80% reduction in absenteeism rates (especially among girls) and increased consciousness of parents on the value of educating their children. Parents of supported schools have exhibited increased commitment in planning, monitoring and supporting schools i.e resource mobilization; follow-up on the teaching of children, attendance of teachers, staff motivation, and respect for children's rights among others. It's therefore imperative to note that holding teachers and schools accountable requires parents to be at the frontline of schools inspections and monitoring.

In a bid to promote uninterrupted learning of school children, government put in place a policy that prohibits school authorities from expelling any pupil that may not have the basic school requirements (Exercise books, pens, uniforms, etc) and only deal with the parents to ensure that these are availed. However, the poorest families still can't afford to provide all school requirements which ultimately affect the learning of their children. Some families in various parts of the country have been supported by non-state actors (NGOs, CBOs, etc), relatives and well-wishers to ensure that children have access to quality education.

- **School environment**

Beyond poverty and parental commitment, many student drop outs are also attributed to the school environment, particularly the inadequate or absence of safe sanitary facilities (especially for girls), inadequate infrastructure (class rooms and desks), and abuse of child rights (e.g corporal punishments, defilement, etc.), poor student/teacher relationships and poor performance/low pass rates among others.

Although Government has made interventions (classroom construction, provision of text books, desks and other learning materials) towards improving the learning environment in some schools, many school environments in Uganda, particularly in rural areas are entirely inadequate and inappropriate for quality learning outcomes to be achieved.

Improvement of the learning environment in schools therefore requires a range of interventions including but not limited to infrastructure development (classroom construction – as some schools still conduct lessons under trees), provision of safe and clean water within the school premises, safe sanitary facilities for girls and boys, equipping schools with adequate learning materials/aids and furniture, recruitment of more teachers to address staffing gaps, promotion of early childhood development, provision of lunch at school, adopting mechanisms to enhance practical learning, strengthening capacity of teachers (through in-service training) and SMCs, establishing and strengthening school clubs, organizing class days, and increased parental engagement in running of schools.

The government capitation grant of approximately UGX 3,500 per child per term is not only inadequate but also released late that it cannot meet the challenges of the school's day to day programmes especially considering the gradually depreciating rate of the economy.

In fact, the main reason for failure of the UPE system is lack of government support. Money sent by the government is too little and irregular. In area of infrastructure and equipment, schools with old classroom blocks cannot repair or replace them thus posing a risk of loss of life in case they collapse. Schools cannot build staff houses thus teachers commute long distances daily which affects their effectiveness. Inadequate sitting facilities for teachers and pupils make learning hard. The number of teachers posted in most schools cannot cater for the curriculum coverage as required by government policy. Absence of lockable facilities for safe custody of text books leads to vandalizing of the facilities. The text books provided by government are few with a ratio of 1:6. Most schools cannot meet the global demand for e-learning and computer literacy in general because they do not have electricity. The furniture is also not enough given the increased enrollment and most schools lack play grounds. 98% of school land is not registered in school names; encroachment on school land. The available houses are too old with leaking roofing. There are also many other problems; inadequate class rooms, inadequate facilities for girls, inadequate latrines, inadequate water supply, inadequate safe water, inappropriate waste disposal, lack of fence

and privacy, inadequate sitting facilities, and lack of cooking utensils and fuel saving facilities. Moreover, Learners and teachers lunch stands challenge although government has continuously promised to support with feeding programmes.

In area of management and administration, the limited and conditional funds can't enable administration to meet all the curriculum requirements that is: testing, evaluation, games, instruction, projects, play gadgets, music equipment, etc.). They have lack of motivation to elicit good performance and lack of appreciation of good performance e.g. rewards, gifts, especially from top management to teachers. There is a problem with mixed priorities; most teachers whose priorities have been directed towards academic performance have ended up frustrated. Head teachers who have been once good performers have been dumped because they are not in good terms with education officers. In terms of co-curricular activities, schools would wish to carry out co-curricular activities for the development of children's talents but this is not possible due to limited funding.

- **Teachers**

Although the number of teachers in UPE schools has increased to meet the increased levels of enrolment, class sizes remain high with over 50 students per class on average. This has created a situation whereby teachers in UPE schools are unmotivated and overstretched in their jobs without the resources or support required to provide a quality education. The major challenges for teachers include; too much workload/burden due to understaffing culminating from a ban on recruitment of new teachers over the last 4 years, poor welfare for teachers as the result of poor response of parents in making contributions towards staff welfare (e.g teachers in some schools go without lunch), inadequate school capitation grants thus affecting day-to-day operations and travelling long distances to school as there is no accommodation (staff quarters) especially for the rural primary schools.

Teachers' attendance at school is regular especially if motivated; School Management committees are supportive and play their oversight role very well; Head teachers exhibit exemplary leadership and school inspection by the District Education Department is efficient

among others. In the absence of the conditions highlighted above, the rates of teacher absenteeism are likely to be very high as is the case in many rural UPE schools.

The teachers' salaries are sometimes irregular and not adequate given the high cost of living in the country. 80% of teachers find it hard to upskill due to low salaries and the system provides no refresher courses. As a result they are demotivated and have to find or manage side income generating activities which most times affects their professionalism and duties.

Most schools do not have teachers' houses at the campus, thus teachers have to rent outside the school and to walk/travel long distances to school without travel allowances. As a result they arrive at school late for lessons, sometimes they are absent especially during the rainy season. Also, 80% of teachers don't have lunch provided by the school.

Aidlink's partners report that teachers are frustrated by the poor teaching environment. In a number of schools, they have to cater for their lunch, in some schools they share sanitary facilities with pupils, and children have no school supplies which make it hard to teach them. In some schools teachers complain of lack of instruction materials like text book and lack of staff rooms and teachers' tables, sometimes there is inadequate supply of text books on the syllabus by the government.

Furthermore, some teachers lack pedagogical skills of handling child centered curriculum given the training they received of teacher centered curriculum. As a result children get bored and disinterested in the teachers classes hence poor performance and frustration on the teachers side. Also, there are other reasons why teachers are struggling; lack of advocacy skills amongst education leadership. The head teachers, education officers and politicians just keep silent and suffer oppression. Lack of motivation and mutual love where by teaching is viewed as a burden.

- **Challenges facing girls**

Despite the increase in girl's enrolment following the introduction of UPE, drop-out rates remain high as a result of the unsuitable school environment and cultural barriers to girls education. An estimated 30% of girls leave school when they start their periods, often because of a lack of sanitary pads. (Caroline Ariba, 2013) Unlike Kenya, the Ugandan government does not budget for hygiene towels, so many girls in rural areas should be at home during the menstrual cycle, as they must be at home during the menstrual cycle. On average, this means that girls miss about a week in a month. This results in a drop-off in class attendance for one year. The lack of adequate hygiene is also a challenge. Where girls attend school during their menstrual cycle, there is usually no privacy or facilities to change, particularly when boys and girls share latrines. Furthermore, the lack of cultural understanding around menstruation means that boys often tease girls or shame them, which again means they do not attend school and drop out early.

Although marriage before 18 is illegal in Uganda, it is not uncommon for teenage girls to marry young in Uganda. Early pregnancy also represents a common phenomenon with again affects girl child education with many schools refusing to allow pregnant girls to attend classes as they represent a "bad example" to others and should be punished.

#### **4. Conclusion and Suggestions**

This paper has shown that while UPE has led to a number of successes, most notably improved enrolment, gender equality, increase in number of teachers, some improvements in physical facilities, and engaging parents, there is still a number of challenges facing the public primary school system in Uganda including poverty, school environment, lack of teacher motivation. Whilst the wider societal challenges (primarily poverty) mean that these will not disappear overnight, the government can implement a number of measures to strengthen UPE, creating a quality school environment that serves to reduce poverty and contribute to social development in the medium to long term.

The following efforts will be needed to provide education and human resources for Uganda to contribute to national economic and social development in the future; Establishment of measures to secure investment in the elementary education and basic education of the government continuously, increase participation in civil society in establishing education development strategy for effective aid and financial resources in education sector, transparency of education finances and governance, and organizing a special programme to talk to parents (to engage them more).

Schools have to be more accountable to parents in terms of delivery of quality services in order to win their interest and support beyond payment of a few items for the children. School should as well improve on information flow by conducting regular school open days. In schools there is clear evidence that if parents are well mobilized and sensitized they can be very supportive of the school's development. In terms of options to support the poorest families who still struggle with the costs of UPE, there are no clear cut options. The available options are families participating in the government and/or NGO supported social economic strengthening interventions that empower resource poor households to become more self-sustaining.

In order for teachers to be supported to strengthen the overall system, there is need to increase the national budget allocation that goes to education. As a result teachers' salaries will be increased at least to correspond with the prevailing high cost of living in the country so that they can meet their basic needs and take care of their families as well. Also with more money allocated to the education sector, the teaching environment (including free accommodation for teachers) will be improved to become more attractive. Once the salaries are attractive and learning environment is conducive, then the monitoring of teachers performance could be the next thing to strengthen the overall system.

But above all, in order for the UPE to effectively help children, the government must more effectively implement policy to improve sanitary facilities and to encourage schools to properly teach subjects and provide an education with teacher interaction and smaller

classroom sizes. By doing this, it will better prepare children for further education and provide a greater opportunity to leave the poverty cycle.

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