

A Comparative Analysis of Universal Primary Education Policy in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda

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Abstract

Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in the form of fee abolition has become popular in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since the mid 1990s in order to achieve Education for All (EFA). Even after learning from the past, the current UPE policy is devoid of analytical studies on its impact and challenges beyond school enrollment. This paper is an attempt to make a comparative analysis on UPE in four countries, namely, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda, to identify common and unique themes and to examine how these seemingly similar policies are responding to the capacity and needs of each country. 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.

Introduction

Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy¹ in the form of fee abolition has become popular in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since the mid 1990s in order to

¹ UPE policy, with its component of fee abolition, is regarded as an effective strategy to achieve equal access to primary education for all, which is a part of Education for All (EFA) goals while EFA includes broader education sub-sectors such as adult literacy and lower secondary education.

achieve Education for All (EFA) (Avenstrup et al. 2004; UNESCO 2008). Despite its recent rapid expansion, UPE policy has a long history in SSA. Existing literature indicate that previous attempts to achieve UPE in developing countries faced problems in its supply-driven policies, unclear mechanisms, and declining quality of education (Allison 1983; Bray 1986; Prince 1997; Sifuna 2007). The past experiences in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya also show that UPE policy implementation was prone to be affected by economic crises (Obasi 2000; Sifuna 2007). In Malawi, 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 is devoid of analytical studies on its impact and challenges beyond school enrollment (Nishimura et al. 2008). Furthermore, some researchers have indicated the recent uniformity of the educational policies that prevail in the SSA countries and suggested that there should be studies to examine how these seemingly similar policies are responding to the capacity and needs of each country (Samoff 1999; Foster 2000; Brown et al. 2001; Klees 2001).

With this background this paper attempts to analyze how UPE policies have been formulated, implemented and evaluated in each country and what kind of administrative and financial issues should be raised from comparative perspectives. As the first attempt to create a comparative analytical lens, four countries were chosen, namely, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda. Malawi (1994) and Uganda (1997) have initiated the UPE policies relatively earlier than other countries, while Kenya (2003) and Ghana (2005) are the more recent implementers. Some basic indicators at the primary level on four countries are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample Countries

| | Ghana | Kenya | Malawi | Uganda |
|---------------------------------------|-------|------------|--------|------------------|
| Year of Introduction of fee abolition | 2005 | 2003 | 1994 | 1997 |
| Enrollment rate (Primary) | | | | |
| 1991 | 54 | 69 (1999)* | 48 | 60 (before 1997) |
| 2005 | 69 | 79 | 95 | 93+ |
| Survival rate to Grade 5 | | | | |
| 1991 | 80 | 77 | 64 | 36 |
| 2004 | 63 | 83 | 42 | 49 |
| Mean score of SACMEQII in 2000 | | | | |
| Reading | - | 546.5 | 428.9 | 482.4 |
| Mathematics | - | 563.3 | 432.9 | 506.3 |

Source: UNESCO. 2008. Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008. Paris: UNESCO.

+ Government of Uganda. 2008. EMIS data. The data is for 2008.

* Ministry of Education, Government of Kenya. 2006. Education Statistical Booklet 1999-2004.

The study team, which consists of five researchers from Africa and five from Japan, formulated a common comparative analytical framework and produced a four country status report based on the existing policy documents and interviews with policy makers in each country. These findings were presented at an international conference held in Kobe in March 2007 where the team received valuable comments from distinguished education specialists on a possible direction for further study. The comparative analytical framework was conceptualized around five gaps in policy analysis namely: 1) performance gap; 2) financial gap; 3) administrative gap; 4) policy gap; and 5) perception gap. After comparing the results from each country, it was found that the performance gaps and policy gaps are the results of the financial, administrative, and perception gaps. It was also clear that there was need for investigating these gaps further at the local level and grasping the process of creating these gaps and the nature of constraints in a more detailed manner (i.e. school and local government levels).

This paper presents the major findings of the research activities over the last two years conducted under the Africa-Asia University Dialogue Project and International Cooperation Initiative by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan (MEXT) with financial support from MEXT. Due to the limited space, this paper illustrates only some common and unique themes that came out clearly from our study. Details can be found in two reports that we have compiled so far as listed in the reference section (Nishimura, ed. 2007; Nishimura & Ogawa, eds., 2008).

Background of UPE Policy in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda

The provision of primary education for all children has long been seen as of great importance, at least in policy discussions, in all the four countries. In Ghana, an Accelerated Development Plan, declared in 1961, sought to expand “access to education” while the Education Act made education free and compulsory at the basic level. Kenya introduced free primary education for the first time in the 1970s. This brought a dramatic rise in gross enrollment rate from 47% in 1963 to 115% in 1980. Similarly, UPE has been an important part of the political agenda since the 1960s in Malawi and Uganda. In Uganda, an education review commission was appointed soon after the country’s independence and stated that expansion of primary education is an essential precondition for highly educated human resources needed to build and develop a new nation.

Such promising policy direction in the four countries, however, faced serious economic and political predicaments in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. In Ghana, the real value of government financing for education fell sharply from 6.4% of GDP in 1976 to 1.4% in 1983. In Kenya, due to a stagnated economy since the early 1980s, cost sharing policy altered free primary education policy in 1989 whereby the cost of textbooks, school activities, additional tuition, and examination fees became parents’ responsibility and communities were to construct physical facilities and ensure their maintenance as the government paid teachers’ salaries. This policy change resulted in a

drop in enrollment by approximately 20% between 1989 and 1995 due to the inability of parents to bear the economic burden of education. In Malawi, political intervention of the Malawi Congress Party abolished any strategies to achieve the goal of UPE in the late 1960s and placed high priority on secondary and tertiary education up until the 1980s. Likewise, in Uganda, the political turmoil that persisted over two decades damaged educational expansion and made UPE a mere slogan until 1986 when the National Resistance Movement took power.

Implementation of fee abolition regained its prominence in the 1990s after Jomtien Conference on Education for All in 1990, but the policy environment and the way policy was implemented varied in the four countries. While national political pledges in the presidential campaigns were the driving force for the implementation of fee abolition in Uganda and Kenya, the cases of Malawi and Ghana were driven more by the education reform process mainly initiated by external donors. In Ghana, the free primary education policy was placed at the heart of Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) initiated in 1996 with support from the World Bank and other international donors. However, it was not until 2005 that the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2003-2015 introduced capitation grant to schools nationwide which put UPE in effect. The characteristics of fee abolition in Ghana, therefore, are that the implementation slowly took place while the idea of fee abolition stayed in the policy documents. Thus enrollment did not rise sharply due to delay in its full implementation. The net enrollment rate at primary school level for children in age group 6-11 years increased from 59.1% in 2004/5 to 81.1% in 2006/7, an unprecedented increase attributed to the introduction of capitation grant (MOESS 2007). The challenges of UPE in Ghana lie in acute shortages of teachers that persist in the rural areas and worsen teacher/pupil ratios and academic performance as well as regional disparity.

The case of Malawi exhibits a more tragic reality of fee abolition policy. With the support of the World Bank, the abolition of school fees began from standard 1 for the 1991/92 school year and was pursued in standards 2 and 3 in the following years. In the 1992/93 school year, the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) program, funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was established and abolished school fees for non-repeating primary school girls from standards 2 to 8. The complete fee abolition for all grades was then introduced in 1994 as the Free Primary Education (FPE) program. However, in Malawi, no direct financial support (e.g. capitation grant) was made to schools to replace the collected tuition at school level until very recently in 2008 when a capitation grant is being piloted in all schools by the World Bank. The enrollment jumped from 1.9 million in 1993/94 to 2.9 million after fee abolition was introduced, but the gross enrollment rate (GER) sharply declined from 137% in 2002 to 106% in 2004. The shortage of qualified teachers is also serious. The pupil-qualified teacher ratio in 2005 remained high at 83:1, which was worse than 81:1 before FPE in 1993/94. This decreasing trend in statistics indicates low efficiency that surfaced after the implementation of FPE.

The cases of Kenya and Uganda signify rapid implementation of fee abolition and alternative funding scheme for schools. In Kenya, the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy was implemented in January 2003 as result of one of the presidential campaign pledges by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) Party. In November 2003, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST)² held a national conference on education and training to address various challenges arising from the abolition of fees and levies. The conference outcomes were then used to develop the Sessional Paper of 2005 and Kenya Education Sector Support Program (KESSEP) 2005-2010. Although the administrative structure is still centralized in Kenya, finance has been decentralized, whereby funding from the government is provided directly through the Ministry of Education to each primary school. The capitation grant is equivalent of 1,020 Kenyan Shillings per pupil to finance the purchase of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials, as well as to support other school operation activities. Not only public schools but also registered non-public ones are entitled to receive the capitation grant after meeting certain requirements. Each school must spend the grant in accordance with the instruction given by the Ministry and not necessarily utilized based on actual needs. As a result of implementation of the FPE program, the gross enrollment rate (GER) increased rapidly in a year, from 88.2% in 2002 to 104.8% in 2003. One of the key achievements of the FPE policy in Kenya is the provision of learning materials. The textbook-pupil ratio tends to be towards 1:3 for core subjects in lower primary and 1:2 for those in upper primary in 2003, as compared to 1:15 before the FPE. A serious challenge which the FPE has not solved yet lies in regional and gender disparity in enrollment and educational achievement.

In Uganda before 1986, education system was severely disrupted prior to the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE). The status of the primary education sub-sector in Uganda was extremely poor, whereby budgetary allocations had declined from 3.4% to 1.4% between 1971 and 1985 and the burden was borne by parents. While expansion of primary education attracted both international and domestic attention in the 1990s, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni pledged for UPE during presidential campaigns in 1996. The UPE policy started in January 1997 after his election as president. The components of the UPE policy initially included five major fields of policy intervention. The first component was abolition of school fees, which initially applied to up to four children per family and changed its eligibility to all children in 2003. The second component was to increase the government expenditure on primary education. The education expenditure as percentage of GDP increased from 1.6% to 4.0% and the share of primary education in the total education expenditure rose from 40% to 65-70%. The third component was to introduce double-shift for grades 1 and 2. The fourth component defined the parental responsibilities as provision of lunch, uniform, and shelter while the government provides

² The Ministry was divided into the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) in 2005.

school fees, textbooks, teachers, and infrastructure. The fifth component was to abolish the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) fees with an exception for the urban areas where voluntary labor is hard to obtain and cost of utilities is high. Moreover, the government initiated administrative and financial decentralization and implemented advocacy campaigns for girls' education. The Ministry of Education and Sports developed a Gender and Education Policy to provide a framework for planning and implementation of gender responsive education sector programs. In the policy, gender equality has been recognized as central to the achievement of universal primary education. Key gender concerns in education highlighted in the policy included disparities in enrollment, retention, and transition rates, negative socio-cultural practices and attitudes which inhibit girls' access, learning environments that are not conducive to girls, stereotyping in learning materials and in class teaching and drop out of girls due to pregnancy and early marriages. The UPE education policy succeeded in reaching the poorest region and children since it reduced the burden of basic education costs from parents' shoulders and its impact was especially large on poor girls (Nishimura et al. 2008).

Since 1997 the government of Uganda has disbursed the UPE capitation grant from the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MFPED) to schools via districts. The grant is calculated based on a variable cost of about 4,000 Ugandan shillings per pupil per year for all government primary schools and a threshold cost for each school of 100,000 Ugandan shillings per month for nine months a year.³ Prior to UPE, pupils' families used to pay more than 80% of the total direct costs of public primary schooling and the government paid the rest, while this figure has reversed after UPE (Mehrotra & Delamonica, 1998). The UPE has brought a sharp increase in primary school enrollment. The total primary school enrollment has risen from almost 3 million in 1996 to 5.3 million in 1997 and a phenomenal 7.5 million in 2007. The net enrollment rate jumped from 60% before UPE to 92% in 2007. The most serious challenges under UPE have been low internal efficiency and quality of education. The available statistics show that only 22% of the children that enrolled in primary one in 1997 managed to survive to primary seven in 2003 (Byamugisha 2006). Majority of the remaining 78% repeated and few (5%) dropped out of school. Results from the National Assessment Progress in Education (NAPE) have indicated that the percentages of pupils who reached defined competency levels in literacy and numeracy was only approximately half in 2007 or lower albeit with substantial improvement between 2003 and 2007.⁴

As such, the idea of fee abolition policy under the UPE or FPE program in four countries has long been reflected in their policy agenda since independence, but has been

³ From 1997 to 2002 school received 5,000 shillings per year for each child in Grades 1-3 and 8,100 shillings per child in Grades 4-7. A threshold for each school was adopted in 2003/4. As is the case of Kenya, schools should comply with the detailed guideline for the usage of the capitation grant.

⁴ The proportions of pupils who reached defined competency levels in literacy were 43% for P3 and 20% for P6 in 2003, which improved to 45% and 41% respectively in 2007. For numeracy, the percentages were 34% for P3 and 20% for P6 in 2003 and increased to 46% and 50% respectively in 2007.

abruptly implemented with both national and international pressure over the last decade or so. When the policy gained momentum for implementation, politicians and external donors have forced it upon the systems hastily. However, the implementation of such bold policy, in the real sense, represents a complex reality. While many agree to the policy direction as primary education is largely appreciated by the population and fee abolition is regarded as being beneficial for the poor, it seems that implementation schemes and procedures had not been carefully thought through by policy makers and external donors prior to policy implementation. There are numerous disparities in educational access and quality, for which fee abolition alone would not find a simple solution, nor does new financial flow of education budget cater for pupils with various needs (e.g. children in the disadvantaged areas and disabled children). Thus, this seemingly simple policy of fee abolition requires thorough investigation that reflects the reality on the ground and stakeholders' reaction to the policy implementation.

Analytical framework and Methodology

Analytical Framework

Since the inception of the study, its aim was not simply a pure academic research in its conceptual framework, but more emphasis was placed on attempting to broaden the scope of activities that are jointly prepared and implemented by the African and Asian researchers and have practical implications. In more concrete terms, this study had four major objectives or targets for the period of approximately three years (i.e. June 2006 to March 2009) as follows:

1. To create a common comparative analytical framework to examine educational administration and finance for UPE policies in sub-Saharan Africa;
2. To grasp common (i.e. regional) and unique (i.e. country-specific) issues of the UPE policies and administrative and financial systems for primary education sub-sector;
3. To strengthen academic exchange between researchers in Africa and those in Asia through the Africa-Asia University Dialogue Project on the issue concerned; and
4. To produce a joint policy recommendation on UPE policies and administrative and financial issues for each country as well as the SSA region as a result of academic collaboration of researchers in Africa and Asia.

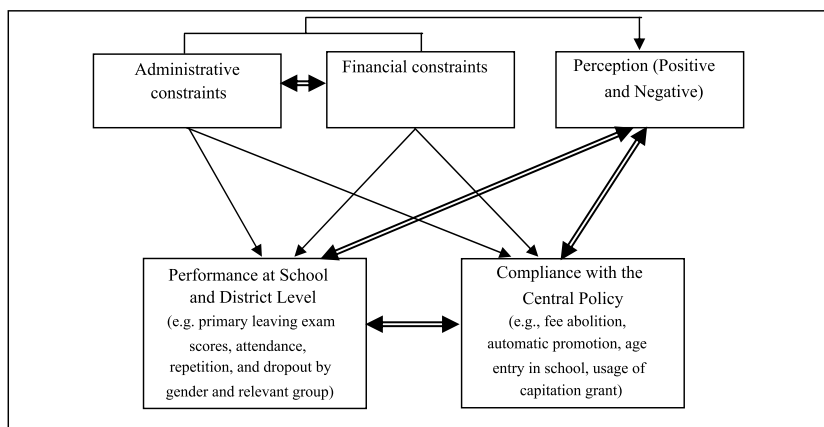
For FY2006 and FY2007,⁵ the activities mainly focused on Objectives 1 and 2, while making continuous efforts towards Objective 3.

The overarching research questions that each country team followed are outlined below:

⁵ Japanese fiscal year starts in April and ends in March.

1. What are the administrative constraints for smooth implementation of primary education provision under the UPE policy?
2. What are the financial constraints for smooth implementation of primary education provision under the UPE policy?
3. How do stakeholders perceive UPE policy?
4. Are administrative, financial, and perceptive issues different in urban and rural areas?
5. What are the possible links among the administrative, financial and perceptive factors, school performance and local compliance (or non-compliance) with the central policy?
6. Are these possible links different in urban and rural areas?

The conceptual map is drawn in Figure 1. Administrative and financial constraints are likely to have a strong link and mutual effects. Financial constraints limit administrative capacity, while administrative constraints may result in inadequate management of local resources for primary education. These administrative and financial constraints together are likely to affect perception of parents and School Management Committees (SMCs) on provision of primary education. The administrative constraints are also likely to influence performance at the school and district levels since adequate monitoring and evaluation as well as sound management of SMCs will affect school performance. This holds true for compliance with the central policy, as inadequate monitoring and evaluation may cause misinterpretation of policies on the ground. The financial constraints can similarly affect performance at the school level as well as local compliance with the central policy. For instance, the lack of finance or delay of capitation grant may cause incapacity at the school level to comply with the guideline for the usage of the grant.



Source: Created by Authors.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Perceptions of parents and SMC members can be influenced by performance at the school level and whether schools comply with the central policy, while these perception, in turn, will encourage or discourage performance at the school level and if schools should follow the central policy. This is mainly because parents decide whether their children stay in school and may demand things that may contradict with the central policy.

Finally, performance at the school and district levels is likely to link with the degree of compliance with the central government policy, especially in terms of school fees and usage of capitation grant.

Each arrow may look different for each country or may depend on geographical location. When analyzing these links, all stakeholders were carefully identified so that complex relationships among actors should be covered. In addition, gender perspective and other necessary social considerations were incorporated when each country team constructed country specific interview protocols.

Methodological design

Since the research attempted to obtain common and unique themes grounded in identified gaps, a qualitative methodology was perceived as most suitable by the team. In the course of the limited duration and the budget, the in-depth case study method was applied with a small number of samples of ranging from 16 to 20 schools in each country. In light of the fact that the countries are largely dominated by rural areas and the need to grasp the difference between rural and urban areas, each country team was designated to figure out the sound proportion of sample schools by location. Furthermore, in order to maintain a relevant research framework for a comparative analysis, the criteria for site selection were determined as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Sampling Criteria

| |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Include between 16-20 schools in total;◆ Schools should be located in at least 2 different districts;◆ The selected site should not include extreme cases:◆ Include both rural and urban/semi-urban schools:◆ Include poor performing, average performing, and well performing schools; and◆ Parents and SMC members should be called upon in areas surrounding selected schools. |
|--|

Source: Created by authors.

Once the sites were selected, each country team identified all possible stakeholders to be consulted with interviews to respond to the overarching research questions. Since each country has a different educational administration system and actors at all levels, details were set by each country team. The overall key actors are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Guideline for the Sample Category and Size of Key Interviewees

| ◆ | | Approx. number |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| ◆ | District Level | |
| | • District Education Officers (DEO) | 2+ |
| | • District Inspectors of Schools | 2+ |
| | • District Administrative Officers | 2+ |
| | • District Finance Officers | 2+ |
| ◆ | School Level | |
| | • Head Teachers | 16-20 |
| | • Teachers | 32+ |
| ◆ | Community Level | |
| | • Parents | 32+ |
| | • SMC members | 16+ |

Source: Created by Authors.

Individual and/or focus group interviews were arranged with a case-by-case approach in each country. In addition to interviews, observations were made in the schools, district education offices and other possible sites to capture the learning conditions including crowdedness of classrooms, teacher absenteeism, and monitoring systems of the schools. Furthermore, test scores and district documents were collected along with interview and observation notes. When compiling the report, results were triangulated by these three sources.

While interview protocols were country specific, the core format remained the same for all the countries. The mode of interview was semi-structured so that interviewers could probe questions as the need arose and apply to each country specific setting. The forms of interview could be either individual or focus group interview. It was recommended for each country team to organize individual interviews with district officers and teachers and focus group interviews with parents and SMC members. The interview protocols incorporated as many close-ended questions as possible for the purpose of comparison across countries by some standardization.

Summary of Findings

General impact of UPE policy

The UPE policy signifies strong government’s commitment and donor contribution towards EFA goals by enabling children who would not have enrolled in school to come to school. The most apparent impact of the UPE policy is seen in increased enrollment in all the four countries. In Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana, UPE intervention also included provision of teaching and learning materials and additional classroom construction.

However, the UPE policy also had drawbacks at the school level. When school fees were abolished, over-age and underage children flocked into school. The most notable challenge was overcrowded classrooms, which in some schools led to low teacher

motivation. The leverage between strong commitment of governments and donors and available resources was another issue. Schools suffer from lack of funds, while not being able to ask parents for fees. Parents have also become passive in every form of participation in school activities and decision making. A common attitude illustrated by parents and communities is that as the government is responsible for *everything*, they have no stake in school governance. Under such an environment, dropout of pupils is another challenge under the UPE policy.

Some unique themes are seen in Kenya and Malawi. In Kenya, examination results declined after the introduction of the UPE policy, while experiencing increased repetition in contrast to a decrease in dropouts. In Malawi, quality indicators of schools also declined. However, some parents in Malawi have changed their passive attitude and become more cooperative with schools after some years of witnessing the lack of additional public resources made available at schools. The case of Malawi shows that quality of education still depends on how parents support education and hence, there is much diversity in the quality of education among schools.

Administrative challenges

Common themes that cut across administrative issues of the UPE policy are mainly rooted in its top-down policy implementation and unpreparedness of the system for the changes. Since the inception of the UPE policy, no clear policy on roles and responsibilities has been shared by stakeholders. Ad hoc training opportunities given to head teachers on accounting and school management under UPE were not enough for head teachers and SMCs to obtain confidence in daily school management.

The UPE policy also creates some policy conflicts that make administration fairly difficult. For instance, the automatic promotion policy which is adopted under the UPE policy at least in Kenya, Ghana and Uganda and an increase in enrollment which brought overcrowded classrooms throw teachers into an extremely difficult situation. Fee abolition and inadequate amount of the UPE capitation grant are also contradictory and give head teachers' headaches and sometimes push themselves in debt. In fact, our study revealed that the amount of the capitation grant is much lower than what schools used to collect from parents. As a consequence of these conflicts, schools are compelled to hold larger classes with more limited resources.

Some unique themes are found in all countries. In Uganda, it has been witnessed that local politicians interfere in schools when schools ask parents for some contribution. This furthered confusion on roles and responsibilities of parents and communities under the UPE policy. In Ghana, functions of SMCs are found to be weak, while district officials hold relatively strong self-confidence in their tasks under the UPE policy. In Kenya, the low participation of parents and SMCs seems to create mutual mistrust and poor relationships in schools, especially between teachers and the community. Finally, in Uganda, Ghana, and Malawi, the decentralization policy devolved much power over educational planning and budgeting to district councils. As a consequence, technocrats

such as education officers at the district level have less power over sectoral planning. Thus, decisions made at the district level may have some conflicts with the national policy.

Financial challenges

Under the UPE policy, the capitation grant has been disbursed from the central government to schools directly in Kenya, and via districts in Uganda and Ghana. Nevertheless, our interviews revealed that the amount of the capitation grant is not guided by a baseline survey⁶ but more affected by whatever is available within the national account and that the aggregated amount at the school level is lower than how much schools used to collect from parents and communities prior to the implementation of UPE policy. In addition to the insufficient amount of the capitation grant, delay of funds is commonly experienced at school level in all the countries. The delay can be for a range of a month to sometimes a whole term and the amount can be fluctuated. This apparently affects daily school activities and planning at the school level. Mismanagement of school funds at school level is also reported as a challenge.

Since the introduction of UPE, the budget for primary education has become heavily dependent on the central government. Although districts are allowed to put some additional resources, minimal or no resources are available at the district level. Parents are also found to be covering private costs of schooling (e.g. uniform, development fees, examination fees, lunch, transportation, and tutoring) that is in fact higher than the capitation grant. The overall insufficient budget allocated towards primary education at the district level seems to most negatively affect the monitoring of schools. Thus, regular monitoring of quality of education and the quality assurance system are yet to be put in place in many schools.

The unique themes are seen in Malawi where there has been no capitation grant for more than ten years under the implementation of the UPE policy. Much of the budget on education has been taken as leave grants for teachers, teacher deaths, and transfer of teachers, leaving a negligible amount for teaching and learning materials. In addition, the case of Uganda also uniquely revealed notable variability of primary education financing at the household, school, and district levels under the UPE policy. District resources are minimal and the central budget on education can be susceptible to diversion to other sectors according to the decisions made by the district council under the decentralized system. School finance and household expenditure on education vary based on the capacity of the SMC and parents to contribute to school. Under such circumstances, rural schools with weak resource base are prone to suffer from insufficient and unpredictable budgets to implement planned activities.

⁶ In Uganda, allocation was amended based on a study in 2003.

Perceptive issues

The UPE certainly was a consensus agreed upon by democratic elections and a domestic decision making process in each country. The majority of the stakeholders interviewed in this study perceive that the current policy is good and that they view primary schooling as either important or very important for both boys and girls. Parents in Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana also report that although they are bearing the private cost of schooling under the UPE policy, the amount is lower than what it used to be. The UPE policy is greatly appreciated by parents and communities for its equitable nature to benefit the poor. The cases of Uganda and Kenya also showed that parents appreciate the provision of teaching and learning materials under the UPE policy.

However, as Table 4 shows, the majority of stakeholders view that the UPE policy is good, but not well implemented. In particular, the automatic promotion policy is much contested by all the stakeholders at the district and school levels. This is due to the fact that promoting pupils to the next grade without meeting the proficiency level set by each grade will do more harm than good for a child since s/he will not obtain anything at the end of the primary cycle and the school system will thus compromise the quality of education. Under such circumstances, how to improve internal efficiency of education in large classrooms without sacrificing pupils' learning is a critical challenge in the four countries.

Table 4. Perception of Local Administrators, Teachers, and Parents on UPE Policy

| | Number and percentage of local administrators who responded, "UPE policy is good but not well implemented." | Number and percentage of teachers and head teachers who responded, "UPE policy is good but not well implemented." | Number and percentage of parents and SMC members who responded, "UPE policy could have been implemented differently." |
|--------|---|---|---|
| Kenya | 5 out of 11 (46%) | 34 out of 46 (74%) | 28 out of 52 (54%) |
| Uganda | 5 out of 9 (56%) | 35 out of 60 (58%) | 29 out of 60 (48%) |
| Ghana | 12 out of 19 (63%) | 37 out of 60 (62%) | 55 out of 120 (46%) |
| Malawi | 11 out of 11 (100%) | 34 out of 53 (64%) | 28 out of 83 (34%) |

Source: Created by authors.

There are some unique themes revealed in Kenya, Uganda, and Malawi. In Kenya and Uganda, there was a gap between what parents perceive and what they actually do. Although interviewed parents claim that they contribute much to school by attending meetings and so on, interviews with district officials, head teachers, and teachers contradict these responses (see Table 5). There may be the possibility of our sampling bias whereby the interviewed parents are those who are relatively cooperative with schools, but the general observation of schools indicate that parents hold more negative and passive attitudes in most schools. In Malawi, fee abolition was not complied with due to lack of any other resource base, hence parents responded that the cost of schooling was higher than before the introduction of the UPE policy. Parents also hold negative views on

nonexistence of teaching and learning materials unlike in other three countries. The case of Malawi, therefore, indicates that the lack of financial and administrative preparedness lead to the non-compliance of the UPE policy in reality.

Table 5. Perception Gap between Teachers and Parents on Parental Passive Attitude

| | Number and percentage of teachers and head teachers who perceive passive attitude of parents as a serious problem after fee abolition (%) | Number and percentage of parents who perceive schooling as important or very important (%) | Number and percentage of parents who perceive their contribution to schools as important or very important (%) |
|--------|---|--|--|
| Kenya | All focus group discussion interviews raised the issue (48 teachers) | For Boys: 52 out of 52 parents (100%) For Girls: 46 out of 52 parents (89%) | 52 out of 52 parents (100%) |
| Uganda | 55 out of 60 teachers and head teachers (92%) | For Boys: 59 out of 60 (98%) For Girls: 59 out of 60 parents (98%) | 58 out of 60 parents (97%) |
| Ghana | 12 out of 20 teachers and head teachers (60%) | For Boys: 120 out of 120 parents (100%) For Girls: 119 out of 120 parents (99%) | 114 out of 120 parents (95%) |
| Malawi | 29 out of 53 teachers and head teachers (55%) | For Boys: 83 out of 83 parents (100%) For Girls: 81 out of 83 parents (98%) | 80 out of 83 parents (96%) |

Source: Created by authors.

Linkages among factors

All four countries showed that administrative and financial constraints have a strong link and mutual effects at both the district and school levels. Limited resources and lack of administrative capacity constrain the capacity of the schools to fully and adequately implement the UPE policy and maintain a high level of performance at the school. However, the overall perception of parents and SMC members of the UPE policy was positive and did not reflect the administrative and financial constraints and school performance in Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana. In Malawi where there was no capitation grant to replace school fees, stakeholder reactions varied and proved that the stakeholders are capable of introducing positive or negative changes to the way schools perform. The linkage among factors seems to cut across rural and urban schools and there was no clear regional difference within a country.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has clearly shown that effective policy implementation would require considerable consultation with key stakeholders. Without a baseline survey, any systematic, effective, quality-focused and result-oriented implementation of the policy may not be feasible. Although governments and donors have organized a series of advocacy campaigns on the UPE policy, continuous and untiring sensitization and commitment towards the policy may be required to avoid any confusion or local political interference. In particular, there is a need for an effective system of monitoring the program and tightening accountability of the policy. Faced with increased enrollments, each country now needs to make cost-effective strategies to raise the quality of primary schools with limited resources in order to tackle the challenge of maintaining both quantity and quality of education. Furthermore, equity issues should be considered, especially for orphaned and vulnerable children who may need special care. Preschool provision may also be needed to prevent underage entry into the primary school. Our findings suggest that unless these measures are taken urgently, we may repeat the previous mistakes as indicated in the literature (Bray 1986; Sifuna 2007).

The study also has limitations. The number of samples is small and may not represent the overall situation in each country. We also faced difficulties in identifying the mechanism of parental passive attitude and their contrary perception on their contribution to school, due to time limitation. Much is also left for further study to investigate the actual classroom situation such as teaching and learning process and school management.

Finally, an important question to be posed is “whose child the UPE policy is.” As mentioned earlier, our study revealed that the relation between school administration and parents and communities has weakened after the inception of the UPE policy. This is not to say that parents would need to pay in order for their voices to be heard at schools. On the contrary, how parents could make their voices heard when fees are no longer required is a key question to be pursued in order to make the UPE policy sustainable. Who owns the UPE policy and who is accountable and responsible for it? Ultimately, it is not just the government which should comply with the policy and be accountable to the public, but it is the public who should also be responsible for what they voted for. Sustainability of the UPE policy can be ensured only with this mutual accountability relation.

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