

IS PARLIAMENT STARVING THE EDUCATION SECTOR? A CRITICAL LOOK AT LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION AS AN UNFUNDED PRIORITY

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, States including Uganda retaliated in the Muscat Agreement to oblige with the internationally accepted standard to commit 6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to the education sector. However, Uganda is yet to implement this and other international obligations requiring the state to allocate substantial resources to the education sector. An analysis of the Uganda National Budget Framework Papers and the Education Sector Ministerial Policy Statements shows that though spending on education has increased in absolute figures, it has declined as a percentage of the GDP from 4.2% in 2003/2004 to 3.3% in 2013/2014. In terms of education for all, the 2000 Dakar Declaration cites provision of adequate, equitable and sustainable resources as the foremost challenge as many governments do not give education sufficient priority in their national budgets. Fast-forward to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015; all states are tasked to implement programs that are inclusive and that ensure that no one is left behind. Specifically on education, SDG No.4 calls on states to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. Uganda has very progressive legislation and policies to ensure the right to education but this is not matched by the needed funding especially for basic education. Though the country has a policy in place and also articulated in the Education Sector Strategic Plan to have a secondary school supported by government in every sub county; access to education is still a challenge as currently 312 sub counties are without any form of secondary school education. Despite the glaring gap in access to education for all, the Education Sector Ministerial Policy Statement for the 2016/2017 financial year (FY 2016/17) has not considered this subject as a priority. This is now listed under unfunded priorities¹ while a lot of resources have been allocated to fund new public and private universities. This is a major setback considering that the state's immediate obligation as regards the right to education is on basic education. This article analyses role and process of Parliament as an organ in appropriation and singles out areas where resources could be drawn from to enable

¹ The items that have been listed in the ministerial policy statement or national budget but not allocated funds due to the unavailability of funds in that particular sector.

government to provide access to secondary education in areas where there is none. For instance the article draws Parliament's attention to the Auditor General's report of 2014 wherein nugatory expenditures and low absorption of funds have been attributed to poor planning and slow government processes, the impact being wastage of the much needed resources. In the article we make a recommendation to Parliament to take deliberate steps to scrutinize the Education Sector Ministerial Policy Statement and guide the ministry in prioritization of resources to ensure access to basic education for all.

Brief Overview

In some of his most memorable quotes, the great Nelson Mandela noted that, 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' To identify what a nation holds dear, one needs to look at what they are willing to invest in. Quality Education is a leveler and it liberates. Its role in social transformation and development cannot be underplayed. Through education, the most important resources (human resources) of a nation acquire knowledge thus improved livelihoods, the nation's skilled labour force increases, the viscous cycle of poverty is narrowed down and educated citizens contribute much more to the economy rather than depending on it.

Every child has an inherent right to education regardless of their social or financial status.² In developing countries where scarcity of resources is very high to which Uganda isn't an exemption, extra effort has to be expended in how these scarce resources are allocated if everyone is to be a beneficiary. Certain social and economic sectors like education³ definitely require a big or fair slice of the budget if the intended global goals are to be realized. In Uganda, It appears that the education sector is relegated to a secondary position and not given the necessary budget allocation it deserves. One wonders whether this underfunding of public education is driven by a system that cares little about the sector, due to the fact that none of the decision makes have their children attending public education. This could be interpreted that the

² Articles 30 and 34 1995 constitution, Article 13 International Covenant for Social and Economic Rights and Article 26 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

³ Education is a social and economic right under the ICESCR

state is deliberately under funding the sector to maintain the status quo in Uganda where many are wallowing in poverty.

I. Priorities in Education

The Education ministerial policy statement FY 2016/17 has a list of priorities among which access to basic lower secondary education is not. Previously, there were 292 sub counties without any form of secondary schools and 218 sub counties with secondary schools under Public Private Partnerships (PPP). With the creation of more local government units, these numbers have recently increased.

In fact, over 615 sub counties were identified from the school mapping exercise to have no government secondary schools, 312 sub counties have no any form of secondary school while 228 sub counties have a private/community secondary school and 75 sub counties are served with PPP participating secondary schools. Lower secondary education has continued to be among the least funded government sectors. Access to basic education is so paramount that the government ought to prioritize it by allocating adequate resources to the marginalized sub counties without any form of secondary education.

Following a Cabinet directive to the Ministry of Education to have at least one public secondary school in every sub county, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports (MoESTS) set up a Committee to undertake the necessary planning and budgeting process to achieve this target. This task is being handled jointly with other Cabinet directives requiring the Ministry to explore opportunities of taking over Secondary Schools constructed by the communities, faith-based organizations and NGOs. This committee was also tasked by the government to have phased out all PPP Schools beginning the FY 2015/16. The Ministry conducted a rapid mapping exercise that informed the finalization of a Cabinet Paper that spells out implementation strategies and cost implications.

In light of the above, it is worth noting that government has continued to prioritize among others the funding of higher education over lower secondary education. Lower secondary education is

all inclusive and informs the early stages of young people's education aspirations the reason government needs to give it equal attention and facilitation.

Four votes under the Ministry of Education have been created; that is the sector of Quality and Standards has one vote and that of Higher Education has three votes.⁴ Higher education vote plans are intended to provide funds to establish Soroti University, support activities of Kabale University, Lira University, support 100 science students at Kisubi Brother's University and also facilitate 4 selected private Universities to expand their infrastructure. The vote will also equip beneficiary universities with ICT systems, procurement of 3 vehicles. Plus offer assistance in reviewing their higher education strategic plans.

This raises the question, whether the above proposed expenditure is justifiable and reasonable compared to the unfunded priority for lower secondary education? Why should public finances be invested into privately owned Universities at the expense of providing inclusive lower secondary education to the identified 312 sub counties with no form of secondary school education? It is important to note that Soroti University, Kabale University and Lira University are to consume over 34bn alone before the 4 selected private Universities' allocations are included.

What does this mean for a tax payer from Kiriki Sub County in Kween District where education is a dream that eludes her over and over again? Unfortunately, Kiriki Sub County is faced not only with lack of secondary school education but also has no Public Primary school in the entire sub county? Are these the forgotten Ugandans? Who then can intervene in the process and aid in reallocating funds to areas that desperately need this money? What role can parliament play to ensure substantive equality in allocation of resources?

II. The Role of Parliament in the Budget Process

Uganda's Parliamentary Budget office plays an important role in supporting parliamentarians to scrutinize the national budget. Much of the parliamentary budget office work takes place during the budget preparation and appropriation period, when it reviews the budget framework paper and the ministerial policy statements. On the basis of their findings it advises parliament on budgetary issues and makes key recommendations to the Executive. The Public Finance

⁴ A Vote under Ministerial Policy Statement means a sector which has been allocated money.

Management Act mandates Parliament to review, and approve the budget framework but also through sector committees, ministerial policy statements are presented by the different ministries and they must justify their priorities. At this stage parliament has the powers to reject some of the proposed expenditures and has the power to move certain items from unfunded priorities to the funded priorities and the reverse is true. Parliament may also advise on what can be prioritized in the next financial year such that a situation of an item perpetually staying under unfunded priorities or staying there for too long is avoided.

Therefore parliament should note that access to lower secondary education requires urgent attention and should be moved from unfunded priorities and must have a vote. The many sub counties particularly those with no form of secondary school education must be given priority in the next financial year. Uganda subscribes to the Sustainable Development Goals and that fact that they encompass the principle of “leave no one behind” should be the basis upon which priority should be given to the areas that are completely without a secondary school, lest they are left behind in this “steady progress” regime.

III. Auditor General’s Report

Parliament should also appreciate that the Auditor General’s report of 2015 and other previous reports, continue to note the under absorption of government funds. Among the most affected sectors is the education sector. Under consumption has been attributed to inadequate planning and other slow and bureaucratic internal processes. The report also notes that government has a lot of nugatory expenditures and also court awards against the government are areas where government is losing a lot of money. These finances are urgently needed and could be utilized to set up schools to deliver quality secondary education in some hard to reach areas around the country. Worse still the report notes that from period 2012 to 2014 court awards rose from 54bn to 164bn yet only 13bn was provided to cater for these awards. The consequence of this state of affairs has led to interest payments for non-settlement of award to a tune of 60bn.

This discussion confirms one thing; the priority of Uganda is not providing inclusive education to those that need it urgently. From unjustifiably providing funds to private Universities, to committing over 34bn to Soroti, Lira and Kabale University to benefit only 300 Students, does not make any economic sense when there are thousands of children in the 312 sub counties without any form of education.

IV. Recommendations

Parliament must recognize its oversight roles and powers to check the actions of the Executive and the implication of fettering such powers on the tax payer. The question of low absorption capacities has been linked to poor planning and inadequate staff to execute some of the duties. Proper planning that involves setting specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic and time bound goals should be the way to go. The set priorities should be able to reflect the demands of the public and should be set in consultation with key stakeholders like CSOs that are usually on the ground. Parliament should also track the adoption of the recommendations from previous years such that a particular item does not year after year stay on the list of unfunded priorities.

Deliberate action must be taken to ensure that all nugatory or wasteful expenditure like court awards and fines, damages for breach of contract and the delays in the procurement processes are addressed immediately. When these issues are addressed then more resources shall be freed and there can be a reallocation to sectors that urgently need these funds. Government must also elevate lower secondary school education for the sub counties that are without a school to a vote and for now suspend the funding of private Universities. The resources earmarked for expenditure in private universities should be reallocated and consideration should be given to the 312 sub counties with no form of secondary education whatsoever. Parliament should be able to recognize the injustice and unfairness perpetuated by the executive and should exercise its oversight mandate by rejecting such proposals for the benefit of the public.

Uganda's international obligations demand that 20% of the national budget should be spent on education; however, this FY 2015/16 education received only 11%. This means that there is a shortfall of 9%, parliament should be able to task the executive to progressively increase the resources putting in consideration inflation such that we do away with nominal increments.

In conclusion therefore, we observe that Uganda as a country has set its priorities not in the service delivery sectors and the impact is on the social development of Uganda. However this can change if all Ugandans channel their voices through their respective parliamentarians and demand that public education be a priority and that lower secondary education deserves immediate attention.

References

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