

ANALYSIS OF UGANDA'S EDUCATION SECTOR IN LIGHT OF THE NUMEROUS STRIKES

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I. Background: An Overview of the Public Education System in Uganda

In the 1960s and early 1970s Gayaza High School, a missionary aided girls' school in central Uganda compared favorably with Nabumali High School, a 100% state supported high school in Eastern Uganda, in terms of academic performance, status and matriculation to institutions of higher learning such as Makerere University, then the only university in the country. The quality of leadership was also more or less of equal standard because most school heads had solid graduate and post-graduate qualifications gained from the colonial era.

Mobility of students was the order of the day and the late President Apollo Milton Obote from northern Uganda and Hon. Ruhakana Rugunda from western Uganda went to study at Busoga College Mwiriri and the Baganda travelled from Kampala to go and study in the regional schools. Success could be found in government and missionary schools across the country.

The late President Idi Amin got the wrecking ball going in the 1970s by forcing missionary-aided schools to go partly grant-aided simply because government wanted to control them. The loss of independence heralded a degree of direct government interference in the running of schools that had been unknown before.

By 1981, economic conditions in Uganda were already dire and the government's neglect of education gathered apace even as the political interference reached unprecedented levels. Heads were transferred or replaced with scant attention to qualification or suitability for the job. School budgets dwindled in favor of defense spending to fight against a guerilla insurgency that followed disputed elections in 1981.

Between 1981 and 1986 the political polarization in the country seeped so deeply into every fabric of society that schools came to be associated with political parties. The Uganda Patriotic Movement's (UPM) stronghold was in the west of the country so all schools in western Uganda came to be seen as UPM sympathizers. The schools in the north and east were associated with then President Obote's Uganda People's Congress. Gradually, parents frowned upon regional schools and the hitherto healthy cross-country student migration came to a halt.

II. The Current Situation

By the time the National Resistance government took power in 1986, the regional schools had lost money, equipment (most of it stolen), a varied student base and, ultimately, academic prowess. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) said all the right things about education and health and then

proceeded to divert any money that wasn't lost to corruption to the fight against an armed insurgency in the north of Uganda as well as to buy political patronage.

One well-intentioned but ultimately shortsighted initiative that still reverberates negatively around public schools today was the political directive to abolish monetary contributions to Parents, Teachers' Associations (PTAs). PTA fees had been used by schools to undertake repairs to school property in the face of the promised government grants that never arrived and were also critical to augmenting teachers' incomes and give them a more realistic standard of living.

Then in came the Universal Primary Education (UPE) project; a political initiative intended to provide 'free' education to all primary-school-going children which was made as a campaign promise in 1996. It was a well intentioned idea but it was too hastily implemented, and wasn't funded. Literally overnight, the number of school-going primary children tripled, from 2.6million in 1997 to 7.6million in 2004 (UNESCO 2000; Ministry of Education and Sports 2005). The quality of teaching couldn't sustain such a rapid increase in numbers that didn't have a commensurate increase in building of classrooms, training of teachers and increase in salaries.

The conversion of erstwhile good, primary schools to UPE created a vacuum in the provision of quality education. Sensing that discerning parents would shun UPE schools, savvy investors rushed to fill the gap with private schools. UPE schools are still soldiering but the quality of their teaching is highly questionable. Pupil/teacher ratios are at more than 100:1 in some schools, and similarly Teacher and pupil absenteeism is rife.

Ironically, private fee-paying education has been the fastest growing service industry in Uganda since 'free' schooling was introduced and education was liberalized to allow anyone who could to set up a school.

The Ministry of Education didn't have the manpower to maintain the inspection program to the schools that existed before education was liberalized. The situation could only get worse after UPE was introduced; leaving schools administrations to manage as best they could. With scant oversight, schools became a free-for-all. Student disgruntlement grew with the deteriorating conditions and staff mutinies and student strikes became customary even in girls-only schools.

Since 1997, any changes Uganda has made to the public schooling system have placed more emphasis on enrollment numbers rather than the quality of teaching and the eventual product; a classic case of focusing on growth rather than development.

Uganda's UPE continues to be dogged by alarming levels of corruption. Ghost teachers and students abound, schools with no classroom buildings whatever continue to be set up and to flourish nearly twenty years after the advent of UPE. In the preliminary findings of a Ministry of Finance Investigation (2014), it was discovered that about Shs30 billion is swindled each year from the schools program alone, enough money to pay 5000 secondary and 8,000 primary school teachers for a year.

Uganda's 160,000 teachers are among the worst paid public workers in East Africa. Primary school teachers earn an average 250,000 shillings (\$71.00) a month and their secondary school counterparts take home 450,000 shillings (\$128.00). A one-bedroom accommodation that a teacher might wish to rent in a blue collar area of Uganda's capital city goes for 150,000/= (\$50.00) per month. With such derisory pay, it is little wonder that teachers go out on strike so frequently.

III. What Role can Parliament Play to Ensure Improved Quality Education?

Under Uganda's 1995 Constitution, Parliament is entrusted with representing the people, making laws that are tailored to address the people's interests—which over time have been presented to encompass access to quality education among others, and the general oversight role over the executive.

Specific to UPE, Parliament had and still has a duty to ensure that, as one of the Government of Uganda's main policy tools for achieving poverty reduction and human development, the UPE objectives are met. District administrations are core in the implementation of the UPE program.

All districts in Uganda have continued to suffer from chronic budget shortfalls caused in part by low collections of local tax revenue, especially following the abolition of graduated tax in 2000. All districts have difficulties in providing healthcare, education and better infrastructure. Parliament has nonetheless continued approving the creation of even more districts, the last of which approval happened in a recess sitting at the beginning of September 2015.

According to statistics from Uganda's Ministry of Education, 1,598,636 pupils enrolled for Primary one in government-aided schools in 2006. But the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) figures for pupils who sat Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) in 2012 were 463,332, which is only 29% of those who enrolled in 2006.

The complaints about lack of funding from the grassroots implementers of government programs ties in with the reports that in East Africa, Uganda has the lowest proportion of UPE children staying in school up to Primary 7, according to a 2010 report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In Kenya, the completion rate is 84%, Tanzania 81% and Rwanda 74%.

In 2003, there were 145,703 primary school teachers in Uganda, of whom 54,069 (37%) had no formal teacher training. An additional 7,960 had just a teaching certificate, obtained after training on completion of primary education. Most of these had retired, but had been recalled into the teaching service due to shortage of teachers after the introduction of UPE. The majority of these unqualified teachers were deployed in UPE schools in rural areas. (Lawrence Bategeka, Nathan Okurut, 2005)

At the start of the 9th Parliament, legislators—in an effort to show their commitment to the cause, formed the Parliamentary Forum on Quality Education. The forum, which brings together legislators committed to ensuring the attainment of universal education, was intended to be a force in the promotion of quality education across the country. However, even with these good intentions, nothing tangible has been witnessed in the legislative body's attempt to address the numerous ills

within the public education sector. One core avenue that would show their will to improve education standards in the country is through increased budget allocation in the sector. These monies may be used to improve the infrastructure, living conditions of the teachers through better pay and hiring of more teachers to address the pupil/teacher ratio to ensure quality education in the universal set up.

Overall, Parliament is not living up to its oversight role over the abysmal UPE statistics, and it would seem to turn logic on its head to approve yet more districts when the existing ones are complaining that they cannot administer the government's flagship education program due to lack of funding.

IV. The Role of other Non-Governmental Stakeholders

Kenya's teachers' union, the Kenya National Union of Teachers, went to court in January 2015 and in August 2015 won a decision for a 60% pay increase for their teachers.

In Uganda, James Tweheyo, secretary general of Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATU), said the union's 159,000 members would not teach when schools re-opened for their final term of 2015 until their demands were met. He, however, capitulated and accepted a promise of a 10% pay increase, post-dated to the 2016-17 financial year.

The teachers' trade unions lack the organization and financial clout to play the oversight and lobbying role. The lack of union influence can be seen in the dismissive words of the NRM government spokesman, Ofwono Opondo, when teachers threaten yet again to go on strike over pay: "UNATU is not the teachers' employer. The government is and we have told them if the push comes to a shove the government will prevail." (Reuters, 2013, September 16)

V. The Political Climate

The decision to introduce UPE to the country came out of the blue, while the president was on the campaign trail in 1996. He promised that UPE would start in 1997 on the spur of the moment in order to steal the thunder of his opposition, Dr. Paul K. Semogerere who had also started talking about the need for free primary schooling. The president of course left the details to the technocrats to sort out. As can now be seen, the results have been mixed at best, shambolic at worst.

Then the government abolished graduated tax in 2000 which had been paid by almost everyone in the country towards their local services. What was left for taxation on income in the name of Pay As You Earn (PAYE) which, however, excluded the majority of Ugandans because PAYE can only be collected from payroll. The tax burden had been lifted from the majority of Ugandans and placed on a very narrow base of largely urban salary earners. The accountability for services had also moved from the local grassroots bureaucrats to the central government.

In Uganda practically every decision of economic import is made by the president who has in turn seen his State House budget balloon from 11bn/= in 1997/98 to 200bn/= in 2013 and is projected to hit 550bn/= in 2015. In comparison, the agriculture budget which supports 85% of Uganda's population has progressively dipped to 382bn/= in 2013/2014.

The president of Uganda thus has more money to spend on his priorities than the Ministry of Agriculture, making him virtually the person to go to by everyone for literally every problem in the country. His NRM Party dominates parliament by 2:1 but hardly any candidate can win on the NRM ticket without the president's financial and political patronage. It is therefore not surprising that majority of parliamentarians who should advocate for improved services in the education sector, have to rely on what the NRM caucus decides concerning any issue before the August house. Hence, the public education system in the country continues to become shambolic as it is not priority to the government—and why should it be, majority of their children don't attend public school. All in all, the president is all but the central government, and the final arbiter on all significant political and financial developments in the country. Parliament continues to be a mere rubber stamp for his wishes. That is partly the reason UPE has staggered along with scant Parliamentary oversight; there is simply no political interest in questioning seriously whether this program is working and/or what can be done to improve it, even if any legislators sent their children to a UPE school which none do. It is in that spirit that Parliament was recalled in August 2015 to approve yet more new districts in areas that favor the NRM but it has never been recalled to question why the UPE dropout rates are so alarmingly high. The president announced that he had been asked by his people for districts and so he gave a directive for Parliament to be recalled so that his people can get their wish.

Uganda's governance model is thus also a significant part of the problem – with too much power entrusted in the office of the president.

VI. Conclusion

While the Government of Uganda's commitment to UPE is not in doubt, it is apparent that the program has suffered adversely from hasty roll-out, unfunded, unplanned growth, failure or inability of many rural parents to meet their end of the bargain to provide basic scholastic materials, corruption and lack of Parliamentary oversight. Funding per UPE pupil remains woefully inadequate at less than \$5.00 per pupil per year. Even if it were increased to \$20.00 it wouldn't be adequate.

The teachers' lobbying arm, the UNATU, is too weak and thus incapable of fighting for its members' interests resolutely. That too, would have to be addressed, perhaps by changing the union leadership, setting up a new union or improving the lobbying and negotiating skills of the existing UNATU leaders. The absence of a strong teachers' lobby is a drawback that ensures that lawmakers and government are not under any pressure to focus more closely on education funding and the quality of provision.

Universal Primary Education and its counterpart, Universal Secondary Education, need to be abolished from the urban areas where parents can already afford to pay towards their children's schooling. The money thus saved should then be re-allocated to the suburban and rural schools where facilities are threadbare and parents cannot afford to pay for the basic school necessities.

All this would, however, require a radical change in government thinking that will not come easy. As long as the rural communities continue to consider the meager offerings from UPE as a godsend, and the urban tax payers and lawmakers can afford to take their children to better, private, fee-paying

schools, totally shunning the UPE schools—which they fund with their taxes, there doesn't seem to be any political imperative for the president to ask for any radical examination, let alone overhaul, of the public education sector in Uganda.

And as long as the president will not move on this issue, there will be no Parliamentary will to ask the necessary and long overdue questions.

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