

Uganda Hits Universal Primary Education Target

The East African Newspaper, Kampala, Uganda Started three years ago, Uganda's strategy of free education for all - the Universal Primary Education (UPE) - is beginning to pay off. The enrolment rate has increased as more children go to school throughout the country. "I am happy that I am now able to send my four children to school. I only pay for their uniform and sometimes exercise books. This system will help the people of my area", says Vincent Oyat, who earns a living from cultivating simsim and fishing on the shores of Lake Kyoga in Apac District. His children go to a nearby school, some three kilometres away from his home. The UPE was introduced in Uganda in January 1997 as part of a government policy to provide free primary education to four children in every family, including orphaned and disabled children. With the introduction of the UPE Uganda hopes that this policy will have an enormous impact on the future of education in Uganda.

In launching the programme, Uganda was conscious of the financial implications of the scheme and the need to provide basic quality education. The overwhelming response nationwide posed some challenges concerning staffing, teaching and learning materials. Enrolment figures have risen from 2.5 million in 1997 to 6.5 million to date.

In some parts of the Central regions of Uganda, the response was so high that some classes had to be conducted under trees. In urban centres, government-aided schools have equally overwhelming enrolment figures, which have raised questions from opposition politicians on the quality of education. Ugandan education and policy makers are convinced that with this kind of response, a framework is needed to re-direct efforts for the challenges ahead. Thus, it developed an Education Sector Investment Plan (ESIP) for the period 1997 to 2003.

The plan was approved in December 1998. The government says this plan was founded upon the 1992 government White Paper on the Education Policy Review Commission Report. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, who is a strong advocate of the UPE programme which he used in his campaign strategy during the 1996 presidential elections, says it will help in eradicating poverty. The argument is that the ESIP provides a framework for investment to enable this vision to be realized through the education sector. The results of the UPE have partly been due to relentless efforts at political level to educate parents on the benefits of free primary education. Local Resident District Commissioners (RDC's) and District Education Officers (DEO's) have been the focus of the implementation of the programme and ensuring its success at village level. Other local leaders agree that the programme has to be closely monitored for full benefits to all.

Uganda now faces three main challenges: Access, equity and efficiency. The target is, therefore, to expand the education sector to accommodate more learners and eliminate disparities in terms of access and performance with special emphasis on removing gender and regional imbalances. Uganda has also taken due considered in the expansion of secondary education and other sub-sectors to absorb primary school dropouts. Although grants have been sent from the central government to districts primarily for the UPE, the amount of interest it has generated has involved parents in school constructions, brick-making and provision of land for expansion.

Besides expanding the classrooms from 52,000 and another 12,000 to be completed before the end of the year, Uganda also aims to have a textbook to pupil ratio of 1:1. Emphasis has also been laid on in-service training for teachers to equip them with skills to provide quality education. As for secondary education, the aim is to have one secondary school in every sub-county. Against the background of an expanded UPE programme and increased enrolment, Uganda plans to construct 850 community polytechnics to provide basic technical skills to primary school dropouts.

Vocational and higher education sub-sectors are also included under the ESIP. Although no specific budget has been set aside, the government says it has earmarked some funds for refurbishing existing polytechnics and higher institutions to complement the programme. As a sign of commitment to its education for all policy, government expenditure increased by 30 per cent from US\$44 billion in 1996 to US\$136 billion in 1998. As of March 1999, US\$6.22 billion had been disbursed for primary school construction in eight districts of Kabarole, Bugiri, Pallisa, Kiboga, Arua, Moyo, Nebbi and Adjumani. Support funds for Uganda's UPE programme have come from the World Bank, the Netherlands government, The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Denmark and Britain.

Unicef / Giacomo Piazz

The Press at the Forum

ACCREDITATION

Journalists who are Senegalese residents will be accredited by a local press board and their badges will be made up by the national gendarmerie, at the Méridien Président hotel, the meeting venue. Journalists who are foreign residents will be accredited by the UNESCO press service (Paris).

PRESSROOM - A room equipped with fifty workstations and 20 computers, 5 of them connected to Internet and E-mail, will be set up on the conference site for the exclusive use of accredited members of the press. A giant television screen in the pressroom will provide a simultaneous broadcast of the proceedings.

DOCUMENTATION - All forum documents and communiqués intended for publication will be made available on a daily basis in the pressroom, under the supervision of two offices to be set up on the forum site.

BRIEFINGS - A general briefing is scheduled for Tuesday, 25 April, at 3 p.m., on the forum site. A daily briefing will be held every day from 26 to 28 April by Mr. Djibril Diallo, an official from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and forum spokesman. A final press conference is scheduled for Friday, 28 April at the close of the proceedings.

Exclusion and Violence Leave Schools at a Loss

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The average unemployment rate for under-25s in the European Union is 21.5 per cent. "You study, you make sacrifices, and in the end what do you have? Nothing," says Rachida Bensmili, 22, a Paris-based business student.

The mature education systems in the region offer 100 per cent coverage in primary and secondary education up to the age of 16.

Despite universal coverage, there is a persistent 'hard core' of underachievers estimated at between 15 and 20 per cent who fail to acquire basic skills at primary school and fall behind in secondary school. Between 10 to 30 per cent of the adult population in the region has difficulty with basic reading, writing and numeracy skills. Priority Education Zones in France and Portugal are examples of positive discrimination in underprivileged areas.

The alienation of growing numbers of young people who have 'fallen through the cracks' in society - neither in school or in employment - needs urgent action, not least because it is perceived as a threat to social cohesion. A 1999 survey of OECD countries shows that their numbers range from 4.3 per cent in Denmark to 19.4 per cent in the United Kingdom. School for them has led nowhere. "It may sound extreme, but in some cases school actually produces marginalised people," remarks Svein Ostveit, Executive Secretary of the Education for All Forum. He points to the failure of rigid, unresponsive formal school systems to cater to the learning needs of all. Initiatives to better equip early school leavers and under-achievers for the job market are appearing in the region. They include programmes in schools and vocational training institutions, as well as work-experience projects run by private companies. A pilot scheme of 'second-chance schools', financed by the European Commission and several public and private partners, is operating in several EU countries. The scheme aims to provide 18-to-22-year-old school drop-outs with job skills so they can make a fresh start.

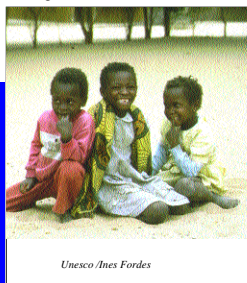
Central and eastern Europe face a different set of problems. The regional assessment confirms that the economic crisis has deeply affected the quality of education. While primary school atten-

dance has remained stable, a combination of demographics and hard times has sent early childhood education into steep decline, with enrolment dropping from 21 million to 12 million from 1990 to 1998.

In central and eastern Europe, stories abound of dilapidated schools, teachers waiting up to ten months to get paid, canteens closing and classes held in freezing temperatures.

To add to existing inequalities, a two-tier system is taking root, where the best private schooling is only accessible to those who can afford it. As a result of increasing social exclusion, violence in schools is rising in many countries of the region. In the United States, the recent classroom killing of one 6-year-old by another shows that the worrying increase in school shootings is not confined to

high schools. Alarm video systems and uniformed guards are now part of many a North American school environment. Some pupils have attempted to set fire to the school where Chantal Collin teaches in a Paris suburb. Others already run foul of the law. "Violence comes from low self-esteem and repeated failure," claims Chantal, who has responded by developing projects and activities to restore confidence in her pupils. But not all teachers have her resourcefulness, and most lack training to cope with aggression. "Today, schools are ill-equipped to deal with violence," says Kaisa Savolainen of UNESCO. "There is a strong need for non-violent strategies for conflict resolution."



Unesco / Ines Forde

Disparities

Basic education around the world is a picture characterised by contrasts. The 1990s, some observers claim, have seen a crisis in education with 113 million out-of-school children, widespread discrimination against girls, nearly a billion illiterate adults - mostly women - dilapidated schools, and a shortage of qualified teachers and learning materials. Others point out that the number of children in school has soared (from 599 million in 1990 to 681 millions in 1998) and that many countries are now approaching full primary school enrolment for the first time. While the donor community is criticised for dwindling aid commitment, countries such as Bangladesh, Brazil and Egypt are earmarking close to 6 per cent of their gross national product (GNP) for education. For some African countries, education absorbs up to a third of their national budgets, although several of them spend as much on debt repayment as on health and basic education combined.

Countries such as Cape Verde, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe are known to have achieved up to 90 percent primary school enrolment. But dropouts have been all too more frequent, reaching a third of the aggregate enrolment in some countries.

Disparities in quality are also widespread. Over-conservative education systems are out of touch with young people's needs, in sharp contrast to the plethora of initiatives that successfully adapt learning to local needs or reach out to marginalized populations with skills training and income-generating activities. New media and virtual networks are also starting to shake the dust off education systems.