

## The African Development Dilemma: Quality or Mass Education

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Uganda is to vote for the next President on February 18, 2011. According to Dr Frederick Golooba-Mutebi of Makerere University Institute of Social Research, the new government will inherit a lot of serious problems including “an education system crippled by large number of pupils/students with few and poorly paid teachers,” [Mugerwa, 2011]. From the time all African nations got independent, the overriding desire of every independent country has been to provide and expand the education system to as many as the financial resources of the country can go. This drive is based on long held views of many Africans that education contributes handsomely to combating ignorance, disease and poverty. It is also based on the fundamental principle that every African kid has the right to basic education and that it is the duty of government to provide it to the limits of available resources.

Every government understood, at the time of independence, that the attainment of this is through the provision of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) to all the nation’s children. Driven by this desire, African governments at different times after independence set themselves to do just that, although few had the resources to support the move. Besides the political motives and the natural desire to bring about national development, there were external forces in the play. In 2000, the United Nations, in an effort to spur rapid international development through international cooperation, enacted the United Millennium Declaration which included eight measurable outcomes as goals. These become the United National Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Goals represented human needs and basic rights that every individual around the world should be able to enjoy. Rights like freedom from extreme poverty and hunger; quality education, productive and decent employment, good health and shelter; the right of women to give birth without risking their lives; environmental sustainability and women and men live in equality. In particular, Goal 2 in the MDGs, was to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. However, in 2010, when the United Nations met again to take stock of the progress made after 10 years, there was a mixed picture as follows (Ki-Moon , 2010):

- Hope was dimming for universal education by 2015, even as many poor countries made tremendous strides
- Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia were still home to the vast majority of children out of school

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- Inequalities within and between nations were presenting the greatest threat towards progress towards universal education

One of the reasons for this mixed picture, especially in Africa, was the growing debate about the value of mass education driven by the MDG policies many of African governments had embarked on and the quality of education resulting from UPE. Across East Africa, for example, where Kenya (twice), Uganda and Tanzania have already embarked on UPE, there are growing problems. At the time of the abolition of school fees no or limited measures were put in place to replace the lost revenue for schools and districts. Schools and districts were at a loss as to what they could do about this lost revenue and how to meet the expenses of added mandates of UPE. With unexpectedly enlarged enrolment and limited money from the ministries of education, schools and districts started charging revenue as building fees. These varied from school to school and district to district. However, very quickly there were raised parental concerns and outcry to governments and governments came in to abolish these channels of school and district revenue. Yet the resources from government to schools and districts to meet the new UPE mandates were very limited and constrained.

The result of curtailed local revenue collection, limited government resources, overwhelming class overcrowding, no new teachers, and the severe and strained supply of teaching and learning materials together created near unsustainable education environments and heated political debates across Africa about the value of UPE. To try and remedy the situation, governments started knee jack reactions that included a requirement of non-retaining of poorly performing students and the recruitment of more unqualified teachers. These government interventions had immediate serious consequences including increased pupil teacher ratios, high drop outs, unexpected increase in education expenses to parents and a drop in the quality of education. As professor Daniel N. Sifuna observes [Sifuna, 2005], while free primary education has increased participation, it has at the same time created considerable problems. It has exacerbated the problem of teaching and learning facilities. As a result of the high influx of new pupils, classrooms are congested. Many of the preliminary surveys seem to show that the existing facilities make a mockery of the free education program. This has upped a level in the debate UPE vs quality of education.

With five years to go until the end of the MDGs, limited national resources and the reluctance of the donor community not willing to commit more finances due to economic restraints back home, this debate is likely to continue.

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