

Newspapers in Education

Woes. While government policy guarantees free primary and secondary education, a report finds that hidden costs continue to exclude the very learners the programme was designed to uplift.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

A new study by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has exposed the silent barriers keeping thousands of children from minority communities out of school, despite Uganda's long-standing Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Secondary Education (USE) policy.

The year-long research, covering 20 minority groups across the Mount Elgon, Karamoja, Rwenzori and West Nile regions, paints a troubling picture of systemic inequality.

While government policy guarantees free primary and secondary education, the report finds that hidden costs continue to exclude the very learners the programme was designed to uplift.

According to Ms Petua Babrye Isabirye, the EOC head of research and monitoring, the promise of free education remains largely theoretical for many vulnerable families.

"Parents are still required to meet costs that are not officially classified as school fees. These include uniforms, meals, scholastic materials, and transport, which many households simply cannot afford," she said.

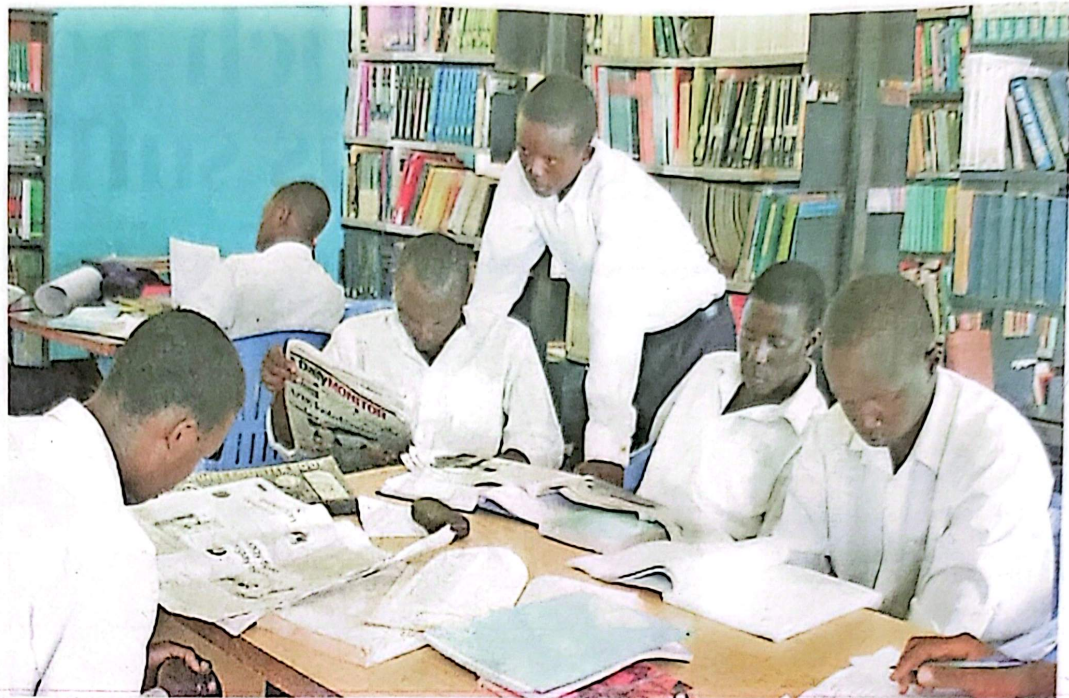
According to the report, these expenses disproportionately affect ethnic minority communities, where poverty levels are often higher and infrastructure weaker.

"In remote areas, children are forced to walk long distances to the nearest school, a factor which also increases dropout rates, particularly among girls," the report reads.

The study also highlights a critical shortage of classrooms and trained teachers in minority-dominated regions, further undermining access to quality education. "In some districts, overcrowded classrooms and teacher absenteeism were reported as persistent challenges, stretching already limited resources," the report reads.

Ms Isabirye says beyond physical and financial barriers, the report raises concerns about cultural exclusion in the education system. "The national curriculum rarely reflects the languages, histories and cultural identities of minority groups. Instruction is largely delivered in dominant languages, leaving many children struggling," she said.

The EOC chairperson, Ms Safia Nalule Juuko, said the findings reinforce



Students study in a school library and USE have been hindered by several challenges. PHOTO: EOC

The challenges hindering free education programme

long-standing concerns about equity in Uganda's education sector.

"While enrolment rates have improved under UPE/USE, completion and learning outcomes remain uneven," she said. She added that there is a need to integrate minority languages into early childhood education, which researchers argue would improve comprehension and retention among young learners.

"The commission is also calling for deliberate efforts to recruit and retain teachers from minority communities, and this would not only address staffing gaps, but also promote cultural inclusion in classrooms," she said.

UPE AND USE

According to the Economic Policy Research Centre and Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Uganda have noted significantly increased enrolment, with over 8.8 million children in primary schools (95 percent enrolment) and nearly

2 million in secondary schools as of 2022-2023, maintaining high gender parity.

However, the system faces challenges, including high dropout rates. About 40 percent of pupils fail to complete primary school. The pupil-teacher ratio is 65:1.

For the 2025/2026 financial year, the government maintained the current unit costs for capitation grants under the Universal

Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) programmes, despite calls for an increase.

UPE maintained capitation grant at approximately Shs20,000 per learner per year, while the USE rate is Shs175,000 per learner per year.

Special Needs Education (SNE): Primary remains at Shs22,000, and for secondary at Shs192,000.

She also wants the government to increase funding to underserved regions, improve school infrastructure, and explore targeted support mechanisms to cushion families from hidden education costs.

"As Uganda continues to pursue inclusive development, the findings serve as a stark reminder that access to education is not just about eliminating tuition fees, but also addressing the broader socio-economic realities that shape a child's ability to learn," she said.

Ms Joan Akidi, a mother of two, said that she thought when the government introduced Universal Primary Education, her children would finally

have a fair chance to access education, but the hidden costs have also failed her offsprings.

"Every term, the school sends our children back home for things they say are 'small,' like a uniform, books, and money for meals. If you fail to pay, your child is not allowed in school," she said.

She explained that for families like hers, surviving on subsistence farming, these so-called hidden costs are anything but small. "I have to choose between buying food and sending my child to school. Sometimes they go without lunch, and cannot concentrate in class," she said.

Asked about this, the Ministry of Education and Sports spokesperson, Mr Dennis Mugimba, said planned interventions are intended for areas affected by female genital mutilation, where the government has committed to provide to construct boarding sections for girls to address the issue of long distances.

This includes the Sebei and Karamoja regions, and island populations. "These are the places where boarding sections can be constructed so that children can access education without the need to travel to and from school every day," he said.

He added that the capitation grant given for universal education covers the provision of scholastic materials for all learners, and the only area where they give more consideration is special needs education. "When we were costing the revamped Universal Primary Education programmes, the guidance we received from the President was that the government is not providing transport, meals, and uniforms," he said.

Mr Mugimba added that these items remain the responsibility of parents. The government covers staffing of schools, infrastructure, utilities, and maintenance, but not personal needs of the learners.