



Education. A teacher conducts a lesson under a tree at Kitiko Primary School, a learning institution implementing Universal Primary Education programme in Buvuma District recently. PHOTO BY DENIS EDEMA

Millions still illiterate 20 years after start of UPE programme

Letdown. In 1997, Uganda embarked on an ambitious journey to give her children a chance to get basic education that would help them to at least be able to read and write. Twenty years later, *Sunday Monitor's* Stephen Kafeero writes about why millions have never enlisted for formal education, in spite of the government's Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme.

The pathetic sight of young girls and women emerging from Katwe Kinyoro is hard to miss. The area itself and its environs are tragically familiar because of the crime and other society ills they embody.

Yet, behind the iron sheets and other settlements that shield the area from the prying eyes of people, especially those using Entebbe road to and from Kampala city, is another ignored tragedy.

From as early as 6am, Karimojong girls as young as three emerge from Katwe and another nearby ghetto in Kisenyi. Their destination, certainly, is not school.

Donning tight unfitting tops some exposing their bellies and short skirts,

the girls older than 10, some are younger, carry a broom and a sack each while the younger ones chase after them.

Those lucky enough, have a shawl to cover their bodies while rest, brave the morning cold. As the older girls make their journey to places like Kisenyi and Owino markets, the younger ones as old as two remain on the streets—to beg.

While all this is happening, affluent parents are either trying to beat the traffic jam as they rush their children to school or are caught up in the same. Other lucky children from the neighbourhood are also seen walking to school.

This and more is the rather sad turn of events 20 years later since Uganda declared an ambitious attempt to give every of its children a chance to go to school.

President Museveni and his wife, who is also the Education minister, Janet Museveni, are also frequent passersby in the area as they make their way from State House Nakasero to State House Entebbe and back. It is hard to imagine they fail to take note of what is happening.

When this newspaper put this question to Ms Museveni on February 12 after she released Primary Leaving Examinations' results, she shifted most of the blame to the communities and parents

who she said were not doing enough to support government initiatives. She also asked the media to do more to highlight the challenges in the sector.

The announcement by President Museveni, in December 1996, that government would offer free primary school education to four children of school going age per family was to say the least, revolutionary. Coming during a heated election, the announcement had dividends for Mr Museveni.

Initially, the programme that kicked off in January 1997 as the Universal Primary Education (UPE), targeted four children per family but was eventually made to cater for all children.

The objectives of UPE as per the Ministry of Education and Sports policy document of 1998 were to, among oth-

ers, provide quality education, provide facilities and resources to enable every child to enter and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete, make basic education accessible to the learner and relevant to his or her needs, as well as meeting national goals.

Others were to make education equitable in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities, ensure that education is affordable by the majority of Ugandans and meet the objective of poverty eradication by equipping every individual with basic skills and knowledge.

The situation prevailing prior to this announcement is best captured in the video for a late 1980s duet by Stella Nant-eza and Jimmy Katumba in which street children interviewed give their experiences of surviving on Kampala streets. All without exception express the need for an opportunity to go to school.

By now majority are adults yet the cycle continues with the Karimojong girls and other street children taking their place. Collectively, they make up the millions of Ugandans who have never attended school, majority of whom were eligible 20 years ago.

To date, they have never been in the confines of four walls of a classroom, not even under a tree that makes for a

7 million

Illiterate. The 2014 National Population and Housing Census put the number of Ugandans who have never been to school at nearly seven million—representing 19.3 per cent of the total population. Another 40 per cent of the population, the census revealed, left before completion.



Desperate. A Karimujong girl begs on a Kampala street with a baby strapped to her back.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL KAKUMIRI

in many places in Uganda.

Such is the case of Generous Akampurira, 24, who to date yearns for a chance to go to school. The mother of four was only four years old when President Museveni made the famous announcement.

We meet in Kabirizi Village, Rubaare Parish, Rubaare Sub-county in Ntungamo District. She decides against speaking to us from her home and instead decides to do so at a function at Kacerere Trading Centre. She says she is afraid of her husband's reaction on finding her speaking to a man.

Akampurira's parents were illiterate themselves and they were only able, she says, to recollect her date of birth to the visit of Pope John Paul in 1993.

Born in Kakanena Village in Rugarama Sub-county, her home is about nine kilometres to a primary school and she says like many other children she grew up with, they could not manage to travel the long distance to school. Their brothers too either went there when they were older or kept at home looking after animals.

"I could not go to school, it was far and I used to follow my brothers to graze cows. When UPE came, my father decided to register four of my siblings and I was the youngest. They went to school and later dropped out because they could not manage the distance," she says.

According to Akampurira, her brothers used to walk at least 18 kilometres to and from Nyanga Primary School, which she could not manage. By the time she could, she was too old to join Primary One.

One of her greatest disappointments is being unable to vote without being aided in the process. "Everyone laughs at me whenever I go voting, they think I have been

bribed not to cast the vote myself, but the fact is I cannot write or read. I have wanted at least to learn how to read but there is no where I can learn it from. My husband also does not allow me to go away from home unless I am taking a child for immunisation. It's also hard for me because I feel shy, I don't want people to know that I never went to school, they would undermine me more," she says.

Without an education, her life has been reduced to digging, cooking, caring for the children and her husband. She plans to have four more children to appease her husband and in-laws.

Like Akampurira, Tonny Ogeni, 23, who we meet in Gulu District, has never been to school. Ogeni works at a washing bay in Gulu Municipality. It is the only source of livelihood that the resident of Laroo Division in Gulu Municipality has ever known. He can hardly read or write.

A similar story pertains when we head to Busoga sub-region. Sowari Nabongho, 21, from Namakooko Village, Kibaale Sub-county dropped out of school in Primary Six when his father died. He had to take care of his family as its new head.

Prossy Nampina's academic journey ended when she was raped. She now takes care of her child. She wants to return to school but she doesn't have the funds to do so.

The UPE programme registered success shortly after the start of its implementation. To date, many children would not have had an opportunity to go to school without UPE. For this Uganda has got commendation. Enrolment increased from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 8.4 million in 2013.

While these rates show increasing ac-

cess to primary education, they leave out the story of the millions left behind.

The 2014 National Population and Housing Census put the number of Ugandans who have never been to school at nearly seven million - representing 19.3 per cent of the total population. Another 40 per cent of the population, the census revealed, left before completion.

The census makes it even clearer in its observation that one in every 10 children of primary school-going age (six to 12 years), has never been to school despite the availability of UPE.

A 2014 study by Uwezo, a 'citizen movement based' approach to assessing literacy and numeracy levels in East Africa found districts in the Karamoja sub-region to shoulder the highest burden of children who have never been to school. Kotido District leads at 61 per cent followed by Nakapiripirit District at 35 per cent, while in Moroto District, 27 per cent of children aged nine to 16 attended school.

The name Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire is synonymous with Uganda's quest to give free education to her citizens. It even earned her the title 'Mama UPE.' Ms Bitamazire was handed the docket of State minister of Education shortly after UPE came into force.

Now a senior presidential adviser on education, Ms Bitamazire says the media and many other people miss the point when they dwell on the failures of UPE.

"What I would like to see is the media and other members of the society pick out the success of this programme. I have been working with graduates from UPE schools; they are doctors, engineers, lawyers and other professions."

She says many people who went through UPE are responsible in their communities and engage in such activities as taking their children to school, for immunisation. Others she says are commanding the economic development in the country.

The focus, she adds, should be on the children in the rural remote areas and in the urban poor areas who are not accessing schools.

"The other aspect we should be addressing as a country is how we should be helping to retain these children in schools," she says.

To Dr Mary Goretti Nakabugo, the country coordinator of Uwezo Uganda, the problem for the country is not only with the children who have not got a chance to go to school but also with "the big number of children who are in school and are left behind in terms of learning outcomes".

The other problem, she notes, is the almost 70 per cent of children entering primary education and dropping out before reaching Primary Seven.

A 2005 report by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), a United Kingdom-based independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues notes that of the 2,159,850 pupils that were enrolled in primary school level one in 1997 at the time UPE was introduced, only 485,703 (23 per cent) reached Primary Seven in 2003. The report cites pupil's lack of interest, family responsibilities, and sickness as the leading cause.

In 2006, more than one million pupils enrolled in UPE in 2006, majority of these again disappeared in the system along the way. Only 463,332 of the 1,598,636 sat for Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) seven years later.

The ODI report also provides insights into why we have failed to fully realise the UPE dream. Some of the "institutional constraints" to the delivery of

WHAT WENT WRONG

Failure.

Renowned educationist George William Ssemivule says a good programme such as UPE was bungled up at implementation right from the beginning when government became over ambitious.

The need by government to impress the formulators of the Millennium Development Goals, especially goal number two did not favour Uganda.

UPE, Mr Ssemivule says, was supposed to answer to millennium development goal number eight but at the same time it was supposed to answer to the constitutional right to education.

"The right to education means that much as it is your right, it is also your obligation. No one would want an ignorant nation. In many developed nations, it is compulsory to have basic education, you have to keep in school up to a certain level and then do what you want. If you are not in school, they either arrest your parents or you..."

To make UPE work and at least achieve its aim, he says the government needs to ensure that when UPE budgets are made, they are fully implemented.

"It is not late, from the word go let them make UPE compulsory, that is the best way. It can take time because you have to write laws through Parliament but the sooner we do so, the earlier we shall see results. This business of leaving human beings to manage themselves, I don't believe in it, sometimes I do but not all the time, especially when you are dealing with different types of people," he says.

quality education services" include corruption which leads to shoddy work, demoralisation of teachers, and poor performance of UPE pupils.

The anticipation that the communities would be involved in the education of their own through contributions of labour and building materials failed to materialise.

The report also faults government on failing to fully take advantage of liberalisation of the education sector, so as to maximise the impact of UPE.

Increase expenditure per pupil in UPE schools in rural areas and for the urban poor is perhaps the most echoed. Proponents of the proposal argue it will help in improving the quality of education, encouraging more enrollment and reducing drop-out rates.

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