

The Observer Dec. 7, 2011

UPE hailed for empowering girl child

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Despite facing harsh criticism over its poor quality and consequent appalling grades, a senior education official says the government is pleased with the outcome so far of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme.

Godfrey Arnold Dhatemwa, the commissioner of education planning in the ministry of Education and Sports, argues that UPE enrolments have boosted Uganda's efforts in achieving Millennium Development goal (MDG) 3, which calls for gender equality and empowering women.

MDG 3, one of the eight ambitious targets that governments of developing nations committed to in 2000, puts emphasis on eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015.

Dhatemwa noted that Uganda has already surpassed that target, thanks to the overwhelming UPE enrolment in the last seven

years. "We have achieved 50.1 percent girl enrolment and that's a tremendous achievement if compared to the situation in 2005," Dhatemwa said while releasing an independent report entitled 'Management and Motivation in Ugandan Primary Schools' at Protea hotel in Kampala last week.

Statistics from the ministry of Education and Sports show that the ratio of boys to girls in primary school improved from 65:35 in 2005 to 49.9:50.1 last year. Coupled with this is the fact that an estimated seven children have joined the primary school education.

Dhatemwa attributed the increased enrolment to UPE, which the government introduced in 1997.

However, several independent assessment reports on UPE have shown how the programme simply churns out children who have not acquired any knowledge.

Most of these children are unable to read and write.

Teacher absenteeism, fuelled by poor pay and deplorable levels of corruption at districts have largely been blamed for the poor state of primary schools and UPE performances in general. This poor performance has been detrimental as donor funders of UPE - like Netherlands - have since opted out of bankrolling the programme.

Stakeholders also blame the government for allocating what they say are very little resources and funding to the education sector. For instance, in the last financial year the government allocated a paltry Shs 8,000 for each child through the UPE capitation grant.

Dhatemwa, who acknowledged the amount can do little with the prevailing high cost of living and commodity prices, explained that the money is supposed buy requirements like chalk and sports equipment.

Meanwhile, the two-year research on 'Management and Motivation in Ugandan

Primary Schools' found that it would cost much less to effectively run UPE if school management committees (SMCs) were fully empowered to monitor and evaluate the progress of the programme. A joint team of researchers from the Makerere University-based Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) and the UK's Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) in Oxford conducted the study.

One of the researchers, Ibrahim Kasirye, explains that they discovered that SMCs (which consist of parents, teachers and local community members) developed effective performance scorecards with underlying issues like teacher absenteeism and staff housing.

The study, funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), was carried out in 100 schools sampled randomly in Apac, Hoima, Kiboga and Iganga.

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