Free Primary Education and Poverty Reduction: The Case of Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi and Uganda

In Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda, free primary education (FPE) was viewed as a step toward achieving universal basic education and as part of scaling up poverty reduction. The removal of school fees contributed to poverty reduction by ensuring universal access to basic education, which in turn could help break the cycle of poverty. It is a significant intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is lagging behind in achieving universal primary education (UPE). The four countries represent different stages of the process over time, using different scales, and different approaches under different political, social, and economical contexts.

Universal basic education is largely understood as universal primary schooling. Only after the Jomtien conference on Education for All (EFA) in 1990 was it understood that by making primary education free would it include children from poor families and thereby perhaps become universal. Schooling costs for families are a major constraint to achieving UPE. Direct costs can include general fees, examination fees, salary top-ups, textbooks, materials, uniform, feeding, transportation, sports and culture. Indirect costs are the opportunity cost of labor at home or work. By eliminating direct costs of schooling, families could send their children to primary school, thus increasing demand. On the supply side, very few school systems in Africa were keyed to education for all from the outset, and a strategy combining the elimination of fees together with the reform of the EFA system is needed.

Relevant contextual similarities among the four countries included the fact that all are emergent multiparty democracies. In Malawi, Kenya, and Lesotho, free primary education was the key election issue on which the new government came to power. All countries have, or have had until recently, high poverty and illiteracy rates and low primary enrollment and completion rates. All four countries were highly centralized and lacked fiscal discipline. Differences among the countries included scale (population size, density, GDP, GDP per capita, foreign debt, and foreign aid) and the FPE starting point (i.e., organization structures, national enrollment rate--NER, institutional capacity, and school ownership). Local social and cultural differences within each country are as great as those among the countries and provided differing FPE contexts.

Malawi was the first of the four countries to start working toward UPE, by abolishing school fees grade by grade in 1991. FPE was launched for all grades by September 1994 after an election campaign where the strategy changed to the “big bang” approach for all grades at the same time. Uganda had a sleeping UPE policy from 1987, but not until relative stability in 1997 was FPE implemented, following the new government’s manifesto. Uganda also used the big bang approach. FPE was in the constitution of Lesotho, but instability delayed implementation until 2000, after the 1999 elections. Lesotho adopted a sequential strategy, phasing in from grade 1. The newly elected government of Kenya adopted the big bang approach in 2003.
In all four countries, a top-level dynamic political initiative triggered FPE implementation, leaving little time for detailed planning before startup. In some cases, there was little time even to negotiate with stakeholders. In Malawi, a two-day national policy symposium was held and a mass media campaign mobilized the population. In Uganda, the radio was used for dissemination and communication; Lesotho, learning from both countries, used the traditional form of community consultation (*pitsos*) and mass media; in Kenya, a stakeholder forum was created, which set up a task force and reported to the government. What FPE would and would not cover, and how, varied somewhat from country to country owing to contextual differences, especially of school ownership.

Key issues in introducing FPE included maintaining the social contract with the electorate, establishing quality education, and developing the capacity to implement and sustain FPE. Criticism of FPE in all four countries has raised questions about its sustainability, the lack of time for planning, slowness to deliver, and problems in quality education. However, introducing FPE as an urgent task shows what major changes are needed in an educational system to redirect it to EFA. In each country, immediate support from at least one major donor/lending agency was needed to ensure confidence in the process. As part of democratization processes, FPE must not be seen to fail.

The public response to FPE was overwhelming and created access shock. Enrollments jumped by 68 percent in the first year in Malawi and Uganda, 75 percent in Lesotho (grade 1 only), and 22 percent in Kenya. This led to overcrowded classrooms; double and triple shifts; and shortages of teachers, textbooks, and materials. Many enrolled are over-age pupils who should have been taking adult education. None of the systems were geared up for the logistical implications of FPE.

Ministries, supported by international agencies, put in place distance in-service teacher and paraprofessional training and retrained teachers for large classes; multigrade teaching in small schools; and in education for all. There was implementation of crash classroom construction programs and, in the case of Lesotho, temporary tents, particularly using community involvement as a lead-in to participation in school management. All four countries want communities to be more involved in school management and saw community involvement in construction as an opportunity. Unfortunately, without proper training and local craftsmen, the results may not be worthwhile.

FPE was implemented concurrently with other reforms: curriculum reform, provision of textbooks and other materials, the use of local languages in education, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks (MTEFs), civil service and local government reforms. These add to the burden of change, but PRSPs/MTEFs together with Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), do ensure a protected resource envelope and increased funding for primary education.
Outcomes

The FPE outcomes so far include, first and foremost, increased access, especially from the poorer quintiles of the population; and increased provision of textbooks, classrooms, and teachers, with a very considerable scale of change in Malawi, Uganda, and Lesotho. Other main outcomes include the realization of UPE’s implications, the impact on the electorate, and closer inter-ministerial and donor/lending agency cooperation. Unforeseen outcomes include a possible push-out effect of overcrowding on disabled and weaker pupils and falling survival rates. Other unforeseen outcomes need to be researched.

In all four countries, ministries are trying to meet the concurrent challenges of increased access and demand for quality. The top priority is to extend continuation of FPE to the poorest, most marginalized populations, and to the most remote areas. Domestic household surveys show that school costs remain a problem for the very poor. Planning and projections are improving. Gaps have been identified in legislation and regulations and are being managed. High dropout and poor completion rates need to be addressed, and improving quality throughout remains a major challenge. Surveys have found a variety of reasons for high dropout rates including school costs, the need for labor, pregnancy or early marriage, disability or illness, or a lack of interest in attending school. Complementary or alternative basic education is needed to reach marginalized groups. UPE’s implications on the education sector as a whole has stimulated the development of sector-wide approaches.

HIV/AIDS is the biggest short- to medium-term challenge because its impact is being felt across sectors. High prevalence is affecting the efficiency and the supply of teachers, rapidly increasing the number of orphans, affecting girls in particular, and it has financial impacts. Improved planning and administrative and managerial efficiency are needed to ensure that FPE continues and that children affected by HIV/AIDS are not lost to education.

FPE/UPE sustainability remains a question: Under what circumstances will FPE be sustainable, and who has responsibility for those circumstances? Innovative solutions are needed, such as bringing back retired teachers or adding day care centers to school so that young mothers can attend classes. Continued commitment from the government and development partners in both policy and financing remains key to FPE sustainability.

Key factors for success include (i) top-level leadership; (ii) a strong social contract with the electorate; (iii) institutional innovation at all levels; (iv) developing capacity—both the sheer increase in volume and the pace of the increase; (v) learning from previous experience; (vi) the presence of external catalysts; (vii) financial security for primary education;(viii) perhaps decentralization; and (ix) good communication and participation strategies. Other factors need to be identified, including what the consensus threshold is in each country and what parental expectations are.

Conclusions

The study’s main conclusions were:
• FPE is a must for achieving EFA and eventually poverty reduction.
• FPE can be implemented, but it is not a straightforward process.
• FPE is a political issue, linked to democratization processes.
• FPE involves a new paradigm of education—education for all—an inclusive system with universal completion and with acceptable levels of learning achievement.
• Learning from experience is important, but adaptation to each context is essential.
• HIV/AIDS is the greatest threat to FPE and has to be addressed through a combination of inter-sectoral strategies.
• Trade-offs are inevitable, whatever strategy is chosen (sequential or big bang).
• There is a need for innovative solutions for quality and access.
• Changing education takes time and depends on each country’s contextual and external factors. Only after some years will one know if FPE actually did make the contribution it was supposed to toward education for all.
• A decision needs to be made about the definition of education for all. Is it universal nominal attendance in school, universal completion of primary education, or universal completion of primary education with optimal achievement, as stated in the Millennium Development Goals? The meaning of the term must be clarified and agreed upon so that the human and financial resources required and the pace of change needed can be better determined.
• To secure the gains made through FPE, it must be supported until the returns to the household and national economy take effect. Continued commitment from the government and development partners in both policy and financing will be key.
• FPE is not sufficient in itself for poverty reduction. Macroeconomic conditions at the country and international levels must be changed to create employment opportunities, and the impact of HIV/AIDS must be dealt with.
economic sustainability of the effort.