A case study from

Reducing Poverty, Sustaining Growth—What Works, What Doesn’t, and Why
A Global Exchange for Scaling Up Success

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Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi and Uganda: Universal Primary Education and Poverty Reduction

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This case study was developed on the basis of documentation and interviews with the political, executive, and administrative levels of the ministries responsible for basic education in the four countries; representatives of donor agencies in each country; and through video conferences.

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Executive Summary

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 (pitos) 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.
The 1990 Jomtien Conference and the move toward universal primary education

DURING THE 1990S many countries—including Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda—eliminated primary school fees in order to provide their people with free primary education. The results were dramatic: by reducing the direct costs to households, all four countries increased enrollments by sizable margins. The challenge these countries now face is to reform their educational systems to accommodate the increase in enrollments so that schools can provide good-quality primary education to all.

Although some movement toward universal primary education occurred before 1990, the UNESCO-sponsored Education for All conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 was the impetus for spurring policy development and implementation on a wider scale. Policymakers attending the conference reached the conclusion that the goal of universal basic education could be reached only by making primary education free (that is, eliminating compulsory school fees).

The Jomtien conference confirmed that universal primary education is one of the most beneficial interventions for reducing poverty. By providing pupils with literacy and numeracy, life skills, and a basic general knowledge of health, nutrition, and society, universal primary education lays a foundation for skills training and further education. By increasing knowledge of health and family life, universal primary education empowers women to reduce the burden of care provision, thereby improving their possibilities for employment. Primary education also empowers children who would otherwise be engaged as child workers or be socially marginalized (such as street kids). Most important, universal primary education helps break the cycle of poverty by creating a new generation that is functionally literate and numerate.

In the wake of the Jomtien conference, it became evident that a major constraint to universal primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa was the cost of schooling, which poor families could not afford. The direct costs of primary education could include school fees, parent-paid supplements to teacher salaries, textbooks, materials, examinations, uniforms, meals, sports and cultural activities, and contributions requested by local schools. These costs were high even before policies introduced as part of structural adjustment programs forced poor families to shoulder a larger share of them. In addition to the direct costs of schooling, households bear an indirect cost: the lost value of children’s work, at home, in the fields, fishing, or in family or other business.

Poor families in Sub-Saharan Africa have had to decide which child—if any—is their best investment in education. Poor parents are willing to invest their children’s time in education if they think they will gain something useful from their investment. However, they need to be

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1 In most countries, that choice has tended to be boys first (investment in girls takes the form of marriage). In contrast, in Lesotho boys have been sent to work in the mines in South Africa or as herd boys, and girls have benefited more from schooling. The gender equity Gini coefficient in Lesotho in 1990–91 was 1.21 in favor of girls.
convincing that their children have access to good-quality education—relevant knowledge and skills taught well in a conducive learning environment. If they are not convinced that their children are getting an appropriate education, they lose confidence in the system and pull their children out.

### Similarities and differences in the educational systems and resources of the four countries

The educational systems in Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda share several key features. In all four countries free primary education was a central issue in the political discussions that led to multiparty elections or the transition to multiparty democracy. In Kenya, Lesotho, and Malawi, free primary education was the key election issue on which the new governments came into power. In Uganda free primary education has been a central issue in presidential elections.

All four countries have, or have had until recently, high poverty rates, high illiteracy rates, and low enrollment and completion rates (table 1). All face great challenges in improving conditions in remote areas, where poverty is worst and access to education is limited. All were heavily centralized and burdened by a cumbersome bureaucracy, all lacked fiscal discipline, and all provided too few resources to primary education relative to other education sub-sectors, especially tertiary education.

#### Table 1. Poverty indicators in Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Lesotho</th>
<th>Malawi</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share of population living on less than $1 a day (%)</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of population undernourished (%)</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility rate</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>114.0</td>
<td>79.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-5 mortality rate (per 1,000)</td>
<td>120.0</td>
<td>132.0</td>
<td>183.0</td>
<td>124.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy (years)</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiteracy rate (% ages 15+)</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female illiteracy rate (% ages 15+)</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### GDP and foreign debt obligations

Economic indicators in the four countries differ widely (table 2). Malawi, the poorest of the four countries, is constrained by both very low per capita GDP ($570) and a very high ratio of foreign debts.
debt to GDP (88 percent). Uganda, with much higher per capita GDP ($1,490) and a much lower ratio of foreign debt to GDP (21 percent) is better able to fund free primary education. Lesotho has a relatively high share of foreign debt to GDP (51 percent), but it has the highest per capita GDP of the four countries ($2,420).

Table 2. Economic profiles of Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Lesotho</th>
<th>Malawi</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school enrollment before introduction of free primary education (percentage of total)</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (millions)</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density (people per square kilometers)</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (billions of dollars)</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita (US dollars)</td>
<td>980.0</td>
<td>2,420.0</td>
<td>570.0</td>
<td>1,490.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign debt (billions of dollars)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign debt as share of GDP</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign aid per capita (US dollars)</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Gross enrollment rates

The starting points for free primary education in each country were also different. In Kenya, Lesotho, and Uganda, enrollment and completion rates rose in the late 1980s but declined in the 1990s. In Kenya the gross enrollment rate rose from 50 percent in 1963 to 115 percent in 1987 before dropping to 85 percent in 1995. In 1990–91 the net enrollment rate fell to 73 percent in Lesotho and 50 percent in Malawi. The decline was due largely to civil unrest, drought, and the drop in household income caused by falling prices for agricultural exports, unemployment, and devaluations, all of which lead to rising prices. Although weakened by structural adjustment programs and other factors, some of the organizational structures for education (directorates for teacher education, educational management information systems) were in place in Kenya, Lesotho, and Uganda. In contrast, Malawi lacked many of these structures.

The role of religious institutions

Christian denominations have influence on the educational system in all four countries, but in different ways and to varying degrees. In Malawi government-assisted schools and unassisted private schools were merged into the same category, and the government took over all financing of both types of institutions. The situation was most difficult in Lesotho, where 90 percent of the schools are owned by several different denominations. The government paid teachers’ salaries and covered the cost of some materials, but it had little say in running the schools. Free primary education meant that proprietors would lose income from parents, school committees would have
a greater say in running the schools, and the government would gain more control over the system.

Providing universal primary education

Before 1990 very few educational systems in Sub-Saharan Africa targeted education for all—or had the financial resources to do so. Instead, they provided services targeted mostly toward urban middle-class pupils. Educational systems were bureaucratic, curricula were oriented toward the urban middle class, teacher training programs were long, support and professional development was limited, development and provision of textbooks was slow, and gender, regional, and social inequities were large.

Malawi was the first of these four countries to start working toward universal primary education, abolishing school fees grade by grade beginning in 1991. The policy was not strongly enforced, however. Enrollments did not rise as much as policymakers had hoped because local authorities demanded that parents contribute to special funds, such as sports and development funds, and they insisted on making school uniforms mandatory. The funds collected were not always accountable.

Because the policy was controversial, it was not widely and openly discussed until the 1994 election campaign, when it became a key issue. Immediately after the election, the president himself announced the introduction of free primary education for all grades. One of the first actions of the new government was the convening of a national stakeholder conference on free primary education in May 1994. Free primary education was launched for all grades in September 1994.

Kenya had a longstanding policy that education should be provided by the government, and the 2001 Student’s Act stated that the government should provide free and compulsory education. Only in 2002, however, when the newly elected government adopted free primary education as its core tenet was such a program possible. It became reality in 2003.

Although the Lesotho Constitution states that primary education should be free and compulsory, fees were high and enrollments low. The minister of education was about to introduce universal primary education in 1993 when political instability made the step impossible. Church control of the education system and an unstable political environment prevented the government from exercising clear leadership on the issue. After political stability was restored through new elections, the new prime minister, who was the former minister of education, championed the cause, announcing in April 1999 that primary education would be free. The ministry had only eight months to develop policy and plan implementation.

In Uganda a universal primary education policy was in place as early as 1987, a Policy Review Commission had been created, and an education white paper had been written, but the question of how to implement universal primary education remained open. Unrest, lack of resources, lack of a focus on primary education, and political constraints on how far policy implementation could go prevented turning the policy into reality. The president wrote the
program into a government manifesto in December 1996. Given the short interval before implementation, the template for universal primary education had to be developed as an emergency plan.

In all four countries there was acknowledgment of the need for free primary education, but political opposition—and in some cases political instability, prevented full implementation until the issue was championed at the highest level and supported by a democratically elected majority party. In all four countries the adoption of universal free primary education was triggered by political demand rather than by rational planning processes. In each case the trigger event was a dynamic, top-level political initiative that left very little time for planning, forcing countries to adopt a “ready, fire, aim” approach. In addition, unreliable statistics and the unpredictability of educational reform processes made it extremely difficult to come up with accurate projections of needs and responses.

In some countries there was little time even to negotiate with stakeholders. Malawi held a two-day National Policy Symposium and launched a mass media campaign to mobilize the public. Uganda used radio spots to communicate with the public, but consultation was insufficient. Learning from both countries, Lesotho used the traditional form of community consultation (pitsos) to negotiate the policy widely, in addition to using the mass media. In Kenya a stakeholder forum was created to forge strong ownership. It set up a task force and reported to the government.

In all four countries the political opposition and skeptics among education professionals cast doubt on the proposal and attempted to weaken the social contract between government and the people. The main criticisms included questions about the financial sustainability of free primary education given the limits of the country’s resources, concerns about the lack of adequate planning, and condemnation of the government’s failure to move rapidly enough to provide what it promised. People with vested interests in the former system exploited policy gaps and potential ambiguities. In Uganda, for example, some local politicians told parents not to send lunch with their children and then criticized the government for not providing school lunches. In Lesotho school owners do not openly disagree with free primary education, but they complain that their possibilities for raising funds for additional school activities are now severely limited. In all four countries quality issues were raised in the political discussion.

Among education professionals, skepticism stemmed largely from concerns over declines in quality (soaring pupil to teacher, pupil to textbook, and pupil to classroom ratios) and the need to field teachers and paraprofessionals trained through short courses. The lack of administrative capacity to deal with the changes is a professional as much as a political issue.

**Mobilizing budget support**

All four countries have had to deal with implementing free primary education starting in the middle of a budget year or with a change of government, and thus without sufficient extra budgets. Mobilizing the funding needed was possible only because of top political backing that
empowered the ministries of education—and other ministries—to adjust their budgets to meet the demand.

The launching of free primary education revealed just how poorly prepared the educational systems had been to provide education for all, despite longstanding policy rhetoric. It showed that primary education had been given far too little priority in education budgeting and far too little attention by education administrations, and that structural changes, capacity development, and major changes in organizational culture and attitude at all levels were needed.

**Attracting donor support**

It was apparent from the outset that free primary education would need support from donors or lending agencies if it were to succeed. However, in each country some international agencies were skeptical or reluctant and joined in the initial criticism about lack of planning, the decline in quality, the lack of capacity, and the near impossibility that the programs could be sustained. When one institution (such as UNICEF, Ireland Aid, the Department for International Development, or the World Bank) followed the government’s lead and made interim arrangements, others soon followed.

**Developing the entire education sector**

Policymakers in all four countries acknowledge that universal primary education can be sustainable only if it is part of a whole-sector approach to developing the educational system. All of the countries started with primary education and are now in the process of looking at the whole sector. Plans are already being made on how to meet the increase in the demand for postprimary education by providing increased skills training and formal secondary education.

**Differences in coverage**

In all four countries the government is responsible for covering the costs of facilities, textbooks, materials, and salaries. All have set targets and devised strategies to reduce the pupil to classroom, pupil to teacher, and pupil to textbook ratios. All allow private schools to exist side by side with the public system, but schools are not permitted to participate in the free primary education system if they raise fees from parents.

In Lesotho the government reimburses schools directly for book rental fees, stationery, building maintenance, and meals, with the money paid directly to the schools. Teachers’ salaries, materials, and other inputs covered by the government are paid only to schools that agree not to demand fees from parents. In principle, churches wishing to raise fees from parents can opt out of the free primary education system. However, few schools could afford to do so.

In Kenya the government provides per capita grants to schools. Feeding programs are provided only in the arid and semi-arid areas.
Malawi abolished all forms of fees, and it made school uniforms optional. The government pays for facilities, teachers, textbooks, and materials.

In Uganda the government first agreed to provide free primary education for up to four children per family in the form of a capitation grant to the school. In families that included both boys and girls, at least two of the four children had to be girls, and children with special educational needs were given priority over other children. Fifty percent of educational spending was to be spent on instructional materials; 30 percent on extracurricular activities, such as sports and culture; 15 percent on maintenance and utilities; and 5 percent on administration. In 2003 the government expanded the policy to include all children, and it made school uniforms optional.

Responding to the overwhelming public response to universal primary education: dealing with access shock

In all four countries the sudden large influx of pupils led to “access shock”: overcrowded classrooms, double and triple shifts, acute shortages of teachers, textbooks, and materials, and large numbers of over-age pupils who should have been taking adult education classes instead of sitting beside 6- to 13-year-olds. In Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda, the public response was far greater than anticipated or what the system could comfortably handle. Grade 1 enrollment in Lesotho rose 75 percent in the first year, from 67,777 to 118,843—16 percent more than the ministry had projected—increasing overall primary education 11 percent. In Malawi enrollment rose 68 percent, from just under 2 million in 1993 to 3.2 million in 1994, the first year of full free primary education, yielding a gross enrollment rate of 108 percent. Enrollment increased 68 percent in Uganda as well, rising from 3.4 to 5.7 million in one year, bringing the gross enrollment rate to 123 percent.

The increase in Kenya was much more modest. Although policymakers had projected an increase of 25 percent, enrollment rose by just 22 percent, from 5.9 to 7.2 million, yielding a gross enrollment rate of 104 percent. The Ministry of Education believes it underestimated constraining factors, such as distance to school and the drift toward private schools.

Increasing the number of textbooks and teachers

Lending and donor agencies made some provision for the immediate procurement of textbooks and materials, but their efforts were inadequate to meet the need. To recruit new teachers, distance teacher education programs were put in place as quickly as possible. In Lesotho and Uganda paraprofessionals were also trained. The number of teachers increased rapidly, but lack of experience in dealing with human resource limitations, high academic entry requirements, lack of flexibility at the training institutions, inefficient curriculum coverage, and poor quality
assurance created many difficulties in developing programs appropriate to the task. In Malawi some teachers trained by a private distance education college in South Africa were so poorly prepared that they had to be retrained. There was insufficient shared knowledge to use different approaches for training teachers—for example, taking in low-level entry teachers and training them on the job to teach successive grades year by year, starting with grade 1, as some projects did successfully.

Changing the teaching paradigm to reflect education for all

The paradigm of teaching has to change to one that is appropriate for education for all—that is, a system in which all social groups and environments are represented and classes include pupils of various abilities, including pupils with special educational needs, as indicated by the 1994 Salamanca Declaration on inclusive education. Teachers also need to be trained to teach large classes, or multigrade classes in small schools, and mixed age groups of adult classes in primary schools. Although former approaches are being adapted by the introduction of new methodologies, very few national teacher education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa have been completely redesigned on the basis of a paradigm of inclusive education for all.

Building new classrooms

To meet the need for additional classrooms, lending and donor agencies expedited procurement and contracting. But inadequate local building capacity and quality control, as well as the need to complete construction before the rainy season, meant that not enough good-quality classrooms were built. Lesotho purchased tents as temporary classrooms, using military helicopters to transport the tents and school equipment to remote areas.

All four countries want communities to be more involved in school management and see involvement in construction as an opportunity for this. Without proper training of the community and local craftspeople, however, the results may not be cost-effective, as the experience of Uganda shows. Mobilizing and training the community to perform skilled functions, not just manual labor tasks, take time and resources and yield medium- to long-term rather than immediate payoffs.

Kenya and Lesotho are currently learning from the experience of district-based support to primary education in Tanzania that more substantial, long-lasting community involvement is necessary. In Malawi the current government finds it politically awkward to support community mobilization for construction because it objected to citizens performing unpaid manual labor for the government while it was the minority party.

3 Many parents simply ignored the fact that free primary education was initially for just four children per family and sent more than four children to school.
Dealing with the effects of HIV/AIDS

The greatest short- to medium-term challenge in all four countries is managing the impact of HIV/AIDS. Recent impact studies are providing better knowledge of the problem and revealing that both the complexity and the scale of impact are greater than first believed. In Lesotho 51 percent of females between the ages of 15 and 24 are HIV-positive, and the country is on the verge of negative population growth. In Zambia average life expectancy is down to 35 years.

Many issues are immediate. Provisions need to be made for dealing with the loss of teachers who die of AIDS or who are absent from classrooms because they are ill or need to care for sick family members. The financial impact of the increase in sick leave and pensions needs to be absorbed. Programs need to be created to deal with the increasing number of orphans, who are at risk of not receiving an education, a risk that is particularly high for girls. All pupils and teachers need to receive effective HIV/AIDS education that teaches them how to avoid contracting HIV and how to provide support for those who are infected. Responding to problems caused by HIV/AIDS requires improved planning and greater administrative and managerial efficiency to meet the challenge posed by the decline in human resources at a time when capacity is already stretched.

Responding to other challenges

In all four countries other reforms occurred concurrently with free primary education or are about to be implemented, causing other changes in education administration to be put on hold. All four countries were in the process of revising their curricula, for example. Providing large numbers of additional textbooks based on the old curriculum was costly, given that new books based on the new curricula would be needed shortly. Development of the new curriculum was problematic, too, as the process began before free primary education was introduced and did not reflect the new paradigm of education for all. Uganda is already drafting its revised curricula, and Lesotho will soon begin doing so. The introduction of local languages, a necessary reform in Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda, represents another challenge.

Reforms outside the education sector include civil service reforms, local government reforms and decentralization (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, and Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks). Although these reforms are intended to ultimately improve transparency, accountability, and efficiency and make strategies more pro-poor, they have exacerbated uncertainty and increased the administrative burden during a period of extreme flux and overstretched administrative capacity. One of the stabilizing factors for the education sector has been the fact that the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks protect funds for basic education and, together with a sectorwide program, make it easier to channel donor funding to the sector. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative has been very important for ensuring that primary education gets as much funding as

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4 Uganda has done more than most African countries in providing effective HIV/AIDS education. Its efforts appear to have helped slow the spread of the disease.
possible from the national budget, but education ministries are still dependent on strong advocacy for education in the ministry of finance for smooth day-to-day running.

**What has happened to education outcomes?**

Major improvements in education outcomes have occurred in all four countries: as a result of increased access, more children are in school and more children are staying in school (table 3).

**Table 3. Education outcomes in Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda before and after introduction of free primary education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Lesotho</th>
<th>Malawi</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6,314,600</td>
<td>6,917,553</td>
<td>364,951</td>
<td>418,668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6,917,553</td>
<td>8,762</td>
<td>8,762</td>
<td>26,333</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>418,668</td>
<td>26,333</td>
<td>3,187,835</td>
<td>3,068,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>1,795,451</td>
<td>53,444</td>
<td>7,354,153</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>3,187,835</td>
<td>139,484</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>3,068,625</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>7,354,153</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>7,354,153</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Lesotho</th>
<th>Malawi</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of pupils</td>
<td>6,314,600</td>
<td>6,917,553</td>
<td>364,951</td>
<td>418,668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent female</td>
<td>49.5 (2000)</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of teachers</td>
<td>197,331</td>
<td>178,037</td>
<td>8,225</td>
<td>8,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil to teacher ratio</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of classrooms</td>
<td>186,000</td>
<td>191,088</td>
<td>5,618</td>
<td>6,544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil to classroom ratio</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of national budget to education</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education budget ($millions)</td>
<td>361.15</td>
<td>419.61</td>
<td>82.84</td>
<td>113.93a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education budget as share of total education budget (%)</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>56.7 secondary</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Enrollment is up**

Enrollment rose 240 percent over six years in Uganda, 78 percent over eight years in Malawi, 15 percent over three years in Lesotho, and 14 percent in one year in Kenya. Free primary education is having a positive effect on the poor, who are much better represented than they had been. In Uganda, for example, enrollment of the poorest quintile is almost on a par with the richest.
**Confidence in government and the education system has increased**

Free primary education has increased the public trust in government and the education system, and it has freed up private resources that had been spent on primary education. According to the 2002 Domestic Household Survey of Malawi, 79 percent of respondents felt that their children were learning more than they had before free primary education was introduced (84 percent of the lowest income quintile and 66 percent of the highest quintile), 65 percent felt that teaching had improved, and 82 percent felt that the quality of infrastructure and the supply of textbooks had improved. These results suggest that education has improved, but not necessarily that the quality of education is satisfactory. The challenge of improving quality is a major concern in all four countries.

**Cooperation between line ministries is closer**

In addition to raising educational access, the provision of free primary education has forced education ministries in all four countries to make changes in their structure, organization, organizational culture, administration, and finance. Line ministries now work more closely together, reflecting the fact that free primary education is not only an education sector issue but involves players from many sectors. Cooperation among donors, and between donors and ministries, has also increased, a natural result of sharing the same goals and agreeing to be task-rather than status-oriented.

**Many challenges remain**

The reforms have produced some unintended and unforeseen negative consequences. Quality issues are of concern in all four countries. Some indications suggest that overcrowding in classrooms is pushing out pupils with special needs, an issue that needs further research. Survival rates (the percentage of a cohort of children enrolled in the first grade expected to reach each successive grade) have also been affected: in Uganda, for example, the survival rate has dropped to 37 percent, down from 59 percent before the introduction of free primary education. The extent of other possible negative outcomes, such as teacher stress and burn-out, as reflected in absenteeism or physical violence, will be revealed only by additional research.

**Improving completion rates.** To increase primary school completion rates, especially on-time completion, policymakers need to recognize why they are low and craft policies that respond accordingly. In rural areas of Kenya, early marriage accounts for 12 percent of dropouts (17 percent in urban areas), school being “uninteresting” accounts for 12 percent (4 percent in urban areas), and examination failure accounts for 10 percent (5 percent in rural areas). Before free primary education was introduced, costs were a major constraint throughout the country, accounting for 30 percent of dropouts in rural areas and 34 percent in urban areas. In Malawi 26 percent of primary school dropouts leave school because of lack of money, 28 percent because
they need to work, 43.5 percent because they “had enough school,” 17.6 percent because of disability or illness, and 14 percent because they failed or had to repeat a grade (Malawi, National Statistics Office 2003). Despite free primary education, costs are a factor for 55 percent of dropouts in Uganda. Twelve percent of pupils drop out because they need to work, 25 percent because they “had enough school,” 13 percent because of pregnancy or early marriage, 10 percent because of disability or illness, and 10 percent because they failed or needed to repeat a grade (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports 2003). The completion rate in Lesotho in 2002 was 77 percent.

Poor quality was not cited as a reason for dropping out in any of the surveys. But some of the reasons classified as “pupil-related,” such as failure, “had enough,” and disability or illness, may rather be problems arising from poor quality. The fact that in Malawi a third of nonattenders did not attend school at all because of lack of interest may also suggest a problem of quality. These statistics show that school systems are failing to include and educate all pupils.6

Reaching more poor and marginalized children. It will take time to make free primary education universal. The top priority is to extend delivery to the most remote areas and to the poorest and most marginalized households, most of which are located in rural areas. The domestic household survey in Malawi revealed that families continue to pay for primary education: 80 percent of households pay for school materials, 70 percent pay for uniforms, 60 percent pay for school development funds, and 33 percent pay for meals at school. The almost 18 percent gap in school attendance between the lowest and highest income quintiles suggests that the direct cost of primary education remains an obstacle for the very poor.

Formal schooling is a resource-intensive mode of education that reaches some social groups more easily than others. Different types of intervention are needed to reach different categories of marginalized children. Uganda provides evening schools and mobile schools as complementary opportunities for primary education. It also offers a basic education program for the urban poor. In Lesotho special measures are needed to reach herd boys in the mountains.

Complementary approaches to primary schooling designed to reach pupils who never entered or who dropped out of school are being piloted and extended in all four countries, with the strong support of NGOs and international organizations such as UNICEF. Alternative basic education programs can complement the formal system and feed in to the development of parallel modes of primary education within the umbrella of universal primary education, developing systems which are more suited to the great diversity of African contexts and the varying life circumstances of children.7

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5 In Lesotho free primary education has freed up $6 (in the mountain regions) to $23 (in urban regions) a year per household. No studies have been conducted on how poor households are using the money or how they are compensating for the loss of labor at home.
6 Social and systemic factors are not mutually exclusive: dissatisfaction with schooling lowers motivation to stick it out when personal circumstances are difficult.
7 Ethiopia is going farthest in providing alternative basic education schools. Its programs are being studied as a model for primary education as a whole.
Improving planning and strengthening legislation. In all four countries planning is improving as a result of increased capacity and experience. Better planning is helping improve financial projections of what the ultimate cost of free universal primary education will be. The challenge is to make these projections as accurate as possible and use them to obtain the predicted funds necessary to reach free universal primary education by 2015. Both UNESCO and the World Bank have provided the countries with improved financial projection models.

All four countries are discovering the implications of gaps in, or lack of, enabling legislation or regulatory frameworks. Education acts that include free and compulsory primary education for all are needed, as are amendments to existing legislation and regulations that deal with the implications of education for all.

Secrets of success: key factors in implementing free primary education

What factors appear to facilitate the successful implementation of free primary education?

Top-level leadership

Where free primary education is a radical departure from the existing system, top-level political leadership in which the president or prime minister takes a leading role, commitment, and stability are needed. A strong consensus and backing are needed at the cabinet level, and the minister of education needs to work closely with the administration. Strong political leadership, commitment, and drive are key factors in overcoming donor reluctance.

The social contract

Top-level leaders need to be in close touch with the electorate, in order to thwart opposition to or reluctance about free primary education at the political level as well as from within the administration itself. In all four countries, where the social contract between top political leaders and the people has been strong, the result has been dynamic. Stakeholder involvement is also a key factor, since many decisions directly affect parents, teachers, administrators, and others with vested interests. Conflict can be reduced by negotiating tradeoffs and making the terms of free primary education clear to all stakeholders.

Institutional innovation

Institutional innovation supported by strong and flexible institutions is critical, but it has been very hard to achieve because of conservatism, entrenched attitudes, and the time it takes for innovation to take hold. In Lesotho neither the university nor the teacher training college could be used to train managers or paraprofessional teachers; the tasks were contracted out to the Institute of Management. In Malawi, where four key institutions (the Institute of Education, the Centre for
Educational Research and Training, the Institute of Management, and the Directorate of Planning) were already weakened by staff and financing shortfalls, interim programs had to be mobilized through the Ministry of Education. In Uganda the revision of the primary curriculum that had been under way proved not to be viable for universal primary education, and external consultants are now helping the government revise it.

Provision of free primary education is a process that must proceed quickly. If existing institutions and structures cannot change rapidly enough, the onus is on the ministry to make ad hoc arrangements for dealing with what amounts to an emergency situation in the short term. Some processes of institutional development were accelerated to meet the challenge of providing free primary education. In Uganda, for example, an Instructional Materials Unit and a Classroom Construction Unit were established to meet demand, and the Inspectorate was transformed into a standards agency.

In all four countries the process within the ministry has depended on a special task force functioning as an innovation enclave, with subgroups performing specific tasks. These units have demonstrated the greatest degree of institutional innovation. In Kenya special monitoring teams at all levels track progress and problems from headquarters to the local level in order to identify new challenges. Over time there is a need to review such interim structures to determine what is needed over the longer term.

Schools are the backbone institutions of the education system, but innovation at the local level has been insufficient, either because the systems have been too centralized or because of institutional conservatism. Some innovation is taking place, however. All four countries have adopted multigrade teaching in small schools in order to facilitate teacher redeployment. Kenya is also using multigrade classrooms to teach adults. In Uganda the Girls’ Education Movement, a project funded by the Forum for African Women Educationalists mobilizes school-going girls to get their nonattending female peers to come to school. In order to ensure transparency and accountability to the community, Uganda posts information about the disbursement of free primary education on notice boards in schools. All four countries have increased school attendance by allowing local synchronization of the school year with agricultural or fishing cycles, so that pupils do not have to miss school when they are needed by their families.

**Capacity**

Two kinds of capacity are needed to provide free primary education. The first is capacity to deal with the sheer increase in volume and the pace of that increase. The second is the capacity to develop the new skills and attitudes needed to implement free education for all and to initiate decentralization. Motivation and commitment underlie capacity. Without the commitment to do what is needed and the willingness to devote oneself to the task, capacity remains latent. In Malawi, in particular, malaise in the bureaucracy is negatively affecting capacity. All four countries have a core group of committed and capable individuals, but widespread institutional capacity is lacking. Capacity-building programs are now in place in all four countries.
Learning from experience

The suddenness with which free primary education was launched left little time for learning from experience and experimentation. Some countries did have ongoing projects that could be built on, however. In Kenya the school audit process, which was already under way, provided a foundation for the educational management information system unit, and the Strengthening Primary Education Project (SPRED), an in-service training program for teachers, provided a model that could be applied throughout the country. In Malawi the Maths and Science Teacher Education Program (MASTEP) provided a model for teacher development that could be adopted nationwide, and the Education Methods and Advisory Services project provided the foundation for a teacher development unit.

The three later countries learned from others when planning their own transitions. Ugandan officials visited Malawi, the first of the four countries to implement free primary education; Lesotho officials visited Uganda and Malawi; and Kenyan officials visited Uganda and Tanzania. Learning also took place through information sharing at subregional and international conferences and through exchanges of documentation. After a study visit to Asia, officials in Lesotho adapted the idea of outsourcing school catering, using the community instead of commercial caterers to provide school meals.

Learning from the experience of others is possible, but adapting programs to the national context is critical.

External catalysts

Despite the efforts of international agencies and international agreements, the catalyst for change came from inside the four countries, not from outside. External technical assistance supported the change rather than serving as a catalyst. At the national level, donor and lending agencies that took the lead in supporting free primary education acted as catalysts for the donor community as a whole.

Financial security

Free primary education is possible only when there is cabinet-level and parliamentary agreement about budget allocations to education, particularly to primary education. In addition, the education desk in the Ministry of Finance must have a strong advocate for education, especially for free universal primary education, so that the sector’s needs are met despite demands from other sectors. Medium-Term Economic Frameworks, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, HIPC

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8 Policymakers visiting Tanzania benefited from observing the way in which the community was mobilized and involved in school and teacher development in the District-Based Support to Primary Education program. The use of pre-registration in October to help plan for the succeeding year was another important lesson learned from Tanzania’s experience.

9 In some cases, communities have begun growing food to meet the needs of the school catering program.

10 An exception was the role played by Ireland Aid (then Irish Aid) in Lesotho, which created an environment for negotiation between government and proprietors, with whom Ireland had strong previous links through churches.

11 The potential of using the Forum for African Parliamentarians in education has yet to be fully explored.
debt relief, and a protected envelope for primary education are all needed, given the doubtful prospects for self-sustainability in the medium term. Long-term donor support as well as economic reforms and changes in the global economy will be needed if universal primary education is to be sustainable. Much more intensive support will be needed if universal primary completion is to be reached by 2015.

**Decentralization**

Implementing free primary education has promoted local development. Building schools has necessitated or stimulated other infrastructural development, such as building roads, water systems, and health facilities. Moving funds directly to schools has tested the ability of local authorities and communities to handle funds. Where communities have been involved in school construction and school management, noticeable improvements have been made.

These changes do not necessarily reflect structural decentralization, since decisionmaking need not be decentralized to involve communities in construction. Free primary education can be a lever for decentralization, but decentralization need not be a lever for free primary education. Whatever the degree of decentralization, free primary education works best when there is a centrally directed or triggered process and strong local ownership.

**Communication**

Good communication and participation strategies have been widely used and are essential to the process. The use of both mass media and traditional leaders is critical. Poor communication has forced the government to redouble its efforts. All four countries are learning about the need for improvement in this area.

**Other factors**

In all four countries the public response to free primary education has been overwhelming, but obstacles to school attendance remain. Although uniforms are no longer compulsory, some parents keep their children at home to avoid the stigma of not being able to afford a uniform. Parents are still expected to provide their children with exercise books and pens, and schools still raise funds for social, cultural, and sporting activities. Demands from schools for contributions are creeping back in, even when the ministry has stated that they should not be requested or must be negotiated first with the community.

Free primary education in Africa is not entirely free: households continue to bear some of the expense. The very poor—such as dispossessed AIDS orphans in urban slums or rural areas, who are not able to contribute anything toward their education—are therefore often excluded from the system. Only completely free education provided in a supportive environment can reach such marginalized groups.

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12 Households headed by single women tend to spend a greater share of their domestic income on the education of children than do households headed by men, even though their income is usually lower.
Is free primary education sustainable?

Is free universal primary education sustainable? The question is framed inappropriately for a rights-based issue, and it is an unproductive way of structuring the debate. Instead, the debate needs to reformulate the question as: “Under what circumstances will free universal primary education be sustainable, and who has responsibility for creating those circumstances?” The discussion would then lead to an appraisal of what sort of national and global society can sustain free universal primary education. Is a disinterested Weberian-style bureaucracy needed? Is managerial efficiency critical? Does the distribution of wealth and power within a country need to be more equitable? Is democracy needed? If so, what sort of democracy? What kind of economy is needed to support free universal primary education—a growth economy, a controlled economy, a liberal economy? What kind of budget allocation is needed across sectors? What level of human resources is needed? Are changes in the global economy required? Is debt relief in developing countries critical to reach free universal primary education? Are pro-poor trade agreements needed? Should protectionist tariff barriers and subsidies be removed?

The governments and people of developing countries can take responsibility only up to a certain level: beyond that, the sustainability of free universal primary education in the developing world is the responsibility of the international community. Developing countries and the international community must each accept their share of responsibility if all the children of Africa are to have good, equitable, free basic education.

Innovative solutions are needed to meet the challenges of providing free universal basic education, particularly given the devastating changes wrought by HIV/AIDS. Ways of thinking that may have been applicable before the pandemic may no longer be useful. Some measures are already being taken, such as bringing back retired teachers and extending the retirement age. Some schools are finding their own solutions to problems. In Kenya, for example, some schools have established day care centers to allow girls entrusted with the care of babies to still be able to attend school.13

Lessons

In trying to elicit lessons learned from the experiences in Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, and Uganda, it is important to recognize that conditions in these countries have changed radically since the early or mid-1990s, when free primary education was initiated. What seemed like the answer to reaching primary education at the time is now at best only one of several strategies needed if universal primary education is to be reached. Policymakers in other countries can nevertheless draw several lessons from these countries’ experiences:

13 Whether early childhood education should be promoted and if so how needs to be researched in the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Providing early childhood education would reduce primary school dropout and repetition rates by freeing girls from the responsibility of caring for preschool-age children.
• **Providing free primary education is doable.** Even under difficult circumstances it is possible to implement free primary education. Political, bureaucratic, and professional opposition or reluctance are likely, but free primary education can be achieved even in countries with limited resources.

• **The decision to provide free primary education is political.** Providing free primary education is primarily a political phenomenon linked to democratization. To succeed, visionary leadership and wide stakeholder consensus are needed. Once free primary education is announced, implementation cannot await other democratization processes, such as local government reform or decentralization. Once begun, it is nonreversible provided that the social contract with the electorate is kept and funding is sufficient.

• **Education for all requires a new paradigm of education.** If free primary education is to mean education for all and not just attendance at school, the change in the educational paradigm has to be taken seriously from the start. Education for all means that teaching, materials, and assessment have to meet the learning needs of a wide range of mixed-ability, inclusive classes. At the outset and throughout the process, issues of quality need more emphasis, and they take more time to solve than simply relieving parents of the burden of school fees. Given that it takes at least six years of good primary education to establish literacy and numeracy, universal completion with acceptable levels of learning achievement rather than universal access should be the goal.

• **Decisionmakers can learn from experience.** Although detailed planning is not possible when the period between the pronouncement and the launch of free primary education is short, it is possible to develop overall strategies and to be prepared for flexible action as the process unfolds. Creating “emergency” measures to deal with implementation at the beginning of the process can be helpful, but such measures are difficult to sustain over time. Important lessons from experience include clarifying the scope of free primary education, conducting extensive and intensive stakeholder consultations, specifying everyone’s roles, finding ways of dealing with or sidelining intractable institutions until they can be reformed, and working with donors who are willing to lead the way. Learning from the experience of others is possible, but creative adaptation to national context is essential.

• **Intersectoral strategies are needed to reach universal primary education.** HIV/AIDS, which is reducing the supply of teachers and administrators and cutting household income, represents the greatest threat to reaching universal primary education. In the short- to medium-term, educational systems will need innovative approaches to human resource development to compensate for the impact of HIV/AIDS on the teaching profession. Containment of the HIV/AIDS pandemic alone will not solve the problem of reaching universal primary education, however. Rising birth rates will continue to increase the demand for schooling, putting pressure on already overstretched resources. Making primary education

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14 The international community has pledged support to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and buffering the impact of HIV/AIDS.
free is only part of the solution to reaching universal primary education. A combination of intersectoral strategies that deal with food security, health care, and care of orphans is needed.

- **Phasing in free primary education grade by grade is easier than introducing it throughout the system simultaneously—but it still creates problems.** Policymakers need to be aware of the tradeoffs between introducing free primary education one grade at a time (stepped implementation) and adopting a “big bang” approach. Stepped implementation is slower than the simultaneous approach, but it gives policymakers time to plan, budget, build schools, obtain materials, and hire teachers. The experience of Lesotho reveals the problems with the stepped approach, however. To take advantage of free education, some parents enrolled children in primary school early (since preschool is not free). Others held children back to avoid paying fees in the next grade. In addition, dropouts returned to school and adults enrolled in large numbers. These inflated enrollments caused bulges in the system in the fee-free grades. The big bang approach is harder to manage than the stepped approach, but it provides quick results and does not create such a big bulge moving through the system.

- **Innovative solutions are needed to ensure quality and access.** The supply of infrastructure, textbooks, materials, and teachers needs to be increased rapidly to accommodate the huge increases in enrollment. Innovative and interim approaches that ensure good learning are needed in all three areas. A variety of complementary educational opportunities are needed to reach very poor people, marginalized groups, and dropouts. Without such measures, a new generation of dropouts will perpetuate the vicious cycle of illiteracy.

- **Implementing universal primary education takes time.** Although Malawi started implementing universal primary education in 1991, it still has a long way to go. The starting point in Kenya and Uganda was much better, and they are closer to reaching the goal. Lesotho will need at least six years to complete the process. External factors, including the national economy; the support of the international community; the impact of HIV/AIDS; foreign debt, foreign trade conditions, and tariffs; and the state of the global economy all affect the achievement and sustainability of education for all.

- **The goal of education for all needs to be clearly defined.** Education for all can mean many things. It can mean universal attendance at school, universal completion of primary education (as called for in the Millennium Development Goals), or universal completion of primary education with optimal achievement. Policymakers need to clarify which goal they are seeking in order to estimate the human and financial resources required and the changes to be made if the goal is to be reached by 2015.

- **Reaching universal primary education is not enough to break the cycle of poverty.** Removing the burden of paying for education increases the number of poor children who attend school, helping to break the poverty cycle. Free primary education must therefore be supported nationally and internationally until the returns to households and the national economy are large enough so that international support is no longer needed. However, achieving universal

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15 The potential of using literate community members as classroom assistants has not been adequately explored in Africa.
primary education is not enough to break the cycle of poverty on its own. Improved health services and nutrition are needed to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS and preserve human resources for the development of the country. Further, only changes to the unjust conditions of the global economy can create the circumstances in which the cycle of poverty can finally be broken by the widespread employment of a labor force well prepared for training by good quality basic education.
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