

## **Implementing Universal Primary Education in Namibia –Trends and challenges**

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### **Abstract**

*In the context of education being a fundamental human right; African governments have, since years of independence, embarked on the provision of free education. Many of the initiatives by African countries regarding the provision of universal education are closely aligned with the recommendation of the World Bank as expressed in international United Nations treaties (Katzao, 1999). Albeit enrolment figures in the primary phase increased by 18 percent between 1999 and 2008 in Sub Saharan Africa the pace of progress is insufficient to ensure that by 2015 all boys and girls complete the full course of primary education (MDGs Report, 2010). Worth noting is that universal primary education requires more than full enrolments. As the cutoff date of 2015 approaches to meet the targets of Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Namibian Government has recently abolished school fees in primary education phase (grades 0-7) in public schools as of 2013, practically signifying a genesis of free primary education in the country. To what extent will this significant step contribute to the achievement of universal primary education in Namibia by 2015? What trends and challenges have been experienced? These are the questions this review paper attempts to respond to.*

### **Context**

At the onset it is imperative to highlight some of the major international treaties that provided the legal and fundamental frameworks for the provision of free education in Namibia and beyond. Setting the agenda is the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly. Article 26 of this declaration outlines the commitment and pledges of member states for the realization of free education as part of human rights. They reaffirmed that:

- (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

In endorsing the provision of Article 26, UN members states agreed in 1996 that primary education should be compulsory and be made available free to all children through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It should also be highlighted here that prior to the above cited UN International Covenant, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989. Articles 28 and 29 state:

All children have the right to a primary education which should be free. Wealthy countries should help poor countries achieve this. Children's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest.

Following these declarations was the land mark conference on education, the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), held in 1990, Jomtien, Thailand, with 1500 delegates representing 155 governments, 33 intergovernmental bodies, and 125 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Institutes, and Foundations. In the same spirit of the previous UN Conventions on Education, the delegates to this conference recalled that education is a *human right* and, therefore, reaffirmed that:

Every person - child, youth and adult - shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs... The scope of basic learning needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably, changes with the passage of time. (<http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/en-conf/jomtien%20declaration%20eng.shtm>, accessed 15/06/13).

With reference to this affirmation, in the same year, member states of the Organization of African Unity (AU), declared and agreed through the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child that, "... every child shall have a right to an education". In order to achieve the realization of this right, parties to this charter agreed to provide free and compulsory basic education.

[http://www.childinfo.org/files/fgmc\\_AfricanCharterontherightsandwelfareofthechild.pdf](http://www.childinfo.org/files/fgmc_AfricanCharterontherightsandwelfareofthechild.pdf), accessed, 15/06/13.

All these developments culminated in a Millennium Summit in 2000, organized by the United Nations and agreed on achieving eight Development Millennium Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015. In attendance were the 193 leaders of the world and 23 International Organizations. One of the goals calls for achieving universal primary education by 2015. This specific goal should be achieved by ensuring that, "children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary school."

[http://www.cooperazioneallosviluppo.esteri.it/pdgc/italiano/Millennium/pdf/Goal\\_2\\_1990\\_2005.pdf](http://www.cooperazioneallosviluppo.esteri.it/pdgc/italiano/Millennium/pdf/Goal_2_1990_2005.pdf)

We, the authors of this paper, are fully aware that some of these international agreements do not directly create legal obligations for countries to provide free education, but they point out some shared values by citizens of the world such as the right to education.

### **The Namibian Picture**

With the transition to democracy, the right of equitable access to schooling formed a cornerstone of the Namibian education policy (Towards Education for All...) and an integral part of the Namibian government's commitment to redress imbalances as result of historical inequalities (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 1993).

The right to equitable access to education was constitutionally guaranteed. Sections of Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution (1990, p. 12-13) states that: "All persons shall have a right to education".

- (1) Primary education shall be compulsory and the state shall provide reasonable facilities to render effective this right for every resident within Namibia, by establishing and maintaining state schools at which primary education will be provided free.
- (2) Children should not be allowed to leave school until they have completed their primary education or have attained the age of sixteen (16), whichever in the sooner, save in so far as this may be by Act of Parliament on grounds of health or other considerations pertaining to the public interest.

Article 20 is further supported by Section 38 sub-sections 1 and 2 of the Education Act, 2001 (Act No. 16 of 2001), which reads:

- (1) All tuition provided for primary and special education in state schools, including all schools books, educational Materials and other related requisites, must be provided free of charge to learners until the seventh grade, or until the age of 16 years, whichever occurs first.; and
- (2) A learner to whom education, other than primary education, is provided in any state school, centre or class or the person responsible for such learner's education, must pay such fees as the Minister determines.

Putting into context the provisions of the above cited legal frameworks, Article 20 could be read in relation to Article 15 of Children Rights, Sub-Article (2) that protects a child from any form of exploitation which states:

Children are entitled to be protected from economic exploitation..... For the purposes of this Sub-Article children shall be persons under the age of sixteen (16) years.

The constitutional provision and other legislations in Namibia paved the way for free universal primary education. As the country's first education policy (Towards Education for All....) that set out major goals (access, equity, quality and democracy) emphasizes that providing universal primary education was the main principle objective for access. The section of this policy reads:

The government's first commitment is to provide universal basic education. Ultimately, every Namibian is to have ten years of general comprehensive education... This is the only way we can march with some hope into the next millennium (Ministry of Education of Basic Education and Culture, 1993, p.33).

Interesting to note is that despite well-crafted legislations and Constitution provision on free primary education, the primary schools in Namibia continued to charge school fees as from 1990 to 2012. Although these kind of fees are referred to in the Namibian Education Act, (Act no.16 of 2001) as school development fund many learners have been denied access to primary education on basis of inability to pay school fees.

As the cutoff date of 2015 approaches to meet the targets of Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaches, the Namibia government decided to fast track the implementation of the Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution. Based on the 2011 recommendations of the National Conference on Education, the Namibian government took a firm decision to implement universal primary education as from January 2013. This as Haihambo Ya-Otto (2013) argues, compels learners to attend primary education without paying schools fees from grade 0-7 in all public schools. These developments practically signify the genesis of free primary education in the country.

Although one would argue that the implementation of this constitutional provision has taken two decades to be realized, it should be noted that this is a significant step that the country has taken, it is an affirmation that Namibia has joined other countries in ensuring, that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling (UNESCO, 2000). Significant to mention is that although Namibia has responded positively to the constitutional provision of making primary education free, parents are still responsible for school uniforms. While we agree that this goal will not be achieved in its totality covering all aspects pertaining to universal education, Namibia will have nonetheless made significant progresses compared to other countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa.

To realize the Namibian Government's commitment to the provision of universal primary education, an amount of N\$162 million was put aside to cover needs related to teaching and learning materials and carrying small repairs and maintenance of school throughout the country (New Era, May 30, 2013). This amount forms part of the education ministry's budget of N\$10.7 billion government allocation for the fiscal year – 2013/14. This amount is expected to cater for 386, 675 learners enrolled in primary school during 2013 academic year. The spending translates into N\$418.96 per child per year to be provided to school directly. The data in table 1, show the budget allocation for free primary education per region in relation to enrolment figures.

**Table 1: 2013/14 Regional Allocation for Free Primary Education.**

<b>Regions</b>	<b>Learner Enrolment</b>	<b>Allocation N\$ Millions</b>
1. Caprivi	18,849	N\$7,896,911
2. Kavango	54,250	N\$22,728,389
3. Oshikoto	37,449	N\$15,689,502
4. Ohangwena	60,634	N\$25,403,008
5. Omusati	55,693	N\$23,332,944
6. Oshana	29,651	N\$12,422,479
7. Erongo	18,295	N\$7,664,809
8. Kunene	13,746	N\$5,758,976
9. Khomas	38,575	N\$16,161,247
10. Omaheke	10,705	N\$4,484,929
11. Otjozondjupa	23,439	N\$9,819,921
12. Hardap	13,532	N\$5,669,319
13. Karas	11,857	N\$4,967,567
<b>Total:</b>	<b>386,675</b>	<b>N\$162,000,000</b>

Source: New Era, 30 May 2013, p.1)

### **Challenges and trends experienced of universal education**

Although the conceptualization of the universal primary education was a global initiative, the origin and popularity of the provision of universal education in some African countries is historically, however, could be traced to the political aspirations of the independent countries. For example, when Kenya expanded equitable access to secondary and tertiary education in early 1970s, a presidential decree abolishing tuition fees in all poor districts where school fees prevented a large proportion of children population from attending schools was issued (Sifuna, 2007). The presidential decrees were in line with the declared policy of KANU (the ruling party at that time) and its election manifesto of 1969 entitled, *What a KANU Government Offers You*. Presidential decrees were seen as problems because they were issued without prior consultation with relevant bodies and structures in government. As Numbi (2010, p 5) explained:

What was especially problematic about these presidential decrees was that they were made without prior consultation with the relevant policy making bodies in government. The implementation was therefore a nightmare for the government bureaucrats and school administrators. Thousands of children otherwise locked out of school suddenly turned up to be enrolled. The sudden flood of new students placed a great deal of strain on facilities and teachers. Following the declaration of free primary education by President Kenyatta in the 1970s, for example, the government was not able to fund the construction of the extra classrooms needed for the increased enrolment. Therefore, school committees eventually reintroduced fees, disguised as building levies in order to construct classrooms and to provide other facilities.

Similarly, the universal primary education in Tanzania was closely linked to the ideology of socialism that called for self-reliance in economic development and hoped to use education as an instrument of attaining such a goal (Sifuna, 2007). Hence, a series of declarations were issued in order to achieve universal primary education such as Arusha Declaration (1967) and Musoma Declaration (1974). In Zimbabwe, primary education was made free in a wider context of socialist philosophy, which as a result expanded enrolment (Kanyongo, 2005). A critical look indicates all these positive educational efforts focused on the question of accessibility which, as a result, created serious challenges which we will now briefly discuss.

In literature, it is clear that efforts to expand enrolments in quest to achieve education for all, issues of education quality become a concern because one cannot achieve it without the other. This was clearly spelled out in the document titled, *2005 EFA Global Monitoring Report, The Quality Imperative*, which maintains that, “quality stands at the heart of Education for All. It determines how much and how well students learn and the extent to which their education achieves a range of personal, social and development goals (UNESCO, 2004, p.18).

Bearing these challenges in mind, Samoff (2007, p.493), has cautioned that, “expanding access without corresponding attention to the structural transformation of the education system will insure low quality education for at least some learners and perhaps most”. Regrettably, however, in some situations, as observed by Sawamura and Sifuna (2008, p.110) rapid expansion of learners attending schools as well as enrolment rates appear to be given a priority at the expense of the provision of quality education that went to the extent that, “it even appeared that they were pushing over-age children into school to achieve their goal”. This was despite the issue of quality education being acknowledged in policy documents. Notwithstanding the above McGee, (2000) had cautioned that huge enrollment without suitable resources compromise the quality of education. One teacher who was interviewed in a study conducted by Morojele (2010, p.43) lamented:

One teacher is teaching 112 children, who are congested in a tent. There is no space to move from one child to another, thus it is difficult to give them enough attention. In summer, some children collapse and faint because of heat and poor ventilation in the tent. We are happy that the government is building some additional classrooms.

Evidence as summarized in the foregoing lamentation and other research have indicated that countries that introduced free primary education experienced an influx of learners’ enrolments which became an obstacle to both teaching and learning resources as well as physical facilities. For example, before the abolition of fees in 1994 in Malawi, less than half of children attended primary school, but by 1999 net enrollment extended to 99 percent. This, as a result, lead to low levels of material provision and contributed to the overall weak level of learners’ achievement (Chimombo, 2005).

The increased enrollments in Malawi also resulted in learners being taught under trees exposing cold, rain and other difficulties as the school classrooms could not accommodate the number of learners in schools (Ministry of Education Malawi, 2001). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, when primary education was made free, this resulted in admission rates expanding radically, which made government resources quickly became insufficient (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). Lesotho, like other countries in the SADC region, primary enrollment grew by 80% between the year 2000 and 2002 (Ministry of Education and Training, Lesotho, 2002). The same pattern of high enrollments was experienced in Uganda, whereby the enrollment figures increased from 2.7 million in 1997 to 7.3 million pupils in 2003 (Tamuzuzza, 2011). In Kenya, Sifuna (2007, p.696) had found that, “enrolments increased from 5.9 million in 2002 to 7.2 million in 2004 with a gross enrolment ratio of 99 percent, while in Tanzania they grew by 25 percent from 4.4 million in 2000 to 6.4 million in 2003, with a gross enrollment ratio up to 108 percent (from 71 in 1990).With reference to the increase in enrollments figures in Kenya, Sifuni (2007, p.692) has the following to say:

With increased enrolments, many schools were unable to cope with the high influx of pupils. It was common to find classes being conducted in the open, under trees or in church buildings to supplement the available space. Many schools introduced double sessions/shifts in the morning and afternoon to cope with the upsurge, while others introduced several streams. The afternoon sessions were particularly uncomfortable for many areas because of the heat and rain in most parts of the country.

The situation in Tanzania appeared to be even worse as Sifuni (2007, 694) further observed:

With the increase in pupil enrollment, the already difficult situation regarding facilities was exacerbated. Classrooms were too few in about 60 percent of the rural schools, leading to very large classes of around 180 pupils per class, and 52 percent of the schools lacked toilets. Pupil-teacher ratios were also high, with some districts recording ratios of 72:1 against the national ratio of 40:1. Some of the districts were in need of 40 percent of new teachers. Of the existing teaching force, over 50 percent were unqualified. With regard to the textbook/pupil ratio, it ranged from 1:10 to 1: 13 in different districts against the recommended official of 1:3.

Lesotho shared the same experience. Morojele (2012, p.37) asserted:

The implementation of free primary education in Lesotho has been a matter of political expediency rather than a carefully thought out and planned reform. Poor quality of educational offering and experience has thus resulted, owing to the increased influx of learners without the school's readiness to contend with challenge. Which is probably why only 48, 000 pupils managed to write grade seven examinations by the end of 2006 against 180, 000 pupils who enrolled in grade one in 2000 when free primary education was first inceptioned.

Another challenge caused by Free Primary Education (FPE) is lack of understanding from parents regarding their responsibilities towards the education of their children. As observed in Lesotho, "most parents understood free primary education to mean a relinquishment of their responsibilities in the education of their children" (Morojele,2012, p. 42). As one teacher in the Morojele's (2012) study commented:

Parents received contradicting messages about the role they should play concerning their children who are attending FPE. As teachers we demand that parents should buy uniforms and exercise books for their children. This was confusing because the Prime Minister [Mr. Mosisili] had spoken in the public gatherings and over the radio that under the policy of free primary education parents do not have to pay anything and that they could send their children to school, even with traditional attire (tsea) and rubber boots (likhohlopo).

Putting all these challenges together one would concur with Sawamura and Sifuna's (2008, p.110) that in a nutshell challenges of free education are enormous as experienced in Kenya and other SADC countries (Malawi, Lesotho, Tanzania and Zimbabwe) which a young country like Namibia, that has just joined the fold should pay attention to: Few of these are captured below:

- Because of acute teacher shortages, teachers were forced to combine classes for a number of grades. Some schools had to introduce double shifts to cater to the increased enrolments. Too few classrooms were available to divide the classes;
- Teachers were less motivated due to increased workloads and the scrapping of extra tuition, which was a major source of their income. This contributed to a decline in the quality of education as it also provided teachers with additional time to complete the syllabus;
- It is rather difficult for teachers to effectively manage large classes. Teacher pupil interaction was minimal, resulting in a disadvantage for slow learners. There were also serious disciplinary problems with overage children;
- Because of free education, some parents came to believe that the government would take full responsibility for education. They became apathetic to all school activities, making effective school management difficult;
- Grants from the government were not distributed in the new school term when schools needed funds, nor was the amount sufficient. The use of funds was uniformly specified, which did not reflect the actual needs of each school.

### **Conclusion and Lessons for Namibia**

The implementation of free primary education in Namibia is a noble idea given the fact that the majority of children in this country did not have access to education during the colonial period. We, view this as an important initiative which gives equal chance for all children to attend school. While the introduction of free primary education in Namibia is at an infancy stage, it is important that Namibia learn from case studies of different countries presented in this paper in order to address the shortcomings at an early stage. While high enrollments has been a success story for most of these countries, which may also be applicable to Namibia in a distant future, the challenges that might be created as a result of this might be enormous. More attention, therefore, must be devoted to issues related to quality of education, human and physical resources and facilities, the management of funds by schools, teachers' workload, and provision of teaching and learning resources and the responsibility of parents as important stakeholders in education.

Not far-fetched from the experiences of other countries that have introduced free primary education, reports have begun to surface on the issues of quality, equity and achievements (Haihambo Ya-Otto, 2013). More importantly is the issue of inclusion of those learners with special needs.

Yes, 2013 marks the inception of free education in Namibia, but how far is the country prepared to mitigate issues of lack of space in schools, parental involvement, lack of human resources and other learning materials including issues of quality? The recent report in the New Era Newspaper of 4 July, 2013 entitled “Mad rush for Grade 1 enrollment” raises concerns that Namibia might fall in the same pit other countries has fallen that not ill-preparedness in terms of classroom space to implement free primary education. The reports on lack of space have at least surfaced in Khomas and Kavango Regions of Namibia. In Khomas it has been that schools are selling application forms for primary education violating the Ministry of Education’s Directive of implementing “free education”. Particularly worrying the situation in the Kavango region where “...parents have to overnight at specific public school” just to secure admission for their kids for 2014 school year (New Era, Newspaper, 04 July 2013). Figure 1 below signals the beginning of serious problems of shortage of space in schools in Namibia if the Ministry of Education puts no mechanisms in place the issue.



**Source:** New Era Newspaper 04 July 2013

It should be concluded here that although universal education is a fundamental human right to which every citizen is entitled, it comes with challenges that requires proper planning. Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that have attempted to implement free primary education met enormous challenges that they did not anticipate and were not prepared to handle. In Namibia with the inception of free primary education in January in 2013, the warning lights are already indicating that we might not escape the challenges other countries faced if no mitigation strategies are put in place. Whether Namibia will be able to overcome these challenges in the years ahead given the available resources, is a question that warrants for further research.



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