spotlight on Uganda

Universal primary education—what does it take?

Primary school enrollment in Uganda rose from 3.6 million students to 6.9 million between 1996 and 2001. What accounts for such a drastic increase in such a short time: Political will? Abolishing user fees? A good macroeconomic environment? Information to empower beneficiaries? All of the above.

Did emerging democracy make the difference?

The argument that free elections contributed to the success in Uganda is buttressed by three observations. Education was a salient issue for Ugandan voters. The electorate had access to information about government performance in this area. And the success of universal primary education contributed to President Museveni’s continued popularity.171

For candidates to believe that they will be judged on whether education promises are fulfilled, education must be important for voters. Museveni’s 1996 commitment to universal primary education would have been expected to draw national support, while Paul Ssemogerere’s positions on the northern rebellion, Buganda autonomy, and reintroduction of political parties would have been expected to generate regional support.

Museveni’s victory did not depend on a single regional base of support. He received more than 90 percent of the vote in Uganda’s western region, 74 percent of the votes in Paul Ssemogerere’s home region (central), and 72 percent of the vote in the eastern region.

In the elections in Malawi in 1994 the winning presidential candidate also made universal primary education part of his manifesto, but voting was much more polarized along regional lines than it was in Uganda. The winner would thus have had an incentive to continue to cultivate a regional base of support, rather than to deliver on a national issue like education.

Ugandan voters had access to various sources of information about the education initiative that enabled them to evaluate how the government had made good on its 1996 election promises. Major national dailies, such as The Monitor and The New Vision, continued to give prominent coverage to universal primary education issues.

Data collected by the Afrobarometer project show that Ugandans believe that President Museveni has performed very effectively, and in rating government performance they are most satisfied with education policy. During the June 2000 survey, 93 percent of respondents reported that they were either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with Museveni’s overall performance. Eighty-seven percent of Ugandans reported that their government was handling education issues well, while the average across the 12 African countries was 59 percent.

Macroeconomic stability and budgetary institutions

Democratic politics may have given the Ugandan government an incentive to deliver on its education promise of 1996. But success in reorienting public expenditures toward primary education has also depended on stabilizing the macroeconomic environment and developing budgetary institutions.172 Stable macroeconomic conditions have undoubtedly made it easier to forecast revenues and expenditures. Under more unstable macroeconomic conditions, African governments like Malawi have found it difficult to maintain a sustained commitment to increasing education expenditures.

President Yoweri Museveni’s decision in 1996 to make universal primary education an issue in the presidential election campaign broke with his earlier position. He had previously emphasized that building roads and infrastructure would provide access to markets to enable people to generate income that would pay for schooling. But in a radio address in March, he promised to give access to free primary education to four children per family, up to two boys and two girls, and all orphans.

Although free primary education was only one part of Museveni’s manifesto, it soon became clear that the promise had struck a chord with the electorate. Finance ministry officials recall that several of Museveni’s advisors repeatedly sent them messages after campaign meetings, emphasizing how the promise had resonated with the public.

The May 1996 election was Uganda’s first presidential election since the military takeover in 1986. Though the elections did not involve official multiparty competition, President Museveni faced a credible challenger, Paul Ssemogerere, the leader of the Democratic party. Ssemogerere promised to restore multiparty politics, negotiate with the rebel movement in northern Uganda, and grant greater autonomy to the Buganda region, once an independent kingdom. These stances positioned him for substantial regional support in northern and central Uganda. He also declared that he would match Museveni’s promise to provide free primary education.

In December 1996, soon after a landslide victory, President Museveni announced the abolition of school fees. Since then there has been a sustained shift in Ugandan public expenditures in favor of education, especially for primary schools. Spending on education has risen as a share of government expenditures from an average of 20 percent in the three fiscal years preceding the election to an average of 26 percent in the three years following. Total enrollment in primary schools skyrocketed (figure 1).

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Uganda’s macroeconomic stability since 1992 has depended on budget reforms—from a cash budget system to the medium-term expenditure framework to the Poverty Eradication Action Plan. The framework aligns resources with budgetary priorities, while the cash budget system ensured that overall fiscal discipline is maintained if there are revenue shortfalls. The Poverty Action Fund has been particularly effective in ensuring that government spending priorities, such as primary education, receive needed funds. It seems unlikely that universal primary education would have been sustainable without these innovations in budgetary institutions.

The power of information in delivering funds for education

In 1996 a public expenditure tracking survey of local governments and primary schools revealed that only 13 percent of the per-student capitation grants made it to the schools in 1991–95. In 1995 for every dollar spent on nonwage education items by the central government, only about 20 cents reached the schools, with local governments capturing most of the funding.

Poor students suffered disproportionately, because schools catering to them received even less than others. Indeed, most poor schools received nothing. Case study evidence and other data showed that the school funds were not going to other sectors either. The disbursements were rarely audited or monitored, and most schools and parents had little or no information about their entitlements to the grants. Most funds went to purposes unrelated to education or for private gain, as indicated by numerous newspaper articles about indictments of district education officers after the survey findings went public.

To respond to the problem, the central government began publishing data on monthly transfers of grants to districts in newspapers and to broadcast them on the radio. It required primary schools and district administrations to post notices on all inflows of funds. This promoted accountability by giving schools and parents access to information needed to understand and monitor the grant program.

An evaluation of the information campaign reveals a large improvement. Schools are still not receiving the entire grant (and there are delays). But the capture by interests along the way has been reduced from 80 percent in 1995 to 20 percent in 2001 (figure 2). A before-and-after assessment comparing outcomes for the same schools in 1995 and 2001—and taking into account school-specific factors, household income, teachers’ education, school size, and supervision—suggests that the information campaign explains two-thirds of the massive improvement.

In 1995 schools with access to newspapers and those without suffered just as much from the leakages. And from 1995 to 2001 both groups experienced a large drop in leakage. But the reduction in capture was significantly higher for the schools with access to newspapers, which increased their funding by 12 percentage points over schools that lacked newspapers.

With an inexpensive policy action—the provision of mass information—Uganda dramatically reduced the capture of a public program aimed at increasing access to textbooks and other instructional materials. Because poor people were less able than others to claim their entitlement from the district officials before the campaign, they benefited most from it.

Figure 2 Amount of capitation grant due schools actually received by schools, 1991–2001