

# Uganda's vision for pre-primary education for all: **an unrealistic ambition?**



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## Introduction >>>

Uganda's impetus to introduce pre-primary education mainly stems from numerous findings that point to the benefits that children derive from attending pre-primary school, prior to starting formal schooling (Palmer, 2016). Research carried out by UNICEF in 2013 indicated that in Uganda, the benefit-to-cost ratio for pre-primary education is 1.6. This implies that money invested in pre-primary schooling will eventually pay itself back (in terms of more productivity, higher income, less crime) with an additional 'profit' of 60% of that investment (UNICEF, 2013). However, although the concept of pre-primary education for all is in fact overdue, large-scale expansion has tended to translate into low quality provision (Baker et al., 2008; Almond and Currie, 2011). This paper highlights the achievements and challenges in early childhood education and proposes six strategies that could help Uganda to achieve quality, equitable and sustainable pre-primary education for all 4-to-6 year old children.

## Background >>>

Countries in East Africa (with the exception of Uganda) have drastically increased pre-primary enrolment. In Kenya, the enrolment rate stands at 53.5%, 35.5% in Tanzania, 29% in Rwanda (National Planning Authority, 2015). Increased government participation is one of the contributory factors in the expansion of access to pre-primary education in the three countries. In Kenya for example, pre-primary education is free and compulsory. In Tanzania each primary school has a pre-primary classroom. And in Rwanda, the Government is responsible for teacher training as well as curriculum development (National Planning Authority, 2015; Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2016).

In order to honour the pledge made at Jomtien, Uganda is looking at following in Tanzania's footsteps; requiring each primary school to have a pre-primary classroom. But this will require massive infrastructure investment because the existing government-aided primary schools do not have adequate structures to cater for the current demand, let alone accommodate the proposed 'Class 0'.

## Progress and challenges >>>

### Progress

Despite the slow progress, Uganda has taken various steps towards improving quality in pre-school provision. Some of the steps taken include:

- i. The creation of the Department of Pre-primary and Primary Education in 2000 (within the Ministry of Education and Sports);
- ii. The development of the early learning and development standards for children 3 to 5 years in 2015. These stipulate the expected learning achievements for young children in areas including cognitive, physical, language as well as social and emotional development (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports 2015);
- iii. Registration of all Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres is mandatory. Before receiving a license to operate, all providers must show that they meet the baseline requirements (non-negotiable minimum standards including toilets and safe drinking water) of quality. The process involves visits from regulators;
- iv. There is increased control of teacher training institutions - in terms of accreditation and entry points (Kisitu, 2009).

### Low access

Pre-primary education continues to be accessible to only a few eligible children. Only 14% of Ugandan children attend pre-primary school (Bridge, 2017). Although low attendance may also be attributed to other factors such as social norms, traditions, societal cultural beliefs, as well as limited parent/community awareness, the main reason for limited access is attributed to the fact that the Government of Uganda is not directly involved in the provision of pre-primary education. Providers include local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) including churches and mosques, individuals and communities, and international and bilateral organisations like UNICEF and the Aga Khan Foundation. Leaving provision in the hands of private providers has had three key consequences:

- i. Enrolment is 'optional' rather than 'universal'
- ii. Participation is highly dependent on household income levels – due to the fee-paying nature of the services provided
- iii. There is uneven distribution of provision between regions - because private providers tend to go where the demand is. As a result, urban centres tend to have more provision compared to rural areas. The existing gap is likely to persist if the Government does not devise a Policy to rectify the skewed access situation (The New Vision, 10/05/2012).

**Table 1: Distribution of pre-primary schools by region in 2014**

Region	No. of Pre-primary Schools	Percentage (%)
Central	5,415	37.0%
<b>Western</b>	<b>3,792</b>	<b>25.9%</b>
Eastern	2,838	19.4%
<b>Northern</b>	<b>2,586</b>	<b>17.7%</b>

Source: National Planning Authority, 2015

Table 1 indicates that the Central Region has the highest share of pre-schools while the Northern Region has the lowest. This is likely to mainly be due to the Central Region's high level of urbanisation and higher average household income levels.

## Poor quality

While the government is responsible for the provision of guidelines for the establishment and management of pre-primary schools under the existing system, standards are developed and promoted by the providers themselves (Kisitu, 2009). Yet different providers come to the field with varying motives and experiences. Absence of strong government involvement has led to a spectrum of pre-school provision that falls short in many important ways:

- i. Curriculum content is largely a matter for the various providers. As a result, curriculum guidelines and recommendations concerning teaching and methodology have continued to be issued by individual organisations to their members, while others have 'picked' and 'mixed' what they view as 'useful'. Some providers are forced to approach primary schools for guidance on what should be taught in their settings, hence exposing pre-school children to primary school level content (Brunette, et al., 2017).
- ii. The learning environments in most pre-schools could be described as inadequate. Centres are crowded, with a teacher/child ratio of up to 1:50. Some of the premises are make shift houses that are in a very poor state and therefore not conducive for effective teaching and learning. Also, many pre-schools do not have appropriate toilets for both boys and girls and no clean and safe water for drinking, for play activities, for the school kitchen, and for children's hand-washing (Kasankyu, 2017).
- iii. There is an acute shortage of trained teachers which means that many pre-schools operate with teachers who are not professionally experienced or qualified. The relatively few training institutions that exist are under-staffed, and over three-quarters of them are neither licensed or registered. Also, institutions are mainly located in urban centres, which make them inaccessible for people in rural areas. There is a high teacher turn-over due to lack of incentives for anyone to remain in the ECCE profession. So, attracting, training and retaining suitably qualified ECCE staff is a challenge. Also, the working conditions and remuneration are poor and there is no clear career ladder offering career opportunities.
- iv. Although quality control is a legitimate function of the state through the Ministry of Education and Sports, there is no framework for inspection and support supervision of pre-primary schools. This leaves quality assurance at the discretion of the providers (National Planning Authority, 2015).

- v. There is no line budget for pre-primary education. Although the pre-primary and primary budgets have remained consolidated, nearly 100% of the entire budget goes to the primary sub-sector; with almost no funds directed at the pre-primary sub-sector (The New Vision, 10/05/2012).

### Absence of an exclusive pre-school policy framework

The ECD curriculum that was developed in 2005 (which underscored the cross-cutting nature of ECD including nutrition, health and education) tends to focus more on child survival and development than the component of education (Mukhwana, 2017). Also, although the 2008 Education Act recognises pre-primary as the first level of education, this level is yet to be given the attention it desperately deserves. There is, therefore, the need to develop a single policy that will specifically address the provision of pre-primary education in the country (National Planning Authority, 2015). The general principles of a pre-primary policy should reflect progressive, child-centred curriculum, blended with some traditional cultural emphases and recognition of the importance of evaluation (Cortet et al., 2006).

### The effect of Uganda's failure to invest in pre-school education >>>

The continued inaccessibility of early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision prior to children starting formal schooling is costing Uganda in two major ways:

- i. There is high repetition and drop out particularly during the transition from P1 to P2 and P6 to P7 (National Planning Authority, 2015).
- ii. For every 1,000 Uganda shillings invested in Universal Primary Education (UPE), the government is estimated to be losing 600 shillings through early drop out and grade repetition. This is attributed to the majority of children not accessing pre-primary education (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2016).

### Uganda's vision for pre-primary education for all: an achievable ambition? >>>

Uganda's vision to provide pre-primary education for all is achievable; but it cannot be realised if expansion is 'haphazardly' implemented. Hence, this paper provides six strategies that could help Uganda to achieve the vision of providing quality, equitable and sustainable pre-primary education for all 4-to-6 year old children.

## Six proposed strategies for achieving quality, equitable and sustainable provision >>>

### Strategy 1: Community sensitisation and involvement >>>

Before any attempt is made to roll out any kind of pre-primary education for all, there is need for the government, as well as other stakeholders, to sensitise communities (especially parents and teachers) to appreciate the purpose and importance of pre-primary education. If not done, pre-school education will continue to fall to the bottom of the priority list.

### Strategy 2: Cost implications >>>

There is need to carry out analysis in the number of children to be catered for; how many days and hours per child; how much money will be available for each child; infrastructure requirements; the number of pre-school teachers that will need to be trained (National Planning Authority, 2015); the cost of learning materials; and the cost of repairing (or building additional) classrooms, among other things.

### Strategy 3: Funding sources >>>

There is need for an adequate and detailed revenue source in order to ensure sustainability. Although many NGOs (both national and international) release funds under the ECD umbrella, the main focus has continued to be on health and nutrition. Uganda needs to look ‘inward’ if the vision of providing pre-primary education for all is to be realised. This is due to the fact that there are no major bilateral donors championing pre-primary education, and even multilateral funders are falling short (Brown, 2017).

The main proposed source of revenue is taxes from private schools. Private schools pay taxes on a number of things including registration - schools registered as companies pay 30% income tax, while schools registered by individuals pay tax at a progressive rate of between 10% and 30%. When schools import items, customs duties are applicable depending on what has been imported (Uganda Revenue Authority, 2017). In 2007, the government had stopped imposing direct taxes on private schools, arguing that the sector was playing a critical role in supplementing government efforts of educating Ugandans. This was however reversed in 2014 (The New Vision, 29/01/2015). Part or all of the money collected from private schools could be ploughed back into pre-primary education provision. Currently, there are over 20,000 known private schools across the country. Most private schools charge higher fees than the public ones because they are perceived to offer better services (The Daily Monitor, 19/06/2014).

### Strategy 4: Adopt the Public Private Partnership (PPPs) model – but with a twist! >>>

Universal pre-school education does not have to (and can never) be accomplished by the government alone (Kenworthy, 2015). Although the structure, mechanisms, and formation of the people and organisations (otherwise called actors) that engage in public private partnerships (PPPs) can vary widely (Gustafsson-Wright, et al., 2016), in the Ugandan context this could mean a mixture of government, NGOs, individuals as well as international and bilateral organisations. PPPs are increasingly being utilised as a way to address challenges in education as a whole. With the aim of improving access to and the quality of services, PPPs have the potential to effectively

target poor and marginalised pre-school going age populations (Gustafsson-Wright, et al., 2016). Some of the common elements of PPPs frequently include some type of formalised partnership between public and private actors, agreed-upon quality and quantity levels, and a set long-term operation period (Araujo, et al., 2013). Although one of the common mechanisms for harnessing PPPs within the early childhood development sphere has been applied through vouchers or subsidies (Barrera-Osorio, 2012; Baker-Henningham and Lopez, 2010), the proposed approach in this paper is through tax exemption.

The fact is there is a mismatch between the taxes that are supposed to be collected from private schools and what is actually collected. For example, although 5% of Uganda's GDP is supposed to be generated by the education sector, the sector contributes only 1% to the tax revenue (Akol Doris, URA's commissioner general, in The New Vision, 29/01/2015). Through tax exemption, private providers could be required to make available a certain number of places to pre-school children (according to the money saved) from poor communities or families. This will require the government to put in place stringent measures in order to ensure that private providers comply and that only those children targeted attract the tax exemption, which would act like a subsidy for those schools who contract into this scheme. It would also help ensure that more schools are registered and those schools would be more sustainable as they would have assured funds from their tax exemption.

### Strategy 5: Quality assurance measures >>>

Quality in early childhood settings has emerged as an important factor in determining whether the potential benefits of educational experiences will be realised. So, before any kind of provision is rolled out, there is need to:

- Integrate the training of pre-primary teachers into the Primary Teacher Colleges (PTCs) (National Planning Authority, 2015) in order to produce pre-primary equipped teachers.
- Develop an integrated pre-primary education policy to stand as a legal framework for ensuring a holistic approach (National Planning Authority, 2015). The formulation and dissemination of the policy will help to give pre-school education a prominent place nationally, as well as in the society's educational and economic aspirations.
- Develop a pre-primary education curriculum with expected learning outcomes in the areas of creative, physical, emotional and social skills besides literacy and numeracy (National Planning Authority, 2015).

### Strategy 6: Phased/priority roll-out >>>

Rather than a countrywide roll out, the expansion of universal pre-school education should be gradual. This calls for the need to set priorities and make strategic choices about who and which areas will be prioritised. This means that universal coverage should only be envisaged in the long run.

### Why phased/priority roll-out?

*The first issue for prioritisation is 'who needs the services most?'* Priority should be given to less-privileged children. Research has shown that early learning programmes have greater impact for children from poorer backgrounds. Such children are likely to grow up in less nurturing environments, with more limited opportunities, leading to poorer outcomes and reduced life chances. Good ECCE programmes provide stimulating environments that the children do not get at home.

*The second issue for prioritisation concerns funding.* Universal pre-school education cannot be reached without substantial increases in financial resources. Yet the ability of the Government to further mobilise domestic finances is constrained.

*The third issue of prioritisation concerns quality.* Universal coverage with funding shortfalls undermine the quality and effectiveness of the programmes (Wong, 2014). Yet research emphasises that the benefits from early pre-school programmes are dependent on the level of the 'quality' that children experience (Taguma et al., 2012).

## Conclusion >>>

Uganda's proposal for universal pre-school provision is a true reflection of her political commitment to the education of all citizens. The majority of children do not have access to pre-school education. Although universal access to pre-primary education will mean that all children aged 4-to-6 years old have equal access the ground needs to be laid prior to any kind of roll-out. This will help in ensuring quality, equitable and sustainable provision.

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A Set of ECCE Topics for Consideration in Uganda

