Is Universal Free Primary Education Policy Sustainable? An Investigation in Lusaka, Zambia

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***Abstract*-** The purpose was to investigate the sustainability of the Universal Free Primary Education Policy (UFPE) implemented in 2002 by the government of the Republic of Zambia through the Ministry of General Education in the wake of declining education financing to the sector. The study employed a triangulation incorporating a causal-analytical paradigm targeting 90 public primary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia with over 180,000 pupils and about 5,220 teachers as population (N). A randomised survey method was used which sampled 14 schools (n) was used with 56 structured self-administered questionnaires being distributed to four persons per school who constitute the school management structure (i.e. head teacher, deputy, senior teacher and accountant) while 1 focus group discussion of 14 teachers coupled with 3 key informant interviews with education district official, MoGE HQ official and donors' representative were held – all through prior appointments and clearance as procedures. Simple random and purposive sampling techniques were used with primary and secondary data being obtained and analysed via thematic / content approaches for qualitative and SPSS / excel for quantitative data along with expert judgement. The study had questionnaire response rate of 95% (53). The findings along with corroborative literature attested to the fact that the UFPE Policy was a worthwhile undertaking by government as it exponentially increased public primary school net enrolment rates from as low as 60% in 2000s to over 120% by 2014 underpinned by massive infrastructural development, consistent teacher recruitments and school supplies to match demand. However, the steady declines in annual financing to the sector as discovered in the variations between 2015's 20.2% and 2020's 12% of national budget contrary to the 20% UNESCO / SADC minimum threshold, weakened the UFPE policy's efficacy. Furthermore, the study identified the country's colossal debt stock (over $11 billion), low economic growth rate (2%) compared to population growth rate (3.8%), and some prominent donors' withdrawal of financial support to the sector budget along with funds mismanagement within the sector as being the major potential threats to the country's sustenance of the UFPE Policy to the effect that within the period under review, grade 1 school places within the district have become so scarce that a latent phenomenon has emerged in which some parents/guardians have been showcased spending nights in some schools to access places for their children/wards during enrolment periods. The study calls on Zambian educationists, politicians and policy-makers to help rethink education prioritization. "*Leaving no one behind in providing quality education by 2030"* is a global education vision (UNDP SDG goal 4) which is also under Zambia's mantle and is consistent with the fundamental propositions of the human capital theory. Policy imperatives, therefore, demand that central government *walk the talk* in actualising this global/regional blueprint via disciplined prioritisation of financing to the sector for sustainability of equitable quality education as envisioned in the UFPE Policy (2002) and the Educating our Future Policy (1996).

***Index Terms*-** Investigation, Sustainability, UFPE and Education Financing.

I. Introduction

The world at large deems education as a basic human right and basis upon which to build peace, harmony, national progress and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2018). On the other hand, the World Bank (1998) views education as the basis upon which economic, social and political development of any nation is founded. This profound conception is equally posited and heralded by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) – a regional body to which Zambia subscribes. Since independence (1964), the government of the Republic of Zambia felt duty bound to enact the Universal Free Primary Education (UFPE) Policy; envisioned to curb inaccessibility, unaffordability, inequity, and high school drop-out rates, and therefore would provide and guarantee the nation of reduced illiteracy levels (Omoeva *et al*., 2018). The UFPE Policy was an act of government through the Ministry of General Education which abolished all manner of user fees as a way of eradicating accessibility barriers for children from grades 1 to 9. This meant that government had taken over total responsibility in making available all necessary and required resources for smooth operations of these public schools in a manner which would not prejudice quality outputs. In other words, it meant government's deliberate mechanism to sustain the optimal operations of the subsector i.e. ability to maintain its optimal service provisions without compromise. Particularly, the abolition of tuition fees at this level meant that the central government had taken-over a life-time responsibility to consistent financing of this subsector for investments, operations and all other activities of primary school life in order to strike a balance between the population growth and the number of schools / classrooms available to swallow all eligible children annually (Masaiti *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, government had entered into a sacred covenant to ensure subsistence and consistency of quality education by effectively managing equitable and optimal resource availability in terms of teaching staff, teaching learning materials, facilities and any other necessary infrastructure to circumvent and forestall any unforeseen service provision compromises within the subsector (ibid). Lusaka District, being the capital city of Zambia, has the highest number of schools compared to any single district in the country thereby permitting for marginal tolerance of extrapolation of findings to other districts in similar circumstances and context as the phenomena under study have wider implications. With this properly and contextually ascertained, this was purposed to investigate the sustainability implications of the UFPE policy in the wake of the dwindling education financing to the sector from 2015 to 2020 in Lusaka District.

1.1. **Problem Statement**

Zambia's UFPE Policy that was declared and instantaneously implemented in 2002 by the Ministry of Education was envisioned to exponentially increase equity, affordability, quality, relevance and accessibility to education by all and promote socioeconomic well-being of all citizens, and to achieve a good quality of life for everyone (Phiri, 2015; GRZ, 2002; and Ministry of Education, 2003). Consistent with this vision and conviction, between 2006 and 2014, government's appropriations to MoGE annual budget increased. This led to massive infrastructural development, increase in teacher recruitment, improved disbursement of grants to schools for operations coupled with consistent supplies of teaching and learning materials (MoGE 2015a; 7NDP, 2017-2021; Seventh National Development Plan (SNDP), 2011-2016). However, there has been a consistent and steady decline in financing the sector from 2015's 20.2% to 2020's 12%, (Ministry of Finance National Budgets, 2015 to 2020; Masaiti *et al*., 2018), which poses a threat to the furtherance and aspiration of the country's sustenance to provide quality UFPE to all its eligible citizens as envisioned (Masaiti *et al*., 2018; World Bank, 2019) and the Primary Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) has been indicted as having declined in 2016 in certain provinces (ibid). There is little known about the sustainability implications of the UFPE Policy in the wake of the declining financing owing to limited scholarly literature available. As a matter of fact, early in 2019, MoGE called for an education stakeholders' consultative conference in order to solicit for '*transformative ideas*' to aid the general education sector but subsequent anecdotal indictment showcased a flop of the 'Indaba' (Lusaka Times, April 2019). The closest to the current was one done by Mobela (2016) who concentrated on the impact of free primary education but not sustainability implications in view of declining financing as the current study's focus. On the other hand, in January (2020) and March (2020), Hapompwe *et al.*, (2020) carried out desk review and empirical studies focusing on *factors accounting for low learner outcomes at grades 5 and 9 levels in Zambia*, and *evaluation of public secondary schools' education financing and its impact on service quality in Lusaka, Zambia*, respectively. Although all these two studies were related to the current study by sectoral umbilical cord, they were not focused conceptually and theoretically to *investigate* the sustainability implications of the UFPE Policy and, therefore, still left gaps for the current study. Therefore, the study's question is, "what are the sustainability implications for the quality Universal Free Primary Education (UFPE) in the wake of declining financing to the sector and subsector alike in Lusaka District?

1.2. Study's Objectives

1.2.1. Main Objective

To investigate the sustainability of Zambia's UFPE Policy against the declining subsector financing in Lusaka District.

1.2.2. Specific Objectives

i. To investigate the performance of the UFPE Policy over time, 2002 to 2014.
ii. To find out central government's consistency in financing the education sector
iii. To identify threats to the sustainability of the UFPE Policy.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1.3. National Population Upswing

Zambia is experiencing a large demographic shift and is one of the world's youngest countries by median age. The World Bank (2018) projects that this trend is expected to continue as the large youth population enters the reproductive age, which will put even more pressure on the demand for jobs, education, healthcare and other social services. In terms of age structure, the population under the age of 15 years and below accounts for about 50 per cent, while those under the age of 35years account for 70 per cent of the Zambian population (Masaiti *et al*., 2018). In terms of figures, 8,158,011 are young people under the age of 15 years (4,094,205 males / 4,063,632 females), 8,876,572 persons between 15 and 64 years old (4,461,085 males / 4,415,487 females), 435,888 people above 64 years (186,934 males / 248,954 females) (World Bank, 2018) (CSO, 2017). *In other words, the country overall has a young population, which makes the provision of educational services to this population to be of strategic importance to government* (EFA, 2015). Critically, the financial commitments and allocations to the sector requires periodic reviews in order to guarantee required quality, accessibility, relevance, efficiency and inclusivity (Masaiti, 2018) (emphasis added).

1.1. *Lusaka District Schools Statistics*

In 2019, there were 90 public primary schools spread in urban areas of Lusaka District (DEBS Statistics, 2019) and has a population of 2,000,000 people of which 46.4% (558,900) are of the school going youths below 16 years of age (Census Survey, 2015) thereby making this infrastructure very competitive. Given the fact that the said total population of Lusaka Province has 46.4% of school going age youths and also that the total population of Lusaka district youths is slightly higher than that of the other districts [ibid], it is on record that there is only very little infrastructural space for which the rest of the 46.4% of the youthful population is competing for. Therefore, this suggests that education quality service provision is compromised in one way or the other. This also might entail that the majority of this population may drop out of school for many a reason, or may be in school just to register presence, yet not attain the liberating intended education. Besides, notwithstanding the fact that the district also has a number of private and grant-aided schools which even outstrip the public ones, these institutions have a different management style and operational philosophy, which is largely anchored on capitalistic and neo-liberal ideological traditions, and therefore, still does not guarantee accessibility to most of the socio-economically disadvantaged learners. Thus, it is imperative to note that the responsibility of ensuring quality and equitable education provision per region is sacrosanctly vested in the government of the Republic of Zambia and that whatever the private sector is doing in this regard is a mere supplement to the government's effort (Hapompwe *et al*., 2020c).

1.2. Country and Policy Context

Following a period of decline in education accessibility and performance due to growing *poverty* and *under investment* and in a decisive action to enhance the provision of basic education and curb all manner of equitable and accessibility barriers which incessantly existed since independence (1964), the government of the Republic of Zambia declared and instantaneously implemented the Universal Free Primary Education Policy (UFPE) in 2002 covering grades 1-9. The UFPE was envisioned to exponentially increase access to education to all, promote the socioeconomic well-being of all citizens, and to achieve a good quality of life for every citizen (Phiri, 2015).

Consistent with this conviction and vision, the trend of public education expenditure between 2006 and 2013 shows steady growth of education expenditure in both nominal and real terms. Government's expenditure on education grew from ZMW 1.5 billion in 2006 to ZMW 5.2 billion in 2013 in nominal terms. The budgetary allocations for 2014 and 2015 increased to ZMW 8.6 billion and 9.4 billion. Using the constant price of 2013, the public education expenditure also grew from ZMW 3.0 billion to 5.2 billion between 2006 and 2013. The ratio of government expenditure in education to GDP stayed strong, by ranging between 3.7 percent and 4.4 percent during the period of 2006 through 2013, and it was projected to be higher in 2014 and 2015, exceeding 5 percent of GDP. This was relatively on higher side in the region and comparable with other emerging economies (World Bank, 2015) to ensure massive infrastructural development, teacher recruitment and teaching material supplies availability as also several co-operating partners committed and actualized their financial support and technical services to the cause.

The circumstance prior to the foregoing undertaking was such that although the country had experienced growth in the primary school subsector between 1972 and 1990, the gross enrolment rate was only about 59% (World Bank and UNICEF, 2009). Furthermore, "the system favoured a small minority who were believed to be academically sound to the detriment of the majority, hence promoting the spirit of imperfect competition at the expense of co-operation (GRZ, 1976:1-14). To address this issue, the Education Reform Document resolved to expand provision at primary level by, among others, conversion of buildings owned by absentee landlords, private homes, churches and community facilities into schools (Masaiti *et al*., 2018). All these aggressive undertakings were inspired by the realization that education was a basic human right for the entire human race and the foundation on which to build peace and drive sustainable development (UNESCO, 2018) for the benefit of all.

Consequently, randomized performance records indicate that between 2005 and 2015, a total of 14,235 classrooms were constructed at primary education level (7NDP, 2017-2021), the number of teachers increased from 50,123 in 2002 to 77,362 in 2009 (SNDP, 2011-2016) and pupil enrolments also increased from 2.5 million pupils in 2005 to 3.3 million in 2009 (Mambwe, 2010; Masaiti *et al*., 2018). On the other hand, over one third of the girls who became pregnant returned to school between 2002 and 2009. Over 200,000 students in basic schools were reached with improved water and sanitation (MoGE 2015a). Between 2014 and 2015, enrolments increased with the number of primary school children reaching up to 3,691,486 in 2014, coupled with improved water and sanitary infrastructure along with library facilities (MoGE 2016b). According to MoGE (2015a), the primary school Gross Enrolment Rate was at 120.8% by 2015. In buttressing the growth in the subsector, the World Bank 2016/2018 Reports placed Zambia's current net enrolment rates at 99%.

1.1. Performance of the UFPE Overtime

Studies by Mambwe (2010) indicate that the introduction of UFPE in Zambia in 2002 significantly improved access to primary education especially after declining enrolments in the 1990s. In trying to actualize effective implementation of the policy, from 2006 to 2010, funding to the education sector steadily increased from 2.9% to 3.5% of GDP and saw an improvement in school infrastructure. Teacher training programs also increased where the teacher supply matched the expansion of school enrollments (from 50,123 in 2002 to 77,362 in 2009). Student enrolment had increased from 2.5 million students in 2005 to 3.3 million in 2009 (SNDP, 2011-2016). *Unfortunately, there is literature indictment to the effect that although there has been this general good performance by the UFPE Policy, the picture began to change from 2015 (with 3,215,723 enrolment) onwards compared to (2014 enrolment figure of 3,691,486) showing a general decline in Primary Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) of 13%* (Masaiti *et al.*, 2018:38).

1.2. Education Financing and Impact Prior to 2015

In actualizing its governmental commitment to the sector, Zambia's historical trend in financial allocations to the education sector from 2005 through to 2015 shows an impressive steady growth in both real and nominal terms (3.7 percent and 4.6 percent of GDP respectively, between 2005 and 2013) (World Bank Group, 2015; FNDP, 2006-2010; SNDP, 2011-2016).

1.3. Economic Recession, Debt Stock and Education Financing

Economists Todaro and Smith (2015) stress that it is difficult to pinpoint when the economy begins to decline due to lack of macro-economic perspective though one can analyse trends and various variables to draw conclusions on the state of the economy and its effect on education service provision. Historically, the Second Republic (1973 to 1991) was marred with economic meltdown owing to low copper prices at London Metal Exchange. This heavily negatively impacted as it declined government expenditures on social services, and increased external borrowing. It became extremely difficult to manage the education system during this period (Masaiti *et al.*, 2018).

Zambia was one of the countries which was granted debt relief by the international community just over a decade ago. In Zambia's past, debt has been a milestone which has held the country back: it held back growth (GDP) by crowding out private sector activity; it stunted development by reducing the amount of money available for investment in health and education; and it made it harder for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to access finance to grow (CTPD, 2018). On the other hand, the World Bank argues that *"an unsustainable debt burden would impact on poverty reduction in Zambia. It would reduce not only public investment and income growth, but would also reduce fiscal space for social spending as the cost of servicing the debt increases. Less money would be available to finance the government's national development plans. In the 1990s and early 2000s, high debt service costs directly reduced government budgetary allocations on health, education, and agriculture; and many social safety nets were eroded" (*World Bank, 2017*).*

The foregoing paragraphs squarely resonate with the notion that economic meltdown or recession and huge foreign debt stock to a country are inimical and menace to any meaningful investments and social spending by the indebted country as most of the resources would be channeled to principal and interest loan repayments while aggregate local demand for products dwindles due to low productivity and lack of production. In this regard, therefore, it is necessary to state that the sustainability of equitable free primary education to all becomes not only a pipe dream but also a nightmare if a country found itself drowned into such economic doldrums and quagmires. Early in 2019, central government issued a Cabinet Memo instructing all heads of government departments to adhere to the austerity measures which government had earlier implemented (Cabinet Office Circular No. 12 of 2019) to respond to fiscal challenges. However, the circular was not categorical enough to disclose the reasonable cause and courses of action for external intelligent analysis.

1.1. Population Explosion

Masaiti et al (2018) strongly stress that the rate at which the country's population is growing relative to available service levels in health and education spheres was unsustainable. They observe that by 2035, Zambia's current population will have doubled and by 2100 it will reach 90 million, making the country 26th most populous globally. The fact that the population is mostly youthful with 700,000 annual birth rate, has serious implications on education service provision (ibid).

1.2. Donor Aid

Zambia has had all-weather prominent donors supporting the education sector budget. This was in recognition of the country's being a lower middle income country and the fact that philanthropism is part of the mission blueprints of the donors. UNESCO (2016) strongly recommended such benevolence to developed countries to express such gestures to less developed countries for sustainability of their social service offerings in education. However, Prima facie evidence, however, indicate that most of the donors have completely closed their assistance to the country's sector while others like Ireland and others have equally pulled out of the pool fund and no longer support the MoGE budget annually as also confirmed by the Minister of Finance while presenting the National budget for 2018 (MoF National Budget, 2018).

1.3. Funds Misuse

In Zambia, public funding for education traditionally flows from the MoGE to schools through a four-tiered administrative hierarchy involving the MoGE HQ, Provincial Education Offices (PEOs), the District Board Offices (DEBs), and finally to schools in a top-down hierarchy, of course from Ministry of Finance. The reviewed secondary data from the Media (Reuters, Lusaka 20th September, 2018) and the *Auditor General's Reports, (2015-2018),* have demonstratively highlighted that this bureaucratic financial disbursement and/or management channels constitute the basis for high risks of misappropriations, misapplication or simply non-disbursement by such recipient higher offices to recipient spending subsector entities. In September 2018, about 80 MoGE officials were suspended for misappropriation of over $10 million meant for school supplies (*ZANEC Press Statement, 19th October, 2018*) while the *2015 to 2018 Auditor General's Reports* indicate funds misapplications and misappropriations in the sector to the tune of **ZMW 256,253,712** and **ZMW 8,715,532** respectively, meant for curriculum development, books, computers, desks, infrastructure expansion, bursary etc.

1.4. Related Studies and Gap Analysis

'Leaving no one behind in the provision of quality education' especially at elementary levels has been the clarion herald of UNESCO to all countries under its charter globally and Zambia inclusive. There is, however, a notable anecdotal trend of declension and departure from this global benchmark in Zambia's education system and seemingly no well-focused study has been conducted to bring out the facts surrounding the phenomena. Closely related to the current study by topic was a comparative research by Omoeva *et al*., (2018) which focused on the long term effects of universal free primary education in Malawi, Ethiopia and Uganda. The scholars paid attention to exploit the roll out of universal primary education (UPE) policies in the three countries as natural experiments to *assess* their long-term causal effects on schooling attainment, adolescent sexual and reproductive health behaviors, and economic outcomes. However, in comparison to the current study, Omoeva et al's focus was to assess the long term effects of UPE while the current study investigates sustainability implications based on financing inadequacies. Besides, whereas the previous study was comparative and international in nature, the current study is uncomparative and is localised by jurisdiction. On the other hand, Mobela (2016), conducted a study in Kabwe district of Zambia, focusing on the impact of free primary education in 20 government schools in which she explored descriptively FPE's provision of quality education, the adequacy of funding by government and the extent to which FPE helped primary school learners to proceed to next stages. However, among the fundamental variations with the current study is that whereas Mobela's (2016) was an impact study, the current is an investigative one on sustainability of the UFPE policy pedestaled on declining education financing to the sector. It is a trend-based study looking at 2015 to 2020 education financing with different conceptual and theoretical focus all-together. Therefore, the three studies fundamentally vary in terms of focus, contexts, complexity, major conceptual and theoretical nuances / variables. Additionally, in January (2020) and March (2020), Hapompwe *et al.,* (2020) carried out desk review and empirical studies focusing on *factors accounting for low learner outcomes at grades 5 and 9 levels in Zambia*, and *evaluation of public secondary schools'*

education financing and its impact on service quality in Lusaka, Zambia, respectively. All these two studies, though related by sectoral inclination, they were not focused conceptually and theoretically to *investigate* the sustainability of the UFPE Policy, which then still left gaps for the current study. The studies by Masaiti *et al.,* (2013), Masaiti *et al*., (2016) and Mulamfu (1998) also from the Zambian context focused on *cost sharing among students in public higher learning institutions, shifting from bursary to loan scheme,* and *financing public higher learning institutions* respectively - all somehow related by sector but with different subsectoral focus and contexts to the current study's conceptual and contextual focus. Early in 2019, MoGE called for education stakeholders' meeting in order to solicit for 'transformative ideas' to aid the general education sector but subsequent anecdotal indictment showcased a flop of the indaba (Lusaka Times, April 2019). On the other hand, the study by Ntawiha (2016) concentrated on the *implications of inputs for outputs for public secondary schools* from the Rwandan context and focused more on pedagogical and classroom-based factors at secondary school levels of education thereby leaving the investigative aspect of the UFPE Policy at primary school level, which is the primary focus of this study.

1.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

1.1.1. Theoretical Framework

A theory is a systematic body of knowledge or interrelated propositions systematically and logically presented to explain certain phenomena and help society interpret occurrences rationally. The Human Capital theory was propounded by Schultz in 1961 and developed extensively by Becker in 1964 (Adan *et al*., 2013). The theory is an economic rationalist approach which focuses on returns to investment in education. Education and training increase workers' productivity and hence the value of educated workers (Adan *et al*, 2013). Woodhall (1997:24) opines that "the concept of human capital refers to the fact that human beings invest in themselves, by means of education, training or other activities which raise their future incomes by increasing their lifetime earnings". It is this aspect of the theory's tenet that informs the current study in as far as education financing and the resultant effect thereof is concerned. It is clearly worth-noting from this theoretical perspective that investing in the education of citizens is a critical requirement for the realization of socio economic benefits as well as personal upward social mobility. The most efficient path to national development lies in the improvement of its production and productivity. This theory stresses the need to train human resources for efficiency and sustainable development by deliberate investment in the education sector, which is the clarion call of this paper against the odds of financing declines to the sector.

Anchored on the pragmatic pedestal of the foregoing theory which lays profound emphasis on the need for human capital investment by government to catalyse the course of national development, the declining education financing to the sector, which essentially poses a threat to human capital development as it eclipses infrastructural expansion relative to demand, human resource and school material supplies, must cause a stir and public concern not only to the politicians but the donors and the general citizenry of the country as the future of the nation seems to be bleak with the phenomena at hand. Without consistent investment in the sector but with the upswing service demand through population explosion, quality education service's sustainability becomes a far-fetched dream, hence the need to strictly adhere to the bright / practical prescriptions of this theory for the country's socio economic salvation.

1.3.1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and informs research. Robson (2011) observes that it is a key part of the design. Miles *et al.,* (1994) defined a conceptual framework as a visual or written product, one that explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied and the key factors which may be concepts or variables and the presumed relationships among them. This paper has been guided by a conceptual framework depicting the probabilistic or potential threat variables / factors (independent variables) to the sustainability of the quality UFPE Policy to Zambia's education sector such as population explosion, financial mismanagement, public debt, economic recession and donor aid shortfalls as independent variables (IV) while the UFPE Sustainability will depict the dependent variable (DV). **Figure 1** below shows the paper's Conceptual Framework.

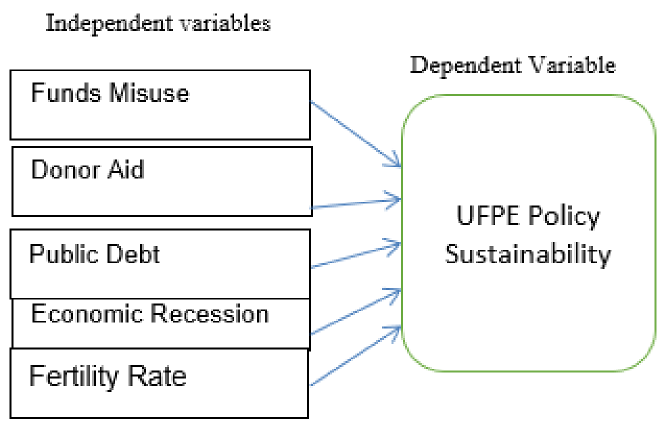

Figure 1: Study's Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's Own Construction (2019)

III. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a triangulation incorporating qualitative and quantitative causal-analytical paradigms targeting 90 public primary schools in Lusaka district with over 180,000 pupils and about 5,220 professional staff as population (N). A randomised survey method which sampled 14 schools (n) (i.e. 15%) was used with 56 structured self-administered questionnaires being distributed to 56 persons in sampled schools who constitute the school management structure (i.e. head teacher, deputy, senior teacher, and accountant) while 1 focus group discussion (FGD) of 14 teachers coupled with 3 key informant interviews with education district official, MoGE HQ official and donors' representative were held – all through prior appointments as procedures. The Self-Administered-Likert-standard questionnaire also underwent reliability pre-testing with 0.769 Cronbach's alpha being obtained. Clustering and simple random sampling techniques were used in selecting schools from different geographical locations (low density, medium & high density) / zones using DEBS' list and in the selection of 14 teachers for FGD while purposive technique was used in selecting the officials for key informant interviews. The obtained primary and secondary data were analysed via thematic approaches for qualitative and excel for quantitative data along with expert judgement. The study had questionnaire return rate of 95% (53).

IV. FINDINGS

1.4. Performance of the UFPE Policy Overtime

On the objective question of the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed on the performance of the UFPE policy overtime, the field evidence shows that 53% (28) agreed followed by 19% (10) who strongly agreed while 13% (7) and 9% (5) disagreed with 6% (3) being neutral. This quantitative evidence did from schools did not vary with information from key informants and FGD. The district education and MoGE HQ officials stressed that the UFPE policy enacted in 2002 multiplied both school infrastructure and teacher recruitments to ensure quality education and that the teaching learning materials were mostly in constant supplies and further pointed to the fact that the policy had good will from donors through the Basic Education Sub-Sector Investment Programme Project (BESSIP), which was heavily funded all the way from the initiation of the policy. The donor's representative also echoed similar sentiments and exemplified many other initiatives which were brought on board and funded to enhance universal primary education like the Programme for the Advancement of Girls' Education (PAGE) to ensure equitable education accessibility to all.

1.5. Financing Trend (2015-2020) and Controls

Field findings show that 59% and 26% agreed and strongly agreed that the termly school grant from government through MoGE has reduced in quantum during the period under review while 13% and 2% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On the other hand, 49% and 19% agreed and strongly agreed that the grant was erratically reaching schools with 21% and 9% strongly disagreeing and disagreeing respectively. Discussions and interviews equally confirmed that some schools were not even receiving grants for the whole year while those who were receiving though erratically stressed that it had reduced in quantum to averages of ZMW 2,000 i.e. US$ 100 per term (from past years' K10,000 i.e. US$ 500) which they said was simply a drop in the ocean in as far as smooth school operations was concerned.

Furthermore, documentary evidence from budgetary tracking from the MoGE and Ministry of Finance National Budgets for the periods spanning from 2015 to 2020 have clearly shown that the national budgetary appropriations to the education sector from 2015 to 2020 (20.2% in 2015; 17.2% in 2016; 16.5% in 2017; 16.1% in 2018, 15.1% in 2019 and 12% in 2020) have been on a declining trend (Ministry of Finance National Budgets, 2015-2020]. A close expert analyses of the financing trend to the MoGE sector based on the 20% minimum standard for the periods 2015 to 2020, indicate that in real terms the MoGE lost in underfinancing colossal sums of money amounting to over **ZMW 18.5 billion (US $ 928,993,699)** which sum is equal to 2015 and 2016's budgets combined and effectively imply that the sector had no financing for the two years in question. Moreover, the information also clearly shows that from 2016 onwards, there was no time that government funded the sector to the 20% benchmark but continued in decrease (shortfalls) consistently from **ZMW 1.528.00 billion (US $ 95,500,000)** in 2016 to over **ZMW 8 billion** (**US $403,993,699**) in 2020. Additionally, in the 2015 to 2017, Auditor General's Reports lie indications to the effect that the amounts allocated during these periods under study did not actually translate into actual disbursements to the sector, which interpretively entail that the the sector has a double tragedy of both under financing and under disbursement as table 1 below shows.

Table 1: Education Budget & Disbursement (2015-2017)

Year	Allocations ZMW	Disbursed ZMW	Under disbursement ZMW	% Under disbursement
2015	8,527,887,660	7,061,931,985	1,465,955,675	17.2
2016	2,582,718,744	2,183,920,068	398,798,676	15
2017	1,533,382,856	783,809,839	749,573,018	49
Total	**12,643,989,260**	**10,029,661,892**	**2,614,327,369**	**25.55**

Source: Auditor General's Reports (2015-2017)

Table 1 below demonstrates further that in addition to the under financing acknowledged here, the same amounts budgeted does not reach the MoGE.

Table 1 above shows that out of the total allocation of **K8,527,887,660** only **K7,061,931,985** was disbursed to the sector in 2015 while **K2, 183,920,068** was disbursed in 2016 out of the total budgetary allocation of **K2,582, 718,744**. In 2017, **K1,533,382,856** was allocated but only **K783,809,839** was released thereby giving the overall *under disbursement* of **K 749,573,017.00**.

1.1. **Threats to the Sustainability of the UFPE Policy**

1.1.1. Financial Loopholes

The primary and secondary field data demonstratively highlighted financial inadequacies in the sector owing to its bureaucratic financial disbursement and/or management channels constituting the basis for high risks of misappropriations, misapplication or simply non-disbursement by such recipient higher offices to recipient spending subsector entities. The key informants stressed that finances to the spending unit (the school) has to go through sometimes three channels, namely; MoF to MoGE, from MoGE to PEO, from PEO to DEBS, and from DEBS to school. This concern was made serious observing that actually schools did not have procurement units as all procurements were done by higher structures in such a way that in certain cases materials unmatched to school requirements were procured without the knowledge of school management. Moreover, the Auditor General's Reports in the same period under review indicted the ministry as being consistently on the wrong side with application of financial regulations and management (Auditor General's Reports, 2015-2018). In the same vein, it was unearthed through in-depth investigations that MoGE HQ in 2018 had misappropriated over $10 million donor funds meant for school supplies.

1.1.2. Donor Aid

Field data show that 53% agreed and 26% strongly agreed to the negative impact on education quality service delivery occasioned by donors' annual sector budgetary support withdrawal while 11% were neutral with 6% and 2% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews also attested to withdrawal of sector financing by some prominent donors and that austerity measures were implemented by government and have greatly affected school operations in terms of school supplies (stationery) etc. A key note interaction with one of the donor officials who was part of the pool fund initiative categorically indicated lack of transparency, accountability and prudence in financial management as being among the key reasons for donors' withdrawal of support to the sector. While presenting the 2018 National Budget, the then Minister of Finance, Hon Felix Mutati confirmed non- disbursement of grants from co-operating partners (Budget Speech, 2018, Hon. Felix Mutati, p.g. 5-7).

Additionally, in their in-depth investigation of the phenomena in another earlier but different study, Hapompwe *et al*., (2020b), quoted one of the donors' representatives as stressing that:

"The country was not in want of further policies, treaties, conventions and laws to guide the education sector in providing quality service but that the practice, attitude and applications of existing standards, controls, policies etc. were fundamentally absurd and did not inspire confidence in donors' sustainable contributions to the sustainable growth, expansion and development of the sector. The system is leaking and most donors will put no more funds in the education system for now until the controls are enhanced."

1.5.1. Zambia's Public Debt

The MoGE and the district education officials during the field interviews confirmed the awareness of the huge public debt stock which they said partly occasioned the invocation of austerity measures by government which have equally affected the sector in both infrastructural investments and teacher recruitments as the sector was currently under employment freeze. Besides, field evidence confirmed massive shortage of teachers to averages of 8 per school based on standard pupil to teacher ratios of 1:40 and classes were heavily congested with all schools having two sessions per day, implying reduced contact hours. Teachers during FGD indicated that in some classes there were over 80 pupils and it was practically impossible to administer effective teaching/learning with better outputs.

Corroboratively, Adeyemi (2011) examined the financing of education in Nigeria during the time of the country's huge debt stock. He highlighted the sources of financing of education in developed and developing countries while the Nigerian *external debt stock* and the *level of debt servicing were given*. The study showed the total revenue accruing to the Federal Government and the amount of money allocated to the education sector at various periods indicating deficits in the funding of the education system. The findings further revealed that the funding of education had not been up to 17% in any given financial year despite the UNESCO minimum standard of 20% of national budget.

1.5.2. Zambia's Economic Recession

A recession is an economic situation in which a country experiences negative growth in gross domestic product (GDP) in two consecutive quarters of the year (Afima, 2017). Closely related to this assertion by Afima, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement as to the negative implications of the country's economic recession on the sustainability of the UFPE policy. The responses show that 49% and 40% agreed and strongly agreed respectively followed by 4% in each case who were neutral and strongly disagreed with 2% being disagreed. At the time, the country's GDP was projected at 2% by IMF (December, 2019 Assessment Report) while the inflation rate was at 14% by close of February 2020 (Central Statistical Office, 2020) and bank interest rates ranging between 30% to 35% coupled with volatility in foreign exchange rates with the local currency having depreciated by close to 30% by end of March 2020 (i.e. from K13 to US$ to K20 per dollar.

1.5.3. Population Explosion and Education Provision

Field findings indicate that 61% and 30% were strongly agreed and agreed respectively to the fact that the growth in the population did not match with classroom space in schools while 4% strongly disagreed and 1% was neutral. Interviews on the phenomena coupled with FGD re-echoed the quantitative data and the phenomena of parents / guardians sleeping in schools to access grade 1 places was affirmatively confirmed by district education and MoGE officials in corroboration with media reports (Lusaka Times, 9th November, 2019) who equally lamented the under investment in school infrastructure which was collectively held as a time-bomb to the sustainability of UFPE. Zambia's population is growing at the rate of about 3.8% (from **3,449,000** in 1964 to **16,212,000** by 2015) with proportionately high numbers being of school going age with **41%** being children below the age of 15 years. This is contrary to the fixed sector's class room space and infrastructural expansion occasioned by declining public financing (Masaiti *et al*.,2018). As a matter of fact, Zambia's annual births of 700,000 already exceeds the number being enrolled each year in grade 1 (ibid).

1.1.1. Other Quality Quantitative Indicators

In trying to square come round the topical issues of the study, the researcher zoomed to elicit pupil/facility/resource ratios which are fundamental indicators of the school's performance and likelihood of producing quality desirable learner outcomes. Table 2 below shows respondents' indications of average prevailing quality ratios.

Table 2: Pupil to Facility/Resource/Service Ratios

The pupil: facility/resource/service ratios as prevailing in learning institutions under study are displayed in **Table 2** below. These ratios indicate input resource variables in the teaching/learning process which to a greater degree measure and/or determine the likely output depending on the factor combinations.

Sn	Facility/ Item	Obtaining Ratios	Normal Ratio
1	Desk : Pupil ratio	1:3	2:1
2	Urinal : Pupil ratio	1:55	1:25
3	Teacher : Pupil ratio	1:75	1:40
4	Computer : Pupil ratio	1:3	1:1
5	Pupil : book ratio (English texts)	1:3	1:1
6	Pupil : book ratio (Mathematics texts)	1:6	1:1
7	Pupil : book ratio (Science texts)	1:7	1:1
8	Classroom : Pupil ratio	1:150	1:40

Source: Field Data (2020)

Table 2 above shows that a double seater desk is shared by 3 pupils while 55 pupils line up for a single urinal meant for 25 male pupils with 45 girls lining up for 20 toilets only without any shower rooms, sanitary towels and toilet paper including handwashing pastes. There are 75 pupils per teacher instead of 40 while 3 pupils share one computer; each English text book is shared by 3 pupils while each Mathematics and Science texts are shared by 6 and 7 pupils, respectively, instead of 1 to 1 in each case. The number of classroom to pupil ratio stands at 1 to 150 especially for schools in slums, implying that the learners have to share the space by dividing the day into 2 sessions i.e. morning and afternoon sessions. This arrangement means that some learners have less learning time/hours than the other especially those for afternoon classes.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The previous sections have provided a firm and profound motif to the subject matter question of sustenance of the the UFPE policy against the odds of declining sector/ subsector financing. The discourse has ably provided intriguing academic and empirical evidence to the effect that the policy was well thought out by government in 2002 and that to a great extent, its performance through a decade and half has been relatively tremendous against its set targets. The infrastructural expansion, human resource and school supplies in right quantity were the main areas of scores for the policy which has been also discovered to have had good will support from a cross section of stakeholders locally and internationally. Authentically, Statistical account shows that during the period of the policy up to 2015, government progressively increased annual appropriations to the sector for investment, operations and activities to the tune of 2.6% of GDP in 2006 to 3.5% of GDP in 2009 while between 2005 to 2014, the figures increased from 3.7% of GDP to 4.6% of GDP. Ostensibly, government increased allocations to the sector from 15.3% to 22.6% (World Bank Group, 2015; FNDP, 2006-2010; SNDP, 2011-2016). This saw the number of teachers increase from 50,123 in 2002 to 77,362 in 2009 (SNDP, 2011-2016) (MoGE, 2015a; MoGE 2016; Masaiti et al., 2018) while the number of classes and with enrollments also multiplied exponentially. It would have been wished that such legacy in the subsector continued for furtherance of equitable human capital development for national development. BESSIP and PAGE were noble complementary packages which have now been reportedly abandoned by donors to the detriment of not only the sector but the nation as a whole.

Unfortunately, after 2015, the question of sustainability of the UFPE Policy comes into question. The confirmed under financing and under disbursement to the sector is a matter of immense magnitude as it greatly prejudices the aspirations of the country in its 2030 Vision. The MoGE (2016b) and Masaiti *et al*., (2018) give an account of reduction in the enrollment of the subsector in that the variation (13%) between 2014 (3,691,486) and 2015 (3,215,723) was too huge and not representative of the demand ceiling. Additionally, it is also noteworthy that the declining enrollments are coinciding with the declining financing to the sector (from 20.2% in 2015 to 12% in 2020). There is further evidence adduced from government records nationally to the effect that the number of children out of school have been also exponentially increasing (195,000 in 2015 to 250,000 in 2016 and 762,000 in 2017 while 2018 recorded over 800,000) (Education Statistical Bulletin, 2016 & 2017; ZANEC, 2019) and the Minister of General Education in Lusaka had to close registration of grade 1 pupils for 2020 intake owing to parents sleeping in schools to scramble for limited available space. The school authorities were operating under pressure in that although they wished to absorb all the eligible learners at every level of education, school capacity was fixed.

Furthermore, there is now enough primary evidence suggesting that government has ceased all capital investments of school infrastructure as a result of austerity measures imposed due to a ballooning foreign debt stock which is currently around $11 billion for which the country has no capacity to liquidate and the economic recessions being experienced. A critical analysis of the 2019 and 2020 national budgets further show that over 87% of the budgets is spent on debt repayment and personnel emoluments thereby leaving only a paltry 13% for possible investments though budget deficits are equally orders of the day. Unfortunately, this scenario has been compounded by the withdrawal of some prominent donors from supporting MoGE sector budget due to lack of transparency and accountability in the management of financial resources. The donors hold a strong opinion that central government has not shown political will in ensuring that officers who are yearly reported to have abused resources were brought to book and faced the law. In the case of the reported US$ 10 million mismanagement of finances, none of the individuals were arrested, and this was cited to be among the frustrations of donors.

In a nutshell, as a consequence of the financing inadequacies and all other challenges alluded to hereinabove, the study ascertained that the public primary school subsector in Lusaka District had suffered enormously in terms of capital investment and operational funding to the effect that close to no physical facilities nor class room expansion projects had been undertaken during the period under review coupled with reductions and randomness in grants disbursement to schools. The ramifications of the phenomena on a large scale were notably extreme compromises in quality education service delivery in that the input factors were way too abnormal to guarantee quality learner achievements and staff motivation. Academically and pragmatically, there is convergence and consensus to the effect that the absence of instructional materials, qualified teachers, appropriate physical facilities in right quantities, ample contact hours etc, there can be no guarantee to desirable learning outcomes (Ntawiha, 2016 and Hapompwe *et al*., 2020c). This scenario essentially impairs the country's aspirations of the UFPE policy to grow and develop socio economically as technical know-how / human development is a primary ingredient to such an undertaking.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

1.6. Conclusion

The primary and corroborative secondary literature gathered and analysed have affirmed the fact that the UFPE policy had brilliant insights and greatly scored to its aspirations from 2002 to about 2014. However, field evidence has also demonstrated sustainability glitches and bleak future of the policy from 2015 onwards, largely due to government's declining financing to the sector, which has declined from 20.2% in 2015 to 12% in 2020. Moreover, the country's colossal debt stock (over $11 billion), low GDP growth (2%) compared to population growth rate (3.8%) and some donors' withdrawal of their financial support to the sector budget coupled with funds mismanagement within the sector have been identified as major threats to the country's sustenance of the UFPE Policy to the effect that within the period under review, the total number of children out of school nationally has soared to over 800,000 in 2019 from 195,000 in 2015 correlating with the budgetary declining period of 12% in 2020 from 20.2% in 2015 but with the population growth rate of 2.8% in 2015 and 3.8% in 2019.

1.7. Recommendation

The findings of this study are a wakeup call to educationists, politicians and policy-makers to help rethink education prioritization. "*Leaving no one behind in providing quality education by 2030"* is a global education vision (SDG 4) which is also under Zambia's responsibility and is consistent with the fundamental propositions of the human capital theory. Policy imperatives, therefore, demand that central government *walk the talk* in actualising this global/regional blue print via conscientious prioritisation of benchmarked financing to the sector for sustainability of equitable quality education as envisioned in the UFPE Policy (2002), the Educating our Future Policy (1996), and the ultimate 2030 Vision of the country.

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