



Why education is not helping the poor. Findings from Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Education emerged as a nearly uncontested development strategy to tackle several forms of social, political, economic and geographic inequalities in low- and middle-income countries. When it comes to the case of Uganda, the country represents a striking paradox. Significant investments and policy reforms in education (such as Universal Primary and Secondary Education) since 1997, did not translate into the expected results with regards to poverty reduction through human capital investment. Progress in poverty alleviation is not only stagnant but the role of education therein can be described as 'modest' at best. Against this backdrop, this article assesses the following research question: *Why did Uganda's investments and policy reforms in education not uplift the poor?* In examining the issue, this article introduces a theoretical framework that contrasts assimilative with transformative approaches in poverty alleviation through education. A rigorous review of Uganda's education sector plans revealed that current strategies to reduce poverty revolve around a strong assimilation-based development agenda, thereby focusing on three main areas of intervention: (a) increased access to education and retention; (b) improved quality of education; and (c) employment generation through education. The article finds that these assimilative approaches do not have an impact on the political, economic and social structures that cause poverty in the first place. Hence, it concludes that assimilative models in education are highly dependent on transformative approaches. Concretely, change cannot emerge only at the very grassroots level, i.e. through educating society at large, but also has to arise from the systemic level, i.e. government institutions at the local, national and global levels. Methodologically, the analysis draws on qualitative data that was collected in the course of two extensive field research stays in 2015 and 2017. In addition, quantitative data in the form of statistical abstracts inform the analysis.

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1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right. As such, it emerged as a nearly uncontested development strategy to tackle several forms of social, political, economic and geographic inequality in low- and middle-income countries. This trend is reflected in numerous global development frameworks, most notably the Education for All Agenda (UNESCO, 2000), the previous MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), the subsequent SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals),¹ specifically the Education for Sustainable Development Goals Learning Objectives (UNESCO, 2017), and most recently the World Bank's 2018 World Development Report on "Learning to Realize Education's Promise" (World Bank, 2017). As the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF (2015, p. 7) put it:

"Education represents the hopes, dreams and aspirations of children, families, communities and nations around the world—the most reliable route out of poverty and a critical pathway towards healthier, more productive citizens and stronger societies. Not surprisingly, when people are asked to list their priorities, education tops survey after survey, poll after poll."

This precise notion of education as being one of the key remedies for poverty alleviation and sustainable development also shaped Uganda's development and education sector plans (MoES Uganda, 2008, see for instance pp. 7, 10, 13, and 14). In alignment with the World Bank, education is primarily depicted by the Ugandan National Development Plan I and II (2015–2020, see especially Section 3.3.5 of the NDP-II) and the Uganda Vision 2040 as an ingredient of human capital development (see: Government of Uganda, 2015, 2010). Recently, Uganda's latest Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP 2017–2020), states (MoES Uganda, 2017, p. ix):

It is through human capital development that Uganda's development objectives will be realized. The ESSP 2017–2020 has been

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¹ See: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>, accessed February 4, 2018.

formulated to support the country's drive towards middle income status by 2020 through consolidation of the gains made by the Government in the Education and Sports sector over the years.

Since 1997, the GoU (Government of Uganda) has indeed implemented a series of policies and made substantial budget investments to move in that direction. Key policies have included the introduction of UPE (Universal Primary Education) in 1997 and USE (Universal Secondary Education) in 2007 and the creation of ECD (Early Childhood Development) centers – to name the most prominent ones.

At first sight, these reforms seem to have yielded significant results. With the introduction of UPE, school enrollment rates have risen from almost 3 million in 1996 to 8.3 million in 2015 (UBOS, 2016). The latest figures from the UBOS (Ugandan Bureau of Statistics) further reveal that in 2015, about 91% of children were enrolled in school (UBOS, 2017a,b, p. 50). More generally, earlier figures also suggest that Uganda has made remarkable progress in poverty reduction. From 2006 to 2013 the proportion of the Ugandan population living below the national poverty line declined from 31.1% in 2006 to 19.7% in 2013 – the second fastest reduction in extreme poverty in SSA (Sub-Saharan Africa) during this time (World Bank, 2016).

At a closer look, however, Uganda's process of sustainable poverty alleviation can be described as 'modest' at best, and the role education played therein remains not only unclear but also highly questionable for a number of reasons: First, latest data from the Ugandan National Household Survey (UNHS, 2017) showcases that the number of poor people increased from 6.6 million in 2012/13 to 10 million in 2016/17. This translates into poverty levels rising from 19.7 percent (2013) to 27 percent (2017) in the past five years (UNHS, 2017, pp. 84–86). Second, and more importantly, Uganda's current national poverty rate of 27 percent is based on a poverty line that was set over twenty years ago, meaning poverty levels are solely measured on the basis of income-levels. This approach does not reflect the multidimensional nature of poverty or the reality in which too many Ugandans live today (World Bank, 2016). In other words, if measurements of poverty are no longer reduced to the sheer lack of income (as was done in the 19.7 and 27.0 percent figures) but also include other factors, such as health or standards of living (e.g.: access to water, education, housing, social or political discrimination), poverty levels of Ugandans are much higher. According to the UNDP² (United Nations Development Programme), in 2016, 51.1% of the Ugandan population were considered to live in multidimensional poverty and 33.3% lived in severe multidimensional poverty.³ Third, considerable investments and policy reforms in Uganda's education sector since 1997 did not yield the expected results with regards to poverty reduction through human capital investment. Despite increased access to education since 1996, much of Uganda's poverty reduction from 2006 to 2013 was predominantly built on agricultural income growth that particularly benefited poor households with low levels of education (UBOS, 2016; World Bank, 2016). Even though the country has experienced a significant increase in school enrollment rates, at the same time it also displays one of the highest school dropout rates worldwide at P (primary) level. Estimates range from 75.2%⁴ to 67.9% (Uwezo, 2015, p. 18) of pupils who drop out between P (Primary) 1 – P7. According to the latest data from the UBOS (2017a, p. 41) up to 90.2% of children enrolled in primary education do not complete school. Moreover, only 25% of those few students who complete primary education

proceed to (lower) secondary education, out of which only 6.1% finish S6 (senior 6) and above (UBOS, 2017a, p. 43). All these developments beg the question: *Why did Uganda's investments and policy reforms in education not uplift the poor?* In assessing the issue, I build on a theoretical framework that contrasts assimilative approaches in education to alleviate poverty with transformative ones. I will showcase that education in Uganda has been predominantly equated with modernization- and assimilation-based development models. In this endeavor, strategies by the GoU to reduce poverty through education revolve around three major themes. These are: (a) increased access to education and better retention, (b) improved quality of education and (c) employment generation through education. As will become evident in the course of my analysis, these assimilative macro policy reforms in education did not alleviate poverty through human capital development, calling for transformative approaches at large.

2. Assimilative versus transformative approaches in poverty alleviation through education

Inspired by the work of Jantzi & Jantzi (2009), I broadly categorize poverty alleviation through education by drawing on two distinct development models that emerged in the mid-20th century and have been revisited and revised by aid agencies and scholars ever since, namely assimilative and transformative approaches. As shown in Fig. 1, both are not static in nature, rather, they serve as a 'roadmap' to broadly characterize two main strands and are therefore depicted as two extremes of a theoretical continuum. The use of a continuum is a deliberate choice as it helps to acknowledge overlaps and to illustrate that each approach can also lean towards the other.

Assimilative approaches (which can be also regarded as mainstream approaches) find their ideological roots in the intellectual tradition of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons or Walt Whitman Rostow, to give a few examples. As such, they build on conventional theories of development (c.f. Peet & Hartwick, 2009, pp. 21–140). In a Durkheimian sense, poverty alleviation through education is embraced as a process that leads to a certain result or endpoint (e.g.: enrollment or completion rates, employment rates based on educational background, educational outcomes and attainment, etc.). Assimilative approaches explicitly equate education with human capital, economic development, increased health and democratization processes. As Jeffrey Sachs put it: "In a knowledge-based world economy, a good education is vital for finding decent work; achieving good health; building functioning communities; developing the skills to be a dependable parent; and growing up to be an engaged and responsible citizen" (Sachs, 2015). The acquisition of human capital is seen as an investment decision whereby individuals forego income for a period of time to undertake education or training, in order to increase their future income (Blundell et al., 1999, p. 24). Investment in human capital was initially expected to increase the likelihood of employment prospects but it is also positively associated with higher wages, improvement of health, or resilience to political, economic or environmental shocks (Bird, Higgins, & McKay, 2011; UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNICEF, 2015).

It is further assumed that education will lead to social returns such as potential dissemination of knowledge to less-educated members of a society, an increase in productivity as well as innovation, and higher participation in the political life of the country (Blundell et al., 1999, pp. 14–15; see also: World Bank, 2017). Thus, education is seen as a tool that provides an opportunity for individuals to be active participants in the economy which, in turn, is expected to encourage the processes of economic growth, poverty alleviation and sustainable development. However, in recent years, research assessing the link between the quantity of education (in

² See also: <http://ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/>, accessed February 12, 2018.

³ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA>, accessed February 5, 2018.

⁴ Percentage retrieved from: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA>, accessed February 5, 2018.

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