

## FREE EDUCATION GIVING EVERY CHILD A CHANCE

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But while he is full of hope, a deputy head teacher in one of the primary schools in Ngoga is not.

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"Most of these children drop out of school when their parents fail to provide books, pens and meals," she said when asked why primary school pupils still drop out even after the government is paying their tuition fees.

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For a programme that was swiftly put together in the run up to the 1996 presidential elections as a campaign tool, the statistics are indeed impressive. However, several studies done since show that it has fared poorly, especially in improving the lot of the intended beneficiaries framework.

A survey by the Independent Evaluation Group — an autonomous unit in the World Bank — says the standard of education in Uganda has been sacrificed at the altar of expansion.

"Improved learning outcomes have often been undermined by rapid expansion. Countries that have taken the 'big bang' approach to improved primary school access, such as Kenya, Malawi and Uganda, have expanded so rapidly that they have been unable to deliver basic educational services effectively," says the report titled *From Schooling Access to Learning Outcomes: An Unfinished Agenda*, and released in July 2006.

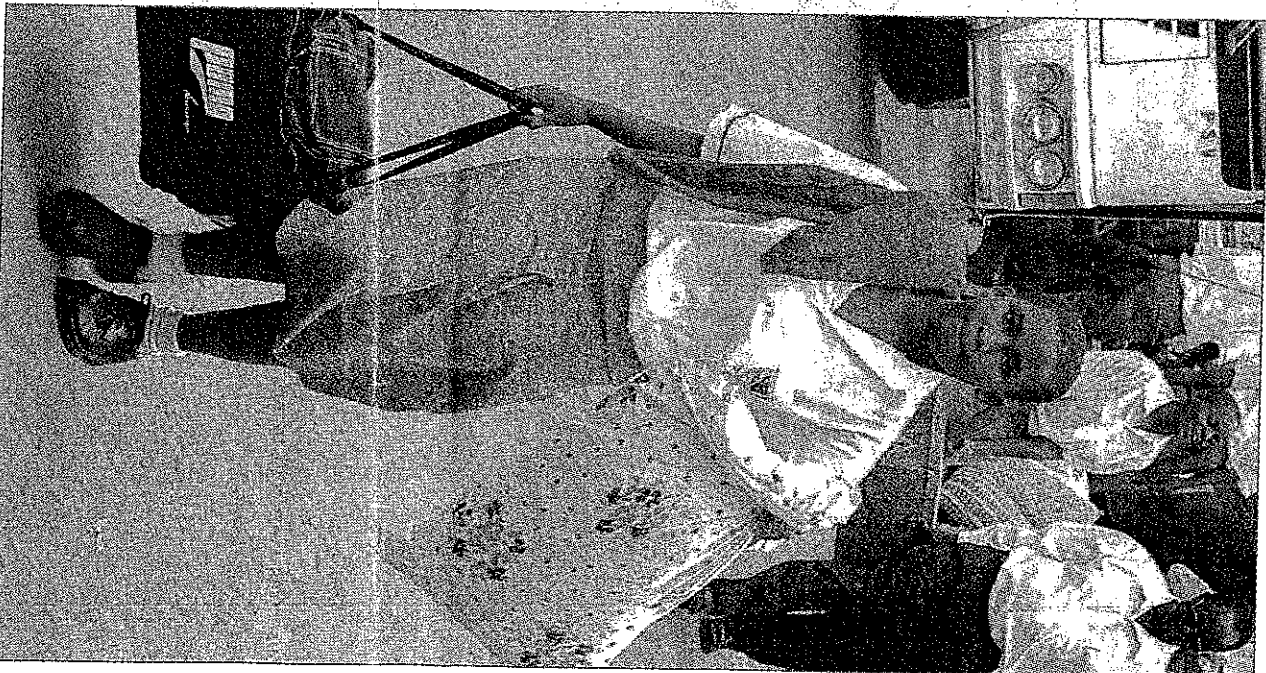
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To illustrate its point, the World Bank's survey cites the case of Bweyale Primary School — the biggest in Masindi district — which is located about 217 km north of Kampala. The start of UPE in 1996 led to an increase in enrolment from 573 to almost 3,000 children at the time the survey was carried out in 2005. While the number of pupils in Bweyale was rising steadily, the school facilities were not being developed at a commensurate speed. As a result, the 2,598 pupils in the school found themselves crammed in 17 classrooms, many of which had no desks the whole school had only 29 teachers.

Bweyale's situation is mirrored in many primary schools across the country. Even the government admits — in some of its confidential programme review reports — this situation is prevalent because adequate planning was not undertaken before the programme was launched.

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The Auditor General's report also reveals that there was no legal framework setting up the UPE programme in the first place. Instead, the programme was adopted from the 1992 government White Paper on Education. The paper was approved by parliament.

Free primary education was introduced in Uganda to fulfil President Museveni's 1996 campaign pledge to provide basic education to four children in each family. During the 2001 campaigns, he said the scheme would be extended to all children of school going age.

The scheme has since become an essential part of the government's long-term plan to achieve the second Millennium Development Goals, which aims at seeing all children completing primary school by 2015. The UPE programme is financed from the Poverty Action Fund, a comprehensive strategy for poverty alleviation in the country.

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But according to the Auditor-General, one of the major problems that has dogged the implementation of the programme has been the criteria used in disbursing the funds.

Under the government's decentralisation programme, UPE is implemented by the districts. The funds are released from the Ministry of Finance in the form of conditional grants to the implementing districts. Districts are primarily responsible for ensuring that tenders are awarded in accordance with PAF guidelines and that the completed projects are of the desired quality.

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"Whereas there are guidelines on the transfer of funds from the central government to the district, during this audit it was established that there are no guidelines on how districts should transfer funds to the schools."

"As a result, districts use different methods some of which are so elaborate and delay transfer of funds," the Auditor General's report says. "That weakness is there," acknowledged Mr Kibenge, "but let's not forget that primary education is a fully decentralised service. The districts don't expect you to decentralise and then they surrender control of how the funds are disbursed."

The misappropriation of UPE money, according to the Auditor-General, also takes place within the beneficiary schools, with some headteachers often inflating the number of pupils in their school so as to receive additional money — which they steal.

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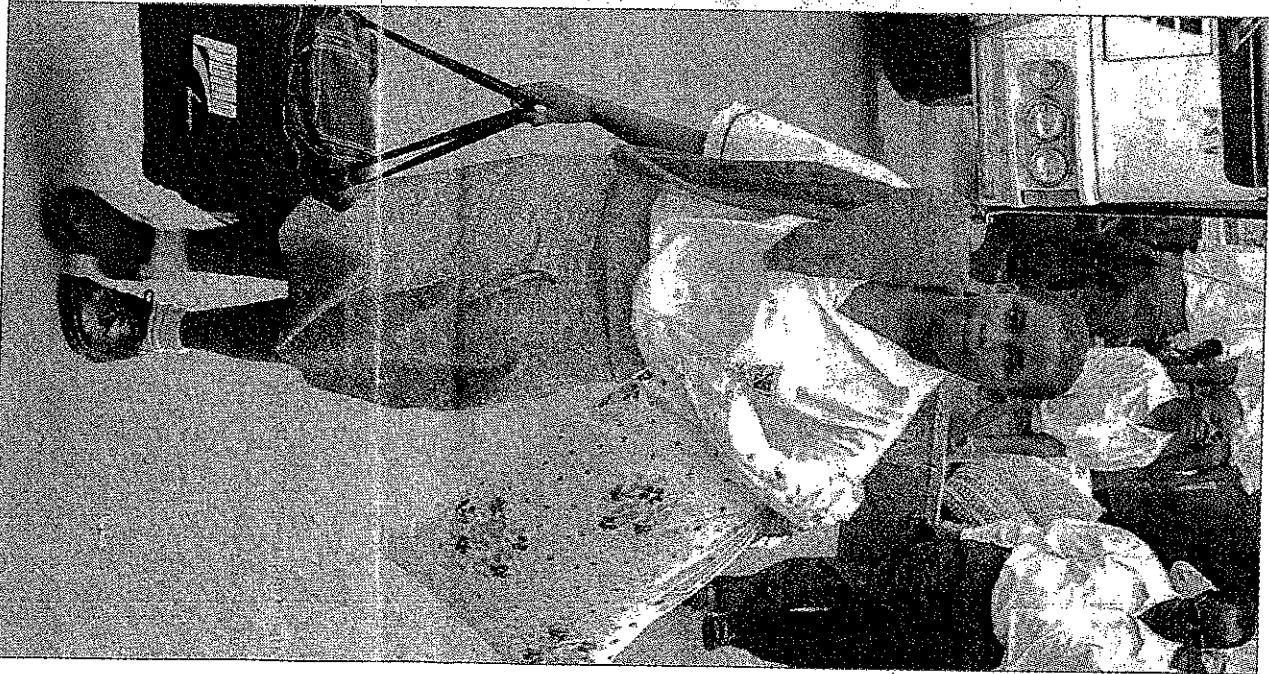
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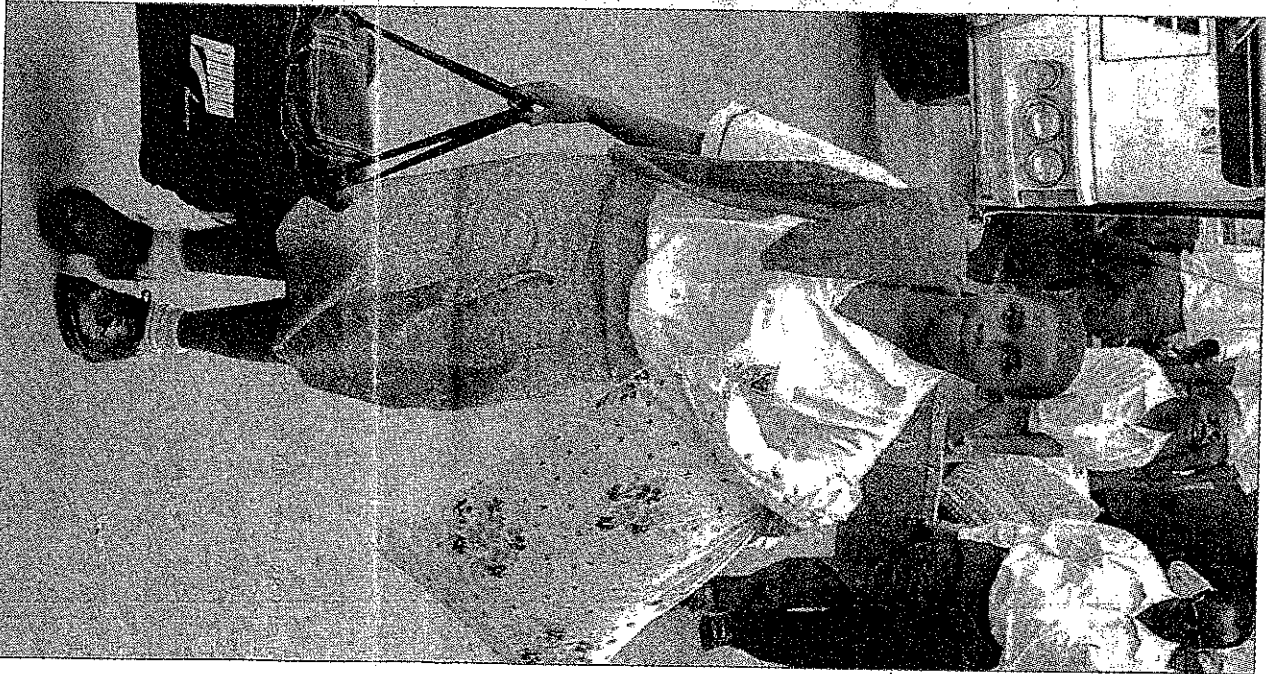
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