

## **The State of UPE Service Delivery in Uganda: Is Social Accountability the Missing Link?**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses the performance of the UPE programme over the past 25 years. It argues that despite the great financial support from the government and donors, the standards have serious implications because of the government's preference for traditional accountability over social accountability. Using evidence from empirical research, this article demonstrated the effectiveness of social accountability in fostering downward accountability. This reveals that when community stakeholders actively engaged in UPE school activities, accountability and service delivery witnessed significant improvements. It concludes by advocating for a blended approach in which upward accountability is supplemented by demand-driven accountability championed by parents, CSOs, and mass media to enhance both financial and service delivery accountability in UPE schools.

**Keywords:** Citizens, community, power, public sector, public officials, social services, UPE accountability.

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## Introduction

Investing in social services is considered a key driver of economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries (WB 2004a). The attainment of quality social services, especially education, is crucial to building human capabilities to meet the socio-economic needs of society. For instance, education empowers people with both knowledge and skills, but especially with civic competence to demand social services from the government and hold service providers accountable. It is in this light that Higgins and Rwanyange (2005) asserts that education has been viewed as a powerful tool for socio-economic development and transformation in Uganda since independence. Moreover, quality social services are a catalyst for other socio-economic benefits, such as improved family planning practices, health, and economic productivity, which accelerate the socio-economic transformation of society. Nonetheless, Uganda continues to face serious limitations in the realisation of quality social services, largely due to governance deficiencies. Regardless of the cocktail of externally driven reforms implemented since the 1990s, governance factors, such as public-sector corruption, affect service delivery (Muhumuza 2016). The social services sector is characterised by gross inefficiencies, lack of transparency, poor accountability, and corruption (Daily Monitor 2013).

This article uses a case study of Universal Primary Education (UPE) to demonstrate how the quality of service delivery has been compromised by poor accountability mechanisms. It attributes this condition to the government's bias towards traditional accountability mechanisms that rely on salaried bureaucrats, paper accountability, and how funds are utilised instead of results. In other words, the government perceives accountability for UPE services, as Suzuki (2002: 250) calls a narrow sense where bureaucrats are preoccupied with accounting for the use of grants received in the form of a report. The traditional approach stresses upward accountability at the cost of social accountability, which manifests in citizens' active participation, downward accountability, and the quality of outcome.

It is against the foregoing discussion that this article discusses the two key mechanisms of public accountability. It adopts DFID's (2008: 1) definition of accountability as 'the processes, norms and structures that require governors to answer for their actions to the governed, and/or suffer some sanction if the performance is judged to be below the relevant standard'. Accountability, in this respect, entails a relationship between the citizens who are, in essence, the principals and public officials who are the agents in the process of delivering public goods (Mulgan 2000: 555). Accordingly, accountability concerns power relations, where

public servants entrusted with public responsibilities must answer for their actions (Moncrieffe 1998: 389). It is characterised by two dimensions of answerability and enforceability (Adibe 2010: 1243). This means that public officials, both elected and appointed, must explain and justify their behaviour and actions to the public which pays for and consumes public goods (Haque 2007: 435). It is within this context that this contribution is grounded in the principal-agent framework where public officials are perceived to be the servants of citizens who have the right to hold them accountable (Gailmard 2014: 90-105). In less developed countries, such as Uganda, the power of citizens is rarely exercised owing to political disenfranchisement. Oftentimes, citizens are denied the opportunity to exercise their power to hold public officials accountable (Grant and Keohane 2005: 40). Consequently, public officials perform their duties with less public scrutiny, which is the main cause of the high levels of corruption and poor service delivery. There is ample evidence that corruption undermines effective social service delivery (Mauro 1998). Indeed, empirical findings show that Ugandans' satisfaction with the quality of public services is low (Wane and Martin 2013; ROU 2011: 34) largely due to the adverse effects of poor accountability. This article asserts that little emphasis on social accountability and quality service outcomes is the main reason for the poor performance of UPE. It subsequently advocates the buttressing of bureaucratic accountability with

social accountability mechanisms to reduce the inefficiencies and financial leakages responsible for the poor delivery and quality of UPE services.

The article begins with an introduction, followed by a description of the accountability mechanisms used by the government in the UPE Programme. The next section critically examines the flaws within the formal-bureaucratic accountability emphasised by the government and discusses research participants' perceptions of UPE accountability. It then explores the alternative mechanisms of social accountability available in UPE schools, and finally gives a conclusion.

The data used in this submission were obtained using descriptive and critical case study research conducted in the three districts of Iganga, Lira, and Kabarole in 2017 and 2018. Lira and Kabarole Districts were purposively selected because they had vibrant communities and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that were actively engaged with UPE schools and thus performed relatively better compared to Iganga District, where the presence of CSOs and civic engagement was low. Primary data were gathered from rural and urban settings using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) administered to central and local stakeholders. These were supplemented with secondary sources. The qualitative data collected were analysed using content analysis.

## **The Predicament of Formal-Bureaucratic Accountability Approach**

Some analysts have tried to link social programmes such as UPE in Uganda to the introduction of competitive democratic elections in Africa. For instance, Stasavage (2005: 54) claims that electoral competition prompted African leaders to become more accountable and improve the provision of basic social services. While Uganda's UPE initiative may not be directly attributed to competitive elections since it predates them, its implementation can be explained by logic. Its roots can be traced back to the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC), constituted by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government in 1987, to review Uganda's ailing education system. Despite the recommendation that UPE be implemented in 1989, this was delayed until 1997 because of funding constraints. The pledge to introduce UPE later featured prominently in President Museveni's campaign manifesto of 1996 at a time he faced stiff political competition from an alliance of opposition parties. He hoped to use the promise of free education to sway the electoral support of the majority poor that were finding it difficult to pay tuition for their children in basic schools (Deiningner 2003). By then, about 44% of the population was the absolute poor (ROU 1996), unable to meet the basic necessities of life due to the adverse effects of Structural

Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). He pledged to provide free primary education to four children from each household if elected. During the first year of implementation, the net enrolment of pupils in primary schools increased from 2.8 million (57%) in 1996 to six million (85%) in 1997 (Bashasha, Benard, Margaret Mangheni and Ephraim Nkonya. 2011). When the limit of four children per household was lifted in 2001 to allow free access to UPE by all school-going children, enrolment increased to eight million.

Over two decades have passed since the government launched the UPE programme, but its performance has been disappointing. Not only do the majority of learners lack adequate competence in numeracy and literacy skills, but failure and dropout rates are also relatively high. According to the Republic of Uganda (ROU 2017), the percentage of learners reaching a defined level of competence in literacy and numeracy in grade six was 51.9 and 52.6%, respectively, while the survival rate to grade seven was 32%. The poor performance is largely attributed to the poor accountability mechanisms used by the government. Given that the promise of the UPE was a campaign pledge, its implementation and oversight processes were influenced by top-down and upward accountability approaches, respectively. This was in contradiction to the decentralisation policy which provided that the provision and oversight of basic social service delivery be under

local authorities (ROU 1993). In theory, primary schools fall under decentralised services, and local authorities are responsible for setting standards and monitoring them ROU (2008a: 26) but in practice a centralised approach persists. The top-down approach manifests in direct central government funding and control over the implementation process and oversight, with less leverage being given to local stakeholders, such as local authorities, parents, and CSOs. Less attention to social accountability is considered the main cause of inefficiency and accountability flaws.

There is evidence that developing countries are increasingly falling for vertical (supply-driven) rather than horizontal (demand-driven) mechanisms of public accountability, regardless of its underlying inadequacies (Gaventa and McGee 2013: S4). As a result, the notion of social accountability, which refers to the active engagement of community stakeholders to demand better service delivery and hold service providers accountable (World Bank, 2004a), has been marginalised. This entails direct intervention, where community stakeholders attend school meetings and ask for explanations about the utilisation of public funds and the state of service delivery. It also involves their participation in the monitoring of teaching and learning conditions at school, as well as making material contributions to support local school programmes where gaps exist. Direct intervention also

involves the election of competent and active parents' representatives to autonomous associations, as exemplified by the parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to oversee the management of UPE schools. Social accountability mechanisms have gained worldwide popularity because of their associated advantages such as transparency (World Bank, 2004b; Ackerman, 2005).

Notwithstanding the various advantages embedded in social accountability, it was stifled to the detriment of the UPE. Instead, the Education Act mandates public officials to supervise and monitor all UPE schools and prohibits the charging of fees (ROU 2008a). However, the supervision and monitoring processes have been compromised by human resources and funding limitations. As a result, neglecting social accountability prompted community stakeholders to disengage from participation. Withdrawal, coupled with the government's failure to adequately fund UPE, created serious oversight gaps, especially in the rural and remote parts of the country. This has been exhibited by, among other ills, laxity, rampant late-coming and absenteeism by both teachers and learners, high dropout rates, poor performance in primary leaving examinations and misuse of UPE grants (Bold Tessa, Deon Filmer, Gayle Martin, Ezequiel Morina, Brian Stacy, Christophe Rockmore, Jacob Svensson and Waly Wane. 2017: 186). Consequently, the

UPE standards have steadily declined and caused concern. The rapid expansion of private basic schools is partly attributed to liberalisation policies. Deininger and Mpuga (2005: 582) attributed the exodus of learners from public to private schools over the years to the poor quality of UPE. Therefore, a lack of emphasis on social accountability has serious implications for UPE service delivery. Within this context, we discuss participants' perceptions of UPE accountability.

### **Public Perceptions about Accountability in the UPE Programme**

Interviewees revealed various forms of accountability lapses that marred the UPE programme at various levels. The first form involved inflating number of learner enrolments by the head teachers. The allocation of Capitation Grants (CG) is determined by enrolment numbers. The higher the number, the larger the amount sent to UPE schools and vice versa. The fraudulent head teachers made it a practice to create 'ghost' (fictitious) learners for private benefits. This vice endured despite the central government's countless verification exercises. An interviewee sarcastically commented that, 'verification exercises have become an industry for self-enrichment of central government officials rather than a solution for the problem'. The second form reportedly involved some head teachers conniving with District Education Officers (DEOs)

to inflate the number of teachers on the payroll and then share the money. This problem persisted even after the government introduced the Integrated Financial Management System (IFMS) and Integrated Personnel Payroll System (IPPS) reforms that decentralised and computerised salary payments for civil servants (ROU 2014). While the reforms greatly reduced the number of 'ghost' teachers, they did not effectively eliminate them. The corrupt head teachers retained the names of teachers who absconded or died on the payroll. Even teachers reportedly compromised head teachers to absent themselves for days to engage in private business.

Mismanagement of instruction time by teachers was also prevalent in UPE schools, especially in rural settings. Teachers reportedly started lessons late, delayed returning to class after lunch breaks, and departed from school earlier than mandated. Coupled with the cheating of the class instruction time, there was a lack of preparation. Often, teachers did not have schemes of work and daily lesson plans, dodged marking of learners' work, and wasted precious learning time making jokes in class. These demented practices were attributed to the high level of demotivation due to low wages, a serious decline in professional ethics among teachers, and inadequate supervision (Altinyelkan 2010: 164-66). The local oversight responsibility for supervising and monitoring school activities resides in head

teachers and School Management Committees (SMCs) (ROU 1998). However, the problem persists in public schools because of the laxity of the two parties. Therefore, the mere presence of teachers at school and the requirement of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoE&S) that they sign an attendance book every morning did not help make teachers accountable and improve their performance as expected of them.

Another form of accountability lapse reported in UPE schools involved connivance between head teachers and chairpersons of SMCs to defraud schools and make false accounts. There were also cases in which SMCs were weak and barely knowledgeable about their roles and responsibilities, especially in rural settings. They mostly consisted of semi-literate members who lacked awareness of their roles. Moreover, the fact that they did not receive facilitation made them abdicate their roles. Consequently, the head teachers took advantage of manipulating them or acting as they wished in their absence and subsequently abused or misappropriated the school grants. The head teachers' manipulative relationship with SMCs had been highlighted earlier by Suzuki (2002: 250), who underscored the power asymmetries between the two, particularly in rural areas. Consequently, the government's assumption that SMCs were effective governing bodies at the school level was an illusion.

Interviewees also revealed cases in which head teachers in UPE schools unscrupulously sold scholastic materials provided by the government, especially textbooks and furniture, to private schools or diverted them to their own private schools. Fraud-related incidents involving district accounting officers and DEOs were also cited. Some of these included deliberate delays by district accounting officers to remit CG to schools by first depositing it on fixed accounts, with the intention of profiteering from it before releasing it to schools. In other cases, these officials diverted school grants to other activities, such as infrastructure construction projects, which earned them kickbacks from private contractors. The delays and diversions negatively affected schools' performance. Interview reports indicated that the CG reached schools in the middle or towards the end of the term. As a result, many public schools opened new terms without buying essential scholastic materials to facilitate teaching and learning. Some proactive head teachers coped with the crisis by acquiring scholastic materials from private business enterprises on credit. However, such transactions sometimes made them vulnerable to penalties or arrests for delayed payment and defaulting, respectively. Another case was cited in the Lira District of Northern Uganda where a District Inspector of Schools (DIS) solicited for and received a motorcycle as a form of institutional support to facilitate school inspections from an

NGO. Shamefully, on his retirement, he deceptively claimed that it was his own and took it. However, on getting wind of the fraud, the furious NGO petitioned the district authorities, and the motorcycle was recovered (*Interview with Plan International NGO official, Lira district, 19 May 2017*).

Accountability flaws also manifested in influence peddling by the political leadership of local authorities. These mostly tampered with school facilitation grants (SFGs) from the central government to build classrooms, latrines, teachers' houses, and for buying furniture for UPE schools. Rather than using the grants to provide such facilities to areas that lacked them, influential local politicians selfishly diverted them to their own constituencies even if they were not needy. In other cases, local leaders peddled the influence of having their companies win lucrative tenders to provide these facilities which tantamount to conflicts of interest, while some reportedly fronted private contractors to get kickbacks. These accountability flaws were responsible for the shoddy work common in UPE schools, as well as the sharp disparities in the distribution of school infrastructure in rural areas.

The above evidence illustrates the existence of various forms of accountability flaws in UPE schools that range from cheating instruction time, absenteeism, and late-coming by teachers, to embezzlement and diversion of school grants, and influence peddling in the allocation

and utilisation of SFGs by school managers and local government leaders. Scholarly evidence corroborates the accountability flaws in UPE schools. For instance, findings by Bold et al. (2017: 189) show that 57% of teachers in Uganda's basic schools were absent from class and learners were taught half of the scheduled time, averaging two hours 46 minutes per day. Teacher absenteeism in Uganda's classrooms was worse when compared to 15% for Kenya and Tanzania, and the SSA average of 33% (Bold et al. 2017: 187-88). Further evidence of fraud and poor accountability in Uganda's UPE programme was cited by Oketch and Rolleston (2007), who noted that only 33% of allocated UPE funds actually reached the intended beneficiary schools. Weak accountability was responsible for the decline of education standards, as exemplified by the persistent underperformance of UPE schools in the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) at the end of the seven-year cycle and the flight of children of affluent parents to privately owned primary schools. The flight to private schools supports the Deininger and Mpuga (2005: 188) claim that satisfaction with the quality of public services among Ugandans is low. The findings also confirm the assertion in the World Bank (2004a) that the underlying cause of failure in basic service delivery in developing countries was weak accountability relationships between the state service providers and the citizens and clients they serve. The next section

critically analyses the accountability mechanisms used by the government.

### **Mechanisms Used by Government to Oversee the Implementation of Basic Education**

Contrary to the current practice, Chapter 11 of the Uganda Constitution mandates local authorities to plan and allocate resources and supervise and monitor the utilisation of funds, including the delivery of basic education (ROU 1995: 117). The Education Act (ROU 2008a) and Guidelines for the Implementation of UPE (ROU 2008b: 10-19) also stipulate that the educational roles of local authorities include ensuring national academic standards, regulating and registering education institutions, supervising teachers, and developing policies, among others. However, the reality on the ground shows that local authorities lack the autonomy to execute their mandates regarding UPE decision-making. Instead, the implementation and management of UPE is centralised, leaving local authorities to implement directives from the central government (Sasaoka and Nishimura 2010: 79).

The government uses formal bureaucratic mechanisms to enforce accountability for financial and service delivery. Both the national and local authority levels have a shared responsibility to provide oversight to the UPE programme. At the national level, the Directorates of Basic

Education (DBE) and Education Standards (DES) are supposed to provide overall oversight to UPE in the country and conduct random supervision exercises periodically. The routine supervisory role is delegated to the DEO and the DIS, who are the technical officers responsible for overseeing the delivery of education services at the local authority level. They are supposed to undertake the supervision of basic schools at least twice every quarter and submit quarterly reports to MoE&S. The other key technical department at the local authority level is the Internal Audit Department which is mandated to ensure that the financial grants remitted by the centre to run UPE schools are properly utilised. Its role is to ensure that head teachers follow stipulated financial guidelines when utilising grants, ensure value for money, and produce timely accountability reports. SMCs are the lowest organs with the statutory oversight role representing the central government. Their roles include ensuring that schools have development plans, approving annual school budgets, supervising and monitoring the use of UPE grants by head teachers, among others. The hierarchical arrangement described above illustrates the vertical nature of implementation and accountability in the UPE. It was also evident that the government used multiple oversight agencies to undertake inspection exercises in basic schools, including officials from the Ministry of Public Service, external auditors from the Auditor General's Office, the

Inspector General of Government (IGG), the District Public Accounts Committee (DPAC), the police, and the sub-county chief. These offices mostly perform random checks. The reporting mechanisms of various actors portrayed upward accountability to the central government, which was a major weakness. The local authorities functioned as conveyor belts in the process because funding, control, and accountability were centralised. Whereas the social accountability mechanism, as manifested in parents, community, mass media, and CSOs, which have a legitimate interest in the success of UPE schools, would have enforced accountability better, it was downplayed.

Evidence from the interviews showed that the approach used by the government emphasised financial accountability rather than the state of service delivery. The focus was on ensuring that UPE grants were properly utilised and effectively accounted for on paper. This mechanism pursued a top-down approach whereby the government was preoccupied with facilitating technical officers to undertake quarterly supervision exercises and submit reports to the DBE and DES at the centre. Despite much emphasis placed on the role of the government's internal and external auditors to oversee financial accountability in UPE schools, there were many flaws associated with the formal-bureaucratic mechanism of accountability. This is discussed in detail in the subsequent section.

## **The Flaws of the Bureaucratic Model of Accountability in UPE Schools**

The UPE Guidelines provide financial transparency and accountability to UPE schools. In this light, head teachers are required to display financial information on school noticeboards for easy public access to information, especially the parents and the community at large. Despite this provision, none of the rural and urban schools visited adhered to this regulation and instead displayed financial information in the head teacher's office. Similarly, the spending of CG by Head teachers was subject to the stipulated guidelines from MoE&S, which were very stringent. The items and percentages of expenditure were predetermined according to the guidelines. These further provided that before spending the CG, the School Finance Committee (SFC), comprising teachers' representatives and chaired by the deputy head teacher, must first budget for money according to the guidelines and submit the budget to the SMC for approval. The SMC chairperson is also a signatory to the school account and is responsible for monitoring CG expenditure and reporting to the DEO in case of fraud.

However, most SMCs lacked competence and were often manipulated by head teachers owing to a lack of capacity building (*Interview with TIU, Lira district, 22*

*October 2018*). This corroborates the findings of Suzuki (2002: 250) that head teachers tended to dominate school governance and manipulate SMCs' work, particularly in rural areas where members of SMCs were often semi-literate and incompetent to oversee the financial accountability and management of UPE schools. However, the education policy did not provide the minimum requirements for membership in SMCs, which was erroneous. In other circumstances, the SMC chairpersons were found to have individualised the role of the committee and were sometimes connived with or compromised by the head teachers they were supposed to monitor and supervise. There were also complaints about SMCs not being facilitated, unlike DEOs and DIS. Most perceived their appointments as government jobs for which they were supposed to receive financial rewards, but later discovered that it was voluntary, which demotivated them. More importantly, they were the ones based at the grassroots and supposed to do continuous monitoring and supervision. The internal auditors, parents, and sub-county chiefs, who were also supposed to ensure that the utilisation of CG followed the UPE financial guidelines, were not effective.

Notwithstanding these elaborate procedures and monitoring roles apportioned between the various stakeholders, there were numerous reports of poor record-keeping in UPE schools, which had financial implications (Interview with Resident

District Commissioner (RDC), Lira District, 19 May 2017). It was also revealed that 'some schools inflated enrolments to get more funding' (Interview with a district administration official, Iganga District, 15 May 2017). In other cases, 'head teachers connived with SMC chairpersons to defraud UPE grants' (Interview with a district education official Kabarole, 22 May 2017) while in other schools, the CG expenditures were disguised and spent on unauthorised items; 'Some capitation grant money is also budgeted for teachers' welfare. It is hidden in some items for the teachers' welfare, such as break tea and lunch to make them teach effectively although this is not allowed by the guidelines.' (Interview with a teacher, Kabarole District, 23 May 2017).

The connivance between some head teachers and SMCs to misappropriate school funds has been reported to be the major cause of conflicts between SMCs and PTAs. Further evidence showed that the SFG, which was channelled through local authorities to cater for school infrastructure and furniture purchases, also faced financial indiscretions. The procurement process in local authorities was reportedly characterised by corruption, especially in the tendering process where responsible public officials connived with contractors to defraud the government. The school structures and supplies of furniture tended to be sub-standard and showed no value for money. As

one DIS conceded, ‘the tendering and bureaucratic processes involved, especially for the construction of school infrastructure and supplies of furniture, lead to leakages of public funds and hence, shoddy work. It would be better to send money to schools and seek value for money and accountability.’ (Interview with a district school inspector, Iganga District, 15 May 2017).

While such financial abuse could have been prevented by internal auditors who had the mandate to undertake that task, they rarely paid surprise audit visits to UPE schools, owing to inadequate staffing and facilitation. These schools visited once in a while, except when there was an urgency. In the Lira District, only two internal auditors were reportedly deployed once a year to go and audit school accounts. Otherwise, the common practice was to ensure that the head teachers first accounted for the previous CG before they got another CG. External auditors, who were supposed to conduct regular and surprise audits, rarely did so. Officials from the Auditor General’s Office came to audit when there was a crisis. Interview reports further revealed that in circumstances where there were serious audit issues in the district, external auditors rather than pay impromptu visits, they put announcements on the radio inviting head teachers to assemble at a designated place with their books of accounts where they would meet them. This approach has created opportunities for creative

accounting and bribery. Besides, the external audit was not proactive but functioned as an ‘ex-post’ exercise. This laxity adversely affected the state of accountability, as evidenced by the repeated occurrence of ‘ghost’ schools, teachers and learners despite frequent verification exercises by the various government departments.

Apart from poor financial accountability, the UPE programme was also characterised by poor service delivery, as exemplified by acute absenteeism and poor time management in basic schools. As noted earlier, these vices were perceived as disguised forms of corruption that negatively affected learners’ performance. Although the law stipulated that DEOs and DIS undertake routine supervision and monitoring exercises in schools at least once a term, they were not effective in executing these tasks owing to inadequate staffing and facilitation vis-à-vis the large number of UPE schools. The policy that introduced UPE and later USE has led to a surge in the number of public schools. According to the policy, each parish and sub-county must have a primary school and secondary school, respectively. Even innovative measures, such as the *Pro rata* system, which were later introduced by the MOE&S to stamp out rampant absenteeism in UPE schools, did not help much. The *Pro rata* system entailed tagging employees’ salaries to the number of days worked. Accordingly, schools were required to maintain daily attendance registers,

where teachers signed as proof that they had worked. In addition, the threat of deleting chronic absentee teachers from the payroll did not help reverse the trend, especially where the absentee teacher compromised the head teacher. The persistence of these problems is largely attributed to inadequate staffing, poor facilitation, corruption, and patronage.

Even SMCs which are the statutory organs closest to schools and charged with the critical role of overseeing the overall planning, operation, and accountability of funds in rural UPE schools, were not effective players. According to one DEO, 'the role of SMC is minimal, as it is a statutory body. However, there are no clear guidelines for implementing SMC decisions. The head teacher can ignore them and there is no enforcement of non-compliance, e.g. failure to invite them.' (Interview with a district education official, Kabarole District, 22 May 2017)

In cases of neglect of duty by a teacher or head teacher, or misappropriation of school funds, the powers of the SMC were limited to reporting only to the DEO to take action. In the event of bad blood between the SMC and the head teacher, the common practice was for the DEO to cause a transfer. However, in circumstances where the head teacher was a friend or relative of the DEO, as revealed in some interviews, the DEO simply ignored the accusations or sided with the accused to the frustration of SMCs

and the detriment of the affected schools. The effectiveness of SMCs also depends on the capability of members in terms of education, exposure and experience. Interviews revealed that many members of SMCs do not know exactly what to do. They think their role ends at approving the school budget and signing school cheques.' (Interview with the official of Kabarole NGO Forum, 23 October 2018). Hence, most of them did not take other leadership roles seriously, such as improving and developing school facilities, mobilising parents, ensuring that the school has a development plan, and monitoring and supervision of school activities. This weakness was attributed to the government's failure to build the capacities of SMCs on a continuous basis. In a few cases, NGOs such as Plan International Uganda (PIU) in Lira and Livelihoods Development Initiative Uganda (LIDI) in Iganga Districts intervened to facilitate the training of SMCs. In some cases, members of SMCs overstayed and subsequently abdicated their responsibilities because of volunteer fatigue. In addition, some SMC members lacked legitimate interest in the prosperity of UPE schools because they did not have children in those schools. It was mostly the chairpersons of SMCs who were active, as confirmed by CSOs; 'When Lira NGO Forum (LNF) visits schools, they find only the SMC chairperson signed in the visitors' book.' (Interview with an officer from LNF, Lira District, 19 May 2017).

The policy also provides for a mandatory General Meeting (AGM) at the end of the year, which is intended to engage all parents. The head teacher and SMC, are only required to present a report highlighting the financial accountability and academic achievements of the school, the development undertaken, the challenges faced, and future plans. However, this one-off annual meeting was found to be a superficial form of accountability given that parents had no power over the meeting. As a result, AGM meetings were poorly attended, because parents shunned them for lacking transparency. Even the few parents who attended such meetings were mostly mothers and yet women were not decision makers, especially in typical Ugandan rural households. The limited engagement of parents in school accountability meetings was also attributed to the government's repudiation of PTAs, the perception that the enforcement of accountability was a role of SMCs, the fact that they were not making any financial contribution to UPE schools, and withdrawal due to frustration caused by the government's failure to act on their demands.

Moreover, the poor state of UPE service delivery was partly attributed to corruption and patronage, in which wrongdoers were allegedly protected by powerful officials from local authorities. An example of patronage politics in UPE schools was cited, where head teachers reported by parents for dodging their duties were protected by the DEOs.

In Amach sub-county, there was a head teacher who had serious accountability issues at school, but was closely related to the former DEO. He converted UPE funds into a private money-lending scheme with impunity. The parents and SMC were all triggered in conflict with him. He could not explain his expenditure, but knew he had protection from the DEO... We had to engage the CAO and RDC for disciplinary action before he was transferred to another school. (Interview with Transparency International NGO Official, Lira district, 24 October 2018)

In addition, the case of teacher incompetence was partly attributed to patronage politics and corruption in the recruitment of teachers by District Service Commissions (DSCs), as revealed by interviewees.

The teachers are recruited on the basis of how much you pay and *ori mwana waani* (which powerful official knows you) because the local politicians, say 'This is my time. I should also bring in my people. (Interview with a teacher, Iganga, 16 May 2017).

As long as you have money in Uganda, you can obtain what you want. For example, here in Iganga, if you want to become a head teacher, you need to dish out Sh. 1,500,000 (US \$417) to District Service Commission (DSC) officials, and you get the post irrespective of your experience and competence... So, in such circumstances, do you expect good accountability and service

delivery? Most UPE schools in Iganga are headed by the wives of bosses in the district. In such cases, would you expect any remedy if things go wrong? (Interview with a teacher, Iganga district, 16 May 2017).

The preceding analysis provides evidence that the bureaucratic approach to accountability in UPE schools has underlying defects. Rather than creating integrity in the accountability of public schools, it instead perpetuated laxity, connivance, patronage, and corruption, which seriously undermined the UPE programme. The next section explains the need for social accountability as a complementary mechanism to fill existing gaps.

### **The Alternative Mechanism of Social Accountability**

The alternative accountability mechanism that exists in Uganda but is not mandatory is social accountability. This is a community-based oversight consisting of various stakeholders and actors who have an interest in public issues such as the education of their children. In the case of UPE, stakeholders include the community, individual parents/guardians organised under PTAs, CSOs with a keen interest in basic education, the media, and *barazas*. A *baraza* refers to a 'public face-to-face meeting' called to discuss an important matter (Loimeier 2005). In 2009, President Museveni initiated *barazas* in response to a public outcry about rising levels of poor accountability and service delivery

in the public sector (*The New Vision* 2009). They were to serve as platforms for improving public accountability where citizens have face-to-face interaction with service providers, and put them to task to account to them directly regarding public funds received and how they were utilised. The dialogue was supposed to create awareness and transparency in the utilisation of public funds meant for service delivery. In other words, this approach was supposed to provide what the World Bank (2004b) dubbed the 'short route' to accountability.

These integrity promotion fora were set up at the sub-county level to plug the weaknesses associated with formal bureaucratic mechanisms of accountability. The expectation was that direct citizen engagement would compel service providers to be careful because they would realise that they would be required to answer at one point in time, and subsequently reduce waste, improve accountability, and the quality of service delivery. Sadly, the timing of the initiative was poor. It came up during the heat of the 2011 election contest and seems to have been conveniently used to calm people's frustration with poor public-sector accountability and service delivery. As the election storm subsided, the initiative also gradually withered away, since it was not entrenched in the law as a mechanism of accountability.

Additionally, the *baraza* initiative was dogged by a faulty implementation process. It also exhibited a centralised mechanism

for enforcing accountability that was to be funded and directed by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) in conjunction with the RDCs, who are appointed representatives of the president in local authorities. The reality is that the *barazas* have tended to be docile, and the idea is usually invoked towards election periods after which it goes into limbo. Moreover, on the few occasions where the *barazas* were organised, they reportedly exhibited glaring weaknesses and have been criticised. They tended to be ceremonial and centred on explaining financial accountability while ignoring the other essential aspects of accountability related to the quality of service delivery, as attested by one DIS; ‘The few *barazas* I have attended look at accountability from one dimension, and that is financial accountability. They leave out critical issues such as the absenteeism of teachers and children, limited UPE grants, inadequate textbooks, furniture, and latrines. Yet these challenges need to be addressed too.’ (Interview with a district school inspector, Iganga District, 15 May 2017)

Consequently, quality-related issues such as the availability of textbooks, pupil-textbook ratio, learner-teacher ratio, teacher refresher training, and adequacy of funding were not taken into consideration. They were also said to be general in scope, and their agenda tended to be crowded, with many issues cutting across all departments. The local authority heads of the department

were required to give general reports rather than focus on one sector at a time, so that specific issues, such as education, could be discussed exhaustively in a single *baraza*. Moreover, interviewees revealed that organisers of these dialogues did not give sufficient notice to communities to attend, did not conduct follow-ups after the dialogue, and the communities were not given feedback on the implementation of the resolutions. Hence, the government’s initiative to use *barazas* to plug the gaps created by bureaucratic accountability mechanisms failed.

Moreover, the organisation and funding of *barazas* lay outside the control of local authorities and were instead a responsibility of the OPM, which was rather busy and remote. Consequently, they tended to be ad hoc and irregularly organised. There was no clear calendar for meetings in the sub-counties because the schedules depended on the whims of the OPM. For example, Kabarole District had only three *barazas* in five years, while Iganga District had only two *barazas* since 2016 owing to the comatose state of the OPM. One senior district official observed that ‘*barazas* were not anchored in the districts because we neither budget nor control them. Their budget remains in the OPM and there is no clear calendar of when the OPM organises them’ (Interview with district administration official, Lira District, 18 May 2017). The *barazas* were not institutionalised as part of mandatory public accountability requirements. There was no enabling

law compelling all government departments to account for the public through *barazas* on a quarterly basis or before receiving funds for the next quarter. The implication of this lacuna is that government officials sometimes ignore them without suffering sanctions. This explains why the *barazas* were lame ducks. Evidently, they were initiated for political expediency. Therefore, in their current state, they lack the capacity to enhance accountability in service sectors such as the UPE.

Further evidence to show that the government de-emphasised the role of the social accountability mechanism was the banishing of PTAs and their replacement with SMCs (*The Monitor*, 1996). The supervisory role of parents was watered down according to Suzuki (2002: 248), PTAs were not given a statutory role in monitoring the incomes and expenditures of schools. Instead, this role was assigned to SMCs. The disempowerment of PTAs was confirmed by an education officer.

There is no legal framework to accommodate PTAs, which has caused hostility between SMCs, who are the legal owners of the school, and PTAs which are legitimate owners of the school. The constitution of PTA requires that you should be a parent, yet membership in SMC does not require you to be a parent. In addition, PTA committee members are popularly elected by all parents, but the SMCs are appointed. (Interview with Municipal Education Official, Kabarole District, 23 May 2017)

While it is in the parents' interest that UPE schools succeed, the Education Act and UPE Guidelines do not apportion them to a mandatory oversight role. Only one parent is represented in the SMC of 12 appointed members, which diluted their power and role. Disregarding PTAs created a big gap in parents' participation to hold Head teachers accountable, as highlighted by another DEO; 'Sometimes parents through PTAs organise against SMCs over management of school funds and transfer of Head teachers. When we go on the ground to investigate such conflicts, we find PTAs are right.' (Interview with a district education official, Iganga district, 15 May 2017) Even the AGM provided by the policy does not give parents the clout to continuously play the oversight role in UPE schools.

While PTAs should have been the main stakeholders in UPE schools and deserved more power and roles than SMCs, the government disempowered them and became mere spectators in their own schools. This partly explains the reported cases of conflict between PTAs and SMCs. Available historical evidence indicates that PTAs were powerful during the economic and political crises of the 1970s and the 1980s (Passi, 1995). They effectively took over the financing and supervision of local schools on a self-help basis because of government failure. This practice continued until the 1990s because of the implementation of cost-sharing policies associated with

the unpopular SAPs, which forced the state to withdraw subsidies extended to social programmes. During this period, PTAs became instrumental not only in supplementing meagre government funding, but also played the oversight role in the management of schools. The positive self-help initiative that managed to sustain the basic education sector in Uganda during the crisis period was sacrificed at the altar of election-driven populist policies such as UPE, which perpetuated a culture of dependence on unreliable government handouts.

Undermining autonomous community initiatives such as PTAs led parents to abandon their supervisory and monitoring roles in the SMCs, which adversely affected the accountability and quality of UPE service delivery. Consequently, elite parents responded by transferring their children from public basic schools to privately-run basic schools. Poor performance was the main reason why the local elite shunned educating their children in UPE schools and opted for private schools. The general view and main concern of most UPE parents is that the political leaders and civil servants who are vested with the authority to oversee the success of UPE care less about improving standards in these schools because their children are not enrolled in them' (FGDs reports, Iganga District, 16 May 2017). Hence, the critical aspect of demand-driven social accountability in UPE schools has suffered owing to the marginalisation of self-help

community initiatives and lack of interest by elites vested with the power of implementation and supervision.

Other important stakeholders are CSOs that engage in education-related advocacy and provide tangible support aimed at improving education in UPE schools. Such support includes, *inter alia*, policy advocacy, financial support, training of SMCs, tracking the utilisation of grants, monitoring, and organising interface meetings and radio talk shows. They also enhance the awareness among parents regarding their roles and responsibilities. The research findings revealed a positive correlation between the availability of active CSOs and improvement in accountability practices and service delivery in UPE schools. A case in point was the Lira and Kabarole Districts, which had vibrant CSOs that mobilised people to engage with service providers to improve responsiveness, accountability, and the quality of UPE service delivery. The vigilance of the CSOs in the two districts had a positive impact on UPE schools. Conversely, Iganga District, which had few NGOs focusing on the education sector, showed little evidence of vigilance in monitoring service providers. Consequently, it had a poor record of UPE service delivery, as evidenced by the very poor grades in PLE for many years.

Notwithstanding the fact that CSOs in Iganga District were few and less vigilant compared to those in Kabarole and Lira Districts, there were some pockets of success in this

seemingly hopeless situation. Some CSOs, such as the Anti-Corruption Coalition of Busoga (ACCOB), Iganga NGO Forum (INF), Integrated Disabled Women Activities (IDIWA), and LIDI, conducted mobilisation and conscientisation and organised communities to engage with service providers to demand better service delivery. They also created alternative spaces for communities to monitor service delivery to hold service providers accountable. In the few instances where CSOs actively intervened to support UPE schools, there was evidence of improvement. For example, INF intervention to mobilise and organise awareness raising campaigns in Busesa parish, Bulanku sub-county, reportedly awakened people to the need to vigorously demand better services, which positively turned around the performance of Busesa UPE School in PLE. Nonetheless, CSOs were constrained by a lack of enforcement power and faced intimidation by state functionaries, who perceived exposing UPE weaknesses as undermining the government's political image and legitimacy. It was also evident that the relationship between CSOs and the government was not institutionalised in policy, law, and practice, which partly undermined their effectiveness. Generally, there is a loose collaborative relationship in which CSOs may be invited to attend meetings at the national level and/or enter ad-hoc memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with local authorities. For example, MoE&S occasionally invited

the Forum for Education NGOs of Uganda (FENU), a consortium of NGOs with an interest in education, to attend meetings. Their invitation and adoption of their policy advice were not mandatory, but rather depended on the discretion of the concerned public officials.

Mass media are another critical player in promoting accountability. It can increase transparency and sensitise all UPE stakeholders regarding their different roles. All media houses (radio and television), regardless of whether they are private or government-owned, are legally required by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) (2014) Directive No.5 of 13<sup>th</sup> March to provide one hour of airtime each week to government officials to interface with and explain government policies and programmes to the public. Evidence has shown that service providers do not use these channels adequately to engage with stakeholders on matters related to service delivery. However, Reinikka and Svensson (2005) observed that when the government used the media to publicise quarterly grant releases to districts in the 1990s, the approach was instrumental in promoting transparency and reducing financial leakages. This incident proves that media can be an effective driver of accountability if harnessed by the government.

The weaknesses perpetuated by the formal-bureaucratic oversight mechanisms emphasised by the government in the supervision of

UPE schools partly explain the variation in performance between UPE and private schools. Participants reported wide performance disparities between the two groups. Private schools generally performed better in terms of learners' retention, time management, reduced absenteeism of learners and teachers, learners' competency in literacy and numeracy, feeding learners at school, actual teaching, discipline, and final performance in PLE. No wonder, then, that privately-run basic schools outnumbered the UPE schools that provided free education. For example, Kabarole District had 185 private schools compared to 124 UPE schools, while Iganga District had 380 private schools compared to 153 UPE schools in 2018. In the case of Lira District, which had more UPE schools than private ones, the difference was attributed to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict that devastated the northern region from 1986 to 2006. While the increase in the number of private schools can be partly credited to the privatisation policies of the 1990s, it is imperative to note that parents' disenchantment with the poor performance of UPE schools was a major contributing factor. Privately-run basic schools performed much better because of reliable financing, strict supervision by proprietors, a business orientation in their relationship with parents, discipline among both teachers and learners, and active participation by parents. According to Sasaoka and Nishimura (2010: 86), the strength

of private basic schools lies in their commitment to public demand and the practice of downward accountability. This was in contrast with UPE schools, which portrayed laxity in supervision, erosion of participation, upward accountability, and a longer disciplinary procedure for errant teachers and head teachers. According to one head teacher; 'Unlike a head teacher in a private school who has a lot of power over teachers and can make them obedient and disciplined, my power stops at reporting them to my immediate supervisors, who are the sub-county chief and DEO. The DEO also submits to the CAO.' (Interview with a Head teacher, Iganga District, 16 2017)

Hence, the disparity in the quality of service delivery between UPE and private basic schools was largely explained by stakeholder engagement and support and the degree of commitment to achieve better results by the respective managers. While parents, CSOs, the community, media, and *barazas* would have been instrumental in turning around service delivery in UPE schools through effective supervision, monitoring, and demanding accountability, as is the case with private schools, they were denied legal status and subsequently starved of enforcement powers.

## Conclusion

It was evident that after 25 years of implementation, the UPE programme continued to register poor service delivery. This is manifested not only

in terms of higher failure rates but also in the incompetence of learners in basic literacy and numeracy. The dismal performance of the UPE programme has been largely attributed to the government's failure to embrace social accountability mechanisms that empower stakeholders at the school level, such as parents and CSOs, which play an instrumental oversight role. Instead, the government opted for the traditional mechanism of accountability, which involves the use of technical and political supervision and the monitoring of UPE schools. The government's emphasis on formal-bureaucratic mechanisms of accountability has led to dismal performance, as evidenced by laxity in supervision, financial abuse, inflated enrolments of pupils, the presence of 'ghost' teachers and schools, chronic absenteeism of teachers and pupils, and high dropout and failure rates of learners, among others. However, poor accountability for UPE grants and service delivery have implications for social justice. It deepens social inequalities, as children of the elite access quality education in private and international schools, while those of ordinary Ugandans are condemned to access poor quality UPE education. Consequently, the children of the poor will be less competent and unable to compete favourably for employment opportunities in the private and public sectors due to a poor education foundation.

Notwithstanding the serious limitations of bureaucratic accountability, the government

continues to pay little attention to social accountability oversight mechanisms, such as PTAs, CSOs, the mass media and *barazas*. These mechanisms are not prescribed in the law and this explains why their interventions to enforce accountability are often ignored. They can only monitor and recommend to public officials to take action on the recalcitrant government officials. Field reports indicated that little or no action was taken on the reported cases, to the disappointment of social accountability actors.

In essence, demand-driven social accountability mechanisms not only restore the power of citizens to hold public officials accountable but also oblige public officials to be answerable to citizens for their actions. Stated differently, the use of social accountability mechanisms anchored in the principal-agent framework has several benefits. These include the active participation of community stakeholders in the supervision and monitoring of service providers, making financial contributions to support public services, and inculcating the spirit of ownership, self-help, and sustainability of such services. Despite the benefits associated with social accountability mechanisms, the government's bias towards bureaucratic accountability mechanisms and the politicisation of UPE service delivery have had many negative implications. It has made the community stakeholders disengage from participating in UPE schools, which created an oversight gap that stifled financial accountability and

service delivery to the detriment of the programme. In general, parents and communities also declined to support learners and schools, respectively, owing to the perception that this was the government's responsibility. Some parents who were disappointed with the persistent poor standards of UPE had to withdraw their children from UPE to private schools, which have mushroomed. The success of private schools provides insights that can help inform UPE policy. Key among these is that parents' financial support was instrumental in the quest for active participation in school affairs. In addition, strict supervision by actors with legitimate interests in schools is critical to efficient and effective performance. In this case, proprietors and parents had a legitimate interest in the success of the schools. Rather emphasising surrogate and remote oversight supervisory agencies, it was essential for the government to legally empower community stakeholders to oversee the UPE service delivery. More particularly, the law that established SMCs ought to be revisited to replace them with PTAs or to make the membership of SMCs

dominated by parents with a higher stake in basic schools. For *barazas* to be effective accountability instruments, they need to be institutionalised so that they become part of the mandatory requirements for public accountability. More importantly, the resources for organising them should be made directly available to local authorities so that they can own the initiative. The oversight of the OPM ought to focus on central government ministries, departments, and authorities (MDAs). It is also time for the government to adopt the best accountability practices that have proved effective in private schools. Some of these practices include separating of administrative and financial tasks. The government should recruit qualified school bursars, as is the case with secondary schools, while head teachers should focus on school administration. Alternatively, head teachers can be trained in basic accounting and financial management practices.

**Funding Details** This research was supported by the Makerere University – SIDA collaborative Grant under Grant No. SS13-2014.

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