

Educational Innovations in Developing Countries: Implications and Challenges for Policy Change in Malawi

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Abstract: This paper tries to share some of the experiences that developing countries face in trying to improve the provision of basic education services. The paper is based on the experiences from the work the author has done over a number of years in the field of education. In particular, the author uses the Free Primary Education policy in Malawi to demonstrate the predicaments that these countries face when they are encouraged to attempt to achieve Education For All (EFA). The paper's main message is that in the short-run, the achievement of EFA is not possible without a high degree of committed assistance from local and international organisations. The amount of resource need and the accompanying logistics make the task insurmountable for these developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to share some experiences of developing countries as they attempt to improve the provision of basic education. The focus of the paper is around policy implementation and impact. The policy in question is that of free primary education (FPE) in Malawi. The introduction of FPE was the most significant educational policy ever undertaken by the government of Malawi. Such government initiatives in the development of primary education system invite a closer study of what mechanisms were employed to improve access, retention and promotion, and what strategies were used to meet the need for additional resources to support the expansion. While the evidence for the paper comes from studies done in Malawi, the issues raised can apply to most of the developing countries of Africa especially those of the Sub-Saharan region. First, a brief historical account of Malawi is given. Then, an elaboration of the FPE policy is made including some preparations to the implementation of the policy. The strategies for the implementation are outlined and this is followed by a discussion of the challenges faced in the process. The last section concludes the paper with a brief discussion of the issues and lesson learnt and some policy directions.

A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

Malawi is a small country in southern Africa. She achieved her independence in 1964 at a time when the 'wind of change' was sweeping across most of the African continent. The country was ruled by a one party system of government (Malawi Congress Party: MCP) under the dictatorship of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda for 30 years up to 1994. Like most of African countries, one of the tasks of the country at independence was to expand education so that it covered most of the Malawi population. And as a result of the efforts made, the primary school sector expanded from a total enrolment of 359,841 in 1964 to 847,157 in 1980 and to 1,895,423 in 1994. However, despite these gains in enrolment figures, the primary school education system in Malawi continued to be beset by a series of inter-related problems. These included:

- * Low enrolment rates, with disparities between regions, urban/rural locations and sex;
- * Overcrowding, especially in urban areas, where many children learn outside under trees, and Teacher/Pupil (T/P) ratios of 1:100 or over are not uncommon;
- * Poor quality and low internal efficiency, with high repetition and dropout rates;
- * A lack of teaching and learning materials, so that very few pupils owned textbooks and in some cases only the teacher had the book; some teachers taught without the teachers' guide;
- * Inadequacy of teachers both in quantity and quality with many of them being untrained.

These problems are longstanding and have a long history. FPE was supposed to solve them but as it will be demonstrated later in this paper, the battle towards solving them is an insurmountable one.

Malawi changed her political system of government from one party to a multi-party system in May 1994. During the one-party government period, primary school pupils paid token school fees. The new democratic government (under the United Democratic Front: UDF) introduced FPE in the 1994/95 academic year, partly in response to the 1990 Jomtien Conference on Education for All (EFA), but also in fulfilment of one of the promises the new government had made to its electorate. This also formed part of a national policy of poverty alleviation (PA) by the new government. The new government had realised that reducing poverty was not possible without sustained economic growth and that economic growth would not happen without investing in education. Education gives people new skills and empowers them to take advantage of new opportunities (UDF, 1994).

As a result of this policy change, more than a million additional pupils joined the primary education system during the first year of the policy change. Consequently, the situation in the education system deteriorated even further. Overcrowding increased, the few resources in schools were inadequate for the increased numbers, and the recruitment of temporary teachers (TTs) made the teaching and learning process fall short of the ideal. The Government was in a crisis of how to keep the children in school. But how did the government respond to this crisis? This is what the paper tries to elucidate.

THE FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION POLICY IN PERSPECTIVE

Based on document analysis and interviews, this section briefly outlines the FPE policy. It defines the policy, and specifies its objectives. The initial preparations for the policy are also outlined. An indication of donor response to the policy is also given.

Definition of Policy

The new democratic government of Malawi took a solid and courageous step when introducing FPE in 1994 after the first ever-multiparty elections. In the past, the previous government had, in accordance with the Jomtien Declaration, introduced a school fee waiver scheme during the second half of the country's Second Education Development Plan period. However, after winning the elections in 1994, the UDF-led government followed through on its political promise to provide education for all Malawians by making primary education free. In this major policy intervention, the fees abolished including tuition, school fund/extra fees and textbook contribution. In some cases, especially in urban areas, it also meant the abolition of other fees such as telephone and water fees. A uniform no longer became a requirement for attending school (MoE, 1996). The policy also contemplated the introduction of community schools in order to cater for small children in Standards 1-4.

Policy Objectives

"The government of Malawi had declared war against poverty in its society". In its educational philosophy as contained in the policy and strategy for PA (GOM, 1995), the government's main purpose was to improve the lives of its people by empowering them with education. There were basically three broad objectives for the introduction of the FPE policy:

- * to increase access to primary education and improve retention and hence reduce illiteracy;
- * to eliminate inequalities in participation; and
- * to build a strong socio-economic base of the society.

Education was here seen as central to sustainable poverty reduction through economic growth with equity (World Bank, 1995). The major assumption was that by improving access to and quality of primary education, the policy would, *ceteris paribus*, contribute to poverty reduction.

Initial Preparations for the Policy and Donor Response

Following the announcement of the FPE Policy in May 1994, the first step the government took was to organise a National Symposium. This symposium brought together people from all walks of life in the Malawian society. Among the major issues discussed during the symposium were those of quantity and quality which were to be considered during policy implementation. Also discussed at the symposium were the resource implications of FPE. Delegates to the symposium made the following recommendations to the Ministry of Education:

- * the Ministry should come up with the definition of FPE and should publicise it;
- * the Ministry should introduce a double shift system in all large schools;
- * Government should increase budgetary allocations to the education sector;
- * the Ministry should recruit more teachers with a two week orientation (MoE, 1995)

In addition to the symposium, the Ministry organised a pre-school registration exercise throughout the country in early August 1994 in order to establish the number of pupils who were to start school in September. This, it was hoped, would enable them to estimate the additional resources needed for the efficient implementation of the policy. Several issues were raised by this exercise:

- * enrolment was to increase from 1.9 million to 3.1 million;
- * at a teacher/pupil ratio of 1:60, 22,797 additional teachers, 38,742 additional classrooms and 30,444 teacher houses were required. This was in addition to the scarcity of teaching and learning resources already being experienced in many schools.

In order to mobilise new and additional resources from Donors, the private sector, NGOs and local communities, the government of Malawi sought to provide an enabling environment to encourage these other organisations to become suppliers of primary and secondary education. Indeed, following the announcement of FPE policy, several donors came forward to provide various forms of assistance: These included: UNICEF, GTZ, World Bank, ODA, USAID as well as other local institutions such as The Press Trust, Universal Biscuits Company, Candlex Ltd and Lever Brothers.

This donor involvement has included activities in school construction, teacher training, provision of T/L materials and curriculum development. As donors provided assistance, one main issue emerged. This concerned the overall challenge of co-ordinating the many donor activities. While some donors claimed that there was a high degree of co-ordination in donor activities, others thought that each donor was pursuing its own projects and goals independently. Indeed, the issue of donor co-ordination is a thorny one in the development arena. A related concern for many donor activities concerned the taxing effect they could have on a ministry already spread thin both in terms of human resources and management capabilities. In every dimension, financial, technical, administrative and managerial, the capacity of the education system was overburdened.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, only three strategies are discussed. These are: staff roles and responsibilities, language policy and community participation.

Staff Roles and Responsibilities.

To implement FPE, a new management position designated as Primary Education Adviser1 (PEA) was instituted. These PEAs were to be the change agents. Each PEA was given a zone of 10-15 schools to

work with. The intention was to enable them to work intensively as combined supervisors and trainers. Thus, in their new roles, PEAs assumed responsibilities of in-service training and resource centre managers, classroom-based trainers and monitors. They formed the core of the school based staff development programme under the innovation.

And to work with these PEAs were the headteachers and senior staff members of schools. An upgraded headteacher role was seen as the key link to the PEA. Heads were to be responsible for the follow-up, support and monitoring of the changes. School-based assistance or at least as close to the school and classroom as possible was to be another key strategy. The heads also assumed the roles of change agents, supervisors, school development co-ordinators, classroom-based trainers and monitors. An immediate reaction to the new roles of PEAs and heads is that they were overloaded with responsibilities and would be difficult to fulfil given the working conditions of these individuals.

To respond to the enrolment increase, government recruited about 20,000 untrained teachers. The new teachers were mainly from among secondary school leavers, who were given only three weeks of training before being dispatched to schools. With some 3,400 untrained teachers already in the system, 48.7% of the primary teachers were temporary (1997 MoE database). The major task for Government was the training of these TTs. Consequently, a Teachers' Development Unit (TDU) was established to co-ordinate teacher support and in-service training through two related programmes - the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Program (MIITEP) and the Malawi Schools Support System Program (MSSSP). It was intended that a combination of on-site training by senior staff and PEAs would provide a support system to raise the general level of teaching competence and strengthen teacher professionalism (Hughes et al., 1996:5).

In addition to the TDU, other implementation units were created. One such unit was the Education Development Management Unit (EDMU) by the World Bank. However, an interview with one of the EDMU senior staff (07/09/98) revealed that there were problems in the management of the implementation of FPE. One major problem was the delay in the disbursement of funds. 'EDMU was supposed to implement school-based in-service training for a period of three years, and most of the money was needed for the training of teachers etc at the beginning of the project but the requirement for approval by the World Bank in Washington caused a lot of delays', he observed. Such a delay meant that the intended programmes such as training for heads and seminars for untrained teachers could not be executed on time and may well have accounted for the failure to implement the policy as planned. Rondinelli et al. (1990:107) observed that:

In many developing countries, ex-ante expenditure controls, combined with lengthy processes for approving expenditures, make it difficult for ministries of education to rapidly respond to changing circumstances. This hampers the implementation of education reform projects, especially those that require substantial amounts of contingency funds to be deployed on short notice as the project progresses.

Indeed, there were many delays in scheduling activities as planned and instead of co-ordinating activities, EDMU had simply become another 'bureaucracy'. But EDMU's defence was that some problems were caused by a lack of co-ordination within the organisational structure.

Usually, there are too many units at the same time wanting monies too soon and everybody wanting to be given priority. We are not given enough signals to give us time to prepare for them and yet all their activities are on the action plan. It's not that they are given new abrupt programmes.

The main problem is one of linkage which concerns the issues of connectedness of persons and elements within a system causing breakdowns in communication and delays in the delivery of services. Although Warwick et al. (1992) contended that an innovation is most likely to be implemented when it is integrated into the administrative structures and operating routines of the organisations, the above seems to indicate the reverse. The promotion of educational change must not only be concerned with the substance of innovation - new ways of teaching, new methods of service delivery - but also with the complex process of introducing and institutionalising change (Rondinelli et al., 1990:12-13).

The Language Policy

Another strategy for implementing FPE was the introduction of local languages as a medium of instruction for standards one to four. Until the introduction of FPE, only English was the medium of instruction in Malawi primary schools, with Chichewa also being taught in all the standards. As a strategy to implement FPE policy effectively the MoE issued a directive that:

With immediate effect, all standards 1,2,3 and 4 classes in our schools will be taught in their own mother tongue or vernacular languages as a medium of instruction. ... In the past, Chichewa was used as both a medium of instruction and a subject, making it very difficult for beginners to grasp ideas. However, English will be used as a medium of instruction beginning in standard five (MoE and UNICEF, 1995).

This new policy was formulated on the belief that children learn better and faster if they are taught using their mother tongue or in their own vernacular languages during the first years of their formal education than when they are taught in another language. This was succinctly put by a World Bank report which observed that:

There is very little research on the cost of bilingual or multilingual alternatives. But we do know something about the effectiveness of the alternative.the evidence is slowly building that it is effective to begin a child in certain situation in his/her first language and later start him or her on the necessary second language. In term of

effectiveness, there may be no choice; if you do not have the first language, you will not have the second (World Bank, 1982:45).

Malawi has 13 main languages. The major challenge with this language policy concerned its feasibility. Saukani quoted in Kishindo (1998) concluded that:

If implemented, the teaching in the vernacular is certainly going to be detrimental to the education of our primary infants. Fancy a pupil whose mother tongue is Tumbuka getting transferred to a Yao area! How do you expect that pupil to match classmates whose mother tongue is Yao? Apply the same with other ethnic groups in the country and you will appreciate how serious the problem is.

This illustrates that the language policy lacked what Wilensky (1967) called initial intelligence. In a multi-lingual country the institution of such a policy needed information about what languages students and teachers speak in each district and in the different schools within each district. As a result, teachers were generally puzzled as to how they should implement the policy change. They had not been given materials in the local languages, they had no training in how to use the local languages as a medium of instruction.

There was an obvious need for a revision of the language book to reflect all the main languages of Malawi. This was an insurmountable challenge and an expensive one indeed. If Malawi could not afford a textbook for each child in English (one subject/language), how could she afford textbooks in all the local languages? And in the absence of appropriate books, what was happening in the classrooms was at variance with the policy intent. Thus, the language policy can be described as rhetorical since there was a wide gap between official announcements and actual practices. The policy has proved impractical however pedagogically sound it might have been. Indeed critics have observed that Dr Banda caused upheaval in the education system by directing that teachers should teach in their regions of origin. 'Is the vernacular issue not tantamount to saying that primary school teachers must go and teach in their respective regions, let alone district of origin? What is this if not a camouflaged form of tribalistic discrimination' (Kazembe, 1996). Commenting on the same, Malwenje et al. (1998:10) observed that:

Many respondents raised issues of teacher assignment, feeling these decisions were being complicated by the need to place teachers according to their ability to speak local languages. Some teachers thought this policy might lead to the requirement that all teachers teach in their own home district

It can be concluded that the language policy was intended more to win political support and legitimacy than to provide guidelines or detailed blueprints for what was to be done.

Community Participation

A further strategy for the implementation of FPE was the realisation of the importance of a more community-oriented strategy - one that mobilised the capacity of Malawian citizens (MoE, 1998). This was in part in response to the Jomtien call for an expanded vision and renewed commitment towards EFA. A revised version of the Policy Investment Framework (PIF) observed that 'there is considerable underdeveloped potential in the contribution towards education of the private sector, the non-governmental organisations and of the community', (MoE, 1998:5) in Malawi. Surveys (Chimombo, 1999) have indeed shown that communities do provide some kind of support to schools. This was perhaps a result of the increased campaign for the development of education under the FPE policy. And this could be expected because many parents have children in school and the evidence from the studies was also that the community's contribution in education was user oriented.

But the evidence also lends support to the literature that very rarely does the rhetoric of community involvement go beyond the form of "supporter" of schools, contributing funds and labour and making sure that children attend (Hoppers, 1998). Labour here constitutes the provision of building materials such as water, stones, sand, bricks etc. This casts serious doubts about the extent to which the communities can be involved in the affairs of the school. The evidence also indicated that the structures put up by the communities were of very low quality and in most cases unsafe for both pupils and teachers and that despite government commitment towards the improvement of education, restrictive budgets in most countries are taking their toll on the quality of education

Indeed, given the already poor conditions of schools, asking communities to put up the structures is not the best alternative. It is counter-productive to the objective of raising the quality of education. Further, the variations in the quality of structures by the communities raise the already documented issue about equity in local resourcing of education (Bray, 1997 and Lewin, 1995). Bray (1997) observed that the most obvious difficulty in community financing is that some communities are in a better position to help themselves than others. And in Kenya, disadvantaged districts remained disadvantaged because they had low incomes in the first place and had therefore found it difficult to embark on self-help projects (Mwiria, 1990). In Malawi, Moyo (1992) suggested that the community contribution in Malawi has contributed to the imbalance in educational development between rural and urban areas because, whereas educational facilities were provided by the government in the urban areas, in the rural areas they were provided by the community on a self-help basis.

Other strategies for the implementation of the FPE policy were the drawing up of a Policy Investment Framework (PIF: 1995-2005) from which proposals for different projects and programme were formulated and presented to donors to ensure a multi-sector approach and collaboration with other key players in the provision of basic education. There were also organisational changes in the administration and management of the education system which were made to facilitate the implementation of the policy.

It can be concluded from the above that FPE policy was/is a comprehensive reform in that it aimed at restructuring the system, changing policies, establishing national institutions for implementation, hence requiring a new division of labour, new teaching skills, roles and forms of relationships, and re-organisation of schooling. The reform envisaged strategies that planned to delegate certain functions down the system and intended to gradually give power to various actors at the local level. Staff development through in-service training and national training efforts, and pedagogical supervision formed one of the key strategies.

A DISCUSSION OF SOME OF THE ISSUES

It has been observed from the strategies adopted that the focus of the change process sought to encourage and support whole school-based staff development programmes and zonal-based in-service training. However, studies (Hughes et al., 1998 and Chimombo, 1999) have shown that most of the key persons in the strategies had not yet conceptualized the change. Further, these change agents were unclear about their roles and they lacked the skills required to perform their new roles. The complex nature of the innovation meant that much more was required to help the change agents acquire the relevant skills and in a very large system like education, this is an enormous task. As pointed out by Fullan and Pomfret (1977:391):

Effective implementation of social innovations requires time, personal interaction and contacts, in-service training, and other forms of people-based support. Research has shown time and again that there is no substitute for the primacy of personal contact among the implementers, and between implementers and planners, if the difficult process of unlearning old roles and learning new ones is to occur.

Indeed, Chimombo (1999) demonstrated that there were still little interactions between schools and the change agents especially that PEAs. With schools not being visited for a whole year, and others not taking part in the innovation, the teachers of these schools might have a sense of being isolated or even abandoned and that they were not part of the change process. This is counter-productive to the goals of FPE policy, which aimed at improving access to and quality of education amongst the disadvantaged groups in society. As pointed out by Levin almost two decades ago:

If planners and reformers use such terminology as change agents,... they tend to believe that the use of the language and the logic of rational change imply a control of the change process itself. In contrast, a review of the educational change and implementation literature suggests that the rhetoric of reform is probably its most important manifestation rather than the change it claims to produce (1980: 34).

In addition, many head teachers and deputies interviewed believed that training should not be part of their duties. They felt strongly that they should obtain extra pay or some form of allowances for supervising and training the teachers as this was outside their normal duties. One head bluntly put it:

Yes I have gone to the seminars for the school-based assistance of the temporary teachers. But if they are not going to give us money, we are not going to do anything. The problem is that they made promises. Therefore no money, no work.

The problem here was that the people who were supposed to do the job were not performing it. They were simply refusing to act. This demonstrates that strategies of change based on a simple format and universal implementation are problematic and that the coercive power is not sufficient to make the system work. In addition, head teachers frequently pointed out that they were already over-burdened with administrative tasks as well as a teaching load and it was unreasonable for the Ministry to expect them to allocate 50% or more of their time to supervisory duties. As observed by Warwick et al. (1992: 298) implementation may be harmed if those to implement an innovation are worried that an innovation will mean more work with no incentives or compensation. Further, the institution of PEAs as change agents meant that they were to be considered as experts in their field and in the best position to pass their knowledge and experience to the practitioners. However, the position in which most of them found themselves acted as a barrier to change. One teacher observed that:

subjects (geography, history, civic, natural studies etc) were combined under the new curriculum to make general or social studies. But we do not have ideas about how to use the new books. We need orientation on how to treat the topics, even how to teach - by subject or just follow the book - since the subjects are mixed. When we ask the PEAs, they say that they do not know. Now if a PEA does not know, how do you expect me to know? And how confident is the ministry that the objectives of the new curriculum are being achieved?

In an examination of systemic reforms, Knapp (1997) noted that at the district level, those in a position to relay and reinforce the message emanating from the sources of reform have varying capacities and willingness to perform this intermediary role. He observes that:

In more ordinary contexts, district-level actors appear to be implementing reforms without grasping deeply what these are all about and transmitting to teachers guidance that is viewed as unhelpful, intrusive or both. As in schools and classrooms, district-level people implement the reforms within the realm of what they know and understand of the subject matter.

According to teachers, the main problem with policy change in Malawi was that policies were not

accorded the necessary support that was needed to implement them. They felt that since education hinges on teachers, any policy change in education must be supported by the necessary change in teachers who are the implementers of the policy. An evaluation of the implementation of the general studies curriculum, Chibwana (1997) found that one of the major problems was that the teaching strategies being utilised in the instructional process were at variance with those envisaged by the teachers'guide designers. "Arguably, one of the major obstacles towards this was the lack of proper and adequate orientation as regards the delivery of the new curriculum in general and general studies in particular" (: 18).

Observations (Miske et al., 1998), document analysis (Hughes et al., 1996) and my own experience lead to the conclusion that the approach to FPE policy was not a realistic one and that the policy itself was/is a much more complex and an ambitious one. 'There was no adequate time for preparation - better if it were done in phases e.g. starting with the infant section', one respondent observed. Another respondent said that 'it should have been implemented gradually, allowing for more qualified teachers to be made available'. Many respondents indeed alluded to the fact that the policy was not realistic in terms of the lead-time allowed and in terms of resources since Malawi did not have the capacity in human and material terms. 'Preparation was below standard since it was done in a hasty manner', one respondent observed. Thus, while politically feasible, FPE lacked the technical support needed for a large-scale reform of its nature. Fuller et al. (1992) has observed that anyone intending to induce change must have a detailed knowledge of both the political calculus and system deficits. Summing up the main problems with FPE, a respondent wrote:

Implementation of FPE was hastily done. Consequently, untrained teachers had to be used, school based supervision did not work without proper orientation of heads and seasoned staff. Teaching and learning materials were not available. Production of T/L materials at MIE proved too expensive and textbooks were not produced in time.

The way the FPE policy was disseminated to the general public also shaped varied expectations held by local groups. As it turned out, there was no proper mechanism put in place to explain the policy to the populace. Community leaders were left to interpret and explain the policy the way they understood it. This gave a lot of latitude for misinterpretation and misguidance. As a result, there were initial barriers to access since there was confusion about what the policy really meant. In areas where there was no strong support for the new government, parents including chiefs apparently were reluctant to send their children to school in order to avoid showing support to the new UDF led government. In some other cases, parents misinterpreted the policy to mean that they were "free" to either send or not send their children to school (MoE, 1998). This was also observed by Malwenje et al. (1998:11) who wrote that in terms of opinions about FPE policy,

Some respondents liked the new policy because it encouraged more children to go to school.. But many also thought that parents and children misinterpreted the new policy to mean freedom to behave as they wanted e.g. to enter or leave school at any standard, and to attend or not, or to behave as they choose.

The general impression gained was that Malawi was experiencing an acute problem of uncontrollable social problems, which were not only retarding the classroom process but also contributing to social instability. The laxity of parents in disciplining their children since the advent of democracy (according to teachers) has directly contributed to the present situation. Many school teachers complained about increasing social dangers posed by anti-authority *chamba* (Indian hemp) smoking and truant pupils who would do anything short of beating up or threatening to stab teachers they disliked. As a result, some teachers feared their pupils. Commenting on the extent of the indiscipline in schools, Malwenje et al. (1998:12) noted that 'indiscipline, absenteeism and abseondment is rampant and pupils show little respect for their teachers. The values previously inculcated by school have been diluted. With deteriorating discipline, school administrators have a hard time exercising control'.

CHALLENGES

There is no doubt that Malawi has made a landmark in the drive towards EFA as a result of the FPE. However, despite the considerable achievements in enrolments, Malawi has not been able to address problems of quality and efficiency in the education system satisfactorily. The challenge that still remains is to maintain current enrolment levels and simultaneously improve the quality and efficiency of the system. This is a loss opportunity resulting from the many who showed interest and started school, but found themselves not welcomed by the prevailing conditions of the system.

Thus, the most salient feature of enrolment trends in Malawi schools is the decreasing numbers of pupils as they progressed through the primary school cycle. There is a disheartening thinning down in the class sizes in the schools. This is related to the high dropout rate in the first two to three standards. Dropping out is mainly caused by lack of interest, cultural beliefs and practices, income generation activities and hence the need for survival and late entry into school among others. Calculations of the pupil flow taking into account dropout and repetition rates showed that out of every 1,000 pupils that entered Standard 1, only 91 completed Standard 8 on time, i.e. within the eight years. Official statistics show that of the 1,006,194 pupils who finished standard one in 1994, only 590,167 finished standard two and 469,816 finished standard three. Research results suggest that although intensive efforts can be made to increase enrolment, serious problems still remain to keep these pupils in school. There is a lot to schooling than mere increase in access.

The evidence showed that one type of repetition problems in Malawi is that which occurs at the lower levels of the system. The problem has been observed to be one that is induced by overall poor learning environment. In the Malawian context, repetition at this level of the system is acting as a signal that

something is wrong somewhere, that achievement is inadequate, that the quality of learning is low and that learning disabilities brought from a deprived environment are present. This problem needs to be urgently addressed.

While the FPE policy was observed to have achieved its objective of increasing access, the policy was seen to have been unrealistic in terms of the resources that were needed to implement it and to provide genuine EFA as envisaged by the Jomtien conference. The FPE policy was also unrealistic because little appraisal of the forces for and against change was made in order to assess the feasibility of the reform. It was based on the simplistic assumption that merely removing fees and the obligation to wear school uniforms was sufficient to enable parents to enrol their children in school and to keep them there. Despite the government's commitment to achieving EFA, studies are pointing out that without increased funding from bilateral and multilateral donors, EFA cannot be achieved and the drive towards EFA remains insurmountable.

It is apparent that the Malawi government has little effect on the local economic practices, social commitments and demands exercised by families and traditional institutions. As long as education has not been accepted as a self-imposing obligation, the road towards the achievement of EFA in Malawi still remains an uphill one and Malawi remains a long way from universal voluntary school attendance. The main challenge to the alleviation of poverty through primary education is that the very same poor are the ones not benefiting from our efforts at improving education.

In terms of implementation of FPE, studies have shown that most of the change strategies were yet to take hold. The implementation process was slow and characterised by ad hoc decision-making. Several key elements that would have facilitated the implementation of the policy were missing. It took many years after the introduction of FPE to have teachers oriented to the art of teaching and most heads and PEAs oriented to the art of supervision, which were the key elements of the school-based reform. The main problem of policy change is seen to be one of 'diffusion'- that is, how to get something like equivalent adoption of implementation of the desired reform on a large scale.

One of the main challenges in recent times has been the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The national AIDS control program estimated in 1997 that one in five primary students was to be positive in the five years to come. And in recent years, evidence has shown that there are a lot of absenteeism from both students and teachers due to prolonged illnesses (Kadzamira et al. 2000). This is causing a lot of problems in the teaching learning process. Indeed, many DEOs are complaining about the inability to sustain funeral expenses from the death of teacher and the problem is compounded when employees have to observe cultural practices. Indeed, the challenge is that in the absence of a care for the disease, the only way is through prevention but prevention requires that people are able to appreciate the messages given to them. In these poverty stricken illiterate communities, this is not an easy task.

LESSONS LEARNT

Our understanding of the implementation process of the FPE brings home three messages: 1) that in the context of FPE, the political factor was the strongest factor for its adoption and increased sustainability; 2) that the central government had limited leverage to influence the behaviour of local implementers; and 3) that implementation analysis is of major importance towards effective policy implementation through the development of institutionally grounded heuristics to help policy-makers adapt their decisions as implementation problems arise. Main lessons among others are:

The Need for Diversity

There is no one explanation for the problems of FPE for the whole of Malawi. In different regions of the country, the sources of income that children can bring to households to complement the main sources of support vary substantially. Therefore, in addition to regional cultural differences, perceived returns to education as well as the opportunity costs of sending children to school in the different regions also vary considerably (Castrol-Leal 1996:33). The implication for this is that strategies devised to curb these problems of schooling cannot be the same. Here the problem of implementation is one of diversity. There is no single strategy that will work everywhere nor can there be one model of implementation that will cope with different problems. The challenge to planners in Malawi is how to encompass these perspectives.

Induced Lack of Effective Demand for Education

Many studies show that the problem is that of lack of effective demand for education. People are saying what is the point of going to school? What is the value? Overall levels of supply by the state are so low that the result is an inducement of low effective demand for education. If a classroom is half-finished, with no windows, no desks, if there are few or no textbooks (nor exercise books), if there are no supplementary readers and if the teacher is inadequate either through lack of training or because there are no teaching materials, but most importantly perhaps, if your chance to proceed beyond the primary cycle is one in a hundred, why go to school? Why go to school to learn little or nothing? These are the realities that are inducing an associated lack of effective demand for schooling. As put by the 1998 World Education Report (: 55), if education is expected to help the poor lift themselves out of poverty, then in the poorest countries, education itself needs first to be lifted out of poverty. This is true for the primary education system in Malawi. EFA can never work unless conditions are improved. It appears that MoE under-estimated the importance of quality and relevance!

We should also separate problems/issues under-control of the Ministry or indeed schools from those of global developmental problems. On the other hand, problems of global economic decline are causing vital elements in the system to be pre-occupied with survival. This is rendering the ineffectiveness of policy. Further, the actions of the IMF are jorpadising the disposition of managers and implementers. This is

causing low levels of infrastructure and overall supply of resources which is hampering the implementation of policy.

Major policy messages:

Based on the discussion above, the paper offers the following policy considerations:

- a) First, it seems obvious that in the short and medium term, EFA is not achievable. Let us forget it and concentrate on quality especially in the first four standards. There is a great deal of loss of opportunity when people who show interest in school dropout. We need to concentrate on those who show interest and start school so that they stay in school until they acquire some level of minimum literacy.
- b) Secondly, we should recognise the need for diversity. Problems of schooling cannot be solved if strategies do not take into account the varied environments in which they are occurring. Of particular importance is the need for deliberate attempt to make bold political decisions and concentrate resources in the south and centre where problems of schooling are more acute.
- c) Last but not least, studies have pointed to the fact that implementation depends on a complex chain of reciprocal interactions between the ministry and the street-level bureaucrats and between the schools and their communities. Problems of schooling cannot be solved if parents (illiterate themselves) remain inactive partners in the schooling enterprise. The need here is the establishment of strong leadership in schools that is able to build proper linkages between the school and the indigenous leadership that bind the society together. Chiefs, who are the driving force behind the mwambo of the village, are vital in these linkages. Further, sending children to school is purely a parental decision. It is necessary therefore to understand the context in which this decision is made. The evidence has showed that the decisions about schooling are shaped by a complex interplay of socio-cultural and economic factors.

This paper can be concluded with the following simple words. When bilateral governments as well as international organisations met (they met in early 60s, throughout the 70s and 80s and they recently met in Jomtien in 1990 and in Dakar in 2000), and encourage developing countries to embark on reforms aimed at achieving EFA (whatever name it is given), they must know that they are putting these countries in states of predicaments. The achievement of EFA is not possible without concerted effort from the international organisations.

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