



## A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF THE FREE COMPULSORY UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (FCUBE) POLICY IN GHANA

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### Abstract

*The concept behind Ghana's free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE) policy was to reduce poverty through a free and obligatory education system for pupils in primary school. The policy has added to and had an effect on increasing enrolment. It has also contributed to the enhancement of the fundamental education program through the introduction of vocational and specialized training, as well as communication and information technology. This has greatly aided in increasing the standard of Ghana's fundamental education system. However, the policy fell short of expectations because it did not take into account the actual circumstances of the impoverished. If the policy's goal was to decrease poverty through free and mandatory basic education, the impoverished should have been the first to be considered before implementing the policy. The policy's measures have, to some degree, failed to reduce poverty by moving toward balancing the opportunity costs of going to school for the poor by not eliminating all types of fees and reducing the secondary costs associated with education. As a result, the policy must be revised to take into account the actual circumstances of the impoverished, particularly in rural areas.*

**Keywords:** Basic Education, Compulsory Education, Free Education, Policy, School going children, Universal Education.

### Introduction

This study examines and evaluates Ghana's free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE) policy and its effect on rural poverty reduction. The strategy is part of the fundamental needs approach. The document begins by describing how the policy was implemented, its goals and



objectives, where it was implemented, the policy's results, both good and negative, and unexpected outcomes. The report also makes a value judgment based on proof of the policy's triumphs and failings. It also investigates why and how the outcomes occurred, how the policy's objective issue was characterized, whether the policy was intended to decrease poverty, and how policymakers described the causes of the problem. Finally, the paper summarizes the thoughts on the policy, looking at the impacts and shortcomings of the policy.

### **A Description of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education Policy in Ghana**

The FCUBE policy took its structures from the 1987 educational reforms in Ghana as a way of restructuring the education system to meet the needs of the economy and society (MOE, 1998; Yamaba, 2006). The policy emerged with the introduction of a new constitutional provision in 1992. The policy took effect in 1996 and was implemented with a constitutional mandate. The policy was different from previous educational reforms including the 1987 educational reforms in Ghana (GES, 2004). This is because the policy provided for a nine year of free compulsory universal basic education having a focus on decentralization, accessibility, participation and quality education management (GES, 2004; MOE, 1996).

The government had a policy priority of ensuring a universal primary education, improved access to senior high school, tertiary education and the promotion of knowledge based skill training through vocational and technical education (Government of Ghana, 2006; IMF, 1999). In view of this, successive governments could not move away from its continuation. The policy had the goal of removing school fees with the aim of increasing school enrolments especially for the poor. It was argued by the policy makers that having the right to education is indubitable and as such fees of all sorts came as a disincentive to schooling (MOE/GES, 2001). That is the policy makers saw the existence of indirect costs including fees that were placed compulsorily on guardians as something that required some regulation and monitoring to secure children's rights to schooling (Akyeampong, 2009). As a basic need approach the policy with the aim of removing school fees to increase enrolment and quality of education especially for the poor, because they were the ones who suffered most when it came to paying school fees.



The policy with monetary aids from the World Bank was geared towards two major objectives. First was the supply aspect, which had an aim of providing steps towards increasing numbers of locations of schools by higher scale building of extra schools and raising standards of physical infrastructure (World Bank, 2004). The other objective was the demand aspects which were geared towards providing support in managing educational policies with a focus on improving management abilities of heads of schools and teachers, reducing fees, increase in time for instruction, improvements in supervision of schools (World Bank, 2004). The government had the aim of ensuring that basic education became compulsory and free for every child of school going age and raising the quality of basic education by the year 2005 (MOE, 1996).

### **The Implementation and Objectives of the Policy**

The FCUBE policy had its publication in 1995 after many years of efforts by education officers, consultants, and personnel of the education ministry, citizen groups and donors. The policy was meant to address four main shortcomings in the education system (Government of Ghana, 1995:4). The four problems included access to education, quality of education, efficiency in education and the relevance of basic education (Government of Ghana, 1995).

With regards to accessibility, the policy was meant to increase access to basic education for children especially children within areas that were deprived in terms of economic and social livelihoods. It was also meant to increase the enrolment of girls in basic education (Government of Ghana, 1995). On the issue of quality, it was meant to improve the score levels with regards to senior high school admission to 80% by the year 2005.

It was also meant to raise the performance of students in basic schools by 75% with regards to the national performance standards by the year 2005 (Government of Ghana, 1995). Concerning efficiency, the policy was meant to drastically reduce the issue of basic school dropout and repetition. The issue of relevancy of basic education had an objective of improving quality of structure and curriculum through strengthening of participation of districts in checking schools within the districts.



## **Strategies and Techniques Adopted by the Policy Makers**

The main implementer of the policy was the government of Ghana with the education ministry and Ghana Education Service as main policy actors. The policy had five strategies integrated to address the problems identified within basic education. The five strategies were curriculum improvement and quality, infrastructure development, improvement in quality of personnel within basic education, participation of communities and reform of management (Government of Ghana, 1995).

Much decentralization was undertaken by the implementers of FCUBE through districts and local governments Acts of 1988 and that of 1993 (Akyeampong, 2009). The 1995 Ghana Education Acts was also included in the implementation. The policy provided a structure for support by donors within basic education. Syllabi, teaching, learning materials and techniques were subsequently revised and reviewed. A scholarship scheme was also introduced for teachers in improving their education through distance learning that will not take them away from classrooms. Housing incentives were provided for teachers within basic education as a form of motivation.

With regards to participation and accessibility, the policy contributed towards attaining gender parity in enrolments for grade one for primary school by year 2000. (Government of Ghana, 1995). It was concerned with increasing accessibility in northern Ghana in obtaining completion level at sixth grade by 93% by 2005 as the region had a history of lesser access to basic education (Government of Ghana, 1995). Girl's enrolment was much highlighted, and more girls had access to education especially in northern Ghana as there was much awareness for girls' education in the north. As noted by Sutherland-Andy (2001:75) providing a greater specific action plan for girls' education aimed to increase girls' enrolment in basic education tend to reduce their dropout, increase transition from basic to high school and expose 'ten thousand girls in pre-tertiary education to technology, science, and mathematics education'.

Further within the policy in 1997, an education unit focusing on girls was established to deal with improving access for girls' in basic level. Much investment in finance was put into this project. Some external donors contributed to this initiative with the aim of making it a success



(Acheampong, 2009). This to an extent contributed to making the policy inclusive and employing a gender-sensitive lens in its implementation (MOE/GES, 2001).

### **Outcomes of the Policy**

The policy's compulsory aspect was very significant as it placed much force on parents to send their wards to school (Akyeampong, 2009). This is because the policy threatened to fine parents who went contrary. However, this decision came without a strategy of enforcement leading to a no threat policy (Mehrotra, 1998). Most heads of schools through indirect strategies started taken fees that were not direct as they were not getting enough money with the removal of fees. Students whose parents could not afford these indirect fees were sent home by teachers (MOE/GES, 2001).

Some heads of schools were even under instruction from their local authorities to charge this indirect fee and were to receive sanctions if they failed to adhere (Mehrotra, 1998). When questioned about the meaning of FCUBE, the Ghana Education Service answered that through FCUBE policy government takes care of teaching and learning materials, subsidizes the costs of exercise books, pays tuition fees, supplements basic education certificate examination (BECE) fees for public and private students but parents on the other hand are required to take their wards to school, provide school uniforms, stationery, transport and food (Daily Graphic, November 17, 2000). This created confusion on what constituted free basic education for all. The government did little about the heads of schools who charged fees from parents. This brought much doubts with parents especially poorer parents about what the government and its ministry meant by free education.

The issue where heads of schools took indirect fees from parents created many problems. An instance is where the resources that were available became dependent on the wealth capacity of the community in question leading to reinforcement of the educational stratification (Donge, 2003). It created a situation where poor schools were found in rural districts with wealthier districts having the good schools. Thus, this led to misunderstandings about what free education meant especially for rural poor.



With the introduction of a capitation grant of US\$3 per student enrolled in 2005/2006, the policy had the aim of increasing enrolment. This is because the capitation came to remove all fees in the basic education (Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, 2007). Enrolments especially in first grade saw an increment of 20% with the introduction of the capitation grant in 2005/2006 (Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, 2007). However, this was not sustainable in the subsequent years. A reason for the unsustainability of increased enrolment with the introduction of the capitation under FCUBE was that the policy was designed in a way that spread benefits and investments basically for all not looking at welfare and income status of the different groups of people within the society (Akyeampong, 2009). As such the policy had contributed less towards sustaining high enrolments within the higher grades basically because its credentials with regards to pro-poor initiatives were less. People from the poorest backgrounds must be considered when it comes to initiating policies on free basic schooling.

Also with regards to girl child education, it could be seen that despite the establishment of an education unit responsible for focussing on girls' education with the aim improving girl education, enrolment of girls at primary levels within a period of four years since 1998 reduced by 0.5% (Little, 2010). With the dropout level been stagnant, the junior high school stage saw 1.1% decrease in dropout (Little, 2010). As noted by Sutherland-Addy (2002: 68) notwithstanding the improvements in basic education, it could be seen that a lower enrolment and transitions within the basic education stage suggests an overall idea of stagnation in the basic education system.

Furthermore, with implementation, there were problems with regards to teacher-student ratio and the training of teachers within basic school system. For instance, the student-teacher ratio increased from 32:1 in 1996/1997 to 35:1 in 2005/2006 (Little, 2010). On the other hand, it was stable with a ratio of 18:1 within the junior high school. With regards to performance at the basic education certificate examination (BECE) it was recorded that there was only a small increase from 60.4% within 1998 to 62.2% within 2008 (Akyeampong, 2009).

It could be seen that FCUBE policy could not meet the increment of student enrolments with regards to the provision of teachers who were trained. In view of this the overall student to trained teacher ratio did not improve much compared to the time the policy was initially introduced



(Akyeampong, 2009). The ratio of student to teacher saw an increment of 43:1 in 1996 to 63:1 in 2005 (Akyeampong, 2009). As such untrained teachers were provided in filling up the mass gap which further brought down the educational quality. The number of trained teachers within rural districts was seen to have reduced from 55% in the years 2003/2004 to 37% within the year 2007 (Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, 2008). There was therefore a doubling in numbers of teachers who were untrained within primary as well as the Junior High Schools (Akyeampong, 2009).

There was however, an increase in total primary school child teacher ratio between 1996 and 2005 by 4%. This increase was only because of the introduction of more untrained teachers into the basic education stream within those years (Akyeampong, 2009). The larger student-teacher ratio gap and the introduction of much untrained teachers might have led to the low performance of students at the basic education certificate examination (BECE) at the end of grade nine.

Moreover, the restructuring of the FCUBE by the government with a new initiative of increasing the basic education from nine to ten years in 2003 was an important innovation. This comprised of two years of kindergarten education, six years of primary school education and three years of junior high school education (Government of Ghana, 2003). It had the aim of focusing basic education on creative arts, literacy, numeracy skills, technical and vocational skills as well as the introduction of information and communication technology. The restructuring in 2003 came as an important initiative but however fell short of its expectation. This is because the issue of accessibility was a problem as most vulnerable groups including the rural poor, girl child and children with disabilities were left out. No special provisions were made by the government and the education ministry to include these groups in the restructuring process.

### **Assessment of the Policy**

In assessing FCUBE policy in Ghana and its impacts towards poverty alleviation, it could be realized that the policy has contributed some benefits to the Ghanaian citizenry. For instance, it has helped some parents and guardian who could not send their wards to schools due to higher fees that were charged to now send their wards to school. Also, the introduction of vocational and



technical training within the education system in the basic stream has helped as children have been able to acquire some technical and vocational skills that enhance their everyday life and activities.

The introduction of the information communication technology within the basic education curriculum is also an important development that has aided school children in accessing basic information and educational materials necessary for their learning and their abilities (Government of Ghana, 2003). Students in the basic stream can now access learning materials and information resources on the internet which is an important improvement compared to the days when information and communication technology were not included in the curriculum of the basic education curriculum. However, the FCUBE like other educational reforms and policies that preceded it including the 1987 educational reform in Ghana had fallen short of its expectations due to the following reasons.

In the first place, it could be observed that the FCUBE policy have not been able to comprehensively address and solve the problem of overage attendance. Most children especially those children from rural and poor homes in most cases get to their respective schools very late because of work. This is because some children basically have to engage in some form of work in order to support their families (Akyeampong, 2009). As such even getting children who are a little older to enrol in schools become a problem as they need to sometimes work to support the family or themselves. This creates a great disincentive towards enrolment by some parents to send their wards to school. As such even just making fees free which is not even all free as they have to pay some levies in some cases is not enough to keep such children in school.

As noted by the Ghana Statistical Services (2003) with children becoming older, the parents tend to have a lesser desire towards sending such wards to school. Even with the enrolment of such children in school their completion also becomes a problem as they have to cope with the pressures of poverty, lateness and work (Akyeampong, 2009). In suggesting a way forward to this, I believe well-structured and comprehensive policies that takes every need of the poor into consideration will be more effective. As noted by Patrinos and Ariasingam (2002) measures such as cash transfer which are conditional can help in solving some of these problems as it has been useful in some developing countries.





Also, the issue of levies within the districts have created much space for school authorities in charging indirect fees. This still prevents most poor households from enrolling their children which tend to reduce the impacts of the FCUBE policy. The removal of all these fees that tend to offset the opportunity cost of going to school will help to improve enrolment (Akyeampong, 2009). The issue of untrained teachers is another problem that comes in. This tends to lower the quality of education as most teachers in basic schools especially rural communities are untrained. Quality is very necessary because even with an increased enrolment if quality remains low then the purpose of the increased enrolment becomes less useful.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it could be stated that the FCUBE policy in Ghana came with the idea of reducing poverty through a free and compulsory education system for students within the basic school. The policy has contributed and made impacts towards improving enrolment. It has also helped in improving the basic education curriculum by introducing vocational and technical training as well as communication and information technology (Acquah, 2022; Shahid, Asif, & Pasha, 2022). This has helped a lot in raising the standard of the basic education system in Ghana.

However, the policy has fallen short of its expectation as it did not take the very conditions of the poor into consideration. If the policy was meant to reduce poverty through a free and compulsory basic education, then the poor should have been the first to consider before implementing the policy. The policy's measures have failed to reduce poverty in terms of moving ahead towards offsetting the opportunity costs of going to school for the poor by not removing all kinds of fees and reduce the indirect costs that come with schooling. The policy therefore needs to be revised taken into consideration the very conditions of the poor.

### **Further Research**

Further research could make use of a mixed method approach in critically assessing and understanding the free compulsory universal education policy and its impacts in promoting education and reducing poverty, mostly among the rural poor in Ghana. This will be significant



for understanding both the qualitative and quantitative aspects and impacts of the education policy as a whole.

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