Fee-free Basic Education Policy Implementation in Tanzania: A 'Phenomenon' Worth Rethinking

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ABSTRACT
This paper is based on a study that employed qualitative research methods to examine the implementation of the fee-free basic education policy in Tanzania. The study reveals that, the policy is misapprehended, and causing confusion and dissonance among key implementers including heads of schools and parents, and it is threatening the quality delivery of education. However, there is no doubt that the implementation of the fee-free education policy has significantly promoted access to basic education for children from various socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, this paper argues that the implementation of the fee-free basic education policy, albeit commendable, it is not a panacea to achieving equitable access and quality education delivery for all. Hence, the policy and its implementation is a 'phenomenon' worth rethinking for Tanzania to realise equitable and quality universal basic education.

Key words: Fee-free education policy, basic education, policy implementation and Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Tanzania attained independence in 1961. The Tanzanian government recognises the value of investing in human capital in order to fight diseases, poverty and ignorance among its citizens. Since independence, various education-related reforms have been implemented to address the challenges that undermine the education sector. The majority of the reforms have been made as measures to express government's commitment to ensuring that all school-age children have access to basic education (URT, 2014). The Tanzania's government commitment and efforts are evident in several international, regional and national instruments to which Tanzania subscribes. These instruments include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 26); the International

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Articles 13 and 14); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 10); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24); the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (Article 4); the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Preamble, Articles 7 and 8); the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Article 11); and the African Youth Charter (Articles 13 and 16) (Right to Education Project, 2014).

Tanzania's efforts to guarantee education for all are further informed by the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, which set out a vision for education and restated the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2000 (UNESCO, 1990). However, by the year 2000, many countries including Tanzania had failed to achieve UPE targets. Consequently, the Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) (UNESCO, 2000) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) restated formally what was required. The DFA and MDG goals for education required governments to ensure that, by 2015, all children, regardless of their gender and geographical location, had access to and completed their basic education. These goals required countries to implement strategies for ensuring access to quality primary education for all children. These goals were further refined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the SDG education targets is that all nations should ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030. In this light Tanzania introduced a fee-free basic education policy that aimed at narrowing the gap for the vulnerable children who shortfall in attaining basic education down to incapacity of their families to afford paying for education expenses.

Fee-Free Basic Education in Tanzania: The Past and Present Contexts

Tanzania has committed itself to ensuring access to education for all school-age children since independence. Immediately after independence, in 1963, school fees were abolished in all secondary schools. This initiative aimed at reducing the disparity in enrolment based on income (Cameron and Dodd, 1970), and providing opportunity for children to

study from primary school up to university level without paying any fees. In the 1970s, however, Tanzania, like many other developing countries, experienced economic instability due to the higher oil prices, among other factors. In response to this devastating problem, the World Bank and IMF introduced a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) for which Tanzania was among the countries to accept (Daven, 2008). Among other things, the programme required Tanzania to cut its spending on the social sectors in order to reduce its budget deficit. Consequently, public expenditure on education declined by a quarter from 1975 to 1990 (UNICEF, 1990). In the 1980s, however, the demand for cost-sharing in education increased due to educational deterioration and pressure from the international financial institutions. This led to a gradual increase in households' contributions and the re-introduction of enrolment fees in 1995 (Daven, 2008). In the early 2000s, however, fees for primary education were abolished as a result of the implementation of the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) 2002-2006. One of the key PEDP components was to expand primary school enrolment by ensuring that all children aged 7-12 years old were enrolled into standard one by 2004. To achieve this enrolment target, PEDP abolished tuition fees and other mandatory cash contributions from parents from January 2002 (URT, 2004). A United States of America (USA) dollar ($10) equivalent to Tshs 10,000 annual capitation grant per pupil was provided by the government to offset primary school-related costs, although parental contributions were also in place to meet additional school running costs. There was no specific amount of contribution set officially. Schools and parents, through school committees or boards, decided how much parents should contribute to the schools depending on the various needs that were also determined, for example, by the location of the school—urban or rural.

In 2002, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) in primary schools stood at 98.6% and 80.7%, respectively. The enrolment rate was higher than that in 2000 by almost 20% and 21%, respectively. In 2007, the GER and NER increased to 114.4% and 97.2%, respectively. This gain, however, was not maintained. Since 2010, progress in increasing access to standard one has been marginal. In 2013, for example, the NER slipped to 89.7%. This implied that Tanzania might no longer be on track towards achieving universal education by 2015 (URT, 2015). According to the MoEST and UNICEF (2016) out of school children report, only 31.7% of pre-primary school-age children were attending school.

About 2 million primary school-age children and 1.5 million lower secondary school-age children were out of school in Tanzania. Of these, 1.7 million children of primary school age and 400,000 of lower secondary school age had never attended school. The report identified several reasons for children being out of school, and poverty was identified as one of the key reasons why many children do not attend school. Further, the report suggested that the indirect costs of schooling were high (MoEST and UNICEF, 2016), which might be an obstacle for parents to enrol and keep their children in school. In 2014, the Tanzanian government introduced a revised Education and Training Policy (ETP) to replace that instituted in 1995. The 2014 policy advocated "Fee Free Basic Education", which means that every child would have access to fee- and contribution-free basic education (URT, 2016).

Up until 2015, the formal education system in Tanzania reflected a 2–7–4–2–3+ structure, encompassing two years of pre-primary (non-compulsory) education, seven years of compulsory primary education (Standards I to VII, for children aged 7 to 13 years), four years of fee-paying lower secondary education (O-Level Forms 1 to 4, for children aged 14 to 17 years), two years of fee-paying upper secondary education (A-Level Forms 5 and 6, for youths aged 18 to 19 years) and three or more years of higher education. The formal education system was recently restructured to 1-6-4-2-3+ (URT, 2014). This reform has expanded the compulsory basic education from seven to 11 years, including one year of compulsory pre-primary education. Nevertheless, the reform is yet to be accommodated in the Education Act, which will enshrine it into Tanzania's law. In the meantime, the former structure remains, although the one year of pre-primary education has been accommodated. In the context of this paper, therefore, the fee-free education policy applies to the 11 years of compulsory basic education (URT, 2014). Following the policy statement on fee-free basic education, the Government Circular No. 5 (URT, 2015a) was established to formalise the government's commitment to providing fee-free basic public education, as stipulated in the Education and Training Policy of 2014. The Circular also provided directives to corresponding public bodies to ensure that primary and secondary education is free. Significantly, the circular releases parents from all contributions, as it reads: "The provision of free education means pupils or students will not pay any fee or other contributions that were being [made] by parents or guardians before the release of the new circular".

Following the issuance of this circular, the government released grants amounting to Tshs 49,173,165,000 for the 2015/2016 academic year. Of the total amount, 64 percent was set aside for primary schools while 36 percent was earmarked for secondary schools. Consistent with the previous fee- and contribution-free primary education, the current fee-free basic education initiative exempts parents with children in public primary schools from paying tuition fees and making other school-related contributions. In addition, the initiative extends to public secondary schools at the ordinary level (Form 1 - 4). This is in recognition that fees place a burden on parents, a condition which limits the maximization of school enrolment. The fee-free basic education funding that the government provides for primary schools is Tshs 10,000 per child per year. Of this amount, 60% (Tsh 6,000) is transferred directly from the Treasury into the school's accounts, whereas 40% (Tshs 4,000) is retained by the government for the purchase of textbooks. The capitation grant set for secondary schools is Tshs 25,000 per student per year. Of this amount, only Tshs 12,500 is expected to be transferred direct to a school. Furthermore, the government compensation for day and boarding secondary school tuition fees is set at Tshs 20,000 and Tshs 70,000 per student per year, respectively. The cost of meals at boarding schools amounts to Tshs 405,000 per student per year. Of the funds transferred to schools, the utilisation distribution is as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Utilisation Distribution of Capitation grants transferred to public schools

Primary School	Secondary School
Administration 10%	Academic purposes 30%
Maintenance 30%	Continuous assessment 15%
Materials 30%	Office expenses 35%
Sport 10%	Minor repairs 10%
Examinations 20%	Medicine and expenses related to female students 10%

Source:(URT, 2015b)

As Table 1 shows, the expected utilisation of the funding for primary and secondary schools differs in terms of the associated items and amounts. Some items receive a greater allocation than others. For clarity and to support the effective implementation of fee-free basic education, the

Tanzanian government has issued a series of circulars: Education Circular No 5 (URT, 2015a) (issued on 27 November 2015); Education Circular No. 6 of 2015 (URT, 2015b) (issued on 10 December, 2015); and Education Circular No. 3 of 2016 (issued on 25 May 2016) and (URT, 2016). Despite Circular No. 5's provisions, tension and mixed feelings about fee-free basic education existed among education stakeholders, including parents, with some perceiving it as precluding making parental contributions for their children's education altogether. As a result, the government issued circular No. 6 (URT, 2015b) to clarify the role of parents with regard to fee-free public basic education. The circular, among other things, states that parents should meet the costs for the following items:

i. School uniforms and uniforms for sports activities; learning materials such as books, pens and pencils
ii. The provision of food for children attending day schools (in co-operation with the school leadership);
iii. Medical expenses for the child, and travel expenses for both day and boarding school pupils; and
iv. Mattress, bed-sheets, and personal hygiene materials for boarding schools' pupils and for those staying in government-owned hostels.

In addition, the parents are obliged to provide information where practices contradict the spirit of the provision of fee-free basic education. These clarifications notwithstanding, confusion persists within a cross-section of the public, particularly among the low-income groups. As a result, the government issued another directive, Circular No. 3 of 25th May 2016, to provide further clarification and list the responsibilities of the various stakeholders: the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST); the President Office-Regional Authority and Local Government (PO-RALG); the Regional and District Commissioners; the District Executive Directors (DED); the school committees/boards; the heads of schools; and the parents. Overall, the responsibilities range from issuing circulars to guide the implementation of the policy, reimbursing capitation grants, planning, budgeting for capitation grants at various levels, monitoring the implementation of the policy, and taking legal action in cases of poor policy implementation (URT, 2016).

Capitation Grants Releases, 2015/16 – 2017/18

The available information reveals that the budget allocation to the

education sector increased by 22% from 2015/16 to 2017/18. However, recently, the budget has decreased by 1.3%, from Tshs 4,770,952,584,000 in 2016/17 to Tshs 4,706,361,982,000 in 2017/18. The Capitation Grants released to primary and secondary schools oscillate (URT, 2018). Table 2 shows the Capitation Grants (CG) released to government-funded primary and secondary schools for the period 2015/16-2017/18.

Table 2: Capitation grants released to government-funded primary and secondary schools, 2015/16-2017/18

	2015/16	**2016/17**	**2017/2018**
Primary	31,444,671,000	53,905,164,000	53,905,165,716
Secondary	17,728,494,000	30,391,704,000	19,699,194,253
Total CG released	**49,173,165,000**	**84,296,868,000**	**73,604,359,969**
No. of Primary Pupils		8,337,545	8,969,110
No. of Secondary Students		1,469,760	1,564,676
Amount per pupil in Primary schools	3,770	6,465	6,010
Amount per student in Secondary schools	12,010	20,678	12,590

Source: United Republic of Tanzania: Education Sector Performance Report, 2017/2018, Tanzania Mainland, September 15th, 2018

As Table 2 shows, the CG released to primary schools increased by 71 percent, from Tshs 31,444,671,000 in 2015/16 to Tshs 53,905,165,716 in 2017/18. Similarly, the CG released to secondary schools increased by 71 percent, from Tshs 17,728,494,000 in 2015/16 to Tshs 30,391,704,000 in 2016/17. Likewise, the amount disbursed per pupil and student increased. Moreover, the data show that the amount released per pupil and student exceeded the policy mandated amounts of Tshs 6,000 per pupil and Tshs 12,500 per secondary school student in 2016/17 and 2017/2018. Similarly, given the effect of fees on access, the policy-makers, educators, and development economics from other Sub-Saharan Africa countries such as Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia, have advocated fee-free primary education in their respective education sectors (World Bank, 2009).

They have raised concerns that the fees are acting as a financial barrier to education. Thus, the abolition of fees would make it easier and less costly for school-age children to enrol in school (USAID, 2007). The available information reveals that enrolment increased significantly in countries where school fees were abolished. In Uganda, for example, the enrolment nearly doubled in the year after the fees were abolished. Similar increases in enrolment following the abolition of fees were noted in Kenya, Malawi and Zambia, to mention but a few. We further learn that enrolment in those countries increased most rapidly among the most disadvantaged children, including girls, orphans and children in rural areas (USAID, 2007). Few would dispute that removing school fees might reduce a significant burden from poor families but it may not be a panacea since the practice may not bring the schooling cost to zero. Even if school fees are abolished, poor and vulnerable children may still face barriers to obtaining an education due to the indirect education-related costs that many households face. Thus, school fees' abolition alone may not necessarily lead to improved accessibility. Other factors need to be considered if the gains made due to the fees' abolition policy and practice are to be consolidated and sustained (USAID, 2007). The initiative of the Tanzania government to provide fee-free basic education has received both national and international attention and, indeed, commendation. However, much remains unknown about how various stakeholders perceive and translate the fee-free basic education policy into practice. We also know little about the impact of the policy implementation within the teaching-learning processes. This study, therefore, aimed to explore the education stakeholders' perceptions and understanding of the fee-free basic education policy and how this policy is translated into practice.

This study is informed by the top-down perspective on policy implementation, which assumes that the policy's goal can be specified by policy-makers and successfully implemented by setting up firm machinery (Paudel, 2009) for implementation. This perspective stresses the formal handling of problems and issues, which can easily be manipulated, centralised and controlled. Of interest are things such as funding formulae, formal organisational structures and authority relationships between the administrative units, plus regulations and administrative controls, such as budgets. In this context, policy implementation begins at the top of the process as an authoritative decision, with a clear statement of the policy-makers' intent, then proceeds through a sequence of increasingly more specific steps to define what is expected of the implementers at each level (Matland, 1995;

Paudel, 2009). The top-down approach, however, fails to recognise the complex implementation structures, placing exclusive emphasis on the framers of the policy as the key actors. Further, this approach neglects the reality of policy modification at the hands of the implementers, and it also assumes that all priorities are known. Moreover, the top-down approach can lead to resistance, disregard and *pro forma* compliance (Paudel, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The study was informed by the qualitative research approach. This research approach allowed the collection of detailed, comprehensive information on the research topic. Data for the study were collected from seven districts on mainland Tanzania that were conveniently selected, one from each of the seven educational zones spread across the country. The inclusion of one district from each educational zone was necessary in order to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the fee-free education policy from zones containing diverse socio-economic backgrounds. For each district, eight schools (four primary and four secondary) were randomly selected. Thus, a total of 56 schools (28 primary and 28 secondary) were sampled to participate in this study. All of the sampled primary schools were day schools while 5% of the secondary schools were boarding schools.

The study involved 339 participants, consisting of seven District Executive Directors, seven District Council Chairpersons, seven District Education Officers, 56 school committee/board chairpersons, 56 heads of schools, 112 teachers, and 84 parents. The district officials and heads of the schools were purposively recruited to participate in the study. On the other hand, the teachers were randomly selected from their respective schools whereas the parents were conveniently recruited based on their availability and consent. The heads of the schools helped to convene the parents with children in their respective schools.

The study employed interviews and focus group discussion techniques to generate information. Interviews were conducted with the district officials, heads of schools, and school committee/board chairpersons. A total of 28 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Four FGDs, two with parents (one with parents with children in primary school and one with parents with children in secondary schools) and two with

teachers (one with primary school teachers and one with secondary school teachers) were conducted in each participating district. In addition, the study employed content analysis of relevant documents. These documents included the Education and Training Policy (2014), Basic Education Statistics of Tanzania, 2012-2016 and 2017 and fee-free basic education-related circulars. All of the interview and FGD sessions were conducted and audio-recorded using Kiswahili, which is the language of the majority of people in Tanzania. The data was later transcribed and translated into the English language. The analysis of the data was informed by a thematic analytical approach. The analysis proceeded through three main steps: preparing and organizing the data; creating the themes; and coding. The preparation and organization of the data for analysis started during the fieldwork. This involved listening to each audio-recorded interview and focus group discussion session. This enabled the researcher to become familiar with the data. This process was followed by a verbatim transcription of the interview and focus group discussion proceedings. Thereafter, the themes were generated inductively. After creating the themes, the transcripts were re-read for coding, which involved associating the data with the themes created.

FINDINGS

Understanding of Fee-free Basic Education

The findings showed that, generally, among the study participants, there was confusion and even some misunderstanding regarding what the fee-free basic education policy meant. When asked what they understood regarding fee-free basic education, 40 percent of the heads of schools, for example, said that it entailed the government meeting the total cost of basic education whereas 23 percent of the heads of schools reported that it meant providing education without paying school fees only. About 32 percent of the other heads of schools understood fee-free basic education as involving parents making a partial contribution to the basic education sector. Furthermore, only about half of the parents expressed that fee-free basic education policy frees parents from paying all expenses related to their children's public-school education. This implies that half of the parents involved in this study understood fee-free basic education policy as constituting freeing parents from paying fees or making any other sort of financial contribution to their children's education whatsoever.

The Capitation Grants Received are Insufficient to Meet all Schools' needs

The findings reveal variations in the amount of grants that the schools received. Some schools reported receiving less than the expected amount while others, the secondary schools in particular, received slightly more than they had anticipated. Nearly all of the heads of schools complained that the capitation grants they received were inadequate to meet the basic school requirements. In particular, the heads of schools were concerned about the amount of funding they received for academic and administrative purposes. For administrative purposes, the secondary schools used the funds received to produce identity cards for the students and teachers, buy files and other stationery, and pay for electricity and water as well as security guards. Similarly, the heads of primary schools explained that the funds were inadequate to meet sports, administrative, examination expenses and repair needed at their schools. In fact, some heads of schools added that the funds they received, were on the basis of the number of children enrolled in their schools, failed to meet the school's needs, which varied depending on the school's location and socio-economic factors in the respective school communities. In this regard, they suggested financing each school differently. One of the heads of schools, for example, commented:

> *I fully support fee-free education. However, I feel that it is unfair to treat all schools in the same way. The allocation [of funds] should not be based on the number of students but on the school plan. Each school has particular needs that differ from those of other schools, which need to be considered. For example, the amount allocated for examinations and repairs is insufficient. Administration requires travel, but this has stopped now as there are no funds for that provision.*

Furthermore, the heads of schools reported that, due to inadequate funding, some crucial school aspects had suffered, such as decreased attendance of the school committee/board members at school committee/board meetings, as there were no funds allocated to cover allowances or travel costs. Moreover, the schools failed to provide mid-day meals for their students as no funds had been allocated for this purpose. The district officials (DEOs) also raised concerns about the inadequacy of the funds dispensed to the schools. One DEO, for example,

stated, “the amount for administration that schools receive is inadequate. Many schools have reduced the number of security guards they employ”.

Strict Adherence to School Capitation Grant Guidelines

The study found that strict government guidelines exist on how the capitation grants received by the schools should be used. These guidelines were issued concurrently with Ministry circular No. 6 of 2015. All of the heads of schools explained that they were using the funds strictly according to the guidelines, and that there was no room for modification. The heads of schools had reservations regarding the guidelines, as they instructed the schools to spend funds on specified items only. The guidelines on the use of the funding restricted the heads of schools from modifying the use of the funds for the benefit of the schools and students. For example, some schools had a farm as an income-generating activity, but this could not be continued as there were no funds allocated for the purpose. One of the heads of schools, for example, asked, “Under what line item will the expenditure on buying seeds and buying tools for farming be located?” It was explained that, among other things, farms were used to produce food to provide mid-day meals for the children in schools.

Parents’ Contribute to Supplement the Capitation Grants

Data analysis revealed that 70 and 61 percent of the heads of schools and teachers, respectively, and more than half of the parents indicated that parental contributions were necessary because of the inadequate and inequitable education spending on the part of the government. Indeed, despite the implementation of fee-free basic education, many of the head teachers, teachers and parents still embraced the idea of supporting the government in financing basic education delivery. Moreover, the study findings reveal that nearly all of the participants across the different categories reported that the implementation of fee-free basic education had reduced the parents’ direct contributions to education costs.

However, some parents still contributed in order to supplement the funds received, and 50 percent of the participants agreed that parents continued to bear a considerable share of the expenses related to the basic education of their children. The participants reported that the parents contributed towards meeting the school security, meal programmes, classroom construction, and internal examinations-related costs. Parents with children in Standard VII contributed to their children’s ‘camping’ for

study. It was reported that towards examination, standard seven classes were put in camps to study. Camps were organized in schools by the schools. They were residential camps, whereby pupils stayed in camps a few months before Primary School Leaving Examination months to prepare for their examination. In the camps students were taught and subjected to revisions and tests/examinations locally organized. These camps were supported through parents' contributions both, in monetary and non-monetary terms. Monetary contributions were reported to range from Tshs 1,000 to 5,000 per pupil per camp. This contribution was used to buy food and teachers' token appreciation. In addition to money, the parents also contributed non-monetary items, such as maize and beans. The overall views of the head teachers and teachers regarding the parents' contribution have been captured by the following statement by one of the head teachers, who remarked;

> *The government should allow parental contributions for specific items…There are parents who are more than willing to contribute to ensure that their children get proper education and do well in examinations…There is a need for flexibility in the policy. Applying it rigidly will do more harm than good. There are areas in which parents can contribute. For example, the toilets in some of the schools are unusable and money to carry out major renovations is not forthcoming from the government. Parents should contribute and solve such problems. How do we handle a case where a student breaks a desk? Should the parent not be required to pay for its replacement?*

In other words, the parents were willing to contribute and wanted the government to allow such parental contributions to supplement the funding that the schools received from the government. In addition, the parents found the guidelines for regulating the utilisation of government funding rigid and, hence, called for some flexibility.

Impact of the Fee-free Basic Education Policy on Teaching and Learning

Trends in School Enrolment

The findings revealed that enrolment at the primary schools assessed in this study increased by 41 percent, from 3,278 in 2015 to 4,989 in 2016. For secondary schools, the enrolment increased by 0.3 percent. In 2016, the projected maximum number of 200 pupils was achieved, and the actual enrolment was 285, an increase of 43 percent of the expected

enrolment. Dissimilarly, national data revealed decrease enrolment of Standard One pupils in government streams. In 2017, for example, Standard One enrolment decreased by 2.6 percent whereas, in 2018, the decrease was 10.2 percent, from 2,016,579 in 2017 to 1,810,814 in 2018. Although national enrolment data for 2015 were missing, there was a sharp increase in enrolment from 1,464,376 in 2014 to 2,070,880 in 2016. Total enrolment of pupils in Standard I-VII has increased by 7.9 percent from 8,639,202 pupils in year 2016 to 9,317,791 pupils in year 2017(URT 2017). Similarly, in 2017 to 2018 increased by 8.5% from 9,317,791 pupils in year 2017 to pupils 10,111,671 in year 2018 (URT 2018).

Furthermore, the national data show that enrolment in Government Primary Schools increased by 13.8% from 10,111,671 pupils in year 2018 to 10,605,430 pupils in year 2019. (URT 2019), this increase might be attributed to the implementation of compulsory and fee-free basic education (PO-RALG, 2017). Moreover, the study found that fee-free basic education had also increased access to education among children from poor families and those with special needs. Nearly all of the participants reported that the fee-free basic education policy had increased the school enrolment of children from poor families and children with special needs, and some of the participants stated that it had reduced delayed entry into school. An analysis of the national data revealed that the enrolment of children with disabilities fluctuated. In 2014, the enrolment decreased by 24 percent, from 30,433 in 2011 to 24,541 in 2014. In 2016, however, the enrolment of children with disabilities increased by 50 percent, from 24,541 in 2014 to 37,034 in 2016. Furthermore, the participants were of the view that cases of dropout had slumped in the schools and even those who had dropped out had returned to school. In an interview, one DEO said, “The fee-free policy has led to a decrease in student dropouts. The policy has led to an improvement in girls’ continuing with their education”.

Declining Teaching-Learning Quality Indicators

The parents and heads of school reported that the fee-free basic education policy had brought substantive benefits and also had an impact on the teaching and learning process, although a good number of the participants feared that its implementation had somewhat compromised the quality of teaching and learning. For example, 55.3 percent of the heads of schools and 36.3 percent of the teachers agreed that the “Introduction of fee-free basic education compromises the quality of education”. Furthermore, 40 percent of the head teachers and 60 percent of teachers indicated that the

fee-free basic education policy was likely to affect the academic performance of learners negatively. The majority of the participants further reported that the fee-free basic education policy had resulted in overcrowded classrooms. For instance, the teacher-pupil ratio (TPR) in Standard One stood at 1:164 in 2016 compared to the average of a 1:99 teacher-pupil ratio in 2015 in the primary schools visited.

Furthermore, the introduction of fee-free basic education was reported to have increased the teachers' workload, with only 10 percent of the teachers agreeing that this policy had improved teacher productivity and motivation. The teachers further stated that the implementation of the policy had translated into a surge in the number of pupils, a shortage of resources, and an increased workload for them, without any attendant positive outcomes for them as teachers. Although more children were enrolled in schools, the number of classrooms and teachers remained the same. In 2016 and 2017, for example, the pupil classroom ratio was 1:77 and 1:73, respectively, compared with the standard of 1:45 at the national level. Similarly, one of the teachers lamented:

> *The fee-free education policy is good as it allows children from poor families to access primary education. It reduces the financial burden on poor families. The fee-free education benefits parents, but what does it do for us? Our workload has increased without concomitant adequate compensation.*

In one of the interviews, a head of school reported that fee-free basic education would affect the quality of the teaching and learning process, pointing out that:

> *In previous years, we had panels for different subjects. These teachers used to meet and discuss how to improve the teaching of these subjects. These teachers were provided with transport and meal allowances. We cannot do that now. Similarly, the heads of schools cannot attend meetings of all heads as there is no budget for that…we've been instructed that we can't use school funds to pay for…travelling allowances*.

The findings suggest that the introduction of fee-free basic education is commendable. However, it has led to overcrowded classrooms and increased teacher workload without increase of extra manpower.

Implicitly, the quality of the teaching and learning processes and learning outcomes are most likely under threat.

Parental Withdrawal and Relinquishing Responsibility for their Children's Schooling

The findings further reveal that, previously, the parents had been contributing to their children's mid-day meals at school. In one primary school, for example, the parents were contributing up to Tshs 10,000 for meals for each pupil per year. In some schools, the parents contributed maize and beans to be used for school meals. However, it was reported that, due to the fee-free policy's implementation, the parents in many schools had withdrawn their contribution for meals, believing that the government now funds for the supply of these items. Moreover, due to the implementation of the fee-free basic education policy, many parents were increasingly relinquishing responsibility for the education of their children. Their attendance at school meetings was falling. As one of the heads of schools, for example, succinctly stated:

> *Free education has meant that parents have left the entire responsibility for the education of their children squarely on the government's shoulders. Recently, we convened a meeting of parents…to discuss how to improve the children's performance. Out of 28 parents, only three turned up for the meeting! In the past, most parents would have come.*

Similarly, another head of school stated that there were positive aspects of the previous policy that allowed parents easily to contribute viably to their children's education,

> *The previous policy created a relationship between parents and schools, and the parents realised that they have a responsibility for their children's education by ensuring that the schools functioned properly. I saw the greater involvement of parents; this, I believe, was very positive.*

Another head of school commented,

> *In the past, parents used to come to school to ask how their children were progressing at school. With the implementation of fee-free education, the parents seem to feel that they have no responsibility at all for the education of their children. Hardly any parent comes to enquire about the progress of his or her children.*

The overall impression is that the parents' engagement with their children's schooling has declined due to a belief that the government's fee-free basic education was taking care of everything. This misconception threatens the parents-teachers/school accountability relationship, which could be detrimental to the quality delivery of education and, hence, the country's overall quality education provision in the long-run.

DISCUSSION

Few, if any, would dispute the value of the government's fee-free basic education policy initiative. This study's findings show that the abolition of fees at the primary school level has resulted in a surge in enrolment in pre-primary classes and Standard One. This positive outcome is consistent with the results of the PEDP, when Tanzania experienced heightened enrolment following the reduction in primary school fees. Similar experiences have been recorded in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda (World Bank, 2009). Moreover, education fees' abolition in 2005 in Burundi led to a sharp drop in the percentage of primary school-age children who had never attended school. Similarly, several studies have found that the elimination of school fees at the primary school level has resulted in an upswing in the enrolment of disadvantaged groups (World Bank, 2009). Furthermore, fee abolition has reduced the number of cases of delayed entry into schooling, incentivised enrolment and reduced the dropout rate, particularly for girls and children in rural areas. Cumulatively, these feats help to foster equity within Tanzanian access to education. Despite the positive aspects that the policy has engendered, several concerns related to the policy's implementation have been noted in this study. The sudden increase in enrolment, for example, was incongruent with the available resources, which remained highly limited and threatening the quality of teaching and learning processes. There has also been an increase in high teacher-pupil ratio, as well as complaints that schools were suffering due to a shortage of classrooms, desks, teachers and other teaching and learning resources. Almost all of the heads of schools, parents, teachers, and school committee/board members reported shortages of this nature. Moreover, the teachers reported that the execution of the fee-free education policy had also increased their workload and led to overcrowded classes, with the policy failing to offer teachers tangible benefits in return for their investment in terms of labour and added responsibilities.

Without remedial action, these negative feelings might reduce the motivation of the teachers, which could threaten education delivery, and consequently undermining teaching and learning outcomes. This surge in enrolment has created quality problems in schools. Tanzania, however, is not unique in this respect. In many countries where fee-free education has been implemented, the quality indicators have been negatively impacted. In Malawi, for example, the pupil to classroom ratio increased to 119:1, the pupil to teacher ratio increased to 62:1, and the pupil to textbook ratio increased to 24:1 (World Bank, 2009). There is a solid body of evidence from around the world that suggests that the single most important factor in children's educational success is effective teachers. A likely consequence of the surge in enrolment is a dramatic rise in the number of pupils per teacher. Many of the teachers in the study cited the large number of pupils that they had to teach as a major concern. Asking teachers to work with twice as many students is likely to lead to academic failure for many students, most notably the poor and vulnerable children who are the supposed beneficiaries of the abolishment of school fees. The deterioration of the quality indicators of primary education delivery is signaled by an increase in the number of children who repeat grades, the lower grades in particular. For example, the number of repeaters in Standard One, increased by 20 percent, from 141,585 in 2015 to 170,234 in 2016, compared with a 15 percent increase from 2014 to 2015. The increase in the number of repeaters is associated with pupils' incompetency in reading, writing and arithmetic. This might subsequently prove costly in the long-run. We might experience this in the near future, from 2021 onwards, when the first cohort of the 2016 fee-free basic education beneficiaries are expected to graduate from primary education.

Despite the surge in enrolment that is attributable to the implementation of fee-free basic education, further analysis revealed that 9 percent of the population of primary school age children (aged 7-13 years) were out of school (URT, 2018), a decrease in enrolment and a persistent dropout rate. In 2017, for example, standard one enrolment decreased by 3 percent, from 2,070,823 in 2016 to 2,016,579 in 2017 (MoEST, 2016/2017). Similarly, in 2016, the number of dropouts was higher for Standards One, Three and Six, at 27,087, 20,178, and 20,468, respectively, compared with 11,947, 16,587 and 15,758 in 2015 (PO-RALG, 2017). There was, however, a decrease of about 3 percent in the dropout rate, from 9 percent in 2015 to 6 percent in 2016. Among other things, the decrease in enrolment and rise in the dropout rate could be attributed to the considerable indirect costs that parents incur with regard

to their children's education (MoEST and UNICEF, 2016*)*. According to Education Circular No. 3 of 2016, the parental responsibilities include covering the cost of items such as: school and sports uniforms; exercise books and pens/pencils; health expenses; and contributions towards mid-day meals for day students and for those in hostels. For those at boarding school, these costs include: mattresses; sheets; personal hygiene materials; and transport to and from the school. The annual cost of these indirect items for a primary school pupil might amount to Tshs 72,000 for girls and Tshs 50,000 for boys. Girls, for example, might need: two skirts (Tshs 25,000); a t-shirt (Tshs 5,000); two pairs of shoes (Tshs 12,000); and exercise books (Tshs 10,000). Boys might need: two pairs of shorts (Tshs 20,000); two shirts (Tshs 12,000); a t-shirt (Tshs 5,000); two pairs of shoes (Tshs 12,000); and exercise books plus pens costing Tshs 12,000 per year.

This implies that the indirect costs that parents incurred related to their children's primary education might be at least eight times higher than the Tshs 6,000 per pupil capitation grant that the government provides for running the schools. Thus, one might argue that some children fail to enroll or drop out of school because of these indirect costs. This threatens the attainment of the targeted education for all. In order to ensure that all children attend school, the government may need to consider how these indirect school costs can be reduced or totally eliminated. Despite the fact that many of the stakeholders appear positive about the fee-free basic education policy, confusion and misunderstandings persist, as already reported. Against this backdrop, doubts arise regarding whether or not the policy is being implemented effectively. The mixed understanding reported in this study is attributable to the seemingly less inclusive and consultative policy establishment process, as well as the inadequate planning prior to its implementation. Despite the repeated clarifications from the government through circulars and other directives, the discussions with the participants indicated that the details about the policy remain largely obscure, as these were not shared with the various stakeholders to the optimum extent. In fact, while the heads of schools received government circulars on policy implementation, there is little to substantiate the idea that these circulars were effectively shared with the relevant teachers, parents, school committee members or even school board members. Apparently, these circulars were largely kept in files, accessible only by the heads of schools. Other implementers only

received verbal information on the policy from the school heads. In this regard, one board member, for example, stated:

"We haven't seen the circular…but we know it amounts to what the head-master told us. We make decisions based on what the head informs us". Nearly all of the heads of schools pointed out that the funds that their schools received were inadequate to meet the school's needs, including the academic and administrative needs. Uwezo (2010), who examined the extent to which the capitation grants met the basic school needs, found that the allocation for textbooks, for example, covered only one book for one subject (out of seven compulsory subjects). At the time, the book's price ranged from at least Tshs 3,500 to 5,000 per copy. Currently, a book would cost between Tshs 4,000 and 6,000. This suggests that each pupil requires a minimum of Tshs 28,000 to buy books for all of the compulsory subjects. In the same vein, the current study found that the capitation grants provided to offset the school needs were insufficient. Moreover, the grants that the schools received were not pegged to the inflationary trends. Consequently, the economic value diminished in the face of high inflation. Furthermore, the study found that the funds allocated to the schools ignored the possibility that the pupils and schools had varying needs. This suggests that the fee-free education policy treats all of the children and schools equally, regardless of their background experiences, needs or whether they are based in the more remote resource-limited or better-endowed urban areas. Children with and without special needs, and those whose parents are better off and those whose parents are poor are lumped together in one 'bucket'.

In addition, although some parents were willing to pay fees and contribute to the school's running costs, the policy simply ignored such an inclination, which neglected a potential fertile area for buttressing the fee-free education. At this juncture, the question becomes, "should the fee-free education funds be used to support the neediest children while continuing to collect revenue from those children whose parents can manage parental contributions to augment this well-intentioned government initiative?" We are aware that the government is in the process of reviewing the capitation grant formula, as evidenced by the production of the draft formula (entitled *The Proposed Revised Capitation Grant Allocation Formula November/December 2017*). The draft formula factors in the needs of schools and equity issues. It thus includes overhead/constant costs and adjusters. Moreover, the formula proposes the covering of overhead cost for all schools to meet the running costs of

each one, irrespective of the school size, location or endowment with physical resources. The costs to be covered under this category include water, security, teaching and learning materials, and facilities. The proposed adjusters would take into account the needs and equity issues to be brokered by enrolment, and distance from school to the council headquarters, the number of students with special needs, and the council poverty headcount, respectively. Despite the promising formula, issues such as school meal programmes have been overlooked. Moreover, the formula depends on previous years' school expenditure data being deployed to determine the percentage of the costs. This application, however, might be problematic because of inflation. Although the formula recognises students with special needs, it does not specify such students' special needs, whose unit cost remains largely indeterminate. Indeed, there are various categories of students with special needs whose unit cost might vary.

Thus, the formula might need to draw on a rigorously determined unit cost. To avoid drawbacks in the implementation of the revised formula, the process needs to be sufficiently inclusive and consultative. Parental engagement with their children's education is instrumental in children's learning outcomes. However, nearly all of the heads of schools reported that the implementation of the fee-free education policy had severely curtailed parental involvement in their children's education. The parents were reportedly less responsible for their children's schooling than in the past, pre-fee-free education period. Only a few of the parents reportedly attended teacher-parent meetings, let alone monitored their children's school progress. This lack of parental involvement endangers participatory accountability, which is crucial in building an equitable education system and providing quality education (UNESCO, 2016) yet, in educational contexts where the degree of participatory accountability is low, parents also fail to hold schools accountable for their children's poor learning outcomes (Komba, 2017). Similar challenges have been observed in other African countries that implement similar fee-free education policies. The rapid surge in enrolment posed a challenge to the quality of education (World Bank, 2009). These countries experienced a severe shortage of classrooms, desks, instructional materials and teachers' housing, as well as insufficient numbers of teachers to cater for the school-age population. These hurdles threaten the delivery of quality education. Had Tanzania effectively drawn lessons from its past and from other African countries, it could have minimised or even avoided

altogether these threats to the provision of quality basic education. Overall, the quality threats are attributable to a lack of proper planning and a limited inclusive and consultative process. In this regard, it is vital to consider various steps for ensuring that fee-free basic education policy initiatives are implemented in an orderly manner without negatively affecting the running of the schools (World Bank, 2009).

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the implementation of fee-free education was informed by a top-down policy implementation approach. The main government intention was to increase access to basic education for all children, regardless of their background. The government set goals, guidelines, and control mechanisms for the effective implementation of the policy. Despite the fact that the policy implementers are complying, there was an impression from the participants that they wished that they could modify the utilisation of the funds in order to meet their school's needs more effectively. In the light of the findings, this paper contends that, despite being misapprehended, causing confusion and parental withdrawal from school engagement, and threatening equitable and the quality delivery of education, the implementation of the fee-free basic education policy has significantly expanded access to education for children from various socio-economic backgrounds. The implementation of the fee-free basic education policy, albeit commendable, is a 'phenomenon' worth rethinking in order for Tanzania to consolidate and sustain the gains, hence, realise quality universal basic education and the 2030 global education agenda. This rethinking may focus on how best and how quickly education stakeholders in Tanzania can intervene in the trade-offs between expanded school access and quality, a re-contextualisation of the amount that each student and school receives on the basis of a rigorous context-specific cost analysis, and whether the fee-free education funds might be used to support the neediest while continuing to collect revenues from those children whose parents can afford to engage in cost-sharing within education.

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