

Experts say the UPE programme is a good initiative. However, it was implemented on a weak foundation.

BY YAHUDU KITUNZI

Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme, 28 years old going on to 29, is struggling under the weight of multiple interconnected challenges. Schools across the country face collapsing infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate funding.

Teacher shortages remain chronic, worsened by low-pay and recurring strikes that disrupt learning. In many parishes, the limited number of government schools forces children to walk long distances, further straining attendance and performance.

Together, these issues have created an environment where learning outcomes are severely compromised. Pupils often leave primary school without mastering basic literacy and numeracy, undermining the very goal of UPE—to provide every Ugandan child with a meaningful education.

Sunday Monitor learnt that in many districts, classrooms are in a sorry state—cracked walls, leaking roofs, broken desks, and unsafe learning environments. Some pupils study under trees or in makeshift structures that barely offer protection from harsh weather.

The poor infrastructure has made it difficult for children to learn effectively, worsening performance and increasing absenteeism.

Dr Juma Kakuba Sultan, a political scientist at Kyambogo University, noted that the UPE programme is a good initiative. However, it was implemented on a weak foundation.

"The government failed to establish proper checks and balances to ensure that the products of UPE would be competitive both locally and internationally. As a senior lecturer, I observe that the quality of students entering university is worrying. Many struggle to write coherently and others find it difficult to express themselves effectively. This communication gap highlights the urgent need to address quality within UPE," observed Dr Kakuba.

He said in the long term, the country will have many students accessing education, but that education will not have a meaningful impact on their lives.

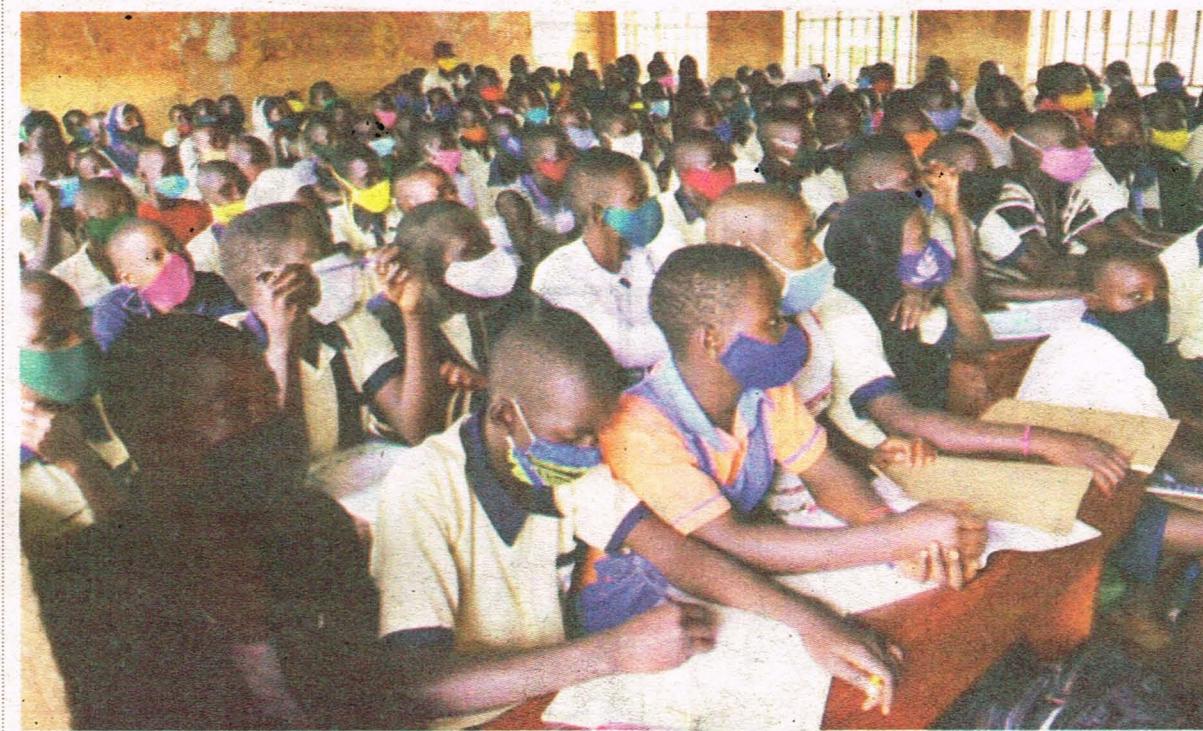
"It is critical that the government introduces policy strategies to improve quality. Despite being in power for over 40 years, many schools still lack basic infrastructure—pupils sit on the floor without desks, which is quite challenging. Yet, day after day, the government continues to establish new schools. Why should new schools be built without ensuring that what is being added truly adds value? We have not yet improved the quality of existing schools, but we keep expanding," said Dr Kakuba.

According to the political scientist, this challenge is not limited to primary schools; it extends to secondary schools and even universities, many of which are politically established.

"At the higher education level, we are receiving the products of UPE, and the task before us is enormous. The foundation determines the outcome at the top. Leaders must prioritise quality. A child who sits on the floor and studies under a tree cannot be expected to perform well," he said.

Mr Ismail Monday, an educationist, said teachers in these schools are equal-

How tutor shortages, weak infrastructure cripple UPE



Pupils attend a lesson at Muhorro Muslim Primary School in Kagadi District recently. Schools across the country face collapsing infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate funding. PHOTO/FILE

ly strained. "Most UPE institutions are severely understaffed, leaving the few available teachers overwhelmed by large numbers of pupils. It is not unusual to find one teacher handling more than one class at a time, or managing a classroom of over 100 pupils. This has compromised lesson delivery, reduced individual attention, and created immense pressure on teachers."

The educationist also noted that the teaching workforce is also discouraged by persistent issues of low pay. Teachers frequently resort to strikes to push for better salaries and improved working conditions, disrupting the learning calendar and affecting pupils' performance.

Despite their efforts, many teachers continue to earn wages that do not match the rising cost of living, leaving them demoralised.

"In many parishes across the country, government schools are still too few to meet the educational needs of the growing population. This forces thousands of children to trek long distances—sometimes several kilometres—just to reach the nearest school. Some arrive late, tired, or even drop out altogether due to the exhausting journey and safety risks along the way," he said.

Mr Steven Masiga, the coordinator of the Makerere University Mbale Centre, said hunger further complicates the situation. "Many children study on empty stomachs because their families cannot afford meals, and most schools do not provide lunch. The lack of food leaves learners weak, unfocused, and unable to fully participate in lessons. Teachers face the same challenge; they also teach on empty stomachs because many schools have no meal provisions for staff."

Mr Masiga said in most rural schools, teachers' houses are either unavailable or in poor condition. "This forces educators to walk long distances to their workplaces every day, often arriving late, tired, and less productive. The absence of proper housing also discourages teachers from staying in remote areas, contributing to high turnover and further weakening ru-

ABOUT UPE

Universal Primary Education (UPE) is a national programme implemented by various ministries, departments and agencies. It is offered to eligible and willing parents who would want their children to attend free public primary education. The government guarantees access, equity, quality and relevance of basic education which is affordable to the majority of the people.

The policy implementation is done through: Establishing, providing and maintaining quality education standards; Providing the minimum necessary facilities and resources; Making basic education equitable in order to eliminate disparities and inequalities; and Equipping every individual child with the basic skills and knowledge with which to exploit the environment for self and national development.

Source: Office of the Prime Minister

ral education systems."

Reforms needed

Despite the government's efforts to improve primary education, these challenges continue to undermine the quality of learning in UPE schools. Communities, teachers, and education advocates argue that meaningful reform is urgently needed. They recommend increased funding for school infrastructure, better remuneration for teachers, construction of more government schools in underserved areas, and introduction of feeding programs to support both learners and teachers.

Mr David Wakabi, an education expert, explained that UPE schools in Uganda face deep-rooted and interconnected challenges that undermine the programme's effectiveness.

"The shortage of teachers—currently estimated at 26,028—has created an overwhelming teacher-to-pupil ratio of 1:75, far above the recommended 1:53, compounded by severe infrastructure deficiencies. Many schools operate with dilapidated classrooms, overcrowded learning spaces averaging 101 pupils per room, and inadequate sanitation facilities, with pit latrine-to-pupil ratios as high as 1:80," said Mr Wakabi.

He said these conditions directly compromise the quality of education.

"Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and poorly resourced environments hinder both teaching and learning. The situation is worsened by limited parental involvement, which is essential for supporting children's academic progress but remains difficult to achieve in many communities. As a result, the quality of teaching suffers, with educators struggling to adapt to large class sizes and inadequate resources," he said.

While UPE has succeeded in expanding access to primary education, the persistent challenges of poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, weak parental engagement, and compromised teaching quality continue to affect academic performance. "These issues also spill over into secondary schools, where resource constraints and adaptation difficulties remain evident," he said.

Mr Wakabi stressed that these intertwined challenges highlight the urgent need for reforms and sustained investment to strengthen the foundation of UPE and ensure its long-term success in Uganda.

Steady progress?

In his 2025 State of the Nation Address (Sona), President Museveni disclosed that as a result of the government continuing to implement the UPE programme, as many as 8,824,923 learners across 12,433 government-aided primary schools have been reached. This has come at a sum of Shs184.49 billion.

"The government, through the School

Facility Grant, constructed 413 new classrooms, for primary schools and renovated 181 classrooms. Government procured and distributed 334 sets of mini laboratory equipment to 334 primary government schools to enhance practical science learning and foster early scientific curiosity among young learners," Mr Museveni said in the Sona.

He also said a total of 593 teachers were recruited to facilitate operationalisation of the newly grant-aided secondary schools in sub-counties.

"The government has successfully completed the construction of an additional 50 Seed Secondary Schools under the Uganda Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfers (UgIFT) Programme, bringing the cumulative total to 161 Seed Schools, out of the 259 planned. The majority of the remaining schools are progressing well and are on schedule for completion by June, 2025. The total number of Government aided Primary Schools in the country is now 12,550," he said.

The President said the total number of government-aided Secondary Schools is 1,416. The technical and vocational schools are 189 and government degree awarding universities are 12.

The government has introduced reforms, in the Education sector, which are aimed at re-orienting the curriculum towards a competency-based approach. This involves equipping learners with practical skills and competencies that are required in the private sector. This will help to reduce unemployment among school graduates," he said.

However, some education experts say most children are in school but not learning. This is demonstrated annually through assessments conducted by Uwezo Uganda.

According to Uwezo Uganda findings from a learning assessment carried out in 2021, the overall proportion of children in primary grades three to seven who could not read or sound out letters of the alphabet almost doubled from 6.2 percent in 2018 to 11.6 percent in 2021. Put another way: one in every 10 children in Uganda are non-readers.

While the assessment findings show some improvement in 2018 where full literacy and numeracy competence for the whole set of students in grades P3 to P7 rose, the proportion of children in P3 who are still at the 'non-reader', 'letter/syllable' and 'non-numerate' stages remain very large.

As indicated in the previous assessments, it is evident that most children are learning the basics of reading in the upper primary grades, whereas they should have mastered them in the lower primary grades so as to benefit fully from other elements in the curriculum.

Previous Uwezo assessments have revealed that a significant proportion of children delay acquiring the foundational skills even after being in school for years. The result is a large proportion of learners who are likely to leave primary schools without acquiring the basic competencies or being able to read or count.

In some cases, some of them may never learn these basic skills at all—a phenomenon we refer to as "learning poverty." This exacerbates school dropout rates as overage children lose the motivation to continue with schooling situations that deny them a chance to value education.