Lalage Bown

Chapter 1

Introduction and acknowledgements

Kenneth Kaunda's story

The former President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, tells the striking story of an episode in his childhood:

> 'The method of teaching young children in the 1920s was to gather them under a tree on which hung a cloth painted with the letters of the alphabet. I well remember sitting for hours under a shady tree chanting a-e-i-o-u, then forming the letters with my finger in the sand. We would smooth out a little area near where we were sitting and the teacher would wander round among the children correcting our letters. Each cloth was called *Nsalu* and when we had *Nsalu* one, two and three, we were promoted to the first class, when we were allowed to use slates.
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> There was no free universal education at that time and every parent had to find half a crown a year. Just before my father died, I had been ill with the influenza and so was unable to attend the opening of the school. When I did at last present myself at school, the teacher asked me for my two and sixpence, and when I told him that I had no money, he sent me back to my mother to get the necessary half-crown. I ran sobbing to her, but she had no money in the house and she wept with me. Fortunately, a kind neighbour came to our aid and lent us the money, which was in due course repaid. For so small a thing in those days could a child forfeit the privilege of his life's education.'
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> (Kaunda, K. D., 1962)

It is startling to realise that if the Kaundas' neighbour had not come up with the money, one of the major figures of twentieth century Africa would have been missing from history; and perhaps equally startling to realise that in many countries, and for many children of today, the situation is not so different from 'those days'. More than eighty years on, some schooling remains similar and there are still various obstacles in the way of many children getting an education of whatever style or quality.

This book describes an attempt to understand how African nations in the future can make sure that their children will not miss out – or risk missing out – on school.

Background to this project

In 1960, a year after the first Commonwealth Conference on Education (now the CCEM), members of the United Nations committed themselves to achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 1980. At that time, and with many nations energised by a new release from colonial rule, the goal seemed not only desirable, but also achievable.

Commonwealth African countries made serious efforts to move towards it and some achieved substantial success. For reasons which will emerge in this book, they were unsuccessful in keeping up the impetus. There were several national and international attempts to revitalise their UPE programmes, including the Education For All (EFA) resolutions at the Jomtien Conference in 1990. For the early twenty-first century, the international educational agenda was set at the World Education Forum in Dakar, when a new goal was adopted: the achievement of UPE by 2015. Early in the decade, there were a number of forces converging which gave some cause for optimism. The African Union, the Commonwealth and the United Nations are all seriously committed to the effort and world opinion has been mobilised by such initiatives as the Commission for Africa and the work of international NGOs, including Oxfam and Action Aid. As a result, substantial new external resources were being made available to African education. With debt relief alongside, African countries therefore had more resources to put into UPE expansion.

The current backdrop of global recession, however, may have serious effects on national economies and on their capacity to capitalise on the additional resources provided and/or promised. There still is, in any case, a serious question as to whether, in the enthusiasm of international gatherings, Commonwealth African countries may have entered into over-ambitious undertakings. Given the realisation, reinforced by the studies in this book, that UPE programmes require quite long lead-times (e.g. it takes time to train teachers and build permanent classrooms), it may be that 2015 is an unrealistic deadline. The EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) for 2006 raises these doubts: 'Progress towards UPE has been slow overall since the World Education Forum in Dakar … many countries still combine low enrolment ratios with insufficient capacity to accommodate all children. Ensuring that enrolled children remain in school until the last grade of primary schooling is a continuing challenge. … Newly published data on learning outcomes suggest that average achievement levels have decreased in recent years in sub-Saharan African countries.' (Burnett et al., 2005). The report suggests that twenty-three African countries have a low chance of reaching UPE by 2015.[1]

Some of the nations currently struggling have in the past come close to UPE, at least in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratios. We need to understand why it fell apart. As Peter Williams has written:

> 'It somehow seems as if nothing is being learned from the past and as if yesterday's mistakes are being recklessly repeated all over the Continent [of Africa]. Whilst each situation has its own special features, it is worthwhile to revisit previous experience and draw appropriate lessons, adapting them as necessary to local circumstances. African Governments and their international collaborators must try to forestall possibilities of future regression and to ensure the suitability of UPE in Africa this time round, if they are to meet the goals to which they have committed themselves.' (in Beveridge et al., 2005)

The Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC) was aware that, for a number of reasons, governments (including ministries of education) have little institutional memory. Its research group has tried to reclaim that memory – in order to gain lessons from the past. The researchers aimed to answer the question: *How can Commonwealth developing*

countries, once having attained Universal Primary Education – assuming that they will be successful – maintain it? This enquiry into the vicissitudes of primary education programmes in some diverse African countries was undertaken to learn from collective experience, for the benefit of Commonwealth and national policy-makers. The objects were to study what had happened in these selected countries and to look at what lay behind their achievements in UPE and at any setbacks they subsequently suffered. The focus was on educational policies, but the research project was framed in the awareness that education does not happen in a vacuum and that account has to be taken of various economic, political and social pressures which may affect the progress of educational provision.

Given that a whole range of factors will affect educational demand and colour educational provision, no-one would suggest that there is a single magic formula for arriving at UPE and staying there, but from detailed study of five very different countries, it was possible to arrive at some general lessons and some basic principles.

A general synthesis of the outcomes of the enquiry was contributed to the 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, held in Cape Town in December 2006; and a short paper on it was presented to ministers there by Dr Gituro Wainaina, who was a member of the research group. This book gives a description of each of the case studies on which the synthesis was based and an extended discussion of conclusions. The case studies are to be found in Chapters 2 to 6 and the general conclusions in Chapter 7. The main work was carried out in 2006, in order to have a preliminary report available for the 16th CCEM at Cape Town. This joint document was presented by Dr Gituro Wainaina under the title *Attaining and Maintaining Universal Primary Education in Commonwealth Africa – Learning from Experience.* Since then, some of the data in some of the studies has been up-dated; but the team believes that in any case the work will maintain its value for some time to come, since these are longitudinal studies, showing trends and recurring phenomena.

Exploration of meanings

This was an open enquiry into what did and did not work, but in preliminary consultations some concepts were explored. To start with, the term UPE is problematic, owing to different ideas of universality and of primary education. Here *universality* has been taken to refer not to universal opportunity/access, but to *universal enrolment and attendance.* We have followed the GMR in using the definition of *primary education* of the International Standard Classification for Education (ISCED): 'Programmes normally designed on a unit or project basis to give pupils a sound basis in reading, writing and mathematics and an elementary understanding of subjects such as history, geography, natural sciences, social sciences, art and music. Religious instruction may also be featured. *These subjects serve to develop pupils' ability to obtain and use information they need about their home, community, country etc.* [our italics].' This may seem rather ambitious in the light of the kind of educational conditions described by Kenneth Kaunda and still sometimes extant; but it serves as a reminder of the richness of opportunity which primary education can promise and the italicised sentence indicates the expected benefits which pupils should derive from their primary schooling.

The advantage of this definition, based on educational purpose and content, is that it avoids technical matters such as age of entry and length of programmes; although it is to be noted that these technical issues have relevance to costs and that because of national differences in the coverage of primary education, international comparisons are not always easy. At the present time, a number of countries are melding primary education with some secondary studies and are using the term Universal Basic Education (UBE) instead of UPE. This is the case with Malawi and Ghana. Nigeria also uses the expression UBE, but with the meaning of universality of access regardless of age, and its national programmes of UBE include adults and out-of-school youth.

A third term in need of an agreed definition is *sustainability*, as a concept and as a goal. A serviceable one for the concept of educational sustainability would be: the achievement of provision sufficient to attain UPE and the conservation and development of that provision so that UPE can be maintained without overstretching available resources. There is still, however, the issue of sustainability as a goal. Many of the politicians who signed up to the goal of UPE in 2015 are no longer responsible for their national educational programmes, but their successors have to ask themselves: will the 2015 deadline be one at which a first cohort of all boys and girls of the relevant age has completed a course of primary education or one at which the entry to the first level will have reached 100 per cent? The answer is likely to be the latter, at best; and on these terms, no one can assume that the provision will actually be sustainable. This reinforces our contention that it is essential to have a primary education strategy in place based on an understanding of what factors are known to have contributed to or derogated from UPE in the past.

Design and plan of research

As already explained, the work focused on case studies of five countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia. They were chosen for their diversity. They are geographically spread, from East, South-Central and West Africa and they entered independence after the colonial period in very different situations. While Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria all had a sizeable educated class, Zambia had only 104 graduates. While Ghana, Nigeria and Zambia had the economic advantage of substantial mineral resources at the time, Kenya and Tanzania were less favoured, Tanzania having almost no financial reserves to fall back on. On the other hand, Tanzania perhaps had an advantage over the others when it came to the medium of education, having an indigenous lingua franca in Swahili; others had several dominant indigenous languages, none of which was used throughout the country (although of course Swahili was widely spoken in Kenya). In terms of administrative structures for delivering education, Nigeria was distinct from the others in its complex federal structure, within which different regional/state governments worked differing educational policies. In terms of politics, the ruling ideologies in the five countries ranged from African socialism and *ujamaa* to pragmatic capitalism. In all contexts, educational enrolment showed an upward trend over the turn of the 20th century; the diagram in the Appendix gives a picture of the changes in gross enrolment ratios between 1991 and 2004.

Three of these nations were studied in depth – Ghana, Kenya and Zambia – as there was

relatively plentiful information about all of them: solid statistical evidence and continuity of data, so that it was possible to see trends. The two others were subjected to less intensive study. Despite the paucity of reliable data, it was believed to be important to gain at least some understanding of what happened in Nigeria, 'the Giant of Africa', just because of its size and significance in Africa. Tanzania also stood out, for a quite different reason; it had extremely strained resources, but still racked up considerable achievements in expanding education. Had time and funding allowed, it might have been illuminating to add other countries to the study, e.g. Malawi and Mozambique; other researchers may wish to take on the task.

The research team was made up of UK-based volunteers, all members of the CEC, each working with an African consultant from the relevant country. In four cases, the studies were carried out in close partnership; unfortunately, owing to communications difficulty, it was only possible to locate a Tanzanian scholar at a late stage and although he made valuable comments, the study (see Chapter 6) was entirely the work of the UK researcher. The whole project was carried out between April and September 2006. The CEC prepared an initial design, with a pro-forma set of questions to be investigated, to ensure at least minimum comparability. The questions covered the educational system, demographic issues, societal, economic and political factors in each case and the international context. After approval from the Commonwealth Secretariat, which provided the core funding, the team was assembled and a weekend workshop held in Dorking in July to do the groundwork on each of the papers. Additional funding was provided by CREATE, the major research consortium based at the University of Sussex. Research then involved consulting sources and experts in the various countries, the case studies were written up in September, then collated and the synthesis prepared in October for distribution in advance of the CCEM.

The speed of the project was only possible because of the researchers' depth of knowledge and good contacts among scholars in Africa and elsewhere, and because of the generosity of those scholars in making comments and suggestions.

Further work has been done on the case-studies, as said above, including several face-to-face consultations among the UK-based scholars and e-mail correspondence with African consultants. Within the team there has also been some peer appraisal. It should be stressed that this has all been done in a voluntary spirit, in the belief that the subject is of considerable public importance.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, the education section of the Commonwealth Secretariat was the main backer of this whole exploration. Their names are also listed at the front; but we must make special mention of the personal interest and commitment of Dr Henry Kaluba, with whom the CEC has had so much fruitful interchange.

Note

1 These countries were (Commonwealth countries in italics): Benin, *Botswana,* Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, *The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya,* Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, *Mozambique,* Niger, Senegal, *Swaziland, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia,* and *Zimbabwe.*