



OP-ED

THE STATUS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA

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Education plays a major role in the economic development of any country. Education, coupled with human and skills development, is an important component of every Government, as it builds the competencies of the workforce responsible for service delivery and development. To this effect, investment in human capital is key towards achieving sustainable economic development. **Primary education is a basic right of every child, and education policymakers around the world are increasingly aware of its potential to impact child development positively.** Therefore, investing in human capital through the provision of primary education, brings about powerful social change and creates opportunities for a developing country like Zambia to realise its full potential.

The Zambian education system has a 7-5-4 structure, namely 7 years at primary school, 2 and 3 years at junior and higher secondary school amounting to 5 years, and 4 years at university for undergraduate degrees. Primary education in Zambia is from grade one to seven and has an entry age of seven years. **According to the 2017 Educational Statistical Bulletin, the 2017 national Gross Intake Rate (GIR), which is a rough measure of access to grade one stood at 110.0%.** The GIR is the total number of entrants in the first grade of primary education, regardless of age expressed as a percentage of the population at the official primary school

entrance. GIR of over 100%, like in the case of Zambia, implies that both under and over-aged learners enter grade 1 at the same time.

The Net Intake Rate (NIR) which is the percentage of seven year olds who enter school for the first time, expressed as percentage of the total number of seven-year-old population stood at 47.7% in 2017, this implies that 47.7 % of the learners in Grade one were of the official entrance age of 7 years. The 2017 statistics also showed that 8.6% and 43.1% of the learners were below and above the official entrance age of 7 years respectively. **The 43.1% of learners above the official entrance age is concerning as studies have proven that cognitive development in a person is at its peak during the early years in one's life.**

The Implementation and adherence to the official age of entry into Grade 1 remains a challenge in Zambia, especially in the rural areas where the reporting of childbirths remains low. For this reason school officials find it challenging to assess whether or not, a child is eligible for Grade 1. Rural areas also experience high levels of poverty which has resulted in many children being malnourished stunted. Without proper birth documentation, such children may be seen as underage thereby disadvantaging them to enroll for Grade 1.

The Zambian Government has made efforts with regards to achieving universal primary

education by being a signatory to several international protocols such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Government has also introduced **free Primary Education Policy and the School Feeding Program** as measures aimed at increasing accessibility to primary education. Another measure which the **Government has taken up is an increase in permanent classroom spaces at primary level.** The 2017 Education Statistical Bulletin showed that there was an increase in the total number of permanent classroom spaces from 39,941 in 2016 to 43,627 in 2017.

However, there have been some challenges that have characterised the provision of primary education which include, among others, inadequate budget financing. According to international standards, such as the 2015 Incheon Declaration, signatory countries were urged to commit 4-6% of their Gross Domestic Product or 15-20% of their public expenditures to improving the status of education. The 2020 budget allocation for education shows a reduction from K13.6 billion in 2019 (representing 15.3% of the national budget) to K13.1 billion (representing 12.4% of the national budget) which is a setback in improving the status of education in Zambia.

The 2017 statistical bulletin also revealed a bias in the location of primary schools. It was reported that 81.7% of primary schools were located within rural areas. In as much as this may be a good move with regards to reducing developmental inequalities, it disadvantages primary school going pupils from poor households living in urban areas. It has been noted that urban areas have a large concentration of private primary schools, which however, have proven to be more expensive and maybe out of reach for the disadvantaged poor urban households. Secondly, it has been reported that most townships in urban areas record high birth rates which increases the demand for primary school. Therefore, there is need for more primary schools to be located in urban areas.

In conclusion **Primary education is important, in fact it is essential for numerous reasons including; ensuring that children acquire basic**

literacy and allowing for students to learn through socialization. Primary education also fulfils the special needs of students during the first few years of their schooling life and it has specific goals that make it a critical component of an educational system as a whole. Therefore, achieving universal primary education is one of the ways in which Zambia as a nation can enhance human development.

In view of improving access to primary education in Zambia, PMRC recommends the following;

- Government should ensure budget allocation towards education meets international standards of 20% of the total budget.
- There is need for sensitization on the importance of recording childbirths as it will help assess the eligibility of one's age of entry as well as provide information that will ensure effective planning for primary schools.
- There is need for a needs assessment to be carried out which will help Government assess areas that require more primary schools.



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