

To cite this article: Martin Söderberg, Vanja Berggren and Edward Kumakech (2024). NATIONAL INTEGRATION OR SCHOOL SEGREGATION? IMPACTS OF ETHNO-REGIONAL MECHANISMS OF PATRONAGE ON UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN UGANDA, International Journal of Education and Social Science Research (IJESSR) 7 (5): 208-229 Article No. 982, Sub Id 1536

NATIONAL INTEGRATION OR SCHOOL SEGREGATION? IMPACTS OF ETHNO-REGIONAL MECHANISMS OF PATRONAGE ON UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN UGANDA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37500/IJESSR.2024.7515>

ABSTRACT

Uganda is an exceptionally diverse, postconflict, sub-Saharan African country with a large share of its population being school-aged children. The launch of universal primary education by the incumbent President Yoweri Museveni was essentially carried out under the banner of national integration and reconciliation. However, contrary to the pronounced ambition, the reform may neither have led to increased equity within the primary education domain, nor to unification among pupils and communities. The article highlights and scrutinizes the underlying factors that in practice have turned the implementation of universal primary education into a double-edged sword. The particular mode of decentralization and districtization in Uganda has entailed a tremendous variability in primary school performances and learning outcomes along economic, social, and geographical lines. At the same time, primary education has become a key integral of the ruling party's patronage machinery, as well as a bargaining chip in relations between national and subnational elites. Secondary sources and data from, for instance, Uwes Uganda and Uganda National Examinations Board, are explored in accordance with a comprehensive framework of political analysis.

KEYWORDS: Uganda, primary education, patronage, decentralization, districtization, Museveni

INTRODUCTION

Objective

Uganda is a country with one of the youngest populations in the world, i.e. nearly half of Ugandans are under the age of fourteen, and about one in five are under the age of five (see Kabay 2021, p. 37). These demographic features make the issue of primary education highly relevant to Uganda. According to the state minister for Primary Education Joyce Kakucu, a staggering 8.6 million children in Uganda are currently enrolled in public primary schools (Katushabe 2023). Hence, the politics and organizational arrangements that surround education in general, and primary education in particular, may not only be important for the young learners, but could also potentially be decisive for the

country's future. At the same time, there has been relatively little analytical focus on the politics that pertain to primary education in sub-Saharan Africa, leaving the field generally under-researched (Hossain and Hickey 2019).

Uganda has since 1986 been governed by the rebel group-turned-party National Resistance Movement, NRM, under the leadership of the incumbent President Yoweri Museveni, who is now serving his sixth term in office. Back in 1997, as part of a nationalistic and inclusive agenda, the NRM Government launched a largescale investment program to introduce universal primary education in Uganda. One of the key, pronounced ambitions of the reform was to bring about a well-needed national integration of the ethnically and socially diverse society, by equalizing all Ugandan children's chances to finish primary school (see Söderberg 2023). However, more than twenty years after the completion of the investment program, it is evident that universal primary education has not entailed the aspired national unification within and through schooling and learning. In fact, one of the most profound characteristics of the primary education domain in Uganda is its variability in school performances and learning outcomes depending on, for example, local economic conditions, school ownership, the urban-rural divide, the ethno-regional situation, or geographical factors (Namara 2020; Datzberger and Le Mat 2019).

This article's overall research question is why the introduction of universal primary education in Uganda, despite the political commitment and intentions, neither has contributed to increased equity, nor unity, among pupils and communities. In other words, what are the current drivers of school segregation along economic, ethnic, or geographical lines, which in effect offset the unifying potential of universal primary education? In order to answer these questions, the analysis must arguably revolve around the dynamics that have steered the implementation of universal primary education in Uganda, and that in practice has turned the reform into a double-edged sword. The case of Uganda may be a perfect example of how mechanisms of regime preservation may undermine strives to transform societal structures through primary education (cf. Datzberger 2018). By scrutinizing how institutional fragmentation, and exchanges between powerful national and subnational actors, play out in the Ugandan classrooms, the article may fill a gap in the existing literature on universal primary education.

Theoretical framework

The analysis draws heavily upon the works of development economist Paul Bennell (2021), sociologist Naomi Hossain, and political scientist Sam Hickey with colleagues (2019), who essentially view primary education as deeply embedded in the intricacies of societies' political economies. Accordingly, the enactments of primary education in sub-Saharan Africa, and the implementation of education reform, are intimately related to the power relations between state actors and various other subnational structures of authority (Bennell 2021). In other words, primary education is far more complex than teaching children elementary skills such as reading and writing. In Africa and elsewhere, public schools are recurrently turned to purposes other than providing quality education in line with broad public interests. In turn, pupils may be situated in the epicentre of a variety of multifactorial political processes, e.g. nation-building, management of ethnic dynamics, and regime preservation (see

Hickey and Hossain 2019). From this perspective, it becomes important to recognize the need to ‘historicize’ the analysis of African politics. Arguably, in a postcolonial and postconflict country like Uganda, any complex political developments, including public service reforms, are virtually incomprehensible outside of their historical contexts (see Söderberg 2023).

Uganda’s political landscape can fundamentally be viewed as permeated with ethnic relations of power. Ethnicity here refers to a group identity in the context of specific ideas that revolve around a common ancestry and sociocultural and/or linguistic heritage. For individuals, the ethnicity may comprise deep-seated sentiments of belonging, influence how the social world is perceived, and offer a backdrop of shared historical and cultural content. In this regard, ethnic conflicts are not the results of any primordial animosity, but rather functions of, for example, one group’s domination over another, or perceived injustices regarding the distribution of material resources (Amone 2015; Söderberg 2023). Following the political scientist Simone Datzberger (2018), it is important to see the confinements onto education of material conditions, while considering the potentially transformative power of schooling and learning onto the economic constraints. In the case of Uganda, poverty must be understood as multidimensional in the sense that it interconnects with other contextual factors with geographic and political connotations. Subsequently, poverty is not something that just happens to people, but rather the compound outcome of layers of political decision-making over time (cf. Bennell 2021; Datzberger 2018).

In Uganda, it may be critical to put under a microscope the power relations relevant to primary education, which may find expression in the extensions of structural exchanges between national elites and local-level political actors. Accordingly, despite the legitimizing rhetoric of decentralized public services, the relationship networks in Uganda between the political elite in Kampala and the peripheral, subnational structures of authority, may arguably be understood out of the logics of patronage (Khisa and Rwengabo 2022; Ojambo 2022). Patronage can be defined as a tactic to build and maintain political coalitions, in which influential political actors use state resources systematically to bestow subnational groups and factions with economic opportunities or other privileges (cf. Hickey and Hossain 2019; Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). A particular configuration of patronage has been labelled ‘decentralized rent-management’, i.e. the allowing of peripheral factions to use their positions in relation to the central state to derive ‘rents’ in terms of different kinds of material gains and advantages (Kjær and Muwanga 2019). The political coalitions undergirded by decentralized rent-management may have very little to do with political beliefs. Rather, they may serve as instruments to control the state and maintain *status quo* (cf. Ojambo 2022). Consequently, it is imperative to shed light on the overall political arrangements that undergird primary education, in particular since they may ultimately decide the learning outcomes of Ugandan school children (cf. Söderberg 2023).

Methodological procedure

An explorative approach (see Kanyamurwa et al. 2022; Elizabeth, Kanyamurwa, and Babalanda 2022) was employed to review secondary sources, and to identify valid information that pertains to variability in school performance and learning outcomes in the case of Uganda. Following Robert Ojambo (2022),

important research results were sorted and analysed thematically in order to examine the background of the variability in question. Furthermore, based on the theoretical framework, secondary sources were studied to grasp the central aspects of the political and economic context in which the identified divisions exist. An explorative, thematic procedure allows for discoveries of key meanings of relations between factors, and descriptions of contextual complexities, which if not brought to the forefront would have risked becoming invisible. Primary schools that receive any funds from the government in Kampala are referred to as public schools, whereas primary schools that do not receive any government funding are referred to as private schools (cf. Sakaue 2018, p. 114). For the purpose of categorizing roughly the drivers of school segregation in Uganda, a distinction was made between inter-district and intra-district variability in primary education respectively, i.e. factors that pertain to the variability between different parts of the country, on one the one hand, and the variability between different schools, on the other.

The latest data on learning outcomes of primary education in Uganda was retrieved from the most recent national survey of basic literacy and numeracy, conducted in August-September 2021 by the independent research institute Uwes Uganda (2021). Following Simone Datzberger and Marielle Le Mat (2019), the relationship between learning outcomes and economic conditions at regional and subregional levels, was mapped using the size of the pertinent geographic area's respective share of the national GDP as proxy for poverty level. Notably, many Ugandan children also drop out of school, and it has been estimated that just one-third of the pupils in rural areas actually complete primary education (see Kim and Jun 2022). Well aware of the segregating effects of high dropout rates in Uganda, this study nevertheless concentrates exclusively on Ugandan pupils and their schools, in particularly learners in the 'latter grades', here defined as the grades three to seven. It is in the third grade of primary school that children in Uganda begin to study English, and this grade interval is predominantly subject to evaluations of school performance (see Uwes Uganda 2021).

By the end of the seventh grade of primary school, all Ugandan pupils take the so-called Primary Leaving Examination, PLE. In order to further study disparities in primary education provision, the aggregate PLE results from each administrative district in 2023 and 2020, as compiled by the Uganda National Examinations Board, were retrieved from the African internet platforms My School Online Uganda (n.d.) and Advance Africa (n.d.) respectively. The aggregate PLE results may arguably serve as indicators of the overall primary school performance of the districts in question. After eliminating administrative subdivisions such as cities and municipalities, the twenty best performing districts and the twenty worst performing districts in Uganda were selected for comparison. Interestingly, 15 districts were found to be among the top twenty, and 12 districts were among the bottom twenty, in both 2023 and 2020, which points to a certain consistency in the PLE results, and thus in school performances, for the better or worse. In turn, these 15 best performing districts and the 12 worst performing districts were pointed out geographically to both illustrate and underscore regional divisions in Ugandan primary education provision (see Figure 1).

THE UGANDAN ETHNO-POLITICAL DIVERSITY

Ethnicity and subnational power structures

Uganda is an exceptionally pluralistic and heterogeneous country in terms of culture, traditions, language, ethnicity, and religion. By the 2005 amendments of the 1995 Constitution, as many as sixty-two separate, indigenous communities are recognized (see Alava et al. 2020; Elizabeth, Kanyamurwa, and Babalanda 2022; Amone 2021), which makes Uganda one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world (Kabay 2021). The three largest ethnic communities in Uganda are the Bantu-speaking Baganda, Banyankole, and Busoga. Although the Ugandan regions are multi-ethnic, the Nilotic and Central Sudanic ethno-linguistic communities are primarily confined to the northern and eastern parts of the country. In other words, Uganda can roughly be divided along the north-eastern gradient, i.e. between the Bantu-speaking majority in the Central Region and Western Region on the one hand, and the Nilotic- and Central Sudanese-speaking minorities in the Northern Region and Eastern Region, on the other (cf. Amone 2021; Kabay 2021; see Figure 1).

Uganda's borders encompass several well-established, pre-colonial Bantu kingdoms, i.e. Tooro, Bunyoro, Ankole, and Rwenzururu in the Western Region, Busoga in the Eastern Region, and Buganda, which currently is congruent with the Central Region. In addition, some of Uganda's communities can actually be described as long-standing, ethno-linguistic nations, e.g. the Nilotic- or Central Sudanic-speaking people of Acholi, Alur, Karamoja, Langi, Iteso, Sebei, and Madi, or the Bantu-speaking Bagisu (see Khisa and Rwengabo 2022; Alava et al. 2020). In fact, the Ugandan demographic diversity comprises persistent, ethno-regional concentrations of power that constitute potentially strong, subnational, political authority structures (see Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). Ranging from the traditional, hierarchically ruled, and centralized kingdoms, to the ethno-regional communities that appoint leaders among chiefs, clansmen, and lineage heads, Uganda's political landscape includes a plethora of coalesced, local factions and elites that in some parts have centuries-long histories (Alava et al. 2020). In the everyday lives of Ugandans, the various ethno-regional identities may actually imply stronger allegiances and sentiments of belonging, or even 'citizenship', than the Ugandan republic does (Kim and Jun 2022; Alava et al. 2020).

Historically rooted social and economic divisions

Throughout Uganda's modern history, ethnicity has been a politically charged topic. Besides being the foundation of social identity and community in Uganda, issues that pertain to ethnicity continuously influence the framing of political narratives, undergird group-level divisions, and exacerbate social tensions (Khisa and Rwengabo 2022; Amone 2015). During the military dictatorships that followed after the independence in 1962, Uganda became notorious for tribalism and ethno-political violence, including the indiscriminate persecution of minorities such as the Acholi. Some of the present ethnic divisions can actually be traced back to the 'divide-and-rule' tactic utilized by the British colonizers that, for instance, involved collusion with the Buganda Kingdom in the violent subjugation of the Bunyoro Kingdom and the Acholi nation (see Alava et al. 2020; Amone 2015; Khisa and Rwengabo, 2022). President Museveni is from the Banyankole people in Western Uganda. Yet, in the war that led

up to him taking over state power in 1986 his troops predominately came from the Western, Bantu-speaking Banyarwanda, while the former regime's soldiers mainly were Acholi or Lango (see Khisa 2019; Kakuba 2022). Hence, the sentiments of Nilotic groups such as the Acholi, Lango, and Iteso toward the NRM Government have ranged from scepticism to resistance (Alava et al. 2020; Simson 2018; see Söderberg 2023).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the far-reaching market liberalizations and privatizations that Uganda committed to under the oversight of the World Bank and IMF, rendered in a considerable economic growth rate. Yet, the subsistence-level farmers and pastoralists in the northern and eastern parts of Uganda were practically barred from the new economic opportunities. Subsequently, the fast economic recovery of the fertile crescent around Lake Victoria may actually have reinforced the pre-existing economic imbalances, and thus exacerbated ethnic tensions (see Reinikka and Collier 2001; Söderberg 2023; Elizabeth, Kanyamurwa, and Babalanda 2022). Furthermore, in the northern parts of Uganda the armed insurgency persisted for another twenty years after President Museveni first took office, and the border areas have recurrently been afflicted by displacements and other spillover effects of the civil wars in South Sudan. The mineral mining industry in Karamoja has been paved with accusations of human rights abuses, and the pastoralist people in the region may be particularly susceptible to certain forms of violence, such as cattle raiding (Söderberg 2023; Datzberger and Le Mat 2019; Simson 2018). In other words, the polarized social and economic conditions under which people live in Uganda continuously create fundamentally different collective experiences of the state (cf. Amone 2021).

NATIONAL INTEGRATION THROUGH PRIMARY EDUCATION

The nationalistic ideology of the NRM Government

To bridge the ethno-regional divides in Uganda has been described as both urgent and exceedingly difficult. Notably, when President Museveni took office in 1986, he promised to unite the country and include all peoples of Uganda in a revival of the nation-building project (see Khisa and Rwengabo 2022; Kjær and Muwanga 2019). From the start, there was an awareness within the ranks of the NRM Government that ethno-political tensions were potentially dangerous obstacles for postconflict, social and economic development (see Söderberg 2023). Accordingly, in the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, it is stated under the National Objectives section that “Every effort shall be made to integrate all the peoples of Uganda while at the same time recognising the existence of their ethnic, religious, ideological, political and cultural diversity.” (Parliament of Uganda, n.d.) President Museveni has since, at least rhetorically, rejected sectarianism and tribal identity politics, while staying committed to an ideology of Ugandan nationalism (see Kakuba 2022; Elizabeth, Kanyamurwa, and Babalanda 2022).

The unifying potential of universal primary education

In the mid-1990s, the NRM Government turned its attention to primary education, and the schooling of children became deemed as a potential catalyst for national integration (cf. Hickey and Hossain

2019; Söderberg 2023). In fact, the idea that an inclusive primary education system can serve as a powerful instrument to promote nation-building and foster a national identity, has historically been embraced by democratic and non-democratic societies alike (see Paglayan 2021). The rationale is that accessible and equitable primary education, besides improving literacy and numeracy, can transform the society in a direction towards unification by forging loyalty to the state, instilling common values, and balancing out social and economic differences (see Söderberg 2023). State-funded, ‘free’ education had also for some time been highlighted within the development discourse regarding Africa, and was a keynote UN Millennium Development Goal (see Tromp and Datzberger 2021; Namara 2020), which was coupled with promises of extensive aid donations and credits (Bennell 2021).

In correspondence, the notion of universal primary education took root in the Kampala corridors of power, undergirded by optimistic stipulations that reformed primary education would bridge ethno-regional divides, remove language barriers, close gaps in political attitudes between different ethnic communities, heal rifts between people who had been on opposing sides during post-independence conflict, equalize opportunities for economic development, and facilitate advancements of Ugandan patriotism and unity. In fact, universal primary education turned into one of the NRM Government’s principal, and most celebrated, domestic policy objectives in relation to national unification (see Elizabeth, Kanyamurwa and Babalanda 2022; Söderberg 2023; Datzberger and Le Mat 2019).

INTER-DISTRICT VARIABILITY IN EDUCATION PROVISION

Deep geographical differences in learning outcomes

A considerable time has elapsed since universal primary education was introduced in Uganda. Still, a salient characteristic of public primary education is its significant variability in terms of performance and learning outcomes depending on regional and local circumstances. The reasons behind the variability are apparently related to different levels of poverty as well as geographical factors (cf. Wenske and Ssentanda 2021; Namara 2020; Datzberger and Le Mat 2019). First of all, according to Uwes Uganda (2021) there are consistent differences between the regions in both literacy and numeracy, i.e. the Central Region is far in the lead, the Western Region is in a middle position, and the Eastern and Northern Regions have similar and comparatively low learning outcomes. Well over half of primary school pupils in the Central Region, and almost half of the pupils in the Western region, can read English and complete basic arithmetic tasks. In contrast, just one-third of the primary school pupils in the Northern and Eastern Regions respectively are able to do the same. For instance, whereas 62 percent of girls in the latter grades of primary school in the Central Region can read words in English, only 30 percent of the girls in the Northern region are able to do the same (Uwes Uganda 2021).

Urban areas and the Western Region make progress

Primary schools in urban centres generally provide comparatively better-quality education than rural schools (see Tromp and Datzberger 2021; Namara 2020). Kampala has about five percent of Uganda’s population but generates over one-fifth of the total GDP. About two-thirds of Kampala’s latter-grade

primary school pupils also show adequate reading competency, which is significantly higher than the national average (see Datzberger and Le Mat 2019; Uweso Uganda 2021). In terms of the aggregate results of the 2023 Primary Leaving Examinations, the urban primary schools in and around Kampala, i.e. in Entebbe, Mukono, Kira, and Masaka, generally excel, along with many of the Buganda districts, e.g. Kalangala, Kyotera, Lyantonde, and Nakaseke. Likewise, the municipal and city schools in the urban centres of the Western Region, e.g. in Ntungamo, Bushenyi, Fort Portal, Rukugiri, Kabale, Kasese, and Mbarara are associated with satisfactory primary school performances (My School Online Uganda, n.d.).

The thriving southern parts of the Western Region comprises a bit more than ten percent of Uganda's population, yet produces more than a quarter of Uganda's GDP. In the latter grades of primary school, the share of pupils with sufficient reading and numeracy competency almost doubles the national average of about one-third, and has Uganda's highest number of new entrances into secondary school (Datzberger and Le Mat 2019). According to the aggregate results of the 2023 Primary Leaving Examinations per district, the Western-Region districts in the traditional, Bantu-speaking, subnational kingdoms of Ankole, Toro, and Rwenzururu respectively, also generally display good learning outcomes (My School Online Uganda, n.d.).

The Northern and Eastern regions fall behind

The rural parts of the Northern Region, on the other hand, are arguably the most economically marginalized and neglected in the country, with the least developed infrastructure in terms of roads, electricity, and proper healthcare (Datzberger and Le Mat 2019). Similarly, the Eastern Region continues to fall behind according to primary school results, as well as other social and economic indicators, which accentuates further the different economic conditions on each side of the north-eastern gradient (Uweso Uganda 2021). Symptomatically, the districts spanning from north-western to north-eastern Uganda generally display the least impressive learning outcomes of primary school (see Maractho 2017; Söderberg 2023; Namara 2020). The Karamoja heartland in the north-eastern part of Uganda accounts for less than one percent of the total GDP, and less than one-third of Karamoja primary school pupils in the latter grades have sufficient competency in reading and numeracy. For instance, in Gulu district in the Northern Region of Uganda just about one in four pupils in the latter grades have adequate reading and numeracy skills (Datzberger and Le Mat 2019).

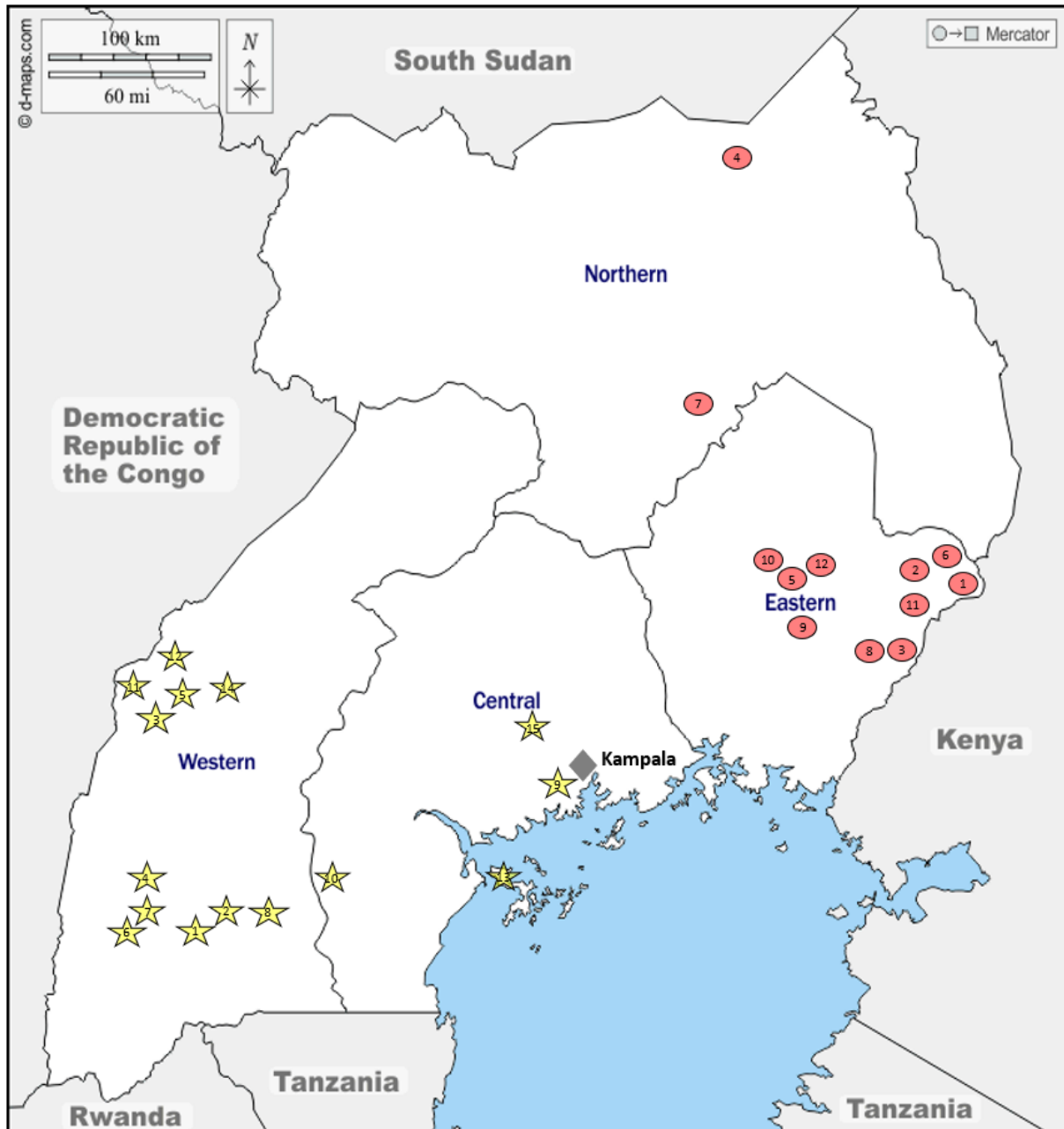


Figure 1. Map of Uganda with regions. The fifteen best performing school districts marked in yellow and the twelve worst performing school districts marked in red.

Differences in school performances by district

The 2023 and 2020 aggregate PLE results by district again demonstrate distinct differences in learning outcomes and school performance depending on the sides of the north-eastern gradient. In fact, all the best performing districts are either in the Central Region or Western Region, whereas all worst performing districts are in the Northern Region or Eastern Region (see Figure 1.). Several Nilotic-speaking, Northern-Region districts in the Acholi, Alur, Lango, and Karamoja heartlands respectively,

perform significantly below national averages, e.g. Kitgum, Alebtong, and Amudat. Moreover, the West Nile subregion in north-western Uganda, which is the home of many Central Sudanic-speaking people, has a few districts that stand out in terms of their low PLE results, i.e. Zombo, Arua, Adjumani, Yumbe, and Moyo, although they are not among the absolute worst performing districts in the country. In the Eastern Region, the districts dominated by the Nilotic-speaking Sebei people, i.e. Bukwo, Kapchorwa, and Kween, and the Nilotic-speaking Iteso, e.g. Butebo, Kibuku, Kapelebyong, and Soroti, are characterized by relatively poor learning outcomes. Likewise, the Eastern-Region districts in the Bantu-speaking Busoga kingdom and the Bugisu subregion, e.g. Bugiri, Luuka, Namayingo, Manafwa, and Sironko, also struggle with comparatively low PLE results (My School Online Uganda, n.d.).

Region	Subregion / Kingdom	District	Rank
Western Region	Ankole	Sheema	1
Western Region	Ankole	Mbarara	2
Western Region	Tooro	Bunyangabu	3
Western Region	Ankole	Rubirizi	4
Western Region	Tooro	Kabarole	5
Western Region	Ankole	Mitooma	6
Western Region	Ankole	Bushenyi	7
Western Region	Ankole	Kiruhura	8
Central Region	Buganda	Wakiso	9
Central Region	Buganda	Lyantonde	10
Western Region	Rwenzururu	Bundibugyo	11
Western Region	Rwenzururu	Ntoroko	12
Central Region	Buganda	Kalangala	13
Western Region	Tooro	Kyenjojo	14
Central Region	Buganda	Nakaseke	15

Table 1. The fifteen districts in Uganda that were among the twenty best performing districts in the country, in terms of Primary Leaving Examination results, both in 2023 and 2020. The ranking 1-15 is based on the aggregate results of the examinations in both 2023 and 2020. Corresponds with the fifteen, numbered, yellow stars in Figure 1.

Region	Subregion / Kingdom	District	Rank
Eastern Region	Sebei	Bukwo	1
Eastern Region	Sebei	Kapchorwa	2
Eastern Region	Bugisu	Namisindwa	3
Northern Region	Acholi	Kitgum	4
Eastern Region	Teso	Pallisa	5
Eastern Region	Sebei	Kween	6
Northern Region	Lango	Alebtong	7
Eastern Region	Bugisu	Manafwa	8
Eastern Region	Teso	Kibuku	9
Eastern Region	Teso	Serere	10
Eastern Region	Bugisu	Sironko	11
Eastern Region	Teso	Butebo	12

Table 2. The twelve districts in Uganda that were among the twenty worst performing districts in the country, in terms of Primary Leaving Examination results, both in 2023 and 2020. The ranking 1-12 is based on the aggregate results of the examinations in both 2023 and 2020, with the worst performing district ranked 1. Corresponds with the twelve, numbered, red dots in Figure 1.

EDUCATION REFORM AND THE REVIVAL OF PATRONAGE

The NRM Government takes control over primary education domain

The universal primary education programme that was launched in 1997 rendered in an elimination of school fees for all primary school-aged children in Uganda (see Söderberg, Berggren, and Kumakech 2023). A prerequisite for the implementation of universal primary education was the creation of a coherent, national school system in Uganda under the control of the central government (Bennell 2021; Kjær and Muwanga 2019). Up until that time, and after the decades of civil unrest, the assortment of rural village schools, Quran schools, and Anglican or Roman Catholic mission schools, was as splintered as the rest of the country, with each primary school essentially functioning as an isolated island (see Söderberg 2023). In correspondence, the NRM Government began to build the administrative capability and legislation to direct the domain of primary education. Initially after the launch of universal primary education, the NRM Government claimed formal ownership over the education domain, took over the management of many village schools, and obliged all schools in Uganda to register and acquire licences by the Ministry of Education and Sports. Furthermore, the NRM Government took a fund-coordinating role and, for example, effected a series of control measures to increase transparency in relation to the funding of primary schools (cf. Kjær and Muwanga 2019; see Söderberg 2023).

A renewed bureaucratic fragmentation of primary education

As regards the particular organizational arrangements in Uganda that relate to the disparities in learning outcomes per district, the implementation of universal primary education in Uganda may arguably

have entailed new forms of bureaucratic fragmentation (cf. Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). In 1998, just a year into the process of implementing universal primary education in Uganda, the reform became subject to the NRM Government's efforts to decentralize the governance of public services. The responsibility for providing primary education was principally shifted to the district-level governments, meaning that each district in Uganda became mandated to make its own priorities regarding primary education (Bennell 2021). The decentralization was introduced under the banner of bringing decision-making power closer to the citizens, increasing financial transparency, and facilitating democratic participation in public affairs (Mutaaya 2018). Moreover, decentralized education would ideally make schools more responsive to local needs, raise the local revenue for funding, enhance efficiency in the use of resources, enable teachers and schools to exercise greater professional autonomy, and aid the implementation of universal primary education by making schools and teachers more accountable (Alumu and Hassan 2019; Bennell 2021).

The decentralization of primary education in Uganda has gone hand in hand with what in the research literature has been named 'districtization'. Districtization essentially refers to the political process in which the number of districts increases as the pre-existing ones are repeatedly divided into smaller administrative units. When President Museveni came into power, Uganda had 33 districts. By 2020 the number had increased steadily to 135 (Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). As of July 2024, Uganda has as many as 146 different districts (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Notably, there are in addition eleven cities in Uganda that may *de facto* be governed as districts, yet these are outside the primary scope of this analysis. The creation of more districts in Uganda has officially been described by the NRM Government as reform efforts to exercise democratization and good governance, to ensure that government funds reach and benefit more areas apart from chief towns, and to promote local political agency and patriotic consciousness (Söderberg 2023; Khisa and Rwengabo 2022).

Government tactics to entrench its power

The actual reasons behind the ongoing districtization in Uganda, and the decentralization that followed upon the introduction of universal primary education, are utterly complex (see e.g. Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). To offer a comprehensive account of all facets is not within the scope of this article. However, any national government in Uganda that wishes to remain in power must recognize and manage not just the cultural diversity within its borders, but also the historically-rooted, ethno-regional relations of power, including the traditional, subnational structures of authority. At least in part, the process of districtization may be a response by the NRM Government to ethno-regional elites' demands for greater autonomy and larger portions of national resources (Ojambo 2022; see Söderberg 2023). There may also be elements of President Museveni seeking to prevent accusations of ethnic favouritism by striving for a kind of ethno-regional balance, or by "dividing the cake" into equal shares between regions and groups (see Simson 2018).

The political opposition in Uganda is generally kept in a short leash through the use of various forms of repression (see Alava et al. 2020; Ojambo 2022). Yet, the rule of the NRM Government may primarily be based on the logics of informal bargaining between powerful central and local political

actors. In fact, the Ugandan central state has been described as managed by ‘deals’ rather than rules and regulations (Hickey and Hossain 2019). Specifically, the NRM Government has worked continuously over time to entrench its rule by building semi-official, strategic networks and alliances with different ethno-regional groups and local factions (Kjær and Muwanga 2019). As an organization, the NRM has strived to become an all-encompassing, political mass movement, and has strategically opened up its ranks to include a wide range of political actors from different subnational divides (Ojambo 2022; Kanyamurwa et al. 2022; Kakuba 2022). In addition, the NRM has established a nationwide, broad-based, party structure from parliament to grassroots levels, which basically has become fused with state institutions, and is currently in the eyes of many Ugandans virtually inseparable from the state apparatus (Ojambo 2022). The NRM’s prominent position within national, official institutions extends its reach of power across Uganda (Alava et al. 2020; Ojambo 2022), and means that state resources can be used to facilitate coalition-building with lower-level political elites for the purpose of ensuring President Museveni’s political survival (Hickey and Hossain 2019; Khisa and Rwengabo 2022).

Primary education and elite coalition building

From the perspective of regime preservation, the districtization combined with decentralization of public services such as primary education, actually constitute a form of patronage, i.e. an exchange with systemic features in which the NRM Government uses state resources to bestow different ethno-regional groups and local factions with various economic opportunities in return for political support (cf. Hickey and Hossain 2019; Khisa and Rwengabo 2022; Alava et al. 2020). Notably, public primary education in Uganda is neither paid for by parents, nor via local tax revenue (Hickey and Hossain 2019). Instead, the funds for primary education, out of which a large portion comes from foreign donors, are channelled from the state budget and received by the eligible district administrations in the form of capitation grants to cover the per-pupil costs of education (Mutaaya 2018; Datzberger 2018). Teachers’ salaries and retirement benefits are paid directly by the central government in order to limit possible misuse of funds (Mutaaya 2018). Nevertheless, the total amount of money that is sent down from Kampala to the districts is among the largest of its kind in Africa (Maratho 2017).

The ‘outsourcing’ of primary education in Uganda to an ever-increasing number of districts, has entailed the establishment of numerous new, semi-autonomous, high-cost, local government agencies with the responsibility to provide primary education (Bennell 2021; Kjær and Muwanga 2019). The nature of this organizational arrangement may well be captured in the following statement by a government official; “...it’s like having nearly two hundred mini-Ministries of Education” (Confidential senior education administrator cited in Bennell 2021). Moreover, it has in effect given subnational, ethnicity-based elites, and local networks of authority, direct access to the national funds allocated to public primary education (cf. Khisa 2019; see Bennell 2021). In other words, the process of shifting the responsibility for public primary education to more and more districts may bear components of both extending and maintaining political coalitions between the NRM Government on the one hand, and subnational and local elites, on the other (Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Bennell 2021).

The arrangement basically allows President Museveni to utilize state revenue and international donor funds, earmarked for the universalization of primary education, to further his economic and personal ties with district administrations and officials around the country, and thus in practice appease local elites (Kjær and Muwanga 2019), and reduce their incentive to mobilize politically against the NRM Government (Kanyamurwa et al. 2022).

Primary education and decentralized rent-management

To channel national resources meant for primary education to the districts, in combination with the handing-over of districts to local elites, may facilitate the extension of patronage in Uganda. Yet, as regards public services, the patronage also takes the shape and form of decentralized rent-management (cf. Khisa 2019). In relation to primary education, the control over a district administration in Uganda indeed comes with prospects to derive ‘rents’, i.e. different opportunities to get paid money from third parties (Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Ojambo 2022). For example, there are chances to enter into contracts with local businesses, to cooperate with NGOs and aid donors, and to negotiate cost-sharing agreements with parents (Hickey and Hossain 2019; Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). Furthermore, according to the State Minister for Primary Education Joyce Kakucu, there are around 140,000 teachers currently employed in public primary schools, and there is an ambition to increase that number to more than 200,000 teachers (Katushabe 2023). According to the current framework of decentralization in Uganda, the districts have the authority to recruit teachers and government officials in the domain of primary education. In other words, decentralized primary education entails a distribution to the districts of immense, countrywide, public-sector job opportunities (Simson 2018).

EFFECTS OF BUREAUCRATIC FRAGMENTATION

The NRM Government loses control over primary education

The transfer of the responsibility to the districts of directly managing public primary schools, has entailed that the NRM Government in Kampala may have lost most of its previously high, but short-lived, level of administrative and political control over Ugandan primary schools. The Ministry of Education and Sports has held on to the tasks of curriculum revision, standard setting for examinations, general inspections, and the oversight of teacher training. The districts are still formally answerable to the NRM Government in Kampala, and the Ministry of Finance has even increased its influence over the resource allocation that pertains to primary education (see Bennell 2021; Söderberg 2023). Nevertheless, in the decentralized framework where primary schools are almost entirely governed and administered at the district level, the central state plays the second fiddle (Mutaaya 2018). In fact, the current bureaucratic fragmentation renders the central government with neither a compelling, nor effective, political presence in terms of the everyday management of schools around the country. The Ministry of Education and Sports simply does not have sufficient resources to regularly conduct countrywide inspections, and school visits are few and far in between. Instead, the ministry relies on periodic written reports that rarely prompts any action (Bennell 2021). Conclusively, since the government in Kampala has relinquished most of its power over what takes place in the classrooms, it

may have very little actual influence over Ugandan school performances and learning outcomes (cf. Pritchett 2019).

Districts may fail to provide primary education

The process of bureaucratic fragmentation of Ugandan primary education essentially implies that district-level administrations are handed responsibilities that they are not equipped to take on. In the current framework of Ugandan decentralization, there are also no compensatory mechanisms in place that would bestow relatively disadvantaged or impoverished districts with extra resources based on the local conditions (Bennell 2021). All districts in Uganda are statutorily responsible for the budgeting and management of primary education, controlling and accounting for funds allocated to the education sector, monitoring and supervising schools to ensure quality, implementing government education standards and policies, recruiting and deploying teachers, and constructing classrooms, many of which were tasks previously assigned to the Ministry of Education and Sports (Namara 2020; Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Mutaaya 2018; Alumu and Hassan 2019). Yet, it is important to note that the actual ability to meet these obligations varies tremendously from district to district (Namara 2020; Marachtho 2017). There are general, well-documented problems in Uganda of insufficient or delayed capitation grant payouts, and arbitrary fluctuations in the amounts of money transferred from Kampala to districts (Alumu and Hassan 2019; Mutaaya 2018). However, districts with their own alternative revenue sources can often allocate additional resources to public primary schools, whereas the budgeted funds for education in other districts have been described as meagre (Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Alumu and Hassan 2019).

District-level inability to supervise and manage primary schools

Another segregating variable that relate to inter-district differences in primary school provision and performance, regards the inner workings of each respective district administration. To a great extent, the actual amount of resources utilized for public primary education depends on the political priority given at the district level (see Söderberg 2023), and the degree to which funds ‘leak’ from district administrations due to inefficiency, covert misappropriation (Alumu and Hassan 2019; Kjær and Muwanga 2019), or misuse through, for example, the diversion of capitation grants under the pretext of funding other urgent investments (Mutaaya 2018). Many district administrations in Uganda lack funding for supervision processes, and thus struggle to manage and supervise effectively the often geographically dispersed primary schools (Bennell 2021). Particularly in the northern parts of Uganda, inspection visits to schools by district officials are scarce (see Datzberger and Le Mat 2019), which may lead to weak linkages of supervision objectives to performances of teachers (Alumu and Hassan 2019; Okia, Naluwemba, and Kasule 2021), as well as insufficient monitoring of teaching and learning (Mutaaya 2018). The inadequate supervision at district level implies that many headteachers and teachers in Ugandan public primary schools neither receive proper guidance, support, assistance, nor in-service training (Alumu and Hassan 2019; Okia, Naluwemba, and Kasule 2021; Namara 2020). Consequently, as far as each public primary school has to fend for itself, national education standards and policies are not properly implemented, and teachers are neither empowered nor encouraged to

prepare learning materials, create good learning environments, nor complete the syllabus (Okia, Naluwemba, and Kasule 2021).

District-level failure to recruit staff within education

The districts themselves are responsible for recruiting the supervisory positions, and other attractive, district-level jobs, within the domain of education. In turn, the particular influence of local strongmen, or other dominating political figures within subnational authority structures, may imply that human resources, including teachers and headteachers, are nepotistically mispositioned. In other words, staff is often appointed according to political affiliation, religion, or personal relationships, rather than merit (Mutaaya 2018). Subsequently, instead of potentially antagonizing relatives or political allies, rules and regulations may get treated with a great deal of flexibility (Namara 2020). Hence, primary school administrators and headteachers in some Ugandan districts may lack both formal training and the skills to effectively manage and supervise their schools (Alumu and Hassan 2019; Kjær and Muwanga 2019), which finds expression in the following statement; “There are undefined policies in the education sector, such as the unqualified monitors and supervisors who are mandated yet know nothing about education. The likes of the politicians, who are even supported by the central government, have jeopardized the education system and operations, undermining performance in these schools” (Confidential district official in Budaka district, cited in Namara 2020).

There are districts in Uganda that simply do not have the fundamental organizational capacity to hire enough competent primary school teachers and headteachers (cf. Tromp and Datzberger 2019). Particularly districts in the Northern and Eastern regions of Uganda struggle with low relative numbers of qualified teachers, high levels of teacher absenteeism, and thus unmanageable class sizes (Uweso Uganda 2021, Datzberger and Le Mat 2019; Namara 2020). The average class size of 146 pupils per classroom in the Northern Region actually doubles the average class sizes in the Central and Western regions, i.e. 67 and 71 pupils per classroom respectively (Uweso Uganda 2021). Symptomatically, districts that are the most deprived in terms of school facilities, scholastic materials, and the overall learning environment, generally also fail to properly staff their primary schools. In other words, since teachers tend to avoid substandard schools, the comparatively low education performance in the Northern and Eastern regions in Uganda to some extent becomes both the cause and effect of the scarcity of trained teachers (see Söderberg, Berggren, and Kumakech 2023).

INTRA-DISTRICT VARIABILITY IN EDUCATION PROVISION

The management and resourcing of individual schools

The current framework of decentralized public primary education in Uganda may both generate and exacerbate variability in learning at different levels, including from school to school in the same districts (Alava et al. 2020; Hickey, Hossain, and Jackman 2019). The performances and learning outcomes at the local level may actually depend significantly on the characteristics of each respective school management (Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Hickey, Hossain, and Jackman 2019). In general, the influence within districts of politically well-connected stakeholders may entail that resources are

distributed to certain public primary schools before others based on political affiliation, which on occasion leads to clearly observable intra-district differences between schools in terms of, for example, facilities, furnishing, and scholastic materials (Mutaaya 2018; Namara 2020). When it comes to the urban-rural disparity in learning outcomes, there are occasional poor resourcing of public primary schools also in urban areas that are considered oppositional (see Bennell 2021). In addition, according to the policy guidelines of universal primary education, urban public schools are exclusively permitted to charge each pupil a considerable per-term fee to cover food, drink, and so called ‘operational costs’, which has been highlighted as further segregating schools rural versus urban (Mutaaya 2018; cf. Datzberger and Le Mat 2019).

Moreover, the financial constraints of ‘free’ primary education in Uganda are recurrently overcome by individual school managements that ignore the rhetoric of universal education and involve local businesses, or churches and other religious organizations, as well as parents, in different cost-sharing arrangements to mobilize support for the everyday teaching and learning activities (see Mutaaya 2018; Okia, Naluwemba, and Kasule 2021; Hickey, Hossain, and Jackman 2019). At the same time, the involvement of religious leaders or politicians may entail, for example, the use of faith-based or affiliation-based recruitment of teachers, which in turn may reproduce school segregation on religious or political grounds (Mutaaya 2018). Likewise, the different levels of more or less officially condoned involvement of parents, and other community actors, in public primary education in effect increases the variability in school performances based on the local, social and economic circumstances (Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Mutaaya 2018).

The involvement of education NGOs

Within the current framework of decentralized, universal primary education in Uganda, school performances may also depend greatly on the presence of aid donor-driven projects (Kjær and Muwanga 2019). Even though the NRM Government over time has taken increasingly stern measures against NGOs that are perceived as being political (see Khisa, 2019; Alava et al. 2020; Kansiime 2019), there is an abundance of active NGOs in Uganda within the domain of education (Bananuka and John 2020). The primary schools that receive investments and support from NGOs generally display relatively good learning outcomes (Maractho 2017; Söderberg 2023). Yet, in principal most NGOs have to be receptive to the various priorities and agendas of their international donors, even when at odds with the interests and culture of the local communities in question (Kansiime 2019; Bananuka and John 2020). However, the perhaps biggest problem with education NGOs in Uganda is that their establishment is *ad hoc*, i.e. whereas some public schools get support on arbitrary grounds, others are completely ignored (Söderberg 2023). For instance, there may be a tendency to overlook communities and ethnic groups who live in areas perceived as remote, and whose enthusiasm about engaging with the state or foreign donors is less prominent (Kansiime 2019).

The proliferation of private primary schools

The far-reaching market liberalizations in Uganda during the 1990s entailed that the NRM Government authorized private ownership within the domain of primary education. After the introduction of universal primary education, and as people became increasingly aware of the overall questionable learning environment in public schools, many resourceful parents shifted their attention to private alternatives. As a result, there has been a virtual renaissance in Uganda of private primary schools in different price ranges, predominantly run by entrepreneurs or various religious organizations. To date, it is estimated that about one-fifth of Ugandan primary school pupils go to private school (see Söderberg 2023; Grindle 2019). Not surprisingly, the lion's share of the more expensive private schools are located in urban centres like Kampala and Mbarara. Despite some low-cost, private primary schools that are notorious for compromising quality for profit (see Tromp and Datzberger 2021; Datzberger 2018), the privately owned primary schools in Uganda have generally better facilities, scholastic materials, pupil motivation and attendance, as well as better teacher motivation and attendance (see Namara 2020; Wenske and Ssentanda 2021; Tromp and Datzberger 2021; Söderberg, Berggren, and Kumakech 2023). Estimatedly, there are in average about half as many pupils per teacher in private primary schools compared to public primary schools (Uweso Uganda 2021).

The differences in education quality by school ownership in Uganda are dramatic, and translate into increased variability in learning outcomes across the country (cf. Wenske and Ssentanda 2021). At the same time, the proliferation of private schools, as well as education-related NGO projects, may reflect the NRM Government's inability to provide the necessary resources for a more uniform school infrastructure (Bananuka and John 2020; Kansiime 2019). The expanding private school sector may have shifted the responsibility of education away from the NRM Government, and thus relieved much of the budgetary burden of the state to provide primary education (cf. Bennell 2021). Yet, resources may also have been pulled from public education, not only because many qualified teachers abandon public schools for greener pastures in private education, but also through the departure of committed parents who hold schools accountable for their performances (Hickey, Hossain, and Jackman 2019).

CONCLUSION

Universal primary education has not united Uganda

Universal primary education in Uganda was introduced by rhetorical promoters of national unity, anti-sectarianism, and patriotic consciousness. Yet, behind the façade of 'free' primary education for all Ugandan children, and subnational development, or extended democratic governance, the current framework of decentralization and districtization may rather have rendered in a bureaucratic fragmentation of the domain of primary education (cf. Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). To date, all districts in Uganda are obliged to provide primary education to all children. However, not all district administrations have the same capability, or political will, to meet their obligations (cf. Maratho 2017). The district-level failures, in combination with the absence of effective political control over the domain of primary education, generate a tremendous variation in school performance both between

and within districts (cf. Bennell 2021; Söderberg 2023). In other words, although the objective of universal primary education is national integration, its implementation comprises mechanisms of fragmentation that actually run counter to nation-building (cf. Khisa and Rwengabo 2022).

The mixed learning outcomes show that universal primary education in Uganda has not equalized education quality and school performances across the country (Namara 2020). Instead, the significant variation demonstrates that local circumstances, such as the level of multidimensional poverty or ethno-political dynamics, still are critical to the learning outcomes of primary education (cf. Hickey, Hossain, Jackman 2019). Despite the intentions and initial efforts to universalize primary education, public education in Uganda may produce major local and regional disparities, which in turn reproduce social divides, including those that pertain to ethnicity and the north-eastern gradient (cf. Bennell 2021; Söderberg 2023). The variability in learning outcomes within the domain of primary education may *per se* be a manifestation of pervasive societal disparities. However, the significant knowledge gaps between pupils in ‘higher standard’ and ‘lower standard’ primary schools in Uganda may drive segregation, not just between rich and poor households, but also between different ethnic communities. In turn, the segregation may subsequently undermine the anticipated social cohesion within and through education (cf. Tromp and Datzberger 2021; Datzberger 2018), as well as erode the trust in President Museveni’s promise of national unification (Khisa and Rwengabo, 2022).

Primary education still essential for political *status quo*

At least on paper, universal primary education remains a significant national interest and concern in Uganda (see Kabay 2021). However, the NRM Government’s initial ambition to create a coherent and centrally governed education system, may in practice have been abandoned (see Bennell 2021; Namara 2020; Kjær and Muwanga 2019). The implementation of universal primary education has increased the centrality of bargains and informal negotiations with lower-level factions and elites, increased the influence of local power centres with different proclivities to accept or resist reform, and may ultimately have reopened the potential for variability in primary education provision across districts and localities (Grindle 2019). At the same time, the implementation of universal, decentralized primary education in Uganda may have been essential for keeping the ruling elites in power. With the decentralized rent-management, and the torrents of funds intended for schools flowing to lower-level political actors, primary education has in practice become a cog in the wheel, if not a pivot, in President Museveni’s patronage machinery (cf. Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Khisa 2019). The bureaucratic fragmentation in Uganda may arguably be the manifestation of a new ‘divide-and-rule’ tactic (see Alava et al. 2020), in which the creation of new districts splits ethno-regional groups along sub-ethnic lines, and subsequently fractures their social fabrics (Khisa and Rwengabo 2022). Yet, as long as the systemic patronage undercuts any political mobilization against the NRM Government, and many local factions benefit from the weak influence from Kampala over primary education, there may be minimal incentive within the elite coalitions to change the current framework of organizing universal primary education in Uganda, even if it neither entails improved equity nor national integration (cf. Kjær and Muwanga 2019; Hickey, Hossain, and Jackman 2019; Alava et al. 2020; Kanyamurwa et al. 2022).

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