



Predicament of the Centralist Approach to Universal Primary Education Accountability and Service Delivery in Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined service delivery under Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) program after nearly three decades of implementation, using a descriptive research design. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used to select 125 participants from a population of 300. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and secondary sources and analyzed thematically. The study argues that government efforts have largely emphasized access, inclusiveness, and funding, with comparatively limited attention to accountability. This imbalance is attributed to a centralized approach to accountability characterized by underlying structural weaknesses. Consequently, increased budgetary expenditure on UPE has not translated into commensurate improvements in educational outcomes. The study recommends policy reforms to institutionalize community-based oversight and strengthen existing accountability mechanisms. Such reforms are expected to address existing accountability gaps, enhance financial discipline and improve service delivery in UPE.

Keywords: Public services; effective service delivery; UPE; accountability; citizens.

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Introduction

The World Bank considers investing in social services a key driver of economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries (World Bank, 2004a). Nonetheless, Uganda's experience shows that increased budgetary allocations to public services that benefit the poor as enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have not brought expected benefits (Reinikka & Svensson, 2004; Friday & Kanyesigye, 2026).

Humphreys (1998) defines public services as those services which are mainly or completely funded by taxation. In many low-income countries, MDGs have not been achieved due to underlying weaknesses in service delivery, such as mismanagement of resources, low capacity of service providers, poor

monitoring and weak accountability (Olumide et al., 2024). Investing in social services without effective delivery does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes.

Shittu (2020) defines effective service delivery as the extent to which services provided by the listed sectors meet or exceed the expectation of the beneficiaries who are the general public. Citizen dissatisfaction with the sorry state of public service delivery in Uganda has been well documented (Therkildsen, 2014; Wane & Martin, 2013; Republic of Uganda, 2011; Deininger & Mpuga, 2005). The public services sector is perceived to be characterized by gross inefficiencies, lack of transparency, poor accountability and corruption (Daily Monitor, 2013).

While effective service delivery reduces poverty and improves the welfare of the poor (Woolcock, 2017), this article's focus is on the effectiveness of Universal Primary Education (UPE) service delivery. It maintains that the attainment of effective basic education service delivery is crucial to the building of human capabilities to meet the socio-economic needs of society. For instance, education empowers people with both knowledge and skills not only to demand for social services from government and hold service providers accountable but also to get out of poverty. It is in this light that Higgins and Rwanyange (2005) asserted that education has been a powerful tool for socio-economic development and transformation in Uganda since independence. However, for basic education to be a catalyst to socio-economic transformation, it must be of good quality, which is demonstrated by effective service delivery. The World Bank (2022) argues that the quality of education attained, rather than the number of years spent in school, is the key determinant of economic development and poverty reduction.

The UPE initiative can be traced far back to the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) constituted by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government in 1987 to review Uganda's ailing education system (Republic of Uganda, 1989). However, its implementation delayed because of funding constraints. The pledge to introduce UPE later featured prominently in President Museveni's campaign manifesto of 1996. He pledged to provide free primary education to four children from each household if elected (Museveni, 1996). As a result, the net enrollment of pupils grew from 2.6 million in 1996 to 7.2 million in 2006, extending to a net enrollment ratio of 95% (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2008). When the limit of four children per household was lifted in 2001 to allow free access to UPE by all school-going children, enrolment increased to eight million (Byamugisha et al., 2015).

Notwithstanding the importance of UPE service delivery, much of the existing literature has concentrated on access, inclusion and funding issues, with relatively limited attention devoted to the obstacles that hinder effective implementation (Zickafoose et al., 2024; Fredricksen, 2023). Even where research attempts to look at the challenges affecting its implementation in developing countries, it is pre-occupied with low funding as the key factor (Lewin, 2022). Yet the World Bank (2004a) attributes poor service delivery failures to

weak accountability relationships between the state, service providers and the citizens. The paradox lies in the fact that while social accountability mechanisms have become increasingly popular worldwide for enhancing citizen oversight and government responsiveness (World Bank, 2004b; Ackerman, 2005), many developing countries remain heavily dependent on formal bureaucratic systems of accountability that are largely vertical and supply-driven in nature (Gaventa & McGee, 2013). In the case of Uganda, the increasing public expenditure by government sometimes amounting to US\$ 302 million (Mwesigwa, 2015) on UPE that provides free access to basic education has not been reciprocated by improvement in UPE service delivery (UWEZO Uganda & PAL Network, 2023).

Much as UPE increased access of the less privileged children, it has faced implementation challenges, such as high pupil-teacher ratios, literacy and numeracy competency deficiencies (UWEZO Uganda & PAL Network, 2023) and poor accountability (Reinikka & Svensson, 2005). Poor performance has persisted, as reflected in high dropout and failure rates at the end of the seven-year primary education cycle (Mugume & Bulime, 2024; Kjaer & Muwanga, 2019; Ngabirano et al., 2023). According to the Republic of Uganda (2017), the percentage of learners reaching a defined level of competence in literacy and numeracy at grade six was 51.9 and 52.6% respectively while the survival rate to grade seven was 32%. The provisional data published by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) Fact Sheet of 2002-2016 confirms these failures. It indicates that the survival rate to Grade seven is 32 percent, which has persisted to-date (Kolyangha, 2026). Hence, there is little to show for the huge budgetary allocations to UPE over the years. Whereas increased donor funding and government budgetary allocations could have improved its performance, ineffective supervision and financial accountability subverted UPE service delivery (Nakabago & Hofisi, 2024; Muhumuza, 2016; Mukudi & Keller, 2010).

According to Humphreys (1998), accountability constitutes a key component of quality public service delivery. Mauro (1998) cautioned that increased public spending on social programs may not translate into improved services in countries where poor public accountability pertains. This article attributes the limitations to the realization of effective UPE service delivery to ineffective

supervision and accountability mechanisms. Given that the promise of UPE was a campaign pledge, its implementation and oversight processes were influenced by the top-down and upward accountability approaches that rely on salaried bureaucrats, paper accountability and on how funds are utilized instead of results. Put differently, the government's approach to accountability for UPE services is what Suzuki (2002) calls a narrow sense where bureaucrats are preoccupied with accounting for the use of grants received in form of a report. The approach marginalizes social accountability that manifests in citizens' active participation, downward accountability and the quality of outcome. This was in contradiction to the decentralization policy, which provided that the provision and oversight of basic social service delivery be under local authorities. In theory, primary schools fall under decentralized services, and local authorities are responsible for setting standards and monitoring them (Republic of Uganda, 1989) but in practice, a centralized approach persists. The top-down approach manifests in direct central government funding and control over the implementation process and oversight. The less attention to social accountability is considered to be the main cause of inefficiencies and accountability flaws.

This study adopted United Kingdom's Department of International Development (2008) definition of accountability as 'the processes, norms and structures that require governors to answer for their actions to the governed and/or suffer some sanction if the performance is judged to be below the relevant standard. Accountability in this respect entails a relationship between the citizens who are, in essence, the principals and the public officials, who are the agents in the process of delivering public goods (Mulgan, 2000). Accordingly, accountability is about power relations, where public servants entrusted with public responsibilities must answer for their actions (Moncrieffe, 1998). It is characterized by two dimensions of answerability and enforceability (Adibe, 2010).

This means that public officials, both elected and appointed, must explain and justify their behavior and actions to the public (Haque, 2007; Hickey & King, 2018). It is within this context that this contribution is grounded in the principal-agent framework where public officials are perceived to be the servants of citizens who have the right to hold them accountable (Gailmard, 2014; Lane, 2020). In less developed countries, such as Uganda,

the power of citizens is rarely exercised owing to political disenfranchisement. Oftentimes, citizens are denied the opportunity to exercise their power to hold public officials accountable (Aiyede, 2026). The consequence has been that public officials perform their duties with less public scrutiny, which is the main cause of high levels of corruption and poor service delivery. There is ample evidence that corruption undermines effective social service delivery (Hout et al., 2022). Empirical findings show that Ugandans' satisfaction with the quality of public services is low (Wane & Martin, 2013; Mazurana et al. 2014) largely due to little emphasis on social accountability. This article analyses the predicament of preferring the centralist approach to UPE service delivery, whereby less leverage is given to local stakeholders, such as local authorities, parents and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

Methodology

This section explains how the research was carried out. It describes the method used to collect data, including observation of research ethics. It further indicates the sampling techniques adopted. It ends by describing how data was analyzed.

Design

The study used the descriptive research design. Atmowardoyo (2018, p. 198) defines descriptive research as "a research method used to describe the existing phenomena as accurately as possible." The descriptive research design was justified by the need to systematically describe the state of UPE service provision as narrated by participants to avoid distortion while at the same time making a rigorous interpretation and evaluation of the responses given.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in Iganga, Lira and Kabarole districts, representing Eastern, Northern and Western Uganda, respectively. Lira and Kabarole were purposively selected because of their relatively high Civil Society Organization involvement in basic education and better UPE performance while Iganga had fewer Civil Society Organizations and poorer PLE performance (DENIVA, 2015; Uganda National Examinations Board, 2000–2016).

Purposive and random sampling were used. Sixteen key education stakeholders were purposively selected from each district, giving 48 participants, together with five senior officials from the Ministry

of Education and Sports. In addition, two FGDs of 12 randomly selected participants were conducted in each district, yielding 72 participants. Overall, the study involved 125 participants from a mapped population of 300 relevant informants.

Sources of Data

Data was collected using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions from central and local level stakeholders, and discussed using secondary data sources accessed from previously published documents.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using themes derived from research questions. Robust categories in each theme were identified, summarized and aggregated into patterns, which were critically analyzed to provide answers to research questions. Then, the meanings were discussed and a descriptive account of findings was recorded. The name of participants used in the findings are not real.

Ethical Considerations

The research proposal and instruments were submitted to the Makerere Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee for scrutiny after which permission to conduct research was given by the committee chairperson. Participants were adequately informed about the nature and objectives of the research, including their rights to informed consent and withdrawal. They were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the public perceptions about accountability in the UPE program, accountability mechanisms used by government to oversee its implementation, the underlying flaws of the centralist approach and why social accountability is viewed as a gap-filler.

Research Question 1: How is Accountability in the UPE Program Perceived by the Public?

This research question sought to find out how the public construed accountability in the UPE program. Interviewees revealed what, in their own opinion, constituted accountability in UPE schools but which was lacking. The following are summarized recurring responses on good accountability from parents: John from Kabarole stated, "Head teachers should be present at school to ensure that teachers do their work." Ruth (code name) from Iganga narrated, "Teachers should report to school early

but the common practice is that they report late, start lessons late, delay returning to class after lunch breaks and depart from school earlier than the mandated time." Peter added, "teachers should have prepared lessons before going to class. However, this is not done always. They dodge marking of learners' work, and waste precious learning time on making jokes in class." Rossa from Lira stated, "integrity of Head teachers is important. There are cases in Lira where Head teachers in UPE schools unscrupulously sold scholastic materials provided by government, especially textbooks and furniture, to private schools or diverted them to their own private schools." Sam remarked that accountability of school managers is about "good performance of learners in Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE)."

Responses from FGDs echoed similar perceptions as summarized in the above recurring issues: a FGD participant observed, "Teachers should have prepared lesson plans and teach learners without fail." Another added, "The headmaster should display a register of teachers and learners on the school noticeboard, report the amount of capitation grants (CGs) received per term to parents' representatives and use the grants properly." One more participant reported, "Government's School Facilitation Grants should be distributed to all needy primary schools without favoritism." In summary, the interviewees conceived accountability in terms of availability of Head teachers and teachers at school, punctuality, effective preparation, teaching and supervision, transparency and proper use of CGs, fairness in the distribution of SFGs and good performance in PLE examinations.

The above submissions portray expectations of participants about accountability in UPE. The reality was that various forms of accountability flaws afflicted UPE schools. These include teacher absenteeism, laxity in supervision and fraud. Scholarly evidence corroborates these accountability flaws in UPE schools. For example, studies by Bold et al. (2017), Wilke et al. (2022) and UNICEF (2020) indicated that pupils received only about half of the scheduled instructional time, averaging approximately 2 hours and 46 minutes of teaching per day. The various government interventions to curtail these weaknesses have been only partially successful. These include attendance book signing by teachers every morning, verification exercises by ministry officials, introduction of the Integrated Financial Management System (IFMS)

and Integrated Personnel Payroll System (IPPS) reforms that decentralize and computerize salary payments for civil servants (Republic of Uganda, 2014). While the reforms reduced the number of 'ghost' teachers, they did not effectively eliminate them (Munyambonera & Lwanga, 2015).

Absenteeism has been linked to poor oversight, inadequate supervision by head teachers, low remuneration and a decline in professional ethics among teachers (Wilke et al., 2022). At the school level, responsibility for supervising and monitoring educational activities rests primarily with head teachers and School Management Committees (SMCs) (Republic of Uganda, 1998; Kavuma et al., 2017; MOE, 2017). However, ineffective oversight is often associated with weak SMCs, particularly in rural areas, where members frequently lack adequate knowledge of their roles and responsibilities (Mugabe & Ogina, 2021). Many SMC members are semi-literate and insufficiently oriented to perform their governance functions effectively. Furthermore, the absence of facilitation and incentives often discourages active participation, leading some members to neglect their responsibilities. As a result, head teachers may exploit these governance weaknesses to misuse school grants (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017). This imbalance in authority is consistent with Suzuki's (2002) findings, which highlighted significant power asymmetries between head teachers and SMCs, especially in rural school contexts.

Further evidence of fraud and weak accountability in Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) program is provided by Nakabago and Hofisi (2026). These accountability challenges have contributed to declining education standards, as reflected in the persistent underperformance of UPE schools in the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) and the growing preference of affluent parents for privately owned primary schools (Namara, 2020; Kjaer & Muwanga, 2019). These findings support the World Bank's (2004a) assertion that weak accountability is a major cause of poor basic service delivery in developing countries.

Research Question 2: How does the government of Uganda oversee the implementation of Basic Education?

This research question sought to examine the strategies employed by the Government of Uganda to oversee the implementation of Universal Primary

Education (UPE). In response to this, the Director of Basic Education reported,

The mechanisms for managing and implementing the UPE program are clearly stipulated in official documents like the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995, Chapter 11) that apportions responsibilities between different levels of government, the Education Policy, Education Act (2008a) and Guidelines for Implementation of UPE (2008b).

Interviewee reports show that the government used a number of approaches to enforce financial and service delivery accountability. Both the national and local authority levels had the responsibility to provide oversight to the UPE program as further explained by the Director of Education Standards:

At the national level, the Directorates of Basic Education and Education Standards are supposed to provide oversight to UPE in the country through conduct of random supervision exercises periodically. The routine and local supervisory role is delegated to the District Education Officer and District Inspector of Schools, who are the technical officers responsible for overseeing the delivery of education services at the local authority level. They are supposed to undertake supervision of basic schools at least twice in every quarter and submit quarterly reports to Ministry of Education and Sports.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned central government oversight institutions, head teachers revealed other agencies of government, which sometimes come asking for information as reported by a head teacher from Lira district:

At times, officers come from Ministry of Public Service, Inspector General of Government, Auditor General's Office, the police and the Sub-County. They ask for information about learners' enrollment records, number and qualifications of teachers, capitation grant received and its utilization, among others. However, this is not routine; it happens once in a while.

Respondents identified the Internal Audit Department and the District Public Accounts Committee as the principal supervisory and accountability mechanisms at the local government level. The Internal audit department plays the role

of ensuring that expenditure complies with the stipulated financial guidelines while District Public Accounts Committee enforces accountability. According to a District Inspector of schools, “the two departments are mandated to ensure that the financial grants remitted by the center to run UPE schools are properly utilized; they ensure value for money and produce timely accountability reports.” This is to ensure that UPE grants are properly utilized and effectively accounted for. This approach was confirmed by an Internal Auditor,

As auditors, we are interested in whether schools comply with guidelines for utilizing UPE funds. For instance, if the School Management Committee has endorsed the accountability and funds have been spent according to the purpose. We look at the amount received and cross-check if it was used as per the guidelines. We check if all the invoices and receipts are attached and if the figures match.

The challenge was that supervision at the local authority level was weak. Often times District Education Officers and District Inspectors of School undertook a one-off supervision exercise due to inadequate facilitation after which they submitted reports to the Ministry of Education and Sports. Similarly, auditors most of the time relied on paper accountability that head teachers submitted to their offices. Definitely, the one-off supervision and paper accountability approach had weaknesses but was reportedly dictated by lack of manpower and poor facilitation.

The lowest statutory oversight organs mentioned were the School Management Committees, which represented the government at the school level. A District Education Officer narrated their roles as follows: “To ensure that schools have development plans, approve annual school budgets, supervise, and monitor the use of UPE grants by Head teachers, among others.”

Based on the findings above, it is evident from the interviews that the government used multiple oversight agencies to undertake inspection and ensure financial accountability in basic schools. Besides, the relationship between local authorities and central government was characterized by upward accountability in UPE. The local authorities functioned as conveyor belts in the process because funding, control and accountability were all centralized. The practice was contrary to Chapter 11

of The Uganda Constitution (ROU, 1995), which mandates local authorities to plan and allocate resources, supervise and monitor the utilization of funds and the delivery of basic education. In addition, the Education Act and Guidelines for the Implementation of UPE further stipulated that the educational roles of local authorities include ensuring national academic standards, regulating and registering education institutions, supervision of teachers and developing policies. However, the reality on the ground shows that local authorities lacked the autonomy to execute their mandates with regard to UPE decision-making. Instead, the implementation and management of UPE was centralized, leaving local authorities with the role of implementing directives from the central government (Sasaoka & Nishimura, 2010; Green, 2015; Kyambadde & Khumalo, 2022).

Research Question 3: What are the underlying flaws of the centralist model of accountability in UPE Schools?

This research question investigated the weaknesses associated with the centralist model of accountability by the government in UPE schools.

One of the weaknesses reported by the research participants was inadequate supervision and monitoring of UPE schools, which undermined service delivery. A mentioned example was acute absenteeism and poor time management. One parent in one of Kabarole District UPE schools lamented,

We are disappointed by the quality of education our children receive. Government seems not to care about the standards of education. It was a mistake for the government to marginalize the role of Parents-Teachers Associations, which was effective in monitoring standards and financial frugality in schools. Those who can afford have shifted their children to private schools.

The complaint of inadequate supervision was further admitted by one District Education Officer that, “though the law stipulates that District Education Officers and District Inspectors of School undertake routine supervision and monitoring exercises in schools at least twice a term, this is not practically possible because we are understaffed and poorly facilitated, yet schools are many.”

Whereas the UPE guidelines established elaborate procedures and apportioned monitoring roles between the various stakeholders in order to enhance UPE service delivery, they were not being adhered to. It is in this light that a Resident District Commissioner stated, “there were numerous reports of poor record-keeping in UPE schools with financial implications.” It was also revealed by an Assistant Chief Administrative Officer that some schools inflated enrolments to get more funding. One District Education Officer revealed, “Head teachers sometimes connive with SMC chairpersons to defraud UPE grants.” However, a DEO who wished to remain anonymous reported that the power of SMCs was limited to check stubborn Head teachers. There are no clear guidelines for the implementation of decisions. The Head teacher can ignore them and there is no enforcement of non-compliance.

In further affirmation of the lack of compliance with the UPE guidelines, a District Inspector of Schools reported, “whereas the guidelines provided that head teachers display financial information on school noticeboards for easy public access, the practice never existed. Instead, financial information was displayed in the head teacher’s office.” Similarly, the stipulated guidelines provided that before spending, the School Finance Committee composed of teachers’ representatives and chaired by the Deputy Head teacher must first budget for the money according to the predetermined items and expenditure guidelines and then submit the budget to the SMC for approval. A teacher stated, “I am one of the representatives of teachers on the SFC but no such meeting ever happened. Decisions concerning capitation grants are handled by the Head teacher and Chairperson of SMC.” An official of Transparency International confirmed the view by noting,

Most SMCs, especially in rural areas, lack competence and were often manipulated by Head teachers because there were not given capacity-building on their new roles and responsibilities. The education policy did not stipulate minimum requirements for membership of SMCs. As a result, SMC chairpersons individualize the role of the committee and sometimes connive with or are compromised by the head teachers they are supposed to monitor.

Interviews with a CSO official corroborated the incompetency view noting that, “many members of SMCs do not know what exactly to do.” As a result, it was mostly the chairpersons of SMCs who were active, as confirmed in an interview with one participant, “When *stakeholders* visit schools, they find only the SMC chairperson signed in the visitors’ book.” They think their role ends at approving the school budget and signing school cheques.

The poor state of UPE service delivery was partly attributed to corruption and patronage, where wrongdoers were allegedly protected by some officials in local authorities. An example of patronage politics in UPE schools was cited by one participant, who exposed a situation when head teachers reported by parents were protected by the DEOs:

In one Sub-County, there was a Head teacher who had serious accountability issues at school but was closely related to the former DEO. He had turned UPE funds into a private money lending scheme with impunity. The parents and SMC had all been triggered into conflict with him. He could not explain his expenditure but knew he had protection from the DEO. We had to engage the CAO and RDC for disciplinary action before he was transferred to another school.

The Internal Auditors who had the mandate to supervise school funds were also not effective. An Internal Auditor admitted that “We rarely undertake surprise audit visits to UPE schools owing to inadequate staffing and facilitation. Visits to schools are conducted once in a while except when there is urgency. The common practice is to ensure that the head teachers first account for the previous Capitation Grant before they get another.

Further evidence showed that the School Facility Grant, which was channeled through local authorities to cater for school infrastructure and furniture purchases, faced financial indiscretions. As a DIS conceded, “the tendering and bureaucratic process involved, especially for construction of school infrastructure and supplies, leads to leakages of public funds and shoddy work. It would be better to send money to schools and seek value for money and accountability.”

This provides evidence that the centralist approach to accountability in UPE schools had underlying defects that adversely affected service delivery and

financial accountability. Rather than creating integrity in the accountability of public schools, it instead perpetuated laxity, connivance, patronage and corruption, which seriously undermined the UPE program. This explains why there was persistent occurrence of 'ghost' schools, and inflated numbers of teachers and learners despite the existence of SMCs and the frequent verification exercises by central government agencies. Nakabago & Hofisi (2024) and Bold et al (2017) agree that laxity in supervision leads to financial abuse, inflated enrolments of pupils, presence of 'ghost' teachers and schools, chronic absenteeism of teachers and pupils, high dropout and failure rates. On the other hand, Wilke et al. (2022) and Mugabe and Ogina (2021) attributed SMCs' poor oversight to lack of capacity.

Research Question 4: How does social accountability serve as a gap-filling mechanism in the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE)?

This research question strove to gather information on the complementary role played by community-based oversight to financial accountability and service delivery in UPE schools. World Bank (2004a) defines social accountability as active engagement of community stakeholders to demand better service delivery and hold service providers accountable. In response to this question, a religious leader considered "community-based oversight as allowing local stakeholders, especially parents, to participate in monitoring, supervision and development of UPE schools, involving election of competent and active parents' representatives to the autonomous associations established to oversee the school management."

Interviewees identified agents of social accountability as PTAs, *Barazas*, Civil Society Organizations and the Mass media. It was revealed that PTAs used to be the mandatory governors of basic schools until the 2008 when they were replaced by SMCs. According to one DEO, "The constitution of PTA requires that one should be a parent yet membership to SMC doesn't require one to be a parent. In addition, PTA committee members were popularly elected by all parents but SMCs are appointed."

Furthermore, one religious leader noted, "before their replacement, PTAs used to make monetary contributions to building and maintaining of school infrastructure, supplement teachers' poor pay and

play an active oversight role diligently because of their proximity to schools. The majority of basic schools were owned by the parents or religious institutions." The shift of UPE school governance to SMCs undermined their role and created hostility between PTAs and SMCs as observed by one District Education Officer: "while it is in the parents' interest that UPE schools succeed, the Education Act and UPE Guidelines do not apportion them a mandatory oversight role. Only one parent serves on the 12-member School Management Committee (SMC), a composition that significantly constrains parental influence and weakens their participation in school governance."

It was also revealed that lack of legal recognition not only affected PTAs' participation to hold Head teachers accountable but also created conflict. It is in this light that one DEO observed, "sometimes parents through PTAs organize against SMCs over management of school funds and transfer of Head teachers. When we go on the ground to investigate such conflicts, we find PTAs are right." Much as PTAs have a genuine interest in the proper functioning of UPE schools, the change of the governance mandate undermined their oversight role. Consequently, they withdrew and social accountability suffered.

In addition to PTAs, a *Baraza*, a public face-to-face meeting called to discuss important matters (Loimeier, 2005), plays a supplementary oversight role in UPE schools. One of the *Baraza* sessions cited by a research participant was the Annual General Meeting, which, under the UPE policy, is mandated to facilitate parental participation and engagement in school affairs. The school management is required, at the end of the year, to present a report to the AGM, highlighting financial accountability, academic achievements, developments undertaken, challenges faced and school future plans, upon which parents have to react. Although AGM has to create awareness and transparency for parents to hold the school management accountable, the AGMs were reported to be poorly attended by parents, and therefore fell short of being a check and balance instrument.

The findings further revealed that Civil Society Organizations played an active role in education advocacy and accountability. DEOs acknowledged that Civil Society Organizations supported UPE schools through policy advocacy, financial assistance, SMC training, monitoring grant

utilization and tracking school performance. However, their effectiveness was constrained by limited enforcement powers and intimidation from state actors who viewed exposure of UPE weaknesses as detrimental to the government's political image and legitimacy. Moreover, the relationship between Civil Society Organizations and government was not institutionalized in policy, law or practice, limiting their ability to provide sustained oversight and address accountability gaps arising from the centralized governance system.

Lastly, the mass media was named as a critical player in filling the gaps left by the centralist approach to accountability. It organized radio talk shows for education officials to interact with the community members in discussing issues of public concern about UPE. An Assistant Resident District Commissioner stated, "media increases transparency and sensitizes UPE stakeholders to play their roles." However, much as the Mass media plays a supplementary oversight role in UPE, evidence showed that service providers were not using it adequately to engage with stakeholders on matters of service delivery.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study concludes that poor service delivery in UPE schools is largely attributable to weak accountability, manifested in lack of transparency in the utilization of UPE grants, teacher absenteeism and irresponsibility, ineffective teaching and supervision, poor performance and weak community-based oversight of school management and monitoring processes. These need to be addressed by the government in order to realize quality UPE service delivery. The government should therefore undertake a policy review to strengthen accountability in UPE implementation. Reforms should institutionalize community-based oversight, reinstate PTAs as key school governance structures and align the accountability of key stakeholders with local authorities in line with decentralization. Enhanced facilitation for supervision is also necessary. These reforms may promote greater transparency, responsiveness and accountability in UPE service delivery.

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