An Assessment of the Free Education Policy in Zambia- Opportunities and Challenges

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Overview

Reducing poverty and vulnerability is a major outcome in the development process and aspirations for Zambia. Thus, attaining Vision 2030, largely depends on economic growth, which, in turn, depends heavily on the knowledge and skills available within the economy. The investment in education serves not merely as an input for high growth, but also as a means of ensuring inclusive participation of every Zambian in the growth process to ensure that no one is left behind.

In 2022, Zambia joined countries like Ghana in the Sub-Saharan Africa region in abolishing school fees in a move towards free universal education. Zambia's implementation of the Free Education Policy has been accompanied by the mass recruitment of teachers. This follows years of underinvestment in the sector which gradually widened the education gap and teacher- pupil ratio and subsequently hampered the provision of quality of education.

The provision of free education was implemented through the abolishment of various fees, including Parent Teacher Association (PTA), examination and tuition fees in all Government Schools. The introduction of free education has been accompanied by the following key interventions;

- Mass recruitment of over 34,000 teachers in 2022 and 2023.
- Construction and rehabilitation school infrastructure.
- Provision of bursaries through the Constituency Development Fund to cover boarding fees at secondary level of schooling.

Enabling Legal and Policy Frameworks

Legal Framework

Zambia remains committed to aligning the provision of quality education with legal frameworks by mainstreaming the international commitments made into its national laws. Zambia's legal system supports the provision of free quality education.

Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act 2016

The Constitution of Zambia guarantees access to education as it is incorporated in the Bill of Rights[1]. This includes the right of persons to education (article 52), the right of children

[1] https://www.parliament.gov.zm/sites/default/files/documents/amendment_act/Constitution%20of%20Zambia%20%20(Amendment),%202016-Act%20No.%202_0.pdf

to free basic education (article 61 (5) (b)), and the right of persons with disabilities to education (article 64)2.

Education Act No.23 of 2011

Access to education is further affirmed in Zambia's main legislation on education, the Education Act 2011. Section 15 of the Act emphasizes that a child has the right to free basic education while Section 22 (1) guarantees this by ensuring the equal access to quality education to all learners including poor and vulnerable children[3].

Children's Code Act 2022

Access to education is also enshrined in the Children's Code Act and emphasizes that education must be transformational. Article 10 (1) (a) of the Act emphasizes that, child's right to education provided under the Education Act 2011 should be directed at ensuring education of a child and developing their talents, skills, mental and physical abilities to the child's fullest potential[4].

Policy Framework

National Policy on Education

The 'Education Our Future' National Policy on Education which was launched in 1996, provides guidelines and recognizes that the basic right of every Zambian is to have good quality education. Thus, the policy sets out the parameters for 'Educating our Future' and recognizes that quality education is key in the reduction of inequalities and ultimately poverty alleviation.[5]

The policy further highlights that, 'as a first step leading to the attainment of the goal of universal education, the government and ministry will ensure that every child will have **access to a minimum of seven years of good quality schooling'**.

However, given that free education has been extended to Secondary school level, and the policy was launched 27 years ago, the policy is overdue for review. For instance, the Government should subsequently commit to providing **access to a minimum of twelve**

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[2] https://www.parliament.gov.zm/sites/default/files/documents/general/Bill%20of%20Rights.pdf

[3] https://www.parliament.gov.zm/sites/default/files/documents/acts/Education%20Act%202011.pdf

[4] https://www.parliament.gov.zm/sites/default/files/documents/bills/The%20Children%27s%20Code%20Bill%2C%202022%20Final.pdf

[5] http://155.0.32.9:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/20/1/Educating%20Our%20Future%20-%20National%20Policy%20on%20Education.pdf

(12) years of good quality schooling. This is essential in ensuring that successive Governments remain committed to providing free education.

free education.

Eighth National Development Plan

The Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP) recognizes education as a key factor in attaining the key national priorities of the country. As such, the 8NDP acknowledges that having a well- educated, highly skilled and healthy labor force to drive Zambia towards middle- income is key by attaining the following strategies;

a) Enhancing access to quality, equitable and inclusive education,
b) Increased access to higher education and,
c) Enhanced science, technology and innovation.

Regional and International Commitments

Zambia has ratified regional and international treaties that protect the right to education and ensure the provision of universal quality and inclusive education. These endorsements ensure that Zambia legally commits to measure the provision of education in its national laws against the international standards. These include;

SADC Protocol on Education

The SADC Protocol on Education[6]implores member states to work towards equitable access by citizens of member states, to good quality education.

UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC)

UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) [7]makes it imperative for Zambia to recognize the right of the child to education.

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

Article 11 (b) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child[8] requires that member states encourage the development of secondary education in its different forms and progressively make it free and accessible to all.

[6] https://tis.sadc.int/files/5213/2680/2090/20060623_protocol_education_training.pdf

[7] https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

[8] https://www.achpr.org/public/Document/file/English/achpr_instr_charterchild_eng.pdf

Sustainable Development Goals

Agenda 2030 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[9] commits Zambia to ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality early childhood education, primary and secondary education by 2030.

Other signed treaties include; UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education and the Convention on Protection of Children.

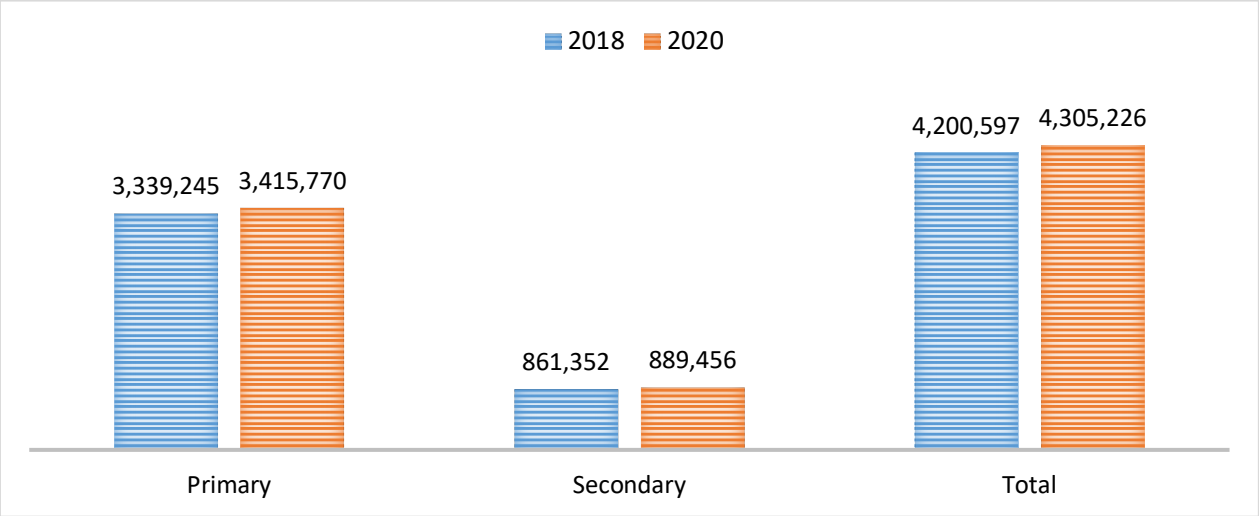
Performance of the Education Sector.

Access to education

The total number of children in Zambian schools was estimated at 4.2 million in 2020. This was only 57% of the eligible population. This implies that over 3 million children eligible to be in school were outside the education system.

Between 2018 and 2020, total number of pupils in primary and secondary schools increased by 2.5% from 4,200,597 to 4,305,226. Despite the lack of updated information on school enrollment, various schools have confirmed that enrollment had increased as a result of Free Education. This was also confirmed by ZIPAR during three case studies conducted in Lusaka, Chipangali and Chipata October, 2022.

Figure 1: School Enrollment by level 2018 and 2020



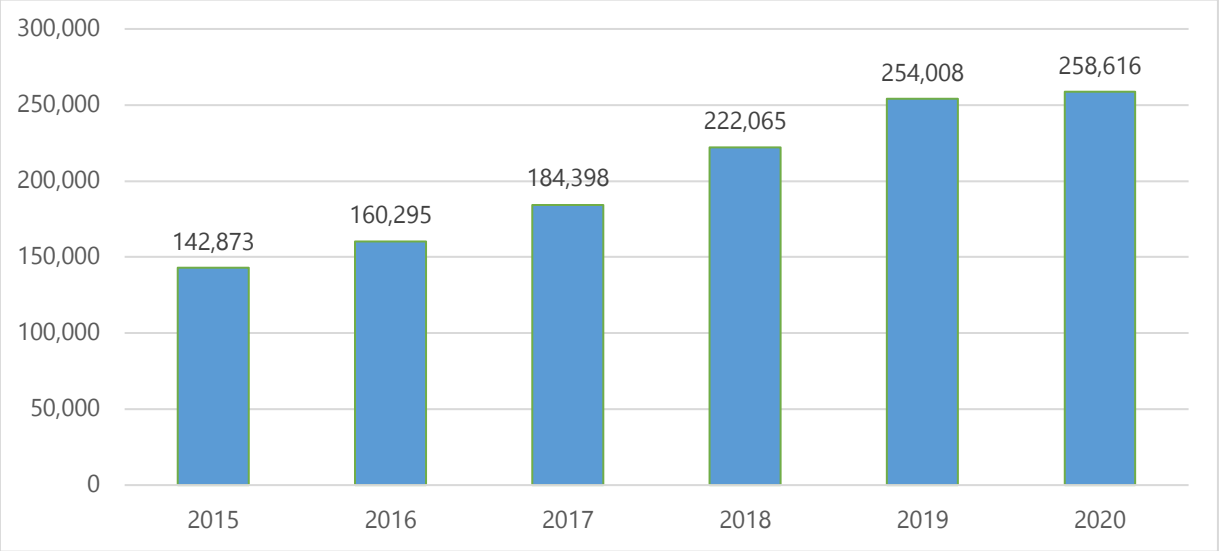
Source: Education Statistical Bulletin (2020)

The Free Education Policy extends to ECE, however, only a small minority of Zambia's children have access to the level of education. As shown in Figure 2, the number of children

[9] https://zambia.un.org/en/sdgs/4

enrolled in ECE has increased from 142, 000 in 2014 to over 250,000 in 2020, representing an 81% increase. However, only 29% of Grade 1 entrants in 2022 had ECE experience. This further highlights the low access to ECE by the eligible children. Ironically, despite the increase in enrollment rates, budget allocation has remained low, as less than 2% of the total education budget allocated towards ECE and infrastructure development has also lagged behind.

Figure 2: Early Childhood Education Enrolment 2015-2020



Source: Education Statistical Bulletin (2020)

Lagged Data on School Enrolments

As earlier mentioned, the latest data on school enrollment is from 2020. The impact of the recent changes in the outdated data on enrollments implies that it is currently not possible to assess the Free Education Policy. That is, whether the policy has been successful in improving enrolment rates and reducing the number of out-of-school children.

Administrative information on enrolment and progression is critical for assessing the effectiveness of the policy variations given that there are more barriers to education access. Further, the updated data will be essential for refining the policy to address other barriers of access to education such as the cost of school uniforms. For example, if the enrolments have not increased despite the removal of school fees, then the policy should be expanded to address other barriers such as the cost of uniforms and notebooks which have proved to be problematic in other jurisdictions.

School Infrastructure

The state of school infrastructure is major hindrance to providing quality free education. To remedy these challenges, a total of K1.5 billion has been allocated for infrastructure development which includes the establishment, construction, completion and rehabilitation of Early Childhood Education Centers, Primary schools, Secondary Schools and Universities.

More specifically, the Government made pronouncements to build 120 secondary schools which, will cushion the high enrollment rates and also increase the number of completion rates. Although the Government plans to construct 120 Secondary schools, there currently exists 9,000 primary schools against 1,000 secondary schools, translating to nine primary schools for every secondary school.

In the first year of the implementation of the Free Education policy, the limited infrastructure coupled with the over enrollment resulted in many learners attending classes without desks. Further, the infrastructure in many rural schools remains dilapidated.

Case Study – Mbulanda Primary School

Mbulanda Primary School is community school in Chipangali District, the school provides for learner from ECE level to Grade 7. Prior to the commencement of the free education policy, the school had a total of 328 pupils and only two functional classrooms. The learners were divided into 8 classes and taught by the only two teachers at the school, one of them being headteacher. Parents were required to pay K40 per term in schools fees that was used to compensate community volunteers. The school also received a quarterly grant of K800-K1000.

Following the implementation of the adjusted Free Education Policy in 2022, the number learners at the school increased by 8% to 354. Further, additional three teachers were recruited to the school following the mass recruitment of teachers at the beginning of 2022. The grant to the school also increased by 1000% from K1000 per quarter to K11,000. This represents a positive change but the school still does not have a specialized ECE teacher and the school infrastructure remains in a deplorable state.

Figure 3: The state of Classroom at Mbulanda Primary School, Chipangali District, October 2022

As shown in Figure 3, the school only has two working classrooms. These are poorly roofed and have a mud (dirt) floor and there are in a state of disrepair damaged shared by 354 learners. In addition to the two designated classrooms the school also uses the School Feeding Shelter as a make shift classroom.

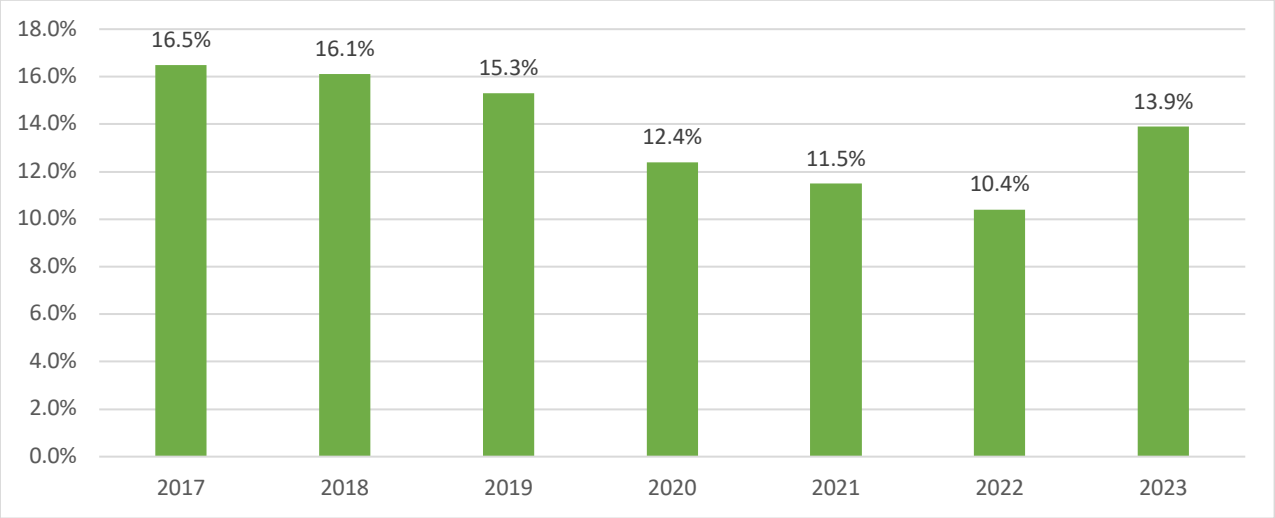
Education Expenditure

In nominal terms, the budget allocations towards education have increased significantly over the years. In 2023, a total of K20.3 billion has been allocated towards the education sector, this represents an increase of 28% compared to the 2022 allocation of K18 billion. Although the allocations in nominal terms have increased, the allocations as a share of the total budget have declined over the years as shown in Figure 4.

In 2022, education expenditure allocations accounted for 10.4% of total expenditure, which was still below the SADC target of 20% and the UNESCO recommendation of 15-20% enshrined in the Education 2030 Framework for Action[10].

[10] https://uis.unesco.org/node/3079574

Figure 4: Expenditure on Education as a share of the total Budget.



Source: Data from the Ministry of Finance Budget speeches.

To support the implementation of the Free Education Policy, the Government increased Secondary school grants by over 2000% from K25 million in 2021 to K592 million in 2022. A key aspect of delivery of free education was to ensure that the grants to schools were released in a timely manner. In 2022, grants to schools were released on a quarterly basis in timely manner. This allowed the schools to operate smoothly in the first year of the Free Education Policy.

However, given the state of the school infrastructure, concerns remain over the adequacy of the allocations to schools. In 2023, the school grants increased by 35% from K592 million to K799 million. The increased allocations are reflective of Governments commitment to enhancing the support provided to schools.

Best Practice on Free Education: Lessons from Ghana

Like Zambia, Ghana experienced debt distress that affected economic growth and budget allocation to social sectors. In 2015 Ghana turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for support. As part of the economic reforms, Ghana implemented a free Senior High Secondary (SHS) policy in 2017. The scholarship covered the following; Every Ghanaian child that passes at primary level receives a three-year scholarship for secondary education[11]. The scholarship covers the following;

- Tuition, boarding and library fees;
- Provision of a uniform;

[11] https://freeshs.gov.gh/index.php/free-shs-policy/#1517427094117-d715f3a8-cea8

- Provision of free textbooks and;
- Provision of meals.

Further, to enhance equity, 30% of places in elite schools are reserved for learners from public schools. This ensures that learners from public school also access the best education available.

Recommendations

In view of improving the free education Policy, ZIPAR recommends the following;

1. ***Continually Improve Budget Allocation:*** Despite the anecdotal smooth implementation of the free education policy in its first year, evidence from the schools show that more resources are required to ensure that the teaching standards are raised to a level that meets the development aspirations of the nation. Education expenditure remains far below the recommended 20% SADC benchmark.
2. ***Address the infrastructure gaps:*** Infrastructure challenges are two-fold, the number of schools are limited while the infrastructure in many of the operational school is in a deplorable state. The Government is urged to enhance effort to rehabilitate schools and continue to construct more schools.
3. ***Extend coverage of the policy:*** Lessons from other jurisdictions reveal that school fees are not the only barrier to education. Parents still face many costs which include the provision of school uniforms, school shoes, note and text books. Government is urged to progressively expand the coverage of the policy to provide uniforms and books to learners. These can be produced and purchased locally as part of boosting the local economy.
4. ***Improve data availability:*** Administrative information on school enrolments and progression must be made readily available to ensure that the free education policy is regularly and efficiently monitored. Government must ensure that administrative data on school enrolments is collected and disseminated on a regular basis.