



Received: 01-05-2024
Accepted: 11-06-2024

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

The Provision of Free Education and its Sustainability: The Zambian Scenario

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Abstract

The Free Education Provision in Zambia and its sustainability study was enthused from the monitoring activities and experience the researchers had in the implementation of Free Education Policy. The Ministry of Education has been charged with the responsibility to provide Quality, Lifelong, Education for All which is accessible, inclusive and relevant to individual, National and Global needs and Value systems (MoE, 1996) ^[8]. In actualising this vision and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 -2030, the Ministry has been implementing different measures to ensure education is accessible to all school going children and the entire Citizenry at large. Education fees (Tuition, Examinations and PTA) have been a huge barrier to accessing education especially to the vulnerable in society, thus, the New Dawn Government has scrapped off all the education fees from Early Childhood to Secondary levels in all Public School to ensure stable socio-economic development of the nation. Most of literature on free education by other researchers has focussed on the impact and effects of free education however, this study focussed on how the Free Education can be sustained through sufficient sustainable flow of funds to schools for quality education provision in Zambia. Mixed method design was employed to gather the data from Education administrators and school administrators across six districts of Lusaka Province. The research findings show that Free

Education policy has received positive response as could be seen from the enormous increase in enrolment levels after its implementation in 2022. However, the positive response to free education policy has come with many challenges ranging from inadequate classroom space and toilets for proper sanitation, inadequate water supply, inadequate specialised rooms and insufficient teaching and learning materials and equipment, increased teacher-pupil ratio just to mention but a few. The research shows that the government has already started addressing the challenges through the completion of incomplete 115 secondary schools as well as commencement of 120 new schools across the country, mass deployment of 30,496 teachers in 2022, increase in budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Education in 2024 from 13.9% in 2023 to 15.4% in 2024, increased CDF allocation from K28.3 Million in 2023 to K30.6 Million in 2024 which has a component of the Education which addresses the needs of the vulnerable learners and approval of ZEPH Board members' to ensure teaching and learning materials are provided. All these milestones showed sufficient funds are required to for sustainable quality provision of Free Education for ALL. The study informs all the stake holders of education on the need for creating a National Education Scheme and prudent use of and proper accountability of Free Education funds for quality education provision in Zambia.

Keywords: Free Education, Sustainability, Accountability, Quality Education, Education Policy

Introduction

The provision of education in Zambia from 1991 has been that of cost sharing among all the stakeholders; the Government, the parents, and guardians. To ensure provision of education for all, the Government under the leadership of His Excellence President Hakainde Hichilema, came up with measures to reform the education sector, create opportunities for all students and learners who cannot afford to pay school fees.

The Free Education Policy (FEP) is a deliberate policy by the New Dawn Government of Zambia to ensure Education for ALL (EFA) as alluded to by the 7th Republican President. School (tuition) fees including Parent Teachers Association (PTA) fees and Examination fees have since been abolished in all Early Childhood to Secondary levels in all Public School. The Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) and Schools have since been compensated with grants that are equivalent to what the parents/ guardians used to pay to ensure that all the vulnerable learners easily access education (MoE, 2021).

The New Dawn Government has shown significant commitment to advancing Free Education for All through various initiatives. This includes the deployment of 30,496 teachers, augmenting budget allocations to the Ministry of Education, enhancing the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), and establishing dedicated funds to support education for vulnerable children. Additionally, efforts have been made to facilitate the purchase of desks for schools. Furthermore, the government has initiated the construction of 120 schools nationwide. Many of the resources utilized to accomplish these milestones have been provided through donations or loans to Zambia by Cooperating partners.

Policies across various African nations frequently undergo revisions following shifts in government leadership. Each new administration brings its own priorities and approaches, often leading to modifications in existing policies. Despite the significant endeavours undertaken by the New Dawn Government to strengthen the implementation of the Free Education policy in Zambia, persistent challenges remain. The fundamental issue lies in the quest for a sustainable funding solution that can reliably support the education sector. Notwithstanding efforts to enhance policy implementation, securing consistent and adequate funding remains a formidable hurdle that requires urgent attention.

The sustainability of Free Education hinges on the availability of steady financial resources directed towards schools, especially those catering to vulnerable populations. Without a stable funding mechanism in place, schools may struggle to maintain quality education standards and adequately support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, while the New Dawn Government's efforts are commendable, addressing the funding gap is crucial for ensuring the long-term success and effectiveness of the Free Education policy. Only through a sustainable funding solution can Zambia truly fulfil its commitment to providing accessible and quality education to all segments of society, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Statement of the Problem

The implementation of Free Education Policy from ECE through to Secondary school level in Zambian Schools has seen an overwhelming response as seen in the increase in enrolments. This has, however, resulted in many challenges among them shortage of infrastructure such as Classroom space, Specialised rooms (Laboratories, ICT, Design and Technology, Home Economics) toilets, inadequate number of desks, inadequate teaching and learning materials, poor sanitation, water supply and huge Class size (increase in teacher pupil ratio). These and many more logistical issues are likely to cause an adverse effect on the Quality of Education offered.

While many studies on FEA) indicate that many researchers have focused on the effects and or impact of Free Education there is insufficient information on the sustenance of Free Education among the middle-income countries and underdeveloped countries. This study aimed at addressing the gaps in research on the sustainability of Free Education in middle-income and underdeveloped countries, focusing on sustainable sources of funds and ensuring quality education provision in Zambia and other countries considering Free Education implementation. Therefore, this study aimed at finding ways of sustaining the Provision of Free Education Policy for Quality Provision of Education and continuous supply of funds.

Research Objectives

This research paper sought to achieve the following objectives.

1. To propose ways how Zambia can create a Sustainable sufficient flow of Free Education funds for quality education provision.
2. To establish strategies of ensuring prudent use of Free Education funds.

Research Questions

The research was governed by the following research questions.

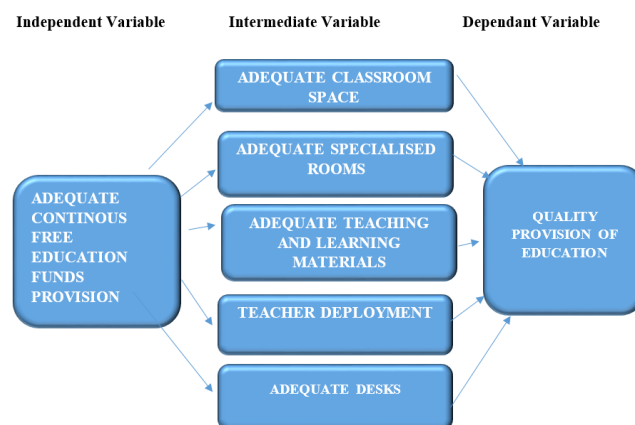
1. What should Zambia do to create a Sustainable Sufficient flow of Free Education Funds to schools for Quality Education Provision?
2. What strategies should be employed to ensure prudent use of resources for Free Education?

Justification

The pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and the imperative for socio-economic advancement necessitate the presence of a skilled, competent, and educated workforce (United Nations, 2015). According to Mashala (2019) [7], countries worldwide are under pressure to formulate education policies and strategies aimed at ensuring universal access to basic education. However, the challenges associated with high enrolment rates cannot be overstated, as they pose risks and undermine the quality of education in terms of syllabus coverage and content mastery. Given that education provision in Zambia has traditionally involved cost sharing among various stakeholders, there is a pressing need to establish stable funding sources specifically dedicated to Free Education initiatives in the country, rather than solely relying on the government. Access to education is a fundamental right for every citizen, and the implementation of Free Education in Zambia benefits both vulnerable and non-vulnerable children in public schools.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework below is visual representation of the complex interplay among independent, intermediate, and dependent variables. It offers insights into the intricate web of relationships and dependencies between these factors, shedding light on how they interact and influence each other within this study context. This visual aid aids in understanding the dynamics and pathways through which variables exert their effects on one another, enhancing comprehension of the overall research framework.



Adequate continuous flow of Free Education funds has a direct effect on Quality Provision of education through adequate provision of classroom space, specialised rooms, teaching and learning materials, qualified teaching Staff and number of desks.

Literature Review

This section presents the literature related to the study focussing on the Provision of Free Education and its Sustainability in Zambia.

Zambian Perspective on the study of Free Education Provision

Zambia has re-joined other countries in addressing the common obstacle to access to education by implementing the Free Education, a promise which was bestowed on the Zambian people during the election campaign of 2021 (Zenda, 2022). To support the new education policy, the following agencies provide the Zambian perspective of Free Education provision;

Increase in Budgetary Allocation

The Government had increased the resource allocation towards the Education Sector in the 2022 National budget which saw an upward increase to 10.4 % translating to 18.1 billion Kwacha in 2022 and a further 3.5% increase in 2023 translating to 23.2 billion Kwacha. (Yellow book, 2022). In the year 2024, there was also an increment by 1.5% translating to 27.4 billion Kwacha (Yellow book, 2023). The increase in budget has necessitated increased quarterly grant allocation to primary and secondary schools.

Deployment of Teaching Staff

The Zambian Government is committed to sustaining Free Education Policy as can be seen in the efforts the President has and is still making. Among important measures put in place to support Free Education for all from ECE to

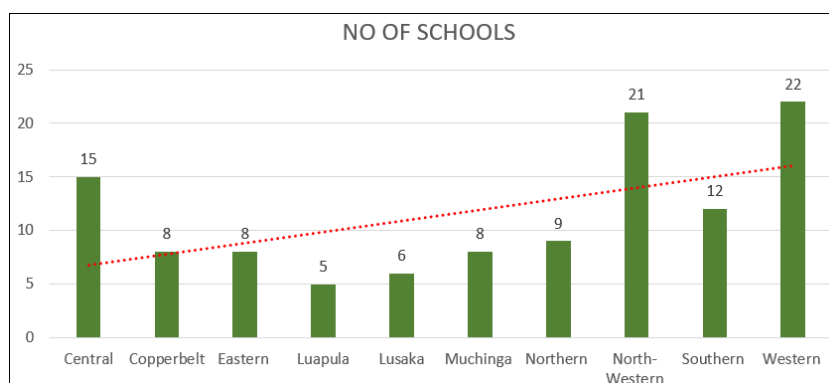
Secondary education levels, was mass recruitment of teachers which saw thirty thousand, four hundred ninety-six thousand (30, 496) teachers deployed (MoE, 2022) [10]. This came as a positive movement towards the achievement of the 8th National Development Plan (8NDP) target of 1 teacher per 45 learners as well as efforts to help reduce the gap in the teacher - pupil ratio. Furthermore, the Minister of Education has indicated that the Government further deployed 7, 221 teachers in 2024.

Teaching and Learning Materials

In addition, Cabinet has ratified the appointment of New Board members to Zambia Education Publishing House (ZEPH), during the 6th Cabinet Meeting at State house accordance to ZEPH Act No. 11 of 1971 and as Amended Act No. 29 of 1992 of the Laws of Zambia. This move is in is line with the Free Education Policy direction as the board is vital in meeting the recommended book ratios in public learning institutions (Cab Memo, 2023). The provision of quality education requires constant supply of quality teaching and learning materials and equipment to meet the needs of the learners.

Classroom Space

The New dawn Government has completed One hundred fifteen (115) secondary schools which started during the MMD government but were politically abandoned by the Patriotic front (PF) government who, started a whole new project under Zambia Education Enhancement Project (ZEEP). The ZEEP project only saw the construction of 80 secondary schools across the country. Further on, the Government has also commenced the construction of 120 secondary school across all the ten provinces in the country following the completion of the process of securing a loan from World Bank. The table below shows the distribution of Schools for each Province.



Source: MoE, 2022

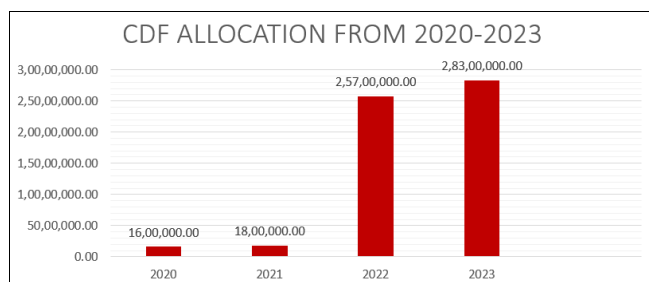
Fig 1:

Constituency Development Funds

In pursuit of achieving the objectives outlined in the Decentralization Policy, the Government is committed to fostering citizen-driven local governance within the framework of a unitary state, as articulated in the National Development Policy (2023). This vision underscores the importance of empowering communities to actively participate in local development initiatives, thereby promoting sustainable progress across the nation. To facilitate this, the Government took proactive steps in 2022

by expanding the constituency development fund (CDF), aiming to bolster community engagement and involvement in grassroots development projects. By increasing the scope and accessibility of the CDF, the Government aims to decentralize decision-making processes and empower citizens to play a more significant role in shaping the development agenda within their respective constituencies. Furthermore, recognizing the pressing need to address educational disparities and alleviate poverty, the Government has allocated supplementary funds within the

CDF to support families facing extreme poverty levels, (Govt, 2021). These funds are specifically designated to cover essential educational expenses for vulnerable children, including skills training, boarding fees, and the procurement of school necessities such as uniforms, shoes, and books (MoE, 2021). This targeted intervention not only provides immediate relief to disadvantaged families but also underscores the Government's commitment to ensuring equitable access to education for all children, regardless of socioeconomic status. By prioritizing educational support within the CDF framework, the Government demonstrates its dedication to promoting inclusive development and fostering social cohesion across communities nationwide.



Source: 2020 -2023 National Budget

Fig 2

Global Perspective

At the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA), the development community established the achievement of universal basic education as a top priority. This was reaffirmed in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and at the United Nations.

Millennium Summit, where 189 nations and international development community promised to guarantee universal basic education by 2015. Arising from this meeting, participants recognized that provision of education at that time was seriously deficient, and it had to be made more relevant and qualitatively improved, as well as available. Hence forth, the declaration was made that education should be provided to all children (UNESCO, Education for All, 2009).

World statistics indicates that costs inhibit school enrolment. Parents in Indonesia, China, the Solomon Island, and many African countries cite user fees as a major obstacle to enrolling their children in school (Saroso, 2005; Yardley, 2005; Pacific News, 2005). In 2001, parents and teachers in Tanzania said that non-payment of fees was the prime reason why children did not attend school (Oxfam, 2001). In order to provide education to all the children worldwide, a handful of countries between 1960 and early 1990s, embarked on the provision of Free Education. For instance, Barbados, Botswana, Costa Rica, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mauritius, Sri-lanka and Zimbabwe were able to provide primary education without charging households for the cost of tuition (Mehrotra and Jooly, 1997). Adding to this, a number of European countries such as Norway, France, Sweden and Finland, which recognized that education is fundamental human right, provided Free Education (Norwegian Ministry of Education Research, 2005).

Whereas from eighties and early to mid-nineties, Cost sharing had been a policy promoted by international financial institutions such as the World Bank, direct and

indirect costs to parents of their children's education became obstacles to their attendance and continued enrolment. The inability of parents to afford such costs fell on girls disproportionately, typically being the first to be pulled out or allowed to drop out of school (UNESCO, 2003).

Comparative Perspective

Free education in Africa started with School Fee Abolition Initiative (SFAI), whose main theme was to seek for acceleration of progress towards quality Education for All children by supporting policies that remove cost barriers, thus preventing parents from enrolling and maintain their children at school. In Ghana, primary school fees were first abolished in 1961; whereas Kenya and Tanzania, fees were abolished in 1974. In South Africa, fees for the two outlawed poorest quintiles were outlawed in 2004. All the countries listed experienced an increase in enrolment levels by huge numbers an indication that Free Education Policy was well received and had managed to reach the vulnerable and highly marginalized populations.

Although Free Education was introduced with good intentions of increasing access to education, a number of African countries had problems regarding financing of the programme. These include Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia due to their declining economies. The Free Education policy had enhanced access to education provision leading to an increase in enrolment of pupils while risking bringing about decline in the quality of education. For example, during free education for primary education only, enrolment in Zambia increased from 2.7 million to 7.5million that had defied the reality because teachers were unable to cope with the big numbers. It had been argued that before the introduction of free education it was easier to have individual pupil attention but that was not the case then (Duncan, Macmillan and Simutanyi, 2003)^[3].

Additionally, teaching and learning resources were inadequate due to insufficient funding. For example, in Delta State of Nigeria, although the intent in the policy statement was that education was to be free, the financial burden of the government later forced parents to get involved in the funding of basic level of education. Since most of the parents were poor, their children remained poorly equipped to learn. Literature has revealed that many African Countries that have introduced Free Education Policy recognized the many implications of reducing the cost of education to parents, reacting to the enrolment surge and the provision of quality of education (Kaulule, 2006)^[6].

Methodology

This study employed qualitative approach using descriptive research design to gather information on Free Education Provision and its Sustainability in Zambia. The participants in this research were purposefully selected from Education Administrators and School Administrators across Six (6) Districts of Lusaka Province. In-depth interview guides were conducted on the sustainability of the Free Education Policy to ensure continuous flow of adequate funds to schools for quality provision of education. The data collected was analysed and evidence-based information was systematically extracted based on the conceptual framework of this study. However, there was a limitation in the research with regard time to conduct extensive research.

Findings and Discussions

The research sought to interrogate the sustainability of Free Education Provision in Zambia which has been implemented in all Public Schools from ECE through to Primary and Secondary levels. As alluded to by many researchers who have studied the Free Education across the world, the effects that arise from positive response to free education due to high enrolment levels cannot be overemphasised. However, the focus was to find ways and means of creating adequate continuous flow of funds to schools for the Quality Provision of Education in Zambia.

Developing Sustainable Self - Financing of Free Education Provision

Education Scheme

The effects of Free Education Provision against the quality provision require adequate funds. With adequate funds, one interviewee stated that,

The challenges of classroom space, adequate sanitation and water systems, adequate number of desks, teaching and learning materials and adequate teaching staff could be resolved.

Another interviewee added to that,

The government through cabinet should come up with an education scheme to which all salaried and taxable employees should contribute at least 0.01% of their basic pay.

Education is a right to all citizenry hence the responsibility of all the citizenry to ensure all the children undergo formal schooling to meet the sustainable development. This responsibility cannot be left to the government alone as good quality provision requires the sufficient funds.

Policy Review

Utilization of Free Education Funds Policy Document - 2022

Arising from the research, the Free Education grants awarded to schools on quarterly basis have not yet been reviewed and revised despite the many children that have joined schools. It was revealed that the current grants were calculated before the free education policy was implemented. This has created a huge gap in terms of addition funds to cater for the learners that have responded positively. A case of IRCHI School which had an enrolment of about 500 secondary school learners in 2021 and now has about 1504 secondary school learners. The high enrolment attracted donation of 12 classroom space, ablution blocks for boys and girls, water system with a tank to supply water, 500 desks and a semi-detached flat for two administrators from the Church of Jesus Christ of the latter saints. This donation necessitated the de-linking of secondary section from the primary school.

Education Policy Document- 1996

Another interviewee from the research also revealed that

There was need to review the Current Education Policy Document (Educating Our Future) to incorporate the Provision of Free Education to all public schools as well as include current issues that

have emerged for the past 27 years since its formation.

Practical Subjects

The current curriculum has a component of vocation pathway which teaches skills and entrepreneurship. The research revealed that there is need to adjust the curriculum to allow for projects that could be used to generate funds unlike the ones that are currently stipulated. One interviewee cited,

An example of design and technology where the size of tables or chairs learners make are of size of toys.

In addition, on construction, one interviewee stated,

It was revealed that in bricklaying there is need for sufficient funds to allow for a construction of big enough structures by various students which could later add to school infrastructure unlike constructing a few courses which is later demolished and result in wastage of resources.

Entrepreneurship

The study revealed through an interview with one participant that,

There was need for schools offering home Management and home economics to tailor their School based assessments products to serve and address the needs of surrounding communities.

This would in turn create revolving funds for schools to supplement to the school grants that the government pay on quarterly basis.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Free Education funds requires 'Policing' if the funds are to be used for the intended purposes. Monitoring involves a systematic process of collecting analysing and interpreting information about a programme (UNESCO, 2013). Accountability and prudent use of funds requires frequent monitoring and close supervision of schools. Currently there are only *four Standards Officers per District* a situation that creates a lot of gaps as the four officers could not provide frequent monitoring of institutions and use of funds.

There are several areas of monitoring among them teacher performance, institution monitoring of ECE centres, Primary and secondary infrastructure, conduct and administration of National Examinations at midyear and end of year which are followed by marking, a process that requires monitoring (Standards and Evaluation Guidelines, 2015).

It was also revealed by one interviewee who stated that

More Standards Officers are required at both district and provincial levels. This could be achieved through the deployment of more officers to the Directorate of standards, Evaluation and Assessments which is charged with quality assurance through inspections.

Furthermore, one interviewee who suggested that

The teaching staff in the same salary scale of Standards Officers at both District and Provincial

levels should be considered for change of duty so as not to affect the payroll.

Free Education Policy as an Act of Parliament

The enactment of Free Education Policy into law would sustain the Free Education Provision in the country. As referred to by Mashala (2019) ^[7], Education Policies in Africa change with change of governments. Thus, turning the Free Education Policy into law through the Act of Parliament would ensure the continuity of Free Education Provision which has become very useful to the vulnerable in society. This would ensure that funds are made available to and would become the concern of all involved.

Conclusion

The study has revealed the key interventions that should be employed to sustain Free Education Provision in Zambian public schools. The interventions are; forming an Education Scheme, Curriculum design of practical subjects, Alternative source of income to schools, explore entrepreneurship skills in schools, meet the need of the surrounding communities as well reinforcing standards officers at both provincial and district levels. And ensure accountability and prudent use of funds in the Ministry of Education. In addition, there is need to review the guidelines on the effective Utilization of Funds Policy documents to address the gaps observed and address emerging issues after the implementation of Free Education for effective distribution of funds.

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