

FREE AND COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION POLICY IN LIBERIA: GAP BETWEEN PROMISE AND ACTUAL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the Government of Liberia free and compulsory basic primary education policy from the perspectives of public school teachers and parents, and critique to what extent the policy that promises basic education for all, children attainment of national literacy, marketable skills through computer literacy and development has evolved. A further examination through empirical analysis on enrollment and education facilities was also conducted. While it is unarguable that the policy appeals to all stakeholders, it is observed that the policy has been seriously characterized by great implementation challenges as evidence by the pathetic perceptions of the respondents and interviewees in this research. Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides to interview twenty five parents and semi-structured questionnaires for twenty five primary school teachers from fifteen public basic primary schools chosen sporadically in Montserrado County. The researchers used case study research design. Findings from the research gathered that the policy is appealing, especially when majority of the country's population is poor and illiterate but the impact has not been felt and the policy is only on paper because parents continue to pay unimaginable complicated fees towards the education of their children. Furthermore, the country was unprepared when it adopted the policy in 2001 and its reaffirmation in 2011 was unnecessary. Findings from empirical analysis shows that more than 60% of basic primary school aged pupils are out-of-school while the education facilities available to support free education is in short supply. The paper recommends that policy of such should be driven by carefully orchestrated plan with proper implementation strategies based on well sourced resources. In addition, the paper recommends national emergency on basic primary education aims at organizing the resources so needed to improve enrollment and reduce illiteracy.

Keywords: Free Basic Primary Education, Promise and Actual Performance, Policy, Liberia

INTRODUCTION

The government policy on free and compulsory primary education in Liberia was introduced 2001 and reaffirmed in 2011 Education Reform Acts to encourage school enrollment and to fulfill the constitutional provision that obligates government to develop the minds of Liberian children. The policy mainly emphasized in addition to academic competency; pupils attainment of national literacy, marketable skills through computer literacy and development (Education Law, 2011). Also, the education for all (EFA) and millennium development goals (MDGs) initiatives largely influenced its formulation. The 2001 Education Act articulated that by 2003, primary education would be free and compulsory to all grades 1-6 pupils. After 10-years, the government of Liberia amended the 2001 Education Act and reaffirmed the concept of free primary education. This time, primary education was modified to basic

education covering primary education (grade 1 to 6) and junior secondary or lower secondary education (grade 7 to 9). The policy indicated private individuals, private institutions and organizations, and faith based institutions as key providers with four comprehensive responsibilities outlined for parents. To date, this article endeavors to critically ascertain the difference between what was promised and actual performance in reality. It is nearly 14-years now since the sequential enactments of such worthy education policy while the government whose leadership took over said policy and further reaffirmed it is less than two years to say good bye to power. Therefore, it is essential to check-mate the program in order to provide meaningful insights for present and future administration. The research blended empirical analysis, considering population of school aged children in school and out-of-school, school facilities, and qualitative and quantitative approaches with a sample size of fifty (50) respondents and interviewees comprising public school teachers and parents. In this way, a succinct understanding of what has been achieved will be revealed while at the same time, perceptions of major stakeholders such as parents and teachers will enlighten policy makers for a safe sail. In this paper, junior secondary and lower secondary (grade 7 to 9) will be interchangeably used because some of the data were gathered before the 2011 Education Reform Act. Furthermore, basic education as would be mentioned several times later in this paper covers grade 1 to 9.

LIBERIA BRIEF PROFILE

Liberia, a West African country that gained independence in 1847, is formally referred to as The Republic of Liberia and it is the oldest African nation and lies on the West Coast of Africa. Monrovia serves as both political and commercial capital city and it is located on the Atlantic Coast. Liberia is bordered by Guinea to the north, Sierra Leone to the west, the Ivory Coast to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The country has an area of about 111,370 sq km (43,000 sq miles), with a length of 548 km (341 miles) east-south-east-west-north-west and a width of 274 km (170 Miles) north-north-east-south-south-west. The country is sub-divided into fifteen political counties with 17 ethnic groups, including indigenous population and descendants of repatriated American slaves who founded modern Liberia in 1822. The country has produced innovative, great and inspirational leaders on the continent of Africa. To name a few, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia (2006 to present) and “Iron Lady” of Africa, President William V.S Tubman, the father of modern Liberia and one of the brains behind the establishment of OAU (AU) and George Oppong Weah, the nation soccer king and Africa only soccer icon so far who won the European Best Player, African Best Player, and World Best Player in a year.

Population Demographics

Liberia is the smallest country within the Mano River Union region with population of less than 4million, Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS, 2015). The Mano River Union region comprises Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and the Ivory Coast. Liberia is one of the least populated nations of the world with more than 60% youth (age 0-14=41.94%, 15-24=20.67%), LISGIS, 2015. over 60% of the country’s inhabitants reside in the port city of Monrovia and major cities such as Buchanan, Kakata, Gbarnga, Ganta, and Sanniquillie. The population graph below (figure 1) indicates that the country population shifts predominantly toward children from 0-14 years, thus putting an unavoidable pressure on national government and society at large to create avenue for elemental education that guarantees solid foundation, brighter future, and better life for children and youth alike.

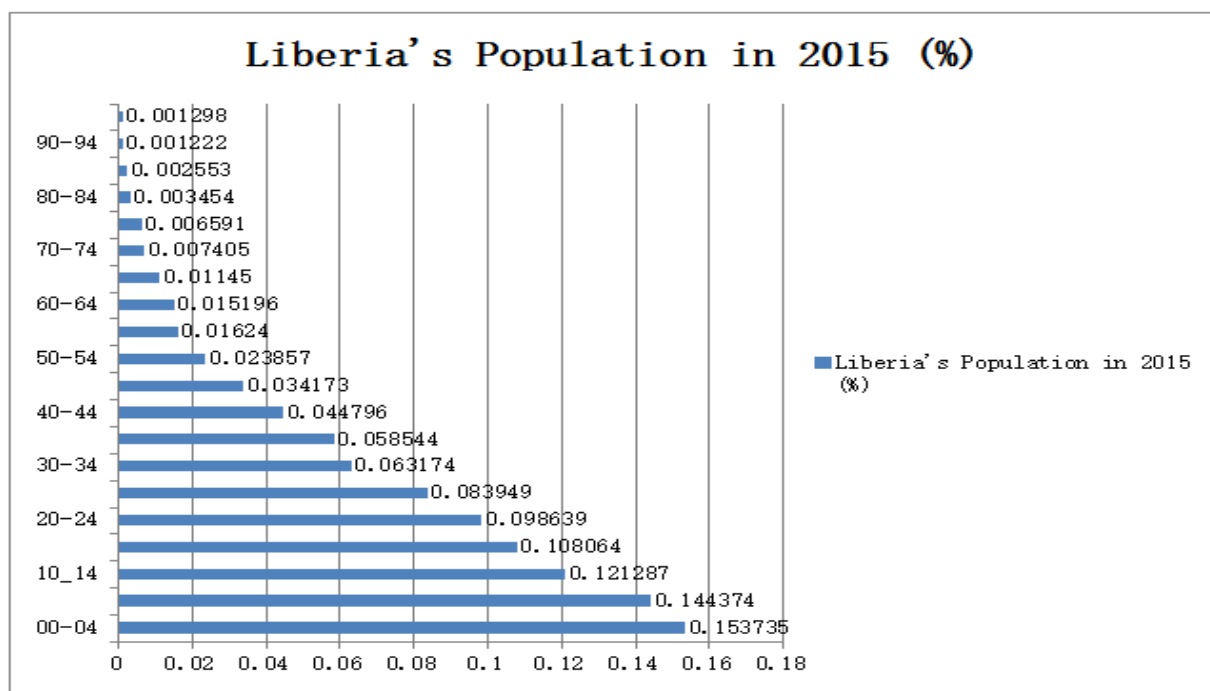


Figure 1: Liberia's Population 2015

Source: Author's calculation of data from Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS National Population Survey)

Brief Conflict Profile

Liberia has recorded tremendous calamities that have stalled its growth for a long time. In rear view are the notorious 1979 Rice riot, coup in 1980 and 14 years of civil war (1989 to 2003). The 14 years conflict was very terrible and left unforgettable wounds. The crises saw so many people escaped the country; the country economy deteriorated and basic infrastructures went down the drains, over 200, 000 lives were lost; leaving so many people, especially children homeless and hopeless. Though the country celebrated 10 years of consistent peace two years ago, but the wounds inflicted by the bloody war can hardly be forgotten. The development needs of Liberia cannot be overemphasized. As indicated by the United Nation Human Development Index or UN-HDI, (2014), improving the health and education systems are urgent priorities.

Economic Condition

Liberia has had a taste of a modern era and unprecedented economic growth in the 1960s. Before being condemned to 14-years of brutal killings, its economic growth record was outstanding at an average rate of 7% from 1955-1975. Early 1980, the country came close to a middle income threshold with a Gross Domestic Products (GDP) per capital reaching a peak of US\$1,765; hugely driven by the exportation of iron ores, rubber and other cash crops. Though the growth was remarkable but there were also problems of massive poverty and inequality in greater parts of the country as less than 20% of the labor force was employed in the formal modern sector while 74% was employed in the informal agriculture sector (Agenda for Transformation, 2012). Although the government has taken several approaches including the introduction Transformation (AFT), and Vision 2030 but its present GDP per capital is recorded at US\$ 329 (The World Bank, 2014), an estimated 64% of the population remained below poverty line, of whom 1.3 million live in extreme poverty. Although the country fiscal budget has progressed dramatically from below 200 million in 2006/2007 to over 600 million in 2015/2016 (Ministry of Finance Budget Data Base), but there remain

overwhelming challenges in every sector of the economy. The country is blessed with natural resources including minerals, rubber, timber, rich soil, oil and gas and is well positioned geographically in Africa but it has been hard to achieve sustainable development due to the lack of capacity, poor management, and institutionalized corruption.

LIBERIA EDUCATION SYSTEM AND MANAGEMENT OF BASIC PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Liberia Education System

The education system of Liberia comprised of early childhood (nursery and kindergarten) for 3 to 5 year-olds, basic primary (grades 1-9) for 6-14 year-olds, senior high (both academic and technical) for 15 to 17 year-olds, junior college and other post-secondary educational institutions, and colleges, universities and professional schools, and Intermediate institutions such as teachers' education, adults' education, vocational training, literacy programs, non-degree theological seminaries, workshops and conferences. Liberia has a decentralized education system with county and district education officers responsible for the management of education in their respective areas of control but major responsibilities including financing, construction, supervision, data collection, procurement, recruitment and appointments, are heavily centralized. Presently, there are more than 60% school aged children out-of-school due to parental poverty and government inability to provide the much needed sources to improve the school system nationwide.

Liberia education system is a replica to that of the United States of America, perhaps because the settlers originated from the US. Government and church organizations established K to 12 schools, largely for children of the free slaves and or so-called Congo. In 1912, a centralized educational system was established by a cabinet of ministers considering few basic primary and secondary schools and colleges subsequently but was highly exclusive. Indigenous children were less targeted to benefit from the gift of education. Children of the lucky few who enrolled at any institutions were grossly discriminated against to the extent change of name became eminent to suit the name preferences of adopted parents and or school administrators before enrollment. Nothing much happened to Liberia's education from this point until 1955 when William V.S Tubman became president. Following economic growth and Tubman inclusive policy, schooling in Liberia revolutionized and extension of education for indigenous Liberians ensued. In 1956, the Ministry of Education (MoE) was established in the Executive Branch of the Government of Liberia under the Education Law and charged with the management and supervision of the nation's educational system and the implementation of Education Law. The ministry of education is managed by 12-ministers (one head minister, three deputy ministers, and eight assistant ministers) who are appointed by the president of the Republic of Liberia in consultation with the Legislature. These ministers are aided by professionals (consultants, specialists, and auditors) and civil servants serving in different positions in all three departments of administration, instruction and planning, research and development.

Education Financing Profile with Emphasis on Basic Primary and Secondary Education

Mainly education financing in Liberia has always been the responsibilities of the government and people of the Republic of Liberia through national budget, private sector; including religious organizations, parents and local communities, and multinational and bilateral organizations (USAID, EU, UNICEF, The World Bank/IDA, and Sweden). For a long time now support to education has been minimum to the extent that affecting comprehensive reforms have been impossible. Since the budget year of 2006/2007, Liberia education sector budget has been steadily progressive. Though so but the ministry has always experience

massive funding gaps up to present. For instance, from 2007/2008 fiscal year to 2011/2012, the ministry had a cumulative funding gap of over US\$78 million while in the ongoing 2015/2016 fiscal year there is an outstanding amount of US\$131 million to enable major reforms which promise to take Liberia education from mess to best as indicated by Education Minister, George K. Werner during the 2015 Education Roundtable Conference held in Monrovia. The conference brought together score of education stakeholders purposefully to set the stage for unearthing the present situation of education in Liberia from the perspective of the Ministry of Education and to solicit general supports to improve the sector.

Management of Basic Primary and Secondary Education

The Liberian educational system is managed by the Ministry of Education. Presently, the ministry is operated by twelve ministers including one head minister, three deputy ministers, and eight assistant ministers, representing the highest policy and decision makers and supreme senior staff respectively. The operation of the Ministry is decentralized. Each of the fifteen counties has a County Education Officer, District Education Officers given the number of districts available, and School Boards. There is a council called the Monrovia Consolidated School System or MCSS expected to play a meaningful and collaborative role in maintaining a vibrant and involved education community. Unlike for post secondary education institutions such as colleges, universities and professional schools, non-degree theological seminaries, security related training and education with different regulatory institutions, the Ministry of Education fully accounts for all other areas of education in Liberia; especially early childhood, basic primary, secondary, and vocational education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims at understanding the level of accomplishment of the free and compulsory basic primary education policy in Liberia. In addition to grasping the empirical dimension on enrollment and school facilities, the perceptions of stakeholders such as parents and teachers to the concept of free education will supplement the empirical findings. In order to achieve this aim, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- i. Are you aware of the free and compulsory basic education policy? How aware are you?
- ii. How has the Liberian Government implemented this policy and what are the results?
- iii. What opinion (s) would you share about the policy?
- iv. Do you think the time of introduction of the free and compulsory basic education policy was timely and necessary?
- v. What recommendation (s) can you offer in order to achieve the objectives of the free education policy?
- vi. Do you think the free and compulsory education policy can be realized? If yes, by what means?

LITERATURE REVIEW

From all indications, it is applauding; the declaration made by the government of Liberia that basic education be free and compulsory for every child. This policy was perceived as a worthy idea meant to accommodate children once left by the wayside with no means of going to school due to poor socio-economic status. While scores of literature are available to appreciate this policy, it is clear that implementation is constraint due to limited resources fueled by lack of political will with serious debate that the policy was a political rhetoric

introduced by government aims at joining the international bandwagon (EFA, MDGs, etc) to attract international funds and that it was not based on well orchestrated and informed undertaking with clear implementation strategies. Paul Kenya (2008) acknowledges that, lot of work has been written on the free primary education, it's been argued that most of it was done either too early in the implementation or was politically tuned to give the new government some credits. ¹Tomasevski, (2001) study indicates similarly to the requirement that education be free of charge, information about the requirement that education be free of charge confined to international treaties and domestic laws". Liberia's 14-years of civil unrest left thousands of children doubtful of achieving their educational goals. Although the government has succeeded in promulgating national policy to ensure these children realize their goals by enacting free education into law to educate all children without discrimination of any kind. However, without clear leadership and implementation plan, triggering paradigm shift in the sector remains difficult. Study conducted by Raja Bentaout Kattan, (December, 2006) in 93 countries in different regions including Africa, East Asia and Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa and South Asia indicates that the abolition of fees must be part of a broad government commitment to achieving universal basic education, with many complementary measures and strong political leadership from the highest levels of decision makers. The children of Liberia have suffered tremendous setbacks in obtaining education that guarantees better future. Fixing such situation requires realistic government reform policies driven by research with immediate development goal. Abby Riddel, (2004) studies of five Sub-Sahara African countries (Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia) on the status of free primary education policies revealed country specific issues. with some recording success stories while others still compiling failures as a result of different approaches used. Tanzania free primary education policy was introduced in 2001 to enroll all children from 7-13 year-olds but the implementation started with 7-10 year-olds in the first year, the age range targeted was extended with clear plan to create enabling environment for continuous implementation and sustenance of the free education policy. Uganda free primary education policy was introduced in 1997 abolishing tuition fees for 6-12 year-olds, and this was intended to apply to a maximum of four children per family. Uganda achieved universal primary education in academic years 2000/2001 with responsive budgetary allocation and commitment. Free primary education was introduced in Zambia in 2002 for all pupils from grade 1-7. All user fees were abolished and uniforms were no longer compulsory. Zambia focused on varieties of support mechanisms such as school infrastructure, educational materials, teacher education, curriculum development, capacity building, HIV/AIDS prevention, equity and gender, and school health and nutrition. These efforts enable the policy to land successfully. In Malawi, parents still been expected to pay book fees and to contribute to school funds though government is supposed to account for all costs having introduced the free education policy in 1994. Kenya introduced its free primary education policy in 2003 thus dramatically increasing enrollments but the influx of students caused shortfalls in funding with emphasis on teaching and learning materials. It is important for governments and their affiliates to make education, especially primary education free and compulsory for all pupils but without well planned and well sourced resources to support such policy, implementation remains a day dream. Adamu-Issah and Schrofer (June, 2007) for such a system to be adopted requires strong government commitment, backed by strategic vision and policy framework. PILDAT (June, 2011) the constitution of Pakistan, approved in 1973; contained commitment of the state for eradication of illiteracy and provision of free education up to secondary level but latest surveys and estimates indicate that over 55 million Pakistanis of age 10+ cannot read and write. Incorporating economically weak and disadvantaged children through free education policy to benefit from the gift of education is a great step forward to reducing illiteracy but it is better to ensure such policy becomes law

with specific budgetary allocation and one front support. ²Tomasevski (2006) global report on free education deduces that only three countries out of 45 in Sub-Saharan Africa fully guarantee free primary education. In 12 of these countries, government have committed to make primary education free in recent years but the general picture has it that too many Sub-Saharan African countries public primary education was supposed to be free but is not free. As outlines in (UNESCO, 2007) publication, education was formally recognized in the universal declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Since then, such declaration has been affirmed in several international human rights treaties including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1961). These treaties institute an entitlement to free and compulsory primary education for all children without discrimination of any kind.

From the supra, it is reasonable to insinuate that the concept of free and compulsory primary education policy is worthy and that introducing it in local laws or national constitutions is a positive step in championing the cause of creating enabling environment to massively educate pupils. Reasonably, it leaves no doubt that such undertaken does not only promote global declarations but gears toward a one front national commitment to support the policy for the empowerment of future generation. Unfortunately, implementation has been extremely constraint due to budgetary inequalities and limited external supports. Nandekar, (2009), the need for Education Act is necessary to protect the quality of education and maintain its importance. The Act provides assistance to poor children and it is about free and compulsory education. This unearths important questions such as: what strategies to employ both locally and internationally? And how resources can be mobilized and funds allocated to make this policy achieve its objectives? Significant progress in terms of increased enrollment and expansion of free and compulsory primary education have been made but the goal of achieving gender parity by 2005 was not met and the aid funds for adequate basic education actually diminished in 2005, finally, the issue of quality for everyone has not been addressed, EI Analysis (EFA, 2008). Countries in Africa that made strong progress toward universal primary education around the 1960s and 1970s did so after they abolished school fees. However, the gains could not be sustained due to lack of financial sustainability, The World Bank (2009). Corruption, mismanagement, and so-called dependency syndrome have caused so many African nations to be heavily reliance on external support in the form of aids. But the hard true is these aids represent recycled resources that originate from the very Africa. If only those leaders at the hand of power can realize this truth and focus their energies and strategies on how to locally generate resources for the implementation of free education policy, the continent can make significant advancements and even become a success story. As technology advances and the world gets more competitive than ever before, obtaining education is a key to escaping poverty, illiteracy, poor health and the likes. Therefore, any policy that supposed to make education accessible, available, and affordable must come with clear execution plan locally. Nearly all countries marketing the free primary education policy depend on some kinds of bilateral or multilateral support to make it happen but sadly, those funds required are not coming forth to sufficiently fill gaps in countries with the greatest needs. Rose, Steer, Smith, and Zubairi, (September, 2013), write: "Among the 41 countries in need, 22 receive \$10 or less from bilateral donors, suggesting that there is a need for the large multilateral donors to come in and fill the gap". Extending the benefits of educational opportunities means addressing constraint in terms of public and private resources, OECD and UNESCO, (2002).

Though schooling is now mandatory for all children ages 7-15 and enrollment has dramatically increased but universal primary education has not yet been achieved in Tanzania, Dennis and Stahley, (2012). Juuko and Kabonesa, (May, 2007), in Uganda; not all school going children are enrolled in school and most of those enrolled eventually drop out. Although the right to education has been challenged in so many cases but these are not substantial enough to match the discourtesy that occur that prevent children from realizing their right to education. Mapako and Mareva, (February, 2013) study on the concept of free primary education policy in Zimbabwe whether the policy was a myth or reality from the perspective of parents and teachers reveals that the policy was an elusive concept, hence a myth. Comparative analysis by Nishimura et al., (2009) on Universal Primary Education in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda reveals that effective universal primary education policy implementation would require considerable consultation with key stakeholders and a baseline survey that will enable systematic implementation and consideration of equity. It further indicates mutual accountability between the government and parents and communities is also a key to the sustainability of the universal primary education policy. In order to deliver on this major human rights article, a dedicated step driven by clear implementation plans is eminent. EFA National Review of Botswana (2015) indicates that Botswana made significant progress in all the six EFA goals due to series of strategic complementary policies with clear implementation strategies. The country is now looking forward to future policy direction for Education for All (EFA).

As reviewed in the literature herein, free primary education concept has revolved differently and with different levels of successes and deficiencies in different countries and regions. As will be read shortly in this paper, the policy has been appreciated and vehemently criticized by parents and teachers alike for performing dismally and the empirical analysis conducted also supplements the perceptual experiences of the respondents and interviewees in this study.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data Collection Procedure

The research plan for this study used empirical analysis and qualitative and quantitative approaches to dissect the extent of accomplishments of the concept of free and compulsory basic primary education in Liberia in terms of promised and actual performance. The use of empirical evidence will give clearer picture of enrollment variances and supporting environment of basic primary education currently unfolding while qualitative and quantitative inquiries on the perceptions of major stakeholders like parents and teachers will supplement. Data were collected using semi-structured interview channel with twenty five parents and semi-structure questionnaire for twenty five teachers selected sporadically in Montserrado county. The main attraction of using mixed method research is that data gained through different methods may complement each other, overcoming weaknesses in individual methods (Harris and Brown, 2010).

Empirical Data on Basic Education

The data below spring from population of school aged children from grade 6 to 14 (enrollment and out-of-school), historical analysis of primary and lower secondary school children enrollment (from 2005 to 2014), and school facilities as at 2014.

Figure 2 below depicts population of children ages from 6 to 14 and the corresponding enrollment of grades 1 to 9. The age appropriate levels for basic primary education according to the Education Reform Act of 2011 are 6 years for grade 1, 7 years for grade 2, 8 years for grade 3, and up to 14 years for grade 9. As indicated in the figure, the situation of out of

school children in Liberia is very alarming and it cuts across every county. Bigger counties like Montserrado, Nimba, Bong, Margibi, and Lofa are hosts to more than 60% out-of-school children. The situation is unarguably the same for every county as their numbers suggest. For instance, smaller counties including Bomi, Rivercess, River Gee, Sinoe, and Grand Kru have equally more than 50% out-of-school children each.

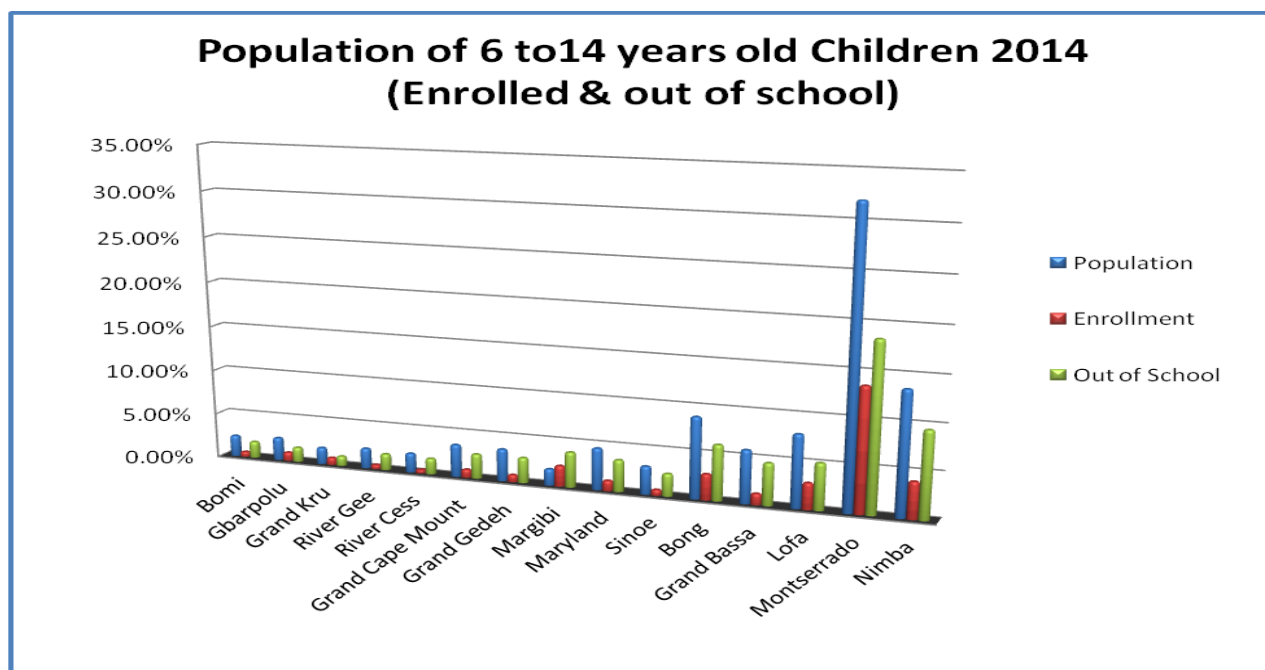


Figure 2: Population of 6 to 14 years old (enrollment and out-of-school) 2014

Source: Author's calculation of data from Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (population) and Ministry of Education (enrollment and enrollment)

As shown in the 2005 to 2014 enrollment analysis of figures 3 and 4 respectively, enrollment for basic primary (primary and lower secondary) school aged children roll-out steadily from 2005 to 2010/2011 until it dropped dramatically in 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 and then increased in 2013/2014. Why? Because prior to the 2011 Education Reform Act, enrollment did not consider aged appropriateness for basic education. However, aged appropriateness came into play in 2011 to meet the new national standard and those pupils who did not fall within such requirement were considered out-of-school. Though some of them were enrolled elsewhere but the portion outstanding and needing basic education is more than those in school appropriately and studying elsewhere combined. While this paper does not intent to compare gender enrollment, it is important to note that enrollment for both male and female has not been balanced since 2005 until date. As indicated in the figures below, there is a recognizable enrollment disparity between male and female students and this is unique nationwide.

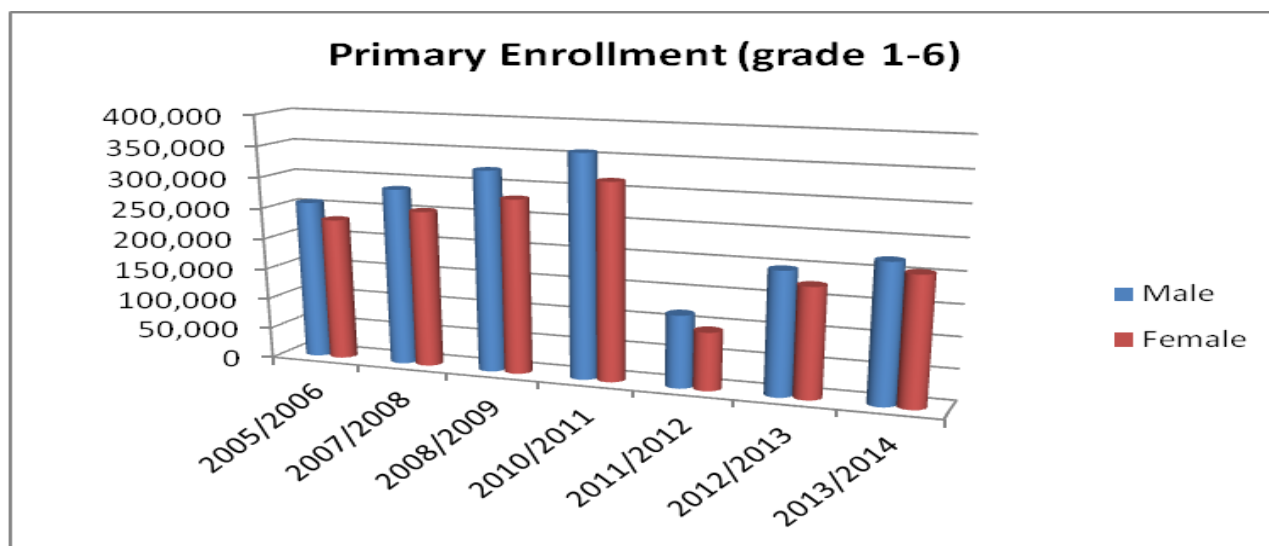


Figure 3: Historical analysis of basic primary enrollments from 2005 to 2014

Source: Author's calculation of data from Division of Education Management Information System, Ministry of Education (enrollment)

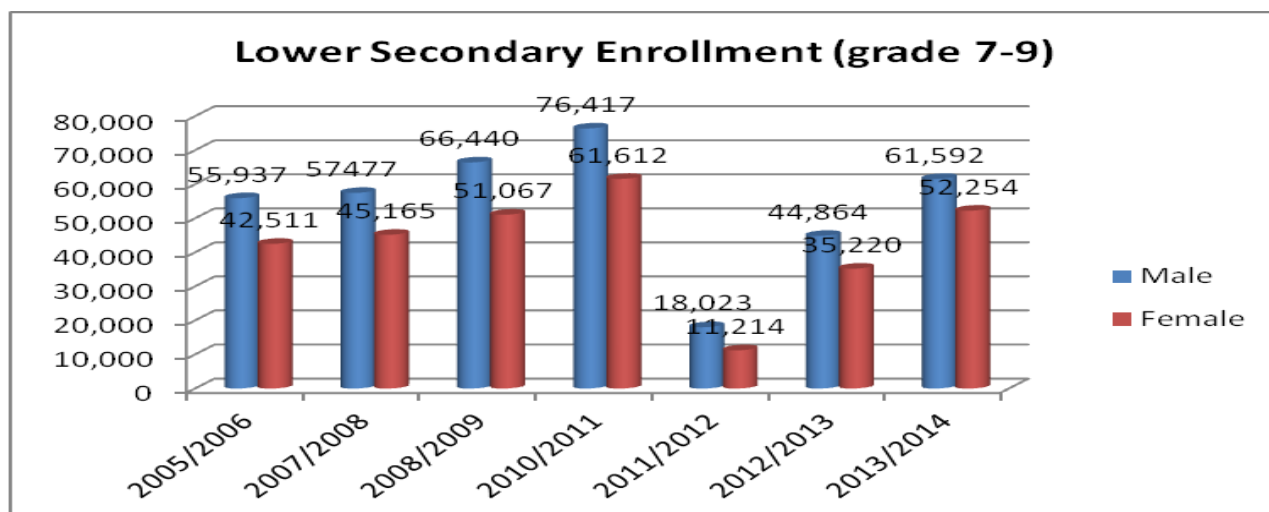


Figure 4: Lower Secondary or Upper Basic enrollment (Grade 7-9)

Source: Author's calculation of data from Division of Education Management Information System, Ministry of Education (enrollment)

The declaration of free education policy is one thing and ensuring supporting environment is another. figure 5 below was designed to give a clearer picture of school facilities in Liberia. As indicated in the figure, the government slightly owned over 50% of schools (basic primary and secondary) with more concentration on 13 counties except for Margibi and Montserrado counties far below 500 hundred school public schools altogether. Montserrado is by population the biggest county in Liberia while Margibi is one of the bigger counties well populated and both have lesser public schools.

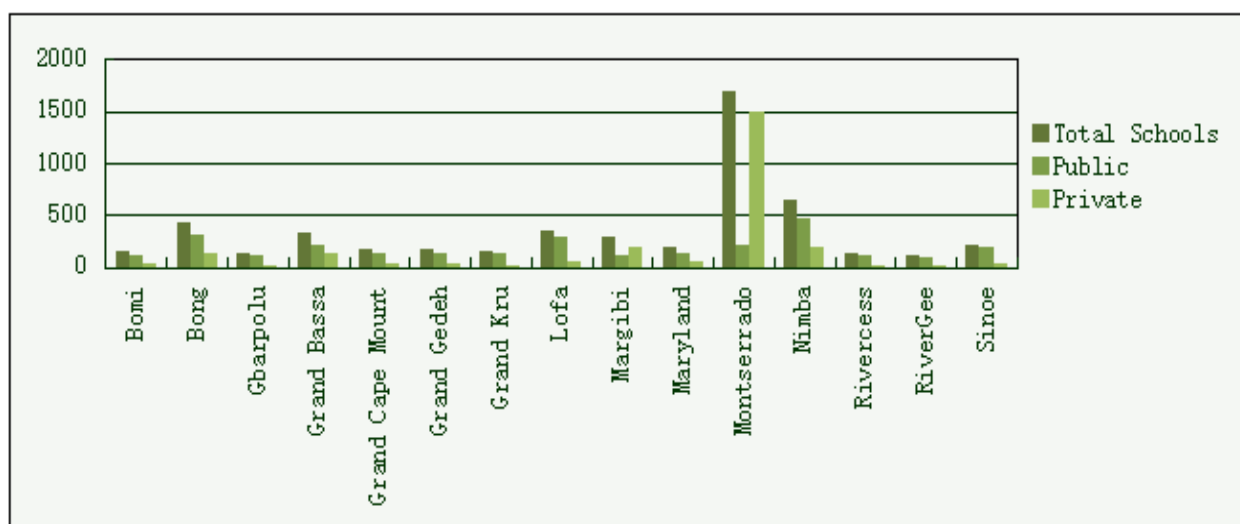


Figure 5: school facilities 2014

Source: Author's calculation of data from Division of Physical Environment (DPE), Ministry of Education (school facilities)

Research Strategy, Population and Sample

The research combined empirical analysis looking at Liberia population demographic, level of enrollments and the ratio of school aged children out-of-school, and qualitative and quantitative approaches with a sample size of fifty (50) respondents and interviewees comprising twenty five parents and twenty five teachers. This strategy enables understanding of how enrollment and school facilities have evolved over the years while perceptions of parents and teachers to the free education concept further inform the findings. The overall results obtained were deemed credible and gave a broad spectrum of a national scenario since the respondents and interviewees hail from different social-economic backgrounds with diverse educational achievement. For some of the parents, simple English was used to promote effective communication since they could not speak fluently to avoid potential impediments in communication.

FINDINGS

This paper, which explores a succinct understanding of what has been achieved in basic primary education both empirically and perceptual experiences of public school teachers and parents to the concept of free and compulsory basic primary education introduced by the Government of Liberia (2001, 2011), has revealed negative appraisal and quite disappointing views. Findings from the research gathered that the policy is appealing and worthy, but its impact is less-measurable, thereby reinforcing this paper assertion that the policy is characterized by scores of challenges. The ultimate concern of whether the policy was necessary with well source resources or politicians only wanted to be on course with international declaration would give leaders a better understanding while making decision that will affect people's livelihood and economy development.

Finding from Empirical Analysis

The importance of including an empirical analysis in this research was to critically ascertain the support environment established by Government to enable a smooth operation of the quote-on-quote free education policy. The analysis considered four major factors including national population presently, population of 6-14 year olds children with emphasis on in

school and out-of-school, historical enrollment of basic primary school aged children from 2005 to 2014, and school facilities available.

During the stratification processes of the population statistics of Liberia (figure 1), it was observed that the country population is vehemently shifted towards youth. Over 70% of the country population falls between the ages of 0 to 24 in which over 55% accounts for ages 5 to 24 year olds, thus putting an unavoidable pressure on government and society at large to create avenue for elemental education that guarantees solid foundation, brighter future, and better life for children and youth alike.

As indicated in figure 2, the situation of out-of-school children in Liberia is very alarming and it cuts across every county. Montserrado, where Liberia's capital city (Monrovia) is located has more than 60% school aged children out-of-school. This situation is similar in all the other bigger counties and that of the smaller ones. Technically, exactly half of primary school aged children are physically out of school nationwide. This statistics is further verified by UNICEF out-of-school survey conducted in 2012 which reveals more than half of pre-primary school aged children are physically out-of-school while exactly half of primary school aged children are affected in the same manner.

The historical enrollment in basic primary schools as shown in figures 3 and 4 respectively was steady between 2005 to 2010. However, the figure deteriorated 2011 through 2014 because the age appropriate level was not taken into consideration from 2005 until 2011, when the Education Reform Act of 2011 came into play. The Act recognizes basic primary school aged children from 6 to 14 and labels over-aged children enroll into other programs as out-of-school. However, this does not mean that all aged appropriate children are in school and those pupils enrolled in other programs are satisfactorily attending. The percentage of basic school aged children out of school is still more than those in school nationwide.

It was observed in figure 5 that government basic and secondary schools dominate in all the smaller counties including Bomi, Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu, Grand Gedeh, Sinoe, to name a few while bigger counties like Nimba, Bong, Lofa, and Grand Bassa follow suit. But the situation is different in Montserrado and Margibi counties. Montserrado hosts less than 250 public schools with more than one thousand private schools while Margibi has less than 40% public schools against total schools in the county. Montserrado is a home to the nation capital (Monrovia) and hosts approximately 35% of local population dominated by youth and children because of its growing economic activities. Margibi is the sixth populated county also dominated by youth and children alike. Limited supply of public schools in these counties means less fortunate kids who supposed to benefit from free education cannot enjoy such freedom. Although massive availability of school facilities does not guarantee immediate enrollment of pupils but schools serve as one of the most important supporting infrastructures of education.

Results from the empirical analysis speak a wake up call for Liberia. The poor attendants of pupils and limited school facilities threaten the long term survival of Liberia. As it is often said, children are the future leaders but such saying can only become a reality through education, the one that enables the attainment of productive skills through quality schooling. Being out of school is counter-productive to the concept of children are the future leaders.

Finding from Interview with teachers

The twenty-five teacher respondents included six part-timers and four school administrators (also parents). They expressed almost unanimous views of the free and compulsory basic primary education policy in Liberia. The teachers talked of their awareness of the policy and really lauded the fact that government could think of educating children free without

discrimination of any sort but expressed deep frustration over its implementation. Below are common responses:

“The free and compulsory basic primary education policy reaffirmed the Liberian Government commitment to eradicate illiteracy and ensure that less fortunate children and child soldiers once deprived quality education due to the 14-years of bloody civil war come to term with children from the rest of the world”.

“During the course of the war, this country was completely destroyed and left so many families and children poor, homeless, and unfortunately deprived of everything they ever worked for. In such situation, a responsible government will find ways to improved the livelihood of its citizens and that is why the government free education policy is hailed”.

On account of the free education results and opinions, the respondents acknowledged that; since its declaration, the policy is unfortunately on paper and not a reality. In some public schools, only tuition is waived but other fees such as uniforms, books, activities fees, transportation, and feeding are the sole responsibilities of students, they asserted. They further added that the compulsory aspect that suppose to obligate parents, guidance, and society at large to ensure all children benefit the gift of education is unarguably not forceful. They desire the government to treat the policy with emergency by allotting more resources to the education sector but also afraid that doing so would affect other key priority areas giving the country poor economic status in the sub-region.

“The free education policy cannot be realized in the absence of better schools, quality teachers, teaching and learning materials, and awareness that promotes what parents and national government responsibilities are”.

The argument above appears to sum up most of the perceptions articulated by these respondents and further buttressed the million dollar concern as to the necessity and timeliness of the free education policy. The respondents were very appreciative of the policy but expressed regret over the level of implementation. Even though they had great admiration and wished it all the best but the issue of government ability to implement was unanimous an impossibility. Nearly 100% of the respondents expressed negative views towards what was termed “free education”. They asserted that in all fairness, the term free education has never been realized ever in Liberia since it gained independence in 1847. Parents have always paid for their children education before declaring the free education policy but the situation; since the policy, has even worsen with complicated unimaginable fees including activities, flexibility, school feeding, etc and etc.

The respondents are also cognizant of the poor state of schools and disappointing rate of school aged children out-of-school in the country. They cited the low enrollment of school aged children and high out-of-school rate as a clear indication that the policy is yet to achieve its intended purpose.

Finding from Questionnaire for parents

Like teachers, the twenty five parents who were interviewed also had predominantly negative assessment of the free education policy. They generally expressed their delight for the policy in the same way the teachers reacted and frown on government inability to make it a reality venture. Except for their additional discussions beyond the teachers stand on the free education policy, those similar views are excluded in this section.

The respondents embraced the policy but indicated they are yet to know the distinction between what is free and what is not. “Since i heard about this free education policy, not a

day our responsibilities as parents have been discussed”, said one parent in the West Point Community.

In summary, the parents views signaled a consensus that the free education policy is still in a promise stage and is yet to be felt. Some of their concerns included the followings: Free education? How would you mention free education when fees such as sports, flexibility, activities, physical education, and cost of uniforms are directly paid by students? How would you talk about free education when ninth grade students are paying for West African Examination Council (WAEC) fees instead of the government? Can there ever be a free education in this country when auxiliary fees are even more than the total tuition and fees charged by private schools? When i heard of the free education policy some times ago, i said to myself it is impossible in this country. Can anyone show me where in Liberia free education is offered? Schools in Liberia have never been free and I am of the conviction that corruption can never allow such initiative to succeed in Liberia, one parent asserted.

DISCUSSION

As unearth in the empirical data of basic primary school aged children and supporting facilities (population in school, out-of-school, and school facilities), it is glaring that the policy is still in the stage of promise yet to be fulfilled as evidence by the huge disparity between enrollment and out-of-school. The limitation of public school facilities; especially in Montserrado and Margibi counties further shows government unpreparedness to make the policy a reality.

Also from the views of parents and teachers, it is concisely clear that nothing has been done genuinely by government to fully implement the free education policy as evidence by inadequate educational infrastructure, and supporting environment thereby implying government lack of political will to minimize the gigantic illiteracy that has befallen the country.

National policies represent government aspiration to deal with prevailing situations in a way that its citizens or target segment of society can be impacted positively for economic development. It is against this background that evaluating the Liberian government free education policy became a worthy project. Giving Liberia conflicts associated misfortunes and pains that left scores of people homeless, poor, and illiterate, such a policy could make a difference. But unfortunately, government has failed to deliver. Free education policy might be perceived differently in different countries or by different people but from the perspective of this paper, it is only objective to see free education as far as barrier free admission is concerned. From all indications, this policy was a political rhetoric that the government developed to join the international bandwagon (EFA, MDGs, etc) meant to attract international funds for other reasons. Honestly, there is a need for free education if you stratify Liberia’s population in terms of social status and livelihood. Education may not be free for all but severely impoverished school aged children could be targeted and sponsored in order to bring them to term with the rest of the kids who can afford.

CONCLUSION

As exhausted in this paper, it is glaring that parents and teachers alike deeply appreciate the free basic primary education policy that promises to educate all children without discrimination of any sorts as opposed to what was experienced before 1960s where the so-called Americo Liberians only established educational institutions to suit their standards with total disregard to the indigenous or native population. At least the policy showed some level of kindness on the part of government to emancipate the downtrodden.

Irrespective of how appealing and worthy the policy was considered as highlighted in this paper, results germinated from empirical evidence and parents and teachers judgment clearly deduced that the free education policy in Liberia is still in a promise stage and yet to be fulfilled. Therefore, this study contents that the gap between promised and actual performance is not reasonable as the policy has failed dismally to achieve its stated objectives. In other words, actual performance is very poor and the policy is nothing but a political rhetoric.

Due to the fact that developing countries are filled with many competing priorities, it is essential to be mindful with the subject of free education so that they do not stocked in the middle in implementing such policy sooner or later when they are faced with challenges from other segments of the economy. In this way, potential failures will be minimized. The country was not ready when it adopted the policy in 2001. Its economy was already disadvantaged and heavily indebted with poor infrastructure altogether due to the civil war. This, in our view, deemed reaffirming the free education policy in 2011 and extending it to 9th grade very unnecessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that national policy of such should be driven by carefully orchestrated plan with proper implementation strategies based on well sourced resources. Basic education should be a national priority in Liberia because the country is overwhelmed by gigantic poverty, unemployment, and high rate of illiteracy in the sub-region, poor economy, and alarming poverty. The government and people should mobilize resources in support of basic education because this is the only way to realizing the concept: “youth are the future leaders” and to fight poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment.

Basic education is very elemental to the survival of a nation. Therefore, it is further recommended that government declares national emergency in support purposefully to organize more resources locally for the education sector. For instance, a national education fund drive program can be organized whereby businesses (stores, shops, transportation operators, government and private employees, diaspora citizens, and multinational companies) could be tasked a minimum amount towards education reform programs.

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