

Examining the Contemporary Status of an Education System: The Case of the Republic of South Sudan

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Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the contemporary status of an education system. The paper takes the case of the Republic of South Sudan. The key issues the paper will examine are the education enrollment and completion rates while paying particular attention to inequalities in both access and quality among racial or ethnic groups, males and females, and rural and urban areas. Furthermore, the paper will also look at if there are programs and policies in South Sudan which improve educational opportunities for poor or marginalized communities given the actuality that the country is in state of conflict. Finally the paper will also gauge some of the evaluation mechanisms put in place on the education sector.

South Sudan as a republic became independent in July of 2011 after enduring two decades of civil war with the Khartoum-led government. The population of South Sudan is estimated according to the World Bank 2015 to exceed 12 million. The people of South Sudan during all these periods have endured a number of constraints. They have one of the lowest literacy rates in the world (USAID, 2013). In South Sudan education is a major priority for its citizenry. This was in accordance with the national government plan. South Sudan as the world's youngest country has 70% of the population under the age of 30 years old. That means that South Sudan's future depends in large part on its ability to educate its young population. The task of educating South Sudan's population remains formidable right now, as more efforts are badly needed to scale up, according to many education experts such as those working for UNESCO. The challenges South Sudan are many and when one just takes education it can be said that education in South Sudan consistently leads the list of government services that are most highly valued and desired by the public. This demonstrates that South Sudanese see a better education for their children as a top priority.

Historically South Sudan emerged from British rule when it used to be under the greater Sudan. Sudan was a British colony from 1899 to 1956. The predicaments of education began during the British era, from 1899 to 1956. During this period the British did not establish schools. As presented by some literature, the beginning of education in South Sudan was witnessed when the religious groups such as the Catholic and Protestant missionaries first provided limited schooling. These schools were taught in the vernacular which did not help children become permanently literate (Akrawi, M. 1960).

Before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 there were relatively few schools operating in South Sudan. The school operations were not part of a coordinated education system. Throughout the war period in South Sudan most schools were run by missionaries, communities, or Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs). The operations of schools in South Sudan differed widely on almost all counts such as: duration of the primary and even secondary cycles; and

curriculum and language of instruction be it English, Arabic and other local languages. In 2005 when South Sudan negotiated and signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) the government established a new education system (World Bank, 2012).

Education Enrollment and Completion Rates

In the first place, education is one of the main priorities for the people of South Sudan. As recent studies show, many communities in South Sudan view education as the most important peace dividend. Based on many articles reviewed concerning education enrollment and completion rates in South Sudan, the following results are revealed.

Generally speaking, South Sudan has some of the worst education indicators globally as a number of literature reviewed shows. As has been noted around 1.3 million children, approximately 50% of primary school-age children, in South Sudan are currently not in school. It has been indicated that when one compares South Sudan with other countries around the world South Sudan can be ranked second to last in terms of providing children access primary school (Katie Smith and Liesbet, 2014).

Taking it further, at secondary school level in South Sudan is ranks last. To point out, the probability that a primary-age child living in South Sudan today will enroll in higher education is reported in a dismal 1 percent (Katie Smith and Liesbet, 2014). Some indications suggest that, many children who enroll in school never complete their education. South Sudan students today leave school at high rates throughout primary and secondary school, with an average 26% of students dropping out at each grade level (Katie Smith and Liesbet, 2014). Some reasons for drop out are psychosocial problems due to poverty and the ongoing war and also the issue of lack of teacher supervision. To put it differently, according to UNESCO (2011) “Most children entering school do not complete a full primary cycle. In 2010 there were just over 426,000 children in Grade 1 but only 117,000 in Grade 5 and 22,000 in Grade 8. In other words, fewer than half of primary school age children are in school and fewer than half of those who enter school get four years of education” (p.7). Estimates by the World Bank indicate that less than 8% of students tested in grade 6 were able to achieve higher than 50% on a basic mathematics test. As it can be argued the education issue in South Sudan is also both on both enrollment and learning outcomes

An important factor in these poor results is the frequent occurrence of the civil warfare which devastated educational prospects for generations of South Sudanese, as most were displaced under for regular school cycles. For instance many displaced children end up receiving schools in other states with different education standards. Conflict displaces citizens and unhinges government services (UNESCO, 2011). Also as pointed out, another challenge which impacted education enrollment and completion is due to high costs, lack of buildings, and insecurity (Faye, R, 2010). According to the World Bank (2012) primary schools tend to be overcrowded, class sizes are large, and schools rarely offer the complete primary cycle. Most compelling evidence reinforcing this point is also stated by USAID (2013) that “32% of primary levels learning spaces are open-air” (p.1). Also as confirmed by the author, in most rural areas in South Sudan big trees are still being used as class rooms. This has a real bearing on education enrollment and the kind of conditions that could have made the students stay in school.

It is important to realize, for a number of years now many parents in South Sudan are pushing for their children to attend school without any necessary support from government (Hjort, H. 2008).

The community has banded together to build new classrooms, but they can only afford local materials like flimsy wood and grass thatch. The inability of the government to fund schools leads to high education costs that most families cannot afford. The quality of these classrooms are not lasting for long specially during the rainy seasons. In South Sudan as such children that access such schools could not continue to enroll and that has led to high dropout and low completion rates. Another key point is that, currently in South Sudan other school classrooms are in tents or only have a semi-permanent or roof-only structure. This has also scared students and made them remain at home. This paper argues that addressing this situation may require South Sudan to add capacity to the education system to reach acceptable standards. The government will need to weigh the relative value of building additional classrooms for existing schools and building new schools. Furthermore, access to school is uneven by state and thus expansion strategies will need to be targeted.

A report by the South Sudan office of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) articulated that 70 % of children between 6 and 17 years old have never set foot inside a classroom, and that only 1 in 10 children complete primary school. As outlined by UNICEF in 2014 the low rates of primary school completion and high gender, geographic and wealth disparities pose enormous challenges to the development of South Sudan. The completion rate in primary schools is less than 10%, one of the lowest in the world. Gender equality is another challenge, with only 33% of girls in schools (UNICEF, 2014).

Highlighting further, concern about access to education at lower level reveals that access to pre-primary and secondary education is even worse than primary education. Only 2% of pre-school aged children are in early childhood development programmes and a mere 44,027 children are in secondary schools, compared with 1.4 million in primary schools (UNICEF, 2014). Some of the factors involved in this situation are related to the increase in the demand for education by returnee children who have been arriving in the South Sudan since 2010, just a few months before South Sudan became independent. Having new entries to such a fragmented education system means stretching the under-resourced and limited resources at hand.

To emphasize, the few schools that do exist in South Sudan both in urban and rural areas are not conducive to learning (World Bank, 2012). First thing to remember will be the South Sudanese educational facilities which are still widely lacking, though it is reported that 500 new schools have been built since independence. To enumerate the new education structures in South Sudan serve 1.4 million children who are now enrolled and those attending primary school are indicated to be a two-fold increase from few years ago (Brown, Gordon and Kevin Watkins, 2012). This paper asserts that enrolment in South Sudan is really alarming as according to date from UNICEF population of children 0 – 5 years are 1,553,629 and population of children 0 – 18 years is 4,417,278 that represent the bulge of the over population. This means that many young South Sudan are really out of education (UNICEF, 2014). As similarly indicated by other reports and authors, rural children, poorer children and girls are considerably more disadvantaged in terms of school enrollment and retention in South Sudan. Much as the gap between girls and boys has reduced, girls still repeat classes more than their male counterparts. Girls are more likely to be enrolled later and removed from primary school earlier than their male student counterparts. Primary schools have a male graduation rate of about 16%, while girls' graduation rates lag behind at 9% (Brown, 2005). For the reasons discussed above, girls are at a clear disadvantage in education.

As World Bank (2012) has further explained, “There are almost equally wide socioeconomic disparities in the retention rate to the last grade of primary school. For those children who did enroll in school, the gaps in the likelihood of still being in school by the last grade are again widest for the urban-rural and rich-poor dimensions”(p.51). It can also be indicated that urban children are 27% more likely than rural children to still be in school by grade 8, children from the richest quintile are 24% more likely to still be in school than children from the poorest quintile, and boys are 14% more likely than girls to remain enrolled until grade 8 of primary education level.

Despite high interest to prioritize education, the indicators on education in South Sudan are still among the worst in the world. According to the World Bank report (2012) the demand for education is high in South Sudan given the increases in school enrolment over the past few years. As also pointed out by authors such Brown, Gordon and Kevin Watkins (2012) many issues prevented the educational infrastructure in South Sudan from reaching its full potential. Some of the issues highlighted include poverty, governmental failures, ongoing violence, poor health of South Sudanese citizens, and inaccessibility to schools that are overcrowded, underfunded, and operated by unqualified teachers. Some of the impacting issues relating to low enrolment is that South Sudan has the worst gender equality in education in the world and that will also affect the system (Brown, Gordon and Kevin Watkins, 2012).

The World Bank also shows that South Sudan is working hard to build an inclusive education system in the face of huge unmet needs. However, the Bank says to catch up with the rest of Africa, South Sudan needs consistent and higher investment in education for more classrooms, more schools in rural areas, more trained teachers and more equitable and efficient allocation of resources for education across South Sudan. To tackle the problem of teachers there is need to consider that a sufficient number of appropriately qualified teachers and other education personnel are recruited through a participatory and transparent process, based on selection criteria reflecting diversity and equity.

Some reports indicate that, there are about 25,000 teachers in primary schools and 1,700 teachers in secondary schools across South Sudan. The numbers of teachers are seen as significant but one has to say that the most striking features of the teacher workforce are the low share of female teachers. When expressed in percentages based on whole numbers at primary school level, female teachers represent 13% while secondary school level 11% of the teacher workforce. There is also considerable variation across states (World Bank, 2012 and UNICEF, 2009). It can be reasoned here that having a low number of female teachers has a significant impact on girl enrolment, retention and completions since most education systems will not promote the good aspects of girl child education. Therefore, this paper needs to emphasize the importance of increasing the number of female teachers. Having many qualified teachers at most schools in South Sudan will help in addressing the many challenges girls and schools are facing today.

With this in mind, disparities in school participation rates are quite substantial in South Sudan. The widest disparities are associated with the urban-rural and rich-poor dimensions, but there are also strong gender disparities. Girls, poor children and children living in pastoralist communities face particular challenges. Of all of the out-of-school children in South Sudan, approximately two-thirds are girls. Another factor that also affected education enrolment for young South Sudanese, particularly girls, is that many parents prefer to prioritize boys’ education over girls’ and that led to girls being removed from school earlier. Also if a family cannot afford to send all

of their children to school, the interests of the boys' education will be favored (Brown, Gordon; Kevin Watkins (2012).

As also reported by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and cited by Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), the dowry associated with marriage can be a lucrative incentive for parents to marry their daughters off at an early age before completing school (IRIN, 2009). Education enrollment and completion have also been effected by early marriage and other sociocultural practices that inhibit education for girls and widen gender disparities. Under those circumstances it was indicated that children from the wealthiest families are 32% more likely to begin primary school than their counterparts from the poorest families. Compounding the problem, children that are lucky enough to be in school learn very little.

According to the latest World Bank Education status and challenges report on the Republic of South Sudan released in September 2012, access to Primary School Education and Alternative Education System (AES) has greatly improved from 2007. The report indicated that from 2005 to 2009, about 700,000 more children enrolled in primary school. The report further advanced that, a child in South Sudan now has a 60% chance of receiving some schooling, up from 40% a decade ago this is because the report shows that at least 60% of teenage children have enrolled for primary education. According to the report it means about 40% of the same age bracket remains out of school as fewer pupils above the age of 19 years enroll for primary education (World Bank).

Another education challenge that affected enrollment and retention rates can be linked to teacher's performance at schools. As some reports suggest, only 39% of the teachers are trained and are not necessarily deployed according to number of students at schools and school levels (Gurtong, 2015). As also reinforced by the World Bank three out of five teachers receive a salary from the government, with an average of 80 children to each salaried teacher. Government-funded teachers are distributed unevenly. Most teachers due to low pay decided to leave the teaching profession and look for greener pastures. Furthermore, the ongoing delays or failures to pay teachers' salaries have continued to limit education activities as teachers do not show up for duties. This has been worsened with difficulties in delivering learning and teaching materials due to poor roads (UN-OCHA 2015). Altogether the paper needs to state that, South Sudan will need more teachers and more pedagogical inputs. The teachers' development must be better managed. It is clear that government-paid teachers are not deployed in an objective manner, considering that there appears to be little relationship between the number of students and the number of teachers in a given establishment. Teachers need to be better paid as this will increase motivation and enhance education teaching outcomes which are necessary for school enrollment.

The need to operate with so many school categories reflects that the boundaries between government and non-government schools are quite fluid. Goldsmith (2010), for example, describes how some church schools have church-government-and parent-paid teachers within the same institution. This arrangement created confusion and inequalities for teachers and for education institutions. The government of South Sudan churches and parents should work toward harmonizing the payment systems so as to create uniformity.

As some findings suggest, most of the primary and some of the secondary schools in South Sudan do not have permanent structures, which leads to the loss of school working days. High average class sizes make instruction a challenge and there is a severe shortage of textbooks in both primary and secondary schools. In primary schools, the average pupil-textbook ratio is 3:1

in both mathematics and English (UNESCO, 2011). Also some literatures show that shortage of text books, papers and writing materials; incomplete syllabus coverage and a reduction in government's expenditure per pupil are the other key challenges affecting the learning environment in South Sudan. This paper also calls for any strategy to lower student-teacher ratios or raise textbook-student ratios must ensure that each additional teacher deployed and each additional book distributed contribute to reverse this inefficiency.

The current war has also negative bearing on enrolment of students to many schools in South Sudan. As UNICEF says "hundreds of boys, some as young as 12, have been kidnapped to be used as soldiers" (Para. 2). The UNICEF report also indicated that while students were preparing for exams, militiamen came to the community and started searching, building by building, for boys to join the fight. Also 88 schools remain occupied by displaced people or armed forces (35 by armed groups, 48 by IDPs, 2 both IDPs and armed forces and 3 school status unknown). This leaves children unable to access education and exposed to abuse.

Education Inequalities

As observed presently, educational inequalities in South Sudan have been attributed to a number of factors. Among the known factors are the; lack of funds and infrastructure, along with a poor and mostly illiterate population. These factors have made establishing an effective education system challenging. Some indications pointed out that there are also certain traditional cultural ideas about women which make it more difficult for girls to get an education than their male counterparts.

Five decades of war and upheaval in South Sudan has had an inevitable impact on education as it can be pointed out that almost three-quarters of adults in the world's newest South Sudan are unable to read or write. This situation also affected the way young South Sudanese are supposed to enroll to schools, as most parents who do not read or write do not value the importance of education. Further, based on the author's understanding, the less the parents value education the higher educational inequalities are likely to be realized in the future. A call for education authorities' to prioritize the recovery of quality education, including free and inclusive access to schooling by both girls and boys, is a key to increase enrollment and retention.

As the paper can assert, low quality is not unexpected considering the state of the education system at the time of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which also affected the operations of schools as they differed in the way they were organized (World Bank, 2012). Since 1956 the education system has been regarded ineffective. Most of these ineffective schools were church-run schools which were shut down in a wave of Islamization. Some indications also pointed out that some new nationalized schools were created, and schools used Arabic instead of local languages. The new schools were also inaccessible to most of the population. The educational opportunities became even more dismal once the civil war broke out in South Sudan (Faye, R. 2010). Complicating matters is the fact that South Sudan has decided to switch from offering instruction in Arabic, which is associated with the north, to teaching in English - a challenge for most teachers and students. Many education experts believe that children should first become literate in their mother tongues. But it should be argued that it is very difficult to do since South Sudan has 66 languages and the cost to support the development of such materials for each of those languages will be high (UNESCO, 2011).

The chronic shortage of qualified teachers is a serious challenge in South Sudan that directly impedes learning. The average ratio of students to teachers in the country is 50 to 1, reaching as high as 145 to 1 in the conflict-affected state of Jonglei. For trained teachers, the country average jumps to 113 to 1. Female teachers, important to improving education for girls, represent just 12 percent of all teachers. Recognizing the scale of the challenge, the government has focused on increasing the size of the teaching force. However, only around 40% of teachers in the country have been trained and many lack the support and qualifications necessary to provide quality learning (Katie Smith and Liesbet, 2014). As indicated by Education Cluster South Sudan (2012) teachers and other education personnel need to receive periodic, relevant and structured training according to needs and circumstances.

Distribution of paid staff across states should be made consistent with the state's share of total enrollments. If a state has 10% of the total student enrollments of South Sudan, it would be consistent that the state would also have around 10% of the total number of paid staff working in states. Such policies will support sustaining the enrolment and retention of children at various schools since some school management systems will be in place given the available number of teachers.

Education policy

As reported by some government officials in Juba the government of South Sudan in 2006 launched "the 'Go to School policy.' This policy initiative called "the 'Go to School' initiative has been the biggest achievement to date. According to UNICEF this initiative has enabled the enrolment of more than 1.6 million, up from an estimated 343,000 before the signing of Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 that ended decades of civil war.

South Sudan adopted a policy of free schooling which means no tuition fee, no uniform fee, no exams fee, no material cost, no Parents Teachers Assistance fee, no registration fee nor any other fees associated with schooling. But this policy initiative remained on paper and is not enforced.

Education programs

Currently in South Sudan a number of organizations and government are supporting the education sector. After South Sudan signed the 2005 peace agreement, its education programme, supported by international donors, underwent one of the world's fastest reconstruction programmes but the outcome of such support have not yet been felt.

International involvement in South Sudan's education reform has been vast, including various United Nations agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations, and individual western countries. Some of the major donors include the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the European Union, and Norway. These donors typically allocate their money to building classrooms, sending textbooks, and training teachers in areas affected by conflict. While these efforts have been met with mild successes like supporting increase in enrollment, a much greater commitment will be required to bring South Sudan up to international standards.

The international community has shown great readiness to help South Sudan to develop and improve its education system. Committed donors have provided strong financial and technical assistance but support for education seems to be waning. Aid commitments to South Sudan were US\$1.4 billion in 2012/13, a slight increase from the previous year, with approximately 10%

allocated to education. While aid to education grew around 16% from 2011 to 2012/13, estimates for 2014 indicate that education funding has declined from the 2011 levels (Katie Smith and Liesbet, 2014).

Among the initiatives is *Go to School Initiative* that was successfully launched in Juba on 1 April 2006. The First Vice President of the Republic of Sudan and President of Southern Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit, declared 1 April be known as 'Education Day' in South Sudan, while the First Lady committed herself to become a champion for girls' education within the *Go To School Initiative* (GOSS, 2010).

Evaluation of education programs

Education evaluation appears to be weak in South Sudan, and as such South Sudan needs to increase its effort towards developing coordination mechanisms for education and support stakeholders working to ensure access to continuity of quality education.

Also Community members should participate actively, transparently and without discrimination in analysis, planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of education responses.

Conclusion

Turning the tide in education for South Sudan will require addressing a number of barriers.

There are wide disparities in the chances that a child will ever enroll in primary school, depending on whether the child is urban or rural, rich or poor, or boy or girl. The widest disparities are associated with the urban-rural and rich-poor dimensions, but there are also strong gender disparities.

Numerous challenges remain in implementing education interventions in South Sudan. Poor infrastructure complicates and increases the cost of supply delivery while less than 40% of teachers are properly trained and qualified. A shortage of more than 25,000 classrooms leads to overcrowding, and in a large number of counties recurrent emergencies and insecurity delay the distribution of educational materials to schools, and compromise attendance during the school year.

In South Sudan, support mechanisms for teachers and other education personnel need to mean the provision of mentoring support guidance and counseling, continuous professional development, training on psychosocial support, administration and management, teacher supervision, and provision of relevant teaching/learning materials, access to adequate food, clean water and medical facilities, provision of materials such as bicycles, paper, pens, ID cards and incentives when no salary is provided.

Renewed commitment and continued support are needed to limit the impact of recent conflict and to prevent reversal of important development gains. South Sudan provides a particular challenge to the aid community requiring both humanitarian and development support. Given the unique and fragile context, flexible financing and strong donor coordination will be needed. Pooled funds, used to enhance coordination and delivery among donors by aggregating resources and programming, have been utilized to improve the currently fragmented aid delivery to South Sudan. The education sector could benefit more from these mechanisms.

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