

THE PEARL

Glaydah Namukasa

Britain's World War II Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill so famously proclaimed Uganda, the pearl of Africa. Not only was he fascinated by the ever green tropical vegetation, rich wildlife, and the magnificent scenery of the mountains, valleys and flat land but also by the rich and diverse culture of the natives. Sadly, this deserving label is not the enduring picture of Uganda, especially in the minds of those not well acquainted with the country. Up until today, mention Uganda, and one will say, 'Oh, Idi Amin. I've watched *The last king of Scotland!*' But if one is to read beyond Idi Amin, one will get to know Uganda, and perhaps understand why even after those so many years of war and dictatorship Uganda still deserves the title, The Pearl of Africa. Among the principle aspects that define the degree of development of a country, accessibility of education ranks among the topmost; therefore, the most important social change in Uganda was the introduction of Universal Education (free Primary and secondary education for all).

Before colonization the educational system in Uganda was simply informal. Every home, and for that matter village, had a kindergarten, a primary school, high school and a university, without the marked gradations. Every child was a student at the respective levels, and every parent or elder a teacher/lecturer, thus the saying, "It takes the whole village to bring up a child." This philosophy in Uganda disintegrated with the introduction of a new system of Education.

The colonialist introduced Formal Education, a system of learning, which, as it turned out, was a gem affordable only to the elites of the country: children of chiefs, government officials, and the privileged few among the common people educated to help the colonialist govern the country. The turn of events left the majority of Ugandan children without an education. The position of the underprivileged children could be compared to an empty polythene bag in mid-air searching for a destination in the existing age of civilization.

"It takes the whole government to bring up a child." This new philosophy was adopted to shift away from elite education to mass education. After four decades since independence, our government

realized that it was important to see to it that education becomes accessible to all children regardless of social and economic status. The idea of Universal Education first appeared in President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni's manifesto during the 1996 presidential campaigns. The idea was then perceived as another of those political gimmicks. However, when re-elected, the president proved that even in political packages of lies you find some truth; similar to what the writer would call "Fictional reality."

Universal Primary Education [UPE] was launched in 1997, and in 2007 Universal Secondary Education [USE] was initiated. It was expected, therefore, that the trend of illiteracy among the young generation would start falling. From 2000-2006 Primary school net enrollment/attendance was 82% [2006 statistics], and 90% of all pupils who passed their Primary Living Exams [PLE] joined secondary school, [TIM Cocks, Reuters foundation, 19 Feb. 2007].

Primary education serves as a strong tool in ensuring the basic/most important knowledge to a growing mind. It is with the basic education that we begin to look further than the houses we live in, know more people than those we live with and participate in much more than the activities we have everyday – take a higher jump to reach beyond our roofs. Therefore, accessibility of this elementary education is the only way forward in securing the position of the Ugandan child as a future global citizen.

Education for girls has been a great success because for every year that the girl child has stayed in school, there has been a reduction in the prevalence of teenage pregnancies and thus a reduction in the rate of maternal and child mortality and morbidity in Uganda. Education for both girls and boys has been and still is a strong weapon in such battles as the fight against HIV/AIDS and the fight against child labour. In the future, Uganda's literate community will contribute so much more to the advancement of the economical, political, and cultural aspects of the country and will be able to stand and counteract such challenges as poverty, ill health and environmental degradation.

Uganda is placed among the remarkably developing countries in the world. More schools, including the private schools and universities have been built to cater for the growing number of students. More teachers have been trained, and this has served a function in increasing professionalism and reducing joblessness. If every child is educated to at least the level of basic literacy and numeracy skills then he/she will be empowered to face the daily challenges in the modern world. Universal Education,

therefore, is one of the most important issues that should continue appearing on the global panel of discussion now and in the decade to come.