Why education is not helping the poor.

Findings from Uganda.

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Abstract

Education emerged as a nearly uncontested development strategy to tackle several forms of social, political, economic and geographic inequalities in low- and middle-income countries. When it comes to the case of Uganda, the country represents a striking paradox. Significant investments and policy reforms in education (such as Universal Primary and Secondary Education) since 1997, did not translate into the expected results with regards to poverty reduction through human capital investment. Progress in poverty alleviation is not only stagnant but the role of education therein can be described as 'modest' at best. Against this backdrop, this article assesses the following research question: *Why did Uganda's investments and policy reforms in education not uplift the poor?* In examining the issue, this article introduces a theoretical framework that contrasts assimilative with transformative approaches in poverty alleviation through education. A rigorous review of Uganda's education sector plans revealed that current strategies to reduce poverty revolve around a strong assimilation-based development agenda, thereby focusing on three main areas of intervention: a) increased access to education and retention; b) improved quality of education; and c) employment generation through education. The article finds that these assimilative approaches do not have an impact on the political, economic and social structures that cause poverty in the first place. Hence, it concludes that assimilative models in education are highly dependent on transformative

approaches. Concretely, change cannot emerge only at the very grassroots level, i.e. through educating society at large, but also has to arise from the systemic level, i.e. government institutions at the local, national and global levels. Methodologically, the analysis draws on qualitative data that was collected in the course of two extensive field research stays in 2015 and 2017. In addition, quantitative data in the form of statistical abstracts inform the analysis.

Key words: *education, poverty alleviation, assimilation, transformation, Uganda*

Highlights

- Education policies, reforms and governance failed to respond to the multidimensional needs of the poor.
- Assimilative models are not responsive to the root causes of poverty to really affect social transformation and change.
- There is a need for transformative policies that are cross-sectoral and not just designed for the education sector alone.
- The political economy context of a country cannot be detached from education sector reforms.
- The focus on economic empowerment through education sidelines the role of enhancing the political agency of the poor.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right. As such, it emerged as a nearly uncontested development strategy to tackle several forms of social, political, economic and geographic inequality in low- and middle-income countries. This trend is reflected in numerous global development frameworks, most notably the Education for All Agenda (UNESCO 2000), the previous MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), the subsequent SGDs (Sustainable Development Goals)[1], specifically the Education for Sustainable Development Goals Learning Objectives (UNESCO 2017), and most recently the World Bank's 2018 World Development Report on "Learning to Realize Education's Promise" (World Bank 2017). As the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF (2015, p. 7) put it:

> *"Education represents the hopes, dreams and aspirations of children, families, communities and nations around the world—the most reliable route out of poverty and a critical pathway towards healthier, more productive citizens and stronger societies. Not surprisingly, when people are asked to list their priorities, education tops survey after survey, poll after poll."*

This precise notion of education as being one of the key remedies for poverty alleviation and sustainable development also shaped Uganda's development and education sector plans (MoES Uganda 2008, see for instance pp. 7; 10; 13; and 14). In alignment with the World Bank, education is primarily depicted by the Ugandan National Development Plan I and II (2015-2020, see especially Section 3.3.5 of the NDP-II) and the Uganda Vision 2040 as an ingredient of human capital development (see: Government of Uganda 2015; 2010). Recently, Uganda's latest Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP 2017-2020), states (MoES Uganda 2017, p. ix):

[1] See: http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/, accessed February 4, 2018

> *It is through human capital development that Uganda's development objectives will be realized. The ESSP 2017-2020 has been formulated to support the country's drive towards middle income status by 2020 through consolidation of the gains made by the Government in the Education and Sports sector over the years.*

Since 1997, the GoU (Government of Uganda) has indeed implemented a series of policies and made substantial budget investments to move in that direction. Key policies have included the introduction of UPE (Universal Primary Education) in 1997 and USE (Universal Secondary Education) in 2007 and the creation of ECD (Early Childhood Development) centers – to name the most prominent ones.

At first sight, these reforms seem to have yielded significant results. With the introduction of UPE, school enrollment rates have risen from almost 3 million in 1996 to 8.3 million in 2015 (UBOS 2016). The latest figures from the UBOS (Ugandan Bureau of Statistics) further reveal that in 2015, about 91% of children were enrolled in school (UBOS 2017, p. 50). More generally, earlier figures also suggest that Uganda has made remarkable progress in poverty reduction. From 2006-2013 the proportion of the Ugandan population living below the national poverty line declined from 31.1% in 2006 to 19.7% in 2013 – the second fastest reduction in extreme poverty in SSA (Sub-Saharan Africa) during this time (World Bank 2016).

At a closer look, however, Uganda's process of sustainable poverty alleviation can be described as 'modest' at best, and the role education played therein remains not only unclear but also highly questionable for a number of reasons: First, latest data from the Ugandan National Household Survey (UNHS 2017) showcases that the number of poor people increased from 6.6 million in 2012/13 to 10 million in 2016/17. This translates into poverty levels rising from 19.7 percent (2013) to 27 percent (2017) in the past five years (UNHS 2017 pp. 84-86). Second, and more importantly, Uganda's current national poverty rate of 27 percent is based on a poverty

line that was set over twenty years ago, meaning poverty levels are solely measured on the basis of income-levels. This approach does not reflect the multidimensional nature of poverty or the reality in which too many Ugandans live today (World Bank 2016). In other words, if measurements of poverty are no longer reduced to the sheer lack of income (as was done in the 19.7 and 27.0 percent figures) but also include other factors, such as health or standards of living (e.g.: access to water, education, housing, social or political discrimination), poverty levels of Ugandans are much higher. According to the UNDP[2] (United Nations Development Programme), in 2016, 51.1% of the Ugandan population were considered to live in multidimensional poverty and 33.3% lived in severe multidimensional poverty.[3] Third, considerable investments and policy reforms in Uganda's education sector since 1997 did not yield the expected results with regards to poverty reduction through human capital investment. Despite increased access to education since 1996, much of Uganda's poverty reduction from 2006 to 2013 was predominantly built on agricultural income growth that particularly benefitted poor households with low levels of education (UBOS 2016; World Bank 2016). Even though the country has experienced a significant increase in school enrollment rates, at the same time it also displays one of the highest school dropout rates worldwide at P (primary) level. Estimates range from 75.2%[4] to 67.9% (Uwezo 2015, p. 18) of pupils who drop out between P (Primary) 1 – P7. According to the latest data from the UBOS (2017a, p. 41) up to 90.2% of children enrolled in primary education do not complete school. Moreover, only 25% of those few students who complete primary education proceed to (lower) secondary education, out of which only 6.1% finish S6 (senior 6) and above (UBOS 2017a, p. 43). All these developments beg the question:

[2] See also: http://ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/, accessed February 12,.2018
[3] http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA, accessed February 5, 2018
[4] Percentage retrieved from: http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA, accessed February 5, 2018

In assessing the issue, I build on a theoretical framework that contrasts assimilative approaches in education to alleviate poverty with transformative ones. I will showcase that education in Uganda has been predominantly equated with modernization- and assimilation-based development models. In this endeavor, strategies by the GoU to reduce poverty through education revolve around three major themes. These are: a) increased access to education and better retention, b) improved quality of education and c) employment generation through education. As will become evident in the course of my analysis, these assimilative macro policy reforms in education did not alleviate poverty through human capital development, calling for transformative approaches at large.

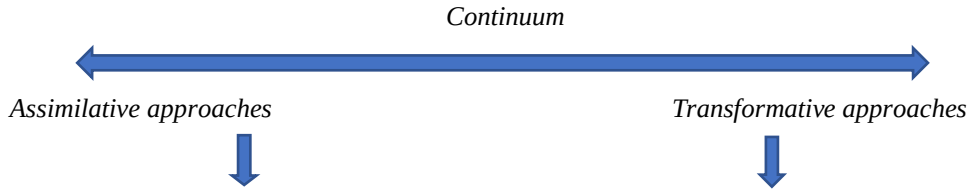
Assimilative versus transformative approaches in poverty alleviation through education

Inspired by the work of Jantzi & Jantzi (2009), I broadly categorize poverty alleviation through education by drawing on two distinct development models that emerged in the mid-20th century and have been revisited and revised by aid agencies and scholars ever since, namely assimilative and transformative approaches. As shown in Figure 1, both are not static in nature, rather, they serve as a 'roadmap' to broadly characterize two main strands and are therefore depicted as two extremes of a theoretical continuum. The use of a continuum is a deliberate choice as it helps to acknowledge overlaps and to illustrate that each approach can also lean towards the other.

Figure 1

Figure 1:

Conceptual Framework: Assimilation versus Transformation through Education*



Development model	Modernization (conventional theories of development)	Liberation (non-conventional, critical theories of development)
Key assumptions (examples)	- Society transforms into modernity through education - Education as a tool for human capital development - Quality (not just quantity) of education will lead to economic growth and prosperity	- Education as a means to overcome exploitation to achieve social justice - Injustices in education have socio-historical roots - The political, economic and social context a society is embedded in cannot be detached from the education sector at large
Goal	Create equal opportunity and access within, but also through, education	Overcome the root causes of social injustices within, but also through, education
Position	Development as a process that leads to a specific result (endpoint).	Development as a constantly evolving process
Philosophical & ideological roots (examples)	Emile Durkheim Talcott Parsons Walt Whitman Rostow Jeffrey Sachs	Paulo Freire Henry Giroux Iris Marion Young William Easterly

*This table was inspired by the work of Jantzi & Jantzi 2009 but significantly revised and adjusted for the purpose of this study.

Assimilative approaches (which can be also regarded as mainstream approaches) find their ideological roots in the intellectual tradition of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons or Walt Whitman Rostow, to give a few examples. As such, they build on conventional theories of development (c.f. Peet & Hartwick 2009, pp. 21-140). In a Durkheimian sense, poverty alleviation through education is embraced as a process that leads to a certain result or endpoint (e.g.: enrollment or completion rates, employment rates based on educational background,

educational outcomes and attainment, etc.). Assimilative approaches explicitly equate education with human capital, economic development, increased health and democratization processes. As Jeffrey Sachs put it: "In a knowledge-based world economy, a good education is vital for finding decent work; achieving good health; building functioning communities; developing the skills to be a dependable parent; and growing up to be an engaged and responsible citizen" (Sachs 2015). The acquisition of human capital is seen as an investment decision whereby individuals forego income for a period of time to undertake education or training, in order to increase their future income (Blundell et al. 1999, p. 24). Investment in human capital was initially expected to increase the likelihood of employment prospects but it is also positively associated with higher wages, improvement of health, or resilience to political, economic or environmental shocks (Bird et al. 2011; UNESCO 2017; UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNICEF 2015).

It is further assumed that education will lead to social returns such as potential dissemination of knowledge to less-educated members of a society, an increase in productivity as well as innovation, and higher participation in the political life of the country (Blundell et al. 1999 pp. 14-15; see also: World Bank 2017). Thus, education is seen as a tool that provides an opportunity for individuals to be active participants in the economy which, in turn, is expected to encourage the processes of economic growth, poverty alleviation and sustainable development. However, in recent years, research assessing the link between the quantity of education (in terms of average years of schooling) and economic growth has shown that low-income countries which expanded schooling opportunities did not necessarily catch up with developed countries in terms of economic growth (Hanushek & Woessmann 2008). This trend informed several strategies designed to place a much stronger focus on the quality of education, especially 'learning', (World Bank 2017) rather than just quantity (see in particular: World

Bank 2011; World Bank 2017; UNESCO 2017, SDGs). For the World Bank (2011, p. 3), "growth, development, and poverty reduction depend on the knowledge and skills that people acquire, not the number of years they sit in a classroom." This new shift is *inter alia* based on the predictions of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) that an increase of one standard deviation in student reading and math scores (roughly equivalent to improving a country's performance ranking from the median to the top 15 percent) is associated with a very large increase of 2 percentage points in annual GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita growth (ibid.).

By and large, assimilative approaches promote social, political and economic structures and norms, as they emerged in western societies, through improved access to high quality education but also equity in education. In this attempt, the focus is not only on the individual learner but also on reforming educational structures and systems at large. This approach towards education is predominantly adapted by aid agencies, donors and governments, in particular the World Bank[5], the Global Education Fund[6] and The Global Partnership for Education[7], but also reflected under Goal number 4 of the SDGs[8]. Assimilative approaches in development more generally, have been critiqued for being Eurocentric, ahistorical, not addressing the root causes of poverty, and labeling traditional / undeveloped societies as backward thereby suggesting that there is only a single (universal) process of the evolution of civilization (c.f. Peet & Hartwick 2009, pp. 137-140).

[5] See: http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education, accessed February 8, 2018
[6] See: http://www.globaleducationfund.org/, accessed February 8, 2018
[7] See: http://www.globalpartnership.org/, accessed February 8, 2018
[8] See: http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/, accessed February 8, 2018

Transformative approaches of poverty alleviation through education find their ideological roots in the work of Paulo Freire, Adam Curle, or more recently Iris Marion Young or William Easterly, to name but a few. Development is, in general, critiqued as being the problem and not the solution. The aim is to liberate those who are exploited by political, economic, social and global structures, i.e. forms of oppression. Poverty alleviation through education is therefore not only achieved through equal access, quality and opportunity in education – as also supported by assimilative approaches – but primarily through the transformation of the political, social and economic structures the society in question is embedded in. Education, in this regard, is seen as a means to restructure society and enable people to initiate social movements to find their own models of change. In this process, not only education systems but also their surrounding political, economic and social structures have to be transformed in a way to enable the poor to make their own decisions about their futures and lives. Hence education systems need to be embedded in a political economy context that is conducive to transformation and change (Gradstein et al. 2005; Novelli, Higgins, et al. 2015). Structural and systemic conditions are the main subject to change alongside the aim to achieve social justice within, but also through, education. By drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1995; Fraser 2005) scholarship on social justice in education points to redistributional and relational forms of social justice through education (see, for instance: Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, et al. 2015; Gewirtz 1998). The former is similar to assimilative approaches in that it focuses on issues such as equal opportunities, access or resource allocation in education. The latter is concerned with participation, representation, and recognition (e.g. of impoverished minorities) in important decision making processes affecting the education sector at large (Casanovas & Poblet 2008). Correspondingly, redistributional justice in education is ultimately informed by relational justice and they cannot be understood in isolation from each other (e.g.: Fraser 1995; Keddie 2012; Novelli et al. 2015; or Robertson & Dale 2013).

The transformative approach is further based on the assumption that most of the conditions under which people act have to be seen through a socio-historical lens: "they are products of previous actions, usually products of many coordinated and uncoordinated but mutually influenced actions over them." (Young 2003, p. 6) It is thus argued that past planning processes (e.g. education systems introduced by colonial powers) have shaped the education sector as we find it today. Development aid and assistance, in the transformative approach, is justified by what Young (2011) termed the 'social connection model'. By participating in ongoing structural and social processes, developed (western) societies produce and reproduce injustices at the global level through their very actions (e.g. consumption habits). They therefore have obligations and responsibilities of (social) justice to any and all who are part of the same structural and social processes. This obligation extends to the provision of education to the poor and marginalized, but attempts to do so by importing western-style education systems to non-western contexts are critiqued by scholars, as they are considered to be reproducing neocolonial structures thereby disregarding local culture and context (e.g.: Nguyen et al. 2009). Critiques of transformative approaches argue that concepts like social justice, liberation or equality are, once again, a Eurocentric manifestation of development discourses and morals (Peet & Hartwick 2009, pp. 230-239).

It is important to stress again that the theoretical continuum (see Figure 1) recognizes intersections of both approaches and different agenda settings from diverse stakeholders. To give an example, proponents of the assimilative approach, such as the World Bank, do acknowledge the political-economy context of a given country (see: World Bank 2011). However, implementation practices and strategies tend to solely focus on the education sector and not the political system of a country or global power imbalances and structures as a whole.

At the same time, proponents of the transformative approach also aim at empowering the poor through assimilative practices such as equal access to high quality education. Approaches also differ when it comes to defining what constitutes high quality education. For instance, transformative approaches embrace aspects of critical pedagogy and critique assimilative ideas of standard setting via the PISA or the TIMSS as being too restrictive and not culturally attuned.

With that said, to ensure awareness of a wide range of context-specific factors and overlaps I refrain from a too deterministic and descriptive application of the theoretical framework to the Ugandan context. Instead, I will use this framework as an explanatory tool to illuminate why assimilative approaches in poverty alleviation through education in Uganda have thus far not yielded the desired results; and why they cannot run in isolation from transformative approaches.

Methods

This article builds on qualitative and quantitative data collected during extensive fieldwork in Uganda in 2015 (January – April) and in 2017 (February – May), in close collaboration with local researchers from Gulu University and Makerere University. Research took place in a variety of sites in the country comprising rural and urban environments and diverse geographical regions, namely Kampala (central), Gulu (north), Karamoja (northeast), Adjumani (northwest) and Mbarara (southwest).

Qualitative methods of data collection involved, in total, 89 interviews (see Annex 1 for a detailed list of interviews) with a variety of actors from the government, CSOs (civil society organizations), CBOs (community-based organizations), school officials, education planners, teaching professionals and local academics. Interview questions were semi-structured, which

allowed interviewers to seek clarification and elaboration on the answers given, probe beyond the response and enter into a dialogue with the interviewee. This article is one, out of several research outputs, emerging from two larger research projects[9]; therefore, interview questions revolved around a wide range of themes which were all related to formal and non-formal education programs, structures, policies and governance in Uganda.

In addition, 7 FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) with youth in four regions of the country inform the findings of this study (see Table 1).

Table 1: Focus Group Discussions held between February – April 2015 with Ugandan youth

Location	**Number of FGDs**	**Total number of participants** Whenever possible we sought to have 50% female and 50% male (aged 18-35).
Adjumani	1	10
Gulu	2	20
Moroto	2	20
Kampala	2	20
Total:	**7**	**70**

All FGDs were facilitated by local researchers who were well reflected on the background of the participants, how they may perceive them, and able to translate into the local language in cases where members were not fluent in English. FGDs' activities included role-plays, the drawing of an 'actors-mapping' in education, and livelihood programs for youth as well as facilitated peer-to-peer and open discussions. Notetakers summarized the dynamics, core messages and overall findings of the FGDs.

All interviews and FGDs were recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded and analyzed by making use of Atlas.ti. In total 62 codes were created, though not all of these codes were used to extract and analyze data for the purpose of this particular article.

[9] One project was funded by the UNICEF-PBEA (Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy) program, the other by the European Commission (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship as part of the Horizon 2020 program)

Given the political sensitivity of this research I will not reveal the identity of my interviewees, and only refer to their professional background or institutional affiliation when permission was granted. I synthesize general findings from all interviews and FGDs and selectively cite respondents.

Prior to and after field research, an extensive review of Uganda's development frameworks and education policies was carried out with a particular focus on: United Nations Development Assistance Framework; National Development Plans; Education Sector Plans and Policies; school textbooks and curricula; academic literature; and policy reports. This also included a review of any other document relevant for the specific case study (e.g. policies about decentralization of the education sector, teacher policies, national plans and strategies for youth).

Quantitative data is used in a descriptive manner and was obtained from statistical abstracts made public by the UBOS, Afrobarometer[10], *The Out of School Children Study in Uganda* (see: Mbabazi et al. 2014); as well as the latest Uwezo (2015, 2016) reports on educational attainment in Uganda.

Education and Poverty Alleviation in Uganda

Following independence (1962), attempts to reform the education sector in Uganda were initially undermined by the political instability during the 1970s and 1980s. The situation significantly changed when President Museveni assumed office in 1986. His government released an *Education Policy Review Commission Report* (1989) in conjunction with the *Government White Paper on Education in Uganda* (1992). Both laid the foundation for

[10] See: http://www.afrobarometer.org/, accessed July 5, 2017

education sector reforms that have been implemented over the last three decades. These educational reforms, concomitant with curriculum change, reflected the wider political economy context pertaining in SSA in the 1990s. Forces of globalization, including international pressure to introduce multi-party elections, led Uganda to commit, rhetorically at least, to the concepts of liberal democracy and market openness. In alignment with assimilative approaches towards development, education came to be seen as an essential ingredient for economic growth and national and human capital development – not only in Uganda (Datzberger et al. 2015) but also in the majority of SSA countries (e.g.: UNESCO Dakar Office 2012; World Bank 1988).

Education was severely underfunded in Uganda before the millennium, but lately some improvements with regards to funding allocations for education have been made (Guloba et al. 2010). Across sectors, education received the second highest proportion of the annual budget for 2013/14 (MoFPED 2015, p 43). Recently, public spending on education was slightly reduced, however, amounting to the fourth highest proportion of the annual budget in 2014/15 (MoFPED 2016, p. 43). If compared to the targets set by the EFA (Education for All) agenda (see: UNESCO 2000) – that is, to increase public spending on education to 6% of a country's GDP and 20% of total government spending – Uganda still lags far behind. Public spending on education decreased from 10.4% in 2000 to 8.9% in 2014[11] and amounted to only 2.2% of Uganda's GDP.[12] In addition, Uganda remains highly dependent on external development assistance (MoFPED 2015, p. 40-41). More than 40 development partners or donors provide financial support to the country. Uganda belongs to the top 10 ODA (Official Development Assistance) recipients in Africa with USD 1.628 billion on aid in 2015.[13] Out of the USD 1.628

[11] See: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS?locations=UG, accessed February 15, 2018
[12] See: http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA, accessed February 15, 2018
[13] See: http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/documentupload/Africa-Development-Aid-at-a-Glance.pdf

billion of ODA, in total USD 77.65 million (4.77%) were allotted to education in 2014-15.[14] Uganda joined the GPE (Global Partnership for Education) in 2011 and has thus far received grants from it totaling USD 100 million. The recent cuts in funding for education have been critiqued by several local experts who were interviewed for this study, as well as within policy reports (see for instance: Uwezo 2015). In addition the GoU's latest ESSP (Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan 2017-2020) makes several mentions of how inadequate budgeting affects policy implementation in education, but does not present at strategy on how resources could be increased.

Thematically, the country's ESSP (Education Sector Strategic Plan 2004-15), RESSP (Revised Education Sector Strategic Plan 2007-15), ESSP (Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan 2017-2020) and Ministerial Statement 2012-13 serve as the main guiding policies which also feed into the country's development plans. Table 2 briefly summarizes all plans and frameworks that were reviewed in the scope of this article.

Table 2:
List of reviewed Education Sector Plans & Policies and Uganda's main Development Frameworks

Timeframe	Framework	Main Objectives*
Education Sector Plans and Policies		
2017-2020	ESSP (Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan)	• Achieve UPE and USE • Enhance equitable access at tertiary level • Strong focus on access and quality at all educational levels • Relevance and quality for all educational levels
2007-2015	RESSP (Revised Education Sector Strategic Plan)	
2004-2015	ESSP (Education Sector Strategic Plan)	
2012-13	Ministerial Statement	• Improved quality and relevancy of education at all levels • Improved equitable access to education • Improved effectiveness and delivery of education services

[14] See: https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDDACAidataglancebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no?&:showVizHome=no, accessed February 15, 2018

Development Frameworks		
2015-2020	NDP-I and NDP-II National Development Plans	• Lists education as a subsection under 'Human Capital Development" • Strong focus on access to education, student retention and quality education • Curriculum reform
Published in 2010	Uganda Vision 2040	• Vision to tailor education system (incl. curricula) to be responsive to demands of the market, with the aim of job creation.
2004-2008	PEAP (Poverty Eradication Action Plan)	• Education seen as "the accumulation of human capital, which is essential for higher incomes and sustained economic growth" (p. 181) • Emphasis on access, quality and retention
2016-2020	UNDAF (United Nations Development Assistance Framework)	• Places education under the strategic intent 'human capital" • Focus on quality and effectiveness of education system
2010-2015	UNDAF	• Focus on improved access to education (in particular girls) and quality education
2006-2010	UNDAF	• Focus on improved access to education (in particular girls) and quality education
2001-2005	UNDAF	• Focus on improved access to education (in particular girls) and quality education
* The list of objectives broadly depicts the main strategies and priorities of these documents with the reservation of it being incomplete		

The short outline of objectives provided in Table 2 does not claim to be complete but is illustrative of the country's main policy directions and priorities in education. To give a more specific example, Uganda's RESP (2007-2015) explicitly perceives education as part of the (MoES Uganda 2008, p. 7):

> *(…) solution to poverty, as well as a vector in its reduction and increase in quality of life* in that *(…) increased access to education should be poverty alleviating and income equalizing among different sections of Ugandans.*

Moreover, the government's PEAP (Poverty Eradication Action Plan) for the years 2004-05 to 2006-07 was developed in synchronization with the ESSP (2004-2015). Pillar five of the PEAP relates education to "increased ability of the poor to raise their incomes," and "enhanced quality of life of the poor" as national targets (MoES Uganda 2008, p.10). The RESSP (2007-2015) with a predominant focus on primary education, and the ESSP (2017-2020) more broadly, further extend these goals with the following three strategic objectives and priority interventions: equitable access to quality education and training; enhanced quality and relevant education and training; and improve effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of education (MoES Uganda 2008; MoES Uganda 2017). This extensive review of development frameworks and existing education sector plans and policies revealed that strategies to alleviate poverty through education revolve around a strong assimilation-based development agenda, thereby focusing predominantly on three main areas of intervention:

a) Increased access to education and better retention;

b) Improved quality of education; and

c) Employment generation through education.

In the following, I delineate and analyze these areas with regards to their achievements in, but also in relation to, poverty reduction. The concluding discussion will then place these findings into the larger context of the theoretical framework applied in this article.

a) Increased access to education and retention

Following a commitment to UPE in 1996 and the abolition of school fees, Uganda pioneered as the first country in the SSA region to also introduce USE in 2007.[15] When UPE started in

[15] Also known as Universal Post Primary Education and Training (UPPET).

1997, it was at first perceived as "a dream come true for most poor parents" (Mwesigwa 2015). Primary school enrollment has seen an impressive increase from 3.1 million in 1996 to 8.3 million in 2015 in Uganda (UBOS 2016), thereby conforming to the general trend in SSA of a steady increase in school enrollment from 62 million in 1990 to 149 million children in 2012 (Africa-America Institute 2015, p. 7). These achievements notwithstanding, UPE and USE have thus far not been successful when it comes to retention in school. The country has one of the highest school drop-out rates worldwide in primary education (Mbabazi et al. 2014), yet data on the exact numbers of children who leave school differs by institution. According to the fifth Uwezo learning assessment report on Uganda (2015, p. 18) only 32.1% of all school children stay in school until P7 – thus pointing to a drop-out rate of 67.9% in primary education. The UNDP HDI (Human Development Index) estimates that drop-out rates are much higher, with a total of 75.2% of all primary school children aged between 7-15 years abandoning education. The UBOS (2017a, pp. 41-42) even reports that only 9.8% (8.5% male, 11.1 % female) of not disabled children, and only 6.5 % (5.7% male, 7.4% female) of disabled children currently finish P7. During interviews with the MoES (Ministry of Education and Sports) Uganda's drop-out rates were not only acknowledged as highly problematic, but it was further stressed that, against the general trend in SSA (see: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2016, p. 3), boys are in fact as prone to drop out of school as girls in Uganda.[16]

Why are school drop-out rates so high? The main reasons can be located in the following factors: flawed implementation of policies, parental responsibilities, the way in which funds are allocated and, ironically, poverty itself is still an obstacle that prevents education. To start with the latter, poverty, it is worth recalling the article's earlier understanding of poverty as

[16] Interviews held at MoES with three different staff members on February 23, 2015; March 31, 2015; and April 2, 2015 in Kampala.

being multidimensional in nature. Although education is supposed to reduce poverty, many children drop out of school because of the numerous different dynamics and factors feeding into it. This does not only occur in Uganda; the World Bank estimates that in 2014 about 61 million primary school children and 202 million secondary school-aged youth with a disproportionate share from poor households were excluded from school worldwide (World Bank 2017, p. 60). Table 3 illuminates the context-specific causes for this trend in Uganda. In a nation-wide survey (Mbabazi et al. 2014) over 3,000 Ugandans were asked to indicate the main reasons why their children have to leave school.

Table 3: Reasons for school drop-out (20013/14 out-of-school children survey) conducted by Mbabazi et al. 2014

Reason	Refugee status		Region				Total
	Non-refugee	*Refugee*	*Central*	*Eastern*	*Northern*	*Western*	
Inadequate funding to pay the costs of school	82.4	70.2	64.9	76.7	89.3	74.8	**78.7**
Cooking or cleaning, fetching water or wood	73.9	78.0	75.0	71.9	78.1	62.5	**75.3**
Child no longer wanted to attend school or had enough	28.7	25.0	22.1	31.7	34.1	14.1	**27.8**
Tending animals, or working on the family farm / family business	25.2	25.0	22.5	53.1	13.7	37.5	**25.2**
Child needed to work or help at home	20.1	28.0	28.7	16.8	26.8	8.1	**22.2**
Classrooms were too crowded	16.8	27.7	13.3	13.0	28.6	11.2	**19.4**
Child failed examinations or had to repeat class	17.7	11.1	6.8	33.3	11.4	12.8	**16.2**
He became married or made someone pregnant	12.9	17.0	17.5	21.7	9.7	5.1	**13.8**
Teachers did not perform well	9.5	26.2	17.5	10.2	16.2	5.6	**13.5**
It was unlikely that child would find a place in secondary education	13.4	12.4	16.5	26.5	6.0	13.5	**13.2**
School buildings or facilities were poor or had problems	8.3	18.5	18.7	9.2	9.4	3.7	**10.7**
The school offering the needed class was far away	8.7	14.7	8.3	7.5	13.7	8.8	**10.3**
Work for an employer	9.6	5.4	6.1	34.4	0.0	0.0	**8.2**
Travelling to school was unsafe	6.3	13.8	15.4	2.5	8.9	7.3	**8.1**
Pupils were unsafe at school	3.9	13.6	13.3	8.7	2.6	2.8	**6.2**
School graduates cannot find good jobs	4.5	10.3	12.7	8.7	2.0	0.0	**5.9**

Source: Mbabazi et al. 2014, p. 20**;** information provided in this table was shortened for the purpose of this article
Sample size: The quantitative sample size for this study was determined by Mbabazi et al. (2014, p 5) using a sample size of 769 per region, which amounted to a total number of n=3,076

The first reason (inadequate funding to pay the costs of school) is related to the most commonly acknowledged form of poverty, namely the lack of financial recourses or income. Parents need their children's help at home in order to leave the house and make an income in any way they can. However, the subsequent reasons (cooking, cleaning, fetching water or wood, tending animals, working on family farms or businesses) are also rooted in other forms of poverty such as inadequate living standards or health. To give an example, it is estimated that 61% of

Ugandans have no access to safe water and 75% of Ugandans do not have access to improved sanitation facilities.[17] Some children simply have to stay out of school to help the family fetch water, alongside many other activities. Likewise, domestic work undertaken by children also includes caring for younger siblings or elderly or sick relatives. Thus, a family's lack of access to health facilities or even limited knowledge on reproductive health and birth control can affect children's school attendance. Not surprisingly, poverty is not only the main cause of why Ugandan children drop out of school but also of why some children are never enrolled in school at all. Nearly one in twenty school-age children have never benefitted from formal education (Mbabazi et al. 2014). UPE as it is implemented at the moment in Uganda, has failed to respond to the multidimensional and everyday needs of the poor. This is a well-known phenomenon among experts and scholars but worth repeating as it affects many other country contexts in the SSA region and beyond (see: UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNICEF 2015). It is also an issue that is not adequately addressed within current development frameworks (e.g.: World Bank 2017; or UNESCO 2017) as they tend to dismiss the need for transformative policies that are cross-sectoral and not just designed for the education sector alone. The concluding section will revert to this point.

Looking at Uganda's education sector policies specifically, they are short of a transformative approach to ensure student retention. As argued elsewhere (omitted ref), there is a lot to be learned from non-formal education programs in this regard, some of which are designed around a flexible learning model that still allows children to be of help to their families at home without missing school. More importantly, policies do not currently respond to the political and socio-historical roots of poverty in the first place. For example, field research revealed that the way in which funds are allocated across the country are not benefitting the historically most

[17] See: https://water.org/our-impact/uganda/, accessed November 3, 2017

impoverished and marginalized populations in Uganda. Primary education takes the largest share of government spending on education (MoES Uganda 2015)[18], yet contradictory statements were made by interviewees, when asked whether funds for education are distributed evenly among regions. Currently, funds are transferred through capitation grants to schools covering the sum of per-student costs other than teacher salaries.[19] In practice, this translates into poorer districts receiving less funding if the population density is also lower, and wealthier districts with a higher population density receiving more resources. This, in part, explains why some regions, such as Karamoja[20], which is historically the most impoverished (due to colonization and subsequent conflicts) and least populated region in Uganda, are still severely disadvantaged when it comes to government allocations in education. In addition, the head of the UNICEF regional office in Karamoja stated that once UPE grants to schools have been allocated, more children enroll in school at a later date – leading to additional costs which are not accounted for.[21] A different way of allocating funds, as was also argued during several interviews, could be to align the resources available with the multidimensional poverty index of a region, thereby taking into account the different challenges people are facing. According to the MoES, discussions are also on-going as to whether funding allocations for schools in richer districts that are also more densely populated should be reduced, thereby shifting more responsibilities to the parents, to the benefit of schools in poorer districts.[22] It is questionable, however, whether increasing parents' financial contributions in wealthier and more populated districts would truly affect change. Firstly, seemingly wealthier districts are still affected by multidimensional poverty – even if not as pronounced as in other regions. Secondly, despite

[18] No exact numbers are made available in the Education Statistical Abstract (2015) or the Background to the Budget of the Fiscal Year 2015/16 (MoFPED 2015) on the amount spent on UPE.
[19] Interviews held at MoES with three different staff members on February 23, 2015; March 31, 2015; and April 2, 2015 in Kampala.
[20] More information on the specific situation of Karamoja can be found at: Datzberger 2017.
[21] Interview held with head of UNICEF in Karamoja, March 11, 2015 in Moroto.
[22] Interview with MoES staff member, March 31, 2015 in Kampala.

free access, parents already have to bear a number of financial costs to send their children to school. The hidden costs of education are a common challenge, and not unique to Uganda (see, for instance, Williams et al.'s 2015 study on Rwanda or expert reports on the situation in the U.K. e.g.: Butler 2014). In the specific case of Uganda, they entail: provision for lunch, school uniform, books or shelter (Nishimura et al. 2009). Studies further show that school drop-out rates among females increase at the onset of menstruation given that parents cannot afford to provide girls with sanitary pads (SNV and IRC 2013). During interviews with school officials, CSOs and the MoES, mixed responses were given on the extent to which parents ought to be financially involved in their child's education. Some experts felt that parents should be mobilized and held accountable to support their children's education through seemingly "small" contributions such as food. Other interviewees noted that the hidden costs of education place an unexpected burden on the poor, in particular in conflict-affected regions spanning from northwestern to northeastern Uganda.

It should be also noted that mismanagement of resources, corruption and lack of co-ordination undermined sustainable results in education sector planning. In 2014 *Transparency International* ranked Uganda's public sector as the most corrupt in the world. To give an example, in 2012, the OPM (Office of the Prime Minister) was found to have misappropriated in total EUR 11.6 millions of donor funds intended for a PRDP (Peace, Recovery and Development Plan) in northern Uganda (Irish Aid 2014). According to interviews with INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations) and local CSOs, corruption scandals did not leave funding allocations for education unaffected. One individual from the UTU (Ugandan Teachers Union) openly claimed that most funds disappear at the very top level within the MoES.[23]

[23] Interview held with UTU February 24, 2015 in Kampala

In regard to the implementation of USE, similar problems in terms of access occur. The USE policy provides a capitation grant, tied to the number of qualifying students at each school; USh 47,000 (USD 16) per student is provided to private schools and USh 41,000 (USD 14) per student in government schools (FHI 360 2015, p. 17). The language used in the policy, as per the Education Act of 2008, creates the expectation of fee-free secondary education, but in reality, the USE allocation is a small amount and no adjustments are made for the location of the school or its actual costs (ibid, p.18). Covering pupils from S1- S4 (lower secondary), it is not limited to the public sector and is also implemented through a PPP (public private partnership), between the MoES and private schools. Hence, USE has failed to reach the poorest students, who are unable to secure even minimal support from families for their schooling (FHI 360 2015). In particular, parents in conflict-affected communities have had only limited capability to pay for secondary education because of disrupted livelihoods, reduced livestock holdings (through cattle raiding) and the destruction of assets (Bird et al. 2011).

b) Improved quality of education

Critics of the previous MDG 2 on universal primary education pointed to its limited focus on quality education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNICEF 2015). In response, SDG 4 now states, "when people are able to get quality education they can break from the cycle of poverty" (United Nations 2015, p. 2). Like in many other SSA countries (see: Mwabu & Ackerman 2013), efforts to increase the access to schooling were not concomitant with improving the quality of education offered in Uganda. The figures speak for themselves. Latest data from 2015 on learning outcomes in Uganda revealed that among pupils in P3 - P7, just three out of ten (32%) can read a P2 story and do P2 division. Besides, among pupils in P3, only 13% have P2 level English literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, only 10% of pupils in P3 can read a

P2 level local language story and in P7, the figure is still not higher than 31% (Uwezo 2015, p. 11). Similar trends can be also observed in other SSA countries, such as in Malawi where the Afro Learning Barometer showed that 52% of girls and 44% of boys are not learning basic competencies by the end of primary school (Mwabu & Ackerman 2013).

There was widespread consensus among Ugandan interviewees that the quality of education varies tremendously from school to school, affecting equal opportunities for poorer societal segments. The distinction between "higher standard" and "lower standard" schools is very common in Uganda, depending on the quality of teachers[24], general infrastructure, instruction materials and language or the overall condition and environment of the school. In the words of a Ugandan academic[25]:

> *If you are poor and from a remote village, you are lucky if you can afford sending your child to the nearest village school. If you are financially a bit better off, you will try to send your child to a school in a city. If you are wealthy you send your child to school in Kampala. If you are rich, you will send your child abroad.*

Out of 18,889 primary schools that responded to an Annual School Census conducted by the GoU, in total 12,048 (63.8%) are government owned whereas 6,841 (36.2%) are private (MoES Uganda 2015, p. 23). There is a reversed trend when it comes to secondary schools. Nationally, 1,672 (62%) are private alongside 1.023 (38%) being under government control (MoES

[24] According to the Ministry of Education, the GoU in collaboration with the Global Partnership for Education aims to reform, support and improve the quality of Uganda's teacher training institutions, especially its 23 Core Primary Teachers' Colleges. (See: http://www.education.go.ug/data/smenu/66/Teacher%20Training%20Education%20Project.html, accessed February 15, 2018). It remains to be seen whether or not these efforts will have an impact on the quality of education in the longer term. A previous study surveying Ugandan teachers (Altinyelken 2010), found many who described the preparatory training as 'severely inadequate'. In addition, a report on teacher issues in Uganda (see: MoES Uganda & UNESCO - IIEP Dakar 2014), describes the current teacher training system at primary level as 'fragmented' with no institutionalized system to improve professional competences.

[25] Informal conversation February 17, 2015 in Gulu.

Uganda 2015, p. 47). Notably, out of the 1,672 private schools, 669 (40%) offer USE making up 43% of 1,555 schools under USE in Uganda (ibid.). However, as noted earlier, in reality USE is not entirely free and many children from impoverished backgrounds do not even reach that level.

As shown in Table 4 and Table 5 respectively, there is an advantage for pupils attending private schools at primary level, although learning outcomes are still low.

Table 4: Pupil teacher ratios by level of education and by sector 2013

	Government	*Private*	*Total*
Primary	55:1	24:1	46:1
Secondary	25:1	20:1	22:1

Source: Uwezo 2015, p. 28

Table 5: Proportions of Primary 3 pupils who were competent in English literacy and numeracy tasks by sector, 2014

	Government	*Private*	*Total*
Able to read a story in English	12%	31%	19%
Able to perform division	23%	36%	28%

Source: Uwezo 2015, p. 35

The UBOS reports that roughly one third of all primary school children do not have an adequate sitting place (UBOS 2016, p. viii). Especially in public primary schools there is tremendous room for improvement - to cite an education expert from a leading Ugandan think tank:[26]

> *When you look at universal primary education and most of the [public] schools in the countryside even within municipalities and pre-urban areas you find that the structures are wanting, they are dilapidated. (…) We have done a lot of monitoring and found for instance in 2015 in the eastern side of Uganda that the ratio of desks to students was so minimal and most of the students were sitting on the floor. (…) Teachers said that it is very hard, especially in primary one, two and three,*

[26] Interview held with staff member, March 1, 2017 in Kampala

> *to help these kids perfect their writing which is very key in terms of quality. But also, having these young kids sit on stones, and on the floor for six, seven hours a day. Some of them [the children] are coming up with back problems because you have to bend when you have to sit on the stone. We would also find schools where they have four classrooms and those classrooms are divided with like a piece of cloth affecting the levels of concentration. One class is talking about English, the other class is talking about mathematics.*

In view of these circumstances, many parents who qualify as poor but do not belong to the severe multidimensional poverty category, opt to scrape together their money to send their children to low-cost private schools, hoping for better quality education and infrastructures (this phenomeon was also extensively discussed in *The Economist* August 1, 2015, pp. 17-20). However, many of these low-cost private schools do not live up to parents' expectations. In 2016, the Ugandan Court ruled that 63 low-cost "Bridge International Schools" had to be closed because of unsanitary learning conditions and unqualified teachers *(The Guardian*, November 4, 2016). Nationally, the rapid increase of private schools, in particular low-cost private schooling or PPPs, led to immense criticism from local CSOs (see in particular: ISER 2016). Whereas the quality of schooling is much better in expensive private schools this is rarely the case for low-cost private schools which tend to compromise quality for profit (ISER 2016). This explains why only 31% of children in private schools are able to read a story in English, alongside only 36% of being capable to perform division (see Table 5). For Mwesigwa (2015), this public-private divide has created a huge knowledge gap between children of the "haves", studying in high quality private schools, and those of the "have-nots", in government or low-cost private schools. As a consequence, FENU (Forum for Education NGOs in Uganda), which is comprised of over 100 CSOs and CBOs, launched a public education campaign in 2012, calling for action by the GoU to prioritize public education, public private partnerships,

and private education.[27] The same recommendation was also made by the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights in Uganda (ISER 2016).

As in most western countries, the educational background is also decisive for university enrollment in Uganda. The quality of secondary education determines whether a student will pass a major exam during S-6, which may enable the top 2-3% to qualify for a government scholarship to university. Numerous interviewees and youth in FGDs felt that pupils who attended costly private secondary schools tend to get most of the government-sponsored scholarships, but no official data is available to substantiate this claim. Then again, the majority of poor children don't even progress to secondary level. Those who still manage to qualify for university entry (public or private) but are then unsuccessful in obtaining a scholarship have to cover all expenses. Once they graduate, only a fraction of Ugandans with tertiary education get absorbed into the job market.

c) Employment generation

Ugandan youth of 18 years old or less make up 55% of the population and 78% of the population are under 30 years (UBOS 2016, p 15). The country's population growth rate of 3.2 per cent is one of the highest in the world, posing serious challenges to the economy. As in many low-income countries, youth unemployment is pervasive, though no accurate figures are available on the exact percentage of how many youth are without a stable job. Depending on the definition of 'unemployment'[28] and what counts as 'youth'[29] estimates on Uganda's youth unemployment rates vary tremendously by source. The GoU indicates that about 4.9% of youth

[27] See: http://fenu.or.ug/about-our-campaign-work/quality-public-education-campaign/, accessed June 26, 2017
[28] Unemployment rates in Africa are likely to be underestimated, as the standard ILO definition puts a considerable number of jobless Africans into the discouraged worker category. This can create a misleading picture about the unemployment situation in the region (see: Baah-Boateng 2015). The definition of a "job" by the ILO goes beyond a paid or salaried position and includes work in the informal sector with no job security or stable income (AfDB 2016, p. 3).
[29] Depending on the development institution (UNICEF, World Bank or INGOs) youth is either defined as aged between 15-24 years, 18-30 years, or more broadly as 15-35 years.

aged 18-30 are currently unemployed, though slightly more than one-fifth (20.7%) of the youth are categorized as not economically active (UBOS 2016, p. 34). According to other sources, around 63% of youth are estimated as being unemployed (Action Aid Uganda et al. 2012). The African Development Bank even refers to 83% (Soucat et al. 2013, p. 3) of unemployment among youth, thereby using a different definition of unemployment than the ILO (International Labour Organization) and WB (World Bank), which does not include unstable and informal income generation, or being in education and training as "employment" (see: Broecke & Diallo 2012).

Based on an assimilative approach, there is a general perception within global development frameworks that education will lead to better employment opportunities. For instance, the latest World Development Report 2018 on "Learning to Realize Education's Promise" states in its foreword (World Bank 2017, p. xi):

> *For individuals, education promotes employment, earnings, and health. (…) For societies, it drives long-term economic growth, reduces poverty, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions and fosters social cohesion.*

Uganda's development frameworks, such as the RESP (2007-2015), reflect that notion in stating (MoES Uganda 2008, p. 10):

> *Uganda must create a bank of highly educated people to manage the emerging economy and which will contribute to poverty alleviation by increasing wealth. Skilled human resources produce more, earn more and pay more taxes. Higher Education contributes to the wealth of nations by directly producing skilled human resources that produce wealth.*

At the same time, several research studies suggest that the level of education or vocational training have thus far not increased employment in Uganda (see: Annan et al. 2006; Bird et al. 2011; Bird & Higgins 2009; UBOS 2013). This is, in particular, the case in the conflict-affected regions in the northern part of the country, where poverty is more pronounced. In the words of one interviewee, who runs a local CSO in Karamoja[30]:

> *After education, there is always unemployment in Uganda even in this community there is unemployment.*

The main reasons why the role of education in employment generation is limited in the context of Uganda are interrelated and have to be discussed in relation to one another. First, there is a general lack of employment opportunities, in particular for youth with higher levels of education, calling for transformative approaches not just in the education sector but also beyond (e.g.: the economic and private sectors). Second, and building on this point, vocational training initiatives and livelihood programmes suffer from weak implementation, co-ordination and context-specific engagement. Correspondingly, Uganda's school curriculum, especially at secondary level, is not attuned to the needs of the local economy and, in its present form, also not designed in a manner to provide useful employment skills. This was also a point frequently raised by interviewees, especially among youth, who critiqued secondary education as being too theory-focused and lacking practicability. It is important to stress that education per se was never the subject of critique among my interviewees but rather the way in which it is implemented, designed, organized and redistributed.

[30] Interview held with director of local CSO, March 9, 2017 in Kotido.

To elaborate on the first point, namely lack of employment opportunities: Although secondary education and/or vocational training have increased the income and affected the quality of work in Uganda (World Bank 2016, p. 89), there has been no impact on the quantity of work (UBOS 2016 p. 31; Bird et al. 2011; Bird & Higgins 2009). In fact, the majority of those who are employed display a low education level, with less than one third of the employed persons (roughly 30%) having attained either secondary education or specialized training (UBOS 2016, p. 31). Unemployment further increases with the level of education attained, as there are only a few job opportunities based on the skills acquired. The Uganda Investment Authority[31] reports that 150,000 jobs are created for university graduates annually; however, roughly 400,000 students graduate each year, leaving 250,000 unemployed (Kiyaga 2012). Latest data from the UBOS (2016, p. viii) further shows that 72% of the working population was engaged in the agriculture sector in 2012/13, which does not require secondary or tertiary education. Following the World Bank (2016), much of Uganda's poverty reduction from 2006-2013 was built on agricultural income growth. Yet, FGDs held with youth across the country in Kampala, Gulu, Adjumani, and Moroto, as well as expert interviews, revealed that particularly urban youth have many prejudices against farming and income generation through agriculture more generally. This is an issue that is not addressed in schools or vocational training programs.

Given the many challenges faced by youth, the GoU introduced a series of initiatives with the hope of reducing the high unemployment rates and consequently poverty. This included a phased curriculum review at all levels of education, with a focus on BTVET (business, technical, vocational education and training), leading to the creation of the BTVET Act of 2008 and the establishment of the UVQF (Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework). Subsequently, entrepreneurship was introduced as a subject at both lower levels of education

[31] See: https://www.ugandainvest.go.ug/, June 25, 2017

and at university with a view of imparting practical knowledge and skills to enable youth to become job creators in an environment with limited employment prospects. In addition, the GoU launched the UYCVF (Uganda Youth Capital Venture Fund) in 2012 which was succeeded by the YLP (Youth Livelihood Program), running from 2013-2018.

The objective behind these policies and programs is to create employable skills and competencies relevant in the labor market instead of educational certificates. In doing so, BTVET aims at reaching out to all Ugandans in need of skills and does not limit itself to primary and secondary school leavers (BTVET Act 2011-20).[32] Due to a liberal economic developmental course and limited public financing for the BTVET, a significant part in the area of skills training and education is left to the private sector. In interviews, MoES staff generally described the BTVET program as a success. By contrast, during all FGDs we conducted an extensive mapping exercise of important actors/initiatives in Uganda's education sector. None of our participants listed, thought of, or even mentioned the program. We subsequently referred to the BTVET program and asked youth participants about their perceptions. The few who were familiar with it felt that youth benefitting from it still face poor employment opportunities or lack the resources for tools to start up their own businesses to become self-employed in an innovative way. This point is further strengthened by the Youth Map Uganda (2011, p.6), which states:

> *The BTVET system is hampered by a lack of coordination with the private sector and inadequate resources to provide effectively the training most in demand by the labour market. Training consequently often focuses on low-cost skills training mismatched to current and emerging labour needs.*

[32] The BTVET program is provided by 133 public institutions, about 600 private training service providers, and 17 apprenticeship programs (Youth Map Uganda 2011).

Also, Ahaibwe & Mbowa (2014) found that the BTVET program continues to be plagued by various challenges, including: lack of infrastructure for undertaking practical lessons; low-cost skills training that is mismatched with labor market demands; insufficient government funding; but also by poor community attitudes towards vocational education, reflected in low enrollment rates (many BTVET institutions run below capacity). Similar problems occur within the UCVYF and the YLP. Both have been critiqued by interviewees and youth as being very difficult to access due to: the lack of skills to draft a proposal to apply for funds (a skill, according to several interviewees, that is currently not conveyed in schools, including how to draft a curriculum vitae); nepotism and corruption among officials responsible for those programs; and, corrupt behavior among youth themselves. In addition, youth referred to several context-specific, regional or individual reasons, such as no access to land rights, arid land because of climate change, or being unable to pay for tools required to start a business or project. The YLP did try to minimize corruption by directly disbursing funds to beneficiaries as opposed to supporting the infrastructures that run the program. However, in early 2017 it was reported that almost 96% of 1,635 projects (from the first phase) are not productive (New Vision, February 27, 2017). In part this stems from the fact that there is no expertise or training available for youth to make it a sustainable and innovative initiative. An expert who extensively worked with and for youth in Uganda mentioned:[33]

> *The majority of all youth livelihood programs have been agriculture based, which is hardly surprising, but apparently the NAADS (National Agricultural Advisory Service) advisors haven't been involved at all in supporting groups of young people in doing agricultural activities. Thus, those sorts of connections aren't made.*

[33] Interview held with youth expert of CSO, March 4, 2015 in Kampala

Correspondingly, the knowledge conveyed in schools was frequently criticized by interviewees and youth for being disconnected from the skills required for the job market, an issue also affecting other SSA countries (World Bank 2014, pp. 67-104). Some respondents further noted that education can even lead to social exclusion (as opposed to social cohesion) in their rural home communities. To cite one FGD participant:

> *What can you do after you studied modern physics as a senior 13? I don't even know how to drive a car but I studied modern physics. When I returned to my community I felt so small, because I could not apply my knowledge practically. What education taught me is to speak different languages – but it exposed me. I would not like my children to go through the same educational system. It does not lead anywhere.*

With the risk of repeating myself, this is *not* to imply that FGD participants did not appreciate the value of education. To the contrary; from a sheer normative perspective, education was recurrently perceived by youth as a means to increase their social, economic and political agency. Points of criticism revolved around *how* education programs are implemented, the structural barriers surrounding the education system, and what is being taught in schools. Table 6, summarizes the findings from all FGDs and interviews with youth and experts on youth in Uganda.

Table 6: Points of criticism by youth and experts on youth on Uganda's education sector

Implementation	***Structural Barriers***	***Curriculum***
➢ Lack of qualified teachers ➢ Poor teacher moral (among other factors, due to low and irregular payment of teacher salaries) ➢ Lack of resources affects infrastructure of schools ➢ USE supposed to be free but in reality not free ➢ No resources to set up business after BTVET or other vocational training	➢ Highly competitive funding schemes to set up a business (e.g. Youth Livelihoods Program) ➢ Corruption and nepotism among officials in charge of distributing funds for youth ➢ Lack of land titles or bad weather conditions (=consequences of climate change) to engage in agriculture projects.	➢ Too theory-focused ➢ Lack of practical knowledge ➢ Not attuned to the job market ➢ Does not convey skills to draft and submit a funding proposal or job applications ➢ Textbooks do not match the requirements of the curriculum

➢ No resources to buy necessary tools for business after BTVET or other vocational training	➢ General lack of opportunities	
Summary of findings from FGDs (n=70) and interviews with youth and experts on the situation of the youth in Uganda		

In summary, while interviewees and FGD participants consistently found fault with the way in which education and livelihood programs prepare youth for the job market and economic environment, the general lack of opportunities for youth should not be left aside. The success of educational programs also depends on the political and economic environment of the country as a whole. Uganda is a low-income country with a GDP per capita equivalent to 3 per cent of the world's average. Although Uganda's GNI (Gross National Income) increased significantly, by about 125%, between 1985 and 2012, it continues to suffer from a discriminatory global trading system with negative impacts on the national market due to USD 2.31 billion of exported goods alongside USD 5.52 billion of imported goods in 2015 alone.[34] Current education initiatives, in particular concerning secondary schooling, vocational training and livelihoods programs, are not addressing this difficult economic environment. At the same time, education reforms rely heavily on transformative changes at the systemic level and across sectors.

Discussion: From assimilation towards transformation.

> *The education system that the government has given us is not helping the poor. It makes the poor poorer. It is still very expensive. I have met mothers who have sold land to educate their sons and daughters. The children who they have painfully paid for then go back to the villages to sell beans and shoes. The education also takes so long. By secondary level you still don't know what you are going to be. After studying a lot of theory and wasting a lot of money. The government promised sanitary towels after giving out money as handshakes. I have met girls who leave schools because*

[34] http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/uga/, accessed July 1, 2017

of sanitary towels. The quality of UPE schools is poor. You can notice from the English these pupils speak. Those on government scholarships are people who can afford.

This statement was made by a female student after a roundtable event at Gulu University in April 2017.[35] It inspired me to dig deeper, put the issue into a wider theoretical context and substantiate her claims with quantitative and qualitative data and findings from field research. In this endeavor, I found that access to education and pupil retention are challenged by flawed implementation of policies (e.g. USE), hidden costs of education, the way in which funds are allocated, and that in fact multidimensional poverty itself is still a cause for exclusion from education. Poverty is further perpetuated by the low quality of education while expensive private schools are on the rise, reinforcing a two-tier system in education where only the wealthy prosper. Those few who manage to proceed to higher education are later confronted with extremely uncertain and limited employment prospects. In addition, secondary education, as well as the BTVET program, the UCVF and the YLP, are not responsive to the needs of the Ugandan economy. The secondary school curriculum was critiqued for lacking practicability and being too theory-focused. All of this has created a vicious circle for the poor, who aspire to a better life for their children through education.

Yet, normative notions of education – as depicted within donor reports, government policies or even among interviewees and youth – are still far-removed from the everyday realities and struggles (c.f. de Certeau 1984) of people affected by poverty. This is surprising and frustrating at the same time, as some of the reasons why education failed to uplift the poor in Uganda are, in fact, widely acknowledged and common phenomena; such as the hidden costs of education or the exclusion from education as a result of multidimensional poverty. That poverty itself is

[35] The roundtable event was organized by the author together with a senior lecturer from Gulu University on April 19, 2017 on "The role of education in democratization processes." More background information on the reference of sanitary towels made by the student can be found here: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/22/activist-uganda-president-buttocks-jail-stella-nyanzi, accessed 03.07.2017.

an obstacle to acquiring education is not exclusive to the SSA context and can be also observed in Western countries such as the United States of America (Duncan & Murnane 2011) or within the U.K. (Butler 2014). In fact, the limitations of Western education systems are well-known to us[36], yet donors promote, and aid-recipient countries continue to assimilate, that model. Also, the current emphasis on enhancing the quality of education (see: the latest World Development 2018 report by World Bank 2017 or SDG 4) is important, but will do little to respond to the political and economic structural barriers that cause poverty in the first place and explain why children drop out of, or will never attend, school.

Against this backdrop, I want to stress again that, education *per se* was never the subject of critique among my respondents but rather how it is implemented, under-funded, organized, re-distributed, what is being taught in schools, and how knowledge is conveyed. The argument of this article is, therefore, not that education does not have the potential to uplift people from poverty. To the contrary, previous research studies on Uganda have shown that formal and non-formal education can help the poor to better cope with the impacts of climate change (see for instance: World Bank 2016 p 81) or in situations of conflict (Bird & Higgins 2009; omitted ref). Moreover, the latest statistical abstract from UBOS (2016, p. 42) illustrates that the majority of Ugandans who remained non-poor (referring to those who have never belonged to the multidimensional poverty category) attained secondary education. Then again, those who are affected by poverty are most likely to never send their children to secondary schools. Instead, this article contends that current models to alleviate poverty through education in Uganda do not have an impact on the political, economic and social structures that cause poverty in the first place, calling for systemic and cross-sectoral change at large (as argued in

[36] See for instance Robinson & Aronica's 2015 bestelling book "Creative Schools. The Grassroots Revolution that's Transforming Education")

transformative approaches), and thus not just within the education sector. In practice, that could, for example, translate into involving the agricultural sector in the design of youth livelihood programs or the development of the secondary school curriculum in close consultations with experts and actors from the public and diverse economic and private sectors. Overall, the general lack of opportunities for Ugandan youth is an issue the education sector can certainly not address on its own, requiring political and economic change and commitment at multiple levels (– an argument, also frequently put forward in transformative approaches towards development). Besides, the issue of parental responsibilities deserves much greater attention when it comes to school retention. More research and knowledge is necessary on what types of support for parents are most responsive to the economic and political realities poor people are struggling with. In addition, current funding allocations in education feed into existing and historically-rooted patterns of inequality – an issue that is of great importance if policies are to aim at inducing social transformation through financing for education. But also corruption in Uganda's public sector (c.f. Rukare 2017; International Alert & UPFYA 2013) continues to challenge poverty alleviation within and through education.

Since independence, Uganda has followed a strict developmental course based on the principles of assimilation to western education models geared towards human capital development and economic growth. However, these attempts were, and still are, surrounded by several structural barriers. The Ugandan case perfectly exemplifies that the political economy of the country can undermine efforts to transform existing power structures and modes of exploitation through education (Gradstein et al. 2005; Novelli, Higgins, et al. 2015). This further implies that change cannot emerge only from the very grassroots level, i.e. through educating society at large, but also has to emerge from the systemic level, i.e. government institutions at the local, national and global levels (c.f. Reigeluth & Garfinkle 1994). It is here where the limitations of assimilative models are most evident. The way in which education is

strategized at the government and global levels (and influenced by donor policies) affects the poor, and those who are most affected by poverty are still significantly underrepresented in important decision making processes. Numerous interviewees stressed that the lack of, but also type of, education prevents poor Ugandans from effectively advocating for their concerns and needs.[37] That further implies that assimilative strategies to improve the quality of education have to go far beyond PISA and TIMSS results and explore how 'non-measurable' skills, like creative thinking and innovation, can be further advanced in situations of extreme poverty. Put differently, the predominant focus on economic empowerment or employment generation through education sidelines the role of education in enhancing the political and social agency of the poor to make necessary changes and decisions to transform their lives in very difficult circumstances. Looking at the political agency of Ugandans, it should be finally noted that, youth aged between 18-30 represent over half of Uganda's registered voters, yet citizenship education has been recently suspended from the formal curriculum in public schools (Watchdog Uganda January 17, 2017). As far as the political literacy of Ugandans is concerned, Table 7 showcases, that out of 2,400 respondents, only 50.7% understood the word "democracy" whereas 30.6% did not understand the term, and 18% required a local language translation. Notably, the higher the education level the higher also the percentage of people who could define the concept.

Table 7: Understanding the meaning of democracy based on educational background
Source: Afrobarometer

	Total	Understood democracy	Required local language translation	Did not understand the word or question	Missing
Education of respondent					
No formal schooling	336	12.6%	20.8%	65.5%	1.1%
Informal schooling only	43	36.4%	20.4%	41.6%	1.6%
Some primary schooling	693	35.0%	24.2%	40.0%	0.7%
Primary school completed	342	51.4%	21.3%	26.7%	0.7%
Some secondary school / high school	453	69.4%	14.1%	15.6%	0.9%
Secondary school / high school completed	280	72.3%	13.9%	13.6%	0.2%

[37] This point was made by the majority of interviewees (n=29) during February and May 2017, when asked whether and how people with little to no formal education would be able advocate for a certain need or cause in their community.

Post-secondary qualifications, other than university	145	86.0%	5.5%	7.7%	0.7%
Some university	43	98.4%	-	1.6%	-
University completed	58	85.8%	3.3%	10.9%	-
Post-graduate	3	100.0%	-	-	-
Missing	2	66.8%	-	33.2%	-
Don´t know	1	100.0%	-	-	-
(N)	(2,400)	50.7%	18.0%	30.6%	0.7%

Source: Afrobarometer 2014/15
http://afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online, accessed July 3, 2017

Apart from Afrobarometer's data, there is hardly any quantitative research or data available on the political literacy of Ugandans. Some interviewees working for local CSOs[38] mentioned that funding for informal citizenship education programs usually increases shortly before an upcoming election but is cut off soon after an election is over. There is limited attention from donors towards citizenship education, thereby disregarding the transformative potential of education in increasing political awareness. Admittedly, educating citizens about their rights is a difficult task to undertake in view of the shrinking space for freedom of speech and civil society in Uganda (see for instance: Rukare 2017) – yet, it is not impossible. I have met and interviewed local CSOs that provide informal civic and human rights education for impoverished and marginalized Ugandans, who are at risk of being unknowingly exploited or deprived of their legal rights. It is difficult, however, to find funding for these activities, and interviewees felt that they are in fact providing services that should be part of the formal education sector.

To conclude, a sheer focus on assimilative approaches to reduce poverty via education is problematic and limiting in several respects. Especially, the imposition of western educational standards is challenged by different political, economic and social structures and how they were shaped over history and time. While transformative approaches agree on the importance

[38] Interviewed during February and May 2017.

of providing equal access, quality and opportunity in education, this is not enough. Current strategies are not responsive to the root causes of poverty in order to really affect social transformation and change. Therefore, critical discussions on the unintended consequences of promoting and perpetuating assimilative approaches in education can no longer be avoided among scholars, donors and development actors in Uganda and beyond.

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Annex 1: List of Interviews in Uganda (2017 and 2015). Anonymized Version

	Interviewee	Gender	Type of Organization	Place	Date
1	Staff Member	M	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	04.05.2017
2	Staff Member	M	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	26.04.2017
3	Staff Member	M	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	26.04.2017
4	Professor	F	Makerere University	Kampala	25.04.2017
5	Programme Manager	M	INGO	Kampala	25.04.2017
6	Programme Manager	F	INGO	Kampala	25.04.2017
7	Component Manager	M	INGO	Kampala	25.04.2017
8	Chair	F	Local CSO	Gulu	21.04.2017
9	Director	M	Local NGO Network	Gulu	21.04.2017
10	Executive Director	M	Local CSO	Gulu	18.04.2017
11	Director and Founder	F	Local Training Centre	Gulu	18.04.2017
12	Officer	M	Coalition of Local Civil Society Group	Kampala	13.04.2017
13	Executive Director	F	Local CSO	Kampala	12.04.2017
14	Project Officer	F	Local CSO	Kampala	05.04.2017
15	Project Officer	F	Local CSO	Kampala	05.04.2017
16	Programme Officer	M	Local CSO	Kampala	21.03.2017
17	Research Officer	M	Local CSO	Kampala	21.03.2017
18	Executive Director	M	Local CSO	Kampala	21.03.2017
19	Director and Founder	F	Local CSO	Kampala	17.03.2017
20	Director and Founder	M	Youth Centre	Kampala	17.03.2017
21	Coordinator	F	Local CSO Network	Kampala	16.03.2017
22	Communications Officer	F	INGO	Kotido	10.03.2017
23	Project Officer	M	INGO	Kotido	10.03.2017
24	Officer	M	Local Government Kotido	Kotido	10.03.2017
25	Project Officer	M	Local Association	Kotido	09.03.2017
26	Director and Founder	M	Local CSO	Kotido	09.03.2017
27	Senior Staff Member	M	Intern. Organization Moroto Zonal Office	Moroto	08.03.2017
28	Senior Staff Member	F	Intern. Organization, Moroto Zonal Office	Moroto	08.03.2017
29	Executive Director	M	Civil Society Network	Moroto	07.03.2017
30	Programme Officer	M	Local CSO	Moroto	07.03.2017
31	Officer	M	Local Government Moroto	Moroto	06.03.2017
32	Co-Director	M	Local CSO	Moroto	06.03.2017
33	Co-Director	M	Local CSO	Moroto	06.03.2017
34	Co-Founder / CEO	M	Local CSO	Kampala	03.03.2017
35	Senior Lecturer	F	Makerere University	Kampala	02.03.2017
36	Senior Programme Officer	F	Local Think Tank	Kampala	01.03.2017
37	Programme Officer	M	Local NGO Network	Kampala	20.02.2017
38	Education Specialist	M	INGO	Kampala	08.04.2015
39	Senior Official	M	Ministry of Education and Sports	Kampala	02.04.2015
40	Education Advisor	F	INGO	Kampala	02.04.2015
41	Officer	M	Ministry of Education and Sports	Kampala	31.03.2015
42	Adult Education Coordinator	M	Local CSO	Kampala	30.03.2015
43	Legal Officer	F	Local CSO	Kampala	30.03.2015
44	Deputy Programme Manager	F	Local CSO	Kampala	30.03.2015

45	Professor	M	Makerere University	Kampala	24.03.2015
46	District Chairperson	M	Local Government	Kampala	16.03.2015
47	Refugee Student	M	Secondary School	Adjumani	13.03.2015
48	Refugee Student	F	Secondary School	Adjumani	13.03.2015
49	Secondary School Student	F	Secondary School	Adjumani	13.03.2015
50	Ugandan Teacher	F	Refugee settlement primary school	Adjumani	13.03.2015
51	Refugee Teacher	M	Refugee settlement primary school	Adjumani	13.03.2015
52	Group Interview	F/M	Nakabat Community	Moroto	12.03.2015
53	Officer	M	Local Government	Moroto	11.03.2015
54	Senior Staff Member	F	Internat. Organization, Moroto Zonal Office	Moroto	11.03.2015
55	Programme Officer	F	Local CBO	Moroto	11.03.2015
56	Youth Co-ordinator	M	INGO	Moroto	10.03.2015
57	Representative	M	Local Council	Moroto	10.03.2015
58	Programme Co-ordinator	M	INGO	Moroto	09.03.2015
59	Regional Coordinator	F	INGO	Moroto	09.03.2015
60	Teacher	M	Non-Formal Education Programme	Moroto	09.03.2015
61	Professor	M	Kyambogo University	Kampala	04.03.2015
62	Development Advisor	M	INGO	Kampala	04.03.2015
63	Senior Official	M	International Organization	Kampala	03.03.2015
64	Staff Member	M	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	25.02.2015
65	Staff Member	F	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	25.02.2015
66	Staff Member	F	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	25.02.2015
67	Staff Member	M	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	25.02.2015
68	Staff Member	F	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	25.02.2015
69	Former Senior Staff Member	F	National Curriculum Development Centre	Kampala	25.02.2015
70	Senior Member	M	Uganda's Teacher's Union	Kampala	24.02.2015
71	Senior Member	M	Uganda Scouts Association	Kampala	24.02.2015
72	Senior Education Officer	F	Ministry of Education and Sports	Kampala	23.02.2015
73	Director	M	Youth Initiative	Adjumani	20.02.2015
74	Officer	M	Local Government	Adjumani	19.02.2015
75	Programme Officer	M	INGO	Adjumani	19.02.2015
76	School Official	M	School official for Adjumani District	Adjumani	18.02.2015
77	Senior Officer	M	Local Government	Gulu	17.02.2015
78	Teacher	M	Primary School	Gulu	16.02.2015
79	Director	F	Training Centre	Gulu	16.02.2015
80	Associate Professor	M	Gulu University	Gulu	13.02.2015
81	Senior Staff Member	M	National Teachers College	Gulu	13.02.2015
82	Director	F	Youth Centre	Gulu	13.02.2015
83	Programme Coordinator	M	Local CSO	Gulu	13.02.2015
84	Member	F	Cultural Centre	Gulu	12.02.2015
85	Social Worker / Councilor	M	Training Centre	Gulu	12.02.2015
86	Programme Officer	M	Radio Station	Gulu	12.02.2015
87	Senior Lecturer	F	Makerere University	Kampala	06.02.2015
88	Programme Officer	M	National Youth Council	Kampala	06.02.2015
89	Programme Assistant	M	Uganda Youth Network	Kampala	29.01.2015