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A Promise Unfulfilled. Challenges of Achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE), Access and Quality in Rural Cameroon: Case of Mundemba Subdivision, Ndian Division-South West region



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A Promise Unfulfilled. Challenges of Achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE), Access and Quality in Rural Cameroon: Case of Mundemba Subdivision, Ndian Division-South West Region

Engmok Bale Hortense¹, Nkengue Abega Protais Brice², Ngoe Fritz Eseokwea^{3*} 

^{1,2}PhD Sociology. Research officer, Department of Social Studies,

³PhD Economics. Senior Research officer, Department of Economics and Environmental Studies,

^{1,2,3}National Centre for Education, Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Yaounde Cameroon

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1849-9554>

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges confronting the achievement of universal primary education in Mundemba subdivision of Cameroons South West region.

Methodology: Four public school in Mundemba settlement and ten public schools in the hinterland were implicated in the study. Primary data for the study was obtained by use of questionnaire, observation and group discussion among actors and stakeholders in the primary education sector. Secondary data was obtained by desk review involving literature from textbooks, journals, publications and websites. Schools environment were observed while available infrastructure, and facilities for teaching and learning were also examined. Other findings were made on socioeconomic, cultural and environmental factors affecting teaching and learning in the Mundemba subdivision.

Findings: Major findings of the study implicated gross underfunding of primary school education as main cause of neglected schools environment, infrastructure, and facilities for making universal primary education a reality in the subdivision. Other factors limiting access to universal free primary education were socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental in nature. These factors must be taken to consideration in government educational policies for UPE to be made a reality in the country's rural sector.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: According to the findings, to put UPE in practice in Mundemba subdivision, government and its agencies must create an enabling environment backed by necessary infrastructure and facilities to support its policy of achieving universal primary education in the subdivision.

Keywords: *Challenges, Access, Education, Quality, Innovations, Universal, Environment*

1.0 Introduction

Education is the greatest human achievement, which has uplifted societies, communities, countries and the world as a whole. Through education, man has been able to achieve the greatest inventions in science, technology, governance and other attributes, which have liberated humankind from ignorance, backwardness and poverty (Fredriksen 1981; Ladislaus 2007). According to Birger (2023), education has been responsible for the transformation of the human race from primitive and backward societies of the ancient times to modern societies where man has made his environment more conducive for developments in science, technology including innovations. Thus, every government that opts to uplift its people from ignorance, poverty and misery must project its educational sectors and fashion them to evolve as changes are taking place in the domain of science, technology, and innovations (Ladislaus 2007). Achieving universal primary education is a key goal of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which aims to ensure that all children, regardless of gender, socioeconomic and cultural background have access to primary education.

According to Lewin (2022), access to quality universal primary education remains a crucial initiative for combating poverty and promoting sustainable development. Achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Cameroon was viewed as part of scaling down poverty reduction and increase school enrolment of pupils from all income brackets. The elimination of school fees in public primary schools was viewed as major step towards poverty reduction because it was to assure significant reductions on household expenditure for primary school education. Although the policy was timely it failed to meet up with government objectives of making education accessible and cost free to all. However, to achieve the goal of ensuring free primary education, many developing countries like Cameroon have encountered challenges due to lack of financial resources to build schools, provide educational materials and train teachers with the necessary skills for development (UNESCO (2020) & World Bank (2020), Although Cameroon has made great strides in the implementation of universal free primary education; the country is yet to achieve the desired objective due to multiple challenges and problems encountered in the implementation of the global policy in all regions of its territory (Derick & Agbor 2022; Bashir *et al.*; 2018).

While primary education is relatively free in urban government schools, families are compelled to pay for uniforms and books, and provide some infrastructure and facilities which government is unable to provide. In the rural areas, challenges of providing infrastructure and facilities are both socioeconomic, cultural and environmental. These challenges affect school enrolment and impacts negatively learning and teaching in most of rural Cameroon (UNESCO 2020, ACET 2021). In most of rural Cameroon, children lack access to primary education due to limited number of public primary schools and limited number of teachers deployed in the available schools. Parents are forced to share the burden of employing teachers in rural public schools to bridge the ever-widening deficits created by absence or shortage of government teachers (Arias *et al.*, (2019). In

addition, geographical features like mountains, hills forests, and rivers cutting across the rural landscapes separate villages, and negatively affects scholarisation and school enrolment. These geographical features affects movement of teachers and pupils as most rural areas lack modern road infrastructure and other facilities to guarantee movement and improve access to education.. Fredriksen (2005) & Birger (2023), view the precarious environment and conditions for teachers and learners in most rural schools reflect teachers attitudes to teaching, and household desire for pupils enrolment; especially as infrastructure and facilities for teaching and learning is lacking or inadequate in most of the rural primary schools.

In Cameroon even though there is no legislation preventing children to be enrolled in primary schools for religious, cultural or other reasons, there are other factors that affect enrolment in most rural areas. As primary education is relatively free most accessible public primary schools are always congested due to over enrollment, thus over stretching the available infrastructure and facilities for learning (World Bank,2009; UNESCO,2020). According to UNESCO (2020) congestion in accessible rural and semirural primary schools increases need for construction of more classrooms, provision of tables, desks or benches, toilets, restaurants including health facilities. However, due to government budgetary constraints most of the schools are grossly underfunded and lack basic infrastructure for teachers and learners. To regulate over enrolment and budgetary constraints most public schools have created the Parents-Teachers-Association (PTA), which supports the primary schools to bridge budget deficits and other financial constraints encountered by the schools. The PTA have been instrumental in building additional classrooms, providing desks, carrying repairs, salaries payment for non-government employed teachers, and didactic materials (Lewin 2022; EFW 2020). PTA levies have been made compulsory in most rural and urban primary schools due to annual budgetary constraints facing the education sectors. This indicates government inability to adequately fund education; thus fueling setbacks in the implementation of access to universal free education as promised in the year 2000 after failure of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by IMF/World Bank in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Cameroon. The implementation of universal primary education, access and quality was seen as poverty reduction strategy meant to alleviate the burden of fees payment and providing school necessities in primary schools. However, inability to successfully implement the policy has been viewed as failed promise in many schools of thought, the country over (Derick and Agbor, 2022).

2.0 Objectives

- 1) An examination of primary schools' environment for teachers and learners in Mundemba subdivision,
- 2) Examine energy problems and effects on teachers and learners in Mundemba subdivision
- 3) An identification of socioeconomic and cultural factors affecting access to quality universal primary education by teachers and learners in Mundemba subdivision.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study area

Mundemba settlement is the capital town of Ndian Division, which also serves as administrative headquarters for Mundemba subdivision. It is located in the Western fringes of the south west region and shares common boundaries with Cross River state of Nigeria. Based on 2005 population estimates the total population of Mundemba subdivision is 14,385 with 5,236 residing in Mundemba town itself. The subdivision covers an area of 1,557 km². It is a rainforest area known as the home of Korop National Park. Crop farming, fishing, and hunting are the main occupation of inhabitants in Mundemba subdivision. Figure 1 shows the map of Mundemba subdivision.



Figure 1: **Map of Mundemba subdivision**

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki> access 15th October 2025

* Note: the Map is blur from the source.

3.2 Sampling Procedures

Fourteen government primary schools were implicated in the study. Ten of the primary schools were purposively selected from the hinterland villages of the subdivision, and four existing primary schools in Mundemba settlement and its neighborhood. The primary schools located in the enclave hinterland were purposively selected because not every village in the subdivision have public primary schools. Pupils and parents were purposively selected from villages containing

public schools. Parents in Mundemba settlement were also purposively selected because some parents sponsored their children in the private primary school.

3.3 Data sources

Data sources for the study are Primary and secondary.

3.3.1 Sources of primary data

Primary data was obtained by use of questionnaires, group discussion, and observation by walkabout of the schools environment. Major areas observed during walkabout include classrooms, water sources, toilets facilities, recreational facilities, and health facilities, restaurants and dining facilities including area designated for sewage and waste disposals. Information was obtained from teachers, head teachers, pupils, parents some village heads and notables. Main while, interviews were conducted with teachers and head teachers in functional schools.

3.3.2 Secondary data sources.

Secondary data was obtained through desk review by documentation from scientific journals, websites, textbooks, online publications, UNESCO documents, and from the state Ministry for Basic/Primary Education.

4.0 Results and discussions

4.1 Examination of primary schools environment in the study area

An examination of schools environment, structures and facilities for quality education in Mundemba subdivision revealed the existence of educational crisis in the subdivision. The underdeveloped or backward nature of primary school's environment observed in the study is an indication that much has to be done by government and its agencies to achieve the objective of universal primary education in the subdivision. Most school buildings were in dare need of repairs attributed to neglect. The roofs of most classroom buildings were leaking due to neglect attributed to government inability to provide funding for repairs in most of the schools covered by the study. According to the study about 57.2% of the schools had roofs needing repairs, 64.2% of buildings constructed of wood undergoing decay, 71.4% uncommented floors, 42.9% constructed with cement blocks. It was further observed that most of the classrooms, especially in the hinterland primary schools were not conducive for learners and teachers during rainy seasons. Other revelations were that school enrolment and attendance were affected by weather conditions and other geographical factors beyond human control. Under the present dispensation, schools are unlikely to meet the standards required for quality and free universal primary education due to the general lack or absence of basic infrastructure and facilities to support both teachers and learners in schools of the subdivision.

Burnett (2020) in related studies in Guatemala, and Burnel (2021) in some countries of the SSA regions confirm difficulties of introducing innovations for quality free primary education in

the absence of the necessary infrastructure and facilities to support learning and teaching. Other revelations were that school enrolment and attendance were a function of weather conditions and other natural factors beyond human control. Majority of the schools were in dire need of desks, benches, tables and chairs for conducive learning. Figure 1 shows a deserted classroom with water on the cemented floor attributed to roof leakages and unprotected windows during rainy season. Respondents testified that during the rainy season most of the classrooms were seldom used due to volumes of water leaking from the roofs and unprotected windows. Water spills and spreads on the floors of most classrooms, making the environment unhealthy for both teachers and learners.

Figure 2. Deserted classroom in need of repairs in Mundemba subdivision



Source: Ngoe Fritz Eseokwea, Field Work Report on Universal primary Education in Mundemba subdivision, 2023

The floors become muddy and made the environment unpleasant for teachers and learners. The muddy classrooms made intra-class movement difficult due to the slippery nature of the floors. Studies by Majgaard & Mingat (2012) in other SSA countries supports this study revelation from Mundemba subdivision. According to these studies, underfunding of education was responsible for inadequate and neglected infrastructure and facilities in primary schools. These factors have a negative impact on education quality in primary schools of most Sub-Saharan African Countries, and rural Cameroon in particular. It was revealed that underfunding of primary education in Mundemba subdivision was responsible for the neglect of environment, infrastructure and facilities for learners and teachers in the subdivision. The Economist (2022) in studies on “Education and Climate” revealed the influence of climate and vegetation on school performance and concluded that there are no ways that schooling could attain favorable outcomes in an unhealthy climate and environment. The study called on governments of developing countries to invest in school’s environment for future benefits of communities.

4.1.1 Health, Hygiene and sanitation facilities in schools

This study reveals that the most common type of diseases among teachers and learners in Mundemba subdivision was malaria partly attributed to the presence of equatorial rain forest and

marshy bushes, which provides breeding grounds for mosquitoes in most schools. There were no designated areas for sewage and waste disposal in most of the schools. Most of the latrines were full and abandoned due to over-use. The absence of portable water for cleaning of toilets provided a breeding ground for flies, cockerages and other vectors of diseases. Pupils defecated out of the latrine holes, on the bare floor, outside the latrine buildings or in the neighborhood bushes. There were no units designated for environment and nature protection in most of the primary schools. The nature of schools environment in Mundemba subdivision was in line with UNESCO (2019) in its Global, education-monitoring report that indicated poor hygiene and sanitary conditions prevalent in most rural primary schools environment of some developing countries have affected school enrolment, as most households are reluctant to enroll their children in environmentally unfriendly primary schools.

Studies by EMIS (2010-2013) on environmental and social assessment of Pamol plantation installations in Ndiain division indicated similar experiences with respect to hygiene and sanitation in the company's installation, workers camps, and primary schools around workers camps. Studies by Ravallion (2009) & Lewin (2020), made similar observation and remarked that government inability to provide infrastructure and facilities constitutes the greatest impediment for realization of free universal primary education in Cameroon. These remarks reflect the unfriendly environment and social condition affecting primary schools in Mundemba subdivision. Birger (2023) and World Bank (2020) have also confirmed these observations in Universal Primary Education in SSA. Both studies reveal some of the disheartening environmental conditions acting as impediment to achieving universal primary education in most developing countries. Studies by Vera *et al.*, (2024) in Cameroons South West region also support these findings, as most primary schools had no modern toilet facilities even in settlements with portable water supply. Figure 2 shows a dilapidated pit latrine facility in the hinterland of the subdivision. The neglected latrine is habitat to different types of harmful insects, animals, and plants growing on rooftops.

These dilapidated structures greatly signify gross underfunding of rural schools in the subdivision. Underfunding of education constitutes a major challenge and setback to achieving universal primary education in the rural milieu as revealed by Brunel (2021); Lewin (2022); IMF (2022) in low-income countries of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure 2. An unkempt latrine facility in a village primary school of Mundemba subdivision



Source: Ngoe Fritz Eseokwea; fieldwork report on achieving universal primary education in Mundemba subdivision, March 2024.

Tohnain and Ngoe (2012), on “School Health Nutrition and Academic Performance in Cameroon”, also support the results in earlier studies, including those by Mwiria (2005) in related studies in rural primary schools of Kenya respectively. Both studies revealed similar scenarios in schools environment.

5.0 The effect of energy Problems on teachers and learners in Mundemba subdivision

Innovations are difficult to introduce in schools and industries without electricity from various sources. Introducing quality education in primary schools must be supported by the availability of electricity at household level and in schools. Mundemba town is the only settlement in the subdivision with a thermal plant for the supply of electricity. Unfortunately, electricity supply in Mundemba is epileptic due to rampant disruptions attributed to either fuel shortages or lack of fuel. Epileptic power supply has not only affected the education sector but all other economic operators who depend on fuel and electricity. In this study, epileptic power supply has been identified among the greatest factors affecting the introduction of innovations in primary schools; with hinterland schools most affected. In the hinterland areas, pupils use lighted candlesticks and lanterns to read at night. According to Mundemba Municipal Council (2019), the Mundemba thermal electricity plant is supplied from the city of Douala, which is more than two hundred and fifty kilometers away. Roads linking Douala and Mundemba are bumpy and impassable during the rainy season, making Mundemba more vulnerable to energy cuts. It was also revealed by Council authorities that most of the fuel used in Mundemba municipality is illegally supplied from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. These problems are directly responsible for underdevelopment of the Mundemba subdivision and negatively impacts schooling, learning and teaching in the subdivision (Derick & Agbor 2020). Burnet (2020) & Levy (1996), who attributed underfunding in education as responsible for the precarious school environment,. Most

of the pupils from hinterland village primary schools acknowledged lack of basic knowledge of the computer and skills in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) due to the general absence of multimedia centers in the subdivision. Multimedia centers are difficult to introduce where there is absence or inadequate electricity supply as prevails in most of Mundemba subdivision. Teachers trained in ICT resented deployment in Mundemba settlement where irregular or lack of electrical energy prevents operation of computers and other devices for teaching and learning.

6.0 Some natural and environmental factors affecting access to primary education

In Cameroon, there is no legislation allowing children to be absent from school for religious, cultural, or other reasons. On the contrary, all national legislation encourages parents to send their children to primary school, public or private. UNESCO (2019) supports that children could only be deprived from school under conditions of war and displacement of individuals and communities; otherwise, primary education could be considered free in government primary schools in Cameroon. However, despite government legislation on compulsory free primary education other factors affect access to universal primary education in Mundemba subdivision and other areas of rural Cameroon. Some of the factors are natural or geographical, socioeconomic and cultural in nature

Mudemba subdivision is highly enclaved with village settlements separated by dense forests, hills, mountains, valleys, streams and rivers that hampers free movement of children of school age. As if to worsen the plight of pupils, most of the subdivision have limited public or private schools. Children have to trek between villages to have access to educations by passing through geographical barriers risky for children of school going age. The risk of primary children passing across dense forests habited by wild animals and birds possess danger for most parents to send their children to schools in the subdivision. Moreover, the roads are inadequate to serve multiple villages that constitutes the subdivision. High absenteeism and under scholarisation of Mundemba subdivision have partly been attributed to geographical factors and the environment Related studies by the MasterCard Foundation (2020); King and Martin (2002); World Bank (2009) are strongly in support that under-scholarisation and absenteeism in most enclave rural primary schools are greatly attributed to factors beyond human control. In this study, natural factors are partly responsible for under scholarisation, absenteeism and low enrolment among pupils in the subdivision. According to studies by Vera *et al.*, (2024) in the South West region, these factors constitute the major causes of both absenteeism and under-scholarisation in most of rural Cameroon, and Mundemba subdivision in particular. Figure 3 shows one of the fast running streams children cross in order to access a nearby government primary school in the subdivision.

Figure 3. Natural obstacles to access primary school in Mundemba subdivision



Ngoe Fritz Eseokwea; fieldwork report on achieving universal primary education in Mundemba, 2024.

Under these, precarious conditions late coming, absenteeism and irregular school attendance have been difficult to avoid by most pupils and teachers in the subdivision. These natural factors were also identified in earlier studies by Ngoe (2012) in “Engaging the Burden of Rural-Urban migrations in Cameroon”. Figure 4 shows a hammock bridge constructed over a stream to facilitate movement of pupils to access some schools. The bridges also facilities the movement of goods and services by economic operators, notably farmers, teachers, gatherers and traders. In spite of these precautions, children of school age find difficulties to cross on the hammock bridge. It was revealed that the precarious climate and other natural factors affects both school attendance and the ability of households to send their children to schools. The same factors are highly implicated for rural poverty and inability of most parents to send their children in the subdivisions It was observed that crossing of most streams in Mundemba subdivision was only manageable during dry season when tides are low.

Figure 4. Economic operators crossing on a Hammock bridge constructed over a river in Mundemba subdivision



Source: Ngoe Fritz Eseokwea. Unpublished Fieldwork reports on achieving universal primary education in Cameroon, 2024

During prolonged rainy season pupils voluntarily stay at home due to severe flooding. Vera *et al.*, (2020) is also in support that weather conditions are a function of school attendance in most enclaved villages of the subdivision

6. Economic, social and cultural factors affecting the achievement of universal primary education in Mundemba subdivision

Economic and social factors have greatly down played the achievement of universal free primary education in the subdivision. One of the greatest economic factor that have contributed to absenteeism and under-scholarisation is the inability of parents to send their children to school and provide for their needs. It was estimated that about 20.5% of the pupils in the study area were equipped with a few necessary textbooks while the larger majority relied on the teachers notes. Due to environmental factors, households in the subdivision are poor due to lack of market access for farm produce. Rural poverty has greatly undermined long-term academic performance of students. In addition, due to socioeconomic problems linked to the environment, most teachers hardly completed their schemes of work due to persistent absenteeism from school. It was revealed that in the hinterland schools, majority of the teachers only come to school towards the end of the term to organize rush-hour classes prior to terminal examinations. It is partly for these reasons that Parent- Teachers-Association engage teachers than depending on government-employed teachers. These testimonies are similar to those by Derick and Agbor (2022) in the Northwest region of Cameroon; Victor (1996) in rural Ghana; and Birger (2023) in other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the authors, rural poverty is major factor contributing to backward educational standards in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing countries. Earlier studies by

Victor (1996) in rural Ghana also confirm that due to poverty and other socioeconomic challenges, most rural inhabitants found difficulties to secure education for their children. In Mundemba subdivision, most pupils victimized by rural poverty and teacher absenteeism are forced to engage in economic activities notably, hunting, fishing and gathering instead of learning. Teachers employed by the Parents-Teachers-Association (PTA) trigger teacher-pupil absenteeism when there are delays in salary payments by the schools. Head teachers revealed that PTA funds for payment of non-government teacher depends on school enrolment. Most rural schools run for months without paying salaries of PTA teachers because of low enrolment. Teachers testified that schools with high enrolment do not encounter many difficulties in payment of PTA teachers. It was also revealed that PTA teachers are poorly remunerated, as their salaries are a function of school enrolment. They equally have no employment contract and have weak bargaining powers since most of them are unemployed school leavers. Figure 4 shows pupils engaged in fishing activities partly attributed to teacher absenteeism and inability of parents to meet school needs.

Figure 4. Pupils engaged in fishing due to teachers absenteeism



Source: Ngoe Fritz Eseokwea National Centre for Education, unpublished reports on access to universal primary education in Cameroon, March 2024

Another socioeconomic problem responsible for teacher-pupils absenteeism is the absence of financial institutions like banks and credit unions in Mundemba subdivision. Most government-employed teachers receive salaries out of Mundemba. A greater majority of teachers never come back on time to engage pupils. Parents resented the unprofessional attitude during group discussions. It was testified that most government teachers engage the services of PTA teachers in the event of prolong their stay out of Mundemba subdivision. Some head teachers resented the practice as it violates academic norms, standards and outcome of learners. Some parents preferred their pupil to engage in extra curriculum activities that sustain families than staying without learning in school. These experiences have been advanced by Balfanz & Legsters (2005) in earlier studies among the rural Fulani and Hausa herdsmen in Katsina state of Nigeria who referred their

children to grazing than sending them to conventional schools. Majority of the parents considered sending children to primary schools as waste of time, efforts and resources.

This study reveals that in addition to economic, social and environmental problems negating access to universal primary education, tradition and cultural belief systems are also plays a role. Inhabitants of Mundemba subdivision are culturally anchored and highly attached to the norms and values their traditions. This is evident in the hinterland where due young men and women are initiated into social groups and cults due to absence of primary schools, inability of parents to sponsor their children, teacher absenteeism and the absence of an enabling environment for learners and teachers. In the wake of these problems, most female children are forced to early marriages while males engage in economic activities to earn a living. Early marriages and start of family life increases school dropout, and absenteeism among pupils. Many young men prefer to marry than staying in the village without going to school, especially when parents are poor to support their education. Young men and women who have not been opportune to attend primary school are easily attracted into sociocultural groups. Activities of cultural manifestations in Mundemba subdivision are beyond the scope of this study. According to study findings, both male and female children are initiated into cults and cultural manifestations for continuity from generation to generation. Respondents testified that cults and cultural manifestations were part of the people rights because both the educated and uneducated are initiated in the sociocultural groups

8. Recommendations

1. There is need to construct roads to disenclave the subdivision, and improve market accessibility, reduce poverty and improve household expenditure on primary education.
2. A greater portion of state budget for primary schools should be directed to the rural sectors because the sector lacks basic infrastructure and facilities for achieving universal primary education
3. Bottlenecks at receiving government credits for public primary schools should be eliminated to provide adequate funds for carrying out repairs and introducing innovations in primary schools.
4. There is need for private sector participation in funding infrastructure and facilities for primary school education in the subdivision. Oil and logging companies must be compelled to pay part of their royalties to the Mundemba council to improve the depressed primary school subsector of the subdivision.

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