Parents' perceptions of universal primary education in Kotido District, Uganda

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Universal primary education (UPE) is a crucial strategy for the global target of *Education for All*, but several countries failed to meet the 2015 mark. This study investigated parents' perceptions of UPE in Kotido District, Uganda. Data were collected during face to face interviews from 36 purposively selected parents who had school-age children. The results indicate that whilst parents perceived UPE positively, only 13 (36.1%) had all their school-age children enrolled in primary schools. The reasons which influenced parents' decisions were socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural. The study also revealed that 32 (88.9%) parents had not attained formal education, which may have influenced their perceived value of education and their choices to enrol children in UPE. Also, parents were cynical about the survival of Karimojong pastoralist culture with the successful implementation of UPE. This study contributes to the understanding of factors that influence access to primary education and recommends more parental involvement in designing further education strategies that suit marginalised communities worldwide.

Introduction

Education is a human right, and yet it has often been restricted to those with adequate financial resources (Peraita & Pastor, 2000; Obiunu, 2015). Many children from poor backgrounds cannot afford the cost of attending school. The launching of *Universal Primary Education* (UPE) in many countries was intended to provide all children opportunities to access education. The assumption was that with free education every child would attend school. The *Education for All* (EFA) (UN, 2000) global commitment perceives education as a fundamental right and a lever in addressing poverty and inequality (UN, 2000). Education imparts knowledge and skills which enhance economic productivity and may lead to improved quality of life.

The quality of life in many countries correlates with educational attainment (UN, 2000). The correlation, on the one hand, suggests that individuals are likely to improve their living conditions based on the quality of education attained. On the other hand, it denotes that children who continue to miss schooling remain vulnerable to marginalisation and poverty. Thus, the introduction of UPE was intended to equalise opportunities for all children to attend school and reduce their vulnerability to poverty. However, after nearly two decades of the global commitment to *Education for All*, millions of children have not accessed education. Many of the children are from minority groups such as the indigenous people in different countries, including Australia (Vass, 2012), Canada (Widdowson & Howard, 2013), Kenya (Egueh & Zani, 2014) and Uganda (Munaabi & Mutabaazi, 2006), among others.

After the introduction of UPE in Uganda in 1997, the government introduced *Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja* (ABEK). This alternative was necessary to allow learning to take place without disrupting the Karimojong lifestyle since it did not require static structures like UPE (Kagan et al., 2009). ABEK is a non-formal education program that is flexible regarding class venue, time, age limit and the number of learners in a session. Such a flexible mode of education is like community education in Myanmar and the Thai border region (Maber, 2016), where learning is cognisant of traditional ethics (Braidotti, 2011). Likewise, ABEK in Uganda was intended to provide Karimojong children with an education that fitted their itinerant pastoralist routines, and also to act as an alleyway to formal education (Chelimo, 2006). ABEK was also intended to provide lessons in livelihood skills (Kagan et al., 2009). Despite all the flexibility that ABEK affords, the net enrolment and literacy levels among the nomadic community have remained low. This low literacy may raise questions on how parents in the region perceive education. To date, there is little information regarding parents' perceptions of UPE in Kotido District. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate parents' perceptions of UPE in Kotido District, as well as to identify reasons for enrolling children in school or not. This study contributes first to the relatively few studies on perceptions of nomadic parents regarding UPE. Second, the study findings may provide an authentic voice from the marginalised parents to better understand the dynamics involved in enrolling children in UPE. Finally, the fact that education is directly related to both human capacity development and productivity, this study may be of interest to development practitioners and policymakers in addressing the challenges of low academic attainment by various marginalised communities worldwide.

Statement of the research problem

UPE in Uganda was intended to provide universal access to primary education by providing opportunities to all school-age children (6-12 years), regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds (UN, 2015). The Government of Uganda through the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) was to provide infrastructure, teachers, and tuition (MoES, 1998). The assumption was that UPE would address the disproportions in accessing education between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Unfortunately, even after two decades of implementing UPE, many school-age children in Uganda, particularly among indigenous groups, are not enrolled in school, resulting in low education attainment in some districts. One of the groups affected by low education attainment are the people in Kotido District (Namukwaya & Kibirige, 2014; Uwezo, 2015). A study by Uwezo (2015) indicated that 61% of children in the 9-16 age-band in Kotido District had never attended school. This percentage is alarming and creates a need to investigate the underlying factors. Since school-age children are normally under the direct care of parents, it is crucial to understand the parents' perceptions regarding UPE. These perceptions may inform future strategies aimed at improving children's participation in UPE and also augmenting the human capabilities in Kotido District, which are critical to development.

Theoretical framework

The theory that guided the study was the capability approach (CA) (Sen, 1999). This theory suggests that an individual has options to make on any given circumstance based on internal as well as external constructs (Clark, 2006). The internal constructs, on the one hand, include, among others, the individual's human capital, level of education and perceptions. For example, the perceived value of education can influence one to enrol children in school and to support them to remain in school. On the other hand, external factors may relate to the environment and policies, which can facilitate or hamper one's ability to benefit from available opportunities.

Moreover, the capability approach theory alludes to the delicate balance between the good intentions of improving the Karimojong people's quality of life through UPE on one side, and the people's values, socio-economic characteristics and the environment on the other (Saito, 2003). Thus, human functionality in a community depends on the interplay between the internal and the external constructs. In this study, the capability approach theory was relevant because the researchers wanted to understand parents' perceptions that may influence the choices to enrol their children in school.

Review of the related literature

The literature review deals with primary education in Uganda, parents' perceptions, the concept of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and provides the knowledge gap that this study addressed.

Primary education in Uganda

Uganda's primary education system consists of seven years of school (one to seven) for the age bracket 6-12 years (UN, 2015). The government is the prime provider of education services although private actors and individuals complement government efforts. While the government and other service providers avail the infrastructure for education to take place, learner support materials such as books, pencils and pens are to be provided by parents. Sometimes, these materials have been the cause for the disparities in children accessing education.

Uganda's economy depends on animal keeping and plant cultivation. These activities depend on the amount of rain in the region to supply pasture for animals and land for cultivation. Different districts vary significantly in the amount of rain and consequently the economic status. Those areas with low rainfall practised nomadism or transhumance in search of areas where there is available grass for the cattle. For instance, in Karamoja, many school-age children abandon school to take cattle to graze. Teachers remain with a few learners in schools. The absence leads to lack of interest and learner drop out. Thus, the principal duty is to keep animals and the family members alive. It is no wonder very few children enrolled in primary school.

In 1986, the government enhanced the education reform process to improve the quality of basic education in Uganda. The process resulted in the government White Paper on Education of 1992 and the introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE). Other initiatives were the Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK), Basic Education for Urban Poverty Areas (BEUPA), Complementary Opportunities to Primary Education (COPE), Empowering Lifelong Skills Education in Masindi (ELSE), Special Needs Education, and Affirmative Action in Support of the Girl Child (OECD, 2008).

The objective of UPE was to make education accessible to all children, increase equity and quality of primary education and to eliminate illiteracy. There were gender and economic disparities in the distribution of essential educational opportunities. Such disparities are most likely to affect the perceptions of parents regarding education. In 1997, the MoES launched ABEK with support from Redd Barna, a Norwegian non-government organisation (NGO). It was specifically designed to reach the pastoral, semi-nomadic communities of Karamoja in northeast Uganda (six parishes in the Kotido and Moroto districts) to overcome their cultural resistance against the formal school system. ABEK mainly targets children aged 6-18 years. Teaching is done at homesteads in the morning before the children take the animals out to graze and in the evening. In 2006, the program had an enrolment of 15,000 pupils in 128 learning centres.

Perceptions of education

Forgus and Melamed (1976) contend that perceptions are the processes one uses to interpret the surroundings to decide what to do. In the case of parents, they receive information regarding education for their children to determine which school to enrol them in. Parents' perceptions regarding Universal Primary Education (UPE) have a bearing on school enrolment. The enrolment in UPE is perceived as one of the approaches to expanding human capabilities (Akinpelu, 2005) and equalising resource distribution. Despite the enhanced capabilities through universalised education in many countries, millions of children do not attend school (UNESCO, 2015) and parents are less involved in encouraging their children to enrol in school. Generally, the impact of parental involvement has challenges (Epstein, 2009), though positive parental involvement in education enhances learning, affords children future traits like self-esteem, and minimises absenteeism in schools (Solomon, 2010). Thus, relationships between schools and families need to become strong bonds that provide avenues for community development (Hixson, 2006). The bond results in preparing children for future productivity and leadership in their communities (Olender et al., 2010). Communities with low economic status often have a low perception of education. Therefore, teachers have a responsibility to assist them to improve perceptions about education. Jeynes (2011) showed that assisting low economic status families is the ideal approach to inspiring parents to improve their perceptions towards education. However, parental involvement may be limited due to their perceptions of education.

Parents' perceptions of education can greatly affect the extent to which children benefit from available education services. The notion underlying parents' enrolment of children in schools is the perceived benefit of acquiring education. Studies have investigated parents'

perceptions of various aspects of schooling. Duman et al. (2018) indicated that parental perceptions about school influenced their choices to send children to a particular school. A parent will only send a child to a school when convinced that there is something to benefit from school.

A study by Mellon (2009) concluded that the difference between parents' involvement at school and their children's academic success was as a result of the quality rather than the quantity of parents' participation in the children's education process. Quality parent involvement will depend on how the parent perceives what the schools offer. Dogaru (2008) and Akinpelu (2005) argued that parents' perceptions of school stimulated parental involvement. After the conviction that acquisition of education has the potential to develop human capabilities (Akinpelu, 2005) and to equalise resource distribution for the marginalised, parents will want to relate with the education system.

The parents' perceptions of education limit their involvement in their children's learning. Also, teachers may not know how to reach out to parents (Epstein, 2009) in order to address the contextual challenges in the communities they work (Harrison, 2017). In Australia children from communities where education is highly valued are more likely to enrol in schools (Armstrong & Buckley, 2011) than children from communities where education is not highly valued. Moreover, at the family level, parents play a critical role to enrol children in school or not. A few studies singled out household socioeconomic characteristics which influence learners' educational attainment in schools (Egueh & Zani, 2014; Young, 2018).

Universal primary education

Formal education such as UPE has been deemed unsuitable for some contexts. For instance, among the nomadic pastoralist communities, acquiring pastoralist skills is perceived to be more relevant than formal education (Chelimo, 2006; Kagan et al., 2009; Siele et al., 2013). These perceptions are based on lived experiences and are likely to impact on the choices parents make in regards to enrolling children in school. According to Noë (2003), perception involves the association between what is perceived as well as the value of the relationship between the perceiver and the object observed. This association influences one's actions. Many studies have investigated reasons that affect children's access to education, but there is a dearth of literature on the perceptions of parents regarding children's access to education. Therefore, understanding parents' perceptions of UPE in areas where primary school enrolment is low such as among indigenous groups can be a springboard to developing relevant strategies towards achieving Education for All. The study intended to address the following questions: (1) What are the parents' perceptions regarding Universal Primary Education? (2) What factors influence parent to enrol children in UPE?

Method

Research design

The study employed a phenomenological research design and a qualitative approach to investigate parents' perceptions regarding UPE. Phenomenology studies are concerned with real-life experiences (Creswell, 2012; Finlay, 2008) and revealing the "essence of things" (Lin, 2013: 369). Thus, a phenomenological research design was suitable because the researchers wanted to identify parents' perceptions and subjective experiences concerning enrolling school-age children in UPE (Levering, 2006; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The qualitative approach was used in order to "… understand human and social behaviour from the insider's perspective" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:322).

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to identify the perceptions of parents (Creswell, 2012). A total of 36 parents (20 males, 16 females) aged between 18 and 55 with school-age children ranging between 6 to 12 years was chosen to provide a range of views on the UPE phenomenon and not for generalisation of the results.

Interviews

The researchers developed an interview guide in English which was given to a University lecturer and a development worker to check the sequence, clarity and relevance of the questions in order to ensure face validity of the instrument. They recommended some changes which were made before the instrument was translated into Ngakarimajong language by a native Ngakarimajong speaker. The Ngakarimajong version guide was back-translated to English (Baker, 1992) to ensure accuracy in translation, and the two versions were compared, and any discrepancies between them were debated to reach a consensus.

Data were collected using face-to-face interviews conducted during April 2014. Each interview lasted for approximately 40 minutes. Most of the interviews took place under tree shades as the study participants felt comfortable. Only five of the interviews took place outside the *manyattas* (the traditional Karimojong homestead). Two native interpreters were employed to translate the Ngakarimojong participants' verbatim responses into the English language for the first researcher to write in a notebook. Each participant's responses were recorded on a separate sheet. The researchers used pen and paper to record the data because the electronic gadget malfunctioned, and the researchers opted to note taking. The respondents were recorded as M1, M2, M3 and so on to represent Male 1, Male 2, Male 3, etc. Similarly, F1, F2, F3, represented Female 1, Female 2, Female 3, etc.

Qualitative research interviews seek to describe and identify the meanings of the lived experiences of the participants. The main task in interviewing was to understand the meaning of what the interviewees said (Kvale, 1996). The researchers are confident that the responses recorded on sheets did not compromise the credibility of the data. After all,

in some social studies, field notes users felt closer to the data than the electronic device users (Gibbs, Friese & Mangabeira, 2002), suggesting that the field notes act as a reference to trigger the researcher's memory and to bring back the field site experiences. For each interview, the individual's written information was read back to the respondent to confirm that the recorded information indeed was an accurate reflection of their responses (Shenton, 2004).

Data analysis

The participants' responses were analysed using content analysis; by comparing, contrasting and categorising data to draw meaning (Krippendorff, 2004). The data gathered from the interviews were analysed by reading each one of the 36 scripts several times, highlighting the key points. The key points were then given codes where related ideas from different participants were given the same code. The related ideas were categorised, and the divergent ideas were also identified. Finally, the different categories from participants' responses were grouped to form the main ideas. The analysis process also involved counting the number of instances in which a specific phenomenon occurred in the texts (Rubin & Babbie, 2008) and percentages.

Results

The results show that parents' perceptions of UPE were generally positive and the reasons for enrolling children in primary schools included: children learning new things, learning how to read and write, benefiting from the school feeding program, as well as the potential to secure good paying jobs in future. Despite these good tenets, only 36.1% of parents had all their school-age children enrolled in school; 63.9% did not have all their school-age children enrolled in UPE. However, all the parents had enrolled at least one child in school. Detailed results are presented below as follows: (1) parents' perceptions of UPE and reasons for enrolling children in primary schools; (2) reasons why many school-age children were not enrolled in UPE.

Parents' perceptions of UPE and reasons for enrolling children in primary schools

Positive perceptions
The majority of parents 83% (30) agreed that enrolling children in UPE was a good idea. Many participants perceived UPE positively because children who attended school learned new things which they shared with them. Among the things that children learned and shared with parents was information about health issues, especially, knowledge about hygiene and HIV/AIDS.

When asked what they perceived of Universal Primary education, below are sample excerpts from parents who exhibited positive attitudes regarding enrolling children in school:

> Children who attend school know many things we do not know. My children who attend school teach me new things every time. (F4)

> Free education to children is excellent. It is an opportunity for our children to learn things that we missed to learn: reading and writing, which many of us missed. Here I am who can give me a job? What work can I do? I do not want my children to lead the kind of life that I lead. (F1)

> Sending children to school is very important. I wish I knew this when I was still young. I attended school and dropped out in Primary 2. If I had continued, I am sure I would now be a different person, probably in a better situation. (M5)

> My child who attends school knows many things about AIDS. She even sings about it. (M7)

A small fraction 30% (11) of parents pointed out the school feeding program as one benefit of sending children to school. One female parent commented that:

> Sending children to school is very good because you are sure the children will get food. It is not good to deprive children of food when it is available at the school. (F11)

Negative perceptions
Some parents expressed negative perceptions regarding enrolling all children in school. Most negative perceptions related to the conflict between school attendance and the survival of the households. Some of the negative sentiments about attending school expressed by parents included:

> If every child goes to school, who will do work at home? (F16)

> Every child in the family has duties allocated to him or her. If they all have to stay at school for the whole day, then that will be a problem. (M14)

Reasons why parents with school-age children did not enrol them in school

Only 13 (36.1%) of parents had all their school-age children enrolled in school, and most of them were in the lower primary classes (Primary one to Primary four). Parents who had not enrolled all their children in UPE numbered 23 (63.9%). The various reasons given for not sending all children to school are presented below in three broad categories: socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors.

Socioeconomic factors

Education level and livelihoods
Most of the study participants 55.6% (20) were male, partly because many females were less willing to participate in the study than their male counterparts. 86.1% (31) of the

parents were married. Most parents 88.9% (32) had not attained primary education although a few had attended ABEK classes, and 38.9% (14) had attended Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) classes. Also, out of four parents who had completed primary school education only one had completed Senior Four (O-level). None of the study participants was formally employed. Thus, most parents had no regular income but depended on sporadic activities for survival.

Poverty

Poverty was the most common reason stated directly or implied for not sending children to school. Many participants indicated that they lacked money to pay for the various school necessities such as uniforms, pencils, pens, and books. For example, F13 expressed that:

> I have one child in school now I am trying to save some money so that I can send the other two to school, maybe in the coming year. (F13)

Even though UPE is known to be free education, parents explained that they had to have some money to be able to send children to school. Clothing was pointed out as one of the costly school requirements. Another explanation from M20:

> I have three other children who should be in school, but I cannot send them now. I need to buy them dresses to wear to school. … Sometimes there are other requirements. (M20)

One female participant indicated that she was struggling to raise twenty thousand Uganda shillings (approximately US$7), which was a contribution towards paraffin that was used for lighting in a boarding school which her daughter attended. At the time of this study, there was no electricity in Kotido District, and paraffin lamps were used for lighting in boarding schools, yet such expenses were not provided for in the UPE funding.

Children's conflicting roles

As participants narrated the benefits of education, there was evidence of conflicts between children attending school and their household roles. Children's roles included: boys grazing animals, girls taking care of siblings, working in gardens to produce food, searching for food, fetching water and firewood, and preparing food. Two excerpts explaining children's roles:

> It is the girls who collect water to be used by the household, they have to work with their mothers to find food, and they must cook. And the boys are responsible for taking care of the family flock. (M30)

> It is good to have every child in school but how about the work? Where will the food come from if everyone went to school? (F8)

Searching for food in this context included looking for wild fruits and vegetables during dry seasons, as the region is chronically food insecure. Additionally, it implied children

finding casual work to earn money to purchase food for the family. These roles were similar for many of the participants except for 'taking care of siblings' which was unique to families that had small children at the time of the study. Two representative excerpts explaining the conflicting roles:

> It is hard to have all children in school. If every child attended school, who will take care of the animals? (M18)

> It is good to go to school but if all children go to school when will they learn to work? (M33)

Cultural factors

From the responses, the following were categorised as cultural factors since they reflected the participants' beliefs, attitudes and gender roles:

> When girls go to school they become lazy. They do not want to work in the dirt. If everyone went to school nobody would do dirty work, and where will they get food? When I send a child to school and she does not want to work, I withdraw her from school. (F34)

> I do not think girls should study a lot if they do, who will marry them? When girls get educated, they don't want to marry men from here. They will go and get married in other communities. (M2)

Some participants indicated that when girls get educated, they become prostitutes.

The boys' role in grazing animals was high on the list of reasons for not enrolling boys in UPE, and there were sentiments that when girls get educated, they become lazy. Two representative excerpts emphasise the boys' role in grazing animals:

> What will happen to the animals if every child enrolled in school? (M26)

> Getting every child to school will cause all the animals to die … then we will be left poor people. (M3)

Environmental factors

From the responses, it was evident that environmental factors influenced parents' decisions to send children to school. These factors are indicated in the boys' role in grazing:

> I did not enrol some of the children in school because I was sure they could not find time to attend classes, especially when they have to graze animals. They have to ensure that the animals survive so they cannot keep in one place. (M10)

The excerpt below expresses other sentiments:

> My children attend school on most days but when we have a lot of work they do not go to school, and when it comes to garden work everyone must participate.

Garden work was explained to include preparing land during cropping seasons, sowing seeds, weeding, and harvesting crops, which work stretches over a period of approximately four months. The garden work mostly affected girls.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate parents' perceptions regarding UPE and reasons that influenced decisions to enrol children in primary schools. The results show that while most parents had positive perceptions of UPE, only a small fraction (36.1%) had enrolled all their school-age children in schools. The parents' positive perceptions of UPE corroborate the results from a comparative analysis of UPE policy in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda (Nishimura et al., 2009) which revealed positive perceptions regarding attending school among Ugandan parents. However, the findings are in sharp contrast with earlier studies which indicated institutional resistance to formal education in Kotido district (Chelimo, 2006; Kagan et al., 2009). Considering the Karamojongs as an indigenous group, the fact that every parent in this study had enrolled at least one child in school indicates a positive trend since getting children to school has been a historic challenge in the region. However, the positive perceptions are in sharp contrast to the low proportion of parents who had all their school-age children enrolled in school. The contradiction between positive perceptions and low enrolment is a result of the multidimensional nature of the factors indicated by the parents' responses. The factors that influence access to education in Kotido district are not limited to tuition. In the context of this study, parents highlighted other legitimate reasons for not enrolling children in UPE as discussed below.

The high illiteracy rate indicated among parents is likely to intricately muffle their perceived benefits of sending all the children to school. It is no wonder; some parents could only envisage the benefit of children accessing a meal for the day at school. The high illiteracy and the resultant low employment prospects are likely to affect access to education adversely, and this is in line with Egueh and Zani (2014) who reported a negative relationship between low household socioeconomic characteristics and children's access to education. Thus, lack of formal education limits parents' capabilities (Saito, 2003) to make choices to enrol their children in school and to meet school financial obligations. These findings confirm the complex interaction between the internal and external constructs (Clark, 2006) as implied by the capability approach (Sen, 1985). The internal constructs in this respect include the people's cultural capital, level of education and their perceptions of education, while the external constructs include food insecurity and other environmental realities.

Although UPE is free, some parents experienced constraints in trying to meet school financial requirements such as clothing. The constraint may reflect the level of poverty in the district, where a parent is unable to find a cloth for a child to wear to school, considering clothing is one of the most basic needs in life. Also, many children did not attend school regularly as parents could not afford to hire labour but instead withdrew their children from school to do household chores, which disrupted regular school attendance. The study findings corroborate the study of Egueh and Zani (2014), and Obiunu (2015) who found that children were being withdrawn from school due to parents' failure to meet the financial obligations of attending school in Kenya and Nigeria, respectively.

Environmental factors

The most suitable livelihood option in Kotido District is keeping livestock, due to the semi-arid topographies of the region. Because of the scarcity of resources in a semi-arid environment, transhumance is practised whereby flocks are moved from one place to another in search of water and pasture. This practice was indicated as a significant cause of low academic attainment because boys have to graze and care for the animals. During dry seasons boys move with livestock from their homes to distant places to find pasture and water for livestock, and this obligation competes with the opportunity to attend school, regardless of free access. The value of the livestock keeping option surpasses the perceived value of schooling.

Consequently, some children are never enrolled in school, and some of the enrolled children drop out before completion of primary education. This value concept is corroborated by Egueh and Zani's (2014) findings of the value of education in Garissa County, Kenya. Also, the role of child labour in communities may prevent parents from enrolling their children in school (Munene, 2010; Muthaa, M'muyuri, Bururia & Mwenda, 2013). These findings may also have an inkling of the hegemonic nature of the formal education provided in the region. Judging from the unpredictable climatic conditions and the limited survival options in the area, the parents' dilemma to enrol children to school as opposed to involving them in herding or seasonal farming seems to them to be logical.

Cultural factors

Culture is an essential aspect of life. Nobles (1985: 102) defined culture as 'a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality.' For example, parents in Kotido district are concerned about educated girls being likely to leave the region after attaining formal education. This study highlights a misconstrued purpose of education where educated people abandon their communities. This study contradicts Corbett's (2007) view of the purpose of education as helping individuals to develop within their environs rather than preparing them to leave. This challenge is not limited to Kotido district but can be observed in many parts of developing countries where educated people abandon their rural communities for urban areas. This may be as a result of the hegemonic nature of formal education, which does not impart skills to improve within one's environment. If educated individuals returned to their communities, in the case of Karamoja, they would

be assets in sustaining the pastoralist culture. The augmented human capital would be useful in improving livestock management in order to increase productivity and this may call for further studies. Education should be customised to improve people's capabilities within their setting (Schelling et al., 2008).

However, there is a new trend in other regions in Uganda where educated individuals have gone back to acquire land in rural areas in order to invest in agriculture. This trend suggests that the improved capacities which individuals acquire through education should not always be a means to exit their communities, but should enable them to better adapt to their environments and to increase production in their local communities. In the Karamoja situation where people already own livestock, strategies to improve their livestock management skills should be intensified as well as diversified by investing in other types of livelihoods. Development strategies in Karamoja, for instance, should include water harvesting techniques that will minimise transhumance. Such strategies will not only improve children's opportunities to attend school but will also increase economic productivity. In this way, the children in Kotido will benefit from both formal and informal systems within their contexts (Ledwith, 2001; Davies, 2011).

Limitations of the study

The study included 36 parents with school-age children in Kotido district, which is a limitation to the generalisation of the study findings. Also, the translation of the participants' responses and the written recording could have led to the omission of some of the respondents' sentiments. However, notwithstanding these limitations, the study findings characterise some of the parents' lived challenges that limit their children's participation in UPE.

Conclusions

From the study findings, it is apparent that factors limiting the Karimojong parent's active participation in UPE in Kotido district are numerous and are not likely to change soon. Since these factors are real, there is a need for closer engagements between policymakers, schools and parents to come up with possible ways to address the various challenges. Such engagement provides platforms for parents to express their challenges and look for solutions. The parents' perceptions expressed in this study can guide in designing focused interventions aimed at promoting UPE as well as augmenting the non-formal education initiatives like ABEK. Such interventions need to be holistic, focusing not only on waiving tuition for pupils but sensitising and supporting parents to appreciate the value of education and enhance their capacities for effective support and engagement in school activities. Both formal and non-formal initiatives are critical to improving the people's human capabilities, without necessary deracinating the entire Karimojong identity. The parents' perceptions of UPE hint at some of the concerns they have which limit their participation in the education programs available, implying that more studies and time should be given to listen to people's concerns when designing future education attainment strategies. Such a consultative approach will be useful to indigenous communities in Kotido district, and may benefit other countries with similar marginalised indigenous

communities. It is necessary to listen to the experiences of parents in order to design sustainable human capacity development interventions. Researchers hope that the findings of this study may provoke questions that assist similar studies elsewhere in the world.

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