

Reflections on education in this year's budget By Samuel Mensah

Employers sometimes complain about the quality of some of the university graduates that come to them. University lecturers question the quality of intakes from the high schools, and high school teachers are not happy with the products of the primary schools. So the buck stops with that foundation level – primary schools – which should therefore be the target for corrective policy.

In this year's budget, the education sector was allocated N\$16.2 billion for the 2016/17 fiscal year (24.55% of the total budget), which is shared between Basic Education, Art and Culture (N\$ 12.79 billion; 79% of the sector's allocation) and Higher Education, Training and Innovation (N\$ 3.41 billion; 21% – Paragraph 97 in the Budget Speech).

The share of the budget that went to the education sector is an indication both of the importance of and expectations from the sector. This alone is enough reason for reflection on the education budget, especially since such allocations have become the norm since independence. It should be obvious that if all the public spending on education each year could in the long term produce some top professionals for a range of specialisations, the returns to society would justify the expenditure.

We may not know how much has been allocated specifically to primary schools in the budget. What we do know is that many primary schools do not have adequate infrastructure, materials and qualified teachers, as is often observed in local media reports. If the budgets for the next six years collectively ensure that primary schools are adequately resourced, the foundation of the education system will be laid; another six years take care of secondary schools, then the quality issue in our school system would have been addressed.

However, the experience of the last 26 years is that allocation of funds alone is not enough for the education system to produce the desired quality and quantity for national development. Funds provide an opportunity for dealing with the problem of quality

– building and equipping schools, providing necessary materials for teaching and learning, etc. However, it is how the school is run (i.e. leadership styles of principals), qualification and experience of teachers, and the teaching methods adopted that bring about quality in education. So these factors should be emphasised in addition to generous budgetary allocations to education. Also, initial attention should be on primary schools. Performance of students at secondary and tertiary levels often depends on the foundation laid in primary school. So it is the quality at primary school level that to a large extent informs the quality of doctors, educationists and managers that the education system produces.

“We have achieved free primary and secondary education as a basis for expanded access to education” (Paragraph 20). This is a powerful statement that requires deep reflection because of its implications for the success of all future development plans – NDP5, NDP6 ... Vision 2030. Have we really achieved free primary and secondary education? Fee-free education is often followed by mandatory education and sanctions on parents who keep school-age children from school. So we need to address the following questions to determine where we are in the effort to provide fee-free education. What does it cost to keep one Namibian child in primary or secondary school a year? What does the budget allocation to schools translate into per child? Does the allocation cover the cost per child or is there a shortfall? Are parents, especially those with little means, required to make up for this shortfall? If that were indeed the case, would such parents agree that we have achieved free primary and secondary education? Subsidised education is an important socio-economic objective, but we should let the figures confirm what we have – subsidised or free education. Subsidised or free education need not be inferior education if they are planned properly. Resource constraints require that implementation be staggered, starting with subsidised/free lower primary school education for a couple of years, then upper primary school, then junior secondary,

and finally high school. Talking about free education, as was done in the budget, has the advantage of targeting it as a priority area for improving economic growth, reducing unemployment and poverty, and improving welfare.

For example, we should see in this year's budget references to programmes to skill some of the unemployed people who judiciously present themselves at major road intersections in our towns and cities every day in the hope that somebody would hire them to do menial tasks, how much has been allocated for such critical training, and how many will benefit from it? Perhaps the Ministers of Basic and Higher Education will provide these details later. The training of these unskilled persons need not be restricted to vocational schools. Apprenticeships in trade skills (electrical repairs, plumbing, carpentry, auto mechanics, etc.) in (labour-intensive) small and medium enterprises, with emphasis on self-employment, will make most of them economically active. Such training has great potential for reducing unemployment, raising household income, GDP, welfare, etc.

The Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF) plays a vital role in access to higher education for students from poor backgrounds. This year's budget only mentioned “increased financial assistance to students”, which does not give us much to reflect on. We may however mention the importance of keeping the proportion of the allocation that is used to administer the process low so that most of it actually gets to students. Also, there should be information on the annual repayments of loans, which would swell allocations and take care of more students. A point for reflection here is whether former students who have benefited from loans are conscientiously making their monthly repayments.

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