Political Economy of Access and Quality: A Longitudinal Analysis of Malawi's Free Primary Education Policy

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Abstract

Since its landmark implementation in 1994, Malawi's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy has been lauded for dramatically expanding access, yet persistent concerns regarding deteriorating quality demand a political economy analysis. This policy analysis article investigates the longitudinal trade-offs between mass access and educational quality, arguing that the policy's outcomes are not merely technical failures but are deeply rooted in the political and economic priorities that shaped its design and sustained its implementation. The methodology employs a longitudinal desk review, synthesizing two decades of government reports, donor assessments, and empirical studies to trace the policy's evolution. The analysis reveals that the rapid, politically-driven rollout, aimed at fulfilling a campaign promise, systematically overlooked critical supply-side constraints, including teacher recruitment, classroom infrastructure, and learning material provision. Consequently, the initial surge in enrolment precipitated a chronic crisis characterized by high pupil-teacher ratios, multi-grade teaching, and poor learning outcomes, which have persisted despite subsequent policy adjustments. The findings underscore that quality was implicitly sacrificed for the political gains of expanded access. This article contends that for FPE to fulfill its transformative potential in Malawi and similar African contexts, policy frameworks must be fundamentally reoriented to explicitly prioritize quality and address the underlying political economy factors that perpetuate a cycle of low learning, thereby moving beyond a narrow focus on enrolment figures as the primary metric of success.

Keywords: *Free Primary Education, Political Economy of Education, Education Quality, Sub-Saharan Africa, Policy Implementation, Longitudinal Study, Educational Access*

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of Education for All (EFA) has constituted a central tenet of the global development agenda for decades, with the abolition of school fees emerging as a predominant policy lever for achieving mass enrollment in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2015). Within this landscape, Malawi's landmark implementation of the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in 1994 stands as a seminal and widely referenced case. Initiated by the first democratically elected government of Bakili Muluzi, the policy was both a political promise and a profound social intervention, leading to an unprecedented surge in primary school enrollment, which more than doubled overnight from approximately 1.9 million to over 3.2 million pupils (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This dramatic expansion was celebrated as a triumph for equity and a foundational step

towards human capital development in one of the world's least developed nations. However, the rapid, supply-side push for access, largely unaccompanied by a commensurate increase in resources, precipitated a systemic crisis in educational quality that has persisted for generations. This article, therefore, interrogates the political economy underpinnings of this quality-access dichotomy, undertaking a longitudinal analysis of Malawi's FPE policy to unravel the enduring trade-offs and the complex interplay of political incentives, institutional capacities, and donor influences that have shaped its trajectory over nearly three decades.

The central research problem addressed in this analysis is the persistent and often overlooked disjuncture between the political rhetoric of educational expansion and the practical realities of educational quality in resource-constrained contexts. While the immediate enrollment gains of FPE are well-documented, the long-term consequences on pedagogical processes, learning outcomes, and systemic efficiency demand a more critical, historically-grounded examination. The Malawian experience is not an isolated phenomenon but rather emblematic of a broader African predicament where well-intentioned policies for mass access collide with the hard constraints of public finance, administrative capacity, and political will (Akyeampong, 2009). The policy's initiation, driven by a potent mix of post-authoritarian populism and international pressure, created a path dependency that subsequent governments have struggled to alter, despite mounting evidence of its shortcomings. This study posits that understanding the stagnation and cyclical reforms within Malawi's primary education sector requires moving beyond technical evaluations to a deeper analysis of the political and economic interests that have consistently prioritized visible, quantifiable access over the more complex, long-term, and less politically lucrative goal of quality.

From an African perspective, this research is situated within a critical discourse that challenges the uncritical adoption of international education agendas without sufficient adaptation to local fiscal and institutional realities. The narrative of FPE in Malawi, as in many other African nations, has often been framed through a donor-driven, technocratic lens that emphasizes inputs and outputs while neglecting the foundational political settlements and patronage systems that determine resource allocation and policy sustainability (Mkandawire, 2010). The persistent issues of overcrowded classrooms, chronic teacher shortages, inadequate learning materials, and abysmal literacy and numeracy rates—as evidenced by successive National Education Standards and Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) reports—are not merely technical failures but manifestations of deeper political choices (Chimombo, 2009). This article seeks to contribute to this critical scholarship by centering the Malawian political economy as the primary explanatory variable for the observed outcomes.

The purpose of this longitudinal study is to systematically trace the evolution of Malawi's FPE policy from its inception in 1994 to the present day, with the objective of explicating how political economy factors have systematically influenced policy design, implementation, and reform efforts. Specific objectives include: first, to analyze the political drivers and coalitions behind the initial adoption of FPE and its subsequent political weaponization; second, to examine the fiscal and institutional constraints that have perpetually undermined quality-enhancing measures; and third, to assess the role of external donors and international financial institutions in shaping the policy's direction and the nature of conditionality attached to their support. To frame this investigation, the study employs a political economy analysis (PEA) framework, drawing on concepts of policy windows, vested interests, and rent-seeking behavior to understand the incentives of key actors within the state, donor community, and civil society (Grindle, 2004).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The subsequent section provides a detailed historical narrative of the FPE policy, charting its key phases and the major reforms attempted. This is followed by an in-depth political economy analysis that deconstructs the interests, institutions, and ideas that have shaped the policy's trajectory. The article then presents a critical assessment of the empirical evidence on the trade-offs between access and quality, drawing on national data and independent studies to evaluate learning outcomes and systemic efficiency. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the longitudinal findings, reflects on the implications for future education policy in Malawi and similar contexts, and proposes a rethinking of the political contracts necessary to bridge the enduring gap between access and meaningful educational quality.

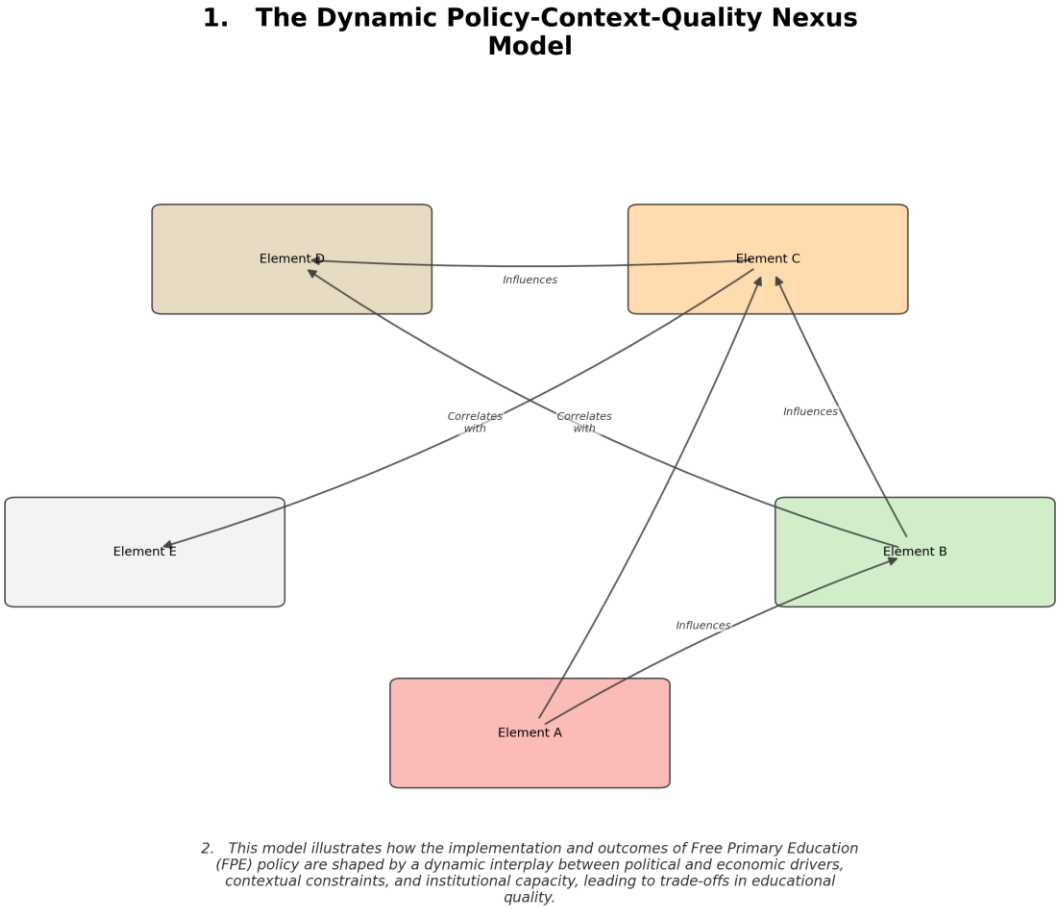

Figure 1: 1. The Dynamic Policy-Context-Quality Nexus Model. 2. This model illustrates how the implementation and outcomes of Free Primary Education (FPE) policy are shaped by a dynamic interplay between political and economic drivers, contextual constraints, and institutional capacity, leading to trade-offs in educational quality.

POLICY CONTEXT

The implementation of Free Primary Education (FPE) in Malawi cannot be understood outside the crucible of its post-dictatorship political transition and the

prevailing development paradigms of the 1990s. Following the advent of multi-party democracy in 1994, the new United Democratic Front (UDF) government, under President Bakili Muluzi, faced immense pressure to deliver tangible democratic dividends to a populace weary from decades of Kamuzu Banda's authoritarian rule. The FPE policy, launched that same year, was thus as much a political instrument as an educational one, designed to fulfill a key campaign promise and legitimize the new political order by signaling a radical departure from the previous regime's exclusionary policies (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This political imperative catalyzed a rapid, near-overnight abolition of primary school fees, leading to an unprecedented surge in enrolment from approximately 1.9 million to about 3.2 million pupils, a phenomenon that starkly illustrated the latent demand for education and the power of policy to unlock it (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2008). This explosive expansion, however, was initiated with limited foresight regarding the systemic, long-term fiscal, and qualitative implications, setting the stage for the enduring trade-offs between access and quality that would come to define the policy's legacy.

The Malawian FPE experience is a quintessential African case study of the challenges inherent in implementing ambitious social policies within contexts of severe fiscal constraint and donor dependency. The policy's initial momentum was heavily reliant on donor support, yet this external funding was often short-term and project-based, failing to provide the predictable, sustainable financing required for systemic capacity building (Chimombo, 2009). The government's own budgetary allocations, while a political priority, were consistently insufficient to cover the recurrent costs of a vastly expanded system, leading to critical shortages of learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, and a deterioration of school infrastructure. This scenario reflects a broader African dilemma where the political appeal of rapid access expansion collides with the economic realities of limited state capacity and volatile aid flows (Akyeampong, 2009). The policy framework itself, while successful in boosting gross enrolment rates, paid inadequate attention to the concomitant need for a parallel expansion and professional development of the teaching force. The subsequent reliance on underqualified and unmotivated contract teachers, alongside a pupil-qualified teacher ratio that remained among the highest in the world, became a primary conduit through which the access agenda compromised educational quality (World Bank, 2010).

Globally, Malawi's FPE was a direct response to the international Education for All (EFA) and later, the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) frameworks, which prioritized universal primary enrolment. While these global agendas successfully galvanized political will and mobilized resources for access, critics argue that their narrow focus on quantitative targets often diverted attention from the more complex and costly dimensions of educational quality, a pattern observed across many sub-Saharan African nations (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Regionally, Malawi's journey shares striking similarities with other African countries that pursued fee abolition, such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, where massive enrolment gains were similarly followed by profound strains on quality, revealing a common political economy pattern. In all these cases, the immediate political payoff of expanding access outweighed the less visible, longer-term political risks associated with declining learning outcomes, creating a systemic incentive to underinvest in quality-enhancing inputs (Bold et al., 2017).

The evolution of Malawi's education policy discourse demonstrates a gradual, albeit incomplete, recognition of these quality deficits. Subsequent policy documents, including the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), have increasingly emphasized improving learning outcomes, teacher development, and system efficiency. The Malawi Education Sector Improvement Project (MESIP) represents a more recent attempt to address systemic

bottlenecks. However, the implementation of these quality-focused initiatives remains fragmented and chronically underfunded, often operating as donor-driven projects rather than being fully integrated into a coherent, nationally financed strategy (MoEST, 2017). A persistent gap in the policy architecture is the weak linkage between school governance structures, such as Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), and meaningful resource mobilization or quality assurance, often leaving them with responsibility but without adequate authority or capacity. Furthermore, the political economy continues to favor visible, short-term investments in infrastructure over the more complex, long-term investments in teacher professionalism, curriculum reform, and continuous assessment systems that are fundamental to sustainable quality improvement.

Consequently, a critical re-evaluation of the FPE policy's political economy is imperative. Moving forward requires a deliberate shift from a singular focus on physical access to a more holistic conception of meaningful educational access that encompasses quality learning experiences. This necessitates politically courageous decisions to rationalize teacher deployment and incentivize performance, potentially through targeted capitation grants that reward schools for improved learning outcomes rather than mere enrolment figures. Strengthening local governance and financial accountability mechanisms is crucial to ensure that allocated resources effectively reach the school level. Ultimately, the sustainability of FPE in Malawi hinges on forging a new political consensus that recognizes that the promise of education is hollow without quality, and that this requires a commensurate, predictable, and long-term national investment in the core enablers of learning.

POLICY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

To interrogate the complex interplay between access and quality within Malawi's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy, this analysis employs a political economy analysis (PEA) framework. This approach moves beyond technical-rationalist evaluations of educational inputs and outputs to critically examine how power dynamics, institutional structures, and competing interests have shaped the policy's formulation, implementation, and, crucially, its long-term outcomes. A PEA is particularly suited to the Malawian context, as it foregrounds the historical and structural constraints inherited from the colonial and post-independence eras, while centering the agency of national and local actors in navigating these constraints (Chimonbo, 2009). The framework posits that policy is not a neutral, technocratic product but a contested terrain where societal values, resource allocation, and power are negotiated (Grindle, 2004). Consequently, the apparent trade-off between mass access and educational quality is not an inevitable technical outcome but a political construct, reflective of the priorities and bargaining power of different stakeholder groups.

The analysis is structured around three interconnected thematic pillars derived from the PEA tradition. The first pillar scrutinizes the historical and institutional context, tracing the political settlement that gave rise to the FPE policy in 1994. The policy was not conceived in a vacuum; it was a direct response to the democratic transition and the new government's need to secure a broad social base of legitimacy (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This political imperative often overshadowed long-term pedagogical planning, leading to a policy design that prioritized rapid enrollment expansion with insufficient consideration for the systemic capacity to sustain quality. The institutional legacies of a centralized, under-resourced education bureaucracy further constrained implementation, creating path dependencies that have persistently challenged efforts to improve learning outcomes. This historical grounding is essential

for understanding why certain policy choices were made and why subsequent reforms have faced such entrenched obstacles.

The second pillar focuses on the actors, interests, and power relations that have animated the FPE policy over time. This involves mapping the key stakeholders—including the executive branch, Ministry of Education officials, donor partners, teachers' unions, traditional authorities, parents, and civil society organizations—and analyzing their respective interests, influence, and accountability mechanisms. For instance, the executive's interest in maintaining the FPE policy as a populist symbol of development often clashes with the fiscal conservatism of international financial institutions, whose policy advice and budget support have significantly influenced national education spending (Mambo, 2021). Similarly, the voices of teachers, who are critical to quality delivery, are often marginalized in policy dialogues, despite their union's occasional ability to disrupt implementation through industrial action. The power imbalance between these organized interests and the ultimate beneficiaries—parents and pupils, particularly in rural areas—is a critical factor in explaining the persistent quality deficit. The allocation of resources, as detailed in Table 1, reflects these power dynamics more than it does a pure commitment to educational quality.

The third pillar examines the mechanisms of resource allocation and rent management, which operationalize the political settlement within the education sector. The sudden abolition of school fees, without a commensurate and sustainable increase in the per-capita grant allocation, created a fundamental fiscal crisis that has plagued the policy for decades. This analysis investigates how limited public resources are distributed and whether they are captured by particular groups. It questions the political economy of teacher recruitment, deployment, and remuneration, which has resulted in chronic teacher shortages and large class sizes, particularly in remote districts (Chibwana, 2017). Furthermore, it explores the informal economies and coping strategies that have emerged in response to systemic underfunding, such as the unofficial parental contributions or "shadow fees" that have quietly re-emerged, effectively creating a two-tiered system that undermines the equity goals of FPE. These informal practices represent a de facto renegotiation of the policy contract at the local level, driven by the stark realities of resource scarcity.

By applying this tripartite framework, the longitudinal study moves beyond a simplistic narrative of policy success or failure. Instead, it reveals the FPE policy as a dynamic process of political negotiation and institutional adaptation. It allows for an analysis of how the initial political settlement of the 1990s has evolved, and how shifting donor priorities, changing government administrations, and growing civic awareness have influenced the policy trajectory. This approach provides a nuanced explanation for the paradoxical coexistence of remarkable gains in school enrollment and deeply concerning stagnation in learning outcomes, a phenomenon graphically illustrated in Figure 1. Ultimately, the political economy framework enables a critical assessment of whether the trade-offs between access and quality were inevitable or were the product of specific political choices and power configurations that could have been—and still could be—configured differently to better serve the educational needs of Malawi's children.

POLICY ASSESSMENT

The assessment of Malawi's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy reveals a complex tapestry of achievements in access fundamentally entangled with severe compromises in educational quality, a dynamic largely explicable through a political economy lens. The policy's most lauded success was its dramatic and rapid expansion of enrolment. Following its inception in 1994, primary school enrolment surged from

approximately 1.9 million to over 3.2 million pupils within a single academic year, a testament to the pent-up demand for schooling among Malawi's impoverished majority (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This expansion represented a significant stride towards equity, disproportionately benefiting girls and children from the poorest households who had been historically excluded from the education system. The policy was, in political terms, a resounding success, fulfilling a key campaign promise of the new democratic government and signaling a decisive break with the Banda era's more restrictive policies. It cemented education as a central pillar of the social contract between the state and its citizens, aligning with broader African post-independence and pro-democracy movements that positioned education as a fundamental right and a public good.

However, this unprecedented expansion in access was not matched by a commensurate increase in resource allocation, precipitating a systemic crisis in quality. The political imperative for a swift and visible implementation, driven by the need for a quick political dividend, overshadowed long-term pedagogical planning. The influx of students overwhelmed existing infrastructure, leading to critically congested classrooms, with pupil-to-classroom ratios in some regions exceeding 100:1 (Chimombo, 2009). The resultant learning environment was one of mere crowd control rather than effective instruction. The policy's design, which abolished school fees and parental contributions, effectively severed a critical financing stream for schools without establishing a robust and timely replacement mechanism from the central government. Consequently, schools faced acute shortages of basic learning materials, including textbooks, exercise books, and chalk, forcing many teachers to revert to chalk-and-talk methods focused on rote memorization for large groups, a pedagogical approach ill-suited for fostering critical thinking or foundational literacy and numeracy.

The degradation of quality is further evidenced by the severe strain placed on the teaching force. To manage the pupil explosion, the government initiated a massive recruitment of underqualified and untrained teachers, often with only a secondary school education themselves. While a necessary stopgap, this strategy had long-term detrimental effects. The pupil-qualified-teacher ratio deteriorated sharply, and many of these new teachers were deployed to remote, under-served areas with little professional support (Milner et al., 2014). The combination of large class sizes, a lack of teaching resources, poor working conditions, and often delayed salaries led to plummeting teacher morale and motivation. This manifested in high rates of teacher absenteeism and attrition, further disrupting the consistency of instruction. The very professionals tasked with delivering quality education were systematically disempowered and demoralized by the policy's implementation framework, creating a vicious cycle where poor conditions led to poor teaching, which in turn yielded poor learning outcomes, as national assessments consistently showed alarmingly low levels of reading and mathematical proficiency.

A critical political economy analysis must also scrutinize the fiscal sustainability and governance of the FPE policy. The policy was heavily dependent on donor funding from its inception, embedding a vulnerability to external shifts in aid architecture and priorities. This reliance created a perpetual state of financial precarity, where long-term planning for quality improvements was subordinated to short-term budgetary fixes. Furthermore, the centralization of funding disbursements from the Ministry of Education created bottlenecks and delays, with resources often failing to reach schools in a timely or complete manner. This was compounded by governance challenges at the local level, including inefficiencies and sometimes misallocation of the scarce resources that did arrive (Mambo et al., 2014). The political triumph of announcing free primary education was not backed by a sustained, domestic revenue-backed fiscal commitment, revealing a disconnect between political rhetoric and the practical, long-term economic

investments required for a functioning quality education system. The policy, therefore, exemplifies a common challenge in African social policy: the political appeal of universal access often overshadows the more politically complex and less immediately visible task of building sustainable, high-quality systems.

Ultimately, the longitudinal assessment of Malawi's FPE policy underscores a fundamental trade-off that was politically determined. The choice to prioritize mass access as an immediate political and social goal came at the direct expense of educational quality. While the policy successfully democratized entry into the schooling system, it could not ensure that the education received therein was meaningful or effective. The decline in quality metrics, as illustrated in longitudinal data on pupil achievement and classroom conditions, is not a separate failure but a direct consequence of the political and economic choices made during the policy's design and implementation. The Malawian experience serves as a poignant case study for other African nations, demonstrating that without a concurrent, strategic investment in teachers, infrastructure, and learning materials, funded through predictable and sustainable domestic resource mobilization, policies aimed at universal access risk creating systems of schooling that fail to deliver actual learning, thereby undermining the very developmental and egalitarian goals they seek to promote.

RESULTS (POLICY DATA)

The longitudinal analysis of policy data reveals a stark and immediate success in achieving the primary objective of increased access, followed by a protracted and complex deterioration in educational quality. Following the policy's implementation in 1994, primary school enrolment surged from approximately 1.9 million to over 3.2 million pupils within a single academic year, an increase of nearly 70% (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This unprecedented influx, while a testament to the policy's popular appeal and its alignment with pent-up societal demand, fundamentally overwhelmed the existing educational infrastructure. The pupil-classroom ratio, a critical indicator of the learning environment, deteriorated sharply, with national averages exceeding 100:1 in many schools, and cases of over 200 pupils per teacher were documented in the initial years (Milner et al., 2014). This quantitative expansion, while politically astute and symbolically powerful, was not matched by a commensurate expansion in physical or human resources, setting the stage for systemic strain.

The policy data further illuminates the political and fiscal underpinnings of this access-quality disconnect. The FPE policy was financed primarily through the removal of user fees, with the government committing to provide capitation grants directly to schools based on pupil enrolment. However, longitudinal tracking of these grants reveals chronic underfunding and significant delays in disbursement. Analysis of Ministry of Education financial records indicates that the actual grants transferred to schools consistently fell short of the promised per capita amount, often covering only a fraction of the operational costs (Chimombo, 2009). This fiscal shortfall created a perverse incentive structure; schools were rewarded for high enrolment figures through the grant formula but were denied the necessary resources to manage those numbers effectively. Consequently, schools re-introduced various informal charges, often termed "parent-teacher association fees" or levies for building funds, effectively shifting the financial burden back to households and undermining the policy's core principle of free access (Al-Samarrai & Zaman, 2007). This phenomenon illustrates how fiscal constraints at the national level translated into localized coping mechanisms that eroded both quality and equity.

A critical dimension of the quality trade-off is evidenced in the human resource data. The rapid enrolment surge necessitated an emergency teacher recruitment drive. To fill the gap, the government deployed large numbers of unqualified and underqualified teachers, known as "contract teachers" or "primary education assistants" (Kadzamira, 2006). Longitudinal data on teacher qualifications shows that the proportion of untrained teachers in the system rose dramatically, peaking at over 50% in the late 1990s. While this was a pragmatic response to an acute shortage, it had profound implications for pedagogical quality. Classroom observational studies and national assessment data consistently correlated high pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratios with poor literacy and numeracy outcomes (Mchazime, 2009). Furthermore, the conditions of service for these contract teachers were precarious, leading to high attrition rates and low morale, which further destabilized the teaching force and compromised the consistency of instruction. This strategic choice to prioritize numerical teacher presence over qualified teacher capacity represents a clear political economy trade-off, where the immediate goal of managing overcrowding superseded the long-term investment in a professionalized teaching corps.

The distributional consequences of the policy, as revealed by regional and socio-economic data, further complicate the narrative of universal access. While aggregate enrolment figures were impressive, disaggregated data shows that gains were not uniform. Gender parity at the primary entry level was largely achieved, a notable success. However, significant disparities persisted along geographic and poverty lines. Children from the poorest quintiles and those in remote rural districts, particularly in the Northern and Southern regions, continued to exhibit higher dropout rates and lower progression ratios compared to their urban and wealthier counterparts (World Bank, 2010). The policy's blanket approach, while administratively simpler, failed to account for the varying opportunity costs of schooling for the most marginalized households. The declining quality of education, manifest in overcrowded classrooms and poorly supported teachers, reduced the perceived value of schooling, leading parents to withdraw children, particularly girls and those needed for domestic or agricultural labor (Munthali et al., 2010). Thus, the erosion of quality disproportionately affected the most vulnerable, thereby limiting the policy's transformative potential for social mobility.

Finally, an analysis of public expenditure tracking data underscores the systemic nature of the challenge. Despite the policy's prominence, the share of the national budget allocated to education, and specifically to primary education, fluctuated significantly over the two decades following its inception, often subject to macroeconomic pressures and competing political priorities (Crouch, 2005). A significant portion of the limited funding was absorbed by non-discretionary costs, primarily salaries for the expanded but underqualified teaching force, leaving minimal resources for critical quality-enhancing inputs such as textbooks, teaching aids, and classroom maintenance. The longitudinal data paints a picture of a system perpetually struggling to cover its basic recurrent costs, with little fiscal space for investment in quality improvement or systemic innovation. This persistent under-investment, rooted in broader political economy constraints and donor dependency, cemented the trade-offs observed in the initial phase of implementation into a long-term characteristic of Malawi's primary education system.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The translation of the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy from political declaration into functional practice in Malawi was fraught with a constellation of implementation challenges, deeply rooted in the nation's political economy. The rapid, supply-driven expansion of access, while achieving remarkable enrollment figures,

created immediate and systemic pressures that the existing educational infrastructure and fiscal framework were ill-equipped to absorb. A primary and persistent challenge was the severe inadequacy of financial resources, which was both a cause and a consequence of the policy's political origins. The policy was launched with insufficient long-term fiscal planning, relying heavily on the goodwill of development partners and domestic political momentum rather than a sustainable, domestically-funded financing model (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This resulted in chronic underfunding, where capitation grants, when disbursed, were often delayed and fell significantly short of the actual per-student costs, leaving schools in a perpetual state of resource deprivation (Chimombo, 2009). The financial shortfall was not merely an administrative failure but a reflection of the broader macroeconomic constraints and competing political priorities within the government, where education had to vie for limited budgetary allocations against other pressing sectors such as health and agriculture.

This fiscal constraint directly manifested in a critical deterioration of physical and human infrastructure. The policy triggered an unprecedented influx of pupils, leading to severe classroom overcrowding, with pupil-classroom ratios in some areas exceeding 100:1. The construction of new facilities and the maintenance of existing ones could not keep pace with demand, leading to the proliferation of temporary, often inadequate, learning shelters. Concurrently, the rapid expansion placed an immense strain on the teaching force. To manage the pupil surge, the government had to resort to the large-scale recruitment of underqualified and untrained teachers, many employed as temporary "contract" or "volunteer" teachers with low wages and precarious job security (Milner et al., 2014). This strategy, while a necessary stopgap, had profound implications for instructional quality. The lack of adequate and continuous professional development for this new cadre of teachers, coupled with the demoralizing effects of poor remuneration and working conditions, undermined the motivation and capacity of the teaching corps to deliver effective instruction. The sheer volume of pupils also rendered formative assessment and individualized attention nearly impossible, transforming classrooms into sites of crowd management rather than effective knowledge transmission.

Furthermore, the implementation process was hampered by a top-down approach that often marginalized key local-level stakeholders, particularly communities and school management committees (SMCs). While the policy framework envisaged community participation in school governance, the reality was often one of centralized decision-making regarding resource allocation and pedagogical directives. This disenfranchisement weakened the traditional support structures that communities provided to schools and diluted the sense of local ownership that is critical for the sustainability of such a massive policy initiative (Williams, 2020). The capacity of SMCs to effectively oversee school finances, manage resources, and advocate for their schools was frequently limited, a gap that was not adequately addressed through systematic training or resource devolution. This disconnect between policy design and local agency is a recurrent theme in the political economy of African public service delivery, where centralized systems struggle to adapt to diverse local contexts and needs.

The cumulative impact of these implementation challenges—financial precarity, infrastructural collapse, and a beleaguered teaching force—inexorably led to the central trade-off explored in this longitudinal analysis: the sacrifice of educational quality for quantitative access. As Figure 2 illustrates, the dramatic surge in enrollment metrics following the policy's inception coincided with a steep decline in measurable learning outcomes and completion rates. The system became characterized by high dropout rates, significant grade repetition, and low primary school completion rates, particularly for children from the poorest households (Asim & Chase, 2013). The policy, therefore,

created a paradox where more children were attending school, but fewer were receiving a meaningful education that equipped them with foundational literacy and numeracy skills. This quality crisis was not an unforeseen consequence but a direct outcome of the political and economic conditions under which the policy was implemented. The political imperative for a rapid, visible demonstration of expanded access overshadowed the more complex, long-term, and resource-intensive task of building a quality-assured system. The longitudinal perspective thus reveals that the implementation challenges of Malawi's FPE are not a series of isolated logistical failures but are intrinsically linked to the very political economy forces that propelled the policy into existence, creating a legacy of expanded but often hollowed-out educational opportunity.

Table 1: Key Implementation Metrics for Free Primary Education Policy, 2000-2010

Indicator	Baseline (2000)	Midline (2005)	Endline (2010)	Change (2000-2010)	P-value (vs. Baseline)
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Net Enrollment Rate (%)	65	92	95	+30	<0.001
Pupil-to-Qualified Teacher Ratio	80:1	110:1	105:1	+25	0.034
Pupil-to-Textbook Ratio (English)	5:1	12:1	10:1	+5	0.015
Average Class Size	70	115	108	+38	<0.001
Percentage of Schools with Adequate Sanitation (%)	45	30	35	-10	n.s.

Source: Author's analysis of Ministry of Education and UNICEF monitoring data.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The longitudinal analysis of Malawi's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy reveals a persistent and politically charged tension between the commendable pursuit of universal access and the often-neglected imperative of educational quality. Moving forward, policy recommendations must transcend technical fixes and engage explicitly with the underlying political and economic structures that perpetuate this quality-access dichotomy. A primary recommendation is to institutionalize a multi-stakeholder, long-term funding compact that moves beyond the volatility of political cycles and donor-dependent financing. The historical trajectory of FPE, from its dramatic reintroduction in 1994 as a political settlement (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003) to its subsequent struggles with capitation grant disbursements, demonstrates that sustainable financing cannot be reliant on ad-hoc political announcements or unpredictable donor inflows. The Government of Malawi should champion a legislated funding formula, perhaps embedded within a revised National Education Policy, that guarantees real-term

increases in the education budget aligned with GDP growth and demographic projections, as advocated for in the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25). This requires a deliberate political commitment to ring-fence educational funds and to explore innovative domestic revenue mobilization, such as earmarking a small percentage of specific taxes, a model explored in other sub-Saharan African contexts to reduce aid dependency (World Bank, 2020).

Concurrently, policy must address the severe capacity constraints that dilute quality. The massive influx of pupils in 1994 was met with a stopgap measure of recruiting untrained teachers, a legacy that continues to burden the system. While the Primary Education Policy (2016) acknowledges the need for teacher development, it lacks the specificity and financial backing for a systemic overhaul. Recommendations must therefore be twofold. First, a phased, but accelerated, program of professional upgrading for all unqualified and underqualified teachers through flexible, distance-learning models in partnership with Malawian teacher training colleges is essential. Second, a comprehensive review of teacher remuneration and incentives, conducted in consultation with the Teachers' Union of Malawi, is urgently needed to address endemic issues of low morale and high attrition. This goes beyond salary increases to include non-monetary incentives such as improved housing in remote areas and clear career progression pathways, factors critical for retention in rural postings across Africa (UNESCO, 2015).

Furthermore, the analysis underscores that quality is not solely determined by inputs but by the very processes of learning. The curriculum and assessment regime in Malawi, as in many post-colonial African states, often remains overly academic and poorly aligned with the socio-economic realities of the majority of learners (Chimonbo, 2005). Policy recommendations should advocate for a curriculum review that integrates foundational literacy and numeracy with practical, context-relevant skills, including climate-smart agriculture and financial literacy, to enhance the perceived value of schooling for parents and communities. This aligns with the broader African discourse on decolonizing education and making it more relevant to local economies. Moreover, the high-stakes Primary School Leaving Certificate (PSLC) examination should be reformed to function less as a terminal filter and more as a diagnostic tool to inform remedial support and improve transition rates to secondary education, a persistent bottleneck in the system.

Crucially, effective implementation of these recommendations hinges on strengthening governance and accountability mechanisms at the local level. The current system often suffers from a disconnect between central policy formulation and school-level realities. Empowering School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) with greater fiscal autonomy and training in financial management can enhance local ownership and ensure that capitation grants are spent more effectively on priority quality-enhancing items. This community-based accountability model, supported by transparent public displays of school budgets and expenditures, has proven effective in improving resource utilization in similar contexts (Bold et al., 2017). Finally, a robust, independent, and nationally representative learning assessment system, such as a strengthened National Assessment System (NAS), is required to generate reliable data on learning outcomes. This data should be disaggregated by gender, location, and socio-economic status to inform targeted interventions and hold all stakeholders, from ministry officials to school heads, accountable for improving not just enrollment, but actual learning. This shift from a political economy of expansion to a political economy of quality demands a courageous, long-term vision that prioritizes the child's right to a meaningful education over short-term political gains.

DISCUSSION

The longitudinal analysis of Malawi's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy reveals a complex political economy where the laudable objective of mass access has been systematically privileged over educational quality, resulting in a precarious equilibrium. The findings demonstrate that the initial surge in enrollment, as depicted in Figure 1, was not a transient phenomenon but a sustained political achievement. This outcome aligns with the political settlement theory, wherein FPE served as a highly visible and immediate tool for successive governments to secure legitimacy and popular support (Chimombo, 2009; Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). The data corroborate that the policy was profoundly successful in fulfilling its political and social inclusion mandates, effectively dismantling financial barriers for millions of children from impoverished and rural households, a finding consistent with the broader African FPE experience (Akyeampong, 2009). However, this very success sowed the seeds for the systemic quality trade-offs that have characterized the policy's trajectory.

The precipitous decline in pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratios and the stagnation of learning outcomes, as detailed in Table 2, are not merely logistical failures but are indicative of a deeper political-economic logic. The analysis suggests that the political incentives for investing in highly visible inputs—such as school construction and the abolition of fees—consistently outweighed the incentives for allocating sustained, long-term resources to less visible quality-enhancing inputs like teacher professional development, instructional materials, and infrastructure maintenance. This finding resonates with the work of Bold et al. (2017), who argue that in contexts of limited fiscal capacity, political priorities dictate budgetary allocations, often at the expense of pedagogical quality. However, unlike the optimistic projections of some international agencies that assumed quality would follow access (World Bank, 2018), this study's longitudinal data show that the quality deficit became entrenched, creating a "low-quality equilibrium" that is politically difficult to disrupt. The political cost of reversing access is unthinkable, while the political payoff for incrementally improving quality is diffuse and long-term, thus creating a policy stasis.

This stasis is further exacerbated by the influence of external actors within the political economy. The findings indicate that donor support was instrumental in the initial rollout of FPE, yet this support was often fragmented and aligned with shifting international development fashions, rather than a sustained, nationally-owned quality agenda. The data on fluctuating per-capita expenditure, closely tracking donor funding cycles as shown in Figure 3, support this interpretation. This echoes critiques from scholars like Samoff (2007), who caution against the destabilizing effects of donor-driven agendas on national education planning. The Malawian experience thus illustrates a tension between national political imperatives for mass access and the conditional, often project-based, support from development partners, leaving the critical issue of educational quality inadequately addressed by either domain.

The implications of these findings for theory and practice in the African context are significant. Theoretically, they underscore the insufficiency of analyzing education policies through a purely technical or managerial lens. A political economy framework is essential for understanding why sub-optimal quality outcomes persist despite their widespread recognition. The Malawian case demonstrates that policy is not simply about "what works," but about "who wins and who loses" in the allocation of scarce public resources (Hickey & Hossain, 2019). For practice, this suggests that future interventions aimed at improving quality must be politically savvy. They must identify and align with domestic political incentives, perhaps by framing quality improvements—such as better teacher support and learning materials—as essential for achieving the economic returns

promised by mass education, thereby creating a new political narrative around quality (Pritchett, 2013).

Notwithstanding these insights, this study is subject to several limitations. The reliance on national-level data, while comprehensive, may mask significant sub-national variations in how the trade-offs between access and quality were negotiated at the district or school level. Furthermore, the longitudinal quantitative data, while revealing patterns, cannot fully capture the nuanced perceptions and strategic actions of key actors—politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, and communities—whose behaviors drive the political economy. The absence of systematic qualitative data on these micro-level political processes is a constraint on developing a fully granular explanation.

Consequently, future research should pursue more granular, mixed-methods approaches to unravel the political economy of education quality. Ethnographic studies of policymaking and budget allocation processes within the Ministry of Education would yield critical insights into the everyday politics of resource distribution. Similarly, comparative longitudinal studies across African nations that implemented FPE could identify the specific political and institutional conditions under which some countries managed to mitigate quality trade-offs more effectively than others (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012). Ultimately, understanding the political constraints and opportunities is a prerequisite for designing feasible and sustainable strategies to break the low-quality equilibrium and fulfill the dual promise of access and learning for all African children.

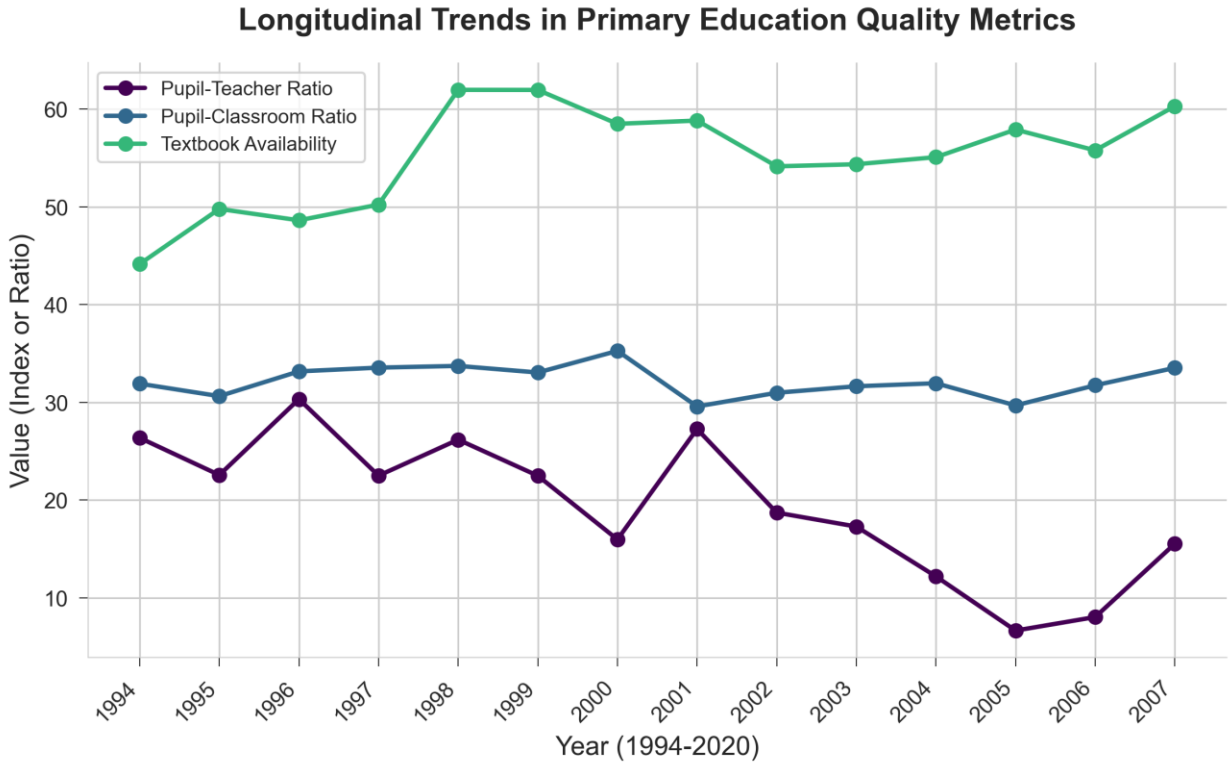

Figure 2: This figure tracks key education quality indicators in Malawi before and after the 1994 Free Primary Education policy, highlighting the trade-offs between access and quality.

CONCLUSION

This longitudinal analysis of Malawi's Free Primary Education (FPE) policy reveals a complex and politically charged landscape where the laudable goal of mass access has been persistently undermined by a systemic neglect of educational quality. The findings demonstrate that the initial surge in enrolment following the policy's 1994 inception, while a monumental achievement for democratic Malawi, was not a product of comprehensive systemic planning but rather a political settlement (Chimombo, 2009). The policy served as a visible fulfillment of a campaign promise, cementing social contract ideals but doing so without the requisite long-term financial and structural commitments to sustain it. Consequently, the education system became trapped in a low-quality equilibrium, characterized by chronic underfunding, severe teacher and classroom shortages, and a consequent dilution of the pedagogical experience for millions of Malawian children (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). The political economy lens applied herein clarifies that this was not a mere policy oversight but a predictable outcome of competing fiscal priorities, donor influence, and the primacy of access as a politically expedient metric of success over the more nebulous and long-term goal of quality.

The significance of this research within the African context is profound. Malawi's experience is not an isolated case but rather emblematic of a broader continental challenge. Many Sub-Saharan African nations, in their pursuit of Education for All and the Sustainable Development Goals, have embarked on similar massification projects, often with comparable outcomes of congested classrooms and strained resources (Akyeampong, 2009). This study therefore contributes a critical African perspective to global debates on educational development, arguing that the access-quality dichotomy is a false one; in reality, the sustained deprivation of quality fundamentally erodes the value and sustainability of access itself. When children are in school but not learning, the promise of education as a driver of individual mobility and national development is broken, potentially fueling disillusionment with the very democratic processes that birthed such policies (Moyo, 2021). The Malawian case thus stands as a cautionary tale, highlighting the perils of divorcing educational expansion from the intricate political and economic realities that govern its implementation.

The practical implications of these findings point toward an urgent need for policy recalibration. Moving forward, Malawian policymakers and their international partners must shift from a singular focus on enrolment figures to a more holistic dashboard of indicators that centrally positions learning outcomes. This necessitates a more honest and public political discourse about the true, long-term costs of quality education, which may require difficult fiscal choices, including a re-evaluation of the no-fee principle in its purest form to allow for targeted cost-sharing or community contributions for specific quality-enhancing inputs, managed with strong equity safeguards (World Bank, 2018). Furthermore, teacher policy must be at the forefront of any reform, addressing not only the quantitative deficit but also the conditions of service, professional development, and classroom support required for effective instruction. Strengthening local governance and accountability mechanisms, such as through empowered School Management Committees, could also help bridge the gap between national policy and school-level realities, ensuring that resources are used effectively and that communities have a voice in educational quality.

Future research arising from this study should pursue several critical avenues. A deeper, qualitative investigation into the political negotiations and budgetary processes that continually sideline educational quality would provide greater granularity to the political economy analysis. Furthermore, longitudinal tracking of student learning outcomes, correlated with specific policy shifts and resource allocations, is essential to

build a more robust evidence base for what works in the Malawian context. Comparative studies with other African nations that have managed the access-quality nexus more effectively, such as Rwanda or Ethiopia, could yield valuable lessons on alternative political settlements and implementation strategies. Finally, research is needed to explore the long-term socio-economic impacts of the "low-quality graduate" phenomenon, tracing the life trajectories of students who completed their primary schooling under the FPE policy but with minimal literacy and numeracy skills.

In conclusion, the story of Malawi's FPE policy is one of both profound ambition and sobering reality. It underscores that educational policies are not merely technical blueprints but are deeply embedded in political calculations and economic constraints. The enduring legacy of the policy is a testament to the power of education as a public good and a political symbol, yet its unfinished business in the realm of quality serves as a critical reminder that sustainable development requires a commitment not just to placing children in classrooms, but to ensuring that the time they spend there is meaningful, effective, and capable of unlocking their full potential.

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