

Back to school: Addressing

Education remains at crossroads during the Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdowns account for school closures that have left almost two dead years for most of the school-going children. Reports highlight numerous challenges facing the learners including child neglect and abuse; physical, sexual, and psychological.



Trainees learn how to repair a motorcycle in Yumbe District as part of Bugema University informal training. PHOTOS/GEORGE KATONGOLE.

Below: Alice Muhereza, a psychosocial officer with ADRA explains how using shifts in Bonga classes has been a breakthrough for informal education.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

The Situation of, and Impact of Covid-19 on School going Girls and Young Women in Uganda report by UNICEF indicates that between March 2020 and June 2021, there was a 22.5 per cent increase in pregnancy among girls aged 10-24 seeking first antenatal care from 80,653 to 98,810. The



UNICEF-supported child toll-free line, Sauti 116, reported more than 600 cases in the month of June 2020 alone. The cases ranged from sexual abuse, physical abuse and even one instance of murder. In addition, approximately two out of every 10 children had less than a meal a day as they no longer had access to the meals provided under the school feeding programmes.

Dr Munir Safieldin, UNICEF representative in Uganda says there is more to schools than learning.

“When schools close, children are at risk with marginalised ones paying a heavier price. Evidence shows that the children’s numeracy and literacy levels fall with many facing the risk of never attending school again. There are other risks such as child labour, negative mental health, and sexual exploitation with many teenage girls becoming pregnant and being victims of early marriages,” Dr Safieldin said in July.

She stresses that government and partners must scale up learning opportunities for all children while at

the same time working to ensure that all protocols necessary for safe reopening of schools are put in place. School owners and teachers are aware of the advantages of schools re-opening but remain considerably cautious calling for a staggered approach to reopening without exposing more people to the coronavirus. Schools reopening after the Covid-19 lockdown need to make sure they are following all the protocols.

With the government widening the scope of activities allowed to open, parental choice remains a key issue as to whether or not they want to send their children to school amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

Skills for life

Among the refugees, the learning must not stop. For them informal training on essential skills is an indispensable part of their life.

Using the format of Bonga Centres to target adolescent girls and boys with Strømme Foundation Learning for Change curriculum, students, especially

girls and young mothers who are mostly school dropouts, are taught applied skills including personal hygiene, diseases prevention, immunisation and sanitation. The trainees are also taught personal finance skills. The lessons are designed to last six months. Other groups are taught tailoring, hairdressing, catering and mechanics to enable them start income generating activities.

According to Susan Gwoka, a 30-year-old volunteer with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (Adra), who was a nurse in South Sudan before fleeing the war, classes have been divided into two shifts with one coming in the morning and the other in the evening.

“It was inevitable to continue with these classes. Some girls come here lacking basic knowledge on personal hygiene. We have to keep teaching to help them prevent transmission of contagious infections while growing in confidence,” Gwoka says.

Alice Muhereza, a psychosocial officer with the Bonga project says they employ skeletal assistant teachers to assist the teaching volunteers to cater for the edu-

22.5%

Pregnancies. A report by UNICEF shows there was a 22.5 per cent increase in pregnancy among girls aged 10-24. Those seeking first antenatal care rose from 80,653 to 98,810 between March 2020 and June 2021.

key issues post-lockdown

educational needs of 400 girls and 96 boys.

"Studying in shifts has been a game changer for us. We are able to create enough space for learners while adhering to hand washing protocols at school. It was demand-driven and I am confident it can even work in the normal curriculum," Muhereza says.

Adra is running a 14-month livelihood project codenamed Programme for Education Advocacy and Child Education (PEACE) with Strømme Foundation and YGlobal funded by the Norwegian Embassy in Kampala to help the humanitarian cause. She stresses that supporting education in an emergency situation lessens the psychosocial impact of trauma and displacement and to protect at-risk groups.

Elizai Duku, who runs a tailoring school in Kombe Parish, Village 14 of Zone III, Bidibidi Settlement in Yumbe District calls it daily bread. Duku has been a tailor since 1968.

"As an instructor I feel children are cheated if they don't learn these skills at the right time. It is essential to adhere to the Standard operating Procedures set by the government while offering these classes," he says.

Mark Makumbi, the head of Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) Bugema University, who are partnering with Adra to deliver skills training among refugees and host communities, says there should not be a gap in training essential workers such as builders, electronic repairs, hairdressers and mechanics.

Luckily for the informal classes in refugee settlements, there have not been any reported cases of Covid-19.

William Asio, the assistant Settlement Commandant in the Office of the Prime Minister says this has been due to strict adherence to SOPs by all partners offering essential services.

"The key requirement is to provide an environment that cannot enable the transmission of Covid-19 and this has been key in introducing water washing points, sanitising, social distancing while masking up all the time," Asio says.

But the challenge with skills training is about continuing with normal classes.

Bashir Tomeka, for instance, who was in Senior Three when classes were suspended in March 2020 at Yoyo Secondary School, is soon completing his motorcycle repairing course under the TVET programme and said he would not continue with classes when asked about his

future options.

"I am studying to get money. With these skills I already know how to make money. Why would I continue attending classes?" the 16-year-old wondered.

Tomeka is one of the many cases. Some have jumped into the fishing and grain business. Experts contend that the media plays an important part by creating awareness on the role of continuing with education despite the gained technical skills.

"The role of education cannot be over-emphasised. These skills are important in the intermediate stage but for the sake of sustainability in the formal job market, we need to encourage more children to stay in school," Muhereza says.

School meals

For schools in rural areas where teachers walk long distances, the challenges are about how to motivate the teachers and children. Key among those are school feeding programmes.

Alice Ataro, the head teacher of Opalacen Primary school in Pader District says in rural areas, the key to returning children to school lies in solving starvation at school.

"Most children stay away from school because of starvation, especially during the second term. Schools need a lot of support in feeding the children," says Ataro.

In Karamoja, for instance, even before the closure of schools and lockdown, 84 per cent of people were unable to access a nutritious meal regularly, according to the World Food Programme.

With risks of food abound, children are unlikely to return to class even when schools re-open.

For many schoolchildren in remote areas, learning on an empty stomach is an everyday reality. But this not only impairs a child's concentration and ability to retain information, it also starves the brain of sufficient nutrients, stunting its growth and development. When children can't learn properly, their school journey, and their future prospects, are compromised.

"We have been sensitised and encouraged to start school feeding programmes. Parents have accepted to support us to feed the pupils but we need partners to avail us quality seeds that can survive the changing climatic conditions," Ataro says.



Mary Kidon explains how skills gained in tailoring classes conducted during the suspension of normal classes can help sustain her

The school in partnership with Adra uses the Community-based school feeding programme that uses three gardens among community members.

Mental health

Phionah Nakateete, a lecturer at Kyambogo University stresses the role of psychosocial support when schools re-open. Dur-

ing a sports outreach camp organised by the Tartan Burner Athletics Club (TBAC) in partnership with the US Embassy in Uganda, she noted that there were major challenges to deal with such as teenage pregnancy and a number of children that have entered the puberty stage with no one to confide in.

"In the face of a changing and challeng-

ing world, there is a need to ensure continued education, in a safe environment. Sports is one of the avenues that can be used to address their anxieties," Nakateete says.

During one of the camps in Fort Portal City, Kabarole District, Promise Ritah Komuhindo, a Senior Four student shared that she was concerned with her changing physical appearance saying she is battling to live with the fact that she is now 18 and still in O-Level. "I sometimes cry because I am getting older. My breasts and hips are becoming bigger and it is worrying that I am still in the same class," Komuhindo said.

Nakateete stresses that school closures come with mental health challenges and without guidance, it could have irreversible effects.

The Uganda National Examinations Board has already addressed the challenge of children that got pregnant during the lockdown by allowing them to sit for their final examinations. But how do schools support those children? Ataro says the role of senior women in schools needs to be reactivated.

Evelyn Kabakama, the deputy head teacher Nyakasura Junior School in Fort Portal City says even though the future is unpredictable, continuing with classes is important for the school system.

"The children in school today are the future epidemiologists, nurses and doctors, and teachers among other professions. What we need is an educated citizenry," Kabakama says.

CRISIS

Finding solutions

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LEFT: Kyambogo University lecturer Phionah Nakateete talks to girls during the TBAC sports camp at St. James COU Kigorobya in Hoima District last month.

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