Context

Most governments around the world temporarily closed schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic leaving an estimated 1.54 billion young people out of school with more concerns about the longer-term effects on learning. Behind the missed school days also lays a bigger challenge for the country’s school children beyond education. When schools close, children are at risk with marginalized ones paying a heavier price, and many face the risk of never attending school again. Closures of educational institutions hamper the provision of essential services to children and communities, including access to nutritious food, affect the ability of many parents to work, and increase risks of violence against women and girls.

The world was already in a learning crisis, and the ongoing emergency will put further strain on hard-won gains in learning. COVID-19 is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons to continue their learning. Learning losses also threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress, not least in support of girls and young women’s educational access and retention. The loss of this time in education will hit the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest, as education has been identified as a key variable in reducing vulnerability to poverty and increasing household resilience to shock (UNDP-Uganda, 2020).
How big is the problem?

In Uganda, over 15 million learners were sent home in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Uganda was ranked among the top 20 countries with the highest number of days of full school closures between March 2020 and February 2021. Data from the UNESCO Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic report (2021) highlights that children in Uganda missed 149 school days during the lockdown in 2020. While online learning was fronted as an alternative approach, more than a third of children in Uganda had no access to remote education, due largely to lack of internet access, computers, or other mobile devices. The government of Uganda announced a plan to distribute radios as learning devices to the most vulnerable children, however, this was not implemented at all.

Girls, in particular face unique risks in light of COVID-19. School closures as a result of the pandemic imply that girls miss out of the protective elements associated with formal education such as life skills, access to essential information, and connections with existing referral pathways and forms of support for SGBV. Out-of-school girls are also more likely to experience various forms of violence at the hands of relatives, neighbors, or those within their communities. Families facing limited financial resources are also more likely to place girls in situations of child, early or forced marriage, or exploitative labour as a possible coping mechanism.

Across Uganda, cases of child transactional sex, early marriage, child pregnancies, and child recruitment and trafficking as a result of the pandemic were reported, further worsening the plight of children. Media reports and household surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that between March 2020 and June 2021, there was a 22.5% increase in pregnancy among girls aged 10-24 years seeking first antenatal care from 80,653 to 98,810. In Moroto alone, at least 6000 cases of teenage pregnancies were reported during lockdown, while in Kitgum at least 2,300 schoolgirls conceived and 128 were married. UNHCR (2020) survey in Kampala shows a 21% increase in teenage pregnancies and 18% in child marriages, leading to school dropout and other devastating health and social consequences for girls. The increase in teenage pregnancies registered during COVID-19 has implications for healthcare and the aspirations of the adolescents affected. Early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancies are associated with a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections—especially HIV/AIDS and a likelihood of death due to childbirth complications, all of which can be worsened by lack of critical care occasioned by the pandemic.

Community interviews in Kyankwanzi and Wakiso by ARUWE showed, as a result of school closures, many children are now engaged in making money in their villages some selling sweet bananas, and others are into brick laying. Community members expressed concern that children might not return to school after engaging in income generating activities, and others feel they have outgrown the classes they are supposed to report back to. On the side of the parents, they also feel less prepared to take their children to school since they don’t have school fees, due to loss of income. Some of the girls of school going age have gotten pregnant and some have gone with the men who impregnated them, with less chance of returning to school.
What can be done?

Scale up remote learning

In the event that schools are still closed, government and partners must scale up remote 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.

Scale up vaccination coverage for teachers

There is urgent need to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks including the school environment. Government should continue prioritizing the vaccination of teachers and to provide the necessary support in terms of human and financial resources for the urgent vaccination of the teaching and non-teaching staff and learners at specific venues and for implementation and monitoring of standard operating procedures in schools/education institutions.

Support implementation of SOPs for schools

There is urgent need to equip schools with the resources and the support required to meet the standard operating procedures (SOPs). The timely release of per capita grants for Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) will be critical. Members of Parliament and other political leaders should use their new mandate handed to them during the recently concluded elections to ensure that funding for schools is in place for continued learning.

Enhance teacher capacity to provide psycho-social support arising from CoVID19

Institute training programs for teachers to provide the necessary psycho-social support arising from CoVID19, as well as management of other cases such as those of SGGB for school going children. As the schools’ resume, they should be able to provide safe spaces for children who have suffered from SGBV and other violations.

Vocational and life skills training for young people

Two years of missing studies without any educational orientation for the children is a key challenge and therefore there is need for the government and other actors to invest in vocational education and short trades that can help the children and youth get practical skills to start life. Vocational education offers the best alternative to COVID-19 recovery as it gives functional skills necessary for the youth to survive amidst shock.
GOVERNMENT should scale up remote 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.

GOVERNMENT should provide financial support to vulnerable households to ensure they get children back to school. Recovery efforts must help families overcome new financial constraints and the opportunity costs of schooling. Strategies could include school-related fee reductions, subsidies, and household cash transfers.

GOVERNMENT AND ALL ACTORS should identify and prioritize students who are the most likely to drop out of school by using existing data on risk factors, and provide safe spaces and skills training in order to reverse dropout rates especially among adolescent girls with multiple vulnerability challenges.

GOVERNMENT AND ALL ACTORS should ensure that vulnerable children who are not able to return to regular school environments are given opportunities to enrol and learn, by providing them vocation and other life skills.

GOVERNMENT AND ALL ACTORS should prioritise ensuring that school infrastructure and facilities are safe, that rooms are clean and disease-free, and that staff are prepared to prevent the spread of disease in the event of a future outbreak. Efforts should include distribution of hand sanitizer and enhance access to WASH facilities for the prevention of COVID-19 transmission. Vaccination for teachers should also be scaled.

GOVERNMENT AND ALL ACTORS should provide psychosocial and emotional support for children returning to school and those who may not return to school due to abuse. Humanitarian crises often affect a child’s psychosocial well-being and can be negatively be impacted by shocks if not addressed.

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY MAKERS should engage students in accelerated learning interventions to reverse crisis-related learning loss and strengthen future learning trends. At the same time, teachers should be engaged in training and coaching so they can help students catch up.

ALL ACTORS should engage community members and use information campaigns to increase enrolment and return to school. Parents, communities and care givers should be given skills on how to handle dropout cases and referral for action. Effective strategies include financing parent-teacher associations, working with local political and school management groups, and creating opportunities for community monitoring.

References