



ISER
Facilitating Social Justice

INITIATIVE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Eight (8) Reasons why Government should safely reopen schools

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EIGHT (8) REASONS WHY GOVERNMENT SHOULD SAFELY REOPEN SCHOOLS

A. Introduction

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on people's enjoyment of social and economic rights including education globally. In Uganda in particular, the right to education has significantly been impacted due to the protracted closure of education institutions since March 2020. The first time the President directed the total closure of Schools was on 20th March, 2020 affecting more than 15million learners and 548,192 and 188,000 teaching and non – teaching staff respectively.¹ From October 2020, there was a phased reopening of schools with a few learners attending school at a time in order to comply with the COVID19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). However, before all learners could report back to school, a second total closure of education institutions was announced and implemented on 7th June 2021. As a result, there are a number of children who have not attended school since March, 2020.

Following the closure of education institutions, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) put in place measures for continued learning, however, these have faced a number of institutional and structural implementation weaknesses and challenges that have rendered them largely ineffective.²

This ineffectiveness in the delivery of continued learning leaves the country with no option but to safely reopen schools if education is to continue for all children. Below are the eight (8) reasons why the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) is urging the Government to safely reopen schools:

¹ Ministry of Education and Sports (2020), Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, P. 6, Available at <http://www.education.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Preparedness-and-Response-Plan-for-COVID19-MAY-2020.pdf> (accessed on August 19, 2021)

² See for example Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2020) The Education Sector interventions during the Corona Virus (COVID-19) Pandemic: How can they be more inclusive? BMAU BRIEFING PAPER (1/20) May 2020. Available at <https://www.finance.go.ug/sites/default/files/Publications/BMAU%20Briefing%20Paper%201-20-%20Education%20Sector%20interventions%20during%20the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic.%20How%20can%20they%20be%20more%20inclusive.pdf> (accessed on August 19,2021) that made an evaluation of the continued learning program during the first closure of schools and found it ineffective due to a number of challenges.

B. Reasons why government should urgently consider safe reopening of schools

1. Widening inequality in access to quality education

Following the closure of schools, several private and elite government aided institutions shifted to online learning for their learners, while children from poorer backgrounds waited for government to support their continued learning. The MoES has been implementing continued learning programs through lessons on radios and televisions and also distributed some hard copy self-learning materials. However, the low rate of ownership of radio and television sets across the country cannot effectively support the implementation of the program. The proportion of households that own radio sets have reduced from 45.2% to 31.7%.³ The same arrangement cannot cater for the deaf learners, but also lacks a feedback mechanism between the learners and the teachers. It is only the children from well to do backgrounds that are continuing with learning through online platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc as well as hiring teachers to instruct them at their homes. This situation will further widen the inequality in learning that was prevalent even before the outbreak of COVID19 and the resultant closure of schools, and will have long term effects on the right to education in the country.

2. Ineffectiveness of continued learning programs

An evaluation of the continued learning program during last year's lockdown established that the program was not effective due to various implementation challenges.⁴ These included the lack of credible data to guide distribution of the self-study materials, limited access and ownership of radio and television sets, limited internet and network coverage in many areas, lack of feedback mechanisms between the teachers and the learners, and the weak assessment mechanism for the quality of learning among others.⁵ Furthermore, there was no provision of braille materials for the blind children as well as sign language interpreters for the lessons that were being conducted on television to cater for the deaf children. The implementation of the continued learning program during the lockdown was premised on the assumption that the parents are able to provide support logistically but also be able to help their children to understand and complete the work given.⁶ With all the foregoing weaknesses, it was established that non-effectiveness of learning during the lockdown was widening inequality between learners who had access to television radios, internet and smart phones and those who did not.⁷

³ Uganda National Household Survey 2019/20 at https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/06_2021_UNHS2019-20_presentation.pdf (accessed on August 21, 2021)

⁴ Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2020), *supra*.

⁵ *Ibid*, for instance The National Household Survey Report 2016/17 had reported that 45.2% and 17.4% of Ugandan households owned a radio and TV respectively. Also, the same report indicated that nearly 90% of students have no access to a computer and further 82% of the children do not have access to internet at home.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*

Following the second closure of schools in June 2021, MoES communicated resumption of radio lesson for primary four and five, and recently for primary six and secondary learners.⁸ However, it is evident that there is no change in the previous model of delivery of the lessons. The ineffectiveness in the delivery of remote learning leaves the country with no option but to reopen schools to ensure that no learner is left behind.

3. Increasing sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies

Since the first closure of schools, there has been a number of reports by the media, civil society and government about an increase in cases of teenage pregnancy and child marriages.⁹ For instance, last year, a report by NGO Human Right Focus Uganda (HURIFO) indicated that a total of 4,062 cases of teenage pregnancy had been recorded within five months of the pandemic in six out of eight districts in the Acholi sub region in northern Uganda. Similar cases have been reported in other parts of Uganda such as Luweero, Kyegegwa, Kamuli, Masaka, among others.¹⁰ This is a demonstration that the continued closure of schools has put many young girls at a higher risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. This is most likely to drive up school dropout of the girl child thus undermining the gender parity gains that had been attained at primary level and worsening the gender inequality in access to secondary education. According to the Education and Sports Sector Analysis Report 2019, the Gender Parity in primary education stood at 1.01 in 2017/18, a reduction of 0.01 from 1.02 in 2016/17 which meant a decrease in gender disparities as a result of the girls' enrolment in primary being slightly higher than that of boys since 2010/11. This was a major progress from the situation before 2007/08 when the gender disparities in primary education access were high. However, even before COVID19 and the closure of schools, access to secondary education was highly inequitable in terms of gender. According to the Uganda Health Demographic Survey 2016, the Gender Parity Index in secondary school attendance was 0.86, which indicated that more boys attended school compared to girls.

⁸ The Statement Issued by the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education and Sports indicated that radio lessons for learners in Primary six and secondary school would resume August 16, 2021 from Monday to Friday of the week. The lesson are implemented up to September, 2021.

⁹ Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2020) COVID-19 and Girl Child Education in Uganda. What are the Emerging Issues? BMAU BRIEFING PAPER (13/20), 2020, available at <https://www.finance.go.ug/sites/default/files/Publications/BMAU%20Briefing%20Paper%2013-20-COVID-19%20and%20Girl%20Child%20Education%20in%20Uganda.%20What%20are%20the%20Emerging%20Issues.pdf>. Also see Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (2020) Leaving No One Behind: Barriers to Continuity of Education for Vulnerable Children Impacted by Covid-19 in Uganda, at https://www.iser-uganda.org/images/downloads/Barriers_to_Continuity_of_Education_for_Vulnerable_Children_Impacted_by_Covid-19_in_Uganda.pdf (both publications accessed on August 22, 2021)

¹⁰ See Wamdera Dan "1,400 teens conceive in Luweero in one year" Daily Monitor, July 23, 2021 at <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/1-400-teens-conceive-in-luweero-in-one-year-3483386> (accessed on August 24, 2021); Alex Ashaba "Kyegegwa battles high teenage pregnancies" Daily Monitor, August 21, 2021 at <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/kyegegwa-battles-high-teenage-pregnancies-3516286> (accessed on August, 24, 2021); Opio Sam "180 P7 pupils in Kamuli get pregnant in lockdown - RDC" Daily Monitor, March 16, 2021 at <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/180-p7-pupils-in-kamuli-get-pregnant-in-lockdown-rdc-3324056> (accessed on August 24, 2021) Kutamba Wilson "Masaka records over 1,000 teenage pregnancies in lockdown" Daily Monitor, August 23, 2021 at <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/masaka-records-over-1-000-teenage-pregnancies-in-lockdown-3521910> (accessed on August 24, 2021)

Therefore, the continued closure of schools which is contributing to a high rate of teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse of the girl child is most likely to dwindle the gender parity gains achieved in access to primary education and worsen gender inequality in access to secondary education.

4. Increasing child labour

Countries across the globe had made strides towards reducing child labour before the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic. According to statistics from the International Labour Organisation, from 2000 to 2016, the number of children in child labour reduced by approximately 94 million, representing a 38% reduction.¹¹ However, with the continued closure of schools and massive loss of jobs and income by many households in the country, many families have opted to engage their children in labour so as to supplement on the household income.¹² In Uganda, incidences of child labour have increased from 31% to 36% during the COVID19 period.¹³ A number of these children are working for long hours under precarious and exploitative conditions in rice and sugarcane plantations, stone quarries and on lakes among others. This is not only grossly affecting the welfare of the children but also their education.

5. Risk of increased school drop outs

As noted earlier, the cases of teenage pregnancy and sexual exploitation of the girl child as well as child labour are on the raise. This will affect the rate of return to school upon resumption of learning in school setting. Before COVID19, 3 out of 10 children that enrolled in primary one would reach primary seven.¹⁴ We note that as a result of COVID many learners who were supposed to complete their different levels of education were not in position to return to school even when schools were reopened. For example, Uganda National Examination Board (UNEBC) registered 98,392 candidates for the 2020 Uganda Advanced Certificate of Examination (UACE) compared to 104,476 candidates registered in 2019. The protracted closures coupled with economic shocks are placing pressure on children to work and generate income for their family support. This poses a big challenge to convincing such children to return and stay in school upon reopening.

Pregnant school going children and teenage mothers will also face challenges staying in school despite the recently adopted MoES revised Guidelines on Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda. Although the guidelines are making an attempt to ensure return to school by the teenage mothers, the conditions that have to be complied with appear to be frustrating. For instance, the guidelines require pregnant girls to go for mandatory maternity leave at three months of the pregnancy and only report back to school when the baby is 6months old, this is a total of 12 months away from school. For the boy, the guidelines require that he too takes

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, Initiative for Social and Economic Rights and Friends of Nation (2021) "I Must Work to Eat" Covid-19, Poverty, and Child labor in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda, P.1 at https://www.iser-uganda.org/images/downloads/I_Must_Work_to_Eat.pdf (accessed on August 24, 2021)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Uganda National Household Survey 2019/20

¹⁴ Ministry of Education and Sports, Education and Sports Sector Analysis 2019

mandatory leave and only return after the girl has delivered. This implies that with the protracted closure of schools amidst the rising incidences of sexual abuse of girls, many of them will not be in position to resume learning when schools are reopened.

6. There is no vaccine for children under 12 years so far, and science suggests less impact of COVID-19 on children

So far, the WHO's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) has concluded that the Pfizer/BionTech vaccine is suitable for use by people aged 12 years and above, and it has also noted that more evidence is needed on the use of the different COVID-19 vaccines in children to be able to make general recommendations on vaccinating children against COVID-19.¹⁵

According to World Health Organization, children are less urgent to vaccinate because they are less likely to suffer from the direct impact of COVID-19 morbidity and mortality compared to other age groups.¹⁶ This is because children and adolescents tend to have milder disease compared to adults.¹⁷ They can only be prioritised for vaccination when they form part of a group at higher risk of severe COVID-19.¹⁸

The unavailability of vaccines for children under 12 years means that their return to school is not dependent on vaccination, but rather appropriate implementation of the COVID 19 SOPs.

7. Limited availability of vaccines in the country to ensure all eligible learners, teachers and non-teaching staff are vaccinated

It has been established that many low-income countries especially in Africa are having challenges to secure vaccines due to hoarding by the developed economies. Since the vaccination program started, the country has been relying on donated vaccines. 864,000 and 100,000 AstraZeneca doses received in March this year from COVAX and the Government of India respectively, 286,080 and 175,200 AstraZeneca doses from the Governments of Norway and France respectively, and recently 300,000 doses of the Sinovac vaccines from the Government of China. These vaccines are insufficient to cater for the vulnerable population and frontline workers like teachers.

Although government has indicated in a number of communication statements and addresses on COVID19 that it has secured money for purchase of 18million doses of AstraZeneca vaccines, no delivery has been made yet. However, even with the small quantities of vaccines received so far,

¹⁵ World Health Organization, COVID-19 advice for the public: Getting vaccinated – last updated on July 14, 2021 at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines/advice> (accessed on August 24, 2021)

¹⁶ WHO SAGE Roadmap For Prioritizing Uses Of COVID-19 Vaccines In The Context Of Limited Supply at <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/who-sage-roadmap-for-prioritizing-uses-of-covid-19-vaccines-in-the-context-of-limited-supply> (Accessed on August 22, 2021)

¹⁷ World Health Organization, COVID-19 advice for the public: Getting vaccinated, *supra*

¹⁸ Ibid

major inefficiencies and challenges have been evidenced in the vaccination program. Therefore, having failed to secure sufficient quantity of vaccines, it is quite unreasonable to peg school reopening to vaccination of all teaching and non – teaching staff. The government should set an achievable target of the number of staff that have to be vaccinated so that schools can be safely reopened.

8. Significant economic impact

The continued closure of schools has left many schools, both government aided and privately owned, without income to meet their obligations and liabilities. A number of them are unable to pay their staff¹⁹ and this has resulted into loss of income for both teaching and non – teaching staff in such schools. As noted in the introduction, the closure of education institutions directly affected 548,192 and 188,000 teaching and non – teaching staff respectively. Many of these staff are currently not earning any income because their employers are not in position to pay them since their main source of income – school fees which they mainly rely on to run and operate the schools is no longer flowing in. The loss of income by the schools has also further rendered them incapable of meeting their suppliers and loan obligations. The continued closure of schools is simply driving poverty and vulnerability among the population. According to the recent Uganda National Household Survey 2019/20, the proportion of poor persons increased from 18.7% before COVID19 to 21.9% during COVID19.

C. Actions points that government must urgently address to safely reopen schools

For the above reasons, the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) is particularly concerned that the continued closure of schools has led to loss of learning that might not easily be made up for even if schools reopen. These losses also have lasting socioeconomic impact on the country and will be soon deeply felt. ISER therefore calls on government to urgently plan for safe reopening of schools;

1. Prioritize vaccination plan for teaching and non-teaching staff. In order to implement this, the government should;
 - a) Fast track the plan for schools to serve as vaccination centres and mobilise teaching and non-teaching staff to go for the jab.
 - b) Roll out vaccination in school settings across the country- as the case has been done for Kampala. This will enable quick identification of all the teachers and non-teaching staff.
 - c) Work closely with the head teachers and District Education Officers to mobilise and track the teachers who finished and those yet to be vaccinated.

¹⁹ For the Government aided schools they are unable to pay teachers who are not on government payroll but under Parents – Teachers Association payroll. They rely on school fees collections to meet these salary obligations.

2. Ensure that all schools put in place measures and equipment to adhere to the SOPs. In order to implement this, MoES should;
 - a) Inspect all schools across the country and ensure that the school environment is safe and adhering to the set SOPs.
 - b) Put in place an effective monitoring and surveillance system for early warning and detection of cases in schools.
 - c) Require school management to develop and submit weekly reports to District Education Officers on management of COVID19 in their respective schools.
3. The COVID-19 taskforce should also leverage community engagements and involvement in the reopening process early to build trust and shape perception of risk. This can be done with the help of teachers, teachers unions, School Management Committees and Board of Governors as well as Parents – Teachers Association among others.
4. MoES in conjunction with other stakeholders should conduct large-scale back to school campaigns on different media platforms as this will ensure inclusion of those with highest risk of dropping out.

D. Conclusion

The prolonged closure of schools has had a number of short-term negative effects which are most likely to cause far reaching implications both in the medium and long-term on the education sector. These include reduced school attendance, increased dropouts as a result of the raise in teenage pregnancy and child labour among others. This is eroding the gains that have so far been attained towards achieving SDG4 on the right to education. It is therefore in the best interests of the children and the country at large that government urgently commences safe reopening of schools.



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