

Leaving No One Behind: Barriers to Continuity of Education for Vulnerable Children Impacted by Covid-19 in Uganda



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Acronyms

CAO – Chief Administrative Officer

CoU – Church of Uganda

DCAO – Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

DEO – District Education Officer

DOS – Director of Studies

FGDs – Focus Group Discussions

ISER – Initiative for Social and Economic Rights

MoES – Ministry of Education and Sports

MoH - Ministry of Health

MEO – Municipal Education Officer

PLE – Primary Leaving Examinations

P7 – Primary Seven

S4 – Senior Four

S6 – Senior Six

SOPs – Standard Operating Procedures

UACE – Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education

UCE – Uganda Certificate of Education

UNEB – Uganda National Examinations Board

UPE - Universal Primary Education

USE – Universal Secondary Education

1. Introduction

The Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) has undertaken a situational analysis of the challenges confronting the girl child – and children more generally – from impoverished backgrounds when it comes to accessing education, following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This study sought to understand how the pandemic impacted the learning prospects of this cohort, more especially the implications of measures implemented to control its spread, including among others: the widespread loss of income and livelihood experienced by many Ugandan families as a result of government-imposed lockdown¹ measures; and the effects of protracted home confinement, notably adolescent pregnancies, marriages and participation in economic activities (e.g. bricklaying, fishing, working in plantations and peddling merchandise by the roadside)

The study objectives thus included: (i) assessing the return to school of candidate class learners once Covid-19 lockdown measures were lifted; (ii) identifying the reasons compelling learners to drop out of school; (iii) analyzing the challenges schools are facing with respect to implementing Covid-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) set down by the Ministry of Health and (iv) assessing the perception of⁷ homeschooling interventions during the closure of schools.

The research was conducted from 1-20 November 2020 in the districts of Buikwe and Mukono in central Uganda, Busia in eastern region bordering Kenya, Kaabong in north eastern region - Karamoja sub region, and Kumi in the east - Teso sub region. The study team visited 27 schools, focusing predominantly on public and government aided schools.

2. Methodology

Study data was collected using a qualitative research approach. With the input of local government education officers, purposive sampling was used to identify the schools to be targeted. In-depth interviews were held with policy makers at the local government level, education officers, school administrators (especially head teachers), senior women teachers, and learners. The study team also interviewed pregnant learners who had dropped out of school, including some who were married. 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with the parents of school going aged children. Ethical protocols were upheld; moreover, to protect respondents' privacy, interviews with pregnant learners and those shifted from private schools have been anonymized. The identity of FGD participants is also not disclosed.

Four key questions underpinned this research namely;

1. What is the situation of return to school of learners in candidate classes after the reopening of schools for them?
2. What factors are influencing learners to drop out of school?

¹ In response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government of Uganda imposed national lockdown measures (and curfews), which called for the closure of all except essential businesses and services, and prohibited all persons save essential workers from venturing out into public – whether by public or private transportation – effectively confining people to their home, and constraining their ability to engage in income-generating activities.

3. What challenges have schools encountered in implementing SOPs associated with Covid-19?

4. What is the perception of homeschooling among relevant stakeholders (teachers, parents, learners, government authorities)?

3. Summary of findings

The research team established that while most schools have reopened for candidate classes, some, in particular low-cost private schools, have not citing operational costs of maintaining the school and adhering to Covid-19 protocols for only one or two classes. While on average most candidate class learners have returned to school, some have not resumed, and this is attributable to a variety of reasons.

The severe economic downturn brought by the pandemic has aggravated the barriers to access to education, more especially for the poor, due to unaffordable school fees. Many families moved their children from private to public schools as a cost-saving measure; however, some households are unable to afford the fees even in government schools. While authorities at national and local government levels are aware of this situation, there is no evidence that concrete steps have been taken to ease the burden of prohibitive school charges.

Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Sport's directive instructing schools to operate either as boarding or day, inasmuch as this was deemed necessary to implement SOPs, has disadvantaged many children – especially those whose schools transformed from day to boarding school, in the light of the substantial fee hike families were expected to meet within a relatively short period. Many children affected in this manner were compelled to seek enrolment in day schools, - in some instances walking over 10kms each day to access a school. In many cases, those who could not afford even the day school option, or who could not be accommodated due to the increased demand, were forced to drop out.

An increase in adolescent pregnancies was observed during the protracted home confinement, with almost all of the schools visited having pregnant learners registered. The local government response to this varied due to the absence of clear policy guidance from the Ministry of Education and Sports. Pregnant adolescents are subject to substantial stigma and discrimination, including those permitted to return to school, which discouraged other girls from continuing with their learning.

The reliance of impoverished families on the money their children generated from engaging in economic activities, coupled with the expense of schooling, was commonly cited as the reason for non-return to school. This was found to disproportionately affect boys.

All school administrators interviewed doubted that their schools would be able to meet the SOP-stipulated 'social distancing' once all classes resumed learning, which they attributed to inadequate infrastructure.

Most parents interviewed had a markedly negative opinion of home-schooling, casting doubt on the efficacy of government's continuity of learning interventions, which included broadcasting lessons on radio and television; and facilitating access to printed self-study

materials. Parents were overwhelmingly of the view that their children are not effectively learning while at home.

4. Findings

4.1 Reopening of schools for candidate classes

While all government schools with candidate classes reopened, a number of private schools did not: either because their facilities were not conducive to implementation of SOPs, or because the number of students enrolled in their candidate classes were inadequate to break even.

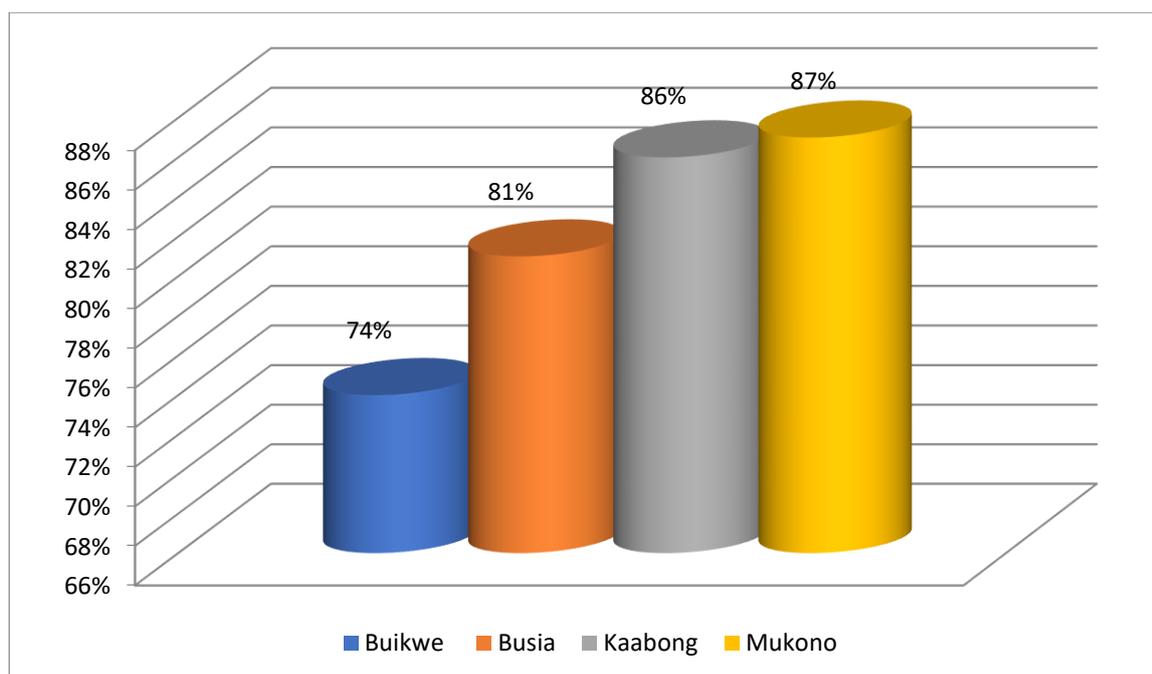
In Kumi Municipal Council, the Municipal Education Officer affirmed that 24 of the 27 primary schools in the municipality reopened. Two of the schools that declined to reopen attributed this to a failure to meet operational costs due to the limited number of learners in the candidate class. At the secondary level, three of the five schools in the municipality opened. The two schools that declined to reopen also cited an inadequate number of candidates to meet operating costs.

Buikwe too had cases of schools that did not reopen, all of which are private schools. At the primary level, 18 of the 68 schools did not reopen; while at the secondary level, six of the 25 failed to reopen. Failure to meet the SOPs issued by the Ministry of Health, coupled with a paucity of learners in the candidate class were the major reasons cited for continued closures.

In Kaabong District, 29 of the 32 primary schools reopened for P7 learners. At secondary level, only Kaabong Secondary School, a government school, had reopened for S4 students.

In Busia District, 115 of the 117 government-aided primary schools reopened. The two exceptions did not have learners enrolled in P7 classes. In contrast, 40 of the 80 private primary schools in the district remained closed in conformity with instructions from the education department. The SOPs they had in place to manage Covid-19 were deemed inadequate. The P7 learners in these private schools were advised to join neighboring government-aided schools. At secondary level, all the schools with candidate classes reopened.

Figure 1. Percentage of schools that reopened for candidate classes



4.2 Operational costs for private schools

When government lifted lockdown measures enabling the reopening of schools, the decision was taken to initially permit resumption of studying for learners in candidate classes, with others incrementally phased in. All schools were expected to adhere to SOPs facilitating management of the pandemic, which approach was always going to be costly for private schools, since their operations depend entirely on school fees collected. Indeed, various private school proprietors expressed concern that income from one or two classes would not suffice to meet all their schools’ operating costs, especially including staff and utility costs.

In key informant interviews with local government education officials, it was ascertained that the inability to meet operation costs with only one class paying was the recurring reason advanced by private schools for their failure to reopen.

The stringent government prescribed Covid-19 SOPs with which schools are required to comply, impose a significant financial burden, in the light of the requisite equipment and adjustments to facilities schools must ensure. These additional, unbudgeted costs constrain low cost private schools – to the extent that some are compelled to remain closed, until such a time as all classes are permitted to resume.

4.3 Implementation of Covid-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Before announcing the reopening of schools for candidate classes, which came into effect on 15th October 2020, the Ministry of Education and Sports issued guidelines for the implementation of SOPs developed by Ministry of Health. Government allocated UGX 1,500,000 (\$400) to each government-aided school as a conditional capitation grant for the procurement of equipment and facilities to facilitate the observance of SOPs. This grant was earmarked to buy such things as handwashing facilities, soap, and a temperature gun. Private

schools were not similarly funded, which therefore required them to fund these acquisitions by means of privately procured resources.

Table 1. Equipment and facilities required to Implement SOPs

Facilities	Quantities	
	Primary school	Secondary school
1. Foot operated hand washing facilities	06	08
2. Temperature guns	02	02
3. Backpack plastic spray pumps	01	02
4. Disinfectant liquid (JIK)	20litres	30litres

(Source: MoES Guidelines for Reopening of Education Institutions under Covid-19 Standard Operating Procedure)



Photo 1: P7 girl at Olungia Primary School washing her hands after slashing the compound

All schools visited by the study team had in place the basic requirements to implement the SOPs issued by the Ministry of Health, albeit not always in the quantities stipulated by the guidelines. Most schools had two or three hand washing facilities, some of which were not foot-operated, one temperature gun and one spray pump.



Photo 2: Improved hand washing facility at Bunyide Primary School, Busia District

The Deputy CAO of Kumi District observed that children are being encouraged to wash hands with ordinary soap rather than sanitizer, because of the greater cost of the latter.

In all of the schools visited, the social distance of at least two metres between students stipulated by the SOPs was successfully achieved. However, this was because schools still have recourse to a greater number of classrooms than learners, which will cease to be the case once all classes resume. By way of illustration, Aakum Primary School, which is located in Kumi, has seven classrooms, of which P7 alone occupies four of them. Once other classes are phased in, it will prove more challenging to observe social distancing requirements.



Photo 3: Aakum Primary School in Kumi District, which like most schools, is strictly observing social distancing and ensuring that learners and students wear masks.

The same was observed at Kodukul Primary School, in Kumi District. The Director of Studies (DOS) at Ongino Secondary School, also in Kumi District, informed ISER that unless the school resorts to teaching children under trees, existing structures will not suffice when other classes report to school. The DOS stated that “this school was grant aided in 2004, but we are still surviving in buildings set up by the community. The school also has no washrooms for girls.”

The DEO of Buikwe also identified adherence to SOPs, particularly by schools in rural areas, as a challenge to the management of the pandemic. He conjectured that a laxity of observance may be due to Covid-19 fatigue or a failure to fully appreciate or take seriously the threat it poses. “ [At] day schools, learners go home for break and lunch, and some schools do not screen again when they return; they only do it in the morning.”² This was confirmed by the head teacher of Nkokonjeru UMEA Primary School in Buikwe, who pleaded for training to be provided to teachers on Covid-19 and SOPs.

Many school administrators complained that the UGX 1,500,000(\$400) provided by government to observe SOPs was insufficient to adequately achieve this purpose. One head teacher claimed that a single foot-operated washing facility costs UGX 600,000 (\$163) yet schools are required to have a minimum of three – in addition to other equipment. Another head teacher confirmed paying UGX 325,000 (\$89) to Crest tank for a foot-operated handwashing facility for use at the school’s main gate and four presumably smaller versions for UGX 250,000 (\$68) each, temperature guns were acquired for UGX 180,000 (\$49) a 20 litre jerry can of sanitizer cost UGX 250,00 (\$68) five liters of JIK disinfectant UGX 36,000 (\$10) and 40 litres of liquid soap UGX 60,000 (\$16).

The Ministry of Health made provision for each candidate class learner returning to school (whether government or private) to be provided two face masks. DEOs were tasked to collect the masks from the Health Ministry, while head teachers collected them from the district.

The research team confirmed the availability of masks in all of the schools visited; however, divergent levels of success enforcing proper use of masks (i.e. concealing the face and mouth) was observed, secondary schools more insubordinate than primary schools. A few S4 learners from Busia Forward SS in Busia Municipality were observed – even in the presence of the teacher – not wearing their face masks, but displaying them on their desks; some learners in the same school were observed walking around with improperly worn masks (i.e. latched at the chin).

² Interview with DEO Buikwe on 17th November 2020



Photo 4: Kaabong SS - social distancing and wearing of face masks by learners

Many schools have displayed posters in classrooms and offices advocating for the observance of SOPs. Information posters have also been put up in school compounds to sensitize children on Covid-19 prevention.



Photo 5: Covid-19 awareness and prevention messages in some of the schools visited

5. Challenges of children returning to school

In all of the districts visited by the study team, district education officers confirmed the rate of candidate class learners returning to school to be above 80%, with the exception of Kaabong in Karamoja, which had a return rate of 51%. Kikanya Primary School in Ngogwe Sub-County, Buikwe District, was the only school visited which confirmed the return of all candidate class learners; this school even received an additional 10 learners, mainly from neighboring private schools. Kikanya's head teacher attributed the more than 100% return to the vigilance of parents and the school management committee. Sacred Heart Najja Senior Secondary School in Najja Sub-County, Buikwe District, recorded a return rate of 50% of learners at both O and

A levels. Nyero Rock Secondary School, in Nyero Sub County, Kumi District, noted a substantial drop in learners returning to S.6. – with only eight of the anticipated 21 girls returning to school. The District Education Officer (DEO) from Buikwe informed ISER that the district registered a return rate of candidate class learners exceeding 80%. While Mukono’s Municipal Inspector of Schools reported at least 90% of candidate learners returned to school.

While Kaabong District had not, at the time of the site visit, conducted monitoring to determine the percentage of learners who had reported back to school following the lifting of Covid-19 lockdown measures, the research team established that an average of 51% of the girls enrolled in the four schools visited was confirmed to have returned to school. In Kathile Primary, only three of the 58 girls previously registered in the candidate class prior to lockdown had returned to school. At Secondary level, the S4 enrolment at Kaabong SS, a government school, subsequent to the removal of Covid-19 lockdown measures stood at 132, an increase of 19 students (14 boys, 5 girls).

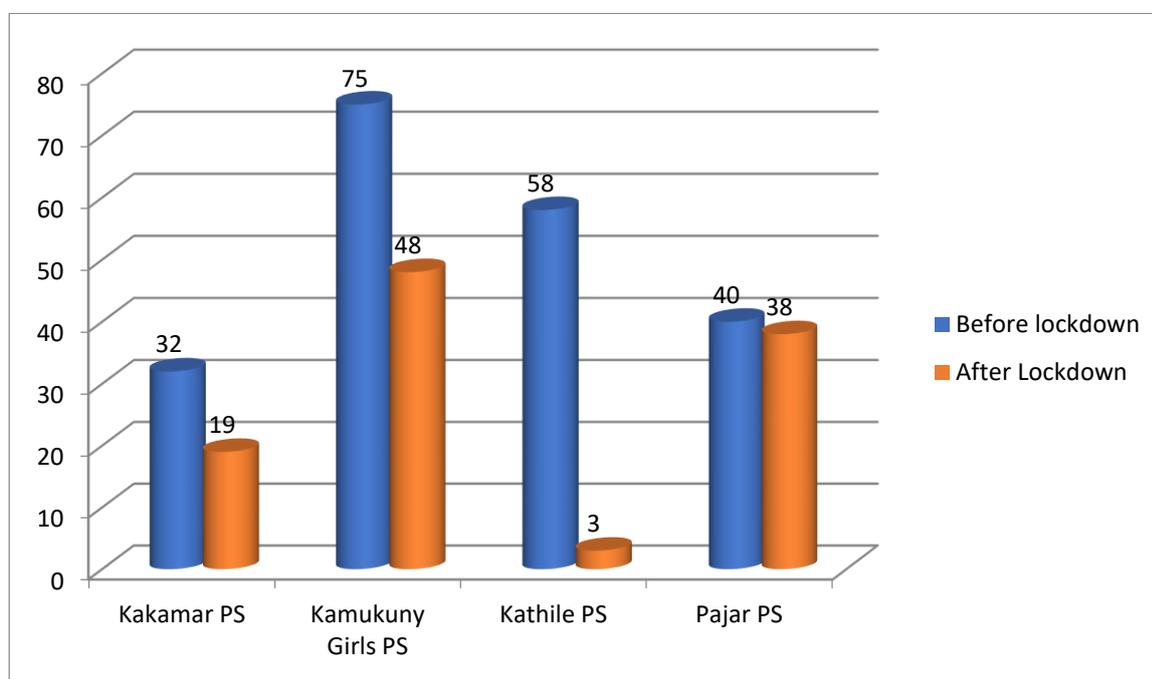


Figure 2: Showing the number of girls in P7 in the visited schools in Kaabong District before and after Covid-19 Lockdown

Busia District’s DEO estimated that over 90% of P7 candidates and over 80% of S4 and S6 candidates in the district reported back to school. He attributed this to a concerted back-to-school radio sensitization campaign, targeted at all learners, including pregnant girls, encouraging them to report back to school and register for national examinations.

In four schools (two secondary and two primary) in the Busia District the enrolment rate was found to be over 90%, of what it was before Covid-19 lockdown measures were imposed. This was partly attributed to the schools receiving new learners from schools that either failed to reopen or located outside the district perceived by parents to be too far a commute for their children in times of Covid-19. This enrolment rate may, therefore, conceal to some extent the true picture of learner drop-outs post-lockdown. For example, in Madibira Primary School, Busia Municipality, 140 learners were registered post-lockdown, 100% of the rate enrolled rate

prior to lockdown. The deputy head teacher of the school revealed, however, that this figure concealed the school's loss of 15 old and enrollment of 15 new P7 learners.

5.1 Transfer of learners from private to public / government aided schools

*"I am 13 years [old and enrolled] in primary seven at Aakum Primary School. [Before] I was at Ongino Junior Primary school – a private school. I was paying 150,000 per term. My mother failed to pay the school fees. I lost my father when I was in primary three. We are eight children. I opted for Aakum because it is near home and [I] was required to only pay UGX 12,000 to facilitate UNEB registration."*³

All of the public schools visited had received an intake of new students transferring from private schools, the majority of whom cited the inability to pay school fees as the reason for the change of school.



Photo 6: ISER's Right to Education Officer interacting with learners who shifted from private to public schools

Ongino Secondary School in Kumi District enrolled two girls and two boys previously attending Trinity Secondary School in Kumi Town Council, which did not re-open.

At Ngogwe Baskerville Secondary School, in Ngogwe Sub-County, Buikwe District, 50% of the learners in S6 are transferees from private schools, whose move was motivated by the prohibitive fees. 23 learners transferred into S4 – some of them from private schools, including Cranes College Nangunga, Hill Top Secondary School Nkokonjeru, Bishop Nkoyoyo SS Matala, Victoria High School Iganga, Green Hill College Mukono, and St Peters Nkokonjeru.

Lweru SS in Buikwe Town Council, Buikwe District, had an intake of nine new learners, all of whom transferred from private school – five of the transferees joined S4 and four S6.

³ Interview with a P.7 pupil who transferred from a private school to a public school on 10th November 2020

Lweru's head teacher stated that "some [transfer learners] came from schools as far as Kampala; majority left because of tuition and registration fees because here registration is free."⁴

Kodukul Primary School in Kumi District, received five new learners, four from private schools. St. Peters Church of Uganda Nantabulirwa Primary School located in Goma Division, Mukono District, received 9 transfers from private schools.

Sacred Heart Najja SS in Buikwe also lost earners who could no longer afford the high fees. The head teacher said the school charges UGX 65,000(\$18) development fee and UGX 50,000 (\$14) for lunches. "I talked to one parent and she said, *Father nze sirina sente ate n'omwana ali lubuto* - she has no money and [her daughter] is pregnant."

Kaabong Secondary School in Kaabong District enrolled 19 new learners into S4, (five are girls, 15 boys) all of whom transferred from fledgling private schools in the district. Madibira Primary school in Busia District took in and simultaneously lost 15 new learners. At Busia Forward Secondary School, nine new learners transferred to the school from other private schools which failed to reopen.

It should be noted, however, that not all children who leave one school transfer to another. Some drop out for a variety of reasons, which will be elaborated in greater detail in the following sub-sections.

5.2 Choosing between day and boarding operation

The Ministry of Education and Sports issued guidelines intended to mitigate the risk of transmission and spread of the corona virus and to reduce the pandemic's impact on teaching and learning. In these guidelines, the Ministry directed all primary and secondary schools resuming operations post-lockdown that they could only operate either as day or boarding schools, eliminating their discretion to offer both. Unfortunately, the guidelines did not restrict schools to their original offering, with the result that learners who attended day schools that shifted to operating as boarding schools were faced with the choice of marshalling higher fees in order to remain, or transferring to more affordable day schools elsewhere.

The Mukono Municipal Education Officer noted that schools previously operating as both day and boarding schools, which switched to boarding prompted some parents, who were unprepared for the fee hike and could not secure alternative schooling, to resign themselves to their children dropping out of school. She provided the example of Mukono High School – a government school, which turned into boarding – which lost a number of learners whose parents' businesses were negatively affected by the pandemic, making it impossible to manage the fees adjusted for the boarding offering, and who therefore had no choice but to withdraw their children.

Nyero Rock Secondary School, located in Nyero sub-county, Kumi District, operating as both a day and boarding school prior to Covid-19; but opted to become a boarding school exclusively once the SOPs guidelines were issued. Children who couldn't afford the higher fees UGX 385,000 (\$105) per term compared to the day rate of UGX 87,000 (\$24) per term

⁴ Interview with the head teacher Lweru S S Buikwe on 17th November 2020

were advised to seek enrollment at Wiggins Secondary School, a government day school located 6kms away from Nyero Rock; Dr. Aporu Okol Secondary School, 8kms from Nyero Rock, was touted as an alternative in the event of capacity constraints at Wiggins Secondary. St. Charles Lwanga Bukerere Secondary School in Mukono District, similarly dispensed with its day offering to focus exclusively on a boarding offering. The head teacher affirmed that this decision negatively affected learners, whose parents were unable to afford the higher fees UGX 440,000 (\$120) per term and who thus had to withdraw their children from the school. Mukongoro High School, in Mukongoro Sub County, Kumi District, also operated as both a day and boarding schooling, which opted to restrict its focus to boarding services.

As noted above, Wiggins Secondary School in Kumi Municipal Council retained its day school offering; however, many of the learners who had previously boarded found the daily commute to be unmanageable. St. Jude Zzinga Primary School, in Najja Town Council, Buikwe District, switched its focus to day arrangement, which resulted in 27 learners (10 boys and 17 girls) leaving the school due to distance.

The DCAO of Kumi cautioned school administrators to refrain from switching to boarding services, if they did not have the appropriate facilities to do so. She attested that some schools, which did not have proper infrastructure, resorted to ad hoc arrangements, such as converting some classrooms into dormitories. However, she rightly observed the dangers inherent in such an arrangement, noting that “girls can be ‘stolen’ by boys/men from schools without a proper fence, which is located near to a town, and lacks proper boarding facilities.”⁵

The DEO of Buikwe confirmed a disproportionate preference by schools to operate as boarding but warned that “we are not going to legalize an illegality. If a school does not meet the minimum standards, they will not be allowed to operate.”⁶

In Kaabong District, schools have always tended to be boarding because of the nomadic nature of the communities and the feeding programmes supported by Government and NGOs. Schools, therefore, reopened for candidate classes as boarding. In Busia, similarly, many schools have retained a boarding focus, compelling many learners unable to meet the higher fees to change schools or fail to report back on the expected date (perhaps on the account of the inability to marshal required resources in time). As indicated earlier, at Madibira Primary School in Busia Municipality, 15 girls did not return to school owing to their failure to secure the UGX 260,000 (\$71) boarding fees. Bunyide Primary School in Buhehe Sub-County Busia District, prior to Covid-19, had only a handful of boarders enrolled at the school; nevertheless, the school insisted on becoming a boarding school when it was required to restrict its focus, despite not even having adequate dedicated boarding facilities. Consequently, make-shift “dormitories” were set up in vacant classrooms with no provision made for beds, learners simply sleep on mattresses placed directly on the floor.

⁵ Interview with DCAO Kumi on 10th November 2020

⁶ Interview with DEO Buikwe on 17th November 2020



Photo 7: A classroom improvised as a dormitory at Bunyidde Primary School

5.3 High cost of education

“I am a single mother. I am a tailor and also deal in selling of secondhand clothes but with the lockdown my sales have reduced. I am not in position to get the school fees for my daughter. She was studying at Omatai primary school in Palisa District, paying UGX 350,000 (\$95) per term in boarding.

I decided to shift her to Mukongoro Township Primary school [a government school]. I have paid UNEB Registration fees UGX 12,000[\$3];

Feeding UGX 40,000 (\$11) and money for tests UGX 2000 (\$0.5). The school is near my home and my daughter is able to walk back home.

However, there are some challenges to meet the basic needs of the child such as sanitary towels, knickers and other scholastic materials. The school does not have a fence and outsiders can enter and harm our children. The face masks which were distributed by the government are also insufficient; when the children wash [them] they do not have any to put on the following day while going to school.”⁷

The Mukono Municipal Inspector of Schools identified school fees as the greatest obstacle to education facing learners and their families. She said, “I have received many complaints about school fees, schools have increased fees. Private schools made parents pay for the 1st term; yet children studied for one month [before government imposed lockdown] – why push the burden onto parents, why not share the cost? Schools claim they had already bought food for the entire term, but why didn’t they sell it?”⁸ This sentiment was echoed by a parent in an FGD hosted in Lumuli Village, Goma Division, Mukono District who asked, “why are these private schools charging parents full school fees for first term when we teachers have not been paid? This is robbery.”⁹

Many parents confirmed school fees are still outstanding for their children who have returned to school, and they attributed this to their impoverished circumstances. “The matooke is

⁷ FGD Participant from Mukongoro in Kumi District on 10th November 2020

⁸ Interview with Mukono Municipal Inspector of Schools on 18th November 2020

⁹ FGD participant Lumuli Village Goma Division Mukono on 16th November 2020

ripening in the garden, but there are no customers. Even the beans and cassava, there are no people buying. This is why we cannot pay fees for the candidates.”¹⁰

The study team found a significant discrepancy in the school fees charged by public schools, which raises questions about government’s regulation of public school fees. For example, Lweru SS in Buikwe District charges fees of UGX 50,000 (\$14) far lower than other government schools in rural districts such as Kumi where Ongino SS in Ongino Sub County, Kumi District, charges UGX 210,000 (\$57) which is considerably high for a day school. However, even where school fees are relatively affordable, many parents still struggle and in cases fail to pay, which confirms the findings of various studies conducted by state and non-state actors which identified fees as a barrier to educational access for many Ugandan children. Lweru SS’s the head teacher decried parents’ failure to pay the low UGX 50,000, with demands for payment from the school met with “*head teacher naffe Covid yatukuba,*” which literally translates to “head teacher we are also affected by Covid.” He expressed fear of political reprisals as the reason the school is reluctant to send children home for non-payment of fees.

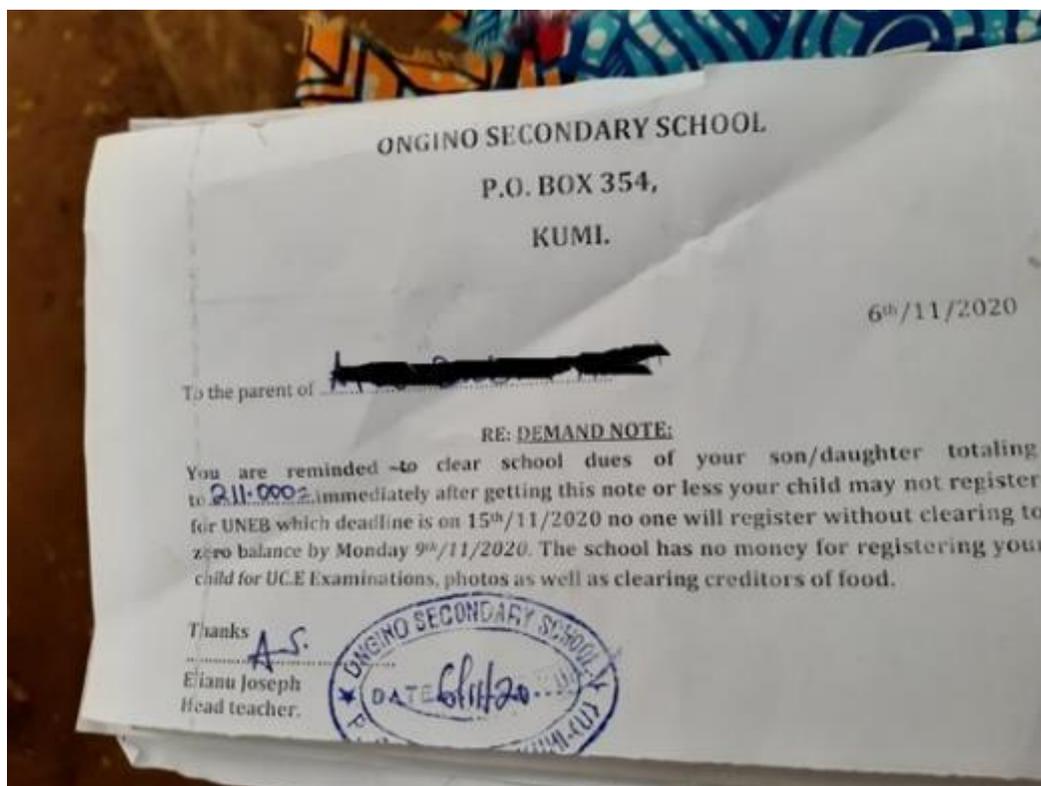


Photo 8: School fees slip Ongino SS in Kumi District

Inasmuch as many learners transferred from private to government schools due to the inability of their parents to pay school fees – as elaborated above – some parents, participating in the FGD hosted in Mukono, informed ISER that there isn’t a great difference between government and private schools in terms of fees. “Madam, how about us who lost jobs, what shall we do with our dear children? Even government schools charge, and the many requirements cost too much, how shall we overcome when these requirements take half of the fees? So even in

¹⁰ FGD participant Ddungi Village, Ngogwe Sub County Buikwe District on 18th November 2020

government schools, the pressure is the same as in private schools, there is no difference! But we want our children to study so what can we do..?”¹¹ Another parent whose son attends Namilyango College School, a government school, complained about high school fees, which make it challenging for her to return her child. “Much as our children did not finish the first term, school fees were cleared to zero, and 2nd term fees were required - we had to pay 50% and sign a consent form committing to clear the balance within two weeks of school commencing. The fees alone are UGX 1,650,000 (\$450), registration another UGX 200,000 (\$54) and the geography tour UGX 300,000 (\$82). I have another child in a private school with similar conditions.” Another parent noted: “the uniforms are not fitting anymore, because they have been home eating nonstop – but you know we must pay UGX 200,000 for the uniform alone. They can’t even allow us to make our own, you have to pay this money to the office.”

Parents complained that even UPE schools deny learners to enroll or chase them home for non-payment of fees. “We have a UPE school here [Misindye Primary School], you always find children on the road walking because they have been chased away because their parents owe fees.”¹²

In Kaabong District, almost half of the expected candidate learners have not reported back to their schools. While a lack of school fees is a commonly cited reason for learners not returning to school, there are other persistent challenges in Karamoja, which have only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the District Inspector of Schools explained that Covid-19 prevention and control measures disrupted campaigns promoting education in the district, which appears to have resulted in education slipping down the community’s list of priorities. In Kaabong Town Council, parents complained about their lost income, in particular that acquired from the sale of the potent local brew, “Buthi” which was banned by the Government in an effort to curb the spread of Covid-19.

In Busia District, loss of income from the ban on cross-border trade was the main reason cited for the failure to pay fees, compromising learners’ ability to return to school. The head teacher of Madibira Primary school in Busia Municipality revealed that most of the parents of learners who did not return to school, indicated that they could not secure school fees, which are UGX 260,000 (\$71) a term. Since Busia is a border district, most of the parents residing here are reliant on cross-border trade, which virtually stopped when international borders were closed to human traffic as a Covid-19 containment measure. At a FGD facilitated in Eastern Ward, Busia Municipality, one physically disabled parent lamented that before Covid-19, they could earn some money by using their wheelchair to help traders ferry their goods across the border. However, once the border was closed, they could no longer earn any money, which they needed to send their children back to school. In Buhehe Sub-County, the community decried the border closure, which has led to widescale loss of income, making it almost impossible for parents to pay school fees. Many members of this community derived an income from selling agricultural produce, like maize, a variety of beans, etc. to traders from Kenya; this is no longer possible due to covid-19 lockdown measures.

¹¹ FGD participant in Lumuli Village Misindye Parish Mukono District on 16th November 2020

¹² FGD participant in Lumuli Village Misindye Parish Mukono District on 16th November 2020

From the FGDs, it is evident that many parents are struggling to survive in the light of the loss of income. Many confirmed that they have been unable to pay school fees for their children who have returned to assume candidate studies. This was corroborated by school administrators, who informed the study team that school fee payment is a significant challenge. At one school, the head teacher said not a single learner had paid their school fees in full. One FGD participant in Kumi told ISER that her mother pleaded with school administrators to allow her to study while she attempts to process a bank loan.

In Lumuli Mukono, one parent said her employment contract was terminated during the lockdown, and her husband is also experiencing considerable financial struggles. “I was working as a private school teacher, they stopped paying me in March and the contract was terminated. I have no income at all. My husband is a businessman, he was buying and selling produce but he had to stop during the lockdown and to survive we ended up eating the capital.”¹³.



Photo 9: FGD in Kumi town

At Mukongoro High School, in Mukongoro Sub County, Kumi District, the head teacher informed the study team that some children left because they could not afford the school fees of UGX 244,000 (\$66) per term.

The head teacher of Busia Forward SS reported that fees payment stood at less than 40%, with the school barely able to meet its most basic operational costs. At Madibira Primary School, only about half the learners had cleared their school fees of UGX 260,000 (\$71) a term. One of the parents whom the study team encountered at the school was there to request more time to complete payment. She complained that the school was asking for the previous term’s fee balance, despite learners being released with two thirds of the term still remaining when schools were ordered to be closed due to lockdown.

5.4 Teenage pregnancy and early marriages

“I am learning from home; I revise my old notes, but my friends also give me their books and I copy notes. I am happy that the school has registered

¹³ FGD participant in Lumuli Misindye Parish Mukono District on 16th November 2020

me for examinations, I will come back to school after giving birth in January [2021], I tell other girls who have got pregnant not to shy away from school.”¹⁴

Local government responses to adolescent learner pregnancies varied, most likely due to an absence of clear policy guidance and communication from the line ministry on this issue. The fear of stigma and discrimination, even where pregnant learners were permitted to resume their education, discouraged many from returning and made marriage an appealing alternative. This is worrying, since pregnancy and early marriage was identified by study respondents as one of the leading causes of school drop outs. The study team learned of 50 incidents of pregnant candidate class learners in the schools visited. The Kumi District Education Officer (DEO) confirmed that several learners dropped out of school on account of being pregnant or to pursue marriage. He cited cases of girls falling pregnant and running away from home; adding that uncharacteristically, there were cases of boys who married during the lockdown. “There has been a wave of pregnant learners. My cousin’s daughter who is in S4 is four months pregnant, but fortunately she has returned to school. In her school there are three other learners in her situation. I also know that pregnancies tend to be under-reported.”¹⁵ He attributed pregnancies in part to the inadequate provision by parents of necessities girls require, including scholastic materials, meals and menstrual pads, which makes girl children susceptible to seduction when men make financial promises to them.

Buikwe District’s DEO noted that head teachers had not yet officially communicated any learner pregnancies and marriages. However, district health workers have confirmed attending to young girls who are pregnant. “As a district we allow them to register for examinations but some shy away when the stomach is big, but we encourage them to study from home.” The head teacher of Sacred Heart SS in Najja, Buikwe District, was aware of 10 learner pregnancies that likely occurred during the lock down period. This number may well be higher. At the nearby primary school, St. Jude Zzinga, one registered learner was confirmed pregnant. She has not, unlike learners in a similar position at other schools, received any counselling from her school. At Lweru SS in Buikwe Town Council, Buikwe District, the head teacher reported five cases of pregnancy and four cases of marriage among his learners.

¹⁴ Interview with pregnant girl in Nyero Kumi District on 11th November 2020

¹⁵ Interview with DEO Kumi on 13th November 2020

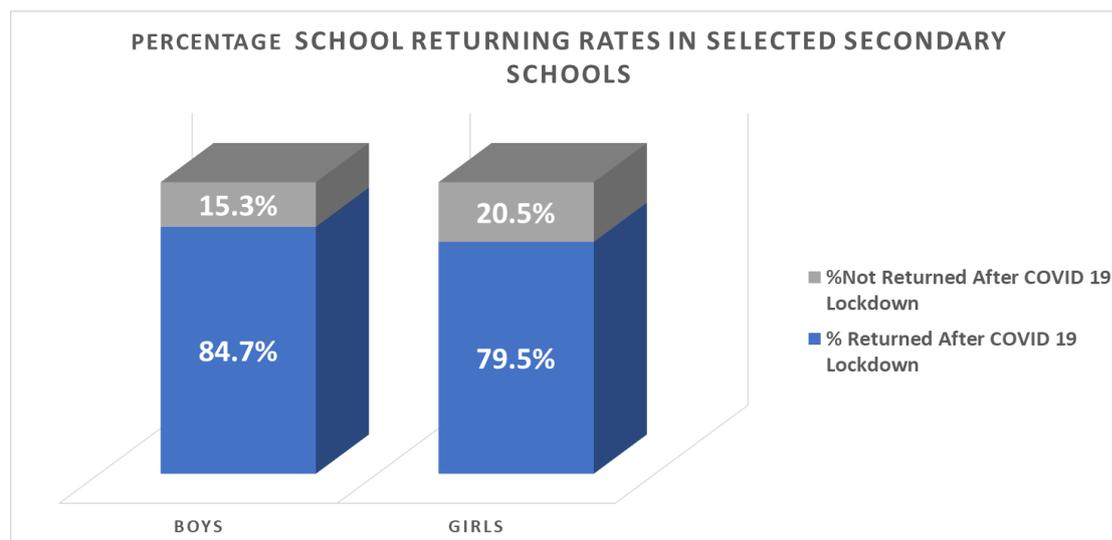


Figure 3: Percentage School Return Rates in Selected Secondary Schools (pre- and post- Covid-19)

The head teacher of Nyero Rock High School, in Nyero Sub-County, Kumi District, reassured the study team that “for us we have no problem, we have welcomed back pregnant girls and are in class studying. We are not chasing away anyone.” The school confirmed that eight learners are pregnant while two have married. At the time of the study team’s visit to the school, four pregnant girls had reported and were in class studying (three in S4, one in S6); one was studying from home but reported to school to register for Uganda’s Certificate Examinations (UCE) examinations. This learner hopes to return to school in January 2021 after she gives birth, two pregnant learners opted not to return to school. The Head Teacher noted that “we have provided counselling to all the students and – in an effort to avoid stigma – also invited officials from the district health office to talk to the learners to appreciate lockdown’s effect on girl children. We advised pregnant learners to check in with staff in case of anything; but so far all is well.”¹⁶ The head teacher had also engaged all staff members, encouraging them to be supportive towards these girls, and to adopt a sensitive manner when talking to them. He noted, “growth and development can be challenging. We must give these children an opportunity to complete the education cycle. Let us be human, this is a lesson for them, they have become more focused and determined. I appeal to my fellow head teachers not to chase pregnant girls away from school. I am a parent, I also have girls [so I can empathize].”¹⁷

As with Nyero Rock, a P7 learners at St. Peters Church of Uganda Nantabulirwa Primary School, located in Goma Division, Mukono District, was reported to be pregnant girl; however, she is proceeding well with her studies, and is registered to sit for the Primary Leaving Exam (PLE). The learner has been provided counselling by the school and the Municipal Education office. Two other learners attending this school were reported to have disappeared from their homes, with one claimed to be married.

At Ngogwe Baskerville Secondary School, in Ngogwe Sub-County, Buikwe District, the head teacher knew of three pregnant learners at the school, all of whom did not return to school. At

¹⁶ Interview with the head teacher of Nyero Rock High School, Nyero Sub County, Kumi District on 11th November 2020

¹⁷ *ibid*

Buikwe Sabawali Primary School, in Buikwe Town Council, Buikwe District, one learner did not return to school after she married. “She got married, the father works as a watchman and used to leave her alone in the house,”¹⁸ the head teacher stated.



Photo 10: School learners with whom ISER interacted, who got pregnant during the Covid-19 lockdown

At Ongino Secondary School, in Ongino Sub-County, Kumi District, three learners did not report back to school. The school’s Director of Studies informed ISER that one of the learners was pregnant, another followed her husband to Kampala, while the third’s parents were unable to pay school fees. In the same sub county, almost half of the candidate class learners at Kapolin Primary School did not return to school. A Senior Woman Teacher attributed these drop outs to poverty, pregnancy, early marriage and sexual harassment. “Some of these girls are attacked on the way to school, they hurl insults at them. When one has big breasts or a big bum, they shout at her that she is wasting time at school. Others are told, you are big enough, get married. Some even say, I can take you. That trading center where they pass is dangerous.”¹⁹

The study team visited a pregnant learner in Koidike village, Nyero Sub County, Kumi District, who declined to go back school to complete P7 due to fear of stigma. She is now married and lives in a homestead with a co-wife. This young woman said, “I don’t want to go back to school because other children will laugh at me. I am now married.”

At Agule Primary School, Kumi Sub County, Kumi District, the head teacher and deputy reported that one learner who fell pregnant is now living in a low-income settlement in Kumi town popularly referred to as Kumi works. The man responsible for her pregnancy abandoned

¹⁸ Interview with the head teacher Buikwe Sabawali Primary School in Buikwe District on 18th November 2020

¹⁹ Interview with the Senior Woman Teacher at Kapolin Primary School on 10th November 2020

her there, fleeing to Kampala. At St. Charles Lwanga Bukerere Secondary School, nine girls are not accounted for. The school received information that one of them became pregnant and presumably lost interest in continuing with school; the study team was unable, however, to verify why the learner had failed to return to school.

The Deputy Chief Administrative Officer of Kumi District informed ISER that she visited a primary schools called Olupe along Soroti road and learned that one of its learners became pregnant during the lockdown period and did not report back to school; while another, due to her parent's dire economic situation, was taken to work as a maid in Mbarara District.

Some head teachers to whom the study team spoke appeared resigned to the incidence of pregnancy and marriage. "You can't do much. Parents tell their girls that they are overgrown. I know of one who chased away a child saying that she was delaying dowry. One of our students got married during the lockdown and the parents invited one of the teachers to be the Master of Ceremony at the function but he declined, that is the society we are living in."²⁰

Pregnancies of learners are not as rampant in urban districts, which are characterized by households with a considerably higher level of income than those in rural areas. One participant in a FGD held in Lumuli Village said, "here it is not common; our children are in fences (gated homes). I think in the villages it is an issue of poverty, where parents do not provide basics for their children. Here we are able to do that."²¹

The issue of learner pregnancy is a contentious one, especially in church founded schools. One head teacher of such a school appealed to the Ministry of Education and Sports to issue a circular to all head teachers with clear guidelines on how to handle the issue, noting that all instructions received thus far have been verbal. According to the head of the Gender Unit at Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry has just released *Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda*. The guidelines provide for a rights-based approach to managing learners' pregnancies, calling for mandatory school leave from the first trimester of the pregnancy onwards. However, these guidelines have not been widely disseminated for implementation by school administrators.

Early marriage is blamed for the substantial number of learners who have not returned to school in Kaabong District, post-lockdown. In Pajar Primary School, two (of the forty) girls in P7 were married. The head teacher of Kathile Primary school, which lost almost 95% of its P7 learners (**only 3 of 58 have returned**) also blamed early marriages for this high dropout rate. At Kamukuny Girls primary school, 28 of the expected 75 girls did not return to school, with some of them citing marriage as the reason for their non-return. The District Inspector of Schools explained that before Covid-19, a greater effort had been expended on campaigns to promote the education of the girl child, with support from partners such as World Vision and Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). Covid-19 lockdown measures seriously disrupted the roll-out of these campaigns, and increased dropouts were subsequently observed.

²⁰ Interview with a school head teacher who chose to be anonymous on 11th November 2020

²¹ FGD participant from Lumuli Village, Misindye Parish Mukono District on 16th November 2020

5.5 Engagement of children in economic activities

“There was a window to join police and prisons and many opted for that. I pleaded with one boy not to go but he told me he was not sure the father would continue paying school fees. The father is a peasant farmer. This boy told me that joining police will enable him to support his siblings”²²

The need for children to prioritize economic activities above their education is disproportionately affecting boys. According to Buikwe District’s DEO, more boys than girls have dropped out of schools in this district. He attributed this to boys having to take on fishing activities in Lake Victoria, while others engage in sand mining.

The head teacher of St. Charles Lwanga Secondary School Bukerere, in Goma Division, Mukono District, informed the study team of the threat posed by a stone quarry that is active near to the school. “Many children work in the quarry, while others engage in bricklaying, especially the self-paying students. Others work on construction sites. Learners are enticed to leave the school premises to keep checking on the business because it is the source of their school fees.”

In Kumi District, a number of learners have dropped out of school to engage in fishing on Lake Bisina. 18 of the 58 candidates class learners at Kapolin Primary School, in Ongino Sub County, have not returned to school post-lockdown. One of the major reasons learners are abandoning school in favour of fishing is the location of the school on the lakeshore (Bisina lake). The Kumi DEO lamented that “some learners brag how they are better off than the teachers. One can catch fish and go to town and make sales of 50,000shs a day, that one will not go back to school. They will buy the parents some local brew and a few things at home and that is it.”²³

Several learners attending Nyero Rock Secondary School and Mukongoro High School in Kumi District joined police and prison services, motivated by rumors that government would declare the 2020 school year nullified.

At Sacred Heart Najja Secondary School in Buikwe District, the Head Teacher confirmed that many boys are engaging in business, losing interest in continuing with their education. “Some went into fishing and farming since we live near the lake shore [Lake Victoria]. Others we see ride bodaboda and they even brag that they are earning better income than teachers, others shout master *kuwe ku [should I give you] lift*”.²⁴

At Lweru Secondary School in Buikwe Town Council Buikwe District, 25 learners did not return to school. The Head Teacher noted that some of the learners set up petty business during the Covid-19 lock down period, while others joined politics. “Some are contesting for the position of councilor, some are working as campaign managers for people contesting for the position of Member of Parliament.”²⁵ At a neighboring primary school, Buikwe Sabawali, one

²² Interview with the Head Teacher Nyero Rock Secondary School Kumi on 11th November 2020

²³ Interview with Kumi DEO on 13th November 2020

²⁴ Interview with Head Teacher Sacred Heart Najja SS Buikwe on 18th November 2020

²⁵ Interview with the head teacher Lweru SS Buikwe on 18th November 2020

boy refused to return to school, opting to continue with bricklaying; another absconded from away from home; and one moved to the Busoga region, citing challenges at his home.

Children are now perceived as a source of cheap labour for business people and as a supplement to the family income, particularly among more impoverished communities. Many parents interviewed noted that they have benefitted from their children's financial contributions during their prolonged home stay, in addition to more customary assistance with domestic chores. "Poor parents are not willing to release their children to return to school – they claim they want to wait until next year. We have explored the skills and talents of our children. My cousin built his house with free labour provided by children."²⁶

It is also true that children have also supplemented the income of their parents and thus hesitant to take them back to school. One parent told ISER that his son was working on a construction site and earning 9,000shs a day. "As a parent I have benefited from the workforce, I borrowed 200,000shs from son when I wanted to buy cement. Good children also buy sugar for the home but the extravagant ones you don't see their money."²⁷

5.6 The dilemma of school feeding

There were complaints that the majority of the learners at Agule Primary School in Kumi Sub-County, Kumi District, remain hungry throughout their time at school, which is from 7am-5pm. According to the head teacher, a significant number of parents lost their sources of livelihood during the Covid-19 lockdown, and are thus unable to provide for their children.



Photo 11: Sorghum garden near Agule Primary School in Kumi District, parents struggle to feed children at school due to changes in loss of income as a result of decline in sorghum trade

"90% of these students stay hungry. Before Covid, they would pay UGX 10,000 per head, per term for porridge. But now they have no money to pay for food. This is a drought-prone area: people grow sorghum, however, a kilo now sells for UGX 400, half of UGX 800 it could fetch at market before lockdown."²⁸

²⁶ Interview with a parent in Kumi town on 10th November 2020

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Interview with the head teacher Agule Primary School on 11th November 2020

ISER learned that enrolment rates have been dropping significantly at this school. Some learners abandon their education to engage in fishing. ISER’s analysis of enrollment for P1 and P7 from 2015 to 2020 shows that the school has many learners in P1, but P7 enrollments are very low. The head teacher noted that the numbers shot up in 2017 when government introduced porridge at lunch time. “People here do fishing but the fish is so tiny, parents are poor, have little land, are not educated and can’t afford scholastic materials. Covid made things even worse. They used to take their sorghum to Bukedea for sale but Covid interrupted the business.”²⁹

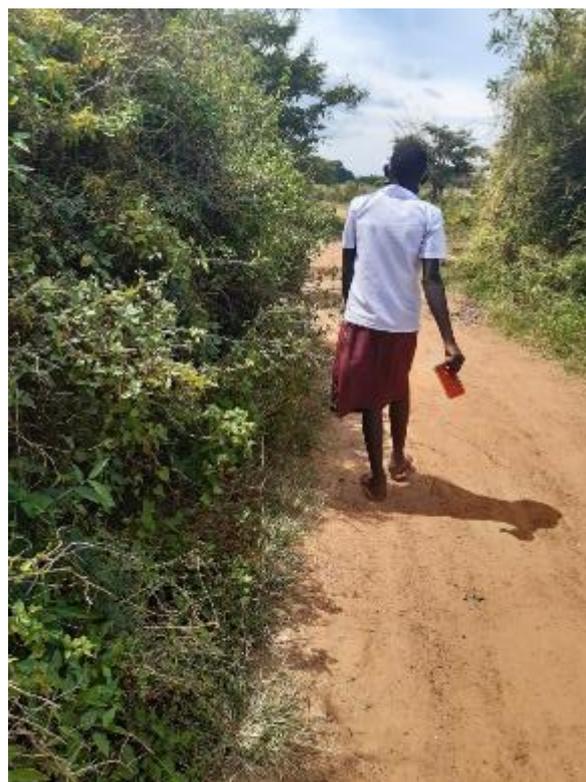


Photo 12: A P.7 learner returning to school after looking for lunch, we found her eating raw mangoes

²⁹ Interview with the head teacher Agule Primary School on 11th November 2020

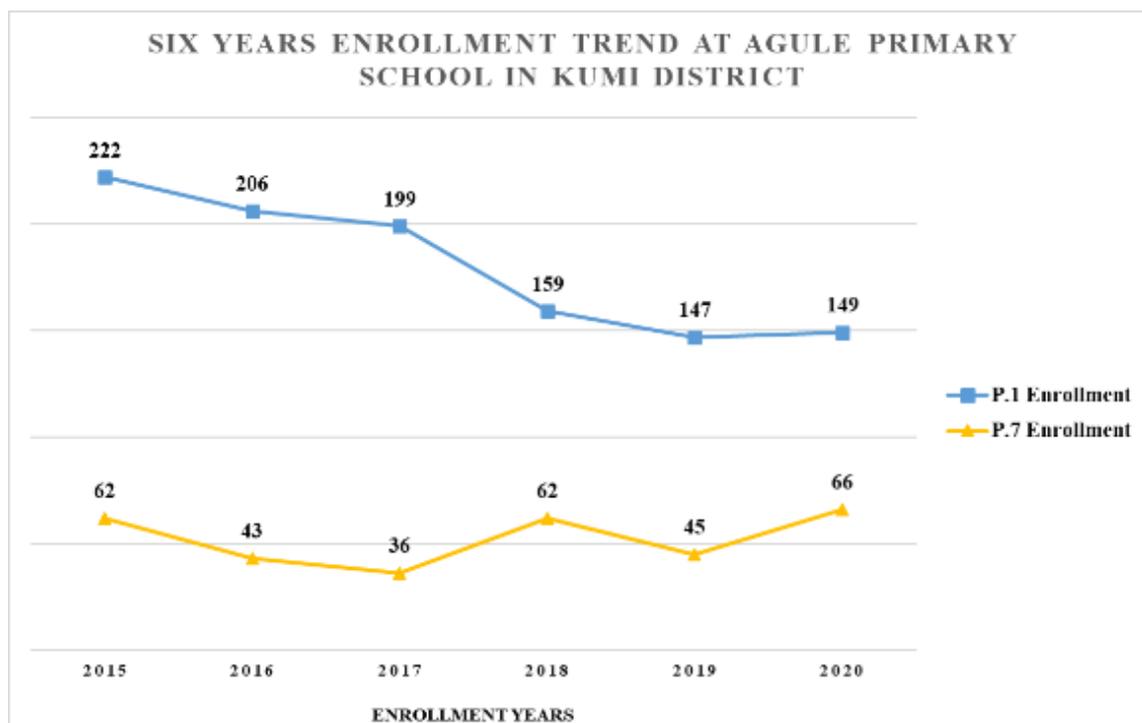


Figure 4: 6 years' enrollment at Agule Primary School

At Nkokonjeru UMEA Primary School, in Nkokonjeru, Buikwe District, learner hunger was attributed to parents having no money to pay for food. This school charges UGX 80,000 (\$22) per term, which is inclusive of food; however, the head teacher noted that only seven of the 29 candidate class learners had paid a feeding deposit.

At Sacred Heart Najja SS in Buikwe, the head teacher told ISER that a number of children shy away from school because of hunger. “We charge UGX 50,000 (\$14) per learner, per term; but, as I speak, only 25 of our 88 candidate learners have paid. Their parents say they don’t have money.”³⁰

In effect, the conundrum of school feeding has become a key barrier to quality education access for learners, in particular those from vulnerable groups. On the one hand when schools demand that parents pay for their children’s feeding at school, the children of parents who cannot afford will rather keep their children out of school. On the other hand, when children stay hungry at school because their parents cannot afford to pay, they lose interest in the school, making them more inclined to drop out completely.

5.7 Quality and equity challenges of homeschooling interventions

“Our children here in Koidike cook food, wash plates, go to the garden, graze cattle. They are not learning.”³¹

To ensure learning during the Covid-19 lockdown, Ministry of Education and Sports developed and implemented the Continuity of Learning Framework, which consisted of the following: lessons broadcasts on radio and television, and the distribution of printed home-study materials.

³⁰ Interview with the Head Teacher Sacred Heart Najja SS Buikwe District on 18th November 2020

³¹ FGD participant from Koidike Village in Nyero Sub County Kumi District on 12th November 2020

In Kaabong District, all the parents interviewed confirmed that their school-going children had received printed materials. However, they were skeptical that their children were learning much from the materials or the radio lessons. The first reason they advanced for this skepticism was the fact that the printed materials are only available in English language, which many primary school learners have not mastered well enough to engage in self-study. The second reason advanced was that many learners have a substantial burden of home chores, which coupled with other distractions (the inference being that learners were less monitored during the protracted home stay than they would ordinarily be at school) caused them to struggle to concentrate and sustain their self-study. Consequently, homeschooling was not perceived to have had its expected effectiveness.

In Busia District, in contrast, the majority of parents engaged affirmed that their children did not receive printed, self-study materials for their school-going children. Instead, they were told that there was only one copy at the Local Council 1 (LC1) office, which they could use to make photocopies. However, loss of income they experienced as a result of the closure of the border (making cross-border trade impossible), meant most parents could not afford to photocopy the study materials.



Photo 13: ISER's Programs Director in a discussion with learners of Koidike Primary School who are still at home because of Covid-19

There has been a great deal of anxiety among learners regarding the return to school process. However, the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer (DCAO) of Kumi District encourages learners not to lose hope, saying that she herself has undergone similar experiences during the National Resistance Army liberation war, which compelled students to abandon school for two years. “I was doing manual work, gardening and it strengthened me, by the time I returned to school I was more mature. I became a better candidate and I scored a first grade as if I had not been in the village. I have told my children, be ready for that, it shouldn't discourage you, time

will come when you will go back to school.”³² However, she added that much as she was able to go back to school and sit for her PLE, some of her colleagues dropped out of school while some were abducted. “That was a war situation but with Covid there is no abduction. I didn’t see much effect of those two years on my performance. I even performed better than children who were in Kampala learning while we were in the village digging. You can also take this as time for the brain to relax, education is very tedious.”³³

The majority of parents who participated in the FGDs concurred that their children are not learning much at home. Most also confirmed that they did not received the learning materials distributed by the government. A few reported that they obtained some learning materials from friends, which they photocopied. “I just heard on radio that government was distributing learning materials, but I personally have never seen them. If those things are there, then there is a big gap in communication and mobilization. The children are not learning, they are just playing.”³⁴

“I have five siblings; my mother is a policewoman. She is away most of the time so I have to take care of them. I also work at a restaurant in town to earn some money...but I will tell you, my siblings are not studying at all.”³⁵



Photo 14: FGD in Ddungi Village, Kikanya Parish, Buikwe District

Parents also noted some limitations with study from radios and TVs. “The TV teachers are very fast, especially for upcountry children who can’t follow and then get discouraged. When I am not at home, my child watches other things on the television.”³⁶

³² Interview with DCAO Kumi on 10th November 2020

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ FGD participant in Kumi Town on 12th November 2020

³⁵ FGD Participant in Kumi Town on 12th November 2020

³⁶ FGD participant who is a retired school head teacher on 12th November 2020

During an FGD convened for parents in Koidike village, Koidike Parish Nyero Sub County in Kumi district, many noted that they are still waiting for the radios government promised them.

In an FGD at Ongino Village, Ongino Sub-County in Kumi District, participants indicated that they were not aware of the government's programme to distribute learning materials. "The children are digging. The LC1 moved around, registering people to receive radios for children to continue learning, but we have never seen them."³⁷

Some parents confessed that they are not in a position to facilitate the home learning of their children. "Let government just open the schools for all learners, we have no capacity to guide them at home to study effectively."³⁸

In the FGDs held in Mukono Municipality, an urban location about 12KMs from Kampala city, the responses were typical of urban, educated parents with higher income levels than their rural peers – though many were not spared from the adverse economic impacts resulting from the Covid-19 lockdown, which effectively shut down the economy. A number of parents made arrangement for their children to study at home. For example, in an FGD held in Lumuli Village, Seeta Mukono, three out of the five participants arranged for teachers to instruct their children from home; while one parent was in the process of identifying a teacher to assume this responsibility because of her childrens' protracted home confinement. "I have a child in P2, I had got a teacher but my money finished. I used to pay UGX 7,000 (\$2) a week, but only managed to do this for one month. Now she is not learning."³⁹

"Mine are completely not learning. They had access to a teacher for the first three months of the Covid lockdown, but my money got finished. I tried to teach the one in baby class, but gave up when she constantly complained that I am not like her teachers, that I am tough."⁴⁰ Another parent of four children complained that her children were doing self-revision until mid-June, but they lost interest due to the prolonged period at home and are now agitating to return to school.

Parents also spoke about the recent curriculum changes, which hinder their ability to effectively support their children who are studying from home. "My daughter is in S1 and they had just changed the curriculum so I am defeated, I have nowhere to start."

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Concluding observations

School fees pose a major barrier to educational access; the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated access to education, especially for learners from households whose incomes and livelihoods have been severely and negatively affected by the measures instituted by the government in an effort to curb the spread of the pandemic. One result the families whose children have been accessing education in private schools have abandoned them for public or government aided schools implementing the universal primary and secondary education

³⁷ FGD participant in Ongino Sub County Kumi District on 12th November 2020

³⁸ FGD participant in Ongino Sub County Kumi District on 12th November 2020

³⁹ FGD Participant in Lumuli Village, Misindye Parish Mukono District

⁴⁰ *ibid*

programs. However, it is unfortunate that even the UPE and USE schools are charging fees in form of UNEB registration fees, fees for tests, development fees among others. This is defeating the spirit and objective upon which the UPE and USE program were initiated.

Many learners have opted for government-aided or public school education rather than private schooling. Although learners are also required to make monetary contributions in government aided/public schools, parents attested that these schools are more affordable when compared to private schools. This confirms that public provision of education remains the key model for the sustainable delivery of education, more especially in low-income communities.

In almost all of the schools visited, learners in candidate classes, (P7 or S4), are using a distributed across a minimum of three classrooms, with most of the schools having no more than seven classrooms in total for primary and four classrooms in total for secondary school learners. This reinforces that schools cannot reasonably begin to bring back semi-candidate classes whilst they are required to enforce social distancing (two metres between learners) without requisite infrastructure adjustments being made. This is compounded by the fact that many schools, even prior to lockdown, were already operating with limited infrastructure, notwithstanding high enrollments rates, especially in lower classes.

The Covid-19 lockdown, which prompted school closures has also aggravated social factors contributing to the high dropout rates noted above. Most notably, these factors include teenage pregnancies and early marriages. During the lockdown, more girls have either become pregnant or been lured or coerced into early marriage, motivating them to drop out of school. Even where schools have received general guidance from government to re-admit and register pregnant candidate class candidate for national examinations many are unlikely to continue with and complete their studies because of the paucity of support systems implemented to facilitate their continued learning.

When school closures were extended, the Ministry of Education and Sports planned to distribute self-study materials and deliver lessons on radio and televisions to facilitate continued remote learning. However, the ministry has since communicated that it printed and distributed only 25% of the required self-study materials, which gap it intended to fill by broadcasting lessons on television and radio. However, the findings of studies, including this one, reinforce that learners are struggling to follow broadcast lessons on radio and television. This is attributed to the lack of interaction and feedback mechanisms between the learners and teachers, as well as the fast pace at which lessons are delivered, not forgetting the significant domestic and formal workload many students bear in addition to their school responsibilities.

6.2 Recommendations

Charging school fees in schools implementing Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) programs creates a barrier to education access, more especially for children from poor backgrounds. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Sports and District Local Governments should urgently establish and strictly enforce mechanisms restricting the charging of fees in UPE and USE schools; or, if this proves impossible, to at least implement a hierarchical fee structure, responsive to the differential income realities found in rural and urban settings.

It is trite to state that pregnant girls are entitled to assert and claim their right to education. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education should prioritize as a matter of urgency the dissemination and implementation of the Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda. In the interim, the Ministry could issue a circular to schools instructing them to register and not turn away pregnant girls, not only for examinations, but permitting their attendance of exam preparation classes. The government should also put in place support measures to support pregnant girls to feel comfortable at school – this could include provision of counseling services, sensitization to entrench stigma free environment. Parents, School Management Committees, NGOs, and development partners should mobilize children to return to school, including those who have dropped out to pursue income-generating activities.

The Ministry of Education and Sports should urgently revise the provision in the guidelines for the reopening of education institutions, which require schools to operate either as day or boarding. The revision should clearly stipulate that schools should adhere to their prior orientation (i.e. whether they previously operated as primarily day or boarding schools, then they should persist in the same vein).

The government, by constructing and providing grant aid to new primary and secondary schools, has demonstrated a commitment to expand access to primary and secondary education. However, government's infrastructural support to existing schools has been limited. Consequently, many existing schools operate with inadequate, dilapidated structures. It is therefore recommended that government prioritize this infrastructure support to ensure that school facilities are capable of observing social distancing measures, even once other classes join candidate classes in returning to school. This is critical, especially given the failings of homeschooling.

It is recommended that government and its relevant partners expedite and strengthen the implementation of support programmes for the most vulnerable learners, especially girls, to increase current educational through-put rates. The Global Fund Project is one of many that seeks to contribute to conditions encouraging adolescent girls to remain in school, in part through the conferral of school subsidies to about 18,000, mostly vulnerable girls in 40 districts. However, implementation of this Project is subject to bureaucratic delays, which government should strive to resolve, especially whilst the implications of Covid-19 persist, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls.

The Ministry of Education and Sports alluded to plans to implement a second phase of distribution of self-study materials. This is likely a response to criticisms regarding the shortfall of materials distributed in the first phase and the inadequacy and inefficacy of the lessons delivered via television and radio broadcast – which were the chief interventions offered to learners during their prolonged home confinement when schools were closed by government in an effort to curb the spread of Covid-19. The Education Ministry, in conjunction with the District Local Governments (District Education Department) is urged to sensitize and mobilize parents and the general public to support the homeschooling of learners.

The closure of several private, for-profit schools motivates for efforts to be directed to strengthening Uganda's public education system. The need to increase funding to government

schools cannot be denied: not only to finance the construction of government schools in areas currently under-served, to ensure an adequate number of schools of an acceptable quality, proximate to all marginalized communities. The pandemic, which has increased demand for government schools, has presented an opportunity to improve service delivery of public education, highlighting the need to prioritize public schools so that any parent who opts for private schooling does so principally, rather than from necessity or desperation.

Annex 1. List of Schools Visited

Kaabong District	
Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
1. Kamukuny Girls Primary school	1. Kaabong Secondary School
2. Kakamar Primary School	
3. Kathile Primary School	
4. Pajar Primary School	
Busia District	
Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
5. Bunyide Primary School	2. Busia Forward Secondary School
6. Madibira Primary School	3. Lwagula Memorial Secondary School
Kumi District	
Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
7. Aakum Primary School	4. Ongino Secondary School
8. Kapolin Primary School	5. Mukongoro High School
9. Kodukul Primary School	6. Nyero Rock High School
10. Agule Primary school	
11. Olungia Primary School	
Buikwe District	
Primary	Secondary
12. St. Matia Mulumba Buikwe Ssabawaali Primary School	7. Lweru Secondary School
13. St. Jude Zzinga Primary School	8. Sacred Heart Secondary School
14. Nkokonjeru UMEA Primary School	9. Ngogwe Baskerville Secondary School
15. Kikanya Primary School	
Mukono District	
Primary	Secondary
16. St. Peters Church of Uganda Nantabulirwa Primary School	10. St. Charles Lwanga Bukerere Secondary School

Annex 2. Enrollment data before and after Covid by district and school

District	School	Before Covid Lockdown		After Covid Lockdown	
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Kaabong	Kakamar Primary School	36	32	24	19
	Kamukuny Girls Primary school	03	72	02	47
	Kathile Primary School	42	58	03	21
	Pajar Primary School	52	40	51	38
	Kaabong Secondary School	73	40	87	45
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Busia	Bunyide Primary School	35	32	32	30
	Madibira Primary School	58	82	60	80
	Busia Forward Secondary School	20	18	22	25
	Lwagula Memorial Secondary School	23	18	21	17
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Kumi	Aakum Primary School	23	30	17	20
	Kapolin Primary School	30	28	23	17
	Kodukul Primary School	28	24	27	25

	Agule Primary school	32	34	47	36
	Olungia Primary School	17	20	17	18
	Ongino Secondary School	40	19	40	16
	Mukongoro High School	168	63	142	60
	Nyero Rock High School	S4: 123 S6: 61	94 21	110 47	72 8
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Buikwe	St. Matia Mulumba Buikwe Ssabawaali Primary School	21	37	18	38
	St. Jude Zzinga Primary School	28	38	21	21
	Nkokonjeru UMEA Primary School	13	15	9	20
	Kikanya Primary School	13	19	17	25
	Lweru Secondary School	S4: S.6: 27	25	85 15	67 12
	Sacred Heart Secondary School	S4: 89 S6: 12	60 8	40 8	30 3
	Ngogwe Baskerville Secondary School	S4: 85 S6: 25	73 26	72 23	60 14
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Mukono	St. Peters Church of Uganda Nantabulirwa Primary School	24	36	31	35
	St. Charles Lwanga Bukerere Secondary School	*	*	*	*

*Incomplete data