



# **“Lay a Strong Foundation for All Children”**

**Fees as a Discriminatory Barrier to  
Pre-Primary Education in Uganda**

Copyright © 2024 Human Rights Watch

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 979-8-88708-130-4

Cover design by Ivana Vasic

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide. We scrupulously investigate abuses, expose the facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all.

Human Rights Watch is an international organization with staff in more than 40 countries, and offices in Amman, Amsterdam, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels, Chicago, Copenhagen, Geneva, Goma, Johannesburg, London, Los Angeles, Nairobi, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, Tunis, Washington DC, and Zurich.

For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.hrw.org>

The Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) is a not-for-profit human right non-governmental organization (NGO) in Uganda. ISER was founded and registered in 2012 to enhance realization of social and economic rights through innovative approaches to research, capacity building, social mobilization, and advocacy.

ISER's programmatic interventions are guided by the following five strategic objectives: to strengthen the legal, policy and institutional frameworks for the realization of SERs; to advance a body of knowledge critical to the realization of SERs; to empower communities to monitor and demand for the realization of social and economic rights, to promote access to remedies for violation of SERs; and to build a well-resourced organization capable of delivering on its strategic mandate.

For more information, visit: <https://iser-uganda.org/>



# “Lay a Strong Foundation for All Children”

## Fees as a Discriminatory Barrier to Pre-Primary Education in Uganda

<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>10</b>
To the Government of Uganda.....	10
To the Ministry of Education and Sports and Parliament.....	10
To the Ministry of Education and Sports .....	10
To the National Curriculum Development Centre .....	11
To Uganda’s Development Partners .....	11
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Terminology.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>I. Uganda’s Education System.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Primary and Secondary Education.....	15
Pre-Primary Education .....	18
Uganda’s Commitment to Free Pre-Primary Education .....	20
<b>II. The Benefits of Pre-Primary Education .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>III. The Negative Consequences of Pre-Primary Fees .....</b>	<b>29</b>
Children Miss Out on Pre-Primary Education.....	30
Interrupted Education .....	32
Poorer Performance in Primary School.....	34
Premature Primary Enrollment .....	35
Higher Rates of Repetition in Primary School .....	37
Higher Drop-Out Rates.....	38
Increased Inequality .....	38
Unequal Access for Rural Children .....	40
<b>IV. Desire for Free Pre-Primary Education .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>V. Financing for Education .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Economic and Social Benefits of Government Funding for Pre-Primary Education .....	46

Government Savings Through Reduced Repetition and Higher Completion Rates .....	47
Availability of Resources .....	49
Assistance from External Partners.....	52
<b>VI. Additional Challenges in Pre-Primary Education .....</b>	<b>54</b>
Unqualified Teachers .....	55
Lack of Government Oversight .....	57
Lack of a Standard Curriculum .....	58
Lack of Awareness of the Benefits of Pre-Primary .....	59
<b>VII. International Law and Standards on Early Childhood Education.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>68</b>

## Summary

Everything in this world has a foundation. Without a foundation, it is weak, and it will collapse. It is important to have a foundation for education and that is nursery. It will therefore be good for the government to lay a strong foundation for education for all children.

— a parent from Kawempe, Kampala

James Muhindo (not his real name) is a “boda boda” motorcycle driver in Tokora, Nakapiripirit. He would like to send his five-and-a-half-year-old son to pre-primary school but said he cannot afford the fees. “I don’t have money to take him to nursery,” he said. “There is a pre-primary school nearby but they [charge] 30,000 [Uganda Shillings, UGX; US\$8] for nursery. It is a private school.... My son cannot read and write. He cannot speak English.... There are these people who are rich who are taking their children to school. For the poor, things remain like that.”

In Uganda, fewer than 1 in 10 pre-primary aged children (ages 3-5) are enrolled in a formal pre-primary school, and 60 percent attend no school at all. The government does not provide any public pre-primary education (often called “nursery”), so families seeking education for their young children must rely on private providers that can charge prohibitive fees. For example, in Kampala, these fees can reach UGX 1,750,000 (US\$462) or more per child per term. For a full school year—three terms—fees for just one child at this rate represent more than two years’ wages for an average person in paid employment in Uganda and exceeds the annual tuition for many programs at Uganda’s leading university, Makerere University.

Parents interviewed for this report said they paid from UGX 5,000 (\$1.35) per child per term in rural Nakapiripirit in the Karamoja subregion to UGX 800,000 (\$215) per child per term in Kampala, the capital city. Some parents said that the high cost of pre-primary education in Uganda meant that their children missed out on pre-primary education all together or stopped attending when they became unable to continue paying fees.



A teacher conducting a lesson at the private Parents' Hope Nursery and Primary School in Namayingo district.  
© 2022 ISER

Children from low-income and rural families are most likely to miss out on pre-primary education. Private pre-primary schools are concentrated in urban areas with higher-income families, where schools are more easily guaranteed adequate income. In 2019, the adjusted net attendance rate in schooling of 5-year-olds in Uganda was more than 17 percent higher for children in urban areas than in rural areas, and 49 percent higher for those in the richest quintile than those in the lowest-income quintile. More than half of children in the poorest 20 percent of households never attend a day of pre-primary.

The disparities in access to pre-primary schooling for low-income and rural families have lifelong consequences and exacerbate Uganda's wealth inequality. Children who miss out on pre-primary do not perform as well in primary school as their peers who attended pre-primary and are more than twice as likely to repeat grade 1 at the primary school level. They are also more likely to drop out of school entirely. Children who miss out on these foundational skills may never catch up to their peers. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), "educational inequalities start early in life and disadvantages accumulate over the lifecycle."

Early childhood learning has profound long-term benefits for children’s cognitive and social development, their health, future educational attainment, and employment and other opportunities later in life. The pace of brain development is at its highest in the first years of life, so this period represents a critical opportunity to make a positive difference in children’s lives.

Pre-primary education also mitigates inequalities among children from families of different incomes and contributes to countries’ economic development. Access to pre-primary education improves employment prospects and earnings, resulting in increased tax revenues and GDP. Between 1980 and 2021, public expenditure on education accounted for 50 percent of global economic growth and 40 percent of extreme poverty reduction. A 2023 cost-benefit study of pre-primary education in Uganda concluded that “investments in early childhood have the greatest rate of return of any human capital intervention.”

In Uganda, every schilling invested in pre-primary education can bring up to UGX 16 in benefits, including improved lifetime earnings, new employment opportunities, and reduced primary school repetition rates. Greater access to pre-primary schooling also increases the employment and income of parents, by allowing them—particularly mothers—to enter or re-enter the workforce earlier.

For this report, the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) Uganda interviewed 102 Ugandan children, parents, teachers, and education officials regarding access to pre-primary education in Uganda. Interviewees identified a wide range of benefits of pre-primary education for children, including the development of their personalities, mental and physical abilities, social skills, and preparation for success in primary school.

A father of four children in Mukono district said that pre-primary school “helps a child to get start-up knowledge like spellings of words which ignites his learning at primary level.” A Kampala tailor said that nursery school “gives the child confidence to respond and answer questions.... By the time they join primary, they are fully prepared and don’t find serious challenges.” A pre-primary teacher said: “Pre-primary education stimulates the kids’ thinking. Kids develop their talents and are able to interact with their peers.”





Children play at the Bobi Nursery and Primary Private School in Omoro district, where pre-primary fees are UGX 80,000 (US\$ 21) per child per term. © 2022 ISER

Experts at Uganda’s Ministry of Education and Sports also agree. Hajat Safina Mutumba, the Principal Education officer for pre-primary education at the Ministry of Education provided a litany of benefits, enumerating how early childhood education boosts children’s cognitive and social skills, helps children become emotionally intelligent, promotes mathematical and scientific reasoning, improves their concentration spans and problem-solving skills, builds their confidence, and prepares them for lifelong learning.

Both teachers and students observed differences in primary school between children who attended pre-primary and those who did not. A 16-year-old boy in Gulu said: “Those who did not study did not know how to write their names, for me I knew because it was the first thing they teach in nursery.” A teacher in Mukono district said: “Those who attended nursery education are always far better than those who missed nursery learning.” Another teacher from Nakapiripirit district said: “When you compare the literacy competence of those who attended pre-primary and those that did not, there is a difference.”



Research supports these observations. A survey by Makerere University of 5,000 grade 6 students from all parts of Uganda found that students who had 13 to 24 months of pre-primary education had better reading and numeracy skills than children who did not benefit from a pre-primary education.

Many parents interviewed for this report described their inability to afford pre-primary fees for their children or the financial hardships they experienced to send their children to nursery. A grandmother who sells groceries at a Kampala market pays for her 5-year-old grandchild to attend nursery school and will send a younger grandchild when she gets older. She said: “They could not start earlier because the mother did not have money.... My grandchildren attend only one year in nursery school. I cannot afford to pay for the three years.” A mother of six in Omoro district works as a subsistence farmer and says: “I always struggle to find the money. For some of my children, they did not finish all the levels because I could not afford fees for every term.”

Some parents said they wanted to send their children to all three years of pre-primary, but could only afford one or two years. Others said they had to discontinue their child’s pre-primary education when they were no longer able to pay the fees. Some said there was no pre-primary school available in their area.

The cost of pre-primary education is often much greater than the costs associated with primary school. For example, a mother of three in Kampala said that pre-primary cost her five times as much as primary school: “Imagine, I paid UGX 55,000 (\$15) per term per child at Kasubi Family Primary School (a public primary school implementing Universal Primary Education). But at nursery, I had to pay UGX 300,000 (\$81) per child per term.”

Because pre-primary school is more expensive than primary school, many parents enroll their children in primary school before the usual age of 6, even though the children are underage and not prepared. Data show that 20 percent of Ugandan children aged 5 are already enrolled in primary school. Early enrollment in primary school creates overcrowded classes, exacerbates inefficiencies in the education system, and increases repetition rates. According to UNICEF, excessive repetition can result in 1.2 extra years of education per child and an estimated 5–10 percent of the education budget wasted.



The Pre-Primary facility at Namalu Primary School (a UPE school) in Nakapiripirit district. The pre-primary program was started in 2019 at the initiative of the community. Fees are UGX 30,000 (US\$ 8) per child per term. © 2022 ISER

Some parents who enroll their children early fully expect their children to have to repeat grades. A mother of eight children in Nakapiripirit sent several of her children to primary school at age 4. She said: “When you take the child to start school, they face challenges. Failing in class is automatic.” Nonetheless, parents often feel they have no alternative.

Nearly all of the family members and teachers interviewed for this report expressed a preference for free, public pre-primary education. A grandmother paying for her granddaughter’s pre-primary education said: “Just like they provide UPE (Universal Primary Education), they should do the same for nursery.... It should be universal nursery education.” A mother in Kampala said: “Nursery schools need to be under the control of government.... Every parish should have a nursery school.” A father in Mukono district with five children said that if free pre-primary school was available, “I should enroll immediately ... Why can’t we have free schools?”

A small number of parents interviewed expressed skepticism about the value of pre-primary education. One teacher from Nakapiripirit said: “Before, Karamoja was not into education, it is now that they are waking up.... [Parents] need to be sensitized.”

In 1997, Uganda declared that primary school education would be free for all children. This Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy opened school doors to millions of children. Between 1997 and 2018, primary enrollment more than tripled from 2.8 million to 8.8 million. Ten years later, in 2007, Uganda became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to introduce universal secondary education (USE).

Despite these significant advances, Uganda’s educational system is underfunded, and outcomes are poor. Only 40 percent of children complete primary education and only 16 percent complete upper-secondary education. The government’s 2022 Education Partnership Compact with its development partners cited high drop-out rates, poor educational achievement, insufficient and inadequately prepared teachers, and too few schools in some areas. Classes are often over-crowded and teacher absenteeism is rampant. The funding provided by the government to local schools (called capitation grants) is often insufficient to cover costs, prompting local schools to impose informal fees on families that create financial barriers and fuel high drop-out rates.

As part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, governments made a commitment at the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea to allocate 4 to 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to education and/or to allocate at least 15 to 20 percent of public expenditures to education. Uganda’s investments in education are far below these benchmarks and are also below its regional peers. Uganda’s education budget—UGX 4,447 billion for fiscal year 2023/24—accounts for only 8.4 percent of the total national budget. By contrast, neighboring Kenya and Tanzania both allocate more than 18 percent of their national budgets to education. Government-funded education makes up only 1.9 percent of Uganda’s GDP, significantly below the regional average of 4 percent and falling well short of the international benchmarks that advise spending 4 to 6 percent of GDP on education.





Children sit outside the Awere private primary school in Omoro district, which opened a pre-primary program in 2014. Fees for children attending pre-primary are UGX 30,000 (US\$ 8) per term for each child. © 2022 ISER

Uganda’s Vision 2040 reaffirmed universal primary and secondary education as a human right, and its 2022 Education Partnership Compact commits to progressively increasing resources for the education budget as part of efforts to transform Uganda’s educational system. The Ugandan government has also recognized pre-primary education as a foundation for further education and set a goal that all children in Uganda should have the opportunity to complete at least one year of quality pre-primary education. President Yoweri Museveni has called for the establishment of an early childhood development center at every UPE school.

A commitment to provide free, inclusive, and quality pre-primary education for all children in Uganda will require significant resources but will also help strengthen Uganda’s overall education system. For example, expanding access to pre-primary education in Uganda could reduce Primary 1 repetition rates by 50 percent, and just one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education is associated with a 12-percentage point increase in primary school graduation rates in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Universal pre-

primary education also results in cost savings at primary and secondary education levels by making education systems more efficient. A 2023 cost-benefit analysis estimated that 90 percent of the costs of scaling up pre-primary education in Uganda could be covered through savings from reduced repetition rates and underage enrollment in primary school. Research in various African countries similarly suggests that investments in early childhood care and education can be offset by up to 87 percent because of higher efficiency within primary education alone.

The Ugandan government should strengthen its efforts to ensure that all children enjoy free, quality, and inclusive education, including by making adequate investments in its education budget. Under international human rights law, states are obliged to take steps to the maximum of their available resources to progressively realize economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education. Multiple analyses have found that Uganda can do more than it does now to secure adequate resources for education, including by widening its tax base, improving compliance with existing tax laws, revisiting tax exemptions, curbing illicit financial flows and other forms of corruption, among other measures.

As part of its commitment to the right to education, Uganda should make at least one year of pre-primary education compulsory and free for all children and should establish government-funded pre-primary units at every primary school implementing universal primary education. Over time, it should make additional years of pre-primary education free for all children.

Every child has a right to education, which should be fulfilled from early childhood without discrimination. Children's access to pre-primary education should not depend on their parents' ability or willingness to pay fees. All children should have access to education at this critical point in their lives and be able to reap its lifelong benefits.

# Recommendations

## To the Government of Uganda

- Establish government-funded pre-primary units at every primary school implementing universal primary education.
- Make at least one year of pre-primary education compulsory and free for all children, and make additional years free over time, as expeditiously as possible.
- Immediately increase financial investment in the public education sector bearing in mind international benchmarks established in the 2015 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action to dedicate 15 to 20 percent of the national budget to education, and the obligation to use maximum available resources for the realization of rights, including the right to education, and specific funding targets for pre-primary education.
- Increase revenue for allocation to public education through progressive and fair taxation, and curbing illicit financial flows, other forms of corruption, and unjustified tax exemptions and tax abuse.

## To the Ministry of Education and Sports and Parliament

- Amend Section 10, subsection 2 of the Education (Pre-Primary, Primary, and Post Primary) Act of 2008 to obligate the government to fund and implement universal pre-primary education.

## To the Ministry of Education and Sports

- Until pre-primary education is provided free of charge, the Minister of Education should issue a statutory instrument to regulate school fees in pre-primary schools to increase access to pre-primary education for the greatest possible number of children.
- Expand capacity for training and accreditation of teachers at pre-primary level at government teachers' colleges and recruit trained and qualified pre-primary teaching personnel.
- Conduct public education campaigns on the value of pre-primary education for children's development and educational success.



- Effectively regulate the private educational sector, ensuring that all pre-primary or “nursery” schools and private primary schools with pre-primary classes are licensed, registered, and regularly monitored to ensure compliance with education law and standards. Increase resources within the Ministry of Education and Sport to ensure ministry officials have more resources to conduct necessary oversight and regulation of private actors.

### **To the National Curriculum Development Centre**

- Develop a unified national curriculum for pre-primary education in a participatory process involving pre-primary teachers, parents, school administrators, experts in early childhood education and other stakeholders. The curriculum should be widely disseminated to all pre-primary schools, and teachers and staff should be trained on how to use it.

### **To Uganda’s Development Partners**

- Meet the global target of dedicating 0.7 percent of gross national income to aid, including allocations for pre-primary through secondary education.
- Provide technical assistance and development aid specifically to assist the government of Uganda in establishing a universal pre-primary education system.

## Methodology

This report is based on research conducted between July 2022 and January 2024. Researchers from the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights in Uganda (ISER-Uganda) conducted 102 interviews with children, parents and other caregivers and guardians; school principals, teachers, and other school staff; and education and other government officials. The 26 children interviewed included 15 girls and 11 boys and were aged 8 to 17. The 38 school personnel interviewed included school principals and pre-primary and primary school teachers at both private and government primary schools.

Interviews were conducted in Kampala, Uganda’s capital, located in the south of Uganda, as well as Nakapiripirit and Omoro districts in northern Uganda, and Namayingo district in eastern Uganda. These locations were chosen to encompass both urban and rural areas and higher- and lower-economic areas.

Interviews were conducted in person in English, Luganda, Lusoga, Acholi, and Samia. ISER-Uganda researchers informed all interviewees about the purpose and voluntary nature of the interviews, the ways in which they would use the information, and that interviewees could decline to answer questions or could end the interview at any time. The interviewees received no inducement, payment, service, or other personal benefit for the interviews.

In addition, ISER-Uganda researchers visited 23 pre-primary facilities, representing a variety of approaches to the provision of pre-primary education in Uganda, including private institutions that required the payment of tuition and other fees; private institutions that provided tuition-free education; government public primary schools with attached pre-schools run as income generation for the primary school teachers; institutions with Christian and Islamic religious affiliations; and one public pre-school institution, at Makerere University, which is primarily for the children of university staff.

Human Rights Watch conducted additional interviews with experts from non-governmental organizations and academics and reviewed secondary sources, including Ugandan government policies and reports; reports from UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank,

International Monetary Fund, and other United Nations entities and international groups; and academic and other sources.

Pseudonyms are used for all children and parents in this report to protect their privacy. Pseudonyms match the gender of the individual but may not correspond to their linguistic heritage or ethnicity.

## Terminology

In this report, “child” and “children” are used to refer to anyone under the age of 18, consistent with usage under international law.

According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) definition, pre-primary education programs are designed to include educational content for children aged 3 years up to the start of primary education, which in Uganda, is age 6.

This report uses the term “pre-primary” to refer to education for children aged 3 until the entry into compulsory primary school at age 6, in line with Uganda’s Education Act of 2008. In Uganda, pre-primary education may also be referred to as “nursery school,” “preschool,” “kindergarten,” or “baby school.” These terms may be used when quoting individuals interviewed for this report.

In many instances in this report, the term “teacher” is used to refer to individuals who have teaching responsibilities in pre-primary schools. These refer to individuals who may or may not have qualifications in early childhood education.

# I. Uganda’s Education System

Uganda’s 1995 Constitution guarantees all persons a right to education. A child “is entitled to basic education which shall be the responsibility of the State and the parents of the child.” The state is required to “promote free and compulsory basic education” and “take appropriate measures to afford every citizen equal opportunity to attain the highest educational standard possible.”<sup>1</sup>

Under Uganda’s 2008 Education Act, the education system for children consists of three years of pre-primary education, seven years of primary education, and six years of secondary education. Seven years of education is compulsory, beginning at age 6.<sup>2</sup>

## Primary and Secondary Education

In Uganda, primary education typically begins at age 6. The government of Uganda introduced “Universal Primary Education” (UPE) in 1997, formally abolishing primary school tuition, Parents and Teachers Association fees, and textbook fees for up to four children per family.<sup>3</sup> The removal of fees prompted a surge in the number of children attending school: Primary enrollment more than tripled from 2.8 million in 1997 to 8.8 million in 2018.<sup>4</sup> To cover costs at the school level, the government allocates capitation grants—funding provided to schools on a per student basis to pay for instructional materials, co-curricular activities, and school maintenance.

In practice, however, primary education is still not completely free even at UPE schools and the government reports that cost is the primary reason for school dropout.<sup>5</sup> Education

---

<sup>1</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995, objectives XIV(ii), XVIII(i)-(ii); and chapter 4, arts. 30 & 34.

<sup>2</sup> Education (Pre-primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act of 2008, art. 10(3)(a).

<sup>3</sup> Sophia Kan and Stephan Klasen, “Evaluating Universal Primary Education in Uganda: School Fee Abolition and Educational Outcomes,” *Review of Development Economics*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2021), accessed May 6, 2024, doi:10.1111/rode.12725, pp. 116-147.

<sup>4</sup> Uganda National Planning Authority, *Third National Development Plan 2020/21-2024/25*, January 2020, <https://www.health.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NDP-3-Report.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, *Uganda’s Progress Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Two Optional Protocols*, 2020, [https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda\\_Progress\\_Report\\_UNCRC\\_Report\\_13.6.2021.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda_Progress_Report_UNCRC_Report_13.6.2021.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 38.

personnel and parents interviewed for this report said that parents had to pay Parent Teacher Association fees, registration fees, learning materials, salaries for non-teaching staff such as security guards, and even toilet paper.<sup>6</sup> ActionAid reported in 2017 that families sending their children to public school in Uganda paid up to 33 percent of their household income for school-related costs.<sup>7</sup>

According to ISER-Uganda’s research, the Ugandan government does not allocate sufficient funding to education and to ensure that capitation grants correspond to real enrollment. Consequently, government primary schools charge non-tuition fees to meet or reduce the funding gap.<sup>8</sup>

In 2007, Uganda became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to introduce universal secondary education (USE).<sup>9</sup> The initiative was intended to make secondary education more accessible, particularly for the increased number of children graduating from primary school. As part of a public-private partnership, the government began to provide subsidies to private schools to make them more affordable for students and families.

The number of secondary schools increased by 26 percent from 2,373 in 2007 to 3,000 in 2017, with the private sector seeing the greatest growth of 34 percent. Secondary enrollment increased from 1.23 million students in 2009 to 1.37 million in 2017.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with Daniel Odongo, primary school teacher; Ajan, Odek, Omoro district, July 28, 2022; and Godfrey Owiny, deputy head teacher, Namalu, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> ActionAid, *Tax, Privatisation, and the Right to Education: Influencing education financing and tax policy to transform children’s lives*, 2017, [https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/tax\\_privatisation\\_report\\_online.pdf](https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/tax_privatisation_report_online.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Mugoya Musa, “Impact of limited Universal Primary Education (UPE) capitation grants and unregulated private school charges on access to basic education under NDP II,” in Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), “Social and Economic Rights in Uganda: Has the National Development Plan II (2015/16-2019/20) lived up to its Expectations?” Economic & Social Rights Advocacy Brief, no. 10, January 2019, [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/19\\_03\\_07\\_ESRA\\_brief\\_issue\\_10\\_design\\_layout\\_Final.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/19_03_07_ESRA_brief_issue_10_design_layout_Final.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024); ISER, Position Paper on the Education and Sports Sector Ministerial Policy Statement FY2022/23, undated, [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ISER\\_Position\\_Paper\\_on\\_the\\_Education\\_and\\_Sports\\_Sub\\_Program\\_Ministerial\\_Policy\\_Statement\\_FY2022\\_23.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ISER_Position_Paper_on_the_Education_and_Sports_Sub_Program_Ministerial_Policy_Statement_FY2022_23.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> James O’Donoghue et al., “A review of Uganda’s Universal Secondary Education Public Private Partnership programme,” Education Partnerships Group, 2019, [https://web.archive.org/web/20231014195549/https://epg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Uganda-PPP-Review\\_2018\\_Final.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20231014195549/https://epg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Uganda-PPP-Review_2018_Final.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Uganda National Planning Authority, *Third National Development Plan 2020/21-2024/25*, <https://www.health.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NDP-3-Report.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2024).



The introduction of universal primary and secondary education expanded access to education for millions of children. Despite gains in enrollment, however, completion rates are poor. The latest data from UNESCO indicates only 40 percent of children in Uganda complete primary education, 34 percent of children complete lower-secondary education, and 16 percent complete upper-secondary education.<sup>11</sup>

In May 2021, Uganda’s government launched an Education Policy Review Commission to review the current education system and propose reforms. As of early 2024, the review was still underway. ISER-Uganda’s analysis is that under-investment in education, coupled with increased enrollment and access, has placed a strain on essential elements needed to guarantee quality education, such as classrooms, teachers, and instructional materials. This has negatively affected the quality of education at all levels—thus undermining primary completion rates, reducing children’s school preparedness and progress, and exacerbating drop-out rates, especially for girls.<sup>12</sup>

Weaknesses in the public education system have also fueled the growth of private alternatives.<sup>13</sup> About 21 percent of primary school students are enrolled in private schools, and the rate grew at an average of about 1 percent per year between 2009 and 2019. At the secondary level, 51 percent of students are enrolled in private institutions. In the analysis of ISER-Uganda, the burgeoning of private schools has not been matched with an effective regulatory framework, and their number exceeds the capacity of the education ministry to effectively regulate and monitor.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO, Institute for Statistics data, 2020, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Saphina Nakulima, “Are we on Track? NDP II Education Budget Commitments and Actual Allocations,” in ISER, “Social and Economic Rights in Uganda: Has the National Development Plan II (2015/16-2019/20) lived up to its Expectations?”; and ISER and other Ugandan organizations working on economic, social and cultural rights issues, “Joint Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Uganda,” 2022, [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Uganda\\_ESCR\\_Cluster\\_Joint\\_Submission\\_to\\_the\\_UN\\_UPR.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Uganda_ESCR_Cluster_Joint_Submission_to_the_UN_UPR.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> ISER and the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Privatisation, Discrimination and the Right to Education in Uganda*, June 2015, [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/privatisation\\_discrimination\\_and\\_right\\_to\\_education.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/privatisation_discrimination_and_right_to_education.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> ISER and other Ugandan organizations working on economic, social and cultural rights issues, “Joint Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Uganda,” [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Uganda\\_ESCR\\_Cluster\\_Joint\\_Submission\\_to\\_the\\_UN\\_UPR.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Uganda_ESCR_Cluster_Joint_Submission_to_the_UN_UPR.pdf), p. 8.

## Pre-Primary Education

The Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary Education Act of 2008 recognizes pre-primary as the first level of education and gives the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports responsibility for oversight.<sup>15</sup> Under the law, however, pre-primary education is not required to be provided free of charge. The law states that pre-primary education is “to be run by private agencies or persons to provide education to children aged from two years to five years and the financing of that type of education shall be a responsibility of the parents or guardians.”<sup>16</sup>

According to the latest available government data, only 9 percent of pre-primary aged children (ages 3-5) in Uganda attend a registered and licensed preschool.<sup>17</sup> Studies suggest that only 18 percent of Uganda’s early childhood care and education centers are registered, meaning that they meet minimum standards, and that a further 26 percent are licensed (meaning they have made an application but have not met quality standards). The remaining 56 percent are neither registered nor licensed.<sup>18</sup> Household surveys indicate that more than 60 percent of 3-5 year-olds in Uganda are not attending school of any kind.<sup>19</sup>

In 2019, there were 28,194 pre-primary schools operating in Uganda, enrolling 2,029,441 children (1,020,941 girls and 1,008,500 boys).<sup>20</sup> Pre-primary schools are run by individual investors, community groups, civil society organizations, international NGOs, and faith-based organizations, operating both as for-profit and not-for-profit establishments.<sup>21</sup> Although some pre-primary schools are attached to UPE schools, they are not government schools and usually charge fees. The only government-funded pre-primary school in

---

<sup>15</sup> Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act of 2008.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 10 (2)(a).

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, “Annual School Census, 2013-2017,” as reported in Uganda Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract, 2021*, [https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/o1\\_20222021\\_Statistical\\_Abstract.pdf](https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/o1_20222021_Statistical_Abstract.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, September 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda> (accessed May 6, 2024), pp. 18-19.

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF, *Uganda Annual Report 2022*, August 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/15431/file/Cover%20page.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 11; citing 2019 Uganda National Household Survey.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> The Constitution of Uganda, objective XVIII (iii), guarantees that “individuals, religious bodies and other non-governmental organisations shall be free to found and operate educational institutions if they comply with the general educational policy of the country and maintain national standards.”

Uganda is at the School of Education at Makerere University for children of university staff. The nursery’s teachers are paid by the university, a public institution.

Children go through three classes at the pre-primary level. Different providers might use terms such as “baby class, middle class, and top class,” “kindergarten I (baby class), kindergarten II, and kindergarten III” or simply “class I, class II, and class III.” Children may attend pre-primary for one, two, or three years, depending on the age of entry.

According to a 1992 government white paper on education in Uganda, pre-primary education should aim at developing the capabilities and healthy physical growth of children; help the child develop good social habits as an individual and as a member of society; to develop moral values; to enrich the child’s experiences by developing imagination, self-reliance, and thinking power; help the child appreciate his or her cultural background and customs; and develop language and communication skills in their mother tongue.<sup>22</sup> Uganda’s National Curriculum Development Center—an autonomous statutory institution under the Ministry of Education—has developed a learning framework for 0-6 year-olds which provides guidance on key benchmarks for early childhood education, but there is no standard national curriculum for pre-primary education.<sup>23</sup>

Although the government does not fund pre-primary schools, it funds a department that coordinates, provides policy direction, monitors, and oversees the implementation of pre-primary education.<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Education is also responsible for registering and licensing nursery schools and monitoring the education sector. Monitoring is delegated to district education officers, who report to the ministry through the basic education department.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Education, *Government White Paper on implementation of the recommendations of the report of the Education Policy Review Commission Report entitled “Education for National Integration and Development,”* (Kampala: Ministry of Education, 1992), p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Gregory Tweheyo, manager research, and Seezi Bogere, research officer, National Curriculum Development Centre, Kampala, September 19, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Ministry of Education and Sports, Kampala, October 5, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



Children at naptime at the Makerere Child Study Center in Kampala. The center is part of Makerere University and is the only government-funded pre-primary school in Uganda. It was initially established for children of the university staff, but it is now open to the general public. © 2022 ISER

## Uganda’s Commitment to Free Pre-Primary Education

In December 2016, Uganda launched a National Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy and Action Plan. The plan endorsed the role of “integrated ECD services” for every child in Uganda as “a critical and fundamental strategic step towards achieving Vision 2040.” Launching the plan, President Yoweri Museveni called for the establishment of at least one quality ECD center in every village across Uganda by 2020, and said: “I would like to see that every Universal Primary Education school has a quality ECD centre.”<sup>26</sup>

In 2020, the government reiterated this goal in its report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, stating that it was planning and working to expand community-

---

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Ntabadde Makumbi, “National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy of Uganda launched,” UNICEF, December 11, 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/stories/national-integrated-early-childhood-development-policy-uganda-launched> (accessed May 6, 2024).

based ECD centers and to attach them to primary schools, and working to develop and implement a comprehensive ECD policy framework.<sup>27</sup>

The Ugandan government’s commitment to education also includes a 2022 Education Partnership Compact, a shared agreement between the government and education development partners to implement policy reforms on priority areas to transform Uganda’s education system. The compact “recognizes that quality pre-primary education forms the foundation for primary education and that quality primary education is, in turn, foundational for a transition to more equitable, relevant, and higher-quality secondary education.” The compact includes an aspiration for “all children in Uganda to have the opportunity to complete at least one year of quality pre-primary education.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, *Uganda’s Progress Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Two Optional Protocols*, 2020, [https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda\\_Progress\\_Report\\_UNCRC\\_Report\\_13.6.2021.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda_Progress_Report_UNCRC_Report_13.6.2021.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, *Education Partnership Compact: Transforming the Education System in Uganda*, August 2022, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2022-09-Uganda-Partnership-Compact.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2024).

## II. The Benefits of Pre-Primary Education

I liked and enjoyed the time in nursery.... At break time we took porridge....

Nursery level can open the mind to think.

— a 14-year-old boy from Omoro district<sup>29</sup>

A growing body of research has found that early childhood learning can have profound long-term benefits for children’s cognitive and social development, educational attainment, health, and employment prospects. The pace of children’s brain development is at its highest in the first years of life, so this period represents a critical opportunity to make a positive difference in children’s lives.<sup>30</sup> Emerging evidence finds the benefits of pre-primary education are not only lifelong but cross-generational.<sup>31</sup>

Access to early childhood education can mitigate inequalities among children from families of different incomes.<sup>32</sup> According to UNICEF, universal access to quality pre-primary education narrows early achievement gaps for children from disadvantaged households and places them on a more equal footing with their well-off peers.<sup>33</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF) states that increasing low pre-primary enrollment can yield “large positive returns over an individual’s entire lifetime, particularly for the most disadvantaged.”<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a 14-year-old boy, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood, UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1 (2006), [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F7%2FRev.1&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F7%2FRev.1&Lang=en) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 30.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., James J. Heckman and Ganesh Karapakula, “Intergenerational and Intragenerational Externalities of the Perry Preschool Project,” May 2019, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 25889, [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w25889/w25889.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25889/w25889.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024); Jorge Luis García, James J. Heckman, and Victor Ronda, “The Lasting Effects of Early Childhood Education on Promoting the Skills and Social Mobility of Disadvantaged African Americans,” July 2021, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 29057, [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w29057/w29057.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w29057/w29057.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>32</sup> See United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education* (New York: UNICEF, 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019> (accessed May 6, 2024); UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, “The persistence of poverty: how real equality can break the vicious cycles,” UN Doc. A/76/177, July 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a76177-persistence-poverty-how-real-equality-can-break-vicious-cycles> (accessed February 8, 2024).

<sup>33</sup> UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn*, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*





A teacher conducts examinations for nursery children at Kindcare Nursery and Primary School, a private school in Namayingo district. Fees are UGX 60,000 (US\$ 16) per term for each child in pre-primary, in addition to UGX 40,000 (US\$ 11) for lunch fees. © 2022 ISER

Pre-primary education can particularly benefit children with disabilities, including by strengthening their capacity to benefit from education, promoting their enrollment and attendance, and reducing stigmatizing and discriminatory attitudes against them.<sup>35</sup>

Education has a multiplier effect, enabling children to realize the full range of their rights, become responsible adults, and contribute positively to society. It plays a powerful role in reducing rates of child marriage, child labor, and other child rights abuses.<sup>36</sup> Pre-primary

---

<sup>35</sup> CRC, General Comment No. 9, The rights of children with disabilities, UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/9 (2007), para. 65; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General Comment No. 4, The right to inclusive education, UN Doc. CRPD/C/GC/4 (2016), para. 55; UNICEF, *The Right of Children with Disabilities to Education: A Rights Based Approach to Inclusive Education* (Geneva: UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, 2012), <https://www.unicef.org/media/126506/file/UNICEF-Right-to-Education-Children-Disabilities-ENG.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2024), pp. 54–57.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, International Labour Organization (ILO), “The elimination of child labour and its root causes – the guidance offered by the ILO MNE Declaration,” April 2022, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms\\_844331.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms_844331.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024); UNICEF, “The Power of Education to End Child Marriage,” data brief, September 19, 2022, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-and-education-data-brief/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

education also helps children develop resilience to cope with traumatic and stressful situations, such as conflict and other emergencies.<sup>37</sup>

Pre-primary education also has significant benefits for economic development. It improves children’s employment prospects and average earnings,<sup>38</sup> which can boost tax revenues and GDP, and reduce public service expenditures in law enforcement, medical care, the justice system, and child welfare.<sup>39</sup> A 2021 IMF survey on public expenditure and inclusive growth found that “[i]nvesting in early childhood education and care has been shown to yield some of the largest returns.”<sup>40</sup>

Students, parents, teachers, and government officials interviewed for this report identified a wide variety of benefits for children from pre-primary education, including the development of their personalities, talents, mental and physical abilities, and social skills, and preparing them for success in primary school.

A trader in the informal sector in Kampala said he had sent four of his seven children to pre-primary school—the other three were still too young. He said:

Children need to start in nursery because at that stage, they are still growing mentally and learning a number of things such as washing hands.... The nursery teachers give those things attention and by the time the child goes to primary, his or her mental capacity has grown. Nursery also prepares a child to join primary level especially the change in environment from home to school. The child gets to learn discipline.<sup>41</sup>

A casual laborer in Mukono district who also has a small firewood business worked hard to put his first four children through pre-primary education, and is now paying for his fifth and

---

<sup>37</sup> UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn*, [https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/News/2019\\_04-175--report--a-world-ready-to-learn.pdf](https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/News/2019_04-175--report--a-world-ready-to-learn.pdf), p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> W. Steven Barnett and Milagros Nores, “Investment and productivity arguments for ECCE,” in *Investing against Evidence: The Global State of Early Childhood Care and Education*, ed. P.T.M. Marope and Y. Kaga (UNESCO: Paris, 2015), pp. 72-88.

<sup>40</sup> Younes Zouhar, Jon Jellema, Nora Lustig, and Mohamed Trabelsi, “Public Expenditure and Inclusive Growth – A Survey,” IMF Working Paper, March 19, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2021/03/19/Public-Expenditure-and-Inclusive-Growth-A-Survey-50190> (accessed May 6, 2024), pp. 36-41.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with parent, Kawempe, Kampala, July 17, 2022.

youngest child to attend. He said the value of pre-primary education for his children was that it “helps a child to get startup knowledge like spellings of words which ignites his learning at primary level.” He said: “I sacrifice a lot to ensure that all my children go to school.”<sup>42</sup>

A Kampala tailor who sent his two children to nursery, said: “The child is offered a good foundation to learn some English and writing. At nursery, my children could greet in English. The learning at nursery also gives the child confidence to respond and answer questions. They prepare them and by the time they join primary, they are fully prepared and don’t find serious challenges at primary level.”<sup>43</sup>

A mother in Omoro district who sent five of her six children to nursery school observed: “The child who attended pre-primary, you cannot compare them to the one who did not because they can easily socialize with their friends.”<sup>44</sup>

Teachers—both in nursery school and in primary school—were among the most enthusiastic in speaking about the benefits of early childhood education for children, echoing international studies that show positive gains in social, linguistic, and physical development for children attending pre-primary.

“Oooh, there are many!” answered a teacher at a joint nursery and primary school in Tokora subcounty in Nakapiripirit, when asked if there were benefits for children in going to nursery. “One, it helps the child to socialize with others. Also makes the child learn how to read and write early. The child gets used to the school environment before joining primary.”<sup>45</sup>

A pre-primary teacher in Omoro district said: “Pre-primary education stimulates the kids’ thinking. Kids develop their talents and are able to interact with their peers.”<sup>46</sup> Another teacher at a primary school said: “There are a number of benefits that a child gets when he or she attends pre-primary school. The social life of a child. A child will also get leadership skills because they train them to lead. Capability of a child to speak fluently. It also makes

---

<sup>42</sup> Interview with parent, Ntawo, Mukono municipality, July 12, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with parent, Kyebando, Kampala, July 17, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with parent, Irra, Paleng Town Council, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Richard Tirimba, primary school teacher, Tokora, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Miriam Achan, pre-primary teacher, Pa-too, Bobi, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

a child to be assertive. It also helps a child to have self-esteem. It helps a child to know how to read and write some good words.”<sup>47</sup>

Christine Akumu teaches at an early childhood development center in Omoro district that offers three levels of classes. She is also a member of the Parent Teacher Association at the local Palenga primary school. She says that when she visits the primary school, she sees that children who attended nursery school “are always the best.”<sup>48</sup>

Teachers interviewed for this report often linked the social development acquired in nursery school with children’s better performance in primary education. For example, a primary school teacher in Nakapiripirit said: “A learner who has attended pre-primary becomes very easy to handle when it comes to primary education in terms of communication and the behavioral part of it—he or she is social. The child comes when he or she has had an opportunity to interact with fellow learners. Pre-primary lays a strong foundation for these children.... Those who attended pre-primary, socially and morally, they find life easy at school.”<sup>49</sup>

Education officials, who have perhaps the broadest perspective on the benefits of education, also spoke positively of the developmental benefits they see for children who attend nursery.<sup>50</sup> Hajat Safina Mutumba, the principal education officer for pre-primary education at the Ministry of Education and Sports provided a litany of benefits, enumerating how early childhood education boosts children’s cognitive skills, helps children become emotionally intelligent, develops their socialization skills, promotes mathematical and scientific reasoning, improves their concentration spans, and builds their confidence. Emphasizing the benefits of learning through play, she said such an approach helps children develop holistically, develop problem-solving skills, and prepares children for lifelong learning.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Franka Omara Acca, primary school teacher, Watamila, Bobi, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with parent, Irra, Paleng Town Council, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Wilfred Iwala, primary school teacher, Namalu, Nakapiripirit, July 20, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022, and Ikwap Robert, assistant commissioner primary education, September 16, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022.



The Nursery Structure at Parents' Hope Nursery and Primary School, a private school in Namayingo district, where fees for pre-primary are UGX 50,000 (US\$ 13) per term, and meals an additional UGX 35,000 (US\$ 9). © 2022 ISER

In addition to the foundational effect on children's socialization and holistic growth, research from around the world shows that children who benefit from a quality pre-primary education have better academic outcomes later in life, starting in primary school. Researchers from Makerere University in Kampala have made similar findings with respect to Ugandan students: They surveyed more than 5,000 grade 6 students from around the country and found that students who had between 13 and 24 months of pre-primary education had better reading and numeracy skills than children who did not benefit from a pre-primary education.<sup>52</sup> According to UNICEF, attending an early childhood education program is one of the strongest predictors for supporting a child's readiness for school, regardless of household or national income level.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Robert Wamala, Omala Saint Kizito, and Evans Jjemba, "Academic Achievement of Ugandan Sixth Grade Students: Influence of Parents' Education Levels," *Contemporary Issues In Education Research*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), accessed May 6, 2024, doi: 10.19030/cier.v6i1.7612, table 2.

<sup>53</sup> UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn*, [https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/News/2019\\_04-175--report---a-world-ready-to-learn.pdf](https://unicef.at/fileadmin/media/News/2019_04-175--report---a-world-ready-to-learn.pdf), p. 15.

Children interviewed also identified positive impacts that they experienced from attending pre-primary school, compared to their peers who did not go to pre-primary. A 16-year-old boy in Omoro district in northern Uganda, said, “I saw the difference.... Those who did not study did not know how to write their names, for me I know because it was the first thing they teach in nursery.”<sup>54</sup> A 14-year-old boy from Omoro district who attended nursery said that all children should be able to attend pre-primary before going on to primary school. “Nursery level can open the mind to think,” he said. “When you join without attending nursery, you perform badly.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Interview with student, 16 years old, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with student, 14 years old, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.



### III. The Negative Consequences of Pre-Primary Fees

Almost all pre-primary schools in Uganda require parents or guardians to pay tuition fees for children to attend. Parents and teachers interviewed for this report provided examples of such fees, ranging from UGX 5,000 (US\$1.35) per child per term in Nakapiripirit,<sup>56</sup> to UGX 800,000 (\$215) per child per term in Kampala.<sup>57</sup> Fees can be significantly higher. For example, some pre-primary schools in Kampala advertise fees of UGX 1,750,000 (\$460) per term, or UGX 5,250,000 per year for one child – more than the annual tuition for many programs at Makerere University.<sup>58</sup>

Tuition fees are often supplemented by additional fees for building maintenance, application fees, school uniforms, or supplies. A father in Kampala who pays UGX 380,000 (\$102) per child per term, said the total of these additional costs was another UGX 70,000 (\$19). He said: “I would manage to pay the school fees because the school allowed us to pay in installments. At the start of the term, we would pay 60 percent of the fees and then pay the remaining balance later.”<sup>59</sup>

In rural areas, schools may require the provision of food or other items. For example, a mother in Omoro district said she pays UGX 85,000 (\$23) per term, and also provides the school with 20 kilograms of posho (maize flour), 10 kilograms of beans, and 4 kilograms of rice.<sup>60</sup> A mother in Nakapiripirit said she provided one kilogram of sugar per child.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Interviews with Eva Adeke, primary school teacher, Komoret Primary School, Nakapiripirit, July 20, 2022, and Joseph Lomongin, Ag. district inspector of schools, Nakapiripirit, July 20, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 23, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> For example, The Kampala Parents’ School charges UGX 1,750,000 per term (UGX 5,250,000 per year), “School Fees Structure 2023,” <https://www.kampalaparents.com/fees-structure> (accessed April 15, 2024); The Hungry Caterpillar charges UGX 1,400,000 per term (for its “national curriculum,” or UGX 4,200,000 per year), as well as a 350,000 admission fee, 500,000 for building maintenance, and 100,000 for medical care, “Pre-primary National Curriculum,” <https://thehungrycaterpillarug.com/national-cirriculum/> (accessed April 15, 2024). By contrast, tuition for bachelor’s degree programs at Makerere typically cost UGX 3,000,000 to UGX 5,290,000 per year, depending on the academic discipline. See Makerere University, Office of the Academic Registrar, “Announcement for 2023/2024 Undergraduate Private Admissions,” <https://www.mak.ac.ug/sites/default/files/2023-12/Mak-Undergraduate-Private-Admissions-2023-2024.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2024).

<sup>59</sup> Interview with parent, Kyebando, Kampala, July 17, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with parent, Alonge, Paidwe, Bobi, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with parent, Kokuwamu, Namalu subcounty, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

The fees for pre-primary represent a significant expense for most Ugandan families. For example, fees of UGX 300,000 per child per term—paid by several parents interviewed in Kampala—total 900,000 per year and represent four and a half months’ wages for an average Ugandan in paid employment.<sup>62</sup>

The cost of pre-primary education can be much higher than the cost of primary school. For example, a mother of three in Kampala said that pre-primary cost her five times as much as primary school: “Imagine, I paid UGX 55,000 (\$15) per term per child at Kasubi Family Primary School [a UPE school]. But at nursery, I had to pay UGX 300,000 (\$81) per child per term.”<sup>63</sup> The headmistress at a mixed nursery and primary school in Kampala said that parents paid UGX 90,000 (\$24) per term for their children attending primary but paid nearly four times as much—UGX 350,000 (\$92) per child—for their children in pre-primary.<sup>64</sup>

Children, parents, teachers, and officials interviewed for this report identified pre-primary fees as a key barrier to pre-primary education, particularly for children from rural and lower-income families. Children without access to pre-primary are also more likely to perform poorly in primary school, and experience higher repetition and drop-out rates.

## Children Miss Out on Pre-Primary Education

Only 9 percent of pre-primary aged children attend a licensed and registered pre-school, and more than 60 percent of pre-primary-aged children in Uganda are not attending any type of school.<sup>65</sup> For many parents and guardians, tuition or other fees are an insurmountable barrier to sending children to school. This is particularly the case for those with little income, and those working in the informal sector, including subsistence agriculture and low-paid manual work.

---

<sup>62</sup> In 2021, persons in paid employment in Uganda earned a median monthly cash wage of Uganda shillings 200,000. Males earned UGX 250,000 compared to UGX 140,000 earned by females. See Uganda Bureau of Statistics, *National Labour Force Survey 2021, Main Report* (Bureau of Statistics: Kampala, Uganda, 2021), [https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/11\\_2022NLFS\\_2021\\_main\\_report.pdf](https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/11_2022NLFS_2021_main_report.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>63</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Jane Kyakuwa, Kitante Primary School, Kitante, Kampala, July 20, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda>; UNICEF, Uganda Annual Report 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/15431/file/Cover%20page.pdf>, p. 11, citing 2019 Uganda National Household Survey.

All parents interviewed for this report who did not send their children to pre-primary school cited the inability to pay for it as a key reason for their decision. Previous studies have also identified cost as the major barrier to pre-primary education in Uganda. For example, a 2017 study in two districts found that a large majority of parents interviewed—73 percent in Mbale district and 93 percent in Kumi district—said that their inability to pay for pre-primary school was the reason for their decision not to send their children.<sup>66</sup>

A mother in Kampala, who works as a food vendor at a market, sent her youngest child to nursery but did not send her first child. She explained: “My first child did not go to nursery school. I did not have money to pay school fees.” If a free pre-primary option had been available, she said, “I would have taken my children to that school.”<sup>67</sup>

Many parents delay their child’s entry into pre-primary school because of the required fees. One mother of three children said: “I did not have enough money to pay for all the three years of nursery school. So I had to wait until each of my children made 4 years before they could join nursery school.”<sup>68</sup>

Another mother of three children said her youngest child is currently in “baby class,” but that he is the first of her children to benefit from pre-primary education, as she could not afford to send the older children. She is paying UGX 165,000 (\$44) per term for her son’s preschool, as well as fees for her older children in primary school. “I pay the school fees in installments. I find difficulty in raising the money for all the three children ... I want government to regulate school fees as there are no government nursery schools.”<sup>69</sup>

A woman who sells groceries at Kampala’s Kamwokya Market is currently paying for her 5-year-old grandchild to attend nursery school and plans to send a younger grandchild to nursery as well. “I take them when they are 5 years such that they study for one year and go to P.1 [Primary 1]. They could not start earlier because the mother did not have money.... My grandchildren attend only one year in nursery school. I cannot afford to pay for the

---

<sup>66</sup> Tracy Brunette et al., “Repetition of Primary 1 and Pre-primary Education in Uganda,” RTI International, International Development Working Paper, No. 2017-02, June 2017, [https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/15594165\\_Brunette\\_et\\_al\\_WorkingPaper2017\\_02\\_June29\\_Final.pdf](https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/15594165_Brunette_et_al_WorkingPaper2017_02_June29_Final.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

three years.”<sup>70</sup> She said that if free pre-primary was available, “I would enroll them at 3 years [old].”<sup>71</sup>

Teachers also see how the cost of pre-primary education constitutes a barrier for many families. Prossy Nassanga, a pre-primary teacher at a private school in Mukono said that the fees charged at her school were UGX 240,000 (\$65) per term. She said the fees were comparable to those of other nearby schools, but nonetheless “scare away some parents” who cannot manage the fees.<sup>72</sup>

Christine Akumu teaches at a fee-paying early childhood development center, which was started by an NGO in 2000. There are at least three nursery schools in the area, but many pre-primary-aged children do not attend because of tuition and associated costs. “So many children do not go to school. [Parents] say it is too expensive to pay for children in nursery, so they wait for Primary 1,” said Akumu.<sup>73</sup> Another pre-primary teacher similarly said: “The first thing that demotivates parents is poverty. Because K level [nursery level] is mainly provided by the private and since most parents have no money, they prefer to keep the children home and enroll them directly in P.1.”<sup>74</sup>

The district inspector of schools in Omoro district expressed dismay “that the cost of attending nursery is higher than primary,” and explained that from what he sees from the district level, even in locations where nursery schools were available, “a parent will therefore decide to wait for primary.”<sup>75</sup>

## Interrupted Education

Even if parents and guardians can initially afford fees to enroll their children in pre-primary education, fees may later become unaffordable, particularly if the parent’s income is not steady or predictable. In such cases, the school may send the child home, or the parent is forced to remove their child from the school. The result is an interrupted education in the

---

<sup>70</sup> Interview with grandparent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Prossy Nassanga, pre-primary teacher, Mukono, July 21, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Christine Akumu, pre-primary teacher, Dogtochi, Palenga, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Miriam Achan, pre-primary teacher, Pa-too, Bobi, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

early years, a key period for children to learn key foundational skills and benefit the most from continuous immersion in early learning.

A mother of six in Omoro district works as a subsistence farmer. The local nursery school charges UGX 50,000 (\$13) per child, and she said: “I always struggle to find the money. For some of my children, they did not finish all the levels because I could not afford fees for every term.”<sup>76</sup>

An electronics businessman in Mukono district in central Uganda said he pays UGX 350,000 (\$94) per term for his child to attend the “baby class” at a local nursery. He said that his child had been sent home from school when he was unable to pay the fees on time, and he pays with difficulty “because business is not always good.”<sup>77</sup>

A pre-primary teacher in Omoro district explained that pre-primary enrollment was low in her area, and that “when the school sends a pupil back home for fees, the parents just leave them to stay at home and they never return.” She said that parents often identified crop failures for their inability to pay fees.<sup>78</sup> Another pre-primary teacher in Omoro agreed, saying, “At the beginning they start very well, but when the term progresses and you ask them for fees, they leave,” she said.<sup>79</sup> A teacher at a UPE school in Namayingo district that charges UGX 30,000 per term for pre-primary said: “Payment of fees is a challenge. Every week you see teachers sending the learners away.”<sup>80</sup>

Omoro’s district inspector of schools, James Boniface Acellam, explained that the weather-dependent nature of agricultural work in that region resulted in inconsistent schooling. At some nursery schools in the district, he said, parents pay the fees with a mix of cash and products—“for example 10 kilograms of beans, maize flour, 2 kilograms of sugar, 10 rolls of toilet paper, and after buying those things they pay UGX 20,000 to 30,000 [\$5-8] per term.” But he noted that in 2022, “This season has not been good because of the drought. The yields were not good. They are not in the position to raise 10 kilograms of maize or beans. By

---

<sup>76</sup> Interview with parent, Irra, Paleng Town Council, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with parent, Ntawo village, Mukono municipality, July 12, 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Nancy Akite, pre-primary teacher, Odeke, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Christine Akumu, pre-primary teacher, Dogtochi, Palenga, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Perez Masaba, pre-primary teacher, Kifuyo Primary School, Kifuyo parish, Namayingo district, July 22, 2022.

this season our people would be selling produce, but drought has been too much. I am worried in the third term the ECDs (early childhood development centers) will close.”<sup>81</sup>

## Poorer Performance in Primary School

Education data and interviews for this report found that overall, children who do not attend pre-primary school do not perform as well in primary school as children who attend pre-primary. Dan Kyagaba, the director of the Uganda National Examinations Board, shared that a study in the 2000s compared students in primary three and six who had not attended nursery and those who had attended nursery, and found “that learners who had attended nursery performed better than those that did not attend nursery.”<sup>82</sup>

Medadi E. Ssentanda, a lecturer at Makerere University in Kampala who has studied the challenges of literacy acquisition in Uganda, says that for rural children who do not have the chance to attend preschool, “Bridging the two-year-gap of their counterparts in private schools is very challenging and in many cases impossible.... The elective preschool provision is currently creating a huge gap between learners within a single education system.”<sup>83</sup>

A farmer in Namayingo district said that two of his four children attended pre-primary school. He said, “When a child starts direct in Primary 1 things are hard. You see that the one in Primary 1 who went to nursery is better than one in P.5 who never went to nursery.”<sup>84</sup>

A 13-year-old girl in Primary 7 said that when she entered primary school without first accessing pre-primary, “I didn’t know anything at the time when I started to study. Even how to write is difficult and reading.”<sup>85</sup> A 9-year-old boy who also missed out on pre-

---

<sup>81</sup> Interview with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Dan Kyagaba, director, Uganda National Examination Board (UNEb), National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE), Kampala, September 30, 2022. See also Robert Wamala, Omala Saint Kizito, and Evans Jjemba, “Academic Achievement of Ugandan Sixth Grade Students: Influence of Parents’ Education Levels,” *Contemporary Issues In Education Research*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), accessed May 6, 2024, doi: 10.19030/cier.v6i1.7612, table 2, which found that students who had between 13 and 24 months of pre-primary education had better reading and numeracy skills than children who did not benefit from a pre-primary education.

<sup>83</sup> Medadi E. Ssentanda, “The Challenges of Teaching Reading in Uganda: Curriculum Guidelines and Language Policy Viewed from the Classroom,” *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2014), accessed May 6, 2024, pp. 1-22.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with parent, Namayingo district, July 22, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with student, 13 years old, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

primary noticed he was different from the other children who were younger and had attended nursery school: “I was not clever like them. The other children could read and write better than me.”<sup>86</sup> Another boy, age 10, said his mother told him that he did not attend pre-primary because she did not have enough money to pay for it. He said that when he entered primary school, he struggled with reading, writing, and speaking English. “Things were difficult for me. I was not understanding,” he said.<sup>87</sup>

Teachers interviewed for this report indicated that children who attend pre-primary school are generally better prepared for primary school. A head teacher at a primary school in Kampala said: “Some parents enroll their children direct in Primary One without attending pre-primary. However, such pupils have challenges socializing with others, toilet habits, writing-tool handling [holding pencils and using them], sounds, reading, drawing, and paying attention to the teacher.” In contrast, he said that children who attend pre-primary education gain abilities in these areas “to kick-start their learning” in primary school.<sup>88</sup>

A primary teacher at a private school in Mukono district noted that when children do not have access to pre-primary, teachers may need to do extra work to mitigate the negative impact. She gave an example of one student in primary school who had not been able to attend nursery school: “His parents did not have money to pay fees at the time he was supposed to join nursery. I had to give him special consideration by sparing time to teach him what he missed in nursery to catch up with the rest of the learners who went through nursery education.”<sup>89</sup>

## Premature Primary Enrollment

Because pre-primary education is so expensive, some parents enroll their children in primary school earlier than the usual age of 6. According to available data, 20 percent of children aged 5 are already enrolled in primary school.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Interview with student, 9 years old, Kampala, July 21, 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with student, 10 years old, Kampala, July 20, 2022.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Roger Nambuli, head teacher, Nakasero Primary School, Nakasero, Kampala, July 20, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Justine Namuli Namusoke, teacher, King David Infant Care Centre, Ntawo village, Mukono municipality, Mukono district, July 12, 2022.

<sup>90</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, September 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda> (accessed May 6, 2024).

A 2017 study in the Mbale and Kumi districts of Uganda found that 28 percent of parents interviewed said that they sent their children “early” to P.1 instead of to pre-primary.<sup>91</sup> These parents often do so despite the knowledge that their child may not perform well. For example, 56 percent of the parents sending their child to primary early said they expected that their children might have to repeat P.1 and 67 percent expected that their children would likely learn less the first time through P.1.<sup>92</sup>

The premature enrollment of children in primary school also creates large classes and can result in extra work for their teachers, who are forced to manage overcrowded classrooms with very young children who are not developmentally ready for primary education. In some schools, Primary 1 classes may have as many as 300-400 students, with only one teacher.<sup>93</sup>

A farmer from Namayingo district said that she could not afford to send any of her four children to pre-primary. Instead, she enrolled them in primary at age four. She said: “They face difficulties understanding. Their performance is not good.”<sup>94</sup> A casual laborer from the same district said that several of his six children started primary school at age four, but that they repeated classes. He said: “They were all challenged because they did not understand well. It took them long to understand.” As a result, he enrolled his youngest child in pre-primary “to understand things early.”<sup>95</sup>

Hajat Safina Mutumba, Uganda’s principal education officer for pre-primary education at the education ministry explained: “When you go to most UPE schools, there are high numbers in Primary 1. There are always streams—A, B, C—and the actual number of Primary 1s are in stream A and for the rest of the streams, their age is for pre-primary. However, schools do not disclose that they have learners of pre-primary school age in Primary 1.”<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 13.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Initiative for Economic and Social Rights – Uganda, “Cost of Education in Uganda: Economics and Social Rights Advocacy (ESRA) Brief,” October 2023, Issue 15, <https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Cost-of-Education-in-Uganda.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with parent, Namayingo district, July 22, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with parent, Namayingo district, July 22, 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022.



## Higher Rates of Repetition in Primary School

Research conducted in Uganda in 2016 found that children who did not attend pre-primary school were more than twice as likely to repeat Grade 1 at the primary-school level as children who had attended pre-primary. Fifty-two percent of the children who did not attend pre-primary repeated first grade, compared to only 23 percent of children who had pre-primary experience. The research found that for children attending pre-primary, the reduction in repetition was the same for boys and girls.<sup>97</sup>

Government officials, teachers, and parents interviewed for this report also observed that children who did not attend pre-primary school were more likely to repeat primary school years than students who had attended pre-primary.

One mother has four children in primary school but could only afford to send two of them to nursery school. She noted that the two children who did not attend nursery school had to repeat the second year of primary school.<sup>98</sup> A mother of eight children in Nakapiripirit sent two of her children to nursery, but others started in primary school as young as age 4. She noted that primary school was difficult for her children who did not first attend pre-primary education: “When you take the child to start school they face challenges. Failing in class is automatic.”<sup>99</sup>

Vincent Makali, the acting district education officer in Namayingo district, said that for children who do not have access to pre-primary, “There is a lot of repeating classes, especially in Primary one.”<sup>100</sup> Robert Ikwap, Uganda’s assistant commissioner for primary education, said that parents who cannot afford enrolling their children in pre-primary send them instead to Primary 1 in UPE schools, but observed, “Such children rarely progress to Primary 2 [without repeating grade 1].”<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Hajat Safina Mutumba, Uganda’s principal education officer for pre-primary education at the education ministry said: “The

---

<sup>97</sup> Tracy Brunette et al., “Repetition of Primary 1 and Pre-primary Education in Uganda,” RTI International, International Development Working Paper, No. 2017-02, June 2017, [https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/15594165\\_Brunette\\_et\\_al\\_WorkingPaper2017\\_02\\_June29\\_Final.pdf](https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/15594165_Brunette_et_al_WorkingPaper2017_02_June29_Final.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with parent, Nakwanga village, Kokuwamu parish, Namalu subcounty, Nakapiripirit, July 20, 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with parent, Kokuwamu, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Vincent Makali, acting district education officer, Namayingo District, July 21, 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Robert Ikwap, assistant commissioner primary education, September 16, 2022.

learners are still in the system because a teacher will not promote a child of four years to go to Primary 2.”<sup>102</sup>

## Higher Drop-Out Rates

Children who do not have access to pre-primary school may be more likely to drop out of school than children who attend pre-primary. Uganda’s 2022 Education Partnership Compact notes that “poorly prepared learners without access to pre-primary education contributes to low primary-level learning outcomes, repetition, and dropout.”<sup>103</sup>

Hajat Safina Mutumba, the Ministry of Education’s principal education officer for pre-primary education, said:

If children do not attend nursery and come straight to primary where we expect serious business, even when they are bright [clever], they are affected psychologically as well as their learning. When children are not prepared well before joining primary, they struggle and even get bored because they cannot get on well at primary level and end up repeating. Some of the learners who didn’t attend nursery get demoralized and even end up dropping out of school.<sup>104</sup>

UNICEF finds that in low-income countries, an increase in pre-primary enrollment is associated with a significant decrease in primary dropout rates. For countries that increase pre-primary enrollment from 25 percent to 75 percent, UNICEF estimates the cumulative dropout rate in the early grades will decrease from 40 percent to 22 percent.<sup>105</sup>

## Increased Inequality

Unequal access to pre-primary education can deepen education inequalities, and when access is tied to income, create significant long-term barriers and exclusion for children

---

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, *Education Partnership Compact: Transforming the Education System in Uganda*, August 2022, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2022-09-Uganda-Partnership-Compact.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2024), p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022.

<sup>105</sup> UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education* (New York: UNICEF, 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019> (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 19.

from the poorest households. UNESCO data for Uganda shows that children from higher-income families are far more likely to be enrolled in pre-primary than children from low-income families. In 2019, the adjusted net attendance rate in schooling of 5-year-olds from families in the richest quintile was 49 percent higher than those in the lowest-income quintile.<sup>106</sup> More than half of children in the poorest 20 percent of households never attend a day of pre-primary.<sup>107</sup> A head teacher at a nursery school in Kitante, a suburb of Kampala, acknowledged only parents “doing good jobs” were capable of paying their fees of UGX 350,000 (US\$92) per child per term.<sup>108</sup>

The benefits of pre-primary education are highest for children who may be at a greater disadvantage, including due to poverty, very low literacy levels among their parents, and little to no access to literacy or educational materials at home or their communities. These children are often the least prepared when starting primary school and are therefore most likely to struggle to catch up with their peers and lose learning throughout their schooling.<sup>109</sup> The IMF has found that “educational inequalities start early in life and disadvantages accumulate over the lifecycle.”<sup>110</sup>

When the provision of early childhood education favors higher-income households in urban areas and excludes lower-income poor and rural families on the basis of availability and ability to pay, inequality will inevitably be exacerbated. Bridging the gap of one to three years of foundational skills between children who benefit from a pre-primary education and those who do not is challenging, and for some may be impossible.

Uganda is a country with high wealth inequality. In 2019—the most recent data available—Uganda’s “Gini coefficient”—a statistical measure of income and wealth inequality—ranked the country as the 35th most unequal in the world in terms of wealth distribution,

---

<sup>106</sup> UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, 2019 data (latest available), <http://data.uis.unesco.org/> (accessed May 6, 2024). Adjusted net attendance rate, one year before the official primary entry age, richest quintile, both sexes, was 88.91 percent. Adjusted net attendance rate, one year before the official primary entry age, poorest quintile, both sexes, was 39.94 percent.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* Adjusted net attendance rate, one year before the official primary entry age, poorest quintile, both sexes was 49.44 percent in 2016 and 39.94 percent in 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Ethel Namunyiri, head teacher, Kitante Nursery School, Kampala, July 20, 2022.

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, UNICEF, “Early childhood development,” undated, <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/early-childhood-development-o> (accessed May 6, 2024); UNICEF, “A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education,” April 8, 2019, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-world-ready-to-learn-report/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

on par with Ghana, Paraguay, Madagascar, and Togo—all of which nonetheless offer at least one year of free pre-primary education.<sup>111</sup>

Because pre-primary education in Uganda is almost exclusively private and fee-paying, families that are lower-income and who live in rural areas are least likely to be able to access it. In 2015, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights expressed concern that Uganda’s reliance on private schools could result in discrimination, rising inequality, and “was a threat to children from low-income households, and for the development and social cohesion in the country.”<sup>112</sup> The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights similarly expressed concern at the widening gap in access to quality education “resulting from the increase in the provision of private education and disproportionately affecting girls and children of low-income families.”<sup>113</sup>

## Unequal Access for Rural Children

In Uganda, most pre-primary facilities are located in urban areas, thereby excluding most of the population who live in rural areas.<sup>114</sup> In its 2020 report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Ugandan government stated that 60 percent of early childhood development centers were located in the central and eastern regions of the country, and that this concentration “excludes over 80 percent of the population who are poor and live in rural areas.”<sup>115</sup> Uganda’s National Service Delivery Survey of 2021 has also noted considerable variations in pre-primary enrollment by sub-region, particularly between the

---

<sup>111</sup> In 2019, the World Bank calculated the Gini coefficient for Uganda to be 42.7; in comparison with Ghana (in 2016, 43.5), Paraguay (in 2021, 42.9), Madagascar (in 2012, 42.6), and Togo (2018, 42.4). Ghana offers two years of free and compulsory pre-primary education, Paraguay three years of free and compulsory education, Madagascar one year of free and compulsory education, and Togo three years of free compulsory education.

<sup>112</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, “Concluding Observations and Recommendations on the 5th Periodic State Report of the Republic of Uganda (2010 – 2012),” November 2015, <https://achpr.au.int/en/state-reports/concluding-observations-and-recommendations-uganda-5th-periodic-report-2010> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>113</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “Concluding observations on the initial report of Uganda,” E/C.12/UGA/C O/1, July 8, 2015, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/ec12ugaco1-concluding-observations-committee-economic-social-and> (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 36.

<sup>114</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, *Uganda’s Progress Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Two Optional Protocols*, 2020, [https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda\\_Progress\\_Report\\_UNCRC\\_Report\\_13.6.2021.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda_Progress_Report_UNCRC_Report_13.6.2021.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024). See also Education Policy and Planning Department, Ministry of Education and Sports, “Education Abstract 2017,” April 2017, <https://www.education.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Abstract-2017.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2023), p. 12.

<sup>115</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, *Uganda’s Progress Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Two Optional Protocols*, [https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda\\_Progress\\_Report\\_UNCRC\\_Report\\_13.6.2021.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda_Progress_Report_UNCRC_Report_13.6.2021.pdf), p. 39.

largely urban Buganda sub-region, and the Karamoja sub-region, which holds the lowest share of the population.<sup>116</sup>

Uganda's unequal distribution of pre-primary schools is in large part because pre-primary education providers are private, and it is easier to ensure fees are paid in locations with more concentrated populations of families able to afford them. In 2019, the adjusted net attendance rate in schooling of 5-year-olds in urban areas was more than 17 percent higher than in rural areas.<sup>117</sup>

A 15-year-old boy in Primary 7 told us he did not attend nursery school “because in our village, there was no nursery school. And even the nearby villages didn’t have nursery schools. They have primary schools only.”<sup>118</sup> A teacher at an early childhood center in Omoro district noted: “Some parents don’t take children to nursery because of distance. Schools should be in communities where children don’t have to walk long distances.”<sup>119</sup>

Even when pre-primary schools are available, rural families are often less able to meet the required fees, due to lower incomes than urban families, or more precarious income streams. A mother of four in Omoro district, who earns money through farming, observed: “I plant crops, there can be drought affecting crops hence I get problem affording to pay. I can pay for two children and request to pay for the rest of learners later. Paying fees is a challenge. Even when we have grown soya, but price is low, it affects paying fees in time.”<sup>120</sup>

A professional nurse and a father of four children in Omoro district said: “Government should first think of us in the villages. You will find that most times only those with money will take a child to nursery. Most people wait for children to reach the age of Primary One to take them to school. You find a nursery school charges UGX 280,000 (\$74). If possible, government should come in and provide free nursery schools to villages because people there can’t afford. Private schools are expensive because they are profit driven....

---

<sup>116</sup> Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), National Service Delivery Survey 2021 Report, 2022, [https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/12\\_2022NSDS\\_2021\\_Final\\_Report\\_2022.pdf](https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/12_2022NSDS_2021_Final_Report_2022.pdf) (accessed March 3, 2023), pp. 16-17.

<sup>117</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019 data (latest available), <http://data.uis.unesco.org/> (accessed May 6, 2024). Adjusted net attendance rate, one year before the official primary entry age, rural, both sexes, was 66.85 percent. Adjusted net attendance rate, one year before the official primary entry age, urban, both sexes, was 84.40 percent.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with student., 15 years old, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with parent, Irra, Paleng Town Council, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with parent, Opong Agweno, Odek, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

Government should consider hard to reach areas because those are areas that don't receive those services.”<sup>121</sup>

The district inspector for school in Omoro noted: “We still have villages without ECDs.... In the past, attending nursery has been more of urban and luxury.... The levels of attainment of these children especially those that have not gone to ECD is not good. That is the reason you will find that our performance as a district is not good because of the nature of foundation at lower level. Because of that we are still far compared to other areas, for instance when results are out, schools in urban areas are better than those in rural areas.”<sup>122</sup>



Pre-primary children study under a tree at Paveway Nursery and Primary School, a private school in Omoro district. Fees for pre-primary are UGX 35,000 (US\$ 9) per term. © 2022 ISER

---

<sup>121</sup> Interview with parent, Minjad, Lalogi, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

## IV. Desire for Free Pre-Primary Education

Nearly all parents interviewed for this report, including those who paid to send their children to pre-primary school as well as those who said they could not afford to send their children, expressed a preference for free pre-primary education.

A casual laborer in Mukono district mentioned earlier in this report, worked hard to put his first four children through pre-primary education, and is now paying for his fifth and youngest child to attend. Asked whether he would make use of government free pre-primary education if it were available, he replied: “I should enroll immediately because it will be a favor to me. Why can’t we have free schools?”<sup>123</sup>

A farmer from Namayingo district said she was only able to send one of her six children to pre-primary. She said that if the government offered free pre-primary, she would have sent all of her children. “All children should have to first go to nursery before going to primary because when they go to nursery first, they get motivated for education or learning,” she said.<sup>124</sup>

A father and an electronics businessman from Mukono municipality said he too would enroll his child in free pre-primary if it were available: “Yes, I will enroll because it will be a relief from my financial burden of meeting the expenses of educating my child.... The government should construct government pre-primary schools to help [those of] us who are burdened by the low income yet we want our children to study nursery.”<sup>125</sup>

A Kampala-based grandmother supporting her grandchildren’s pre-primary fees said, “Just like they provide UPE [Universal Primary Education] they should do the same for nursery.... It should be universal nursery education.”<sup>126</sup> A mother in Kampala, who works as a food vendor at a market, struggled to pay for her second child to attend nursery school, but said

---

<sup>123</sup> Interview with parent, Ntawo, Mukono municipality, July 12, 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with parent, Namayingo district, July 21, 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with parent, Ntawo village, Mukono municipality, July 12, 2022.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with grandparent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

that if a free pre-primary school had been available, “I would have taken my children to that school.”<sup>127</sup>

Teachers also endorsed universal pre-primary education. A teacher at Palenga Primary School in Omoro district said: “I think the government should attach pre-primary to all UPE schools.”<sup>128</sup> The sentiment was echoed by several other teachers.<sup>129</sup> Medadi Ssentanda, a lecturer at Makerere University in Kampala, who has studied the challenges of literacy acquisition in Uganda, recommends: “The pre-school level should be made compulsory for all Ugandan children. As reading and writing are critical skills to master in the early years of learning and since they determine the progress of a child’s educational life ... this should be a priority area for investment in education.”<sup>130</sup>

Educators said that a government decision to make pre-primary education free, or free and compulsory, would also help communicate the importance of early childhood education to parents.<sup>131</sup> For example, a head teacher at a primary school in Omoro district worried that “because it is parents’ decision now ... we cannot insist on the child to go to nursery.” But he felt that the government should have a role to “pass on the information to all parents and guardians on the importance of pre-primary,” and “should fund pre-primary which will help parents to know that it is important since the government is putting in money.”<sup>132</sup>

When asked if all children should have the opportunity to attend nursery school, all of the children interviewed responded affirmatively. A 12-year-old boy from Omoro district said: “Every child should first go to nursery. To learn how to write, read, know how to speak English.”<sup>133</sup> A 13-year-old girl who did not attend pre-primary said: “I want them to attend so that by the time they go to Primary One they know how to write names and count numbers. I also wanted to be like that, but they didn’t take me.”<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 25, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Odongo Francisco, primary school teacher, Palenga, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Betty Kawoton, pre-primary teacher, Rene Nursery and Primary School, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>130</sup> Medadi E. Ssentanda, “The Challenges of Teaching Reading in Uganda: Curriculum guidelines and language policy viewed from the classroom,” *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2014), accessed May 6, 2024, pp. 1-22.

<sup>131</sup> Interviews with Acellam Boniface James, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022, and Lomongin Joseph, Ag. district inspector of schools, Nakapiripirit, July 20, 2022.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Musa Oburu, head teacher, Grace Community School, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with A.F., 12 years old, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with A.C., 13 years old, Omoro district, July 28, 2022.



## V. Financing for Education

As part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, governments made a commitment at the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea to allocate 4 to 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to education and/or to allocate at least 15 to 20 percent of public expenditures to education.<sup>135</sup> The 2021 Paris Declaration on Education Financing reaffirmed these international benchmarks.<sup>136</sup>

In 2004, Uganda spent over 20 percent of its national budget on education.<sup>137</sup> Since then, however, its investments in education have declined significantly. Uganda’s education budget for 2023/24—UGX 4,447 billion—accounted for only 8.4 percent of the total national budget, significantly below the international benchmark of 15 to 20 percent.<sup>138</sup> Its neighbors, Kenya and Tanzania, both allocate more than 18 percent of their national budgets to education.<sup>139</sup> Analysis by ISER-Uganda also shows that total public sector education spending during the National Development Plan II (2015–2020) did not live up to its budget commitment.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> UNESCO, *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*, 2015, [https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 14.

<sup>136</sup> UNESCO, *2021 Global Education Meeting, Paris Declaration: A Global Call for Investing in the Futures of Education*, 2021, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380116?posInSet=6&queryId=N-EXPLORE-69cd2d8f-efdo-49of-94ae-1b447b444f62> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>137</sup> UNESCO data, cited by ActionAid in *Tax, Privatisation and the Right to Education: Influencing education financing and tax policy to transform children’s lives*, 2017, [https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/tax\\_privatisation\\_report\\_online.pdf](https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/tax_privatisation_report_online.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 20.

<sup>138</sup> UNICEF, *Sustaining the Gains in the Education Sector: Uganda Budget Brief, financial year 2023/24*, October 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/13251/file/UNICEF-Uganda-Education-Budget-Brief-2023-2024.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2024). Regarding international benchmarks, see UNESCO, *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*, [https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf), para. 105. See also, Global Partnership for Education, “Heads of State Declaration on Education Financing,” (also known as the “Kenyatta Call to Action on Education Financing”) endorsed by 17 African countries, adopted July 6, 2021, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/news/heads-state-declaration-education-financing> (accessed January 30, 2024); African Union, “Nairobi Declaration and Call for Action on Education: Bridging Continental and Global Education Frameworks for the Africa We Want,” April 2018, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000263829> (accessed January 30, 2024).

<sup>139</sup> In 2020, Kenya allocated 18 percent of its national budget to education, and in FY 2021/22, Tanzania allocated 18.9 percent. See UNESCO, Institute of Statistics, undated, <http://sdg4-data.uis.unesco.org/> (accessed May 6, 2024); and UNICEF, “Education Budget Issue Paper, Mainland Tanzania,” July 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/11541/file/UNICEF%20Tanzania%20Mainland-%20Education%20Brief%202022.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2024).

<sup>140</sup> Saphina Nakulima, “Are we on Track? NDP II Education Budget Commitments and Actual Allocations,” in ISER – Uganda, “Social and Economic Rights in Uganda: Has the National Development Plan II (2015/16-2019/20) lived up to its

In 2022, Uganda spent 2.56 percent of its GDP on government-funded education, below the regional average in sub-Saharan Africa of 3.68 percent,<sup>141</sup> and falling well short of international benchmarks that advise spending 4 to 6 percent of GDP on education.<sup>142</sup> In the 2023/2024 budget, the percentage of GDP devoted to education fell even further, to 1.9 percent.<sup>143</sup>

The World Bank estimates that “a child born in Uganda today will be only 38 percent as productive when she grows up as she could be if she enjoyed complete education and full health.”<sup>144</sup> Increasing Uganda’s investments in education, particularly in pre-primary education, would not only be cost-effective, but would have enormous benefits for children, families, and Ugandan society.

## Economic and Social Benefits of Government Funding for Pre-Primary Education

Education investments contribute significantly to economic growth. A 2023 analysis of national income data and over 1,300 nationally representative surveys across 155 countries between 1980 and 2021 found that public expenditure on primary, secondary, and tertiary education accounted for 50 percent of global economic growth, 70 percent of income gains among the world’s poorest 20 percent of individuals, 40 percent of extreme poverty reduction, and over 50 percent of improvement in the share of labor income accruing to women over this period.<sup>145</sup>

---

Expectations?” Economic & Social Rights Advocacy Brief, no. 10, January 2019, [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/19\\_03\\_07\\_ESRA\\_brief\\_issue\\_10\\_design\\_layout\\_Final.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/19_03_07_ESRA_brief_issue_10_design_layout_Final.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>141</sup> USAID, Country Profile for Uganda, undated, <https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/uganda/education> (accessed December 22, 2023).

<sup>142</sup> UNESCO, *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*, 2015, [https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 14.

<sup>143</sup> ISER – Uganda, “Cost of Education in Uganda: Economics and Social Rights Advocacy Brief,” October 2023, Issue 15, <https://iser-uganda.org/publication/cost-of-education-in-uganda-esra-brief-issue-15/> (accessed May 6, 2024), p. 13. The paper quoted Hajji Ismail Mulindwa, director of basic and secondary education, Ministry of Education and Sports.

<sup>144</sup> Uganda has one of the lowest Human Capital Indexes (HCI) in the world. The HCI looks across health, education, nutrition, and skills and is calculated based on five indicators: probability of survival to age five, children’s expected years of schooling, quality of learning, adult survival rate, and the proportion of children who are stunted. “A child who starts schooling at the age of 4 is only expected to complete 6.8 years of school by her 18th birthday, compared to the Sub-Saharan average of 8.3. However, her actual years of learning are 4.3, with 2.5 years considered “wasted” due to the poor quality of education.” The World Bank, “The World Bank in Uganda,” last updated April 3, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uganda/overview> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>145</sup> Amory Gethin, “Distributional Growth Accounting: Education and the Reduction of Global Poverty, 1980-2022,” World Inequality Lab Working Paper No. 2023/25, December 7, 2023, <https://amory-gethin.fr/files/pdf/Gethin2023JMP.pdf>

Pre-primary education is a particularly powerful investment, paying for itself many times over. A 2023 cost-benefit analysis of pre-primary education in Uganda found that every 1 Ugandan schilling invested in pre-primary education could yield up to UGX 16 in social and economic benefits, including reduced primary school repetition rates, improved lifetime earnings, new employment opportunities, and gains from freeing up the time of primary caregivers. The study concluded that “Investments in early childhood have the greatest rate of return of any human capital intervention.”<sup>146</sup>

Expanding free pre-primary schooling can increase the employment, earnings, and productivity of parents, including by allowing parents—particularly mothers—to enter or re-enter the workforce earlier.<sup>147</sup> A number of studies have found that access to early childhood care and education programs increase mothers’ income and labor force participation, and contribute to gender equality.<sup>148</sup>

## Government Savings Through Reduced Repetition and Higher Completion Rates

Investing in universal free pre-primary education can make education systems more effective and efficient, resulting in significant cost savings at primary and secondary education levels. Research from sub-Saharan African countries suggests that investments

---

(accessed May 6, 2024), p. 3. See also Gethin, “Revisiting Global Poverty Reduction: Public Goods and the World Distribution of Income, 1980-2022,” World Inequality Lab Working Paper No. 2023/24, September 18, 2023, [https://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/WorldInequalityLab\\_WP2023\\_24\\_Revisiting-Global-Poverty-Reduction\\_Final.pdf](https://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/WorldInequalityLab_WP2023_24_Revisiting-Global-Poverty-Reduction_Final.pdf), pp. 12-14, 22, 52.

<sup>146</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda>.

<sup>147</sup> Anna Powell, Sarah Thomason, and Ken Jacobs, *Investing in Early Care and Education: The Economic Benefits for California*, UC Berkeley Labor Center, May 2019, <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/investing-early-care-education-economic-benefits-california/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, David K. Evans et al., “The Impact of Early Childhood Interventions on Mothers,” *Science*, vol. 372, no. 6544 (2021): pp. 794-796, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/evans-et-al-impact-early-childhood-interventions-mothers.pdf> (accessed December 21, 2023); Rasheed Malik, *The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, DC* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, September 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/> (accessed May 5, 2024); Jim Stanford, *The Role of Early Learning and Child Care in Rebuilding Canada’s Economy After COVID-19* (Vancouver: The Centre for Future Work, November 2020), <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ELCC-Report-Formatted-FINAL-FINAL.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2024); UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education*, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019>, p. 24.

in early childhood care and education would be offset by up to 87 percent because of higher efficiency within primary education alone.<sup>149</sup>

Uganda's education data shows that more than half of children who do not attend pre-primary school end up repeating grades, at significant cost to the government. According to UNICEF, excessive repetition can result in 1.2 extra years of education per child and an estimated 5–10 percent of the education budget wasted.<sup>150</sup> A 2017 study estimated that expanding access to pre-primary education in Uganda could reduce Primary 1 repetition rates by 50 percent.<sup>151</sup>

A 2023 cost-benefit analysis estimated that Uganda could save UGX 24.5 billion (US\$6.5 million) in repetition costs by 2030 by increasing pre-primary coverage to 90 percent. It also estimated that 90 percent of the costs of scaling up pre-primary education could be covered through savings from reduced repetition rates and underage enrollment in primary school.<sup>152</sup>

The high costs of private pre-primary also prompt many families to enroll their children in primary school before the usual entry age, creating inefficiencies due to over-enrollment in lower grades. Because these children are not adequately prepared for primary school and are less mature than their peers, their early enrollment also results in poor performance, higher repetition rates and unnecessary strain on teachers who manage large classrooms.

In contrast, children who have attended pre-primary education are more likely to enter school on time, less likely to drop out or repeat grades, and more likely to complete primary and secondary school.<sup>153</sup> The provision of at least 1 year of free and compulsory

---

<sup>149</sup> Adriana Jaramillo and Alain Mingat, "Early Childhood Care and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: What Would it Take to Meet the Millennium Development Goals?" Paper presented at the ADEA Biennale held in Gabon, March 2006. Paris, France: ADEA. Cited in Jan van Ravens and Carlos Aggio, *Expanding early childhood care and education: How much does it cost?* Bernard Van Leer Foundation, March 2008, <http://catalogue.safaid.net/sites/default/files/publications/Expanding%20Early%20Childhood%20Care%20and%20Education.pdf> (accessed December 21, 2023).

<sup>150</sup> UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn*, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019>.

<sup>151</sup> Tracy Brunette et al., "Repetition of Primary 1 and Pre-primary Education in Uganda," RTI International, [https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/15594165\\_Brunette\\_et\\_al\\_WorkingPaper2017\\_02\\_June29\\_Final.pdf](https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/15594165_Brunette_et_al_WorkingPaper2017_02_June29_Final.pdf), p. 1.

<sup>152</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda>.

<sup>153</sup> UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn*, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019>.

pre-primary education is associated with a 12-percentage point increase in primary school graduation rates in low- and lower-middle-income countries.<sup>154</sup>

## Availability of Resources

For most countries, domestic financing (primarily tax revenues) is by far the largest source of education funding. Ninety-three percent of Uganda’s 2023/24 education budget is funded from domestic sources.<sup>155</sup> Most of the remainder is funded by the World Bank, Uganda’s main and most consistent external donor for education.<sup>156</sup>

Even in the lowest-income countries, there are various policy options open to governments to secure resources for education in a progressive manner. These include widening a country’s tax base and stemming tax abuses, improving governance and accountability (including reducing corruption and tax evasion), and re-allocating public expenditures. For example, the Ugandan government could generate additional revenue by curbing illicit financial flows, strengthening compliance among high-net-worth individuals for already existing taxes, curbing tax exemptions and examining the introduction of new taxes. The types of new progressive taxes open to governments to introduce include a wealth tax, taxing large multinationals in the digital economy, applying a financial transactions tax on large bank transactions, and applying a lower threshold for capital gains taxes.<sup>157</sup>

Uganda’s tax-to-GDP ratio as of its 2021-2022 budget stood at 12.3 percent, largely collected through indirect taxes, such as the 18 percent value-added tax (VAT) on goods and services and excise duties.<sup>158</sup> Value-added taxes, which are an indirect tax, tend to be

---

<sup>154</sup> Alison Earle, Natalia Milovantseva, and Jody Heymann, “Is free pre-primary education associated with increased primary school completion? A global study,” *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2018), accessed May 6, 2024, doi:10.1186/s40723-018-0054-1.

<sup>155</sup> UNICEF, “Sustaining the Gains in the Education Sector: Uganda Education Budget Brief, financial year 2023/24,” <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/13251/file/UNICEF-Uganda-Education-Budget-Brief-2023-2024.pdf>, p. 17.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. World Bank funding was designated for Uganda Skills Development in Refugee and Host Communities, the African Centers of Excellence II Project, and the Uganda Secondary Education Expansion Project. OPEC provided an additional UGX 53 billion.

<sup>157</sup> ISER, *Leveraging Progressive Taxation to Fund Public Services*, 2022, <https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Leveraging-Progressive-Taxation-to-Fund-Public-Services.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2024); and ISER, *Corporate Income Tax Structure and the Realization of Human Rights in Uganda*, 2022, [https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Corporate\\_Income\\_Tax\\_structure\\_and\\_the\\_realization\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_in\\_Uganda.pdf](https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Corporate_Income_Tax_structure_and_the_realization_of_human_rights_in_Uganda.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2024). See also ActionAid, *Who Cares for the Future?: Finance Gender-Responsive Public Services*, April 13, 2020, <https://actionaid.org/publications/2020/who-cares-future-finance-gender-responsive-public-services>, pp. 70-86.

<sup>158</sup> ISER, *Leveraging Progressive Taxation to Fund Public Services*, <https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Leveraging-Progressive-Taxation-to-Fund-Public-Services.pdf>.

regressive since they are ostensibly the same for people regardless of income, but ultimately burden people with lower incomes more, as they must spend a higher share of their income to buy goods and services subject to VAT.

In Uganda, personal income tax revenue is collected only from individuals in formal employment. Yet nonpayment of such personal income tax is common: In a sample taken in the financial year 2013-2014, only 28 percent of the top lawyers in the country, and only one of 71 high-level government officials, paid personal income tax.<sup>159</sup>

Uganda has one of the lowest corporate income tax collection rates in sub-Saharan Africa, while offering generous corporate tax incentives. In 2021, for example, Uganda lost an estimated UGX 156 billion (US\$40.6 million) in revenue due to special tax holidays.<sup>160</sup> UNU WIDER reports that less than 15 percent of businesses in Kampala pay both the national corporate income tax and local trade license fee, resulting in a loss of approximately UGX 10.278 billion (US\$2.675 million) in revenue in 2022.<sup>161</sup>

Uganda also loses an estimated US\$34 million every year to global tax abuse, including the use of tax havens, by both multinational companies and individuals.<sup>162</sup> The Tax Justice Network estimates that these lost taxes are equivalent to nearly 5 percent of Uganda's annual education spending.<sup>163</sup>

In 2010, the African Development Bank estimated that tax incentives and exemptions were costing Uganda at least 2 percent of its GDP, the equivalent to about US\$272 million.<sup>164</sup> ActionAid estimated that if Uganda eliminated these tax incentives and allocated 20

---

<sup>159</sup> Jalia Kangave et al., "Boosting Revenue Collection through Taxing High Net Worth Individuals: The Case of Uganda," International Centre for Tax and Development Working Paper 45, January 2016, <https://www.ictd.ac/publication/boosting-revenue-collection-through-taxing-high-net-worth-individuals-the-case-of-uganda/>, pp. 12, 21.

<sup>160</sup> Nicholas Musoke, Tereza Palanská, and Caroline Schimanski, "Did Uganda's Corporate Tax Incentives Benefit the Ugandan Economy or Only the Firms?" WIDER Working Paper 2023/133 (Helsinki: UNU-WIDER, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2023/441-0> (accessed February 8, 2024), p. 22.

<sup>161</sup> UNU WIDER, "Why are businesses in the capital area of Uganda not paying their taxes?" Research Brief, vol. 2023, no. 6, (Helsinki: UNU-WIDER, 2023), <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/why-are-businesses-capital-area-uganda-not-paying-their-taxes> (accessed February 8, 2024).

<sup>162</sup> Tax Justice Network, Uganda Country Profile, undated, <https://taxjustice.net/country-profiles/uganda/> (accessed April 4, 2024).

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> ActionAid, *Tax, Privatisation and the Right to Education*, [https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/tax\\_privatisation\\_report\\_online.pdf](https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/tax_privatisation_report_online.pdf), p. 13.

percent of the savings (US\$54.4 million) to education, it could pay for schooling for the 477,000 primary-age children then out of school, for 20,000 additional qualified teachers, and for free school meals for over 470,000 children for one year.<sup>165</sup>

A 2016 report from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggests that tax revenues above 15 percent of GDP are key to reducing inequality.<sup>166</sup> The World Bank has similarly used this 15 percent tax-to-GDP ratio to measure how much more money governments could raise to spend on social services.<sup>167</sup> Some nations with robust social welfare systems may even double these World Bank and IMF benchmarks, such as Denmark, which had a tax-to-GDP ratio of about 41.9 percent in 2022.<sup>168</sup> Among OECD countries, the average tax-to-GDP ratio was about 34 percent in 2022.<sup>169</sup>

The IMF estimates that most countries could realistically raise their tax-to-GDP ratio by five percentage points over the next decade, enabling low-income countries to dramatically increase social spending.<sup>170</sup> ActionAid has calculated that if Uganda increased its tax-to-GDP ratio by 5 percent, it could generate an additional US\$3.1 billion in revenue compared to 2017 levels, more than enough to double the 2023 national budgets for education, health, social security, and water, sanitation, and hygiene.<sup>171</sup>

In 2023, the World Bank classified Uganda as a low-income country with a gross national income per capita of \$930. At least three other low-income sub-Saharan African countries offer at least one year of free pre-primary education—Madagascar (gross national income per capita of \$510), Sierra Leone (\$510), and Togo (\$990). Sierra Leone, despite having a

---

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>166</sup> Vitor Gaspar, Laura Jaramillo and Philippe Wingender, “IMF Working Paper: Tax Capacity and Growth: Is there a Tipping Point?” November 2016, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16234.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>167</sup> Raul Felix Junquera-Varela and Bernard Haven, “Getting to 15 percent: addressing the largest tax gaps,” post to “Governance for Development” (blog), World Bank Blogs, December 18, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/governance/getting-15-percent-addressing-largest-tax-gaps> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>168</sup> OECD, “Revenue Statistics 2023 – Denmark,” undated, <https://www.oecd.org/tax/revenue-statistics-denmark.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2024).

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Vitor Gaspar et al., “Fiscal Policy and Development: Human, Social, and Physical Investment for the SDGs,” IMF Staff Discussion Note, January 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2019/01/18/Fiscal-Policy-and-Development-Human-Social-and-Physical-Investments-for-the-SDGs-46444> (accessed May 5, 2024).

<sup>171</sup> ActionAid, *Who Cares for the Future?: Finance Gender-Responsive Public Services*, April 13, 2020, <https://actionaid.org/publications/2020/who-cares-future-finance-gender-responsive-public-services>, p. 82.



much lower per capita income than Uganda, devotes 9.1 percent of its GDP to education, more than triple Uganda’s education investment.<sup>172</sup>

## Assistance from External Partners

External donors provide a small proportion of Uganda’s education budget. Since 2019/2020, donor funding has ranged from 2 percent to 7 percent of the total education budget. In 2023/24, the World Bank and OPEC contributed 7 percent of the education budget,<sup>173</sup> while other external donors provide “off-budget” support for education projects. For example, in March 2023, Education Cannot Wait announced US\$180 million over three years to support the inclusion of refugee children in Uganda’s national education system.<sup>174</sup>

According to the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, domestic resources should fund the large majority of education costs, but international financing is still critical to reach the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals for education.<sup>175</sup> The commission estimated that with greater efficiencies and expansion of domestic financing, only 3 percent of total education financing will be needed from international sources, but to cover this 3 percent, international financing for education would need to increase to \$89 billion per year by 2030.<sup>176</sup>

Over the past 20 years, however, the share of earmarked aid to education has declined. Education accounted for 14.7 percent of total aid in 2003 (not including aid devoted to overall budget support), but only 9.7 percent in 2021.<sup>177</sup> In addition, much of the assistance

---

<sup>172</sup> World Bank, “Government Expenditures on Education,” Gender Data Portal, undated, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/indicators/se-xpd-totl-gd-zs/> (accessed December 18, 2023).

<sup>173</sup> Donors in 2018/19 included the African Development Bank, Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, Belgium, Islamic Development Bank, Japan, and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the World Bank. In 2023/24, external donors were the World Bank and OPEC.

<sup>174</sup> Education Cannot Wait, “Education Cannot Wait Renews Multi-Year Resilience Programme in Uganda with US\$25 Million in Catalytic Funding Investment; Calls on Donors to Scale-Up Support,” March 15, 2023, <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/news-stories/press-releases/education-cannot-wait-renews-multi-year-resilience-programme-in-uganda> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>175</sup> International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, *The Learning Generation: Investing in Education for a Changing World*, 2016, [https://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Learning\\_Generation\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Learning_Generation_Full_Report.pdf) (accessed April 15, 2024).

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>177</sup> UNESCO, “Finance” n.d. <https://www.education-progress.org/en/articles/finance-aid> (accessed May 10, 2024).

was provided in the form of scholarships in donor countries rather than assistance to low-income countries that need it the most.<sup>178</sup>

UN member states agreed in 1970 to dedicate 0.7 percent of their gross national income to official development assistance, and have repeatedly reaffirmed this commitment, including in the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>179</sup> In 2022, only five countries—Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, and Sweden—met or exceeded this target.<sup>180</sup>

---

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, “Sustainable Development Goals 17.2,” undated, [https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17#targets\\_and\\_indicators](https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17#targets_and_indicators) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>180</sup> World Bank, Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals 2023, “17: Partnerships for the Goals,” undated, <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdgateatlas/goal-17-partnerships-for-the-goals/?lang=en> (accessed March 29, 2024).

## VI. Additional Challenges in Pre-Primary Education

The Ugandan government has the obligation to oversee pre-primary education and ensure its quality, even when it is provided by private actors. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has reminded states that where non-state services play a major role, states parties still “have an obligation to monitor and regulate the quality of provision to ensure that children’s rights are protected and their best interests served.”<sup>181</sup> The Abidjan Principles, adopted in 2019, outline the human rights obligations of states to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education. These guidelines, which have been recognized by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and which apply to all levels of education including pre-primary, similarly state that states must “establish, maintain, and adequately resource effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, to ensure private actors involved in education comply with applicable standards and regulations ... and meet their responsibility to respect the right to education.”<sup>182</sup>

Uganda’s 2008 Education Act requires the government to provide the curriculum, guidelines on minimum standards for school buildings, equipment and other relevant facilities for pre-primary institutions through its relevant agencies; provide the curriculum for teachers’ training for pre-primary teachers and ensure that the teachers who teach in pre-primary institutions have the necessary qualifications; and ensure that all pre-primary schools are licensed, registered and regularly inspected by government education inspectors.<sup>183</sup> Yet, these requirements have not been implemented.

Parents, teachers, and officials interviewed for this report identified a range of concerns regarding pre-primary education, beyond the fees families are required to pay. These include unqualified pre-primary teachers, and government failures to properly regulate pre-primary schools, including licensing, registration, and monitoring.

---

<sup>181</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood, UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1 (2006), [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F7%2FRev.1&lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F7%2FRev.1&lang=en) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 32.

<sup>182</sup> The Abidjan Principles: Guiding Principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education, February 2019, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c2do81daf2096648cc801da/t/61484ef2125d785da37eb98d/1632128758265/ABIDJAN+PRINCIPLES+\\_ENGLISH\\_August2021.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c2do81daf2096648cc801da/t/61484ef2125d785da37eb98d/1632128758265/ABIDJAN+PRINCIPLES+_ENGLISH_August2021.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2024), para. 84.

<sup>183</sup> Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act, 2008, Part IV, art. 10(2).

## Unqualified Teachers

Teachers, parents, and education officials all stated that teacher qualifications and the quality of education at pre-primary educational facilities often fell short. Pre-primary teachers are often trained at unaccredited institutions and have lower qualifications than teachers at primary level, who are required to have a Grade III teaching certificate.<sup>184</sup> According to the Ministry of Education and Sports, only half of all pre-primary education teachers have the relevant qualifications, and 18 percent report that they have no training at all.<sup>185</sup>

In its 2020 report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Ugandan government noted that there were “few qualified teachers” in early childhood development.<sup>186</sup> The principal education officer for pre-primary education, Hajat Safina Mutumba, agreed: “The qualification and quality of the personnel recruited to handle the children in pre-primary schools is a challenge.”<sup>187</sup> The district inspector of schools in Omoro district noted that while the majority of primary schools have qualified teachers, “Some of the schools don’t have qualified teachers in nursery ... the majority of the teachers are not that qualified to teach nursery.”<sup>188</sup>

A parent in Kampala said:

Opening of ECDs should not be for everyone. It should be for people who are qualified.... In the medical profession you cannot open a health facility if you don’t have qualifications. But for education, the door is very open. Everybody including the one who sells okra can open the ECD school and after one term it has closed due to poor management largely because the proprietor is not professional.... There must be a policy along that line.<sup>189</sup>

---

<sup>184</sup> “Phasing out of lower teaching qualifications to start this year,” *The Independent*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.ug/phasing-out-of-lower-teaching-qualifications-to-start-this-year/> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>185</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda>.

<sup>186</sup> Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, *Uganda’s Progress Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Two Optional Protocols*, 2020, [https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda\\_Progress\\_Report\\_UNCRC\\_Report\\_13.6.2021.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/10266/file/Uganda_Progress_Report_UNCRC_Report_13.6.2021.pdf), p. 39.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022.

<sup>188</sup> Interview with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with parent, Kampala, July 23, 2022.

The commissioner for teacher education training and development, Jonathan Kamwana, attributed the prevalence of untrained teaching staff to the fact that they can be paid less: “People want cheap labour. Otherwise, the qualified ones are there but they don’t want to recruit them because there are unqualified ones who are cheap.”<sup>190</sup> Low salaries also drive high turnover among pre-primary teachers, with some sources estimating that half of pre-primary teachers leave the profession every year.<sup>191</sup>

Uganda’s National Development Plan III (2020/21-2024/25) called for training of early childhood development professionals at government teacher training colleges.<sup>192</sup>

Commissioner Kamwana said that the government has committed funds for training of pre-primary teachers at government teachers’ colleges, advertised diploma programs for pre-primary teachers, and was trying to register all qualified pre-primary teachers to establish the number of trained teachers.<sup>193</sup>

In November 2023, Uganda’s Cabinet approved the National Teacher Bill to establish a regulatory body for teachers at all levels, including pre-primary. The bill, if approved by Parliament, would create a National Teacher Council, responsible for professionalizing the teaching profession and overseeing and regulating teacher standards. The council will be responsible for registration, licensing, and accreditation of teachers. Minimum qualifications for teachers would require a bachelor’s degree at all levels, including for pre-primary teachers.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Interview with Jonathan Kamwana, commissioner, Teacher Education Training and Development, October 4, 2022.

<sup>191</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda>.

<sup>192</sup> Uganda National Planning Authority, “Third National Development Plan (2020/21-2024/25),” adopted January 2020, <http://library.health.go.ug/sites/default/files/resources/Third%20National%20Development%20Plan%20III%2C%202020-21-2024-25.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2024), p. 160.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with Jonathan Kamwana, commissioner, Teacher Education Training and Development, October 4, 2022.

<sup>194</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, National Teacher Policy, September 2018, at <https://www.education.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/National-Teachers-policy.pdf> (accessed on February 23, 2024), p. 7.

## Lack of Government Oversight

An estimated 82 percent of early childhood care and education centers in Uganda are not registered, which means they are not certified as meeting the minimum standards set by the government. Fifty-six percent are neither registered nor licensed.<sup>195</sup>

The national Directorate of Education Standards has a mandate to ensure the quality of primary, secondary, and tertiary education, as well as technical schools and polytechnics offering certificates. Pre-primary education, however, does not fall under the directorate's mandate. The responsibility for registration, licensing, and inspection of pre-primary schools falls to the district local governments, and individual district education officers.<sup>196</sup>

District inspectors say that they have limited capacity to oversee pre-primary schools. The district inspector for schools in Omoro district explained the restraints on his ability to monitor nursery schools: “Finances. According to guidelines, the inspection grants are sent based on the number of schools. So, we prioritize the government schools and also consider a sample of private schools. With the limited budget, you become a bit constrained. If you are supervising 120 schools, you go to all 66 UPE schools and 20 private schools and leave out nursery private schools.... The other challenge, we have few inspectors. We are only two inspectors.”<sup>197</sup>

Joseph Lomongin, the AG district inspector of schools in Nakapiripirit, said that only 7 of the 25 pre-primary schools in his district were licensed.<sup>198</sup> He said: “Nursery goes without inspection. Things have gone digital but the tool for inspection and even the server in the ministry does not include nursery.”<sup>199</sup>

George Karyabuki, the principal inspector of schools and director, Directorate of Education Standards, said: “The major challenge is the fact that the Education Act places pre-primary education in the hands of the private sector and only leaves the government with the role

---

<sup>195</sup> UNICEF, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, and G:ENESIS, *Investing in the Future: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda: Final Draft Study Report*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/documents/investing-future-cost-benefit-analysis-pre-primary-education-uganda>.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with George Karyabuki, principal inspector of schools and director, Directorate of Education Standards, September 23, 2022.

<sup>197</sup> Interview with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Joseph Lomongin, Ag. district inspector of schools, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

of regulation. This is problematic because the private sector is often profit-driven, as such, market demands often override the standards. The decentralization of early childhood development is also another challenge.”

Karyabuki said that the directorate is designing tools to be used by all local governments to better achieve uniformity in inspection and monitoring.<sup>200</sup> In the meantime, he said, “there is no harmony in the tools designed by each district and local government education officials when it comes to inspection and monitoring of those schools. There is no uniformity of inspectors at this level while executing their mandate.”<sup>201</sup>

## Lack of a Standard Curriculum

According to UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Global Partnership for Education, “an appropriate pre-primary curriculum is crucial to achieve the many potential developmental and school readiness benefits of early childhood education.”<sup>202</sup> Uganda’s National Curriculum Development Centre adopted a “learning framework” for early childhood development in 2005, providing guidance on key benchmarks for early childhood education.<sup>203</sup> However, teachers and education officials said that a standard curriculum was not available for pre-primary schools.

A teacher at an infant care center in Mukono district said: “The government should provide a standard syllabus to all nursery schools instead of each school designing its own.”<sup>204</sup> Another teacher in Nakapiripirit district said: “A clear syllabus should be established for nursery with the clear subject matter to be handled at that level of pre-primary.”<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>200</sup> Interview with George Karyabuki, principal inspector of schools and director, Directorate of Education Standards, September 23, 2022.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Global Partnership for Education, *Mainstreaming Early Childhood Education into Education Sector Planning*, October 2019, [https://www.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/module\\_2.pdf](https://www.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/module_2.pdf) (accessed April 1, 2024), p. 6.

<sup>203</sup> National Curriculum Development Centre, *Learning Framework for Early Childhood Development*, 2005, [https://web.archive.org/web/20221128075539/https://ncdc.go.ug/images/DOCS/resources/ECD\\_FRamework.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20221128075539/https://ncdc.go.ug/images/DOCS/resources/ECD_FRamework.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Justine Namuli Namusoke, teacher, King David Infant Care Centre, Ntawo village, Mukono municipality, Mukono district, July 12, 2022.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Richard Tirimba, primary school teacher, Tokora, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.



## Lack of Awareness of the Benefits of Pre-Primary

Finally, some parents are simply unaware that nursery school was an option for their children or do not appreciate its benefits. A primary school teacher in Namalu subcounty of Nakapiripirit said some parents “think that children in pre-primary may not get good care as those in primary.” She said: “There should be enough sensitization of parents especially in rural communities about the benefits of this program such that they too are encouraged. It will be an eye opener for them.”<sup>206</sup>

The district inspector of schools in Omoro district said parents perceive nursery “as wastage of money and they would rather spend on primary as opposed to nursery. Some of them think those children just go to learn how to sing. There is no content.” He added: “The other reason is ignorance. Some of the community is so rural that they don’t value education so much. Those ones will not be able to send a child to school.”<sup>207</sup>

A teacher at a free pre-primary school supported by a Protestant church in Tokora subcounty in Nakapiripirit district, said that even though there were no fees at her school, many parents were still keeping children at home because they “think that the children are still young or underage to go to school.”<sup>208</sup> Another teacher in Nakapiripirit district said: “It can be due to both affordability and attitude of parents.... Before, Karamoja was not into education, it is now that they are waking up.... [Parents] need to be sensitized.”<sup>209</sup> A third teacher said: “Some say it is time-wasting to take the child to school in pre-primary because the three years of pre-primary is too long.”<sup>210</sup>

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child notes that “knowledge and expertise about early childhood are not static but change over time,” and encourages states parties to undertake systematic child rights training for both children and their parents. It also urges states parties to conduct awareness raising campaigns for the public at large.<sup>211</sup>

---

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Wilfred Iwala, primary school teacher, Namalu, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with James Boniface Acellam, district inspector of schools, Omoro district, July 29, 2022.

<sup>208</sup> Interview with Peace Ngiro, pre-primary teacher, Tokora, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Godfrey Owiny, deputy head teacher, Namalu, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Richard Tirimba, primary school teacher, Tokora, Nakapiripirit district, July 20, 2022.

<sup>211</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood, UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1 (2006),

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F7%2FRev.1&lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGC%2F7%2FRev.1&lang=en) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 41.

The education ministry currently carries out activities such as community dialogues and other awareness raising activities to encourage communities to invest in early childhood education, but more could be done to increase awareness among parents of its value.<sup>212</sup> Ultimately, a decision by the Ugandan government to make pre-primary education free and compulsory and expand its provision to rural areas would send a clear message of the indispensable value of this period of education.

---

<sup>212</sup> Interview with Hajat Safina Mutumba, principal education officer, pre-primary education, Kampala, October 5, 2022: “The ministry has been mobilizing the communities to inform them of the benefits of pre-primary education through community dialogues. And of recent, the ministry has developed and launched the parents’ book to ensure that the parents/guardians can make use of it to prepare their children even while at home. The content in it, if well used can enhance children’s readiness for formal education. The parents’ book is currently, in four languages, including English, Ateso, Lugwere and Lunyole and soon it will be translated.... We are carrying out community dialogues in each and every district to sensitize the parents and administrators of ECDs on the modalities of running and operating ECDs. We are also mobilizing funds from development partners to support the sensitizations because government resources are not adequate.”

## VII. International Law and Standards on Early Childhood Education

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declared that everyone has a right to education. This guarantee has been recognized in legally binding international and regional treaties that Uganda has joined, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,<sup>213</sup> the Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>214</sup> and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.<sup>215</sup>

In implementing their obligations on education, governments should be guided by four essential criteria: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Education should be available throughout the country, including by guaranteeing adequate and quality school infrastructure, and accessible to everyone on an equal basis. Moreover, the form and substance of education should be of acceptable quality and meet minimum educational standards, and the education provided should adapt to the needs of students with diverse social and cultural settings.<sup>216</sup> The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) states that making education accessible entails ensuring that it is accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable groups, in law and fact, without discrimination; that it is physically accessible (i.e. within safe physical reach or via modern technology); and that it is economically accessible, i.e. that everyone can access irrespective of their income.<sup>217</sup>

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of the child to education, and states that the education of the child “shall be directed to: (a) The development of the

---

<sup>213</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976, ratified by Uganda on January 21, 1987, art. 13.

<sup>214</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2, 1990, ratified by Uganda on August 17, 1990, art. 28, 29.

<sup>215</sup> African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), entered into force November 29, 1999, ratified by Uganda on August 17, 1994, art. 11.

<sup>216</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 13, The Right to Education (Art. 13), UN Doc. E/C.12/1999/10 (1999), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/d-general-comment-no-13-right-education-article-13-1999> (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 6 (a)–(d).

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 6.

child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations; (c) The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own; and (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.”<sup>218</sup>

The Committee on the Rights of the Child—a group of independent experts who monitor countries’ compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child—has long addressed pre-primary education within the context of the right to education. In its 2005 General Comment on early childhood, the committee interpreted the right to education “as beginning at birth,” and called on states “to ensure that all young children receive education in the broadest sense.”<sup>219</sup> The committee emphasized the government’s responsibility for early childhood education, saying, “States parties are responsible for service provision for early childhood development. The role of civil society should be complementary to—not a substitute for—the role of the State. Where non-State services play a major role, the Committee reminds States parties that they have an obligation to monitor and regulate the quality of provision to ensure that children’s rights are protected and their best interests served.”<sup>220</sup>

In regards to the cost of pre-primary education, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has recognized “with appreciation” that some states parties were planning to make one year of preschool education available and free of cost for all children,”<sup>221</sup> and underscored that making pre-primary education free is key to its accessibility, especially for lower-income families.<sup>222</sup> In its 2005 review of Uganda’s compliance with the Convention on the

---

<sup>218</sup> CRC, art. 29.

<sup>219</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood, paras. 28, 30.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 32.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 28.

<sup>222</sup> See, e.g., Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding Observations: Bahrain,” UN Doc. CRC/C/15/Add.175, March 11, 2002, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2F15%2FAdd.175&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2F15%2FAdd.175&Lang=en) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 42 (expressed concern that pre-primary education in Bahrain was only available through

Rights of the Child, the committee specifically recommended that Uganda “increase public expenditure on education, in particular pre-primary, primary and secondary education.”<sup>223</sup>

An overarching principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is that “in all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”<sup>224</sup> Designing an education system that establishes parents’ ability or willingness to pay fees as a threshold barrier for whether a child can access pre-primary or secondary school is hard to reconcile with this principle, as it prioritizes the parent’s economic situation or valuation of education before any consideration of the child’s best interests and rights.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, states that “every child shall have the right to education.” It also similarly states that the education of the child “shall be directed to: (a) the promotion and development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; (b) fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms with particular reference to those set out in the provisions of various African instruments on human and peoples’ rights and international human rights declarations and convention; (c) the preservation and strengthening of positive African morals, traditional values and cultures; (d) the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, tolerance, dialogue, mutual respect and friendship among all peoples

---

private institutions, and recommended the government “take steps to provide free pre-primary education”); Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding Observations: Republic of Korea,” UN Doc. CRC/C/15/Add.197, March 18, 2003, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2F15%2FAdd.197&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2F15%2FAdd.197&Lang=en) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 53(b) (recommended that South Korea “develop a time-bound strategy for reducing and eliminating the cost of pre-school”); Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding Observations: Albania,” UN Doc. CRC/C/15/Add.249, March 31, 2005, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=CRC%2FC%2F15%2FAdd.249&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False> (accessed May 6, 2024), paras. 60–61 (regretted that “at least one year of pre-school education was not made compulsory” and urged Albania to consider doing so); Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding Observations: Mexico,” UN Doc. CRC/C/MEX/CO/3, June 8, 2006, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FMEX%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FMEX%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en) (accessed May 5, 2024), paras. 56–57 (expressed concern that Mexico had not allocated “necessary resources ... to ensure that preschools will have sufficient human and material resources to be free and accessible to all,” and recommended that Mexico “ensure that quality preschool education will effectively be available to all children” within three years). See also Sandra Fredman et al., “The Right to Early Childhood Education as a Human Rights in International Law,” July 16, 2021, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3964160> (accessed May 6, 2024).

<sup>223</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: Uganda,” UN Doc. CRC/C/UGA/CO/2, November 23, 2005, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=CRC%2FC%2FUGA%2FCO%2F2&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False> (accessed May 5, 2024).

<sup>224</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 3(1).

ethnic, tribal and religious groups; (e) the preservation of national independence and territorial integrity; (f) the promotion and achievements of African Unity and Solidarity; (g) the development of respect for the environment and natural resources; (h) the promotion of the child’s understanding of primary health care.”<sup>225</sup>

In 2016, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR)—the independent experts who oversee the implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which Uganda ratified in 1986—urged African states to “guarantee the full scope of the right to education,” including the “provision of pre-school.”<sup>226</sup>

In its 2022 General Comment 7 on “State obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights in the context of private provision of social services,” the ACHPR examined state obligations to provide and fund social services, including in education. This includes the obligation to “mobilise, allocate and utilise public resources to fully implement approved legislation, policies, programmes and budgets relevant to the provision of public social services, including resources mobilised through: (i) primarily domestic resources, such as fair and progressive taxation and other domestic income generating mechanisms; expansion of the revenue base; reallocation of public expenditure; elimination of illicit financial flows, corruption, tax evasion, and tax avoidance; the use of fiscal and foreign exchange reserves; the management of debt by borrowing or restructuring existing debt; the development and adoption of an accommodating macroeconomic framework; or (ii) international assistance and co-operation.”<sup>227</sup> Further, the commission stated that “States should ensure that spending does not fall below the level required by domestic or international funding commitments, such as the percentage of gross domestic product earmarked in development goals.”<sup>228</sup>

The ACHPR made it clear that the state “cannot exempt itself from its human rights obligations by invoking the involvement of private actors in social service provision,” and found that “although States have reasonable discretion when designing their systems for social service provision, there should always be a quality public option. This system

---

<sup>225</sup> African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, art. 11.

<sup>226</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, “Resolution on the Right to Education in Africa,” ACHPR/Res.346(LVIII), April 20, 2016.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 38.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 40.

should be adequately funded, democratically controlled, and non-commercial in nature.”<sup>229</sup> This applies particularly to education.

The commission also outlined strict regulatory conditions for private actors delivering public services, “not simply to ensure that they do not explicitly abuse rights, but also to ensure that these private actors support, rather than undermine, broader efforts to realise economic social and cultural rights.” This obligation entails to “(a) set human rights standards for the social service in question, (b) monitor and evaluate compliance by service providers, (c) prohibit, punish and redress human rights violations, (d) facilitate access to information and effective public participation, and (e) address regulatory capture.”<sup>230</sup> As the CESCR, the ACHPR found that treaties require “States to impose a range of ‘public service obligations on all actors involved in social service delivery.’”<sup>231</sup>

In 2017, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women—the independent experts monitoring compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Uganda ratified in 1985—in its recommendation on the rights of girls and women to education, stated that education “should be free and compulsory from preschool through secondary school,” and recommended that countries institute “universal, free and compulsory education from preschool to secondary school, regardless of socioeconomic status.”<sup>232</sup>

In June 2015, the UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which monitors compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Uganda ratified in 1987, recommended that Uganda should “assume the primary responsibility for the provision of quality education to all children,” by “strengthen[ing] regulations and expand[ing] monitoring and oversight mechanisms for private education institutions.”<sup>233</sup>

---

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, paras. 30, 35.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, paras 43, 44.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 15.

<sup>232</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 36 on the right of girls and women to education, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/36 (2017), paras. 36, 39.

<sup>233</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “Concluding observations on the initial report of Uganda,” UN Doc. E/C.12/UGA/CO/1, July 8, 2015, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/ec12ugaco1-concluding-observations-committee-economic-social-and> (accessed May 6, 2024).

The “Abidjan Principles” on the human rights obligations of states to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education were adopted in 2019 in Côte d’Ivoire by a group of experts on the right to education and have been quoted by all major UN and regional human rights bodies. They provide a summary of states’ existing legal obligations regarding the delivery of education including authoritative interpretations provided by human rights bodies. They outline states’ duties to provide free, public education of the highest attainable quality to everyone as effectively and expeditiously as possible, to the maximum of their available resources.<sup>234</sup> They apply to all levels of education including pre-primary, and they lay out the obligation to realize the right to education including by prioritizing the provision of free, quality, public pre-primary education.<sup>235</sup> Where private actors are involved in the provision of education, states must regularly monitor compliance of private institutions with the right to education and ensure all public policies and practices related to this right comply with human rights principles.<sup>236</sup> They recall that “international assistance ... must prioritise free, quality, public pre-primary, primary, and secondary education for all, especially vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalised groups, and move as effectively and expeditiously as possible towards free, quality education in public educational institutions at other levels.”

The African Union’s “Agenda 2063,” a blueprint for inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development, adopted in September 2015, calls for “sustained investments based on universal early childhood development and basic education, and sustained investments in higher education, science, technology, research and innovation, and the elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education.”<sup>237</sup> The complementary Continental Education Strategy for Africa, 2016-2025, recognizes pre-primary education as “the pillar on which future learning and training are grounded.”<sup>238</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup> The Abidjan Principles: Guiding Principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education, February 2019, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c2do81daf2096648cc801da/t/61484ef2125d785da37eb98d/1632128758265/ABIDJAN+PRINCIPLES+\\_ENGLISH\\_August2021.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c2do81daf2096648cc801da/t/61484ef2125d785da37eb98d/1632128758265/ABIDJAN+PRINCIPLES+_ENGLISH_August2021.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2024), Overarching Principal 2.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 9.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, Overarching Principal 8.

<sup>237</sup> African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, September 2015, [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063\\_popular\\_version\\_en.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 14.

<sup>238</sup> African Union Commission, *Continental Education Strategy for Africa, 2016-2025*, undated, <https://ecosocc.au.int/sites/default/files/files/2021-09/continental-strategy-education-africa-english.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2024), sections 2.2.1., 2.2.1.3.



In 2015, Uganda, along with every other member of the UN General Assembly, approved 17 Sustainable Development Goals as “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.” As Goal 4, states agreed to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education including early childhood,” with a target to “ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” by the year 2030.<sup>239</sup> The Framework for Action adopted by UNESCO member states later in 2015 outlines how to translate this target into practice, and encourages states to provide “at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education of good quality.”<sup>240</sup>

Existing international law recognizes that not all countries are able to immediately implement the right to free education, but requires countries to progressively implement the right “to the maximum of their available resources.”<sup>241</sup> This entails putting in place a plan and taking steps to make progress as expeditiously as possible, including by raising revenues, domestically and/or internationally, to ensure the right to education for all.

Human Rights Watch calls on all states to make at least one year of free and compulsory, inclusive, quality pre-primary education available and accessible to all children. This call should be viewed with the same urgency as other minimum core obligations as set out by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. We further call on all states to adopt a detailed plan of action for the progressive implementation of further years of pre-primary education, within a reasonable number of years to be fixed in the plan.<sup>242</sup>

---

<sup>239</sup> UN General Assembly, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” Resolution 70/1, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, October 21, 2015.

<sup>240</sup> UNESCO, *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*, 2015, [https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2024), para. 29.

<sup>241</sup> ICESCR, art. 2 (1).

<sup>242</sup> Human Rights Watch Policy on Pre-Primary Education, 2022.

## Acknowledgments

This report is the product of a collaboration between the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) – Uganda and Human Rights Watch. Research for the report was conducted by Joseph Byomuhangi, program manager, business and human rights; Mugoya Musa, program officer, right to education; Nassozi Rehema Ssozi, social accountability and citizen participation officer; Joshua Kisawuzi, community outreach officer; Lawrence Iga, monitoring and evaluation manager; and Labila Sumayah Musoke, program officer, of ISER-Uganda. Bede Sheppard, children’s rights deputy director at Human Rights Watch, and Jo Becker, children’s rights advocacy director at Human Rights Watch, wrote the report.

Joya Fadel, associate in the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, conducted additional desk research.

This report was edited by Elin Martínez, senior researcher in the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. Aisling Reidy, senior legal advisor, and Tom Porteous, deputy program director, provided legal and program reviews. Expert reviews were provided by Oryem Nyeko, senior researcher in the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, and Sylvain Aubry, deputy director in the Economic Justice and Rights Division of Human Rights Watch.

Angella Kasule Nabwowe, executive director, and Saphina Nakulima, programs director of ISER-Uganda also reviewed and commented on the report.

Travis Carr, digital publications officer; Fitzroy Hepkins, senior administrative manager; and José Martínez, administrative officer of Human Rights Watch provided additional production assistance and prepared the report for publication. Katherine La Puente, coordinator in the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch provided editorial and production support and formatted the report.

Human Rights Watch and ISER-Uganda are deeply grateful to the children, parents, teachers, and other education personnel and officials who shared their stories and insights with us for this report.