



African Population and
Health Research Center



Bridging the Education Gap: Empowering School Children from the Urban Poor in Uganda

Where are we coming from?

The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), in collaboration with state and non-state education actors, launched the urban education project in 2018. This transformative initiative led to the creation of the Uganda Urban Education Group (UEG), advocating for quality education for children in urban informal settlements.

Stakeholders identified a pressing gap in evidence regarding how and where children in these areas access education. It was found that many children in Uganda's urban informal settlements attend private schools due to their proximity (among other reasons) and space, as government schools are overcrowded. Moreover, children from these settlements are disproportionately affected by educational disruptions like COVID-19, highlighting the urgent need for immediate government measures to support these children in such situations.

Introduction

If the current population trajectory and/or increase in urban centers are anything to go by, the global population will predominantly be urban by the year 2050 (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). For instance, in 2018, more people were living in urban areas than in rural areas, the former accounting for 55% of the global population (UNESCO, 2019). The incremental trend is expected to continue, with projections estimating that by 2050, 68% of the global population will be living in urban areas (Lerch, 2017). In Uganda, the urban population currently stands at 28.6% of the total population. The urban population growth rate is approximately 5.4% per year (Worldometer) (PopulationPyramid.net).

This trend significantly impacts education, especially in Uganda, where urban growth demands substantial educational planning and investment to ensure all children, particularly those in urban poor informal settlements, receive quality education without discrimination.

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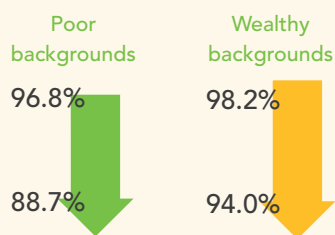
The issue and what evidence show

Despite Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy introduced in 1997 to eliminate tuition fees and increase access to education for marginalized groups, children from these groups still face educational exclusion due to factors such as gender, regional disparities, socio-economic status, and disabilities.

Children in urban informal settlements face significant barriers to education, including overcrowded schools, lack of facilities, and limited access to qualified teachers.

A research study titled *"The Urban Education Agenda in Uganda: A Call for Targeted Attention on Education for the Urban Poor"* was conducted in 42 villages across seven parishes in Kampala and Mukono, urban informal settlements in Uganda, and revealed that:

- School enrolment Research findings indicate that out-of-school children aged 4-17 years were 2.1% before COVID-19 and 9.0% after full school reopening. This varied by gender where, before COVID-19, more male learners (2.4%) were out of school compared to (2.1%) while after school re-opening, more female learners (9.2%) were out of school compared to male learners (8.6%) This implies that female children were more affected after COVID-19, which could be attributed to high cases of teenage pregnancies (Datzberger & Parkes, 2021);



- Regarding the household wealth index and school enrolment before and after full re-opening, the enrolment of children from both poor and wealthy backgrounds declined from 96.8% to 88.7% and from 98.2% to 94%, respectively, meaning that those from poor backgrounds were more affected.

- The Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) at the primary school level was high in government schools

55:1 in government schools compared to **19:1** in private schools.

- Slightly more than half **(51.9%)** of parents from the urban informal settlements felt that the quality of education had improved since the introduction of the Universal Free Primary Education policy.

These research findings on school enrolment and related factors highlight significant challenges and disparities in equity and inclusion within the education sector, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in out-of-school children aged 4-17 years from 2.1% before COVID-19 to 9.0% after schools fully reopened is alarming. The gender disparity in this increase, where more girls

(9.2%) were out of school compared to boys (8.6%), suggests that girls faced greater barriers to returning to school post-pandemic. This disparity could be attributed to higher rates of teenage pregnancies among girls during the pandemic, a factor that significantly hinders their educational continuity and future opportunities (Datzberger & Parkes, 2021).

Additionally, the household wealth index indicates that the pandemic's impact on school enrolment was more severe for children from poorer backgrounds. Enrolment rates for children from poor households dropped from 96.8% to 88.7%, compared to a decline from 98.2% to 94% for children from wealthier backgrounds. This disparity emphasizes the heightened vulnerability of economically disadvantaged children to disruptions in education, further entrenching existing inequities.

Moreover, the high Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in government schools (55:1) compared to private schools (19:1) reflects systemic inequalities in educational resources, which likely affect the quality of education received by students in different types of schools.

Despite these challenges, there is a positive perception among slightly more than half (51.9%) of parents in urban informal settlements who feel that the quality of education has improved since the introduction of the Universal Free Primary Education policy. This perception indicates some progress in educational inclusion, though significant gaps remain.

Overall, these findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address gender disparities, support economically disadvantaged students, and ensure equitable distribution of educational resources to foster a more inclusive education system.



Policy Recommendations

The shift towards a predominantly urban global population necessitates significant planning and investment in the education sector to ensure that all children, particularly those in rapidly growing urban areas, have access to quality education. Key recommendations include:

1. Increase Number of Teachers

There is a need for the government to lower the PTR in government schools, through the employment of more teachers, in order to improve the pupil-teacher learning environment.

2. Increase Public School Infrastructure

Build more public schools to accommodate the growing number of learners in urban informal settlements. Strategic planning for new schools in emerging cities and urban areas is essential to meeting the educational needs of the increasing population.

3. Support Re-enrolment of Pregnant Teenagers

There is a need for comprehensive sensitization programs targeting all educational stakeholders to promote the re-enrolment of pregnant teenagers. These programs should also address gender inequities and provide support to both girls and boys to reduce dropout rates and promote continued education.

4. Emergency Preparedness for Learning Disruptions

Develop robust measures to ensure continuity of learning during emergencies, such as providing free and effective remote learning resources and supporting poor families to mitigate the impact of school closures on children's education.

Conclusion

Improving access to quality education for children in Uganda's poor urban informal settlements requires a systematic approach involving government action, community engagement, and public-private collaborations. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, educational equity can be enhanced, and better opportunities provided for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background.



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