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## Early Childhood Development in Uganda: Investing in Human and National Development – Reflections from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Anil Khamis

Aga Khan University, [anil.khamis@aku.edu](mailto:anil.khamis@aku.edu)

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# Education in Troubled Times:

*A Global Pluralist Response*

Edited by

Yahia Baiza

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Education in Troubled Times: A Global Pluralist Response

Edited by Yahia Baiza

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I dedicate this book to all the young girls and women of Afghanistan and those in similar circumstances whose education has been interrupted or even lost because of international conflicts and proxy wars, political turmoil, traditions, and customs and, above all, because of having been born female. In many parts of the world, the female gender is the only factor that makes women subject to unequal treatment at home, at educational institutions, and in the larger society under the excuses of various narrow-minded interpretations in the name of culture, tradition, and religion.

This is written while hoping for the day when the female gender, to which human existence is tied, will be respected as much as men. Every man knows that he exists because a woman was there before he was born, and that woman gave birth to him and taught him how to talk and walk. And hoping for the day when women of Afghanistan and others around the world may live a peaceful life, free from violence and discrimination.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges over the past two years, the direct and indirect effects of which have also been felt during the completion of this book. Soon after Rebecca and I agreed on the book's details in the second half of February 2020, the pandemic began to spread across the world and disrupted all aspects of our lives. Some of our authors and their family members contracted the virus, while some others also experienced the loss of their loved ones. Another friend and colleague of mine had to withdraw her contribution because of a sudden and severe illness for which she had to undergo an operation amid the pandemic. After months of little physical activity and spending more time sitting at my desk at home, I developed muscle stiffness and then severe pains in my lumbar spine and both legs for which I had to attend urgent hospital treatment, followed by weeks of video physiotherapy. It was important not to put pressure on our authors because each of us had to cope with many challenges. Meanwhile, the book project had to be also completed within a reasonable timeframe. Appropriately, Rebecca and Clementine Joly (former author liaison officer for this book), offered their full support to this book and our authors. They always spoke of flexibility and of giving authors more time to complete their chapters. On behalf of all our authors, I wholeheartedly thank Rebecca and Clementine Joly, as well as the technical

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# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN UGANDA: INVESTING IN HUMAN AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT – REFLECTIONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ANIL KHAMIS

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

## **Abstract**

This chapter presents an analysis of the development of early childhood development in Uganda from policy to programme development in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the achievements and challenges as well as the opportunities for government and its partners whilst navigating an evolving and increasingly competitive political economy. The chapter identifies gaps that need to be addressed in terms of human development, which is argued to be the basis of national development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are presented as an acceptable and agreed framework by all stakeholders as Uganda and other nations confront uncertain futures. The chapter concludes by recommending strategic and programme development options that exist at the policy level, including the role of partnerships, which are critical in addressing future challenges as exposed by the pandemic.

## **Introduction**

The devastating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on education across the world portends troubled futures for the whole generation of learners affected. The World Health Organisation declared the global pandemic in March 2020 and by mid-2020 UNICEF estimated that 1.6–1.9 billion learners were out of school and that nearly half a billion children and adolescents were unable to access remote and distance learning (UNICEF

2020). Subsequent studies show the stark and sobering direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, it is estimated that Covid-19 will lead to an excess of hundreds of thousands of maternal and child deaths exacerbated by the limiting or halting of nutrition benefits and immunisation normally provided by governments and their development partners (UNICEF, 2021a). There will be an increase in the number of children who are severely malnourished leading to a steep rise in poverty across the countries of the global south. As poverty rates rise, unwanted pregnancies — including amongst teenage girls — will result in a downward spiral of poor development of both mothers and their children reversing many gains of the past three decades. The numbers of children dropping out of school, added to those who have never accessed schools, will further add to learning losses (UNICEF, 2021a; UNICEF, 2021b). The overall effect on human development and consequently national development will be incalculable unless responses at the national level supported by regional and global efforts are forthcoming quickly and reflective of lessons from past tragedies as well as being based on a critical analysis of future prospects.

The effects of the pandemic have brought into sharp focus debates that have plagued education for a number of decades. The three principal debates centre around: (i) the provision of education in terms of the balance between access and quality; (ii) the system readiness of schools to receive children and ensure good learning outcomes; and (iii) the fit-for-purpose or instrumental purpose of education to serve national interests. These debates encapsulate other aspects of educational provision. The right to education for all children in the declaration of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, spearheaded by the United Nations, is particularly relevant. The CRC is the most ratified convention in history — signed by all the countries of the world except the USA and Somalia. However, there have been lingering arguments about the provision of education in emergency contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this is a moot point: all education ceased globally as the focus shifted to restoring health and well-being thereby illuminating the priority and primacy given to education. Additionally, a number of other attendant areas have become prominent: environmental degradation and climate change (UNDP, 2020); access to information and the digital divide (Pandey and Pal, 2020); and the recalibration of economic growth (Gross Domestic Product, GDP) as a measure of development (Calderon, 2020). The resolution of some debates and the opening up of new areas of investigation have the potential to address what were considered until recently intractable problems that more often than not exacerbated existing inequalities.

In the light of the current COVID-19 situation and its longer-term consequence, this chapter focuses on the critical need for investment in early childhood development (ECD). A study of ECD in Uganda is instructive on what is possible as well as pitfalls to be avoided if the educational needs of all communities are to be served and if meaningful national development is to be re-launched and achieved. The collaborative and synergistic efforts of the public and private sectors working in partnership, as well as health and education professionals working in tandem, will be required to meet the challenges ahead.

## **Uganda – Contextual Background**

Even prior to COVID-19 two out of every three children in Africa lived in extreme poverty. Uganda had the added burden of a number of long-lasting and ongoing conflicts within its borders as well as cross-border warfare that displaced whole populations. The consequent capacity of the government to deliver social services remained hampered and the country as a whole exhibits low economic and human development outcomes (World Bank, 2019).

Uganda is a landlocked country that borders Kenya to the east, South Sudan to the north, the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west, and Tanzania and Rwanda to the south. It is divided into four administrative regions that are further sub-divided into 134 districts. A distinguishing socio-demographic feature of the districts is ethnicity. Uganda, since its independence in 1962, has suffered continued civil strife, military coups, and external influence. The economy is largely agricultural based with high levels of poverty.

The most recent developmental data available for Uganda are from 2016 (UNDP 2020). Adjusted for birth rate and reported economic indicators, it is estimated that the majority of Ugandans are multi-dimensionally poor (over 55%) and another 24.9% are classified as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (UNDP, 2020a). Wide regional variations are reported in terms of maternal and child mortality, stunting, and wastage as well as deprivations including access to infrastructure, water and sanitation facilities, and to health clinics and schools. Multidimensional poverty is a composite indicator that relates to poor health, limited education, inadequate living standards, political, social, and economic disempowerment, poor quality, and/or insufficient work done below one's capacity, threats of violence, and living in areas that are environmentally

hazardous. Uganda is classified in the low human development category positioned at 159 out of 189 countries and territories (UNDP, 2020). However, from 1990 to 2019, Uganda made significant progress in each of the human development indicators: life expectancy at birth increased by 17.5 years; mean years of schooling increased by 3.4 years; and expected years of schooling increased by 5.7 years (UNDP, 2020a). These are impressive gains that speak to concerted policy development and national planning over a sustained period of over two decades.

### **Policy Context: A Case to Invest in ECD**

Uganda is a very young country demographically with 60% of the population aged 15 years or younger (UNDP, 2020a). The Ugandan National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD, 2016) builds on evidence of the importance of investing the early years. NIECD also articulates with other laws and legislation building on the CRC (1989) that is reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (State House of Uganda, 1995), Local Governments Act (1997), Children Act (Cap 59), Early Childhood Policy (2007), The Uganda Vision 2040 National Development Plan II (2015/16-2019/20), and the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) Party Manifesto, 2016-2021 (NRM, 2021).

Research spanning more than 40 years demonstrates the critical period of a child's early years, the first 1,000 days from conception to aged three and then the next 2,000 days, up to a child's eighth birthday that affect the whole life course of individuals (WHO, 2018). The benefits of good ECD are evident and last across the lifespan of individuals as well as communities at large; concomitantly, the costs of inaction or delaying programming are equally well established. In effect, poor ECD experiences lead to poor outcomes and good ECD leads to good outcomes across the whole of a person's life. The ECD framework informing policy in Uganda is the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) (WHO, 2018) that comprises of five areas: good health; adequate nutrition; responsive caregiving; security and safety; and opportunities for early learning. These components bridge various disciplines and social sectors from health and education to sanitation and new fields of study of environmental effects on the whole population, neuroscience, and culture.

The benefits of good quality ECD include building resilience, cognitive development, and improved health including reduced disease burden and lower incidences of non-communicable diseases such as hypertension at the

level of the individual. At the level of the community, the benefits include more peaceful societies, greater equality, and more creative and responsive problem-solving capabilities aimed at the whole of society (Clarke et al, 2020). The effects of limiting or neglecting the period of ECD result in increases in poverty, malnutrition, insecurity and violence, gender inequities, and poorer mental health. At the national level, there is an increase in the disease burden a country faces, medical costs associated with rehabilitation, and security and restitutive justice including costs associated with the penal system (WHO, 2018). Recent studies confirm earlier notions that the benefits of investing in good ECD are directly related to economic returns first noted by the Nobel Laureate James Heckman (1999), which has been contextualised for Africa (Garcia, et al, 2008; UNICEF, 2021b). The basic return on investment is at least seven-fold: for every one dollar invested in ECD a country benefits by more than seven dollars in terms of greater returns in education (throughput and success), better health, improved economic productivity and employability; the return far exceeds any other financial investment (Heckman, 1999). Recent work to quantify Heckman's pioneering work over the past two decades shows an even greater effect of investing in early years for individuals and whole societies (UNICEF, 2021b). In the context of the global south, analyses indicate that a 50% increase in preschool enrolment affects increased lifetime earnings. Similarly, one extra year of pre-school enrolment is associated with an additional 2.6 years retention in school and 15% increase in one's wages (World Bank, 2019).

The cost of inaction – not investing at this time that is critical for human development – is to condemn children to irreversible lifetime damage. In Uganda, evidence shows that limited access to ECD leads to downstream societal costs that carry a very high burden. The costs affect the whole education sector from access to survival to learning outcomes as well as cross-sector costs that are very high.

## **National Policy Framework**

The Uganda Vision 2040 Development Plan prioritises education and nutrition for children and women of reproductive age including adolescent and teenage mothers. Data presented in subsequent Development Plans make sombre reading: early years interventions can reduce under-five child deaths by over 16,000 per year; increase productivity by UGX 130 billion (USD 35 million) (National Planning Authority, 2013); and, as per the Second National Development Plan (NDPII, 2016) reduce societal

inequalities (National Planning Authority, 2020). The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development presented the National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy in 2016. This policy provided a framework to deliver ECD services to all children reflecting the Nurturing Care Framework (WHO, 2018). The holistic approach calls for ante-natal and post-natal care, infant stimulation and education, parental education, health and nutrition education and care, sanitation, and protection against abuse, exploitation and violence.

The responsibility for the delivery and financing of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programmes, as they are referred to in Uganda, and their further expansion is considered to be a remit of the private sector (The Republic of Uganda, 2008). This accommodation, whereby the government provides the framework for the provision as well as the regulatory oversight of the sector providers, reflects the scarcity of resources devoted to ECD on the one hand and the support for public-private partnerships on the other hand. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) consider the importance of non-state actors with Goal 17 stating: “A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. These inclusive partnerships built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, are needed at the global, regional, national and local level” (United Nations, 2015).

Whilst the private sector has much to offer, cross-national studies in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) show that where the private sector becomes responsible for a central service this may lead to exacerbating existing inequalities (Britto et al, 2014). The service is offered to those who can either pay or target services to those who are easily accessible who reside in urban and peri-urban areas. The Ugandan experience shows that the private sector has been encouraging expansion of ECD provision. However, the quality of such provision cannot be guaranteed without government oversight. Evidently, if services are not equitably provided, the systems that support education more generally suffer. The resulting lesson is that national systems of ECD services for the whole population need to be strengthened with government oversight and that greater coordination of providers, public and private, is necessary to accrue benefits.

Uganda’s policy framework and approach has yielded significant quantitative benefits. From 2013 to 2017, a 31% increase was recorded in access to ECD provision representing a net enrolment ratio of 9.5%. Access



remains uneven with the urban areas benefiting at a rate of two-to-one over rural areas with underage and overage children enrolling in centres (National Planning Authority, 2020). This leads to system inefficiencies, wastage of resources, higher repetition rates particularly for rural learners, and greater inequalities in learning outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## **Discussion**

The prospects for ECD in Uganda are encouraging and challenging. The unfolding digital ecosystems, increased monitoring capacities, and developments in technologically-aided personalised learning – focused on the individual child – give hope for accelerating access and quality ECD provision across the country. The NPA (2020) considered these prospects and presented options as well as cost-benefit analyses to the Government of Uganda, including identification of relevant indicators to be monitored regularly (Table 1).

The current provision of partial Government funding with regulatory oversight of private sector ECD provision has had modest outcomes but remains insufficient. Thus, other options must be considered beyond the status quo with financial analyses that support feasible programming. To address these challenges NPA along with international partners, particularly UNICEF and Save the Children with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), identified five options building on current provision to accelerate ECD across the country. The five options are: (a) the current option for ECD delivery (status quo); (b) decentralised and fully government-funded early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision; (c) the status quo and strengthened awareness raising on ECCE; (d) the status quo and affirmative action for ECCE; and (e) status quo and administrative and economic regulation of ECCE. Table 1 below summarises the options, costs, and assessment of each option.

Table 1: Accelerating ECD in Uganda – A Cost-Benefit Analysis

	<b>Option</b>	<b>Finances (UGX)</b>	<b>Assessment</b>
1	Maintain status quo	Cost: 159,311,061,630 Benefit: 79,655,530,815 Coverage: 563,913	The cost outweighs the benefits and will not make significant progress for ECCE provision.
2	Status quo + provision of ECCE to all children	Cost: 1,021,224,775,700 Benefit: 1,531,837,163,655 Coverage: 3,614,827	Is the most effective but very expensive to implement currently
3	Status quo + strengthened awareness creation on ECCE	Cost: 306,367,404,480 Benefit: 459,551,106,720 Coverage: 1,084,448	Though less effective than option 2, it is more effective than option 1 but with no guarantees on action, no way of predicting what types of action will be taken as well as a time scale for action.
4	Status quo + affirmative action for ECCE	Cost: 408,489,684,300 Benefit: 612,734,526,450 Coverage: 1,445,930	Preferred option though less coverage compared to the option of universal coverage.
5	Status quo + administrative and economic regulation of ECCE	Cost: 255,305,982,060 Benefit: 382,958,973,090 Coverage: 903,706	Least effective option in terms of enhancing access to ECCE. In addition, offers no guarantees on action relating to enforcement and market reaction to the regulation.

Source: MoES, 2018, A Regulatory Impact Assessment Report cited in NPA Report (2020)

Table 1 displays that there are no easy options and all options require significant additional investment hence, at present, the status quo remains the default position. Black *et al.* (2017) assert that there is a lacuna of studies in ECD funding generally, specifically in comparison to other sector-specific services. Thus, follow up studies are needed to consider the comparative expenditure within and between sectors aimed at children in the 0-8 year age range and the potential for synergy in programme delivery. The Uganda ECD framework allows and encourages innovations, such as training of staff in health clinics during ante- and post-natal screening, to support caregivers and parents, early stimulation in the home, health promotion and education in early year centres, and early detection, intervention, and screening to support required interventions for those with disabilities or special needs. Such innovations will be critical responses to meet the ECD and basic educational needs of the whole population.

Uganda is very vulnerable to the degradation of its human social capital. The country has been in a state of civil strife during most of its post-independence era and engaged in cross-border conflicts in Somalia, South Sudan, and supporting armed conflicts in DRC and further afield. Furthermore, it is estimated that annually the Government of Uganda spends an estimated Uganda Shillings (UGX) 2 trillion – over USD 500 million, more than 5% of its GDP, to ameliorate the harm children suffer early in life (National Planning Authority, 2020).

Given this troubled situation, the Ugandan government clearly appreciates the critical stage of the early years for both individuals and the nation to thrive and development. It has built on research evidence and best practices to enable a facilitative policy and engage bilateral and international agencies to support its provision. To ensure equitable access to quality ECD services and thereby to accrue benefits for all its citizens and the country as a whole, the nation must act to prioritise ECD — if necessary over other sector provision as well as other expenditure items. The time to act is now. The Lancet Series on Women’s and Children’s Health in Conflict Settings (Wise *et al.*, 2021) reveals that 630 million women and young children, including new-borns, face increased threats of mortality as a result of rising crises. This is a three-fold increase since 2000.

Uganda’s low human development index of 0.55 and the challenge of increasing competition, as the world moves towards a knowledge society where economic activity is increasingly in the hands of competent and qualified people, the limited human capabilities of its population will continue to create and exacerbate existing inequalities. In its recent report,

*The Changing Nature of Work*, the World Bank (2019) makes explicit that only those countries that invest in the health and education of their entire populations can navigate successfully the transition to a knowledge economy. Uganda's early start in the development of effective ECD policies and supportive legislation in ECD provision places it in an encouraging position. However, the luxury of time to reach entire populations on its current trajectory is not available. The potential of its unfulfilled human capital will severely hamper Uganda's development. As discussed below, the situation in Uganda is further vexing as its neighbours in the region accelerate their efforts and investments in ECD which can lead to exacerbating existing regional competition as the economies of those countries undergo transformations.

### **Systemic Considerations**

Since 2017, with changes in Uganda's Constitution in 2005 which responded to calls for the restoration of multiparty democracy, some gains have been evident with other rights and entitlements having been compromised. Of particular note is that women's representation in parliament has been limited and presidential term limits have been scrapped. This has facilitated an unprecedented sixth contiguous presidential term in the 2021 national elections. Such constitutional manoeuvres coupled with other state capture or rent-seeking schemes can allow ruling elites and private interests to prevail upon the state's decision-making for the benefit and profit of the few (Collard, 2019). The government, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when all learning institutions were suspended, ruled that all internet users were to register with a regulator before being allowed to publish online. Alarms were raised that regimes in 91 countries, including Uganda, on the pretext of COVID-19 measures, increased their authoritarianism, limited accountability, and further disenfranchised vulnerable populations signalling a retreat from serving peoples' social sector needs on an equitable basis (The Economist, 2020). The apparent limited accountability, the prospects to serve vulnerable sectors of society, as prioritised by ECD provision in policy, remain distant.

As per current practice, the private sector will continue to be a significant stakeholder in the ECD arena for the foreseeable future and can be a valuable partner to support government efforts but only with the requisite governance and financial accountability to serve the needs of all citizens and to ensure their entitlements to services remains the prerogative of the state. The alternative is to have greater and deeper inequalities between the

rich and poor, greater inter-generational divisions, increased strife, and increased likelihood of continuous conflict amongst the citizenry. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, the cost of inaction or being ill-prepared has grave consequences.

### **Regional Considerations: Uganda and the East African ECD Context**

Lessons from the current COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda and the case of its neighbour, Kenya, are illustrated by the president: "Turning to the social front ... I am concerned by increasing tensions within our homes. Cases of gender-based violence have increased, mental health issues have worsened, and instances of teenage pregnancy have escalated" (Kenyatta, 2020). A country like Uganda can ill-afford further exacerbating these issues given its youthful demography that is a great and untapped resource whilst it struggles to complete on the global level. However, across the region there is evidence of the very real possibility of reaching the most marginalised populations.

ECD is gaining importance and rising on the policy agenda across the three East African countries, as evidenced by Piper (2018) in Kenya, by Ejuu et al (2019) in Uganda, and by Bakuza (2019) in Tanzania. The issues of who provides this education, where leadership comes from, and how all children are served, remain unaddressed at the level of policy implementation. The region is aware that to invest in ECD and make the provision sustainable will require investment and innovative financing options to reach the most marginalised and disenfranchised (Khamis, 2018). The financing options will need to articulate with the structural, systemic, and teacher training responses and ongoing social, political, and economic changes underway in the region. In Kenya, for example, a curriculum reform process known as the 'Competency-Based Curriculum' (CBC) initiated in 2013 and rolled out in 2017, includes two years of preschool provision (KICD, 2013). The CBC, in a span of three years, has increased enrolment to over 50% with Tanzania's preschool enrolment at approximately one-third of all children.

Bakuza (2019) argues that critical gaps exist in governance oversight of the educational system in Tanzania. Whilst the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology has responsibility for policy and programme development, local governmental authorities manage and supervise schools which include a compulsory one-year pre-primary known as Early Childhood Education. In Kenya, the situation is similar except that a private sector provider

supported by the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID), has assumed leadership of development and delivery of ECE provision known as *Tyari* (readiness) and *Tusome* (all learners) with the assistance of government subsidies (Piper et al, 2018). This reflects the Ugandan experience where the government notes the critical importance of early years' education provision at the level of policy whilst implementation or service delivery is not within the remit of the public sector. The preparation, status, and remuneration of ECD teachers remain problematic. Ugandan ECE teachers command a sum of USD 7 a week or one dollar a day. The situation in Kenya and Tanzania is not much better. This is exacerbated by many private, low-cost, unregistered providers who offer ECE without any of the requisite training or understanding of child development thereby possibly doing more harm than good to the children under their care (Khamis, 2018).

Establishing ECD as a policy priority in the East African region's educational systems without either a policy implementation framework or dedicated resources raises serious questions and issues. Two issues stand out: (i) governance and oversight of ECD provision; and (ii) accountability for the resources already available (Britto et al, 2014). However, at the same time, the lessons from Uganda and the region indicate the very real possibility to reach the most marginalised populations.

### **Issues and Consideration: Generating Evidence and Data**

As the analyses presented above illuminate, much has been written, attested, and advocated on the benefits of ECD including in terms of economic gains. However, very few studies and analyses are available on the financing of this critical area of human development in developing country contexts. Uganda offers a good example of developing an Integrated ECD Policy involving multiple ministries, agencies, and partners to formulate an agreed policy framework that builds on empirical evidence. Much work remains to understand the coordination and delivery mechanisms in terms of which ministry is responsible for doing what, how it reports its work, and which other providers are involved. Information presented above, building on governmental efforts and studies, sheds light on such questions as well as on which children have access to what type of ECD provision and more critically which children do not have access. One clear recommendation that emerges, therefore, is to consider the creation of a dedicated 'Ministry of Early Childhood Development' to increase the focus on this area of priority thereby not only advocating for the needed investment but also to be held

accountable as policy formulation now revolve around integrated ECD policies specifically across the health and education as well as allied social sectors.

Available evidence shows that it is the marginalised and disenfranchised communities that have been underserved by government social services for decades and who have benefitted the least from existing ECD provision. The last half century has been marred by continuous conflict including military rule and coup d'état, a military insurgency that ultimately overthrew the civilian rule, single party dominance, and ongoing cross-border and guerrilla warfare. Uganda has the distinction in East Africa of continued internal strife and cross-border engagement in conflict with its neighbours. The Ugandan Defence Forces constitute the largest peace-keeping contingent of the African Union in Somalia, are engaged in South Sudan, and involved in the conflicts in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Ugandan scholar, Mahmood Mamdani (2020), demonstrates it is simplistic to blame one party or one group of people if we seek to understand ongoing conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. Continual efforts at neo-colonialism, access to the rich resources of the region, and external actors' geo-political and strategic considerations have had a significant impact mirroring the region in turmoil. Consequently, it is not surprising that Uganda has a large number of child soldiers and children who have been separated from their families. This reality leads to extreme psychosocial distress, difficulty to adapt to peaceful times, and limited capabilities to continue with education (Barrett, 2019). Additionally, faced with a heavy health and financial toll due to the ongoing HIV-AIDs epidemic, chronic and congenital diseases including the burden of infectious diseases such as malaria, and inadequate targeted nutrition, many children suffer from stunting that further limits their development potential and cognitive functioning (Yang et al, 2018).

An important consideration is that Uganda is endowed with rich natural, water, and mineral resources. Despite limited investment in the agricultural system, Ugandan farmers have multiple annual harvests — up to four per year for some crops — keeping starvation at bay. It is well served by river-fed agriculture, has suffered no recorded famines unlike other countries in Eastern Africa, and has very fertile soil (Mugizi and Matsumoto, 2021). The country has also been applauded for important developments in environmental and animal rights legislation, supporting its nomadic peoples, and opening up animal — specifically elephant — migration corridors across the country (Lindsay, 2017). As noted above, Uganda is one of the most youthful populated countries in the world with 60% of the

population aged 15 years and under. This can be either a positive resource for the country, known as the demographic dividend, or it can spawn a crisis of youth who are ill-educated with poor health and unable to participate positively and productively in society.

## Conclusion

African countries were expected to be the most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic given the very limited health and protection infrastructure across the continent; however, the continent with the youngest population (average age of 18 years), has fared far better compared with the ravages experienced in other parts of the world, and has a comparatively lower number of cases of severely ill patients and recorded deaths. The effect of the pandemic on fatalities is one side of the story. Connie Shemereirwe, the Ugandan contributor to the UNDP Human Development Report (2020), asserts that, as a region, the full picture of the effects of the pandemic on children, families, communities and economies across Africa are still yet to be fully understood and documented. With the closure of all learning institutions for almost two years in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the poor have been disproportionately affected and rates of poverty have increased along with school dropouts.

Africa has the largest percentages of children out of school or whose education will have been completely interrupted as a result of the pandemic according to the United Nations Agencies. Additionally, many African countries will enter into their first-ever economic recession precisely when external agency aid budgets are being cut and the pandemic has catalysed further automation placing large percentages of physical labourers' families in financial ruin (UNCTAD, 2020). The United Kingdom Government has for the first time, as a result of its 'Spending Review', cut overseas development aid from the globally agreed commitment of 0.7% of GDP citing the negative economic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (UK Government, 2020). Concomitantly, funding from external sources for education is one of the first programmes to be cut.

The COVID-19 experience is a warning to Uganda and the region more broadly: national governments must reprioritise their investments in ECD now. The case for ECD as a multi-sectoral effort to significantly improve the human condition cannot be overstated. Malaria, for example, amongst other infectious diseases kills many more people than the COVID-19 disease. This pandemic presents an opportunity for public health and



education officials to work together to support efforts to limit and prevent infectious diseases, initiate better preparedness to confront health and other emergencies, and support positive relations amongst people beginning with good ECD programming. Based on the Ugandan experience, the hampering factors for ECD growth are more structural than financial: insufficient coordination between various sectors; wastage of resources that mitigate against synergistic approaches, and insufficient contextualisation of programmes to respond to children's cultural and environmental factors (Elder et al, 2021).

The experience of ECD in Uganda outlined above shows the power of collaborative and synergistic efforts of the public and private sectors as well as health and education professionals that will be required to be sustained to meet the many unforeseen challenges ahead. These challenges will be addressed by children today who are equipped with good ECD that is the right of all children. Uganda and the region have the wherewithal to confront the challenges they face as demonstrated in its successful past campaigns with HIV and other epidemics. The main and critical point is to trust and invest in all its people and build on the foundation of the evidence-based policies it already has to promote and accelerate good ECD programming for all children without delay.

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## NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Yahia Baiza** is a Research Associate in the Central Asian Studies Unit, Department of Academic Research and Publications at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, and Regional Editor for Afghanistan at Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies.

**Riaz Hussain** is a Senior Instructor and Head of Professional Development Centre Chitral, Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University.

**Syed Gohar Shah** is an Instructor at Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University.

**Anil Khamis** is a Research Professor at the Aga Khan University and the Institute of Education, University College London.

**Wu Pinhui Sandra** is a Lecturer at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

**Charlene Tan** is a Professor of Educational Philosophy, Policy and Leadership at the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong.

**Kathleen Fincham** is the Director of the Centre for Research into the Education of Marginalised Children and Young Adults (CREMCYA) and Course Lead for the MA Education, International Development and Social Justice at St Mary's University, Twickenham.

**Sameh F. Henien** is a Senior Researcher at Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

**Laila Kadiwal** is a Lecturer in Education and International Development at the Institute of Education, University College London.

**Lotika Singha** is an independent scholar, formerly an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton.

**Swati Kamble** is a feminist researcher-activist, a Co-founder of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi-Vimukt Collective, and an independent researcher at New Castle University.

**Ketan Dandare** is a Doctoral Candidate at the Institute of Education, University College London.

**Manasi Pande** is a Research Fellow at the Office of Education Research, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

**Jeff Tan** is an Associate Professor at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Aga Khan University.

**Nekpen Okhawere** is a Lecturer at the School of Business Administration, the University of Benin.

**Sarah Eyaa** is a Lecturer at the School of Business, Excelsia College.

**Fredrick Mtenzi** is an Associate Professor and Head of Research at the Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University.

**Musa Saimon** is a Tutor in Business Communication at the College of Business Education.

**Gulnar Adebietqzy Sarseke** is an Acting Professor in the Department of Kazakh Language, L. N. Gumilyev Eurasian National University.

**Stephen M. Lyon** is a Professor of Anthropology at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Aga Khan University.

**Mirat al Fatima Ahsan** is Assistant Professor at Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University.