COVID-19'S LESSONS FOR UGANDA'S ECD LANDSCAPE

BY

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While COVID-19 negatively impacted Uganda's early childhood development space, there are some longer-term positive impacts we can identify as education was placed nearer to the community. Policymakers have an opportunity to learn from this, writes Uganda Department of Education's Fred Musisi.



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*T*his article highlights Uganda's early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood development (ECD) landscape, surveying how it has evolved from the pre-pandemic status quo to the contemporary situation. While COVID-19 negatively impacted the ECE/ECD space, there are some longer-term positive impacts we can identify as education was placed nearer to the community. Policymakers have an opportunity to learn from this and enact policies that improve ECE/ECD accessibility.

Like the rest of the world, Uganda was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The country went into lockdown on March 18, 2020. From that point until January 2022, schools were closed and students had to find ways to learn from home. With school shutdowns lasting nearly two years, Uganda was among the countries with the longest period of shutdown in the education sector.

Uganda is a land locked country located in East Africa whose estimated population of 45 million people is equivalent to 0.59% of the total world population. The country has one of the most youthful populations in the world with 55% of the population below 18 years as per the last census. (2014.) The country's education system features an early childhood program of pre-primary that caters to children aged 3-5 years. Current social and economic trends—such as the declining influence of the extended family system, urbanization and work-driven migration, and

increasing participation of women in the labor market—have been disruptive to more traditional childcare arrangements, leading to a high demand for ECE in Uganda.

Despite these trends, ECE enrollment for the country stands at only 18.7%, meaning that only 1 out of 5 children aged 3-5 years currently accesses pre-primary services. These enrollment numbers are low compared to Uganda's neighbors. In Kenya for instance, enrollment is at 53.5%; Tanzania at 35.5%, and Rwanda at 29% as of 2017. Uganda's low level of early ECE enrollment attributed to several factors. These include: the inability of parents to pay fees, uneven distribution of ECD centers around urban areas, and generally negative sentiments about ECE—driven by a lack of awareness about ECE among most parents.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, all enrollments for ECE ended as ECD centers were closed. Yet there were some positive developments. Some informal ECD centers were established within neighborhoods—from market centers to private homes. The establishment of these informal centers was driven by increasing difficulties around children being forced to stay at home, causing disruption to the lives of working parents. This, accordingly, raised awareness and appreciation of the utility of pre-primary schools. Teachers and caregivers, meanwhile, were motivated to informally look for and recruit young learners so they could continue to earn a living.

These unofficial centers operated for around one year, and policymakers should take away several lessons from those operations. Centers operated within neighborhoods, which increased accessibility. Centers also operated separately from school structures, becoming less academically oriented and concentrating more on meaningful play—which facilitated a more tailored teaching and learning process. Finally, these distributed centers don't contribute to the overhead costs associated with school systems—meaning costs are lower for parents to put their children into these centers as compared to formal school settings.

Policymakers in Uganda should take these lessons to heart and give support to neighborhood ECD centers, helping them to flourish. Creating more centers away from schools will increase accessibility. We can help to make this possible by making markets and community centers available to caregivers. Further, in communities where there aren't enough qualified caregivers, professional development programs can be enacted to ensure each community has the support of a sufficient number of well-qualified caregivers.

About

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