



— WHY THE —
**GOVERNMENT OF UGANDA
NEEDS TO PRIORITIZE EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**



ISSUES PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The government of Uganda has put in place the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD) 2016 and the National Child Policy 2020. The NIECD Policy presents a comprehensive approach to policies and programs designed for children from conception to eight years of age, their parents, and other caregivers, purposely to help the children grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally, and socially. The Cabinet recently approved the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy. However, pre-primary education remains largely in the hands of parents and private institutions despite this development.

Early Education (ECE) in Uganda is a critical yet underdeveloped sector. The majority of children aged three to five years are expected to attend nursery school, but access remains limited, especially in rural areas due to financial constraints (New Vision, 2024). The National Early Childhood Development Situational Analysis Report (2024) highlights that Uganda has made some progress in improving services for young children through initiatives like the Uganda Reproductive, Maternal and Child Health Services Improvement Project (URMCHIP) and Universal Primary Education (UPE). However, significant challenges persist, including inadequate funding, a lack of trained teachers, and insufficient infrastructure (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2024).

The report also reveals stark regional disparities in ECE service delivery, with areas like West Nile, Karamoja, and Bunyoro facing disproportionately poor access (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2024). Nationally, more than half of children aged 0-4 years are multi-dimensionally poor, and a third are stunted, indicating severe vulnerabilities (UNICEF, 2018). Addressing these challenges is crucial for harnessing Uganda's demographic dividend and achieving long-term economic growth.

ECE is crucial for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. Research indicates that quality ECE programs significantly enhance school readiness, reduce achievement gaps, and promote lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2024). Neuroscientific studies show that early experiences shape brain architecture, laying a strong foundation for future learning and behavior (UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, investing in ECE yields high economic returns by fostering a skilled workforce and reducing social inequalities (UNESCO, 2024). Therefore, prioritizing ECE is essential for sustainable development and social equity.



SDG 4, Target 4.2, calls for all girls and boys to have access to quality ECD, care, and pre-primary education. Fertility rate in Uganda is high, with about 5 children per woman aged 15-49 years. Roughly three-quarters (9.3 million) of the ECD cohort lives in rural areas. The remaining quarter (almost 3 million) reside in urban areas. Uganda also hosts the largest number of refugees in Africa, over 50% of which are children.

About 91% of Uganda's children are not accessing pre-primary education. Over 80% of the population cannot afford the fees charged for pre-primary education, which limits access (NPA 2015). According to the Education and Sports Sector Annual Performance Report (ESSAPR), 2015, the ECD enrolment stood at only 433,258 yet there were over 5 million aged 3-5 years' children. Hence, for every 100 children of preschool going age (3-5 years), only 9 were enrolled and 90.5% will wait until they are 6 years to join primary education most especially those in the rural communities

In Uganda, Children who had attended pre-school had better language skills than nonparticipants and achieved better results in school until grade 4 (Mwaura, 2005, 2006). In comparison to other East African countries, Uganda's enrolment in preschools is far behind. In Kenya, enrolment is at 53.5%; Tanzania at 35.5% and Rwanda at 29%.

According to the Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit in the Ministry of Finance, for every UGX 1,000 invested in Universal Primary Education (UPE), the government of Uganda loses UGX 600 because most of the children have not accessed pre-primary education.



IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Cognitive and Social Development

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a pivotal role in brain development and learning capabilities. During early years, the brain undergoes rapid growth, forming neural connections that are crucial for cognitive functions. Quality ECE programs stimulate these connections, enhancing memory, attention, and problem-solving skills (UNESCO, 2023). Research shows that children who participate in ECE exhibit better academic performance and social skills later in life (UNESCO, 2024). Thus, investing in ECE is essential for fostering lifelong learning and development.

ECE significantly enhances social skills and emotional well-being. Through structured interactions, children learn to communicate, cooperate, and resolve conflicts, fostering positive relationships (Mariposa Education, 2024). ECE environments provide a safe space for children to express emotions and develop empathy, which are crucial for emotional regulation and mental health (NAU, 2024). These foundational skills contribute to better academic performance and overall life satisfaction.

Long-term Education Outcomes

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is strongly correlated with future academic success. Studies indicate that children who attend high-quality ECE programs exhibit better cognitive abilities, higher test scores, and improved school readiness (Brookings, 2021). These children are more likely to complete higher education and achieve better career outcomes (Brookings, 2021). ECE provides a foundation for lifelong learning, fostering skills essential for academic achievement and personal development.

ECE significantly contributes to reducing school dropout rates and improving literacy levels in Uganda. ECE programs equip children with foundational skills, fostering school readiness and enhancing their ability to succeed academically (UNICEF, 2022). Studies show that children who attend ECE are more likely to stay in school and achieve higher literacy levels, as early interventions address learning gaps and promote continuous engagement (UNICEF, 2022). This early investment is crucial for mitigating dropout rates and ensuring long-term educational success.

Economic Benefits

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is vital for developing a skilled future workforce in Uganda. Quality ECE programs enhance cognitive and social skills, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and productivity (UNICEF, 2022). Investing in ECE leads to



higher educational attainment and better job prospects, which contribute to long-term economic growth and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2023). By equipping children with essential skills early on, Uganda can foster a more capable and economically stable population.



KEY ISSUES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN UGANDA

Limited Access and Enrollment

Limited access and enrollment in Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs remain significant challenges. In 2020, enrollment rates for children aged 3-4 years dropped to 40%, highlighting disparities in access (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Barriers include geographical factors, with rural areas often lacking facilities, and socio-economic factors, where low-income families face financial constraints (Raikes et al., 2023). Addressing these disparities requires targeted policies to ensure equitable access to quality ECD programs.

Quality of Education

The quality of education in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Uganda faces significant challenges, primarily due to a lack of trained teachers and educational resources. Many ECD centers operate with insufficiently trained staff, impacting the delivery of quality education. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure and poor learning environments further hinder effective learning. The Ministry of Gender's Situation Analysis report highlights that only 30% of ECD centers meet the minimum standards for infrastructure and resources, exacerbating the issue (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2024).



School feeding

Many pre-primary and primary schools struggle to provide adequate meals due to limited resources and funding. The Ministry of Education and Sports recognizes that feeding is essential for improving children's health, cognitive development, and school attendance. However, disparities exist, with urban children more likely to receive school meals than their rural counterparts (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). Malnutrition greatly affects the growth of the children and affects their ability to learn. According to the ECD Situation ANationally, more than half (55%) of children aged 0-4 years are multi-dimensionally poor, 1/3 of the children aged 0-5 years are stunted and only 14% of children aged between 3 and 4 were found to be developmentally on track.



The Education Act of 2008, particularly Section 10, restricts public financing for pre-primary education, leaving many ECE programs underfunded. This limitation results in insufficient government support and reliance on private providers, which many families cannot afford. Pre-primary education is not always considered in the national budget. Consequently, the quality and accessibility of ECE services are compromised, affecting children's early learning experiences (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2024).



CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES

Case Study 1: Kenya's Early Childhood Development Program

Kenya has made significant strides in Early Childhood Education (ECE) through its comprehensive ECD policy framework. The government has integrated ECD into the national education system, ensuring that all children have access to quality early learning. Key lessons from Kenya include the importance of government commitment and the integration of ECD into the broader education system. These strategies have led to improved enrollment rates and better learning outcomes. Uganda can adopt similar policies to enhance its ECD programs by ensuring government support and integrating ECD into the national education agenda (UNICEF, 2022).

Case Study 2: Tanzania's Community-Based ECE Model

Tanzania has successfully implemented a community-based ECE model, which leverages local resources and community involvement to provide early childhood education. This approach has been effective in reaching children in remote and underserved areas. The key lessons from Tanzania include the value of community participation and the use of local resources to overcome infrastructure and resource challenges. Uganda can apply these lessons by promoting community involvement in ECD and utilizing local resources to improve access and quality of early childhood education (World Bank, 2021).

Recommendations

- Amend the Education Act Section 10 (2a) to provide for pre-primary education offered and financed by both government and the private sector.
- Make pre-primary education compulsory starting with at least one-year compulsory pre-primary education in all government aided schools.
- Appropriate sufficient finances for pre-primary education. Research indicates that for every USD invested in Early Childhood Development (ECD), there is a return of up to 13% per annum through better education, health, and economic outcomes (Heckman, 2011).
- Support teacher training and professional Development for ECE teachers. Government needs to support programs for training and certifying ECE teachers and continuously offer professional development opportunities.
- Support Infrastructure Development for ECD centres. There is a need to build classrooms for ECD classes and upgrade the existing facilities. The ECD centres established by the communities and near the government primary schools should be annexed so they get support from government schools.



- Support school feeding programs. There is a need to support interventions for school feeding in primary and pre-schools to ensure that children have access to the appropriate nutrition.

Call to Action

As a country we need to prioritise Early Childhood Education (ECE) in planning and budgeting. This requires an amendment of the Education Act Section 10(2a). Parliamentarians need to support the amendment which will increase access to early learning for the majority of the children.

Evidence shows that if the government invests in ECD with precision and commitment, it will be making a huge and positive down payment on Uganda's future – setting up the next generation for success.



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