

## **Joint statement: It is time to start re-opening schools and learning institutions**

**14<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Signed by: AWYAD, AYWE, AAR Japan, ADRA, Backup Uganda, Centre for Social Research, Diakonia, East African Playgrounds, Finn Church Aid, Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Uganda, Forum for Education NGOs in Uganda (FENU), Humanity & Inclusion, International Aid Services Uganda, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Uganda, Oxfam, Plan International, Save the Children, Send a Cow, Street Child, Teach A Man to Fish, World Vision, ZOA**

It is more than three months since all schools and education facilities in Uganda were closed indefinitely, as part of measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. More than 15 million learners in Uganda are still out of school, and there is currently no plan or timeline for reopening. It seems Uganda is in a “wait and see” situation. Prolonged school closure will have a devastating impact on their safety, wellbeing and learning, and also on the whole of Uganda’s socio-economic development in the short and long-term.

Other sectors in the country have reopened with realistic and practical Standard Operating Procedures. The same should be prioritized for schools and learning institutions.

The closure of these at the start of the outbreak was appropriate and in line with the global response to the pandemic. However, we have since learned that children and schools are not the main drivers of the epidemic across countries. We have also learned that there is no known evidence of a correlation between the rate of disease transmission and whether or not schools and learning institutions remain open or closed.

Yet, decades of experience and research have taught us that when children are out of school for prolonged periods of time, their exposure to physical, emotional and sexual violence increases. Their mental health deteriorates. They are more vulnerable to child labour, teenage pregnancy, child marriage and less likely to break out of the cycle of poverty.

In our work throughout Uganda, we see all of this happening right now. In addition to education, schools provide a vital protective role to learners. Since they closed, the number of calls made to the 116 National Child Helpline has increased by around 70%. We are seeing rising numbers of out-of-school children doing dangerous work in quarries, markets and mines; and girls increasingly forced to sell sex for cash, food or even sanitary materials. Adolescents are not getting information about reproductive health, and pregnancy and child marriage is increasing. We are seeing a deterioration in the mental health of children who are out of school, unable to socialise with their friends and uncertain when this will change; and increased domestic violence by parents who are stressed by growing poverty and children confined to home.

**The risks to children’s lives, safety and wellbeing by keeping schools closed may now outweigh any potential public health risks of reopening them.**

Despite efforts to continue home-based learning, most children are not learning effectively during this period and are being left behind. The current situation is exacerbating inequality in society, with many children – especially the poorest and most vulnerable – still not having received study materials and unable to access radio, TV or online learning. For example, 57% of refugee children who were previously enrolled in primary school have still not received any home learning materials – and this rate is echoed for many Ugandan children. Children with disabilities are facing huge challenges to access adapted materials, have no access to services and face strong protection risks. Even children who do have materials are not learning with the depth that keeps them on track with grade level. The longer these children are out of school, the less likely they are to ever return, with girls in greater danger of never going back to school. Uganda has made a very significant increase in school enrolment in recent years, but this progress is now at risk of being reversed.

The long-term consequences of this are potentially enormous – on children’s health, wellbeing and on Uganda’s society and economy. OCHA estimates that every three months out of school reduces a child’s future income by 2%. Prolonged closure could cost Uganda’s economy billions of dollars.

Re-opening schools and learning institutions can also be a tool to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Many children at home still do not have adequate information about the virus and how to prevent it. Schools are where children learn these practices most effectively – and then replicate these to the rest of the household - and teachers can be trained to ensure that children have information about, and practice, thorough handwashing, no touching, personal hygiene and other vital measures.

**The COVID-19 virus will be with us for the foreseeable future, and as a society we must adjust and adapt.** All efforts should be exhausted to prevent a “dead year” but we need to act fast and end the current uncertainty. We urge Government, donors and development partners to treat the matter with urgency:

- A Task Team co-chaired by the Ministry of Education & Sports and the Ministry of Health – and including teachers’ unions and development partners – should be formalized and meet immediately to approve a Roadmap with clear milestones to safely reopen schools and learning institutions as soon as possible. This should build on, agree and finalize the current draft guidelines, and set out how schools can practically be made safe and by when.
- Government, donors and private sector should commit immediate investment to get schools ready to reopen safely. Many schools do not have adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities and infrastructure to adopt social distancing. This needs to be installed quickly, along with thermometers and child-friendly information materials. The Government should issue a supplementary budget to support reopening schools, and ensure that easily accessible grants or loans are made to schools which need support to meet re-opening guidelines.

Even getting learners back into class and in contact with teachers for one or two days a week is better than none at all. There are a number of practical and realistic approaches which can be explored:

- **Phased reopening:** Candidate and senior classes could return first, followed by younger children soon afterwards. Numerous other African countries have already adopted this approach. All schools should be supported to open as soon as possible. Schools that can meet the established conditions immediately could start to reopen, while those that lack resources will need urgent investment to meet the criteria that allow them to reopen
- **Rotation to reduce class sizes:** Double or triple shifting (with one group coming in the morning and the other in the afternoon) or splitting classes by day (for example, P7 on Monday, P6 on Tuesday) can help schools adapt to social distancing measures.
- **Adjust academic calendars to help children catch up:** If children go back to school soon they can still complete this year rather than have to repeat it. Both the 2020 and 2021 academic calendar can be adjusted to allow for catch-up classes and accelerated learning, while still making sure that children have enough time to play, see friends and make sense of the stressful situation Schools have more than 100 holiday days each year – even reducing this to 70 days would allow an extra month or fourth term of teaching. Another option could be to synchronize the primary and secondary school calendar with the university school year which starts in September.
- **Set up task forces to ensure compliance:** A joint task force for reopening schools should be constituted at district level, to inspect schools and ensure they meet guidelines. Every school should also have a task force made up of teachers, board of governors and parents to ensure the school is practicing the necessary measures.
- **Make use of outside space:** In many rural schools, classes are often held outside due to lack of infrastructure. This can be encouraged to increase access, as COVID-19 transmission is less likely to occur outdoors.
- **Provide basic health training:** This would equip school leaders and teachers with the skills to identify and refer suspected cases, and to adapt teaching and learning methodology. Teachers should also have guidance on providing basic psychosocial support to students and referring relevant cases, to help students manage the negative psychological impact of COVID-19 and the associated lockdown.

**SIGNED BY:**

