

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

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No Longer at Ease: COVID-19 Crisis as a Profound Moment to Reform Uganda's Education System

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15,000,000,000

Number of learners
impacted by school closures
worldwide (WEF-March 2020)

15,000,000

Number of Ugandan school-going children
affected by COVID-19 induced school closures
(UNICEF 2020)

10.7m Primary

2m Pre-Primary

2m Secondary

314,548 University &
Tertiary

On Friday 25 September 2015, inside the hallways of the United Nations Headquarters on 405 East 42nd Street in New York, world leaders from Governments and other stakeholders in collaborative partnership congratulated themselves upon a phenomenal accomplishment. The United Nations Sustainable Development Summit had just adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – “a global development agenda to transform our world by 2030”. Negotiated and adopted under Uganda’s presidency of the United Nations General Assembly, the SDGs is a package of 17 development goals with 169 targets representing a shared global commitment to focus on ‘people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership with a pledge to “leave no one behind.” In particular, SDG 4 proposes a transformative education vision, aspiring to ‘ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning.’

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Leaving no one behind is what has been on my mind since the closure of schools announced during the presidential address on March 18, 2020 due the Corona Virus (COVID-19). In a subsequent address, the Minister of Education and Sports, Hon. Janet K. Museveni on April 4, 2020, was overly optimistic to a point of predicting that schools would re-open on April 27. This was never to happen, because on April 14, 2020 the President extended the lock down for an extra 21 days. Globally, over 1.5 billion learners have been affected by school closures, accounting for up to 91.4% of total enrolled learners. In Uganda more than 15 million learners have been affected by school closures.

In a follow up televised address on April 20, 2020, the Education Minister presented the ministry's framework for continuity of learning. She instructed that lessons

for primary and secondary school levels would be conducted on radio and television (starting Monday April 20, 2020) and printed materials would be distributed to the district leadership led by Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) and Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) to be distributed further down to sub-county chiefs and parish chiefs. This approach is disastrous for our education system and the country as a whole because it does not present effective solutions, and does not address the systemic problems in the education system strategically.

Perhaps, the Ministry of Education and Sports would have faced less criticism had they not been aware that out of the over 15 million learners in Uganda's education system, 70% are from the rural communities. As learners from families that have attained middle income status study on radio, TV, download materials from the internet, this 70% of our nation's children will be waiting for parish chiefs to deliver to them printed materials. One might argue that those in the rural areas have access to radio and TV: granted! But how many of our rural parents are willing to volunteer their radio for hours to their primary school going child for lessons? Oh, how the elite are disconnected from the social discontents of the same society which raised them.

This approach for 'continuity of education' is not only flawed, it will further entrench the inequity in our education system: inequality in access to education services; inequality in quality of education; and inequality in learning outcomes. These are all drivers of the vicious cycle which will further deepen the socio-economic inequalities. There is no win-win for the rural poor in this COVID-19 crisis; it is a lose-lose-lose-lose. Lose – you and your children are hungry because your source of livelihoods closed down. Lose – your children can't learn because you own no TV, while learners from middle-income households are learning on TV.

The real emergency is the perpetually broken education system that for years has created bipolar nodes of learning outcomes for the haves and have-nots. COVID-19 threatens deepen and perpetuate these inequalities

Lose – you are illiterate and therefore do not add value to your children’s-self- learning at home. Lose – your parish chief will not even deliver materials to you because you normally don’t vote well. Away from these deeply entrenched social inequities, the girl children are hit harder by such crises because they are at higher risk of being subjected gender-based violence, pregnancy and other injustices against girls as evidence from the Ebola Crisis teaches us.

This plan for continuity expected to cost millions of dollars based on scenarios presented in the draft plan (worst case scenario being schools are closed for one to six months) is a missed opportunity to fix the bottlenecks that stifle innovation in the education system, including adoption of technologies for the poor and those at a high risk of being left behind. Without modification, the proposed framework for continuity of learning is equivalent to throwing money at an invisible problem. There is no evidence to show that throwing colossal sums of money around fixes the real systemic problems.

So, what is the real problem that the Ministry of Education and Sports is trying to fix in such a rushed manner?

- In the one month that schools have been closed, have children lost significant instruction time? – No, because all the holiday time combined is less than the time we have been in lockdown.
- Suppose we have lost significant instruction time, would learners recover from it? Yes, because the Ministry could order compressing the syllabus, and extending school time to holiday time.
- How about delivery of exams and assessments? In such a crisis, examinations of non-candidate classes are not essential. The Ministry can decree automatic promotion for all classes, and candidate classes could be examined at the start of a new academic year, this would only shift the school calendar for the next level only by a few weeks.

In other words, in this COVID-19 lockdown, there is no emergency with regard to the

Reform Now!

Build a world class education system that;

Provides equal opportunity to all children and minimizes inequitable approaches; Innovates for resilience and sustainability;

Minimizes the digital divide recognizing that ‘learning from home’ might be the future of education;

Leverages public-private partnerships to deliver innovations in learning.

delivery of education services. The real emergency is the perpetually broken education system that for years has created bi-polar nodes of learning outcomes for the haves and have-nots.

For long, our planners and decision-makers in the education system have been at ease with doing business as usual; paying capitation grants and recurrent expenditures, and building classrooms. This profound moment of the COVID-19 lockdown should have engaged the 'No Longer at Ease Button' for strategic thinking and out of the box decision-making to transform Uganda's education system. This is the moment for the reformers to shine and drive an agenda that would build a more resilient and equitable education system based on innovation. This however, requires political will and strategic thought. The starting point would be a commitment to build a world class education system that provides equal opportunity to all children and minimizes inequitable approaches, innovates for resilience and sustainability, minimizes the digital divide recognizing that 'learning from home' might be the future of education; and leverages public-private partnerships to deliver innovations in learning.

Let's not waste this crisis, and miss the opportunity to reform and shape the future of our education. The Vision 2040 and the National Development Plans emphasize human capital development as one of the core fundamentals for our national development, but we still do business as usual. Uganda's industrialization strategy which is now being touted as the magic fix for our development malaise will inevitably require huge investment in education, and uncomfortable transformation to produce the skill sets to support the industrialization agenda and the requisite research and development.

The COVID-19 crisis has given countries blank cheques to reset and use the opportunity to fix broken education systems that discriminate against children on the basis of economic, geographical, social and other forms of marginalization. The Coronavirus pandemic has given us an opportunity to reflect and prepare ourselves for future crises. Today we are dealing with a public health crisis. Tomorrow we may have to deal with a war or an environmental disaster that requires similar or even more disruptive containment measures. The education sector can make smart investments to address the existing bottlenecks, prioritize investments in technology and prioritize use of data and evidence for education management. The coronavirus pandemic has generated necessary conditions for reform. But, do we have the political will to step up, stand out, and pursue the requisite education policy transformation agenda?

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