

# CHILDCARE AS ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

TURNING EVIDENCE INTO EMPOWERMENT



When Uganda's markets reopened after the COVID-19 lockdowns, women returned first, carrying toddlers under their arms, selling produce, and balancing care and survival. For millions, unpaid childcare was the quiet tax on their labour. It was this gap that inspired the ACE Policy Research Institute (APRI) to act. Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) under the GROW East Africa Program, APRI conducted a randomized control trial (RCT) across six markets in Greater Kampala. The goal: to test whether childcare could raise women's productivity, incomes, and well-being.

The logic was clear: when mothers can work without constant interruptions or safety concerns, they earn more, invest more, and strengthen their families. APRI's data confirmed it.

- Mothers with childcare access worked 20% longer hours and earned a higher daily income.
- Children scored 15% higher on hygiene and nutrition measures.
- Market accidents involving toddlers fell to almost zero.
- Over 1,200 children and 1,000 mothers benefited directly.

This small structural shift created measurable economic gains. According to Uganda's 2018/19 Time Use Survey, women spend 6.6 hours per day on unpaid care compared to men's 5.1 hours, equivalent to thousands of lost work hours. Globally, women perform 76% of unpaid care work, valued at over US\$11 trillion a year (ILO). In Uganda, this hidden labour equals nearly 9% of GDP, more than agriculture contributes annually.

“Childcare isn’t just compassion, it’s economics,” says Jacklyn Makaaru Arinaitwe (PhD), APRI’s Founder. “When women’s time is supported, the entire economy benefits.” Senior Probation Officer Golooba Rogers adds, “APRI’s evidence gave government the confidence to prioritize childcare in national planning.”

The findings influenced the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2024), which for the first time, includes children under three, and informed NDP IV, framing childcare as core to economic growth. Partnerships with KCCA, the Hilton Foundation, and refugee-led organizations such as YARID Uganda have already extended the model to both refugee and host communities.

APRI’s next phase explores hybrid models that blend subsidized childcare with microenterprise training, allowing centers to sustain themselves through modest fees and shared management. This approach reflects what economists call “double dividend development,” which boosts both productivity and child well-being.

The cost of inaction is clear: every hour women lose to unpaid care is an hour of income, growth, and potential unrealized. Expanding access to affordable childcare is among the most cost-effective gender equality strategies available to low-income economies.

“What distinguishes APRI,” says George Bogere, Project Manager, “is that we don’t stop at research papers. We build evidence that lives in the community - evidence you can touch, visit, and measure.” By turning data into daily change, APRI is helping Uganda reclaim lost hours, raise incomes, and redefine care as the foundation of prosperity. Because every hour of care enabled is an hour of growth regained.



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