

COVID-19, Poverty Widen Education Gap in Uganda

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Students attend a class at the Sweswe Primary School after schools reopened following the COVID-19 shutdown in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, in Kyegegwa District, Uganda, Jan. 11, 2022.

KAMPALA — Uganda reopened schools this month after a nearly two-year shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of students have returned, but many others have not, due to poverty and the need to earn income for their families.

Fifteen-year-old Rania Kyomuhangi is one of six children in her family who will not be returning to school.

When schools closed in March 2020 for more than 15 million students, Rania had just reached high school, with a dream to be a medical doctor.

“I feel bad because I see my friends, my neighbors, them calling us, telling us that they are going back to school. Asking us that when are you going back to school, and I don’t know what to say,” said Rania.

Uganda reopened schools January 10. The government launched a one month back-to-school campaign to ensure all children return.

The Ministry of Education has issued guidelines for schools not to raise tuition for returning students. Some families, however, are still unable to pay the fees.



Fridah Namuganza, a Ugandan student, works as a waitress in the Kayunga district of Central Uganda, Jan. 7, 2022.

The state minister for primary education, Joyce Moriku Kaducu, said people who are not able to afford tuition should devise other means to ensure the children resume their studies.

“Some parents may not have money, but they may have food. In rural schools they may have cassava, they may have maize, they may have beans,” she said. “That is also something the school can say okay, you don’t have the money, but are you able to bring some food stuff, which we can translate into money?”

Oliva Naiga, a former teacher and Rania’s mother, comforts her six children with a bible session. She was laid off and with no school to hire her, could not afford to take the children back to school. The minister’s suggestion did not resonate with her.

“We tried Rania to take her back where she was, pleading that we shall pay slowly. They were not ready to accept. And I see my girl is growing. It is not easy to stay with a girl who is growing at home for two years,” she said.

UNICEF Uganda says that during the school closure, the country’s 15 million students collectively lost 2.9 billion hours of learning time per month.

Many of those children began working during the closure, and Munir Safiieldin, the UNICEF country representative, said their families will not easily give up that income.

“And to facilitate the return to school, we definitely need to look into a number of support systems, support programs. Which I also understand, there’s a trade-off. These support systems like social protection systems, where families which are experiencing poverty, should be supported,” said Munir.

Munir notes that these programs require a lot of public financing, which is a challenge for a country like Uganda.