

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN UGANDA

KEEP CHILDREN LEARNING AND SAFE WHILE SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED

27th March 2020. Signed by: AWYAD, AVSI, Catholic Relief Services, Danish Refugee Council, Finn Church Aid, Humanity & Inclusion, International Rescue Committee, Jesuit Refugee Service, Norwegian Refugee Council, PALMCorps, Plan International, Save the Children, Street Child, Tutapona, War Child Holland, Windle International Uganda, ZOA

At this critical time, it is vital that international governments and donors increase funding to enable children in Uganda to continue learning. The closure of 51,000 learning institutions to prevent COVID-19 has left 15 million children out of school and facing increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. Closing schools must not mean suspending learning. There are evidenced home, community and media-based methods to ensure that children can keep learning and safe during this period. Funding is urgently needed to ensure that these are in place from the start of the response before the opportunity closes.

Uganda has joined the growing number of countries to close all education facilities to try and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. All early learning centres, schools, training institutes and universities are currently closed for 30 days (from 20 March), but it is likely this will be extended.

15 million children in Uganda are now out of school due to the closures, including 600,000 refugee children. The prolonged closure of schools will have a potentially devastating impact on the education of the next generation, but also on their protection, health and wellbeing. For many vulnerable children, schools are the main source of safe water, nutrition and mental health support. In normal times, schools also provide children with protection from violence and abuse, and a safe place of routine and normalcy.

If children, including those with disabilities, are not provided with a routine of learning at home to replace school, they will face increased protection risks such as physical and sexual abuse, hazardous and exploitative work, child marriage and early pregnancy. There will also be additional burden on girls, who at home often absorb extra work of caring for other children and are more exposed to domestic violence. Without a learning routine, children are also more likely to play and gather in groups, putting them at further risk of spreading the virus.

We make the following recommendations to international governments and donors:

1. **Ensure that education is a core part of the COVID-19 response and is adequately funded from the start.** There is overwhelming evidence that the longer children are out of school, the greater the risk of them never returning. There is a window of opportunity to set up learning systems that could continue throughout the response – but the window will shrink as restrictions on movement become greater, so it is essential that education is included and funded from the start.
2. **Align funding and activities to support government response plans.** The Ministry of Education and Sports, with support from UNICEF and NGOs, has quickly developed an Education Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19. Donors should align their funding to this plan.
3. **Support alternative/informal learning to continue while schools are closed.** The closure of schools inevitably makes learning more challenging, but there are many practical ways to keep children learning even in these circumstances. Different approaches will be required for different communities, children and local contexts, but donors should consider supporting activities such as:

Home learning kits, including reading material and exercises which can be done by children at home, either on their own or with parents and caregivers. These can be distributed to households now, but the window for doing so is rapidly shrinking.

Distance learning and use of mass media: Radio broadcasts can be an effective way to support home learning, either through structured lessons, short messages or communal reading. 87% of Ugandan households have a working radio compared to 35% with a TV and 10% with internet access (*BBC Media Action, NITA*). This varies in some communities, such as refugee settlements where radio and phone

network is limited, but even there radio is generally the most trusted source of information (*Sentinel Project*). In communities without network, mobile loudspeakers can communicate to large numbers of people. Newspaper supplements targeted at children have also had proven impact in improving literacy and providing critical information; while in some areas mobile phone apps may be viable. The special needs of children with disabilities should be considered and learning materials should be adapted and inclusive.

Use of learning through play and stimulating activities. With children's daily routine disrupted, and a period of uncertainty lying ahead, play and fun is more critical than ever. Caregivers need to be supported and empowered to encourage children to engage in play in a safe and healthy way while schools are closed. Mental stimulation for children is a priority in this time.

Supporting community groups. We work with a range of community structures which offer a potentially key resource for maintaining and promoting learning – such as Parent Teacher Associations, Community-Based Volunteers and School Management Committees. Members of these groups are also parents, respected in their communities. They can not only support learning activities but can also role model positive practices for their neighbours and link with other vulnerable families.

Enhancing literacy and numeracy skills. NGOs have set up book banks and reading clubs in many communities, and these are likely to need increased stock and replenishing, in line with Government guidelines on contact and gathering, so that children can keep reading. These could ideally be accompanied by radio programmes to promote communal reading.

Paying teacher and staff salaries. Uganda already has a shortage of teachers, who are low paid and over-stretched. The government plan has stressed the importance of teachers continuing to be paid while schools are closed and as the cost of living rises, so that they can support home learning activities, keep contact with communities, send advice through phone/SMS/radio, and be ready for when schools reopen. Donors should support this with additional funding.

Supporting teacher networks: WhatsApp and other social media have shown great potential in bringing teachers together in virtual groups to share resources and methods of teaching remotely.

4. **Support planning to prepare for schools to reopen safely.** While immediate priorities are on maintaining learning, it is important that schools are ready for children to return as soon as it is safe. School facilities should not be used for public health interventions or as isolation units during the outbreak, to avoid the risk of contamination and delayed return to school. Lessons from West Africa's Ebola response show that fear can linger for a long time after the outbreak is contained – e.g. parents were reluctant to let their children return to the same schools as children and teachers who had survived Ebola. Communities in Uganda are already afraid, and significant community mobilisation efforts will be needed to reassure teachers, learners and parents when it is safe to return to school. It is critical that preparations start early to develop guidance and materials to support catch-up classes and short-term bridging. The school calendar and holiday time will need to be revised to ensure children can still attend school for the full number of weeks.
5. **Ensure that children are protected from harm.** Given the increased risks, education activities must be closely coordinated and aligned with child protection activities. Teachers can be valuable resources tasked to identify at-risk children (such as child-headed households) who will be particularly vulnerable with schools closed, and support monitoring by para-social workers.
6. **Ensure that the most vulnerable children, such as refugees and children with disabilities, have access to learning.** Uganda hosts 1.4 million refugees – the third most in the world – and 60 percent are children. The closure of schools comes at a particularly vulnerable time, as lack of funding has forced the World Food Programme to announce a 30% cut in food assistance to refugees from April, which will put further financial strain on families. If their education stops completely now, many children are likely to have to go to work and are highly unlikely to return to education. Remote learning responses should be designed in recognition that many refugee communities have poor phone network, which may make traditional home teaching more effective than technology-based approaches. Other children face similar uncertainty – such as children with disabilities, who already face enormous challenges accessing school, and adolescent girls who often drop out of education completely after becoming pregnant or being married off young, which is likely to increase.