

The Plight of Illiterate Youth in Uganda

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The Plight of Unemployed Youth in Uganda

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The Center of Faith, Family and Justice (CFFJ) is a Ugandan Christian Think Tank founded in 2021 to contribute to evidence-based policy, advocacy, and decision making. Our main focus is to investigate how the social, political and economic conditions of life affect faith, family and justice. We aspire to connect policymakers and citizens; and to build transformed, resilient, and integrated communities.

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Executive Summary

Education is a foundational aspect of human development. Without it, people lose agency to a significant degree. Many a child in Uganda continues to grow without a full education. This goes on year after year for many different reasons. But what is the plight of these millions of children? What best can come out of their lives? This policy brief examines this issue and recommends that the Government of Uganda puts in place measures and incentives that can allow these children to live productively.

Introduction

Education is a human right for all children. It enables one to realize their full developmental potential. In spite of this provision, millions of children in Uganda still grow into adulthood insufficiently uneducated.

In this brief, youth illiteracy refers to the portion of 15–24 year-olds unable to read and write a simple sentence in everyday life (UNESCO n.d.). The proportion of illiterate youth in Uganda has fallen through the decades, mainly due to the Universal Primary Education (UPE) drive that the Government of Uganda (GoU) put in place in 1997. The aim of this program is to provide equitable access to education, through offering free primary education to all the children in Uganda.

In 2018, the National Planning Authority carried out a comprehensive evaluation of the UPE programme and found that albeit not being fully efficient and effective, the average years of schooling for the household head increased to 10 years from 4.2 years in 1997 (NPA 2018). The quality of this free education, however, remains low, with half of the children finishing primary school while still illiterate (UNICEF 2019). Coupled with the low quality of education, high school dropout rates remain an issue to contend with. In addition, in secondary schools, early pregnancies remains a big cause of secondary school dropout (MoES 2012). Illiteracy rates in Uganda are still quite high and illiterate youth end up stuck with a narrow choice of livelihoods—mostly menial jobs— which do not even earn them well enough to live comfortably. Uganda Bureau of Statistics found the median nominal wage of the working class in Uganda (14–64 years of age) to be 168,000Shs per month in 2016/17 and 132,000Shs per month in 2012/2013. With the majority working in Agriculture, and with females earning nearly half as much as males in both cases (UBOS 2017).

Repercussions of the high illiteracy rates

The effects of illiteracy on life are far-reaching with one's inability to reach their full potential as the single biggest problem. Illiteracy also continuously hinders a country's development through foregone tax incomes, increased dependency on the government, and persistently low standards of living. In general, the failure of citizens to reach their full individual potential results in a country's disability reaching its full development potential.

In addition to this, because of their low level of income, illiterate youth may be unable to provide their children with good quality education—compounding the effects of their illiteracy. They are also less likely to engage in proper health practices, increasing the disease burden of the nation.

Illiterate youth are also more likely to engage in crime, domestic violence, prostitution, human trafficking and other such destructive lifestyles. We thus see that illiteracy serves as a detrimental factor in society.

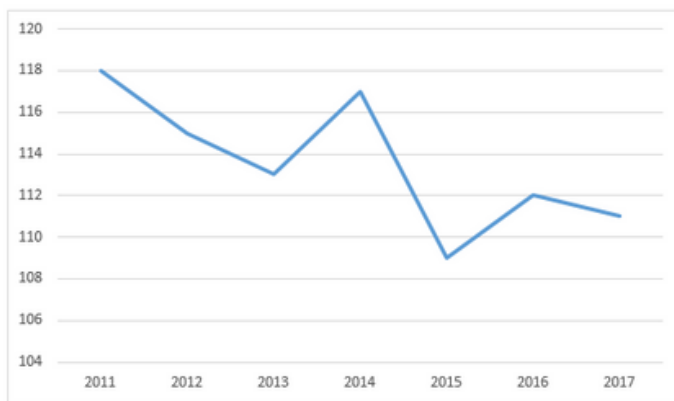
Statistics

Figure 1: Percentage of Illiterate Youth in Uganda



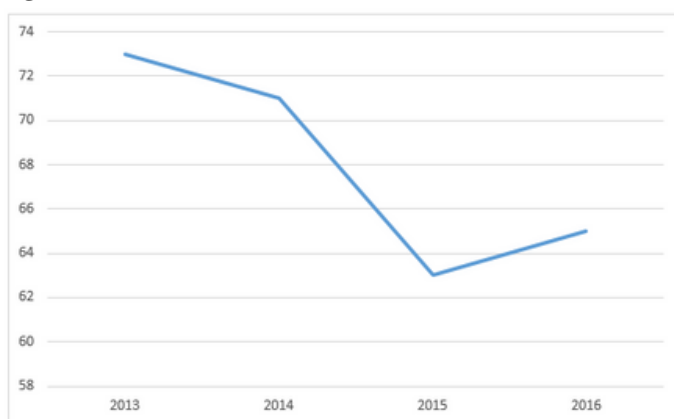
Source: Trading Economics, World Bank

Figure 2: Primary School Gross Enrolment Level in Uganda



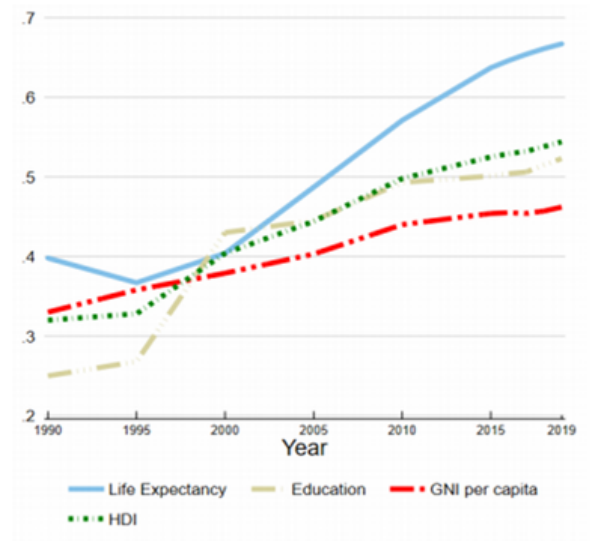
Source: UBOS 2018

Figure 3: Student Transition Rate to Senior One



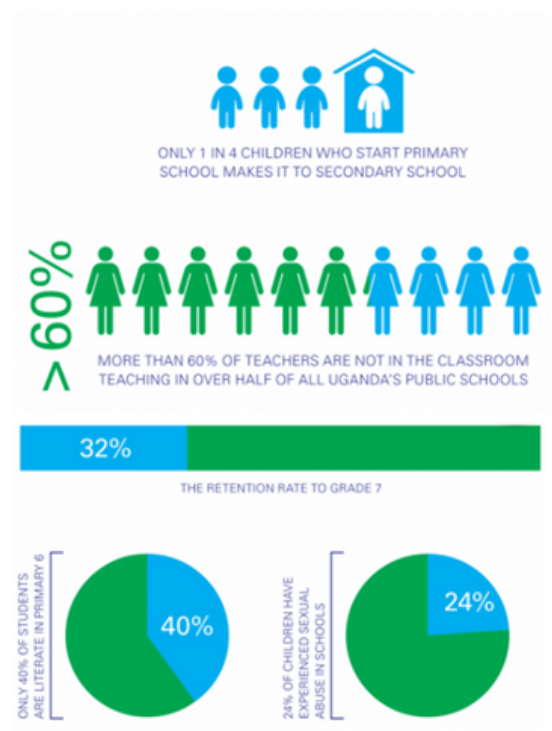
Source: UBOS 2017

Figure 4: Trends in Uganda's HDI



Source: UNDP 2020

Figure 5: Info-graph of UPE Statistics



Source: UNICEF

Policy Recommendations

Illiterate youth in Uganda need a fighting chance to escape the poverty trap awaiting them if nothing is done to remedy the situation.

- Running aggressive adult education drives to provide school dropouts with a redemptive chance to acquire education. This second chance would cause many positive ripple effects in the society and nation.
- Turning the UPE system around to increase their efficiency and effectiveness is paramount if the cause of the high illiteracy rates is to be resolved. This would require: Continuous retraining of teachers to ensure effective knowledge transfers to students thus increasing the school retention rates of students; Dealing with the high teacher absenteeism rates through instigating negative consequences of the costly practice.
- Providing social safety nets for young school dropouts like scholarships for orphans and free uniforms for the absolutely poor parents, and allowing payments in kind as options to payments in cash for other fees paid at school.
- Providing different incentives for acquiring good quality education to curb the school dropout rates: Reducing the student-teacher ratio, which discourages many pupils from going to school. Classes of students as many as 300 make it hard for many students to understand the education content, leaving many discontented and prone to looking for 'better' ways to spend their time; Making education more attractive than the short term gains of dropping out of school to work or give birth.

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