

After a 2-year lockdown, schools in Uganda have reopened – but for many it may be too late

*After a two-year lockdown of schools in Uganda, the social costs are high – many families are financially unable to send their children back to school, and many teachers have found alternative sources of income with no intention to teach again. In this photo essay, **Hilke Mairi Gudel (LSE)** shares the stories of urban families she has worked with during her field work and the consequences of the school closures.*

Last month, Uganda reopened its schools for the first time since March 2020 – they had been closed for nearly two years. In no other country was face-to-face teaching interrupted for this long due to COVID-19.

Many criticise that the re-opening of schools has come too late. They fear that Uganda's youth will pay the price for one of the world's strictest lockdowns. Looking at the figures, this may be true. It is estimated that up to 30% percent of all school-aged children – roughly 5 million students that is – will not return to the classroom. The country is also lacking teachers. During the pandemic, many had to find alternative sources of income. They now no longer want to go back into teaching. Faced with these pressures, numerous schools have decided to close their gates for good. Over 3,000 elementary and nearly 1,000 high schools are expected to remain permanently closed. In other words, Uganda's education system is experiencing a crisis. Some are already talk of a lost generation.

It is a crisis that many saw coming long before schools were finally re-opened this month. When I visited Uganda in October 2021, some schools and teachers had already started working again against government guidelines.



Flavia in her home teaching

Flavia, who used to teach literacy at a private school in Kampala, decided to start giving lessons from her home in August 2021. When I met her in October, she tutored about 10 children between the ages of four and 10.



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Flavia's students catching up on maths and literacy. She tells me that she stayed in the profession as she loves teaching. Seeing children progressing from one level to the next makes her happy.

She started teaching again after many of her neighbours actively approached her, asking her to provide lessons for their children. After over a year at home, many children had forgotten everything they had once learned in schools. Worried parents were happy for Flavia to teach them for a weekly fee of 25,000 Ugandan shillings, which equates to \$7 dollars.

The shutdown of educational institutions also affected nursery schools. Gladys decided to open her day-care centre in Nsambya, Kampala, in August of last year.



Teacher Gladys in her nursery school in Nsambya, Kampala.

Initially numbers were low, but they soon started to increase. In October, she already took care of over 30 children, with some even sleeping over at the nursery school. She actively encouraged parents to send their children to be with her in the centre.



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Children at Gladys' day-care centre. Since the start of the lockdown, she takes care of several different age groups. Concerned parents, especially those who work, are looking for their children to be taken care of during their absence.

Some parents work abroad so that their children have to sleep at the centre.

In her opinion the school closures put many children at risk. Several of her former students, some as young as three or four years of age, were sexually assaulted and raped during the lockdowns. A lot of parents had no choice but to leave their children at home alone while they went out working. It is for this reason that Gladys lets parents pay according to their abilities. Her main motivation for re-opening the day-care centre was not to earn money but to keep children safe.

But not everyone is as flexible as Gladys when it comes to fees. As a result, 51% of all students in Uganda stopped learning when schools closed in March 2020. Remote lessons did not reach everyone, and most parents lacked the money for private tutors.

One of the families affected was also that of Theo Namukwaya. All of her seven children had lost their jobs during the pandemic, forcing some of them and their children to move back in with Theo. Most of the financial responsibility now falls on her.



Theo with her daughter and three of her grandchildren.

Her daughter Catherine has two children. Since losing her job in a hotel she does smaller jobs mostly to provide for food. At a certain point the family had hired a private tutor. The tutor initially requested 3,000 Ugandan shillings per child per day but soon increased the fee to 5,000. At this point the family was no longer able to pay. The financial burden that will come with the re-opening of schools already worries Catherine. She enquired with several different schools in the area and most quoted prices between 700,000 and 800,000 Ugandan shillings per term (between \$199 and \$227).

One thing that was already evident in October of last year was that Uganda would face a significant shortage of teachers when schools would finally re-open, especially teachers who used to teach at private schools and had to find alternative sources of income during the pandemic. In the process, some decided that they would not go back into teaching. One of them is Christopher.



Christopher on his boda boda. While his new business comes with its own challenges, he is slowly getting used to his career change.

He used to teach maths and science at a private elementary school in Kampala. After a few months of unemployment, he invested his savings into a small motorcycle or *boda boda* business. He likes the flexibility that comes with owning a business. He could only see himself teaching again if salaries were higher and paid on time.

Harriet, a former nursery schoolteacher, feels similar. She now owns a small bar in Kampala. She is happy with her new job choice, seeing potential for business growth. Other teachers now work in agriculture or as domestic aids abroad.





Harriet in her bar in Kampala (top). Some of her customers (bottom).

Poor and already marginalised communities were particularly affected by the negative effects of school closures. Uganda hosts around 1.5 million refugees, 100,000 of whom reside in Kampala. Tharcisse, his wife and his four children fled from Burundi to Uganda in 2015.



Tharcisse is pictured with three of his children. His wife (not pictured) is away most days, trying to sell his produce.

Like many other refugees, Tharcisse has a small business, producing and selling sausages. COVID-19 and its economic implications affected many micro-entrepreneurs. Tharcisse's capital is nearly depleted. In order to kickstart his business again, he would need financial support. Throughout the lockdowns his children have mostly stayed inside. He does not have the money to hire a private tutor. They also cannot teach their children. While he produces the sausages at home, his wife tries to sell them on the street. The prospect of schools re-opening makes Tharcisse anxious. He asks me: "when even feeding them is hard, what about school fees?"

Mubiye (16) and her friends Joseph, Samson and Abisad have not been to school since COVID broke out. Originally from South Sudan, they spend most of their days hanging out together and playing football.



Mubiye (in blue) and her friends. They admit that some of the young people they know have turned to petty crime and drugs. Community workers are equally concerned.

Although they would like to go back to school, they lack the money to do so. When I ask them whether they have a plan B, they tell me that they do not. Some of them would like to run their own businesses but even for that they would need capital. Despite these difficulties, they have managed to stay out of trouble. Others have not. Petty crime and drug use have increased and so have cases of rape.

Agnes (19) from South Sudan was raped in one of Uganda's settlements. She found out she was pregnant soon after.



Agnes at her new home in Kampala. Her favourite subject at school used to be maths. She hopes to be a professional driver one day.

When she explained to her uncle what had happened, he told her to leave his home. Already caring for 18 children, some of whom are his nieces and nephews like Agnes, the prospect of raising another child simply overwhelmed him. She is now two months pregnant and stays with one of her uncle's daughters in Kampala. Once she gives birth, she hopes to go back to school.



Janet with one of her daughters. Mother and daughter went to the police to press charges. But Janet does not know the name of her kidnapper. So far, he has not been found.

Janet (16) shares a similar fate. She was abducted in Kampala during the first lockdown. Over the next few months, she was essentially held as a sex slave, forced to sleep with various different men every single day. When she was able to escape, she was already pregnant with twin girls. She eventually gave birth in March of 2021, aged just 15. Her mother tries to support her daughter as best as she can. But she struggles to do so. As a single mum of four, she lost her job in a restaurant during the pandemic. So far, Janet has not received any counselling.

Now that schools have re-opened the Ugandan government is trying to get as many students as possible to get back into education. The stakes are high. If the government does not succeed, as many as 5 million students may not return. For many, the government's efforts may already be too late.

All photos used were taken by Hilke Mairi Gudel.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. It first appeared at the [LSE Government blog](#).