



ECD Budgets: Investing in Uganda's early years of its population

ECD BUDGETS: Investing in Uganda's early years of its population

A child's future is decided long before they learn to write their name, the first five years of life often overlooked and under supported is where it all begins. During this period, over 90% of brain development takes place at lightning speed, habits are formed and personality is taking shape.

Global estimates indicate that every one dollar invested in Early Childhood Development (ECD)¹ yields up to 13 dollars in long-term economic returns. For Uganda, every 1 UGX invested in quality ECD generates between 8.9 and 16.3 UGX in returns, ultimately creating over 50,000 jobs by 2030 and building long-term human capital. Regionally, Africa has declared ECD a cornerstone of its development agenda with the African Union's vision² for 2063 including a promise to nurture our youngest citizens. But promises alone don't shape children's minds and action, investment and care does.

In Uganda, too many children are being left behind before they even get a chance to begin. We are either investing in this critical window or slamming it shut. A World Bank report reveals that a child born in Uganda today will be only 38% as productive³ as they could be if they had access to full health and quality education. While children complete an average of 7 years of schooling by age 18, the poor quality of education reduces this to just 4.5 effective learning years, with 2.5 years lost due to learning gaps.

Despite high enrollment, learning outcomes and completion rates remain really low. These challenges begin even earlier: less than 41% of ECD centers⁴ are regulated with only 10% of children aged 3 to 5 are enrolled in licensed pre-primary programs. Nearly 1 in 3 children under five is stunted, and just 35% of 4 to 5 year-olds are on the developmental track. While there is growing ECD awareness amongst parents, and communities are taking action by building ECD/daycare centers however, the gaps in access, quality, and support remain intense. The World Bank⁵ report also highlights that eliminating child marriage alone could boost Uganda's economy by USD 2.7 billion by 2030.

On the downside, to many Ugandans, access to quality ECD is still a privilege, not a right. Rural areas remain starved of services. Many centers operate without trained teachers, learning materials and play-based curriculum, safe learning environment, or even proper hygiene. ECD centers should be nurturing spaces, staffed by trained and supported caregivers, and accessible in every community not just in affluent areas. ECD is not daycare nor luxury. It is brain development. It is identity formation. It is nation-building.

Diving deep into the role of parents, the often overlooked heartbeat of ECD, who through acts like preparing nutritious meals, ensuring good health, and creating a safe, loving environment, lay the foundation for their children's learning and growth. Children need more than care, they need love, safety, and affirmation. Let's be honest, most of the ECD programs are being shouldered by parents who are paying heavily. Families need to be empowered through support and an enabling environment, they should not be judged in their ECD efforts.

Uganda does not need to reinvent the wheel. We already have the ideas. We have the frameworks. We have made commitments. Now we need the courage to move. Let's put real action behind our words. Let us train teachers and build centers for all children to access ECD. Let us stop calling it a future priority and start calling it what it is; an emergency. If we don't invest in children now, we will pay the price later in dropout rates, poor health, and in cycles of poverty that refuse to break. But if we act today, the rewards will echo for generations.

Written by: **MICHELLE DHIKUSOOKA**

1 [The Lancet Series on Early Childhood Development](#)

2 [Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want](#)

3 [Ugandan children can only achieve 38% productivity as adults](#)

4 [UNICEF on ECD in Uganda](#)

5 [Ending Child Marriage Could Generate \\$3 Billion in Annual Benefits for Uganda's Population by 2030](#)