



Improving education in Uganda

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MediaGlobal News, New York—Determined to improve an educational system beset by challenges, advocates recently launched Uganda's first [Quality Public Education Week](#). Talk shows, panel debates, exhibitions and rallies were held throughout the country April 22-26, 2013—a call for action from Ugandan decision-makers.

Poverty, hunger, disease, and brutal strife all impact access to learning in Uganda. Nearly 30 percent of the population earns less than \$1.25 per day, [according to UNICEF](#). One-third of children below age 5 suffer from stunting caused by chronic malnourishment. AIDS has orphaned well over 1 million youngsters, who themselves are at risk. Malaria is a constant concern.

A [decades-long insurgency](#) in northern Uganda has led not only to the displacement of nearly 2 million people, but also to the kidnappings of 60,000 children, [reports Save the Children](#) (SC), an international humanitarian organization.

Helping students rise above these obstacles is a daunting task. The [Forum for Education NGOs in Uganda](#) (FENU), an umbrella coalition of NGOs and other stakeholders including SC and UNICEF, spearheads efforts to improve Ugandan public education, citing the need for "urgent action" due to "waste, mismanagement and tragedy." Of special concern: high drop out rates, low teacher morale, congested classrooms, and hunger.

Frederick Mwesigye, FENU's Director, coordinated Quality Public Education Week. He tells **MediaGlobal**, "We have come together to say that there is a crisis in our education system – our children are not learning, our teachers are demoralized and our schools are not properly resourced. Only with coordinated action from all players will we be able to solve this crisis...and ensure that every child in Uganda has access to a quality education."

Quality Public Education Week is FENU's latest initiative. It was inspired by, and held in conjunction with, Global Action Week, an annual event sponsored by the [Global Campaign for Education](#) (GCE), "a civil society movement that aims to end the global education crisis," according to their website. This year's theme, "[Every Child Needs a Teacher](#)," has been promoted internationally [via video](#) narrated by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

While public schools are available at no charge to Ugandan boys and girls ages 6 through 12, experts question the facilities' quality and effectiveness. As youngsters age, drop out rates soar—as many as 66 percent leave, according to SC. An alarming 18 percent of those eligible do not attend school at all.

Zacharia Kasirye, Advisor/Basic Education for SC in Uganda, explains the system to **MediaGlobal**: "Children have two options for attending school:" formal primary schools run by either the government or private institutions, and non-formal programs "targeted to marginalized children, such as those living in very remote areas" or those supporting "their family's livelihood (e.g., fishing, farming) during regular school hours."

Although "parents do not have to pay to send their children to [government-run] school," Kasirye says "there are other education-related fees such as meals, uniforms, books, pens and contributions" that are out of reach for many.

Even children with adequate resources for private school face many difficulties. Caroline Walradt, who teaches second grade at [Sacred Heart's Princeton Academy](#) in New Jersey, visited several Sacred Heart schools in southern Uganda last summer. In an interview with **MediaGlobal**, she describes encountering "the most hospitable, welcoming, generous people I'd ever met in my life." At the same time she witnessed numerous, oppressive hardships.

Her Ugandan colleagues cope not only with devising lesson plans but also with capturing rainwater, growing food, and fighting disease. Access to electricity is sporadic at best ("more off than on," says Walradt).

Diets are limited to beans, corn, and bananas—porridge cooked over wood fires. Some schools get several meals a day, but others receive only one. Trash is burned, spewing toxins into the air and soil. Malaria is an ever-present threat, fought with nets; still, Walradt reports, one-third of a class contracted the disease in a single term.

Youngsters are packed into classrooms. Curriculum is limited. Walradt describes learning as rote and repetitious, although math levels are good and handwriting is "exquisite." Teacher turnover is high because, as in the public system, morale is low.

Both private and public schools throughout Uganda provide graphic instruction concerning malaria, HIV/AIDS, and venereal disease to young children by necessity.

Kendra Blackett-Dibinga, SC's Advisor on Orphans and Vulnerable Children, tells **MediaGlobal** why early exposure to concepts such as HIV/AIDS, which has "decimated" communities, is important:

"Children, even the smallest ones, are effective communicators. They can bring the messages from school to their home," Blackett-Dibinga says. "In doing so, they can change cultural norms and attitudes...encouraging older siblings or parents to access services that might have brought shame or embarrassment before."

Conditions in the north are particularly dismal. Aside from coping with AIDS and other diseases, residents are engulfed in conflict. Children cannot be easily schooled when their safety is at risk. In addition, the terrain there is ragged and the soil is infertile. It's difficult to build schools and grow food. SC is attempting to address these complexities with a multi-faceted approach including its CHANCE and Literacy Boost programs, helping children learn both in and out of school.

Quality Public Education Week displayed stakeholders' dedication. "People embraced the opportunity to take action," Mwesigye tells **MediaGlobal**. "NGOs worked with learners across the country asking them what they like about their education, and what they would like changed. Anglican, Catholic, and Islamic leaders united in a public rally in Gulu. Panel debates and radio talk-shows saw debates on child labor and the barriers to education, the role of language in education provision and what makes a good teacher."

Despite such optimism, Uganda may well feel the impact of its educational deficiencies for generations. Walradt laments, "I know what my kids miss if they're absent for one day of teaching, so what happens when children miss months and years of education?"

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Students line up at St. Bernadette Primary School in Nakibizzi, Uganda for one meal a day. Photo credit: Caroline Walradt

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