



It Pays to Go to School

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OVER seven million primary school pupils and over half a million secondary school students went back to school yesterday. Another 350,000 will join S1 in two weeks. That is the highest number of young people in schools ever in the history of Uganda.

Of all children aged six to 12 years, 86% are now in school, with children of poorer families as likely to attend primary school as those from better-off families.

The Government needs to be commended for this achievement. Expenditure on education increased more than three-fold in the past decade: from 1.5% of GDP in 1991 to 5.2% in 2004. Uganda now spends a higher share of its GDP on education than India, Australia and Japan!

Literacy rates, too, have gone up. Almost 70% of adults can now read and write, up from 56% in 1991. Among the youth, literacy levels have even reached 76.6%.

But there is another side of the story. Too many children in Uganda still drop out of school. Unicef claims that almost 80% of those who start Primary one do not reach Primary seven.

The reasons vary, ranging from financial constraints, early pregnancies to social problems at home. Too many children are encouraged to leave school and look after younger siblings or earn a living for the family, be it in the form of selling charcoal, boda-boda cycling or looking after cattle.

Parents should be made aware that schooling pays off. Children can easily be exploited when they start full-time work prematurely. Better educated people also get better-paid jobs and will more likely get promotions.

The Government too should do more to retain children in school. Setting quality standards, developing evaluation systems, training and motivating teachers, and increasing the accountability of school administrators to parents are only some of the measures needed.

In Kenya, it was found that a very simple incentive tried out by the World Bank not only lowered drop out rates but also delayed pregnancies among teenage girls: providing school uniforms!

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