

# **BRUDER UND SCHWESTER IN NOT**

## **Learning against the odds: the struggle for education in Uganda**

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Why should you care about education in Uganda?

When you hear that question, what comes to mind? For many of us, education is so deeply woven into our lives that we hardly recognize it as a privilege. We read news articles, scroll through social media, or pick up books without a second thought. Yet right now, someone without access to education would not even be able to read these words.

Think about it: if I asked you about your favorite book, you would probably have an answer. But for many children and adults in Uganda, that question is unimaginable— they've never had the chance to learn to read, let alone enjoy a book.

Education is more than literacy. It is a gateway to knowledge that strengthens the mind, frees us from ignorance, and gives dignity to the self. It is a form of wealth that cannot be taken away, opening doors to dreams and possibilities that remain closed to those denied it.

So why does access to education remain such a challenge in Uganda? Let's take a closer look. To begin, let's place the country in context: Uganda lies in East Africa, bordered by Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with Lake Victoria to the south.

In Uganda, children usually start school at around age six. The path is long: seven years of primary school, then four years of lower secondary, two years of upper secondary, and finally three or more years at university or college. Before primary, there are nurseries, but these are mostly found in towns and are not common in rural areas.

### **Education statistics in Uganda**

The government has tried to make education more accessible. Since 1997, primary school has officially been free, and since 2007 there's also been a program to subsidize secondary education. Still, the reality is mixed. Most primary schools are government-run, but when children move on to secondary school, they often end up in private or church-run institutions that charge fees.

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Having a school system on paper doesn't mean every child makes it through. In Uganda, almost all children now enroll in primary school, yet only about one in three actually finish the seven years. By the time secondary school comes around, the numbers fall even further— fewer than one in five students make it to the end, see Figure 1. At university level, participation is tiny, with only around 8% of young people enrolled.

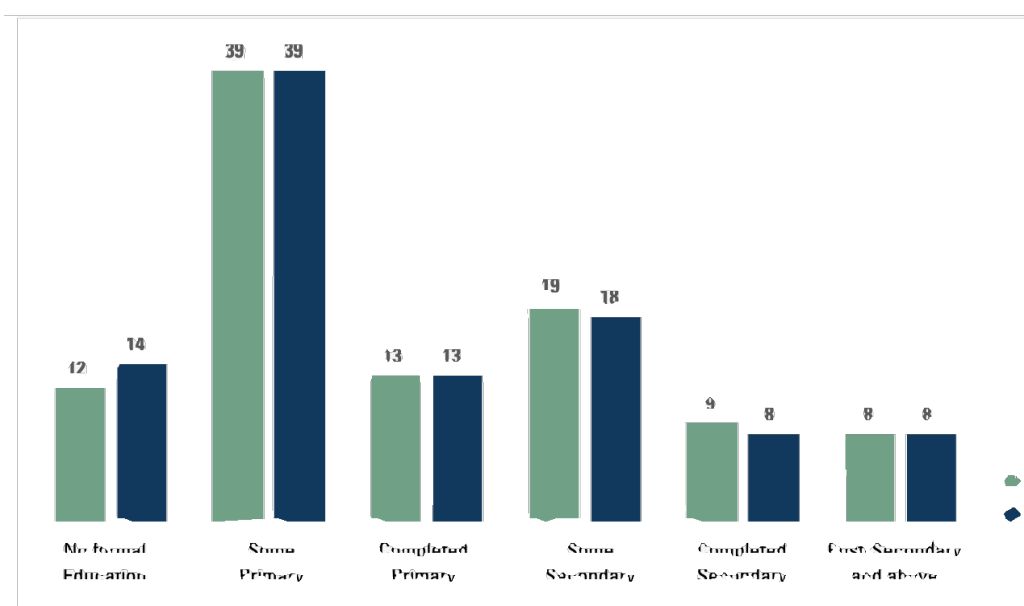


Figure 1: Highest level of education attained by individuals aged 15 years and above (%). Source: Uganda National Household Survey 2019/2020

## Literacy rate and gender gap in education

Literacy among Ugandans aged ten and above was about 76% in 2020, compared to almost 99% in Austria. Yet looking more closely at learning outcomes tells a harsher story: only around one in five primary pupils can read fluently at their grade level. At the start, boys and girls perform about the same— roughly 52% of boys and 54% of girls complete primary school. But after that, the gap widens. By their late teens, about 24% of Ugandan girls aged 15–19 are already mothers or pregnant, and nearly one in three young women marry before the age of 18. These realities push many girls out of school long before they can complete their education. Regional differences also matter: children growing up in Kampala, the capital, are 30–40 percentage points more likely to be literate than children in the more remote northern regions.

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What are the major challenges and how to overcome them?

Uganda faces multiple overlapping challenges to provide basic education, the fundamental challenge being the low transition and retention rates into the secondary school, and particularly among girls. According to a report by UNICEF, financial barriers remain the main reason. Let us understand this better, along with the other reasons.

1. **Poverty and cost:** Families struggle to pay for the costs of education, such as school fees, uniforms, scholastic materials, and school meals.
2. **Overcrowded schools and teacher shortage:** There are far too few qualified teachers. A UNESCO statistics study report from 2016 titled “The world needs almost 69 million new teachers to reach the 2030 education goals”, suggested that Uganda stood with the highest disparity between the growth rate of teachers then and the required growth rate to achieve a universal secondary education by 2030, see Figure 2. More recent UNICEF data shows that these challenges persist: Uganda still faces a teacher–pupil ratio of about 1:65 (far above the 1:40 benchmark), with rural schools most affected by shortages. Low pay drives many teachers to seek second jobs, leading to chronic absenteeism, while training gaps also remain as a major challenge, i.e. fewer than half of new teachers demonstrate minimum proficiency in English or numeracy.

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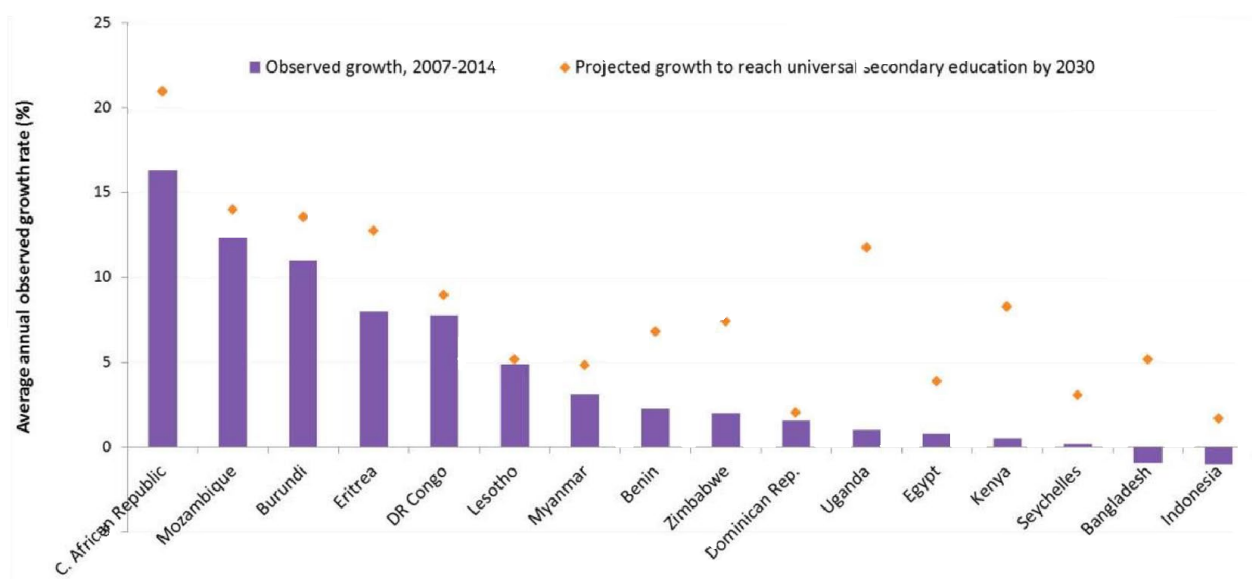


Figure 2: Countries expected to close the gap after 2030. Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics

3. **Infrastructure:** Many schools lack proper buildings, desks, toilets, or textbooks. In rural areas, classes may be held in tin shacks or under trees. These conditions can force girls to stay home (for lack of toilets) and lower overall quality.
4. **Early marriage and pregnancy:** About 24% of girls aged 15–19 are pregnant or mothers, and child marriage often forces girls to drop out of school.
5. **Rural access:** In remote regions, children may walk long distances to the nearest school, and nomadic lifestyles or droughts make regular attendance difficult.
6. **Political instability and refugees:** Border conflicts (e.g. in nearby DR Congo or South Sudan) bring refugees into Uganda (1.6 million+ hosted). While Uganda provides refugee children schooling, the sudden influx strains local schools.
7. **Funding shortfalls:** Uganda spends only 8–9% of its national budget on education, below UNESCO’s recommended 15–20%. Infrastructure and

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teacher pay are under-funded. This underinvestment underlies many other challenges.

## What Can Be Done? UNICEF's Key Recommendations

A 2024 report from UNICEF "Overcoming the Challenges of Education in Uganda " strategically addresses these challenges and provides actionable recommendations to overcome them, which are summarized below:

1. **Tackle poverty barriers:** Expand school meals, scholarships, and social support so children from poor families can stay in school.
2. **Professionalize and incentivize teachers:** Create an enabling environment to attract good candidates to the teaching profession. Recruit more teachers, raise salaries, and offer incentives like bonuses or housing to attract quality teachers (especially women) even to remote areas.
3. **Expand infrastructure:** Build more classrooms, desks, and teacher housing, and improve access roads to reach remote schools.
4. **Keep girls in school:** Support pregnant teens and young mothers with flexible learning options, while fighting child marriage.
5. **Reach rural learners through technology:** Use digital tools, distance learning, and alternative pathways to bring education to remote communities.
6. **Support refugees with dedicated plans:** Ensure refugee children have equal access to quality schooling through dedicated funding and programs.
7. **Increase funding:** Raise Uganda's education budget toward 20% of national spending, and coordinate more international aid.

## Conclusion

Uganda's education system has expanded impressively, with more than 10.8 million pupils in primary school by 2019. Yet challenges remain: literacy and

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completion rates are far below European standards, and poverty, teacher shortages, and early marriage continue to interrupt learning for many. NGOs and governments are working on solutions – from cash grants and catch-up lessons to new teacher-training models, and some communities are already seeing change. Still, as UNESCO has warned, Uganda faces “a learning crisis”: enrollment alone does not guarantee literacy or skills.

But there is always hope. And hope must be followed by action. Every effort, no matter how small, adds to the larger change, and this article is just a tiny step from my side. By learning about these challenges and sharing them, we are already part of the solution. The future of Uganda’s children is not fixed, and with solidarity and persistence, more doors to education can and will open.

## **Bruder und Schwester in Not: Standing with Uganda and taking action**

At Bruder und Schwester in Not (BSIN), we run active projects in several countries, including Uganda, with all focus on empowering poor communities through education, vocational training and advocacy. For example, in Uganda’s Kassanda district BSIN helped establish a local NGO forum that engages authorities on social issues like schooling, health and water, a group that ensures government promises are kept and literally “acts as a mouthpiece” for the affected people. In northern Uganda (Karamoja), BSIN funds vocational training so that young men and women learn trades such as tailoring, hairdressing and shoemaking, giving them a way to earn an income and support their families. A key part of that is a sewing program for girls, explicitly designed as an alternative to early marriage, and indeed, many of the young women have since started businesses and became role models in their communities.

By combining practical help including training, supplies and infrastructure, and with advocacy and faith-based solidarity, BSIN enables the poorest to take charge of their own futures. Each program, whether a simple sewing machine, a piglet or a safe house, becomes a seed of hope. Through these efforts even the most desperate situations are transformed: children can go to class instead of staying home, young women start businesses instead of early marriages, and whole communities learn to speak up for clean water and schools. These stories of empowerment which are born of compassion and the conviction in every person’s dignity, show how solidarity can turn hardship into a new beginning.

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If you are reading this from Austria, you should know that when we support education in Uganda (through scholarships, church projects, or donations), we're tackling issues of gender equity, health (since educated girls have healthier families), and economic development. Learning to read and write is a critical lifeline for Ugandan children; every extra textbook, trained teacher or girl in school can make a large difference.

## **References**

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