

Targeted action needed on orphans, child motherhood

THE Uganda Bureau of Statistics last week released the Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Monograph 2024, showing a slight decline in the prevalence of orphans in the country. Orphans now make up 12.9% of the population, down from 13.2% in 2002. Child motherhood has also dropped from 4% in 2002 to 1.5% today.

These gains are commendable and reflect years of investment in social protection, education and health services. However, they should not lull policymakers into complacency. Instead, they should spark more precise, targeted interventions to support orphans and address the root causes of child motherhood.

This is because, despite the overall decline, the report highlights regional disparities and persistent child vulnerabilities.

For instance, the Madi sub-region, comprising Moyo, Adjumani and Obongi districts, has the highest prevalence of orphans at 20.1%, approximately one in five children, followed by Karamoja at 19.3% and West Nile at 18.3%. Tooro, Ankole and Acholi also record rates above the



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national average, whilst Kampala and Teso have the lowest at 9.3% and 9.5% respectively.

The most affected regions are also grappling with higher poverty levels, displacement and limited access to social services. A uniform, nationwide approach will not resolve such disparities. Children in Madi, Karamoja, West Nile and Acholi need deliberate interventions to access education, healthcare and sustainable livelihoods.

For orphans, this means going beyond general welfare programmes. The finding that only about half of school-age orphans are in school and that many are engaged in labour, should alarm policymakers. School feeding programmes and community-based child protection systems must be scaled up in high-burden regions to keep these children in school and out of labour. Equally critical is the strengthening of family and community support systems.

Similarly, regions such as Bunyoro and Lango, which record the highest levels of child motherhood, require targeted and sustained interventions. Early pregnancy continues to derail the lives of young girls, pushing them out of school and into early marriages marked by hardship.

Addressing child motherhood demands more than awareness campaigns. It requires keeping girls in school, enforcing laws against child marriage, expanding access to adolescent reproductive health services and supporting young mothers to return to education. Crucially, intervention must tackle the underlying drivers, especially poverty and harmful social norms.