

## We are investing in roads, oil, and airlines, great! But what about children?

Nearly 28 percent of Uganda's population is under the age of eight, yet Early Childhood Development remains on the margins of national human capital planning.

Who you are as an adult today, our abilities, physical and cognitive state, has everything to do with what happened in the first few years of your life. From birth to age eight, a child's development is shaped by everyday care and consistency.

Early Childhood Development (ECD), is the period from pregnancy to age eight. During these early years, a child's brain forms more than one million neural connections every second. The evidence on why this matter is strong and consistent.

The Harvard University Center on the Developing Child shows that more than one million new neural connections form every second in the first years of life, laying the foundation for learning, behaviour, and health.

Long-term studies such as the HighScope Perry Preschool Study found that children who attended quality preschool were more likely to complete school, earn higher incomes, and avoid crime decades later.

Uganda's public financing for education starts at Primary One through the Universal Primary Education program. What comes before that, the early years when the brain develops fastest, receives almost no direct government funding. Early childhood care and pre-primary education sit largely outside the public system.

A 2011 review by economist James Heckman concluded that returns on investment are highest in the earliest years. Therefore, when we exclude ECD from public financing, we are not saving money and our national budget priorities should reflect this reality.

Uganda's National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy was launched in 2016, marking an important phase toward supporting young children. In 2024, the government introduced a more robust Early Childhood Care and Education Policy that places clear emphasis on children's physical, mental, and psychosocial development.

This policy aligns with global guidance such as the Nurturing Care Framework, the World Bank's Early Childhood Development Initiative, and UNESCO's ECD guidelines, all of which call for comprehensive support in the early years.

Uganda is famous for having some of the most progressive policies, and on paper, these look solid. However, enforcement is weak, oversight is limited, and implementation across the country is uneven at best.

Most pre-schools in Uganda, operate without proper licensing. An official pre-school curriculum exists, but in many centres it is not being used in any meaningful way. Training for caregivers and teachers is inconsistent, with no clear national standard.

It is not hard to see why early childhood development slips down the list of national priorities. The government, keen on maintaining national security, allocated Shs 3.737 trillion to national security in the 2025 budget.

Investing Shs5.698 trillion in roads and transport makes sense when the goal is growth and connectivity. Oil development promises revenue. Reviving the national airline signals ambition and a desire to compete globally.

These investments speak to progress and national pride. But progress depends on people. What will these roads, oil fields, and aircraft mean in 10 to 15 years if the country has not invested with the same urgency in its youngest citizens?

Infrastructure builds a nation's backbone. Early childhood development builds its future workforce, leaders, and citizens.

Nelson Mandela said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

The question is simple. How will Uganda choose to treat its children, and what will that choice say about us?

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