

Outlook

Keeping up a class struggle

In a forgotten war zone teachers do their best to educate huge numbers of pupils

Ken Burnett

Uganda's northern war has been called the most neglected humanitarian crisis in the world. The UN under-secretary, Jan Egelund, recently described it as "worse than Iraq". Just surviving here is difficult. Trying to learn is a further challenge.

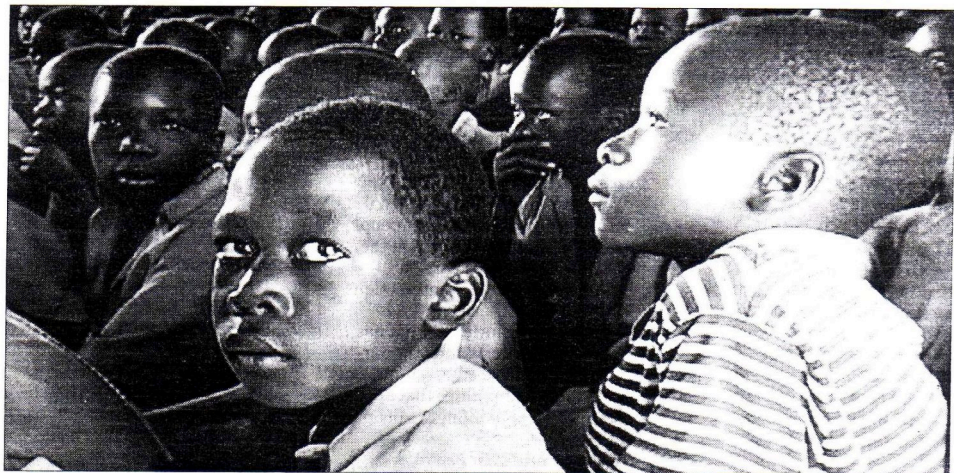
Teachers struggling to rebuild the school system in northern Uganda's camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) are dealing with a huge displaced population, fragile security, returning child soldiers, girls (often with babies) who have been abducted and forced to marry soldiers, increasing HIV infection, underfunding, class sizes in the hundreds and chronic teacher shortages. Yet they persist in trying to deliver education.

Winfred Akera has never known anything but this conflict, yet her teachers describe her as a top performer. The 11-year-old orphan gets up each day at 6am, sweeps and cleans, then prepares whatever breakfast she can find for her younger brother and sister and their sick grandmother. She then goes to school, where she tries to learn.

To feed her family Winifred works weekends and evenings for other people. "I dig gardens and sometimes people give me raw beans and cassava," she says. "Due to being an orphan, it is now left to me to do all this work. If I don't do it, it means we should not eat that day."

Christine Alum was abducted at the age of 11 and forced to be the wife of a much older soldier. Now 13, she takes her baby with her as she studies. There is no one else to look after her. When the baby cries, Christine has to leave the room. Still she won't give up on her hopes of achieving an education.

Henry Ogwal, national coordinator for the Commonwealth Education Fund in Uganda, catalogues the everyday difficulties faced by teachers and pupils. In addition to constant threats of ambush, robbery, violence and abduction, there are problems that arise in a traumatised



Against the odds . . . NGOs say there is money to run schools, but basic institution-building is less attractive to funders

society, a shortage of teachers, particularly women (salaries are low and accommodation is often in makeshift huts vulnerable to theft, attacks and fires), regular food shortages, inappropriate classrooms (often open-air, under trees), lack of teaching materials and absence of school furniture. Water is often short and sanitation is appalling – sometimes there aren't even pit latrines, one reason for the high rate of preventable infections and diseases. Medical facilities around the camps range from grossly inadequate to non-existent. Not surprisingly, recruiting teachers is a challenge.

Well-meaning outsiders often make things worse. Assuming that IDPs have access to land to grow food, the UN World Food Programme provides teachers with inadequate food, believing that this will encourage teachers and parents to grow more themselves. Because of rebel attacks and government soldiers with orders to shoot anyone spotted out of the camps, this isn't possible.

The \$43m that will be spent on the Commonwealth heads of government conference in Uganda in November adds insult to injury.

Amanda Serumaga, ActionAid's director in Uganda, points out that the cost could cover annual salaries for more than 46,000 teachers, buy 4,213,483 mosquito nets or supply 8,426 boreholes.

Five years ago the British chancellor, Gordon Brown, launched the Commonwealth Education Fund to draw attention to the struggles of teachers such as those in Uganda. David Archer heads ActionAid's international campaign on education. He says the key is to make national education systems function effectively, to make government schools work. "Through coalition building, lobbying for rights and putting pressure on governments we can be very effective at this," Archer says. But, he points out, it's hard to attract funding for such work.

"It's comparatively easy to get money to run schools, for direct

'Soldiers have orders to shoot anyone spotted outside the camps'

delivery of services. But these are often unsustainable. It's harder to get money to support citizens groups in demanding action and accountability from their government to track and monitor budgets and performance."

Run by ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children, the Commonwealth Education Fund has been an exception, supporting national education coalitions in 16 countries. Its approaches have proved effective at getting children into school. The fund will end next year, but there are plans to create national civil society education funds in every country.

Noerine Kaleeba, the Ugandan founder of the Aids support organisation Taso and now chair of trustees of ActionAid International, says, "The rest of the world has to support and put pressure on the governments of struggling countries such as Uganda, to ensure that the millennium development goals do not become just another failure in the catalogue of unfulfilled promises."

Ken Burnett is a trustee of ActionAid International and BookAid International. The views here are his own