



BRIEFING | APRIL 2021

Reducing conflict within schools in northern Uganda

The introduction of free universal primary and secondary education in 2007 by the government of Uganda resulted in a significant increase in school enrolment. Since then, further provisions and policies have been developed to provide a safe learning environment that enables children to learn, stay in school and finish their education.

Uganda is also committed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹ which include SDG4 on providing quality education through the following areas: strengthening school systems; enhancing the capacity of teachers and empowering students to strengthen prevention and response to violence against children in schools; and engaging with communities to shift social norms and behaviours towards child protection and rights.

While these steps have contributed to Uganda's significant progress towards fulfilling its 'education for all' obligations, they have not resulted in a corresponding improvement in the quality and infrastructure of the education sector. There are also significant challenges and disparities in children's attendance at school. While education is officially free, there are associated costs for uniforms and materials that may be prohibitive for some families. Having a child in school also means that the child is unable to engage in income-generating activities, which may be vital to their family's livelihood. Gender norms also mean that girls are more likely to be taken out of school at a younger age than boys. Tensions arising from these factors, combined with the wider context within which schools operate, can lead to violent conflict in schools – which not only compromises the safety of pupils and staff but also undermines the learning environment and the education being provided.

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This briefing is based on a gender and conflict analysis focusing on the education sector in refugee settlements and surrounding host communities in Adjumani in northern Uganda. It was carried out between September and October 2020 in Agojo and Mungula refugee settlements and surrounding host communities in Adjumani district by Saferworld and Right to Play (RTP), an international NGO that is recognised as a leading authority in play-based learning. The two settlements were selected as RTP is operational in both, and they comprise South Sudanese and host community members from ethnically diverse groups. This has meant that the settlements are hotspots for conflicts – as old tensions flare up and conflict divisions from South Sudan continue among refugees. The high number of refugees living in the settlements has also put pressure on already limited resources, including education which adds to the general challenges in the education sector outlined above.

The briefing outlines the main conflict issues that arise in and impact on the education sector in the settlements and how these affect Uganda's ability to meet its commitments under SDG4. It provides recommendations for policymakers, government, and teachers of both primary and secondary schools on how to address these issues, and aims to increase conflict sensitivity, knowledge and understanding across the sector to reduce conflict and enhance the learning potential of both refugee and host community children in Adjumani. While the recommendations are based on data from Adjumani many of them are applicable across the wider education sector. Data was collected using a qualitative approach based on focus group discussions, key informant interviews and a review of available literature. Respondents for the focus group discussions included: teachers, school administrators, learners (not leaders) and school governing bodies (School Management Committees and Parent Teacher

Associations), while key informant interviews were conducted with district education officials, the police department of family and child protection, junior leaders (learners) and refugee welfare committees. These were a mix from both refugee and host communities.

Background: RTP is implementing a project funded by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Safe to learn – reducing violence within schools in northern Uganda'. The project is being implemented in the four refugee settlements of Adjumani district: Maaji II, Mungula, Pagirinya and Agojo. The project aims to improve safety in schools for 8,100 girls and boys aged 11 to 18 years from both refugee and host communities. The project is based on the idea that if conflict-sensitive education is not integrated into the education sector and related policy and programming, there is a risk that tensions will increase in schools – which will in turn impact on the quality of education provided.

Conflict-sensitive education is the process of:²

1. understanding the context in which education takes place
2. analysing the two-way interaction between the context and education programmes and policies (development, planning and delivery)
3. acting to minimise the negative impacts and maximise the positive impacts of education policies and programming on conflict, within an organisation's given priorities



Teachers in group work during gender and conflict sensitivity training by Saferworld in Pagirinya.
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Key conflict issues

Adjumani is a rural district in northern Uganda that borders South Sudan. Its population relies mainly on subsistence farming. It is host to a large number of refugees from South Sudan; in 2019 alone it hosted the second-largest population of refugees in Uganda. The number of refugees (almost 210,000) was nearly equal to that of the host community (approximately 234,000).³ The high number of refugees has put further pressure on already limited resources, including education. Ethnic tensions among refugee communities, mainly among the Dinka and Nuer, are also so entrenched that it is often not possible for children from different ethnic groups to peacefully co-exist in the same settlement or share school classrooms. This is exacerbated by different norms and practices between different refugee groups and host communities.

In this context a number of key conflict issues were identified:

1. Ethnic and cultural differences

Differing cultural and ethnic beliefs and practices were found to be a source of conflict within school settings. This can be linked to ongoing and historical conflicts in South Sudan, which have been transferred to refugee settlements – also exposing children to potential risks in schools. Risks such as sexual, physical and psychological violence were reported to be more prominent between Dinka and Nuer students but also between Madi and South Sudanese Acholi pupils. Students across the two divides are often unable to peacefully coexist in the same school. Respondents said that some of these conflicts originate among children and adults of different ethnicities living in the same refugee settlement, but escalate and extend to school. For instance, teachers of a particular ethnicity may dedicate more time and support to learners of the same ethnicity, including the provision of learning materials like pens, textbooks and pamphlets, and providing answers to questions related to subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and physics. In some instances, tensions are exacerbated by teachers from one refugee group abusing students of different ethnic backgrounds. This behaviour by some teachers impacts on the capacity of other teachers to deliver lessons to learners in such an environment and impacts on the ability of learners to progress.

The study found that pupils who received less attention from teachers either had higher absence levels or left school. This suggests that insensitivity (exhibited by some teachers) to the cultural and ethnic tensions between students can result in violent conflicts, as was cited in Agojo, where parents of the affected pupils attacked the school and the teachers involved. The research also found that some schools encourage local languages* to be spoken, especially in lower primary schools. Children have been reported to take advantage of this by abusing their peers and even teachers; for example, a child can tell a peer or a teacher that he/she looks like a "gorilla" or has "a big head". This poses a challenge, as it creates conflicts and tensions between learners and teachers who do not understand the language.

2. Access to the Accelerated Learning Programme

The Accelerated Learning Programme was introduced as a 'catch-up' programme for refugees in primary schools who were performing poorly because they had been living and studying in a conflict context in South Sudan and were not able to perform to the same level as Ugandan students. Host community members also want their children to attend the programme, but they do not meet the programme criteria; this has created tensions between teachers and parents, with parents verbally attacking staff. The introduction of the programme and the conflict it has created shows how important it is to understand the wider context within which such programmes are implemented. In this case, host communities believe that refugees receive more support than they do.

3. Corporal punishment

The Government of Uganda passed a policy of zero corporal punishment in all schools. Where this happens, it is perceived as an action against the rights of school children. School children who took part in focus group discussions in both Agojo and Mungula cited corporal punishment as a major driver of conflict between teachers and children and between teachers and parents. In Agojo, some pupils described how "punishments [including] beating by the teachers, cutting grass around the school compound and washing latrines" create tension. Learners who have faced such treatment identified their experiences as being a factor in their being unhappy with their school. Gender-disaggregated information showed that men teachers instigated more corporal punishment than women teachers, and that boys were more likely to be punished than girls. This creates questions as raised by boys and their parents about whether there is fair/equal treatment of children. However, when girls were punished, this was more likely to impact their attendance rates. A discussion with pupils revealed that they are punished by teachers as a result of indiscipline, challenging the teachers, arriving late to school (especially girls), and fighting between and among themselves (especially boys).

4. Differences in workload for teachers

The research found that in some instances, there is an imbalance of work allocation among women teachers compared to their men counterparts. Some men teachers were reported to pass on work by allocating two to three subjects to their fellow teachers (in particular women), and choosing only one subject for themselves. Men teachers gradually lessen their teaching commitments, do not turn up to or deliver classes when supposed to, or arrive late to school as they have a lower workload compared to women teachers. In most cases, this is not addressed by school management and/or the administration (which is chaired by head teachers, who are usually men), which creates frustration among women teachers and leads to tensions and latent conflict between staff. In one of the focus group discussions, children mentioned that there are no clear mechanisms and systems within schools to report teachers' absences and when they talk to their parents about this, their parents become annoyed that their children are not receiving a proper education.



Focus group discussion with teachers in Mungula.
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5. Ethnicity and discrimination

Teachers, some administrators and pupils who participated in the focus group discussions in Agojo and Mungula reported that there are high levels of favouritism and discrimination in schools, which leads to tensions between the school administration and teachers. If teachers are of the same ethnicity as school management staff, they are often given special rights and prospects such as the opportunity to attend trainings and seminars, promotions, and being offered better transfer opportunities to other schools. Depending on their ethnicity, favouritism and discrimination is also experienced by pupils. Pupils of the same ethnicity as management staff often receive preferential treatment such as gate passes, particular seats in the classroom, attention to class work, and meals, while others pupils are neglected. Some teachers deny children the right to express themselves in cases of conflict, which creates problems and tensions within the school environment.

Primary school teachers reported that some head teachers discriminate against certain teachers and staff during meetings and decision-making processes, for a number of reasons. The situation is further exacerbated by the practice of transferring teachers from one school to another. This has created more tensions between teachers and the school administration or government authorities, who manage the transfers. The transfer of teachers by the district-level education office is sometimes accelerated on the recommendation of a head teacher, with unclear grounds.

Focus group discussions with teachers and key informant interviews with authorities showed that there are two salary levels between national and refugee teachers who provide the same services in the same schools. Refugee teachers from South Sudan reportedly receive a lower monthly salary which is paid by development partners, compared to their Ugandan counterparts who are paid by the Ministry of Education and Sports. This inequality was said to result in tensions and conflict where some teachers preferred to hold fewer lessons, as refugee teachers (especially men) feel they are being exploited and that national teachers are benefitting at their expense. This impacts on the relationship amongst the teachers with less cooperation at and outside of school. Some teachers who are on the lower pay scale were also reportedly not teaching some of the lessons they were supposed to.

6. Land boundaries

Respondents reported that the land on which some schools were built was offered for free by landlords. The time period the land was given for varied – ranging from 35 to more than 60 years – and negotiations for gifting the land were usually carried out between landlords and families, the church or individuals, including government representatives. Many people have now realised the value of the land however, and, in particular, young people related to the landlords want to take the land back so they can use or sell it. Some of the landlords have since passed away, and as the land is now viewed by the landlords' relatives as being highly valuable, they question how schools could have obtained such large pieces of land without any documentation or proof of offer. Some of the land is also customarily owned (and is held in trust by either clans, family heads or individuals), and therefore the clans or families who live nearby perceive this as land grabbing by schools. There were also reports of host communities grazing their animals on school land since the school was initially not fenced off, which directly affects the entire learning environment. These tensions between school administrations and local communities have resulted in conflicts that interrupt school activities.

7. Mismanagement of school funds

In an interview with education officers and authorities in the district, they outlined how the overall management of a school is carried out. The head teacher ensures the implementation and enforcement of guidelines and policy, and if he/she does not effectively perform his/her role, this can create conflict. For example, the management and implementation of universal primary education capitalisation funds – given by the government to all schools for their day-to-day running of the school – often exclude key actors from the financial planning process. Education policy requires that, in each school, there should be a finance committee comprising heads of departments such as agriculture, mathematics, sports, and arts and crafts. However, in most cases, head teachers completely disregard the official process for disbursing funds by involving only a few school management committee members in decisions over cash withdrawals and spending. The finance committees are never consulted and are often left in disarray, which causes conflict with the district education authorities and school administration.

During a focus group discussion with secondary school teachers, respondents said that some head teachers are involved in the procurement of food for the school – however, Ministry of Education and Sports policy demands that each school have an independent procurement officer. In the cases reported in the focus group discussions, the bursars and head teachers procure food for the school and end up buying food that may not be recommended for consumption. In other cases, parents are asked to provide food as part of their school dues contribution; the parents then buy the cheapest food they can – which leads to children complaining and violently attacking school administration staff, resulting in destruction of property and injuries. School administrations also argue that they lack adequate storage facilities, which results in food going stale, and that their budgets are insufficient, forcing them to buy low-quality food.

8. The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic led to schools across Uganda being closed for eight months in 2020. During this time, both teachers and children struggled. Respondents reported that some teachers resorted to drinking alcohol in shops and markets in trading centres, due to their frustrations with the lockdown, which had a negative impact on their reputation and standing within their communities. Children were left vulnerable by school closures; this was particularly the case for teenage girls. A district official in Adjumani indicated that during the COVID-19 lockdown, 150 teenage pregnancies were recorded among schoolgirls from both host and refugee communities, which has resulted in high dropout rates and has affected the future prospects of the girls. Other girls were forcefully married off by their parents, or married men in the community out of choice (though the degree to which they felt they had a choice is debatable). This was attributed to rumours that schools would never open again.

Though schools were re-opened only for the final primary school classes, all primary school teachers were required to be at school regardless of the previous classes they had taught and their subject specialisation, which led to conflicts between authorities, the administration and teachers. Because of a lack of prior assessments, teachers of younger pupils had to teach older pupils, even when the teachers felt they didn't have the skills to do so. The allocation of teaching schedules also created tensions between teachers and school administrations, since some teachers felt they had higher workloads compared to others who had only a few lessons.

9. Gendered dimensions and impacts of conflict

The research sought to establish whether specific gender or nationality categories or groups (both refugees and hosts) are targeted in these conflicts, and whether the conflicts have differences in terms of their impact on different groups such as men, women, boys, girls, and people with disabilities. The research found that there were variations as to which gender and nationality were most affected by attendance in schools, retention, school drop-out rates and levels of concentration. There were reduced levels of enrolment and school attendance rates for both girls and boys. Boys from host communities are often required to carry out farm production work during the rainy season, and they must also undertake casual labour when their families need additional income – both of these factors affect their attendance in the classroom. For girls, cultural norms can hinder their continued attendance at school due to less value being placed on girls' education, family caring commitments and high rates of early or forced marriage. These and other dynamics can lead to gender-based violence and sexual abuse. Girls in particular were subjected to sexual abuse by their teachers, fellow students and community members in both Agojo and Mungula settlements as well as in schools.



School pupils in Mungula engaged in a team building exercise with their teachers and Saferworld in preparation for a focus group discussion.
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Recommendations

To the Government of Uganda:

- Acknowledge that conflict exists in schools in Adjumani (and more widely) which impacts teachers, students and the quality of education being provided, and that external conflicts in the community and between host and refugee communities continue between students in school.
- Based on this, develop materials and trainings on gender, conflict and conflict-sensitive education, to help those who teach and manage education programmes in conflict areas and refugee-hosting areas. This will help develop an awareness of issues that are likely to cause conflict, meaning that issues can be addressed at an early stage, and will promote peaceful coexistence among learners, communities and school administrations.
- Ensure that the government, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Education and Sports and other government departments work together to address conflict issues arising in education and to mitigate conflicts between school administrations and communities.
- Enhance the capacity of all teachers and authorities at national, regional, district and local levels through training programmes and orientations on gender and conflict sensitivity. This could help bridge the awareness and knowledge gap for teachers, education system authorities and local leadership.
- Establish a gender and conflict sensitivity subgroup to strengthen the capacity of education officials, with a specific focus on issues such as the workload of men and women teachers and remuneration imbalances between men and women teachers and between host and refugees teachers. Raise awareness of the legal, gender, cultural and traditional aspects of host communities, and sensitise host communities on co-existence.
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of all actors including teachers, authorities and communities in order to reduce conflicts and the mismanagement of funds.
- Allocate financial and human resources to promote conflict sensitivity in the education sector. This will help address issues of accountability, communication and resource management at all levels.
- Ensure government guidelines for the procurement of school meals are enforced, so that allegations of corruption and mismanagement are addressed.
- Address land rights issues related to the land on which schools are built, in conjunction with ongoing measures to address land conflicts within and between communities.
- Consistently enforce laws banning the use of corporal punishment of children in schools. Investigate allegations and ensure perpetrators are brought to justice.

To civil society organisations and international NGOs:

- Conduct a gender and conflict analysis before the implementation of any education project, programme or service delivery to ensure the activity is based on a thorough understanding of the context and will therefore contribute to conflict-sensitive education. This will also help identify both gender norms that are contributing to conflict within schools and the ways these could be addressed.
 - Involve community members from refugee settlements and host communities, as well as relevant educational individuals/bodies, in the inception phase of each project, to ensure there is a clear understanding between them. This will help make the project transparent and prevent rumours and misunderstandings from creating or exacerbating tensions.
 - Where appropriate, establish host community and refugee committees to address issues as they arise. Where similar mechanisms already exist, work with them to address issues that are affecting education and schools. Tackling conflicts within and between communities will minimise the risk of these spilling over to educational settings.
 - Through trainings, increase the number of conflict-sensitive education specialists in teams and allocate specific budgets to integrate conflict-sensitive education into programmes. This would ensure issues are dealt with in a timely and effective manner, preventing conflict and mistrust between and within refugee and host communities and school settings.
 - Coordinate and support information, education and communication programmes that focus on trainings and sensitisation to help resolve conflict between and among refugee groups, teachers and parents.
- To schools:**
- Develop and enforce policies, regulations and/or guidelines against the marginalisation and discrimination of staff and pupils based on their gender and ethnicity, and ensure a zero tolerance policy for such behaviour.
 - Reiterate to staff that corporal punishment is illegal and will not be tolerated.
 - Introduce play-based approaches – games and sports that promote conflict sensitivity among learners and teachers.



Focus group discussion with Junior leaders in Mungula.
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About the project

Right to Play (RTP) is implementing a UNICEF-funded project, 'Safe to learn – reducing violence within schools in northern Uganda'. The project is being implemented in the four refugee settlements of Maaji II, Mungula, Pagirinya and Agojo in Adjumani district. Saferworld provided technical support and conflict sensitivity training to teachers, RTP staff and government education officials in Adjumani district. Saferworld supported the integration of a conflict sensitivity methodology in RTP learning resources and guides that are used by teachers and government authorities. Saferworld also carried out conflict sensitivity monitoring and evaluation which will be used to inform research, and produced this policy brief, which is based on a gender and conflict sensitivity analysis of ways of reducing child violence and promoting safety in schools.

Methodology for the gender and conflict analysis

Primary data was collected using a qualitative gender-sensitive conflict analysis methodology based on focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Secondary data was collected through a review of available literature, such as recent contextual reports, relevant national frameworks and strategic papers. The different methods of data collection allowed for a greater depth of understanding of the complexity of the context. The research involved a total of 119 respondents (39 men, 36 women, 22 boys and 22 girls), including teachers, parents, community members, school children/learners, education authorities, police and local leadership.

Notes

- ¹ "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests." United Nations, 'The 17 Goals' (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)
- ² Adapted from: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2013), 'INEE Guidance Note on Conflict Sensitive Education' (https://inee.org/system/files/resources/INEE_CSE_Guidance_Note_EN.pdf)
- ³ Saferworld (2020), 'Gender and displacement: South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda', March.
- ⁴ Local dialects from South Sudan. It is worth noting too that the Madi from South Sudan speak the same dialect as Madi from Uganda and so, generally, feel more able to communicate.



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Focus group discussion with refugee pupils in Agojo.
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About Right to Play (RTP)

RTP is an international organisation recognised as a leading authority in play-based learning, with a track record of scaling up play-based approaches to address child rights and protection, gender-based violence and social cohesion. RTP's mission is to protect, educate and empower children to rise above adversity using the power of play.


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