

Cocoa cash fuels education crisis in Bundibugyo

BY LONGINO MUHINDO

BUNDIBUGYO. Parents and local leaders in Bundibugyo District have raised the alarm over the increasing number of school dropouts, particularly among girls, as half of those who transition from primary to secondary school fail to complete their O-Level education.

New findings presented at a stakeholders' meeting last week show that at least 55 percent of girls who pass Primary Seven and enrol in Senior One never reach Senior Four.

Leaders said because Bundibugyo is a cocoa-growing district, girls are particularly vulnerable. Adolescents who earn money during the harvest often pursue relationships with girls, sometimes leading to pregnancies. Parents, in some cases, accept money and choose not to report such incidents.

Ms Elizabeth Atuhaire, a human rights

officer at Rwenzori Forum for Peace and Justice (RFPJ), shared the findings during the meeting held at the district headquarters. The gathering brought together parents, teachers, and local leaders. •

"We are seeing a crisis that could erase years of progress in education and equality for women. Our girls are going through many challenges. These include peer pressure, poor parenting, easy money from cocoa farming, and deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs," Ms Atuhaire said.

Ms Atuhaire said many girls become pregnant shortly after joining secondary school, trapping them in a cycle that cuts short their academic journeys.

"We are very worried about the number of girls who, out of fear, attempt to end the pregnancies through abortion. This dangerous and illegal act is putting their lives at serious risk. Many suffer severe health complications, and sadly,

some lose their lives," she said.

The District Education Officer, Mr John Byamukama, said for years, enrolment and retention rates for girls have remained low.

"Many girls have dropped out due to early marriages and pregnancies, often worsened by parental negligence. We are engaging key stakeholders to ensure concerted efforts to stem these challenges," he said.

Bundibugyo is Uganda's leading co-

BACKGROUND

Bundibugyo is Uganda's largest cocoa-producing district. Around 70 percent of Uganda's total cocoa production comes from Bundibugyo and neighbouring districts such as Ntoroko District.

coa producer. While cocoa farming has boosted household incomes, leaders say the influx of cash is contributing to risky behaviour among adolescents.

Ms Jane Apipawe, a cocoa farmer from Harugale Sub-county, said the community has long struggled with the unintended consequences of sudden wealth.

"We need mindset change lessons for farmers. Otherwise, we cannot talk about fighting poverty with this kind of thinking," she said.

The district vice chairperson, Mr Joel Bwambale, placed responsibility squarely on parents and guardians, who he accused of failing to provide career guidance, focusing instead on giving children money at an early age.

Mr Bwambale added that teenage pregnancies often involve boys who are financially empowered but lack guidance.