

Welcome to SEDCU Newsletter No.15 covering the period February 2021 – July 2021

The COVID pandemic continues to have a severe impact on education in Uganda. Following the initial lockdown in March 2020, some classes were allowed to reopen in October for children due to sit national exams, with special needs allowed to return to school in the following months. In the early months of 2021, more classes were allowed to open at both Primary and Secondary level, and Colleges and Universities reopened. However, with rising infections and deaths, a second national lockdown was implemented in Mid -June and all schools and colleges are currently closed. During the current Lockdown SEDCU is again providing support for teachers at three schools as well as for the benefit of the wider community. SEDCU Trustees remain in contact with the local community leaders and head teachers.

Pandemic Disrupts Education Across Uganda

When we published the last newsletter in January 2021, children in the ‘exam year’ classes at Mgahinga Community Primary School (MCJS), Kisoro Demonstration School (KDS) and Kisoro Vision Secondary School (KVSS) were in school, as were special needs children at KDS. Schools had to demonstrate compliance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in order that the authorities could be confident that they were safe for pupils and staff.

In the following months schools were progressively opened to all other year groups provided they could demonstrate compliance. Colleges and Universities were just reopening and almost all children were in education when the second lockdown was announced and all schools, colleges and universities had to be closed at 2 days’ notice. According to press reports, this caused a degree of chaos with some students stranded, being unable to afford the fares to return home on public transport which were greatly inflated by bus companies taking advantage of the situation.

The latest lockdown was initially set to last six weeks but inevitably the Government needed to review the situation at the end of July. As we went to press some restrictions on internal travel had been lifted and some shops were allowed to reopen, but the lockdown has been mostly extended and all schools and colleges will remain closed until further notice.

Before the Government implemented the new lockdown, it had announced a plan to make up for the months of lost education and a return to the normal academic calendar. The intention had been to complete the 2020 academic year on July 24th 2021, by which time all relevant exams would have taken place. The first term of academic year 2021 was to have commenced on August 9th. With adjustments to the timings of the following academic years, it was hoped that after 3 years, school timetables could return to normality in 2024. Depending on how long the current lockdown lasts this plan may or may not have to be revised.

MUGABE JOSEPH

It was with great sadness that the Trustees of SEDCU learned that Joseph Mugabe had passed away on 2nd July 2021 in Kisoro, following a diagnosis of Diabetes complicated by the current health environment. He was only 45 years.

Joseph leaves a wife and three children.

Readers may recall that SEDCU had supported Joseph to study for his degree in Special Needs Education. We featured him in the Newsletter of July 2019. Joseph was Deputy Head and Head of Special Needs at Kisoro Demonstration School. The Governors and Head Teacher will have difficulty in replacing Joseph. They said he *“is surely irreplaceable. He left a ditch in our hearts, at his home and also in the School”*. Having travelled and worked closely with him we saw, at first hand, his dedication to his pupils past and present.



MAY HE REST IN PEACE

Uganda in the Pandemic – Media Reports

Throughout this newsletter we are quoting from Ugandan media reports shown in italics.

An Overview

Halfway into the lockdown, the country remains in the midst of a challenging battle that has strained the health system, claimed thousands of lives, brought the economy to its knees and wiped out livelihoods.

The President on June 18 imposed a 42-day nationwide Covid-19 lockdown as a key measure to break the chain of Covid-19 transmission in the country. The lockdown followed weeks of non-adherence to Covid-19 measures and increase in cases of community infections, deaths and hospitalisation in the second wave of the pandemic. The government said the lockdown, which has greatly affected livelihoods and social wellbeing of Ugandans, was aimed at minimising the disastrous effects of the second wave on the health system and the economy. While justifying the lockdown, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, the Health minister, said it was aimed at interrupting Covid-19 transmission among health workers and the population. Dr Aceng said the other objectives of the lockdown were to give time to increase the capacity of health facilities to manage Covid-19 cases, strengthen home-based care and vaccinate more people, among others.

The President banned public gatherings in various places identified as hotspots for transmission, and instituted a 9pm to 5.30am curfew.

Projections by the ministry indicate that the country will reach the peak of the second wave between July and August before cases start to drop. The current lockdown will expire on July 30.

As of July 31st, Uganda has registered 93,927 cases and 2,690 deaths.

Accelerating Vaccination



Going by the Ministry of Health statistics, 1,085,382 people of the targeted of 21.9 million people have been vaccinated since the launch of nationwide mass vaccination on March 10 2021.

A Government minister said: “The initial target is to vaccinate at least 6 million most vulnerable persons comprised of teachers, health workers, the elderly and persons with chronic ailments.” Uganda’s attempt to inoculate its citizens against the pandemic has staggered given the global shortage of Covid-19 vaccines. Although government had placed an order of 18 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine, this hit a snag after India suspended exportation of vaccines following a surge in Covid-19 cases in their country.

A variety of other vaccines are being procured through the Covax facility and the Chinese Government.

In addition to the Vaccine shortfall Uganda is also facing a shortage of medical oxygen. Newspaper reports indicate that there is a capacity to generate 37 million litres of oxygen per day against an estimated demand of 62 million.

Kisoro Demonstration School

Kisoro Demonstration School (KDS) currently has 114 children with various categories of special needs. Having demonstrated compliance with the SOP's set by the Ministry, all special needs learners were permitted to return to KDS in January 2021.



At the beginning of every term school requirements are purchased and issued to the beneficiaries / vulnerable children at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

SEDCU sponsored children were provided with scholastic materials such as books, pens, pencils, Braille papers, slates, styluses, reams of papers to enable the children to access the educational skills, plus personal needs.

Children with special needs reported to school and teaching started, as usual, but with social distance both in and outside the class and in dormitories. In addition, to this, remedial teaching to children with hearing and visual impairment was also provided.

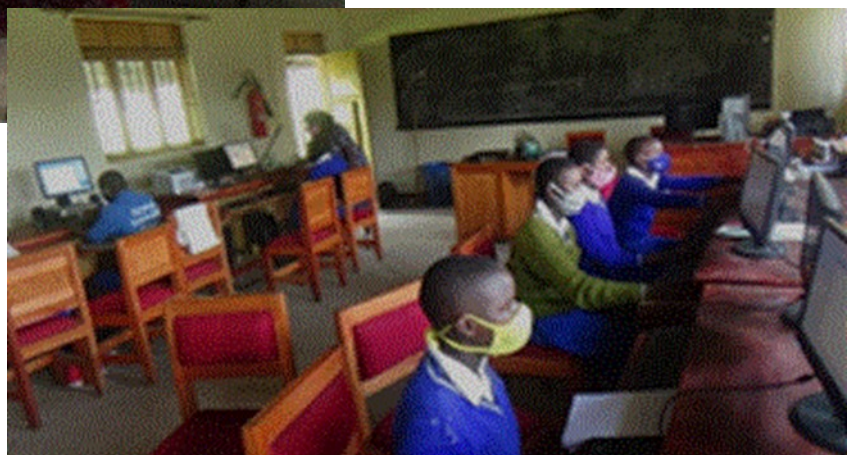
The parents of children with special needs were taught about living with COVID 19 by wearing masks daily, washing hands, use of sanitizers in important places, keeping social distance and maintenance of the received materials at school and during holidays. COVID 19 cases are increasing rapidly: the school fears that the children are not safe in the villages because they may not keep social distance and continue putting on face masks. Special needs children like being at school and parents feel their children are safer at school. Screening of children with a temperature gun is done at the school gate.

All special needs children did their end of year exams and they have gone for a holiday for four months, they will report back to school on the 7th August 2021 if all goes well.



Weekend Knitting

IT Training



Parents of sponsored children were given relief food to supplement the children's diet.



Children with special needs are continuously taught agricultural skills both practically and theoretically. In the grounds crops such as vegetables like spinach, beetroot, cabbages, dodo (pigweed in England), Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, maize and beans are grown.



DI coming from school garden carrying harvested maize

Planting of Cabbages in the school ground



A is blind and a former student of KDS and Hornby High School (HHS). She is now studying at a Primary Teachers College. During the Lockdown in May 2021 she spent part of her time back at KDS compiling her child study report.

“Child study is part of the college practice that prepares student teachers to bond and have love for the learners they are likely to meet in the field”.

MCDO

The Mgahinga Community Development Organisation (MCDO) has been very active on a number of fronts. They have established a potato farming project and on 21st June 2021 had 52 members of the community harvesting! (42 were women!)



This project aims at extending working opportunities nearer to the people, clean seed multiplication and storage, as well as working as a demonstration for the community members to learn and improve their agricultural projects.

Preparing nursery beds for the farm and for distributing to the needy in the community. This time the planting is cabbage and carrots will follow!



You may recall that in our Newsletter of January 2021 we featured The Mgahinga Reformed Poachers Association and their Onion Project. Happily, this has been very successful, and they have had a bumper harvest!

Mgahinga Community Junior School



Pupils enjoy break porridge (before lockdown) in the new Dining Room. It is so gratifying to see it in use.

The facility, and ground outside, is also used for private functions by the community.

The grounds have been transformed by grass and hedging.

However, there are causes for concern about the effects of the pandemic as this extract from our main contact explains:

“When it comes to schools and schooling, Uganda has got very big challenges where more than 600 public schools are on sale due to limited capacities for the founders to run them. What can I really say here? Mgahinga Community Junior School (MCJS) is not yet on sale, and we still have hope to resume.

The reason is due to your support otherwise we would have closed some time back. Many thanks to the SEDCU and MCJS supporters, for giving hope to the people from such a hard-to-reach area, even amidst universal crisis!

Despite all the problems the team at MCJS have been determined to make things work. The older classes resumed with SOPs in place and P7 took their Primary Leaving Exams with outstanding results. ***“We are proud to announce that MCJS has been among the best performing schools in the district, in the 2020 PLE.”*** *“You have enabled the school to reach at this brilliant performance, and we are determined to continue aiming higher.”* SEDCU joins with the school governors and community to *“congratulate the pupils, teachers, parents and the head teacher Mr. Kwesiga Julius for his commitment at work.”* Some of the younger classrooms failed the SOPs and so the children were put into bubbles and taught in other available places in the community much to the delight of the parents and satisfaction of the teachers.

MCDO have been very reassuring about the wellbeing of the children sending SEDCU photos of them at home and with their families.



E working in the fields



O with his vegetables grown in bags



CONGRATULATIONS to P on her exam success and being offered a place at the African College of Commerce and Technology to study Tourism and Hotel Management. The College is in Kabale, some 180 kms from Kisoro. Her sponsors are delighted and will continue to support her. We wish her every success.

Why poor Ugandans are losing the COVID fight

Across the country, many people with Covid-19, especially the poor, are staying away from hospitals. The fear of financial ruin from hospital bills has kept many away – preferring instead to lean on private home medical care and natural treatment regimens. More than a respiratory infection, Covid-19 has laid bare our dire financial straits and the shortcomings of preparedness and response to the pandemic. Many impoverished people lack access or cannot afford the basics, which can shield them from infection, despite billions of shillings spent. As a preventive measure, government appropriated Shs 53 billion for the procurement and distribution of non-medical masks to all individuals aged six years and above.



According to the Covid-19 preparedness and response plan, the masks were expected to be procured and distributed in June, July and August 2020 and later again in March and April 2021. But many Ugandans to date haven't received a single free mask. They can't even afford the cheap masks being sold on the streets for Shs 1,000 and Shs 2,000. Many have instead improvised with all sorts of outlandish nose and mouth shields. The standard operating procedures (SOPs) aiming to stem the spread of Covid-19 lay emphasis on social distancing, wearing of masks, washing hands with soap or use of sanitizers. But most of these basic requirements have been priced out of reach for many impoverished people. Many slum dwellers can't wash hands that so often because clean tap water and soap are expensive. A jerrycan of water costs between Shs 500 and Shs 1,000. That is a day's meal for many. A piece of washing soap costs about Shs 1,000. That too is not affordable either. Hand sanitisers are extremely pricey. [Shs 1000 equals 20 pence]

The 42-day lockdown is taking its toll. Supplies are running low and frustration is high. And now the poor face a jail sentence for failing to afford a mask. The minister of Health Jane Ruth Aceng announced a two-month jail sentence for anyone found flouting Covid-19 SOPs including wearing of masks. Doctors have advised that the best way to avoid serious ailment is to test for Covid-19 early as soon as mild symptoms manifest. But the tests are too costly for the poor. Free screening in public hospitals is for people who have showed symptoms, not for asymptomatic people.

The lack of access to the essentials has made it harder for the unconnected to fight this viral infection. While the impact of Covid-19 has been felt by most households, the poor have been hardest hit. Even with the lockdown to contain the spread of the disease, little is being done to support the poor employed in the informal sector, who live off handouts, and stay in congested areas – which are super spreaders of the virus. Uganda sent the police to chase vendors selling merchandise in Kampala despite a Covid-19 stay home orders given by the President. Some residents have been sneaking into the city to make a living. "Part of the guidelines was to make sure that hawkers and people who are selling on the roadside are not doing that business, but unfortunately we found many of them doing that and over 200 have been arrested," said a Kampala police spokesman.

SEDCU Supporting Schools and Communities

As in the first Ugandan lockdown, SEDCU is seeking to alleviate some of the impacts of the latest lockdown. Thanks to accumulated reserves and continuing donations by SEDCU supporters, funding totalling £7,000 has been sent to cover part salaries of staff laid off without pay as well as to provide broader support to families of sponsored children and the communities in which they live. We will receive information on how this has been spent and whether there are further actions we need to take. Our contact at MCDO has just written as follows:

“Regarding the use of the funds, we had MCDO management meeting yesterday and came up with plans on how best to spend the money:

- Staff (both teaching and non- teaching) at MCJS
- 51 community members
- 22 of the supported students and pupils who include all those supported by SEDCU plus other three from Batwa families.
- Some school requirements for 8 students who have successfully passed their exams from MCJS and will join secondary when schools open hopefully soon.

We have given an assignment to some of our staff members to finalize with the plan, and we will share all proceedings”.

Fundraising

Like most charities we have struggled to run fundraising events. However, the collection of watercolours of Lake District landscapes by David Almond, which was donated to SEDCU, as previously mentioned, has continued to generate some income for us.



We mounted a small exhibition at The Hive in Nenthead, Cumbria. We also participated in PromArt, the open air artists’ market which is held monthly through the Summer on the Promenade at Grange over Sands to the South of the Lake District. We made some sales and plan to return shortly.

Thank you to our sponsors, donors, supporters and all who take an interest in SEDCU. Together we can continue to make our stated mission a reality. If you wish to donate you can do so through the website or by cheque made out to SEDCU and mailed to Lowstead, Highford Lane, Hexham NE46 2DP. Or you can pay online into the SEDCU account, sort code 20-74-81, account number 83561356.

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