



HOW COVID-19 IMPACTED LAKE BUNYONYI'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Diana Guardado

Supervisors: Raymond Bokua and Bright Kiboneire

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SUMMARY

In the effort to learn how COVID-19 impacted education in communities around Lake Bunyonyi in southwestern Uganda, this project collaborated, evaluated, and constructed outcomes that are for and by the people. One of the recurring issues students, parents, and headmasters revealed is how the pandemic exacerbated poverty in households which disables families from covering children's school fees. The insidious cycle of poverty impacts students' academic careers since the lack of stable streams of income in households forces families to shift priorities away from education and towards survival. Therefore, this project proposes establishing self-reliant individual earning businesses that will provide financial assistance for families to cover school fees.

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE

Accompaniment

In the summer of 2022, Diana Guardado conducted research in partnership with the Global Livingston Institute (GLI) to assess the impact COVID-19 has had on students attending government-aided public schools in southwestern Uganda – specifically in communities around Lake Bunyonyi. The Global Livingston Institute (GLI), a research institute advancing best practices in community development, provided training and guidance on how to be an “accompaniment,” one who works with organizations and communities as “equal partners... to take on some of the most complex problems” (Igoye et al. 54). In eight weeks, the project engaged in meaningful community-based research using GLI’s Listen. Think. Act framework of story-sharing, empathy-building, and fostering collaboration.



“Do Something”

Traditionally, international development exerts a “Do Something” mentality which engages foreign problems with the agreement of an infinite answer, the assumption of residents’ needs, and the enforcement of values and theories. However, this research project understands the importance of developing robust relationships with community members to listen directly to those impacted by historically systemic problems. Consequently, this approach requires “a near-constant humility, a willingness to admit that there is always more to learn, and always another perspective to consider” (Igoye et al. 51). In the case of education, all stakeholders’ stories, including students, teachers, parents, and headmasters, were needed to comprehend the unique viewpoints of each group. This research project worked in partnership with these individuals to develop comprehensive strategies for approaching gaps in education.

The following schools were visited:

1. Kyabahinga Primary School
2. Bwama Primary School
3. Hakahairo Primary
4. Mugyera Secondary School
5. Mugyera Primary
6. Kengoma Primary School
7. Asiiimar Preparatory School
8. Kisiizi Primary School

The following stakeholders were interviewed:

- 135 students
- 35 parents
- 15 teachers
- 6 headmasters

METHODOLOGY

Listening First

The following research uses GLI's Listen. Think. Act framework. This approach requires building relationships with villagers by taking a step back from the “*Do Something*” mentality and listening to their realities. This approach manifested in the research in many ways. For example, visiting the Sunday church services at Kavumo Church of Uganda to observe families contributing crops and shillings during “offerings.” Also, speaking with subsistence farmers about micro-financing associations while farming with them at GLI's model farm sparked discussions on reciprocity. Above all, fostering the family-oriented atmosphere harnessed by the Entusi Resort and Retreat Center staff nourished the project's understanding of religious practices, gender disparities, and family dynamics.



This methodology requires practitioners to assess the narratives of people and cultures. In the process of becoming globally literate, speaking with communities, and entering their space as an observer rather than a doer will deepen connections between organizations and communities.

Context

Uganda experienced its first nationwide school lockdown on the 20th of March for 30 days. As curfews and lockdown extended, schools continued to be closed until a few were allowed to reopen in February 2021. Shortly after, in June 2021 a total lockdown occurred as the country surpassed 1,000 cases, resulting in schools closing for over 83 weeks. The lack of access to the internet, devices, and scholastic materials disabled students from participating in virtual and remote learning while Uganda experienced “the world's longest disruption” (Rodney Muhumuza, Associated Press).

In January 2022, schools reopened and students were promoted to the next level without obtaining and revising the material from their previous class. Although Uganda's Ministry of Education funded and distributed academic handbooks at the start of the lockdown, several students were preoccupied with grazing animals, collecting firewood, and digging. In other words, students did not consume academic material for over two years.

FINDINGS

Findings from Teacher and Headmasters Survey

Analysis of the teacher and headmaster survey reveals that teachers and headmasters have had difficulty transitioning students back to school routines.

As identified by the surveys, the two main issues faced by teachers and headmasters as they reopen schools are:

- Lost learning; and
- Food insecurity.

After schools remained closed for around 83 weeks, teachers and students in rural parts of Lake Bunyonyi were unable to continue teaching or complete the curriculum on which they were working. A small portion of students who lived within walking distance from their teachers received “coaching,” private tutoring sessions to review materials. In most cases, however, students have not obtained materials from previous levels for over three years, leaving them to struggle to pick up from where they left off. Consequently, teachers must begin class an hour before government time, “remedial time,” to brief students on missed content before following the “Primary School Abridged Curriculum” handbook.

The second major issue teachers have indicated is the food insecurity students and families are experiencing. According to the United States Agency of International Development, “almost one-third of children... are stunted,” because of malnourishment (USAID 2020). Teachers attest to this statement given the frequency of students dozing off and losing attention after lunch hours. Overall, the overload of content and food insecurity has teachers and headmasters anxious with the academic future of students.



Findings from Student Survey

The student survey revealed that students are experiencing financial stressors which are infringing on their ability to pursue an academic career.

As identified by the surveys, the two main challenges faced by students are:

- Food insecurity; and
- High school fees.

Food insecurity seems to have been exacerbated by COVID. Students have expressed feeling “hungry” and “tired” in the afternoons because of the inadequate amount of nutrition they are consuming throughout the day. In some cases, students consume homemade millet porridge before spending the rest of the day on an empty stomach. Government-aided primary schools expect students to bring packed lunches which supposes parents have the time and resources to prepare and provide lunch for their children. However, families around Lake Bunyonyi own or rent small acres of land that limit their ability to produce more food and then result in their children consuming less than one meal per day. According to the student surveys, issues related to food insecurity have been exacerbated by the pandemic.



On top of experiencing malnourishment, students struggle to pay school fees and costs for scholastic materials. Unlike in the United States, both government-funded schools and boarding schools in Uganda charge students tuition. While the “government prevented [schools] from increasing school [fees],” the rise in prices for commodities has altered families' financial stability (Team). Now, schools frequently send students home if their name continues to have a pending unpaid balance. In that case, students began participating in temporary paid positions by breaking bricks, weaving baskets, fishing, and grazing to cover school fees. While students have expressed feeling eager and overjoyed in returning to school, they are unable to be fully present in class when

schools are sending them home until school fees are paid. Despite the excitement of schools reopening, students' financial status is blocking them from pursuing and evolving into the educated leaders of today.

Findings from Parents Survey

The unconditional support of parents who welcomed our team into their homes and personal lives helped shape the findings of this research project. With their investment and interest in their children’s lives, the project discovered that the economic downfall caused by COVID has impacted the priorities of parents.



As identified by the parent's surveys, the main issue faced by parents during and after COVID is:

- Economic instability

To understand the typical household on Lake Bunyonyi, this project studied the form of farming practiced by villagers. Around “96.4% of the population is engaged in either crop growing or livestock farming” resulting in a significant number of villagers producing crops for their own personal consumption (“Kaberamaido Piggery Project - Greater

Calling”). The three types of farmers include the following:

Market Producers	Subsistence Farmers, Household Producers	Exchangers
At the time of harvest, farmers use the production of crops for personal consumption and to obtain a monetary valuation. The crops are set as a source of output that is sold to other households or business enterprises.	Farmers keep and store production for personal consumption only. Households use personal capital, such as land, water, seeds, and firewood, and unpaid labor to produce and harvest crops within their respective household	Generally, households with small ownership of land and production of one or two crops exchange production to obtain a variety of options to consume and reproduce.

In most of the interviews, parents are identified as “subsistence farmers” who only grow and harvest for personal consumption. These households, therefore, earn income by molding bricks, carpeting, selling crafts, and digging crops, such as Irish potatoes and beans. The pandemic further limited these sources of income since families were unable to produce and sell their products and services to the public which, in turn, has affected their ability to support their children’s costly school fees. Therefore, parents have communicated borrowing money from micro-association groups to cover term costs. These micro-association groups collect a non-refundable membership fee from villagers who store their savings under these accounts. After schools reopened, parents have heavily relied on these associations to pay the growing balance under their children’s names which have inevitably deepened their financial instability. In other words, parents agree to borrow money with interest fees without having a current stable stream of income to cover these costs. This reveals an insidious cycle of poverty that parents are experiencing after schools have reopened.

COVID-19 Exacerbated the Financial Instability Experienced by Subsistence Farmers

CONCLUSION

In the span of two months, this project has been able to hear directly from teachers, headmasters, parents, and students about how COVID-19 has impacted their homes, lives, and academic careers. From the start, the project intentionally worked to build robust relationships with community members by attending Sunday services, gardening with members of Bunyonyi's Women Association, and teaching English at a local school. These experiences allowed locals to grow comfortable with the process and intention of the project which in turn created a safe space for people to share their desires and aspirations. In addition, these findings made evident that the topic of education intersects with the gender inequality, the health disparities, and the economic instability Uganda faces. In order to address issues under education, this research warrants further investigation on Lake Bunyonyi to acknowledge and solve all these other underlying issues that may hinder a child's ability to further their schooling.

In the meantime, with the collaborative spirit and insight of villagers living on Lake Bunyonyi, this project constructed a recommendation that works to address the economic instability revealed by the people. This is an income-generating project that has been created and implemented by Asiimar Ronald, founder of Asiimar Preparatory School, at Burimba village.

RECOMMENDATION

One of the common threads throughout the survey include the need for financial assistance to pay school fees.

This project highlights how COVID has exacerbated poverty in households which paralyzes families from paying school fees. The project recommends that the objectives to redevelop a household's economic status should focus on creating an income-generating project. While advocating for free public education is highly preferred among students and parents, addressing the root cause of these financial discrepancies is imperative in empowering Ugandans to become self-reliant and economically stable. Therefore, providing capital for households to grow, graze, and/or harvest crops and animals will build the financial capacity of parents to cover academic costs and grow village ran businesses. An example includes starting a **Piglet Project** that provides parents with a self-reliant individual earning machine.

As a starting point, the Global Livingston Institute should provide 10 sows to the local council of Kavumo village, each sow costs around 50,000-100,000 shillings. The project phases will work as follows:

Phase One: The chairperson will match a family who owns a male pig with a family who will possess a sow from GLI.

Phase Two: The first batches of piglets will always be returned to the local councilmember, so they distribute piglets to other families across the village.

Phase Three: After families breed the first batch, they will gain full ownership over the new sets of piglets. The families will be expected to use the profit generated from the sales for the sole purpose of school fees.

Phase Four: To ensure families are using the revenue for their children's school fees, the chairperson will monitor the balances of students at the start and end of each term. At the start, the chairperson will have a record of the students, who act as beneficiaries, and the balance they owe.

Phase Five: During the mid-session of each academic term, the chairperson will track the breeding status of each of their beneficiaries and the amount of revenue they have obtained after selling the pigs.

Phase Six: By the end of the term, the chairperson will review whether each family has paid the students' balance according to the number of pigs sold in each term.

All in all, families on Lake Bunyonyi need the capital to establish a sustainable stream of income to cover students' fees. With the support of this piglet project, parents will work in partnership with neighbors to breed pigs and learn to market and sell their commodities. As a result, families will learn to operate micro-businesses and translate these soft skills into other areas of their lives.

A sincere thank you to Asiimar Ronald for sharing this model with the project. His guidance and expertise in income-generating projects shaped the research understanding of sustainable and culturally responsive solutions. Above all, his devotion and compassion for his students demonstrated the power of community development as he tirelessly works to improve the education of students attending Asiimar Preparatory School.

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