



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Katumba Parents Humanist School Bundibugyo

July 2018



Children at Katumba School and extract of school values from staffroom wall

Living on the edge

We received an email request for support from Katumba Parents' Humanist nursery and primary school about 10 months ago and this was our first opportunity to visit.

The school is on the outskirts of the small town of Bundibugyo, situated on the remote

western border of Uganda, a 7-hour drive from Kampala on good metalled roads. The town is a crossing point for goods and people between the troubled Eastern Congo and Uganda.

The long border between Uganda and the Congo is porous. It has local people walking backwards and forwards across it on a daily basis, and smugglers take advantage of this. They pay local farmers to carry contraband

across for them, and especially illegally mined precious minerals; the most notable of which is coltan, an essential ingredient in the manufacture of capacitors and chips for a wide range of micro-electronics, including smart mobile phones. Bundibugyo adjoins the troubled area of Eastern Congo, which is riven with conflict among competing warlords.

Virunga National Park on the Congo side of the border is one of the last refuges of the mountain gorilla. In recent years almost a hundred park rangers have been killed protecting the area from rebel incursions, and recently two British tourists were abducted and their female Congolese guide shot dead. The deaths have led to the National Park being closed to tourists.



Budibugyo itself lies on the Western slopes of the high Rwenzori range of mountains, which rises to Mount Stanley (5,109metres). The Rwenzori are the fabled Mountains of the Moon, which Ptolemy speculated must exist as the source of the River Nile – a huge river that appeared to come impossibly from the Sahara desert. Ptolemy speculated correctly about a more distant mountain source. In fact the melt water from snow and glaciers on the Rwenzoris, flows into Lakes Victoria and Albert in Uganda, which, in turn, feed the waters of the White Nile, which flows north through Sudan to Egypt. The red arrow below indicates the location of Bundibugyo on the Uganda-Congo border on the western slopes of the Rwenzoris.



The Ugandan side of the border has not been without its own troubles. Since the time of Ugandan independence, the local Bakonjo and Baamba peoples have campaigned to create their own kingdom of Ruwenzururu, independent of the kingdom of Toro, which governed them for many years. The status of Kingdom was finally granted to Ruwenzururu by President Museveni in 2008. It encompasses the whole Rwenzori region from Bundibugyo to Kasese on the eastern flanks of the Rwenzori mountains, where the Kasese Humanist Schools are located. However, far from quelling unrest in the area, pressure to secede from Uganda and create a new state joining with part of Eastern Congo increased.

In 2014 things came to a head when an uprising took place. Local people, lightly armed with pangas and spears, took it upon themselves to attack the Ugandan army barracks in Bundibugyo with a view to stealing weapons and starting an independence struggle. A local witchdoctor spread potions on the chests of the rebels and persuaded them that bullets would bounce off them. They didn't, and almost a hundred young men were shot and killed by the defending soldiers. The rebellion briefly spread to Kasese but was swiftly and brutally put down by the Ugandan armed police, who killed a further 70 rebels. Thus the insurgency was nipped in the bud and peace now seems to have been restored to the area.

Founding of Katumba School

Bundibugyo is in a very fertile zone with deep soils and substantial rainfall throughout the year. Farming is on a subsistence basis with peasant farmers growing crops on a small holder basis – 5 or 6 acres being typical. The improvement which has taken place in the standard of roads from this western outpost to Kampala has stimulated the growing of cash crops. The area produces the bulk of Uganda's cocoa harvest and also high grown, high value arabica coffee. Unfortunately, much of the crop is sold through middlemen who give the local farmers low prices for their produce. So, although there is a cash income, it remains low.

Katumba parents (many single parents)



The difficulty that local people had meeting the cost of school fees persuaded a group of parents to bring the community together and found their own nursery and primary school. The three founding parents were Maate Hassan, Irumba Juma Siriwayo and Matte Elisha Ssebaddu. These three provided their own land for the school and created a group of parents to manage the school. Using what little money they could muster and using timber cut from local forests they constructed make-shift classrooms with earth floors and opened the school in 2010. To emphasise that the school was an initiative of parents from the small village of Katumba it was named Katumba Parents Nursery and Primary School.

Juma, one of the founding parents, had been brought up a Moslem. However, becoming

increasingly disillusioned by formal religion, he searched the internet for alternatives. He came across Humanism and the rational stance and focus on creating a good society here and now and making the best of the one life we know we all have appealed to him. He read information from the American and UK Humanist websites and those of Uganda Humanist Schools Trust and Uganda Humanist Schools Association.

After the insurrection of 2014 killed almost 100 fathers in the school and left 180 children to be brought up by their mothers alone, they decided that the school's mission must combat superstition and the influence of local witchdoctors and clerics. In 2016 the school added Humanist to its name. It adopted in full the recommended constitution outlined on the website of Uganda Humanist Schools Association and gained recognition as a Humanist School from Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports.

The School's constitution states the following:

OBJECTIVES

1. To raise the next generation of Uganda pursuing excellence in academic and practical skills and imparting children with humanism and science for a secular world, so that each child will become a responsible and productive citizen of the nation.
2. To absorb children from absolutely poor families who cannot afford primary and vocational training fees.
3. To educate and train helpless orphaned children in Bundibugyo and neighbouring districts to make them useful citizens.
4. To cater for the basic health and nutrition of the pupils.

5. To promote peaceful coexistence and harmony within the community using humanist values and principles.
6. To provide children with a sound educational experience, to protect their safety and promote their well-being.

Since its formation, the school has grown and now educates 285 children. The funds have come entirely from the parents of the children in the school. Only one small external grant has been received from Humanists in the U.S. to establish the culture of oyster mushrooms, which contributes to the diet of children. Any surplus is sold in the local market to boost school income.

Physical development

The school is 4km from the small town of Budibugyo. The road to the school is unmetalled and extremely rough. Being in mountainous terrain the road has very steep sections and is almost unpassable in wet weather.

There is a narrow, guarded entrance to the school, which is a gap between two houses on the village street. Once inside there is an orderly square of classrooms built around a central quadrangle.

We visited the school during a dry period, but it was evident that there was a problem coping with rain run-off. Channels had been dug around the school to prevent classrooms from flooding. Water from the roof of one classroom fell directly onto the village house beneath it and clearly caused problems for the family living there, during the rains.

The parents had ingeniously led the water through channels into a deep, square hole, which they intend to stock with farmed fish as a source of additional protein. The classrooms have humanist slogans painted on the walls (see picture below)



The classrooms had small windows, were dark and it would be a problem for the children to read the chalk board. There were very few books and learning resources around. However, in a craft room (below), the children were making baskets from recycled plastic strips.



Hope in people

We met the teachers in the school. All had at least the basic level of primary teachers' certificate qualification, gained from two years further study after O-levels. They spoke good English and conducted all lessons in English from the Primary 1 class, though the local vernacular was used with English in the nursery classes.

Some of the teachers



Moses and Peter with Juma and children...

Enthusiastic children



The children then acted out a play about the 2014 insurrection, in which many of their fathers died. The moral of the play was the folly of following the Black Magic practices promoted by witch doctors.

We were treated to an entertainment by the children. They opened by singing, dancing and xylophone playing (below) to welcome the visiting party, which included Peter Kisirinya and Moses Kamya, from the Uganda Humanist Schools Association (UHSA).

After the play individual pupils stood up and told us their personal stories about their home life, their siblings and what being able to go to school means to them. We were very impressed by their confidence in speaking publicly and by the high standard of their spoken English. Although the children had clearly prepared what they were going to say, they spoke from memory and without the need to use prompt notes. The teachers at Katumba are clearly well motivated and doing an excellent job in very difficult circumstances.



Given the traumatic effect of the deaths of many of the children's fathers in 2014 the school is doing a remarkable job to support the

families through education. It is being hugely successful in creating a safe environment which fosters confident and happy students. In doing so, the school is giving the remaining parents, and mothers in particular, hope for the future. We found the visit truly inspirational.

The School's Needs

Katumba Parents' Humanist School is making a huge contribution to this war damaged community. It is educating and building the self-confidence of its children on meagre resources. All the school's money comes from very low fees paid by the children's families. Each year the cost for each child is:

Tuition 240,000 Uganda shillings (£48)

Uniform 30,000 U.Sh (£6)

Shoes 20,000 U.Sh. (£4)

TOTAL £58 per child per year.

These figures are very low and enable the school to provide only the bare minimum. In fact, very few parents are in a position to pay more than a small part of this money, yet the school does its best to educate all the children in the village.

The key priorities for the school are to obtain:

1. A regular cash injection to enable it to pay its teachers and essential staff: administrator, caretaker, cleaner, nurse and cook.
2. Money for essential day-to-day running costs: meals, chalk, paper, pencils.
3. Books and learning resources, including toys and playground equipment.

However, the existing site is on sloping ground on the side of a hill. Water rushes through the

site and through classrooms during the rains and the ground becomes extremely muddy. All the buildings are of a temporary nature – dark classrooms created from hand-made planks of wood.

The school needs to be rebuilt from scratch on a new site. Building costs in this deprived area are low, so the cost of a completely new school would not be huge. A larger site nearby has been identified and the land is already owned by parents. They are prepared to set up a 99-year lease of the land to the school.

Decision on UHST Support

UHST's objects are to support Humanist Schools in Uganda, so long as they meet the standards set for membership by the Uganda Humanist Schools Association (UHSA). Katumba Humanist School, after a visit by the Chair and Secretary, has been welcomed as a fourth member of UHSA.

Our second object is to provide scholarships to enable bright but needy children to attend the school.

UHST's priority is to focus help in areas which give the greatest benefit in terms of raising educational and welfare standards in the schools. We place considerable emphasis upon enriching the learning experience of pupils by providing learning resources, and in particular books, which we believe make a huge contribution to enabling students to become independent learners.

In order to help a school with infrastructure needs we need to see progress in implementing measures in school governance that provide assurances about the long-term future of the school. For example we want to see all schools that are seeking a longer term partnership with UHST to be making progress towards:

1. Incorporating the school as a not-for-profit charity, with a governing board

of Directors that includes key stakeholders.

2. Long-term land security either through the land being owned by the school or leased on a long-term basis to the school.
3. Producing good quality annual accounts, which are professionally audited. Any infrastructure fund must go into bank accounts and payments to builders and service providers made by cheque or bank transfer and the statement made available to UHST's auditors.

It goes without saying that funds provided by UHST must be used exclusively for the purpose for which they were given.

UHST Trustees are in the process of deciding whether to accept Katumba Humanist Primary School into the schools we support and whether to support the school by providing:

- (a) Books and learning materials
- (b) Support with school fees and running costs
- (c) Help with infrastructure

Our current challenge is to finish off the infrastructure of the two secondary schools and we have launched an appeal to raise £150,000 for this purpose. However, Katumba Humanist School does seem to be deserving of support. If, as a supporter, you have a view on whether we should support the school and at what level, we would be very happy to hear from you

If you would like to contribute to our 10th Anniversary £150,000 Building Appeal for the other schools or to provide general support for UHST programmes in the Humanist Schools then please visit:

<http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>

Or contact me directly...

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