



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Katumba Parents Humanist Primary School July 2022



Children enjoying the learning experience at Katumba

Recent Visit

This was our third visit to Katumba Parents Humanist Primary School. The first two were to the old school site. It was clear from our first visit that this was a community worthy of our support. Katumba must be one of the most remote communities in Uganda. It is located on the far western side of the 15,000 ft Ruwenzori Mountains. The border between former British and Belgian colonies dissected the Bakonjo people, leaving a majority in the Eastern Congo and the rest in a small enclave of Uganda. Schools are few in the area and in 2014 the parents of Katumba village came together to

build their own from timber hewn from the surrounding forests. Within 2 years they were providing an education for 250 children – but on a site that was subject to flooding in heavy rains.

Local people cross the Congo border freely to visit relatives and to trade in local produce and, in the past year, the area has been receiving refugee family members displaced by the civil conflict in the Eastern Congo. In 2016 a failed attempt to gain freedom led to many local people dying in fighting with the Ugandan and Congo armies. 100 young fathers from

Katumba School died, leaving their wives to bring up children on their own.



Timber buildings at the old school

While the events of 2016 were devastating for the community, it strengthened the resolve of families to support the school and give the single-orphan children a decent education. By the time of our first visit in July 2018 one or two children each year were gaining grade 1 in their Primary Leaving Examination. This was a remarkable level of achievement gained by scarcely 6% of children in the whole of Uganda. Inspired by a bright young graduate from the village, Irumba Juma Siriwayo, the parents and school rejected the witch doctors that had fomented discontent and conflict and adopted a humanist ethos for their school.

The New School

There was considerable interest in the story of Katumba among UHST supporters and one of them made the generous offer to fund the construction of a new brick-built school on a more suitable site. This was our first opportunity to see the new purpose-built school. Land for the school was donated by a female elder of the community, Teopista Nanganda, who has several grandchildren in the school. The new land is dry with plenty of space for buildings and for play. It is in a pleasant location surrounded by woodland and hills with gardens (small farm plots) growing green bananas (matoke), maize, cassava and cocoa, the main cash crop.

Staff, children and parents are proud of their new school and, on arrival, they treated us to a tour of the site.



Welcome from Children at the new Katumba School

We started with the kindergarten, which takes children from age three. The pre-school children are divided into three classes by age – baby, middle and top, with up to 60 children in each. The baby class has no furniture but a large mat on the floor to enable children to take naps when they feel tired. The other rooms had some, but insufficient furniture. Three additional rooms were built at rightangle to the classrooms – a storeroom, a nursery staff room and a room destined to become a discovery centre where children will take part in play-based learning.



Baby room in the Kindergarten

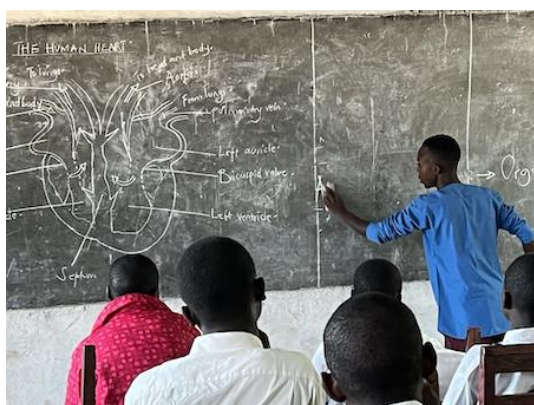
The other buildings form a U-shape around the back of the plot, leaving an open area for play in front. The site is fenced, and hedging plants will eventually create a green surround to the school. While most of the classrooms are finished with plaster walls and paint and have windows and doors, there was not enough money to complete the central admin block, which needs windows and doors and plastering and painting. Separate toilets have been constructed for boys and for girls.



School cook house (needs new stoves)

We provided funds for a kitchen with efficient wood-burning stoves but unfortunately the stoves were made by an inexperienced builder who did not know to use firebricks, so the stoves broke up and collapsed on first firing. For the time being, school meals are being cooked over an open fire, which is very inefficient. Remaking proper wood burning stoves is a priority as soon as we have the funds.

The remaining infant and primary classrooms are in good order, and we saw some excellent lessons in progress, taught by enthusiastic young teachers. The two maths teachers in our group were impressed by the standard of the Maths and Hilary, a biologist, felt that the biology lesson, on the heart and circulatory system, taught to the Primary 7 class would not have been amiss in a good GCSE classroom in the UK.



Teaching about the Human Heart & Circulation

Children and staff

The old Katumba School had 250 children. As the new school site is 3 km away, there was an

initial fear that numbers would fall at first. In the event, children have been more than willing to walk to the new school and many new children have been attracted to this first brick-built school in the area. Katumba Parents Humanist Primary School is already at capacity, with 637 children on the new site. 80% of the children live within a 4km radius of the school. They all walk to and from school, with some walking 6 or 7km in each direction. To reduce the number of very young children walking, a further 123 little ones are still attending kindergarten classes on the old site. The new school has 12 full-time teachers and 4 ancillary staff.



Irumba Juma Siriwayo with the Katumba Teaching Team

The strict Covid lockdown made it impossible for the community to get their produce to market so what little savings they had have been used up. Katumba is a desperately poor community and this year, due to unusually dry weather, the cocoa pods, which are the main source of cash, are withering on the trees. 420 children have paid their school fees of 100,000 Uganda shillings (£24) per term. Half as many again have either paid nothing at all or just a small contribution. Teachers at the school earn as little as £50 a month, with the headteacher earning £70, but the low fee income makes it difficult for the school to pay teachers regularly at the end of each month.

Accumulating arrears of school fees are unlikely to be paid, and yet the school is reluctant to exclude those children from destitute families who cannot pay. So, they are paying for school food and firewood for cooking for over 200 children, who are unable to contribute. This is not sustainable so some hard choices will need to be made. There seem

to be two options, to send home those children who cannot pay or for UHST to raise additional funds to cover the costs.



Katumba village children not in school



A local subsistence farm plot

Poverty has other consequences. When many of the children go home from school, they are expected to work to help the family. While this is understandable, in this area there is much forced child labour, and many children find it difficult to keep up with schoolwork. This is difficult for children in their Primary 6 and 7 years when they are preparing for their Primary Leaving Examination. To help these children the school, at the request of many parents, allows the older children to sleep in school – some on bunkbeds but many on mattresses on the floor of classrooms. The school would like UHST to build dormitories for boys and girls and we are coming around to the necessity of this – though the cost will be substantial.

Co-curricular activities

Despite the precarious financial foundations of Katumba we are anxious that the children

there have a broad education that includes making the school experience an enjoyable one. In 2020, during Covid, UHST paid for a bus and entrance fees to enable Katumba children to make their first visit to one of Uganda's national parks. They went to their nearest park, Semliki National Forest where they saw primates and birds and some antelopes. They also visited Sempaya Hot Springs, which send hot water from underground volcanic vents to the surface through fissures made by the East African Rift Valley faults. The trip was strong in the memories of teachers and children.



Cooking bananas in hot spring in the national park

The school also works hard to maintain local traditions through a traditional music and dance programme. The Ruwenzori region is known for a melodic traditional wooden xylophone, called the Endara.



Katumba parents enjoying their children's performance

On our final day at the school, the parents were invited along to hear their children performing traditional songs and dances and playing local instruments, including the Endara and a local flute or pipe, where the players blow across a

hollow tube. They also presented short plays about local life and about their understanding of what it means to be a humanist. They were both funny and moving.



Traditional dance with flute music



Bike made from local materials in science class



Girls performing a play they had written

The performance ended with speeches from the Headteacher, School Director, Chair of the Parent Teachers' Association, the Chairman of the Local Council of Elders and Hilary and I spoke on behalf of UHST. We explained how delighted we were with the evolving partnership with the Katumba Community and promised to do our best to raise funds to

provide the resources so their children could have a good educational experience in a safe and caring environment. We asked the parents to do their very best to contribute sufficient in school fees to buy school food, firewood for cooking and to pay the teachers. It was good to end this wonderful event in a very positive and mutually appreciative way.



Headteacher, Hassan Matte, making an address



Retired Headteacher Chair of PTA addressing audience

The School Annual General Meeting

On the final afternoon we held the school's AGM. Members of the Board included: Irumba, Juma Siriwayo, the School's Director, Hassan Maate, the Headteacher, Matte Elisha Ssebadu, a retired civil engineer with considerable experience of managing building projects for NGOs, Balikamanya Kabotya Freedom, whose mother gave the land for the school and who is a local celebrity, being a leading member of Uganda's national marathon squad. I was there as a representative of UHST. The meeting agreed to widen the Board to bring in one of the mothers who had played a prominent part in founding

the school and a director from one of the other Humanist schools.

The AGM received the school accounts, which had been audited by UHST's accountant in Uganda and approved by UHST's Independent Reviewer of Accounts in the UK. There was much discussion of the policy on free places and the local team were left to review whether they could afford to keep over 200 children in the school who were making no contribution at all. The meeting identified school priorities for the coming year.

School Priorities

1. Closing the deficit on the school accounts by encouraging more parents to pay fees, possibly asking some children who do not contribute anything to leave the school (a very hard thing to do) and by UHST trying to raise additional funds through an appeal to help all the Humanist primary schools, which face similar financial challenges.
2. With the school having attracted much larger numbers of children than anticipated, there is an urgent need for more books of all kinds and for learning and play materials.
3. Well-constructed wood burning stoves need to be installed in the school kitchen to reduce firewood consumption and keep down smoke levels.
4. The school needs additional funds to complete the staffrooms by adding windows and doors, floors, plastering and painting walls.
5. There is a need for more furniture in most classrooms.
6. The school needs lightning protection.
7. The library and IT room need to be completed so that books can be safely stored in school.
8. There is an urgent need to improve conditions for those P6 and P7 children sleeping in the school by providing decent metal framed beds, mosquito nets and eventually building proper sleeping quarters so the classrooms can be released for teaching and learning.

If you would like to help us to meet the urgent needs of Katumba School then please contact:

stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338).

Donation forms can be found at:

<https://ugandahumanistschooltrust.org/donate/>