



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Mustard Seed Schools, Busota, Kamuli July 2022



The new Deputy Headteacher, Irene, taking us on a tour of the school

The Secondary School

There was an air of excitement among the students surrounding our first visit to the school since 2019. Since Covid reached Uganda in March 2020 there have been continual periods of school closures with partial openings in between.

When closed, the school's only source of income has been grants funded by UHST supporters. Our concern has been for the school to be able to retain their team of staff. We have helped by covering 50% of the salary bill throughout 2021. This has drained our reserves and squeezed funds for

infrastructure. We have, however, been able to help the school construct additional toilets and to move the kitchens onto the new school site. An additional dormitory block has also been completed. Further money was found for building repairs, repainting with anti-mosquito paint, for pathways and ground improvements. We could not fail to notice, however, that there had been some rundown of facilities since 2019, reflecting long periods of closure.

Our visit to Mustard Seed started with a guided tour of the secondary school led by students and staff.

Hilary met all students receiving UHST scholarships and ensured they were all well.



Scholarship students at the main classroom block

Students showed us around their dormitories. The boys stay together on one site, across from the main school. There is one purpose-built dormitory and four former classrooms, which have been turned into sleeping places. The site has a large toilet block and wash and shower rooms.

Resident girls are housed in two dormitories on the new site, close to the borehole and water pump and with toilets and washrooms nearby. Pictured opposite is the girls' dormitory, funded by members of the Ethical Society of St Louis. It is equipped with solar lighting and a satellite dish to enable the girls to watch TV during their leisure time.

With close to 400 resident students on the school site, there is a ready demand for services. Local traders have built tuck-shop shacks selling soap, washing powder, pens, stationery, cakes and other small treats. Students can even buy local delicacies, such as Rollex (an omelette wrapped in a chapati) and kabalagala (small cakes made with flour and sweet bananas.)



Classroom turned into sleeping space for boys



Boys' pit latrine & shower room



The new girls' dormitory



Local trader at the school

Covid is still active in Uganda and there are warning signs around the school. As in Europe and North America, some people take the threat more seriously than others.



Some secondary students wear face masks

The New Primary School

We looked forward to visiting the new Mustard Seed Humanist Primary School and were not disappointed. The school had been run as a Muslim foundation until it went bankrupt in March 2021. The local community saw this as an opportunity to have a more inclusive Humanist school and asked Moses Kamyia to take it over. Moses approached UHST and we mounted an appeal to raise the £26,000 needed to buy the school.



Mustard Seed Primary School



The new wood-burning stoves

Funds raised from our supporters paid for essential repairs and painting, for decent new toilets and for the construction of a new kitchen with efficient wood-burning stoves (above).

We were introduced to the teachers and spent some time with their classes. The commitment of the young teachers and the standard of lessons we saw were impressive. Primary 1 children were learning through dance and chant, and the children were revelling in the experience of learning English together.



Children learning English by dance and chant

We also saw more formal classes like the one below. Teachers have adapted their teaching to a low resource setting. They use a very effective didactic style where the children repeat 3-times in unison all key words. Children love the approach, which keeps them alert and engaged throughout each lesson. They share the joy of mastering new information together. No child is left behind. Children clearly love being in school and their learning is at a high level.



More formal lesson but with total participation

Local Families

Some children took us to their homes to meet their families. This allowed us to gain an understanding of how local people make a living and the day-to-day problems they face. Pictured here is Patricia Kikobye. Patricia walks 7km to and from school each day. She does daily chores before she leaves for school and when she comes home at night. As a result, she often arrives late for school. Her father works away, and his three co-wives have 18 children

between them. Patricia is the oldest child and does a lot to help with her younger siblings. Her family of subsistence farmers grow their own food. They are expecting to have a problem this year, because the rains have finished early and crop yields will be low.



Some of Patricia's siblings at home

We also visited the home of a former Mustard Seed scholarship student, Hope Mirembe. She left the school last year with good O-level grades and her uncle promised to pay for her A-level schooling in Jinja town, two hours from her home in Busota.



Sadly, her uncle died and Hope's family were unable to pay the fees for her new school. Given the circumstances, we arranged for Hope to return to Mustard Seed School to continue her studies. Her family is very poor. They have a small subsistence plot, where they grow essential foodstuffs. Before Covid, her father had a job in the local sugar refinery and the family were doing well. However, Covid reduced demand for the one luxury, sugar, so the refinery laid him off, along with many others. They are now struggling to make ends meet and have started making bricks from the local earth to bring in some money.



Making bricks by hand

Challenges Facing Mustard School

1. Mustard Seed School is in a poor part of Uganda, where families' capacity to pay school fees is low. Primary school fees, including tuition and food, are 135,000 UgSh (£30) per term. Secondary school fees for S1 and S2 students are 160,000 UgSh (£35) and for upper classes 200,000 UgSh (£45). Full boarding fees for S1 and S2 students are 400,000 Ug Sh (£90) and for upper school students are 500,000 UgSh (£110). However, relatively few manage to pay full fees. Many fall into arrears. Covid prevented farmers in Uganda from taking their produce to market. Most relied upon selling surplus food to earn income but, during the lockdown, families were confined to their farms. Food output increased, but prices collapsed due to oversupply.
2. Since the opening of a sugar refinery by an Asian businessman, local farmers turned to growing sugar cane as their major cash crop. At first, they received a good price, and many local men were employed in the factory.

However, the Covid lockdown crippled the Ugandan economy causing poverty and slashing demand for the one luxury item in the daily diet, sugar. The sugar factory reduced its purchases of smallholder grown sugar and laid off many local workers. This further depressed local incomes.

3. Families used what little savings they had in paying for essentials. By the end of 2022 savings were exhausted, as was their ability to pay school fees.
4. In 2022, when Covid abated, trade opened up again, but farmers in this one crop and one wage a year economy had to wait until harvest time in July/August before they had products to sell in local markets. Many paid no school fees for the first half of the year. 2022 is turning out to be a year of serious drought throughout East Africa. The rains stopped early, so the maize crop has not had time to mature and yields are expected to be low.
5. The war in Ukraine has had a devastating effect on Africa, which is dependent upon imports of oil and food cereals, both of which have rocketed in price. Farmers will be unable to capitalise on the good market conditions for maize, because yields will be so low. The whole economy has been affected by the hike in world fuel prices. Rising food and fuel costs have further depressed real incomes and the ability of families to pay school fees.
6. Over 100 secondary school children have been withdrawn from Mustard Seed School by their parents, who cannot pay fees and would rather their children stay at home to help with household chores and work on the land.
7. The formerly Muslim primary school has recruited only 125 students making its finances precarious. This is partly for the same reason as the fall in secondary school numbers. However, the school faces a concerted campaign by the local Muslim community to ostracise the school. They feel that their former Muslim school, which went bankrupt, has been stolen from them. Yet, the new Humanist School welcomes children of all religions and continues to educate 9 Muslim orphans who resided in the former school. The difference is that Islam is now taught within the framework

of a broader religious education curriculum and not as an exclusive canon.

8. During the enforced Covid lockdown there was a substantial rise in domestic abuse in Uganda. Many children were beaten and used as child labour. Sexual assaults on women and girls increased. Four girls from the school became pregnant during the lockdown and teenage girls still feel unsafe as they move around, especially in the darker early mornings and evenings.

SCHOOL RESPONSE

The school has been forced to make changes to keep girls safe and to manage the huge financial burden of low fee income.

School boarding

1. During our last visit to the school in 2019, before Covid struck, the school had grown to 600 and many boys were being housed in insanitary conditions in two overcrowded classrooms. To alleviate these conditions, UHST supporters contributed money for a second boys' dormitory. This was completed during 2021, in the Covid lockdown.
2. Girls were sleeping in dormitories on two different sites with early morning (5am) and evening movement (7-9pm) between them for meals and for prep. Girls made representations to say that they felt unsafe walking along the lane between the two sites in hours of darkness.
3. When children returned to school, adjustments were made to respond to the new circumstances. Girls were moved to the new dormitory, originally intended for boys, on the same site as the second girls' dormitory. UHST provided funds to complete a security fence around the site and to construct a new kitchen to prevent the need for cross site movement in hours of darkness.
4. Unfortunately, this left boys, who could not fit in the main boys' dormitory, sleeping in the same overcrowded classrooms as before. To alleviate the situation, the school converted the two remaining classrooms near the boys' dormitories into sleeping spaces. This created

a boys' site with one purpose-built dormitory and 4 classrooms with well-spaced bunk beds, toilets and washing facilities. UHST provided funds to build security fencing around this site too.

Water supply

1. Prior to Covid we connected Mustard Seed to public mains water supplies. This was a response to the dire shortage of water that we found at the time. However, fixed quarterly and usage charges rose to 1 million Uganda shillings (£275). This became unsustainable when local fee income fell, and the school had no alternative but to close off the public supply. Coincidentally, the local pumping station on the River Nile broke down, so the water company was unable to supply water in any case.
2. All students, boys and girls, are now reliant on fetching water from the main borehole on the main school site and which supplies a large volume of water without interruption.

Rationalisation of teaching

1. During our last visit, the school was doing well. In the 2021 exam league tables the school came 5th out of 36 schools in Kamuli District. The school was operating with classes of around 50 in two parallel non-selective streams.
2. The school has 32 teachers, 22 of whom are full time. The monthly earnings of a normal classroom teacher at the school are 300,000 UgSh (£66). Senior staff earn up to 500,000 (£110) a month.
3. Since the pay of science teachers has been raised substantially in government schools (up to £1,000 a month), it has been hard for private schools to complete. Mustard Seed, like others, was losing science teachers. The school has now stabilised the situation by concentrating all the work of each science teacher on 2 days of the week and paying them a full week's salary for doing it.
4. As some teachers had not returned after Covid and there was a need to reduce staffing costs, the two-stream model was abandoned for S1

and S2 classes. Children have been combined into in a single large class of over 100 in each year.

5. While this may appear to be a backward step, it is in line with practice in other schools in Uganda. For some time, government schools (20% of the total) and many private schools have operated with classes up to 150. Large class sizes with well-behaved children, as Ugandan schoolchildren are, has proved manageable but it does require some adjustment to teaching methods.
6. The Uganda government commissioned its National Curriculum Development Centre to prepare a new competency-based curriculum based upon large classes working interactively in groups of up to 10. Children work on problem-based tasks under teacher guidance. Mustard Seed is a pilot school for the new curriculum and was highly commended by NRDC officers for the quality of its implementation. Senior 1 to 2 classes are taught in 10 groups of 10, under the leadership of a single teacher. NRDC has provided, free of charge, an adequate supply of print materials for every child and comprehensive teachers' guidance. Moses Kamyia, the school's headteacher, says that everyone has taken well to the new programme. Children enjoy the new learning approach and feel they are making good progress. Teachers prefer their new learning and support role, where they interact more with individual students. Whereas before many felt they were often little more than dictating machines.
7. The new problem-based curriculum could not have come at a better time. By reducing staffing requirements, it has helped the school to keep financially afloat and it seems to have done this without adversely affecting learning and children's enthusiasm for school.

Use of space on the old site

1. Since the girls are no longer sleeping on the old site, space has been reallocated.
2. The site still houses the IT room, which is in continuous use for teaching Computer Studies (focused on developing competency in the use of Microsoft Office).



Primary children in the computer room

3. The site also houses the library and reading room, where students borrow, read and carry out research tasks. In the new curriculum, every class must spend one timetabled hour every week in directed library research. This is a good opportunity for students to develop their reading and research skills, and it has proved to be a popular addition to the school timetable.



Book store/library and reading room

4. The school clinic, also on the site, was disappointingly short of basic medical materials.

Housing teachers

1. With the school unable to increase teachers' pay, inflation has caused hardship to staff at the school.
2. Many teachers rent a room from a local householder and the owners have been increasing rents so they themselves can make ends meet.
3. This has led to growing pressure from teachers to be housed in school.
4. Since the school admin and staff had moved to rooms on the new site, the old staff rooms have been used to provide free onsite housing for the school bursar and the head teacher.
5. The old girls' dormitory is being used to accommodate a small number of orphan girls from the former Muslim Primary School. Once these girls have completed their primary schooling, the school plans to use the dormitory block to provide rent-free housing for single staff. They feel that this measure will encourage staff retention, which has become a problem post-Covid.

None of these changes was expected, but they have been an understandable way for the school to respond to the challenges brought by the Covid lockdown and the post Covid financial realities.

School Priorities

1. Given the scale of ongoing arrears with school fees, the school is in urgent need of cash flow support to enable it to pay its teachers, buy food and firewood. This will need to go on until the local economy picks up.
2. The introduction of the new national curriculum calls for a large investment in books and learning resources.
3. As there is a large online learning element in the new curriculum, so the school needs more computers.
4. Money is needed to improve conditions in the boys' dormitories, including the purchase of new beds and mosquito nets.
5. Low recruitment in the new primary school and low levels of fee paying are proving a challenge. We need to raise supplementary funds to enable the school to cover essential costs until it gets on its feet.

If you feel you would like to help us to meet the essential needs of the schools, please contact stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338). Donation forms can be found at:

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