

## **The potential of school gardening to mitigate short-term hunger among Universal Primary Schools in Kamuli District, Eastern Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a Field Attachment Program Award (FAPA), an internship undertaken by the first author to report back to the communities where the MSc thesis research was done, and come up with ideas to scale up the Masters' research outputs. The Masters' research was on the "Effects of Short-Term Hunger on Schooling among Universal Primary Schools in Kamuli and Soroti Districts". The research established that 59% of the pupils go without food and therefore drop out of school because of hunger. Following the establishment of school gardens under this project which was run by the pupils themselves, the pupils did not only engage themselves in gardening which supplied food to the school, but school gardening enhanced their attendance and retention in school, got them interested in farming, and they begun taking the information around the villages; they thus became 'local village extension agents'. The internship provided opportunity to scale up the activities that were done in one school to four more schools, and to the district at large, which is further scaling them up. This internship was carried out with the Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO), a local non-governmental organisation, which is now scaling up and out the school gardening project.

Key words: School gardening, short-term hunger

### **Résumé**

Cet article rapporte sur l'Intérêt du Programme d'Attachement sur Terrain (FAPA), un stage effectué par l'auteur pour rendre compte aux collectivités où la recherche d'un mémoire de maîtrise a été faite, et trouver des idées pour intensifier les résultats de la recherche de maîtrise. L'étude de maîtrise était sur les «Effets de la faim à court terme sur la scolarisation dans les écoles primaires des districts de Kamuli et Soroti». La recherche a établi que 59% des élèves vont sans nourriture et par conséquent, abandonnent l'école à cause de la faim. Après la création des jardins scolaires dans ce projet qui a été exécuté par les élèves eux-mêmes, les élèves ne se sont pas engagés

seulement dans le jardinage qui a fourni de la nourriture à l'école, mais le jardinage scolaire a renforcé leur présence et leur rétention à l'école, les a aussi intéressés à l'agriculture, et ils ont commencé à prendre de l'information autour du village ; ils sont devenus ainsi «des agents locaux de vulgarisation du village». Le stage a donné l'occasion d'étendre les activités qui ont été faites dans une école à quatre écoles différentes, et finalement au district dans son ensemble, qui les élève davantage. Ce stage a été effectué avec les Efforts de Bénévolat pour les Questions de Développement (VEDCO), une organisation locale non-gouvernementale, qui est maintenant à plus grande échelle et en dehors du projet de jardinage scolaire.

Mots clés: Jardinage scolaire, faim à court terme

## **Background**

Currently, the Government of Uganda is running Universal Primary Education (UPE) Programme, which provides free schooling for all the students. The programme is currently facing a challenge of high drop out because of lack of school feeding. This MSc. thesis research examined the effects of short-term hunger on schooling among pupils and studied possibility of using school gardening to address the problem. The study was done in one school (Nabango Primary School) in Kamuli, Eastern Uganda. The results showed that 59% of the pupils go without food the entire schooling day, which affected their enrolment, retention and attendance in school. The MSc study therefore sought to establish school gardens for the pupils to be able to produce their own food to eat, and equip them with practical agricultural skills. The school garden was also to serve as "a school agricultural lab" for teaching about agriculture. The schools, students and Makerere University researchers worked with the pupils, teachers and local community for about two years on the project. However, with just a two year window to implement this research, the project could not run the complete cycle of its life. There was still the need to follow up with the communities to ensure the gardens became fully functional and self-sustaining. Under a competitive grant process, RUFORUM through the Field Attachment Programme Award (FAPA) granted an award to the first author (M.Sc student) to enable her go back to the communities and inform them and other key stakeholders (especially district officials) about the outcomes of the research that had been carried out, and to seek their support to scale out the initiative.

## **Literature Summary**

Universal Primary Education (UPE) was introduced in Uganda in 1997 as a landmark ahead of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No.2 whose agenda was of ensuring that all children, both boys and girls, complete primary education by 2015. During the implementation stage, the Government of Uganda (GoU) realised that parents were not willing to contribute any fees partly because of many other demands they had to shoulder. Consequently the Government scraped parents' contributions but also went ahead and banned all other forms of fees (including paying for lunch), further complicating the running of UPE programme.

Based on the lessons learnt, the Government policy on school feeding now stipulates the responsibility of parents to meet the feeding needs of their school going children in UPE schools. Since 72% of parents cannot afford to provide lunch for their children (Loga, 2011), pupils end up suffering from short-term hunger, which leaves many with sensational feelings that cannot be clearly differentiated from physical ailment. These include: stomach ache, headache, fever, general body weakness, getting angry all the time and temporal blindness. Pilot school gardens were therefore set up in Nalango Primary School in Kamuli (Eastern Uganda) to test the potential of school gardening to mitigate short-term hunger, and also to act as a learning laboratory for pupils in UPE schools.

Results so far indicate that: Pupils have now become local village extension agents since they transfer knowledge from their school gardens to their homes and neighbouring communities, pupils are getting more and more interested in working in the school gardens and are therefore gaining practical agricultural skills that will be very helpful to them in future, and they are now producing their own food to eat while at school hence mitigating short-term hunger and enhancing retention of pupils.

## **Study Description**

**Description of what was done under FAPA.** This internship was carried out as a follow up of the Masters' research and as a means of coming up with ways of scaling the research lessons. The Intern linked with VEDCO, an NGO working in the area, and was interested in scaling-up school gardening in the district. In VEDCO, the intern was directly reporting to the school gardening project coordinator, and in the schools, she worked hand in hand with the head teachers. On arrival in Kamuli, the intern interacted with different stake holders who

included: the District Education Officer, Local council leaders, different primary school head teachers, VEDCO (an NGO) officials, staff and pupils of Nalango Primary School. A presentation of the outcomes of her M.Sc. thesis research was done, followed by a request for ways of out scaling the findings.

It clearly came out from the discussions that the already existing garden had to be used to bring more schools on board. Based on this, a meeting with all head teachers in the sub county was held, and seed from Nalango Primary School gardens was given to the head teachers of Mpakitoni, St. Jude Bulange, Makoka and Butaya Primary Schools. In addition, field visits were made to Nakanyonyi and Namasagali Primary Schools where VEDCO was keen to establish its school gardens. These exchange visits were meant to strengthen the functioning of the school gardens since pupils would be learning from fellow pupils.

**Scalability of the work done.** Results from the pilot school gardens showed that pupils had become more interested in practical agriculture. Unlike in the past where school gardening was viewed simply as a labor-based activity and punishment, it is today seen as offering learning opportunities to pupils who engaged in it.

In addition, pupils are now producing their own food to eat while at school. From the time school gardens were established in Nalango Primary School, pupils in the study schools have been able to have meals at school for at least three weeks every season. According to the students and teachers, these have turned out to be the most exciting weeks of the term since all pupils look forward to having free food at school. Interestingly, these weeks have been nicknamed “Dorcas weeks”, named after the first author.

The argument that schools can serve as platforms for reaching rural communities with farming innovations is a tale no more! It is now a reality that pupils in Nalango primary school have become “local extension agents”. They transferED knowledge learnt from the school gardens to their homes and to pupils from other schools and the surrounding communities as large. Further, pupils of Mpakitoni, St. Jude Bulange, Makoka and Butaya primary schools have now come on board. They have established demonstration garden at their schools, using the skills and seed got from Nalango primary school.

## **Lessons Learnt**

One of the key lessons learnt from FAPA was that for any research initiative to succeed there is need for full support from local leaders. Schools whose head teachers and staff did not believe in school gardens frustrated the idea, yet those who supported it had their gardens flourish.

Further, a majority of the people do not get to know the outcomes of research carried out in their communities, so they are tired of participating in research, especially that which is not participatory. Hence, taking an initiative to report back to the communities (what is done under FAPA) makes stakeholders feel very happy and valued.

## **Acknowledgement**

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