

## **School gardens for improved quality of primary education and community food security in Soroti district, Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

School gardening was practiced in Uganda over 30 years ago. Perceptions about school gardening were however varied, with many people looking at it negatively. It is however known to have positive attributes including transferring practical agricultural skills to communities. This study was conducted in 12 schools under the government's UPE programme in Soroti district in Uganda to find whether schools can be used as social change centers for sustainable rural development. Data were collected using participant observation, in-depth interviews with pupils and key informant with district and lower level local government staff, and focus group discussions with the parents through their PTA and SMC structures. The study revealed a strong interest by pupils to willingly participate in school gardening activities and enhanced learning and transfer of skills to their homes. Pupils also benefited through acquisition of knowledge and practical skills on crop production. Results also showed immense potential of using schools as social change centers for communities as they brought parents back to school to monitor their children's performance. It is recommended that various education stakeholders and the communities be exposed and engaged to appreciate the processes and outcomes of school gardens as social change centers and a strategy for self-sustainability of school feeding programmes. Funding support should be incorporated into school budgets to ensure continued implementation of school gardening activities. Furthermore, the publicity challenge could be offset by engaging the media to create awareness, advocate for and popularize the best practices of school gardening.

**Key words:** Community food security, parents, quality, primary education, school garden, Uganda

### **Résumé**

Le jardinage à l'école a été pratiqué en Ouganda il ya 30 ans. Les perceptions sur le jardinage scolaire ont été si variées, avec beaucoup de gens qui le considéraient négativement. Il est cependant connu pour avoir des attributs positifs, y compris le

transfert des compétences pratiques agricoles pour les communautés. Cette étude a été conduite dans 12 écoles du district de Soroti, en Ouganda, qui pratiquent le programme du gouvernement de l'École Primaire Universelle, pour savoir si les écoles peuvent être utilisées comme centres de changement social pour le développement rural durable. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'une observation participante, des entretiens approfondis avec les élèves et avec des informateurs clés du district et le personnel inférieur du gouvernement local, ainsi que des discussions de groupe avec les parents par le biais de l'Association Parents-Enseignants (PTA) et les structures SMC. L'étude a révélé un vif intérêt par les élèves en voulant participer à des activités de jardinage scolaires et améliorer leur apprentissage et faire le transfert de compétences vers leurs foyers. Les élèves ont aussi bénéficié grâce à l'acquisition des connaissances et des compétences pratiques sur la production agricole. Les résultats ont également montré l'immense potentiel de l'utilisation des écoles comme centres de changement social pour les communautés, comme les parents sont facilités à retourner à l'école pour surveiller les performances de leurs enfants. Il est recommandé que les divers acteurs de l'éducation et les communautés soient exposés et engagés à apprécier les processus et les résultats de jardins scolaires en tant que centres de changement social, et d'une stratégie d'auto-durabilité des programmes d'alimentation scolaire. Le soutien financier devrait être intégré dans les budgets des écoles pour assurer la mise en œuvre continue des activités de jardinage à l'école. Par ailleurs, le défi de publicité pourrait être compensée par l'engagement des médias pour faire connaître, promouvoir et vulgariser les meilleures pratiques de jardinage à l'école.

Mots clés: sécurité alimentaire communautaire, les parents, la qualité, l'enseignement primaire, jardin de l'école, l'Ouganda

## **Background**

A school garden is an agricultural plot around the school yard that lets educators to incorporate and sustain hands-on learning in a diversity of interdisciplinary standards - based lessons which connects pupils with their environment and local community food system. It is a living laboratory where lessons are drawn from real-life experiences rather than textbook examples, allowing pupils to become active participants in the learning process as they learn practical agricultural skills that last a lifetime. School gardens existed in the 1950s through 1980s for purposes of supplying midday meals for pupils and teachers at

school and complementing science lessons through experimental learning. They were then ignored for reasons that ranged from negative attitude of pupils, teachers and parents as well as changing government policies. With conflicting statements from policymakers and politicians on the application of Universal Primary Education (UPE), many communities in Uganda have neglected their role in shaping the environment within which their children are learning. SNV/Netherlands Development Organization in partnership with 8 District Local Governments, UNICEF, and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands, is implementing a 3-year Community Empowerment Programme (CEP). The programme contains 4 major components, namely; a) Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) at School; b) Community WASH, c) Gardens at School (which is an entry point for Community-School Partnership, with strong aspects of mentoring, food security, agricultural practices, provision of scholastic materials and school feeding); and d) Civil Society Organizations (CSO) strengthening. SNV piloted school gardens in the Rwenzori region in partnership with a local capacity builder. The results of this have shown an immense potential of using schools as change agents in delivery of services for communities in education, WASH and agriculture. With over 70 % of the Uganda population being dependent on agriculture, school gardens offer a good opportunity to improve livelihoods. School gardens in this project were used as demonstration centres for pupils, parents as well as surrounding communities. They also helped pupils to get a more positive perception of farming as a source of income and employment. School gardens can “bring back” parents into schools to effectively play their key roles and share responsibility. Parental participation in the school gardens creates a platform for interaction with the school on pupils’ progress in learning, nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, school management and violence against children. This study mainly set out to ascertain *that schools can act as social change centers for sustainable rural development solutions in communities.*

### Literature Summary

The Uganda government white paper on Education for national integration and development recommended Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme and vocationalization of education through teaching of agriculture and other practical subjects (Government of Uganda, 1992). UPE was then introduced in 1997 but faces a number of challenges including high dropout rate (Murphy, 2003). Less than 30% of the children who enroll

in primary one complete primary seven yet most of these turn to farming as a source of livelihood (Kibwika *et al.*, 2010).

Although it has been argued that schools can serve as platforms for reaching rural communities with farming innovations through pupils (Miiró and Orum, 2007), in the case of Uganda, agriculture in schools is often viewed simply as a labour-based activity, offering few learning opportunities to pupils, a majority of whom leave school without employability skills (Kibwika and Tibeziinda, 1998). Learning agricultural production skills does not only benefit pupils after they dropout of schools, but it could also be of immediate benefit to them while in schools through school gardening. If properly applied, school gardening could enable the schools to produce food to partly cater for their school feeding programme. However, SNV together with the Education Development Partners agreed on a Results Framework for the Primary Education sub-Sector within the Joint Assessment Framework (JAF) and identified four performance issues as impediments to quality Universal Primary. They included; 1) Inequitable deployment of teachers, across districts and within districts and schools; 2) High teacher absenteeism; 3) Inadequate instructional materials for primary teachers and learners; 4) Insufficient and ineffective community participation. This programme was specifically intended to impact positively on performance issue 4 and to a lesser extent on performance issue 2, as indicated above.

### **Study Description**

The study was conducted in two consecutive cropping seasons in 2011/2012. Purposive selection was employed by SNV-Uganda to select 60 UPE schools of Soroti district in Eastern Uganda. This study engaged with 12 UPE schools (Onyakai, Akaikai, Odudui, Dakabela, Olegei, Agirigiroi, Arapai, Omadira, Arabaka, Tukum, Angai and Adamasiko) of Arapai sub-County in Soroti district. The study employed a case study methodology applied in action research framework to engage with pupils, teachers and parents. Data were collected using participant observation, in-depth interviews with pupils, key informant interviews with the local government staff both at the district and lower local governments and focus group discussions with the parents through their PTA and SMC structures.

### **Research Application**

In these meetings, each school agreed to some operationalization strategies best suited to their individual settings. Strategies that cut across schools included: participation of parents in the school gardening activities in their respective villages on school land,

establishment of village coordinating committees, establishment of vegetable study plots for pupils, that SMC becomes the overall coordinating committee for the proper management of school gardens, and lastly that school gardens be put on the school Annual General Meetings (AGM) agenda to further popularize the school gardens ideology. The SNV/LCBs Review workshop entitled, "Start, Stumble & Self-correct" that took place on 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> May, 2012 noted that education stakeholders had picked interest in up-scaling school gardening activities at their various levels notwithstanding some challenges. We engaged t with the Agriculture and Education ministries' staff at the district level to address the inadequacies in the school curriculum and time tables (missing practical lessons). This process has helped in initiating policy influence and development through sharing with the education stakeholders some of the acceptable findings from the student research as stated above.

Consultative processes with the Local Capacity Builders contracted by SNV, facilitated experience /specialized knowledge sharing with local organizations, education stakeholders and local government structures at different levels to enhance better institutionalization of school gardening approaches. Findings showed that there was strong interest by pupils to willingly participate in school gardening activities and enhanced learning transfer of skills from the school garden to pupils' home gardens. School gardening had a number of benefits to pupils such as acquisition of knowledge and practical skills on crop production through pupils' study plots. Results also showed immense potential of using schools as social change centers for communities as they brought parents back to school to monitor their children's performance. Through this engagement, the following have been recommended: (i) Various education stakeholders and the communities be exposed and engaged to appreciate the processes and outcomes of school gardens as social change centers, (ii) The primary school agriculture curriculum in Uganda be reviewed to include the practical component in the school timetables, (iii) Funding support should be incorporated into school budgets to ensure continued implementation of school gardening activities, (iv) The implementation of school gardening should ensure ownership of its benefits by pupils for their motivation, (v) Encourage parents with land around schools to give idle land for school gardening, (vi) Publicity challenge could be offset by engaging a wide range of stakeholders including the media

to create awareness, advocate for and popularize the best practices of school gardening.

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