

**Promoting Peace through Education:  
Countering the Destabilizing Effects of HIV/AIDS in Uganda  
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When Fred Ssewamala was just 12 years old, his parents, two older siblings, and a niece were killed by the military during a period of civil unrest in his home of central Uganda. "I was orphaned at age 12," he says, "Because of this, I know what orphans in Africa are going through. It's so important to help them to understand that they have a future." He survived thanks to the help of his extended family who contributed to the costs of his education. He did exceptionally well in school and eventually won a scholarship to Makerere University and then traveled on scholarship again to Washington University in St. Louis for his graduate and Ph.D. work. Now a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Social Work, he has committed his life to working on behalf of other orphans from Uganda. He is passionate about the liberating effects of education, and is promoting an asset-ownership strategy to combat poverty and promote peace in poor communities devastated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Uganda.

I had the honor of meeting Fred while studying abroad in Uganda last spring. I accompanied him to his project site and learned how he had set up a family savings scheme for vulnerable children orphaned by AIDS. He explained that traditionally, the burden of raising orphans in Uganda falls primarily to the surviving extended family members comprised of grandparents, uncles, aunts and family friends. Unfortunately, the steady increase in the number of orphans especially in the last two decades (due to the AIDS epidemic), coupled with the increase in poverty has overwhelmed traditional extended families. As a result, a considerable number of orphans who would otherwise have been cared for within the extended family have either dropped out of school in order to farm the land to take care of themselves and their siblings or, in desperation, migrated to large urban areas in search of employment opportunities. Since the majority of the orphans who migrate to the urban areas have no employable skills, they often end up on the streets where they live as street children. While on the streets, these children beg, engage in petty theft, begin drug and substance abuse, and prostitute themselves for money, exposing them to health risks including HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a threat to peace around the world. The destabilizing effects the disease has had on customary support structures are profound. Poor orphaned children who loose touch with traditional networks of family and friends are more likely to engage in dangerous behavior. These risky behaviors will eventually undermine the fragile state of peace central Uganda has experienced since the end of a protracted civil war in 1986.

I visited Fred's project site (called SUUBI, which means 'hope' in his local language Luganda) on a perfect day to understand how his approach works- the children and families would be opening bank accounts with a local bank. We left Uganda's capital city of Kampala early in the morning and drove four hours to a rural village (Kalisizo) in Rakai District. Our car was met by a swarm of children who had come to open their first bank accounts. After having been identified by their primary school teachers as orphans, they and their families had been contacted earlier by Fred and asked if they would like to participate in an experimental "family-asset promotion" project designed to pay school fees for poor orphaned children. Uganda is praised around the world for its free universal primary education (UPE). The problem with the system, however, is that upon completion of lower school, students must pay school fees and buy textbooks to remain enrolled in Senior school. Families who take on the extra burden of orphans often cite school fees as the largest deciding factor on whether to do so. As an orphan who escaped the dredges of poverty through education, Fred was adamant in his belief that the key to helping promote peace in Uganda was through education. He developed a project whereby a 'child's development account' (CDA) was opened in a recognized financial institution and funded by contributions from the child's family members or friends. Each month, Fred would match the families' saved funds 2:1. Account holders could use the CDA only to pay their educational expenses, or to invest in such income generating activities as raising livestock or starting a small business. In addition, the children would receive the usual care for orphaned and

vulnerable children in Uganda that included peer counseling, health education, and scholastic materials.

I had heard a lot about the project



**Program participants tell me what they want to be when they grow up**



**"I'll be back," I promised this 'jjajja' (Luganda for grandfather)**

from Fred before we arrived at the school where a hundred children and their families were waiting to open accounts, but nothing could have prepared me for the enthusiasm and gratitude these children poured on Fred and myself. I was merely a spectator to Fred's genius, and yet I knew then and there that this idea was worth supporting. I talked to a lot of the children about the program, and I only heard good things. One little girl told me that because of the matching funds, she wouldn't have to drop out of school after primary school and could instead train to be nurse as she had always wanted. Another young boy proudly produced his passport sized photograph that would be pasted in his bankbook, "It's the first picture of myself I have ever had," he told me. I also talked to the loving and caring extended families who had taken these orphans in to live with them. An old man, clearly worn tired by age and years of hard work, came up to me and kissed my hand to thank me for the "blessing" that I had sent him. He spoke little English, so I can't be sure if he understood me when I promised to return and bring more 'blessings' with me.

Inspired by Fred's idea and motivated by the enormous task ahead, I am applying for a 100 Projects for Peace grant to support the work of SUUBI. My contribution to the project will be two-fold: financial and support-based. Financially, I will put \$7,000 towards providing matching funds for 50 children's development accounts (CDAs) and buying textbooks for 100 children. The children I have selected were enrolled in the program in 2004 and saved enough money to Senior 2 level in school. My contribution to this project will allow the students to receive matching funds for three months (20 USD per month, for a total of 60 USD per student over the course of the summer). This amount will pay for at least one extra year of lower secondary schooling fees for those children.

#### Expected Outcomes:

I plan to link the ideas of asset ownership and peace promotion because promoting asset- ownership opportunities is not only a means of fighting poverty, but also of promoting socially and economically constructive behavior. When people acquire assets, they are more likely to think about investing in and planning for their future. In the Ugandan context of widespread poverty, "Security for a few is insecurity for all," (Nelson Mandela). Given that the theory behind asset-ownership is that if people own a stake in their society, they will be more involved in the decisions and activities that impact their lives, it can be expected that a more involved community will stand to benefit from peaceful resolutions to disputes and want to avoid the costs of conflict. Therefore, if we want to build stable and peaceful communities, we must invest in the livelihoods and education of individuals. By creating an educated and thereby economically empowered community, we will be strengthening the chance for sustainable peace and development in Uganda.

This project is designed both as a social science experiment and as a strategy for caring for the increasing numbers of orphaned and vulnerable children in Uganda. My work will generate data on the effectiveness of family- asset based intervention as well as provide tangible benefits to the students enrolled in the program (money for school fees, textbooks). The hypothesis is that we can stabilize and enhance family functioning, increase civic engagement and community participation, reduce family breakdown and minimize school dropouts (among children) if we create asset-ownership opportunities for children and their families within a family environment. By building the capacity of individuals and communities, we can counter the destabilizing effects of poverty and disease (like HIV/AIDS) and promote peace and development in Uganda.