

Title: Promoting Peace through Education: Countering the Destabilizing Effects of HIV/AIDS in Uganda
School: Columbia University
Student(s) submitting report: Elizabeth Mooers

1. Project Summary: Describe location, timeframe, participants, other funding involved, scope of work, and goals intended.

For ten weeks during the summer of 2007, I lived and worked with an organization in southern Uganda known as "SUUBI/SEED." Suubi is a Luganda word meaning 'hope' and the organization is an academic research project being run by Dr. Fred Ssewamala, a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Social Work. Dr. Ssewamala is testing the effectiveness of an asset-ownership based strategy for carrying for the increasing number of children orphaned by AIDS. Dr. Ssewamala's project is an intervention program designed to create and broaden asset-ownership opportunities and life options for orphaned and vulnerable children in Uganda. SUUBI targets primary school children (ages 12-15) and aims to help them save money and start planning for the future (in terms of four main areas: achieving future goals and educational aspirations; increasing school attendance and grades; increasing self-esteem; and reducing sexual risk taking behaviors). Dr. Ssewamala is testing the idea that if people own assets, their behaviors will change (for the better.) SUUBI believes that poor children in primary school with no expectations that they have the economic means or opportunities to afford post-primary education are more likely to have high levels of depression, academic difficulties, and reduced self-esteem, and will consequently drop out of school. With this kind of helplessness and hopelessness, children may not be able or have the desire to avoid negative health consequences, including sexual risk taking and teen-pregnancy.

The SUUBI Project works to counter the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS through three major conduits: a matched (by a ratio of 2:1) savings account is opened in the child's name to encourage the child to save money for future schooling or microenterprise; the child receives weekly guidance and counseling from a mentor to encourage positive behavior; and the child receives textbooks to facilitate her learning at school. As a research project, there is a 'control' group and a 'treatment' group. The control group only receives the standard care for orphans and other children made vulnerable by AIDS- material assistance (textbooks). As a research project, the central question is whether basic material assistance (like textbooks) is enough on its own to break the cycle of poverty and disease that devastates communities in Uganda.

Prior to SUUBI, Dr. Ssewamala ran a pilot project with 100 children based on the same principle- that education and a culture of savings- in essence, having hope for the future- is the key to leading a peaceful and healthy life (known as the SEED Project). When the SEED Project proved successful in keeping children in school and avoiding sexual risk-taking behaviors, the United States National Institute for Mental Health approved a grant to fund a 2 year expansion of the Project. Unfortunately, the money from the NIMH cannot be used to fund the original SEED students' participation in the Project. Therefore, my contribution to the SUUBI/SEED Project was to donate matching school fees (\$3,000) for 50 (SEED) children (those in the treatment group) for three months. This extension will allow for an additional year of schooling for those students saving on a regular basis. In addition, I contributed \$4,000 to the purchase of textbooks for 100 children (control and treatment students).

In addition to the material assistance I offered to SUUBI, I spent the majority of my time working with SUUBI's Project Coordinator, Proscovia Nabunya. Together, we decided to collect testimonials from project participants with the hope of using their photos, stories, and voices to raise money and attention for SUUBI. We interviewed dozens of local politicians, children, teachers, headmasters, guardians, bank officials, community leaders, and religious figures. My work on this project (to produce a documentary and a photo book) was not part of my initial Projects for Peace Proposal, but by drawing attention to SUUBI's unique and successful approach to orphan care, I feel it will contribute to my overall goal of strengthening family ties, improving community relations, and ultimately promoting peace in Uganda.

2. Project Results: Self-evaluate the project; your assessment should enumerate what goals were and were not accomplished.

I would regard my project as a success. Because a lot of my day to day activity involved interacting with people who were benefiting directly from my contribution (and the larger Project as a whole), I received a great deal of feedback. Everyone who I talked to expressed sincere gratitude for my contribution, but they also appreciated the unique "SUUBI" approach to helping orphaned children. Unlike other aid agencies that make big promises and often don't deliver, SUUBI

involves the beneficiaries themselves in the project. A student and her guardian must save a certain amount of money for the project's matching funds to kick in. This set-up further encourages the child to feel in control of his or her future.

School fees are often cited as the number one reason why extended families decide or decline to take care of orphaned children. My project directly addressed this common hardship that contributes to the breakdown of social support structures. For example, an 'Auntie' who looks after her dead sister's daughter told me that because of the Project, she could now sleep peacefully, knowing that some way or another, her daughter would receive an education that she herself had never the opportunity to pursue. She said, "Anti munnage obutasoma buluma okuze, kati ffe abataasoma tetwejjusa nti sinag twasoma? Naye ffe seente zaabula bubuzi, twali twagala. Kyenbadde njagala. Neb we mba nvude mu nsi munnange, asigala bulungi" ("You know what...you feel the pain of not getting education when you grow up... Now like me who never went to school, I regret having not continued with my studies...but for me, I lacked school fees to continue. So what I want is that even if I die, she will still be in position to have a good life!").

As far as specific indicators go, I successfully transferred \$7,000 to the Project's bank account- \$3,000 for school fees and \$4,000 for textbooks. Due to funding complications (I did not receive the money for my project until the day before I departed Uganda), I was unable to complete my planned project. I had intended to spend \$4,000 on textbooks for secondary school students and distribute those books to the children myself. Because my sponsoring institution (Columbia) was unable to disperse the money in time, the textbooks were purchased the day before my departure. In addition, were it not for the fact that I was working with an established organization, I would not have been able to provide the \$3,000 for matching school fees. Luckily, the Project was able to cover these costs until the funding arrived and the students continued to benefit from an extension of the SEED project.

3. Implications: What are the project's implications for peace? What are the future prospects for the project? What have you learned?

My primary goal in traveling to Uganda (Rakai specifically) was to promote peace in the face of the AIDS epidemic. AIDS has torn apart communities and broken down traditional familial support structures. In the schools I visited, it was not uncommon for over 50% of students to be orphaned by AIDS. Because AIDS attacks the most productive members of society, the economy is also suffering in Rakai. Coupled with poverty, AIDS is one of the greatest threats to peace in all of Uganda. Unless children have a future that is worth living for, there is no reason to believe that they will not turn to more dangerous and exploitative activities in order to survive. Education is a crucial component in fighting the hopelessness that drives the cycles of poverty and disease. As a recent report by UNAIDS states, "A basic education contributes to poverty reduction and the elimination of gender inequalities, as well as being associated with reduced HIV vulnerability since education fosters economic independence, delayed marriage, information on sexuality, and practice of safer sex."¹

I observed that children who were not in the treatment group (those who did not receive the Project's mentorship or matched savings account) were at a much higher risk of dropping out of school. I interviewed one girl who had been impregnated by a teacher at age 13 and another who had dropped out of school to get married at age 14 because her caregivers could not afford to pay her school fees. I tried in vain to locate a boy who had previously been the head of his household (a child-headed household), but when I went to the place he stayed, I was told he had been brought (or 'bought') by a local businessman to the capital city to work on the street. Those children without education lack the ability to stand up for themselves and make healthy decisions. A girl working as a barmaid told me that she wanted to go back to school because, "Omuntu nga yasoma taba kye kimu naatasoma...Kuba aera nabatukozesa basinziira ku kusoma kwo era akuyisaayisaamu amaaso." (Roughly: "Even someone who went to school is different from those who never went to school. Even the people who employ us, they do not treat us the same way. If you didn't go to school, they treat you differently from someone who attained education.")

My hypothesis was that peace begins at home; if you can restore the vitality and strength of traditional support structures, you can help rebuild a community. Peace is not simply the absence of war: it can also mean having enough food to eat, access to the right medicines to treat a disease, and the educational opportunities to prevent a life of exploitation. I hope that my work with the SUUBI/SEED Project has promoted peace through empowering children orphaned by AIDS to lead healthy lives oriented towards futures worth living for.

¹ UNAIDS Guidance Note: HIV and Sex Work (April 2007).

