

# A Sustainable Start for the Youngest Congolese Refugees in Uganda

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Despite the wealth of evidence that early learning opportunities are crucial for young children in crisis,<sup>1</sup> little evidence shows a commensurate commitment to early childhood development (ECD) provision in refugee and humanitarian programming.<sup>2</sup>

The Kyaka II refugee settlement in Uganda is a case in point. Home to over 125,000 Congolese refugees, Kyaka II settlement has quadrupled in size over the past three years and is now populated well beyond its intended capacity. Close to the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this settlement received approximately 3,500 new Congolese arrivals each month in the pre-pandemic era; numbers are sure to rise again when the borders reopen.

Typically, over 65% of the arrivals are children, many of whom have suffered extreme trauma after witnessing the brutality of war and displacement. They face serious child protection risks and have few safe places to go during the day. While a number of NGOs are providing primary education, ECD provision remains limited.<sup>3</sup>



Children listen to lessons on the radio

photos courtesy of Children on the Edge



## Early Learning Is Vital, and It Needs to Come From the Community

When Children on the Edge first began to spend time talking with the refugee community in Kyaka II, the lack of ECD provision became clear.<sup>4</sup> Despite the construction of some large buildings by a handful of organizations, the infrastructure

was not designed to be supported in the longer term and many buildings remained unused. Little teacher training was provided and many of the teachers who *had* received training quickly left the refugee settlement for better opportunities within Uganda.

Nevertheless, 30 different communities across the vast 81.5 km<sup>2</sup> settlement were

Many children have been learning in tents



working with great dedication to provide early learning opportunities for their youngest children. With little to no support, these groups were using dilapidated wood and mud shelters or old tents as preschools. They were facilitating lessons with no training and few learning materials, essentially offering little more than basic child care as they did not have access to the resources necessary to ensure strong educational and developmental outcomes.

These communities did not need an outside agency to swoop

in and build centers that would stand empty or provide qualifications that encouraged teachers to leave. They needed resources that would enable them to provide their own quality early years education, for over 5,000 children, for years to come. This education had to be sustainable, effective, independently run, and accessible for all. It needed to provide the space for children to process the trauma of witnessing and fleeing war, achieve improved mental and physical well-being, gain the key skills needed

to embrace future educational stages, and benefit from daily opportunities to play and enjoy being children.

### The First Steps: A Conversation, Not a Clipboard

For 30 years, Children on the Edge had been working with local communities to create protective environments for marginalized and overlooked children. When they began talking with communities in Kyaka II, they had just spent five years building and replicating ECD programs in the slums surrounding Jinja, a few hours south of the settlement.

These centers had been firmly rooted in the local communities, made full use of sustainable learning materials, followed the Ugandan ECD framework to prepare children for primary school, and, most important, followed a holistic approach that ensured



Early learning for refugee children in Kyaka II refugee settlement, Uganda



Children celebrate the opening of a new center

each child would develop and flourish as an individual. With this background and their years of experience providing education in some of the most volatile refugee situations, Children on the Edge were well placed to begin working alongside the Congolese communities in Kyaka II.

As staff from Children on the Edge Africa began to talk with people from each of the 30 identified communities, the diversity of child development approaches across the settlement was evident. Each center and community looks different and runs differently, depending on the local people, the children and their needs, and the available resources. Rather than enforcing a blueprint on each area or working through some kind of checklist, the first step was strengthening the local leadership of each center so they could author the development of their own programs.

Swafiya Said, First Trainer, Director and Co-Developer of the Ugandan Madrasa Programme,

says, “Many early childhood programs are initiated without the understanding of the communities’ actual needs or consideration of culture, religious beliefs, or traditional values. As a result, many communities do not participate in the programmes as fully as expected.”<sup>5</sup>

Early on in the program, center management committees (CMCs) were established in each area. Volunteers, both refugees and nationals, receive training in how to promote and maintain early years education. Initial training covered a number of topics, including the benefits of ECD, insights into how children learn, committee composition, roles and responsibilities, networking, and resource mobilization. Children on the Edge Africa works alongside these committees to develop effective financial systems and procedures. With a start-up amount provided, parents who are able have begun to regularly contribute a small fee for “the pot”; the aim is for each center to be more able to support themselves.

To date, 294 committee members have been trained in the core concepts of ECD, child rights, gender responsiveness, child abuse, and young children’s developmental needs. They are becoming proficient in the management and administration of centers, creating supportive learning environments, and increasing parental participation. In the short time that they have been running, local parents’ engagement in the education of their children has noticeably increased, as has their understanding of its importance. Programme Officer Balaba Henry Bosco notes, “The CMCs have become a strong pillar in the affairs of the programme and have been at the forefront of many developments at most of the centers.”

All decisions are made by the CMCs, teachers, and the community. When problems or issues arise, Children on the Edge Africa supports the community as they come together to find solutions; there are no “one-size-fits-all” solutions. Members in all 30 areas have been instrumental in identifying how existing ECD centers should



Center management committee training





Daphine completes her building training



Cutting the ribbon on a brand new community learning center



Making sustainable learning materials

be rebuilt or simply renovated in order to make them waterproof, light, comfortable, and temperate. Each committee decided what they could contribute, and all communities pledged to help where they could—offering labor, water, and building materials.

### Sustainable Buildings: Inside and Out

*“Our early years school was on the brink of collapse. . . . The classrooms were dilapidated and everything was falling apart. I was worried pieces of the mud wall would fall on the children and hurt them. Now two of our classrooms have been refurbished and they are filled with pictures and numbers on the walls.” (Maureen - Kyaka II parent)*

Having previously worked together to build two model ECD centers in Jinja, Children on the Edge and Haileybury Youth Trust (HYT) began partnering again, working closely with the Kyaka II communities, to rebuild and rejuvenate the many and various early learning spaces, all in different stages of collapse or dilapidation.

HYT transforms communities by constructing low-cost school buildings and installing rainwater storage tanks and

sanitation facilities. While many development projects overlook environmental concerns, HYT’s use of Interlocking Stabilised Soil Blocks (ISSB) preserves rather than damages the Ugandan landscape. This compressed earth technology offers an economical, climate-friendly alternative to the environmentally damaging fired brick (which has caused extensive forest degradation around Bidi Bidi refugee camp).

Not only is this process sustainable from an environmental point of view, it also encourages sustainability by providing training and employment for the refugee community. There is an urgent need for skills training and employment opportunities in Uganda, which has one of the world’s fastest growing populations—most significantly in refugee communities. With dramatic reductions in support

for refugees as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this need has only increased.

HYT trains young Ugandans in its innovative, carbon-saving building technology and 10 refugees in Kyaka II have already gained construction skills that will improve their future opportunities. Despite the challenges of lockdown, four two-classroom buildings had already been completed and handed back to the communities by the end of 2020. A new group of refugee trainees have been recruited for the next series of construction projects.

Kahindo is a resident of It-ambiniga and a parent to Muruhiya, who attends one of the 30 centers. She is also a CMC member and has been fighting hard to make sure that her local center shines and improves in performance. She was one of the key people mobilizing parents and the community to improve the first temporary shelters before

Children on the Edge Africa and HYT constructed the brand-new classrooms. Now that the building is constructed, Kahindo is optimistic that the enrollment and performance of the school will improve upon reopening.

She says, *“With these two classrooms, we are now sure that the school will serve the community for a long period of time. The children are excited about being elevated from dilapidated classrooms to well-built ones. We are all excited, and the center management committee plans to meet next to decide on which students will be attending the new classrooms.”*

### Training and Retaining Early Learning Teachers

Given the damaging trend of teachers gaining qualifications and using them as a ticket to a job elsewhere, a new approach was needed—one that would encourage sustainable incomes for teachers while nurturing their dedication to the local children in their care.

Rather than providing unsustainable salaries that encourage dependency, Children on the Edge Africa trains teachers in business and saving and then offers a loan to start up a small,

locally based enterprise. In this way, they develop a reliable income alongside teaching that is embedded within their community. While occasional stipends are provided, the microloans encourage teachers to find their own means of earning a living and give them the freedom to decide how to do this, using the skills they have gained, long after Children on the Edge has moved on.

Pascali Samuel, a teacher in Kaborogotta ECD center, has been dedicating his time to teaching the children since 2019. After receiving a business loan, Pascali set up a smoked fish stall, which he described as a “dream come true” despite the hard work necessary to keep going under lockdown. The stall has enabled him to continue teaching and put some savings aside.

Pascali shared, *“It’s not been rosy since I received the loan, as within a few weeks a total lockdown was declared by the President of Uganda, but I have tried to make sure that my business stays afloat amidst the challenges. I have been able to maintain it and earn money to meet basic needs.”*

Children on the Edge Africa are currently training 180 refugee and local teachers and, to keep training standards high, they registered as a training center in the settlement, in conjunction with Uganda’s Makerere University. Trainees are offered a variety of accredited certifications, making training inclusive and accessible for refugee teachers who lack entrance qualifications. No matter what accreditation stream they are on, all teachers are trained in the delivery of the official Ugandan ECD framework, education psychology, and child growth and development. A large component of their training is focused on how to craft a huge array of learning equipment from local, low-cost, sustainable materials. These materials are not only carefully



Kyaka II refugee settlement





Outside learning will be commonplace for the majority of 2021, due to COVID regulations

designed to help with learning milestones, but also incredibly colorful. The teachers create an engaging, child friendly environment inside each center.

As a result of this training and support, parents and communities soon reported improvement in the productivity of teachers, a change in teaching style, improved relationships with students, and a positive impact on the behavior of children at home.

### Adapting for Lockdown Has Inspired Learning Beyond the Classrooms

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ugandan Ministry of Education instructed all services to shut down in March 2020. The team in Kyaka II had to look quickly for creative ways to support teachers and ensure the children had access to learning. This included providing lessons via a local radio station, facilitating peer cluster training for teachers, and providing home learning parcels and support for 5,000 children and their parents.

Under national COVID-19 restrictions, ECD centers are likely to remain closed for much of 2021. As staff and committee members began to research what

opening up again post-lockdown would look like, they identified a still-growing demand for early years education. When the borders to the Democratic Republic of Congo reopen, arrivals will surge; even with the new, roomier buildings being constructed at speed, the emerging need will not be contained indoors.

The team, teachers, and committee members decided to take their lockdown learning and create a new adaptive model. Following a pilot program in one zone of the camp, in each of the 30 communities, clusters of 5-10 children will learn throughout the week in COVID-safe areas, including under trees and in other shaded spots, and in the homes of teachers and local leaders. Teachers will carry specially developed kits of learning materials to the venues and radio lessons will continue to be broadcast five days a week.

Parents will be encouraged to join in, naturally attracting the attendance of younger children (ages 0-3). Once laws permit the re-opening of the buildings, the classrooms will be filled, but learning also can be extended further through the cluster groups, meeting the early development needs of a greater

number of the most marginalized children. This will maximize engagement and training opportunities with parents and ensure a wider reach to meet the needs of all children ages 0-5.

What this adaptation shows is that when education is owned by the community, and sustainability is the priority, programs become resilient to shocks and are able to continue in all kinds of volatile environments. Over the course of a decade, Children on the Edge has seen the same local level resilience develop in the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, where 2,700 children were able to access quality education in low profile classrooms, attached to local homes. The refugee communities in Kyaka II are just starting out with this initiative, but are already well on their way to creating their own sustainable, safe, and vibrant spaces that will enable thousands of the youngest Congolese refugee children to play, learn, and flourish.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Committee on The Rights of The Child (UNCRC). 2006. General Comment No. 7 (2005) Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood. Fortieth Session - Geneva, 12-30 September 2005, Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). 2018. Global Education Monitoring Report 2019 - Migration, displacement and education - Building Bridges, Not Walls. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 7, Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, Regional Refugee Coordination Office (RRC), Nairobi, Kenya - Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan - "The integrated response plan for refugees for South Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo" Jan 2019 - Dec 2020

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, Regional Refugee Coordination Office (RRC), Nairobi, Kenya - Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan - "The integrated response plan for refugees for South Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo" Jan 2019 - Dec 2020

<sup>5</sup> Bartlett, K., Evans, J., & and Virani, S. N. (2008). *The Madrasa Early Childhood Programme: 25 years of experience*. AgaKhan Foundation and Rockhopper TV.

## Early Childhood Education for Refugee Children

### Little Ripples: A Case Study

Little Ripples, a refugee-led early childhood program initiated by iACT, builds the capacity of refugee women to implement and manage in-home preschools and to improve the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development of refugee children.

Key findings outlined in a case study featured on Promising Practices in Refugee Education:

- There is a serious need for quality early childhood education in refugee settings, particularly with a focus on play-based and social-emotional learning, positive behavior management, and mindfulness.
- Hosting preschool in the existing home spaces of refugees living in camps reduces the costs of building school structures and the barriers of access to education for young children, and directly integrates the community into the education solution.
- Empowering refugees to adapt and lead an education program fosters ownership from the outset, ensures the solution is culturally relevant, and enables the program to be sustainable beyond the support of international aid agencies.
- Providing quality and comprehensive training for early childhood development teachers improves the social-emotional and cognitive development of children and increases student engagement and attendance rates.
- Integrating water, sanitation, and hygiene curricula into the daily learning and routine of preschool students effectively improves children's hygiene behaviors and transfer of information to their families.

Read the full case study:

<https://www.promisingpractices.online/i-act>



### Refugees in Uganda

The most recent Global Trends report from UNHCR shows that the number of people forced to flee their homes due to war and conflict is at a record high. By the end of 2019, an unprecedented 79.5 million people were refugees. Of these, 40% are children.

Although one of the poorest countries in the world, Uganda has welcomed huge numbers of refugees. It is currently host to more than 1.4 million refugees and offers the new arrivals the opportunity to work, study, and set up their own plot of land. Kyaka II in western Uganda is currently home to some 100,000 people, mainly refugees from Burundi, DR Congo, and South Sudan.

Unrest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has displaced an estimated 5 million people between 2017 and 2019 – namely in the Kasai, Tanganyika, Ituri, and Kivu regions. Over 918,000 DRC refugees and asylum-seekers are being hosted in African countries (as of 29 February 2020).