

A narrative: A nomad's view on education in South Sudan and Uganda



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From smart phones to tablets, from Mxit to Facebook to Twitter to Pinterest – mobile technology is rapidly transforming the way we live, study, play and communicate.

It is true that we can make plans but we cannot always dictate the events that take place while we are travelling on the path we've chosen. In my case the destination was Kampala. In July last year I left South Africa for Uganda to run a marketing company and establish a development consultancy with a friend. As in all good stories, everything didn't go as planned. I then met Dr. Ian Clarke, mayor of Makindye District and Mr. Robert Common, Programmes Director for HOPE for Children, and ended up working with them as a fund raiser for a Public Private Partnership initiative called Events For Namuwongo (EFN). It was during this time in Kampala that South Sudan became more than just a new country I was interested in visiting.

South Sudan

I was oblivious to South Sudan's challenges regarding education until I spoke to Mr. Mabior Garang de Mabior, the director of the Dr. John Garang International School. He painted a realistic picture of the challenges the South Sudanese government is facing in providing adequate access to basic education. These tests include the transition from Arabic to English as an official language, and low adult literacy levels. There is a shortage of well trained South Sudanese teachers and most of the few that there are have to be retrained to use English as a medium of instruction. Other factors that exacerbate South Sudan's situation are inadequate infrastructure and the fact that a universal curriculum is yet to be developed. The state has to rely on importing teachers from neighbouring countries, and these are teachers who do not necessarily speak the local languages. This does not only affect learner-teacher interaction; it is also a costly exercise for a society that is building all institutions from scratch.

Seventy-two percent of the population are below the age of thirty, twenty seven percent are literate. Although females make up over sixty percent of the general population, only sixteen percent of the population of literate South Sudanese are female. Eighty-three percent of South Sudanese live in rural areas and ninety percent of rural women are illiterate.

It is these statistics that make Mr Mabior Garang's idea of replicating the Cuban Literacy Campaign an urgent solution. It would require that battalions of volunteers be trained to go into the countryside to teach basic literacy. This programme would also enable teacher trainers to produce scores of youth who can provide basic education to marginalised rural communities. I believe that this programme can be part of the solution if it also draws from the successes and pitfalls and history of the Botswana national literacy programme. For instance, the programmes in Botswana were conducted in seTswana, which marginalised other languages and cultures. In my view this concern makes it imperative for South Sudan to develop a mother-tongue-based literacy programme. This can be achieved through training locals to implement and develop education programmes that are based on social, economic and cultural needs which are specific to communities. Training local educators would help learners in developing a grasp of English, the official language. It will also help develop indigenous languages and an indigenous literary culture.

South Sudan has the task of developing a state, and it is also faced with the mammoth undertaking of fostering a culturally diverse nation with over sixty different languages. The people of South Sudan are still overcoming conflict, cultural subjugation and statelessness. The transitional constitution exists but the document itself is not accessible to most of the population, physically, and because of literacy and language barriers. The literacy programme can help initiate the process of translating the constitution into all the indigenous languages of South Sudan. This would also empower citizens to exercise their rights and responsibilities, as part of a nation.

Offering to recruit volunteers for a literacy initiative, I ended up visiting South Sudan briefly. Juba is the seat of the Republic of South Sudan's government; it is a rapidly developing urban centre in desperate need of spatial planning and sanitation. Like every developing city, it is a paradox of extreme wealth and extreme poverty co-existing, but not really interacting.

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I visited the Dr John Garang International School and was impressed by the administration's tireless efforts at providing a world-class education. They face similar obstacles as the government regarding recruitment and curriculum development. Despite this, the school represents a progressive and continuous learning process for the administration and the learners. Dr John Garang International School's premises are available for mixed use as an IT vocational training centre and English language school. This is a worthwhile example of what South Sudan can achieve in utilising limited resources for optimum service delivery in academic development and vocational training. It is an example of an institution that is shaping itself according to the immediate and future needs of the community it is serving.

The ethos of "each one, teach one" is a beacon of positive community participation in Yambio, Western Equatoria State, where a primary school was established by orphans in 2001. Yambio has a high concentration of orphans who were created by South Sudan's liberation struggle and Joseph Kony's raids. The school was started by the Self Help Orphans Association (SHOA) in 2001. This initiative was established by the orphans themselves, some of who are former child soldiers. These youths had left Western Equatoria to seek work and high school education in Kampala. On their return, the enterprising founders first did the teaching themselves under trees.

They took on odd jobs to fund the establishment of the primary school. They also established vegetable gardens to provide food and to raise funds for expanding their programme to human rights and gender sensitivity training, sex and gender based violence awareness, counselling, life skills, a straight talk sex education programme, and a hygiene and sanitation programme.

This initiative is plagued by problems like limited resources and the loss of land to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This has shut down a steady income stream, because SHOA region can no longer grow crops to raise money. As trying as circumstances are, the school is still running but other programmes have been suspended because of the shortage of funds. As for SHOA, it is now a registered Community Based Organisation which caters for 619 orphans, and has secured financial support for 484 orphans. Just over 100 of the orphans are former child soldiers, and some are arrow boys. The arrow boys also have the role of protecting communities from threats like the Lord's Resistance Army. They are called "arrow boys" because they use bows and arrows as a means of self-defence. The primary school itself now has four classrooms and its teachers are paid by the Republic of South Sudan's Ministry of Education. The Orphan's Primary School offers classes from kindergarten level to P8.

The most urgent goals they are working towards are creating employment and providing vocational training opportunities. SHOA plans to achieve this by building more classrooms, establishing a primary healthcare centre, establishing a water point, opening a restaurant and a charcoal making business, and by developing a volunteer programme of professionals who can impart skills to beneficiaries.

As insurmountable as the challenges appear to be, SHOA is mobilising other CBOs that work with orphans in all nine counties of Western Equatoria. So far they have solidified partnerships in Ezo, Tambura, Ibba and Maridi. SHOA is coordinating with Joint Effort to Support Orphans (JESO) in mobilising a critical mass for affecting change.

SHOA is now trying to develop a programme that will empower young women by supporting them through high school. The founders of the organisation also seek to study further formally and informally, so they can develop the capacity to deliver more services to the orphaned children and the rest of the communities of Yambio. The most urgent goals they are working towards are creating employment and providing

vocational training opportunities. SHOA plans to achieve this by building more classrooms, establishing a primary healthcare centre, establishing a water point, opening a restaurant and a charcoal making business, and by developing a volunteer programme of professionals who can impart skills to beneficiaries. I hope that in the near future most of the volunteers will be young people from neighbouring Uganda.

Uganda

To me, the sight of children walking to and from school is a symbol of continuity, a sign that all is well. It is one of the reasons why I slept peacefully for three nights, in a tent in the garden of a backpackers lodge in Entebbe; the other reason was the armed guard at the gate. During those first three days I met and spoke to all kinds of volunteers. Like the snowboarder who was taking a break from counselling HIV infected and affected children in a rural area. Then there were anecdotes from gap year teenagers who had just completed six months of teaching primary school children who can only speak their mother tongue. These conversations would come to mind whenever I spoke to working class Ugandan parents; mothers and fathers

whose aspirations for their children are beyond their means. Like Eva, a twenty-nine year old domestic worker, a single mother with three children. She earns 40 000 Ugandan shillings per week from two jobs that take 40 hours of her time weekly. She also echoed concerns about overcrowding in classes, shortage of trained Ugandan teachers, limited access to laboratories and libraries, and a pupil to book ratio of +/- three pupils to one book. Those issues were also raised by teachers; a young female primary school teacher spoke of the difficulties she went through to get her diploma.

Seemingly the Ugandan government does not have the money to put enough teachers and nurses through school to meet the nation's demands. Then surely some of the development aid channelled into Uganda can help improve education infrastructure and the quality of the universal primary school education that the government is offering. I think the humanitarian aid would be more effective if education NGOs develop an education delivery strategy in real partnership with the communities they serve, and with relevant arms of government. An example of how such partnerships can be fruitful is Events For Namuwongo. The political will of the Kampala Capital City Authority Makindye District makes it possible for Hope for Children and the International Medical Group to deliver sanitation, health and education solutions to the Namuwongo slum. The aforementioned organisations are just three of Ugandan and international participants and supporters of the EFN initiative.

For the poorest children and orphans, a high school education is a luxury they can only afford through sponsorship. Since the government can no longer afford to provide free secondary education, it is charities like EFN who find individual anonymous sponsors for children.

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Just like in most developing countries equal access to schooling does not guarantee good quality education. Private schools provide a better start for middle class children, who then become the most likely candidates for a tertiary qualification. Only a small number of economically disadvantaged children are sponsored through university. It is usually private school taught children who reach the standards of excellence necessary to get a government scholarship.

EFN's goals include setting up an academy that will service 500 children and the needs of the wider community. This academy's curriculum and facilities will be like that of any well equipped, well staffed school in the developed world. I think it is not only a brilliant solution to providing education, but it is also a necessary intervention in providing a safe learning and living environment for indigent and homeless children. According to Hope for Children's Robert Common, the high drop-out rate of indigent and homeless children is caused by harsh living conditions. These conditions include abject poverty and abuses ranging from physical abuse to child labour. Although the academy offers a fighting chance for some disadvantaged children, it is not a solution that guarantees further education. That is why I believe that vocational training as part of the curriculum will go a long way in creating more opportunities of a better life for beneficiaries.

At the moment – for children from excluded communities – tertiary education is a rare gift that sometimes comes from Ugandan philanthropists like entrepreneur and politician, Dr Ian Clarke. He has adopted half a dozen children over the 25 years he has spent in Uganda.

My dream is to see the establishment of more virtual universities, so more working class young Ugandans with full time jobs can study further. This would require improved internet access for all, and mobile phone friendly learning and monitoring tools. It is a possibility that would be realised sooner through strong partnerships between the government, the private sector, non profit organisations and communities. Uganda's progressive information and communications sector makes M-learning and e-learning more feasible. The Virtual University of Uganda is a prime example of how technology can make education cheaper and more accessible. The open source web application, *Moodle*, is a cost-effective tool that is used by VUU, Makerere University and the International Health Sciences University in Kampala.

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I think the next step to volunteerism should be a free online Ugandan university staffed by volunteer lecturers who will give non-paying m- and e-learning candidates a high quality education. This move would require more investment in the establishment of more community based, free to access ICT hubs.

I also support the move towards investment in ICT, driven towards vocational and entrepreneurship training. The need for training in gathering and applying open source learning tools is gradually being addressed by ICT driven initiatives like Hive Colab. They are attempting to bridge the gap between Uganda based entrepreneurs and the world market by giving budding entrepreneurs access to a technologically enabled space that allows them to learn how to develop their products, and how to use web-based marketing tools. Hive Colab also provides the physical space and resources required for people to then apply their knowledge in a creative office environment. The challenge is to bring such resources closer to the densely populated slum areas, which have a high number of unemployed and self-employed youth and women.

There are non-profit and religious organisations which are already exploring these possibilities, yielding a mixture of success and teething problems. Some collapse due to administrative failure. According to a former employee of a faith-based NGO that received government funding, corruption and appalling labour practices are some of the contributors to the failure of the organisation she worked for. Despite the uphill walk and pitfalls, education in entrepreneurship as a means of development is a vision shared by young Ugandans who have attended Dr. Mwenza Blell's insightful talks. Like them I believe Ugandans are an enterprising nation capable of propelling an informal sector that can tackle youth unemployment and alleviate poverty. ICT is already creating jobs through the mobile money market. In Namuwongo slum there are more mobile money centres than there are shops that sell bread. I think this development is just a fraction of what ICT can achieve in giving access to education.

Joseph Mathaba

Joseph matriculated at Tholokuhle High School in Richards Bay in 2009. He is currently in 3rd year Metallurgical Engineering at the University of Pretoria. He has a bursary from Exxaro.

- He was acknowledged by Golden Key International Honour Society for being part of 15% top academic achievers at the University of Pretoria in 2010.
- He was elected to be the school president in matric
- He obtained numerous leadership and academic certificates in High School

In his own words:

“I was in an under-resourced school, we had no facilities/equipment for experiments so we had to try and visualise everything in our heads. Each class was crowded with about 60 learners which made it difficult for teachers to control the noise levels sometimes and to give every learner individual attention during assessments and tutorials. There were 30 computers which were only accessed by learners who did IT/CAT, the whole school with more than 1000 learners had no access to those computers.



“The teachers tried their best to assist us (learners) but the facilities limited them, as a result it was a big challenge for them to produce good results and 100% pass rate. As we all know that some learners are good listeners and can grasp the information fast while other need to see animations or see the process practically in order to understand. Therefore, the teachers weren't able to assist us adequately.

“I had material such as textbooks, question papers and memos but all these are not as useful if the concept(s) are not well understood.

“I used to access *Wikipedia* via cell phone and through computers at the community library. Actually I would Google the concepts I used to struggle with almost every day after school hours and choose *Wikipedia* articles because their explanation can be understood by a layman. I found *Wikipedia* very helpful because even if it gets technical when explaining certain concepts it includes links to help the reader understand certain terms used in that particular field of study. It's unfortunate I was advised not to use *Wikipedia* at varsity because its articles can be modified anytime which is not good for researches and referencing. But I still use *Wikipedia* just to build basic understanding of certain concepts even now.

“I used to help my fellow classmates and schoolmates a lot because I was one of the learners who usually grasped the concepts fast and I used to study ahead. I would normally organise morning classes or after school classes to help them with physics and maths. For this reason my principal still asks me to assist the matriculants during recess.

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