

AFRINSPIRE: TACKLING THE ROOT CAUSES OF POVERTY



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AFRINSPIRE IS A CHARITY BASED IN CAMBRIDGE WHICH WORKS WITH AND SUPPORTS PARTNER ORGANISATIONS IN UGANDA AND OTHER COUNTRIES IN EASTERN AFRICA. IT WORKS AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL, TO UNDERSTAND AND TACKLE THE ROOT CAUSES OF POVERTY. FOR THIS, TRUST AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE LOCAL PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS NEEDED IS VERY IMPORTANT.

Afrinspire's founder and CEO, Ian Sanderson, has been travelling to Uganda for more than 20 years, and the impact that he has made in that time is truly inspiring. During the summer, he offers students the opportunity to join him in Uganda for 3 weeks, allowing them to see the work he does first-hand and help facilitate the Afrinspire Young Entrepreneurs Conference. The different parts of Uganda we visited encompassed the eastern, north-western, western and southern regions of the country, with our base locations being either Kampala or Mbarara. I became involved with Afrinspire myself last year, while attending this trip. Now I am on the committee of the Afrinspire Cambridge Student Society, which aims to foster and maintain links between Afrinspire and the students in Cambridge. This article describes several of the projects that we visited, in particular in some of Afrinspire's core focus areas of employment and enterprise, female empowerment, and the education of children and young people.

A large role Afrinspire plays is in facilitating teaching of skills to assist people to lift themselves out of poverty. The Young Entrepreneurs Conference in Mbarara is a key part of this. I was able to help facilitate the conference during my trip; however, Afrinspire also runs other conferences such as the Afrinspire Women's Conference. Approximately forty people from all over Uganda, as well as nearby countries such as Burundi, attended the conference, with the aim of learning new business skills, including how to help their ventures succeed. Youth unemployment is high in Uganda, and required practical skills are often not taught sufficiently in school or missed completely by those unable to attend school. Teaching people business

skills equips them both with a means to create an income for themselves and also to create other jobs in their community.

The sessions offered covered a range of topics, such as understanding markets, record-keeping, and designing a project. For the project design exercise, groups of eight people worked together through the various steps needed to set up a business while considering all the challenges that this entailed. My role was to lead one such group, ensuring that everyone was contributing and offering up suggestions. The business skills I had learned in my manufacturing engineering degree were not only useful, but also showed how skills learned as part of a degree in a theoretical setting are transferable into the real world in order to help people.

Some of the people at the conference had already started their own business, and Afrinspire offers a Young Entrepreneurs Fund to give financial support to people who have business plans that can improve their communities. During the conference, a visit was made to one of these successful ventures, a juice production business, which had received this funding in 2017 and is now a registered company. In total, 28 projects have been supported, creating more than 100 jobs and helping more than 600 people.

We also visited job creation and training centres such as MidPro and Uganda Development Services (UDS). Midpro offers vocational training courses such as car mechanics, plumbing, hair-dressing, fashion and design, whereas UDS offers skills training, for example in IT skills.

UDS also ran a specific women-orientated train-

ing course, which helped 20 women. We visited two of these women, both of whom were previously unemployed, but were now successfully working as a fruit seller and on a mobile money stall respectively. Other women were able to

start their own businesses, for example in poultry, soap-making or crafts. The program overall has the greatest impact if women without jobs are targeted, which was not always the case. Mathematical aptitude is vital as part of this education process, as the women need the everyday business skills of setting a selling price, or having knowledge of the expected overall income. These factors may be missed when people are starting out in their business ventures.

Helping women gain business skills empowers them. In Uganda, men are more likely than women to get an education, and the literacy rate for men is much higher than women.

THE FUNCTIONAL ADULT LITERACY (FAL) PROGRAMME IS A UGANDAN PROGRAMME, WHICH IS DELIVERED BY THE UGANDAN GOVERNMENT AND ASSISTED BY NGOS. THROUGH EDUCATION, THIS PROGRAMME GIVES WOMEN A GREATER VOICE IN THEIR COMMUNITY, ALLOWING THEM A LARGER INFLUENCE IN DECISION-MAKING AND HIGHER ECONOMIC ACCUMULATION.

We were able to visit multiple FAL groups in various stages of advancement across Uganda. Rose Ekitwi, who is a partner of Afrinspire and a leader of the FAL program, has trained teachers for more than 70 groups across Uganda. She travelled with us for part of the trip to see the progress some of the FAL groups were making. By and large they were running well, and we were able to attend a graduation ceremony in Namasagali, where several FAL groups and 45 people in total were graduating from the programme.



The FAL programme is primarily built around teaching reading, writing, numeracy and English skills. While Uganda has only two official languages, English and Swahili, there are approximately 40 different languages spoken in the country because of the many different ethnic populations. The two core books used to implement the programme have been translated into 22 local Ugandan languages, and lessons are taught in a practical context which can be readily applied to daily life. Often, the leaders of the FAL groups are already community leaders, and existing groups such as church or savings groups may turn into FAL groups. One of the first lessons involves learning how to write their own name, which led to a beautiful moment when we visited a FAL group and the members of the group presented what they had learned. The members of the group proudly wrote their own names onto the blackboard, which they had not been able to do before starting the program.

Other lessons in the program incorporate skills such as hygiene, healthy living, and farming. For example, there is sometimes the perception that having more children means that there are more children to take care of you when you are old, whereas the FAL program teaches that you should only have as many children as you are financially able to take care of. FAL teaching resources are also geared towards gaining skills which are useful for starting businesses.

In a village called Gabusan near Tororo mountain, we visited three new FAL groups which had just been formed, consisting of roughly between 20 and 30 people. From the first group alone more than 70 people would be helped, due to the sizes of the households of those involved; someone gaining literacy and numeracy skills does not just solely benefit them, but also their entire family. The second group of 25 people was asked about their education, with 10 never having been to school, whereas some had managed to get a primary school education. Overall Afrinspire works with 105 FAL groups in 10 districts in Uganda. Groups typically contain 15-20 people, primarily women, with each person having a family size of 7-10 people.

The longer-term impact of FAL was also shown when we visited Rise and Shine Nursery, which had initially started as a FAL group. However, it was extended into the nursery as the parents in the group also wanted their children to get an education. The education of children and young people is also a major focus of Afrinspire, as despite Uganda offering free education in theory, this is often inaccessible due to the distance and terrain the students would have to traverse. Afrinspire has supported a number of schools, either through paying school fees for specific pupils, or by providing money for stationery and facilities. During the trip, Afrinspire supplied funds to a school to pay for food for the teachers and students, as the region had been heavily affected by the late rainfall and start of the wet season. This is an example of how Afrinspire listens to the community and takes into account their specific requirements at a certain time.

I have described just some of the ways in which Afrinspire is making a massive impact. We also visited a water jar project which stores water for use in households, as well as a farm trying different crops and growing methods where the obtained knowledge can then be used in other farms. Afrinspire also works with people who are frequently discriminated against, such as the disabled community. For example, in Kabale a disabled singing and dancing group has been formed, which is a way for the disabled community to become empowered. The group welcomed us with a performance, initially showing us how badly they had been treated in the past, whereas the following act presented the abuser repenting and being welcomed back into the community.

The best part of the trip was visiting and interacting with a variety of extremely inspiring people, who are attempting to make real positive changes in their communities and who have achieved a great deal already. Uganda is very different to the UK, and a major challenge for me was seeing the level of poverty that people experienced in many of the regions we went to. The key part of Afrinspire's success is the collaboration with the local partners, working towards the common goal of achieving the most positive impact on Uganda's communities.