

# Escape route from Uganda's rural poverty cycle

by Afua Hirsch Tuesday 29 December 2009



**1** Some visitors to parts of rural Africa, such as the Teso region of north-east Uganda, have been dismissive of nursery education. Maybe the idea of giving children as young as three a foundation in education and basic life skills is considered too western in a place where, as stereotype would have it, the only concern is scratching a basic living from the mud.

**8** The fact is, in villages such as those found in Kaberamaido district, where there is no electricity and mobile phone networks are out of reach, access to nursery school is a valuable advantage for children who will struggle to stay in primary school and to finish their education.

**14** "Nursery school is good for the children," says Jessica, a 19-year old who lives in the district and is determined to pursue her ambition to become a nursery teacher. "When the child is young, they learn to pick things up faster. So then when they get to primary school they are better. When the teacher asks them their name, the child already knows how to respond."

**20** Jessica volunteers at a nursery attached to the primary school in a village a few kilometres from her own, started by a local man.

The nursery school is a single room, with a dirt floor and three tiny benches lined up in rows.

**24** Every morning Jessica runs through the timetable posted on the wall. "Prayers, singing songs and news" fills one 30-minute slot. "In 'news' I encourage the children to tell me what they did yesterday," Jessica says. "I also tell them what I have done. They learn to talk about themselves, to think about things."

**29** It is followed by "break, porridge, play outdoors, toileting and washing hands. It is important to teach the children hygiene," says Jessica, although the porridge is a legacy of things gone by. "There is no porridge any more. Since the famine, parents don't contribute fees any more. Sometimes I bring bread out of my own money for the children. They like it."

**35** Jessica's attitude to education reflects slow but steady social change here. Her parents, who describe themselves as peasants, are dependent on their cassava and sorghum crop to feed, clothe and educate eight children.

**39** "When you depend on produce, you may sell a large quantity but you get less. Or if the sun is too hot, it burns everything," she says, referring to a recent drought which devastated her family's sorghum crop.

**43** Jessica's family got by, paying her school fees in small instalments of a few shillings, although it was often too much for the family to manage and she was forced to spend time out of school until the fees were paid.

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47 Like many families in this part of Uganda, her parents turned to making alcohol as a last resort to pay fees, learning how to brew liquor from dried cassava.

50 Last year, when Jessica's younger brother reached school age, she was forced to drop out. The story is a common one here: the pressure of fees forces women out of education and into marriage, then they in turn begin having children whose education they are unable to support.

55 "The people in the village talk about me because I am not married," Jessica says.

"Some of them were married at 13, but now they are having problems with their husbands and their families have to pay a refund." She is referring to the bride price that poor families so often rely on when marrying off a daughter.

61 Jessica's father, who left school before finishing primary education, supports her ambitions to go further. Although he could no longer afford to pay her school fees, he has encouraged her to volunteer at the nursery school.

65 "I want her to study so she can come back and help the family," he says. "Everyone knows that if you continue beyond O-levels you can get a good job."

68 Jessica is one of a new generation which sees education and training as the way out of the cycle of rural poverty and dependence on simple crops, and smaller families as a way to concentrate resources and give better chances to a few children.

"If I have children, I will have very few," says Jessica. "If I have few I will be able to pay for them and see them through to finish university."

72 The nursery school is Jessica's best chance of finding a career that could help lift her and her family out of poverty, and hand down learning and life skills to a new generation.

75 She hopes a scholarship from the Mvule Trust, the charity the Guardian is supporting through its Christmas appeal this year, will pay for further training so she can fulfil her ambitions.

"One day I would like to open my own nursery so that I can help my family and the community also. Since my parents are poor I would also like to help them and our home."

81 Jessica is working at the school for free and struggling to find money for food to sustain the mornings teaching and the afternoons planning the next day's lessons, writing report cards for the children's parents, and helping her family.

85 She hopes that further training will allow her to get paid work.

But for now, she says, there is a more immediate advantage to her work. "I have many problems", Jessica says, "but when I am around children, they lift me. I like the way they are."