



## Kitengesa, Uganda: Happy Development

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Women's Group in Kitengesa, with Newly Purchased Chairs

Too often, development "success stories" are the exception rather than the rule. The history of development programs is rife with tales of high expectations followed by disappointment on the part of both aid recipients and donors, once-solid hopes and expectations melting into a pool of disillusionment.

So when a case like Kitengesa village in Uganda comes along, where mini-grant funded projects are not only successful and self-sustaining, but also give birth to new projects that aid development, it is in everyone's interest to identify the ingredients of that successful recipe.

And a successful recipe for rural villages is certainly needed. Eighty-three percent of Ugandans reside in rural areas with 73 percent engaged in agriculture—and 34 percent live below the poverty line. As a landlocked country, with limited access to international markets, Uganda needs to look at programs that help raise living standards and promote quality of life in villages

In Kitengesa, one of the villages of the Masaka district (population 5,000) in western central Uganda, that "recipe" started with a [community library](#). In the year 2002, the simple mud-brick library building was constructed with a \$3,000 grant from the UN Staff 1% for Development Fund (this UN staff-supported fund, in line with ethicist [Peter Singer's "Pledge"](#) provides seed money to development projects). The community library began providing books and newspapers to rural villagers who'd had little access to reading materials before.

As it also offered family literacy classes, tutoring and textbooks for high school students (there is a notorious shortage of textbooks in Ugandan secondary schools), meeting space for the local Women's Group, plus "Game Nights" for the community (with literacy-promoting games such as scrabble), the Kitengesa Library soon became a center of village life.

And a few years later, the library became an even more striking presence in the village. After a UN Staff Book Fair for Literacy held in New York raised money for a solar panel, the Kitengesa Library could stay open until 9 pm—and in this town far from the electrical grid, it was the only village building illuminated at night.

Later, additional solar panels made it possible to add a small computer center with a few laptops.

Besides providing information, the library set a vision for education, a foundation from which other projects could spring. And spring they have.

By 2007 the growing number of library users required a larger space, and so a second and larger library building was planned. The building that originally housed the library gained a new function as a small

sewing factory that produced re-usable (washable), affordable sanitary pads for women called "[Afri-pads](#)," that are sold to NGOs or to local women at low cost.

The Afri-pad Factory was started by a pair of socially conscious young American entrepreneurs, Pauls Grinvald and Sophia Klumpp. The young couple, who also resided in Kitengesa, were idealistic about promoting rural development and so started their factory in a village, rather than in the capital, Kampala. The new village factory created 30 jobs for village women.

This was good economic news not only for local women, but also for the community library—which now received rent income from its transformed original building. The rent paid by the factory has helped sustain and develop the library, allowing it to expand its reading programs and to offer educational supplements to local primary and secondary school students, who now regularly visit the library.

What's more, the Afri-pad Factory's product itself supports education by encouraging girls' school attendance. Research shows that due to a lack of available sanitary products (commercial products like Kotex, typical in western countries, are price-prohibitive and are unavailable in rural Africa in any case), girls tend to miss many days of school because of their periods—and sometimes drop out of school altogether. Fear of accidents and lack of female-friendly public toilet facilities are discouraging. Having easy access to the washable set of pads provided in the "Afri-pad kit," with its convenient carrying case and disposal bag, has made girls feel more comfortable and confident attending school.

The Afri-pad Factory, with its good local working conditions, has gained status in the village, with some local men also expressing a wish to work there (though thus far, the factory has hired only women). Some of the women are quite proud of their jobs at the factory, even wearing tee-shirts that say, "Afri-pads: Freedom for Women."

Because of their close connection and proximity, there is a lot of natural "back-and-forth" between the Afri-pad Factory and the library, which women workers feel encouraged to use. The women take advantage of reading the library's newspapers, books, and attending Game Night.

Another group of females who benefit from the library is the local Women's Group, composed mostly of farmers from the surrounding villages. They use the library as a meeting space to discuss matters of work, family, and household economics. From the library, they learned of the UN Staff 1% for Development Fund and Walugembe Magret, the group's head, submitted a proposal for a mini-grant to start a chair rental business. These women had decided to adopt the village's 30 orphans, with each woman taking a few of the children to live with her family. As the women already had their own children to support, they needed extra income to support the adopted children and pay for their clothes and school fees.

It seems that renting chairs is a good business in Kitengesa. Whenever a major life ritual such as a wedding, funeral, or baptism takes place, all the neighbors from Kitengesa and surrounding villages come to attend. The host is responsible for supplying chairs and there are never enough.

The Women's Group eventually received the requested \$2,000 grant from the UN Staff Fund, and was able to purchase 100 stackable plastic chairs for rental.

A chair rental business might be one of the last things a well-meaning "expert" in development would think of. Outside experts can lack understanding of local realities. These women farmers and other key members of the community agreed that a chair rental business would provide the needed extra income for the group of ten women.

Indeed, the village women in this group are not alone in needing a supplement to their income. While females make up most of the rural subsistence farmers in Uganda, they also comprise most of the rural poor. Female heads of households are more likely to fall into poverty—and less likely to escape it.

Ironically, women supply 70-75 percent of agricultural products in the country—and yet own just 7 percent of the land (not surprisingly, a book about land rights for women became a sought-after one at

the Kitengesa Library). Because rural people generally have such limited access to information, rural women do not always know they have the right to own land.

To aid development, the government of Uganda introduced a policy of affirmative action to encourage women's greater participation in local government, village councils, and in access to education.

Yet another project that sprang from the library is the tending of vegetable nursery beds. The farmers, both female and male, in Kitengesa have also contributed to their community by tending the vegetable nursery beds that are now on the library's land. In 2009, the library teamed up with the Forestry for African Development Association (FADA), which offered partial funding to purchase land for the larger library building. The library land now also hosts FADA vegetable nursery beds, which create jobs for the local people who tend them.

It is telling that the foundation for all the projects was the Kitengesa Library, with the services it offered and the vision it set. The Kitengesa Library was the idea of local resident, Emmanuel Mawanda, also founder and principal of the Kitengesa Secondary School. Working with Mawanda was Hunter College (New York) Professor, Kate Parry, who lived in Kitengesa for an extended period while doing research into literacy. Parry still maintains a residence in the village.

Another resident-researcher who helped develop the Kitengesa project was Shelley Jones, who lived for a year in Kitengesa studying girls' experience of education and also facilitating a Women's Group at the library. As Jones says, "Community libraries must be seen as part of the community and must actively promote their services to become valued and valuable local institutions."

Jones, who was then director of research and education at a global education program at University of British Columbia (UBC), also established the international service learning placement in Kitengesa, which promotes global partnerships between UBC students and the Kitengesa community. UBC students who participate in this program live in the Kitengesa community for an extended period of time and volunteer in a range of capacities, including offering programs that promote the culture of reading, teaching the use of computers, and the internet; and, helping with extra-curricular programs.

Jones persuaded UBC to build houses in the village for the volunteer UBC students, as well as a house for the very talented local librarian, Dan Ahimbisibwe. Ahimbisibwe has been described as the "heart and soul" of the Kitengesa Library, and is a highly esteemed member of the Kitengesa community at large, is credited with helping a number of village residents to improve their reading skills. He works along with the dedicated library assistant, Gorreth Nakyato, who facilitates family literacy programs.

Active participants also include the "library scholars," high school students who volunteer at the library for 15 hours a week in exchange for having their school fees paid.

The success of the Kitengesa Library has been credited in large part to choosing books with topics that local people had expressed interest in learning about. From the start, the library founders made a point of not accepting well-meaning, but haphazard donations of books. Rather, they sought grants to stock the library with books relevant to local people's interests and needs.

As of 2010, the library counted nearly 1,200 members (while local secondary school staff and students are automatically members, residents of the sub-county are required to pay an initial membership fee of \$2,000 Ugandan shillings (about \$1). The Kitengesa Library has also become a model for other village libraries in Uganda—and even as far away as Central America. Just recently the UN 1% for Development fund received a proposal for a grant to set up a village library in Chacraseca, Nicaragua. The applicants were inspired by reading about the Kitengesa Community Library's success.

One of the star users of the Kitengesa Library is Hassan Lwanga, who at first did poorly on his school essay exams. Following the head librarian's advice to read more, Hassan borrowed a book every week. When Hassan took his national exam in 2007, he scored higher than all the students in Kampala. He is now close to graduating as a lawyer from Makerere University in Kampala.

Another success story is library user Angela Namuddu, a village resident who was not able to read when she first joined the library in 2002. Thanks to the library, Angela learned to read—and gained the distinction of borrowing and reading more books than any other library user.

Library success stories also include the village mothers, who are taking part in the "family literacy" program, improving their reading skills by learning how to read books to their children; the high school students who now have available textbooks to study for their exams and tutors to help them with their homework; the children from local primary schools who come for the special library reading programs; the primary school teachers who come to prepare their lessons; the local Women's Group members who meet to discuss issues of family economics; the workers from the Afri-pad Factory, who drop in to read the newspapers; and the general users, who come to read, chat with friends, and meet on "Scrabble Night" in the only village building that lights the darkness at night.

So what is the winning recipe in Kitengesa? The compatible goals of the different, yet inter-related village projects are a large part of what makes them work, providing a cohesiveness that binds them together. What these projects have in common, from the library, to the factory, the vegetable beds, and the chair rental business, is that they were all initiated by people who live in the village, or who have lived in the village and so understand the needs of their neighbors. They all started with mini-grants, which recipients managed well. Small can be beautiful.

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#### Notes

[BBC broadcast on Kitengesa Library project](#)

[Kitengesa Community Library website](#)

Jones, S.K. (2009). "[The Community Library as a Site of Education and Empowerment for Women: Insights from Rural Uganda](#)" *Libri*, 59(2), 124-33.

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The University of British Columbia International Learning Service Program: [Literacy, Community Libraries, and Achieving Primary Education: Uganda](#)

[Afri-pad project website](#)

UN radio interview with Patricia Duffy: "[UN at 60: Literacy in Uganda](#)"

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