

Community development:
Hope for Uganda

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This publication may be cited as: Matthewson, P. (2018). Community development: Hope for Uganda, *Whanake: The Pacific Journal of Community Development*, 4(1), 64–69.

Founded at Unitec Institute of Technology in 2015

An ePress publication

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In January 2018 I was privileged to visit Uganda, hosted by Tony Ssembatya who is a board member for the International Association for Community Development (IACD). Tony is from Uganda, but currently works for UN Women in New York, undertaking reviews of countries' constitutions for the implementation of gender-rights policies. He is also completing a PhD at Leipzig University, Germany, in the area of citizenship and statelessness. In Uganda Tony has established an educational foundation, spearheading pre-school and primary school education for children from the poorest of the poor families in the city of Jinja.

Over three weeks we travelled through the north and west of the country, seeing the amazing wildlife in its natural habitat in the Murchison Falls and Queen Elizabeth National Parks.

As we journeyed we discussed some of the traumatic history of those parts of the country over the last 50 years. We were also able to visit some inspiring community development initiatives.

As an example of that history, from the late 1990s into the 2000s the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by the psychotic Joseph Kony, swept through Northern Uganda, recruiting child soldiers and raping, pillaging and murdering as it went. People fled and were re-housed by the government into temporary villages with simple thatch-roofed houses. However, corrupt politicians embezzled money that had been provided by the UN



Peter Matthewson and Tony Ssembatya.



Village in northern Uganda.



for building them proper housing. People remained living in what was intended to be simple transitional housing.

Unlike much of the Western world, in Uganda there is no welfare system or government funding of social services. Of necessity, community development must include economic development and wealth creation, as well as wealth distribution. Environmental sustainability is a vital aspect of these initiatives. We were privileged to visit a number of examples:

- Caritas, based in Kampala (<https://caritaskampala.org/>), is actively promoting sustainable agricultural development programmes, particularly facing climate change head on, as well as health, women's, and peace and justice initiatives.
- The Kabarole Research and Resource Center (KRC) (<http://krcuganda.org/>), headed by IACD board member Julius Mwangi, is based in Fort Portal in Southwestern Uganda. It is particularly focused on sustainable livelihood development and food security, and facing the challenges of climate change. Energy-saving stoves are a particularly interesting innovation of this organisation. KRC is also actively engaged in working with refugees (as is common among some developing countries, Uganda hosts significant numbers of refugees from surrounding countries, including Burundi and South Sudan); conflict resolution and peace building; civic education and engagement; and working with HIV/AIDS-affected people.
- Social enterprise is also significant. An example is McBern Tours and Travel (<http://mcberntours.com/>), an inclusive tour company that has been established to generate funding for the McBern Foundation (<http://mcberntours.com/elderlycare/>), which provides support for elderly people who are often neglected in Uganda.

Religion plays a very significant part in life in Uganda. According to the 2014 census approximately 40 percent of the population is Catholic, 32 percent Anglican and 14 percent Muslim. However, the fastest-growing religion is Pentecostal Christianity (now 11 percent), generally referred to as 'born again'. The banners across the front of taxis (minibuses which function like buses) often inform the religion of the driver rather than where the taxi is going. A memorable experience in Jinja was waking in the early hours of the morning to the sound of the call to prayer from the loudspeakers on the local mosque, as is common in Muslim communities. However, this was followed by some loud and rousing music, then by lengthy Pentecostal-style preaching. Apparently these different religions are now competing for the morning attention of local people. No chance of a sleep-in there!

A highlight of our visit was meeting Catholic Cardinal



The Caritas office.



A sustainable development poster from the Caritas office.



A Ugandan family using a more sustainable stove they had developed.

Emmanuel Wamala, now 92. He is a truly humble and gracious man who has served the people of Uganda throughout the troubled last 50 years in his country. His experiences include being detained and escorted by soldiers during the overthrow of Idi Amin, and some years later being held hostage by an aggrieved former Amin loyalist armed with hand grenades. He graciously gave us all signed copies of a book about his life and family history.

In 2011 Tony established the Kirabo Doors of Hope Foundation (www.kirbodoorsofhope.org) in his home town of Jinja. The focus of this centre is to provide proper nutrition and education to rural children from families living below the poverty line. It empowers many rural young mothers aged between 18 and 30. The centre enables them to acquire basic self-sustainability skills, and provides income-generating programmes through agriculture, and a community-building initiative aimed at generating a sense of belonging. The centre currently supports 300 children and 280 young mothers. The project is managed by an administrator, and a qualified social worker works with these children and families. These two positions are currently voluntary, and funding is desperately needed for these dedicated workers to be paid a liveable income for their work. The facilities are also in significant need of renovation and expansion due to increased numbers of children being supported.

An interesting feature of life in Uganda is that it is quite normal and common to see men expressing the affection of friendship by holding hands or other physical touch. I think it is lovely, and emotionally healthy, something our touch-starved, British-derived culture could learn from.

However the reality for rainbow communities in Uganda is a totally different story, and it is not good news. It was very inspiring and humbling to meet with Umulugele Richard Lusimbo. Richard is head of knowledge mobilisation for Sexual Minorities Uganda – SMUG (<http://sexualminoritiesuganda.com/>) – and is a leading advocate and activist for LGBTQI communities there. Prior to the 2000s the situation for sexual minorities in Uganda was similar to that in New Zealand before decriminalisation in 1986: under law inherited from Britain male homosexual activity was illegal, but the law was not particularly enforced. However instead of making progress, in the 2000s things got worse. In the context of the total collapse of state institutions following the Amin regime and subsequent military coups, conservative Christian groups have provided valuable social, health and educational initiatives. This, however, gave them political influence, leading to the introduction of more repressive laws. In 2000, female homosexual activity was also criminalised alongside male homosexuality. Then the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2014 (previously referred to as the “Kill the Gays Bill” in the Western media, due to death-penalty



The Kabarole Research and Resource Center.



McBern Tours and Travel.



Meeting Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala.



The Kirabo Doors of Hope Foundation.



clauses included in the original Bill), introduced severe penalties including prison sentences for groups and individuals advocating LGBTQI rights. Richard played a pivotal role in successfully challenging the extremely oppressive laws introduced in the Constitutional Court, however rainbow community people still face regular harassment and intimidation. At least in Uganda they have the support and advocacy of Richard's organisation, unlike in other African countries. Richard also proudly showed us the Ubuntu Prize he was awarded from the University of Pretoria Centre for Human Rights, where he completed his masters, as the student who most demonstrated the spirit of *ubuntu* – a term meaning “a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.”

Overall, I had the most amazing time. Huge gratitude to Tony and all of his *amaka* (whanau) and friends for their amazing welcome and inclusion. I know the time I had was hugely enriched by being hosted and guided through the country by them – far better than any standard tourist package, let alone trying to find my own way.

The country has spectacularly beautiful landscapes, and it was breath-taking to see wildlife in its natural habitat. Yet I was acutely aware that this country has suffered immense trauma over the last 100 or more years, from colonisation to military coups and despotic tyrannical regimes, and most recently the LRA's mass violence. Our journey through various parts of the country was often accompanied by fascinating but sad conversations about events that had happened in those places.

Even now, although the country has achieved some measure of political stability, more so than some of its neighbours, life is harsh for most of its people. It is sickening to see children who appear no older than three begging in the streets. Disabled people have an especially tough life, and are often dependent on very crude mobility aids. Yet, despite the hardship, there is the most amazing spirit of fun and laughter that is totally infectious.

It was an immense privilege to make friends with so many genuine people who are fully committed to serving their country and its people in various ways, and making a real difference. I know these friendships will last a lifetime. I totally love Uganda and trust I will be able to return before too long and visit other parts of this amazing continent.



Transitional villages in an area affected by the LRA.



Richard Lusimbo with his Ubuntu Prize.

Peter Matthewson is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Practice at Unitec. He has previous social work practice experience in a range of statutory, mental health and non-governmental organisations. He maintains active engagement with an international community of social-justice organisations and the challenges they face.