

Youth Leadership, Empowerment, and Engagement in Rural Uganda



Location: Kyetume, Uganda

Kyetume, Uganda is a small rural village located in the Masaka district 4.5 hours outside of the capital, Kampala. The official language in Uganda is both English and Swahili, however language is largely determined by region and tribe. In Kyetume, Luganda is the premier language spoken. Uganda was named “The Pearl of Africa” by Sir Winston Churchill and is home to Lake Victoria, Queen Elizabeth National Park, and half of the world's gorilla population. Almost half of the country's population is under the age of 14 and bicycles are the major mode of transportation. Christianity is the predominant religion though the country is very accepting towards various religions.

Challenges Ugandan Youths Face:

- The HIV/AIDS epidemic hit Uganda hard, 1 in 4 children are estimated to be orphans in the Masaka and Rakai districts, leaving youths to become heads of households (NY Times, 1993)
- Nearly half of the country's population is under the age of 14
 - Agriculture is the main source of income, however global climate change and droughts are reducing crop production
- High unemployment rates even with university education dissuade children from continuing school, many stay home to work in the fields



Global Independent Study Project

I volunteered with the Uganda Rural Fund where I worked mainly with elementary and high school age students. URF is a small, grassroots organization whose mission is to empower underprivileged children and women in the countryside to fight poverty in their communities by creating educational and sustainable opportunities. The organization's aim is to give community members the tools and support they need in order to pull themselves out of poverty for good. URF was developed by members of the community it served and employs people from that same community knowing that those best able to make an impact are those who have experiential qualifications.

During my time in Uganda I:

- Taught leadership, youth empowerment, and community engagement/organizing to the primary and secondary school students
- Developed and implemented a leadership manual and training guide for years to come
 - Gave leadership and community organizing/engagement/empowerment presentations in 6 different schools in nearby communities
- Taught and implemented photovoice as a tool to engage and empower communities for social change



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Skills Developed

- Cultural humility and working with diverse populations
- Empowering youth to use their voice while respecting their culture of discipline
 - Advocating for myself in an uncomfortable environment

Educational Preparation

- SW 648: Global Social Work Practice – Prepares you for all aspects of travelling abroad, from visa issues to working through language barriers. It encourages you to think critically through scenarios that may arise abroad as well as ethical dilemmas.

Lessons Learned

- Social work can look very different in other countries
- Don't believe everything you read prior to travelling to another country
- While cultures and customs differ around the world, people have the same needs

Acknowledgments

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Career Connections

My future career goals include reforming the juvenile justice system, specifically reducing the overrepresentation of marginalized, impoverished communities within it. In order to help reform this system, working with diverse populations with cultural humilities will be essential. This experience forced me to navigate relationships with cultural and language barriers, enhancing my abilities to effectively work with diverse communities.

Advice

- Research your potential organizations thoroughly
 - Speak to past volunteers from the agency
- Make sure your expectations of what you plan on receiving and giving are reasonable
- Remember to enjoy the journey, there will likely to obstacles and negative experiences but try not to let them overshadow the many positive ones