

## Kasiisi Project 2023 Reflection

During the summer of '23, I spent six weeks in western Uganda, working with Kasiisi Project, a non-profit organisation that operates in the rural area of Kibale National Park, collaborating with 16 local schools. The project focuses on improving education, health, and environmental conservation efforts in the local communities surrounding the park.

Preparing for the trip took several months. We had virtual meetings with Dr Zarin Machandra, researched Uganda's culture through books, and completed necessary tasks like getting vaccines and visas. As the departure date approached, I felt both excitement and anxiety about travelling so far alone, spending six weeks with new people, and living in a new country. Upon our arrival at Kasiisi Primary School, one of the Kibale Forest School Programme (KFSP) schools, we received a warm welcome, which made settling in and meeting the staff, pupils and other scholars much easier.

As a health team, our focus was on two key initiatives: the Village Health Team Manual and the Child Health Curriculum. The Village Health Teams (VHTs) programme, established in 2001 by Uganda's Ministry of Health, relies on dedicated volunteers who act as a vital link between formal healthcare systems and local communities. These volunteers, selected by their communities, are meant to undergo basic training to provide essential healthcare services and health education. However, in practice, the training is often inadequate, leaving VHTs without sufficient resources and knowledge to support their communities effectively.

Recognizing this gap, the VHT Manual project aimed to provide the volunteers with additional knowledge through a manual and training. We took on this project from last year's Laidlaw scholars and spoke to them online. With the assistance of KFSP staff, we conducted interviews with VHTs to gain deeper insights into their work. Throughout our project, we modified, wrote, and consulted the VHT manual with KFSP staff. The manual is now formatted, and we hope that future scholars will get a chance to use it to support additional VHT training.

The Kasiisi Project stands out for its holistic approach to education, extending the school curriculum to include health



and conservation topics. As part of the health team, we had the opportunity to contribute to the existing curriculum. The Child Health Curriculum covers subjects ranging from sanitation and puberty to teenage pregnancy and includes initiatives like building gardens on school grounds. I found this to be an important incentive as it equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead healthy lives and care for their communities. Alongside Dr Patrick Tusiime and Ms Shamilah Tuhaise, we also visited schools to deliver talks. Although students speak English, they struggled to understand our accents – speaking clearly and slowly helped to an extent. This challenge made me reflect on the importance of clear communication, whether talking to children, working in a team or resolving a misunderstanding. That leads me to another reflection.

Despite our shared goals, it became evident that each member of our health team had different visions and expectations regarding our work dynamics. While we discussed dividing tasks, establishing a timeline, and generating ideas, we overlooked essential conversations about our individual expectations, preferences, and work styles within the team. Looking back, discussing our expectations, preferences and work style at the start would have allowed us to avoid the conflict. A team where everyone is happy and understood is undeniably more effective and motivating. For me this was a big takeaway for future teamwork and leadership.

One of the other sustainable initiatives within the Kasiisi Project is the Reusable Menstrual Pads Project. Students learn how to create menstrual pads using locally available materials such as fabric, plastic foil, and towels. Through addressing period poverty, this project aims to improve girls' school attendance. To combat the stigma surrounding menstruation, boys also participated in these workshops and learned about periods. We also got to make reusable pads and sew them with students. This project is a prime example that a community can develop self-reliant solutions instead of depending on external support. It also shows that period waste and its impact on the environment can be reduced.

However, our time in Uganda was so much more than just the project work, and it enriched us in unexpected ways. Throughout our journey, we had the privilege of attending



speeches by local leaders, and one individual who left a lasting impression on me was Dr. Emily Otali. Her inspiring leadership and academic journey shed light on the many challenges that girls and women encounter on their career paths in Uganda. Dr. Otali now oversees the KFSP scholarship program, nurturing the brightest students whom we might see become Uganda's future leaders.



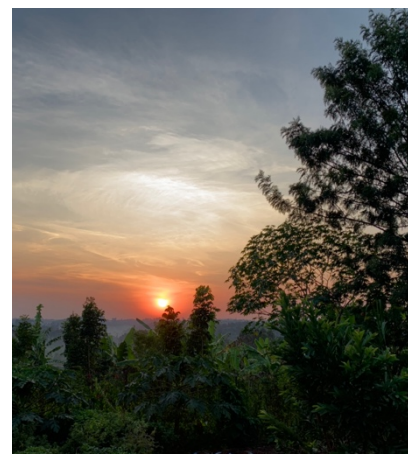
Immersing ourselves in the vibrant culture of Uganda was made possible by the incredible KFSP staff, who provided us with many opportunities to explore the beauty of western Uganda. Throughout our time, we learned a lot about the culture of the Tooro Kingdom. Among my favourite memories was attending a wedding, a celebration with around a thousand people, complete with speeches, orchestral performances, and lively dancing. Additionally, we had the chance to visit Kibale National Park, where we encountered our closest relatives, chimpanzees, in their natural habitat. During the trip, a long-time dream of mine, to see zebras in the wild, came true as we visited Lake Mburo National Park. We also saw baby zebras!



Reflecting on my experience, I would name it "Learning in Action" rather than "Leadership in Action." My time with the Kasiisi Project and KFSP was a profound learning opportunity. It allowed me to deeply understand the workings of KFSP schools and communities in the Kabarole district, the challenges they face, and the innovative solutions they have developed. Moreover, throughout the 6-week experience I learned a lot about myself, how I work in a group, communicate and approach challenges.



I am immensely grateful for the chance to be a part of Kasiisi Project, and it has been a privilege to work alongside KFSP staff. Many thanks those made this opportunity possible: Dr Zarin Machandra for organising the project; Dr Patrick Tusiime and Ms. Shamilah Tuhaise for their invaluable knowledge, guidance and patience; the rest KFSP staff for providing support and answering all the questions we had; the staff of Kasiisi Guesthouse who provided us with excellent care and delicious food (I miss the fried plantain); Juice and Francis for driving us safely. Moreover, I would like to thank Mr Chris Cullen for all his support throughout last two years. Lastly, I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation for funding this project.



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