

**Using School Gardens to Promote Experiential Learning in Uganda**

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### **Introduction and Need**

More than five million students are currently enrolled in over 3,220 private and public secondary schools across Uganda. Yet, the national secondary school completion rate is only 6%, with an even lower rate of 2.6% for students in rural areas (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Very few of these students will progress to university or tertiary institutions. Studies in this region show that a lack of food at school and at home as one of the leading causes of high dropout rates and low achievement among students (Acham et al., 2012). The high rate of school dropouts, coupled with a lack of employable skills and knowledge, has created a cycle where youth are consistently forced to live below the poverty line. With a population that heavily relies on agriculture for household food supply and employment, it's important that agricultural education is given priority at all levels of education (World Bank Group, 2007).

Agriculture employs more than 68% of Ugandans and accounts for 50% of the country's exports (Lugolobi, 2021). However, school-based agricultural education continues to be taught with minimal hands-on training, which can lead to a lack of problem solving competence typically associated with experiential learning (Cheng et al., 2019). Consequently, Ugandan students are being taught in a manner that neither fosters the employable skills nor the positive life skills required for a productive citizenship (Kibwika et al., 2010). According to Kaggwa and Namanya's policy research report (2018), 78% of youth in Uganda are unemployed. To alter this trend, a group of like-minded educators created the Young Farmers' Club at Gayaza High School with an aim of promoting agricultural education and a passion for farming among students. After conferring with American-based FFA representatives, the club rebranded into Youth Future Farmers of Africa (YoFFA) and expanded to other schools in Uganda (YoFFA, 2020). YoFFA worked with teachers and school leaders to create various, school-based chapters and now has over 100 chapters in primary and secondary schools across Uganda with more than 25,000 student members and approximately 200 teachers (YoFFA, 2020).

YoFFA supports its chapters' efforts to introduce experiential learning into the classroom by hosting a national annual school farm camp, mobilizing businesses and individuals to offer funding for school-based agricultural programs, and working with organizations to offer professional development to agricultural educators (YoFFA, 2020). As a result of these efforts, YoFFA and its partners have created a School Gardening Program that initiated 100 gardens in 100 schools in Uganda. In this program, students can gain hands-on skills in vegetable growing, engage in purposeful agricultural instruction, participate in career and leadership development activities, and serve as change agents in their farming communities (Acker & Gasperini, 2009). Addressing the dire need of Ugandan youth development and aligning with needs identified by the National Research Agenda's Research Priority Areas Three and Five (Roberts et al., 2016), this innovative educational approach fosters practical learning of agriculture and supplements inadequate food sourcing at schools and in homes.

### **How it Works**

As Uganda prepared to re-open schools in January 2022 after two years of total school closures, there was no strategy to implement a new lower secondary school curriculum at senior

one (7<sup>th</sup> grade) and senior two (8<sup>th</sup> grade) levels, which requires agricultural educators to offer hands-on learning to their students. YoFFA set out to address this issue by creating an experiential learning based opportunity, the School Gardening Program, for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade learners in Uganda. In addition to offering curriculum, this program had a central focus of developing educators' abilities to deliver instruction through engaging and meaningful activities associated with vegetable production (YoFFA, 2020). At the beginning of the school year, agricultural educators were encouraged to register their schools for the School Gardening Program using the "Ag Educators Platform," a WhatsApp group of over 200 Ugandan educators. After registration, educators completed a Google Form that collected their contact information and vegetable seed preferences. Then, educators participated in a virtual training to learn about the program's implementation structure, funding sources, target outcomes, and next steps. During the implementation phase, educators participated in a series of virtual and in-person professional developments that focused on using gardens as learning laboratories, developing practical lesson plans, and creating programs of activities for their students using their gardens as a center of engagement. At the end of the gardening season, Farm Day Exhibitions were held at the local, regional, and national levels where students entered their garden products to win personal and chapter awards.

### **Results to Date and Future Plans**

So far, 100 gardens were established and maintained in 100 schools across Uganda. Produced vegetables are sold by chapter members and income collected saved to fund future chapter activities while some vegetables are used by schools to supplement their school meals. YoFFA conducted four virtual professional development trainings on Experiential learning for Ag educators. 10 schools participating in this project exhibited at the 1<sup>st</sup> National Agricultural Education Show that took place in Jinja, Uganda. YoFFA involved in the organization of the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual School Farm Camp 2022 hosted by Gayaza High School between 12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> August 2022. Lastly, we created a YoFFA website, a repository of School-Based Agricultural Education SBAE in Uganda.

In 2023, we plan to establish 100 new school gardens while maintaining those gardens created in 2022. We look forward to, establishing collaborations between YoFFA chapters and local FFA chapters in the United States, conducting more professional development workshops, developing school gardening resources, and mobilizing our school chapters to participate in in-school youth focused leadership and career development events. To achieve this, we have contacted a number of prospective partners in Uganda and started a GoFundMe campaign to raise the much-needed financial resources for the SPG 2023 project.

### **Cost/Resources**

YoFFA obtained in-kind funding for the School Garden Program from Victoria Seeds (U) Limited and Holistic eLearning Platform (HeLP). Victoria Seeds provided schools with their required vegetable seeds, and basic gardening tools & equipment. Seeds and tools were worth \$2000 while HeLP hosted the four virtual teacher professional development workshops via Zoom, this is costed at \$300.

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