

CONTINUING IMPACT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON COLOMA PRIMARY SCHOOL.

On March 20th 2020 as a result of the Corona virus pandemic Coloma Primary School and all educational institutions went into lockdown as ordered by government. It has greatly impacted on childrens education and on family life in Uganda .

The following is an attempt to share with you some of the problems that the school has faced and continues to face over these past months as well as an appreciation for the support that we have received and which have enabled the school to remain alive and in good condition.

Coloma being a private school all staff are recruited privately. The school does not receive any support from government and so all staff salaries have to come from the fees paid by the parents. Also, there is no unemployment benefits for those out of work. At first we expected that we would close for a few weeks and so we used the school money to pay salaries as the teachers and non-teaching staff remained waiting for reopening. As we went into the second, third etc. months and no sign of the school reopening we reduced on salaries to half of the amount and sent home the staff except essential persons to maintain the place. Finally, as the month went on all salaries were stopped. We were lucky to have received a gift from friends who heard of our dilemma and agreed that we could pay euro 12 per staff member per month. This we know, was a token but also pure gift and began in July and it continues to date for those who have remained here. Of course, it is very little but in a time of crisis it is appreciated.

Over the months food became an issue as we had to sell what we had in stock since it would not keep. Again, we were supported by friends in the purchase of food as needed, to feed those who remained at school and also to assist our local community and even at times parents came to tell us of their need for food and we were happy to share. Families have been badly impacted. Many lost their jobs and with all the children home from school (families in Uganda are big) food and money became scarce. As you can imagine this in many cases led to indiscipline and family violence. There have been many recorded instances of this – pregnancies, theft, violence etc. We were also blessed when we received from donors money non designated (to be used where needed most) and this was very helpful for the case of the sick. Women continued to give birth and people had normal diseases. On many occasions we were called upon to assist with medical bills for the poor and vulnerable. By the end of 2020 families are noticeably poorer and morale is low among many.

The Present situation

All is well at Coloma. We, the Sisters, are all remaining healthy and strong. Right now, we are into the dry season and the sun is bright and hot. We hear that the virus does not like the heat and we are almost proving it as the number of official cases of the virus seems to have decreased over these past few weeks. However, statistics in Uganda cannot be relied upon but for sure we are not hearing of many deaths. There are few testing centres and the cost of tests is beyond the reach of most people



The top class of the school returned in October under very strict operational procedures. For Coloma it was only 39 pupils and so we were able and happy to accommodate them. It was a good learning term and the children did well. Having been at home for over 6 months it required a lot of counselling and guidance and general support and encouragement to prepare them for study and for their future. After Christmas they returned on January 4th and these girls are now ready and will complete their final state exam on 30th and 31st March. Under normal circumstances they would complete November but this is an extended

year. So far they are all healthy and doing well. Uganda is doing a lot of preventative herbal treatments. The children take a concoction of herbs each morning. Even, we the Sisters do herbal inhalation daily. Also, we have added a lot of fruit to the childrens' diet and it seems to be working. Thanks again to the donors who are supporting us in buying extra food for the girls.

As I write this we still do not know when the remaining children will return. It is very difficult to know what is the future and how to plan. We had general elections Jan 14th and we hoped to open after that but it is now Feb and we still don't know. It is our hope that at least the next 2 top classes will soon return and we really see no reason why the whole school cannot. We expect a lot of financial issues when we reopen as many parents have lost their jobs and will not have fees. Again, we are thankful that donors have offered to help with the poor for whom this will be a problem. Normally we have 3 terms per year but we now wonder will 2021 be only for 2 terms. Some children have studied from TV and radio while at home, others have either played in the



fields or herded goats or... and will have forgotten everything. We don't even know if we will have the choice to ask children to consider a repeat year or will the Ministry force all to go up to the next class. Government schools are highly supported by overseas aid and those may be the ones dictating policy to government. We hope that as a private school we may have a bit of freedom. We still don't know if we will have a new beginning class although we have received over 50 applications. Poor children, poor parents.



Happily, the school has continued its construction work. Rotary had granted funding for the construction of an underground rain water tank. Since we were able

to offer accommodation to the builders the school was allowed to continue construction work. The tank is completed and the pump fittings are under way. Hopefully by the next rainy season in April there will be no longer any water problems at Coloma. The top floor of the dormitory is presently under construction also. The window frames are inserted, the walls and ceiling are plastered. The ablution block still remains to be done, floors cemented and the whole building painted. For sure we expect it will be ready for a new intake in 2022. The whole front compound of the school is getting a new and smarter look. Again it is thanks to our kind donors that such good work can continue.



As Sisters in the community we have not wasted our time – all have got involved in hand and needle craft and card making. These are for sale in order to maintain the Sisters. The younger Sisters have worked with the hoe and produced harvests of vegetables and fruits for the community and for sale.

We are very grateful for all the support that we receive from our friends and we wish you blessing of peace and good health.

Sr Justine Asimirwe