

Situation at Coloma primary School as of Sept 25th 2021

This is my next update regarding our school situation presently. Just to recap from the beginning of the Covid lockdown. On March 20th 2020 on government orders all schools were closed.

The school year in Uganda begins 2nd week of February each year so the children had only studied for 6 weeks in their various classes at closure time. At first we expected it to be for a few weeks but the weeks became months and the months continue. No child returned to school until November when the top class returned and studied till March 2021 when they sat their final exam.



The next 3 classes came in April and studied until June 4th when we again went into total lockdown which still continues. We had high hopes for the past few weeks that the whole school would return in October. In preparation for this we bought in all the dry foods necessary for the term. What a disappointment it was last Tuesday 21st when the president announced that all primary and secondary schools remain closed until January 2022. A date was not given and so we wonder if it could be extended even further.

This is a great disappointment to parents, teachers and children to find themselves at home for a further 3 to 4 months. All other areas of life have been opened up, markets, transport, sports fixtures, churches so for us it is difficult to understand why schools remain closed. It is true that about 50% of the population is under 18 years and of course nobody wants the youth to be infected en masse. Yet we are aware that these same youth will be the ones to frequent the markets and roam the streets and cause lot of discipline problems in the homes. It is indeed frightening to hear how many young girls have become pregnant these past months of being out of school.

Covid wise we think that Uganda has coped very well. The number of people who have been infected is low compared to other countries and even those who become infected seem to overcome it being treated with local herbal cures. Those who have died are mainly those with other illnesses and the elderly. While my sister Eileen and myself are among the elderly we have thank God been in very good health during these past months and have even enjoyed certain aspects of the freedom this time has

given us. Of course Uganda has a very good climate and no artificial fertilizers or herbicides are used. The diet is all fresh foods with an abundance of fruits and our people are great prayers to God who surely hears all their prayers.

Financially the situation for families is very bad. Many people were made redundant and there is no such thing as redundancy pay or welfare payment in the country, or proper medical insurances or any meaningful insurance so people can be left in very difficult situations. Even the good cultures that have existed in Uganda have to be dropped on financial grounds. I give an example. People when they die are buried at their own homes. After burials are carried out everyone present gets an opportunity to speak about the dead person and everyone eats before leaving the grieving family. During this lockdown people have buried their dead before announcing the death because they cannot afford to feed the people. This has created lots of tensions in family life.

We at Coloma have also experienced financial problems though we are extremely lucky to be members of a Congregation and to have extremely good friends. Being a private school we get no assistance from government. We are dependent on school fees from parents and sponsored children to pay salaries, to buy food, to maintain the school and compound and all other necessities. When we have no children then we have no money. Over the years since the school began we have not kept any money as savings. Everything was put into furthering the development of the school. We have a very well educated teaching staff, thanks to the continual capacity building which is part of their being at Coloma. Knowing and hoping for a short lockdown we have all along continued to pay a much reduced salary to the teachers. Some went to their own homes but most asked to stay at school even with their families. The school provides them with free accommodation, light and water and food. It is our way of keeping them for the future while also helping them. Most of the support staff we asked to go home and they get no salary from us so we wonder how many will return when we eventually reopen. Some staff we have had to keep – night watchmen, those who maintain the compound, cut the grass and the hedges and keeps the place, a cook and the men who look after the cows and those in the plantation. All work is done by hand so without a tractor we need people to help. I thank many people who have generously helped with money to give reduced salaries to all our staff. Without this help we would have had to send them home with nothing. We hear of schools which have just shut down and the place has grown wild, others have sold the premises, others have the classrooms turned into hen houses and the compounds are growing potatoes. Many teachers have left the profession and are working on building sites or as machinists or traders. There will surely be chaos when we reopen.

The school has faced problems with food – when the children left we had food bought in for half a year. We hoped for return and kept it for as long as we could until it started to go bad and by then nobody wanted to buy it so we literally offered it to anyone who would take it. In July 2020, December 2020 we harvested beans and maize, always hoping to open school. Both times there was a glut of food on the market as schools are the main buyers of dry foods and so we had to sell at shockingly reduced rate. In July this year we were sure of reopening and so planted large gardens of beans and maize but these are now in the stores and we must start searching for a market. Maize does not last for long without becoming infected with weevils so we are facing another food issue.

Sicknesses seem to be on the increase, probably from stress and mal nutrition. Many families are unable to pay hospital bills or for treatment thus this is one of the areas that we are able to assist in at the moment with families, thanks to the generosity of many of you, our friends. You have shared your sponsorship money and told us to use it according to the needs and we have surely done this. When school reopens I shall inform you of all financial and class details of your children.

However we are also lucky with our friends who are supporting us with our building programme and this has not stopped at the school. For this we are very grateful. Another good blessing that we have: Our community of Sisters has increased. We have 3 new young women who have joined us intending to become Sisters. The lockdown has given us time for training them in various religious and secular disciplines. Surely it is an ill wind that blows no good and we are happy for this.

We thank all of you for your love and friendship and your support in so many ways. Please continue to keep in touch. We shall never forget you.

Compiled by Sr Mona Maher