

Embrace International Foundation recently provided our Ugandan partner charity, Kyanninga Child Development Centre (KCDC), with a grant to purchase life changing equipment for children with physical disabilities. Through this support KCDC has been able to provide 135 children with various pieces of equipment that will increase the quality of life for themselves and their families.



Tabisha in her new wheelchair

These pieces of equipment include 23 locally made wheelchairs to support children with Spina Bifida, Cerebral Palsy, spinal injuries and other mobility challenges. This has also enabled 8 children to enrol into school as their lack of mobility had been preventing them from attending.

48 children received CP seats; these are simple wooden chairs made locally that are widely used by children who are unable to sit independently. These seats enable children who would otherwise be left lying on a mat or on the floor to be in an upright position. This allows increased engagement with other family members, improved digestion for eating and increased participation in activities as they are in a well-supported sitting position, allowing for strengthened head control and upper limb function. In addition, 5 children were provided with a corner seat; these are also simple wooden seats that provide an increased base of support compared to the CP seats and are more effective for children with low muscle tone and poor trunk control.

5 children have received a walking frame that will enable them to increase their lower limb strength and stability and enables children with poor walking ability a sense of freedom and independence. The walking frames allow children to go out into the community with siblings, family and friends and work to develop independence with many children progressing to walking on their own and the walkers are then passed on to another child in need.

9 children have received a standing frame that enables them to experience the feeling of being upright and to develop strength and weightbearing in their lower limbs when they are unable to stand independently. This can prevent contractures within their legs, increase bone strength, improve digestion and respiratory function as well as enabling them to engage with family and other people around them.

Following correction of club foot deformities, 25 children have received foot splints as part of their ongoing treatment management to maintain good foot position and ensure that there is no regression of the deformity. Children must wear these splints for 23 hours a day for the first 6 months following serial casting for correction of the deformity and then once they are walking, they must wear the splints every night for 5 years.



Goodluck in his CP seat



Davis with his walking frame

Many children with cerebral palsy struggle with swallowing and regularly choke on solid foods, resulting in poor weight gain, malnutrition and poor developmental outcomes. Culturally, many families use hand feeding which often forces too much food into a child's mouth and is both stressful and rushed. 20 children have received specialised cups and feeding spoons to teach slower and manageable feeding techniques which allow families to feed children with complex and profound disabilities more efficiently and effectively, encouraging weight-gain and development.

COVID-19 in Uganda

In mid-March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Ugandan Government introduced a set of strict measures to prevent the transmission of the virus in Uganda as the healthcare system would be unable to cope with the high numbers of cases seen in other countries, with only 135 intensive care beds and 104 working ventilators in the country.

These measures include:

- All schools, universities and colleges closed
- All non-food markets and businesses closed
- All passenger flights into and out of the country suspended
- All land borders closed except for cargo trucks
- All public and private transport suspended
- All church services and other public gatherings suspended

After 2 long months some restrictions were eased, allowing non-food businesses to reopen, private vehicles and some public transport to restart.

Added onto that small income, the rising costs of food and an inability to earn due to the restrictions on businesses and transport meant that many of the KCDC families had to reduce the amount of food they were consuming, for example; some down to only 1 meal a day, leading to an increased risk of malnutrition.

Without public transport, particularly motorcycle taxis, which remained banned at the time, families were unable to access health care. Many families reported either long walks carrying their disabled child to the nearest health centre or staying at home without adequate medical attention or missing out on essential medications for epilepsy.



Teaching correct feeding techniques to prevent malnutrition

During April and May, KCDC focused on supporting the most vulnerable families KCDC work with, through its Buckets of Love campaign. KCDC filled buckets with basic dry foods, soap and therapy/ education packages to distribute to our families.

Through this KCDC aimed to:

- Improve the nutritional status of 100 children with disabilities who already had malnutrition
- Prevention of malnutrition for 150 of the most vulnerable children with disabilities
- Provide ongoing therapy and education plans to 250 children, as well as COVID-19 information.

Since April 2020, KCDC staff from both the Kabarole and Kasese clinics have been conducting home visits to the most vulnerable families, delivering buckets of food, therapy programmes and educational materials. They have reached a total of 428 families who are all extremely grateful to be thought of during this time and who were really struggling to survive.

KCDC found 82 children who had severe malnutrition that required additional food and 4 that required hospital admission for management of their condition. Fortunately, all 4 are putting on weight and can now be managed at home, with additional support from KCDC.

Additionally, severe flooding hit Kasese district in May, when 3 rivers burst their banks, causing 10 of KCDC families to lose their homes and possessions. KCDC provided mattresses, clothing and cooking utensils to these families in addition to food. KCDC will continue to support these families in the area who lost their life-sustaining crops due to the flooding with high yield seeds to help them restart their livelihoods.

Uganda's cases (and deaths) have risen fairly slowly over the last 8 months, with community transmission only becoming evident over the last couple of months as people begin to move about again. The country has to date registered 10,788 cases, 7,066 recoveries and 97 deaths (October 21st, 2020).

In September, President Museveni announced changes to the existing restrictions including the opening of Entebbe International Airport and all land borders, allowing schools to re-open on October 15th for final year students in primary, secondary and university institutions and permitting places of worship to gather with groups of 70 persons or less. He also lifted restrictions on movement to and from border districts, and allowing open air activities to resume without spectators.

Long-term implications: -

Impact on children: Global literature from the Lancet, UNICEF and the World Bank has shared data on the long-term impact of COVID-19 on children around the world. It is predicted that children will be the prime casualties of the global economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Children are experiencing increased risk of abuse, poverty and severe malnutrition.



Economic Impact: The World Food Programme warns of a hunger pandemic with 6.7 million children at risk, of which the majority live in Sub-Saharan Africa. With increased risks of malnutrition in pregnancy and early childhood, there is also a high chance of children experiencing developmental delay and needing additional support to reach their full potential.

Developmental Impact: while most restrictions have been lifted, schools are scheduled to officially fully open in March 2021 meaning a whole academic year has been lost. This is likely to mean that many children, particularly those with disabilities may never return to school however, our SEN team are working closely with families providing educational packs to ensure that these children are not left behind.

KCDC's multi-disciplinary team of therapists, special needs teachers and social workers are currently conducting clinic visits, home visits and community outreaches while taking appropriate measures such as mandatory use of masks and face shields, sanitizing before and after each client, use of temperature guns, social and physical distancing. KCDC staff will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that children with disabilities are ready to go back to school, are not malnourished, ensure early assessment of new babies to tackle any developmental delay as soon as possible and work with families to help them recover economically through KCDC's Street Business School programme.