

Intervention. Community members have started an initiative to support parents who cannot afford sending their children to some of the privately-owned early learning facilities in Ngora district. Parents are obliged to provide firewood and water for preparing porridge for the children.

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NGORA. Moru-Irion Village in Ngora Sub-county, Ngora District is located near Nyero rocks, a 10-minute ride southeast of Kumi, on the Ngora-Serere highway.

The local community is less vibrant economically with many of the households largely dependent on subsistence farming.

There is, however, an allure of hopelessness in the village, one of many parts of Teso sub-region that bore the brunt of previous insurgencies and are struggling to recover.

"It's like many people here have lost hope in life. They don't care about the future and only mind about what they will have to eat for the day," says Mr Gilbert Osojo, a resident and retired primary school teacher.

Indulgence in excessive consumption of alcohol is the order of the day by mainly the youth with high cases of child neglect and domestic violence.

"A bigger part of the burden to fend for the families has been left to women as the men spend much of the day gambling and drinking alcohol," says Mr Francis Egonyu, the Ngora District community development officer.

Mr Egonyu says during the recent prolonged dry spell, several households across the district suffered adverse effects resulting from food shortage that forced many parents to remove their children from schools citing lack of money to buy uniforms and books.

There is general low farm productivity and high household poverty since many men have relegated their responsibilities to women.

This, according to Mr Sam Ocung, the Ngora District education officer, has affected the education dreams of many children in food-insecure homes.

Low learning interest

Mr Ocung says early learning for children in the district is seriously deficient and partly the reason for lack of interest in education by the children even when they eventually enrol under the Universal Primary Education programme.

According to a United Nations Children's Fund 2014 study on the status of out-of-school children across the country, 50 per cent of infants aged between three and six in eastern Uganda could not enrol for school due to poverty.

The report indicates that poverty stands out as a major reason limiting children from poor families from enrolling in school.

Ngora mothers start self-help initiative to drive early learning



Community-led initiative. A women's group at Moru-Irion Village in Ngora Sub-county during their weekly savings scheme meeting. The savings help members to enrol their children for early learning as well as support their nutrition. PHOTO BY RICHARD OTIM

age children, particularly those ready to enrol for early learning, failed to go to school in Moru-Irion Village mainly because their parents could not raise the school requirements, including fees.

This propelled some community members to start a community-led intervention to enable poor parents who cannot afford sending their children to some of the privately-owned early learning facilities in the area.

"We have had to guide members of this community, especially the women to adapt childhood development challenges with self-help oriented solutions such as savings scheme and vegetable growing for sale," says Ms Beatrice Okello, a volunteer educationist working with local mothers at Moru-Irion to help them start their own Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre.

20,000

AMOUNT OF MONEY THAT EVERY CHILD IS CHARGED AT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

She says 40 children aged between

Each of the children is expected to contribute Shs20,000 through their parents for running of the facility.

"Those guiding children at the learning centre just volunteer and are only provided with subsistence token because what is raised from the fees, for now, cannot be adequate for their salaries as well," says Ms Okello.

The chairperson of the mothers' group which is spearheading the ECD centre, Ms Rose Akol, says the attitude by many parents towards their obligations at the facility is still poor, especially towards collecting water and firewood used to prepare porridge for the children.

Single mothers and widows

According to Ms Akol, many of the children attending instructions at the centre come from families of single mothers and widows.

"We came up with the idea of starting this learning centre for our children because many of us could not afford to send our children to the private nurseries," Ms Akol says.

Ms Frances Atim, chairperson of the women's group that has started the Aica ECD in Ngora, says despite being required to pay only Shs20,000, many parents still find it hard.

She says some fathers have also not been cooperative towards supporting them in ensuring that requirements at the early learning centre are ad-

Voices

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CHAIRPERSON

"A survey we carried out last year indicates that out of every 10 children old enough to enrol for early learning, only three do actually join the nursery schools. Our role is to inspire communities to start their own early learning centres that are not profit-oriented,"

JOHN ROBERTS
OKIROR,
REPRESENTATIVE
OF ACH360, A
VOLUNTEER MEDIA-LED
ORGANISATION

we would like to have at the learning centre but what comes from our male partners in fees is so little," she says.

Ms Sharon Akurut, a volunteer at the early project, says many of the children in the first stage of learning are aged five and above, making them eligible to join Primary One but they cannot because their parents are unable to pay for the required fees.

A committee of nine parents has been constituted to help with the running of the early learning centre which envisages acquiring their own land for a more spacious facility.

"Parents are required to contribute firewood and water every week which they do in turns for preparing porridge for the children," Ms Akurut says.

Support

Ms Akurut says the centre is being supported by ACH360, a volunteer media-led organisation which is guiding them on capacity development to run the project on their own.

A representative of ACH360, Mr John Roberts Okiror, says their support to the community is only limited to technical guidance and helping them with advocacy and lobbying for possible funding to the initiative.

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