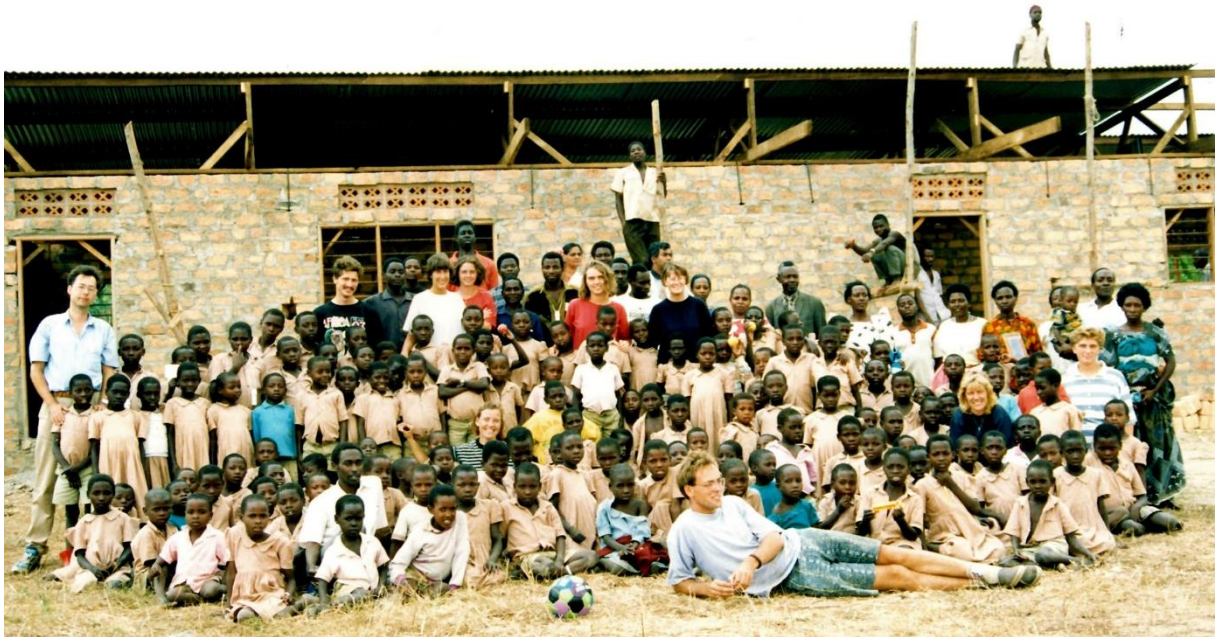


Visiting Kibaale in October 2023

By Helena Posthumus (secretary ICCF Holland)

In 1993, I went to Kibaale, Rakai district in Uganda for the first time. At that time, Kibaale still had an orphanage that was started by necessity as there were many orphans in the area due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Poverty was everywhere, there were no public services or amenities, and people lived off their small farms. The orphanage had started with 450 children a few years earlier, but the government made deliberate efforts to place orphaned children back with family members and neighbours in the area. However, all these children needed education but their guardians had no money for school fees. So the orphanage was turned into a primary school instead and that is how Kibaale Children's Centre started in 1992 with support from a church in Canada.



Where it all started: visiting Kibaale back in 1993; Bram is on the far left of the picture, Helena is on the far right

I was part of a team of (young) adults from the Netherlands; we had done some fundraising back home to raise funds for a school building and travelled to Kibaale to help build it. It was a tough time, hearing the stories of the orphaned children and being surrounded by high levels of poverty. But we also loved the children's curiosity and zest for life, the dedication of the small group of staff to help the children, and the community spirit of the villagers. It was a special time that none of us will ever forget. Bram Moolenaar, founder of ICCF Holland, was also part of this group. He was gripped by the children of Kibaale, and was determined to support them for the rest of his life. He founded ICCF Holland in 1995 with the aim to raise funds through sponsorships and (at a later stage) donations obtained through the VIM opensource software. Over 150 children in Kibaale were able to go to school thanks to the sponsors of ICCF Holland (many of them recruited by Bram), and some even became university graduates. This would have been impossible without Kibaale Children's Centre and the many sponsors across the world who have committed themselves to sponsoring the school fees of these children, whether through ICCF Holland or through the charity Kuwasha Canada.

I was keen to revisit the Kibaale Children's Centre after 30 years; I heard the stories of the changes but it is impressive to see it in real life. What started as a small primary school with a handful of

young teachers and 50 children in 1993, has now turned into a large primary and secondary school, with 1000 students and 150 teaching staff. The compound is spacious and green, a quiet and inviting environment for the children to study. The school building we built in 1993 was still there, but it is now being used as the staff canteen. In addition, a medical centre has been added where children and the families can be treated for illnesses such as malaria, and a maternity ward. Each year, about 20,000 patients are being treated at the medical centre who wouldn't have had access to health care in the area otherwise. There is also a guest house on site to receive small groups of visitors; these are often visitors who support the project, including sponsors who get a chance to meet the children that they sponsor and their families. The centre also has farmland, and they started planting coffee trees a few years ago. The aim is to grow and sell coffee, and fund the medical centre with the revenues obtained from the coffee. To see how the centre has developed and expanded over the years is proof of the commitment of the staff and that the funding is well spent.



Students studying outside on the grass

On a normal day, children start coming from all corners early in the morning, as school starts at 8am. They all walk to school, some may have to walk for an hour or even longer to get there, but this is quite normal in Uganda. At around 10 the children get some porridge as a first meal, followed by a healthy lunch at 1pm. There is a bit of time to play afterwards and you find groups of children all across the campus, on the play grounds, playing soccer, chatting and hanging out. They look happy and confident, full of energy. Classes resume at 2pm and all of the sudden it is all quiet again. Some classes go outside and continue their studies under a big tree. By 4pm, there is a lot of excitement on the sports field again, as one of the classes is doing some sports activity where they are having lots of fun. They run, cheer, dance, clap and sing. Watching them puts a big smile on my face.



Some things don't change – the children are still queuing up for their lunch, also 30 years later

KCC has a handful of social workers who monitor the progress of the children regularly, but also stay in touch with their guardians. They know the home situations of each child and give additional supports to the homes that face challenges. The wall of the office for the two social workers working with the children doing their A-levels or university is covered with graduation pictures of the children that are now adults and have become medical doctors, teachers, a lawyer, businessmen and even a Member of Parliament. Education really can change lives and communities.



Kibaale's Wall of Fame: with over 150 graduates from Kibaale Children's Centre

Despite the successes there have also been failures. Once in a while, Kibaale receives a larger donation for a special project to trial an innovation, whether on the farm or at the schools. Sometimes these fail but then the team is eager to learn and take that into account for a next initiative. It is important to note that funding from the sponsors are never used for such trials. All the money that we receive from sponsors go straight to Kibaale to cover the costs of the education of the children, including the meals and the healthcare they receive on site. Kuwasha Canada organizes special fundraising campaigns to fund special projects, such as the establishment of the coffee farm, or adding a new school building.

Though the change is visible and undeniable, there is still a lot of work to do. Inequality has increased. There are still poor families in the region who struggle financially and are not able to send

all their children to school. The public schools are often not well financed by the government, and there is a lack of teaching materials and qualified teachers. Many families come to Kibaale Children's Centre requesting for a place for their child. The social workers know the families well as they come from within the community. Whenever there is a place or sponsorship available, the social workers go through the applications to select a new student. As a rule, only one child per family receives sponsorship to make sure as many families can benefit from the sponsorships as possible.

Over the last months, ICCF Holland also received many generous donations from the community of VIM users across the world, in memory of Bram. We are very grateful for that and we are discussing with Bram's family, Kibaale Community Centre, and Kuwasha Canada how we can best invest this money in such a way that it honours Bram and adds value to the educational experience of the children. There are a few exciting ideas that we think Bram would really love. It was really special to get back to the place after 30 years. I met some of the young teachers then who are still working in Kibaale and we could share memories from 1993 and discuss what had changed since then. Other staff were in nursery class or primary school at the time and they are now dedicated teachers and social workers. And of course we shared memories of Bram; the way he has supported Kibaale Children's Centre in the past 30 years is really special and is highly valued by staff and students in Kibaale. We will keep remembering him with much fondness. Though Bram did most of his work very quietly, his impact in Uganda has been enormous.



"Education Changing Lives & Communities"