

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Promoting Life-saving Health Interventions for Vulnerable and Marginalised Communities in Uganda

Joab Tusaasire



Uganda is a landlocked country located in East Africa, with a population of approximately 46 million, projected by the United Nations to reach 104 million by 2060.

Providing adequate health services for its populace is one of the major challenges Uganda is currently facing. With already deteriorating national health indicators due to a high burden of communicable diseases such as malaria, HIV, and tuberculosis, as well as non-communicable diseases like diabetes and cancer, malnutrition is another serious public health concern. Malnutrition threatens to impact the lives of a whole generation of children as it is a cause of irreversible stunted growth. Furthermore, in Uganda malnutrition is the cause of death for 40% of deaths of children under five. Despite the efforts made by the government of Uganda and development organisations to implement policies and programs to address malnutrition, the healthcare infrastructure and services remain inadequate. The adequacy of the healthcare system is further compromised by the inaccessibility of these services for marginalised rural communities, who are already bearing the brunt of food insecurity and poverty.

Joab Tusaasire is a Commonwealth Alumnus who completed a Master's degree in International Primary

Health Care from University College London (UCL) in 2010 as a Distance Learner, and has been instrumental in implementing life-saving health interventions during and after his studies using the knowledge and skills honed during his Scholarship. Working alongside hospitals, universities, international NGOs, and local councils Joab has supported nutrition rehabilitation programs aiming at promoting the recovery of malnourished individuals. His dedicated efforts have positively impacted several vulnerable groups, including children under five, expectant mothers, people living with HIV, and refugees. Furthermore, Joab has led a research trial supporting the Ministry of Health on recommending an appropriate dosage of the local ready-to-use therapeutic food to be administered to malnourished patients. The adoption of this dosage has resulted in effective treatment and management of malnutrition, positively contributing to a long-term impact on the health and well-being of Ugandans.



Joab Tusaasire was awarded a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship in 2007 to study for a Master's degree in International Primary Health Care as a distance learner. Alongside his studies, he worked as a Nutritionist for the Ministry of Health in Uganda. After being promoted to a Senior Nutritionist he led a pilot research study that generated evidence on the appropriate dosage of locally made ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTAF) for malnourished children and patients affected by HIV, AIDS, or tuberculosis. This dosage was approved as the standard dosage by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in Uganda, and has since been incorporated into the Nutrition Assessment Counselling and Support Guidelines, and informed the integrated Nutrition Assessment Counselling and Support into health service delivery (NACS 2021). Joab has also been instrumental in supporting the district local governments to develop and implement five-year District Nutrition Action Plans which align with the Uganda Government National Development Plan and SDGs and led to the scaling up of nutrition actions across the country to improve the health and wellbeing of the people of Uganda. In 2014, Joab joined World Vision as a Nutrition Specialist and contributed to the development of the nutrition strategy for World Vision for 2015 to 2020. Currently, he is a Consultant in Nutrition Governance for UNICEF and has played a pivotal role in supporting government departments and NGOs to plan for nutrition interventions targeted at communities in the most remote parts of Uganda. Joab is a renowned National Quality Improvement Coach and a founder of a start-up, Keziya Pharmaceuticals, which has improved access to pharmaceutical drugs and services to marginalised communities in Uganda.

A Life-changing Opportunity: The Commonwealth Scholarship

While working as a Nutritionist for the Ministry of Health in Uganda, Joab landed a long-awaited opportunity, a Commonwealth Scholarship, to study for a Master's degree in International Primary Health Care as a distance learner. Joab started seeing the benefits of his studies well before completing his study course.

'I have to say that the Commonwealth Scholarship was a life-changing experience for me because after having graduated from my Bachelor's degree, I had attempted to get a Scholarship for close to seven years, because I couldn't afford the tuition for a postgraduate study. Enrolling for the Master's study under the Commonwealth Scholarship contributed to my promotion to a Senior Nutritionist at Fort Portal Regional Referral Hospital. So, that was one of the first fruits that I got from this Scholarship. Then when I completed my studies, it also expanded my employment opportunities.'

While with the Ministry of Health, Joab saw an opportunity to apply the newly acquired research skills from his Master's studies under the Commonwealth Scholarship to implement a project investigating the use of locally made ready-to-use therapeutic food for malnourished children and patients affected by HIV, AIDS, and tuberculosis. As part of this work, Joab supervised the nutrition project trial conducted at the Fort Portal Regional Referral Hospital and reported the findings of the research to the Ministry of Health, which informed decisions made by the Ministry on an appropriate dosage of the local ready-to-use therapeutic food for malnourished patients.

'While I was still serving at the Ministry of Health in Uganda, one of the useful skills that I got from my Master's study was the research skills. I was the focal point for this research, overseeing three hospitals: Fort Portal regional Referral Hospital; Virika Missionary Hospital; and Kabarole Hospital, where the trials for this ready-to-use therapeutic food were being administered on patients. The dosage that could bring out complete treatment of malnutrition was arrived at from these trials and this informed the Nutrition Assessment Counselling and Support (NACS) guidelines for the Ministry of Health.'

Following the approval of the evidence-based dosage by the Ministry of Health, and in line with the National Development Plan and SDGs, five-year district nutrition action plans were developed aiming to scale up the nutrition actions across the country to improve health and nutrition wellbeing of the people of Uganda.

'Apart from the research skills I gained, we were using technology, having to manoeuvre through the Moodle-Learning platform while on Scholarship. By having moderated discussions, participating in an online community, contributing ideas, having assignments, and meeting on time, it all expanded my approach on how I normally do things at work.'



Engaging local government staff in Nakapipirit Karamoja in nutrition action plan monitoring in 2021.

Apart from influencing the planning and delivery of the nutrition action plans, Joab also worked closely with the beneficiaries of the ready-to-use therapeutic food programme who were admitted at Fort Portal Regional Referral Hospital. These beneficiaries included children who received inpatient therapeutic care. This type of care involves providing medical and nutrition therapy to severely malnourished patients with a high mortality risk. Being part of this life-saving intervention is something that is particularly heart-warming for Joab.

Joab identified providing the inpatient therapeutic care to children as the most significant change that he brought to his community as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship.

'One of the things that has been my major contribution was to oversee admitted patients, on the verge of death, and help them recover, with minimal supplies. I had about 647 children who were saved under my inpatient therapeutic care. If I were to meet a mother of a child that I treated while on the paediatric ward, they can smile and say, 'This Uganda health worker saved my child'.'



Joab at a Community Food demonstration stall visited by King of Tooro kingdom in 2012, during 'Empango' coronation celebration week.

Bridging the Gap in the Supply and Demand of Health Professionals

As Senior Nutritionist, Joab headed the Nutritional Unit of the Fort Portal Regional Referral Hospital. Located in the remote region of Rwenzori, this hospital provides services for eight districts including refugee settlements in Rwamwanja, Kyaka II, and Bundibugyo, the latter inhabiting thousands of refugees from Uganda's neighbouring country, the Democratic Republic of Congo. The influx of refugees has triggered the demand for more healthcare services, placing an increasing burden on the hospital's staff, hence the urgent need for recruiting more healthcare professionals. However, due to its remote location the hospital struggles to attract and retain health professionals.

Having seen the gap in the human resource supply chain and how it was affecting the potential to deliver the overall objectives of the nutrition programme, Joab wanted to help bridge the gap.

Fortunately, the flexibility of being on a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, offered him the opportunity to join the Mountains of the Moon University as a part-time teaching assistant while also allowing him to complete his studies. His teaching position was later formalised after Joab completed his Master's degree.

'The motivation for taking up teaching was to ensure that we trained more people who can lessen the burden for us at the referral hospital. In short, I could only get the opportunity to train others in the university that would expand support to managing the many cases of malnutrition in the region after attaining a Master's degree sponsored by Commonwealth Scholarship. The Master's degree opened opportunity for me to serve in the community university, where a MSc was the minimum qualification for the starting position at university. I was taken up as teaching assistant to share my experiences in management of nutrition with the students at the university.'

Joab taught a course unit on Public Health Nutrition to undergraduate students studying Public Health. This was a new course that he had designed for addressing the very issues Ugandan health system has been facing. This course has now been adopted by the university on a permanent basis. In addition, Joab supervised clinical students, guiding them on how to treat malnourished patients. To successfully deliver his tasks, Joab largely drew from his experiences and the knowledge and skills honed during his Commonwealth Scholarship.

'Over 90 students passed through my hands. For clinical students at diploma level, over 300 have passed through my hands. They had to make clinical rounds at the nutrition unit in the hospital, which is part of the paediatric department.'

Implementing Nutrition Programmes to Alleviate Malnutrition in Rural Uganda

In 2014, Joab worked as a Nutrition Specialist for World Vision Uganda, a Christian humanitarian aid organisation that supports vulnerable children in response to humanitarian emergencies. He took charge of the nutrition portfolio as part of the health nutrition programmes administered by World Vision in 22 districts of Uganda. He provided technical support and supervision to the health team for the maternal, infant and young child (under 5 years of age) nutrition programmes. Moreover, Joab trained the health team, building the team's capacity to plan and implement their workplans in line with the programme goals more effectively.



Joab leading a community meeting with care groups for nutrition actions in Acaba, Oyam district in 2017.

'I've been designated as a National Quality Improvement Coach and I utilised the skills that I got from my MSc study, because we had a module on Quality Improvement. The other theoretical knowledge and skills acquired from my studies formed a framework of what I do practically in the field.'

In addition, Joab participated in the development of the World Vision nutrition strategy for 2015 to 2020. As part of this work, he led the needs assessment process and set programme objectives and targets. Furthermore, he developed the logic frameworks to support technical teams in the districts to plan and budget for programme activities for the identified beneficiaries.

'A Master's qualification opened up opportunities for me to be employed on some of these jobs that need postgraduate academic level, which I wouldn't have got if I didn't get this Scholarship.'

While with World Vision, Joab frequently tapped into his skills and knowledge he built during his Master's degree under the Commonwealth Scholarships. He utilised his newly developed research skills from his Master's studies to successfully undertake an innovative research study in collaboration with his work colleagues to investigate the effectiveness of using a community health worker assessment and improvement matrix to strengthen village health team systems.

From the research conducted, Joab and colleagues published a journal article titled: **Utilization of the Community Health Worker Assessment and Improvement Matrix to Strengthen Village Health Team Systems in Uganda: A Case for Kitgum District**. In this paper, Joab and colleagues recommended periodic use of the matrix (which proved to be an effective tool based on the findings from the Kitgum District case study) by the District and the Health Facilities to assess the performance of the Village Health Team systems (VHTs) and to identify areas of improvement. This tool has been adopted by other districts in Uganda and it has proved to strengthen the VHTs that are key in bridging the gap that exists between the un-served households and the formal health system. VHTs play a pivotal role in mobilising and empowering communities to take part in decision making processes that affect their health, thereby strengthening health service delivery at the household level.



Village health team meeting at a health centre in Acaba in North Uganda in 2016.

‘The skills I acquired through the MSc helped me contribute to the research work I conducted while with World Vision. Together with colleagues, we published a paper. Also, I wrote a conference abstract for African Nutrition Society Conference in Morocco, which I attended and presented a paper. I shared with the wider audience how we use community approaches to improve the nutrition status in Uganda.’



Sample kitchen garden promoted by Joab and colleagues in land-limited households for dietary diversity in Namanyonyi, Mbale District in 2018.

Nutritional Governance: Advocating for the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups at risk of Malnutrition

In 2019, Joab joined the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Uganda as a Nutrition Governance Consultant. He supported UNICEF programme activities which focused on addressing causes of malnutrition beyond the common factors such as disease and lack of adequate food, digging deeper into underlying issues and broader governance related challenges going beyond the health sector to multiple sectors.

Joab led nutritional programmes aiming at improving the wellbeing of pregnant and lactating women, children under five, school-age children (5-12 years), and adolescents, all of whom were classified as vulnerable groups at risk of malnutrition.

Moreover, Joab has supported government departments and other NGOs in preparing action plans for addressing malnutrition. He facilitated collaborative partnerships with stakeholders in some of the most remote parts of Uganda, such as the nine districts of Karamoja.

'I'm confident that we are doing a lot of work in the communities and underground. Because so far, nine district councils have been supported to develop nutrition action plans. The tangible thing that I consider as my biggest achievement at UNICEF is that these districts now have district nutrition action plans which are approved by their district councils. These are real commitments where the highest policy-making bodies within the local governments commit themselves that they will allocate the resources to improve nutrition within all the sectors under their mandate. Nutritional governance was my docket and now a successful project. I'm proud of the work that we do in these remote communities.'

The districts have since integrated their nutrition plans in the district development master plans, and also weaved them into all annual departmental work plans with a budget allocated to the activities involved in delivering the plans.

To ensure an effective implementation of the district nutritional action plans, Joab and colleagues supported quarterly or biannual district nutrition coordination meetings with various stakeholders to review the work plans.

The stakeholders include representatives from the government departments of Planning, Commercial Services, Education, Production, Health, Gender, and Community Development; and implementing partners in the district such as Uganda Bureau of Statistics and National Planning Authority. During these meetings, progress made towards the implementation of planned activities was assessed.

While working in rural areas and with marginalised communities, Joab noted that besides access issues to health services and trained professionals, access to pharmaceutical drugs is another major problem compromising the effectiveness of health interventions. For Joab to deliver a meaningful change, he founded Keziya Pharmaceuticals in Mbarara, his local community. This start-up aims to increase access to health products in rural communities.

'So, I felt that if I can ensure that standard services reach rural communities and improve access to drugs and approved medicines, then I would have contributed to the improvement of health, which is in line with the Masters's degree in Primary Healthcare that I did.'

Reflecting on the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarship, Joab identified the **most significant change to himself as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship.**

'Uganda is a developing country, and there are a lot of struggles to meet needs at a personal level. So, when one doesn't have employment, and they have a family, life becomes more challenging. So, the Scholarship was a life-changing opportunity for me. It helped me attain a Master's qualification and skills which opened employment opportunities by organisations in my country. And this, on a personal level, has also helped me to look after my family. I support them to achieve their dreams.'

Looking ahead, Joab plans to continue identifying and utilising opportunities to contribute to the development of his country, Uganda, particularly in the health sector. At the top of his priority list is the expansion of his start-up, Keziya Pharmaceuticals, which will further improve access to pharmaceutical drugs and services to his local community and beyond. Expanding the start-up in Mbarara, will also award Joab an opportunity to spend more time with his family, something he is very much looking forward to.

More about Joab Tusaasire's work

<https://www.sciencepublishinggroup.com/journal/paperinfo?journalid=251&doi=10.11648/j.sjph.20170504.11>

<https://www.morressier.com/o/event/5c335b14e668b90015af9ea4/article/5c51786979e4d5001478ccda>

<http://library.health.go.ug/community-health/food-and-nutrition/integrating-nutrition-assessment-counselling-and-support-health>

<https://bwizibwera-pharmacy-keziya-pharmaceutical-cold.business.site/>

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK

Woburn House

20-24 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HF

Email: evaluation@cscuk.org.uk

Website: bit.ly/cscuk-evaluation

