

Umatara Special member annual update

Dominique Ndagijimana, co-founder of Umutara School, Rwanda, shares an overview of how his non-government organisation met his school's needs during the Covid-19 pandemic

Umutara School caters for 123 residential deaf pupils ranging in age from 5 to 21, with pre-school, primary and vocational departments. It is situated in the north-east of Rwanda, in a poor rural area.

Government reaction to the Covid pandemic

Our schools were closed suddenly on 14th March when our government issued a decree, closing all schools and imposing a severe lockdown on many activities and travel.

At first it was not possible to do anything but we became very concerned for many in the locality, whose work had stopped and who were struggling to buy even basic food for themselves and their families. We were able, with the support of one of our donors, to buy food parcels for many of the poorest in our community and also the families with deaf children or adults.

However, by July, some of the lockdown was eased and we could start being more proactive in supporting our children and their families in other ways.

Covid requirements

The government was not able to tell us when the schools would be allowed to open again, but they did tell us what adaptations would be required in order for us to be allowed to open. This enabled us to prepare for the new term.

One requirement was handwashing stations, with four taps at a distance from each other. We were told that we needed two of these stations, so we were able to source funds and employ local builders to build them.

Another requirement was that each child should have their own desk. This was a challenge as we had double desks throughout the school, and in the younger children's classes sometimes they sat three to a desk. We had 30 desks like this. We have 123 children,

so we needed a lot more desks! The desks the government suggested were very expensive, but we managed to find a company that would make them for us for £40 per desk. Thanks to a donation from DeafReach (www.deafreach.org) we have been able to order 70 more desks, so now we have enough for 100 children. We hope to be able to raise the money for the rest of the desks before the beginning of term. We think this may now be in November.

We were also required to enlarge the dining room and kitchen area, so that the children could space out more during meal times, and to tile the kitchen area to improve cleanliness. The Canadian charity 'A Better World' (<https://www.abwcanada.ca/>) helped to fund this work.

Opportunities

Apart from trying to meet the government requirements for re-opening, we were also thinking about ways that we could support our pupils while they are at home. Our government has put many lessons on the radio and TV for pupils to access. However, most of the families of our pupils are very poor. They do not have a TV and many don't have access to the radio either. And being deaf, neither the radio nor the TV is of much use. We have been very concerned about the welfare of many of our pupils,



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and their safety, as we were not able to explain much about Covid protection before they left school, and their ability to communicate with their families is generally very limited, as most of the families do not use sign language.

So we discussed this with our donor, and the money that they would have donated towards food at the school for the two terms, we have been able to use for teacher outreach visits (once the travel restrictions were lifted). So the teachers have been able to visit the children at home. This has actually been quite a blessing in many ways!

- We were able to take masks and soap to the families.
- We were able to help the children communicate with their parents and families as we could act as interpreters for them.
- Many of the parents/siblings have become more interested in learning sign language.
- Some were also shocked by how well their children could understand the school curriculum – as there is still a belief that if you are deaf then you must be stupid as well.
- The children felt encouraged by our visits, as it showed them how much we value them.
- People in the community also could see that the deaf pupils are valued, as we brought gifts to the children and families and also gave our time to visit them.
- The teachers have discovered 14 more deaf pupils in the villages that they have visited, who have not been attending any school! Why? Because the parents believed they were not capable of learning!

Vocational opportunity

One of our vocational departments is tailoring, so we



thought that maybe we could make our own facemasks. This was so successful that a local charity, Streets Ahead Children's Centre Association (SACCA), which supports street children and some adults who are homeless, has commissioned us to make 1000 masks for them to distribute. We have just finished this order and they have said that they will order 2000 more from us (we are waiting for the official order to come through).

This has been a great opportunity for us. Seven of our young people, six girls and one boy, have been employed during this difficult time. We have been able to make 50% profit on each mask, so they have been earning some money as well as contributing to the welfare of vulnerable people on our streets. Also, others can see that the deaf youth are capable and hard working. A great example to all.

Conclusion

So this Covid-19 time has brought challenges and opportunities for us. We have endeavoured to do what we can to support our pupils and their families while they are at home and to prepare for their return to school. We thank our donors, too, for their willingness to adapt their giving to support our unexpected needs.

We will not forget 2020. But that is true for the whole world, from the remotest Rwandan village, to the most highly populated cities of every land.



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