

When parents drown their children's grades in alcohol

By Conan Businge

As the sun rises over Okunguro village, 12km out of Soroti town, a couple of boys wearing dirty shirts and torn shorts, kick a deflated ball along a dusty road.

Just a few metres away, three of their fellow pupils from the neighbouring homestead are dashing to school to catch up with the morning lessons in the nearby private school.

Since teachers in public schools were on strike, the two boys probably aged nine and 10; did not go to school and their father, a seasoned drunkard, is not bothered about their education. Their mother is illiterate, though hardworking. She sells fish in the trading centre.

For the whole week, I spent in this village, during a Twaweza immersion exercise, the two boys' playing soccer was a daily routine; from morning to evening. No home chores, no going to school – even after the strike ended and schools re-opened.

"We will go to school next week," the presumably older boy of the two responds, when I inquire from him why he never goes to school.

Michael (not real name), the eldest, in this family of three boys and one girl, dropped out in Primary Six and is a drunkard just like his father in Soroti town. Their sister was defiled and made pregnant by their father's 40-year-old drink-mate three years ago, at 13 years of age. The case was never reported to the Police and she was married off to him.

Alcoholic parents

Such a scenario seems isolated. But for the 39,000 people in this sub-county, alcoholism is a serious problem.

Much as there are no local studies to show the negative effect of parents' alcoholism on pupils, a study done recently by Maiua Casas and Josei Navarro in Spain shows that children of alcoholics constitute a population at risk commonly for poor performance, skipping school and dropping out. The study is named, "School characteristics among children of alcoholic parents".

"Parental alcohol misuse brings disruption to family functioning and gravely affects the children's ability to learn," explains another research done the New South Wales (NSW) Government Department of Community Services. It examines the impact of alcohol misuse on individuals, families and society and spans the past 40 years. There is an extensive body of literature concerning the impact of parental alcohol misuse on children and adolescents.

In Uganda, a crisis is already looming given that the country is lagging behind others in East Africa in having children reach the expected competency levels in primary schools, according to Uwezo reports; yet the country tops the region in having a high rate of alcohol consumption.

A survey by US broadcaster Cable News Network (CNN) ranked Uganda eighth in the global alcohol consumption. It was only ahead of Germany and Australia at positions 9 and 10, respectively.

In another ranking, WHO report shows that *ajon*—a semi-fermented millet beer drunk from communal pots using long straws, and other local brew, constitute 89% of all the types of alcohol consumed in



Men enjoy millet brew in Soroti. Alcoholic parents rarely support their children in school

Uganda.

A few Ugandans (9%) take bottled beer, 3% spirits and 1% wines.

In Okunguro, it is mainly *ajon* that is consumed. A good number of women and men in Soroti district are always in drinking joints by midday until late in the night, all week.

The same WHO report shows that about 23.7 litres of pure alcohol are consumed per capita by alcoholics in Uganda. Rwanda and Burundi follow each, registering 22.0 litres per capita per year. Kenyans follow with a registered 18.9 litres, while Tanzania consumes about 18.4 litres.

The NSW report presents no clear evidence if maternal alcohol misuse has a greater or lesser impact on children than paternal alcohol misuse. But the same report, notes that, "Children whose mothers misuse alcohol are more likely to be exposed to a variety of risks and it is the accumulation of such factors that poses the greatest threat."

Eastern region ranked highest

The Twaweza immersion exercise, which had close to 50 staff living in homes in Kumi, Soroti and Serere, noted that indeed the majority of the house heads in these districts consumed alcohol excessively.

It is argued that alongside several other challenges, alcoholism partly explains the low academic performance of pupils in this eastern region. However, the same problem of excessive alcohol abuse is reflected in other parts of the country and could have a disastrous effect on children's learning competencies and upbringing.

Academically, Uganda, especially the eastern region, is trailing in academic

Alcoholic parents, rarely keep their children in school and pay little attention to their education needs

performance among East African countries.

Basing on the 2013 report released last month by Uwezo (under Twaweza), Soroti district was ranked in the 303rd position out of 361 districts in East Africa, with only 35.2% of pupils' competent in literacy and numeracy.

The other district which was visited during this immersion was Kumi, which in the same year was ranked 252nd with a 42% pass rate. The best district in Uganda, compared to the whole East African region, was Kampala with a 64.1% pass rate and in the 89th position.

The Uwezo report results were highly consistent with those of the studies done in the previous years. The organisation found out that many children who attend school are not learning basic skills in the first few years of education.

Moreover, a substantial proportion of children in their final years of primary school have not mastered Grade 2 level competencies.

The Uwezo tests are set according to the Grade 2 level curriculum for each country, which is the level to be attained after two

years of primary education. Thus, assuming education quality standards are maintained, one should expect pupils at Standard 3 or above to correctly answer the entire test questions. This is termed a 'pass' in the presentation of the results.

In regard to Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) done last year, of the 4,144 pupils who sat for the examinations in Soroti district, only 156 pupils; making it 4%, passed in division one. In Kumi, out of 4,689 pupils, only 281 (6%) passed in the same division. Serere had the worst performance, with only 2% (123 pupils) passing in division one, out of the 5,633 who sat for the exams.

Public view on alcoholism

Some of the teachers and opinion leaders in Okunguro believe alcoholism is indeed a setback for the community. Our host, Moses Otira, believes that alcoholism, if not controlled, will greatly reduce the gains attained in the district. "Parents, especially men, have resorted to spending more time at drinking joints," he laments.

Peter Tusubira, a retired teacher, notes that alcoholic parents, rarely keep their children in school and pay little attention to their education. He also notes that such homes are always characterised by disorder, which greatly affects the children's learning process.

He says parents need to know that it is vital to focus on their children's education, if they want them to succeed. "This is a fact. I know it as a parent and a retired teacher," he says.

Ruth Matoya, a counsellor and psychologist, says alcoholic parents always affect their children's performance.

"The child's performance is often determined by the factors back home. If the parents are alcoholics, they end up being victims of the problems created by their alcoholic parents," Matoya notes.

She adds that: "There is also shame and conflict in such homes. At times children end up playing roles that are not theirs. Their mental capacities end up getting diverted and this affects their performance."

One of the first difficulties that often reverberate in poor school performance is the conflict between parents. She explains that teachers frequently observe that when family conflicts occur, academic performance is lower and the child's motivation decreases.

There is also a noted high dropout rate in this area. The case in point is where about 250 pupils joined Primary One Seven years ago, but there are only 73 of them today. This is a 70.1% drop-out rate, which is slightly less than the country's drop-out rate at 84%; although still worrying.

However, this does not mean that all children in the homes of parents who are alcoholics fail in education. "Some children," as 39-year-old Augustus Odeke, who says he grew up with alcoholic parents, notes "have strived and made it."

"If we were in such abusive homes, but managed to make it, it means one can still survive under such harsh conditions. However, I must admit that this is not the best environment for grooming a child who will be academically strong," Odeke says.

Like Okunguro village, with a good number of parents drinking, all hope should not be lost. However, the alcoholism situation still raises questions for the academic future of pupils in this village.