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Tackling malnutrition through peer to peer education in primary schools in rural Uganda

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Program/Project Purpose: With childhood malnutrition levels at 40% and stunting at 5% in SW Uganda, a 3-year project to train primary school children as peer group educators was developed with the aim of spreading nutrition information and encouraging behavioural change in school children and through them to the community.

Structure/Method/Design: The project goal is to strengthen nutritional practices of children in four primary schools in SW Uganda. Two rural parishes with trained Volunteer Health Teams who have successfully introduced farming of High Vitamin A Orange Sweet Potatoes and High Iron Beans were identified. Four government primary schools with a total enrolment of 1500 students were selected at random, two in each parish. A teacher at each school was identified by the head teacher as the contact person and was trained as a Peer Group Facilitator along with six volunteers from Health and Development Agency-Uganda, a local NGO. Students and teachers at each school selected 6 students from Primary 4-6 as Peer Group Educators (PGE), a total of 24. A curriculum of six sessions each on nutrition and school gardens was

prepared using interactive exercises. Monthly visits by PGF were made during school to train the PGEs at each school using interactive techniques and materials. As school staff and children gain confidence and skill in health education, all four schools are expected to develop and maintain school gardens as well as hygiene and nutrition clubs. Participating in the school garden and learning about compost use, local remedies for pests, traditional plants and soil preparation will allow children to initiate kitchen gardens at home. Use of locally available materials such as tippy taps, rice bag posters, board games, songs, stories and cards that are easy to replicate will help ensure sustainability.

Outcomes & Evaluation: Although only in the second year of the project, there is evidence that communities are going to continue the school gardens. Schools and local churches have donated land for gardens; parents have offered gardening assistance; VHTs assist in school gardens; and one of the schools is planning a school lunch. From 2 kg of seeds, schools produced approximately 30 kg. of high iron beans; enough to re-plant, and handfuls for children to begin gardens at home. Schools have harvested OSP and some have maintained a supply of vines between seasons, ensuring ongoing crops. An Endline evaluation in one year will provide information on numbers of kitchen gardens as well as feedback from parents, children and teachers.

Going Forward: Reaching all school children often and effectively with only six PGE per school remains the main challenge, while high transport costs to these remote sites limits routine training and supervisory visits.

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