MEGA PHONICS EXPANSION PROJECT
Kitgum District, Northern Uganda
January - December 2025

African Revival — Investing in Education

IMPACTS:

72
teachers trained in phonics methodology

5,931
books distributed

Project schools outperform control schools
in every grade and reading subtask at endline

+16.7
more words read per minute by P3 pupils in project schools at project end

+9.7
more letter sounds identified per minute by P2 pupils in project schools at project end

PREPARED BY

Amos Ojok - ARU
Mega Phonics Project Officer

December 2025

For any queries, please contact:
info@africanrevival.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mega Phonics Expansion project was a one-year initiative that aimed to strengthen foundational literacy for early grade learners in rural government-aided primary schools in the Kitgum District of Northern Uganda. Building on previous successes in this and other districts, the project focused on equipping teachers with practical phonics methodology to support effective reading instruction; in classrooms still recovering from years of conflict and COVID-related school closures.

In 2025, African Revival implemented the project across 10 rural primary schools in Kitgum District, training over 70 P1–P3 teachers to plan and deliver structured phonics lessons, create low-cost learning materials, and foster interactive, play-based classroom environments. Pupils gained access to new reading resources and benefited from lessons that encouraged active participation, motivation, and confidence in reading and writing. The project also engaged district education officials and school leadership to ensure sustainability and local ownership.

Feedback from teachers and school leaders highlights significant improvements in teacher confidence, classroom practice, and pupil engagement. Assessment data suggests that pupils are making measurable progress in foundational literacy skills, with many demonstrating greater fluency, comprehension, and enthusiasm for learning following phonics tuition. The holistic approach of the Mega Phonics Expansion Project, combining training, resource provision, and community engagement, has laid a strong foundation for lasting improvements in literacy outcomes in Kitgum District.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION
10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES
17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

About African Revival

Our vision is an Africa where every child has equal access to quality education, as we believe education is the key to overcoming poverty. Since 2005, we have worked with **over 300 primary and nursery schools** in Uganda, South Sudan and (until recently) Zambia, to allow **over 120,000 children** to fulfil their potential. We don't just provide infrastructure; we empower whole communities – pupils, teachers, and parents – to transform schools into thriving learning environments that build brighter, better futures.

Why Phonics?

Phonics is a structured teaching method that links sounds to letters, helping children decode unfamiliar words and build strong literacy foundations. In Uganda, literacy is often taught through rote memorisation, which limits children's ability to read independently. Phonics offers a more empowering approach, enabling learners to tackle new words confidently and improve comprehension across all subjects.

Globally, research identifies phonics as one of the most effective strategies for early literacy, with systematic instruction improving decoding, fluency, spelling, and comprehension. Our experience shows phonics not only boosts literacy rates but also transforms classrooms; teachers gain confidence, collaborate, and create engaging learning aids, while pupils become more motivated, participate actively, and show improvements in reading and writing.

Awareness of phonics is growing in Uganda and it is now included in the national teacher training syllabus, though often covered superficially. As a result, many volunteer and even qualified teachers in rural schools remain unfamiliar with the approach, creating an opportunity for targeted support.

Project Background

Between 2016 and 2020, African Revival implemented two phonics programmes across 45 primary schools in the Amuru and Nwoya Districts of Northern Uganda. Over 100 teachers were trained, contributing to literacy rates rising from 12.9% to 32.4% by the end of the 2018 programme.

Since 2022, phonics training has extended to 15 ECD teachers in five Amuru District schools through our three-year Step-Up project. The two-year Mega Phonics project (2023–2024) in Kitgum District trained a further 26 tutors, 200 in-service teaching students, and 43 teachers from 10 rural primary schools.

Across these initiatives, results have been consistent: improved literacy outcomes and stronger classroom practice. Building on this success, the 2025 Mega Phonics Expansion Project aimed to train 30+ more primary teachers at another 10 rural schools in Kitgum District — our second phonics initiative in the area — designed to strengthen pupils' literacy skills.

Kitgum, in Uganda's Acholi sub-region, continues to recover from decades of conflict, with education further disrupted by two years of school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, creating an urgent need for targeted literacy support.

African Revival — Investing in Education

Project Objectives

The 2025 Mega Phonics Expansion Project aimed to:

- Train at least 30 P1–P3 teachers from 10 rural schools in phonics methodology, including mastery of Sets 1, 2, and 3 sounds.
- Build teachers' capacity to plan and deliver effective phonics lessons through practical training on lesson planning and classroom delivery.
- Support teachers in developing schemes of work and creating low-cost learning resources to enrich classroom instruction.

Teachers' phonics training at Opette Primary School

School Selection

32 rural schools in Kitgum District were surveyed and 10 project schools (along with 10 paired control schools) were selected and approved by the District Education Office (DEO):

Project Schools: Alune, Lokira, Kitgum Matidi, Lagot Cugu, Lumule, Mucwini, Mulago, Okidi, Ocettoke & Opete

Control Schools: Adyee, Akara, Labilo, Lamola, Layama, Ojuma, Onya, Oryang, Pagen & Yepa

We thank all project and control schools for their collaboration.

Baseline Findings

Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

At the start of the project, Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) were carried out in both project and control schools, to establish children's literacy levels. A total of 900 pupils in Primary 1–3 were randomly selected (15 per class) and tested on their ability to identify letter names and sounds, read real and made-up words, and demonstrate reading comprehension.

Children were scored based on the number of correct responses per minute. Although there was expected improvement between P1 and P3, as children developed, overall average results (shown in the table below) were very low, This highlighted significant weakness in foundational literacy across both project and control schools. The similarity in baseline performance between the two groups also confirmed the reliability of EGRA as a benchmark for measuring success of the project's interventions.

Table 1, below, shows average baseline EGRA scores in project and control schools.

Baseline EGRA, Alune Primary School

	Grade	EGRA Scores	Letter Names	Letter Sounds	Real Words	Made-up Words	Story Reading	Reading comprehension
Baseline EGRA	P1	Project School	2.75	0.10	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Control School	6.99	0.31	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Difference (Proj - Ctrl)	-4.23	-0.21	-0.11	0.00	0.00	0.00
	P2	Project School	13.27	2.79	1.03	0.03	0.13	0.02
		Control School	12.77	0.59	0.64	0.01	0.06	0.00
		Difference (Proj - Ctrl)	0.49	2.20	0.39	0.01	0.07	0.02
	P3	Project School	25.50	5.57	5.64	1.41	3.19	0.14
		Control School	21.57	4.52	4.07	0.97	2.90	0.11
		Difference (Proj - Ctrl)	3.93	1.05	1.57	0.44	0.29	0.03

African Revival — Investing in Education

Activities Delivered

Phonics Teacher Training

This year, 72 teachers (P1–P3) across 10 project schools participated in training sessions on Set 1—3 phonics sounds. While the initial target was 30 teachers (three per school), additional teachers showed interest and were welcomed to join.

Training was delivered on-site at each school and followed an 11-day structured programme, including:

Phonics Teacher Training at Ocetokke Primary

1. Introduction to phonics and Set 1 sounds
2. Resource-making for Set 1
3. Lesson planning and demonstration for Set 1
4. Support supervision and use of Set 1 readers
5. Introduction to Set 2 sounds
6. Resource-making for Set 2
7. Lesson planning and demonstration for Set 2
8. Support supervision and use of Set 2 readers
9. Introduction to Set 3 sounds
10. Resource-making and lesson planning for Set 3
11. Consolidation of Sets 1–3, including songs, videos, and phonics readers

Teacher demonstrating use of sound buttons

Additional guidance was provided on pronunciation and effective delivery of phonics lessons, to strengthen teachers' confidence and classroom practice.

Key Insights from Teacher Training:

By the end of the 11-day programme, classes were being taught on reading and writing using phonics. Teachers demonstrated improved pronunciation and phonological awareness, had gained confidence in blending and segmenting words, and supported colleagues with constructive feedback. They also received guidance on introducing new sounds and planning effective lessons.

Pupils responded enthusiastically, showing ability to identify sounds, blend and segment words, and write accurately. At Kitgum Matidi, even older learners in P6 asked their teacher to continue phonics — a sign of its relevance and appeal beyond early grades.

Joint Support Supervision

Support Supervision was conducted in all 10 project schools, with four schools jointly observed by a representative from the District Education Department — Mr. Obur Richard, District Inspector of Schools for Kitgum. Joint sessions took place at Ocettoke, Opette, Mucwini, and Lagot Cugu Primary Schools — the two best- and two lowest-performing schools respectively; selected for comparative learning. During these sessions, teachers were observed teaching phonics, scored against a standardised methodology, and immediate feedback was provided to strengthen practice.

African Revival — **Investing in Education**

Joint Support Supervision Insights:

- **Performance Range:** Teachers' scores varied from 45% to 90%, with 60% or above considered satisfactory for a phonics lesson. Interestingly, scores varied within schools; for example, at Ocettoke, one teacher scored 82% while another scored 47%.

- **Top Performing Teacher:** A P2 teacher from Opette Primary led with a score of 90%.

- **Strengths of High-Performing Teachers:** Clear modeling of sounds, teaching sounds in sequence, and consistent application of the five phonics steps guided learners effectively. Peer support was evident, with at least two teachers in most schools supporting colleagues to improve lesson delivery.

- **Challenges for Low-Performing Teachers**: Skipped teaching steps and inconsistent sequencing of sounds reduced lesson quality. In particular, teachers at Mucwini and Lagot Cugu struggled with lesson consistency and following the correct order of sounds.

- **Inspector's Feedback:** Mr. Obur Richard highlighted strong introductions of letter sounds, effective use of flashcards, and good chalkboard demonstrations, but recommended that school administrators ensure all lesson plans are approved before teaching.

Distribution of Classroom Resources

In Term 2, all 10 project schools received essential classroom resources to support effective phonics instruction. A total of 1,173 slates were distributed, along with chalk, pens, rolls of paper, lesson plan and scheme books, as well as balls and skipping ropes, to promote learning through play.

For many children, this was their first experience writing on slates. One P7 pupil from Ocettoke Primary, Emma R, joyfully wrote on a slate: "I love it" — a testament to the excitement these materials brought to classrooms (see photo below)!

Lumule Primary receiving classroom resources

"This programme will continue with or without development partners, because we have already benefited from the training, and seen that it works well for teaching reading and writing. Teachers who were trained should roll it out to others, and this is our sustainability plan."

Mr. Lawot Anthony Lam, District Education Officer

"The phonics training gave us a clear roadmap. Before, I used to skip reading lessons because I felt unequipped with reading skills. The five steps of phonics gave me an organised way of teaching, and now my pupils are eager to read and write!"

Odong Reagan Nebson, English Teacher, Lagot Cugu

Emma R. (P7), Ocettoke

MEGA PHONICS EXPANSION, KITGUM
JANUARY - DECEMBER 2025

African Revival — Investing in Education

Book Distribution

In total, 5,115 Set 1-3 phonics readers, 30 teachers' phonics manuals (procured from READ For Life in Gulu), and 40 bilingual folklore storybooks in Acholi and English (published locally) were distributed. In addition, seven schools received a total of 746 storybooks from Book Aid International, and Ocettoke Primary was given a wheelable library as part of African Revival's Read Together project.

Wheelable library provided by African Revival

"The bilingual stories are the best books for making learners understand vocabulary easily, and those are the exact stories we were told at the fireplace by elders."
Mr. Nyeko S. Noeh, Deputy Headteacher

"Thanks for such a creative idea of bringing a wheelable library into the school. Teachers can easily move books across classes with less challenges, the books are termite-free."
Mr. Obur Richard, District Inspector of Schools

DEAR Day - Drop Everything And Read

On 19 March 2025, Kitgum Matidi Primary School hosted a DEAR Day celebration to promote a school-wide culture of literacy and critical thinking. The event engaged 553 participants, including pupils and staff, in diverse reading activities such as teacher-led read-aloud sessions, silent reading, collaborative group discussions and reflective exercises.

The day demonstrated the power of collective reading to spark curiosity, enhance literacy, and foster community. Pupils not only interacted with texts but also reflected deeply on their relevance to personal growth and societal values.

"It was fun when Madam read the story with different voices. It felt like the story came alive!"
Peace L.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Joint Monitoring

In November 2025, a joint monitoring exercise was conducted in four of the ten project schools — Opette, Lumule, Okidi, and Mucwini — bringing together representatives from African Revival, the District Education Office (DEO), the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), and a Centre Coordinating Tutor (CCT). Ten teachers were observed delivering structured phonics lessons, with their practice evaluated using the standardised scoring system; the aim was to observe phonics teaching practices, assess teacher competencies, and provide constructive feedback.

Joint Monitoring Insights:

Results revealed notable variation across schools. Ocettoke, Mucwini, and Kitgum Matidi stood out, each achieving average lesson scores of 75% or higher, and every observed session in these schools met or exceeded the 60% threshold considered satisfactory for phonics instruction. Lagot Cugu, Alune, Lokira, and Lumule also demonstrated consistent quality, all achieving satisfactory lessons in the sessions observed, with average scores ranging from 69% to 77%. In contrast, Opette and Okidi faced greater challenges, with average scores of 57% and 49.5% respectively, and fewer lessons reaching the satisfactory mark.

Observation Results:

Project School	No. lessons observed	Average score (%)	Range (Min – Max)
Ocettoke	3	77.7	76 - 80
Mucwini	3	77.3	72 - 82
Kitgum Matidi	3	75	72 - 77
Logot Cugu	3	71.3	61 - 66
Alune	2	69	66 - 72
Lokira	2	69	65 - 73
Lumule	2	69	68 - 70
Opette	3	57.3	54 - 62
Okidi	2	49.5	43 - 56

Observers linked strong performance to early lesson preparation, consistent modelling of sounds, and active use of slates and phonics readers. In high-performing classrooms, teachers used teaching aids effectively, organised group and pair work, and ensured all learners, including those at the back, were engaged. Pupils in these schools confidently articulated, wrote, and blended letter sounds, reflecting clear progress in foundational literacy. The participatory approach fostered motivation and improved classroom dynamics, with learners enthusiastically distributing materials and marking each other's work.

In schools where performance was lower, the monitoring team noted that teacher absenteeism, recent teachers' industrial action, limited use of learning aids, and challenges with classroom congestion contributed to less consistent lesson quality and pupil engagement. In Mulago, no lesson observations could be conducted in Term 3, as one teacher did not return after the holidays/strike action, and no information was available as to their absence, highlighting the ongoing challenge of staff retention and attendance in some rural schools.

Overall, stakeholder feedback was highly positive. The DEO highlighted significant improvements in reading and writing among P1–P3 pupils and stressed the importance of sustaining phonics instruction across the district. The CCT noted better delivery of phonics content and greater learner engagement, while the CAO's representative reaffirmed the district's commitment to expanding the program beyond the current partnership.

African Revival | Investing in Education

Endline Results

At the end of the project, the same EGRA used at baseline was repeated in both project and control schools, to measure any changes in children's literacy levels.

Table 2, below, shows that across all grades, pupils in project schools, made clear progress from baseline to endline. In P1, pupils progressed from very low starting points to solid early decoding skills by year's end. P2 showed rapid improvement in recognising letter sounds and reading real words, marking a key transition toward fluent reading. P3 demonstrated the most pronounced gains, especially in story reading and real word recognition, indicating that pupils were not only decoding but also reading connected text with greater speed and accuracy. The strongest improvements were seen in letter sounds and real/made-up word reading, reflecting the impact of focussed phonics instruction. While reading comprehension scores started low (particularly in the early grades) steady progress was observed, consistent with the typical pattern where comprehension follows gains in decoding and fluency.

Table 2. *Project schools' EGRA results: Endline vs. baseline, by grade and subtask.*

	Grade	EGRA Scores	Letter Names	Letter Sounds	Real Words	Made-up Words	Story Reading	Reading comprehension
Project Schools	P1	Baseline	2.75	0.10	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Endline	11.24	4.31	0.77	0.23	0.13	0.01
		Absolute change	8.49	4.21	0.71	0.23	0.13	0.01
	P2	Baseline	13.27	2.79	1.03	0.03	0.13	0.02
		Endline	26.28	12.50	3.89	1.39	2.76	0.15
		Absolute change	13.01	9.71	2.85	1.36	2.63	0.13
	P3	Baseline	25.50	5.57	5.64	1.41	3.19	0.14
		Endline	44.45	16.75	17.98	6.69	19.84	0.85
		Absolute change	18.96	11.17	12.34	5.28	16.65	0.71

Table 3, below, shows that across all grades and reading subtasks, project schools out-performed control schools at endline, with the largest differences seen in P3 story reading, letter names and letter sounds, as well as in P2 letter sounds. In the earlier baseline comparison, project and control schools were broadly similar at the outset, with project schools even slightly lower in some areas, particularly in P1. It is important to note that two control schools (Lamola and Ojuma) are located nearer an urban area, where pupils are more likely to have attended nursery school and received English-medium instruction prior to P1, which may have contributed to higher early scores in some control classes. Some improvements in control schools may also reflect the movement of trained teachers and pupils between schools during the project period. Despite this, project schools achieved greater progress and higher endline outcomes across all key measures.

Table 3. *Baseline EGRA results: Project schools vs. control schools, by grade and subtask.*

	Grade	EGRA Scores	Letter Names	Letter Sounds	Real Words	Made-up Words	Story Reading	Reading comprehension
Endline EGRA	P1	Project School	11.24	4.31	0.77	0.23	0.13	0.01
		Control School	11.16	1.11	0.55	0.03	0.02	0.00
		Difference (Proj - Ctrl)	0.08	3.20	0.22	0.21	0.11	0.01
	P2	Project School	26.28	12.50	3.89	1.39	2.76	0.15
		Control School	18.66	1.56	1.24	0.12	0.19	0.01
		Difference (Proj - Ctrl)	7.63	10.94	2.65	1.27	2.57	0.14
	P3	Project School	44.45	16.75	17.98	6.69	19.84	0.85
		Control School	32.06	4.71	7.54	2.11	7.63	0.37
		Difference (Proj - Ctrl)	12.39	12.04	10.44	4.58	12.21	0.48

Project Impacts

Outputs

- **72 teachers** trained in phonics methodology across 10 project schools.
- **5,931 books** distributed, including phonics readers, teacher manuals, and bilingual storybooks.
- **1,173 slates** and other classroom resources provided to support interactive learning.
- **10 rural schools** equipped with new phonics resources and supported through regular supervision and monitoring.
- **Over 550 pupils** and staff engaged with reading activities at DEAR Day and other literacy events.

Outcomes

- **Significant Improvements in Literacy**: Project schools out-performed control schools in all grades and reading subtasks at endline, with the largest gains in P3 story reading, and identifying letter names and sounds.
- **Enhanced Teacher Confidence and Skills:** Teachers demonstrated improved lesson planning, classroom delivery, and peer support, with many reporting increased motivation and capacity to teach reading and writing.
- **Greater Pupil Engagement:** Pupils showed increased participation, motivation, and confidence in reading and writing, with many expressing excitement about new resources and classroom activities.
- **Sustainability and Local Ownership:** District officials and school leaders have committed to sustaining and expanding phonics instruction, with plans to roll out training to additional schools.

Challenges

Despite strong progress, the project team encountered several challenges:

- **Scheduling Delays:** Some teachers were not punctual to arrive for training in Term 1, causing sessions to begin late and run over schedule.
- **Competing Activities:** Inter-school sports, and Music, Dance, and Drama (MDD) event preparations in Term 2 disrupted training schedules and reduced attendance, though targeted teachers remained engaged.
- **Absenteeism:** Rural teacher and pupil absenteeism affected activities. Children are often kept home for chores, and when a teacher is absent without cover, pupils can miss an entire week of learning.
- **Staff Turnover:** New teachers joined after initial training sessions, requiring additional support.
- **Lunch Break Constraints:** Teachers do not receive lunch at school and must leave to find food, often returning late, which impacts afternoon learning sessions.
- **Industrial Action:** Teachers' strikes in Term 3 disrupted regular teaching and phonics training, leading to inconsistent lesson delivery. On their return, teachers focused on catching up examined-subjects as a priority, ready for Primary Leaving Exams.

The team responded by providing additional mentoring, flexible scheduling, and ongoing support supervision. District officials played a key role in encouraging teachers and ensuring resources were used appropriately.

African Revival | **Investing in Education**

Conclusions

One year of phonics training for teachers in Kitgum District has led to significant improvements in literacy and reading rates in several rural project schools, firmly establishing phonics as a foundation for all academic subjects. These gains demonstrate the transformative power of targeted teacher training and resource provision, and highlight the value of sustained, collaborative efforts between schools, district officials, and other stakeholders.

Our aim is for phonics to become a core component of primary teacher training in Northern Uganda, ensuring these gains are sustained and expanded in the years ahead. Research consistently shows that child literacy is vital for academic achievement and broader development. Improved literacy leads to higher exam pass rates, greater progression to secondary education, and long-term benefits for health, nutrition, civic participation, and poverty reduction.

The Mega Phonics Expansion Project has laid the groundwork for lasting change, with benefits that will continue to ripple outwards — impacting not only pupils, but entire communities, for years to come.

> *"I used to think phonics was only for the baby classes. But now I see that the sounds are found in the books our P4-P7 pupils read. The training connected the dots for me. The sessions were very active! We were not just listening; we were doing it. Using sound buttons has shown me exactly how to teach it."*
>
> **Mr. Oyat Johnson, P3 teacher, Alune**

> *"Before this training, I would simply tell pupils a word. Now I can give them the tools to discover the words for themselves. The training helped me in checking and correcting my word pronunciations. It has made me a better reading teacher, but also a better English speaker. I feel more confident and respected by my learners when I guide them."*
>
> **Ms. Akello Nancy, P1 teacher, Alune**

Budget

The cost of Mega Phonics Expansion project activities in 2025 was **£24,000**. This was broadly in line with our budget, with exchange rate fluctuations over the year averaging close to the peg rate of £1:4,500 UGX used to draw up the original estimate. This project was funded by underspends from previous phonics projects (largely originating from The Allen Trust), as well as proceeds from the AR Ball 2024.

Thank you from all the teachers trained in phonics this year for making this project possible!