

Mega Phonics, Kitgum – End of Project Report, December 2024

Introduction:

Mega Phonics was a two-year project, funded by African Revival – Investing in Education and The Allen Trust, that aimed to teach Phonics methodology to tutors and student teachers at Kitgum Core Primary Training College (KCPTC), as well as nursery and lower primary teachers at 10 rural schools in Kitgum District, to maximise both the geographical reach, and number of beneficiaries impacted.



Kitgum is located in the Acholi sub-region in the North of Uganda, which is still recovering from decades of brutal war. Education for children, particularly primary and nursery ages, was further impacted by enforced closures of schools for two academic years, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

KCPTC serves the districts of Lamwo (bordering South Sudan), Pader, Agago, Kotido and Abim, amongst others. In 2018, African Revival completed the building of a new model Early Childhood Development (ECD) Nursery and Training Centre at KCPTC, including a 1x3 ECD classroom block, 1x2 trainee classrooms, office and rest room, with latrines for pupils and staff, a playground, furniture and scholastic materials. We used the PTC as a base to implement our Phonics programme, since newly-qualified teachers will provide expertise to pupils in schools across the whole region throughout their teaching careers.

Why Phonics?

At present, literacy in Uganda is usually taught using rote memorisation techniques, which means children can recognise words they have already been taught but cannot tackle new words on their own. Phonics is an innovative, new teaching method, that correlates sounds with letters, providing children with a stronger literary foundation that is central to academic achievement in all subjects. In Uganda, awareness and acceptance of Phonics as an effective teaching method is growing and is recognised by the Government of Uganda. It is included in the syllabus for training primary teachers; however, it is not focused on in enough detail and there is therefore a large knowledge gap. Most voluntary teachers in rural schools are not familiar with Phonics at all.

Between 2016 - 2020, African Revival implemented two Phonics programmes in 45 primary schools in the Amuru and Nwoya Districts of Northern Uganda (funded by BFSS – British & Foreign Schools Society - The Allen Trust and several other donors), which trained over 100 teachers and provided in-classroom support. At the end of the 2018 programme, literacy rates had increased to 32.4% (from 12.9% before the project started). Since 2022, we have introduced Phonics training to 15 ECD teachers in another five schools in Amuru District, as part of our three-year Step Up project (again funded by BFSS). We have found that Phonics training not only improves literacy rates, but also improves teacher confidence and promotes collaboration between teachers. Teachers realise the importance of an effective classroom environment and develop learning aids to support lesson delivery. Other benefits to pupils

being taught Phonics include: increased motivation and participation in lessons, increased confidence to read and write, and improved reading ability.

As a result of these projects and the observed impacts, Phonics has been widely accepted by teachers, district officials, pupils, parents and other local community members in the areas we have worked in. The Mega Phonics project aims to ensure Phonics knowledge travels even further; outside of the project area, as newly-qualified teachers are assigned to other districts.

Project Activities:

In Y1, once Project Officer, Amos Ojok, had been recruited and an MOU had been signed with KCPTC and witnessed by Kitgum District Education Office, 39 rural schools in Kitgum District were surveyed and 10 project schools (along with 10 'paired' control schools) were selected and approved by the DEO. 18 of these were primary schools and two were nursery schools. A project launch took place at KCPTC in April 2023 and was attended by five local council and district/municipal education representatives, the Principal and Deputies of KCPTC, as well as headteachers and two teachers from each of the 10 selected project schools. The attendees were orientated on the purpose and main aims of the Mega Phonics project. KCPTC built time into their teaching timetable for Phonics training to take place.

Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA)

Baseline assessments took place in April 2023, in both the project and control schools, to establish children's literacy levels near the start of the project. A total of 840 P1-P3 pupils (15 randomly chosen from each class) were tested on their knowledge of letter names, letter sounds, real words, made-up words and comprehension.



Right: EGRA taking place at KCPTC Demonstration Primary School, with AR's Project Officer

EGRA testing was repeated with another 900 P1-P3 pupils in project and control schools at the end of October 2024, to measure the impact of providing targeted and intensive Phonics training to improve literacy.

Phonics Training

In Y1, the original aim was to teach 32 tutors and 136 in-service teachers at KCPTC, as well as 30 teachers from 10 surrounding rural schools, a good foundation of Phonics methodologies and how to teach them, including learning all Set 1 sounds. Participants were also taught how to make learning resources to enrich their classrooms.

- Training at KCPTC

Y1: The participants at the PTC were taught in groups of 50+ and each group was invited to attend four one-day sessions in total (each session ran from 9am-2pm, with breaks) –

1. Phonics introduction and Set 1 sounds.
2. Set 1 finish & refresh.
3. Classroom resource making.
4. Recap Set 1, finish resources, listen to recorded sounds & songs, lesson planning, how to use Phonics readers.

A total of 200 student teachers also attended the course in Y1, which was 64 more than initially expected. The additional students reported late for the course, during the second term. The students' departmental heads gave full support to our programme and mobilised students for the Phonics training. Participants were highly motivated to attend, because in most schools, teachers with knowledge of sounds have a higher chance of being employed.



Left: Phonics training being conducted by AR's Project Officer at KCPTC, right: students showing their work.

In Y1, 26 tutors from KCPTC attended the four training sessions. Not all of the 32 target tutors were able to attend, due to teaching responsibilities at the college – we knew this would be a challenge, but the majority did participate actively, to expand their knowledge of sounds and all were very excited to learn Phonics.



Left: Energizers during tutors' training, right: AR's Project Officer training KCPTC tutors

Y2: The following sessions were taught to participants at the PTC:

1. Revision of Set 1 sounds.
2. Introduction to Set 2 sounds.
3. Introduction to Set 3 sounds.
4. Refresh Set 2 & Set 3 sounds and resource making.
5. Recap Sets 1-3 sounds, songs, lesson planning and using Phonics readers.

In Y2, 186 student teachers attended the sessions. Sets 2 and 3 were learnt more easily, since some of the sounds are similar to Set 1 and therefore easy to decode.

Tutors' training took place during the school holidays in Y2, to try to allow more participants to attend, however, then the challenge was travel to and from the training, which was in some cases a long distance and expensive. 11 tutors fully completed the training, the majority of these were pre-service tutors who are based at KCPTC and not posted to other areas. All tutors appreciated learning Phonics, as before they had lacked the knowledge to support their students confidently with the skill..

"Before learning the sounds, I never had any concept that the letters in a word would have individual sounds. I feel I have learnt something very new this year." said **Joel Akera**, Tutor at KCPTC.

- Training Rural School Teachers

In Y1, a total of 39 K1-P3 (infant and primary) teachers at 10 project schools were trained in Set 1 Phonics. Two of the project schools were the model ECD and primary school based on-site at KCPTC. The aim was to train 30 teachers (three at each project school), but others were interested and were welcomed to sit in on the training sessions if they were able to. Training took place at each of the schools individually and consisted of:

1. Phonics introduction, Set 1 sounds and resource-making (two days).
2. Refresh Set 1 and lesson demonstrations (two days).

Participants embraced the training and by the end of Y1, all infant classes were being taught reading and writing using Phonics methodology. Teachers could identify sounds in words, were confident to correct their colleagues and gave positive feedback.

Right: Preparing for a lesson demonstration at Oryang Ojuma Primary School.



In Y2, participants attended the following sessions:

1. Refresh Set 1 (1 day) / Introduction of Set 2 sounds (1 day).
2. Refresh Set 2 & resource making (1 day) / Finish Set 2 & lesson planning (1 day).
3. Introduction to Set 3 sounds
4. Refresh Set 3 & resource making
5. Finish Set 3/ Resource making & lesson planning
6. Refresh Sets 1-3
7. Lesson planning, songs & videos

New sounds were taught and more guidance was given on pronunciation and how to conduct Phonics lessons for children. Teachers' pronunciation really improved, and the training boosted their confidence to recognise sounds and teach Phonics.

Right: Teachers training at Akworo PS.



Support Supervision for Rural Teachers

During term 3 (both years), teachers were supervised in the classroom teaching Phonics by AR's Project Officer. At some schools, these sessions were also attended by representatives from the District Education team, and a tutor from KCPTC. In the morning, teachers were observed and in the afternoon they received feedback and refresher training on sounds, and watched demonstration videos.

In Y1, 28 of the 30 target teachers were observed. Two of the ECD teachers missed the activity because they were absent from school. During the supervised lessons it was observed that, on average, teachers scored above 50% in terms of competent Phonics teaching. Most teachers had mastered the sounds well and were using them effectively in teaching.

In July 2024 (Y2), 4/10 selected schools were observed by the Kitgum DEO, Mr. Lawot Anthony Lam (two strong performing schools and two less strong). Not all teachers were able to attend the activity, as two were preparing for a district music competition at Akado Primary School and another teacher had left Odunglee Primary School. 9/12 teachers were observed. Teachers demonstrated good skills in teaching letter sounds, modeling letter formations, engaging pupils to freely participate in lessons and making them repeat sounds. There was also good use of games and flashcards to make learning real. The teachers' average competency scores had increased to above 70%.

Mary Amony, Headteacher of Odunglee PS, told the DEO that after the Mega Phonics training, P2 pupils can now write exams without teachers reading the questions for them and P3 can read any words written on the chalkboard by the teacher.

Distribution of Classroom Resources

In Y1, the 10 project schools were supported with a delivery of classroom resources, to help them teach Phonics effectively. The items included 1,690 Set 1 Phonics readers, 40 Phonics manuals for teachers (procured from READ For Life in Gulu), as well as 773 slates, chalk, pens, paper, balls and skipping ropes, to support learning through play. Most of the project schools were government-registered and had curriculum-based textbooks, but the Phonics readers provided an opportunity for reading for fun, as well as practising sounds..

Right: Odunglee Primary School receiving Phonics readers.



In Y2, we distributed 3,380 Set 2 & Set 3 Phonics readers, lesson planning books for teachers, chalk, chalkboard paint, paper, masking tape, pens and other stationery. In addition, a total of 1,170 bilingual folklore stories printed in local Acholi and English languages (from a Ugandan publisher, Pangea) and 1,096 English story books donated by Book Aid International were delivered to the project schools, to further support improved literacy and enjoyment of reading. As part of AR's separate Read Together project, a wheelable library and book workshop were also delivered to KCPTC Demonstration Primary School.

Right: Pajimo PTA/SMC receiving scholastic materials.



Joint Monitoring of Rural School Teachers

Towards the end of November 2023 (Y1), a joint monitoring visit took place with AR's Project Officer, Mr. Okumu Amos Awira - Deputy Principal of KCPTC and two representatives of the Kitgum District Education Office (Mr. Okot P. Bitek - District Inspector of Schools, Chua West and Mr. Ocan Michael - District Inspector of Schools, Chua East). Three project schools were selected to visit - Oryang Ojuma, Lukwor and Pachua Pakuba Primary Schools – which included the best- and worst-performing project schools in relation to Phonics teaching, reading and writing.

During the visits, district officials observed beneficiary teachers, who had all completed training on Set 1 sounds, teaching Phonics. They gave positive feedback to both teachers and pupils, who were able to listen to sounds then read and write words including the new sound. The average observed lesson score was just under 73%, showing that teachers had successfully learnt and were able to teach Phonics methodology. The district officials were impressed by the impact Phonics training is having on both teachers and pupils.

Right: Inspector checking pupils work during a visit.



The Deputy Principal of KCPTC, noted that the teachers' competence in delivering lessons had greatly improved with Phonics training. Pupils' pronunciation was clearer and their phonological awareness had improved. Use of slates and chalks enhanced children's interest and participation in learning phonics by making learning fun. Children's ability to read with fluency and write well had improved at all project schools by the end of Y1.

In late November 2024, more joint monitoring took place at the best-performing (KCPTC Demonstration and Pajimo) and worst-performing (Oryang Ojuma and Odunglee) of the 10 project schools. Observers were AR's Project Officer, Mr. Anthony Lawot - Kitgum DEO (one school only), Mr. Kilama George - Education Secretary, Chua East, Mr. Okello Dic – KCPTC Academic Registrar and Mr. Komakech Michael - KCPTC Language Tutor. The average teaching competency scores were above 75%, with teachers teaching sounds well and pupils able to use sounds correctly in reading out words and writing simple sentences. The DEO was impressed with seeing a teacher read aloud, learners listening attentively and later answering

all questions asked by the teacher about the story. It was noted that P1-P3 pupils in project schools can now read and write words better than some of the upper primary pupils, which is likely due to intensive Phonics teaching.

Mr. Okello Dic from KCPTC commented that, teacher's variations of voices when sounding made lessons fun and pupils need to be taught in a fun manner to keep them alert and active during learning.

Right: Phonics lesson at Oryang Ojuma PS



Other Project Activities

In Y1, AR participated in International Literacy Day in Kitgum, along with USAID (who were also working on a reading project in some of the same project schools). AR's Project Officer taught 94 pupils at Demonstration Primary School a sound in a Phonics lesson and guided ECD student teachers to present how reading can be more effective when teachers teach Phonics sounds.



ARU Country Manager, Vincent Komakech and AR's Project Officer visited the new Kitgum DEO's office regularly over the two years, to give updates and build a relationship, and were invited to a Kitgum District Education Co-ordination meeting at the end of November 2024, where they were able to give a brief overview of the Mega Phonics project to the district team and other NGOs attending.

AR's Project Officer also attended the sixth graduation ceremony of the KCPTC Model ECD and distributed success cards for P7 candidates sitting their Primary Leaving Exams in the Mega Phonics project schools.

Project Outcomes:

A total of 26 tutors and 200 in-service teaching students at KCPTC, as well as 43 infant/primary teachers from 10 surrounding rural schools have improved their knowledge of Phonics methodology and been taught how to use learner-centered teaching techniques to confidently deliver the curriculum. Training on complex sounds, letter formation and creating learning aids to enrich classrooms has improved literacy, comprehension and writing. Teachers' Phonics classes were monitored, to ensure lessons were well-planned and student participation was good. All teachers received instant feedback after each class, to help develop their lesson delivery.

Project Impacts:

- This project has immediately impacted the literary education of more than 4,500 nursery and primary children currently enrolled at the 10 project schools (which include the Model ECD and Demonstration Primary School at KCPTC) and will impact countless pupils who

enroll in the future, as well as those that encounter trained teachers graduating from KCPTC at other schools in Uganda.

- 43 teachers in the district have increased confidence and new skills, so they can enrich their school environments with improved lessons and learning aids, and they can pass their Phonics knowledge on to other teachers in their own, or neighbouring schools. Rural schools in Uganda are typically under-equipped and under-staffed, so improving the standards of teaching will increase the standard of education dramatically.
- 26 education tutors will be able to pass on their knowledge to colleagues and future teaching students at KCPTC, and 200 trainee teachers are now able to take their Phonics knowledge and spread it across the region, as they are appointed teaching roles by the District Education Office. Student teachers are now able to identify mistakes made by their colleagues and correct them and 29 students testified that they are already teaching Phonics to infant classes in the schools where they have been posted.
- In Y2, learning of Set 2 & 3 sounds gave participants more courage in other teaching techniques, such as blending and segmenting sounds and words, teaching tricky words, lesson planning and lesson delivery. They widened their knowledge of alphabet letters, the 44 sounds in the English language and the 120+ different ways of writing them. The scholastic materials distributed made it easier for schools to implement the project, since before they had few supplies. The slates provided as part of this project have made a big difference to the way reading and writing can be taught. They make learning interesting and fun for the children and now everyone wants to participate in lessons.



Far left: ECD teacher supporting pupils to write the sound 'm',

Left: Phonics lesson with slates in P2 at Odunglee Primary School.

EGRA results:

At the start of Y1, neither the project nor control schools scored highly on any of the parameters tested, although there was some knowledge of letter names at all schools, especially from P2 onwards. Children hardly recognised any letter (Phonics) sounds or real 2-3 letter words in English (none in P1, average of 1 in P2, average 5-8 in P3). Pupils were unable to read or comprehend a simple short story. Children were also shy to take part in the testing. There was some improvement between P1 and P3, as you might expect with children developing and progressing through school. Interestingly, both ECD nurseries (project and control), where K3 pupils were tested, scored higher on letter sounds than P1 and P2 at all the 18 project primary schools at the start of the project. As all nurseries are private in Uganda some of these teachers had encountered Phonics before, which could explain this result.

By the end of Y2, pupils at project schools were confident while being assessed, although they were not competitive to answer as quickly as possible within one minute and could have

recognised even more. The average scores from the nine project primary schools are shown below – this is average correct answers within one minute, for each parameter:

Class	Letter names	Letter sounds	Real words	Made-up words	Correct comprehension questions
P1	40.01	24.50	10.86	4.57	0.21
P2	46.50	29.62	17.35	7.54	1.13
P3	66.78	45.46	37.97	21.09	3.49

The control primary schools did not perform as well, but still showed some improvement in Y2, especially in letter sounds, real words and made-up words in P3. We had intended control schools to show the effect of no Phonics training and assumed their scores would be similar to the start of Y1 (almost zero in P1 & P2 and very low in P3). However, many of these pupils did benefit from learning Phonics over the two years, as student teachers who were being trained as part of the same project at KCPTC were posted to these schools (and all over the district). This was an unintended effect, but shows that even a few teachers trained in Phonics dispersed to various schools can have an impact. Average scores for the control schools are shown below:

Class	Letter names	Letter sounds	Real words	Made-up words	Correct comprehension
P1	11.89	2.93	3.27	1.41	0.06
P2	21.50	5.60	6.49	3.62	0.49
P3	43.86	14.56	22.41	11.55	2.61

The project ECD nursery, where K3 pupils were tested, increased from average 29 letter names and 9 letter sounds at the start of Y1, to average 40 letter names and 29 letter sounds by the end of Y2. They could also read an average of more than 5 short real words in one minute, having not been able to read any at the start of Y1.

The control ECD improved from average 11 letter names and 2 letter sounds to average 34 letter names and 8 letter sounds. They were also able to read an average of just under 5 short real words in one minute.

The feedback given after the assessments convinced teachers in both the project and control schools that Phonics can improve reading if taught consistently at school.

Challenges:

- Poor time management and other study/professional demands led to some participants missing Phonics training sessions.
- Rural teacher and pupil absenteeism affected some activities. Children are often kept at home to help with gardening tasks and household chores in the morning. If a single

teacher is sick or absent, children may go the whole week without learning, if there is nobody to cover them.

- Transfer of teachers trained in Phonics to other schools – there is a need to improve teachers' welfare and motivation, especially where they are paid from parental contributions. Towards the end of Y1, the Kitgum DEO announced he was planning to move many teachers in the district to different schools (this is normal, every few years), which would have affected some of our project schools and therefore the outcome of our project, as some of our trained teachers could have been relocated. We convinced the DEO not to move any teachers in our project schools until after 2024.
- Some schools are packing slates and other resources in the store and not utilising them to improve education – headteachers have been tasked to ensure teachers use slates when teaching reading and writing.
- Thematic curriculum has greatly affected the ability of children to speak and understand English language in lower primary in rural schools. Almost all lessons are conducted in the native language of the area, with teachers reading and translating questions out of English, although children are expected to write their responses in English and national exam UNEB questions are set in English. Up to P3, some children find it hard to identify the names of letters in English. It is still beneficial to teach English Phonics sounds however, as most of the same sounds are shared with the local languages.
- Weather and end of term examinations caused delays to some activities.
- Pupils were slow in completing the EGRA assessments. Even though they now know letter names, sounds, and are even able to read words, they were not fast enough when doing the test within the time frame.
- Most schools have poor book storage facilities.

Testimonials:

"As teachers in government-aided schools, we hear phonetics from other teachers and kids in private schools. Here, we rely on government grants that have specific usage, thus making us unable to afford to hire an expert to train us in Phonics. We shall ensure that teachers make use of this opportunity."

Aryemo Brandy, Deputy Headteacher, Pachua Pakuba PS.



"This phonics training helped me learn sounds and correct mispronounced words to help me to improve on my sounding and my spoken English. Now I can say all the sounds in Set 1, sound and read words and I am taking this knowledge to my children at home and learners in Latolim Primary School, Lamwo District."

Lamwaka Immaculate, student teacher at KCPTC.



"We are so glad and happy to receive the first success card ever for the current P7 from AR. This shows you care about the children in our schools. Following the feedback of EGRA assessment, we used not to have P1 reading words with fluency but now we are excited that through Phonics our learners can read words they had never interacted with before."

Madam Lilly Grace, Primary Headteacher, Pajimo PS.

Budget:

This project was funded mainly by The Allen Trust, with unspent funds from AR's Phonics Expansion project, which had to stop during the Covid-19 pandemic. There was also a contribution from AR Ball '22 and AR Unrestricted. The overall project cost was **£43,772** - significantly under-budget, due to changes in project design (e.g. support supervision was ongoing and combined with joint supervision with the DEO at the end of the project, instead of a separate activity). A large fluctuation in exchange rate over the two years of the project also reduced the cost in GBP. Excess/unspent funds (totaling just under £20,000), will be rolled over to fund a new one-year project to provide Phonics training to 10 more rural nursery/primary schools in Kitgum District in 2025 – the Mega Phonics Expansion project.

Conclusion:

After two years of Phonics training for multiple beneficiaries in Kitgum District, we have observed improved literacy and reading rates in project schools, which has reinforced the value of Phonics as a teaching method and a strong foundation for all academic subjects. The aim is for Phonics to be prioritised in the syllabus for training primary teachers in Uganda, so it is taught in more detail going forward. Other NGOs, such as USAID and Play Matters, implemented literacy and other projects at the Mega Phonics schools during the course of the project, which have helped support African Revival's efforts.

Research has shown child literacy is vital for high levels of academic attainment in all subjects. With improved literacy, the number of children passing their Primary Leaving Exams, and therefore progressing into secondary education, should increase, and it has been proven that early interventions for disadvantaged children lead to improvements in survival, health, growth, and cognitive and social development. Improved education will have wide reaching impacts, not just on pupils but on the whole community, as it has been shown to have a causal and direct impact on numerous social markers such as sanitation, health and mortality, nutrition, civic participation, and rural poverty.



Report prepared by:

Amos Ojok, Mega Phonics Project Officer
Abi Dar, Executive Director



African Revival – Investing in Education

info@africanrevival.org

www.africanrevival.org | www.facebook.com/africanrevival | www.twitter.com/african_revival

Registered Charity No: 1108718 Company Limited by Guarantee No: 05169063