

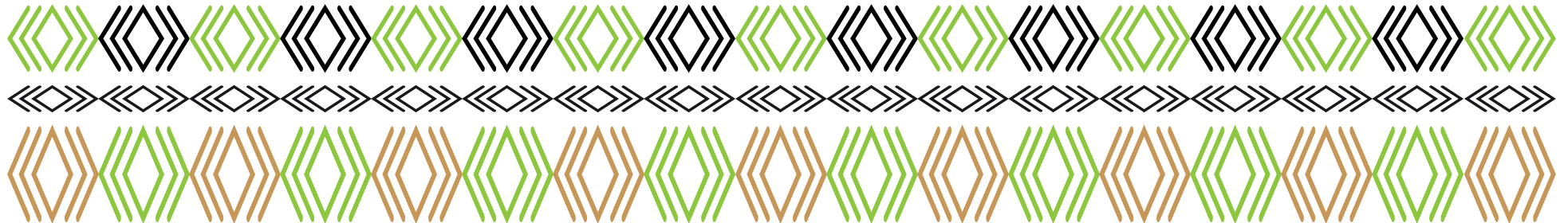


Voices of Resilience in Uganda

Struggle narratives of grassroots women in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The voices were sampled from some Districts in Uganda where NAPE is currently implementing the Sustainability School and Community Green Radio Programmes. For any feedback, please send your comments to nape@nape.or.ug or at at.kalangi@nape.or.ug

Voices of women from the oil-rich Albertine graben (Hoima, Kikuube and Buliisa Districts)

Sylvia Kemigisa, Chairperson of Kaiso Women's Group in Buseruka Sub County Hoima district.

For long, us women who live on the shores of Lake Albert have largely depended on the fish business for our livelihoods. Before oil activities started here about 10 years ago, we hardly had any other income generating activity that was not related to fishing.

The oil industry however, disrupted our fish business with security personnel stopping us for months from accessing the lake while surveys and explorations were going on. At the same time many people who came to our area to work in the oil companies or road construction companies started enticing girls into prostitution.

This forced me and some other young women to form a community-based organization (CBO) known as Kaiso-Women's Group. With the help of some NGOs we started sensitizing women to look at other sources of earning income besides the fish business. We started a drama group and recruited many women into it. We would perform at functions and earn some income. We would also use our drama to sensitise the communities on the importance of environmental protection and the dangers posed by HIV/Aids. We started making crafts, baskets, and bracelets among others and selling them in markets.

In 2019, some organization donated to us sewing machines and this boosted our work seriously. We started realising noticeable income which we would partly to develop our group but also share for personal use as members. Some of our group members who are single mothers could be able to take care of their homes and pay fees for the children. Those who are married could ably supplement their husbands' income while the unmarried girls in the group could not be easily enticed to run away with oil workers for little money.

Enter COVID-19 and the floods

When everything seemed to be going in the right direction, COVID-19 hit! One day in March 2020, we heard the President of Uganda on the radio imposing a countrywide lockdown. Public transport was banned, schools, markets and many other things were closed.





Though we had not registered any case of COVID-19 in our community, we were badly hit by the lockdown and the fear of contracting the virus. As if the outbreak of COVID-19 was not bad enough, Lake Albert flooded like we had never seen before all our lives and several houses at our fish landing site were submerged or completely destroyed by water. There was panic all around.

Our response to the pandemic

As reality sunk in that COVID-19 was not going away any time soon, we decided to devise ways as a group of combating the effects of the pandemic. We used the skills we had acquired in handling the challenges of the oil industry on this new challenge too.

Our first step was to come up with ways protecting the community members from catching the virus. We embarked on making face masks as per the guidelines of the ministry of health using our sewing machines and hands. We then started demonstrating to our group members and other women in the community on how to wash hands properly and regularly.

We sensitised and demonstrated to the community on how to boost immunity through growing and eating green vegetables. We established a demonstration site at our small office and many people are coming to us to learn and pick seedlings.

We are also teaching people how to grow mushrooms. We don't have money now, but we have food and hope that we can keep ourselves safe from succumbing to COVID-19. Since the president has started easing the lockdown, we hope that we shall resume our normal activities soon.



*[ABOVE] Some of the homes at Kaiso-Tonya fishing villages affected by the rising water levels of Lake Albert
[LEFT] Making masks as part of their efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19*



Norah Bahongye - Kigaaga Village, Hoima District

I am a single mother with eight children and several grand children. Many people in my village call me a radio addict. I am always listening to the radio while doing my work at home or in the gardens. I first heard about COVID on the Community Green Radio.

At that time we were told that a very strong virus was killing many people in outside countries. They said that old women like me were very prone to this new virus. I was not much worried about this virus because it was said to be very far away.

“ Many people in my village call me a radio addict...”

One evening in the month of March while I was sleeping, one of my grand children woke me up and told me that the President had announced that COVID had entered Uganda and that the country had been put on a lockdown. In my many years of existence I had never witnessed anything close to a lockdown or quarantine for human beings.

I started quaking thinking that I could contract the virus and succumb to it because of my old age. I continued listening to the radio and heard that it was possible for one to prevent herself from catching the disease. I kept following all the guidelines and I kept myself busy in my gardens.

The good thing is that I always grow all kinds of nutritious foods such as pumpkins and green vegetables. I keep feeding well, taking local herbal concoctions for immunity boosting and steaming in the evenings. I am in very good health and I am no longer so scared about the virus. The few children who are still staying with me at home are all strictly following my guidelines for preventing COVID-19.



**Katusabe Grace Muhoojo, Kakindo
North Buliisa District**

I am a catechist and at the same time a fishmonger. Early this year during a market day, we were chased by security officers saying they don't want people to gather. That is when I got to know that there was an outbreak of COVID-19.

Since then, life has never been the same. I had just got a loan to put in my business. When the businesses were put to halt, my business was affected and my money wasted. I used to buy fish of shs.1,000,000 and take to Panyimur market and other places for sell but that is no more. I have spent all the money I had saved, my business capital and even the borrowed money.

You see, I have 12 children to feed. The big problem is that I was born in

a fishing home and I had no previous experience in gardening. All my all life has been rotating on the fish business; moving from one place to another as a fishmonger.

Therefore, this pandemic has greatly affected me. To make matters worse, the rising water levels of Lake Albert have also displaced us from our home. We are now staying in a temporary shelter. Life is not easy at all here for sure. We now eat one meal a day.

One big lesson I have learnt from COVID-19 is that one should not put all eggs in one basket. I am now in the process of looking for some land where the children and I can start practicing agriculture.

I have also learnt that it is very helpful to be good to people when things are still good. I don't know how we would be surviving if it was not for some assistance from well-wishers.

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Lucy Mbuubi-Butimba Village, Kikuube District

I am a mother of four and a teacher at Wambabya Primary School in Kikuube District. I am also a volunteer in many community groups especially those working on women empowerment and environmental conservation. One of those groups is Butimba Sustainability Conservation Association (BUSUCA).

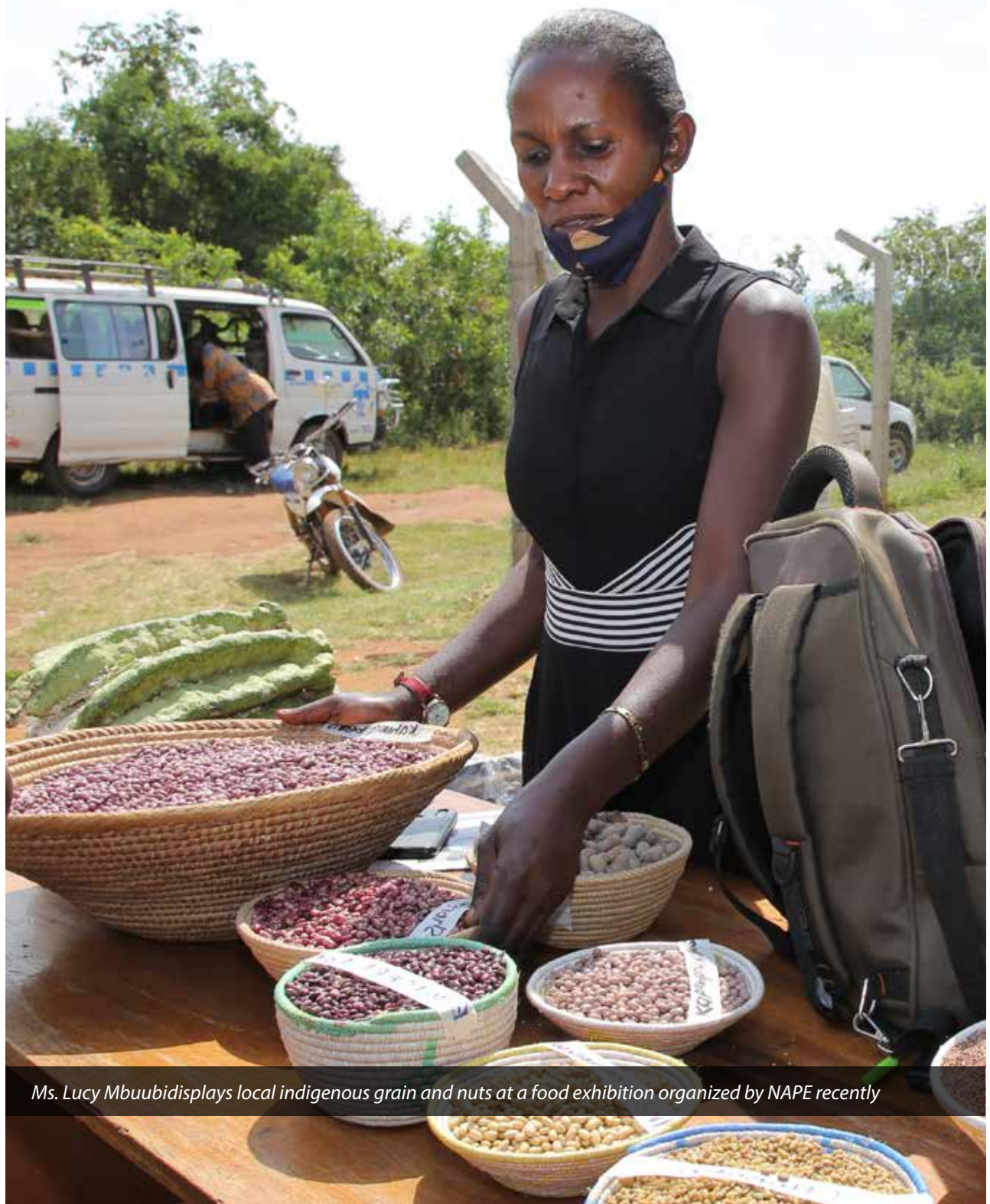
As a community volunteer and women activist, COVID-19 presented a big challenge to me and my colleagues. We had to move around different homes to see how mothers were coping. The lockdown and ban on public transport was specifically hard for expectant mothers and mothers of young babies. One had to first get permission from the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) to be able to use any kind of private vehicle to hospital. We had to try our best to ensure that these mothers got these letters in time.

The families that were hit hardest by the COVID-19 lockdown are those without enough food. Luckily enough many homes in my community had food. At BUSUCA we have been promoting food sovereignty for all households and this pandemic has given our campaign more meaning.

When accessing health centres became a problem for many people during the lockdown, we turned to using local herbs which our grandparents had always used. There are all kinds of herbs around us to treat all sorts of ailments for children and adults which had been neglected. The unfortunate thing is that environmental degradation is a threat to the survival of these medicinal plants.

There is a small indigenous forest in our village which we have been conserving but with a lot of pressures from local businessmen who want to turn it into a rice field. This very forest has now been a source of herbal medicine for the whole village.

We hope that all people will now take the lessons learnt from this pandemic seriously.



Ms. Lucy Mbuubi displays local indigenous grain and nuts at a food exhibition organized by NAPE recently



Anna Basiima- Kigaaga Village, Hoima District

This COVID-19 has been a serious problem to all our families but it has also opened our eyes. It has worked as a wakeup call to many of us that any time problems can come and maybe only those who are better prepared can survive. I am a mother of 13 Children and I belong to the Kigaaga Oil Refinery Community Women Development Association (KORECWODA).

When the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed, all the children came back home. I saw that as a challenge especially in terms of feeding them, but it presented an opportunity for getting support in our projects. I involved them in the beekeeping project of our group. You see, when COVID-19 came, we were told by the President of Uganda that it had no medicine.

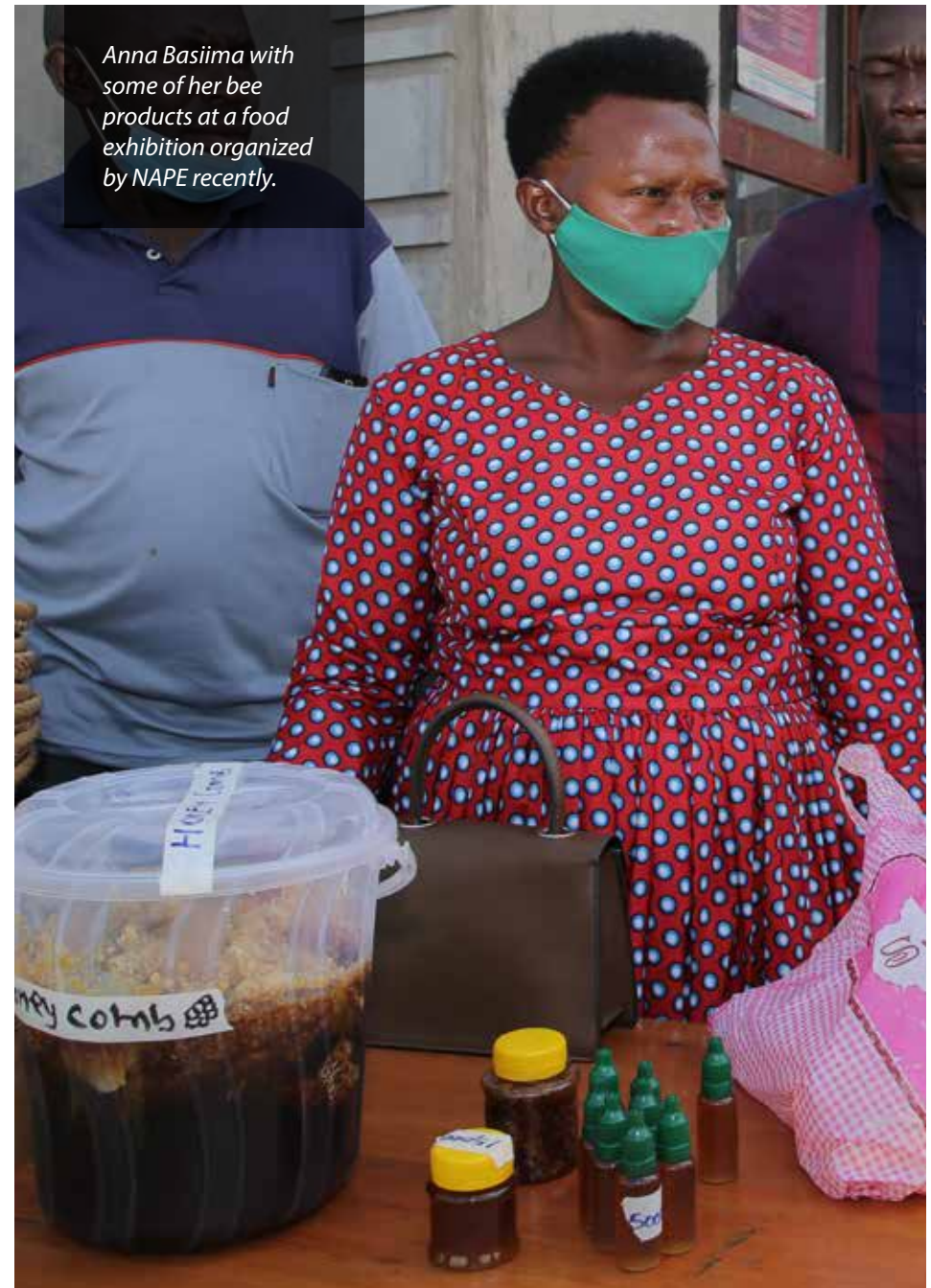
Later we heard on the radio that honey and its products were very good in preventing people from catching COVID and also treating those who are already infected. With this, we had to double our efforts in honey production.

“ There is high demand for bee propolis and in the last three months we have sold over 1,000 bottles of propolis tincture. With the money obtained, we have been able to add 40 more beehives to our group.

We also emphasized the making of bee propolis which is said to be treatment for a variety of diseases including some viral infections. Right now many people including Chinese who are working on oil projects are coming to our place looking for honey. There is high demand for bee propolis and in the last three months we have sold over 1,000 bottles of propolis tincture. With the money obtained, we have been able to add 40 more beehives to our group.

We are calling upon all people not to let the COVID-19 pandemic to lower our spirits. We should work harder utilizing all opportunities available to us. We thank organisations like NAPE which have been giving trainings on how to remain resilient to such big societal shocks.

We also thank NAPE for training us on good practices in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and also giving us some items to use such as hand wash water tanks and temperature thermometres.





Jennifer Businge from Kigwera village in Buliisa District.

The COVID-19 times have been tough for our community. All the children were sent back home from the schools and many spend the whole day loitering in the village. We have heard many cases of young schoolgirls who have gotten pregnant during this period. When COVID-19 broke out, the children were sent home from school. To make matters worse, the government established a military detach in our village to enforce the lockdown and probably stop the fish trade on Lake Albert. These soldiers are a menace to everyone, and we hear that they are responsible for making some of the schoolgirls pregnant. We have reported them to higher authorities, and we are still waiting for action to be taken on them.

But the COVID-19 hardships have been felt by different families differently. The families that have enough food have not suffered too much. I am an example of those that have kept so busy during this lockdown. I am a mother of four school going children. Since they are all home now, I have engaged them in cultivation and other home-based projects. We have cassava, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and many other food crops in my gardens. I am also rearing rabbits, pigs and chicken. I am not so badly off generally because my family is food secure and is feeding well.

I feel it is my duty now to use this COVID-19 pandemic as an example to sensitise other women in my community to mind about food security at all times.



Voices of women from the central region districts of Kiboga and Kyankwanzi



Sarah Kamyuuka from Kapeke Sub-County in Kiboga District

For me, COVID-19 found me when I had something I was doing at home. I am a beekeeper, and this business does not require much so I kept doing my work as usual. March was a honey harvesting season and so I harvested and packed my honey as usual. The only challenge was taking the honey to Kiboga

Honey Possessors Cooperative because movements were restricted. But still I would send it on a motorcycle. Despite this, the market demand for honey has increased. Honey is said to be very good for COVID-19 prevention and treatment. In addition to bee keeping, I also have my gardens of cassava, beans, and others so my family has been food secure all through.

When the children were sent home, I started training them in beekeeping business to keep them busy. I trained them on how to tap bees and clean beehives, how to harvest honey and now they are the ones doing most of the work.

This COVID has taught us to save and store more food because most of the people who have suffered are those without food.





Sarah Kamyuuka's children attending to the beehives. [LEFT]: Kamyuuka displaying a small bottle of bee propolis which is said to cure many diseases including giving fast relief to COVID-19 patients

Nabilanda Lamula from Nkokonjeru village in Lwamata Town Council

COVID-19 has affected me like any other Ugandan but not so badly. I am a peasant farmer engaged in growing crops like beans, cassava, coffee, vegetables, ground nuts and I also rear goats and chicken.

When the children were sent home from schools some families that did not have enough food panicked. I would have been on tension too if I did not have enough food to feed the children on during this endless holiday. I am concerned about my children's long stay from school but in the meantime we are all doing our best to keep safe from COVID-19 through regular hand washing and wearing masks whenever we go to public places.

This COVID has taught me to work harder, have more than enough food and also join income saving groups.



“ COVID-19 affected us so much as town dwellers. I was teaching at some school and alternating with running a small restaurant which were all closed due to COVID-19 providing food for my family. I was saved by some members of my group most of whom are farmers. They would call me and give me food.

COVID-19 has taught me how to save and to work hard. I have learnt how to cultivate and now I have a garden of maize and I have harvested beans. I have also started weaving and now I can make some side money even when schools are still closed.

Kayesu Moreen, from One Green Heart Women's Association in Lwamata Town council



Kengonzi Janat, from Lwamata Town Council

We got to know COVID-19 outbreak from the media. We heard how people were dying and it got us scared. Community Green Radio started sensitizing us on how to protect ourselves by putting on masks, ensuring social distancing and later the government put a lockdown. This affected us so much especially town dwellers because we were not ready for it.

We did not have enough food and our businesses were closed. It opened our eyes to think beyond one business and we have been engaged in different income generating activities as One Green Heart Women's Group like weaving and saving money.

Community Green Radio gave us a hand washing water tank which we have been using to sensitise other people on the importance of washing hands to curb the spread of the pandemic. They have also given us a platform on radio to give our thoughts on the pandemic and what we are doing to prevent it.



Esther Nanvubya, Kiyuni village in Mulagi Sub-County in Kyankwanzi District

I am happy that Community Green Radio gave us a handwashing water tank to help us sensitise the public that handwashing is the first medicine to treat COVID-19 and putting on masks.

While handing over this hand washing water tank to us, we were trained to wash our hands with soap every time and ensure that we avoid touching soft parts like the mouth, ears and the nose. Since my home is near the road, this tank has helped many people because they pass by to wash their hands. COVID-19 has not affected me so badly because it found me when I had my savings and food secure.

We were trained on the radio that we need to eat balanced diet to build strong body immunity systems to fight COVID-19. So I put much emphasis on growing green vegetables.





**Nabakooza Annet, Kyanga village,
Kiboga Town Council**

I live in Kiboga Town Council and like other town dwellers, we don't have much land where we stay. I am an ardent listener of the Community Green Radio especially the **Nyinabwenge** (Mother of knowledge) Programme.

Listening to the radio and watching some agricultural shows on television have inspired me to be more creative and use our small plot of land productively.

By the time of the COVID-19 lockdown, I had already embarked on kitchen gardening but on a small scale. Now with schools closed and children back home, we concentrated on intensive agriculture around our house.

My husband is a politician and is away from home most of the time but he is supportive of my initiatives. We grow onions, tomatoes, cabbages, and dodo among others. We plant in sacks mostly because there is not much land to till. We use organic manure also collected around the home and our yields are usually so high.

During the lockdown most other markets were closed apart from the food markets. Being near town it was easy to send our products to the markets. So we have been eating healthy but also making some money during these COVID times.

We strictly follow guidelines for preventing COVID-19 spread at home.



No visitor can for example enter our home without washing hands. I have been invited to appear on the Community Green radio to sensitise the listeners on kitchen gardening. I will be going there very soon.

[ABOVE] Nabakooza shows off a large cabbage she grew in a sack in her compound [RIGHT] An improvised hand washing facility at Nabakooza's home

Voices of women from the Ssesse Islands (Kalangala District)

Nakacwa Susan - Buyoga Village, Kalangala District

I am a mother of eight who practices small scale farming here on Ssesse Islands. As a family, we mostly grow sweet potatoes, cassava, maize and beans. We grow food on small plots since most of the land on the Island was taken over by the palm oil companies especially, BIDCO.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown, we would sell most of our surplus food to the fish landing sites such as Kyagalanyi, Nakatiba and Kaagonya. But that market collapsed so we now grow food only for home consumption. All the children are out of school and we have a problem of them loitering around endlessly. As the reality of COVID-19 hit us, Bujumba Sustainability Development Association (BUSDA), a local CBO invited us for trainings.

They trained us on how to avoid catching the corona virus. We were trained on how to make our own face masks like the one I am wearing. We were trained on how to boost our body immunity through eating food rich in vitamins. We were encouraged to have vegetable gardens around our houses.

I have now grown a lot of vegetables and I am actually getting money from them. This COVID-19 has taught us how to be resilient when faced with serious hardships.





Firida Namusoke-Bujumba Village

I am a mother of 8 children and I have stayed on the Ssesse Islands most of my life. Before the oil palm companies came to our Island, life was very good and affordable. The soils were fertile and from small gardens we would get enough food for our families.

We would supplement this food with wild fruits and mushrooms from the forests. When most land was converted to palm plantations, we had to learn how to grow food on small plots and also rear some animals. It is this surplus food that we have been selling in the markets to get some income.

When the government imposed the COVID-19 lockdown and the markets closed, we started suffering. We had no other source of income and we started fearing that if any of our family members got sick, we would not have any money to take them to hospital. With training received from the BUSDA CBO, we decided to revisit our traditional ways of treating diseases using local herbs from the forests.

Many of us started missing the many forests we used to have around us which have all been cleared to pave way for oil palm plantations. Still we had to utilise the remaining patches on natural forests on the island. We started trekking to these forests in search of herbs and mushrooms. I am a talented mushrooms collector.

So during this lockdown, I and my children have made several trips to the forests and collected mushrooms which we have smoked and preserved to be eaten in the months ahead. Mushrooms are also said to be serious immune boosters so many people have started coming to my home to buy them and I have started making some money. If wild mushrooms were still abundant as they used to be, I would certainly become a very rich woman now.

Annet Nakato-Bujumba Village

I stay here in Bujumba village where our family's main source of income is small scale farming. We grow a number of food crops such as cassava, sweet potatoes and maize. We also keep some animals such as goats and chicken.

Like all other families in the neighbourhood, when markets and public transport were suspended due to COVID-19, we had nowhere to sell our farm products. We were stuck at home with all the children but no money and yet the lockdown was taking so long.

In our women groups in the village we agreed that we could not fold hands just and wait for the lockdown to end. We said that each of us should do something that would bring in some profit now or in the future. It is then that I concentrated on making mats.

I have made so many mats especially with the help of my children who are now at home. I hope that when the markets fully reopen, I will sell them and make some good money. In that way the regrets of the COVID-19 lockdown will be minimised

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