United Movement to End Child Soldiering (UMECS-Uganda)

Organization’s Information
United Movement to End Child Soldiering (UMECS-Uganda)
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Description of specific project, practice or technique:

UMECS-Uganda has pioneered a project, using specific innovative practices that have great potential, to demonstrate that a nation submerged in war for three generations can build a sustainable culture of peace to prevent new wars. Furthermore, this project is being integrated into the recovery and development strategies of post-conflict Northern Uganda and developmentally, throughout Uganda. The name of this project is Peace Education and Guidance & Counseling in Secondary Schools in Northern Uganda. UMECS’ chief project partner is the Ministry of Education and Sports. The project, piloted last year in 2010, was funded by USAID/Uganda and is now in its mainstreaming implementation stage.

Following a brutal twenty-year war in Northern Uganda, the twin pillars of peace and development are foremost in people’s minds. UMECS believes that what happened to two million people in Northern Uganda should never happen again, not in Northern Uganda, not in East Africa, not anywhere.

UMECS-Uganda’s Peace Education and Guidance and Counseling Program in Secondary Schools in Northern Uganda is building a culture of peace to prevent new wars by building peaceful schools and communities linked to addressing the psychosocial counseling and guidance needs of war-affected youth.

In 2009, in a highly competitive process, UMECS-Uganda won a grant from USAID/SPRING in Uganda to pilot Peace Education and Guidance and Counseling in Secondary Schools in Northern Uganda in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sports. Chief goals: building a culture of peace to prevent new wars, building peaceful schools and communities, replacing cycles of revenge with reconciliation and linking peace to economic and social development domains.

The project was piloted in seven secondary schools in Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts and in the National Teachers College-Unyama (Gulu, Northern Uganda) with remarkable results and transformative experiences. A major long-term objective: to mainstream the pilot throughout Uganda’s secondary education and teacher training systems.

Project Rationale
There have been multiple wars in Uganda since Independence, the latest being the protracted war in Northern Uganda. Preventing new wars and recurring cycles of revenge can no longer be left to chance. Wars must be prevented because once wars start, they rage out of control like forest fires. To prevent new wars, communities affected by war must build a culture of lasting peace in which people co-exist and want to co-exist in harmony. This requires systemic strategies and long term commitment - and cannot wait! The next war is historically inevitable - unless it is prevented.

Project Components
1. Peace Education Classes
2. Student-centered Peace Activities (peace drama, peace compositions, peace poetry, peace debates, peace songs, peace music and dance)
3. Guidance courses (peer mediation, peer counseling, relationships, problem solving, decision making, academic enrichment, career guidance, et al)
4. Psychosocial Counseling – individual and group counseling
5. Peer Counseling, Peer Mediation and Youth Leadership Trainings
6. Inter and intra-school events

UMECS selected the seven pilot secondary schools (Pabo SSS in Amuru; Lira Palwo SSS in Pader; Kitgum Alliance in Kitgum and in Gulu district, Sacred Heart Secondary, Sir Samuel Baker School, Gulu College and Gulu High and National Teachers College-Unyama); established teacher selection criteria, selected and trained to certificate-level 88 secondary school teachers and lecturers in peace education and guidance and counseling. Student-centered curriculum was developed. The program rolled out in February 2010. Monitoring & Evaluation, including supervisory support visits by the Ministry of Education, were regularly conducted. Data was tracked, monthly reports compiled and ongoing video and photographic documentation was conducted. This year, 2011, the program continues, now in the mainstreaming stage.

Innovative Practices and Techniques:

1. The program is systemic in nature, assuring that each youth participant is immersed in the program’s activities throughout his or her secondary school career
2. The program is systemically integrated into the recovery and development of post-conflict Northern Uganda, and developmentally throughout Uganda.
3. The program is sustainable as it is being mainstreamed throughout the secondary school and teacher training systems.
4. The program is unique, combining peace education with guidance and counseling.
5. The program is replicable as the technique of building ownership into the teachers creates a huge pride and motivation amongst the teachers to implement and replicate the program.
6. Student roles are prominent. 2,441 students were trained as peer mediators and peer counselors in the pilot, creating an ethos of non-violence and student responsibilities to help their peers solve problems and improve their conditions.
7. Restorative justice replaced punitive justice at all seven pilot schools.
8. This year, a community outreach component is being implemented in which students conduct peace forums, workshops and trainings of youth in students’ village communities.

Year I Results

After one year, (Jan – Dec 2010), the program has had groundbreaking results:
Ø 2,441 students trained as peer mediators and peer counselors
Ø 88 teachers trained as peace educators and guidance counselors
Ø Eradication of bullying at all seven secondary schools
Ø Greatly improved academic performance
Ø Greatly reduced student indiscipline
Ø Transition from punitive to restorative justice systems at all seven schools
Ø Extensive healing of students from war-related trauma
Ø Significant improvement in student openness, self-awareness and confidence
Ø Creation of an ethos of non-violence at each school
Ø Student mandate and responsibility to create a culture of peace at each school
Ø Teacher empowerment and ownership in helping to create these transformations
Ø UMECS launched its Journal of Peace Education and Guidance & Counseling as a Ugandan, African and international forum of practice for peace educators and guidance counselors

Year II – 2011 Project Activities

1. The project mainstreams from this year, adding 14 new schools and continuing with all of the
2. The community outreach component commences, in which students become peer educators with their out-of-school youth counterparts in nearby and home village communities.

3. There is increased emphasis on training youth as peer educators, in addition to their role as peer mediators and peer counselors.

For more information, please visit www.endchildsoldiering.org to download key documents including the Journal of Peace Education and Guidance & Counseling.

**Information on the organization or agency including history and scope of work:**

**United Movement to End Child Soldiering (UMECS-Uganda),** a registered NGO, Registration Number S 5914/6805, started operations in 2005, became a registered organization in 2006 and fully operational in 2007.

Since 2005, UMECS-Uganda collaboratively establishes, administers and sustains community and school-based programs and projects which contribute to building a culture of peace to prevent new wars, build peaceful schools and communities, rehabilitate children and youth affected by conflict, foster self-sufficiency through entrepreneurship and jobs creation, address public health needs and link peace to sustainable development. Their programs and projects provide long term commitment to the communities and community institutions they serve and are established collaboratively, with local stakeholder and local and international partners.

**UMECS Mission**

UMECS supports secondary school and higher education for children and youth affected by conflict, together with school-based peace education and counseling and guidance programs, and helps to build a culture of peace to prevent new wars. We seek solutions to problems that foster self-sufficiency, have systemic implications and are sustainable.

**UMECS Vision**

A society, through its communities that builds and maintains a culture of peace, will reap the benefits of education, community building, sustainable development, environmental restoration, and global citizenship.

Core Values and Principles include: Transparency and accountability, partnership and collaboration, culture of integrity, community ownership, systemic strategies and sustainability, teamwork, long term approaches and relationships, respect for government and local structures, managing resources responsibly.

**UMECS-Uganda Programs and Projects:**

**Peace Education and Guidance and Counseling Program in Secondary Schools in Northern Uganda,** in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Sports:

The pilot was supported by USAID. Major goals: building a culture of peace to prevent new wars, building peaceful schools and communities, and providing guidance and counseling. There are four components: peace education classes, student-centered peace activities, guidance courses and psychosocial services. Groundbreaking results include eradication of bullying, improved academic performance, extensive healing.

**Northern Uganda Education Program:**

UMECS sponsors and mentors 111 war-affected children from secondary school through
higher education graduation. Established in 2005 and now in Year 7, this program is designed to uplift children and youth affected by war, including former child soldiers and child mothers, through long term commitment to their education and rehabilitation. Students are enrolled in cohorts in 18 partnered secondary schools in Northern, Northeastern and Central Uganda. UMECS is the only organization in Northern Uganda that sponsors war-affected children and youth from secondary school through higher education graduation. A major goal of this program is to prepare students to become qualified professionals, entrepreneurs and peace builders so they may meaningfully contribute to their families and communities. UMECS staff members provide mentorship, counseling and guidance and hold their students to high expectations. The majority of students are excelling academically and socially; many are in the top 10% of their classes. School head-teachers praise UMECS for the way they manage this program, and how their students remain disciplined peer role models. For more details on how this program is regarded, please visit the Tributes section of their website, www.endchildsoldiering.org

The A-Factor Project:
A developing program designed to transition from donor dependence for funding secondary, vocational and technical education to sustainable self-sufficiency through youth-led agricultural entrepreneurship and environmental conservation. A major program goal is to build ownership among key stakeholders – local government, communal land leaders and secondary, technical and vocational school leadership – so the implementation of the pilot has broad ownership. In this way, the program will become mainstream. UMECS believes that a society in which the majority of youth remain uneducated is creating entrenched poverty and seeding the next conflict. Unfortunately, the costs of secondary education are prohibitive for the majority of youth and their families throughout Uganda. Therefore, unless there are major paradigm shifts, the majority of youth will remain uneducated. The A-Factor Project is designed to create the next cadre of youth entrepreneurs and to shift mindsets that currently rely on donors to fund secondary education. Cohorts of youth on donated agricultural land will be trained in entrepreneurship, environmental conservation and successful, modernized agriculture. Youth will join small and medium size agricultural enterprises, become skilled in business and agriculture. The annual proceeds will fully fund secondary, vocational and technical education for youth participants. This gender-balanced project will also help reduce exploitation of girls and reduce human trafficking; girls will be able to empower themselves through education, economic and social development.

The E-Factor Project:
A developing program in partnership with the Faculty of Medicine at Gulu University is designed to drive massive investment in girls’ secondary education as an integrated strategy to prevent HIV/AIDS.

Strengthening Schools Program:
A program to strengthen teaching and learning in secondary schools through books, school library, science & computer lab campaigns.

Local Partners:
Ministry of Education and Sports; District authorities in Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum and Pader; National Teachers College-Unyama(Gulu); Gulu University; 18 secondary and technical schools in Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum, Pader, Soroti, Masindi and Kiryandongo districts; Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO)

International Partners:

Names, Titles and brief overview of UMECS-Uganda Staff:
Arthur Serota, Executive Director; Charles Onencan, Associate Executive Director; Joel Ojok, Counseling and Guidance Program Director; Margaret Akech, Peace Education Coordinator; Anthony Ojok, Education Field Coordinator; Douglas Openy, Accounts Manager; Job Ezama, Facilities Manager; John Oyubi, Assistant Facilities Manager; Ben Moro, Transport and Logistics Manager; Alex Okello, Intern; Denis Owor, Intern.

UMECS-Uganda leadership and staff are qualified professionals, most of whom hail from, live in and are affected by war as are its constituents and Northern Uganda communities they serve. UMECS staff is composed of qualified educators, social workers, psychosocial counselors, school administrators, finance managers, project managers, agriculturalists, published writers, youth mentors, leadership specialists and NGO managers.

Describe the context in which the agency works, analyse conflict, and indicate how this analysis has influenced the peacebuilding work of the organization:

UMECS-Uganda, anchored in Northern Uganda in 2004, established the Northern Uganda Education Program in 2005 while a brutal protracted war raged on. [The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in August 2006 and the peace has held since then.] The war began in 1985 and during its course, displaced more than two million people from traditional ancestral villages in which most families were prosperous and self-sufficient from land, cattle and agricultural production. Northern Uganda itself, until the war began, was known as "the breadbasket of the nation."

The war affected the entire Acholi sub-region, much of Lango sub-region and part of Teso sub-region. All three groups have strong cultural traditions, including indigenous reconciliation and mediation traditions, but the war overwhelmed these communities and turned their lives upside down.

Over a twenty-one year period, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or died from the effects of war. Tens of thousands of women were raped and mutilated. Over 30,000 children -- average age twelve but some as young as eight -- were abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army, a rebel group that led an insurgency in Northern Uganda. Abducted children were forced to become child soldiers and pressed into sex slavery.

The Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps to which most people were displaced were squalid, overcrowded and anti-cultural. Children under five died in large numbers from preventable and treatable disease. Women were depressed and there were many attempted suicides. Culture was severely damaged, children were raised without full supervision, traditional roles of adults and elders were sidelined and once prosperous self-sufficient peoples with well-established family and community support systems became dependent on handouts from the World Food Program.

From 2007 to 2009, the vast majority of youth and families returned to their ancestral villages to rebuild their agricultural systems and to start life anew.

The majority of UMECS staff hail from these communities and were deeply affected by conflict. Despite the ordeals they endured, they rose through education, family and community support to become qualified professionals and community workers, committed to building sustainable peace to prevent new wars.

UMECS analysis about this conflict, and about conflict overall, shows that conflicts often lead to violence, as they have multiple times in Uganda, until or unless communities and societies build a culture capable of preventing violence and new wars. This must be done proactively and
comprehensively, with a long term commitment to build a sustainable peace: a peace linked to economic and social development, environmental restoration, education, health and empowerment of women.

UMECS analysis shows, too, that child soldiering will not end until wars are prevented. This is because children are a soldier of choice in many of today’s wars. Hence, unless wars are prevented, child soldiering will continue.

UMECS also believes that long term commitments must be made to prevent wars; trying to stop a war once it has started is an unlikely proposition. Once wars start, they rage out of control. Additional factors keep wars going: factors such as war-time economies, revenge and profit through control of resources and power. In short, wars must be prevented.

In order to prevent wars, UMECS believes, relationship-oriented cultures of peace must be built, both within war-affected and post-conflict communities and between different groups. Why do wars start? Sometimes they are started by governments against marginalized groups. Wars also start through lack of trust, miscommunication, or competition for resources and political power. In short, there are many reasons wars start, but a common denominator is poor relationships between groups, often in which there are unresolved grievances.

Cultures of peace must be built within and between groups. Trusted relationships must be developed and maintained among all ethnic, cultural, religious and geographic groups within a country and region. In addition, strategies must be analyzed and implemented which can start and sustain processes of healing within and between groups.

UMECS analysis shows that in order to build sustainable cultures of peace, there must be systemic strategies. Short term or sporadic approaches may contribute to peace building, but they are not likely to have the needed impact of building sustainable, maintainable cultures of peace to prevent new war.

This analysis has influenced UMECS strategies, programs and projects. The UMECS commitment to systemic strategies led them to spend three years planning this program with partnered secondary schools and the Ministry of Education and Sports. Together they built a shared vision, ownership and strategies to implement Peace Education and Guidance & Counseling in Secondary Schools in Northern Uganda with the overarching goal to mainstream the program throughout Northern Uganda.

Building peace education into the secondary school system, now being mainstreamed, is a strategy to institutionalize peace-building, ensuring secondary students will become immersed in peace-building theory and experiential practice. It also helps to ensure children and youth become lifelong peace-practitioners, committed to building and maintaining cultures of peace in their schools, communities and greater society.

UMECS chose secondary school, instead of primary school or higher education, as its systemic forum -- with strong agreement by the Ministry of Education and Sports -- because secondary school is where children transition from adolescents to young adults. Secondary school is where children are most influenced by their peers, are forming their moral platforms and planning their lives. The results of the pilot program, now being mainstreamed, speaks volumes about UMECS analysis and strategies. The fact that USAID selected UMECS strategies as a pilot, and the Ministry of Education and Sports joined hands to institutionalize this program into the education system, demonstrates the impact of this program in building peace.

**Impact of work:**
The impact of UMECS-Uganda’s work is huge. It is believed this is a “first-ever,” the first time a government has partnered with an NGO representing grassroots communities in a post-conflict area to institutionalize peace education into the secondary school and teacher training systems.

It is likewise believed this is the first time a government has adopted and is institutionalizing into the secondary school system a grassroots-borne program with a chief goal of “preventing new wars.”

This peace program is no longer a pilot but is now mainstreaming into the Uganda secondary school and teacher training systems. The Ministry’s decision to mainstream the program is both a sustainability plan and a significant statement of policy.

To demonstrate the Ministry’s commitment to this program, Ministry of Education Commissioner George Wirefred Opiro wrote in the launch edition of UMECS-Uganda Journal of Peace Education and Guidance & Counseling: “The major goals of the Peace Education program are to systematically build a culture of peace so as to prevent new wars and build peaceful schools and communities. Peace education promotes forgiveness as a value and provides the values, skills and competencies to address conflict through dialogue, cultural traditions, relationship building and other nonviolent means…..The long term plans are to mainstream the program throughout Northern Uganda and ultimately throughout Uganda.” To download a copy of this Journal, please visit UMECS homepage www.endchildsoldiering.org Free Downloads section, central lower column.

In short, UMECS peace work through this program is having credible, systemic, groundbreaking influence on education and peace policies in Uganda, with a stated, committed goal of “building a culture of peace to prevent new wars.”

Likewise, UMECS peace work is having exceptional impact at the secondary schools in which the program is currently situated, on hundreds of teachers and thousands of students with multiplier effects in family and community lives.

An additional positive impact is the development of passionate, dedicated peace educators who see their roles as pioneering and fostering peace education as critical to building lasting peace.

There has also been impact with USAID in terms of seeing the benefits and impact of combining peace education with guidance and counseling, what is known in the field as “rice and beans.” Rice is good, beans are good, but when combined... So too with Peace Education, which is good, and Guidance and Counseling, which is good, but when combined... This model, combining the two disciplines, is demonstrating that guidance and counseling helps students to heal from trauma, become open, self-aware and supportive of peers. These processes of personal development, healing, and being trained as peer mediators and peer counselors lead toward understanding, believing in and practicing peace in its many forms.

As a further demonstration of impact, two months ago, a group in South Sudan, Solidarity for Southern Sudan (SSS), asked UMECS-Uganda for a meeting this year to share its Peace Education program so that it can be implemented in South Sudan by SSS as a means to build a culture of peace to prevent new wars. That meeting is currently being arranged.

Story of agency’s peace work:

UMECS-Uganda’s peace work has resulted in many inspiring stories of peace-building and transformation of people, policy, practices and systems. Here is one such story.
From November – December 2009, UMECS conducted certificate-level training of 88 teachers from the seven secondary schools which piloted the Peace Education and Guidance & Counseling in Secondary Schools Program. The teachers were surprised to discover that the majority of the training modules reflected their recommendations, thus creating in them a sense of ownership.

By the time the training ended, a great bond had been built among the teachers. Mr. Michael Obote, a UMECS-trained teacher in the program, characterized the impact of the trainings at the awards ceremony: “This has been more than a training we have attained. The opportunity has created a strong bond of brotherhood and sisterhood and created cadres of peace-builders, guidance and counseling educators throughout Northern Uganda.”

The following month, the teachers led the curriculum development for the curricula in peace education and guidance and counseling, guided by UMECS staff and curriculum specialists. What emerged was, in the words of the teachers, a “teacher-owned, student-centered” set of curricula. The role of vision, pride and ownership has stayed with the teachers ever since.

Last March 2010, as the new program was in the early stages of implementation, an incident occurred at one of the seven pilot schools which tested the teachers’ commitment to their training as peace educators and guidance counselors.

A young man at one of the seven schools, a former child soldier, having felt falsely accused in a dispute with the Deputy Head-Teacher lost control and threatened to do bodily harm to the Deputy. This was reported to the Head-Teacher who issued an order to expel the student from school.

Within an hour, some of the trained peace educators and guidance counselors heard about the incident and went to see the Head-Teacher to plead the soon-to-be-expelled student’s case. “We are now peace educators and our school was chosen to build a culture of peace, to pilot this program, to change the way we do things. Let us talk to the student and see if we can use our training and new practices to reconcile what happened.”

The Head-Teacher said: “I sympathize with what you are saying, but I must follow the rules. The rules state clearly that if any member of staff is subjected to violence or threatened with violence by a student, that student must be permanently expelled. I have no choice in the matter.”

“But, Head-Teacher,” one peace educator advocated, “we are supposed to be making change. How can we transform ourselves and our school if we are not willing to practice what we preach?”

The Head-Teacher relented. “Ok” he said, “I’m willing to give you a chance to see what you can do, but talk to the Deputy first. He was the one who was victimized. If he agrees, then take the next steps.”

The Deputy, it turns out, was feeling sorry that this incident was causing a student to be expelled. He gave the teachers his blessings to “try something new.”

The peace educators and guidance counselors, by now a group of six, found the student and they sat down together. The teachers explained the situation. He must, they insisted however, be willing to make change. Otherwise, their efforts would be a failure. They made it clear that he was still expelled, subject to his willingness to be open to wanting to change and seeking the means to change. The student listened intently, and seemed to appreciate the teachers’ honesty and sincerity. Up until this point, he said nothing and just listened.

Then he was told: “We know you had a difficult time during the war. We know you were abducted. Now you must help yourself to heal. And we will help you. We will work together.”
When the student heard these words – “And we will help you; we will work together” – he broke down sobbing. The teachers consoled him. “You have been keeping everything inside all these years. Now you no longer have to.”

With urging from the teachers, the student started telling his story of his long ordeal as a child soldier, what he had endured, and how this affected his humanity. Some of the teachers broke down as he told his story.

As the teachers and student sat together, as the student finally felt the trust and comfort to open up, he let out the stories and experiences he had had been hiding and ashamed to tell since he escaped his abduction. A great wave of relief overcame him, and he pledged he would now join a counseling support group and start the process of healing and reconciling. He thanked the teachers for their caring and compassion, noted that before he was abducted, he had been respectful and caring of his teachers and that he would restore himself through this new program and their support.

The teachers reported back to the Deputy, who was overjoyed, and to the Head-Teacher who rescinded the expulsion order.

From that point on, the student was a changed person. He went personally to the Deputy and apologized for his behavior, saying that he was now going to become a changed person. The Deputy gave him his blessings, pledging his support. He actively participated in the peace education and guidance classes, and joined a counseling support group. He had a successful school year and eventually became a peer counselor. He continues to do well today.

This story is one of many similar stories of what happened when the participating secondary schools in the UMECS peace education program transitioned from punitive to restorative justice principles and techniques. Last year was a groundbreaking year when students were no longer suspended or expelled, a year when peace was no longer just a word but a practice and a policy.