The slum

Child of Hope is based in Namatala, Mbale (Eastern Uganda) – an area which qualifies as a slum by all United Nations’ indicators. There are no up-to-date figures regarding the slum but it is estimated that there are between 30,000 to 40,000 people living in the area. Although development is coming, it is still the biggest slum in one of the poorer regions in one of the poorest countries on earth. Uganda is rated 161 of 187 countries in the UN’s Human Development Index.

Around half of the population are of school age but only around half of that number actually attend school. Housing is characterised by mud huts with grass-thatched or iron sheet roofs. These properties are rented at a rate of around £4 to £15 per month. Typically families of five or more share a mud hut, while some families share huts due to extreme poverty.

Sanitation takes the form of pit latrines (many installed by Child of Hope) as mains sewerage is not available to the majority. Mains water is available in the form of standpipes owned and managed by the landowners. So, many residents choose the river as a source of free water for domestic and animal needs – approx ½ km from the edge of the slum. At times, this gives rise to epidemics of typhoid and cholera.

Typically the families are headed by the mothers, as fathers are either physically or emotionally absent due to death, sickness, polygamy, alcohol abuse, etc. Many of these mothers struggle to find an income – choosing to scavenge through the streets or finding casual labour jobs. Financially they live a hand-to-mouth existence, with no means of saving for medical needs, school fees or rent payments.

And then it began...

Child of Hope was started by Moses Okotel, having grown up as an IDP himself. He started by assisting a handful of children with school fees. After marrying Bex, a British National, in 2007, he had a dream to start a nursery school in the heart of the slum.

The Child of Hope nursery was started in February 2008 for around 40 children in a borrowed church building. It became apparent that these children were malnourished and a feeding programme was added to the project.

A lack of affordable or available healthcare and social welfare assistance had to be overcome. Medicines and healthcare were needed for children falling sick. Advice, advocacy, training and intervention were required for those families in abusive or risky home situations – and a strategy for helping families out of financial crisis. So, a holistic approach was developed. CoH now has over 70 staff organised into departments of health & nutrition, welfare, education, income-generation and administration. Construction of our purpose-built school commenced in 2010 and was completed in 2015.

The picture today

Now Child of Hope School has 500 pupils (from nursery up to secondary) and over 200 of their parents are in an income generation scheme. The team works closely with the community, including local councillors, elders and church leaders, to ensure full ownership by community members, and that only the poorest of the local families access the programmes.

What’s next?

Until 2020, nearly all our primary leavers were sponsored in local secondary schools. Sadly, we were disappointed by the standard of education provided in them – and the subsequent decline of the children’s performance. So in 2020 we opened our own secondary school. We have a high reputation in the area and ten years of experience… so we believe we are ready to take on this new challenge!