

Enhancing OVC Adolescent Well-Being: Insights from A Comprehensive Survey on Health, Education, and Support Systems

Richard Okotel*

Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation, P.O. Box 1966, Mbale, Uganda.

*Correspondence:

Richard Okotel, Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation, P.O. Box 1966, Mbale, Uganda, Mobile: +256782605534.

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ABSTRACT

The age group that currently needs the most attention is the adolescent age. It is a transition age that, if left unaddressed, would have significant negative implications for the population. In Uganda, over 60% of the population is a young population putting pressure on the aging population in terms of health and dependency. This paper presents highlights on the current state of the adolescent age group and the implication on health of the population. In the highlights it was observed that the adolescents have challenges as far as education, health, employment, skills and knowledge on health-related issues. Over 50% of the adolescents face significant challenges that affect their health and how they address their challenges. A holistic approach is highly recommended to address adolescent issues at play.

Keywords

Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), Adolescent Well-Being, Health and Education Outcomes, Support Systems, Psychosocial Support.

Background

Adolescence is a critical developmental phase marked by profound physical, emotional, and social changes [1]. This paper presents findings from a comprehensive survey analyzing the interconnected dimensions of adolescent health, education, and support systems. The study explores educational attainment, mental health issues, key challenges, and strategies for promoting well-being. Results emphasize the importance of community engagement, supportive environments, and evidence-based policy advocacy in fostering positive adolescent development and resilience. This research highlights the need for holistic interventions that address both the root causes and symptoms of the challenges adolescents face today. Adolescence (ages 10-19) is a transformative period bridging childhood and adulthood (2). This stage is characterized by rapid physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development that shapes future health, behavior, and opportunities. However, evolving societal norms, academic pressure, mental health concerns, and limited access to essential services pose significant challenges to adolescent well-being. Understanding how health,

education, and support systems interact is critical for crafting effective interventions.

Despite being seen as a healthy stage of life, adolescence carries risks, including preventable illnesses, injuries, and even death. Patterns of behavior related to diet, physical activity, substance use, and sexual health often form during adolescence, influencing health outcomes later in life. According to WHO [2], empowering adolescents to take care of their well-being and that of others is crucial to safeguarding their future health.

Education: A Critical Lever for Well-Being

With 1.3 billion adolescents worldwide accounting for one-sixth of the global population their well-being is increasingly relevant. Most adolescents live in low- and middle-income countries, where 90% of this demographic resides. Each year, an estimated 1.1 million adolescents die, with leading causes including road accidents, suicide, and interpersonal violence. Health risks also vary with age and sex, with younger adolescents facing hygiene and sanitation challenges, while older teens are more affected by unsafe sex, substance use, and intimate partner violence.

Despite the availability of treatments, adolescents encounter barriers in accessing health services due to restrictive policies, cost, lack of

confidentiality, or parental control. Therefore, large-scale surveys are essential for providing insights into the challenges adolescents face and guiding the development of interventions that promote their well-being. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of health, education, and support systems, providing evidence-based recommendations to enhance adolescent outcomes.

Key Dimensions of Adolescent Well-Being

Health: The Foundation of Well-Being

Adolescent health encompasses both physical and mental well-being. Physically, adolescents may struggle with malnutrition, obesity, substance abuse, and healthcare access, all of which impact emotional stability, academic success, and long-term health. Mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, are increasingly prevalent due to pressures from social media, academic demands, and peer relationships. Without timely intervention, mental health issues may persist into adulthood, leading to poor outcomes like substance dependency, academic failure, and social isolation.

Survey Insights

Education equips adolescents with essential knowledge and skills while fostering social structure and purpose. However, challenges such as unequal access to quality education, academic stress, bullying, and poor teacher-student relationships can negatively affect adolescent well-being. Moreover, beyond classroom learning, extracurricular activities and access to counseling are key components of a supportive educational environment. A well-rounded educational system should nurture both academic excellence and social-emotional development.

Support Systems: Ensuring Resilience

Adolescents thrive when surrounded by robust support systems, including family, peers, teachers, and community organizations. Positive relationships foster emotional resilience and enable young people to overcome challenges [3]. However, some adolescents face barriers such as poverty, family instability, or trauma, limiting their access to essential services. Strengthening social support networks, including mental health services and mentorship programs, is crucial to ensure that all adolescents have the opportunity to succeed.

Survey Methodology

The study collected data from a diverse group of participants, including adolescents and adults. The survey captured demographic information, educational attainment, mental health awareness, challenges faced, and respondents' perspectives on effective strategies for enhancing adolescent well-being.

Results and Discussion

Gender Distribution

The survey results revealed that there were more female respondents 57% as compared to the 43% male respondents. This may provide insights into the number of adolescent respondents by gender in the community.

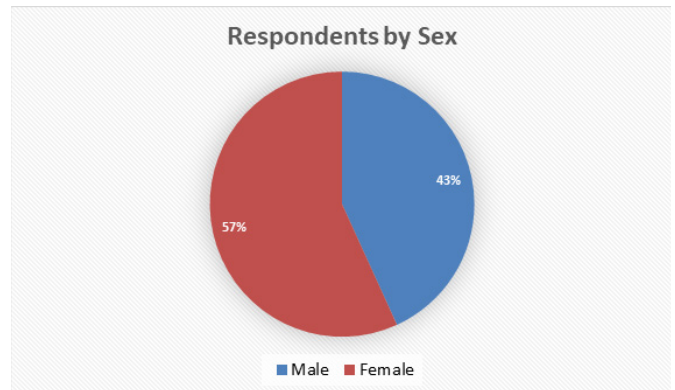


Figure 1: Showing respondent categories by gender during the interviews.

Educational Attainment

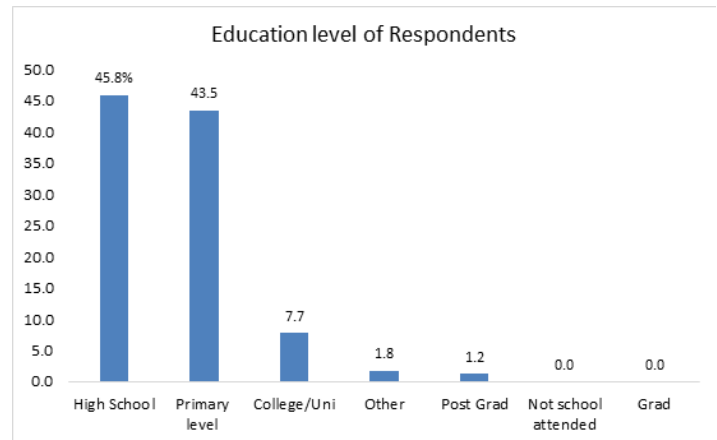


Figure 2: Showing the Education level of the respondents.

The survey revealed diverse educational backgrounds, the majority of respondents had completed high school (46%), secondly, there were 43% who had completed primary school. There were only 8% and 1% only that had a postgraduate education (Figure 2). Over 75% of adolescents do not pursue higher education and this increases the challenges and the vulnerability of the adolescents. This distribution highlights disparities in access to education, which directly influences adolescents' experiences and perspectives.

Mental Health Awareness

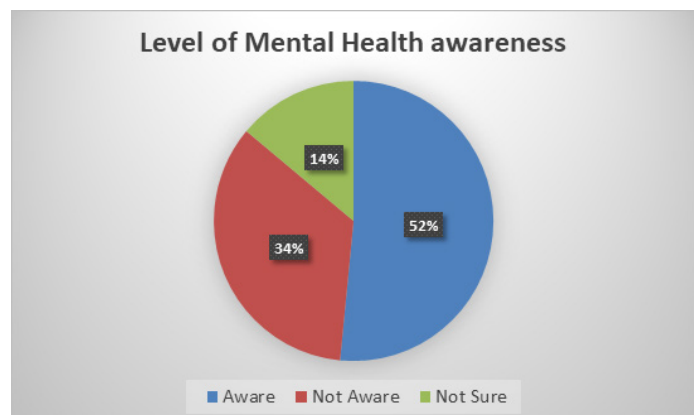


Figure 3: Showing the level of mental health awareness among the respondents.

52% of respondents were aware of mental health issues, while 34% were unaware, and 14% were unsure (Figure 3). This implies that a significant percentage of adolescents are still unaware of mental health challenges. The findings underscore the need for more comprehensive mental health education and counseling services for the adolescents in these communities.

Policy Advocacy

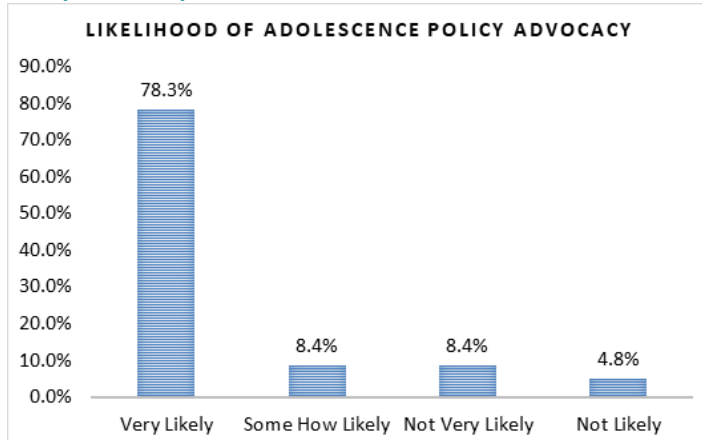


Figure 4: Showing likelihood of adolescent focused policy advocacy.

The results reveal that 78.3% of respondents supported that there is a likelihood of adolescent-focused policy advocacy (Figure 4). This reflects increased awareness of the importance of adolescent focused health and education policies promoting adolescent health and education. It also highlights the importance awareness among the policy advocates that there is a serious problem faced by the adolescents that need policy attention by the authorities [4,5].

Supportive Environments

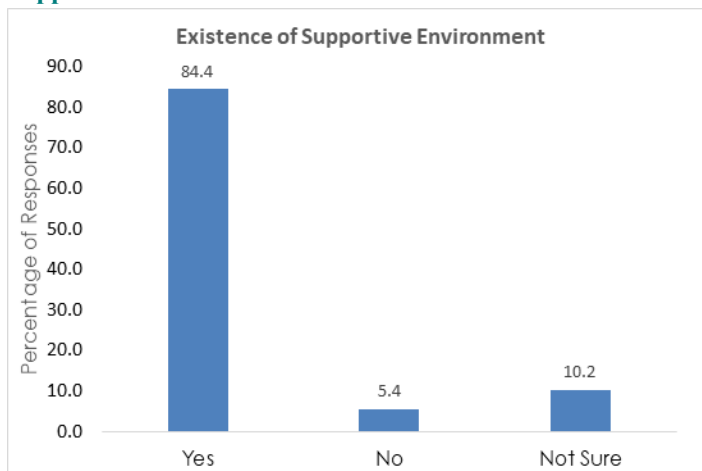


Figure 5: Showing the existence of supportive environment among the adolescents.

The majority of participants emphasized the need for supportive environments, including family and community support systems, to foster adolescent growth (Figure 5).

Challenges Faced by Adolescents

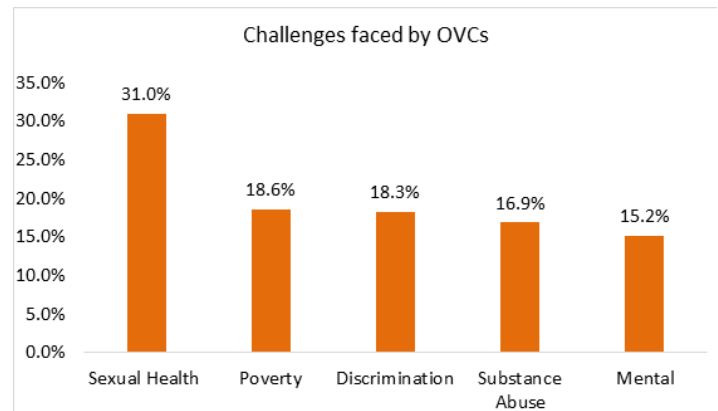


Figure 6: Showing challenges faced by adolescent OVCs.

The key challenges identified include poverty (18.6%), discrimination (18.3%), substance abuse (16.9%), and limited vocational training opportunities (Figure 6). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach, combining community engagement, educational support, and policy reform.

Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC)

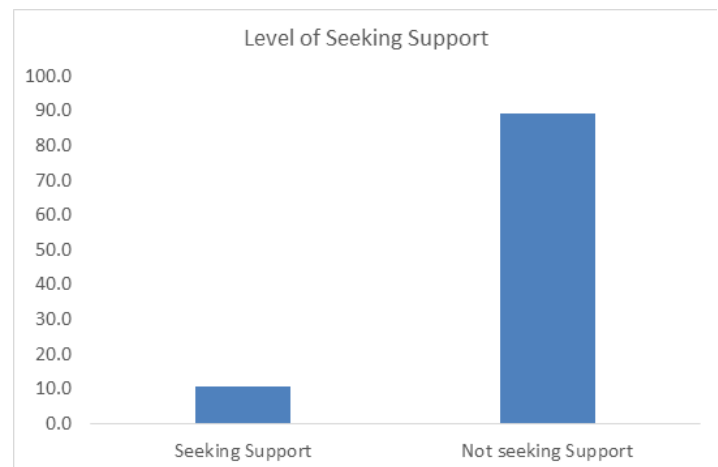


Figure 7: Showing level of support-seeking among OVCs.

Many OVC adolescents do not seek support due to a lack of awareness or accessible platforms (Figure 8). Without proper guidance, these youths may turn to unproductive peer groups, leading to risky behavior [2].

Substance Use and Abuse; Alcohol consumption, Smoking (cigarettes or vaping), Drug use (marijuana, narcotics, inhalants), Prescription drug misuse.

Unsafe Sexual Behavior; Unprotected sex (without condoms or contraceptives), Multiple sexual partners, early sexual initiation, Sexual exploitation or coercion.

Violent and Aggressive Behavior; Bullying (physical, verbal, cyber), Fighting and gang involvement, Carrying weapons, Domestic violence.

Digital and Online Risks; Excessive screen time and internet addiction, having personal information online, engaging in cyberbullying or harassment, Sexting (sharing sexual content).

Poor Health and Nutrition Habits; Poor diet (junk food, skipping meals), Lack of exercise or physical inactivity, Irregular sleep patterns, Self-harm or eating disorders (e.g., anorexia, bulimia).

Risky Driving and Transportation; Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, Speeding or reckless driving, Riding without seat belts or helmets, Distracted driving (e.g., texting while driving).

Academic and Work-Related Risks; School truancy or dropping out, Cheating or plagiarism, Poor work ethics and irresponsibility.

Financial Risk-Taking; Gambling (sports betting, lotteries, online gambling), Excessive spending and debt accumulation.

Mental Health Neglect; Ignoring signs of depression, anxiety, or stress, avoiding seeking help for mental health issues, Substance use to cope with emotional struggles.

Risky Social Associations; Associating with peers engaged in harmful behaviors, Joining gangs or cults.

Awareness of Adolescent Health Issues

Respondents demonstrated varied knowledge of key issues such as substance abuse, mental health, sexual and reproductive health (S&RH), and poverty (Figure 8). This knowledge is essential for developing strategic impact targeted interventions and educational programs to empower adolescents to become productive members of society (5).

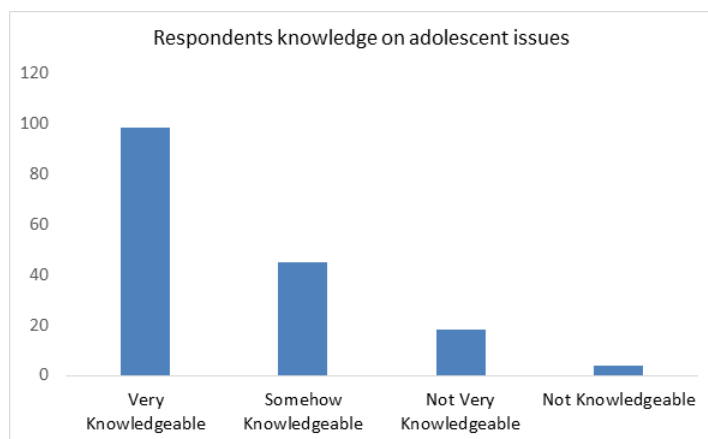


Figure 8: Showing Respondents knowledge on adolescent issues.

Figure 9 shows that adolescents consider these services highly important (4). Meaning that, the services help them to address most of the problems they face as adolescents [6].

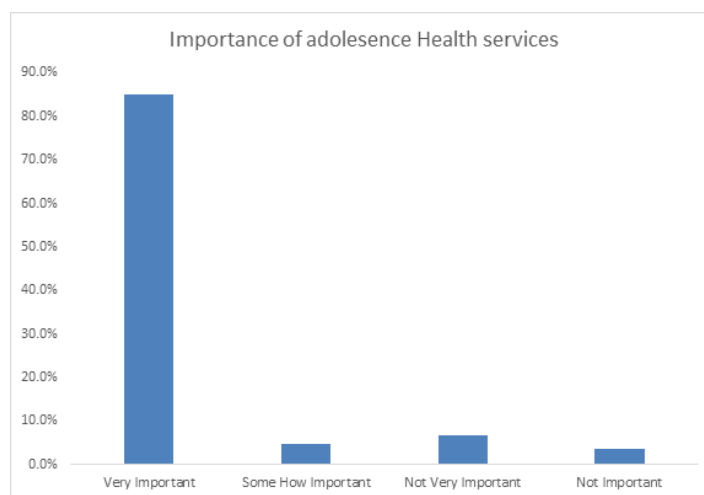


Figure 9: Showing importance of adolescence health services.

Contribution of Spotlight on Africa to OVC Adolescents to Mbale District and Mbale City

Spotlight on Africa and its sister organization, Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation, have made a remarkable impact on the lives of orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) and the wider community in Mbale District and Mbale City. Their initiatives span education, healthcare, vocational training, community health, and economic empowerment. Key contributions include:

Education initiatives:

- **Construction of Two Primary Schools:** Benefiting 1,500 OVCs .
- **Direct special Support to 155 OVCs:** Through sponsorship, counseling, food and medical assistance, including personal care.
- **Building a Secondary School in Namatala:** To bridge education gaps
- **Establishment of Dormitory Facilities:** To ensure safe learning environments

Healthcare Services and Infrastructure

- **NMF Women's Hospital and Outpatients Clinic:** Offering maternal health care, antenatal services, immunization, outpatient services
- **HIV Counseling Units:** Provide support for vulnerable individuals.
- **Two Laboratories:** Enhancing diagnostic capabilities
- **250 Community Health Promoters (Volunteers):** Ensure healthcare services reach underserved areas.
- **Vaccination Outreach Programs:** Initiatives to safeguard public health.
- **Carpentry and Tailoring Training Centers:** Equipping adolescents and community members with practical skills enhancing employability and entrepreneurship.
- **Market Gardens:** Supporting sustainable agriculture, improving food security and income generation at family level.

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- **Three Savings Schemes:** Promote financial literacy and savings habits among community members, fostering economic resilience.

Hygiene and Sanitation Initiatives

- **Reusable sanitary pads (Wonderpads) for Menstrual Hygiene:** These reusable sanitary products help adolescent girls manage menstruation with dignity, improving school attendance and performance.
- **Provision of 35 Water Sources:** These water sources improve access to clean water, reducing health risks and improving overall well-being.
- **Feeding Program at Musoto Christian School:** Ensuring that students receive nutritious meals, supporting their growth and academic performance.
- **Community Health and Space for Antenatal Care:** Initiatives promote well-being by improving access to maternal and child healthcare services.

Through these impactful programs, Harpenden Spotlight on Africa and Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation have transformed the lives of OVCs and the broader community in Mbale. Their holistic approach combining education, healthcare, vocational training, and community development has empowered adolescents to overcome challenges and build brighter futures.

The Critical Role of Spotlight on Africa in Adolescent Well-being and Systems Support

Spotlight on Africa and its sister organization, Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation, play a pivotal role in promoting the well-being of adolescents by addressing key areas of education, healthcare, vocational training, and community support. Their holistic, systems-based approach ensures that the unique challenges faced by adolescents particularly those who are orphaned or vulnerable are effectively addressed. The same was reported by Kieling [7], where challenges faced by adolescents need holistic approach to address. The organizations' contributions extend beyond providing basic needs to fostering environments where young people can thrive emotionally, socially, and academically.

Comprehensive Education Support for Holistic Growth

Access to education is a crucial determinant of adolescent well-being. By constructing primary and secondary schools and offering dormitory accommodations, the organizations provide vulnerable adolescents with stable learning environments [8]. These schools offer more than academic education; they create safe spaces where students can build relationships, develop life skills, and grow emotionally. Through direct support for 155 OVCs, they address barriers such as school fees and personal care needs, reducing dropout rates and improving educational outcomes [9].

Healthcare Interventions that Safeguard Adolescent Health

Adolescents face unique healthcare challenges, including mental health issues, sexual and reproductive health risks, and HIV vulnerability. The establishment of NMF Women's Hospital, outpatient clinics, HIV counseling units, and community health

outreach programs ensures that adolescents have access to essential healthcare services. These facilities also address key maternal health needs, ensuring young mothers receive proper care. Vaccination programs, sanitation initiatives, and the provision of safe water sources further promote health and well-being, preventing illness and supporting healthy development [10].

Vocational Training for Economic Empowerment and Future Stability

Vocational training plays a critical role in empowering adolescents to become self-reliant and financially independent. By establishing carpentry and tailoring centers, Harpenden Spotlight on Africa equips young people with practical skills to secure employment or start small businesses. These efforts help break the cycle of poverty and provide sustainable livelihood options. Additionally, the market gardens and savings schemes promote financial literacy and community resilience, helping adolescents and their families plan for the future.

Empowering Adolescents through ICT Skills Training

In addition to its health and education initiatives, Harpenden Spotlight on Africa, through the NMF ICT Centre in Musoto, has empowered 90 adolescents with critical information and communication technology (ICT) skills. This training equips young people with competencies such as computer literacy, coding, digital marketing, and basic software applications, preparing them for the evolving demands of the modern workforce [13]. By fostering digital inclusion, the ICT Centre enables adolescents to access educational resources, explore employment opportunities, and develop entrepreneurial ventures. This initiative not only enhances their technical skills but also builds confidence and resilience, ensuring they are better prepared for academic and professional success in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

Mental Health, Safety, and Hygiene Support Systems

The organizations' focus on mental health, safety, and menstrual hygiene demonstrates a deep understanding of the broader well-being needs of adolescents. Access to Wonderpads for menstrual hygiene ensures that girls stay in school, reducing absenteeism linked to menstruation. The provision of safe dormitories offers protection for students who might otherwise be vulnerable to violence or exploitation. Trained community health promoters further support adolescents by creating awareness about mental health and helping them navigate personal challenges [4].

Building Strong Social Support Networks

Strong support systems are essential for adolescent resilience, especially for those experiencing poverty, trauma, or family instability. Harpenden Spotlight on Africa strengthens social support through family engagement, mentorship programs, and community health outreach. Their work ensures that adolescents have access to trusted adults and peers who can offer guidance and support. The feeding program at Musoto Christian School ensures that students' nutritional needs are met, enhancing their concentration and ability to learn.

A Model for Sustainable Community Development

Harpenden Spotlight on Africa's integrated approach to education, healthcare, and vocational training not only supports individual adolescents but also strengthens entire communities. By training 250 community health promoters, establishing water sources, and supporting savings schemes, they lay the groundwork for long-term community well-being. These initiatives ensure that adolescents grow up in environments where their health, education, and economic needs are met, creating a foundation for a more sustainable and prosperous future.

Through these comprehensive programs, Harpenden Spotlight on Africa and Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation have become indispensable in promoting adolescent well-being and systems support. Their efforts not only address immediate needs but also build the structures and capacities necessary for long-term positive outcomes, ensuring that adolescents in Mbale District and Mbale City have the opportunity to lead healthy, productive, and meaningful lives [11].

Why the Harpenden Spotlight on Africa Model is Ideal for Adolescents

Harpenden Spotlight on Africa (SoA) and its sister organization, Spotlight on Africa Uganda Foundation, have developed a highly effective model for addressing the unique needs of adolescents. Their holistic, community-centered approach integrates education, healthcare, vocational training, and support systems, which makes their model particularly well-suited to the challenges faced by young people. Below are the key reasons why the SoA model is exemplary for supporting adolescent well-being and development [12].

Holistic Approach: Addressing Multiple Needs Simultaneously

Adolescents require more than just academic education or healthcare they need well-rounded support. The SoA model addresses multiple dimensions of adolescent well-being, including physical health, mental health, education, vocational skills, and social development. This interconnected framework ensures that adolescents grow up with the tools and resources they need to thrive, reducing the risk of falling into negative cycles such as substance abuse, school dropout, or early pregnancy.

Access to Quality Education and Safe Learning Environments

Education is one of the most powerful tools for changing the lives of young people. By building schools, providing dormitories, and giving direct support to OVCs, SoA ensures that adolescents, especially vulnerable ones, access education in safe and nurturing environments. The emphasis on both primary and secondary education ensures continuity, preventing gaps in learning and improving long-term outcomes.

Health Services that Address Adolescent-Specific Challenges

Adolescents face particular health challenges, including mental health issues, reproductive health risks, and vulnerability to HIV. SoA's establishment of healthcare facilities such as NMF Women's Hospital, outpatient clinics, HIV counseling units, and vaccination outreach programs ensures that adolescents have

access to adolescent-friendly health services [13]. This focus on preventive care, reproductive health, and counseling promotes healthier lifestyles and empowers young people to make informed choices [14].

Empowering Adolescents with Vocational Skills for Self-Reliance

Many adolescents face challenges related to unemployment and economic instability. SoA's vocational training centers in carpentry and tailoring offer practical skills that equip young people to earn a livelihood. This focus on vocational education provides alternative pathways for adolescents who may not excel in traditional academics, enabling them to build sustainable futures and reduce dependency on external support [15].

Building Strong Support Systems and Social Networks

The presence of stable support systems is critical for adolescent development. SoA fosters strong community connections through programs that engage families, teachers, peers, and mentors. The involvement of 250 trained community health promoters further ensures that adolescents can access guidance and health-related information. The SoA model emphasizes the importance of emotional and social support, which helps adolescents build resilience, especially those facing trauma, poverty, or family instability.

Promoting Mental Health, Safety, and Dignity for Adolescents

The SoA model recognizes the growing importance of mental health, menstrual hygiene, and personal safety. Providing Wonderpads for adolescent girls ensures they can manage their menstrual health with dignity and remain engaged in school. Safe dormitories protect adolescents from risks such as violence and exploitation, creating an environment where they feel secure and valued. Additionally, SoA's mental health outreach initiatives reduce stigma and encourage young people to seek help when needed [16].

Community Engagement for Sustainable Impact

SoA's model not only focuses on individuals but also strengthens the entire community. The provision of clean water sources, savings schemes, market gardens, and feeding programs builds community resilience and ensures adolescents grow up in healthy, supportive environments. This integrated approach helps reduce poverty, improve public health, and promote economic stability, benefiting not just adolescents but entire families [17].

Evidence-Based and Scalable Model for Broader Impact

SoA's programs are based on real community needs, as demonstrated by the success of their projects in Mbale District and Mbale City. This data-driven approach allows them to adapt and scale their initiatives to meet changing needs. The model serves as a blueprint that can be replicated in other regions, especially in low-resource settings, amplifying its impact beyond the immediate community.

Long-Term Focus on Adolescents' Future Success

The SoA model ensures that young people are not just supported

through adolescence but are also prepared for adulthood. With a focus on both education and skills development, SoA helps adolescents build a strong foundation for future employment, leadership, and financial independence. Their involvement in savings schemes, community gardens, and health promotion programs equips young people with practical knowledge for long-term success [18,19].

Recommendations

The survey findings highlight several strategies to enhance adolescent well-being:

- **School-Based Mental Health Programs:** Implement initiatives to address mental health concerns and reduce stigma.
- **Health Promotion Initiatives:** Promote nutrition, physical activity, and substance abuse prevention.
- **Strengthening Support Systems:** Build networks of mentors and family support to guide adolescents through challenges.
- **Community Engagement:** Foster partnerships with local leaders to provide vocational training and mental health services.

Conclusion

Spotlight on Africa's integrated approach is a model for sustainable community development and adolescent empowerment. By addressing the full spectrum of adolescent needs, the organizations ensure young people are equipped to overcome challenges, grow into responsible adults, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Their work not only transforms individual lives but also builds resilient systems that will benefit future generations.

Acknowledgement

We owe gratitude to the Spotlight on Africa partners who have walked a long way touching the lives of the most vulnerable people in communities. The impact they have left in the communities will never cease. They created a ray of hope in the lives of many children, mothers, youth, born and not born who will find the life-saving investments in these communities, their decisions were truly inspired by the living God and on that note, we say thank you to the following; Nick Maughan, Nadine Kaneva (NMF.org), Spotlight on Africa UK, Harpenden community, Intra Health, EM-R4DW, Eckersley o' Callaghan, Phillip Lee Harvey, CA.UK.IN studio, UKaid, Silman, Peas, Food for the hungry and Hefin Rees KC, Wendy Howson, Laura Bailey, Will Treasure, Scott Cowan, Dr Bethan Rees, Wendy Bampton, Simon Taylor, Philip Lee Harvey.

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