

JOHN GRIFFITHS MS – NEWPORT EAST

REPORTING BACK - TRIP TO MBALE, EASTERN UGANDA – 10TH FEB TO 20TH FEB 2023

INTRODUCTION

In February this year I was invited to join PONT – a small charity from South Wales to learn more about how they are working with the Welsh Government’s Wales Africa programme and other organisations to tackle poverty, and make a difference to the lives of people, particularly in health, education and community development in Mbale, Eastern Uganda. The group is run by volunteers through direct community links and is a partnership based on friendship, commitment and respect. This report back will focus on some of the projects and initiatives, especially those focused on healthcare, I saw being taken forward when I was in Mbale,

I also stayed in PONT’s eco lodge development. It has a restaurant with panoramic views and hosts many meetings. It includes an animal park which is visited by local schools. The development is designed to promote tourism and help sustain PONT’s and its programmes.

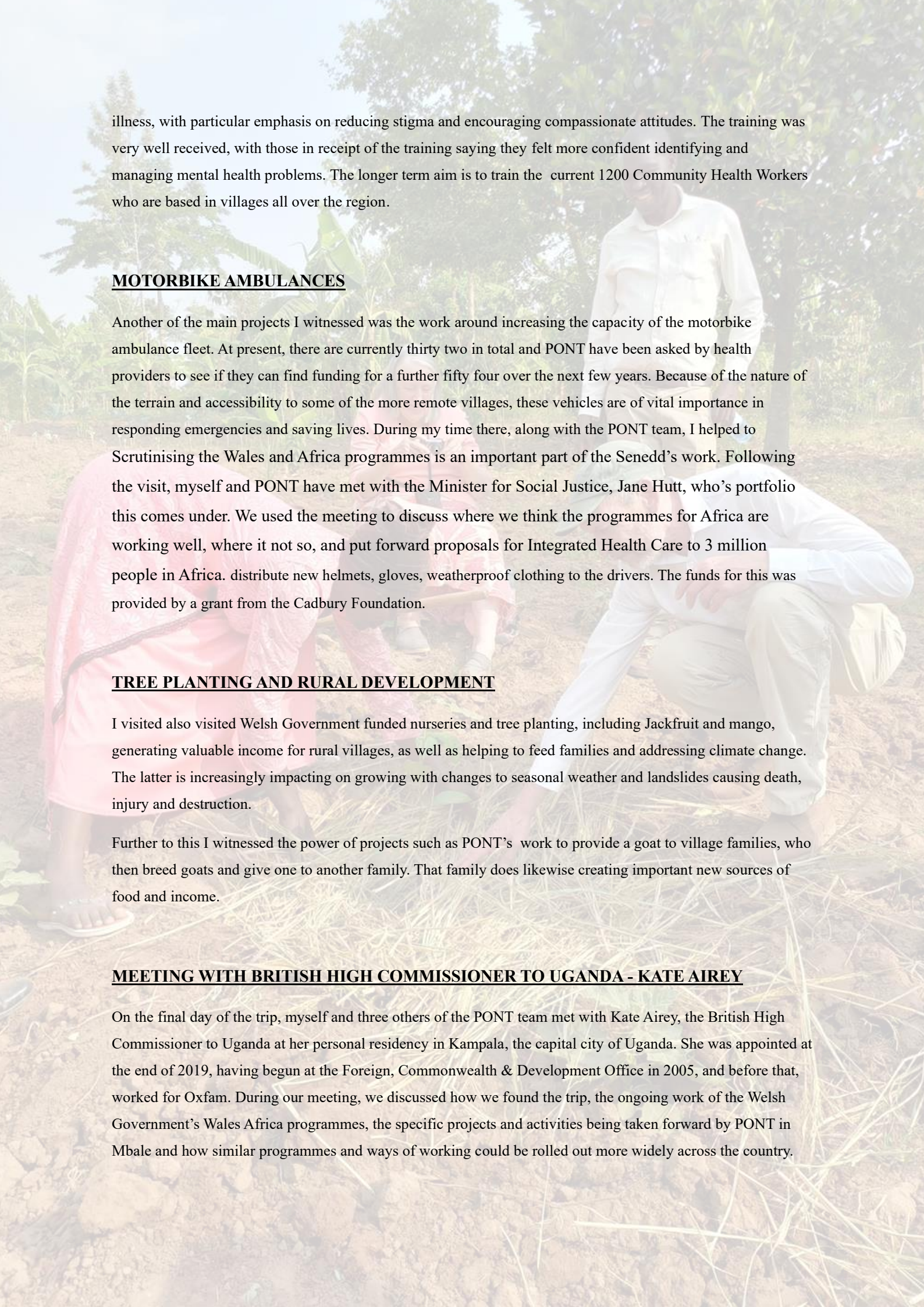
COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

For fifteen years PONT has been building up an effective network of Community Health Workers and a fleet of Motorbike Ambulances. They help serve a population of about half a million people in rural areas around Mbale. Over this time period, health outcomes have been improved as these programmes work closely with local government, health services and other groups in the community.

During the trip, the Pontypridd-based charity announced an additional 240 new Community Health Workers. This is an initiative which has been made possible by funding from the Welsh Government through their Wales for Africa programme. The 240 are selected from rural villages without existing local healthcare and will provide much-needed medical support for up to 120,000 people. Through training, they will learn how to diagnose common diseases, promote healthy living environments, recognise and refer patients who need hospital treatment. A particular focus of their work will be on the health of pregnant mothers and young children because at the moment death rates of mothers and young children remain high. PONT say the community health workers will make huge difference, becoming lifesavers in their own villages.

MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

When I was in Uganda, I was told as many as 14 million people in the country are affected by poor mental health. To address this problem, PONT have begun working with health groups to run mental health awareness courses. This was launched when I was in Mbale. During the trip, a team of Welsh and Ugandan health professionals worked together to plan and deliver a “train the trainer” course for 80 government health workers and partner non-government organisations (NGO) staff. This promoted an understanding and identifying mental



illness, with particular emphasis on reducing stigma and encouraging compassionate attitudes. The training was very well received, with those in receipt of the training saying they felt more confident identifying and managing mental health problems. The longer term aim is to train the current 1200 Community Health Workers who are based in villages all over the region.

MOTORBIKE AMBULANCES

Another of the main projects I witnessed was the work around increasing the capacity of the motorbike ambulance fleet. At present, there are currently thirty two in total and PONT have been asked by health providers to see if they can find funding for a further fifty four over the next few years. Because of the nature of the terrain and accessibility to some of the more remote villages, these vehicles are of vital importance in responding emergencies and saving lives. During my time there, along with the PONT team, I helped to

Scrutinising the Wales and Africa programmes is an important part of the Senedd's work. Following the visit, myself and PONT have met with the Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt, who's portfolio this comes under. We used the meeting to discuss where we think the programmes for Africa are working well, where it not so, and put forward proposals for Integrated Health Care to 3 million people in Africa. distribute new helmets, gloves, weatherproof clothing to the drivers. The funds for this was provided by a grant from the Cadbury Foundation.

TREE PLANTING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

I visited also visited Welsh Government funded nurseries and tree planting, including Jackfruit and mango, generating valuable income for rural villages, as well as helping to feed families and addressing climate change. The latter is increasingly impacting on growing with changes to seasonal weather and landslides causing death, injury and destruction.

Further to this I witnessed the power of projects such as PONT's work to provide a goat to village families, who then breed goats and give one to another family. That family does likewise creating important new sources of food and income.

MEETING WITH BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER TO UGANDA - KATE AIREY

On the final day of the trip, myself and three others of the PONT team met with Kate Airey, the British High Commissioner to Uganda at her personal residency in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. She was appointed at the end of 2019, having begun at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in 2005, and before that, worked for Oxfam. During our meeting, we discussed how we found the trip, the ongoing work of the Welsh Government's Wales Africa programmes, the specific projects and activities being taken forward by PONT in Mbale and how similar programmes and ways of working could be rolled out more widely across the country.

CONNECTING WITH THE SENEDD

The experience and knowledge garnered has helped my work as a Member of the Senedd - in plenary proceedings, on statements relating with Wales and Africa specifically, and Wales' role in the world more broadly, committees and constituency work.

Since visiting Mbale, I have met with the Minister for Social Justice, whose portfolio Wales and Africa comes under. I have outlined where I think the programmes are working well, but also with the support of PONT, shared proposals around delivering integrated health care to three million people in Africa. This is built on the long standing health links between Wales and Uganda and aims to deliver combined community health and motorbike ambulance services to four regions within the country.

I represent a multi-cultural constituency, which includes individuals and groups with strong African connections. This visit has given me the opportunity to connect groups and organisations from Newport and the wider area, with those I met in Mbale. One of the ways I will seek to do this will be through our annual Africa Day event in Newport. Events like this will allow the promotion of Wales and the work of the Senedd and to enhance the reputation of the Senedd in an international context.

Finally I will next month be sponsoring an event in the Senedd with Fair Trade Wales, where I will also be sharing my experiences of the trip and the Wales and Africa programmes.

CONCLUSION

It was a great privilege to go to Mbale with PONT and be part of the very good work taking place - in health, education and community development. The partnerships and friendships built and sustained over many years are testament to the value and strength of this work. To see communities in Uganda and Wales engaged in mutually beneficial projects is an important part of our country's international engagement. In Wales we are fortunate to be part of the relatively secure and prosperous world. This gives us a moral imperative to reach out to countries where need is greatest. As a Member of the Senedd, I was pleased to have the opportunity to see how PONT are working, including as part of the wider Welsh Government's Programme for Africa and what can be achieved and sustained with a community to community approach. I feel privileged to have made many new friends in Pont and Mbale – and to have witnessed the commitment, energy and organisation of all involved.

