

MY EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

I am Caroline Mwebaza, Energy Poverty Consultant for Solar Health Uganda. I raise public awareness about energy poverty concerns, educate people about benefits of clean lighting, conduct solar energy needs assessment, distribute solar lights to vulnerable people in the rural off-grid communities in Uganda, follow up and evaluate solar energy impacts among the program beneficiaries, and build the capacity of women solar entrepreneurs.

I also supervise the Safe Birth and Healthy Homes project. It was started in order to reduce maternal and child mortality rates in Uganda, through public health education, solar electrifying health clinics to increase access to electricity and improve health care quality; providing solar lights to new mothers to incentivize clinic-based delivery and reducing health and environmental risks at home.

When the Government of Uganda instituted the COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020, the lives of vulnerable people drastically changed for the worse! Many of our program beneficiaries lost their jobs, they became very poor, they had limited access to food, they could not easily access health services due to restricted movement, the children had been told to stay at home but could not study at night as they lacked light and their parents could not afford to finance household lighting. Some girls ended up becoming pregnant.

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, our organization changed the program implementation approaches whereby I would conduct outreaches and make one-on-one interactions with the people instead of gathering them in a group. This negatively affected my service delivery as it necessitated me to spend longer periods and more funds to complete the activities. Curfew had been instituted so I would have to leave earlier than expected in order to comply with curfew restrictions. Because of this, I could not finish all the work so I would go back another time to complete it and this meant additional operational expenditures due to the additional visits made in the field.

What gives me hope is that a lot of sensitization has been carried out by various actors in the well-being of the people and the PPEs are being produced in large quantities so it becomes easier for even poor people to acquire them. Besides, the Government also distributed free face masks to the public.

The lockdown was lifted early July and some people resumed working. The Government has also announced its intention to provide financial assistance to enable the COVID-19 vulnerable people to become economically resilient. The schools opened for candidates and it is hoped that in the near future other classes might be allowed to resume studies also. Public transport was allowed to resume although with half the carrying capacity.

In addition, the authorities through their various agencies are aggressively encouraging people to observe the standard operating procedures (SOPs), and also apprehending those violating them. With the lifting of the lockdown, the provision of financial support to the needy, and the

enforcement of the SOPs, I am optimistic that things will improve as generally people are gradually adapting to the post lockdown life situation. With strict observance of the SOPs by both the service providers and the program beneficiaries, we hope to continue program implementation with minimal risks.