

6.13.2021



This image shows a screenshot of our full team at a Zoom meeting. Top row, left to right: Caroline Nambwere, Arthi Vaidyanathan, Joel Kibonwabake. Second row, left to right: Brian Herbert Ssemanda, Benon Brian Kyakuwa. Third row, left to right: Joan Ac-Lumor, Cydney Livingston, Dorothy Nam. Bottom row, left to right: Joan Perroni Namata, Catherina Nazziwa, Afreen Ashraf.

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Internationally collaborative research is no small feat, even in pre-COVID times. Add in the new norms of our shared Zoom world and the challenges only increase. Our team works across ten hours of time zone differences from Mountain Daylight to East Africa, with members located in New Mexico to Kalangala, Uganda. In the first few weeks of our project, community-engage Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) research and educational outreach in Kalangala, has spent the first few weeks of our project navigating sometimes expected and sometimes unforeseen challenges of online work. Nonetheless, we have begun to move forward towards our research goals, learn important lessons about building equity in collaboration across cultures and technological barriers, and grow together as a team.

We are composed of individuals from a true variety of backgrounds. Our team leaders are Duke professor Dr. Kearsley Stewart and Dr. Joel Kibonwabake, head of Kalanga Health Center IV in Uganda. Four Duke undergraduate students, one Duke global health Master's student, two Ugandan university students, and two Ugandan research assistants comprise the rest of the

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team. As the pilot year of a proposed three-year project, we are navigating the learning curves of founding a project, alongside the challenges of conducting our research. The project entails community-engaged research on SCD, in Kalangala, Uganda. With the recent development of affordable rapid point of care SCD diagnostic tools, we are hoping to assess the facilitators and barriers to implementation of the testing and provide educational outreach. This will enable responsible, effective, and ethical screenings for SCD to be provided in the next phases of the project, with intention to benefit the community and address the issue of SCD in Kalangala.

At this point in our project, our main focus is editing our research protocol submissions to be approved to conduct our interviews, focus groups, and other research activities. Though we completed the submission for the Duke's Institutional Review Board (IRB), we are also required to update previously approved permission from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) to conduct research with human subjects in Uganda. These review boards, (IRB and UNCST), require us to submit detailed applications giving insight to our research including background information, justification, study design, and consent forms, among other elements. This helps the institution and/or government determine if our research is being conducted in an ethical fashion and protects the participants. Because this process is critical to the project, it can be a time-consuming process and require multiple rounds of revisions before approval.

An important component of our research project is "twinning." This means that both Duke researchers and Kalangala researchers are taking part in an equally collaborative and mutually beneficial learning experience, working together cohesively on the project. One example of our twinning in our project so far was pairing one Ugandan university student with one Duke university student to edit the UNCST submission. Teams met outside of scheduled meeting times to discuss appropriate changes for the 2021 submission so that we could more quickly submit and receive approval to get our main research activities under way. Although there were minor organizational issues in scheduling meeting times and delegating tasks, this "twinning" method became a great way to collaborate and learn from different members of the team, as well as form closer connections amongst twinning pairs.

Thus far, we have learned a lot about collaborating across cultures and barriers. One of these important lessons is that of flexibility. Connectivity issues are one main kind of problem that has expanded our flexibility. This means that sometimes Duke members are not able to call into our meetings on time and sometimes our Ugandan members are unable to keep their camera on due to poor connection. Meeting times and agendas must shift to adapt to real-time developments, rather than conceptualized expectations for how each meeting will unfold. Additionally, communicating between cultures has been an interesting and diagnostic part of our team's collaboration. Because of differences in accents and linguistics, the team has prioritized speaking slowly and checking for understanding to assure that all members are on the same page and comprehending one another. Further, another important lesson is that our work is developing within complicated external contexts: We are still doing work in an ongoing, unstable COVID moment. This means that each of us is living in a world that is subject to ongoing fluctuations and unpredictability. For example, because Uganda is now facing a new wave of

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potential lockdowns and threats to safety due to COVID, this is something we must approach strategically and accommodate for in our work. To do this, we have begun to reconfigure our timeline and reimagine our interviews to accommodate a new cultural climate that places health and safety at the forefront.

Amidst the planning, work, and learning, we have begun to grow together as an internationally-comprised team. Check-ins, accompanied with jokes and laughs, have become the norms for our daily meetings. Though we are working remotely and cannot engage with our colleagues face-to-face, these moments at the beginning of meetings are impactful — allowing us to know and care for our colleagues as individuals with lives beyond the research setting. Moreover, a recent story circle activity invited members to listen to and share meaningful experiences from previous times in their life. The concept of ‘story circles’, as developed by the 2013 UNESCO publication on Intercultural Competencies, recognizes the power of storytelling across cultures and emphasizes the need for listening in order to develop intercultural competencies and meaningful relationships with diverse individuals. The activity involved listening to other group members share a story about a memorable interaction with someone different from themselves and what they learned about themselves and the other person in the interaction. Rather than listening to respond, the goal was listening to understand — no judgement, interruptions, or interjections. The team concluded that this was an important measure for building meaningful, lasting relationships and friendships beyond the scope of the project. Our team is comprised of people from vast walks of life—university students, graduate students, a midwife, and a medical school student— carrying with them nuanced and important strengths and vantage points. This coalition of collective knowledge is important not only to achieving our research goals, but for blooming deeper appreciation for the lives and stories of others unlike ourselves.