



SPECIAL EDITION



**Mbarara University of Science and
Technology Launches "Support Moms"**

VOLUME 10



COMMUNICATIONS CREW

Dear readers, it is with pride that we present this special edition dedicated to Dr. Esther Cathy Atukunda's groundbreaking "Support Mom" project. This internationally recognized initiative has the potential to empower mothers around the world, and we are thrilled to share its story with you.

This edition point out key factors . We'll delve into the project's purpose, its innovative use of technology, and the dedicated partnerships that make it possible. However, this wouldn't be complete without celebrating Dr. Atukunda's incredible journey. We'll explore her path from humble beginnings to global recognition, showcasing the power of unwavering spirit.

This special edition is also a tribute to the transformative power of mentorship. The heartfelt story of Dr. Atukunda's benefactor exemplifies the profound impact support can have on achieving one's dreams.

As we eagerly await the implementation of "Support Mom," we hope this edition fills you with inspiration and optimism. This project has the potential to change countless lives, and we invite you to join us in celebrating its potential.

Happy reading!

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On November 14 2023, Mbarara University of and Technology (MUST) proudly launched the "Support Moms" project, a groundbreaking initiative aimed at improving maternity services use, their well-being and ultimately reduce the Maternal Mortality Rate in Uganda. The project has great potential to stimulate and encourage routine healthcare utilization and improve maternal-fetal health outcomes among all rural expectant mothers including those with limited education, and lay the groundwork for evaluation for a regional implementation of this novel intervention. The attendance was both physical and online.

Addressing Critical Challenges in Maternal Health

Despite expanded capacity to improve the number of skilled birth attendants at community facilities, Ugandan women still have low rates of antenatal care (ANC) utilization and skilled births, resulting in one of the highest maternal Mortality and perinatal mortality rates in the world. Women's lack of information, social support, financial independence for emotional and economic provisions, decision-making autonomy regarding childbirth, birth preparedness, and perceived need for maternity care services are important challenges to utilizing available maternity services in these settings. One analysis showed that women at risk of unskilled home births needed relevant and context specific strategies to encourage ANC attendance and skilled delivery. The high cost of maternal mortality highlights the need for adaptable interventions that boost ANC and maternity services utilization to reduce maternal and early childhood deaths. The "Support Moms" project directly addresses these issues through its 5 key pillars; Health awareness, partner involvement, social support network engagement, birth preparedness, empowering decision making for women and automated SMS and voice calls to motivate health care seeking and utilization.



Support-Moms seeks to test a tailored, sustainable intervention platform of public health importance that uses multiple low-cost modalities on a locally available feature phone to facilitate individualized end user engagement. Integrating this novel patient-centered mHealth intervention into routine antenatal care could catalyze and ensure mothers receive comprehensive context-specific and tailored individualized support and guidance throughout their pregnancy journey.

The project aims to 1) address predisposing factors through improved information sharing and transfer to alter existing negative social-cultural norms and beliefs, 2) increase perceived need to seek care through individual and group internalized benefits, and 3) motivate and enable individual service utilization through customized appointment reminders and social network engagement. The project's careful, targeted intervention is therefore likely to succeed where others have not. The use of technology to enhance and not replace necessary human support, using available types of cell phones to deliver timed, automated and targeted messages to support women is likely to be impactful and powerful especially in bridging the gaps between individual beliefs, perceptions, practice and desired health service utilization.

Building a locally developed, highly promising home-grown solution to an area of critical need, through available social support networks. The project fosters a sense of community among mothers by connecting them with social networks, healthcare providers, peer mentors, and other resources. Support-Moms was tailored with context-specific content to enhance the likelihood of uptake, adoption, its potential for sustainable impact and integration into routine care.

The Principal Investigator/ Project Director is Dr. Esther Cathlyn Atukunda from the Faculty of Medicine, MUST.

CO-PIs: Dr. Mark Siedner and Prof. Jessica Haberer from MGH/Harvard Medical school, Dr. Lynn Mathews and Dr. Van Nghiem from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Prof. Celestino Obua, the Vice Chancellor and Health Systems Researcher at MUST, Dr. Peter Waiswa from Makerere University School of Public Health, Dr. Godfrey Mugenyi Rwambuka a senior Lecturer in the department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at MUST



Some members of the organizing team

International Partners: A Celebration of Collaboration and Innovation

The "Support Moms" project is a testament to the power of collaboration. It is a joint effort between MUST, the MGH Global Health Collaborative, University of Alabama at Birmingham and the Ugandan Ministry of Health. This collaboration leverages the power of a multi-disciplinary team that brings together exceptional expertise and collaboration to conduct the proposed aims within the stipulated timelines, ensuring the project's success.

The launch ceremony was a joyous occasion, marked by inspiring speeches from dignitaries, project leaders, and expectant mothers themselves. The excitement was palpable as everyone recognized the potential of the "Support Moms" project to make a real difference in the lives of countless mothers and their families.

The event was graced by the presence of Dr. Richard Mugahi, the Assistant commissioner reproductive and child health Ministry of Health, he was also the keynote speaker of the day



The entire congregation was welcomed by the Vice Chancellor Prof. Celestino Obua and co- PI of the project welcomed the congregation. He thanked the chief guest and Key note speaker of the day Dr. Richard Mugahi, and his colleague Dr. Dan Murokora.

Prof. Obua said Support-moms project is one of those project that have or should have a key impact on Maternal and perinatal health in Uganda and beyond, further noting the unacceptable maternal and perinatal mortality indices that Uganda is not proud of. He thanked Dr. Atukunda for thinking about such an impactful project.

He challenged the congregation on the meaning of R01 funded mechanisms, later sharing his live? opinion in such highly competitive grant mechanisms used by NIH. He prayed that the results of this project be embraced by policy makers at National and International level For the greater good.

"Access to health is not simply walking to health centres, but there needs to be a mechanism for people to "make health and healthy choices at home". One of the ways he highlighted was to make use of available technology to add value and improve health and health outcomes.

He concluded by saying the project scored 10 nearly 100%. He congratulated Dr. Atukunda and her team for such a great milestone. "I could not have been prouder as the Vice Chancellor, I didn't get a chance see this in Makerere University, word has it that MUST is giving MUK a run for their money".



He mentioned that in the In the whole of Africa, South Africa is the best , Uganda ranks second with a small difference. MUK tops this in Uganda and MUST comes next.

Prof. Obua encouraged other faculty at MUST to take on the mantle of writing. “The sky no longer exists for you, make a difference in the community we serve It is possible for every one I know we shall make it”.



MCs of the day: Dr. Godfrey Mugenyi and Ms. Angella Nakato

Dr. Mark Siedner from Harvard Medical School shared his remarks inform of a story and a metaphor. He said It great being together at MUST with other partners across the globe.

He said,

“It all started way-back in 2011, it is hard to remember that far, at that time Barack Obama was the president in my country, this hotel did not exist, I do not think the country of south Sudan existed yet, Mbarara was not declared a city yet by the country of Uganda. Someone can say it was not yet on the map, and I can say from a research perspective I can tell you Mbarara was not on the Ugandan map.”

When I came here in 2011 there was one of these R01 grant it was held by an American esteemed professor from Harvard University, David Bangsberg, he was the only person that held an R01 grant in Mbarara University of Science and Technology.



What is an R01 grant, The description is like a metaphor

when most researchers get started on a small grant, it is called a training grants

Step I: Training grant: think of these the foot hills of mbarara not so tall a little challenging but most people can get up those hills every one can try and go up.

Step II: Mentoring K grants : these can be like Mountains of the moon the rwenzoris these are pretty challenging may be we know a few people that have climbed that high but not so many people have made it to the top

Step III R01: above the mountains of the moon is the mountains of the stars like the mountain Everest few people have don't, it in places like this it is essentially unheard of



Esther's story by Prof. Siedner from Harvard Medical School



It is 2011, a young lady walks into my office and tells me, I hear you are a scientist, I told her, not quit, I am a fellow myself, I was at the foot hill of Mbarara at the time and she said to me that she was working on a project, I asked her to tell me about it she began to described to me project which as a PhD student has done which is a randomized clinical trial one of the most important an effective forms of science to test the medicine to try to prevent bleeding in a woman at child birth and the first thing I could say to my self was why is this woman asking me for help it should be the opposite I should be the one asking her for help she was so advanced in her scientific career, I was wondering if I had anything to offer her.



Assoc. Prof. Charles Kazooba DVC F&A Dr. Stephen Asimwe Director GHC-Uganda & Proff. Nixon Kamukama

She developed an application for women who are pregnant to try to enhance their ability to get to clinics to have antenatal care, to safely deliver babies and it was just an idea at the time and frankly, it seemed a little bit crazy that time.

If someone here would develop something so thoroughly, so effective, test it and showed in a small pilot study worked. As we were celebrating, she published and published and published, she said she was ready for the next stage.

At this point I was not sure if she was going to going to climb Everest because no one had climbed Everest from MUST. They are couple in MUK but not MUST, She put a team together to climb the mountain Everest. This is the only grant in my life that I have been involve in as an investigator, co-investigator that got a perfect score by the NIH.



Esther all I can say to you is you climbed Everest you the only scientist in this university that has made it there. You are a woman scientist from a low resource country in Africa, I am not sure you can see us on top of that mountain but we can see you and we are proud of you.

Like the Vice Chancellor has said you have immediately become a source of inspiration and a role model to an entire generation of scientists who can now saying you know what, this is possible. Thank you for everything you have done for this community, thank you for letting us be part of your team an we cannot wait to do this together.



Prof. Jessca Hebarer thanked the organisers an asked Dr. Esther to stand up an see the people who had come to celebrate her. She appreciated Mark for explaining the RO1grant. Prof. Jessca requested to add onto the explanation.

She said the RO1 is an international symbol that means one is an independent investigator, she also said this can also mean you have arrived.

Jessica added the RO1 requires a lot of work and commitment, it's a real moment described as a distinction in anybody's career development she congratulated Esther and her team for reaching that moment.

She reflected on the moment where Esther was described through the steps of the hills, The rwenzoris and mountain Everest.

Jessica pointed out her recent chat with Esther about career development, it spelt out how a mentor is key in anyone's career development.

She shared and said that as an American woman who is a scientist and a clinician, she would not have made it that far, if it was not for the dedicated mentors like Prof. David Bansberg and other people. She said these helped her develop her skills, get new skills and to apply for grants

Jessica said anyone who has written a grant can share their journey to inspire others. What it is like to take that first move to walk to a mentor who you think will help you, (Esther walked to Mark), she said it is never that easy. There is a lot of inequities especially in global health, inequities within a given culture or a given setting. Said Jessica.



How do you make the 1st step, then the other, how do you develop that project, how do you make it to completion, how do you rebound when you have a down moment: such as papers that are not funded, papers that are not published right away, how do you overcome that". Jessica Challenged the audience.

She pointed out that this journey is made easy working with role models within our communities. Jessica welcomed Esther into the fold trusting that she had all it takes to help people by guiding them who are coming from the exact same circumstance that she came through.

Prof. Jessica said the main principle of a research village is connecting research to the community by promoting locally grown solutions. She affirmed that those connections come from being in the community, and working together in a village like the ubuntu philosophy

Support- moms project is a home grown solution and these are rare and the best solution to work and have an impact in the community.

She urged the audience to pay more attention to what they see around them, find innovations for sustainable solutions that can be supported to change villages to develop internationally funded projects and untimely recognized awards.

She concluded by thanking Dr. Esther for the credible example in so many ways of what she hoped many will be able to either learn from or benefit from.

"I ask my self as some one with GHC, why am I here in mbarara? what am I bringing to the table ?who am I working with? why am I working with them? how are we working together?" challenged herself and she redefined GHC from her perspective as a collaborative efforts to promote health according to these locally driven priorities and values.



Esther's Parents, Mr. And Mrs. Kamuntu and Ms. Katrina Ashaba Mugenyi representing the Mugenyi Family



Dr. Winnie muyindike Director ISS Clinic, Prof. Judith Hahn mentor, Sam Mwesigwa Data Manager

A Beacon of Hope for the Future

The "Support Moms" project is not just a research initiative; it is a beacon of hope for the future of maternal health in Uganda. By empowering mothers with knowledge, support, and a sense of community, the project has the potential to:

- Reduce maternal mortality and morbidity rates.
- Improve the quality of care mothers receive.
- Empower mothers to make informed decisions about their health.
- Strengthen families and communities.

The launch of the "Support Moms" project marks a significant milestone in the fight for better maternal health in Uganda. As the project unfolds, its impact will be closely monitored and evaluated. One thing is certain: the "Support Moms" project has the potential to transform the lives of mothers and their families for the better.

The key note speaker Dr. Richard Mugahi shared a presentation

"I am honored to stand before you today as we launch a transformative project aimed at advancing maternal health in Uganda—the "Integration of a Patient-Centered Health Intervention into Routine Antenatal Care to Improve Maternal Health in Uganda," also known as the Support-Moms Project".

His presentation was about

- 1. Uganda's ANC Milestones.**
- 2. What does the ANC Model aim to achieve? ANC focused on achieving a particular aim or result.**

- Improve Maternal and perinatal Health.
- Improve the Health and survival of Infants.
- Increase the rate of SBA.

2 b) What are the key areas of focus?

- Screening. For early detection and management of disease and abnormality.
- Therapeutic interventions eg IPT.
- Education on planning for safe birth, emergencies during pregnancy.



Dr. Richard Mugahi

3. Will high ANC Coverage without Quality will not provide the desired outcome?

He said, 'In conclusion we need to collectively address the quality of our ANC, As we launch the Support-Moms Project today, let us all commit to its success. Let us work hand in hand to support the exciting and promising initiative that can potentially transform maternal health in Uganda. I look forward to seeing its results and impact in the coming years.

Thank you, and let the journey to healthier mothers and children begin'.

This was followed by presentation by Dr. Esther. She thanked every one who honored the invitation especially, the international guests, the key note speaker, the university top management, the different health workers in their capacities, the Village health Teams among others

Dr. Atukunda guided the audience through the impactful journey of integrating a patient-centered health intervention into routine antenatal care. The dissemination of results showcased the project's potential to revolutionize maternal healthcare practices, ultimately benefiting both expecting mothers and their infants.



Acknowledging the collaborative effort that fueled the success of the SUPPORT-MOMS Project, Dr. Atukunda expressed profound gratitude to the dedicated team that relentlessly prioritized the health and well-being of pregnant mothers.

This milestone marks not only the beginning of a new era in maternal health but also a testament to the power of collaborative research and the shared vision of healthcare professionals striving for the well-being of mothers and their precious newborns. MUST proudly stands behind the SUPPORT-MOMS Project, recognizing it as a beacon of hope for the future of maternal care in Uganda.



The Support-moms app demonstration was shown and tried out at the launch by Mr. Ssemitego James working with U-catch technology.



Dr. Dan Murokora, Dr. Byamugisha and Dr. Peter Ssebutinde

A panel discussion session was held to understand how such programs such as Support-moms can be optimized in the community. The panel discussion included DHOs-Dr. Peter Ssebutinde the DHO Mbarara, Dr. Byamugisha DHO Mitoma District and the WHO consultant, Dr. Dan Murokora. This was moderated by Dr. Godfrey Mugenyi



At the end of it all a dummy placard was unveiled by the different dignitaries in the audience

Congratulations to Dr. Esther Atukunda for your sleepless nights are going to pay off, and benefit the community you serve, thank you for thinking about the future generation.

A biography of Dr. Esther was presented by Dr. Edith Wakida a colleague and friend.



Dr. Edith Wakida is a highly respected research fellow with a strong background in implementation science and psychiatry. Her expertise lies in bridging the gap between research and practice, focusing on promoting the utilization of evidence-based interventions in non-communicable diseases, particularly: Dementia, Alcohol Use Disorders, Mental Health, Epilepsy.

Edith is a Senior Research Fellow in the department of Psychiatry, Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), she is a Post-doctoral fellow at the Center for African Studies, Harvard university: cambridge, Massachusetts, she an assistant professor at the California University of science and Medicine school of Medicine: Colton, CA US.

It was right and fitting for Edith to present the biography Dr. Esther

Behind the face of Support MOMs project is an iron lady, **who is she ?**





Dr. Esther C Atukunda PhD is a Pharmaco-epidemiologist and Senior Lecturer in department of Pharmacy at Mbarara University of Science and Technology. She has been invested in investigating alternative user centred, appropriate medicine and intervention use in low resource settings utilizing observation studies, surveys, modelling cost-effectiveness and randomised controlled trials over the last 10 years successfully effected policy change in Uganda. She is a proud recipient of a K43 award (K43TW011004) focused on developing and testing a novel intervention using mHealth technology and social support to encourage and support women to access maternity care to improve maternal-child health outcomes, for which the current grant culminated. She is also a recipient of a CFAR (000521347-SP024-SC001 UAB Centre for AIDS Research) Developmental award aimed at exploring Intersectional Stigmas Among Men Living with HIV in Uganda. She supports & supervises several work of MSc/MMed and PhD students in Uganda on medicine access, adherence, maternal health and health service utilization.

Dr. Ankunda's work is essential in providing the much-needed support to mothers, who often face many challenges while pregnant and after giving birth. This grant will make a real difference in the lives of many families.

Congratulations to Dr. Esther Ankunda for winning such a big grant to support our mothers. This is an amazing achievement and as the University community, we cheer and toast to success. Succeed we MUST!



In three two one..... congratulations to the New Project of Support MOMs



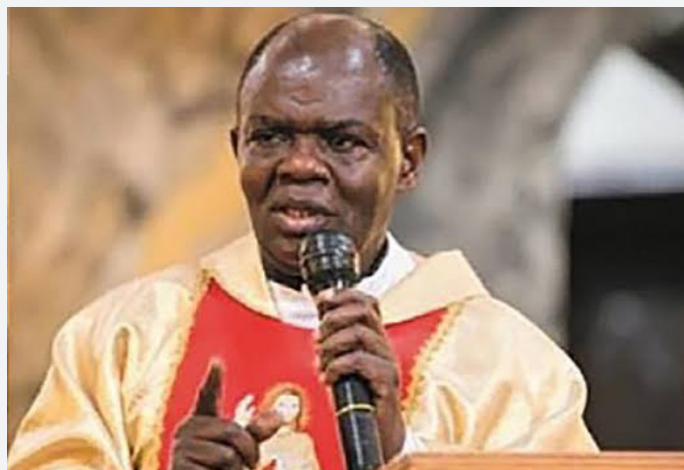
Fr. JB Bashobora made me who I am today: Esther Atukunda's Journey of Gratitude and Service



Esther Atukunda stands tall, not just in stature, but in the strength of her spirit and the depth of her gratitude. Adopted as a child by Rev. Fr. John Baptist Bashobora, Esther found not just a family, but a foundation and a calling. This is a story of faith, education, and the transformative power of believing in a child's potential.

At the peak of my struggles with school & straying around alone in the darkest of nights looking for help & direction, he picked me up, & adopted me as a little child....my poor but humble parents had tried all they could & were overwhelmed. Fr Bash appeared as I hopelessly meandered along a narrow road to nowhere! He gave me one of the warmest embraces with my smelly body & drove me back to school in the quiet night! He saved & re- birthed ME!

Esther begins, her voice carrying the weight of history yet brimming with warmth. "Rev. Fr. Bashobora saw something in me – a potential that I might not have seen in myself." He instilled in her a love for learning,



Rev. Fr. John Baptist Bashobora. Founder and Executive Director of Father Bash Foundation

and Esther thrived. Bweranyangi Girls School, Makerere High School, and finally, the prestigious halls of Makerere University became her classrooms, each step fueled by the unwavering belief of her adoptive father.

"He motivated me," Esther continues, her eyes twinkling with admiration. "He believed in me when I might have doubted myself." And that belief blossomed into remarkable achievements. Today, Esther stands tall not only as the Finance Director of the Father Bashobora Foundation, where her guardian angel and God father entrusted her to help oversee his projects like Divine Mercy Hospital, Divine Mercy Babies Home, Father Bash college of health science, Pope John Paul 2 Ntungamo High School, St. Mary's Vocational School, Mbarara Parents School, other schools and tertiary institutions. But as a senior and respected Lecturer of pharmaco- epidemiology, research methods, pharmaceutical care and clinical trials at MUST. She has curved with great interest in improving access to medicines, health systems and adherence. But Esther's impact extends far beyond numbers and academic accolades. As Finance Director, she ensures the smooth functioning of the Foundation, her financial acumen touching countless lives. As a lecturer, she ignites young minds, passing on the torch of knowledge with the same passion instilled in her by Father Bashobora.

Yet, beyond the numbers and spreadsheets, Esther's work carries a deeper significance. "The foundation is my home," she declares, her voice resonating with a sense of belonging. "Father Bashobora gave me a chance, and now, I have the opportunity to give back, to serve the community that embraced me."

In her success, Esther embodies the Foundation's mission of empowering individuals and communities.

She is a living example of the transformative power of education, faith, and the unwavering belief in a child's potential. As she concludes, her voice filled with emotion, "To my loving Father and guardian Angel, I hope I have made you proud."

Esther Atukunda's story is more than just a professional success; it is a testament to the ripple effect of compassion and the enduring power of gratitude. It is a story that inspires, uplifts, and reminds us all of the profound impact we can have when we choose to believe in the potential of others.



Prof. Charles Tushabomwe-Kazooba giving closing remarks

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