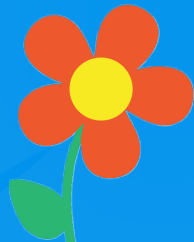


ubongo

# LEARNING REPORT

2020



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“My baby likes it and it builds her reasoning and speaking skills. She’s learning how to talk.”

- Kenyan Parent

# THE BIG WHY

**Ubongo's vision is to equip Africa's next generation with the educational foundation, critical skills, and positive mindsets to change their own lives and communities for the better.**

We know that kids today live in a rapidly changing world and have to adapt and evolve as societies continue to transform. Well, 2020 forced us Ubongoers to fully embody the skills and mindset that we encourage in kids through our work. We've had to be resilient, creative problem solvers, and curious... we've had to keep learning, ask questions, and work together... and above all else, we've had to lead with empathy, practice gratitude, and live life with purpose.

In this learning report, we (Ubongoers) will share some of the challenges we faced in 2020, the opportunities that emerged, the decisions that were made, and what we learned from all of them. More than ever before, we relied on our core values "Ubongoers Principles" to guide our path, and it was only by "owning it," "failing fast and failing forward," "having a growth mindset," and other Ubongo values which we will share, that we were able to not only survive, but thrive this year.

Hopefully, you too can gain something of value that can inform the work you do.



# Ubongo Growth Timeline



## ubongo toolkits

Over 600 parents, kids, educators and innovators play, learn, and engage at the first ever Building Brains Conference in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania!

We launch the Ubongo Toolkits, a digital library of quality, African-made early learning materials and educational resources for kids aged 0-14. Partners pledge to reach 604,840 kids



Ubongo programs airing on TV in 11 African countries in Kiswahili, English, Hausa, French and Kinyarwanda



Akili and Me Season 3 launches



We launch on free TV in 8 new countries: Senegal, Benin, Cameroon, DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Botswana & Zimbabwe

Ubongo supports the World Bank, OECD, RELI and others to share best practices in TV and radio education with organizations and governments around the world, to help education systems keep kids learning through the pandemic

Ubongo and partners launch a new play-based learning at home radio show in Tanzania and Uganda

Reuters published an article and video on Ubongo that got picked up around the world by Al Jazeera, El Pais (in Spanish), Terra (Portuguese), CNBC Africa, The Tribune India, Hindustan Times, Metro, Capital News (Georgian), Kompas (Indonesian), VOA Swahili, and many many others!

We launch on Country Radio in Sierra Leone!

Kids across Tanzania, Kenya and Nigeria to enjoy brand new 'utu'-filled episodes from Ubongo Kids Season 5!



Ubongo shows airing on radio in Tanzania, Zambia and Kenya

We close our offices in Tanzania and South Africa and start working remotely from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic

We expand to 38 TV stations and 20 radio stations, including launching on radio in Uganda

Blog post by the Center for Global Development shows that 89% of edtech users in Africa are viewers and listeners of Ubongo content

Akili and Me in Hausa launches on Arewa 24 in Nigeria!

Ubongo featured on the New York Times story about remote learning during the pandemic

Ubongo featured with Khan Academy on Learning to Overcome podcast by UNICEF and Imaginable Futures

Ubongo content available for families who don't have access to TV or radio via interactive voice response (IVR) in Tanzania, Nigeria, Uganda, and Rwanda!



Akili and Me launches in isiZulu and Sesotho on DBE TV in South Africa!

We put all our content under the Creative Commons license, so that anyone who wants it can access and use it legally for free!

Produce weekly at-home learning timetables with accessible activities and lessons for kids to do independently

Akili Radio launches on Radio Khwezi in South Africa!

**Number of countries on free nationwide TV: 19**  
**Number of countries on Radio: 6**  
**Number of Languages broadcasting: 8**



## JAN-MAR

Ubongoers across Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, United States, Malawi, Rwanda, Cote D'Ivoire come to Tanzania to prepare for the Building Brains 2020 Conference! Soon after, the COVID pandemic hits sub-Saharan Africa and we start our emergency response efforts.

## APR-JUN

The Ubongo team works hard to keep kids learning safely at home. Within 3 months we increase our reach from 11 to 18 countries on free TV, launch a new at home radio show, publish weekly at-home lesson plans across digital platforms, and share dozens of COVID-related PSAs to help keep families informed, engaged in learning, and healthy.

## JUL-SEP

Ubongoers continue to work hard to keep kids learning and engaged across Africa. We expand the content offerings on our free digital library, Ubongo Toolkits and launch a WhatsApp Chatbot service for families in English, Kiswahili and Hausa. Our efforts are recognized by media outlets such as the New York Times, Aljazeera, and Reuters.

## OCT-DEC

Ubongo is awarded the Al-Sumait Prize in African Development in the area of education and the Klaus J. Jacobs Best Practice Prize. We finish the year strong with the launch of *Ubongo Kids* Season 5 in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, as well as a special episode featuring Kenyan Sign Language!



"The program has the interest and focus of the child at heart. It also gives a child a high sense of understanding, based on the environment and mind of a child. It helps develop a child's character."

**- Nigerian Parent**

## Lesson 1: Go All In - It Takes a Village to Raise a Changemaker

Equipping parents with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to support their kids' learning has been a priority for us since the founding of Ubongo. Research shows that 90% of brain development happens in the first 5 years of life. However, throughout the years, our own outreach and research has found that a majority of caregivers believe that learning only starts when kids begin school. This is especially detrimental for young kids, who spend the majority of their time at home and may not receive the stimulation and engagement they need for healthy cognitive and social-emotional development.

Part of the problem is that the information surrounding early childhood development often remains within academic and development circles... and is 'trickled down' to caregivers in ways that aren't relevant to their needs and motivations. In 2020 we set out to do something **BOLD** to address this issue - host an interactive and fun early childhood development conference, **Building Brains**, bringing together kids, parents, educators, and development partners.

**We wanted different groups of people, who were often never in the same rooms and conversations, to come together for the shared purpose of improving the learning lives of young kids.** This required every single Ubongoer to give 100%, dive deep into the details, and take on tasks they've never done before (from making toys from plastic bottles to emceeding a 600 person event)!



## UBONGOERS went all in and on March 6th and 7th...

### Over 600 people

from all walks of life attended the conference including parents, teachers, journalists, development workers, policy makers and kids themselves!

### Over 25 media outlets

in Tanzania and Kenya covered the conference and key learnings

### Over 500 online conversations

were generated

### Over 20 Ted-style talks, workshops and learning exhibitions

were conducted in English and Kiswahili, and shared to over a million additional participants via TV and YouTube

### Over 150 kids

attended, including our master of ceremonies, guest of honor, and panel discussion facilitator

Partners pledged to **reach 604,840 kids** in Tanzania with our learning resources

Feedback from attendees showed that **parents felt motivated to support their kids' learning** and wanted more events like this. We plan to replicate this conference across different regions in Tanzania, as well as different key markets we're in like Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria

Learn more at: <https://www.buildingbrainsconference.org/>

"We went all in to hold an event and share our 100% unwavering commitment to supporting young children's early learning. And we found that there were hundreds out there willing to go all in with us! Someone just needed to bring them together. It takes a village to raise a changemaker!"



**Doreen Kessy,**  
Chief Business Officer,  
South Africa

## Lesson 2: Innovate and Simplify - Make Sharing Simple

When COVID 19 hit sub-Saharan Africa in March 2020, ensuring that parents and kids could continue to learn safely at home together became our top priority. In the first days of the pandemic in Africa, we quickly realized that to get our content to families who needed it the most, **we had to make it as easy as possible for broadcasters and other distribution partners to get legal access to use and share our content.**

Ubongoers constantly strive to find better ways to work, create, and deliver results. But we don't innovate for the sake of invention or newness. We innovate to achieve outcomes and to simplify the path to these outcomes. So instead of spending weeks reviewing and negotiating licensing agreements with TV and radio stations, digital networks, and development partners, we changed our modus operandi and put all our content under the Creative Commons Non-Commercial license. This means that anyone in the general public has permission to use our content for free if they are using it for non-commercial purposes.

We also made all of this content available on our online Toolkits platform, through which anyone can register, browse, search, and download from Ubongo's full library of content. We even made a section for broadcasters where stations can get self-service access to full top-quality episodes to show on free-to-air TV and radio.



## 'Shareability' increased access and reach, we've:

Expanded our **reach from 11 to 19 countries** (on nationwide TV) - almost DOUBLING the markets we're in

Launched on **18 radio stations** in **6 countries**

Launched in **28 free and pay TV stations** in **40 countries**

Had **323 additional partners** sign up on our toolkits platform and pledge to distribute our content to **9,020,784 kids**

Grew our library of available shareable content to **968 video, audio, and printable resources**

Learn more at: <http://toolkits.ubongo.org/>

"It's all very well creating engaging and impactful content, but if it doesn't reach the intended audience - in our case underserved kids - then we'd be wasting our time. We have to make sure that we are creating products and packaging them with "shareability" at the core. Whilst we are still working out how this best manifests itself, this year it has meant minimising file sizes of our multimedia content (through editing and compression), baking in the details of the creative commons license into each piece of content (to encourage sharing) and prioritising a self-service approach to accessibility of the products (primarily through our Toolkits Platform)."



**Stephen Boustred,**  
Head of Digital Products,  
Tanzania

## Lesson 3: We are Always Learning - Kid-Centered Research in a Pandemic?!!

While working remotely from home in 2020 brought about many challenges, like slower internet connections, unstable electricity, and kids interrupting zoom calls for playtime - this was our most productive year when it came to content creation.

We created a full season of a new learning-through-play radio show for kids and caregivers to learn together, producing 24 episodes in 4 languages in less than 3 months. We also produced over 30 public service announcements and video shorts for TV, in addition to our normal slate of *Akili and Me* and *Ubongo Kids* episodes. Before the pandemic, our education and research team could test concepts, storylines, songs, and episodes directly with kids. Now, **we had to learn how to 'virtually' conduct rigorous research and user-testing with kids and caregivers in low resource environments.** *Ubongoers are lifelong learners. We see challenges as opportunities to learn,* and we were committed to learning new strategies for research to ensure that we are creating highly effective content.

There's still a lot that we missed. For instance, the languages we adapted the radio show to are better understood by the caregivers than the kids! We don't have a perfect system, but it's an ongoing lesson that we're committed to learning.



## We applied a multi-platform approach to testing the new radio show...

We **worked with research partners** who collected feedback from parents through phone interviews in multiple countries

We also **built virtual networks** of parents via WhatsApp that we send content and questions to for feedback

We relied on our on-the-ground country representatives in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Rwanda, Nigeria and Cote D'Ivoire to help us get **feedback from kids across cultures** and languages

We learned so much! For instance, parents took figurative concepts like "squeeze your shoulders up to your ears" literally and felt disappointed when their kids couldn't do it. We needed to be more clear with instructions to avoid confusion, so "lift your shoulders upwards as far as you can, as if you are trying to reach your ears."

"This year took "always learning" to another level but I believe that we have responded well and come out stronger. One of the biggest challenges was finding innovative ways to co-create content with users in low-resource settings where internet and electricity pose a challenge. While this is something we are still working on, it really showed us that in an emergency, there is no one-size-fits all approach. We must adapt and use whatever resources the user has access to."



**Clodhna Ryan**  
Head of Education,  
Tanzania



“When my kid gets out of school she moulds things like dolls and she starts teaching them. She has never done this before but since she started watching Akili and Me she has been learning in a fun way.”

- Maasai Father

## Lesson 4: Do More With Less - Reimagining Content Creation

One of our greatest strengths as an organization is our rich library of educational content for kids in multiple African languages. This year, we were able to extensively grow this library of learning resources, despite facing more restrictions in our production and operations than ever before. How did we achieve this? We had to rethink what we consider 'new' content.

Ubongoers want to get the most out of every shilling, every hour, and every spark of creativity... so we can bring more and more to the kids we serve. This year we took a step back and revisited previously shelved ideas, reviewed old episodes, and explored more ways we could use our greatest asset "our existing content" to impact kids in new ways.

For example we created a new radio show to support learning at home, by integrating new narration from a single narrator (an Ubongoer recording from home) with songs, stories, and lessons from our old *Akili and Me* radio show. We also repackaged *Ubongo Kids* content into bite-sized math, science and life skills video lessons for TV and 'shareability' across digital platforms.

**Repurposing old content to make something new is now a core part of our strategy, and partners are also finding new ways to use our content, with teachers around the world integrating our educational shorts into their remote lessons.**



## Doing more with the content we already have, has led to...

**33** new COVID related PSAs covering handwashing and health, social distancing, learning at home, and psycho-social support created

**24** episode season of at-home learning radio show produced in **4** languages

Launched a chatbot service with over **36** pieces of repackaged content

**92% of parents** in Tanzania who saw our new COVID content said it helped them learn how to protect themselves and their families

"As creatives, we tend to begin with using our imagination to create new content (exploring all possibilities), but having to repurpose old content forced us to rethink what creativity is and how we can still produce new ideas by recycling content. This has enabled us to expand our content library even more. Having constraints forced us to innovate, and as a result this year we've done so much more than ever before despite restrictions."



**Doreen Bateyunga,**  
Pre-Production  
Coordinator, Tanzania

## Lesson 5: Work Together and Lend a Hand- Practicing Heart-Centered Collaboration

Ubongoers have always been close. We know the names of each other's kids, we remember birthdays, anniversaries, and are there to support each other through difficult times. But this year, our 'closeness' was put to the test when we had to figure out how to effectively work together and do more than we've ever done before, while dealing with internet instability, power outages, sick family members, mental health, our children, social unrest, and the myriad of challenges that 2020 posed.

We've spent a lot of time working on season 5 of *Ubongo Kids*, which focuses on the theme of Utu (our shared humanity in Kiswahili), and each episode highlights an Utu value like empathy, collaboration, and responsibility. **Ubongoers had to live the things we teach**, and more than ever before, we had to lead with empathy. We all had to become even more flexible and understanding of each other's needs, priorities, and communication styles...We had to talk often and openly to quickly fix the things that weren't working, and work together to build systems and processes that inspire transparency and clarity.

We hit many roadblocks and had some 'shaky' moments, but we got through them by listening to each other and remembering our collective purpose of helping kids in Africa realize their potential. If all else fails, lead with empathy and your big "WHY?"



## Doing more with the content we already have, has led to...

We grew our team to **50 Ubongoers** working collaboratively across **8 countries** in Africa

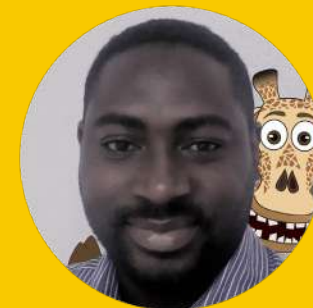
**64%** Increase in our employer NPS score

**80.8%** of Ubongoers say they are very happy with Ubongo's work environment

**100%** of Ubongoers understand how their daily work contributes to the Ubongo mission

**91.1 %** say Ubongo provides a safe working environment

“In the midst of all that 2020 threw at us, I witnessed first hand the strength and resilience of Ubongoers. Even with so much uncertainty and the constant need to keep adapting to the changing world, Ubongoers stepped up and went above and beyond to continue delivering without dropping quality or losing impact. I now realize it came naturally to most because Ubongo has attracted some of the brightest and most committed minds to her mission. But above all else, Ubongoers truly care about each other and the kids they serve.”



**Tayo Olaniyan,**  
Nigeria Representative,  
Nigeria

## Lesson 6: Deliver Quality Results - “Fun” Is the Not-So-Secret Recipe to Effective Kids Content

Right before the pandemic hit, we completed endline data collection on a new study in partnership with the University of Maryland School of Public Health, examining educational outcomes from our *Akili and Me* preschool education when kids view in natural settings with the free choice on whether to attend and watch the shows.

Something particularly interesting that emerged from the research findings was that **kids’ engagement with the show was the strongest predictor of learning outcomes**, even over the level of exposure. Kids who were engaged enough to remember the names of multiple characters, even if they watched only infrequently and saw only a few episodes, had strong learning gains across learning outcomes.

### So what does this tell us?

This confirms something that seems a bit like common sense, but we can too often forget: kids will only learn if they’re paying attention! And our way of getting kids to pay attention is through fun, captivating storytelling and, of course, great music. This is why we invest so much time and resources into doing kid-centered research and design and focus on quality, not just quantity. **Kids’ approval of our content is how we control for quality, but also deliver on our promise to help kids learn through our edutainment.**



## What we've learned from our 2020 'Akili and Me' impact study...

Kids who paid enough attention to **remember the names of 4 characters** showed significant gains of **13% in Kiswahili numeracy and literacy, 5% in English skills, 7% in social emotional skills and 19% in health knowledge attributable to watching *Akili and Me***

When there's no adult forcing learners to pay attention, it's critical to tap into kids' own interests and encourage them to want to learn

Kids are most engaged in learning when it's in a language they speak and understand

"This study shows overwhelmingly that children who watched and remembered characters from Akili and Me performed better on practically every assessed developmental outcome. It also confirms something that we should already know: kids learn if they **pay attention**, so capturing and holding their attention is key!"



**Prof. Dina Borzekowski,**  
University of Maryland  
School of Public Health,  
U.S.A



I like the show because of “The fact that it allows kids transition in learning Kiswahili and English, and because it is locally relevant.”

**- Kenyan Parent**

## Lesson 7: Own It - Taking BIG risks to Tackle BIG Problems

We were all blindsided by the global health crisis and were forced to quickly make some hard decisions about what unknown risks we were willing to take on, in order to counter the very serious and known risks associated with children's education being disrupted.

As a non-profit that exists to use media and edutainment to support African kids' learning outside of school, there was no question that we needed to do everything we can to make our programs freely available to as many families as we could reach, and do that as quickly as possible.

We ended up putting all our content under the Creative Commons license and giving it out for free to everyone who wanted it, but this decision raised many concerns and fears about future revenue potential and sustainability. 'If we go free now, will people ever pay again in the future?' Moreover, we also debated whether we should wait for a donor to offer to fund emergency response or bootstrap and potentially drain what small reserves we have, to do what we have to NOW.

There were also concerns from partners, who wanted to keep exclusivity to our content and work. In one country, the largest TV station, who we reached over 3 million families through, said that if we let any other broadcasters in that country show our content, they would refuse to show it ever again. So **we had to make tough decisions on whether we should do what we believed was right, or what we knew was safe.**



## We did what was right, owned our decisions and it worked out okay...

Most of our **commercial partners** who PAY us for this same content are continuing to do so because they **understand the need**

We ended our relationship with the big broadcaster who wanted exclusivity, and every single other major broadcaster in that country took **our content and is showing DAILY for children**

We stepped away from funding that did not allow us to openly share and distribute content to kids across the continent

We launched in **8 new countries in just 3 months**

Our our existing funders and new supporters saw the work we were doing and stepped in with **additional funding and support**

“We took BIG risks responding to COVID: giving away our content to anyone who would take it, spending our own funds before we knew if any funders would step up, and cutting ties with partners who didn’t agree with this approach. It was scary but it has paid off in the long run! During this pandemic we’ve been expecting kids to be resilient and go about their work of learning in previously unimaginable ways... we need to expect the same of ourselves.”



**Nisha Ligon, Co-founder and CEO of Ubongo, Tanzania**

## Lesson 8: Speak Up and Speak Out - Navigating Dangerous Times

In July, we worked with a research partner to conduct in-depth phone interviews with over 200 parents in Tanzania. We wanted to learn about the impact of our programs in their kids' lives - especially during the pandemic, and what more we could be doing. While the narrative in Tanzania at the time was "Covid is over", an overwhelming majority of parents asked us to create even more COVID-19 content aimed at wider community awareness and to keep them better informed.

Throughout the year, we've grappled with the question **"what is the role of our voice in critical issues affecting kids and families?"** Whether it be state-sanctioned misinformation about coronavirus, social injustices, or internet censorship, "What price are we willing to pay for doing the right thing?"

As an organization, we've decided that our approach to speaking up, is to always put the needs of kids and their families first. And so, when states were still debating whether or not COVID 19 was a public health crisis, we went ahead and used our platforms to give families vital information about hygiene, mental health, social distancing, and information literacy. And even later when states declared that "Corona was over" we continued to share resources that helped keep families safe and healthy.

For us, speaking up is showing up for our communities and the people we serve.



## Interesting things we learned from our audience in Tanzania...

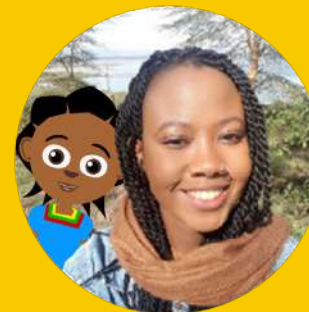
**95% of parents** reported that Ubongo's content is 'very important' for their child's education

**86% say the importance of Ubongo content has increased** during the pandemic

40% had seen Ubongo's recent COVID-19 related content. For viewers that had seen the content, **92% said that Ubongo's COVID-19 content helped** their family learn how to stay safe and healthy

The **#1 request from parents** when asked what other content Ubongo should create, was more **content for COVID-19 awareness**

"Internally, we believe that all Ubongoers have the responsibility to voice their thoughts, and should do so to teammates and leaders at every level without hesitation. However, how does this translate publicly? In spaces that aren't always safe? We've had to make a lot of tough and risky decisions this year, and as an organization, it's important to be clear on your vision and trust your instincts. If you lead with that in mind, you'll always be heading in the right direction."



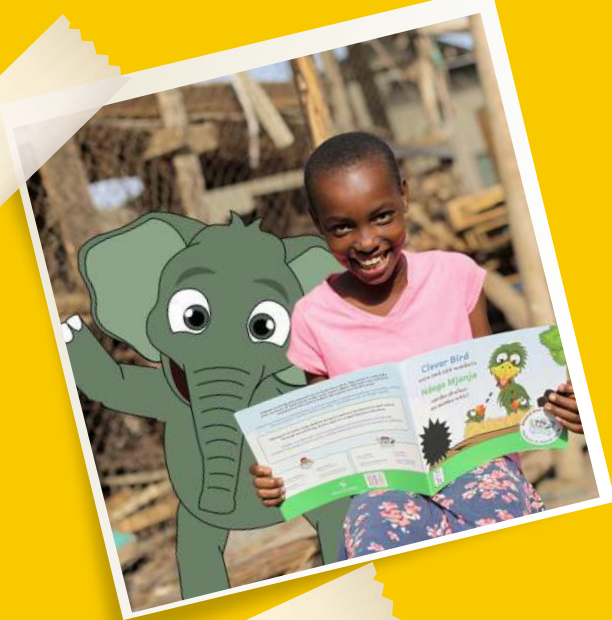
**Iman Lipumba,**  
Head of Marketing and  
Communications,  
Tanzania

## Lesson 9: Fail Fast, Fail Forward - Learning as We Do

One of our first priorities for our COVID response plan was to map all our content and other edutainment resources from partners to the curriculums in some key markets like Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, and Nigeria. Our assumptions were that we would need to focus on ensuring the continuity of curriculum-based learning while kids were at home. Moreover, some ministries of education who are very curriculum-focused would be more willing to work with us and distribute our content via their public broadcast services. We quickly learned that our assumptions were wrong.

Mapping our content against the curriculum did not expedite the long and extensive process of getting approvals from different ministries of education. More importantly, we learned from experts, partners and above all, families themselves, that **the most important thing right now was to keep kids engaged, learning, and resilient**, rather than the pie-in-the-sky dream of continuing their normal school curriculum via TV or radio.

Ubongoers take action, and then we quickly put everything to the test to see what works and what doesn't. We bring forth our ideas with passion, and then we welcome chances to be proven wrong. In this case, we quickly learned that the priority should be to get our content library out there to as many partners and kids who could use it as possible and to empower caregivers to support their kids learning and wellbeing. We still don't have all the answers on the best ways to keep out-of-school kids learning, but we're committed to trying, failing, and keep moving forward.



## The Results...

From the first day of school closure, kids in 11 countries were able to continue learning and smiling with Ubongo programs

Over **300 TV and radio content pieces** distributed this year in **8 languages**

Ubongo **radio programs** airing in **6 countries** in 4 languages

Ubongo **TV programs** airing in **40 countries** (free TV and satellite) in **7 languages**

Viewers show significant learning gains in numeracy, literacy, social emotional skills, motor skills, health, math and financial literacy!

“As part of our strategy to help parents and caregivers with homeschooling their kids, we started creating weekly Ubongo Kids and Akili and Me timetables, which included activities that the parents could do with their kids and sharing them on our social media channels. To parents this was a lifeline! We received positive feedback, thanking us for creating the timetables, helping them know where to start with teaching their own kids. We had parents sharing the timetables with their friends. And if we were late in posting the timetables online, we had parents inboxing to find out what was happening.”



**Husna Chikaha,**  
Social Media Associate,  
Tanzania



“I have been able to learn also new things for example the energy topic. Watching it with my children has brought us very close and they feel free to ask me whenever they need clarity.”

**- Tanzanian Parent**

## Lesson 10: Have a Growth Mindset - Partnerships for Impact

From our inception, we've been challenged with the question, "how might we reach kids in the last-mile (who don't have access to TV and radio) with our edutainment solutions?" In 2016, we piloted video-screenings of our shows in local video centers 'video bandas' for kids in rural Tanzania. However, we soon realized that this direct on-the-ground approach was not cost-effective and unsustainable for us to maintain by ourselves to reach every village in the country and beyond.

People with a growth mindset "believe that their abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work." Luckily, Ubongoers did not give up on thinking of ways to effectively reach underserved kids, and through a lot of research, learning, and testing, we've come up with a model that focuses on **working with partners who directly reach and work with last-mile communities.**

With the support of the Human Development Innovation Fund (HDIF), we developed the Ubongo Toolkits, a multiplatform digital library of easily shareable and localized educational content, which partners can use in their programs and share with kids and their parents.

We also applied this 'impact through partnerships' approach to our content adaptation process. For many years, we've tried to adapt our content to local languages ourselves, and this worked in some markets but proved to be hard to scale. We reiterated the process and developed adaptation packages that enable partners to adapt the content themselves.



## So far we have...

**323 partners** using our Toolkits platform

Partners estimate reaching **9,020,784 kids with content** from our Toolkits platform

Ubongo **radio programs** airing in **6 countries** in 4 languages

**968 multiformat pieces** available on the Toolkits platform

Goal of **reaching 1 million more kids who don't have access** to TV and radio in 2021

“ We have been met with many willing broadcasters and partners who believed in our mission and wanted to keep children learning when classrooms doors were shut. We have also placed great emphasis on our content being adapted into local languages to reach more children than we ever thought possible. With our vast network of radio and television broadcasters, and our growing network of on-the-ground partners; children in underserved communities were given access to quality education when their classrooms were closed. We look forward to strengthening these partnerships in the future and forming new ones in the new year to reach as many underserved children as possible.”



**Kriyen Ponnann,**  
Broadcast Manager,  
South Africa

## Lesson 11: We Are All Teachers - Fostering a Thriving EdTech Community

Over 80% of learners in Africa do not have access to the internet or digital devices like laptops, so how do we reach these kids with meaningful learning experiences right now? At the height of the pandemic, when millions of kids across Africa were stuck at home with little to no learning support, **we knew we had a significant role to play in sharing the knowledge we have about remote learning with the education ecosystem.**

Throughout 2020 we've been sharing our best practices for engaging kids through TV and radio with whoever wanted to learn. For instance, we saw that a lot of educational programs were filming teachers teaching as they lectured at a chalkboard, or recording their audio as they read from a textbook. We know from research and our own experience that this isn't an effective model to keep kids engaged, and that kids don't learn if they're not paying attention. Instead, it's important to add a lot of interactive moments, such as:

- The narrator directly asking questions to kids watching the program
- Characters asking the kids for help with activities
- Reinforcing lessons through catchy songs
- Using stories that make concepts more relevant to kids' lives

We hope that by sharing what we know, other individuals and organizations who are also motivated to support kids learning can take the lessons we've learned and create innovations for their contexts.



## Check out some of the knowledge we shared with...

**The World Bank:** We talked to the World Bank Edtech podcast about remote learning for Africa's learner

### **World Innovation Summit for Education**

**(WISE):** Listen to our CEO, Nisha Ligon, talk about the pedagogy of edutainment on the Wise Words podcast

**Imaginable Futures & UNICEF:** Our Head of Marketing and Communications, Iman Lipumba, talked about COVID and EdTech on the Learning to Overcome podcast

We hosted a webinar on 'Building Brains @ Home' with our peers from **Rising Academy Network, Teach for Uganda, eKitabu, Sesame Workshop South Africa & the International Teachers Network**

And we've been thrilled to see teachers around the world, from Costa Rica to Pakistan, Ghana to Indonesia, creatively integrating our content into their remote lessons. One motivated teacher from Brazil even dubbed our videos into Portuguese herself!

"In 2018, 122 students took part in these literacy classes, with 59% successfully finishing, having passed the final reading test. The success % was lower than planned (we aim for 90%) due to a large number of students who were not attending the classes. In 2019, 119 students took part in the literacy classes, with 73% successfully passing the final reading test; with better use of tablet devices with Ubongo's application and resources from the Ubongo Toolkits platform, the attendance of students improved significantly."



**Thomas Faber,**  
Jiamini

## Lesson 12: Always Do It for the Kids

We cannot say this enough, kids are at the heart of everything we do. We've faced many unforeseen challenges this year, and have had to take big risks and make hard decisions - what helped us through uncertainty was our core belief that enabling and empowering kids to better their own lives and communities will lead to long term and transformational change in the world.

Ubongoers put the kids we serve first: before our own egos, our preconceived ideas, and our personal preferences. We listen to kids, co-create with them, and we take their feedback as seriously as that of any adult expert. We make decisions with them and not for them because we know that kids have the capacity to show us what they need. **We truly believe that we work for kids, and as long as we continue to "do it for the kids," we will always find our way through any obstacle.**



## So what do kids and their families have to say about us?

"I feel more proud; my friends and relatives congratulate me for my children on the great improvement that came from watching these TV programs. They said I have had very intelligent children." - Tanzanian Parent

"Soo thankful for y'all! My babies love you guys! We catch every single episode as soon as it is up. Thank you guys for all you're different for children of color! It means sooo much to me that my children are blessed to have Akili at such a young age!" - U.S Parent, Instagram

"I like Akili animations because my kids are learning something new everyday" - Habiba Abdullahi, Nigeria

"My little sisters always want to watch Akili and Me and Ubongo Kids and I always watch with them learning english words, alphabets and numbers." - Lungile Ndimande, South Africa

"They have improved more academically and morally where they are complementing each other, just as the character Koba helps his colleagues in the television show."- Tanzanian Parent

"It develops the ability of children to express what they have in their mind, Akili and Me dealt much on expanding and growing the health of the brain through entertaining songs and cartoons." - Tanzanian Parent





“The program is very educative and African kids can easily relate with it since characters are African kids.”

**- Ghanaian Parent**

# TAKEAWAYS AND QUESTIONS

**There are now over 500,000,000 kids in Africa, and as we get closer to our 2025 goals of:**

- Making free, top quality edutainment available to kids across all of sub-Saharan Africa in local languages
- Getting 60 million kids learning with us monthly, and improving their cognitive, social-emotional, and life skills
- Growing an industry-leading Pan-African team and culture, spearheading a movement to create change for kids!

**We have learned some invaluable lessons, including:**

- Innovation should simplify processes instead of complicating them
- When resources are limited, find new ways to use what's already there
- The most rewarding partnerships are with those who share our core motivation to "do it for the kids"  
In times of uncertainty, making decisions based on values instead of fear builds credibility, motivates others to do the same, and can lead to long-term impact
- Empathy is essential to building driven and connected teams
- Kids learn best when they are paying attention and engaged
- Sharing our failures and lessons learned helps build a thriving education ecosystem focused on change for kids

**But there are still a lot of questions that we need to answer, like:**

- Is it our role to develop curriculum-based knowledge or, should we stay focused on building the underlying cognitive and social-emotional skills that support kids to learn and thrive?
- How do we create inclusive educational resources for ALL learners (kids with different learning styles, abilities, and environments)?
- How can we deepen engagement and learning beyond TV and radio? And who do we need to work with to this cost-effectively at scale?
- What technologies and approaches can we test and adapt to make it easier for more people to adapt our content (themselves) into their local languages?
- How do we ensure that our Ubongo 'Utu' values and culture are sustained as our team grows across Africa?

**If you have any ideas or feedback for us, please let us know at [iman@ubongo.org](mailto:iman@ubongo.org)**



## SHOUT OUT TO THOSE WHO DID IT FOR THE KIDS!

thank you



We couldn't have made it through this year without the support and inspiration from the global education ecosystem and some AMAZING partners and friends! We can't end this learning report without 'shouting out' some of YOU! So we'd like to give an extra special "WE SEE YOU" to...

Rising Academies, a for profit private school company that created a free and really high quality radio program for children in Sierra Leone and Liberia— AND they made their scripts and audio free to use. It's now been adapted and is reaching kids across the continent.

Food for Education, who normally do school feeding, stepped up to deliver over 1 million meals to families in need while schools are closed.

Eneza Education, for keeping kids in Kenya, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire learning through their mobile service for educational content to children in primary and secondary schools

Khan Academy, for helping millions of families transition to at-home learning by offering free educational resources, guides, and lesson plans

Arewa 24, Nigeria's biggest Hausa-language broadcast network who took it upon themselves to adapt our edutainment into Hausa so that millions of kids in Nigeria can learn in their heart-language!

Our awesome, creative partners including Lomoro Ronald who found innovative ways to adapt our radio programming into Juba Arabic with refugee children in Uganda, and WhizKids Workshop who went miles above and beyond to adapt content to four languages for refugee children in camps across Ethiopia. Thanks to them, vulnerable, displace populations are have gotten critical learning support during this incredibly difficult time!"

TEACHERS, many of whom haven't been paid in months, took it upon themselves to call families and provide support and tutoring. We've also found out that teachers across the world from Pakistan to Brazil to Ghana have been using our content to create fun lesson plans for their kids.

**THANK YOU and so many more individuals and organizations for DOING WHAT WAS NEEDED in 2020!**



Ubongoers 2020