

SUPREME: Uplifting the Potential of Youth in Northern Uganda's Workforce



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The challenge of youth unemployment and skills in Uganda, particularly in the West Nile region, is significant. Uganda has a rapidly growing population, with approximately one million young people entering the job market annually. However, the youth unemployment rate remains high at 30%. Additional challenges in the West Nile region contribute to the high youth unemployment rate. Refugees in the region face difficulties finding employment due to factors including lack of educational qualifications. To address the challenge of youth unemployment and skills in the West Nile region, it is crucial to provide comprehensive skills development support, including initiatives such as vocational training programs, entrepreneurship training, and access to financial resources for starting businesses. One of the initiatives implemented to address this challenge is the Security, Protection, and Economic Empowerment (SUPREME) programme. Fuelled by a shared vision, SNV, a global development organisation, in collaboration with World Vision, ZOA, and RICE-West Nile, is implementing a four-year SUPREME programme funded by the European Union. This programme seeks to increase access to viable employment and economic avenues for both refugees, who are marginalised and host communities across the four districts of Moyo, Obongi, Terego, and Madi Okollo in the West Nile sub-region. This initiative aligns with SNV's core mission of facilitating linkages between the labour market and skilled youth, fostering entrepreneurship and employment. The programme aims to benefit 25,000 individuals from refugee and host communities, indirectly impacting the lives of approximately 112,500 household members. The backbone of this endeavour is the establishment of Savings and Development Clusters, grassroots community structures that support the two target groups.

Alaru's Journey: A Triumph in Poultry Entrepreneurship

Poultry farming in Uganda plays a significant role in food security and socioeconomic empowerment of households. However, there are still challenges regarding prevalent diseases that can hinder productivity. Youth engagement in poultry farming is essential to the sector's development in Uganda. Sunday Alaru, a 22-year-old dynamic youth entrepreneur in the Moyo district, has experienced a journey of multiple income-generating pursuits – from farming and brick-laying to becoming a bodaboda (motorbike) rider. Yet, despite his relentless efforts across various ventures, he faced the challenge of providing for his parents, who reside under his roof and shouldering the



Alaru feeding his chickens.

responsibility of his siblings' school fees. Alaru's educational aspirations were cut short in secondary school, as he made the tough choice to labour for his family's sustenance.

Recalling his uphill battles, Alaru shares, "I had tried everything and even purchased 50 chickens with the money from

brick-laying. It was disappointing that most would die because they were not vaccinated. I had many challenges, including finding money to build a chicken coop, feeding the chickens, and identifying diseases."

His life changed when he learned about the SUPREME programme during a skills training engagement with Alaru's Raukii Savings Group. They included poultry management, tailoring, welding, hairdressing, brick-laying, concrete practice, and apiary. As Alaru explains, "I liked poultry because it can be done at home, and you will get money in a few months."

After that, he enrolled for a three-month poultry management course at Moyo Community Polytechnic. He recalls, "I was taught how to locate and build a poultry house. This includes considerations like the terrain and position of the sun. I also began to grow trees behind the poultry house to provide shade and act as a windbreaker to protect the chicken." Alaru acknowledges newfound attention on poultry feeding, hygiene essentials and disease prevention, imparted during his internship at a local poultry farm where he was linked through the SUPREME programme. "I gained experience handling young chicks, identifying sick birds, vaccinating day-old chicks and mixing feeds, and now my chickens feed well, so they stay healthy."

Alaru also underwent entrepreneurship training: "We were taught how to negotiate for good prices in the market, conduct market surveillance and compare prices with competitors, and understand seasonal price changes, for example, during festive seasons". Alaru has since graduated and received his business, technical vocational education and training certificate.

"After the training, I secured a loan of UGX500,000 from our group and began applying my new knowledge and skills. I used the money to buy 100 one-day-old chicks and feeds. I sold each chicken after four months for UGX40,000 and used the profits to build a bigger chicken coop. I have trained my mother and younger siblings to care for the birds. The cost of feeds is the greatest expense, so I allow the more mature birds to scavenge during the day so that we can reduce the feeding cost," he said.

Alaru's aspirations stretch far and wide. To elevate his poultry venture from 180 to over 500 birds, he envisages branching into egg production by rearing layers. His ambitions extend beyond personal gains, as he envisions mentoring fellow youth in the poultry domain. Alaru's counsel? "I want to encourage them to start small and support their businesses to grow through loans from their savings groups. Without the skills from the SUPREME project, I would still struggle to keep my birds alive; now, the losses are minimal, and profit is increasing. I am happy because I can now support my family and grow my business."

Brick by Brick: The Resilience Narrative

Uganda's West Nile region is one of the hardest hit with high unemployment rates, and it wrestles with additional complexities due to the influx of refugees, mainly from South Sudan and the DRC. According to data from UNHCR, approximately 1.53 million refugees residing in Ugandan settlements, women and children constitute 81%, with more than half dwelling in urban areas. Refugee women face a cocktail of factors, including limited access to land and markets, inadequate vocational and entrepreneurial training, and limited access to credit options, obstructing their ability to secure sufficient income to sustain their households.

To empower refugees, it is crucial to create economic opportunities to access meaningful jobs and start their businesses in the communities where they have settled. The SUPREME programme has extended its skills training reach to 770 refugees, including 377 young women, out of a targeted 2,000. One of them, Zainabu Naduku, a 25-year-old single parent and



Zainabu laying bricks at a construction site in Moyo District.

refugee who fled South Sudan in 2017 to Moyo district in the West Nile Region, exemplifies the transformational power of such interventions.

Zainabu's journey is one of tenacity and perseverance. Having left school after primary six, she initially faced bleak prospects, surviving on the meagre earnings from selling banana pancakes. Her experience with domestic violence and an unfulfilling marriage further compounded her challenges. However, her life changed when her father nominated her for the SUPREME skills training programme.

"My father informed me about the vocational training programme offered by SUPREME. He felt he was too old to participate but encouraged me to try it," said Zainabu. "I opted for brick-laying and concrete practice, motorcycle repair, and welding courses, but I was most interested in brick-laying because I believed it could lead to employment opportunities within companies."

Zainabu mastered the essential tools and techniques by enrolling in a rigorous three-month brick-laying and concrete practice course at the Moyo Community Polytechnic School. After that, the SUPREME programme linked her to an internship which equipped her with foundation laying, cement mixing, and wall plastering skills. Beyond the technical expertise, the programme provided Zainabu with life skills. "I learned that life has hardships, and we must learn to overcome them. I also learned to let go of the painful memories of separating from my violent husband and plan for my future," said Zainab.

Zainabu's transformation culminated in her successful entry into the male-dominated masonry field, where she now earns over UGX390,000 per month, surpassing the average monthly income for low-skilled labour in Uganda. Her newfound stability allows her to support her son's education and rent and dream of exporting her skills back to Sudan while inspiring other girls to challenge gender norms and pursue empowering careers.

Horticulture Boost: Enhancing Vegetable Yields

Horticulture farming in Uganda faces production, skills and knowledge gaps challenges. The lack of access to knowledge, information and training opportunities limits farmers' ability, especially youth, to engage in horticulture. James Bida Peter is a 26-year-old refugee residing at the Imvepi refugee settlement in Terego district. For James, the challenge lay in amplifying the yield of his tomato, eggplant, and onion crops, which had a very low yield. "Because I had very little knowledge in vegetable farming, we used to eat all the produce because it was not



James in his tomato garden.

enough to sell," he recalls.

Since James enrolled in the SUPREME youth skilling programme, his productivity and perception of growing vegetables changed. "I learnt about the skilling program from my savings group. I chose horticulture because it was something I was already doing. The three-month training at Adraa Agriculture College improved my farming skills because I did not know how to control pests and diseases, but now I know how to apply and use fertilisers."

Empowered with newfound knowledge of fertiliser application, James witnessed heightened crop yields and spread awareness within his community. "Community members come to me to learn skills, and I tell them about the different types of pests and diseases, how to control and prevent them, and how to apply fertilisers."

Through SUPREME, James's skills were reinforced with a one-month internship at Abaru Farm in Offaka Village. Here, he learnt to craft organic fertiliser from animal waste, improving his vegetable cultivation. The journey led him to introduce rabbits and goats into his repertoire, leveraging their manure to invigorate his crops.

Stitch by Stitch: Bridging the Skills Gap

Uganda has long grappled with the limited inclusion of women in employment. Young women, specifically those aged 15 to 29, face the brunt of challenges such as elevated unemployment rates, unequal wages, heightened employment vulnerability, and difficulty transitioning from education to careers.

The challenge of unemployment mainly affects young women, perpetuating a significant gender gap in the job market where women bear a heavier burden of joblessness than men. Among every five unemployed individuals in Uganda, three are women. Further, in 2021, data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) indicates that this disparity is especially pronounced among young women, with an alarming unemployment rate of 20.4%. In Moyo district, a stronghold of northern Uganda's host communities, 22-year-old Amadio Christine's aspiration of a career in fashion was met with the challenge of acquiring the necessary skills.

She recalled, "I dropped out of school in the primary because I was not performing well. I was selling fish for my uncle at the Lefori market because it did not need a certificate. I had always been interested in doing other work and wanted fashion, but I had no chance."

Christine's journey, marked by determination, led her to the SUPREME youth skilling programme. "During our savings group meeting, staff from SNV informed us that there was an opportunity to learn and earn for those interested.



Christine smiles while tailoring at the boutique.

They said we could choose the trade we wanted to learn. I applied for tailoring because I like fashion and wanted to know how to design and sew different styles." Her enrollment and choice of tailoring as her vocation marked the start of a transformative path. Through the programme, she honed her communication skills. "My life was transformed after the life skills training. I have improved my relationship-building skills because I used to be shy; now, I know how to communicate with people. I could not talk to a crowd, but now I know how to speak to many people to market my business," she recalled.

The training instilled in Christine a mastery of fashion design and sewing machine operation, further enriched by the linkage to an internship at a boutique. Complementing her creative prowess with entrepreneurial acumen, the programme equipped her with skills for launching her own tailoring business. Today, Christine's trajectory is one of promise as she saves towards establishing her own tailoring shop within three years.

Dignified Youth Employment: The Road Forward

SNV aims to achieve full and productive employment and decent work, especially for women within refugee host communities, by providing robust support in collaboration with the private sector, thereby ensuring sustainable prospects. The youth stories above are a few examples of over 2,000 youths empowered by SUPREME.

Crucial to SUPREME's success in empowering the youth is its strategic partnership with over 30 private sector actors in the region, which has facilitated community-based training and eased the transition into employment through internship linkages and retention. From surveys, the programme has achieved over 44% job creation for trained youth midway through implementation. The community-based training approach has yielded higher attendance rates and reduced dropouts than centralised training models that focus on business, technical and vocational education and training institutions. Pregnant and lactating women and people with disabilities have notably shown heightened participation.

The programme emphasises forming the Saving and Development Clusters as a pathway for sustainable growth, and 450 clusters have been created. Youth who complete the training are encouraged to join these clusters, tapping into group savings and development grants. They also offer loans for investment purposes and nurturing small income-generating ventures. Youth are also encouraged to form savings groups to benefit from government initiatives, including Operation Wealth Creation and the Parish Development Model. These groups can also access low-interest loans from SUPREME-partner financial institutions, bolstering their enterprises.

The SUPREME programme is a testament to the potential locked within Uganda's youth, particularly its young women. The programme propels youth towards self-sufficiency through strategic partnerships, skills development, and entrepreneurial mentorship and augments the nation's economic landscape.

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