



Armstrong Okeng takes care of his pigs



Okeng's poultry unit has 27 chickens. He now sends home between sh20,000 - sh30,000 every month

# Supporting youth in achieving productive, sustainable livelihoods

By Andrew Masinde

**A**lthough Armstrong Okeng 22, is handicapped he is the head of a household with four children. He says when his father developed mental illness and later passed on in 2001, his mother abandoned them. Okeng was only nine years old at that time, and yet he was also the eldest child.

For lack of fees, Okeng and his siblings eventually dropped out of school, "We kept doing odd jobs, offering our labour and growing some foodstuff on a small piece of land. We barely had enough to eat," he says.

He also says for them, clothing was a luxury. "Most people also despised me because of my disability. People thought I would not acquire any good thing. Some of them even asked me why I struggle when I did not have the ability to do anything good. Nevertheless, I did not allow their words to crush my spirit," he says.

Okeng says while he was still wondering what to do with his life and responsibilities, God answered his prayers through the launch

of the Empowering Youth for Sustainable Livelihood Project in Lira by Plan International with support from the European Union.

"I attended one of the meetings and passed the vulnerability assessment. I was given an opportunity to select a course for vocational training. I picked agriculture since this is what I knew I could do and I had a passion for it," he says.

After the training, Okeng secured a job at Ave Maria Vocational Training Institute as a poultry attendant. "From this job, I used to earn sh70,000 per month. My wages were increased to sh100,000 per month after I completed my six-month probation period. The money I earned may have seemed little but I have achieved quite a lot in just five months," Okeng says.

Okeng has saved and started his own poultry farm. "I now have 27 chickens, three goats, and I am also able to send home between sh20,000 - sh30,000 every month. I plan to send two of my siblings back to school this year," Okeng says.

In 2018, he says he plans to enroll for a formal certificate in agriculture. As his savings and investments continue to grow, he has

bigger plans as well. Okeng plans to build a permanent house by 2020. Asked what the most significant change in his life has been, Okeng replies with a smile, "The vocational skills I have acquired."

## More youth benefit from project

Like Okeng, hundreds of youths in the sub-counties of Agweng in Lira district and Akura, Abako and Amugo in Alebtong district are now earning a living, thanks to inroads made by the Empowering Youth for Sustainable Livelihood project.

Patrick Sebbowa, the National Programme Manager for the project at Plan International Uganda says the organisation with its implementing partners – Concerned Parents Association, Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns and Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation have reached out to many youth through the Empowering Youth for Sustainable Livelihood Project since January 2015, to ensure that they are economically empowered to meet their needs.

Sebbowa says a number of preparatory interventions were carried out in order to prepare the youth for the project. "This

included career guidance, functional adult literacy, business skills, life skills and negotiation skills," he says.

Sebbowa explains that 917 (488 male and 429 female) youth have taken part in vocational/technical trainings since the inception of the project in 2015.

"Of the 917 youth who have benefited from the project, 639 (325 male and 314 female) youth underwent a three-month apprenticeship training in various courses including painting, and decoration, welding and metal fabrication, tailoring, knitting, computer repair, bricklaying and concrete practice, catering, hair dressing, motorcycle repair and bakery, phone repair, shoe-making and agriculture," he says.

Sebbowa adds that the trainings were tailored according to the Directorate of Industrial Training curriculum. Currently, 28.1% of the youth trained are now formally employed, 48.5% self-employed while 23.4% are yet to find employment.

Isaac Obong, the project manager says, over the last two years 914 out of 917 youth who enrolled for training have successfully graduated.

## Motorcycle workshop uplifts other youth

Gilbert Ongom Junior, 25, is a resident of Agweng village in Lira district. He says after dropping out of school due to lack of fees at the age of 18, he resorted to spending most of his time in trading centres with fellow youth.

In 2014, he was identified by Plan International Uganda and offered training in mechanics for six months after which he was able to start up a motorcycle repair garage in Agweng trading

centre.

"Because of the quality of my work, Plan International Uganda also offered to attach fellow youth to my workshop for training. This has boosted my business. Every after six months Plan International sends me some youth for training at a fee. I don't know where I would be now if Plan International had not taken me for the training," Ongom explains.

Ongom embarked on his

venture with a startup capital of sh300,000. He is now worth sh32m. "I am now looked at as a role model youth in the village," Ongom says.

## Parents form Village Saving groups to educate children

Sebbowa says besides the vocational skills, the project trained 50 Village Savings Loans Associations (VSLAs), including parenting groups on business skills, financial literacy and

income generating activities.

"These groups were supported with complete VSLA tool kits and are now actively saving and borrowing from the group envelope to meet households expenses and children's needs like education, health, wellbeing. The village saving group structure is also used as a platform for creating awareness to prevent violence against children among their families," Sebbowa says.



Gilbert Ongom Junior at his motorcycle repair garage in Agweng trading centre