

Supporting youth empowerment

By Andrew Masinde

Jackie Nakalega, 19 is a resident of Namungona suburb in Kampala. After the death of her mother, she was taken on by her mother's friend, who promised raise her and pay her school fees. That support came through until she completed P.7.

For a year thereafter, Nakalega stayed at home doing housework, before her aunt took her back to school. Unfortunately, tragedy struck again when she was in S2. Nakalega's aunt was involved in an accident and was no longer able to pay her school fees.

A friend promised to find her a job in Kampala. "When I reached Kampala, the job I was given was that of a waitress at a bar. I was paid between sh3,000 and sh4,000 a day which could hardly pay my bills. I turned to prostitution to supplement my little earnings," she says.

One day, someone who noticed her plight advised her to join the Partnerships for Empowerment of Vulnerable Women and Girls in Urban Slums of Kampala City (PEVUS) project.

The project aims at rehabilitating more than 900 girls and women who have been sexually exploited, by giving them alternative livelihood options. This is in addition to skills training to enable them develop confidence and create linkages for them to employment opportunities.

So far 900 girls have been trained in vocational skills including hair dressing, tailoring, plumbing and electronics. Of these, over 70% are employed and about 25% are self-employed. This number is expected to rise following the distribution of start-up kits to all beneficiaries. The start-up kits include hair

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dressing materials and equipment, electronic and plumbing tool boxes, catering sets, tailoring and knitting machines.

Besides equipping the beneficiaries with vocational skills, they are sensitised on how to demand for their sexual reproductive health rights, access information and sexual reproductive health services. The project has also developed capacity of duty bearers. The project's main objective is to create deep-rooted and lasting improvements in the lives of girls and young women aged 13 to 25 in Kawempe and Rubaga divisions of Kampala City.

Nakalega is not alone. Many other youths have benefited from the scheme.

Margaret Namutebi, 24, graduated in 2014 from Uganda Christian University with a Bachelor of Project Planning and Entrepreneurship and spent a year at home without a job.

"I applied to different organisations, but none of the responses were positive. I had given up, when I came across an advert at the Kawempe Division office calling upon youth to apply for the SmartUp Factory, the Plan International youth innovation mentorship and skilling



Plan International Uganda beneficiaries welding a door at their garage in Lira

programme," she says.

The SmartUp project seeks to empower 10,000 marginalised young men and women in the organisation's areas of operation. Namutebi applied and was selected for the training.

"We were encouraged to have a positive attitude and to always be enterprising and innovative in everything we do. I learnt how to use computers, especially excel and PowerPoint, the kind of skills I had not gotten even as an entrepreneurship student," Namutebi notes. In addition, Namutebi trained in public speaking. "This really boosted my self-esteem," she says.

Today, she works with Kampala Hospital as an administrative assistant. She attributes her success to the confidence she gained at the SmartUp Factory. Nakalega and Namutebi's success stories are among thousands of others of youth who have been supported by Plan International over the last 25 years.

Working in partnerships with other youth organisations through its Youth Economic Empowerment (YEE) programme, Plan International Uganda has created safe, inclusive, gender-sensitive employment opportunities, especially for girls.

The organisation has been able to mobilise and organise youth to participate in and manage YEE initiatives.

Justine Nakiwala, Plan International Uganda's communications manager, says Youth Economic Empowerment is one of their five key country programmes. She explains that they have worked in partnership with civil society organisations, the private sector and government, to increase the provision of safe, inclusive, gender-sensitive youth employment opportunities, especially for adolescent girls and young women.

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Youth gaining skills, employment

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“Youth organisations are strengthened to participate in and manage YEE initiatives, including demanding accountability from the Government. During the next five years, Plan International Uganda is committed to reaching more than 90,000 young women and 70,000 young men,” she says.

According to Patrick Emukule, the Kamuli programme unit manager, they are implementing A Working Future project supported Plan International Uganda to develop a YEE model.

Emukule explains that A Working Future project had its foundation in Village Saving and Loans Associations (VSLAs), which provided increased access to financial services. It is used as a platform to teach critical skills required for formal jobs and self-employment.

“The project was implemented in partnership with local governments of Kamuli and Tororo, as well as community-based organisations and private companies, including KK Fresh Foods, Mukwano Group of Companies and Community Vision Uganda, Restless Development, Young Drive, Airtel, Grameen Foundation, Barclays Bank,”

According to Emukule, a total of 12,326 youth who mobilised into savings groups have obtained employment. A total of 430 VSLA groups were formed. “The VSLA model proved to be an excellent platform to introduce different paths towards financial services and employment,” he says, adding, “Seven percent of these groups were later linked to formal financial institutions.”

“Over time, average monthly savings per member reached \$9, with most of the youth across programme units being able to access

financial services. Additionally, 99% were employed through the programme, including 223 youth non-beneficiaries who were employed indirectly by beneficiary businesses,”

For instance, 474 producer groups were formed, 11,340 youth were employed in agriculture, 385 in micro-franchises, 108 formally employed and 2,835 self-employed.

Nakiwala explains that the producer groups and individuals that worked directly with KK Fresh Produce Exporters Limited produced 60,052 kg of chillies valued at \$34,400 and were able to access the European market.

“Through the partnership with Mukwano Group of Companies, 385 youth improved their business relationship with the private sector, through the programme. According to a project evaluation report, 68% of youth beneficiaries’ business volume had increased, while 24 % saw an increase in the number of customers. More than half expressed that they had gained customer relationship skills, while 39% gained marketing skills,” she says.

A member of Petta Youth Development Association (PAYODA) in Tororo district identified as Obbo, says joining A Working Future project was the best decision he had ever taken. “When I joined the project, my eyes were opened to so many opportunities. I identified new business ventures and now I employ five youths. My family has no financial stress. Food on the table is assured. We have decent clothing. Our children enjoy a good education and our future is secure,” says Obbo.

With funding from the European Union, Plan International Uganda is implementing an eco-agriculture project that is part of the Switch Africa Green Initiative in Uganda. This project is being implemented in partnership with the National Organic Agricultural Movement of



Betty Adong and Denis Ogwang of Bar sub-county in Lira district ploughing their field with oxen

Uganda (NOGAMU).

Patrick Ssebbowa, the youth economic empowerment national programme manager, says the general objective of the project is to contribute to change production and consumption management practices to reduce the negative environmental impact in Northern Uganda, specifically Lira district. The project also contributes to increase livelihood opportunities for youth sesame farmers, through access to eco-agriculture production, marketing and green economy inclusion.

Currently, 405 youth have been empowered with skills in eco-agriculture and exposed to green business opportunities along the sesame value chain. “Youth were trained on organic production of sesame, eco-agriculture practices, organic products quality management, eco marketing principles, standards and market requirements, business development, production planning and entrepreneurship, postharvest handling,” says Ssebbowa

Christine Akidi, the chairperson of Ayira Child Mothers Youth Group under Switch Africa Green project, explains that the application of the skills gained in ecological agriculture practices have made it possible for many youth to realise improved production and productivity of sesame. “Even under the current variations experienced in rainfall patterns, we have managed to maintain soil fertility using local concoctions. We have also used these concoctions to kill pests and diseases without spending on fertilizers and pesticides; and this has meant increased earnings,” Akidi explains.

The project also supported the update of the draft National Organic Agriculture Policy (NOAP), NOAP Implementation framework and conducting of a regulatory impact assessment for NOAP. The generated policy documents have been adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries and are yet to be presented and approved by the cabinet and Parliament of Uganda.