

Refugee pupils struggle in English-only classrooms

BY SYLVIA KATUSHABE

Uganda is internationally recognised for its progressive refugee policy, welcoming people fleeing conflict from neighbouring countries such as South Sudan, DR Congo, Somalia and Burundi.

Most refugee children have previously studied in Arabic, French or local dialects. Upon enrolment in Ugandan schools, they are expected to follow lessons taught in English, a language many do not understand. Teachers warn that without adequate language support, these learners struggle to keep up academically, withdraw socially and, in some cases, drop out of school.

Education stakeholders say the language gap affects not only learning outcomes but also integration into school communities.

These concerns were highlighted as Windle International Uganda (WIU) in partnership with UNHCR and Makerere University's School of Languages, Literature and Communication, concluded a 10-day specialised training for teachers of English from Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. Funded by the Mastercard Foundation, the programme focused on equipping teachers with practical skills to support refugee learners with little or no knowledge of English.

Mr Charles Rubangakene, a teacher of English at Kiryandongo High School and a beneficiary of the programme, said it has transformed how teachers handle linguistically diverse classrooms.

"This programme has changed our perception and equipped us with new ways of teaching learners from different cultures and countries," he said.

Rubangakene explained that teachers were introduced to approaches such as translanguaging, communicative methods, teaching sounds and drawing on learners' lived experiences. The training has also improved teachers' ability to assess and place non-English-speaking learners in appropriate classes.

Muhamood Kimera, education programme manager at WIU, says the organisation runs two major language initiatives in Kiryandongo. The English for Adults programme targets adult refugees, mainly from Sudan, while a language-bridging programme supports school-going children by running alongside the Ugandan curriculum. The bridging classes are conducted before and after regular lessons to help learners gradually transition into English instruction.

"These language training services support refugees' productivity within the settlement and their ability to integrate into the Ugandan community," Kimera said. "Since Uganda's official language is English, learners must acquire basic proficiency to succeed in school and life."

Kimera noted that WIU currently supports 364 adult learners with only four teachers due to limited funding, underscoring the growing demand for language services. Also, some refugee students now rely on smartphone translation applications during lessons.

Assoc Prof Saudah Namyalo, dean of the School of Languages, Literature and Communication at Makerere University, said the university is developing instructional materials for beginner, elementary and intermediate levels to support both adult and child learners. She reaffirmed the university's commitment to refugee education and encouraged trained teachers to continue upgrading their qualifications through mature-age entry programmes and ongoing research.