

How refugee graduates transform community

Against daunting odds, refugee graduates in Uganda are turning university education into powerful tools for community transformation. They create jobs, improve healthcare, drive innovation and proving that investing in refugee higher education fuels dignity, development and lasting impact.

BY NAKABIRI DAPHINE

As Uganda continues to host thousands of refugees across its settlements, access to education, particularly higher education, remains a distant dream for many young people.

Poverty, common in both refugee and host communities, continues to shut talented youth out of universities, limiting access to funding, exposure and opportunity, and leaving vast potential untapped.

A 2024 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) paints a stark picture: only 2.11 percent of refugee youth in Uganda aged between 19 and 35 are enrolled in tertiary education, and of these, just four percent are women. The figures underscore the scale of exclusion and the immense human capital that remains underutilised.

For Solomon Bhaghabhonerano, a refugee living in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, education once felt out of reach. Raised in an economically disadvantaged family, he recalls finishing A-Level education with no clear path forward. "I faced the prospect of sitting idle, with little hope of continuing with my studies," he says.

That trajectory changed when he was awarded a scholarship under the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), enabling him to pursue a degree in Climate Change and Conservation at Makerere University. The opportunity not only transformed his life but also ignited a wider impact. Armed with new skills, Bhaghabhonerano founded Live in Green, an initiative promoting clean energy solutions such as briquettes and energy-efficient stoves in both refugee and host communities.

The venture has improved household livelihoods and created employment for more than 16 people within the settlement, clear evidence that when refugees access higher education, communities benefit.

Capacity beyond the classroom

These stories took centre stage at the DAFI Alumni showcase held in Kampala, convened by Windle International Uganda (WIU) in partnership with UNHCR and supported by the German Federal Government. The event brought together more than 100 refugee graduates and stakeholders under the theme *From scholarship to impact*.

The showcase celebrated the transformative power of higher education and highlighted refugee graduates' contributions to community development and national progress. Alumni presented thriving businesses, innovative non-governmental organisations, community projects and professional careers improving lives across refugee and host populations.

According to Mr Anthony Kerwegi, director



Refugee innovators display clean-energy technologies, briquettes, and handmade African print products at the DAFI Alumni showcase, highlighting youth-led solutions for sustainable livelihoods. PHOTOS/DAPHINE NAKABIRI.

of Institutional Development and Quality Assurance at WIU, the alumni achievements are living proof of the value of investing in refugee education.

"Today, we are not just talking about potential, we are showcasing proven results," he said. "These graduates are professionals, innovators and community leaders. When you educate a refugee, you invest in peace, stability and sustainable development."

From survival to solutions

As the DAFI programme marked 30 years of impact, it celebrated more than 3,000 completed scholarships. Ms Hilda Namakula, WIU's programme manager for Scholarships, noted that these have generated over 3,000 research projects half of them led by women while another 3,000 refugee students still await opportunities.

Among the alumni is Faustin Zikama, a healthcare entrepreneur whose Master's scholarship inspired him to tackle health gaps in Nakivale. With support from fellow graduates, he secured a government loan and established Marifa Medical Clinic in 2019. Comparable to a Health Centre IV, the facility now provides affordable healthcare and employs more than 30 people.

Similarly, Marot Touloung, chief executive officer of the African Youth Action Network (AYAN), has mobilised funding to empower refugee youth through vocational training, entrepreneurship and peacebuilding. AYAN's initiatives, ranging from the Refugee Pathpreneur Project to innovation centres offering co-working spaces, childcare, internet access and skills training, have helped move refugees from dependency to dignity.



HIGHLIGHT

Beneficiaries so far

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Barriers that persist

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Limited funding continues to constrain the DAFI programme, while many refugee students face documentation delays, restrictive work permit policies and early marriage, especially among girls which derail education prospects.

Participants at the showcase called for stronger partnerships with the private sector, expanded scholarship financing, targeted outreach within settlements, and greater alumni involvement in mentorship and advocacy. They also urged better documentation and storytelling to amplify refugee achievements and influence policy.

As Uganda's refugee population grows, one message rang clear: investing in refugee higher education is not charity, it is a strategic investment in human potential, community resilience and