

Let your brain work!

Uganda's youth unemployment rate, which stands at 80%, is one of the highest in Africa. The problem is magnified by the fact that an estimated 50% of the country's population are under the age of 15. Youth unemployment is of particular concern in northern Uganda, which remains the most economically depressed region in the country. Most youth in the region have limited educational opportunities, lack the skills necessary to actively participate in commercial agriculture, and remain unemployed. The region, however, has the potential to create business opportunities for its youth, especially through growing sectors such as agriculture.

Mr. Rudu Julius a 32-year-old youth from South Sudan who was born and raised in Moyo district, Lefori sub county from 1990. He is no exception to the youth limitations in livelihoods yet still married to Mrs. Sumbua Kalsum with six (06) children (03 boys and 03 girls) in Primary Four, Two and One respectively. Being the head of the family, he worried so much on the future of his children, their education, medical/health care, and basic needs.



Photo showing Mr. Julius Rudu of Lefori Sub County posing with his cow.

With no basic agronomic and enterprising skills Julius always harvested the lowest yield in a season. In 2020 he planted maize on an acre piece of land using the traditional methods and harvested two (2) sacks sold and at Ugx. 250,000. This money could not help him meet the family needs. Julius acknowledged that he was financially illiterate contributing to his poor planning for the little income he earned.

Mr. Julius belongs to a savings and development cluster called *Ujekogwe* literally translating *let your brain work* in the madi dialect. The group undertakes savings and farming as their primary activity and had for 2 years being doing this without a proper knowledge and guidance from experts. At the end of a cycle the share out by members was never well planned and would be used for festive season celebrations, changing diet and dressing which still left the members in the poor economic situation.

In July 2020, Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment West Nile with support from European Union started implementing an economic empowerment consortium project titled '*Security, Protection and Economic Empowerment in Northern Uganda*'. World Vision Uganda, SNV and ZOA are the other consortium partners. Moyo and Obongi districts being the target for the project enhanced chances of economic empowerment for the vulnerable households. Lefori among three other sub counties (Metu, Moyo and Palorinya) are targeted for the four years implementation. The project works through savings and development clusters (SDCs) targeting 333 across the project scope.

In 2020 November, mapping of the SDCs was conducted with the support of the sub county local government officials to identify suitable community groups to be supported based on the project criteria of vulnerability index. Ujekogwe has 30 members (21 female, 9 male) with 43% of the members being vulnerable – PWDs, male adult headed households, female headed households etc met the criteria. The following year the groups were enrolled for trainings in Enabling Rural Innovation approach. Series of trainings were offered to the group members in financial literacy, conflict resolution, and farmer managed natural regeneration aimed at changing their perceptions about socio-economic life and the environment.

To Mr. Julius Rudu, attending these trainings was the turning point for a brighter future. They established a demonstration garden for ground nuts of 1 acre where they got 2.5 sacks which is not sold but the group plans after selling, they will buy chairs for rent and renew their registration certificate.

"After the trainings I realized I needed to have my own productive assets for the safety of my children's future" – says Mr. Rudu Julius.

The good practices applied in the demonstration gardens inspired the young man to buy cabbage and start his own garden. He invested Ugx. 300,000 in the cabbage garden whereby he is expecting to reap between Ugx. 700,000 to 1,000,000. What motivates him further is the family support towards the farm work. He chose cabbage because of the demand cabbage it has in the community and short yield duration of three months. He confessed that he did not know about first conducting a market scan before choosing an enterprise. He gets frequent support from the Project Officers in terms of extension services.



Photo showing Mr. Julius being offered technical guidance in his cabbage garden by Mr. Eladu Calvin. Photo credit. Aleku Rolex.

The group shared out Ugx. 5,700,000 out of which he had the lion share of Ugx. 1,250,000. This was no miracle to him because after the financial literacy training, he increased his weekly savings from Ugx 5,000 to Ugx. 10,000 and Ugx. 20,000 depending on the availability of funds. He remembers; *"Our teacher told us borrow and save wisely."* When he got the money his first plan was to buy a cow which costed him Ugx. 850,000 which to him was the foundation of his household's better future. The balance of the money was spent on school fees and scholastic materials for the children.

Julius appreciates RICE West Nile and the funding partner European Union for the opportunity of life time economic transformation. His prayer is that the partners reach more youth in the communities who are desperate for life changing opportunities.