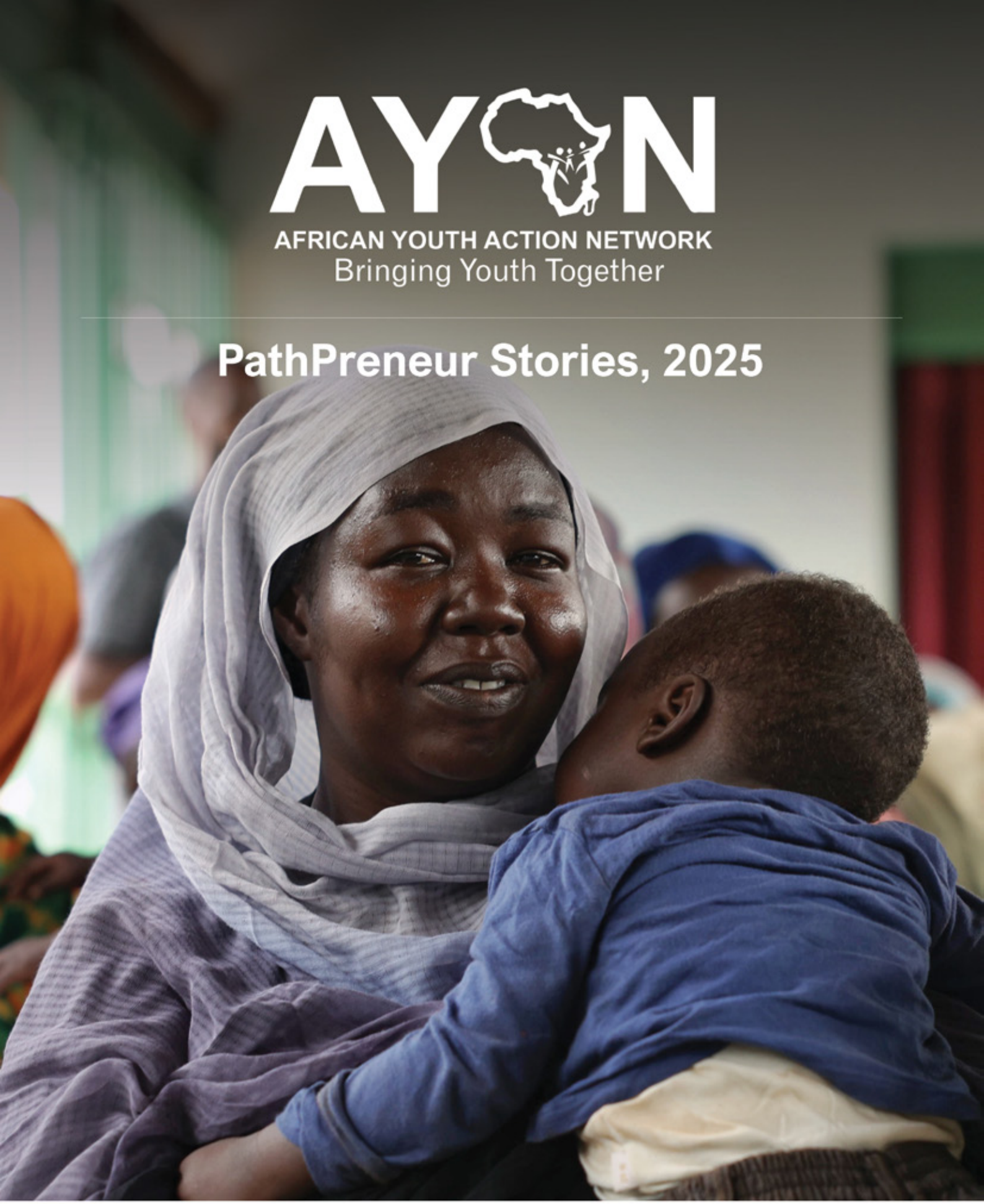
AYAN

AFRICAN YOUTH ACTION NETWORK

Bringing Youth Together

PathPreneur Stories, 2025



Hilton CONRAD N. HILTON FOUNDATION



Simon Marot Touloung
Team Lead, AYAN.

FOREWORD

At the beginning of 2025, our AYAN's Path-Preneur Program, implemented with generous support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, entered the second phase. The program applies a two-generation model that integrates support for both children and their caregivers or parents, breaking cycles of poverty and exclusion through holistic, family-centred interventions.

Children from 0-5 years who are formerly associated with armed conflict or born in the refugee settlement are engaged through stimulating play, given nutritious meals, and supportive environments for both the children and their caregivers to thrive.

For caregivers, we work with them to build economic resilience through entrepreneurship training while equipping them with parenting, trauma-healing, and child protection skills to support their children's reintegration and development.

In 2025, we enrolled 350 children and 350 caregivers (out of the planned 900 children and 900 parents over three years) across Kyaka II, Kiryandongo, and Rhino Camp Innovation Centers, delivering daily impact through psychosocial support and weekday play sessions for 15-20 children at each center.

At the end of the year, we spoke with some parents about the program and identified ways we can improve our work in 2026. What we heard is covered in this report. The stories and reflections shared in this short report from some of the parents we worked with in 2025 show how much more our society can benefit if we put children at the center of our work and programming. We understand that there are many needs, but we are happy with the progress we hear from the parents of these children.

As we move into the second year, we look forward to working with 300 children in 2026, alongside our partners and local leadership, to ensure that children in Kiryandongo, Kyaka II, and Rhino Camp refugee settlements have the best start in their lives.

A huge thank you to the Conrad N Hilton Foundation for the most generous support and for believing in us; to the government of Uganda for giving us the space to exercise and support our community; and to the AYAN Board of Directors for ensuring that we put quality above everything. Our staff and all the community leaders in the three settlements, these stories are because you contributed. May we keep working together to forge a promising future for our children ■



> **“ AYAN has transformed my daughter’s confidence, curiosity, and sense of responsibility.**

Leila Hasabo, 27 and Minas.

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda

Photos & Text: Okello Herbert Andrew | **Design & Layout:** Inemba

Learning to Build Again

When heavy fighting broke out in the city of Al Fasher, Darfur, Sudan, in 2023, we fervently hoped it would not last long, but it did. The city we had called home rapidly deteriorated. Insecurity, armed robberies, assaults, shootings and violent break-ins sharply increased. In February 2024, our family home was attacked by two armed men who robbed us and beat up my husband. Everything valuable and portable we owned was looted and taken: money, gold, and even the jewellery I had around my neck and wrists was violently grabbed off me.

I was sure the militants were going to shoot us. So I broke down and started reciting prayers in Arabic. We decided it was no longer worth our lives to live in a city trying to kill us, so we sold what we could of our home and our grocery shop and relocated to Juba, South Sudan.

I was heavily pregnant when we decided to travel to Uganda. Upon arrival, we discovered we had to start from scratch here. My husband rented a bed sitter for us, but then we ran out of money, and the landlord asked us to leave. I was in the hospital for 9 days after giving birth because the hospital was the only decent place I could stay with my newborn baby. The hospital authorities asked me to leave because my baby was healthy and I was taking up bed space. A Ugandan landowner allowed us to stay on their land on the agreement that we would pay them back when we had established ourselves. We have been living here for the past few months because the land is located closer to the trading centre. My husband went to Masindi to find work at a factory. I have been doing everything in my power to survive.





The only silver lining about living in this settlement has been the community of parents I met at AYAN's office, whose children are enrolled in AYAN's Early Childhood Development Classes. My daughter, Minas, is one of the enrolled pupils who attend classes once a week at AYAN's office here in the settlement. We sing, recite poetry, and listen to guidance to support our emotional well-being and also to equip us with home gardening skills. Twice a month, AYAN reimburses all parents for transport costs. I saved part of this money and invested it in my small business. I bought pumpkin seeds and nuts and sold them at the community trading centre. I made 30,000 UGX in profit on the first day and bought biscuits for my children. My brother, who stayed behind in Juba, sent me fabric and bed-sheets, which I sell here. The first few months in the settlement were tough. On some days, we went to bed hungry. Alhamdulillah, my children no longer go to bed hungry.

Since May 2025, my daughter has been going to AYAN. AYAN has transformed her confidence, curiosity and sense of responsibility. Every evening after her session, Minas rounds up her siblings and teaches them all she knows. Minas is a real leader, and she has been there for me. She reassures me that we shall know better days. Minas now speaks Arabic, English and Füran, which are the languages the children speak at AYAN. She also learnt Acoli and Dinka words. She now switches languages depending on who she's speaking to. She helps her younger siblings practise counting and new words she learns at AYAN, and tells stories she makes up. My daughter, under my supervision, cooks and serves porridge for her siblings. Minas insists on carrying my baby and helping out in our garden, where we grow okra, beans, and sorghum.

AYAN has been teaching us to be better parents to our children, not to shout at or beat them. I am trying to be a better parent. To listen to my children and not scream at them or beat them, because we are all trying to recover from all our losses. My children are starting to see me not just as their mother but also as their friend. They share their fears with me and let me in on their little secrets, too. I feel they now trust me more than they did. I am grateful to AYAN for supporting my family, my daughter and myself. I know my children have a safe place to go. I feel the most difficult days for me, my children, and me are now behind us ■

Threading Goals, Stitching a Community's Future

I bought my first sewing machine in 2022; before then, I rented machines and paid a small sum to shop owners who allowed me use part of their premises to serve my clients. I own three machines. I still hire machines, especially when I need my trainees to have hands-on training. I have trained seven refugee women, who have since started their own businesses. Seeing them graduate into business owners reminds me why I must continue to train others, because someone also once gave me a chance.

My family relocated to Uganda in 2017 after the fighting broke out in the Eastern Equatoria region of South Sudan. My husband, child and I walked for three days to the border between Uganda and South Sudan. Starting over in a new country made me realise that I needed a skill I could rely on anywhere. After one year, I decided to take tailoring lessons so I could make money as a seamstress. My husband is a mason, but often our family had extra needs that his income could not cover. I now make money from training others, selling fabric and sewing. This extra income helps me contribute to our family expenses and to my child's education. I hope to learn to knit sweaters because there is a growing need for them among schoolchildren in the settlement and host communities. My biggest need right now is capital to expand: secure space for more formal training of larger groups of trainees and buy better sewing machines to refine and quicken my production process.

This year, I attended two Personal Initiative Trainings organised by AYAN. We interacted with facilitators who guided us on Business Management, Client Relations, Savings, Financial Literacy, and Networking. While my technical skills as a tailor are good, I have always struggled with relating to customers. Before the training, I had a reputation in the neighbourhood for refusing to deal with clients I considered difficult. I remember once telling a customer to leave and never return because she questioned my measurements. I have since adopted softer means of resolving disputes. I am open to negotiation and compromise. Before, I was open to losing clients if they were unwilling to accept my advice; now, I listen to their concerns.

I have improved, too, in managing business funds. I now separate my personal expenses from business expenses, which allows me to see whether the business is growing or struggling. I have also drafted my short-term and long-term plans to guide my business.



Aloyo Alice, 24 | Tailor

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda



Central to my plans is the dream of setting up a training centre to teach young people and women tailoring skills. What keeps me motivated is knowing that as I grow, I can continue helping women gain skills that give them independence.

I successfully participated in pitch session organised by AYAN for refugee entrepreneurs in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. All successful pitches will receive financial and technical support to enable us to grow and increase market penetration. I am grateful for the networks, lessons and guidance that AYAN has brought to young entrepreneurs in the settlement. I am eager to grow my business, serve my community and train more women ■





Rebuilding Life After the Landslides: Makayi and Dorcus' Story

Bududa district sits on the slopes of Mountain Elgon, a dormant volcano in Eastern Uganda. My grandparents and their grandparents have always occupied Elgon's slopes because the soil there is fertile. The only danger about that place is the risk of landslides whenever the rains fall hard and heavy. In 2023, I lost crops, my house, livestock, friends and neighbours in the landslides that struck our neighbourhood. The government relocated my family to Kiryandongo refugee settlement, where we have lived since. Back in Bududa, I grew crops to survive. I grew maize, cassava, potatoes, beans and groundnuts. I have tried to do the same here, but the land and weather patterns are different. Everything that was once predictable to me is chaotic here. I was allocated a small plot of land to live on and cultivate. Every time it rains heavily at night, I struggle to find sleep.

I have been receiving support from AYAN on how to navigate the mental noise caused by loss, sudden relocation, and the uncertainty of starting afresh. I have been struggling with frustration, and this has affected my family and my work. At AYAN, I have met parents who survived even more difficult circumstances. Families that lost everything in the war in Sudan, yet they have hope that things will get better. I have learned that speaking about my frustrations helps me better understand what is affecting me and find solutions. I realised that my prolonged silence was increasing tension and fear at home.

I learned that taking naps and going for walks, rather than holding everything in when I feel overwhelmed, helps me calm down.

My granddaughter and I have a close relationship. I live with her and five other people in our new home here. Every week, I take my granddaughter Dorcus to the AYAN Centre here in the settlement to play with other children and learn. Dorcus has improved over the last six months since she started going to AYAN. She is more expressive. She insists on performing songs for our guests and her family. Dorcus now takes the goats to feed and brings them from the fields in the evening. The goat recently gave birth to two kids, and Dorcus has appointed herself the human caretaker of the little goats. Dorcus narrates to me the friends she meets at AYAN, and everything new she sees or learns. Dorcus can count up to 20, recites the English alphabet, and is interested in drawing, colouring and reading picture books.

As parents, AYAN also guides us on farming through the demo gardens at the AYAN office. We receive tips on soil identification, the benefits of mulching, intercropping, spaced cultivation, and kitchen gardens, to help us improve our food security and better prepare for adverse weather changes. Realising I am not alone has given me the strength to reconnect with people around me and to pay more attention to my family and garden. Watching Dorcus become more confident and responsible has made me believe that if a small girl can get bolder, then maybe I should also try harder to overcome my past challenges



Makayi John, 58 and Dorcus 4.

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, Western Uganda

The Quiet Healing of Halima's House

The City of Al Junaynah (Geneina) lies in West Dafur, in the Masalit region of Sudan. For a long time, my family called Al Junaynah home. After completing my philosophy program at Nileen University, I returned to Al Junaynah. Three of my four children were born there. Al Junaynah means 'the little garden' in Arabic. When the fighting broke out in 2023, we lived in fear but also in hope; we hoped the fighting would spare 'the little garden.' The fighting didn't spare us. The Rapid Support Forces soon took control of our city, changing our lives for the worse. Many families we know left the city in search of safety. My own family held on as long as we could before finally relocating.

On 10th October 2024, two armed Rapid Support Forces soldiers broke into our family home in Madani, pointed a gun at my husband and beat him up. The armed bandits wanted money. My husband screamed for help, and his brother responded. A scuffle ensued, and in the process, my husband's brother was stabbed and shot. My children witnessed their uncle bleed to death; a memory still difficult to erase. My husband, despite his medical background, was too shocked by the attack to save his brother. This incident traumatised my children so much that they refused to sleep in the family house again. That was the moment we knew we had to leave Sudan altogether. We fled to Uganda in February 2025 and have been living in Kiryandogo Refugee Settlement since. Work is hard to come by, making it hard to access basic needs here.

The first months were especially difficult for the children. My daughter Yomna was quick to anger because she had trouble sleeping at night. When we experienced uncertainty due to intertribal tensions in the settlement, I had to tell my children stories to distract them from the voices and footsteps at night. Yomna used to scream and wail every time I was unable to fulfil her needs. Fortunately for me, she enrolled on the children's programme at AYAN. She has learnt to sing songs, recite the alphabet, count, read, write, and speak a considerable number of words in English and Nuer. Before, she only spoke Arabic and our language, Furan. Yomna brings home whatever she receives from AYAN sessions, crayons, simple learning materials, and small treats so she can share them with her siblings. She also responds to questions fast and correctly, takes the initiative to help with housework, and expresses gratitude even for small gestures. Since she began going to AYAN, Yomna now either holds the baby or comes to me rather than isolating herself in anger, which has helped us all bond better. We barely have anything here, but it gives me hope that we recognise that we have each other.

The AYAN centre has become a safe place for both my child and me. I always look forward to the parent sessions. It is refreshing to talk to people who share your pain and aspirations, strangers who know the taste of home and the pain of losing it. The good people at AYAN are teaching us to be soft on our children.



To recognise signs of abuse and to understand the risks and consequences of verbal, physical and psychological abuse on children. We are learning how to be present parents even in hardship. Some days, we still feed only once, but I am learning to hold my stress so it does not fall on my children. I also take walks to decompress, especially when nothing worthwhile seems to be happening for us. I am learning on the go to still be a parent to my children even in these very different circumstances. Although we are still finding our feet, I feel we are making small steps forward and not just running away from our past."



Halima Adam Ahmed, 36.

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda



Kwaya, the Beekeeper of Kiryandongo.

My first real interaction with business was during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. I started making and selling mandazi (fluffy, deep-fried wheat bread) because I needed money for my day-to-day needs. I have refined my mandazi recipe over time. My mandazi recipe includes ginger, carrot and lemon zest for flavour. My mandazi business funded my university education. I hold a Bachelor's Degree in Business Management. The mandazi business has limited expansion potential, yet I have always wanted to sell my product beyond Kiryandongo. I zeroed in on selling honey. I used proceeds from my mandazi business to purchase my first bee equipment in 2021: two bee hives and a bicycle to ease transport. I learnt everything I know about beekeeping from YouTube and TikTok. The internet is still my classroom, though in business, the real lessons are imparted by doing. I currently own 28 bee hives.I harvest honey from my bees every three months.I also work with eight beekeepers who supply me with honey and beeswax. My goal is to expand from 28 hives to 100 by 2026 so I can grow my supply capacity and meet the increasing demand.

Kwaya Daniel, 26 | Beekeeper

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda

Challenges

As a South Sudanese refugee born in Uganda, I find it difficult to access large tracts of land. I have to pay 450,000 UGX every year to hire land where my largest colony of beehives is. Climate change is a real issue here. My parents relocated to Uganda in 1993 because of the civil unrest in Sudan. Mother says the weather has always been predictable, but that is no longer the case. My mother lost three acres of maize in December 2025 because the weather pattern changed and the rains were delayed, resulting in farmers like my mother losing their crop. Climate change also affects us. If bees cannot access flowers in the neighbourhood, it affects the colonies because worker bees cannot access nectar, which they need to make honey. Heatwaves and extreme rainfall, driven by climate change, also destroy beehives, reducing honey volume and quality. Climate unpredictability slows down growth and widens the gap between demand for honey and my ability to meet it. I am currently saving to purchase a bee venom collector to expand my product line and reduce my reliance on beeswax and honey.

AYAN

I am a beneficiary of the AYAN initiative to support cottage industries. I participated in Personal Initiative Training, focused on teaching entrepreneurs in the settlement and communities the basics of business: setting up, networking, value addition, capital management, resilience, mindset change, sourcing income, time management, leadership, and team management. I also successfully pitched before a panel of judges for a grant to grow my business. I requested support to purchase a bee venom collector, explaining the growing demand for bee venom in the pharmaceutical industry. This pitching experience helped me learn how to communicate my business vision with clarity and confidence. And I also realised the gaps and possibilities in my business.

The Personal Initiative training has helped me overcome procrastination. I was always mismanaging time to the detriment of suppliers and clients. I have hugely improved my time management, communication, and networking skills, and I am beginning to see the fruits of these lessons. I am excited about 2026. I want to set up a bee farm in the next five years that doubles as a training facility for youths, students, women, and fellow beekeepers on emerging and sustainable beekeeping practices. This honey hub will serve as a reference point for refugee resilience and beekeeping excellence ■




Demo Garden
KITCHEN GARDEN
FOOD TOWER GARDENS
SACK MOUND GARDENS


SACK MOUND
GARDENS
KITCHEN
GARDEN





Parenting Support





ECD Centre











HODARI FOUNDATION



HODARI FOUNDATION: DiscoverMe Project

The **DiscoverMe Project**, implemented by one of our community partners, **HODARI**, provides children and teens with a safe place to learn, share their ideas, and build confidence. Each week, they take part in discussions, debates, creative projects, leadership training, and community service. DiscoverMe fills gaps left by formal schooling by teaching life skills, offering guidance, and helping young people understand their rights, responsibilities, and potential. The project focuses on encouraging young people to speak up, take responsibility, and value their community, so they can grow into confident people who make a positive difference at home, at school, and in their neighborhoods

HODARI FOUNDATION



Community visit of elders in the settlement.

Five languages, Five Values, One Dream.

I live with my aunt and three cousins in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement. We moved here in 2018 after my father died in the war in North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our journey here was difficult. The settlement is like a meeting point of different people from different places. As a result of interacting with many people, I fluently speak all five main languages spoken in the settlement: English, Kinyarwanda, Swahili, Rutooro, and Lingala. Speaking many languages has opened doors for me.

I joined the Hodari DiscoverMe Project in January 2025. I help with interpretation every time we go to the communities, especially when we visit the elderly. Acting as an interpreter has helped me build my confidence, self-esteem, and public speaking skills. I cherish visits to the elderly in our settlement because I enjoy their guidance. I also know that we must never neglect our elders. Through my work as an interpreter and the confidence I have gained at DiscoverMe, I now believe I can speak up for myself and for others.

We hold weekly sessions at AYAN Innovation Centre, engage in debates, and access the library and computer laboratory to conduct research. We also read the Bible and discuss lessons from biblical teachings. Participating in the DiscoverMe Project has enabled me to realise my leadership potential. Because of DiscoverMe, I am more confident expressing myself in public, which encouraged me to run for leadership positions at school. I was elected Secretary of Life Skill Club and Class Coordinator of Scripture Union. As a leader, it is my responsibility to encourage children to behave well and also teach them about their rights and responsibilities, since not all children have the opportunity to participate in this programme.

Our trainers emphasise the need to be disciplined and how we can protect ourselves from child abuse. I have, through the sessions, learned the importance of solidarity, kindness, respect for elders, and working hard. Through debates and dialogue, we also learn how to resolve disputes and manage disagreements.

I take my schoolwork more seriously now because I can see how education is connected to the person I want to become. I believe that I will achieve my dream. I want to be a doctor so I can extend a hand towards the street children who have no homes. We have over 60 street children in the settlement. My hope is that when I become a doctor, I will offer free treatment to those who cannot afford it ■



Happy David, 16

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement, Western Uganda.

Finding My Voice

I have always been shy and reserved. At school, I tried to remain in the background as much as possible. I refused to raise my hand in class, even when I knew the answers. When I joined Hodari DiscoverMe, I realised my self-esteem was low and that I needed to work on my confidence.

I live with my grandmother in Kyaka II Refugee settlement. My mother lives in Nakivale Refugee settlement with four of my siblings, about 160 km away. We moved to Uganda in 2021 because we kept losing people and property to the chaos from the fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I attend one of the community primary schools in the settlement. The teachers at our school are overwhelmed by the number of students, so they focus only on academics, not extracurricular activities or guidance. The Hodari DiscoverMe Project fills this gap by giving us space to learn, express ourselves, and receive guidance that we do not get at school.

Under the Hodari DiscoverMe project, we meet once every week during school term and three times a week in the holidays. I look forward to these meetings because I get to discuss my challenges with my friends and our facilitators at AYAN Innovation Centre. We play sports: football, netball, and volleyball. I am not very sporty, so I prefer training sessions that focus on learning about children's rights. We are taught how to protect ourselves from abuse and how to identify trusted adults in whom we can confide. We also sing, recite poetry, dance, perform plays, and debate. My favourite debate activity is the Fish Bowl, where we discuss issues affecting children and seek solutions. Every time we come to the centre, we eat balanced meals and drink mushroom juice together.

We engage in community activities such as tree planting and cleaning public spaces. We also visit the elderly members of the community to remind them that they are important to us. We listen to them, spend time with them and share the little we have with them. These visits have taught me that we should never abandon those in need in our communities and that sharing is a responsibility, not a burden.

Through DiscoverMe, my confidence has improved. I am now able to speak in public, express my fears, and contribute during debates. I feel more comfortable with myself. Participating in the programme has also shown me that I must work hard toward my dream. I want to be a medical doctor in the future. I want to make my grandmother proud ■



Julliene Kaniki, 16 (Left)

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda.



DiscoverMe Activities





Visiting the elderly

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement





Word from the Programs' Support.

As one of the facilitators at AYAN, I have had the privilege of walking closely with families as they rebuild their lives in the face of displacement. The stories shared here are not just about programmes or activities, but rather, they are about parents doing everything they can for their children, caregivers finding new strength and children learning, laughing, and growing again. They remind us that even in uncertainty, people continue to choose hope, dignity and a better future.

At AYAN, we have seen how meaningful change often starts small. A safe space where a child feels seen and a new way of supporting a child with patience instead of fear. A small garden growing where nothing once did. Through education, psychosocial support and household food production, these simple and intentional efforts begin to restore confidence and stability. This publication brings together lived experiences that demonstrate what becomes possible when people are given practical support, time to learn, and the opportunity to build on their own strengths.

Looking back on this journey, I am encouraged by how trust and learning have grown in tandem. Progress did not come overnight; it came through listening carefully, showing up consistently and allowing families to move at their own pace. As facilitators, we learned that real impact occurs when we respect communities as partners, not beneficiaries, and when we recognise the knowledge and resilience they already possess. Looking ahead, I hope to see this work reach more families, so that more children can learn in a safe environment, more caregivers can feel confident and supported, and more households can meet their needs with dignity. I hope AYAN continues to walk alongside families not just as a service provider, but as a trusted companion, helping turn small changes into lasting peace and self-reliance

Mercy Chelimo
Childcare Giver - AYAN

Seed, Structure and Stability

When the fighting back home refused to stop, I knew I had to choose between keeping my family safe and keeping close to the place we had always called home. We left Bukavu, South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2018. My family walked for three days before we reached the border crossing into Uganda. At the border crossing, a vehicle drove us to Kyaka II Refugee Settlement. We have been here since then. I live here with my husband and our ten children. The oldest child is 22, while my youngest, Richard, 'Kado', is just 4.

When my family arrived in Uganda, we relied heavily on Mupokeru (the monthly living stipend from the World Food Programme). The stipend stopped coming to us eight months ago. Life became harder because we were not eating well and did not have a way to produce our own food. I occasionally made money by washing clothes in the neighbourhood, but it wasn't enough to feed us three times a day. Before setting up this kitchen garden, nothing grew here. We had unused space around the house on the small land allocated to us by the settlement authorities, but we did not know food could grow here. Our food expenses and worries increased.

My relationship with AYAN has helped my family in different ways. Kado is part of the children's classes at the AYAN Innovation Centre, and every time he returns from the week's sessions, he excitedly gives us details about his day. Kado has not started formal school yet. For him, AYAN is his first interaction with formal education. Through these lessons, Kado now knows his ABCs, can solve simple maths problems, and asks questions about everything. He tries to read and draw, and this is exciting for me because I know the importance of education and what it can do for his future. Kado is naturally soft and shy, but AYAN has made him confident. I love that he now greets us all in the morning and apologises when he is in the wrong.

Through Kado's participation in the classes, AYAN introduced us to training on utilising the small space at home to grow vegetables. We received training from AYAN on growing vegetables in sacks and building food towers. AYAN provided us with vegetable seeds and guidance on how to care for them. This guidance helped us start our kitchen garden, from which we produce our own food.



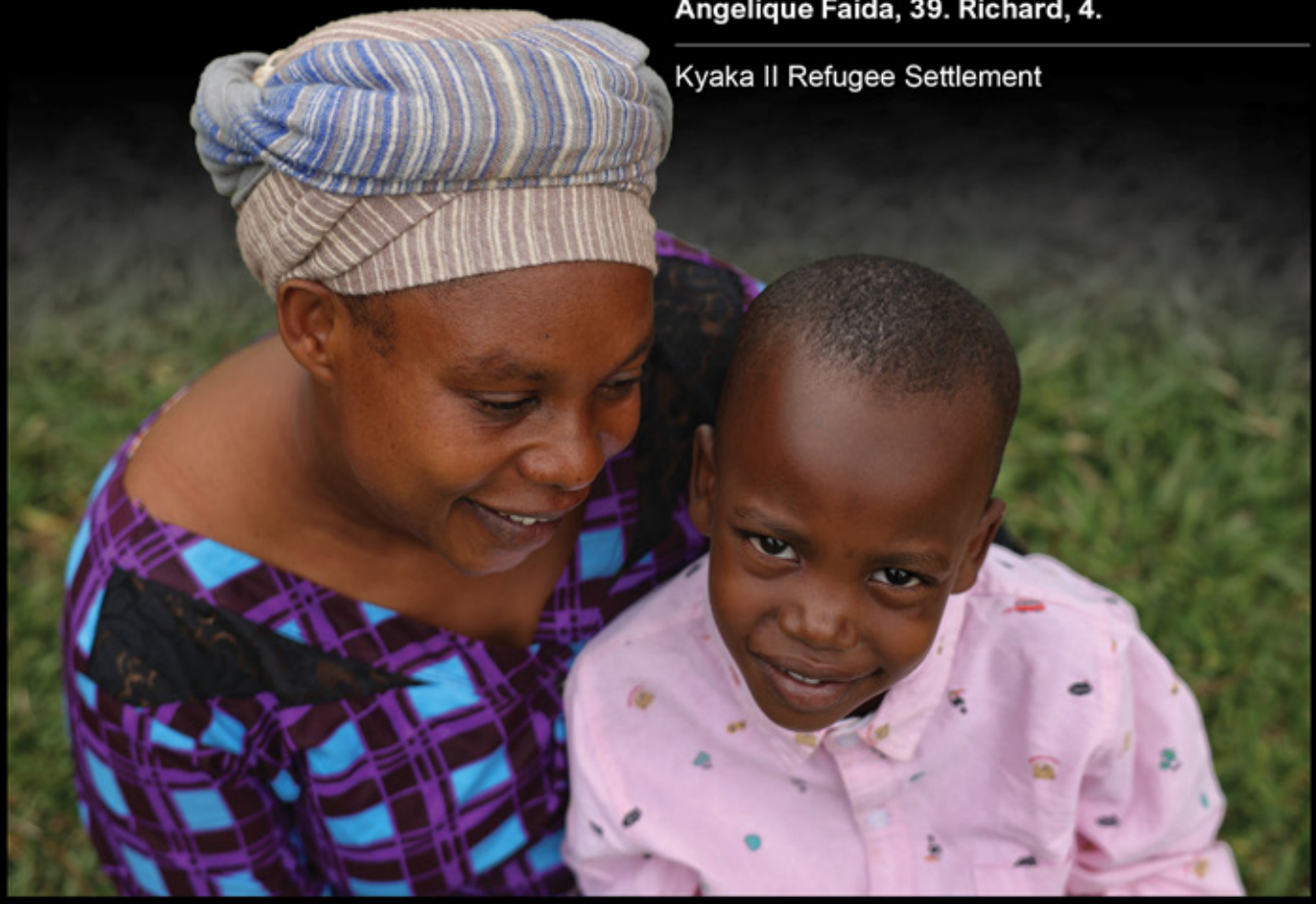


I now grow celery, spinach, amaranth, eggplants, and garden eggs, and these vegetables have changed how we eat at home. We cook vegetables almost every day. My kitchen garden now feeds my family, and I sell the surplus harvest to my neighbours, who are also starting their own kitchen gardens after observing mine do well. *I feel proud to be doing something for ourselves without having to wait for donation.*

I also planted the 1kg of beans AYAN gave me on land I rented from members of the host community. I used the training I received on spacing my crops. Out of the 1kg of beans, I harvested 27 kg. I sold 10 kg of my harvest and bought hens whose eggs Kado eats. I did not expect that I could transform dry land into something that supports my children. This experience has showed me that even here in the settlement, we can still build something ■

Angelique Faida, 39. Richard, 4.

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement



Turning the tables and tides, through food towers.

I have been a farmer for as long as I can remember, yet despite my devotion to farming, I sturggled to make a reliable income from it. I constantly reaped just enough feed my family till the next harvest. The danger of depending on the soil and seasons is that when the sun shines too bright and the rains hide, your efforts go to waste. Before I received support from AYAN on how to guard myself from the changing climate as a subsistence farmer, I always depended on planting maize, potatoes and beans, which not only limited my income but also my family's diet. My family often ate once a day, and often, it was a simple meal of posho and beans.

In 2024, I received training on spacing my crops to ensure they receive optimal rainfall and sunlight without competing for resources. I was also taught about the benefits of mulching. The biggest turnaround for my family came from the training on kitchen gardens. I received seeds and guidance on growing vegetables in small patches of land. I now grow onions, eggplants, garden eggs, spinach, celery, pumpkin, and nakati (Ethiopian nightshade). I grow the vegetables in sacks and on food towers.

My family has moved from eating once a day to having three full meals composed of carbs and vegetables, rather than just cassava on some days. I can sell any surplus from my garden, which means I can afford to buy soap, sugar, salt, rice, and books for my six children.

I have since expanded my farming to include pineapples, pumpkins, papayas, and passion fruit, which have supplemented my income and my family's nutritional needs. My children have access to fruit, their skin looks better, and they rarely fall sick because their nutrition has boosted their immunity. I am now able to save some money from my crop sales; before, I lived from hand to mouth.

I also received support from AYAN regarding my four-year-old daughter Musiimenta Princess. Every Thursday, Princess goes to AYAN Innovation Centre where she meets, plays with other children and learns. Princess was initially hesitant about going to the centre, but that has since changed, as she now reminds us to take her there on the stipulated day. Through her weekly time with other children and her teachers at AYAN, Princess has made significant improvements in her learning and interactions. I can see she is now curious and eager to learn.





Bamuturaki Edward, 32. Princess, 4.

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda. (Host Community.)

Princess tries to work things out on her own before asking for help. I have many times listened to her explaining to her siblings and friends what she learnt from her weekly trips to AYAN. She imitates her teachers during playtime with her siblings and correctly responds to simple instructions.

As a parent, I was also guided to be gentle, protective, and patient with my children. I have since moved away from being a tough parent to being a present father who listens and is not feared, which has drawn my children closer to me ■

My grandson Brian is a special child. I have lived with Brian for the last three years. Brian's father brought him to me because he did not know what to do with him after his mother abandoned him. Brian, as a result, was weaned way too early and deprived of the bond a son and mother ought to share. Brian was already sickly when he came to me. I soon realised that Brian had learning challenges.

Brian requires constant attention; a few months ago, he left home while I was in the garden and followed older neighbourhood children to fetch water. Brian, unfortunately, fell into a stream and nearly drowned. Since then, I worry whenever he is out of my sight because I fear something bad could happen to him. The only place I trust that Brian will be safe is the AYAN office, where Brian goes once a week to learn and play. In the past, Brian was not only irritable but also aggressive to his teachers and fellow children. He lashed out and bit when his demands were not met. Brian's teachers at AYAN are patient but firm with him.

Over time, Brian has become less irritable and calmer. Through the sessions at AYAN, Brian's behaviour has slowly improved.



Paulina Mugisha, 56 (In dress). Brian, 4.

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda. (Host Community.)

"The only place I trust that Brian will be safe is the AYAN office.



He interacts better with other children, listens to instructions, and loves to play. Brian can now recite part of the alphabet, control his emotions better, and even offers to follow me to the garden.

The biggest change for me has been learning how to care for Brian without screaming or beating him. Through my interactions with Brian's teachers at AYAN, I have also learnt that screaming at him and beating him is wrong and only makes him resent me. I now talk to him patiently, and he responds with more calmness. This has made me feel more capable of supporting him.

Each time I take him to AYAN, I receive a 20,000 UGX transport refund. I have been saving part of this money. I recently used part of my savings to buy him his first ever mattress. He was very happy when I handed him the mattress.

AYAN also supported me with vegetable seeds and training on growing vegetables at home to supplement our diet. I have a food tower and a sack garden here where I grow eggplants, collard greens, spinach, garden eggs, and nakati (Ethiopian Nightshade). I harvest from my garden on days I am unable to buy food for my family.

I grow bananas, maize, cassava, and beans, but these seasonal crops are not as readily available as the vegetables in my kitchen garden because they take time to mature. I supplement my income by offering to weed, plant or harvest in people's gardens.

The people at AYAN have helped me overcome my alcohol addiction. I used to drink every time I felt too heavy to cope with personal challenges. I now speak to my husband each time I feel troubled. I also tend to my kitchen garden and nursery bed. I now know that I can improve crop appearance by applying soil cover and liquid manure, which I make by soaking chicken droppings in water for 3 weeks.

Over the last six months, since AYAN first contacted me, I have observed slow but steady changes in my life. Brian is more stable. I have my drinking problem under control, and now, my family cannot go to bed hungry. There is something to eat here. What gives me the most joy and relief is hearing Brian laugh, count from one to ten, or simply come to me and sit quietly by my side, because he knows I do not beat him anymore ■





ECD Centre at Kyaka II






AYAN

Small Hands, Small Seeds, Steady Stews



> “I have learned how to deal with my bad days without beating my children.

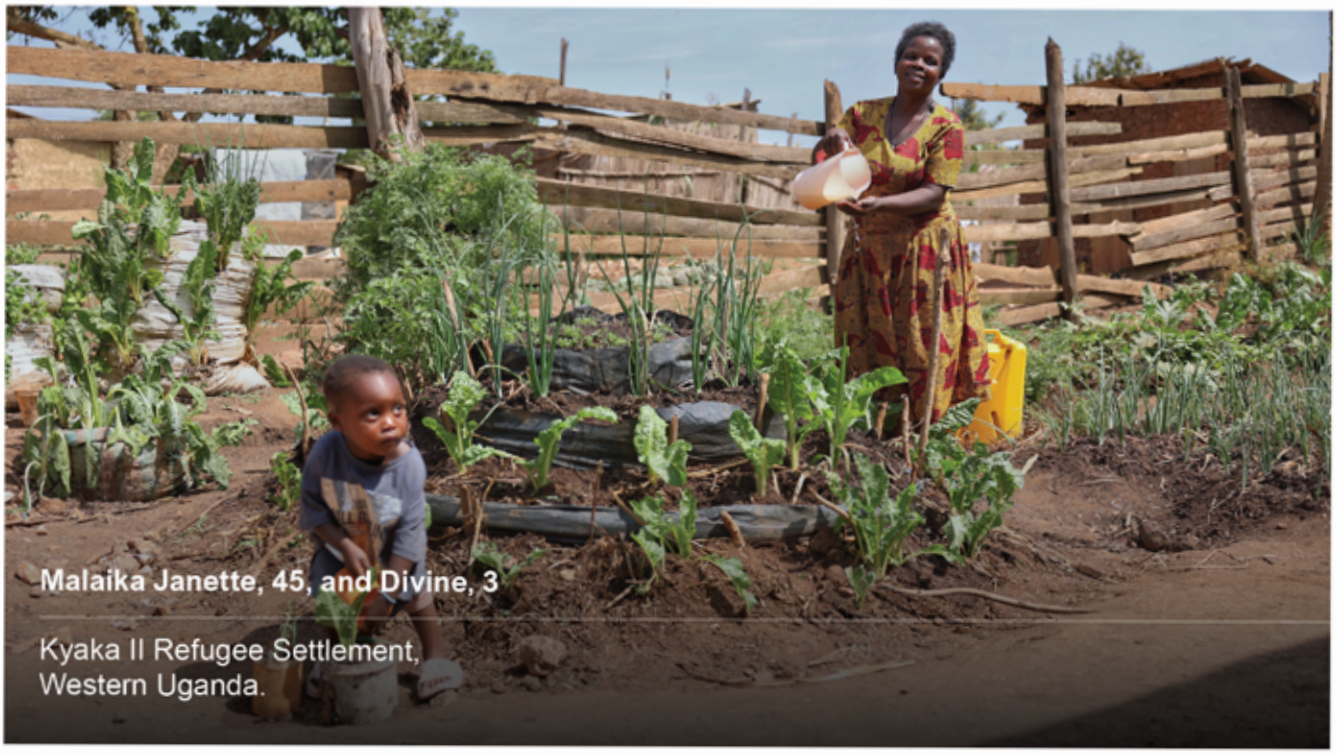
I was born in Rutshuru, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 45 years ago. My family left Rutshuru for Uganda in 2007 after fighting broke out back home. I have lived in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement for the past 17 years with my husband and our ten children. Life here is understandably challenging.

Back home in Rutshuru, I had a few things going well for me. I owned gardens and ran a profitable fish business. Here, I run a small local brew business, which only brings in enough to survive. My husband tried selling beans, but the business failed. The lack of work is a constant source of worry for me. In the past, I often transferred my frustrations onto my children, especially the older ones.

Once a week, my youngest child, Divine, 3, goes to the AYAN Innovation Centre to play and study. All parents of children attending AYAN received guidance on child protection and parenting. We were cautioned about the dangers of raising children in violent homes and encouraged to use dialogue. I have since learned how to deal with my bad days without beating my children.

Divine has been attending classes at AYAN for a few months now. In the past, Divine avoided new faces because they terrified her. Divine would hide from guests, refusing to come out of the house until they left. She has now lost her fear of unfamiliar faces. She plays with the neighbourhood children, and she is very curious and involved in home affairs. Divine has her own small kitchen garden made up of plants in two plastic tins that she takes care of. Despite her age, she can tell weeds from crops and knows not to destroy the family's vegetables. Divine was also self-centred, but her interactions with children at AYAN have taught her the importance of sharing.

Before AYAN, my backyard was a wasteland. AYAN taught us to identify soil suitable for farming, make organic fertilisers, mulch, and set up sack gardens and food towers. We also received vegetable seedlings. In just four months, I now have a small garden of carrots, onions, eggplants, garden eggs, collard greens, amaranth, celery, spinach, and green peppers. I also applied the training to the land I hired from the host community to grow beans, maize, and potatoes, and my yields have doubled. My family no longer eats plain carbohydrates at mealtimes when I cannot afford to make stews. My daughters can always harvest from the kitchen garden and cook. My children have learned the importance of caring for things and the gift of responsibility through the garden.
AYAN has helped me expand my network. I now have people I can consult on parenting, business, and mental health. I have also improved my public speaking skills. I earn a little money from selling spinach and celery leaves to my neighbours, who especially love celery. I am now a point of reference in my neighbourhood for sack farming ■



Malaika Janette, 45, and Divine, 3

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda.







Vegetables and Dignity.





The first two years in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement were the hardest. I arrived here in 2018 because of the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where I had been a subsistence farmer growing maize, beans, cassava, and sweet potatoes. Life back in Congo might not have been perfect, but it was promising. When the fighting broke out, everything fell apart.

In 2018, armed men attacked our village and drove everyone out. In the chaos of the attack, I got separated from my family. Everyone ran for their lives. I fled to Uganda without my family. For two painful years, I looked for my family. I had just their names and no photos, which made my search harder. I knew my wife and children were somewhere in Uganda, but I just could not locate them. I was entirely overwhelmed by worry over my family's well-being. Luckily for me, after two years, I was reunited with my family. I now live with my wife and our five children.

The main challenges of living in the settlement are water and food shortages. The land allocated to us is too small to sustain my family. To raise income, my wife offered labour in gardens for payment in cash or in kind. We also hire land from the host community where we grow beans and maize, but because we cannot afford to hire much land, the harvests are only enough to feed us for a while. The lack of enough food is an actual problem in the settlement. We used to eat a single meal of cassava, but now we rely on fresh vegetables from our small kitchen garden.

> **"I have taught three neighbours how to grow vegetables in sacks.**

AYAN helped us set the garden up after my son, Samuel, registered for the children's education program at the AYAN centre. Through him, we were introduced to training on growing vegetables in small spaces. AYAN taught us how to prepare nursery beds, use sacks and food towers, and make use of the little land around our house. They also gave us vegetable seeds. That is how our kitchen garden started. Our vegetables are doing well. My children love the vegetables because they improve the taste of our meals. My family grows celery, spinach, amaranth, eggplants and garden eggs.

The space that we were initially not using now grows our vegetables. We prepare vegetables every three (3) days to supplement our diet, which not only improves our nutrition but also reduces our food worries. As a father, I do not have to beg for food from anyone. And because our kitchen garden is working, I have already taught three of my neighbours how to grow vegetables in sacks, so they can also improve their food supply.

My son Samuel attends classes at the AYAN once a week. AYAN refunds my transport costs, and part of that money helps me buy day-to-day family essentials like soap, sugar, salt, utensils, and even cooking oil. My son has improved his numeracy and literacy skills. He can count up to 20, read simple words and sing learning songs. I have observed that they are more confident and curious. He understands simple instructions and asks many questions. Samuel is more active at home: helps with fetching water, sweeping the yard and harvesting vegetables ■



Kazungu Batista, 39. Sam, 4.

Kyaka II Refugee Settlement,
Western Uganda.

AYAN
AFRICAN YOUTH ACTION NETWORK
Bringing Youth Together

Hilton CONRAD N. HILTON FOUNDATION

AFRICAN YOUTH ACTION NETWORK (AYAN)
Plot 1496, Block 15, Kibuga, Nsambya
Mobile: +256 764 201 899 WhatsApp line +256 764 201 900
P.O Box 16772, Kampala-Uganda

Photos & Text: Okello Herbert Andrew
+256 779 262720

Design & Layout: Inemba
+256 394 829467