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YOUTH EDUCATION & WORK



Youth, education and work in (post-)conflict areas

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Intermezzo:

Gulu Association of Lifelong Learning

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Gulu Association of Lifelong Learning[10]

It was on a hot October day that the Through Art Keep Smiling (TAKS) Community Centre in Gulu was bustling with creativity, innovation, and shared learning around the opportunities for youth in small scale entrepreneurship. The afternoon started off with an ice-breaker activity which aimed to encourage participants to share knowledge and experience and voice the dreams and challenges they have to start small businesses.

This was the inaugural Community Learning Café, hosted by the Gulu Association for Lifelong Learning. Inspired by the UNESCO field school, a group of students, faculty and community members came together to form this group to act on the research results of the field school by deepening relationships with the community, inspiring creativity and innovation, and developing a network of mentors and practitioners where we can all learn from each other. Ultimately, we decided to try out a series of 'Community Learning Café's as a means of opening a space of dialogue.



[10] The pictures in this chapter were taken by members of the Gulu Association of Lifelong Learning in their first meeting.

So, in October 2018, we invited 50 community members to come and learn together about small scale entrepreneurship in Gulu. We strategically invited some highschool students interested in entrepreneurship, some small-scale entrepreneurs just starting out, some experienced small-scale entrepreneurs and NGOs who provide opportunities and work with youth in the field. In addition, we asked four panellists to briefly present their own success stories.

Following the introductory activity, the panellists inspired us all with their unique stories of the challenges they have faced and how they then overcame them. Their messages of determination, patience, research and passion were well received. The second activity placed participants in mixed groups and tasked them with developing a business plan, listing common challenges and solutions in business, or mapping out the characteristics of a sustainable business which they then presented.



Going into the inaugural community learning café, we had no idea if we would be able to pull it off, however despite a number of challenges and surprises we feel that in the end, we were successful primarily because of our willingness to trust each other, ask

each other for help and take ownership of our individual or group tasks . As a result, we were flexible and able to adapt.

The success of the event was evident first and foremost by the enthusiasm of the participants and the various maps and plans they produced. A great deal of informal learning took place as participants shared existing ideas and inspired new ones. Connections were made among participants, along with practical suggestions and opportunities and the press were there to write the story. Most importantly, we have fostered meaningful friendships. It was a lot of work, but in the words of one of the organizers: 'We nailed it, we made it better, it was perfect!'

The Community Learning Café demonstrated that there is significant interest in this form of learning on the topic of small-scale entrepreneurship. We realized very quickly that there are a lot of organisations and community groups that work with youth in this capacity. There is a clear need to map out who is doing what and ensure plenty of space for coordination. In fact, our event initiated some activity in this domain. One of the key and unpredicted outcomes was the beginning of a conversation with NGOs and civil society organisations in the region about the potential to develop an 'incubator hub' together: a community space where youth could come and learn, share their ideas and search out opportunities available to them.



Many of the participants in the learning cafés have founded lasting partnerships with employers and some of our newly-graduated members found employment using their

newfound facilitation skills through our UNESCO network. They remain integral to our regular meeting group. On a personal note, I have the fortune to have become acquainted through our workshops with a young arts-based youth group: STARFACE CAMP. These very talented young musicians, poets, artists, beat boxers, yoga instructors, painters, fashion designers, playwrights, movie makers and break dancers were once failed by the discipline-based, static formal education system. In contrast, in the STARFACE CAMP they learn together, experientially and in enriching traditional circumstances and have become determined to bring art, passion and creativity to Lifelong learning in Gulu and are very inspiring partners to our network.

We come from various backgrounds, bringing diverse perspectives that require negotiating as we decide on themes, locations, and facilitation methods. The learning is purposefully informal, yet still planned carefully. Our key learning outcomes are threefold: learning the general field and conditions around a particular theme that is impacting the youth involved in the café- including understanding key barriers and challenges participants face and potential pathways or opportunities available; developing a network of youth support and capacity building; and opening up spaces for people to dream and aspire for realistic futures. To achieve these goals, we invite a targeted group of people from diverse backgrounds, including university students, secondary students, out-of-school youth (either working or not) who have an interest in the field, professionals from the field and NGOs or CBOs (Community Based Organisations). We facilitate dialogue among these stakeholders, usually with arts-based methods such as storytelling, painting and theatre, to share experiences and learn from each other. To contextualize the topic, we always host our cafés 'in situ'. For example when we hosted a learning café on agriculture, we did it from a local dairy farm. The participative and art-based approach to our learning demands that all participants bring their particular experience to the cafés. In this way everyone is recognized as a teacher and we build on the diversity in the room to learn collaboratively and catalyse strategies for decent futures for all.

It is now 2020, and we find our group deeply engaged in planning another community learning café, this time to share stories of pathways and aspirations of youth in vocational education and training in the pursuit of decent and sustainable work. In the last year and half, we have gained considerable momentum with our strategically oriented learning café's. We have learned a lot about the many aspirations and the important role in community development occupied by youth. We now have a

community space, in the Gulu Centre for Community Based Participatory Research and Lifelong Learning where we provide internet, loan computers and books, hold our meetings and convene workshops. This is thanks to the work of Professors Openjuru and Zeelen and the research grants provided in partnership with the University of Nottingham. Our latest projects include a community tree planting project on all the streets in Gulu initiated by one of our members, Deo, and documented on film by another member, Dickens; another Community Learning Café and hosting a youth component of the 2021 UNESCO Chair conference in Gulu.



We are a modest group, our activities remain small and largely unnoticed, but we can feel the relationships we are softly building are important and meaningful. We also feel that our youth connection with African Rural University in Kagadi, initiated in the summer school of 2017, has been valuable to integrate the national network of lifelong learning. We had the opportunity to visit Kagadi, learn about the amazing community integrated curriculum they have and co-host our signature lifelong learning café! We look forward to more opportunities for connection in Uganda and beyond in pursuit of lifelong Learning. We are always looking to build more stories - different from the negative and disempowering stories that are too-often told about northern Uganda.

Each time we make a connection we start a new story of hope, love and realized dreams. So, stay tuned as you never know, we may be hosting a Community Learning Café at a theatre near you!