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# EU BACKS REFUGEE INCLUSION EDUCATION DRIVE

PHOTOS BY WILFRED SANYA

The European Union (EU) has partnered with the Uganda Small Scale Industries Association (USSIA) to train refugees in inclusive education, aiming to help them integrate with host communities.

Sam Walusimbi, the project manager at Vocax Startup Hub and Training Centre, said the project is a refugee-led exchange that fosters empathy and offers critical thinking skills to trainers.

"As the modern job market demands strong digital skills, this project intends to deliver targeted training in digital and soft skills to enhance participants' employability," he said.

Walusimbi made the remarks during a training session at the USSIA headquarters in Lugogo, Kampala, on April 28.

He noted that the project, co-funded by the EU, is a virtual exchange initiative designed to promote intercultural dialogue and digital inclusion for refugees and youth in conflict-affected regions, who often lack access to stable education.

Walusimbi revealed that the project is collaborating with Italy, Lithuania, Tanzania and Ghana to develop a working document that will be shared with countries hosting refugees worldwide.

"Our goal is to connect young people from different countries in inclusive online spaces to share lived experiences, challenge stereotypes, and build shared identities rooted in empathy, mutual respect, and civic values," he said.

Walusimbi added that the project is a valuable opportunity for participants to access the job market, as developing digital skills will allow them to pursue online education, connect with global opportunities, find remote jobs or start businesses.

"We believe the training will enable refugees to communicate and collaborate across cultures and participate in our society. Many refugees are already skilled but face barriers to opening up," he said.

Trainers will work with refugees to help them transform their lives through integration with host communities so they can contribute to Uganda's economy – a link that is currently missing.

"If we train them and equip them with the skills they need, they can add value to our economy and transform their lives to end donor dependence," Walusimbi said.

## WHAT OTHERS SAY

George Ssebanenya, a counselling psychologist at YMCA who specialises in teaching, said there are several challenges refugees encounter.

"When refugees spend a lot of money, they carry a lot of fear. Handling them requires trained



A cross section of participants during a training at Uganda Small Industries Association Scale headquarters in Lugogo, Kampala, on April 28

counsellors who exercise patience and empathy," he said.

"When you see a refugee in a country, they have sacrificed a lot – including their culture, family, and way of life – to adapt to a new environment. We have people who go to the Middle East and Ugandans who seek greener pastures," he said.

Ssebanenya said refugees who have been repatriated or forced to flee their country because of war or other reasons require special attention in any school.

"The word 'inclusive' may not be enough; the people handling them need to be attentive," he said.

Ssebanenya urged those working with refugees to show genuine empathy.

"Most refugees in Uganda are from Islamic states and are very honest.

If you forget an item, it will be kept safely."

"Many times, we assume refugees know nothing and



Hailed the programme: Apita

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think we must teach them from scratch. Yet some are already educated and only need language skills to fit into society," he said.

Patrick Apita, the academic co-ordinator at Lugogo Industrial Training Institute, said the training targets people who have completed the Advanced Certificate of Education, and he commended the programme.

"Considering the people we train, this kind of programme equips them to set up their own businesses," he said.

Apita said once they leave training, they can eke out a living.

"Technical and vocational education and training teach practical skills so you can earn a living. This training gives us knowledge to pass on to others," he said.

Apita added: "Our learners are diverse. Some don't speak the language, and some have low levels of education. But our goal is to give them a means of survival, such as laying bricks in construction."

# UGANDA-EU TIES GO BEYOND AID

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Uganda now enjoys duty-free, quota-free access to EU markets under preferential arrangements, helping drive export growth in commodities such as coffee, fish, flowers and fruits.

## GLOBAL TRADE

Exports to Europe have risen significantly in recent years. Crispin Kaheru, a commissioner at Uganda Human Rights Commission, described the relationship between the EU and Uganda as one of the country's most enduring and influential international partnerships.

Although the EU formally established diplomatic relations with Uganda in 1976, Kaheru said the connection between Europe and Uganda goes back much further through trade, missionary work,



education, infrastructure development, and political engagement.

He said the partnership has had a major influence on Uganda's governance and institutional growth.

"The EU-Uganda relationship is one of the longest, deepest and most consequential international partnerships Uganda has had in the modern era," Kaheru said.

He added that the good news is that the relationship is now evolving beyond traditional aid dependence.

Kaheru pointed out that Uganda's changing economic and political landscape requires a new type of partnership focused on investment, industrialisation, technology transfer, skills development, digital

infrastructure, climate financing, and youth employment.

"The relationship is gradually shifting from aid to investment, from dependency to competitiveness," he said.

Looking ahead, Kaheru expressed optimism about the future of EU-Uganda relations if both sides adapt to changing realities.

He highlighted the complementary strengths of both partners, noting that Europe possesses capital and technology while Uganda has a youthful population, expanding markets, and growing economic potential.

"The next phase of the partnership should therefore be less about lectures and more about co-creating prosperity. The strongest partnerships are not those without disagreements.

They are those that



Ambassador Leroy

survive them and continue building together," Kaheru said.

## GOVERNANCE, RIGHTS

The EU's role has not been limited to economic development. It has also been a longstanding partner in governance, supporting institutions linked to Electoral Commission, Parliament, civil society and human rights advocacy groups.

Kaheru said this support

has "significantly shaped Uganda's institutional evolution," particularly in areas such as accountability, refugee protection and the rule of law.

The EU describes the partnership with Kampala as one grounded in continuity and trust.

"The best partnerships use history as fuel. Fifty years on, the partnership is strong, and the next chapter will be written together."

## CLIMATE RESILIENCE

As climate change intensifies, environmental co-operation has become a growing priority. Uganda, like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, faces rising risks from erratic rainfall to deforestation and land degradation.

In response, the EU has scaled up support for renewable energy, forest conservation.