

Education for refugees provides the knowledge, skills, and opportunities needed to rebuild their lives, integrate into new societies, and contribute to both their host and home communities.

# Ladder to Learning

Supporting Refugee Learners in Uganda

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Children jumping on letters and learning letter names and sounds in a structured PLAY activity.

There are approximately 1.7 million refugees in Uganda, making the country the third largest refugee-hosting country in the world and the highest in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup> These refugees are living in the poorest and most underdeveloped areas of the country, exposed to dilapidated conditions that increase their vulnerabilities. These dire economic and environmental conditions make it difficult for refugee children to access quality education that could offer safety, security, and stability, further worsening the vicious cycle of underdevelopment, marginalization, and inequity.



photos courtesy of Street Child

A study of over 1,000 refugees across East Africa revealed that 2 in 5 children cannot enroll in education despite attempting to do so, due to loss of learning and differences in language and learning norms. This exclusion is extreme in Uganda. Over half of school-age refugee children are excluded from education<sup>2</sup> and only 11% of refugees access secondary education.

Language and learning norms constitute the biggest constraint for refugee learners attempting to access education in Uganda because they struggle to demonstrate competencies in English despite acquiring them in their local language (Arabic, French, or Swahili). Learners are assigned to lower levels, contributing to misalignment between their cognitive and linguistic levels. This misalignment, in turn, leads to negative coping mechanisms that result in disengagement, disruption, and dropout. Also, these children experience shame/discrimination from classmates at being assigned to lower levels, causing lasting psychological impact and further exposing them to other protection risks. All these challenges intersect to make refugee learners one of the most vulnerable groups in Uganda.

To address this challenge, Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID), a refugee-run organization, and Street Child, an international organization specializing in education in emergencies, collaboratively conceptualized and created a simpler,



more scalable, and sustainable program to help refugee learners acquire foundational skills in English and thus making it possible to transition into state schools in Uganda. This program is called **Ladder to Learning (LTL)**.

***Ladder to Learning is the first and only language intervention for refugee learners in Uganda, allowing refugee learners to acquire language skills in a safe, secure, and stable space, with strong, supported transitions into state schools.***

### **Innovation**

LTL exemplifies a low-cost, localized approach that infuses literacy and numeracy education with dynamic activities to enhance learning outcomes for refugee learners. LTL has dramatically enhanced both the integration and retention of refugee students in Ugandan schools, creating new pathways for their educational success. Our remarkable success is tied to four innovative approaches:

- **Mother-Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE).** This approach helps learners develop the language skills needed to access age-appropriate content and achieve outcomes consistent with their cognitive abilities. Refugee learners gain capabilities and confidence in English, crucially increasing access to education and ensuring their reintegration, retention, and success in Uganda's state schools.



Children learning the alphabet in English during a structured PLAY activity.



***Ladder to Learning exemplifies a low-cost, localized approach, and commitment to creating and collaborating on simple, scalable, and sustainable solutions. At a cost of <\$95 per child, Ladder to Learning is an in-time investment, saving millions in accelerated and remedial interventions that cost over \$200 per child.***

## **Impact on Learning**

To measure success, we administered baseline and end-line assessments before enrollment and after program participation. This evaluation was complemented with weekly monitoring and qualitative data gained from discussions with teachers, learners, and caregivers.

Success was defined by three critical factors:

- CSF1 - Learners achieving the “minimum level” of foundational skills in literacy and numeracy required for successful transition into formal education.
- CSF2 - The proportion of enrolled refugee learners successfully transitioning into the Ugandan formal education system.
- CSF3 - The effectiveness of playful learning in enhancing the learning experience and outcomes for refugee learners.

For CSF1, assessments showed remarkable results. By the end of cohort 1, 86% of learners achieved the minimum level in literacy (up from 4% at baseline) and 97% achieved the minimum level in numeracy (up from 19% at baseline). Cohort 2 saw 84% achieving the minimum level in literacy (up from 7% at baseline) and 98% achieving the minimum level numeracy (up from 23% at baseline).

For CSF2, LTL proved effective in transitioning refugee learners into state schools, equipping them with crucial foundational and socio-emotional skills. The program supported 85% of refugee learners in cohort 1 and 99% in cohort 2 to transition successfully into formal schools.

For CSF3, we captured teachers’ and learners’ opinions and behavioral changes, providing insights into the benefits of playful learning. Leveraging teachers’ feedback to design and trial a PLAY manual enhanced teachers’ ability to facilitate play sessions. Additionally, 96% of learners said play activities made them want to attend more sessions, sharing comments such as, “Some play activities are educative,

- **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL).** To improve children’s basic arithmetic and reading abilities, the TARK methodology groups learners according to their learning level rather than age or grade. This approach uses interactive activities tailored to the learners’ needs, utilizing locally available materials.
- **Conducting classes in safe, secure, and sufficient spaces.** Activities are conducted in communal spaces that provide a stable and supportive environment children can easily access to acquire fundamental skills and build resilience amid displacement. Whenever possible, these classes are held at state schools, allowing children to establish relationships with teachers and develop routines, such as traveling to and from school, that are crucial for reintegration into formal schooling.
- **Partnering with LEGO Foundation to operationalize PLAY.** The inclusion of playful learning in the curriculum is a unique aspect of this innovation, expanding the program’s impact potential. This approach served multiple purposes, including: increasing language learning capabilities and confidence, promoting continuity and engagement in the classroom, and enhancing coping skills to ensure high-risk children are intentionally included in daily activities.



Children learning the alphabet in English during a structured PLAY activity.

like number jump, which helps me learn how to count numbers and makes me want to attend sessions more.” Integrating playful learning strengthened learners’ language skills, ensured continuity of learning, and enhanced cooperation among refugee children and their peers.

### Investing in Stakeholders

Collaboration and coordination were crucial to the success of LTL. Street Child and YARID determined that the program’s success would be strengthened by establishing and nurturing relationships with several key stakeholders, including:

- **Community and Caregivers:** We recognized the importance of community acceptance and parental buy-in for ensuring learners’ participation and continuity in our program. To achieve this, our team engaged with community members and caregivers, educating them about the program and its benefits. We invited caregivers to attend and observe learning sessions twice a month, giving them firsthand experience of children’s engagement and fostering a sense of responsibility for the program. This approach helped win caregivers’ support, resulting in LTL champions who advocated for their children’s transition, leading to widespread community acceptance.

- **School Administrators:** We recognized the need to collaborate with school administrators for smooth refugee learner transitions. Street Child and YARID engaged headteachers and administrators of neighboring schools, ensuring they were informed about the program and prepared to integrate transitioning learners.
- **Teachers:** We engaged teachers throughout the program to co-design and prototype play activities. This included training 36 teachers, integrating community teachers as grade 3 assistants, embedding play in learning sessions, and training 18 refugee community mentors to act as a bridge between teachers and caregivers. This collaboration also helped co-design the PLAY manual, enhancing facilitation and engagement in interactive activities.

### The Challenges

The LTL program has successfully turned challenges into stepping stones for refugee children’s growth. The biggest challenge concerned language of instruction. Parents were initially apprehensive about their children being taught in local languages through the L2F2 (Learning from Familiar to Formal) approach. However, our approach ensured children could acquire a strong understanding of concepts in their local language prior to introducing the same concepts in



English — allowing us to consolidate conceptual understanding as a foundation for more effective and efficient language learning. Additionally, the TaRL methodology, which groups students by learning level rather than age, caused unease among older students sharing a classroom with younger peers. Throughout the LTL learning program, teachers and mentors reassured students that despite age differences, everyone was on the same learning journey. Mixed-gender activities during TaRL lessons also met resistance from parents of particular faiths. Teachers adapted these activities as appropriate, and also clarified that these practices mirrored those in formal schooling systems, gradually easing concerns.

The transition to formal schools presented another challenge. Many parents were resistant to paying the associated fees. However, parents who recognized the value of formal education became advocates, encouraging other caregivers to embrace this transition and take responsibility for their children’s education.

Retaining teachers amid rising living costs and reduced food rations was also challenging. We recognize the need to adapt the program to address this challenge by developing mechanisms or driving advocacy to support teachers’ retention in these learning centers beyond the program lifecycle. Despite these hurdles, LTL successfully turned challenges into opportunities, ensuring an enriching learning journey for learners.

## Lessons Learned

Drawing from the remarkable success of the LTL approach, there is significant potential for replicating this model in other contexts. We hope that our experience might offer advice and core considerations for other innovators, including:

- **Prototype Before Implementation:** Testing ideas prior to full-scale rollout is crucial for innovation. For instance, before launching play programs, Street Child and YARID experimented with various activities and gathered feedback from children, teachers, and parents. This adaptive approach allowed us to refine the project and identify the most engaging and inclusive activities for children.
- **Engage the Community and Stakeholders:** Successful projects rely on community engagement and acceptance. The value of keeping all stakeholders informed and involved from the beginning of a program cannot be overstated. For example, in some areas, girls’ education is not prioritized. This was particularly true where female learners had to complete household chores before attending classes, which affected their engagement and attendance. Through community engagement, we raised awareness about the importance of education for girls, remedying this barrier.
- **Encourage Parental Involvement:** Parents are the first teachers, so it is essential to win their trust to foster a supportive learning environment. We encouraged parents to visit the centers and observe their children’s education firsthand. This helped parents understand and value the learning process, becoming advocates for our program.
- **Adapt Play Activities to Local Contexts:** It is important to tailor play activities to align with diverse cultural norms. For example, in certain communities, it may be necessary to modify activities to respect ethno-religious norms. Additionally, play and learning spaces must be inclusive, providing extra support for children with disabilities and adolescent girls.
- **Address Financial Barriers:** Some parents face challenges associated with enrollment fees as their children transitioned from our learning centers to state schools. Addressing this challenge requires targeted support to improve caregivers’ livelihoods and enhance their financial security in order to ensure they can cover school-related costs.
- **Support Teacher Retention:** Providing mechanisms to support teacher retention beyond the

program period is crucial to addressing demotivation and preventing early resignation. Continued support, including on-site mentoring from Master Trainers, is essential to enhance teachers' confidence and capabilities.

## Looking Ahead

Street Child constantly seeks to expand and sustain the impacts of the LTL program through strategic fundraising, consistent iterations, and tailored approaches that include community mentors and caregivers. By transitioning learners into formal institutions, the program shifts responsibility from temporary remedies to long-term solutions within established state schools. Street Child is also leading an action research project, Playful Learning Across the Years 2.0 (PLAY 2.0), to evaluate child-centered pedagogies and their impact on children's holistic development. PLAY 2.0 is being implemented in Bangladesh, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. Initial evidence has indicated remarkable improvements in learning capabilities and social cohesion, particularly in low-literacy and refugee contexts, highlighting the importance of playful learning in curricula. The insights from PLAY 2.0 will support efforts to expand and replicate LTL in Uganda and other contexts. Street Child aims to use this research as a strong evidence base to develop global programmatic interventions that integrate playful learning methodologies and advocate for their inclusion in education policy and teacher training curricula.

## Case Study: Muhinda

Muhinda is a 14-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) currently residing



Sensitizing and soliciting the support of caregivers.

with her father and younger sister in Kakoni B, Uganda. Forced to flee her home country due to the outbreak of war, Muhinda's life took a dramatic turn as she sought safety and stability in a new land.

Muhinda learned about the LTL program from teachers who visited her community, actively encouraging children to enroll in LTL, which offered free education, scholastic materials, and sanitary pads for girls. The promise of these essential resources captured Muhinda's attention and encouraged her to hope for a better future.

Muhinda's enrollment in the LTL program has been nothing short of transformative. "LTL has made me enjoy schooling, which I didn't have the chance to experience before," she says. Through LTL, she has learned Kiswahili and English, significantly enhancing her ability to understand and engage with the curriculum. This new knowledge has helped her appreciate schooling and grasp concepts more quickly in class. "The LTL program has excellent teachers who are welcoming and friendly, which has alleviated my fears about schooling," she notes.

In her daily life, Muhinda had faced several challenges. Illness often prevented her from attending school, and a lack of sufficient food at home left her hungry

during school hours. "I didn't have sanitary pads during my periods, making me reluctant to come to school. And I don't have enough clothes to wear both at school and in the community."

The LTL program has been instrumental in addressing these challenges. It has not only provided free education and scholastic materials, but also educated Muhinda about child protection and safeguarding. Furthermore, the program has helped improve her personal hygiene, allowing her to bathe and wash daily — a significant improvement from her previous situation.

Muhinda's aspirations for the future are fueled by the opportunities she has received through the LTL program. Despite her concerns about possibly not being able to pay formal school fees, she remains hopeful. "I am determined to become a nurse in the future if I get the opportunity," she says.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Uganda Factsheet - April 2024 - Uganda: <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/unhcr-uganda-factsheet-april-2024>

<sup>2</sup> VVOB, UNICEF, & MoES. (2023). *Teaching at the Right Level, accelerating foundational skills development in Ugandan primary schools.*

### Disclosure Statement:

The author is an employee of Street Child.