



ILO empowers refugees and youth in Uganda through a pilot digital work program



Online Gig Work training session – Nakivale Settlement

TESTIMONIAL



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“ - Enock Nyagasani, Refugee, Kampala District

In an era where digital innovation is transforming economies worldwide, the International Labour Organization (ILO) is pioneering change in Uganda through its Online Gig Work Pilot Program.

A 2023 ILO-commissioned study has shed light on the potential for young people to participate in the rapidly growing gig economy.

The report, titled, “Rapid assessment of digital skills gaps and microwork opportunities in Uganda” identifies online freelancing and microwork as viable options for youth employment. However, the study also highlighted challenges.

According to Evans Lwanga, Chief Technical Advisor at ILO in Uganda, “The report underscores several barriers to entry for young people in Uganda. These include limited access to reliable and affordable internet, lack of connected devices and weak transversal skills for work. The findings of the study call for concerted efforts to address these challenges and harness the potential of digital work.” Previous ILO studies also indicate that workers in the gig economy often face a lack of labour and social protection, and sometimes insufficient earnings.

In response, the ILO has developed a comprehensive pilot program focused on skill development and job linkage, ensuring that gig work acts as a springboard to more sustainable career paths.

Officially launched in January 2024, and being implemented through partners StartHub Africa and Kolaborate, the ‘Online Gig Work’ pilot program is part of the ILO’s broader efforts to harness digital transformation for economic growth, job creation, skills promotion, and inclusion.

The pilot’s call for participants attracted over 800 applicants from Kampala and Isingiro districts, retaining those with intermediate to advanced digital skills, for the program to build on their existing capabilities and improve their employability.

Transforming lives through skills and training

Since its launch, the Online Gig Work program has trained nearly 200 gig workers, including refugees in Nakivale Settlement in Isingiro, with careful considerations on gender equity. Participants gain core work skills to perform effectively in common online gig tasks, including web research, freelance writing, content creation, graphics design, web development, and social media management.

Additionally, they receive guidance on building a personal brand, navigating global and regional online job platforms, understanding ethical considerations in Artificial Intelligence (AI), and maintaining online safety. The program also connects participants to additional online training resources.

The program spans three weeks, beginning with 10 days of intensive group training sessions complemented by one-on-one mentorship. After this initial phase, trainees move on to real-world test projects, where they gain hands-on experience. Following the tests, they are directly connected to paid opportunities, allowing them to immediately apply their skills and start earning an income. Each cohort includes 25 youth, and a trainee is considered successfully linked to a job once they have earned at least USD 30.00 from gig work.

Enock Nyagasani, a 29-year-old Congolese refugee with a Bachelor’s Degree in Computer Science, shared his experience on the program. “The Online Gig Work Program didn’t just teach me skills, it allowed me to envision a brighter future. Today, I design websites for clients in the United Kingdom, and confidently navigate professional collaborations.”

Participants not yet ready for paid opportunities are connected to additional online training and receive ongoing mentorship and support.

Creating opportunities in forcibly displaced contexts ILO’s gig economy initiative is part of the Partnership for Improving Prospects for Forcibly Displaced and Host Communities (PROSPECTS) program, funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which has the overarching

objective of promoting the economic inclusion of host communities and refugees. Within the inter-agency PROSPECTS program, the ILO aims to promote decent work and improve employability, including for some of the country’s most vulnerable populations.

“Uganda’s dedication to hosting refugees is admirable, and the Netherlands is a major contributor to meeting the challenges that Uganda and refugees face. We believe that self-reliance of refugees and employment are crucial for a sustainable model of refugee reception,” said the Ambassador of the Netherlands in Uganda, Frederieke Quispel. “For this we have started the PROSPECTS partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC).”

“The role of digital innovation is indispensable in solving societal and economic challenges for development and holds the potential for job creation and improved livelihoods. Refugees and their host communities should not miss out. As the Netherlands we are therefore excited that the ILO and the other partners in PROSPECTS have created this opportunity for young refugees and Ugandans to gain these digital skills and find work opportunities.”

From digital inclusion to digital livelihoods

The pilot operates in refugee and host communities within Kampala and Isingiro districts. It recognizes the potential to connect refugees and host communities in both rural and urban areas with remote job opportunities, e-commerce, and digitally-supported entrepreneurship. Young refugees’ enthusiasm, particularly from young women, has been remarkable as they see digital work as a way to overcome mobility constraints and challenge restrictive social gender norms.

“I never thought I could work online, but now I’m earning a steady income,” expressed Sagesse Akingabiye, a young female Burundian refugee participating in the pilot through Her Dreams Count, a refugee and women-led youth skilling organization in Nakivale.

Protecting workers’ rights and promoting social dialogue in the digital economy

The Online Gig Work program prioritizes the protection of workers’ rights, recognizing that gig work often serves as a stepping stone rather than a long-term solution.

In collaboration with the National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU), the Online Gig Work program also includes awareness-raising sessions on labour rights, with a focus on online workers, and how to navigate the digital risks related to the protection of personal information, phishing, fraudulent job vacancies and more.

The partners on the Online Gig Work program are also actively engaged in the creation of a Community of Practice, led by the Federation of Ugandan Employers (FUE), with ILO’s technical support. This platform will bring together key stakeholders including government, private sector, civil society and international agencies, to shape policies, uphold decent work standards, and collaborate for a more inclusive digital economy.

Partnering for success

The ILO is implementing the pilot through local organizations StartHub Africa and Kolaborate who bring expertise in youth skilling and jobs matching. For workshops and youth mobilization, Kampala City Council Authority (KCCA), and refugee-led organizations based in Nakivale (Unleashed and Her Dreams Count)



were engaged. Additionally, interagency collaboration with UNICEF and UNHCR contributes to the mobilization of digitally-skilled youth into the program, and the provision of connected devices. These collective efforts are essential in empowering refugees and youth in Uganda through digital work.

Overcoming challenges and moving forward

The pilot encountered initial challenges, including language barriers, youth struggling to balance training with other responsibilities, and a general lack of understanding of gig economy platforms. These issues were mitigated early on by recruiting trainers from both refugee and host communities, offering flexible training schedules, and providing daily mentorship and support to the youth.

However, ongoing challenges such as the high cost of data and the lack of fully equipped workspaces continue to hinder participants’ access to online gigs and training opportunities. These issues reflect broader systemic challenges, where digital access and affordability remain significant barriers to economic empowerment.

To address the challenge of high internet costs, the ILO simultaneously introduced a parallel ‘Connected Learning’ initiative leveraging Kolibri, an open-source platform for offline learning. This initiative runs alongside the Online Gig Work Program, providing additional support for digital skills training in areas with limited internet connectivity, and complements the broader goals of the PROSPECTS Program.

Building on the lessons learned during the pilot, the ILO is considering expanding the Online Gig Work program to other host communities and refugee settlements in Uganda.

A call to action for a more inclusive digital economy

Drawing from the learnings of this pilot program—highlighting both the challenges faced and the opportunities for digital livelihoods and economic inclusion—the ILO urges all stakeholders to act now. By making internet access more affordable, advancing digital skills training, safeguarding the rights of online workers, and strengthening cross-sector collaboration, we can together build a more inclusive digital economy that provides pathways to jobs and livelihoods for refugees and youth in Uganda.

Scan the QR code to read the ILO’s Microwork Study

