

Learners are selling the products they make to support their studies.

BY ABUBAKER KIRUNDA

In the informal settlements of Soweto and Masese in Jinja City's South Division, where many households struggle to meet basic needs, a quiet transformation is taking place inside classrooms.

For years, poverty pushed children, especially those raised by single parents, out of school. Today, however, a new wave of practical learning is helping them stay.

The shift is driven by the emphasis on skills-based learning, alongside academic learning. For many vulnerable learners, those skills are becoming a lifeline.

At Masese Seed Secondary School, 15-year-old Hannington Mukisa is proof that the classroom can double as a workshop for survival.

When he joined Senior One, Mukisa had no reliable source of school fees. Dropping out seemed inevitable. But a school project in soap making changed his trajectory.

"My project was in bar soap making. I had no hope of getting fees, but when I applied what I learnt, things started working out," Mukisa says.

With Shs100,000 raised from well-wishers, he bought raw materials and began producing soap. Each batch yields about 30 bars, which he sells at Shs5,000 each, earning Shs150,000.

After costs, he remains with a profit of around Shs40,000, which he uses to support both his education and family.

Skills-based training keeps Jinja's poor learners in school



Catherin Babirye, a pupil of Lake Site Primary School in Jinja, displays some of the products she makes. PHOTO/ABUBAKER KIRUNDA

CURRICULUM

The new Competence Based Curriculum for lower secondary education, which was launched in 2020, emphasises skills based learning. Moving away from rote memorisation, the curriculum prioritises the development of practical skills, core competences and the ability to apply knowledge in real world context.

His routine is demanding. Before dawn on school days, Mukisa starts the soap-making process, leaving his mother to complete the drying. By evening, the products are ready for sale.

"I balance books and business," he says, with quiet determination.

Across Masese, similar stories are emerging. At Lake Site Primary School, entrepreneurship clubs have become unlikely incubators of resilience.

Catherine Babirye, a Primary Six pupil, says the skills she has acquired have eased the burden on her single mother.

Through the club, Babirye learned to make necklaces, bangles, and liquid soap, items she now sells within the school community.

"My mother would sometimes fail to buy me books and pens," she explains.

"But now I can get them myself because I make and sell liquid soap."

The school's deputy head teacher, Ms Jessica Wailire, says such initiatives are already making a measurable impact.

"Absenteeism due to lack of scholastic materials has reduced," Ms Wailire notes. "Learners are more engaged because they can meet some of their own needs."

However, she says limited capital has hindered many learners. While students have the skills, scaling their small ventures remains difficult without financial backing.

That gap has attracted external support. During a recent visit to Jinja's vulnerable communities, American philanthropist James Patrick Cowles was struck by the ingenuity of the learners.

In response, he launched the Patrick Entrepreneurs Corner (PEC) in March to boost student-led enterprises.

The initiative identifies schools with active young entrepreneurs, offering them both capital and advanced business training. "We want to empower these learners to become more successful," Cowles says. "It's about building sustainability, not dependency."

Mr Paul Batambuze, the LC2 chairperson of Masese Parish, says: "When you look at the living conditions here, you understand how vulnerable these children are."