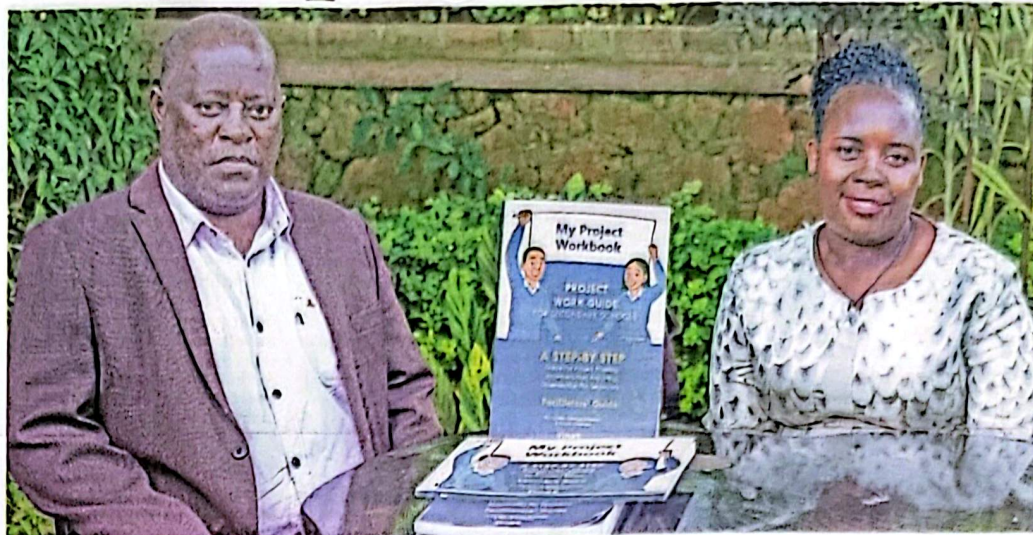


COMPETENCE-BASED CURRICULUM

Education. Christine Nantongo Kirembeka, an educationist and social innovation leader, and seasoned educator Richard Joseph Kirembeka are the brains behind Nurturing Exceptional Transformers Limited (NEXT). They are simplifying how project work is implemented in secondary schools. They spoke to *Daily Monitor's* Joan Salmon about their flagship innovation, the My Project Workbook, and how it is fast emerging as a national solution to bridge the gap between learning and earning solution.

How the Kirembekas make school project work easier



Richard Joseph Kirembeka and Christine Nantongo Kirembeka during the interview. PHOTO/ GEOFFREY MUTUMBA

What drew you into education?

Mrs Kirembeka: I have always seen education as a very powerful force of transformation in my life, and it has been very personal. At eight, I lost my mother and my father at 11 years.

After that, I was supported by a guardian and Kulika Charitable Trust, who enabled me to complete my education and train as a teacher. I eventually earned a Bachelor of Arts in Education from Makerere University. That experience taught me a critical lesson, that no matter how talented you are, without education, opportunities are very limited.

And what critical lessons have you picked from your time as a teacher?

Mrs Kirembeka: During my early years as a teacher and as a leader in the education space, I observed that many learners performed well academically but struggled to apply their knowledge in real-life situations.

This gap became even more visible when we looked at important parts of the curriculum. While the curriculum includes elements such as problem-solving, civic engagement, and innovation, many schools lack the structure and tools to implement these effectively.

That realisation led me to engage more deeply in education, not just as a teacher but also as a systems thinker, coming up with practical tools that make learning more practical, impactful, and meaningful.

Mr Kirembeka: Honestly, nothing particularly interested me in teaching; it was purely destiny. I did not want to become a teacher because I thought I would not teach effectively. I pursued a BSc Economics. However, even when, I was shortlisted for a civil service position, I fell ill, failed to attend the interview.

Eventually, I opted to teach as a temporary solution to earn a living while my job search continued. However, I soon realised that I had underestimated myself.

I may not have been the very best teacher, but I was certainly above average

at all levels and in all the subjects I taught. That is because my students never complained, which gave me confidence that I could teach effectively. With that, I settled into the profession.

Why did you create this book?

Mrs Kirembeka: One of the reasons we partnered was that we both had experience in education.

When project work was introduced, the Uganda National Examination Board (Uneb) assessment criteria and the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) outline were clear.

But the challenge was: how do teachers and students actually carry this out? While the planning, implementation, reporting, and dissemination of project work were outlined, students and teachers still struggled with moving from the theoretical learning to practical application.

There was limited guidance on identifying meaningful problems, developing viable ideas, conducting research, and presenting structured outcomes. This is what motivated us to create the project workbook.

What were the underlying strategies as you prepared this book?

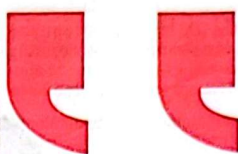
Mrs Kirembeka: As we designed it, we focused on providing a clear step-by-step guide and tools that simplify the execution of project work from planning through to dissemination.

We also incorporated practical tools, such as the problem tree and the "5 Whys" technique, to help learners identify the root causes of problems.

The structure supports learners in thinking through risks and developing ideas into workable solutions. It also includes assessment tests after each chapter, which help learners to navigate the content effectively.

The workbook also responds to the need for standardised, curriculum-aligned support materials, that are accessible and easy to use in different school contexts, including low-resource environments.

Ultimately, this workbook is intended to nurture a generation of learners who are



Supporting schools.

We are working on programmes that support schools in creating innovation clubs, training teachers as innovation and business coaches, and linking learners to mentors and innovation centres. This helps learners move from generating ideas to turning them into products and eventually into income-generating ventures.

Christine Nantongo Kirembeka,

The book.

The workbook is not just for secondary schools as it can be used by tertiary institutions and individuals transitioning into employment or entrepreneurship. It equips users with essential skills such as innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and communication, and provides a structured process for developing and testing ideas and turning them into viable ventures.

Richard Joseph

not only academically competent but also innovative, self-reliant, and capable of transforming ideas into solutions.

You talk about human-centred design as the backbone of developing the book. What is its benefit?

Mr Kirembeka: Human-centred design means involving the people who are directly affected by the problem. We involved them when analysing the problem and designing solutions.

This ensured that the solutions address real issues experienced by the community, rather than assumed or superficial

problems. Human-centred design ensures that learning and solutions are rooted in real-life needs and experiences of the people affected. That way, learners are guided to understand their community, empathise with people who are facing the challenge, define real problems rather than perceived problems, then develop and test solutions that solve the real problems.

Do you believe that project work is crucial in unlocking students' potential in Uganda? Why?

Mrs Kirembeka: Yes, it is very crucial. Project work plays a significant role in unlocking learners' potential and transforming education from theory to practice.

From our experience, it encourages critical thinking, promotes creativity, and builds practical skills. It bridges the gap between learning and earning. We have seen this in practice.

Through our structured model, we have worked with over 2,400 youth across five regions in Uganda and developed around 480 innovations. About 50 percent of these have transitioned into successful businesses.

The success of this approach even led to its adoption and replication in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia, demonstrating its relevance, scalability and regional impact.

Tailoring this structured approach to secondary schools is not just timely but transformational. Strong project work leads to stronger competencies, improved work readiness, and smoother transitions into employment or entrepreneurship.

Can students maintain this innovative mindset beyond the classroom and into the world of work?

Mrs Kirembeka: Yes, they can, but only if there is a supportive ecosystem. If innovation stops at the classroom level, it becomes difficult to sustain.

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ers to mentors and innovation centres.

This helps learners move from generating ideas to turning them into products and eventually into income-generating ventures.

Why is pedagogy important in improving Uganda's education sector?

Mrs Kirembeka: Pedagogy defines how learning happens. If learners are actively engaged, if teaching builds on their experiences, and if it promotes learning by doing, then learning becomes more effective. Our workbook is grounded in experiential learning. It ensures that learners actively participate and apply knowledge acquired in the classroom. This improves understanding, retention, and real-life application.

Teachers are concerned about assessing project work. How would you advise them?

Mrs Kirembeka: Every project is unique because it addresses a specific problem. Assessment should therefore focus on whether the learner has identified a real problem, analysed its root cause, proposed a viable solution, conducted research, engaged stakeholders, and developed and tested a prototype. We also included structured checklists in the book at each stage to guide both learners and teachers in evaluating the quality of the work.

What your final words?

Mr Kirembeka: The workbook is not just for secondary schools as it can be used by tertiary institutions and individuals transitioning into employment or entrepreneurship. It equips users with essential skills such as innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and communication, and provides a structured process for developing and testing ideas and turning them into viable ventures.

The workbook is the entry point into a scalable, national solution that aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of project work in lower secondary schools as a pathway for transitioning learners from learning to earning.