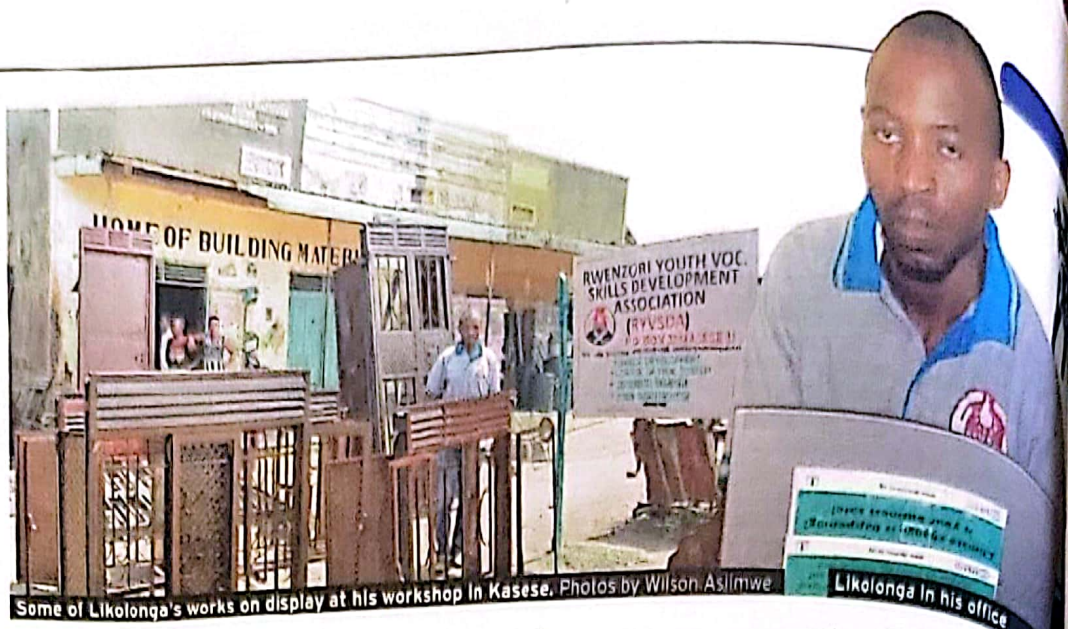
How an S4 dropout is empowering 360 youth

He dropped out of school in Senior Four because of failure to pay school fees. But rather than wallow in self-pity, Steven Likolonga Nkufu, 30, went to the DR Congo, where he acquired skills in metal fabrication and thereafter returned to set up his own business. Today, he runs several businesses under Rwenzori Youth Vocational Skills Development, a business valued at sh70m in Bwera, Kasese. He employs over 30 people and has so far trained over 360 youth in metal fabrication and carpentry, writes **Wilson Aslimwe**



Some of Likolonga's works on display at his workshop in Kasese. Photos by Wilson Aslimwe

Likolonga in his office

Early life

While in Senior Four at St John's Seminary in Kasese district in 2006, my father got bedridden. My mother was a house wife, and could not afford my school fees. I dropped out of school just before writing my final examinations.

In 2007, my father passed on and I moved to Beni in eastern DR Congo to live with my relatives.

While in DR Congo, I started going with my friends to pass time at workshops – both carpentry and metal fabrication. Through observation, I started learning how to fabricate metals and join wood to make furniture. However, it took me a year to interpret the measurements used in making the items.

Coming back to Uganda

After three years in the DR Congo, I felt I had acquired enough experience in metal fabrication and carpentry to set out in business. I returned to Uganda in 2010 and settled in Kasese town.

I got a job as a metal fabricator with Balikongo Metal Fabricators in Kasese town. Two years later, I left for a better paying job.

I subsequently got a job as a metal fabricator with Muhokya Lime Works, in Kasese. For all the time I worked, I always dreamed of doing my own business, but I had not yet identified a good site to operate from.

In 2013, seven months after I joined Muhokya, the Government extended power to Bwera in Mpondwe-Lhubirha town council in Kasese, near the Uganda-DR Congo border.

I saw an opportunity in that. There were potential clients from both Uganda and DR Congo because at the time, the Congolese living across the border did not have access to power, so they had to come to Uganda for all their metal works.

I quit Muhokya and relocated to Bwera to set up my business.

Starting own business

While working in Kasese, I had saved and bought a few basic welding machines, such as a grinder, in preparation of starting my own business. With these, I rented a room in Bwera town at sh250,000 per month, which also doubled as my store and office.

I paid for four months from the money I had saved and started working.

Because of my experience and exposure, I knew how to fabricate most of the designs on the market. Later, I started making my own designs.

The business grew fast and in a month, I made a gross of sh3m, which translated to a net profit of sh900,000 after deducting all the expenses.

I sold a single door at between sh900,000 and sh1.5m and a window at between sh300,000 and sh600,000. I invested the sh2.1m profit in buying more machines to expand the business.

After a year, I decided to start training youth free-of-charge. After the training, I recruited them as casual labourers and paid them for the work they did. They earned between sh8,000 and sh10,000 per day. I trained over 20 youth at the start.

With more money, we were able to buy more equipment and pay electricity bills. In 2015, I registered the business.

Venturing into carpentry

Since I had skills in wood and joinery, I decided to venture into carpentry in 2015.

I did not need much capital to start the business since I already had a workshop. I had earlier bought some of the necessary equipment.

With sh300,000, I bought timber and made windows, which I displayed at the workshop. In a few days, I started getting orders.

When the carpentry business grew, I rented a bigger room near my metal fabrication workshop.

Since I needed more manpower, I got 10 youth who were interested in both metal fabrication and carpentry to train.

I had built a reputation in skilling the youth and the number at my workshop had grown to over 40.

In February 2015, Save the Children Uganda, a non-profit organisation, expressed interest in working with me to develop the vocational skills of the youth in the Rwenzori region.

The project was to operate in districts of Kasese, Ntoroko and Bundibugyo.

Under the arrangement, Save the Children would identify the youth to be trained. They paid me sh50m to execute the entire project.

Consequently, I opened up more workshops in Ntoroko and Bundibugyo, which were also businesses and training centres.

In Bundibugyo, I rented a room at sh200,000 per month. I was already in business with the metal fabrication workshop.

I diversified between sh100,000 and sh200,000 in profits from the doors fabricated from steel and sh50,000 to sh100,000 from the furniture I made.

I also paid sh200,000 monthly rent for the place in Ntoroko. I spent sh1m monthly in wages and sh2m on utilities in Ntoroko and Bundibugyo respectively.

Motorcycle garage

In 2016, I started a motorcycle repair workshop at my premises in Bwera.

I got some friends in Kasese and asked them to work in Bwera. However, my landlord in Bwera had reservations about the new venture, saying garages tend to be messy.

I was forced to rent another room, about 500m from my metal fabrication workshop, at sh50,000. However, this increased my expenditure.

Rwenzori Youth Vocational Skills Development Association

It was time for me to be professional. So, I set up an office and a showroom. I identified office space at Bwera and paid sh500,000 for three months' rent and also bought office furniture.

I have so far injected sh3m in the office, buying other equipment such as a computer, which is essential in bookkeeping. I hired an office attendant, a website designer and a secretary. Each earns sh200,000 per month.

What others say



John Bwambale, Nyamambuka resident
Likolonga is a very committed person. He loves work and treats his fellow youth well at work. That is the reason why he has managed to attract many youth across the region to his businesses as well as grow his business empire. His achievements are an inspiration to the youth.



Julia Kabugho, Kyogha resident
Although he is yet to get his own children, Likolonga is already paying school fees for over 10 children in different schools. Most of the youth who drop out of school in the area due to financial constraints run to Likolonga for assistance and he has often bailed them out. We are proud of him.



Denis Kalibala, Kyabolokya resident
Likolonga is an honest young man. When you give him an order for work, he completes it on time. He also does quality work. That is why he attracts customers from across the border in DR Congo.

I pay school fees for 10 children

● I have bought seven acres of land in Bwera, where I am constructing a four-bedroom house. I also want to set up a vocational training institute to help vulnerable children acquire vocational training free-of-charge by 2018.

I believe there are youth out there who need vocational skills, but they do not have the opportunity. Since 2015, I have trained over 360 youth, some of

I was despised

■ When I started the business, many people were sceptical that I could succeed, saying I was young. They judged every decision

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