# Bridging the Digital Divide in East Africa

The Thrive Digitilization Project
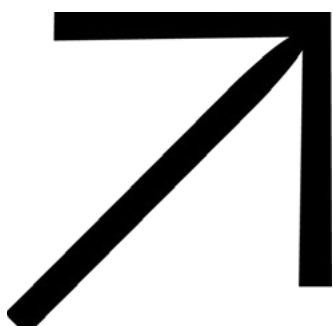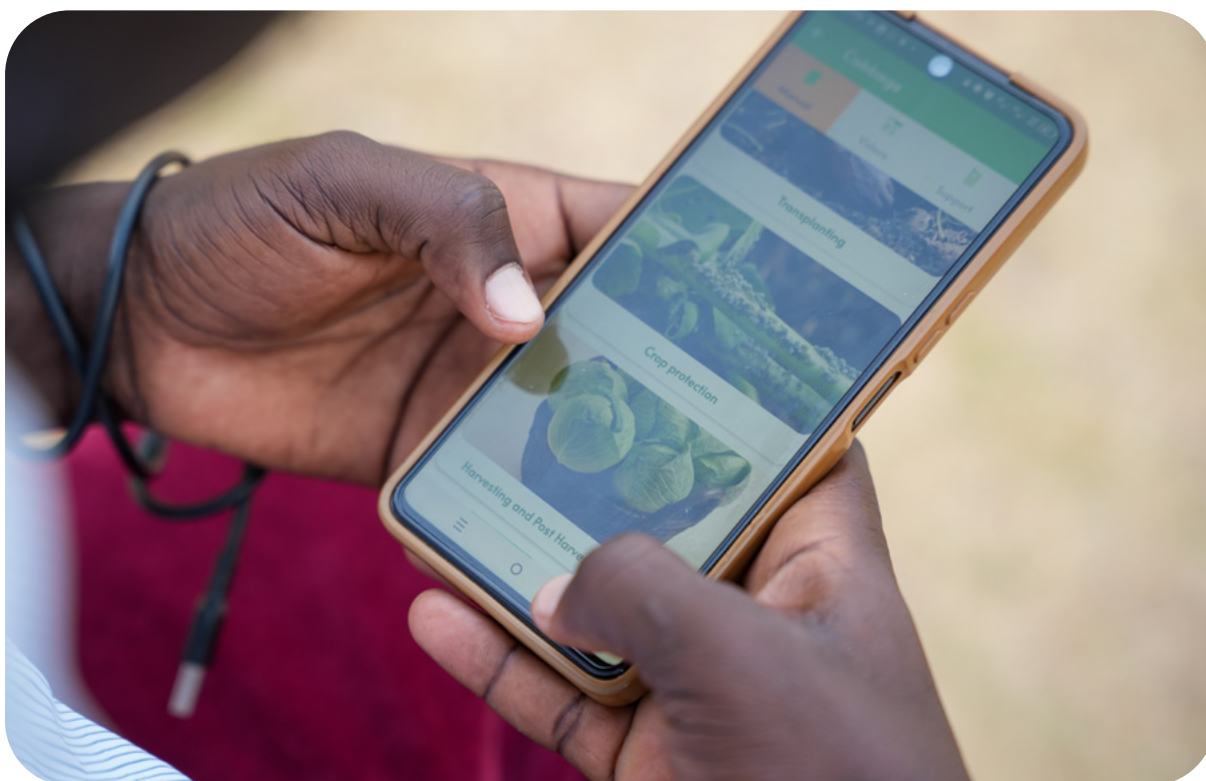
Phone displaying the toll free number provided by MHOLA for legal assistance in Bukoba, Tanzania

# Table of Contents

horizont ³⁰⁰⁰

# Bridging the Digital Divide - East Africa - The Thrive Digitalization Project

## Project Summary

For a long time, a significant digital divide has existed between developed and least-developed countries. This gap became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when physical operations were restricted, forcing many organizations to rely on digital solutions. Many organizations in digitally unstable regions, including those in horizont3000's operational areas in East Africa, faced major operational disruptions underscoring the necessity of digital tools and literacy to ensure continuity and resilience. The Thrive Digitization Project was launched to equip organizations and communities with the skills and resources required to navigate an increasingly digital world.

The Project by horizont3000, through support from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) was implemented over a period of two years between December 1, 2022, and November 30, 2024, aiming to drive digital transformation among 25 partner organizations (POs) and the communities they work with in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. It was developed in response to a survey highlighting the strong interest in digitalization among ADA Framework POs.Through online capacity-building courses and targeted interventions, the initiative would enhance digital skills and services while emphasizing gender equality.

By the project's conclusion, 25 POs have successfully applied and scaled up digital tools, improving their services for the benefit of the communities they work with. All interventions were guided by the "Principles for Digital Development," ensuring sustainability and alignment with best practices in digital transformation.

## Project Outputs

The project outputs included:

**Capacity Building:** All 25 POs were trained in digital principles, online communication, user-generated content management, digital monitoring, evaluation, accounting, and learning (MEAL), as well as data storage.

**Gender Equality:** Gender equality in digitalization was strengthened through sensitization, training, and privileged access, aligning with SDG 5 (Target 5.1).

**Agricultural Digitalization:** Three POs in Uganda scaled up digital marketing, agricultural knowledge-sharing, and extension services, benefiting around 21,730 farmers (SDG 2, Target 2.3).

**Legal Digitalization:** Two POs in Tanzania digitalized legal consulting services in land rights and human rights protection, benefiting over 2,250 individuals (SDG 16, Target 16.1).

**Youth Empowerment:** Two POs in Uganda equipped over 625 rural and semi-urban youth with digital tools to realize their business ideas and trained around 500 students to improve their education (SDG 4, Target 4.4; SDG 8, Target 8.6).

**Horizont3000 Internal Capacity:** The East Africa regional team improved its digital capacities and facilitated structured learning and knowledge-sharing among the 25 POs.

# Project Achievements

Through the Thrive Digitalization Project:

- A digital training curriculum for 25 POs in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania was developed and delivered

- Coaching on hardware, free licenses, and open-source software was provided.

- Gender analysis and partner sensitization on gender equality in digitalization was conducted

- Farmer-Managed Market Information System (FAMIS) in the West Nile Region of Uganda through AFARD was scaled up.

- The iKnowFarm App in Arua and Wakiso districts via PALM Corps and AFIRD was expanded

- A digital platform for legal aid advisors and clients through HAKIARDHI and MHOLA in Tanzania was built

- A semi-urban IT Resource Centre (YARD) was established, and five schools were digitally equipped through AFIRD

- Over 500 youth were trained in digital marketing tools through YARD

- Over 200 students and 125 youth were equipped and educated in digital tool applications through AFIRD

- The digital capacities of the horizont3000 regional office in Kampala to support digital solution development were strengthened.

## Overall Impact

While this report majorly focuses on just 6 implementing partners of the Thrive Digitalization Project, there has been an overall successful enhancement of digital capabilities of POs and the people they work with, empowering communities with innovative solutions in agriculture, youth empowerment, legal services, and education. The project has ensured sustainable and inclusive digitalization, fostering long-term benefits in the East African region.

Though not without its challenges, living conditions continue to significantly improve across Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania through advanced digital solutions, enhanced digital skills, and broader digital transformation. Importantly, digitalization has been intentionally integrated as a cross-cutting theme within the project. Digital tools and approaches have been embedded across initiatives that touch on multiple SDG areas, such as education (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and climate action (SDG 13), contributing to all 17 SDGs in a holistic and interconnected manner.

Mr Amute Darwin of Palm Corps (in green t-shirt) conducts a digital skills training session in Yelulu, Rhino Refugee Camp next to Lukuru Joyce, the chairperson of the group

**PALM Corps**
**Catalyzing** Empowerment and
Resilience for **Sustainable Growth**
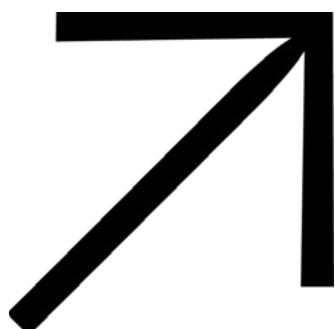
horizont ³⁰⁰⁰

# From Surviving to Thriving, Restoring Livelihoods through Digitalization

For years, refugee communities at Rhino Camp have relied heavily on humanitarian aid to meet their daily needs. But today, a digital revolution is taking root, equipping farmers with the tools and knowledge to build self-sufficient livelihoods. Thanks to the

Thrive digitalization Project through implementation by Palm Corps, most farmers now no longer have to depend purely on aid, instead, they can access digital resources, gain critical skills, and connect to markets like never before

www.horizont3000.at

Betty Night a refugee at Yelulu, Rhino Camp in Uganda packing cassava in a sack after drying

## Betty Night; Finding Refuge in Digital Empowerment

Betty Night left South Sudan in 2016 and has since settled in Yelulu, a village within the Rhino Camp refugee extension. Life in displacement has for the longest time meant isolation and limited opportunities. Separated from her family back home, communication was a challenge as her traditional mobile phone couldn't enable online communication with her kin back home -until now.

With a subsidized smartphone provided through the Thrive Digitalization Project, Betty can now seamlessly connect with her loved ones via calls and video chats, bridging the gap that once seemed impossible to close. But her phone is more than just a communication tool, it has been a gateway to knowledge and economic empowerment.

Betty has been using her phone to expand and improve her small agricultural business. With access to the iKnowFarm app by Palm corps and other online agricultural applications, she can;
- Research poultry and crop diseases and learn how to manage them effectively
- Get real-time agricultural extension services to improve her crop yields
- Identify potential markets for her farm produce
- Engage with other farmers in online forums to share experiences and find solutions to farming challenges
- Get weather predictions and advice on what to grow and when to grow it.

Betty Night a refugee at Yelulu, Rhino Camp in Uganda

has also been a big help for school-going children who can now access learning materials online through smartphones.

Within the Rhino camp host and refugee communities continue to benefit from digital literacy training by Palm Corps to ensure effective use of digital tools for livelihood improvement. There has been a major shift as more women like Betty take up initiative to purchase smartphones and endeavor to access digital knowledge for learning and marketing purposes.

Digital literacy and access to technology are transforming lives. With mobile devices and the internet, communities at Rhino Camp are no

"Before, I relied on trial and error for my farming," Betty says. "Now, I can access expert advice at my fingertips. I know how to take better care of my chickens and crops, and I don't have to wait for someone to come teach me, I can learn on my own."

While she initially just produced enough food for domestic consumption, Betty is now able to produce surplus for sale both online and offline, gradually improving her quality of life. Her poultry farm has substantially grown encouraging her to diversify in her vegetable farming as well. While her story is multiplied across other small-holder farmers in the settlement each learning from the other, digitalization

> **"Before, I relied on trial and error for my farming," Betty says. "Now, I can access expert advice at my fingertips."**
>
> *Betty Night a refugee at Yelulu, Rhino Camp in Uganda*

longer just surviving, they are thriving. The Thrive Digitalization project has proven that displacement does not mean dependence. With the right tools, knowledge, and connectivity, communities can build sustainable livelihoods breaking free from the cycle of aid dependency. As more farmers embrace digital solutions, the future of communities in this region looks brighter than ever.

Betty Night (right) a refugee at Yelulu, Rhino Camp in Uganda with Charity Fazi during a digital skills training session

MunguJakisa Robert, a market committee member records price data from a market vendor at Pakwach main market, Uganda
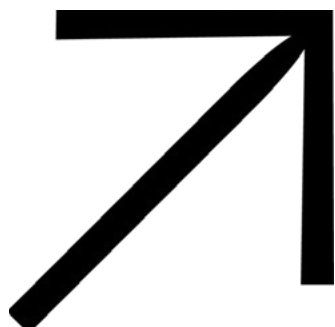
# Accelerating Regional Development in West Nile, AFARD

## Background

Now transitioning to implement projects throughout Uganda, the Agency for Accelerated Regional Development (AFARD) is a local, non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Nebbi, West Nile, Uganda.

Established in July 2000 by professionals from the West Nile region, AFARD aims to enhance the capacities of vulnerable and marginalized

communities, including youth, women, and refugees, to achieve inclusive, dignified, and sustainable socio-economic transformation in Uganda.

Operating across districts in the West Nile region, including Nebbi, Pakwach, Zombo and Yumbe, the organization has, through the years, established over 30,000 community groups, each comprising 25-35 male and female members, cutting across all age groups. AFARD's key areas of focus include, among others, agriculture, to ensure food and economic security, and general improvement of the livelihoods of the communities they serve.

Throughout West Nile, AFARD collaborates with local and refugee farming communities to enhance agricultural production at both smallholder and commercial levels. Field officers play a key role in monitoring, supervising, and providing regular training on best farming practices. To strengthen these efforts, the organization works closely with community facilitators, who complement and support the work of field officers, ensuring continuous knowledge transfer and agricultural development.

Over the years, farmers in the region have experienced a marketing challenge for their products. "They lacked access to real-time product prices, as middlemen often lowered them for their gain", Dan Evans, the Project Coordinator for Farmer Managed Market Information System Project at AFARD says, "Prices listed in newspapers were generalized for the entire country and did not always reflect the actual market rates for commodities in West Nile. We wanted to address this challenge"

Incorporating existing farmer market oriented groups in Nebbi, Yumbe and Pakwach districts, the Thrive digitalization project would, through AFARD implement the Farmer managed Market Information System (FAMIS) project in the region to contribute to improved living conditions through digital solutions. This project, implemented for 2 years through 2023 and 2024, would improve digital skills and support the digital transformation of AFARD and the communities they serve. 1250 smallholder farmers were targeted in West Nile to enhance their access to real-time market information to facilitate farming as a business initiative. A digital innovation, FAMIS app would be enriched, rolled up and scaled to aid this intervention.

**"Prices listed in newspapers were generalized for the entire country and did not always reflect the actual market rates for commodities in West Nile. We wanted to address this challenge"**

*Dan Evans, the Project Coordinator for Farmer Managed Market Information System Project*

Grocery store in the main market at Pakwach, Uganda

## Connecting Farmers to "Big Buyers", The FAMIS App

In an era where digital transformation is shaping communities worldwide, smallholder farmers in Northern Uganda, West Nile are staying up to date. The Farmer Managed Market Information System (FAMIS) project, implemented by the Agency for Accelerated Regional Development (AFARD) through the Thrive Digitalization Project is empowering communities to integrate digital solutions in different areas of the agricultural value chain. As a result, participants are marketing and selling their produce to the highest bidder!

The project implemented between 2023 and 2024 saw the digital enhancement of 50 market-oriented farmer groups in Nebbi, Pakwach and Yumbe. Marketing committee members from the groups were equipped with 100 smartphones..They would also be taken through digital training where they learned to collect real time market prices, consolidate the data and upload it on the FAMIS app, along with details of the goods available for "hot sale" Buyers with access to the app due to its popularization in the region's markets could then reach out directly to the groups for purchases, eliminating exploitative intermediaries. In the past, smallholder farmers in West Nile were often exploited by resellers who bought their produce at rock-bottom prices, maximizing their own profits at the farmers' expense.

To enhance market efficiency, marketing committee representatives are tasked with frequenting various local markets to collect data on the

**14**

"live" price of the different commodities they produce, record it, and present it to group members for review upon return. After consultations with the group, they then settle on a fair, common price and upload it on the FAMIS app from where other groups, individual farmers, and buyers can access, to buy and sell. This structured approach has ensured farmers have accurate, up-to-date pricing information, strengthening their bargaining power and reducing the risk of exploitation.

The commodities traded through this system include cassava, beans, potatoes, vegetables, rice, and other staple crops. This innovation has transformed local trade, enabling smallholder farmers to secure better deals and market access. Previously, farmers earned just enough from their sales to get by. Today, some groups have recorded sales of up to 50 million Ugandan shillings a milestone that would have been unimaginable without this intervention



MunguJakisa Robert, a market committee member for the FAMIS app by AFARD in Pakwach main market, Uganda

## Transformed Livelihoods

Robert Mungu Jakisa is the Marketing Committee representative for a Youth group in Ongwele, Pakwach District, that has implemented the FAMIS project. Their group, initially trained on horticultural farming by AFARD, would face marketing challenges. After harvesting, they remained with a lot of produce in their stores that would eventually go to waste or be sold at very poor prices through local middlemen.

With the FAMIS project Robert says, "We have realized as a group that there is value in our farming. We have been able to reach buyers who purchase our products at worthy prices. From

collective marketing, our group has made good sales of cassava, tomatoes, rice and other commodities that we trade. My life has improved to such an extent that I have bought a few goats and chairs for myself. My peers in the youth group have also made major improvements in their lives since we are now selling more and producing even more than before. The group has been able to sell to buyers from as far as Gulu (over 100 kilometers away) through the FAMIS app "Hot Sale" Approach". This approach involves farmer groups, through their marketing committees, identifying the most readily available or in-demand agricultural produce at a given time, setting a competitive price, ensuring bulk availability, and promoting it as a "Hot Sale" on the FAMIS App.

MunguJakisa Robert, a market committee member records price data from a market vendor at Pakwach main market, Uganda

Throughout the three districts reached through the FAMIS project, farmers have appreciated the improvements they have made in farming and general livelihoods as a result of their change in marketing approach and advanced farming techniques learned through this intervention. While collective marketing has taken up their sales, farmers have also made remarkable progress in sales at personal level, through adoption of skills introduced through digital training at group level.

Through the FAMIS project, Individuals and Community groups have been able to benefit from;

• Market Accessibility – Farmers now have access to real-time pricing and demand trends, allowing them to make informed decisions on what to grow and when to sell.

• Increased Income – By eliminating middlemen and gaining direct market access, smallholder farmers have significantly boosted their earnings.

• Digital Literacy – Training sessions under the project have empowered farmers with basic digital skills, enabling them to navigate and utilize online market platforms effectively.

• Sustainable Agricultural Practices – By treating farming as a business, communities are now adopting improved agricultural techniques to maximize productivity.

## Key Challenges and lessons in Bridging the Digital Divide

### Challenges

• Low levels of digital literacy- Adopting digitalization at the grassroots level, especially among groups with limited formal

education, has not been easy. Many community members, particularly women who make the biggest percentage of smallholder farmers, still struggle to navigate digital platforms without guided support.

- Limited personal initiative- Digital adoption is still largely driven by external interventions. Farmers at the basic level need further education and motivation to understand why digitalization is essential even in their routine farming activities. There remains a gap in encouraging them to take the initiative to build their own knowledge and skills for maximum benefit.
- Digital device accessibility-Digital devices remain unaffordable for many individual farmers, limiting their direct engagement with digital platforms and tools.
- Gendered barriers- Women often face even greater challenges,

including limited access to training opportunities, digital tools, and time due to domestic responsibilities and socio-cultural norms.

- Complex user interface- The interface of the FAMIS App has proven difficult for some local users to navigate. Community members often must follow a lengthy and unintuitive process to place an advert, which can be discouraging. A simplified, more intuitive design would make the app significantly more user-friendly and increase adoption.

**Lessons Learned**

- The value of regular training- Consistent and practical digital training has been essential, especially for women. Ongoing digital literacy sessions have helped bridge skill gaps and boost confidence in using technology.
- Peer-to-peer learning is effective- Peer-led training, delivered in local languages, has proven successful in empowering community members who may be hesitant or unfamiliar with digital tools.
- Group marketing bridges the gap- In communities where individual access to devices is low, group marketing has enabled farmers to benefit from digital platforms through collaboration. Farmers promote their produce and learn by leveraging the support of their peers.
- Sensitization spurs ownership- Farmers need continued sensitization on how digital tools can improve productivity and market access. Building this awareness is key to helping them take personal ownership of their digital journey.

**'Recognizing the success of this initiative, AFARD is now expanding the use of the app into other areas of its programming to ensure long-term sustainability and an even greater impact.'**

A variety of produce at the main market at Pakwach, Uganda

## Expanding Reach, Learning from Collaborations

By project conclusion, over 1250 people have had access to and benefited from the FAMIS app, with its popularity continuing to rise among communities in Uganda. 750 women and 500 men have directly been reached by the project, with the impact extending to 4183 women and 3266 men indirectly. The project has also facilitated peer learning between organizations, particularly AFARD and Palm Corps, in integrating digital solutions into their work. Recognizing the success of this initiative, AFARD is now expanding the use of the app into other areas of its programming to ensure long-term sustainability and an even greater impact.

**750**
women have directly been reached by the project

**500**
men have directly been reached by the project

**1250**
people have had access to and benefited from the FAMIS app

Ayeth Filda, a member of Toro Youth Group in Pakwach, Uganda

Mr Amodoi Robert, head of digitilization at Masiko Primary School demostrates how to prune a banana tree using the Iknow Farm application knowledge

# Empowering smallholder farming communities through sustainable farming system, AFIRD

## Background

With a mission to empower smallholder farming communities for income, food and nutrition security through sustainable farming system and contributing towards organic agriculture and environment policy

development and implementation in Uganda, AFIRD (Agency for Integrated Rural Development) is an indigenous non-governmental organization founded in 1997 and registered in 1998 to work across the country towards an integrated approach to rural development and overall development of Uganda.

Over the years, the organization based in Wakiso, with projects heavily spread in Central Uganda's districts of Wakiso, Mpigi and Mukono, has implemented 13 agro-ecological projects in pursuit of a society free from hunger and disease, living in a peaceful and green environment. Community capacity building through training to improve food security, household income and environmental protection has been at the core of AFIRD's activities, reaching 170 groups, 36 primary schools and 5 prisons.

To ensure effectiveness, AFIRD's strategic areas of focus include ;Farmer-led extension system to empower farmers to find their own solutions to their challenges, establishment of a Permaculture Resource Centre, Youth Empowerment Program (YEP), Institutional Development (ID), and Advocacy & Lobbying Program (ALP).

Among approaches employed by AFIRD to fulfil her mandate include among others;
- The Group Based Facilitator (GBF) approach; a participatory and community-centered approach used by AFIRD to promote agro-ecological practices through local leadership and collective action. GBFs are carefully selected collaboratively within each community group according to pre-determined criteria to ensure that the right people with the

right qualities are selected. Those selected are then equipped with skills through structured capacity building to enable them to facilitate development processes among their peers.
- Permaculture Design is an innovative approach to agriculture and sustainable living, focusing on creating eco-friendly and self-sustaining environments. By integrating land, resources, people, and nature, it aims to develop synergistic systems that provide food, shelter, and energy in a harmonious and enduring way. Embracing principles such as diversity, stability, and resilience, Permaculture Design offers a blueprint for a sustainable future, marrying ecology with human ingenuity.

These approaches would be used to implement the Thrive Digitalization project among schools and affiliate farming communities. The objective of the project implemented for 2 years

'Over the years, the AFIRD has implemented 13 agro-ecological projects in pursuit of a society free from hunger and disease, living in a peaceful and green environment.'

Mrs Namata Beatrice (standing) makes her remarks during a digital training session at St Francis Xavier Primary School Jjalamba in Mpigi District Uganda

(2023 and 2024) was to see schools apply and scale up digital tools to improve their services for the benefit of their affiliate communities. Digitalization would enable smallholder farmers to use data driven approaches and decisions in improving their livelihoods.

The project would ensure the capacity building of AFIRD staff, through trainings on digital skills necessary to ensure successful implementation of the project and for the day to day operations of the organization.

## Peer Collaborations to enrich the iKnowFarm App

Through the Thrive digitalization project, there was establishment of sustainability partnerships between AFIRD and Palm Corps leading to introduction of more value chains on the application. Content on coffee, bananas, nakati and rabbit which

was previously not on the app was developed through consultations between the organizations and other stakeholders, and uploaded on the app, serving the needs of farmers in Central Uganda, and consequently resulting in popularization of iKnowFarm in the region. Partnerships with organizations like AFARD, and YARD would be established during this time, ensuring inter-organization staff digital capacity building.

## Schools as Agricultural Knowledge Hubs for Communities

Before the peak of digital solutions for information generation, AFIRD staff would be required to offer one on one extension services to the communities they serve which would take more time and resources to successfully achieve the desired goals. Trainings would be solely dependent on the

Mr Eustace Sajjabi, the executive director at Agency for Intergrated Rural Development (AFIRD) at the demo farm in Wakiso, Uganda

5 schools in Mpigi district, Central Uganda would be equipped with computers, projectors, solar chargers and smartphones to aid in agronomy and agro-economy trainings and knowledge transfer.

The Thrive Digitalization Project had two objectives;
1. To build school capacities by equipping them with digital equipment that would enable them popularize the use of digital tools in farming to improve production, and enhance learning and teaching systems.
2. Extending/ roll out the iKnowFarm in central Uganda.

Each of the schools would establish a Digitalization committee comprising of parents, teachers and students and youth all gender balanced to take lead in piloting the project and further the train to the rest of the community.

availability of an extension worker. Reaching all the farming groups targeted by the organization would be an uphill task. The School Permaculture Program, implemented in 21 schools in central Uganda, supports schools and school communities to improve food production and enhance the environment using organic farming methods. The Thrive Digitalization project would be piloted in 5 of these schools, to address outreach challenges and enhance extension services using digital tools.

"Through the Thrive Digitalization Project", Eustace Sajjabi, The AFIRD Executive Director Says, "We have been able to not only reach smallholder farmers but also students and teachers by digitally equipping schools and using them as agricultural information centers for all stakeholders"

"**Through the Thrive Digitalization Project, we have been able to not only reach smallholder farmers but also students and teachers by digitally equipping schools and using them as agricultural information centers for all stakeholders**"

*Eustace Sajjabi,*
*AFIRD Executive Director*

**23**

Nalule Allen,the headteacher at St Francis Xavier Primary School Jjalamba in Mpigi District Uganda demonstrates mobile application use to pupils during a digital skills training.

Model farms, set up in the school compounds would serve as learning grounds from where the communities would gain practical knowledge to implement on their farms back home. Learning sessions are set for convenient times weekly during which topics on the various areas of farming (plant breeding, soil health, irrigation, pest control, etc) are taught through online platforms such as YouTube and later demonstrated on the model farms for easier understanding.

While integrating digital classrooms for agricultural practices, the project would ensure the roll out of agricultural digital applications such as iKnowFarm and FAMIS in Central Uganda, availing

more platforms for farmers to access extensional knowledge, marketing and market access information for their products.

"Most smallholder farmers affiliated to the School Permaculture Program are women, who for a long time did not benefit much from their farming efforts, mostly for lack of knowledge. By involving them in digital training, we have empowered them to increase their yields and improve marketing, leading to improved production and more sales hence improved livelihoods", Waswa Faizo, the program Manager for the Permaculture School Program at AFIRD says, "We have seen farmers increase production and sales of coffee and

Parents at at St Francis Xavier Primary School Jjalamba in Mpigi District Uganda during a digital skills training session

bananas since they are the main crops grown in these regions"

Since the project is set up inside primary schools, it has seen students and teachers greatly improve their digital skills, enabling them to easily navigate digital platforms that provide necessary scientific information for farming and agricultural subjects, that they further transfer home, to peers and affiliate communities.

This has resulted to a rise in digitalization interest among the parties, leading to transfers of students to "tech-equipped" schools, purchase of more digital equipment for through other partnerships and smartphones adoption by communities.

> **"Most smallholder farmers affiliated to the School Permaculture Program are women, who for a long time did not benefit much from their farming efforts, mostly for lack of knowledge."**
>
> *Waswa Faizo, Program Manager for the Permaculture School Program, AFIRD*

Mr Kame Jackson, a digitilization committee member and teacher at St Francis Xavier Primary School Jjalamba in Mpigi District Uganda takes parents through a digitilization training

## Tech-enhanced Rural Schools for Sustainable Farming

St. Francis Xavier Primary School, Jjalamba, and Masiko Church of Uganda Primary School are among five schools in Central Uganda that have successfully implemented the Thrive Digitalization Project. Introduced through existing permaculture clubs, the project has not only enhanced the teaching of agricultural subjects but has also opened up new learning opportunities across various disciplines, thanks to the digital tools now available in the schools.

To support this transition, each school received a computer, a projector, solar chargers, and three smartphones.

While the computer and projector were set up in the school-based information centers, the smartphones were distributed to members of a digitalization committee consisting of a teacher (center manager), a parent, and a youth leader. According to Daliah Nabunnya, AFIRD field officer in charge of school communities, this approach ensured that digital knowledge flowed beyond the school facilities.

"We had to mobilize the teachers, pupils, and parents, bringing them together to form a 12-member committee responsible for incorporating digital tools into farming. To ensure they could fully use these resources, we ran digital literacy clinics across the schools, with teachers playing a key role in passing on the skills."

Nakigudde Allen, a student at St Francis Xavier Primary School Jjalamba in Mpigi District Uganda uses a computer during a digital skills training class

The impact has been remarkable. More students are embracing technology, and the benefits extend beyond academics. One student at St. Francis Xavier Primary School shared their excitement: "Before, we could only read about modern farming methods in books, but now, we can watch videos and learn how they work in real life. It makes learning fun and easier to understand. I could not operate a computer or a smartphone before. Since the project was introduced and through the training, I have learned how to type, research on science homework and even help my parents in their research for farming and marketing online."

Teachers have also seen a major shift in how lessons are delivered. A teacher at Masiko Primary School noted, "With the projector, we can show students practical demonstrations in class. They ask more questions and understand concepts better. It has changed the way we teach."

The transformation has reached parents and the wider community as well. Many parents, who were once limited to traditional farming methods, are now using digital tools to increase their farm production and market their produce through mobile applications. They can now track weather changes, identify the right pesticides, learn about irrigation techniques, and improve soil quality, learn how to do intercropping and introduce new crops and animals in their farms among other practices. The school farms have become learning centers, where students and parents work together to apply these modern practices, proving that even on small plots of land, better techniques can yield more.

Beyond individual gains, the project has led to a stronger sense of collaboration among farmers. Online platforms allow them to share challenges, exchange ideas, and find solutions together. Peer-to-peer training has taken root, with farmers teaching one another how

Mr Amodoi Robert, head of digitilization at Masiko Primary School, Kituntu, Mpigi District, Uganda displays the digitlization timetable

to use digital tools and recommending apps like iKnowFarm, which was introduced through the project.

The project's success has also drawn more students to the schools, as they are now recognized as digital learning hubs in rural areas. More students have now taken interest in agriculture as a source of livelihood as the digital tools have eased the process of learning and practical implementation of agricultural lessons.  Seeing the value of technology, parents at Masiko Primary School have taken it upon themselves to electrify the school, ensuring a steady power supply to support digital learning.

With more partners taking up other development initiatives in the digitally improved schools and parents embracing smartphones to maximize the benefits of technology introduced through the Thrive Digitalization Project, it is clear that technology is more than just a learning tool it is a catalyst for overall community transformation, opening up new opportunities for students, teachers, and farmers alike.
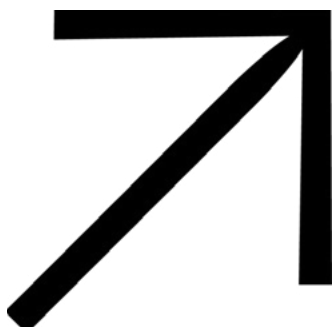
Nakigudde Allen (left) and Namata Beatrice using the Iknow Farm mobile app to check coffee plants in her farm in Jjalamba, Mpigi District Uganda

Ms. Ajambo Esther, a digital skills trainer at Youth Association for Rural Develpment trains a yotuh group in Maligita,Kayunga District Uganda

# Youth Association for Rural Development (YARD)

## Background

Headquartered in Ngogwe, Buikwe District, Central Uganda, the Youth Association for Rural Development (YARD) has operated since 1995. Founded by individuals who recognized the need to address pressing issues affecting youth in rural communities, the organization was registered in 1996 and has since worked to empower rural

YARD signage in Ngogwe, Buikwe District Uganda

- Promotion of energy-saving technologies

YARD runs two vocational schools to equip youth and farmers with practical skills for self-sufficiency. The organization further works with multiple youth farmer groups, providing training and support to enhance agricultural productivity.

Through the Thrive Digitization Project, YARD would establish an ICT resource center within one of the vocational training institutes (St Luke's) in Ngogwe to integrate digital skills into the curriculum. This initiative is meant to empower students and other young people in the communities to leverage digital tools and services, particularly in digital marketing, to bring their business ideas to life and promote their products more effectively.

communities, especially youth, women, and children, to overcome poverty through education, skills development, and sustainable livelihoods.

YARD operates across Buikwe, Mukono, and Kayunga Districts, and the wider Busoga Region, focusing on youth skills training, agricultural development, enterprise support, education, and environmental conservation, envisioning a self-reliant rural society where every child, youth, and woman has the opportunity to thrive and actively participate in shaping their future.

With a focus on sustainable development, gender equality, and climate action. The Organization's Key Programs and Activities include;
- Youth skills development and vocational training
- Sustainable agriculture and rural farmer support
- Micro-enterprise and asset-building initiatives
- Education and health awareness
- Environmental protection and conservation

**'Through the Thrive Digitization Project, YARD would establish an ICT resource center within one of the vocational training institutes (St Luke's) in Ngogwe to integrate digital skills into the curriculum.'**

Mr Byantuyo Sadati, an ECD trainer during a digital skills session at the ICT resouce centre in Youth Association for Rural Develpment (YARD)

## Empowering Youth Through Digital Skills: YARD's Journey with the Thrive Digitization Project

Before the Thrive Digitization Project, St. Luke's Vocational Training Institute, operated by YARD, faced significant limitations in digital access, with students having little to no opportunity to develop the computer skills essential for marketing their technical abilities and navigating the modern job market after graduation.

Running through 2023 and 2024, the project would kick off with the establishment of an ICT Resource Centre equipped with computers, something the institute had long struggled to access. "Before the project, we only had two computers, mainly used by staff for administrative work," recalls Joyce Birungi, Head of Programs at YARD. "With over 180 students, it was impossible to allow each of them to practice computer skills."

Over the two years, YARD has trained over 600 youth in basic digital skills. At the vocational institute, students now take a three-month course in computer literacy. These skills are integrated into their programs, such as Early Childhood Education(ECD) training, hotel management, hairdressing, tailoring, mechanics, building, among others. Students not only learn how to

Mrs Joyce Birungi, head of programs at Youth Association for Rural Develpment (YARD) in Ngogwe Buikwe District, Uganda

**"Before the project, we only had two computers, mainly used by staff for administrative work. With over 180 students, it was impossible to allow each of them to practice computer skills."**

*Joyce Birungi,*
*Head of Programs at YARD.*

use essential computer programs, but also explore digital tools for research and marketing.

"We're now seeing students use platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram to market their services," Joyce says. "They're not just learning, they're applying these skills to real-life ventures, and even teaching their peers in the community."

The impact of the ICT Resource Centre stretches beyond the institute. On weekends, it opens its doors to community members interested in learning digital skills. Additionally, YARD works with over 35 youth groups in four districts Mukono, Kayunga, Buikwe, and Buvuma Island offering digital literacy classes tailored to their businesses. These include agriculture, tailoring, poultry, piggery, knitting, shoemaking, and value addition among others. Ongoing digital literacy clinics at the grassroots level have empowered the groups with the skills to brand and sell their products online using smartphones. The impact has been remarkable, with some groups successfully reaching international markets, with sales extending as far as Dubai.

"We've learned that online marketing gives youths better prices and broader reach," says Joyce. "But it's also taught us the importance of having sufficient stock when the market responds positively. That's why we've encouraged collaborative marketing, where groups pool products and learn together in joint training sessions. This way, they can meet demand as a collective."

The digitization project has created a ripple effect. Young people have gained not only digital skills but also confidence and a sense of independence. Some have started their own business ventures, both online and in person, while others have encouraged their friends to join development groups. This has led to more self-employment and better use of their time. More youths in the region are now interested in joining the vocational institute, intending to gain technical and computer skills to help grow their future careers.

Ms. Ajambo Esther, a digital skills trainer at Youth Association for Rural Develpment trains a youth group in Maligita,Kayunga District Uganda

## Fostering Collaborations in Digital Content

In 2024, YARD began collaborating with other partners to implement the Thrive Digitization Project across Uganda. Their interest in mobile applications for farmer support led them to join hands with AFIRD to develop content for iKnowFarm, an app by Palm Corps. YARD also partnered with AFARD to promote the FAMIS app, introducing these tools to their communities.

These apps have since been widely adopted by youth groups and local farmers, who now use them to improve agricultural productivity and access better markets. Through these partnerships, YARD has deepened its digital reach and contributed to meaningful innovations for rural development.

## Sustaining Digital Growth

To ensure sustainability, YARD launched a Digital Master Class for instructors at its vocational training institute. These trainers, including teachers, agriculture extension staff, and community leaders, were trained in advanced digital skills such as Excel, website design, cybersecurity, and online marketing. Some staff would be equipped with laptops to enable continuation of trainings at community level.

"Through the master class, we've sharpened our skills in ways that are not just useful in the office but also

in community training," shares Esther Ajambo, an assistant accountant at YARD.

Trainers at the vocational institute are now confident to deliver digital lessons using facilities at the ICT Resource Centre, making learning more engaging and effective. These enhanced skills will continue to benefit students long after the project ends. Marketing committees continue to carry out peer trainings at the community level.

## Digitized Grassroots Youth Ventures

With the Thrive Digitization Project reaching youth groups in Buikwe and Kayunga, Mukono and Buvuma districts, the digital divide has narrowed greatly, and local businesses have bloomed. Tusobola Youth Group, Agricrown Group, and Kayunga Maligita Youth Group, are among the many groups in Central Uganda that have gained access to digital literacy training and practical tools for economic empowerment through the Youth Association for Rural Development (YARD).

These groups, composed of both young men and women, were already engaged in activities such as piggery, poultry, vegetable farming, and tea value addition. But what they lacked were the digital skills to maximize their impact. That changed with the introduction of smartphones, digital clinics, and creative tools like Canva and Jiji.

"We are now free from middlemen who tricked us into selling cheaply. Now, we know the market prices and sell at a value worthy of our products," says Nsereko Amos, a Trainer of Trainers at Tusobola Youth Group. The Group, with



Nsereko Amos, the digital trainer at Tusobola Youth Development Group in Mukono district Uganda checks his smartphone



Mr Odoi Simon Peter (left) with Mr Kuteesa Ronald take photos of tomatoes as part of their digital skill training with YARD

Nsereko Amos, the digital trainer at Tusobola Youth Development Group in Mukono district Uganda takes photos of pigs for digital marketing

45 active members, now sells products directly online, has designed their logo, branding materials, and listings. Each member saves at least 2,000 Ugandan shillings per week with the group from improved sales. For some, like one mother in the group, this means being able to feed her seven children and pay school fees through earnings made online.

In NkokoNjeru Town Council, members of Agricrown Group share similar gains. With better access to research and marketing platforms, they've expanded into growing more agricultural crops, guided by trends and knowledge found online. Their growth has not just been economic, it's been transformative. Meanwhile, in Kayunga, the Maligita Youth Group, led by John Crystom

**"We are now free from middlemen who tricked us into selling cheaply. Now, we know the market prices and sell at a value worthy of our products,"**

*Nsereko Amos, a digital trainer at Tusobola Youth Group*

John Crystom Mukisa, chairperson of the digitilization youth group in Kayunga district Uganda taking a photo of their products

John Crystom Mukisa, chairperson of the digitilization youth group in Kayunga district Uganda posing with their products

Mukisa, has turned its value-added tea business into a regional brand. Thanks to digital literacy sessions, they can now design branded stickers to enhance their value-added tea packaging, manage their social media presence, and reach wider markets. Their tea is now stocked in supermarkets beyond Kayunga, the group is generating jobs in packaging and wholesale distribution.
"We no longer look for customers; customers now look for us," says John proudly.

Through this project, these youth groups are not just learning to use technology, they're redefining what it means to do business in the digital age. They've moved from being local "hustlers" to digitally

'Through this project, these youth groups are not just learning to use technology, they're redefining what it means to do business in the digital age. They've moved from being local "hustlers" to digitally savvy entrepreneurs'
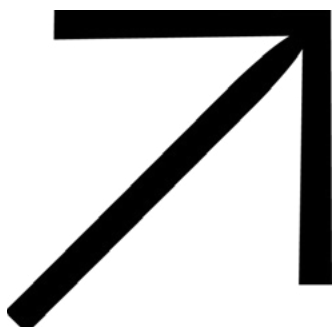
savvy entrepreneurs, proving that when equipped with practical tools and knowledge, youth can create sustainable livelihoods for themselves.

Neema Musa (left), a paralegal in Bukoba, Tanzania with Flora Stephano (right) during a legal assistance briefing

# Mama's Hope Organization for Legal Assistance (MHOLA)

## Background

Mama's Hope Organization for Legal Assistance (MHOLA) is a nonprofit, non-governmental organization based in Muleba District, Kagera Region, Tanzania. Established in 2006, the organization is committed to empowering women, children, and other vulnerable groups through rights

Theresia Bujiku (centre) with Richard Agnes (right) and Flavia Asimwe (left) at the Mhola Office in Bukoba Tanzania

To improve access to justice at the grassroots level, MHOLA has supported the establishment of paralegal units across all eight districts of Kagera Region, training more than 200 community-based paralegals. Among other services the organization operates a Daycare and Community Training Centre that promotes early childhood development through education, nutrition, and child protection initiatives.

'MHOLA envisions a healthy society free from extreme poverty, gender-based violence, and discrimination.'

awareness, legal and psychosocial assistance, and community health education.

With an initial focus on women and children, the organization's current mission is to create awareness on rights and health-related issues and to provide legal and psychosocial assistance to women, children, and all vulnerable people who lack access to those rights. MHOLA envisions a healthy society free from extreme poverty, gender-based violence, and discrimination.

MHOLA operates in several districts In Tanzania, including Muleba, Karagwe, Ngara, Geita and Bukoba within Kagera Region, as well as in Dar es Salaam, with the head office located in Butembo Village, Muleba District.

## Reviving and Redefining Access to Justice through Digital Innovations

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Mama's Hope Organization for Legal Assistance (MHOLA) was a thriving organization with over 50 employees, including 17 legal aid officers, serving 4000 to 5000 community members annually. Operating across Bukoba, Muleba, Geita, Karagwe, and Ngara districts in Tanzania's Kagera region, MHOLA provided crucial legal

Mr Saulo Prosper Malauri, the executive director of MHOLA at the head office in Muleba, Tanzania

the situation, building a digital platform to improve communication between legal aid advisors and their clients by digitalizing their services in legal consulting in land rights and protection of human rights.

## The " Dial MHOLA" System and other innovations

Maria George, an advocate at MHOLA's Muleba office, said: "The project introduced a toll-free calling service, named 'Dial MHOLA for Legal Assistance' (Swahili: *Pata Msaada wa Kisheria Kiganjani Mwako Bure*), allowing clients to contact legal advisors at no cost. To raise awareness, MHOLA launched a widespread campaign using its signature Mia Mia Cup community football tournament, local radio stations, women's group meetings, printed materials, and direct outreach by trained paralegals."

This toll-free number quickly became a lifeline for many, removing distance

support to some of the country's most underserved populations.

Like many other organizations, MHOLA would face a financial crisis in the wake of the pandemic, leading to a drastic reduction in staff. Saulo Prosper, the Executive Director of MHOLA, shared: "The organization now runs with just 10 employees, with the legal department reduced to only four officers: two fully employed and two dedicated volunteers. The crisis threatened to paralyze MHOLA's ability to meet the legal needs of the communities it serves."

The Thrive Digitalization Project would provide a digital lifeline and salvage

**"The project introduced a toll-free calling service, named 'Dial MHOLA for Legal Assistance' (Swahili: *Pata Msaada wa Kisheria Kiganjani Mwako Bure*), allowing clients to contact legal advisors at no cost."**

*Maria George, advocate at MHOLA's Muleba office*

**40**

Flora Stephano using the toll free number provided by MHOLA to seek legal assistance

and cost barriers and providing timely legal advice. However, it also gained popularity beyond MHOLA's service areas, revealing a greater regional need and signaling a strong case for future expansion. Each of MHOLA offices now reports up to 15 calls per day from community members seeking legal assistance. These cases vary widely but often include matrimonial conflicts, property disputes, and inheritance issues, reflecting the pressing legal needs of the local population. The ability to respond quickly to such cases is a direct result of the new digital system and toll-free call service.

Bulk SMS services would be adopted to further popularize the toll-free number, as well as passing vital messages related to MHOLA's work to communities.

In addition to the hotline, the project would introduce a digital case management platform connected through over 20 paralegals working with MHOLA. Previously reliant on paper files that were often misplaced or delayed, paralegals now use smartphones to submit case information directly into a centralized system. Before the project, MHOLA would wait a month to hold meetings and compile case files, imposing transport costs on the organization, further delaying case processing. Theresia Bujiku, the head of the Legal Department at MHOLA, explained: "The revived referral system database enables MHOLA legal officers to track, follow up, and manage cases in real-time, ensuring that no client is forgotten. And no time is wasted. It also allows for easy referrals, detailed

Theresia Bujiku, the head of the legal department at MHOLA at her office in Bukoba, Tanzania

reporting, and accountability at every stage. Officers responsible can now instantly view: Who filed a case, where it was filed, its current status (settled, dropped, in progress) assigned officer, etc., through this platform. This shift has significantly improved efficiency and transparency in MHOLA's operations. The system has saved time and resources, as officers no longer have to wait for monthly meetings to compile cases or travel long distances to consult and handle paperwork."

## Challenges in the shift

The project has not been without hurdles. Network coverage issues in rural areas have occasionally disrupted access to the toll-free line. Community perceptions also pose a challenge, as some clients believe their issues

"**The revived referral system database enables MHOLA legal officers to track, follow up, and manage cases in real-time, ensuring that no client is forgotten. And no time is wasted.**"

*Theresia Bujiku, head of the Legal Department at MHOLA*

Richard Agnes takes a call from the MHOLA office in Bukoba Tanzania

**'The Thrive Digitization Project has helped MHOLA reach over 2300 individuals with legal assistance.'**

## Wide Digital Search for Justice

Since its launch, the Thrive Digitization Project has helped MHOLA reach over 2300 individuals with legal assistance. This has not only improved access to justice but has helped reduce poverty and community conflicts, as legal issues are resolved more efficiently and equitably.

MHOLA has gained a reputation for being fast, responsive, and efficient in delivering legal aid, further reinforcing community trust and institutional credibility.

To ensure long-term sustainability, MHOLA is exploring partnerships with the government and other stakeholders to absorb some of the operational costs currently covered by the project. This includes advocacy for government co-financing of legal aid services for vulnerable populations.

The organization continues to empower its volunteer legal officers and paralegals through capacity-building efforts, ensuring they remain active contributors to the digital system beyond the project's life span. Digital tools are now being integrated across MHOLA's broader operations, not just legal aid, marking a cultural and operational shift toward technology as a means of empowerment.

must be handled face-to-face, while others use the hotline for matters best resolved locally by village elders or paralegals.

Technically, breakdowns in the digital tools, including toll-free table phones and the filing database, have required bringing in external technicians due to the lack of a resident IT expert. This has added to operational costs, though staff have received training on basic troubleshooting to mitigate downtime.

Transitioning paralegals and legal officers to the new system has also required ongoing digital literacy training. While some adapted quickly, others needed more time and support to fully embrace the change.

With funding from

# Austrian Development Cooperation


Dreikönigsaktion
Hilfswerk der Katholischen Jungschar

**Implemented by**

horizont 3000

**Partner Organizations**