

Expanding Employment Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities in Rural, Indigenous, and Under Resourced Communities: Lessons Learned in a Global Context

Employment First Policy and
Practice Course (EFPP101)

Report, 2025



United
Persons with
Disabilities

United Persons with Disabilities

In Partnership with



KYAMBOGO UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Special
Needs and Rehabilitation



VCU

**VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH
UNIVERSITY (VCU)**
Rehabilitation Research
and Training Center



United
Persons with
Disabilities

United Persons with Disabilities



Employment First Policy and Practice Course (EFPP101)

*Advancing inclusive, integrated,
and competitive employment
for people with disabilities
and Indigenous communities
in Africa*

**June 2024 through
December 2024**

In Partnership with

RRTC

Rehabilitation Research &
Training Center



VCU



KYAMBOGO UNIVERSITY
**Faculty of Special
Needs and
Rehabilitation**

Table of Contents



Message from Harunah	2
Message from Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson.....	3
Message from Dr. Patrick Ojok.....	4
Introduction	5
Why EFPP101	5
Course Format and Delivery.....	6
Course Topics.....	6
Capstone Presentations	7
EFPP101 in Numbers.....	8
Course Outcomes.....	8
Key Achievements.....	9
Challenges.....	9
Participant Feedback.....	10
Implications for Rural, Indigenous, and International Communities.....	11
International Actions for Individuals, Government and Stakeholders.....	12
Participants Recommendations.....	12
Lessons Learned	13
Way Forward	14

EMPLOYMENT FIRST POLICY & PRACTICE COURSE (EPP101)

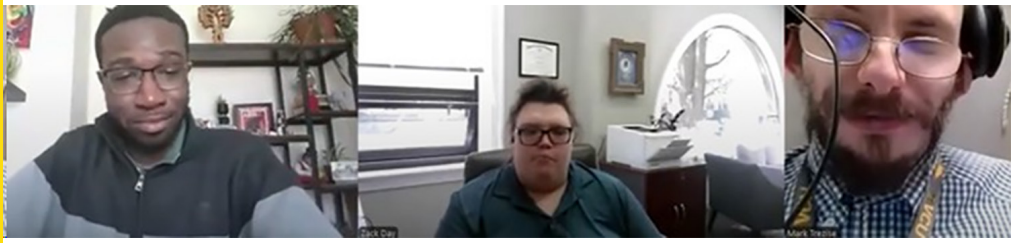
INAUGURAL COHORT



Participants at
registration: 150



Countries: 15



Finding a good employer will be key for so many people with disabilities. The best approach is to try to connect with someone in the local community who can help link individuals to local job opportunities. Many larger businesses in the corporate sector are becoming more exclusionary. They have an idea of who they want and the type of person they expect.”

Self Advocate





INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Harunah Damba, Chairperson, United Persons with Disabilities

“Inspired by this experience, I have since dedicated my efforts to empowering people with disabilities in Uganda—a community I personally identify with.”

Harunah Damba
Chairperson, United
Persons with Disabilities

For years, I have dedicated my career to advocating for the empowerment of people with disabilities in my community. My true calling in this mission was solidified through the Professional Fellows Program on inclusive Civic Engagement. During this period in the United States, I had the privilege of working with Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson, who introduced me to the Employment-First philosophy. This philosophy asserts that every individual has the capacity to work and that no one is too disabled to contribute meaningfully. I witnessed firsthand a society where individuals, regardless of their disabilities, are valued and recognized for their intrinsic worth and the meaningful contributions they make.

Inspired by this experience, I have since dedicated my efforts to empowering people with disabilities in Uganda—a community I personally identify with. As the Chair of United Persons with Disabilities, I actively collaborate with the disabled community on initiatives to unlock the potential of young people with disabilities and foster more inclusive communities. Dr. Parent-Johnson and I have continued to collaborate on several impactful post-fellowship initiatives, including the Twezimbe project for Inclusion, the Journeys to inclusion series and the present Employment-First Policy and Practice course (EFPP101), which has impacted over 150 people across 15 countries.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson, VCU-RRTC, Professor,
Department of Counseling and Special Education

The focus of my career has been on enhancing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities with particular emphasis in the areas of supported and customized employment, transition from school to work, Employment First policy and practice, and healthcare transition from pediatric to adult medical care.

My work together with Indigenous and rural communities has expanded my knowledge and teachings of culturally responsive practices and creative strategies that expand access to employment supports and improved outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities often overlooked in service delivery.

I have had the honor of collaborating with individuals from Tanzania and Uganda as a Professional Fellows mentor and host as well as an Outbound Fellow allowing me to visit and learn from the grass roots leaders in these countries who are truly making a difference.

The EFPP 101 course brings together the richness of my many experiences and partnerships developed in collaboration with my wonderful colleagues to further advance the impact of that work and the benefits of employment through this energizing and productive space.



“My work together with Indigenous and rural communities has expanded my knowledge and teachings of culturally responsive practices.”

Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson
Rehabilitation Research & Training
Center and Professor, Department of
Counseling and Special Education,
Virginia Commonwealth university



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Patrick Ojok, Dean, Faculty of Special Needs and Rehabilitation,
Kyambogo University

“While persons with disabilities want to work and can work, the peculiarities that hinder their employment are often overlooked in policy and/or practice.”

Dr. Patrick Ojok Dean,
Faculty of Special Needs
and
Rehabilitation, Kyambogo

Advocating for disability inclusive employment is unique and complex – it is not enough to prohibit disability based discrimination that preclude persons with disabilities from employment. Employers must make necessary and appropriate adjustments and modifications in the employment process and the workplace to break the barriers that disadvantage job applicants and employees with disabilities from competing and performing at an equal basis with others.

While persons with disabilities want to work and can work, the peculiarities that hinder their employment are often overlooked in policy and/or practice. I have dedicated a substantial part of my academic career supporting government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), civil society organizations, and grassroots efforts to tackle systemic, policy, attitudinal, and practice injustices affecting persons with disabilities in education and employment through research, training and advocacy.

The Employment First Policy course initiative sought to empower course participants to recognize and design strategies to address disability specific and intersectional peculiarities that tend to limit persons with disabilities from participating in employment on an equal and fair basis like others.

■



Introduction

Numerous reports indicate that unemployment rates among people with disabilities continue to rise to alarming levels, a trend particularly evident in many African countries, including Uganda. Despite this trend, employers, civil society organizations, and governments have shown limited concern and have not adequately addressed employment equity issues for people with disabilities.

The Employment-First Policy and Practice course (EFPP101) was founded on the belief that true community inclusion is achieved when everyone is able to work and contribute. Our vision is to advance disability employment and foster a society in which people with disabilities are recognized NOT for what they lack, but for the valuable contributions they make. EFPP101 focuses on engaging youth and adults with disabilities, self-advocates, university students, emerging entrepreneurs, and employers who might otherwise lack access to professional development opportunities and clear pathways to address gaps in competitive, integrated employment in their communities.

In total, we directly served 150 participants across 15 countries in our inaugural cohort, which took place from June to December 2024. Our impact has been both broad and deep, made possible through collaboration with key partners, including Kyambogo University, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and subject-matter experts such as Professor Augustus Nuwagaba.

EFPP101: Expanding Resources: Engaging Partners, Building Teams, and Developing Funding Sources



Why EFPP101

Africa, and Uganda in particular, continue to grapple with a series of intersecting crises that exacerbate economic instability and social inequality. The continent's heavy reliance on external financing has rendered it vulnerable to fluctuations in global funding, destabilizing critical sectors and impeding sustainable development. Persistent fiscal deficits have further constrained domestic investment, weakened social support systems, and deepened economic vulnerability. Within this context, individuals with disabilities face even greater barriers to success in an inherently ableist society. Legal frameworks prohibiting discrimination in employment remain insufficient and are rarely enforced.

Despite these challenges, Africa remains a continent of immense creativity and untapped potential. The Employment-First Policy and Practice (EFPP101) course was designed to harness this potential by fostering experiential leadership pathways and equipping individuals with disabilities, self-advocates, and emerging entrepreneurs with the skills necessary for sustainable economic participation—which is a key to putting education into action to advance economic independence and broader social inclusion.

Course Format and Delivery

The Employment-First Policy and Practice (EFPP101) course was delivered in collaboration with Kyambogo University in Uganda and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in the United States, with additional contributions from distinguished experts. The program was conducted entirely online, utilizing Zoom and the Kyambogo University E-Learning Management System (KELMS).

Our structured virtual format provided participants with a comprehensive academic experience, including mentorship, leadership development, and motivation. A typical week consisted of one live lecture session, lasting no more than two hours, four days of independent engagement with course materials, and one team-building activity. The program was entirely free, eliminating financial barriers to participation. Accessibility was a core principle, and participants had the flexibility to contribute meaningfully to course content, including selecting focus topics, designing community projects, and structuring their schedules.

The program ran from June to December, 2024, with additional months from January to February 2025 dedicated to capstone/community project presentations, evaluation, reporting, and planning for future cohorts.

Self-Advocacy and Employment Success



Stories from Individuals Working in Competitive Employment and Self-Employment

Course Topics

Employment Policy and Practice in Uganda: Current Trends, Issues and Initiatives

Instructors: Dr. Patrick Ojok and Denis Ouma

Economic Policy Analysis: Understanding Different Economic Structures and the Role in Shaping Economic Policy and Growth

Instructor: Professor Augustus Nuwagaba

Employment Best Practices in the U.S.: Key Takeaways to Advance Creative Work Opportunities

Instructors: Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson and Harunah Damba

Person Centered Planning: Developing a Strengths Based Approach --

Instructor: Alissa Brooke

Preparing for Work: School, Post-Secondary Education, and Vocational Training Opportunities for Skill Development and Career Planning

Instructors: Nery Birdsell and Elizabeth Rwabu

Engaging Employers: Job Development and Business Partnerships --

Instructor: Jenn McDonough

Job Training, Supports, and Accommodations

Instructor: Dr. Whitney Ham

Self-Advocacy and Employment Success: Stories from Individuals working in Competitive and Self-Employment

Instructor: Rachael Rounds and Panel

Expanding Resources: Engaging Partners, Building Teams, and Developing Funding Sources

Instructor: Crystal Hince and Joshua Drywater

Investments and Capitalization: Sources, Types, and Understanding Wealth and Income

Instructor: Professor Augustus Nuwagaba

Telling the Story: Data Gathering, Narrative-Based Impact Assessment, Policy Briefs, and Dissemination

Instructors: Dr. Lauren Avelone and Lucian Friel

Capstone/ Community Project Presentations

Judges: Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson, Harunah Damba, Elizabeth Rwabu and Denis Ouma

“If we're looking at employment, then our question is NOT, 'Can they work?' but rather, 'What do they want to do?' Then, we can start looking at what is needed to help people with disabilities find work and support them on their key transition to employment”

Dr. Wendy Parent-Johnson



Capstone Presentations

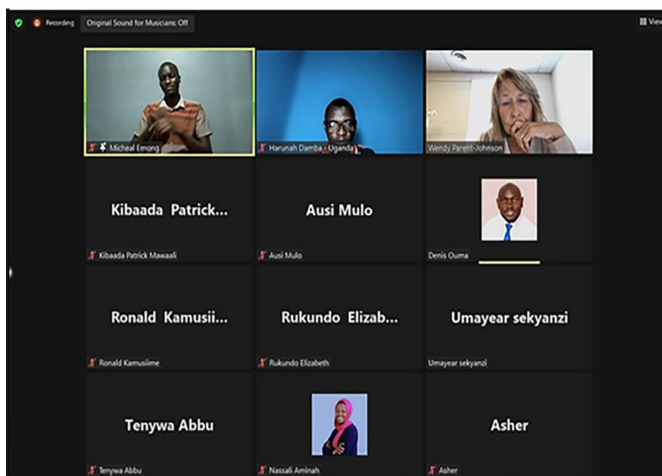
PROBLEMS

- Zombo District produces 65,000 tons of banana yearly unfortunately 28,000 ton face post harvest losses making each farmer to lose up to \$300 per year
- No major market for bananas in Zombo District
- poor storage facilities considering that bananas are highly perishable

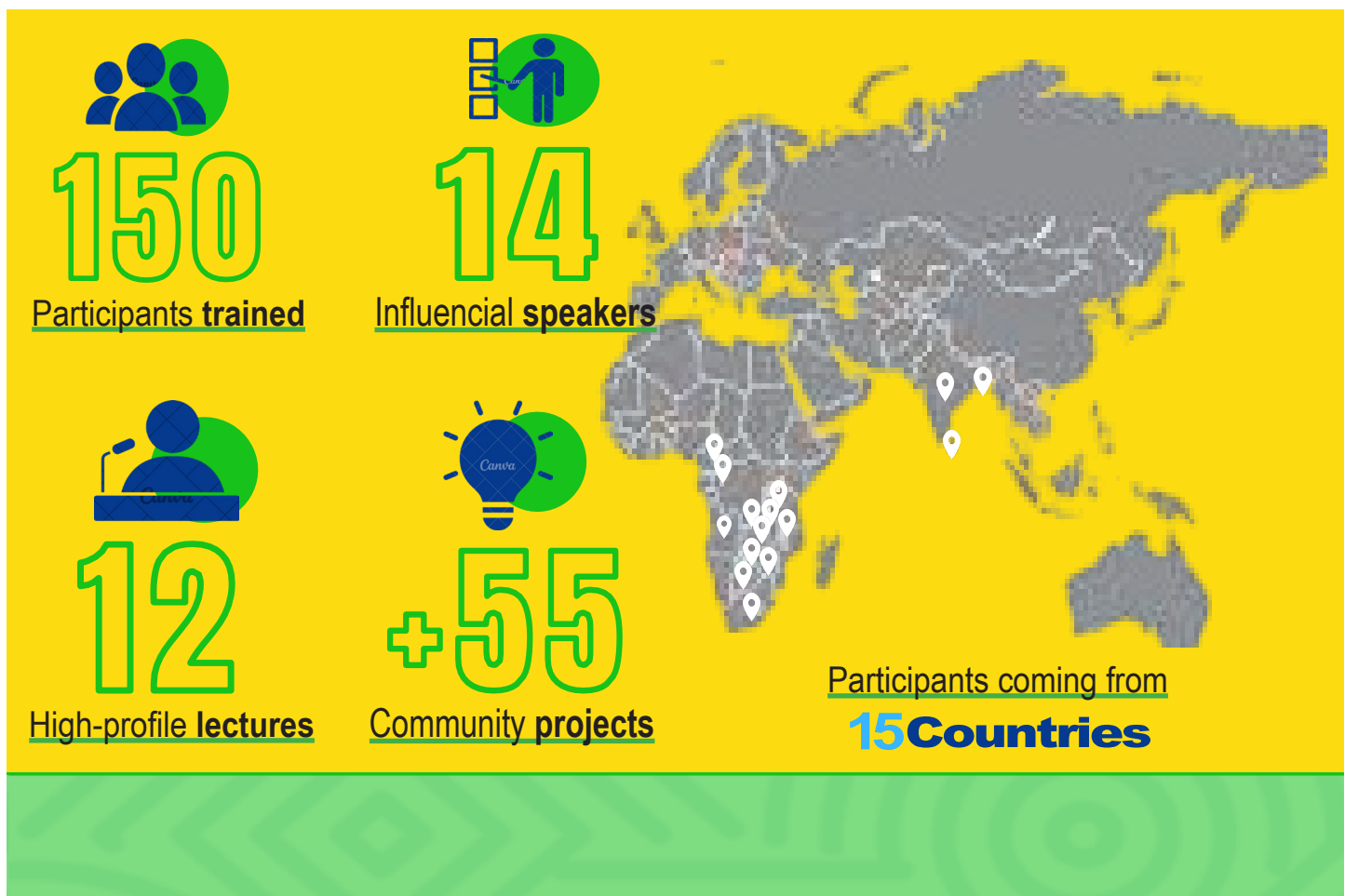


The capstone project component of the EFPP101 provided an opportunity for participants to apply their skills to innovative and impactful venture ideas. Many of these projects addressed pressing community challenges and showcased entrepreneurial potential that, with the right support, could flourish into sustainable and transformative initiatives. These projects demonstrated participants' ability to identify opportunities, develop strategic solutions, and engage stakeholders, reinforcing our mission to empower individuals with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

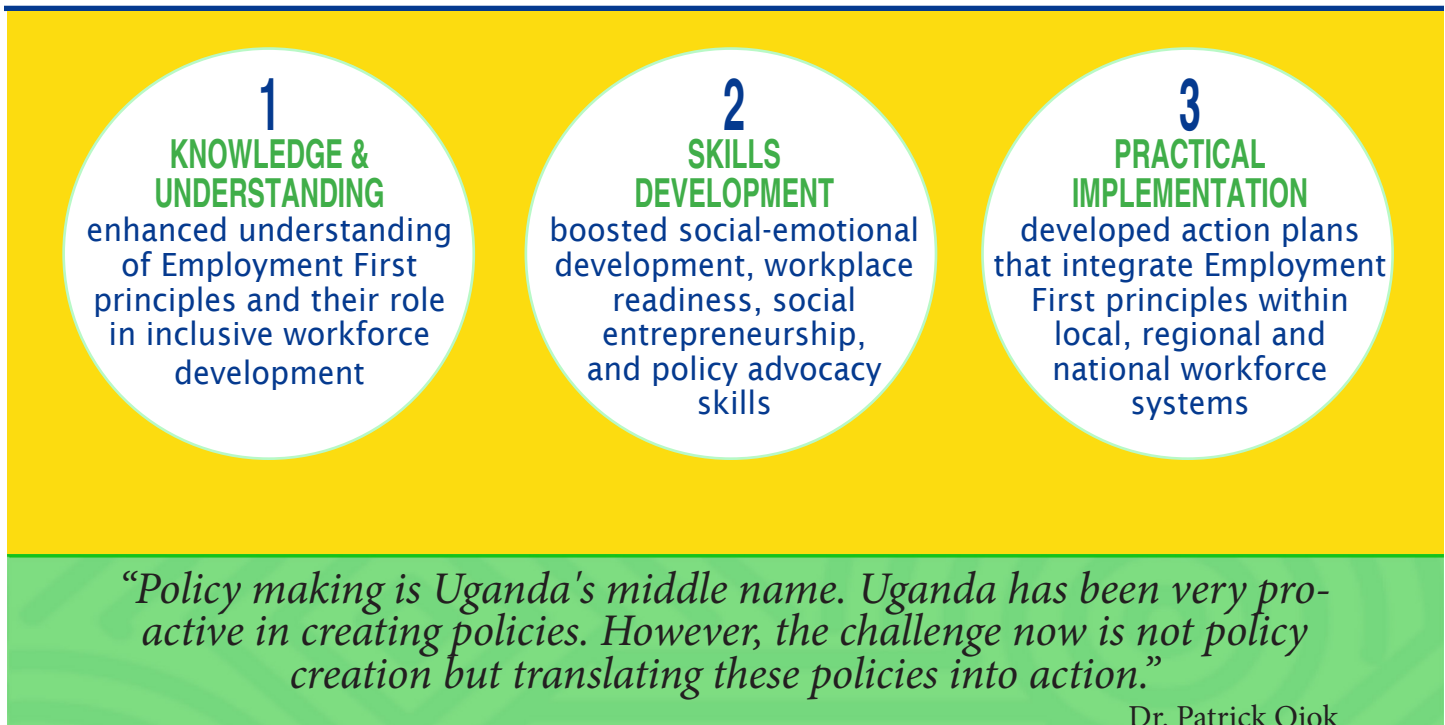
Through their capstone work, participants demonstrated proficiency in public speaking, project planning and management, and stakeholder engagement. This further solidified their preparedness for self-advocacy, self-employment, entrepreneurship, and traditional employment as well as broader grassroots advocacy and program development. The capstone presentations tackled key issues such as value addition, skills development, and leveraging technology for greater accessibility and opportunity.



EFPP101 in Numbers



Course Outcomes



Key Achievements

The EFPP101 curriculum was designed to address topics of greatest relevance and interest to participants, including Developing a Strengths-Based Approach, Engaging Partners, Building Teams, Developing Funding Sources, Understanding Wealth and Income, and more. In addition to fostering personal growth, the program played a crucial role in strengthening participants' social-emotional skills while equipping them with essential hard skills such as public speaking and project planning, as demonstrated in their session engagement and capstone/community project presentations.

Through this program, over 85% of participants demonstrated improved and sustained high outcomes in key competencies such as social-emotional development, workplace readiness, entrepreneurship, and policy advocacy. The course served as a platform for skill-building, reinforcing self-confidence, social awareness, and a positive future-focused culture that encourages participants to dream big and envision their futures. Participant contributions and impact were enhanced through their multiple roles and positions as university students, community leaders, advocates, employers, and nonprofit workers.



Challenges

While the course was free, it required substantial commitment of time and resources to participate. Logistical challenges were frequently reported related to data costs, electricity shortages, and technology access with individuals applying creative solutions such as saving their data, using their phone, borrowing a device, or relocating to other locations to join.

Several additional factors led to participant drop-out along the way. At least 40% had to leave in pursuit of work. Personal concerns such as financial difficulties, family, and community pressures often led to increased stress and emotional issues preventing completion. The lack of visible pathways and encouragement to enter self-employment and pursue a career further compounded these challenges.

The program provided scholarships and offered asynchronous content that participants could access and engage with at their own pace in an effort to mitigate some of the challenges impacting active participation.



Participant Feedback



I am deeply grateful and proud for the opportunity to learn from leading experts. I am grateful for the opportunity that has opened up for me to pursue my undergraduate degree. The content has been highly informative and will be invaluable to my academic and professional journey. - Angella Bridget



This course has significantly contributed to my professional growth as a human resource professional and has provided me with valuable insights on advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. Your selfless dedication to equipping us with new knowledge, often at the expense of your valuable time and resources, has deeply touched my heart. Thank you for dedicating your time, and resources to shaping our careers. - Muswali M. Peter



Through this course, I gained valuable skills, including creative thinking, self-confidence, and communication. I have begun to see a stronger self within me and plan to utilize my skills by establishing Empowering Education and Employment Program for People with Disabilities in Uganda (EEPWD). - Kasasa Charles

Over the past seven months, I have gained a wealth of knowledge and insights that have not only deepened my understanding of Employment-First Policies and Practices but have also inspired me to become a more effective advocate for inclusive employment. I have developed essential social and economic skills that are vital for daily life. I appreciate the interactive sessions, including Zoom meetings every Friday, capstone projects, and group discussions, which enriched my learning experience.

- Kyakuhaire Christine



Employment levels the field and give people with disabilities the chance to be valued in the community. I'm truly grateful for the patience, support, and dedication of the facilitators, who went the extra mile to help us succeed. Their guidance and mentorship have motivated me to always do my best.

- John Lamek Okodi

I was privileged to attend the course free of charge. The knowledge I gained has been truly eye-opening. I have started to think more and more creatively about the many ways to support people with disabilities in my community. I am confident that the newfound knowledge I have acquired will help me make a positive impact.

- Rooney Ombanya



Being part of the leadership team that contributed to the inaugural Employment-First Policy and Practice course has been an incredibly fulfilling. The opportunity to help, share, and listen to others' aspirations and dreams has been truly rewarding. I am both happy and proud to have contributed to this course, which has guided me along a path of professional development.

- Micheal Emong

Implications for Rural, Indigenous, and International Communities

United Persons with Disabilities, in collaboration with the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center at Virginia Commonwealth University in the US and Kyambogo University in Uganda, developed the Employment-First Policy and Practice Course (EFPP101). Launched in June 2024, the course was delivered via live-stream lectures on Zoom, with course materials hosted on the Kyambogo University E-learning System (KELMS).

The Employment-First Policy is a national framework in the United States that advocates for the employment of people with disabilities, through both waged and self-employment. The purpose of this was to examine the policy's evolution, impact, and potential for adaptation in diverse contexts beyond the US. Key themes included Employment Best Practices, Economic Policies, Person-Centered Planning, and Investment Models. These themes were explored by both indigenous (Africans) and American expert facilitators who drew on examples from both African and Western economies to contextualize the discussions.

The course underscored the importance of implementing training programmes that are all-encompassing, fit-for-purpose and adopt traditional methodologies as well as western concepts.

Our curriculum incorporated knowledge systems from academic traditions rooted in the United States, and the wisdom and perspectives of Indigenous epistemologies. As a result, the Employment-First Policy and Practice course contributed to innovative thinking by highlighting policy responses, best practice examples, and the value of partnerships—with government, industry, and community.

Participants indicated that the course significantly enriched their knowledge, fostered meaningful relationships, and provided access to valuable networks and contacts. Further discussions identified a range of intentional actions for individuals, governments, and stakeholders, as elaborated below.

International Actions for Individuals, Government, and Stakeholders

START

What Should We Start Doing

- Emphasize the benefits and opportunities of self-employment as a viable career pathway.
- Use an evidence-based approach to drafting and setting policies.
- Have a greater belief in the potential of people with disabilities to contribute to national economic development.
- Improve market access for PWDs owned businesses through government linkages and connections.
- Provide robust, fit-for-purpose extension programs, including 'train the trainer' initiatives.
- Establish robust monitoring mechanisms for grant-in-aid programs.

STOP

What Should We Stop Doing

- Setting policies and directives based on one size fits all.
- Significant financial cuts to disability-specific aid and grant programs.
- Underestimating or overlooking the positive impacts that PWDs labor force can have on local, regional and national economies.
- Inappropriately undertaking consultations on key matters related to disability development. Ask, listen and implement how people with disabilities expect to be engaged.
- Focusing on growth, and not development.

KEEP

What Should We Keep Doing

- Telling stories, sharing knowledge and experiences, especially across different platforms.
- Investing in skill building and training programs.
- Taking advantage of existing policies, specific aid, and grant programs that foster growth and empowerment of people with disabilities to achieve their own aspirations.
- Using cooperative models that enable development, particularly for small businesses owners.
- Gather and share data on outcomes and impact of work on the individual and community.

Participants Recommendations

- Success in youth employment requires a strong foundation rooted in improved education. This can be achieved by combining the resources and expertise of both the public and private sectors, resulting in better training, more job opportunities, and smoother transitions into the workforce.
- Addressing youth unemployment requires creating pathways for young people to access productive work opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, small businesses, and Household Enterprises (HE).
- Grant-in-aid programs are promising initiatives and will likely be more effective if supported by robust monitoring mechanisms -- Rwanda is a good example.
- The aspiration of majority youth for wage employment in the formal sector often comes at the expense of more immediate opportunities in the family and household enterprise (HE) sector.
- Building on existing private-sector approaches, such as microfinance, capacity-building, and financial literacy programs, can help youth enhance productivity and profitability within the family and household enterprise sector.
- Two key policy dimensions: Skills development and the business environment.

Lessons Learned

The connections through this course and power of the grass roots exchange can not be underestimated. The shared space of the online platform created the opportunity for a diverse group to come together bringing their varied perspectives and experiences from a wide range of geographical locations connected by their mutual passion for employment. The differing roles of participants, speakers, and instructors allowed attendees to gain insights from other points of view contributing to the generation of new knowledge, resources, and ideas. For many, these held promise of great benefit for themselves as individuals with disabilities in pursuit of employment. For others, the potential benefits and impact were in relation to actions aimed at the larger community through advocacy, services, policy, and training.

Each successful step that was presented during the sessions by participants illustrated the application of course concepts to real life. The capstone projects reflected the culmination of learning into a thoughtful and comprehensive proposal addressing a real issue in an individual's community. Follow up sessions will engage participants to recreate the shared space, for encouragement, brainstorming, support, and reporting progress on their journey to personal employment, capstone implementation, and continued learning. These participants can be the future role models, mentors, and change agents for other individuals and their communities.

Knowledge gains were twofold. Strategies found to be successful in rural and under resourced communities that don't have designated disability services and funding for employment supports offer suggestions that can be useful in other areas experiencing similar challenges. The importance of community and family were repeated themes that can be tapped into as an expanded network of supports and assistance when paid services are unavailable.

Perhaps the greatest significance are the new tools and resources contributing to personal empowerment and renewed motivation that anything is possible and anyone can work. There is a collective power and accomplishment generated by a group of grass roots experts who bring the value of their lived experience to influence policy, practice, and outcomes. This is something that can be replicated in other communities by having a champion who steps up and takes the lead.

Way Forward

The course has proven to be an effective vehicle for applying an indigenous development lens to foster collaboration and facilitate the exchange of ideas on innovative and inclusive development.

Through this course, we have learned that there is strength in identity—understanding and celebrating diversity serves as a powerful tool for empowerment, allowing marginalized communities to share their own stories, unique experiences, and contributions. We learned that integrating indigenous knowledge with Western concepts and expertise is effective in promoting the convergence of diverse perspectives, knowledge systems, and values in ways that allow for reciprocal learning and a holistic understanding of complex issues.

Through this course, we have established a solid foundation for a clear and inspiring model that motivates and supports the next generation to pursue self-employment, entrepreneurship, and meaningful participation in the labor market.

Building on the success of this initiative, we plan to continue collecting data on the outcomes and impacts experienced at least annually. These data will be synthesized into cohesive narratives and used to refine the course and follow-up activities, informing future iterations and providing key recommendations for others interested in conducting similar or comparable initiatives aimed at advancing support and employment outcomes for people with disabilities in Uganda and beyond.



“Poverty is not as dangerous as inequality. Inequality is having many people living on the wrong side of growth—growth with exclusion. Growth with exclusion is disastrous; it can lead to increased crime, civil conflict, terrorism, and the disintegration of society and nations.”

- Professor Augustus Nuwagaba

“It is coming to a decade and a half trying to implement Uganda’s Disability Employment Quota policy without success. The National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda has been in these talks, and I believe that it’s the right time for us to step forward as advocates for inclusion, and be part of the solution.”

HARUNAH DAMBA



COURSE COORDINATOR

Harunah Damba

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