

## Transforming Lives through Innovation: Gulu University's Nutritional Renaissance

*Nestled within the challenging terrain of the Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement in Uganda, a beacon of hope is meticulously emerging through the collaboration of Gulu University, the Response Innovation Lab (RIL), and Save the Children. This unfolding narrative, generously backed by Innovation Norway under the Local Innovations for Nutrition Solutions (LINS) project, unfolds against the backdrop of two critical issues plaguing refugee-hosting communities—malnutrition and limited access to diverse, nutritious foods.*

### Revolutionizing Nutrition with Composite Flour:

At the forefront of innovations funded by LINS, Gulu University's pilot project focuses on the development, processing, and marketing of a revolutionary composite flour. This amalgamation of millet, sesame, soybean, and Orange Flesh Sweet Potato (OFSP) not only exemplifies nutritional richness but adheres to rigorous standards. Dr. Solomon Olum, an esteemed faculty member, spearheads this groundbreaking venture. What sets this project apart is its commitment to community-driven innovation.

Dr. Olum explains, *"We developed different formulations of the same product and subjected them to consumer evaluation. From a nutrition point of view, they were almost the same, but the consumers got to say which product they liked the best."* This dedication to community feedback validates Gulu University's mission to create products embraced by those they aim to serve.

### Combating Malnutrition and Fostering Economic Empowerment:

The Rhino Camp grapples with alarming rates of malnutrition, particularly among women and children. Gulu University's composite flour emerges as a vital tool in this fight. Its nutrient density, coupled with community-driven initiatives, provides a lifeline for families grappling with limited access to diverse, nutrient-rich foods. However, Gulu University goes beyond addressing nutritional deficiencies; it aims to combat economic challenges within the settlement.

The university not only imparts knowledge on cultivating raw ingredients but also provides training in optimal processing techniques. This dual approach empowers households to become self-sufficient in producing nutrient-dense flour, creating avenues for additional income by selling surplus flour to the community. Dr. Olum explains, *"With our flour, someone need not worry as much if they are consuming the flour but not accessing other sources of nutrient-dense food due to financial challenges."*

## From Training to Transformation: Progress and Challenges:

Supported by the Nutrition Innovation Challenge Fund within LINS, Dr. Olum and his team conducted comprehensive training sessions for 68 parents. Despite initial challenges, including delays and limited implementation time, the project achieved notable success:

- **Training Impact:** 86 parents were trained on composite production.
- **Independence:** 94% of beneficiaries could process the flour independently.
- **Economic Growth:** 20% of local businesses were established, generating income.
- **Satisfaction Rates:** 100% of households reported satisfaction with the composite flour.

However, challenges such as unreliable weather, community reliance on aid, and the need for sustainable business models posed hurdles to widespread adoption. Dr. Olum acknowledged the necessity of balancing support to set beneficiaries up for success without fostering dependency—a nuanced approach that aligns with Save the Children's vision through the Uganda Response Innovation Lab.

## LINS Project's Impact Beyond Gulu University:

Gulu University's contribution extends beyond nutrition; it integrates a robust business component into each innovation. Through comprehensive training sessions, beneficiary groups and individuals are equipped with essential business skills. This strategic inclusion of business training and start-up kits aims to empower these groups to establish trial microenterprises, fostering income growth and enhancing overall livelihood security and resilience.

Within beneficiary communities, a palpable enthusiasm surrounds the innovations. The MISESO-OFSP composite flour has found favour among both children and adults. *"We no*

*longer need sugar for our porridge; it's incredibly tasty and nutritious,"* shares a consumer. Beyond tangible outcomes, Gulu University's Nutrition Pilot Project has navigated the delicate terrain of cultural beliefs on nutrition and childcare, fostering acceptance and understanding.



Facilitating a design clinic for the Care Mothers Group in Ofua 6, Rhino Camp, aimed at supporting them in developing their branding and packaging. This initiative is made possible through the support of Save the Children and the Response Innovation Lab. Photo credits: Christine Nyarech

## **Facilitating Change: The Journey Ahead:**

As the LINS initiative progresses, Gulu University's Nutrition Pilot Project lays out a plan for the months ahead. The initiative relies heavily on the Care Groups established by Save the Children through its refugee response program, serving as the foundational support. These groups are gearing up for a transformative experience as their participation and efforts take center stage. The upcoming phase involves equipping



Care Groups with knowledge on cultivating Orange Fleshed Sweet Potatoes (OFSP), a Vitamin-A-rich vegetable.

To enhance their capabilities, a strategic collaboration with Gulu University's Department of Agribusiness and Rural Development has been established, offering the Care Groups a comprehensive crash course in good business practices. The ultimate measure of success lies in the transformation of knowledge into viable businesses. Dr. Olum envisions the necessity for comprehensive facilitation, aligning existing plans for an optimal journey to success. Every note of assistance resonates in this composition of progress, ensuring that the melody of their dreams crescendos into a harmonious success story.

### **Lessons Learned and Future Directions:**

Dr. Olum and his team reflect on invaluable lessons gleaned from the pilot project, offering profound insights that illuminate the path ahead. Key lessons emphasize the potential for complementarity with other Nutrition Innovation Challenge Fund pilot projects. A visionary approach emerges, exemplified by Dr. Olum's recognition of the symbiosis between initiatives, creating a transformative impact on nutrition. Crucially, the importance of setting beneficiaries up for success comes to the fore.

Gulu University's long-term vision extends beyond the current pilot project, with aspirations of forging new partnerships with LINS and other collaborators. The journey of nourishing lives and transforming communities unfolds, propelled by a commitment to sustainable impact and a vision of holistic well-being. Every detail of this narrative, supported by facts and outcomes, resonates with the essence of Save the Children's commitment to transformative change for the most vulnerable.

In conclusion, Gulu University's Nutrition Pilot Project stands as a testament to how innovation, guided by community involvement and supported by entities like the Response Innovation Lab, can revolutionize lives. The journey is one of challenges and triumphs, lessons learned and visions expanded. As the initiative continues to unfold, it exemplifies the potential for sustainable impact, setting the stage for a brighter, more nourished future for the most vulnerable communities.

**By Uganda Response Innovation Lab**

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