



Isiolo Youth Innovation Centre: A Centre of Excellence providing Safe Spaces for Youth Talent, Skills and Competency Development for Improved Livelihoods

Introduction

The study curriculum authorized by the government of Kenya allows young people to take a short break before joining both high school and college. This break allows the youth to take months away from the strict school life which contributes to how one's life is shaped before moving to the next stage. Only 13.7% of the population has attained a high school level education or higher compared to the National average of 22.8%. During these short and long breaks, youths in Isiolo County have previously engaged in harmful habits like using drugs, crime. According to the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA), Isiolo has the highest use of *khat* (67%) and with *marijuana* and *heroin* among the most abused drugs by the youths.

Most parents opt to send these young people for short-course training in basic computer packages among other courses. The training is in most cases offered by few schools which are usually private institutions with few computers and expensive school fees. Isiolo has one of the highest poverty rates in the Country, with unemployment rate of 53.6% compared to the National average of 10.4%. This has caused the poor to remain at home while those who can afford the computer packages proceeding to train.

Communities in Isiolo County being among the marginalized groups in Kenya have endeavored to empower the youth through talent and business support to engage in County issues and become active citizens who not only participate in the selection of leaders but also can become leaders at both the local and national level. For this to be effective, there is need to provide the young people with a platform for engagement on governance and leadership issues. This need led to the establishment of the Isiolo Youth Innovation Centre (IYIC).

IYIC is an initiative of the County Government of Isiolo, the Kenya School of Government (KSG) and UNDP. The idea was birthed in 2017 when the Isiolo County Governor approached UNDP for support in capacity building initiatives under the devolution programme. Discussions with KSG pointed to a gap in youth capacity building since the World Bank and USAID Ahadi were undertaking training programmes in a wide range of courses targeting the County Governments' executives and assemblies.

Structure and Operationalization of the Isiolo Youth Innovation Centre



The UK Government, through the then DFID (now Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)), provided UNDP with funding to support devolution activities in FCDC Counties in the previous devolution programme (Integrated support to the Devolution process in Kenya) which ended in 2019. Support to IYIC transitioned to the Joint UN Devolution Programme (Consolidated Gains and Deepening Devolutin in Kenya project), which is funded by the Governments of Sweden, Finland and Italy. Norway funds also supported some of the activities in IYIC through Strengthening Devolved Governance in Kenya project. To establish the Youth Innovation Centre, the County Government provided space which was refurbished by KSG while UNDP provided the ICT equipment and furniture and the Centre's branding. The Centre was formally launched in October 2020.

The vision of the Centre is, "Innovative inclusive and sustainable Centre for an empowered youth," while its mission is, "To provide a safe and supportive environment by nurturing talent, developing skills and competencies for improved livelihoods." The IYIC aims to build the competencies of young women and men to take on jobs or start businesses in the markets, while also working with local institutions to adopt new business models and expand the number of jobs available for youths. The centre also is inculcating a governance engagement culture among the youth to enable meaningful dialogue with their leaders and participation in county planning and budgeting.

Following the launch of the Isiolo Youth Innovation Centre in October 2020, a team of youth volunteers (2 from each of the 15 wards) was selected to mobilize young people and coordinate their participation in the activities of the centre. In December 2020, volunteers sensitized all the 10 Wards of Isiolo County on the Centre. The next step was the formation of the ward structure in each ward headed by a Coordinator who is a member of the IYIC Advisory Council according to the Centre's structure. All wards had selected their Coordinator's from the 10 wards by May 2021. An additional 11th Ward was created for PLWDs with their coordinator and officials.

Main activities carried out at the Isiolo Youth Innovation Centre

1. Essential Computer Literacy Course — parents who cannot afford to pay the exaggerated private institution school fees can now pay a cheaper amount at the Centre for the same training.
2. County Sports/Football Club — the Centre has established a football club where the youth interested in sports can train with a qualified coach and better their skills.
3. Coffee talks — the Centre provides space for young people to participate in discussions about County governance and leadership.
4. Film production classes — the Centre offers short training on film production, acting and scripting.
5. Agriculture (Certified Hydroponic Farming Training) — the Centre offers training on how to use technology in agriculture and embracing climate change in Isiolo.
6. Personal development, CV writing and cover letter writing training
7. Entrepreneurship Training
8. Computer Networking and Security Training



9. Ajira Digital Courses Training
10. Martial Arts Classes
11. Isiolo County Public Participation platform 'Sema Usikike': This platform with already 600 youth subscribers frequently engages the youth on programs and also provides an opportunity for youths to provide feedback on programs being run as well as projects being launched by the County Governemnt

Key partners, implementers and collaborators in the establishment and operationalization of the Centre.

Partner	Support provided
Huawei	Wi-Fi connectivity to the centre; Computer networking and system security training (50 Youths trained)
Miramar International College	Cerified hydroponic farming training (164 Youths completed 1 st cohort)
Information & Communication Technology Authority	National Optic Fibre Backbone (NOFBI) high-speed internet connectivity to the Centre
Ajira Digital	Content writing, digital marketing and transcription, among other digital skills tailored for the online workspace (65 Youths trained)
Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB)	Licensing and training of local content producers (40 Youths trained)
Catholic Relief Services	Supported training on Leadership during International Youths Day 30 participants trained
Kenya Red Cross Society	basic life skills training
People's Development Consultancy	Curriculum vitae (CV) writing and personal development (45 Youths trained)
Ministry of Housing	Sustainable interlocking block making (75 Youths trained)
Kenya School of Governemnt	Essential Computer Literacy Course (Ongoing, 100 learners completed)
Isiolo Red Tigers Taekwondo, Mr. Nicholas Willigis, Trained Instructor	Martial Arts Class ongoing with 30 youths enrolled and engaged martial arts competitions in Eastern region

Sustainability

The Youth Innovation Centre is one of the priorities of the Isiolo County Government and is part captured in the 2017–2022 County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP). Every financial year since its inception, the County Government allocates resources to facilitate youth initiatives in the Centre.



The County is also in the process of developing the Youth Inclusion Bill, which is an effort to anchor the Centre in legislation for its sustainability while also ensuring representation of young people at all levels of governance and decision making.

Results of the Youth Innovation Centre

1. *Empowered youths to participate in leadership:* 940 Young people in Isiolo County have been empowered through the coffee talks to participate in leadership programmes and activities with confidence and awareness
2. *Job opportunities:* The visibility and experience from the Centre has assisted youths who have been trained there to secure employment in both County and private sectors. As a result, 4 youths secured formal employment and 20 youth pursuing opportunities in business, videography, agriculture and saloon businesses.
3. *Reduced rates of drug abuse:* Previously, the number of youths affected by substance abuse was high compared to now that the Centre provides a youth-friendly space to engage in various aspects of personal development. A youth-friendly peer-counselling unit also provides a space for youths to face their fears and find a way to cope with their situations.
4. *Computer literacy among the youths:* With affordable computer classes, 100 youths in the County accessed basic computer skills which have improved their skills in use and application of technology. A further 25 youth are currently enrolled in various computer classes.
5. *Talent support:* 150 youths equipped with different talents like dancing, football, Martial Arts and even acting have been allocated coaches and trainers who support their talents.
6. *Disciplined and empowered youths:* 940 youths empowered to have a focused life through guidance on the pursuit of visions and how to avoid distraction from peer pressure.
7. *Agribusiness ventures:* 164 youths equipped in agricultural-influenced businesses and income generating activities, including aquaculture, beekeeping, hydroponic farming and horticulture. This has led to the growth of self-employed groups who practice fish and beekeeping as a source of income.
8. *Entrepreneurship Training:* The first cohort of 52 youths were trained on entrepreneurship, followed up with a second cohort of 45 youths. This has increased youths involvement in businesses, including Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO). From the trainees, 5 youths have directly benefitted from AGPO through County Government and other agencies. Other youths from the program are already pursuing businesses as sole proprietors.

Lessons learnt

The Isiolo Youth Innovation Centre has had a great impact on a lot of youths in Isiolo County. For example, the Entrepreneurship training has changed the lives of some youths.

1. The youths who benefitted from the training were able to translate the knowledge gained to practice with a great level of success. For instance, Josephine Kendi, a resident of Bullapesa



Ward attended training on Entrepreneurship at the Centre, and with the knowledge gained, she undertook a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis of her business. As a result, she transformed her business, from hawking her beauty products to opening a shop. Jabir Hassan also used the business plan formulated in his group discussion during the training to start his own camel milk supply business.

2. The safe space provided to the youths has been monumental in helping the youths avoid pitfalls like drug abuse while also allowing them to use the Centre to gain skills. Harun, like many youths in Isiolo, has found a refuge where he can express himself and also get to learn new skills. Harun is a beneficiary of the *Essential Computer Literacy Course* and continues to utilize the Centre to produce content on his YouTube page. Yasmin, after benefitting from the computer literacy classes, decided to volunteer her time at the Centre to impact more youths. Kamal Ibrahim, is a self-taught content producer, editor and director. He regularly produces content for clients and also for his YouTube page, **Da Prince Unit**.
3. UNDP also supported the Isiolo County Public Participation platform dubbed “Sema Usikike”, which has also played a role in engaging the youth on different projects being implemented as well as informing the youth about training opportunities available at the Centre. Through this platform, the youths have shared their opinions on different issues that they would like addressed as well as feedback on training conducted at the Centre.

Recommendations

1. There is need for intense resource mobilization for the Youth Centre to enable the following next steps to be achieved.
 - a. The Innovation Centre should have a strategy in place to monitor and document lessons from established projects to avoid repeating previous failures while implementing new projects. The Strategy should include having a secretariat and a board of Management to ensure there is staffing, proper oversight and also reliable funding to sustain the programmes.
 - b. There is a need to decentralize the Youth Innovation Centre to the Sub-counties and eventually up to the ward level to ensure it has reach and relevance across the County
2. Other Counties should consider establishing similar Centres with customized programmes for youth within those Counties in line with specific County needs.

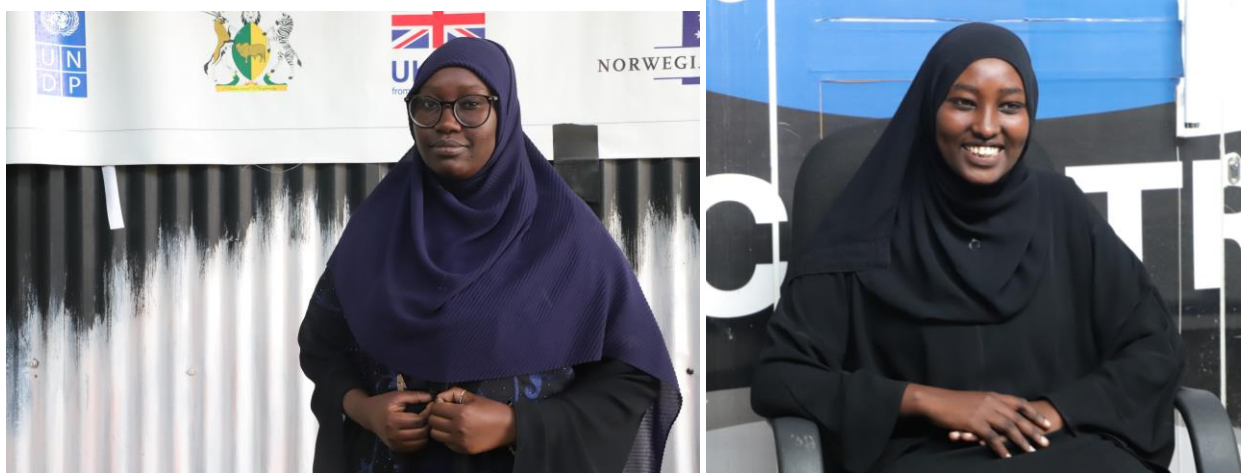


Gallery



Pic 1: CECM in charge of Youth, Isiolo County

Pic 2: Youth Innovation Centre



Pic 3 and 4: Some of the beneficiaries of the IYIC during the interviews