



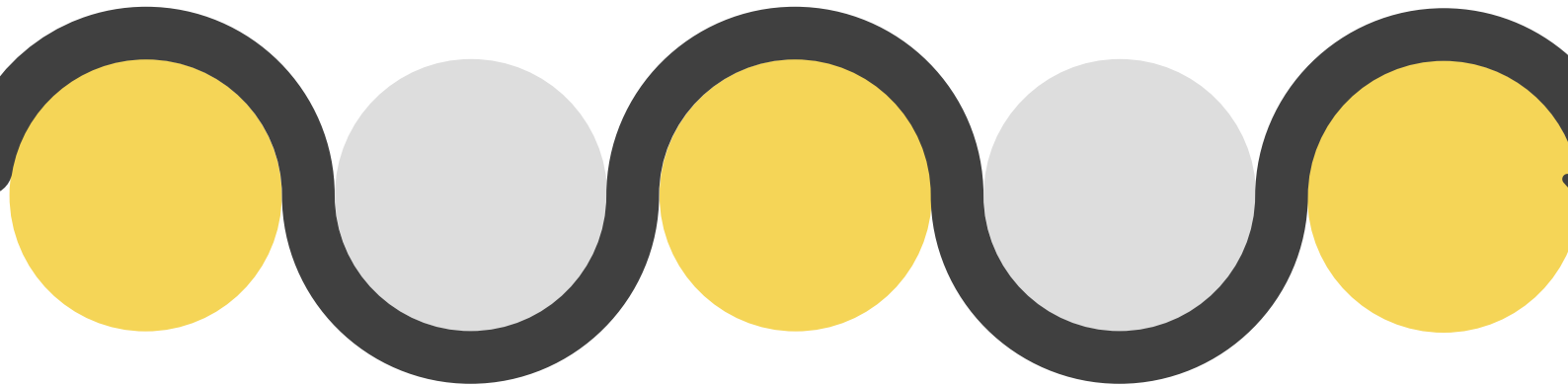
Research in Alternative Global Education

Working Paper Series

April 2025

# From Barriers to Bridges

Examining Rwanda Nook Hub's Role in Transforming  
Learning and Livelihoods in Gahanga, Rwanda



## About Research in Alternative Global Education (RAGE)

Research in Alternative Global Education (RAGE) is the research arm of Project DEFY ([www.projectdefy.org](http://www.projectdefy.org)) dedicated to creating knowledge about alternative education and meaningfully involving learners and communities in the production of knowledge.

RAGE serves as a platform to identify gaps in the global knowledge landscape focusing on alternative education and bridge these through empirical evidence from 'Nooks'. Set up in marginalised communities with limited access to resources, Nooks are alternative community learning spaces that follow principles of self-designed-learning. Nooks are currently located in 32 locations across India, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Uganda.

RAGE provides a collaborative learning space for like-minded researchers, practitioners, and learners who wish to challenge the hegemony of dominant approaches within educational research.

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## About Dream Village Rwanda

Started in 2016, Dream Village is located in Kigali city, Rwanda. The organisation aims to empower vulnerable communities particularly HIV positive young adults and youth to reach their potential. Dream Village runs several projects including the Rwanda Nook Hub, Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters Project (CATS), Bamboo Project and Agriculture Project.

The organisation has collaborated with various partners including Project DEFY, africorps, aidshealth.org, Health Development Initiative Rwanda, UNAIDS, Rwanda Biomedical Centre, Rwanda Civil Society Platform, PLAN International, and Aarogya Seva. More information about Dream Village can be found here: <https://dreamvillagerw.org/>

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all learners, parents, community members and government officials from Rwanda who gave us their valuable time and participated in our study. We would especially like to acknowledge the contribution of the 3 learners, Dusabimana Chadrack, Iradukunda Aisha, Iradukunda Evode, who led various aspects of the data collection process and supported preliminary analysis. Lastly, we are grateful to the Project DEFY and Dream Village teams for helping us plan and execute the study.

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# Abstract

Despite Rwanda's positive macroeconomic performance over the past two decades, **youth continue to face structural and financial barriers to education and youth unemployment** persists in the country. The Rwanda Nook Hub, an initiative by **Dream Village Organisation** and **Project DEFY**, aims to address these challenges through a community-based model of learning, skill building and holistic development.

This study addresses **motivations of youth in Gahanga to join the Nook**, the Hub's impact on **acquiring skills and livelihood opportunities**, and how the benefits spillover to the community. Through a **mixed-methods approach** (including surveys, interviews, focus group discussions) with the key stakeholders - learners, parents, community members, and government officials, the study finds that the Nook serves as an **inclusive learning environment** that enables learners to acquire key technical and soft skills, further supporting them in securing livelihood opportunities. In terms of enhanced income, we find **all learners report securing income from projects completed at the Nook**, with the majority of learners earning for the first time. Learners are able to identify their chosen technical skills through the Nook's **self-designed learning approach** designed to ignite curiosity in learning. The effects of the learning philosophy and skills spillover to the community through positive **behavioural changes in the household, emergence of role models**, and creating projects that address persistent challenges in the community. The study also **highlights gaps such as relatively low awareness of the impacts of the Hub at the community level** and recommends strategies for enhancing the impact of the Rwanda Nook Hub in Gahanga and beyond.

**Keywords: youth, skill development, self-designed learning, livelihoods, community transformation, Rwanda**

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# Acronyms

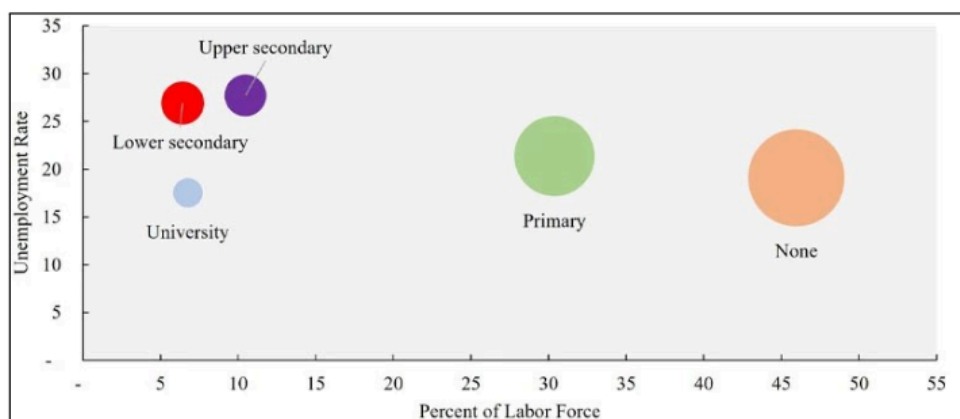
<b>RAGE</b>	Research in Alternative Global Education
<b>CATS</b>	Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters
<b>NEET</b>	Not in Employment, Education or Training
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>TVET</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
<b>RWN</b>	Rwanda Women's Network
<b>NEP</b>	National Employment Programme
<b>GPE</b>	Global Partnership for Education
<b>SDL</b>	Self-Designed Learning
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>RNH</b>	Rwanda Nook Hub

# 1. Introduction

Rwanda's transformation in the past two decades has been hailed as an exemplary illustration of **economic growth and poverty reduction**. Fueled by structural reforms, “**growth rates since 1995—the year after the genocide— have averaged 8 per cent annually** over this period, more than four times the decade before. Poverty rates have fallen, maternal health has improved, and infant mortality has plummeted” (Ggombe & Newfarmer, 2018, p317). Estimates show that “**Rwanda's GDP is expected to increase by 7.2 percent on average in 2024–26**” (World Bank, 2024, p1). With a GDP per capita of US\$1060, the largest contributor is the **services sector (45%)**, followed by agriculture (26%) and industries (21%) (ibid.). Ggombe & Newfarmer (2018) note four factors that have contributed to this remarkable growth story - first, the government's role in the period of recovery and reconstruction; second, the shift of labour from low-productivity to high-productivity activities, showcased by decreasing reliance on agriculture initially towards services and now manufacturing; third, establishing international partnerships and enhancing foreign direct investments to fuel growth; and fourth is the pre-eminence of industries such as agro-processing, information and communication technology as movers of growth.

Yet, despite **positive macroeconomic trends**, challenges in **employment and employability** remain, particularly for Rwanda's large youth population. Rwanda's population is predominantly young, with **78% of Rwandans below the age of 35** (UNDP, 2024). The youth bulk in Rwanda, like in many other countries, presents itself as both an opportunity and a challenge. ILOStats show that more than **one in four young people in Africa (72 million) fall under the ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET) category with two-thirds of these being young women** (ILOStat, 2023). Rwanda's NEET figures are equally disconcerting. According to the “**Rwanda Labor Force Survey, 2022, about 34.2 percent of the youth aged 16-30 years (approximately 1.1 million) are in NEET, majority in rural areas, with a higher proportion of NEET women (35 percent) compared to men (27 percent)**” (World Bank, 2024, p2). Moreover, **higher education has not led to employment opportunities and “unemployment rates are particularly high among individuals with a secondary or high school education** - more than for those with no or just an elementary or primary education” (World Bank, 2023) - see figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment, 2021



Source: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/nasikiliza/jobs-vs-skills-conundrum-how-do-we-create-enough-quality-jobs-and-skill-population-meet>

**Identifying and overcoming challenges in skilling and education for youth in Rwanda** has been a major policy priority. This paper discusses one such initiative - **the Rwanda Nook Hub** - a partnership between **Dream Village Rwanda** and **Project DEFY**, supported by **Leopold Bachmann Foundation**, to address this crisis for young people and communities in Rwanda. Before we introduce the specific objectives of the study, this section provides an overview of **various initiatives** that have been introduced by the **government** and a range of actors from **multilateral institutions to civil society organisations** to improve opportunities for Rwanda's burgeoning youth. **Table 1** below summarises selected programmes that target youth to improve **livelihoods, skill development, entrepreneurship and community leadership**.

Table 1: Initiatives in Rwanda to enhance skill development and livelihood opportunities for youth

	USAID Rwanda Akazi Kanoze Youth Livelihoods Project   EDC	Kora Wige Program (Work and Earn Program)	TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) Programs	The Hanga Umurimo Program	Rwanda Women's Network (RWN) Youth Programs	The National Employment Program (NEP)
<b>Key Area of the Programme</b>	Youth workforce development and livelihood skills training	Job creation and skills development for youth	Vocational skills training and education	Promoting entrepreneurship and business development	Youth empowerment, gender equality, and leadership	Job creation, entrepreneurship, and workforce development
<b>Target Audience</b>	Vulnerable youth aged 14–24 in Rwanda	Young entrepreneurs and unemployed youth	Youth seeking technical skills and employment opportunities	Entrepreneurs, especially youth and women	Young women and girls	Job seekers, entrepreneurs, and youth
<b>Geographic Spread</b>	Nationwide, with a focus on urban and semi-urban areas	Various districts across Rwanda	Nationwide through vocational training centers	Nationwide	Primarily focused on Kigali and rural communities	Nationwide
<b>Partnership Model</b>	Implemented in partnership with local NGOs, government agencies, and private sector stakeholders	Collaboration between government agencies and private companies	Public-private partnerships, supported by the Ministry of Education and donor agencies	Implemented by the government in collaboration with financial institutions and local authorities	Partnerships with local NGOs, community groups, and international donors	Government led, in collaboration with private sector and international organizations

Source: Author's work. 2025

## 1.2 Literature Review of Challenges and Opportunities in Building Youth Skills and Livelihoods in Rwanda

Globally, there has been an increasing recognition of entrepreneurial literacy combined with innovation skills, ICT, emotional regulation, among others, as comprising the framework for 21st century skills, considered necessary to adapt to uncertainty such as structural changes in the economy (see GPE, 2020 for the ‘Framework for 21st Century Learning’). The Rwanda Management Institute’s module on ‘Entrepreneurship, Skills and Management’ recognises this link and includes goals such as, “**to develop and enhance such qualities as creativity, inventiveness and independent problem-solving skills**” (Rwanda Management Institute, 2020) in its module overview.

Despite existence of these **holistic frameworks**, Dinika (2024)’s study on **digital skills and entrepreneurship training in Rwanda** finds a “potential misalignment between skills supplied and practical application [which] underscores the need to complement technical content with hands-on learning and post-training guidance” (Dinika, 2024, p7) and recommends **strengthening support systems** in the form of **finances and guidance** to encourage entrepreneurship. In terms of **youth employment programmes in Rwanda**, Muhanguzi (2024)’s comprehensive review reveals **successes and barriers in implementation**.

Through **key informant interviews** of policymakers at national and district levels, the study notes challenges such as “shortage of individuals with strong technical skills, poor alignment between the skills taught in vocational training centers and market needs...[and] cultural bias as one of the hurdles limiting female youths from participating in the labor market” (Muhanguzi, 2024, p7).

Beyond formal programmes, D’Angelo et al. (2022) note an increase in the number of non-formal initiatives focused on 21st century learning and life skills development for youth. Their study focused on adolescent participants and mentors within the ‘Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence’ consortium in Rwanda across the Southern Province (Huye district), the Eastern Province (Ngoma district), and Kigali city (Gasabo district). Importantly, the study looks at gendered development of these skills and notes key pedagogical factors enabling these outcomes including experiential learning opportunities, safe spaces and trusting relationships, and mentors as role models. Important takeaways from the study include the role of trust and safe spaces in developing life-skills for vulnerable adolescents and youth.

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These studies **highlight various challenges and opportunities in developing youth skills and enhancing livelihood opportunities, including misalignment between training and opportunities, inadequate post-training support and the importance of developing trust-based relationships in programmes to foster safe spaces.** Addressing these barriers necessitates alternative ways of imagining learning and skill development. This paper presents one such initiative - the **Rwanda Nook Hub**, and discusses how its unique **pedagogical inclination of self-designed learning** through a **community-based approach** supports youth livelihoods and opportunities in Gahanga, Rwanda.

## 1.3 Rwanda Nook Hub and Situating Objectives of our Study

The Rwanda Nook Hub (RNH) is a self-learning and skill development community centre set up in 2019 through a collaboration between Dream Village Rwanda and Project DEFY, and supported by Leopold Bachmann Stiftung. RNH is a local adaptation of the 'Nook' i.e. "physical community learning spaces with principles of self-designed learning (SDL) as the overarching pedagogical inclination that enables people to explore their interests" (Project DEFY, 2023, p10) (1). Nooks are currently spread across 5 countries - India, Bangladesh, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Rwanda.

RNH is located in Gahanga, Kicukiro district in the outskirts of Kigali City. Gahanga faces several challenges including high numbers of unemployed youth with inadequate learning and skilling opportunities, infrastructural challenges related to power and electricity, scarcity of clean drinking water and limited economic resources.

Acknowledging these structural challenges and dearth of opportunities, RNH was set up in Gahanga to provide a space for youth to develop holistic skilling and learning, and support community transformation. The key levers for realising these outcomes include knowledge sharing among Nook learners and community members, community involvement in the Nook through initiatives such as gardening and the community radio station, a platform for discussing approaches to solve pressing community challenges, enabling mindset shifts through the learning approach and supporting post-Nook opportunities for learners through guidance and mentorship. RNH considers a gender-transformative approach to learning by encouraging girls to take up STEM and technical skills usually reserved for boys in the community environment. Moreover, the centre places emphasis on developing a safe space for learners to develop bonds and build trusting relationships. RNH's emphasis on interest-driven learning by doing, and experiential approach distinguishes it from curriculum-based modules on skill development.

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(1) See <https://projectdefy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAGE-Working-Paper-Series-1.pdf> for details on the Nook model, composition of learning cycles through the self-designed-learning approach



The approach is intended to foster creativity, entrepreneurial skills and build a sense of purpose for learners.

More than 5 years since the inception of the RNH, the implementing partners - Project DEFY and Dream Village Rwanda - conducted a research study with the following objectives:

- To understand why vulnerable communities come to the Nook and to what extent the space fosters a sense of trust and safety
- To understand how the Nook has responded to the community's needs and aspirations in Gahanga
- To understand the influence of the Nook on post-cycle opportunities and livelihood outcomes

The study included the following research questions to understand these aspects in greater detail:

**Research Question 1 - What are some reasons why people come to the Nook (particularly vulnerable groups)?**

**Research Question 2 - How does the Nook address community needs and aspirations?**

**Research Question 3 - How has the approach to learning in the Nook enhanced economic opportunities for the learners?**

In addition to these questions, we include a section on programme and policy recommendations to link our findings from the study to share areas of improvement for the RNH and implications for the wider skill development and youth employment ecosystem in Rwanda.



## 2. Methodology

The study utilises a **mixed-methods approach** to research combining **quantitative and qualitative data sources** including **surveys, focus group discussions (FGD), interviews and participatory methods**. The **timeline of the data collection period** was **September to October 2024** and involved **4 key stakeholders - RNH learners, their parents, community members and government officials** familiar with the programme. Prior to data collection, the **Project DEFY team conducted a 2-day training** at RNH with 2 Nook Managers and 3 learners who had spent significant time at RNH. The learners led certain aspects of the data collection process including administering surveys, acting as team leaders in the ranking exercise, and presenting learnings from the entire process at the **‘Research Exhibition’**. This **‘peer research’** technique was intended to **enhance the capacity of learners in data collection, analysis and public speaking**. Further, all data collection was conducted in **Kinyarwanda** and later translated to **English** for purposes of analysis.

The **breakdown of respondents** in the study can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2 - Study Participant Profile

Respondent Category	Number of Respondents	Average age (if applicable)	Gender Breakdown	Methods of data collection for each category
Learners <sup>2</sup>	16	21 years	9 Males; 7 Females	Survey, FGD, Participatory Methods
Parents	9	NA	3 Males; 6 Females	FGD, Participatory Methods
Community Members	5	NA	6 Males	FGD, Participatory Methods
Government Representatives	2	NA	2 Males	Interview

(2) To assess the impact of recent activities at the Nook and post-cycle opportunities, learners who had completed the most recent cycle (the 4th cycle) were selected for inclusion in the study.

Barring the ‘**research exhibition**,’ where all stakeholders came together to discuss learnings from the exercise, data collection was conducted separately for each group (i.e. there was no inter-mixing of groups during the focus group discussions). The **description and purpose of each data collection tool** is as follows:

Table 3: Data Collection Overview

<b>Data collection Technique</b>	<b>Overview</b>
1. Survey	1 Survey was administered to learners to understand opportunities after completing a cycle at the Nook and how the Nook had helped them in this new role.
2. Interview	2 interviews were conducted with government officials to understand broader impacts of the Nook in Gahanga and how learning opportunities through the Nook supported community transformation. Additionally, officials were asked for their suggestions to enhance the impact of the Nook.
3. FGD	3 sets of FGDs were administered to learners, parents, and community members. The questions differed for each group. For parents, the focus was on changes in the home environment once learners started coming to the Nook; for learners, it focused more on their aspirations and how the Nook supported these; and for community members, there was a wider discussion around the Nook’s role in the community.
4. Ranking exercises	These were done with learners at the beginning of the data collection period to first discuss their challenges and aspirations (at a personal and community level) and use ranking methods at a group level to identify the top 3 challenges and aspirations.
5. Research Exhibition	At the end of the data collection period, stakeholders from each group - learners, parents, community members, and local government - were asked to come together at the Nook. We discussed the learnings from the exercise and shared the key areas identified by each group. This was followed by collaborative brainstorming to identify how the Nook’s impact could be strengthened further.

## 2.1 Ethical Considerations and Limitations of our Study

To ensure **high standards of ethical data collection** in our study, we took the following measures:

- Explaining the objectives of the exercise to research participants and emphasising that they could participate only in those aspects of the study they were comfortable with;
- Collecting signed consent from all participants (from a parent in case the participant was below 18 years);
- Assigning codes to participants in data analysis and anonymising all data presented in this study to protect the privacy and confidentiality of respondents.

Despite adequate planning and safeguarding measures, there are certain **limitations in our study** that are important to contextualise in light of the sample and findings. Specifically, **Table 3 notes a skewed gender distribution of respondents** with a higher number of males. In two of the data collection exercises, we were only able to speak to males. While limitations on availability, higher number of **male government representatives**, and **burden of domestic chores for females** were primary barriers to ensure an equal gender representation in our sample, we acknowledge that the **dominance of a particular group** within activities is a **key limitation** of the present study. Yet, when this challenge emerged, we began to iterate the study design and ensure an equal representation of males and females in the research exhibition.

A second limitation of our study is that the **learners we spoke to had recently completed the 4th cycle in the Nook**. While many of the 4th cycle learners had participated in previous cycles at the Nook, **learners exclusively from the first three cycles were not included in the study**. Hence, we exercise a degree of **caution in generalising the specific quantified outcomes** related to livelihoods to all former Nook learners. We recommend **conducting a separate survey** sampling equal numbers of learners from different cycles to **ascertain the average livelihood impact** and how this may differ with time spent at the Nook.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our study's use of **participatory methods** was **uniquely positioned to understand the experiences** of different research participants and **highlight the impact of the Nook** on these groups. In the following section, we present the key findings from our study.

# 3. Findings

## *Motivations For Coming to the Nook*

### **Barriers to Schooling, Free access to RNH and Developing Confidence**

From the perspective of parents, high school fees and financial barriers to continue formal education were the primary reasons for their children's participation in the Nook (3). It must be noted that RNH does not charge any fee and is open for all learners irrespective of their educational background and financial status. For learners, while high school fees were the initial reasons why they were drawn to the Nook, a learner stated, "typically, among school dropouts, many lack confidence because they feel they haven't achieved anything but exposure to learning allows Nook learners to develop confidence."

### **Lack of Workshops in Gahanga and Skill Development Opportunities at the Nook**

High rates of unemployment and lack of workshops for hands-on learning remained a concern for learners and they expressed the value of coming to the Nook against this backdrop. They expressed the wide availability of tools to undertake practical projects across a range of skills such as tailoring, welding, photography, and music production. Flexibility of timings was a key factor to enable wide participation of learners, taking into account competing responsibilities. Moreover, the aspect of 'relevance' was highly associated with the skills acquired in the Nook, as compared to experiences of learners in formal education.

### **Safe spaces - Addressing Social Barriers and Stigma**

Beyond economic factors, respondents pointed to social norms and stigma in the community that limited opportunities for the youth. A local government official stated, "some parents restrict their children from pursuing their passions (especially girls) due to traditional beliefs. But the Nook has shown these young people they can achieve their dreams. Learners now have confidence in their skills, are more open minded, and inspire others in the community."

In line with the lack of rigid eligibility criteria, learners emphasised that "gender and disability is not a barrier to come to the Nook - it has a welcoming environment that helps fight stigma." Parents of children with disabilities reiterated this aspect further and a father recalled how his child found it difficult to integrate with formal institutions due to low sensitivity and awareness around inclusive infrastructure. He acknowledged how the Nook had welcomed his child and provided a safe environment for learning and making him feel safe.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Ministry of Education's '2021/22 Education Statistical Yearbook' School for the year ended in July 2022, the national dropout rate in secondary schools was 9.2% - with males at 9.7% and females at 8.7% (Ministry of Education, 2022, p56).

# *The Nook's Role in Addressing Community Needs and Aspirations*

*Through the ranking exercises with learners, they came up with the three most pressing challenges in the community: first, the lack of workshops in Gabanga; second, alcohol and drug abuse; and third, unplanned pregnancy which caused further social and economic strain on girls and their families. Other challenges discussed included unemployment, lack of capital to start businesses, high taxes for purchasing land for businesses, and pressure from families to gain productive employment from a young age.*

All four stakeholders were presented with these challenges described by the learners and were asked how the Nook specifically addressed them.

## **Behavioural Change Among Learners and Spillover Effects in the Home Environment**

Learners and parents pointed out that the Nook's learning environment provided an avenue for productive use of their time and built a sense of discipline among learners. Beyond technical skills, the team activities at the Nook and exhibitions helped learners enhance confidence, communication skills and public speaking. A learner mentioned "positive behavioural changes that discouraged drug abuse through creating a sense of community at the Nook," connecting it to previous findings around how RNH was able to build a safe space for learners.

Parents mentioned other behavioural aspects that spilled over to the household. These included supporting family expenses through monetising projects at the Nook and learners picking up the habit of saving. Community members stated, "the Nook provides space to obtain new skills that are relevant for each household - for example, growing a kitchen garden in the Nook is a good idea to replicate within people's homes." Parents similarly discussed how learners had begun planting vegetables at home for consumption and building household furniture like chairs or tables using their carpentry skills.





## Positive Role Models at the Nook

Seen parallelly with the collaborative team-based approach to projects at the Nook, learners modelled positive behaviour for others to emulate. Learners mentioned, “several learners have excelled in areas that they experimented with at the Nook including *Fashion, Music, Carpentry, and Design* - these encourage other learners in the community and build trust in learners’ skills.” Notable examples of such instances include the case of 19-year-old David and 23-year-old Chadrack.

Chadrack joined RNH in 2022 and explored various creative fields, including art, photography, and graphic design. However, he found his true passion in fashion design and launched his own brand, Abami X. He designs clothes and collaborates with various models to post his work on Instagram. He is now integrating all his skills into the fashion industry, combining design, editing, visual storytelling, branding and sales.



A glimpse of Agami X on Instagram

David pursued his interest in music at RNH and developed his skills in playing multiple instruments and music production. He started his own YouTube channel and released four songs with views ranging from 91 to 667. He also uses AI generated videos to accompany the music, a skill he taught himself at the Nook.



David practices om his music software

## Projects that Address Local Challenges

While more structural challenges such as burden of taxes or infrastructural issues were not addressed by RNH, several learners and community members pointed to the uptake of specific projects that solved local challenges. Learners mentioned how **“Nook learners have created several products which were not earlier available in the community. For instance, space saving furniture helps the community because of inadequate space in the homes.”** Similarly, projects combined carpentry skills with an awareness of the pressing water scarcity issues in Gahanga and developed a prototype for a modular kitchen that reused water.



## ***Livelihood Outcomes and Opportunities for Learners beyond the Nook***

Given unemployment and lack of workshops in Gahanga, RNH serves as a space for taking up practical projects and enhancing skills. We administered a survey to the learners who had completed the fourth cycle and asked them specifically about livelihood outcomes and the role of the Nook in making these opportunities accessible for them. The key results are as follows:

- **Learners included in the survey had spent between 6 months and 4 years at the Nook and completed between 1 and 5 projects in total. Involvement in multiple cycles was noted for the majority of the learners, indicating an increased proficiency in honing particular skills.**
- **93.8% learners who had completed the cycle were engaged in some form of livelihood activity, with the highest percentage noted in the self-employed/ business category (43.8%).** Learners had been engaged in livelihood activities between 1 month and 5 years, highlighting a significant variation in the duration of sustained employment. Moreover, the learners were involved in these activities within Gahanga itself, with only exceptions of 2 learners going to Bugesera and Muhanga (adjacent districts).
- **56.25% of learners were earning for the first time after coming to the Nook.** Of those who were earning before coming to the Nook, the average pre-Nook income was 30,000 FRW. **All learners reported an increase in income after completing one or more cycles.**
- **All learners responded ‘Yes’ to the question, ‘Did you earn any money on the products/services that you created at the Nook?’**
- **While 81.3% learners reported their income in the category 80,000 FRW or less after coming to the Nook,** a smaller proportion of learners earned between 80,000 320,000 FRW per month on average, showcasing a significant increase in income after coming to the Nook.



- Connecting these opportunities to learner experiences in the Nook

>Total sales on products of all learners was 4,866,000 FRW (3493 USD). Individual sales varied from 7,000 FRW to 1,000,000 FRW with a median sale price of 230,000 FRW.

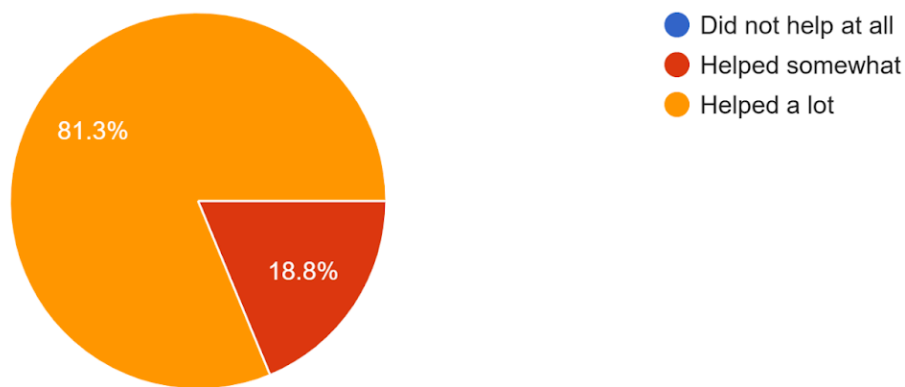
>Moreover, 93.8% learners said that they received orders for similar products after the cycle as well.

>Majority of learners (81.3%) also said that their experience at the Nook helped their career prospects a lot. See Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Link between learner experience at the Nook and career prospects**

16. Do you think that your experience at the Nook helped you in your career prospects? (single selection) Ese utekereza ko igihe umaze muri N...agufasha mubyo uteganya kuzakora mu gihe kizaza?

16 responses



Specifically, learners were asked to connect the skills used in their current job to those learnt at the Nook. There was a significant overlap between technical skills such as welding, carpentry, fashion design, music production, tailoring, and digital skills (using laptops). In addition, learners pointed to soft skills such as ‘confidence, public speaking, and social interaction’ as helpful in their current roles.

-In the FGD with learners, they pointed out that “Nook networks help learners get internships and further employment opportunities in the community.” Community members alluded to this through an observation that the Nook exhibition, designed to present learner projects to the community, served as an important platform for learners to develop connections and receive more opportunities.

## 4. Discussion

The findings from our study highlight the role of the Nook in addressing economic, social and structural challenges faced by youth in Gahanga. In this section, we highlight major implications of the key findings from our study and how these can be further addressed in the following sections.

First, we find that barriers to formal education from an affordability lens drive youth to the Nook, which is viewed as an accessible learning space. The Nook addresses this by setting low barriers to entry - including free access and inclusion of youth from all social and financial backgrounds. As emphasised by learners and parents, the lack of workshops and economic precarity in Gahanga pushes youth to seek skill development for augmenting income and strengthening future opportunities. These findings align with broader literature that demonstrate the value of enabling multiple educational pathways with low barriers to entry for learners to acquire skill-based learning beyond formal institutional modes.

Second, in terms of livelihood outcomes, the high percentage of learners (93.8%) who engaged in some form of livelihood activity after completing the fourth cycle demonstrates the viability of the Nook in supporting learners to acquire income-generating opportunities. The wide range of skills acquired at the Nook - from carpentry, welding, to music production - and networks available through the Nook are deemed useful by learners in their future vocations. Beyond technical skills, learners highlight soft skills such as developing confidence, discipline and engaging in public speaking as equally important to excel in their work. Acquiring 'technical' and 'soft' skills further aligns to previously discussed frameworks on 21st century learning that can support holistic development for youth.



Third, the Nook's inclusive ethos through free and equitable access and providing a safe space for experimentation highlights its role in building inclusive learning environments. The impact of the Nook goes beyond individual learners' projects to encompass the wider community through spillover effects. As mentioned by parents, they find positive behavioural changes within the home environment with learners contributing to household expenses, and adopting the habit of savings. Community members further note the relevance of projects in tackling community challenges (space-saving furniture, community gardening, among others). Finally, the influence of positive role models in the Nook is seen as an example for fellow learners and youth in the community to participate in the Nook's activities and engage in practical hands-on learning to excel in their chosen skill-set.

While many of these findings positively highlight the impact of the Nook in areas such as skill-development, supporting livelihood opportunities and community building, we find that there are certain aspects that can be further strengthened to enhance the Nook's reach. In the following section, we outline recommendations for the programme stakeholders and policymakers based on our findings.



## 5. Recommendations

We recommend the following strategies to enhance the impact of the Nook and similar learning environments in Gahanga and beyond.

**Enhancing Lifelong Learning:** While Nook learners spend a dedicated amount of time at the Nook to build their projects, most learners move on to pursue livelihood opportunities after completing a cycle. Given the learning philosophy of the Nook and its emphasis on learning through everyday resources and experiences, we recommend enhancing opportunities for learning that can be done independently (from the Nook) - at home, in transit, and even while undertaking jobs. Take-home projects through easily accessible resources or providing small incentives for continuous skill building can support learning (and not just livelihoods) beyond the Nook. Moreover, the effects of at-home projects can enhance the reach of the learning philosophy further by involving family members, who currently see themselves as disconnected from the learning process of the Nook.

**Market Linkages:** While the Nook has taken a positive first step in enhancing livelihood opportunities for learners, more can be done to extend support systems for learners through market linkages with companies, start-ups, and community leaders and provide start-up capital for learners with an entrepreneurial bent.

**Dedicated Entrepreneurship and Business Development Opportunities :** In addition to the recommendation above, for learners inclined towards entrepreneurship and self-employment, tailored support through mentorship and capital can help increase the aspirational value for such avenues. Examples include DEFY's SANDBOX programme.

**Enhancing Engagement with Local Leaders and Government Officials:** During data collection, local leaders and government officials expressed their support for enhancing the reach and impact of the Nook. Regular deliberations with these stakeholders can provide a strong push for Nook outreach, develop crucial connections for market linkages, promotion of existing skill-sets at the Nook, and influence local policy on skill development.

**Continuous Evaluation of Programme Impacts:** While most community members are aware of the Nook's role in skill development, there is relatively low awareness around the diverse outcomes and achievements of learners. Many community members continue to view the Nook primarily as a vocational training centre. Continuous evaluation of key impact areas including those within the spectrum of 21st century learning and sharing these widely in the community can strengthen the perception of the Nook as a holistic learning environment.

Moreover, further inquiry around areas and gaps identified in this paper can support a deeper understanding. For instance, to understand the reasons for average incomes being lower than the average, learners can be contacted for follow-ups in addition to the current research study.

**Leveraging Social Media and Digital Platforms:** While there are instances of learners utilising social media to share their projects and market them within the community, these platforms can be further emphasised as a means to secure widespread recognition for learner projects in the community. Through existing resources at the Nook (laptops, free internet access) as well as peer support by learners who have engaged in digital marketing activities, platforms like Instagram, Youtube or X (widely used in Rwanda by the youth and community members) can be utilised to enhance reach and visibility.



## 6. Conclusion

We began by contextualising the skill development ecosystem for youth in Rwanda and the challenges and opportunities from an analysis of existing programmes. Our study intended to examine why people come to the Nook, how the approach to learning supports skill development and livelihood opportunities, and understand RNH's wider community impact. Lastly, we discussed these findings in light of wider programme and policy recommendations. Our core findings highlight RNH's role in providing a flexible learning environment where learners undertake interest-driven skill development through projects and additionally develop confidence through public speaking opportunities and teamwork. These skills help learners acquire income-generating opportunities after completing a cycle at the Nook. We also find spillover effects in the community through behavioural change and contextually relevant projects that address key challenges in Gahanga. In our recommendations, we make note of areas that can be further strengthened to enhance the impact of the Nook such as enhancing lifelong learning for deepening the self-designed learning philosophy, partnership building through engagement with local leaders, continuous evaluation of RNH impact indicators and disseminating these findings to the community, among others.

Overall, the Nook's role in the Gahanga community and its value as an alternative learning pathway emphasises the need for diversifying opportunities and creating spaces that provide hands-on learning for youth. Our study solidifies our belief that community engagement in these spaces can help revitalise peri-urban economies and contribute to a burgeoning entrepreneurial ecosystem at the grassroot level in Rwanda.

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