

# Final Evaluation of VPlus

**Enhancing the capacity of young persons with  
disability through vocational and literacy  
education and training**

**A project based in Gulu, Northern Uganda supported by UK Aid  
Direct's Small Charities Challenge Fund and Enhancing the Capacity  
of Persons with Disability**



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## **Final report**

Prepared by  
Enhancing the Capacity of Persons with Disability  
December 2023

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## ***Acknowledgements***

This report has been prepared by Enhancing the Capacity of Persons with Disability (ETC) Trustees based on information, both quantitative and qualitative, collected by VPlus funded staff at Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), on observations by Trustees and a Mannion Daniels<sup>1</sup> Performance and Risk Manager during visits to the project, and on monthly discussions on progress between ETC and GDPU via Zoom.

ETC would like to thank:

- The staff at GDPU for their enthusiasm and professionalism, their commitment to the wellbeing of their beneficiaries, and their eagerness to discuss how to meet a variety of challenges that were thrown at them, what was working or not working and why and how outcomes and impact could be improved.
- The trainees and graduates who gave up time to provide information for this evaluation and who were open to providing information on progress and the challenges they were facing.
- The staff at Mannion Daniels who asked searching questions on delivery, provided useful advice on delivery and monitoring and evaluation, and helped us overcome bureaucratic hurdles.

Needless to say, any errors in this evaluation are the responsibility of ETC.

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<sup>1</sup> Mannion Daniels manage the UK Aid Direct Programme on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of the British government.

## Executive Summary

VPlus, the subject of this project evaluation, was a two-year training and employment/business support programme for young persons with disabilities in northern Uganda that ran between January 2021 and March 2023. It aimed to increase the economic opportunities for 100 young people by providing two 6-month programmes of vocational training, education and other support followed by post-training support to help graduates secure sustainable employment or self-employment.

The context of this initiative included high levels of poverty, a high percentage of people with disabilities in the local population, negative societal attitudes to young people with disabilities and the lasting effects of the violent upheavals in the region which ended less than 20 years ago. Many of the trainees had received little or no formal education.

Five vocational skill areas were offered during the first 6-month training programme: sweater knitting, hairdressing, design and decoration, motor vehicle repair and maintenance and electronics. An additional sixth skill area of tailoring was offered on the second 6-month programme.

The vocational training was combined with all-important 'Plus' elements of literacy, numeracy and financial literacy; work experience; psychosocial support and cultural and community activity such as traditional dance and music, debates and meetings with other successful young people. Attention to safeguarding was a central element of VPlus. All these elements were fundamental to success because they built confidence and self-esteem.

The long-term support to graduates in establishing and sustaining businesses or employment, a further 'Plus' element, also proved to be essential for success. A small revolving capital loan fund, as an alternative to grants, was established to help graduates with their start-up costs.

VPlus was jointly funded by the UK-based Enhancing the Capacity of Persons with Disability charity (ETC) and the FCDO's UK Aid Direct under the latter's Small Charities Challenge Fund grant programme. It was delivered by Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), an umbrella organisation of disability organisations based in Gulu, the largest city in Northern Uganda and the region's capital.

The overall expenditure on the project was £57,988 (UGX 266,218,000, UGX= Ugandan shillings) with ETC providing £29,170 and UK Aid Direct £28,818.

VPlus was a great success, exceeding its demanding outcome and output targets and as evidenced in the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the graduates almost all of whom have benefitted both economically and socially. Against a target of 100, 119 young people were recruited of whom 115 graduated, a remarkably low dropout rate particularly in the light of the five-month Covid-19 lockdown of training and educational institutions during the first 6-month programme. GDPU staff moved heaven and earth to ensure trainees could continue training at home or as apprentices at workplaces that weren't locked down during these five months.

As of March 2023, at least 107 of the VPlus graduates (93%) had secured employment or were establishing a business that was earning income and at least 94 (82%)

graduates had increased the income they earned before they started on the project. At reflection meetings of graduates organised to learn lessons and to identify the continued support graduates needed, many talked about how VPlus had transformed their lives.

According to more detailed data outcomes, were high for females and males demonstrating that young women have been included in the benefits of VPlus. More women were recruited (66F, 53M), graduated (66F, 49M) and were employed or self-employed (58F, 40M) than men. **Every female trainee graduated.** Safeguarding policy and practice were essential drivers of gender inclusion.

There was also success across all types of impairment/disability including physical, visual and hearing impaired, those with epilepsy, albinos and those with mental health issues or learning difficulties.

Others benefited from VPlus in addition to the young people with disability; 20 GDPU Board members and staff were trained in sign language, safeguarding and strategy development, and 12 work placement providers were trained in safeguarding and managing trainees. Indirect beneficiaries included at least 260 family members of the trainees who benefitted from the increased income brought in, and local communities where there is evidence of improving social attitudes towards people with disabilities. GDPU's capacity to deliver training and business support has also increased.

### ***Reasons for success***

What were the key success factors behind VPlus that GDPU needs to sustain and that other providers can learn from?

1. Dedicated, skilled, flexible, innovative and, above all, caring and beneficiary-centred staff who are supported by the delivery organisation's management and Board.
2. Interactive support by funders throughout delivery which recognised and acted upon the fundamental importance of local knowledge.
3. Networks in local communities, with other civic society organisations and private and public organisations, including local state institutions.
4. Engagement of parents and other relatives from an early stage and throughout.
5. Planning provision based on an understanding of the barriers faced by young people with different impairments.
6. Adequate facilities and equipment to deliver the training.
7. Quality skills training based on good local labour and product market research.
8. 'Plus' elements based on an understanding of the impact of intended beneficiaries' limited participation in formal education and the marginalisation by society of people with disabilities.
9. Strong safeguarding policies and practices with responsibility taken by caring and skilled staff.

10. Recognising the need for post-training support for a significant period of time that is based on the identified needs and demands of each graduate cohort.

11. Good feedback mechanisms with beneficiaries and staff.

12. An evaluative and problem-solving approach.

### **Areas for improvement**

What are the main areas for improvement?

- The need for more than the **literacy and numeracy and financial literacy training** available over 6-months to fully tackle the challenges facing graduates in these areas.
- Issues around **financial literacy and record keeping** are probably best dealt with in the post-training phase as it is only when graduates are trying to establish and sustain their businesses that the importance of good financial records is fully appreciated.
- Operation of the **revolving loan fund**. A major challenge was changing the expectation that a grant or an 'in-kind' donation (such as tools) would be provided for start-up rather than an interest-free loan. This combined with slow or erratic business revenue in the early days to make repayments of loans slower than scheduled in many cases. These difficulties were expected and operation of the fund has been and continues to be a learning and capacity building exercise for GDPU.
- It became clear in the months following the graduation of Cohort 2 those living in remote areas with dispersed populations were finding it difficult to find a sufficiently large market for their products and services. They often had to travel substantial distances to earn sufficient income and this was costly and difficult for trainees with mobility impairments. This issue was partly obscured initially by the availability of seasonal employment/self-employment, primarily in agriculture. This has raised the need to improve market research in these more remote areas and to offer training in different vocational areas to those who lived in these places.

### **Sustainability**

The successes of VPlus have led to a big increase in demand for repeats of the training programme and post-training support from across northern Uganda. This demand cannot be met adequately unless further funding is secured. A smaller training programme charging fees has been started at GDPU following the completion of VPlus and individual sponsorship is being sought for trainees whose families cannot afford these fees. The search for further funding continues.

In addition, ETC is funding a further two years of post-training support to the VPlus graduates as experience has shown longer term support than that allowed by the two-year SCCF grant is essential for success.

Funding has also been secured for a music production course for vocational trainees and the integration of music into the vocational curriculum at GDPU.



### **Some of the recommendations**

1. Continue to deliver and seek funding to deliver similar training and post-training support as VPlus.
2. Explore ways that adequate literacy and numeracy education can be provided for those for whom 6 months training is not enough.
3. Conduct more rigorous local market assessments in remote areas and consider developing new, more appropriate skill areas to train people from these areas. Also, continue to assess whether certain skill areas are 'saturated' in more populated areas. Monitor technological changes in all skill areas.
4. Establish the training and post-training support service as a distinct training institution within GDPU management and governance structures.
5. Examine the possibility of developing a system of work-based apprenticeship-style training with the use of distance learning material.
6. Develop proposals for the training of trainers and for advising schools and other training institutions on ensuring people with disabilities are included and not marginalised.
7. FCDO should reinstate funding smaller charities helping civic society organisations deliver development objectives.

## 1. Introduction

*“Before enrolling for the skills training in 2022, I was not valued in my family because of my medical condition, I dropped out of school because no one bothered to keep me in school. I was seen as marriage material at a very young age,*

*The VPlus project change everything. It was a miracle. I can say I learnt new employable skills in hairdressing, I identified my talent and potential through music, dance and drama.”*

Adoch Fiona, VPlus Graduate

*“The overall assessment ... is that the project has scored an A+ with outcomes exceeding expectations.”*

UK Aid Direct feedback on VPlus Project Completion Report

VPlus was a training and employment/business support programme for young persons with disabilities in northern Uganda that ran between January 2021 and March 2023. It recruited 119 young people to two 6-month vocational training projects of whom 115 graduated. Graduates then received continuing support and, where specific needs were identified, participated in additional short training courses.

The context of this initiative included:

- the high levels of poverty in northern Uganda,
- a high percentage of people with disabilities in the local population,
- negative societal attitudes to the capabilities of young people with disabilities which are a barrier to their economic and social opportunities and destroy their self-esteem, and
- lasting effects of the violent upheavals in the region which ended less than 20 years ago.

The training and support were delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic and had to cope with a five-month lockdown of training and educational institutions.

As of March 2023, 107 of the VPlus graduates (93%<sup>2</sup>) had secured employment or were establishing a business that was earning income and at least 94 (82%) graduates had increased the income they earn before they started on the project. These are just some of the indicators that the project has been a great success, exceeding its demanding outcome and output targets. Success is also evidenced in the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the graduates.

### VPlus in greater detail

VPlus was jointly funded by the UK-based Enhancing the Capacity of Persons with Disability charity (ETC) and UK Aid Direct under the latter's Small Charities Challenge Fund (SCCF) grant programme<sup>3</sup>. It was delivered by Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), an umbrella organisation of disability organisations based in Gulu, which is

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<sup>2</sup> The percentages are based on the 113 graduates working on establishing a business or finding a job to earn income as one of the 115 graduates continued with further training and one tragically died a few weeks after graduating.

<sup>3</sup> The original name for the programme in the application to the SCCF programme was 'Enhancing the Capacity of Young Persons with Disability through Vocational and Literacy Education and Training'. VPlus was adopted later as it is much shorter.

dedicated to improving the socio-economic welfare of persons with disability and empowering them to create a society where there is dignity for every person with disability. Gulu is the largest town in northern Uganda and GDPU trained and supported young people from Gulu and surrounding Districts.

Five vocational skill areas (the V in VPlus) were offered during the first 6-month training programme. These were selected following an assessment of market relevancy, that is, the demand for those skills in local labour markets, an indicator of the likelihood of trainees securing sustainable employment or self-employment. These were:

- sweater knitting,
- hairdressing,
- design and decoration,
- motor vehicle repair and maintenance and
- electronics.

The trainees decided which skill they wanted to learn following a discussion with GDPU staff and their families.

An additional sixth skill area of tailoring was offered on the second 6-month training programme following requests from trainees.

The vocational training was combined with all-important 'Plus' elements of training/education in:

- literacy,
- numeracy,
- financial literacy including business plan preparation,
- work experience,
- psychosocial support and
- cultural and community activity (including traditional dance and music, debates, visits to other training institutions and meetings with other successful young people including graduates from previous training programmes who had established sustainable businesses).

These elements were fundamental to success, as this evaluation will show, because they built confidence and self-esteem. Many of the trainees had received little or no formal education.

The long-term support to graduates in establishing and sustaining businesses or employment, a further 'Plus' element, also proved to be essential for success. A small revolving capital loan fund, as an alternative to grants, was established to help graduates with their start-up costs. This was based upon lessons learnt from similar training projects. In these trainees were given a start-up grant or tools but in many cases the grant was spent on something else and tools were sold. ETC and GDPU thinking was that if a no-interest loan was given, this would focus minds on how the income could be raised to pay off this loan. (A case study in Appendix 2 looks at how this innovation worked in practice.)

The overall expenditure on the project was £57,988<sup>4</sup> with ETC providing £29,170 and UK Aid Direct £28,818. However, VPlus was not an isolated programme but part of a continuum of support and empowerment. ETC raised £2,630 of funds for capital investment required before the programme could start (including making GDPU's training centre 'COVID-ready') and the revenue costs of £2,145 to manage this investment, a total of £4,775<sup>5</sup>. ETC is also continuing to fund support provided to graduates, essential for sustainability.

### **This evaluation**

Evaluations are an essential tool to assess whether a project has been a success and what its impact has been. Most importantly, evaluations are needed to assess the lessons of a project – what has worked well and why, and what has worked less well (or not at all) and why. Lessons learnt feed into decisions on whether a project should continue and in what form, whether it should be extended, or whether it should come to an end. An evaluation is therefore an important document to present to potential future funders. Lessons learnt are also valuable for others tackling similar issues. ETC, UK Aid Direct and GDPU were all keen to learn lessons from VPlus and hence producing this evaluation formed part of the original proposal.

Large projects are required by UK Aid Direct to have an independent, external evaluation but the expenditure on VPlus did not justify the cost of a fully external one. However, there is an independent aspect to this evaluation as it was conducted by ETC Trustees who were not involved directly in delivery but who have professional evaluation experience. Drafts of the evaluation were discussed with GDPU delivery staff to correct factual errors and for comments.

The following evidence was used to reach the conclusions of this evaluation:

- Outcomes and output indicators from quarterly monitoring data.
- Notes from trainee/graduate feedback sessions.
- Data on inputs: Money and volunteer time.
- Reports of visits including a visit by a Performance and Risk expert from UK Aid Direct.
- Case studies.
- Interviews with staff including instructors.
- Surveys of beneficiaries at reflection meetings.
- Comparison with other training programmes.

### **Report structure**

Rather than start with a dry summary of output, outcome and impact data, the next section is a narrative of what happened. This gives a better feel of how VPlus worked, the way various challenges, some expected, some not, were handled and the innovation and adaptation involved. Hopefully, it also provides a taste of the

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<sup>4</sup> Or 266,218,000 Ugandan shillings (UGX) which means that the average exchange rate over the life of the project was 4,591 UGX per £, 59 UGX less than the cautious 4,650 UGX used to convert the budget calculated in UGX into pounds sterling. This is not a huge difference but did cause some problems even when managing a relatively small project in foreign aid terms.

<sup>5</sup> A pound sterling exchanged for more UGX (4,848) at the time than the average throughout the VPlus project.

excitement of the VPlus journey and a practical guide for any organisation that wants to replicate a similar initiative.

Section 3 provides the summary of results while Section 4 draws these and further qualitative evidence together to suggest lessons.

Conclusions and recommendations are laid out in Section 5.

Appendix 1 discusses issues in data collection in greater detail. Appendix 2 provides six full case studies.

## 2. The story so far

*There is a summary timeline at the end of this section.*

The roots of VPlus lie in the Youth Development Programme (YDP), delivered by Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) and funded by the Department for International Development (DFID, now absorbed into the Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office – FCDO). This aimed to provide six months of training and six months of post-training support in establishing businesses for 15,400 marginalised young people with little or no education in Northern Uganda.

These roots were both personal and a base for the structure of VPlus. Two of ETC's trustees were volunteers on this project, focusing on curriculum development and monitoring and evaluation. When they left Uganda, they felt strongly that much of the achievements would fade if continued support and development were not continued, a fate of many successful projects funded by foreign aid. This applied immediately to the need for continued post-training support to graduates of the training courses because experience around the world, not just in low-income countries, suggested that six months was not adequate for marginalised young people with no business experience and no networks of entrepreneurial support.

They kept in touch with one of the training centres they had worked with successfully, that at GDPU, and personally funded continued post-training support for a year. To make this support more sustainable and to explore the potential for widening this support, they approached three friends with relevant expertise to establish a charity. Charity certification date was 13 June 2018.

Two further one-year projects were delivered, providing post-training support including short courses to enhance and diversify skills. Examples of skills diversification were courses in the repair of generators and slashers (strimmers or bush cutters in UK and USA terminology) for those who had established motorcycle repair shops. Each project was evaluated confirming that those supported had consolidated their businesses and increased their incomes.

However, it was clear that there was a huge demand for further training programmes because of the large number of young people with disabilities that were being short-changed by society. These high numbers are reflected in official statistics – 19% of the population of Uganda, with a higher proportion in northern Uganda. However, when GDPU were involved in a Big Lottery funded disability project which collected finer grain data via door-to-door surveys, they were shocked to discover the extent of hidden disability that hadn't been picked up in official data. The demand was huge but such programmes cost more than ETC could raise from private donations. ETC and GDPU began, therefore, to search for institutional funders. UK Aid Direct's Small Charities Challenge Fund (SCCF) appeared to fit the bill.

### The SCCF Application

Accordingly, a bid was drawn up in November 2019 for £28,818 of SCCF support for a two-year programme for 100 young persons with disability who had not accessed the earlier YDP courses. The broad objective of the programme was stated in the bid as "An increased ability for young persons with disability (YwD) to improve their vocational and life skills, secure sustainable employment or self-employment and

play an active role in their community thereby contributing to developing a stable post-conflict society.”

In greater detail this objective was broken down into three objectives:

1. Developing and delivering a flexible and affordable model of vocational and life skills training for YwD with little formal education in the northern Ugandan context.
2. Developing and delivering a flexible and affordable model of post-training support to increase the sustainability of employment or self-employment for YwD graduates of vocational training programmes and to increase the income they can bring in for themselves and their families (the secondary beneficiaries).
3. Developing and consolidating GDPU's capacity to continue offering fit-for-purpose vocational and life skills training and employment/business support for YwD with minimal subsidy levels.

Although this was ETC's first bid and it was a small and new organisation even by SCCF measures, the bid received preliminary approval in April 2020.

And then everything became uncertain because of the Government's decision to review DFID's budget which put all applications on hold between June and September 2020. This was on top of the difficulties caused by COVID-19 becoming a worldwide pandemic and the consequent need to ensure that adequate safety from infection measures were implemented.

Mannion Daniels, the consultancy that managed UK Aid Direct on behalf of DFID, was very helpful in starting, during the DFID budget review period, the due diligence process required to move to full approval. This was despite not knowing if the review would lead to the cutting of SCCF projects that had received preliminary approval. Mannion Daniels also said that projects could start if applicant charities could guarantee completion of what they had started if the SCCF funding was cut. Because expectations had been raised both at GDPU and with young people who were hoping to start training, ETC decided that they would move ahead with preparations to run one 6-month course together with post-training support.

The preparations involved capital spending to improve the training facilities, including hygiene improvements as a barrier to COVID, to buy more training equipment and to improve security at GDPU's site. There were also revenue costs for the management of these investments and to begin the process of recruiting trainees and staff including instructors. This spending followed the budget laid out in the original bid for funds. This work led to approval from health inspectors in Gulu for the programme to start. It also meant that the first training course was ready to start on 15<sup>th</sup> January.

During this period there was also further work on assessing the demand for different skills in local labour markets. A decision was made to not offer welding skills despite, or perhaps because of successful training in Gulu in this area in the past. Instead, a new Design and Decoration course was developed.

In parallel, ETC worked with Mannion Daniels on the due diligence process and the various policy documents that would be required. This was a thorough but arduous process for a small charity. The trustees felt that some of the requirements were not

appropriate for a charity the size of ETC (though very appropriate for significantly larger charities) but, overall, most of it was relevant and helped set ETC up on a firmer basis.

ETC passed the due diligence process and the grant was ready for approval with a variety of conditions such as production of specific policy documents. However, the budget had to be revised as Mannion Daniels had stated that if the SCCF grant was approved, only costs following the approved start date would be eligible for DFID funding. In the end full grant approval was given on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021, just in time for the start of VPlus on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

### **Delivery: Cohort 1**

Around half of the 53 trainees (29 females and 24 males) recruited to the first 6-month course were boarders because they lived too far from Gulu to travel in every day. In addition, 42 of this intake were aged between 15 and 24 and 11 between 25 and 40. This breakdown of the first cohort of trainees underlined the importance of safeguarding and explains the need for a matron and for a day and a night-time guard on the security gate.

Parents were asked to provide their children with tools for the courses they had selected, although in some cases they had to be chased up, particularly when it caused a serious safeguarding issue for one trainee.

The program had deliberately been open to young people of all types of disabilities and this was reflected in the intake, using Ugandan government categories, as follows:

1. Physical including three sickle cell (18)
2. Intellectual/mental (5)
3. Albino (4)
4. Visual impairment (5)
5. Hearing impairment (9)
6. Epilepsy (12)

In addition to the staff mentioned above and a Program Coordinator, Guidance Counsellor, and a part-time Accountant, the following were recruited for the period of each training course:

- Five instructors, one for each vocational area.
- Literacy trainers.
- Two sign language interpreters.

Following a few days of orientation and settling in, the course began in earnest with morning sessions dedicated to vocational training and the various 'plus' elements introduced in the afternoon. During the early days, trainees confirmed their chosen vocational area selection, voted for student positions such as head-boy and head-girl and undertook qualitative baseline tests with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Although efforts were made to encourage female trainees to take up non-traditional vocational skills, this was not successful. On the other hand, some male trainees did take up vocational skills seen as primarily female in the local context.



Early in the programme, a discussion was held on safeguarding and how students were expected to show respect to each other and consider each other's needs. This was particularly important for students who had had very little formal education and therefore little experience of studying with others to fall back on. The safeguarding covered personal hygiene during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as what to do if faced with physical, mental or sexual abuse including who to report it to. (See below for further details on safeguarding policy and practice.)

Meetings were organised with all trainees at the beginning of the week with a report back on action taken on Friday. This was a fundamental component of trainee feedback mechanisms organised throughout the VPlus program. At a later date, regular meetings were established with instructors to hear their suggestions and concerns and to hear about issues they had observed with individual trainees.

Previous graduates from GDPU's programmes were invited in to talk to the trainees about their experiences of setting up a business reflecting an important part of GDPU's approach, that of developing networks of support between persons with disability.

A mid-course test was held to measure the progress being made by each trainee. These were compared with the baseline for each trainee and almost all showed progress in vocational areas and in literacy and numeracy measures.

An important innovation took place in the second quarter of the VPlus programme. Ten staff, including instructors, started sign language training so that the number of hearing-impaired trainees felt more included and so sign language interpreting could be available more consistently, even if at a basic level, across all skill areas. This innovation became even more important when one of the sign language interpreters was on maternity leave.

In mid-May 2021, most trainees were found a three-week work experience placement as planned, some with businesses established by graduates from the YDP and some in GDPU instructors' workshops. But then a huge challenge suddenly emerged: a COVID-19 lockdown was announced with very little notice and GDPU had to close their training centre. The trainees could not return to their training at the centre and did not know how long before they could return.

Naturally, GDPU staff were worried that, with a long period away from the training centre, the momentum of learning and personal development would come to a shuddering halt with trainees becoming demoralised and forgetting what they had learned. Adaptability and innovatory thinking went into overdrive. Workshops were allowed to continue operating during the lockdown so GDPU developed the concept of mini-apprenticeships, asking those providing work experience whether they would keep on those placed with them and provide their 'apprentices' with on-the-job training and tasks to practice what they had learnt so far. In agreement with ETC Trustees, a budget was created to pay those providing the mini-apprenticeships a small amount as well as for one-to-one training on how to manage apprenticeships, including Covid-19 and more general safeguarding requirements.

Although there were 12 mini-apprenticeship providers, they could not be organised for all trainees so instructors and VPlus core staff visited them at home, which was allowed under the lockdown rules, to provide them with distance learning material

and tasks to practice what they had learnt to date. In addition, GDPU core staff remained in regular contact with all trainees to check how things were going and so that they did not feel alone through this prolonged period of isolation.

This approach proved to be far more successful than anticipated as when the lockdown ended in November after five long months, 49 of the 53 trainees returned to the GDPU Centre to complete their last month of training, a drop-out of only four.

The last month of training had to be adapted on an individual basis as there had been some variation in what each trainee had learnt during their mini-apprenticeship.

In December, trainees took their final exams followed by the all-important graduation ceremony, which, for many, was the first time in their lives that they had received public recognition of their achievements. GDPU Certificates were presented to the graduates by well-known community figures such as the Lord Mayor of Gulu, the former Chair of GDPU and the councillor for people with disability in Gulu. The graduates were now being seen as a person with a skill, an ability to earn a living and a contributor to community life, and not dismissed as 'a disabled person who has little to offer'.

Towards the end of January 2022, graduates were followed-up (tracer studies in YDP and VPlus jargon) and provided with post-training support where needs were identified. This was supplemented by reflection meetings of Cohort 1 graduates which provided views on how the training could be improved, fed into the design of the Cohort 2 course, and included further opportunities to find out about the challenges they were facing and how they could be helped through these challenges. The first steps to implement the Revolving Capital Loans Scheme were taken.

### **Delivery: Cohort 2**

Knowing that the lockdown had also delayed the start of the second training course, GDPU conducted an intense process of advertising and discussions with potential trainees and their families during the lockdown. As a result, by the end of 2021 there were over 70 serious, potential recruits to the second cohort of trainees. In the event, 66 trainees were recruited and the second course began in January 2022, three months later than originally scheduled but a delay of two months less than the lockdown period.

Of these 66 trainees:

- 38 were female and 28 were male;
- 53 were aged 15-24 and 13 aged 25 to 49;
- 23 physically disabled or with sickle cell;
- 8 with learning difficulties or mental illness;
- 6 with visual impairments;
- 14 with hearing impairment;
- 15 with epilepsy.

While the second cohort's training programme proceeded according to plan, albeit with a 3-month delay, there were several innovative features. These were:

- The introduction of tailoring as a vocational skill area in response to student demand and the consequent addition of a tailoring instructor.
- Involvement of a Cohort 1 graduate in the design and decoration component of the training to fill in a skill gap of the new instructor in this area.
- Two specific consultation sessions with trainees, one for the visually impaired and one for the hearing impaired.
- Election of peer counsellors from amongst the students.
- Greater involvement of parents and relatives in supporting the trainees.

The graduation ceremony, held in July 2022 following final exams, was also important for the Cohort 2 trainees. Some of ETC's Trustees were able to attend as well as well-known community figures and educational professionals. Parents and relatives of the trainees were there in greater numbers than the Cohort 1 graduation ceremony. The trainees marched in supporting each other and put on displays of music and traditional dance. Some relatives joined in these. The joy and excitement of each trainee in receiving their graduation certificate was tremendous and infectious.

### **Post-training support**

Tracer studies were instituted in September for the Cohort 2 trainees. These involved meetings in the GDPU training centre in Gulu for graduates who lived in Gulu itself, field trips by the programme manager and guidance counsellor to individual graduates and groups of graduates in districts further afield, and telephone calls where meetings in person could not be arranged within the timescale.

In agreement with the FCDO, the VPlus project was extended by two and a half months (from the usual maximum of two years) to the end of March 2023 at no additional cost to FCDO. This was because the Covid-19 lockdown had meant that the post-training period of the project would have been substantially less than originally envisaged and therefore giving less time for graduates to secure employment or establish a business.

Through the tracer studies for both Cohorts 1 and 2 a programme of post-training support was established, which evolved as further needs and challenges were identified, including the following elements:

- Further literacy, numeracy and financial literacy training sessions for some graduates.
- Involvement of the instructors in visiting graduates to check and advise on the set-up of new businesses graduates had established and to refresh various skills. This meant that graduates were more receptive to advice offered and increased the commitment of instructors to GDPU's work and to the wellbeing of their ex-students.
- Further roll-out and adaptation of the revolving capital loan scheme. This has been a learning exercise for all concerned as it was a sharp change from the previous grant culture. However, it has increased GDPU's capacity and skill set in running loan schemes as well as help graduates establish viable businesses. This is explored in greater detail in the case study in Appendix 2.
- Development of peer-to-peer support mechanisms including the formation of a sweater knitting group.

- A large reflection meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023 involving 102 of the graduates from both cohorts. This was so appreciated by the graduates as a support mechanism that further large reflection meetings are to be held every year as part of the succession plan funded by ETC.
- Greater involvement of parents and relatives in supporting the trainees. Some relatives received vocational skills updating training so that they could help their relatives with disabilities in practical tasks if need be.

Three aspects of GDPU's approach during the delivery of VPlus need further elaboration. These are: safeguarding, feedback mechanisms and gender inclusion.

### **Safeguarding**

A firm starting base was key. Both ETC and GDPU developed a comprehensive and functional safeguarding policy. These policies, risks and mitigating actions were discussed and shared within and between ETC and GDPU. Safeguarding was an item on every ETC Trustees' meeting and every monthly liaison meeting between ETC and GDPU. All staff (including instructors), Board members, staff, volunteers and trainees were provided with training in policies and what needed to be done when a safeguarding issue arose. This training was refreshed and updated the following year. Work placement providers were also trained and visited. Staff and trainees had to sign a code of conduct.

GDPU developed a clear incident reporting and management structure which meant that all knew where to report incidents making it easy for case management and follow up. Good communication, monitoring of trainees and the vigilance and expeditiousness of the guidance counsellor and other staff were essential. This saved the life of one trainee when it was picked up that he had not arrived at the GDPU training centre but contacting his parents revealed that he had left home. This was one of the very few incidents that had to be dealt with in connection with the training centre, and these were handled expeditiously and sensitively. However, other issues had to be tackled after the trainees had finished their training and returned to their community even though this was not the direct responsibility of GDPU. A small number of sexual assaults had to be dealt with; GDPU staff supported parents in getting the police to act against the assailants.

Good, confidential feedback methods were also essential in spotting issues early. These included the role of the peer counsellors, regular meetings with trainees and instructors and a suggestion box, introduced during the project's second year. Following a suggestion from the Mannion Daniels PRM, posters, banners and leaflets were developed with information on where to report incidents or ask for help.

GDPU's policy and practice has been disseminated to all implementation partners, local government and through GDPU's community network using brochures which were translated into the local language and English, and the banners and posters that were also used at the GDPU centre. This has helped GDPU deal with cases like child neglect and sexual assault. GDPU ensures that all potential job applicants are aware of the organizations safeguarding commitment via job adverts. GDPU also carries out routine safeguarding risk assessment before project design and implementation.

Following the completion of the first cohort's centre-based training, safeguarding support for graduates was extended to cover the geographical areas where they live

and work. This involved further development of GDPU's safeguarding policy and further training of staff and board members, translation of key incident and survivors' reporting documents into Luo and reminding graduates that they should report any incidences of abuse they face or hear of. GDPU staff would be available at the end of a hotline to respond.

GDPU's good practice was recognised in that it was selected to take part in a project of developing its safeguarding policy further and cascading it to other civic society groups in northern Uganda.

### **Feedback mechanisms**

The type of feedback from project beneficiaries' mechanisms differs between the initial, 6-month training course and the post-training support phase. During the former, GDPU held regular Monday meetings with trainees to hear any issues or suggestions they wanted to raise. Every Friday, GDPU staff would hold another meeting to report actions taken in response to issues raised at the Monday meeting, thereby 'closing the loop'. This was an informal process and perhaps if any future courses are run, basic action notes could be taken at each of these meetings.

The weekly meetings raised a wide range of immediate concerns, some of which could have become major problems if not dealt with quickly. Examples include concerns about the amount and quality of food (one reason that the spending on meals increased) and the introduction of the tailoring course.

These meetings were supplemented by concerns brought to staff by the peer counsellors and by a suggestion box that was put up in the final weeks of the Cohort 2 course. Regular meetings with instructors were also instituted with the Cohort 2 course.

In addition, two specific sessions were organised by the guidance counsellor for trainees with visual impairments and those with hearing impairments. These influenced the last few weeks of the training course and the preparation and delivery of the graduation ceremony. One major change was the introduction of sign language training to all GDPU VPlus staff so that the work of the sign language interpreters could be supplemented.

More formal and larger feedback meetings were held with graduates in the weeks following the end of the 6-month in-house training and notes were written up on these. Some were held in Gulu city while others were held in outlying districts. These provided useful information for the design of future courses as well as providing information on the challenges graduates were facing in establishing their own businesses or in securing and retaining employment, and the support that was needed to meet these challenges. These meetings, supplemented by information from tracer studies and visits to individual or smaller groups of graduates, were used to develop the details of the rolling programme of additional training and support.

The last couple of meetings also provided a more formal method of monitoring graduates' views on the contents of the 6-month training programmes and post-training support. The final meeting in March 2023 was a longer, two-day affair which helped consolidate bonds and peer support amongst graduates and was a vehicle for delivering some of the post-training support. Its success has led to the inclusion of

such an annual meeting in the ETC funded programme of a further two years of post-training support to VPlus graduates.

### Gender inclusion

From the outset, GDPU aimed for at least half of its trainees and graduates to be female. This meant an additional effort in talking to parents and relatives on the untapped potential of young, disabled females in their families and in supporting female graduates after training. In the event, more women were recruited than men (66 versus 53) and more graduated from the training programmes (66 versus 49). **Every young woman recruited, graduated, a strong indicator of gender inclusion.** Furthermore, more women than men went on to find jobs or establish a viable business (62 versus 45). Female trainees were also encouraged to take up training places in traditionally male dominated vocational areas such as motor vehicle repair and maintenance and electronics, but none were taken up.

Safeguarding was key to tackling gender inequality. GDPU is an organization that has zero tolerance for sexual harassment and gender-based violence. All trainees received training on tackling sexual abuse, harassment and violence and all had to sign up to a code of practice that covered all these issues. A matron was on site to help boarders, especially female boarders. Stopping sexual harassment was a specific focus of the guidance counsellor during the training programme and afterwards, as was providing encouragement to women to succeed. At least half of the Peer Counsellors voted in by the trainees had to be women. They played an important role in preventing sexual abuse and feeding back to GDPU staff issues of concern being raised by female students.

Provision for women with children was available through the matron and a room that could be used as a nursery. In the event, only two of the trainees had children and they made arrangements for them to be looked after by relatives while they were on the 6-month training component at the GDPU centre.

Female role models, including successful earlier graduates from previous GDPU training programmes, were involved in discussion meetings with trainees. Female representation on GDPU's Board is ensured in the election of Board members. There is also staff balance; the GDPU human resource manual states that women should make up at least 40% of those employed at the organization.

### Post VPlus developments

The successes of VPlus have led to a big increase in demand for repeats of the training programme and post-training support from across northern Uganda. This demand cannot be met adequately unless further funding is secured. A smaller training programme charging fees has been started at GDPU following the completion of VPlus and individual sponsorship is being sought for trainees whose families cannot afford these fees. The search for further funding continues.

In addition, ETC is funding a further two years of post-training support to the VPlus graduates (second year subject to the availability of resources) as experience has shown longer term support than that allowed by the two-year SCCF grant is essential for success.

Funding has also been secured for a music production course for vocational trainees and the integration of music into the vocational curriculum at GDPU.

## VPlus@GDPU Timeline

DFID- funded Youth Development Project (YDP) delivered by VSO in northern Uganda	2013-2015
ETC of PWD support to three small projects to provide business and employment support to GDPU's YDP graduates	2017-2020
Establishment of ETC of PWD as a charity	13 June 2018
SCCF bid by ETC of PWD submitted	28 <sup>th</sup> November 2019
SCCF bid receives preliminary approval	April 2020
Review of DFID period which puts applications on hold	June 2020 to September 2020
Decision for ETC of PWD to fund one course in the event of DFID cutting budget for preliminary grant approvals	July 2020
Full grant approval following due diligence (Accountable Grant Agreement)	11 January 2021
Preparatory period of securing training equipment and material, COVID safety investment and staff and student recruitment, all funded by ETC of PWD but this matched funding not counted (but noted) in SCCF budget	October 2020 to mid-January 2021
<i>Cohort 1 of trainees</i>	
SCCF project (VPlus) formally begins with recruitment of first Cohort of 53 trainees, following Ugandan government approval of COVID safety measures	15 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
Trainee placement in workshops for 3 weeks	May 2021
New COVID lockdown starts closing GDPU training centre for 5 months	June 2021
Organising of extended placements with on-the-job training (mini-apprenticeships) and learning and skills practice opportunities at home	June – October 2021
Lockdown ends; GDPU training centre reopens	November 2021
Exams and graduation ceremony for Cohort 2 trainees	December 2021
Second Cohort of 66 students starts	January 2022 and onwards
Follow-up of Cohort 1 graduates begins	January 2022
Trainee placement in workshops for 3 weeks	May 2022
Exams and graduation ceremony for Cohort trainees	29 July 2022
Follow-up of Cohort 2 graduates begins	September 2022
SCCF project original end date, later extended	14 <sup>th</sup> January 2023
Variety of post-initial training support programmes	October 2022 to end-March 2023
Large feedback/reflection meeting of 102 graduates	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup> March 2023
End of SCCF project funding succeeded by ongoing support of Cohorts 1 and 2 graduates from project	31 <sup>st</sup> March 2023

### 3. Results: outputs, outcomes and impact

Evaluations generally look at three types of interlinked results: outputs, outcomes and impact.<sup>6</sup> There are many definitions of these three types of results, usually differing only subtly. A simple definition is that provided by the OECD<sup>7</sup>:

- **“Outputs:** The products, capital goods and services which result from development interventions.
- **Outcomes:** The likely or achieved short-term and medium-term change and effects of intervention outputs.
- **Impact:** Positive and negative, primary and secondary, long-term effects produced by development interventions.”

A requirement of UK Aid Direct grants is to define target outcomes and their related outputs in a results framework with targets set for each 6 months and a final, end-of-project target. Desired impacts also need to be described. Targets are set for direct and indirect beneficiaries.

This section examines the performance of VPlus against its results targets. Note that there were some changes to the outputs and targets around halfway through the project because of the delayed start to the project and because UK Aid Direct rightly felt that some output measures should be broken down into constituent parts. See Appendix 1 for further details.

#### Outputs and outcomes

The tables below provide the end-of-project targets and actual achievements of the two outcome targets set for VPlus together with their associated output targets and achievements. These are followed by data showing outcomes by gender and disability based on the responses of 102 beneficiaries at a large reflection meeting in March 2003, and by an overall assessment of outcomes.

Table 3.1 shows that the first outcome target and five associated output targets were exceeded, sometimes substantially. Major reasons for the overachievement were recruitment and graduation numbers being higher than forecast, the quality of the vocational training, the benefits of the ‘Plus’ elements delivered during the 6-month initial training and the quality and immediacy of post-training support.

GDPU always recruited a few more than the hoped for 50 graduates to allow for some dropout and because demand for places was so high. However, retention rates were very high despite the increased dropout risks created by the 5-month lockdown in 2021 reflecting the individual attention and care given to the young trainees. The early engagement with parents and relatives also proved to be very important in ensuring graduates received ongoing support from their families in securing employment or setting up a business.

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<sup>6</sup> Evaluations should also look at inputs, especially financial ones, to make judgments about VfM (Value for Money). These are covered in the VfM subsection of Section 4 of this report.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.oecd.org/dac/results-development/what-are-results.htm#:~:text=Outputs%3A%20The%20products%2C%20capital%20goods,effects%20produced%20by%20development%20interventions>



Not only has this project achieved more than the ambitious targets we set, to the best of our knowledge its achievements compare very favourably to similar training projects for young people, both disabled and able-bodied, across the world, not just in Uganda.

However, GDPU and ETC are not complacent and would like to see graduates earning more income than they are currently. The income being earned by many is less than was being paid to the gatekeeper and nightwatchman but that is still an improvement from the baseline of zero. On a brighter note, 13 are earning close to or more than that amount with four earning more than the Ugandan average wage. (One, as a successful musician, is earning a substantially higher amount.) In addition, it is still early days following the training course; settling into employment or establishing a stable business usually takes more time than the 8 to 14 months since graduates completed their initial training. That is why ETC is funding at least two more years of the post-training support for the VPlus graduates.

A further word of caution however, although there was real progress from starting points in literacy, numeracy and financial literacy, the starting points for some graduates were very basic and more than 6-months was required for these trainees to reach the levels required to successfully run a business. This was and continues to be addressed in post-training support.

**Table 3.1 Outcome 1 and Outputs 1.1 to 1.5**

<b>Outcome/Outputs</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Achieved</b>	<b>% Variation</b>
Outcome 1: Number of young people with disability increasing the income they earn (compared to baseline at start of training)	75*	91*	+21%
Output 1.1: Number of people acquiring vocational skills through training in market-relevant skill areas	100	115	+15%
Output 1.2: Number of people demonstrating improvements in literacy	100	107	+7%
Output 1.3: Number of people demonstrating improvements in numeracy	100	107	+7%
Output 1.4: Number of people demonstrating improvements in financial literacy	100	105	+5%
Output 1.5: Number of people demonstrating increased confidence and self-esteem through 'soft' skills training and active citizenship (e.g., engagement in community activities)	100	114	+14%

\* Note, these are the targets and achievements for 6 months after the initial training component. The two-and-a-half-month extension to the project meant that the achievement at the end of the project (94 trainees having increased their income) was not strictly comparable to the target set.

**Table 3.2 Outcome 2 and Outputs 2.1 to 2.5**

Outcome/Outputs	Target	Achieved	% Variation
Outcome 2: Number of people sustaining employment or self-employment	80*	98	+22.5%
Output 2.1: Number of people securing employment or establishing a viable business	100	107	+7%
Output 2.2: Number of people able to demonstrate new skills and knowledge from post-training support, top-up courses and diversification training.	105	113	+7.6%

\*The original target was 105 but this included 25 graduates from the YDP programme who would have continued to receive post-training support in the early months of VPlus if it had started on the original date envisaged. The delay in starting meant that these 25 had completed their post-training support by January 2021 and therefore should have been taken out of the target. This has been done here.

Again, there is a significant overachievement of this second outcome target shown in Table 3.2 above for similar reasons to that given for the first outcome as well as encouragement and advice given by successful previous graduates of GDPU programmes. The difference between outcome 2 and output 2.1 is the word 'sustaining'. As the data was collected at the end of VPlus, there was not sufficient time to judge sustainability. A rule of thumb was therefore set that a business or employment was not sustainable if less than 50,000 Ugandan shillings was earned in the last 3 months.

There was also a broader target of 120 direct beneficiaries as other people were expected to be trained as well as the 100 young persons with disability. Actual achievement was higher at 151 because as well as 119 young persons trained (four of whom did not graduate) the project also trained 20 GDPU Board members and staff in sign language, safeguarding and strategy development, and 12 work placement providers in safeguarding and managing trainees. Indirect beneficiaries were at least 260 family members of the trainees and local communities where there is evidence of improving social attitudes towards people with disabilities.

It is possible to look more closely at the outcomes disaggregated by gender, by disability and by vocational area, through an analysis of information collected at the March 2023 reflection meeting attended by 102 graduates. This information is (See table 3.3 below.)

A few words of caution in interpreting the data from this table. First, the employment/self-employment outcome is deemed sustainable which has been defined here as earning more than 50,000UGX over the three-month period leading up to the meeting. The 'income increased' is anything over 0.

Second, the responses are the graduates' perception of their employment status. There is some fluidity in the nature of employment, self-employment and unemployment as in any country with a large informal sector. Mechanics employed at a garage are in some cases are really self-employed as they have to compete for customers with other employees and are only paid for the customers they work for. Some respondents who reported themselves as unemployed nevertheless reported income levels sometimes higher than those who said they were self-employed or employed.

Third, many earned income from a range of activities but described themselves as self-employed. Fourth, this meeting was still relatively early on after the completion of the six-month training, even for Cohort 1 graduates, plus it was during the ground preparation and planting season so many graduates were drawn to working on the farms of relatives rather than concentrating on establishing their own business. Fifth, these are 'at least' figures as 11 graduates did not attend the reflection meeting. Finally, there are a few errors in the recording or categorisation of the responses though not enough to affect the broad picture.

**Table 3.3 Outcomes\* disaggregated by gender and disability.**

	<b>Numbers** Responding</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Self- Employment</b>	<b>Increased Income</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	55 (67)	7	41	50
Male	47 (52)	9	29	45
<b>Disability/Impairment***</b>				
Physical including three with sickle cell anaemia	31 (41)	4	22	29
Intellectual/mental	13 (13)	1	7	10
Albino	4 (4)	1	3	4
Visual impairment	10 (11)	1	9	10
Hearing impairment	18 (23)	3	12	17
Epilepsy	25 (27)	7	14	23
<b>Vocational area</b>				
Sweater Knitting	20 (25)	0	16	17
Hairdressing	21 (25)	6	14	20
Design and Decoration	14 (17)	1	11	14
Motor Vehicle Repair and Maintenance	25 (25)	8	11	25
Electronics	13 (16)	0	11	11
Tailoring	9 (11)	1	6	8

\* This refers to sustainable employment or unemployment so those earning less than 50,000UGX are excluded even if they responded employed or self-employed. \*\*Numbers in brackets and italics are the total numbers recruited. \*\*\* One respondent did not specify their impairment

Despite these words of caution, the data provides useful information on how different graduates benefitted and on what needs to be looked at in the future. First, the outcomes were very high both for females and males demonstrating that **young**

**women have been included in the benefits of VPlus.** The percentage differences between the two – higher on securing sustainable employment or self-employment for females and higher on increased income for men – are not significant given the cautionary statements above. There does seem to be a greater likelihood that young women will become self-employed, but this might reflect the skill areas they trained in and the more limited openings they have in local employment markets. There is not sufficient data, however, to make this a firm conclusion.

There also appears to have been **success across all types of impairment/disability.** Some impairments seem to lead to young people choosing an employment option to a greater extent such as epilepsy, hearing impairments and physical impairments, but self-employment has been the majority route taken across all six disability categories.

There are **real differences between vocational skill areas for self-employment rates** reflecting, in part, the business structures of the industries that require those vocational skills. For example, none of the sweater knitting and electronics graduates said they were employed though many were self-employed, and only one design and decorating and one tailoring graduate said they were employed while many were self-employed. On the other hand, significant numbers of hairdressing and Motor Vehicle Repair and Maintenance graduates said they were employed though even here more were self-employed.

Two factors make this distinction less clear cut. First, some describing themselves as employed, such as in Motor Vehicle Repair and Maintenance, were with an employer but had to seek their own customers from those visiting their employer to earn any income. Conversely, some who described themselves as self-employed, such as in electronics, were operating from an employer's premises. Nevertheless, the differences in predominant business structures between different economic sectors are important context for graduates.

A second factor is that many of those who were **self-employed were operating in a different skill area from their training or were earning income from more than one source.** For example, of the self-employed sweater knitters, 11 were not sweater knitting. Also, as the third case study of the Rubanga Mamiyo Sweater Knitters in Appendix 2 describes, given the seasonal nature of demand for knitted products, it is necessary to earn income from other work at certain times of the year and to raise working capital. In addition, being able to sell more than one product or service does provide greater economic security.

The high level of self-employment amongst graduates emphasises **the importance of literacy, numeracy and financial literacy.** This importance is underlined by the number of graduates who work in other areas than the skill they were trained in or who seek income from additional sources.

The high proportion of graduates from design and decoration and from tailoring suggests that it was a correct decision to start training in these new skill areas. However, the data suggests that there may now be fewer employment opportunities in sweater knitting.

The data from the large reflection meeting shows an **income range** from 15,000 UGX to 6,000,000 UGX. However, the largest income figure is an outlier as the graduate is

having some success in music and dance. The two highest incomes earned below this were 1,000,000 UGX and 900,000 UGX. The **average income**, excluding the outlier, was **198,766 UGX**.

In conclusion, the project has been a great success, exceeding its demanding outcome and output targets and as evidenced in the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the graduates almost all of whom have benefitted both economically and socially. Other training and educational institutions could learn a great deal from the VPlus approach to inclusion.

## Impact

There are many aspects to the impact achieved. In terms of immediate benefit to trainees, the outcome and output figures above, speak for themselves. Targets were exceeded and beneficiaries have described the impact on their lives of the Vplus project at beneficiary feedback sessions, through case study interviews and at meetings with ETC trustees and the Mannion Daniels visitor. These descriptions often went beyond the self-esteem of now having a vocational skill and included the confidence and enjoyment of the many other activities held in the 6-months training. For example, at the March 2023, beneficiary feedback session, out of 102 beneficiaries responding, 90 said that the debates organised were very good or good, 96 said the same about the community engagement activity and 99 said the same about the music and dance. Furthermore, 98 said that the post-training support was good or very good.

Measures of indirect beneficiaries also give a feel for impact. At least 260 family members were reported (by the 102 at the March 2023 feedback session) to be benefiting from the income earned by the graduates, with two attendees telling the meeting how they had used some of the income they earned to fund a sibling's education. While this is below the "finger in the air" target of 440 set before any trainees had been recruited, it is still a substantial number. They are also likely to be underestimates because of the use of cautious assumptions and not all beneficiaries reporting on family members benefiting. The impact on families also includes changing attitudes of family members illustrated in the case study of the Rubanga Mamiyo Sweater Knitters.

The other indirect beneficiaries were estimated as 200 community members benefiting from community activity such as cleaning of Gulu central market and 9 additional female trainees funded by a national disability organisation.

There were other direct beneficiaries besides the 119 VPlus trainees. (The 4 who dropped out of Cohort 1 did so after many months of training so can be seen to have benefited positively to some extent.) These were 12 work placement/mini-apprenticeship providers (training in safeguarding and working with trainees) and 20 GDPU staff and Board members (sign language, safeguarding and strategic planning). The sign language training provided to the GDPU staff, including instructors, will continue to have an impact on future trainees.

An impact objective underpinning the VPlus project design and part of GDPU's mission, was to change the negative attitudes of the wider community to young people with disabilities, especially a belief that they could achieve very little. Comments collected from employers, government officials and clients of businesses

established all point to improving attitudes. At the March 2023, beneficiary feedback session, beneficiaries were asked to state what they perceived the attitude of the community to them was before trading and after trading. Of the 102, who responded to this question, 72 said the attitude was bad before training, but, after training, only three said the attitude was bad with the rest stating the attitude was good.

However, these are just small steps towards the huge changes that are needed. More work needs to be done changing how other educational and training institutions work, deepening the understanding of funding bodies of the measures that promote inclusion and their cost, and to influence policy makers at a national level. At a District level, the overall manager of GDPU represents persons with disability on governance structures.

A further impact of VPlus's success has been a big increase in demand for repeats of the training programme and post-training support from across northern Uganda. This demand cannot be met adequately unless further funding is secured. A smaller training programme charging fees has been started at GDPU following the completion of VPlus and individual sponsorship is being sought for trainees whose families cannot afford these fees. ETC is funding a further two years of post-training support to the VPlus graduates (second year subject to the availability of resources) as experience has shown that longer term support than allowed by the two-year SCCF grant is essential for success. Funding has also been secured for a music production course for vocational trainees and the integration of music into the vocational curriculum at GDPU.

### **Capacity building**

Another strand of results is around building GDPU's for GDPU capacity to continue delivering VPlus levels of training and business support. Over the two years and three months of VPlus, this has included:

- Detailed safeguarding training and the development of more detailed safeguarding policy and procedures which can be cascaded to civil society organisations and to organisations in the private and public sectors. This included the safeguarding training in Kampala received by some staff members through involvement in the Motivation project.
- Sign language training which improved the inclusion of hearing-impaired trainees on VPlus and which has increased GDPU's capacity to include greater numbers of those with hearing impairments in future projects.
- Some staff and board members have undertaken training in financial management, strategic plan development, and validation of the strategic plan development.
- Visits to other training centres helped instructors to develop their training capabilities.
- Internal GDPU training and advice has deepened instructors' understanding of disability issues and how to increase inclusion.

- A former trainee has been trained as an instructor which allowed the introduction of a sixth vocational course into VPlus. Another instructor received support to widen the range of skills that could be taught.
- Reflection by staff and the GDPU Board on how the courses are going and on innovations have also built capacity through the lessons learnt and then applied.
- Trialling the Revolving Capital Loan Fund has increased GDPU's capacity to run such a fund effectively.

The capital investment in toilet and water access, classrooms and boarding rooms, security fencing, and training equipment in the pre-FCDO funded introductory portion of the project, with additional equipment and security features funded later by FCDO, has also improved tremendously the capacity of GDPU to provide quality training in a safe environment.

## 4. Lessons learnt and challenges: What worked well or less well, and why

While an evaluation relies on monitoring data, to be of real value it must do more than collate monitoring data; it has to assess all available quantitative and qualitative data over a period of time to make judgments about:

- what has worked and why,
- what has not worked (or not worked as well as hoped) and why, and
- the lessons that can be drawn for the future and for other initiatives with similar objectives.

Each of these three questions are looked at below for VPlus. This is followed by a few paragraphs on how the project ensured value for money.

### What worked well and why?

The emphasis placed by GDPU on **the quality of the vocational skills training** is the first aspect to point to that worked well. This is suggested by feedback from employers and their willingness to take on trainees for work experience, mini-apprenticeships and as fully-fledged employees. One of the case studies on electronics provides an individual example of a business that has prospered by taking on a VPlus graduate. Here the VPlus training also provided a basis for further training in new areas provided by the employer.

The pass rate and acceptance of the GDPU exam by employers is also a sign of the quality of the training. GDPU instructors have the capacity to train to the Ugandan government's industrial training exam standards where these exist, and has done so in the past, but this previous experience, on the YDP for example, did not provide value for money as it was not sufficiently flexible to meet local labour market needs, took a long time to organise and was costly. Possessing such a certificate has not appeared to improve employment opportunities more than GDPU's own certificate which has proved to be acceptable to local employers.

For those establishing their own businesses, the quality of the training is reflected in their ability to attract and keep customers and therefore ensure that their business is viable.

The training quality improved trainees' self-esteem as revealed in the confidence and enthusiasm with which they demonstrated their skills at the graduation ceremonies. It also improved relatives' perceptions of what the graduates can do, motivating them to provide support.

Finally, the views of the graduates themselves: 100 (97%) of the 102 of them at the March 2023 beneficiary feedback event (see below) said the skills training was good (48%) or very good (49%). (See table further ahead.)

The Performance and Risk Manager (PRM) from Mannion Daniels who visited the project in April 2022 pointed to the need to keep track of technological developments in vocational skills areas such as the move towards smart phones, and the risk of training more people in some vocational areas than there is demand in local labour markets. In subsequent discussions with the PRM, GDPU and ETC stressed that both



risks were understood and that they were addressed by regularly conducting local labour and product market research. Instructors aimed to update the training offered on the 6-month course in line with technological developments, something they had to do in sustaining the workshops they ran when not training. The post-training support had also included updating and diversification training based on spotting market opportunities such as in generator and strimmer repair.

Turning to the **“Plus“ elements included within the initial 6-month training, these had a real impact and were as necessary to ensure success as the vocational training given the starting point of little education and marginalisation of the trainees.** ‘Plus’ elements included psychosocial; trainees’ engagement in community activities and visits; debates; learning traditional dance and music; basic literacy, numeracy, and financial literacy/business planning. These aspects of the training have taught graduates how to work in teams, helped their communication skills, developed their ability to overcome challenges through their own initiative and problem-solving skills, encouraged them to continue to support each other after graduation and led to many becoming advocates for people with disabilities.

Nevertheless, because such impacts are harder to measure than quantitative measures such as exams passed, jobs secured and businesses established, some funders, unlike UK Aid Direct of the FCDO, have been reluctant to support the extra costs involved in providing these Plus elements. This is despite the wide acceptance in Western education that these general elements should be included and despite GDPU’s evidence that persons with disability are usually marginalised and neglected in training courses where these elements are not provided. This evaluation has sought to collate and assess qualitative evidence that backs up GDPU’s insistence that ‘Plus’ is included in any training they provide.

First, there are the verbal reports on the reactions and progress of trainees from the instructors, guidance counsellor and programme manager through the informal, individual and group feedback mechanisms. These confirm the development of trainees’ confidence because of the various ‘Plus’ components, although, clearly, each individual trainee reacts differently to each component.

For example, a Cohort 2 trainee, Adoch Fiona, said:

*“Dancing has been part of my strength, it has developed my self-esteem, changed the way I looked at myself and contributed to my confidence, I was able to earn a decent living because of the skills I acquired in Hairdressing from the VPlus project.”*

The three graduates that have established Rubanga Mamiyo Sweater Knitters (Case Study 3) when asked what were the main things they drew from the VPlus course, listed understanding the importance of record keeping, the vocational skills training, the life skills training and basic literacy.

Akello Brenda (Case Study 1) said she enjoyed the non-vocational elements of the VPlus programme as well, especially the traditional dance in which she excelled.

The report by the PRM on his visit in April 2022 noted that *“the [GDPU] centre’s councillor had detailed records on each trainee, with observations on their progress in group activities, self-confidence and other soft skills. These are used alongside case studies/stories of change and beneficiary self-reporting to build up a body of evidence.”*

Second, there are the comments made to ETC trustees by trainees and graduates during their visits to the project. For example, when asked to give examples of the things that had boosted their self-confidence, some trainees said, 'being able to write my own name', others described how the debates had helped them communicate what they wanted to do with others explained how music, drama and dance had showed how they could work with others in cultural activity from which they were usually excluded. The enthusiasm of the trainees in displaying their musical and traditional dancing skills was certainly on display at both graduation ceremonies.

Third, the importance of the 'Plus' components in improving trainees' confidence and self-esteem so that they can secure employment or establish businesses has been confirmed by the trainees' themselves through the more structured survey feedback at reflection meetings later on in the project. At a small reflection meeting attended by 16 graduates on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2022, the attendees were asked, "Which of the following are the most helpful components of the VPlus project?" The results are shown in the table below.

What stands out is the very high importance given to the 'Plus' components listed including 100% identifying music, dance and drama, the same as for the vocational skills training. The lower percentage (though more than half) given to literacy and numeracy perhaps reflects that only 6-months training was available while more was needed for many trainees. The 50% for community engagement and exchange visit probably reflects that the primary objectives for these two elements were, for the former, changing public perceptions of people with disabilities, and for the latter, building the capacity of GDPU staff (and for the training institution being visited).

<b>Which of the following were the most helpful components of VPlus? (Out of 16 beneficiaries)</b>		
Components	Numbers identifying as most helpful	% identifying as most helpful
Music, dance and drama	16	100%
Vocational skills training	16	100%
Games and sports	15	94%
Guidance and Counselling	13	81%
Debate	13	81%
Business plan	12	75%
Record keeping (Financial literacy)	10	63%
Literacy and numeracy	9	56%
Community engagement	8	50%
Exchange visit	8	50%

At a later, much larger reflection meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023 attended by 102 graduates (90% of graduates). Attendees were broken down into smaller groups and asked a series of questions including to provide a rating of the key elements of VPlus choosing between Very Good, Good, Fair and Useless.

<b>What did you think about the following components of VPlus?</b> (Out of 102 beneficiaries)						
<b>What</b>	<b>V Good</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Useless</b>	<b>% Very Good</b>	<b>% V Good and Good</b>
Music, Dance & Drama	50	49	2	1	49%	97%
Skills training	59	41	2	0	58%	98%
Games and sports	35	59	7	1	34%	92%
Guidance and Counselling	53	47	2	0	52%	98%
Debate	45	55	2	0	44%	98%
Business Planning	40	58	4	0	39%	96%
Exchange visits	35	62	5	0	34%	95%
Literacy and Numeracy	33	68	1	0	32%	99%
Community Engagement	29	67	5	1	28%	94%
Post-Training Support	33	65	4	0	32%	96%
Revolving Capital Loan	32	67	3	0	31%	97%

The results are shown in the table above. In terms of the 'Plus' elements, all received over 90% very good or good with the top three in terms of a very good rating being:

- Guidance and Counselling at 58%
- Music, Dance & Drama at 49%, and
- Debate at 44%.

Community Engagement received the lowest Very Good rating, 28%, again probably reflecting that the primary objective of this component was to change community attitudes rather than to build trainees' confidence. However, another question on this survey asked what trainees' experience of community attitudes was before and after the 6-month training. The answers to this provide a strong suggestion that attitudes were changing for the better because of VPlus, at least for VPlus graduates and the people they interact with. This is most likely due to the overall improvement in skills and confidence of the trainees rather than just the community engagement component although this component is likely to have improved attitudes beyond the people that the graduates interact with.

<b>What is your perception of community attitudes to you before and after the training?</b>					
<b>Before Bad</b>	<b>Before Bad</b>	<b>After Good</b>	<b>After Good</b>	<b>Before % Good</b>	<b>After % Good</b>
<b>72</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>97%</b>

A further essential 'Plus' component was the **post-training support**, including individual counselling and additional short training courses, provided to graduates over a long period. Although the time available within the two years available under SCCF was not adequate, there are many examples, even within the short timescale, of this

support helping individuals start and sustain a business or employment within the programme and this accounts for the high outcomes reported. The experience from the three years of work undertaken with GDPU, funded by ETC, before the SCCF project confirms, through three evaluations, the importance of this work. Many graduates from the earlier YDP programme were able to diversify and sustain their business because of this ongoing support. Some of these have been involved in the VPlus project, talking to the trainees about their experiences and the challenges they faced, providing work experience for some of the trainees and, in some cases, providing employment.

Why this worked is because of GDPU's approach, based on lessons learnt from earlier work. First, there was tracer work which involved doing everything possible to contact every individual graduate to ask how things were going and what were the challenges they were facing. Second was the follow-up with more detailed discussion, one-to-one and in group reflection meetings, and analysis by GDPU's programme manager and guidance counsellor of the challenges being faced by graduates and of their individual needs. Third was the organisation of specific support and training such as:

- literacy, numeracy and financial literacy (especially around the need to keep financial records);
- polishing up skills that were taught in the 6-month course and filling in skill gaps;
- checking the way graduates had set up their business both physically and financially;
- discussing with and advising the graduates on ways they might overcome some of the barriers to securing and sustaining employment or establishing a sustainable business;
- helping trainees find the start-up resources they need whether financial, purchases by relatives of raw materials and machinery;
- suggesting ways that graduates could support each other especially in more dispersed districts;
- diversification training such as on new products that could be made from knitting machines.

A further innovation that worked well with the Cohort 2 graduates was **the integration of instructors into the post-training support**. This was an idea suggested by the instructors themselves who were keen to see their trainees continue to prosper. Because of the relationships of trust and respect established during the 6-month training together with the knowledge that instructors had of their ex-trainees, discussion, training and advice were more productive than bringing in new, technical experts.

Another innovation within the post-training support that appears to be working well is the provision of brief training to some relatives in the skills learnt by trainees. This should mean that these trained relatives should be able to support their disabled relatives better.

Other aspects of VPlus that worked well, judging by the feedback from and performance of graduates were:

- The **work experience** element especially the ‘mini-apprenticeships’ introduced to maintain momentum during the 2021 lockdown also worked well as discussed in section 2 earlier.
- The **individual-focussed** care provided by the project co-ordinator, guidance counsellor, matron and instructors which identified and sought to meet the different needs of different impairments and different experiences of each trainee.
- **Safeguarding** policies and practice. (See the discussion in Section 2.)
- **Engagement of family members** from recruitment through to supporting their disabled relatives establish a business or find employment. This helped change relatives’ and others’ as shown in an attached case study where the proven ability to knit a sweater changed a mother’s attitude to her daughter’s capabilities.
- **‘Training the trainers’** including the **sign language training** given to GDPU staff, training of workplace providers for the mini-apprenticeships, and the training an earlier graduate as an additional knitting/tailoring instructor to allow the introduction of a tailoring course on top of the original five vocational areas.
- **Peer group support mechanisms** within the initial training programme and beyond. These are being developed further as part of sustainability.
- The value of having a **revolving loan** rather than grant facility in ensuring the seriousness of graduates in their self-employment and employment endeavours. This has also provided an incentive to parents and others to contribute to working and fixed capital needs.

Additional factors which may have made the second cohort even more successful include:

- No interruption to the training programme by a Covid lockdown.
- Even greater involvement of parents and other relatives throughout.
- Involvement of instructors in some of the follow-up support work.
- Younger age profile of this group.

Finally, the relationship with Mannion Daniels worked well. Mention has been made of the helpfulness in getting the project started during the initial uncertainty around funding and of the visit by Mannion Daniels to GDPU. In addition, the quarterly reporting framework, with greater detail and discussion every six months, helped give the project a framework for monitoring and evaluation which improved upon the one established by ETC for earlier but smaller projects. In discussions, the ideas suggested were clearly from people who had a practical understanding of how training and business support projects worked on-the-ground. Financial control was good but reasonable adjustments were allowed to the budget, within the grant amount approved, when it was clear that they were required because of unexpected events or the impact of inflation and exchange rate variations. There were some

unnecessary bureaucratic problems in financial control and monitoring systems but these were overcome with Mannion Daniels help when it was clear that these were unnecessary for fiduciary or project management reasons.

### What worked less well and challenges.

The results framework data, and the finer grain information from the tracer studies and feedback sessions, have revealed areas where we have not been as effective as we would like and which constitute the main challenges faced. These are:

- The need for more than the **literacy and numeracy and financial literacy training** available over 6-months to fully tackle the challenges facing graduates in these areas, although real progress from baselines was made as a result of instructors' efforts. Post-training follow-up revealed the need for a higher degree of functional literacy, especially numeracy and financial literacy, to move further forward with their business or employment. There are limitations to the degree that effectiveness in these areas can be improved within a six-month course especially when many of the trainees had had very little or no prior formal education before they enrolled in VPlus. Additional literacy and numeracy classes have been organised in the post-training phase for some trainees in areas distant from Gulu once a local teacher was found, and these are being sustained beyond VPlus. A new, more detailed numeracy assessment test, developed for free with an educational professional based in Britain, is being piloted.
- Issues around **financial literacy and record keeping** are probably best dealt with in the post-training phase as it is only when graduates are trying to establish and sustain their businesses that the importance of good financial records is fully appreciated. This was highlighted by some graduates when they admitted that they had not really paid attention during the financial literacy classes as they found them boring. They regretted this when they realised how important record keeping and working out how much to charge for products and services was for their economic wellbeing. Record keeping is a constant theme in follow-up support. A more sophisticated, one-off financial literacy session was organised for those who needed more advanced support than basic record keeping. For some graduates, including those with learning difficulties, basic numeracy needs to be improved first before record keeping can be embedded.
- In relation to the **revolving loan fund**, a major challenge was changing the expectation that a grant or an 'in-kind' donation (such as tools) would be provided for start-up rather than an interest-free loan. This combined with slow or erratic business revenue in the early days to make repayments of loans slower than scheduled in many cases. These difficulties were expected and operation of the fund has been a learning and capacity building exercise for GDPU. In the longer run, graduates experience of this scheme will help them secure funds from other sources at a later date.
- Restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 lockdown provided a huge challenge that all the learning of the first 5 months of the 6-month training would be lost and trainees would not return to the centre. Quick, mitigating action meant only 4 out of 53 dropped out.

- While there was clearly some positive change in community attitudes to persons with disabilities because of VPlus, negative attitudes and discrimination remain a major challenge to graduates seeking to sustain employment and businesses. Changing these remains a broad objective of GDPU and its training work.
- It became clear in the months following the graduation of Cohort 2 those living in remote areas with dispersed populations were finding it difficult to find a sufficiently large market for their products and services. They often had to travel substantial distances to earn sufficient income and this was costly and difficult for trainees with mobility impairments. This issue was initially partly obscured by the availability of seasonal employment/self-employment, primarily in agriculture. This has raised the need to improve market research in these more areas and to offer training in different vocational areas to those who lived in these places.

### **Key lessons learnt.**

VPlus@GDPU's design was based on learning from the VSO Youth Development Programme of the 2010s and work on post-training support funded by ETC. Both GDPU and ETC continued to learn a great deal throughout implementation, adapting delivery in the light of this new learning. Key learnings have been:

- Involving parents and relatives in trainees' development from the start, throughout the training programme and in the establishment of their businesses or employment makes a real difference. Some relatives have joined in the post-training support so that they can remind graduates on some skills or help them with their business when they are ill or have a rush of work.
- The need for further literacy, numeracy and financial literacy training, which should probably be linked to what is needed to sustain employment or a business. Being part of a six-month vocational training program is not enough to meet the needs of many in the project's target group. Linked to this has been learning how to refine baseline assessments especially of numeracy to be clearer where each trainee stands on understanding numerical concepts and techniques (e.g. addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, percentages).
- The benefits of involving instructors in post-training support both for the beneficiaries themselves, but also for keeping instructors committed and involved. This was a suggestion made by the instructors themselves.
- The value and importance of networking between graduates of the VPlus and previous courses, and the learning that can be supported by peers.
- That the demand for VPlus training is huge and has spread across northern Uganda. Many Disabled Persons' Unions in other districts are linking in with the work of GDPU in this area as none have training programs anything like VPlus.
- The decision to introduce a new tailoring course was right. This was introduced following early feedback from Cohort 2 trainees. Similar flexibility will be needed in the future.

- Flexibility in what vocational skills should and can be offered, based on good local market research, needs to continue. Post-training follow-up has revealed difficulties in establishing businesses in more remote and population-dispersed areas because there is insufficient demand for the skills graduates have learnt.
- How the Revolving Capital Loan Fund can help businesses, start-ups and engage parents and relatives. This is only the beginning of the process of learning how to make the Fund work. Issues around this are explored in one of the case studies in appendix 2.
- The need to emphasise the importance of the Plus elements of our approach to potential funders, explaining why they are key to the effectiveness of VPlus for young people with disabilities in northern Uganda.

VPlus has also re-emphasised learning from previous work including:

- The different challenges for different skill areas, different disabilities and different geographical locations. This requires an individual-centred approach.
- The importance for post-training support for a much longer period than 6 to 12 months to ensure that self-employment and employment are sustainable.
- The value of work experience and the potential for developing apprenticeship programs combined with distance learning material.

### **Value for Money**

A key consideration in evaluations is the value for money (VfM) of the project. This is usually broken down into three (overlapping) 'Es': economy, efficiency and effectiveness. UK Aid Direct added two more 'Es': equity and cost effectiveness.

The economy of the VPlus proposal was commented upon positively at the start by the due diligence assessor. GDPU has throughout sought that most economical way forward without compromising on essential quality; buying food in bulk, for example, but not so much that it would go off before it was eaten or of such a low quality that it would be inedible. Staff salaries were set to match market rates. Recruiting well over 50 trainees for Cohort 2, though not so many that there wasn't capacity to provide a quality service, reduced the average cost per trainee<sup>8</sup>. ETC Trustees have also contributed to economy by undertaking many admin tasks at no cost, that is, donations in-kind, the latest example being this project evaluation.

However, there is a fine line between economy and false economies. Training people with disabilities usually incurs extra costs to guarantee inclusion and therefore equity. The need to employ sign language interpreters, and train staff in sign language, is an example here. Furthermore, the northern Ugandan context requires the Plus elements GDPU introduced to produce the level of positive outcomes VPlus has delivered. The results recorded by VPlus suggests that its effectiveness and cost effectiveness is second to none. ETC does not know of any training project that has produced better

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<sup>8</sup> A broad estimate suggests that the unit cost for Cohort 1 was £490 while for Cohort 2 it was £360. This difference is not just down to economies of scale but also reflects the costs of the Covid-19 lockdown and some capital costs plus staff sign language training which were assigned to Cohort 1 but also benefitted Cohort 2.



unit costs for trainees proving they have acquired basic vocational skills or graduates securing sustainable employment.

Estimating unit costs is not a straightforward task. For example, where there are different outputs, judgment is needed on which costs should be assigned to each output. Exchange rate issues and inflation also affect the calculation. A broad estimate from the final spend on VPlus from January 2021 to March 2023 suggests that £410 was spent on training each graduate and £95 per graduate on post-training support.

However, in estimating unit costs, it needs to be recognised that the VPlus project covered a part, albeit a major part, of the whole process of training and supporting a disabled person. ETC funded necessary capital works and revenue costs before the trainees started, and ensuring sustainable results requires a much longer period of post-training support than allowed under the two years available to SCCF projects. This is not a criticism of the SCCF programme as without UK Aid Direct funding the number of trainees would have been less than half and there would not have been the same momentum of project development.

GDPU have also sought to improve the efficiency of their training throughout by, for example, visiting other training institutes to learn new tricks of the trade. A further example of economy, effectiveness, efficiency and equity was the training of an earlier trainee as an instructor on Cohort 2 which allowed both the recruitment of more than 50 trainees (reducing average costs) and an expansion of the vocational skills training on offer to include tailoring.

To the end of VPlus (and beyond with successor projects) ETC and GDPU continued to seek to maximise VfM so that the prospects for as many graduates as possible were consolidated. The deployment of instructors to support some graduates is an example here as this has allowed more graduates to gain benefits specific to their vocational areas of work more quickly than if GDPU had relied on the work of the programme manager and guidance counsellor alone.

GDPU and ETC have agreed that VfM will be at the forefront of their minds as funds are sought to continue the work of VPlus. But it will be VfM in its proper, rounded sense. GDPU will not try to sell cheaper training that it knows will not be as effective, and therefore not as cheap in reality. To do so would be dishonest to potential beneficiaries.

At the same time, improvements to enhance VfM will always be sought so that future funders will be able to echo the words in the project visit report by the Mannion Daniels PRM: “the model seems well designed to give a good return on investment”.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

VPlus was an outstanding success. This is shown clearly in the monitoring data and qualitative perceptions of trainees/graduates reviewed in this evaluation. The VPlus project trained 119 young people with disability in market-relevant vocational skills of whom 115 graduated, a significant over-achievement of the target set in the desired overarching outcome of *“Increased economic opportunities for 100 young people with disabilities in Northern Uganda”*.

This is a remarkable achievement in any context, but even more remarkable as this took place during the Covid-19 pandemic with one training programme (Cohort 1) continuing after a 5-month lockdown imposed during the fifth month of the 6-month course. That only 4 trainees decided not to return is a testament to the tenacity of GDPU staff and their commitment to remaining in touch with and supporting their trainees.

‘Increased economic opportunities’ were also measured by two outcome indicators and targets: numbers increasing their income (compared to income at the start of the VPlus training) in the months following graduation and the numbers establishing a sustainable business or securing sustainable employment. These too were exceeded. As of March 2023, at least 94 (82%) graduates had increased the income they earn before they started on the project and 107 of the VPlus graduates (93%) had secured employment or were establishing a business that was earning income and at least 50,000 Ugandan shillings per month. (For further details of performance against outcome and output targets, see Section 3.)

To the best of the evaluators’ knowledge the achievements against the two outcome indicators compare very favourably to similar training projects for young people, both disabled and able-bodied, across the world, not just in Uganda. For example, the evaluation of the earlier Youth Development Project reported that 83% had secured employment/self-employment compared to 87% for VPlus even though this was measured after a shorter period following project completion. In addition, the YDP evaluation reported that only 39% had secured a ‘decent job’, defined as at least 6-months employment earning at least 141,000UGX per month. The data collected for this evaluation is insufficiently detailed to make a direct comparison, but the data does suggest that VPlus beneficiaries are on a more positive trajectory.

This monitoring data together with comments made by VPlus beneficiaries at reflection meetings about how their participation in the initiative had led to improvements in their economic and social wellbeing, their strong satisfaction ratings for components of VPlus given at the large reflection meeting in March, and evidence from case studies and visits to graduates by ETC trustees and the Mannion Daniels PRM confirm that VPlus achieved its broad objective laid out in the project application. This was: *“An increased ability for young persons with disability (YwD) to improve their vocational and life skills, secure sustainable employment or self-employment and play an active role in their community thereby contributing to developing a stable post-conflict society.”*

However, GDPU and ETC are not complacent and know, from experience of working together in this arena for many years, that at least two more years of post-training support will be required to ensure that the grasping of economic opportunities by VPlus

beneficiaries is sustained and built upon in an ever-changing environment. They know that more needs to be done to consolidate businesses and employment already secured by the beneficiaries. They know that there are still some who need support to establish and sustain a business or employment. There is also a need to increase income earned so that all beneficiaries earning well-above the poverty line. For this reason, the application for funding from the SCCF stated that support would have to continue beyond the two years allowed for under the SCCF rules.

**In short, VPlus outcomes, though substantial, are a work in progress<sup>9</sup>.**

Turning to the three, more detailed objectives in the project application:

1. *Developing and delivering a flexible and affordable model of vocational and life skills training for YwD with little formal education in the northern Ugandan context.*

As described in Section 2 and throughout this evaluation, the model was clearly delivered and had to be flexible to adapt to unexpected challenges (the Covid-19 lockdown), to overcome the different barriers to inclusion faced by young people with different impairments (sign language training for GDPU staff) and to meet the demands from trainees (the introduction of a tailoring skills course for Cohort 2). It was also affordable as it was delivered within budget and with good VfM when account is taken of the extra costs to ensure inclusion (the equity facet of VfM) and the lack of formal education and marginalisation of the trainees.

2. *Developing and delivering a flexible and affordable model of post-training support to increase the sustainability of employment or self-employment for YwD graduates of vocational training programmes and to increase the income they can bring in for themselves and their families (the secondary beneficiaries).*

Again, post-training support was delivered from January 2022 (following the graduation of Cohort 1 trainees) to the end of the project and continues still. This has had to be flexible and innovative as what is delivered depends upon the needs identified during follow-up of graduates' progress. Innovation has included involvement of the instructors in the process and training relatives of the graduates so that they can provide better support. The innovations have also improved affordability. Nevertheless, the cost of travel to and from dispersed and thinly populated areas will always be a challenge.

3. *Developing and consolidating GDPU's capacity to continue offering fit-for-purpose vocational and life skills training and employment/business support for YwD with minimal subsidy levels.*

There was extensive capacity building at GDPU as listed in detail in Section 3. This included premise improvements and new equipment prior to the start of

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<sup>9</sup> This is a paraphrase of a statement from the Singapore exhibition at the 2023 Venice Architectural Biennale!

VPlus. During the project it included safeguarding training, sign language training, visits to other training centres, training an earlier graduate as a trainer, and developing the Revolving Capital Loan Fund. This, together with the strong reputation that GDPU has developed through VPlus across northern Uganda, has meant that GDPU has been able to develop as a training school, albeit with fewer trainees than on VPlus. However, given the levels of poverty in northern Uganda, there is an ongoing need for subsidies for the GDPU to operate its training school and business support at the same level as on VPlus. Sustaining capacity requires funding. Some has been secured as described below. GDPU continues to seek additional funds so that it can make more of a dent on the huge demand for their training and support in northern Uganda.

While, VPlus has been a success, can this success be sustained or will it be a flash in the pan, leaving graduates to sink or swim and many others who could benefit greatly from the VPlus approach not having the opportunity to do so.

### **Sustainability**

There are two aspects to sustainability for the VPlus project: how to sustain the learning, employment and self-employment secured by VPlus graduates, and how to sustain effective training activity and post-training support for new trainees. Both require funding.

Based on the experience of pre-VPlus ETC funded projects, the first requires at least a further two-years of post-training follow-up support which ETC has agreed to fund for one year at least following GDPU's preparation of a costed work-plan. ETC has also managed to secure funding from the owners of Viva la Visa<sup>10</sup> to purchase equipment for the introduction of a standalone music production course for 10 young trainees and the integration of music into the vocational curriculum at GDPU over a period of 12 months. There will be an element of cost sharing as beneficiaries will provide their own meals.

On the second, GDPU has developed a costed plan for a clearly identified subsidiary - a training institute - of GDPU which will provide new VPlus training and ongoing support for graduates. The plan provides an estimate of the unit cost for an individual trainee and costs for components of the work which can be packaged as specific projects for funding. This creates the basis for a cocktail of funding made up of fees paid by parents and relatives that can afford it, donations by wealthy philanthropists and less well-off individuals who may sponsor one or more students, and grants from funding organisations. Given the level of poverty in northern Uganda, the latter will be required to repeat a project on the scale of VPlus.

At the time of writing, there are 10 school-age trainees who have started studying design and decoration, sweater weaving and tailoring. Further vocational skills will be added when numbers justify this. An American institution has sponsored four trainees for the next intake in August and there are hopes for more in the future.

Applications are being made although one hopeful area has temporarily closed – the potential funder believes that the VPlus project is too expensive compared to other

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<sup>10</sup> Viva la Visa is a UK based company that helps musicians travelling abroad obtain the necessary travel documents.

training providers who do not provide the 'Plus' elements nor the dedicated support young people with disability often require. In GDPU's view, this ignores the importance of effectiveness over and above (false) economy. GDPU will continue to talk with all potential funders to convince them of the specialist support young people with disabilities require.

It is a pity that the SCCF is no longer available nor are there other funds available under UK Aid Direct for charities such as ETC as a further proposal had been planned if VPlus had gone well (as it has) focussing on some innovative areas such as training the trainers.

### **Key success factors**

What were the key success factors behind VPlus that GDPU needs to sustain and that other providers can learn from?

1. Dedicated, skilled, flexible, innovative and, above all, caring and beneficiary-centred staff who are supported by the delivery organisation's management and Board.
2. Interactive support by funders throughout delivery which recognised the fundamental importance of local knowledge.
3. Networks in local communities, with other civic society organisations and private and public organisations, including local state institutions.
4. Engagement of parents and other relatives from an early stage and throughout.
5. Planning provision based on an understanding of the barriers faced by young people with different impairments.
6. Adequate facilities and equipment to deliver the training.
7. Quality skills training based on good local labour and product market research.
8. 'Plus' elements based on an understanding of the impact of intended beneficiaries' limited participation in formal education and the marginalisation by society of people with disabilities.
9. Strong safeguarding policies and practices with responsibility taken by caring and skilled staff.
10. Recognising the need for post-training support for a significant period of time that is based on the identified needs and demands of each graduate cohort.
11. Good feedback mechanisms with beneficiaries and staff.
12. An evaluative and problem-solving approach.

### **Recommendations**

Several recommendations emerge from this evaluation. First **for GDPU**:

1. Continue to deliver and seek funding to deliver similar training and post-training support as VPlus, taking into account improvements made because of learning during its delivery.
2. Explore ways that adequate literacy and numeracy education can be provided for those for whom 6 months training is not enough. Can this education be linked in with larger and longer provision funded regionally or nationally or by a large funder? Investigate whether there are models that deliver literacy and numeracy in ways that are directly related to work or social life. Pilot the new numeracy assessment test to examine whether it helps better targeting of necessary support. Consider ways to better measure progress in these areas.
3. Conduct more rigorous local market assessments in remote areas and consider developing new, more appropriate skill areas to train people from these areas. Also, continue to assess whether certain skill areas are 'saturated' in more populated areas. Sweater knitting is one area to assess further. Tailoring and design and decoration appear to be skills where training should be continued. Finally, monitor technological changes in all skill areas so that training can be kept up-to-date and relevant.
4. Build on the new music training project as a skill area in its own right and for integrating into the 'plus elements' of training in other skills areas.
5. Build an easy-to-manage monitoring framework based on the learning from VPlus. This will need to include using the reflection meetings to gather detailed post-training data and collecting trainees' and graduates' qualitative perceptions of the value of all elements of project and how they felt each element had helped them, especially the 'Plus' elements. The information collected in the two reflection meetings described in the early part of Section 4 above are a firm basis for a system of collecting qualitative perceptions.
6. Establish the training and post-training support service as a distinct training institution which is a subsidiary or distinct component of GDPU with its own management committee which reports to GDPU's Board. Seek helpful accreditation for this institution.
7. Further develop the financial model of this training and support in a way that it can be presented as a complete project for funding or as a series of components that could make up a cocktail funding package.
8. Use this evaluation and UK Aid Direct's assessment of the VPlus Project Completion Report ("outcomes exceeded expectations") when seeking funding from other sources, to disseminate lessons learnt and to lobby for changes in the approaches of institutions to inclusion of persons with disabilities, and for improvements in policies and practice of government at District, regional and national levels.
9. Examine the possibility of developing a system of work-based apprenticeship-style training with the use of distance learning material.

10. Develop proposals for the training of trainers and for advising schools and other training institutions on ensuring people with disabilities are included and not marginalised. The latter would involve developing a list of good practice requirements perhaps developed from the list of key success factors in this evaluation.

**For ETC of PWD:**

11. Continue to fund GDPU to provide continued support to the VPlus graduates for at least two years (with an annual review) to ensure they can establish sustainable businesses or secure sustainable employment.
12. Continue to work with GDPU in developing the services it offers, including the new music initiative and further VPlus-type training, and to secure funding for these services.
13. Disseminate this evaluation report and UK Aid Direct's assessment of the VPlus Project Completion Report as a guide to good/best practice and to help secure further funding.

**For the FCDO:**

14. Continue to provide support and advice that is rooted in practical experience of project delivery. This was a major strength of Mannion Daniels' support.
15. Restart funding programmes that support civic society organisations, networking between these organisations and partnership working between civic society, public and private sector organisations.
16. Simplify grant approval and monitoring procedures for smaller organisations, without losing the essential due diligence and fiduciary requirements.
17. Disseminate this report to others working with young people with disabilities around the world and encourage the formation of a discussion and good practice sharing forum.
18. Understand that projects such as VPlus are a continuum, which may require more than two years to make a lasting impact.
19. Provide advice and signposting on other potential funders to organisations that have received SCCF grants.
20. Emphasise that in supporting civic society organisations, FCDO is also supporting institution building which is essential when such institutions are not provided by the private or public sector.

## Appendix I: A note on data collection.

The collection of data on direct beneficiaries while undertaking training was straight forward and accurate, especially for the core beneficiaries on the vocational plus training course, because of the use of registers and a database that recorded progress. The outcome measures of securing sustainable businesses/employment and of increased income levels posed more challenges because of difficulties in reaching beneficiaries (partly overcome by the collection of data at a beneficiary feedback session in March 2023 attended by 102 of the 114 living graduates) and because of reliance on not always directly verifiable statements from beneficiaries. GDPU staff had to make judgements at times based on their experience and observational evidence. However, the outcome and output data discussed in Sections 3 and 4 of this evaluation provide a reasonably accurate picture of achievements exceeding targets as well as further details on issues with the indicators.

Data on indirect beneficiaries relied more on estimation and could not be easily broken down by gender, age, disability, location.

The results framework was improved approximately halfway through the project following a visit from a Mannion Daniels specialist. This included a reduction in the overall direct beneficiaries' target from 135 to 120 in acknowledgment of the delay in the start of the project resulting from the review of the foreign aid budget (25 existing business owners included in the target had already completed their additional training by the time the project started) and to test some potentially more meaningful indicators.

The breakdown of direct beneficiaries was 119 VPlus trainees, 12 work placement/mini-apprenticeship providers and 20 GDPU staff and Board members trained, 152 in all, 27% above target.



## Appendix II: Case Studies

### Case Study 1: Akello Brenda

#### **Vocational Area**

Akello Brenda studied Design and Decoration

#### **District, age, gender and disability**

Gulu District; Ioyo Boo village, 22 years old; Female; Sickle Cell Anaemia

#### **Key Points**

The quality of skills that can be developed through the 6-month VPlus centre-based training. The way ex-trainees help future trainees. The importance of parental support. Difficulties of working some distance from potential customers. How assistance for working capital from the Revolving Loan Fund can boost income.



#### **The story so far**

Akello Brenda is a Cohort 1 Design and Decoration VPlus graduate who has a real eye for colour and design. She returned to GDPU to help teach Cohort 2 trainees and their new instructor basket weaving. (The previous instructor decided to move on and a new instructor with different skills was employed.)

She used to make her products at home, supported with the cost of materials by her mother, where she also helped in other work of her family. She makes her products at home, She took her products to the big, local market once a month where they sell well. However, it is some way to travel, and the market days were occasionally rained off. Brenda dreamt of finding a unit in the trading centre on the main road as well as learning how to make more complicated jewellery.

In 2022 she was supported with a revolving capital loan of about 150,000/= from the VPlus @ GDPU project. Interest is not charged on loans from this fund and there are no strings attached to it to help VPlus beneficiaries consolidate, enhance and grow the business they have started.

With support from her parents, Brenda gained new skills in tailoring by enrolling in the Emmanuel School of Fashion where she studied on weekends. She graduated in August 2022, and managed to buy a sewing machine for 350,000/= from her savings. She found a shared space in the centre of Loyo boo, Unyama Sub-county Gulu District. She always displays her products for tailoring and decoration in front of her shop, Brenda also goes to every Sunday market day to sell her products. She earns an average of 25,000/= in a week.



Brenda enjoyed the non-vocational elements of the VPlus programme as well, especially the traditional dance in which she excelled.

***Challenges and the future***

Brenda's sickle cell anaemia is an issue, a hidden impairment, which has greatly affected her business because of frequent admissions to hospital.

High market competition especially from traders who have started hawking their wares from house to house, diminishing the incentive customers have to come to shop-based traders.

Lack of materials for basket weaving which are sometimes out of stock in Gulu as these materials are brought from Congo.

## Case Study 2: Odong Haron Bob and Okello Samuel

### *Vocational Area*

Odong Haron Bob studied Electronics and Okello Samuel studied Motorcycle Repair

### *District, age, gender and disability:*

Lira City and Aleptong District; aged 19 and 20 ; male; Albinism.



### *Key Points*

The discrimination faced by albinos in securing employment. The difficulties but benefits of securing employment where skills can be enhanced and gaps filled. The disadvantages of limited schooling. The time it takes to establish a sustainable business.

### *The story so far*

Both Bob and Samuel were graduates from Cohort 1 of the VPlus programme. Both struggled to find employment, in part because employers ask for an upfront payment to cover the risk of taking on someone who has limited work experience and who will need further training.

Bob, with support from his family, was taken on finally by a forward-looking businessman who is impressed by Bob's existing skills and his eagerness to learn new ones. He has learnt how to mend audio equipment, change mobile phone software and mend laptop computers. He is very happy in his employment and intends to keep learning and honing his skills. Over the past year he has increased his income base from 100,000 Ugandan shillings a month to 600,000/=. He reported to the March 2023 feedback meeting that he had saved UGX 700,000 from this income so far.

Samuel, on the other hand, had not been able to find a job in the first 6 months after graduating. Potential employers have been asking for large upfront payments. He thinks this is because his limited schooling meant he did not get as much out of the vocational training

as others and because his period out of work means he has begun to forget some things he learnt. It may also be because of prejudice against albinos. However, he does believe he will remember many things again and pick up new skills if he can start working. He has a long-term plan to start a business with an unemployed friend who has more experience than he has. The business will be near Lira where there is more demand for motorcycle repair. With advice from GDPU, he has developed a business plan with his friend and they have found a location to establish their business. He has not avoided work in the interim but planted a field of sunflowers as an alternative source of income and is also selling domestic products door-to-door.

***Challenges and the future***

The challenges the two have faced include: securing and retaining employment in difficult economic times; countering prejudice against albinos; keeping up with rapidly changing technology; competition from other businesses especially in the motorcycle repair market.

Things are looking bright for Bob as he has a forward-looking employer who is training him in new areas and he is keen to learn.

Samuel will continue to receive support from GDPU staff. When he is ready to start his business, he will be eligible for a revolving loan from VPlus.

### Case Study 3 Rubanga Mamiyo Sweater Knitters

#### **Vocational Area**

Sweater knitting and weaving.

#### **Enterprise Members**

Lanyero Jacklyn, Akumu Sharon and Opiyo Derick with support from Auma Janet, a mentor and also a trainer in sweater knitting.

#### **District, age, gender and disability**

The business is based in Anaka Town Council in the rural District of Nwoya, Northern Uganda. The 3 members all graduated from Cohort 1 of VPlus; their ages range from 19 to 26. One male, two females. Impairments: Physical and Epilepsy.

#### **Key Points**

The value of the support given by existing businesses to trainees during lockdown and beyond. The importance of parental support and how this can be enhanced by VPlus's revolving capital loan. The challenges of working in more remote rural areas. The importance of the life skills element of VPlus (the 'Plus' in addition to the vocational training element) although some aspects like literacy will need additional support. The potential for diversification.



#### **The story so far**

Jaqueline, Sharon and Derek were placed in 'mini-apprenticeships' at Janet's workshop during the 2021 lockdown. They learnt new skills and filled gaps during this period and decided to establish a business together with Janet's continued support. They won a school contract to make 240 sweaters and take their products to the local, monthly market. Some sales were made to the few people who pass by their earlier work location. They have knitted other products besides sweaters - e.g. trousers for babies, socks - and expressed a desire to be trained in ways of making sweaters with more complicated patterns.

Their business was able to start when parents paid for a knitting machine while the revolving loan fund of the VPlus project paid for another one. One parent changed from believing that

their child could do nothing to becoming an advocate for supporting the business when their child brought home a sweater they had made as a present for their mother.

The three members of the group also supplement their income through agriculture, making and selling liquid soap and charcoal, selling fish and buying, processing and reselling basic food stuffs. They use some of this income to buy material for their knitting and weaving business. This is important because sweater weaving tends to be cyclical because the main market is school contracts in the run up to the new school year. They have joined their Village Savings and Loans Association.

They have recently moved to a roadside location with more passing trade although this has increased the distance they must travel to their workplace which exacerbates travel challenges. They have also recently been trained in techniques to knit more complicated patterns.

When asked about the main things they drew from the VPlus course, they listed understanding the importance of record keeping (Jacklyn is the group's formidable record keeper), the vocational skills training, the life skills training and basic literacy.

### ***Challenges and the future***

The main challenges are covering the rent they have to pay and the difficulties of working in a relatively remote area which means a distance to travel from their homes to work, travelling to find customers and for organising further training.

### ***Ways forward***

The group has shifted from Nwoya junction which had little customers to the main road heading to Anaka Town council which is more exposed. Support and training from GDPU will continue, funded by ETC, with a longer-term aim of bringing together other GDPU graduates in the area for training and mutual support. More financial literacy training on how to run a successful business will be provided.



## Case Study 4: Disabled Youth Living Enterprise Group Sweater Knitting (DYLEG) and Waneno Anyim Sweater Knitting (WNSK)

### Vocational Areas

Sweater weaving and design and decoration

### District, age, gender and disability

Gulu City with links to Omoro and Nwoya Districts; age range from 21 to 30; almost all women but includes 2 men, one of whom is deputy to the Chair; disabilities include intellectual, physical and visual impairment.

### Key Points

Time and support needed for a business to really take off. The importance of leadership, good records and planning. The networks of support developed by GDPU graduates.



### The story so far

The DYLEG business started life in a room at the GDPU centre a few years ago and has now left to rent its own independent premises in Gulu. (At the end of 2022, the group moved

again to a busier location in Gulu.) It is chaired by Apiyo Miriam who owns WNSK which is registered with Gulu City Council and nationally. Miriam recently won an award from *Light of the World*, a charity, for her entrepreneurship.

The quality of the goods produced by Miriam and her colleagues together with her excellent record keeping, business planning and marketing has meant that she has won two large contracts with schools for sweaters and secured grants to purchase additional equipment. Miriam passes the work secured through these contracts to colleagues in DYLEG and to two other businesses established by GDPU ex-trainees in outlying Districts.

Delivering these contracts on time means intensive work is required for a part of the year as school sweater orders are seasonal, with less work in other parts of the year. The members of DYLEG earn income at other times through smaller contracts with individuals and sales at markets and to people passing by their workshop. They have also diversified their product range by taking on two graduates from Cohort 1 of the VPlus project who studied Design and Decoration and can make woven mats and covers, jewellery and baskets.

DYLEG has taken on a further 3 knitting graduates from Cohort 1, one of whom is based in Gulu City and the other two in outlying Districts. Two of these graduates were provided with loans from the Revolving Capital Loan Fund to purchase a knitting machine each.

In December 2022, DYLEG were awarded a UGX 5,000,000 (Ugandan shillings) national special grant for disability to buy two knitting machines, 2 sewing machines and procure knitting threads for next year's contracts with schools. They are waiting for orientation training by a Community Development Officer on how to use the grant.

Members of the business have been trained by GDPU in knitting machine maintenance though they need to call in a specialist for more complicated repairs. Nevertheless, this has helped improve continuity which was disrupted previously by small machine malfunctions.

### ***Challenges and the future***

A key challenge is to earn more income in periods when there are no large school contracts. Some members of the group expressed a desire to learn how to use computers and to develop on-line marketing of their products. The future does appear to be bright as these businesses have developed a good reputation and market what they can do intensively.



## **Case Study 5: The Revolving Capital Loan Fund**

### ***Why was the Fund Set Up?***

The over-arching aim of the VPlus project is to enable young people with disabilities to secure sustainable employment with a reasonable income. Slightly more beneficiaries have sought self-employment than a job with an existing employer. However, most businesses, whether in Uganda or anywhere in the world, need some start-up capital for equipment and/or materials. However, most of the VPlus graduates do not have this start-up capital and the support their parents or relatives can give them is often limited. Furthermore, local sources of capital such as banks and Village Savings and Loan Associations usually require a track record before they are prepared to loan cash.

In the past, donors funding training programmes gave out boxes of tools or cash to get things going. Perhaps surprisingly, free stuff didn't help. Far from it. These gifts could distort training before it even began. The first question would-be trainees asked was: what tools are you going to give me? How much money will I get? The gift became the goal, not the training or the aim of a sustainable life. That expectation ruined so many vocational training enterprises; no one values free money. And, anyway, most free tools were sold or stolen within days. Some cash also went to thieves or debts or parties. The vulnerable were preyed on by the powerful; very little went to the new business.

The solution [Gulu Disabled Persons Union](#) (GDPU), which ran the [VPlus programme](#), came up with was innovative: the Revolving Capital Loan Scheme. ETC of PWD agreed to contribute UGX 7,500,000 (around £1,650) in two tranches from its own resources and donations from individuals. It depends on strong connections with family and the community, as all schemes in this context must if they are to last. Learning from the first [VPlus cohort](#), GDPU deliberately built good bonds with families in the second cohort.



*Opiyo Benson in front of his new workplace in Koch Goma.*

### ***How the Scheme Works***

In essence, and all participants are told this right from the beginning, they will have to contribute something themselves. The trainee or, more often, parents and relatives will part fund their graduates' start-up costs. The rest of the start-up money comes from a ring-fenced fund set up by GDPU and financed by [ETC of PWD](#).

For example, say a group of graduates want to buy a knitting machine for a sweater weaving business as was the case for the Sweater Weaving Group in Anaka (see photo below). The graduates would have to cost their needs while drawing up a business plan during training. That plan would be the basis of their loan application. The amount to be borrowed, payback terms, the parental/ community contribution and involvement will have been discussed with all concerned, at some length and formally agreed. After the loan terms are agreed and the matching fund is in, GDPU will buy the right machine at a good discount from their suppliers in Kampala (guaranteeing quality and supply etc).

At each subsequent Post-Training Support (PTS) visit, staff from GDPU will also look at the graduates' record books (training in bookkeeping is, of course, part of the training). However, experience with the first set of eight loans has led to the requests for loan repayments being handled by the GDPU accountant rather than PTS staff because some graduates resisted support visits for fear that they would be asked for money they did not have. Separating out support from loan repayments has now removed that problem. GDPU has also reformed repayment schedules which were sometimes too steep, making them flexible according to income and circumstance as recorded by each graduate in their all-important record books.

What is also new, is that participants know from the start that the repaid loan is not returned to ETC or GDPU. This money goes into a separate account, used for the next graduate loan. It becomes a revolving, and hopefully growing capital fund for the disability community. Parents and graduates are reminded that repaid loans help their community and the next person down the line; this seems to help repayment. Second cohort parents are far keener to support and keep their children working when they know that their income goes towards repaying the loan. GDPU has even started training family members in core skills, so they can keep enterprises going when graduates' health and disability makes work difficult.



*The VPlus Programme Manager, Musema Faruk, discussing a Revolving Loan application*

### ***Is it Working?***

The fund gave its first loans to six Cohort 1 graduates in April 2022. Subsequently a further two loans have been given, bringing the total loaned to almost 3,900,000 Ugandan shillings (around £900). Businesses supported include two in motorcycle repair and maintenance, two in electronic repair and maintenance, three in sweater knitting and weaving and two in Design and Decoration. Up to the end of 2022, just over one million shillings had been repaid. Repayment difficulties included tools being burgled and illness, which are risks unrelated to business planning and performance. They also included failure to hit targets and the cyclical nature of sweater knitting which does not sit easily with a monthly repayment schedule. However, loan repayments have been rescheduled in line with the actual income of these nascent businesses, and most of the loans are expected to be repaid eventually.

There has also been a challenge of changing cultural expectations of grants or in-kind gifts at the end of a training programme rather than loans that need to be paid back. These cultural expectations, based on years of aid funding in the region, extend not only to trainees and their families, but also include local officials and community leaders. GDPU has spent some time explaining the new system.

There is now a demand for loans from some Cohort 2 graduates which are being processed. Learning from experience to date, changes to the Fund's management which are expected to improve its impact include the role of the GDPU's accountant in securing repayments, greater involvement of parents and relatives, waiting for requests for loans rather than offering loans before graduates are ready, and greater flexibility in the setting of repayment schedules recognising, for instance, that January and February are key months for working on cash crops. In addition, GDPU now seeks a guarantor, usually a relative, for new loans.

The VPlus Revolving Capital Loan Fund is a small but innovative approach to addressing problems with previous training and enterprise initiatives. So far, it has been a big learning process for both GDPU and ETC, and for those receiving the loans, and it will almost certainly continue to be so. It has also increased GDPU's capacity to offer support to young people with disabilities. However, early signs are that it has been worth the effort and contributes to the success of VPlus.

### **Case Study 6: Adoch Fiona**

Fiona Adoch is a graduate from the second cohort of trainees of the VPlus project. She is now a Hairdresser and Acholi Traditional Dancer. Aged 21, she lives in Gulu City, Laliya Bardegelayibi Division, and has Sickle Cell Anaemia. Here she tells her story of how and why she joined VPlus and how it changed her life.

Dancing has been part of my strength, it has developed my self-esteem, changed the way I looked at myself and contributed to my confidence, I was able to earn a decent living because of the skills I acquired in Hairdressing from the VPlus project.



#### **The story of Change.**

Before enrolling for the skills training in 2022, I was not valued in my family because of my medical condition, I dropped out of school because no one bothered to keep me in school. I was seen as marriage material at a very young age,

The VPlus project change everything. It was a miracle. I can say I learnt new employable skills in hairdressing, I identified my talent and potential through music, dance and drama. Now I can write my name because of the literacy and numeracy skills I gained from the programme. I met new friends, visited other centres to see how they do their work,

The best learning I got from this project is that we all had a common goal of living a dignified life. Most of us shared the same problems of stigma, discrimination and lack of trust from our parents and communities.

I was employed in Sarah Beauty Saloon located in Laliya main Market in Gulu City, I was treated well, I earn about 5000/= per day in a very good day, I have saved 100,000/= in my mobile money account, I have joined a community dance group and I'm among the dance leaders.

No one sees my disability now.

#### **Challenges**

- I still have challenges with record and bookkeeping.
- I also face transport challenges because of the distance from home to saloon is far.



