

2023 IMPACT REPORT

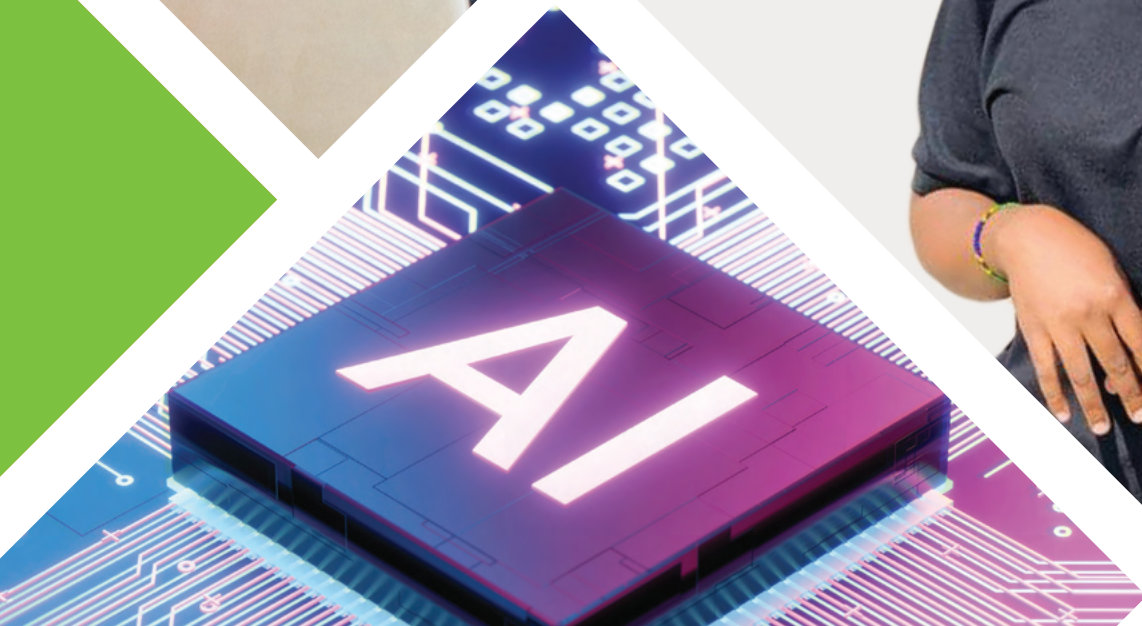


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Letter from Executive Chairman

Chris Harrison



2023 was a year of growth and refinement for Next Step Foundation. We grew the number of partners who support our work, enabling us to deploy new programs and new tools to help us better equip our participants with the necessary skills to compete in the digital economy. We grew the number of community-based and disabled-persons organizations from whom we recruit participants into our programs, enabling us to include Persons with Disabilities from cities, slums and rural areas into our programs. We improved the tools we use to deliver our training, including launching our Nikkoworkx data annotation training platform, a first-of-its-kind instruction platform that enables participants to learn and practice in the same tool. And we refined our approach to so-called “soft skills” training by recognizing that the stigmatization and discrimination from which many Persons with Disabilities suffer requires a more intensive psychosocial support intervention.

We continue to believe that meaningful employment is the most cost-effective way to reduce poverty among Persons with Disabilities, their families, and their communities. We also believe that enabling employment for Persons with Disabilities will help dismantle the stigma and discrimination that this population so often faces. And we further believe that our proprietary RAATT Method® is instrumental to our delivering the impact to which we aspire.

Because one of our primary goals is placing our participants in meaningful employment, we engage in outreach to the local, national, and international business communities to advocate for the recruitment and retention of Persons with Disabilities in the workplace. Our corporate disability inclusion training program helps companies at any stage of their disability inclusion journey. While we have a long way to go, we are heartened by the eagerness with which so many business partners have embraced disability inclusion as part of their corporate culture.

We learned that some of our participants struggle with the self-confidence required to advocate for themselves in the workplace, leading to frustration and attrition. Our mentorship program helps participants understand how to navigate work environments and thrive in new employment settings. Even after job placements of our participants, we continue to work with our business partners to ensure that our participants meet or exceed expectations and contribute to the corporate's mission.

Our recent experience also led us to conclude that earlier psychosocial support interventions would improve the self-esteem and self-confidence of Persons with Disabilities and lead to improved academic performance and job readiness. After meeting with nearly a dozen secondary schools that educate Persons with Disabilities to learn more about their challenges in supporting the mental health needs of their students, we launched the Upili Pilot Program (“upili” means “secondary” in Swahili). Working with high school students, the Upili Pilot Program provides Counselors with Disabilities to counsel Persons with Disabilities to address the unique mental health challenges facing Persons with Disabilities, including stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization- in addition to the “normal” challenges of being a teenager! By engaging Counselors with Disabilities, the Upili Pilot Program will also open the eyes of some educators, family members, and people in the broader community about the ability of Persons with Disabilities to make their own positive impact on society.

Letter from Executive Director

Peres Were



Dear Donors, Partners and Colleagues,

As we reflect on the past year, I am excited to share the remarkable achievements and milestones that have defined this transformative year for Next Step Foundation. It has been a period of growth, innovation, and impactful partnerships that have significantly advanced our mission.

In 2023 our first cohort of neurodiverse participants, successfully completed a Game Development program. This marked a significant milestone for our work in expanding our skilling and job placement programs.

This past year witnessed the establishment of the Disability Inclusion Advisory Unit within our organization, further broadening our work to support employers who want to build more inclusive workplaces. We also launched our Upili Program that is already having a profound impact on the lives of Persons with Disabilities, by providing much needed psychosocial support.

We are particularly proud to introduce the Nikkoworkx Data Annotation online course. This pioneering program enables participants across the continent to acquire employable skills in data annotation. Such initiatives align with our commitment to fostering skill development and increasing employability at scale.

In this report, we are thrilled to announce new alliances with donors, employers, and disability organizations, all of whom have played a crucial role in supporting our initiatives.

As we reflect on the achievements of 2023, we extend our deepest gratitude to all our donors, partners, participants, and the community at large.

Thank you for being an integral part of our journey. Together, we are making a lasting impact.

2023: Year in Review



Launch of Nikkoworkx

Nikkoworkx provides individuals with essential data annotation skills crucial for driving advancements in AI, as seen in technologies like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Tesla's autonomous driving systems.

Krowdworkx Project

In partnership with Shortlist, we provided comprehensive four-week training to 50 talented Persons with Disabilities, focusing on honing their skills in Data Annotation. Their job placements are currently ongoing as we work toward integrating them into the professional world.



The Kapebo Program

In partnership with Ministry of Labour & Social Protection and KCB Bank, a cohort comprising 20 Persons with Disabilities underwent a comprehensive 4-week training regimen encompassing fundamental digital skills, Data Annotation, Optical Character Recognition, Job Readiness and Life Skills workshops.

Game Development Program

Our transformative partnership with iLAB Africa and Ludiqueworks involved 18 neurodiverse students immersing themselves in a foundational training program for basic-level skills in gaming and development, setting the stage for their journey into this dynamic field.



Software Engineering Scholarships

Through our partnership with Disability Rights and Empowerment Trust and the Moringa School, full scholarships were awarded to five incredibly talented Persons with Disabilities, granting them access to upskill in the field of Software Engineering.

Career Mentorship Session

Alongside the Microsoft Africa Development Centre, we hosted an enlightening mentoring session catered specifically for Persons with Disabilities enrolled in our skilling programs. Participants gained firsthand insights into the intricate nuances of the tech job market.



SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK



Kapebo Program

The KAPEBO Program is a collaboration between the Ministry of Labour & Social Protection and KCB Bank, aiming to shift the paradigm for vulnerable communities in Kenya, namely Persons with Disabilities, orphans, and widows, by transcending the Charity Model and embracing the Social Model. This innovative initiative aims to break down existing barriers and empower these communities with essential digital, entrepreneurial, and life skills, nurturing their journey towards economic self-sufficiency.

The inaugural cohort comprising Persons with Disabilities underwent a comprehensive four-week training regimen encompassing fundamental digital skills, Data Annotation, Optical Character Recognition (OCR), Job Readiness and Life Skills training. This holistic approach sets the stage for their transition to independent living, providing avenues for job placements tailored to their abilities and aspirations. Moreover, the program prioritizes the integration of participants into the formal banking sector by facilitating the establishment of bank accounts. This crucial step not only assists in managing and monitoring income streams but also cultivates financial discipline, stimulating personal growth and paving the way for strategic investments. All twenty students transitioned to work.



SkillsHub

Advanced Data Annotation and Work Readiness

This was a four-month pilot program involving three key partners: Shortlist, SkillsHub, and Next Step Foundation. Fifty Youths and Persons with Disabilities were carefully selected from underserved communities in Nairobi. The participants were trained in Advanced Data Annotation and work readiness. Through diligent efforts, the pilot successfully concluded with all fifty participants gaining valuable skills and work experience. The program facilitated participants' integration into the digital workforce, and all fifty were placed to work remotely with SkillsHub and for an AI company based in the USA.

SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK



Software Engineering Cohort

In collaboration with Moringa School and the Spinabifida Trust, we sponsored five deserving Persons with Disabilities to study Software Engineering at Moringa School. It is a comprehensive learning experience focusing on technical mentorship, peer learning, hands-on practical exercises, and dedicated career coaching. The six months program ensures that students are well-equipped for the dynamic field of software engineering.

Participants benefit from practical, hands-on learning that emphasizes in-demand market languages and skills. The course structure includes labs and real-world portfolio development, preparing students to become job-ready upon graduation. Technical concepts are reinforced through scheduled check-ins with instructors, providing personalized guidance on pacing and program milestones. Students also have access to a supportive network comprising fellow learners, alumni, and technical mentors.

Upon completion, the graduates emerge as developers well-prepared to contribute to and thrive in the ever-evolving tech industry. They get career coaching and job-hunting assistance for up to 12 months post-graduation further.

Game Development

In collaboration with iLab Africa and Ludique Works, Next Step Foundation initiated a transformative Game Development program for 18 neurodiverse students at Strathmore University, utilizing the Unreal Engine Software to impart essential gaming skills and job readiness.

Recognizing the unique needs of neurodiverse individuals, the program integrated accommodations, a special needs expert, and a hybrid training method. Encouraging a collaborative approach, students engaged in peer learning, fostering knowledge sharing and boosting confidence. A structured routine, verbal prompts, and breaks addressed challenges related to anxiety and sensory overload. This program equips students with diverse technical skills, including programming, graphic design, audio engineering, and problem-solving, paving the way for promising career prospects in the dynamic game development industry.

THEORY OF CHANGE (R.A.T.T.T METHOD)

RECRUITING

Young Persons with Disabilities in Africa face invisibility due to social stigma, familial shame, and prioritization of resources, leading to segregation in education.

We have a network of schools, universities and Disabled People's Organizations who help us identify and recruit young Persons with Disabilities to participate in our training programs.

ASSESSMENT

Diversity among Persons with Disabilities, ranging from mobility challenges to hidden disabilities compounded by intersecting personal attributes, poses unique and multifaceted barriers to inclusion and support.

The assessments are program-specific and are designed to match candidates with the right training. They also identify what tools / resources are needed to address any disabilities.

ACCOMMODATION

The diverse needs of Persons with Disabilities necessitate tailored accommodations, ranging from screen-readers and sign language interpreters to specialized equipment and learning environments, posing challenges for inclusivity.

We use the results of our assessment process to identify the accommodations each candidate will require to successfully complete the training program and obtain employment.

TRAINING

Digital skills training programs often lack comprehensive instruction, failing to equip graduates, particularly Persons with Disabilities, with the necessary technical and soft skills demanded by employers

We offer only skills-based training that imparts practical knowledge that is aligned with existing and future labor market demands.

TRANSITION

Limited focus exists on addressing the 'last mile' challenge of transitioning Persons with Disabilities into employment, as they encounter their first job with associated hurdles.

We provide mentors for our graduates that help them transition into employment and help identify ways in which corporations can establish and grow disability inclusion programs.

EMPOWERING CHANGE

In the pursuit of fostering inclusivity and empowering Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), we have remained steadfast in our commitment to driving tangible change. As we reflect on the achievements of 2023, we are proud to share the significant strides we have made in reshaping perceptions and creating opportunities for PWDs.

70%

The Percentage of PWDs trained by the foundation in 2023 who were placed in jobs

In 2023, we were thrilled to witness the impact of our skills training programs, as **70%** of the Persons with Disabilities trained by us were successfully placed in jobs. For perspective, the average national percentage of PWDs employed in most organisations is **9.8%**.

This achievement represents more than just numbers; it symbolizes the realization of dreams and the breaking down of barriers.

36%

The Percentage of the foundation's staff who are PWDs

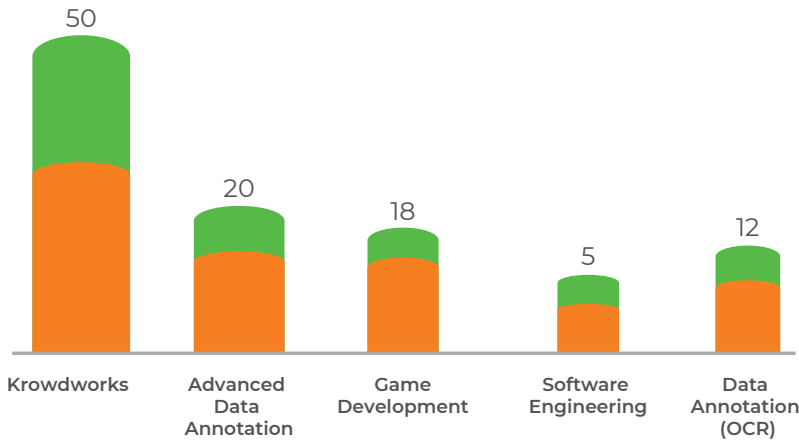
With inclusivity at the heart of our ethos, we are delighted to report that **36% of our dedicated staff members are Persons with Disabilities themselves**. Through their unique perspectives and talents, they enrich our organization, driving innovation & fostering a culture of understanding and acceptance.

In 2023, our Disability Inclusion (DI) training and awareness initiatives resonated deeply with **75%** of the corporates we collaborated with, prompting them to take concrete actions or initiate conversations regarding PWD inclusion within their offices.

This remarkable response underscores the growing recognition among businesses of the importance of fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces.

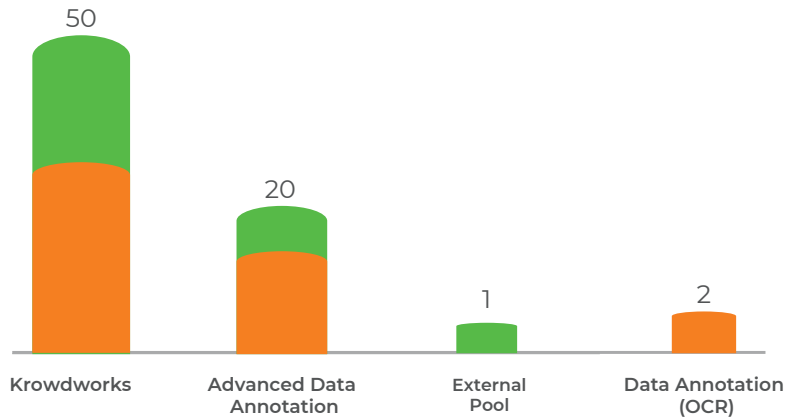
OUR IMPACT

TRAINING



| | Male | Female |
|--------------------------|------|--------|
| Krowdworks | 25 | 25 |
| Advanced Data Annotation | 10 | 10 |
| Game Development | 15 | 3 |
| Software Engineering | 3 | 2 |
| Data Annotation (OCR) | 7 | 5 |

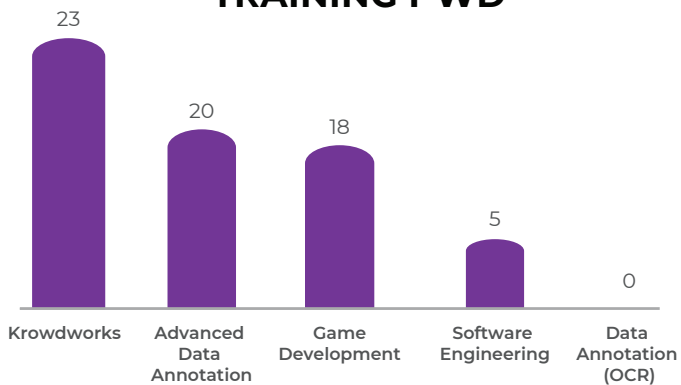
PLACEMENTS



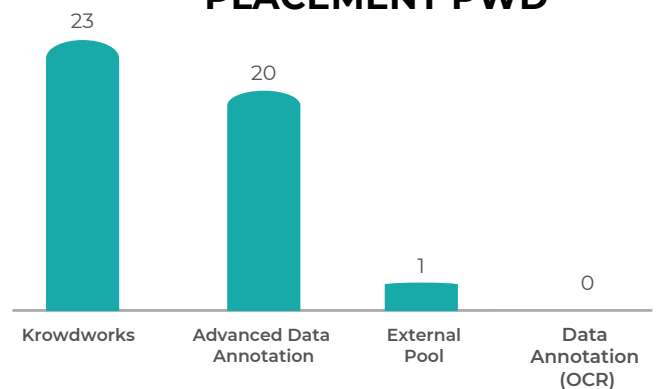
| | Male | Female |
|--------------------------|------|--------|
| Krowdworks | 25 | 25 |
| Advanced Data Annotation | 10 | 10 |
| Data Annotation (OCR) | 2 | 0 |
| External Pool | 0 | 1 |

* Game Development and Software Engineering programs are still ongoing. Placements of students will commence once the programs are completed.

TRAINING PWD



PLACEMENT PWD



Disability Inclusion Training & Awareness



In January 2023, we launched our corporate disability inclusion training sessions with the goal to raise awareness by sharing knowledge and building confidence on all parties regarding disability inclusion at the workplace.

We successfully conducted 12 awareness sessions across different sectors and reached about 770 employers and their staff in different sectors. This effort has seen an increase in the employment prospects of our participants as corporates have become more deliberate about inclusive employment.

In 2024, we continue with advocacy and awareness sessions to shift mindsets and open work opportunities for more Persons with Disabilities.

Organisations



Work Integration Training



Job Integration Training addresses the employment disparity faced by Persons with Disabilities. The program focuses on equipping participants with essential soft skills necessary for success in the evolving workplace. Our training emphasizes navigating interpersonal skills, fostering strong relationships, adaptability and problem-solving abilities.

To date, we have successfully trained numerous participants, with many securing long-term roles after internships, showcasing the impact of honing these critical soft skills.



MENTORSHIP PROGRAM



Next Step Foundation's Mentorship Program empowers young people, especially Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), to transition from education to the professional world. The program offers invaluable insights, guidance, and support, connecting young graduates with experienced mentors who provide personalized advice and share industry knowledge.

Participants gain exposure to diverse work environments, broadening their horizons and understanding various industries and career paths. Program connects young graduates, especially PWDs, with mentors guiding them toward fulfilling careers, bridging the gap between education and employment and unlocking their full potential.



Empowering moments at our recent mentoring session! Next Step Foundation, in collaboration with Microsoft Africa Development Centre, held an insightful session for Persons with Disabilities from our skilling programs. Participants received invaluable guidance on building successful tech careers, excelling in interviews, and landing tech jobs, directly from the experts at Microsoft.

The Upili Program's Vision for Students with Disabilities in Kenya



The statistics are alarming: Youth with Disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to battle depression. In places like Kenya entrenched beliefs exacerbate the challenges faced by Children with Disabilities. This stigmatization often compels families to conceal children at home fearing societal misconceptions and even prompts thoughts of abandoning or euthanizing Newborns with Disabilities.

In Kenyan households, Children with Disabilities frequently encounter social isolation, discrimination, and the disheartening message that they will not contribute to society or lead independent lives. When these individuals eventually join specialized schools, they bring years of trauma and mental health struggles stemming from these experiences. Consequently, this psychological burden becomes an additional hurdle, with students finding it virtually impossible to keep pace with their non-disabled peers. The resulting challenges, ranging from depression to anxiety and anger, contribute to the disheartening statistic showing a 60% higher likelihood for Persons with Disabilities to drop out of school compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

"There exists a mental health crisis among youth with disabilities in Kenya, and Next Step Foundation's Upili Program aims to reshape this narrative."

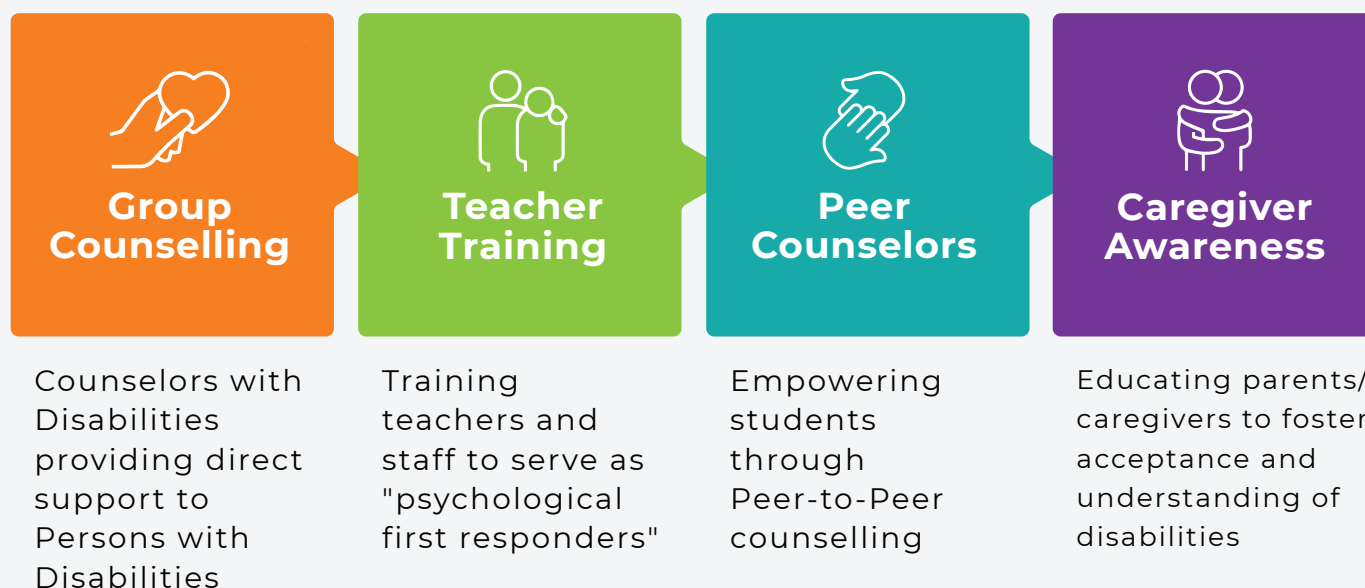
At Upili, we acknowledge the pivotal role of psychosocial support in alleviating past trauma and equipping individuals to successfully navigate future discrimination. We believe group counseling, led by Counselors with Disabilities who foster a safe space through shared lived experiences, is invaluable. These counselors establish swift and immediate rapport with the students and they also represent an option many had not previously known to exist: thriving professionally as a Person with a Disability. The sense of 'This could be me some day' impacts students and families alike as both groups shift their perception of what is possible.

"The stress and stigma our students face start and end at home. Returning after breaks, they carry the weight of neglect and oppression. Anger becomes a significant challenge on campus post-breaks."

George Wairobi, Deputy Principal, Kambui Secondary School for the Deaf

Upili's four-fold Theory of Change is designed to cater to the immediate therapeutic needs of students while concurrently establishing a robust support structure:

Upili Theory Of Change



Upili launched its pilot program in January 2024 at SA Joytown Secondary School in Thika, Kenya. At the time of writing this we have held one group therapy session and the response could not have been more positive. Students have expressed excitement around both participating and meeting Catherine Ngoroge, Upili's Senior Counselor. Joytown School administration, teachers and staff welcomed Upili with one individual saying: "We needed you like yesterday."

School administrators, teachers, and staff echoed the necessity for increased psychosocial support, recognizing its synergy with traditional academics in ensuring the current and future success of students. In the face of overwhelming statistics, the urgency of the Upili Program is undeniable. The Program stands as a beacon of hope, aiming to alleviate immediate traumas carried by the students and foster an environment of understanding and support. As a Team, we look forward to watching Upili graduates transition from secondary school into the Kenyan workforce. Armed with newly acquired self-awareness, self-confidence, and the ability to self-advocate, for the first time this demographic will be better prepared than peers with the job placement, performance and resultant economic stability to show for it.

Beneficiary Stories





Beneficiary Stories

Eva, the youngest of seven children, was born in Tanga, rural Tanzania. Her academic journey began in the same town, as she progressed from primary school to earning her advanced-level degree in public administration at the University of Dodoma in July 2022.

Her life in remote Tanzania, however, had many challenges. When she was ten years old Eva's mother passed away leaving her to be cared for by her father and sister, neither of whom had stable incomes. Originally from Zambia, the family found work as laborers on the north coast of Tanzania, cutting stones to earn a living.

Due to the loss of her mother, Eva's childhood offered much love yet lacked consistent financial support. Occasionally compelled to rely on the generosity of family, friends and neighbors, Eva vowed not to be confined to the exhausting life of stone-cutting and to do whatever she could to increase her family's standard of living. Despite the hardships, and with the support of their father, three of the siblings, including Eva, managed to pursue higher education.

Even with the addition of education, Eva's family struggled financially. Her brother assumed most of the financial burden while Eva, who now worked as a teacher, contributed where she could.

Eva remained undaunted. She was committed to acquiring new skills so she could create the financial future for her family she dreamed of as a child. The next step in her learning journey occurred when she trained to become a certified AWS Cloud Practitioner with Next Step Foundation immediately after graduating from University.

Eva, one of few women in the Tanga region to complete AWS Cloud Solutions Architect certification, now designs and implements custom solutions for complex business problems, selecting and integrating technologies to meet organizational needs.

Most recently she and her team created a cloud infrastructure for a medical application in partnership with a hospital in Tanga City. To Eva the app. is not only a work project-- it is a life altering creation for individuals just like her and her family. The new platform will break down barriers to accessing medical services and highlights the transformative potential of technology in formulating accessible healthcare.

Inspired by the kindness and support she has received; Eva is committed to becoming a community resource. She envisions using her vast array of experiences to support other girls of Tanga in their educational journeys.



Eva John Nondo

Tanga AWS & Data Annotation



Beneficiary Stories

I am Mary Awino, the second child in a family of eight, currently residing in Kibera slums with my parents. Kibera is the largest slum in Africa and the third largest in the world. Despite the hurdles I have faced growing up, I have navigated through my life with determination and resilience. Born in western Kenya, I moved to Kibera during my fifth year of primary school and continued my education at Kibera Primary and attended Nyabola Girls Adventist for my high school education.

Back in 2014 I found myself more committed than ever to changing my family's living conditions. It was at this time I developed an interest—let's call it a passion--around studying technology. Even though I possessed determination and motivation I immediately came up against the challenge of my family's financial constraints. This familial lack of funds delayed my dreams for seven long years.

Finally, in 2021, I enrolled in a certificate program in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). I was quite happy finally being about to pursue more learning yet unfortunately, again due to insufficient funds, I was forced to discontinue my studies after the third semester. I was quite disheartened and uncertain where my next opportunity would come from. Thankfully my turning point came when I learned about Next Step Foundation through the Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Association of Kenya (SHAK).

I was told, thanks to a collaboration between Ministry of Labour & Social Protection, KCB Bank and Next Step Foundation, I would have the chance to undergo training in Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and learn Data Annotation. I was excited and happy and said yes to the opportunity immediately! After graduating from these programs, I secured a position as an OCR agent and was also afforded the opportunity to work part-time using my new Data Annotation skills.

These employment opportunities arrived precisely when I needed them the most. I was finally able to support both my family and my child. Additionally, the remote nature of the work (mercifully facilitated by a laptop provided by the KAPEBO project) allowed me to create a work and family responsibility balance.

My goal is now to save enough funds to return to school, complete my ICT certificate, and progress to a diploma. Working on OCR has financial stability and opened doors to personal growth and learning. Challenges persist, yet my optimism fuels my determination. I am deeply inspired to excel in my field as I find unexpected joy when I discover capabilities I never dreamed possible when I was a girl in Kibera.

I find myself acquiring new programming skills and always dreaming of the next opportunity – another programming language? a master's program? My journey is one of continuous challenge and growth, fueled by the desire to be the best version of myself and make a lasting impact in Kenya.



Mary Awino

KAPEBO, OCR & Data Annotation



Update on Job Placement

Ephantus Kagwi experienced a typical Kenyan life until he was in college. It was there he contracted meningitis, an infection/inflammation of the fluid and membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. What began with headaches progressed rapidly and Kagwi lost his ability to walk. Although he eventually regained minimal usage of his hands and legs—his life was entirely changed.

In Kenya Persons with Disabilities are viewed as different. There is stigma. I want to show Kenyans what Persons with Disabilities can achieve and do.

Kagwi, now 25 years old, completed his degree in Applied Physics and Computer Science with an emphasis on Computer Networks in October 2023. A few months prior to graduation, in July 2023, he finished his internship as a Network Engineer at Safaricom, the largest telecommunications company in East and Central Africa.

I did many, many job interviews and I either heard nothing back or I received a no. It was tiring and frustrating.

Just as Kagwi was growing disheartened the unexpected happened: he received a congratulations and welcome! email from a very familiar place: Safaricom. The email congratulated him on his new Network Operations Center Engineer position and Kagwi could not have been more happily surprised.

It was great to know they saw I had something special and wanted to bring me back. In my new role I sit at the same desk I sat as an intern surrounded by the same Team—I love the work I do.

In 2023 Kagwi shared with Next Step Foundation he aspired to someday be a changemaker for other Persons with Disabilities in Kenya. With the new job at Safaricom and the confidence that accompanies it someday is quickly becoming today.

I am the first Person with a Disability to work in Network Operations at Safaricom. Before meeting me some believed a Person with a Disability could not work a 12-hour shift like other Team members. I have had the opportunity to prove them wrong.

Kagwi has come tremendously far in a year and dreams of how much further he will go. With regards to making an impact in Kenya, he repeatedly emphasizes this is just the beginning for him. He believes it is incumbent upon Persons with Disabilities to come together and rewrite the disability narrative themselves and not wait for others to do it for them. He is grateful to the Team at Next Step Foundation for both facilitating and encouraging this dream.

I call the Team at Next Step Foundation ‘destiny connectors’ because of the work they do. If it wasn’t for them helping me meet my destiny I don’t know where I would be today.



Ephantus Kagwi

Safaricom Plc

Team Members



Peres Were
Executive Director



Carla Birnberg
Head of
Storytelling



Jim Cohick
Head of Healthcare
Technology Solutions



Daniel Ngugi
Head of Inclusion
& Development



Calvince Odemba
Head of Impact &
Sustainability



Carol Okara
Head of Corporate
Partnerships



Allan Maonga
Head of People,
Diversity & Culture



James Ngane
Finance Manager



Becky Mwaniki
IT Manager



Nickson Owuor
Training Specialist
in Computer Vision
& NLP



Bethsael Wauna
Digital Marketing
& Communications
Specialist



Peter Simiyu
Logistics Associate



Terry Mwea
Executive Assistant



Peter Kanyagia
Research Analyst



Mariam Ndegwa
Fundraising Support
Officer



Martha Wanjiku
Hospitality Assistant

Board of Directors



Chris Harrison



Scott and Sally Harrison



**Lillian Wambui
Chege**



Asiya Mohamed



Bernard Chiira

Board of Advisors



Prof Bitange Ndemo



**Prof. Chris Lavy,
OBE MD MCh FCS FRCS**



Rene Syler



Skip Hendrickson



Ali Ingersoll

Our Partners





Why Inclusivity Matters

Now age 23, Grace became visually impaired due to illness at age 13. She completed her primary education in a non-specialized school only joining Thika School for the Blind for her high school education. Inspired both by learning and the opportunity to learn surrounded by other Students with Disabilities, Grace continued her educational journey enrolling in Kenyatta University for a Diploma in Human Resource Management. Unable to take courses at the same pace as her peers due to lack of funds, it took Grace an additional year to complete her diploma.

Undeterred and ever patient Grace continued earning additional H.R. certifications, was invited to join both the prestigious Young Graduate Internship Program and the IBUKA Program which provides mentorship to Women with Disabilities.

In 2023, Grace found herself offered her most exciting opportunity yet: an HR internship at a multinational company in Nairobi. It was during this internship she expanded her skillset to include managing teams' calendars, shortlisting candidates for interviews, and learned more about overall employee engagement. Through this extraordinary opportunity Grace honed her presentation skills and built her self-confidence in the workplace. Noticed for these workplace-success traits, Grace was asked to take the lead on a company-wide Persons with Disabilities Readiness Project

Grace readily shares her story of educational and career experiences as a Young Person with a Disability in hopes of inspiring others. She acknowledges she achieved this success largely due to the availability of office accommodations and a hybrid work model. The support from her line manager, fellow interns, and a 'buddy system' used by the company created an environment conducive for her ease of integration and success.

In her message to corporations, Grace advocates against assumptions and false stereotypes around Persons with Disabilities. She urges corporates to treat each person as the individual they are and to focus on their unique needs and capabilities. Grace emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive workplaces and developing and implementing inclusive policies and of trusting Persons with Disabilities to execute the work they are hired to do.

Her advice to Youth with Disabilities emphasizes the lessons she has learned through own experience: always ask for help when needed, remain resilient and adaptable, seek continuous learning opportunities and put new skills into practice.

Not only successful in school and work, Grace defies stereotypes around Persons with Disabilities by living entirely independently.

She reminds us: ***If you have a disability, education is the only redeemer; education breaks barriers and opens doors.***



Grace Murugi
Unilever

Grace Murugi's journey is a story of determination, challenges, hope, and accomplishments.



Staff Story

I went to S.A Joytown Secondary School for four years. When I entered Joytown, culture shock hit me hard for I had never seen so many Persons with a Disability in one place.

For once in my life, I got to appreciate who I was with my Cerebral Palsy as many had more severe disabilities than I did. And we all helped each other.

Most importantly, thanks to the bubble the school created, I thrived. Specialized schools in Kenya are a space of security where everyone is accepted no matter the disability. Joytown was/is a home away from home for us all.

When I left Joytown life wasn't as easy as it was inside the bubble of the school. Reality kicked in and I quickly learned when I looked for work no one saw beyond my disability.

People had the misperception if I came to look for a job that as a Person with a Disability I was coming to the premises to beg not seek work. Yet I adjusted and succeeded. I taught myself to create a shield from hashtag#discrimination and to advocate for what I needed in the workplace and beyond.

I was reminded of this when I did school visits prior to the launch of Upili. I found myself repeatedly telling the story of how I created a shield and how it served me after leaving the safety of Joytown.

The more I spoke the more I realized it was not only the passive shield of protection, but also an active spear. I'd learned to advocate for myself and other Persons with Disabilities. So much so it become my job at Next Step Foundation.

This is why the group counselling Upili offers is almost more important for the students they leave campus than when they are on.

We are helping students create their own shields and spears as Kenya, or even the world, is not yet entirely disability friendly or equipped for our Upili Participants.

I got my tools late in life, but for them they will leave school with self-awareness able to advocate for themselves and have the tools required to be ready to face the world.



Mariam Ndegwa

Fundraising Support Officer



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