

# PAKASA

HOW CATTLE HORNS HAVE TRANSFORMED ELIMAN BYANYIMA'S LIFE

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## SALBORN EMPOWERS YOUTH TO ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL DREAMS, BUSINESSES

By Maureen Nakatudde

**W**hile in Germany, Etienne Salborn, the founder of Social Innovation Academy (SINA) in Mpigi, never dreamt of helping young people achieve their educational dreams and also becoming a mentor to them in business. Yet, for the past 17 years, Salborn has done exactly that. He has empowered 350 marginalised young people to achieve secondary education, with 60 of them becoming social entrepreneurs, creating over 360 jobs. These are spread in various sectors that include health, fighting against sexual violence, upcycling, recycling, construction, water, education, sanitation, art and agriculture.

Located in Mpigi district, SINA started in 2015 to empower vulnerable youths to explore their potential and achieve their dreams.

The institution's compound is dotted with structures, some made from mud and others from plastic bottles.

"All that you see is the young people's creation and innovation," Salborn says.

Charles Busuulwa, one of Salborn's mentees and ambassador, says they used plastic bottles to reduce waste and manage costs.

"We want an environment-friendly place," Salborn says, adding: "We can only do that if we turn trash into treasure and reduce the cutting down of trees."

### THE DREAM

Looking at the well-manicured compound dotted with students busy



The institute's compound has structures made of plastic bottles. They are used to reduce waste and manage costs

creating or improving their business ideas, one might be tempted to ask how this came about.

In 2005, Salborn completed high school. "Back then, it was mandatory to either join the army in Germany or do community service after high school," Salborn says. Since he was not interested in the army, Salborn chose community work.

"I found out there was a placement

and an opportunity in Uganda."

He came to Uganda in 2006 and volunteered with the Kankobe Orphanage in Mpigi, for a year.

"Good Samaritan nuns were running

the orphanage," he says. Salborn was helping with the general repairs, school work and, sometimes, engaging in sports with the children.

To his dismay, the children would drop out of school after completing their Primary Leaving Examinations, owing to inadequate resources. Salborn, who was 20 at the time, was moved to help these children.

"I started asking friends and relatives from Germany to support me, so these children could pursue their secondary education in boarding schools," he says.

At that time, the orphanage had about 120 pupils. Every year, Salborn used to support 10-20 pupils that completed their primary education. Salborn says they have, to date, seen 350 students through A'level, with close to 80 being sponsored in 2023 in various boarding schools.

In due time, Salborn says, he observed that there was a skills gap when the first batch completed their secondary education and he decided to change this.

### SINA IS BORN

In 2013, the first cohort of children sponsored completed their secondary education.

"However, they could not join university because the tuition fees were high, and they failed to find jobs. It was not automatic that the now grown children would be able to sustain themselves, let alone, help others."

When the students completed A'level, Busuulwa shared that Salborn gave each capital to start businesses to earn a

Salborn

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living. But unfortunately, all of the businesses collapsed within a year.

Salborn says he could not blame the students since they had not been prepared.

"They lacked the right mind-set and the skills to enable the business to succeed." He consulted the youths on a way forward and the idea for a space where young people create their jobs was born.

Therefore, in 2014, SINA was birthed in the Mpigi district. Salborn says they set up the first structures together with recruited facilitators and the first 20 students, who are referred to as 'scholars'.

"We experimented with different ways to cut costs and thus used mud and plastic bottles." They later included interlocking bricks, which are environmentally friendly because one does not need firewood to make them.

"We train vulnerable youth, that is orphans and those from difficult backgrounds, to explore their potential so that they get skills that can turn them into social entrepreneurs and create jobs," Salborn says.

In addition to setting up the structures, Salborn says the scholars run everything, which helps them gain the experience they will need to run their businesses.

"If the accountant leaves, someone else can ably fill that role," he says.

Whereas the scholars can stay as long as it takes to master their business, Salborn says the average period is nine months to one-and-a-half years. The model has produced over 60 businesses and employed 360 youths.

Solomon Ssekamanya, one of SINA's scholars, says they usually admit students three times a year. "We bring everyone here together, about 50 or 60 young people," he says. The programme is not premised on one's academic background, but one should be between 18 and 30 years.

"In the end, Salborn observed not every SINA scholar will become a social entrepreneur, but scholars discover themselves, grow and also become attractive to employers and find well-paying jobs. Some scholars also decided to raise tuition for themselves with the skills gained to join universities to pursue programmes, like medicine, law and engineering, among others"

**PROGRAMMES IN THE ACADEMY**

When a number of young people come, they need to learn more about themselves and how to run a business; having little formal education makes it worse. However, with hands-on skills, the scholars learn and can manage their businesses. To prepare scholars to be able to think of a ground breaking idea and turn it into a business, Salborn says their system is different.

"It is self-driven and forces one to think for themselves." A scholar will be asked questions to help discover

# SOCIAL INNOVATION ACADEMY GIVING



SINA officials explaining to President Yoweri Museveni (left) in 2014 how plastic bottles can be re-used



SINA learning hut

themselves, like: "Why has God created you?" or "If you had all the money you could ever need, what would you spend your days doing?"

Salborn says these are questions which scholars probably have never thought about. As a result, they can transform their difficult past into a solution or a business enterprise.

He gives an example of one of the entrepreneurs who suffered malaria as a child and was also at the orphanage, but today she runs a successful business called Uganics, a mosquito repellent soap, which contributes to the fight against malaria.

Another SINA alumnus started

the Totya Platform to support victims of sexual violence and rape to find help, hope, and medical support and to create awareness about the growing problem.

**STAGES OF TRAINING**

"To prepare scholars, Salborn says, they are taken through different stages. The first is a three-month Applied Social Innovation Programme, also referred to as the confusion stage," Busuulwa says. He says young people learn

about overcoming their limiting beliefs. He adds that since they have youths from difficult backgrounds, like former child soldiers from northern Uganda, people with disabilities, and those who have gone through traumatic experiences, they need to discover themselves to ably exploit their potential.

**EMERGING STAGE**

This stage focuses mainly on the challenges in Ugandan communities.

"That is where our scholars take their responsibilities in the community. They turn challenges into opportunities," Salborn says. Scholars also take up roles to run the academy. For example, since the academy has a challenge with water, especially during the dry season, someone has to take responsibility for it.

"So, someone has a role of supplying the whole community with water.

That individual has to plan, budget, and develop new solutions to ensure that water is readily available at the premises." As the scholars take up responsibilities, it prepares them to run their businesses. "One starts with small

roles and, maybe a year later, they gain big roles and they are ready to face the world with all the experience needed to start their own businesses," he says. While people

**BENEFIT**  
**'SINA HELPS TRANSFORM YOUTH'S DIFFICULT PASTS INTO SOLUTIONS.'**

## ACHIEVEMENTS

Salborn is happy they have contributed to the country's economy by churning out over 60 businesses with employees totalling 360.

The model has been spread to several refugee settlements across Uganda, with a total of 600 scholars in nine locations.

They are also proud to have replicated the SINA programmes elsewhere in Africa, that is, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Zimbabwe.

Since a lot of plastic is always burnt and some dumped on the road, Salborn says they have succeeded in reducing environmental hazards by recycling it and by establishing structures using plastic bottles.

Different businesses have been created to solve many communities' problems. For instance, there is a business providing safe drinking water through natural filtration in schools, another business produces recycled fashion and accessories and another supports people living with HIV.

are in the emerging stage, Salborn says business ideas are born.

**CONCENTRATION STAGE**

This is the stage at which business ideas are presented and tested. Ssekamanya says that their mentors support and help scholars structure their business ideas. This is followed by testing the ideas. "You go out, try and see if people are willing to buy," he says.

"Then, if you can find a team and work together, the business moves into the concentration stage, followed by a five-day boot camp," he says. Ssekamanya says in the morning, Scholars structure their ideas and, in the afternoon, they go to the field. They should convince people to buy the product. At the end of the week, they should have sales. If they do not have any sales, that is when they change the idea.

"A number of ideas do not work out," Salborn says. "So, people go back to the emerging stage, continue learning and growing and try again," Salborn says, noting that failure is just a learning stage.

On the other hand, some ideas work out. "If they have made shrm in revenue, it is an indication that the business is starting to form," he says. Salborn says they then help the

# HOPE TO YOUTH FOR BETTER FUTURE

## WHAT STUDENTS SAY



Students during a lesson at SINA



Salborn empowering students

**Angella Babirye and Johnson Kato**  
We joined in May last year. We learnt we could overcome narrow-mindedness and come up with solutions. One thing that stood out is the effects of bad skin products. So, we linked up and made natural shine creams and lotion.

We then named our enterprise Eco-belleza Beauty Company. We built the product at Uganda Research Institute. Before that, we did a prototype. Currently, we are testing the product on five people, so far.

We want to improve it, to improve the sales. The feedback so far shows it is promising.

**Charles Busuulwa**  
I came to the institute after graduating with a Bachelor of Arts and Design from Makerere University. I am the first of seven children and was expected to help with my siblings' school fees and upkeep. Upon graduation, I got a teaching job, where I was earning sh250,000, which was not enough.

So, when the organisation called for applications in 2021, I applied and was admitted. With self-discovery, I realised that I had a passion for agriculture and started Aual Agroecology Company. It fights fruit loss and waste. We dry and process fruits. We are finally looking at the expansion of our business.

**Solomon Ssekamanya**  
I have a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from Nkumba University. I was not comfortable with my job where I was earning sh300,000 per month. I met a woman who was once at SINA and became a facilitator.

She advised me to join the programme, which I did. When I reached the academy, I learnt that I could be part of the solution to some of the country's social problems. So, I teamed up with Susan Nakisekka in 2021 and formed a company that deals in improving soil for farming purposes, which we registered last year.

entrepreneur formalise the business by registering it and getting an office space.

### LINKING STAGE

After registering, the business should have proper accounts, records and professionalism. The business should help others in the community. To sustain their business, entrepreneurs are linked to mentors to help them overcome challenges.

SINA does not issue a certificate to the scholars, but supports the enterprise, until it can stand on its feet financially and they graduate. Since some businesses can also be performing well and lack the capital to grow even further, Salborn says, they are working on a programme where the social enterprises pay back loans through a revenue-share model of 5% quarterly, until the loan is completed.

### STUDENTS GIVING BACK

Even though some of the beneficiaries may not give money directly to the academy, Salborn says some do it in the form of mentorship and lectures. In addition, a few can donate some of their finances back to the academy through their goodwill or support of upcoming new entrepreneurs.

### CHALLENGES

Salborn calls SINA a "freesponsible" system, combining freedom and responsibility. While this supports the growth of scholars and allows them to create their curriculum through their chosen roles, it has also come with challenges. In the beginning, Salborn says the academy lost funds to those managing the finances. Having



Members of the Eco-belleza Beauty Company with their creams

discovered that, Salborn said they put better systems in place with the organisation becoming cashless with transactions only handled online or via mobile money.

Unfortunately, scholars are sometimes used to being told what to do that if no one commands them, they sit and wait. This is why SINA is not the right place for everyone, Salborn says, and it needs youth with dedication and self-drive.

### SALES SKILLS

Are social entrepreneurs born or created? Salborn says social entrepreneurs can be created if one

## PLANS

Etienne Salborn, the founder of Social Innovation Academy in Mpigi, dreams of an organisation generating more of its revenue to lessen the dependence on donor funds. He desires to train non-governmental organisations about their methods and has already contacted a few.

aligns their purpose with what they like. This is because they will have the passion and hence be able to connect

to other people. Unfortunately, many try to find their passion in pursuit of money and when they do not get it, they give up. However, one aligned with their purpose will persist through difficult times and never give up on the path to achieving their dreams.

### BUSINESS PRACTICES

Unlike a number of businesses that make decisions top-down or in consensus, at SINA, it is different. Salborn says they use the method called holacracy: Decisions are not made based on consensus, where everybody has to agree. This method inclines more on proposals and objections.

"If you have a role, you can propose to do something different. Even if others do not like it, they have to object with a valid reason," he says. "If it is not there, the proposal will be validated."

"If a new idea is a good for the organisation to grow and does not harm anyone, then it will be actualised. "Scholars bring up proposals all the time which support SINA to improve."

### INSPIRATION

When Salborn sees all the lives of young people he has touched and how they turned out makes him happy and forces him to work harder.

"I met this girl when she was 11 years old at the orphanage," he says. "Today, she has won several international awards and is currently in the US putting forward her business. That encourages me to work harder because there is a lot of untapped potential in the youth," he says.

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