From Refugee to Leader: Finding My Voice Through U-Report

By Bénie Lokika

My name is Bénie Lokika. I am a U-Reporter with UNICEF and a Congolese refugee living in Uganda. For many years, the word refugee felt heavier than my name. It felt like a label that entered the room before I did. It spoke of loss before anyone could see my potential. Being a refugee meant losing home, familiarity, and the comfort of knowing where you belong. Sometimes it felt like losing identity. There were days I felt invisible in crowded spaces. Days I quietly wondered whether my voice even mattered.

Yet I always cared deeply about my community. I saw young people struggling. Girls dropping out of school. Boys losing hope. Families facing harmful practices like FGM. Children affected by climate change and poverty. I saw pain, but I also saw potential. I wanted to speak, but I did not know where my voice belonged. Then I discovered U-Report.

At first, it seemed simple. Polls sent to my phone about education, health, protection, and youth issues. I would answer quietly and press send. But each response meant something. I was participating in decisions. I was shaping conversations. I was being counted. For the first time, I was not just a refugee receiving services. I was a contributor. A voice.

Out of the 1.9 million refugees in Uganda, I was nominated to represent refugees in the United Nations Youth and Adolescent Program. That moment changed how I saw myself. I received training in leadership, advocacy, monitoring, and evaluation. I traveled to districts like Yumbe, Kiryandongo, and Lamwo to monitor youth programs. A refugee girl who once questioned her worth was now sitting in meetings, speaking to leaders, and contributing to decisions that affect thousands.

In 2024, I attended the U-Report Training of Trainers and was shortlisted to travel to Jinja to form a Community of Action supporting the polio campaign. I learned that leadership is not about standing in front of people. It is about standing for people.

I co-facilitated Human Centered Design and Social and Behavior Change trainings organized by UNICEF and the Ministry of Health. At first, my hands trembled when I spoke. But I spoke anyway. Each time, the fear became smaller.

In 2025, I attended FGM trainings organized by UNICEF and UNFPA and was deployed to Karamoja to help form a Community of Action working toward an FGM free community. The girl who once felt powerless was now helping protect others.

I also monitored the Gender for Development Uganda program in Yumbe, advocating for girls' enrollment, retention, and completion in school. I participated in climate change dialogues, documenting how environmental changes affect children's lives. I traveled to Nakivale refugee settlement to launch FunDoo, ensuring young people could access digital financial education.

Through life skills training organized for U-Reporters, I developed Smart Student Footsteps, a tool to guide students in focus, discipline, and intentional growth. What began as learning became creation.

I have facilitated life skills training for children of UNICEF staff. I have supported data entry for the ICT Needs Assessment, contributing to evidence based decision making. Even behind the scenes work shapes change.

Over time, something shifted within me. I stopped introducing myself as just a refugee. I began introducing myself as a leader and an advocate. The greatest change in my life is not the travel or the

meetings. It is the transformation within. I moved from silence to strength and from invisibility to impact.

Today, I speak not only for myself, but for every refugee who has ever felt unseen. U-Report did not erase my past, but it changed how I see my future. When young people, even refugee girls, are given a platform and trusted with responsibility, they rise. And when they rise, they lift entire communities.

