

Aron Okello: A Journey of Hope Restored



By: Aron Okello

I give thanks to God for the journey that brought me from a small subsistence-farming household to a university graduation gown and now to a classroom where I stand as a teacher and mentor. When I look back at where I began and where I am today, I am overwhelmed with emotion. Only tears can define my joy and immense gratitude.

I lost my father when I was in primary three (3). From that moment, my mother became everything – a parent, provider, protector and teacher. She depended entirely on subsistence farming to feed me and my siblings as well as pay our school fees. Many seasons, the harvest was often not enough. In desperate moments, she sold all our food crops just to keep me in school, leaving nothing at home to eat. I watched her health deteriorate, her ulcer worsening under the weight of stress. Family members saw me as a burden. More than once, she nearly gave up on my education.

By the time I completed my O- and A-levels, I was emotionally exhausted. I remember kneeling down and whispering, *“Ebenezer, Ebenezer,”* meaning *“Thus far the Lord has brought me.”* I knew that finishing secondary school had been nothing short of grace. Hope for further education had almost disappeared. I was physically present in life, but peace and happiness were absent. The stress of school fees and lack of basic needs drained my confidence and dimmed my dreams.

Yet even in that darkness, two teachers, Mr. Opio David and Mrs. Judith Caroline Abwin kept speaking life into me. *“Worry not, all will be well. Forget the challenges at home and concentrate on your academics and future.”*, they would repeatedly say. Their words and guidance anchored me when everything else felt unstable, and I still thank them till this day.

In 2019, news reached my remote village about an opportunity from the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. It was a call for applications under the [Transforming Africa’s Agricultural Higher Education Institutions for Economic Growth & Development \(TAGDev\)](#) Nurturing Grant. I was told it supports disadvantaged students with full academic onboarding. I hesitated at first, then gathered courage and applied.

For two months, I waited anxiously. Then one day, a message arrived from the RUFORUM Secretariat: **I had been awarded a full scholarship to pursue a Bachelor’s Degree in Business Education at Gulu University.** I had to read the message again and again. Tears flowed relentlessly and, in that moment, my academic hope was restored.



At campus, I found more than financial support. I found a community. RUFORUM staff and university coordinators guided us closely. They did not just pay fees; they mentored us, built our confidence, and challenged us to think beyond survival. For the first time in my life, I studied without the constant fear of being sent home for unpaid tuition. I had accommodation. I had a stipend. I had dignity.

Freed from financial anxiety, I focused on learning. I began to see education not only as a path out of poverty for myself, but as a tool for transforming others. RUFORUM emphasized entrepreneurship, innovation, and community impact. We were trained not merely to look for jobs, but to create them. That shift in mindset changed everything.

In February 2023, I graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Education. But the real graduation had already happened within me - the transformation from a hopeless village boy into a confident professional with a mission and hope.

Today, I serve as an Entrepreneurship Education teacher at one of the best schools in the West Nile region, St. Andrew's College Moyo. Everyday, I stand before young people, Ugandans and South Sudanese alike - many of whom face struggles similar to mine. I mentor them to believe that their circumstances do not define their destiny.

The socio-economic ripple effects of TAGDev did not stop at my graduation. Inspired by the programme's emphasis on job creation and community service, I founded **New Blessing Produce Line-Uganda (NBPL-U)**, a registered youth-led organization. Its mission is to empower local farmers to produce high-quality, clean agricultural food crops that can compete in different markets.

In 2026 alone, we registered 50 local farmers for training in vegetable production and financial literacy. Many of them own land but lacked the technical knowledge to use it productively. Today, they are learning how to treat farming as a business. During times of scarcity, we buy and sell food crops at affordable prices, stabilizing local access to food. NBPL-U currently employs four staff members - three community farmer trainers and one produce buyer, with plans to increase local employment by 70% in the next five years.

Households that once struggled to generate income are beginning to see farming as a pathway to dignity and stability. Youth who might have migrated in search of uncertain work are finding opportunities within their communities. Through environmental conservation efforts, tree planting, and training in hygiene and waste management, we are also nurturing a culture of sustainability.

All this began with one scholarship and one decision to invest in a disadvantaged student. TAGDev did more than educate me; it interrupted a cycle of poverty. It protected my mother from further sacrifice. It turned despair into productivity. It converted a potential dropout into a teacher, an employer, and a community mobilizer.

I hope the TAGDev program see's beyond statistics. Behind every funded student is a family spared from extreme sacrifice, a classroom filled with inspired learners, a network of farmers increasing productivity, and a community gradually transforming.

I remain deeply grateful to RUFORUM and Mastercard Foundation who believed in students like me. Their investment has multiplied far beyond one beneficiary. It lives in every farmer trained, every student mentored, every job created, and every household that eats because local production improved.