

Charles Chol: A refugee teacher at the forefront of advocating for inclusive education in Kakuma Refugee Camp



Meet Charles Chol Matiop , a teacher at Tarach Pre- School: one of 21 primary and 13 pre-primary schools managed by LWF in Kakuma refugee camp on the mandate of the UNHCR under the Kenyan system of education; implementing the newly adopted Competency Based Curriculum (CBC). Born in South Sudan in 1991, Charles contracted measles because of lack of vaccination which caused him his sight, leaving him blind at the tender age of two. Due to protracted crisis and war in South Sudan, his parents were not able to get him immediate medical care since hardly any facilities were operational forcing them to eventually flee their country and seek refuge in Kenya in 1994.

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Upon arrival in Kakuma refugee camp, Charles was not able to access education due to the myths held by his community that the blind cannot learn, and that his condition was a curse. He also had a hard time in school attributed to his condition and the lack of schools within the camp at that particular time that could accommodate his learning needs, forcing him to remain home while his peers went to school. In 2003, he joined St. Francis School for the Blind in Kapenguria – Kitale in class three to continue with his primary school education then proceeded to Kiboz High School in Kisumu. His parents championed for his education and through support he successfully completed his primary and secondary school education. Charles' dream had always been of becoming a journalist, he wished to join an institution of higher learning to study journalism after his high school but to date has remained unsuccessful in securing admission because of his condition.

"In my experience, not every child with disability in the camp had the chance to access education because of various reasons. Having gone through the social stigma and having gained vast knowledge and experience together with multiple trainings, I want to be the voice of hope for children with special needs." It is with such resolve that Charles came back to Kakuma refugee camp and approached LWF to become a volunteer teacher, then eventually retained at the Tarach Pre-School – SNE Unit.



Charles Chol Matioop during one of his lessons at Tarach Pre - School.



LWF promotes inclusive education through rigorous training programs. This has been achieved through collaborations with the Kenya Institute of Special Education. Training teachers has improved the quality of inclusive and special education for children with disabilities in Kakuma refugee camp. LWF has also increased accessibility to schools for children with disabilities through infrastructural and physical adjustments i.e. ensuring that buildings have ramps, hand rails and wide doors for wheel chairs. With the support of donors, LWF has enabled assistive technology access to learners with disabilities. Consequently, the use of assistive technology has had enormous contribution on the access of curriculum materials and coverage as well as early completion of class work and assignments by learners. In the 21 primary schools, children with disabilities access the regular curriculum through inclusive education. However, those with severe disabilities access a specialized curriculum taught by special education teachers in the seven special needs units within the schools. Often, children who demonstrate improvement are integrated in the regular classrooms.

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The community and other children with disabilities see Charles as a role model; on the other hand, Charles sees children with disabilities as an inspiration to him. He is a passionate Swahili poet and teacher, who strives to shape learners' behavior and inspire change in them every single day.

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Charles offers guidance and counseling to help the learners with special needs come to term with the acceptance of their situation. He takes them through steps to overcome feelings of self-loath, self-pity and dependability by giving them testimonials. He also takes time to talk to parents to enroll their children to school rather than hiding them away out of the perceived shame and stigma attached to raising children with disabilities.

His job as a teacher has also enabled him to gain self-reliance skills, improving his economic status. "I support my family financially. They no longer see the disability in me. Instead, they acknowledge my achievements through education, and as a change agent in the community."

In his view, the provision of both supportive learning and teaching materials has enabled the access to education for formerly excluded learners with disabilities. The learners access braille machines which are part of assistive technology in inclusive education; abacus, that helps visually impaired children learn math and numbers; and tactile maps to be able to learn history and get familiar with different parts of the world. This has been actualized through the support of Educate A Child, UNICEF, ECHO and the UNHCR.