

Connecting Refugee Talent to Work 2025

TALENT HAS NO BORDER



ORGANIZED BY



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Foreword

Dear Friends,

What happens when refugee youth are given the chance to show what they can do, not as beneficiaries, but as professionals?

This is the question that inspired Opengates, and it is the question CRTW Hackathon 2025 sought to answer. For too long, refugee youth have been defined by barriers. Yet in Kakuma, we witnessed something different: 18 young freelancers standing with confidence, proving that talent and innovation can thrive even in the hardest places.

Opengates was created to open doors where they were once closed. Work is dignity, and dignity is hope. CRTW carried this belief forward by bringing youth, businesses, and organizations together to connect talent with opportunity. The results were clear: jobs secured, skills recognized, and stories amplified. But more than numbers, it was the spark of possibility that mattered most.

This hackathon reminded us of something fundamental, that resilience grows when people are trusted, that innovation rises when voices are heard, and that true change begins when opportunity is shared. The courage and creativity of the participants showed us not just what refugee youth can do, but what the world stands to gain when no one is left behind.

We thank our partners, **Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR), International Trade Centre (ITC), World University Service of Canada (WUSC), and Microsoft**, for walking with us, and to every participant and entrepreneur who made this journey real.

Together, we are not just imagining a future where refugees are included, we are building it.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'Ramazani Mwemedi', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Ramazani Mwemedi
Co-Founder & CEO, Opengates

Acknowledgements

The Connecting Refugee Talent to Work (CRTW) Hackathon 2025 was more than an event, it was a bold reminder that refugee youth are not waiting to be included; they are already shaping solutions, building businesses, and creating opportunities.

We honor the partnership that made this possible: **Opengates**, together with the **Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR)**, the **International Trade Centre (ITC)**, the **World University Service of Canada (WUSC)**, and **Microsoft**. Your leadership and shared vision turned CRTW from an idea into a platform where talent met opportunity.

We extend heartfelt thanks to **InkoMoko**, whose efforts in connecting us with businesses and entrepreneurs around Kakuma and Kalobeyei ensured that participants could showcase their skills directly to the marketplace.

We are equally grateful to the representatives from **Resilience Action International (RAI)**, **Action for Refugees Life (AREL)**, **Kalobeyei Initiatives for Refugees (KI4BLI)**, **URISE**, **KUA Initiative**, **WeAreCohere**, **Finn Church Aid (FCA)**, and many others who stood beside us during the event. Your presence reflected the strength of collective action.

To our **jury members**, thank you for lending your expertise, honesty, and encouragement. To the **business representatives and entrepreneurs**, your willingness to engage with freelancers, not as beneficiaries but as partners, embodied the very essence of CRTW.

Above all, we celebrate the **18 youth participants**. You carried the heart of this hackathon. Through your ideas, resilience, and courage, you showed us the future of freelancing in Kakuma and beyond.

And to the **Opengates team and volunteers**, whose tireless commitment held everything together, we say thank you.

CRTW 2025 was not just a gathering. It was a movement, a shared belief that dignity, opportunity, and hope can be created when communities, partners, and youth come together.



Mapping the Experience



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Executive Summary



The Connecting Refugee Talent to Work (CRTW) Hackathon 2025, held in Kakuma from 27–29 August, brought together refugee youth, businesses, and partners to showcase skills and unlock opportunities for dignified digital work. Organized by **Opengates**, in partnership with the **Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR)**, the **International Trade Centre (ITC)**, the **World University Service of Canada (WUSC)**, and **Microsoft**, the event demonstrated the power of collaboration in addressing youth employment challenges.

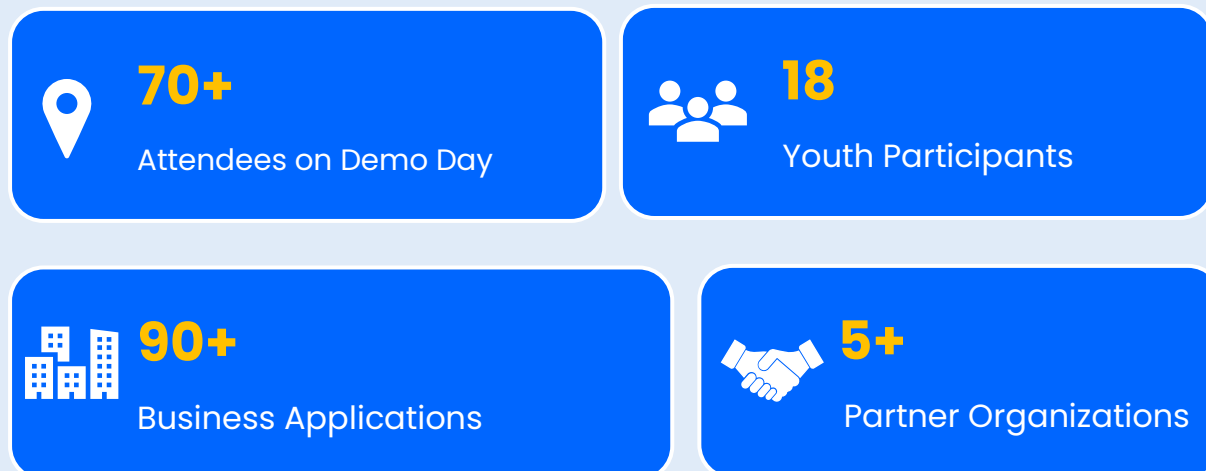
From **40+ applications**, **25 youth were shortlisted**, and **18 participants** engaged fully in the hackathon. The demo day gathered **70+ attendees**, including representatives of leading organizations and businesses, while interest from the private sector was reflected in **90+ business applications**.

The outcomes were immediate and meaningful. **8 jobs were secured** for youth, including **7 developers** and **1 digital marketer**, while **2 laptops were awarded** to outstanding participants. In addition, **7 video stories** and **18 profiles** were captured, amplifying the voices and journeys of refugee freelancers.

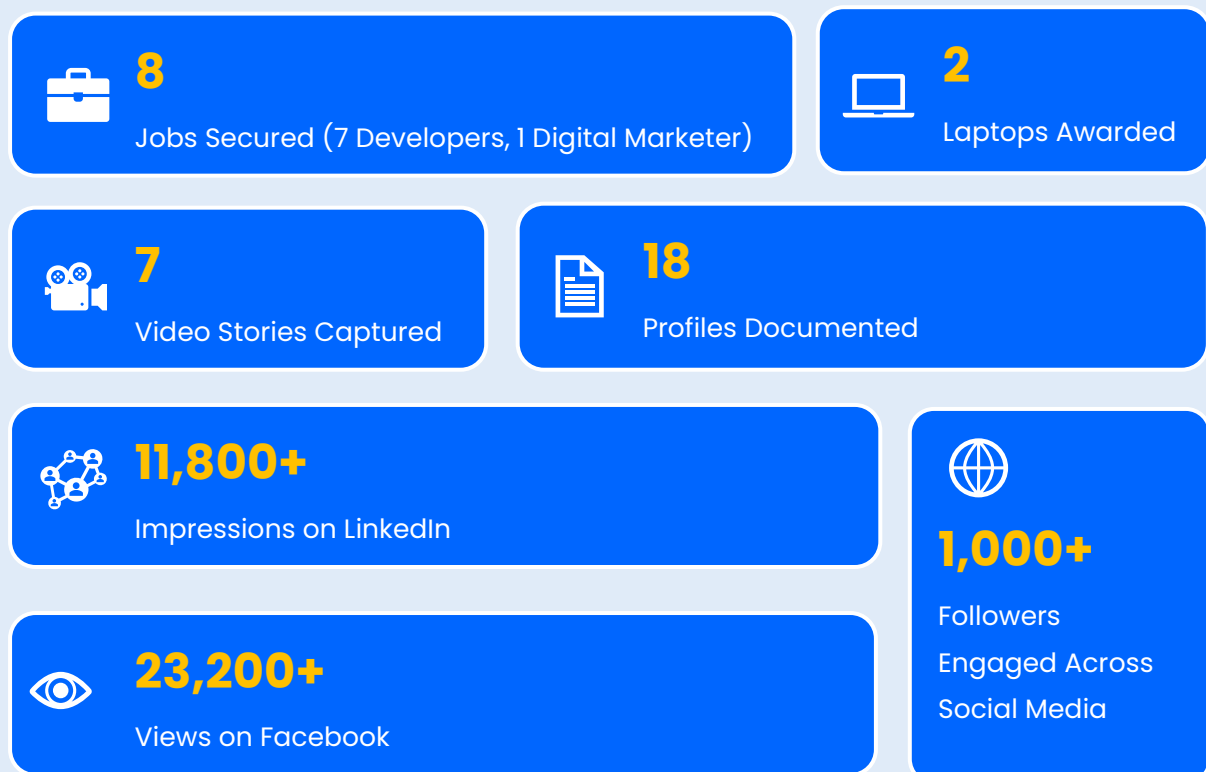
CRTW's impact also extended beyond Kakuma, reaching thousands online and showcasing refugee talent to a wider audience. More than an event, CRTW 2025 was a milestone in reimagining how refugee youth can connect to dignified work, with businesses and communities standing as partners in that journey.

CRTW 2025 At A Glance

Attendance



Outcomes



Introduction & Background

Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei settlement together host more than **309,169 refugees** as of Aug 2025, making them one of the largest refugee-hosting sites in Africa. Most have fled protracted crises in South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others. While international agencies have increasingly focused on fostering self-reliance, the reality for refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei remains marked by vulnerability and economic precarity.

According to the Refugee Economies Program and WFP's 2024 study, only **40% of households** in Kakuma and Kalobeyei have at least one adult earning an income, and at the individual level, just **15% of adults** work for pay. Average monthly earnings for those employed remain as low as **KES 5,827 (\$49)**, with most opportunities limited to informal or incentive work with NGOs. Farming and small businesses exist but are constrained by harsh climatic conditions, scarce water, and limited access to markets.

Humanitarian aid remains a lifeline, yet it is often insufficient. In July 2023, WFP was forced to reduce assistance, covering only **60% of refugees' basic food needs**. As one South Sudanese woman explained: *"There is nothing I can do to reduce this poverty for my family, because there is no job, nor any kind of business. We can only depend on Bamba Chakula."*

The consequences are stark. About **83% of refugee households are food insecure**, with South Sudanese households faring worst, consuming fewer than **1,500 kcal per day**, far below the recommended 2,100 kcal. Debt has become an unavoidable coping strategy: **87% of households are indebted to food retailers**, with many forced to hand over their WFP SIM or ATM cards as collateral. In Kalobeyei, debt per person averages **KES 6,850 (\$57)**, the equivalent of three months of food assistance, creating a cycle that many describe as a "debt trap".

It is in this context that **Opengates** was created. Born from within refugee communities, Opengates exists to break this cycle by connecting young people to digital livelihoods. We believe that *work is dignity*, and that refugee youth should be recognized as professionals, not as aid recipients.

The **Connecting Refugee Talent to Work (CRTW) Hackathon 2025** was conceived as a practical extension of this mission. It offered refugee freelancers a platform to showcase their skills, connect with businesses, and secure dignified work opportunities. More than a competition, CRTW was a response to the urgent need for

pathways beyond aid, pathways that enable refugee youth to move from dependency to independence, and from resilience to leadership.

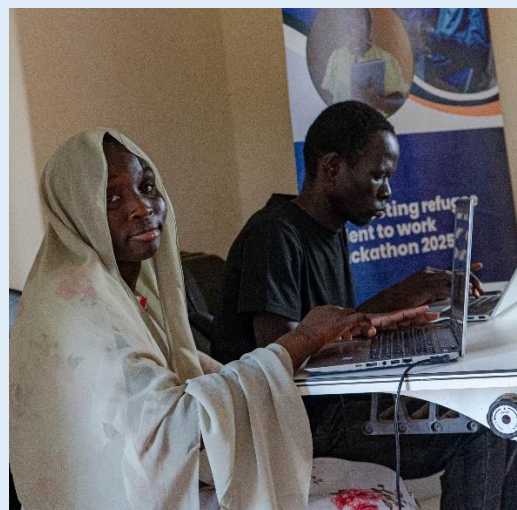
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Objectives of the Hackathon

At its core, the Connecting Refugee Talent to Work (CRTW) Hackathon was never just about coding challenges or presentations. It was about creating a space where young refugees could stand with confidence, be seen for their abilities, and be valued as professionals.

Too often, refugee youth are spoken about in numbers, but behind every statistic is a young person with dreams, skills, and the determination to succeed. The hackathon sought to shift

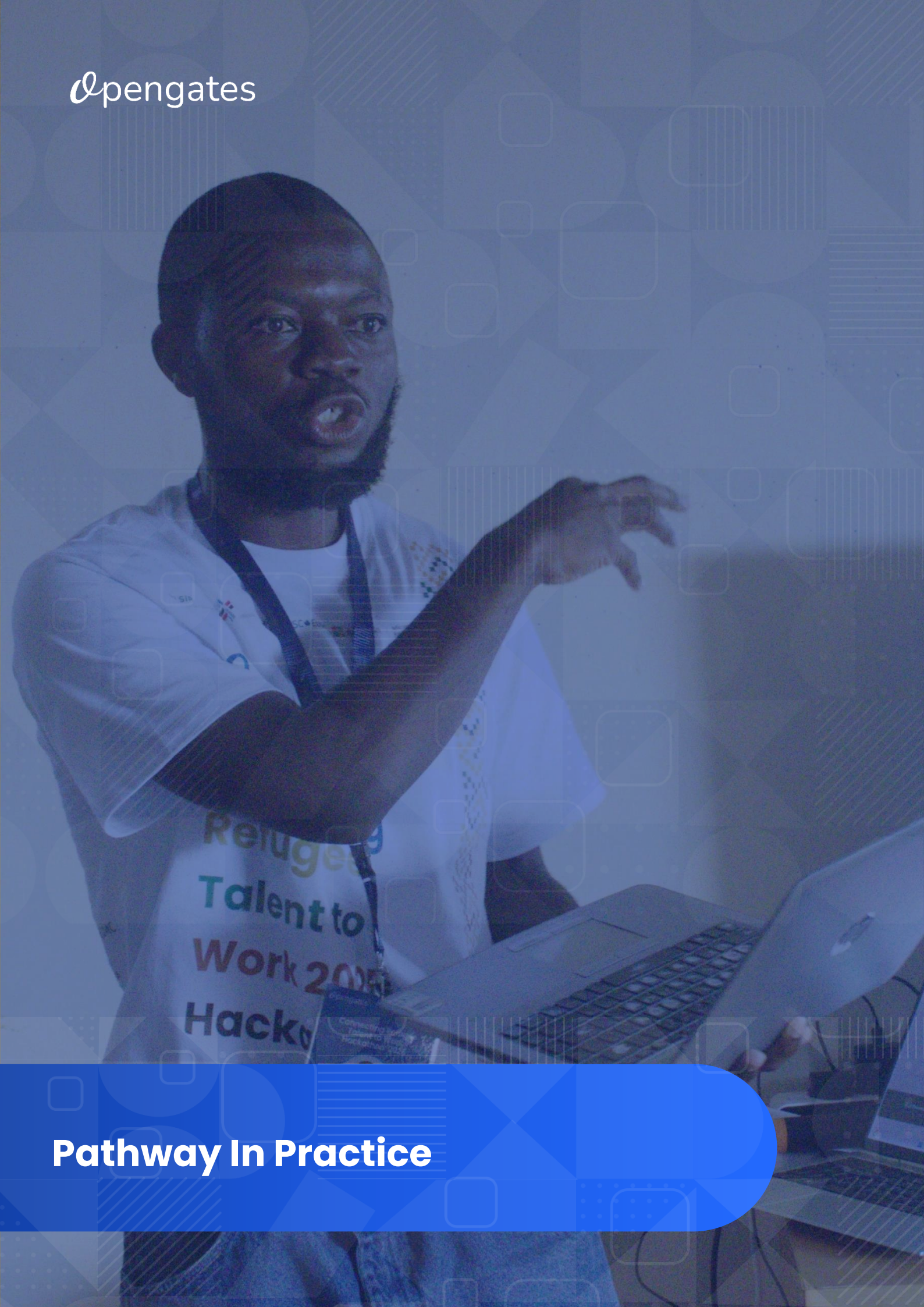
the story from barriers to possibilities, from survival to dignity.



Its objectives were simple yet profound:

1. **To showcase talent:** giving refugee freelancers a stage to prove that their creativity and skills match global standards.
2. **To connect to opportunity:** ensuring that participation was not symbolic, but linked to real jobs, contracts, and pathways forward.
3. **To amplify voices:** capturing the stories of resilience and ambition that too often go unheard and share them with the world.
4. **To engage businesses:** inviting entrepreneurs and companies to see refugee youth not as beneficiaries, but as partners and innovators.
5. **To build community:** weaving together refugees, host communities, organizations, and businesses into a network that believes in possibility.

In every sense, CRTW 2025 was designed to remind us of something fundamental: that when refugee youth are given a chance, they don't just participate, they lead.



Pathway In Practice

Day 1 – Opening & Orientation

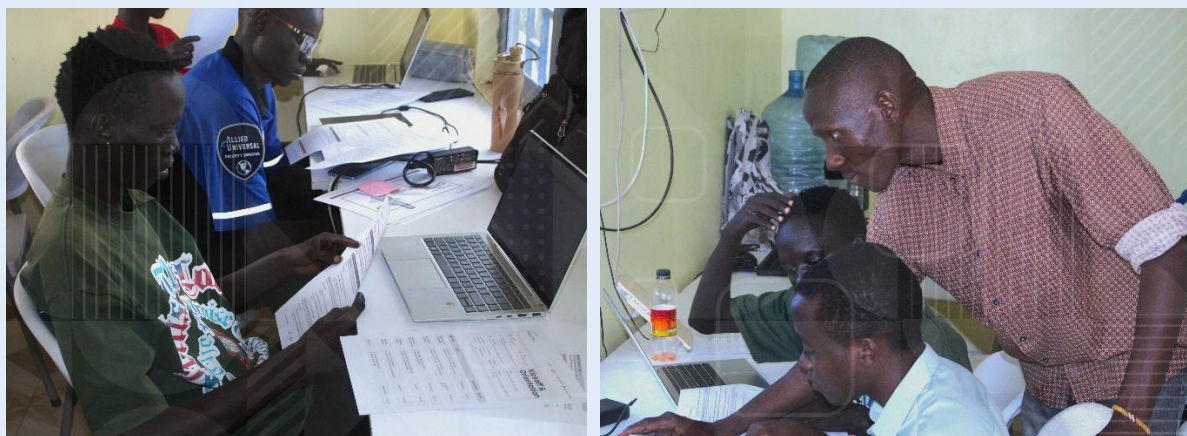


The first day of CRTW Hackathon 2025 marked the official start of a journey from talent to opportunity. From **41 applications**, **25 youth were shortlisted**, and **18 participants** fully engaged in the hackathon, a testament to both the demand for opportunity and the selectiveness of the process.

The day began with welcoming remarks and introductions, setting the tone that CRTW was not simply a competition, but a professional space where refugee youth could be recognized as innovators. The agenda included:

- **Opening Session:** Greetings from Opengates and supporting partners, affirming the mission of connecting refugee youth to dignified work.
- **Participant Introductions:** Each of the 18 participants presented themselves, their skills, and their motivations for joining.
- **Team Orientation:** Facilitators explained the structure of the hackathon, expectations for submissions, and the judging criteria.
- **Ice-Breaker Activities:** Participants engaged in interactive exercises to build trust, encourage collaboration, and spark creativity.

- **Setting the Challenge:** The hackathon theme was introduced, emphasizing the importance of creating digital solutions and showcasing freelancing skills that respond to real-world needs.



For many participants, this was their first opportunity to stand in a room where their skills were acknowledged in front of businesses, organizations, and peers. The atmosphere was filled with anticipation, but also with pride, a collective recognition that refugee freelancers have both the talent and the drive to contribute meaningfully when given the stage.

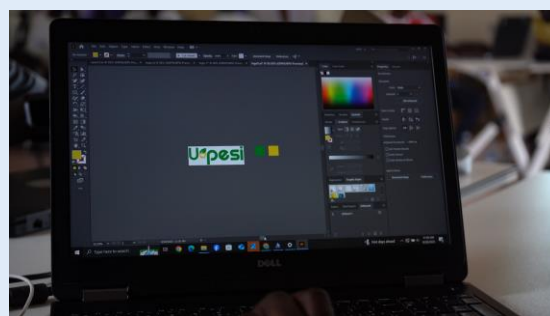
Day 2 – Building Like a Startup



Day 2 moved from inspiration to execution. Participants were grouped into **cross-functional squads** so each team worked like a small startup, bringing together **UI/UX & design, web development, content & storytelling, digital marketing, and business & customer support**. Instead of working in silos, every squad owned a single vision: a lean e-commerce platform that could help local businesses in Kakuma and Kalobeyei sell beyond the camp.

Designers set the tone with a **lightweight brand kit** (logo, colors, fonts) and **mobile-first wireframes** for the homepage, product page, cart, and checkout. Developers translated these into a **clickable prototype**, fast, simple, and reliable for low-bandwidth contexts, complete with a product listing, a basic cart, and a demo checkout flow. Content leads crafted the platform's **voice and story**: clear

product descriptions, an “About” page that centers dignity and resilience, and visuals to bring the marketplace to life.



Marketing paired that narrative with a **go-to-market plan**, sample posts, one mock ad, and searchable keywords/hashtags to grow awareness from day one. Meanwhile, the business & support lead ensured the platform **made sense commercially and operationally**: a practical revenue

model (e.g., commission or seller subscription), an onboarding path for local vendors, and a simple customer-

care layer (FAQ plus a short chatbot/email script).

Throughout the day, squads worked in short build-review loops: design handed off components to development; content and marketing aligned on headlines and imagery; business checked for feasibility and user support gaps. By evening, each team had a **cohesive platform pitch**, a working prototype, brand & content pack, a mini marketing launch, and a

basic business model, ready to present as one integrated story on Demo Day.



Day 3 – Demo Day & Awards



The final day brought the hackathon into a public arena. More than **70** guests, local business owners, training organizations, community leaders, and youth, gathered to see what the **18** shortlisted participants had built and to explore concrete ways to work together.



Teams presented as small startups, each telling one coherent story from **brand, prototype, route-to-market, basic support model**. The jury highlighted strong **mobile-first design** and **lightweight performance** suited to low bandwidth and advised tightening **vendor onboarding** and **catalogue standards** (titles, imagery, pricing) ahead of wider rollout.



A moderated discussion connected skill pipelines to live business demand, featuring a refugee-led training voice and a local entrepreneur.



Wyclife Omondi,
Programs Manager, RAI

"There is no need for us to seek web developers, designers, or digital marketers from Nairobi when we already have talented and capable people right here in the camp, ready to provide these services." He added "The platform is ready, and the talents are ready as well. We are now seeking partners and organizations to outsource jobs to Opengates and hire directly from the platform."

From the market side,

"These young people lifted a haze from my eyes. I now see that bringing my business online opens a much broader reach; if I had embraced social media earlier, many more people would already know my business.... Businesses can operate smarter if they embrace online visibility through channels such as websites and social media, as these young people have just demonstrated."



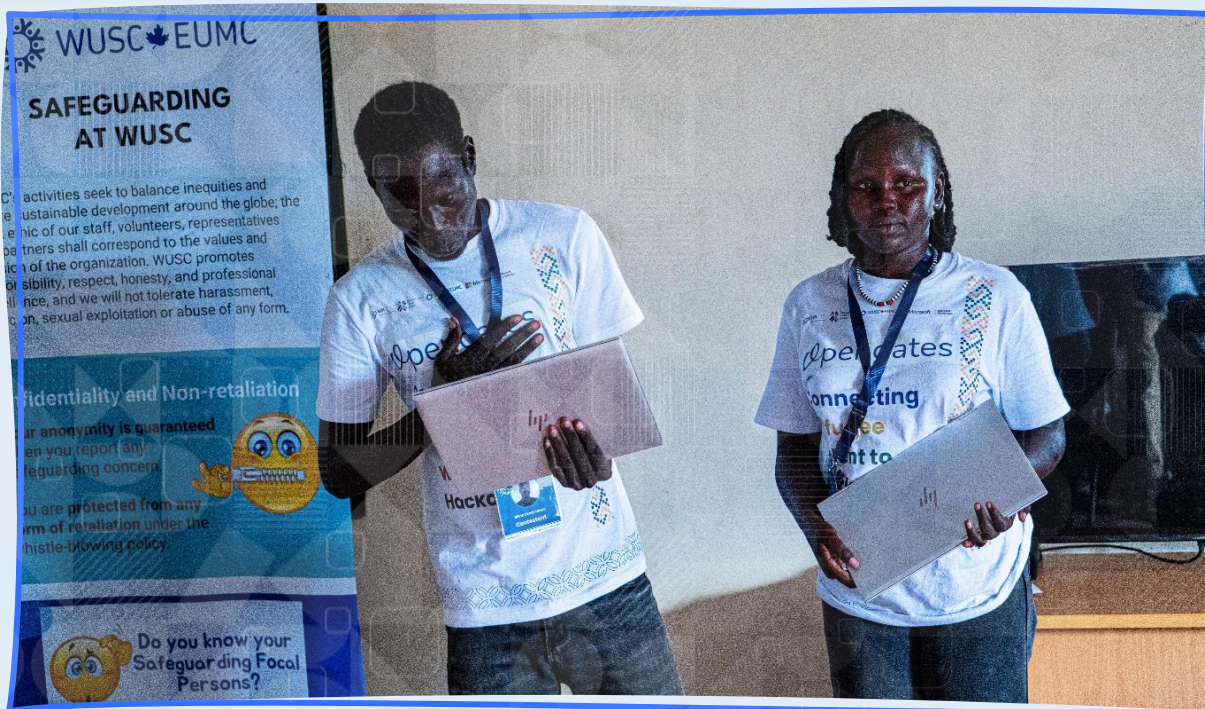
Thierry Light,
Business Owner

Engagement on the floor. After the pitches, conversations moved quickly to practical first steps: **starter storefronts, catalogue clean-up & product photography,** and **short social campaigns** tied to upcoming promotions. Contact details were exchanged and initial scopes outlined with interested businesses.

Most engagements converted **after** Demo Day through structured follow-up with businesses. In total, **8 jobs were confirmed, 7 developers** and **1 digital marketer**, with both parties confirming the engagements. This pattern reinforces the event model: public pitch → scoped discussion → first deliverable → paid work.



To turn talent into real opportunity, partners from **SIR** and **ITC** introduced a simple, fair way to close the device gap. Among the **11** participants without laptops, an **equity draw** offered two chances to receive a work-ready machine.



The room went quiet as slips were opened; when **1 young woman** and **1 young man** revealed "Laptop," the applause felt bigger than a prize. It was a hand on the shoulder saying: *you're ready-go build*. The devices were set up on the spot so the winners could begin working immediately.



Recognition did not end there. **Certificates of participation** were issued to **all 18** participants, more than a keepsake, a credential of professional effort that they can add to their Opengates profiles and CVs. Together, the laptops and certificates sent a clear message: with the right tools and proof of work, refugee youth can compete, and win-in the digital economy.

Participants & Stories



Hissen Tutu Suleiman

Website Developer



Ayen Thon Lul

Graphic Designer



Destin Buhuluki

Graphic Designer



Hassan Omar Abdulle

Content Writer



Wuor Bhang

Website Developer



Diing Atem

Graphic Designer



Moses Madut Mam

Graphic Designer



Otongole Abuna Shiro

Graphic Designer



Nyuon Simon Duop

Graphic Designer



Thijin Simon Duop

Digital Marketer



Darasalem Yakub

Digital Marketer



Lwiho Rajabu Chakila

Digital Marketer



Amisi Mwanue Sila

Website Developer



Lucien Hussein

Website Developer



George Musa

Digital Marketer



James Loree Ewoi

Website Developer



Silvio Ukoth Ukoro

Website Developer



Chapoth Deng Gabriel

Content Writer

Every story in this section is a reminder of why initiatives like CRTW exist. In the words of these young people, we hear both the challenges of working from Kakuma and Kalobeyei and the courage to overcome them. We also hear the clarity of their ambition: to work with dignity, to contribute globally, and to open doors for others. Their voices invite us to see refugee youth not as passive recipients of aid, but as partners in shaping the digital economy of tomorrow.

Spotlight: Ayen, Graphic Designer



"My name is Ayen, I am from South Sudan and live in Kakuma 3. I joined the CRTW Hackathon to put my graphic design skills into practice and to grow as a freelancer."

Ayen began her freelancing journey by designing logos for local clients, learning the importance of **practice and discipline** in building quality work. She shared that for her, freelancing is not just about skill, but about **courage**, especially as a woman navigating a space often dominated by men.

Like many in the camp, Ayen faces daily challenges: limited access to electricity, internet, and reliable workspace. Yet she finds ways to adapt, visiting local centers when needed, and maintaining the consistency required to deliver projects on time.

Looking ahead, Ayen envisions herself becoming an **established graphic designer** with the capacity to **train other refugees** and share her skills with the community. She believes platforms like Opengates open doors that were once closed to refugees: "With this platform, refugees can finally connect directly to opportunities that match their talent."

Ayen's story reflects the resilience, ambition, and professionalism at the heart of the CRTW cohort, youth who are not waiting for handouts, but actively building the digital futures they want to see.

Spotlight: Amisi, Website Developer



Amisi, a talented **web developer from the Democratic Republic of Congo**, arrived in Kakuma in 2010. His journey into technology began unexpectedly when, as a teenager, he failed a computer-based DJ audition because he had never touched a laptop before. Instead of giving up, that moment ignited his determination to learn digital skills. Step by step, through local training centres such as RAI and Don Bosco, and later at the Institute of Certified Studies in Nairobi, Amisi built a foundation in IT and web development.

Today, Amisi has developed websites for organizations such as **Ubuntu Youth Organization in Nairobi, Human Aid in Kakuma**, and **Youth Talent Innovation**, all of which actively use his work. His portfolio demonstrates both technical skill and professionalism, built on values he holds

dear, **communication, respect, and commitment to clients.**

Despite challenges like limited internet and frequent power shortages, Amisi adapts by securing client deposits to cover connectivity costs and ensuring transparency if deadlines are at risk. His resilience allows him to deliver projects reliably, even in the most difficult conditions.

Looking ahead, Amisi envisions sustaining himself and his family entirely through freelancing. He continues to expand his expertise by learning new programming languages and exploring emerging technologies. For him, freelancing is not just work, it is a **path to independence and dignity**, and a chance to prove that refugee youth can provide professional services on par with global peers.

Spotlight: Ding, Graphic Designer

Ding Atem, a refugee living in Kakuma, is a **graphic designer with a strong eye for detail and creativity**. He began his journey in digital design at *Learning Lions*, where he gained his first formal training earlier this year. Driven by a desire to put his skills into practice and connect with other refugee professionals, Ding joined the CRTW Hackathon to test himself in a real-world, high-pressure environment.

For Ding, the project he is most proud of is the website design he created during the Hackathon itself. It marked not only a personal milestone but also proof that refugee youth can deliver high-quality digital solutions under tight deadlines. He believes that deadlines are not barriers but opportunities “a way to push us to improve, work faster, and deliver better results.”

The values that guide his work, **consistency, discipline, and professionalism**, shape his vision for the future. In three years, Ding sees himself as an established freelancer, collaborating with global companies and mentoring other refugee youth who are just starting their freelance journeys.



To Ding, platforms like **Opengates** mean far more than earning income. They represent dignity, purpose, and safety. “Freelancing keeps youth off the streets,” he reflects, noting that many refugees have skills but lack opportunities to showcase them. With access to the internet, electricity, and the right tools, he believes refugee freelancers can thrive, contributing not only to their own livelihoods but also to businesses and organizations worldwide.

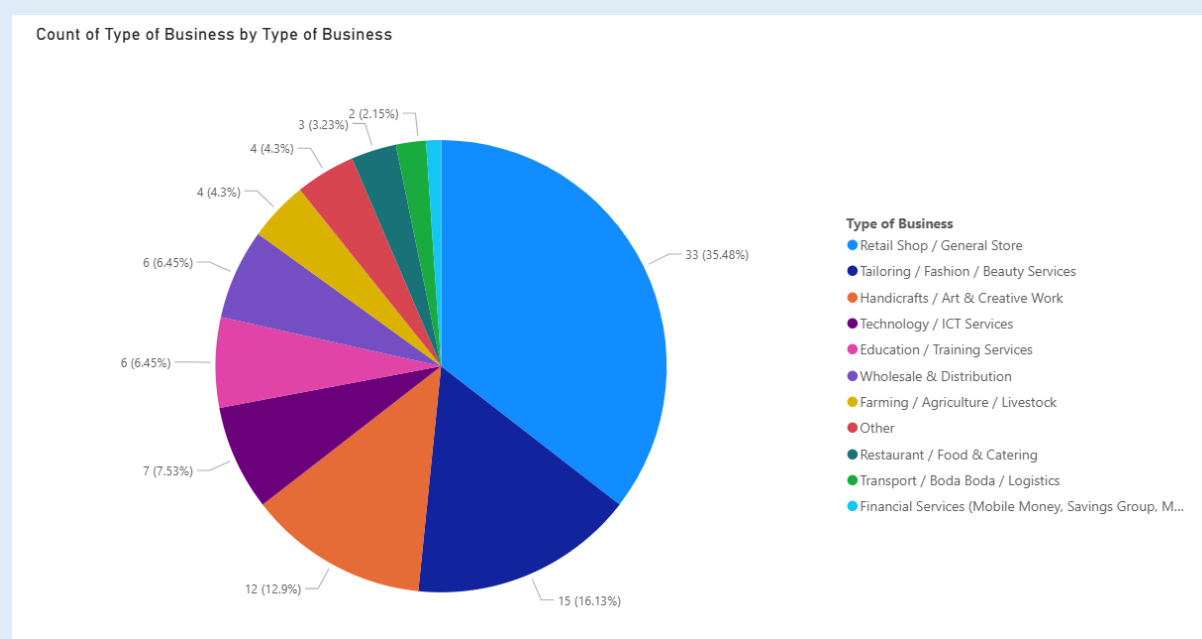
Ding defines himself in three words: **resilient, creative, and professional**. His story illustrates what becomes possible when refugee youth are given the opportunity to step forward, showcase their talent, and build futures beyond the limits of the camp.

The stories of Ayen, Amisi, and Ding are just a few among many. Behind each face in the camp is a young person with determination, skills, and dreams that extend far beyond the borders of Kakuma and Kalobeyei. These narratives reflect the resilience and potential of countless refugee youth who, if given the chance, are ready to contribute meaningfully to the digital economy.

By highlighting these individual journeys, we aim not only to celebrate their achievements but also to remind ourselves of the vast, often unseen, reservoir of talent waiting to be recognized and supported. Their voices carry the aspirations of many, and their success is a glimpse of what is possible when opportunity meets resilience.

Business & Partner Engagement

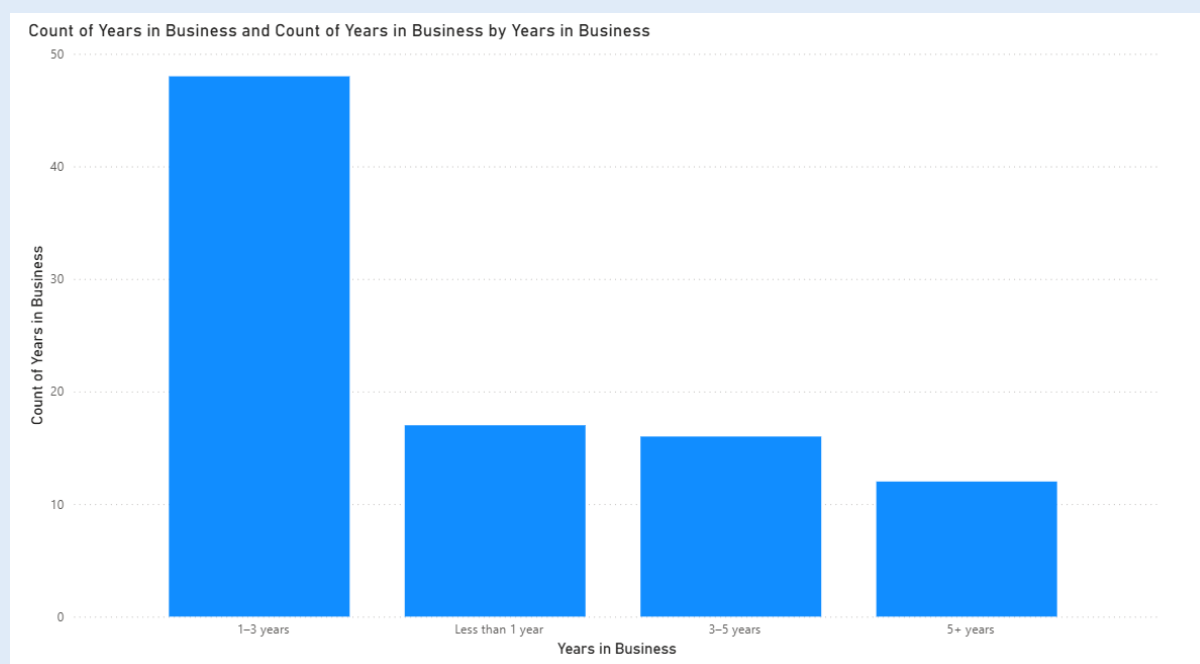
The CRTW Hackathon did not only spotlight individual digital talent – it also brought businesses into the conversation. Over **90 business owners applied** to engage with refugee freelancers, reflecting both the dynamism of Kakuma and Kalobeyei's entrepreneurial landscape and the growing recognition of digital opportunities.



The applicants came from diverse sectors, with strong representation in **retail, fashion and tailoring, food services, ICT, and handicrafts**. Many were early-stage entrepreneurs, nearly one-third operating for less than a year, while others brought several years of experience. This mix highlighted both the vibrancy of new ideas and the steady resilience of established refugee-led and host community businesses.

Their motivations were equally inspiring: some sought **networking and collaboration**, others aimed at **learning and skills development**, while many looked to **digital visibility and access to new markets**. Together, these motivations underscored a common drive – the pursuit of growth and sustainability through connection.

The engagement was further strengthened by the role of **Inkomoko** and participation from key organizations, including **RAI, AREL, KI4BLI, URISE, Cohere, FCA**, among others. Their involvement demonstrated that collaboration across ecosystems, from grassroots innovators to international partners, is essential for unlocking opportunities.



Spotlight on Hackathon Submissions

The CRTW Hackathon was not only about competition – it was a platform for participants to demonstrate innovation, creativity, and resilience. From branding strategies to live websites, digital campaigns, and handcrafted designs, the submissions reflected the ambition of refugee and host community youth to build a future in the digital economy.

Turkana Crafts Online

- A live e-commerce prototype developed by **Lwiho Rajabu**, designed to give artisans in Turkana and Kakuma a marketplace to connect with buyers worldwide.

- The project demonstrates how local crafts can be digitized to reach broader audiences and create sustainable income opportunities.

[View Project](#)

Velourany Care – Digital Marketing Campaign

- Created by **Madut Mam**, this submission included:
 - A Mailchimp email campaign introducing products and offers.
 - Facebook and Instagram ad mockups highlighting beauty with purpose.
 - A structured five-post social media launch strategy with campaign goals, target audiences, and hashtags.
- The project shows how refugee youth can create professional marketing assets ready for use by real-world brands.

[See live demo](#)

Brand Identity & Storytelling

- **Ayen Thon** developed a brand identity and logo design, supported by a narrative about the creative process.
- This work demonstrates the role of storytelling in building authentic and professional digital brands.

Graphic Design Deliverables

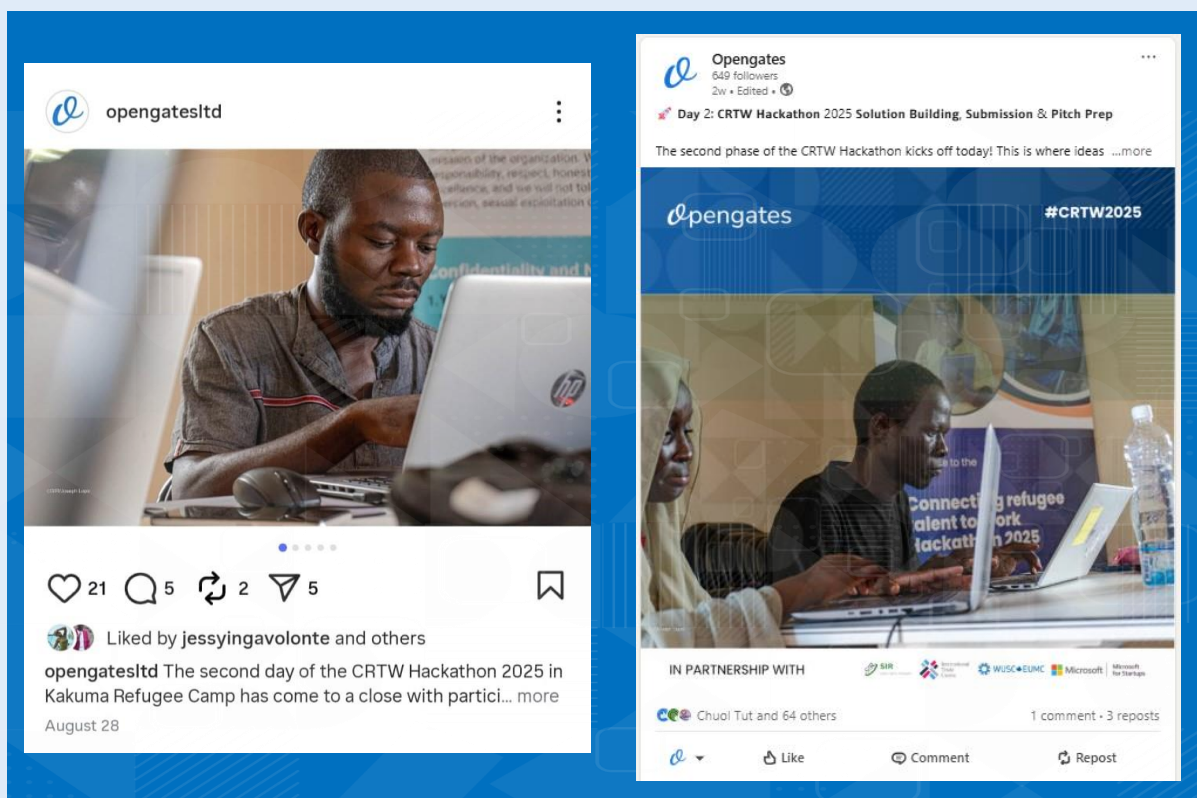
- **Diing Atem** submitted a portfolio of designs, including brand visuals and mockups, showcasing strong technical ability and professional-level execution.
- His submission illustrated how design can directly support business needs and strengthen digital presence.

[View Designs](#)

Together, these projects highlight that refugee and host community youth are not just learning they are producing market-ready digital solutions. Their work demonstrates the value they can bring to employers, brands, and global partners when given the right platforms and support.

A woman with long, dark braids is shown in profile, looking down at a smartphone. The image is overlaid with a blue geometric pattern of squares and circles. A blue rounded rectangle is positioned at the bottom left, containing the title text.

Social Media Engagement To CRTW 2025



Keeping the Momentum Alive

The CRTW Hackathon was not just a three-day event, it is the beginning of an ongoing dialogue about refugee talent, digital livelihoods, and business innovation. We invite partners, businesses, and supporters to keep the conversation alive by engaging with us online.



FOLLOW, SHARE, STAY ENGAGED

The Road Ahead

The CRTW Hackathon was never just about two days of competition. It was about opening doors, planting seeds, and setting in motion a future where refugee youth can thrive in the digital economy.

- **Mentorship & Support:** Participants will continue working with mentors and partner organizations, refining their skills and strengthening their entrepreneurial journeys.
- **Jobs & Opportunities:** Selected talents are being linked to freelance projects, internships, and potential employer partnerships, ensuring their skills translate into income and dignity.
- **Sustained Growth:** By anchoring CRTW within the Opengates platform, refugee freelancers will gain ongoing access to global markets, clients, and resources beyond the event itself.

Looking ahead, **CRTW 2026** promises to scale higher, wider, and deeper:

- More participants from diverse industries.
- Stronger partnerships with global and local businesses.
- Bold new challenges in areas like green innovation, digital commerce, and creative industries.
- A stronger pipeline from training to work, building pathways that last.

This is more than an annual hackathon. It is a movement, a growing platform that shows the world what refugee youth can achieve when given the tools, the trust, and the chance. CRTW is here to stay, and the journey has only just begun.

We invite partners, businesses, and changemakers to walk this journey with us. The next edition of CRTW will only be stronger through collaboration, whether by mentoring refugee youth, offering freelance and job opportunities, providing resources, or co-creating bold new challenges. Together, we can transform CRTW into a continental model of refugee talent development, proving that when opportunity meets determination, innovation knows no borders.

@pengates



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