Powerful Means Initiative

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2025 IMPACT INCUBATOR

12 Month Report

Investing in Human Potential. Incubating Hope.

In memory of Akidi Sabina Hope, a student in the 2024 cohort of Innovation Scholars and a participant in the 2025 Impact Incubator.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

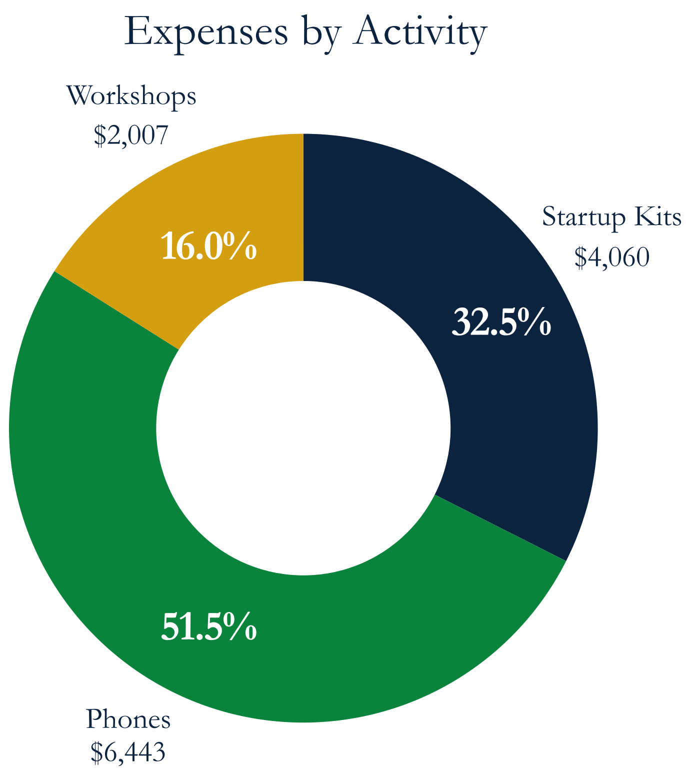
This report provides a comprehensive review of the 2025 Impact Incubator program at St. Bakhita Vocational Training Center (SBVTC), made possible by the support of the Richard and Mary Ann Sleece Foundation. Grounded in the mission of "Investing in Human Potential. Incubating Hope," the program was designed to bridge the gap between vocational education and sustainable entrepreneurship for the school's most promising graduates.

The 2025 Impact Incubator pursued three core objectives: supporting Innovation Scholars to thrive post-graduation, fostering self-sustainability for St. Bakhita, and improving the economic prosperity of the Agago District. By providing startup kits, mentorship, and a structured financial model, the program aimed to empower 24 scholars—comprising 13 tailors, 9 hairdressers, and 2 caterers—to transition into impactful community leaders.

Throughout the course of the year, and with the help of both quantitative and qualitative data collection, we believe the Impact Incubator has demonstrated the potential for meaningfully supporting graduates of St. Bakhita. Many gaps and challenges will need to be addressed in order to create a more robust and rigorous program, but the incubator does appear to enable agency and provide additional value to those participants that engaged fully with the program. Despite the operational hurdles of tracking a mobile alumni base, the program has successfully catalyzed sustainable businesses, created employment and training opportunities, led to stronger financial savings practices, and instilled a sense of professionalism and "shared prosperity" among its participants. This foundation allows us to refine our structure for the next cohort, ensuring that SBVTC continues to serve as a beacon of economic hope in the region.

This report compiles some of the key metrics tracked throughout the year, including engagement and repayment rates across the cohort. It also lists key learnings in various dimensions of the program in hopes of providing clear strategies for improving success in future iterations, as well as sharing insights which may support related work and initiatives. Lastly, it highlights some of the individuals who have led, inspired, and shaped the incubator's progress.

INVESTMENT



$12,510

dollars invested in the 2025 Impact Incubator

The program centers on a strategic micro-investment model designed to bridge the gap between vocational training and independent entrepreneurship. Rather than providing simple grants, the initiative provides scholars with high-quality, vocation-specific tools required to launch a business. This startup kit model is built on a foundation of shared accountability, where entrepreneurs are expected to repay a portion of the asset value. This structure is intended to foster a sense of ownership and financial discipline, transitioning alumni from students to responsible business owners who are invested in their own success.

The initiative invested in 24 Innovation Scholars, providing kits valued at approximately 1,000,000 UGX (~$275 USD) each. Participants who demonstrated business growth and consistent engagement were eligible to receive smartphones to enhance operational capacity and communication.

Learnings

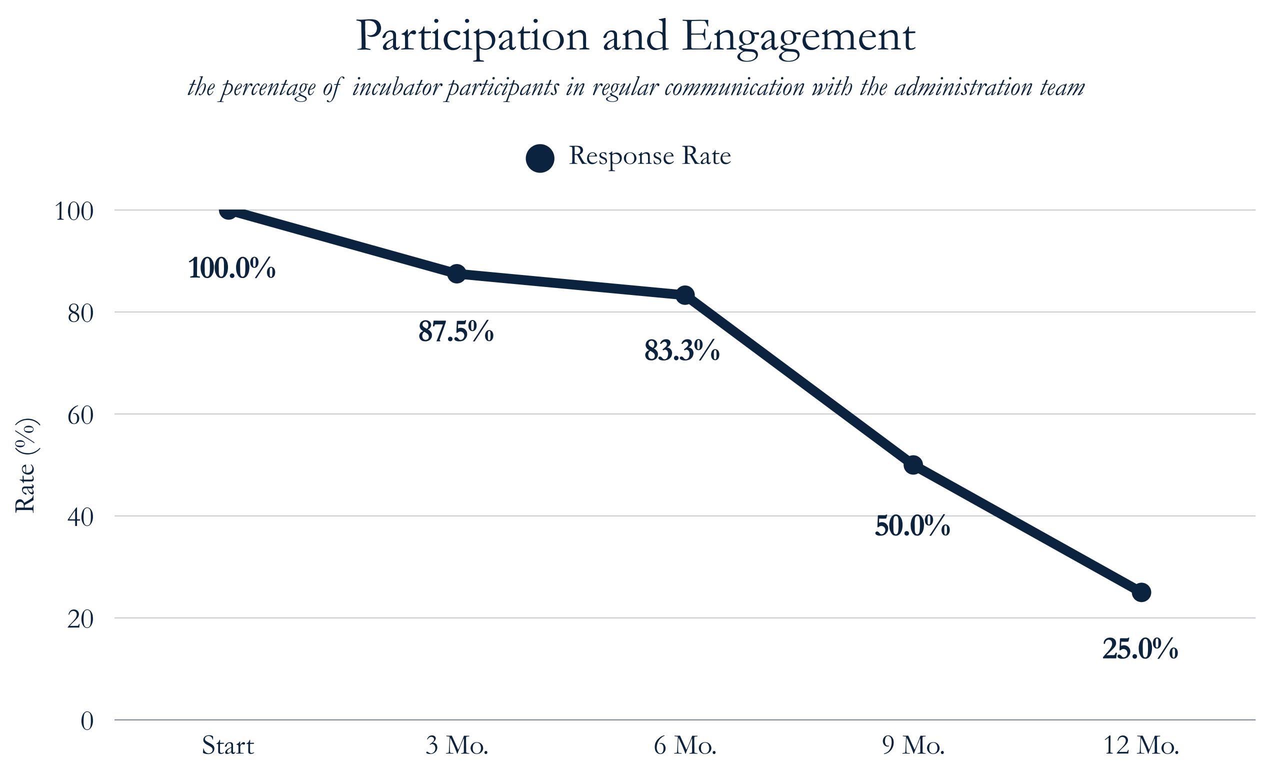
- **The Critical Role of Family "Investors":** Initial business stability is often provided by family members who act as the first line of support by covering rent for the first few months or providing immediate micro-loans to keep operations running during lean times.
- **Proactive Asset Recovery for "Idle" Kits:** Operational protocols are needed to manage "idle" assets—startup kits sitting unused due to a participant's health complications, marriage, or relocation. These tools can be recovered and redistributed to ensure ongoing impact.
- **Structural Barriers to Growth:** High rent costs remain a major barrier, forcing some participants to operate from home or delay their launch. Additionally, a lack of national IDs prevents alumni from accessing formal banking, reinforcing the program's reliance on VSLAs.
- **Transition Toward Cooperative Models:** There is a growing strategic interest in cooperative business models to allow for cost-sharing and shared prosperity, enabling alumni to "lift others as we were lifted".
- **Evolving Training Needs:** While basic vocational skills are strong, participants have identified a need for specialized training in digital marketing, menswear tailoring, and computer skills to remain competitive in a changing market.
- **Customer Service as a Competitive Differentiator:** Alumni identified "kindness," "respect," and "professionalism" as their primary business strategies to stand out from competitors. The "St. Bakhita" brand serves as a mark of quality that earns immediate trust in the community.

Jacob Odur

Innovation and MSME Growth Specialist, St. Bakhita Board Member

Jacob Odur is an expert in business growth and innovation with over eight years of experience supporting startups and small businesses across East Africa. As a Board Member of St. Bakhita Vocational Training Center, Jacob contributed to the incubator's inception, including designing and leading the five-day kickoff workshop in January 2025. Currently serving as the Founder and Lead of Tuku-Tuku Innovation Labs, Jacob brings a wealth of knowledge in digital transformation and business modeling to the program. His extensive background provided a solid foundation for the Innovation Scholars as they began their entrepreneurial journey.

ENGAGEMENT



Engagement is the "high-touch" component of the incubator, focusing on building a supportive network for alumni as they navigate the isolation which often accompanies early-stage business ownership. The strategy utilizes a combination of professional development workshops, academic partnerships with university students, and regular monitoring to provide mentorship and collect data. The goal is to ensure that every participant feels connected to the St. Bakhita community while receiving the technical and moral support necessary to overcome the immense challenges of rural entrepreneurship.

The program began with 100% participation in the kickoff workshop and an 88% regular contact rate through the first six months. Regular contact dropped to 50% by the nine-month mark. By April 2026, 18 alumni were unreachable by phone, often due to relocating businesses or changing phone numbers.

Learnings

- **High Attrition in Remote Communication:** Phone-based tracking is insufficient for long-term monitoring. Regular contact dropped from 88% at six months to just 50% by nine months, as participants changed numbers or relocated without notice. This has necessitated a shift toward physical field visits and engaging parents or local leaders to maintain contact.
- **Transparency and Repayment Management:** Some participants may withhold information regarding their savings to avoid the pressure of making loan repayments. To address this, the program is moving toward a more transparent tracking approach and increased sensitization on the importance of accurate data for future planning.
- **Community Accountability in Distribution:** Launching the incubator with a public ceremony involving parents and community leaders served as a deliberate operational tactic to build a sense of shared responsibility for the entrepreneurs' success. This can be further developed by engaging local politicians and officials in the participants' engagement and evaluation in the incubator.

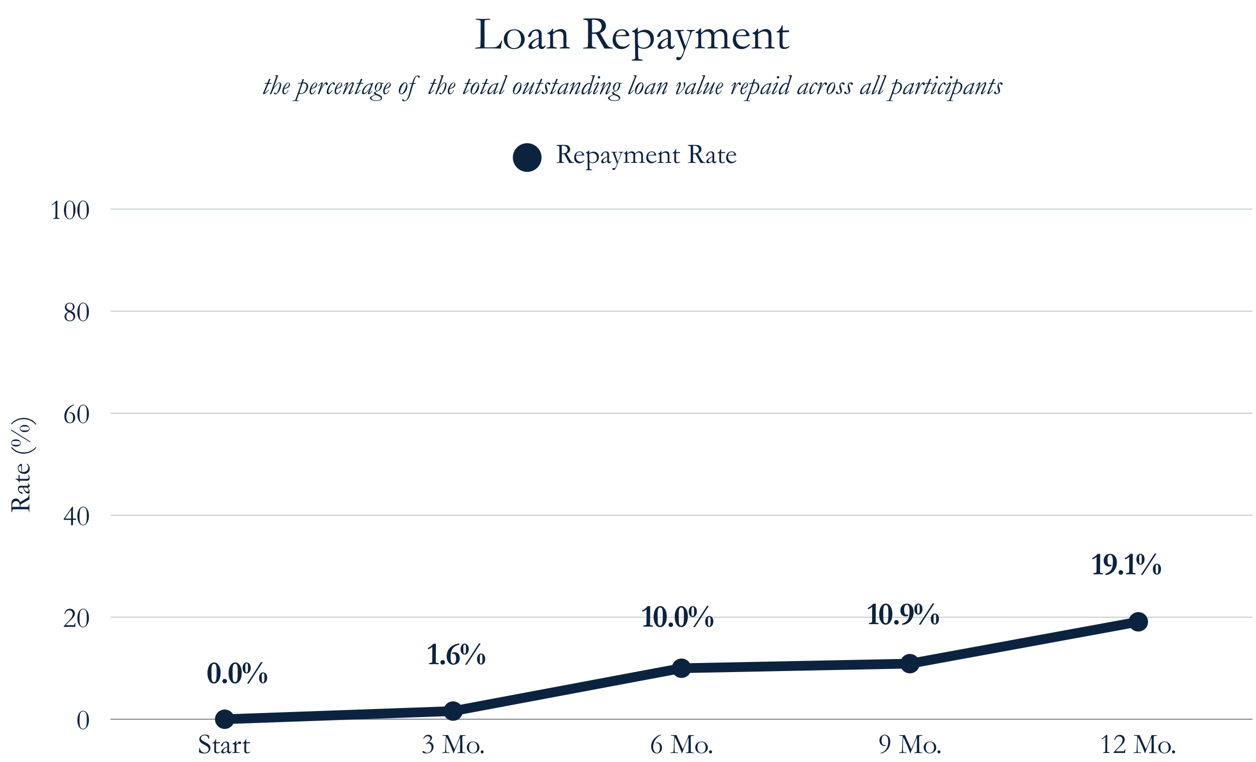
Teresa Abur, *SBVTC Entrepreneurship Instructor*

Teresa served as the lead coordinator and field mentor for the incubator's first nine months. She executed a high-touch monitoring strategy, conducting regular phone and site visits for the 24 Innovation Scholars. Teresa was a vital partner for the Notre Dame spring immersion trip, co-leading interviews to evaluate early business hurdles. Her detailed progress reports provided the foundational data used to manage loan repayments and adapt program tactics to seasonal economic shifts.

Victoria Nyanjura, *SBVTC Head of School*

Victoria managed the final quarter of the 2025 incubator cycle, focusing on data collection and individual alumni evaluations. She documented key financial milestones, including full loan repayments, and assessed long-term business viability. In response to high phone-based attrition, Victoria spearheaded a shift toward integrated field visits, ensuring accountability and support for unreachable alumni. Her work established the "Next Steps" protocol for the program, effectively bridging the transition between the 2025 and 2026 cohorts.

IMPACT



The incubator's ultimate goal is to create a transformative ripple effect within the community by turning graduates into job creators. Impact is measured by the sustainability of the businesses launched, the growth of personal savings, the ability of entrepreneurs to mentor others, and by their ability to successfully repay the loan. By integrating participants into community-based financial systems, the program fosters long-term economic resilience that extends beyond the life of the initial loan. This model creates a path toward shared prosperity, where successful alumni eventually "lift others as they were lifted".

Three participants – Busoboozi Rafella (hairdressing), Aketowanga Beatrice (tailoring), and Lakica Julian (tailoring) – successfully cleared their loans to a zero balance. In addition, a fourth incubator participant reached 83% repayment by the end of the year.

Learnings

- **Diversified Income as a Core Resilience Strategy:** Successful entrepreneurs rarely rely on a single trade. Most participants have integrated agricultural production (planting sunflower, soya beans, and simsim) or retail resale (petrol, salt, cooking oil, and second-hand clothing) to stabilize their cash flow. Additionally, some generate revenue by charging fees to train students in their own shops.
- **Deep Integration with Community Financial Ecosystems:** Approximately 63% of participants leverage Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). These groups are the primary mechanism for financial discipline, with many participants strategically planning to clear their startup kit loans in December when VSLA savings are disbursed.
- **Navigating Seasonal Economic Shifts:** Businesses must account for the rainy season, during which customer traffic for tailoring and salons drops as the community prioritizes "garden work".

Rafella Busoboozi

Atura, Kiryandongo District

Operating a thriving salon in Atura, Rafella was the first participant to repay her loan. Her success is driven by effective diversification of income, including charging training fees to other students, expanding into goat rearing, and adding premium inventory items to her shop.

Julian Lakica

Kitgum, Kitgum District

Originally launching a tailoring business in Kitgum, Julian successfully cleared her loan and currently leverages her expertise as a salesperson in her mother's shop. Her strategic focus on expanding into material sales helped her meet her financial obligations.

Beatrice Aketowanga

Paimol, Agago District

A tailor based in Paimol, Beatrice achieved full repayment by balancing her trade with commercial agriculture. She bolstered her business's financial health by planting sunflowers and soya beans for sale and maintaining a disciplined commitment to her community saving group.

NEXT STEPS

The 2025 Impact Incubator demonstrated that targeted investment, mentorship, and accountability can help St. Bakhita graduates launch businesses, generate income, and begin building economic independence. While the first year revealed important operational challenges, it also provided a clear roadmap for strengthening the model. Building on these lessons, the Powerful Means Initiative and St. Bakhita Vocational Training Center will implement several enhancements for the 2026 cohort:

- **Increase dedicated program capacity by engaging one to two university students to support management of the Impact Fund and Incubator.** These student leaders will help strengthen participant engagement, improve data collection and reporting, support fundraising efforts, coordinate communication between stakeholders, and ensure continuity between cohorts. Their involvement will also deepen opportunities for Notre Dame students to contribute meaningfully to poverty alleviation through business as a force for good.

- **Transition to a more flexible startup kit model.** Rather than distributing a standardized kit, eligible graduates will receive access to up to $200 USD in vocation-related startup assets. Participants will have greater autonomy to select the tools, inventory, and equipment most relevant to their business goals while continuing to repay 50% of the value received. This approach is intended to increase ownership, improve fit between investments and local market opportunities, and reduce the risk of idle assets.

- **Expand access to micro-loans that address one of the most significant barriers identified during the pilot year: startup operating capital.** These loans may be used for expenses such as rent, inventory, transportation, or other business-related needs that cannot be met through startup equipment alone. By complementing asset investments with working capital, we hope to increase the likelihood of successful business launches and long-term sustainability.

- **Introduce milestone-based support levels that reward engagement, business progress, and repayment performance.** Participants who demonstrate commitment and growth will unlock access to additional resources, including smartphones that can be used for communication, customer engagement, mobile banking, record keeping, and participation in future incubator activities. This tiered approach creates positive incentives while helping ensure that limited resources are allocated to those making the greatest use of the opportunity.

- **Strengthen entrepreneurial development through more frequent and accessible training opportunities.** In addition to bringing participants back to St. Bakhita for advanced workshops, we will explore regional training sessions that reduce travel barriers and allow alumni to learn alongside peers closer to home. Future training topics will be informed by participant feedback and are expected to include financial management, customer service, digital marketing, cooperative business models, inventory management, and specialized vocational skills.

As the incubator enters its second year, our focus remains unchanged: investing in human potential, strengthening pathways to self-sufficiency, and empowering graduates to create opportunities not only for themselves but also for their families and communities. The lessons learned from the inaugural cohort provide a strong foundation for continued innovation, deeper impact, and the long-term development of a sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem in Northern Uganda.

Kickoff ceremony for the incubator, as well as signing participation contracts and receiving startup kits

Notre Dame students conduct interviews with participants

Ongoing workshops and training sessions