

INVESTING IN YOUTH EMPOWERMENT, SCALING GENDER EQUITY

How Scaling the Tuseme Club Protects and Empowers
Refugee and Internally Displaced Students in East Africa



2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROBLEM

In refugee and internally displaced settings in East Africa, disrupted and under-resourced **education systems fail to address the gendered and psychosocial impacts of displacement**, leaving girls at heightened risk of violence, early marriage, and dropout, and boys increasingly disengaged from schooling.



THE SOLUTION

Tuseme (Kiswahili for "Let us speak out") is a school-based student-led empowerment club with a **track record of success across 20+ countries**. In mainstream settings it helps young people to identify the challenges they face and by harnessing the power of the creative arts, they equip members with **the skills they need to advocate for and claim their educational and social rights**. An adapted model can transform the lives of refugee and internally displaced learners.



THE EVIDENCE

A recent multi-country study in **Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda** identified the specific and extensive social, economic, and cultural challenges refugee and IDP youth are facing in the region. It confirmed the **significant potential for Tuseme clubs to combat these challenges** and the community readiness for the student-led empowerment model.



SCALABILITY

Tuseme is low-cost and scalable. It leverages existing school structures and aligns with national and international education policies on gender and inclusion, making it suitable for integration into school systems at scale. The club's success in diverse contexts, from urban schools to rural communities, demonstrates its adaptability and relevance to local realities.

CALL TO ACTION

International donors are urged to **champion the Tuseme club** within the donor and policy communities and invest in **scaling it up across East Africa and beyond**. Backing expansion and refinement, especially within **refugee and internally displaced communities**, will enable thousands more girls and boys to "speak out" and drive grassroots solutions, advancing global goals on education and gender equality.

THE PROBLEM

In East Africa, protracted displacement continues to undermine the safety, wellbeing, and educational outcomes of millions of adolescents living in refugee and IDP communities. Schools in these settings are frequently overcrowded and under-resourced, and struggle to respond to the compounded challenges young people face, including poverty, trauma, insecurity, social exclusion, and disrupted learning pathways.

For girls in particular, **displacement intensifies exposure to harmful gender norms, gender-based violence (GBV), and early marriage and pregnancy**, which are key drivers of school dropout. For example, evidence shows that over 60% young women and girls in displaced contexts have experienced physical or sexual violence.

For boys, they are often **disengaged from education or prematurely pushed into informal labour**.

Combined these issues exacerbate the challenges faces young people, especially girls, in East Africa, reducing their confidence, agency, and ability to speak out and challenge behaviours that negatively affect their lives. Without targeted, school-based approaches that address gender norms, psychosocial wellbeing, and power imbalances, schools are unable to function as protective or empowering spaces.



THE EVIDENCE

The evidence put forward in this brief was generated from the **GPE KIX Tuseme - A voice for refugee and internally displaced children project**. The aim of the projects is to understand if and how the Tuseme model can be scaled into displaced communities across the East Africa region. It does this by studying the current model, conducting scoping exercises into displaced communities, and developing and testing an adapted Tuseme model.

The evidence used in this brief is from 97 focus group and key informant interviews with students, parents, teachers, policy makers, and wider stakeholders in 12 refugee and internationally displaced school settings in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

THE SOLUTION

The Tuseme Model

Tuseme, a Swahili term for “let us speak out,” is a student-led empowerment club for girls and boys using arts-based dialogue to identify and act on barriers to education. At its core, Tuseme is about amplifying youth voices – especially girls’ voices – to solve problems in their schools and communities, and overcome gender-based challenges.

Tuseme was first developed as a school club-based intervention in Tanzania in 1996 and later championed by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). Over the following three decades, Tuseme has evolved into a widely recognized empowerment model for gender equality in education, expanding across at least 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Since 1996, Tuseme has reached over 80,000 students and improved girls’ confidence, leadership, and academic success while fostering boys’ support for gender equality. The approach is now being adapted for refugee and post-conflict contexts.

How Tuseme Works

Each Tuseme club is a student-led forum, usually established in a school and open to girls and boys. A teacher patron (mentor) supports the club, but students take the lead.

Through participatory arts and dialogue – such as theater skits, songs, poems, debates, and role-plays – club members identify the challenges that hinder girls’ education in their context.

Once problems are identified, club members are guided to analyse root causes and brainstorm solutions. Common issues raised include school dropouts, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, lack of sanitary facilities, and other barriers the girls experience.

They then develop action plans to address these issues, with activities ranging from peer mentoring and advocacy campaigns, to engaging school administrators and community leaders for support.

WHY TUSEME?

Field insights from Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia

Evidence from schools in refugee and IDP communities confirms that **Tuseme has the potential to extend its impact beyond mainstream school settings** and support meaningful improvements in the lives of young people in these communities. The study identified a range of social, economic, and cultural issues related to gender equity, which feed into harmful gender practices. This section highlights six key reasons why Tuseme is the perfect solution to combat these challenges, and areas for model adaptation to ensure it responds to the daily realities of refugee and IDP communities.

#1 SAFE SPACES

Schools and clubs are often the safest spaces a girl can find.

Refugee girls face heightened risks: **gender-based violence, child marriage, exploitation**, especially when education is disrupted. Research from the previous project stage confirmed that Tuseme clubs in mainstream schools were widely perceived as safe spaces where members felt free to share their problems and look for solutions.

Translating this to refugee contexts, Tuseme clubs can create a place where girls speak out about violence or discrimination, learn about their rights, receive psychosocial support and build the confidence to seek help and resist harmful norms.

Safe spaces have proven essential in fragile settings, both for protection and for enabling girls to build resilience and social capital. However, few scaled initiatives focus on adolescent girls in refugee school settings, which points to a persistent gap in humanitarian education programming.

Replicating the impact of Tuseme in mainstream settings will require **dedicated safe meeting spaces** even in overcrowded camp schools, and **trained facilitators** who can handle disclosures of trauma or abuse.

WHY TUSME?

#2 GENDER EQUITY

Engaging boys helps build trust, foster more equitable and respectful relationships, and challenge harmful gender norms.

Emerging research also calls for greater attention to **boys' participation** and **male socialisation** in refugee settings. This is often neglected despite the importance in reinforcing or challenging harmful gender norms.

"After taking the Tuseme training, we no longer fear asking for pads, even in front of boys"

By engaging boys as allies and fostering dialogue on gender roles through tools like participatory theatre, Tuseme helps shift social norms, **reduce stigma** and build more equitable, **respectful peer relationships**. In crisis-affected contexts, this directly supports protection, participation and recovery.

- Female Tuseme member,
Nafyad Secondary School

#3 HOLISTIC SUPPORT

In crisis-affected communities, educating girls and boys, requires a holistic safety net addressing basic needs and wellbeing.

This stems from the fact that a hungry, traumatised, or insecure child cannot fully engage in education. Project data shows that these are all pressing issues within refugee settings, ones that are compounded by problems such as overcrowded classrooms, unqualified teachers, language barriers, and wider resource limitations.

Gendered coping strategies often emerged as responses to deep socio-economic insecurity. Displaced girls spoke of being pulled out of school for domestic duties, transactional sex to access basic goods including sanitary supplies, and heightened vulnerability to harassment.

Tuseme is a powerful tool to support children to speak out against the challenges they are facing. However, to succeed in refugee and IDP contexts, it also cannot act in isolation. It must integrate supports like nutrition, health/hygiene, and psychosocial care alongside club activities. This is in line with the existing literature where community engagement and multi-component interventions were found to be the most effective strategies in preventing child marriage and GBV.

WHY TUSEME?

#4 LOCAL OWNERSHIP

Displaced communities face unique and evolving challenges, which require localised solutions.

Refugee and IDP communities themselves must shape and drive the interventions for them to be effective and sustainable. Localisation is central to Tuseme's empowerment philosophy, with club members defining their own priorities and engaging with parents, teachers, local leaders, and wider community to create change. By adapting to each community's language, culture, and realities, Tuseme becomes "**the community's own solution**" rather than an external intervention.

In practice :

- Club activities are adapted to cultural and linguistic contexts : materials are translated and culturally relevant, club schedules adjusted for domestic chores, and community elders consulted to legitimise activities.
- Empowering community members to take ownership involves engaging local women's groups and refugee-led organisations, training refugee youth as Tuseme facilitators or forming parent support committees.
- Local communication channels like local radio stations and "community mobilisers" generate awareness and legitimacy.

"When elders saw what the club did, they said: now we know it's not just a performance, it's a mirror of our problems."

- Community leader, Kenya

"If this initiative of girl child brings benefits to the community then the community will monitor and watch and fight anything [that] brings [the] collapse of this project."

- Camp manager, Hagadera Refugee Camp, Dadaab, Kenya

Investing in Tuseme is investing in community empowerment

From earlier research, we know that where clubs lacked institutional ownership, they faltered once external support ended. In displacement settings, this fragility is even more pronounced. The adapted model we are testing therefore emphasises **embedding Tuseme** in **co-curricular structures** at national and school levels, in partnership with local actors and ministries. This ensures clubs remain even when funding shifts.

WHY TUSEME?

#5 HUMAN CAPITAL

Tuseme strengthens teacher ownership, but more support for facilitators is needed in crisis-affected contexts.

Field data shows that teachers act as **caregivers, guides, and immediate implementers** of Tuseme. In refugee schools, however, staffing is often precarious: turnover is high, many teachers are untrained or volunteers, and refugee educators are frequently excluded from formal development systems. This makes training and mentoring facilitators a **key action point** for scaling Tuseme .

Tuseme already helps address this fragility by building ownership through local facilitation. Yet, earlier research in mainstream schools highlighted sustainability risks when facilitators leave or are unsupported. By investing in local educators through **gender-responsive training, incentives**, and **integration into teacher development** pathways, donors can multiply Tuseme's impact across classrooms and camps.

"If you only train the children and not the teachers, it doesn't last."

– Patron teacher, Uganda

Training local educators means reducing reliance on external facilitators, increasing knowledge retention in the community, and sustainability. Noticeably, encouraging more **female mentors** and gender-sensitive educators also creates safer environments and **visible role models** for girls and boys.

#6 A PATHWAY TO FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Tuseme offers youth, especially girls, a vision for leadership, voice, and self-worth beyond the instability of displacement... if systems are in place to sustain it.

Refugee camps are often seen as spaces of "permanent temporariness". This perception discourages investment and leads to missed opportunities for building young people's leadership and resilience. Yet, evidence shows it is precisely the presence of **safe, empowering learning spaces** and projects that helped youth imagine futures beyond the immediate struggles of displacement, provided these are **sustainable**. Tuseme offers a low cost, tested model to do just that.

While students in mainstream settings **described Tuseme as life-changing**, few clubs had systems to ensure continuity: no club logs, mentoring guides, drama handbooks, or inter-club exchanges. The absence of basic supports meant that clubs had little institutional memory, leading to decline or new cohorts starting from scratch. This underlines a clear opportunity for donor investment.

WHY IT MATTERS

Alignment with Global, Regional, and National Priorities



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SGD 4 – Quality Education

Tuseme advances the SDG 4.5 target by tackling gender disparities and exclusion, two barriers that disproportionately affect refugee and displaced girls in accessing and completing education.

SDG 5 – Gender Equality

By strengthening students' confidence and autonomy, and addressing social norms and vulnerabilities (such as early marriage, transactional relationships), Tuseme equips girls and boys with tools to navigate and challenge harmful practices.



AFRICAN UNION STRATEGIES

Tuseme aligns with **Agenda 2063** and the **Continental Education Strategy for Africa** (CESA), including the **AU Decade of Education** for Africa, which calls for the protection and empowerment of all learners, including those in crisis or displacement settings. It also advances the **AU Gender Strategy** (2018–2028) by amplifying youth voices and challenging systemic gender barriers.

NATIONAL EDUCATION AND GENDER POLICIES

Tuseme complements national efforts to promote gender equity and refugee inclusion in education:

- **Kenya's** National Education Sector Strategic Plan (2018–2022) commits to refugee integration into public education.
- **Uganda's** Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities (2018–2021) provides a framework for inclusive, community-based education.
- **Ethiopia's** Education Sector Development Plan VI includes gender and refugee inclusion targets aligned with CESA.



DONOR AND PARTNERS STRATEGY



Tuseme also supports the goals of key global frameworks:

- The **Global Compact on Refugees**, promotes refugee inclusion through equitable access to national education systems.
- **UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030**, calls for gender-responsive, inclusive education for displaced learners.
- **GPE's** Gender Equality Policy and Strategy (2021–2025) and **UNICEF's** Gender Action Plan.

As a scalable, low-cost, and community-driven model, Tuseme offers donors a practical entry point to advance durable, equity-focused education in crisis-affected settings.

CALL TO ACTION

"Tuseme came at the right time because it is especially helping our girls, considering the kind of society we have"
- Teacher, Uganda

We call **international donors and education stakeholders** to support the **scale up of Tuseme** across East Africa through **investment, collaboration, and advocacy**. Together we can empower thousands more girls and embed this approach into education systems for lasting change.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Youth leadership and agency

1 Invest in approaches like Tuseme that **amplify learner voice** and agency, enabling girls and boys to identify risks, articulate priorities, and engage safely with school and community decision-makers.

2 Invest in **club resources** that allow members to fulfil their action plans, develop club memory through documentation, and enable clubs to engage in activities that are economically empowering.

Policy and System Advocacy

3 Become an active champion of Tuseme and support its institutionalisation within **Education in Emergency** frameworks, refugee education response plans, and national education sector plans.

4 Embed social and gender norms transformation into delivery, by promoting Tuseme as a complementary component in existing education and health programmes in refugee and IDP communities.

Strategic Investment and Financing

5 Invest in the **testing, adaptation, and scaling** of the Tuseme model in under-resourced, rural, and humanitarian settings.

6 Fund **monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems** to track long term impact, build global evidence bases, and inform policy.

Community Engagement

7 Work with schools and communities to strengthen **accountability mechanisms** that enable learners, particularly girls, to safely report concerns, ensuring schools function as protective and enabling environments.

8 Tuseme cannot act in isolation: **Support partnerships** between schools, local NGOs, and humanitarian actors, to ensure coordinated and equitable service delivery for both displaced and host communities, reducing duplication and loss of momentum

LEARN MORE

FAWE, HERS-EA, and ACER UK (2025). Scoping Study: The Enabling Factors, Barriers, and Limitations to an Adapted Tuseme Club in Refugee and Internally Displaced Communities in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. GPE-KIX Tuseme: A voice for Internally Displaced and Refugee children project report. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.18567.87202](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.18567.87202)

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