

ANNUAL REPORT

ADVANCING HEALTH, DIGITAL, CIVIC
& ECONOMIC RIGHTS IN RURAL
UGANDA

Rural Smiles Foundation Annual Report 2025

Kibaale District, Uganda
Reporting Period: January – December 2025

Executive Summary

Rural Smiles Foundation is a rights-based, community-led organisation working to advance health, digital, and economic rights for vulnerable and marginalised communities in rural Uganda.

Overview

In 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation strengthened its role as a trusted grassroots organisation responding to complex and interconnected challenges affecting rural communities, including fragile health systems, digital repression, economic exclusion, and shrinking civic space.

Throughout the year, the Foundation implemented integrated programmes that combined service delivery, advocacy, protection, and community empowerment. Our work focused on improving access to essential health services, advancing digital safety and documentation for human rights defenders, strengthening economic resilience for women and youth, and amplifying civic participation in contexts of increasing restriction and risk.

A key focus of the year was laying the groundwork for sustainable systems rather than one-off interventions. This included developing and securing partnerships and funding agreements to support renewable energy solutions for rural health facilities, notably through the development of a project proposal and the signing of a funding agreement with the URBIS Foundation, alongside the design of secure digital tools for threat reporting and referral.

Despite operating in a challenging environment marked by limited resources and heightened risks for civil society actors, Rural Smiles Foundation remained committed to accountability, inclusion, and community leadership. The organisation prioritised the voices and lived experiences of rural women, widows, youth, survivors of gender-based violence, and human rights defenders, ensuring that programmes were responsive, rights-based, and grounded in local realities.

By the end of 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation had strengthened both its programmatic and institutional foundations, positioning the organisation for effective implementation, scale, and deeper engagement at national, regional, and international levels.

2
NEW PROJECTS

1
INTERNATIONAL
AWARD RECEIVED

+1600
COMMUNITY
MEMBERS REACHED

S Meth

Advocacy Officer, Rural Smiles Foundation



Our work in 2025 reaffirmed that lasting change comes from empowering communities, protecting those at risk, and building systems that endure beyond individual projects.

Message from the Executive Director

2025 was a year of resilience, learning, and deliberate foundation-building for Rural Smiles Foundation. It was a year shaped by both opportunity and constraint where rural communities continued to face persistent inequalities in access to health services, economic opportunities, and digital safety, while civil society organisations operated within an increasingly restricted civic environment.



Against this backdrop, Rural Smiles Foundation remained steadfast in its mission to advance health, digital, civic and economic rights for vulnerable and marginalised communities. Our work throughout the year was guided by a clear understanding that sustainable impact cannot be achieved through isolated interventions alone. Instead, we focused on strengthening systems, building trusted partnerships, and centring community leadership in all aspects of programme design and implementation.

In 2025, we implemented integrated, rights-based programmes that combined service delivery, advocacy, protection, and community empowerment. We deepened our engagement with rural women, youth, widows, survivors of gender-based violence, and human rights defenders groups that continue to experience heightened risk, exclusion, and limited access to justice. At the same time, we invested significant effort in laying the groundwork for future impact, including the development of strategic proposals, the formalisation of partnerships, and the strengthening of institutional and digital systems.

A key milestone during the year was the successful development of a renewable energy project proposal for rural health facilities and the signing of a 3 years funding agreement with the URBIS Foundation. While implementation will take place beyond the reporting period, this achievement reflects our commitment to addressing structural barriers in rural health systems and to building long-term solutions that improve service delivery, particularly for maternal and reproductive health.

Throughout the year, we also expanded our digital rights and civic space work, recognising the growing risks faced by activists and community leaders. By advancing secure documentation tools, protection mechanisms, and advocacy engagement at national and regional levels, we sought to ensure that rural voices are not silenced and that violations are documented, addressed, and challenged.

None of this work would have been possible without the trust of the communities we serve, the dedication of our staff and volunteers, and the solidarity of our partners and supporters. As we look ahead, Rural Smiles Foundation remains committed to integrity, accountability, and community-centred leadership. We enter the next phase of our work with renewed clarity, strengthened partnerships, and a firm belief that lasting change is built by empowering communities, protecting those at risk, and investing in systems that endure beyond individual projects.

Ahaisibwe Geoffrey Mwaka
Executive Director

2025 at a Glance

In 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation consolidated its role as a community-led, rights-based organisation responding to intersecting challenges affecting rural and marginalised communities in Uganda. The year was shaped by a shrinking civic space, increasing digital threats, and heightened risks for civil society actors, particularly those working at the community level.

Against this backdrop, the Foundation prioritised strengthening civic space and organisational resilience through a combination of policy engagement, digital innovation, and protection-oriented programming. The year combined ongoing programme implementation with strategic systems-building, ensuring that immediate protection needs were addressed while laying foundations for sustainable, long-term impact.

A central milestone of 2025 was the development and operationalisation of SPACEUG, a digital platform designed to support secure reporting, documentation, and referral of threats affecting civic actors. The platform was developed with support from the CIVICUS Crisis Response Fund under the Flexible Support Mechanism, a six-year programme led by civil society organisations and hosted by Oxfam Novib, together with implementing partners Protection International, CIVICUS, and Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean.

Regional Recognition & Youth Peace Engagement

Key Areas of Work in 2025



Strengthening Civic Space & Resilience

Engaged with civil society organisations and state institutions, including the Uganda NGO Bureau, to address regulatory challenges, promote compliance, and contribute civil society perspectives to discussions on the operating environment and protection of civic freedoms.



Digital Protection & Documentation (SPACEUG)

Developed and rolled out the SPACEUG Threat Monitoring and Referral tool to enable secure, confidential, and anonymous reporting of threats, intimidation, and civic space violations, alongside referral pathways and anonymised insights for advocacy and protection responses.



Strategic Foundations for Health Systems

Developed a comprehensive project proposal and signed a 3 years funding agreement with the URBIS Foundation to support renewable energy solutions for rural health facilities, with implementation scheduled beyond the reporting period.

In December 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation participated in the Continental Stocktaking Conference on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) held in Nairobi, Kenya, from 8–10 December 2025. The conference was convened by the Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region (OSES-GLR) in collaboration with UNFPA, UNDP, UNICEF, the African Union, and Regional Economic Communities.

The conference marked ten years of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 and brought together governments, United Nations entities, youth-led civil society organisations, researchers, and regional institutions to assess progress, identify gaps, and agree on forward-looking accountability commitments for the YPS agenda across Africa, with a strong focus on the Great Lakes Region.

Rural Smiles Foundation participated as a youth-led civil society organisation from Uganda and was recognised as one of the five finalists of the “Peace in Action” Youth Award 2025, selected from 169 regional submissions. During the award ceremony, the organisation presented its work alongside peer organisations from Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Tanzania, and was ranked 5th overall. This outcome was received with appreciation and humility, reflecting the highly competitive and rigorous selection process.

This recognition affirmed the relevance of Rural Smiles Foundation’s grassroots work in rural civic participation, peacebuilding, and community resilience, and elevated the visibility of rural Ugandan youth voices within a regional policy and accountability space.

Performance Analysis

In 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation assessed performance through the lens of programme relevance, protection outcomes, institutional compliance, and systems development, rather than commercial or marketing indicators. Performance analysis focused on how effectively the organisation responded to emerging risks, strengthened civic space, and built sustainable systems to support civil society actors and rural communities.

★ Civic Space Engagement & Policy Dialogue

During the reporting period, Rural Smiles Foundation actively engaged in constructive dialogue with regulatory and oversight institutions, including the Uganda NGO Bureau. These engagements addressed compliance requirements, operational challenges, and the protection of civic freedoms, strengthening mutual understanding between civil society actors and regulators.

★ Digital Protection, Documentation & Response

Through the ongoing Strengthening Civic Space and Resilience work, the Foundation advanced digital protection and documentation mechanisms for human rights defenders, community leaders, and civic actors. A key performance outcome was the continued development and use of the SPACEUG platform, which enabled secure reporting, structured documentation, and referral pathways aligned with do-no-harm and protection-first principles.

★ Regulatory Compliance & Institutional Standing

In 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation strengthened its institutional standing through formal registration and regulatory compliance. The organisation received its Certificate of Registration and a five-year Permit to Operate from the Uganda NGO Bureau, affirming its legal status and operational legitimacy. Rural Smiles Foundation is a Registered NGO in Uganda, operating in accordance with the NGO Act, Cap. 109 and the NGO Regulations, 2017.

Certificate No.: INDR173616944NB

Permit No.: INDP0006944NB

This milestone enhanced the organisation's credibility with communities, partners, donors, and state institutions, and provided a stable legal foundation for long-term programming and advocacy.

Organisational & Systems Strengthening

Alongside programme delivery, the Foundation invested in strengthening internal systems, including digital infrastructure, documentation processes, partnership management, and reporting systems. These improvements enhanced accountability, learning, and readiness for future scale.

S STRENGTHS

Rural Smiles Foundation demonstrated strong community trust and legitimacy in 2025, grounded in its consistent presence in rural communities and its rights-based, protection-first approach. Engagement with the NGO Bureau, formal registration, and receipt of a five-year operating permit strengthened institutional credibility, while the development of the SPACEUG platform highlighted the organisation's capacity for digital innovation and systems-building.

O OPPORTUNITIES

Growing attention to civic space, digital safety, and protection of human rights defenders presents opportunities for Rural Smiles Foundation to scale impact and deepen partnerships. Support from CIVICUS and consortium partners positions the organisation to expand SPACEUG, strengthen referral networks, and contribute evidence to national and regional advocacy. Formal legal status and external recognition also create opportunities for ensuring multi-year funding and policy engagement.

W WEAKNESSES

Operating with limited financial and human resources constrained the pace and scale of implementation in 2025. Dependence on project-based funding limited flexibility, while security risks and digital threats required careful prioritisation of staff time and organisational capacity. Continued investment in internal systems remains essential for sustainability.

T THREATS

The civic operating environment in Uganda remains volatile, with regulatory scrutiny, intimidation, and digital surveillance posing ongoing risks to civil society organisations and individual activists. Internet disruptions, security threats, and funding uncertainty continue to challenge programme continuity and community engagement.



SWOT Analysis

This SWOT analysis reflects Rural Smiles Foundation's operating context and institutional experience in 2025 and informs strategic decision-making, risk mitigation, and programme planning for the next phase of implementation.

Budget & Spend Analysis

Rural Smiles Foundation managed its financial resources with a strong emphasis on programme delivery, accountability, and sustainability. Financial decisions were guided by donor agreements, internal financial controls, and statutory requirements, ensuring that resources were used efficiently to support ongoing programmes and institutional operations.

The organisation prioritised direct programme costs while maintaining proportionate administrative expenditure, reflecting a commitment to impact, transparency, and responsible stewardship of funds.

REVENUE	2025 (UGX)	2024 (UGX)
Donations and Grants	321,871,479	319,956,106
Other Income	192,534,277	5,702,156
Total Revenue	514,405,756	325,658,262

EXPENDITURE	2025 (UGX)	2024 (UGX)
Direct Project Expenses	378,568,623	102,601,661
Administration Expenses	34,824,652	30,522,324
Total Expenditure	413,393,275	133,123,985

Surplus / (Deficit) of the Year shs 101,012,481

Financial Note

The surplus recorded in 2025 reflects timing differences between income receipt and programme expenditure. In accordance with donor agreements and internal financial policies, the surplus has been retained and earmarked for approved ongoing and future programme activities.

Programme Spend Ratio

During the reporting period, approximately 80% of total expenditure was directed toward direct project costs, demonstrating the organisation's strong focus on programme delivery and community impact.

The remaining expenditure supported essential administrative and compliance functions required for effective and accountable operations.

Strengthening Systems & Partnerships

In the reporting year, Rural Smiles Foundation focused on strengthening the systems, relationships, and approaches that enable effective and sustainable community-led action. Beyond individual projects, the organisation invested in building structures that support protection, accountability, learning, and collaboration across its work in civic space, peacebuilding, digital safety, and community resilience. These efforts ensured that programmes were not only responsive to immediate needs but also positioned to adapt, scale, and endure in a challenging operating environment.



Key Enablers of Impact in 2025



Strengthened Reach & Influence

During the year in review, Rural Smiles Foundation expanded its reach beyond direct community engagement to include policy spaces, regulatory dialogue, and regional platforms, increasing the visibility and influence of rural voices in civic and peacebuilding processes.

Future Goals & Strategy



Building on the foundations laid in 2025, Rural Smiles Foundation enters the next phase of its work with a clear focus on consolidation, scale, and sustainability. The organisation's strategy is informed by lessons from grassroots engagement, regional dialogue, and the realities of operating in a constrained civic environment.

Future efforts will prioritise strengthening systems, deepening partnerships, and ensuring that rural and marginalised voices continue to shape civic, peacebuilding, and development processes.

“ Our future work will focus on strengthening systems that protect people, amplify rural voices, and sustain impact beyond individual projects. ”

Strategic Priorities (2026 and Beyond)

01. Strengthening Civic Space & Protection

Expand protection mechanisms for civil society actors and human rights defenders, deepen engagement with regulatory institutions, and contribute evidence to policy and accountability processes at national and regional levels.

02. Scaling Digital Safety & SPACEUG

Enhance and scale the SPACEUG platform to reach more communities, strengthen referral networks, and improve early warning and documentation capacities while maintaining strong data protection standards.

03. Sustainable Community-Centred Programming

Implement planned projects, including renewable energy solutions for rural health facilities, while integrating peacebuilding, inclusion, and economic resilience into community-based initiatives.





Rural Smiles Foundation

Sustainably Empowering Rural Communities

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