

# How to make learning fun and give parents more agency

A conversation with Nisha Ligon, founder and CEO of Ubongo, Africa's leading producer of edutainment media



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An infant's development is inseparable from their relationship with their primary caregiver. Parents are the child's first teachers and they structure their environment in ways that ultimately shape their brain development (Fox et al., 2010). But every parent needs agency and capacity to meaningfully support a child's development during these early years.

Since 2017, the International Rescue Committee has partnered with Ubongo, Africa's leading producer of edutainment media, to develop a

family learning program called Tunakujenga or “We Build You Up” in Kiswahili in Tanzania. **The program enables parents to be the best parent they can be—a desire that is intrinsic in every caregiver.**

Building on Ubongo’s expertise in content for children that parents also enjoy watching—like the popular Tanzanian TV show *Akili and Me*—Tunakujenga aims to empower parents to understand and practice social-emotional learning (SEL) and brain building activities at home with their children. SEL activities, when practiced regularly, are known to improve resilience, well-being, and greater foundational learning outcomes that can tremendously impact children’s lives. This is particularly valuable to those who have experienced trauma due to displacement or poverty.

## Mfundishe mtoto wako kupitia michezo! | Fanya iwe ngumu | Tunakujenga



Parents learn to challenge their children in games like "Make it Harder," where they do an activity and incrementally add small challenges to help teach children to never give up.

Tunakujenga is the result of three years of research and human-centered design work involving over 400 caregivers face to face, dozens of prototypes and iterations and four media campaigns reaching over 1.2 million caregivers across Tanzania. The IRC and Ubongo are invested in understanding how SEL activities bring value to parents, how they can be made relevant to East African culture, and how they can be practiced every day in the home.

*“If I play with my child too much, he will learn to disrespect me, and then he won’t be disciplined.” — Mother in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania*

*“I didn’t graduate, so how can I educate my child? That’s a teacher’s job.” — Caregiver in Kigoma, Tanzania*

Alongside Ubongo’s national TV broadcast of Tunakujenga content that is currently underway, the IRC is piloting Tunakujenga in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in Kigoma, Tanzania. The IRC is providing parents and caregivers with fun, highly engaging, culturally-appropriate videos that demonstrate playful SEL activities that target different competencies. **Videos are being distributed through faith-based institutions, like local churches, and supported by trusted faith leaders who are known and respected in their communities.** Caregivers meet once a week in peer groups, watch edutaining videos on a shared tablet, discuss —and with the support of habit-building aids—develop consistent playful parenting routines at home.





Trusted community institutions, like local churches and their faith leader are promising delivery channels for the Tunakujenga program. Parents in the Tunakujenga program often discuss Social Emotional skills, children's education and parenting practices with their faith leaders and their close community members at church.

Ubongo recently spent time with our team in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Tanzania to check in on how the Tunakujenga pilot was going and learn from Tunakujenga participants on how to further improve the program and content. After returning from this trip, we talked to **Nisha Ligon**, the founder and CEO of Ubongo, to learn more about their work and what they have planned with the IRC. Below is our conversation:

## What is “edutainment” and why is it important?

**Nisha:** “Edutainment” is just a quick way of saying educational entertainment. We apply best practices from entertainment—compelling storytelling, lovable characters, top quality visuals and music—to motivate and support kids’ learning. The great thing about edutainment is that it can reach a massive audience with minimal inputs. If you create content that’s really engaging, then the audience comes to you, instead of you having to work so hard to get to them. That motivational factor makes a huge difference. We’ve got 11 million unique monthly viewers and listeners on TV and radio, and they keep coming back because they love our stories and songs. Kids are willingly learning about algebra and renewable energy on their Saturday mornings, because it’s easily accessible and fun!

## Why did you start Ubongo? What is your vision?

**Nisha:** There is an education crisis in Africa, and many of our 440 million kids are missing out on the life changing opportunity of a quality education. We have to act now, to change things for the next generation. So we founded Ubongo to utilize existing technologies that families already have (like TV, radio, and mobile phones) to deliver quality learning at low cost and massive scale. Our edutainment help kids build a foundation of school readiness, develop critical skills, and find purpose and motivation in their learning, so they can change their lives and communities for the better.



## **How did you succeed in creating such amazing, well-received content for kids? What are some best practices in your work that got you to where you are today?**

**Nisha:** Kid-centered design! We involve kids really closely in our content creation and test things with them continuously. We spend a lot of time listening to kids, telling them stories to see how they respond and learn from them, and even eye tracking. Combine that with our in-house team of incredible Tanzanian writers, animators, musicians, and the rest of our team who work together to create brilliant content.

## **We know that you do a lot of contextualization and testing, what are some tips and tricks that you use to ensure that the content is engaging?**

**Nisha:** Storytelling is key, even if you're doing something that is non-fiction or educational. Rather than focusing on the "*What*," we try and concentrate on the "*Why*"—once you have a good why, your audience gets engaged and motivated to watch and learn.

To get there, you have to really be able to empathize with the user, and the only way to do that is by spending lots of time with them, listening to them and observing them. With kids, we'll put them in a room with a hidden camera while they watch and that allows us to see how they respond to things without adults looking over their shoulders. It's really authentic, and often so cute!

For contextualization, we've found that it's important to anchor the content in what people recognize and know... and from there you can introduce new things or fantastical elements. So for instance, in *Akili and Me*, the main character Akili goes on adventures in a dreamland with her animal friends, but the things they do and games they play are familiar to kids in Africa.



Characters before children's input

One great example of needing to contextualize and adjust was when we created an episode about family, and Akili goes to visit Little Lion's family. When we tested the video, we asked kids to point to Mother and Father Lion afterwards.

And they always pointed to the male lion as "mother lion." When we asked them why, they said, "Because she has

hair!" referring to the male lion's mane.

We realized that it was silly to expect that young children, even in Tanzania, would know what a male vs. female lion looks like.

So we asked them to tell us what father and mother should look like, and they said that father should have a tie and mother should have "**clicky clacky shoes.**" So we responded and re-designed the characters.



Characters after children's input.

Another example of contextualization was when we worked with the IRC to adapt proven, best-practice social and emotional learning activities to a refugee context in Tanzania. One activity was to have kids make a construction paper star as a gift for someone who they admire for working hard and persevering. But the families we were working with had no access to scissors or colored paper or glue, so we changed the

activity to “A Song for a Star” and had a song that they could sing for their “star” and even adapt or personalize on their own.

*“My kids used to be so scared of me! If they ever did something wrong they would never tell me. But now we’re closer and they feel more comfortable to tell me if something bad happens.” — Caregiver participating in Tunakujenga*

### What are you most excited about these days in the work that you are doing?

**Nisha:** I’m really excited for the potential of using edutainment to really shift learning mindsets for millions of people... little kids, students, even parents. The education community is discovering that character development, mindsets, and what are often called “soft skills” are just as critical to academic and life success as IQ. I believe that this is an area

where media can have a really big impact. And it's exponential! If we can help a new generation become self-motivated, lifelong learners with a sense of purpose in their learning, we believe that they will go on to create change in their own communities.

### **We are so excited to be working together on Tunakujenga, can you tell us more about why Ubongo is interested to engage with the IRC and caregivers?**

**Nisha:** The only way that we can have really transformational impact for kids is to also to get their parents on board. We get the kids learning with us for a max of half an hour a day. The rest of the time they're with their family.

Working with the IRC is so exciting because we can deliver our interventions together through multiple channels that really deepen the learning an impact. With the Tunakujenga clubs, caregivers are coming together, connecting, and really building a community for themselves to celebrate and support each other in what they're doing for their kids. We're really excited to scale that!

### **Social-emotional learning (SEL) is at the core of Tunakujenga, why is Ubongo interested in creating SEL content?**

**Nisha:** Social emotional learning is so critical, both for kids in refugee and displacement contexts, and everyone else! And it's something that's really been left out of a lot of school curricula, despite its importance.

We really believe in the power of empathy and character development, and it's been amazing to be able to work with the IRC on this, since there's such a depth of knowledge and experience in SEL. We've worked really closely with the IRC team to adapt their proven approaches to SEL into something that works via media on the screen. It's been a really interesting challenge and has not only informed how we can better teach SEL, but also how we develop our content for all topics.

### **Who is most inspiring to you and your work?**

**Nisha:** Honestly, it's kids themselves. When we see their resilience, the breadth of their imagination and their boundless energy, I feel optimistic about the future, and inspired to do more to help them realize their amazing potential. Young people like Malala Yousafzai, Thandiwe Chama (who at 8-years-old mobilized her fellow children in Zambia to demand their right to education), and climate activist Greta Thunberg show us their power to create change, and we also see that happening on a daily basis in all of the communities where we work! I'm inspired by them, and want to bring them more inspiration too!

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*Findings from our pilot program will be released in late May 2019. From there, we will further develop our scaling strategy, test out dissemination methods, and explore partnerships for scale and for our impact evaluation. If you or someone you know is interested in partnering, please reach out to [laura.dereynal@rescue.org](mailto:laura.dereynal@rescue.org).*





