



# **Budding environmentalist with a heart for community service**

## Budding environmentalist with a heart for community service



**Nhial Thok  
Chuatawea**

**Nationality  
S. Sudanese**

**WIK Alumnus,  
environmentalist  
and co-founder of  
a CBO.**

**Bachelor of  
Science in  
Environmental  
Science at  
The Turkana  
University  
College**



*Nhial Thok Chuatawea*

### **Who is Nhial Thok Chuatawea?**

Nhial is a leader, mentor, passionate environmentalist and an articulate humanitarian with a good grasp of community issues.

### **How would you describe your life growing up?**

I was born in Dungkok, Nasir County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan.

As a young boy from a pastoralist community, I recall growing up looking after cattle and moving with them season by season in search of pasture. As a result, due to the morbidity, I would often miss school which was further complicated by the on-going conflicts as we also had to look for safer areas to settle. We were learning under the trees and in churches. I had a yearning for education and at one point begged my father to leave my village in Nasir to go to Khartoum for better education opportunities. For a man who was a chief in a community that had little regard for education and also believed that the role of boys in a family was to keep and look after the cattle, it was a long shot that thankfully paid off.

## How did you start off your life and education journey in Kakuma Refugee Camp?

After leaving for Khartoum in 2006, I was admitted to class two in a local Primary School where I studied up to class seven. In January 2010, I found myself in Kakuma Refugee Camp where I got enrolled in Class Six at Pokotom Primary School and later at Kare Academy where I wrote my KCPE in 2012. I thereafter proceeded to Phinehas High School in Trans-Nzoia County where I did my KCSE in 2016. For 13 years, I have called Kakuma home.

## You describe yourself as an environmental activist. How did this come to be?

Growing up in South Sudan as a young boy, I witnessed first-hand the adverse effects of climate change that plagued the country. The drought forced us to move from place to place in search of pasture for our livestock and erratic rainfall patterns also affected our pastoralist livelihood. People also suffered from health problems relating to pollution, disease outbreaks, and there was overexploitation of land and water causing food insecurity.

Consequently, children like me would end up missing or dropping out of school.



*Chuatwea (2nd from left) after planting a ceremonial tree in Karura Forest with WIK staff and scholars to commemorate the World Refugee Day.*

Coming to the camps, the situation was no different. The prolonged presence and dense concentration of refugees has continued to impose a strain on the already delicate ecological environment.

I knew that I wanted to be in the frontlines on environment and climate issues. When I was therefore awarded the DAFI scholarship in 2017, I chose to study Bachelor of Science in Environmental

Science at the Turkana University College where I was admitted in September 2017 and later graduated in December 2021.

**Would you describe being DAFI scholar as a wholesome experience?**

I would say the scholarship gave me wings to fly. It was such a privilege and a dream come true as for most refugees, the dream of getting tertiary education is sometimes elusive.

The opportunity unlocked my potential in ways I could only imagine and made me learn things about myself that I had not discovered yet.

For instance, I got the opportunity to serve in different leadership roles such as being elected as the Representative of International Students at the university between 2019 and 2020. I discovered that I loved working with groups ,and it therefore didn't come as a surprise when in June 2020 I was awarded The Young African Leaders Initiative Award for "Understanding Climate Change and Strategies for Personal Growth and Development", Yali network.

I believe this was preparing me for bigger tasks ahead which I gracefully embraced with confidence.

**Are there other ways that this experience has changed you? For example in your mindset, thinking, actions towards others?**

Absolutely! It has taught me what it means to give and love others without discrimination. This is exactly what we are doing through our organization I stretch My Hand (ISMH), which I am a co-founder and the president, Kenya Chapter. At ISMH, we sponsor needy and bright South Sudanese refugees in the Naath Community from Kakuma Refugee Camp with Secondary School Education Scholarships to study in top High Schools in Kenya.



*Nhial speaking to ISMH beneficiaries during induction*



*Nhial (far right) with a section of ISMH leadership.*

The larger refugee community in Kakuma also benefits from our mentorship programme that supports on areas like career guidance, scholarship opportunities, girls motivation among others.

5 refugee students were selected in first cohort of the Naath Scholarship Program in 2021 and successfully enrolled in respective schools.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the organization distributed more than 500 face masks to vulnerable people within Kakuma.

I love giving back to the community as it is about putting other people's needs before mine and volunteering also further opens your eyes to the needs in the community. Ultimately, it brings such a positive impact even through the simplest of ways. Furthermore, these acts of service build good character, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness which are crucial values in life.

### **What have you been engaged in since graduating?**

I am currently doing internship with KEFRI as an environmental junior researcher with my work involving data collection, data analysis and Geographic Information Systems (GIS).I was awarded the intern of the month for my outstanding performance.

Previously, prior to my graduation, I had also undertaken my industrial attachment with the organization and further volunteered with NEMA Lodwar office.

In 2022, I participated in Environmental Science Research Excellence Award, an award given to graduating Environmental Science major students that have delivered excellent research within the field of Environmental Science in the course of their undergraduate studies.

Within the same year in April, I also joined thousands of other young people for the virtual 10th The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum on the journey to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, as the youth must play a central role.

**What/who inspires you and what are your aspirations for the future?**

I am greatly inspired by people like me who beat all odds to be where they are today. Eng. Captain Bol is one such person. At a young age he beat all odds and was commissioned to the United States Army as a 2nd Lieutenant Field Artillery Officer in 2013 and attained the rank of Captain in 2017. Most importantly he founded the MENTORSHIP and TUTORING PROGRAM (MTP) that provides quality education to many students in Gambela, Ethiopia. He is such an inspiration in our work at ISMH.

For my future plans, I am interested in research work tailored to address the challenge of environmental pollution, water security in South Sudan and how this can help increase food security in the region.

My research dimensions will look at the workable technologies applied elsewhere in addressing these challenges globally and how they can be domesticated at home.

I believe to achieve this I will need to enroll for post-graduate studies and the skills acquired will position me in a strategic place to centrally be part of the decision-making influence and advise on relevant programs that support water and food securities in the region.

To prepare for this, I have created close networks with research experts and professionals from various institutions who would be instrumental in modelling and mentoring me in developing top notch research concepts that can significantly address the gaps I'm pursuing.

**What would your advice be for other young refugees?**

Be open to and try new things, be kind to everybody and experience a little bit of everything.



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