NETHOPE CONNECTED

SpaceUG threat monitoring

Putting AI to work on reports the team could not read

Rural Smiles Foundation, Uganda

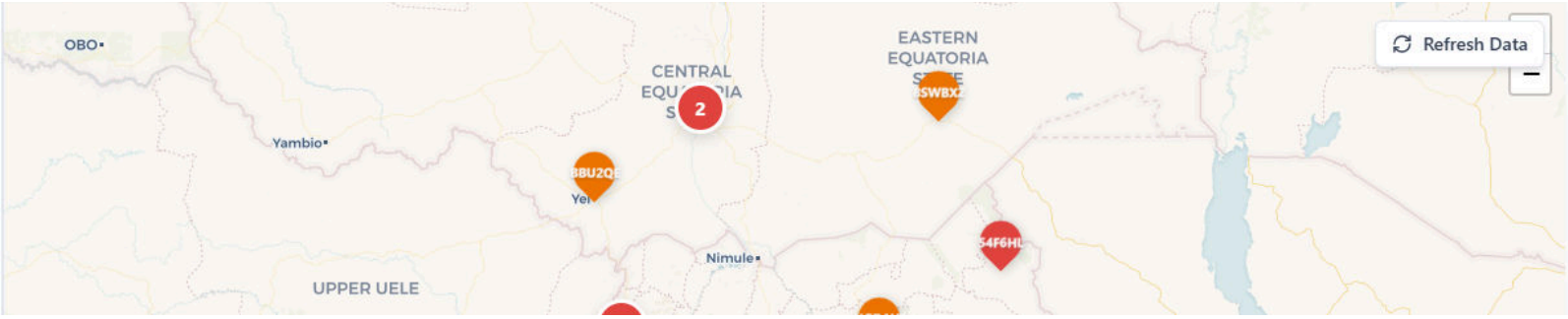
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Digital Transformation Analyst, NetHope · October 2026

ABOUT NETHOPE CONNECTED

NetHope Connected is a growing community designed by, for and with small and locally-led nonprofits. It helps organizations strengthen their digital capacity at their own pace, through learning resources, peer connection and practical guidance for adopting AI and technology responsibly.

This case study focuses on NetHope Connected's AI grant work, supporting Connectors to explore responsible, purpose-driven AI.

SpaceUG is a platform built by Rural Smiles Foundation for its work on digital rights and internet freedom. Its threat monitoring module is a public reporting tool used across East Africa: human rights defenders, journalists and community members report threats to civic space anonymously, and each reporter receives a tracking code to follow what happens to their case. Rural Smiles has integrated an AI layer into the module that does three things. It translates an incoming report into a language the case officer reads, it searches published sources for material that corroborates the account and it routes the case to the officer who covers that country and region. Nevertheless, it does not classify or assess a case; that judgement stays with the person who decides what happens to every report. Translation is live today and verified in Swahili and Kinyarwanda, while source verification is still in development.



Map intelligence view of the threat monitoring module, showing reports across East Africa by severity.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Rural Smiles Foundation is a youth led grassroots nonprofit registered in Uganda and Burundi, and establishing legal standing in Kenya. It works across five areas: health and health threats, digital rights and internet freedom, social inclusion and civic space, renewable energy and climate resilience and economic empowerment. Its work reaches young people, women, people with disabilities and hard to reach communities.

SpaceUG is the platform behind its digital rights work. It has three parts: a social module where actors from different backgrounds interact, a participatory module still in design and the threat monitoring module described here.

Ahaisibwe Geofrey Mwaka
Executive Director

www.ruralsmiles.org
Rural Smiles Foundation

The problem: reports arrive in languages the team cannot read 01

A threat report is only useful if someone acts on it while it still matters. The module was built for that: a person who witnesses an incident can file a report through a public form, without giving their identity and without leaving more personal data than the case requires. Human rights defenders, journalists, community reporters and members of the public use it, and what they describe traces the pattern of pressure on civic space in East Africa: intimidation and arbitrary arrest, doxxing, misinformation, election violence and internet shutdowns. The reports come from across the region, in whatever language the person writing feels most able to use.

In the first quarter of 2026, the module received 73 reports from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Burundi. It was the organization's first real baseline and, with it, a clear view of two problems identified. The first was language: the two staff members sorting every report were both Ugandan and worked only in English, while some reports arrived in Swahili and other local languages. Those cases waited until someone who spoke the language could be found. The second was capacity: two people cannot keep pace with a growing caseload, whatever language it arrives in.

> *"Most of our staff doing the case sorting were Ugandans, with no language other than English, and some of the cases being reported were in Swahili and other local languages."*
>
> Ahaisibwe Geofrey Mwaka, Executive Director, Rural Smiles Foundation

Why AI was the right tool

AI was not chosen for what it could decide. It was chosen for what it could process.

01

Read what arrives

A case officer can translate a report into a language they read, inside the platform, without sending it to a third party.

02

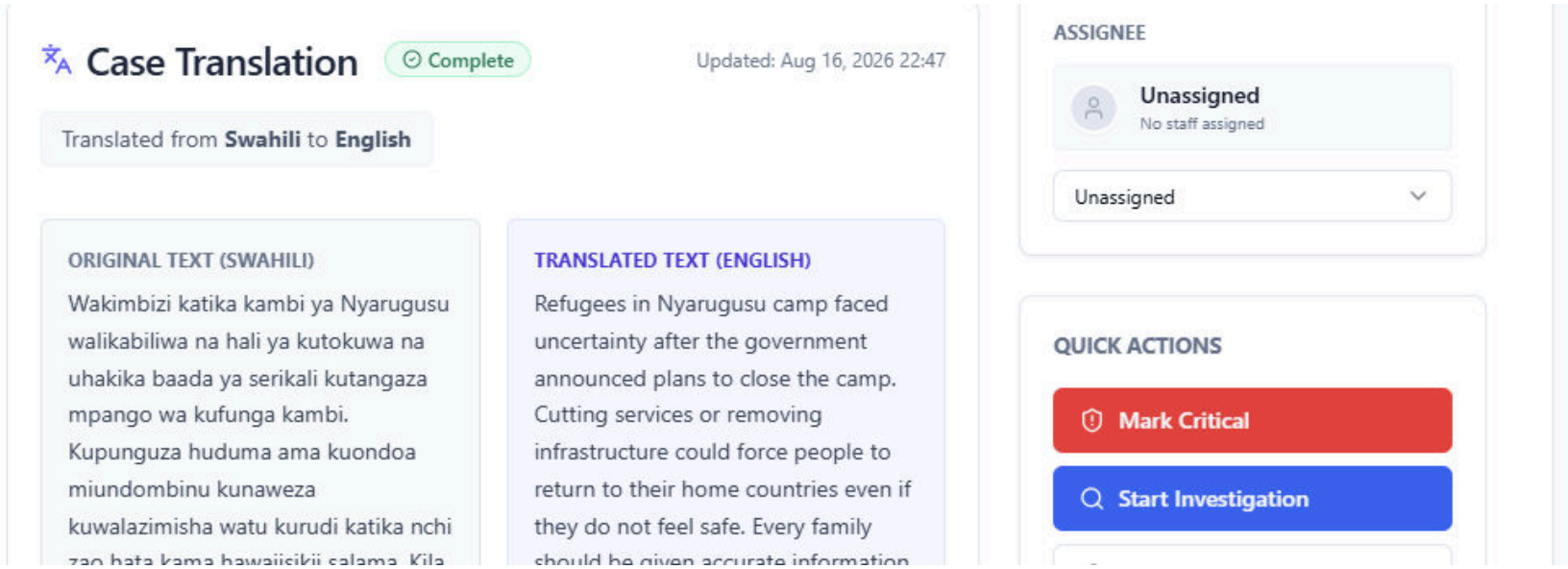
Corroborate the account

The system searches published material for reports carrying the same details, so an officer weighing a case has something to check it against.

03

Absorb growth

Each report is routed automatically to the officer who covers that country and region, so a small team can take on more without anyone sorting a queue by hand.



Case translation in the case officer view, showing a report translated from Swahili to English.

Developing the AI module

02

A small organization does not build an AI layer on its own, and Rural Smiles did not try to. The security advice, the funding, the services and the user testing all came through relationships it already had. Four partners shaped the module, each at the point where their expertise mattered.

01

Security and technical advice

Access Now advised on the module. Their recommendation shaped the approach: rather than build custom models, draw on AI services through APIs.

02

Platform strengthening

Hivos, through the Digital Defenders Partnership, supported the earlier work that built the threat monitoring module, to which the AI layer was later added.

03

Provider selection

Rural Smiles is a beneficiary of Google for Nonprofits, which made it straightforward to request credits for the translation and search services the design needed.

04

User consultation

Because the tool is built to be used by other organizations and not only by Rural Smiles, but the team also consulted civil society representatives through a network of 98 member organizations in western Uganda.

The funding for the AI work arrived through the same network of relationships that produced technical advice. Rural Smiles is a voting member of CIVICUS, whose Flexible Support Mechanism supported the original building of the platform. CIVICUS also pointed Rural Smiles toward NetHope Connected, which is how it became eligible to apply for the NetHope Connected AI grant program and secure this funding. The team already had a working platform and a clearly identified gap, which made the work straightforward to begin.

How the AI layer is built

The AI layer is built using a set of commercial services called through APIs from the SpaceUG threat monitoring platform. Translation runs on Google's translation service. Source verification uses Google's custom search service to look for published material matching the keywords in a case. Google for Nonprofits credits cover the cost of these API calls.

The routing feature works on a fixed rule. When a report comes in, the system reads the country and region named in it and sends the case to the officer who covers that area. It is the simplest component in the layer, and the one that does most to let a small team carry more.

No custom model was trained on reporter data. Case records stay in the SpaceUG database on virtual private servers the organisation already runs for its website and staff portals, and the AI provider retains nothing beyond the API call itself. Access to modules is controlled by role, and during upgrades it is narrowed to key staff.

The choice of provider came down to three things the team could assess for itself.

Translation quality

Their own testing put Google ahead of the alternative for African languages.

Cost

Google offers nonprofit credits that cover the API calls, while the alternative would have charged a monthly subscription fee.

Governance

The organization runs on Google Workspace and can enforce its own policies there.

Responsible design in practice

DATA MINIMIZATION

The report form is anonymous by default and collects as little personal information as possible. The tracking code lets a reporter follow a case without identifying themselves.

PROVIDER ACCOUNTABILITY

The team assessed privacy terms, accuracy and how each provider fits the systems it already governs and chose the one it could answer for in front of its board.

HUMAN OVERSIGHT

Translation and routing are automatic. Assessment is not. A case officer reviews every case and decides the next step, and the escalation recommendations planned for later will be advice a person acts on rather than a decision the system makes.

Putting the module into practice

03

How it works today

A case moves through the module in a set order. It begins with the public form, which anyone can fill in: the reporter describes the incident, chooses a severity level and receives a tracking code to follow the case afterwards without giving their name. The platform then reads the country and region named in the report and sends the case to the officer who covers that area. If the report is written in a language that officer does not read, they translate it inside SpaceUG, and the translation is saved beside the original so both stay on the record. The officer reads the case, judges what it needs and takes it forward: verifying the account, referring the reporter to an organization that can support them, or carrying the incident into the advocacy work Rural Smiles does with partners.

Not all of that is live yet. Rural Smiles builds and tests the platform one module at a time, finishing and checking each one before the next begins, so faults surface while they are still small rather than accumulating across the system. Translation is fully operational today and running on live cases. Source verification is written but not yet released, because the work of connecting it to the rest of the platform is still under way.

Who uses it

Cases are handled by case officers: Rural Smiles staff and staff at partner organizations recruited into the role. Partner organizations are onboarded against two conditions. They must work in a defined geography and they must be able to use what the data shows, either to shape their own programs or to respond to what is happening in that community. Smaller organizations that cannot yet meet the second condition are encouraged to join consortia, so referrals can still reach them.

CHALLENGES IN ROLLOUT

A feature they had to drop

The first design had AI classify each case by severity. The team dropped it after finding a bias risk it could not engineer around, and the risk lies in how people describe what has happened to them. A first account often understates the danger, because the reporter is frightened, writing quickly, or has normalized what they are living through. A case officer reading that account brings context to it: they know the district, they know what else has come in from there recently, and they notice when a flat description does not match the situation behind it. A classifier reads only the words on the form. An understated account produces an understated ranking, and the case that most needs attention is the one that gets the least.

The replacement is deliberately simple. Rather than rank reports by urgency, the system sends each one to the officer who covers the district it was reported from. That is a decision anyone can check, and it speeds up the work without a machine deciding whose emergency comes first.

Translation accuracy with no baseline to measure against

Checking a translation takes someone who can read both versions of it. For Swahili and Kinyarwanda that was straightforward: native speakers on the team read each translation beside its original and could say whether it held. Indigenous languages are harder, for two reasons. Several are grouped under aggregate labels, so one setting covers varieties that differ in practice. Runyakitara, for instance, covers Runyoro, Rutooro, Runyankole and Rukiga. And for those languages there is no reference translation to compare an output against.

That leaves the team without a baseline. Until speakers have reviewed a sample of real cases in those languages, there is nothing to measure accuracy against, and the team will not claim a standard it has not tested. A spot check is scheduled for that reason.

> *"Even though AI is solving some of the global challenges, we cannot eliminate the manual review."*
>
> Ahaisibwe Geofrey Mwaka, Executive Director, Rural Smiles Foundation

What the team learned

04

> *"If we had based this entire process on a one man decision, we would have developed a vague system that does not meet our aspirations."*
>
> Ahaisibwe Geofrey Mwaka, Executive Director, Rural Smiles Foundation

What went well

Making staff part of every decision, including which provider to use, removed a doubt they held about whether machine translation could be trusted with sensitive reports.

Technology evolves quickly, and the organization kept technical oversight inside the room. Security advisors, funders, technical partners, peer organizations and staff each shaped part of the design.

Adding the AI feature to the existing platform rather than starting again also held up. A roadmap was in place, so the AI could be built onto SpaceUG instead of rebuilding it.

What they would do differently

One reflection the team offers to others taking a similar route is to settle how accuracy will be evaluated before development starts. Translation went live and worked, and the question of how well it works for indigenous languages only became answerable afterwards, once there were real cases to look at. Planning that check alongside the build, rather than after it, is the step they would sequence differently next time.

What comes next

STRENGTHENING WHAT EXISTS

- Complete a security review with Access Now at the end of September, before any partner is onboarded.
- Run a spot check of indigenous language translations to find out whether accuracy holds across varieties grouped under aggregate labels.
- Finish the source verification module, and after it, add escalation recommendations, a case officer reviews before acting.
- Document the full workflow so partner organizations can troubleshoot without depending on Rural Smiles staff.

SCALING

- Expand into Kenya and Tanzania through the CIVICUS Civic Tech Lab, with technical support from Evidence Methods Lab in Uganda.
- Hold to a ceiling of 10 to 15 partner organizations across the two countries, because civic space restrictions make careful onboarding more important than rapid growth.
- Respond to interest from West Africa, where Afro Leadership has approached Rural Smiles about coordinating adoption across the region.
- Keep the architecture flexible enough to absorb new modules without rebuilding.

MONITORING AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Publish quarterly reports with data aggregated by country and region, written to inform advocacy rather than to count usage.
- Measure impact through advocacy events held, position papers adopted and over time a fall in the incidents being reported.
- Raise an internal sustainability fund annually to cover hosting on servers the organization already runs.
- Recruit strategic partners for specific gaps in the platform roadmap rather than for general support, the approach that brought in CIVICUS, Hivos and NetHope.

Learn more about NetHope Connected

NetHope Connected is a global community and digital program designed by, for and with nonprofits, to help small to mid-sized organizations strengthen digital capacity at their own pace.

The NetHope Connected AI grant program is one of the programs in the community, where we support grantees like Rural Smiles Foundation to design, test and run AI responsibly, and publish the results as case studies like this one.

GET IN TOUCH

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JOIN THE COMMUNITY

Join NetHope Connected

SCAN TO JOIN

With thanks to Ahaisibwe Geofrey Mwaka. Developed with support from the NetHope Connected AI grant program. October 2026.