

Entrepreneurship and innovation by refugees in Uganda

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In order to make a living, refugees have to be innovative, and refugees in Uganda have contributed tremendously to entrepreneurship and innovation in the country.

Uganda hosts nearly 380,000 refugees and asylum seekers, of which the majority come from DRC, South Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. The majority live in approved settlements while some 54,000 live in the capital, Kampala. Contrary to common assumptions, refugees in Uganda have contributed tremendously to entrepreneurship and innovation in the country, and their entrepreneurial success and innovation is highlighted by the Humanitarian Innovation Project in its report *Refugee Economies*, based on research conducted in Uganda in 2013.¹ The report shows that in order to make a living, refugees have to be innovative, and there are several small and medium enterprises which are owned or are run by refugees all over Uganda. This is possible because of Uganda's refugee policy which gives refugees freedom of movement and the same right to jobs and employment opportunities as the host community.

The government's policy of providing agricultural land to refugees in the settlements enables refugees to produce food both for their own consumption and to sell

the surplus. In addition, remittances have been a big source of funding for refugee entrepreneur start-up, in particular for the Somali refugees as there is a large Somali diaspora. Furthermore, while refugees in Uganda have limited access to information and communication technologies, many have nonetheless successfully overcome these hurdles to become effective technology users. Others go further, creating or adapting technological innovations for their business activities using locally available resources.

In the remote locations of Nakivale and Kyangwali settlements in Uganda's rural countryside, some 70% of refugees now regularly use mobile phones and, despite limited access, refugees have higher levels of internet use than the general population. Half of those using the internet in Nakivale get online using the Community Technology Access Centre (CTA) – an internet café in the settlement which is also a computer literacy training centre. The CTA was set up with the support of UNHCR and donations but is now run by a board of refugees and generates income from classes and internet use to pay for the teachers, director and

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maintenance, leaving UNHCR needing only to support the internet connection.

Some CTA customers use the internet to buy and sell items they need for their businesses, and to support entrepreneurial ventures. Demou-Kay, a young Congolese refugee, visits the CTA in Nakivale every day with his laptop, which he rents from another refugee, to use the café's internet connection and electricity supply to do his video editing work. He has also used his self-taught technical skills to make a radio transmitter to create a radio station, the only one in the settlement. The radio transmitter was constructed out of second-hand electrical parts and a mobile phone found in the settlement. His radio station transmits

over a 5-10 km radius, providing songs, news updates and health messages to listeners in and near Nakivale. By charging a small fee for song requests, he has begun to generate income from the station, helping to maintain the project.

Music shops are common in both Nakivale and Kyangwali, and rely directly on computers and phones for their services. Henry, a young Congolese man who owns one such shop in Nakivale, leaves the settlement every month for the neighbouring town of Mbarara. There he loads up a USB stick with hundreds of MP3 files which he purchases from a Ugandan merchant. On returning to Nakivale, he transfers the files from his USB onto a laptop; from his computer, he then loads

the files directly onto his customer's mobile phones, charging a fee per song.

Refugee-led organisations are also providing employment to a number of refugees. My organisation, the Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID), is one such organisation, set up initially to address the problem that many young refugees who had no work were turning to crime and drugs. A

group of Congolese refugees in Kampala decided to start a regular football game for both refugees and local people, after which young people would stay to discuss issues affecting their lives. As language barriers were seen as the main thing preventing them from finding jobs and integrating into their new society, the group of founders decided to start providing English

classes for free every morning. Today YARID has three English classes with an average of 30 students in each, including Ugandans. It has also set up tailoring and craft-making training for refugee women; among the eight graduates to date, three have started their own businesses. Finally, YARID, in collaboration with charity organisation the Xavier Project, run Tamuka Hub, a space where refugees can come together and use the internet for free and where they can receive training courses in social media, business skills and distance learning online.

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1. Report online at www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/refugeeeconomies



Demou-Kay running his radio station in Nakivale.