

“We are well able to stand on our own if we are given the opportunities”: perspectives from affected populations in Uganda

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Persons affected by forced displacement undoubtedly know what solutions are best for them, yet their voices and ideas are rarely included in policy discussions at national levels.

As the world’s forcibly displaced population increases, more refugees are trapped in protracted situations,¹ with limited prospects for repatriation or resettlement to a third country. Sustainable socio-economic integration as a durable solution has not been facilitated by most host governments and humanitarian agencies, especially in the Global South. In the East African region, there are Somali, South Sudanese, Rwandan and Congolese refugee communities, particularly in Kenya and Uganda, who have been living in refugee camps and settlements since the 1990s.

Listening to refugees and host communities about their concerns and their ideas for possible solutions is important to inform policy, programmes and the overall refugee response. However, this is rarely done, and in cases where efforts have been made to integrate refugee voices the existing systems and structures have not been effective in achieving positive change.

The author has drawn on stories shared by and conversations with refugee community leaders, as well as his personal experience working on the refugee response in Uganda, to show how integration has tended to be based on short-term livelihoods interventions that are seldom effective in building resilience to shocks. He also highlights high-level policy recommendations for sustainable socio-economic integration.

Ugandan strategy for self-reliance and refugee integration

Uganda’s government has historically followed progressive refugee policies compared with neighbouring countries. Freedom of movement and access to employment are the key refugee rights enshrined in its 2006

Refugee Act. The majority of refugees reside in open settlements rather than in restricted camps and approximately 7% of the refugee population lives in urban areas. Over the past two decades, in collaboration with humanitarian and development partners the government has continued to build on its Self-Reliance Strategy launched in 1999 to improve standards of living for refugees and host communities.²

This strategy is largely premised on providing access to land for food production whereby, on arrival, refugee households in the settlements are allocated land plots of about 30m² for subsistence farming. In contrast, urban refugees or self-settled refugees have no access to land (whether for agriculture or for any other purpose) and humanitarian assistance such as food distribution or cash transfers is only given to settlement-based refugees.

In the spirit of enhancing and improving the socio-economic integration of refugees, the government made a deliberate move to pay special attention to refugee-hosting districts by integrating its Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA) into the country’s National Development Plan II. One of the landmark initiatives by the UN and World Bank to support the STA was the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) strategy, a framework aimed at promoting the resilience of refugees and host communities.³ Uganda is also implementing the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) to protect refugees and facilitate integration through supporting hosting districts to empower refugees to become self-reliant.

However, despite these well-intentioned initiatives, the self-reliance strategy has not lived up to expectations⁴ and refugees experience

significantly worse socio-economic outcomes relative to host communities.⁵

What solutions do affected populations propose?

The concerns and stories of community leaders from different settlements reflect their belief that socio-economic integration has only partially been achieved and that more remains to be done. In monthly community feedback sessions and interviews, “We are well able to stand on our own if we are given the opportunities”, was often repeated by refugee community leaders.

Even since community leaders have been included in national policy consultation mechanisms such as the CRRF Steering Group (CRRF-SG), their suggestions for solutions are rarely heard or considered, partly due to the limited time allocated to presentations at CRRF-SG meetings.⁶ Below are some of their reflections:

“We are not given time to share our concerns and solutions at the steering group meetings. We need more time, otherwise we are not relevant in those meetings.” (A refugee representative to the CRRF-SG)

“To be able to successfully integrate, refugees need more than just access to documentation. If our documents are not recognised by institutions that offer services, then we are better off not having the documents. I wasn’t able to swap my telephone line because my refugee ID card could not be accepted as a valid ID...” (A male urban-based refugee community member)

“I have been residing in this settlement for over seven years. I see the same persons benefiting from the skills trainings every year. The selection of beneficiaries is not done well. Community leaders are not consulted. These interventions can only be helpful if the right beneficiaries are selected.” (A female settlement-based refugee community leader)

Most community leaders proposed solutions beyond the provision of basic socio-economic rights, instead calling for more inclusive and sustainable socio-economic integration. Their ideas can be summarised in two main policy recommendations:

1. Implement a phased approach to the refugee response

Community leaders are calling on host governments to work closely with UNHCR and development partners to implement a more structured phased approach to the refugee response. This approach would have three major phases: the emergency phase, the recovery phase (three to five years after arrival in the host country) and the self-sufficiency phase (six years onwards). During emergency situations, affected populations would be given life-saving multi-sector emergency services and humanitarian assistance. During the recovery phase, focus would shift to more sustainable livelihoods interventions including skills development and access to self-employment opportunities. During the self-sufficiency phase, refugees would be given opportunities to access the local labour market, business services including access to credit, travel documents for greater mobility, and permanent residency or citizenship, to enable them to more meaningfully contribute to the development of their host countries.

This approach reflects research in the field of forced migration, which reveals that when given the opportunity to exercise their socio-economic rights, refugees become less dependent on humanitarian assistance, thereby building their resilience. For example, when they have the right to engage in gainful employment, they use their skills to start business enterprises that create jobs not only for fellow refugees but also for members of the host community, and in this way increase the host country’s tax base.⁷

2. Include refugees in government development programmes

Humanitarian and development partners should advocate for refugee inclusion and access to key government development programmes, including tertiary education and employment programmes. This will require recognition of refugee documentation by all government and private institutions. Because refugees are an integral sector of the population within a country’s territory, host governments should be the primary actors responsible for hosting, protecting and providing assistance



The Chairperson of the Refugee Welfare Council III listens to a submission by a Council member representing persons with disabilities during a consultative meeting in Nakivale refugee settlement. (Credit: Junior Maarifa, RWC III, Nakivale)

to them. The abdication of State responsibility towards refugees and host communities means that UNHCR and international humanitarian agencies have to fill the gap, which may lead to unsustainable interventions.

To better incorporate refugees' voices and suggestions, host governments and UNHCR should set up national level engagement and feedback mechanisms that provide space for meaningful participation. This would require building the leadership capacity of refugee representatives through training sessions in advocacy and communication, so they are able to represent their communities in local and national fora. One such mechanism has been successfully established in Uganda; at the quarterly Refugee Engagement Forum meetings international organisations such as CARE International have been given slots to train refugee representatives on advocacy skills. These sessions are largely practical,

allowing leaders to support their respective communities to advocate for improved service delivery and engage with local implementing organisations. However, there is limited participation at national level policy discussions due to poor planning and communication. For example, the agenda for CRRF-SG meetings is frequently disseminated at short notice, not allowing enough time for refugee representatives to consult community members and consolidate their inputs. Additionally, response actors should start involving refugee community representatives in programmes and policy discussions from the initial design phase rather than simply organising consultations during implementation.

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1. UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as: "... those in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years [...] while it is not safe for them to return home, they also have not been granted permanent residence to stay in another country either", available at bit.ly/protracted-displacement
2. UNHCR (2003) *Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR) for Uganda Self Reliance Strategy: Way Forward* bit.ly/development-assistance
3. United Nations Uganda and World Bank (2017) *REHOPE – Refugee and Host Population Empowerment: Strategic Framework – Uganda*
4. Betts A, Chaara I, Omata N and Sterck O (2019) *Refugee Economies in Uganda: What Difference Does the Self-Reliance Model Make?* bit.ly/refugee-economies-uganda
5. Beltramo T, Fix J and Sarr I (2021) *Uganda Knowledge Brief: Using Socioeconomic Data to Promote Employment Solutions for Refugees in Uganda*, UNHCR bit.ly/refugee-employment-uganda
6. U-Learn (2021) *Refugee Engagement Forum in Uganda: Good Practice Study* bit.ly/refugee-engagement-uganda
7. Clemens M, Huang C and Graham J (2018) *The Economic and Fiscal Effects of Granting Refugees Formal Labor Market Access* bit.ly/formal-access

