

## Uganda's approach to refugee self-reliance

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**Uganda has chosen inclusion over marginalisation; rather than coerce refugees into camps, Uganda upholds their rights to work, to attend school and to move freely.**

Headlines and hashtags speak of the refugee 'crisis' as if the mere presence of people from another country poses a threat. Even among humanitarians, refugees are often understood as a 'burden' to be shared. This rhetoric obscures the reality that refugees' ability to contribute to the societies where they are living depends precisely upon those factors most outside their control: the policies of host governments; the availability of public services; the health of local and regional economies; the budgets of humanitarian organisations; the priorities of international development actors; national and regional security; and so on.

More often than not, these factors – individually or together – deny refugees the very rights and opportunities that enable people to take care of themselves. As the heads of the United Nations development and refugee agencies recently explained, refugees' vulnerability is not inevitable; rather, it stems from circumstances that are "imposed upon [them] and reinforced by the world's incomplete response."<sup>1</sup>

But the opposite effect is also possible. Properly aligned, the above-mentioned factors can empower refugees to **benefit** their host communities and not to burden them. This is no surprise. Nationals and refugees are similarly affected by local and regional development challenges, such as inadequate access to health care or education. Addressing those challenges benefits everyone in the area, like a rising tide lifts all boats.

Such enabling environments are tragically rare. Uganda, where refugees have consistently found asylum since the Second World War, offers an important exception. Today, Uganda hosts more than 500,000 refugees. More than 100,000 arrived in 2015, mostly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and South Sudan, where conflict and instability foreclose the possibility of repatriation any time soon.

Uganda has chosen inclusion over marginalisation; rather than coerce refugees into camps, Uganda upholds their rights to work, to attend school and to move freely. And it has striven to do so sustainably, by cultivating an environment that supports the self-reliance and resilience of entire communities, including the refugees among them. The three pillars of its refugee policy are:

- **equality, dialogue and mutual support**, leading to community resilience
- **sustainable livelihoods support** that takes account of the demographic, cultural and economic contexts of each community
- **inclusion of refugees in local government-managed systems**, such as for public health and nutrition, the environment, education, gender-based violence prevention and response, and child protection services.

Crucially, this pioneering approach is based on two premises: **firstly**, that displacement is an area of shared **responsibility** for governmental, humanitarian and development actors; **secondly**, that it is an area of shared **opportunity** for refugees and Ugandans alike.

### Shared responsibility

As to the first premise, a notable feature is the division of the work among the various stakeholders in ways that play to everyone's strengths. Development actors and donor states support agricultural projects, including by promoting access to land, introducing new techniques that lead to more lucrative crops, and improving market linkages. Private sector and other actors such as microfinance institutions and employers – working in conjunction with international NGOs, multilateral development banks and UN agencies – support non-agricultural livelihoods by promoting waged employment, identifying viable livelihoods opportunities and providing credit as well as skills training in business



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Joël Mutabazi, a tailor and a Burundian refugee now living in Kashojwa village, Nakivale, Uganda. Refugees in Uganda have the right to work and start their own businesses.

literacy and small business development. The Ugandan government also enhances social service delivery capacity in refugee-hosting areas, with a view to integrating services for refugees into local government systems.

Within this cooperative environment, new ideas and new approaches are proliferating. Uganda has already incorporated refugees into its National Development Plan. In rural areas, refugees have long received plots of land to grow crops for personal consumption. The government, along with its international partners, is now exploring larger-scale agricultural projects that are designed to benefit both refugees and host communities.

Any programme of this size has its pitfalls, and Uganda's history reveals mixed results. Past efforts have been hampered by, for example, insufficient consultation with affected communities, who are not only the beneficiaries of a self-reliance programme but also its agents. This fact requires a pragmatic approach to ensuring that each individual, whether refugee or citizen, gets the support they need until they are actually prepared for the transition away from assistance. Adequate funding is essential, as is pragmatic engagement with the political economy in which the programme

must operate. The competing priorities and interests of local governments, for example, have sometimes resulted in refugees being disfavoured when funding began to dry up.

Fortunately, Uganda has been learning from those past lessons and is moving forward with a holistic approach that addresses the distinct development needs of girls, boys, women and men, whether Ugandans or refugees. The model that Uganda has adopted sequences short-/intermediate-term humanitarian interventions and longer-term development approaches in order to help participants gradually increase their degree of self-reliance and resilience.

### Shared opportunity

This welcoming environment is bringing tangible benefits and renewed dignity for both Ugandans and refugees. Hence the second premise of Uganda's policy: that displacement represents a shared opportunity. A recent economic study of refugees in Uganda described a "refugee community that is nationally and transnationally integrated, contributes in positive ways to the national economy, is economically diverse, uses and creates technology, and is far from uniformly dependent on international assistance."<sup>2</sup>

The evidence presented is strong: of refugees living in rural Ugandan settlements, just 1% depend entirely on humanitarian assistance. Many operate their own businesses and even employ Ugandans. Likewise, in the capital Kampala, an estimated 1 in 5 refugees employs non-family members, and roughly 40% of those employed by refugees are Ugandans.

Rather than stealing jobs, "refugees are more likely than nationals to start new businesses, increasing rather than reducing the number of available jobs". Refugees contribute in other ways as well, including by paying taxes, by stimulating demand

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and by bringing new ideas and skills that local residents may not have. Together, these benefits “significantly outweigh the costs of additional social services and environmental protection measures”.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, economic inclusion of refugees is also the **right** thing to do. Pope Francis recently lauded how Uganda enables refugees “to rebuild their lives in security and to sense the dignity which comes from earning one’s livelihood through honest labour”.<sup>4</sup> Many of Uganda’s leaders, including President Museveni, were once refugees. They are well-placed to appreciate the dignity and hope that self-reliance can bring. Through their inclusive vision, Uganda and its international partners have discovered what much of the world has refused to accept: the benefits of refugee self-reliance outweigh any associated costs.

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