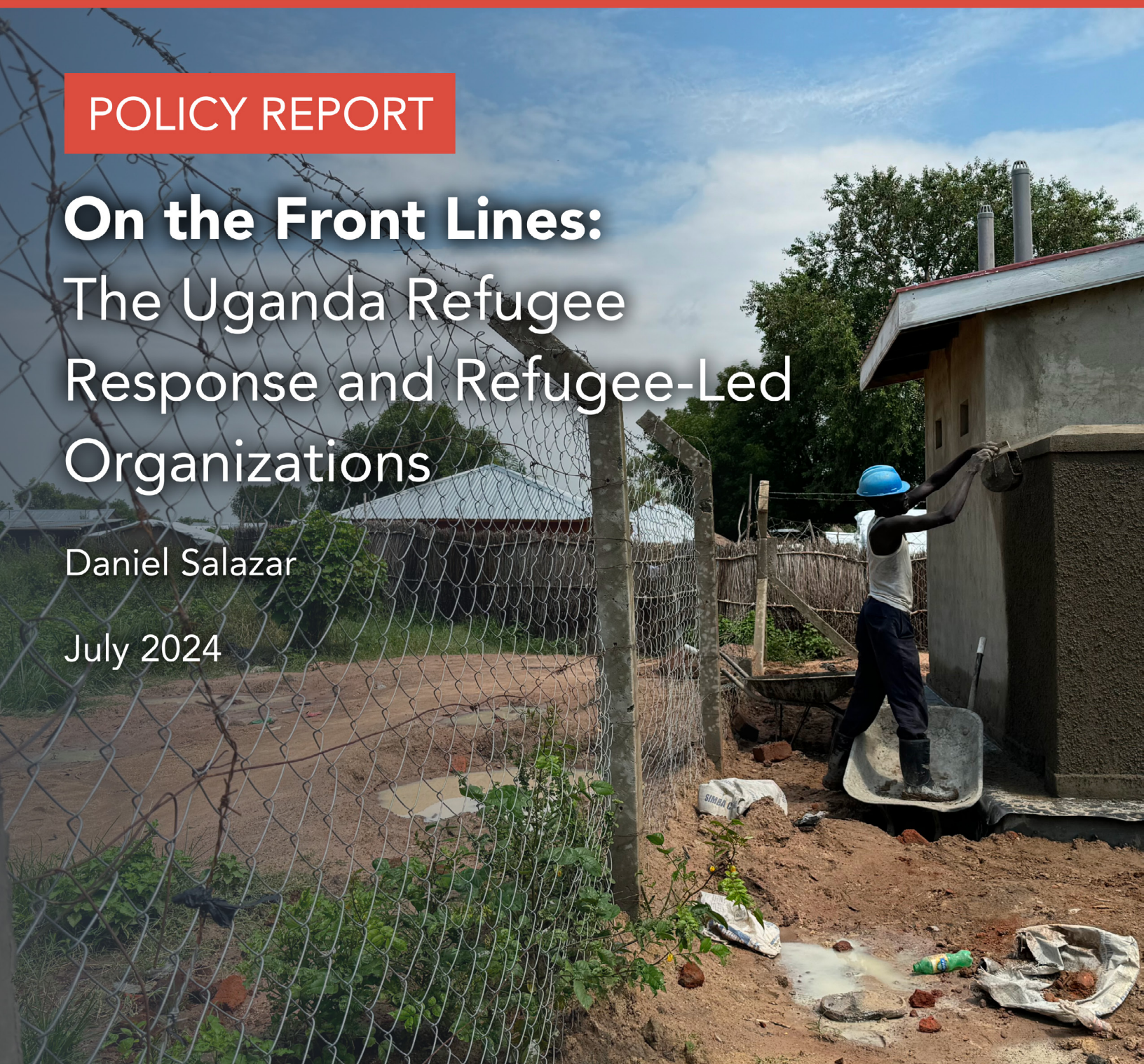


POLICY REPORT

On the Front Lines: The Uganda Refugee Response and Refugee-Led Organizations

Daniel Salazar

July 2024



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Preface

Janvier Hafasha was a child when rebels attacked his home in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both his parents were killed in attacks.

In flight, Hafasha had an itinerant life—“two days here, one week there... Eating sorghum and maize stems... [and] nothing to drink—just the water in the stream.”

After crossing the border into Uganda and settling in Kyaka II refugee settlement, he worked through the trauma he had experienced losing his family. He began volunteering and working with organizations involved in the refugee response.

He says service to other refugees helped him discover his purpose—“to support fellow youth who are struggling.” He now leads Hodari Foundation, a refugee-led organization (RLO) serving unaccompanied minors and orphans in Kyaka II refugee settlement in western Uganda.

Ayoo Irene Hellen is a South Sudanese refugee born and raised in Kiryandongo refugee settlement in northern Uganda.

Her parents made their living gathering charcoal, which refugees burn as a fuel source. She has seen firsthand how gathering and burning unsustainable sources of fuel impacts the lives of refugees. It destroys the environment around the settlement. It contributes to air pollution. And it is a protection risk for women and girls who must travel long distances to gather firewood or charcoal.

She is now a partnership officer at Last Mile Climate, a non-governmental organization focused on climate solutions like clean cooking. She also works with an RLO, African Youth Action Network, and is attaining a degree in public administration.

“Being a refugee and a young woman with a lot of energy, I can’t just sit down,” she said of her work.

In 2014, Kubana Alexis founded Tomorrow Vijana, a refugee-led organization in Rwamwanja refugee settlement in southwestern Uganda.

He resettled to the United States in 2016. Within a year, he began working for the resettlement agency that resettled him in Massachusetts. He now works at that agency, International Institute of New England, as the associate director of workforce initiatives.

He still serves as the executive director of Tomorrow Vijana, which has now grown to a staff of about 25 employees. Often, his first meetings of the day occur at 4 a.m. given the seven-hour time difference between the eastern United States and Uganda. He travels to international forums that other RLO leaders are unable to attend due to visa restrictions.

“I did not stop the ambition I had when I was a refugee back in Uganda,” he said.

The UN Refugee Agency did not define “refugee-led organizations” until 2023. Yet, for years, refugees have been organizing themselves to respond directly to their communities’ needs. At times of crisis, such as during COVID-19 lockdowns, these organizations are some of the only actors remaining to provide services.

Indeed, refugees are increasingly setting the direction of the global response to forced displacement. But multilateral structures and approaches to funding, decision making, and meaningful engagement do not reflect the depth of the passion, expertise, and innovation that refugees and refugee-led organizations bring to the table.

“Our heads are here, even though we lost something there,” a refugee leader in Kyaka II refugee settlement said.

Executive Summary

With 1.6 million refugees residing in its territory, the Republic of Uganda is Africa's largest refugee-hosting country. Instability in neighboring countries, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, has created a protracted refugee situation in Uganda. With few refugees resettled in third countries and mass repatriation unlikely, hundreds of thousands of refugees are likely to stay in Uganda for the coming years.

In an era of policies preventing people from seeking safety in other countries¹, Uganda has maintained an open-door policy to refugees and asylum seekers. Uganda's progressive approach remains enshrined in national law, despite dwindling international support for the response in country. Unlike in other contexts, refugees in Uganda can legally obtain the right to work. Refugee settlements coexist alongside host communities where refugees and Ugandan nationals regularly interact. Ugandan law also allows refugees to freely associate—to form civil society groups.

In this welcoming framework, refugee-led organizations have sprouted across the country. Ranging from large, professional networks to handfuls of volunteers, these groups channel their talent and past trauma into providing services, promoting livelihoods, and giving other essential support to their neighbors. But these groups struggle to get consistent funding. They face obstacles getting formally registered. They are sidelined in processes that affect their lives, from local projects to the Global Refugee Forum.

This report examines the state of the Uganda refugee response and the role of refugee-led organizations (RLOs) in it. It posits that RLOs in Uganda and, indeed, the entire refugee response in Uganda are frontline actors on some of the most pressing issues in global displacement: equitable responsibility sharing and meaningful refugee participation. As displacement continues across the Great Lakes region, both RLOs and the response in Uganda more broadly have not been given adequate support from the international community. This lack of support threatens important progress made to welcome refugees in what many consider a "model" response.

To protect and enhance the refugee response in Uganda, USCRI recommends:

- Increased donor support for the Uganda refugee and humanitarian response
- Flexible, multi-year funding to refugee-led organizations that builds RLO capacity and meaningfully includes RLOs in program development, design, and implementation
- Eased restrictions on RLO registration in Uganda
- Boosting refugee access to legal aid and to assistance in urban settings
- Steps to unlock refugee potential on financial inclusion, education, and employment
- Removal of barriers to refugee participation at the Global Refugee Forum and other spaces

This report was drawn from field research conducted in Uganda in June 2024. Through the partnership of RLOs and RLO networks, USCRI participated in and co-convened focus group discussions of RLOs in Kampala, as well as the Southwest (Kyaka II) and West Nile (Rhino Camp) regions. USCRI also conducted key informant interviews with the Office of the Prime Minister, RLOs, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and key multilateral agencies such as the UN Refugee Agency and World Food Programme.

Methodology

This report was written and prepared by U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar. It draws upon existing data and literature, as well as field research conducted in Uganda in June 2024.

In April and May 2024, USCRI conducted a literature review on the refugee response in Uganda, displacement in the Great Lakes region, and refugee-led organizations. This review informed a policy brief from USCRI published on May 9, 2024, “The Uganda Refugee Response.”²

USCRI participated in virtual interviews and discussions in April and May 2024 with Alight, ChildFund Uganda, Church World Service, Hodari Foundation, Nourish All, Refugees International, Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, and Youth Social Advocacy Team in preparation for field research.

USCRI Director of International Programs Taylor McNaboe traveled to Uganda in May and June 2024. USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar traveled to Uganda in June 2024.

USCRI participated in three focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugee-led organizations in the Southwest, West Nile, and Kampala regions, respectively: in Kyaka II refugee settlement, convened by the Kyaka II Refugee Led Organization Network; in Rhino Camp refugee settlement, convened by the Youth Social Advocacy Team; and in Nsambya, Kampala, convened by the Refugee Led Organization Network of Uganda.

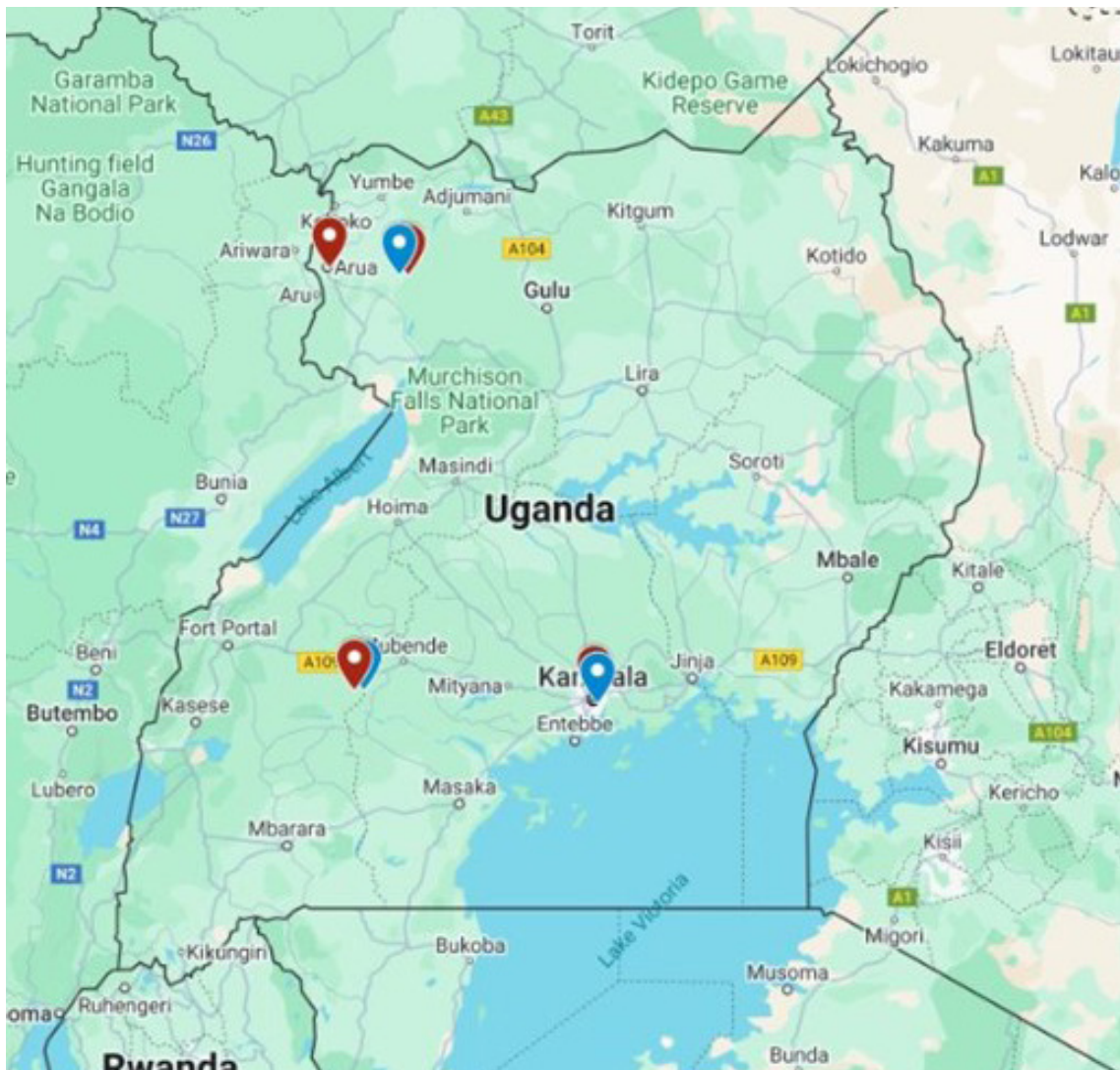
This report also draws upon key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted in June 2024 as part of the field research. In Kampala, USCRI conducted KIIs with Alight Uganda, African Youth Action Network, Cohere, Hodari Foundation, International Organization for Migration, Last Mile Climate, the Office of the Prime Minister’s Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework team, the Refugee Law Project, the Refugee Led Organization Network of Uganda, and the World Food Programme. In Kampala, USCRI also attended a Humanitarian International Non-Governmental Organization Forum scenario planning workshop, which featured dozens of representatives and staff members of international non-governmental organizations participating in the humanitarian and refugee response in Uganda.

In Kyaka II, USCRI conducted KIIs with African Youth Action Network, Hodari Foundation, the UN Refugee Agency, and Youth Initiative for Development in Africa. USCRI visited several sites around Kyaka II through the guidance of Hodari Foundation.

In Arua, USCRI met representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister, Oxfam Uganda, the UN Refugee Agency, and Youth Social Advocacy Team. In Rhino Camp, USCRI also conducted KIIs with Youth Social Advocacy Team staff. USCRI visited several sites in Rhino Camp with YSAT staff members, primarily in the Ocea zone of the settlement.

In June and July 2024, USCRI conducted follow up virtual KIIs with International Refugee Rights Initiative, Tomorrow Vijana, and Youth for Peace Initiative.

This mix of focus group discussions and key informant interviews follows the methodologies of other insightful research conducted in recent years on refugee-led organizations in Uganda and the state of the Uganda model, namely Mary Gitahi’s study, “Refugee Led Organizations: Uganda Country Report” for the Refugee-Led Research Hub; Oxfam Uganda’s report “Oxfam’s Engagement with Refugee-Led Organizations in West Nile (Uganda)”; and Maciej Grześkowiak’s article “When Legal Inclusion is not Enough: the ‘Uganda Model’ of Refugee Protection on the Brink of Failure.”



Map of Uganda with focus group discussions (blue) and key informant interviews (red) marked in Kampala, Kyaka I refugee settlement, Rhino Camp refugee settlement, and Arua.

Introduction

The Republic of Uganda is Africa's largest refugee-hosting country with more than 1.6 million refugees residing in its territory. The East African nation receives refugees fleeing violence and instability in neighboring South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as well as nearby states such as Somalia and Sudan. Uganda is now considered a protracted refugee-hosting situation, particularly with bleak prospects for stability in South Sudan and the DRC—the main two countries of origin for refugees in Uganda.

In an era of rising displacement, other states have hardened their borders and pushed displaced populations back into danger. In contrast, Uganda has maintained an open-door policy to refugees and asylum seekers. Uganda's progressive approach remains enshrined in national law, despite dwindling international funding to support the response in the country. Unlike in other contexts, refugees in Uganda can legally obtain the right to work. Refugee settlements coexist with host communities where refugees and Ugandan nationals regularly interact. Ugandan law also allows refugees to freely associate—to form civil society groups.

To fill gaps in the refugee response, refugee-led organizations (RLOs) have sprouted across the country, many of them in the last decade. Ranging from large, professional networks to small outfits with handfuls of volunteers, these organizations channel their talents and past trauma into providing services, promoting livelihoods, and giving other essential support to their neighbors. They played a vital role in service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic response as other organizations pulled back their operations. But these groups struggle to expand their capacity to deliver programs to more people. They face obstacles getting formally registered. They are sidelined in processes that affect their lives, from local projects to the biggest stage in displacement policy—the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, Switzerland.

This report from the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) examines the state of the Uganda refugee response and the role of refugee-led organizations in it. It is based on field research conducted in Uganda in June 2024.

The report begins by providing the context of the refugee response in Uganda, discussing the history of displacement in Africa's Great Lakes region, refugee policy in Uganda, and refugee-led organizations more broadly. Drawing upon key informant interviews (KIIs) with multilateral agencies and international NGOs, the report then discusses the mounting pressures on the "Uganda model" from continuing arrivals, dwindling international funding, and accelerating climate change.

Based on KIIs and focus group discussions (FGDs) in Uganda's southwest, northwest, and capital, the report highlights the contributions of RLOs to the refugee response, while discussing the barriers and challenges that RLOs face in delivering support to refugees and host communities. The report concludes with policy recommendations drawn from the research.

The Uganda refugee response, and RLOs in Uganda specifically, are leading the way on some of the most pressing issues in global displacement: equitable responsibility sharing and meaningful refugee participation. As displacement continues across the Great Lakes and needs rise, the international community is failing both RLOs and the response in Uganda more broadly. This lack of support threatens important progress made to welcome refugees and to support their leadership in shaping durable solutions to the displacement that upended their lives.

History of Displacement in Uganda, the Great Lakes Region

Human mobility patterns have long been fluid in Africa's Great Lakes region, particularly across artificial borders drawn by European colonial powers. Uganda has hosted displaced populations since before its independence from the United Kingdom in 1962 and even before the modern refugee architecture was established by the Refugee Convention in 1951.

In the early 1940s, several thousand Polish refugees fled Europe during World War II and were hosted in Central and East Africa, including Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Northern and Southern Rhodesia.³ After an uprising against Rwanda's Tutsi monarchy in 1959, tens of thousands of Tutsis fled into Uganda.⁴ Violent pogroms in Rwanda forced even more Tutsis to Uganda in the 1960s.⁵ Meanwhile, growing numbers of Sudanese fleeing violence in southern Sudan—also newly independent from the British—were confined to camps in northern Uganda.⁶

Displacement trends reversed in the 1970s and early 1980s as Uganda became a refugee-generating country amid internal instability.⁷ By 1985, refugees and internally displaced persons made up seven percent of the country's population. Beginning in the late 1980s, an insurgency by the non-state Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), caused further displacement in northern Uganda.

Instability and conflict, much of it interwoven in the broader Great Lakes region, continued to drive displacement in and around Uganda, even as Uganda itself became relatively more stable. The 1994 Rwandan genocide once more resulted in mass displacement north into Uganda, from which the now-ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front had originated.⁸ A decades-long civil war between Sudan's government in Khartoum and the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army in southern Sudan resulted in recurring cycles of cross-border displacement south into Uganda. The First and Second Congolese Wars in the late 1990s and early 2000s killed and displaced millions across the Great Lakes region, including to the east into Uganda.

By 2014, Uganda hosted about 400,000 refugees.⁹ In the decade since, Uganda's refugee population has more than quadrupled to over 1.6 million. This dramatic increase is due to intermittent large-scale refugee influxes—including a period when nearly a million refugees arrived from the end of June 2016 to July 2018.¹⁰

The majority of Uganda's refugees are originally from South Sudan, which gained independence from Sudan in 2011. South Sudan descended into a civil war after fighting erupted in the capital of Juba in mid-December 2013, prompting initial waves of displacement to neighboring countries. By early March 2014, more than 240,000 South Sudanese had fled the country—about 99,000 of them into Uganda.¹¹ A shaky peace agreement in South Sudan reached in August 2015 collapsed in July 2016, when heavy fighting broke out between government forces of President Salva Kiir and rebel forces loyal to then-Vice President Riek Machar.¹² This renewed fighting resulted in an unprecedented number of refugees crossing into Uganda, doubling the refugee population of the country in less than seven months.¹³ This influx was one of the largest in the world and resulted in daily arrival counts of several thousand people at some points. South Sudanese refugees in Uganda now primarily reside in Uganda's West Nile region in the country's northwest, namely in Adjumani, Bidi Bidi, and Rhino Camp refugee settlements.

The Policy Context: The “Uganda Model”

After the initial flight from their country of origin, refugees across the world often face severe immobility, spending years and even decades languishing in cordoned-off camps.²⁰ Some countries severely limit freedom of movement for refugees—preventing them from leaving these settlements even temporarily. For decades, USCRI and others have led advocacy efforts against these cross-continental patterns of “refugee warehousing.”²¹ Global powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom are also increasingly shirking their obligations under international law by externalizing their asylum systems to third countries.

In contrast, on paper, Uganda has one of the most progressive policy approaches to refugees in the region, if not the world. Uganda has decidedly rejected the harmful policies and practices of refugee warehousing through a modern legal framework set up by the Refugee Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations of 2010.²²

The progressive nature of this regime cuts across multiple areas of policy. First, unlike other contexts, Ugandan law quickly grants refugee status to many of those arriving in the country. Article 25 of the Refugee Act allows for the group recognition of refugees and asylum seekers amid a mass influx.²³ South Sudanese arrivals and most Congolese arrivals are thus recognized as refugees on a *prima facie* basis and do not need to go through an individual refugee status determination process to demonstrate their status.²⁴

Furthermore, Uganda provides refugees with access to key rights and social services that is on par with access provided to Ugandan nationals. Ugandan law allows refugees the freedom of employment and business ownership. Refugees can also access government-provided health care and primary education. Refugees in Uganda receive parcels of cultivable land if available at the time of their assignment to a refugee settlement.²⁵ In Uganda, refugee settlements are also integrated with local host communities, which allows for greater freedom of movement and refugee-host interactions than those of countries with more restrictive warehousing policies.



Bukere Zone in Kyaka II refugee settlement. (Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)

Refugee policy in Uganda is heavily centralized within the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), which co-manages the settlements with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and coordinates other government ministries across the refugee response. The Department of Refugees within OPM was established through the Refugee Act of 2006 and carries out key aspects of the refugee response.

Uganda has also adopted a structure known as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) for its refugee response. The CRRF is an international framework for responding to large-scale refugee influxes and protracted refugee crises that was adopted by the United Nations in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016.²⁶ Uganda was one of the earliest countries to update its national policies by implementing this new approach, which originated from discussions about more equitable refugee responses in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis dominating policy and media circles in 2014 and 2015.²⁷

In Uganda, the CRRF has five reinforcing pillars:

- Admission and rights
- Emergency response and ongoing needs
- Resilience and self-reliance
- Expanded solutions
- Voluntary repatriation²⁸

The CRRF Steering Group is a government-led structure that brings together high-level partners across the response, such as development and humanitarian actors, international NGOs, and regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. The Steering Group sets the direction for carrying out the CRRF agenda in the Uganda context. A Secretariat office then serves as the technical and analytical support structure for the Steering Group's decision making.

Unlike other countries, Uganda also has formalized state and substate structures for displaced populations to make their voices heard. Refugee welfare councils or committees (RWCs) are local leadership structures that mirror local governing bodies.²⁹ Representatives from the RWCs then report to the Refugee Engagement Forum, a government-established forum that gathers refugee input on how the CRRF and the larger refugee response are carried out.³⁰ UNHCR officials note that these structures often inform agencies of key trends and insights, while refugee engagement bodies can help dispel rumors and misinformation spreading in communities.

In some areas, Ugandan policy pre-dated the CRRF structure that emerged on the global scale—Uganda had already incorporated refugees into its development and settlement plans and had already established domestic law to protect rights and freedoms for refugees.³¹ However, the framing of the CRRF also flows into the government’s future plans, such as a pillar in the CRRF on self-reliance and resilience translating into the government’s pledges on self-reliance and resilience made at the most recent Global Refugee Forum.

“It has taken the country a lot of thought to get where we are now,” said a member of the CRRF Secretariat team.

These policies and structures—an open-door policy to South Sudanese and Congolese refugees; progressive attitudes on freedom of movement and employment; an embrace of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and systems to implement it; and mechanisms for refugee participation such as RWCs and the Refugee Engagement Forum— all contribute to what is understood in literature and the policy world as the “Uganda model.”

In recognition of its forward-leaning approach on refugee issues, Uganda was one of the co-convenors of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, Switzerland, along with Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan, and Niger.³²

Refugee-Led Organizations

For decades, the global humanitarian system has largely reinforced a provider-beneficiary relationship where United Nations (UN) organizations and their partners provide assistance to affected populations like refugees and internally displaced persons.³³ This system has contributed to perceptions that refugees and other migrant populations are passive actors or helpless victims at the whim of larger forces.³⁴

This view discounts the agency and resilience of refugees to advocate for themselves and provide for their communities. Indeed, refugees frequently mobilize to create organizations and networks as alternative providers of social protection.³⁵ Refugees have also long been active members of civil society, advocating for policy changes for themselves and other populations.

Calls for greater participation of refugees and other forcibly displaced populations in decisions about their own future have been ongoing since at least the 1980s.³⁶ However, discussions about refugee-led organizations (RLOs) have only recently become more mainstream, particularly at the UN level. In 2023, the UN Refugee Agency defined “refugee-led organization” as “an organization or group in which persons with direct lived experience of forced displacement play a primary leadership role and whose stated objectives and activities are focused on responding to the needs of refugees and/or related communities.”³⁷

Through different agreements, the global humanitarian system is moving toward localization and greater participation of those who are displaced or affected by humanitarian disasters. The Grand Bargain, the overarching accord on humanitarian aid reached in 2016 and subsequently reaffirmed more recently, calls for increased funding and support to local actors, as well as “greater participation of affected populations in decision-making at all stages of the programme cycle.”³⁸ The Global Compact on Refugees, the international accord adopted in 2018 on refugee issues, calls for states and others to support “consultative processes that enable refugees and host community members to assist in designing appropriate, accessible, and inclusive responses.”³⁹

Despite this momentum toward local actors in refugee and humanitarian responses, significant work remains to be done on ensuring organizations closest to their communities, such as RLOs, have the appropriate resources or are consulted in key decision-making processes.

RLOs tend to be “chronically” underfunded—with only a fraction of humanitarian and development funding reaching these organizations.⁴⁰ Grant sizes to RLOs are also significantly smaller than those provided to international non-governmental organizations.⁴¹

This lack of support has a direct impact on RLOs being able to build their capacity, to expand their services at scale, and to become more formalized. A major study on RLOs in East Africa found that RLOs will stagnate in an informal, “self-help” stage unless they are able to access funding from humanitarian donors or diaspora support.⁴²

The Humanitarian and Refugee Response in Uganda

Uganda's "model" status due to its generous policy framework should not gloss over how conditions for many refugees are grim, with their most essential needs often not being met.⁴³ Indeed, needs are vast across the Republic of Uganda for the country's refugee population and its refugee-hosting districts. "Many refugees do not have hope to go back to their motherland," said a Kyaka II focus group discussion participant. "Here, life is very challenging."

Poverty remains widespread and chronic across segments of the overall Ugandan population.⁴⁴ "Similar and worse poverty, education, and employment rates are found amongst refugees in Uganda," according to the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan. Refugees also have lower employment and labor participation rates compared to host communities.⁴⁵

Focus group discussion participants and key informant interviewees detailed numerous challenges that refugees still face getting ahead in their daily lives. Refugees are often unaware of their rights under Ugandan law and lack access to legal support and counsel when they interact with the justice system. Refugees often have trouble opening bank accounts and accessing other formal financial services. Access to education becomes dramatically more difficult after primary school—which is universally provided to Ugandan nationals and refugees for their first seven years of school.⁴⁶ Those with professional nursing, medical, and other degrees obtained in their home countries are unable to get similar opportunities in Uganda—and instead are heavily underemployed in alternative sectors. Even when refugees receive opportunities with larger organizations, such as international NGOs, they are traditionally employed as translators or community liaisons and have difficulties gaining upward mobility in their roles.



*A UN Refugee Agency truck drives out of Ocea Zone, Rhino Camp refugee settlement.
(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)*

In this context, higher prices and poor access to markets, land, and formal financial services have created an enormous need for livelihoods—one that the refugee response has been unable to meet.⁴⁷ “We [have] failed to deliver in the area of livelihoods,” a UNHCR official in Kyaka II said.

Psychosocial distress and trauma are also common in Uganda’s refugee population. Protection and psychosocial needs are high due to widespread patterns of gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence by armed actors in the eastern DRC and South Sudan.⁴⁸ “GBV prevalence is very high from the countries where they are originating,” said an official with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Uganda.

Despite the vast needs in what is Africa’s largest refugee-hosting context and one of the largest refugee-hosting countries globally, Uganda does not have the same multilateral processes and structures in place in other contexts. For example, in Uganda, there is no Humanitarian Country Team—a leadership body that provides strategic direction for interagency humanitarian responses in crisis contexts.⁴⁹

The following sub-sections discuss some of the most pressing issues or trends in the humanitarian and refugee response in Uganda:

Reduced Funding

Forced displacement has skyrocketed in recent years across the world, with now 117 million people forcibly displaced from their homes as of mid-2024.⁵⁰ The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine created a massive regional displacement crisis—one that rivals the other large-scale regional crises of Syrians, Venezuelans, and Afghans forced from their home countries. In 2023, outbreaks of conflict in Sudan and Gaza displaced millions more. In some cases more than others, donors have responded to these emergencies by providing life-saving and life-sustaining support for populations in crisis. However, there is an “urgent and sizable gap” between the funds available and the funds required to assist populations in need.⁵¹

Uganda is a prime example where needs have risen dramatically but the response has been unable to adjust in kind. “The refugee population in Uganda is rapidly swelling but the resources are not,” an international NGO official said.

Uganda was one of UNHCR’s top 13 underfunded operations globally in 2023.⁵² The appeal for the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and its nutrition programming in Uganda faces a funding gap of 89 percent.⁵³ The World Food Programme (WFP) has faced years of declining support for its operations in Uganda and has had to shift to a new prioritization-based model.⁵⁴

UN agencies and international humanitarian NGOs express pessimism that funding trends will reverse amid other crises. “Uganda is not the only one that needs to be supported,” a WFP official said.

But officials still believe that Uganda should be higher on the agenda of international donors.

“Uganda really needs some more attention,” said an IOM official. “No country can survive this way.”

Prioritization

Reduced international support has a clear impact on refugees' daily lives in the form of reduced food rations through the World Food Programme (WFP)—which provides assistance to about 1.4 million of Uganda's 1.6 million refugees with in-kind food assistance or cash-based transfers.

Beginning in 2020, WFP began progressively reducing food rations for refugees across Uganda due to limited funding.⁵⁵ This reduction was framed in the context of shifting to “needs-based assistance” under the principle of “prioritization,” which seeks to prioritize reduced resources for the most vulnerable populations with the highest ration possible.⁵⁶ Rations were reduced for all refugees in April 2020 and again in February 2021.

In July 2023, WFP fully rolled out the third phase of its prioritization model—which meant 60 percent food rations to the most-vulnerable category of refugees and 30 percent food rations to moderately vulnerable refugees. The least vulnerable category of refugees was fully moved off monthly food assistance.⁵⁷ New arrivals continue to receive 100 percent rations for three months.

Prioritization was imperfectly rolled out in part because of the data WFP used to implement it. WFP hoped that 25 percent of refugees would receive the highest-possible food rations. Instead, only 14 percent of refugees did. In short, thousands of refugees in the most vulnerable category did not receive the food assistance they should have.

“This has impacted the general food security of households,” a WFP official in Kampala said.

WFP's tools to measure refugees' needs and vulnerabilities, such as the Vulnerability and Essential Needs Analysis or Individual Profiling Exercise, were not designed to carry out a process like prioritization.⁵⁸

“We could have done better data collection,” a WFP official acknowledged.

WFP officials said they were hopeful that other interventions would be able to allow refugees to become more self-reliant, moving from one vulnerability category to the next and eventually off assistance altogether.

Refugees and RLOs have said that WFP prioritization was a disaster for thousands of refugees, resulting in crime, child marriage, prostitution, sexual abuse, and children dropping out of school with parents unable to pay for school fees.⁵⁹

“This has actually created more issues than we had before,” said Jerry Lukendo Mbokani of the Refugee-Led Organization Network of Uganda. “Becoming self-reliant is a process. You don't just wake up and become self-reliant.”

Self-Reliance

Many interventions to support refugees in their countries of asylum or resettlement are aimed at building self-reliance, which involves individuals, households, and communities becoming better equipped to meet their essential needs independent of outside aid. Self-reliance is part of a larger global movement promoted by UNHCR since the 1980s to make refugee populations more active participants in development and less dependent on humanitarian assistance.⁶⁰

Self-reliance is now an essential part of the Uganda refugee response—although its presence in government policy goes back to at least 1999.⁶¹ “Resilience and self-reliance” is one of the main pillars of Uganda’s CRRF strategy, which was adopted in 2017. Under the CRRF, Uganda wants to promote development interventions that allow refugees and host communities to be self-reliant through sustainable livelihood initiatives, enhanced service delivery, and more resilient institutions and skill development programming so communities can cope with future shocks.⁶²

When it co-convened the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, Uganda focused its first thematic area of its pledges on increasing resilience and self-reliance. Uganda will strive to create at least 300,000 economic opportunities for refugees and host communities by 2027 through improved agricultural production, private-sector investments, skills training, and job creation.⁶³

However, the self-reliance part of Uganda’s model has been increasingly stretched thin with the rate of arrivals and declining international support for the response. Work opportunities remain limited in settlements with subsistence farming as the only, yet insufficient, means of self-reliance for many refugees.⁶⁴ “The land is not sufficient to produce food for one family,” an OPM official in Arua said of the government’s land allocations to individual families.



*In Uganda, refugees are allocated small plots of land in settlements, such as this plot in Rhino Camp refugee settlement.
(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)*

Climate Change

In the context of a high-needs, under-funded refugee and humanitarian response, climate change is exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and making life more difficult for Uganda's refugee population and host communities.

Wet seasons inundate homes and gardens while dry seasons scorch crops— and both are becoming more extreme and unpredictable from climate change. The World Food Programme warns that climate change combined with environmental degradation—such as deforestation—could stoke tensions between refugees and host communities as the availability of cultivable land dwindles.⁶⁵

Refugees in both Kyaka II and Rhino Camp refugee settlements said climate-related events like rainstorms and drought conditions make subsistence agriculture more difficult. Refugees in Rhino Camp in particular said the area's rocky soil and arid climate shorten the growing season significantly, putting strain on families with dwindling support through food rations.

Humanitarian actors across the response are prioritizing interventions that are adaptive to the changing climate, such as agroforestry, climate-smart agriculture, improved early warning information, and more. Ugandan RLOs, such as Live in Green, play "a vital role in addressing issues around climate change affecting refugee hosting communities."⁶⁶

Uganda's least food-secure region is Karamoja, the far northeastern corner of the country bordering Kenya.⁶⁷ While it is not a refugee-hosting area, Karamoja is of grave concern to humanitarians due to its deep poverty, extreme rates of food insecurity, and its levels of climate-related risk.



The landscape in Rhino Camp refugee settlement is semi-arid and rocky,⁶⁸ which makes subsistence agriculture more difficult. (Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)

Sanitary Pads

USCRI research in Kenya's Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps last year found that dwindling resources had negatively impacted access to menstrual hygiene materials for refugee women and girls.⁶⁹ Poor sanitation facilities in the camps and ongoing stigma and discrimination related to menstruation have created various negative outcomes for refugee girls, including serious infections and dropping out of school.

In key informant interviews and focus group discussions in June 2024, refugees and RLOs told USCRI that access to menstrual hygiene materials is also a challenge in refugee settlements in Uganda. Multiple RLOs discussed how a lack of menstrual hygiene support can cause girls to drop out of school.

"It is a risk that we are going to lose many of our girls," said a Rhino Camp focus group discussion participant.

Some RLOs, Ugandan NGOs, and international NGOs provide sanitary pads to refugees or provide skills training on sewing and making reusable sanitary pads. An improved water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) situation in Uganda compared to Kenya's refugee camps means that reusable sanitary pads appear to be more common than in Kenya.

Ayoo Irene Hellen, an African Youth Action Network community engagement lead, said that refugee children in Kyaka II noted continued concerns about accessing these supplies. "Young girls, in particular, are struggling to afford menstrual pads and washing soap," she said. "Many of these girls live with their fathers and, in our African culture, it is often considered inappropriate for girls to ask their fathers for such things."

RLOs, particularly in the Kyaka II focus group discussion, noted that new interventions to improve access to menstrual hygiene materials should be community-based processes that meaningfully include RLOs.

Support for Host Communities

Low-income and middle-income countries host a disproportionately large share of the world's displaced populations—both by their population size and the resources they have.⁷⁰ In many protracted crises, refugees live in settlement or camp settings on the margins of these hosting states, such as Rohingya refugees in Eastern Bangladesh, Syrian refugees in southern Türkiye, or South Sudanese refugees in northern Kenya's Turkana County. Refugee camps and settlements, "almost by definition, are located in peripheral, marginalized areas with poor connectivity and infrastructure."⁷¹ At times, local host communities can be just as poor and marginalized as refugees themselves, if not more so—with real or perceived disparities in assistance and government support creating tension or even violence between the two groups.⁷²

This dynamic also plays out in the Ugandan context. Uganda's refugee-hosting districts are concentrated in the southwest and the West Nile regions—far from the center of economic and political power in Kampala. "The underlying poverty and vulnerability of refugees and their hosts, their limited resilience to shocks, and insufficient viable economic opportunities contribute to often higher poverty levels in refugee-hosting areas, which are often remote and less developed," according to a Uganda CRRF roadmap document.⁷³

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the Uganda refugee response is characterized by support for host communities of Ugandan nationals. This focus on host community support is embedded throughout the response—from the government's pledges at the Global Refugee Forum to the ways that humanitarian and developmental aid is delivered on the ground in Uganda.

The refugee response follows a 30:70 or 70:30 principle from Ugandan government policy—where 30 percent of all assistance should benefit the host community when feasible.⁷⁴ This government policy means that, in general, 30 percent of a project's deliverables should benefit members of the host community who are not refugees. Under the 70:30 rule, money spent on these projects should also reflect the input and needs of the local host community.⁷⁵ It also means that humanitarian and development projects can be routed through district plans to ensure that both refugees and host communities benefit from new infrastructure, like roads or schools. "They share almost everything," an Oxfam official in Arua said, referring to refugees and host communities. "We don't have borders."

This rule is meant to ensure equity and social cohesion within refugee-hosting areas, which are resource-strapped regions that are hosting thousands and even hundreds of thousands of refugees. “We are supposed to support the host communities so there is peaceful coexistence,” an OPM official in Arua said.

Research suggests that this approach has largely paid off: Uganda’s open-door approach to refugee influxes has not sparked a backlash from Ugandan nationals in host communities because these communities can benefit from improved service delivery.⁷⁶ RLOs and others described frequent interactions with host community representatives and structures, characterizing refugee-host community relations as generally positive.



*A host community residence outside of Rhino Camp refugee settlement.
(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)*

Localization

In 2016, aid organizations and major donor countries committed to the greater localization of humanitarian responses across the world through the Grand Bargain. Signatories pledged that at least 25 percent of humanitarian funding should go directly to local and national organizations by 2020.⁷⁷

While some progress has been made on the flexibility of funding and other areas, the 25 percent target has become an “uncomfortable disappointment” for the Grand Bargain’s signatories.⁷⁸ In 2022, only 1.2 percent of total international humanitarian assistance was provided directly to local and national organizations—a “disappointing” showing given the commitments to support greater local humanitarian leadership.⁷⁹

Uganda’s refugee response has also traditionally centered the government and international organizations over local and national actors—with only 8 percent of international humanitarian assistance going to local and national organizations in 2017, a year of significant needs to respond to an influx of South Sudanese refugees.⁸⁰

Ugandan government policy continues to push forward an agenda of localization on several different fronts. The secretariat of the CRRF is developing a plan to implement localization across the refugee response. “Local stakeholders are usually the first responders to refugee influxes and other disasters,” according to a CRRF strategic direction document. “To sustain the refugee response, advancing the localization agenda will be critical.”⁸¹

At the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, the government of Uganda pledged to include localization provisions in its strategies and frameworks across the refugee response “to strengthen the role of national and local responders and gradually achieve the Grand Bargain commitments.”⁸² Uganda plans to require the integration of localization into international non-government organization plans, including processes to build the institutional capacity of local actors.

Many international, national, and local NGOs in the Uganda response are also part of the Charter for Change working group in Uganda, which provides a space for dialogue on localization.⁸³ International humanitarian actors say they still face barriers for carrying out localization, including donor restrictions and reluctance to grant directly to national, local, and refugee-led organizations; low ceilings on budgets for organizations to allocate to partners; short-term funding cycles; and insufficient budgets to build capacity for local organizations, according to the Humanitarian International NGO Forum of Uganda.

Refugee-Led Organizations

Refugee-led organizations in Uganda take many shapes and forms, as they vary in size, scope, services, mission, location, and other factors. RLOs in Uganda can include “any organization, association, coalition, formal or informal network, faith-based group or initiative that is led by refugees or asylum seekers in urban, rural, camp, and settlement settings.”⁸⁴

RLOs often form in response to a gap within the larger refugee response. For example, African Youth Action Network started in 2015 to address a gap in subsistence and self-reliance programming. Hodari Foundation formed to provide services for unaccompanied minors and youth in Kyaka II. Somali Youth Action Organization was created to address gaps in the response serving Somali refugees in urban settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an inflection point for RLOs in Uganda. With movement restrictions in place and many international NGOs sending staff home, RLOs became the first—and, in some cases, only—responders. Across Uganda, they provided COVID-19 measures, such as personal protective equipment or community education. RLOs also responded to other challenges that spiked during the pandemic, such as rates of domestic violence and psychosocial distress.

“The RLOS were able to respond to all of the crises that came out of that,” said an official with Cohere, which manages a platform to elevate the profiles of RLOs.

Despite their integral role in the COVID-19 response, RLOs are still viewed skeptically in some circles. Some donors and implementing partners think investing in RLOs is riskier than investing in large international organizations, believing RLOs are less able to manage grants as responsibly or deliver programs as effectively as international NGOs.⁸⁵

When RLOs lack internal policies and procedures, donors worry about providing “funds they can’t account for,” a UNHCR official in Arua said. UNHCR officials in Kyaka II said that RLOs lack capacity on developing project proposals, mobilizing resources, and financial monitoring and reporting.

Some literature also suggests RLOs are not necessarily objective actors and do not maintain the strict sense of impartiality and neutrality that humanitarians should follow. “RLOs are not immune from becoming biased, or pursuing the narrow interests of their own communities,” according to a German Institute of Development and Sustainability policy brief. “Since they are community-based, they can also at times replicate existing biases within an ethnic or national community.”⁸⁶

RLOs disagree with the characterizations and perceptions of their organizations. In key informant interviews and focus group discussions, RLOs say that larger non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emphasize the vulnerabilities of RLOs because they view RLOs as competition for ever-scarcer funding. “They think we have no capacity,” said a member of the Kyaka II Refugee Led Organization Network.

“That mindset is the only thing killing us,” added a Rhino Camp focus group discussion participant.

RLOs believe that concerns about their capacity are self-serving and self-reinforcing. RLOs say that international organizations assume that RLOs cannot manage large, complicated projects. Without financing or access to grants, RLOs then have problems with capacity building—which prevents them from being more competitive for projects.

“RLOs can and will create sustainable solutions if... empowered,” said a Kyaka II focus group discussion participant.

At a time when accountability to affected populations is an important objective in humanitarian responses,⁸⁷ RLOs note they are perhaps the most accountable actors because they draw directly from members of the displaced community.

RLOs also take umbrage with the perception they are not cost-effective because their processes have not been formalized. They argue they are much more cost-effective than NGO interventions that may pay international-scale salaries. “RLOs are very cost-effective because of staff being based here,” said Janvier Hafasha, Hodari Foundation’s founder.

Services and Activities

RLOs in Kyaka II, Rhino Camp, and Kampala discussed the variety of their services and support to refugee and host communities. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a summary of some of the most important efforts RLOs lead in the refugee response.

Livelihoods and Skill Development

Livelihood programming is a key priority for RLOs in both urban and rural settings—given low levels of income, declining humanitarian aid including food rations, and cost-of-living increases.⁸⁸

Livelihood programs championed by RLOs are often cross-cutting ventures—activities that not only provide wages for refugees but also achieve some other outcome. For example, many RLOs in settlements work on climate-smart agriculture, which also promotes sustainability and improves food security for refugees. WFP officials noted mushroom farming has grown in popularity because it’s “easy to do [and] doesn’t take a lot of land.”



Hodari Foundation livelihoods officer Edrick Bwambale discusses mushroom cultivation efforts in Kyaka II refugee settlement. (Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)

RLOs also manage cash-for-work projects to boost refugee employment while addressing community needs. Cash-for-work interventions try to achieve dual objectives of providing income for short-term work and building or rehabilitating community assets or infrastructure.⁸⁹

In USCRI's visit to Rhino Camp refugee settlement, YSAT project manager Atama Albert said cash-for-work projects target needs that refugees identify in community engagement meetings, such as a new latrine under construction in the Ocea zone of the settlement. During USCRI's visit, a new road connecting the Ocea and Eden zones of Rhino Camp was also under construction. Refugees were receiving payments for helping build the road, which would shorten the time to get to Ocea from Eden—a zone of Rhino Camp with less infrastructure.



*A latrine under construction in Rhino Camp's Ocea zone through a cash-for-work project.
(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)*

RLOs such as African Youth Action Network (AYAN) provide livelihood support in the form of skills training and business development. AYAN's programming has helped refugees turn informal kiosks into more formal ventures across a wide variety of enterprises such as retail, perfume, meat roasting, fruit stands, salons, pesticides, and more.

RLOs believe support to refugee-owned businesses will not only benefit refugee business owners, but other refugees if these businesses are able to expand. "If they have a sustainable business, then they can create jobs for other refugees," said Bacokorana Patrick Kanyeihamba, a program lead with AYAN.

Support to Vulnerable Groups

Many refugee-led organizations tailor their services to particular groups of refugees who are either marginalized or whose needs are not met in the larger refugee response.

Hodari Foundation, for example, provides support for unaccompanied minors and orphans in Kyaka II refugee settlement. Hodari provides warm meals to children every week and hosts activities such as art therapy, dancing, and spiritual education. They also work with particularly vulnerable children, such as those with albinism.



*An acrobatics performance at Hodari Foundation's space in Kyaka II refugee settlement.
(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)*

Many of the RLOs in the Kampala focus group discussion were formed to champion specific groups of refugees who face barriers to inclusion. The Association of Refugees with Disabilities formed to advocate for refugees with disabilities—promoting income-generating activities and inclusion of refugees with disabilities in government plans for health facilities and schools. “We need learners with disabilities to feel free in the same classes as abled learners,” ARD director Muombamungu James said.

Two leaders in the Somali Youth Action Organization, Ismail Ibrahim Mohamed and Abdullah Mohamed, discussed how their group was formed to provide opportunities for “forgotten Somali youth.” SYAN provides early child development, English-language training, and other support to Somali refugees.

Sudanese refugee Dawla Hussein said her RLO, Kandaakiat Organization for Women Empowerment and Development, saw a gap in assistance to Arabic-speaking refugee women due to language barriers. The group provides livelihood support, trainings, and other assistance.

Ariane Dora Niteka is a doctor and a refugee from Burundi. Her organization, Bridge of Solidarity, provides medical care to refugees, particularly those with chronic health conditions like epilepsy and cerebral palsy. Many refugees with chronic health conditions face challenges such as lack of access to care. “To get daily medicine, it’s a huge challenge for refugees,” she said.

Peacebuilding and Community Education

Social cohesion among refugee populations, as well as host communities, can be delicate in displacement or post-conflict contexts.⁹⁰

RLOs are active in peacebuilding initiatives in the Ugandan response, particularly with regards to South Sudanese refugees. In fact, many of the larger RLOs began as peacebuilding initiatives, such as AYAN and YSAT. “Refugees have done more to give peace amongst themselves,” said a Rhino Camp focus group discussion participant.



A community sensitization event hosted by Youth for Peace Initiative on the issue of stray animals. (Photo provided by Youth for Peace Initiative director Remo Emmanuel)

RLOs play a key role in spreading messages about issues that can cause community friction. In Rhino Camp, stray animals like goats can roam around and destroy neighbors’ crops—which can cause conflict between refugees or between refugees and host communities. RLOs such as YSAT and the Youth for Peace Initiative perform community sensitization trainings and outreach to spread the word about rules and fines for leaving goats untethered.

Other community events cover drug abuse, sexual and reproductive health, land use, financial literacy, and more. Implementing partners often rely on RLOs to communicate messages to beneficiaries, or to learn about community dynamics from RLOs—in part because they can cut through language barriers and are trusted by refugee communities. “They have the context at their fingertips,” an Oxfam official in Arua said. “They know their people and they know the needs of their people.”

Advocacy

Given their experience and expertise, RLOs and refugee-led networks in Uganda are some of the best advocates for “refugee-centered and rights-based solutions” to influence decision-makers at the local, national, regional, and international levels.⁹¹

Some RLO advocacy is specific to their constituencies, such as the Association of Refugees with Disabilities advocating for inclusive policies and facilities for refugees with disabilities. Other RLO advocacy is more targeted toward easing the administrative and operational burdens of RLOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) trying to operate in Uganda.

RLOs and refugee leaders also participate in international advocacy on the Global Compact on Refugees and the meaningful participation of refugees. For example, John Jal Dak of Youth Social Advocacy Team serves as a member of UNHCR’s Global Advisory Board for Organizations led by Displaced People.

Advocacy can be a challenge for RLOs (as discussed in a subsequent section on meaningful refugee participation). “RLOs remain marginalized, particularly in government-led policy forums and spaces,” according to an Oxfam Uganda study on RLOs in West Nile. “Even the Refugee Engagement Forum and its taskforce (bringing together the Office of the Prime Minister, the CRRF Secretariat, UNHCR, and INGOs) appear to have had very little, if any, interaction with RLOs or refugee-led networks.”⁹²

Like other advocates, RLOs must balance advocacy that is critical and holds the government accountable while maintaining access to key stakeholders.

Challenges

RLOs face numerous challenges in delivering assistance as part of the refugee response in Uganda.

Registration

Refugee groups in Uganda face barriers in registering as non-governmental organizations or community-based organizations, which limits their opportunity to participate in coordination spaces or the refugee response more broadly.⁹³

Multiple RLOs described difficulties in formally registering their organizations with the government—a trend that matches findings in other research.⁹⁴ They described securing preliminary approvals online, but being told in-person that approvals never went through.

YSAT’s John Jal Dak said RLOs often find that different registration agencies within the Ugandan government don’t talk to each other. He said YSAT’s registration took more than a year and a half. “We had a breakthrough because of our network and our connections,” he said.

Jerry Lukendo Mbokani, the director of the Refugee Led Organization Network of Uganda, said these issues stem from a discrepancy between the Refugee Law of 2006 and a separate law in 2016 that regulates non-governmental organization (NGO) registration.

The Refugee Law of 2006 affords refugees many of the rights of Ugandan nationals, including the freedom to form civil society groups. “Refugees should be given the right to associate the same way as a Ugandan,” he said. However, the 2016 NGO law essentially considers refugees as foreigners instead of nationals—which sets up a host of other steps for organizations to formally register.

With the Ugandan government requiring organizations in the refugee response to have a memorandum of understanding with OPM, the hurdles to registration can block everything from partnerships with NGOs to unlocking funding.

“If you are not registered, you do not have the grounds to do what you do,” said an RLO leader with Global Rehabilitation and Transformation Response during the Rhino Camp focus group discussion.

Funding, Internal Capacity

RLOs across refugee responses tend to be underfunded compared to larger international non-governmental organizations.⁹⁵ Funding that does trickle to RLOs can be narrow, short-term, and “tokenistic,” meant to play up the local credentials of a project despite the fact it is largely carried out by an international organization. RLOs “tend to be instrumentalized as niche ‘service providers’ tasked with implementing narrow project activities, rather than as equal partners capable of co-designing programs,” according to a major study on RLOs.⁹⁶

Multiple RLOs in Uganda identified the lack of funding as their core challenge, expressing frustration about the attitudes of NGOs and the UN toward the capacity of RLOs. Funding gaps prevent RLOs from expanding their services, securing supplies, and becoming more established organizations. RLOs feel they have the interventions and projects to improve conditions for their communities, but that they do not have the resources to carry them out. “Whatever idea you have, you need funds,” said Aider Refugee Initiative’s Mustaf Abdilhafid in the Kampala focus group discussion.

Even larger RLOs with better access to funding continue to face uneven partnerships. YSAT staff described projects where an NGO would want to bring them on board with nearly the entire project design already complete. Tomorrow Vijana executive director Kubana Alexis discussed several proposals from international NGOs that were heavily weighted in favor of their organizations, which would have required significant RLO staff time for only a small fraction of the project budget.

Because RLOs often start as small, volunteer outfits, they may not initially have internal procedures set in place, such as risk management, internal financial controls, human resources policies, and monitoring and evaluation systems. The lack of these systems may discourage skeptical donors from investing and partnering with RLOs. However, this dynamic quickly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—RLOs are not funded because they have not built up their internal capacity, systems, and structures, but RLOs are unable to more successfully expand that capacity because they are not sufficiently funded.

Larger RLOs and certain efforts like Cohere’s Reframe platform are beginning to elevate the profile of smaller RLOs and channel funds directly to these organizations.

Infrastructure

Multiple RLOs discussed infrastructure challenges as a constraining factor for their activities. At times, these issues stem from a lack of infrastructure at the settlement level. Other times, these issues originate from the larger issues of funding and capacity building—like the inability to have a space of their own.

Multiple RLOs mentioned the difficulties of delivering services in zones with less developed infrastructure. A lack of connectivity and other basic necessities can make hosting activities like workshops or community outreach events difficult, according to focus group discussion participants. “How do I conduct a training without water?” one RLO in Rhino Camp asked.

In Kyaka II, Youth Initiative for Development in Africa staff said their school’s small library and the lack of a fence hurts learning outcomes and endangers children, respectively.

By contrast, an infusion of support for infrastructure can be game-changing. Kyaka II Refugee Led Organization Network members described the impact of securing their own space to host community events and discussions.



Kyaka II Refugee Led Organization Network’s new office and meeting space in Kyaka II.

(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)

Lack of Information, Meaningful Participation

RLOs, particularly in the Rhino Camp focus group discussion, said lack of information was a significant challenge. From WFP prioritization to third-country resettlement, RLOs feel they are not provided adequate information to respond to questions from beneficiaries.

RLOs and RLO networks told USCRI that further work needs to be done to meaningfully include refugees and refugee-led organizations in formal processes and forums.

RELON's Jerry Lukendo Mbokani said the Refugee Engagement Forum, Uganda's formal structure for refugee input within the CRRF structure, features "political leadership" from local Refugee Welfare Councils, rather than the more activist mindset of RLOs that is geared toward advocacy and program delivery. Thus, RLOs do not feel "recognized or represented" at the Refugee Engagement Forum and that meaningful refugee participation is still "far away" from being realized.

"We are absent in so many conversations," he said. "Issues of refugees are being discussed without refugees at the table."

Numerous RLO leaders said they faced obstacles representing themselves or their organizations in international forums, ranging from regional gatherings in Kenya or Tanzania to international events such as the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, Switzerland. Many refugee leaders in Uganda were denied visas by Switzerland to attend the GRF last December. Refugee leaders view these visa denials as arbitrary—and suspect that authorities think refugee leaders granted visas will seek to stay in these countries rather than return home at the end of these forums.

"The next four years of your life is being determined in Geneva and you're not there," YSAT's John Jal Dak said.



*The 2023 Global Refugee Forum at the Palexpo in Geneva, Switzerland.
(Photo by USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar)*

Recommendations

To improve the refugee response in Uganda and to support the invaluable contributions of refugee-led organizations within it, USCRI recommends:

Increased donor support for the Uganda refugee and humanitarian response

Donors' investment in the Uganda refugee response should match the scale of the need and the importance of Uganda as a regional and international model for a progressive, rights-based response to forced displacement. Donors must commit to funding levels and strategies that reflect long-term burden sharing and support for Uganda's implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.

Flexible, multi-year funding to refugee-led organizations that builds RLO capacity and meaningfully includes RLOs in program development, design, and implementation

In pursuit of the goals of the Grand Bargain, direct funding in the Uganda refugee response toward refugee-led and community-based organizations should be maximized.

Funding partnerships with more nascent RLOs should be paired with capacity building efforts to improve their internal procedures, to boost their profiles, to network their activities, and to connect them with further funding opportunities.

NGO partnerships with local actors must not be in name-only and on the back end of an intervention. In partnerships, RLOs should be fully involved in program and project development, design, implementation, and evaluation.

Eased restrictions on RLO registration in Uganda

The government of Uganda should work with refugee-led organizations, community-based organizations, and others to smooth and simplify the registration process for local actors in the Uganda refugee response. Changes to the registration and certification process should be then proactively communicated to RLOs and RLO networks.

Boosting refugee access to legal aid and to assistance in urban settings

Despite the rights afforded to refugees under Ugandan law, many refugees are not aware or familiar with their rights, freedoms, and protections in Uganda. The current legal assistance landscape in Uganda is a patchwork of various non-state providers, who are unable to meet widespread needs for assistance in legal proceedings and other justice mechanisms.

Uganda should adopt a national legal aid scheme that provides accessible legal services to those who need it, particularly refugee and asylum-seeker populations.

The government of Uganda and other actors must work to address another gap: urban refugees. Ugandan refugee policy should be reformed to facilitate refugee registration in secondary cities like Arua, ease access to labor markets, and permit humanitarian assistance for refugee populations in secondary cities.

Local authorities in Kampala should work with RLOs on establishing local structures and lines of communication for refugees in Kampala, the largest host of urban refugees in Uganda.

Steps to unlock refugee potential on financial inclusion, education, and employment

Actors across the refugee response should examine how barriers and obstacles to opportunities for refugees can be removed in the areas of financial inclusion, education, and employment.

Know-your-customer and customer due diligence processes to verify refugee identity can be a barrier for refugees accessing remittances and other formal financial services.⁹⁷ OPM and financial service providers should explore making identity verification processes more efficient, in line with the country's National Financial Inclusion Strategy.⁹⁸ The government should work with banks and other institutions on simplifying bank registration processes for refugees and increasing access to financial services for those who don't have a refugee ID card or an OPM-issued attestation document.⁹⁹

Humanitarian actors should explore education programs that expand access to secondary school and continuing education opportunities for older Ugandans—as barriers to post-primary education were a frequent concern in the focus group discussions of this research.

NGOs should proactively explore how to employ more refugees across their organizations and in positions outside of their traditional roles as translators or community liaisons. Certification authorities should examine and reduce obstacles for refugees who obtained professional degrees in other countries to get recertified in Uganda. “As we are bringing refugees to the table, let us respect their capacity,” said a Kyaka II Refugee Led Organization Network leader.

Removal of barriers to refugee participation at the Global Refugee Forum and other spaces

Travel issues such as visa denials, residency and legal restrictions, and delayed invitations have undermined progress to meaningfully include refugee representatives in important policy spaces such as the Global Refugee Forum.¹⁰⁰ Host and convening countries of large regional, multilateral, and international events must proactively work with their customs and immigration authorities to examine and address barriers to entry and admission for refugee representatives ahead of their respective forums.

In lieu of these improvements, convenors of regional, multilateral, and international forums on refugee and displacement issues should explore holding these events in more travel- and visa-friendly locations.

In the domestic space, donor meetings and humanitarian coordination meetings in Uganda should be made more accessible to refugee-led organizations and community-based organizations.

Conclusion

Hundreds of thousands of people have found refuge in Uganda from carnage in South Sudan, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other nations and regions in crisis. But durable solutions to the displacement that upended their lives are elusive for most of the refugee population in Uganda.

Uganda has pledged to continue its support for the regional processes that may one day bring peace and stability to South Sudan and eastern DRC—allowing refugees to voluntarily return there. But most recognize those two crises are unlikely to ease significantly anytime soon, at least not enough for returns on a wide scale. “We don’t see repatriation coming soon,” said one OPM official.

Third-country resettlement can offer a new life to refugees in the United States or Canada—but only for a small fraction of the country’s 1.6 million refugees.

Local integration remains the most likely durable solution. Yet, the road to self-reliance in Uganda is a long one—with dwindling international support, sparse economic opportunities, mounting pressures on allocated land, and other challenges. Questions of integrating refugees into Uganda permanently, through naturalization or citizenship, are sensitive topics for officials.

Humanitarian actors hope that the situation in Uganda will improve, or at least not deteriorate further. But they are wearily watching the outcome of elections in South Sudan later this year and whether instability and uncertainty around the elections will prompt more arrivals into Uganda. There is also an air of unease about Uganda’s own internal stability and how long the status quo can be maintained for a government in power since 1986. “We’ve been receiving refugees for a long time,” said a panelist at a Humanitarian International NGO Forum scenario planning workshop. “But it’s also possible that we can supply refugees to other places.”

For the praise the “Uganda model” has received, actors in the refugee response acknowledge the Republic of Uganda’s refugee-friendly policies are far from assured, considering the pressure that deepening climate change, increasing arrivals, and diminishing support have created. “The model is more fragile than it has been,” said an international NGO leader based in Kampala.

There is a wide gap between the needs of displaced populations in the Great Lakes region and the available support. Both the government of Uganda and refugee-led organizations in Uganda have risen to try to fill this gap in their context at nearly every turn, from the South Sudanese influx of 2016 and 2017 to the needs of the COVID-19 pandemic. But these frontline actors risk being left behind by an international community unwilling to take on its equitable share of responsibilities in line with the goals of the Grand Bargain and the Global Compact on Refugees.

Donors, governments, and others must rise to the challenge of cross-border displacement in the Great Lakes by elevating locally-driven or refugee-driven solutions and champions that are delivering support where it is needed the most. Through equitable responsibility sharing and meaningful refugee participation, the Uganda refugee response can truly deliver on its potential to provide durable solutions to refugees and to serve as a model for the region and the world to turn back the rising tide of forced displacement.

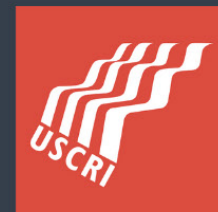
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The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), established in 1911, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization dedicated to addressing the needs and rights of refugees and immigrants.

This report is part of USCRI's ongoing commitment to serving the needs of refugees globally.

USCRI advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants both nationally and globally, helping to drive policies, practices, and law.

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