

POLICY BRIEFING 1

IMPROVING REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING



“When they volunteer during the food distribution assistance, they earn some little money through this volunteering work.”

Photo and quote by young male participant from Democratic Republic of Congo (Rwamwanja refugee settlement)

REFUGEE VOLUNTEERING, LIVELIHOODS & WORK

Volunteering supports young refugees’ strategies for livelihoods and work by providing an income, but can lead to exploitation and inequality.

Forced displacement is one of the most complex issues of the 21st century, and refugees adopt various coping strategies to deal with challenges. Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda (RYVU) research reveals how volunteering intersects with refugee livelihoods, work and inequalities in diverse and often contradictory ways. The research dataset indicates that 70% of young refugees in Uganda participate in some form of volunteering, and that half of those currently volunteering come from families whose incomes fall below the international poverty line. Refugee volunteering can take many forms, which can be unpaid (e.g. everyday peer-to-peer support in their communities) or for a per diem or other incentive (e.g. programmed activities managed by organisations). There are particular implications when refugees are involved in activities that provide regular financial compensation for volunteering, such as opportunities offered by international humanitarian and development agencies. The research also shows how volunteering is not only seen as one of a number of pathways to work, but also *as* work for many. This is particularly shaped by unequal patterns of remuneration for different types of volunteering and volunteers, including according to gender and location.

On the one hand, not everyone is able to access the most recognised and rewarded opportunities, meaning that volunteering can be exclusive. On the other hand, young refugees who do access such opportunities can inadvertently become dependent on volunteering for their livelihoods, meaning negative impacts of volunteering (such as their safety), or sudden changes in volunteering opportunities, can increase existing levels of insecurity. Policy-makers and organisations do not currently recognise these high levels of volunteer participation by young refugees nor acknowledge the significant but uneven ways it impacts their livelihoods. This research challenges existing thinking about who volunteers, why they do it, and how volunteer economies result from – and respond to – the lack of access to jobs and income for refugees. Improving the ways volunteering can contribute to refugee livelihoods requires action from policy-makers and organisations to ensure transparency and accountability, so that the volunteering label is not used to promote precarious and sometimes exploitative work.

Whilst the research highlights the agency and capabilities of young refugees to build lives and livelihoods, it also shows that volunteering should not be a smokescreen for the inequalities and exploitation they experience. In this policy briefing, we provide a set of recommendations on how policy-makers and humanitarian and development practitioners can support volunteering and prevent it from exacerbating precarity amongst refugee communities.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Over 100 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide in 2022 – a number which is predicted to rise further in the coming years. Uganda is one of the largest hosting countries for populations displaced across borders, home to over 1.5 million refugees, mostly aged under 24 years old. Socio-economic inequalities often exclude young refugees from formal schooling, opportunities to build their skills and access to sources of secure and reliable income. RYVU research shows high levels of refugee participation in diverse forms of volunteering, a practice increasingly identified with building skills and enhancing employability. However, research to date has tended to focus on international volunteers and the ‘gap year’, or volunteering experiences in Europe and North America. Limited research has investigated volunteering by vulnerable groups and individuals, particularly in the global South. While the practice is often associated with acts of kindness towards the less fortunate, evidence shows how volunteering is also used as a form of low-cost service delivery for states and organisations. At the same time, boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘volunteering’ are blurred with the emergence of complex volunteer economies, particularly when there are different levels of access and patterns of remuneration for volunteering. The RYVU project critically analyses the roles of volunteering in the lives of young refugees in Uganda, and the implications for their livelihood strategies. This contributes new knowledge of relevance to research and practice in humanitarian and development settings, providing a unique evidence base for academics and policy-makers to improve practice when it comes to volunteering amongst refugees.

WHAT WE DID

From 2019 to 2022, the Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda research project worked with refugees to capture their experiences of volunteering. This included a large-scale survey with young refugees, an online survey with employers, interviews and workshops with refugees, organisations who work with them and government representatives in four sites: Kampala city and the refugee settlements of Bidibidi, Nakivale and Rwamwanja. It also included a photovoice project, through which young refugee participants took photos and explained how they perceived volunteering (see examples in this briefing). Across these settings, the research team engaged with refugees, particularly youth aged 15-24 years, from the four main nationalities present in Uganda: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Somalia. Over the three years of research activities, the team worked closely with national and international partners, and participants engaged not only in data collection but also in co-analysis during policy-focused workshops. Importantly, the research was supported by local Youth Advisory Boards comprised of young refugees who shared their expertise and provided valuable guidance to the team throughout all project phases. The researchers also engaged these Boards and wider stakeholders to operationalise a definition of volunteering that reflected young refugees’ own ideas and experiences, rather than those of donors and global North scholars.

RYVU definition of volunteering: “Any time spent or expertise provided with the purpose of contributing to the refugee youth’s community or other communities. This can happen occasionally or regularly, through their own initiative or with organisations (such as community groups, NGOs or UN agencies), and it can be unpaid or for a per diem or other incentive.”



“This is showing some girls and boys who are volunteering in a hair salon ... so many youths were involved in that salon. Some volunteer with a pay, though it’s not that much payment”

Photo and quote by young female participant from South Sudan (Bidibidi refugee settlement)



3,131
SURVEY
RESPONDENTS



20
PHOTOVOICE
PARTICIPANTS



80
QUALITATIVE
INTERVIEWS



631
STAKEHOLDER
WORKSHOP
PARTICIPANTS

In total, the project involved over 3,800 participants, including young and adult refugees, employers, government officials, and staff from humanitarian and development agencies and community-based organisations.



RESEARCH FINDINGS & KEY INSIGHTS

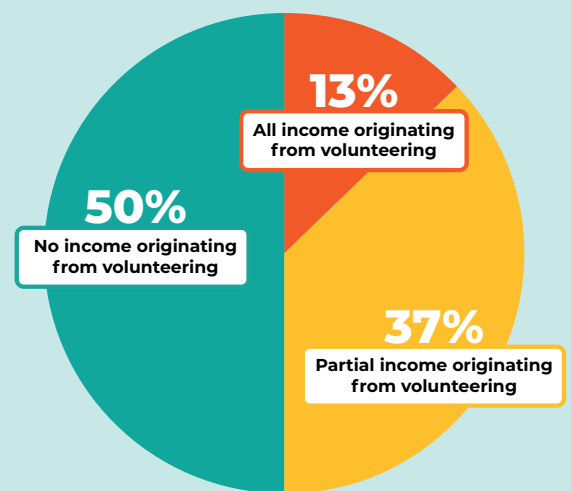
The research shows that volunteering is central to the livelihoods and coping strategies of refugees, most of whom are living on less than \$2.15 a day. Whilst such high levels of vulnerability do not prevent refugee youth from volunteering, there are important implications for understanding income generation through volunteering. Financial compensation for volunteering is often determined by donor timeframes and external agendas, particularly those of international humanitarian and development agencies. Despite the Ugandan refugee regime formally permitting refugees to work, the realities on the ground negatively affect the prospects of sustained refugee employment. In this context, volunteering is not only seen as a pathway to work, but also as work by many. Earning money and getting a job ranked highly amongst the main motivations for volunteering; and half of the young refugees currently volunteering reported earning some or all of their income through volunteer activities.

Humanitarian and development organisations tend to rely on volunteers to deliver their services and were perceived by stakeholder workshop participants as the main providers of volunteering opportunities for refugees. Because volunteering does not fit easily within a single programming area, it often falls between the gaps, receiving limited critical attention and often just assumed to be a good thing. However, diverse and disconnected institutional engagement of refugees as volunteers risks young refugees being exploited as a form of 'cheap labour', especially when the terms and conditions for volunteering are unclear and opportunities do not take into account volunteers' own needs and expectations. This also leads to the undermining of volunteer activities that are not financially rewarded, inadvertently creating competitive economies that side-line some volunteers and forms of volunteering.

The evidence generated by this research calls for stakeholders working with volunteers to enhance support mechanisms and policy frameworks to increase transparency and avoid exploitation of refugee volunteers.

“...people are looking at [volunteering] as an opportunity to gain experience, to earn income, an opportunity to get even skills, training ... The youth who are unemployed are ones who are mainly targeted by these volunteer schemes and the main objective ideally would really be to empower them, help them improve on their skills so that they can be deployed later on when there are opportunities for them to access wage payment services. So ... I really look at it as another form of employment for the youth.”

Male Government Official (Kampala city)



 **50%**

of respondents earn some or all of their income through volunteering.



“This [volunteering] is her source of income, according to her, this is the activity that takes her kids at school, that looks after them, that pays her rent.”

Photo and quote by young female participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kampala city)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research identified two main areas where stakeholders need to work together and as actors in their own right. First, recognising volunteering as a critical part of the livelihood strategies of young refugees and, with that, the responsibilities that come from engaging refugees as volunteers. Second, ensuring that the volunteering label is not used to avoid responsibility in terms of the risks of exploitation and exacerbating vulnerabilities in this process. This calls for the following action steps, both within Uganda and in other national contexts engaging refugees as volunteers:

Volunteer-involving organisations – including national and international humanitarian and development agencies, the private sector, and community-based organisations – should prioritise:

- Setting transparent terms over remuneration and avoiding discrimination and uneven rewards, both between different refugees, and between refugees and national volunteers.
- Ensuring that promises made to recruit refugee volunteers are realistic and can be fulfilled to avoid exploitation.

Governments should prioritise:

- Ensuring there is a national volunteering policy framework that recognises workforce, community and individual needs, and prioritises transparency, accountability and equality in the promotion, recruitment and management of volunteering, including amongst refugee communities.
- Implementing accountability systems for organisations to report on fair and inclusive conditions for volunteering, including the provision of adequate insurance, equipment and protection for volunteers.

All relevant stakeholders should work together to:

- Create inclusive feedback mechanisms that enable young refugees to shape decision-making around the development and management of volunteering.
- Avoid sudden negative changes to volunteer opportunities that can worsen inequalities given its roles in livelihood strategies, particularly amongst refugees.
- Ensure there is an adequate evidence base on the roles and impacts of volunteering on refugee lives and livelihoods to support policy and practice that better reflect the needs and experiences of refugee communities.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & CONTACT DETAILS

To access further data and insight from the RYVU project, including materials related to this briefing, visit www.ryvu.org. On the website, you can find a range of resources to explore and download, including:

- Further policy briefings
- Academic publications
- Interactive games for exploring project findings and their implications for policy and practice
- An exhibition of photographs taken by young refugees documenting their volunteering experiences

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“As an impact of volunteering, the lady managed to create a small retailing business that with time went on expanding to this level.”

Photo and quote by young male participant from Burundi (Nakivale refugee settlement)

RESEARCH FUNDERS:



RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS:

