

POLICY BRIEFING 2

ENHANCING THE IMPACTS OF VOLUNTEERING ON REFUGEE SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY



“The trainer is in a training room giving young volunteers data collection skills and they were all looking active, ready to work. It means that the youth are eager and ready to work when given opportunities.”

Photo and quote by young female participant from Burundi (Rwamwanja refugee settlement)

VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION, SKILLS & EMPLOYABILITY

Refugee youth can develop skills through volunteering, but refugees face barriers to participation in volunteering that need to be addressed.

Enhancing the skills and employability of young people affected by forced displacement is critical not only to their own future prospects, but to the long-term stability and development of their host communities. Volunteering is often associated with developing skills, especially in contexts of high youth unemployment rates. Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda (RYVU) research shows how the relationship between volunteering, skills acquisition and employability is more complex than often assumed. It also shows that approaches from the global North cannot simply be transplanted to settings such as Uganda, where volunteering may take different forms and where many young people struggle to secure their livelihoods. The research dataset shows that young refugees can develop skills and employability through volunteering, but this is not guaranteed. While refugees may gain *skills from* volunteering, they often need particular *skills to* access the volunteering opportunities that promise the greatest rewards.

This research challenges existing thinking by evidencing how:

- Refugees often require skills and proof of those skills in order to be able to volunteer, which means promoting it as a pathway to skills development can be misleading;
- Skills that are developed from volunteering will not necessarily enhance employability due to the particular challenges faced by young refugees (e.g. certification, mobility, discrimination);
- Volunteering can be a form of employment in itself, meaning participation in it is as much about present livelihood challenges as it is about future potential work.

Improving the ways participation in volunteering can enhance skills acquisition and employability and fulfilling the promises on which it is often promoted requires action from policy-makers and organisations. This is to ensure there is transparency and accountability in volunteer management, and honesty on the skills and employability being promised to refugee volunteers.

Whilst the research highlights the agency and capabilities of young refugees to build lives and livelihoods, it also shows that the volunteering label should not be used to obscure their lack of access to education, jobs and income. In this policy briefing, we provide a set of recommendations on how policy-makers and humanitarian and development practitioners can enhance the impacts of volunteering on refugee skills & employability and promote fairer practices for recruiting, training and recognising their volunteer activity.



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. Socioeconomic 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 have 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, combining an assumption that skills development is inherent in volunteering with a lack of wider support for refugees’ employability leads to volunteering being increasingly promoted as a convenient strategy for refugees’ skills acquisition. However, the challenges faced by refugees make their skills development through volunteering particularly complex. The RYVU project critically analyses the roles of volunteering in the lives of young refugees in Uganda, and its impacts on employability and skills acquisition. 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.”

High rates of volunteer engagement among young refugees:



are currently volunteering.

Half of the current volunteers are from households earning less than **100,000 UGX** [28 USD] per month.

“In the refugee settlement they already know that volunteering is one of the stepping-stones towards a more gainful employment and so they [the family and community members] keep pushing their youth to be around places where there are volunteering opportunities because they think maybe one day they will be lucky to be picked up to gain full employment.”

Male staff, International NGO (Kampala city)



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 main types of skills that young refugees use in their volunteering activities are community engagement skills, translation, marketing, agricultural and teaching skills. This research identified that learning or gaining new skills ranked highly amongst the motivations for refugee youth to volunteer. Their volunteering tends to be seen as a 'win-win' situation, providing both skills acquisition for young refugees and service-delivery for humanitarian and development actors. But the constraints on refugees' choices in relation to both volunteering and employability is often then ignored. Policy-makers and organisations do not currently address this complexity and risk treating volunteering as a form of 'low-cost' Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

In this context, the presumed linear relationship between volunteering, skills and employment needs revisiting. Data shows that skills acquisition through volunteering is not guaranteed for refugees – it varies across individual volunteers, access to opportunities, forms of volunteering and types of training. In many cases, there are also skills requirements for refugees to be able to volunteer, hindering access to volunteering opportunities for those who do not already possess certain competences, or sufficient evidence of them. When it comes to employability prospects, nearly 50% of employers surveyed have attested that skills and experience gained from volunteering are a stronger asset when corroborated by reference letters or certificates. This is particularly important due to the difficulty for potential employers to equate qualifications from refugees' home countries with Ugandan ones.

Key Barriers to volunteer participation from RYVU survey data:



“I have just talked about giving these young people certificates after they have attained some skills or completed some trainings organised by certain NGOs. The papers can talk better, not just saying that ‘I know how to drive’...”

Male staff, International NGO (Rwamwanja settlement)



“Personally, I think I forgot [about] applying for jobs in 2014. This is when I stopped sending applications because I got disappointed at some point when I looked at those who advocate for refugees and see that they can’t even provide an employment opportunity ... simply because a refugee holds a refugee status.”

Male refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kampala city)

However, having skills may not necessarily increase employability because of the circumstances in which refugee youth find themselves. Despite the favourable refugee regulatory framework in Uganda that formally permits refugees to work, **refugees still face challenges in the labour market**, including not only certification of their prior qualifications, but also different forms of discrimination. Moreover, access to volunteering is also determined by refugees' physical and/or online presence in spaces where such opportunities are advertised.

Despite dominant narratives around volunteering as a pathway to work, **gaining skills from volunteering will not necessarily lead to sustained employment**, since volunteering does not itself address the barriers that are faced by young refugees. Volunteering can reproduce inequalities from the labour market, and can itself become a form of paid work for many refugees when there is financial compensation attached to their voluntary labour (see RYVU Policy Briefing 1).

The evidence generated by this research calls for stakeholders working with volunteers to address barriers to refugee participation, provide recognition and development of young refugees' skills, and promote volunteering in ways that reflect the realities of skills acquisition and employability amongst refugees.

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:

- Establishing fair and inclusive volunteering recruitment policies both between different refugees, and refugees and national volunteers, supported by appropriate measures that prevent inequalities in the process (e.g. recognising diverse records of past experience, providing access to transport).
- Offering certificates on completion of volunteering that capture volunteers' labour in ways that are recognised by employers.

Governments should prioritise:

- Increasing investment and opportunities for refugees to access Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to reduce reliance on volunteering schemes as a route to skills acquisition.
- 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.

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.
- Develop shared and inclusive terminologies for recognising diverse volunteering experiences and their potential contributions to skills acquisition and employability.
- Ensure there is an adequate evidence base on the roles and impacts of volunteering on refugee skills and employability 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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"Many youth in our community normally come to this place to find adverts about different job and volunteering opportunities by different organisations and even the private sector in the notice boards."

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

RESEARCH FUNDERS:



RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS:

