

## VOLUNTEERING, SKILLS AND LIVELIHOODS IN UGANDA

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### Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda (RYVU)

RYVU is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It aims to understand whether volunteering by refugee youth in Uganda helps their skills acquisition and employability and reduces the inequalities they experience. The project is a collaboration between Northumbria University (UK), Mbarara University of Science and Technology (Uganda), Uganda Martyrs University (Uganda) and Loughborough University (UK). For more information on the project and the full team, visit: [www.ryvu.org](http://www.ryvu.org).



Figure 1: Trader in Rwamwanja Settlement. Source: Robert Turyamureeba

### Introduction

This working paper discusses initial findings on volunteering policy and practice and its relationship to refugee youth skills in Uganda. It shows that:

- ◆ Policy making for volunteering in Uganda strongly emphasises its impacts on youth skills;
- ◆ Volunteering has diverse and often contradictory meanings and uses in Uganda;
- ◆ How volunteering impacts skills is related to existing socio-economic inequalities.

### Data

The data presented here were collected in 2019 and 2020 during Phase 1 of RYVU through workshops and qualitative interviews across four sites in Uganda: Kampala city and Bidibidi, Rwamwanja and Nakivale refugee settlements. These activities engaged diverse stakeholders with interests in refugee youth, volunteer engagement, skills and employability, such as young refugees, government officials, civil society representatives and staff from refugee organisations.

## The Volunteering Policy Environment in Uganda

Volunteering is an increasingly important feature of governmental and civil society strategies for service delivery, civic engagement and citizenship, skills development and crises<sup>1</sup>. RYVU research shows that government volunteering policy in Uganda is particularly focused on youth empowerment. But there are also wider frameworks that shape volunteering. For example, the emphasis on refugee self-reliance provides an important policy context for understanding when and why volunteering by young refugees might be supported. Popular media reporting on volunteering in Uganda also emphasises its impact on employability.

## What is Volunteering? Diverse Stakeholder Perspectives

Data from RYVU highlights a range of views about whether volunteering should mostly benefit communities, volunteers themselves or governmental, non-governmental (NGO) or private actors, and how they might benefit. We have identified three main sets of ideas about volunteering, which sometimes overlap.

**Community and volunteer well-being:** For some stakeholders, and particularly volunteers who were refugees themselves, volunteering is about care for fellow humans and community, without expectation of reward. As a male refugee volunteer from Bidibidi said:

*Volunteering to me means doing things without payment. It is something that is in one's heart to help others who are in need but with no payment. That is my simple understanding.*  
(Male South Sudanese Refugee Volunteer, Bidibidi)

Stakeholders have also identified volunteering as helping the volunteer cope with current and past challenges. One noted that, for refugees, it can work as a *“healing process, it builds resilience”* (NGO worker, Nakivale) while others noted how engaging in volunteering can help newly arrived refugees navigate and understand their new environment.



Figure 2: RYVU Stakeholder Workshop in Kampala, 23 October 2019. Source: Matt Baillie Smith

<sup>1</sup> Hazeldine, S., & Baillie Smith, M. (2015). *Global Review on Volunteering Report*.

*I think it is understood very much as a stepping-stone into the marketplace. It comes with remuneration and it's not unusual for the individual to expect that there should be a long-term arrangement. It certainly [is] what I would say in my experience possibly the main route into formal employment.*

*(NGO staff, Kampala)*

**Livelihoods and work:** As mentioned by a NGO staff member in Kampala, some stakeholders focused on volunteering as a pathway to employability or in terms of the access to resources it could give. A key theme was how volunteering often carries an expectation of a more permanent salaried position, although this also led to concerns about volunteering as exploitative. Volunteering was also seen as an *“alternative way of accessing some resources”* (Government Official, Kampala). In this way the financial and other rewards (such as training) that can come with volunteering provide a means to enhance volunteer livelihoods.

**Service delivery:** For some stakeholders, volunteering is seen as *“filling in the human resource gap”* (Government Official, Kampala) and helping reduce wage bills and address labour shortages. Seeing volunteering in terms of ‘service delivery’ reflects a longstanding trend in volunteer engagement and has been extensively researched and critiqued<sup>2</sup>. Volunteering to deliver services may also provide opportunities for the volunteers, but at the same time, relying on volunteers for professional roles *“may not provide the necessary services to the concerned persons”* (International Development Official, Kampala). Some also felt it was *“immoral to get volunteers and get them operating like paid staff”* (NGO staff, Kampala).



Figure 3: Boda boda driver in Rwamwanja Settlement. Source: Robert Turyamureeba

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, K. (2008). Practically professionals? Grassroots women as local experts - A Peruvian case study. *Political Geography*, 27(2), 139–159; Baillie Smith, M. (2020, May 19). Coronavirus volunteers aren't just a source of free labour – don't take advantage of them. *The Conversation*.

## Critical Issues: Remuneration, Inequalities and Programmed Volunteering

Our data reveal three critical themes that shape what volunteering means, who can participate in it and how it might impact skills acquisition.

**1) Remuneration.** Volunteer remuneration was a critical issue for stakeholders. For some, it was central to defining what volunteering means, either because volunteering should be unpaid, or because it was exploitative unless there was some recompense. Other research by the RYVU team shows that remuneration can create hierarchies between volunteers, but that it is also essential for vulnerable groups to be able to volunteer<sup>3</sup>. However, one stakeholder questioned whether paying volunteers is less efficient than allocating resources to a scheme focused on providing sustainable employment opportunities.

*Why spend money on volunteering and why not spend money to promoting employment right away.  
(International Development Official, Kampala)*

**2) Programmed vs. everyday volunteering.** Not all forms of volunteering are equally valued, understood and supported. Most stakeholders focused on formal volunteering programmes rather than everyday community volunteering. Some felt that the voluntary labour given by people as part of supporting their communities or in their everyday lives, did not really count as volunteering. Our research revealed that Ugandan histories and traditions of voluntary action are missing from policy and popular debates. As a result, voluntary practices outside organised government or civil society volunteering strategies, are poorly recognised and understood.

**3) Inequalities.** Existing socio-economic inequalities impact who is able to access what kinds of volunteering and what benefits they might get from it:

*... for us we don't believe a poor man can volunteer.... A poor man is actually looking for a way of survival.  
(Government employee, Kampala)*

For some, volunteering is something for people who already work, although this contradicts arguments that volunteering can be a means to access resources. It also does not take into account less programmed and day to day voluntary labour in communities. Some stakeholders identified differences in who can access what kinds of volunteering, with professionals only able to access remunerated forms of volunteering. Existing inequalities particularly impact how volunteering shapes skills acquisition and employability. A skilled refugee may use volunteering to gain qualifications that are recognised in Uganda, improving their employability but not necessarily their skills. A refugee without professional skills may wish to volunteer to build their skills, but may struggle to access the volunteering opportunities that allow for this.

<sup>3</sup> Baillie Smith, M., Fadel, B., O'Loughlen, A., & Hazeldine, S. (2020). Volunteering hierarchies in the global South: remuneration and livelihoods. *Voluntas*.

## Conclusion

Some of the findings from Phase 1 of RYVU have identified:

- ♦ diverse understandings of volunteering in Uganda;
- ♦ that more programmed and professionalised forms are valued and rewarded over others;
- ♦ limited recognition of forms of voluntary action rooted in Ugandan histories and traditions;
- ♦ that volunteering opportunities and impacts are strongly shaped by existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

A range of stakeholders see volunteering as having important relationships to strategies and approaches for building skills, training, employability and livelihoods. This is particularly important for young refugees, who may not have access to other skills development opportunities, and who may have reduced opportunities for employment. But despite the popular and policy emphasis on volunteering for skills acquisition, there is a lack of robust and systematic evidence in Uganda backing this claim up. Understanding who benefits from what kinds of volunteering is critical to ensuring that it does not reinforce skills and employability inequalities.

## Covid-19 impacts

The purpose of this working paper is to highlight emerging issues and critical themes for understanding refugee youth volunteering in Uganda. The impact of Covid-19 among vulnerable communities, particularly in refugee settlements, is indisputable. While there has been significant global celebration of volunteering in the context of Covid-19, its role is not uniform across settings and groups. The issues raised in this working paper have emerged through ongoing crises of precarity and vulnerability, and continue through this pandemic. This means we need to understand volunteering during the pandemic not only in terms of community well-being, but in relation to livelihoods and work and how it fits within donor approaches to refugee communities during the pandemic. Issues of remuneration, inequalities and what kinds of volunteering are supported and for who have not gone away because of the urgency and severity of the pandemic. Future working papers will explicitly address the relationship between Covid-19 and refugee youth volunteering in Uganda.

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