

REFUGEES AND VOLUNTEERING 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.



Figure 1: Rwamwanja and Bidibidi Settlements. Source: Robert Turyamureeba and Moses Okech

Introduction

This working paper discusses initial findings on volunteering experiences among youth refugees in Uganda. It shows that:

- ♦ Young refugee’s limitations in accessing paid work is critical to understand volunteering’s role in building livelihoods;
- ♦ Discriminatory hiring practises among different groups create inequalities in access to volunteering opportunities;
- ♦ Refugees in urban settings account for additional challenges that influence the social aspects of their volunteer experience due to increased competition as well as a lack of institutional structures.

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.

Differences in volunteering between urban and rural refugee contexts

Both in urban and rural settings, volunteering among youth refugees is not as an isolated practice, but rather an essential part of local livelihoods, and one where altruistic reasons are entangled with financial motivations in the quest for securing a job. This calls for further investigation of how volunteering as part of efforts to support refugee communities in Uganda is intertwined with local economies and inequalities. The significant number of humanitarian organisations in settlements can mean more ‘formal’ volunteering opportunities relative to urban areas. Moreover, youth refugees in urban areas have reported higher levels of competition with Ugandan hosts for fewer opportunities available.

Rural refugee settlements were perceived by stakeholders as more structured than those in urban areas in terms of the support provided by refugee welfare councils, UN agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) of the Government of Uganda. Refugees who decide to move to towns to seek opportunities often rely on economic support from relatives or friends already in towns. Young volunteer refugees in urban settings have therefore reported a more ‘strategic’ approach towards the kinds of allowance they can get from volunteering to afford living costs, such as house rent, transport and other basic needs. In rural settlements, a stronger sense of ‘social volunteering’ was reported when it comes to common needs to help each other in activities such as clearing the fields in preparation for planting of crops.

I think the other motivational factor is the learning opportunity that they receive that is in form of training and orientation that they receive. Sometimes unfortunately that is driven by the hope for financial reimbursement and I think in the refugee response in Uganda we are faced with the very unsustainable system where a lot of refugee volunteers receive regular stipends and as a result continue to be volunteers and don't always do it out of pure motivation and that is something we are struggling with here.

(Development worker, Kampala)



Figure 2: Art on the walls of the Antonio Guterres Urban Refugee Centre in Kampala. Source: Matt Baillie Smith

Refugee barriers to volunteering and employment

Data from RYVU suggests that refugees are faced with a number of challenges in accessing both employment and volunteering opportunities. Inequalities and exclusions from employment opportunities provide a critically important context for understanding how volunteering activity fits young refugees' strategies to gain work and build their livelihoods. Participants in Rwamwanja and Nakivale reported that refugees, especially those from French speaking countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, face a challenge of recognition of their academic qualifications. Although refugees have an opportunity of certifying their certificates with the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (UNCHE), the high cost means that many refugees cannot afford the payment of equating their qualifications with the Ugandan British system.

In this context, language becomes a barrier in itself, adding a layer of complexity for refugees that do not speak Uganda's official languages. This can create barriers to finding employment or volunteering opportunities in the country. This is coupled with the lack of schools in the settlements especially at secondary and tertiary levels. Participants in Nakivale observed that there is only one secondary school and a vocational institute in the whole settlement. In addition, scholarships to enable refugees to continue with higher education are also limited.

***Volunteering is what, you know,
what is in you and how you use it
to help others for free.***

(Male Refugee Volunteer, Rwamwanja)



Figure 3: Young refugees meeting with researcher Moses Okech in Bidibidi settlement. Source: Moses Okech

Refugee hiring practises and working conditions

According to workshop participants in Kampala, refugees reportedly face different forms of discrimination. It was observed that favouritism based on close relationships is common in accessing job opportunities. They noted that refugee employers tend to favour those from their own country of origin, for example, a Somali refugee employer will tend to favour fellow Somalis in recruitment for employment as well as nationals of the host country will also possibly favour fellow country men and women.

Other elements reportedly affecting recruitment processes of refugees are language, religion and culture, with employers again often favouring those with similar backgrounds to their own. Furthermore, differences in remuneration according to race, gender and nationality have also been mentioned. For example, workshop participants in Nakivale settlement reported that employers tend to pay less money to women compared to their male counterparts.

Workshop participants in Rwamwanja and Bidibidi reported that refugees are overworked or employed under unfavourable conditions, working for long hours with little pay and lacking bargaining power. Furthermore, participants noted that refugees are often deprived of basic resources to be able to search for a job. Importantly for RYVU, these constraints also impact abilities to access volunteering opportunities. Job seeking involves being able to access job adverts, which is not a straightforward process when refugees cannot easily access relevant sources of information (e.g. through newspapers, radio, etc.). It also requires actively moving from one area to another. In this case, when refugees don't own a car or a bike and/or are unable to afford public transportation within and beyond settlements, they are forced to cover long distances with little or no transport allowances. According to the participants, this issue particularly affects youth in large settlements like Bidibidi and Nakivale where refugees have to move from one zone to another. In addition, they also find it a challenge to get lunch allowances. There are also delays in pay, as well as reports of harassment and sexual exploitation.

I operate a small shop in Old Kampala, but currently things are hard. We used to buy merchandise for sale, but the movement is not allowed now. People are not there in the market and survival is now hard because I have to buy soap and essentials for the children.
(Congolese Refugee)

Covid-19 impacts

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a big impact on youth employment in Africa and Uganda in particular, where a total lockdown was imposed by the government in March 2020. Due to lockdown, confinement and other restrictive measures, many people including refugee youth have found themselves out of work. The lockdown restricting their movement in and out of the settlements has eroded their already limited opportunities for alternative income in the host communities, making them solely dependent on humanitarian assistance for their essential needs.¹

Also, employers, including refugees who operated businesses, were forced to close during lockdown, except for those selling essential goods, and the protracted socioeconomic effects of the pandemic have been increasingly leading to the suspension of contracts and lower pay. These changes have exacerbated existing barriers to employability. They also increase the potential significance of volunteering in young refugees' strategies for finding work and building their livelihoods.

¹ Kyeyune, H. (2020, June 20). Uganda strives to protect refugees from COVID-19. *Anadolu Agency*.

Conclusion

This working paper has explored how:

- ♦ limited opportunities to access employment provide a critical context to understanding the role of volunteering in young refugees' strategies to gain work and build their livelihoods;
- ♦ the discriminatory hiring practises that exist between refugee communities and Ugandan hosts, as well as within different refugee communities, create inequalities in access to volunteering opportunities;
- ♦ urban refugees face extra challenges in trying to access volunteering opportunities due to a lack of institutional structures and increased competition. This also affects the social and altruistic aspects of their volunteering.

Understanding these dynamics around employment is not only crucial to understanding where volunteering fits in strategies to gain work. The barriers to employment and skills development also impact who is able to volunteer and how they are rewarded. 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. Volunteering is not separate from the inequalities young refugees experience, meaning its roles and impacts need to be situated with the specific dynamics and pressures experienced by young refugees in particular settings.

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