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# Uganda: A Refugee Haven?

Assessing the “State” of Self-reliance

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of record-high refugee numbers and the lack of durable solutions, the self-reliance strategy has returned to the forefront of refugee governance. It is based on the idea that refugees should meet their own needs by accessing resources, opportunities, and rights while contributing to their host communities. In the process, policymakers and academics have praised Uganda as a “role model” for its progressive self-reliance policies. The Ugandan model equips refugees with a plot of land in a rural settlement, grants them the freedom of movement and the right to work, while offering integrated public services alongside local communities. Through a combination of desk research and qualitative interviews, this thesis attempts to verify whether this model translates into real opportunities for self-reliance in the settlements. The findings, while emphasizing the adverse effects of a strategy framed along the logic of cost reduction, reveal only minor positive results in Africa’s oldest refugee “camp,” Nakivale. In parallel, this thesis highlights the importance to support refugee-led organizations (RLOs) for service provision within the humanitarian establishment. While pushing for a wider understanding of refugee models encompassing regulatory framework for RLOs, the thesis urges Uganda to think beyond the settlement approach in order to adequately support refugees who opt to live out of them.

## Foreword

The choice of topic stems from a personal encounter, dear to my heart. In 2019, I was riding my bicycle through Africa and Uganda when I met Godfrey from South Sudan. He claimed to be a refugee and yet, he was freely riding a taxi bike in Bweyale town, next to Kiryandongo refugee camp. I could not make any sense out of this. How come Godfrey is working alongside Ugandan taxi bikers? Don't refugees usually stay in camps? Until then, I had always pictured refugees segregated in camps, waiting in line for aid.

Godfrey invited me to his self-built shelter in the rural area, where he offered me to stay for the night. The government had given him a plot of land to settle and cultivate potatoes—unfortunately for him, elephants love them too. Sure, life didn't look like a walk in the park. Yet, Godfrey called Uganda “a good place to come as a refugee.” His freedoms, I thought, must have had something to do with it. His freedoms, in turn, opened my eyes to a new reality.

The discovery of an alternative refugee response collided with my traditional, media-driven outlook. And it never left me. Every line of this thesis was written with the precious memory of Godfrey and his children nestled in the corner of my mind. Dear Godfrey, I can still see your little South Sudanese flag floating on your shelf. May conflict resolution and peace-building activities allow you to return home, someday soon.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Foreword .....	3
Acknowledgments .....	4
Table of Contents .....	5
List of Abbreviations.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Chapter 1: Methodology .....	14
1.1 Research Design .....	14
1.2 Scope .....	14
1.3 Qualitative Research.....	15
1.3.1 Selection of Participants.....	15
1.3.2 Ethical Considerations .....	16
1.3.3 Data Analysis .....	17
1.3.4 Limitations .....	18
Chapter 2: Self-reliance – Context Matters .....	19
2.1 Economic Focus .....	19
2.2 Neoliberalism and the Refugee Entrepreneur .....	20
2.3 Historical Developments .....	22
2.4 Exit Strategy?.....	23
2.5 Power Imbalances .....	24
2.6 Closing Words.....	25
Chapter 3: Protection of Refugees in Uganda.....	27
3.1 Refugee Status.....	27
3.1.1 Who is a Refugee? .....	27
3.1.2 Non-refoulement.....	29
3.2 Right to Work.....	30
3.3 Rights at Work .....	31
3.4 Freedom of Movement .....	32
3.5 Closing Words.....	33
Chapter 4: Case-study .....	33
4.1 Country Profile: Uganda’s Refugee Context.....	33
4.1.1 Key Facts .....	33

4.1.2	Strategical Developments.....	35
4.1.3	Welcome to Nakivale.....	37
4.2	The State of Self-reliance.....	39
4.2.1	Aid Dependency.....	41
4.2.2	The land allocation model: an infertile promise?.....	43
4.2.2.1	Land Profitability .....	43
4.2.2.2	Assumptions .....	45
4.2.2.3	Social Coexistence .....	46
4.2.3	Protection .....	48
4.2.4	Alternative Livelihoods .....	50
4.2.4.1	Vocational Training.....	52
4.2.4.2	Access to Financial Services.....	54
4.2.4.3	Private Sector .....	54
4.2.5	Integrated Services .....	55
4.2.6	Local Integration.....	57
4.2.7	Closing Words.....	59
4.3	RLOs — By Refugees for Refugees .....	60
4.3.1	The Added Value of RLOs .....	61
4.3.2	Uganda’s Regulatory Framework .....	62
4.3.3	RLOs within the traditional aid landscape.....	66
4.3.4	Closing Words.....	68
	Conclusion .....	69
	Bibliography.....	73
	Appendix 1: Overview of Participants .....	86
	Appendix 2: Interviews — Guiding Questions.....	87
	Appendix 3: Refugee Self-reliance Definition.....	90

## List of Abbreviations

ACBON – Association of Community Based Organizations in Nakivale

CBO – Community-based Organization

CRRF – Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework

EU – European Union

GBV – Gender-based Violence

GCR – Global Compact on Refugees

GoU – Government of Uganda

GRF – Global Refugee Forum

ICCPR – International Convention for Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR – International Convention for Economic Social and Cultural Rights

LGBTI – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

OAU – Organization for African Unity

RELON – Refugee-led Organization Network

RLO – Refugee-led Organization

UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

URSB – Ugandan Registration Services Bureau

VSLA – Village Savings and Loan Associates

WFP – World Food Programme

## Introduction

*“We are like in the middle of an ocean. We are nowhere. We are not citizens of where we come from and we are not citizens of Uganda.”<sup>1</sup>*

Yet a new report. Yet again, vertiginous figures. According to the latest Global Trend Report, a record 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2023 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order (UNHCR, 2024c). The last ten years, in particular, have seen a staggering upsurge of refugees and humanitarian emergencies worldwide (UNHCR, 2024h). The exceptional scale and speed of displacement were initiated by the millions of Syrians and Venezuelans fleeing war and economic collapse respectively. Then, within the last three years, the Taliban takeover of power triggered the “eighth phase of Afghan displacement” (Iqbal and McAuliffe, 2022), while Russia’s invasion of Ukraine took the number of displaced people to new record highs. And yet, the curve is set to steepen further due to raging civil war in Sudan.

Beyond those figures, the real refugee crisis is that “too many refugees have been refugees for far too long” (Ferris, 2018). Despite a clear consensus that camps are ineffective, the encampment model has been the default response to refugee crises (Idris, 2017, p. 2). In Asia and Africa, especially, refugees are coerced into temporary enclosed facilities in border zones, designed by relief agencies to meet immediate protection and assistance. In camp settings, refugees are subjected to bureaucratic systems and decisions that impact the services accessible to them as well as their legal status (Agier, 2002). They are piled up in a warehousing model where life prospects are slim and grim. Employment and other livelihood opportunities are scarce, simply because refugees are not expected to reach self-sufficiency nor merge with local communities. French ethnologist and anthropologist Michel Agier describes those sites as “city-camps”, segregated from the ordinary social and political world (Agier, 2002, p. 320). Beyond the convenience they offer in managing aid, host governments appreciate the political advantage of camps as they limit security problems in the region (Jacobsen, 2002, p. 593). Repatriation is also perceived as easier, partly because harsh conditions in camps make prolonged stays less appealing (Jacobsen, 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> Male refugee, Nakivale, 05/2024

However, the encampment model doesn't respond adequately to contemporary challenges, characterized by prolonged refugee crises increasing in frequency and scale (Idris, 2017, p. 13). While new conflicts are breaking out, many others are getting bogged down with no end in sight. In turn, refugee camps, which were initially intended as temporary reception areas, frequently persist for the long term (Agier, 2002). Over time, camps become open-air prisons as responses to refugees living in protracted situations. A universally accepted definition of the phenomenon does not exist. The UNHCR, however, recognizes a protracted situation as one "in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years" (UNHCR, 2020). The Syrian civil war is high on the list of examples, so are the ongoing hunger crisis in Somalia, Yemen and the latent instability in the world's youngest country, South Sudan (IRC, 2022). As for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), its decades of instability and violence have long been the subject of controversial silence (Reliefweb, 2022). In those neglected parts of the world, millions of people have fled never-ending conflicts while being overshadowed by donor and media fatigue. They endure silently and while global attention fades, their needs accumulate. In those circumstances, camps can only offer refugees a way of life that is "permanently temporary" (Dunn, 2015). Current estimates set the average length of exile for refugees at 20 years (ECHO, 2024). People live and die in camps. Children born in camps. The camp, sees the existence of entire generations unfold.

Not only are camps dubious in human terms but also ineffective in practical terms. In fact, camps are costly and pose substantial challenges on the host countries' structural capacities. Scholars generally agree that a protracted crisis is "[...] leading to the breakdown of the institutional capacity to meet the affected population's growing needs" ("Protracted crises", 2022). In other terms, not only do camps fail to deliver durable, human rights-based solutions for refugees. In addition, camp set-up and maintenance efforts place a financial and political burden on host states, one that is not adequately supported by the international community after the emergency phase (Feldman, 2007, p. 52).

Facing up to the enormous challenges, global governance has mobilized in the last ten years. The Syrian "crisis<sup>2</sup>," in particular, has prompted UN officials to rethink international refugee governance by placing it under the banner of solidarity. This is how the 2016 New York Declaration came into being, adopted by all 193 Member States reaffirming the international commitment to uphold the rights of refugees and

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<sup>2</sup> The term "crisis" can also be instrumentalized. It is interesting to note that in Europe, the situation has been described as such even though the "old" continent has received just over a million Syrian refugees, far behind neighboring countries (5.5 m) or what it was able to absorb during the Ukrainian influx (5 m) (UNHCR, 2021b).

migrants. Member States recognize that refugee camps “should be the exception” used only as a temporary response in case of emergency. Together, they called for a more equitable and predictable sharing of responsibilities among refugee-hosting countries. This declaration further outlined the essential components of a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), an operational tool designed to address contextualized large-scale refugee movements and protracted refugee situations. In 2018, the CRRF was itself incorporated into the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) (Aleinikoff et al. 2018, p. 8), as called for by the New York Declaration as an anticipation to offer a wider, systemic approach to refugee protection and solutions worldwide. Overlapping with the objectives of the GRC, the CRRF was rolled across more than a dozen countries throughout 2017 and 2018 in coordination with relevant national stakeholders. The Framework is built on four pillars (UNHCR, 2024b):

1. Ease pressure on countries that welcome and host refugees
2. Build *self-reliance* of refugees
3. Expand access to resettlement in third countries and other complementary pathways
4. Foster conditions that enable refugees voluntarily to return to their home countries

In practice, repatriation to safe homelands is often not an option, nor is the prospect of a permanent residence to a safe third country, a privilege granted to less than 1% of refugees (Betts, 2016). As a result, an overwhelming majority of refugees find themselves stuck in a state of limbo. Many either become urban destitutes or languish in camps, rendered dependent of aid at the expense of socioeconomic freedoms. This is where self-reliance, the second pillar, enters into play.

As defined by the UNHCR, self-reliance is the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity (UNHCR, 2005). Self-reliance, as a program approach, refers to developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance (UNHCR, 2005). Self-reliance supporters argue that refugees need more than simply food, tents and blankets (Betts, 2017, chap. 2). They hold the belief that refugees should not be seen as mere passive recipients of aid, but as actors capable of defining their trajectory. By accessing education and labor markets beyond the emergency phase, refugees can build their skills and gain autonomy, hereby contributing to the development of local economies (UNHCR, 2024b). By promoting self-reliance, the CRRF marks a shift away from traditional “humanitarian” encampment approaches of the most unthinkable and undesirable populations (Agier,

2002, p. 320) towards more inclusive environments where talents and aspirations are embraced (Betts, 2016).

The experience of people escaping violence abroad can vary dramatically. As opposed to camps, self-reliance efforts can be pursued following two alternative approaches: self-settlement and settlement. Firstly, *self-settlement* refers to the majority of the world's refugees (78%) establishing themselves in the main cities of their first host country (USA for UNHCR, 2024; Doraï and Dahdah, 2022, p. 1). Although urban areas provide better chances for independent living and employment opportunities, they present significant obstacles for refugees. In most host countries, refugees share housing or reside in unsanitary public buildings, collective centers, slums, or other forms of informal settlements with substandard living conditions (USA for UNHCR, 2024). It is estimated that 90% of Syrian refugees and most Venezuelans are hosted in urban settings, facing struggles to make ends meet (UNHCR, 2021b). Refugees, according to the UNHCR, should be allowed to live among host communities the moment they arrive in the host country (2024b). However, *self-settled* refugees, as they are called, often have no legal refugee status within the host country (Jacobsen, 2003), nor do they enjoy the right to engage in employment activities. They engage in informal or illegal work, exposing themselves to discrimination, low pay and exploitation, thus perpetuating their cycle of vulnerability (Dryden-Peterson, 2006).

Alternatively, refugees can live in *settlements* in the form of structured, separate communities or villages established specifically for them (Jacobsen, 2003). Settlements are a “deliberate and coherent package and administrative measures whereby a group of refugees is enabled to settle on land, usually in an uninhabited or sparsely populated area, with a view to creating new self-supporting rural communities that ultimately will form part of the economic and social system of the area” (UNHCR, 1989, as cited in Harrell-Bond, 2000). In essence, settlements seek to provide refugees with more sustainable living arrangements, opportunities for self-reliance, and integration into local communities. In practice, the line between a camp and a settlement is often unclear. It is more efficient to look at some criteria such as the freedom of movement permitted, the mode of assistance and governance, the temporality of shelter and the population size or density (Idris, 2007, p. 3). Freedom of movement, for instance, is typically stronger in settlements. Relief assistance, on the other hand, is clearly favored in camp settings, operating under strong hierarchical governance designed by INGOs and aid agencies. Conversely, refugees in settlements are not seen as mere recipients of aid. They are, on the contrary, anticipated to provide for themselves and attain self-sufficiency (Jacobsen, 2003). Furthermore, they are allowed to engage in income-

generating activities and have a greater say in decisions that affect them. Finally, population density tends to be weaker in settlements, where movements in and out are permitted (Idris, 2007, p. 4).

One country in particular has been widely recognized for its progressive refugee response: Uganda. Uganda pursues an open-door policy towards refugees, becoming Africa's largest host country (1.6 million) and the world's sixth-biggest refugee hosting country (JICA, 2024). Uganda's refugee policies stand out from other host countries in three different ways. Firstly, Uganda's assistance model allocates refugees a plot of land to cultivate or build on within rural settlements (Betts et al., 2019). Secondly, Uganda's regulatory framework grants refugees the right to work and the freedom of movement, allowing refugees to move freely in and out settlements and integrate into host communities, look for employment opportunities and engage in entrepreneurship. Thirdly, Uganda promotes integrated social service provision for refugees such as education, health, and other services on the same basis as nationals. By focusing its approach on self-reliance and economic empowerment, Uganda enables refugees to contribute to local economies while fostering social cohesion with host populations (Betts et al., 2019). Stating that the Ugandan model has been praised is an understatement: "generous," "role model," "success-story," even "refugee paradise," are superlative frequently used by political and humanitarian actors to portray Uganda's refugee model (Titeka, 2022). UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi himself, after visiting Rhino settlement in January 2018, expressed gratefulness towards the Ugandan government, claiming that "despite recent influxes, Uganda has the most progressive refugee policies in Africa, if not the world" (ECRE, 2018).

Only one month after Grandi's statement, however, a resounding corruption and management scandal tarnished the Ugandan refugee scheme. Evidence of inflated refugee numbers, embezzlement of funds, and bribery involving both UNHCR and government officials responsible for refugee management were uncovered by a UN probe (Titeka, 2022). The scandal directly concerned stakeholders with high interests at stake. It has angered donors such as the European Union, motivated to ensure that Uganda's refugee-hosting model succeeds so as to set a powerful precedent for successful intra-African migration (Coggio, 2018). The scandal has also exposed an intriguing mutual dependency between the UN refugee agency and Uganda's government. In fact, the UNHCR needs Uganda to showcase a success model abroad while Museveni's regime has long leveraged its position as Africa's largest refugee-hosting country to build political capital and escape accountability on governance transgressions (Titeka, 2022). Ultimately, the first victims behind this vitrine of political interests are the refugees themselves. They have been deprived of investments that should have been turned into valuable tools and assets for self-reliance.

In the process, breaches in Uganda’s refugee scheme have undermined the country’s undisputed status of exceptionalism. Is Uganda’s model really worthy of its praise after all? Does the settlement approach, in particular, fulfill the promise of self-reliance for those escaping violence and deprivation? Ultimately, the rationale behind those questions is to reflect on whether the Ugandan self-reliance model deserves to be branded as a “role model”, and whether it should be replicated elsewhere. The question merits study because the Ugandan model is being used as a template for global refugee advocacy (Betts, 2021, p. 2). Given the protracted nature of displacement, the question is all the more important when we consider that the longer refugees have been living abroad, the less likely they are to return to their home country (Browne, 2006, as cited in Tulibaleka et al., 2022, p. 8). This thesis seeks to answer these questions by exploring how so-called progressive policies influence the everyday lives of refugees in Uganda’s settlements. Concretely, I will analyze how the three special features of Uganda’s self-reliance strategy—*de jure* right to work and freedom of movement, allocation of land, integrated services—translate in *de facto* opportunities and self-reliance for refugees. The first chapter sets the stage with a literature review of the self-reliance global strategy. Chapter 2 will review international, regional and national legal protection mechanisms for refugees, and more specifically the right to work and freedom of movement. Chapter 3 will be devoted to the study of refugee self-reliance in Uganda’s settlements, based on the three key factors developed above. A final section of that chapter will be dedicated to a growing phenomenon, still understudied yet so decisive, which has become central in the course of my research: the rise of refugee-led organizations and their potential for refugee self-reliance. In short, this paper suggests taking a break away from complacent rhetoric by uncovering the realities behind flattering buzzwords; in large part, by raising the voice of the first people concerned — the refugees.

## Chapter 1: Methodology

### 1.1 Research Design

This study seeks to explore how self-reliance policies translate into self-reliance outcomes for refugees in Uganda. It does so by analyzing the effectiveness of the Ugandan triptych, composed of the right to work and freedom of movement, the land allocation model and the integration of refugees within national social services. To shed the—right—light on the phenomenon, the study utilized a combination of qualitative interviews and desk research. My qualitative findings are extracted from research in Nakivale Refugee Settlement as told through the account of seven<sup>3</sup> participants. In fact, my research included primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews with the primary parties involved: the refugees. Collecting original data directly from the source allowed me to obtain first-hand information specifically tailored to my research objectives. Occasionally, I draw on external input to support and complement my findings to provide a more comprehensive analysis. It builds on reports and literature review, encompassing recent developments on self-reliance studies and implementation programs in Uganda. Collecting secondary data was made possible by following the work of leading academics in the field, among others Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria and Naohiko Omata. In addition, various reports issued by the Government of Uganda (GoU), international agencies and various organizations constituted valuable tools for data collection.

### 1.2 Scope

Defining the time period under study was an important step of the research. While relying on necessary historical data, input collected to assess the parameters was restricted to the time frame from 2016 to the present day. There are two reasons for this. Year 2016 coincides with Uganda's willingness to roll out the CRRF at the Leaders' Summit and with the start of a two-year historical surge from 300,000 to 1.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024f). Exceptionally, some considerations predating 2016 will be taken into account, as the upsurge of refugees has deteriorated rather than bettered economic conditions,

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<sup>3</sup> Among the seven respondents, four were interviewed specifically on their own understanding of self-reliance and four also or specifically on RLOs

human capital, institutions' capacities and resilience to shocks, remaining therefore essential today (Omata, 2018; Bjørkhaug, 2020).

The geographical scope of the study was equally decisive. While about 9% of refugees live in urban areas, mainly in Kampala, the vast majority (91%) is spread within Uganda's 13 refugee-hosting districts (UNHCR, 2024g). The field study explores the lives of refugees residing in Nakivale Refugee settlement. For this reason, the realities of urban refugees will not be studied specifically, neither will those of refugees living in different settlements; although some secondary data used may have a national scope. On the other hand, urban refugees cannot be totally overshadowed in this research, as the freedom of movement is the very reason why refugees may legally live in urban areas. Therefore, this study will not delve into the details of urban realities but will occasionally refer to them when relevant.

## 1.3 Qualitative Research

### 1.3.1 Selection of Participants

Time and budget constraints did not allow me to travel to Uganda, which is why I looked for participants online. Two sets of respondents were targeted for the interview phase. As a first step, I contacted RLO leaders and representatives via their respective websites and LinkedIn pages. This was a step I had to persevere with, as several "elite" (big and well-established) RLOs did not respond to my requests. On the other hand, the participants who were available showed great enthusiasm to answer my questions. In the process, I conducted an interview with an advocate for refugee leadership. She was kind enough to act as a facilitator, putting me in touch with other refugees by email. That was a crucial step, because making contact with refugees from a distance is a difficult task, especially if they live in settlements. After careful consideration, I requested her to put me in touch with adult men and women aged between 20 and 45 of different nationalities. At my request, she selected four respondents living in Nakivale settlement, Africa's oldest refugee "camp". In fact, gathering my entire sample of respondents in one single place, Nakivale, was a carefully considered choice as a way to narrow the field of study and build some degree of representativeness. In summary, I conducted interviews with four adult women and three adult men, among them four Congolese, one Somali, one Kenyan, and one Ugandan (head of operations in an RLO).

### 1.3.2 Ethical Considerations

The introduction starts with a participant quote so as to emphasize from the outset the importance of including refugee voices in the global discourse and to highlight the inclusive nature of this research, to the best of my abilities. It is vital to engage refugees more actively in research, particularly when it pertains to their experiences. This not only fosters a more inclusive and ethical research approach but also guarantees a more accurate representation of the narratives and perspectives of those directly impacted. This thesis focuses on the ways in which refugees become actors rather than mere beneficiaries. Logically, giving refugees the opportunity to express themselves first-hand in this paper appeared non-negotiable. Organizing online interviews became non-negotiable, especially due to working remotely and facing time constraints. This took a certain amount of time, logistics and creativity but above all, it required some ethical reflection.

Mack et al. (2005, p. 8) point out that “whenever we conduct research on people, the well-being of research participants must be our top priority.” Conducting interviews online has two major effects in this respect. First of all, it is slightly embarrassing to invite someone and take up their time without being able to welcome them properly, with even a snack or cup of tea. But above all, having an interview online represents a financial cost to respondents. In the settlement, internet access is provided by recharging mobile data. What’s more, one respondent living in a remote village had to use public transport to get to an area with a better internet network. Reimbursing transport and data costs proved essential in order not adversely affect the quality of life of my respondents. However, this approach potentially had the perverse opposite effect. My offer could indeed be exploited as a way of monetizing research. Of course, it is essential to respect the ethics of refugees, but it is just as important to have self-respect but especially protect researchers following my footsteps who will carry out similar research in the future. This is a perverse effect I managed to mitigate with the assistance of my facilitator. Similarly, the leader of an RLO suggested that I launch a fund-raising campaign for his project, a suggestion I dismissed out of conflict of interest.

A second point to which I have attached great importance is expectation management. Respondents involved in RLOs especially showed a favorable response when approached about the research project. They expressed curiosity about the research and its potential benefits for them. I took the initiative to clarify the study’s scope and objectives, managing expectations and ensuring that the respondents understood the purpose of the research.

Finally, I attached great importance to issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Anonymity seemed particularly important to protect my respondents on their understanding and perception of self-reliance. On the contrary, RLO leaders rather expressed interest at the idea of being identified. Eventually, preserving full anonymity presented itself as the safest option. Furthermore, I systematically asked for permission to record the interviews, to which each respondent spontaneously agreed. Finally, no party other than myself, the researcher, has access to the data and conversations.

### 1.3.3 Data Analysis

After the data collection, I followed some steps of grounded theory, which is an inductive methodology centered on the discovery of theory from data (Mohajan, D., Mohajan, H., 2023, p. 2). Firstly, the audio files were uploaded and transcribed automatically through Pinpoint. I systematically revised the interview transcript, with audio support, to correct errors and omissions. I made sure to consider pauses, chuckles, evasive looks and other cues by the interviewee as markers for important events in the interview (McGrath et al., p. 2004).

I then moved on to the coding stage in a word-processing document. I began to identify concepts, which are categories that correspond to factors of self-reliance, such as education, refugee/host relationship or livelihood opportunities. I associated each code with a color that was used to highlight every relevant piece of dialogue in each interview. In this way, I was able to establish a tree structure of codes through core categories. Finally, in a new document, I gathered the colored entries by code to obtain a centralized view that allowed me to theorize the information.

Self-reliance, as will be established in the literature review, is often studied, promoted, and assessed through a strong economic lens. Yet, there is a persistent lack of clarity on refugees' own understanding of self-reliance, what the alternative ways of attaining self-reliance are, and how they can get supported to get there (Easton-Calabria et al., 2017). Orienting my research around my respondents' own understanding of self-reliance was therefore essential. After verifying that they were familiar with the concept—which they all were—I asked them to define self-reliance. Direct answers combined with other revealing indications scattered during the conversation led me to theorize a tailored definition. To be self-reliant, in the eyes of my interviewees, is

*To be independent, to believe in yourself to create your own path towards income, food; to feel empowered and improve your life standards through healthcare, education and protection for you and your family.*<sup>4</sup>

#### 1.3.4 Limitations

I faced four essential limitations during my qualitative research. Firstly, due to time constraints, the number of interviewees is too small to claim national representativeness. I did consider disaggregating the data to isolate those relating to gender, ability or age, but these data would suffer from a division that would be even more damaging to the representativeness. A higher degree of representativeness could have been achieved through focus group discussions. However, the impossibility to conduct field research in person in Uganda did not make this option realistic. While I chose to give the foreground role to refugees, consulting various stakeholders like agency staff, INGOs, and the government would have made for a more comprehensive approach.

Secondly, conducting interviews online may have negatively impacted the spontaneity and authenticity of the exchange. In fact, the absence of physical interaction can damage the necessary comfort and trust to open up. This is especially relevant in woman-to-man interactions, as women may feel already more comfortable speaking to another woman, especially on sensitive topics like gender-based violence. Language barriers did not seem to be an issue since I am a French speaker (like Congolese) and my respondents have been living in Uganda long enough to learn English. However, the poor audio/video quality of the call made the conversation challenging at times. In fact, systematically verifying and validating the information with my interviewees often disrupted the natural flow of the conversation.

Thirdly, my sample of respondents is concentrated within Nakivale settlement only. Qualitative research is highly context-dependent. Therefore, collecting my data in one single environment enabled me to create a case study within a case study, so as to create some very localized representativeness. On the other hand, it equally undermines representativeness of any of the other twelve Ugandan settlements, where self-reliance could be experienced differently. Neither do my findings claim to mirror national representativeness albeit containing a fair indicative value for Nakivale settlement. In order to improve the relevance of this thesis, I complemented my qualitative research with literature review and reports of previous researchers.

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex 3 for the development of the self-reliance definition following a framework proposed by Kodlin (2018)

Finally, the selection of participants was not entirely random. The process was delegated to a first respondent after having established trust and cooperation. My assumption is that she selected people capable of communicating in English effectively and having sufficient longevity and engagement within the settlement to feed my research. As the facilitator is strongly involved in refugee leadership, the level of criticism and commitment of my participants may be slightly above average. At the same time, the sampling encompassed different nationalities, genders, and self-reliance levels. The respondents were therefore well positioned to provide rich, contextualized data and perspectives, which was essential to gather in-depth insights. I recognize the potential for bias and have taken steps to mitigate its impact through the diversity and the added input of desk research.

## Chapter 2: Self-reliance – Context Matters

At first glance, self-reliance has everything going for it: it is a catchy buzzword, presented as a groundbreaking solution to the fate of one out of 69 people in this world (UNHCR, 2024c). Alexander Betts et al. went as far as calling self-reliance “arguably the holy grail of the global refugee regime” (2017:13). Self-reliance has clearly gained traction in the humanitarian arena in the last two decades. Yet, there is no consensus about what self-reliance precisely means and neither is there measurable tools available. In its Handbook for self-reliance, the UNHCR defines the strategy as

*the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity.* (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1)

On the surface, the definition is satisfactory. It is holistic insofar as it covers both livelihood and non-economic aspects, and frames self-reliance as a goal to be pursued at the individual and wider social circle. Additionally, the focal point of dignity is a welcomed reference to the fundamental principles of human rights.

### 2.1 Economic Focus

On the ground, however, self-reliance practices and discourses exist largely through an economic lens. In programmatic terms, efforts have focused on improving refugee livelihoods, which the UNHCR defines as the means through which refugees “secure the basic necessities of life, such as food, water,

shelter and clothing initiatives” (2014, p. 7). The UNCHR and implementing partners have indeed focused predominantly on market-based interventions (Field et al., 2020, p. 167) and practitioner guides are increasingly centered on livelihoods<sup>5</sup>. The creation of the UNHCR Livelihood Unit in 2018 is further indication of the importance given to economics, even more so the 66% budget increase in Livelihood Programming from 2010 to 2012 (Easton-Calabria, 2015, p. 413). Similarly, the economic value of the refugee is endorsed by key authors in academia. Karen Jacobsen, for example, expanded on refugees as economic assets and how they present a win-win situation for both the refugee and the state (2002). As for Alexander Betts, arguably self-reliance’s most vocal supporter in academia, he repeatedly frames refugees as employees, consumers, job creators, innovators and distributors (2009, 2014, 2017). As a result, the economic emphasis of the humanitarian strategy is widely regarded as the benchmark of its success (Carpi et al., 2021, p. 434).

## 2.2 Neoliberalism and the Refugee Entrepreneur

To understand the phenomenon and its implications, it is important to look at self-reliance in context. It has been argued that self-reliance gained prominence with the rise of neoliberalism on the international political scene (Binns and Nel, 1999; Krause and Schmidt, 2020, p. 36). As a politico-economic concept, neoliberalism can be understood as the renewal of economic theses that favors private enterprise and seeks to transfer the control of economic factors from the government to the private sector (Monde diplomatique, 2024). The aim is to create an environment conducive to the inflow of capital by deregulating markets and reducing the welfare state, perceived as an accomplice in fostering a spirit of dependence. Inevitably, the neoliberal paradigm has infiltrated and altered the refugee response itself. While initially established to provide emergency relief, policies have transitioned from a “maintenance and care” approach to building self-reliance through livelihood initiatives in humanitarian programming (Crisp, 2017). Developmentalist approaches are reflected in the reduction of food and cash transfer provisions, on the one hand, and the promotion of participation in work-related programs on the other. By emphasizing the responsibility of the individual, neoliberalism has placed the refugee in a position where (s) he should break the cycle of dependency and create his or her own solutions. It demonstrates a shift of responsibility away from the state towards creating “self-governing and entrepreneurial refugee subjects who will be responsible for their futures” (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015, p. 337).

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<sup>5</sup> Examples include the UNHCR Handbook for Self-Reliance (2005), the UNHCR Policy on Alternatives to Camps (2014), the Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy (2019–2023), the Global Strategy for Livelihoods (2014–2018).

This is structurally problematic. Firstly, because national governments are duty-bearers. They are therefore responsible and should be equipped to ensure legal environments conducive to self-reliance. The latest Global Refugee Work Rights Report identifies the lack of domestic laws protecting refugees' right to work or engage in wage-earning employment as the primary barrier to realizing refugee work rights globally (Ginn et al., 2022). By shifting the responsibility away from the state, refugees are pushed to perform in environments that often do not allow them to. Governments are still reluctant to integrate refugees for security and political reasons. Compounding this, recognizing the added value of refugees for the development of their country risks undermining their claim to international aid in the name of "burden-sharing" (Omata, 2023, p. 9). The catch, as Betts and Collier put it very well, is that urban refugees are expected to help themselves and yet cannot freely access the labor market (2017, chap. 5).

Secondly, by framing refugees in dualities, refugees are deprived of their humanity. They are increasingly portrayed as resilient market participants instead of the previous "vulnerable victims in need of assistance from the international community" (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018, p. 5). But if not *all* refugees are passive recipients, nor are they *all* entrepreneurs. Refugees are people—with each their own personalities, skills and vulnerabilities. Overly categorizing people in boxes can lead to unrealistic expectations and detrimental effects. A refugee could be stigmatized for his or her inability, how ever justified, by a system that praises the few who succeed, and blames the many who fail. It is these very people, the majority, who risk finding themselves struggling with despair, hereby fostering rather than reducing vulnerability. After all, the stigma attached to dependency is strikingly context-*dependent*. Mark Duffield makes a disturbing point when contrasting the relationship to dependency among the "insured" (people in developed countries) and the "uninsured" (people in underdeveloped countries). The former are not expected to become self-reliant although they rely strongly on social welfare protections, while the latter are expected to be self-reliant in the absence of social safety nets (Duffield, 2007, as cited in Kalu et al., 2021). These ideas will only be perpetuated if individual and economic factors keep overshadowing the need to address systemic and structural issues. In refugee governance, it begins with expanding the way we think about self-reliance, by moving beyond the scope of purely economic factors (Kalu et al., 2021). Without meaningful participation, the push for developmental approaches leaves refugees at the mercy of the market survivability without coverage from social and political rights (Duale, 2020, p. 4, Omata, 2023, p. 10).

## 2.3 Historical Developments

The hegemony of neoliberalism is the fertile ground on which self-reliance policies have flourished, with a contemporary interpretation more focused than ever on individual, economic sustenance. But the concept of self-reliance is not innovative. While it has been portrayed as a groundbreaking solution, it is as old as the refugee regime itself (Kellie et al., 2022). Evan Easton-Calabria argues that refugees have been perceived as economic subjects since the early days of refugee governance (2022, p. 9). In 1919 already, the League of Nations embarked ethnic Greek refugees from Asia minor in livelihood programs. They were perceived as labor migrants able to serve the host society by engaging in farming, artisan livelihood, vocational training and microfinance schemes—methods still widely used today. Altogether, the Greek settlement was considered a success (Easton-Calabria, 2015, p. 419). While the focus was on income generation and development, pre-war *self-sufficiency*<sup>6</sup> plans were equally designed to foster *social* self-reliance. Initiatives included university access, improving working conditions, as well as granting travel documents via the Nanson passport (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020, p. 7).

Self-reliance strategies were used after WWII, albeit with modest results and different means. The perspective, according to Easton-Calabria, shifted from a bottom-up to a top-down approach (2015, p. 428). In the late 1950s, the UNHCR expanded to developing countries, especially Africa, to address displacement caused by wars of independence and decolonization. Refugees were integrated passively into national development plans as a way to benefit both host communities and themselves (Betts et al., 2016, p. 16). As such, governments established large-scale rural settlements whereby the aim was to achieve *collective* self-sufficiency (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020, p. 7). This was the first attempt by the UNHCR to bridge the humanitarian-development gap (Crisp, 2001, p. 169). Nevertheless, only few settlements were deemed “self-sufficient.” The majority remained dependent on aid due to poor soil quality, poor planning and lack of competitive markets. Other barriers included restrictions on rights and legal pathways to work (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018, p. 3). The reluctance of asylum countries to remove structural barriers further contributed to the failure of the displacement-development nexus in the ’70s. In the face of a growing displacement population, low-income host countries launched the “Refugee aid and development” project to attract international support on the spirit of burden-sharing.

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<sup>6</sup> The terminology of self-reliance has evolved over time, making historical analyses challenging. It is further being repackaged into “resilience,” which refers to the ability of an individual, a community or a country to cope with, adapt and recover quickly from the impact of a disaster, violence or conflict (ECHO, 2021).

However, it hardly materialized (Crisp, 2001, p. 172). The program failed mainly because donors suspected host countries to favor national development plans over integration of refugees. Other reasons behind its failure was the emergency caused by the 1984 Ethiopian famine, then the priority given to repatriation strategies after in the post-Cold War years.

Historical developments show evidence that self-reliance is not a novelty. Nor was it a concept overly focused on income-generating avenues. Last but not least, we have also learned that self-reliant initiatives have rarely led to large-scale self-reliance results (Easton-Calabria, 2015, p. 2). How come then that those strategies have regained credibility in refugee governance? Neoliberalism alone cannot explain that upsurge of interest. In addition, the emphasis of self-reliance and the economic abilities of the refugees is a response to the sector's critical financial health.

## 2.4 Exit Strategy?

The UNHCR itself is anything but “self-reliant.” It is mainly donor-funded and therefore heavily reliant on public and private donations. In the last 20 years, budgets have not kept pace with soaring expenditures. In 2005, the gap between funding and needs represented already 12%. Despite a doubling of donations by 2018, the gap widened even further to 49%<sup>7</sup> (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020, p. 14). In the face of chronic underfunding, the UNHCR faces a constant dilemma: how to respond to new crisis while maintaining adequate assistance in the context of protracted crises?

In light of budget constraints, self-reliance makes for a profitable strategy. The financial appeal of self-reliance was already evident in the 1960s, when lack of funding proved instrumental in the decision to launch settlement plans (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020, p. 7). Almost 50 years later, the idea was crystallized in the 2005 UNHCR handbook. As a program approach, self-reliance

*refers to developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance.* (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1)

Self-reliance is guided by the philosophy that refugees have the skills, capacity and agency to stand on their own and sustain themselves. But they had better attain this while “graduating” from decreasing aid (Ferris, 2018). The modern economic focus does indeed support self-reliance with employment and

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<sup>7</sup> More recently, the budget shortfalls in 2023 went slightly down to 42.3%.

livelihoods, while linking assistance with a reduction in hand-outs (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020, p. 2).

Self-reliance is formulated as the antithesis of economic dependency, as it is positioned in direct opposition to expenditures. It is a way to save money, or as Easton-Calabria and Omata call it, it is a cost-effective exit strategy (2018, p. 12). However, by polarizing self-reliance and the reduction of aid, the risk is to misunderstand self-reliance as a zero-sum game, whereby it is assimilated as “a process of reduction of external inputs and support for refugees” (Meyer, 2006, p. 14). The concern arises that top-down decisions are influenced rather by the need to cut costs than improving the well-being of the people they are mandated to protect. Avoiding fallacious reasoning involves making honest assessments on how self-reliance is perceived on the ground. For example, Elizabeth Ferris observed how refugees deemed self-reliant and no longer in need of aid are often teetering on the brink of poverty (2018). The dichotomy’s pernicious effects are also visible in Omata’s research on Liberian refugees in protracted exile in Ghana. While the UNHCR left the camp with a sense of achievement, underlining the burgeoning commerce, the refugees who could get by did so mainly through international remittances (Omata, 2017, p. 58). Clearly, skills-building training did not materialize into self-reliance, and refugees not benefitting from social networks sank into higher levels of vulnerability. The issue is that the UNHCR often sees refugees as “self-reliant” when they are living without external assistance (Omata, 2017), while it is clear that short-term initiatives do not yield sustainable results. Instead, withdrawal of relief should at best occur in a phased manner over an extended period of time. Furthermore, Sarah Meyer argues that efforts to foster an independent, sustainable living require more financial inputs at the beginning, not fewer (2016, p. 64). Funds are required to launch and establish income-generating activities, small businesses or invest in tools for agriculture. Self-reliance does not equal freedom from aid indeed. If self-reliance is an honest and desired objective, humanitarian assistance should in all logic be replaced by development assistance (Easton-Calabria, 2015).

## 2.5 Power Imbalances

Finally, there is an intrinsic hypocrisy about the whole concept. Refugee governance has decided, maybe before the objects themselves, that refugees will henceforth be “self-reliant.” At the same time, policy formulations oddly associate self-reliance to wishful thinking. That is, because, refugees are not exactly framed as “actors” but “actors to be.” In that context, vocational training and other socio-economic projects make for essential enablers. They are presented as prerequisites for refugees to regain

effective control of their lives. In some way, initiatives to foster “empowerment<sup>8</sup>” simultaneously signal that refugees are, currently, powerless. By claiming that refugees should now contribute, the humanitarian sector paradoxically conveys the message that they are not yet ready to help themselves.

More than just words, arbitrary narratives reveal asymmetric power relations within a system on the brink of failure (Doyel, 2022). By rebranding the way we should think of refugees, the higher instances reaffirm control upon a subgroup of people. Similarly, the rejection of responsibility by institutions (government and aid agencies) is a further reaffirmation of power structures over refugees (Krause and Schmidt, 2020, p. 35). This top-down approach is obvious in decision-making, where refugee participation has historically been close to non-existent. Moreover, Evan Easton-Calabria suggests that little has changed since it was claimed in a 1985 report policy group that “refugee participation may be the concept with the worst ratio of rhetoric to reality in the entire refugee assistance system” (RPG 1985, p. 104 as cited in Easton-Calabria, 2015, p. 429). In fact, she argues that contemporary programs<sup>9</sup> still operate with the mindset of delivering *for* and not truly *with* refugees. Collaborative initiatives to foster self-reliance, livelihoods and innovation have multiplied and yet, they remain embedded in top-down power relations. The UNHCR may have developed its own Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations (2006) but refugee involvement has been tokenistic or limited to data collection rather than design and implementation (Harrell and Hobbs, 2021, p. 13). The fact is that those sitting in the driving seat are refugee-serving staff, the private sphere, and academia, while refugees remain at the receiving end with no end in sight (Easton-Calabria, 2015, p. 430). Self-reliance strategies, it has been argued, can be seen as proxies for refugee participation in recent global refugee policy discourse (Duale, 2020, p. 3). In reality, not only does it lack substance, but I also argue, with underlying motives of self-reliance in mind, that refugee participation is more of a means than an end. While the purpose is to empower people to take control of their lives, the humanitarian family ironically perpetuates the vicious relationship of dominance. As Omata boldly states, UNHCR’s self-reliance motto “help refugees help themselves” could be rephrased as “help refugees help the international refugee regime” (2023, p. 8).

## 2.6 Closing Words

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<sup>8</sup> A concept repeatedly used in the 2005 Handbook for self-reliance

<sup>9</sup> Examples include the Transitional Solutions Initiative (2013), the UNHCR 2014–2018 Global Strategy for Livelihoods, the UNHCR’s Innovation Initiative (2012)

Policies do not exist in a vacuum, separated from wider economic contexts. We have seen, in fact, how refugee governance has been swept along by the currents of neoliberalism amid a dry financial state. Myopic, unproven self-reliance strategies are the product of moody interests from above. Krause and Schmidt go even further by arguing that self-reliance policies can be understood as “an expression of the regime’s helplessness to improve the social, political and legal conditions of refugees in host countries (2020, p. 38). Self-reliance is a panic move. While gambling on an unproven model showing little prospects for success, the humanitarian system tries to heal internal bleeding with yet another bandage.

While recognizing its flaws, I do support self-reliance as a desirable pathway. Bottom line is, refugees generally express their willingness to become self-reliant (Ferris, 2018; Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020, p. 18). In its definition, the UNHCR did well to integrate the notion of human dignity, which is the intrinsic value, indisputable and equal to every human being (Collste, 2014, p. 461). As such, preserving dignity means putting people at the heart of the debate. More than an inherent component, dignity is also to be understood as a quest for a decent existence, comprised of desirable conditions like healthcare or education, or, on the contrary, the absence of suffering (Collste, 2014, p. 461). And when people do not have the ability to make meaningful choices about their lives, their dignity is trampled.

On a practical level, there is a need to deconstruct structural approaches and listen to what self-reliance exactly means to the first people involved. Unregulated liberalism runs the risk of digging vulnerabilities that current economic rationales of self-reliance do not address. I hereby join Skran and Easton-Calabria’s call for a broadened understanding of self-reliance. With a multidimensional approach, a degree of malleability can be preserved to adequately respond to the needs and abilities of individuals, households, and communities. This multifactorial approach can include legal and political rights, as well as the recognition of networks as a social achievement of self-reliance. In that regard, the Self-Reliance Index (SRI) created by the Refugee self-reliance initiative (RSRI) is slowly gaining consensus, providing a promising framework across twelve domains of self-reliance (Kellie et al., 2022).

In the meantime, structural barriers need to be addressed. As history shows us, the potential of self-reliance is *dependent* on duty-bearers’ willingness to address legal barriers. Nevertheless, it remains more ethical and realistic to demand improvements from states than to expect refugees to flourish in repressive environments. As such, governments must be reminded of their responsibilities and commitments to foster right-based environments for refugees. This is a vital avenue for refugees but also the UNHCR to avoid being accused of condoning the stalemate into which they are pushing the refugees (Omata, 2023, p. 10).

In supporting self-reliance, I do not see the concept as a universal remedy, suitable to all contexts and individuals. Nor am I comfortable with schizophrenic narratives formulated in New York and Geneva. In any case, self-reliance should be understood as a pathway more than an objective. The lack of consensual indicators do not allow this yet, and self-reliance remains an ideal impossible to attain in essence. In fact, every individual or household is intertwined in networks of social dependencies and our lives are governed by the larger systems and circumstances that surround us. Self-reliance, as Omata names it, is a myth (2017). For lack of better options, self-reliance remains a valuable ally nonetheless to equip refugees with complementary solutions that can, if not provide a panacea, ease their path through rehabilitation. After all, how can we possibly debate the morality of helping people become independent from limited humanitarian relief?

## **Chapter 3: Protection of Refugees in Uganda**

Refugees are among the most vulnerable groups in the world. They are forced to leave their homes, exposing themselves to exploitation and extortion. Efforts to crystallize their protection in legal systems bore fruit in the aftermath of WWII, when millions of forcibly displaced people prompted states to convene on an international protection model (UNHCR, 2024a). This chapter presents refugee protection developments in legal systems at international, regional and national levels. It starts by specifying the determination of refugee status. In further presents the right to work and the freedom of movement, two rights fundamental to the pursuit of self-reliance. As this thesis focuses on Uganda, the following sections will explore international instruments and those existing in the African region and Uganda.

### **3.1 Refugee Status**

#### **3.1.1 Who is a Refugee?**

The question of refugees has been on the agenda since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 (Amnesty International, 2024)<sup>10</sup>. Article 14 is very explicit in that regard, stating that “everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”. Nevertheless,

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the refugee definition appears only three years later in the cornerstone of modern international refugee law: the 1951 Refugee Convention. Article 1 of the (also called) Geneva Convention defines a refugee as someone who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” Initially, the scope of the 1951 Convention was limited to “events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951” but geographical and temporal constraints were later eliminated in the 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2024a).

In spite of those adjustments, some regional voices remained critical of the Refugee Convention for its Eurocentric approach. It still did not address different realities elsewhere, particularly in Africa where displacement was mass in scale and stemming from internal conflicts (Viljoen, 2001). In fact, the 1967 protocol remained centered on a “well-founded fear” while ignoring other factors justifying international protection such as internal wars or natural disasters. As a response, the Organization of African Unity (OAU)<sup>11</sup>, among other regional frameworks<sup>12</sup>, supplemented the Refugee Convention with a contextualized instrument: the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. Adopted in 1969, it establishes regional standards to better respond to African realities, hereby expanding the subjective notion of “well-founded fear of being persecuted” to events “owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part of the whole of his country of origin or nationality” (UNHCR, 2024a). This development demonstrates the commitment of the OAU to the protection of human rights, specifically for refugees. Examples of refugees who have gained protection under the expanded definition include individuals fleeing from South Sudan and Somalia (Abebe et al., 2019).

Besides being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the ICESCR, Uganda is also a signatory to the OAU Convention and the Bangkok Principles on the Status and Treatment of Refugees (Ginn et al., 2022, p. 174). Uganda’s refugee law is firmly rooted in its national legislation through the Refugees Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations of 2010. This legislation aligns with

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<sup>11</sup> The OAU is rooted itself in the principles of Human Rights as evidenced by its founding Charter (1963), its advocacy for the elimination of colonialism and apartheid, and its establishment of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

<sup>12</sup> The OAU helped inform the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America and the 1994 League of Arab States’ Arab Convention on Regulating Status of Refugees in the Arab Countries

international standards while honoring the human rights provisions listed in Chapter 4 of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (RLP, 2019). Remarkably, the Refugee Act applies broader eligibility criteria as it encompasses the categories defined by the international and refugee conventions, but also includes explicitly<sup>13</sup> individuals fearing harm due to “sex” (art. 4 [a]) and “gender discriminating practices” (art. 4 [d]). In addition, Uganda notably grants *prima facie* recognition to refugees from Sudan, South Sudan and DRC (Africanews, 2024). The practice, widely acknowledged as shaped by the OAU Convention (Abebe, 2019), involves granting refugee status to an asylum seeker from a country solely based on their nationality, without the need for an individual assessment to determine if they meet the legal definition of a refugee (NRC, 2018).

### 3.1.2 Non-refoulement

The core principle in asylum and of international refugee law is non-refoulement, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom (UNHCR, 2024a). It has been defined in a number of international refugee instruments, both at the universal and regional levels. The principle is set forth in article 33 of the Refugee Convention, stating that “no Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

As a basic principle, non-refoulement is not subject to any reservation and is further replicated in regional frameworks (UNHCR, 1997). From the outset in Article II, the OAU Convention states that “no person shall be subjected by a Member State to measures such as rejection at the frontier, return or expulsion, which would compel him to return to or remain in a territory where his life, physical integrity or liberty would be threatened for the reasons set out in Article I, paragraphs 1 and 2.” — directly referring to its expanded definition of a refugee including situations of external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order. At national level, the 2006 Refugees Act devotes a broad and satisfying section to non-refoulement under “Extradition, return of refugee, *etc*” (section 42).

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<sup>13</sup> In the Geneva and OAU Conventions, gender-based discrimination falls under “membership of a particular social group.”

## 3.2 Right to Work

Self-reliance presupposes that solutions come from refugees' own resourcefulness. This is only partly true, as one person's right is another man's duty. As we have seen in chapter 1, refugees are dependent on national governments, the primary duty bearers, to obtain legal and practical access to work. When permitted to engage in safe and lawful work, that is, refugees can fulfill their basic needs for survival and recover aspects of their lives that have been disrupted by displacement (Jacobsen, 2014). In short, the right to work is key to access wage-earning opportunities, self-employment and the enjoyment of further human rights.

The right to work is a well-established principle in both international human rights law and refugee law. The right to work for *everyone* has been articulated in international human rights instruments in particular through the UDHR (art. 23) and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (art. 6). In Refugee law, the right to work has been repeatedly promoted from the 1951 Refugee Convention to the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (Ginn et al., 2022, p. 12). The UN Refugee Convention devotes an entire chapter to "gainful employment" in chapter III<sup>14</sup>. Unfortunately, many African ratifications were granted at the cost of reservations on socio-economic rights most conducive to self-reliance (UNHCR, 2024e). Article 17, notably, stipulating that refugees lawfully staying in an asylum state have the same right to access wage-earning employment as the most favored foreigner, holds the highest number of reservations (Ahimbisibwe, 2016, p. 40). This explains why recent soft-law instruments such as the New York Declaration and the Global Compacts on Refugees have reminded States to promote refugees' right to work.

The OAU Convention specific to Africa builds explicitly on the principles of the UN Refugee Convention. However, it does not replicate the same structured, detailed right-based approach. By failing to go through a comprehensive set of socio-economic rights, the OAU Convention is not conducive to effective refugee protection (Ahimbisibwe, 2016, p. 41). The right to work to all individuals is certainly defended in the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPHR) (art. 15). As a non-binding instrument, however, it can only do so little against the reservations to the Refugee Convention.

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<sup>14</sup> Including art. 17: right to engage in wage-earning employment, art. 18: right to self-employment, art. 19: right to practice liberal professions.

Uganda lodged a reservation to article 17 of the Refugee Convention, whereby it reserves the right to grant greater benefits to foreigners with whose governments it enters into specific agreements (Ginn et al., 2022, p. 175). Nevertheless, this is the limit of formal discrimination. Refugees in Uganda enjoy *de jure* right to engage in lawful employment, subject to obtaining work permits and complying with national labor laws. Section 29 of the Act states that “a recognized refugee shall receive at least the same treatment accorded to aliens generally in similar circumstance relating to” the right to have access to employment opportunities and engage in gainful employment (vi), “the right to engage in agriculture, industry, handicrafts, and commerce and establish commercial and industrial companies” (iv) and “the right to practice the profession of the refugee who holds qualifications recognized by the competent authorities in Uganda and who wishes to practice that profession” (v).

### 3.3 Rights at Work

The law alone is not enough to guarantee refugees’ access to the labor market. In fact, *de jure* right to work means little without *de facto* right to work. Laws are insufficient indeed if permit fees are exorbitant or access is fraught with bureaucratic obstacles. Conversely, signatory states do not systemically provide the best protection of rights (Zetter and Ruaudel, 2016). In some cases, protection may even be stronger in non-signatory states than in signatory states (Janmyr, 2020). In any case, governments must go beyond the law and implement concrete measures to ensure easy access to work permits. In doing so, duty-bearers must also address the refugees’ rights at work. That is, the inclusion of refugee workers in protections that ensure that work is safe, fair, and decent (Ginn et al., 2022, p. 16). These protections imply requirements on minimum wages, maximum working hours, workplace safety and worker well-being, prompt payment, legal aid, and the right to organize. These rights ensure that refugees can legally engage in employment and contribute to the economy while being protected under the law.

International and regional instruments encompass various protections and guarantees on the rights at work, such as the right to fair and equal employment opportunities safe and healthy working conditions<sup>15</sup> and the ability to join trade unions and engage in collective bargaining<sup>16</sup>. In Uganda, refugees are

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<sup>15</sup> UDHR art. 23, ICESCR art. 7, Refugee Convention art. 24, ACHPR art. 1

<sup>16</sup> ICESCR art. 8, Refugee Convention art. 17, ACHPR art. 10

generally not specifically mentioned as a distinct group in any national legislation. The law applied to Ugandans is therefore extended to refugees beyond the scope of the Refugees Act (ILO, 2023, p. 12). Refugee rights are thus regulated by domestic laws across various areas, including business registration, trade union and cooperative membership, as well as access to education and finance (ILO, 2023, p. 12).

### 3.4 Freedom of Movement

The right to work would be highly ineffective without freedom of movement, defined by the right of a person to be able to choose where to live and travel (Ginn et al., 2022, p. 16). In fact, the right to travel domestically and to choose one's place of residence is essential for pursuing gainful employment. It allows individuals to commute to a job, to support their livelihoods through market access and create a network of contacts conducive to business activity. Beyond the scope of employment, freedom of movement enables access to education, healthcare, family life, cultural and civic participation, personal security, justice, and overall well-being. Ensuring this freedom is fundamental to enabling individuals to lead fulfilling and dignified lives.

Globally, the freedom of movement is protected under human rights law through the UDHR (art. 13), the ICCPR (art. 12) and more specifically for refugees in the 1951 Refugee Convention (art. 26) and in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. Likewise, the freedom of movement has triggered strong reservations among African nations. From the UN Refugee Convention, three out of four African states parties placed reservations to the freedom of movement (art. 26) (Ahimbisibwe, 2016, p. 40). The lack of meaningful participation, integration and access to practical resources means that the Refugee Convention is often incapable of promoting self-reliance (Ahimbisibwe, 2016, p. 41). Furthermore, the OAU Convention may be credited with its contribution to fostering “open-door policies” among African countries (Abebe, 2019), but as explained in the previous section, it does not provide refugees with clear protections and rights. Similarly, the 1981 ACHPR does little to address that despite promoting freedom of movement and residence to all individuals within the borders of a state (art. 12).

Uganda lodged a reservation to article 13 of the Refugee Convention, whereby it reserves to itself right to abridge this provision with recourse of courts if it is in public interest. Section 30 of the Refugee Act explicitly states that refugees lawfully staying in Uganda have the right to freedom of movement. This right is subject indeed—applying to aliens generally in the same circumstances—to any restrictions that are necessary for national security, public order, public health, or public morals or the protection of the

rights and freedoms of others. A further restriction is contained in section 44 (2), stating that a refugee must apply for permission to reside in a location other than a designated refugee settlement.

Similarly to the right to work, the freedom of movement can only be safeguarded with concrete implementation on the ground. Refugees may still face barriers despite legal permits, including harassment or arrest from officials while on the move, encampment policies requiring exit passes, restrictions on areas of residence and curfews specific to refugees (Ginn et al., 2022, p. 47).

### 3.5 Closing Words

In conclusion, refugee status in international and regional law is governed by a combination of treaties and frameworks designed to protect individuals who are forced to flee their countries due to persecution, conflict, or violence. Although international and regional instruments exist to guarantee labor rights and freedom of movement, the commitment must be nuanced by numerous reservations among state parties. On the bright side, Uganda's legislation governing refugees in Uganda is "robust and broadly fit for purpose" (ILO, 2023). The 2006 Refugees Act is a progressive law that protects refugee rights and reflects its national, regional and international obligations (Ahimbisibwe, 2016). Regardless, *de jure* rights need to be enjoyed *de facto*. In order to safeguard them, policy and coordination efforts must be sustained on the long run among government agencies, international and local partners.

## Chapter 4: Case-study

### 4.1 Country Profile: Uganda's Refugee Context

#### 4.1.1 Key Facts

Uganda is the 6th largest refugee-hosting country in the world and the largest in Africa (JICA, 2024). As of 31 May 2024, Uganda hosted 1,644,870 refugees and 43,933 asylum seekers for a total of 1,688,803, comprised of 80% of women and children (UNHCR, 2024g). A vast majority of them originate

from South Sudan (56.%) and the DRC (31%) followed by various neighboring countries like Somalia (3.1%), Eritrea (3.0%), Burundi (2.6%), Sudan (2.2%), Rwanda (1.5%) and Ethiopia (0.8%). While a minority of refugees have self-settled in Kampala (9%), the vast majority (91%) lives in 13 refugee-hosting districts comprised of 30 designated settlements. Refugee-hosting areas are located mainly to the West Nile and Southwest regions, characterized by above-average levels of poverty and underdevelopment.

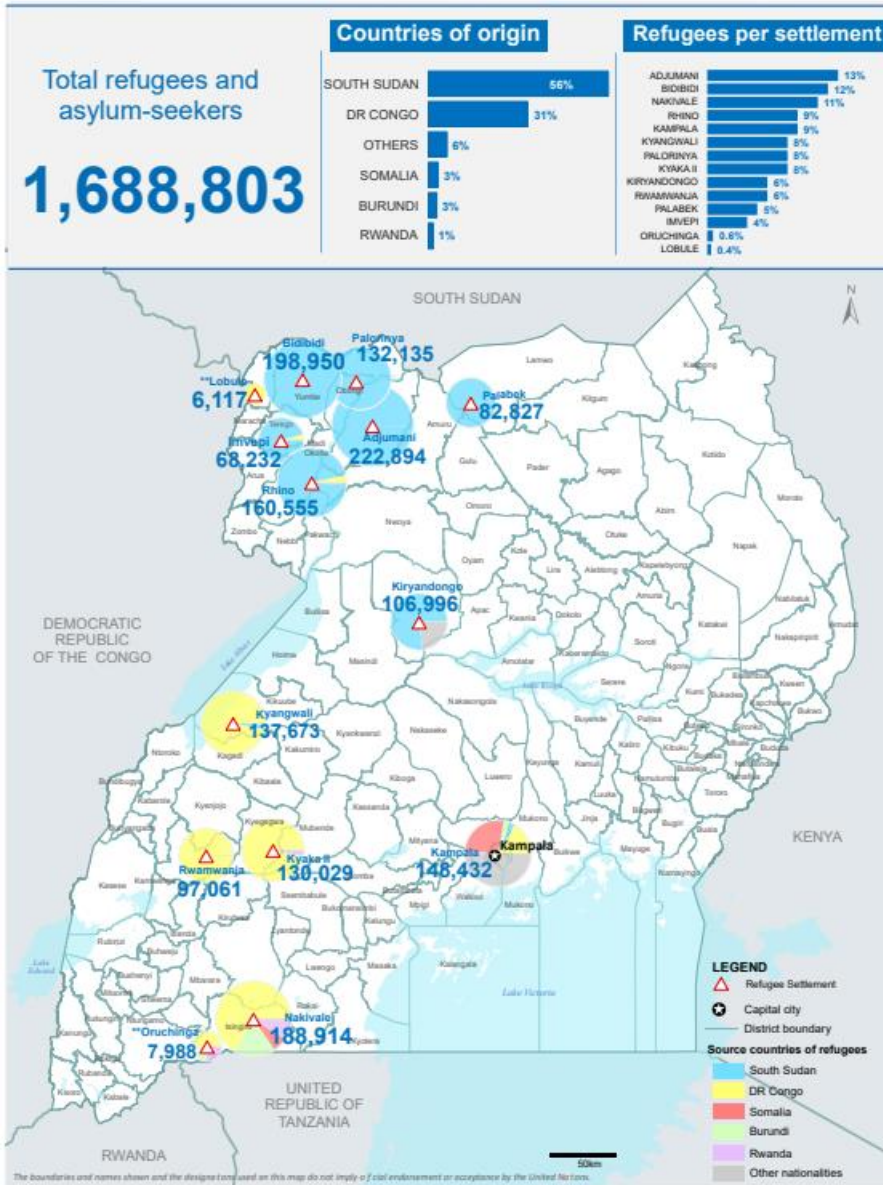
Uganda's refugee landscape has taken a dramatic turn since mid-2016. In the space of two years, large-scale influxes from South Sudan, DRC, and Somalia brought the number of refugees and asylum seekers from 300,000 to 1.5 million (UNHCR, 2024g). Uganda has maintained an open-door policy in the name of a shared experience of war and displacement (Mosel et al., 2020), although its 2017 Solidarity Summit failed to attract substantial financial support for burden sharing (Betts, 2021, p. 30). Finally, it should be mentioned that Uganda's refugee landscape is increasingly urbanized. Official figures indicate 148,432 refugees in Kampala and an urban refugee percentage of 9% of the country's refugee population (UNHCR, 2024g). The upward trend is consistent with the increasing phenomenon of self-settled refugees worldwide, aiming at urban areas mainly to secure better opportunities of employment, education and social services (Dryden-Peterson, 2006).



UGANDA - POPULATION DASHBOARD

ANNEX II - Map - Refugees and Asylum Seekers

31-May-2024



\*\* Oruchinga and Lobule symbols not to scale  
Population data: proGres (OPM) Author: UNHCR Representat on in Uganda Feedback: ugakaimu@unhcr.org For more info, please visit: www.ugandarefugees.org

Map showing the distribution of refugee settlements across Uganda. Source: (UNHCR, 2024d)

4.1.2 Strategical Developments

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees, and some aspects of Uganda’s self-reliance model are more than sixty years old (Betts, 2021). Ahimbisibwe (2018, as cited in Gingyera, 1998) states that the first refugees to inhabit Uganda’s settlements in the outlying regions were European prisoners of war following WWII. Due to independence and decolonization struggles, the settlement model was prolonged in the 1950s to offer protection to over a hundred thousands of Kenyans, Zairians, Sudanese and

Rwandans (Ahimbisibwe, 2018). Since the 1960s, Uganda's refugee-hosting policies have evolved from being highly restrictive to becoming some of the most progressive in the world (Mosel et al., 2020, p. 6). While the foundations were already there, however, the organized settlements did not always come with the socio-economic freedoms, as we know, today. Post WWII, refugees were granted *de facto* rights depending on political agendas of successive presidents, who saw the development of hinterlands either as an asset or a threat to authority building. Remarkably, the UNHCR already applauded and rewarded Uganda for its liberal policies during, in 1968 (Betts, 2021, p. 11). However, ensuring the well-being of refugees had little to do with philanthropy; besides local and national authority building, it mostly became a way to consolidate international legitimacy and attract international resources. On the question, Gidron and Hovil highlighted that Uganda's refugee policies "cannot be seen in isolation to national and international politics, which have fed off each other" (2018, p. 7). In the 1990s, President Yoweri Museveni made refugees "a development issue" (Betts, 2021, p. 21). Since his support base was concentrated in the southwest and West Nile regions, developing these areas was instrumental to consolidate his power. Concomitantly, budgetary constraints in the humanitarian sector made the developmental approach an appealing cost-effective idea, which was further precipitated by donor concerns about secondary migratory movements towards Europe (Betts, 2021, p. 28). National and international interests aligned helped formalize the settlement model through the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) in 1999, hereby reaffirming refugee integration through land allocation and public services on an equal footing with nationals. As presented in the previous chapter, the following 2006 Act grants refugees' access to social services, the right to work and the freedom of movement. They obtain the right to association and join unions although they must remain nonpolitical. Last but not least, refugees are entitled to international travel documents and the right to justice without discrimination. In contrast, the Ugandan refugee legislation does not grant refugee the right for citizenship, hereby emphasizing the need for self-reliance initiatives.

Further strategical developments have led to a "bricolage of policy frameworks" (Gidron and Hovil, 2018) under the umbrella of Uganda Vision 2040, to foster "a transformed Ugandan society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years" (NPA, 2013). In 2014, the GoU developed the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA), essentially incorporating the SRS into a new framework with development initiatives for the refugee host populations. Remarkably, the STA was integrated in the National Development Plan (NDP), thus integrating refugees into national planning (UNHCR, 2018). The STA was financed by the World Bank through the ReHoPe initiative (2015), which itself has been repackaged into the CRRF (2019), a multi-stakeholder approach striving to ease pressure on refugee-

hosting countries through self-reliance strategies. However, the failure of the 2017 Solidarity Summit fragilized relationships with the United Nations, and donor confidence has been severely undermined by the 2018 corruption scandal implicating both the GoU and UN agencies in the deliberate inflation of refugee numbers (Betts, 2021; UNHCR, 2018). Lately, severe underfunding and disinterest in longer-term programming have provoked, according to NGO workers, a “chronic state of emergency, despite it no longer being an emergency” (UNHCR, 2018, p. 31).

#### 4.1.3 Welcome to Nakivale

This paper focuses on refugee self-reliance in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Africa’s oldest refugee camp located in Isingiro District, southwestern Uganda. It was established in 1958 to accommodate Tutsi refugees fleeing the Hutu-initiated “social revolution” in neighboring Rwanda (Bjørkhaug, 2020, p. 268). Fast-forward 60 years and Nakivale has become Uganda’s third most populous “camp” with a number of 188,914 residents and 56,682 households (UNHCR, 2024d). The settlement covers an area of 185 square meters and is inhabited by primarily Congolese, Somali and Burundian populations. It is geographically distributed across three administrative zones, Base Camp, Rubondo and Juru, themselves divided in approximately 80 villages, 12 being populated by Uganda nationals. Refugees have their own representation system through Refugee Welfare Committees (RWCs), whose leaders are elected at the village, zone, and central level (GRI, 2023).

Today, Nakivale is administered by the government of Uganda through the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the UNHCR (Bjørkhaug, 2020, p. 268). OPM is responsible for the overall management of the camp, security and the allocation of land to refugees. The UNHCR coordinates protection, livelihood skills training and other basic services while the World Food Programme (WFP) manages the provision of food rations provision to refugees in a context of decreasing assistance. The two agencies cooperate with numerous national and international implementation partners to ensure the delivery of specific services like healthcare, education, water and sanitation, community services. Finally, the head of Nakivale settlement is OPM’s highest-ranked official: the settlement Commandant.



Welcome sign in Nakivale Refugee Settlement (Irakoze, 2023)

## 4.2 The State of Self-reliance

*“If you give me maize because I said I’m hungry... That’s what you think I need. But what if I need land?”<sup>17</sup>*

To be self-reliant, in the eyes of my interviewees, is

*To be independent, to believe in yourself to create your own path towards income, food; to feel empowered and improve your life standards through healthcare, education and protection for you and your family.<sup>18</sup>*

With independence being strongly correlated to income-generating activities, self-reliance retains a considerable economic focus. That said, the notion of dependency referred essentially to “*outside*”<sup>19</sup> actors, for example INGOs and other “*white people*”<sup>20</sup>, less so to family members or community members. This suggests that dependency to inner networks is *socially* acceptable and therefore, not subject to stigmatization. Moreover, access to social services retained a considerable focus among my interviewees. While gaining independence remains central to self-reliance, accessing services conducive to human development certainly is a by-product of it. Finally, my respondents made emphasized the importance to build confidence and self-esteem in their personal development, both as a result and a means towards self-reliance. The importance of self-belief was linked especially to confident engagement in social interactions and in the pursue of economic goals. It was also most explicit among female respondents.

Women referred several times on issues related to gender-based violence (GBV). Although the women interviewed did not explicitly link protection to the definition of self-reliance, I included protection as a main concern expressed by refugees. As such, the definition built around four respondents differs only slightly from the UNHCR definition<sup>21</sup>. My participants did not transmit the idea of “sustainability” in their understanding of self-reliance. Moreover, the reference to the “community” was not that obvious

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<sup>17</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>18</sup> See Annex 3 for the development of the self-reliance definition.

<sup>19</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>20</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>21</sup> *The social and economic ability of an individual, household or community to meet basic needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity. (UNHCR)*

although mention was made of the family circle. Finally, the paramount value of dignity is arguably conveyed through notions of self-belief and the longing to improve one's own living standards.

*Well, then, are you self-reliant?*

Respondents were unanimous: the majority of refugees in Nakivale are *not* self-reliant. “About 5% are living in self-reliance mode, only depending on themselves and no longer receiving food aid or money from the World Food Programme.”<sup>22</sup> Another respondent added that “most people are like zombies, they have nothing to do around. Most of them understand the concept but they tell you there is no way for them to become self-reliant.”<sup>23</sup>

Individual answers of my participants exposed the stigma attached to not being self-reliant. In fact, this was made clear by their tone and body language used. On the one hand, participants replying with the negative showed clear signs of discomfort. They gave timid responses, accompanied by evasive glances and embarrassed laughter. For example, a respondent complemented his initial “no” by the—unconvincing—hope to become self-reliant “*maybe in a couple of years...*”<sup>24</sup> Then, a second participant uttered an almost imperceptible “*Yes... Trying...*”<sup>25</sup>, which rather suggests the opposite is true. At the other end of the spectrum, the only “*Yes*”<sup>26</sup> I received was firm, convincing and manifested different times throughout our discussion.

As it turns out, that same respondent is the biggest supporter of the self-reliance “*philosophy*.”<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, his understanding is driven by mostly economical means, backed by mindsets of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship. In other words, the economical understanding of self-reliance is endorsed by the only respondent successful at sustaining himself independently. Meanwhile, the other respondents expressed rather hopelessness at an idea that “*does not make any sense*.”<sup>28</sup> In any case, this first round of questions highlighted a form of embarrassment at admitting oneself as not self-reliant.

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<sup>22</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>23</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>24</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>25</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>26</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>27</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>28</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

#### 4.2.1 Aid Dependency

As a general rule, WFP assists new arrivals to Nakivale on a monthly basis with consumable items (food and water). But for some years now, the vast majority of refugees have started receiving assistance through cash-based transfers, currently worth around UGX 12,000 (USD 3).

Whether food or cash, aid is not enough to go through the month. However small, that contribution is still considered “*vital*” by most respondents, and the prevailing feeling is that WFP is doing their best and that things are better than in recent years. In attempt to manage funding cuts, the monthly cash assistance dropped to as low as UGX 9,000 per person in 2020. In 2021, WFP applied a needs-based assessment approach whereby refugees identified as vulnerable would benefit from higher levels of assistance to the detriment of others. Refugees were assigned a category number from 1 to 3 according to their assessed vulnerability level (Neiman and Titeca, 2023). That prioritization policy was deemed “*unfair*”<sup>29</sup> by a respondent, which is an opinion I share since self-reliance is understood mainly through individual economic means. In fact, a woman may be assessed self-reliant due to her income-generating activity, but that in itself would not necessarily provide the right healthcare to her sick husband, or enable her to place her children to a faraway school (Kalu et al., 2021, p. 9). The unfairness was exacerbated by wrong or outdated data placing refugees in erroneous categories. Finally, the categorization policy also triggered disastrous effect on “crime, prostitution, sexual abuse, and child marriages” (Neiman and Titeca, 2023). Altogether, refugees show some understanding for the sector’s budget constraints. “*They are trying to make the best out of a bad situation*”<sup>30</sup>, is something I heard a lot despite the monthly aid being down to survival standards. To top it all off, gradual deprivation has attracted collateral adverse effects in the settlement. “*They broke into my house while I was at church*”<sup>31</sup>, testified one respondent. Theft, in fact, is growing security concern for refugees in the face of inadequate support.

While the system is failing them, refugees have resorted to creative coping strategies. Some of them unfold on food distribution day, a key one in the refugee calendar. As soon they have collected their ration, some refugees sell or trade part of it to acquire soap and other assets that they cannot otherwise obtain. This strategy poses questions as food deprivation can exacerbate nutritional deficiencies of already restricted rations. Moreover, Nakivale attracts many people on distribution day as refugees return from urban areas to collect food rations. In fact, refugees are allowed to use their freedom of movement

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<sup>29</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>30</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>31</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

to seek opportunities outside of the settlement. That said, eligibility to hand-outs remains tied to registration at the settlement. As a bypass method, many refugees decide to live in urban areas, but commute back on distribution day to collect their food ration or to proceed to the quarterly verification obligation of their cash-based transfer card. One respondent called aid a “*lifesaver*,”<sup>32</sup> bearing in mind that two months can go by between income-generating tasks. “*I have 6 people on my ration card. Most of my family stays in Kampala. The little money I get from there really helps me out. A total of 20 dollars can push me to another month.*”<sup>33</sup>

This highlights two important points. Firstly, refugees use freedom of movement to their advantage, and in recent years, this right has been made easier and safer from practical barriers and discrimination through a refugee ID. However, removing aid entitlements to refugees residing outside of the settlement is a devious limitation to the freedom of movement. Reading between the lines, *de jure* freedom of movement is tarnished by a restriction that makes *de facto* freedom ambiguous. Besides, the exclusion is discriminatory in nature and based on the assumption that urban refugees enjoy better living conditions. However, urban refugees may be just as vulnerable, if not more so, than those in settlements. (Dryden-Peterson, 2006). They generally suffer from marginalization, discrimination, the cost of rent, violence and poor access to rights and services, as well as work permits and business licenses (Krause and Gato, 2017, p. 79; Monteith et al., 2017). On the other hand, relocation outside of the settlement is in theory subject to formal authorization by OPM, as stated in section 44 (2) of the Refugee Act. However, in contrast to the previous observation, what is in fact a *de jure* restriction is rarely applied *de facto*.

Secondly, the coping strategy reveals the importance of social networks in building self-reliance. In addition to monthly cash, many refugees receive remittances as a main livelihoods source from contacts and family members earning better incomes in Kampala (Omata and Kaplan, 2013). Mutual financial assistance is particularly common within the Somali community, characterized by sophisticated social networks (Betts et al., 2019). Most Somalis for that matter live within one single village located in Base Camp, Nakivale (Omata and Kaplan, 2013). This also applies to my Somali respondent, who remained lucid when commenting about his ration card that “*you cannot really say it’s part of self-reliance because then again, you rely on somebody else.*”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>33</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>34</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

In contrast, benefitting from formal aid does not necessarily make a refugee dependent. For example, my only respondent claiming to be self-reliant keeps benefitting from monthly cash assistance. He insisted that it does not make him dependent, as “*refugees cannot survive on 3 dollars.*”<sup>35</sup> This shows the subtle relationship that refugees have with aid and dependency. In practice, a non-self-reliant refugee could be cut off from aid while depending on remittances sent from families and communities abroad or in urban areas, while a self-reliant refugee could benefit from cash allowance without experiencing dependence. As such, the duality between self-reliance and expenditure dominating global narratives is not experienced in the same way on the ground. Dependency turns out to be a malleable concept among refugees whereby it is less tied to the reception of hand-outs than to the way refugees navigate within their given context. Although dependency is a key criterion in the refugee definition of self-reliance, it remains a relative concept that does not echo the governing dichotomy between self-reliance and expenditures.

#### 4.2.2 The land allocation model: an infertile promise?

The Ugandan self-reliance model is land-based. Once they have been granted refugee status—which happens rather quickly—refugees are allocated a plot of land by OPM in accordance with the Refugee Act. This is arguably Uganda’s flagship measure, whereby refugees build self-reliance through food, nutrition and income security. They are expected to engage in agricultural livelihoods, producing consumable crops surpluses for resale. In fact, all my respondents were given a plot of land plus basic equipment like saucepans, plastic sheeting, a machete, plastic plates, jerrycans, basins, in numbers according to the family size. However, the discussion revealed that the policy falls short of its promises to deliver sustainable livelihoods. The shortcomings developed below include lack of assets, erroneous assumptions and the fragile social coexistence with Ugandan communities. That said, all three arguments have a common denominator: land scarcity, driven by local and refugee population growths.

##### 4.2.2.1 Land Profitability

More people, less land. Inevitably, availability has suffered from the constant influx of refugees and the growing local population. According to a UNHCR report on Nakivale, between one and two acres of land is necessary for self-reliance (Weaver, 2020, p. 8). In 2019, Alexander Betts et al. suggested that shelter plots are now generally 15m x 20m. Reduction in the land surface was confirmed by one respondent, whom I was video calling from his shelter plot. He reacted to my question with a self-

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<sup>35</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

deprecating chuckle, adding: “*they really offer ... a plot of land ... let’s say ... about 15 by 10. You can do any activity on an empty, unused land but it is not at all big.*”<sup>36</sup> In fact, land size is a very common critique of the allocation scheme, deemed both generous and insufficient for livelihoods. The fact is that the majority of refugee households have access to land, but most of them having cultivated it deemed it insufficient to provide food for their entire household (88%), either because it was too small or ill-suited for crops (Meskers, 2019, p. 2). Moreover, against the backdrop of land scarcity, it is not uncommon for OPM to reallocate already given plots to newcomers. The same participant mentioned a fellow refugee who recently had part of his farming land redistributed to newcomers. “*He said: “they settled people on the land where I was supposed to get food for this season. What am I going to do when farming is the best thing that I can do?”*”<sup>37</sup>

At any moment, OPM can reallocate land to newcomers. These governmental practices, if repeated and systemized, understandably deter refugees from embarking on any agricultural activity. Moreover, additional factors influence the unpredictability of land-based livelihoods. Size aside, over-farming has decreased land fertility. The same piece of land may have been exploited for over a decade, and as result, soil quality has deteriorated leading to poorer harvests (Betts et al., 2019, p. 20). Additionally, Uganda is exposed to climate variability, which leads to unreliable rainfall, floods and droughts (UNDP, 2018 p. 8). Climate-related complaints were indeed striking among my participants and some already look to a future beyond agriculture. One respondent plans to open a food depot because “*there is a lot of sunshine in Uganda. We got nothing from our garden and the food challenge will always be here. I know it will work.*”<sup>38</sup> Most strikingly, the most resigned response came from a second participant who went as far as calling Nakivale’s farming days “*a thing from the past.*”<sup>39</sup>

Even if land were abundant and profitable, there is the issue of an “*awful lack of markets.*”<sup>40</sup> Nakivale is located in a rural area, approximately 45 kilometers away from the nearest major road in Mbarara, which makes it challenging to reach urban centers with larger markets. Even within Nakivale, allocated land is geographically remote, involving sometimes 30 minutes of transport to connect Nakivale’s administrative and economic center, Base Camp. With a high percentage of refugees engaging in agriculture within the settlement, the market is inevitably saturated and selling prices are low. “*Markets,*

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<sup>36</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>37</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>38</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>39</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>40</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

*there are few connections to markets! This time, they are harvesting beans. If I go to the village, I will go and buy 1 kg at 1500. Outside, that 1 kg they buy it at 6000!”<sup>41</sup>*

Occasionally, Ugandan traders purchase and resell crops in Mbarara or Kampala through middlemen inside Nakivale (Omata and Kaplan, 2013; Idris, 2020). Despite filling the missing link, these initiatives generate little profit and incentives for farmers to cultivate. As long as government and development actors fail to structurally support refugees with viable market linkages, there will be little prospects of self-reliance through agricultural livelihoods.

#### 4.2.2.2 Assumptions

Secondly, Ugandan policies are based on the premise that refugees have the ability and willingness to engage in agriculture (Betts et al., 2019). Above 70% of the population in Isingiro is engaged in small-scale subsistence farming (Weaver, 2020, p. 40). While the suggestion for refugees to engage in mainstream livelihood activities appears logical, it relies on two detrimental assumptions.

On the one hand, expecting refugees to work the land is a denial of the various coexisting identities in Nakivale. Not all nationalities, ethnicity, and populations traditionally engage in farming for livelihoods, nor do they have the desire to cultivate. Somalis, typically, do not possess farming skills. My Somali respondent stated in that regard that “*land is home. I built it with a friend. My people don’t traditionally engage in agriculture.*”<sup>42</sup> Instead, Somalis engage more typically in trade and other more profitable commercial businesses. The freedom of movement is therefore much more valuable than land to cultivate, as Somalis rely on their mobility to conduct business and engage freely in transnational and international supply chains (Betts et al., 2019, p. 20). Additionally, social networks are key enablers of livelihoods once more, facilitating access to services and markets (U-Learn, 2023, p. 4).

At the other end of the spectrum, Congolese’ livelihoods traditionally revolve around land. In Nakivale, they are the highest refugee population engaged in rural, labor-intensive work. However, the land allocation model is not sufficiently supported by training. While many Congolese see value in land, there is a deep-rooted misconception that they possess the knowledge to dig it.

*If they could stop assuming that we know. They give out the land but they don’t give the skills. Land is given but few people have the ability to use it. I’m from a village, all I know is how to grow sweet potatoes. I know the old ways, but maybe there are modern strategies to multiply the harvests.*

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<sup>41</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>42</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

*Here is what they do: Hairdressing, Tailoring, welding. Those things. But not agriculture and rearing which are the main, main source of life in Nakivale!*<sup>43</sup>

This comment resonates with a UN report, stating that “across refugee-hosting districts, and clearly evidenced in Isingiro District and Nakivale settlement, agriculture is characterized by low production and productivity, limited access to agriculture technologies, tools and quality assets, high vulnerability to climate change and high post-harvest losses” (Weaver, 2020, p. 9). Another study in the northern settlements showed that the lack of innovative modern technologies prevented more sustainable, resilient and productive farming (UNDP, 2018, p. 8). The usage of improved seeds, fertilizers and irrigation systems, to name a few, are not mainstreamed yet essential to optimize productivity.

*“Even if there were sufficient land and markets... You must buy insecticides, pesticides for the treatment of your garden... But again, the money that you got is not enough.”*<sup>44</sup>

Without financial support, most techniques remain unavailable or unaffordable for refugees. In any case, the knowledge gap combined with lagging technology hampers refugees’ capabilities to optimize and scale agricultural production, as well as mitigate the effect of environmental changes.

#### 4.2.2.3 Social Coexistence

Last but not least, the allocation scheme puts a strain on social coexistence with the host populations. Two participants claimed that they were evicted from their plot of land:

*“I got my status and then they gave me land where I could construct but it was so far away. It was in the bush—it clearly was in matooke plantations. I didn’t stay there because the owner came and chased me away.”*<sup>45</sup>

*“You can’t construct because it’s someone’s garden. If you construct on it, people come with panga machetes and chase you away. And if you resist, the Bahimas, they can even kill you.”*<sup>46</sup>

These testimonies are all the more alarming as they predate 2010, at a time when the refugee population strain on local resources was not as strong as it is today. My respondents assured me that eviction cases still occur and more so nowadays due to increased population pressure. In Uganda, relationships between

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<sup>43</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>44</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>45</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>46</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

refugees and local populations have often been described as cordial (Vancluysen, 2021; Mosel et al., 2020). Nakivale's borders are porous, and relations with the few Ugandans living in or moving to the center on a day-to-day basis to conduct business is said to be "*uncomplicated*."<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, coexistence is more tense with Ugandans living inside the settlement boundaries, claiming to be autochthonous (Bjørkhaug, 2020, p. 269). In fact, land ownership is a complex issue in Uganda, and disagreements have existed since the early days of Nakivale. The ambiguity was evidenced by contradictions among my participants—some claiming that land belongs to the government, other to the communities or even to the UNHCR. Even more confusing, ODI reports that refugees in Nakivale are allocated government-gazetted land, while the UNHCR reports that “contrary to verbal reports, there may be no formal gazetting on the land on which Nakivale sits” (Mosel et al., 2020, p. 20; Weaver, 2020, p. 68). For his part, Betts et al. reported on the widespread misconception among refugees believing in their ownership rights of land, although non-citizens are only permitted to lease land (Betts et al., 2019, p. 23; Meskers, 2019, p. 21). Nevertheless, in the context of land scarcity, refugees have resorted to renting land parcels, from nationals but in bigger part from other refugees (Meskers, 2019, p. 23).

In reality, land tenure in Uganda is 80% communal land, which implies the absence of formal documentation or land registry to own and prove ownership (Weaver, 2020, p. 68). Citizens are landowners under Ugandan law, which means that land disputes are settled amicably through resettlement or monetary compensation. In the case of Nakivale, settlement boundaries have not been clearly drawn nor formally registered by the government and as such, the latter has no legal claim of ownership under Ugandan law. Due to a lack of consensus, stakeholders navigate in a gray area whereby host populations may be labeled as illegal settlers by the government. Ingunn Bjørkhaug has documented cases of expropriation acts against nationals to make way for refugees, accompanied at times by the destruction of their properties and plantations (2020, p. 272).

In Nakivale, refugees and Ugandans have a relatively peaceful history. However, the ever-increasing influx has multiplied frictions over arable and grazing land, water, forest, and other resources (Bjørkhaug, 2020, p. 268). By allocating their land to refugees, there is a growing perception among the population that OPM is protecting the interests of the refugees at their expense. Below, I will analyze what that means for refugees' protection concerns.

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<sup>47</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

### 4.2.3 Protection

The protection mandate is held by OPM and the UNHCR, collaborating with international and national non-governmental organizations to ensure the safety, rights, and well-being of refugees. However, all my respondents denounced a shocking lack of protection, both for conflicts involving local populations and refugees. OPM has become a distrusted institution in the eyes of refugees in its capacity to deal with violence, including gender-based violence, theft, and other security threats within the settlement.

Firstly, OPM does not guarantee land security for refugees. Upon allocation, refugees are not provided any official document legitimizing their presence, paving the way for contestation and insecurity. Moreover, OPM shows little interest or ability to resolve subsequent land disputes. By the look of it, OPM is involved in reverse power imbalances with stakeholders: both with regard to local populations, against whom they can do little to retain land, and with regard to refugees, whose safety becomes of secondary importance.

*“When the government is there, they don’t show up. When the police is gone already ... that’s when they come and chase the people away who have been given the land. So, it’s a big risk. There’s no one who can actually build his life to remain there.”<sup>48</sup>*

Without arbitration, refugees often end up in the negotiator role to retain their plot of land. As they have little weight in the balance against local communities, many leave indefinitely. And since no formal documentation is attached to the plots of land, refugees lose their entitlement. Cases often remain unresolved, only to be replicated with future refugee arrivals.

The land allocation model poses further threats to physical safety. Scarcity of land means that plots are distributed further and further away from Nakivale Center. For many refugees, this means considerable transportation times and costs. For women, this means increased exposure to gender-based violence:

*“If I can’t pay for transportation, I need to walk 20 kilometers to access my land. There are no houses, only bush. There is not enough security for that. Sometimes, there are cowboys.”*

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<sup>48</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

*[Interviewer: cowboys?] Yeah, cowboys! They rape women. There were also these aggressions being done by the host community, whereby if you are a woman and they find you in the garden, they rape you and cut you with pangas. It happens!”<sup>49</sup>*

Physical and sexual violence against women in Nakivale is a serious issue posing significant risks to their safety and well-being. Similarly, while deforestation is an environmental concern, the depletion of natural resources causes spillover effects on their physical security. To gather firewood, women and girls have to walk longer distances and expose themselves to assaults. Last but not least, domestic violence and vulnerabilities stemming from early marriage are further deep-rooted concerns for many refugee women in the settlement. Once again, victims feel they cannot rely on OPM to support them in their complaints: “*They told us to collect firewood, in groups!*”<sup>50</sup> said one female respondent in disbelief. In short, participants expressed abandonment from formal protection services in the face of systemic crime. Victims of physical and sexual violence do not feel heard and complaints remain unresolved. Among refugees, feelings of impunity and injustice are rampant. Over time, refugees have dangerously accommodated to deception and inefficiency of formal services. Absence of legal pathways has progressively led to report fatigue among refugees who, by keeping quiet instead, perpetuate a culture of abuse and violence.

*“They have had enough of reporting. For you to just give a statement, they ask you for money. For you to just get the paper document to go to the hospital, you have to give money. You go to the police, they pretend like they didn’t hear anything. There is no justice. They don’t care what happens.”<sup>51</sup>*

On the other hand, my research shows that refugees are not always informed about the processes and mechanisms available for addressing their protection concerns. Due to low education and literacy levels, victims of violence are not all aware of what to do or who to consult.

*“There are two sorts of people in the settlement: the illiterate and the literate. If someone comes to talk to me, I know how I can support them because I have some education about consequences. I know maybe*

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<sup>49</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>50</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>51</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

*a friend who can go and talk to the police and they get help. But these people who are not educated, they don't know.*"<sup>52</sup>

As my research shows, social networks play a strong role in addressing protection concerns as well. Knowing the right person helps navigating complex systems and access assistance where formal assistance fails. The danger, however, is that refugees involved in protection of others risk becoming targets themselves, as “*choosing a side is exposing you to adversity as well.*”<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, the protection landscape in Nakivale is a vicious circle whereby victims of violence are handed over to a system that not only abandons them, but also creates vulnerabilities in the form of reprisals against those willing to fill the gap. Finally, in addition to the lack of legal pathways, respondents expressed the wish for more psychological assistance to help them deal with trauma, stress and insecurity. In that regard, my research also highlights the role played by civil society such as women refugee groups for moral support. Additionally, the Church was cited several times as a key player to accommodate refugees for several years after they have been chased from their allocated land.

While violence is not imputable to the land allocation model only, this system exposes and exacerbates it. Systemic physical and sexual violence in the settlement are not properly addressed. To put an end to impunity, OPM must regain the trust of victims of abuse and, to do so, must fully assume its role as an arbitrator. In a climate of permanent insecurity, refugees, particularly women, will otherwise remain vulnerable in all their efforts to achieve self-reliance.

#### 4.2.4 Alternative Livelihoods

Self-reliance is mainly understood and achieved through economic means. Unfortunately, a joint research conducted by REACH and NRC shows that all households in Ugandan refugee settlements struggle to earn enough money (Meskers, 2019, p. 30). While agriculture is the dominant source of income in Nakivale, farming alone does not ensure food security nor sustainable livelihoods. Alternatively, many refugees wish to engage in alternative forms of livelihoods. Whether the opportunities available are conducive to economic self-reliance is what this sub-chapter seeks to address.

Within the settlement, there is a lack of stable and lasting job opportunities. Respondents rely on short-term contract and tasks when called upon by international organizations or even OPM. Refugees are

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<sup>52</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>53</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

sporadically hired as interpreters, incentive workers for INGOS or even support staff for OPM. With day tasks averaging UGX 10,000 (USD 3), activities are not considered lucrative. “*It does not bring control over your life, but it can push you to another month.*”<sup>54</sup> Otherwise, reaching qualified positions is complexified by language barriers and poor recognition of foreign diploma and skills acquired in the country or origin, although this barrier is more pronounced in urban areas (Vemuru, 2016, p. 42). Additionally, refugees may be guaranteed the right to work, but obtaining documentation and work permits from the GoU to access formal employment and establish businesses remains a significant challenge due to the lengthy and complicated process (U-Learn, 2023, p. 28).

The labor market in the settlement is thin with opportunities few and far between. To some extent, this has led to a great deal of competition and discrimination concerns. For example, refugees are sometimes hired as facilitators on behalf of organizations to conduct polls or training whereby they are given the task to select participants among the refugee population. This has attracted nepotism practices whereby friends and family members are favored. Moreover, refugees express a growing feeling of discrimination against Ugandans when looking for jobs. In addition, women report a growing feeling of gender discrimination in the job search. On the topic, a previously conducted research established that “refugee women face discrimination in accessing productive resources, land, credit, employment and self-employment opportunities, which increases female refugees’ exposure to risk” (Ruau del & Morrison-Métois, 2017, p. 11). Vulnerable refugees unable to support themselves and their families may resort to survival strategies, including transactional sex. One respondent confessed engaging in prostitution at the lowest point of her refugee life, adding that “*I cannot even pretend I know who the father of my child is.*”<sup>55</sup> In addition, women usually end-up having to balance wage-earning activities with domestic responsibilities (Nilsen, 2023, p. 67). That was echoed by one participant claiming that while fetching firewood or traveling to her land, she was worried about her children staying at home alone, not knowing what could happen to them. Recent studies have shown that mothers use their contacts and social networks as coping mechanisms to help each other deal with those dilemmas. This, in turn, emphasizes once more the interdependencies of economic livelihoods with a social dimension, still largely underestimated in the ability of refugees and their households to achieve self-reliance (Nilsen, 2023, p. 67).

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<sup>54</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>55</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

Nakivale’s “business district”, Base Camp, is packed with vibrant markets, small shops, restaurants, hair salons, and guesthouses (Bjørkhaug, 2020). As established before, Somalis value mobility rights as they are conducive to better economic strategies than might otherwise be unavailable or expensive for their business (Betts et al., 2019). For example, Somali trade networks between Kampala and Nakivale settlement appear to be particularly dense (Omata and Kaplan, 2013, p. 15). My respondents, too, are full of entrepreneurial ideas, ranging from running food depots to internet cafes and primary schools. However, starting a business in the settlement requires overcoming significant challenges. The main barriers they face preventing them from bringing their business projects to fruition are skill-building and capital. This finding is backed by the joint REACH-NRC study, showing that the three top income-generating challenges for refugee households are poor access to credit to start or continue a business (62%), lack of work opportunities (61%), followed by the lack of skills (44%) (Meskers, 2019, p. 32). These three components will be addressed below through the delivery of training at the vocational center, the financing options available and the potential for contractual work with the private sector.

#### 4.2.4.1 Vocational Training

Running a business requires specific qualifications. To this end, humanitarian assistance in Nakivale is operationalized through a set of training at its vocational center. However, the modus operandi of UNHCR and its implementing partners triggered vivid criticism during my interviews. The center’s remoteness and the sole use of English as the instruction language were quickly cited as barriers for refugees. Moreover, there are mixed feelings about the priority system in favor of vulnerable groups, as priority to enroll “*is given to orphans, school drop-outs, those leaving marriage and GBV survivors.*”<sup>56</sup> Women make up the majority of the beneficiaries (Easton-Calabria, 2022), which is applauded by the first concerned, wary about the harmful effects of lack of education leading to early marriages, but also a source of irritation by “*discriminated*”<sup>57</sup> men, expected to reach self-reliance while benefitting from fewer resources. Target groups are products of international donor interest, prioritizing children and women in precarious situations (de Raaij, 2020, p. 57). The top-down approach, nevertheless, was more strikingly felt throughout the lack of consultation that refugees experience at the vocational center.

In fact, the biggest drawback of the training center according to my respondents is the mismatch between offer and demand. The training mentioned during our discussions include hairdressing, tailoring,

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<sup>56</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>57</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

weaving, knitting, welding. *“They are targeting grandmothers and single mothers!”*<sup>58</sup> commented a respondent vividly. In fact, my respondents were unanimous about the lack of offers tailored to the participants. The implementing partner showed no willingness to include their needs, suggestions let alone take into account their former skills acquired. As a result, training at the vocational center is widely perceived as a rigid, depersonalized—not to mention useless—process.

In their attempt to challenge the status quo, two refugees came up against the inflexible bureaucracy. *“They said you must study for this course because they are going to pay for this course. Why study something I don’t want?”*<sup>59</sup> A second refugee pushed for more advanced computer courses than the basic ones on offer, but stumbled against a similar degree of fatality: *“They said: no this is what we are supposed to implement under UNHCR here. We can only do what we are mandated to do.”*<sup>60</sup> Many refugees feel let down by a system whereby they *“learn what they [UNHCR] want them to learn.”*<sup>61</sup> *“They don’t want us to improve, claimed one respondent. There is a mentality to limit refugees’ skills, maybe to prevent competition between refugees and local communities.”*<sup>62</sup> The current system is counterproductive at best, vicious at worst. How can refugees become “actors” if they barely have a say in their own learning path?

Livelihoods are high on the self-reliance agenda. However, it is irresponsible to ask refugees to achieve economic security under the threat of reduced aid, if programs are not better tailored to their needs, skills and ideas. By linking self-reliance to a certain degree of self-confidence, my respondents clearly expressed the need to determine their own pathways. However, building belief is illusory under the current generalized, directive system, limiting human development. To be meaningful, livelihood assistance must serve the so-called actors by supporting initiatives they have chosen for themselves. Alexander Betts has written extensively on refugees’ ability to innovate (Betts et al., 2015, p. 3). Refugees show strong innovative entrepreneurship, including the use and adaptation of technology. But to be materialized in action, innovation must be accompanied by enabling environments that support economic autonomy. At a structural level, this means putting refugees at the center of decisions that affect them. Including their aspirations in the learning process is vital for them to feel involved and supported towards confidence and self-reliance.

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<sup>58</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>59</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>60</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>61</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>62</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

#### 4.2.4.2 Access to Financial Services

Unfortunately, completing a training course does not mean getting a job. A refugee may have acquired the skills, the land, even found market opportunities. Still, one major obstacle remains: capital.

*“Where am I going to get the 20k to start my project? Banks set conditions to give out a loan but I don’t have a motorcycle, I don’t have a bike, not even my land which is from OPM. You give me the skills and just leave me lying over here!”<sup>63</sup>*

Access to seed funding is a significant challenge for refugee farmers and other entrepreneurs. Free courses are of little use indeed without capital to launch a project. Opportunity Bank was mentioned several times as the bank of reference in Nakivale. The institution takes great pride in being the first “humanitarian bank” providing “affordable financial solutions,” training on financial literacy and support for agricultural projects as well as child-centered development centers (Kabayo, 2023). However, they may have higher barriers to access due to formal requirements and credit assessments. At a smaller scale, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are multiplying in Nakivale. They are small community-based groups providing small loans from members’ savings, offering an accessible option for credit (“Home”, 2024). The downside, however, is that loans are rather small and meant for immediate or short-term needs. Then, UPSHIFT, a joint ILO and UNICEF initiative, was also mentioned during my discussions. The program aims to fill the gap by offering alternative learning, skilling pathways and a seed-funding solutions. However, rewards for convincing projects are capped at USD 150, which for most businesses will rather be a relief than a substantive game changer (“UPSHIFT”, 2022).

Various initiatives for financial access have set up and developed in Nakivale. On the topic, the Head of Operations of a refugee-led organization (RLO) assured me that financial inclusion is no longer something refugees have to worry about. Next to Opportunity Bank, several commercial banks have recently set up business, offering various financial products and services. Refugees, to quote her, are now “spoiled for choice.” Many refugees do own bank accounts, but the fact remains that seed funding to start a business is still inaccessible for a fringe of the refugee population.

#### 4.2.4.3 Private Sector

Both in and around the refugee settlements, the private sector remains underdeveloped and dominated by sole-proprietor enterprises (U-Learn, 2023, p. 28). However, the expansion of banking

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<sup>63</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

services in Nakivale illustrates a growing phenomenon. For the last three years indeed, Nakivale has witnessed an increase in private sector representation. Companies have over time understood the potential of emerging markets of a growing refugee population, unlikely to repatriate any time soon.

*“They initially came on a corporate social responsibility concept but they have now been investing. They no longer consider refugees as charity cases. They are looking at them as potential clients and customers.”<sup>64</sup>*

In fact, refugees can also contribute to their businesses in one way or another. Ten years ago, Betts et al. already witnessed how refugees can engage in the business sector playing different roles, such as the beneficiary, customer, employee and entrepreneur (2012, p. 11). The emerging role of the private sector offers concrete prospects for job creation in Nakivale. Construction companies, for example, have operated projects while offering payable positions. Other telecom, Wi-Fi and internet companies are now also fully invested in the settlement. Nakivale has been slowly developing and as a result, is increasingly being perceived as a big town. Nakivale is not a village or rural settlement anymore, but a *“city-to-be.”*<sup>65</sup> While Kampala still offers much more on many levels, it has become easier in Nakivale to get most of the good people usually get in bigger towns. As a matter of fact, products usually manufactured outside settlements now have outlets in the settlement. Nakivale has historically lagged behind due to its remote location, poor road infrastructure and insufficient electricity supply. Going forward, those structural barriers must be lifted to attract further investments. This is conditional to offering refugees the opportunity to diversify their livelihoods through various forms of employment. As one respondent said, *“The process is underway.”*<sup>66</sup>

#### 4.2.5 Integrated Services

Access to healthcare and education for children were cited by my participants as important aspects of self-reliance. The good news is that Uganda’s response strategy is based on integrated service for refugees. The policy was driven by morality concerns and the expectation that shared services would support social cohesion (Vemuru et al., 2016, p. 20). The positive societal outcomes were indeed highlighted by one respondent, supporting the idea that *“sharing social amenities, hospitals, water point areas and schools bring them together.”*<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, refugee-hosting districts are particularly

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<sup>64</sup> RLO Head of Operations, female, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>65</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>66</sup> RLO Head of Operations, female, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>67</sup> Program Officer and advocate for refugee leadership, female, Nakivale, 05/24

underdeveloped, and as a result, public services are of mediocre quality. I speak on behalf of all my respondents by arguing that free access always comes at the price of quality.

Firstly, on education, refugees have been incorporated into Uganda's Universal Primary Education System (Ilcan et al., 2015, p. 5). Primary education is free but despite a population of 150,000, Nakivale only has got two primary schools and one secondary school. The lack of offer leads to overcrowded classrooms, ranging from 70 to 200 pupils. It is nearly impossible to foster discipline or provide personalized support in these conditions, especially when the teachers themselves are "*not professionals*."<sup>68</sup> Overpopulation in the classroom strangely coincides with high drop-out rates, fostered by language barriers and Nakivale's rural context, meaning that children tend to work on the land instead of attending school. Unfortunately, these structural barriers lead to low enrollment and high dropout rates. Enrollment levels at the only secondary school are even lower since post-primary school is subject to considerable fees.

In parallel to the public service, refugees have set up a private school operating through contributions from enrollments. The termly enrollment fee per pupil (UGX 50,000—USD 20) "*can be expensive to refugee life*,"<sup>69</sup> but it is overall appreciated for its higher quality of teaching, due in part to the smaller number of pupils in class (45-50). "*At least, your kid comes back with a little bit of English*."<sup>70</sup> The main disadvantage is that it operates without accreditation under government control, whereby examinations, for example, must be taken within the public school. "*The school is there. But the quality is not at a level whereby I can say it is comfortable for everyone*."<sup>71</sup>

The same narrative could be reproduced when presenting the public health service. In fact, medical care provided by the—only—hospital is another question mark. The main concern expressed by my respondents was the inadequacy of treatment. They report taking tests for tropical diseases to which they were ultimately given painkillers. "*They give you paracetamol when you have chronic disease. And then I'm getting UGX 12,000, where am I going to get treatment?*"<sup>72</sup> In principle, indispensable medicines like malaria tablets are sporadically available. Alternatively, they can be found from pharmacies in the settlement although not everyone can afford them. The participants were further appalled by the lack of space and privacy. "*People are crazy in there and you spend the whole day waiting for paracetamol when*

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<sup>68</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>69</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>70</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>71</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>72</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

*you have typhoid. Imagine walking next to a room and you see a woman giving birth. It's not appropriate, it's not human.*"<sup>73</sup> That said, one respondent mentioned the inauguration of a surgery room for pregnant women. Moreover, an ambulance transfer system to a regional hospital when cases are beyond local capacities. This shows some progress but in any case, a lot needs to be done still to raise the current "*absolute minimal*"<sup>74</sup> service to adequate levels of decency and efficiency. As things stand, some participants, appalled by how they were treated, swore they would never come back. "*In the end, people don't get what they deserve.*"<sup>75</sup> Public services are available and free of charge. But at what cost?

#### 4.2.6 Local Integration

My participants express a dire need to be heard and consulted. A lot could be improved, they believe, if they were placed at the center of the decisions concerning them. Listening to refugees' voices in humanitarian governance is crucial since refugees are not entitled to political rights under the Refugee Act. And without those rights, they don't have the political leverage to influence the policies that govern them. Similarly, acquiring Ugandan citizenship is a privilege out of reach for refugees.

Strikingly, however, my research has shown that the vast majority of refugees in Nakivale are not interested in gaining citizenship. After all, they enjoy roughly the same rights as Ugandan while having their own representative system in Nakivale through the election of Refugee Welfare Councils. But more than disinterest, the prospect of naturalization inspires reluctance, even fear. I found two reasons for this: patriotism and—more importantly—resettlement. In fact, acquiring Ugandan citizenship means losing refugee status and thus eligibility for relocation to a third (western) country. One female refugee commented: "*Citizenship would put an end to my dreams, to my hopes.*"<sup>76</sup> After all, the idea behind the settlement response is not to provide a durable solution in the country of asylum. On the contrary, the "promotion of self-reliance is clearly an interim measure in the context of an overarching commitment to repatriation as a durable solution" (Meyer, 2006, p. 7).

The goal is not to achieve local integration, which has been defined as the outcome of a legal process (citizenship), an economic process (livelihoods) and a sociocultural process, whereby a refugee becomes socially accepted and contributes in the host society without fear of discrimination (UNHCR). I argue, based on my discussions that the preference for resettlement is in part due to the lack of social integration

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<sup>73</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>74</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>75</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>76</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

prospects for refugees. In fact, my respondents have all experienced one way or the other acts of discrimination in Uganda.

*“If you don’t speak English, you are dead on the market. Even if you speak in Luganda, they will know and make you pay three times more. You have to translate your master’s diploma into the Ugandan system but stiiiill, they will say you are from Congo and they won’t employ you. Should you get citizenship, people will insist that this person was not supposed to be a Ugandan. You are worth less. Segregation is still there.”<sup>77</sup>*

Acts of discrimination mentioned during my discussions include acts of harassment, rejection for employment, intimidation or mistreatment at work on a discriminatory basis. These repeated incidents take away all hope of refugees to ever become fully accepted and given equal opportunities. They believe that neither the law nor the society will ever consider them legitimate equal. Resettlement, in the face of discrimination, is perceived as a better means towards social acceptance and opportunities.

However, my research identified a disturbing mismatch between refugees’ enthusiasm for resettlement and their actual chances of this to happen. In fact, resettlement is by no means a refugee right, and besides, opportunities have become increasingly limited globally (Gidron and Hovil, 2018, p. 13). Unfortunately, the striking optimism around resettlement has implicit and unintended consequences for self-reliance. While it can offer hope, it also hampers refugees’ efforts to build their own autonomy in Uganda. In fact, the anticipation of resettlement as a viable option can divert their focus away from present opportunities and limit their motivation to seek employment, vocational training and other language courses. If resettlement is perceived as an imminent realistic solution, refugees may invest fewer efforts to integrate and engage in social networks—as we have seen a vital, underrated way to attain self-reliance. There is pressing need to better inform them about their realistic perspectives. Managing expectations was a strong ethical consideration of mine during qualitative research. To support refugees going forward with the right mindset in the right way, managing refugees’ expectations on matters that define the course of their lives must be a top priority.

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<sup>77</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

#### 4.2.7 Closing Words

The case of Nakivale Settlement shows that there is still a long way to go until refugees call themselves self-reliant. While retaining a strong economic focus, the concept understood by refugees encompasses inner drivers of confidence and self-belief, which are not explicit in global narratives embedded in a top-down system. In fact, refugees' attempts at building meaningful lives are hampered by the expectation upon them to produce economic value in the backdrop of chronic underfunding and lack of consultation. Refugees have indeed been made responsible to find their solutions. However, the little room for maneuver they dispose ironically perpetuates the cycle of dependence within a dynamic of reduced assistance and neo-liberal currents (Ilcan et al., 2015). The blame for failure traps them deeper in a cycle of stigmatization, which is detrimental to their dignity and self-worth. In order to compensate for a system which is failing them, refugees have instead resorted to coping mechanisms. Valuable assets in that regard include social networks and working and mobility rights, although the latter are not absolute in practice and subject to questionable limitations.

In its early days, Nakivale offered sufficient arable land to refugees fleeing decolonization wars and Cold War proxy conflicts (Betts et al., 2019, p. 18). However, food sufficiency and sustainable livelihoods through agriculture has become an aspiration due to lacking surface, fertility, markets and modern technologies. Simultaneously, the land allocation model fragilizes peaceful coexistence with local populations while exposing refugees' unanswered calls for protection. Unfortunately, alternative pathways to livelihoods appear equally challenging. In fact, both the models of land allocation and vocational training suffer from generalized approaches, neglecting individual skills and population identities. In the settlement, the road to entrepreneurship has been encouraged by humanitarian actors but remains hampered by bureaucratic deadlocks and inaccessible capital. Undoubtedly, Uganda deserves some credit for the provision of social services among host populations. However, the quality of service in underdeveloped, outlying regions is far from satisfactory and hardly conducive to self-reliance. That said, shared services with host communities do offer a valuable platform for social cohesion (O'Callaghan, 2019). Enhancing peaceful coexistence is much-needed in a context where discrimination nurtures refugees' unrealistic longing for resettlement, thousands of kilometers away from Nakivale.

Many barriers impede self-reliance for refugees in Nakivale. Until they are removed, the current model will yield only minor results. Going forward, I suggest prioritizing population-tailored policies over generalized approaches. There has been too much focus on land-based strategies and a certain mismatch with refugees' profile, many of whom have limited skill or interest in agriculture. Land-based strategies

could make way for urban relocation in the context of Nakivale’s urbanization. Secondly, OPM would be well advised to clarify ambiguities on land ownership and formalize plot allocation through documentation. In the process, it will be crucial to consult local communities in order to involve their needs and interests. Refugee rights, indeed, cannot be achieved at their expense (Gidron and Hovil, 2018). A similar balance should be sought between the provision of market-driven skills and refugee involvement in training design. Wherever possible, training should be combined with concrete employment outcomes, although attracting the private sector will require further investments in transportation networks, energy infrastructure and communication technologies. With the growing involvement of private players, it will also be necessary to keep a close eye on rights at work to ensure fair, safe, and dignified working conditions for refugees.

### 4.3 RLOs — By Refugees for Refugees

*“It starts with refugees. Build with refugees, for refugees. That part cannot be omitted for any sustainable program.”<sup>78</sup>*

*“Having a person that can just give you a smile and listens to you the whole day or even just a few minutes to pour yourself. It’s so more important than giving out soap.”<sup>79</sup>*

The previous chapter highlighted the shortcomings of formal channels to build self-reliance. This chapter explores civil society engagement through refugee-led initiatives, which have been mobilized to fill the gaps by UN agencies and their implementation partners. In fact, the many ways in which self-reliance is achieved cannot be ignored. When refugees identify unmet needs within their communities, refugee leaders take over through organizations, associations, coalitions, faith-based groups and other networks. These initiatives are known as refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and operate in various areas including livelihoods, aid provision, research, assistance for special groups (albinos; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex [LGBTI]), protection and dissemination of information to other displaced people and their host communities (Alriwahi et al., 2021, p. 1; Easton-Calabria and Pincock, 2018, p. 57). In Nakivale, most RLOs have emerged in the past decade with rising refugee numbers and the growing support for the localization of aid (Gitahi, 2023, p. 10). RLOs come in various forms and

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<sup>78</sup> RLO Head of operations, female, Nakivale, 05/2024

<sup>79</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

differ greatly in scale, scope, and specialization. Most RLOs are small, informal structures filling niche needs and running on member contributions. A few but large “elite RLOs”, on the other hand, are registered groups and operate with funds from international donors. Whether big or small, we will explore below the increasing role they play within a landscape dominated by agencies and international organizations. After highlighting their added value, we will examine how they are supported by the regulatory framework they navigate in. Finally, we will look at their challenges and suggest a constructive way forward. Once more, through the voices of refugees—leaders—themselves.

#### 4.3.1 The Added Value of RLOs

In a humanitarian landscape dominated by NGOs and UN agencies, refugee-led organizations offer a parallel platform for refugee protection and livelihoods. A preferred pathway, even, according to my research and that of Betts et al. (2021). Essentially, RLOs earn refugees’ favors because of a shared experience of displacement. As community members, RLO leaders and staff have faced similar challenges. They often share a common language and are likely to understand the cultural context of the refugee better. By leveraging their local knowledge and networks, refugee organizations have the trust of their beneficiaries and respond to their needs more effectively than formal pathways. *“They put themselves in the shoes of refugees. It’s not like someone, coming from Kampala without the experience living with refugees, who does not know the language and essentially comes for money.”*<sup>80</sup> Conversely, agencies’ services are rather used as last resort due to huge caseloads, concerns on corruption, impersonality and lack of real investment in refugees’ futures (Easton-Calabria and Pincock, 2018, p. 57). Refugees, scholars and practitioners alike recognize that RLOs offer unparalleled trust, time and comfort, and customized services that respond to the needs of refugees more efficiently (“The evidence”, 2023; Betts et al., 2021; Gidron et al., 2023).

Reflecting on refugees’ need to be consulted, bottom-up organizations offer more adequate services than top-down agencies and implementation partners. The difference in approach is striking indeed. Wakati’s training center, for example, designs bureaucracy-free skilling programs for refugees. As opposed to the formal vocational training center, activities are accessible in various languages and are customized through personal skill assessments. As a bonus, trainees receive a small salary; they are formed and employed simultaneously, without the barriers of formal pathways. Furthermore, two respondents participated in entrepreneurship programs at Opportunigee, a popular self-organized social

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<sup>80</sup> Female Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

entrepreneurship and IT-hub—a “*life-changing opportunity*.”<sup>81</sup> In fact, leadership training has emulated in the creation of their own social enterprises, teaching refugees how to grow mushrooms and employing disabled refugees in soap production. RLOs are therefore job providers and job creators. On financial inclusion, we have already presented VSLAs already as valuable grassroots initiatives for those who cannot afford formal banking services. On mental health support, Tumaini Women group came up repeatedly as a safe hub for GBV survivors. On primary education, refugees have set up their own private schools, which have become popular because they have no language barriers and the number of pupils is more moderate. Refugee-led organization and networks have also proven instrumental for refugee activism, influencing decision-making at all levels of governance (Gidron et al., 2023, p. 10). For example, an advocacy campaign between Oxfam and a participant RLO managed to restore higher levels of monthly aid after it demonstrated the disastrous effects of aid reduction on schooling, mental health, domestic violence, etc.

Refugee-led organizations (RLOs) are not new, nor are they specific to Uganda. However, the Covid-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for grassroots initiatives at a time when humanitarian personnel were being repatriated, or no longer dared to venture into the settlements (Betts et al., 2020; Getachew et al., 2022). Meanwhile, RLOs and their networks ensured refugees life-saving support through food distribution, healthcare and vaccine information and access (Alriwahi et al., 2021, p. 1). By mobilizing on the frontline, RLOs proved during the pandemic that they could not only take over from the humanitarian sector, but also lead operations in the field. This is why, in the aftermath of the sanitary crisis, it is crucial to assess whether recognition has been followed by substantial support to help them fulfill their invaluable role. Given the increasing relevance of RLOs in building refugee self-reliance, I argue that the assessment of Uganda’s self-reliance model is incomplete without an in-depth analysis of the regulatory framework within which RLOs navigate on the ground.

#### 4.3.2 Uganda’s Regulatory Framework

Under the 2006 Refugee Act, refugees have the right to join non-profit and non-political associations and trade unions. In practice, the regulatory framework under which organizations operate is instrumental to attract funding and partnerships (Gitahi, 2023, p. 3), and formal registration is a game changer in that regard. RLOs can register in Uganda’s database either as community-based organizations (CBOs) or NGOs depending on the scale of their activities (Getachew et al., 2022, p. 35). Once they

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<sup>81</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

appear at the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB), RLO leaders can open a bank account and, above all, gain credibility among international donors in their attempts to attract funding. Registration is a milestone, and one that has been made much easier in the past years. Until recently, the legal freedom of association was fraught with *de facto* obstacles that hampered most RLOs to get past the first stages of registration. “*Lately, a multi-stakeholder approach has simplified the process and multiplied the number of registrations.*”<sup>82</sup> The government of Uganda, particularly, has been credited with a progressive mindset to support RLOs. First of all, all RLO stakeholders interviewed emphasized the remarkable work done by the GoU to encourage and facilitate registration. For starters, registration fees have been made affordable. In any case, the costs have been reduced compared to registration for other national and international organizations. More importantly, perhaps, bureaucracy has been largely simplified. For Nakivale Settlement, the only requirement to register an RLO is a recommendation letter to submit at the district government. OPM has been credited with active support in that regard, once it has established that the organizations’ activities are genuinely operating in the interest of the community. In turn, registration empowers the GoU to apply control measures to protect the sector’s credibility. In 2024, for example, it has engaged in verification processes whereby fallacious RLOs, not legally registered but attracting funding through deceiving websites and online platforms, were sieved out. On the flip side, small RLO-leaders complained about OPM’s excessive controlling habits, particularly concerning their financial activities. Therefore, while the framework is largely deemed satisfactory by the RLO-leaders, my research also highlights power imbalances on the part of the smaller players, which merit further study.

Secondly, access to information has greatly improved over the years. Until recently, awareness on registration was limited to Kampala, whereby RLOs in the settlements knew little about the benefits associated to registration and how to proceed. It should be pointed out, however, that many structures prefer operating informally, for fear of losing effectiveness or diluting their cultural identity with outside influence. While the government supports registration, non-registered RLOs remain free to operate without pressure from local and regional authorities (Getachew et al, 2022, p. 36). These organizations, by choosing not to register, focus their services solely on their contributing members (Gitahi, 2023, p. 7). For others, access to information has been pivotal to their growth. Registration steps have been clarified and made available in different languages. For additional guidance, OPM has appointed an advisory person receiving RLO leaders willing to register. Enhanced access to information must be credited to

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<sup>82</sup> RLO Head of Operations, female, Nakivale, 05/24

other stakeholders as well. As partners, NGOs have acted as enablers to the legalization process, which in turns has led some RLOs to establish direct donor relationship post-registration. Elite RLO leaders themselves have played their part, using contacts at registration offices and RLO networks. In summary, less bureaucracy has made the regulatory framework more flexible and arguably successful for RLOs. In that regard, stakeholders underline the proactivity of the authorities and look forward to a brighter future for the expansion of RLOs.

No matter how practical, the regulatory framework would not be as decisive without the freedom of movement and the right to work. Those freedoms are crucial enablers for RLOs. The right to work, for starters, considerably improves RLOs' ability to operate and support their communities. Over time, RLOs have come up as major employers for refugees. Small structures operate as social enterprises employing refugees to fabricate and sell goods for their sustainability. What's more, refugees can legally work for RLOs and RLOs are able to link refugees to other non-refugee-led employment opportunities. Elite RLOs, especially, hire volunteers and paid personnel to design and lead operations, offering usually higher salaries than incentive workers by aid organizations. Other RLOs focus directly on employment creation, like "Opportunigee", empowering youths with leadership and entrepreneurial skills. *"Opportunigee is really important because it has grown my profession. We are always training people so that they become job creators and not job seekers."*<sup>83</sup> After graduation, refugees are encouraged to create their own opportunities in Nakivale or may be linked with employment opportunities in Kampala through established networks. As for Wakati Foundation, it has the particularity to be subcontracted by the private sector, hereby providing direct employment for refugees in the construction sector (Gitahi, 2023). In the context of service provision, Uganda's regulatory framework should be credited with the 70/30 rule, referring to the distribution of resources where 70% are allocated to refugees and 30% to host communities. According to my respondents, ensuring balanced support in RLO (and INGO) programs has helped foster positive relations in the last couple of years. *"There was a lot of animosity at that time but other organizations have caught up on that. In any training or workshop, it is clearly stipulated. You cannot leave out the host community, and it starts with the staff."*<sup>84</sup>

The freedom of movement is all the more decisive for RLOs. Before anything else, mobility rights facilitate the registration process. Using their recently issued refugee IDs, RLO leaders are able to travel hassle-free through the district government without the need to carry their paperwork. Once registration

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<sup>83</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>84</sup> RLO Head of Operations, female, Nakivale, 05/24

is secured, the freedom of movement further supports the expansion of an RLO. In fact, RLO members can access nationwide resources and support in the form of training and supplies. Attending skill workshops, meetings and conferences, however, present the added advantage of securing new valuable connections. As crucial as social networks has been proven for refugee self-reliance, building networks has been identified as the main driver for an RLO's success (Gitahi, 2023). Social capital involves making connections at all levels ranging from aid organizations to authorities, refugee diaspora and Ugandans themselves.

My research has identified various correlations between mobility rights and networking. Firstly, they have encouraged the collaboration of RLOs throughout various settlements. By creating joint partnerships, RLOs from different regions are able to support and learn from each other, at the same time establishing best practices and common strategies. Furthermore, networking has culminated with the creation of supportive structures. ACBON, for smaller-scale CBOs, but especially RELON, was pioneered by a consortium of four elite RLOs with the aim to strengthen the capacity of RLOs in their challenges ("Who we are", 2024). In the settlements, RELON has assisted RLOs in their starting phase and led various initiatives through networking, advocacy and resource securing. *"RELON is vital! I don't know if small organizations have caught up on that simple fact. But we have benefited from it a lot. There is no way out of it."*<sup>85</sup> Despite growing over 50 memberships, small-scale RLO leaders expressed rather skepticism towards refugee networks, perceived as gatekeepers for resources: *"Some of those people are strangers. They write proposals to support the community. But they eat the money. Most people preach for their families."*<sup>86</sup> The mistrust is induced by heightened competitive spirit and disappointment at the lack of concrete results from RLO networks (Gitahi, 2023, p. 16). Among affiliated RLOs, RELON is believed to do its utmost best but is found to juggling limited resources to serve various interests and objectives among the RLOs themselves. Of course, building trust is a much slower process than breaking trust. This is why it will require time and transparency to convince RLOs to subscribe to valuable networks. Nevertheless, with increased mutual assistance during the registration phase, many RLOs have assimilated the value of cooperation over competition. For many organizations accredited to RELON, competition is believed to be slowly *"dying out."*<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, grassroots organizations struggle to

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<sup>85</sup> RLO Head Operations, female, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>86</sup> RLO Leader, male, Nakivale, 05/24

<sup>87</sup> RLO Head of Operations, female, Nakivale, 05/24

move beyond the start-up phase. While they want to stand out, survival seems to be more a matter of competition—and mistrust—than mutual aid.

Remarkably, the GoU and OPM have supported the freedom of movement in the broader sense. Authorities have shown willingness to support international travels and particularly so for the attendance of workshops and networking opportunities. The Convention Travel Document (CTD) has been made more readily available compared to previous years, with considerate requirements and shortened processing times. This dynamic in turns has accelerated RELON’s expansion internationally, especially in Kenya, whereby RLOs have explored each other’s solidarity to unlock bigger potential (Ahmad, 2023). *“There is a lot of cross-cutting with information, most RLOs share the same donors. They are almost invited to the same events. They are in the same advocacy groups. So whatever is happening in one country would also be happening in the other country.”*<sup>88</sup> Collaboration with Ethiopian and Tanzanian RLOs, on the other hand, remains weak due to encampment policies and restrictive regulatory frameworks in practice. Regionally and beyond, RLOs in Uganda remain in a privileged position, navigating in productive frameworks and supported by invaluable mobility and working rights. However, traveling to a global North country using a CTD remains extremely challenging. Last December, Ugandan refugee leaders were denied visa access despite their invitation to attend the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in Geneva. This highlights a form of tokenism, where refugees are rhetorically included in global discussions but practically excluded from meaningful participation. These power imbalances, as the next section highlights, are replicated directly on the ground.

#### 4.3.3 RLOs within the traditional aid landscape

All RLOs, whether registered or unregistered, small-scale or elite, share one common challenge: funding. Funding is crucial indeed for these organizations to expand, enhance community resilience and implement their ideas (“Funding”, n.d.). However, in order to attract funding, RLOs need to secure partnerships with International organizations, as they give RLOs visibility and legitimacy within the donor community (Gitahi, 2023).

In fact, registration is only a preliminary step towards recognition for partnerships. Prior to that, small-scale RLOs must usually demonstrate stability and impact. Even so, it is perceived difficult to compete in an environment where national organizations have been firmly established for decades. Once more, small organizations suffer the impacts of isolation in an environment where connections are instrumental.

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<sup>88</sup> Program Officer and Advocate in refugee leadership, female, 05/24

Network deficits produce little visibility and exposure to international donors. “*Once you want to enter the big room, you need intermediaries, people able to connect and recommend. Someone has got to throw those people in the room.*”<sup>89</sup> That said, there is no shortcut for long-proven elite RLOs either. Access to sustainable funding remains impeded by unrealistic funding protocols, imposing high requirements which are difficult to meet for RLOs despite them being in a good position to lead projects. This reveals little willingness from the humanitarian and development sector to involve RLOs substantially in the provision of services for refugees.

It should not come as a surprise since the 2016 Grand Bargain has not delivered on its promise to channel 20% of humanitarian aid directly to national and local actors (Ahmad, 2023). This, despite a “whole-of-society” approach formulated in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016) and further commitments to foster meaningful refugee participation in refugee responses (Gidron et al., 2023). It can be argued that the Covid-19 pandemic strengthened awareness on refugees’ role as service providers and reliable partners for localized responses (Easton-Calabria, 2023). With few exceptions, nevertheless, new rhetoric’s on localization has proliferated with little materialization on the ground. While organizations have been credited with registration support for RLOs, few of them have taken the strong measures to put RLOs in the driving seat. Instead, partnerships have rather been “light-touch, project-based, and short-term” (Gitahi, 2023, p. 15). RLOs are occasionally attributed implementation tasks, but that does not usually come along with meaningful participation in design. A meaningful transfer of power cannot happen when decision-making and funding remain the prerogative of agencies and international NGOs. Unfortunately, RLOs navigate within a context whereby well-established structures are still favored over grassroot organizations in the eyes of a top-down humanitarian system (Pincock et al., 2020).

The issue at stake is one of trust (Sturridge et al., 2023), or so it seems. While many RLOs have proven records of efficiency and transparency (“The evidence”, 2023), donors still considered them as high-risk investments. This is partly due to the fact that they remain perceived as homogenous informal structures, while the case of Uganda shows that RLOs vary widely in terms of scale and experiences. Donors may have legitimate concern about the volatility of refugee-run structures, insofar as the staff or leader may have to leave depending on their request for asylum, resettlement or even repatriation. In absence of track record of receiving funding, modest-sized structures simultaneously raise questions about capacities to ensure compliance and accountability with international resources.

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<sup>89</sup> RLO Leader, male, 05/24

However, the dominant focus on upward accountability is problematic when it overshadows downward accountability to communities (Vuni et al., 2023), which RLOs have proven to ensure better than traditional actors due to mutual respect and comfort to share feedback on activities (Gitahi, 2023, p. 18). Capacity-building for compliance can be necessary—it is even desired by smaller RLOs. Nevertheless, training has reportedly been tokenistic for the sole purpose of ticking the box of the localization agenda, and deemed unnecessary for established structures already handling six-digit budgets. RLOs are ready for action. Training, if delivered, is a collaboration step that should then in all logic be supported by material trust through direct funding. The current system top-down after all, does not make efficient use of financial resources. Generous funding gets inevitably diluted through the various bureaucratic stages and high salaries of humanitarian staff. *“From the time the money does get to its beneficiaries, it’s been eaten off in the middle there, down to 10%.”*<sup>90</sup> Conversely, RLOs minimize logistical costs and are more likely to be resourceful, calling on the community’s talents and skills. Calling on networks not only creates a sense of ownership in the program, but also allows to channel a large portion of the budget—up to 70%—to direct project implementation. Over time, many RLOs have shown that they can be trusted with direct funding through a track record of life-changing services and transparency (“The evidence”, 2023). Moreover, the 2018 scandal shows that funds are not necessarily better managed by traditional agencies and organizations. Therefore, RLOs are not only best suited but also the “cost-effective” solution forward. By exploiting the weaknesses of refugee organizations rather than improving them (Ahmad, 2023), the humanitarian sector demonstrates resistance rather less driven by distrust than competition—a view widely shared by my respondents.

#### 4.3.4 Closing Words

Uganda’s self-reliance model is often understood through its triple feature or land allocation scheme, integrated services and mobility and working rights. This chapter, in addition, contributes to its broader understanding. In parallel to formal pathways, refugee-led initiatives do have immense potential to respond to the needs of their communities. The right to work and the freedom of movement are enabling tools in that regard, as they support organizations and networks to fill the gaps of formal pathways in various areas including protection, vocational training, education, microfinance, mental health support and legal representation. Furthermore, the regulatory framework they navigate in has been instrumental to their expansion, and in that sense, deserves equal attention. Given the pressing need to

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<sup>90</sup> RLO Leader, male, Nakivale, 05/24

support RLOs, I argue for the inclusion of regulatory frameworks as quality criteria in our understanding of a refugee model.

Meaningful empowerment, however, has remained largely tokenistic without transfer of decision-making power and direct funding. RLOs are well established through the trust of their communities, but have not yet gained that of donors. Unfortunately, INGOs have donor connections that RLOs don't have, and we have underscored the decisive role played by networks in the growth of organization. RLOs are holistic and cost-effective service providers (“What we do”, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to recognize them as major players in global localization and refugee leadership instruments (Pincock et al., 2020, p. 732). Beyond the whole-of-society approach, the GCR could recognize RLOs explicitly as “civil society actors” in order to initiate and normalize direct collaboration with donors. Reinforcing upward and downward accountability, in fact, could prevent humanitarian and development actors from having *carte blanche* in establishing reactionary *modus operandi*.

On the ground, establishing mechanisms to identify RLOs demonstrating efficiency and transparency is a constructive way forward (Betts et al., 2020). This would justify the introduction of capacity-building and flexible protocols, enabling RLOs to apply for grants following viable requirements. For this to happen, donors and institutions on their side would have to assume a greater share of risk in the allocation of funds (Betts et al., 2020). Considering the costly establishment, participation through refugee leadership *is* a “great bargain” for both donors and refugee-led organizations. While social protection must remain the primary responsibility of the state, making RLOs self-reliant is arguably the best way to improve refugee self-reliance altogether.

## Conclusion

Uganda's progressive refugee policies have attracted relentless praise over the years. Pope Francis himself, upon a visit in 2015, lauded the country's “outstanding concern for welcoming refugees, enabling them to rebuild their lives” (Vemuru, 2016). This thesis raised the question whether Uganda's refugee response model translates into self-reliance outcomes for refugees in settlements. This research, shaped by the voices of refugees themselves, denies these allegations. In fact, a strategy imperfect by nature cannot produce fairy-tale results. Despite an unproven record, self-reliance—the “fourth solution” (Ferris, 2018)—has returned as a central tenet of international refugee policy, catalyzed by neoliberal

currents and the appeal for budget-friendly strategies. By placing self-reliance in direct opposition to aid reduction, agencies are driven rather by the need to cut costs than ensure the dignity and prosperity of the people they are mandated to protect. This zero-sum game approach makes the Ugandan model “at best ill-conceived and at worst a device to cut humanitarian costs” (Doyel, 2022, p. 2).

Inevitably, Uganda’s policies have fallen short of expectations, with 80% of refugees living below the international poverty line (Mosel et al., 2020). My research in Africa’s oldest “camp,” Nakivale, indicates that a small minority of refugees *are* indeed, self-reliant. Far from the conquering image conveyed by global discourses, they have been described by their own peers as “*zombies*.”<sup>91</sup> Severe shortcomings are evident in every aspect towards meaningful lives indeed, ranging from livelihoods and protection to education, healthcare, and self-esteem. Altogether, the study shows that current policies do not result in favorable and prosperous right-based environments for refugees, while also endangering the rights of national Ugandans themselves.

Taken in isolation, the Ugandan model presents many flaws. When we want to understand if something or a phenomenon is good, however, we implicitly ask the question, “compared to what?” From that perspective, we have to recognize the remarkable—yet not disinterested—efforts produced by this fairly small country to welcome refugees. While many parts of the world refrain from accommodating refugees, Uganda has long acknowledged the need to shift away from policies that keep refugees segregated in camps (UNDP, 2018). Uganda’s progress should not be belittled and, in a way, is a victim of its own success. The upsurge of refugees, in fact, has put an immense pressure on the country’s absorptive abilities. Uganda’s hosting capacities are often taken for granted without consideration to its economic limitations and yet, Uganda’s success does not depend on Uganda alone (Omaha, 2023, p. 9; UNHCR, 2018). In fact, the international community is yet to deliver on its commitments of significant financial support, resettlement programs and peacebuilding investments for voluntary repatriation (Hovil, 2018). Without equitable responsibility sharing, it is unreasonable to expect much more from a country whose population itself is struggling to cover basic needs.

In the meantime, refugee leaders have stepped up to respond to unmet needs in their communities. In fact, refugee-led organizations in Uganda have been expanding under a supportive framework, facilitated in recent years by a proactive multistakeholder approach. Given the crucial importance of RLOs to fill the gaps of defective formal channels, I push for the integration of regulatory frameworks for RLOs into

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<sup>91</sup> Male Refugee, Nakivale, 05/24

our understanding and assessment of a refugee model. In that regard, Uganda’s evidenced support in recent years is worthy of its praise, although it does in no way exempt the government from its primary duty to ensure rights for refugees and local communities alike. Going forward, the humanitarian establishment must embrace a wider “whole-of-society” approach (United Nations General Assembly, 2016) by facilitating pathways to funding and partnerships with RLOs. If the sector is serious about engaging with refugees as actors, agencies and organizations should approach refugee organizations and networks on equal terms, in the shared spirit to deliver efficient, grassroot and customized refugee solutions to refugee problems (Krause and Gato, 2017, p. 93).

As Uganda continues to be an inspiration around the world (UNHCR, 2023; Betts, 2019, p. 37), there is a need to nuance its successes. Refugee responses in any case remain context-specific, and the broader political dynamics at play show that Uganda’s policies have been less motivated by good will than legitimacy and benefits at national and international levels (Gidron and Hovil, 2018; Betts, 2021). With that in mind, sugarcoated rhetoric should not lead us to underestimate the need to hold critical debates within multistakeholder engagements—including refugees—so as to determine who self-reliance policies really benefit. Flattering discourses should also not come at the price of concrete evidence about what works, what does not and what needs to be adapted to different contexts, so as to ensure fair and transparent responses to displacement (Betts, 2019). The Ugandan model, for that matter, has attracted media attention due in part to isolated market-based success stories (Bjørkhaug, 2020, p. 268). Actual outcomes for refugees have been embellished in the process, whereas the refugee landscape remains largely one of poverty and hopelessness (Kigozi, 2017).

In light of these findings, there is a need to enable refugees to “thrive, not just survive” (UNHCR, 2024b) beyond the settlement approach. Refugee settlements should be looked at for what they essentially are: an upgrade from camps (Gidron and Hovil, 2018). In fact, while offering practical freedoms to refugees, they also offer practical means of containment to authorities, primarily interested in the development of marginal, isolated areas. The settlement approach, it must be insisted, remains essential for protection in the emergency phase. Nevertheless, authorities would be well advised to recognize and support the global urbanization of refugees. From this angle, refugees settling outside of the settlement could be assisted with tailored approaches for support in their integration and well-being. On the basis of this research, it starts by restoring monthly aid to urban refugees, which is provided only to refugees registered the settlement. Then, after easing bureaucracy for RLOs, the government could apply equal efforts to simplify access to work permits and business licenses, essential for formal employment and

entrepreneurship. Finally, next to economic integration, it will be crucial to address the social integration issue for refugees. Anti-discrimination measures include public awareness and sensitization campaigns on refugees' rights, shared access to services and community centers, and cultural exchange programs. Uganda has a progressive track record on refugee policies. If the country wants to preserve its role model status, it has every interest in embracing refugee inclusion "from the very beginning" (UNHCR, 2024b) in the most proactive, audacious, and pioneering way possible.

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## Appendix 1: Overview of Participants

Participant	Gender	Country	Age range	Occupation	Current location	Arrival in Uganda
1. A	F	Kenya	25-45	Program officer and advocate for refugee leadership	Kampala	2009
2. B	F	Uganda	25-45	RLO Head of Operations	Mbarara	n/a
3. C	M	DRC	25-45	RLO leader	Nakivale	2006
4. D	M	DRC	25-45	RLO leader + training provision at an RLO	Nakivale	2012
5. E	M	Somalia	25-45	Intermittent Interpreter, pollster, aspiring RLO leader	Nakivale	2013
6. F	F	DRC	25-45	Intermittent interpreter — aspiring farmer	Nakivale	2009
7. G	F	DRC	25-45	No occupation — aspiring food depot keeper	Nakivale	2006

## Appendix 2: Interviews — Guiding Questions

### 1. To refugees

- **Introductory questions**

- Firstly, I would like to know more about you. Could you tell me where you come from what are the reasons for you to go to Uganda and how was the migration journey?
- How did you feel upon arriving and what kind of assistance did you receive?
- Did you receive a plot of land to build a house or grow food?
  - Is it useful to you? Why, why not?

- **Daily life**

- What does a typical day look like in Nakivale?
- How important is aid delivery to you?
- Is WFP doing enough?
- Do you have a family?
  - Does she receive everything they need?
- Are you interested to move to the city or do you prefer staying in Nakivale?
- Would you be interested in gaining Ugandan citizenship? How would life be different if you became a citizen of Uganda or obtained permanent legal status?

- **Self-reliance**

- Are you familiar with the concept of refugee self-reliance?
- What does self-reliance mean to you?
- Is self-reliance important to you? (Why? Why not?)
- Do you consider yourself self-reliant?
- What are the challenges you face to become self-reliant?
- *As a woman, do you feel specific challenges to attaining self-reliance?*

- What would improve your self-reliance?
- What can governments, international or national organizations, communities do to better support you in becoming self-reliant?
- **Livelihoods**
  - Do you have any source of income? Or external assistance?
  - Have you or are you following vocational training?
  - Do you have a business?
    - How did you start it?
    - Do you have access to banking services?
    - Do you need a work permit as a refugee?
  - Have you participated in any programs or initiatives aimed at promoting self-reliance among refugees? If so, how was your experience?
  - What difference does it make to be Somali/Burundian/Congolese? Are there some advantages or difficulties?
  - What skills or experiences from your home country have helped you become more self-reliant in your new context?
  - *As a woman, do you feel you have particular challenges or opportunities?*
- **Host communities**
  - How is the relationship with local communities? Good/bad?
  - Are there any challenges or disputes?
    - How do disputes get resolved?
- **Services**
  - Education
    - Do your children go to school?
    - Are there challenges? (quality, affordability, distance)
  - Health
    - Do you have access to healthcare and medication?
    - *As a woman, can you access health care specific to your needs?*
  - Protection
    - Do you feel safe? (Why, why not?)
    - Who do you consult for immediate protection?
    - *As a woman, have you felt threatened and have you been able to find support? Where? How?*
- **Concluding questions**
  - Is there anything you would like to add about the topics we have discussed?
  - Do you have any questions to ask me before we end our discussion?

## 2. To RLO leaders

- **Introductory Questions**
  - First, I would like to know more about you. Where are you from and how did you arrive in Uganda?
  - How did X come about? What is your role at X and what are the main activities?
- **Regulatory Framework**
  - What makes it easy or challenging to create and lead an RLO like X in a country like Uganda? (Freedom of movement, right to work, right of association?)
  - How difficult is or was the registration process of X?
  - Is X active in other countries? Why not? How would it be different?
  - Did X receive land or premises to conduct activities?
- **Challenges and risks**
  - A lot of small RLOs seem to struggle to obtain funds and grow as a bigger actor—what has made the success of Wakati?
  - What are the challenges and opportunities of X?
  - What are the key strategies for X to keep developing?
  - How does X ensure monitoring activities, accountability and compliance with donor funding?
- **Localization**
  - How does X find a place in the traditional aid landscape?
  - As things stand, do you feel X or RLOs in general have enough space, enough credit and capabilities? Why, why not?
  - Engaging in partnership with INGOS, is it risky for the nature of X? (Like loss of independence to attract funding; risk that ideas or projects are coopted by the international actors, does that lead to competition among RLOs?)
  - How involved has the private sector been?
- **Networks and partners**
  - How important for X are networks like RELON and ACBON?
  - How is the relationship with the host communities?
- **Advocacy**
  - What would you do, or what would X do if you had a magic wand?
  - Is X engaged in advocacy to change or improve their outreach and development?
  - How to convince agencies and INGOs to divert the funds directly to RLOs?
  - How can UNHCR or International organizations engage RLOs or X in a more meaningful way?
- **Concluding questions**
  - Is there anything you would like to add about the topics we have discussed?
  - Do you have any questions to ask me before we end our discussion?

### Appendix 3: Refugee Self-reliance Definition

Participant	Coded segment	Notes
E	I think self-reliance is part of <b>coping up</b> with the mechanism around. Because maybe you just be like the way other people living within. So in a self-reliant mode, maybe you look for a way of you gonna depend on yourself. Or maybe you'll try to find your <b>basics</b> . You're going to depend on yourself. In terms of maybe <b>food</b> , maybe other kinds of things you'll be part of <b>depending on yourself</b> . Maybe you'll be looking for a way of maybe ... having a <b>business that is going to support you</b> . And finding out how you're going to support yourself <b>without anyone or anybody helping you</b> . [laughs] I think that's how I define myself as a self-reliant. Within the camp, <b>you have to maneuver within</b> and try to check on what is good what you can try to do.	A coping mechanism to break free from dependence. To have a business to rely on yourself in the context that you have. To have food and basics.
E	The government and the organizations within, they should really do something so that these people can <b>believe in themselves</b> , that they can understand that they can be self-reliant.	To believe in yourself
D	Oh, yes. I've heard about it many times and we're also trying to it to make sure that because	To create employment for yourself

	<p>our philosophy is to <b>eradicate job seeking and promote job creation</b> through youth that we are training. And when you have created the project,</p> <p>You have <b>created an employment for yourself</b>. You'll be self-reliant. So that's the destination of self-reliance.</p>	
D	<p>Self-reliance is when you <b>don't depend on someone from outside</b>. You are ... running your <b>business</b> that is <b>feeding yourself</b> and you're not looking at someone from America or Europe ... or OPM or UNHCR to provide food and so on but you are able to <b>feed yourself</b> on a daily basis.</p>	<p>No outside dependency outside your networks. Ability to feed yourself.</p>
D	<p>Yes, I'm self-reliant! (laughs) <b>because I work for myself</b>, that's been long time since I started working and make sure that yeah, this is the man that is supporting myself to live here in Uganda.</p>	<p>To work for oneself</p>
D	<p>[...] not only make money but beyond that okay, make money <b>and be able to access other services</b> for yourself like <b>for me and my family</b> most of the time we get treated from a private <b>Clinic</b>.</p>	<p>To access services like healthcare for your family</p>
D	<p>Self-reliance is a <b>very good philosophy</b> because it helps people to work for themselves, you know. And again something out of your sweat ... and it will help to <b>avoid dependency</b>, depending on someone, depending on an organization, depending on a white person, you know, yes and ... and that was creating...</p> <p>Laziness, stupidity, and not even <b>progress</b> in people's mind. So that mind shift is very important because</p> <p>We need more <b>entrepreneurs</b>. We need more people who are <b>innovators</b>, who are <b>creating</b> work trying to change things, you know. Yeah for me, I would support that philosophy. Yes, I would support it for sure.</p>	<p>To avoid dependency and laziness and instill progress, innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship</p>
G	<p>So, they are forcing you to do the course that you don't want. Why do I want to study something that I don't want? Let me work for money. When I get money, I get study was for my choice. That is</p>	<p>To be able to choose your educational and professional path.</p>

	a bit what self-reliance is supposed to mean that you <b>can choose the topic or the area that you want to.</b>	
G	It is a <b>person being confident</b> in what she's doing or the person <b>doing anything by him/herself.</b> And what you are doing as a person <b>enhances your standards of living.</b> Whatever you're doing, you need to <b>believe in yourself.</b> You have to be confident and whichever you're doing and whatever you're thinking whatever idea you're giving, you need to be confident.	To be confident in what you do and improve your standards of living.
G	What I can add is at least support the refugees around, mostly girls.  [Interviewer: Mostly girls?]  Yeah, for their education support, because they are getting married <b>not educated</b> and when it comes to family because <b>they are not self-reliant,</b> you don't have anything that you're doing.	Education and female empowerment.
F	So, self-reliance to me is like <b>you teach me, let me tell you my problem.</b> You tell me how to do it. But don't just sit there; you're pushing me to do what you want me to do when <b>you haven't heard from me.</b>	To turn your skills into an income-generation activity. To practice independently what you choose to learn. Receive support
F	No, I'm not self-reliant; <b>I don't have land, I don't have anything.</b> I have some ideas of growing things. It's beautiful when people are growing things and you go there when <b>you don't need to go to the market</b> to buy even beans when you know that you grow some beans you can eat it alone at home and the rest you can also sell it and <b>buy maybe</b> books for the children.	To live in autarchy. Own land, assets and provide education to children.
F	most of them are <b>illiterate.</b> How do you want to tell them to be self-reliant?	To be able to read and write
F	François, I like working. I like working, spending the time maybe in the field working not agriculture, but you know, <b>sweating for my</b>	To be independent, have self-esteem and feel you deserve.

	<b>money.</b> I want to be <b>independent.</b> I want to own myself. I want to <b>see how strong I am by myself.</b>	
F	It's good to <b>have your own things.</b> Anytime in your life, when you are stranded, when you need money... I always <b>encourage women.</b> When I find women crying that "oh my husband did not bring my soap! Oh, my husband did not do that!" I asked her: what did you do? What's your contribution?	Female empowerment.
<b>Definition of self-reliance</b>		
To be independent, to believe in yourself to create your own path towards income, food; to feel empowered and improve your life standards through healthcare, education and protection for you and your family.		