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Refugee mobility and livelihoods in Uganda

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Key points

- Refugees in Uganda predominantly reside in rural settlements, but they are free to move within the country and engage in income-generating activities. Given the limited availability of farmland and livelihood opportunities within settlements and the gradual reductions in the humanitarian aid provided to refugees, freedom of movement can play an important role in their economic lives.
- To evaluate how freedom of movement contributes to the livelihoods of settlement-based refugees in Uganda, the Refugee Economies Programme conducted mixed-method research among South Sudanese and Congolese refugees in two refugee settlements in Uganda's borderlands: Pagirinya and Kyangwali.
- Across communities and sites, movement between settlements and urban areas is uncommon and very rarely undertaken in order to engage in income-generating activities. Trips to urban areas are mostly undertaken to access health or education services. In some cases, refugees are more likely to undertake trips to their country of origin than to urban areas in Uganda.
- Short-distance, daily movements around the settlements are common, with most refugees reporting leaving the settlement several times in the past month. However, such movements are undertaken almost exclusively in order to exploit resources such as vegetation and land, engage in low-paying and irregular casual labour, and, to a more limited extent, engage in small-scale, informal trade.
- Settlement-based refugees mostly move in order to survive under conditions of extreme precarity. Maintaining humanitarian aid while providing sustained and tangible support to agricultural and off-farm enterprises that target customers and markets outside the settlements are essential for promoting more sustainable and dignified livelihoods for refugees.

Refugee mobilities

The 'secondary' movements of refugees in the Global South – that is, movements that are undertaken after an initial flight, within countries of asylum or internationally – are often portrayed in policy and political discourse in rather negative terms. Policies of encampment and control, for instance, have long been justified by framing the movements of refugees as a cause for potential disorder and criminality. A growing body of research, countering such assumptions, emphasises the positive dimensions of mobility and its contribution to the socio-economic lives of refugees. Freedom of movement may allow refugees, for example, to access markets, find employment opportunities, connect with relatives, access and maintain informal networks of communal support, and engage with host communities. In other words, mobility can contribute to the integration of refugees, promote their wellbeing, and help them to progress and lead dignified lives in exile.

Much of the research on the mobilities of refugees focuses on urban sites, entrepreneurship, and refugees who engage in mobile livelihood strategies such as commerce. Urban centres often attract skilled refugees with higher social capital, wider networks of support, or access to remittances – that is, refugees who have resources that allow them to leverage their freedom of movement. Yet, across East Africa, most refugees continue to reside and receive humanitarian support primarily in designated camps or settlements in undeveloped, peripheral areas. Such refugees may be too poor to relocate to urban centres or engage in capital-intensive mobile livelihoods, and therefore, rarely exemplify the sort of lifestyles celebrated in the scholarship or by development agencies. It is therefore pertinent to ask whether freedom of movement supports their livelihoods, and if so, in what ways.

Mobility and refugee support in Uganda

As of October 2024, Uganda hosted more than 1.7 million refugees, including some 963,000 South Sudanese and 545,000 Congolese. Most of these refugees reside in the northern and western parts of the country in 'settlements', where they are provided with small plots of land and have access to humanitarian aid, primarily in the form of monthly cash rations. Approaches to refugee rights and mobility have been more restrictive in the past, but under Uganda's 2006 Refugee Act, refugees enjoy freedom of movement and the right to engage in income-generating activities. They are allowed to reside in urban areas, but humanitarian aid is provided almost exclusively to those living in settlements. Those who decide to 'self-settle' forgo humanitarian assistance unless they register themselves in a settlement, informally leave it, and travel back regularly in order to 'verify' their presence.

Among donors and humanitarian agencies, Uganda has long been celebrated as a 'model' of refugee hospitality, due to its generous, progressive policies and its commitment to promoting the 'self-reliance' of refugees. The impact of its settlement-focused approach to refugee reception and support has nonetheless been debated. Some have criticised the emphasis on rural settlements as inconsistent with international human rights law and with efforts to promote genuine integration of refugees, calling for greater emphasis on 'out-of-camp' solutions. Others have argued that Uganda's assistance model and regulatory framework nonetheless allow at least some refugees to be more mobile and earn higher incomes. Whether or not they support the use of settlements in principle, researchers and practitioners generally agree that, in practice, promoting the 'self-reliance' of settlement-based refugees, with limited access to land and in impoverished rural areas, has long been a challenge.

As the South Sudanese and Congolese displacement crises have become protracted, international funding for Uganda's refugee response has gradually decreased, and the challenge of 'self-reliance' has become increasingly pressing. As of mid-2024, 17% of the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan was funded. The cash rations provided to settlement refugees have gradually been reduced since 2020, and refugees are now expected to pay for most services in the settlements, including the 'free' primary education. Humanitarian agencies report

that lack of funding and support has already led to a rise in malnutrition, suicide, child labour, school dropouts, domestic violence, and transactional sex in the settlements, as well as to a decrease in access to water and latrine coverage and shortages of medical supplies[1]. The daily mobilities of refugees offer another prism through which to explore the consequences of the withdrawal of aid, and some of the structural limitations of Uganda's 'self-reliance' approach.

Case studies and methodology

Research was conducted in two refugee settlements in Uganda between March 2022 and August 2023: Kyangwali, in western Uganda, and Pagirinya, in the north. Kyangwali hosts more than 120,000 refugees from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), alongside small populations of other nationalities. Most Congolese come from Ituri Province, on the other side of Lake Albert, and have fled to Uganda since 2017. Others come from North Kivu Province and have spent longer in Uganda. Pagirinya settlement is located in Adjumani District, near the South Sudanese border. Established in 2016, it is Adjumani's second-largest settlement, with a population of about 37,000 refugees. Most refugees are Ma'di speakers from South Sudan's Eastern Equatoria State, located across the border. The second-largest group is Nuer, most of whom originate in Unity State, in the northern part of South Sudan.

The qualitative part of the research involved group discussions and in-depth interviews with refugees of different backgrounds. In Pagirinya, we conducted three focus group discussions with 14 refugees and individual interviews with 24 refugees. In Kyangwali and surrounding villages, we conducted three focus group discussions with 14 refugees and individual interviews with 23 refugees. Based on the qualitative data, we developed a mobility survey. We randomly selected households from Ituri and North Kivu (in Kyangwali) and from Eastern Equatoria and Unity State (in Pagirinya) to participate and provide information about the movements of all adult household members. The survey sampled 224 households (112 in each settlement, 56 of each region of origin) and recorded the mobilities of 645 refugees. The surveys were administered by refugee enumerators with the support of two refugee-led organisations: the Youth Empowerment Foundation (YEF), in Pagirinya, and COBURWAS International Youth Organization to Transform Africa (CIYOTA), in Kyangwali.

Figure 1. A map of Uganda with key cities and the research sites.

Key mobility patterns

As part of our survey, refugees were asked about the number of times they had left the settlement over the past three years in order to visit Kampala (Uganda's capital city), one major secondary city located in relative proximity to their settlement, and their country of origin. They were also asked about the number of times they had left the settlement over the past month to move anywhere within the district of their settlement or a neighbouring one. Across all groups, trips to urban centres were rare, and hardly ever linked to income-generating activities. Rather, refugees travelled to urban areas mostly to access health and education services. Short-distance movements around the settlements to nearby forests and villages, on the other hand,

were extremely common, and more obviously linked to the livelihoods of refugees and their day-to-day survival.

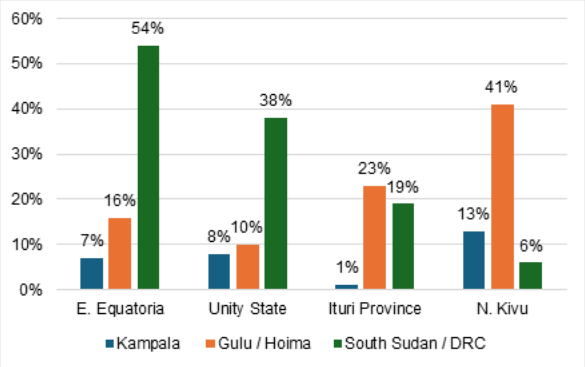

Figure 2. Percentage of refugees who visited Kampala, Gulu or Hoima, and their country of origin (South Sudan or the DRC) over the past three years, by area of origin.

Movement to urban areas

About 7-8% of adult South Sudanese refugees reported visiting Kampala over the past three years. Among Congolese, the rate was 0.7% among refugees from Ituri (a single person within the sample) and 13% among refugees from North Kivu. Nonetheless, even the few who did visit Kampala did so, on average, less than twice over the course of this period, Congolese from North Kivu being the exception with a slightly higher average of 2.6 trips. The most common reasons for travelling to Kampala were accessing medical treatment, attending to a sick relative (among Congolese), or accessing education (among South Sudanese). Refugees from North Kivu, who travelled to Kampala at higher rates and slightly more often, tend to be more established in Uganda. They have spent longer in the country, have wider networks, and are more commonly resettled to third countries, a process which also entails trips to Kampala.

Two secondary cities were selected for the survey: Gulu, for South Sudanese, at a distance of 90km from Pagirinya, and Hoima, for Congolese, at a distance of 90km from Kyangwali. Like Kampala, both Gulu and Hoima host large numbers of South Sudanese and Congolese respectively. Nonetheless, movement between the settlements and these cities, though slightly more common than movement to Kampala, was also rare. While the percentage of refugees who visited such cities varied, those refugees who travelled to Gulu or Hoima did so, on average, around 1.6-1.9 times over the course of three years, across all groups. Both South Sudanese and Congolese travelled to Gulu and Hoima predominantly for medical reasons such as attending to a sick relative or accessing medical treatment themselves. Among South Sudanese, visiting relatives and attending funerals and marriages were also common reasons for going to Gulu.

Cross-border movement

In recent years, there has been a growing policy interest in borderland economies in the East African region and in the opportunities these economies may offer to borderland populations. Both Pagirinya and Kyangwali are situated in close proximity to Uganda's borders with South Sudan and the DRC, and we therefore sought to explore the extent to which refugees engage in cross-border livelihoods. Our survey indicates that patterns of cross-border movement differ considerably between South Sudanese and Congolese. Nonetheless, even among the most mobile group, South Sudanese from Eastern Equatoria, refugees who reported travelling across the border did so, on average, less than three times in three years. Among other groups, the average number of cross-border trips was 1-1.5 over three years. The most common reasons for visiting South Sudan were visiting family and attending funerals for refugees from Eastern Equatoria and visiting family and seeking medical treatment for refugees from Unity State. Among Congolese, refugees from Ituri mostly travelled across the border to attend funerals, while refugees from North Kivu, where very few such trips were reported, travelled to visit family members.

Movement around the settlements

In the survey, refugees were also asked about their trips over the past month within the district of their settlement or a neighbouring district. In Pagirinya, this referred to trips within Adjumani and Amuru

districts. In Kyangwali, it referred to trips within Kikuube and Kagadi districts. In both cases, the districts in question include forests or 'bush' areas, agricultural land, host community villages, as well as small commercial centres with markets, schools, and clinics. About 80% of the South Sudanese in Pagirinya and 75% (Ituri) and 57% (North Kivu) of the Congolese in Kyangwali reported leaving the settlement at least once over the past month to go anywhere within the district or a neighbouring one. Many undertook such trips on a regular basis. South Sudanese moved almost 10 times per month on average, while among Congolese from Ituri and North Kivu short-distance trips out of the settlement were undertaken about 8 and 5 times per month respectively.

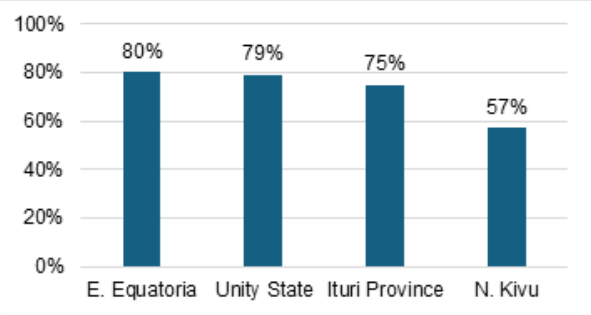

Figure 3. Percentage of refugees who left the settlement to go anywhere within Adjumani and Amuru (among South Sudanese) or Kikuube and Kagadi (among Congolese), by area of origin.

The costs of mobility

Settlements are not fenced and they are typically connected by public transport to nearby urban centres. Within Pagirinya, for example, there is a 'stage' where vehicles leave for Adjumani and Elegu (on the South Sudan border) when full. From Kyangwali, it is possible to find transport to Hoima and Kampala. Boda-boda motorcycle taxis also operate in and around the settlements and facilitate short-distance movements. Moreover, while the Refugee Act does leave room for the authorities to introduce restrictions on the freedom of movement of refugees, in practice, refugees are not required to secure permits in order to move out of the settlements. Attitudes towards movement across the border into refugees' countries of origin are more ambiguous, as this movement is often interpreted as inconsistent with international refugee law. Border officials are fully aware that this kind of movement takes place, but they generally tolerate it, while refugees typically avoid identifying as such at border points.

Movement is often restricted by its monetary costs, rather than by Uganda's regulatory framework. As in other parts of East Africa, refugees in Uganda have faced severe economic shocks in recent years, which have been compounded by reductions in the amounts of humanitarian aid they receive. At the time of research, refugees in Pagirinya received 19,000 Ugandan Shillings (UGX) (USD 5.13) per person every month, while refugees in Kyangwali received UGX 13,000 (USD 3.51)[2]. Trips to urban areas or across the border are too expensive for most refugees to afford. A one-way ticket from Kyangwali to Hoima on public transport cost UGX 20,000 (USD 5.40), while travelling all the way to Kampala cost UGX 40,000 (USD 10.81). Prices of transport between Pagirinya, Gulu, and Kampala were similar. Short trips outside the settlements, on the other hand, are time consuming but less 'capital intensive', as refugees can walk, or, less commonly, use a motorcycle taxi.

Mobility and survival

While all movement in and out of the settlement may be economically significant in some way or another, our survey suggests that the most common ways in which mobility directly contributes to income generation among refugees are by allowing them to access natural resources (namely, land and vegetation), engage in casual labour, and, to a more limited extent, trade. Such activities are not equally practised across communities, because the daily movements and livelihoods of refugees are shaped by multiple factors that may vary significantly between contexts. These include the pre-displacement practices of refugees, their networks in Uganda or capacity to build them, the opportunities or resources available in hosting regions, and the assistance available within the settlements. Moreover, some activities, such as collecting firewood or petty trade, are strongly associated with women, and are therefore less commonly undertaken by men.

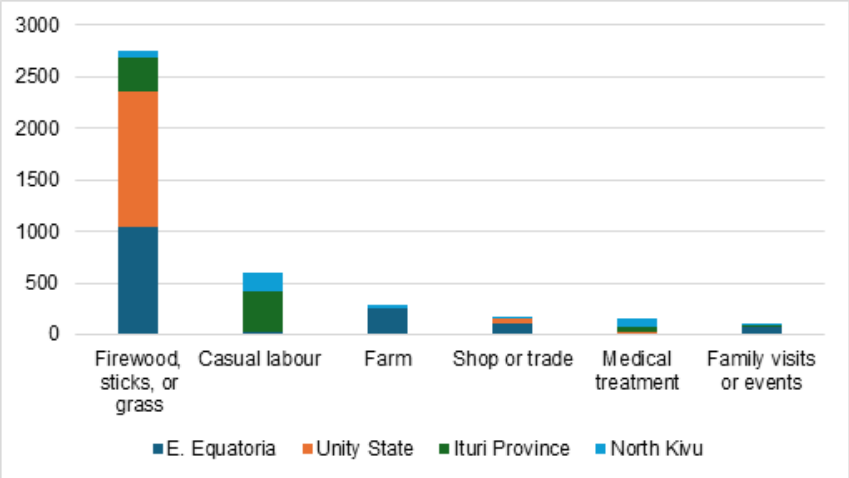

Figure 4. Number of trips out of the settlement undertaken by refugees over the past month, for different reasons, by area of origin. 'Medical treatment' includes movement by the respondent to support a sick relative. 'Family visits or events' includes funerals and marriages.

Economic precarity, however, plays an important role in shaping mobility (and immobility) patterns. Across all communities, daily movements around the settlements were more common among refugees of lower economic status. In Pagirinya, for example, and especially among Nuer refugees, access to remittances from relatives working in South Sudan plays an important role in economic stratification. In our survey, members of those Nuer households who had received USD 500 or more in remittances over the past year reported leaving the settlement only 4.5 times in the last month on average – less than half of the general average among Nuer household. Many of the refugees from North Kivu in Kyangwali settlement have been in Uganda for decades and tend to have more assets and greater access to land. In our survey, they reported fewer daily movements compared to refugees from Ituri, most of whom have little to no access to farmland and few assets in Uganda.

Vegetation

Collecting dry grass and firewood is a common reason for daily movements, especially among women. Among Nuer refugees in Pagirinya, this was almost the only reason reported for ever leaving the settlement, alongside a few shopping trips. Dry grass, firewood, and wooden poles are used for the construction of shelter or as a source of energy. They can be sold in bundles or used at home, as the humanitarian support refugees receive does not include alternative sources of energy. If not used at home, the income generated by selling bundles of firewood and grass can be UGX 3,000-8,000 (USD 0.81-2.16) per day. However, the reliance of refugees on such natural resources and the resulting environmental degradation around refugee settlements are usually a significant cause for tensions between refugees and hosts and this activity is therefore sometimes limited by the authorities. In Kyangwali, rapid loss of vegetation has been a major concern, and refugees are only allowed to venture into the forest in search of firewood once a week.

Farming

Agriculture has long been central to Uganda's 'self-reliance' approach, but refugees today rarely have access to sufficient farmland within the settlements to subsist on cultivation. Land has to be rented outside the settlements, from Ugandans. This is a common practice among refugees in Pagirinya, though less so in Kyangwali, which is located in a more densely populated area. However, since refugees typically cultivate for self-consumption, they often struggle to find the cash to retain rented plots, and investment in high-quality agricultural inputs is rare. This is particularly problematic when erratic rains and

dry spells – as experienced throughout 2022 and early 2023 – result in poor harvests. Several South Sudanese interviewees explained that they used to rent farmland but could not afford to continue doing so as their savings depleted or external support decreased. It is only those refugees with wider local networks, often based on shared 'ethnic' identity and language with hosts, that are able to access land for free or in exchange for a share of the produce at the end of the season.

Casual labour

Engaging in casual labour is a common reason for moving out of the settlement in Kyangwali but is rare among South Sudanese. South Sudanese often prefer to cross the border to seek casual labour in Juba, where daily payments can be higher. In Kyangwali, refugees cultivate for Ugandans in villages around the settlement, an activity that usually earns them UGX 3,000-10,000 (USD 0.81-2.70) per day. Labour demands fluctuate between seasons and depend on rainfall, and refugees who engage in casual labour compete with the poorest members of host communities, a competition that draws wages down to the detriment of both. Given Kyangwali's proximity to Lake Albert, casual labour in artisanal fishing has long been common among refugees from Ituri, many of whom come from fishing villages on the other side of the lake. Due to the overexploitation of fish stocks, however, the Ugandan government has introduced restrictions on fishing, and refugees have increasingly found themselves suffering losses due to harassment by soldiers and the confiscation of their equipment.

Petty trade

Although not dominant in our survey statistics, one of the most common income-generating activities among refugees is small-scale arbitrage trade, which entails buying goods in one location and selling them in another, typically within the settlement. This kind of trade, particularly in food items, is predominantly practised by women. Among humanitarian agencies it is often celebrated as a form of 'entrepreneurship', and refugees are encouraged to join saving associations and take out interest-bearing loans to engage in it. As a livelihood strategy, however, it is remarkably precarious and vulnerable to shocks, and rarely enables any form of accumulation or stability. Traders make tiny margins, not least because they compete with dozens, if not hundreds, of other traders offering exactly the same goods and with whom they share the same pool of customers. Moreover, because their 'businesses' largely rely on the limited purchasing power of other refugees, who in turn rely heavily on humanitarian aid, the monthly injection of cash rations into the settlement economy is crucial for their survival.

Fishermen at the shore of Lake Albert in western Uganda. Credit: Yotam Gidron.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Refugees in Uganda are free to move, but those who reside in settlements rarely do so in order to engage in sustainable livelihoods or access reliable and 'empowering' economic opportunities. In Pagirinya and Kyangwali, mobility allows refugees to access natural resources, engage in casual labour, and trade, but there are also serious structural constraints that prevent such activities from being sustainable livelihoods. The engagement of refugees in these two settlements with urban economies or cross-border enterprise is very limited. Trips to urban areas or across the border are a luxury: they are expensive and are rarely undertaken in order to secure economic profit, even if they may help maintain access to networks or assets over the long term. Small trips around the settlements, on the other hand, are a daily survivalist activity: they require little to no financial investment, have immediate or short-term benefits, but do not offer avenues for growth and asset development over the long term.

The data from Pagirinya and Kyangwali calls for a more nuanced understanding – in both scholarly analysis and humanitarian and development programming – of mobility and its role in the socio-economic lives of refugees. Celebrating refugee mobilities as an index of entrepreneurialism, progress, and empowerment risks misrepresenting the daily realities of most refugees and shifting the focus away from the more acute and structural factors that contribute to their poverty. Freedom of movement is a fundamental human right and central to the day-to-day survival of refugees. However, mobility alone cannot change the economic realities of refugee-hosting regions without complementary strategies for wealth creation and the equitable redistribution of resources. In light of these findings, this brief concludes with several recommendations for policymakers and development and humanitarian actors, in Uganda and elsewhere.

Promoting freedom of movement and reducing its costs

The fact that refugees in Uganda are free to move, even if they continue to regularly reside in settlements, enables them to diversify their livelihoods and reduce their dependency on humanitarian aid. While transportation to urban centres is not always affordable, there are no additional costs associated with movement, such as a requirement to secure permits from the authorities. This renders livelihoods that rely on mobility more viable. Investment in transportation infrastructure in refugee-hosting regions will reduce the monetary costs of mobility and make it safer, benefitting both refugees and Ugandans. Other countries in the region that have so far not done so should similarly adopt regulatory frameworks that respect the freedom of movement of refugees.

Maintaining humanitarian support in the settlements

The fact that refugees move and engage in livelihoods activities around settlements does not mean that they can secure sustainable incomes and no longer require humanitarian assistance. Much of the mobility around settlements is driven by economic desperation and does not guarantee access to reliable sources of income. Moreover, refugee enterprises within the settlements, even when they have some links with markets beyond it, are highly dependent on aid. In this context, and in the absence of reliable data on the individual socio-economic profile of refugees, the support provided to them should not be reduced. This lesson, too, is relevant to other countries in the region where reductions in aid and policies of 'prioritisation' or 'targeting' have been introduced in recent years.

Supporting farmers and facilitating access to land

Land is a finite resource and cannot support the livelihoods of all refugees. However, given the limited employment and off-farm livelihood opportunities in refugee-hosting regions, and the fact that many refugees do have experience in agriculture as well

as an interest in cultivation, more should be done to increase their access to land and to help them increase their yields. This can be promoted through interventions that bring refugees and hosts together and incentivise hosts to offer land, including by compensating them. By promoting agroecological practices and subsidising quality agricultural inputs, government institutions and development agencies can help render cultivation a more sustainable livelihood, as well as mitigate some of the adverse impacts of climate-related shocks and hazards.

Rethinking 'private sector engagements'

Promoting 'private sector engagement' has been a key priority for humanitarian and development agencies in Uganda and the East Africa region in recent years, but progress in this area has been limited and not always in the most productive direction. More often than not, interventions focus on turning refugees into customers (for instance, of banks or telecom companies) or on supporting small-scale refugee enterprises in specific fields that rely heavily on the limited purchasing power of other refugees (such as arbitrage trade of food items, hairdressing, or tailoring). Greater emphasis should be placed on providing sustained and tangible support to refugee-led or co-led enterprises that can produce goods or offer services to markets and customers outside the settlements.

Understanding mobility in context

The broad similarities and trends highlighted here notwithstanding, the ways in which refugees move to support their livelihoods vary across populations and locales. Conducting research in order to understand existing patterns of movement and their economic significance in particular contexts is a valuable vantage point from which to devise interventions that aim to promote the welfare and livelihoods of refugees and host communities. The role of gender, ethnic background, age, socio-economic status, and other factors in determining people's capacity to leverage opportunities through movement as well as in forcing them to undertake precarious mobilities due to economic desperation should also be considered, to ensure interventions benefit those most in need.

Endnotes

1 UNHCR, Impact of underfunding on the Refugee Response, 31 October 2023, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/104367.

2 Conversion rates refer to the time of research, in 2022, when USD 1 was worth roughly UGX 3,700.

Further reading

Yotam Gidron (2024) 'Survivalist mobilities: freedom of movement and the economic lives of settlement refugees in Uganda', *Journal of Refugee Studies,* doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae079

Naohiko Omata and Yotam Gidron (2025) 'Returning to fund refugeehood: dispersal and survival between Uganda and South Sudan', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51 (1): 101-21, doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2419965

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Cover photo: Pagirinya settlement's main public transport stage. Credit: Yotam Gidron.

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