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Uganda's Self-Reliance Model: Does it Work?



Key Points

- Uganda gives refugees the right to work and freedom of movement through its self-reliance model. The model has been widely praised as one of the most progressive refugee policies in the world.
- Our research explores what difference the self-reliance model makes in practice. Which aspects work, under what conditions, and for whom?
- In order to answer these questions, we compare outcomes for refugees and host community members in Uganda and Kenya, neighbouring countries with contrasting refugee policy frameworks.
- We identify four major advantages to Uganda's regulatory framework: greater mobility, lower transaction costs for economic activity, higher incomes, and more sustainable sources of employment.
- Nevertheless, there are some limitations to Uganda's assistance model, notably in relation to the viability of its land allocation model in rural settlements, the inadequacy of access to education in the settlements, and the ineffectiveness of urban assistance.
- Overall, our research offers a strong endorsement of the value of allowing refugees the right to work and freedom of movement, but calls for a more nuanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of refugee assistance in Uganda.

Recommendations

- In Uganda and elsewhere, the international community should reward governments that give refugees the right to work and freedom of movement, not only because it is a right within international law but also because it leads to better socio-economic outcomes.
- The international community and the Government of Uganda need to recognise that despite the exemplary nature of the Ugandan model, service provision for refugees is weak in some areas, such as access to education in the settlements.
- Reflection is needed on the sustainability of Uganda's land-based self-reliance model. Although access to land is associated with better food security outcomes, there is currently not enough land available to offer an adequate basis for self-reliance for all.
- The way in which policy-makers conceive of enabling environments for refugees should be population-specific. The same self-reliance programmes in Uganda, for example, lead to different outcomes for Somali refugees compared to Congolese refugees.
- There is a need for policy-makers, the media, and academics to adopt a more nuanced view of both the Ugandan self-reliance model, and other 'success stories' or cases of 'best practice'.
- Policy-makers should work towards building comparable datasets, collected on the basis of common methods, that can allow measurable outcomes to be 'benchmarked' against comparable contexts. Our experience of piloting this approach to compare Uganda and Kenya highlights the analytical value of this type of benchmarking.

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Uganda's self-reliance model

Uganda's refugee policies have been widely recognised as among the most progressive in the world. The BBC has described Uganda as 'one of the best places to be a refugee'. Despite currently hosting more refugees than any country in Africa, it allows refugees the right to work and significant freedom of movement. This approach contrasts with many other refugee-hosting countries in the region, which often require refugees to live in camps and deny them access to labour markets.

Ever since the Nakivale settlement, Africa's oldest refugee camp, opened in 1958, Uganda has provided refugees with plots of land in rural settlements, allowing them to engage in subsistence farming. Uganda's approach was formalised in policy through the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS), established with donor support in 1999. The right to work and to choose a place of residence were incorporated into law in the 2006 Refugee Act. The Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) strategic framework updated the SRS model in 2016, and support for Uganda's self-reliance model is a focus of UNHCR's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). Crisis and conflict in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have led refugee numbers in Uganda to increase from 450,000 in early 2015 to around 1.4 million by late 2017.

Uganda's model has three core elements that distinguish it from most other refugee-hosting countries. First, its regulatory framework: it lets refugees work and choose their place of residence. Second, its assistance model: it allocates plots of land for refugees to cultivate within its rural settlements. Third, its model of refugee-host interaction: it encourages integrated social service provision and market access.

But what difference does the self-reliance model make in practice? To what extent does it lead to better outcomes for refugees and the host community? Which aspects work, under what conditions, and for whom?

Comparing Uganda and Kenya

Assessing the impact of the self-reliance model relies upon being able to compare outcomes for refugees and hosts within the model to refugees and hosts outside the model. In order to do that, we compare welfare outcomes for refugees and host communities in Uganda with those in neighbouring Kenya. We choose this comparison because the countries have contrasting legal and policy frameworks relating to refugees, and yet, both are in the same region and host refugee populations from the same countries.

Although they are neighbours, there are three major contrasts between Uganda and Kenya's refugee policy models. First, in terms of regulation, while Uganda's 'Self-Reliance Strategy' allows refugees to work and move freely, Kenya's 'Encampment Policy' does not. Second, in terms of assistance, Uganda generally adopts an open settlements model in which refugees are offered access to land for cultivation; Kenya has a camp model premised upon international aid delivery. In cities, Uganda allows refugees to have economic freedom; in Kenya, they are generally prohibited from living outside camps. Third, in terms of refugee-host interaction, in Uganda refugees are integrated into national service provision; in Kenya, refugees generally receive access to parallel services provided by the international community, which nationals can usually also access.

We draw upon quantitative and qualitative research, including a survey of over 8,000 refugees and host community members in urban (Kampala and Nairobi) and camp contexts (Nakivale and Kakuma). We selected Nakivale and Kakuma partly because they are both widely regarded as the most progressive and economically dynamic camps or settlements and they host the same nationality groups. We focus on outcomes for Congolese and Somali refugees. The data is representative of our focus populations and selected sites but cannot be considered representative of all refugees or host communities in Uganda and Kenya.

Dimensions of the model	Uganda's Self-Reliance Strategy	Kenya 'Encampment' Policy
1) Regulatory framework	Right to work and move freely	No right to work or move freely
2) Assistance model	Self-reliance in settlements and cities	International aid in camps, and precarity in cities
3) Refugee-host interaction	Refugees within national service provision	Nationals within international service provision

Table 1. Comparing Uganda and Kenya's refugee policy models

	DRC	SOM	Host	Total
Kenya				
Kakuma	445	459	605	1509
Nairobi	712	566	1191	2469
Uganda				
Kampala	473	459	955	1887
Nakivale	804	823	667	2294
Total	2434	2307	3418	8159

Table 2. Our sample size, by location and population (n=8159)

We recognise that the Ugandan and Kenyan contexts vary in a range of ways beyond the legal and policy variables we are interested in, and that a range of confounding variables are likely to contribute to our observed outcomes. We therefore use our qualitative research not only as a means to inform our survey design but also as a means to triangulate our quantitative observations, and to elaborate on the causal mechanisms that may underpin quantitative patterns and correlations.

Regulatory framework

The right to work and freedom of movement make a difference.

1. Greater mobility

Refugees in Uganda's Nakivale settlement are 70% more likely to have travelled from camps/settlements to the city in the last year than refugees in Kenya's Kakuma camp.

22% of Congolese and 29% of Somalis in Nakivale report leaving the settlement in the last year, compared with 13% of Congolese and 17% of Somalis in Kakuma (Figure 2). This is a gap of around 70% for both communities. Moreover, over 80% of our Somali refugee sample in Uganda have engaged in secondary movement from Kenya to Uganda and, of those who moved, around 30% cited the absence of freedom to work and move as the primary reason for onward movement. Greater mobility rights are valued because they enable refugees to adopt economic strategies that might otherwise be unavailable or expensive. For example, many Somali refugee families adopt a split-family strategy in which some family members remain in Nakivale in order to access aid and free accommodation while others live in Kampala, and may return occasionally for food distribution or verification exercises. The prevalence of this strategy among Somalis is borne out by the data: only 40% of Somali refugees in Kampala reported to live in the place where they are registered.

Fatuma, a Somali refugee who runs a shop in Nakivale, explained the importance of mobility for her business: "I go to Kampala every 2 months to purchase my stuff. I usually buy in Owino and Chikubu markets in Kampala... When I go there, I stay at my friend's place in Kisenyi... I initially started this business with my Somali refugee friend who moved from Nakivale to Kampala. She started sending items to me to sell in

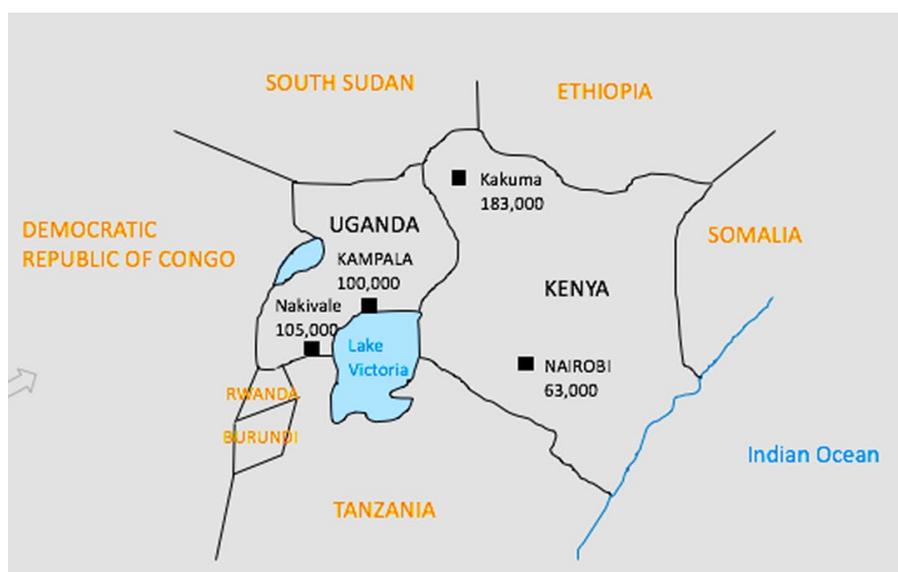


Figure 1. Our four main research sites, and their approximate refugee populations

the camp and we were sharing profits... Later she got resettled to Sweden. But I continued this business."

2. Lower transaction costs for economic activity

Somali refugees in Kampala face more than 20 times lower rates of arrest and police bribery than Somali refugees in Nairobi.

Refugees in Kenya are working and moving but they are moving less and paying far higher transaction costs for doing so. This is especially the case for Somali refugees in Nairobi, 29% of whom report being arrested in the last 3 months and, as a community, report paying an average of \$23 USD in police bribes over the last 3 months. This compares to negligible levels of arrest and bribe solicitation in Kampala (Figure 3). One Somali refugee, who moved from Nairobi to Kampala, explained: "Kenya is tough. Police harass refugees. We cannot move freely. We have to carry our ID all the time in Kenya. Nairobi is also dangerous and has so much crime... Uganda is safer and more peaceful. When we are walking, no one harasses us. It is much easier to live here."

3. Higher incomes

Being a refugee with a job in Uganda is associated with having a 16% higher income than being a refugee with a job in Kenya, controlling for other variables.

Refugees in Uganda generally have higher incomes at purchasing power parity than those in Kenya (Figure 4). Indeed, our regression analysis suggests that, controlling for other variables, being a refugee with a job in Uganda is associated with a 16% higher income than being a refugee with a job in Kenya. However, there is one notable exception: Congolese refugees in Nakivale are comparatively worse off. This appears to reflect the inherent limitation of agricultural work as

Greater mobility	70% more likely to travel from camps
Lower transaction costs for economic activity	Somalis 20 times lower arrest and bribe rates in Kampala
Higher incomes	16% higher income, controlling for other variables
More sustainable employment	Employment by other refugees (compared to NGOs and nationals)

Table 3. Summary of the main positive findings relating to the impact of Uganda's regulatory framework, when comparatively benchmarked against Kenya

a means to access high income levels. Regression analysis tells us that the statistically significant determinants of variation in income for refugees across our data are: human capital (education and health), identity (gender, age, being Somali), and the environment (being in a city rather than a camp, and being in Uganda rather than in Kenya).

4. More sustainable sources of employment

Refugees in wage-earning employment are more likely to be employed by refugees of the same nationality in Uganda than Kenya.

Surprisingly, employment rates for refugees in Kenya are higher than for those in Uganda (Figure 5). In the camp/settlement context, this is mainly because Kakuma offers low paid 'incentive work' to refugees. In the urban context, it may well be that Nairobi simply represents a larger labour market, albeit that refugees are required to work in the informal economy. However, the sources of employment in Uganda appear to be more sustainable. In particular, refugees in Uganda are far more likely to be employed by other co-national refugees, while refugees in Kenya are more likely to be employed by NGOs and international organisations in camps, and illicitly by members of the host community in cities.

Assistance model

Uganda's assistance model has strengths and weaknesses.

1. Inadequate land for rural self-reliance

80% of Congolese refugees who arrived in Nakivale before 2012 have access to land compared with just 17% of those who arrived after 2012.

Our data also reveals that the more land farming households have access to, the better they do in terms of dietary diversity, food security, and calorie intake. Put simply, a functioning land allocation system can be an effective means to support refugees from agricultural backgrounds. However, there are two qualifications to this. First, Uganda's current land allocation model is not working effectively. Due to growing refugee numbers, the quantity and quality of land available to new arrivals is inadequate. Strikingly, 80% of Congolese households who arrived in Nakivale before 2012 have access to land, compared to 17% of Congolese households who

arrived after 2012. Land scarcity is in turn contributing to land disputes. The implication is that if refugee numbers continue to remain high, a rethink may be needed in terms of how finite land is allocated and cultivated. Second, the land allocation model should only be considered an option for some groups of refugees. Somali refugees do not engage in subsistence agriculture, and refugees who engage in agriculture generally have lower incomes and welfare outcomes than refugees who work in other sectors such as commerce. The implication is that agriculture should be promoted alongside a range of other pathways to self-reliance.

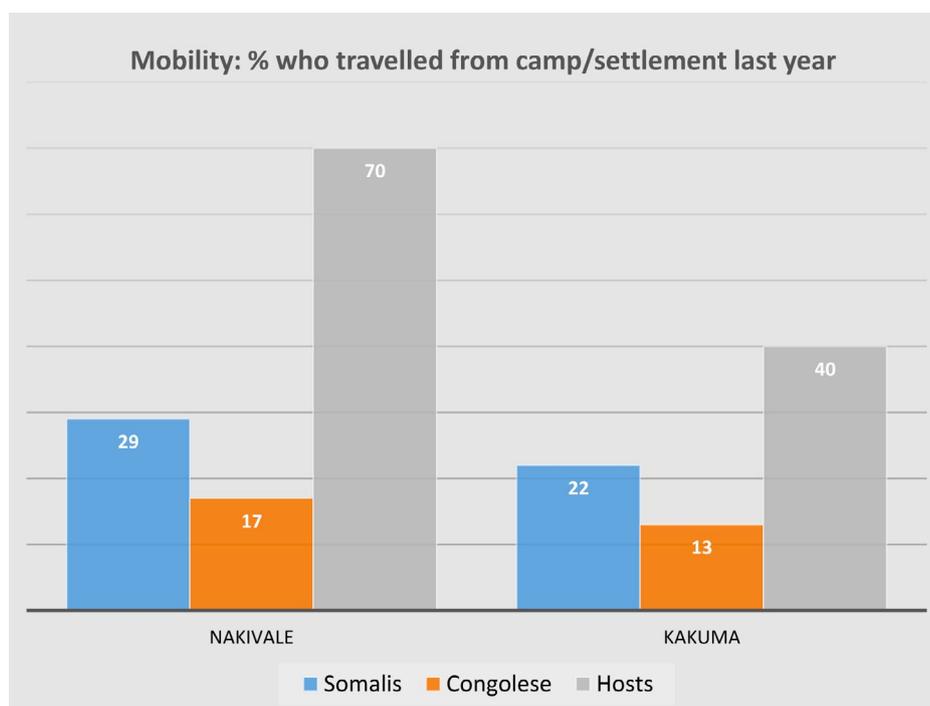


Figure 2. Comparing refugee and host community mobility from camps/settlements to cities

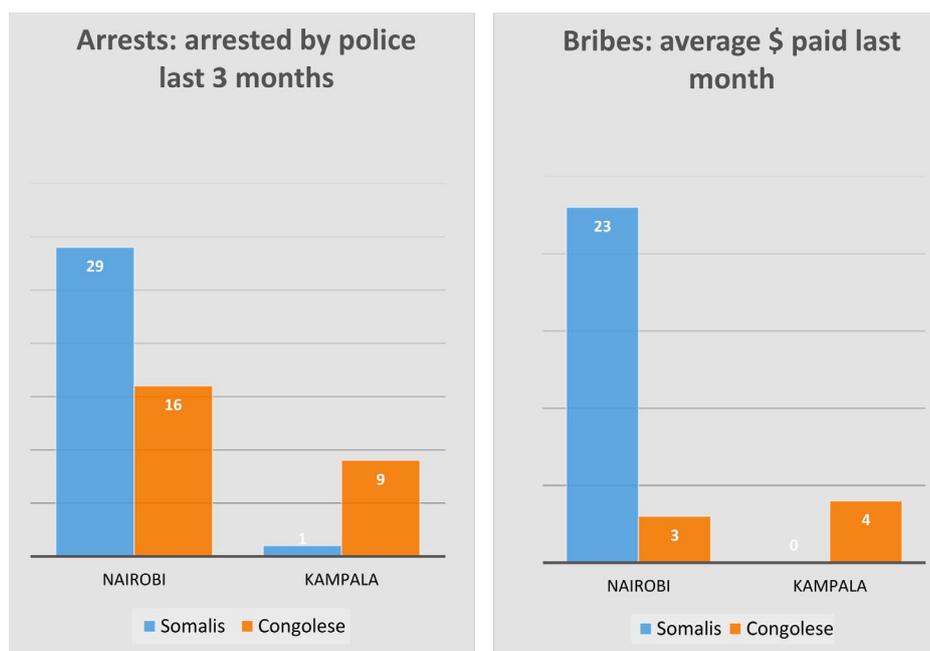


Figure 3. Comparing arrest rates and bribes paid for refugees in Nairobi and Kampala

2. Limited access to education

Refugees who arrived in Nakivale before the age of 16 have on average 3 years less education than refugees who arrived in Kakuma before the age of 16.

There is some evidence that access to education for refugees may be more limited in Uganda than in Kenya. In regression analysis based on our pooled data from Uganda and Kenya, and controlling for other variables, being in Uganda is associated with 2 years less education for refugees who arrived before the age of 16. Disaggregating this data suggests that while there is no significant difference between Kampala and Nairobi, the difference increases to 3 years for Nakivale and Kakuma. This finding is corroborated by UNHCR data, which shows that overall primary school enrolment rates for refugees are 54% in Nakivale compared to 92% in Kakuma.

Our qualitative research suggests two possible reasons for the contrast. First, Congolese and Somali refugees report greater practical challenges relating to education in Uganda, including as a result of distance, language, and cost. Second, the international community has a greater role in education provision in Kakuma than in Nakivale. Indeed, in Kakuma, schools are mainly run by UNHCR and its implementing partners, while in Nakivale they are mainly run by the national government. The implication is that Uganda's integrated service provision model may need greater international support, particularly in relation to overcoming practical barriers to access.

3. Weak urban assistance

Although refugees are generally better off in the city than the settlement, they frequently raise concerns about the quality of the urban assistance programme in Kampala.

Urban refugees have, on average, higher incomes and better socio-economic outcomes than those in camps and settlements. However, having given up access to most formal assistance, many struggle to access basic services, including health and education. In particular, the urban Congolese population has worse outcomes than the urban Somali population. Social protection and economic opportunity tend to come from within the community or are underwritten by remittances.

Just one implementing partner, Interaid, has responsibility for UNHCR's urban programme. Meanwhile, dozens of

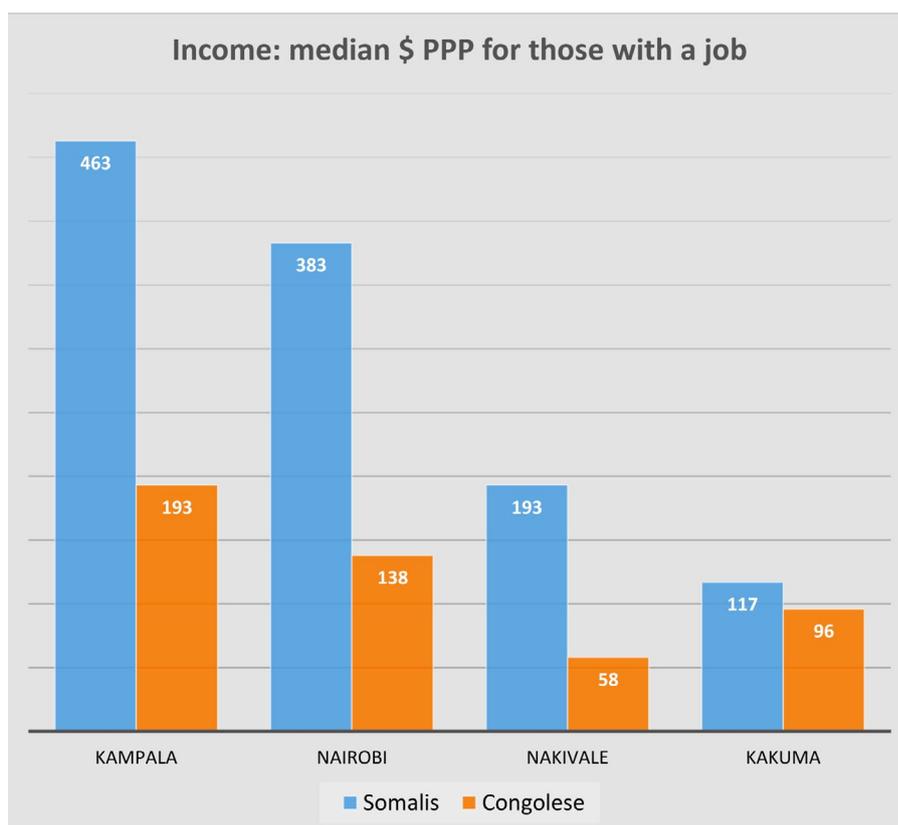


Figure 4. Comparing median income levels at purchasing power parity (PPP)

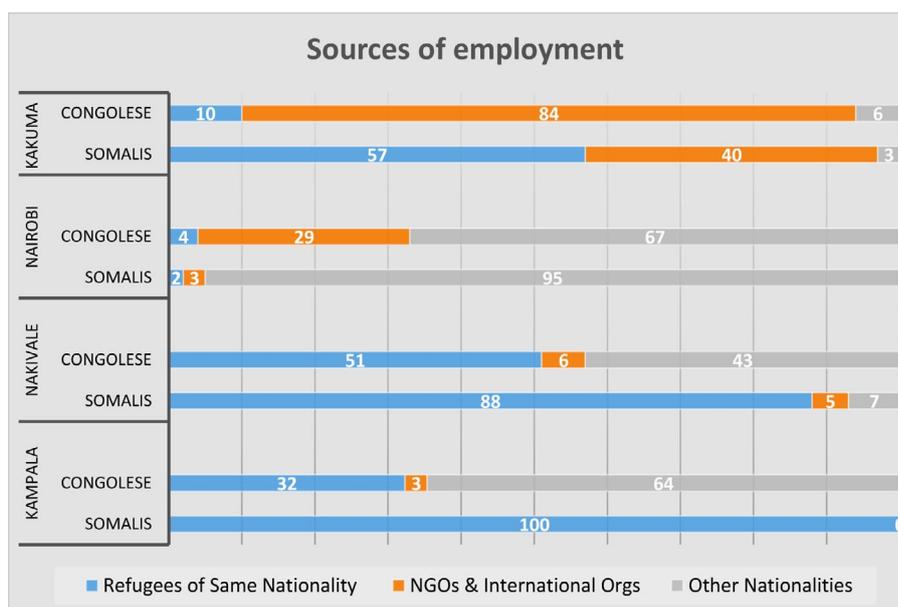


Figure 5. Comparing sources of employment for those refugees who are employed

refugee-led organisations represent an important source of social protection but are largely excluded from the formal humanitarian system. The implication is that there is a need to revisit the presumption that refugees who choose to reside in urban areas are necessarily able to support themselves. A better level of social safety net may be needed. UNHCR should also consider diversifying its implementing and operational partners in Kampala, including through deeper collaboration with refugee-led organisations.

Refugee-host interaction

Refugee-host relations in both Uganda and Kenya are generally cordial. However, three interesting contrasts offer insights into the Ugandan model.

1. Economic competition

There is a moderate perception of economic competition between refugees and the agricultural host community around Nakivale, but there are also indications of refugee-host interdependence.

The Turkana around Kakuma have a more positive perception of the economic contribution of refugees to the host economy than Ugandans living close to Nakivale (98% of Turkana agree or strongly agree that the presence of refugees in Kakuma has increased their economic opportunities, while 72% of Ugandans living close to Nakivale agree or strongly agree that the presence of refugees has increased their economic opportunities). Our qualitative research suggests that one reason for the more positive refugee-host perceptions in Kakuma compared to Nakivale may be that the skills and activities of refugees and hosts are complementary in Kakuma, whereas refugees and hosts in Nakivale often undertake the same economic activities, leading to a greater perception of competition. In Kakuma, for example, the local Turkana tend to specialise in areas such as livestock, charcoal, and firewood, which are prohibited areas of activity for refugees. In Nakivale, the host community is growing the same set of crops as the many refugees involved in agricultural work. However, Ugandan traders are likely to identify the presence of refugees as a significant economic benefit. This observation has wider implications: it suggests that refugees may be more likely to be perceived as a boon for the economy when they bring different sets of skills and activities than those already available within the host community.

2. Land disputes

Among the refugee and Ugandan households that have access to land for cultivation, about 32% have experienced a land dispute at least once.

For some people in Nakivale land competition has recently become a source of tension. The number of refugees living in Nakivale has increased more than 60% in the last 5 years but the size of the settlement has remained the same. Among the refugee and Ugandan households that have access to land for cultivation, about 32% have experienced a land dispute at least once. The main reasons for land disputes are conflicting claims relating to land ownership and land boundaries. The increased number of refugees in Uganda is clearly affecting their relationship with host populations. In 2017, for example,

there was a demonstration led by Ugandans against refugees in Nakivale relating to the boundaries of the settlement. Local protesters demanded a clear boundary between camp and non-camp areas. According to refugees in Nakivale, this demonstration lasted about 2 weeks, making some refugees feel threatened. As one Congolese refugee commented: "During the demo, we all stayed at home and did not send children to school. We stopped farming."

3. Security

Ugandans living close to the Nakivale settlement have fewer security concerns about refugees than Kenyans living close to the Kakuma camps.

Host communities in Nakivale are less likely to view refugees as a security threat than host communities in Kakuma. Meanwhile, refugees are more likely to perceive the host community as 'friendly' and 'trustworthy' in Nakivale than in Kakuma. In the capital cities, there is not much difference across the two countries, and perceptions are relatively neutral. But Somali refugees in Nairobi have a particularly positive relationship with the ethnic Somali Kenyan host community. In general, Congolese refugees have more negative perceptions of the host community than Somali refugees.

Conclusions

Three big conclusions emerge from our research.

First, the right to work and freedom of movement make a significant difference to refugees' welfare outcomes. Policy-makers and practitioners should reward countries like Uganda that provide refugees with the right to work and freedom of movement.

Second, although Uganda's regulatory framework is in many ways exemplary, we need a more nuanced view of Uganda's self-reliance model, based on an evidence-based understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions. On the one hand, we should not overly romanticise 'success stories'. On the other hand, we should not dismiss successes because of imperfections.

Third, our research highlights the value of comparative, cross-country research on the economic lives of refugees and host communities. Comparing refugee and host community outcomes and perceptions across Uganda and Kenya has given us the opportunity to benchmark key performance indicators. We have focused on just two countries, two refugee populations, and two different sites in each of these countries. This type of data collection and 'comparative benchmarking' should be carried forwards, at greater scale, based on multi-country and time series data. It offers opportunities for evidence-based policy-making, programming, and advocacy.

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Cover photo: A Burundian refugee passes by cattle belonging to a Ugandan citizen in Nakivale.
Credit: UNHCR/Frederic Noy

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