

# SEEFAR

Empowering Uganda's forgotten refugees



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*As many countries weaken their commitment to refugees, Uganda stands apart as a progressive model of refugee protection and integration. Yet urban refugees remain an afterthought despite stark needs. With a few simple changes, these “self-settled” women, men and children living in Uganda’s capital could support themselves.*

### Key points:

- There are more displaced people in Uganda’s urban areas with bigger challenges than most actors acknowledge;
- Refugees in Kampala have significant humanitarian and long-term needs distinct from those facing the city’s urban poor, yet few can access support;
- Simple and cost-effective solutions can help these refugees thrive, such as improved information, language classes, psychosocial support and community-based livelihoods projects.



**Alizia<sup>1</sup> arrived in an unfamiliar city with three young children and no idea of where to go.**

She had been running for days, fleeing the armed men who had taken her husband in her home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After crossing into Uganda, she came directly to the capital with her children. Alizia had little money and did not speak English. With no friends or family in Kampala, she tried to find her way to a Congolese church to ask for help.

**Francis\* faced a harrowing journey to Kampala.**

When he was a university student, he and five of his friends were active human rights advocates who used music to call for better governance in his native Kivu. His activism drew the ire of local authorities, who imprisoned and tortured him and his friends. Several of his friends were killed in captivity. Francis managed to escape and fled without money or identification. He could not return home. Over two weeks, he walked nearly 700km to the Ugandan border. He arrived in a foreign country exhausted, alone and no sense of where to go for assistance.

Alizia and Francis are two of Uganda's estimated 1.3 million refugees, among which about 350,000 (27%) are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their stories of violence, trauma and fear in their home country echo the experiences of refugees from South Sudan, Burundi, Somalia, and beyond - many of whom have found safety and the opportunity for a new life in Uganda.<sup>1</sup>

Uganda hosts the third largest population of refugees in the world and is widely recognised as having some of the most generous and refugee-friendly policies in the world.<sup>2</sup> Refugees in Uganda are given access to healthcare, employment, identification documents and freedom of movement - key services and rights that are often missing in other refugee-hosting contexts. Uganda launched the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and has worked diligently to integrate refugees into legislation, policies and programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2019) 'Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Portal' <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, UNDP (2017) 'Uganda's Contribution to Refugee Protection and Management' <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64687>



What also sets Uganda apart is its unique land allocation scheme, where newly arrived refugees like Alizia and Francis are offered small plots of land to cultivate and live on. This generous distribution of land has led most of Uganda's refugees to live in rural areas. The international refugee response has correspondingly focused on these rural regions. For example, Bidi Bidi, a refugee settlement in northwestern Uganda, is now one of the largest refugee settlements in the world and has a population of over 200,000 refugees (mainly refugees from South Sudan). Dozens of international organisations work there and support refugees and host community members alike.

### But Uganda's robust refugee regime has one blind spot: refugee women, men and children living in Kampala.

With the direction and support of a local church in Kampala, Alizia submitted a petition for asylum to the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda (OPM). Like all arriving refugees in the city, she was told that she could not remain in Kampala - the land allocation scheme required that she move to a plot of land far outside the capital.

Alizia could not imagine living in another refugee camp. After the Rwandan genocide, she had worked in Kibumba<sup>3</sup> as a nurse with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). She and her team frequently were the victims of violence - one particularly horrific attack left dozens wounded or dead. She described the attack in vivid detail: "We were taking a bus and after we passed the Goma airport we were attacked. We lost 3 members [of our team], 5 people had their heads cut off, others had arms cut off... 62 people were on the bus. Some of them died on the spot, others at the hospital, others... it was not good."

When Alizia told officials at OPM that she did not want to leave Kampala, she was told that she had to write a letter declaring that she could remain in the city on her own - that she was a "self-settled" refugee who did not need support. Alizia felt like she had no choice - she could not live in a refugee settlement again - and she signed the letter.

Like Alizia, many refugees choose to remain in Kampala despite the lack of support for urban refugees. For some, confusion upon arrival means that they are not processed at the border. Many are afraid to declare themselves at the border due to fear of being forcibly returned to their home country. Such fear of deportation is common among newly arriving refugees though there is little evidence of this practice actually happening in Uganda.

Others choose to move to Kampala because they are from urban areas in their home countries and would not feel comfortable or safe in rural areas. Some refugees believe that their possibility of finding jobs would be much higher in Kampala than in a rural settlement. There are also reports of sporadic individual or communal conflict in parts of Uganda that can lead to secondary displacement of refugees to Kampala.

Following a major verification exercise, official statistics indicate that about 65,000 refugees are living in Kampala. This figure represents just 5% of Uganda's total refugee population.<sup>4</sup> Yet local actors engaged in the refugee response say that Kampala's refugee population is currently far larger than international estimates and growing rapidly. For example, Robert Hakiza, the Executive Director of YARID (Young African Refugees for Integral Development), estimated that Kampala hosted upwards of 200,000 refugees.<sup>5</sup> If accurate, this would mean that one in every eight people in Kampala could be a refugee. At the minimum, such local knowledge of refugee populations calls the accuracy of international estimates into question.

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<sup>3</sup> A now-defunct refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for Rwandan refugees

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR (2019) 'Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Portal' <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>

<sup>5</sup> YARID (2019) 'Young African Refugees for Integral Development' <https://www.yarid.org/index.php>



### Urban refugees face significantly different needs from those living in Uganda's refugee settlements.

There is a pervasive sense among international humanitarian and development actors that refugees who choose to live in Kampala are better-off than those who live in settlements. They often assume that those who choose to “self-settle” in Kampala have more money and local connections, and thus do not need support.

However, Alizia and Francis' stories reveal that many urban refugees are just as vulnerable as refugees living in settlements - if not more so. Mr. Hakiza, a refugee himself, shared this view and said that refugees in Kampala are among those who are most in need of protection. Some refugees who come to Kampala may genuinely be better-off than most refugees - for example, the Eritrean refugee community in Kampala is viewed as well-established and wealthier than others. But Congolese, Somali, and other refugees living in Kampala often find themselves in dire conditions with no access to basic needs.

Urban refugees often end up living in Kampala's slums, which are generally characterised by poverty and poor sanitation. Refugees face distinct challenges in these areas - for example, refugees report being charged more than locals for housing or basic services. A lack of local networks and language barriers are further difficulties confronting Kampala's refugees.

Despite facing specific threats to their well-being, refugees in Kampala often appear to be part of the urban poor and may be unable to access critical humanitarian and development support. For example, a 2018 study found that 85% of refugees interviewed in Kampala did not receive support from charities despite widespread need.<sup>6</sup>

There are also reports of sporadic intercommunal violence in areas of Kampala affecting refugees. While data on Ugandan perceptions of refugees is largely positive, incidents like a major riot in Bwaise three years ago, which displaced the entire Somali refugee community in the area, highlight further vulnerabilities facing Kampala's refugees.

### Despite these challenges, a few simple programmes could better protect and empower Kampala's refugees.

In a country with widespread poverty, both refugees and Ugandans are often left with few options for finding sustainable jobs. This is particularly in Kampala, where agricultural activities are less available and youth have few opportunities for job training. Yet several organisations in Kampala have demonstrated how easy-to-implement programmes can set refugees on a path towards self-reliance.

Alizia and Francis have both benefited from **free English language classes** provided by the Refugee Law Project (RLP).<sup>7</sup> Lack of English skills is a central barrier preventing refugees from accessing jobs or services in Kampala. Correspondingly, there is extremely high demand for such classes among refugees in Kampala. Each language class RLP offers has a capacity of 400 students but sign-ups regularly exceed 800 within 1-2 days. YARID similarly offers English classes at different levels, a service they began based on community consultations with Congolese refugees. Such programmes are cheap, scalable and can provide livelihoods as teachers for both hosts and refugees.

Alizia emphasised how important language classes were to her economic well-being in Kampala. "Here in Uganda, we came, not knowing that one day I will speak English. But now, I can go somewhere to ask for a job, to apply for a job as an interpreter. Sometimes I get work, sometimes I do not. But at least I can introduce myself or ask the things that I need."

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<sup>6</sup> Agora (2018) 'Understanding the needs of urban refugees and host communities residing in vulnerable neighborhoods of Kampala' [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/agora\\_kampala\\_all\\_in\\_one\\_report\\_26072018\\_vf.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/agora_kampala_all_in_one_report_26072018_vf.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Refugee Law Project (2019) 'Refugee Law Project' <https://www.refugeelawproject.org/>

**Youth-run livelihood training** and programming offers another opportunity to empower refugees in Kampala. Action for Fundamental Change and Development (AFFCAD) is a youth-driven nonprofit that supports both refugee and non-refugee youth living in Bwaise, Kisenyi and other slums in Kampala.<sup>8</sup> Their community-based approach generates practical job skills and has enabled refugee and local youth participants to find good, paid work upon completion of their programming. Some students eventually become teachers for AFFCAD, or are supported through small business start-up grants to begin their own venture.

Francis emphasised how Kampala is well-suited to refugee entrepreneurship and refugees need basic support to succeed. He said, “there are good opportunities in Kampala. And the people are open-minded... if you are in Kampala you can do your business with anyone. This group of ours, we have some small activities we are doing that we hope to improve to earn money, freely, as refugees.”

Both Alizia and Francis highlighted the importance of **psychosocial support** to their lives in Kampala. RLP runs a variety of individual therapy and support group programmes, including groups focused specifically on female empowerment. Such services are critical to support urban refugees, many of whom live with symptoms of trauma and depression stemming from their displacement and ongoing challenges in a difficult transition to Kampala. Psychosocial support for urban refugees in Kampala is extremely limited but offers tremendous impact where available.

**EU PARTNERS IOM UGANDA AND AFFCAD TO PROMOTE SOCIAL COHESION IN SLUMS**

**SSCoS project's key result areas**

- Increased knowledge of conflict delivery in Kampala slums communities
- Capacity strengthening for AFFCAD
- Building community capacity to resist radicalisation and violent extremism
- Capacity building for relevant government agencies such as the Counter-Terrorism Police, on radicalisation, extremism and human rights
- Capacity building for relevant government agencies to provide sensitive and non-discriminatory services
- Vocational training, employment, opportunities, and financial aid for start-ups

**Students studying electric installation at the institute in Bwaise, Kampala**

**Slum youth beating odds with support from European Union**

**THERE MAY BE MORE LUCK FOR KIBIRIGE AS AFFCAD PLANS TO SUPPORT SOME OF ITS GRADUATES WITH CAPITAL TO START THEIR OWN BUSINESSES.**

By Jacky Achon

**L**ife was good when Farouq Moses Kibirige lived with his mother in Bwaise. She was his sole caretaker. He had a roof over his head and was educated. In his last year of high school, he passed his final A-Level examination. But fate had other ideas. In his final year, his mother died. From then, Kibirige had to fend for himself. When he got to A-Level, he had no money to pay for university education and no relative was willing to help. His education dream looked all but over.

But all luck would have it, Kibirige got to meet Muhammad Kizza, the founder and CEO of the Action for Fundamental Change (AFFCAD), a non-governmental organisation that runs Bwaise Business and Vocational Institute (BBVI). A scholarship followed and Kibirige now speaks about the future with ample optimism.

As a student at BBVI, Kibirige is one of about 300 youths supported by the Strengthening Social Cohesion and Stability in Slum Populations project (SSCoS).

...of euros 4.5m (sh16.4b). It is implemented by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Uganda, in partnership with various organisations, including AFFCAD in the Bwaise area.

Among other things, the SCoS project aims at tackling the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the Kampala slums of Bwaise, Kibira, Kisenyi and Kibuli. According to the Kibiriya survey, poverty and unemployment are among the root causes of communal conflicts in slums. Hence, SCoS works to impart vocational skills in young people and help them get job opportunities and start-up capital for those who want to venture into self-employment.

Kibirige, 24, is enrolled for an electrical installation and repair course which he hopes to complete in December.

But even before he even graduates, he is using the skills so far acquired. Working part-time at a friend's workshop, he can carry out simple electrical repairs under supervision.

"The little time I spend working, am able to make sh6,000 in a day to take care of my needs," Kibirige says.

With palpable sadness, Kibirige laments that the image of slum dwellers like him is not good.

...most people do not see "value" in them. However, he says this only makes him work harder to prove the doubters wrong.

**Of youth, for youth**

According to Aliza Namaganda, a trainer at BBVI, students are mostly encouraged to follow their passion into gaining employment.

"We always tell our beneficiaries that coming for vocational training is not a curse. Instead, with the hands-on training, they will not have to look for jobs, but create jobs and money is always assured," Namaganda says.

Rose Byakattanda, 30, is the eldest of six orphans. Having lost her father, she dropped out of school in Senior Two due to lack of school fees. She says the EU-funded SCoS project has given her hope.

"Now, studying cookery and a bakery, she is producing cakes and

...strategic plan, which focuses on demand-led skills development. With the support from European Union, the youth in the slums of Kampala will get marketable vocational skills and will be assisted to find work placements or to launch their own small businesses." Abdulkadir

During the launch of the SCoS project in Kampala last October, Ambassador Kristian Schmidt, the head of the European Union Delegation in Uganda, spoke of need to support slum communities above inter-employment frustration and crime.

"The youth in Kampala's slums must not lose hope, nor become marginalised as radicalised," Schmidt said.

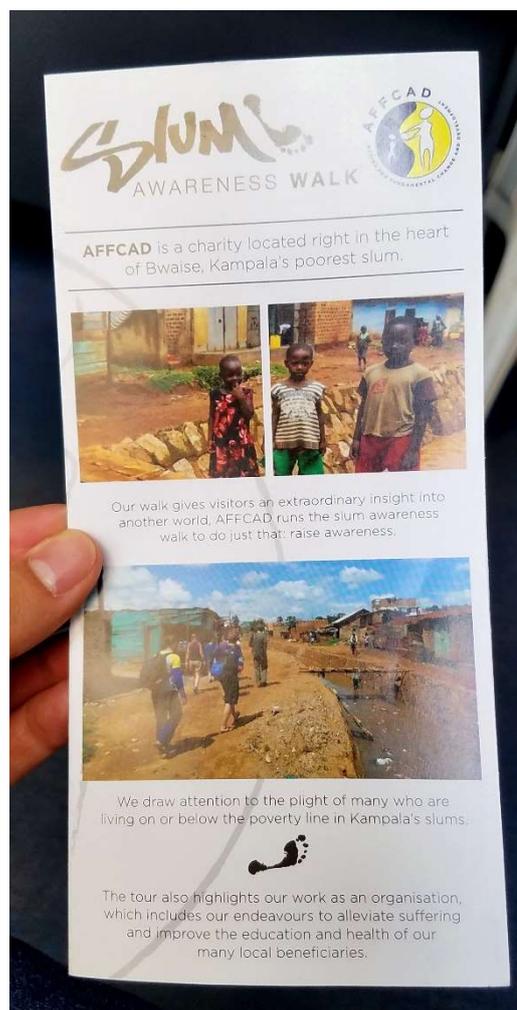
Kibirige, whose dream was to be an engineer, hopes to further studies after this set up an electrical works own.

"The only thing that can stop me from succeeding is if I don't have the support from the European Union Trust Fund, which made the SCoS project possible. I said the project ties in well with the Government's 'rising Uganda'

<sup>8</sup> AFFCAD (2019) " <https://www.affcad.org/home>

Last, delivering **targeted and trusted information** to refugees upon arrival in Kampala can help them to make informed decisions about their futures and facilitate better access sources of support. Refugee interviews indicate that key information gaps include how to register as a refugee, access basic services and identify potential sources of support, such as RLP, YARID or AFFCAD.<sup>9</sup> Such a large-scale communications campaign should be delivered in-person through a community-based approach and in refugees' native languages.

**Uganda's refugee response should be commended for enabling refugees to build new lives across the country, but the challenges facing urban refugees in Uganda are steep and poised to grow over time compared with refugees living in rural areas.** The examples of promoting urban refugee self-reliance cited in this article focus on national NGOs and CSOs: such actors have identified successful and sustainable innovations for the international refugee response to fund and scale. With a few small changes and improved funding, such programmes hold tremendous potential to enable refugees in Kampala to thrive.



<sup>9</sup> Agora (2018) 'Understanding the needs of urban refugees and host communities residing in vulnerable neighborhoods of Kampala' [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/agora\\_kampala\\_all\\_in\\_one\\_report\\_26072018\\_vf.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/agora_kampala_all_in_one_report_26072018_vf.pdf)



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Alex Silberman [alex@seefar.org](mailto:alex@seefar.org)  
Senior Research Analyst, Seefar  
[www.seefar.org](http://www.seefar.org)

This article is based on the author's  
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