

## Refugee-run organisations as partners in development

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**Incorporating refugee-run organisations into development programmes, potentially as implementing partners, provides a means to capitalise on refugees' skills, reach refugees who may not be affiliated with international organisations, and take steps to close the relief-development gap in protracted refugee situations.**

In Kampala, Uganda, refugee-run organisations host activities which aim to foster refugee self-reliance and – with their focus on language and skills training – to actively contribute to local integration and development efforts. These organisations arose out of grassroots efforts by refugees to help each other and are now nationally registered or community-based non-profit organisations with their own committees, boards of directors, websites and logos. In short, these are professional organisations with hard-working staff, which are important to the material and social well-being of many refugees in Kampala.

Refugee-run organisations, such as Hope of Children and Women Victims of Violence (HOCW), Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) and the Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Center, are important sources of social and practical resources for refugees in Kampala. These organisations offer skills training in a variety of areas such as tailoring, arts and crafts, hairdressing and computer literacy. Functional adult literacy classes and basic to advanced English lessons are also provided. Organisations also offer community-based micro-savings and lending groups run by refugee leaders, which address refugees' abiding exclusion from formal micro-finance institutions.

Importantly, refugee-run organisations provide refugee-serving organisations such as the Refugee Law Project (RLP), Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) with refugee community 'hubs' that can be utilised to implement livelihoods trainings and programmes to sensitise refugees to a variety of issues such as maternal health and

gender-based violence. Several initiatives led by refugee-run organisations began with support and training from IRC and FRC.

However, these activities are not labelled as partnerships, and thus the integral role of refugee leaders and organisations in these operations, which are not simply a case of benefactors serving beneficiaries, remains under-recognised. Instead, these interactions comprise a nuanced interplay of organisational resources, existing community hubs created by refugee-run organisations and refugee initiative and leadership for particular livelihoods training and enterprises. Together, these resources enable livelihoods training for refugees that may be impossible to operationalise without both refugee and non-refugee actors taking part.

Importantly, directors and members of refugee-run organisations do not feel sufficiently included in the livelihoods creation or development process. Many refugees with advanced skills are involved in initiatives run by outside organisations but only in limited capacities. For example, a refugee working at the Bondeko Center<sup>1</sup> was a trained nurse in his home country yet is prevented from practising as a nurse in Uganda due to the cost of becoming re-certified. He emphasised, however, that he and his fellow refugee nurses could be tremendous assets to the refugees at Bondeko Center, as well as to Ugandans in the area, if they were to receive support to treat instead of just educate refugees. Describing a health training offered by InterAid, the main implementing partner in Uganda of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, he said, "InterAid gathered all the refugee nurses for a meeting but trained us only to sensitise refugees in

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malaria.... refugees must go all the way to InterAid just to get paracetamol. Or they go and wait two days to go to Mulago [Uganda's national referral hospital] for malaria. But there are many nurses here. We can diagnose and treat from right here at the Center!"<sup>2</sup>

Although sensitisation on health issues is a valuable contribution to communities, the main health struggle cited by refugees is in obtaining medicine and good treatment at hospitals and clinics. Yet the health skills of the nurses at Bondeko Center remain unutilised, despite their eagerness to work and the desperate need for health care in Uganda. This example highlights a struggle for involvement and partnership that extends across the many sectors that refugees are qualified to work within.

### An example of refugee-led development and integration

In efforts to share their skills with others and in the face of inadequate assistance, refugees across Kampala have founded their own organisations. HOCW<sup>3</sup> was created in 2008 by Congolese refugees and a Ugandan pastor, and expanded through the support of international volunteers who fundraised and provided materials. Located on the outskirts of Kampala, this organisation provides various livelihoods activities for both refugees and local Ugandans, as well as English lessons and programmes for children. The initiative began after women expressed the need to diversify their skills, as the majority could only find work in Kampala washing clothes; it started in 2013 with a tailoring programme, and now runs a range of programmes including arts and crafts, hairdressing, mushroom-growing and business skills. An estimated 40% of training participants at HOCW are

Ugandans. Such refugee-run organisations have the ability to advance local integration through building community networks and fostering self-reliance, supporting non-refugees as well as refugees in their area. There is an opportunity for national or international organisations already working with these communities to support them

through, for example, paying rent, either in part or in full, for the spaces that refugee-run organisations base their operations out of. This seems especially reasonable given that UNHCR's implementing partners and other organisations serving refugees also utilise these spaces for their own operations, and through them gain

access to refugees who otherwise might not be identifiable among local members of the urban poor. However, of the organisations researched in Kampala, only FRC had a programme specifically focused on building the capacity of refugee-run organisations. In addition to training on leadership and finances, it offers refugee-run organisations 5 million Ugandan shillings (approximately US\$1,500) per year to start or expand programmes that contribute to organisational sustainability. Refugees involved in FRC's programme have found this useful and felt that their own work and skills in creating organisations was acknowledged and called upon through this support.

### Conclusion

The potential of refugee-run organisations to contribute to local integration and development is enormous, and in Uganda this is already being actualised on a small scale. However, these organisations' capacity to reach more refugees is limited by their ongoing struggle to meet the basic needs of running an organisation – paying rent, accruing funds and tools to implement



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livelihoods training, and providing stipends to volunteer teachers and staff. The significance of these organisations in the lives of refugees as well as in the ability of international and national non-refugee organisations in Kampala to implement activities should be more widely recognised. The relative lack of written documentation on refugee-run organisations occludes recognition of them not only as stakeholders but as important partners in livelihoods interventions. The capacity for refugees to self-organise and provide support is similarly unrecognised and this, whether unintended or not, serves to perpetuate the perception of refugees as merely beneficiaries, even where

guidance documents are designed to utilise their agency. Providing funding dedicated to sustaining and strengthening refugee-run organisations is an important step to take. A shift in current rhetoric and practice from seeking refugee participation in programmes to forming refugee partnerships to implement them is perhaps an even better one.

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