

The Politics of Food and the Myth of the Self-Reliant Refugee in Uganda

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Changing geopolitical dynamics and a widespread ‘donor reconfiguration’ have resulted in reduced refugee assistance funding, compelling World Food Programme to make significant cuts to food assistance. This reduction has coincided with a strategic and theoretical shift towards refugee self-reliance in northern Uganda. While this responsabilisation of refugees has been globally praised as progressive and beneficial, refugees’ settlement experiences have questioned the sustainability of this approach, for whom it works, and under what conditions. This brief argues that WFP’s premature reduction of assistance, driven by the promotion of self-reliance, ultimately pushes refugees into greater hardship, while simultaneously highlighting the flaws in Uganda’s refugee model.

INTRODUCTION

How do refugees experience protracted life in Ugandan settlements? What are the effects of World Food Programme reallocation of food assistance? At what cost is refugee self-reliance promoted? Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted in June and July 2023 in the West Nile region of northern Uganda, this brief critically explores the gap between the expectations of the current refugee regime and the lived experiences of refugees.

By the end of June 2023, the global number of refugees in forced displacement worldwide reached 110.8 million, marking a rise of 21.5 million compared to 2021.¹ Considering current conflict patterns and the increasing

number of prolonged crises,¹ it is anticipated that protracted displacement will escalate in the forthcoming years, becoming the new standard. A continued surge in refugee numbers alongside an international funding shortfall, has compelled World Food Programme (WFP) to make significant cuts to food assistance across nearly half of its operational countries,² including Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Haiti, and Uganda. The emergence of recent high-profile refugee crises has resulted in reduced donor support for protracted refugee populations. It is estimated that a 1% cut in food assistance will push an additional 400,000 people into emergency hunger, amidst conflict and climate-related shocks. In Uganda, where WFP collaborates with the Government of Uganda (GoU) to manage the refugee response, the organisation has been forced to implement a food prioritisation scheme “to save only the starving, at the cost of the hungry”.³ The current geopolitical climate and reduced refugee assistance funding have altered the conception of refugees from vulnerable individuals to capable social actors, leading to policies that strongly emphasise self-reliance.

This brief begins by contextualising the Ugandan refugee model within the broader framework of resource uncertainty, before exploring principles and practices of self-reliance in the settlements.

AFRICA’S LARGEST REFUGEE-HOSTING COUNTRY

Currently hosting a total of 1,611,732 refugees, Uganda has continuously hosted the largest refugee population of the

¹ 49 protracted situations in 2020; 57 in 2022 (UNHCR. (2022) Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2022, pp.20-22. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>).

continent, accommodated across 13 settlements.⁴ Political instability and violence in the neighbouring countries of South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Burundi have contributed to the country's role as a haven for refugees. Since the onset of the Sudan conflict in April 2023, Uganda has welcomed an additional 15,000 Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers.⁵ Praised as "one of the best places to be a refugee",⁶ its open-door policy towards refugees is celebrated for its progressive approach, serving as an example of generosity and hospitality. Its model stands out from other refugee-hosting nations through three core pillars: refugees' freedom to work and choose their residence, the allocation of land plots within rural settlements, and ensuring access to integrated social services and markets. By supporting those displaced, the GoU aims to address the effects of regional instability. Additionally, Uganda engages in military operations and regional cooperation in the conflict in the DRC, alongside mediating efforts in South Sudan, attempting to mitigate both the causes and effects of conflict. However, recent discourse has called for "a more honest conversation about the Ugandan model",⁷ illustrating challenges in translating self-reliance policies into tangible outcomes. The ongoing food crisis is pushing millions of refugees to the brink of starvation, threatening the country's open-border policy and refugees' livelihoods, potentially prompting their return to conflict-affected areas.

NAVIGATING RESOURCE UNCERTAINTY

Despite reaching an absolute high of \$14.1 billion in 2022, the funding capacity of WFP has declined. Initially introduced to support and advocate for the poor and hungry, the organisation has been instrumental in addressing global food security challenges. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression, and subsequent inflation, WFP's capacity to assist has been affected. This has caused deep funding shortfalls, leading to alarming levels of hunger and malnutrition. Driven by resource competition, donor nations have progressively reduced their financial investment in long-term refugee populations, signalling a broader shift in donor priorities. This disparity between needs and available resources is illustrated in Uganda's

Refugee Response Plans, which secured only 40% of necessary funding in 2023 and merely 20% as of April 2024.⁸

The interplay of geopolitical dynamics and donor preferences has made food aid an unpredictable resource. The pursuit of political objectives and diplomatic relations between the GoU and (non-)traditional donors such as China and the United States, has led to the increasing bilateralisation of food assistance.⁹ Both the erosion of multilateralism and budget reallocation, amid under-resourcing and a growing influx of refugees into Uganda, have severe implications for WFP. To reduce the impact of limited funding on vulnerable households and phase out self-sufficient refugees, the organisation has adopted a prioritisation strategy for food and cash assistance in 2021. As of 1st July 2023, the final phase of the strategy has been enacted nationwide. This has led to standard cuts of 40% in food aid for highly vulnerable refugees, 70% for moderately vulnerable individuals, and discontinued food assistance for those whose needs are deemed less urgent than others. This approach has resulted in unequal aid allocation, leaving millions of refugees facing acute food insecurity.

THE MYTH OF SELF-RELIANCE

The Global Compact on Refugees and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework advocate for the local integration of refugees into national development plans, instead of viewing refugee assistance as purely humanitarian. Emphasising refugees' abilities to fulfil their needs, self-reliance is positioned as essential in reducing their vulnerability and long-term dependence on external aid. This comprehensive approach aims to manage food crises, and support social cohesion and self-reliance for refugees. Strategically and theoretically, the promotion of self-reliance is evident, as refugees are increasingly conceptualised as capable social and economic actors rather than vulnerable victims.

Self-reliance is thus a cornerstone of Uganda's refugee approach, embodied in its national Self-Reliance Strategy and included in the Second National Development Plan.

However, research indicates that there is no increase in self-reliance among refugees over time and that its conceptualisation is flawed on multiple fronts. Firstly, the categorisation of refugees by vulnerability levels has been labelled as arbitrary, negatively impacting livelihood opportunities.¹⁰ Secondly, the emphasis on self-reliance has led to a transfer of responsibilities onto refugees, who are now expected to address their basic needs through land allocation and integration into local markets. This expectation of partial independence from financial and material support, particularly in terms of food provision, undermines the notion of “empowerment for self-reliance”.¹¹ Consequently, this drastic change in the conceptualisation and support of refugees in Uganda has had wider repercussions for communities affected by forced displacement, leading to increased food insecurity and instability in their livelihoods. Thirdly, self-reliance pathways often fail to result in self-reliance outcomes due to the variable effectiveness of a one-size-fits-all policy, ambiguous metrics to determine its impact, and diverse needs among refugee populations.¹² The question then arises: for whom is self-reliance promoted? It would be simplistic to equate autonomy from food assistance with self-reliance. Whilst portrayed as beneficial to ‘self-reliant refugees’, this discourse is not isolated from the donor community’s interests in minimising their financial contributions.

BRIDGING THE GAP: PRACTICES OF SELF-RELIANCE

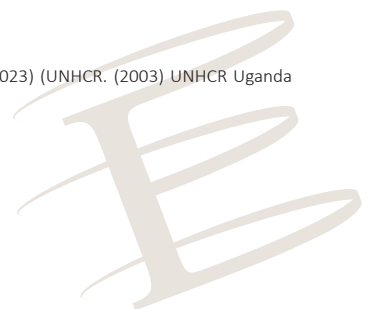
Uganda’s rural self-settlement policy aims to enhance the standard of living of the local population in refugee hosting districts and the refugees themselves through the integration of service provision for refugees and nationals. Primarily focused on agriculture and independence from food rations, this assistance model provides refugees with a plot of land upon arrival, enabling them to engage in agricultural residence, subsistence, and commercial purposes. However, during fieldwork in the settlements of Imvepi, Rhino Camp, and Bidibidi, the reduction of food rations emerged as the most contentious issue, as many refugees expressed concern over its disastrous effects on their food security. Refugees have further stated this prioritisation policy to occur alongside cuts

in other essential areas, including access to medical services, education fees, access to non-food items, and employment opportunities.¹³ Far from resulting in self-reliance, limited access to social support and protection places a burden on the refugee community: *“Back then, they used to help us. They provided food, free education, and even medical care. Now, the situation has changed. We have no money and no food”*. An effective land allocation system could be instrumental in supporting refugees in promoting self-reliance. Yet, the self-reliance agenda faces significant obstacles.

Firstly, the concept is often conflated with rural livelihoods. As such, it heavily relies on the assumed ‘homogenisation’ of refugees as productive farmers,¹⁴ failing to include a large proportion of refugees who do not have backgrounds in agriculture. *“Here, UNHCR has bought land from the host because this is all about farming.”* Secondly, the continued influx of refugees into rural settlements has gradually strained the country’s inclusive land allocation system. Since 2016, the refugee population has increased by 217%.¹⁵ As a result, both the quality and quantity of land accessible to refugees have declined over the years. Many refugees lack sufficient access to land, while others grapple with infertile plots and soil exhaustion: *“Yumbe district is full of rocks. The water cannot penetrate the soil. That is what takes people back to South Sudan.”* Despite variations across settlements, agriculture’s potential as a viable livelihood option remains constrained. In addition, the growing refugee population and corresponding land scarcity are exacerbating tensions between host and refugee communities, resulting in widespread land disputes. Refugees seeking to acquire additional land encounter challenges due to competition over natural resources, insecure land use rights and ownership.

“Every day, we work for food because the land we rent from the host is not provided for free. They don’t recognise us as refugees; they view us as another business opportunity. If you purchase land this year, they will reclaim it the next year, expecting you to buy it again.”

¹⁵ From 509,077(2016) to 1,611,732 (2023) (UNHCR. (2003) UNHCR Uganda Factsheet: February 2016).



Thirdly, the country's vulnerable climate has significantly affected agricultural productivity. Subjected to seasonal variations, factors such as reduced rainfall, prolonged drought, pests, soil erosion, land degradation, and crop failures render agricultural self-sufficiency precarious.¹⁵

“When you compare the weather here to that in other places, you’ll notice the difference. For two months, there hasn’t been any rain. You need to plant your crops, but everything just dries up.”

Refugees and media outlets have further reported adverse coping strategies among refugees, including instances of transactional sex, rising domestic and gender-based violence, increased substance abuse, child labour exploitation, and early marriage.¹⁶ These issues, exacerbated by reductions in rations, reach beyond settlement areas, fueling tensions between host and refugee communities and leading to incidents of jealousy, theft, and minor crimes. The Minister of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, Hilary Onek, has gone so far as to frame refugees as a threat to the host communities, citing difficulties in maintaining law and order due to food shortages.¹⁷ Onek further voiced concern about Uganda's overstretched open-door refugee policy, referring to the financial strain of supporting refugees. By suggesting a possible policy review, he intensified the pressure on the international community: “A small country like Uganda is overstretched. The open-door refugee policy is costing us a lot. If the international community doesn’t come to help and contain the situation, we may become hostile and review the policy. We feel sorry for the refugees, but it becomes a problem when it is abused.”¹⁸

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? BALANCING RETURN AND INTEGRATION

When asked about their reason for departure, refugees provided a similar description of the instability, insecurity, and hardships endured in their home countries. For many, displacement has not only been repeated, but protracted, after a succession of transit camps and settlements. However, refugees' consideration of whether to stay or further relocate is primarily determined by their

access to food and services. Limited access has led to a growing awareness of settlement's temporary character, prompting thoughts of unfeasible survival and return, carefully balancing risks and opportunities.

“When you visit the health centre, you can see refugees who have died from hunger or illness. Some have chosen to return to South Sudan, to their land, but, some of them were killed before reaching their destination.”^{III}

Despite ongoing violence in large parts of the country, spontaneous return to South Sudan has increased since April last year, reaching a monthly record of 71,660 in November 2023.¹⁹ These figures call into question the effectiveness of the self-reliance model. Hence, a critical re-evaluation is needed for both the existing approach to food assistance and the conceptualisation of self-reliance.

Improving refugees' land access and availability. The objective of fostering self-reliance through the creation of 'enabling environments' fails to align with the realities of settlements. Although aiming to empower refugees to contribute to their communities, settlement conditions contradict this ideal. Located in the country's poorest districts and borderlands, settlements are characterised by substantial human displacement, economic and cultural marginalisation, restricted access to social services, and low agricultural productivity. Their rural and isolated nature, coupled with limited economic opportunities and connectivity, further hinders progress towards self-reliance. In light of this mismatch, a growing need exists to improve refugees' legal certainty around land use, rights, and ownership.

Establishing a shock-responsive food allocation model.

To counter the adverse effects of climate shocks on food production, a more responsive and tailored approach is necessary. A shock-responsive framework could offer additional food assistance in response to rising climate-related emergencies such as droughts or pests. Temporarily modifying food rations or expanding the scope

^{III} All quotes are from interviews with refugees in Bidibidi Zones 1 and 5, July 2023.

of beneficiaries could serve as longer-term alternatives, given the disproportionate impact of these shocks on refugees' agricultural activities and food security. Renewed donor engagement through anticipatory action and shock-responsive financing instruments during periods of climate-induced food insecurity could foster a more sustainable pathway towards self-reliance.²⁰

Promoting alternative livelihood pathways. Considering the high numbers of refugees, there is a need to reassess the conflation of self-reliance with agricultural activities. Factors such as refugee's previous work experience, gender, age, and the availability of local resources significantly determine their ability to establish rural livelihoods. Therefore, this requires the continued promotion of alternative pathways, beyond traditional agriculture, along with adequate resources and frameworks. Drawing on the complementarity between different development partners and programmes would enable refugees to maximise the utilisation of alternative skillsets.

CONCLUSION

WFP's decision to reduce food assistance and promote self-reliance is taking place within broader geopolitical dynamics and a widespread 'donor reconfiguration'. This strategic and theoretical shift towards self-reliance has redefined the conceptualisation of refugees, who are no longer conceptualised as vulnerable victims but as capable social actors. While it is important to promote refugee self-reliance, at what cost? Refugees' settlement experiences in northern Uganda have questioned the sustainability of this approach, for whom it works, and under what conditions. Despite being globally praised as progressive and beneficial, the responsabilisation of refugees has led to significant suffering for displaced communities, confronted with the expectation of having to survive on their own. In addition to the current mainstreaming of self-reliance, WFP's premature reduction of assistance exacerbates the existing flaws in Uganda's refugee model, particularly regarding land issues. As such, the decontextualized promotion of self-reliance viewed merely as independence from material support, fails to address the growing structural issues

of food insecurity and unstable livelihoods. As a result, this approach ultimately pushes refugees into greater hardship, undermining prospects for sustainable self-reliance and increases the likelihood of their return to home countries.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges of protracted displacement in Uganda requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and a commitment to increased donor investment. It is crucial for donors to realise that cutting food assistance goes beyond refugees' immediate coping strategies; it poses significant risks to Uganda's broader refugee protection framework. While fostering refugee self-reliance is important, it should not be used to reframe the lack of durable solutions for displaced communities.

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Endnotes

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