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The End of Uganda's Refugee Model, or Just a 'Transition'?

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Uganda is lauded world-wide as a [model for refugee-hosting](#): It hosts nearly [1.7 million refugees](#), the highest in Africa, taking in refugees from its neighbouring countries. It also [offers them free access](#) to a plot of land, as well as public services. This refugee model is however under severe pressure, due to reduced donor funding. This is largely for political and ideological reasons: donors are increasingly unwilling to finance a protracted crisis such as the Ugandan one; a process which was further accelerated by the outbreak of major humanitarian crises such as Ukraine and Gaza.

In this context, funding for the Ugandan refugee crisis is shifting from humanitarian to development funding, but without any major donor willing to foot this bill. This situation shows a major friction in the geopolitical status(es) of the country: on the one hand, Uganda is a key ally for the West as a 'regional host country', in which refugees can be hosted in their home regions, and are prevented from migrating to the West. On the other hand, Uganda is experiencing rapid democratic backsliding, manifested by measures such as the brutal anti-gay law or skyrocketing corruption, making continued engagement difficult - including for the much-lauded refugee model.

FUNDING IS RUNNING OUT – PARTLY CONTEXT, PARTLY CHOICE

Uganda has been long a model country for its refugee policy, for different sides of the ideological spectrum. Progressive voices consider the model [an example for the West](#); whereas more conservative voices consider it as global example of a 'regional host country' – demonstrating the ability of African countries to host

refugees, and hence, to stop them from coming to the West. This became particularly important for European governments after the 2015 migration crisis: during this year, [over 1 million refugees crossed into Europe](#), creating major division in Europe as how to cope with this.

In this context, Uganda benefited from generous international financing. For example, in 2017, UNHCR had a budget of almost \$220 million for 1.4 million refugees. However, this funding started to dwindle later on. By the end of 2023, there only was a budget left of \$141 million,¹ which had to cater for even more refugees - 1.5 million. This funding gap is expected to widen, with funding continuing to plummet while the number of refugees is growing. There are two interrelated reasons for this underfunding. First, there is strongly reduced humanitarian funding for the refugee response, [in the light of other ongoing global humanitarian crises](#) – from Ukraine, to Sudan and Gaza. Second, given the protracted nature of the refugee crisis in Uganda, donors are increasingly hesitant to foot the bill. Whereas the most recent wave of refugees started from 2016 onwards – mainly from South Sudan – other refugees (e.g. from Rwanda or the DRC) have been present for decades. Nakivale, the country's oldest refugee settlement, for example [opened in 1958](#). Even though the settlement is [one of the biggest](#) in country, the UNHCR field office in the settlement was closed in July of this year, due to a reduction in UNHCR's funding.

There is therefore pressure by the main donor countries, such as the US or UK, for a different refugee policy: on the one hand, there is pressure from these donors to

¹ Internal notes from the Refugee Humanitarian Partner Group meeting in December 2023.

stop giving 'blanket support' to refugees, as this cannot be considered a short-term humanitarian crisis. In recent times, this has led to a so-called 'prioritization policy', which assists refugees with food or cash depending on their level of vulnerability. This policy has been [criticised](#) for its [problematic implementation](#) and negative impacts on refugee livelihoods. On the other hand, there is pressure – from the government, but also other actors – to stop two parallel social service systems, operating in the same areas: one funded by the international humanitarian community for refugees, another one by the government, for Ugandan nationals.

In this context, a 'transition policy' is currently being gradually implemented in Uganda, which aims to hand over refugee-assistance from humanitarian actors to the Ugandan government. Concretely, instead of services to refugees being provided by NGOs (national or international), or UN agencies, these should now be provided by the local governments.

This policy does not come out of the blue, and has been an ongoing process since 2018. It for example is already being implemented in the sectors of education, health, and water. While some phased initiatives have taken place both at ministerial and donor-level (and particularly in the water sector), there overall isn't much happening.² Much of this has to do with the question of whom will foot the bill.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS EXPECTED TO CONTRIBUTE

The expectations of the government are that international partners will redirect their funding to financially support the government in social service delivery. This fits within the broader government narrative on responsibility and burden sharing. This question was particularly prominent in the run-up to the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), which was held in December 2023 in Geneva, and of which [Uganda was one of the co-convenors](#). At the November

² For education and health, there is some movement to include some staff on the government payroll, however, these numbers stay very small and it is difficult to speak of a real transition rather than one just on paper.

2023 pre-GRF conference in Kampala—bringing together donor countries and other stakeholders – and which one of us attended, Uganda's Prime Minister, Robinah Nabbanja, claimed that other countries "aren't free of responsibility."³ In its [pledges](#) before the Global Refugee Forum, the Ugandan government therefore vowed the continued management of relevant infrastructure and services, but asked for an "alignment of partner investments within the National Development Plan and District Development Plans".⁴ In other words, the development partners should provide financing for the refugee response.

And while there indeed is a consensus that the Ugandan government cannot bear this responsibility alone, it remains a question as to how much the international community will be willing to step in. Tellingly, none of the international donors officially responded to this government pledge. Why was this?

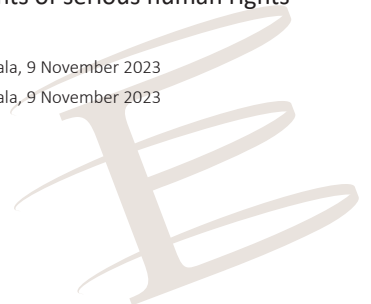
DETERIORATING RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UGANDAN GOVERNMENT AND THE WEST

Whereas humanitarian aid is seen by donors as largely apolitical, this is less the case for development aid. Here, the nature of the regime in place, and the broader (geo) political relations towards it, play a more prominent role in funding decisions. And this is where the problem lies for the Museveni regime. Over the years, the latter has shifted from being considered a [donor darling](#) – recovering miraculously from civil war with the help of development aid – to a ['hybrid regime'](#), constituting elements of both a democratic system and authoritarian regimes. Over the last years, this has further declined: it is now considered to be firmly on the [authoritarian end](#) of the scale, as repression, human rights violations and corruption have further escalated.

This also had an impact on the relations with the donor community – particularly those from the West, which has become increasingly strained. The 2021 elections, which were characterised by incidents of serious human rights

³ Pre-GRF conference, Munyonyo, Kampala, 9 November 2023

⁴ Pre-GRF conference, Munyonyo, Kampala, 9 November 2023



violations, further increased this process. In the run-up to these elections, President Museveni for example [called the European Union 'fools'](#) for what he perceived as support to leading opposition figure Bobi Wine; while government spokesperson Ofwono Opondo, [called the EU ambassadors 'charlatans, passing for diplomats'](#). From the (Western) donor side, this has led to what many summarized as a 'lost enthusiasm' in Uganda, and particularly in the ability of development aid to make a difference.

In the midst of these deteriorating relations – in May 2023 – the Ugandan authorities [passed the Anti Homosexuality Act \(AHA\)](#), which prescribes the death penalty for 'aggravated homosexuality'. This further worsened the relations, with for example the World Bank [freezing any future lending](#) in the wake of the law. The AHA also had an effect on potential refugee funding. According to a range of donor officials and humanitarian actors we spoke with, donor capitals are hesitant to commit to any more funding, due to the pressure of their capitals about the AHA.

The 'transition' scenario requires donors to redirect their funding from humanitarian spending – mostly through NGOs or multilateral agencies – to development funding, which mostly happens through the government. Yet, in the above-described situation, donors – whether bilateral or multilateral – are not necessarily keen to commit to more development funding: the relationship between the government and Western donors is considered by many 'at its worst in its recent history'. This was very much reflected in our conversations with donor actors. As one donor summarized "The relationship with the government has crumbled further and further in recent years. We tolerate each other, but that's about it. And the AHA has further worsened it."⁵ This also means that on-budget support for refugees – as requested by the Ugandan government for the transition – will be difficult, if not impossible, to materialise. The sustained, or even increasing, [concerns about corruption](#) in the country also contribute to this situation: In early 2024, the [United](#)

[States imposed sanctions](#) on Uganda's parliamentary speaker and a number of other officials, over corruption and human rights abuses. In February and March, [online activists exposed the major corruption](#) in the Ugandan parliament. This corruption also manifested itself in the refugee sector, which was hit by a major corruption scandal in 2018, when it became clear that over [300,000 'ghost refugees' existed](#) – which may have resulted in millions of dollars of relief supplies being diverted.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: ARE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS READY FOR THE JOB?

Lastly, the transition scenario would mean a shift to a particular kind of government actors, namely to the local governments, which will be responsible for service-delivery towards refugees. But also here, there are a range of concerns. There is a [wide academic literature](#) showing how the explosive growth in districts in Uganda – from 56 in 2002 to [146 today](#) – was fuelled by [political reasons](#), to create support for the ruling party and president. Without sufficient administrative capacity in place for these new districts, this created a negative impact on public service provision: [evidence has shown how](#) public services have worsened in new districts.

As the transition-scenario puts an additional 1.7 million refugees under the authority of the local governments, this of course raises major concerns. And indeed, interviewees – both governmental and non-governmental actors - express a general concern of a lack of readiness and capacity among the districts. As one humanitarian actor summarized "if there is a struggle to provide these services to the host communities, why would this work for the refugee communities as well?"⁶ In other words: if local governments are failing to meet the minimum standards of service provision to the host population, there are serious doubts about their capacities to do so for an even larger target population, which includes refugees – particularly in times of humanitarian underfunding.

⁵ Interview donor official, Kampala, 13 December 2023.

⁶ Interview humanitarian officer, 1 August 2023.



All of this creates major concerns among refugees – and particularly refugee leaders.⁷ First, refugees will no longer receive water services free of charge: they will have to pay for the operation and maintenance of the water pumps – however, at a reduced rate – something they do not have to do when the water services are managed by the NGOs. This does raise concern among refugees, however. Yet, these concerns seem to be based on the misplaced perception that people will have to pay for *all* services – including education and health – which is not the case. Communication on the topic is, therefore, needed. In the words of one refugee leader “If it’s transitioned to the government, they will charge people. The question is, how will people pay in this time of crisis? Some family may not be able to afford? (...) It’s worrying us.”⁸ Second, refugees express concerns about how they will be considered second-tier citizens by local governments, and receive worse services (in a situation in which many refugees have a feeling that services are ‘better’ with humanitarian actors). These sentiments were also widely shared (both in the meeting and in personal conversations) at the [Refugee Engagement Forum](#) in November 2023, which brought together refugee leaders from all settlements in Kampala.

THE END, OR JUST A TRANSITION, FOR THE UGANDA MODEL?

For now, the situation does not seem to threaten Uganda’s progressive policies, but the question is for how long the Ugandan government will tolerate the current situation, in which they feel the international partners are not contributing enough. In the past, the government has threatened to close down the ‘Uganda model’ in response to what was perceived as unfair behaviour of the international community. For example, in response to the latter’s insistence on accountability for the 2018 refugee corruption scandal, the [threat was made to shut down the refugee settlements](#). In July last year, the government has pushed back against the underfunding by threatening to [restrict its refugee policies](#). In September

last year, the Minister responsible for Refugees, Hilary Onek, argued how this underfunding pushed refugees into [stealing from the host community](#); but also made the (unsupported) claim that refugees left Uganda for Europe. These statements are a tried-and-tested approach by the governments in the region: in [January 2023](#), the Rwandan government threatened to evict Congolese refugees; in reaction to international criticism on the country (for its participation in the Congolese conflict). Similarly, in the context of a [2021 diplomatic row](#) with neighbouring Somalia, the Kenyan government threatened to close Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps – the majority of its inhabitants originating from Somalia. Neither the Rwandan or Kenyan threat materialised. These threats, as well as the Ugandan ones, instead have to be understood as a form of [refugee rentierism](#) by national governments, or the way in which refugees are used as a diplomatic bargaining chip by both Western and African governments. For the Ugandan case, it remains to be seen what the outcome of this bargain will be for its refugee policy – and for the ‘transition’ in particular.

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⁷ The majority of refugees does not seem to be aware of a potential transition since it is not being widely implemented yet.

⁸ Refugee Engagement Forum member, online interview, 9 November 2023





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