EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 397

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Will Uganda's 'open-door' refugee policy hold? Aid cuts and rising anti-immigration sentiment

Yotam Gidron and Kristof Titeca

Uganda has long been praised for its progressive refugee policy. Whereas many countries close borders or confine refugees to camps, Uganda operates what is often described as an 'open-door policy' that grants refugees unrestricted entry, freedom of movement, access to public services, and the right to work. Refugees who are unable to sustain themselves in urban areas are allocated a small plot of land in one of Uganda's rural 'settlements', where they can construct shelter and cultivate. This approach has been celebrated by aid agencies and donors as a unique model for promoting the economic integration and 'self-reliance' of refugees, reducing their dependency on aid, and managing forced displacement as a development, rather than a humanitarian, issue. Hosting one of the largest refugee populations in the world, Uganda contrasts itself deliberately with border-fortressing regimes elsewhere and with countries that handle refugees exclusively as a population in need of humanitarian support.[1]

1. Introduction

Beneath this narrative, however, the Ugandan 'model' has entered a period of profound strain. The refugee response is facing on the one hand an unprecedented number of refugees and on the other hand, an unprecedented funding crisis. Pressure on livelihood resources and lack of funding for relief aid and social services has led to mounting precariousness in and around refugee settlements. Meanwhile, intolerance towards refugees, at least of certain nationalities, is increasingly visible in urban areas, particularly Kampala. These developments raise the question of whether the 'open-door policy' can be sustained, and if so, in what form and with what implications. In a rapidly changing political and economic landscape, the answer to this question appears to be ever less certain.

2. A structural crisis

While Uganda has been promoting the 'self-reliance' of refugees through various policies for decades, the country never faced circumstances as challenging as it does today. The return to civil war in South Sudan in 2015 and renewed violence in the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the following years led to mass displacement into Uganda. Meanwhile, Uganda has also been receiving refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan, albeit in smaller numbers. UNHCR figures from October 2025 indicate that Uganda hosts over 1,920,000 refugees and asylum seekers[2], making it the third-largest refugee-hosting country in the world and the largest on the African continent. For comparison, in the 1990s, at the height of Sudan's second civil war and the pick of movement of refugees from Sudan's southern regions into Uganda, the estimated number of refugees in the country did not exceed 300,000. By the time Uganda's famous Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) was formalised in 1999, refugee numbers were even lower.

One implication of the sharp growth of the refugee population has been reduced access to cultivable land and livelihood resources more broadly. Consider, for example, the case of Kiryandongo refugee settlement, which was established in 1990 on uninhabited land gazetted earlier as cattle ranching area, along the road leading from Kampala to South Sudan. In the late 1990s, the

settlement was estimated to host a population of about 12,000 refugees and was described by UNHCR as 'the most successful settlement in Africa'. However, already then, it was debatable whether or not its population was 'self-sufficient' thanks to its engagement in agricultural production[3]. Today, Kiryandongo hosts over 165,000 refugees, both South Sudanese and Sudanese. The plots in the settlement have been repeatedly redistributed to accommodate new arrivals, with 'older caseload' refugees gradually losing access to farmland. Similar trends have been evident in other settlements in Uganda.[4] If refugees are interested in cultivating, they now have to rent farmland from the host population (i.e. private Ugandan individuals), as the land provided to them by the Ugandan government is not sufficiently large. While this is common practice across refugee-hosting regions, it ironically tends to benefit refugees who are already better off, because they are the ones who are able to cover the costs of hiring land.

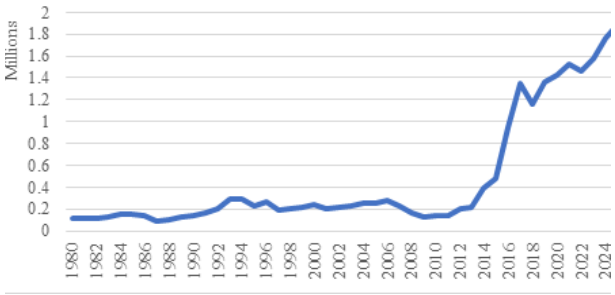

Figure 1. Registered refugees in Uganda, 1980-2025 (source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder).

Yet, while the population has grown and the pressure on resources increased, funding for refugee support has collapsed. Between 2020 and 2024, the Uganda Refugee Response Plan has received 35-51% of the requested funding each year. The 2025 refugee response plan requires a budget of US$968 million, but so far, only 18 percent of this has been funded. In other words, 82 percent of the required budget is missing. For most refugees, the immediate and most acute consequence of funding shortages has been reduced access to food assistance. Reductions in the monthly rations of refugees (typically provided in the form of cash, but in some cases in-kind) began in 2020, when all refugees started receiving only 70% of the full 'food basket'. In 2021, a system of geographical prioritisation was introduced, and rations for refugees in some areas in Uganda were further reduced to 60% or 40%. Within each settlement, however, all refugees still received the same amount or aid.

More recently, this also changed. Throughout 2023-24, a new and highly controversial 'needs-based' prioritisation system was introduced: those refugees deemed most vulnerable started receiving 60% of the full rations, those 'moderately' vulnerable received 30%, and those assessed to be not in need of assistance at all received nothing[5]. Initially, only about 55,000 refugees fell under the last category and received no support at all under this arrangement. However, in May 2025, due to severe funding shortages, this figure suddenly rose to 1.1 million.[6] Those still eligible for relief aid now receive extremely low amounts (22-40% of the full rations), and far below what is necessary for survival without any other sources of income. It should be noted that Uganda is not the only country where such schemes have been introduced. Similar differentiated assistance models have also been introduced in neighbouring Kenya and Rwanda.

For several years now, aid agencies and donors have been describing the situation in Uganda as being 'on the brink'. Yet, the commonly feared 'backlash' from refugees or hosts, such as violence, has not materialised. While this might point at the securitisation of the overall refugee response – there indeed was a heightened presence of Ugandan armed forces when the policy of 'prioritisation' in aid was first implemented – reality is more complex. Long before recent crises, structural limits in Uganda's refugee support model had already placed refugees under growing strain and deepening economic insecurity.[7] With limited access to farmland, many had to look for ways to supplement their income. Heavy reliance on remittances is common in some refugee communities, in both urban areas and the settlements. Some families have been compelled to split across the border, with some adults moving in search of income and others staying behind to care for children.[8] Yet other refugees have resorted to increasingly precarious forms of casual labour, competing

with financially insecure Ugandan hosts over limited opportunities to eke out a living.[9]

This does not mean that these recent aid cuts did not have any effect. They surely did, because even if assistance was little, it still mattered for many, and particularly for the most impoverished refugees. In the absence of farmland, aid agencies in Uganda have increasingly sought to promote the self-reliance of refugees by encouraging 'entrepreneurship' and self-employment. In development rhetoric this kind of support is often associated with 'innovation' and the promising prospects of tapping into new markets and opportunities, but in practice, growing numbers of refugees have been compelled to engage in small-scale retail, petty trade, and the provision of basic services, essentially competing each other over tight markets and in increasingly demand-constrained environments. Aid cuts have further exacerbated this situation, as businesses in the settlements tend to be heavily reliant on the spending capacity of refugees, who are in turn reliant on aid. They have therefore undermined business activity, slowly pushed refugees into debts, forced children out of schools, and put community networks of care and support under duress.

3. Anti-immigrant sentiments

IWhile conditions in the settlements have been precarious for years, in urban areas, and particularly Kampala, relations between refugees and hosts have become tense, and anti-immigrant sentiments have grown. This is especially the case in neighbourhoods like Kansanga, Kabalagala, and Nsambya in the southern part of Kampala, which hosts the largest portion of refugees in the capital. These areas have experienced a notable increase in residents from the Horn of Africa, including Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Sudanese who have joined more established but growing South Sudanese and Congolese communities. There are about 160,000 refugees officially registered as residing in Kampala, although informally the figure may be far higher, as many foreigners register as refugees elsewhere (including in rural settlements) but then relocate to Kampala. Kabalagala and surrounding areas have colloquially been labelled 'Little Horn of Africa,[10] signalling both the density of migrants and the way their presence is framed. What was once celebrated as cosmopolitan diversity is now increasingly discussed in terms of threat, competition and demographic anxiety.

Over the past two years, this has become evident in social media and popular representations of refugees. Posts explicitly praise Donald Trump's policies on migrants and ask President Museveni to 'do the same' by expelling Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis.[11] Others blame refugees for rising housing costs, linking market dynamics to a discourse of foreign invasion. One recurrent theme is that refugees are allegedly using Uganda as a 'transit country' to access Europe or North America – getting married to Ugandans in order to obtain documents and then leaving the country.[12] In local tabloids and online forums, even more sensationalist claims circulate: Ugandan sex workers have complained about being 'pushed out of business' by Eritrean and Somali women working in the area.[13] Public commentary increasingly frames migrants not as people fleeing persecution, but as competitors for scarce economic and social opportunities.

There are multiple layers to these sentiments, which fuse political and economic anxieties with racial taxonomies and stereotypes. Across urban areas in Uganda, South Sudanese have long been regarded as wealthy customers due to the ease with which they seem to be able to pay schools fees and rent accommodation.[14] Urban areas tend to attract South Sudanese who rely on robust remittances (often sent by relatives working for NGOs, oil companies or the government in South Sudan) and who rarely ever engage in business activities. Therefore, while they have certainly attracted the envy of the Ugandan poor, for whom the costs of education and accommodation are a major, daily concern, their presence has not been experienced as an immediate threat. Less pronouncedly, the dark skin colour of South Sudanese stigmatises them in the eyes of many Ugandans, particularly in Kampala, and they are seen as less sophisticated and lacking urban savvy.

Congolese refugees, for example, do not visibly stand out like South Sudanese, both because of their physical traits

and their lifestyle. They tend to be more active in the urban informal economy, engaging in survivalist activities such as street vending, hawking, casual labour, tailoring and hairdressing. As such, Congolese refugees have been accused of competing with Kampala's more impoverished populations over tight urban markets and within an already oversaturated informal sector.[15] Members of the Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali communities, however, have established high-profile enterprises, tend to frequent higher-end entertainment and leisure complexes around Kampala, have stronger links to diaspora networks in Europe and North America, and are typically lighter skin. All of this renders their omnipresence in urban spaces far more noticeable, and they are perceived as more intimidating even by the Ugandan middle class.

These dynamics unfold against a backdrop of pervasive economic discontent among ordinary Ugandans.[16] Escalating and inefficient patronage politics, weak economic performance, and entrenched crony capitalism have made (formal) employment increasingly scarce, fuelling widespread frustration.[17] In this context, urban refugees become an easy target for popular resentment. Political actors have sensed the growing popularity of anti-immigrant rhetoric. During the 2025 political season, at least one presidential aspirant promised to 'send refugees back home.'[18] While op-ed writers, journalists, and some civil society actors have publicly denounced these sentiments,[19] these interventions remain limited compared to the volume of anti-immigrant content circulating online.

At the same time, invoking the threats of 'brewing xenophobia' and an impending 'implosion' has arguably also enabled the leaders of the Kampala Capital City Authority to attract donations and support.[20] The longstanding focus of the Ugandan refugee response on rural settlements, which are administered by the Office of the Prime Minister alongside aid agencies, has often been a point of contention. While the Ugandan government typically sought to orient aid towards settlements and refugee-hosting districts, aid agencies and donors have called for more support to urban refugees and municipalities as part of a broader effort to promote self-reliance and integration. This has created an incentive for municipal authorities to emphasize the impact of refugees on urbanisation and 'visibilize' urban refugees, to position themselves as important stakeholders in the refugee operation and attract support.[21] In northern Uganda, for example, Koboko municipality secured close to EUR2.8 million from the European Union to increase access to basic social services for refugees, as part of a larger project on inclusive urban development in the Horn of Africa region.[22]

4. Asylum bureaucracy under duress.

The increasing portrayal of refugees as sources of insecurity, fraud, and systemic risk is not limited to public discourse; it is also mirrored in government action. In March 2023, the government halted the registration of Somali asylum seekers, officially because of reports that Kenyans were posing as Somalis to obtain refugee status.[23] The effect, however, was not to stop migration but to create a population of unregistered people with no access to documentation, making them increasingly vulnerable. On January the 10th of this year, the government also stopped the registration of Eritrean refugees. Reporting on the issue mentioned that a fraud ring involved in counterfeit registration had been discovered, but particularly, that Eritrean refugees became involved with money-laundering and fraud. As Uganda only recently had been removed from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list,[24] the government became determined not to slip back into a category associated with poor monitoring of financial flows – and hence blocked Eritrean registration.[25]

Finally, registration for Ethiopians was also stopped. Interviews claim this happened in August of this year. In an official statement on 20 October, the responsible officer from the Office of the Prime Minister declared that they 'intend to narrow support to only vulnerable refugees,' adding that registration for applicants 'from countries not in conflict, notably Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, has been closed.'[26] This was later repeated by the Hillary Onek, the Minister responsible for refugees, who explained that he has 'instructed our officers not to give refugee status to citizens coming from those countries

because there is no war there, particularly those from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia.'[27] These announcements raised more questions than answers – most notably why Somalia is suddenly no longer considered to be in conflict – underscoring that the decision to halt registration may have been driven by political, rather than legal considerations. Interviews suggest how this decision was not taken due to factors specific to Ethiopian refugees, but because there was a concern that 'Eritreans were now posing as Ethiopians' to register as refugees.

While the precise procedural and legal implications of the decision to halt registration for certain nationalities remain unclear, it should be noted that an automatic denial of asylum based on nationality alone is difficult to justify under Ugandan or international refugee law. Uganda's Refugee Act of 2006 adopts the definitions of a 'refugee' of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 OAU Convention on Refugee Problems in Africa. It defines those compelled to leave their country due to 'events seriously disturbing public order' as refugees, but also those outside their country 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted' on certain grounds.[28] Therefore, the absence of active conflict in certain countries cannot be invoked to automatically deny access to asylum to all individuals from these countries, because claims of persecution on other grounds should still be individually assessed.

Internationally, however, this approach is not unprecedented. It was European countries (starting with Switzerland and Belgium) that first used the concept of 'safe country of origin' to justify expedited processes for handling the asylum claims of individuals from certain countries deemed safe. When countries face large numbers of asylum applications, such expedited processes can reduce bureaucratic workload, but they have often been introduced 'based on crude political calculations' rather than rigorous evaluation of country-of-origin conditions.[29] Whether the use of the 'safe country of origin' concept in asylum procedures is discriminatory has been debated, but there is a consensus that it cannot be invoked to justify the automatic rejection of claims from designated nationalities. UNHCR's position, for example, has been that 'notions such as "safe country of origin" […] 'should be appropriately applied so as not to result in improper denial of access to asylum procedures.'[30] Put simply, while countries are allowed to automatically grant refugee status to individuals from countries deemed generally unsafe, they are not allowed to automatically deny protection to individuals from countries deemed generally safe.

However, if the decision to halt registration for several nationalities is difficult to justify in legal terms, this may be because dwindling resources and declining international support rather than legal arguments seem to have informed it. Most South Sudanese, Sudanese and Congolese refugees register in rural settlements, where they are granted refugee status *prima facie*, based on their nationality and without an individual assessment process. In Kampala, however, individuals of all other nationalities must first apply for asylum and go through a refugee status determination (RSD) procedure. Like refugees in rural settlements, urban refugees fall under the responsibility of the Department of Refugees at Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). However, their eligibility for refugee status is not granted automatically but individually assessed by OPM's Refugee Eligibility Committee, and this is a lengthy and costly bureaucratic process. While there has long been a backlog in the processing of asylum cases, in recent years, the budget for the RSD bureaucracy reduced as a result of funding cuts, and the situation has worsened.[31] Currently, there are close to 31,000 asylum seekers in Kampala, predominantly Eritrean, whose applications for refugee status are pending. Some refugees are said to be waiting for years for their cases to be assessed.

5. The politics of refugee hosting

Will Uganda's refugee policy survive in these circumstances of dwindling support, and increasingly hostile sentiments? The reduced funding has led to complaints from Ugandan governmental actors, particularly those in charge of refugees. Both UNHCR and Uganda's minister responsible for refugees, urgently appealed for more funding, noting that otherwise they would be unable to sustain current

policies.[32] Understandably, the gradual withdrawal of foreign aid fuels a local sense that Uganda is being taken advantage of: While the country has maintained its progressive policies and committed significant resources (including land) to refugees, international partners are perceived to have lost interest and abandoned it. Moreover, the number of refugees is getting close to two million, a figure which for years has served as the informal 'limit' communicated by the country. While the decision to cease registration of asylum seekers of certain nationalities can certainly be read, at least in part, as a protest against the decline in international support, for now, it is unlikely that Ugandan authorities will end their ' open-door policy' and rethink the country's approach to refugee issues, for a number of reasons.

First, because President Museveni is a major supporter of it. His position has always been that the country should keep its doors open for refugees, as a considerable number of Ugandans, including himself, have sought refuge across the border at one point in their lives. Progressive refugee reception is one political agenda that both appeals to Western donors and resonates with Museveni's Pan-African ideals and political rhetoric. Even amidst anti-Western rhetoric, Museveni has continued to reassure international partners that refugee hosting remains a priority, and numerous diplomatic actors confirm that he has personally emphasised his commitment to maintaining the policy. Notably, Uganda's capacity to generously host refugees from across the region not only represents a commitment to Pan-African ideals but also indexes a degree of economic and political stability at the national level, thus reinforcing Museveni's position as a responsible leader in a volatile part of the world.

Second, and relatedly, because of the political utility of the refugee operation. Refugee hosting has always been useful, both internationally and domestically. Progressive refugee policies have repeatedly served as diplomatic capital, enabling the Ugandan government to secure financial resources, political legitimacy, and favourable relations with external partners – particularly the West.[33] For example, Uganda has benefitted significantly from funding from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, which focuses on migration management, and has been designated as a priority country for development cooperation by the Netherlands. Along the same lines, it has also entered refugee transfer arrangements with Western governments, including the United States and the Netherlands, and similar deals are currently being discussed. All of these allow for economic and political capital, generating geopolitical returns – what can be called 'refugee rentierism'.[34]

Finally, also for these logics, some nuance is at place: amidst changing political and economic circumstances, refugee support may increasingly be sidelined, leaving refugees to fend for themselves. For a start, the Ugandan government is increasingly distancing itself from Western donors and aligning with new geopolitical actors, including Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for whom refugee affairs are of limited interest.[35] While the UAE has made several donations over the years to the Ugandan refugee response, refugee governance is not a major concern in its international agenda. At the same time, anticipated oil revenues are expected to reduce Uganda's dependence on Western development financing, and global aid cuts have made external assistance far less reliable. Together, these dynamics diminish the incentive to rely on Western partners and thus weaken the logic of 'refugee rentierism', which no longer guarantees the political or financial returns it once did.

6. The future: open doors, closing options?

For years, the 'Ugandan model' has been held up as proof that progressive refugee protection is not only possible but can have a positive socio-economic impact even in a low-income state. This assertion has persisted largely due to its political expediency, rather than empirical evidence. Ugandan policies have long sought to promote refugee self-reliance and 'graduation' from aid, but in practice, the refugee operation always relied heavily on international support, and the full socio-economic integration of refugees was more of a vaguely defined, distant ideal than a concrete, achievable goal. With more refugees than ever before and less funding than ever before, the Ugandan support model is now revealing its internal contradictions

and fault lines – or, as an article in the Ugandan Daily Monitor summarised 'Uganda's open door refugee policy comes home to roost'.[36] It also reveals the profound failure of the international community to uphold its moral and legal commitments to refugee protection.

In this context, the future of Uganda's refugee policy hinges on more than just financial sustainability. It depends on whether the political and societal coalitions that have sustained the open-door policy will survive. For now, President Museveni continues to back it; international and national actors who meet him repeatedly note that he emphasises its strategic importance. But the policy has always depended on a delicate equilibrium between donor financing, state interests, and societal tolerance. That equilibrium is eroding. Uganda is dangerously close to the symbolic threshold of two million refugees – as stated above, this is a limit informally acknowledged by policymakers. The question is not whether Uganda can continue to host refugees today, but whether the fragile social, economic, and political underpinnings of its model can survive the pressures of tomorrow – especially in a post-Museveni future. Whereas Museveni himself is a firm believer in the open-doors policy, this is much less certain for others, such as his son Muhoozi.

Yotam Gidron is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at KU Leuven. ***His research is funded by the Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek [12Y8923N].***

Kristof Titeca is a Professor at the Institute of Development Policy (University of Antwerp), and a senior associate fellow at the Egmont Insitute.

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