

REFUGEES IN UGANDA

What Prospects for Durable Solutions?



MAY 2023

Refugees in Uganda: What prospects for durable solutions?

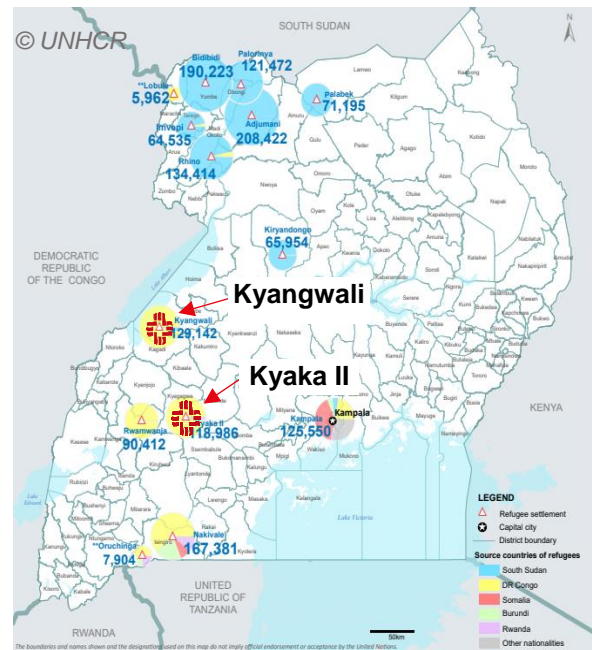
The escalating conflicts in DR Congo and South Sudan continue to drive thousands of men, women, and children to flee to Uganda, already the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. While Ugandan authorities express their intention to continue their long tradition of hospitality and protection, the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023 provides a perfect opportunity for Belgium and other states to make concrete pledges in support of these objectives.

The African country that hosts the most refugees

The intractable cycles of violence in South Sudan and eastern DR Congo have generated large-scale displacement into Uganda for decades.¹ Since January 2022, more than 160,000 refugees have crossed into Uganda, including almost 14,000 people just since the start of 2023. The majority (64%) have fled the violent resurgence in armed conflict in Eastern DR Congo. For the 1.5 million refugees already living there, many of whom have been there for many years, the plight of newly arriving families is undermining hopes of return to their country of origin (for example, see [Return to Burundi, but under what conditions?](#) in the full publication).

At the same time, **Uganda's reception system and international protection space have also fallen victim to trends of dwindling international aid and solidarity.** Regional Refugee Response Plans for Congolese (only 22% funded) and South-Sudanese (42% funded) refugees were severely underfunded in 2022.² Last year, the World Food Program (WFP) was forced to reduce its food rations by 60% – a blanket reduction which directly worsened the daily livelihoods of refugee households, particularly for the most vulnerable families and those with protection needs.³ In 2022, shocks caused by the war in Ukraine further impacted aid funding and led to a spike in household prices in Uganda.⁴ Worryingly, resettlement opportunities to third countries – reserved for refugees with a particularly vulnerable profile – continue to fall far short of commitments made.

This difficult context has **undermined the prospect of durable solutions for refugee communities:** return is a deadly risk, sustainable socio-economic inclusion in Ugandan society remains uneven, while resettlement is only available to a small minority.



Map of the refugee situation in Uganda (as of January 2023), including the location of current CI.be partnerships and programs.

¹ For more information about how Caritas responds to these challenges in DR Congo, read the [first edition of Local Actions, Global Lessons – "Overcoming Fragility in DR Congo"](#).

² OCHA (2023) [Financial Tracking Service – Uganda 2022](#).

³ The New Humanitarian (December 2022) ["Life is even worse now": Ration cuts and price rises hit refugees in Uganda](#).

⁴ Segawa (June 2022) [The shrinking of "Rolexes" in Uganda due to the war in Ukraine](#).

From humanitarian dependency to sustainable livelihoods

Uganda's refugee system is often **cited as an example**. Unlike other countries in the region, Uganda's policies and laws grant refugee populations indiscriminate access to employment, education, and health care. They also allow for freedom of movement and the right of enterprise. Once their cases are processed, refugees are relocated to "refugee settlements" where they are given a plot of land.

While this vision and hosting strategy should in theory foster self-reliance and development opportunities, both for refugees and host communities, their **potential remains largely untapped in practice**. Poverty levels among refugee populations remain high, particularly in comparison to Ugandans.⁵ Although agricultural activities are the primary source of income in the refugee settlements and regions where they are located, the limited quantity and quality of land distributed often provides insufficient opportunities to establish sustainable agricultural practices.⁶ The economic downturn forces many families to rely on limited humanitarian assistance to meet their daily needs. Today, each refugee receives a daily food ration worth only 400 UGX (0.10 euros), which does not even allow for the purchase of a chapati (bread), which costs about 500 UGX (0.12 euros).

The recognition of the risk of increasing aid dependency has made self-reliance a crucial goal for sustainable responses to many protracted displacement situations around the world.⁷ In the case of Uganda, this goal will only be achieved by **scaling up initiatives to develop sustainable employment opportunities**. Through its work in refugee settlements and with host communities in the north and west of the country, the Caritas network has worked with individuals and community groups to develop their income-generating activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural.⁸ These actions have focused on injecting capital and organizing technical and vocational training in the refugee hosting districts, supporting sustainable family farming on the plots of land provided, and setting up village savings and credit associations (VSLAs). Entrepreneurship and innovation are also emphasized.

⁵ A [2018 World Bank household survey](#) found that around 50% of the refugee population in Uganda were living in poverty, compared to 17% of Ugandans in the same regions.

⁶ In 2016, newly arrived refugee families (regardless of their size) were allocated plots of 50x50 m², today this has been reduced to 15x30 m² due to land shortages and situations of overcrowding.

⁷ In the case of Uganda, see the [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in Uganda](#) and the [2020-2025 Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities](#).

⁸ For more information about Caritas projects in western Uganda, visit our [dedicated webpage](#).

"We started our mushroom production in an innovative way, building a dark room where we are able to grow and cultivate mushrooms in a short space of time. We have created a new market in the area and have already started teaching others in the community how to do the same."

- Justine Uwimana, 22, is a Congolese entrepreneur born in the refugee settlement of Kyangwali in western Uganda.



© Esther Mbabazi

Justine (right) with her mother Albertine Nzamukunda (left), who fled to Uganda from North Kivu more than 20 years ago. They founded Upendo Group, a VSLA initiative supported by Caritas.

In order to unleash the full potential of hosting migrants, Caritas' experiences internationally and in Belgium have shown that investing in income generation will allow communities to **break cycles of aid dependency, encourage refugees on the path to greater self-reliance, and contribute to the development of host and home countries.**⁹

The **rights and ambitions of host communities must also be an integral part of strategies for sustainable and peaceful development** in areas hosting refugee populations in Uganda. The precarious situation of host communities, also facing challenges related to poverty, access to services and protection, strengthens the argument for inclusive and sustainable development more generally. In the various regions receiving people in host villages have increased pressure on natural resources, resulting in environmental degradation and deforestation. These issues have become underlying sources of conflict, discrimination, and competition at the individual and community levels, sometimes undermining social cohesion. It is **imperative that sustainable resource management be ambitiously supported** so that Uganda can continue to provide a safe haven while offering socio-economic opportunities, as well as protection, for all.



Edward is the Chairman of Wazee Tuamkeni – a VSLA founded by a group of local Ugandans. Caritas has supported them to develop sustainable farming activities based on agroecological practices.

"We had to adapt to a changing society and climate, changing our traditions and ways of life. We were a fishing community living on the shores of Lake Albert. But we faced a long list of challenges: restrictions from the authorities, threats from bandits, a hostile environment due to decades of deforestation. Today, oil exploration on the lake has also led to the physical displacement of our communities."

- Edward, 23, is a farmer living near Lake Albert in western Uganda.

⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of the links between migration and development, see Caritas Europa (2019) [Common Home](#).

Protection gaps must be at the forefront

Restrictions on humanitarian assistance hit the most vulnerable hardest. As food rations dwindle, the most vulnerable members of refugee communities – single mothers, unaccompanied minors (UAMs), victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) – are falling into even more precarious situations. In addition, **justice and protection mechanisms remain severely underfunded and inaccessible in refugee settlements in Uganda**, including for unaccompanied children and victims of SGBV.

Although the visibility of these issues has increased in recent years, there are still **significant gaps in the protection regime for unaccompanied foreign minors (UAMs) in Uganda. As of December 2022, 71,746 unaccompanied children were identified across the country, more than double in just six months (31,609 in July 2022).**¹⁰ In practice, these children arrive without their parents or other adult relatives, often because they were killed or became separated during and after fleeing violence in their home countries. Once in Uganda, a guardianship system is in place, but it is scarcely supported, often forcing guardians to abandon the children due to lack of resources. To help address this gap, the Caritas network strengthened the socioeconomic livelihoods of 355 unaccompanied minors in the host villages of Kyangwali and Kyaka II in western Uganda between 2021 and 2022. Further investments in specialized and quality education, child protection case management and skills development remain essential to adequately address the critical needs of every child at risk, regardless of age.



© Esther Mbabazi
Bahati (left) and Issa (right) were supported by Caritas so that Bahati could become Issa's legal guardian and start a bakery to support their daily needs.

" We both lost our parents to the violence in North Kivu. When we first met here in Uganda, I was desperate to find a way to support him. Today, we are a family and Issa does not need to be alone anymore."

- Bahati Maneno, 26, and his adopted son Issa Barijunaki, 17, who arrived alone at the Kyangwali refugee settlement in Uganda.

Sexual and gender-based violence is also an under-reported and neglected protection trend in the context of the reception of refugees in Uganda. This is despite an increased risk during and after displacement due to cycles of violence and disruption of family and community structures. The recent COVID-19-related lockdowns and school closures in Uganda have been particularly challenging for youth and have resulted in an increase in reported cases of SGBV and teenage pregnancy. Assessments by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the most frequently reported forms of SGBV within the household were physical violence (51%), followed by sexual violence (43%), and forced marriage (38%).¹¹

¹⁰ UNHCR (2022) [Uganda - Refugee Statistics December 2022](#).

¹¹ HCR et REACH (2021) [National Report: Uganda Refugee Operation - Participatory Assessment](#).

The increase in SGBV cases is not limited to refugee communities, however, as it is also a growing trend among host populations. At the same time, actors responding to SGBV in Uganda have experienced a drastic reduction in funding in recent years. This lack of resources makes it even more difficult to address pre-existing gaps: lack of regular follow-up with victims, socio-economic reintegration, mediation, and costly access to the justice system.

"Individuals and their communities struggle in situations where they find themselves in an unfamiliar environment. For example, we have witnessed first-hand how violence can increase within a household during and after episodes of displacement."

- Father Francis Xavier Magezi, *Executive Director of Caritas Hoima (HOCADEO), CI.be's local partner in Western Uganda.*



The serious protection challenges facing refugee and host communities have prompted CI.be and its local partners, Caritas Hoima and Caritas Fort Portal, to develop and advocate for **coordinated responses for the protection of people at risk such as victims of SGBV and unaccompanied children**. This approach includes addressing immediate needs through psychosocial and legal support, as well as covering medical costs and distributing dignity kits for victims of violence.

In addition, Caritas aims to provide tools for socio-economic reintegration through employment and training opportunities for UAM guardians and SGBV victims, enabling individuals to protect their dignity and provide for themselves and their families. This strategy is also driven by the understanding that **protection incidents are not isolated, but rather a community and societal issue that presents multi-sectoral challenges**. As a result, a series of trainings and awareness-raising sessions are organized with authorities and communities at large on issues of social cohesion, gender equality, exploitation and child protection. The overall objective is to contribute to a holistic protection environment in the refugee hosting areas in Western Uganda.

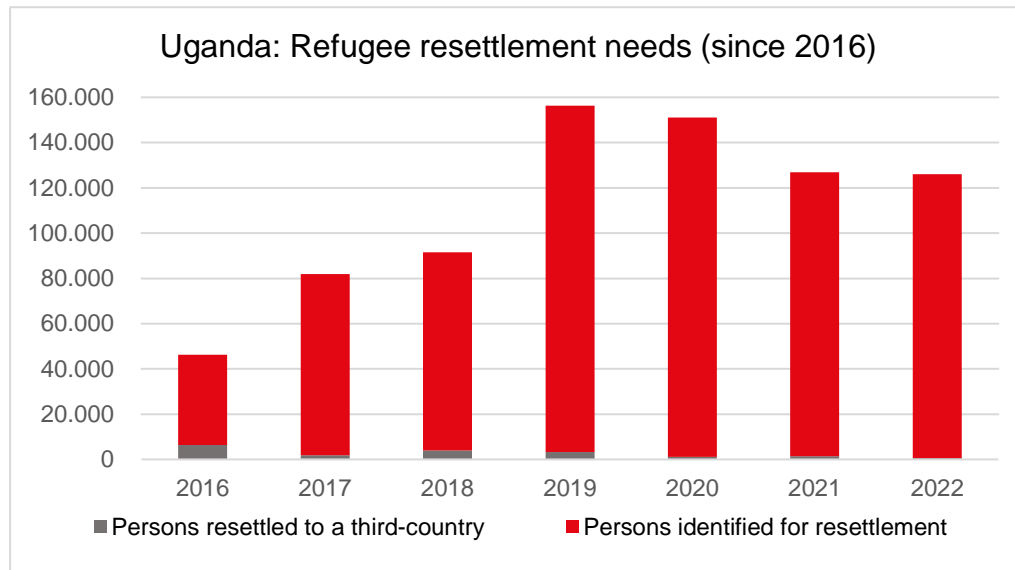
Resettlement – a forgotten durable solution for the most vulnerable?

For some of the most vulnerable refugees, resettlement to a third country is often the only realistic and sustainable option for a safe and dignified life. But **resettlement opportunities are still sorely lacking for refugee populations in Uganda**, including UAMs and victims of SGBV. Since 2016, only 19,811 people have been resettled from Uganda to Europe and beyond, representing about 15% of the 125,403 refugees in Uganda who have been identified for resettlement.¹² Only 1,747 refugees were resettled in 2022.¹³ The scarcity of resettlement places should serve as a **warning that thousands of people, some of whom have already been waiting for decades, are at risk of having their chance to find real protection**

¹² According to UNHCR's categories: Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs; Survivors of Torture and/or Violence (including SGBV); Medical Needs; Women and Girls at Risk; Family Reunification; Children and Adolescents at Risk (including UAMs); Lack of Alternative Durable Solutions.

¹³ UNHCR (2023) [Resettlement Data Finder](#) (consulted in March 2023).

further delayed or even abandoned. Major refugee-hosting countries, such as Uganda, continue to bear the greatest responsibility in the face of deteriorating financial and resettlement solidarity from high-income states.



Source: [UNHCR](#)

The European Union (EU), including Belgium, must make concerted efforts to implement their existing commitments and strengthen their resettlement programs.¹⁴

In 2019, EU Member states committed to resettle 30,000 refugees by 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant obstacle, Belgium and its neighbours have been slow to meet their commitments, despite record resettlement needs around the world. Since 2018, Belgium has not resettled a single refugee from Uganda,¹⁵ even though hundreds of people have already had their cases approved by UNHCR based on specific criteria.¹⁶ As a result, they have been left in limbo for several years.

In this context, **resettlement must be defended as a crucial durable solution, alongside local inclusion rooted in the promotion of sustainable socio-economic livelihoods and a protective environment for the most vulnerable** (children, victims of violence and abuse, etc.), for both refugee and host communities in Uganda. In the absence of prospects for return to DR Congo or South Sudan, these are the programmatic and political areas that will need to be prioritized in the prospects for durable solutions for refugee populations and host communities.

¹⁴ For more information, see Caritas Europa's statement from June 2022: ["Mounting global needs call for renewed European leadership on resettlement"](#).

¹⁵ In 2021 the Belgian Government promised 1,500 resettlement spaces overall but only 964 and 31 people arrived in 2021 and 2022 respectively. None were from Uganda. The State Secretary argues – as did her predecessors – that this is caused by the lack of space in Belgian reception centres.

¹⁶ For more information on the stages of the resettlement procedure for vulnerable refugees in Belgium, visit the [dedicated page of Fedasil, the federal agency responsible for the reception of refugees](#).

> **RECOMMENDATIONS to foster durable solutions for refugee populations in Uganda (and beyond) at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023**

In the framework of the **Global Compact on Refugees**, hundreds of international actors, including Uganda, the EU, and Belgium, have committed to prioritize durable solutions for refugees, as well as the communities that host them.¹⁷

In order to respect these commitments at the **upcoming 2023 Global Refugee Forum, Belgium, alongside the EU, must increase their political and financial support for the reception of refugee populations** in Uganda (and beyond), with particular attention to:

1. Pledging **multi-annual funding for the UN Refugee Response Plans** for Congolese and South-Sudanese refugees.
2. Making **specific pledges and matching pledges** in the Ugandan context, focusing notably on:
 - Increasing **direct funding and capacity development opportunities for local and national humanitarian actors**;
 - Encouraging **greater participation of refugee communities and their representatives in national, regional, and local policies**.
 - Supporting **holistic and community-based approaches to address SGBV and child protection challenges**;
 - Enhancing **refugee self-reliance and socio-economic development in refugee-hosting areas**;
 - Promoting initiatives that strengthen **social cohesion, sustainable resource management, and environmental protection**.
3. Reflecting on and sharing lessons on the implementation of the **humanitarian-development-peace nexus** in situations of protracted displacement, in terms of coordination, funding and programming modalities.
4. Meeting and increasing **refugee resettlement commitments**, while dedicating at least 20% of Belgium's annual resettlement spots for the Great Lakes region.
5. Continuing to **advocate bilaterally and multilaterally for greater socio-economic inclusion and self-reliance** in major refugee hosting states (access to work, social services, education, healthcare).

This analysis was written in partnership with [Caritas Hoima \(HOCADEO\)](#) as part of the Caritas International Belgium publication, [Local Actions, Global Lessons - Uganda, Burundi, Niger: The Urgent need for Durable Solutions](#). The original version from December 2022 was updated in May 2023.



¹⁷ For more details on the commitments of governments and other actors to self-reliance, local inclusion, resettlement and policy coordination, visit the [UNHCR dedicated platform](#).