



Safe, but not surviving: Sudan's urban refugees in Uganda

Uganda's open refugee policies have allowed nearly 2 million people to seek protection in the country, yet the recent arrival of Sudanese, many with urban backgrounds, is testing the foundations of Uganda's rural-settlement approach.

Uganda has long been recognized globally for its progressive refugee hosting model. Based on open borders, land allocation, right to work, and access to national services, Uganda has received over 1.89 million refugees, mainly from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, the arrival of over 80,000 Sudanese refugees, many of whom are urban professionals fleeing from Khartoum, Darfur, and other cities, is challenging the fundamental principle of rural settlements upon which Uganda's refugee system was built.

This note explores the distinct needs and experiences of Sudanese refugees, how they diverge from the expectations embedded in Uganda's settlement-based response, and what this implies for the future of refugee hosting in the country. It draws on field discussions, donor assessments, and refugee testimonies to highlight the urgent need for a

recalibrated, inclusive, and adequately funded approach that reflects the new demographic and social realities of forced displacement.

The changing face of displacement

Unlike the predominantly rural South Sudanese and Congolese populations who form the bulk of Uganda's refugee caseload, many of the Sudanese arriving since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 are from urban centres such as Khartoum and Al Fasher. They bring with them a markedly different set of needs, expectations, and aspirations.

"I was a lawyer in Sudan. I came to Uganda because I thought the culture was similar and it was safe. But now I am unable to find work, and school fees for my children are

beyond reach,” said one refugee from South Kordofan now living in Kampala. This population is not looking for farmland or small plots in remote rural settlements. They seek connectivity, continued education, professional requalification, and employment — necessities that Uganda’s refugee settlements are ill-equipped to offer. For many, the priority is not subsistence, but the ability to rebuild lives in ways that reflect the skills and urban livelihoods they had before displacement.

The existing refugee response has not kept pace with this shift. Though Uganda’s legislation guarantees access to work and services, in practice, the lack of an operational refugee policy, obstacles such as digital application systems, informal payments, and language barriers block many from meaningful integration into the urban labour market.

“Safe, but not surviving”

The dramatic reduction in donor funding — particularly the cuts from the United States — has triggered a cascading collapse of essential services. Food rations have been slashed, with 60 percent of refugees now excluded from assistance. Health and education services, which had previously surpassed national averages in some settlements, are deteriorating rapidly. World Food Programme (WFP), already limited in scope, is no longer allowed to distribute cash assistance in many cases, and its nutrition programming is being outpaced by growing need.

A Sudanese refugee from Khartoum now living in Kampala described his situation bluntly: “We used to eat three meals a day. Now it’s one and a half. I had [previously in Sudan] a date farm, I rented houses. I invested in my life. Now, nothing.” Many are

relying on remittances from family still in Port Sudan or living abroad, but this is a fragile safety net. Others, like a public health officer from Al Fasher, now make soap or perfume for modest income, selling to their communities through WhatsApp groups.



Women displaying the soap products they sell.

Uganda remains physically safe for refugees — but safety is no longer enough. Without food, livelihoods, or a pathway to regain dignity, many face worsening mental health, forced destitution, and pressure to undertake onward movements. Some refugees have applied to third countries like Saudi Arabia — but these options are limited and only a tiny number are successful. One refugee told of his experience in leaving his passport at the Saudi Embassy to process his application, then being immediately detained by the police outside the embassy and forced to pay a bribe as he did not have his passport on him.

A system stretched beyond capacity

The Ugandan government has reaffirmed its commitment to hosting refugees, even as national resources remain limited. But the response architecture is increasingly buckling. Settlements like Nakivale and Adjumani now house more than 200,000 refugees each and are overwhelmed.

Education services, already precarious, are collapsing under the strain.

Meanwhile, transit centres are operating at 700 percent capacity, some Sudanese refugees tell of sleeping on floors awaiting transfer to settlements. Even then, arrival in the settlement marks the end of structured support.

Donors are attempting to prioritize life-saving assistance, yet the gaps are too large to be bridged with current resources. UN agencies report a crisis of “running development with humanitarian tools”—a model that is now unsustainable. The once-ambitious vision of livelihoods, resilience, and graduation has been deprioritized.

Urban refugees

Sudanese refugees are increasingly bypassing rural settlements altogether, choosing instead to settle in towns like Kampala, Entebbe, and Arua. This growing urban caseload presents a direct challenge to Uganda’s rural-centric model of refugee hosting. An urban refugee response strategy has been developed by the government and UNHCR, though this is limited to five divisions within Kampala – and does not address the Sudanese staying in the greater Kampala metropolitan area, or other urban centres. Added to which, most refugees interviewed felt there was little or no structured support available to them.

For example, refugees registered in Kampala do not receive any assistance from WFP. As a result, some remain registered in Kiryandongo despite living in Kampala and travel to Kiryandongo every few months to collect the cash allowances. Though the numbers of people still receiving this support is steadily reducing and many Sudanese

refugees have stopped receiving any support at all.

The Office of the Prime Minister discourages investments in urban refugee programs, fearing it may encourage more arrivals in cities. This has hampered efforts to assist Sudanese refugees in Kampala, even though UNHCR has now opened an urban refugee office and secured some funding for urban response partners.

The lack of service provision in cities has made life precarious. Refugees report high rent costs, difficulty accessing schools, and no consistent aid. Many tell of how they survive “day by day”.

Political realities

Uganda’s legal framework for refugee protection is among the most progressive globally. Refugees are entitled to documentation, land, and access to services. However, Uganda lacks a cohesive national refugee policy to complement its legislation. And while the country’s welcoming attitude to refugees is led by President Yoweri Museveni, there are some cracks emerging in the official narrative.

In recent months, Uganda has suspended the registration of new asylum seekers from Eritrea and Somalia. This decision has sparked some debate within the country. Government officials have cited concerns over national security and the strain on public resources as primary reasons for the suspension. Though there are also reports indicating the suspension of Eritrean registrations is an attempt to crack down on human trafficking and money laundering networks set up by Eritrean émigrés.

Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness, and Refugees, Hillary Onek, emphasized the



challenges posed by limited international support, stating, "There is too much emphasis on this open-door policy for refugees. We will be forced to review the policy since it is suffocating us if we are not assisted in providing food for these individuals".

Additionally, several media reports claim that the influx of refugees — particularly South Sudanese and Eritreans — into urban areas of Uganda, such as Kampala and its suburbs, has significantly driven up rental prices. These articles also note social tension and economic strain in host communities and call for more balanced housing and integration policies.

Upcoming national elections in January 2026 add another layer of uncertainty. While refugee issues are not central to the political narrative, the risk of increased populist or anti-refugee rhetoric cannot be dismissed.

Despite these challenges however, there remains significant support for hosting refugees. District leaders view refugee settlements as a source of development and job creation. In fact, some are actively requesting new settlements. An IPSOS survey found that 80 percent of Ugandans believe they benefit from refugees. Yet without proper funding and planning, these benefits are rapidly eroding.

Rethinking the response

Uganda remains a regional outlier in its open-door policy, which deserves continued recognition and support. Yet without a bold rethinking of the refugee response model, this generosity risks being undermined.

If Uganda and its international partners can adapt to this new reality — shifting from a one-size-fits-all settlement model to a

differentiated, inclusive approach — they will not only uphold protection but unlock the potential of refugees as contributors to society.

The arrival of Sudanese refugees highlights three core failures in the current system:

- **Misalignment of Services:** The assumption that all refugees are rural farmers is no longer valid. The system is not equipped to serve urban professionals.
- **Inadequate Funding:** Cuts in international support have eroded food, education, health, and livelihoods programming — leaving refugees unable to meet basic needs.
- **Unsustainable Humanitarian interventions:** What are fundamentally development aims are being delivered through short-term humanitarian tools and from humanitarian funding streams.

It is time to consider structural reforms:

- **Fully implement the Urban Refugee Response Strategy 2024 -2028:** Uganda must acknowledge the urbanisation of displacement. Urban refugees need tailored services, protection, and inclusion.
- **Create a National Refugee Policy:** The legal framework must be operationalised into coherent policies to regulate, plan for, and respond to changing refugee demographics and needs.
- **Invest in Localisation and Systems Building:** Rather than temporary INGO staffing, long-term investments



in government capacity (including salaries) are needed.

- **Remove barriers to work permits and professional accreditations:** unlock the potential of Sudanese

refugees' professional skills to enable them to contribute meaningfully to the national economy, reduce aid dependency, and foster inclusive economic growth.



Sudanese refugees in Entebbe.

Links to other relevant information:

www.nrc.no

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