



# Uganda's Congolese refugee surge: a humanitarian model under threat

*Uganda's refugee policies have for decades been a pressure valve in a region beset by conflict and instability, yet significant funding cuts threaten to undermine the entire system.*

Uganda has long been a model for refugee protection, offering freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to land for cultivation. Yet today, this model faces a fundamental crisis. A progressive and now drastic reduction in donor funding, particularly the recent cuts by the United States, coincides with an unexpected surge in refugee arrivals from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The pressure of new arrivals comes against the backdrop of the country's existing protracted refugee caseload and is severely straining the capacity of humanitarian actors and the Government of Uganda to maintain the various elements of the system that makes up the Ugandan refugee response.

## Funding

The downward trend in donor funding for Uganda's refugee response has been ongoing for several years. This decline had already led to a reduction in basic services that has

been accelerated by sweeping cuts to US development and humanitarian funding worldwide. In addition to those projects directly funded by the US, the impact is also being felt through cuts to UN agency programmes. Apart from some health programming, most directly US funded projects have been terminated, and the UN has cut about 20-30 percent of support to implementing partners and the government. Education programming is particularly hard hit, with thousands of teachers being withdrawn from schools serving refugee children. This is a crisis for a refugee population of which about 60 percent are children.

Even before the US funding cuts, food ration reductions under "prioritisation" strategies had already left many refugees food insecure. Today, 60 percent of refugees are excluded from food assistance entirely. "The targeting system wasn't well designed," one official explains. The central criterion

became length of stay, with many long-term refugees losing support, resulting in a resurgence of malnutrition among populations previously considered stable.

The US decision to withdraw support for cash-based interventions dealt another blow. A donor describes this pullback from cash-based solutions to less efficient in-kind distributions by saying “we are going back in time”. Despite stop-gap allocations – such as increase in funding by some European donors to counterbalance the US cuts – the humanitarian architecture in Uganda remains critically underfunded. And small amounts of funding now serve only the most vulnerable, mostly new arrivals, leaving a vast population in a state of precariousness.

## New arrivals

The refugee inflow from eastern DRC, driven by escalating violence and the closure of IDP camps, is fundamentally challenging Uganda's already overstretched reception capacity. The initial 2025 contingency plan accounted for 50,000 new arrivals over the year. Yet by the end of May, more than 100,000 people had already crossed the border. Some transit centres along the DRC border are operating at 700 percent capacity. Of those that have arrived in Uganda this year, 63,000 have come from DRC, 22,000 from South Sudan and 12,000 from Sudan.

The levels of new refugees arriving daily, combined with diminished funding across all aspects of the response means that most resources are currently being directed towards getting newly arrived refugees registered and settled as fast as possible. Yet this comes at the cost of drastically reduced support once refugees are settled. “Then comes the abyss,” remarked a UN official, referring to the absence of sustained support

following initial registration and transport to a settlement.

New arrivals are often arriving in a deteriorated state of health. Acute malnutrition (GAM) rates exceeding 15 percent, reaching 17 percent among children under five, are being reported among Congolese arrivals. UNHCR provides nutritional supplements at the reception centre, though this cannot be continued after they leave the centre, and the 5-7 days that they spend at the reception centre is often not enough time for malnourished children to build up weight.

Added to which, many settlements lack adequate WASH infrastructure, and insufficient funding has left essential services such as latrine construction unbudgeted. For example, in Nakivale settlement the partner organisations that were digging latrines ran out of funding, and there is no one that can take over. This dynamic is being replicated across all services from education to health and livelihoods. As one government official explains, “we are putting people there and then not supporting them.”

## Sustainability under strain

The core strength of Uganda's refugee policy is its integration with national systems, and the ability of refugees to access services. Refugee-hosting districts benefit from significant infrastructure investment and service provision. Basically, UNHCR seconds INGO staff to the government – thousands of healthcare workers and teachers – in the hope that one day the government would be able to take these on permanently. Yet the steady decline in funding, compounded by the sudden removal of US funding and the continued arrival of new refugees means that the vulnerabilities in the system are



being exposed. Alongside these vulnerabilities, lie real questions about the long-term sustainability of the system to survive.

Today, 96 percent of health centres are government-run, but the government only provides 20 percent of staffing, relying on seconded INGO personnel to fill the gap. Schools in the refugee settlements are overcrowded. For example, one primary school might accommodate 3,000 children with just seven teachers provided by the state, and an additional 30 positions are funded by donors.

While the World Bank has committed over \$2 billion to support Uganda's refugee hosting regions, the funds are directed towards infrastructure rather than the salaries and operational costs that sustain service delivery. Without human resources, "who will work there?" donors ask.

Settlement land, the cornerstone of Uganda's self-reliance model, is also sustained via support to accompanying services. Officials explain that the size of allocated plots are shrinking, climate events are making them less viable, and support for livelihoods has been deprioritized. Against this backdrop, refugees continue to arrive.

## Uganda's neighbours

A central element of the challenge facing Uganda's refugee response is the deep instability in DRC and South Sudan that has for decades forced people to seek protection in Uganda. And which tragically seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The conflict in eastern DRC, particularly in North and South Kivu, and Ituri provinces, is driven by a complex interplay of ethnic tensions, competition over natural resources,

and regional power dynamics. These seemingly intractable and overlapping conflicts are fundamentally part of a wider regional crisis which sees many regional powers actively engaged in conflict or supporting various proxies – Uganda included. Ugandan forces are deployed in Ituri province fighting the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) armed group.

Similarly, South Sudan is once again in a state of profound crisis. Deep political instability, including the apparent unravelling of the 2018 peace agreement, combined with growing violence and potential for the country to become drawn into the conflict in Sudan has seen Uganda deploy troops to stabilise the capital, Juba. In both cases, there is little optimism that conditions will change such that refugees return in any meaningful numbers. Indeed, most analysts would agree that the overwhelming and deep fragility of both countries – with neither offering any glimmer of a pathway towards stability or political resolution – will mean refugees continue to cross their borders seeking protection in Uganda.

## Towards a sustainable future

Uganda's refugee model stands at a crossroads. The twin pressures of surging arrivals and collapsing donor support necessitate not just more funding but a fundamental reassessment of strategy.

Opportunities do exist. Localisation and system-reconfiguration are gaining traction. "This is a golden opportunity," a donor remarked, stressing that ownership by local organisations can create more sustainable and scalable solutions. Donors can capitalise on Uganda's progressive policies by aligning funding with localisation efforts.





Refugees' right to work, education, and services should be maintained, but realistic pathways must be developed to operationalise these rights. Local integration should be linked to functional service delivery, legal clarity, and economic opportunity. Investments in resilience and livelihoods cannot remain optional.

For now, Uganda continues to demonstrate remarkable generosity in hosting refugees. However, the model that underpinned its success is fundamentally at risk. The country cannot sustain this approach without meaningful international support. As one official succinctly put it: "We still have land. But what good is land without support to survive on it?"

At the core of the challenge facing Uganda's refugee response going forward, is the reality that the number of refugees coming to the country will continue to grow. Managing the support of the existing 1.89million people that Uganda currently hosts with reduced funding would be difficult enough, but responding to the immediate needs of a seemingly never-ending flow of new arrivals challenges the system in a more existential way.

The time has come for a collective humanitarian and development rethink. Donors must rally not only to provide immediate emergency relief but to enable a restructured, sustainable, and locally led refugee response that ensures dignity and opportunity for refugees and host communities alike.



Refugees from Congo line up for registration. Nakivale refugee settlement

## Key messages:

### Address Critical Funding Shortfalls

- **Immediate Action:** maintain critical humanitarian support for new refugee arrivals (6-12 months) to Uganda, including protection, health, education and food/income support to settle and allow for transition to the self-reliance model.
- **Long-Term Commitment:** support the government of Uganda, and displacement and development focused agencies, to support long-term programmes to build the individual and household self-reliance and resilience of refugees, as well as the institutional strength of national agencies to support them.
- **Support the government of Uganda:** modify and strengthen its own systems to enable refugees to be fully participating members of their communities. For example, removing bureaucratic barriers to work permits to which refugees are legally entitled.

### Promote Refugee Self-Reliance through Livelihood Support

- **Agricultural Initiatives:** Invest in climate-smart agriculture and inclusive value chains to empower both refugees and host communities, enhancing food security and income.
- **Skills Development:** Implement vocational training tailored to refugees' backgrounds and market needs, focusing on youth and women.
- **Access to Finance:** Support the formation of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and cooperatives to facilitate entrepreneurship and economic integration.

### Enhance Environmental Sustainability and Energy Access

- **Reforestation Efforts:** Support community-led tree planting initiatives to combat deforestation caused by the reliance on wood fuel.
- **Renewable Energy Solutions:** Invest in solar energy projects and other renewable sources to reduce environmental degradation and improve living conditions in refugee settlements.
- **Resilience Building:** Incorporate climate adaptation strategies into refugee assistance programs to address the environmental challenges exacerbated by climate change, such as extreme weather events affecting settlements like Nakivale.

Links to other relevant information:

[www.nrc.no](http://www.nrc.no)

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