



PRESS RELEASE
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Thinking beyond the refugee settlement: new IRRI policy paper

Uganda's refugee policy urgently needs an honest discussion, if sustainable solutions for both refugees and host communities are to be found, a new policy paper by International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) reveals.

The paper, entitled [*Uganda's refugee policies: the history, the politics, the way forward*](#) puts the "Ugandan model" in its historical and political context, shines a spotlight on its implementation gaps, and proposes recommendations for the way forward.

Uganda has since 2013 opened its borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees from South Sudan, bringing the total number of refugees to more than one million. It has been praised for its positive steps on freedom of movement and access to work for refugees, going against the global grain. But generations of policy, this paper shows, have only entrenched the sole focus on refugee settlements and on repatriation as the only viable durable solution. Support to urban refugees and local integration have been largely overlooked.

Lucy Hovil, Senior Researcher at International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) and author of the paper said *"There has been a tendency to idealise Uganda's refugee response, while there is another side to the story. The intention of this paper is not to belittle the progress made by Uganda but to ensure that there is a robust critique to enable it to become much better."*

The Ugandan refugee crisis unfolded at the same time as the UN adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, and states committed to implement a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). Uganda immediately seized this opportunity and adopted its own strategy to implement these principles. As the world looks to Uganda for best practises in refugee policy, and rightly so, it is vital to understand the gaps between rhetoric and reality, and the pitfalls of Uganda's policy. This paper identifies the following challenges:

- There is a danger that the promotion of progressive refugee policies becomes more rhetoric than reality, creating a smoke-screen that squeezes out meaningful discussion about robust alternatives. Policy-making has come at the expense of real qualitative change on the ground.
- Refugees in urban areas continue to be largely excluded from any support due to an ongoing focus on refugee settlements, including through aid provision
- Local integration and access to citizenship have been virtually abandoned, leaving voluntary repatriation as the only solution on the table. Given the protracted crises in South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo, this remains unrealistic.
- Host communities remain unheard, with policy conversations largely taking place in Kampala and Geneva. Many Ugandans and refugees have neither the economic resources nor sufficient political leverage to influence the policies that are meant to benefit them.

The policy paper proposes a number of recommendations to improve the Ugandan refugee model:

- First, international donors need to deliver on their promise of significant financial support.
- Second, repatriation cannot remain the only serious option on the table. There has to be renewed discussion on local integration with Uganda communities and a dramatic increase in resettlement to wealthier states across the globe.



- Third, local communities hosting refugees must be consulted and their voices incorporated in a more meaningful and systematic way, if tensions within and between communities are to be avoided.
- Fourth, in order to genuinely enhance refugee self-reliance, the myth of the “local settlement” needs to be debunked and recognized for what it is: the ongoing isolation of refugees and the utilization of humanitarian assistance to keep them isolated and dependent on aid.

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This policy paper is part of the wider RIGHTS IN EXILE series published by IRRI with focus on refugee policy and refugee rights