



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

VULNER

VULNER POLICY BRIEF: UGANDA

Addressing Refugees' Core Protection Needs Amidst Resource Limitations and Mass Influxes in Uganda

Sophie Nakueira

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KEY MESSAGES

- Strengthen and diversify refugees' skills and capacities. The allocation of land plots, which are too small and not fertile enough to guarantee livelihood, does not suffice to enhance refugees' self-reliance and achieve the objectives of the Common Refugee Response Framework.
- Fund core aid programs on the long term. Ever-changing aid priorities and targets fuel a lack of understanding of selection criteria, and they perpetuate allegations of corruption and distrust in Uganda's aid system.
- Involve refugees in the planning of core aid programs and offer them adequate compensation for their operational tasks. Refugees' involvement in the design of aid programs is key to addressing their needs and improving the aid system's legitimacy and efficiency. Compensating refugees who work in the aid system's operations is key to mitigating corruption and the soliciting of bribes from vulnerable refugees.
- Remove obstacles to refugees' integration in Uganda and be transparent about the fluidity or instability of resettlement criteria as these ultimately rest on the receiving countries. Very few refugees are likely to be resettled because resettlement slots are extremely few. Yet, many of them put their lives on hold, out of fear that integration in Uganda will hinder resettlement prospects.
- Increase the number of resettlement slots and conditions for safe and orderly migration. One way of achieving this is through the expansion of complementary pathways (such as increasing opportunities for labour migration and education pathways) and through increased enrolment or participation of developed countries in the resettlement programs.
- Address the root causes of forced displacement in refugees sending countries, to reduce forced population movements and to enable repatriation as a sustainable durable solution.

In the current legal and policy discourse on asylum and migration, there is an increasing emphasis on the need to address the specific protection needs of the most vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. For example, the UN Global Compact on Refugees requires addressing the specific protection needs of the most vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees, and the objective 7 of the UN Global Compact for Migration calls on states to 'address and reduce' vulnerabilities in migration more broadly.

Yet, there is no common understanding of what migrants' vulnerabilities are, nor of how they should be assessed and addressed. To produce scientific knowledge that assists policymakers in designing policies and implementation strategies that will contribute to reducing vulnerabilities among migrants seeking protection, the VULNER project conducted extensive enquiry in 8 countries located in Europe (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway), the Middle-East (Lebanon), Africa (Uganda), and North America (Canada) – thus encapsulating different policy contexts that range from the humanitarian response in first countries of asylum (Lebanon and Uganda), to asylum and other relevant processes to address the protection needs of migrants in Western countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway). The objective is to reach a better understanding of the multiple challenges, promises, and pitfalls, of relying on 'vulnerability' as a conceptual tool to design and implement institutional responses to migrants' protection needs.

The inquiry thus covered a variety of policy contexts, ranging from humanitarian responses in first countries of asylum (Lebanon and Uganda) to asylum and other related processes addressing the protection needs of migrants in Western countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway). The objective was to gain a better understanding of the multiple challenges, promises, and pitfalls of relying on 'vulnerability' as a conceptual tool to design and implement institutional responses to migrants' protection needs.

In a first research phase, the VULNER researchers documented the various legal and bureaucratic approaches to identifying and addressing 'vulnerabilities' among migrants seeking protection. They analysed the relevant domestic regulations and case-laws, and they conducted 216 interviews with public servants and social and aid workers. This resulted in policy recommendations for the policymakers of each of the countries under study, as well as for the EU policymakers, which can be found here: <https://www.vulner.eu/58198/policy-briefs>

In a second research phase, the VULNER researchers also met with migrants seeking protection to understand how they experience their vulnerabilities, and what they identify as their main life challenges. In Uganda, 311 refugees and asylum seekers were interviewed. Fieldwork was conducted in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, with a focus on the settings where refugees access services (such as health centres, police stations, refugee welfare offices, food distribution centres, water distribution points), and at refugees' dwellings in some of the distinct villages that are part of the settlement. Moreover, legal aid officers were shadowed at a police station and a prison in a precinct city, outside the settlement.

Based on the results of that second research phase in Uganda, this policy brief proposes concrete policy recommendations on how to design Uganda refugee and asylum policies, which effectively consider and address the vulnerabilities among refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants seeking protection.

- **Chronic Hunger and Exploitation**

In addition to limited cash and food assistance for those who are categorized as extremely vulnerable, Uganda provides refugees with small plots of land, so that they can grow their own food to supplement aid rations.

In practice, however, these plots are too small due to mass influxes of refugees, and extreme weather patterns render dependence on agriculture unviable. High unemployment rates countrywide and the socio-cultural heterogeneity of refugees further complicate the agricultural approach to self-sufficiency. It promotes dependence on insufficient aid, as refugees who are unable to grow enough food for their subsistence and cannot find other means of livelihood rely on less than 5 euros of aid support per month. This produces associated health problems (such as malnutrition), increases school dropout rates, and fosters servitude and exploitation by host communities and other refugees.

With poor crop yields and insufficient aid money for buying food, many refugees must develop alternative strategies to afford food. Some refugees work on farms owned by Ugandans citizens in exchange for food, making them prone to servitude and exploitation. Some young girls marry early to escape difficult living conditions, and other school-going children simply drop out of school. These conditions have led to disillusionment of a possible future in Uganda and Africa as a whole, making people contemplate futures elsewhere.

- **High Levels of Distrust in the Aid System**

There are high levels of distrust in the aid system, which is generally viewed as corrupt and defunct by refugees excluded from aid programs and associated benefits. Evidence of mismanagement of food aid and donor funds in 2018 led to reforms, including the introduction of biometric systems to minimise fraud, yet allegations of corruption persist.

Without discounting the veracity of these accusations, the perception of corruption in Uganda's aid system is also perpetuated by a lack of understanding of the selection criteria for aid and resettlement programs. This results from the fluidity of the selection criteria, which depend on the specific program and the mandate of each aid agency, and which constantly evolve as programs end and are replaced by others due to the temporary nature of funding. Moreover, because of limited resources, only a fraction of the most vulnerable refugees among those who fit into a program's selection criteria, actually receives aid.

This sustains lack of transparency, confusion, and allegations of corruption by refugees, who do not understand the selection criteria and processes for aid programs – in a context where power asymmetries between aid workers and refugees do not foster or promote open inquiry about the selection criteria and procedures for the diverse aid programs.

- **Slow and Reactive Responses to Core Protection Needs in a Fragmented Aid Environment**

Many refugees, who are facing problems that need urgent attention, are falling through the cracks of Uganda's otherwise well-designed humanitarian response because of the large population. Moreover, interventions are siloed even though the aid system is designed for aid services to be complementary. For instance, even though refugees are referred from one agency to another one with the specific protection mandate to address their specific problems, there is seldom any proper follow-up to find out whether refugees' needs were addressed. Additionally, when aid agencies

address refugees' needs, the response times or interventions are often slow. The response is usually reactive (e.g., in the case of health assistance for people who are not categorized as a priori vulnerable, such as children under 5, pregnant women, or elderly people).

During the field research, some aid agencies had either closed, reduced the numbers of field officers, or did not have resources (such as vehicles) to conduct field operations due to funding cuts. This negatively impacted the type of interventions refugees received. Some refugees reported that there was no follow-up, despite having reported that they were victims of sexual and gender-based forms of violence, facing acute health problems or other salient issues. Acute human and material resource limitations exacerbated the life challenges experienced by refugees, who must reach a state of heightened vulnerability to benefit from minimal interventions that are often insufficient to address the root causes of their problems.

This is particularly true in case of mass influxes of refugee populations, which Uganda frequently faces due to protracted conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, without having sufficient human and financial resources to address refugees' core protection needs.

- **Inadequate Compensation for Refugee Community Workers**

Refugees play an active role in their communities in different ways. In the context of humanitarian protection, their role is considered critical in the identification of very vulnerable refugees in their communities or mediating disputes. However, despite the added value of involving refugees in the humanitarian response, they are not adequately compensated. In some cases, they work on a voluntary basis (as is the case of the Refugee Welfare Councils, which attend to civil disputes in their communities). While the inclusion of refugees in Uganda's aid system is commendable, relying on people who are inadequately compensated fosters corruption. The field research showed that refugees who could offer bribes to community workers or leaders were the ones who managed to be identified and listed as 'vulnerable' by the aid agencies. As a result, the specific needs of the vulnerable refugees who do not have the means to offer bribes often remain undetected at the community level.

- **Inherent Contradiction in the Durable Solutions**

In humanitarian contexts, three durable solutions to refugees' situation are envisaged, namely voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and integration in the host country. Although the voluntary repatriation is the most preferred solution, it is an unattainable option for many refugees in Uganda, who originate from countries in recurring or protracted conflict. This leaves integration and resettlement as the remaining durable solutions.

Resettlement is often not a likely durable solution, because there are very few available slots for resettling refugees globally. For most refugees in Uganda, integration is the most realistic option. Yet, it is also the less desirable for them, given the extreme poverty and the lack of employment prospects in Uganda. The field research showed that many refugees spend years aiming for resettlement and refusing to engage in programs that might enhance integration. They fear that their integration will make them appear as less vulnerable, and that their chances for resettlement will be negatively impacted (given that the lack of integration prospects in the country of asylum is one of the criteria for resettlement). There is an inherent contradiction in the durable solutions because the hope for resettlement makes refugees more vulnerable as they put their lives on hold.

1. Diversify and Boost Livelihood Options

Refugees receive less than 5€ per month as food assistance, with the expectation that they will grow food on the land they received, and that over time they will achieve self-sufficiency.

However, extreme weather patterns combined with the small size of the allocated land plots, does not make agriculture an attainable livelihood option. Moreover, refugees come from different countries and regions (countryside and urban areas), and they have very diverse educational and socio-cultural backgrounds. As a result, their agricultural skills vary greatly.

This homogenous approach to self-sufficiency is unrealistic, and it results in large refugee populations remaining heavily dependent on insufficient cash for food assistance. A long-term development approach, which aims to wean refugees off short term humanitarian assistance, should aim at skills training in diverse areas, and at equipping refugees with start-up kits to ensure that they can utilize these skills immediately. This will help achieving the objectives of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which seeks to enhance the resilience of refugees in protracted situations.¹

2. Address the Root Causes for Refugees' Distrust in the Aid System

The findings show that there is an acute problem of distrust of the humanitarian aid agencies. The distrust is caused by a lack of understanding of the selection criteria of vulnerable groups, the exclusion of eligible refugees due to resource limitations and the frequent introduction and termination of new programs, which each introduce new vulnerability categories that often reflect ever changing donors' priorities more than contextual realities. This perpetuates a perception of the aid system as highly corrupt, and it sustains the exploitation of many refugees by middlemen or brokers, who claim that they can assist them navigating the selection criteria - particularly in the context of resettlement programs and scholarships.

The distrust between refugees and the humanitarian system can be addressed by increased transparency on the selection criteria for different aid programs, especially for resettlement. This would entail clarifying who determines selection criteria, and why others are excluded despite fitting into the classifications of vulnerabilities, as well as investigating corruption expeditiously. Donors should consider consistency in funding core protection programs, as opposed to the current practice of temporary funding for short term programs. This would prevent the confusion that arises with periodic changes in the selection criteria.

Refugees who are tasked with identifying vulnerable people in their communities or mediating disputes should be adequately compensated, to minimise temptations to exploit refugees and solicit bribes. Additionally, increased support should be provided to Uganda to put responsive measures that mitigate corruption and punish the key actors involved.

¹ See: UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Global Compact on Refugees, 2018, available at: www.refworld.org/docid/63b43eaa4.html [accessed 1 February 2023].

3. Remove Obstacles to Refugees' Integration in Uganda

The inherent contradiction between resettlement and integration, which results from the resettlement criteria that include the lack of integration prospects in Uganda, could be solved by making such integration desirable. This would entail addressing the practical and legal obstacles to accessing Uganda citizenship, and the broader social and economic issues that make people want to leave the country.

Refugees cited health infrastructure, unemployment, and hunger, as the main difficulties they faced in Uganda. Many participants were frustrated that resettlement was the only way out of their suffering — suggesting that they simply want a better life. A well-funded, realistic, and comprehensive development approach in the long term, which goes beyond temporary international support to assist Uganda in reacting to humanitarian emergencies, is needed to improve the living conditions of its population, thereby also facilitating refugees' integration.

Additionally, an honest conversation about resettlement criteria is needed, to encourage refugees to seek realistic options for dealing with the challenges they face in Uganda. While this might not stop some refugees from hoping for a better life abroad, it would likely reduce on the suffering they endure while waiting for a durable solution that might never materialize. Moreover, it is important to be transparent about the profile of the refugees that receiving countries generally accept to resettle. This would encourage refugees to get skills as ultimately, it is not the most vulnerable refugees that get resettled, but those who can contribute to the economies of the receiving countries.

It is also important for developed countries to participate in resettlement programs. Very few receiving countries are currently participating, and most offer but a few resettlement slots compared to the large number of refugees in Uganda, making them very competitive. Means to increase the slots should be explored, including through the increase of opportunities for complementary pathways (such as education or labour migration programmes). Such complementary pathways should consider the contextual realities of refugees' background when setting eligibility criteria—keeping in mind that criteria, such as the refugee's age for completing school or their performance, may have been impacted by war.

4. Address the Root Causes of Forced Displacement in Countries of Origin

Crises such as the Covid pandemic, the current war in Ukraine and a global recession have resulted in high cuts in funding to operations in countries with protracted refugee situations, including Uganda. This year alone, Uganda received more than 96,000 refugees on top of the 1.5 million refugees it is already hosting making it difficult to address core protection needs of large numbers of vulnerable groups.

A meaningful way to minimise the harmful impacts of acute resource limitations would be to mitigate the drivers of forced population movements in countries of origin through a reimagining of political and economic engagement with key actors at regional and global level. The majority of the refugees in Uganda are from mineral resource regions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Engaging with the political leaders in refugee sending countries and confronting the economic actors and processes that perpetuate unethical extraction of resources in the DRC will go a long way in mitigating forced displacement in these areas.

Addressing the root causes of forced migration will have a ripple effect on durable solutions such as repatriation efforts, thereby reducing the protracted nature of displacement. This will reduce forced displacement of populations into Uganda, a developing country that is currently buckling under the weight of periodic mass influxes without having the resources to address their needs.

THE VULNER RESEARCH PROJECT

This policy brief has been issued by Sophie Nakueira. It reflects the scientific data she obtained and analyses she developed within the framework of the VULNER research project. Many thanks are due to Dr. Luc Leboeuf for the detailed feedback and reformulations or suggested revisions, for reading previous versions of this policy brief, and for his input in the final draft.

The VULNER research project is an international research initiative aiming at gaining a deeper understanding how migrants applying for asylum and other humanitarian protection statuses experience vulnerabilities, and how they could best be addressed. It thus uses a twofold analysis, which compares the study of existing protection mechanisms for vulnerable migrants as they are defined, designed, and implemented in various local bureaucratic contexts with an examination of migrants' experiences

The VULNER research project is coordinated by Dr. Luc Leboeuf, from the Department of Law & Anthropology of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle a.d. Saale (Germany). It is being funded from February 2020 to June 2023 under the Horizon 2020 research programme.

The views contained in this policy brief are those of the authors. The European Union and the project coordinator are not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

For more information on the VULNER research project and its outputs and events, have a look at our website (www.vulner.eu) and follow us on Twitter (@VULNERproject).



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CONSORTIUM	Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – MPG, Halle, Germany Ca'Foscari University of Venice – UNIVE, Venice, Italy Catholic University of Louvain – UCL, Louvain, Belgium Center for Lebanese Studies – CLS, Beirut, Lebanon Institute for Social Research – ISF, Oslo, Norway Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg – MLU, Halle, Germany Population Europe – PE, Berlin, Germany University of Ottawa – UOTTAWA, Ottawa, Canada
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WEBSITE & TWITTER	www.vulner.eu @VULNERproject
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Dr. Luc Leboeuf, Department of Law & Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, MPG, Halle a.d. Saale, Germany, info@vulner.eu
FURTHER READING	S. Nakueira. <i>Protecting Vulnerable Refugees: An empirical examination of the implementation practices of aid workers and state actors in Uganda</i> . 2021. VULNER Research Report 1 . https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5518521 S. Nakueira. <i>Lived Vulnerabilities under Constraints: An Empirical Account of how Refugees Experience Uganda's Protection System</i> . 2022. VULNER Research Report 2 . https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7312905 S. Nakueira. VULNER Policy Brief: Uganda . 2021. https://www.vulner.eu/87936/VULNER_PB_Uganda_20211.pdf