EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

VULNER POLICY BRIEF: UGANDA

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KEY MESSAGES

- The capacities of the Uganda asylum system to process large numbers of asylum seekers should be strengthened to reduce the lengthy duration it takes to attain refugee status and which sustains exploitation of refugees by middlemen.

- Uganda's humanitarian protection structure suffers from systemic acute resource limitations which affects the quality of interventions and can barely respond to the number of vulnerable refugees that have been identified.

- Resources should be coordinated by the different authorities involved in the assessment of vulnerabilities to allow for timely and comprehensive interventions to the protection needs of asylum applicants. This is crucial for rebuilding trust in the humanitarian system.

INTRODUCTION

The UN Global Compacts for Migration and on Refugees require states to develop their migration and asylum policies in ways that consider the vulnerabilities that migrants and refugees may be facing. In Uganda, there is no specific law requiring a focus on specific vulnerability criteria in the reception of asylum seekers. But in practice Uganda's humanitarian operation follows UNHCR Vulnerability criteria and diverse agencies use their respective administrative guidelines to identify and address the needs of especially vulnerable asylum seekers.

The VULNER project on Uganda studied how vulnerable asylum seekers (and other vulnerable migrants) are identified, and how their special reception and procedural needs are assessed and addressed by Ugandan asylum authorities and local and international agencies. To that end, legislation, case-law, policy documents and administrative guidelines were examined, and 26 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders working as civil servants, social workers in local and international humanitarian aid agencies in Uganda.

This Policy Brief explores the findings, highlighting the challenges and the shortcomings observed in Uganda as well as proposing concrete policy recommendations for the international donor community.

The research shows three interrelated key findings:

- **Length of time to process asylum seekers is too long**

Uganda is one of the largest refugee hosting countries and is surrounded by many countries in conflict. As a result, many people fleeing conflict in the region flock to Uganda. However, despite its very welcoming policy, authorities in charge of reception and registration struggle to issue registration cards within the legally recommended timeframe of 3 months because of the large population that have to be assessed. On average it takes up to 2 years to get refugee status from the time of registration. This enhances the vulnerabilities of those who have been identified as needing special services but whose needs cannot be catered to in a timely manner because they lack the proper documentation. Additionally, until the asylum applicants attain refugee status they have to renew their temporary documents periodically which subjects them to long queues and associated exploitation by unscrupulous brokers who promise to expedite the asylum application process.

- **Systemic human and material resource limitations**

Financial resource limitations and lack of enough manpower was a key aspect mentioned by all those who were interviewed. Interviewees stated that there were limited resources to hire more humanitarian workers to provide crucial services to the large populations who were identified as vulnerable. Despite assessing and identifying asylum seekers who require special services, civil servants and social workers explained that the number of people identified always exceeds their targets. Moreover, they said that this affected the quality of the services provided as each of the civil and social workers had an overwhelming number of vulnerable asylum seekers to attend to and specific monthly targets to meet. Thus, at the asylum reception level for instance, this could potentially lead to the rejection of cases if interviewing officers do not take note of important issues due to fatigue of refugee status interviewing officers. Even if the rejection of the asylum case could later be overturned (upon furnishing additional information as per Ugandan refugee laws) this would further delay the already lengthy procedure to attain refugee status, thus exacerbating the experiences of the vulnerable applicant.

- **Lack of (timely) coordination of resources**

Although the strength of Uganda's protection system is its broad approach to protection and its collaborative protection structure, in practice the provision of protection needs and services are not well coordinated. The various social workers that were interviewed all stated that in identifying and assessing the needs of vulnerable persons, they referred the identified persons to the humanitarian organisation best suited or mandated to attend to the specified need. They also reported that response from many agencies was slow. Thus, the findings show that even if people are assessed and identified as vulnerable, addressing their needs is dependant on the timely response of other agencies. For example, at the urban reception desk in Kampala, those who are identified as vulnerable usually languish outside reception office with no accommodation or food and no way to reach the offices of the department of refugees or the offices of other agencies to which they have been referred. This further enhances their experiences of vulnerability and makes asylum seekers prone to unscrupulous middlemen or brokers who promise to expedite the asylum application. The result is that the use of middlemen perpetuates allegations of corruption and fosters distrust in the humanitarian protection system.

These policy recommendations are made based on the empirical research:

1. Strengthen the capacities of the Uganda asylum system to process asylum applications

The findings show that it takes on average 2 years to attain refugee status because there are only 8 refugee interviewing officers. This is causing insurmountable delays in processing asylum applications. The humanitarian protection response could benefit from that would allow the government of Uganda's Department of Refugees and other agencies with which it cooperates to hire and train more people that could conduct refugee status interviews in a timely manner. This would significantly reduce the backlog of applications waiting to be assessed and reduce the exploitation that comes with frequently interfacing with the humanitarian bureaucracy to renew temporary registration cards – thus addressing one of the main causes of refugees' vulnerabilities at its roots.

2. Refrain from developing additional programmes targeting vulnerable refugees without first allocating sufficient resources to existing ones

Overall, the findings show that there is a disproportion between existing programmes to identify vulnerable refugees, and the available resources to address their most basic needs. It is recommended that this systemic problem should be addressed in order to respond to the needs of the large numbers of people that have been assessed and identified as needing urgent protection services, before developing new and additional programmes to address the specific needs of some vulnerable groups. The importance of addressing this systemic problem is urgent and critical to (re)building trust and credibility in Uganda's humanitarian program. Meaningful protection of those who have been identified as vulnerable can only be achieved if their basic needs are met. The findings showed that the quality of protection interventions was severely impacted because aid workers were overwhelmed by the number of vulnerable persons they must attend to monthly and the inadequate material resources available.

3. Agencies Interventions should be coordinated

In addition to the acute resource problem which hinders a proper response to the protection needs of those identified as vulnerable, interventions of diverse agencies are not coordinated. It is recommended that authorities involved in identifying and assessing vulnerable asylum seekers should also collaborate in implementing interventions. This could entail joint decisions on how they can use available resources (no matter how limited these may be) to address the needs of those who have been identified as vulnerable. Such collaboration in addressing responses could potentially enable existing resources to be coordinated in a way that is responsive to protection needs because by considering how and when respective agencies' competencies and resources can be used in targeted interventions.

This policy brief has been issued by Sophie Nakueira. It reflects the result of her own scientific data and analyses, which was developed within the framework of the VULNER research project.

The VULNER research project is an international research initiative, which objective is to reach a more profound understanding of the experiences of vulnerabilities of migrants applying for asylum and other humanitarian protection statuses, and how they could best be addressed. It therefore makes use of a twofold analysis, which confronts the study of existing protection mechanisms towards vulnerable migrants (such as minors and victims of human trafficking), with the one of their own experiences on the ground.

This policy brief reflects only the authors' views. The European Union and the project coordinator are not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

PROJECT NAME   VULNERABILITIES UNDER THE GLOBAL PROTECTION REGIME - How Does the Law Assess, Address, Shape and Produce the Vulnerabilities of the Protection Seekers? (VULNER)

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FURTHER READING   S. Nakueira. *Protecting Vulnerable Refugees: An empirical examination of the implementation practices of aid workers and state actors in Uganda.* 2021. **Vulner Research Report 1**. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.5518521