



# FAILING THE 'UGANDA MODEL'

Why Donors Must Urgently Bridge Uganda's Refugee Financing Gap

Dwindling and inadequate resources for the refugee response in Uganda are a significant threat to the country's progressive refugee policies and an important testimony to the international community's failure to implement commitments made under the Global Compact on Refugees. Without urgent action to address the financing gap, Uganda may be forced to scale down its support to refugees.

## A model at breaking point

*"Uganda has the most progressive refugee policies in Africa, if not the world"*

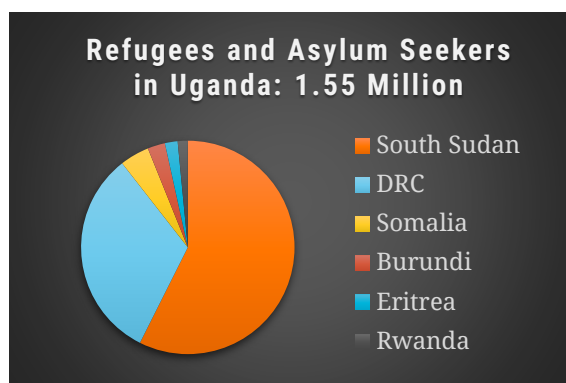
— Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Uganda has long been lauded by the international community for its progressive refugee policy. Its self-reliance approach permits refugees to work and move freely, allocates plots of land for refugees to cultivate within settlements, and gives refugees equal access to services such as health and education. The country's generosity towards refugees has earned it a reputation as a model for refugee hosting countries around the world. But global financial support for the "Uganda model" has so far not matched the praise.

In 2022, Uganda's refugee response received less than half of what was required, and four months into 2023 the funding landscape looks just as bleak, with less than 13% secured for the response. Looking at some specific donors, we even see a clear deprioritisation of the Uganda refugee response over the past few years. For example, according to OCHA's [Financial Tracking Service](#), France's contribution to Uganda's humanitarian and refugee response was over \$2 million in 2018, but merely over 500,000 in 2021 and 2022 combined.

Uganda requires a lot more than praise to sustain its refugee response. Since January 2022, nearly 180,000 new refugees arrived in Uganda, mostly fleeing ongoing conflict in neighbouring South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Classified as a least developed country by the OECD and ranking 166th out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index, Uganda remains a strikingly poor country faced with fundamental economic challenges, some of which are directly linked to

the residual impacts of COVID-19, global inflation, and other external factors including the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. In that context, it is entirely unrealistic to expect Uganda to keep up with the responsibility of hosting the 1.55 million refugees currently living within its borders without substantial international support.



Source: UNHCR, June 2023.

Large refugee influxes and chronic funding shortfalls have led national services and systems to become severely overstretched, and pursuit of refugees' self-reliance increasingly challenging. Although access to plots of land was initially intended to ensure better livelihoods and food security outcomes for refugees, land is becoming scarce and less fertile, and does not offer an adequate basis for self-reliance for all. Similarly, refugees' equal access to education services has not translated into improved outcomes for refugee children who currently face serious challenges. Recent assessments showed that for each classroom there is an average of 131 children, one teacher is available for every 73 children, and they are sitting on the floor or sharing desks with up to six other pupils. If urgent funding is not mobilised for the refugee response, projections show that the teacher-student ration could reach 1 in 90 in 2023. In settlements across the West Nile region, parents increasingly send their children alone to urban centres so that they can get an education. As a result, not only are there grave protection risks for large numbers of unaccompanied children, but urban schools are in turn becoming overcrowded.

In recent years, the Ugandan government and its implementing partners have consistently raised the alarm that funding available is not of the scale or predictability required to allow them to plan for and implement an effective response. Even though the policy landscape itself is very generous, conditions for many refugees are grim, with their most essential needs often not being met.

## Refugees unable to cope

Increasingly limited funding has had an important impact on humanitarian organisations' operations and pushed them to make difficult decisions, such as cutting back support in certain areas or focusing primarily on the most vulnerable people. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) has had to undertake a heavy prioritisation exercise this year. As a result, it was decided that starting July 2023, over 80 percent of refugees across all settlements will receive only 30 percent of food and cash assistance needed to cover basic needs, while new arrivals will only be guaranteed a full food ration for the first three months of their arrival in the settlements. In a country where [evidence](#) shows that the majority of refugees rely on humanitarian aid to access food, those funding cuts have devastating impacts.

In settlements across the country, refugees consistently report not having enough food. A recent [assessment](#) by REACH of refugees' living conditions in Rhino Camp and Nakivale Camp found that the large majority of households in the two settlements (74% and 90% respectively) reported eating less than in their home country. Levels of malnutrition among children are on the rise in settlements, with 40% refugee children being anaemic and 7% of children aged six months to five years identified as being acutely malnourished by humanitarian partners.

The recent surge in new arrivals means that many reception and transit centres are overcrowded, and it can take months before refugees are able to move onwards to settlements. Many informal settlements appeared around transit centres, where living

conditions are incredibly poor. Refugees and asylum seekers are forced to leave under makeshift camps and struggle to access safe and clean water, sanitation facilities, and other essential services.

The starkest illustration of this situation is probably the growing number of people leaving the settlements, sometimes soon after they arrived. Refugees often move to urban centres in Uganda – where they are not officially recognised as refugees - in the hope of finding opportunities to provide for their families. Increasingly, some of them also decide to return to South Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where violence continues to occur on a large scale and chronic shortages of essential services are still a reality. When asked why they decided to leave, many people report not being able to survive in Uganda. A rise in the occurrence of negative coping mechanisms such as forced marriage and child labour in settlements is another testimony to the deteriorating situation. Harrowingly, we have also seen the number of attempted and completed suicide attempts within settlements more than [quadruple](#) between 2018 and 2022.

Unsurprisingly, the situation is particularly dire for women and children, who make up the majority of the refugee population in Uganda. Without adequate funding, they are at increased risk of gender-based violence, trafficking, and exploitation. Yet humanitarian partners estimate that over half of children who have been exposed to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation are not receiving support due to staffing gaps in case management services and alternative care services.

The refugee crisis is also impacting host communities. Although historically relationships between refugees and their hosts were harmonious and seen as mutually beneficial, competition over resources is becoming increasingly rife and tensions are increasing between large refugee populations and the local community.



– Ntakarutimana Jeanmarie, from Burundi.

*“When I arrived at Nakivale Refugee Settlement almost 8 years ago, I was full of hope and dreamt of finding safety and a better future. At first, life was fine, but as time went by, I became painfully aware of the reality of the conditions in the settlement. And now the challenges we face every day make it difficult for me to imagine a sustainable life here.*”

*The cash assistance I used to receive was a livelihood for my family that allowed us to meet our basic needs and keep our lives somewhat manageable. It allowed us to buy food, pay medical expenses, and meet other vital needs. Now that this support has been discontinued, we are on the verge of despair. Many of us have relied on cash assistance as our only means of subsistence. Without it, we no longer have a stable source of income, making our already precarious situation even worse. It feels like we have been abandoned, outcasts left to face the overwhelming challenges of survival alone. Now I have no choice but to leave Nakivale.”*

## A great international cooperation failure?

*“The response from the international community is worrying us and this might make us consider changing our refugee policy.”*

— Hilary Onek, Uganda Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees

When UN Member States unanimously adopted the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018, Uganda saw a shimmer of hope. The GCR was described as a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing that recognised that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation. It built on the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the annexed Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). As a global model for refugee hosting and integration, Uganda was chosen as one of the first countries to roll-out the CRRF and embraced the GCR as a tool to call on the international community to support its refugee response.

Years after those historic commitments were made, promises were not kept. The global deprioritisation of Uganda’s refugee response started in 2017, when the Uganda government and UNHCR hosted a *Solidarity Summit on Refugees* to jump start the implementation of the CRRF. While the Summit was well attended, the international community failed to mobilise enough funds to meaningfully support Uganda’s refugee response plans. In total, only \$350 million of the \$2 billion requested funds were

pledged. As of June 2023, this financing gap continues to threaten the very existence of the “Uganda model” for hosting refugees.

The failure to cooperate has also happened at an operational level. In refugee-hosting districts in Uganda, humanitarian actors – including donors and implementing organisations – are often the only ones present, leaving a huge gap in terms of transition towards sustainable development. As the humanitarian community tries to fill this gap, funding available for addressing urgent needs become increasingly stretched thin. It is vital that development actors – currently focusing all their efforts on areas that do not host refugees – increase their presence in refugee-hosting communities and support this crucial transition towards sustainable development for both refugees and host communities.

If additional and adequate resources do not come in, the Ugandan government could have no other choice than to scale down their support to refugees and revise existing policy commitments towards hosting and protecting refugees, including the ones made under the CRRF and GCR. Worryingly, Uganda would not be the first country to do so. In 2018, Tanzania blamed a lack of global financial support for the refugee response for pulling out of the CRRF entirely. Today, we face a real risk of seeing Uganda following in the footsteps of Tanzania or other countries in the region with less favourable policies towards refugees. That is a message that was voiced by government officials time and again in recent years, and would not only undo years of positive work in welcoming refugees, but also threaten the credibility and sustainability of the GCR as a tool for international cooperation.



## The opportunity: recommendations to donors

The upcoming **Global Refugee Forum** in December 2023 presents an opportunity for the international community to revive commitments to support Uganda in its efforts to become a trailblazer for refugee integration, and reaffirm that the “Uganda model” is one that other countries around the world can trust, learn from and be inspired from. Here are concrete ways for the international community to do so:

1

**Global donors should prepare financial pledges consisting of both humanitarian funding and development cooperation substantial enough to fully fund the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan for 2022-2025, in line with their responsibility-sharing commitments.**

- Traditionally large donors to the Uganda refugee response such as the US, Germany, Denmark, and the European Commission should increase their financial commitments while taking the lead in garnering more support for the Uganda refugee response from less or non-traditional donors such as China, South Korea, development banks, and the private sector, including through the co-organisation of a Solidarity Summit for Uganda in the margins of this year’s Global Refugee Forum.
- Development donors, including multilateral development banks and institutional development donors, such as AFD or DANIDA for example, should recognise the need to support both refugees and host communities to achieve sustainable development in protracted forced displacement situations, and increase their share of long-term financing to refugee-hosting areas in Uganda.
- Humanitarian and development donors should enhance coordination to improve the balance and complementarity of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding funding flows to the refugee response in Uganda.

2

**Donors should improve the flexibility and predictability of funding made available for the Uganda refugee response.**

This is crucial to allow the Ugandan government and implementing organisations to address urgent needs while also building resilience and working towards durable solutions for both refugees and host communities.

Links to other relevant information:

NRC’s work in Uganda: <https://www.nrc.no/countries/africa/uganda/>