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Volunteering by Displaced Youth in Uganda: Livelihoods, Skills, Employability and Inequalities

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Abstract: This chapter explores the role of volunteering in the lives of young refugees in Uganda. It analyses findings from 'Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda' (RYVU), a large interdisciplinary research project aimed at developing a critical understanding of volunteering by young refugees that builds from their voices and experiences. The chapter outlines the mixed-methods collaborative approach of the project and explores the relationships between volunteering and the livelihoods of displaced young people, how volunteering impacts their skills, employability, and the inequalities they experience, and the roles that volunteering plays in shaping social connections and community development efforts. It concludes by highlighting the implications of the findings for ensuring that participation in volunteering does not increase inequalities or take advantage of displaced young people.

Keywords: Volunteering, Displacement, Livelihoods, Youth, Uganda

1. Introduction and Background

Volunteer engagement permeates different forms of civic action and humanitarian and development activities worldwide and is often framed as an altruistic practice that simultaneously delivers services to the less fortunate, as well as contributing to community development and building the skills of volunteers. However, the evidence base on who volunteers and how volunteering impacts different individuals and communities has tended to focus on international volunteers, or volunteering experiences within Europe and North America (Laurie/Baillie Smith 2017; McLennan 2014; Enjolras 2021). This means there is limited research to date on volunteering experiences *by* – rather than *for* – vulnerable groups in the global South, particularly displaced populations. Refugees and asylum-seekers are frequently portrayed by dominant humanitarian narratives as passive recipients of aid, with limited agency and citizenship. Reversing this narrative to focus on refugee volunteering echoes emerging attempts to decolonise and decentre global North organisations and capacities in volunteer and migration studies (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) and to localise humanitarian governance (Pincock/Betts/Easton-Calabria 2021).

The 'Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda' (RYVU) research project contributes to these debates by analysing the lived experiences of refugee youth volunteers in Uganda to reveal the multi-dimensional and diverse meanings of volunteering for young refugees. Uganda is home to over 1.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers, most of them under the age of 24 years old and is currently one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world (UNHCR 2023). Despite the relatively progressive refugee protection regime in the country (Uganda Refugees Act 2006), young refugees often remain excluded from formal education and opportunities to develop their skills and have limited access to sources of stable and consistent income due to socioeconomic inequities.

In this context, RYVU research shows high levels of refugee participation in diverse forms of volunteering, a practice increasingly identified with building skills and enhancing employability. Yet, project findings also reveal the complex and sometimes contradictory relationships that exist between

volunteering and refugee livelihoods, employment, and inequalities. This provides new insights that are particularly relevant to understanding the on the ground realities of volunteering in humanitarian and development settings. It also offers a unique evidence base for students, academics, humanitarian organisations and policymakers to draw on to improve both conceptualisations of volunteering, as well as policy and practice around volunteering amongst refugees.

In the next sections, the chapter will provide a brief overview of the study's methodology, highlighting the importance of actively engaging with refugee youth to shape the project's approaches. We will then explore four key themes that capture some of the project's key findings. These findings challenge established thinking on volunteering by identifying the diverse roles of refugee youth volunteers in urban and rural settings in Uganda and revealing the multi-dimensional and diverse impacts of volunteering on their livelihoods and the inequalities they experience. The chapter concludes by identifying recommended further resources addressing some of the issues arising from the research as well, as well as identifying some key issues and questions for stakeholders working in this field.

2. Methodology in a Snapshot: Conducting Research *with* Refugees

From 2019 to 2022, the RYVU research project worked closely with refugee communities in Uganda to capture their experiences of volunteering in four sites: Kampala City and the refugee settlements of Bidibidi, Nakivale and Rwamwanja. The study was funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and involved two universities in the UK (Northumbria University and Loughborough University) and two universities in Uganda (Uganda Martyrs University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology). The project received full ethical clearance from Northumbria University Ethics Committee, the Mildmay Research Ethics Committee (MUREC), and the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST); it also received the approval and support of the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) to access the refugee settlements. In total, the project involved 3,862 participants and stakeholders, including young and adult refugees[1], employers, government officials, and staff from humanitarian and development agencies and community-based organisations. It adopted a mixed-methods approach including a large-scale survey for youth refugees (3,053 respondents); an online survey for employers (78 respondents); 80 qualitative interviews; and 20 participants conducting participatory photography, also known as photovoice. Over the three years of activities, the team also actively engaged with national and international partners and stakeholders in co-analysis during policy-focused workshops involving over 600 participants.

Importantly, the research was supported from its inception by local 'Youth Advisory Boards' formed by young representatives who shared their expertise and provided valuable guidance to the team throughout all project phases. The researchers worked closely with the Boards and wider stakeholders to operationalise a definition of volunteering that reflected young refugees' own ideas and experiences, rather than those of donors and global North scholars. Accordingly, in the RYVU project, volunteering was defined as:

> Any time spent or expertise provided with the purpose of contributing to the refugee youth's community or other communities. This can happen occasionally or regularly, through their own initiative or with organisations (such as community groups, NGOs or UN agencies), and it can be unpaid or for a per diem or other incentive.

The research findings provide new insights into the scale and complexity of refugee volunteering which will be discussed in the following section.

[1] The project involved refugee participants, particularly youth aged 15-24 years, from the four main nationalities present in Uganda: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and South Sudan.

3. From Livelihoods to Friendships: Unpacking Volunteering Experiences of Young Refugees

The RYVU research particularly highlights the multiple roles volunteering plays in young refugees' lives. The data revealed that 70 percent of the displaced youth we surveyed in Uganda participate in some form of volunteering, and that nearly half of them come from families whose incomes fall below the international poverty line. In this context of widespread vulnerability and, at the same time, high levels of volunteer participation, the project conceptualised the involvement of young refugees both in 'everyday volunteering' activities (e.g. peer-to-peer support in their communities, often unpaid) as well as in 'programmed volunteering' (e.g. activities managed by organisations, often for a per diem or other incentive) (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a).

While the practice of volunteering is often associated with acts of kindness towards those in need, evidence also shows how the boundaries between *work* and *volunteering* are blurred and how there are different levels of access to volunteering and uneven financial compensation for volunteering. This deepens current debates around the impacts of remuneration on volunteering (Baillie Smith et al. 2022b) and highlights how volunteering can be entangled with local inequalities that then negatively affect the efforts at community development that volunteering may be setting out to promote (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a). The project's findings show how:

- Volunteering supports young refugees' strategies for livelihoods and work by providing an income for many, but can lead to exploitation and inequality;
- Refugees can develop skills and employability through volunteering, but youth face barriers to participation that need to be addressed;
- Volunteering enables young refugees to contribute to the development of refugee and host communities and the relationships between them when adequately supported;
- Volunteering helps young refugees make new friendships and connections when navigating new environments.

The next sub-sections will explore each of these four thematic areas using key highlights from the research findings.

3.1. Livelihoods and Work

The project's findings show that whilst high levels of vulnerability do not prevent refugee youth from volunteering, patterns of remuneration are critical to understanding the roles of volunteering in young refugees' lives. Despite the Ugandan refugee regime formally permitting refugees to work, the realities on the ground negatively affect the prospects of sustained refugee employment (Ahimbisibwe 2020). Therefore, the remuneration that comes with some forms of volunteering plays a central role in local livelihoods strategies, leading to the perception of volunteering not only *as a pathway to work* but also *as work* by many:

> '…people are looking at [volunteering] as an opportunity to gain experience, to earn income, an opportunity to get even skills, training … I really look at it as another form of employment for the youth.' (Male Government Official, Kampala City)

Earning money and getting a job ranked highly amongst the main motivations for volunteering by survey respondents in a context where humanitarian and development organisations were perceived by stakeholder workshop participants as the main providers of volunteering opportunities for refugees. These organisations often rely on volunteers to deliver their services in exchange for some form of reward; **Figure 1** shows an example of a food distribution activity involving volunteers.

Figure 1. Photovoice material from Bidibidi.



‘They are at the distribution point where the volunteers are there, and the staff are also there. The volunteers are trying to pull those tents out, they're trying to help.’

Source: Photo and quote by young male participant from South Sudan based in Bidibidi settlement.

The research reveals the importance of financial compensation in shaping how volunteering happens and the ways it is perceived, echoing wider research that shows how the income generated through volunteering becomes a source of livelihoods for volunteers (Baillie Smith et al. 2022b). This means that the diverse and often short-term institutional engagement of refugees as volunteers can lead to hierarchies, inequalities and exploitation, especially when the terms and conditions for volunteering are unclear and opportunities do not take into account of volunteers’ own needs and expectations in the longer-term (Okech et al. 2021; Turyamureeba et al. 2021).

3.2. Participation, Skills and Employability

The second thematic area from the research challenges the presumed linear relationship between volunteering, skills and employment. Whilst volunteering is often associated with building skills, the evidence shows how volunteers not only gain *skills from* volunteering but often also need particular *skills for* accessing volunteering activities (Tukundane/Kanyandago 2021). The main types of skills that young refugees reported using in their volunteering activities are community engagement skills, translation, marketing, agricultural and teaching skills. Volunteering in this context tends to be seen as a ‘win-win’ situation, providing both skills acquisition for young refugees and service-delivery for humanitarian and development organisations (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a). Yet, in many cases there are skills requirements for refugees to be able to volunteer in the first place, hindering access to volunteering opportunities for those who do not already possess certain competences, or sufficient evidence of them (Tukundane/Kanyandago 2021). Moreover, access to volunteering is also determined by refugees’ physical and/or online presence in spaces where such opportunities are advertised:

> ‘Only those who have the capacity to keep coming to the operations areas everyday will get the opportunities, while those who cannot move much will lose out on that.’ (International NGO Staff, based in Kampala City)

When it comes to employability prospects, the research highlights there are particular challenges faced by refugees in accessing opportunities, but also that accessing them may not increase employability because volunteering does not necessarily address the wider barriers that are faced by young refugees, such as the lack of access to sustained employment:

> 'In fact, we don't have more connections [between young refugees' volunteering and employment trajectories] because we do not have the links to those employment things. So right now in the refugee camps that's why you see a number of people are not employed.' (Young male participant from South Sudan, based in Bidibidi settlement).

3.3. Refugee Community Development

The third theme from the project reveals how volunteering is not separate from (the absence of) community development efforts but is rather entangled with these processes and the challenges faced by young refugees in Uganda. There is evidence that volunteer engagement can enable young people to contribute to the development of their refugee communities, including through fostering connection, resolving disputes and supporting community organisations and groups. Young refugees also volunteer with their host communities, supporting them and playing central roles in shaping relationships between refugees and hosts, as shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2. Photovoice material from Kampala.



'This tells a story of refugees being able to bring support to other community members through distribution of food items to both refugees and Ugandans, which is also done voluntarily just to support the community members.'

Source: Photo and quote by young male participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, based in Kampala City, Uganda.

However, it cannot be assumed that volunteering will *necessarily* strengthen refugees' self-reliance and community development efforts if not enough attention is paid to the inequalities and hierarchies that can emerge in this process (Turyamureeba et al. 2021). The evidence points towards the importance of action from stakeholders working with volunteers to enhance support mechanisms and policy frameworks that can increase transparency and avoid discrimination of refugee volunteers:

> '…if my documents are equated, I also need to be like Ugandans… we should be paid equally and as volunteers we should be given equal support.' (Young female participant from South Sudan, based in Bidibidi settlement)

This means that volunteering is not always oriented towards refugee community development when the engagement of refugees as volunteers responds to diverse and disconnected institutional agendas. Hence, context-specific support to refugee-led initiatives is needed to enable young refugee volunteers to contribute to the growth of both refugee and host communities as well as the connections between them in sustainable ways.

3.3. Friendships and Connections

Finally, the research highlights the roles of volunteering in facilitating connections and friendships, especially as young people are learning how to deal with trauma whilst (re)building their lives in a new setting. Volunteer participation has been identified elsewhere as a source of well-being and a key part of the coping strategies for young refugees to strengthen their sense of belonging (Carlton 2016). RYVU data echoes this argument by showing how the coming together of displaced young people through volunteering can create friendly spaces which have value in itself:

> 'One of the impacts of volunteering is getting new friends and having fun, although we are refugees and some might have no jobs and good lives, we all still have hope, and we discuss with each other about future plans.' (Young male participant from Somalia, based in Kampala city)

Hence, volunteering is not only about the provision of services, but also about friendships and conviviality, which are different pathways to development. At another level, participants explained how volunteering helped them navigate new environments and establish social connections and exposure to further work opportunities, particularly upon their arrival to Uganda:

> '[I had] the volunteering opportunity with [International NGO 1] and this exposed me to get many more connections and friends, and then from there I joined [Government agency] as a translator, so I worked there for some years until of recent when I left and joined my current volunteer work with [International NGO 2] still as a translator.' (Adult female participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, based in Nakivale settlement)

On the one hand, this shows the potential of volunteering as a means for refugees to build social capital and access professional opportunities. But, on the other hand, this also needs to be understood with care both in relation to the inequalities experienced above, and in terms of the importance of wider strategies and action for integration which volunteering itself cannot solve.

5. Concluding Remarks

Working with young refugees in Uganda, the RYVU project has built a new evidence base on the role and significance of volunteering in young refugees' lives. Whilst volunteer engagement is often presumed to be homogeneously positive, the evidence discussed in this chapter reveals that volunteering experiences amongst displaced youth are multi-dimensional and diverse, showing how this can also create or accentuate inequalities across individual volunteers and forms of volunteering, with varied levels of access to opportunities and financial compensation (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a).

The project identified two main areas of attention for academics and practitioners exploring voluntary engagement amongst displaced populations. First, there is a need to recognise volunteering as a critical part of the livelihood strategies of young refugees and, with that, the responsibilities that come both from engaging refugees as volunteers as well as understanding the meanings of volunteering amongst displaced populations (Okech et al. 2021; Turyamureeba et al. 2021). Second, it is important to ensure that the label of volunteering is not used to avoid responsibility in terms of the risks of exploitation and exacerbating vulnerabilities in this process (Baillie Smith et al. 2022a). To conclude, the evidence generated by this research calls for stakeholders working with volunteers to address

barriers to refugee participation, provide recognition and development of young refugees' skills, and promote volunteering in ways that reflect the realities of skills acquisition and employability amongst refugees.

Recommended Readings (English only)

- Baillie Smith, Matt; Mills, Sarah; Okech, Moses; Fadel, Bianca (2022): Uneven Geographies of Youth Volunteering in Uganda: Multi-Scalar Discourses and Practices. In: Geoforum, vol. 134, pp. 30–39, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.05.006
    - *This paper explores how and why different ideas and practices of volunteering have contrasting impacts on youth inclusion, inequality and opportunity in global South settings. The paper highlights what happens when ideas of volunteering from the global North 'land' in the global South, and open ups discussion about the ways power shapes what counts as volunteering, the importance of approaches that recognise its multiple forms, and that there is significant unevenness in the ways different ideas and practices of volunteering are recognised and resourced.*
- Baillie Smith, Matt; Thomas, Nisha; Hazeldine, Shaun (2021): Rethinking Volunteering and Cosmopolitanism: Beyond Individual Mobilities and Personal Transformations. In: Geopolitics, vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 1353–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1666106
    - *This paper helps challenge the idea of 'international' (or national/local) volunteering, exploring how it is formed through assemblages of bodies, ideas, languages, histories and power relations that may emerge through and across national borders. Through this, the paper expands established debates around the relationships between volunteering, ideas of cosmopolitanism (understood in terms of both openness to difference and global citizenship) and development.*
- Blerk, Lorraine van; Shand, Wayne; Prazeres, Laura; Bukenya, Badru; Essaid, Aida A.; Hunter, Janine; Ibrahim, Rawan W.; Kasiryem, Rogers (2021): Youth Transitions in Protracted Crises: Conceptualising the 'rupture' of Refugees' Pathways to Adulthood in Uganda and Jordan. In: Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 315-330, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12500
    - *This paper conceptualises youth transitions to adulthood for young refugees growing up in situations of prolonged displacement and conflict, suggesting that this situation can have a rupturing effect on their capabilities and aspirations for the future. This reading prompts debates on how to better understand the impact of this 'rupture' on those affected by major global challenges during their formative years of life, and the types of support needed to ensure their efforts to build adult lives are strengthened.*

Data Access Statement

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