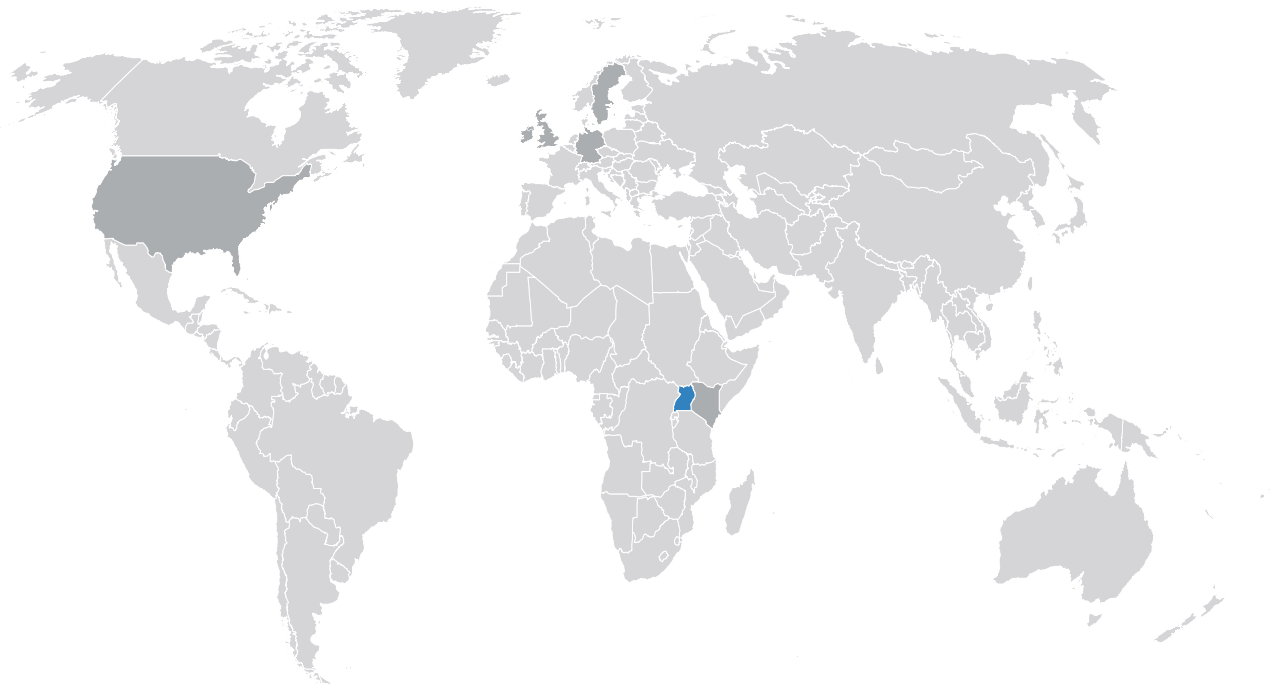# Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Uganda country profile

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Contents

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Uganda, recent trends in migration, refugee and asylum patterns, public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. This is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at engaging public and private investors interested in migration and displacement.

Executive summary

Uganda hosts a much higher proportion of refugees and other migrants relative to its population than other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Over 99% are from other African countries and almost 90% from Uganda's immediate neighbours. Approximately three quarters of this overall population are refugees and asylum-seekers. Uganda currently hosts the fourth largest refugee population in the world, following an unprecedented rise in numbers over the past decade due to renewed conflict in South Sudan and, more recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Over time, the country's approach to refugee hosting has shifted from being heavily restrictive towards becoming – at least in theory – one of the most progressive in the world. Since 2006 Ugandan legislation has permitted refugees freedom of movement and the right to work, establish a business, own property and access national services, including primary and secondary education and healthcare. Most of Uganda's refugees live in rural settlements, where they are provided with services alongside host communities and allocated plots of land to farm. Yet, despite Uganda's progressive approach, various challenges have emerged in practice – from overly centralised decision-making and inconsistent enforcement, to practical barriers to fulfilling refugees' rights.

International and regional private sector actors are showing increased interest in investments in Uganda's refugee-hosting areas. However, with a few exceptions, and in contrast to other regional players such as Kenya, this has so far largely been limited to small-scale initiatives. Despite some promising examples, many private sector initiatives have suffered from persistent

challenges that have undermined the success of Uganda's self-reliance model and remain largely unaddressed – namely, that refugees are mostly hosted in remote, under-developed areas without sufficient infrastructure or market links.

There are several parallel narratives surrounding refugees and other migrants in Uganda:

- **Uganda as a model refugee host:** Uganda has long been held up by international actors as an example of good practice for refugee hosting. However, international praise has not always been matched with tangible funding commitments to help sustain Uganda's progressive model, despite the government's calls for greater international assistance in the face of rising refugee numbers.
- **A narrative of welcome:** Uganda's government has advanced a welcoming narrative both domestically and internationally, grounded in Pan-Africanism and the idea of helping 'brothers' in need. The government has often espoused an understanding of refugees' plight – with many Ugandans, including senior government officials, having experienced displacement at some point in their lives. Such messages are broadly echoed by wider actors, including Uganda's media, who are a primary information source for citizens.
- **Communities under pressure:** There are concerns that welcoming narratives in Uganda may be under pressure following the sharp growth of the country's refugee population. While it is likely that the predominant narrative reaching Ugandans remains centred on humanitarian concerns, polling suggests that a significant proportion of Ugandans have heard narratives that

position refugees as a threat to security or that they are creating pressures on government spending and resources.

- **Skills and labour market integration:** Distinct narratives are also emerging at the local level, among municipalities and civil society actors, who place a greater emphasis on refugees' skills and labour market integration. These actors have highlighted the need for greater local-level support to bring the government's progressive politics into reality.

Polling on public perceptions of refugees and other migrants in Uganda is extremely limited. However, where data is available it suggests that attitudes broadly reflect prevailing narratives. Namely, that Ugandans welcome foreign nationals and view refugee-hosting as helping those in need, but that concerns, particularly around pressures on the country's natural and financial resources, are gaining some traction in public opinion. Smaller studies in refugees' immediate host communities corroborate this picture, overall documenting high levels of peaceful coexistence. However, there are indications of increasingly challenging dynamics in the country's north – where refugee numbers have risen most substantially in recent years and pressures on resources are highest – including episodes of intercommunal tension and violence.

There are various opportunities for different actors seeking to engage with narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Uganda; from government at all levels, civil society and the private sector, to regional and international organisations:

1. **Invest in polling data to better understand Ugandans' attitudes towards refugees and other migrants,** through their more consistent inclusion in existing global, regional and national datasets, alongside support for more detailed national studies. This should include efforts to understand whether perceptions have been influenced by the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

2. **Ensure that international praise for Uganda's progressive approach is matched with tangible commitments to address pressures that may put positive narratives at risk,** including as part of commitments under the Global Compact on Refugees. Efforts to ease pressures should consider any impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. **Build on existing positive narratives to support a pragmatic national conversation around refugees and refugee hosting, with a focus on development benefits.** Narratives in Uganda are positive, largely rooted in empathy and the desire to help those in need. However, discussion of the benefits of refugee hosting has not been a prominent feature of national discourse. Greater domestic understanding and discussion of such benefits, alongside steps to make the most of them, could provide a counterbalance in future should concerns around pressures grow more pronounced. Those with first-hand experience of such advantages – particularly local communities, municipalities and civil society – can play an important role promoting tangible benefits.

1   Introduction

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of policies in Uganda concerning refugees and other migrants, recent trends, public perceptions, and international and national narratives. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation, which aims to engage public and private investors interested in migration and displacement. The briefing is based on a review of available literature and polling, as well as 13 key informant interviews – with staff from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the United Nations (UN), donors, and business and civil society actors in Uganda (via Skype) and at the regional level in Nairobi. This research was carried out before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and so is unable to provide a full analysis of its impacts, although some reference is made where particularly relevant.

This report was published alongside a profile exploring the Kenyan context and comparisons are drawn between the two where possible. This brief uses the terminology 'refugee and other migrants' in reference to the broad group of all foreign nationals in Uganda, with the term 'refugees' used when referring only to this more circumscribed group. Given refugees' predominance in the Ugandan context, this brief focuses more heavily on the latter.

2   Uganda's history hosting refugees and other migrants

Uganda has long hosted refugees and other migrants from neighbouring countries, partly spurred by ethnic ties that have transcended the country's porous borders (IOM, 2013).[1] The arbitrary drawing of colonial frontiers has meant that many communities historically straddle borderlands; the Madi, Kakwa and Acholi people, for example, are found on both sides of the border between northern Uganda and South Sudan (Vemuru et al., 2016).

Over the years, the country has hosted populations of – predominantly African – labour migrants, in line with African Union (AU) and East African Community (EAC) commitments towards free movement of workers in East Africa and the continent as a whole. However, the country's labour immigration history remains relatively limited compared to other regional hubs like Kenya; emigration from Uganda to seek work has, to date, been a far more significant trend.[2] Uganda has more commonly featured as a transit country for those heading to Kenya or Tanzania (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018) rather than as destination.

In contrast, Uganda's history as a refugee host is expansive; it has a long history of hosting refugees and a strong reputation for progressive, open-door policies. Over the years, many of Uganda's leaders have themselves been displaced, and there is substantial common understanding among the population of what it means to be a refugee (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018).[3] While southern Sudanese moved freely to Uganda to work in the cotton industry in the 1950s (Bascom, cited in Merkx, 2000), refugees began arriving shortly after Sudan gained independence in 1956, many of whom spent much of the 1960s in exile. During this period, Uganda also received tens of thousands of Rwandans, as well as Congolese, Kenyans, Somalis and Ethiopians (Lomo et al., 2001; Kaiser, 2010; Hovil, 2018). More Sudanese arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, fleeing the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005). By 1993, Uganda was hosting almost 300,000 refugees, a population that had almost doubled since 1990 (Migration Data Portal, 2020).

Throughout the 2000s refugee numbers declined – to a low of 140,000 in 2009 – with the 2005 peace agreement in Sudan, the repatriation of Rwandan refugees and increasing stability in the DRC and Burundi. However, the situation changed again in 2013 with renewed conflict in South Sudan, forcing many South Sudanese who had repatriated to return to Uganda. This influx, which picked up pace in 2016–2017, was much larger than in previous decades. By the end of 2017, over one million people had arrived in Uganda from South Sudan (see Figure 1), with Uganda's overall refugee population increasing almost tenfold between 2011 and 2017. In 2018, following new outbreaks of conflict in DRC, a further 119,919 Congolese refugees sought safety in Uganda (UNHCR, 2019a).
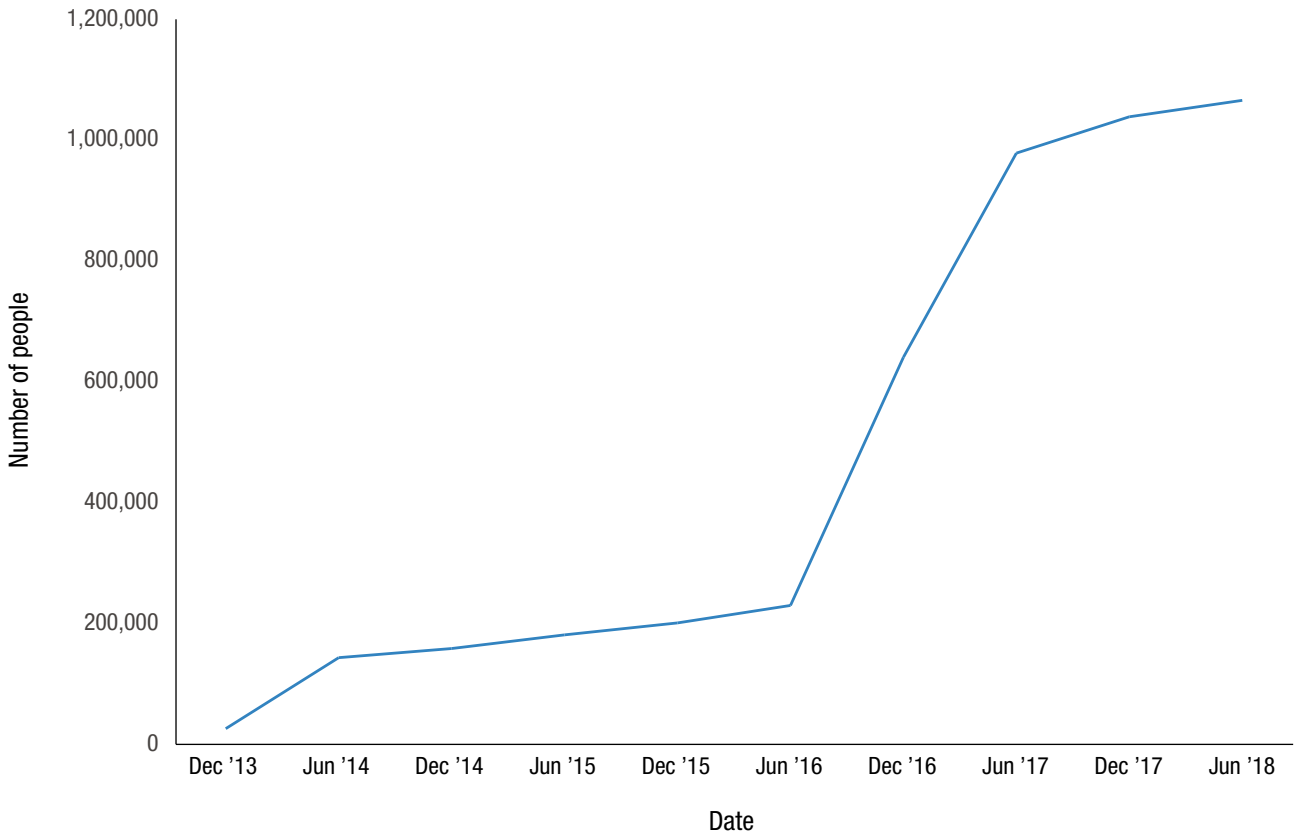
From the 1960s onwards, Uganda's approach to refugee hosting shifted from being heavily restrictive towards becoming one of the most

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1   This profile focuses on cross-border movements. However, Uganda is also home to significant to internal movement of its population. Decades of conflict in the north between the government of Yoweri Museveni and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) displaced 1.7 million people in Acholi region (IOM, 2013). By 2000 there were an estimated 640,000 internally displaced people in Uganda (Hovil, 2018). Internal migration is also common, largely in search of work. Migrants tend to head for urban centres or sugar and tea plantations. Migration is also an integral part of the agro-pastoralist Karamajong livelihood system (IOM, 2013).

2   Labour emigration is common, with one out of every 1,134 Ugandans migrating every year (DTDA, 2014). According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey (Msafiri and Makanga, 2019), 34% of Ugandans have considered emigration to other countries, although far fewer are actually making plans to leave.
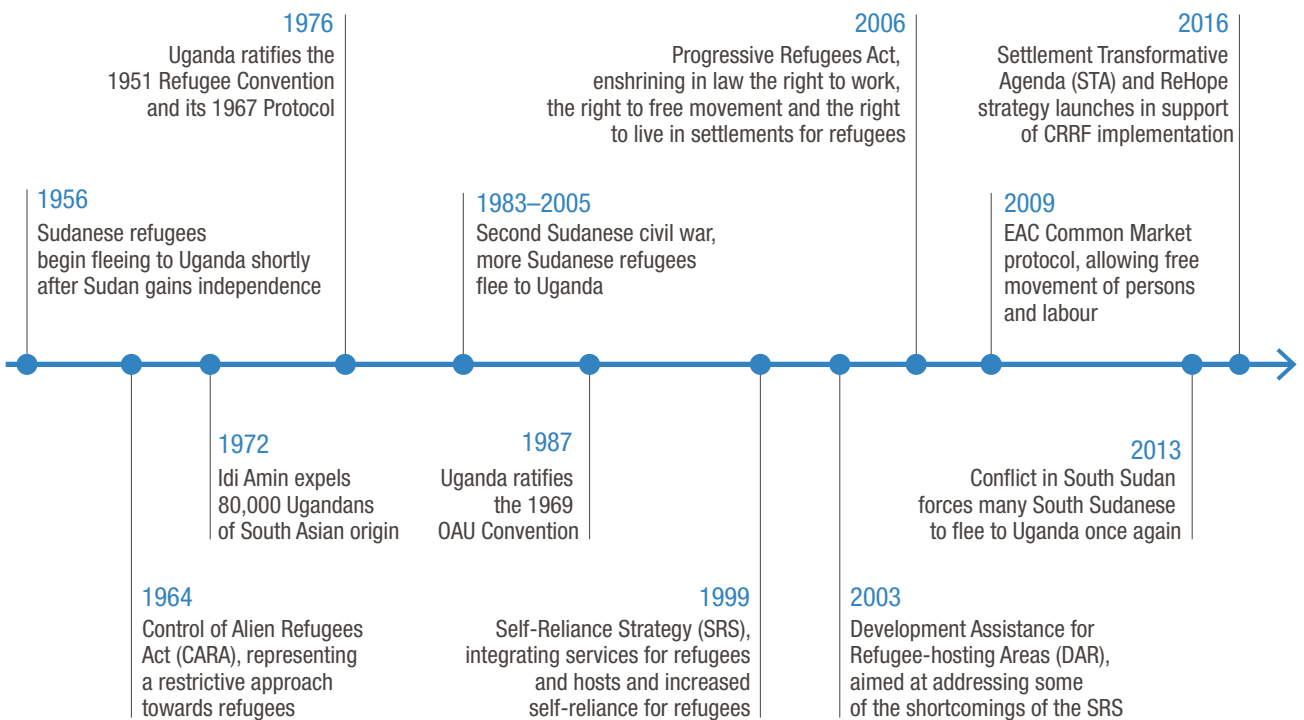
3   Many were displaced in 1972, when Idi Amin expelled 80,000 Ugandans of South Asian origin, and more left during the 1970s and 1980s, fleeing conflict and political instability (Orozco, 2008).

Figure 1   Number of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda

Source: Coggio (2018)

Figure 2   Timeline: refugees and other migrants in Uganda

1976
Uganda ratifies the
1951 Refugee Convention
and its 1967 Protocol

2006
Progressive Refugees Act,
enshrining in law the right to work,
the right to free movement and the right
to live in settlements for refugees

2016
Settlement Transformative
Agenda (STA) and ReHope
strategy launches in support
of CRRF implementation

1956
Sudanese refugees
begin fleeing to Uganda shortly
after Sudan gains independence

1983–2005
Second Sudanese civil war,
more Sudanese refugees
flee to Uganda

2009
EAC Common Market
protocol, allowing free
movement of persons
and labour

1972
Idi Amin expels
80,000 Ugandans
of South Asian origin

1987
Uganda ratifies
the 1969
OAU Convention

2013
Conflict in South Sudan
forces many South Sudanese
to flee to Uganda once again

1964
Control of Alien Refugees
Act (CARA), representing
a restrictive approach
towards refugees

1999
Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS),
integrating services for refugees
and hosts and increased
self-reliance for refugees

2003
Development Assistance for
Refugee-hosting Areas (DAR),
aimed at addressing some
of the shortcomings of the SRS

progressive in the world, albeit under increasing pressure in recent years as numbers have increased (Figure 2). Uganda's refugee policies originally derived from the restrictive Control of Alien Refugees Act (CARA) of 1964. The Act was inconsistent with international standards on refugee protection, failing to set clear criteria for refugee recognition (Dryden-Peterson and Hovil, 2004; Buwa, 2006). Refugees' freedom of movement was restricted, and authorised officers were conferred with excessive powers, including to confiscate their property (Buwa, 2006). However, the Act was never fully implemented and applied mainly to mass influx situations (Hovil, 2018).

1999 marked a turning point for the government's approach, with the launch of the joint UNHCR and Ugandan government Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS), which sought to transform refugees from a 'burden' into agents of development. The policy aimed to support refugees' self-reliance by providing them with land for cultivation, while integrating services provided to refugees with those of hosts (Hovil, 2018). This approach built on Uganda's historic approach to refugee settlement, whereby since 1957 refugees in Uganda had resided in rural settlements alongside host community members. In 2003 the SRS was superseded by the 2003 Development Assistance for Refugee-hosting Areas (DAR) policy and in 2006 supplemented by new, more progressive legislation.[4] The restrictive CARA was replaced by the 2006 Refugee Act and its 2010 counterpart Refugee Regulations. The 2006 Act has been termed 'the most progressive refugee law in Africa' (UNHCR, 2018 in Crawford et al., 2019), formally allowing refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, establish a business, own property and access national services, including primary and secondary education and healthcare (UNHCR, 2019b).

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4   The 2003 DAR policy sought to remedy some of the shortfalls of the SRS, such as lack of local engagement and limited integration of refugees in national development plans (Hovil, 2018). However, fundamental problems, such as the remote locations of refugee settlements, remained unaddressed.

3   Current trends and policy approaches

3.1   Population trends

In 2019 Uganda hosted over 1.7 million refugees and other migrants (UN DESA, 2019a). This represents 3.9% of the population – much higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 3). Over 99% came from other African countries and almost 90% from Uganda's immediate neighbours (UN DESA, 2019b).

In 2019 approximately three quarters of Uganda's foreign-born population were refugees or asylum-seekers (UN DESA, 2019a). Uganda currently hosts the fourth largest refugee population in the world and the seventh largest per capita (UNHCR, 2020a). As of April 2020, UNHCR estimated that there were 1,423,740 refugees and asylum-seekers in the country (UNHCR, 2020b).[5] The majority – 880,367 – are from South Sudan, alongside 414,831 from DRC, 48,287 from Burundi and 80,255 from other countries (UNHCR, 2020b; see Figure 4).

Refugee-hosting is not distributed equally across the country. Over half (57.4%) of Uganda's refugees live within six districts in the West Nile region in the north (Adjumani, Arua, Koboko, Moyo, Lamwo and Yumbe), close to its border with South Sudan, with the remainder largely in the south-west (in Kiryandongo, Hoima, Kyegegwa, Kamwenge and Isingiro) (UNHCR, 2020b). The majority (94%) of refugees live in settlements – although recorded figures may underestimate the number of refugees living in urban areas (Crawford et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2020c).

3.2   Refugee policy: current approach and implementation

Nationally, Uganda's progressive refugee rights framework and self-reliance policies remain in place (see Box 1). In June 2020 the Ugandan government made clear its continued commitment

to the country's open door policy, even in the face of challenging circumstances, lifting border restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic to allow the entry of thousands of refugees who had fled violence in DRC (BBC, 2020).

However, while promising on paper, various challenges have been noted in the implementation of Uganda's policy framework. The centralisation of decision-making in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) means that many at the local level remain unaware of national policy-level approaches. Therefore, commitments on refugees' rights are not always upheld in practice (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018). This is exacerbated by inconsistent interpretations of policy provisions across different parts of central government, for example between the OPM and Uganda's Immigration Department, at times leading to inconsistent enforcement and confusion (Betts et al., 2016). In addition, central government support to areas hosting refugees has been channelled primarily to district levels, leaving local municipalities poorly resourced (Lozet and Easton-Calabria, 2020).

Meanwhile, Uganda's refugee self-reliance policies have failed to demonstrate clear results, with 80% of refugees living below the international poverty line (FAO and OPM, 2018; Development Pathways, 2020). This can largely be attributed to Uganda's settlement approach, whereby refugees are granted freedom and movement, as well as the right to work, but are required to reside in Uganda's rural settlements (where land is allocated) in order to access support. In practice, this means that freedom of movement is curtailed, with most refugees remaining in remote settlements where livelihood opportunities are limited (Crawford et al., 2019). The plots of land allocated – which have reduced in size in recent years with the sharp growth of Uganda's refugee population – have provided benefits in terms of cultivation for

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5   The reliability of such data has, however, has been called into question in the past, with local officials reportedly inflating numbers, registering 'ghost refugees' in urban areas and rural settlements in order to receive additional assistance (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018; URN, 2018). UNHCR has, however, conducted verification exercises, where this discrepancy in figures was revealed in 2018.

Figure 3   Refugees and other migrants as a share of the total population in Uganda, Sub-Saharan Africa and globally (2019)
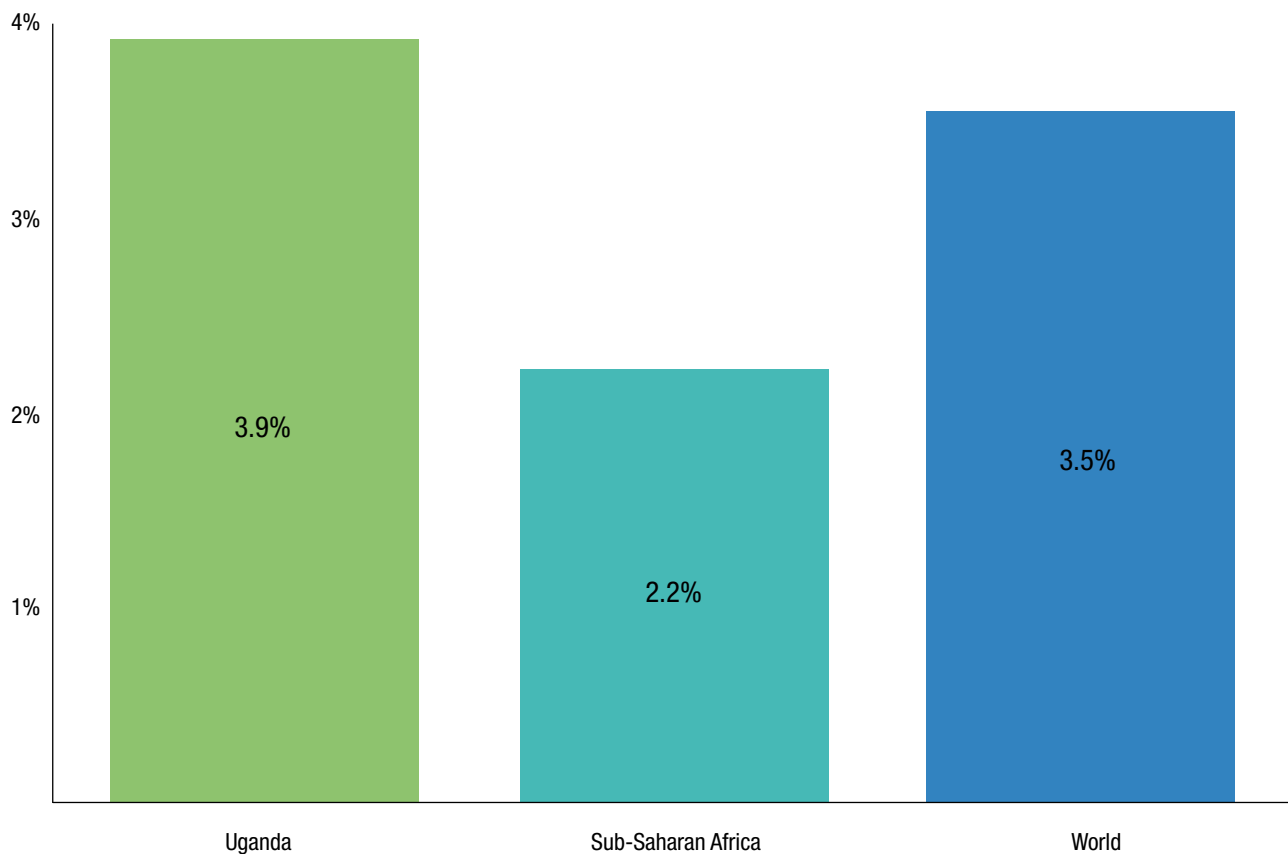
Source: UN DESA (2019a)

Figure 4   Refugees and asylum-seekers in Uganda by nationality (2019)
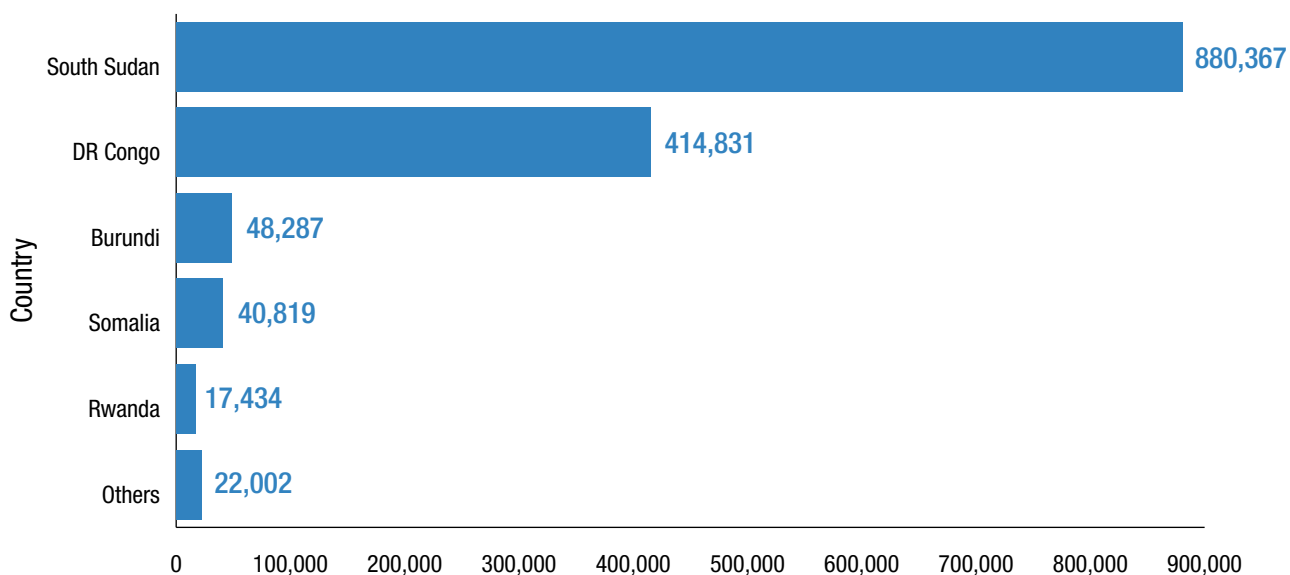
Source: UNHCR (2020b)

Box 1   Overview of Ugandan immigration, refugee and citizenship policies

Immigration policy

Uganda's immigration and border policies are codified in the 1999 Citizenship and Immigration Control Act (amended in 2009), which is implemented by the National Citizenship and Immigration Board and the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control (DCIC), within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (IOM, 2018).

In 2009, Uganda adopted the EAC Common Market protocol allowing the free movement of people and labour (IOM, 2013) and has since permitted visa-free entry for citizens of EAC Partner States – Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania – with work permit fees also waived (DCI, 2017; ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018).[1] For citizens of states not party to these, or other bilateral exemptions, visas are available for those wishing to invest, study or seek employment in the country (IOM, 2018). All migrant workers must possess a work permit, although EAC citizens planning to work in Uganda for less 90 days can do so with a 'special pass' (DCI, n.d.). Work permits are available under nine sector-specific categories, including mining, agricultural investment and manufacturing.

Asylum and refugee policy

Uganda is a signatory to various international and regional frameworks concerning refugees. The country ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol in 1976, and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention in 1987. Uganda's current national legislation derives from the 2006 Refugee Act, which guarantees refugees' access to social services, right to work and freedom of movement. However, as outlined below, many of these progressive provisions are not fully realised in practice.

South Sudanese and Congolese refugees are granted prima facie refugee status upon arrival in Uganda. Those from other countries of origin must apply for individual Refugee Status Determination (RSD), administered by Uganda's Refugee Eligibility Committee (UNHCR, 2019b). Identification documents are relatively easy to access for refugees (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018) and, once registered, they are offered a piece of land on which to settle and cultivate.

Citizenship policy

Foreign nationals can apply for citizenship after living in Uganda for at least 10 years or after being married to a Ugandan citizen for five years (IOM, 2018). However, citizenship requirements are much more stringent for refugees, with time spent in Uganda under refugee status considered exempt from the residence conditions required for citizenship (IRC, 2018).

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1   Uganda is a signatory to various other regional and international frameworks relevant to migration. At the regional level, Uganda has endorsed the 2006 AU African Migration Policy Framework, the 2012 IGAD Regional Migration Policy and – at the global level – the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Uganda has also signed a number of international conventions and frameworks safeguarding migrants' rights, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

Box 2   In focus: including refugees in development planning – from commitments to reality

Uganda is a signatory to various recent international and regional frameworks that focus on advancing longer-term approaches to refugee crises and refugees' inclusion in national development planning. The government was a signatory to the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, became a pilot country for the CRRF in 2017 and in 2018 endorsed the Global Compact on Refugees. In parallel, Uganda has endorsed recent key IGAD frameworks, including the 2017 IGAD Nairobi Declaration on durable solutions for Somali refugees, the 2017 Djibouti Declaration on refugee education and the 2019 Kampala Declaration on jobs, livelihoods and self-reliance.

In 2016 the government launched the Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA), which aims to promote sustainable livelihoods for refugees alongside host communities and include refugees in the country's broader development agenda, in particular the second National Development Plan. The STA recognises refugees as a key part of Uganda's ambition to transition to a middle-income country by 2040 and is supported by the UNHCR and World Bank Refugee and Host Population Empowerment strategic framework (ReHoPE) (Coggio, 2018). Since 2017, steps towards refugees' inclusion in development planning have been progressed under the banner of the CRRF. These have been supported by a plethora of new institutional arrangements for CRRF implementation and sector plans – led by different line ministries – which aim to include refugees within national systems in sectors ranging from jobs and livelihoods, to water and education (Crawford et al., 2019).

However, while representing some progress, these national advances have not yet translated into significant changes. For example, one 2018 evaluation, focused on Rhino Camp in northern Uganda, highlighted that 'district planning does not (yet) adequately consider refugees and there is little emphasis on refugee populations in the implementation of service delivery' (RDPP, 2018). In particular, Uganda's CRRF process has suffered from excessive bureaucracy, a perceived lack of strategic vision and lack of engagement from district governments (Crawford et al., 2019). While some World Bank and other development funds have been mobilised since the launch of the STA, new frameworks arising from Uganda's more recent CRRF process do not yet appear to have attracted significant new funding.

household consumption, but are not large enough to allow excess production and sale of produce (FAO and OPM, 2018; Crawford et al., 2019). 'Self-settled' refugees in urban areas have often been able to achieve higher degrees of self-reliance. However, this has been effectively due to refugees' own initiative outside the support provided by national policies; municipal authorities lack the power, resources and, crucially, data needed to provide additional support to urban refugees (Lozet and Easton-Calabria, 2020).

More recently, Uganda has been party to various new international and regional frameworks – most notably the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) – which, among other elements, have advanced greater support to refugees' inclusion and self-reliance, alongside their inclusion in national

development planning. However, while progress has been seen in Uganda following these commitments in terms of national planning documents and strategic frameworks – with refugees included more comprehensively in national development ambitions – initial evidence suggests that significant changes in practice have not yet materialised, particularly at local levels (see Box 2).

3.3   Policies towards other migrants

Uganda's policy frameworks concerning other migrants are far less developed in comparison, although there are areas where Ugandan practice can be considered progressive and even exemplary within the region. For example, there

have been great strides in recent years in terms of the systematic provision of documentation to foreign nationals in the country, including both refugees and other migrants (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018).[6]

However, overall legislation concerning other migrants focuses predominantly on border control and administrative processes, rather than on rights and entitlements. There is no comprehensive framework or policy regarding migrants' rights to access public services, including healthcare and education, and, while the government is drafting a comprehensive National Migration Policy, the process has long been ongoing (IOM, 2013; 2018).

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6   Progress on the provision of documentation to refugees and other migrants in Uganda has been part of wider efforts for the country to ensure provision of identification to its own citizens, spurred by commitments made under the 2010 EAC Common Market protocol (for further details see ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018).

4   'It could be any one of us': a narrative of welcome

Several parallel and overlapping narratives can be identified surrounding refugees and other migrants in Uganda. This chapter focuses primarily on narratives surrounding refugees – which existing literature and key informant interviews discussed in more depth – although where relevant this is set in the context of broader narratives towards other migrants.

4.1   International narratives

Given the scale of engagement by international actors in Uganda, particularly in terms of the country's refugee response – from governmental donors and UN agencies, to INGOs and, increasingly, international and regional private sector players – international-level narratives form an important backdrop to national discourse. This can be understood both in terms of how Uganda's role as a refugee host is characterised by international stakeholders, as well as the narrative taken up by the Ugandan government in its interactions with international actors.

Uganda has long been held up by international actors as an example of good practice for refugee-hosting, regularly receiving praise within international fora for its progressive approach. The Ugandan government has played an active role reinforcing this image, speaking positively of its experience and the benefits of refugee hosting, and enthusiastically casting refugees as agents of development in international and regional discourse.

In such settings, the Ugandan government has often spoken of its approach as being rooted in an understanding of refugees' plight – many Ugandans, including several current government officials and Uganda's president have experienced displacement at some point in their lives (Vemuru et al., 2016). As Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda said in an address on World Refugee Day in 2018: 'Today, it is them, tomorrow, it could be any one of us' (cited in Coggio, 2018). However, some commentators have suggested broader motivations, pointing to the role that such internationally focused narratives may play as part of efforts to attract foreign political support, while also providing leverage to push back on international scrutiny of wider domestic concerns (Hitchen, 2017; Hovil, 2018).

In recent years the Ugandan government has – understandably – become increasingly vocal about the need for more financial support from the international community, particularly given the sharp rise in its refugee population from 2016 onwards. Speaking to one international media outlet in 2018, Uganda's State Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees called for more support, emphasising that refugee hosting was a 'shared responsibility' (Okiror, 2019). In a statement at the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019, the Ugandan government spoke of how the country's refugee-hosting model 'provides refugees greater prospects for self-reliance than found anywhere in the world', while giving the stark warning that 'we cannot take this for granted' (OPM, 2019).

Yet, while Uganda's refugee-hosting model has been much-praised by international stakeholders, this has not translated into robust financial commitments to help Uganda maintain its approach in the face of new pressures. While funding to Uganda's refugee response saw a significant increase in real terms from 2016 to 2017 (Degnan and Kattakuzhy, 2019), levels of funding have since fallen and overall have not kept pace with Uganda's vastly increased refugee population (UNHCR, 2019b; FTS, 2020). In December 2019, UNHCR reported that the Uganda Refugee Response Plan (RRP) had received only 55% of $927 million funding requested for the year (UNHCR, 2019c). With international donors' attention currently preoccupied by the domestic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a likelihood that funding prospects may worsen further in future. In April 2020 the World Food Programme (WFP) announced a 30% reduction in food rations provided to refugees in Uganda, citing large funding shortfalls (Okiror, 2020).

To some extent concerns around humanitarian funding capture only part of the picture. In recent years Uganda has been the beneficiary of various tranches of development funding, including the EU Trust Fund for the Development of Northern Uganda (€150 million over six years) and substantial World Bank funding (over $500 million over five to seven years) (Crawford et al., 2019). Likewise, a renewed international and regional focus on the role of the private sector in refugee settings, including through processes such as the CRRF, has prompted new interest from international private sector actors looking to engage in the country's refugee-hosting areas – although new initiatives and investments have so far been small-scale (see Box 3). Nevertheless, the overall picture suggests waning donor interest, which may partly reflect damaged donor confidence following a high profile scandal in 2018, including corruption among officials involved in the disbursement of donor funds and reports of critical UNHCR mismanagement (Okiror, 2017; Parker, 2018).

4.2 National narratives

At the national level, narratives surrounding refugees and other migrants are overall markedly positive in tone, although nuances can be identified within this.

Domestic narratives from the central government largely reflect its international positioning. Many of Uganda's leaders espouse a strong tradition of Pan-Africanism, underpinning government narratives around refugees and other migrants. Domestic narratives on refugees focus on helping 'brothers' or 'neighbours' in need. This contrasts with other countries in the region such as Kenya, where governments have focused more heavily on concerns around crime, terrorism and the need for crackdowns on 'illegal migration' when engaging with domestic audiences (Hargrave and Mosel, 2020). However, while positive overall, interviewees suggested that – unlike in its international
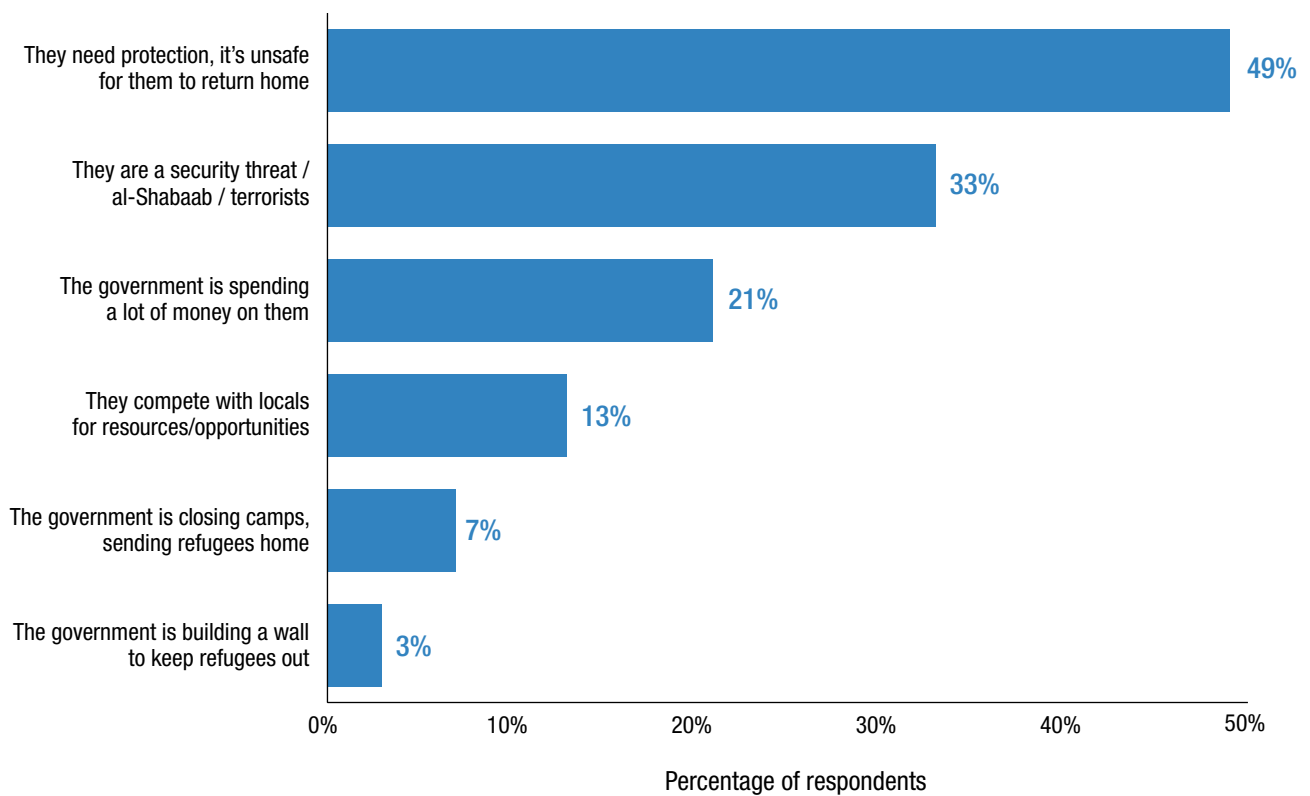
engagement – the Ugandan government has rarely engaged with its citizens on the benefits the country has experienced from refugee hosting. Interviews also indicated worries that a focus on pressures linked to hosting refugees may become more prominent in domestic government narratives if refugee numbers continue to rise, particularly ahead of Uganda's 2021 election (see also Herbert and Idris, 2018).[7]

Recent polling suggests that such concerns have already become relatively common in narratives beyond Uganda's government – particularly in Uganda's national media and among local communities. One 2018 International Rescue Committee (IRC) poll of Ugandans found that very few respondents said they got their information about refugees from politicians or local government (IRC, 2018). The majority cited media sources – 81% said they got their information from the radio – with a significant number (19%) also citing their friends and family. The same poll found that, although what Ugandans were hearing from these sources generally reflected humanitarian concerns, a significant proportion – 33% and 21% respectively – pointed to security threat narratives and pressures on government spending, while a smaller number (13%) reported hearing concerns around resource competition (IRC, 2018; see Figure 5).

A final set of narratives can be identified among municipalities, as well civil society actors, who have focused on refugees' skills and labour market integration, while also highlighting the need for greater local-level support in order to make the government's progressive politics a reality. For example, civil society in Kampala have articulated concerns that, while national ambitions for self-reliance are high, the supporting mechanisms, particularly in urban areas, are simply not in place to facilitate this (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018). Within Kampala, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) has attempted to fill perceived gaps

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7   While this research was carried out before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, further attention is needed to assess how the pandemic may play a role shifting narratives within Uganda, in terms of its economic and wider social consequences within the country and the wider region.

Figure 5   What have you heard about refugees from your sources of information?

Category	Percentage
They need protection, it's unsafe for them to return home	49%
They are a security threat / al-Shabaab / terrorists	33%
The government is spending a lot of money on them	21%
They compete with locals for resources/opportunities	13%
The government is closing camps, sending refugees home	7%
The government is building a wall to keep refugees out	3%

Percentage of respondents

Source: IRC (2018)

in the national policy approaches, taking on a strong leadership role in the city's urban response, while also seeking to support other refugee-hosting cities in Uganda. The KCAA has convened inter-agency symposiums to better understand gaps to supporting urban refugees, while also being vocal about the need for improved datasets on migrants' skills to support their labour market integration (ACMS and Samuel Hall, 2018).

Box 3   Private sector engagement in Uganda

International and regional private sector actors are showing increased interest in investments in Uganda's refugee-hosting areas. However, with a few exceptions, and in contrast to other regional players such as Kenya, this has largely been limited to small-scale initiatives. Despite some promising examples, many private sector initiatives have suffered from the persistent challenges undermining the success of Uganda's self-reliance model and remain largely unaddressed – namely, that refugees are mostly hosted in remote, under-developed areas without sufficient infrastructure or market links. Key informants indicated that on the whole actors are still exploring how they can best add value, undertaking small pilots and trialing market-based, sustainable approaches before scaling them up.

Private sector engagement has so far been concentrated in three areas: financial inclusion, energy/solar and agriculture. Some examples of good business practice include:

- **DanChurchAid (DCA) and Mukwano Ltd's partnership on sunflower seeds.** Mukwano is a leading consumer goods manufacturer in East and Central Africa, which works in partnership with DanChurchAid (DCA) in northern Uganda. The partnership aims to catalyse farmers' inclusive access to markets, supporting both refugee and host farmers to grow sunflower seeds through training and ensuring they can sell their produce. In this way, Mukwano receives critical volume and quality, and an incentive to engage in under-developed parts of the country where it would not normally be present.
- **Smart Communities Coalition (SCC) work on basic service delivery.** The SCC is a public–private initiative co-chaired by Mastercard and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with over 40 partners, focusing on basic service delivery in three key areas: energy, connectivity and digital tools, with Kenya and Uganda selected as its pilot countries. As a first step, the coalition created market profiles for three settlements across different parts of Uganda: Bidi Bidi, Kiryandongo and Rwamwanja. Based on this analysis it supports a number of pilot projects. One example is mini-grids and CE3+ in Rwamwanja refugee settlement, through which it is advancing market-based community energy solutions and internet infrastructure, alongside market development and livelihoods programmes.
- **FINCA International/BrightLife work on microfinance and clean energy distribution.** FINCA Impact Finance is a network of 20 microfinance and financial institutions around the world that focuses on financial inclusion for refugees and hosts. FINCA's clean energy social enterprise in Uganda, BrightLife, aims to promote awareness of clean energy products among off-grid populations, enabling access to affordable, high-quality products and services, such as solar home systems and improved cooking stoves, through monthly payment plans or pay-as-you-go financing. By using payment histories in financing, BrightLife aims to foster financial inclusion by building credit profiles for unbanked populations. In 2019, BrightLife received support from USAID Power Africa to establish a presence in a town adjacent to Kiryandongo refugee settlement, facilitating access to its products while also offering employment opportunities.

As investors consider new and larger scale projects that target refugees and host communities in Uganda, their engagement with broader underlying challenges associated with the country's refugee-hosting model will be critical. Likewise, understanding – and responding to – prevailing national narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants is important: both to ensure the success of this engagement and to understand how it can play a role supporting refugees' inclusion.

5   Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Polling on public perceptions of refugees and other migrants in Uganda is extremely limited. While this is a common trend in low- and middle-income countries, there is reason to pause and consider why more regular or detailed polling has, for the most part, not been attempted in the fourth largest refugee-hosting country in the world.[8] While similar gaps are seen in other countries in the region, data is particularly scarce in the Ugandan context compared to neighbouring Kenya (Hargrave and Mosel, 2020). Uganda is not included in many of the key global datasets covering refugees and other migrants, making assessments of overall national-level attitudes difficult to fully substantiate.[9] Where data is available, it does not make clear how attitudes vary with different segments of the public.[10] Nor has polling measured the salience of immigration and refugee hosting to Ugandans – namely, how important it is considered relative to other issues.

5.1   National trends

Several datasets measure Ugandan attitudes towards 'migrants' or 'immigration'. However, the wording of polling questions does not always make clear whether this includes refugees, or

if such polling reflects more limited attitudes towards foreign workers. This data paints a mixed picture. In Afrobarometer's 2017–2018 survey, Ugandans were asked their opinion on having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours. Over three quarters showed positive or neutral opinion: 43% said that they would strongly or somewhat like it and a further 33% that they 'would not care' (Afrobarometer, 2018). However, data from Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index, drawing on 2016 World Poll data, suggests the need for caution in overstating the positivity of Ugandan attitudes. Uganda ranks roughly halfway in Gallup's index – 72nd of 138 countries– with a 5.45 'acceptance' score, slightly above the world average (5.29) but below the average for Sub-Saharan Africa (6.47) (Esipova et al., 2017).[11]

In terms of attitudes towards refugees specifically, a 2018 IRC survey paints the most detailed picture available across the country as a whole. Broadly, the poll's findings suggest public attitudes reflective of prevailing narratives. According to the poll, almost two thirds of Ugandans characterised their opinion of refugee-hosting as 'hosting refugees to help those in need' (IRC, 2018). A large majority (81%) thought that their government had done well or very well in terms of the refugee response, with clear
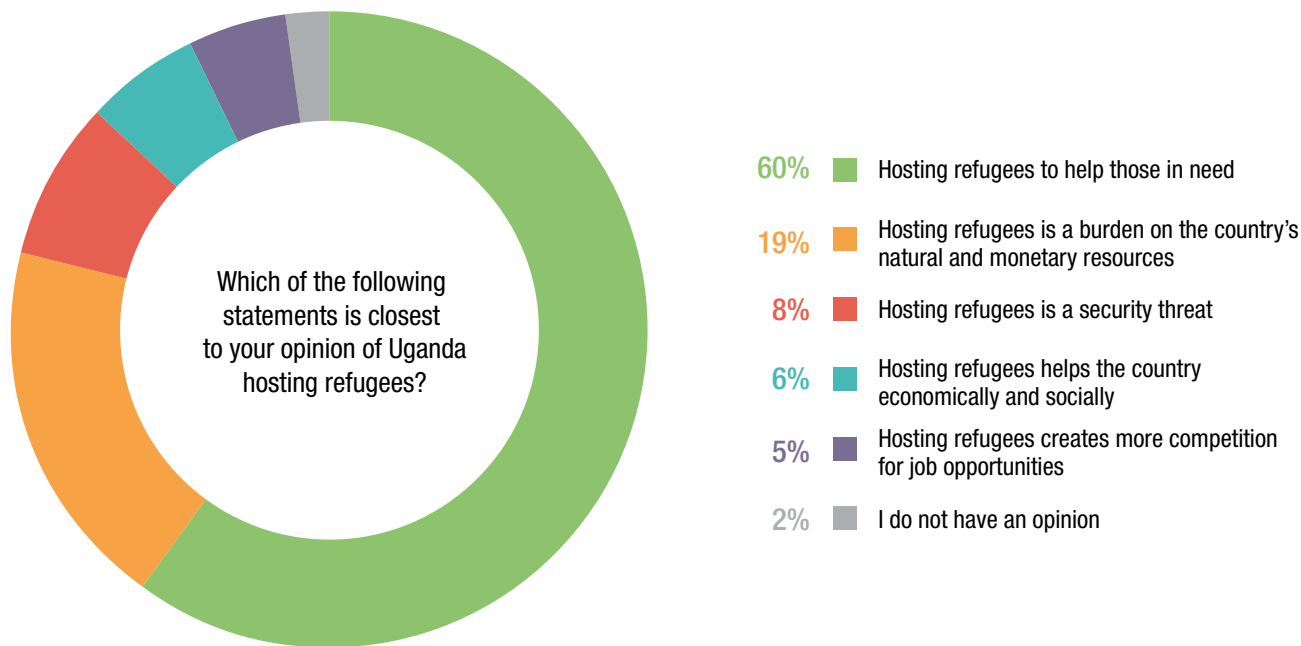
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8   As a notable exception, the Center for Global Development (CGD) has recently initiated a randomised controlled trial to examine whether sharing aid between hosts and refugees engenders goodwill among host communities in Kampala. The research aims to measure social outcomes, including support for hosting additional refugees and allowing them to work, and economic outcomes, such as business survival and profits, to test whether effective development aid associated with refugees can induce support for inclusive hosting.

9   For example, Uganda was not among the 26 countries included in Ipsos' 2019 Global Refugee Study, nor was it among 27 countries included in Amnesty's 2016 Refugees Welcome Index. Pew Global has on two occasions polled Ugandan attitudes to immigration; however, only one question was asked and this has not happened since 2007. Uganda was not included in the latest seventh wave of the World Values Survey, which includes several questions relevant to migration – although efforts have been made to identify funding and partners to facilitate its inclusion in future.

10 For example, while detailed attitudinal segmentation has been carried out in several high-income countries aimed at understanding how attitudes towards migrants are distributed across the public and how these interact with broader opinions and values (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017), no such segmentation exists in the Ugandan context.

11 Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index is based on data from the 2016 Gallup World Poll, producing a score for each country based on the proportion of respondents who consider immigrants living in their country, becoming their neighbour or marrying a close relative a 'good thing'.

Figure 6   Which of the following statements is closest to your opinion of Uganda hosting refugees?

- **60%** ▊ Hosting refugees to help those in need
- **19%** ▊ Hosting refugees is a burden on the country's natural and monetary resources
- **8%** ▊ Hosting refugees is a security threat
- **6%** ▊ Hosting refugees helps the country economically and socially
- **5%** ▊ Hosting refugees creates more competition for job opportunities
- **2%** ▊ I do not have an opinion

Source: IRC (2018)

majorities supporting the government's provision of security (97%), healthcare (97%), education (96%), permission to work (81%) and, by a smaller margin (58%), access to land to refugees. The poll did, however, suggest that narratives around specific concerns linked to refugee hosting – particularly pressure on national resources – may be finding some traction within public opinion (see Figure 6).

5.2   Perceptions in immediate host communities

The concentration of refugees in a small number of the country's districts has resulted in markedly different experiences of refugee hosting across Uganda. IRC's 2018 polling found that only a third of respondents had interacted with a refugee (see Figure 7).

Overall, data measuring attitudes is not sufficient to fully delineate sub-national trends. However, perceptions of refugees and other migrants are likely to be geographically nuanced. Additional insights can be drawn from a number of smaller studies that have focused specifically on communities hosting refugees. While these often focus predominantly on issues such land or self-reliance, they also include some data and qualitative assessments

of host-community members' perceptions and refugee–host interactions.

Overall – in line with national attitudes – studies of immediate host communities highlight high levels of peaceful coexistence and positive perceptions (Vemuru et al., 2016; DRC and DDG, 2018; REACH and UNHCR, 2018; REACH and NRC, 2019; Van Laer, 2019). One 2017 study, carried out when refugee arrivals were at their peak, found that approximately two thirds of both host-community members and refugees saw hosts as having a 'generally positive' attitude towards newcomers (cited in Coggio, 2018). A large-scale assessment of households in all of Uganda's 30 refugee settlements found that neither group considered themselves significantly under physical threat from members of the other (REACH and UNHCR, 2018).

Studies suggest that considerable interaction between the two groups at shared services such as health centres, schools and markets – an integral part of Uganda' refugee model – contributes to a positive atmosphere in many settlements (Van Laer, 2019; Vemuru et al., 2016). Intermarriage is frequently reported between refugees and host community members (Vemuru et al., 2016) and host communities have in some cases played a critical role in providing refugees with informal networks of support, for

Figure 7   Have you interacted with a refugee/refugees in any way? If so, where/how?
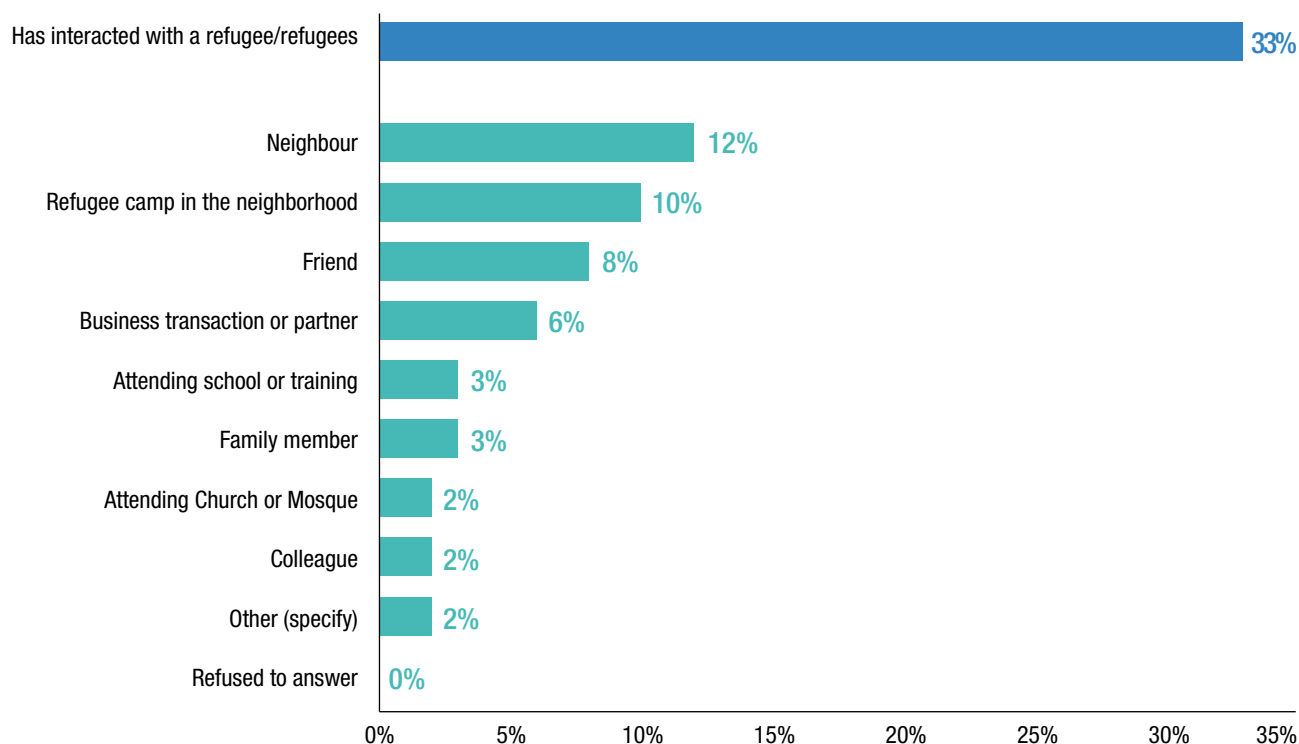
Source: IRC (2018)

example providing access to finance through local village and livelihoods associations.

Smaller qualitative studies do, however, suggest more challenging dynamics in the country's north, where refugee numbers have risen most substantially in recent years and, concurrently, where pressures on resources are increasing. In some districts in northern Uganda, refugee numbers increased so rapidly that South Sudanese refugees quickly outnumbered locals (Herbert and Idris, 2018). In these areas, friction tends to occur over natural resources – particularly land, firewood and water, as well as livelihoods and stray animals. Isolated incidents between individuals have occasionally sparked larger fights. For example, in December 2019 violence broke out between South Sudanese refugees and host communities in a settlement in Adjumani District, leaving 12 injured and one dead (Kamoga, 2019).

Interviews also suggested a sentiment in these areas that the government is favouring refugees at citizens' expense, a view which likely interacts with wider perceptions of

inequality and marginalisation among northern Uganda's host communities. While there has been significant progress in poverty reduction across Uganda, overall inequality has increased – leaving northern districts among the most impoverished in the country, far more so than the country's central and western regions (where President Musevini's base of political support is concentrated) (Hitchen, 2016). In northern Uganda community-owned land is leased to the central government who then go on to allocate it to refugees, in the expectation that underdeveloped areas will receive significant investment and services.[12] Key informants suggested that some communities are threatening not to lease their land again in future, given the belief that they have not seen sufficient return on their investment. Although studies suggest that such anger is primarily directed towards the OPM, which administers negotiations over land, aid actors and refugees are increasingly impacted (Crawford et al., 2019).

Overall, key informants indicated less acute cause for concern regarding attitudes in

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12 Notably, land distribution is different in the south-west, where refugees are allocated government-gazetted land. In these areas therefore, communities do not have the same expectations in terms of returns.

refugee-hosting settlements and urban areas elsewhere in the country. In the south-west, locals do not share ethnic or kinship ties with refugees (they are mainly Rwandan, Congolese and Burundian) – unlike in the north – but settlements are older and refugee populations longer established. Uganda's south-western settlements are not completely unaffected by pressures seen elsewhere in the country; in particular, studies have documented episodic tensions in Nakivale settlement primarily due to environmental degradation and competition for land (Sebba, 2006). However, overall levels of integration are high and there are fewer concerns over intercommunity tensions. Similarly, key informant interviews suggested a relatively positive picture in Kampala, where refugees were reported to be more widely dispersed and better integrated into communities. However, studies have also suggested the need for caution, documenting instances of 'suspicious' attitudes towards refugees in urban settings, as well as cases of police harassment and discrimination, (Rosenberg, 2016, cited in Herbert and Idris, 2018: 15; AGORA, 2018; REACH and NRC, 2019; Omata, 2018).

6   Recommendations

There are various entry points for actors seeking to engage with narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Uganda; from government at all levels, civil society and the private sector, to regional and international organisations. This study offers the following recommendations to actors already engaging, or interested in engaging, in this space:

1. Invest in polling data to better understand Ugandans' attitudes towards refugees and other migrants.

Given that Uganda hosts the fourth largest refugee population in the world, the absence of more extensive polling data is notable. While some conclusions can be drawn from available data, more effective engagement can be supported through a scale-up of relevant polling, as part of wider efforts to strengthen the availability of such data in low- and middle-income countries, including across the wider region. This could include:

- Exploring how Ugandan attitudes towards refugees and migrants can be more consistently included in existing global, regional and national datasets.
- Providing support to more detailed national studies, in particular exploring possibilities to undertake attitudinal segmentation and to measure the salience of immigration and refugee hosting among the Ugandan public.
- Efforts to measure whether and how perceptions have been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts within Uganda and the wider region.

2. Ensure that international praise for Uganda's progressive approach is matched with tangible commitments to address pressures that may put positive narratives at risk.

The Ugandan government has received well-deserved praise for its progressive policies and positive narratives concerning refugees, which stand in sharp contrast to those in neighbouring countries and more widely. This positivity should not be taken for granted and may come under threat in the face of rising pressures, especially in the country's north and in light of possible impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic. Efforts to ease pressures should be grounded in recent international commitments under the Global Compact on Refugees.

- **International donors** should ensure that sustained humanitarian and new development financing are made available, including as part of the country's ongoing CRRF process. Financing aimed at alleviating pressures should be sensitive to, and ultimately seek to address, wider inequalities and marginalisation experienced in impacted communities.
- **Private sector actors** can play a key role to address pressures experienced in Uganda's refugee-hosting areas, but greater investment is needed to coordinate and scale up existing efforts and initiatives in this space, including through existing platforms. Investors can also play a key advocacy role, highlighting elements of Uganda's settlement approach that pose a barrier to sustainable larger-scale investment.

3. Build on existing positive narratives to create a pragmatic national conversation around refugees and refugee hosting, with a focus on development benefits.

Narratives in Uganda are positive and give much to build on, largely rooted in empathy and the desire to help those in need. However, discussion of the benefits of refugee hosting has not been a prominent feature of national discourse. Greater domestic understanding and discussion of such benefits, alongside steps to maximise them, could provide an asset in future, providing a counterbalance should narratives

around pressures grow more pronounced and empathy wane.

- Those with first-hand experience and evidence of such benefits – particularly **local communities, municipalities and civil society** – can play an important role elevating their experiences. Given their influence with Uganda's public, such actors could consider how they can work with national and local media to promote such narratives.

- Efforts to promote the benefits of refugee hosting should, however, also be grounded in **efforts to better realise these in practice.** This includes addressing fundamental barriers to fulfilling the government's progressive ambitions for refugee self-reliance, including the centralisation of policy-making, insufficient funding and data at municipality levels, and limits to refugees' freedom of movement resulting from the country's settlement approach.

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About the project

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: implications for action is a two-year project led by ODI's Human Mobility Initiative, funded by the IKEA Foundation. It aims to provide detailed and practical recommendations to help businesses and investors influence attitudes to migrants and refugees, with a focus on Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US and more in-depth studies of attitudes in Kenya and Uganda. Briefing papers will feed into broader events and roundtable discussions where practice, partnerships and policy can be developed and shared among businesses and sector experts.

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