



Asylum policy under threat - The case of Uganda

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Uganda has long stood as a beacon of progressive refugee policy in a region marked by protracted displacement and recurring crises. With nearly 2 million refugees and asylum seekers currently hosted across its territory, Uganda maintains the largest refugee population on the African continent and the fifth-largest globally. Forcibly displaced populations continue to arrive daily, driven by ongoing violence, instability, and climatic shocks across the region. Due to the escalation in the conflict in eastern DR Congo, a record 131,335 asylum seekers have arrived in Uganda as of September 2025, against an initial prediction of 145,000 new arrivals for the whole 2025.

For years, the country's inclusive approach—granting refugees freedom of movement, access to land, education, and national health systems—has been lauded as a model of generosity and resilience. But this model is under increasing strain. Uganda's geographic location – bordering South Sudan and DR Congo – places it at the frontlines of the region's refugee flows, and continued instability in both countries means new arrivals are ongoing. At the same time, funding shortfalls and global donor fatigue are converging to erode the very foundations of Uganda's refugee response. The government's openness is increasingly out of step with the international community's shrinking support, and the risk is clear: without urgent action, Uganda's refugee model could collapse under the weight of its own success and become a forgotten crisis.

A refugee model under threat

Uganda's location at the heart of one of the world's most displacement-prone regions means that it would host large refugee populations regardless, but its progressive policies often means that refugees stay over long periods of time.

Unlike many host countries, Uganda integrates refugees into national systems rather than confining them to isolated camps. The 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugee Regulations grant freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, land and the right to work, in line with the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compact on Refugees. However, it is heavily dependent on predictable international solidarity and coordinated humanitarian-development cooperation.

International praise for Uganda's approach has not translated into adequate investment. Humanitarian appeals are consistently underfunded. In 2024, less than 40 percent of the Uganda Refugee Response Plan was funded—and prospects for 2025 remain grim. The result is a widening gap between policy and reality, with profound consequences for protection, resilience, and social cohesion.

Shrinking protection space

DRC's protection assessment and community engagement across multiple locations in Uganda indicate growing vulnerabilities, particularly for women, children, and urban refugees. In informal urban settings like Kampala, refugees frequently report incidents of harassment, exploitation, and extortion—especially in housing, informal labour, and interactions with authorities. Refugees without valid documentation are at heightened risk of arbitrary arrest or detention, with some reporting demands for bribes to avoid police action.

Recent displacement trends reveal an overwhelming majority of new arrivals are women and children. In a review across Imvepi, Lobule, and Rhino Camp settlements, 88.5 percent of recently displaced individuals were women, followed by girls and boys, while adult men constituted just 1.9 percent. This reflects gendered displacement patterns: many men remained in countries of origin to protect property, engage in conflict, or seek livelihoods, while women fled with children in search of safety. Consequently, many households are now female-headed, often without stable support, and face heightened protection risks, psychosocial distress, and economic hardship.

Child protection needs are particularly acute. Unaccompanied and separated children – including child-headed households – are present in growing numbers, often without access to case management or family tracing services. Uganda currently hosts close to 50,000 unaccompanied and separated children, a worrying figure in the shrinking protection space. Many boys are out of schools due to child labour or having returned to conflict-affected areas, while girls are more visible in classrooms but at heightened risk of early marriage and exploitation. Across all settlements, education systems are overwhelmed and under-resourced.

A humanitarian response on the brink

This disconnect between rising protection needs and shrinking resources has placed Uganda's model under serious threat, particularly in the context of the humanitarian reset, which prioritises efficiency, localization, and strategic divestment without adequate transition support. The humanitarian reset has noble ambitions, however, its current implementation risks leaving high-needs contexts like Uganda behind.

With needs rising and resources falling, even the most basic support – food, shelter, protection, health – is no longer guaranteed. Food assistance has been cut multiple times in recent years, with many refugees now surviving on less than 40 percent of the recommended daily caloric intake. Health centres lack essential supplies, and education programmes are overstretched and under-resourced.

Cash-based assistance, a critical tool for both dignity and efficiency, has been drastically scaled back. Protection services – legal aid, psychosocial support, case management for GBV survivors – are often the first to be cut.

Funding constraints are driving competition among actors and undermining coordination. Local NGOs, despite being close to communities, are routinely underfunded and sidelined. If localization is to be meaningful, Ugandan civil society and government institutions must be resourced and capacitated to meet protection responsibilities. If strategic prioritization is to be principled, Uganda must remain on the global radar—not as a success story to move on from, but as a system to invest in.

The cost of inaction

The cost of inaction is already being felt. Protection violations are increasing. Social tensions in host areas are rising. Durable solutions are out of reach for most refugees. Uganda's reputation as a refugee-hosting leader is at risk, and with it, the regional stability gains it has helped foster.

If support continues to decline, Uganda may be forced to reconsider the very openness that has made its model so effective. This would be a devastating reversal, not only for the nearly two million people who have sought refuge in Uganda, but for the international refugee protection framework as a whole.

DRC calls for

- » Stronger support for national protection systems and localised responses, including refugee-led and host community structures.
- » A renewed regional approach to displacement, conflict prevention, and diplomatic engagement to reduce inflows and create conditions for voluntary return.
- » Long-term development investments aligned with humanitarian needs, including support for Uganda's integration policies and host communities.
- » More equitable responsibility-sharing, including expanded resettlement and complementary pathways for refugees hosted in Uganda.

Uganda has done what few countries have been willing or able to do: provide safety and dignity to over a million refugees. But its generosity is not inexhaustible. As the humanitarian system undergoes its reset, Uganda's protection space hangs in the balance. Without urgent, sustained, and smart investment, the country's exemplary model may become a cautionary tale of global neglect.

DRC in Uganda

DRC Uganda provides targeted assistance to address acute and growing protection risks. In partnership with UNHCR and DANIDA, we support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence (GBV) through case management and psychosocial support (PSS), while working to reduce social stigma through awareness-raising and community engagement.

DRC also plays a pivotal role in child protection, delivering case management and PSS to children at risk. Through UNHCR- and DANIDA-funded programmes, we work with children and youth to strengthen healthy coping mechanisms and life skills that prepare them for adulthood.

At the community level, we systematically strengthen protection structures and systems to mitigate the effects of a shrinking protection space. Over time, these community-based structures are equipped to care for individuals exposed to protection risks and to prevent such risks within their own communities

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