



Focusing
Philanthropy

RefugePoint Trip Report Kampala and Kyangwali, Uganda May 27-30, 2025

Key People

Focusing Philanthropy (FP) Staff

- Whitney Schaefer (WS)
- Larry Gilson (LG)

RefugePoint (RP) Staff

- Jenna Hornsby, Manager of Philanthropic Partnerships
- Sarah Hidey, Chief Development Officer
- Zack Gross, Associate Director - Deployment Program
- Ned Meerdink, Training & Technical Support Manager - Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Staff

- Maureen Anyango Lugalia, Child Protection Expert - Kampala (*RP deployment*)
- Arikew Gashaw, Child Protection Expert - Kwangali (*RP deployment*)
- Marta Bellini, Child Protection Officer - Kampala

Executive Summary

LG and WS traveled to Uganda with a small team of RefugePoint staff to learn about the work RefugePoint is doing to advance durable solutions for refugees in country. RefugePoint does not have a local office in Uganda but currently has several staff members based there as part of its partnership with the UNHCR, through which RefugePoint deploys trained Experts to UNHCR offices worldwide to augment child protection and resettlement capacity. Additionally, Uganda is one of 72 countries where partner agencies are deploying RefugePoint's Self Reliance Index, the first-ever global tool for measuring the progress of refugee households toward self-reliance.

The FP/RP team met with NGO partners, RefugePoint/UNHCR third-country solutions staff, refugee-led organizations, and refugee communities in two locations: urban Kampala, the capital city, and rural Kwangali, a refugee settlement on the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), seven hours northwest of Kampala by car.



Key Takeaways

1. Cuts to foreign aid are having severe, widespread consequences on refugees, drastically diminishing their quality of life and prospects for safety and stability, especially for children
2. Uganda's progressive refugee policy presents a unique opportunity to deepen refugee self-reliance work in country
3. An international network of partner agencies is effectively scaling to new geographies key elements of RefugePoint's flagship self-reliance program in Nairobi, with potential for further expansion

Background

Since 2005, RefugePoint has helped nearly 180,000 refugees across 52 countries relocate to safety via resettlement and complementary pathways (family reunification, labor mobility, education visas) and set an additional 8,000+ on a path to self-reliance through its Urban Refugee Protection Program in Nairobi.

Focusing Philanthropy has partnered with RefugePoint since 2017 to expand access to resettlement and advance additional long-term solutions for refugees to rebuild their lives. This was FP's first time observing RefugePoint's work in Uganda, following five previous RefugePoint monitoring trips to Canada, Niger, and Kenya.

Uganda Refugee Snapshot

Uganda hosts more refugees than any other country in Africa, due in part to its open-door refugee policy. Asylum seekers from DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan are granted refugee status upon arrival at the Ugandan border. Other nationalities must apply for individual refugee status determination. Once granted, refugees have freedom of movement, the right to work or start a business, and access to basic welfare services.

Another notable feature of Uganda's progressive refugee policy is the absence of refugee camps. New arrivals are settled by default in one of 13 designated "settlements" across the country. Whereas refugee camps provide temporary emergency shelter, settlements are more formal, long-term living arrangements focused on local integration and self-reliance. Refugees who choose to live in a settlement have access to concentrated humanitarian aid and are allocated a small plot of land where they can build a home and engage in agriculture.

At the time of our visit in May 2025, Uganda was host to nearly 1.9 million refugees and asylum seekers (a number expected to reach 2 million by year end):

- 52% are under 18 (recently crossed the million child mark)
- 78% are women and children
- 91% live in settlements and 9% reside in urban areas (8.5 of 9% in Kampala)
- 100,000+ arrivals since January 2025 (already 500% more than in 2024)

Days 1-2: Kampala

Why is Refugee Self-Reliance Important?

- 160 million people displaced worldwide, fewer than 3% can access durable solutions (return home, local integration in country of asylum, resettlement to a third country)
- Global resettlement quota for 2025 projected to be the lowest in 20 years
- 80% of refugees in protracted displacement (in exile more than 5 years)
- \$30+ billion (90% of global humanitarian aid) spent annually on short-term emergency response
- Self-reliance programming helps refugees reach stability and meet their own needs so that they can contribute to their host communities, begin to rebuild their lives where they are, and work toward freedom from dependence on aid

Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI)

- Multi-stakeholder initiative to advance opportunities for refugee self-reliance
- Global network of 350 member organizations sharing best practices
- Co-founded by RP and Women's Refugee Commission
 - 2018 – formal launch at UN General Assembly
 - 2020 – launch of the Self-Reliance Index
- Lost funding from US government as part of 2025 foreign aid cuts, little prospect of future funding from this source

Self-Reliance Index (SRI)

- First-ever global tool for measuring the progress of refugee household toward self-reliance
- Administered as a semi-structured conversation at the household level
- 12 assessment domains:
 - Basic needs: housing, food, education, health care
 - Resources: employment, financial resources, assistance, debt
 - Sustainability: savings, safety, social capital, health status
- Each household receives a composite score from 1-5 (5 is highest)
 - 2.5 is global average; rare to see scores above 4
 - Achieving a score of 5 and/or independence from humanitarian aid is not the only evidence of success; material progress in one or more key domains can also be meaningful
- Provides feedback to practitioners so they can adapt programming in real-time
- Adopted by 70 agencies in 34 countries
 - Deployed in refugee camps, settlements, and urban communities
 - Open source and free to download from RSRI website; organizations strongly encouraged to attend free formal training led by RP before implementation
 - RP collects and analyzes SRI assessments from reporting agencies and is building a global data set on refugee household progress toward self-reliance (preparing for public launch)
- Before 2025 cuts to foreign aid, US State Department required SRI use for self-reliance program funding

Meeting: International Rescue Committee (IRC) Kampala

- The IRC is one of the world's largest refugee-focused nonprofits and a member of the RSRI global network, using RefugePoint's SRI to evaluate and improve its own programming
- RE:BUiLD initiative
 - IRC livelihoods project focused on economic self-reliance of urban refugees in Kampala and Nairobi
 - Applies RefugePoint's SRI across all economic self-reliance tracks serving ~10,000 clients
 - SRI scores guide program adaptations (e.g. when vocational training received low scores, shifted focus to cash payments and business loans)
 - Generating learning briefs on which intervention areas work best
 - Refugee clients moving from scores of 2.5 to 3.5 in 12 months
 - Target was 50% of clients considered self-reliant (scores 3.5/5 or above); 2025 is final year of 5-year project and have already achieved 60%
- Client visits: two Congolese refugees participating in RE:BUiLD
 - Annie Morisho
 - Single mother of five, received a \$550 grant to open a fish & vegetable shop
 - Previously sold goods on the street because she could not afford to rent a business space; street vending is illegal in Kampala and she was constantly worried about run-ins with the law
 - Now operates a legal business, earns stable income, and has the promise of a better future for her children
 - Remembers the exact day of the week she received the grant--"a Tuesday in July"--because she says it changed her life
 - Bosila Mboyo Martinie
 - Started a hair salon in her teens, later trained in financial literacy and linked to a financial service provider via the program
 - Has taken three small business loans at increasing intervals to expand her salon and launch an online clothing business; has repaid first two (~\$340 and ~\$700) and is currently repaying the third (~\$1,400)
 - At age 20, she operates two successful businesses and uses the profits to help support herself and members of her family

Meeting: UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Kampala

- Impact of foreign aid cuts in Uganda
 - International NGOs are leaving the country
 - Humanitarian caseworker ratio has increased from 1:25 to 1:200
 - Growing urban refugee presence (no food aid in rural settlements due to reduced funding)
 - UNHCR only has 17% of what's needed to fund its 2025 programs; forced to significantly reduce staff
- RP deployment program
 - RP deploys trained Experts to UNHCR offices worldwide to augment child protection and resettlement capacity
 - We met two RP Child Protection Experts currently deployed in Uganda
 - Both from East Africa, former UNHCR staff

- Assigned to the cases of vulnerable, unaccompanied children who would otherwise fall through the cracks. Examples:
 - One child had seen his parents killed. He was told he did not qualify for resettlement because his description of their death, which he was asked to explain multiple times in detail, wasn't consistent throughout his interview process. A Child Protection Expert voiced concerns for his mental health and fought for his application to be approved, and the child was resettled
 - Another child turned 21 before his resettlement was finalized, effectively aging out of his pending application. He was separated from his younger siblings and they were resettled without him. A Child Protection Expert helped successfully petition for him to rejoin his family
- Common for Experts to move between RP and the UNHCR--long history of mutual respect--and to serve multiple deployment terms in different countries
- RP Expert positions in high demand because of strong organizational culture, good compensation, and quality training; one Expert said he waited three years for an interview
- RP anticipates reduced number of deployments due to funding cuts and dwindling resettlement spaces; low global resettlement quotas mean less need for resettlement casework

Days 3-5: Kyangwali Refugee Settlement

Kyangwali snapshot

- Established in the 1960s; one of the oldest refugee settlements in the country
- Located in western Uganda, near the shores of Lake Albert and the DRC border
- Only settlement in the country that receives refugees by boat; journey is perilous and there have been numerous deadly capsizing incidents
- Less than halfway through 2025, new arrivals (4,260) had surpassed numbers from all of 2024 due to rapidly escalating offense by M23 rebel group in the DRC
- Population
 - 150,324 individuals across 44,983 households
 - 97.2% Congolese nationals, followed by 2.6% from South Sudan
 - 56% children
- Size and availability of plots of land allocated by government decreasing, too small to sustain a family
- Limited livelihood opportunities outside subsistence farming
- Half of all children do not reach secondary school
 - Overcrowded classrooms with high student to teacher ratio
 - No abridged curriculum (refugee children of all ages have to start in first grade)
 - Language barrier for students who don't speak English or Swahili
 - Long distances between home and school
 - Small admin and school uniform fee (~\$20) prohibitive for many families

Visit to Kagoma Reception Center

- New arrivals transported here for registration, health and security screening, and to await allocation of plot of land; provided with temporary housing, hot meals and basic humanitarian services

- Processing should only take a few days but can take weeks, even months, due to system overload
- In one month in 2025, there were 3,000 arrivals at center meant to shelter 800 people

Impact of foreign aid cuts

- Reduced food aid (overwhelming issue)
 - Majority of Kyangwali population no longer receiving any support
 - Concerns about rising rates of malnutrition and depression/suicide
- Closure of critical child protection programming, some remaining now charging fees for service
- Loss of teachers at already overcrowded schools
- Medical clinics at risk of shutting down
- Disproportionate harm to children
 - Child labor, drug use, teen pregnancy on the rise
 - Girls turning to survival sex work and early marriage
 - Boys becoming child soldiers for the same rebel groups from which they had fled
 - Children effectively abandoned as heads of household leave settlement in pursuit of jobs Children
 - as young as 12 taking their own lives out of a sense of hopelessness and/or to relieve their families of the cost of supporting them

Next steps:

- Convene leaders in skills-training, health, education and humanitarian aid sectors to brainstorm ways to expand innovative income-generation opportunities for refugees
- Explore potential to leverage RSRI network for rapid scaling of SRI reach and impact

Photos: Kampala



The entrance to the grocery shop Annie Morisho opened with a small business grant from the IRC



Annie has had success selling traditional foods from her home country, such as these dried fish, to the local diaspora community



20-year-old Bosila Mboyo Martinie (right) inside the hair salon she expanded through small business loans secured via IRC



Whitney and Larry (5th and 6th from right) with RefugePoint and UNHCR staff outside the UNHCR Kampala office

Photos: Kyangwali



The Ugandan shores of Lake Albert, where asylum seekers arrive by boat from eastern DRC (visible in the distance)



New arrivals await processing and registration at Kagoma reception center



An aid worker interviews a family to confirm eligibility for refugee status



The outside of a dormitory-style temporary housing building



Families sleep on the floor inside as they await a plot of land in the settlement (processing should take days but often takes weeks or months)



Hot meals are provided by humanitarian organizations



Children gather at the center playground (the gate and barbed wire prevent overnight use)



Once resettled on small plots of land provided by the government, refugee families build homes and grow crops to supplement food aid



Child-Friendly Spaces operated by aid organizations offer structured play, psychosocial support, and a safe learning environment for kids on the settlement



Several have closed due to funding cuts, others must now charge a fee for service that most families cannot afford to pay



A meeting with refugee community members and local NGO staff



A mother explains the consequences that reduced humanitarian aid is having on her children