

Movement and livelihood intentions of urban refugees in Uganda

General trends & Gulu case study

July 2023 | Uganda

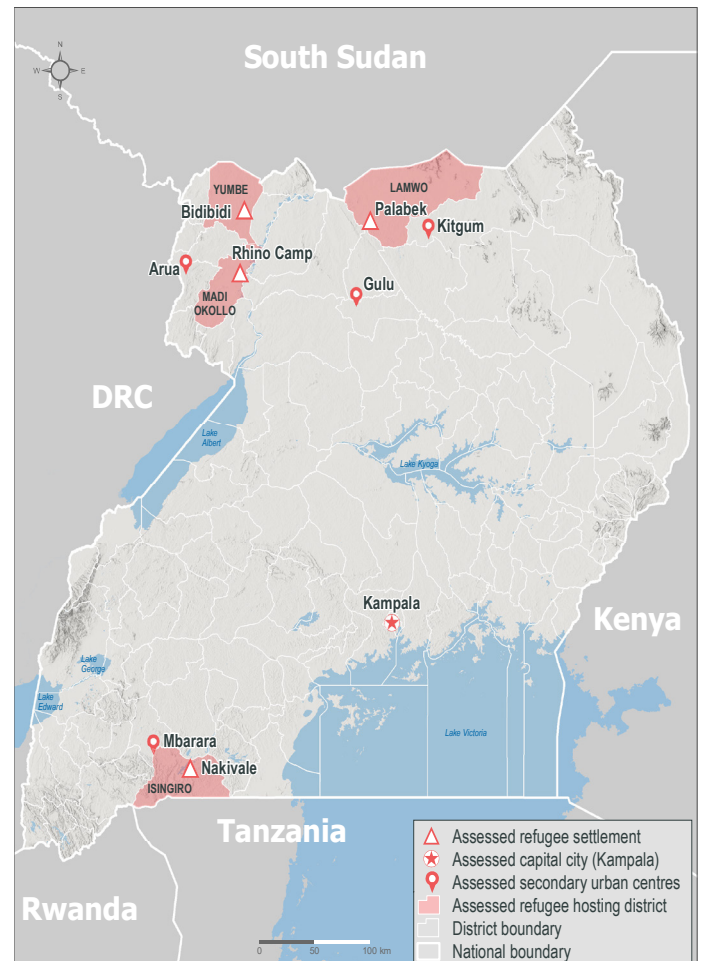
CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees. Approximately 1.5 million refugees are residing in Uganda at the time of writing, making Uganda the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa.¹ Most refugees are from South Sudan (roughly 60% of refugees) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (roughly 30%).² Refugees continue to arrive in Uganda, with continued influxes in the first half of 2023.

Uganda's progressive refugee policies have resulted in refugees being welcomed in settlements across the west and north of the country, with freedom of movement and the right to work. This has resulted in many refugees moving to various areas in Uganda, including the capital city Kampala and secondary cities such as Mbarara, Gulu, and Arua. Self-settled urban refugees are often assumed to have better opportunities for employment and self-reliance. However, according to the livelihoods assessment titled [The Realities of Self-reliance within the Ugandan Refugee Context](#) published by U-Learn and REACH in April 2023, the livelihood strategies and sources of income for the urban refugees are relatively unsustainable and unreliable.³

Following the aforementioned livelihoods assessment published in 2023, an in-depth assessment has been carried out in the city of Gulu to further understand the linkage between the movement intentions, role of remittances, and livelihood intentions among urban refugees. **Therefore, this assessment supplements the information already obtained from the livelihoods assessment.**

Map 1: Urban centers and settlements covered in the livelihoods assessment



KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of refugees living in the settlements appear to have **no intention of moving to an urban centre**. This is most likely due to a lack of financial capital to support living in urban areas without external financial assistance such as remittances. Expected changes in General Food Assistance (GFA) rations, however, may change these dynamics.
- The main barriers to sustainable livelihoods for refugees were identified to be **poor access to formal financial services and poor access to markets**, and **social networks play a key role** in mitigating limited access to these services and in facilitating urban migration.
- Access to remittances appear to be a pre-requisite** for many refugees' ability and willingness to self-settle in urban centres.
- For urban refugees receiving remittances, **remittances generally make up the majority of their total income**.
- In Gulu, **remittances were the most commonly reported source of income**, and are typically used to meet the basic needs of the household, as well as accessing services and paying rent.
- Urban refugees in Gulu expressed an interest in **starting a business in Uganda**.
- The majority of refugees in Gulu are **registered as refugees**, though approximately a quarter of respondents had not passed through a settlement, meaning they will likely not have any refugee documentation.

Livelihoods Assessment

The geographic scope of the assessment covered nine locations, consisting of four refugee settlements (Bidibidi, Nakivale, Palabek, and Rhino Camp) and five urban centers (Kampala, Arua, Gulu, Kitgum, and Mbarara). Data collection took place during October and November 2022. Urban locations were selected through a review of secondary sources and consultations with actors engaged with urban refugees. Data collection methods consisted of 2,559 structured household surveys, 36 focus group discussions, 36 in-depth interviews (IDI), 18 participatory workshops, and key informant interviews (KII).

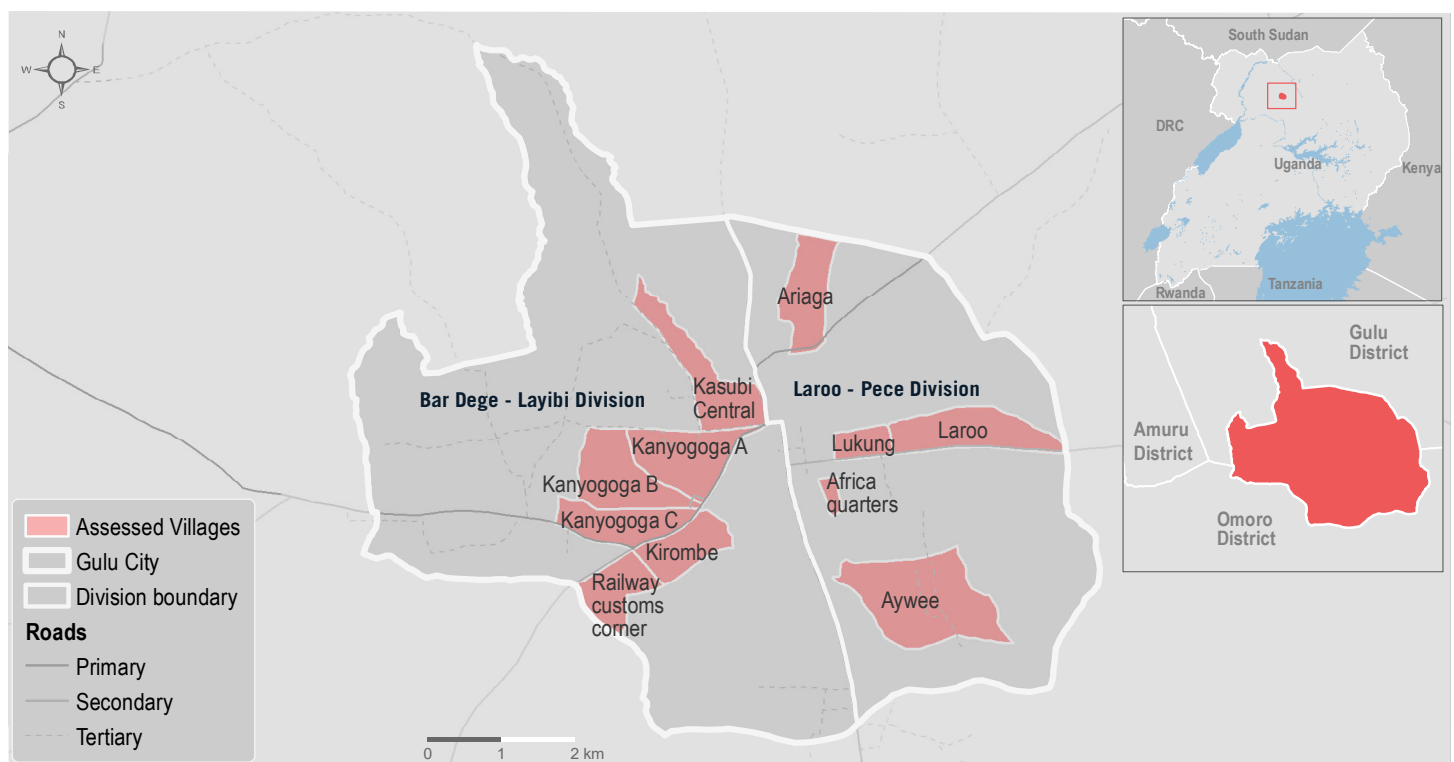
Limitations related to the quantitative data included that the data cannot be weighted, because the population sizes of urban refugees in secondary urban areas are unknown. As a result, aggregated data is not representative, and findings should be taken as indicative only. Moreover, data collection was conducted purposively in two locations (Gulu and Kitgum), as collection could not be carried out randomly. Finally, no strict definition of refugees was enforced for the assessment, thus households that some may consider as migrants are included in the sample. More details of the methodology can be found in the [livelihoods assessment report](#).

Gulu Case Study

The data collection method for the assessment was exclusively qualitative and consisted of 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 60 in-depth interviews (IDIs) carried out by REACH during the month of March 2023 through purposive sampling. KIIs were conducted with implementing partners identified through the livelihoods assessment, those implementing livelihood activities or providing support to the refugees. KIIs were also conducted with Gulu city government officials, such as the city economic planner, to gain a government perspective about the refugees in the city. Community leaders were also interviewed to better understand the opinions of those in close contact with the refugees.

IDIs were identified through the prior livelihood assessment and interviews with key informants, with community leaders acting as focal points in identifying members of the community for interviews. After data collection and data analysis was completed, the qualitative findings were triangulated with the quantitative analysis on movement intentions conducted during the livelihood assessment. Limitations include the inability for the findings to be considered representative of the urban refugee population, due to the purposive nature of the sampling, and the lack of knowledge regarding the exact population of urban refugees in secondary urban centres. Details of the methodology can be found in the [terms of reference](#).

Gulu Assessment Coverage



FINDINGS

Movement Intentions

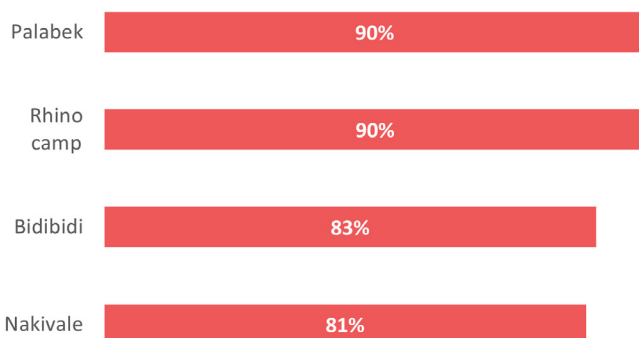
Quantitative analysis was conducted as part of the livelihoods assessment in an effort to better understand the movement patterns and intentions of both urban refugees living in cities and refugees residing in settlements. More analysis on this can be found in the [REACH Analysis of Refugee Movement Patterns and Remittances](#). Overall, 89% of refugee households in the covered settlements expressed no interest in moving to an urban center. Regarding their movement intentions, 21% of settlement-based refugee households reported having plans to move somewhere else within Uganda besides an urban center, while 2% did report having plans to move to an urban center. Respondents were also asked if they had or would ever consider leaving their settlements.³ As shown in the below table, the majority of households would never consider moving to an urban center (56%), while 11% had considered or were considering moving elsewhere, but not to an urban center.

Figure 1: Percentage of settlement-based refugee households by movement intention

Planning to move to an urban center	2%
Planning to move elsewhere (not an urban center)	21%
Currently considering to move to an urban center	0%
Considered moving to an urban center	1%
Considered or considering to move elsewhere (not an urban center)	11%
Would consider moving to an urban center	9%
Would never consider moving to an urban center	56%

More specifically, settlement-based refugees who had not considered moving to an urban center were asked if they or their household would ever consider moving to a city or town in Uganda, outside of the settlements. The majority, 86%, reported that they would not consider doing this, while 13% reported they would consider moving to an urban area within Uganda. This is shown in the following graph disaggregated per settlement:

Figure 2: Percentage of households willing to relocate to a city or town in Uganda, outside of the settlement



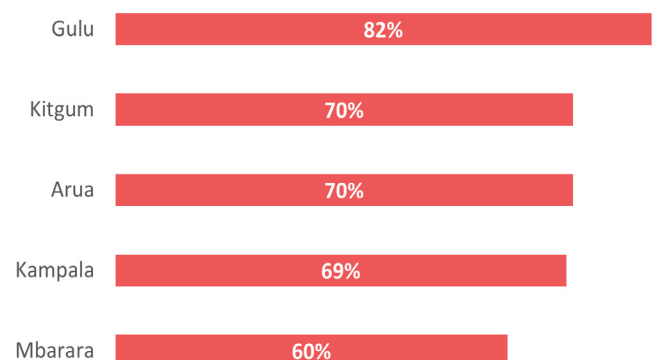
Factors impacting movement

Quantitative data from the livelihoods assessment, therefore, indicates that the majority of settlement-based refugees do not have intentions of moving to urban centers within Uganda, and would not consider moving in the future.³ Reasons for this included not knowing anyone there (37%), none or worse access to assistance in cities (37%), none or worse access to land in cities (31%), none or worse access to services in cities (29%), among others.* Additionally, refugees may not have the financial capital to support living in urban areas without external financial assistance and support. FGDs conducted during the livelihoods assessment confirmed this, with the majority of groups with refugees in the settlements mentioning the cost of shelter, land, and services in urban areas as key deterring factors for urban migration.³ Considering the upcoming GFA ration cuts, it will be necessary to monitor the outcomes of this major development on the most vulnerable refugees' mobility trends, given the possible difficulties of life in the settlements with less support.

The top three most commonly reported push factors from settlements among urban refugee households who reported having lived in a settlement consisted of limited access to education (69%), limited access to healthcare (58%), and limited availability of food (31%).* Similarly, the top three most commonly reported pull factors among urban refugees to their current place of residence included access to education (68%), access to healthcare (46%), and availability of food (25%).* Research conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre suggests that of their respondents who required medical attention while in Kampala, the majority of them sought medical attention in private hospitals (61%), and that the majority of them paid for medical services (84%).⁴ Reasons for this could include the need to access different kinds of care, or difficulties with documentation and accessing public services.

Moreover, urban refugees who had lived in a settlement at some point were asked if they or their household ever travelled back to the settlement, and overall 70% reported to travel back to the settlements, while 30% did not. The below graph provides this data disaggregated by each urban center:

Figure 3: Percentage of households reporting travelling back to the settlement

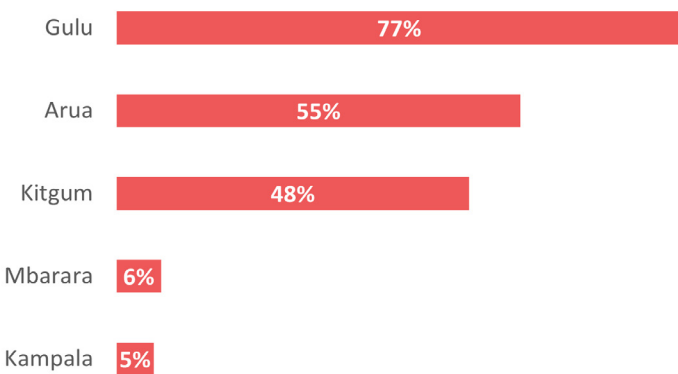


* Multiple choice: total can exceed 100%

Of those who reported travelling from the urban centers to the settlements, 48% of respondents reported doing so approximately once a month, while 39% reported approximately less than once a month. Of those travelling back to settlements approximately once a month, those travelling most frequently were living in Arua, Gulu and Kitgum.

Respondents were also asked if they or a different household member ever travelled back to their home country. Of those living in urban centers, a total of 63% of respondents reported never travelling to their home countries, while 37% reported in the affirmative. The below graph details the data disaggregated per urban center.

Figure 4: Percentage of households reporting travelling back to their home country



As is visible in the above graph, there are considerable variations between urban centers, with very few of those living in Mbarara (6%) and Kampala (5%) reporting travelling back to their country of origin, while 77% of those living in Gulu reporting travelling to countries of origin. The proximity of Gulu, Arua, and Kitgum to the South Sudanese border is likely a contributing factor in this, making it easier for households to travel to and across the border. Additionally, when asked regarding the frequency of these travels to their country of origin, 26% of those living in urban centers reported travelling back approximately once a month, while 61% reported this to take place approximately less than once a month.

When asked for what reasons the urban refugees or their households travel to their country of origin, **the majority of those staying in urban areas reported wanting to see their friends and family**, with the highest percentage being those living in Gulu (73%), and the lowest in Kampala (50%). Other reasons provided included accessing services such as healthcare, to work, and to assess the situation in order to determine if the conflict is still ongoing.

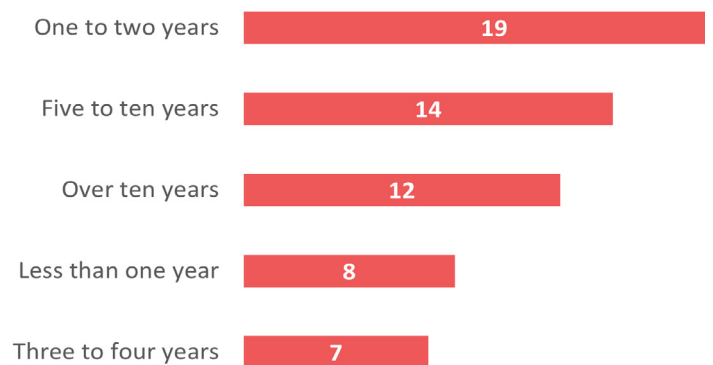
With regards to the Gulu case study, the majority of IDI respondents (48/60) were female, of which four were classified as being elderly, and two classified as being persons with special needs. The remaining 12

respondents were male. Finding a balanced rather than a proportionate representation of male and female respondents proved challenging to identify throughout the process, possibly due to the high number of males working in their country of origin, thus resulting in a higher number of females living in the secondary urban centers compared to males. The fact that the refugee population in secondary urban centres is predominantly female could raise some particular protection challenges. According to the Cities Alliance Arua Census, female-headed households are also more likely to struggle to financially provide for their families, thus potentially forcing their young daughters into early marriage or even prostitution to support themselves.⁵

Of all IDI respondents, almost three-quarters (43/60) reported being registered refugees from settlements within the Kiryandongo, Lamwo, and Adjumani districts of Uganda. The quantitative movement analysis conducted for the livelihoods assessment confirms this data, with 67% of all surveyed urban refugees reporting having lived in a settlement in Uganda before settling in their current cities, thus indicating they were likely registered. In Gulu specifically, 69% of respondents reporting living in a refugee settlement in Uganda prior to settling, and 31% reported never having lived in a settlement in Uganda.³

The remaining 17 unregistered refugee IDI respondents included those waiting to receive a registered status, those who applied for registered status and were rejected, and those arriving directly from neighboring countries without having gone through the registration process. Of the total number of IDI respondents (60), the majority were from South Sudan (53), while those remaining were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (4), Sudan (2) and Somalia (1). The below graph displays the time spent in Gulu at the time of being interviewed, as reported by interviewed respondents.

Figure 5: Time spent in Gulu, by number of respondents



When asked about their future movement plans, almost all IDI respondents indicated planning to remain in Uganda for five to ten years, while four respondents indicated plans for leaving Uganda in the near future. Some respondents reported their plans for staying or leaving Uganda being dependent upon specific circumstances,

including waiting for peace in their countries of origin, waiting for their children to complete education, or waiting for improved health.

"If all goes well and there is peace in my country, I will go back to South Sudan though I don't know when. I will stay here until SSD is safe."

-female urban refugee, Lukung

Within the Gulu case study, respondents were asked about the factors impacting their decisions to remain and leave Uganda. Overall, the majority of respondents referred to conflicts in their countries of origin as the reason for seeking safety in Uganda. Of other reasons provided, **the most commonly reported factor for remaining in Uganda among both IDI respondents and key informants was access to education, followed by healthcare.** This supports the findings from the livelihoods assessment, highlighting the importance of having access to services.³

"I came to Gulu first because of schooling for the children, the children have grown but the schooling in the camps is not good."

-female urban refugee, Ariaga

IDI respondents in Gulu in addition to respondents from the livelihoods assessment reported access to healthcare as being the second most commonly mentioned factor.³ Key informants also highlighted the importance of security and peacefulness in the area. Livelihoods assessment respondents in Gulu additionally reported the availability and price of food (32% and 11%, respectively) and conflicts between groups in the settlement (9%) as significant factors.³ In contrast, IDI respondents and key informants mentioned access to employment, proximity to family, and good weather as other reasons for staying in their current location.

Regarding factors impacting their movement away from Uganda, most IDI respondents indicated that the length of their stay would depend on the status of conflicts in their country of origin, with the conflict in South Sudan being the most commonly mentioned.

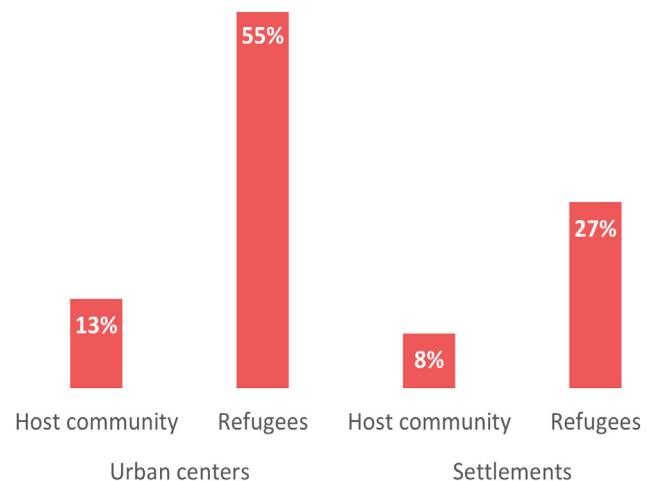
Respondents expressed a desire to return as soon as the conflicts were resolved. However, the majority of interviewed key informants (9/10) suggested that the main reason for urban refugees wanting to leave Uganda would be employment opportunities, followed by the need for a more affordable life and freedom.

Livelihoods

Livelihood Activities

The livelihood activities of households in urban centers are diverse, with no particular activity being most commonly reported. However, within urban centers, refugees were found to be especially likely to rely on remittances and support from friends and family for their income. Within the livelihoods assessment, 17% of the urban refugee households reported not engaging in any livelihood activities, and 66% reported receiving remittances or other sources of support from family and friends as a source of income in the 30 days prior to data collection.³ **Among those urban refugees (66%), the median contribution of remittances and support to the total income was 55%. This suggests a high reliance on external financial support for refugee self-settlement in urban areas, which may also suggest economic vulnerability** considering that financial support originating from South Sudan may not be sustainable.

Figure 6: Percentage of median contribution of remittances as income sources per respondents



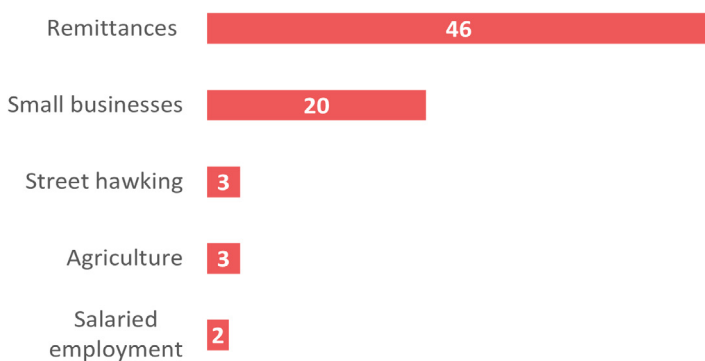
Barriers to livelihoods

The main barriers to sustainable livelihoods among urban refugees and host communities were found to be limited access to formal financial services and markets. Urban refugees were found to be particularly affected by limited access to formal financial services, despite improved availability compared to those in the settlements. Formal financial services are of high importance as the informal service providers accessible to many of the households are often not able to extend loans that are large enough to facilitate meaningful livelihood investments. IDI respondents and participatory workshop participants also noted high interest rates and demands for collateral, as well as discrimination and issues with documentation. **Respondents highlighted the importance of documentation in being able to access financial services,** limiting urban refugees' ability to take out formal loans and negatively impacting their ability to invest in their livelihoods in a self-sustaining manner.

Regarding access to markets, urban refugees were also found to be heavily reliant upon social networks and connections with other refugees in order to access employment, services, finance, and buyers. Respondents were reported to rely heavily on their social connections with each other and host community members in order to negotiate access to customers and buyers. According to the Refugee Studies Centre, social connections and networks are extremely important for refugee livelihoods, even more so than humanitarian aid.⁶ Dependency upon social networks, however, could prove harmful as social networks can be exclusionary.³

This is supported by findings from the Gulu case study, with the most commonly reported sources of income among IDI respondents being remittances, while income-generating activities were less commonly reported as being main sources of income. Aside from receiving remittances, interviewed respondents also reported engaging in small businesses, including the selling of food, table mats, soap, and weaving baskets. Fewer interviewed respondents reported working in agriculture, or working within the formal sector. Key informants confirmed this, with some reporting urban refugees to also be involved with theft and prostitution.

Figure 7: Most commonly reported sources of income, by number of respondents (multiple answers possible)



Preferred Livelihood Activities

When asked about their preferred livelihood activities, two thirds of the Gulu case study IDI respondents (39/60) expressed a desire to start their own business, including opening restaurants, tailoring businesses, grocery shops and rental property businesses. Nine respondents reported wanting to work within the agriculture sector, while others wanted to return to education and obtain salaried employment. This was confirmed by interviewed key informants.

"I would want to get into large scale agriculture and selling produce here in Gulu. I think if we do this in my household, we'll be able to meet some if not all of our needs."

-Male urban refugee, Kasubi

Moreover, the majority of IDI respondents expressed a desire to pursue their preferred livelihood activities within Gulu, citing reasons including safety, stability, market conditions, and increased access to education for their children. Eleven respondents reported wanting to pursue these activities elsewhere, most commonly in their country of origin, due to having more familiarity with the location, relatives to assist with their businesses, and knowledge of the local language.

Barriers to pursuing livelihood activities

A large majority (50/60) of IDI respondents in Gulu indicated that the biggest barrier to pursuing their preferred livelihood activities was limited access to capital, combined with increasing prices.

"The issue is the increase in renting and school fees. What my husband is giving is not enough especially these days when things in Uganda are getting expensive."

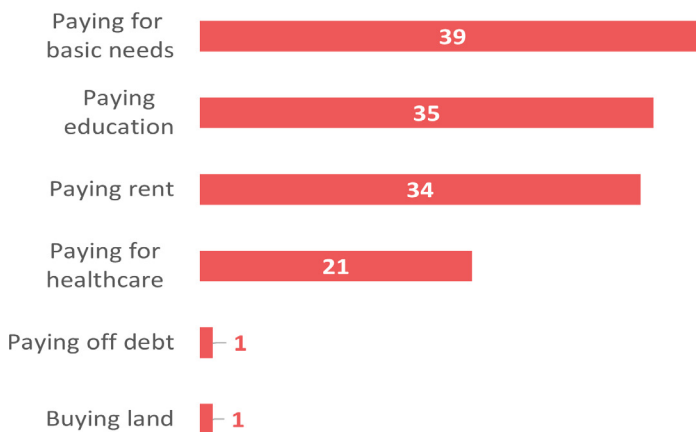
- female urban refugee, Kanyagoga

Despite a large number of urban refugees reporting receiving remittances, it is clear that the amount they receive is often insufficient to pursue their preferred livelihood activities. Other IDI respondents cited additional challenges, including poor market conditions, limited access to land, education and skills, and a lack of resources. Some respondents expressed concerns about feeling like outsiders in the wider community, and a small number were fearful of lack of acceptance. One key informant highlighted that Gulu has experienced an increase in child labor, which raises the risk of potential losses due to children being more vulnerable to being cheated or scammed, alongside the loss in education and development of the child.

Remittances

Most IDI respondents (46/60) within the Gulu case study were found to have received remittances from their countries of origin within the past 30 days, with the majority of these remittances originating from friends and family in South Sudan. This is supported by livelihoods assessment respondents, as 84% reported receiving remittances, while 16% did not.³ Additionally, findings from the livelihoods assessment show that 84% of urban refugees in Gulu are more commonly receiving remittances from outside Uganda.³ Moreover, 50% of livelihoods assessment respondents reported receiving money from family or friends in their home country approximately once a month, while 38% reported this to occur approximately less than once a month.³ Key informants echoed this, with most reporting urban refugees regularly received remittances. It should be noted that a number of IDI respondents expressed feeling uncomfortable commenting on whether they receive remittances, mostly due to fear of assistance being cut, or due to shame.

Figure 8: Remittances per type of usage, by number of respondents (multiple answers possible)



Of those reported to be receiving remittances, both IDI respondents and key informants noted the most common use of remittances to be paying for basic needs (including food, clothing, and the paying of bills), paying for education, rent, and healthcare. **The regularity with which most urban refugees in Gulu receive remittances, combined with the way in which the remittances are used to pay for basic needs (including food and clothing), education and healthcare, suggests a heavy reliance upon remittances to fund their living expenses.** This is particularly salient when considering findings from the livelihoods assessment whereby the median contribution of remittances and support to the total income was 55% for many urban refugees (66%).³

“Yes, there are some people who receive remittances. There is no way someone can live here in town without support from somewhere else, although our people may deny, they get money from somewhere else because life is expensive here.”

-key informant, youth leader

When asked if the remittances contribute to consumption or investment, interviewed informants reported urban refugees to mainly use their remittances on consumption rather than investment, noting that the money they receive is not enough to cover both paying for goods and investing in housing, land or other ventures.

Impact on movement intentions

When asked whether receiving remittances had influenced their movement intentions and plans, **over half of IDI respondents receiving remittances (27/46) reported their intentions to remain in Gulu, citing that without the remittances they would not be able to afford to stay and pay for their rent, school bills, and basic needs.** Most key informants, however, suggested that urban refugees would rather leave Uganda with their remittances, to access education or to pursue employment opportunities elsewhere due to a perception that livelihood activities are more prosperous outside of Uganda. A number of IDI respondents noted that

the impact of receiving remittances resulted in reduced levels of money being available for investment in their countries of origin, which could act as an incentive for refugees to return to their home countries and contribute to investment opportunities. Finally, nine IDI respondents reported their remittances to have had no impact on their movement intentions in any way, which could suggest that the amount received was not enough to influence movement in one way or another.

Impact on livelihood intentions

Interviewed key informants and IDI respondents reported that remittances had the impact of better educational opportunities, leading to an increase in employment opportunities. Other respondents reported a reduced incentive to work, with some considering it unnecessary to seek employment with a regular flow of money from abroad. On the other hand, a number of IDI respondents reported claiming that remittances resulted in an increased incentive to find employment, as many respondents reported the amount received through their remittances to not be enough to cover their monthly expenses.

“The remittances act as first aid and not enough to do income generating activity or any extra thing from it.”

- female urban refugee, African Quarters

Conclusion

The main barriers to livelihood activities for urban refugees primarily were found to be limited access to formal financial services and markets. Respondents placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of documentation in order for refugees to access financial services, as well as highlighting the importance of social connections for refugees to access employment, services, and finances. Surprisingly, access to services such as education and healthcare played a significant role in attracting urban refugees, despite the availability of free services in settlements. Urban refugees rely heavily on regular remittances, which raises questions about their self-reliance and resilience.

Regarding movement intentions, data indicates that the majority of settlement-based refugees do not intend to move to urban centers within Uganda and would not consider moving in the future. Due to upcoming GFA ration cuts, it will be necessary to monitor the outcomes of this development on the most vulnerable refugees' mobility trends, given the possible difficulties of life in the settlements with less support. Urban refugees in northern regions tend to travel between urban cities and their countries of origin more frequently than those in the south. In Gulu, refugees were found to heavily depend on remittances to meet basic needs, access services, and pay rent, while limited access to capital and rising prices hindered refugees from starting their own businesses. In terms of movement intentions, the majority of refugees had been in Gulu for over a year, and expressed a desire to return to their countries of origin once the security situation changes.

ENDNOTES

1. UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal", see [here](#).
2. UNHCR, "Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Portal," see [here](#).
3. REACH & U-LEARN, "The Realities of Self-Reliance within the Ugandan Refugee Context", see [here](#).
4. Mixed Migration Centre, "4Mi Cities: Data Collection on Urban Mixed Migration, Kampala City report", see [here](#).
5. Cities Alliance, "Census of Migrants and host Communities", see [here](#).
6. Refugee Studies Centre, "Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions", see [here](#).

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).