

Challenges of Economic Integration of Urban Refugees in Kampala City, Uganda

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Abstract

Uganda ranks among the top ten refugee hosting countries globally, hosting over 1.85 million refugees in March 2025 of which 8.5 percent live in Kampala capital city. Uganda received 98,232 refugees in 2023 of which 49.3% arrived in Kampala. The refugees arriving in Uganda are fleeing conflict and adverse effects of climate change. Other refugees are shifting from settlements in rural areas due to the dwindling support from government to urban areas in hope of better life. This study examined the socio-economic integration of refugees in Kampala city specifically access to employment opportunities and economic participation. The study used a cross-sectional design and mixed methods approach. A self-administered questionnaire and key informant interviews were used to gather data from the refugees and local authorities respectively. Percentages and thematic analysis were used to analyze quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Results indicate that socially, refugees are easily accepted and absorbed in the communities in Kampala city but the stiff competition from the local population for jobs and business opportunities is a barrier to economic integration. Refugees with capital through remittances from their home countries are faring well in business and employing locals and other refugees. The Covid-19 pandemic however has reduced remittances and led to job loss and business collapse. Besides, the need for work permits and restrictions to travel outside of the country has limited access to jobs and business opportunities. The government of Uganda should clearly interpret the law on access to employment for refugee to enable them access work. The government and donor agencies should craft economic interventions for empowering the urban refugees just as for rural refugees.

Key words; Economic integration, employment, economic participation, Urban refugees.

Introduction

Integration of refugees is one of the most crucial and pressing challenges to refugees, host communities, national governments and international community globally. This concern arises from the governments as they seek durable solutions for Urban refugees. Socio-economic integration of urban refugees is earnestly the genuine integration of urban refugees. Extant literature stress that economic integration is crucial as it leads to self-reliance of urban refugees, (Kobia & Cranfield, 2009). Socio-economic integration is critical in urban refugees because of lack of family, community and government support rendered for contrast with

refugees encamped in the rural refugee's settlement. Self-reliance is about individualized responsibility for economic wellbeing and social security (IIED, 2017). Self-reliance implies participation in economic activities (Mwangu, 2022). Thus, many governments seek to ensure that urban refugees do not depend on assistant long term.

The forcibly displaced persons are a serious problem globally with 122.6 million people displaced of which 71% are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2015a). The displaced persons face economic deprivation, poverty, discrimination, lack of legal recognition among others. Sadly, the number of forcibly displaced persons is progressively increasing every year circumscribed by persecution, conflicts and environmental upheavals in different parts of the world. For example, the world had 117.3 million forcibly displaced persons by the end of December 2023 representing an increase of 8% or 2 million people when compared to the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2015a). The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region) hosted 5.2 million refugees and asylum seekers; and 18.9 million internally displaced persons at the end of February 2025 (UNHCR, 2025c). These refugees originate from IGAD members countries facing conflict namely, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan and beyond i.e. Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Syrian Arab Republic (UNHCR, 2025b).

Uganda a IGAD member state is the leading host refugee hosting country in Africa with 1,858,060 refugees and asylum seekers i.e. 1,820, 047 refugees and 38,013 asylum seekers (Table 1) of whom 157,378 (8.5%) are urban refugees living in Kampala city (Table 2) by the end of March- 2025 (UNHCR, 2025c). Urban refugees refer to refugees whose habitual area of residence is government designated urban areas, as opposed to a camp or settlement (Jacobsen, 2006: 274). Uganda's refugee policy specifies that refugees must reside in formally defined settlements to access protection and material support (UNHCR, 2019, p.72). This implies that urban refugees have to craft their own livelihoods without external support. Consequently, all refugees residing in urban areas have to find their own means of survival. The urban refugees in Uganda are expected to be self-reliant and for this matter, very limited humanitarian assistance is available in Kampala (Ryan, 2018:10). The refugees who fail to sustain themselves in urban areas are advised to revert to settlements where they can access support. Consequently, most of urban refugees are needy, lacking basic needs and thereby exposing themselves to other vulnerabilities (Tippens, 2019; Enock et al., 2023). Nonetheless, refugees are closely knit in Uganda and Kampala's economies, attracting goods, people (market) and people from outside the country to the internal local market (Bettes, et al., 2014). This implies that refugees are an asset in the country's economy. Indeed, Anyanzu & Nicole De Wet-Billings (2002:98) observe that a substantial number of refugees and asylum seekers dwell in Kampala in contrast to rural settlements areas. Nonetheless, majority of urban refugees in Kampala are lining in appalling in poverty, face unemployment and unfavorable living conditions.

Uganda is rated among the countries with the most favorable environments in the world for refugees as refugees are permitted to offer labor services, set up businesses and free movement in diverse spaces countrywide (Bohnet & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2019; Crawford et al., 2019). The refugees also access the government provided free universal primary education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE) and health care. These rights are rarely granted as refugees in many countries of arrival are viewed as competitors for scarce resources and jobs (Tessa, 2018; Bohnet & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2019). Our attention on Uganda is due to the swelling arrival of refugees from neighboring countries, for example Democratic Republic of Congo where over 46,000 arrivals were registered between January and April, 2025 (UNHCR, 2025c) and how the urban refugees are integrating socio-economically.

Table 1: Refugees and Asylum Seekers population in Uganda by country of origin as at 31st March 2025

Country of origin	Population	Percentage
South Sudan	994,247	53.5%
Dem. Rep. of the Congo	593,511	31.9%
Sudan	75,424	4.1%
Eritrea	58,977	3.2%
Somalia	50,662	2.7%
Burundi	43,676	2.4%
Rwanda	24,398	1.3%
Ethiopia	15,260	0.8%
Others	1,905	0.1%

Source: (UNHCR, 2025c)

Urban refugees are varied and complex with unique challenges that they have to overcome in order to access services (Kobia & Cranfield, 2009, Palacios, et al., 2024). Urban refugees live alongside the urban poor and are equally exposed to exploitative practices by land lords, difficulties affording rent (O’Loughlen & Bwami, 2018) and having survival. The urban refugees have not been extensively studied. Perhaps a major factor in the lack of scholarly attention to this subject is the UNHCR's hesitancy to take on the urban problem, despite being a major participant in the global "management" of refugees in many host nations. Kampala, the capital and biggest city of Uganda is currently the fifth largest local government and top most urban area (Table 2) hosting refugees and asylum seekers in the country (UNHCR, 2025c). Statistics on urban refugees in Uganda is fragmented and the exact figures are not clearly known. This affects effective planning including budgeting and designing innovative strategies in addition to policy formulation. Refugees are inspired to settle in urban areas because of the need to access better education and social services and employment opportunities (Dryden-Peterson 2006; Bukuluki et al., 2020). Consequently, the increasing refugee population in Kampala reflect the rising global trend of refugee urbanization, as refugees are more and more likely to end up in urban areas rather than camps, attracted by similar benefits (Jacobsen 2006). This study examined the socio-economic barriers that limit refugees’ participation in formal and informal economic sectors; and evaluated the coping and adaptive strategies employed by urban refugees to navigate economic challenges in Kampala’s informal economy.

Table 2: Refugees and Asylum Seekers population in Uganda by host district as at 31st March 2025

District	Population	Percentage
Madi Okollo & Terego	248,736	13.4%
Isingiro	246,100	13.3%
Adjumani	230,185	12.4%
Yumbe	206,626	11.1%
Kampala city	157,378	8.5%
Kiryandongo	148,422	8.0%
Kikuube	147,369	7.9%
Obongi	139,334	7.5%
Kyegegwa	134,021	7.2%
Kamwenge	101,797	5.5%
Lamwo	90,047	4.9%
Koboko	6,332	0.3%

Source: (UNHCR, 2025c)

Theoretical perspective

The study benefits from the remits of the “Capability Approach” developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) The Capability approach hypothesizes that a person should have freedoms to attain wellbeing and that this freedom must be understood in terms of capabilities i.e. real opportunities and possibilities a person has to achieve the kind of wellbeing or life they value. It recognizes that people’s diversity, individual agency and environmental and social factors form those real possibilities and opportunities. The Capability Approach contends that these factors govern a person’s real wellbeing, rather than the dominant metrics often used by aid agencies, such as goods, income wealth, etc. Even when the refugees are given the same opportunities like the host population such as equal wealth, income or goods will not automatically have equal wellbeing as actual possibilities and opportunities to translate goods into wellbeing will contrast due to environmental and social factors. Apparently, urban refugees in Kampala should have substantive freedom, opportunities and possibilities such as access to all employment opportunities, access to economic empowerment programmes offered by the state and non-state actors just like the local residents in order fully integrate and achieve the kind of wellbeing/life they value. This will ensure self-reliance and durable solutions rather than long-term aid.

Methodology

Study area: The study was carried out in Kampala City that functions as the political and economic capital of Uganda. Consequently, it an economic hub with a population of 4.3 million people. Kampala city covering a 189km² is divided into five political divisions namely Rubaga, Kawempe, Kampala Central, Nakawa and Makindye all of which host refugees. The area is densely populated with 22,500 per square kilometer with government health service scarce and low quality while the private services are vibrant and of good quality but expensive. Therefore, the refugees have to dig deep in their pockets to acquire the good services but with limited employment opportunities, they remain deprived.

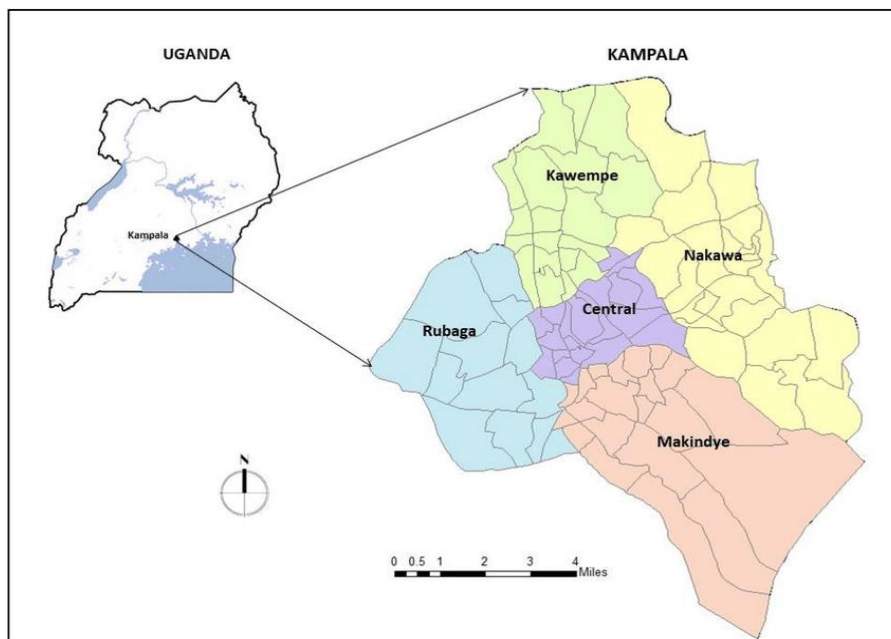


Fig. 1. Map of Kampala City

Participants were selected from a cross section of the community including the refugees, their leaders of refugees of different nationalities and local leaders of the host communities. Data was corrected from them at one point in time Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in order to complement each other.

The sample was collected from urban refugees who are 18 years and older because these are the ones allowed to work as well as benefit from economic empowerment programmes. Respondents were drawn from Ethiopian, Somali, Sudanese, Congolese, South Sudanese, Eritreans and Burundian refugee communities. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) a total of 391 participants responded to questionnaire while seventeen local authorities (including leaders of refugee of participating nationalities and leaders of host communities) were interviewed because they had deeper information of the refugee situation. Quantitative data was collected from refugees using a questionnaire while qualitative data was gathered from local authorities through Key Informant Interviews. Respondents were drawn from Kisenyi I & II, Kansanga, Namuwongo, Nsambya, Mengo and Katwe I. Due to the transient nature, the urban refugees were accessed through snowball sampling. The local authorities linked us to the leaders of the various refugee communities, who then linked us to their members who were willing to participate in the study. The questionnaire was pretested while a content analysis was done for the interview guide. Due to language problems, seven research assistants (one each from each nationality) were trained and conducted the data collection. The quantitative data was analyzed using percentages while qualitative data from interviews was analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 and Table 3 show the profiles of respondents. Fifty three percent of the respondents were male while 47 percent were female. Eritrean refugees were reluctant to participate due to political sensitivities, fear and suspicion of being exposed to their countries that would presumably jeopardize their status.

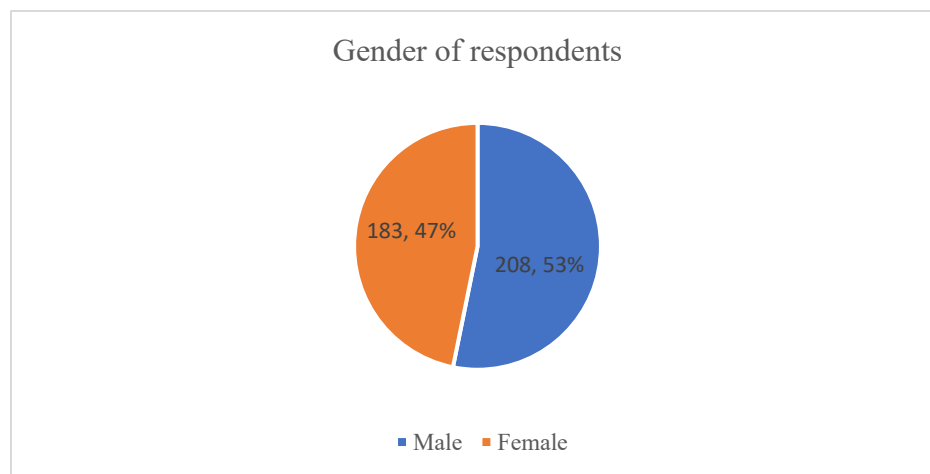


Fig. 2: Gender of respondents

Source: Authors' fieldwork

Table 3 Gender of respondents according to nationality

Nationality	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Somali	39	37	76	19
South Sudanese	39	34	73	19
Congolese	37	35	72	18
Ethiopian	38	33	71	18
Burundian	28	31	59	15
Sudanese	15	8	23	6
Eritrea	12	5	17	4

Source: Authors' fieldwork

Figure 2 indicates that a bigger number of respondents (42%) have been living in Kampala for more than five years resulting to protracted refugee situations. Refugees in this category cited limited opportunities to return home, continuous instability in their countries of origin that has limited voluntary repatriation, and lack of prospects for resettlement in a third country. A relatively big proportion of respondents i.e. 23 percent and 14 percent have been in Uganda for 1-2 years; and less than a year respectively. This points to the increase in new arrivals in Kampala over the past two years compared to 17 percent of refugees who have stayed in Kampala for 2-5 years. Some of the new arrivals in Kampala are indeed transferring from settlements to the urban area motivated by the need of better social services while others are from Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan escaping the ongoing civil conflict there. A local authority of Katwe noted that “considering the 2-5 years period, some refugees have relocated from Kampala to settlements that are located in rural areas due to failure to survive independently and a few of them have been lucky and got asylum in a third country”.

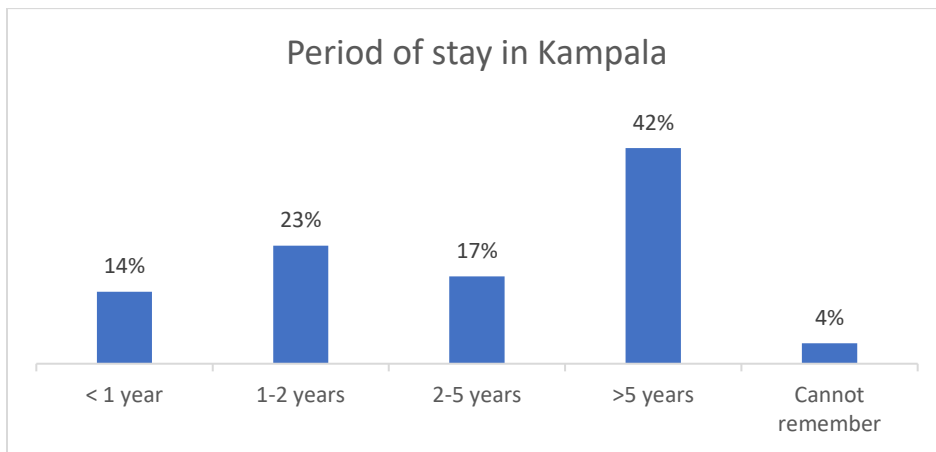


Fig. 3 Period of stay in Kampala
Source: Authors' fieldwork

In regard to access to income, 58% of the respondents observed that they were not earning income while 42% confirmed that they were earning (Figure 3). This is explained by the big number of arrivals over the last two years majority of whom have not got jobs. In Figure 4, 48 percent of the people earning income are self employed and engaged in small business, 43 percent receive irregular payments because of the casual nature of their jobs while 31% receive regular payments

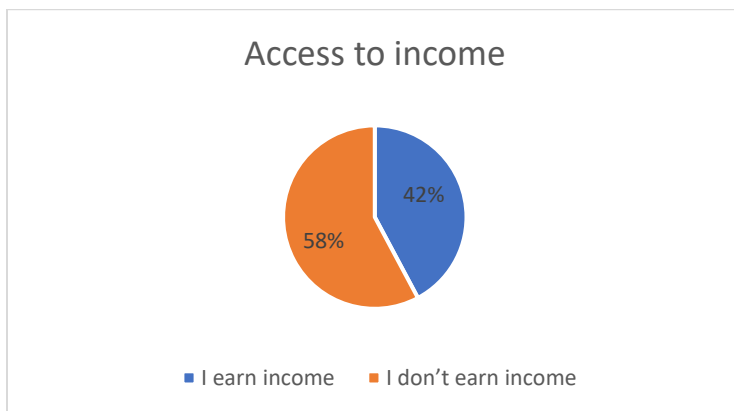


Fig. 4: Access to income
Source: Authors' fieldwork

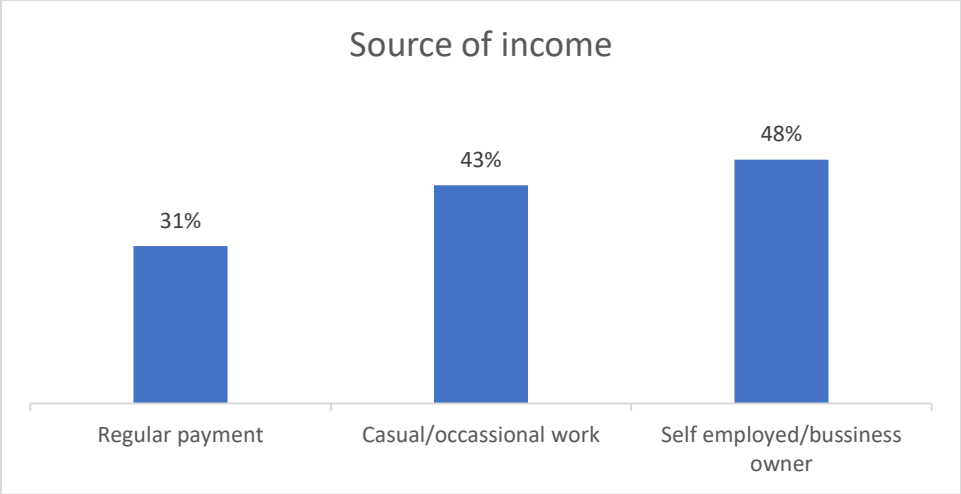


Fig. 5: Source of income
Source: Authors' fieldwork

Results indicate that 28 percent of respondents earn over 150\$ monthly, however a big number 46 percent receive between 50-100\$ monthly which is equivalent to the average income of the majority of the local population in Kampala city (Figure 5). With families, food and housing costs, the monthly income received is an indicator that refugees are languishing in poverty and struggling to survive just like the majority of their host. Some of the income for the refugees is received from remittances from relatives in countries of origins and other parts of the world.

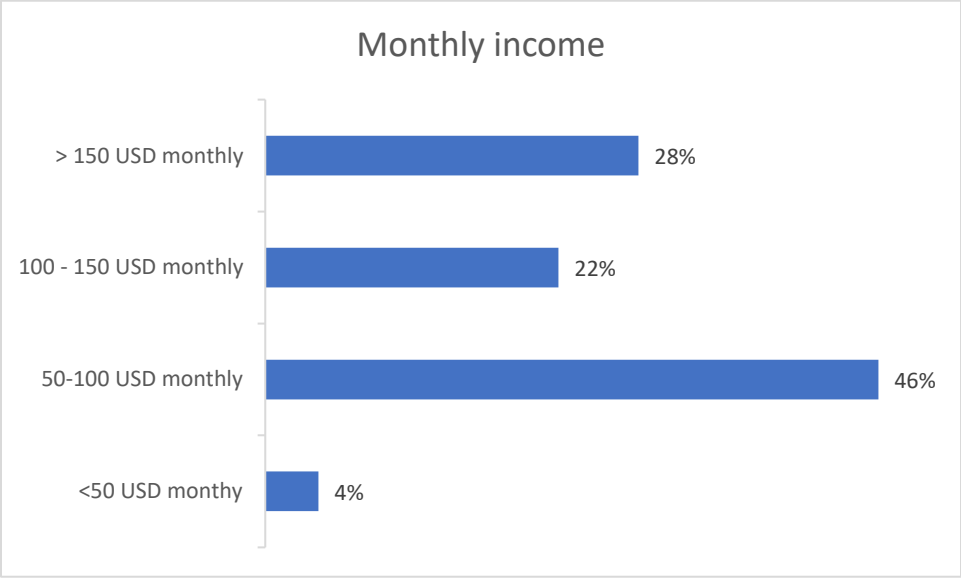


Fig. 6: Monthly income
Source: Authors' fieldwork

Twenty two percent of the respondents revealed that with the joint income received by all family members, they are always able to cover their basic needs, 44 percent noted that sometimes they are earning enough to cover the needs of the households while 34 percent are not able to meet the needs of their households. Those who have funding gaps resort to borrowing from fellow refugees, reducing other expenses, reducing food

portions, begging, sending all family members including children, selling belongs, priorities feeding vulnerable family members. Reducing expenditure on essential items like health and food are coping strategies for families faced with low incomes worldwide (UN 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

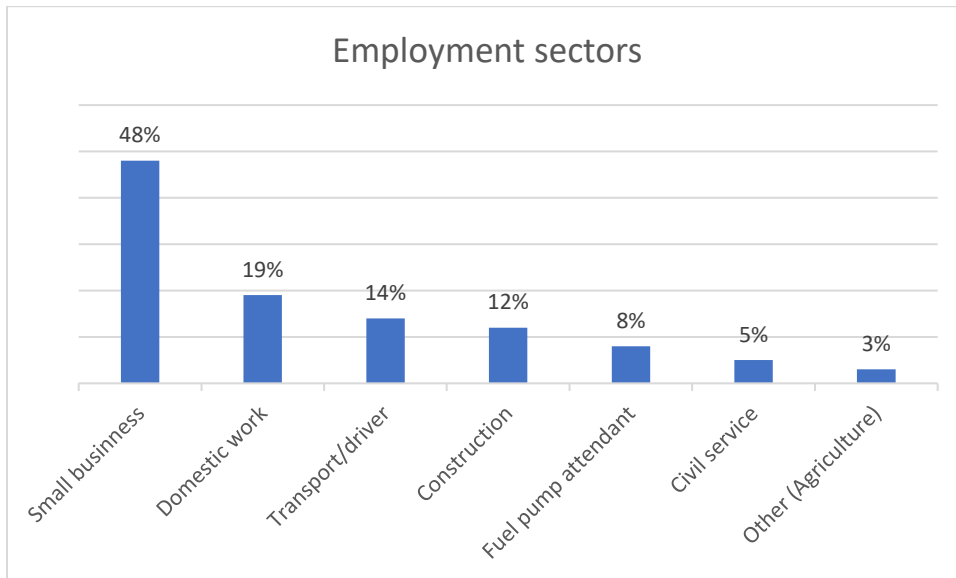


Fig. 7: Employment sectors for refugees

Source: Authors' fieldwork

Further analysis of data illustrates that a big number of respondents (48%) are engaged in small business followed by domestic workers who are working in homes of economically capable refugees, transport services and construction which categories are basically dominated by Somalis and Congolese. While civil service employs 5 percent who are basically teachers of Kiswahili and French languages as well as some health workers. A few Congolese and Burundians are engaged in Agriculture targeting food for home consumption. Some of the refugees noted lack of information on available jobs.

A refugee leader disclosed that,

“Majority of refugees have failed to get jobs because employers don't recognize their academic documents and qualifications. In the end, they are underemployed and doing work below their qualification and which below what they were doing before they were displaced”.

Another refugee leader noted that

“Affluent refugees who have succeeded in business employ a big number of refugees together with Ugandan”.

This implies that some refugees are self-reliant and after all not a burden to government. Vemuru et al. (2016) observed that refugees had boosted economic activities and creation employment for Uganda. At the same time Clements et al. (2016) discovered that in Kampala, one in five refugees employs non-family members and around 40% of the people employed by refugees are Ugandans.

The Refugees Act 2006 (Act 21) grants refugees to practice their qualified professions but the limited access to civil service jobs and formal employment limits the ability of the refugees to gainful employment and negate their contribution to sustainable socio-economic development envisaged in the Act. The Women Refugees Commission (2010); Addaney (2017) observe the challenges for urban refugees to access formal employment arise from the misinterpretation of the Refugees Act 2006 (Act 21) by government officials that a work permit is required just like other aliens. This makes the potential employers scary of employing

refugees and frustrating the refugees' changes of getting jobs. This does not only undermine Article 40 of the Constitution of Uganda (1995) that stipulate that all persons to be entitled to decent work and equality without discrimination but also limits the chances of improving their livelihoods.

Further analysis of data revealed that the main challenge for accessing employment and business is the lack of opportunities (52%) (Figure 7) followed by lack of capital (49%), competition with locals and lack of entrepreneurial skills that are necessary to startup, maintain and grow business in the event that capital is available. Other challenges hindering access to jobs and business is lack of academic qualifications, lack of work permits, discrimination and restriction on movements. Some refugees revealed that although the Refugees Act 2006 (Act 21) and corresponding and 2010 Refugee Regulations allow free movement of refugees, there are restrictions for example movement outside the country to East Africa and other parts of the world for trade is not possible limiting more profitable opportunities.

Although the Refugees Act 2006 (Act 21) and 2010 Refugee Regulations specify the rights to movement, refugees are unable to freely move across international borders to limited access to convectional documents. Indeed, Addaney (2017) observed that only refugees travelling on health grounds and resettlement are entitled to convectional documents that enable them to cross borders. Consequently, these restrictions encumber trading and business activities operated by urban refugees in Kampala who wish to trade in East African region and beyond just like the local traders.

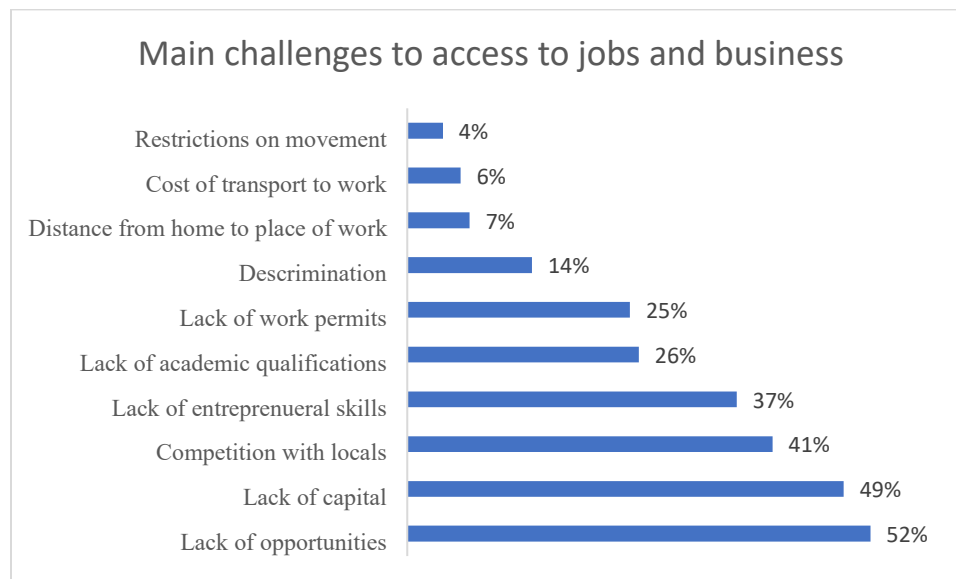


Fig. 8: Main challenges to access to jobs and business

Source: Authors' fieldwork

Further investigations revealed that 28% of respondents save money after spending on households while 72 percent don't save. The savings are made into bank accounts, informal saving groups especially with membership of refugee, Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCO) and Community Association of refugees. A total of 73 percent of respondents have access to mobile phone banking while 21 percent had access to final banking while 6 percent did not have access to any financial facility. In regard to loan services, 71% revealed that they don't have access to loan services, others received loans from mobile phone loans from phone companies, employers, informal money lenders, bank, family/friends and other community establishments.

In regard to economic empowerment programmes initiated by government, 91 percent of the participants had not accessed them because the local structure involved in the selection process of beneficiaries prioritize the nationals and explicitly claim that they are meant for the host communities. These are financial resources

to offset or boost small scale businesses among the grassroots communities who are largely poor. A leader for one refugee community said “The selection committees for Parish Development Model (PDM) programme have been discriminative against us. It has been unfair as they base on Local Council recommendations that prioritize their electorate to compete for the meagre resource envelope”. However, 42 percent claimed to have received food support from government and non-government organizations while 38 percent received employment support programmes such as vocational, market led and entrepreneurship skills training, start-up kits, micro-enterprise opportunities, linkage to employment opportunities although majority were disrupted by Covid-19.

Noted that social support systems through remittances especially cash transfers have been affected by job losses for their relatives in their countries of origin and the global north that was largely caused by Covid -19 pandemic. The refugees in Kampala confessed to having lost jobs themselves as well. One refugee community leader observed that “Even if the work or business environment is conducive, we don’t have capital to start up business. Our businesses suffered during Covid-19 lockdown and remittances reduced. This has affected our business and our wellbeing”. This concurs with the World Bank (2020) projections of a sharp decline in remittances in 2020 by about 20% due to Covid-19 induced economic crises. In addition, Bukuluki et al (2020) noted that urban refugees without social support networks and contingency livelihoods that serve as coping resources and shock absorbers are affected in different ways.

Conclusion

Urban refugees in Kampala are struggling to breakthrough into employment and business but they are facing many barriers. The safety nets were affected by Covid-19 pandemic and thus are no longer effective. Covid -19 led to loss of jobs of the refugees and their funders back home as well as in the diaspora. The Refugee Act 2006 allow free movement, access to work as well as non-discrimination but the contradictions in interpretation of the law by government official requiring work permits is not only discriminative and against the constitution but also a barrier to integration. In addition, non-recognition of academic documents by employers is a disadvantage to socio-economic integration of refugees in Kampala. Besides movement of refugeeed across borders for trade, business and employment is restricted by the lack of convectional travel documents limiting the extent of social economic integration. The benefits that come with reaching the markets directly are erased making the refugee owned businesses less competitive. Similarly access to employment and business for refugees is basically through safety nets. Remittances have reduced and what remains are entrepreneurial skills. However, self-reliance and durable solutions cannot be entirely entrepreneurial. The government policy is for urban refugees to be self-reliant with limited support, but the provisions of the 1995 constitution that grants equality and non-discrimination should be respected in respect of urban refugees. Besides excluding refugees from economic empowerment programmes is discriminative and puts them at a disadvantage. Lastly, the capabilities of refugees in Kampala are not fully constructed because of the loopholes in policy interpretation and other limitations discussed earlier affecting the environment where the refugees cannot live the kind of life they value.

Recommendations

- i. The government should give a clear interpretation of the Refugee Act 2006 and 2010 Refugees regulation in respect to the right of the refugees to work.
- ii. The government should recast the policy on urban refugees by including a provision to facilitate and support refugees to access self-reliance including economic integration for example access to jobs as this will widen the tax base.
- iii. The government and non-state actors should support and strengthen self-reliance initiatives for urban refugees through improving the right to movement in the region (i.e. the East African community and IGAD) and beyond, such that they can participate competitively in business and employment.
- iv. UNHCR should design complementary pathways for urban refugees such that their issues about wellbeing are not marginalized in the refugee programming.

- v. The government and UNHCR should do a job - skills matching on arrival of refugees and connect them to the relevant job/labor markets in order for them to be self-reliant and also contribute to economic development of the country.

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