



# *Refugee Law Project*

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## **Self settled refugees in Uganda: An alternative to camps**

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Over the course of the past 6 years, the Refugee Law Project has interviewed hundreds of self-settled refugees throughout Uganda, questioning the assumption that the local settlement policy is best suited to Uganda's social, economic and political realities. The following presentation draws together some of the findings within the field, considering briefly the security, economic and social realities that exist for self-settled refugees.

It is impossible to know exactly how many self-settled refugees there are in Uganda, which, in itself, serves as an indication of their ambiguous legal status. While the government claims to use the 1951 Convention as its guideline for determining refugee status, in practice only those who live in settlements are considered to be refugees. As a result, from the perspective of the national government, self-settled refugees are not eligible for assistance within the Ugandan context.

However, our findings show that, at a local government level, things are viewed very differently. Despite lack of official national recognition, what was striking in all the areas visited was the extent to which local government officials generally accepted the presence of self-settled refugees and were allowing them to live and work within their districts. Given that they are doing this with no additional assistance from central government, it shows the extent to which there is opportunity for supporting refugees within local government structures. Their vulnerability notwithstanding, therefore, those self-settled refugees who were interviewed had managed to carve out enough status for themselves to be living and working within the rubric of the local government system.

### **So, why self-settle?**

In opting out of the settlement structure, the two most common reasons given were insecurity and lack of economic opportunity. In the case of the former, refugees were put off by the frequent attacks on camps, and the presence of security agents from various government and rebel groups. In some instances refugees talked of how they were even prepared to return to their countries of origin rather than live in a camp, despite explicit danger to their lives.

Along with security concerns, the search for economic activity was a primary motivating factor in refugees' decision to make a living outside of the settlements. Those interviewed were engaged in a wide variety of livelihood activities. For instance, by the landing sites near DRC, the majority were fishermen, either using boats they had managed to flee with, or hiring them off locals; others, particularly in West Nile, were engaged in agricultural farming,



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generally at a subsistence level; some were engaged in petty trade or owned businesses.

In the clear majority of cases, nationals and refugees alike talked of their relationship in positive terms. In particular, cross-border connections were seen to play an important role in refugees' ability to survive, particularly in the initial stages of displacement. Many refugees were drawing upon networks rooted in population movements that existed long before the civil conflicts of today. In addition, the fact that refugees were paying taxes was recognised as a positive contribution to the district. For instance in a small village on the shores of Lake Albert in Bundibugyo district, Congolese refugees were seen to have boosted a depressed local economy by injecting cash and commodities into the area.

But it was also clear that, while the host population showed considerable willingness to allow refugees to live in the area, the sustainability and success of this was largely contingent upon the refugees being seen as a net benefit to the area. This was particularly important given the extra stress put on resources such as health clinics and schools: given that only encamped refugees are officially recognised within the national and international assistance structures, districts accommodating self-settled refugees get no additional help for doing so.

Thus although we found a clear willingness to host refugees, it is not something that should be over-romanticised or presumed upon. Instead, the findings present clear indicators that, should areas hosting self-settled refugees be given additional assistance, their ability to absorb refugees would increase to the benefit of both the refugees and their hosts. It also suggests that such willingness on the part of the host communities could be translated into progressive policies that would go a long way to maximising protection for refugees.

Finally, perhaps one of the most interesting findings was the fact that the vast majority of those interviewed expressed their longing to return home. This goes against the commonly held assumption that refugees who integrate in their country of exile are less likely to want to eventually return home. Even in the case of a group of Sudanese refugees who have become successful businessmen and have been in the country for more than 20 years, there was a clear desire to return to their homeland. As one researcher observed, there were no graves in the compounds of the Sudanese refugees we visited as they were taking their dead back to Sudan to be buried; a clear indicator of where their roots are.

In conclusion, the initial indicators generated by this research point to the fact that, measured against the yardsticks of security and development, there is



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empirical justification for de-emphasising the local settlement policy in Uganda and moving towards a policy that encourages the local integration of refugees within the host community. Findings show that this group of refugees offer an alternative approach to being a refugee in Uganda: they are working, paying taxes, and contributing to the economy of the districts in which they are living. Rather than being a burden, they are an asset to the communities in which they live. They are able to make decisions about their own security, and have been able to use skills and knowledge that they brought with them. And, most importantly, they are planning for the day that they can return to their homeland.