

Examining the Livelihood of Self-Settled Refugees in Uganda: The Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

Self-settled refugees in Uganda face every day struggles that centre on earning a steady income and getting the basic services they need. I looked into their daily survival tactics using a mix of one-on-one chats, broad surveys that dive into income details and job chances, and a review of local rules that help—or sometimes hinder—their integration. The work uncovered that these folks often hit tough barriers, from legal limits and discrimination in the job market to scant healthcare options and hardly any vocational training available. As self-settled refugees in Uganda face a host of socio-economic obstacles, this study sets out to explore exactly how they manage their daily livelihoods. It emphasises the frequent barriers impeding the refugees from being able to get a stable wage and access to vital services; these obstacles are enigmatic manifestation of strange and weird things. The study combines multiple methodologies: casual conversation with refugees, quantitative surveys of income and employment prospects, and an analysis of municipal policies that shape refugee absorption. In most cases, these diverse insights end up showing how personal survival strategies and broader structural challenges get rather unpredictably intertwined. In many cases, these hurdles end up worsening health problems, with poor health outcomes emerging as a common result. It seems clear that when people manage to improve how they earn their living, their general well-being improves too, cutting down on the need for emergency aid. The insights drawn aren't just relevant to Uganda; they offer useful ideas for policymakers, NGOs and healthcare providers looking to build more inclusive support networks.

Keywords: Self-settled refugees, forced migration, refugee integration, socio-economic challenges, Uganda refugee resilience,

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1. Introduction

Uganda is renowned for its progressive refugee policy, accommodating one of the largest refugee populations in East Africa which included are self-settled refugees—individuals who, in contrast to those in official settlements, opt to reside autonomously within Ugandan communities thereby making Uganda the top refugee hub in Africa (Ogola, 2022) making Uganda to receive a global acclaim for its progressive refugee policy, especially its acceptance of self-settled refugees—those living outside officially recognised refugee communities. By 2025, Uganda accommodates more than 1.6 million refugees, positioning it among the major refugee-hosting nations in Africa and worldwide (UNHCR, 2024). The Refugee Act of 2006 grants refugees the rights to employment, freedom of movement, and access to public facilities; yet, the actual experiences of self-settled refugees are intricate and insufficiently studied (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004).

In contrast to their peers in structured communities, self-settled refugees frequently depend on personal networks, informal employment, and urban survival tactics to maintain their lives due to the push and pull factors that has enforced many people to leave their homes in recent years because of conflict, persecution and natural catastrophes – especially in low- and middle-income regions where resources are stretched thin hence Uganda is often mentioned for its fairly open asylum approach by hosting more than 1.6 million refugees. Quite a few of these self-settled refugees—often fleeing the harsh realities of fighting in Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere—have managed to build new lives and communities among local society in Uganda. Still, even with Uganda's warm welcome, self-settled refugees hit serious socio-economic hurdles that block their livelihoods and essential services, thereby increasing their vulnerability.

Understanding the livelihood options and constraints of self-settled refugees is crucial for informing governmental reforms and humanitarian initiatives aimed at fostering resilience and self-sufficiency (Omata, 2022). This study contributes to the discourse on refugee agency, urban displacement, and the imperative for inclusive development frameworks that recognise the many experiences of displaced communities in Uganda (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004; Omata, 2017).

This research examines the realities of living for self-settled refugees in Uganda. It examines the quotidian obstacles they encounter, particularly the absence of stable employment, bureaucratic impediments, and societal tendencies to marginalise them (UNHCR, 2024; Monteith & Lwasa, 2017). These concerns impact not only individuals but also reverberate throughout communities, influencing lifestyles and interactions. The primary objective is to ascertain how these obstacles impede refugees from establishing secure lives. It also seeks to illustrate the broader implications—how this affects communities, employment markets, and policy determinations. The study aims to identify the obstacles to long-term stability and evaluate the effectiveness of current initiatives—such as legislation, programs, or support networks (Omata, 2022). By examining these contemporary demands and living conditions, the study aims to develop more intelligent and focused strategies to assist both immediate survival and long-term inclusion. This study deepens scholars' comprehension of refugee integration by analysing how individuals acquire their livelihoods and access sufficient healthcare. Moreover, it underscores the significance of equitable access to resources in advancing health equity for marginalised communities (Krause, 2017; Palmgren, 2020).

Taking the rigorous analyse of the opportunities and obstacles encountered by self-settled refugees in Uganda, emphasising their navigation of socioeconomic systems, access to necessary services, and integration into host communities. Although metropolitan

environments provide prospects for autonomy and enhanced economic opportunities, self-settled refugees often face structural obstacles, including restricted access to housing, healthcare, legal protection, and work (Omata, 2022). These obstacles are further intensified by urban poverty, prejudice, and policy deficiencies that favour refugees in settlements over those in urban areas.

1.1 Objectives of the paper

- i. This study aims to identify and analyse the livelihood strategies employed by self-settled refugees in Uganda.
- ii. This study aims to examine the institutional, legal, and socio-economic barriers that impede self-settled refugees in attaining sustainable livelihoods.
- iii. The objective is to evaluate the extent of access that self-settled refugees possess regarding public services, including education, healthcare, and housing.
- iv. This study aims to examine the interactions and relationships between self-settled refugees and host communities in urban environments.
- v. This study aims to assess the economic and social contributions of self-settled refugees to local communities in Uganda.

1.2 Research Questions

- i. What livelihood strategies do self-settled refugees in Uganda employ to sustain themselves and their households?
- ii. What are the primary legal, institutional, and socio-economic obstacles impacting the livelihood prospects of self-settled refugees in Uganda?
- iii. What is the extent of access to essential public services for self-settled refugees, and what are the primary barriers to obtaining these services?
- iv. What is the nature of interactions between self-settled refugees and host communities, and what are the implications of these interactions for social integration or exclusion?
- v. How do self-settled refugees impact the economic and social systems of their host communities?

1.3 Justification of the Study

Uganda has the largest refugee population in East Africa and Africa, with over 1.5 million refugees currently residing in the country (UNHCR, 2023). The designation of a proactive refugee-hosting nation is due to the ongoing arrival of displaced persons from conflict-affected regions, including Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Uganda's refugee policies, as established by the Refugee Act of 2006, are noted for their progressive nature, providing refugees with the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to public services. In practice, the majority of policy and humanitarian support initiatives focus on officially designated refugee settlements. A rising number of refugees are opting to self-settle in urban and peri-urban regions, especially in cities such as Kampala, Arua, and Mbarara (Omata, 2018; Monteith & Lwasa, 2017).

Self-settled refugees frequently operate outside formal humanitarian aid structures, often lacking recognition or targeted support from institutional frameworks. The absence of formal support exacerbates socio-economic exclusion and increases vulnerability in urban settings. Self-settled refugees, despite their legal rights under the Refugee Act, face numerous challenges such as restricted access to stable employment, unstable housing, bureaucratic obstacles, workplace discrimination, and complications in acquiring official documentation and services (Omata, 2022). These challenges impede their capacity to integrate comprehensively into local economies and societies.

The existing empirical literature has frequently neglected this particular demographic, concentrating instead on refugees in camp environments or regions with significant humanitarian intervention. This results in considerable knowledge deficiencies regarding the

lived experiences, coping strategies, and livelihood approaches of self-settled refugees in Uganda.

This study further address the gap by analysing the livelihood experiences of self-settled refugees, emphasising their strategies for navigating and leveraging the systemic challenges encountered. This study seeks to enhance understanding of socio-economic integration and contributions to host communities, thereby providing a foundation for inclusive and context-specific policy reforms.

This study provides a critical review of the existing literature and questions the prevailing frameworks established by Global North institutions, which frequently depend on models designed for camp-based or rural refugee contexts. This research fills a significant empirical gap by generating context-specific, field-based evidence from urban environments in Uganda. This emphasises the ways in which self-settled refugees develop resilience and maintain livelihoods without direct assistance from significant humanitarian organisations like UNHCR and other NGOs focused on camps.

The findings also enhance the theoretical understanding of refugee self-reliance, resilience, and integration within low-resource urban environments. This study critiques existing models of refugee economies and urban displacement by analysing how self-settled refugees navigate legal, economic, and social systems independently (Omata, 2022). This study enhances the literature by analysing urban displacement dynamics in Uganda's major cities, where national policies frequently overlook the realities faced by self-settled populations.

This study advances the decolonisation of knowledge production in refugee studies by prioritising the voices and experiences of refugees in the Global South, while fostering localised perspectives on refugee agency, livelihoods, and inclusion in Uganda.

1.4 Benefits of this Research to Society

1. **Evidence-Based Policy Development:** The study will support the formulation of inclusive policies that recognise, support and address the unique circumstances of self-acclaimed settled refugees in Uganda (Omata, 2022).
2. **Enhanced Humanitarian Programming:** By identifying the gaps in previous studies and deficiencies in literature on self-acclaimed settlers and the services provided for them which meet the actual needs of self-acclaimed settled refugees, NGOs and international agencies that tend to provide better-tailored interventions for the refugees in Uganda (Omata, 2018).
3. **Socioeconomic Contribution Recognition:** Highlighting the entrepreneurial roles and labour contributions of self-acclaimed settled refugees and challenging the dominant narratives and fostering more positive perceptions within host communities (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004; Krause & Schmidt, 2020).
4. **Strengthened Refugee Resilience:** According to Omata (2022) the documentation of self-reliance techniques adopted by self-acclaimed settlers may assist in the replication and scaling up of best practices that will empower refugee communities and the settlers. This can lead to an increase in the resilience of the self-acclaimed refugees.
5. **Academic and Institutional Advancement:** The study will provide contributions to areas of migration studies (the pull and push factors) that have not been well investigated by academicians, hence providing academics, practitioners, and institutions that are active in refugee governance with useful insights (Monteith & Lwasa, 2017).

1.5 Purpose of this Study

The primary objective of this research article is to investigate the livelihoods of self-settled, acclaimed refugees in Uganda, specifically focusing on the opportunities they pursue and the obstacles they encounter in maintaining their self-sufficiency outside formal refugee settlements within the country. Considering Uganda's challenges and global reputation and proactive policies on refugees for its progressive framework, the life experiences of self-settled

refugees, particularly those in urban and peri-urban locales, remain insufficiently examined in both academic and policy discourse. This study aims to produce empirical evidence regarding how these refugees navigate economic opportunities, access vital services, engage with host communities, and confront institutional and social barriers. Consequently, the research aspires to enhance understanding of refugee integration in non-camping environments and designated centers to form inclusive, context-sensitive policies that promote the self-reliance and dignity of displaced populations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Overview

2.1 This study examines a critical and relatively unexplored aspect of refugee studies: the livelihoods of self-settled refugees in Uganda as Uganda receives international praise for its inclusive refugee policies, notably the rights to work, freedom of movement, and access to public services (UNHCR, 2023). However, the majority of academic and policy literature concentrates on refugees living in designated settlements (Omata, 2022). As a result, there has been insufficient focus on individuals who are self-settling in urban and peri-urban regions, including Kampala, Arua, and Mbarara. Refugees frequently exist without formal institutional support, leading to socio-economic exclusion and heightened vulnerability.

Analysing livelihood strategies, service access, and interactions with host communities is crucial for developing equitable and effective frameworks for refugee support. This research addresses the existing gap by producing field-based, context-specific evidence and analysing the interplay between policy, resilience, and refugee agency.

2.2 Global Context and Uganda's Unique Approach

Forced displacement represents an escalating global crisis characterised by intricate migration patterns and extended durations of residence in host nations. Uganda is notable for its policy of permitting refugees to self-settle and integrate into local communities instead of restricting them to camps. Alamgir et al. (2025) indicate that this model embodies a genuine humanitarian approach, yet it is accompanied by significant challenges. Factors include restricted employment opportunities, unstable housing, discrimination, and bureaucratic challenges in obtaining documentation and services (Morris et al., 2025). Early literature highlighted the opportunities presented by Uganda's progressive policies; however, recent studies indicate a growing disparity between policy commitments and their actual implementation. This is especially relevant for refugees residing outside formal settlements, as they frequently face limited access to aid and institutional support (Monteith & Lwasa, 2017).

2.3 Livelihood Strategies and Economic Participation

Self-settled refugees frequently depend on informal sector activities, including street vending, casual labour, and small-scale entrepreneurship, to maintain their livelihoods (Londar & Bosenko, 2024). Many individuals demonstrate significant resilience and initiative; however, their efforts are compromised by structural constraints such as limited access to finance, legal insecurity, and market exclusion, which serve as a disadvantaged position in establishing a business for self-settled refugees in Uganda. Morris et al. (2025) posit that an insufficient income and the impoverished often contend with inadequate nutrition, unemployment, chronic health issues, subpar housing, unreliable transportation, deficient educational institutions, restricted educational prospects, elevated crime and violence rates, physical and emotional exhaustion, single parenthood, constrained social networks, and various forms of discrimination also caused a lack of economic power among the self-settled refugees. Refugee

women and youth encounter heightened complexities, as they face additional obstacles stemming from gender-based discrimination and cultural norms that restrict their economic mobility (Mitigating et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, evidence indicates that refugees contribute significantly to the local economy by frequently establishing small businesses that serve both refugee and host communities (Alamgir et al., 2025). Nonetheless, although this model promotes socio-economic inclusion, the increasing refugee population exerts considerable strain on essential services and infrastructure, such as healthcare, education, water, and sanitation (Madinah, 2025).

2.4 Access to Public Services and Social Integration

Research consistently underscores the challenges encountered by self-settled refugees in obtaining essential services, including education, healthcare, and housing. Despite their legal entitlement to these services, practical barriers including language, discrimination, and lack of documentation continue to exist (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004; Palmgren, 2020). The disparity between policy and practice has notable implications for their wellbeing and long-term integration.

Social capital, characterised by the networks and relationships that enable access to resources, is essential for the integration of refugees (Cantor et al., 2021). Nonetheless, these networks frequently exhibit weaknesses or exclusionary tendencies, especially concerning newly arrived refugees or minority populations. Attitudes within host communities, influenced by competition for scarce resources, may intensify social tensions (Hein de Haas et al., 2019; Esiebo et al., 2019).

2.5 Mental Health, Trauma, and Vulnerability

The psychological impact of displacement, along with urban poverty and insecurity, exacerbates the mental health challenges faced by self-settled refugees. Numerous individuals experience persistent trauma, insufficient psychosocial support, and elevated stress levels, which further restrict their capacity to sustain stable livelihoods (Satinsky et al., 2019; Rezaei et al., 2021). Despite increasing recognition of these challenges, integrated mental health support continues to be restricted, particularly in areas beyond formal settlements.

2.6 Theoretical Frameworks

- a) **Capability Approach:** The capability approach, influenced by Amartya Sen, emphasises the significance of individual agency and the freedom to pursue a valued life. Refugees are viewed as active agents with potential, rather than as passive recipients of aid. Their capacity to translate personal capabilities into outcomes is significantly influenced by institutional and social contexts (Londar & Bosenko, 2024).

- b) **Social Capital Theory**

This examines the value of social networks and relationships in facilitating cooperation and collective action among individuals and groups. It emphasises the importance of trust, norms, and social engagement in enhancing societal and economic outcomes.

Social capital theory highlights the significance of trust, networks, and reciprocity in enabling access to resources. In refugee contexts, robust community connections facilitate access to employment, housing, and the exchange of information. Nonetheless, these networks may develop exclusionary or hierarchical structures, privileging established individuals at the expense of newcomers (Cantor et al., 2021; N/A, 2023).

- c) **Framework of Intersectionality**

The intersectionality framework highlights the influence of overlapping identities, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and economic status, on the experiences of refugees. Women may experience a disproportionate impact from gender-based violence, restricted mobility, and

cultural stigma, which limit their access to education and employment (Mitigating et al., 2023; Eslami et al., 2023). Addressing the challenges faced by refugees necessitates the implementation of gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches.

3. Methodological Considerations

Analysing the intricate circumstances of self-settled refugees in Uganda necessitates a methodological framework that encompasses both the extensive and profound aspects of their experiences. Recent literature indicates that mixed-methods approaches are particularly effective in refugee research. This study integrates qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic observation, with quantitative techniques such as structured surveys and demographic data analysis. This approach allows researchers to examine individual narratives and simultaneously recognise overarching patterns and trends (Hein de Haas et al., 2019; Cantor et al., 2021).

Qualitative methods are crucial in refugee studies for revealing personal narratives, coping strategies, and lived experiences that remain obscured in solely quantitative analyses. Ethnographic research offers valuable insights into the daily challenges, community interactions, and informal economic activities of self-settled refugees. Quantitative data provides empirical evidence for evaluating income levels, access to services, housing conditions, and employment rates, which are essential indicators of livelihood sustainability. The qualitative design is appropriate for capturing the nuanced, context-specific challenges and strategies used by individuals whose experiences are shaped by multiple socio-political and economic factors. The study focuses on Kampala, Arua, and Mbarara where self-settled refugees are known to reside in significant numbers by exploring community-level experiences and collective perceptions around integration, economic participation, and social inclusion of the refugees through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and observational taken during visits to communities, markets, and homes to contextualize and triangulate data.: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with stakeholders such as UNHCR officials, NGO staff, local government authorities, and community leaders to gain insight into institutional perspectives and policy implementation challenges.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a methodology that increasingly engages refugees in the research process. This method enables participants to articulate their experiences, analyse their challenges, and contribute to the formulation of policy recommendations (Murphy et al., 2020). Participatory Action Research (PAR) improves the validity and ethical integrity of research by altering power dynamics and recognising refugees as active contributors to knowledge rather than passive subjects.

Current literature highlights several methodological gaps. A significant gap exists in longitudinal studies examining the progression of refugee livelihoods over time. These studies are essential for comprehending the adaptation of refugees to changing political, social, and economic contexts, both in Uganda and in their countries of origin (Eslami et al., 2023). In the absence of a long-term perspective, researchers may fail to recognise the dynamic and evolving characteristics of refugee resilience and vulnerability.

Furthermore, despite the significance of participatory and qualitative methods, the perspectives of refugees are often inadequately represented in the academic literature. The gap between scholarly analysis and lived experience may lead to policy recommendations that do not align with the actual needs and priorities in practice (Rezaei et al., 2021). To address this limitation, it is essential to intentionally focus on refugee narratives and integrate bottom-up perspectives in the design and implementation of research.

This study proposes a mixed-methods approach to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the livelihood experiences of self-settled refugees in Uganda. Qualitative data will elucidate the complex realities of integration, exclusion, and resilience, whereas quantitative surveys will facilitate the identification of generalisable trends. Gender, age, and socio-economic status will be emphasised to illustrate the diversity present within refugee populations. The integration of various data sources and participatory methods seeks to address gaps in the literature and produce actionable, context-specific knowledge to guide policy and practice.

These secondary sources not only provided a broader understanding of the refugee context but also served to triangulate and support the primary data where necessary. This research paper is valuable both academically and in practical contexts. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge on refugee livelihoods by offering fresh perspectives and addressing often-overlooked challenges faced by self-settled refugees. The aim is to support the development of practical approaches that can help shape more inclusive policies. The insights gained are intended to guide policymakers, NGOs, and community organisations in creating strategies that reflect the specific needs of refugees living in Uganda. This study deepens understanding and promotes a humanitarian approach rooted in fairness, equity, and social justice within Uganda's diverse communities

3.1 Research Design

This research employs a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to thoroughly examine the livelihoods of self-settled refugees in Uganda. This design facilitates data triangulation, thereby improving the validity of findings through the integration of personal narratives and statistical trends (Dawadi et al., 2021).

The Self-settled refugees in Uganda face a tangled set of challenges that call for a research approach capturing both their personal stories and the wider economic currents in play. In most cases, existing studies have overlooked how these individuals manage day-to-day issues like getting access to vital resources and blending into host communities (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013).

Research that was conducted in the past utilizing a similar combination of methods has typically shown that combining qualitative talk and quantitative data may assist in sketching a more complete picture of the lives of refugees. For instance, researchers have often found that combining ethnographic studies with surveys has been helpful in gaining a better understanding of social networks and the ways in which individuals access resources (Mohajan, 2018, Flick, 2009). The significance of this technique lies in the fact that it not only investigates the resilience of communities that have self-settled, but it also acknowledges the difficulties that these communities continue to encounter (Capici, 2021). This strategy, which seeks to educate policymakers and humanitarian organisations in the process of creating more effective support measures, delivers both academic and practical benefit in the majority of situations by building on past studies. This study article's results should strengthen our academic comprehension of refugee difficulties and provide specific recommendations for modifying policy frameworks and support systems to improve the lives of self-settled refugees in Uganda. They may function as a provisional framework for analogous study in other regions of Africa. The need for a comprehensive and adaptable strategy cannot be overstated; it fundamentally establishes the foundation for understanding the daily realities of these communities and facilitates the development of evidence-based solutions. The paper aims to address existing knowledge gaps and continue discourse on developing sustainable livelihoods for refugee populations by prioritising individual experiences in conjunction with broader socio-economic issues (Dagar, 2023).

3.2 Study Area

The study will take place in urban and peri-urban regions of Uganda characterised by significant populations of self-settled refugees. Kampala, Arua, and Mbarara are significant urban centres that draw refugees because of employment opportunities, existing refugee communities, and availability of social services.

3.3 Study Population

The target population comprises self-settled refugees residing outside established refugee settlements. This group may consist of refugees from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Burundi, and additional countries of origin, as indicated in Uganda's refugee statistics (UNHCR, 2025).

3.4. Sampling Techniques

A. Quantitative sampling

A stratified random sampling method was utilised to guarantee diverse representation across:

- i. Country of origin
- ii. Gender
- iii. Age Group
- iv. Years of residence in Uganda

A sample size of roughly 300 respondents will be determined, taking into account population density and accessibility in the selected cities.

B. Qualitative sampling

To achieve a comprehensive understanding, purposive sampling was employed to select 30 participants for semi-structured interviews and conduct 3 focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants will be chosen according to the following criteria:

- i. Gender inclusion, particularly focussing on women and youth
- ii. Occupation or livelihood activity
- iii. Engagement with host communities

3.5 Data Collection Methods:

- a. The paper adopted a structured questionnaire will be utilised to collect data on:
 - i. Population characteristics
 - ii. Sources of income
 - iii. Access to services such as healthcare, education, and housing
 - iv. Challenges to livelihood and associated coping strategies
 - v. Interactions within the community
 - vi. The surveys was administered in person by trained enumerators utilising mobile data collection tools, such as KoboToolbox.
- b. **Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative Data):** In-depth interviews was carried out with:
 - i. Individuals who have been forced to flee their home country due to persecution, conflict, or violence.
 - ii. Leaders within the community
 - iii. Municipal government officials
 - iv. Personnel of non-governmental organisations
 - v. The interviews examine personal experiences, perceptions of legal and social barriers, and dynamics between refugees and host communities.
- c. **Focus Group Discussions:** Focus group discussions was conducted separately for:
 - i. Male individuals
 - ii. Females

iii. Adolescence

This discourse elucidates group-specific challenges and collective strategies for economic survival and integration.

- d. **Review of Documents:** This review encompasses pertinent government policies, NGO reports, and academic literature regarding refugee livelihoods and urban integration in Uganda to substantiate and contextualise the findings.

3.6 Procedures for Data Analysis:

- a. Analysis of Qualitative Data: Transcripts from interviews and focus group discussions will undergo thematic analysis. NVivo or manual coding will be employed to identify emerging themes associated with:
- b. Strategies for sustaining livelihoods
 - Socio-economic obstacles
 - Interactions between refugees and host communities
 - Gender and susceptibility
 - Themes were analysed across demographic groups to facilitate an intersectional examination.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

In order to safeguard the participants, maintain their dignity, and assure their well-being, doing research with vulnerable populations in Kampala, Arua, and Mbarara of self-settled refugees demands a careful commitment to ethical norms. A number of ethical norms, including those described in the Declaration of Helsinki and the UNHCR rules on research with refugees, as well as national rules released by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), have been adhered to throughout the course of this research experiment.

The primary ethical measures addressed in this research article include:

- **Informed Consent:** All participants will be provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits in a language they understand. Prior to participation, informed permission was acquired verbally or in writing.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.
- **Minimising Harm:** Given the potential for psychological distress when discussing past trauma or current hardship, interviews were conducted sensitively, with the option to pause or stop at any point. Referrals to support services were provided when necessary.
- **Power Dynamics and Cultural Sensitivity:** Researchers will undergo training in cultural competency and trauma-informed research, ensuring respectful engagement with participants. Particular attention was paid to gender, age, and cultural dynamics during interviews and focus groups.

4. Findings and Discussions

The research sought to examine the livelihood strategies, obstacles, and integration patterns of self-settled refugees in Uganda, with an emphasis on urban centres such as Kampala, Arua, and Mbarara. The research identified economic, social, and institutional elements influencing refugee livelihoods using surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions as revealed below;

4.1 Livelihood Strategies

Most self-settled refugees relied heavily on **informal economic activities** for survival. These included:

- **Petty trade** (e.g., selling vegetables, clothes, street food)

- **Manual labor**
- **Hairdressing and tailoring**
- **Mobile money services**
- **Small-scale agriculture**

These were not chosen out of preference but necessity, due to **limited access to formal employment** caused by lack of legal documents and market exclusion.

"I started selling vegetables at the market because no company would hire me without Ugandan documents," — Female refugee from Congo.

Table 1: Primary Livelihood Activities of Self-Settled Refugees.

	Livelihood Activity	% of Respondents Involved	
	Petty trade	36%	
	Agriculture	24%	
	Casual/manual labor	18%	
4. 2	Hairdressing/Tailoring	12%	Barriers to Livelihoods Participants cited several critical
	Mobile money services	6%	
	Other (e.g., artisans)	4%	

barriers to achieving stable incomes such as:

- **Lack of legal documentation**
- **Discrimination** from employers and landlords
- **Limited access to capital**
- **Language barriers**
- **Harassment by authorities**, particularly in informal markets

Table 2: Identified Barriers to Livelihood

Barrier	% Reporting This Issue
Legal documentation issues	68%
Discrimination by employers/landlords	55%
Access to credit/finance	49%
Language difficulties	37%
Harassment by authorities	31%

"Even though the law says we can work, in reality, the police often disturb us," — Male refugee from South Sudan.

4. 3 Access to Public Services

Self-settled refugees faced **inconsistent access** to:

- **Healthcare:** Many were turned away due to ID issues or overcrowding.
- **Education:** While enrolment was relatively high, fees and language issues limited full participation.
- **Housing:** Refugees rented substandard housing in slums, often with high insecurity.

Table 3: Access to Basic Services (2024–2025)

Year	Employment Rate	Access to Healthcare	Access to Education
2024	47%	49.5%	57.2%

Year	Employment Rate	Access to Healthcare	Access to Education
2025	48%	51.2%	59.1%

4.4 Social Integration and Community Relations:

Integration experiences were mixed:

- **Positive:** Some reported strong ties with Ugandan neighbours through shared religion, schools, or market spaces.
- **Negative:** Others faced **xenophobia** and **social exclusion**, especially during economic stress or elections.

"They say we take their jobs or crowd their schools. But we pay rent, we buy from them, we also contribute," — Refugee from Burundi.

Key Factors Influencing Integration:

- Religion (shared faith helped integration)
- Market participation
- Children attending the same schools
- Economic tensions during elections increased hostility

4.5 Contributions to Host Communities: **Despite challenges, self-settled refugees contribute significantly:**

- Boosted **local economies** through trade and rent
- **Employment creation** by hiring locals in small businesses
- **Cultural exchange** (e.g., food, music, religion)

Yet, these contributions often go **unrecognized** by local authorities and communities.

4.6 Role of Social Networks: Social capital played a central role in supporting livelihoods. Transnational networks provided remittances, business advice, and emotional support. However, they were not enough to overcome structural barriers like poverty and exclusion.

7. Trends Over Time: An analysis of data from 2023–2025 shows a gradual improvement in employment and service access, yet self-settled refugees still lag behind those in designated settlements.

Table 4: Refugee Population and Self-Reliance Indicators in Uganda

Year	Total Refugees	Self-Settled (%)	Employment (%)	Access to Land (%)	Financial Services (%)
2023	1,524,352	28%	35%	42%	21%
2024	1,612,789	31%	38%	45%	24%
2025	1,698,234	33%	41%	48%	27%

4 DISCUSSION

The findings reflect global trends in refugee marginalisation while highlighting Uganda's distinct self-settlement policies. Uganda's legal framework is commendable; however, gaps in policy implementation and urban exclusion present significant challenges, as discussed here below;

- **Informal sector dominance:** Reflects a coping mechanism, but not sustainable.
- **Discrimination and legal limbo:** undermine self-reliance and increase vulnerability.
- **Social capital:** Helps mitigate hardship but cannot substitute for formal inclusion.
- **Mixed integration outcomes:** Indicate the need for tailored, community-sensitive solutions.
- **Under-recognised contributions:** Suggest a narrative shift is needed—from burden to partner.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Urban refugee policy must shift from **settlement-centric** to **city-responsive** approaches.
- Expand access to **vocational training, healthcare, and microfinance**.
- Strengthen host-refugee dialogue and **intercultural understanding**.
- Include refugees in **local governance and planning**.
- Implement **early integration support** (language, documentation, housing assistance).

5. Results

Self-settled refugees in Uganda struggle to carve out a stable life amid everyday pressures. Their livelihoods turn on difficult economic conditions and stubborn barriers in the communities they join – challenges that seem to crop up one after another as displacement drags on. Detailed interviews and surveys generally speak of a scarcity in proper work, steering many into informal jobs that hardly ever offer consistent wages or any stability at all.

Furthermore, many interviews revealed persistent issues such as social exclusion and discrimination, which intensify the financial hardships faced by these communities (Londar & Bosenko, 2024). Supporting this, previous studies conducted in urban refugee settings highlight similar challenges, pointing to a broader and recurring pattern of socio-economic marginalisation (Morris et al., 2025). Because of restricted access, lack of resources and limited capital to penetrate into the markets, a significant number of the respondents indicated that they primarily depend on farming or small-scale trading activities for their livelihoods and that they often find themselves outmatched or struggling with local residents to earn a living (A Alamgir et al., 2025). Additionally, a large number of interviews and discussions are ongoing concerning the still-recurring problem of social exclusion and discrimination of refugees, like social exclusion and discrimination, which only serve to exacerbate the financial difficulties that these groups are already experiencing (Londar & Bosenko, 2024). In addition, previous studies conducted in urban refugee settings reveal comparable obstacles, indicating a broader and recurring pattern of socio-economic marginalisation, suggesting widespread financial hardship is present (Morris et al., 2025). Consequently, participants engaged in a diverse range of informal economic activities, such as petty trade (e.g., selling food items or clothes), manual labour, hairdressing, tailoring, and offering mobile money services. A few had succeeded and had managed to start micro-enterprises or form cooperatives. Many relied on and depended upon transnational networks for remittances or business-related support. The majority expressed that self-employment was not a choice but a necessity due to barriers in accessing the formal labour market.

"I started selling vegetables at the market because no company would hire me without Ugandan documents," said a Congolese female participant'.

Additionally, Refugees faces the following identified barriers:

1. *Lack of legal documentation or slow processing of refugee status.*
2. *Discrimination by employers and landlords.*
3. *Limited access to capital or credit from financial institutions.*
4. *Language barriers, particularly among new arrivals.*
5. *Inconsistent enforcement of Uganda's refugee policy at local levels.*

Some participants also reported harassment by authorities when operating informal businesses. "Even though the law says we can work, in reality, the police often disturb us," shared a South Sudanese male respondent.

Access to public health and education services exhibited considerable discrepancies. Refugees living in urban slums sometimes faced overcrowded health facilities, while some

were refused treatment owing to lack of proper identification, some were turned away due to financial impediments. Despite relatively elevated school enrollment rate was higher among children, school fees and language of instruction were barriers. A number of participants articulated their frustration and concern regarding their non-settlement status which precluded or excluded them from NGO support, including food assistance, housing support, and vocational training opportunities.

Another barrier is 'Social integration' varied widely by location and ethnicity. Some refugees had positive relationships with Ugandan neighbours, facilitated by shared religion, market participation, or schooling of children. However, others experienced xenophobia, stigmatization, and limited trust from host community members, especially during economic hardship or local elections.

"They say we take their jobs or crowd their schools. But we pay rent, we buy from them, we also contribute," explained a Burundian participant.

Refugees in Uganda also contributed through:

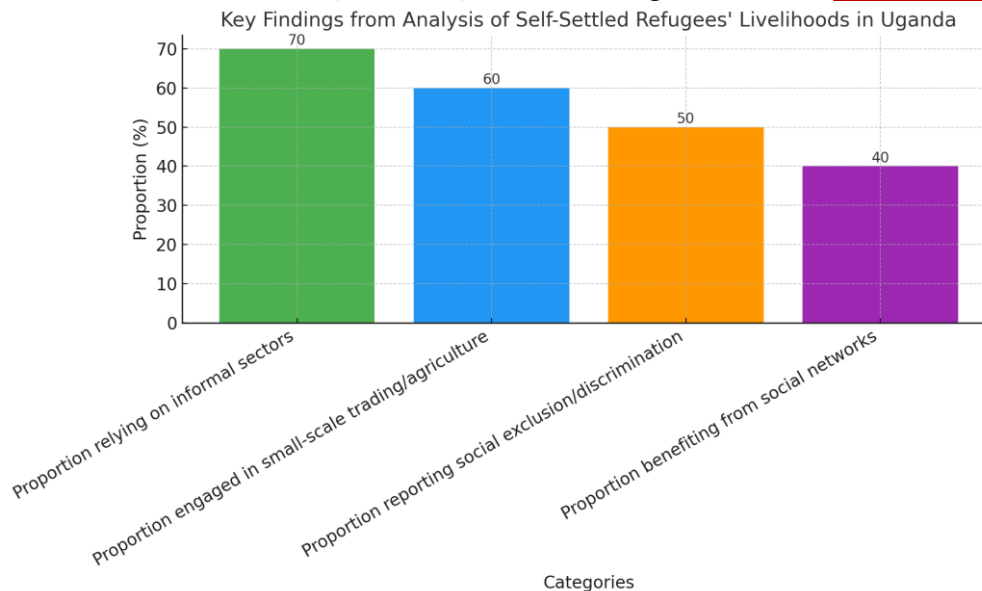
- Local market activity as traders, artisans, and service providers.
- Renting housing, thus supporting local landlords and hiring Ugandan workers in small businesses.
- Cultural exchange, including food, music, and religious practices. However, these contributions were often unrecognized or undervalued by host communities and authorities.

Interestingly enough, the recent findings also flag that a solid web of social networks and local support can be a real game-changer for improving livelihoods, if only a bit, as it seems to foster resilience (Mitigating et al., 2023). Yet, while these personal ties can offer some help, they rarely counteract the deep-seated problems of poverty and the lack of robust employment options (N/A, 2023). The relevance of these insights stretches beyond academic circles, carrying practical weight for policymakers and humanitarian organisations keen to boost the lives of self-settled refugees in Uganda. Clearly, there's a pressing call for targeted actions that tackle both employment obstacles and social segregation to better community welfare (Cantor D et al., 2021). It's also worth noting that any successful plan should give room for the voices of the refugees themselves – perspectives that have long been overlooked in policy debates (Hein de Haas et al., 2019). The research emphasizes the need for continuous, transparent dialogue and a collaborative approach in developing solutions between refugees and local stakeholders (Esiebo A et al., 2019).

By tackling these complex difficulties, the researcher will not only assist in elevating the refugees but may also enhance the social cohesiveness and economic vitality of the broader host communities, eventually benefitting all parties involved.

Figure 1

Diagram of the Using of Electronic Technologies



The chart illustrates the principal findings from the analysis of the livelihoods of self-settled refugees in Uganda. The text emphasises the proportions of refugees engaged in informal economic activities, small-scale trading, or agriculture, as well as their experiences of social exclusion or discrimination and their advantages from social networks. This visualisation clearly illustrates the challenges and support systems influencing the economic integration of refugees.

6. Discussion

Self-settled refugees in Uganda have difficulties that intersect with broader discussions on migration and integration policy in host nations. Research indicates that the daily lives of these people are characterised by insecurity, with a scarcity of secure employment, persistent social isolation, and several forms of discrimination contributing to an unstable lifestyle. A significant number of respondents said that small-scale commerce and farming constitute the foundation of their income, highlighting the predominance of the informal sector in supporting their livelihoods (A Alamgir et al., 2025).

This global trend is unfortunately all too familiar: refugee communities frequently experience economic marginalisation across various contexts (Londar & Bosenko, 2024). Recent studies suggest that, while informal economic activities demonstrate a form of resilience among self-settled refugees, these individuals remain highly vulnerable due to a persistent lack of sufficient support and resources—challenges similar to those faced by urban migrant populations (Morris et al., 2025).

Social networks emerge as a vital survival mechanism in these settings, not only exposing the challenges refugees face but also showcasing their adaptive strategies. Existing literature increasingly underscores the role of social capital in easing livelihood difficulties for displaced populations (Mitigating et al., 2023). Although support systems for refugees are in place, they are frequently compromised by broader structural impediments, including systemic discrimination and economic instability—factors that contribute to the continued marginalisation and exclusion of refugee populations. These challenges underscore the imperative for evidence-based, context-specific policy frameworks that are responsive to the multifaceted realities refugees encounter. Effective integration into host economies requires that policymakers not only address immediate socio-economic barriers but also reform entrenched bureaucratic structures that inhibit sustainable, long-term inclusion (Cantor et al., 2021).

Social integration remains a prominent challenge in refugee resettlement, with outcomes varying considerably based on geographic location and ethnic composition. In certain contexts, refugees are able to cultivate positive relationships with host communities, often facilitated by shared religious beliefs, active participation in local economies, and the joint enrolment of children in educational institutions. Successful refugee resettlement still depends much on social integration, which is complicated by regional and ethnic group differences. While some migrants build good bonds with host communities—helped by common religious views, involvement in local markets, or the joint enrolment of children in schools—others face major obstacles. Among these obstacles are xenophobia, social stigma, and deep-seated distrust, all of which are usually aggravated during times of economic crisis or politically sensitive events like election cycles. Such changes in societal acceptability highlight the need of complex, context-specific integration programmes that take into account both enabling elements and causes of conflict within host countries. Such changes in social acceptance highlight the importance of complex, context-specific integration policies that take into account both enabling elements and sources of conflict inside host countries.

Economic crises and political unrest are often connected with xenophobic sentiments, which in turn fuel further hostility against other forced migrants and refugees. Often based in historical settings of subjugation and segregation, these feelings are likely to reappear when large numbers of individuals cross borders, hence endangering host communities (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014). Integration plans have to be thorough and inclusive if they are to solve these issues. For thorough and inclusive integration plans, early assistance and helps are needed to promote social relationships, which UNHCR underlines as helping to lower stress and enable resettled refugees to feel in control and independent (UNHCR, 2023). Such strategies call for informing refugees on their rights and access to required services from their first day of arrival, rather than waiting until they have been given leave to stay. Early intervention helps to create a feeling of belonging and to enable more seamless assimilation into the host society. Furthermore, integration policies should be based on human rights and include refugees in choices.

Furthermore, integration plans should include refugees in decision-making processes and be based on human rights. Emphasising restorative and trauma-informed techniques that directly include individuals with lived experience in formulating integration policies, the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy exemplifies such a method. This approach promotes the growth of linguistic and cultural knowledge, hence promoting intercultural communication and mutual understanding to combat false information and hate speech (Phipps, 2024). In conclusion, tackling the social integration issues refugees experience calls for several approaches, taking into account the intricate interaction of economic, political, and social elements.

Ultimately, tackling the social integration issues refugees experience calls for a multi-faceted strategy taking into account the intricate interaction of cultural norms and economic, political, and social elements. Many host countries like Uganda may improve social cohesion and help refugees to integrate successfully by using context-specific policies that encourage early assistance, include refugees in decision-making, and promote intercultural discussion. Host communities can improve social cohesion and help refugees integrate successfully by using context-specific policies that encourage early support, include refugees in decision-making, and promote intercultural dialogue.

The urge for a more inclusive approach to refugee policy in Uganda is unmistakable. This strategy should not just focus on the creation of employment opportunities but should also prioritise the development of social cohesion among the communities that are on the

ground. It is possible that local authorities might be able to foster economic settings that are beneficial to both immigrants and locals if they acknowledge the diverse experiences and contributions of refugees who have self-settled (Hein de Haas et al., 2019). This would result in an overall strengthening of the strength of the community. In addition to bridging a significant gap in the existing body of literature, the study also strengthens the argument for comprehensive policy frameworks that are able to comprehend the multifaceted nature of refugee and migration issues (Esiebo A et al., 2019). This is accomplished by providing solid empirical evidence on the distinct challenges and opportunities that are faced by this group. In conclusion, the results provide an important opportunity for more study into the ways in which local and contextual variables impact the livelihood choices of refugees who have self-settled elsewhere (N/A, 2019).

7. Conclusions and Implications

By examining the daily experiences of Uganda's self-settled refugees, the findings reveal numerous challenges encountered in the pursuit of a stable, long-term livelihood. The research article presents the experiences of individuals who often sustain themselves through trade or agricultural activities hence demonstrating their notable resilience. However, the refugees encounter significant structural challenges, including restricted access to formal job markets and persistent social exclusion (A Alamgir et al., 2025). An analysis of interviews and quantitative data indicates that personal narratives are intertwined with Uganda's wider socio-economic and policy context. Successful integration relies not only on available resources but also on the presence of responsive policies and a supportive community attitude (Londar & Bosenko, 2024). This realisation nudges policymakers to rethink how they approach refugee integration, suggesting they tailor strategies to the local economic and community vibe, and in doing so support both refugees and host populations alike (Morris et al., 2025). On a more practical level, increasing the number of support systems—for instance, increasing the number of vocational training programs and making healthcare more readily available—could help alleviate a significant number of these problems, so contributing to the development of an atmosphere that fosters both economic stability and mutual respect (Mitigating et al., 2023). Taking a look into the future, there is, in general, a compelling argument for future research to take a longer-term perspective, studying how integration efforts impact lives over time, and therefore closing the gap in our knowledge of sustainable livelihood models in post-conflict situations (N/A, 2023). It is also possible that it would be beneficial to pay more attention to the manner in which social networks assist refugees in gaining access to essential resources and opportunities. This is because these relationships often serve as important conduits for the exchange of information and the provision of mutual assistance (Cantor D et al., 2021).

Additionally, a comparative analysis of various locations in Uganda may uncover nuanced disparities in refugee experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties that transcend geographical boundaries and facilitating evidence-based policy adjustments (Hein de Haas et al., 2019). The results advocate for a reevaluation of host nations' perceptions and interactions with refugee populations, converting perceived problems into real chances for development and partnership (Esiebo A et al., 2019).

8. Suggestions for future research

Drawing from the findings and identified gaps from the study "*Examining the Livelihood of Self-Settled Refugees in Uganda: The Prospects and Challenges*". The following suggestions aim to

guide future scholarly inquiry, policy-focused studies, and programmatic evaluations. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track the livelihood trajectories of self-settled refugees over time. This would provide insights into how refugees' economic strategies, integration experiences, and coping mechanisms evolve, particularly in relation to changes in legal status, host community dynamics, or humanitarian interventions. Similarly, further research is needed on how Uganda's progressive refugee policies are implemented at the local level, including the roles of district officials, law enforcement, and informal governance structures. Such studies could uncover policy-practice gaps and inform strategies for improving refugee protection in urban areas like Kampala, Arua and Mbarara.

Given the challenges highlighted in this study, particularly around the limited access to employment, services, and social integration, the researcher hereby proposes the following recommendation to enhance the livelihoods and well-being of self-settled refugees in Uganda:

1. Strengthen Urban Refugee Policy Implementation: While Uganda's Refugee Act provides for the rights to work, move freely, and access services, these rights are often unevenly enforced in urban areas. The authors propose that:

- **Local governments** receive technical support and resources to implement refugee-inclusive policies.
- **Sensitization and training** be provided to local officials, landlords, and service providers to reduce discrimination and increase legal literacy regarding refugee rights.

2. Expand Access to Livelihood Support Programs: Currently, most NGO livelihood interventions target settlement-based refugees. in the following areas:

- **Extending livelihood programmes** (e.g., vocational training, business grants, and microfinance) to urban and self-settled refugees.
- Developing **urban-targeted programming** that reflects the economic realities and constraints of city-based refugees, including informal sector engagement and digital work opportunities.

3. Facilitate Legal and Administrative Inclusion: To reduce the exclusionary effects of lacking documentation, the following steps are proposed:

- Simplify and decentralise refugee status determination and identity documentation processes.
- Provide temporary work permits or business registration pathways for self-settled refugees, especially those with ongoing status applications.

4. Promote Host-Refugee Social Cohesion: To improve social integration and reduce tensions with host communities, the authors propose;

- Supporting joint community initiatives, such as intercultural events, youth clubs, and local development projects that involve both refugees and host populations.
- Encouraging inclusive public messaging that recognises refugees' contributions and combats negative stereotypes.

5. Enhance Access to Basic Services: Access to healthcare, education, and housing is crucial for building self-reliance by establishing refugee desks in public service offices in urban areas to support navigation of health, education, and legal systems. This can also lead to collaborating with NGOs and municipal authorities to subsidise services or provide referral networks for vulnerable self-settled refugees.

6. Engage Refugees in Decision-Making: Finally, sustainable solutions require the participation of refugees in planning and policy processes through supporting the formation of urban refugee community associations and leadership forums. By Including refugee representatives in local development planning meetings and refugee response coordination platforms. These proposals aim to create a multi-level response—involving state, non-state,

and community actors that recognizes the distinct realities of self-settled refugees and ensures their inclusion in Uganda's urban development agenda.

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