

IKEA Foundation



Boosting Livelihoods



WORLD BANK GROUP

# From Evidence to Policy: A Research & Policy Symposium

Post-Event Report - 2024

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# Executive Summary

The Research and Policy Symposium was held on October 15-16, 2024, in Nairobi, Kenya to examine and advance refugee self-reliance and economic inclusion in East Africa. The symposium was convened by the **Re:BUiLD**<sup>1</sup> program, **the IKEA Foundation**, and the **World Bank** in collaboration with other partners. It provided a platform for researchers, policymakers, practitioners and donors to exchange ideas and increase awareness of, access to, and utilization of impactful evidence products in policy. Discussions over a two-day period focused around four key themes: access to finance and microenterprises, access to jobs and skills development, access to justice and legal identity, and access to social protection. Presentations of research papers were done to set the tone for evidence-driven dialogue combined with insights from those with lived experiences in forced displacement, to inform policy making.

Key highlights from the various speeches, presentations and discussions:

The urgent need for policies that go beyond short-term humanitarian support and that focus on fostering self-reliance was highlighted. The Symposium came at a time when efforts to transform the lives of refugees and host communities are more vital than ever. By the end of 2023, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda alone hosted close to 3.3 million refugees, with political tension, conflict and natural disasters at the root of most of the region's large refugee and displaced populations.<sup>2</sup>

- The importance of identifying practical pathways to refugee self-reliance and resilience and the need to break the cycle of aid dependency by enabling refugees to meaningfully contribute to local economies were stressed.
- A major theme throughout the symposium was **economic inclusion and access to finance for refugees**. Presenters noted that financial inclusion is essential for refugee self-reliance but remains challenging due to documentation requirements, gender disparities, and limited access to formal banking services.
- The symposium also highlighted the importance of **integration of refugees into national development plans** in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Programs across these three countries exemplify a shift in regional policy from seeing refugees as a temporary humanitarian challenge to viewing them as contributors to national and local economies. However, gaps remain, as participants highlighted regulatory barriers, including the need for recognized refugee documentation for business licensing and market access. Additionally, women refugees face distinct challenges, including limited literacy and financial knowledge, underscoring the need for tailored financial products and cooperative opportunities that address gender disparities.
- **Social protection and legal identity** were identified as critical elements for refugee resilience and integration. Social protection programs were shown to boost livelihoods by enabling refugees to invest in assets like housing and small businesses. Existing frameworks that support refugees were recognized, but participants noted that predictable and reliable funding is crucial to maintaining these programs. Research highlighted the connection between economic and psychosocial wellbeing, with

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<sup>1</sup> Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD) is a five-year program that fosters self-reliance for urban refugees and other vulnerable host community members in Nairobi and Kampala, with an overarching goal of understanding 'what works' to achieve this change. It started in 2021, being implemented by the IRC in collaboration with partners, and is funded by the IKEA Foundation.

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/eastern-africa#:~:text=Uganda%20\(1.6%20million\)%2CEthiopia,to%20conflict%20\(8.5%20million\)](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/eastern-africa#:~:text=Uganda%20(1.6%20million)%2CEthiopia,to%20conflict%20(8.5%20million))

cash transfers alleviating financial stress and contributing to reduced anxiety and depression among refugees. Despite these advances, challenges persist, including funding limitations, lack of formal ID systems, and limited awareness among refugees about their legal rights and access to justice. These gaps underscore the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and coordinated institutional support to promote sustainable integration.

- The need for a **regional approach to refugee policy** in East Africa was underscored, recognizing that Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda collectively host a significant portion of Africa’s displaced populations. Many attendees advocated for a common refugee policy framework across these countries to ensure cohesive support systems and equitable access to services. Representatives called for biannual or triennial reviews of policy implementation, allowing stakeholders to monitor progress, address challenges, and adapt strategies to emerging needs.
- The **importance of inclusive, evidence-based policies to promote refugee self-reliance and integration** was also emphasized. While progress has been made, particularly in the areas of social protection and financial inclusion, ongoing challenges in funding, documentation, and policy implementation remain. The Symposium emphasized that with strong cross-sector collaboration and targeted support, refugees can transition from recipients of aid to active contributors in their host communities, benefiting not only refugees but also national economies and social cohesion across East Africa.
- Recommendations for enhancing refugee inclusion and support included **stronger collaboration across governments, NGOs, and private sector partners**. Local governments emphasized the importance of demographic data on refugee populations to facilitate better planning for services and resources. Participants advocated for policies that would allow refugees to access formal financial services, secure work permits, and transition from informal to formal employment.



October 16, 2024, Nairobi. A panel discussion on Access to social protection at the symposium (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for The IRC)



## Introduction

The Re:BUILD<sup>3</sup> Research and Policy Symposium was held on October 15-16, 2024, in Nairobi, Kenya, focusing on transforming refugee livelihood policies and investments in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. The symposium provided a platform for researchers, policymakers, practitioners and donors to exchange ideas and increase awareness of, access to, and utilization of impactful evidence products in policy. Throughout the two-day event, a diverse group of researchers, policymakers, and field experts shared valuable insights into the critical areas of access to finance, social protection, jobs and skills development, justice, and legal identity. The collaborative dialogue and exchange of research findings set a strong foundation for shaping policies that positively impact refugee communities.

This report presents key evidence and policy highlights from the Symposium, organized under four key themes:

- Access to Finance and Microenterprises
- Access to Jobs and Skills Development
- Access to Justice and Legal Identity
- Access to Social Protection



October 15, 2024, Nairobi. Participants at the symposium that brought together researchers, policymakers, practitioners and donors to exchange ideas and increase awareness of, access to, and utilization of impactful evidence products in policy. (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for The IRC)

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<sup>3</sup> Re:BUILD is a five-year program funded by the IKEA Foundation that seeks to deliver livelihood interventions for urban refugees and vulnerable host residents to achieve economic self-reliance and benefit from strengthened urban economic, regulatory, and social environments. It aims to enable change at varying levels, from better access to livelihoods opportunities and inclusive services within communities, to improved refugee-related policies and more targeted and effective service delivery by national, regional, and global actors. Some of the key features of the program's approach are flexible funding, adaptive design, and continuous knowledge and evidence generation. The program is being implemented in Kampala and Nairobi cities. The IRC is the lead partner and has been coordinating a consortium of local and international partners to deliver the program interventions.

## Setting the Scene - Refugee Self-Reliance and Economic Inclusion

Opening remarks on the first day of the Symposium set the tone for subsequent discussions by focusing on the themes of refugee self-reliance and economic inclusion. [The Symposium briefing note](#) prepared by the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, IGAD and UNHCR situated the Symposium within the Global Refugee Forum Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Economic Inclusion and Social Protection and the Intersection with GRF Policy and Evidence Pledge Initiatives in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

Highlights from the scene-setting session included:

**Shifting the paradigm in refugee programming.** Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia collectively host 65% of the 5.5 million refugees in the region, most of whom continue to rely on aid. The protracted nature of displacement results in lost generations, stressing the urgency of using available evidence to address long-term needs. Speakers noted the need for a paradigm shift in how we approach refugee self-reliance, moving away from dependency toward sustainable inclusion, including by moving beyond short-term humanitarian interventions, especially for refugees facing protracted displacement. Given the remarkable resilience of refugees, efforts to break the cycle of aid dependence must include policies that enable them to contribute meaningfully to society. This requires a shift towards fostering an environment where refugee-led initiatives thrive and pave the way for sustainable futures.

**Including the voices of refugees in research design and policy engagement.** To drive meaningful change, speakers noted the importance of including the voices of refugees in research design and policy engagement, ensuring they are actively part of the solutions they envision. Integrating perspectives from those with lived experiences strengthens the relevance and impact of policies that directly affect their lives. By focusing on our shared goal—crafting policies that allow refugees to thrive—we can create a foundation for sustainable, inclusive change.

**Building the evidence base to inform policies and programs.** Speakers noted that addressing refugee challenges in the region requires robust evidence to inform policies and programs, as well as innovative research that responds to evolving needs. Meeting these demands calls for collective action by humanitarian and development actors, guided by essential analytical work from researchers. With countries in the Horn of Africa at a crossroads, a symposium on this topic offers an important platform for discussing targeted, long-term investments.

**Tackling policy obstacles to pave the way for better programming.** Despite ongoing efforts and commitments by all actors—including governments—to promote self-reliance, policy obstacles remain significant, particularly in creating inclusive systems that address the needs of refugees. Persisting exclusion stems from decades-old systems that marginalize refugees, making it essential to confront these entrenched structures and foster greater inclusion. Policies that support refugee inclusion, such as granting work rights, are critical, as are efforts to conceptualize self-reliance in a way that does not segregate refugees from host communities. Bringing policymakers to the table is crucial, as their role in crafting policies that shape refugees' lives cannot be overstated.

# Theme 1: Access to finance and microenterprises

## Key takeaways

Recognising micro-enterprises as a viable economic option for refugees, the symposium explored the role of financial inclusion and support systems for refugee-owned businesses. Speakers highlighted challenges faced by refugees and refugee-owned businesses in accessing financial services, which hinder their economic integration and ability to contribute to the local economy. Key recommendations included recognition of refugee IDs for access to financial services and business licensing, the need for microfinance institutions and other financial service providers to offer loan and credit to refugees—with tailored products for women—and the need for further research on the effectiveness of different financial inclusion approaches and on the impacts of mentorship. The sessions also highlighted how success in refugee economic inclusion relies on collaboration and coordinated efforts across governments, private sector, and NGOs.

## Papers presented: *(Links available for finalized papers only)*

1. Bridging poverty graduation and market systems development a sustainable solution to economic inclusion in protracted displacement settings | *John Ilima, Kari Diener, Rahul Mitra - RSRI/RefugePoint, Mercy Corps/Village Enterprise DREAMS consortium and the Danish Refugee Council*
2. [The Self-Reliance Evidence Review \(SRER\)](#) – | *Kari Diener – RSRI/RefugePoint*
3. Benefits of cash alone and cash + mentorship for Kenyan and refugee micro-entrepreneurs in Nairobi, Kenya | *Sana Khan – Princeton University and Beatrice Leydier – Georgetown University. Re:BUiLD RCT*
4. Mentoring Small Businesses: Evidence from Uganda - | *Thomas Ginn – CGD. Re:BUiLD RCT*
5. UNHCR Endline Performance Evaluation of the Phase 3 IKEA Foundation Livelihoods, Energy and Environment Projects Among Somali Refugees and Host Communities in Ethiopia | *Yazan Abdallah – UNHCR in partnership with TANGO International.*
6. [“I’d rather pay for the tea” – bribes and refugee livelihoods in Nairobi](#) - | *Jack Makau IIED and SDI-Kenya*
7. [Scaling refugee-owned MSMEs: Assessing effects of targeted capacity-building and inclusive financing on livelihoods in Kakuma, Kenya](#) | *Rohin Onyango - Inkomoko*
8. Livelihoods of Internally displaced people (IDPs) residing in towns and cities in Ethiopia. | *Caitlin Sturridge – ODI.*

## Key evidence and findings

1. **Refugee business owners often face higher operating costs and barriers:** In Nairobi, research has shown that refugees face higher informal fees as well as greater risks of arrest and harassment than host communities. Refugee-owned micro, small and medium enterprises also have limited access to finance and capacity-building support. These challenges hinder refugees’ economic integration and ability to contribute to the local economy.
2. **Cash grants show promise but require further research:** Evidence from the Re:BUiLD program’s randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in Kenya and Uganda suggests that cash grants can significantly boost business ownership and profits for both refugees and host communities. However, the sustainability and long-term impact, especially for women (and refugee women in particular), need further investigation.



3. **The effectiveness of mentorship was inconclusive:** While the Re:BUiLD studies aimed to explore mentorship's impact alongside cash grants, the results were mixed. On average, providing cash grants only was just as effective as mentorship. The studies found that the mentor's refugee status and gender, as well as the level of competition within the business sector, significantly influenced outcomes. Neither cash alone nor cash + mentorship increased refugee women's likelihood of owning a business relative to their comparison group. Preliminary analysis indicates that women in general, and refugee women in particular, face market, household, and social constraints that prevent them from growing their micro-enterprise.
4. **Financial inclusion requires a multi-faceted approach:** The studies highlighted the need for interventions that go beyond simply providing access to financial services. Factors such as business training, market linkages, and addressing legal and regulatory barriers are crucial for enabling refugees to effectively utilise financial services and succeed in business.
5. **Cooperatives present a potential pathway:** The success of the IKEA Foundation's livelihoods project in Ethiopia, which facilitated the formation of cooperatives providing energy, agricultural services, and diverse businesses, points to the potential of this model. However, ensuring sustainability and addressing membership retention are key challenges.

## Participant reflections on the evidence presented

**The Role of Research and Evidence:** Rigorous research is essential to inform effective programming and policy decisions related to refugee self-reliance. RCTs and other impact evaluation methods, for example, can help determine the effectiveness of different interventions. Research should also focus on understanding the specific needs and challenges of different refugee populations, including women and youth.

**Paradigm Shift to Self-Reliance:** There is a growing consensus on the need to move beyond traditional humanitarian aid and focus on empowering refugees to become self-reliant. This shift requires moving away from a "camp" mentality and integrating refugees into the economic and social fabric of host communities. At the same time, the relevance of microenterprise as a primary economic solution was questioned, with some advocating for expanded labor market opportunities beyond self-employment, recognizing that entrepreneurship may not align with every individual's goals or capabilities.

**Collaboration and Partnerships:** Partnerships between NGOs, governments, private sector actors, and refugee communities are essential for successful self-reliance programs. Governments have a key role to play in creating enabling environments for refugees to access work permits, business registration, and other opportunities while the private sector involvement can provide market access, investment, and employment opportunities for refugees. The Symposium highlighted successful examples of collaboration, such as the Shirika Plan in Kenya and research partnerships between NGOs and local governments.

*"For private investments to flourish in the displaced context, the government can play a really essential role in de-risking those investments because these investments are critical for fostering entrepreneurship."*  
- John Ilima, DREAMS Program.

## Implications and recommendations for future research, policy and practice

**Promoting Financial Inclusion and Access to Financial Services:** Microfinance institutions and other financial service providers should play a role in offering loans and credit to refugees to enable entrepreneurship and economic independence. This should include accepting refugee IDs to reduce documentation barriers and promote access to formal banking systems. Linking village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) with formal financial institutions can also provide refugees with access to more stable funding, but requires supportive policies and access to formal identification.

**Providing Policy and Regulatory Support:** Policy solutions must be adapted to the unique needs and challenges faced by different refugees and host community populations. Among other measures, recognizing refugee documentation for business licensing and reserving market quotas can enhance refugee economic participation. At the same time, local authorities should be sensitized to reduce harassment and extortion of refugee entrepreneurs.

**Ensuring Gender Equity in Financial and Economic Programs:** Given the disparities in financial service usage by refugee women, strategies should explicitly focus on increasing financial literacy and access for women, including by tailoring financial products and cooperative opportunities to their unique needs. More research should also be conducted to identify effective economic inclusion strategies specifically for women, addressing the current evidence gap on gender-specific impacts.

**Building the Evidence:** To strengthen policy decisions, a broader evidence base on self-reliance is necessary, as current findings rely heavily on a limited set of studies. Future research should encompass social networks, the roles of public and private sectors, and the impact of climate change to economic outcomes. Studies are also needed on the effectiveness of financial inclusion approaches on microenterprise development, including assessments of cost-effectiveness. Research should prioritize understanding which mentor characteristics are most effective in enabling mentee success in refugee entrepreneurship and employment.

**Increasing Collaboration and Multi-Sector Partnerships:** Success in refugee economic inclusion relies on collaboration across governments, private sector, and NGOs, with coordinated efforts to support long-term financial and social integration of refugees. Effective refugee integration also requires active government engagement, particularly in creating an enabling policy environment that bridges short-term NGO support with sustainable, formal sector opportunities.

**Tailoring mentorship programs:** Researchers recommend more targeted and tailored mentorship programmes for different aspiring-entrepreneur groups based on gender and refugee-status. The evidence on mentorship also suggests that other interventions may be required to address the constraints faced by women and enable them to benefit from economic opportunities.



October 15, 2024, Nairobi. (From Left) Kari Diener - RSRI/RefugePoint, John Ilima - Mercy Corps/Village Enterprise DREAMS consortium and Rahul Mitra - the Danish Refugee Council in a panel during the symposium (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for The IRC)

## Theme 2: Access to jobs and skills development

### Key takeaways

Discussions focused on the effectiveness of vocational training, digital freelancing, and the role of technology in enhancing employment opportunities for refugees. The evidence highlighted the need for vocational training to be aligned with local labor market demands and developed in partnership with the private sector. It also identified benefits of vocational training that go beyond the economics, including feelings of optimism, social cohesion, trust and cooperation among participants. Digital jobs were recognized as an opportunity, but participants urged careful consideration to ensure equitable access and avoid potential exploitation. Key recommendations included reforming education systems to better prepare individuals for today's workplace, removing legal barriers to accessing job markets, and the importance of being willing to share research findings transparently, especially when they are unexpected.

### Papers presented: *(Links available for finalized papers only)*

1. [The Kenya Analytical Program on Forced Displacement \(KAP-FD\) | Mirko Vintar - World Bank](#)
2. [Designing a Randomized Controlled Trial on Livelihoods for Refugees and Hosts: The Case of Re:BUiLD in Kampala | Thomas Ginn - CGD](#)
3. [Improving Employment and Social Cohesion among Refugee and Host Communities through TVET | Abis Getachew - Jigjiga University](#)
4. [Unlocking Potential: Digital Freelancing as a Pathway for Refugee Economic Empowerment | Lorraine Charles - Na'amal and Jobtech Alliance](#)

## Key evidence and findings

1. **The effectiveness of vocational training is context-dependent:** The evidence indicates that the effectiveness of TVET programs hinges on aligning training with local labour market demands, involving the private sector and equipping refugees with skills that lead to decent-paying jobs. Simply providing training without considering market relevance has not been proven to yield positive outcomes.
2. **Vocational training has benefits beyond the economics:** Some of the research found that program participants gained a huge sense of optimism following vocational training, and also found that TVET trainings improved social cohesion by promoting an inclusive identity, trust and cooperation among participants.
3. **Digital jobs offer opportunities but require careful consideration:** The rise of digital freelancing platforms presents new avenues for refugee employment. Initiatives focusing on developing in-demand digital skills and connecting refugees to online work opportunities can leverage the growing digital economy and create pathways to sustainable livelihoods. However, ensuring equitable access, navigating platform fees, and addressing potential exploitation are crucial for leveraging these opportunities effectively.
4. **Business development trainings can support new businesses:** Equipping refugees with business skills, such as financial management, marketing, and business planning, can enhance their entrepreneurial capabilities and support the growth of their ventures. However, such training needs to be cost-effective and tailored to the specific needs of the target population.



## Participant reflections on the evidence presented

**Contextual Relevance:** Interventions need to be carefully tailored to specific contexts, considering the needs, preferences, and skills of displaced populations, as well as the local labour market dynamics. This requires understanding the dominant economic sectors, available opportunities, and prevailing cultural norms. Designing interventions that promote intergroup connections, and understanding can contribute to better outcomes.

**Gendered Impacts:** The discussions consistently pointed to the need for a deeper understanding of the gendered impacts of interventions. This involves analysing how different programs affect women and men in terms of access to finance, skills development, and employment opportunities.

**Formal vs. Informal Employment:** The informality of the economy in many regions hosting refugees presents both challenges and opportunities. While it can facilitate initial engagement in income-generating activities, it often lacks social protection and access to formal financial services.

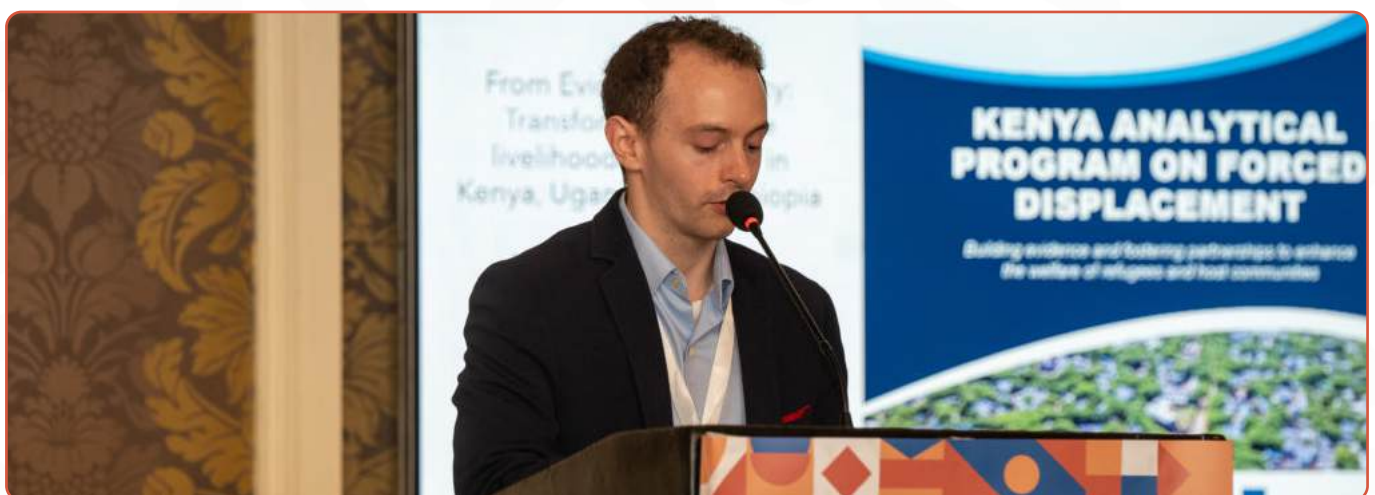
## Implications and recommendations for future research, policy and practice

**Investing in Digital Infrastructure and Skills:** Realising the potential of digital jobs requires investments in improving access to technology, enhancing digital literacy through education and training programs, and addressing legal barriers to online work for displaced populations. Organisations connecting refugees to digital jobs play a vital role in facilitating their integration into the digital economy. Providing support to these intermediaries can enhance their capacity and reach, creating more opportunities for displaced populations.

**Leveraging Technology for Learning and Income Generation:** Exploring innovative ways to leverage technology, such as online learning platforms and digital marketing tools, can empower refugees to develop in-demand skills and access global markets.

**Collaborating with Private Sector:** Partnerships with the private sector can create job opportunities and support skills development programs tailored to industry needs. This can bridge the gap between training and employment, increasing the relevance and impact of interventions.

**Promoting Refugee-Led Organisations:** Recognizing the expertise and experience of refugee-led organisations and involving them in program design and implementation can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions.



October 16, 2024, Nairobi. Mirko Vintar - Global Practice Consultant in the World Bank's Poverty and Equity Global Practice at the symposium. (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for The IRC)

## Theme 3: Access to justice and legal identity

### Key takeaways

Discussions highlighted progressive refugee policies in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda to guarantee access to justice and documentation but noted that persisting implementation gaps and limitations are hindering effective access. Given the significant economic penalties refugees face due to existing legal and regulatory barriers, access to appropriate documentation—including work permits and business licenses—was identified as key to allowing refugees participate in the formal economy and avoid exploitation. Recommendations included the establishment of government-funded legal aid organizations to provide accessible legal support to refugees, integrating refugee IDs with national ID systems through digital ID program, allowing refugees to access banking, registration services, and social programs, developing policies to facilitate refugees' access to the labor market and implementing targeted support for refugee women and people with disabilities.

### Papers presented: *(Links available for finalized papers only)*

1. Legal barriers encountered by women in the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement | *John Emmanuel Dei – through Refugee Led Research Hub*
2. Examining the Dynamics of Protection and Promotion of Durable Solutions for Urban Refugees in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia | *Dr. Alemu Asfaw Nigusie - Bahir Dar University*
3. Understanding Socio Economic Barriers for Refugees in Kenya: Challenges with Registration and Documentation at Kakuma Refugee Camp. | *Rai Friedman - Global Rights Defenders*

## Key evidence and findings

- **Legal barriers create significant economic penalties for refugees:** The study on refugee livelihoods in Nairobi revealed that while both refugees and host communities face obstacles in doing business, the economic penalties are greater for refugees, largely due to limited awareness of refugee rights.
- **Documentation is key for economic inclusion, but several barriers impede access to such documentation:** Access to appropriate documentation, including work permits and business licenses, is essential for refugees to participate in the formal economy and avoid exploitation.
  - » Obtaining refugee documentation is often a protracted process, taking months or even years. This delay leaves refugees in a precarious legal position, unable to fully participate in society or access essential services.
  - » A lack of coordination between different governments and humanitarian systems creates confusion and inefficiencies in the registration process. This can lead to delays, errors, and a lack of clarity for refugees trying to navigate the system.
  - » Refugees often lack awareness of their legal rights, and the procedures involved in accessing documentation and legal services. Similarly, authorities may not be fully informed about refugee rights and relevant legislation, leading to misinterpretations and discriminatory practices.
  - » The inability to communicate effectively due to language differences poses a significant obstacle for refugees seeking legal assistance or navigating legal processes.

- **Existing barriers have a profound impact on the socioeconomic outcomes of refugees, restricting their access to employment, education and essential services:** Without proper documentation, refugees face significant challenges in securing formal employment, limiting their opportunities for self-reliance. They are often relegated to the informal sector, characterized by low wages and precarious working conditions. Lack of documentation can also prevent refugees from enrolling in educational institutions or accessing scholarship opportunities, hindering their ability to acquire essential skills and improve their future prospects. Finally, access to healthcare, financial services, and other essential services is often contingent upon possessing valid identification documents. The absence of such documentation can leave refugees vulnerable and excluded from critical support systems.

## Participant reflections on the evidence presented

- **Legal and Documentation Challenges:** Across discussions, there was a strong emphasis on legal protection and documentation for refugees. Lack of clear legal mandates and jurisdiction issues between city and federal levels complicate matters for refugees. The need for foundational identification systems was highlighted by multiple speakers, who pointed to digital ID integration with national systems as essential for refugees to access services, financial systems, and other critical resources. Additionally, the necessity of interpreters in court and administrative settings was raised due to language diversity. Providing clear and accessible information about the registration process, wait times, and the status of applications can empower refugees and reduce anxiety and uncertainty.
- **Economic Inclusion and Self-Reliance:** Participants highlighted the economic potential of refugees. The ability of refugees to contribute economically was framed not as charity but as a mutual benefit for host communities. However, issues like limited registration access and restrictive work permits in Kenya create barriers to refugee employment and integration. Discussions also covered the role of the private sector in facilitating refugee self-reliance, with calls for economic inclusion that addresses specific barriers faced by marginalized groups, such as women and people with disabilities (PWDs).
- **Social Barriers and Gender Considerations:** Gender and social barriers, particularly for women, children, and PWDs, were consistently underscored. Barriers in accessing justice and services due to lack of tailored provisions for women and PWDs pose ongoing challenges. Access to childcare and support services, such as legal aid and social security, were suggested as areas where policy improvements could make significant impacts on these vulnerable groups' lives.
- **Policy Alignment and Institutional Coordination:** Speakers highlighted the need for coherent practices across government institutions involved in refugee management, such as immigration and refugee authorities. The lack of coordination between these institutions can create inconsistencies in service delivery, especially regarding refugee documentation and pathways to naturalization. This misalignment between immigration and refugee management in Uganda and Kenya leads to complications in addressing both immediate and long-term refugee needs.
- **International and Institutional Support:** The discussion highlighted suspicions between host countries and international organizations, with concerns over whose interests are prioritized. Additionally, representatives urged organizations like the World Bank to align their support with host country interests. Coordinated buy-in from international and local organizations was noted as crucial to achieve sustainable refugee policies.



## Implications and recommendations for future research, policy and practice

- **Strengthening Legal and Documentation Frameworks:** Several concrete recommendations were provided to reduce barriers currently faced by refugees in accessing justice and legal identity.
  - » Integrate refugee IDs with national ID systems through digital ID programs, allowing refugees to access banking, registration services, and social programs.
  - » Establish government-funded legal aid organizations to provide accessible legal support to refugees, especially those facing discrimination and exclusion due to their undocumented status.
  - » Expand interpreter services in judicial and administrative settings to accommodate the linguistic diversity of refugees and asylum seekers.
  - » Introduce mobile courts with increased frequency to provide accessible justice within refugee settlements.
- **Enhancing Economic Integration and Employment Opportunities:** Refugees' access to the labor market and digital economy can be improved by removing restrictive restrictions on the right to work and addressing issues in recognition of refugee qualifications. This could include allowing refugees to use government-recognized IDs for work and business purposes. The private sector should also be encouraged to participate in job creation and skills training tailored to market demand.
- **Addressing Social and Gender-Based Barriers:** Implement targeted support for refugee women and PWDs by providing access to services like interpreters, social security, and childcare and by developing policies with specific provisions for refugee women to ensure equitable access to justice and economic participation. Encourage gender-sensitive interventions in refugee support programs, with a focus on reducing economic and social barriers for marginalized groups.
- **Improving Policy Coordination and Institutional Capacity:** To streamline refugee information management and improve service coordination, governments should establish a unified data system accessible to relevant stakeholders. Collaboration between immigration authorities and refugee management agencies should also be increased to bridge policy gaps and align objectives, particularly around citizenship and naturalization.
- **Strengthening International and Regional Partnerships:** To increase trust and collaboration, foster a transparent dialogue between host countries and international organizations, ensuring alignment of support structures with host country and refugee interests. This should include leveraging international financial support in ways that build local capacity rather than fostering dependency, focusing on programs that align with host community goals and exploring mechanisms for consistent funding to build institutional resilience and mitigate dependency on sporadic aid.



October 16, 2024, Nairobi. Lucy Otto from Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) - Uganda, at the symposium. (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for The IRC)

## Theme 4: Access to social protection

### Key takeaways

Discussions highlighted the importance of social protection as a key pathway to resilience and self-reliance. The session explored the different forms of social protection, including cash transfers and in-kind assistance, and their impact on refugee livelihoods and resilience to shocks. Participants highlighted challenges faced by existing social protection programs and emphasized the need to formally integrate refugees within national frameworks to ensure predictable and equitable access to essential services. Additional recommendations included the need for cash transfer programs to consider the benefits of larger, one-time disbursements for longer-term investments, the importance of producing detailed demographic data on refugee populations to assist government planning, and the need for more research to understand the effectiveness and long-term impact of different social protection interventions.

### Papers presented: *(Links available for finalized papers only)*

1. [Cash transfers amid shocks: A large, one-time, unconditional cash transfer to refugees in Uganda has multidimensional benefits](#) | Emmanuel Rukundo - IDInsight and Apata Insights
2. [Impact Evaluation of a Cash Transfer and Psychosocial Training Program for Refugees in Kenya](#) | Antonia Johanna Sophie Delius - World Bank, UNHCR and University of California, Berkeley
3. [Influence of Drought on Livelihoods' Adaptive strategies of refugees with physical disabilities in Kakuma refugee camp](#) | Muraya Peter – through the Refugee Led Research Hub (RLRH)
4. [Area-Based Assessments on Movement, Livelihoods, and Access to Basic Services in Adjumani Town and Mbarara City, Uganda](#) | Melle Van-Hilten - IMPACT Initiatives

## Key evidence and findings

1. **Cash transfers as a form of social protection:** The success of the GiveDirectly cash transfer program in Uganda (a large, one-time, unconditional transfer to refugees) demonstrates the positive impact of social protection on refugee livelihoods, particularly in boosting asset ownership and business creation. The large, one-time transfers had more transformative impacts, allowing refugees to invest in housing, land, and small businesses. Smaller, monthly transfers were less effective for investment but sustained basic needs. Another study highlighted the value of cash transfers in diversifying livelihoods for refugees with physical disabilities adapting to drought.
2. **Psychosocial and economic wellbeing are connected:** Economic hardships are correlated with stress, depression, and anxiety, with higher levels observed among refugees. Refugees and hosts both used cash transfers for basic needs like food and healthcare, suggesting that these are unmet for many. Economic stability through cash transfers may positively impact mental wellbeing.
3. **Formal social protection programs have limited coverage:** Refugees and other vulnerable groups are often excluded from formal schemes, leaving many individuals and families without adequate support. Insufficient funding for social protection programs limits their scope and effectiveness, hindering the ability to reach all those in need. This underscores the need for increased investment in social protection, both from national governments and international donors. Humanitarian aid serves as de facto social protection, but without formal integration into national systems, support remains inconsistent.

## Participant reflections on the evidence presented

- **Funding Models and Barriers:** Funding limitations and lack of coordinated resources are major obstacles for implementing effective refugee support systems. In Ethiopia and Kenya, government and NGO partnerships aim to extend coverage and financial services to refugees yet face logistical and financial challenges in scaling up these initiatives.
- **Inclusion of Refugees in National Development Plans**
  - » **Uganda** integrates refugees within its National Social Protection Policy, offering cash-for-work and labor-intensive programs that engage both nationals and refugees, addressing social security needs directly.
  - » **Kenya** works with organizations like IRC and UNHCR, where initiatives like the NSSF's Haba Haba program extend informal sector coverage to refugees, helping them contribute toward social security and access savings if they leave Kenya.
  - » **Ethiopia** has integrated over 80,000 refugees and nationals into its social protection framework, using social protection as a tool for unity and economic growth. Through public works and livelihood programs, Ethiopia plans to reach an additional 43,000 refugees, particularly youth in urban areas like Addis Ababa.
- **Sustainability through Unique IDs and Data Tracking:** Creating IDs linked to support individuals receive from different agencies could ensure better tracking of support across households and prevent overlap in aid distribution. Unique ID numbers could facilitate more precise and equitable access to aid, enabling agencies to better coordinate assistance across various programs.
- **Research and Collaboration with Government:** Participants emphasized the value of co-creating research agendas with government stakeholders to ensure findings are relevant and actionable and that studies are aligned with pressing policy needs, supporting more effective and sustainable refugee integration.

## Implications and recommendations for future research, policy and practice

- **Integrating Refugees into National and Local Policies:** Integrating refugees into national social protection policies is crucial to ensure consistent and reliable support, rather than relying solely on ad-hoc humanitarian assistance. This would provide refugees with a more predictable and sustainable safety net, contributing to their long-term well-being and self-reliance.
- **Integrating psychosocial support:** Given the link between economic hardship and psychological distress, integrating psychosocial support into economic aid programs may increase resilience. Additionally, awareness campaigns and mental health training can reduce stigma and address unmet needs.
- **Accounting for disability costs:** Shifting towards adaptive social protection frameworks that consider the unique needs and vulnerabilities of refugees, including those with disabilities, is essential. This would involve accounting for disability costs, such as the additional expenses incurred by people with disabilities in accessing services and participating in society.
- **Carrying out further research to better inform interventions:** Conducting rigorous research, including longitudinal studies and impact evaluations, is essential to understanding the effectiveness and long-term impact of different social protection interventions. This data can then inform policy decisions and ensure that programs are designed to effectively promote resilience and self-reliance among refugee populations.



## Policy-maker reflections

Policymakers from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda were invited to reflect on the evidence presented over the two days and offer insights from their contexts, who emphasized the following:

- **A shift towards integrating refugees into urban centers and existing systems** rather than confining them to camps. Uganda's Kampala Mayor advocated for clear best practices for urban integration, highlighting challenges refugees face in cities like Kampala, Nairobi, and Addis, including regulatory barriers and limited access to resources. Kenya's Deputy Commissioner for Refugee Affairs highlighted Kenya's progress with the Refugee Act of 2021 and the ongoing development of a refugee policy to enhance inclusion and equal opportunities for refugees in economic, educational, and health sectors. Ethiopia committed to a national roadmap for refugee integration, with intentions to harness refugee skills for economic development.
- **The need for strong legal frameworks to support refugee inclusion** was a recurring theme. Participants suggested a common regional policy on refugee management, which would promote cohesion and shared responsibility among neighboring countries. Regular reviews of policy implementation were recommended to assess progress and improve upon existing frameworks.
- The importance of **greater inclusivity in research**, emphasizing the importance of government input and of understanding the local context. This could include the creation of a structured framework to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers, which could support improved access to refugee rights.



October 16, 2024, Nairobi. Henok Ketema - Advisor of the State Minister, Ethiopia at the symposium (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for The IRC)

- **Incorporating the private sector** emerged as essential to supporting refugee services. Kenya for example has engaged Mastercard and other partners to provide access to education and financial services, helping refugees gain independence. There was strong advocacy for enabling refugees to compete economically, with many noting the economic contributions already made by successful refugee businesses in places like Kakuma.
- **Greater focus on the underlying drivers of forced migration**, such as political conflict and climate change. Addressing these factors is seen as critical to a sustainable refugee response. Uganda's Kampala Mayor also expressed concerns over the political weaponization of the refugee crisis, recommending further research on these dynamics.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the Symposium served as a call to action for all stakeholders to work together to generate more evidence and make sure the research findings translate into tangible policy changes that empower refugees and promote their well-being. Participants acknowledged that the symposium provided a valuable platform for cross-sectoral dialogue and set intentions to continue these conversations.

It emphasizes the **need to tailor interventions to the specific needs and contexts of different refugee populations**, recognizing the diversity within these groups. Governments were also encouraged to focus on implementing evidence-backed programs to ensure they are effective, especially given that research shows refugees are capable of achieving self-reliance. The Symposium highlighted the wealth and depth of evidence already available, and participants acknowledged that while more research is needed in certain areas, we also have sufficient evidence to inform tangible policy changes that are critical to improve refugees' self-reliance and livelihoods. However, participants recognized that this requires collaboration between the government, private sector, and researchers, particularly to address shared challenges faced by both refugees and host communities through integrated responses. This collaborative approach ensures that research is relevant, context-specific, and leads to impactful policy changes.

The need for refugees to receive adequate legal recognition and support and have access to the right documentation cut across all themes at the conference, as was the importance of ensuring refugees have the right to work and the freedom of movement needed to pursue appropriate livelihood opportunities. Speakers also stressed the need for **meaningful inclusion of refugees in all aspects of programming and research**, dismantling systems of "othering" and empowering refugees to shape their own futures. They also advocated for using robust evidence, such as data from randomized control trials and other rigorous research methodologies, to inform policy decisions. This data-driven approach promotes effective interventions and ensures accountability in resource allocation.

With 130 in-person attendees and over 1,000 virtual participants, the Symposium underscored the strong interest in leveraging research to shape policy. Insights from the symposium will help guide policy in the region, supporting refugee self-reliance and inclusion in labor markets.

Overall, the evidence presented at the symposium highlighted the need for a nuanced and multi-dimensional approach to refugee inclusion and integration. Interventions should consider the specific context, address legal and regulatory barriers, and prioritize the meaningful participation of refugees in designing and implementing solutions. Participants agreed that fora like this Symposium provide valuable platforms for dialogue between researchers and policymakers, ensuring that insights from research translate into actionable strategies for refugee support, and commitments were made to hold the second edition of this Symposium in 2026.

## Quotes

"If you see somebody in a foreign land, just try to imagine the kind of problems they're running away from. It is serious, and so we should not add other problems in terms of discriminating against them."

*Mr Jashon Awuor, Deputy Commissioner,  
Department of Refugee Affairs, Kenya*



"We need to reflect critically on the regulatory barriers refugees face in accessing employment, registration, and basic services. We need to harness the available opportunities within the existing legal framework."

*His Lordship Erias Lukwago, Mayor of  
Kampala, KCCA, Uganda*





# Appendix 1

## Event Recordings

Please access recordings of the 2-day event [here](#).

# Appendix 2

## Symposium program

### From Evidence To Policy: A Research & Policy Symposium



**Day One: 15th October**

**Day 1 Themes: Access to finance microenterprises & Access to jobs and skills development**

**Opening**

**08:00 - 08:35:** Registration, issuance of merchandise and welcome coffee/tea  
**08:35 - 09:00:** Welcome remarks, agenda, objective adoption and keynote briefs for Day 1  
*Moderator: Priscilla Dembetembe - Program Director, Re:BUiLD, IRC*

- International Rescue Committee (IRC): **Banchiamlack Dessalegn, PhD, Regional Vice President, East Africa**
- The IKEA Foundation: **Rediet Kassaye, Program Manager, Refugee Livelihoods Portfolio**
- World Bank: **Miguel de Corral - Senior Operations Officer, Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) Group**
- Refugee-Led Research Hub: **Mohamed Hassan, Researcher**

**Situating the dialogue**

**09:00 - 09:30:** **Situating the dialogue: The policy scene – underpinning on GRF pledges.**  
*Moderator: Jacob Bonyo - RefugePoint, Country Director, Kenya*

**Theme 1: Access to finance and microenterprise**

**09:30 - 10:00:** **Situating the evidence: Overview of the Policy & Practice Status**  
*Moderator: Kari Diener - Executive Director, RSRI/RefugePoint*

**Co-presenters:**

- **John Ilima** - Village Enterprise, Country Director, Uganda
- **Rahul Mitra** - Global Advisor for Economic Recovery. Danish Refugee Council

**Papers presented: 2**

1. Bridging poverty graduation and market systems development a sustainable solution to economic inclusion in protracted displacement settings - **RSRI/RefugePoint, Mercy Corps/Village Enterprise DREAMS consortium and the Danish Refugee Council**
2. The Self-Reliance Evidence Review (SRER) – **RSRI**

**10:00 - 11:00: Spotlight 1: Is a combination of mentorship + cash grants the key to transform livelihood outcomes? Launching Re:BUiLD's wave 1 Randomized Control Trials (RCT) results**  
*Moderator: Belinda Muya - Deputy Program Director, Re:BUiLD, IRC*

**Papers presented: 2**

3. **Sana Khan** – Princeton University and **Beatrice Leydier** – Georgetown University  
Paper: Benefits of cash alone and cash + mentorship for Kenyan and refugee micro-entrepreneurs in Nairobi, Kenya
4. **Thomas Ginn** – Center for Global Development (CGD)  
Paper: Mentoring Small Businesses: Evidence from Uganda

**11:00 - 11:20: Coffee Break and photos**

**11:20 - 11:30: Day 1 keynote speech: Government of Kenya**  
*Moderator: Priscilla Dembetembe - Program Director, Re:BUiLD, IRC*

**Jashon Awuor** - Deputy Commissioner, Department of Refugee Services

**11:30 - 12:30: Evidence deep dive**  
*Moderator: Rufus Karanja - Embassy of Switzerland to Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia and Uganda*

**Papers presented: 4**

- 1. Yazan Abdallah** - United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) in partnership with TANGO International.  
*Paper: UNHCR Endline Performance Evaluation of the Phase 3 IKEA Foundation Livelihoods, Energy and Environment Projects Among Somali Refugees and Host Communities in Ethiopia.*
- 2. Jack Makau** - International Institute for Environment and Development and SDI-Kenya  
*Paper: "I'd rather pay for the tea" – bribes and refugee livelihoods in Nairobi*
- 3. Rohin Onyango** - INKOMOKO  
*Paper: Scaling refugee-owned MSMEs: Assessing effects of targeted capacity-building and inclusive financing on livelihoods in Kakuma, Kenya*
- 4. Caitlin Sturridge** - Overseas Development Institute (ODI).  
*Paper: Livelihoods of IDPs residing in towns and cities in Ethiopia.*

**12:30 - 1:20: Dialogue:** Discussions, reactions and practical implementation of presented evidence. Identification of evidence gaps and next steps.

**1:20 - 2:30: Lunch**

## **Theme 2: Access to jobs and skills development**

**2:30 - 4:30: Overview of the Policy & Practice Status and Evidence Deep Dive**  
*Moderator: Caroline Njuki - Chief Technical Advisor on jobs (employment) and skills development with the ILO in Kenya.*

**Papers presented: 3**

- 5. Thomas Ginn** - Center for Global Development (CGD)  
*Paper: Designing a Randomized Controlled Trial on Livelihoods for Refugees and Hosts: The Case of Re:BUiLD in Kampala*
- 6. Abis Getachew** - German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) Esurv Consults Jigjiga University  
*Paper: Improving Employment and Social Cohesion among Refugee and Host Communities through TVET*
- 7. Lorraine Charles** - Na'amal for Jobtech for Refugees Community of Practice (Co-led by Na'amal and Jobtech Alliance)  
*Paper: Unlocking Potential: Digital Freelancing as a Pathway for Refugee Economic Empowerment*

**Dialogue:** Discussions, reactions and practical implementation of presented evidence. Identification of evidence gaps and next steps.

**4:30 - 4:45: Reflections on day 1, evening coffee, photos and departure**  
*Moderator: Brian Ssebunya - Senior Technical Director, Economic Recovery & Development, IRC*

# From Evidence To Policy: A Research & Policy Symposium



**Day Two: 16th October**

**Day 2 themes: Access to justice and legal Identity and Access to social protection**

## Opening

**08:30 - 09:00:** Sign in, and Morning Coffee

**09:00 - 09:35:** Day 1 recap, tone setting and keynote briefs for Day 2

*Moderator: Priscilla Dembetembe - Program Director, Re:BUiLD, IRC*

- Government of Ethiopia: **Anteneh Mekasha** - Livelihood and Job Creation Team Leader, RRS
- Government of Uganda: **Patrick Okello** - Commissioner for Refugees Management, OPM

**09:35 - 11:10: Spotlight 2: Building Evidence to Enhance Livelihoods of Refugees and Host Communities. Spotlight on the Kenya Analytical Program on Forced Displacement (KAP-FD)**

*Moderator: Marion Kimani - Operations Officer, Forced Displacement Program, Africa Fragility Unit, IFC*

### Panelists:

- **Mirko Vintar** - Global Practice Consultant in the World Bank's Poverty and Equity Global Practice
- **Masud Rahman** – Economist at the UNHCR
- **Jane Mjambere** - Rwandan refugee based in Kenya, working on community engagement and empowerment

**11:10 - 11:30: Coffee Break**

## Theme 3: Access to Justice and Legal Identity

**11:30 - 1:00: Evidence deep dive via panel**

### Research panelists:

*Moderator: Andrew Maina, Regional Durable Solutions Coordinator, Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS)*

### Papers presented: 3

1. **John Emmanuel Dei** - Refugee Led Research Hub  
*Paper: Legal barriers encountered by women in the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement*
2. **Dr. Alemu Asfaw Nigusie** - Assistant Professor -Department of Political Science and International Studies, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia  
*Paper: Examining the Dynamics of Protection and Promotion of Durable Solutions for Urban Refugees in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*
3. **Rai Friedman** - Global Rights Defenders.  
*Paper: Understanding Socio Economic Barriers for Refugees in Kenya: Challenges with Registration and Documentation at Kakuma Refugee Camp.*

### Policy maker panelists:

4. **Rahel Kassa** - Legal and Policy Advisor at the National ID Program of Ethiopia
5. **Hon Justice Dr. Douglas Karekona Singiza** - Judge of the high court in Uganda
6. **Fresiah Wanjiku Githumbi** - Advocate of the High Court of Kenya and the Acting C.E.O of the National Legal Aid Service (NLAS)

**1:00 - 2:00: Lunch**



## Theme 4: Access to Social Protection

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### 2:00 - 3:00: Evidence deep dive and panel discussion

Moderator: *Brian Ssebunya Senior Technical Director, Economic Recovery & Development, IRC*

#### Papers presented: 4

1. **Emmanuel Rukundo** - IDInsight and Apata Insights  
Paper: Cash transfers amid shocks: A large, one-time, unconditional cash transfer to refugees in Uganda has multidimensional benefits
2. **Antonia Johanna Sophie Delius** - World Bank, in collaboration with UNHCR and University of California, Berkeley  
Paper: Impact Evaluation of a Cash Transfer and Psychosocial Training Program for Refugees in Kenya
3. **Muraya Peter** - Refugee Led Research Hub (RLRH)  
Paper: Influence of Drought on Livelihoods' Adaptive strategies of refugees with physical disabilities in Kakuma refugee camp
4. **Melle Van-Hilten** - IMPACT Initiatives, research implemented under our REACH Initiative  
Paper: Area-Based Assessments on Movement, Livelihoods, and Access to Basic Services in Adjumani Town and Mbarara City, Uganda

### 3:00 - 4:00: Policy maker reflections

- **Millicent Awiti** - General Manager, Strategy, Research and Risk, NSSF Kenya – Inclusion of Forcibly displaced people in Social Protection
- **Dr. Debebe Barud** - Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, Ethiopia – Refugee Inclusion in Community Based Health Insurance
- **Lucy Otto** - Principal Social Development Officer, Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, Uganda – Old Age Cash Pilot for Refugees

## Now what – next steps

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### 4:00 - 4:10: Icebreaker

Facilitator – *Anthony Wachira, IRC*

### 4:10 - 4:25: Reflections, key take aways and vote of thanks

Moderator: *Precious Zikhali - Senior Economist, World Bank's Poverty & Equity Global Practice*

*Key takeaways, summary of outcomes, actions/agreements and acknowledgment of research needs identified by policy makers for future collaboration.*

### 4:25 - 4:40: Closing remarks

Government of Ethiopia: **Mr Henok Ketema** - Advisor of the State Minister

Government of Kenya: **Jashon Awuor** - Deputy Commissioner, Department of Refugee Services

Government of Uganda: **Daniel Kaseregenyi** - Deputy Director, KCCA

International Rescue Committee (IRC): – **Elijah Okeyo**, Country Director, IRC Uganda

### 4:50: Evening coffee, networking and departure