

Refugees' Access to Wage Employment in Kampala and Nairobi:

Lessons from the Re:BUiLD Program



REBUiLD
Boosting Livelihoods



Lead Authors: Vitaline Ajambo & Moses Onyancha

Contributors: Claudius Maghanga & Moses Odokonyero

Technical support and Review: Boniface Odhiambo, Elizabeth Mukami, Belinda Muya, Priscilla Dembetembe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief examines urban refugees' experiences in accessing wage employment in Kampala (Uganda) and Nairobi (Kenya), drawing on insights from **Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD)** program over the period 2022–2023. Re:BUiLD is a five-year initiative led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in partnership with the IKEA Foundation, the Centre for Global Development (CGD), Open Capital Advisors, and the city authorities of Nairobi and Kampala. The program delivered livelihood support to urban refugees and vulnerable host community members, generating evidence on “what works” for economic integration. During the implementation period 2022–2023, Re:BUiLD provided vocational training, apprenticeships, Value chain, skills certification, and related services to 2,726 clients in both Nairobi and Kampala, 64% of whom were women and 55% refugees. By July 2025, the program had reached 20,738 clients across its various interventions. These efforts form part of a broader shift toward long-term development solutions for refugees in East Africa, as reflected in recent policies like Kenya's *Shirika Plan (2025)* and Uganda's *Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan (2021–2025)*.

Learnings from Re:BUiLD's wage employment intervention highlight that technical skilling, while necessary, is not sufficient to secure sustainable employment for refugees. Many participants who participated in the intervention gained new vocational skills and certifications but still struggled to obtain decent jobs. In mid-2023, for example, 88% of trained refugee clients in Kampala and 46% in Nairobi were not yet engaged in any income-generating activity, underscoring the need for additional support beyond skills training. Re:BUiLD's experience suggests that complementary measures such as *addressing restrictive work policies, providing job placement support, expanding refugees' professional networks, raising employer awareness of refugees' rights, and strengthening soft skills like language and job-readiness* are critical for converting skills into actual employment. Improving refugees' employability must go together with advocacy and systemic changes to remove barriers in the labor market. These lessons inform the recommendations in this brief, aimed at practitioners and policymakers seeking to promote refugee self-reliance through wage employment

URBAN REFUGEES IN KAMPALA AND NAIROBI: NAVIGATING BARRIERS TO ECONOMIC SELF-RELIANCE

Kampala and Nairobi, two of East Africa's fastest growing metropolitan hubs, host large and diverse refugee populations. In Kenya, ¹111,900 refugees and asylum seekers reside in urban areas (primarily Nairobi), accounting for about 13% of the country's total refugee population. Uganda² is one of Africa's top refugee hosting nations with about 1.85 million refugees as of 2025, of whom an estimated 8–9% live in the capital, Kampala. These urban refugees hail from across the region, including countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Burundi, and Rwanda. While some have lived in exile for decades, others arrived more recently due to ongoing conflicts and instability in their home countries. They typically settle in Nairobi's and Kampala's low-income informal neighborhoods, where public services are overstretched, and livelihood opportunities are few. Like their vulnerable host community neighbors, urban refugees often struggle to meet basic needs and pursue stable employment in these settings.

Refugee-rights policies ³in both Kenya and Uganda in principle support economic inclusion, but implementation gaps and practical barriers have limited their impact on refugees' daily lives (Beltramo, 2021). Kenya's Refugee Act of 2021 enshrines the right to work and freedom of movement for refugees, marking a progressive shift from the country's decades-long encampment policy. In practice, however, **bureaucratic**

¹ Kenya Statistics Infographics | May 2025

² Refugees and nationals by district

³ The New Refugee Act in Kenya and What it Means for Refugees

obstacles such as lengthy procedures to obtain or renew the mandatory Class M work permits, delays in issuing refugee identity cards linked to the national ID system (IPRS), and requirements to register for tax PINs (Personal Identification Number) **hinder refugees' access to formal jobs**. Many employers (and even local officials) remain unaware that refugees have legal work rights under the new law, or they are hesitant to navigate the administrative red tape involved in hiring refugees. As a result, even qualified refugees in Nairobi find it difficult to secure jobs in the formal sector. A recent assessment conducted by the Re:BUiLD Program noted that without stronger enforcement of the Refugee Act and streamlined processes, refugees will continue to face an “opaque” path to work authorization, effectively barring many from the formal labor market. In one example, the IRC’s Re:BUiLD program struggled to officially hire refugee Research Assistants due to work permit bottlenecks, ultimately engaging them as short-term contractors without standard benefits. Such outcomes illustrate how gaps between policy and practice undermine refugees’ employment prospects.

Uganda is often lauded for its progressive refugee policies which grant refugees the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to public services under the 2006 Refugee Act. The government’s self-reliance strategy and inclusion of refugees in national development plans (e.g. the National Development Plan and sectoral response plans) reflect a commitment to socio economic inclusion. However, refugees in Uganda also face strong challenges in the labor market. The 2021 USAID & UKAID⁴ -sponsored analysis found that only 29% of refugees in Uganda were actively employed, compared to 64% of host nationals, with unemployment among refugees (31%) four times higher than for hosts (7%). Refugee women have markedly lower labor force participation than men and host community women, due to cultural and household constraints. Moreover, when refugees do work, they are often confined to the informal and subsistence sectors.

Crucially, urban refugees in cities like Nairobi and Kampala do not benefit from the structured assistance (food rations, housing, etc.) available in camp settings, yet they face unique vulnerabilities. They must compete in the open market with host country job seekers and often without local networks or documentation that host nationals take for granted. For instance, most formal employers require a national ID or recognized qualification documents which many refugees lack or struggle to obtain as well as local references or connections. Refugees also frequently pay higher fees for work permits or business licenses (if they can get them at all) and may encounter xenophobic attitudes during the hiring processes. Local labor markets are often saturated with underemployed youth, meaning refugees end up accepting precarious, low-wage work if they find work at all. Indeed, surveys conducted by actors in Nairobi, show many refugees working informally as day laborers, casual domestic workers, street vendors, or other survival jobs that offer little security or progression. Social capital plays a significant role too notably, Re:BUiLD’s survey found that Kenyan nationals were more successful than refugees in securing jobs, due to their stronger personal networks and referrals. In Re:BUiLD’s 2023 client survey, 45% of refugee jobseekers cited the lack of professional networks as a major obstacle to finding work (second only to work permit issues). This indicates that in urban environments, “who you know” matters for employment, putting refugees at a disadvantage relative to well-connected locals.

⁴ Labor Market Assessments covering Refugee Hosting Districts in Uganda

WHAT RE:BUiLD HAS DONE TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM?

At its inception, the Re:BUiLD program conducted a series of assessments to inform a tailored livelihood strategy for urban refugees. These included a comprehensive [Skills and Labor Market Assessment](#) and a value chain analysis in Nairobi and Kampala, carried out with local partners and research institutes. The studies examined refugees' existing skills and the demand in local labor markets, identifying sectors with high employment potential (such as services, construction, transport, ICT, and certain trades) and the gaps preventing refugees from accessing those jobs. A key finding was that providing training alone would not be sufficient unless actual market opportunities exist and barriers are removed, thus interventions needed to be coupled with efforts to create demand (through private sector engagement) and reduce regulatory obstacles. Using this evidence, Re:BUiLD and its partners designed multiple pathways to wage employment, aligning training programs with viable value chains and known skill shortages in the local economy. Major interventions implemented include:

- **Technical and Vocational Training (TVET):** Re:BUiLD supported refugees and host community members to enroll in formal vocational courses **aligned with labor market needs**. Training fields were chosen based on market demand (e.g. tailoring and apparel, hairdressing and beauty, baking and catering, information technology, electrical repair, solar energy, driving). In Kampala, over 900 trainees (around 67% women) attended certified courses through local partners such as **Makasi Foundation** and **Raising Gabdho Foundation**, receiving nationally recognized certificates from the Directorate of Industrial Training (DIT). In Nairobi, about 1,000 refugees and hosts (over 64% women) were placed in accredited vocational colleges including government and private institutions (such as *PC Kinyanjui Technical Institute*, *Institute of Advanced Technology*, *St. Theresa Vocational Centre*, and others). Partnering established training centers ensured credibility of the credentials and alignment with industry standards. Graduates obtained trade certificates (e.g. Kenya's National Industrial Training Authority exams or Uganda's DIT), enhancing their chances in the job market. However, follow-up surveys revealed mixed outcomes: among 650 (Female 358, male 292, Host 390 and 260 Refugees) trained clients evaluated for employment in mid-2024, only 39% had secured salaried jobs, while 45% were working in casual labor and others were in seasonal work or unpaid volunteer roles. This indicated that additional support was needed to translate skills into stable employment.



Photo Credit: August 04, 2022, Nairobi, Kenya. The Re:BUiLD program supported clean energy solutions by equipping clients with market relevant skills in fields like solar technology and electrical wiring, sectors that are typically male dominated. (PHOTO: Moses Odokonyero for the IRC).

- Apprenticeship Programs:** To provide hands on experience and direct workplace exposure, Re:BUiLD organized structured apprenticeships and on job training placements. In Nairobi, 474 clients (121 refugees and 353 hosts, 61% female) were placed as apprentices with local businesses across sectors including beauty/cosmetics, textiles, food service, engineering, health care, and administration. These 3-month placements were facilitated through **Memoranda of Understanding** with private companies such as Kenya Textile firms, supermarkets (Coolmart, Tasya Mart), training institutes (Mahanaim Educational), hospitality venues (Grace House Resort, Jari Inn Bistro), media and manufacturing firms which agreed to mentor and train the interns. In Kampala, similarly, refugees trained in trades like welding, mechanics, tailoring, and salon work interned with local artisans and businesses under supervision for several months. Notably, Re:BUiLD made efforts to place women in non-traditional, higher paying trades for instance, 14 refugee women took on apprenticeships in typically male dominated fields such as auto mechanics, carpentry, and metal fabrication. Apprenticeships proved successful: in a follow up sample of 211 (Female 139, 72male ,Host 153,Refugees 58) Kenyan apprenticeship participants, 55% had secured employment (often staying on with the host company) and 35% had started their own small businesses, with only 10% not working. In Nairobi, 140 apprentice graduates were hired by their placement employers, continuing to earn regular income. These outcomes suggest that practical work experience coupled with employer partnerships can significantly improve refugees' employment prospects, especially when training is linked to real job openings. To support those pursuing self-employment after apprenticeships, Re:BUiLD also provided a limited number of **start-up kits and micro grants** for example, 87 Female and 36Male, Host 66, Refugee 59 in Kampala received grants to buy tools/equipment for trades learned, and a post-distribution monitoring found most had utilized the funds to launch or expand small enterprises.

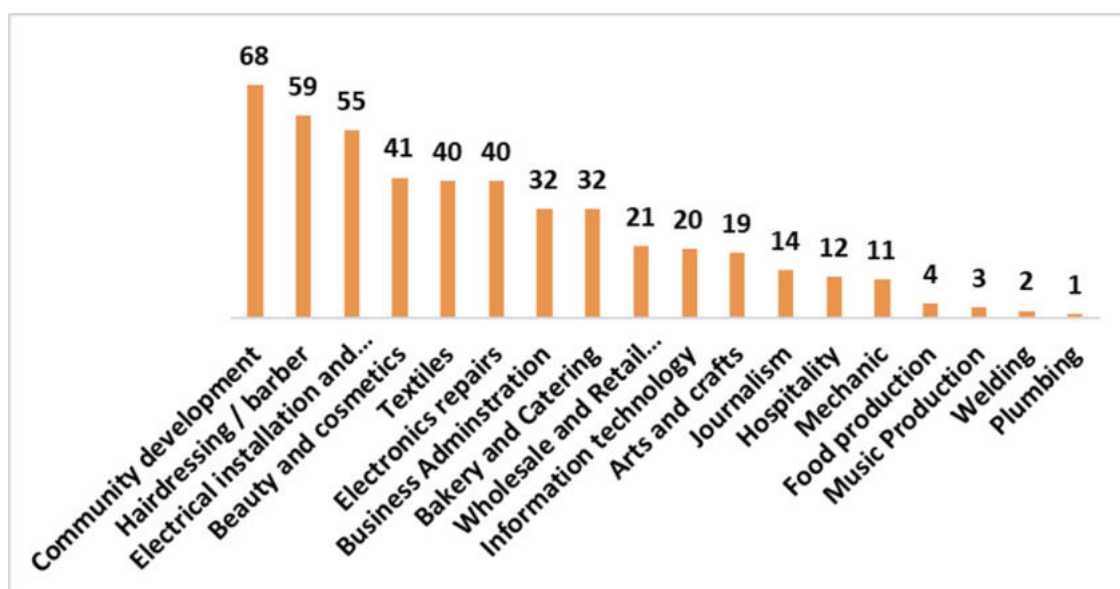


Fig 1: Number of clients placed per Industry/sector

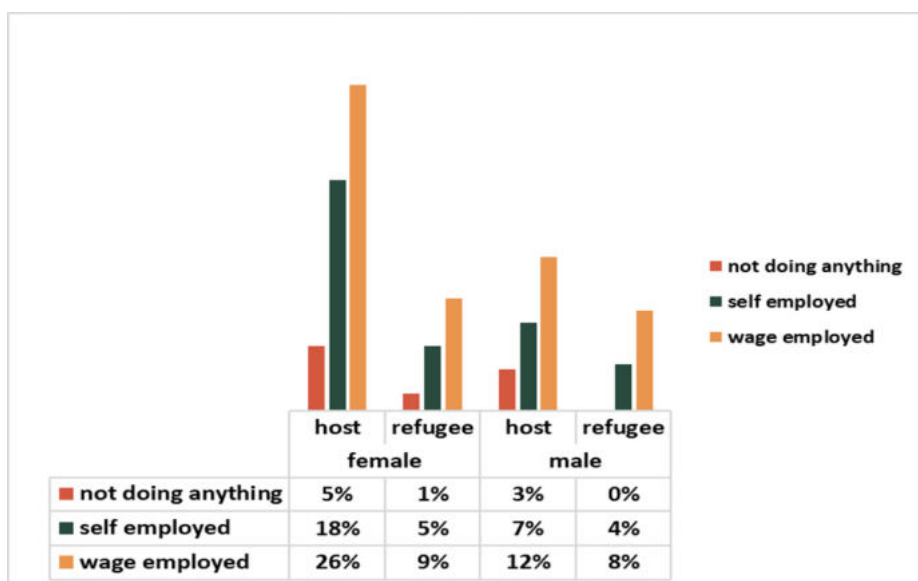


Fig 2: The category of employment

- **Value Chain-Based Employment Initiatives:** Re:BUiLD worked with specialized partners to integrate refugees into inclusive value chains identified as high potential. A study by Open Capital Advisors highlighted growth opportunities in “green” sectors, food processing, and textiles/garments, which informed pilot projects. In Kampala, Re:BUiLD partnered with Fine Spinners Uganda Ltd, a major textile manufacturer, to train 103,(60 Refugees,43 Host, 85 Female,18 male) and host community members in tailoring and industrial sewing, preparing them for jobs across the textile supply chain from production to sales. In Nairobi, a collaboration with Styles Industries (Darling) a leading cosmetics/hair products company enabled 20 female clients (13 Refugee, 7 Host) to be trained and certified in beauty therapy and hairdressing, after which many were absorbed into the company’s outlets. Another partner, Castro’s Mancave barbershop, took on refugee apprentices in the cosmetology field. These value-chain programs boasted strong employment outcomes, about 88% of participants (8 Refugees, 6 host) in the value-chain trainings in Kenya secured wage employment, with a few others starting enterprises in the sector. The high success rate is attributed to the demand driven nature of the training and the direct link to employers in the chain.
- **Bridging Support and Soft Skills Training:** Midway through implementation, Re:BUiLD introduced “bridging services” to strengthen the transition of trained refugees into employment. This was a response to the finding that many graduates were still unemployed due to deficits in job search skills, confidence, and connections. The bridging program, launched in mid-2023, offered short courses and coaching on critical soft skills such as communication, business English, interviewing, CV writing, workplace etiquette, and teamwork as well as individualized career guidance and networking support. Re:BUiLD engaged private sector HR professionals to provide mentorship and organize job fairs and networking events to connect refugees with employers. These bridging activities were meant to “top up” the technical training with the practical knowledge to land a job. Early evidence showed that this pivot was appreciated by clients and filled a crucial gap. Many refugees reported they lacked knowledge in navigating formal job application processes and needed a “mindset shift” to confidently compete with nationals. By equipping refugees with soft skills and linking them to job opportunities, Re:BUiLD aims to improve the placement rate of its graduates into gainful employment.
- **Skills Certification and Recognition:** Another innovative pathway piloted by Re:BUiLD was the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to formally certify refugees’ existing skills. Many urban refugees possess vocational skills learned through experience (e.g. auto repair, tailoring, construction) but lack documents to prove their competencies to employers. In Kenya, Re:BUiLD worked with the Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA) to implement the country’s RPL framework (launched in 2022). Through this pilot, 81 refugees and 25 host community members in Nairobi were assessed and awarded certificates recognizing their prior skills in trades such as plumbing, carpentry, and cosmetology. This was done in conjunction with KNQA and industry bodies. This was a landmark development which contributed to the RPL policy launch event in 2024 where refugees received certificates alongside Kenyans. By mid-2024, a total of 81(70 refugee,11 host, 23 Female, 58 Male) candidates in Kenya had obtained formal certification of their skills through RPL, which is expected to boost their employability. In Uganda, where an official RPL system is still nascent, Re:BUiLD partnered with Makerere University and other bodies to validate refugees’ skills in selected areas, resulting in 29(5Female, 24male 12Refugees and 17 Host) clients gaining certificates or accreditation through special assessments.

One of the key challenges faced in promoting certificate accreditation under the Re:Build program was limited demand, despite extensive recruitment and sensitization efforts. This was largely due to a lack of awareness about accreditation opportunities within refugee communities. Coordination with embassies and government agencies also proved complex, particularly for clients from Ethiopia and Eritrea, where education policies link certificate issuance to compulsory national service. Many political refugees were unwilling to share personal information with their embassies, fearing political repercussions. In Kenya, refugees from francophone countries like DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda faced language barriers and lacked confidence navigating English-language government systems. Furthermore, discrepancies in curricula

and the absence of national examination boards in countries like Burundi and DRC limited the Ugandan government's ability to equate secondary and tertiary certificates. Specialized fields, such as law, posed additional hurdles due to differences in legal systems, requiring foreign-trained professionals to pursue further local qualifications to practice legally in Uganda.

Early feedback suggests that having a recognized certificate improves refugees' confidence and credibility in the job market. Employers are more willing to hire a refugee welder or chef, for instance, if they can show a certificate equivalent to a local qualification. The RPL and certification pilots thus helped bridge an important gap, and they align with government efforts to include refugees in national TVET and qualification frameworks. By formally recognizing refugees' skills, host countries can better tap into refugees' talent while refugees gain a competitive edge for decent work.

Through these multi prolonged interventions, Re:BUiLD directly equipped nearly 3,000 clients (1641 Refugees, 1342 Host, 2015 Female, 968 Male) with skills and experience to improve their livelihood prospects. Re:BUiLD's approach had generated a range of evidence and models from cost-effectiveness analyses of training to case studies of refugee employment success intended to inform other programs and policies in East Africa. The lessons learned, discussed below, highlight what worked and what challenges remain in promoting wage employment for urban refugees.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED FROM RE:BUILD'S WAGE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

- **Formal Certificates Alone Do Not Guarantee Employment:** Simply obtaining a vocational certificate (even from a reputable body like DIT or NITA) is not a ticket to securing a job for refugees. Re:BUiLD observed that many graduates with new certificates still could not find employment without additional support. Employability is more than hard skills - , refugees often need soft skills, local experience, and connections to secure work. This lesson underpinned the introduction of bridging services. A qualification on paper must be paired with mentorship, mindset shifts, and job search skills to translate into real employment. Practitioners should temper expectations that vocational training alone will lead to jobs, and therefore plan for post training follow up and placement assistance.
- **Cost-Effectiveness Varies by Modality – Apprenticeships Often Provide Better Value:** An internal "best use of resources" analysis compared the cost per successful outcome across training modalities. It was found that traditional vocational training was more expensive, yet not more effective, than apprenticeships in leading to employment. In Kenya, for instance, vocational training cost around €519–€1,414 per client, whereas apprenticeships cost €259– €1,111 per client for similar or better job outcomes. Higher costs for TVET were due to tuition fees paid to training institutions and longer durations (4–6 months) requiring stipends, versus shorter (3-month) apprenticeships with on job training. Moreover, when IRC implemented training directly, it incurred higher average costs than when delivered through local partners (such as community-based organizations), largely because the NGO provided more comprehensive start up kits and support. This suggests that partnering with local organizations and focusing on job training can yield more cost-efficient results. Programs should regularly evaluate cost-effectiveness and consider shifting resources toward interventions (like apprenticeships or job matching services) that achieve better outcomes at lower costs.
- **Policy and Documentation Barriers Remain a Major Obstacle:** Experience under the Re:BUiLD Program reinforced that systemic barriers beyond the program's direct control often determine employment outcomes. In Kenya, despite new laws, the cumbersome processes to obtain work permits, refugee IDs, and other documents continued to hamstring refugees' job prospects. Even Re:BUiLD's own refugee hires faced delays in obtaining permits, affecting their employment terms. Such hurdles not only discourage refugees but also deter potential employers who find it easier not to hire refugees at all. In Uganda,



Photo Credit: August 16, 2023, Kampala, Uganda. In 2022, RE:BUiLD registered Florence Awor and placed her for apprenticeship after going through a mechanical engineering course. After 3 months of the apprenticeship, Awor's supervisor decided to continue working with her. Awor says she enjoys working with vehicle engines and gearbox (PHOTO: Joseph Sosi for the IRC).

although refugees have the legal right to work, certain industries impose experience or certification requirements that refugees struggle to meet (for example, trucking companies requiring Ugandan driving experience, or employers unfamiliar with foreign qualifications). Bureaucratic red tape and lack of recognition of refugee credentials nullify the right to work in practice. Programs like Re:BUiLD can help individuals navigate these requirements, but broader advocacy is needed to streamline government procedures (e.g. faster issuance of IDs and work permits, waiving certain fees) and sensitize employers. Without addressing these policy level issues, the impact of training programs will be limited.

- Align Skills Training with Market Demand:** A clear lesson was the importance of continuously scanning the labor market and focusing training on skills in demand. The initial market assessments were crucial in selecting sectors for Re:BUiLD's interventions. When training matched market needs, for instance, garment skills for which a textile firm was actively hiring placement rates were high. Conversely, training refugees in trades with saturated supply or where refugees cannot be hired yielded poor outcomes. A [UNHCR market assessment](#) in Nairobi similarly emphasized investing in skills that the private sector is actively seeking and willing to employ refugees in. The lesson for practitioners is to base livelihood programs on solid market analysis and to remain agile, adjusting courses offered as economic trends evolve. What was "marketable" last year may not be today, so close collaboration with industry is needed to keep training relevant.
- Social Networks and Community Connections Matter:** Refugees' relative lack of social capital in urban environments emerged as a significant factor in employment. A routine Re:BUiLD survey found that 45% of refugees cite lack of personal networks as a barrier therefore highlighting that skills and effort alone may not overcome the advantage that host-country job seekers gain from referrals and connections. Host nationals in the program more easily found jobs, often through family or friends, whereas refugees (especially recent arrivals) were effectively locked out of many opportunities that are filled informally through word-of-mouth. This points to a need to intentionally build refugees' networks – for example, through mentorship programs, peer support groups, and connecting refugees to professional associations or job fairs. Some of Re:BUiLD's activities (like inspirational speaker sessions and networking events) were steps in this direction.

- **Low Awareness of Refugee Work Rights – Among Refugees and Employers:** Re:BUiLD observed a pervasive lack of knowledge regarding refugees' legal rights to work, both within refugee communities and among potential employers. Many refugees were unaware that they could lawfully work or start businesses especially in Kenya, where misinformation about the encampment policy lingered, resulting in them not attempting to apply for jobs. On the other hand, local employers often do not realize that hiring a refugee is legal or assumed it is prohibitively complicated. This knowledge gap is a serious impediment to refugee employment. Policies have been slow and fragmented in implementation, resulting in low awareness on all sides. The lesson is that outreach and information dissemination are essential: refugees need to be informed of their rights and available services (e.g. how to obtain a work permit or business permit), and employers need targeted awareness campaigns to clarify the processes and benefits of recruiting refugees. In Re:BUiLD, some advocacy sessions were held with private sector groups and government officials to improve this awareness, but it remains an area requiring further work by stakeholders.
- **Experience Requirements and Other Hidden Barriers:** Another insight was that refugees often face hiring criteria that make it hard for them to compete. For example, in Uganda, some vocational graduates (like mechanics or drivers) found that employers expected a minimum of 3–5 years of local work experience a catch 22 for refugees new to the country. Similarly, certain professional licensing bodies did not easily recognize refugees' qualifications or demanded costly exams. Even when policies are inclusive, these de facto barriers (experience, local references, language fluency, etc.) prevent refugees from converting skills to jobs. Programs should anticipate these hurdles and prepare refugees accordingly (e.g. by facilitating internships to gain experience or providing language classes). It is also important to advocate for flexibility in such requirements or special consideration for refugees where possible, for instance, encouraging companies to consider refugee candidates with equivalent foreign experience.

The Re:BUiLD program's implementation underscored that successful refugee employment initiatives must address both, supply side readiness (skills, certification, soft skills) and demand-side openness (policies, employer attitudes, network inclusion). The above lessons highlight why an integrated approach ie one that reduces structural barriers and supports refugees through the entire employment continuum is necessary for urban refugees to attain sustainable livelihoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the experience and evidence from Re:BUiLD's wage employment programming in Nairobi and Kampala, we propose the following recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders:

1. **Scale Up Advocacy to Enforce Refugee Work Rights and Streamline Documentation:** Legal rights to work for refugees exist on paper (e.g. [Kenya's Refugees Act 2021](#), [Uganda's Refugee Act 2006](#)), but implementation lags. Governments and advocates should intensify efforts to ensure these laws are fully operationalized at all levels. This includes simplifying and expediting the issuance of refugee IDs, work permits, and business permits, and eliminating unnecessary fees or requirements. For instance, Kenya's authorities could consider waiving the Class M work permit requirement for refugees or decentralizing its approval to speed up processing. In Uganda, increasing awareness of refugees' right to work among district officials and employers is vital. Regular training for government staff on refugee documentation processes, plus clear guidelines for employers (a one-stop information portal on hiring refugees), would reduce confusion. Advocacy coalitions involving NGOs, refugee leaders, private sector champions, and UN agencies should engage policymakers to address specific regulatory hurdles (like recognition of foreign qualifications and inclusion of refugees in public employment services).

- 2. Integrate Soft Skills and Job-Readiness Training with Technical Programs:** Vocational training programs for refugees should incorporate dedicated modules on soft skills and job readiness to improve graduates' employability. These skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, interviewing, professional etiquette, and basic business English or host country language are frequently cited by employers as lacking among marginalized jobseekers. Embedding soft skills into the curriculum (rather than as an afterthought) will produce more well-rounded candidates. Additionally, providing career guidance and coaching as refugees near graduation can help them prepare resumes, practice interviews, and search for jobs effectively. By boosting refugees' soft skills, we enhance their competitiveness and ability to integrate into workplace environments, which in turn encourages employers to retain and promote refugee staff.
- 3. Promote Dual Skilling and Cross-Training through Private Sector Partnerships:** Dual skilling equipping individuals with multiple competencies can increase refugees' flexibility in the job market and resilience to shifts in demand. We recommend developing partnership programs with industry associations and employers to offer refugees combined training or apprenticeships in complementary skill sets. For example, in Kampala the Uganda Hotel Owners Association could partner on a program to train refugees in both hospitality and culinary skills, enabling them to work in various hotel roles. Likewise, manufacturing firms could cross-train refugees in machine operation and basic equipment maintenance, making them more valuable hires. Re:BUiLD's experience suggests that employers are more inclined to retain trainees who can multitask and fill diverse needs in the business. Dual-skilled workers also have alternative employment options if one sector faces a downturn.
- 4. Provide Start-Up Kits and Business Seed Support for Graduates:** Upon completing training, many refugees lack the tools or capital to apply their new skills, which hinders both self-employment and even wage employment in some trades. Providing graduates with basic start-up kits such as toolsets, equipment, or initial stock relevant to their trade can significantly jump-start their economic activities. For example, a certified tailor receives a sewing machine and fabric to begin taking orders, or a trained electrician gets a toolkit and voltmeter to perform electrical repairs. Re:BUiLD's provision of start-up tool grants in Nairobi and Kampala showed positive results, with recipients launching small businesses or improving their employability by owning the tools of the trade.

We recommend that livelihood programs budget for in-kind kits or small cash grants for committed graduates, coupled with guidance on how to utilize them productively. Even those pursuing wage jobs can benefit eg a mechanic with her own set of tools is more attractive to a garage employer, and a hairstylist with equipment can more easily rent a salon space. To ensure sustainability, programs might make kit distribution conditional on a viable business plan or job offer and follow up to provide advice. Additionally, linking refugees to micro-credit or savings groups upon graduation can help them access working capital to grow their toolkits or businesses further. Equipping refugees to practice their skills not only empowers them towards self-reliance but also increases the return on investment of the training itself.

- 5. Expand Career Counseling and Mentorship Services:** Personalized career guidance and psychosocial support should be integral to refugee employment programs. Many urban refugees, especially youth and those who experienced trauma, benefit from one-on-one counselling and mentorship to navigate career choices in a unique environment. We recommend establishing career counseling centers or sessions within refugee serving organizations in cities. Trained counselors (including successful refugees or host community professionals) can help refugees identify their strengths, set realistic career goals, and map out steps to achieve them. They can also address psychological barriers like low self-esteem, trauma, or fear of discrimination that often hold refugees back from pursuing opportunities. Re:BUiLD found that some refugees needed encouragement and coaching to apply for formal jobs, having faced repeated rejection or marginalization. Regular mentoring – pairing refugees with mentors in their field –

can provide ongoing advice, motivation, and networking connections. For instance, a refugee aspiring to work in IT could be mentored by a tech professional in Nairobi who provides industry insights and referrals. By investing in career guidance, programs help refugees make informed decisions (e.g. which courses to take, which jobs to target) and develop the soft attributes like resilience and professionalism that employers value.

- 6. Inspire and Inform through Role Models and Peer Learning:** It is important to highlight success stories and create peer learning opportunities for refugees striving for wage employment. Organizing inspirational speaker sessions, networking events, and peer support groups can boost morale and provide practical tips. Re:BUiLD hosted events where successful refugee professionals and entrepreneurs shared their journeys – these resonated strongly with participants, showing them that attaining decent work is possible and providing guidance on overcoming challenges. We recommend that agencies hold regular “career days” or community forums where refugees who have secured jobs or started thriving businesses speak to others about how they did it. Such forums can also include Q&A, where newcomers ask questions and get advice from those with experience. Beyond formal events, facilitating peer networks (e.g. WhatsApp groups for job seekers in similar trades) allows refugees to exchange job leads, mentorship, and emotional support.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can build on the Re:BUiLD program’s learnings and move closer to the ultimate objective of: urban refugees and their host neighbors attaining dignified, sustainable livelihoods. Achieving this will not only improve the self-reliance and well-being of refugees but also contribute to the economic development and social cohesion of Nairobi, Kampala, and other cities that welcome those seeking refuge.

REFERENCES

- i. Beltramo, T., Fix, J., & Sarr, I. (2021). *Uganda Knowledge Brief: Using Socioeconomic Data to Promote Employment Solutions for Refugees in Uganda*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- ii. Centre for Global Development (CGD). (2024). *How Donors Can Better Support Urban Refugees in Kampala and Nairobi* (Policy Paper 323 by J. Kotut, A. Vos, H. Dempster, & H. Tang). Washington, DC: CGD.
- iii. International Rescue Committee (IRC). (2023). *Re:BUiLD in Action – Year 3, Q2 Newsletter. Nairobi/Kampala: IRC Re:Build Program*.
- iv. International Rescue Committee (IRC). (2025). *Access to Decent Work: A Pathway to Durable Solutions for Urban Refugees in Nairobi and Kampala (Re:Build Decent Work Policy Brief)*. Nairobi/Kampala: IRC.
- v. Refugees International. (2024, June 3). *The New Refugee Act in Kenya and What It Means for Refugees* (Commentary by A. B. Halakhe, A. Mukuki, & D. Kitenge). Washington, DC: Refugees International.
- vi. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2022, September). *Market and Value Chain Assessment for Refugee Livelihoods in the Nairobi Metropolitan Area. Nairobi: UNHCR Kenya Operation*.
- vii. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024, June 20). *Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Report 2024. Geneva: UNHCR*.
- viii. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2025a, March 31). *Kenya Statistics Package – 31 March 2025* (Operational Data Portal report). Nairobi: UNHCR Kenya.
- ix. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2025b, April 2). *Uganda Refugee Statistics – March 2025 (Settlement and Urban Profiles)* (Operational Data Portal report). Kampala: UNHCR/Office of the Prime Minister (Uganda).
- x. US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). (2025, May 13). *Toward a Shared Future: Advancing Refugee Integration in Kenya*. Washington, DC: USCRI (Blog post by USCRI Kenya).

In partnership with the IKEA Foundation, Re:BUiLD brings together the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Center for Global Development (CGD), Open Capital (OCA), Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and Nairobi City County Government (NCCG). Re:BUiLD is committed to generate and share evidence for innovative, sustainable livelihood solutions that can be adopted to support refugees and host residents in other cities in East Africa and beyond.

The opinions expressed in this brief belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Re:BUiLD's funding entities and partners.

Vitaline Ajambo is the Livelihoods Manager for the Re:BUiLD Program in Kampala, Uganda

Moses Onyancha is the Senior Livelihoods Officer based in Nairobi, Kenya for the Re:BUiLD Program

Copyright ©2025 IRC.

All rights reserved. Sections of this document may be reproduced without the permission of but with acknowledgment to IRC.

