



Agents of Change: Community Process Facilitators, Driving Refugee-Host Integration in Kampala

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Introduction

This learning brief presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted to evaluate the impact of Community Process Facilitators (CPF) as a sustainable community-led approach to enhance refugee and host community integration in Kampala. In addition to fostering social cohesion, the brief highlights the critical role CPFs have played in improving access to services by bridging the gap between communities and service providers, ensuring that referrals, follow-ups, and community feedback loops are more responsive and inclusive.

The brief is informed by insights from community mobilization and social integration activities carried out over a four-year period under the Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD) program. Re:BUiLD is a five-year program (2021-2025) implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partners in Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya, with funding from the IKEA Foundation. This brief shares insights and learnings from social cohesion activities in Kampala implemented by Re:BUiLD's implementation partner, Platform for Vendors in Uganda (PLAVU). The recommendations from the learning brief are intended for partners involved in social cohesion activities to promote refugee-host social integration. The brief highlights learnings from two critical areas: the effectiveness of the CPFs in facilitating refugee-host collaboration and the social cohesion changes observed at the community level resulting from their work.

The CPF Approach, developed by Re:BUiLD and PLAVU, is a practical model based on years of community observations. A World Bank study in East Africa¹ found that attitudes about refugee-host relations often form within households and close groups. The CPF Approach supports conducting social cohesion activities at these intra-group and neighborhood levels.

During the first three years of Re:BUiLD (2021–2023), various grassroots advocacy approaches were applied to strengthen refugee-host relations in Kampala. While these approaches generated useful lessons, they were often fragmented, short-term, and heavily dependent on external facilitation, which limited their sustainability and community ownership. These gaps highlighted the need for a more structured and locally driven model that could embed responsibility within communities themselves. In response, and building on earlier experiences, the Community Process Facilitator (CPF) model was formally introduced in 2024 as a sustainable mechanism to strengthen social cohesion, improve service access, and foster inclusive refugee-host integration.

Bruno Onzima² defines the CPF methodology as a community-driven strategy aimed at empowering refugees and vulnerable host communities by fostering ownership of advocacy efforts. By building existing community structures, the CPF model equips selected individuals (Community Process Facilitators) to act as agents of change, by leading their communities in advocating for social cohesion initiatives and essential services and contributing to the promotion of a more inclusive and responsive local governance system.

At the core of the CPF model is peer-led advocacy, which ensures that knowledge and skills are shared and sustained within the communities. Initially, communities are engaged through existing groups or associations, which elect representatives to serve as CPFs. Since March 2024 to date, PLAVU has supported 30 (23 females and 7 males) CPFs comprising of 15 refugees and 15 host community members who have participated in Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions covering key advocacy topics, equipping them with the necessary skills to raise awareness, mobilize action, and relay critical information within their communities.

¹ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/598681643291911822/pdf/Social-Cohesion-and-Refugee-Host-Interactions-Evidence-from-East-Africa.pdf>

² Bruno Onzima was the Program Manager at Re:BUiLD partner, Platform for Vendors who came up with the idea of the use of Community Process Facilitators (CPF) for community level advocacy in Kampala

Methodology

Data for this learning brief was gathered through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) comprising 10 (6F&4M) CPFs, and 2 key informant interviews from PLAVU. The FGD comprised CPFs from the refugee and host communities from the five divisions of Kampala. The research questions were categorized under three main axes:

- How effective is the CPF structure in addressing the needs of both refugee and host community members?
- To what extent have stakeholders Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Local Council One structures (LC1s) collaborated to facilitate refugees' access to services and ensure their inclusion in decision-making processes?
- What systematic changes have occurred in local government as a result of the inclusion of refugees, and how have they influenced broader policy or governance reforms at the LC1, division, and city levels?

Description of the CPF Models and Activities

Community Selection and Engagement: CPFs were identified and selected through existing community groups and associations, ensuring representation from both refugee and host communities. This participatory process not only strengthened local ownership but also laid the foundation for sustained community-driven advocacy.

Capacity Building and Training: PLAVU conducted intensive Training of Trainers sessions for 30 CPFs (23 females and 7 males; 15 refugees and 15 host community members). These sessions focused on advocacy strategies, community mobilization, structured engagement with duty bearers, evidence collection, and inclusive leadership skills. The training equipped CPFs with the knowledge and tools to lead initiatives effectively within their communities.

Mentorship, Follow-Ups, and Technical Support: Continuous mentorship and technical guidance provided CPFs with ongoing capacity development, reinforcing skills acquired during training and supporting sustainability. Regular follow-ups helped maintain accountability, strengthen community relationships, and enhance the overall effectiveness of advocacy interventions.

Peer-to-Peer Advocacy and Structured Engagement: CPFs implemented peer-led advocacy approaches, mobilizing community members, gathering evidence of local challenges, and engaging in structured dialogue with relevant duty bearers. By following a systematic approach to issue escalation and resolution, CPFs ensured that concerns were addressed at the appropriate levels while promoting collaboration and trust between communities and authorities.

Sustained Community Impact: Through these activities, CPFs have not only addressed immediate community concerns but also established a model of grassroots engagement that builds trust, fosters collaboration, and encourages long-term integration between refugee and host communities in Kampala.

Outputs and Results

Non-Confrontational Advocacy Approach

According to Onzima, the CPF model emphasizes a non-confrontational and solution-oriented approach to advocacy. The model requires that CPFs are trained to follow a structured process of escalating issues, identifying the right duty bearers, engaging constructively, and escalating concerns when necessary. This respectful and strategic engagement encourages collaboration rather than conflict, thus increasing the chances of sustainable solutions.

In Lungujja Parish, a neighborhood in Kampala, CPFs demonstrated this approach when they mobilized their community to respond to a public health risk caused by an individual attempting to construct a building on a drainage channel. Initially, the CPFs approached the LC1 chairperson; however, upon discovering that he had been compromised, they escalated the matter to the division authorities, where similar challenges persisted. Determined to find a resolution, they took the issue to the Resident City Commissioner (RCC), who organized a village meeting to resolve the concern. Through this collective effort and perseverance, the construction was halted and thus preventing potential health hazards.

The Lungujja scenario shows the importance of structured escalation processes when referring issues for redress. CPFs follow a step-by-step method of escalating issues starting from the lowest level (e.g., LC1) and moving up to higher authorities (e.g., RCC) when necessary. This ensures that issues are addressed at the appropriate level and increases the likelihood of accountability.

CPF's key strength lies in the foundation of community trust, mobilization, and collaboration and this is driven by their ability to maintain a good supportive relationship within their community enabling them to collectively identify challenges and advocate for solutions. This scenario thus highlights the importance of persistence, strategic engagement, and structured escalation in advocacy. The CPF approach, built on

continuous follow-ups, capacity building, technical guidance, and mentorship, ensures that communities are equipped to effectively navigate governance systems and influence positive change.

Empowerment and Inclusive Community Advocacy

The CPF approach has transformed refugee representation from a passive role into active, participatory advocacy empowering communities to address issues directly and collaboratively. In Lungujja Parish, Sendawula Cell, Kaitesi Florence, a Burundian refugee and CPF, worked with fellow CPFs to tackle a long-standing hazard of a poorly maintained drainage system that flooded during rains, causing accidents and blocking access especially to school going children. By collecting testimonies, documenting the problem with photographs, and mobilizing local support, they successfully engaged the Local Council I (LC1) leader to escalate the matter to KCCA. Persistent follow-up ensured the drainage was repaired, restoring safe passage and reducing the risk of future accidents. This success illustrates how CPF-led advocacy blends grassroots mobilization, evidence gathering, and structured dialogue to deliver concrete results.

In Kisasizi Cell, Makindye Division, CPFs also played a key role in strengthening collaboration between refugees and LC1 leaders by creating regular dialogue platforms. Through this process, LC1 Chairperson Amos Kaumba identified and co-opted David Kigera, a respected refugee leader, into the LC1 structure. David has since become a vital link between the refugee community and local governance, amplifying voices, helping resolve disputes, and improving communication. This inclusive leadership model has enhanced community cohesion, strengthened representation in decision-making, and improved responsiveness to shared needs, offering a replicable example for other LC1 structures across Kampala.

CPF Advocacy Escalation Flowchart



Figure 1: CPF Advocacy Escalation Flowchart

Utilization of Existing Community Structures

CPF supported interventions have transformed the way refugees and host community members engage with public spaces, turning them into inclusive hubs that foster interaction, trust, and mutual respect. In Kisasizi, St. John's Playground, once predominantly used by nationals, is now a vibrant shared space for joint sports activities, HIV awareness sessions, counseling services, and community gatherings. Similarly, in Kabalagala, the One Stop Youth Centre provides both refugee and national youth with free vocational training in cosmetology, ICT, and computer literacy, promoting youth integration, peer collaboration, and collective economic empowerment. At Kisugu Health Centre III, refugees now access maternal health, immunization, and outpatient care alongside host nationals, thanks to CPF-led awareness sessions and engagement with health workers on inclusive service provision.

These inclusive spaces have become platforms for deeper collaboration on shared concerns. For instance, CPFs have worked closely with Village Health Teams (VHTs) to organize joint health outreaches in these venues, addressing issues like immunization, maternal health, and HIV prevention for both communities. In Kisasizi and Nsambya Kevina Cell, CPFs have further promoted integration through joint membership of refugees and host nationals in Urban Savings and Loans Associations, as well as facilitating community dialogues and policing initiatives. By leveraging existing community structures as shared spaces, CPFs have not only expanded service access but also strengthened social cohesion, reduced tensions, and fostered a spirit of collective problem-solving.

Effective Issue Identification, Problem Solving, and Capacity Building

CPFs play a critical role in spotting and addressing community issues that might otherwise go unnoticed by authorities such as Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Being embedded within their communities allows them to detect emerging problems early, mobilize residents, investigate root causes, and engage relevant duty bearers for solutions. This proactive approach is strengthened by the regular capacity-building support CPFs receive from PLAVU and IRC, which equips them with essential skills in conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution (ADR), GBV prevention and response, case management, and referral pathways.

A notable example comes from Kisasizi Village, where increasing incidents of theft, insecurity, and targeted attacks on refugees had raised alarm. Trained in problem-solving, advocacy, and community mobilization, CPFs led efforts to address the issue by advocating for improved street lighting and formally engaging KCCA. Although budget constraints delayed immediate action, the CPFs, drawing on their negotiation and community engagement skills, worked with LC1 leaders to mobilize landlords. Each was encouraged to install a security light on their premises, an idea Sarah, a landlord in Kisasizi Cell, readily embraced installing lights for her tenants and improving visibility and safety at night.

This case demonstrates how CPF capacity building directly fuels effective, community-driven problem solving transforming identified concerns into actionable solutions that improve safety, strengthen trust, and foster more resilient neighborhoods.

Tangible Improvements in Service Delivery and Access

CPF-led advocacy has been instrumental in addressing key barriers that hinder service delivery and community access, particularly for refugees and vulnerable host populations. At Kisenyi Health Center III, CPFs intervened to address a challenge that prevented refugees from accessing healthcare services. A newly introduced security protocol required all individuals entering the facility to be registered by security personnel, which was geared towards improving security. This system, however, hindered refugees' access to services, as gatekeepers were reportedly soliciting bribes for entry. Through swift community mobilization and engagement with the health center administration, CPFs successfully advocated, and the registration system was removed, thereby restoring fair and equitable access to healthcare services by refugees and all community members.



Photo Credit: July 11, 2025, Kampala, Uganda. Community facilitators and partners clean Gaba Market as part of activities to mark World Refugee Day 2025. (PHOTO: David Hangi for the IRC).

Challenges and Gaps

A significant challenge for the CPF model is its inconsistent recognition by some local government authorities. In Kampala, numerous informal groups play a pivotal role in mobilizing communities for government programs and among these groups is the CPFs as recognized by the Re:BUiLD program. However, without formal acknowledgment from local leaders and Community Development Officers (CDOs), these groups often lack the legitimacy and access needed to influence decision-making processes effectively.

Evidence from our program has shown that establishing formal linkages between CPFs and local councils, including CDOs, has led to improved social cohesion between refugees and host communities. When CPFs are recognized and engaged by local leaders and CDOs, it signals that these groups are trusted and credible. This formal recognition not only enhances cooperation but also builds community confidence and strengthens social cohesion.

Sustainability, Scale, and Future Plans

The CPF model has demonstrated promising outcomes in fostering social cohesion and strengthening collaboration between refugees and host communities. To ensure its sustainability and long-term impact, several strategies are underway:

Strong Linkages with Local Leaders: The model have created opportunities for direct engagement with local leaders, many of whom have recognized and supported CPF initiatives. Through these connections, CPF groups have been linked to Community Development Officers (CDOs) at divisional level, ensuring stronger institutional anchoring and continuity.

Geographical Scale-Up: Initially piloted in three divisions (Makindye, Central, and Rubaga), there are plans to expand the CPF model to Nakawa, Kawempe, and the wider Kampala metropolitan area. This scale-up will allow more urban refugees and host communities to benefit from the model and strengthen its visibility as a citywide best practice.

Recommendations

For Policymakers and Government Agencies

Institutionalize refugee representation within LCI council structures to ensure refugee participation in local planning and decision. This inclusive approach will help amplify refugee voices, promote equitable service delivery, and strengthen social cohesion within host communities.

Develop clear referral frameworks that integrate CPFs, local councils (LC1s), and partners, thus enhancing a coordinated response to community issues.

Adopt and scale the CPF model to other refugee hosting cities and settlements.

This will enhance community-led protection, accountability, and service delivery. The CPF model has proven effective in Kampala in bridging the gap between communities, local authorities, and service providers.

For CPF Structures and Community Leaders

Empower CPFs to advocate for external support, mobilize community interest, and collaborate with organizations to co-design and implement mentorship, data collection, and social cohesion initiatives.

- Invest more in community-based data collection and reporting tools to help CPFs gather, document, and present evidence. This will help to ensure that community needs and priorities are accurately reflected in local government planning and budgeting.

Promote social cohesion activities like community dialogues, sports and drama and community policing between refugees and the host communities to address shared challenges and build mutual trust.

Conclusion

The experiences shared in this brief highlight the role CPFs play in promoting social cohesion between refugee and host communities in an urban setting of Kampala. Their ability to mobilize communities, dialogue with duty bearers, and bridge the gaps between service providers and communities has been impactful and replicable. For the CPF model to realize its full potential, there is a need to support it through policy recognition, motivation through incentives, and capacity building.



Photo Credit: Moses Okot, Advocacy Manager, leading a Focus Group Discussion with CPFs in Kisasizi Cell to gather community insights.

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.

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