



Key Strategies for Effective Collaboration Between Development Partners and Kampala Capital City Authority for Sustainable Delivery of Services to Urban Refugees

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Overview

Over the years there has been reinvigorated interest and focus on the position of cities and municipalities and their response to better address the needs of displaced populations in a sustainable manner. For instance, in 2009, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) policy on refugee protection and solutions for urban areas¹ recognized cities and towns as legitimate places for refugees to enjoy their rights. The policy defines an urban area as a place that “accommodates a large number of people living in close proximity to each other, and where the majority of people sustain themselves by means of formal and informal employment and the provision of goods and services”. The policy is, however, explicit in asserting that, while refugee settlements share some features with urban areas, they are excluded from this definition.

UNHCR’s recognition of cities and towns underscores the growing place and importance of urban areas² in hosting refugees. Moreover, globally, an increasing number of refugees and the internally displaced are finding sanctuary in cities.³ Coupled with this development, the UN estimates that by 2025, 68%⁴ of the global population is projected to live in urban areas. The mix of urbanization, climate change and increasing numbers of displaced people in cities offers interesting dynamics for learning by humanitarian and development actors. This scenario is not any different in Uganda, where 10% of the 1,829,047 refugees⁵ in the country live in Kampala- the capital city with the number likely to increase.

This learning brief is situated within the context of Kampala the capital city of Uganda a country with a progressive refugee policy and an increasing urban refugee population. The brief traces the journey travelled by Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) through the *Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development* (Re:BUiLD) Program implemented from 2021-2025 to promote economic self-reliance for urban refugees and vulnerable host nationals. The Re:BUiLD Program received financial support from the IKEA Foundation.

Furthermore, the brief outlines emerging trends pointing towards sustainable approaches in working with the city to enable urban refugees to have access to city services and inspire adoption by other cities in Uganda, East Africa, and beyond. The brief also shares learnings and recommendations that promote partnerships between the city and development and humanitarian actors in addressing the needs of displaced populations in an urban context.

Background

The East Africa, Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes regions have a combined population of 5,884,999 refugees and asylum-seekers⁶. Uganda hosts the highest number of refugees on the African continent at 32.8% followed by Ethiopia at 18.5%.

In 2018, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) published a paper⁷ that argued on the need for humanitarian and development actors to work directly with municipal authorities and cities through a resilience lense to address urban displacement crises. In the paper, the IRC highlighted the “unprecedented rate of global urbanisation and the heightening of the role of cities as safe havens for the world’s marginalized.” In Kampala, this reality is reflected by the fact the Ugandan capital hosts 10% of the country’s more than 1.8 million refugees.

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-policy-refugee-protection-and-solutions-urban-areas>, retrieved on 24th July 2025.

² The UNHCR policy statement defines an urban area as a built-up area that accommodates large numbers of people living in close proximity to each other, and where the majority of people sustain themselves by means of formal and informal employment and the provision of goods and services. Refugee settlements while sharing characteristics of urban areas, are excluded from this definition.

³ <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/news-stories/transformational-power-municipalities>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/uk/desa/68-world-population-projected-live-urban-areas-2050-says-un>

⁵ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>

⁶ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/rbehag>

⁷ <https://www.rescue.org/report/response-resilience-working-cities-and-city-plans-address-urban-displacement>

In a move contributing towards direct work with the city, in March 2022, the IRC Uganda and the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)⁸ that established a framework of cooperation between the IRC and KCCA aimed at addressing critical livelihoods and protection needs of urban refugees and vulnerable nationals in Kampala.

In Uganda, refugees in urban areas like Kampala are by policy expected to be “self-reliant” meaning they should be able to sustain themselves if they choose to live outside of the settlements, located mostly in rural parts of the country. Often, it is assumed that these refugees are able to take care of themselves, yet urban refugees continue to face unique challenges⁹ including limited job opportunities, discrimination, limited access to services, information and language barriers and challenges in accessing documentation needed for formal and informal work.

Against this backdrop, the *Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development* Re:BUiLD program was designed to address the challenges faced by urban refugees and host nationals to enable them to achieve economic self-reliance and benefit from strengthened urban economic, regulatory and social environments¹⁰. Launched in January 2021¹¹ the Re:BUiLD program, has offered services to 10,515 direct clients in Kampala (Female 6,291; Male 4,213; Others 11; Refugees 6,367; Hosts 4,148) and 52,575 indirect clients (Female 26,288; Male 26,287; Refugees 31,545; Hosts 21,030)

Objectives of the Learning Brief

Influence and Adoption (I&A) is the third pillar under the Re:BUiLD program, the first and second being “Service Delivery” and “Evidence & Learning”, respectively. The objective of the I&A strategy¹² is to “champion change and influence the immediate delivery and scaling of city services, plans, and policies to better serve refugees and vulnerable host communities in Kampala and Nairobi.”

This learning brief highlights the interventions and collaborations with between the Re:BUiLD program and the KCCA to champion change that promotes dignified livelihoods for urban refugee and their access to city services. It also serves to showcase a successful model of partnership with city government, highlighting the practical ways in which to champion inclusion of refugees in accessing city services.

Further, the brief shares key insights and adaptable strategies learned from the experience in Kampala, offering concrete recommendations on pathways for other cities and municipalities to proactively and sustainably respond to the needs of displaced populations.

Re:BUiLD - KCCA Interventions

Re:BUiLD’s vision is “for women and men who are displaced due to conflict or other circumstances to be able to build dignified, economically secure lives in their host cities and participate alongside host communities in thriving, safe, local economies and neighborhoods.”¹³

⁸ Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Kampala Capital City Council Authority (KCCA) signed on 28th March 2022.

⁹ <https://www.refugeeselfreliance.org/resource-database1/2019/12/18/ugandas-self-reliance-model-does-it-work>

¹⁰ <https://ikeafoundation.org/grants/refugees-in-east-africa-boosting-urban-innovations-for-livelihoods-development-rebuild/>

¹¹ <https://www.rescue.org/uk/article/rebuilding-livelihoods-20000-refugees-east-africa>

¹² Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re: BUiLD): INFLUENCE AND ADOPTION STRATEGY, 2022.

¹³ Re:BUiLD strategy document 2020

At the vision level, KCCA was envisaged as a vital partner in promoting economic self-reliance of refugees and Ugandans. At a strategic level, KCCA has representation in Re:BUiLD's Steering Committee, the highest decision making and oversight body for the program. KCCA is also a member and leads the Re:BUiLD Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG), comprised of Refugee Led Organizations (RLO's), clients, community members, private sector actors, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR. The SRG offers advice on contextual developments reflective of community needs. Re:BUiLD's advocacy strategy identified and sought to work with KCCA as a host and primary advocacy partner in addressing the inclusion of refugees in city planning.



Photo Credit: August 28, 2025, Kampala, Uganda. Clients were being taken through the processes of Black Soldier Fly production at KCCA Kyanja Agricultural Resource Center Uganda (PHOTO: David Hangi for the IRC).

In-kind grant approach: Throughout implementation, Re:BUiLD had an in-kind grant budget to support KCCA to facilitate inclusion of refugees in service provision. In November 2022, the in-kind budget was used to procure video, photography, and waste recycling equipment worth 36 million Uganda shillings (approximately USD 9,670) and donated to KCCA to boost the capacity of the city's One-Stop Youth Centre¹⁴. The Youth Center supports young people aged between 18-35 years to undergo hands-on training in disciplines ranging from leather tanning, electrical repair & installation, digital skills and hair dressing, among others. Importantly, the training offered at the One-Stop- Youth Centre is free.

The second in-kind support to KCCA was in 2023 and went to the Employment Services Bureau (ESB) which is mandated to implement programs geared towards empowering youth with entrepreneurial and employment skills¹⁵. Like with the One-Stop Youth Centre, the ESB intersected with Re:BUiLD's pivoting towards offering 'bridging services' to clients. The bridging services sought to improve the likelihood of employment and self-employment for clients who, after skilling, faced challenges in transitioning to gainful employment. Bridging services included communications skills, CV writing, improved interpersonal skills and linkage to the private sector. The ESB was already offering these services except that the facility did not have adequate furniture, computers, a tent for waiting clients and other required amenities. The ESB was identified as the right place to offer these 'soft skills' to young people and link them to the private sector and potential employers. In late 2023, Re:BUiLD supported the ESB with an assortment of items worth 70 million Uganda shillings (about 17,500 Euros) for the facility to better carry out its mandate.

¹⁴ <https://www.kcca.go.ug/news/287/one-stop-youth-centre-to-equip-communities-with-life-skills-and-spur-the-lives-of-the-kampala-city-youths#.Y76E9nZBw2w>

¹⁵ <https://somesa.ug/open/modules/lesson/jyw6wq65k7/Computer-Literacy/KCCA-Employment-Services-Bureau#lesson76>

The third in-kind support in 2024 was a donation of five printers to five divisions of KCCA to support in the printing of certificates for registration of Community Based Organization (CBOs). The support was intended to address a backlog of 1,300 unprinted certificates from various organisations including Re:BUILD supported Urban Saving & Loans Association (USLA) that had applied for registration with KCCA. Re:BUILD's in-kind support enabled KCCA to print the certificates which enabled USLAs to access financial services with UGAFODE, a private sector financial service partnering Re:BUILD on a refugee bankability pilot¹⁶.

Training community leaders on refugee rights: Uganda's legal framework notably the Refugee Act of 2006¹⁷ and its 2010 Regulations¹⁸ provides for refugees and asylum seekers to access social services including employment and the right to establish livelihoods enterprises. However, awareness about these laws and policies and the rights they confer on refugees remains a challenge that hinders their efforts towards economic self-reliance. For instance, in the process of setting up a livelihoods enterprise, a refugee or indeed even a Uganda is often asked to bring a recommendation letter from their local leader, usually the Local Council (LC)1 Chairman. From client feedback and from feedback received during community engagements, it was found that some of the community leaders were uncertain whether offering a refugee in their neighbourhood a recommendation letter is legal. Some of these leaders would take the side of caution and refuse to offer the service to refugees. To contribute to addressing this challenge, Re:BUILD working in partnership with KCCA in August 2023 conducted training for 150 community leaders¹⁹ on refugee rights. The trainings took place at the Rubaga Division headquarters and KCCA's One- Stop Youth Centre in Kabalagala in Makindye Division. The prominent role played by KCCA in organizing and participating in the trainings made it a success as the involvement of KCCA was viewed as a stamp of credibility and legitimacy for the LCs to offer services to refugees. Subsequent training targeting KCCA managers was conducted to enhance the capacity of KCCA staff to effectively respond to the needs of urban refugees and vulnerable host populations by increasing their understanding of Uganda's refugee legal framework, policies, and protection standards.

Kampala & Nairobi's Global Refugee Forum commitments: The Global Refugee Forum (GRF) is held after every four years and brings together the largest gathering designed to "support the practical implementation of the objectives set out in the Global Compact on Refugees: Ease pressures on host countries, enhance refugee self-reliance, increase access to third-country solutions and improve conditions in countries of origin."²⁰ For the 2023 GRF, Re:BUILD supported Kampala Capital City Authority and the Nairobi City County Government (NCCG) to make pledges²¹ at the forum. KCCA's pledges were aligned to the pledges²² of the Government of Uganda which focused on increasing resilience and self-reliance; empowering refugees to secure their own livelihoods; taking actions against climate change and localizing the refugee response.

Learnings from Koboko municipality: Koboko municipality in Koboko district²³ is one of the leading refugee-hosting districts in Uganda. Between 2020 and 2023 Koboko municipality implemented an EU funded '*Inclusive Urban Development and Mobility in Koboko*'²⁴ project with direct funding support from the EU to the municipality. The municipality worked in partnership with Associazione Centro Aiuti Volontari (ACAV)²⁵, a civil society organization to pilot the direct funding model, incorporating strategic national and municipality collaborations with a strong focus on community ownership and participation. In July 2024, Re:BUILD supported a team from KCCA and Nairobi City County Government (NCCG) on a learning visit to Koboko to draw lessons from the innovative and pioneering approach of direct implementation with support from EU and partnership with a civil society organisation. The project's success in offering services to 83,000 hosts and refugees offered insights and learnings for Re:BUILD, KCCA and NCCG on legal approvals needed for a municipality to collaborate with an NGO; programmatic experiences for direct implementation and accounts management through local government.

¹⁶ <https://rebuild.rescue.org/learning-briefs/refugee-bankability-lessons-from-a-results-based-loan-guarantee-fund-pilot-for-refugees-and-nationals-in-kampala-learning-brief>

¹⁷ <https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/2006/21/eng@2006-08-04>

¹⁸ <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2010/en/102127>

¹⁹ <https://nilepost.co.ug/news/167903/150-community-leaders-in-kampala-trained-on-refugee-rights>

²⁰ <https://www.unhcr.org/events/global-refugee-forum-2023>

²¹ <https://rebuild.rescue.org/press/rebuild-kcca-nccg-2023-global-refugee-forum-geneva-switzerland>

²² https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/final_pledges_-_global_refugee_forum_2023.pdf

²³ <https://www.koboko.go.ug/>

²⁴ <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/inclusive-urban-development-and-mobility-koboko>

²⁵ <https://www.acav.eu/it/>

Climate Smart & Sustainable Livelihoods Solutions for Urban Refugees: The Re:BUiLD program and KCCA are jointly implementing a climate smart livelihoods intervention that leverages on KCCA's competences, and the services offered at the city's Kyanja Urban Farm²⁶ and learnings from Koboko municipality. The intervention is a direct implementation by KCCA to offer services to refugees. Through the KCCA efforts, 500 clients (60% refugees; 40% nationals) are being supported in mushroom production, briquette making and black soldier fly rearing. The intervention is based on learnings from KCCA's capabilities in urban farming, and from an internal assessment by IRC, KCCA and Raising Gabdho Foundation (RGF)²⁷ which resulted in the collaborative identification of urban farming enterprises that offered the most economic opportunities to clients.



Photo Credit: August 12, 2024, Kampala, Uganda. Clients in the process of making energy-efficient cook stoves, briquettes, and slow-cooking baskets. These skills are empowering youth to use clean energy solutions. (PHOTO: Raising Gabdho Foundation).

Learnings & Recommendations

The 2018 IRC paper *'From Response to Resilience'* which used the example of Kampala and Amman recommended the need for humanitarian and development actors to engage city and municipal authorities to explore opportunities for meaningful collaborations; strive to understand the interests and incentives of the city and its stakeholders; share information and better coordinate with other response stakeholders within the city; advocate for inclusion of refugees in city plans. These recommendations are in sync with Re:BUiLD's objectives and the learnings and recommendations in this brief:

²⁶ <https://www.kcca.go.ug/kabd/listings/kcca-kyanja-demonstration-farm/>

²⁷ <https://raisinggabdho.org/>

More collaborations with the city on shared outcomes: Partners in the refugee response in Kampala need to collaborate more with the city on shared outcome areas building on learnings generated by the utilization of the in-kind city grant. KCCA identified the [One-Stop Youth Centre](#) which offers skills support to young people and the [Employment Bureau Services](#) which empowers youth with entrepreneurial and employment skills. Re:BUiLD has a shared interest with KCCA in enhancing the capacity of the two facilities for utilization by both nationals and refugees. Since 2024 133²⁸ refugees have been trained at KCCA's One-Stop- Youth centre, acquiring skills in computer use, photography, hairdressing and cosmetology. Meaningful collaborations with the city and partners can therefore lead to tangible results in ensuring refugee access to city services.

Supporting KCCA to deliver on its Global Refugee Forum commitments: In 2023, Re:BUiLD collaborated with KCCA, Nairobi City County Government (NCCG) and the [Mayors Migration Council](#) to support the two cities in developing and making commitments at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in Geneva, Switzerland. This brief recommends for actors to build their collaborations and partnership with KCCA around the delivery on KCCA's GRF commitments. New programs targeting urban refugees and hosts in Kampala should also be aligned to and contribute towards supporting KCCA delivery on its commitments.

Directorate of Gender, Community Services & Production, focal point for refugee matters: Over the last four years, KCCA's Directorate of Gender, Community Services & Production has emerged as the focal point for refugee matters in Kampala. Contacting the right department on a given matter is important in addressing the issue. For refugees, the Directorate of Gender, Community Services & Production has been crucial in coordinating, supporting and offering technical advice in the partnership with Re:BUiLD. It is recommended that other partners in the refugee response work through the Gender directorate to improve coordination.

Inclusion of city in strategic decisions: When Re:BUiLD started in 2021, implementation was only in the three divisions of Makindye, Kampala Central and Rubaga Divisions. Bringing on board of Nakawa and Kawempe Divisions into the program was through the strategic advice of KCCA. Subsequently, Re:BUiLD's geographical coverage expanded in 2023 from the initial three divisions to cover all the divisions of Kampala. The strategic move addressed concerns that had already been expressed during coordination meetings on overconcentration by partners in particular divisions of the city. This strategic move enabled the program to offer services to underserved areas within Kampala.

More capacity building to solidify achievements registered: There is a need for continued advocacy efforts for inclusion of refugees in accessing city services, and capacity building for local community leaders in Kampala and at KCCA to improve awareness on refugee rights, refugee legal frameworks and policies in Uganda. es.

Learn from other municipalities: While most of the learnings and recommendations in this brief are from Re:BUiLD and Kampala, it is important that going forward partners in Kampala and other urban areas draw lessons from initiatives from elsewhere to inform and bolster partnerships with city and municipal authorities. A case in point is from Koboko municipality which received a direct EU grant to implement an initiative that delivered services to both hosts and refugees in the municipality.

Conclusion

The collaboration between humanitarian and development partners and Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) under the Re:BUiLD program has demonstrated that cities play a transformative role in responding to urban displacement. Through strategic partnerships, in-kind support, capacity building, and alignment with national and global frameworks on refugees, KCCA has emerged as capable and reliable partner in the delivery of services to both refugees and host communities. The learnings from Kampala, as well as from peer municipalities like Koboko, underscore the importance of localized, city-led approaches that are responsive to community needs and grounded in national policy frameworks. Strengthening these pathways will not only enhance service delivery to urban refugees and vulnerable nationals but also contribute to more resilient and inclusive cities.

²⁸ Sourced from KCCA's One- Stop Youth Centre

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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