

A Flawed Premise. A Bold Pivot. A Case for Smarter Investments.

How we designed, learnt, adapted, and remained true to Re:BUiLD's commitment to evidence.



REBUiLD
Boosting Livelihoods

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Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	2
2. The Motivation	3
3. The Premise: Foundational Assumptions That Grounded Design.....	3
4. Failing Forward – Wins, Misses, And The Lessons In Between.....	5
5. A Bold Decision, Grounded In Evidence.....	11
6. A Case For Future Investments - Key Takeaways.....	11
References	13

1. Executive Summary

In 2021, the Re:BUiLD program was launched in Nairobi and Kampala to provide self-reliance services for urban refugees and vulnerable host communities while challenging the inefficiencies of traditional livelihoods programs. Over five years, the program tested employment pathways, generating robust evidence on **what works, what doesn't, and what it costs**. This learning brief synthesizes lessons from the design, evidence generation and program adaptation processes to offer **implementers** and **donors** recommendations on adaptive programming and value-for-money investments.

On program design, evidence and adaptation: Re:BUiLD demonstrates how to **embed continuous learning and adaptation** into design, ensuring evidence drives real-time shifts rather than becoming static data. The findings call for program designers to **re-examine the foundational assumptions and assessments** that influence intervention design to avoid reinforcing outdated or ineffective solutions. We show that success depends on **sharpened targeting** that balances inclusion with viability, ensuring that clients have the interest and capacity to maximize impact. Additionally, even as programs aim to be ambitious, they must be **grounded in socio-economic and political realities** that impose limits on what can be achieved. Re:BUiLD demonstrates that a commitment to **evidence-led programing requires bold teams and leaders** to navigate operational and cultural challenges when shifting from familiar but ineffective approaches. Transparent communication and a steadfast focus on data and impact are key.

On value-for-money investments: the results demonstrate that while not a one-size-fits-all solution, **cash grants deliver faster, more cost-effective outcomes than skilling programs**, offering superior returns on investment and stronger income gains per dollar spent. By contrast, **traditional skilling and job placement programs proved expensive and slow to yield results**, particularly where structural barriers such as legal documentation, employer bias, and limited job opportunities remain unresolved. This underscores a critical design and investment lesson: **invest first in removing systemic constraints and shaping labor demand** before scaling training supply.

2. The Motivation

Motivated to overcome the shortfalls of traditional livelihoods approaches, in 2021, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the IKEA Foundation partnered with researchers, technical advisors, governments, private sector, refugee-led agencies and local partners to implement the Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (**Re:BUiLD**) program in Nairobi, Kenya and Kampala, Uganda. The goal was to challenge persistent shortcomings of these approaches, namely: **growing and underserved** urban refugee populations; **cost-inefficient** approaches that offer **minimal results** in the wake of **declining funding**; and the **disconnect** with evidence, policy, practice, and donor investments. Re:BUiLD committed to advance sustainable solutions and generate evidence on **what works**, what it **costs**, and **what doesn't work** for urban refugees and their host communities in East Africa and beyond. To this end, Re:BUiLD undertook extensive evidence reviews, community consultations and foundational assessments to inform service designs. The services were then layered with numerous pilots, four large Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), and costing analyses to enable further testing and learning about what provides the strongest cost-sensitive outcomes. This knowledge brief captures the journey, lessons and outcomes of this rigorous approach, **focusing on employment** – the primary service provided by Re:BUiLD.

Re:BUiLD delivers a suite of self-reliance services including **innovative financial inclusion** and dedicated **support to policymakers** to **contribute** to conducive labor markets. Employment services are at the core of the suite of services. These are banded under 2 categories: i) **wage-employment** via skilling accompanied by job placement support. ii) **self-employment** via cash for business accompanied by business acumen support. The initial strategy targeted 20,000 clients: 12,000 (60%) through wage employment and 8,000 (40%) through self-employment. Re:BUiLD targeted the **most vulnerable people** in the community. Client selection screening included vulnerability assessments that prioritized the most vulnerable individuals. To this end, Re:BUiLD's client profile included individuals who were struggling to meet basic needs, had low literacy, minimal work experience and minimal social and language integration.

3. The Premise: Foundational Assumptions That Grounded Design

Re:BUiLD grounded its design and strategy upon evidence, client preferences and feedback through the following **three foundations**:

3.1 First foundation: Collating evidence and client preferences.

To effectively resolve the inadequacies of ineffective livelihoods approaches, Re:BUiLD sought to unpack existing challenges by undertaking: i) an evidence review that outlined shortcomings and proposed solutions; ii) assessments to determine context-specific gaps, opportunities and client preferences. These included a gender analysis, skills and labor market assessment, context analysis, value chain analysis and private sector mapping. The assessments were undertaken in partnership with the community (through refugee and community led agencies) and included numerous client and stakeholder interviews. Some of the assessments were undertaken remotely during the Covid-19 period.

3.2 Second foundation: Design based on evidence and client recommendations.

The collated evidence and client preferences were applied in a co-design process that brought together a diverse team of partners from implementing and advisory agencies. The process involved navigating tensions between client-driven recommendations and rigorous evidence that challenged the effectiveness of some proposals. The final intervention designs reflected a deliberate balance, blending community input, client aspirations, operational feasibility, and robust evidence. Each component was purposefully curated to address specific, identified challenges. Employment interventions were designed based on the following objectives, identified gaps and explicit solutions:

Employment intervention designs

Self-employment

Objective: to help aspiring micro-entrepreneurs to start or grow businesses. Measured by assessing business establishment, survival and changes in profits.

Design: service bundles included cash of up to \$540 labelled as business capital + accompanied by business acumen support via **mentorship** or **facilitated business networks**.

Targeted constraints and solutions: Designs were informed by research that identified key constraints facing aspiring entrepreneurs as lack of capital, business acumen, and networks (Abebe, 2023). Re:BUiLD targeted solutions provided cash grants plus interventions on mentorship and business networks, ensuring both knowledge transfer and connection to wider support systems.

Costs of delivery per client: \$762 - \$881 for cash only interventions and \$1,181 - \$1,200 for cash + mentorship based on program cost analyses (Lee, Cochran, & Magambo, 2025).

Wage employment

Objective: to help job seekers secure decent, stable and profitable wage-jobs. Measured by assessing transitions from skill acquisition to salaried jobs and income.

Design: service bundles included **skilling through five approaches:** vocational skills, apprenticeships, skills certification via Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), soft skills training, and accreditation/equation of country-of-origin certificates. These were accompanied by a lean level of private sector engagement to motivate job opportunities (demand-side activities) (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2025; Muya & Clingain 2023).

Targeted constraints and solutions: Lack of alignment with market demands and client preferences were resolved by allowing participants to choose their preferred industries. A client feedback mechanism was also embedded into the program. Market assessments guided selection of trades. To reduce dropout rates, sustenance and childcare stipends were provided. The most vulnerable individuals were prioritized, addressing their historical exclusion from labor markets. Recognized institutions delivered training to address issues of quality of instruction and certification. Light-touch private sector engagement and job search support were included to expand employment opportunities.

Costs of delivery per client: apprenticeships \$259 - \$1,924; skills certification and accreditation \$832 - \$1,730; and vocational training \$593 - \$1,908. (Lee, Cochran, & Magambo, 2025).

3.3 Third foundation: Embedding continued learning and client feedback.

To ensure community voice remained central throughout its five-year journey, Re:BUiLD integrated proactive and reactive client feedback mechanisms. To enable continued learning and adaptation beyond the initial design phase, Re:BUiLD embedded rigorous monitoring, evaluations, and cost analyses. Structured reflection points like the annual Program Learning Conferences (PLC) ensured evidence and feedback informed real-time adaptations. Finally, to consolidate this evidence-driven design, feedback, and adaptive learning framework, Re:BUiLD institutionalized its commitment to sector-wide knowledge sharing through regular production of learning and policy briefs, as well as formal participation in dissemination events. Re:BUiLD took a principled and, at times, uncomfortable path; choosing to share evidence transparently, even when it challenged established norms or unsettled widely held assumptions.

4. Failing Forward – Wins, Misses, And The Lessons In Between

Through the rigorous and intentional foundation described earlier, Re:BUiLD has made significant strides in advancing refugee programming. The program not only generated robust evidence but also used it to adapt interventions and influence the broader sector. Key achievements include: **delivering self-reliance services to over 21,000 clients** and impacting more than 104,000 refugees and host community members; **contributing to refugee policy shifts in Kenya and Uganda**, including the integration of refugees into urban planning frameworks by the Nairobi and Kampala City Authorities; **demonstrating that refugees are bankable** - paving the way for future financial inclusion efforts; and **producing vital cost data** to inform more efficient and scalable livelihoods programming (Re:BUiLD, IRC, 2022a; Re:BUiLD, IRC, 2022b). Specifically, under employment initiatives which are the focus of this brief, the wins include: Execution of the **decent work campaign** and resultant **Decent-work-policy-brief**; Over 82% business survival rates in the cash and self-employment track; 70% of clients with increased Self-reliance Index (SRI); 35% of clients with an increase in income; and 88% of graduates from the skilling-for-wage employment track engaged in economic activity (of these, 48% are in wage jobs and 52% are in self-employment).

More critical for learning, the misses, lessons and recommendations have been robust. The prominent ones of these include:

4.1 Re-imagining foundational assessments.

As discussed earlier under the first foundation, Re:BUiLD anchored design and strategy on in-depth assessments and strong community input. These were critical in ensuring solutions resounded with client preferences. However, as implementation unfolded, two key misalignments with market realities emerged revealing cracks in some of the core assumptions - a flaw in the premise, so to say.

i. Client preferences at odds with market evidence:

In several cases, client preferences conflicted with evidence on what interventions delivered strong outcomes. For example, while vocational training was consistently prioritized by clients, evidence suggested that traditional vocational tracks often led to weak livelihood improvements compared to interventions such as cash for entrepreneurship or structured apprenticeships (McKenzie & Woodruff, 2012). The design team had to navigate this tension, honoring client voices while avoiding technically unsound investments.

As a compromise, Re:BUiLD used existing evidence to redesign such services to address known barriers and improve outcome potential. For example, the program provided childcare and sustenance stipends, aligned vocational courses with high-demand sectors such as green sector skills, and embedded soft skills training, job search and preparedness support. Still, this raised a critical question: **are clients genuinely choosing what they want, or simply echoing what they've historically seen NGOs offer?** The strong preference for familiar services may reflect limited exposure rather than informed ambition.

Key take-aways

Client-centered design requires not just listening but also **educating**. Gathering feedback without building client understanding of market realities risks reinforcing outdated or ineffective solutions. Programs must invest time and resources to **inform and broaden clients' perspectives**, as well as expand their own evidence-based offerings, enabling client preferences that are both aspirational and aligned with what works (Sultana, 2022).

ii. Market assessments can miss nuance - and may be flawed by design

Despite the breadth of assessments conducted, several programmatic decisions based on the findings did not translate into the expected uptake. For instance, we identified trades like tailoring as viable, yet they proved to be oversaturated, contributing to limited market absorption. Similarly, our labor market and value chain assessments acknowledged opportunities for women in male-dominated sectors but underexplored deeper issues such as community perceptions, cultural norms, safety concerns, and implications for women's standing within families; factors that ultimately influenced participation.

This signals not just a gap in **what** data we captured, but also in **how** we designed and executed assessments. Question framing, data collection methods, and even the positionality of those conducting the assessments (i.e. NGO staff, government officials, private sector consultants, or refugee-led organizations) can shape responses, reinforce dominant narratives or reproduce expected answers. When we don't craft tools to surface complexity or challenge assumptions, we risk validating conventional programming paths rather than opening space for innovation.



Photo Credit: March 28, 2023, Kampala, Uganda. Nakubulwa Patricia Sarah underwent Vocational training in metal fabrication, a largely male dominated sector. (PHOTO: Moses Odokonyero for the IRC).

Key take-aways

When assessments fail to push beyond surface-level data or challenge traditional assumptions, programs risk defaulting to “business as usual” interventions with limited outcomes. Program designers, implementers, and research teams responsible for shaping livelihoods interventions should **re-examine foundational assessments, not only for content but also for methodology**. This includes critically reviewing what questions are asked, how insights are gathered who gathers them, and whose perspectives are prioritized. Without this, assessments may continue to gloss over key contextual dynamics and steer programs toward interventions that feel familiar but fail to deliver meaningful change.

4.2 Targeting Matters: Right Service, Wrong Recipient?

Getting the right service to the right person is critical for achieving strong outcomes and cost-effectiveness. Re:BUiLD’s evidence shows that the impact of interventions varies significantly depending on the recipient. For example, mentorship delivered uneven results, with refugee women in Kampala experiencing declined profits (Baseler et al., 2025) while in contrast, Kenyan men in Nairobi and refugee men in Kampala reported positive income gains averaging an additional \$26 per month. Similarly, in Kampala, business grants delivered stronger outcomes for larger, more established businesses. For smaller or nascent ventures, results were modest, suggesting that the same service can land differently depending on the recipient’s starting point (Baseler et al., 2025). In Nairobi, clients with no businesses prior to the program experienced more improvements than clients with existing businesses, highlighting the challenges in growing small businesses in an ever competitive and increasingly saturated market.

Part of this misalignment traces back to Re:BUiLD’s deliberate focus on the most vulnerable. While ethically sound and aligned with humanitarian principles, this approach came with trade-offs. Many clients faced intersecting barriers: limited work experience, financial strain, caregiving demands, and low social capital. This created a **tension between vulnerability and viability**, placing natural limits on their ability to benefit fully from economic interventions. Macroeconomic factors such as cost-of-living crises, inflation, and the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated these vulnerabilities: finite household income didn’t stretch as far, business resources may have been redirected to meeting basic needs, and some clients may have had to shut down their businesses. **It is important to be alive to the realities of what you can achieve as a program when you target the most vulnerable** and plan for potential disruptions of the status quo. In response, Re:BUiLD wrapped core services with measures like multipurpose cash, referrals for protection services, childcare and transport stipends. These improved participation but didn’t always translate into strong economic outcomes. For example, as observed with Re:BUiLD clients, highly vulnerable clients struggled to save (only 40% reported improved savings) as daily survival took priority. The Kenya Wave 1 RCT also showed that aspirational entrepreneurs outperformed those driven by necessity in terms of business growth – reflecting a broader pattern noted in refugee entrepreneurship (Abebe, 2023). This doesn’t mean vulnerable clients should be excluded. There is however, need for implementors and donors to honestly assess their readiness for the heavy human and financial investments that would be required to include the most vulnerable clients in economic programs. **Services must be better matched to where clients are starting from, and what they’re equipped to make use of.**

Key take-aways

Even well-designed services can miss the mark when **misaligned with recipient’s capacity or context**. While prioritizing the most vulnerable is ethically sound, **compounding barriers often limit the outcomes such groups can achieve**, even with wraparound support. Programs must **balance equity with effectiveness**, using targeting approaches that are **responsive to differing levels of readiness**. Re:BUiLD’s experience calls for **flexible, layered intervention models** with varying intensity and pacing, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach toward more **nuanced, evidence-driven targeting**.

4.3 Design within Socio-Political Realities – Ambitious, but Grounded

Inspired by progressive policy shifts in Kenya and Uganda, Re:BUiLD set bold refugee employment targets. However, implementation revealed significant gaps between policy and practice. For example, In Kenya, while Class M work permits are legally available to refugees under the Refugee Act (2021), they remain largely inaccessible (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2025). Limited employer awareness and high national unemployment further constrained outcomes, particularly in wage employment (ILO, 2020; UNHCR, 2019). Even when Re:BUiLD secured employer commitments to hire refugees, gaps in documentation and legal ambiguity often derailed placement efforts. For example, Re:BUiLD committed to hire six qualified refugees as regular staff in Kenya, aiming to provide fair pay and benefits beyond incentive work arrangements. These efforts were not successful due to work permit bottlenecks, resorting to short-term contracts, illustrating how “opaque” work authorization processes can hinder well-intended efforts (Baseler et al., 2024). These underscored the complexity of achieving employment outcomes in contexts where enforcement mechanisms are weak and opportunities are already scarce. In response, Re:BUiLD launched the **Securing Documentation campaign (2025)** to tackle documentation barriers, recognizing that livelihoods programming can only succeed when foundational enablers are in place. The program also weathered Covid-19, elections, socio-political unrest and climate events that disrupted livelihoods and slowed delivery. Ultimately, ambition must be tempered with appreciation of political, social and market constraints, and realistic timelines for interventions to yield results.

Key take-aways

Re:BUiLD entered the employment space optimistic about policy progress in Kenya and Uganda but learnt that surface-level alignment with progressive frameworks wasn't enough. **Even well-designed interventions struggled where structural barriers remained unaddressed.** It was a chicken-and-egg dilemma: without these foundations (documentation, employer confidence, available jobs), transitions into wage employment stalled. The key lesson is to first invest in **alleviating systemic constraints** and creating a receptive environment so that subsequent skilling and wage job placement interventions can deliver as intended (ILO, 2020)

4.4 Re-Thinking Skilling

Re:BUiLD's experience calls for a re-evaluation of traditional skilling investments, particularly vocational training and certification programs. While skilling remains a core element of economic inclusion, Re:BUiLD shows that conventional models are often **expensive, slow to yield returns, and poorly aligned** with employment realities for refugees, even in some of the most refugee-friendly policy contexts. In Re:BUiLD's case, skilling was primarily geared toward wage employment. However, the outcomes highlighted shortcomings: **courses were lengthy**, spanning 3 to 12 months, **cost up to \$1,920 per client**, and produced **relatively low wage job transition rates at only 48% securing wage employment** while 52% of the skilled clients transitioned to self-employment. While in total, 88% of clients from the skilling track are now engaged in work (48% in wage jobs, 52% in self-employment), there is an indication of challenges and low interest in wage employment. Most of the graduates **(64%) reported to be engaged in jobs unrelated to their industry of skilling**, calling into question the direct value of the skilling pathway (e.g., a trained plumber employed as a shop assistant). Additionally, many of the clients requested a business grant after facing challenges securing a job post-graduation. Providing this added an additional \$500 to the base cost for the skilling service. In contrast, over 82% of clients in the self-employment track sustained their enterprises, a service that costs marginally lower at \$762-\$1,200.

Several systemic and contextual issues also undermined effectiveness, including high unemployment in both Kenya and Uganda, weak enforcement of inclusive employment policies, and the long-tail nature of the skilling-to-employment transition. While additional wrap-around interventions (like soft skills training and job search support) may strengthen outcomes, these come at a significant additional cost, raising questions about sustainability and return on investment. These costs may seem prohibitive to practitioners when

coupled with the fact that impact on job-related outcomes can take a significant amount of time to realize. That said, **skilling programs can provide non-economic benefits**, and implementers need to determine if these are a significant outcome priority. The evidence suggests that, beyond economic outcomes, TVET programs may yield improved health and well-being, increased self-efficacy and confidence, enhanced social capital, and a greater likelihood of pursuing further education (Lewis et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2018). These broader gains, while harder to quantify, contribute meaningfully to refugee resilience and long-term integration.

Key take-aways

Traditional skilling programs must be approached with clear expectations, both in terms of cost and the time it takes for results to materialize. Where skilling is pursued, programs should be **explicit about the broader value** (e.g. promoting social integration or personal confidence) and not rely solely on short-term economic returns. In other words, vocational training can be valuable, but primarily as a long-term investment in human capital and well-being rather than an immediate fix for unemployment (Alfonsi et al., 2017; Hardy et al., 2019).



Photo Credit: March 12, 2025, Kampala, Uganda. A Community facilitator (Left) chats with a Re:BUILD client during a business verification exercise. The client received a UGX 2M grant during the RCT Wave 2 in Kampala. (PHOTO: Nathan Tibaku for the IRC).

4.5 Shift the Focus: Invest Where It Counts - Prioritize the Demand Side

The low transition rates from skilling to wage employment revealed an imbalance in program design: **too much emphasis on preparing jobseekers, not enough on preparing the job market**. While Re:BUILD invested in private sector engagement, job fairs, and employer outreach, much of the early efforts and budget were directed toward supply-side interventions: identifying and skilling potential employees. This skewed focus reflects **where client demand felt most immediate, where impact seemed most tangible** in the short term and what practitioners are often most familiar with. But it became clear that **starting with the supply side alone was a flawed entry point**, highlighting a **supply-side bias** in employment programs (Ismail & Mujuru, 2020). Demand-side interventions aim to increase labor demand by generating jobs and fostering a business-friendly environment. Research in the TVET field shows the need to engage private sector to influence program design and align training with concrete market opportunities (Giordano et al., 2021; ILO, 2020).

In the program's second and third years, Re:BUiLD recalibrated. We **prioritized employer-driven** efforts, engaging businesses first to co-shape interventions and secure job opportunities before sourcing and training candidates to fit those roles. This shift improved placement outcomes but came late in the program lifecycle. Demand-side work proved **resource and time intensive** to educate employers, build trust and nurture a sustainable pipeline of job openings (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2025). Similar observations have been made in other contexts where even subsidized apprenticeship programs face challenges with firm participation (Alfonsi et al., 2017). By the time this insight was fully integrated, limited program runway led us to pivot away from wage employment interventions and double down on other promising approaches. As further work in this area, we recommend rigorously testing the hypothesis that prioritizing demand-side interventions over supply-side efforts yields stronger, sustainable wage employment outcomes. Notably, we see actors in Kenya begin to pilot dual apprenticeship models in efforts to link training with industry needs (Kithinji, 2022), reflecting a broader interest in demand-driven solutions.

Key take-aways

Wage employment efforts must **start by shaping demand**, not just preparing supply. Early, sustained investment in private sector engagement is critical as employer behavior change is gradual. Future programs should consider testing models where **demand-side groundwork leads**, with supply-side efforts following as a response to concrete, pre-identified opportunities. This sequencing may yield more efficient use of resources and stronger employment outcomes (Ismail & Mujuru, 2020; Giordano et al., 2021).

4.6 In a World of diminishing resources, Lead with Cash.

In contexts where resources are stretched and needs are growing, **cash programming stands out as effective and efficient**. In Re:BUiLD, cash for entrepreneurship consistently delivered the **strongest economic outcomes at the lowest cost**. Our **cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness analyses** on two randomized controlled trials demonstrate that **cash alone outperforms more complex, bundled interventions**. For instance, the cost per client for cash-only interventions ranged between **\$762 and \$881**, compared to **\$1,181 to \$1,200** for cash paired with mentorship. When measuring value for money, it costs **\$3.40 in program investment to generate \$1 in profit** in the cash-only intervention, versus **\$4.60** in the bundled model (Lee, Cochran, & Magambo, 2025). Clients who received cash plus mentorship earned about the same profits as those who received cash alone, reflecting wider evidence that business training usually brings only small gains (McKenzie & Woodruff, 2012). The contrast becomes even sharper when viewed alongside skilling services, which cost up to **\$1,920 per client** and had lower wage-employment transition rates. With such insights, **we adapted**, redirecting investments away from costly skilling tracks toward cash grants for entrepreneurship, where we saw more reliable and quicker returns. That said, **cash is not a universal solution**. As mentioned earlier in this brief, **client fit and interest matters**. Not everyone is positioned to turn a grant into a viable business, and not everyone wants to. Likewise, not every client who receives the same \$500 business grant will reap the same benefits; individuals with more socio-economic barriers and vulnerabilities may seem to lag behind their peers. Individuals have different capacities and preferences (for example, they might prefer formal employment or require additional support to succeed in business). The same cash grant may go farther for some subgroups than others. For instance, women in our program typically invested less of their cash in business growth and saw smaller profit increases, indicating that female entrepreneurs may still need complementary support (networking, childcare, etc.) to fully reap the benefits of cash assistance (Baseler et al., 2025). Moving forward, it will be important to tailor cash-based support to client readiness – pairing cash with other support for those who need it, and not assuming one size fits all.

Key take-aways

Cash programming is **effective, efficient, and well-suited to resource-scarce settings**. Re:BUiLD shows that **cash outcomes outperform traditional skilling or bundled services at lower cost**. However, it's not a universal solution: it works best when clients have the **interest and capacity** to turn funds into viable enterprises. One-size-fits-all models won't work. Donors and implementers should reconsider the default bias toward complex, costly services like skilling or mentorship unless tied to strong demand-side links or tailored to specific client needs. Prioritize cash where client profiles and conditions align and invest in precise targeting to drive impact.

5. A Bold Decision, Grounded In Evidence

Throughout implementation, Re:BUiLD consistently interrogated outcome and cost data to inform programming. This led to both **incremental tweaks and, ultimately, one of the most consequential shifts in the program**. At the end of the third year, drawing on the evidence on high-cost, low-yield outcomes from skilling initiatives, stronger performance of cash programming, and persistent structural barriers to wage employment, the program made **a bold decision**: to phase out skilling services and shift focus and resources to enterprise and financial inclusion support, where clearer impact had been demonstrated. This pivot dramatically reshaped program targets. Wage employment targets (and related budgets) dropped from 12,000 to 3,100, while enterprise support scaled up from 4,000 to 12,400, with the remainder reallocated to financial inclusion interventions. But this was not just about a shift in target numbers and budget, it was a shift in programming strategy and the embodiment of the commitment to be led by evidence. The shift required the program to navigate significant operational, cultural, and strategic challenges.

Managing change within tight program timelines demanded swift coordination to **prevent service disruption**. Internally, the team structure, skillsets, and mindsets had been built around skilling and wage employment. **Repurposing roles, retraining and reorganizing operations** required careful, **human-centered change management**. The pivot also **challenged long-held sector narratives** about the presumed value of traditional skilling. For staff, letting go of the familiar (area of long standing technical capacity) in favor of evidence-based programming was uncomfortable and challenging. It took **courage to trust the data, question the status quo, and shift course in pursuit of impact**. Externally, we had to **manage community disappointment** over the removal of familiar services and **recalibrate partnerships**, especially with training institutions and employers beginning to open to refugee hiring. This wasn't just a programmatic pivot; it was a **values-driven recommitment to evidence and impact**.

6. A Case For Future Investments - Key Takeaways

Finally, as we come full circle, Re:BUiLD's journey reflects a bold investment in evidenced design, client voices, continuous iteration, and honest learning. As we close, we distill what worked, what didn't and what it cost, offering a roadmap to strengthen livelihoods programming, and investments for urban refugees and their host communities. These recommendations are particularly relevant for **program designers, implementers and donors**.

1. Build for evidence and adaptation

Programs aiming to be evidence-driven must plan beyond initial designs. They need built-in mechanisms that make continuous learning and adaptation non-negotiable. This means embedding opportunities for reflection, course correction, and decision-making directly into program architecture. Without clear triggers or accountability loops, data risks becoming passive rather than catalytic. Re:BUiLD, for example, institutionalized annual learning conferences and stage-gated decision points to ensure that evidence consistently informed strategic shifts.

2. Align design with informed client preferences

Client choices often reflect legacy and exposure rather than informed market choices. Truly evidence-aligned co-design requires combining participatory feedback loops with strategic nudges towards evidence-backed options. In practice, this might mean educating clients about outcomes of different interventions (e.g., the advantages of entrepreneurship grants over lengthy vocational courses) so that their 'informed' preferences align with what evidence shows will help them most (Sultana, 2022).

3. Re-examine assessment methodologies

Traditional labor and market assessments can reinforce dominant narratives and overlook critical nuance. Rethink assessment design to move beyond surface-level data and actively challenge embedded assumptions. Calibrate content, process, and roles carefully, and embed diagnostic tools that surface hidden constraints and question conventional wisdom.

4. Sharpen targeting – consider viability, not just vulnerability

Outcome variance is strongly correlated with client interest and capacity. While inclusive targeting remains a moral imperative, segmentation based on economic viability improves intervention effectiveness. Layered service models with flexible pacing enable tailored support without excluding vulnerable cohorts.

5. Design within socio-political realities

Even as programs aim to be ambitious, they must be grounded in the structural realities that shape what is possible. Re:BUiLD's experience shows that even well-designed interventions **struggle where structural barriers (legal rights or economic conditions) are unaddressed**. Aligning with the socio-political context ensures that investments are both strategic and impactful. The key lesson is to first invest in **alleviating systemic constraints** and creating a receptive environment so that subsequent interventions (training, financing, etc.) can deliver as intended.

6. Skew investments toward demand-side efforts

Preparing jobseekers without confirmed labor demand risks wasting time and resources. Employer co-creation and vacancy-led models offer more targeted, effective pathways. Scaling and testing these demand-driven approaches presents both a gap and opportunity in employment programming (**Ismael & Mujuru, 2020**). It may require redefining success metrics (e.g., number of employer partnerships formed, in addition to number of people trained).

7. Cash interventions offer superior ROI

When it comes to cost-efficiency and economic outcomes, cash consistently outperforms skilling and other bundled services in Re:BUiLD's context. It yielded higher income gains per dollar spent and faster time-to-impact. However, it's not a universal solution; one-size-fits-all models won't work. Cash should be prioritized where client profiles and conditions align, with attention to timing, complementary measures, and targeting to drive impact. (Lee, Cochran, & Magambo, 2025)

8. A commitment to evidence-led programing requires bold teams and leaders

When evidence calls for a major shift, expect operational, cultural, and strategic challenges. Pivoting from familiar approaches demands transparent, empathetic leadership and clear communication. The process may challenge teams, unsettle partnerships, and invite resistance. Staying grounded in data, centered on people, and focused on impact ensures the transition is smooth and serves its purpose.

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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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