

Unpacking Effects of Mentorship on Refugees and Hosts in Kampala and Nairobi

A Qualitative Study

Clare Clingain, David Martin Musiime, Doris Nassuuna, Aisha Sophia Otwoma

October 2025



REBUILD
Boosting Livelihoods



Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	5
RCT Results and Qualitative Study Motivation	6
Qualitative Study	7
Study Objectives and Research Questions	7
Data Analysis Approach	8
Results	9
Program Purpose	9
Research Question 1: Mentorship Experience	10
Research Question 2: Why women did not benefit as much as men.....	13
Research Question 3: Differences between existing/big and new/small businesses..	18
Research Question 4: Differences between Refugees and Hosts	21
Discussion	23
Conclusion.....	27
References.....	27

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the IKEA Foundation for their partnership and financial support to the Re:BUiLD program including this qualitative study and the two RCTs referenced in this report. We are grateful to the following staff – Scholastica Kamolo, Betsy Soi, Ismahan Aden, Kennedy Kibe, Judy Mbuvi, Najat Abdi, Zayed Abubakar, Billy Omondi, Faisal Abdiqani, Ronald Mutebi, Samuel Melkamu, Farhiyo Abdiqani, Sheila Kabasele, Sylvia Neumbe, David Hangi, Leah Apolot – who made this research possible, as well as all the Re:BUiLD participants who shared their experiences for this study. We are thankful to our research partners at Georgetown University, Princeton University, the Center for Global Development, University of Rochester, and the Economic Policy Research Centre from the Wave 1 RCTs referenced in this report. Special thanks to the Re:BUiLD Program Management Team (PMT) and IRC Uganda and IRC Kenya Senior Management Teams (SMTs) for their continued support.

Executive Summary

In many urban contexts of lower- and middle-income countries, refugees are often excluded from formal employment and depend on micro and small-scale businesses as their primary source of income. Capital support, business training, and semi-formal savings structures such as Urban Savings and Loans Associations (USLAs) have been widely used to strengthen these livelihoods, but results remain mixed, especially for women and other marginalized groups who encounter multiple structural and social barriers.

To respond to these challenges, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) designed the **Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD)** program in 2021 in Kampala and Nairobi. Using Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), the program tested whether cash grants and business mentorship could improve the livelihoods and well-being of both refugees and host entrepreneurs. The trials revealed nuanced outcomes: in Kenya, men benefitted most from the combined approach of grants and mentorship, while refugee women showed limited improvements compared to men. In Uganda, cash transfers favored larger businesses, whereas mentorship produced uneven effects, with women, particularly those mentored by other women sometimes reporting negative experiences. Across the contexts, cash support alone delivered outcomes comparable to cash combined with mentorship in the short and medium term.

Through formative qualitative research, we explored these dynamics to unpack the findings and provide actionable recommendations. Five key insights emerged:

- 1. Mentorship experiences varied widely.** While some participants gained valuable business knowledge, resilience, and networks, others faced numerous challenges, highlighting how **implementing mentorship at a large scale is a challenge**. This was attributed to the high number of mentors engaged in the program, hence guaranteeing quality and uniformity across all participating mentors was not certain.
- 2. Greater responsibilities and barriers limited women's ability to fully invest in their businesses.** Household responsibilities, partner dynamics, limited capital, and social constraints reduced women's ability to invest in businesses. With fewer responsibilities, men were able to commit most of their time to business, work early or late hours, and travel further to source their goods. Women also tended to open businesses in less lucrative sectors compared to men, partly due to limited business skills, but often because business is seen more as a means of **survival rather than thriving**.
- 3. New entrepreneurs' motivation can carry them far, while bigger established businesses can leverage their reputations.** Start-ups demonstrated high motivation, adaptability, and strong planning, enabling early success. In contrast, larger established business benefitted from stronger supplier networks, access to finance, and customer trust. However, all were affected by persistent challenges like inflation, which led to wide claims that the business grant was insufficient.
- 4. Host community men have the "home advantage" over refugees.** In Kenya, host men had better market access and market information than refugees. In both cities, mentors usually did not make a lot of connections for their mentees, meaning refugees did not gain adequate links to suppliers, customers, and other advice that could help them reach hosts' level of knowledge and level the playing field.
- 5. Social cohesion remained limited.** Although refugees and hosts joined the same mentorship program, participants viewed the main goal of the program as an individual one – start or grow one's own business. Language barriers, discrimination, cultural differences, and business sector mismatches further constrained interaction.

While cash may be a more cost-effective option for achieving business outcomes, **mentorship** can still be effective, though it likely works best **at a smaller scale** with careful mentor selection, intensity of the mentorship design, mentor training, close monitoring, and strong alignment between mentors and mentees.

Programs should move away from a one-size-fits-all model and instead adapt support according to business size, type, maturity, gender, and vulnerability. Diversifying the range of business sectors is also important, as many entrepreneurs, such as Congolese entrepreneurs who largely sell phone accessories and traditional attire, tend to concentrate in similar trades by gender and nationality.

Tailored support is therefore needed across different business stages: start-ups often require higher initial capital and basic training, while established businesses benefit more from advanced guidance for growth and sustainability with strategic capital infusion with potential to focus on job growth.

To strengthen accountability and impact, business grants should align with business plans and, when possible, supplemented by access to additional financial services. Practitioners should also provide **cash assistance** alongside business grants to **cover basic needs** and **prevent diversion** of business capital. **Behavior change** also needs to be emphasized to enhance business commitment.

For women, unlocking potential requires targeted measures such as childcare support, peer networks, business skills training and spousal sensitization. Promoting solidarity among women is equally important, as it reduces rivalry and builds collective confidence. Finally, building social cohesion calls for **intentional action** to address – social norms particularly those affecting women, overcome language barriers, foster collaboration, build trust, appreciate cultural differences and embed inclusive practices to ensure both refugees and host communities benefit equitably.



Photo Credit: September 11, 2022, Nairobi, Kenya. A 1:1 mentor, mentee session in progress during the RCT Wave 1 implementation. (PHOTO: Aisha Otwoma for the IRC).

Introduction

There are limited opportunities for formal employment in urban centers of low- and middle-income countries, particularly for refugees who may face restrictions on their participation in the labor market and access to basic documentation and services. Instead, many turn to micro-entrepreneurship as a way to make a living. Practitioners typically design microenterprise to address two barriers: 1) capital constraints, usually addressed with cash transfers; and 2) gaps in business knowledge, addressed with some form of business training (Quinn and Woodruff, 2019). On average, there are high returns to capital-centric interventions (Quinn and Woodruff, 2019) and modest returns to standard business training (McKenzie, 2020). However, some evidence suggests that these positive outcomes may be limited to businesses run by men (Jayachandran, 2020), drawing attention to how these interventions may not be sufficient for populations that face more constraints. For example, women’s care responsibilities may make standard classroom-based business training inaccessible. Similarly, refugees and migrants who have relatively limited business networks and who face discriminatory behavior from customers may encounter more limited economic returns from capital and business knowledge investments.

In 2021, the international Rescue Committee (IRC) launched the Re:BUiLD program in Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya to generate rigorous evidence and test innovative ideas for refugee and host livelihoods in the two urban cities. As a part of the program, the IRC launched two randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to understand how cash grants alone and in combination with business mentorship influence economic and psychological outcomes for aspiring refugees and host micro-entrepreneurs.

In Kenya, the RCT encompassed four research arms: (a) pure control – delayed cash, (b) cash only, (c) cash plus 1:1 mentorship, and (d) cash plus 1:1 mentorship plus perspective sharing training for the mentors (Khan, Paluck, & Zeitlin, 2023). The inclusion criteria were that participants were: (a) Kenyans or urban refugees with proof of registration documents, (b) residing in Nairobi, (c) were interested in business, (d) willing to commit to attending the mentorship sessions, (e) open to working with all populations, (f) and between 18-35 years old. Participants who completed their baseline survey were then randomized into one of the research arms, stratifying by gender and nationality for mentees (mentees: N = 2,023; mentors: N = 1,902).

Figure 1. Kenya RCT Treatment Arms

Cash	Mentorship	Perspective Sharing
All mentees received a cash grant of USD \$456 that was labelled for use to start or invest in a microenterprise.	Mentees and mentors were instructed to meet in 1:1 pairs every week for eight weeks. Mentors received a brief training by the IRC to set expectations for mentorship sessions and were compensated USD \$205 for their participation in the program. The IRC organized an initial meeting between mentors and mentees, after which all subsequent meetings were directly coordinated between the pair.	Mentors received additional training on active listening, the importance of non judgemental listening and responsiveness, perspective sharing, and prompts/ tools to implement perspective-sharing in all their meetings with their mentees.

In Uganda, the RCT arms were: (a) pure control – delayed cash, (b) cash only, (c) cash plus homogenous mentorship group, (d) cash plus heterogeneous mentorship group, (e) cash plus homogenous mentorship group + shared fate lottery, and (f) cash plus heterogenous mentorship group + shared fate lottery (Baseler et al., 2023; Baseler et al., 2025). The sample included 2,000 aspiring micro-entrepreneurs and 600 mentors and was balanced by gender and refugee status.

The inclusion criteria for the mentees were that they: (a) were 18-35 years, (b) had less than six years of business experience, and (c) planned to work at minimum 20 hours per week on their business, (d) spoke either English or Luganda and (e) were willing to commit time each week for mentorship sessions and potential surveys. For the mentors this was: (a) at least 25 years old, (b) owned a business, (c) had at least four years of experience, and (d) possessed the necessary interpersonal and business skills to mentor, (e) spoke either English or Luganda and (f) were willing to commit time each week for mentorship sessions and potential surveys (Baseler et al., 2025).

Figure 2. Uganda RCT Treatment Arms

Cash	Mentorship	Performance Incentives	"Shared fate" incentives
All participants received a cash grant of USD \$540 partway through the program. Mentors got USD \$270 mid-program and an additional USD \$54 at the program's end.	All mentorship groups included three mentees and one mentor and were formed in three configurations: - aligned groups ith four individuals of the same nationality and gender, - cross-gender groups with two men and two women of the same nationality - cross-nationality groups with two Ugandans and two refugees of the same gender.	All mentorship programs included performance-based incentives such that participants entered a lottery at 2,4, and 6 months from launch and were eligible to win if thie business was still in operation.	To incentivize mentors, some groups were eligible for an additional lottery in which for every mentee who won, the mentor would receive USD \$27.

RCT Results and Qualitative Study Motivation

Results from the two trials revealed that cash alone typically performed similarly to cash plus mentorship in improving business outcomes in the short and medium term. However, key differences were observed regarding demographics and business capacity.

In Kenya, neither cash nor cash plus mentorship improved business **outcomes for refugee women**. Meanwhile, cash plus mentorship provided **unique increases in business profits and well-being for Kenyan men** (Re:BUiLD, 2025).

In Uganda, benefits of the cash grants were concentrated among **individuals with larger businesses**. Mentorship showed mixed results, with women – particularly **those mentored by other women – experiencing negative effects** on their business profits (Baseler et al., 2025; Re:BUiLD, 2025).

To better understand the heterogeneity in these RCT results, this qualitative study conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with key profiles of Re:BUiLD RCT clients with the aim of clarifying recommendations to practitioners, including how the IRC should redefine its mentorship model and business curriculum for micro-entrepreneurs that are commonly used across IRC programs.

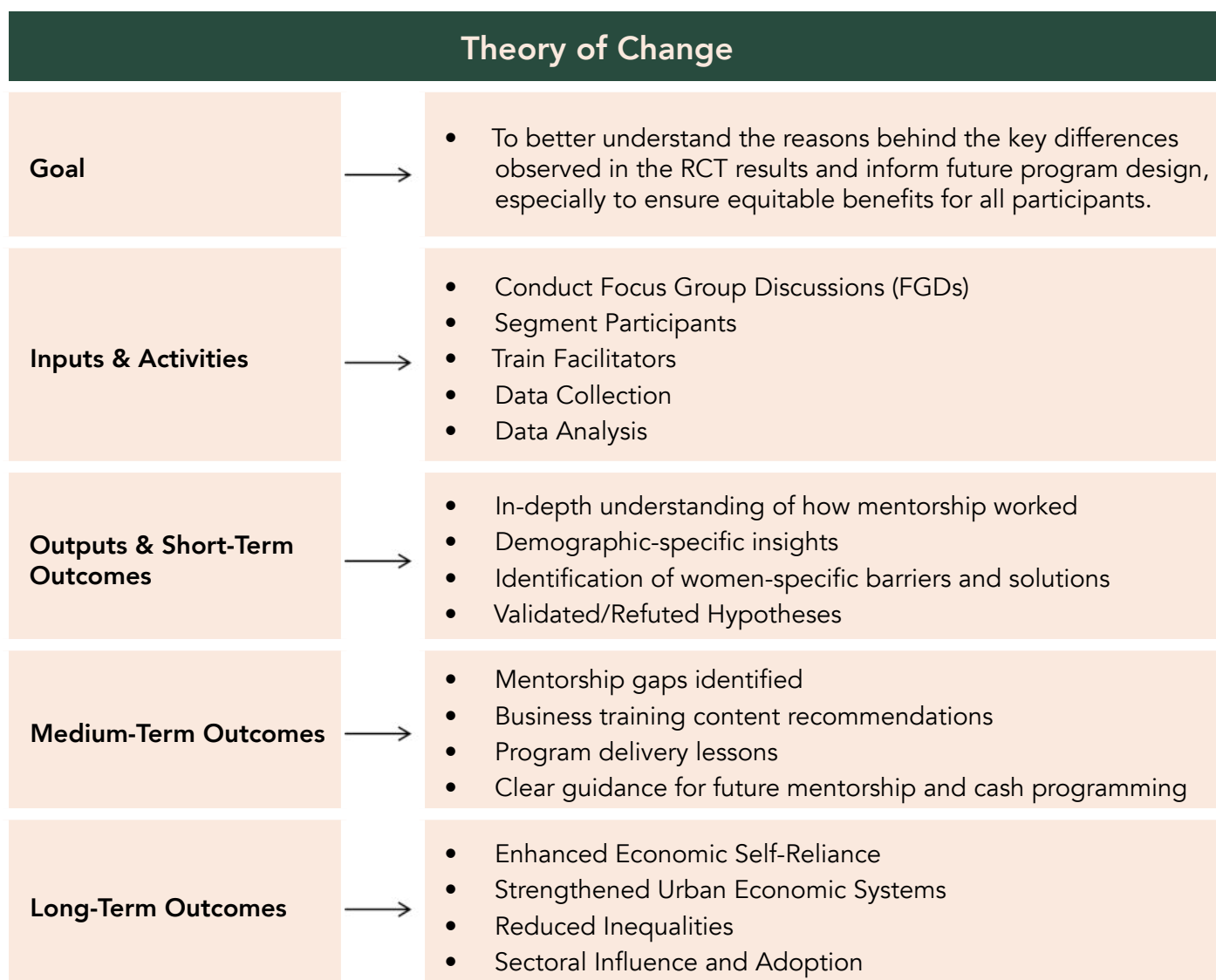
Qualitative Study

Research Questions

The research sought to answer the following questions:

- (i) What mechanisms of mentorship inhibited or enabled improvement in business outcomes for Re:BUiLD clients?
- (ii) Why did women benefit less than men from mentorship, and how did gender influence the effectiveness of mentorship mechanisms?
- (iii) Why did mentorship outcomes differ between larger or more established businesses and smaller or newer businesses?
- (iv) Why did mentorship outcomes vary between refugee-owned and host community-owned businesses?

Figure 3. Theory of Change for Qualitative Study



Data Collection Procedures and Sample

We conducted a total of 32 FGDs, with 16 held in each city. Each FGD had between 6-8 participants with a total of 235 participants taking part in the study (Nairobi: 117; Kampala: 118).

Participants were randomly selected from the Wave 1 RCTs client pool of the Re:BUiLD program using the R statistical software. Selection was based on three criteria – gender (both cities), refugee status (both cities), and business experience (Kampala only) or having a business at baseline (Nairobi only) – based on the RCT results. Only clients who were part of the mentorship arms were eligible to be recruited into the study, excluding clients who were in the cash and control treatment arms. After identification, the research team reached out to participants via phone to obtain their consent for participation.

The 16 FGDs per city were split by gender, nationality and business size/performance. There were therefore four refugee women groups, four host women groups, four host men groups and four refugee men groups. Two of each of those groups were for high business performance/large business size and two were for low performance/small business size. The groups were segregated to: (a) create a safer space for sharing information given the diversity of experience of clients in the RCTs and (b) to better distinguish the subgroup-driven effects.

Data collection and transcription took place between 2nd June and 15th July 2025. Data was collected via paper forms and audio recordings. The audio recordings were solely used to transcribe notes from the FGDs and supplement written notes. All FGDs were completed by a team of facilitators who worked in pairs (one facilitator, one notetaker). Prior to field work, the facilitators underwent intensive training covering study objectives, the FGD guide, consenting, facilitation techniques, translations and transcriptions, the IRC way, safeguarding, client responsiveness, and ethical considerations in conducting research with human subjects.

To foster comfort and openness, facilitators were gender-matched with the participants. The discussions, which were preceded by the administration of informed consent, were conducted in safe and secure hired venues, providing a neutral environment that encouraged participation and protected client confidentiality.

All research activities were approved by the International Rescue Committee's Institutional Review Board (IRB), by MildMay Research Ethics Committee (MUREC) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) in Uganda, and by Strathmore University Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (SU-ISERC) and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya.

Data Analysis Approach

We leveraged content analysis with inductive coding to unearth any unexpected mechanisms behind why the RCTs yielded the results they did. Data analysis was conducted by all four members of the research team through the following process: (a) a pair of two independent coders read through each transcript and arrived at independent assessments of how to code them in Dedoose ([Dedoose, 2023](#)), where we used to separate work spaces to ensure assessments remained independent; (b) a third independent coder reconciled the codes between the two coders for each transcript, meaning that each transcript had three out of the four research team members review it; (c) we then calculated the frequency of the codes and mapped out the primary themes present in the data in a Miro board. All code frequencies can be found in the Annex.

Results

Program Purpose

To establish participants' understanding of the Re:BUiLD program, we asked each FGD to describe the primary purpose of the program. The responses indicated a clear awareness of the program's objectives. The most frequently mentioned purpose was boosting businesses through grants (mentioned 110 times), followed by improving lives and livelihoods (48 mentions), providing mentorship (47 mentions), business training (23 mentions), and learning from each other (18 mentions). Participants less frequently associated the program with broader social benefits such as supporting refugees, understanding refugees, improving society, making friends, forming savings groups, and establishing business connections.

"For the grant, I think it was support from IRC for refugees and host communities to those whom they had businesses they need to boost or had those one who don't have business to start up and to support themselves and their families. For the group mentors, the purpose was to learn from each other from our different backgrounds in business, to help ourselves to learn how to boost our business or how to improve our business." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

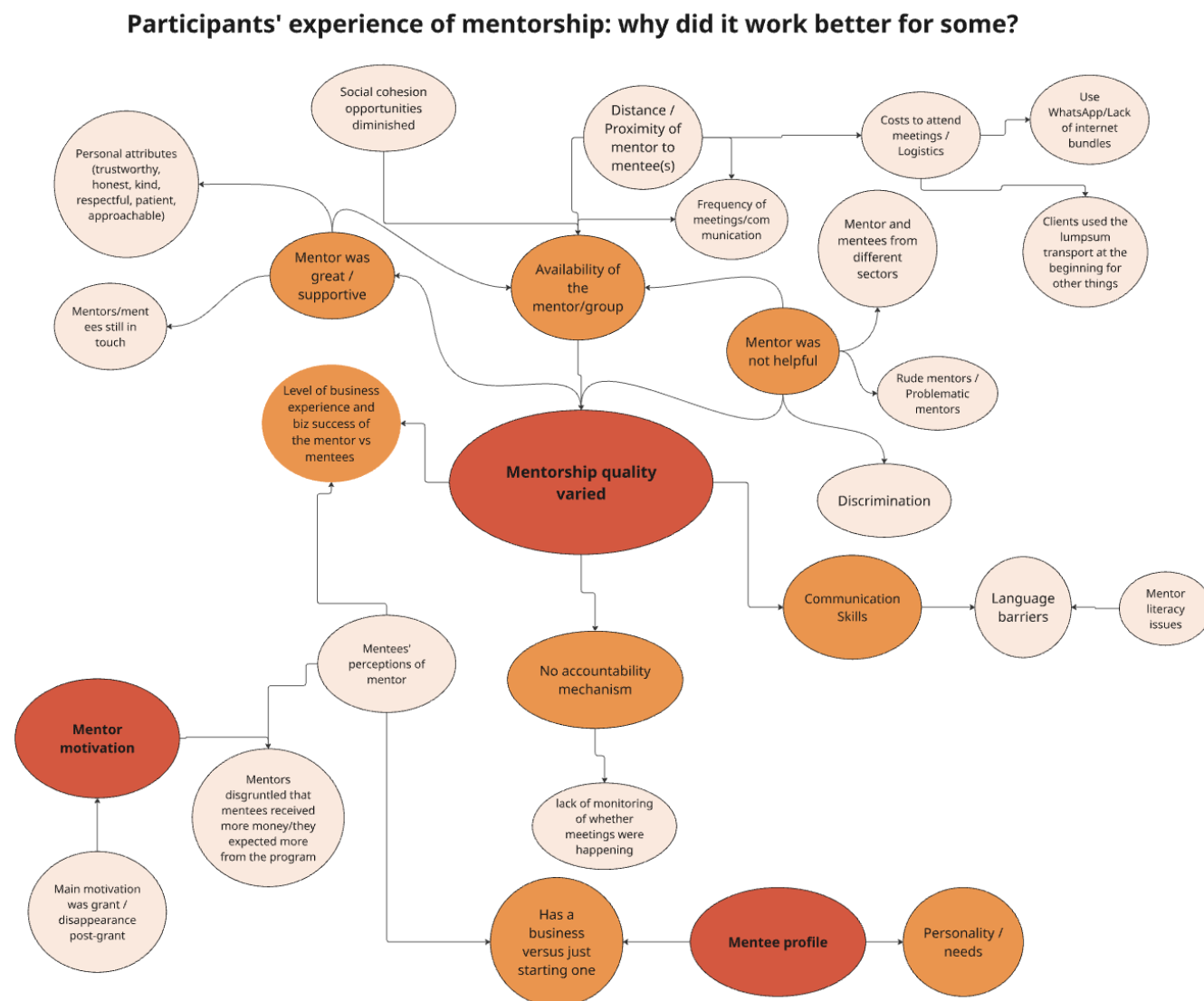
"The grant was for the beneficiary to either start up the business or to boost their business. The part of the membership was three people and assign one mentor to mentor them in the past as they are running their businesses. They are expert who's better than the mentee to guide them on how they can navigate and run their businesses." - Male Refugee (Kampala)

"So, cash had no problem because it picked me up from one person's business and put me into my own." – Female Host (Nairobi)

Participants viewed the Re:BUiLD program primarily as a means of economic empowerment through grants, but they also recognize its role in supporting personal development, enhancing business skills, and building social networks. Nonetheless, financial support remains the most dominant aspect of their understanding.

Research Question 1: Mentorship Experience

Figure 4. Thematic map of factors impacting mentorship



Finding 1: Mentorship experiences and quality varied widely

Mentorship experiences under the Re:BUiLD program were mixed. While some participants described mentorship as supportive and beneficial, others highlighted serious challenges that limited its effectiveness.

On the positive side, some focus group participants in Nairobi and Kampala described their mentorship journeys as smooth and motivating (55 mentions). Mentors who engaged consistently were credited with creating a supportive learning environment that helped mentees build both **practical business skills**, such as customer service (48 mentions), management (16), financial record-keeping (13), planning and budgeting (7), marketing and idea generation (5), and **soft skills** like patience and perseverance (12). In some cases, mentors even taught mentees their own trade.

"Uh, for me, I didn't face any challenges. But my mentor was in a business that was doing very well, so I was inspired to do the same business... To me, this wasn't a challenge it was actually a good experience, and the mentor was helpful for me." – Female Host (Nairobi).

Beyond technical skills, some mentors were valued for their **emotional support**. They encouraged mentees to remain resilient, adopt a positive business mindset, and embrace independence and risk-taking. Some mentors also played a role in facilitating **business connections**, that is, linking mentees to suppliers (31 mentions), customers (21), and other entrepreneurs (9), which helped improve access to markets, reduce input costs, and expand networks. In other cases, these relationships were reciprocal, with mentees also introducing mentors to new contacts or sharing market opportunities. Mentors further offered **practical advice** (42 mentions), drawing on their own experiences to help mentees navigate challenges and make informed business decisions.

"My mentor has a shop in Kiamako, He has shown me that patience matter when you want to improve the business. He told me that you will encounter many challenges, but you need to be patient cause you will enjoy later." – Male Host (Nairobi).

"The connection I got from my mentor helped me. Something I was buying at 200 now I am buying at 150 from the supplier he connected me to." – Male Host (Nairobi)

We agreed I sell her the fabric and show her Congolese designs then she'd get me 'vitenge' (African Fabric) customers. Just that. We connected each other to business opportunities". - Female Refugee (Nairobi)

However, these benefits were far from universal. Participants across both cities also pointed to significant **quality challenges** that undermined mentorship outcomes. The most frequently cited issues included concerns about mentor behavior and ethics (55 mentions), absenteeism or weak commitment, lack of relevant and adequate business connections, mismatched experience, and communication barriers. Mentees expressed frustration with mentors who were arrogant, dismissive, or discouraging, and in some cases reported problems linked to alcohol use, dishonesty, or irrelevant discussions. Issues regarding negative or discouraging attitudes were raised 20 times.

"My mentor was selling onions and the mentorship I was receiving was not of the business I was doing. I tried to tell him about my business, but we did not bond well." – Male Refugee (Nairobi).

"Some of the mentors for sure they did not know what you had written in the books... we expected them to know more than we did" - Male Refugee (Kampala)

A recurring complaint was that many mentors failed to provide meaningful business connections (63 mentions), either because they operated in different sectors (39) or, in some cases, because they did not run businesses at all. Mentor absenteeism was also common, with mentees reporting mentors who stopped attending sessions (35 mentions) or became unreachable (24). Some perceived that mentors only showed up when payments were due, while others struggled with the logistical burden of mentors being based far away (36 mentions). In some cases, mentees provided connections to their mentors.

"Actually, I'm the one who connected my mentor to other networks—he sells electronics, and I linked him with someone. So, I ended up being his mentor!" - Male Host (Nairobi)

In Kampala, an additional concern was the **perceived lack of expertise** among some mentors. A number of mentees felt their own business knowledge exceeded that of their mentors, leaving them disappointed and questioning the value of the engagement (9 mentions). Communication and language barriers further compounded these challenges, particularly in mixed groups, making it difficult for some participants to fully benefit from discussions.

"My mentor was a Munyarwanda and spoke Kinyarwanda, which I couldn't respond. He could come and we'd talk, but most of what he said—I didn't understand.... Even though he tried to explain but language was an issue" - Male Host (Kampala)

Finding 2 (Kampala): Female mentors don't have the same amount of time as male mentors

When we shared with FGD participants in Kampala that the RCT results revealed that mentees did not perform as well when they had a female mentor, participants suggested that a major driving factor was the mentees' perceived competence and lack of respect for women mentors (10 mentions). This lack of respect may have been rooted in perceptions around women mentors' limited business experience (9) and perceptions that men are more professional and knowledgeable.

Others noted that women mentors likely suffered from the same time and availability constraints as women mentees; they are responsible for most household chores and caregiving and have to work their business schedule around these duties (23 mentions).

"My mentor was a man. He always gave us his time but what I think for those that didn't do well is that the women have so many responsibilities. A man can wake up and go and not leave you without a single coin and you can't go to meet the group to mentor them and leave the children at home starving. That's what I think, because women's responsibility is a lot-- cooking food, washing clothes-- so you can't divide your time." - Female Host (Kampala)

Finding 3: Mentor-Mentee communication varied widely

The frequency of mentor-mentee communication during and after the program varied widely. Some mentees noted that their communication with their mentor ceased once the prescribed mentorship sessions finished (41 mentions). Communication that ceased during the program either occurred at the very beginning or shortly after the business grants were disbursed. In other cases, mentors and mentees intended to stay in touch, but one party may have disconnected their phones or lost phone numbers for continued contact.

"In our group with our mentor, we only met in two sessions. We did not see him again after getting the money. We only met two times with our leader." – Male Host (Kampala)

After the program ended, mentor-mentee communication remained rare (28 mentions), occasional (47), and in other cases frequent (44). Some mentees noted that they had been in contact with their mentors up until the same week as the focus group and were actively in touch either in person or via phone calls or WhatsApp (25). In Kampala, some groups were still meeting at the time of this study.

"For me, in a month I talk to my mentor about two times because he stays very far from me." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

We have been communicating with the mentor because we use WhatsApp. We always check on each other" – Male Host (Kampala)

For some mentees, the continued contact aligned with their expectations (13 mentions), while others were surprised that their mentor still made time for them after formal commitments were completed, especially while all parties were now quite busy with their businesses.

Finding 4: Mentors need to be available, experienced, and good communicators

Participants identified several key attributes that define an effective mentor, reflecting the direct impact of the qualities (or lack thereof) they experienced.

First, business expertise and relevant experience emerged as the most important quality (88 mentions). Participants valued mentors who had successfully run their own ventures, preferably in the same sector, and could pass on practical lessons about overcoming challenges, managing capital, and sustaining a business.

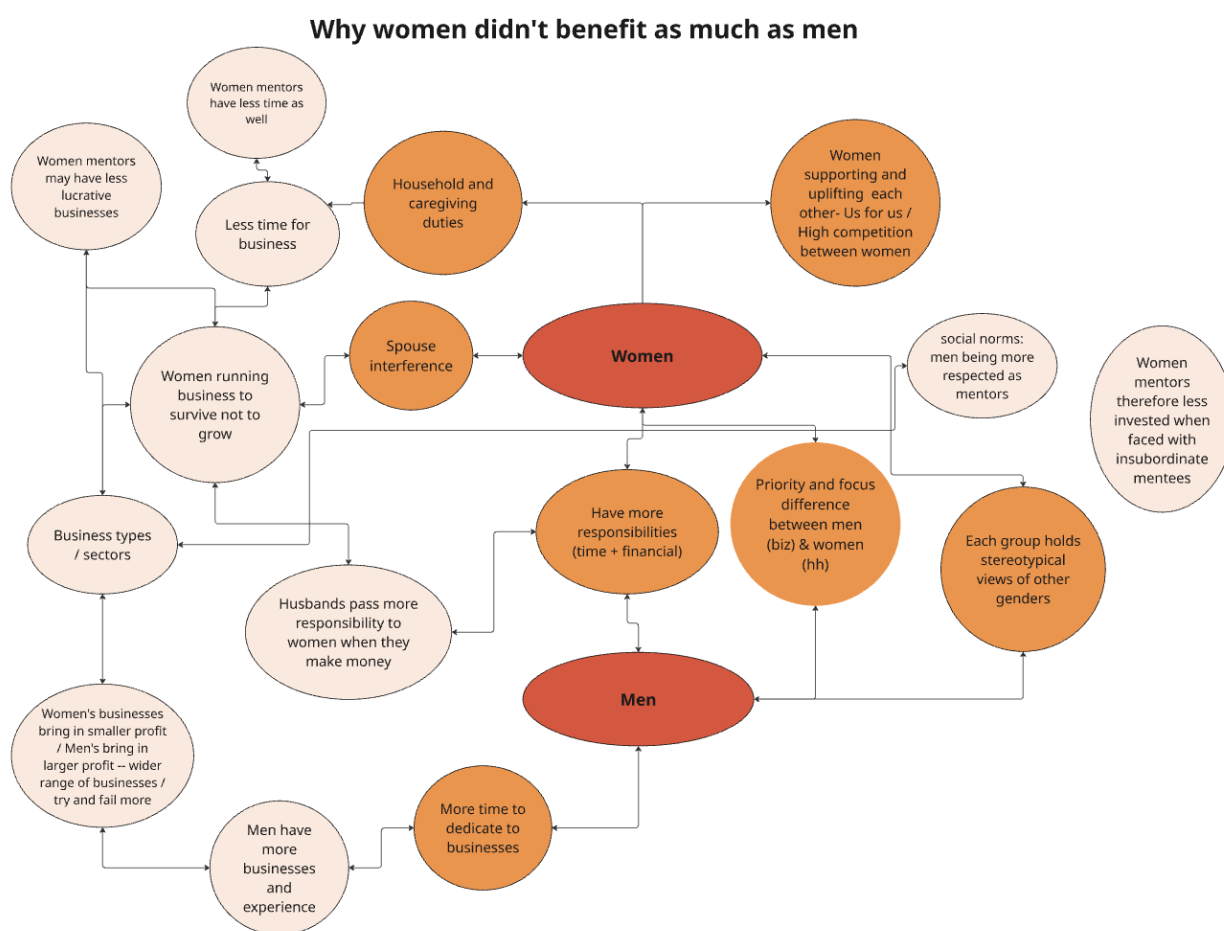
"Ideally, mentors should be able to provide practical advice, demonstrate success in their own ventures, and act as a role model for the business the mentee is running" – Male Refugee (Kampala).

Second, effective communication and interpersonal skills were frequently highlighted (45 mentions). Mentees wanted mentors who were approachable, respectful, and non-discriminatory, capable of explaining concepts clearly, listening attentively, and providing constructive feedback. They stressed the importance of encouragement and collaboration rather than arrogance, dictatorial behavior, or dismissiveness.

Finally, reliability and integrity were seen as essential (around 40 mentions each). Mentees preferred mentors who were consistently available, committed, and lived nearby to ease logistical barriers. Honesty, transparency, and good character were equally valued, alongside confidentiality and maturity. Negative behaviors such as alcohol use, gossiping, or jealousy were noted as undermining trust and the mentorship process.

Research Question 2: Why women did not benefit as much as men

Figure 5. Thematic map on gender differences



Finding 1: Time, money, and knowledge make women's business growth lag behind that of men

"You find that a woman has to first cook, clean, look after children, then later she goes to the business. By the time she reaches, she has already lost half the day." – Female Host (Nairobi)

The RCTs revealed that women achieved improvements in their business, but not as much as men, even when they got the same support as men in terms of mentorship, cash grants, or both. Focus group discussions highlighted that this gender gap is shaped by overlapping financial, household, and social factors as well as differences in personal drive and decision-making. The most significant drivers included caregiving and

household duties; spending on personal and household expenses; high financial demands on women; hard work and self-drive to run a business; married women's dependence on husbands or having controlling husbands; and lack of business information and knowledge. These factors were consistently reinforced by gendered norms and partner dynamics, constraining women's ability to grow their businesses compared to men.

The most frequently cited barrier was the burden of caregiving and domestic work (74 mentions). Women described balancing business with childcare, taking care of other sick family members, cooking, and household management, which left limited time and energy for entrepreneurial activities. This **"double workload"** was seen as a structural disadvantage compared to men.

Closely linked to this is the recurring pattern of spending on personal and household needs, as profits were often diverted toward family expenses such as school fees and household upkeep (mentioned 36 and 22 times respectively).

"You know usually it's the woman who manages the home and when she notices there are no onions she'll go buy, she notices there's no tomatoes, no milk for the children and she will buy, A child's uniform is torn and she buys, another has been sent home from school and the father is away, she will pay. Women are really close and are touched by the children thus she must do all these as a mother and not wait for the husband to come back home" – Female Refugee (Nairobi)

"A woman's needs are too many, she can't separate business money from family money. That is why even if she works hard, the business stays small." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

In contrast, men were frequently described as demonstrating greater self-drive, persistence, hard-work and determination in running their businesses (21 mentions). Participants emphasized that men are more willing to take risks, work longer hours, focused, remain committed to business growth and are more knowledgeable on business matters.

"Men don't fear working late or moving far for customers. Women get tired, but men push on until they succeed." – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Marriage added another layer of complexity. Married women often relied on their husbands for financial security and major decision-making (10 mentions). This perceived *"safety net"* reduced the urgency to invest effort and resources into their enterprises, with businesses sometimes treated as side activities rather than core income sources. Other discussions highlighted cases where women faced unsupportive or controlling spouses who actively restricted their ability to manage or expand their businesses (24). Such dynamics further constrained women's economic independence and business growth potential.

"My husband doesn't support my business. He sometimes drinks and comes home jealous, making it hard to focus." – Female Host (Nairobi)

Several secondary factors also contributed to slower business growth for women. These included low business knowledge (10 mentions), credit selling or generosity to customers (6), lack of perseverance and consistency (8), pregnancy and birth interruptions, physical strength differences, and social norms or discrimination in male-dominated sectors. Although less frequently cited, these factors underscore the layered and intersecting constraints women navigate in their entrepreneurial journeys.

"Most women don't have enough business knowledge. They start but don't know how to plan or keep records. Men know how to calculate profits and push forward." – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Finding 2: Gender influences entrepreneurial challenges and pressures

Participants described multiple challenges shaping entrepreneurship in refugee and host communities, with men and women experiencing these pressures differently. While both groups reported financial, social, and structural barriers, the specific forms these took varied sharply along gender lines.

Financial pressures emerge as a central theme for both genders, though they take distinct forms. Women had limited access to capital and reliance on a single income source, which constrained business expansion (mentioned 13 times). High costs of business stock, unplanned spending, bad debts, household expenditure and household responsibilities, compounded these pressures. Men, on the other hand, faced financial burdens often tied to societal expectations of provision. The pressure to support families either monogamy or polygamy including paying rent, school fees, and food frequently diverted business income away from reinvestment (41).

"Why our businesses are not improving, we borrow a lot as women to use the money for our many expenses. We have groups, you find a woman in five groups, and she has to pay back the money borrowed to all of them in one week; however, her business is not capable of generating that money, and cannot reinvest that amount in that business." – Female Host (Kampala)

"Sometimes I feel like I'm going to war — every day, it's a struggle. That's the challenge for a man: needing money every single day. Today, people expect me to have money. Even if I don't have any, they still see me as the man and expect me to provide." – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Social and cultural norms influenced men and women differently. Restrictive norms around women's domestic roles, low self-esteem, and not being good in business like men constrained women's opportunities, while men's expectation to be the providers in a household, difficulties with negotiation or networking (6 mentions each) and the pressure to maintain a certain image in the society (18) lead to poor financial decisions.

"Society thinks women should only focus on the home. If you try to run a business, people will talk negatively." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

"Men sometimes fail to express themselves... in meetings they keep quiet, but inside they have ideas." – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Operational and business management challenges also came up. Women were frequently described as facing gaps in business knowledge, record keeping, and planning (14 mentions). By contrast, participants explained that men's business challenges often stemmed from behavior-driven issues such as inconsistent investment, balancing multiple businesses, diversion of funds for non-business purposes such as alcohol (19), pleasing women and friends.

"I don't know how to budget or plan for my business. Sometimes I buy stock I can't sell." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

"Some men, after making sales, go straight to bars. By evening, there is no money left to take back to the family or to restock the shop." – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Finally, safety and vulnerability emerged as uniquely critical for women (9 mentions), who faced harassment, theft, and emotional stress that impacted business operations. Other minor challenges cited included fear of business failure, risk aversion, fraud, and structural burdens that affected both genders, though often in gendered ways.

"Sometimes I feel unsafe going to the market alone. I have to be careful about my money and goods." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

Finding 3: Give women more time, money, and training

Across the study, participants emphasized that women face unique challenges in achieving business improvements compared to men, even when receiving the same support.

Financial assistance emerged as the most frequently discussed factor (23 mentions). Participants highlighted the need for larger grants and more contextually aligned support to enable women to overcome start-up barriers. Some participants also recommended combining cash grants with in-kind support such as stock, equipment, or rental assistance, as well as multi-modal packages that could maximize women's chances of success. Others drew attention to the difficulties women face when operating informally, calling for assistance that could help secure more stable business spaces.

"For the hawking maybe they can help the women to get them a place to help them from the KCCA instead of doing business while running away from KCCA, get them a place, pay for them like 6 months, after, let them continue their own business" – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Beyond financial resource tailored training and capacity building are critical to enabling women's business growth (18 mentions). Participants recommended early business training, financial literacy, matching support to individual skills and individualized training based on need would enable women to make the most of financial assistance.

"I think what organizations should do is give them (women) training first. They should be taught how to do some research and business assessment before starting. I believe this will help women who want to start business" Male Refugee (Nairobi)

"IRC should understand each person's skills and what they want to do before giving out the grant. Once IRC knows our individual skills, they can offer support based on that" – Female Host (Nairobi)

Participants in the conversation stressed the importance of mentors and role models, mentioning them a total of 14 times. This highlighted the necessity of personalized guidance and the opportunity to learn from successful women in leadership roles. Furthermore, they acknowledged the vital role of regular peer check-ins and support systems in maintaining women's motivation and confidence.

During the discussions, participants raised the issue of household dynamics, mentioned 12 times, citing it as a hindrance to women's involvement and advancement. They emphasized the significance of receiving support from their spouses and having mutual responsibilities. Additionally, recommendations were made to provide assistance with household and childcare costs, like educational expenses, to alleviate burdens within the household and enable women to be more actively involved in entrepreneurial activities.

"Sitting with their husbands and convincing them of what the women can do and how best they can support" – Male Refugee (Kampala)

Some less common but noteworthy proposals comprised promoting the entry of women into industries dominated by men, offering rewards for exceptional business achievements, backing collaborative business initiatives, and simplifying bureaucratic obstacles like identification requirements, licenses and permits.

Finding 4: Socio-economic and structural factors gave Kenyan men an edge

The RCT showed that Kenyan men in mentorship groups gained the most benefits, both in business growth and social outcomes. In contrast, refugees and Kenyan women did not experience the same improvements. This difference was attributed by participants to a mix of structural, social, and economic factors that worked in Kenyan men's favor.

Being local was seen as giving Kenyan men a clear head-start because of their familiarity with markets, greater freedom of movement, and fewer risks of discrimination or harassment. Many emphasized the “home advantage,” noting that local men already understood how to navigate business environments (21 mentions).

These advantages were reinforced by systems (mentioned 16 times) that more readily served locals. Participants noted that access to finance, legal documentation, and networks often worked more smoothly for Kenyan men, while refugees faced additional hurdles. A female host in Nairobi explained:

“The system is built around those who know it. Kenyan men already have connections and fewer restrictions, whereas refugees face barriers to mobility and starting businesses.” – Female Host (Nairobi)

Kenyan men were reported to have stronger social and business networks (11 mentions), providing access to markets, information, and referrals. Additionally, participants emphasized differences in mindset and drive. Kenyan men were seen as proactive, risk-taking, and efficient in using resources. They invested grants quickly and strategically.

“Some businesses grow because of who you know. Men tend to share information and support each other, while women often do the same type of business in the same area, without expanding networks.” – Male Refugee (Nairobi)

Kenyan men were said to have easier access to credit and fewer household financial burdens (7 mentions). This allowed more resources to flow directly into their businesses. Less frequent but still relevant factors included higher-level business knowledge and skills, easier access to credit, and fewer personal financial burdens such as rent.

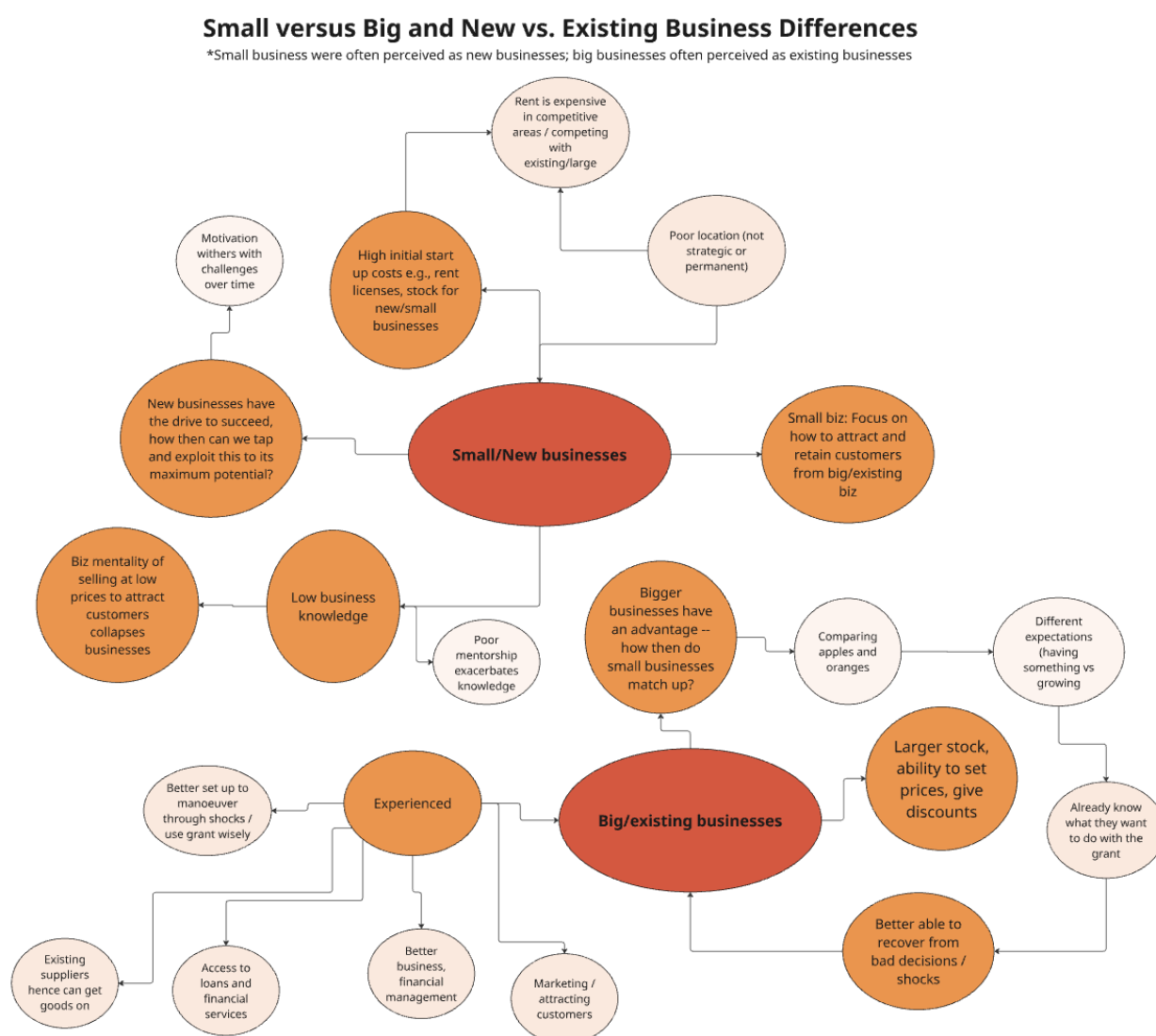
“Some men can borrow easily from local groups or use informal loans. Refugee women struggle to access the same funds.” – Female Refugee (Nairobi)



Photo Credit: October 5, 2022, Nairobi, Kenya. A mentor taking mentees through a session during the RCT Wave 1 implementation. (PHOTO: Aisha Otwoma for the IRC).

Research Question 3: Differences between existing/big and new/small businesses

Figure 6. Thematic map of business size differences



Finding 1: Motivation Versus Challenges: The Small Business Experience

In Nairobi, the RCT results showed that program benefits such as starting new businesses, increasing profits, acquiring productive assets, and devoting more time to business activities, were concentrated among individuals who did not own a business at baseline. In contrast, the Kampala results revealed the reverse, with participants who already operated larger businesses at the program's start gaining the most from the cash support (Re:BUiLD, 2025).

In line with these findings, responses from the FGD participants indicated that small and newly established businesses in Nairobi often demonstrate high levels of commitment, motivation, and determination in their initial stages. It was noted that start-ups are generally driven by a strong desire to succeed and invest significant effort into their operations (mentioned 21 times). This, coupled with flexibility of choosing a new and suitable business location (6 mentions) and better planning (6 mentions), is what perhaps made the small

businesses in Nairobi succeed. However, the case was different for Kampala where enthusiasm tended to diminish over time as small businesses faced multiple challenges that prevent long-term survival, with many closing within the first few months.

Key challenges cited that made small businesses in Kampala not perform as well included high start-up costs such as rent, licensing, stock purchases (mentioned 41 times), limited business knowledge (31 mentions), low customers (12) and poor business location choices (7). Rent emerged as the most significant burden, with participants emphasizing that securing a strategic location is often more expensive than the grants provided. Beyond financial hurdles, participants believed that start-ups struggle with weak record-keeping and limited marketing skills. To attract customers, many resort to lowering prices, a practice that undermines productivity, reduces profitability, and threatens long-term competitiveness, particularly in increasingly saturated markets.

“The main issue is rent, but also when you talk about micro support, it’s important to remember that small businesses always face many challenges. You may plan to start a business but then find that the rent is too high and you have no other option. When a business is small, the challenges are even greater, especially if you’re fully depending on that business for your income. On top of that, you also need a place with good security. You might fear paying high rent, but at the same time, you don’t want to be in an unsafe area just because it’s cheaper.” – Female Host (Kampala)

The challenges shown in the figure above are echoed in participants’ experiences. As one refugee man in Kampala expressed:

“As you know small business bring a lot of stress ..., you know having a small business and being with a lot of responsibilities like responding to all of the needs in the house .., first of all the business is small then after your need and a family needs are more than what the business can afford and your business does not go up, it ke[pt] on remaining at one place”

Finding 2: Larger businesses have a safety net but face unique challenges

In Uganda, compared to start-ups, larger and more established businesses were found to be better positioned to navigate business shocks and thrive since they have the experience (mentioned 36 times). Participants believed that such businesses benefit from having established supplier networks, enabling them to acquire goods on credit and access quality stock. They also enjoy greater access to loans and financial services, and stronger management systems. This competitive advantage combined with better business location allows them to make more profit by attracting and retaining customers, through offering discounts, better prices and a wide range of quality products (mentioned 35 times). Participants felt that these factors help explain the RCT findings showing why larger businesses performed better in Uganda (Re:BUILD, 2025).

“The truth is, a Kenyan businessman can take a loan, combine it with the grant, and fully stock his shop. All the customers will go to him because he has everything they need. I sell phone accessories, but my stock is small. A customer might walk in asking for a specific phone cover, if I don’t have it, they’ll go to another shop. Eventually, people will say, “That shop has nothing,” and stop coming! That’s how the business goes down. A good business is one that meets all the customer’s needs.” – Male Refugee (Nairobi)

Despite these strengths, established businesses in Kenya, as per the RCT findings, did not report significant increases in profits after receiving grants compared to their counterparts in Uganda. Two main possible explanations emerged from participants: first, a degree of complacency and reluctance to expand since their businesses were already stable (mentioned 17 times), and second, the diversion of grants to meet non-business needs (20). Other challenges cited were debt burden, business competition, theft and lack of business expansion skills. This suggests that while established businesses may be resilient, they do not always prioritize growth-oriented investment.

“Those with business are reluctant compared to those who are starting business. For those with business they just add up stock, so that reluctance contributed for those with business to not succeed. Those starting business were very focused so as to have a source of income” – Male Host (Nairobi)

Finding 3: Business grant amount was likely insufficient to start or grow a business while meeting growing cost of living

When asked how grants were used, most participants discussed applying part of the funds to start or expand their businesses. However, it was highlighted in 67 instances, (most often in the female and refugee focus groups), that the grant was split between business needs and personal household expenses, leaving little money for business. This reflects the dual pressures faced by entrepreneurs who must balance business growth with family survival. The findings suggest that without additional support mechanisms, business grants risk being diluted and may not achieve their intended impact.

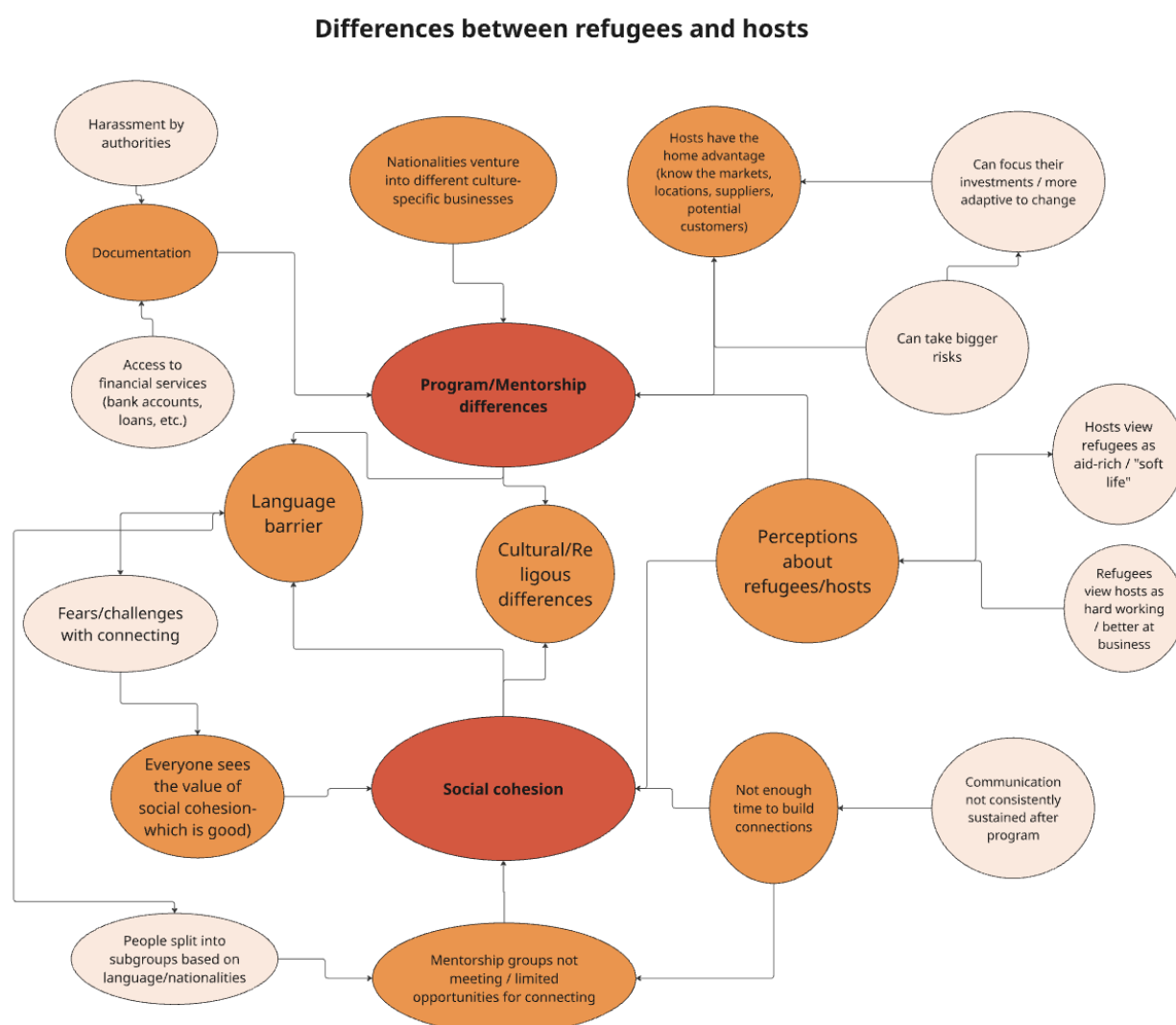
“The challenge I faced with the money? I won’t say I faced challenges with money, but rather the money found me when I had challenges. I am a single mom with children, and one of my children is sick and mentally ill. I received the money when I had many difficulties—my kid burned everything at home when I was not around, including clothes and everything else. So, when I received the grant, I had to replace what the kid burned. I also took the child to different organizations such as NRC and AHA. I took my son to the mental hospital, but I won’t say all the money went there. I have a business where I sell drinks, milk, and soda, so I used the remaining money for that. After replacing the burned items, I had a balance of 1 million UGX. I even paid the rent arrears money my landlord was demanding me. And for my son he is still in the mental hospital, but I usually check on him.” – Female Refugee (Kampala)

Other challenges raised included lack of capital (31 mentions), rising inflation (17 mentions), harassment from city authorities (12 mentions), and high initial costs of setting up a business (10 mentions). Participants also highlighted gaps in business skills, exposure to shocks such as COVID-19 and flooding, as well as the absence of effective mentorship. Interestingly, a notable number of respondents (31 mentions) reported that they did not face any challenges with the grants given and had only positive experiences to share. The prominence of inflation as a recurring concern underscores the vulnerability of small businesses to broader economic shifts, with rising costs eroding both capital and profitability, and in turn limiting the effectiveness of support interventions such as grants and mentorship.

“The challenge I faced was that, yes, I invested in the business, but I also had to pay rent, support myself, and cover other daily expenses. When you start a business, it doesn’t grow overnight, it takes time to improve. I know the money was meant strictly for business, but the reality is that I had to use part of it to pay rent for my house and the business premises. So even though the grant was helpful, after covering these costs, it wasn’t enough to fully grow the business.” – Female Refugee (Nairobi)

Research Question 4: Differences between Refugees and Hosts

Figure 7. Thematic map for differences by nationality



Finding 1: Differences in language fluency prevented social cohesion

Despite going through the same program on paper, refugees and hosts had different experiences of the mentorship programs in both cities. In Uganda, participants often referenced inability to communicate due to language differences as the primary hindrance for increased social cohesion between hosts and refugees (mentioned 43 times).

"We had Eritreans but it was so challenging that even the English we would discuss in they weren't understanding, I try my level best to use English but they had to first call someone to translate and for the mentor, she didn't know English at all so we had no way to understand one another. So, language was hard. One colleague once invited me at her home to support me in baking, but language was a challenge and her child that would have supported us in translating is at school also, so it gave me hard time." – Female Refugee (Kampala)

“But its language for example, as we are all here, you are speaking Luganda though you said you are not Muganda right? (referring to the moderator) but what has united us is the language. Now, someone might come when they are from a different nationality and I might speak English, but I don’t speak it well, So, we will end up looking at each other like a picture. The language challenged a lot of people, so, it needed when people are selected, they should speak a common language that connects them. Or you decide and say only English will be used.” – Female Host (Kampala)

Other factors that prevented group mentorship from bridging social divides in both cities included discrimination by hosts against refugees, differences in culture or religion, as well as differences in participants’ business sectors which often fell along national identity lines.

Finding 2: Individually focused programs may undermine social cohesion goals

Although the shared fate arm of the Uganda RCT was intended to encourage group members to be more invested in each other’s businesses and the perspective sharing arm in the Kenya RCT aimed to help Kenyan mentors and refugee hosts better understand each other’s experiences, one participant highlighted a fundamental crux of trying to improve social cohesion in an individual-focused program:

“You see, when you don’t have a project that combines you, there’s nothing else that can bring you together. Do you get me? So, when a project for rearing chickens comes, or making bricks. Whether it’s from the north, a Sudanese, Congolese, you become a single team. When you give me a project to go and start a shop, and another one to go and rear chickens, nothing combines us. We shall remain as individuals and well separated. However, when they bring a project that forces us to work together as a team, this would be better. That’s the reason why we cannot cooperate. When we are in the same project, this one can be Sudanese, Rwandese, they will be forced to learn Luganda because what we are doing is the same, and the money we are going to get is the same; we are not separated. But in this case, everyone was doing an individual venture, so that’s how it was.” – Male Host (Kampala)

Finding 3: Refugees still lack basic documentation while hosts have home advantage

Refugees encountered several barriers that their host counterparts did not. In Nairobi, participants often mentioned refugees’ continued challenges with legal documentation – including both refugee IDs and business licenses (mentioned 15 times). Without documentation, refugees are also unable to access financial services and face harassment by city officials. Both refugees and hosts in Nairobi often referred to Kenyan nationals as having the “home advantage” to starting and maintaining businesses, as well as responding to shocks that could financially disrupt a household. As a part of this “home advantage”, participants shared that hosts have better knowledge of markets, suppliers, and alternative livelihood opportunities should small businesses not work out.

Host only focus groups also believed that refugees aren’t dedicated to staying in the country as imagined prospects of resettlement present impressions of a more enticing future; therefore, they may not have invested as much in their business.

Refugees, especially women, also faced heightened risks of insecurity and harassment, (mentioned 10 times) which limited their business activity. A female refugee in Nairobi shared:

“Sometimes it’s unsafe for us to open shops in certain areas. Men can move freely, but as a refugee woman, you worry about theft or harassment.” – Female Refugee (Nairobi)

Discussion

Reflection 1: Implementing mentorship at a large scale is a challenge, but there are clear ways to improve it at a smaller scale

Although some Re:BUiLD clients clearly benefited from mentorship, others faced numerous challenges, highlighting how implementing **mentorship at a large scale is a challenge**. How do you ensure quality and uniformity across all mentors? How should you effectively track that mentors are following the program and that mentees are attending sessions? How do you ensure sufficient number of mentors representing all sectors that mentees are in?

The focus groups lead us to a few possible answers. Programs could recruit quality mentors through a rigorous screening process, ensure proper matching of mentors and mentees, provide training for mentors, or conduct regular follow-ups on mentorship sessions. However, each of these options adds extra costs to a program design that has already been shown to be less cost-effective than providing business grants alone (Re:BUiLD, 2025). As many of these recommendations can add to the cost per client to deliver the program, practitioners should weigh each of these program components against their scale ambitions, desired impact, program length, and target population. If practitioners are set on using mentorship, the added costs of these recommendations may be worth it.

On a smaller scale, for mentorship to be effective, practitioners should consider these key factors, almost all of which were echoed by participants during the FGDs:

1. **Heavily screen mentors to ensure quality:** all mentors selected should possess similar qualities. The thorough screening should go beyond assessing their technical and business expertise to include interpersonal skills like communication, empathy, teamwork, respect, patience, flexibility, dependability and genuine commitment to guiding others. Without more intense screening, mentorship programs run the risk of role reversal as highlighted by a male refugee in Kampala:

“Of course you gave us mentors, and they became mentees to us.”

2. **Consider letting mentees choose their mentor:** Encouraging mentee choice strengthens ownership of the mentoring relationship. However, to avoid uneven distribution or choices based on comfort rather than mentor strengths, programs should consider a structured matching process with strong participation engagement. This would balance mentees’ preferences with programmatic criteria, ensuring that all mentors’ skills are optimally utilized.
3. **Monitor sessions:** It is important for programs to set up monitoring systems that confirm mentorship is happening as planned, while also striking a balance so the natural relationship between mentor and mentee is not disrupted.
4. **Consider the ratio of mentors to mentees in group mentorship:** For the Re:BUiLD program, we applied a 1:1 mentorship model in Nairobi and a 1:3 model in Kampala, each with its own advantages and drawbacks. In the 1:1 approach, mentorship could not take place if one participant was unavailable. In contrast, the 1:3 model faced challenges in coordinating schedules, as bringing all four individuals together at the same time was difficult, often resulting in fewer participants attending each session. For group mentorship therefore, this factor should be taken into consideration.

“Another important thing is putting effort into helping people of different nationalities work together. For example, if you have Congolese, Sudanese, and Rwandese participants, don’t just fill the group with mostly Congolese and only a few Sudanese. Instead, mix them equally. That kind of balance can really help people connect and learn from each other better” – Female Refugee (Kampala)

5. **Consider location of mentor and mentee(s):** Mentors and mentees should be located close to each other to allow for easier meetups. In the Re:BUILD program, we provided transport support as a one-time allowance at the start, but this proved ineffective as participants often redirected the funds to other urgent needs. On the other hand, arranging transport stipends on the actual meeting day can create logistical challenges. Programs therefore need to find a balanced approach to address this issue.
6. **Consider the business sector of the mentor:** matchings by sector can be instrumental as the conversations then become relatable, relevant and practical advice. For some trades, same sector matches are critical, while others may be easier to learn from general business challenges and experiences. A male host in Kampala shared:

"I was in a piggery project, and my mentor was dealing in electronics. We couldn't connect. I found it very hard to get connections about piggery products, like getting someone who wants a piglet, and so on!"

7. **Consider implementing more intensive mentor training:** equip mentors with the skills needed to effectively support their mentees and foster stronger, more impactful mentoring relationships.

Reflection 2: When will we finally address long-standing challenges inhibiting women's economic progress?

Women's household responsibilities and the lack of documentation for refugees remain some of the most persistent barriers to participation in income-generating activities. Despite consistent efforts by practitioners and government actors, these challenges continue to stifle economic progress, particularly for refugee women. Although interventions such as childcare stipends temporarily remove or reduce barriers, these supports often end when a program closes, causing the same obstacles to re-emerge. Improving women's economic outcomes requires more than resources and skills alone; it depends on an enabling environment that stretches from the household – where domestic responsibilities and spousal support play a decisive role – all the way to the broader market and social systems that shape women's opportunities.

Practitioners can consider:

1. **Budgeting for and providing additional direct support to women:** Although interventions such as childcare stipends, transport reimbursements and cash for basic needs, temporarily remove or reduce barriers, these supports often end when a program closes, causing the same obstacles to re-emerge. Practitioners should consider low-cost delivery models that are sustainable e.g., community-based childcare even as they budget for support that is specific to the women's needs.
2. **Providing market-focused training for women:** Training initiatives for women should be designed to provide practical, market-oriented knowledge that strengthens both their livelihoods and resilience. Many women run small businesses in sectors with low returns and narrow profit margins, often as a means of **survival rather than growth**. To address this, programs can incorporate financial literacy, business management, and digital training aligned with local market demands. It is also important to ensure that training environments are accessible and responsive to women's realities, including caregiving responsibilities and mobility constraints. By offering comprehensive and inclusive opportunities, women are better positioned to transition from survival-oriented enterprises to more sustainable and profitable ventures
3. **Combining direct program support with advocacy and policy engagement:** It is not enough to focus on women as individuals; it is imperative to work with systems and other actors that directly influence women's ability to engage in meaningful income-generating activities. Without parallel efforts to influence systemic constraints such as restrictive gender norms, limited access to markets, and policy gaps, programs risk limited impact.

4. **Facilitating safe, structured peer-support spaces for women:** Competition and rivalry among women may weaken the effectiveness of mentorship approaches and social cohesion. Women need to uplift each other and having a dedicated space to build confidence and connection could reduce unhealthy rivalry, improve psychological well-being, and encourage social connection and networking.
5. **Prioritizing spousal and household sensitization:** Including spouses or other household members in introductory sessions and communications may help mitigate undesired interventions to divert business grants from their intended purposes for women, as well as ease concerns around women's participation in group meetings. As a male host in Kampala shared:

"I think it would be important that if there is a program targeted for women about work. The money is to be given to my wife however even me, the husband I ought to be there. In that sense, I go back to my earlier statement that all problems originate with us men. I would like to be taught together with my wife so I can know what our roles are in that when we get home, I won't be giving her a hard time for her to do what she needs to do. The IRC should teach us the men, how to support our wives in business, to show us the good things/side of things that if my working wife did will reduce my burden too."

Reflection 3: Business grants, training, and mentorship have the potential to be powerful, however practitioners should avoid "one-size-fits-all" approaches and instead tailor to the distinct needs of specific subgroups

While mentorship can be valuable, a uniform approach may not suit everyone and, in some cases, may not justify the additional cost compared to cash-only support. Entrepreneurs who are just beginning often need more than financial capital; they require direction on how to grow their businesses, manage risks, and navigate unfamiliar environments. In contrast, larger businesses may be able to take more risks and could more readily enact advice from experienced businesspeople. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to work, as entrepreneurs face diverse challenges depending on gender, business stage, and level of vulnerability.

This raises another key question for programs to consider: "who should be targeted for mentorship?" Practitioners should also consider what outcomes they hope to improve, for whom, and whether the added cost is worth it. Moreover, when considering mentorship, it is important to identify the **'tipping point'** of the mentee population that can be served, that is, how many can be reached without compromising the factors highlighted in Reflection 1.

Practitioners can also consider:

1. **Tailoring business grants for specific target populations:** Programs could explore business plan-based grants, where funding is tied to clearly articulated business plans to ensure alignment with realistic growth strategies and the specific needs of different enterprises. For instance, start-ups require additional grant support to cover critical start-up costs such as rent and licensing, while growth-stage businesses may need support geared toward expansion and innovation.

"So, for example, take like these two jerricans, one empty and one is half, that means it already has something. When you add a small cup to the half full one, that means everything is fixed. You can work smoothly, you have all the customers, you are doing the advertisement, and you are getting what you want. But the small business is getting challenges, the capital is not enough, and the income is small too. At the same time, you have to pay the same rent."
– Male Refugee (Kampala)

2. **Tailored trainings for specific target populations:** When it comes to business size, small business owners often believe that success lies in selling goods or services at low prices, relying on frequent discounts to attract or retain customers, or choosing cheaper rental locations. While such strategies may yield short-term benefits, they can be detrimental in the long run and often lead to business closures. To counter this, there is a need for targeted training and tailored support that encourage

the adoption of more sustainable practices. The nature of training would differ for start-ups compared to established businesses. Although some studies suggest that classroom-based training has limited effectiveness, many start-ups still require some form of comprehensive business knowledge.

“You see, the training we were given really helped those who were starting from zero. They had to learn everything from scratch — like how to price their items and understand the business environment. But for those who already had businesses, it was harder to change or adjust what they were already used to doing. The new business owners had the advantage of starting fresh with new ideas and planning everything from the beginning.” – Female Host (Nairobi)

3. **Facilitating access to financial services:** Business grant amounts are often insufficient due to budget restrictions, thus facilitating access to supplementary financing, such as connections with financial institutions for loans, or Urban Savings and Credit Associations (USLAs), could help reduce over-reliance on grants and promote long-term sustainability.

Reflection 4: Social cohesion may not happen without explicit instruction to collaborate and sufficient means to communicate

Finally, if practitioners want to improve social cohesion between hosts and refugees or between men and women, they need to be intentional about it; otherwise, they risk replicating social norms and challenges that exist in society within mentor-mentee relationships and groups. Within the context of livelihoods programs, having individual goals (i.e., running one’s own business) without explicit guidance on collaborating with others may undermine any implicit assumptions that a program may facilitate social connections between hosts and refugees. Moreover, if language barriers aren’t addressed, it is no surprise that refugees and hosts will not be able to make strong cross-cultural bonds.

Social cohesion, therefore, requires **intentionality across all programs**, ensuring that interventions are designed not only to support business growth but also to strengthen inclusion, trust, and collective resilience within communities.

Practitioners can consider the following pathways for improving their programs’ potential for boosting social cohesion:

1. **Addressing language fluency barriers:** Specific pathways may look different based on program goals, activities, and target population. Even when language barriers appear on paper to be minimized – as was the case for the Re:BUiLD RCTs where language skills were included in mentorship pair or group selection – there still may be issues that arise in group settings. One potential option is to have at least two people in a group who speak the same language, which could help minimize individual isolation and attrition from group-based programs.
2. **Including both hosts and refugees in programs, and provide sensitization against discrimination:** There is a clear benefit to programs including both hosts and refugees as both groups frequently mentioned stereotypes about the other and for refugees, there is a diversity in hosts’ positive views of them based on nationality and religion as documented from the Kenya study in [Khan \(2024\)](#). Continuous sensitization against discrimination and social cohesion should be an on-going process embedded in all programming efforts. As a male refugee in Nairobi put it:

“I would request IRC to sensitize Kenyans, about us, that refugees are here to look for better life. Refugees are from different countries with different problem, so it is all about building future. Sensitize Kenyans, first of all to feel that we are all African, we are humans and let them stop hating us because we are not in our country. Let them understand us that we look for better life. Let them understand that we left our country because of different reasons, we did not come to do bad things. If you sensitize, they will understand that we are looking for better life like them.” – Male Refugee (Nairobi)

3. **Setting individual goals versus group goals:** From what Re:Build participants shared, it's clear that the individual goal of "boosting businesses" was seen as the program's primary purpose as opposed to improving social cohesion. When programs have both individual and group-based components, practitioners should review all messaging to clients to ensure it reiterates both sets of program goals. Practitioners should also review program activities to understand whether there are clear opportunities and incentives to collaborate.

Conclusion

Large-scale mentorship programs are difficult to implement effectively, but smaller, well-structured models with careful matching between mentors and mentees could be valuable. Although cash is typically a more cost-effective way to improve business outcomes, macroeconomic factors can quickly render business grant amounts insufficient to start or grow a small business. Programs should consider tailored tracks for specific populations such as women, refugees, and small versus larger / new versus existing business owners. Persistent barriers such as women's household responsibilities and refugees' documentation challenges continue to constrain women and refugees' ability to grow their businesses and earn a living, highlighting the need for household engagement, peer support, and enabling ecosystems. Differentiated assistance for start-ups and growth-stage businesses, along with access to financing could further enhance efficacy and sustainability. Finally, social cohesion requires intentional program design, explicit encouragement of collaboration, and ongoing sensitization to address stereotypes and language barriers

References

Baseler, T., Ginn, T., Muya, B., & Zeitlin, A. (2023). "Re:Build: Cash grants and mentorship to strengthen refugee economic and social integration in Uganda." AEA RCT Registry. May 03. <https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.9212-3.0>

Baseler, T., Ginn, T., Muya, B., & Zeitlin, A. (2025). "Cash and Small Business Groups for Ugandans and Refugees." CGD Working Paper 716. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/cash-and-small-business-groups-ugandans-and-refugees>

Dedoose Version 9.0.107, cloud application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2023). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC www.dedoose.com.

Jayachandran, S. (2020). "Microentrepreneurship in Developing Countries," Working Paper 26661, National Bureau of Economic Series: Working Paper Series.17 https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26661/w26661.pdf

Khan, S. (2024). The promise and limits of perspective taking. World Bank Blogs: Development Impact. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/impactevaluations/the-promise-and-limits-of-perspective-taking--guest-post-by-sana>

Khan, S., Paluck, E., & Zeitlin, A. (2023). "What are the benefits of mentorship for aspiring micro-entrepreneurs? An examination of mixed gender, same gender, and refugee-host and host-host mentoring pairs and the effects of mentoring and mentoring with perspective-sharing over simple cash transfers." AEA RCT Registry. April 21. <https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.10113-3.0>

McKenzie, David, "Small Business Training to Improve Management Practices in Developing Countries: Reassessing the Evidence for 'Training Doesn't Work'," 2020.

Paluck, E., Porat, R., Clark, C., & Green, D., (2021) "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72(1), 533–560. eprint: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-071620-030619>.

Quinn, S. & Woodruff, C. (2019). "Experiments and Entrepreneurship in Developing Countries," *Annual Review of Economics*, 11(1), 225–248. eprint: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080218-030246>.

Re:BUiLD. (2025) "Research Briefs: Results from Re:BUiLD's Wave 1 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) on Mentorship and Cash Grants for Microentrepreneurs in Nairobi, Kenya, and Kampala, Uganda." <https://rebuild.rescue.org/learning-briefs/wave-1-rct-research-brief>

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.

Clare Clingain is a Researcher, Economic Recovery and Development at the International Rescue Committee

David Martin Musiime is the Research Coordinator at the International Rescue Committee - Re:BUiLD

Doris Nassuuna is a Research Manager – Uganda, at the International Rescue Committee - Re:BUiLD

Aisha Sophia Otwoma is the Research Manager – Kenya, at the International Rescue Committee - Re:BUiLD

Copyright ©2025 IRC.

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

