



Building Self-Reliant Refugees: East Africa as a Model

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Abstract

This study examines how Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya are translating global refugee commitments into national practice to foster refugee self-reliance and socio-economic integration. Through a comparative analysis of legal frameworks, national strategies, and implementation approaches, the paper argues that East Africa is emerging as a pioneering model of refugee inclusion, characterized by the integration of refugees into national systems, shared development benefits with host communities, and a shift from humanitarian dependence to sustainable livelihoods aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees.

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1. Introduction

The global refugee regime is undergoing a paradigm shift, moving from short-term humanitarian assistance towards long-term development approaches that foster self-reliance and socio-economic integration. Nowhere is this shift more evident than in East Africa, a region that hosts a significant proportion of the world's forcibly displaced population. This paper examines how Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya are translating international commitments into national practice to build self-reliant refugee populations. Through a comparative analysis of legal frameworks, national strategies, and on-the-ground initiatives, this study argues that East Africa could offer a pioneering model for displaced refugee self-reliance, if it continues to develop.

This model is characterised by the progressive integration of refugees into national systems, the strategic inclusion of host communities, and a focus on sustainable livelihoods. The paper concludes that while contextual differences exist, the East African approach provides valuable lessons for the international community on operationalizing the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees and moving beyond dependency towards sustainable integration and shared prosperity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Realising the Sustainable Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees

The refugee crisis remains one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges worldwide. By 2024, an estimated 129.9 million people were forcibly displaced across the globe, including 42.7 million refugees who fled their countries in search of protection and safety abroad (UNHCR. (2024a) ^[21].

Africa hosts the largest proportion of displaced populations globally. According to UNHCR. (2024b) ^[21], the continent accommodates approximately 30 million forcibly displaced persons—comprising refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and stateless individuals—representing nearly one-third of the global total. This underscores Africa's pivotal role in responding to displacement and advancing durable solutions for affected populations.

People are compelled to flee their countries due to armed conflict, persecution, political instability, natural disasters, and increasingly, the effects of climate change. During displacement, refugees often experience loss of livelihoods, separation from family members, and significant risks to their safety, well-being, and dignity, World Bank (2023). Host countries bear a dual responsibility of ensuring protection while also managing the social and economic impacts of hosting displaced populations. While refugees bring skills, labor, and resilience that can positively contribute to host communities, their arrival often places additional pressure on limited resources such as housing, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (Betts, A., & Collier, P. (2017) ^[3]. This situation highlights the need for comprehensive approaches that combine humanitarian assistance with long-term development planning, ensuring both refugee protection and social cohesion. Thus, understanding the situation of refugees requires not only a humanitarian perspective but also a socio-economic and developmental lens that acknowledges both the vulnerabilities and the potential contributions of displaced populations.

2.2. The International and Regional Framework for Self-Reliance

2.2.1. The Need for a New Consensus for Refugees Quality of Life and Self-Reliance

The refugee crisis remains one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of our time, with an estimated 129.9 million people forcibly displaced globally by 2024, including 42.7 million refugees who have crossed international borders (UNHCR, 2024a) ^[21]. Africa hosts a substantial share of this population, accommodating nearly one-third of the global total of forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR, 2024b) ^[21]. This reality underscores the continent's, and particularly East Africa's, pivotal role in shaping durable solutions. Traditionally, refugee response has been dominated by a humanitarian model focused on care and maintenance, often leading to prolonged dependency and strain on host resources (Betts & Collier, 2017) ^[3]. However, a new consensus is emerging, championed by frameworks like the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which call for a more equitable and sustainable approach that enhances refugee self-reliance and benefits host communities.

2.2.2. Review of United Nations Commitments on Refugee Protection and Self-Reliance

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol together form the cornerstone of international refugee protection law. They define who qualifies as a refugee and outline the rights and obligations of both refugees and host states. According to Article 1A (2) of the Convention, a refugee is defined as:

A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of their

former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2010) ^[24].

The same document emphasizes the fundamental principles of the Convention: non-discrimination, non-penalization, and non-refoulement. It also establishes the minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, which include access to courts, primary education, employment, and documentation—such as a refugee travel document in passport form. Additionally, the Convention outlines the obligations of refugees, notably that they must respect the laws and regulations of their host country (UNHCR, 2010) ^[24].

New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants reaffirms the importance of the international refugee protection regime and contains a broad range of commitments adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 September 2016. In the Declaration, Member States expressed profound solidarity with people forced to flee, reaffirmed their obligations to fully respect the human rights of refugees and migrants, and recognized that protecting refugees and supporting the countries that host them are shared international responsibilities that must be borne more equitably and predictably. The Declaration also pledged robust support for countries affected by large movements of refugees and migrants, endorsed the core elements of a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and committed to developing a Global Compact on Refugees and a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (UNHCR, 2025) ^[22].

2.2.3. Review of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2018 a), the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is a global approach to refugee management and protection adopted in Annex I of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016). The CRRF is based on the principles of international cooperation, and on burden- and responsibility-sharing, to protect and assist refugees while supporting the host states and communities involved.

The same document explains that a comprehensive refugee response involves a multi-stakeholder approach, engaging national and local authorities, international organizations, international financial institutions, regional organizations, coordination and partnership mechanisms, civil society partners—including faith-based organizations and academia—the private sector, the media, and the refugees themselves.

The implementation of the CRRF is designed to achieve four key objectives: to ease pressures on host countries; to enhance refugee self-reliance; to expand access to third-country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity. To realize these objectives, a set of core activities were developed, including reception and admission, support for immediate and ongoing needs, support for host countries and communities, and promotion of durable solutions (UNHCR, 2017; ^[26] UNHCR, 2018 b) ^[26].

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) represents a new and more inclusive way of responding to refugee situations, emphasizing strong humanitarian and development cooperation to achieve sustainable outcomes (UNHCR, 2018 c). This framework promotes joint action between governments, humanitarian actors, development partners, and the private sector to address both the needs of refugees and the challenges faced by host communities.

By June 2018, with support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the CRRF had been rolled out in 14 countries. These included Belize, Chad, Costa Rica, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mexico, Panama, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda, and Zambia (UNHCR, 2018). The rollout in these countries provided practical experience in applying the CRRF principles and informed the development of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), adopted later in 2018 (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. (2018, June 5).

2.2.4. Review of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)

This is an international cooperation framework adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 17 December 2018 through Resolution A/RES/73/151. The GCR was developed in response to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), which emphasized the shared international responsibility to address large movements of refugees and migrants. The GCR reflects the collective political will and commitment of the global community to strengthen burden- and responsibility-sharing and to mobilize coordinated action aimed at improving responses to refugee situations (United Nations, 2018) ^[27].

According to UNHCR. (2025) ^[22], the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), as agreed upon by Member States in Annex I of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), forms an integral part of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which builds upon and expands the principles and approaches established by the CRRF. In application of GCR in support of refugees and countries affected, there are a program action. The program help to maintain arrangements to share burdens and responsibilities through a Global Refugee Forum (every four years), national and regional arrangements for specific situations, and tools for funding, partnerships, and data gathering and sharing. The program focus on the areas in need of support, from reception and admission, to meeting needs and supporting communities, to solutions.

2.3. East African Countries Approach for Refugees Self-Reliance

This paper posits that Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya are at the forefront of implementing this new approach, serving as a de facto model for building self-reliant refugees. While each country has a distinct context and policy pathway, collectively they demonstrate a region-wide commitment to transforming refugee protection from a humanitarian burden into a development opportunity. The analysis will first establish the international and regional legal foundations for this shift. It will then explore the distinct yet complementary legal and policy frameworks adopted by each of the three nations. Finally, it will assess concrete self-reliance initiatives on the ground, synthesizing their contributions and outlining the core principles of the East African model.

The legal and normative foundation for refugee self-reliance in East Africa is built upon a triad of international and regional instruments. The cornerstone is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which define refugee status and establish minimum standards of treatment, including critical rights such as access to employment and education (UNHCR, 2010) ^[24]. This universal framework is complemented by the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, which acknowledges the continent's unique displacement contexts and promotes African solidarity and shared responsibility.

These conventions were given renewed impetus by the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which led to the development of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the subsequent Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018. The GCR, in particular, represents a landmark global commitment to strengthen burden- and responsibility-sharing. Its objectives are fourfold: to ease pressures on host countries, enhance refugee self-reliance, expand access to third-country solutions, and support conditions for safe return (United Nations, 2018) ^[27]. Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya were all part of the initial cohort of countries to roll out the CRRF and have endorsed the GCR, signaling their alignment with this new approach. These global frameworks provide the essential scaffolding upon which national policies in East Africa are being built.

2.4. Sampling the National Legal and Strategic Pathways to Refugees Self-Reliance in Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya

While guided by common international principles, Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya have developed distinct national pathways to foster refugee self-reliance, reflecting their specific political and developmental contexts.

In Rwanda, the approach is one of explicit legal integration. The recent Law No. 042/2024 of 19 April 2024 Governing Refugees and Applicants for Refugee Status in Rwanda is a transformative piece of legislation. It grants refugees the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to travel documents and national services, effectively embedding them within national systems rather than parallel humanitarian structures (Republic of Rwanda, 2024) ^[18]. This legal stance is operationalized through strategies like the Joint Strategy on Economic Inclusion of Refugees and Host Communities (2021-2024) and the Multi-Year Strategy (2023-2025), which aim to ensure refugees become "self-reliant members of the Rwandan society" by aligning refugee inclusion with Rwanda's National Strategy for Transformation (MINEMA & UNHCR, 2021; UNHCR, 2025) ^[14, 22].

Uganda's model is renowned for its progressive settlement approach. Its Refugee Act of 2006 and Refugee Regulations of 2010 provide a legal basis for refugees' rights to work, establish businesses, and access social services (UNHCR & Refworld, 2006; 2010) ^[23, 24]. This framework is strategically implemented through the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA) and the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) framework. These policies directly integrate refugee response into Uganda's National Development Plans (NDP II/III), positioning refugees not as beneficiaries but as active contributors to the country's development agenda (Office of the Prime Minister, 2022; UNHCR & World Bank, 2017) ^[16, 26].

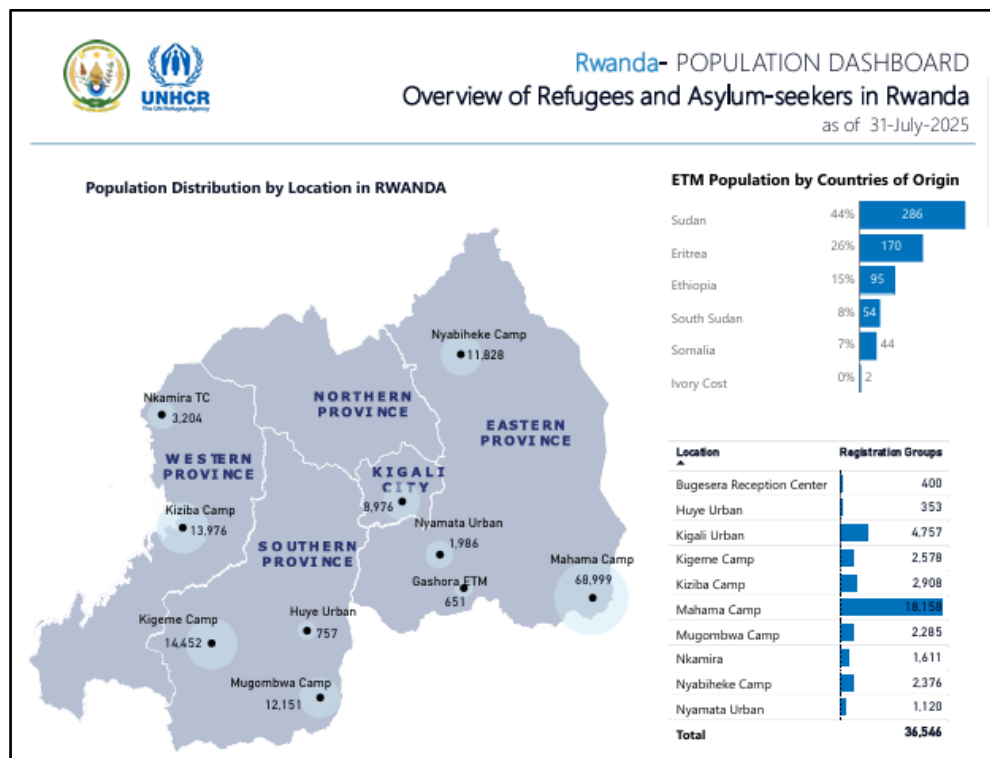
Kenya, which has historically maintained a strict encampment policy, is embarking on a significant transition. The Refugees Act No. 10 of 2021 grants refugees rights to movement, work, and property, marking a decisive break from the past (UNHCR & Refworld, 2021) [25]. This legal reform is supported by ambitious long-term plans. The Shirika Plan (2025-2036) aims to transform refugee camps into integrated settlements, while the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan (KISEDIP) represents a pioneering area-based development approach that jointly serves refugees and the host population in Turkana County (Ministry of Interior and National Administration, 2025; Government of Kenya & UNHCR, 2023) [15, 13].

3. Application & Analysis

3.1. Analysis of the Main Refugees Status in Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda

3.1.1 Rwanda Refugees

As of August 2025, Rwanda hosted an estimated 137,232 refugees and asylum seekers. The majority originated from the Democratic Republic of Congo (60.81%), followed by Burundi (38.35%). A smaller portion included individuals evacuated from Libya under the Emergency Transit Mechanism (0.47%), as well as refugees from other countries (0.36%). This data reflects Rwanda's continued commitment to international refugee protection and regional solidarity in hosting displaced populations (MINEMA & UNHCR. (2025) [14].



Source: UNHCR Rwanda. (2025, July) [22].

Fig 1: Refugee population distribution by location in Rwanda

As of July 2025, Rwanda hosts refugees across five main camps, in addition to urban and transit accommodations. In the Eastern Province, the largest camp is Mahama Refugee Camp, which accommodates 68,999 refugees, primarily from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Also, in the east, the Nyabiheke Refugee Camp shelters 11,828 Congolese refugees.

In the Southern Province, the Kigeme Refugee Camp hosts 14,452 Congolese refugees, while the Mugombwa Refugee Camp accommodates 12,151 Congolese refugees.

In the Western Province, the Kiziba Refugee Camp is home to 13,976 Congolese refugees.

Rwanda also hosts urban refugees. In Kigali City, there are 8,976 refugees, mainly Congolese. Huye City in the Southern Province hosts 757 refugees from both the DRC and Burundi, while Nyamata Town in the Eastern Province accommodates 1,986 refugees, predominantly Burundian, with some from the DRC.

Additionally, Rwanda maintains transit centers for asylum seekers and emergency evacuations. The Nkamira Transit

Center in the Western Province hosts 3,204 Congolese asylum seekers, while the Gashora Emergency Transit Mechanism in the Eastern Province shelters 651 refugees. These individuals primarily come from Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Guinea, and Mali, many having been evacuated from Libya.

3.1.2. Uganda Refugees

Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and the third largest globally Crawford, N., O'Callaghan, S., Holloway, K., & Lowe, C. (2019, September). As of June 2025, the country hosted approximately 1,927,539 refugees, primarily originating from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ReliefWeb. (2025, July a).

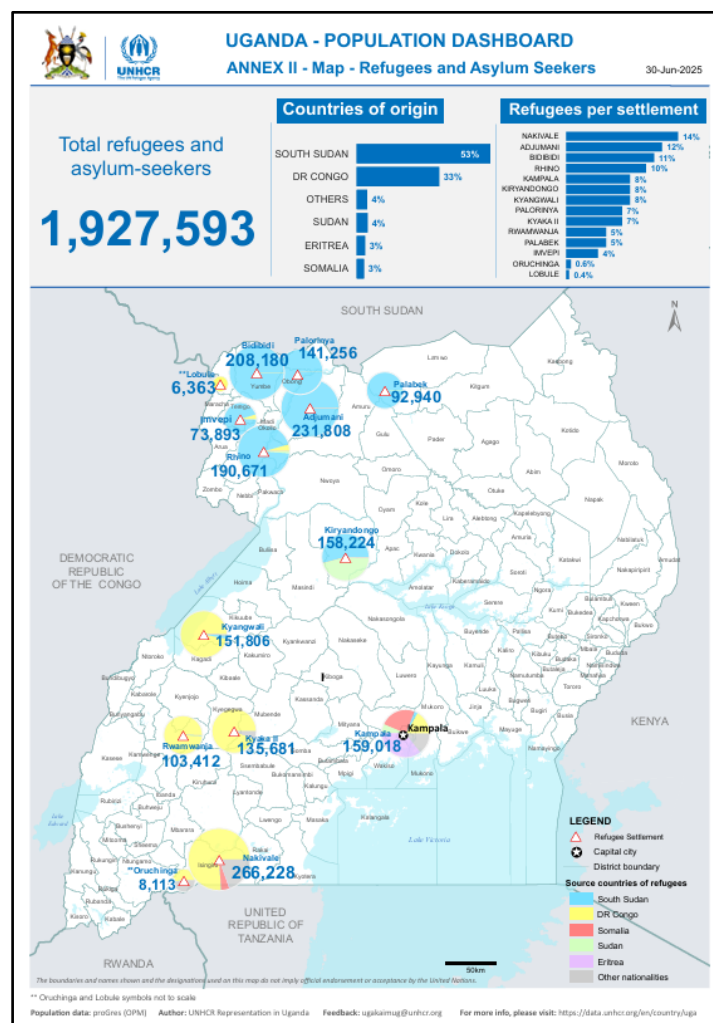
The major refugee settlements in Uganda start with the Nakivale Refugee Settlement. This settlement is located in Isingiro District near the Tanzania border in southwestern Uganda, is one of the oldest and largest refugee settlements in the country Wikipedia. (2025, October a). According to ReliefWeb. (2025, July b).as of June 2025, the settlement

hosted approximately 266,228 refugees, the majority originating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Nakivale also accommodates Burundian, Rwandan, and Somali refugees. Furthermore, ReliefWeb. (2025, June a). indicates that these refugees are primarily distributed across three main zones: Rubondo, Juru, and Base Camp. Then comes the Adjumani Refugee Settlements, located in Adjumani District within the West Nile sub-region of northwestern Uganda, border South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Wikipedia. (2023, September). As of June 2025, the Adjumani settlements hosted approximately 231,808 refugees, the majority from South Sudan, with a smaller number from Sudan (ReliefWeb, 2025c). According to ReliefWeb. (2025, June b)., refugees in Adjumani are distributed across several zones, including Nyumanzi, Pagrinya, Ayilo I & II, Maaji I–III, Boroli I & II, Mirieyi, Alere, Agojo, Baratuku, Mungula I & II, Olua, Oliji,

Elema, and Olu.

The third settlement is the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. It is located in Yumbe District in the West Nile sub-region (Wikipedia, 2025, November). As of June 2025, it hosted 208,180 refugees, mostly from South Sudan, with smaller populations from Sudan, the DRC, and Ethiopia (ReliefWeb. (2025, July d)).

The fourth settlement is the Rhino Refugee Settlement which is found in the North-West Nile region (GFA Consulting Group GmbH. (2021). It hosted 190,671 refugees as of June 2025, mostly from South Sudan, with smaller groups from the DRC, Sudan, and Rwanda (ReliefWeb. (2025, July e)). Finally, Uganda have also in Kampala (Urban Refugees) where Uganda's capital city is home to 159,018 refugees and these urban refugees mainly come from Eritrea, Somalia, the DRC, and Ethiopia ReliefWeb. (2025, July f).



Source: ReliefWeb. (2025, July g).

Fig 2: Uganda – Population Dashboard

ReliefWeb. (2025, July h) mentions also about eight settlements. Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement: Located in Bweyale, Kiryandongo District (Wikipedia. (2025, August a)). As of June 2025, it hosted 158,224 refugees, originating from Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Kenya, Sudan, and South Sudan. Also, the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement which is located in Kikuube District (formerly part of Hoima District) in western Uganda (Wikipedia. (2025, August b)). As of June

2025, it hosted 152,394 refugees, mostly from the DRC, with smaller numbers from Sudan, Rwanda, and Burundi.

The ReliefWeb. (2025, July i) also mentions the Kyaka II Refugee Settlement: Located in Kyegegwa District in western Uganda (Wikipedia. (2025, August c)). As of August 2025, it hosted 131,681 refugees, primarily from the DRC, with smaller groups from Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan. Besides, the Palorinya Refugee Settlement: Located

in Moyo District in Northern Uganda (Wikipedia, 2024). Established during the South Sudanese civil crisis of 2016, it hosted 141,256 refugees as of June 2025, primarily from South Sudan, with smaller numbers from the DRC and Sudan.

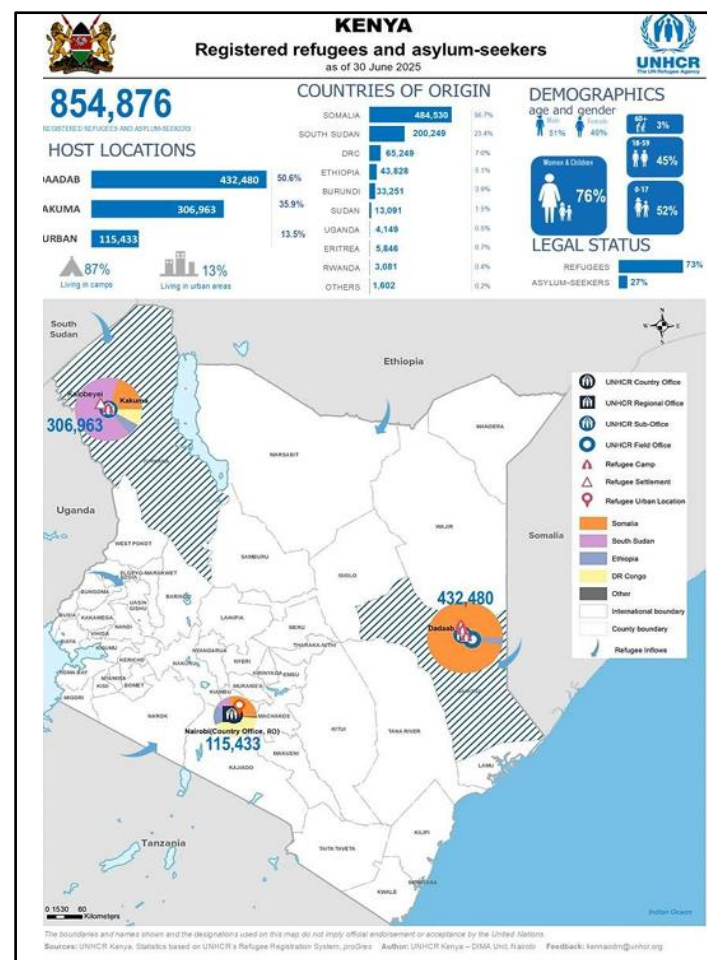
(UNHCR, 2025a) also reports the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement which is located in Kamwenge District in southwestern Uganda (Wikipedia, 2025). As of June 2025, it hosted 103,412 refugees, mainly from the DRC, with smaller groups from Rwanda, South Sudan, and Burundi. Also, the Palabek Refugee Settlement: Situated in Lamwo District in Northern Uganda, near the South Sudan border (Wikipedia, 2024). As of June 2025, it hosted 92,940 refugees, mostly from South Sudan, with smaller groups from Sudan and the DRC (UNHCR, 2025a).

Finally, (UNHCR, 2025b) mentions three more settlements. Imvepi Refugee Settlement: Located in Terego District (formerly part of Arua District) in the West Nile sub-region (Wikipedia, 2025). As of August 2025, it hosted 74,530 refugees, mainly from South Sudan, with smaller groups from the DRC, Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Then, the Oruchinga Refugee Settlement which is located in Isingiro District in Southern Uganda (Wikipedia, 2024). As of August 2025, it hosted 8,137 refugees from the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan. And finally, the Lobule Refugee Settlement: Located in Koboko District in Northern Uganda (Wikipedia, 2024). As of August 2025, it hosted 6,394 refugees, mainly from the DRC, South Sudan, and

Somalia (UNHCR, 2025b).

3.1.3. Kenya Refugees

According to Ministry of Interior and National Administration. (2025 a) ^[15], Kenya remains one of the leading refugee-hosting countries, with 854,876 refugees and asylum seekers registered as of June 2025. There are three main refugee settlements. The Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement is located in Turkana County, Turkana West Sub-county, in the north-western region of Kenya, approximately 754.5 kilometres from Nairobi by road. The camp hosts 306,963 refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Then, Kenya have the Dadaab Refugee Complex which is situated in Garissa County, about 90 kilometres from Kenya's eastern border with Somalia. It accommodates 432,480 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from Somalia, with smaller numbers from Ethiopia. Also, the Urban Refugees in Kenya is set to support the refugees and asylum seekers authorized to reside in urban areas, including Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, Eldoret, Kitale, Meru-Maua, Isiolo, and Bungoma (UNHCR Kenya, 2025) ^[14]. As of June 2025, 115,433 refugees and asylum seekers were hosted in urban areas, primarily from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia, with smaller populations from Ethiopia and South Sudan (Ministry of Interior and National Administration. (2025b) ^[15].



Source: (Ministry of Interior and National Administration, 2025 c) ^[15].

Fig 3: Kenya - Registered refugees and asylum seekers

3.2. Analysis of the Refugees Policies in Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda

3.2.1. Rwanda Policies for Refugees Self-Reliance

Rwanda has favorable environment and supportive protection for self-reliance of refugees. According to Article 21 of Law No. 042/2024 of 19 April 2024 Governing Refugees and Applicants for Refugee Status in Rwanda, any person recognized as a refugee in Rwanda is entitled to the rights and liberties provided for under the international instruments on refugees ratified by Rwanda. This means that, because Rwanda has ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol, the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, and other bilateral and multilateral agreements, refugees in Rwanda automatically benefit from all rights contained in those treaties.

In practice, refugees in Rwanda have the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to travel documents, refugee identity cards, birth and death certificates, marriage registration, and other national services. Through Law No. 042/2024, refugees are integrated into national systems—such as education, health, and financial services—rather than being served through separate humanitarian structures. This strengthens inclusion and supports long-term integration.

Rwanda also has published the Joint Strategy on economic inclusion of refugees and host communities in Rwanda 2021-2024. This strategy was developed by Ministry in charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA) Livelihoods Team and UNHCR Rwanda. It was built on previous commitments, including those made at the 2016 Leaders' Summit on Refugees, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and the Global Compact on Refugees. It has incorporated the principles of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the 'Leave No One Behind' agenda and was given the vision with aim of ensuring that by 2030, all refugees and neighboring communities living in Rwanda are able to fulfil their productive potential as self-reliant members of the Rwandan society who contribute to economic development of their host districts.

For developing this strategy, the following Strategic objectives 2021-2024 were given : Enable refugees and host communities to acquire and preserve livelihoods assets to construct their living, become self-reliant and build resilience to shocks; Promote socio-economic inclusion of refugees and host communities and their enhanced access to economic opportunities on a sustainable basis; Expand proven and innovative ways of supporting self-reliance² of refugees and host communities in Rwanda, especially through the graduation approach and market-based interventions; Promote results and evidence-based programming by improving planning- implementation – monitoring – learning and practice on successful livelihoods approaches (MINEMA & UNHCR. (2021) ^[14].

The Rwandan strategy 2023-2025 is aligned with Rwanda's National Strategy for Transformation (NST1) (and preparatory alignment for NST2, which begins around 2025). As the previous strategy, this one is also guided by global frameworks: The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), and commitments from High Level Segment on Statelessness. This strategy put emphasis on the shifting from a humanitarian approach to a development providing

sustainable livelihoods and social-economic cohesion for both refugee and Rwandan host communities (UNHCR. (2025) ^[14].

3.2.2. Policies for Refugees Self-Reliance

The Refugees Act of 2006 aligns with Uganda's international obligations, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (UNHCR & Refworld, 2006). The Act is operationalized through the Refugees Regulations of 2010, which provide the legal framework for its implementation (UNHCR & Refworld. (2010).

Both the Refugees Act (2006) and the Refugees Regulations (2010) address the first pillar of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in Uganda—admission and rights of refugees—which encompasses access to territory, the principle of non-refoulement, individual registration and documentation, access to social services such as education and health, as well as the rights to work and establish businesses (UNHCR Uganda, 2017).

Uganda also have established the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA) which is government-led strategy established to integrate refugees into the country's Second National Development Plan (NDP II). This strategy supports the third pillar of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in Uganda, which focuses on resilience and self-reliance but also supports indirectly CRRF Uganda' Pillars two, four and five (UNHCR Uganda, 2017).

According to the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM, 2022) ^[16], the Uganda Settlement Transformation Agenda II (STA II) was developed for the period 2022–2027, building on the achievements and lessons learned from STA I (2016–2020). Like its predecessor, STA II is aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and Uganda's National Development Plan III (NDP III). Collectively, these frameworks emphasize the effective settlement of refugees and the equitable provision of services to both refugees and host communities.

Uganda also has a transformative strategic framework called the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE). This framework is whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach designed to guide the Government of Uganda and the United Nations (UN), in collaboration with the World Bank, donors, development partners, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and the private sector. It promotes coordinated and effective programming to provide a comprehensive response to displacement in Uganda.

ReHoPE supports the Government of Uganda in integrating refugees into the National Development Plan II (NDPII, 2015/16–2019/20) through the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA), thereby positioning refugees as active contributors to Uganda's development agenda. The framework constitutes a critical component of Pillar Three of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in Uganda, focusing on resilience and self-reliance (UNHCR & World Bank, 2017).

3.2.3. Kenya Policies for Refugees Self-Reliance

The Refugees Act 10 of Kenya (2021) is a parliamentary act that provides the legal basis for the recognition, protection, and management of refugees in Kenya. It defines the term

refugee and outlines the procedures for applying for refugee status. The Act affirms that refugees possess specific rights and obligations, consistent with the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. The rights granted include freedom of movement, the right to work, property rights, and access to education and healthcare. Correspondingly, refugees are obliged to comply with the laws in force in Kenya. Furthermore, the Act emphasizes the integration of refugees into host communities by promoting shared use of public institutions, facilities, and spaces between refugees and host populations (UNHCR & Refworld. (2021).

The country has put the Shirika Plan—which is derived from the Swahili word “*shirika*,” meaning “*coming together*”—is a multi-year initiative (2025–2036) launched by the Government of Kenya to integrate refugees and host communities into the national socio-economic framework. The plan aligns with Kenya’s Vision 2030, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA), the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018). It is structured around six key pillars: (1) legal, policy, and institutional reforms; (2) transformation of refugee camps into integrated settlements; (3) enhanced access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities; (4) promotion of work and business inclusion; (5) support for self-reliance among refugees and host communities; and (6) strengthening of social cohesion. The Shirika Plan is designed to be implemented in three phases—transition, stabilization, and resilience—to ensure a gradual shift from humanitarian assistance to development-oriented inclusion (Ministry of Interior and National Administration. (2025) ^[15].

According to Government of Kenya & UNHCR. (2023) ^[13], the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan (KISEDIP) is a 15-year comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder initiative implemented in Turkana West Sub-County, Kenya. It aims to bridge humanitarian assistance and development, focusing on both refugees and host communities. KISEDIP was designed in a preparatory stage and three phases.

Preparatory Stage (2016–2017): This stage involved consultations and groundwork for developing a sustainable framework for refugee and host community inclusion. Then, Phase I (2018–2022) start which would mark the roll-out of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). It introduced an integrated development model that enhanced socio-economic inclusion for refugees and host populations in Turkana West Sub-County (UNHCR, 2018). Then, Phase II (2023–2027): Coinciding with the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP III), this phase builds upon the outcomes of GCR and CRRF. It emphasizes improved access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), healthcare, education, protection, sustainable energy solutions, agriculture, livestock and natural resource management, as well as private sector development and entrepreneurship—all aimed at strengthening resilience and self-reliance among the Turkana and refugee populations (Government of Kenya & UNHCR, 2023) ^[13]. Then the final phase is Phase III (2028–2030), This phase is envisioned to consolidate gains from

earlier stages, ensuring sustainable, inclusive, and resilient socio-economic growth in Turkana West through integrated development and durable solutions for refugees and host communities.

4.3. Operationalizing Self-Reliance: Initiatives and Impacts

The efficacy of Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda national frameworks are demonstrated through a diverse portfolio of self-reliance initiatives that provide tangible support and generate measurable impacts for both refugees and host communities.

In Rwanda, the Misizi Marshland Project exemplifies the “whole-of-society” approach, where a cooperative of 1,427 refugee and host community households cultivates 55 hectares of government-provided land, transitioning from food aid to commercial agriculture (Global Compact on Refugees, 2023) ^[12]. Similarly, the Jya Mbere Project is a large-scale, World Bank-funded initiative that has completed 261 infrastructure subprojects—including schools, health centers, and markets—benefiting approximately 194,000 people and providing matching grants to over 5,000 entrepreneurs (World Bank Group, 2025) ^[28].

Uganda’s initiatives highlight market-based and financial inclusion models. The Sustainable Market Inclusive Livelihood Pathways to Self-Reliance (SMILES) project combines the Graduation Approach with Market Systems Development (MSD) to empower households in refugee settlements through asset transfers, skills training, and market linkages (AVSI People for Development, 2025) ^[2]. Concurrently, Opportunity International has established formal banking services within the Nakivale Refugee Settlement, providing refugees with access to savings, credit, and remittances, thereby stimulating local economic activity and fostering financial self-reliance (Opportunity International, 2024) ^[17].

In Kenya, efforts target both urban and camp-based refugees. The Inuka Project in Nairobi provided urban refugee youth with start-up capital and business incubation, enabling them to establish micro-enterprises (AVSI People for Development, 2025a) ^[1]. In the camp context, the Skills for Life (S4L) project in Kakuma and Kalobeyei delivered vocational training, life skills, and entrepreneurship programs to over 3,000 youth, many of whom started income-generating activities and accessed financial services through group savings (Swisscontact, 2025d) ^[19].

4.4. The Outcome of the Self-Reliance Initiatives in Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda

The contributions of these initiatives are multifold. Firstly, they directly reduce dependence on humanitarian aid, as evidenced by refugees selling agricultural produce or running successful businesses. Secondly, they promote economic inclusion by positioning refugees as workers, producers, and consumers within the local economy. Thirdly, and perhaps most critically, they strengthen social cohesion by creating shared economic interests and fostering cooperation between refugees and host communities through joint projects and shared infrastructure.

The experiences of Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya coalesce to form a coherent and instructive East African model for building self-reliant refugees. This model is not a monolithic blueprint but a set of shared principles. It is grounded in the progressive transposition of international law into national

legal frameworks that grant refugees fundamental socio-economic rights. It is strategic, aligning refugee response with national development plans to create win-win scenarios for hosts and displaced populations alike. It is practical, leveraging multi-stakeholder partnerships to deliver integrated support packages that combine access to assets, capacity building, and market linkages.

The success of this model demonstrates that self-reliance is not a distant ideal but an achievable outcome. By viewing refugees as agents of development rather than passive recipients of aid, East Africa is charting a sustainable path forward. The region's pioneering work offers a powerful proof-of-concept for the Global Compact on Refugees. For the international community, the lesson is clear: supporting host countries in implementing such development-focused, inclusive approaches is not merely an act of solidarity but a strategic investment in sustainable peace, stability, and shared prosperity. The future of refugee protection lies not behind barbed wire, but in the integrated markets, classrooms, and communities that the East African model is working to build.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

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