

Why Uganda's refugee response demands a new devt plan

For decades, Uganda has been grappling with response and management of an unprecedented influx of refugees into the country, hosting more refugees than any other nation in Africa. This is not only an accident of geography but a direct result of its celebrated open-door policy, which offers sanctuary to those fleeing conflict and persecution. However, this extraordinary generosity has come with an extraordinary strain. The sheer scale of the influx since 2016 has pushed a traditionally humanitarian response to its breaking point, revealing a critical truth: humanitarian aid alone is no longer sufficient.

Local governments, traditionally responsible for development plans based on their national population, now find their schools, health centres, and water sources stretched thin by a significant, unplanned-for population. For years, the burden of refugee support fell to the Office of the Prime Minister and international partners, creating a parallel system that often bypassed local government structures.

We must remember that development and peace are inseparable.



Emmanuel Pacoto
Refugees

This is where the real crisis in refugee management lies. The impact of a refugee influx does not respect official boundaries.

The Project for Strengthening Resilience in Refugee Hosting Districts of West Nile (Proceed), supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica), is pioneering a necessary plan for this new reality. It moves beyond mere crisis response to tackle the core issue, building the capacity of local governments to plan for everyone within their borders.

The project's work in developing integrated plan-

ning handbooks, in partnership with the National Planning Authority (NPA), is a critical first step. It provides local planners with the tools to formally document the pressures on their services and to advocate for resources based on evidence, not just estimates.

The project recognises that resilience is not only about managing today's population, but also about preparing for tomorrow's shocks. By helping districts like Zombo mainstream disaster preparedness into their development plans and budgets, the project builds a foundation of stability.

This approach aligns with the global framework known as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus. It acknowledges that we cannot silo these three objectives. A refugee's journey is not just about survival (humanitarian); it is about building a meaningful life and contributing to their host community (development), which in turn fosters social harmony (peace). Supporting refugees holistically is not just an act of charity but an investment in the development of Uganda and a building block for future stability in their countries of origin.

Therefore, the project exemplifies this balance. It seeks to strengthen inclusive resilience for hosts, affected communities, and refugees alike, creating a more sustainable model where support for one group does not come at the expense of another.

The refugee crisis in Uganda and across Africa is not a temporary emergency. So, it is imperative for the government and its partners to double down on this integrated approach. The central government must continue to empower local governments with the mandate and resources to plan inclusively.

Development partners must align their funding with these locally led, integrated plans, moving beyond short-term project cycles.

Our shared goal must be to ensure both refugees and their hosts can live safely, and with dignity and opportunity. At the right time, we must remember that development and peace are inseparable.

Uganda's refugee story is one of a crisis and a test of our collective compassion and our shared ingenuity.

By uniting behind a new plan for integrated development, we can pass this test and build a more stable, prosperous, and humane future for all who call Uganda home.