

LETTER OF THE DAY

Let refugees' right to work in Uganda become reality

Every morning in Kampala, Sadio* (not real name) wakes up before dawn to sell handmade baskets. She did not plan on doing this professionally; she does it because she is a refugee, and employers in Uganda do not recognise her accounting degree from Somalia. Each day, she weaves hope from straw, wishing she could use more of her education and potential.

Uganda should be recognised worldwide for its progressive refugee policies. The 2006 Refugees Act has guaranteed refugees, for the last 20 years, the right to work and to run businesses. On paper, these are among the most generous provisions on the right to work for refugees in Africa.

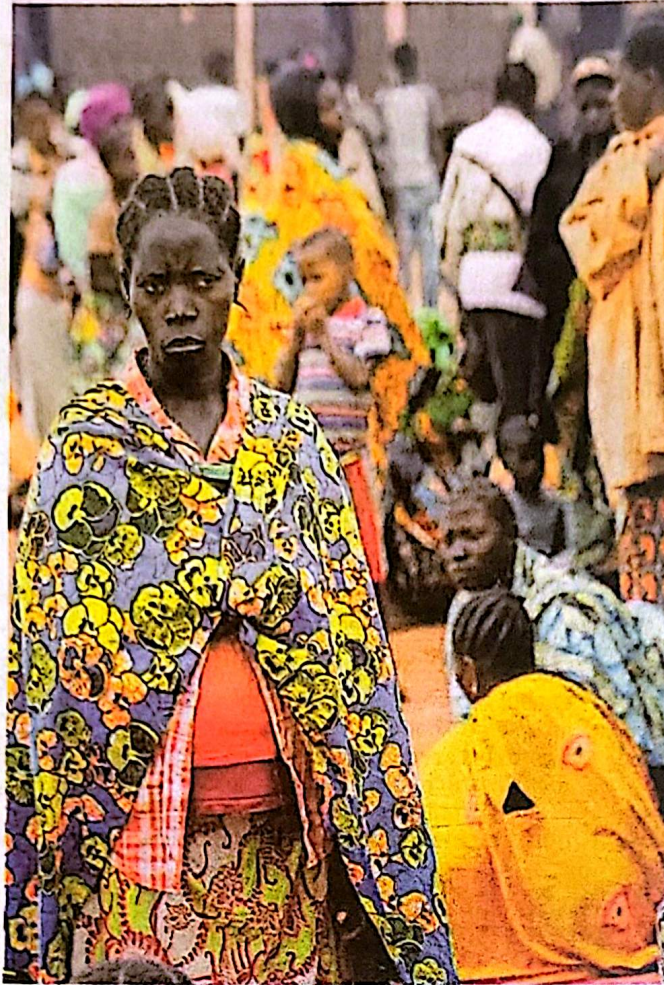
However, there is a gap between what the law says and what really happens. I know because I am a refugee in Uganda.

While the right to work is written in law, in reality, it often stops at the settlement gate. Most refugees are limited to informal, low-paying jobs. Refugees in Uganda include engineers who now ride boda boda (motorcycle taxis), nurses who sell vegetables, and teachers who cannot find work.

All of this professional talent is a missed opportunity for Uganda. The problem is not a lack of skills, but a lack of recognition and bureaucratic hurdles that leave meaningful employment out of reach.

Now, as global cuts have reduced the availability of humanitarian aid for refugees in Uganda, the situation is becoming more urgent. Refugees don't want more aid – they want to work and support themselves.

Making it easier for refugees to find work is not just about rights. It is now essential for survival. And doing so is a win-win



for refugees and their Ugandan hosts.

The World Bank has found that when refugees can fully join the formal economy, productivity increases, tax revenues rise, and long-term aid needs decline. Allowing refugees to work and access land has reduced needed international aid by nearly 45 percent.

Despite good laws on the books, refugee-led organisations in Uganda have consistently documented the barriers to refugee employment: qualifications are not recognised, hiring practices are unfair, and

there are few ways into formal work. The issue is not what refugees can do. The issue is that the system excludes them.

One administrative barrier to refugee access to the formal labour market is the costly, slow, and unclear process of validating their academic credentials. For instance, a refugee will require Shs50,000 (almost \$14) to have a page of their academic qualifications translated for government approval. Additionally, equating academic qualifications for recognition in Uganda's system costs Shs250,000 (nearly U\$72).

Another issue is access to credit. While refugees can start their own businesses, banks and other financial institutions have often been reluctant to serve refugees, citing that they might leave or lack credit histories.

Uganda has already set an example in protecting refugees. Now it must ensure its law allowing refugees the right to work translates from paper to reality. Three practical steps could help.

First, Uganda should set up a simple national system to recognise refugee academic and vocational qualifications. This system should have clear timelines, lower fees, and information that is easy for all refugees to access, whether they live in settlements or cities.

Second, the government should encourage banks and micro-finance institutions to lend to refugee entrepreneurs by offering credit guarantees or blended finance options – a de-risking tool that uses public money to bridge the gap between a bank's perception of risk and the actual reality of a refugee's reliability. The repayment data already shows this is a smart business move.

Third, Uganda should integrate refugees explicitly into national employment and private-sector development strategies. Public-private partnerships should include refugee talent pipelines as a matter of policy, not an exception.

Uganda's welcoming policy toward refugees has saved lives. Now it must secure livelihoods. As global humanitarian aid decreases, the best refugee policy is not to keep providing assistance, but to provide access to work.

Ismail Hussein Ismail is a fellow at Refugees International and a refugee living in Uganda. ihussein@refugeesinternational.org