

DOCUMENTATION CAMPAIGN:

Report from the multi-stakeholder meeting with RLOs, civil society, Human rights actors, & legal experts.



Photo Credit: July 10, 2025, Kampala, Uganda. Ismail Hussein Ismail, Team Leader, Aider Refugee Initiative sharing key challenges faced by refugees in accessing documentation. (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for the IRC).

Background

The Refugee in East Africa Building Urban Innovation and Livelihood Development ([Re:BUiLD](#)) program is a multi-sectoral initiative implemented in Kampala and Nairobi, that supports urban refugees and vulnerable host community members to achieve economic self-reliance and social inclusion. The central focus of the initiative is the Influence & Adoption pillar, which aims to drive meaningful policy, and systems change at the city, national, and community levels. This pillar employs a three-pronged advocacy strategy i.e Evidence-Based Advocacy, Multi-Stakeholder Engagement and Systems-Level Change Facilitation.

Through these approaches, Re:BUiLD has successfully implemented high-impact campaigns, such as the **Decent Work Campaign in the year 2024**, which advocated for the recognition of refugee rights to work, pushed for reforms to eliminate documentation barriers, and promoted inclusive employment practices.

Building on these achievements, the Documentation Campaign was launched in 2025 to address persistent barriers that refugees face in obtaining essential documentation. Documentation is a critical enabler for refugees to secure formal employment, access education, healthcare, and financial services. As part of this initiative, Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) were convened on 10th July 2025 to gather grassroots perspectives and lived experiences regarding documentation challenges. Subsequently, on 15th July 2025, a consultative meeting was held at Skyz Hotel Naguru, bringing together civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and legal experts to collectively identify systemic gaps, share practical insights, and propose actionable recommendations aimed at improving refugee access to documentation.

Objectives of the consultative meetings

- To capture lived experiences and community-level perspectives on documentation barriers and challenges through direct engagement with Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs).
- To facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration among stakeholders by sharing best practices, legal insights, and ongoing initiatives aimed at improving documentation processes.
- To co-develop actionable recommendations and advocacy priorities that support systemic reforms and influence policy change at city, national, and regional levels.

Key findings

During both sessions, one held with Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs), and the other with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), human rights defenders, and legal experts, participants engaged in focused breakout discussions guided by specific questions aligned with the objectives of the Documentation Campaign. These questions were designed to elicit insights into the challenges refugees face in obtaining documentation, as well as to explore potential solutions and generate actionable recommendations. Some of the key issues that emerged from these discussions included:



Photo Credit: July 10, 2025, Kampala, Uganda. RLO representatives participating in a breakout session to discuss the key challenges affecting refugee access to documentation at Skyz Hotel Protea. (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for the IRC).



Challenges affecting documentation

- **Limited awareness.** It not only affects refugees but also stakeholders. Its more severe among vulnerable groups such as children, PWDs, and women.
- **Language barriers.** Service information is often not available in refugees' native languages, making procedures hard to understand. Legal identity documents have procedures usually only published in English. Language issues can lead to misspelled names, compromising legal identity. Corrections via statutory declaration or deed poll are costly, posing a financial burden on refugees. IRC helps cover these costs, enabling refugees to overcome bureaucratic and financial barriers and build economic stability.
- **Centralized services and travel distances.** Centralized services and travel distance create challenges, especially for refugees in transit or settlements. travel to Kampala is often required for key procedures (e.g., validating academic documents).
- **Challenges in Accessing Documentation Among Vulnerable Groups.** Women and girls in rural areas face cultural and patriarchal barriers that limit access to documentation. Persons with mental and psychosocial disabilities are often overlooked by an under-equipped judiciary, while those with physical disabilities receive slightly more attention due to the visibility of their needs.
- **Prolonged Processes in Acquiring Refugee Status Documents.** Refugees in Uganda often face significant delays in obtaining vital documentation such as asylum seeker certificates, refugee identification cards, and attestation letters. These delays may be caused by bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate digital systems, and inconsistent coordination among relevant agencies. As a result, many refugees remain undocumented for extended periods, limiting their access to essential services such as healthcare, education, legal protection, and formal employment opportunities. The prolonged documentation process also increases vulnerability to exploitation, arbitrary arrest, and difficulties in integrating into host communities or participating in development programs.

Refugee status determination can be emotionally distressing, as it forces individuals to relive past traumas without adequate psychosocial support, often impacting their mental well-being and the outcome of their cases

- **Fraudsters taking advantage.** Fraudsters often exploit the vulnerability of refugees during documentation and status determination processes by posing as agents or officials who promise to expedite services in exchange for money
- **The process of document equivalency is unclear.** for example, Burundian nurses often face challenges obtaining practicing licenses in Uganda. Additionally, the high cost of these procedures and discrepancies between education systems across countries further hinder recognition of refugees' qualifications and access to employment.
- **NSSF for refugees.** Accessing documents such as an NSSF number is difficult for refugees, as the process requires going through an NSSF employee rather than being accessible through self-service channels. This dependency creates delays, limits autonomy, and increases the likelihood of exclusion due to limited knowledge, mobility, or support networks.
- **Conflicting Policies on Free Movement in the EAC Bloc:** Although the East African Community (EAC) promotes free movement of persons, goods, and services among member states, the implementation of these policies is inconsistent—particularly for refugees holding Convention Travel Documents (CTDs). While some countries recognize the CTD and allow refugees to cross borders freely, others either reject it or impose additional requirements, such as visas or clearance letters, undermining the principle of regional integration. This inconsistency creates confusion, restricts mobility, and limits refugees' access to regional opportunities, such as employment, education, and family reunification.
- **Right to work.** The Refugee Act grants the right to work, but work permits are still demanded by employers. The law does not specify which exact jobs require a work permit.

- Contradictions between the NGO Act and the Refugee Act regarding refugees' right to work. The provisions on staffing of NGOs under S. 43 of the Act do not specifically allow refugees to be employed by NGOs. There have been cases of refugees being refused jobs because of being refugees. In many cases, refugees are employed to do just simple and often temporary work, such as being translators, community educators, etc., even when they have qualifications to do better-paying jobs.

S. 43(c) provides that an NGO shall not employ a person who is not a citizen of Uganda unless that person has, before proceeding to Uganda for the purposes of employment by the organisation, submitted his academic qualifications to the Ugandan diplomatic mission in his or her country of origin for transmission to Uganda. Since refugees leave their countries without a formal visa and permission, these provisions keep them out of the employment system. This is the case despite the fact that Uganda's Refugee Act allows refugees in Uganda to seek employment and be employed in the country.

- Temporary suspension of refugee status provision to Somali and Eritrean refugees. No feedback given back the government on the reason for suspension.
- Refugees are excluded from national development frameworks such as the Parish Development Model (PDM).
- **Access to finance in relation to documentation.** Banks devalue Refugee IDs, often insist on rarely carried Family Attestation Cards. Some of the bank financial products are not suitable for refugees.
- Siloed data systems limit real-time info sharing and coordination among actors
- Freedom of movement. Freedom of movement guaranteed, but refugees are arrested when traveling for services.
- Free primary education is guaranteed, but KCCA schools charge interpretation fees.
- Recognition of refugee qualifications is limited, blocking employment access.

Recommendation:

- Provide exception on the requirements for work to cater for refugees who cannot have visas and criminal clearance before they leave the countries of origin.
- Call for Integrating Refugees into the Ugandan System: There is a need to fully integrate refugees into national systems such as health, education, and employment, to promote self-reliance, reduce aid dependency, and ensure equal access to services for both refugees and host communities.
- Advocate for Inclusion of Refugee Artists in Programming: Promote the integration of refugee musicians and artists into programs to showcase talent, preserve culture, and create income-generating and employment opportunities.
- Strengthen refugee and stakeholder capacity on documentation and rights
- Promote awareness campaigns using accessible, multilingual formats
- Foster collaboration among government, private sector, and CSOs
- Reduce documentation fees and prevent discrimination
- Decentralize and simplify access to documentation
- Improve services for vulnerable groups (e.g., PWDs, offline users)
- Recognize refugee academic qualifications
- Establish refugee employment targets and transparent policies
- Integration of refugees in national development plans and City plans to promote inclusion and ensure equal access to services.
- Documentation of success stories of refugees' contribution to the Ugandan economy:
- Capturing and showcasing the positive economic impact of refugees is vital in shifting narratives and influencing inclusive policy decisions.
- Need to engage financial institution to create refugee friendly products.
- The creative industry, spanning music, fashion, film, and digital media, offers youth meaningful economic opportunities. Strategic investment in this sector can boost employment, foster innovation, and promote refugee-host community integration through shared cultural expression.
- Involvement of RLOs as a key important player is crucial.
- Award for Refugee Employers. Refugee Artists Category. Introduce a category to recognize refugee artists, highlighting their contributions to culture, creativity, and community integration through music, fashion, film, and digital media.

Key action points

- Organize an engagement between RLOs and the GROW project to iron out issues arising in regard to refugees having access to their products.
- Strengthening Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) is essential for sustainable, community-driven solutions. This includes providing training in advocacy, legal literacy, project management, and fundraising.

Conclusion

The multi-stakeholder consultative meetings held under the Documentation Campaign created a vital platform to surface the systemic, legal, and practical barriers refugees face in accessing essential documentation. Valuable insights from Refugee-Led Organizations, civil society actors, human rights defenders, and legal experts have been consolidated and will inform an upcoming high-level engagement with policymakers and key stakeholders on 14th August 2025. This engagement will serve as a critical step toward driving inclusive policy reforms and strengthening coordination to improve documentation access for refugees in Uganda.

Documentation Campaign in Pictures



Photo Credit: July 10, 2025, Kampala, Uganda. RLO representatives and IRC staff pose for a group photo following the engagement meeting held at Skyz Hotel Protea. (PHOTO: Edgar Otieno for the IRC).