ReDSS
GREAT LAKES
Unlocking Protracted Displacement

Exploring levels of self-reliance, livelihood opportunities and alternatives to encampment among displaced populations in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

BURUNDI, RWANDA, UGANDA, TANZANIA & DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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ReDSS
Unlocking Protracted Displacement

The Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat for the Great Lakes (ReDSS-GL) is a coordination and information hub that acts to catalyse forward thinking and policy development on durable solutions for displacement. ReDSS GL seeks to improve joint learning and programming, inform policy processes, enhance capacity development, and facilitate coordination in the collective search for durable solutions. It is comprised of 10 organisations working together to maintain focused momentum and stakeholder engagement towards durable solutions for displacement-affected communities inIn the Great Lakes region.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Displacement in the Great Lakes

This study considers the Great Lakes region as comprising the countries of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). With the exception of Tanzania, all of these countries have generated refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in significant numbers since their independence, and all have hosted refugees. The violence during colonial times, followed by conflicts after independence, created cycles of displacement that have devastated lives and livelihoods in the region for decades.[1] While Uganda has long hosted significant numbers of refugees from the Horn of Africa (namely, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia), other Great Lakes countries have mostly provided shelter to refugees from within the region.

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A pivotal moment in the region came following the end of the Cold War and the introduction of multi-party politics, with the Rwandan civil war (1990-1994) and 1994 genocide, the outbreak of Burundi's Civil War (1993-2005) and the consequent first (1996-1997) and second (1998-2003) Congo wars. These interlinked crises generated violence and displacement on a massive scale and led to a series of aftershocks that are still evident in the region today, with displaced populations who are yet to find a stable place to call home. More recently, ongoing violent conflict in eastern DRC and the crisis in Burundi in 2015 have once again led to mass displacement across the region. The situation has been further compounded by the outbreak of civil wars in South Sudan (2013) and the Central African Republic (CAR, 2012), which have led to additional displacement within the region.

The net result is that millions remain displaced beyond the borders of their states but within the Great Lakes region. These include more than 665,000 refugees from the DRC, 275,000 refugees from Burundi, and close to a million South Sudanese refugees, the latter hosted primarily in Uganda.[2] Uganda remains the region's largest refugee hosting country, with close to 1.5 million refugees, primarily from South Sudan. It is followed by the DRC, which hosts more than 500,000 refugees, mainly from Rwanda and CAR. Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi each host a smaller number of refugees from within the region.

The legal infrastructure and policy environment

A number of national, regional, and international legal instruments shape the refugee policy environment in the respective countries in the region. All five countries have ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol and the1969 OAU convention. Several countries made reservations with regard to some aspects of the UN Convention, including on freedom of movement (Rwanda), access to wage-earning employment (Burundi) and right of association (Uganda),[3] but these have had limited impact on policies on the ground. National laws relating to refugees in the region are generally more recent, having been enacted in each of the countries since the late 1990s. There is considerable variation between these laws and the policies put in place in order to implement them, including their conformity with international refugee law on freedom of movement and socio-economic rights of refugees.

Several additional sub-regional instruments shape refugee policies among the countries of the International Conference on the Great Lakes region (ICGLR), which includes the five countries studied in this paper. One is the ICGLR's 2004 Dar-es-Salaam Declaration on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region. In this declaration, its member states committed to "find lasting solutions to the protracted problems of displaced and refugee populations, notably with regard to their peaceful co-existence with resident populations, their voluntary repatriation and return or local integration."[4] The declaration was followed by the 2006 framework for the Protection, Assistance and Search for Durable Solutions for Displaced Populations (Refugees and IDPs) and Communities that Host Them.[5] In 2019, the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region and the Executive Secretariat of the ICGLR co-organised a meeting between the ministers in charge of refugees in the Great Lakes Region, in Kampala. In this event, the participants recommended "that ICGLR develops a Regional Strategy for Durable Solutions for the Great Lakes region and an action plan to implement this strategy", which is now being developed with the support of UNHCR.[6]

In addition to developments within the ICGLR, all five countries are members of other sub-regional bodies that influence the development and implementation of their refugee and migration policies. Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda are part of the East African Community (EAC) and, while coordination on refugee affairs at the EAC level has been limited, member states have agreed to establish "common mechanisms for management of refugees," and the organisation is in the process of developing a refugee management policy and action plan. Uganda is also a member of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which introduced several policy instruments relating to migration management, including, most recently, the Kampala Declaration on jobs, livelihood, and self-reliance for refugees, returnees, and host communities.[8]

2. VARYING APPROACHES TO DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Despite their identical international obligations and overlapping regional commitments, Great Lakes states have developed different approaches to durable solutions for refugees. Refugees of different nationalities and in different countries of asylum have faced very different realities and prospects to end their exile across the region. These realities have been influenced by the nature of the situations from which refugees have fled, the relationships between governments within the region, and the domestic realities in the country of refuge. Under international refugee law, refugeehood may formally terminate under four circumstances: repatriation following the cessation of refugee status; voluntary reestablishment in the country of origin; resettlement in a third country; and naturalization in the country of asylum.[9] While some refugees in the Great Lakes have had access to at least one of these solutions, many have had access to none of them, leaving them in a semi-permanent state of displacement, especially as many of the causes that pushed them into exile continue to persist.

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Voluntary repatriation

The solutions of repatriation and voluntary reestablishment in country of origin are often conflated in both popular discourse and policies under the term "voluntary repatriation", which is what UNHCR is mandated to promote under its statute.[10] Voluntary repatriation is commonly described by governments and the UN as the preferred solution to refugee situations. This is also the view that governments in the Great Lakes region have adopted. For instance, this position was reiterated in the 2019 ICGLR meeting in Kampala, where ministers highlighted that "voluntary return remains the preferred solution in the majority of refugee situations," and "acknowledged the ongoing efforts and new commitments to establish Tripartite Commissions with the support of UNHCR."[11] The most significant effort to promote "voluntary repatriation" in the region in recent years has been the repatriation of Burundian refugees, particularly those hosted in Tanzania.

In August 2017, the Tripartite Commission for the Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian Refugees from Tanzania agreed to implement a work plan for the voluntary return of Burundian

Photo credit: Danish Refugee Council

refugees. Since then, Tanzania has taken various measures to limit the freedom of movement and livelihood of Burundian refugees to try and incentivise their return, leading some agencies and civil society groups to question the voluntary nature of these returns. This controversial approach has achieved its objective, however, and between September 2017 and June 2021, some 129,535 Burundian refugees have left Tanzania for Burundi.[12] Other countries in the region have taken a more lenient approach to promoting the return of Burundian refugees and have seen smaller numbers of Burundians registering for assisted return: over the same period of time, 5,842 Burundian refugees have returned from the DRC and 233 from Uganda.

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Rwanda only started the voluntary return process of Burundian refugees after the 2020 elections in Burundi signalled the beginning of a thaw in the relations between the two countries. Some 28,212 have since returned. Contrary to Tanzania, which is a close ally to the Burundian government regarding the voluntary return of Burundian refugees, the Rwandan government is not actively promoting returns nor restricting the rights of refugees to encourage them to do so. This illustrates how relations between the different countries and domestic politics can impact on the situation of different refugee communities. Similarly, the potential mass return of Rwandan refugees in the DRC has for long been a contentious subject between and within the two countries, but more cordial bilateral relations have recently been established after years of tensions.

Resettlement in a third country

The third avenue for the termination of refugee status – resettlement in a third country – is much desired by many of the world's refugees but, in reality, remains available to only a fraction of the global refugee population. In the Great Lakes region, resettlement has been available almost exclusively to refugees from the DRC. The number of resettlement places is limited to several thousand individuals every year and is supposed to be utilised primarily as a protection tool reserved for the most vulnerable. However, the number of refugees being resettled is significant enough for many Congolese refugees to harbour hope that they will be selected – hope that has a significant impact on how Congolese refugees plan their future and calculate their decisions when it comes to migration and potential return.

Photo credit: Danish Refugee Council

Meanwhile, for refugees of other nationalities, the knowledge that resettlement places are not available also shapes decisions around potential return or onward migration. Among some South Sudanese communities, for example, it is known that resettlement places may be more available in Egypt, and some refugees have moved there with the hope of accessing them. Likewise, among Eritreans, Uganda, is a temporary hub for individuals and families hoping to move to North America or Europe under alternative (non-UN) resettlement schemes or various family reunification programmes. Smaller numbers of Eritreans have also left Uganda and travelled via North Africa to Europe in search of their own "durable" solutions to their circumstances.

Naturalization

Naturalization, the fourth event that can bring refugeehood to an end, has long been deeply problematic to host governments, with many governments seeing it as a solution that is not politically viable. According to Article 34 of the Refugee Convention, states "shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees." Globally, some countries have put in place policies that enable refugees to access citizenship under certain circumstances and after spending a certain amount of time in the country. In the Great Lakes region, however, countries have been reluctant to enact clear policies that allow for the naturalization of refugees. Even when the option exists in theory, such as in the DRC, Uganda, or Burundi, it is not applied in practice. It is important to note that refugees are not necessarily interested in naturalization, particularly in situations where their country of origin does not allow dual citizenship. In some countries, it is known that a small number of refugees have been able to access identity documents informally – a strategy that represents, in effect, a bottom-up "durable solution".

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However, in terms of formal policies, the most significant naturalization processes in the region have been ad hoc measures, applied to specific groups of refugees at a specific time, rather than being enshrined in consistent legal procedures. The most important example in this regard was Tanzania's decision to offer citizenship as an alternative to voluntary repatriation to Burundian refugees who fled their country in the 1970s. In 2007 the Tanzania Comprehensive Solution Strategy (TANCOSS) gave Burundian refugees who had resided in the country since fleeing the 1972 violence, the right to opt for naturalization. This offer followed a similar strategy of integration and naturalization that was applied in the mid 2000s to some 3,000 jareer weyne refugees (a Somali minority clan originally mainly from Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi), who fled to Tanzania in the 1990s. While more than 150,000 Burundian refugees have subsequently received Tanzanian citizenship, the process has more recently stalled and thousands of refugees who were unable to be naturalized when the process was initiated have been unable to access citizenship. Having renounced their Burundian citizenship when applying for naturalisation, many are stateless as a result.

In Rwanda, the government has offered naturalisation to Congolese refugees on a number of occasions. Few have taken up this offer, however many Congolese refugees hold out hope for returning to DRC,[13] know that humanitarian assistance (albeit often sporadic and insufficient) is tied to their refugee status, or simply hope to be resettled to a third country from Rwanda. In the DRC, meanwhile, there have been attempts to promote access to nationality for children of Rwandan refugees who were born in the DRC after their parents left Rwanda in 1994, so far without tangible results.

In some cases, other legal stay arrangements have been introduced to allow refugees to access a more durable status in their country of asylum without accessing citizenship. Some 51,000 Angolan refugees who chose not to return when their country's civil war ended and the cessation clause was invoked in 2012 were given a temporary local integration card in the DRC, which despite its two-year expiration term remains valid up to today. The DRC government has promised to promote access to identity documents for this group and to give 200,000 Rwandan refugees who do not want to return, a 10-year residence permit after the cessation clause will be invoked.[14] In Tanzania, foreigners from neighbouring countries were able to apply for a "peasant permit" in the past, which allowed them to legalise their stay in Tanzania, without granting them citizenship.

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3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AS A TEMPORARY "SOLUTION"

The protracted nature of many refugee situations (including the ongoing political crises in both DRC and South Sudan), the reluctance to offer citizenship to refugees, and the limited number of resettlement spaces available, have led some states in the region to promote refugee self-reliance and strategies of local integration that are not designed to formally bring refugeehood to an end but rather to render it more "sustainable" for refugees, host communities, and governments. Uganda has arguably put in place the most ambitious policies when it comes to refugee local integration in the region, increasingly incorporating refugee populations into its national development planning strategies – an approach now promoted as part of the CRRF implementation. The DRC, meanwhile, allows such local integration in its legal framework and practice, but does not have the state capacity and international support to promote it. In Rwanda, another roll-out country of the CRRF, there are a number of policies and structures in place that promote integration, but also stronger limitations on the freedom of movement of refugees.

The meaning(s) of local integration

The term "local integration" does not have a clear definition under international refugee law. [15] It commonly refers to various forms of refugee inclusion that are supposed to enable refugees to remain in their host country for a long period of time and become meaningful members of society. This inclusion is multi-layered and takes place both at policy level and "on the ground", and it involves both refugees and host communities. UNHCR's Executive Committee describes "local integration" as a gradual process "comprising three distinct but interrelated legal, economic, and social and cultural dimensions."[16]

Photo credit: Danish Refugee Council

1. The legal dimension of integration entails providing refugees with a legal status that enables them to enjoy a wide range of rights "that are broadly commensurate with those enjoyed by its citizens."[17] Ideally, this also means access to citizenship and thus the formal termination of refugee status (as discussed above).

2. The economic dimension of local integration often refers to refugee self-reliance, meaning that "individuals, households and communities are enabled increasingly to become self-sufficient and can contribute to the local economy."[18] In this context, freedom of movement, the right to work and access to land play an important role, and hence also policies that pursue alternatives to encampment. Documentation is key to all of these aspects - whether it is to enable movement, to open a bank account or to have access to land and other assets.

3. The socio-cultural dimension of local integration is concerned with the promotion of positive relations between refugees and citizens and the creation of an environment of tolerance, non-discrimination, and mutual respect. Relevant policies in this context are those designed to combat xenophobia and racism, for instance, and promote peaceful co-existence.

The approach increasingly encouraged by the international community and adopted by refugee-hosting countries in the Great Lakes region is one that promotes the socio-economic integration of refugees without necessarily paving the way towards their naturalization. In the Global Compact on Refugees this approach is represented through the notion of "other local solutions" which "entail interim legal stay, including to facilitate the appropriate economic, social and cultural inclusion of refugees, and are provided without prejudice to eventual durable solutions that may become available."[19] In the 2019 ICGLR high-level meeting in Kampala, ministers also recommended the implementation of durable solutions for refugees through the three traditional solutions "or through other local solutions" and emphasized "that successful local integration requires legal stay arrangements, freedom of movement of refugees... and inclusion of refugees in national services and systems such as education, health care, social welfare and protection services, community policing, and land management."[20]

Furthermore, while access to formal citizenship as such does not, in and of itself, imply that refugees will be accepted and will enjoy the same rights as citizens in any particular local setting,[21] it should also be noted that local integration, as a socio-economic process, "is not really distinguishable from the core response to refugeehood envisaged by the Refugee Convention, namely simple respect for refugee rights."[22] In other words, the socio-economic rights that countries have come to promote under the umbrella of "local integration" as a "solution" to refugeehood are often the same rights already owed to refugees under the Convention. As far as international refugee law is concerned, economic, social, and cultural inclusion does not, in and of itself, constitute an end to refugeehood, even if it does alleviate the hardships of life in exile and render it more sustainable.

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Integration, development planning, and refugee programming

Countries within the Great Lakes region have taken different approaches to the socio-economic integration of refugees, with Uganda and Tanzania arguably representing the two substantially different approaches within the region. Uganda has fully endorsed the CRRF's "whole of government" approach and has sought to integrate refugees into its national development planning, an approach celebrated by the international community as a paradigmatic representation of the "humanitarian-development nexus". Tanzania, however, has rejected this approach and sought to draw a clear line between humanitarian responses targeting refugees and development projects targeting Tanzanian citizens. In the same vein, while Uganda has made self-reliance a formal policy objective, in Tanzania, refugee self-reliance has been viewed as an undesirable objective, and the overall approach is that the needs of refugees should be addressed through humanitarian interventions, which can cater for their immediate needs until they can return to their country of origin.

Photo credit: Danish Refugee Council

The interest in the "humanitarian-development nexus" and "whole of government approach" may be a recent development, but it is important to note that programmes that seek to render refugees self-reliant and link refugee responses to broader developmental goals have a long history in Africa, dating back to the 1960s. A common approach pursued by young post-colonial governments was to settle refugees in designated areas and provide them with land, so that they could engage in farming and other income generating activities. Humanitarian aid was initially provided to refugees, but the idea was that such "settlements" would eventually become self-sufficient and fall under the responsibility of host governments.[23] In Uganda, for instance, policy strategies that promote refugee self-reliance and the integration of refugees into national services have been in place since the late 1990s. In Tanzania, refugees who fled Burundi in the early 1970s were given significant land in the three settlements of Ulyankulu, Katumba and Mishamo, which were originally set up along the same Ujamaa village system as the rest of Tanzania.[24]

As part of the CRRF implementation in Uganda, refugees have been included directly in the development plans of refugee-hosting districts and different line ministries have developed their own sectoral response plans that aim to address, simultaneously, the shared needs of refugees and host communities. There are various challenges associated with the implementation of this approach – from securing funding to coordination between various government institutions at the national and local levels. But this is nonetheless an approach that international actors have encouraged and have been willing to support. In Tanzania, integrated programming has been discouraged, with the government arguing that efforts to promote refugee self-reliance or socio-cultural integration only create an incentive for them to remain in Tanzania rather than return.

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Other countries in the region are arguably situated in between the two examples of Uganda and Tanzania. Rwanda's recent approach to refugee support - which both predates the New York Summit and has resonated with the processes that have come out of it - has been based on a number of policy documents adopted since 2016 that build on the view that refugees are potential "self-reliant members of Rwandan society who contribute to the economic development of their host districts".[25] It has made significant progress in creating an enabling policy environment for the inclusion of refugees who are no longer exclusively confined to camps. For instance, all refugees in urban settings and all refugee students in boarding schools now have access to national health insurance.[26] Progress towards including refugees in development programming has been reflected in a number of projects, including the Masizi Marshland project that promotes agricultural opportunities for hosts and refugees. However, refugee assistance continues to be strongly centralised in practice under the Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA) - which, as the name suggests, operates from within an emergency/humanitarian paradigm.

In Burundi and the DRC, there have been rather recent efforts to promote the inclusion of refugees in development programming, in particular by the World Bank, which is funding several programmes to this aim, but the current results remain modest. Both countries are faced with other displacement challenges that take up much of the capacity of both government and international actors and the limited funding provided by donors, in particular the refugee return

and reintegration in Burundi and the very high number of displacement in the DRC. Much of the response remains of a humanitarian nature, rather than long-term and development-oriented. Rather than streamlining refugee issues across the government, the national agencies involved in refugee protection remain the central actors, even when it comes to limited development programming. Due to the limited capacity and the access challenges, especially in the DRC, the role of local actors remains rather limited in both countries.

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While not representing an end to refugeehood, the approach of integration has multiple benefits. Some actors highlight that it helps increase the sense of local ownership of programmes and strengthen the involvement of government actors in the refugee response, while also ensuring that interventions benefit both refugees and citizens, thus reducing tensions between these communities. This approach also allows humanitarian objectives to align with longer-term development goals which, in turn, helps render interventions more sustainable in a context in which humanitarian funding is increasingly difficult to secure, including due to the COVID-19 crisis. At the local level, however, it is also important to acknowledge that there is also a growing concern about the huge numbers of refugees in some refugee-hosting areas, compared to citizens, and about the allocation of lands to settlements and the pressure on natural resources.[27]

Ultimately, the varying approaches of countries in the region to local integration have been informed by the nature of the crises they face and the extent to which they can garner international support. Uganda's largest refugee population comes from South Sudan, where violence continues and repatriation, in the near future, appears unlikely for most refugees. In this context, the government has sought to leverage its position as a progressive leader in refugee programming, and attract international support that, Ugandan officials have hoped, would ultimately benefit both citizens and refugees and help the government channel resources to some of the most impoverished parts of the country. Rwanda, which has a significantly smaller refugee population, has made significant strides forward in allowing for the inclusion of refugees within the country, but continues to be held back by its reliance on camps and strongly centralised approach. Tanzania's management of refugees has meanwhile been influenced by the relationship between its government and the government of Burundi: both governments share the position

that Burundian refugees should be encouraged to return in line with the restored general stability and return to normalcy in Burundi. While the situation of Congolese and Burundian refugees has received considerable international attention, this is less the case for those refugees hosted in the DRC and Burundi. Both countries are still in the process of political transition and face a number of development challenges. Up to February 2022, the slow warming of relations with the donor community has left little focus and support for local integration of refugees. But since then, thanks to the lifting of sanctions that were imposed on Burundi, the climate in the country is a more optimistic one, and funding strategies are being established to respond to the refugee situation.

Photo credit: Danish Refugee Council

Freedom of movement

Despite varying approaches to the integration of refugees, the emphasis of refugee programming in all Great Lakes countries remains on designated camps, sites (in DRC) or settlements (in Uganda), in which assistance is provided to refugees. Moreover, the common tendency among all five countries has been to discourage refugees from settling in urban areas, primarily by avoiding providing support to refugees who reside outside their designated areas. While UNHCR's policy on Alternatives to Camps was launched in 2014, governments in this region and elsewhere have demonstrated little interest in implementing it and international partners, including those who in theory support its approach, have had limited room to advocate for it. Nonetheless, the extent to which countries have enabled refugees to move freely varies greatly across the region. And while even those countries that allow refugees to move freely have limited the assistance they provide to "self-settled" refugees, the mere freedom to move often enables refugees to access opportunities and lend support to each other.

It is worth reiterating that the question of integration notwithstanding, under international human rights law, refugees lawfully staying in a country are entitled to move freely within its territory.[28] Only in some Great Lakes countries this is indeed the case. In Uganda, while support is given almost exclusively in settlements, refugees are allowed to move freely, and indeed, many of them take advantage of this freedom, and do so on a regular basis. Refugees move between settlements, between settlements and urban areas, and even across Uganda's borders, sometimes on a daily basis, albeit informally. Refugees who have the means to do so – whether because

they are supported with remittances by relatives elsewhere or were able to engage in income-generating activities, have settled in towns. In the DRC, meanwhile, some three quarters of refugees live in rural areas, and not in refugee camps or sites where aid is provided. As in Uganda, this sort of de facto integration is made possible due to a relaxed encampment policy but also due to the linguistic and cultural similarities between refugees and host communities.

Tanzania, on the other hand, has limited the freedom of refugees to move. A very small number of refugees facing exceptional circumstances, are granted permission to reside outside the camps in the country. Permissions are granted for short periods of time and can be revoked, and they allow refugees to reside in a certain part of Tanzania – not to move freely in the country. It has been estimated that thousands of refugees have left the camps in order to reside in urban areas, but have done so informally, and thus remain at risk of being arrested by the authorities and exploited by employers. This form of informal integration leaves them in a more precarious situation, living under the legal radar and taking more risks price for their freedom to move. Thus, while as in other countries, urban refugees are not able to access aid, the explicit limitations on their movement (and by implication, wider set of rights) further hinders their ability to support themselves.

The extent of freedom of movement of refugees also depends on how a given community of refugees is perceived by the host community and on the relations between the host state and the country of origin. In Tanzania, the government is particularly strict on the encampment of Burundian refugees, as it has a shared objective with the Burundian government to encourage their return. In the DRC, on the other hand, Rwandan refugees are often hesitant to engage with national and international actors. When refugees are affiliated with armed groups, they often fear that interaction with the authorities could result in their return to Rwanda, about which they still hold negative perceptions. They thus opt to remain in insecure areas in North-Kivu province and humanitarian actors often only reach them when they are re-displaced due to clashes between armed groups. In Uganda and Burundi, refugees from Rwandan and Congolese Rwandaphone communities respectively, can sometimes be approached with some level of doubt. This perception increases the risk of arrests and more general restrictions to their freedom of movement. As a consequence, the options for accessing livelihoods for such communities

in urban settings decreases, making them dependent on humanitarian handouts, or in the case of Rwandan refugees in the DRC, highly vulnerable.

Economic self-reliance

As with other aspects of refugee integration, approaches to refugee economic self-reliance in the Great Lakes vary between countries, and different refugee communities in the region have engaged in different livelihood strategies and have been able to achieve different levels of economic independence. Where refugee integration and self-reliance has been explicitly rejected as a policy objective – Tanzania's approach to Burundian refugees being the strongest example in the region– any space or intervention that allows refugees to develop their livelihoods and engage in economic activity has been discouraged. Other countries have been more willing to allow refugees to cater for themselves, whether through agricultural activities, legal access to wage labour or entrepreneurship. And yet, progress in this context has been limited – even in those countries that have been willing to promote self-reliance for refugees.

Refugees are often hosted in peripheral regions with long histories of being less developed and registering more poverty, such as West Nile in north-western Uganda, Kigoma in north-western Tanzania or eastern Burundi. This peripherality means not only limited access to social services and infrastructure but also limited private sector activity, formal employment opportunities, or opportunities to engage with markets – factors that impact both refugees and host communities. Where they are allowed to develop their livelihoods, refugees are often active in similar livelihood strategies as host community members: predominantly in small-scale agriculture and informal trade. However, their ability to do so often depends on two major factors that put them at a disadvantage: access to fertile land and their relations with host community members.

Many areas in the Great Lakes region are characterised by a high population density and high dependence on agricultural activities for survival and access to income. This means that land is often in short supply for refugees, especially in Burundi and Rwanda. In the DRC, the availability of land depends on the region: in North-Kivu, access to land is scarce and contested, while in other provinces, it is more readily available, making it easier for refugees to make a living through agriculture. This

is less formalised than in Uganda, where the main strategy for promoting refugee self-reliance has been to allocate land to refugees and encourage agricultural activity in order to reduce reliance on humanitarian aid. However, given the large number of refugees in the country, there is not enough fertile, cultivable land in most refugee-hosting districts to guarantee self-reliance, and neither are all refugees interested in (or have the skills) to sustain themselves through agricultural work. In practice, many of the refugees in Uganda's settlements and camps across the region are food insecure and live in poverty.[29]

While international actors have generally struggled to promote private sector investment in refugee-hosting regions in order to create job opportunities, various arrangements have sprung up on the ground where the regulatory framework allows. These arrangements are predominantly informal and depend on ties with local communities, either with host or diaspora communities. Somali refugees in Uganda, for example, taking advantage of ties with Uganda's local Somali populations, have often been able to find jobs in Somali-owned businesses.[30] In the DRC, Burundian refugees are often employed informally by Congolese citizens, who value their skills in agriculture and work ethics. Even in Tanzania, there have been positive examples of economic activities benefiting both refugees and Tanzanians and enabling interactions between them. The opening of "common markets" in the refugee camps of Kigoma region has been widely celebrated as one such positive example, even if the government has recently decided to close it. They illustrate that modest interventions can have a positive impact, even where opportunities are otherwise scarce.

4. TOWARDS A REGIONAL BUT LOCALISED APPROACH TO REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS AND DURABLE SOLUTIONS

In light of these findings, this paper highlights three broad principles for promoting refugee livelihoods and working towards longer-term solutions:

Recognise the importance of a regional approach to national refugee policy

Each country within the Great Lakes has developed its own refugee policy, and information sharing and harmonisation of policies on the regional level remains limited. Yet precisely because the refugee crises in the Great Lakes are of a regional nature, there is much to be gained from greater regional coordination when it comes to addressing them. Such coordination can have a positive impact on several levels:

- *Policy making and best practices:* Bringing countries in the region together to discuss shared challenges and approaches to solving them will help disseminate knowledge of good practices between countries, particularly if such regional engagement is not limited to officials in highest levels of government in each country but brings together a more diverse set of actors involved in refugee programming and support.

- *Mediation:* Decisions about refugee policy are political, and the challenges faced by refugees are often the result of complicated dynamics between governments. Driven by a shared commitment to improve the lives of refugees and returnees, regional engagement could help in overcoming the bilateral political blockages related to some of the refugee situations in the Great Lakes, for instance those between the DRC and Rwanda, or between Tanzania and Burundi.

Each country within the Great Lakes has developed its own refugee policy, and information sharing and harmonisation of policies on the regional level remains limited.

- *Livelihoods:* Regional coordination can help strengthen livelihood interventions and economic development across the region. The new livelihood strategies or skills refugees are able to gain in their country of asylum inevitably shape their ability to rebuild their lives not only in exile but also following their return: refugees who return to Burundi from Kenya, for example, arrive with a different set of professional and language skills than those returning from the DRC.

- *Migration management:* Refugees respond to policies just as much as policies respond to the movement of refugees. For example, it is clear that Uganda's more progressive refugee regime often leads refugees in other countries – Somalis in Kenya, Burundians in Tanzania – to migrate to Uganda with the hope of being able to find more sustainable livelihoods, safety, and freedom.[31] A regional approach to refugee programming could identify such trends and respond to the challenges that drive them more effectively.

- *Cross-border livelihoods:* In the Great Lakes region, many communities straddle international borders, which are often the legacy of colonial encroachments. These cross-border networks influence refugees' decisions to move, their livelihood strategies, and their relationship with host communities. Often, histories of displacement and other forms of migration continue to influence people's livelihood strategies, which do not necessarily take into account national borders. International agencies and NGOs that support livelihoods of refugees should take these cross-border dimensions into account and include them in their programming.

In short, the policies that any country in the region adopts have implications for their neighbours – implications that a regional approach should address. It is therefore useful to reinforce a nascent regional community of practice between different practitioners in the field of livelihood support and durable solutions, composed of officials of the different countries, international experts and representatives of refugee and host communities, to promote best practices and promote the principle that national decisions related to migration management and refugee rights should be grounded in regional thinking.

Localise interventions and increase support for community-based mechanisms of social protection

The experiences of countries in the Great Lakes region makes clear that policies impact different communities, in different contexts, differently. Thus, for example, in Uganda, Somalis show little interest in farming but are highly active in the market economy, while South Sudanese are more reluctant to establish businesses. In Tanzania, meanwhile, Burundians tend to be more interested in agricultural training programmes than Congolese refugees, who do not necessarily view agriculture as central to their livelihoods either in the present or the future. Different communities have not only different livelihood strategies, or different experiences of interaction with markets and host communities, but also different traditions and norms of informal social protection that are operationalised in different ways in exile.

The important implication of this observation is that there is no single policy solution or type of intervention that fits everyone and can simply be duplicated from one context to the other. International actors and governments tend to celebrate progressive policies and promote their implementation across different countries. Such efforts are not wrong as such, but for concrete interventions to be successful, they must be complemented by more robust engagement with the realities on the ground in refugee hosting areas, and be both market and demand-driven. In particular, in the context of livelihoods and self-reliance, there is a need to be more attuned to how different groups of refugees are already helping themselves and how they are supported (or not) by the host communities in the areas where they settle.

Despite an emerging concern among international actors with the "localisation" of aid, in practice, interventions remain primarily "top-down" in nature, and the involvement of refugees and hosts in the design, implementation and evaluation of various interventions is limited at best. Even if regional policy making is necessary, it also has to pay closer attention to the varying livelihood strategies of different communities and to community-based mechanisms of social protection that can be supported and enhanced. For international actors, this would mean making an effort to localise interventions, including by lending support to refugee-led organisations, local organisations composed of host community members,

and other community structures, while ensuring that projects are informed by the insights of engaged local actors and are grounded in context-specific research. In this regard, placing a strong emphasis on local solutions within a regional context is critical.

Promote freedom of movement and engage with urban refugees

Restrictions on the movement of refugees are not only unlawful under international law but also hinder self-reliance and exacerbate the challenges faced by both refugees and hosts. They make it far more difficult for refugees to support themselves, undermining both the ability of individuals to engage in income-generating activities, and the ability of community networks to redistribute resources and support those in need. It is essential, therefore, that countries in the region with regulations impacting the movement of refugees should seek to alleviate certain policies and regulations to guarantee freedom of movement.

However, even those countries that already enable freedom of movement should refocus attention on refugees in urban areas. They should refrain from limiting humanitarian and development interventions to camps or settlements only, as this creates an incentive for refugees to remain in these areas, where the avenues for them to become self-reliant are limited. New forms of support should be devised, targeting urban refugees both in national capitals but also in other urban or peri-urban areas that are often side lined when responses are designed. Ultimately, this is the key to ensuring durable livelihoods and hybrid forms of local integration for many refugees, even in the absence of international support, as the DRC case illustrates.

Meanwhile, promoting freedom of movement at the regional level through the introduction of legal arrangements that allow citizens to move between Great Lakes countries and work in neighbouring countries with greater ease can help reduce pressure from refugee programmes. More importantly, it will create more space for people to cater for themselves and for transnational community networks to support individuals across borders.

ENDNOTES

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The Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat for the Great Lakes (ReDSS-GL) is a coordination and information hub that acts to catalyse forward thinking and policy development on durable solutions for displacement. ReDSS GL seeks to improve joint learning and programming, inform policy processes, enhance capacity development, and facilitate coordination in the collective search for durable solutions. It is comprised of 10 organisations working together to maintain focused momentum and stakeholder engagement towards durable solutions for displacement-affected communities inIn the Great Lakes region.