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Refugee Volunteering and Responses to Displacement in Uganda: Navigating Service-Delivery, Work and Precarity

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the role of voluntary labour in refugee-led responses to displacement. Despite the wide celebration of volunteering in response to crises and community needs, refugees and displaced populations tend to be depicted as passive beneficiaries of support. This paper engages with critical literatures challenging this assumption and provides an analysis of refugee volunteering experiences in Uganda, interrogating the uneven spaces of articulation between dominant humanitarian thinking and action on displacement, and volunteering by refugees. The analysis draws upon data collected as part of a large mixed methods investigation of volunteering by young refugees in Uganda, exploring its impacts on their skills, employability, and experiences of inequality. We explore narratives of volunteering in relation to service-delivery and self-reliance, and how different understandings of voluntary labour emerge from and against the precarities experienced by refugees navigating employment and livelihood strategies. We conclude by arguing that volunteering connects with responses to displacement in ways that are shaped by refugee subjectivities and livelihoods in particular places, and that its potential to de-stabilise existing systems is ambivalently situated between self-reliance strategies and the perpetuation of dependencies.

Keywords: volunteering; refugees; inequality; livelihoods; Uganda

Introduction

There is growing recognition of refugee-led action within humanitarian and development spaces, challenging the construction of refugees as beneficiaries. Volunteering is an increasingly important part of this landscape. It is variously celebrated as a demonstration of humanity and

community resilience and enabling rapid and localised response while at the same time benefitting volunteers themselves and demonstrating their agency and citizenship (Baillie Smith *et al.*, 2018; Chadwick and Fadel, 2020; UNV, 2018). Yet there remains relatively limited evidence on volunteering in and by individuals and communities in the global South, and in particular,



volunteering amongst vulnerable groups including refugees and displaced populations (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.*, 2022).

By analysing refugee experiences of volunteering in Uganda, we argue that current dominant constructions of volunteering remain contained by established humanitarian and development imaginaries. Superficially, volunteering may be invoked as evidence of local ownership or destabilising top-down technocratic approaches. But this obscures a more ambivalent contribution to refugee lives and overshadows forms of voluntary labour by refugees that may offer greater scope for destabilising existing systems and recognising and mobilising refugee agency. We examine how the coming together of humanitarian response and dominant ideas of volunteering provide convenient forms of engaging refugees in responses to displacement in particular ways, notably for service-delivery of external agendas. However, to reveal the ambivalent ways volunteering can shape refugee lives, we show how this can exacerbate inequalities experienced by refugees. We also show how dominant ideas of volunteering, particularly in its association with the ‘proper job’ (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.*, 2022; Ferguson and Li, 2018), obscure wider forms of voluntary labour that do not fit the global North norms of volunteering, failing to capture how refugees themselves use volunteering to contest exclusion and push for change. Through this, we argue that to understand the potential of volunteering to support and animate refugee-led responses and challenge existing systems, we need to disaggregate forms and infrastructures of volunteering by refugees more carefully to delineate if and how volunteering supports change, and where it reinforces the status quo.

In the first section, we discuss connections between debates on refugee-led responses to displacement and volunteering in humanitarian and development settings. In the second section, we outline our methodology and the context of our research in Uganda. In the third section, we explore how dominant volunteering discourses and practices articulate with established humanitarian agendas around displacement, focusing particularly on volunteering’s fit with ideas of service-delivery and self-reliance. In the fourth section, we argue that different understandings of voluntary labour emerge from and against the precarities experienced by refugees as volunteering intertwines with employment and livelihood strategies. We explore how participation in volunteering also reflects limited job opportunities, different skills levels, and comes to represent a form of work itself for many refugees. We conclude by arguing that the relationship between volunteering and responses to displacement are more contingent than hopeful rhetorics and donor expedencies, shaped by specific experiences of being a refugee in a particular place.

Situating Volunteering in Southern-Led Responses to Displacement

To explore Southern responses to displacement we bring together literatures around refugee-led action, and volunteering in humanitarian and development settings. Dominant narratives in popular discourses about forced displacement, particularly disseminated by the mainstream media, frequently depict refugees as mere recipients of humanitarian assistance and aid, perpetuating stereotypes that shape wider public perceptions (Wright, 2014). Traditionally, refugee assistance in the global South has been mainly provided by international state donors that fund the UNHCR which in turn delegates responsibilities to implementing agencies. However, evidence shows how refugees themselves are also actively involved in the delivery of support, services and protection to other refugees in ways that challenge traditional humanitarian governance systems (Pincock *et al.*, 2021) and promote ‘refugee-refugee humanitarianism’ practices (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). This is echoed by a growing body of literature highlighting how refugees often mobilise assistance and support through Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs) and informal networks to support their fellow refugees (Betts *et al.*, 2021; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020a; Sahin Mencutek, 2021). The emphasis on refugee-led action also resonates with efforts at decolonising and de-centring global North agencies and capacities in migration studies (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020c) and with the increasing emphasis on localisation in the context of humanitarian and development agendas (Roepstorff, 2020; United Nations, 2019). It fits well, particularly in the Ugandan context, with the promotion of refugee self-reliance. The practice of volunteering is also identified with these shifts, even if in partial and emergent ways. The traditional focus of research and policy on international volunteers temporarily placed in global South settings (Laurie and Baillie Smith, 2018; McLennan, 2014; Tiessen *et al.*, 2021) is being challenged by an emphasis on volunteering within and by global South actors (Baillie Smith, Fadel *et al.*, 2022; Hustinx *et al.*, 2022). Building on research addressing volunteering as ‘service-delivery’ (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015), studies have turned to examinations of the ways volunteering relates to ‘work’ in resource-poor settings in the global South (Prince and Brown, 2016); how volunteering practices are gendered (Cadesky *et al.*, 2019); and how local communities are not simply ‘hosts’ to international volunteers (Fadel, 2021). In the context of calls to localise and decolonise, the centrality of community volunteers and local actors has been increasingly acknowledged on the basis of their unique expertise and capacities (Baillie Smith, Jenkins *et al.*,

2022; Chen, 2021), as well as the potential of grass-roots mobilisation when states and international aid agencies fail to provide support to refugees (Sandri, 2018).

Evidence also shows how individual refugees frequently take the initiative to assist fellow refugees on a voluntary basis (Mukandayisenga, 2016), providing social protection mainly in the form of food, shelter and health care (Easton-Calabria & Pincock, 2018). These support systems are often organised along tribal, national or communal lines of solidarity. Refugee-led humanitarianism has particularly assisted in responding to community needs for new refugees. For example, scholars have analysed the provision of support from Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to Syrian refugees through their formal and informal resources, despite their own poverty and scarcity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016, 2020b; Sahin Mencutek, 2021; Sharif, 2018). Research with urban refugees in Egypt also shows how community-based programmes through refugee-led infrastructures have assisted in mobilising material humanitarian assistance for shelter in a context of reduced aid budgets (Pascucci, 2017a); however, these interventions were perceived by refugees as inadequate and not promoting self-reliance, becoming sites of friction where re-politicisation could occur (Pascucci, 2017b). At the same time, there is a risk of 'extractive humanitarianism' (Tazzioli, 2022), particularly in refugee settings, when voluntary labour is promoted as beneficial to refugees but is largely a means for cheap delivery of services and activities – masking wider inequalities and hierarchies, notably in the context of reduced aid budgets and limited international mobility due to COVID-19 (Baillie Smith, 2020).

We can see from this brief overview that the debates around refugee-led action and volunteering have significant common ground in their apparent challenge to humanitarian and development orthodoxies. However, this can also obscure how the resultant volunteering practices might exacerbate inequalities and side line other forms of refugee voluntary labour that are an important part of refugee-led responses to displacement. Consequently, there is a need to avoid placing a homogenised version of volunteering on a pedestal and rather interrogate it as a contested practice at the intersection of refugee lives, humanitarian systems and emergent alternatives.

Research Context and Methodology

This article draws on research conducted as part of the Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda (RYVU) research project, a large mixed methods investigation of volunteering by young refugees in Uganda, and its impacts on their skills, employability and experiences of inequality.

Uganda provides a particularly revealing context in which to explore volunteering and refugee response; it is currently the third largest hosting country for populations displaced across borders, home to over 1.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024). The country's refugee management regime is often identified as relatively liberal (Watera *et al.*, 2017), and this is particularly relevant to the role of volunteering in young lives given refugees' right to work and decide on their place of residence in the country (Ahimbisibwe, 2020). Uganda was also among the first governments to roll out the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), as an application of the principles stated in the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants signed in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017) and hence, is seen by many international actors as its 'proof of concept' (Crawford *et al.*, 2019). Two key building blocks for the CRRF in Uganda are the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment Strategy (ReHoPE) – focusing on self-reliance and resilience – and the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA), as policy tools for integrating refugee services into the country's National Development Plan (UNHCR, 2017). ReHoPE and STA provide a framework on the joint use of social services and other collaborations between refugees and host populations, while Uganda's refugee policy also particularly encourages integration in host communities (World Bank Group, 2016). In line with the CRRF commitments, the Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan (JLIRP) has further detailed the country's strategy for improving the socio-economic and financial inclusion of refugees and host communities (Government of Uganda, 2021). The combination of a relatively liberal regime and emphasis on self-reliance provides a rich context in which to explore volunteering experiences given its associations with service provision, particularly where the state is absent, and links to employment and work.

The research project on which this paper draws is the result of a collaboration between two universities in the UK (Northumbria University and Loughborough University) and two universities in Uganda (Uganda Martyrs University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology), NGO partners, and local Youth Advisory Boards comprised of young refugees. Data were collected in four sites to capture experiences from both urban and diverse rural refugee settlement contexts: Kampala city; Nakivale, Rwamwanja and Bidibidi refugee settlements. Across these settings, the research team engaged with refugees from the four main nationalities present in Uganda: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Somalia. This selection reflected a desire to understand both how volunteering might relate to particular causes of displacement, but also its relation to particular histories of voluntary labour

within different places, and what happened when people moved between them. The research builds on data collected through stakeholder workshops and interviews; a large-scale survey with young refugees (aged 15–24); participatory photography and photo-elicitation interviews with young refugees; biographical interviews with adult refugees (aged 30–45); and an online survey of Ugandan employers – bringing into dialogue qualitative and quantitative data. Full ethical approval was obtained from Northumbria University, the Mildmay Research Ethics Committee (MUREC) and the Ugandan National Council for Science & Technology (UNCST), whilst the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) also supported the research team’s access to the refugee settlements.

This article draws principally on the qualitative data from the stakeholder interviews and workshops, and biographical interviews undertaken between 2019 and 2021. Due to the severe impacts of COVID-19 during this period, research plans were adapted to follow public health advice and safeguard all involved in the project. Upon the safe resumption of travel and fieldwork, the research team based in Uganda adhered to appropriate health and safety guidelines for engaging with research participants and stakeholders. They also worked closely with the Youth Advisory Boards to agree on the most suitable approaches for activities in each location, including how to capture the impacts of COVID-19 on refugee volunteering. Data were analysed using NVivo, following a thematic coding framework covering the following key themes: Motivation; Format of volunteering activity; Volunteer meanings/perceptions; Time; Remuneration; Skills, knowledge and learning; Livelihoods; Wider impacts; Life course and mobility; Volunteering links to employment; Employment; Access and conditions; Humanitarian and development systems in Uganda; and COVID-19.

A critical methodological challenge that emerged in early stages of the project was related to the very understanding of ‘volunteering’, which is a contextual and multifaceted concept (Fadel, 2020; Steimel, 2018). To build an inclusive framework that reflected young refugees’ own ideas and experiences, rather than those of donors and global North scholars, we engaged our Youth Advisory Boards and used a survey pilot to operationalise the definition of volunteering to participants as:

Any time you spend, or expertise you provide, with the purpose of contributing to your community or other communities. This can happen occasionally or regularly, through your own initiative or with organisations (such as community groups, NGOs or UN agencies), and it can be unpaid or for a per diem or other incentive.

This definition will also guide the ways volunteering is discussed in this paper.

Volunteering, Humanitarian Action and Displacement: Service-Delivery and Self-Reliance

The mainstreaming of volunteering in humanitarian and development discourses, and its role and invocation by political leaders in relation to COVID-19, often orients the understanding of volunteering around the notion of ‘service’ (Baillie Smith, 2020; Doerr, 2017). Not least due to the dominance of ideas from North America and Europe, volunteering is then framed in terms of giving something to someone or a group, who are less fortunate. The label of ‘service’ reflects the institutionalisation of volunteering in global North settings, and its mobilisation for ‘service-delivery’ in the context of neoliberal rolling back of the state (Boesten *et al.*, 2011; Sandri, 2018). It also suggests the idea of a benevolent and affluent giver and less well-off beneficiary. However, our data shows how volunteering forms a significant part of the ways young refugees, who do not fit into this binary, support the well-being, health and inclusiveness of their own communities, as well as those of their hosts (Arar, in this issue). These approaches work through established humanitarian systems, with volunteering opportunities being realised via donor organisations and NGOs, but also in ad hoc ways. For some, volunteering is still portrayed in terms of the types of ‘service’ it provides:

I have seen people support other refugees, delivering basic social services to the people; I have seen refugees volunteering to create their own organisations; I have seen refugees volunteering to support business initiatives from a company. I have seen volunteers also mobilising communities to clean, to undertake community work. (Stakeholder interview with UN agency staff, Kampala)

This link to the idea of contribution and service for refugee communities remains strong regardless of the mechanism through which it takes place. However, the relationship of volunteers’ work to established humanitarian structures creates a powerful association with those systems’ languages and approaches, as highlighted by a Congolese man in his early 30s living in Rwamwanja who described his volunteering trajectory as follows:

My first volunteering was in DRC after I had completed my senior six and I was a secondary school teacher teaching mathematics for two semesters, then the second was here in Uganda where I

volunteered with [international NGO 1 in] Uganda and I was a cleaner, then later a storekeeper. Then after, I volunteered with [international NGO 2] in Rwamwanja and I was a hygiene promoter for a year, then my next volunteering was with again [international NGO 2]; that was in 2017 and I was a construction assistant, then later I volunteered with [international NGO 3]. I also volunteered with [international NGO 4]. (Biographical interview with male refugee participant from the DRC living in Rwamwanja)

Volunteering can thus situate volunteers centrally within structured humanitarian and development activities and architectures, framing their contribution within the particular languages of those systems. Refugee-run organisations become key partners in the development and humanitarian spaces, often filling the gaps of NGOs and international agencies (Can, this issue). Wider research in Kampala has previously identified that refugee organisations are engaged in activities ‘which aim to foster refugee self-reliance and – with their focus on language and skills training – to actively contribute to local integration and development efforts’ (Easton-Calabria, 2016: 72). Nonetheless, the labour of volunteers filling gaps due to limited resourcing and capacity within or alongside wider humanitarian infrastructures, including refugee-led organisations, also means that the practice can inadvertently become a form of cheap labour. This can also result in voluntary labour becoming part of what Murrey and Jackson refer to as racialised systems of ‘localwashing’ work and knowledge, in which the engagement of ‘locals’ provides a smokescreen for the persistence of exploitative and top-down practices (Murrey and Jackson, 2020). This provides insight into the ubiquity of volunteering as a means of engaging refugee labour capacity – as it can be noticed in the excerpt above where the participant describes his work with multiple international NGOs. The language of ‘service’ elides other ways in which volunteering positions young people in relation to the livelihood strategies and challenges faced in their communities. It can also render invisible some of the ways in which refugees make sense of the needs of their community due to an emphasis on systems of placements and established ideas of which ‘services’ are needed. For example, a Somali man in his early 30s living in the Nakivale settlement located his volunteering as starting before he became a refugee, and being intertwined with family and religious life:

I think I started volunteering during that time when I was with my mother, that is 2007, and most of the volunteering included helping elderly people, who were mostly friends of my grandmother, and

participating in activities around the mosque and religious areas and in school. So I had it from home and it became like a norm that I got used to, until I came to Uganda. (Biographical interview with male refugee participant from Somalia living in Nakivale)

This highlights the importance of not subsuming volunteering by refugees within established rationalities, temporalities and systems of humanitarian response. Here, volunteering is explained beyond the formal systems of service and community intervention and care, highlighting peer-to-peer support strategies in ways that are determined by communities’ own needs and priorities and which are not necessarily documented or made ‘visible’ as a form of volunteering (see also Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020b). This is something we also see in the following insight from a Somali participant in his mid-30s living in Kampala city, who explained how language barriers can encourage community collaboration grounded in community-led response:

Well, I decided [to volunteer] just because, you know, the majority of the people are suffering in the community and most of the people are having their language problems with language barriers. So, we see that the person, maybe [international NGO], wants to meet and wants to access the area but they can’t understand each other, and then [international NGO] might not hire an interpreter, so we just get to make sure that the person gets help, sacrifice your time and knowledge to make sure that person gets help and they continue with their lives to survive. In the community, you see the person suffering by our side, then when hiring volunteers the community gets support. (Biographical interview with male refugee participant from Somalia living in Kampala)

Volunteering is here recognised as a critical part of the ways in which participants framed how they contribute to promoting change in their own refugee communities, including participation in volunteering itself supporting community cohesion. Furthermore, the lasting legacy of skills that volunteers may build, including through organisations or projects which are time-limited, can also support community development, both within a more service-delivery frame of giving ‘help’, but also through greater networks and capacities for advocacy:

I also look at it from the sustainability perspective, that if, for example, you have volunteers who are skilled and are from these respective communities, even if some projects phase out refugees ... I mean volunteers will stay with those skills and they can act as community-based resource persons. (Stakeholder interview with international NGO staff, Kampala)

Here we recognise that the importance of refugee contributions through volunteering is not necessarily bound by the geographies of settlement or refugee status and identity. Our data shows how volunteering is a practice through which refugees and host communities contribute to each other's lives. Significant scholarship has documented host volunteer contributions to refugees, especially in Europe and North America (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2020; Fratzke and Dorst, 2019; Neis *et al.*, 2018; Steen Bygballe Jensen and Kirchner, 2020). Nonetheless, while this might fit more established thinking on volunteering by the more affluent on behalf of the disadvantaged, there is growing evidence of the ways volunteering by refugees can make a contribution to host communities across settings in the global North and South, supporting host community learning and integration (Dryden-Peterson, 2006; European Commission, 2016; Fratzke and Dorst, 2019). Our data shows how, in the Nakivale settlement for example, refugee volunteers extend teaching services to Ugandan children since they attend the same schools alongside the refugees, and host communities have benefited from the services of refugee health volunteers working in the settlement health centres. In these ways, volunteering is part of how 'refugees bring human capital in the form of labour, skills and entrepreneurship and may help develop the host country and increase the welfare of citizens' (Jacobsen, 2002: 578).

We argue that while volunteering is undoubtedly a key part of refugee response and contribution to service-delivery on behalf of displaced communities, an exclusive focus on outcomes can allow volunteering to remain constrained by wider humanitarian discourses and architectures. It also risks obscuring how volunteering practices can shape refugee lives in different ways. In this sense, a key articulation between volunteering and livelihoods relates to how refugees navigate volunteering in relation to 'work', tackling precarity in ways that are often not accounted for in humanitarian and development debates.

Volunteering, Work and Precarity

In this section, we analyse how certain understandings of voluntary labour that fall outside established norms of humanitarian discourses remain poorly understood, particularly in terms of volunteers' everyday efforts to navigate socio-economic precarity and sustain their livelihoods. Despite the Ugandan refugee regime formally permitting refugees to work, the realities in the ground of 'opaque regulations and the extra burden to comply with them' (UNHCR, 2021: 3) negatively affect the prospects of refugee employment. This provides a key context for understanding the role of volunteering in

refugee responses to displacement; rather than only an act of 'benevolence' to the less well-off, volunteering needs to be understood also as a form of (often precarious) work and as part of struggles to find employment:

Personally, I think I forgot [about] applying for jobs in 2014. This is when I stopped sending applications because I got disappointed at some point.... I realised that, if we don't step out ourselves and probably make sure we have our own employment that we've created for ourselves, then our children and dependents will die here. So, those are all the factors that motivated some of us to start what we are doing but also with the love that we have also for our community. (Biographical interview with male refugee participant from the DRC living in Kampala)

For many, volunteering emerges both from and against the precarity that comes with their displacement and its impacts on their status and lives. Volunteering remains especially significant for those people who are forcibly displaced and do not have professional qualifications or have limited education:

Some of the youth didn't finish the studies and to get access to jobs within Uganda here is very hard for refugees; that is why most of the refugees are here volunteering, are doing voluntary work. Like me, myself, due to the pain we have, we don't have access to job opportunities, then we decided to team up as refugees to create this refugee initiative ... where, all of us, we come together and create our own initiatives, different projects where we can learn by doing through it. (Stakeholder interview with young female refugee participant from South Sudan living in Bidibidi)

While it is the case that volunteering provides opportunities to contribute to community and personal development, how it emerges from and against precarity illustrates significant ambivalence in volunteering's roles in localising aid and signifying or animating refugee-led responses to needs. The coming together of refugee status, professional qualifications and employment challenges allows volunteering to gain particular meanings (see also Tomalin and Wilkinson, 2023 for an analysis on the diverse impacts of training opportunities in the humanitarian sector). Whilst for professionally qualified refugees, it may be imagined as a pathway to professional work within Uganda, for those who did not finish their education, volunteering may be seen primarily as a form of work in itself:

Of course being here volunteering has changed my status a bit here because, if you just compare with

others, since arrival up to now those that have not volunteered, their lives have deteriorated totally. So, the volunteering aspect has really, at least, even though it has not put me to some level ... at least I have earned some living. (Biographical interview with female refugee participant from South Sudan living in Kampala)

The issue of volunteer remuneration has received growing attention in recent years (Baillie Smith, Fadel *et al.*, 2022), particularly in terms of its relationship to what counts as volunteering (Overgaard, 2019). Staff from international organisations based in Kampala have emphasised the reliance of refugee volunteers on this type of income for survival and supporting their families:

Some organisations pay volunteers for the work they do. In fact, these volunteer opportunities are looked at as employment. This makes volunteering very attractive. Where such payments exist, refugees are always willing to join. Of course, refugees have used this payment as a source of livelihood and survival. (Notes from stakeholder workshop, international NGO staff, Kampala)

If the remuneration of volunteering makes it critical to sustaining livelihoods, this practice also presents a risk of reproducing inequalities – particularly for displaced populations navigating discrimination and barriers to accessing work and sources of income (see also Okech *et al.*, 2024). In this context, external organisations can draw upon a ready source of low-cost labour and do so in ways that sidestep labour legislation and other protections (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015). This situation can be made particularly acute as a result of refugee status, as the following exchange shows:

I can't say that it [my volunteer work] changed a lot [since I became a refugee], just a little because the volunteering that I did back in Somalia was not a big deal like it is here in Uganda. In my home country, volunteering was not seen as something so useful but here it is really useful, even as a way of living. (Biographical interview with male refugee participant from Somalia living in Nakivale)

In this example, the meaning of volunteering shifts as the person is displaced from Somalia to Uganda, with their refugee status meaning the income from volunteering becomes more significant. These examples point to the way that volunteering amongst refugee groups in Uganda, as in other contexts (Brown and Green, 2015; Overgaard, 2019; Wig, 2016), can become a form of 'work' for individuals facing vulnerabilities – it is done out of necessity as a key and often only source of income. But it is also not only about income, it is about a sense of

value and worth (Perold and Graham, 2017); as discussed elsewhere (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.*, 2022), the idea of the 'proper job' remains very powerful, even as the reality of youth unemployment in Africa is far more fragmented and improvised. This means that volunteering can also be seen as an 'equaliser', providing a means to 'go to work', as described by a Congolese man in his late 30s living in Kampala:

There is a very big relationship [between my volunteering and current working life] because you understand that my children know that whenever I leave home every morning, I am going to work. But, personally, knowing how work is defined, I know that I am actually a volunteer because I don't get a salary on a monthly basis. So, on the other hand, I am working to support my community to provide some of the solutions to their problems. I call it work and at the same time I call it volunteering to support them. So actually, to me at the moment, it is very difficult to separate the two. (Biographical interview with male refugee participant from the DRC living in Kampala)

While the relationship between volunteering and work has been discussed elsewhere (Overgaard, 2016; Prince and Brown, 2016), this gains particular significance for young refugees who are often battling multiple layers of uncertainty and precarity. This is reinforced in Uganda by the powerful association between volunteering and the 'proper job' (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.*, 2022; Ferguson and Li, 2018), and means that forms of voluntary labour that resemble a 'job' can provide greater value not simply in terms of income, but as symbolising worth. However, this means that other forms of voluntary labour, such as care work or unpaid activist labour, can be ruled out of considerations of volunteering, further entrenching dominant humanitarian and development framings which also tend to be gendered. Whether and how volunteering by refugees reflects or produces agencies for Southern leadership, local ownership or decolonising is then highly contingent. It is shaped by particular biographies and precarities, but also the specific humanitarian infrastructures and discourses that surround them. As one NGO stakeholder based in Kampala city commented:

When you look at the context and the opportunities available, in the refugee settlements maybe they are more organisations there and if they require someone to speak the language they might have a better opportunity; and also the availability of humanitarian organisations in the rural settlements compared to Kampala where there is so much competition between the nationals and refugees,

and also the number of places to volunteer for refugees may be limited. (Stakeholder interview with international NGO staff, Kampala)

Here we see how the meaning of volunteering can shift depending on the individual levels of precarity and literacy, but also that its realisation is then shaped by the specific contexts where they live and the geographies of aid. Volunteering gains particular significance in the coming together of contexts where humanitarian and development infrastructures and organisations play critical roles, such as refugee settlements. So not only does volunteering for young refugees have particular significance due to their precarity, but their access to opportunities is also unequally shaped by that precarity and vulnerability, and their intersecting identities. This means that different individuals are, therefore, differently positioned within those shared structures and systems of inequality, precarity and vulnerability.

Conclusion: Contingent Contribution?

In this article we have brought together debates around volunteering in humanitarian and development settings, and refugee-led responses to displacement, through analysis of data on volunteering by young refugees in Uganda. We have shown how their voluntary labour articulates with ideas of refugee-led contributions to refugee lives, both through 'service' and in shaping refugee subjectivities and livelihoods. However, we have argued that the apparently easy fit between volunteering and established humanitarian and development discourses around displacement and self-reliance, obscures the complex political economies of volunteering and their relationships to precarity and inequality. Analysing these economies and disaggregating more diverse forms and structures of voluntary labour reveals how volunteering can both entrench the colonial legacies of aid and humanitarian programming as well as animate new agencies and resistance to these legacies. The focus on volunteering within existing humanitarian frameworks risks an emphasis on outcomes over process, participation and context. This is significant, given the growing ubiquity of volunteering with humanitarian programming and practices and the claims that are often made around it. While refugee volunteering through established humanitarian systems may give the impression of supporting community needs and reflecting refugee-led responses, the picture is made more contingent by existing precarities and complex geographies. As we discuss in further depth elsewhere, the uneven access to different volunteering opportunities identified amongst refugees in Uganda means that 'what kinds of volunteering are available, who is able to access them, and how

they benefit from engaging, is bound up with existing patterns of inequality and skills acquisition' (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.*, 2022: 36). Particular caution is needed then, where voluntary labour is being mobilised to support external donor ideas and practices around intervention and support. While the presence of refugee volunteers in delivering activities suggests agency and action, volunteering as a form of low-cost labour from a position of precarity paints a rather more complex picture of refugee volunteering, as illustrated by the Ugandan case. Therefore, the potential contribution of volunteering to de-stabilising existing systems is distinctly ambivalent given its uncomfortable position between self-reliance strategies and the perpetuation of dependencies, particularly in refugee spaces.

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Data Access Statement

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