

Identifying, Addressing and Preventing Trafficking in Refugee Communities: Lessons from the Uganda Policy Research Workshop

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Refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs and people on the move in [crisis](#) are acknowledged to be communities vulnerable to human trafficking. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this vulnerability by closing schools, diminishing access to social services, and putting lockdowns into effect that increase domestic violence and risk for informal sector and domestic workers.

In November 2021, it was [reported](#) that 1.56 million refugees are hosted in Uganda — the largest population of refugees in Africa. Most are from South Sudan, DR Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda and Eritrea. Refugees are housed in administrative districts, including 14 settlements of which the largest is Bidi Bidi, hosting 245,000 South Sudanese refugees. Many more refugees are also “self-settled” in urban communities. Starting from October 2021, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR is undertaking a [joint verification and profiling of all refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda](#) to assess demographics, vulnerabilities and needs of this population.

As well as being a significant host country for refugees, Uganda is a source, destination and transit country for trafficking in persons. People are trafficked into Uganda (including under the premise of receiving refugee status); trafficking occurs within Uganda, victimizing both refugee and local communities; and Uganda is also a corridor for transit of trafficked persons to other East African countries — such as Kenya — and outside Africa. Continuing and emerging conflict regionally is likely to increase risk of both refugee movement and trafficking in persons. South Sudan, CAR, DR Congo and Ethiopia are all experiencing tensions that have escalated to violent conflict, and Kampala was recently the target of bombings by a militant Islamist group based in eastern DR Congo, resulting in the entry of Ugandan military forces into DR Congo. These conflicts also complicate international humanitarian response.

Bearing this context in mind, Delta 8.7 partnered with the Refugee Law Project, Makerere University School of Law and the Irish Centre for Human Rights at the School of Law, National University of Ireland (Galway) to host a February 2022 workshop to facilitate exchange on the most effective measures to prevent, identify and remediate trafficking of persons in refugee and asylum-seeking populations in Uganda. In order to identify and scale up action, each Delta 8.7 workshop explores a particular country or a particular sector or issue within a country and brings together policymakers, researchers and members of civil society to discuss “what works” to effectively address modern slavery in that specific context. This was the fifth Policy Research Workshop prepared by Delta 8.7 (following workshops focused on Brazil, Ghana, India and Malaysia).



Prior to the workshop itself, Delta 8.7 and its partners held consultations with each participant to identify four primary areas of focus for consideration in discrete sessions during the workshop:

- Crossing borders: trafficking in the regional context
- Localizing trafficking response: community contexts for identification and prevention
- International frameworks: bridging the gaps
- Finding a common language for identification and prevention

In these discussions, the following three areas for action were identified, along with accompanying recommendations to strengthen response.

International, regional and national frameworks for action

Many responses are in place at the international level that address some aspects of human trafficking, but participants in the workshop noted the lack of a systematic mechanism to address trafficking within the humanitarian response system. This may result in obscuring identification of trafficking cases, as when a trafficked person seeks support within other protection systems more readily available to them (such as within child protection or sexual and gender-based violence support systems). While this may achieve the goal of immediate protection for a trafficked person, the lack of targeted or long-term support may introduce the risk of re-trafficking for that person, in addition to the loss of accurate data on the scale, prevalence and nature of the offence. To strengthen frameworks for action, participants in the workshop suggesting a range of measures, including:

- The implementation of the Palermo Protocol in complement with existing human rights treaties and instruments. In addition to the Palermo Protocol, participants discussed the use of international and regional human rights frameworks and their instruments in the approach to trafficking;
- The adoption of a regional approach to labour agreements, including to build collective leverage to address migration as a development opportunity while also recognizing irregular migrants as highly vulnerable to trafficking;
- And a coordinated international and national humanitarian approach to ensure that responses to refugees and migration are not in silos.

Partnerships, collaboration and capacity-building

Uganda has comprehensive laws and policies in place to address both refugee support and anti-trafficking measures. The Ministry of Internal Affairs manages coordination of anti-trafficking response within its Coordination Office for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons (COPTIP) which acts as Secretariat for the National Task Force Against Human Trafficking. The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) manages refugee status determination and documentation with the support of other national and international agencies, and it represents refugee matters at the National Task Force level. Workshop participants noted a lack of clarity, however, regarding who holds the responsibility for documentation of trafficking in refugee populations, for what



information is gathered, or for how it is shared. To improve national-level coordination on trafficking in refugee contexts, participants discussed the following:

- Coordination between refugee protection systems and anti-trafficking authorities to improve identification and prevention of trafficking in Uganda, to include clear referral pathways through victim protection guidelines, including child-centred spaces and separate spaces where male and female victims can access support;
- Complement national referral pathways with local approaches to combat trafficking that reframe trafficking in ways that are comprehensible to local populations, engage survivor expertise and increase resilience to trafficking through community education;
- Develop partnerships to improve identification and response apart from prosecution contexts, including through the healthcare sector.

Identification and data

Despite progress in training and capacity-building for identification and referrals, documentation of cases of trafficking among refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda is an ongoing challenge, due to a variety of factors. One has been the difficulty of screening in mass displacement contexts where the responsible agents have limited screening capacity and where victims are not always aware they are being trafficked, do not consider themselves to be victims of trafficking or might have been coached to evade detection. Additionally, the varied experiences of people on the move may include trafficking as well as smuggling; an experience of trafficking can lead to asylum-seeking, and a person who has been granted refugee status may then be trafficked. This can complicate the screening and documentation process.

Participants discussing these issues considered the following recommendations:

- Offer specialized training on trafficking to authorities (including police, military, administrators and community leaders) who interact with refugee communities on how trafficking presents itself in local contexts;
- Triangulate administrative data (including data collected as part of registration and needs assessment) with frontline agent experiences of what is happening on the ground, to get a better sense of who is entering settlements regularly or who is offering employment to residents, and whether such encounters might present a risk of trafficking;
- Employ a victim-centred and survivor-informed approach in data collection to minimize risk of re-traumatization of vulnerable populations, and ensure that investigations do not approach potential victims of trafficking as suspects.

This article has been prepared by Alice Eckstein as contributor to Delta 8.7. As provided for in the Terms and Conditions of Use of Delta 8.7, the opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of UNU or its partners.

