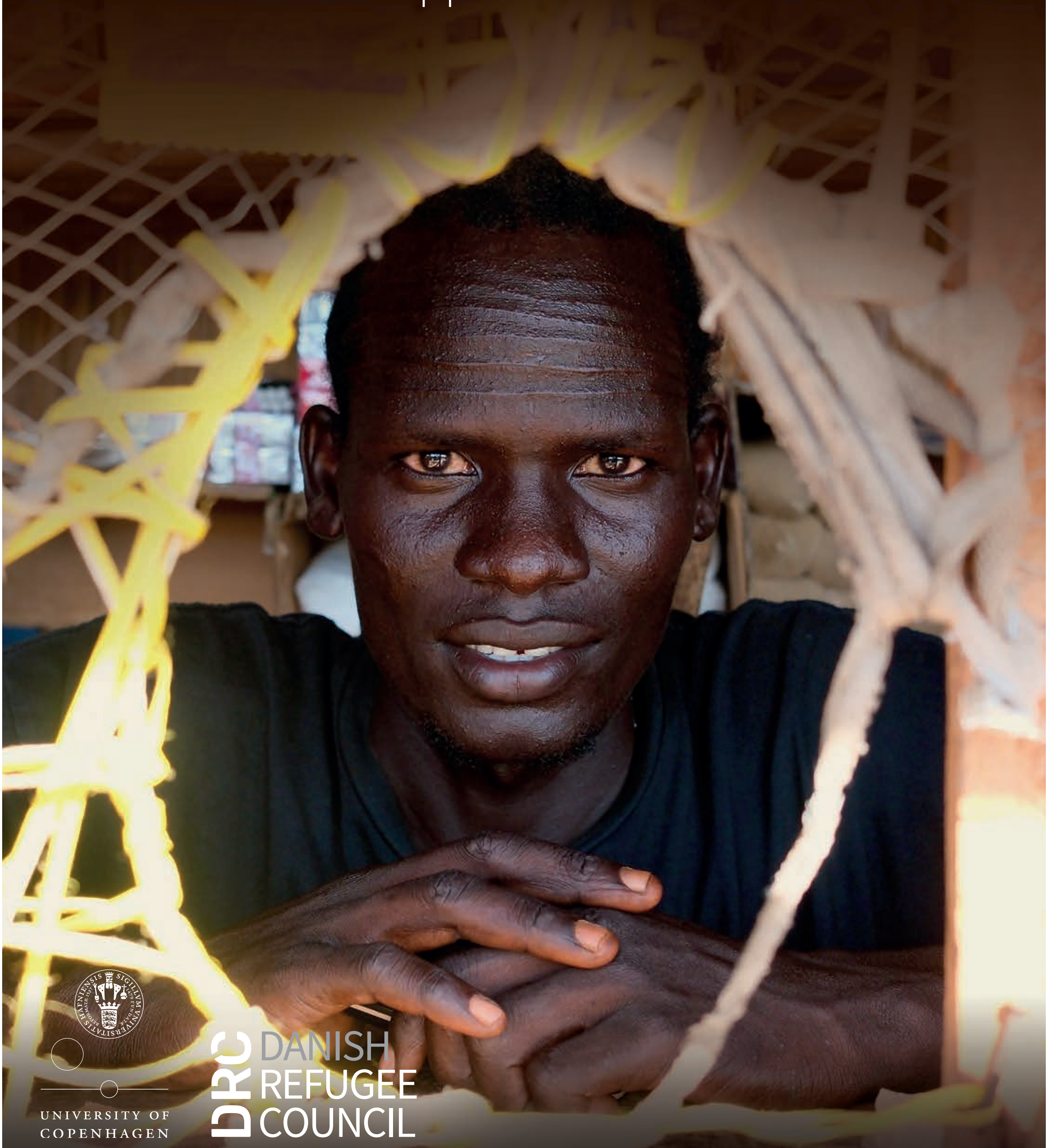
Staying and Moving:
Refugee Adaptations to Cuts in Humanitarian Support



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Shopkeeper in new extension area of Rhino Camp for influx of newly arriving refugees opened in 2025 @Ayo Degett/DRC

The study

This report presents the findings of the study 'Navigating life after aid cuts: Decision-making, economic adaptation and mobility by encamped South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and Kenya'. It was funded by the World Bank Group (WBG) through the PROSPECTS Partnership Programme, administered by the Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Forced Displacement. The study was implemented by the Participatory Research Team on Community-led Action (PARTOCA), a collaboration between Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and University of Copenhagen. It was conducted from September 2025 to August 2026 in Uganda, Kenya and South Sudan. Ayo Degett (PhD), Programme Manager for Research, and Susan Reynolds Whyte, Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, wrote the report. The content and opinions expressed in this report represent the authors' views and should not be attributed to, and do not necessarily represent, the views of the WBG.

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PARTOCA local Field Researcher is given directions by a community member in an informal settlement for internally displaced South Sudanese and families returning from Kenya and Uganda in the outskirts of Juba, South Sudan, 2026 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

Executive Summary

Deep cuts to humanitarian aid in 2025 mean that refugees must adapt to radically different situations, where livelihoods and hopes for the future are challenged in new ways. How they respond is shaped by the conditions in which they have found refuge. This report explores the adaptive practices of South Sudanese refugees in Kenya and Uganda. Comparing refugee life on the ground in these two neighbouring countries allows appreciation of commonalities under current circumstances. It also provides a clear picture of how different conditions create different possibilities for adaptation. Policy, geography, and the history of social relations contrast in consequential ways. As support disappears, refugees are responding in two modes: either stay in the camps and try to survive through multiple adjusted practices; or move in the hope of food security. Based on ethnographic data from 98 South Sudanese households in Kakuma and Kalobeyei (Kenya), Rhino Camp (Uganda) and Juba (South Sudan) assembled from January 2025 to March 2026, this paper analyses the socio-economic considerations and practices of South Sudanese who decide to stay and those who decide to move to other locations, mainly South Sudan.

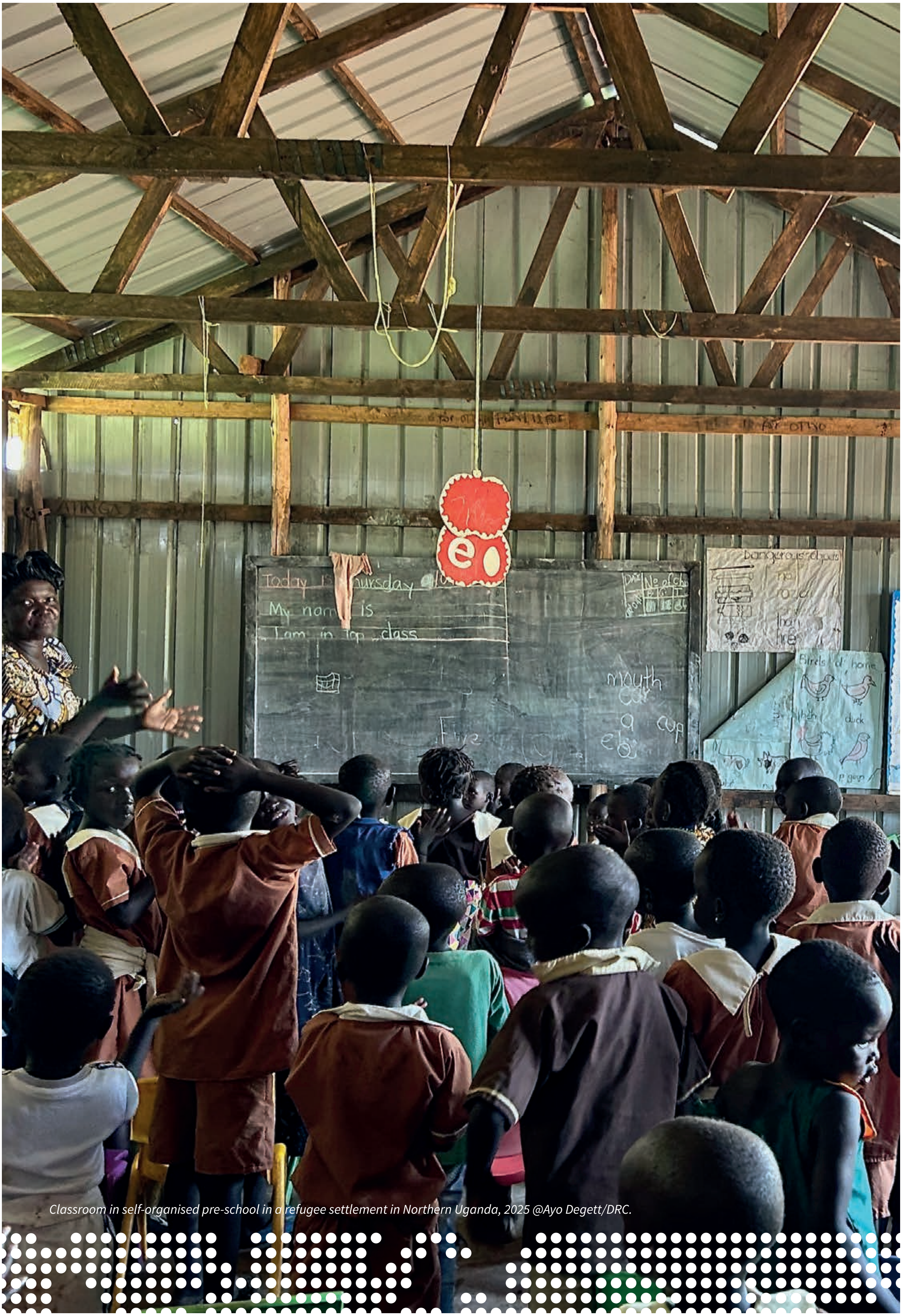
While rural camps[1] in both Kenya and Uganda offer limited livelihood opportunities, subsistence farming in Uganda provides a way to remain in the settlement and survive the phasing out of food assistance. By contrast, camps in Kenya offer better cash flows and therefore better opportunities for small-scale business and casual jobs working for other refugee groups with better access to remittances (e.g. Somali, Ethiopian, and Afghan refugees). In both settings, houses and homesteads are seen as valuable assets: accommodation in the rural camps is free in principle, and having access to a rent-free house is valuable at this time of economic precarity. Cultural and linguistic similarities between the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and their local hosts make intermarriage and arrangements to use farmland much more common than in Kenya, paving the way for integration and self-reliance.

There are important contrasts between the mobility patterns of camp-based refugees in Kenya and Uganda. In Kenya, most refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei come from villages far from the border, which makes return cumbersome and expensive, and restrictions on free mobility make short exploratory trips difficult. In Uganda, many refugees travel back and forth to South Sudan to assess the security situation and livelihood options. This is possible because many in Rhino Camp are originally from villages and towns close to the border. Rather than moving with the intention of staying in South Sudan, people evaluate their limited options and decide to go where possibilities seem slightly better for the time being. In both settings, loans play an increasingly essential role in the household economy, to the extent that many feel forced to return to South Sudan to flee their debt.

Social networks and connections are a defining factor in refugees' decisions to stay or move. People tend to stay in the camp because of the support provided by their local network, and they can only relocate to towns if they can draw on support and accommodation from their network. Self-settlement and income generation/entrepreneurship in towns are often highlighted as options for self-reliance in Uganda but are not common in practice for camp-based refugees. They mainly engage in 'survivalist mobility' when no other options seem possible or 'split return' where the breadwinners try their best to generate income for household members in the camps through casual labour in South Sudan.

The debate over how best to transition from camp-based living and aid dependency to self-settlement and self-reliance has moved to centre stage in the wake of these cuts. With this study, we want to nuance this debate by providing detailed ethnographic evidence on refugees' current practices, motivations and grounds for choosing one option over the other.

1 This study engages with different types of encampment arrangements. We will collectively be referred to them as 'camps' for simplicity, while recognizing that their structures and legal basis are different.



Classroom in self-organised pre-school in a refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, 2025 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

1. Introduction

The general decline in humanitarian funding for refugees worsened dramatically in early 2025 when the US cut aid, and other donors followed suit. Food assistance and other services were severely reduced in refugee camps across East Africa (Dawisha 2025; Halakhe 2025; NRG 2025), and current aid levels are historically low (WFP 2025a). Refugees dependent on donor support must adapt to radically different situations. The conditions in which displaced people find refuge shape how they respond. This report explores the adaptive practices of South Sudanese refugees in Kenya and Uganda. Comparing refugee life on the ground in these two neighbouring countries allows appreciation of commonalities under current circumstances. It also provides a clear picture of how different conditions create different possibilities for adaptation. Policy, geography, and the history of social relations contrast in consequential ways. As support disappears, refugees respond in many different ways. This report analytically divides these strategies into two predominant modes: Either stay in the camps and try to survive through multiple adjusted practices; or move in the hope of food security, at least. Accordingly, we address staying and moving separately as adaptive practices and describe how opportunities look depending on social, economic and physical ability arguing that these coping practices feed into current debates on self-reliance and aid-dependency in the humanitarian context (especially for protracted displacement situations) (Hoogeveen and Hopper 2024; Omata 2023; Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018; Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2020a; Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2020b).

The recurring periods of armed conflict in South Sudan have left few lives untouched. By the end of 2024, about 4,400,000 people were forcibly displaced from their homes. Approximately 2,270,000 of these have sought refuge in neighbouring countries; 43% (1,060,550) are being hosted in Uganda and 8.5% (220,589) in Kenya (UNHCR 2025c:6). While new refugees arrive regularly as fighting flares up in South Sudan, there are large numbers of ‘legacy’ refugees who have lived in Kenya and Uganda for many years.

Those fleeing from South Sudan are refugees under the Geneva Convention, and as such, they are given refugee status on a prima facie basis in both Kenya and Uganda. As refugees, they have been forcibly displaced by circumstances beyond their control. As social actors, however, they attempt to exert some control over their lives. In responding to changing conditions, they weigh options and seek opportunities. They do so not simply as individual actors; their decisions and actions are calibrated with those of kinfolk in the home country and the countries of refuge. They differ in terms of resources. This partly depends on how long they have been in refuge, but also on occupation, social networks, access to remittances, and household composition.

Building on data from interviews, participant observations, and extended cases, the research explores how South Sudanese refugees in Kenya and Uganda respond to cuts in international humanitarian aid. The study engages with two research questions:

1. What are the differences and similarities in the conditions for survival, income generation, and self-reliance among South Sudanese refugees in Kenya and Uganda?
2. On what bases do men and women decide to stay, return, or go back and forth?

Refugee women selling vegetables at market in Kakuma Refugee Camp, 2025 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

2. The study

The study 'Navigating life after aid cuts: Decision-making, economic adaptation and mobility by encamped South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and Kenya' was undertaken by the Participatory Research Team on Community-led Action (PARTOCA) team at Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and University of Copenhagen from September 2025 to August 2026. It took place in three locations: Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement in northwestern Uganda; Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement in northwestern Kenya; and Juba city in South Sudan. The study includes fieldwork and interviews with urban refugees in Arua, Kampala and Nairobi.

Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement has hosted refugees since 1980. The settlement stretches about 85km, and is located on clan-owned land,[2] with refugees living close to nationals. Refugee households are assigned small plots on which they construct houses and where they plant small vegetable gardens, soil permitting (Degett 2023; Degett and Whyte 2023). As of June 2026, 203,423 refugees and asylum-seekers live in Rhino Camp.[3] Most of the South Sudanese arrived as part of the massive influx of 716,732 refugees who fled South Sudan between 2016 and 2017 (OIOS 2018:1). The largest number are from the southern part of South Sudan and have linguistic and cultural affinities with their Ugandan (Kakwa and Lugbara) neighbours in the surrounding communities. Others from pastoral groups farther north have less in common with their Ugandan hosts. In June 2026, 30,694 individuals in Rhino Camp were registered as having specific needs (such as disability, serious medical conditions, and being Unaccompanied and Separated Children [UASC]). However, these are not the only vulnerable groups. There are new arrivals—30,220 in Q1 of 2026 (UNHCR 2026a)—who are often traumatised and lack a social network in the camp. Many medical conditions that are, in principle, less serious can become debilitating when treatment is unavailable or unaffordable. Given that there are 41,443 households across the entire camp, the likelihood of having a vulnerable person in your household is quite high, as reflected in the collected data. In addition, approximately 56% of the population in Rhino Camp is under 18, while 2% (4,229) are over 60, leaving many able-bodied adults with many dependents to care for (UNHCR and OPM 2026).

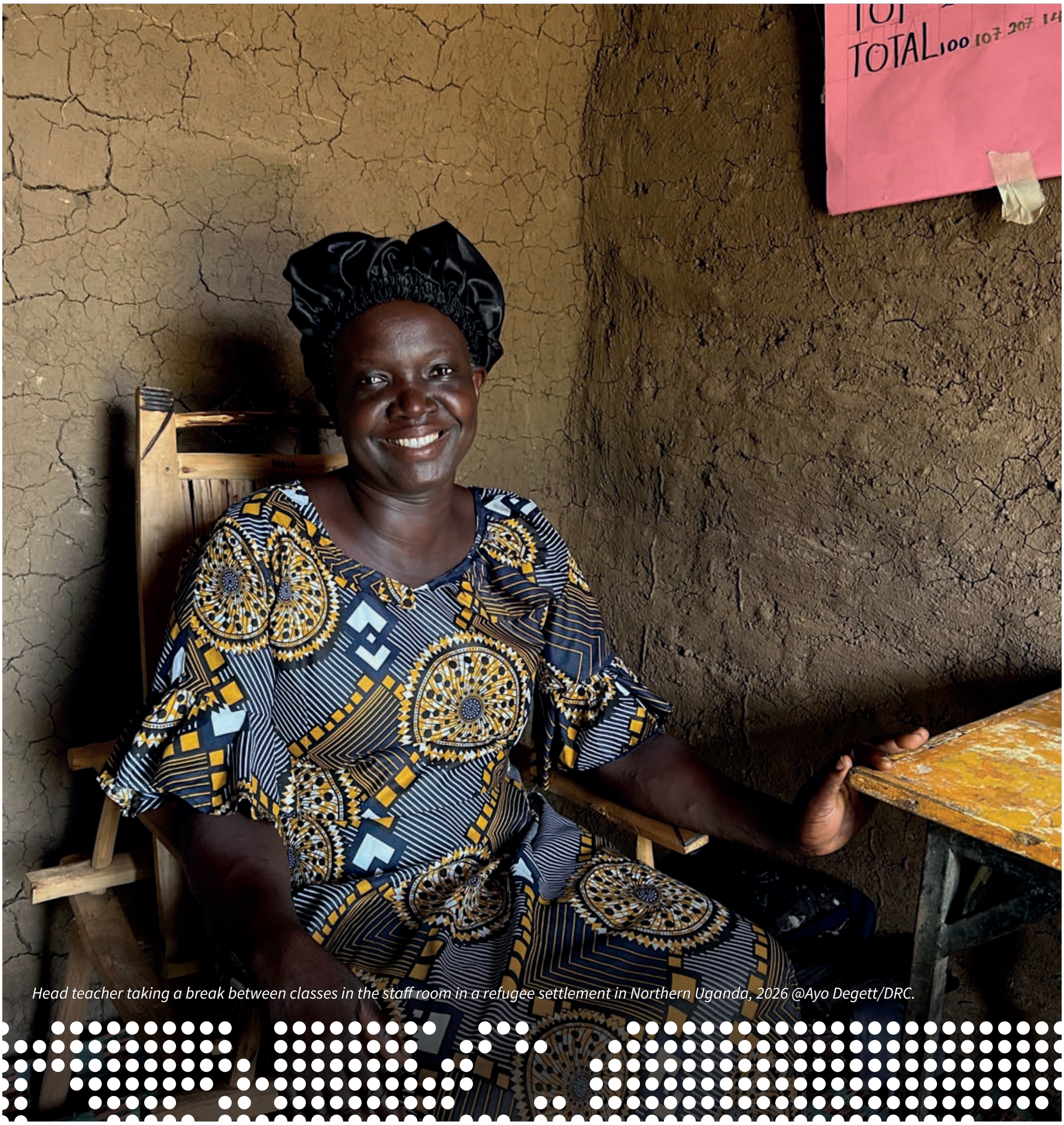
Kakuma Refugee Camp, in Turkana County, was opened in 1992 to accommodate those fleeing from the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). Many other nationalities sought refuge in the camp over time, and by 2026, the camp hosted 230,220 refugees from about twenty different nations. The majority (57.4% - 132,086) are still South Sudanese (UNHCR 2026c), mostly from pastoralist societies - Nuer, Dinka and Anuak - from the more northern parts of South Sudan. They share many lifeways with the Turkana people of the area. Kakuma is overcrowded, hosting four times the population it was designed to accommodate (UNHCR 2025a).

Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement was opened in 2015 to take pressure off nearby Kakuma, which was increasingly overcrowded. Currently, it hosts 83,780 people, with a majority (72.9% - 61,154) from South Sudan (UNHCR 2026c). Kalobeyei spreads along a tarmac road where host community members and refugees conduct their errands in shops and buildings like those in a rural town.

In Kakuma and Kalobeyei, 52% are below 18, and 5,053 are above 60 (UNHCR 2026c). The data on specific needs is more limited in these settlements compared to Rhino Camp. A study from 2018-2019 showed that refugees are more likely to be disabled than Kenyans at the national level, with 4% of the population in Kakuma and 7% of refugees in Kalobeyei having a disability (Fix et al. 2019:9; Pape et al. 2019:12)[4]. The study also found that the refugees' dependency ratio at the time was 1.2 in Kakuma, meaning that, on average, there were 6 dependents for every 5 working-age adults, whereas in Kenya generally, the ratio is 0.9 (Pape et al. 2019:10). As of 2021, there were over 8000 unaccompanied and separated children living in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, the majority of whom are cared for by relatives or friends of their families (UNICEF 2023).

2 Land in this part of the West Nile area is held under customary tenure and owned by indigenous communities, administered through traditional governance methods, and passed on through ancestral lineages (O'Callaghan 2018:20).
3 Out of these 93.21 % (189,615) are South Sudanese; others are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Sudan and Rwanda, with a handful from Burundi and Eritrea (UNHCR and OPM 2026).
4 In the study, disability is defined as reduced sensory, motor and mental abilities that affect communication and activities of daily living.

Juba, South Sudan's capital city, has undergone rapid growth and hosts large numbers of displaced people, which include people who have been displaced since the armed conflict in 2013, people who have come back from asylum in neighbouring countries but are unable to return to their location of origin and refugees from Sudan, including people who consider themselves South Sudanese but have stayed in Sudan for generations (Berke and Larsen 2025:7). The research is mainly conducted in the hills of southwestern Juba, where many people from Rhino Camp and other settlements in Uganda self-settle in simple shelters and in Managateen, a large informal settlement hosting people internally displaced by conflicts in their rural home areas and returnees from asylum in Kenya and Uganda. In Juba, we work with this latter category.



Head teacher taking a break between classes in the staff room in a refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, 2026 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

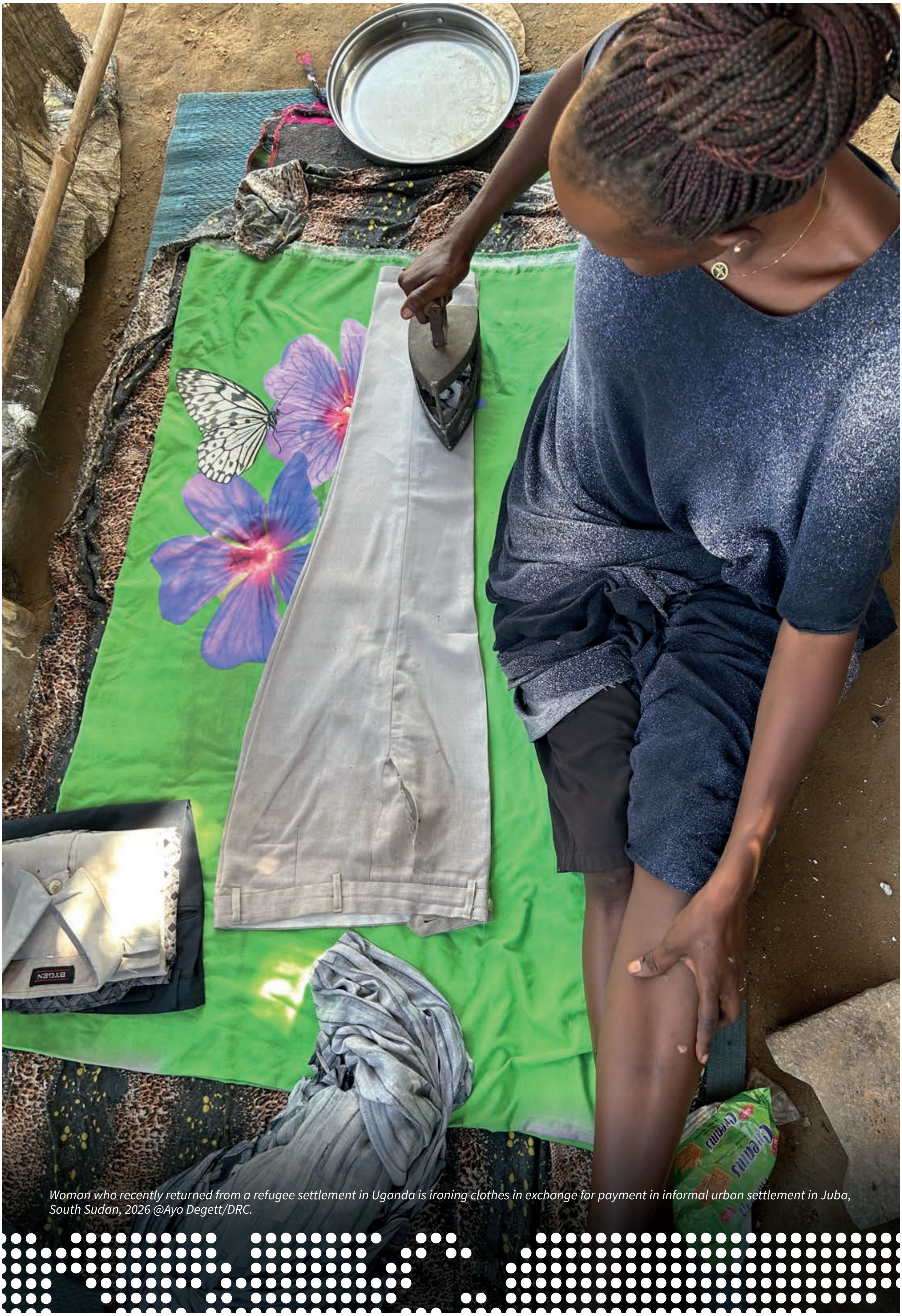
2.1. Methods and data

This study draws on qualitative ethnographic data assembled by PARTOCA, a research team that has worked on various topics related to South Sudanese life in displacement in the same locations since 2018. The team consists of 10 anthropologically trained refugee peer-researchers, all living in refugee camps (except one, who temporarily lives among urban refugees in Nairobi), led by the Research Lead (PhD) and two anthropological supervisors. The peer researchers identify interlocutors and interviewees in their own neighbourhoods. The team collects data from interviews, participant observation and extended cases of men, women and entire households who decide to stay, move elsewhere in their host country, return, or go back and forth.

Through ongoing interactions with the same 98 households across research locations in Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan, the research team explores the motivations and social conditions that shape refugees' income generation, coping practices, and (im)mobility. After the reductions in humanitarian aid, it is not attractive to continue living in the camps. Those who had the option to settle outside the camps have done so, while those remaining in the camps do so because they have limited or no other options. With the exception of a few cases, all households the team has engaged with had some vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities include disability, chronic illness, single parenthood, many dependents, old age, social marginalisation, mental illness, recent arrival, substance abuse, and other conditions and circumstances.

The study engages with households in three overall income categories: low income, moderate income, and stable income. Households in the first category eat one meal or less per day and have very limited access to alternative Income Generating Activities (IGAs). These households often depend on coping strategies such as debt, reducing meals, begging, and favours. Moderate-income households have one or more meals per day as well as some small-scale IGAs such as a small roadside shop, agriculture, or ad-hoc casual work. Stable households have a relatively reliable monthly income from, for instance, remittances, farming, formal work or casual work. All three household categories are vulnerable, though to varying degrees. For instance, a household may be stable because of a steady inflow of remittances, yet if the relatives sending remittances pass away or lose their jobs, the household may suddenly become more vulnerable.

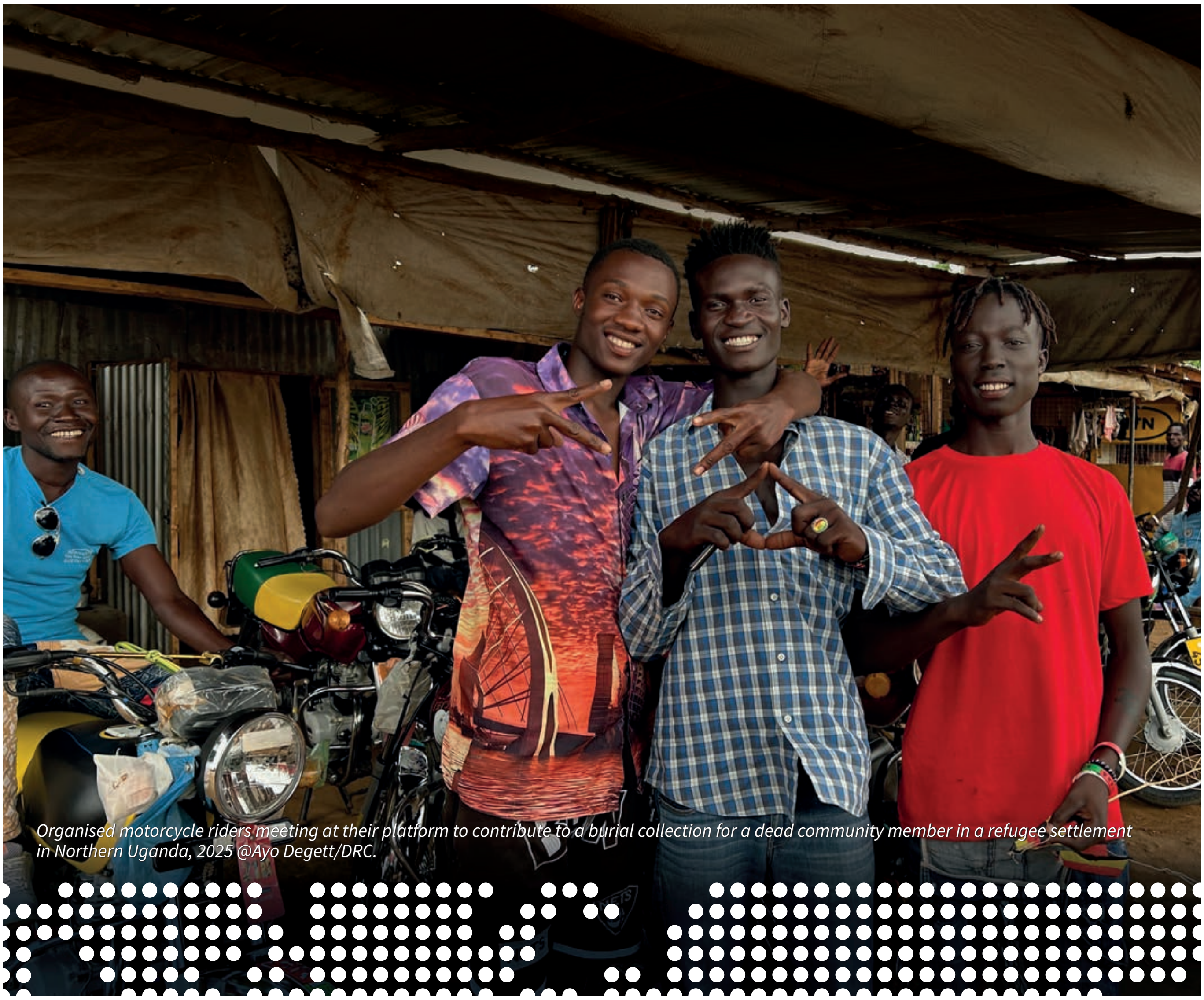
The categories are not fixed, and as we have observed in the study, several households have moved categories, though mostly moving down rather than up. By 2026, out of all 98 tracked households, 49 were categorised as poor, 34 had a moderate income, and only 15 had a stable income. Most of these households are based in the camps, but approximately 31 are based in towns, cities, and urban settlements (Arua, Kakuma, Nairobi, Juba, and Kampala). In addition, the team conducted 90 key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders since January 2025 (57 since August 2025 when this specific study started), institutions and organisations, and monitored prices for key products and services at six locations (see section on daily expenses below).



Woman who recently returned from a refugee settlement in Uganda is ironing clothes in exchange for payment in informal urban settlement in Juba, South Sudan, 2026 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

3. Conditions

In both Kenya and Uganda, the camps are located in marginal, underdeveloped areas. Host communities face many of the same livelihood challenges as refugees: unemployment, strong competition for limited market opportunities, and unpredictable weather conditions that affect subsistence activities. Common to the two refugee contexts after aid cuts are at least three factors: An overall depressed economy because humanitarian resources have dried up; the need to prioritise food, which means less cash to invest in other income-earning activities; and more competition because everyone is looking for income possibilities at the same time. Despite these overall similarities, conditions for refugees in Kenya and Uganda differ on political, geographic, and socio-cultural dimensions, with consequences for economic opportunities.



Organised motorcycle riders meeting at their platform to contribute to a burial collection for a dead community member in a refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, 2025 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

3.1. Policy

Uganda's refugee laws are often portrayed as progressive global ideals for supporting refugees in pursuing self-reliance and a life beyond the settlements (Degett 2018). They are outlined in the 2006 Refugee Act[5] and the 2010 Refugees Regulations,[6] which: 1) open Uganda's doors to asylum-seekers irrespective of their nationality; 2) grant refugees relative freedom of movement and the right to seek employment; and 3) allow each registered refugee family a small piece of land within a settlement.

Kenya's refugee policy was originally based on security concerns. Registered refugees are restricted to camps; movement in and out is difficult. It is very hard to get employment outside the camp, making them dependent on humanitarian assistance. Work permit options are, in principle, being introduced gradually since 2025, but are difficult to process in practice. Employing refugees on permits is rarely an attractive option for employers as there are many nationals who are available for employment. With the introduction of the new Refugee Act in 2021 (Refworld 2021), Kenya took steps to shift its refugee management policy toward one more aligned with Uganda's approach. The Shirika Plan (Government of Kenya and UNHCR 2023) envisions integration of refugee services into national systems and offers options for mobility, financial inclusion in the host community and self-reliance. Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement is a preview of this more open policy towards refugees. However, these transitions are taking time; lack of funding is delaying implementation and continuing bureaucratic hurdles are slowing down the process (World Bank 2026).

3.2. Geographic, social and cultural dimensions

Turkana County, where Kakuma and Kalobeyei are located, is arid, suitable mainly for pastoralism. The Ugandan camps, including Rhino, are in more fertile locations where agriculture is common. Rhino Camp is close to the border of South Sudan, which facilitates travel back and forth. In Uganda, there is a history of back-and-forth interaction across the border with South Sudan. People from northern Uganda sought refuge in southern Sudan, and Ugandans have received earlier waves of refugees from southern Sudan. Many host and refugee groups share ethnic and linguistic similarities. This is not the case in Kenya, although some commonalities exist: most refugees were pastoralists, as were their Turkana hosts. Kakuma is more ethnically and nationally diverse; concentrated within its boundaries, it is like a cosmopolitan town, while Rhino Camp is a large rural village with houses spread across plots and occasional knots of shops and churches.

5 See the 2006 Refugee Act in the UNHCR's overview of country-specific refugee legislation and treaties (Refworld 2006).
6 See the 2010 Refugee Regulations (Refworld 2010).

3.3. Access to aid: the cuts

In Uganda, budget cuts have led to heavy reductions of all core services for camp-based refugees, including education, shelter, protection, WASH, health, and food security (OCHA 2025a). Taking healthcare as an example, by early 2026, only 6% of the required funding had been secured for Uganda's refugee health system in the first quarter, leaving nearly 2 million refugees without access to lifesaving health and nutrition services and a health system on the verge of collapsing (IRC 2025; IRC 2026a; ECHO Flash 2026). Health outreach activities are being phased out, including important maternal health programmes detecting high-risk pregnancies and malnutrition among pregnant women, and the outreach services for people with high-risk chronic illnesses such as HIV and diabetes. These programmes are carried out by centrally important Village Health Teams (VHTs) that have been cut from 2,517 to 163 members (ECHO Flash 2026). Access to most medicines has been difficult since 2025, with both ARVs and insulin being out of stock for extended periods. As part of the scale-down of activities in Rhino Camp, the NGO that was running the healthcare facilities in 2025 has handed over all activities at one end of the camp to the Ugandan government, which, due to a funding shortage, has lowered the capacity from 30 to 11 healthcare staff (Degett, Whyte, and Hansen 2026) with the support to patients – both refugees and host community – falling proportionally. While Ugandan nationals also suffer from a weak government health care system, the refugees feel it even more keenly because they lack money for private sources of care.

For refugees in Uganda, funding for food assistance and other services has been decreasing since 2020. The continuous reduction in aid prompted the introduction of 'prioritisation exercises', which entail reducing food assistance and distinguishing between groups categorised by vulnerability (Brown and Torre 2024). Large reductions occurred in March 2025 due to USAID cuts. In Uganda, the most vulnerable refugees are supposed to be placed in 'category 1', which receives 40% of the calculated minimum calorie intake to survive[7]. Approximately half of these rations are delivered in-kind and half in cash (ibid). These are the lowest food rations WFP provides in East Africa. In May 2025, WFP reduced the number of refugees receiving aid from 1.6 million to 662,000, and reduced food rations: new arrivals received 60%, category 1, 40%, and category 2, 22%. Prior to the aid cuts, in February 2025, new arrivals received 100% of the ration, category 1 received 60%, and category 2 received 30%. In West Nile, 100% (calculated minimum calorie intake) rations corresponded to UGX 46,000 (approx. 12.25 USD) per person per month and 16.65 kg in-kind food per person per month (UNHCR 2025b). Among refugee households, 65% face food insecurity – compared with 29% of host community households – and malnutrition rates are also on the rise (UNHCR 2026b; Humanitarian Action 2025). It is estimated that 94% of refugee households in Uganda lack the economic capacity to meet essential needs (UNHCR 2026b). The Global Acute Malnutrition increased from 5.4% in 2024 to 7.8% by mid-2025. The highest rate (9.4%) was recorded in West Nile (Humanitarian Action 2025). New arrivals receive basic non-food items on arrival and food rations for the first couple of months (WFP 2025b).

As a consequence of the cutbacks in 2025, education sector partners estimate that close to 400,000 refugee learners in Uganda will be directly impacted (REACH 2025a:6). Because education programmes funding teachers across all settlements have been affected, the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) has deteriorated from 1:77 (2024) to 1:117 (2025) (Humanitarian Action 2025). In Rhino Camp, at the primary school level, the PTR reached 1:163. In addition, programmes supplying school materials, providing financial support, and supporting vulnerable children have been affected, while child protection programmes have also been heavily impacted (ibid.).

In Kenya, in 2025, years after Uganda introduced the prioritisation approach to food assistance, camps adopted the same approach, using four categories. Due to funding shortage, food rations remained low for most of 2025[8], with categories 3 and 4 receiving no assistance; at one point, WFP had to reduce the food assistance to 32% of the ration, the lowest level of food assistance ever documented in Kenya. From February 2026, however, WFP

7 Moderately vulnerable refugees are placed in category 2, which receives 22%; and the least vulnerable are placed in category 3, which is phased out of assistance (WFP 2025b).
8 By August, only 69% of the refugee population in Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei received food assistance (WFP 2025c). The most vulnerable (category 1) received 40%, and the moderately vulnerable (category 2) received 20% (WFP 2025c).

has been able to increase rations for refugees in Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei to 80% and 60% of the ration for categories 1 and 2, and 20% for category 3 (WFP 2026). Yet, in Dadaab, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei, 430,000 – two-thirds of the population – still face high levels of acute food insecurity, and all three camps are categorised as 'emergency' level food insecurity (IPC 2026; WFP 2026). In Kakuma, 65.8% have unmet food needs, and in Kalobeyei it is 74.7% (OCHA 2026). Generally, as indicated in the newly published longitudinal study of the socioeconomic conditions among refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei and their hosts, most refugees (respectively 85% and 87%) are considered 'multidimensionally poor', a slight rise over the past years (World Bank 2026:12).

According to IRC, the main health provider in Kakuma, half their funding was cut with the withdrawal of USAID in 2025; with the introduction of the prioritisation approach to food assistance, they observed a significant rise in malnutrition (IRC 2026b). USAID funded more than two-thirds of refugee food aid in Kenya and more than 70% of education and protection services (Halakhe 2025:9). These developments have heavily affected service levels and quality (NRG 2025).

The education of 150,000 refugee learners was affected by the funding cuts (Halakhe 2025:11). Teacher numbers and learning materials have decreased by 23% in secondary education, while classrooms are overcrowded and attendance is declining (NRG 2025:7). In Kakuma and Kalobeyei, more than 25,000 children are out of school (OCHA 2026). In addition, aid cuts have also affected healthcare. At the beginning of 2025, when aid was cut, 38% of refugees across Dadaab, Kakuma and Kalobeyei reported that long waiting times prevented them from accessing health services, while 24% reported that certain medicines, treatments or services needed were unavailable (REACH 2025b).

In both Kenya and Uganda, the stark decline in the number of households receiving food assistance and the reductions in the amounts of food for those still eligible have redirected their attention toward immediate survival strategies (Degett et al. 2026). Households are less able to provide extra support to neighbours and more vulnerable community members in dire need (such as those with chronic disabling conditions). Conflicts are triggered as people resort to negative coping practices such as theft, forced child marriage, child labour and substance abuse (OCHA 2025a; Degett et al. 2026).

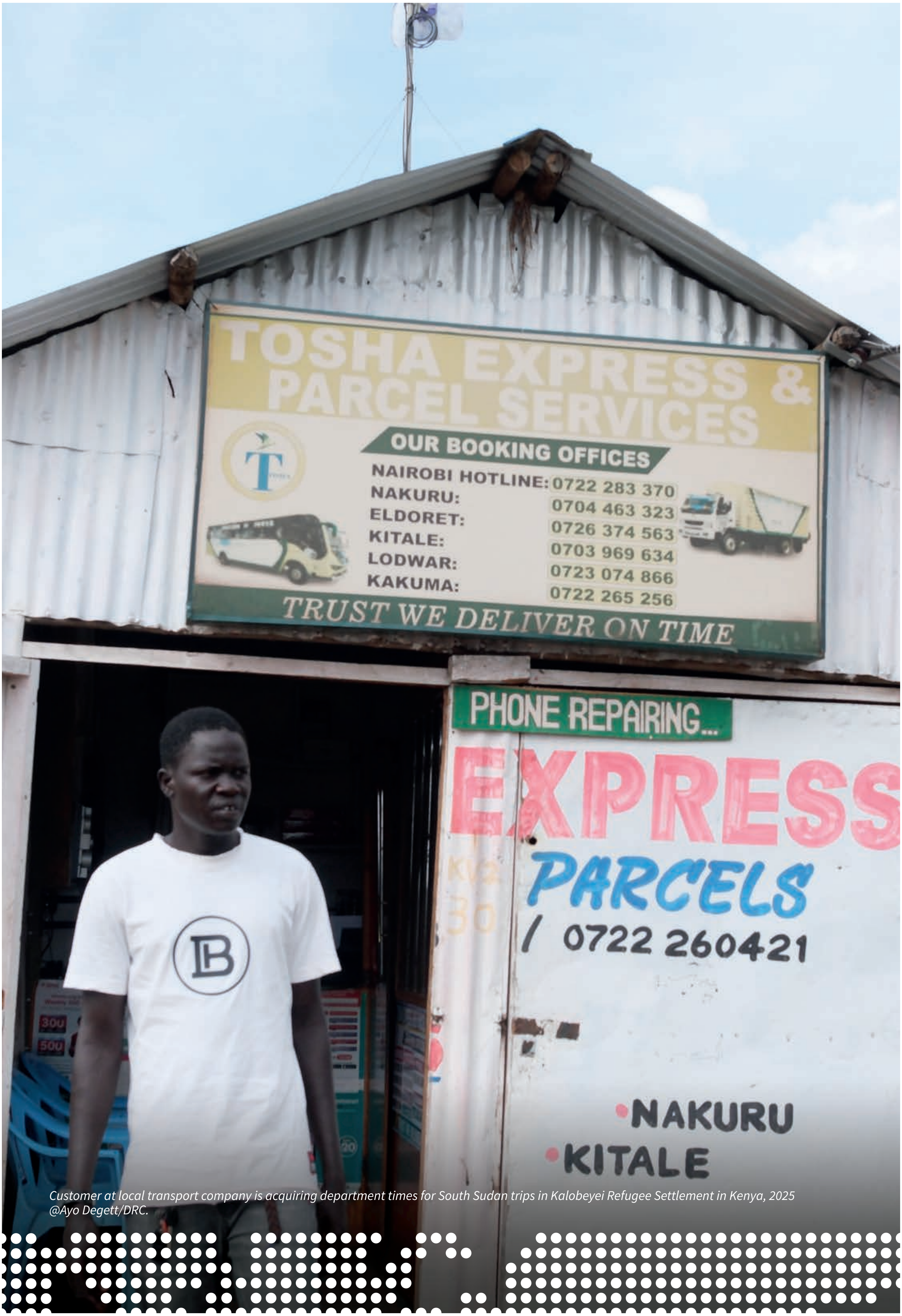
Reduced food assistance affects refugees in ways they actively respond to. Beyond the immediate harms, long-term effects develop gradually (see discussion of "slow violence" and immediate harm (Nixon 2011)). Certain issues stem from efforts to address immediate food insecurity. When a refugee household in a camp loses food aid and income declines, coping mechanisms such as eating less, stealing, borrowing money, or pulling children out of school can lead to cumulative negative effects. Initially, these impacts may be unnoticed. However, over time, they cause deteriorated health, psychological issues, and reduced life expectancy.

3.4. Cost of living

For refugees in Kenya and Uganda, life in camp settings entails key expenses, especially for households with children and family members who need regular medical care. Although access to core services such as education, water, shelter and healthcare is free of charge in principle, there are fees and expenses in practice. For instance, obligatory expenses for a child attending secondary school in Uganda amount to approximately 200USD per year, including exam fees, enrolment fee, school feeding, etc. In comparison, the expenses relating to secondary school in Kenya amount to approximately 80USD per year. For healthcare, households pay for medication and procedures, as well as often costly transport to the health facility. In times of recurring water shortages in specific areas of Rhino Camp, refugees purchase water by the liter at privately installed taps. It is not unusual for families to pay informal rental fees, in order to stay in a more advantageous location or to have a better house. All in all, keeping a household in these settings entails costs that are not always visible to the untrained eye. To better understand these costs, which of them have been affected by the aid cuts - and how so - the research team has followed price developments for key services and commodities over the past couple of years.

Price monitoring is conducted monthly across the same four camp-based markets (Southern and Northern markets in Rhino Camp, Kalobeyei, and Kakuma), and some prices are compared with those in South Sudan (Juba) and urban centres (Arua and Nairobi). The monitoring covers selected products and services across categories based on what refugees themselves defined as essential for daily life and survival. A few of these might be specific to the location, e.g. grass roofing is more common in Uganda in comparison with Kenya where iron roofs are more common. From January 2025 until the writing of this report (March 2026), prices of most fresh food products have stayed relatively stable with some seasonal and situational variations. For household products across the camp-based markets in Kenya and Uganda, the largest price differences occur in the price of soap (an increase of approx. 100%) and over-the-counter drugs such as paracetamol, malaria medication and antibiotics, which have risen by 75-100% across the two research locations. Materials for constructing houses have also increased significantly: iron sheets increasing by approx. 40% in Kenya and bricks by approx. 150%. In Uganda grass for roofing has increased by approx. 60%. Cows for slaughter in Uganda, and goats and sheep in Kenya, have all increased significantly by approximately 300%. While it is beyond this project's scope to conduct a market analysis, the increase in prices of goods, building materials and medicine could partly be explained by global disruptions to supply chains, and other changes could be explained by the market's adaptation to the different sources of income in relation to the phasing out of aid and changing weather conditions (e.g. the increase in grass prices).

The research team is also monitoring the transport prices within the camps and the prices for return to South Sudan. The return mobility prices are monitored from the main departure locations in the camps, in the main destination spots in Juba and periodically along the route through phone interviews with the taxi drivers and transport coordinators who participate in the research. According to our findings, the return transport prices from Kakuma/Kalobeyei to South Sudan (Torit/Magwi/Kapoeta/Narus/Juba) have not increased much. The return transport from Rhino Camp to South Sudan (Kaya/Yei/Juba) however, has increased between January 2025 and January 2026 by 50%. The prices we have tracked for internal commutes in the camps (primarily motorcycle taxis/boda-bodas) have been relatively stable with variations between 15-20%. We are anticipating a further increase in relation to the fuel shortage unfolding globally because of the crisis between the US/Israel and Iran.



Customer at local transport company is acquiring department times for South Sudan trips in Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement in Kenya, 2025 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

4. Staying: Adaptive livelihood practices

Continuing violent conflict and weak human security in South Sudan make return to the home country an unattractive prospect for many. Relative safety and opportunities for education and health care make staying in Kenya or Uganda desirable. But how is staying possible in the face of aid cuts? In this section, we examine the economic options in the two settings and how they are changing.

4.1. Agriculture

In Uganda, cultivating crops and raising livestock to supplement food assistance has long been common. According to UNHCR statistics, only 6% of the population in Rhino Camp has an occupation; most of those 6% are engaged in farming and fishing (UNHCR and OPM 2026). However, farming rarely provides a stable income; it is seasonal and often affected by climate and weather conditions. Most refugees in Rhino Camp are accustomed to farming and consider it their primary source of food. In asylum, they plant kitchen gardens on their plots if they are not too rocky or swampy; however, as more refugees arrive, plot sizes diminish, making it ever more necessary to access additional land from the host community. The land in and around Rhino Camp is held by local kin groups, and many of them previously let refugees cultivate nearby for free or in exchange for portions of the crops harvested. These sharing arrangements are transitioning to cash rent payments (Whyte and Vusso 2025). About eight years ago, when PARTOCA started monitoring access to host farmland, the cost (if any) to use an acre was about 50,000 UGX (14.31 USD) per year. This price increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the years following. The largest increase has occurred from January 2025, when the average price was about 85,000 UGX (24.32 USD), to January 2026, when it reached 200,000 UGX (53.70 USD). As humanitarian support for food decreased, the demand and price for renting hosts' farmland rose, as did conflicts over agreements. In Rhino Camp, hosts and refugees are making written contracts outlining rental conditions. The same is occurring in other refugee-hosting districts, such as Kiryandongo (Nelson 2023) and Adjumani (Vancluysen 2021:112; Syn and Cunial 2024). While the host community can earn an income by renting out their land, the rising prices make it difficult for some refugee households to afford land for cultivation.

Agricultural interactions between hosts and refugees extend beyond individual households. Several large-scale collaborative initiatives exist between refugees and local Ugandan farmers, some encouraged by donors. One association in Rhino Camp counts more than 200 members, has a tractor and a mill, and has developed a savings group. They produce crops for members' own consumption as well as for sale.[9] Access to farmland depends on relations with Ugandan hosts. Most South Sudanese in Rhino Camp come from groups socially and ethnically related to those of the host communities. They speak similar languages, which facilitates communication on arrangements for land use. Historically, people have sought refuge back and forth across the border. Following Amin's fall in the late 1980s, and during the armed conflict in West Nile in the aftermath, many Ugandan residents from and around Rhino Camp became refugees in South Sudan (Harrell-Bond 1986). There, the very families and clans who now live in Rhino Camp

9 An example of larger-scale interaction is found in Kiryandongo, another refugee-hosting district. Asili, one of the largest maize and soybean producers in East Africa, collaborates with smallholder farmers as both customers and suppliers. The produce purchased from refugee farmers is supplying the WFP with grain that is distributed as food rations. Because of the success in this area, Asili sees potential to expand its partnership with refugee farmers into other parts of the country (UK Aid and U-learn 2025:22).

supported them with farmland, shelter, and food. Many from the older generation, whether they fled or stayed behind, share a feeling of gratitude and reciprocity from those years. In addition, many of the refugees in Rhino Camp have a long-term relationship to particular villages and community leaders in the sub-counties, as they have been refugees in these camps several times before, and many adults in Rhino Camp have 'grown up' with these neighbours. Some even went to school with them during the last armed conflict in the 1990s. By the same token, however, it is more difficult for newcomers with weaker social networks to reach agreements with locals and neighbours regarding access to land for cultivation.

In Uganda, rearing livestock is legal in the settlements, and keeping animals like chickens, ducks, and sometimes pigs, is not unusual. Earlier, keeping goats was common in parts of the camp with some access to grazing or fields. Yet, as socio-economic conditions declined, goats have become a popular target of theft, leading to many heated conflicts (Degett et al. 2026). Because of the high risks involved, in combination with the general decline in income, goats have become a rare sight. While it is legal to keep cows, the small 10x10-meter plots make it unfeasible. Refugees from pastoralist backgrounds rarely bring cows from South Sudan; they prefer to keep their herds with extended family members back home. Those who do keep cattle set up arrangements for common herding with local Ugandans who have cattle, another indication of the predominantly positive and fruitful relationship between refugees and their national hosts in Rhino Camp.

In Kenya, agricultural activities are limited for several reasons. The refugee legislation and encampment model restrict refugees from engaging in occupations reserved for the host community. Kitchen gardens are rare, partly because the climate is semi-arid (UNHCR 2025c:48) and partly because most South Sudanese refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei come from pastoralist backgrounds and have limited interest in farming. Before life in displacement, some have cultivated food crops seasonally, but their main economic focus was livestock. There are a few farming initiatives, such as small kitchen gardens in Kalobeyei (WBG 2024:52). Some inhabitants have managed to plant crops along the Laga, a seasonal river between Kakuma 2 and 3. In Kalobeyei, there was an initiative involving greenhouses, but crop theft led to its abandonment.

Keeping livestock in the camps is forbidden. A few courageous individuals bypass the rules and keep cattle or goats in their compounds, but generally, this is not a common source of food or income. People are allowed to rear chickens, but they are not common. Several RLOs in Kakuma engage in chicken rearing, and one has had success with farming mealworms, grasshoppers, and other insects as a protein alternative.

Sunset in the outskirts of a refugee settlement in Uganda, 2026 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

4.2. Casual labour

On a November day in 2025, we wait for Kathrine in the midday sun in front of her house in Kalobeyei. She is diabetic, and on our other visits, it was necessary for her to lie down after a good hour of conversation. Although Kathrine is ill, she is taking care of her own four children and two from her sister. Because of her deteriorating health condition, we are concerned to see the house empty and locked up this time around. As we start to walk back towards the main road, we see the outline of a woman on the horizon, walking steadily but slowly. As she gets closer, we recognise Kathrine; she is waving her hands and calling our names. In one hand, she is carrying a piece of soap wrapped in a small piece of cloth and a blue cup with flour. Kathrine and her household have recently been put in category 2, and because she prioritises letting the five children continue their primary and secondary education, she is responsible for generating income to supplement the limited food rations provided by WFP. Like many other women of her age, she therefore sets off before sunrise to the Somali neighbourhood of Kakuma Camp, where she offers to wash clothes or dishes. After finishing (4-5 hours of work), she receives her payment, often in-kind, such as a cup of flour or a piece of soap, as on this day. At other times, if she is lucky, she is paid in cash.

Leja-leja, informal casual labour, is a common source of income among refugees in both Kenya and Uganda. In the study, households with casual labour are categorised as moderate or stable. Refugees find short-term work from NGOs, the host community, and other refugees. This work does not require special skills, and there are no fixed working hours. Casual work is usually gendered. Women often engage in domestic and small business tasks. These include childcare, washing and ironing clothes, washing dishes, assisting business owners in cleaning and drying cassava for sale, helping in hair salons, preparing food for street kitchens, cleaning or sweeping compounds or shops. Women are also paid to help smear houses and fetch grass for roofing. In some South Sudanese societies, it is not acceptable for married women to do public casual work, especially in the evenings. This might reflect badly on the husband, who would be confronted with degrading comments if his wife is seen washing dishes at the food joints. These types of work are therefore mostly undertaken by women who are unmarried, divorced or widowed.

Men often do small-scale construction work such as digging latrines and rainwater ditches, constructing mud or mudbrick walls, or herding livestock. Payment for such work is either in-kind or cash. Unauthorised small-scale mining is beginning to attract casual labour from the refugee community as well. This is not without risks, and several refugees over the past year have died from accidents (Hawari 2025). Men who are better educated try to avoid this type of work; they might prefer returning to South Sudan to digging other people's latrines. The humanitarian regime itself provides many opportunities. Through cash-for-work interventions, humanitarian actors have been important employers of casual labour. Some unskilled workers are hired by the day; often, refugees just turn up at a particular spot and are noted down for that specific day of work. Others are employed for a month - the so-called 'incentive workers' described below.

Despite many commonalities, casual labour has somewhat different patterns in the two settings. In Uganda, due to the freedom of mobility, it is more common for refugees to engage in casual labour for local Ugandans as well as other refugees. Both men and women undertake casual work on small-scale farms. Often, a group of refugees organises and takes on a few days of work on a particular farm. During the harvesting season, it is common for refugees to be paid in a portion of the harvested crops rather than cash. It also happens that Ugandans from nearby villages organise and are paid to work on the farms rented by the refugees. In fact, this is often expected by the local landowners as an additional exchange. The national casual workers are mostly paid in kind with farm produce.

Casual work in Ugandan towns and cities is possible but rare. The PARTOCA team's long-term data includes individual examples of people who are well-connected in Kampala and Arua and able to work as day labourers in factories or on construction sites. But most businesses prioritise Ugandans, as many people in Uganda are willing to work under dire conditions because of high unemployment rates. In addition, the expenses of life in town are much higher than in the camp, where accommodation is free (or almost free). As confirmed in larger studies across refugee settlements in northern Uganda, the financial costs of seeking casual labour in towns outweigh the advantages for refugees in most instances (see also Omata and Gidron 2025; Gidron 2025).

In Kenya, mobility restrictions mean that day labour out of camp is much more limited. Currently, it is possible to request permission to move for specific purposes, but the process is cumbersome, and the reason for the movement needs to be in alignment with what the Department of Refugee Services (DRS) sees as valuable, such as the pursuit of a Master's degree, a specific training opportunity, etc. Nevertheless, even if refugees were allowed to leave the camp, there are no farms in this semi-arid area where the camp is located where they might find *leja leja* work. However, they have more opportunities within the camp than do their counterparts in Uganda. Kakuma has large and vibrant markets. The population is diverse; some residents, particularly Somalis, have small businesses and access to remittances. They hire other refugees on a casual basis to help in their homes and enterprises, for instance, as shop assistants, hawkers or dishwashers. Remittances to refugees and, thereby, cash flows are greater and so are the markets and options for casual labour. Some INGOs, including DRC, are exploring options for job creation in joint efforts with host communities by linking private Kenyan business owners to casual labour. In such cases, the humanitarian actors often support parts of the arrangement, e.g., transport to a commercial farm or factory, based on the assumption that the setup would eventually be self-sustainable. As the Shirika Plan is being rolled out and mobility restrictions are relaxed, more initiatives linking refugees with casual work in the commercial sector will be possible.

4.3. Regular income from salaries and business

In both Kenyan and Ugandan settings, reliable salaries are rare, and refugees are seldom employed on a regular basis. In 2024, in Kakuma, for instance, only 14% of men and 7% of women were employed in a capacity with regular income (WBG 2024:45). In Uganda, formal employment remains inaccessible, and barriers to work permits hinder economic integration. In the first quarter of 2026, only 656 refugees secured short-term informal employment (UNHCR 2026d). In the study, those who manage to earn a regular income from salaries and business belong to the category of stable households. For Kakuma, Kalobeyei, and Rhino Camp, regular income jobs include work in the informal service sector within the settlements, the informal transport sector, and restaurants. Even though most motorcycle taxi riders (boda-bodas) rent their motorcycles, many do so on a regular basis. Some shops, makeshift movie theatres and roadside restaurants have staff who consider their job to be more than casual labour. In the main streets of Ocea Zone, near the reception centre in Rhino Camp, some restaurants have regular staff, and aspiring staff members must undergo training and an internship to secure more regular agreements. Hairdressers, barbers, and nail salons also employ some staff in more regular positions. In these businesses, staff are paid per day, but their engagement is long-term. On average, such jobs pay about 3,000 UGX per day (a full month of work amounts to approximately 25 USD). In Kenya, similar jobs will pay about 300 KES per day (approximately 70 USD for a full month).

Humanitarian actors are significant providers of more regular work. In addition to daily jobs for unskilled labour, they offer more regular agreements for refugees with specific skills and qualifications. The 'incentive workers' are paid by the month for jobs, including: social work at community level (mostly offered by the humanitarian actor in charge of protection), outreach healthcare (mostly offered by the healthcare providers), enumeration (offered by UNHCR or NGOs), interpretation, water monitoring and, in the case of Kenya, a spot at the Community Peace Protection Team (CPPT). In DRC, many key incentive workers have held the same positions for almost 10 years - longer than most office staff and managers.[10] However, many

10 The institutional knowledge and experience of these community members are indispensable for the humanitarian actors' activities in the settlement. Sadly, many of them have lost their positions due to the funding cuts.

incentive positions in humanitarian organisations are precarious for refugees, who are often hired on short-term contracts, with few benefits, and reduced 'incentive pay' (WBG 2024:6). These positions have also been affected by the reduction in aid. Only a few years ago, DRC in Rhino Camp employed over 500 incentive and casual workers, who worked constructing houses for People with Specific Needs, clearing bush for construction sites, digging drainage canals, preparing hot meals at the reception centre, and off-loading food supplies and non-food items. Currently, DRC only employs 37 incentive workers. Income from these incentive jobs has been instrumental in covering living expenses for these workers and their extended families, including start-up capital for small-scale businesses, expenses for medication and education.

The funding cuts have had broad impacts on the humanitarian sector, which has been a major economic driver in the refugee-hosting regions. In Uganda, businesses dependent on refugee and aid worker spending have been severely affected by the funding cuts (WFP 2025a:6). As a result, the local markets in the camps are visually shrinking. According to WFP, each dollar of aid previously generated over two dollars in local activity (WFP 2025a:6). Not only refugees but also host communities are affected. Especially in Uganda, many have lost their small-scale businesses in the camps and their income from casual labour for humanitarian actors and in the local communities (e.g. host community members were often hired for specific tasks including laying the grass roofs).

Formal employment outside the humanitarian sector is rare. Some positions are filled by South Sudanese, but not all are registered refugees, and some hold Kenyan and Ugandan ID cards. While it is easier for South Sudanese refugees to get jobs in Uganda than in Kenya, the high unemployment in Uganda makes the competition very tough. Even many nationals complain that you need to pay a bribe or have connections to get employment. For many jobs, it is necessary to show papers (such as school certificates), and specific work permits may be required (UK Aid and U-learn 2025:13). Refugees have little chance when nationals themselves struggle to find jobs.

4.4. Business

Lisbeth, a widow and mother of four children in Rhino Camp, was determined to earn enough money to send her children through school. She ran a small shop at the local market, where she sold a limited variety of goods. The years went by, and the children needed to attend secondary school. Demand for school fees grew, as Lisbeth wanted to send them to more expensive schools in Arua town, which were known to be of higher quality. She therefore decided to take a loan and expand her business by renting land near the camp, farming maize and selling the produce at the market.

At this time, she had two more children with her new husband. Her agricultural business expanded to include several crops (beans, nuts, cabbage), which she sold at the local market. It grew enough that she could transport and sell them in Arua town. In fact, she was able to financially support her oldest son through his diploma as a clinical officer and her oldest daughter started studying at nursing school, levels of education which rare in Rhino Camp.

At the peak of her local business venture, in 2023, however, the entire household, counting 13 members with all dependents, was put on category 3 (removed from food rations). At the same time, the maize production failed for several seasons because of inconsistent rainfall. Lisbeth knew that she had to change tracks and diversify her business to sustain her income. She therefore decided to take the maize production to a location near a river, where she rented another plot of land from the host community. At the same time, she took another loan from a local farm collective and started a piggery and a small poultry farm. By mid-2026, she had more than 500 birds for resale; her daughter was able to complete nursing school, and she had enough savings to let her son open a small local drug shop generating income for him to support his siblings' education.

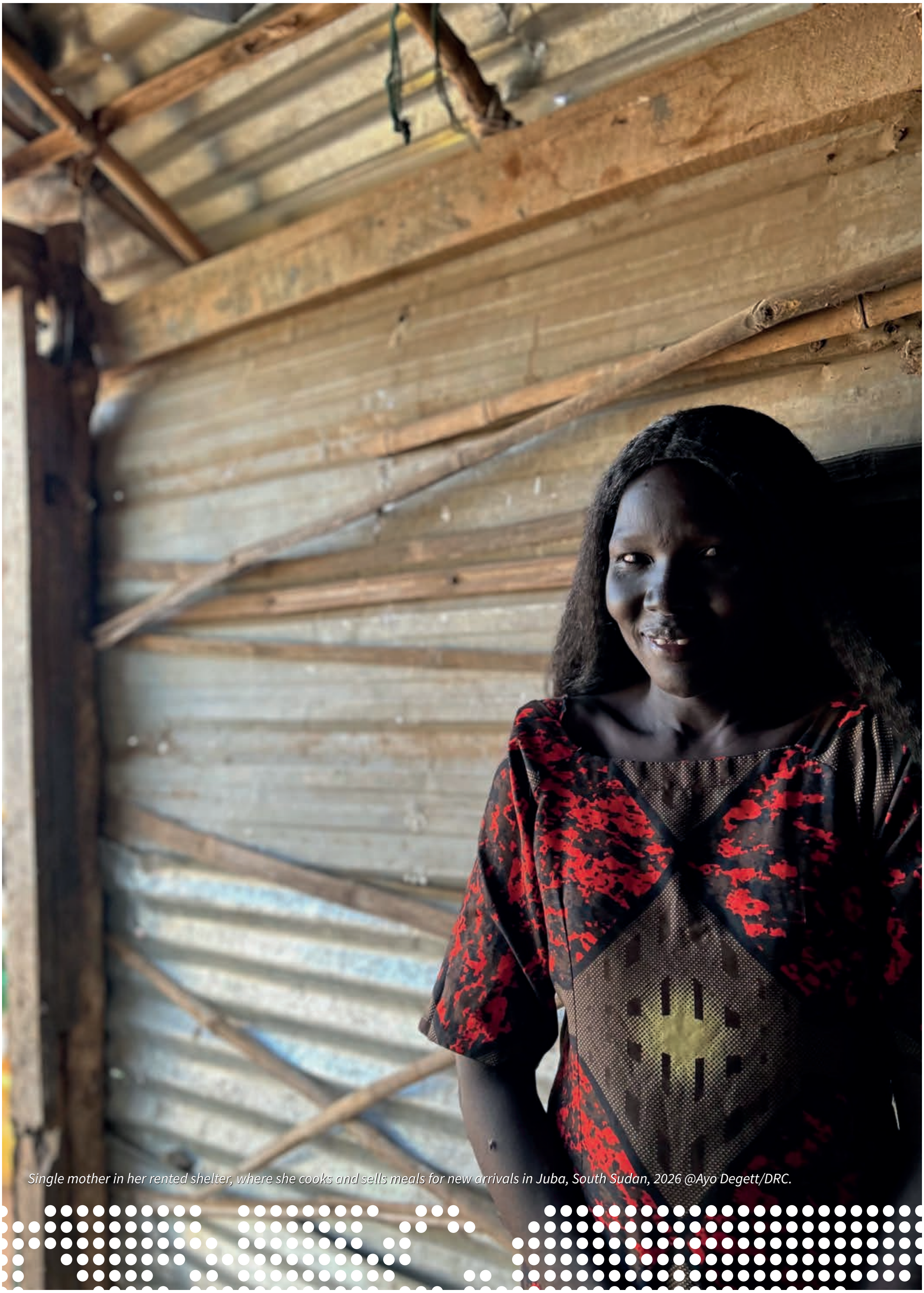
As Lisbeth's case shows, some individuals in Kakuma and Rhino Camp start and sustain businesses that provide stable income and even opportunities for promising futures for their children. Often, these people have strong connections to actors or kin who can help with start-up loans and diversify their businesses to survive dry periods in rainfall and donor funding, as did Lisbeth. While these innovative business ventures exist, the overall deprived economic situation in the camps means that many of these local refugee business owners have more relatives they need to support, mouths they need to feed and therefore less capital to improve their business.

Lisbeth's household is among those we categorise as 'stable-income'. For low-income households in the study, it is common that at least one member is elderly or has a health condition. Given the difficulty of finding employment and the irregularity of casual labour, small businesses are a popular source of income for many refugees in both Kenya and Uganda. As Lisbeth's example shows, refugees constantly adjust their efforts to earn income, and in tumultuous times, such as the aid cuts in 2025, social networks are important for managing financial risks. Women without their own shops often cook food to sell on the street and in small restaurants. Mothers might prepare the dough for mandazi (fried bread), which elder daughters might cook and sell near the entrance to the secondary school or health clinics. Reselling of common commodities in small portions is widespread in all camp settings. Traders buy in the market and transport goods to another location, where they sell the small amounts that buyers can afford. Small enterprises sell services too, with tailoring, hairdressing, and phone charging among the most common.

These initiatives were significant for household economies even before the aid cuts. Now they assume even greater importance, as they are increasingly sought after while also becoming increasingly rare opportunities. But as sustainable frameworks for self-reliance, they are problematic. The market is weak, especially within the camps and settlements. Refugees have little money, and many entrepreneurs compete for the same customers for daily necessities. Entrepreneurs with no cushion are vulnerable when school fees or medical emergencies take their operating capital. Those who are most successful either have another source of income to cover larger expenses or no dependents to support (Gidron 2026). Many who have access to some finances aim to diversify their income and thereby also spread the risk if one option fails. In the market areas in both Kakuma and Rhino Camp, the same business people are spread across several 'sectors'. For instance, a local businessman might own a shop specialising in phone charging, a motorcycle he rents to boda-boda riders, and a food joint. In the study, one moderate-income household in Rhino Camp has managed to make ends meet since they were phased out of food assistance by producing and selling bricks. This household diversifies its income through subsistence farming and is currently rearing chickens, which they will soon begin selling. In this way, they have spread the risk, and although the harvest this season was unfavourable, they make ends meet.

In Uganda, where refugees are allowed to move freely, their intermingling with Ugandans means that, at least in some areas, host populations and refugees patronise each other's businesses and even compete for customers. But enterprises are modest and tend to duplicate one another. Small markets with simple commodities exist in Rhino Camp. For a larger, more diverse market, inhabitants of Rhino Camp must travel to Arua.

In Kenya, businesses benefit from the size and composition of the Kakuma market. The camp population is diverse, with some refugees having strong business skills. There is, therefore, a greater variety of enterprises concentrated within the confines of the camp.



Single mother in her rented shelter, where she cooks and sells meals for new arrivals in Juba, South Sudan, 2026 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

4.5. Remittances, loans and favours from kin

Remittances play an important role in camp life, although they are generally rather small and irregular for the South Sudanese who are the focus of this study. They are almost invariably sent by kin, often in response to a request. The line between remittances and loans is sometimes blurry. Some support is given on the condition that it be repaid at some point, although the receiver and the provider might know that chances of returning the money are slim.

Almost all the remittances mentioned by interlocutors in this study came from relatives in South Sudan or within the same country (e.g., a brother working as casual labour in a construction site in Juba or an uncle working as an incentive staff for an NGO in another camp). Camp-based South Sudanese rarely receive monetary support from relatives in the global North. In a recent study among refugees in Pagirinya (in Adjumani District), 41% of 112 household respondents reported receiving remittances from relatives in South Sudan over the past year (Omata and Gidron 2025:114).

For refugees in urban areas, support from relatives elsewhere is crucial (Gidron 2026). Almost all the households that the research team is engaging with in the urban areas outside Rhino Camp and Kakuma receive remittances, which appear significant for funding life in town. For example, Sylvia, a woman in her late 70s with multiple health conditions, was living in a cramped house on the outskirts of Arua with relatives. Once in a while, she received a cash transfer from her daughter, who struggled to support her mother and children in Uganda through a small shop in Juba re-selling flip-flops and foam loafers (see also sections below on mobility to urban areas).

4.6. Realising assets and restructuring households

A South Sudanese woman, in Rhino Camp, we call Nancy, moved to a different area of the camp when she was cut off food assistance in 2025 to better acquire land for farming. She planned to sell the house, but one of her neighbours, Kate, was in dire need of shelter, and Nancy therefore allowed Kate to stay in the house for the time being. Shortly after, Nancy's family took control of the house, leaving Kate with no choice but to move into a poorly built house with a leaky roof on her estranged husband's compound.

In Uganda, refugees like Nancy and Kate are assigned plots and build their own houses, except for those with specific needs, who are allocated semi-permanent houses (or at least this was the case before the funding for shelter programmes was downsized). The houses themselves and the location of the plots constitute an asset that can be realised. Selling or renting houses or plots is common, despite being against the rules set by the camp management, and it often leads to conflict. Some wish to relocate to an area of the camp closer to relatives or with better farming opportunities. Some who have good houses or attractive locations rent them to others. In an earlier study by PARTOCA, a single mother of five who had been allocated a central spot in Rhino Camp saved enough money from renting out her house to put her two oldest children through secondary school (see Degett 2023). Some sell their homes because they are desperately in need of money, for instance, to pay for the return journey to South Sudan, move to other settlements or pay off debt.

In Kenya, refugees in Kakuma build their own houses on assigned plots, while those in Kalobeyei are allocated permanent brick-and-iron-sheet houses (except new arrivals who start out in houses made from plastic sheets and poles). Refugees are not allowed to sell their houses, which are under the authority of DRS in Kalobeyei. In Kakuma the allocated plots are under authority of DRS and refugees are therefor not supposed to sell or rent out houses on the plots. When leaving, refugees are supposed to turn them over and obtain a document confirming they have done so. However, it is possible to get around this regulation, and refugees sell their houses to raise cash for moving elsewhere, just as they do in Uganda.

Not only are houses exchanged, but households are also restructured in response to aid cuts and budget tightening. Refugees may sell a house if they can move into the households of others. Merging households allows the sale of duplicate household items and is a common practice, as it frees up immediate cash to pay off debt, cover medical bills and other immediate needs. Among poor families, children are taken out of school, both because of the costs of schooling as described in the section on conditions, and so they can help generate an income.

One of the most drastic ways of restructuring a household is to marry off a daughter. Not only does she leave, thereby diminishing the number of children to support. Her marriage is likely to bring bridewealth to her family. Child, early and forced marriage are linked to economic hardship as well as cultural practices. These are often arranged by the girl's family to alleviate financial burdens (Concina, Drzewiecki, and JRS 2024:64). An increase in early and forced marriages has been noted by the research interlocutors as an indirect effect of pressure on the household economy. In both Uganda and Kenya it is illegal to engage in a sexual relationship with girls under 18 years of age, and it can lead to many years in prison for defilement. Our data shows that in Kakuma and Rhino Camp, girls and young women are typically forced into marriage with older men in exchange for dowry when they visit - or are tricked or coerced into going to - South Sudan (Degett et al. 2026).
In comparing how the law on defilement is practised in the two refugee contexts, it appears to be more emphasised **in Uganda**. This indicates that women frequently return to South Sudan for marriage, even when both partners reside in Rhino Camp. Many of the young women tracked by the research team exemplify this pattern. One of them was a 17-year-old girl who was forcefully married to a much older man. Although the girl tried her best to escape, extended family members dragged her to South Sudan, as an agreement for the marriage had already been made, and dowry had changed hands. She somehow managed to escape South Sudan, was later married to her Ugandan sweetheart, and became pregnant right away. When the severe budget cuts hit the health services for refugees, she gave birth. The child was healthy, but the bleeding continued, and because of the shortage of transport to the referral hospital and a severely stretched healthcare system, she died a few days later.

A recent study in Kakuma, Kenya, indicates that 52% of South Sudanese girls are married before 18, with 9% married before 15 (Concina, Drzewiecki, and JRS 2024:66). In contrast, among Kenyan nationals, 23% are married before 18 and 4% before 15. Early marriage is often associated with early pregnancies, which hinder girls' access to education and frequently lead to school dropout (ibid.:64-65). Additionally, boys in secondary school who impregnate girls sometimes drop out to avoid punishment or to find work to support the girl and child (ibid.). The research team tracks several young men and women who have faced social ostracism due to pregnancies and children born to teenage mothers.

Most of the households in the study that see no other option than merging households, taking children out of school, or marrying off daughters to cope with their lack of income are categorised as poor. Several households classified as having moderate or stable income earn income from rent or by selling their house to relocate to an area of the camp with better farming opportunities.

4.7. Debt and begging

One of the most frequently reported coping practices in both settings is borrowing money. This is especially prevalent among the poor households in the study. One of the greatest problems is the inability to repay. In interviews with people departing, high debt in the camp, combined with no prospect of ever clearing it, is reported as one of the main reasons for returning to South Sudan. Debt is accumulated with shopkeepers who allow customers to buy food on credit. Some people owe money to several different shops. Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) experience that members cannot repay their loans. Private moneylenders charge very high interest and sometimes require a borrower to name someone else to stand surety. If the borrower returns to South Sudan, another assumes the debt. Preliminary data suggests that excessive debt to moneylenders is more common in Kenya than in Uganda, where there seem to be more checks on interest rates.

For the poorest families in our study, begging is reported as a frequent practice. According to the interlocutors, begging in the market is becoming more frequent. While it may be possible to ignore the entreaties of a stranger in the market, it is difficult to refuse help to family members and neighbours. Even when they do not explicitly beg, there is a very strong moral commitment to share food with them. Alex, a young man in Kakuma who is physically disabled and uses a wheelchair, explained in an interview in October 2025:

> *'Once you get a category one [the highest amount of food assistance], let's say within [the] family, we can share. We understand. But to your neighbours also, you cannot eat alone while your neighbour is having nothing (...) So when I bring it [the food rations] home, I distribute it, because I cannot eat alone.'*

Despite his vulnerability and limited livelihood opportunities, Alex, like many other South Sudanese, feels a strong responsibility to share his food ration with his relatives and neighbours. It is culturally inappropriate - or even taboo - to turn down neighbours and relatives (especially children) who come to one's compound looking for a meal.

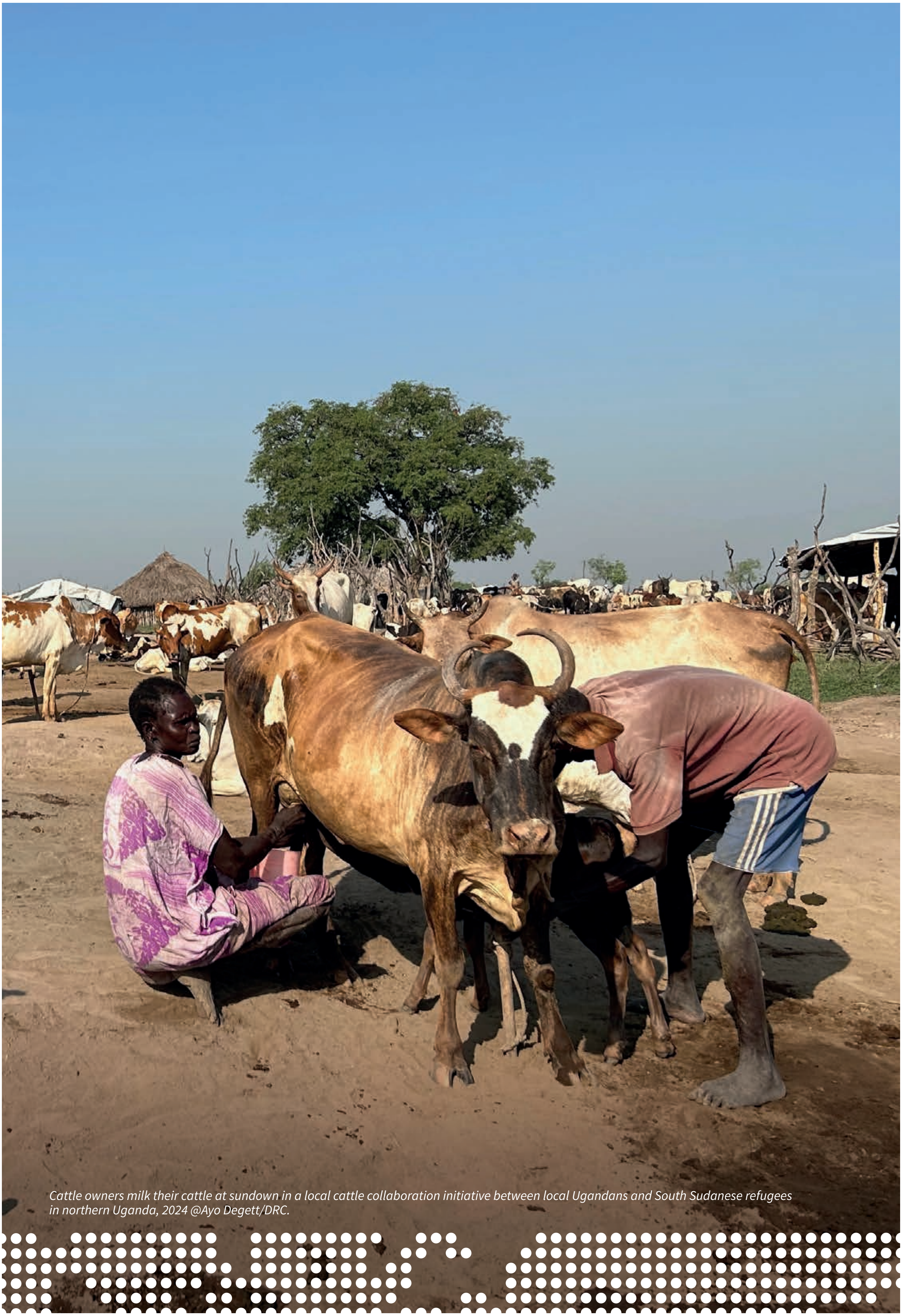
4.8. Theft

Community members report a sharp rise in theft and crime since the reduction in aid and food assistance at the beginning of 2025. Yet, due to the limited police forces, much of this is not being formally reported. These cases range from minor ones – such as children stealing food – to larger cases of organised theft and robbery by gangs. The research team has recorded many instances of desperate situations where people are attacked by angry crowds for stealing something as small as a handful of beans. In Kakuma, the CPPT have recorded an increase in theft and robbery since the aid reductions but oftentimes the suspects are unknown and thus cannot be arrested until identified (Degett et al. 2026). At one of the police posts in Kalobeyei, the officers have likewise noted an increase in these cases. They stated that as of October 2025, they received approximately five cases of theft and robbery per day. In comparison, in October 2024 (prior to the heavy funding cuts) theft and robbery cases were reported approximately once a week (ibid).

While the aid reductions indirectly cause an increase in theft, they have also diminished the number of security actors in the settlements. The CPPT has been reduced in number and the customary community safety actors have been closed down by the camp management, leaving the residents with few options for support if they are robbed or attacked. In time, if developments continue, this decrease in the safety net will likely have serious implications. When thieves are caught, mobs can beat them to death if police do not intervene. Other minor irregularities within this category include the manipulation of the refugee registration system, as illustrated in the case below.

Nyalat is a South Sudanese refugee woman in her thirties and a caregiver for seven children: three of her own and four of her sister-in-law. Recently, the household was placed in category 3 and no longer receives the food assistance they previously depended on. A neighbour advised Nyalat to 'hire' someone from the host community to register as a new arrival and the family head of Nyalat's children. This would allow the children to be re-registered and the family would get a new food attestation card. It is illegal for host community members to register as refugees; however, for a bribe of around 70,000 to 100,000 Ugandan shillings some are willing to do it. Nyalat decided to borrow some money and found a national woman named Sarah, willing to register as the family head of Nyalat's children. They switched clothes for Sarah to appear like a South Sudanese woman, and she took the children to the reception centre where she stayed for two weeks until the registration process was complete. Afterwards, Sarah handed over the attestation card to Nyalat who started receiving money. However, when time came for receiving food assistance, the family head needed to go to the food distribution centre. Sarah, however, decided to keep most of the food for herself and in the end withdrew from their agreement altogether, also keeping the attestation card. Nyalat was in despair and went to a host community leader to seek help. The leaders decided that since Sarah could not pay back the amount she had been paid to register as head of the family, she had to give the attestation card back to Nyalat and in return Nyalat would continue to give Sarah a food ration corresponding to a family size of one.

Some households in Rhino Camp who were placed in category 3 during the recent aid reduction, and thus phased out of the food assistance, attempt to re-register some household members, mainly children under the age of five, whose biometrics have not previously been captured in the system. Such illegal arrangements are risky. In the case of Nyalat and Sarah, community leaders sometimes stepped in to facilitate a solution (Degett et al. 2026). Yet generally, the increase in crime and theft also has a significant impact on trust among refugees and between refugees and hosts, which affects the social cohesion and options for improved relationship building between the two neighbouring groups (WBG 2024). The PARTOCA research team has conducted research and published findings on conflict dynamics, including theft and crime, in the same research locations as this study, with the latest report analysing the effects of the aid cuts (see Degett and Whyte 2023; Degett et al. 2024; Degett et al. 2026).



Cattle owners milk their cattle at sundown in a local cattle collaboration initiative between local Ugandans and South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda, 2024 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

5. Moving: Livelihood and out-of-camp mobility

As it becomes harder to survive in the locations assigned to refugees, many move in search of livelihood and support. In this section, we describe the kinds of mobility people are undertaking. Again, there are some common patterns and also important differences between conditions in Kenya and Uganda.

5.1. Movements within, between and near the camps

The most common movements are within the camps. As described above, it is common for families to merge households to save money and gain immediate cash by selling duplicate household items. Movements are informed by social networks within and around the camps. Those who have been phased out of food rations and have siblings or in-laws with better access to food, income, or services in another part of the camp or settlement will likely move there in times of precarity.

In Uganda, it is common for refugees to move between camps if they have family members or relatives who can support or host them. These movements tend to happen more because of needs than as strategies for income generation. Food rations are attached to the registered location of residence. So, if you choose to self-settle in Adjumani or Bidibidi while registered to live in Rhino Camp, you will need to travel far to get your food assistance if you are on the food log. In previous years, the cost and trouble of transport related to food distribution restrained some people from these internal movements. With far fewer on food assistance, people seem to be self-settling with less hesitation, and several areas of Rhino Camp are left empty, especially those far from markets, schools and healthcare facilities. Some refugees with a larger network move to areas with soil and weather more conducive to farming. In the interviews in Rhino Camp in 2025, the research team engaged with refugees who had friends and family members who rented farm plots in Obongi, Bweyale and Bushia. In these instances, the refugees are not moving their families. They go alone with the purpose of farming for a few months and come back to the camp with the produce for eating and selling.

In Uganda, intermarriage between refugees and host communities is common. Many refugees have lived and returned to the same areas for decades and have gone to school, worked, or lived next to the same people in the nearby villages for generations. Most of the families interviewed for this study have at least one family member who has married someone from the host community. In the nearby villages, most belong to the Lugbara ethnic group and some to the Ugandan Kakwa all of whom speak languages similar to those of most Central Equatorian refugees. Across Uganda and South Sudan, a woman usually moves into her husband's family upon marriage. Accordingly, it is common to see Ugandan women in the settlements, who easily blend in. Refugee women who marry Ugandan men most often move in with the families of their husbands in the villages bordering the settlement. Thus, much of the rural movement out of the camp is due to intermarriage.

In Kenya, it was anticipated that the populations in Kakuma Camp would relocate voluntarily to Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, given its greater openness. For several reasons, this did not happen. The income-earning opportunities or chances to be 'self-reliant' were not perceived to be better in Kalobeyei (Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2020a) and people's existing social networks in Kakuma outweighed the potential opportunities offered in Kalobeyei (Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2020b).

5.2. Movements to urban areas

In Uganda, the research team engaged with 17 households[11] in the urban areas near Rhino Camp. Many of them are staying in Arua because of access to healthcare, such as a woman the research team has followed over the past two years. Mary was fortunate that she and her son (who suffers from a developmental disability), were able to stay with an elderly woman from the same ethnic group without paying rent. Most of the families the team follows have few income options in the urban area, and Mary still depends on the food ration, which she picks up at the camp every month, as they are not distributed at the urban areas. If her son did not require frequent access to the district hospital, she would stay with her children in Rhino Camp and support the household through farming. A recently published brief on camp-based refugees' movement to nearby urban areas in Uganda concurs. Based on 645 interviews with refugees in Kyangwali and Pagirinya settlements, the study finds that refugees who genuinely take advantage of their freedom to move into towns tend to have financial resources and support networks that help them develop their lives and income opportunities (Gidron 2025:1). All urban households in our study have these characteristics: They have moved to town for survival and are staying at the mercy of extended family members. Or, they have an established network in Arua and resources to run a small business, such as a shop or motorcycle transport. In all cases, households keep their refugee registration open, although most have been placed in category 3 (phased out of food); only a few households (Mary's and two others) are still receiving food rations. Households keep their registration active in case their category becomes eligible for food assistance in the future or in case of potential ad hoc distributions.

In comparison with the large number of refugees in the settlement, the number of people moving to urban areas is small. Staying in the settlement is cheaper because shelter and access to water are free. Although many would enjoy some of the advantages of town, they are too poor to afford life in the urban and peri-urban areas. Mary, like several other poor members of the cohort in the study, is only able to stay in Arua because someone else is hosting her. Few households in Rhino Camp have this option available. Some stable households can cover town rent, but for poorer families, especially as food aid reduces, living rent-free in settlements with subsistence farming options seems to be the best choice under current circumstances. Overall, there may be a small rise in young people seeking employment and income opportunities in Arua, but for most, movements to urban areas beyond the settlement remains infrequent and rarely connected to income-generating activities, mirroring the findings from Kyangwali and Pagirinya (Gidron 2025:2). **In Kenya**, the research team follows four households on the outskirts of Nairobi. Due to current mobility restrictions for refugees, the households in urban areas are fewer and less mobile than those in Uganda. In contrast with Uganda, most of the refugees the team engages with in Nairobi receive remittances from relatives abroad, and supplement these with small-scale business activities including hairdressing, barbershops and beauty salons, handicrafts and market trade. The poorest households in Nairobi receive ad hoc charity from churches, which are often the meeting point for ethnic groups. One entrepreneur found a unique business opportunity exporting traditional dresses to her ethnic diaspora living in Canada. She contributes school fees for a large number of children in her extended family in line with the redistribution pattern for the few who make a decent income.

Both Nairobi, Kampala, and nearby towns like Arua, Koboko, Lodwar, and Eldoret host South Sudanese students from settlements on scholarships, often with stipends for living expenses. Refugees in Rhino Camp who can afford private education send their children to boarding schools in Arua and save money for fees.

11 Some of the households in the study have moved 'base' within the period of the study (2025-2026), which is also one of the points of this section. 17 is the number of households based in town at the time of writing this report.

5.3. Return mobility

Refugees from both Kenya and Uganda face severe challenges in returning to South Sudan. First of all, the journey is expensive, and people struggle to pay for a place in shared taxis, at a price of about 100 USD per adult (including bribes at roadblocks and transfer fees at police checkpoints). Secondly, the journey involves many risks.[12] Vehicles travelling to South Sudan from both Kenya and Uganda report frequent robberies and the team has received several reports of kidnapping children along some of the routes (Degett et al. 2026).

Despite the risks involved, refugees are returning to South Sudan in large numbers. According to UNHCR and IOM, approximately 14,000 South Sudanese cross into South Sudan each month, with an average of 4-5000 from Kenya and similar numbers from Uganda[13] (others are from DR Congo, Ethiopia and Sudan). IOM is monitoring three official crossing points, but based on information from interviews and observations at the border points by the peer researchers, people use many informal routes for crossing, and it is likely that the number of returnees is much higher. People tend to use these more informal routes to avoid being removed from their UNHCR registration (on grounds of voluntary repatriation), which would cut them out of the food log. Staying registered with UNHCR makes it easier to return, and others can collect their food rations while they are away.

In Kenya, there are few routes from Kakuma and Kalobeyei into South Sudan. The most common one passes via Lokichogio to the border town of Nadapal, and onwards to Kapoeta and Torrit. The trip is long and exhausting. Few people in Kakuma and Kalobeyei are from these southern parts of South Sudan, so a long journey lies ahead for them once they cross the border. Interviews with elected and customary community leaders confirmed that, despite the risks, many people choose to return on foot. An elderly Dinka leader mentioned in an interview that about 500 people from his community have returned on foot between July and September 2025. Although we cannot verify these numbers, they clearly indicate that informal movements are occurring.

In Uganda, there are many crossing points from Rhino Camp into South Sudan. The most common routes are from Rhino Camp via Arua to Koboko and via Kaya border crossing to Yei in South Sudan, or via Nimule border crossing directly to Juba. As with refugees in Kenya, those in Uganda tend to avoid formally registering their return.

This study engages with refugees from Kenya and Uganda who plan to return, as well as those who have arrived in Juba recently. Those going back to other locations are contacted by phone upon return. Across the interviews, the main driver for return is reported to be the lack of access to food and income. None of the people interviewed are driven by ambitions for engaging in entrepreneurship, specific income-generating activities, or setting up profitable businesses. Most who decide to return do so because they see no other options for survival. Debt is often cited as a motivation for returning. Almost all households interviewed in Kakuma and Kalobeyei and Rhino Camp who are preparing to return mention that they need to leave because of debt to the shops and community members that they cannot repay. Sometimes relatives remaining in the camp are held responsible for the debt. As more people have been unable to repay their loans, it has become more difficult to get credit, as shopkeepers have become more selective about whom to lend to. As a result, most shops in the research locations in Kenya and Uganda have stopped payment on credit, according to our interviews with shop owners. People also borrow from relatives to facilitate a return, as in the case of James.

12 As part of the ASPIRE project, the PARTOCA team tracked safety incidents in South Sudan via an RLO that keeps online records of recorded clashes and safety incidents. Data confirm the rise in kidnapping of children in these areas, which are hit by extreme poverty and armed actors desperate for income. According to the extended families interviewed, these children are sold and traded to work on agricultural and household tasks.

13 During September 2025, 4,249 crossed from Kenya, while 4,772 crossed from Uganda (IOM 2025a) and similar trends were registered in following months (IOM 2025b).

"Okay, so I decided to bring the wife [of my brother] and her two children here [Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement] after... after my brother died last year in South Sudan [murdered in a cattle raid in 2024]. I decided for her to live here [with me]. But now there's no… I cannot get any support from anyone… So they will go back to the country so that they can dig [farm]. We are in category three [the family has been removed from food assistance]. Paying for the transport [home], I called them back in South Sudan. I requested one cow to be sold and send the money… in the future we're going to return it."

James, 19-year-old secondary school student, queuing for a seat at the local taxi platform transporting people back to South Sudan. Kalobeyei Settlement, Kenya, October 2025.

When James' brother was killed, he inherited the widow and children as is the custom in his community. They were sent to him in Kalobeyei for protection and care. James was in school, barely an adult, and not well situated to cater for extra mouths to feed. But family solidarity meant he could not object to this arrangement. The sister-in-law was registered as a refugee and placed on food assistance, which helped make ends meet until they were removed following the funding cuts in 2025. They decided that sending her back to South Sudan, where she can at least engage in subsistence farming, was the best option. To support this solution, James asked an extended family member across the border to sell a cow and transfer the money to pay for the ticket and irregular roadblock fees (approximately 100 USD). James said he will 'hustle' to make it through his final year in secondary school, which will open better opportunities for him in future. Perhaps he or another relative will repay the loan for the cow.

Many families say they will return to their rural homes and support themselves from subsistence farming, *if* and *when* it is safe. The hope of returning to their own homes may be one reason people go to Juba rather than to large cities in Kenya and Uganda. The journey to Juba is expensive, but life is somewhat cheaper in comparison with Nairobi and Kampala, and it may be easier to earn an income. Juba is safe for now and is a step closer to home. Some young people interviewed engage in 'split-return' (Harpviken 2014:57; REF and Samuel Hall 2023:5), which involves going to a larger town, such as Juba, and trying their luck with low-paid *leja-leja* (casual work) with the ambition of sending remittances to family members left in the camp. In these instances, what we see from following the same households is that those who depend on services, especially education or healthcare, stay behind and hope to receive economic support from those who have returned. These patterns are also reported in a study of return movements from Pagirinya in Adjumani District (Omata and Gidron 2025). In line with other observations, our data from Kenya and Uganda suggest that South Sudanese mostly engage in 'survivalist mobility' or 'distress migration', rather than having a strategy for income (Gidron 2025; Omata and Gidron 2025; REF and Samuel Hall 2023; WFP 2025a).

5.4. 'U-turn' movements and exploratory visits

In Kenya, most of the refugees from Kakuma and Kalobeyei are from villages located many days (or weeks) of travel into South Sudan. Moreover, mobility restrictions mean that once a refugee leaves Kenya, it is difficult to return.

In Uganda, many refugees go back and forth to South Sudan, a pattern locally referred to as 'u-turns'. Other scholars working with South Sudanese return mobility have reported similar tendencies in return patterns, describing them as circular or fluid (Omata and Gidron 2025; Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020; Leonardi and Santschi 2016). These shorter trips are possible because many inhabitants of Rhino Camp are originally from South Sudanese villages and towns near the border. They can leave Rhino Camp in the morning and arrive in their village or urban area by evening the same day. This situation is not unique to Uganda, it is also recorded in a recent study from Gambella, Ethiopia (REF and Samuel Hall 2023:28). This pendular approach is not necessarily motivated by aspirations of much better living conditions but rather by options for survival. Rather than moving with an intention to stay in South Sudan permanently, people evaluate their limited options and decide to go where options appear slightly more bearable for the time being. As explained by an interlocutor in the above-mentioned study, many South Sudanese keep one leg in South Sudan and one leg in another country for safety reasons.

In Uganda, it is clear from discussions with refugees that some of the 'u-turn' movements are exploratory visits where family heads return to investigate the possibilities for a decent life at home, including the state of their farmland, their cattle and the level of insecurity. Before crossing, people seek information over the phone about the state of affairs at home from relatives there. Yet another method is simply monitoring returning vehicles at the border. Drivers know about any recent roadside robberies or insecurities, as they have just passed the same roads. In October 2025, for instance, a member of a household the team is following tried to return to South Sudan for a visit, but at the border point, all departing vehicles turned back a few kilometres into South Sudan because of information about clashes affecting road passage.

Social media is a popular channel for gaining information about events and security levels at home. An RLO that the research team has engaged over the past eight years has developed a so-called 'rumour tracker' to map and check reports of security events in South Sudan. Refugees who want to confirm the validity of information on social media or from relatives can send or call in the key information. Over the following days, the teams from the RLO do their best to triangulate the information with their sources in the relevant locations and confirm if it is true or false. This service is used actively by many refugees interviewed in Uganda.

5.5. 'Onward movers'

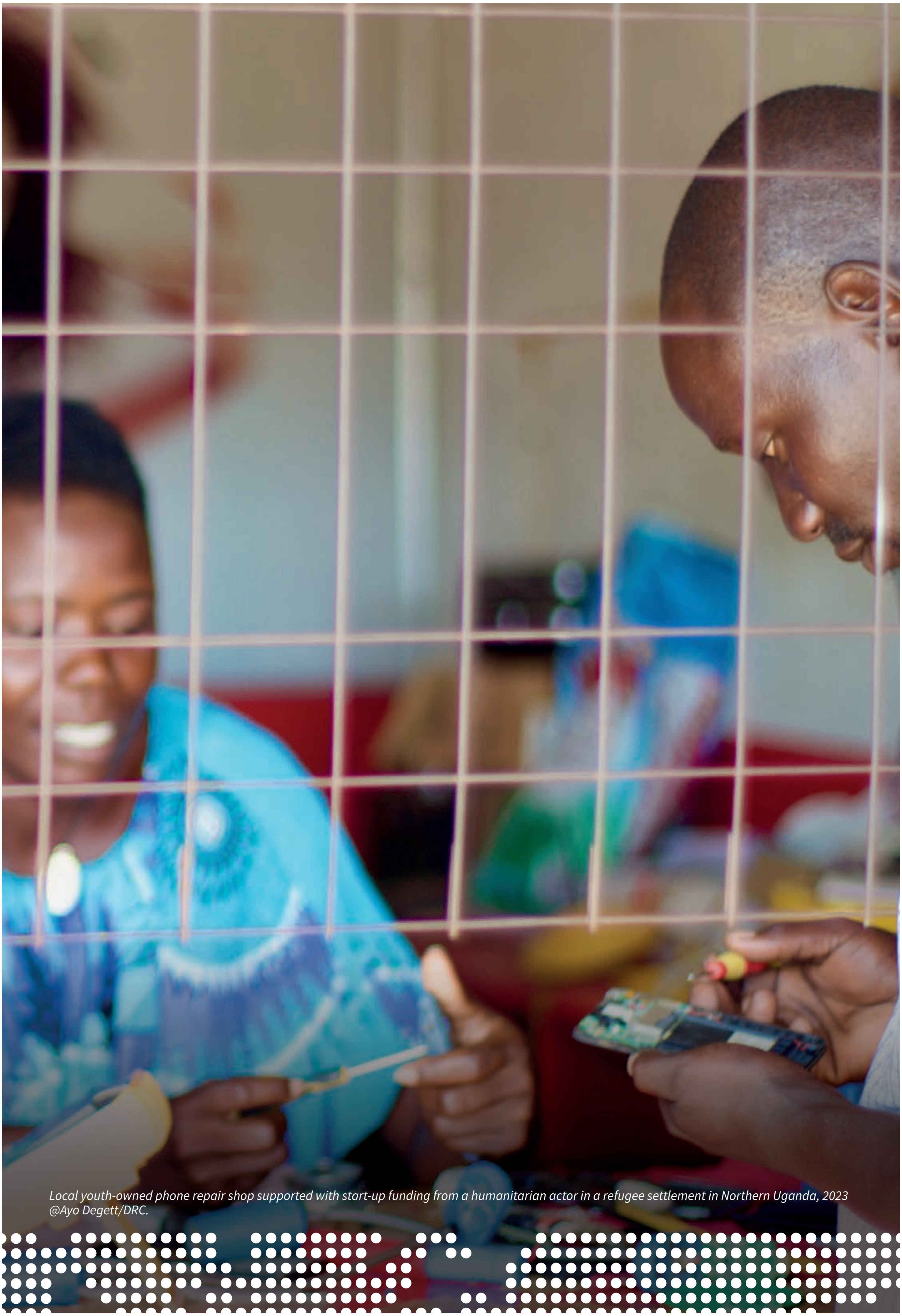
'When I was cut out of food rations, I decided that my business is not satisfying the needs of my house[hold]...I decided to remove the [iron] sheet [roof] of this room ... to sell them... I got around 300 or 200 US dollars in total so that the family can travel to Uganda. To relocate to Uganda, to work because there, people cultivate.'

For Sarah, a South Sudanese refugee living in Kakuma, her only income comes from selling minor food items, such as onions, salt and oil, which she keeps in a bucket (see also Degett et al. 2026). According to her, returning to South Sudan is not an option, but she has very limited options to feed her 12 dependents and expects transport to Uganda will cost around 500 USD. After some time, Rose was able to collect enough money and relocate to Rhino Camp. Rose could be characterised with the popular term 'onward mover', someone who moves onwards to a third country, if staying and returning are both exhausted as options in their opinion. In a similar case in Uganda, Jane was phased out of food assistance due to the aid cuts. Currently, she and her children are surviving by eating leaves collected in the forest, and sometimes neighbours support them with a meal. Since Jane has not been able to attain access to farmland close to her house in Rhino Camp, she is considering other options:

'I will have to sell this house I have built to allow me go to another camp where I might get a small piece of land to survive on through farming because I have seen there is no hope to survive here again.'

Though she hopes to relocate to Adjumani, the transport costs are high, and there is currently no buyer interested in her house.

The 'onward movers' from Kenya into Uganda are few. Due to UNHCR's biometric registration system, it is not formally possible to move your registration to a different country. The only exception is in case of third country resettlement, which is very rare. The PARTOCA team has followed a few households and individuals from Rhino Camp and Kakuma who have been resettled in Europe, Canada, and the USA over the past eight years. While the chances of resettlement in Western countries are almost nil following current political developments, the already resettled families play an important role in sending remittances.



Local youth-owned phone repair shop supported with start-up funding from a humanitarian actor in a refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, 2023 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

6. Concluding observations

The debate over how best to transition from camp-based living and aid-dependency to self-settlement and self-reliance has moved to centre stage in the wake of the 2025 aid cuts. This study aims to nuance this debate by providing evidence and insights from refugees' perspectives to inform upcoming policies, initiatives, and interventions under current circumstances. Conditions in the country of refuge are significant in shaping options. In contrast to Kenya, Uganda's policies, together with its geography and history of host-refugee relations, are more conducive to self-reliance. Without humanitarian aid, most Kakuma residents would struggle to remain in Kenya unless they achieve greater social and economic integration. That said, in both locations, some refugees are so dependent on aid that they might not survive if it is phased out completely. Others have sufficient resources for coping with the new conditions. The large majority have the potential for greater self-reliance, but it is important to understand what self-reliance means under the current conditions. These refugees do not rely on themselves alone but depend on kin and social networks as they adapt to declining international aid. That said, the ability to meet social, economic and moral obligations towards kin and family has been heavily affected by the aid cuts and the escalating armed violence in South Sudan, where most remittances stem from. All in all, detailed evidence on people's socio-economic coping practices, decisions and motivations is required as aid is being re-set.

Self-reliance can be understood as less dependence on aid. Based on our findings for this study and 9 years of data collection in these communities, refugees would prefer this, contrary to what many might think. The irony – or paradox - is that in order to build a better foundation for self-reliance, most South Sudanese need access to services provided in Kenya or Uganda. Parents hope that an adequate education will improve their children's prospects for income and employment. Access to quality education in South Sudan is limited, especially in rural areas. With a certificate of education from Kenya or Uganda, young people stand a better chance of getting a job in South Sudan and in the neighbouring countries. It is therefore a misperception that most refugees are passively awaiting integration into the neighbouring countries; for many families, formative years in the camps are an investment in education that will benefit chances of return and employment at home. Nevertheless, it is important to note that widespread armed violence, high levels of insecurity and flooding in South Sudan are still ongoing, and therefore, there is a need for safety. These legitimate safety concerns and needs for refuge co-exist with South Sudanese' hope for education and employment. Regarding integration and self-reliance, the findings also highlight intermarriage between refugees and their hosts and, in turn, the importance of cultural and linguistic similarities in refugee-hosting areas. Almost all refugee households consulted in Uganda had at least one intermarriage with a Ugandan, among their extended family members. These intermarriages are instrumental for integration and thereby access to farmland and livelihoods in the long term[14].

An important part of this debate is the direction of the donor community's attention. Numerous conversations with actors in the humanitarian and development community suggest a clash in understanding refugees' aspirations and endeavours for the future. Many humanitarian actors seem to assume that refugees want to continue being refugees, benefiting from aid dependency. Yet most refugees that the research team engages with would prefer to return to South Sudan if conditions were more favourable. They know that staying in Uganda or Kenya will bind them to a lifetime of being second-class citizens with limited opportunities to enter the formal job market. Obviously, political instability and other factors constrain donors' options for improving and rebuilding infrastructure in South Sudan. But perhaps more can be done. If more effort were put into improving conditions for return in South Sudan, many more refugees would likely go back. All in all, refugees are responding to the new situation as social actors, considering possibilities in relation to donors, NGOs, host communities, ethnic belonging and kin.

14 Intermarriage happens organically, but policy changes in Kenya that allow more interaction between hosts and refugees would create better conditions for organic integration. In both countries, it is, in principle, possible to obtain citizenship by marriage (in Kenya after 7 years of marriage and in Uganda after 3 years). But the main socio-economic benefits of intermarriage are rather the opportunities that the network and connections bring in terms of access to farmland and business.

Young South Sudanese woman walking the streets of the busy food market in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya in 2026, @Ayo Degett/DRC.

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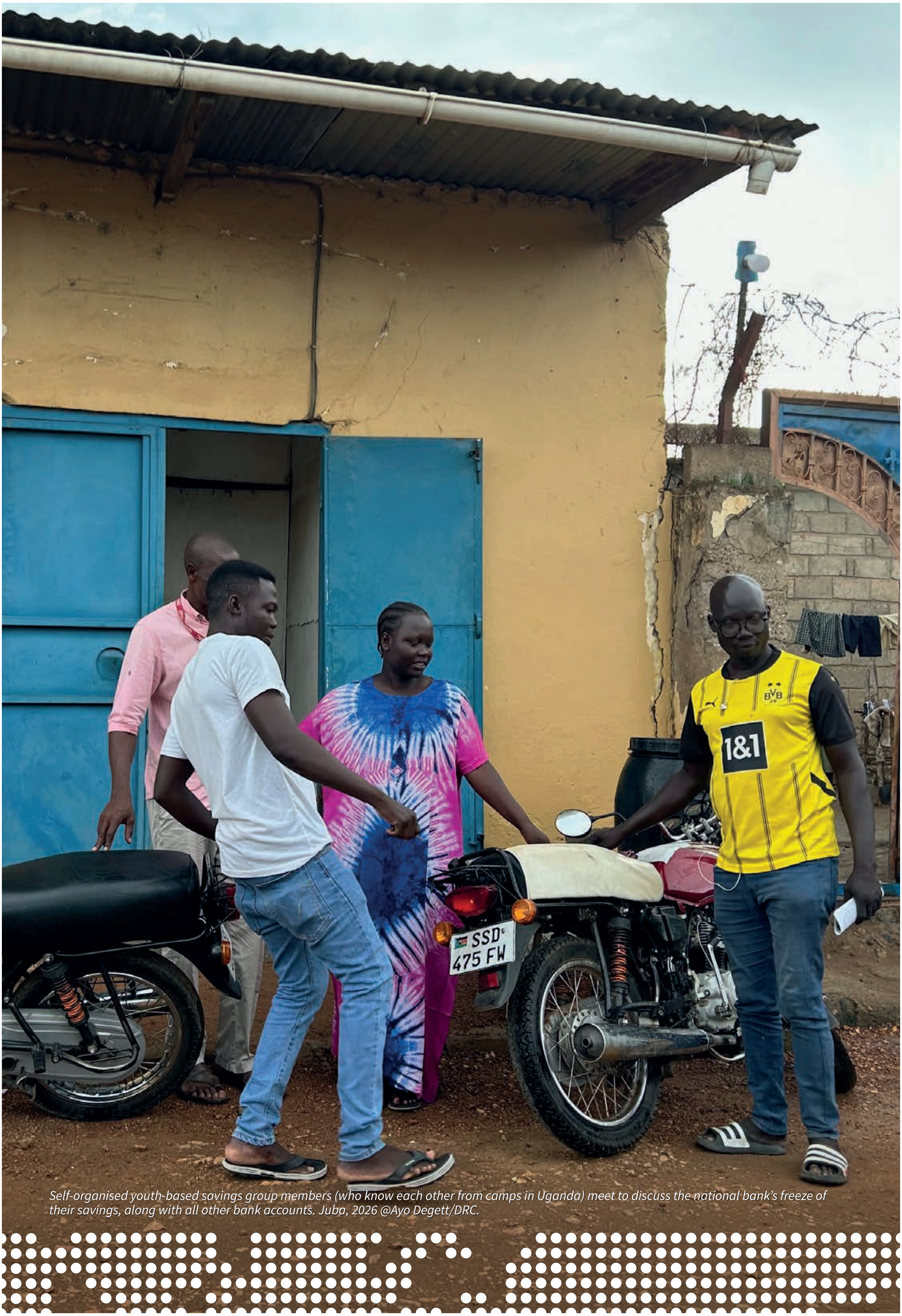

Self-organised youth-based savings group members (who know each other from camps in Uganda) meet to discuss the national bank's freeze of their savings, along with all other bank accounts. Juba, 2026 @Ayo Degett/DRC.

Abbreviations

CPPT	Community Peace Protection Team
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DRS	Department of Refugee Services
IGA	Income Generating Activity
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KES	Kenyan Shillings
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRG	NGO Refugee Group
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PARTOCA	Participatory Research Team on Community-led Action
PTR	Pupil-Teacher Ratio
RLO	Refugee-led Organisation
UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UGX	Ugandan Shillings
US	The United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	US Dollars
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
WBG	World Bank Group
WFP	World Food Programme

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