

Growing Up Displaced

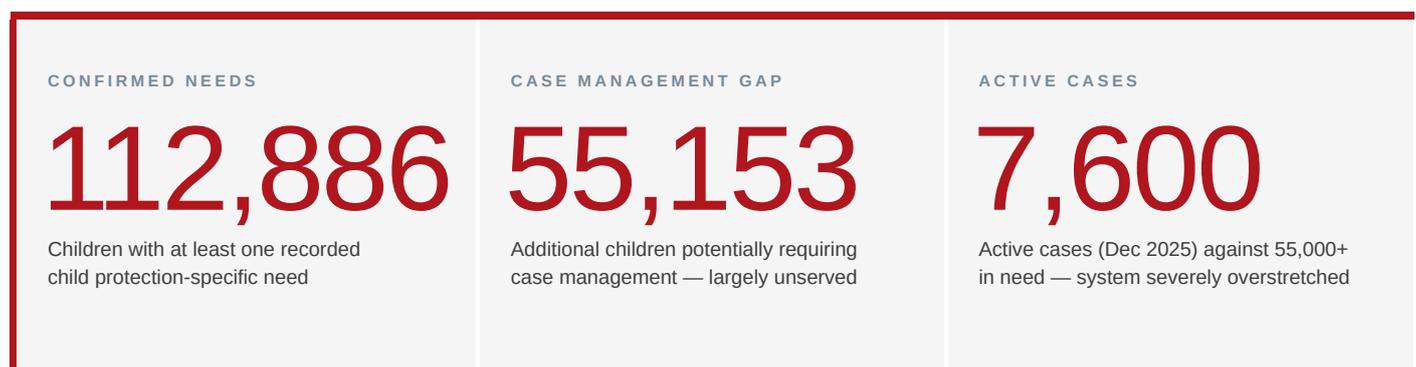
Understanding and addressing child protection risks in Uganda February 2026

Despite ongoing humanitarian efforts, child protection risks in Uganda’s refugee response remain structural and persistent. Children’s exposure to harm is closely linked to family separation, precarious economic situation and limited access to education and social services. Without sufficient system capacity and targeted interventions, these risks are likely to accumulate over time, particularly for adolescent girls, unaccompanied and separated children, and children with disabilities, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability.

The scale of the problem

Children constitute **52 per cent** of Uganda’s refugee and asylum-seeker population, representing more than one million children. Of these, 112,886 children are recorded with at least one child protection-specific need, indicating that child protection concerns affect more than one in ten refugee children. An additional 55,153 children are identified as potentially requiring child protection case management, underscoring a significant gap between needs and system capacity.

These figures reveal a structural challenge rather than isolated incidents. Protection risks are concentrated in settlements such as Adjumani, Rhino Camp, Imvepi, Nakivale, Kyaka II, and Kyangwali, where population pressure, economic stress, and stretched services converge to create persistent vulnerabilities.



THE PROTECTION GAP



Together, **168,039 children** represent a significant unmet need — a gap between identified vulnerability and the protection services currently available

¹ UNHCR Monthly Child Protection Dashboard, Uganda, December 2025.

Who is most at risk?

ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Disproportionately exposed to early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and sexual violence. Early school dropout feeds compounding cycles of exploitation.

UNACCOMPANIED & SEPARATED

Over 47,000 children. Most live in informal kinship arrangements with limited caregiver support, leaving many exposed to neglect, child labour, and secondary separation.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Disability acts as a multiplier: heightened exposure to neglect and abuse, barriers to education and services, social isolation, and elevated risk of exploitation.

Boys face distinct risks — school dropout, hazardous work, and neglect — driven by economic and social expectations that place the burden of income generation on them. School dropout feeds a cycle in which children are drawn into child labour or early marriage, leading to further cascading risks including sexual and emotional violence and exploitation.

Family separation and economic stress are central drivers of these risks. School dropout feeds a cycle in which children are drawn into child labour or early marriage, leading to further cascading risks including sexual and emotional violence and exploitation. Systemic pressures are severe, with 7,600 active child protection cases recorded in December 2025 (UNHCR Child Protection Dashboard), against over 55,000 children in need of case management and continued high intake of new cases, straining case management capacity and delaying best interest determinations and durable solutions.

FIELD STORY - RHINO CAMP SETTLEMENT

Balbal's story

Balbal (her real name has been changed to protect her privacy), 16, arrived at Rhino Camp in 2023 as the sole caregiver for her two younger siblings after losing both parents in South Sudan. After experiencing neglect from relatives, she was placed in a family household and subsequently took the step of reporting her situation to a community help desk. A DRC case worker visited Balbal at home, assessed her protection needs, and initiated sustained follow-up to support her recovery. Together with Balbal, a tailored protection plan was developed with a shared goal of safety, stability, and continued schooling. This included counselling, parenting support for her caregiver, multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA), and the construction of an additional shelter space, ensuring her voice guided the response throughout. Within months, all three children were enrolled in school, the household had stabilised, and Balbal, once withdrawn and overwhelmed, was healthier, more confident and looking towards the future with hope.

DRC's Child Protection response in Uganda

DRC delivers an integrated child protection programme across refugee settlements in West Nile, combining case management, prevention, and systems strengthening. Through a localisation approach, DRC supports District Local Governments, national NGOs, and community structures to lead protection responses that address both immediate risks and their underlying drivers.

Key areas of intervention include:

- **Case management:** Dedicated teams work alongside para-social workers to ensure early identification, follow-up, and referral of at-risk children to specialised services.
- **Prevention:** Adolescent life skills sessions, positive parenting programmes, and child-led initiatives, aligned with government curricula, promote protective norms and reduce risks including early marriage, child labour, and neglect.
- **Systems strengthening:** DRC builds the capacity of community structures, para-social workers, national partners, and District Local Governments to supervise, coordinate, and sustain quality child protection services, with progressive handover to local systems.

Recommendations for strategic investment

Donors

- **Strengthen child protection services:** Prioritise funding to expand case management capacity while strengthening community-based structures that identify and refer at-risk children. This should include increased support to District Local Governments (DLGs) to enhance the training and oversight of para-social workers, as well as capacity strengthening for national NGOs in child protection case management, supervision, and quality assurance in settlements with high concentrations of children at risk.
- **Fund integrated child protection and livelihood programming:** Support programmes that link child protection case management with MPCA, livelihoods support, and access to vocational training and education for caregivers and at-risk adolescents, strengthening household self-reliance and enabling families to provide safe, stable care while reducing reliance on harmful coping mechanisms such as child labour, early marriage, neglect, and family separation.
- **Invest in prevention:** Prioritise funding for community-based prevention programmes that address the drivers of child protection risks - including early marriage, child labour, neglect, and family separation - through adolescent girls' education, family strengthening, positive parenting, and psychosocial support for high-risk groups.

Humanitarian and development actors

- **Prioritise prevention and family strengthening:** Scale up community-based prevention initiatives — including positive parenting, adolescent programming, and psychosocial support — through strengthened government and community protection structures to reduce risks such as child labour, early marriage, neglect, and family separation before they escalate into complex protection cases.
- **Strengthen government and community workforce capacity:** Work in partnership with DLGs to strengthen the capacities of para-social workers in line with national curricula, including positive parenting, safeguarding, and child protection case management, to ensure consistent, quality support to vulnerable children and families.
- **Work through and strengthen national, district and local systems:** Coordinate with government social services, DLGs, national NGOs, and community structures to reinforce referral pathways, supervision, and locally led child protection mechanisms in line with national frameworks.

Authorities

- **Strengthen child protection systems:** Allocate dedicated resources within District Development Plans, including oversight of para-social workers, supervision of case management services, and support to community-based prevention and family strengthening programmes.
- **Link families to social protection and enforce child protection law:** Ensure vulnerable families are systematically linked to national social protection schemes and that child protection laws and procedures are enforced to prevent neglect, exploitation, and secondary separation.

Targeted investment in these areas can reduce systemic risk and prevent long-term harm by strengthening case management capacity and improving coordination across government levels and humanitarian actors. Prioritizing high-risk groups and overstretched settlements will make interventions more equitable and efficient, protecting children today while building community resilience for the future.

Contact

Samuele Otim Rizzo, Country Director - samuele.rizzo@drc.ngo



www.drc.ngo



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