Refugee Engagement Forum in Uganda

Good Practice Study

Uganda 2021

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The Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) Good Practice Study is a joint collaboration between U-Learn (The Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability and Research Network) and the REF Taskforce (REF TF).

The **REF Taskforce** is co-chaired by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It was established in early 2019 with a mandate to facilitate meaningful participation of the affected population to Uganda's Comprehensive Refugee Response, particularly to the CRRF Steering Group. The REF TF comprises of representatives of the OPM, such as the CRRF Secretariat, UNHCR and INGOs.

U-Learn is a UKaid-funded consortium which collaborates with the Government of Uganda and a wide range of implementers and stakeholders to facilitate learning, conduct assessments and amplify refugee voice and choice in the protracted refugee crisis. U-Learn has been working closely with the REF and REF TF since 2020.

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U-Learn would like to thank

Amos Kayiamahe and Jamal Anan, U-Learn Field Officers, who supported data collection; Kai Kamei, Ground Truth Solutions Programme Coordinator, who supported data collection and analysis; and Rick Bartoldus, U-Learn Senior AAP Coordinator for instigating the Good Practice Study.

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Executive summary

The Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) has proven to be a successful model for sustained refugee participation in national decision-making. Whilst it is not yet very well known, its unique structure and demonstrated value have the potential to inspire other countries to adopt a similar approach. As a result, the REF Good Practice Study was instigated to identify key lessons and successes from the REF, and to document the Ugandan experience for the benefit of those in and outside of Uganda.

How does the REF work?

The REF is a unique, participatory mechanism designed to systematically ensure refugee voices are taken into account. Through a representative system, elected REF members are able to directly advocate on behalf of their communities at the highest level of Uganda's refugee response coordination structure. It is the first of its kind.

The REF empowers refugees throughout Uganda. Its 37 REF members are refugee leaders elected from existing leadership structures across refugee settlements and from Kampala; they meet quarterly to discuss their communities' concerns and provide feedback on the functioning of the refugee response. They feed their key messages up to the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Steering Group (CRRF SG), the overarching national refugee response coordination body in Uganda.

The Good Practice Study first outlines the inception, composition and functioning of the REF. It then details the successes and key lessons from the REF's implementation, and considers its way forward.

Key Successes Identified

The REF's key success is its ability to influence policy-making & programme design through the two-way feedback flow between refugee communities and the most senior level refugee response coordination body. In addition, in the relatively short time it has existed, the REF has been able to feed into other global and regional discussions and forums, and has inspired others to adopt similar accountability mechanisms.

Key Lessons Learned from the Ugandan Experience

The following six lessons were identified as the key points to be considered for those looking to replicate the REF in another context:

- **Lesson 1. Building upon existing structures:** the REF draws its legitimacy from pre-existing democratic structures.
- **Lesson 2. A diverse and inclusive REF:** intentionally inclusive structures and reserving leadership positions for specific minority groups allow the REF to represent a heterogeneous population.
- **Lesson 3. Fostering interpersonal relationships:** close working relationships keep people motivated, and ease consensus building and decision making.
- **Lesson 4. Operationally flexible structures:** adaptable structures and systems are essential in a changing context.

- **Lesson 5. Ongoing learning and adaptation:** an ongoing learning and adaptation process allows for continuous improvement and innovation.
- **Lesson 6. Support across stakeholder groups:** wide-ranging cross-stakeholder support from the outset - including staff time and financial support – is key for sustained the growth and development of the mechanism.

Way forward for the REF

While the Good Practice Study did not set out to provide a comprehensive list of recommendations, it does lay out a number of areas that will help continued improvement and strengthening of the REF. Some of these, such as strengthening the REFs communication and consultation with an increased number of refugees, are already under way. For others, such as increasing the engagement between the REF and the wider refugee response, the publication of the Good Practice Study may play an enabling role. Nonetheless, most important will be that the REF retains and increasingly gains the active support (financial and otherwise) from the wider refugee response for its goal of systematic refugee participation in refugee response coordination and decision making, thus truly "representing the refugee voice in Uganda".[1]

[1] CRRF Uganda, RAF ToR: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64520

List of Acronyms

AAP - Accountability to Affected Populations
CBO - Community-based Organisation
CRRF - Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
CRRF SG – Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Steering Group
DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo
GBV – Gender-based Violence
GCR – Global Compact on Refugees
GoU – Government of Uganda
IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO – International Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
OPM – Office of the Prime Minister
PSN – Person with Specific Need(s)
RAF – Refugee Advisory Forum
REF – Refugee Engagement Forum
REF TF – Refuge Engagement Forum Taskforce
RWC – Refugee Welfare Committee
SGBV – Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SOP – Standard Operating Procedures
ToR - Terms of Reference
U-Learn – Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability, and Research Network
UN - United Nations
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. An introduction to the REF Good Practice Study

Recap: What is the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF)?

The REF is a pioneering refugee engagement mechanism that was established in October 2018 to ensure the representation of the refugee community at the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Steering Group (CRRF SG), the overarching national refugee response coordination forum in Uganda. Its creation marked an important step for systematic refugee participation in the refugee response.[2] It is the first national-level refugee engagement and representation mechanism: there is currently no similar organisational structure for refugees elsewhere.

The REF empowers 37 refugee leaders (REF members) from across refugee settlements and in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, to convene every quarter to discuss the concerns of their communities and to provide feedback on refugee response plans and initiatives. Based on these discussions, two (2) elected REF members take a seat at the CRRF SG quarterly, where they share the key messages from the REF meetings.

Image from the 3rd REF meeting, 26 - 27 June 2019. (Photo credit: UNHCR Uganda)

As refugees themselves, as elected community leaders, and as a group that is diverse in demography, age and gender, REF members are well-placed to advocate for their communities' concerns and needs.

What is the REF Good Practice Study?

The REF is a successful model for sustained refugee participation in national decision-making with a two-way feedback function; a model, that could be even better known and understood in Uganda, and could inspire other countries to adopt a similar mechanism.

[2] From Key Informant Interview research as part of this study.

In recognition of the unique structure and value of the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF), the REF Good Practice Study seeks to identify key lessons and successes from the REF, and document the experience in Uganda for the benefit of wider audiences. The Study has three specific objectives:

- Summarise key overarching lessons to help further strengthen and embed the REF in Uganda;
- Raise awareness amongst the Uganda refugee response community on the strengths and potential of the REF;
- Show what success and an enabling environment look like in practice for those in other countries or contexts whom are considering the adoption of similar structures to strengthen their community engagement and accountability.

The intention is not to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the REF, but rather to provide a light touch collection of successes, lessons learned and the potential for continuous improvement.

Why does the REF matter?

Empowering refugees as active participants in the way aid is designed and delivered (rather than passive recipients) is a key current global movement. Supporting refugees' meaningful participation in national policy-making and decision-making is a goal for many refugee-hosting countries.

> "Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist. […] States and relevant stakeholders will explore how best to include refugees and members of host communities, particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities, in key forums and processes, as well as diaspora, where relevant. […]" - the Global Compact on Refugees, section 3.2, paragraph 34.

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which includes the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), includes ambition "by the international community […] for strengthened cooperation and solidarity with refugees and affected host countries".[3] Uganda was one of the first countries to implement this new approach of responding to refugee situations when the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) officially launched the CRRF on 24th March 2017. In January 2018, the Uganda CRRF Road Map was adopted.[4]

The Grand Bargain (2016) includes a commitment from donors and humanitarian agencies to a 'participation revolution', to "include the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient".[5] Taking meaningful and concrete steps towards this goal at a national level however, remains a challenge globally.

[3] UN, Global Compact on refugees, New York, 2018. https://www.unhcr.org/5c658aed4.pdf
[4] Uganda National Plan of Action to Implement the Global Compact on Refugees and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) – Uganda's revised CRRF Road Map – 2018-2020 (hereinafter Uganda National Plan of Action). https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Uganda%20National%20Action%20Plan%20for%20GCR%20implementation%20%282019%20revision%29.pdf
[5] Grand Bargain, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/a-participation-revolution-include-people-receiving-aid-in-making-the-decisions-which-affect-their-lives

In Uganda, the creation of the REF is a major accomplishment towards Comprehensive Refugee Responses' priority to increase the meaningful participation of refugees and therefore to work towards increased Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP).[6] AAP is "the active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account, by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist". Effective AAP is critical both in ensuring timely, effective assistance and key to delivering against GCR and Grand Bargain commitments.

The REF further helps deliver against the 5 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Commitments which underpin effective AAP (Leadership, Transparency, Feedback & Complaints, Participation, and Design, Monitoring & Evaluation): [7]

- **Leadership:** The REF plays a role in integrating AAP into refugee response planning and coordination.
- **Transparency:** The REF provides a forum in which the refugee leaders can hold refugee response actors to account, and ask questions about the provision of support.
- **Feedback & Complaints:** The REF captures the views and feedback of refugees in a streamlined manner, differentiated by settlement.
- **Participation:** The REF empowers refugees to meaningfully engage in higher, national-level decision making, as the representatives of the REF attend the highest decision-making forum for Uganda's comprehensive refugee responses, the CRRF SG, alongside other coordination fora.
- **Design, Monitoring & Evaluation:** The REF's involvement allows feedback from the refugee community to inform on an ongoing basis the design, monitoring and evaluation of the CRRF SG policy decisions.

What methodology was used?

As per the ToR agreed between the REF Taskforce and U-Learn, the following qualitative methodology was used to inform the REF Good Practice Study:[8]

- A secondary desk review of key REF documents and reports.
- The direct observation of the 9th REF meeting between December 2 – 4, 2020. OPM, UNHCR, 31 REF members, 4 interpreters, and NGO representatives were present.[9] A semi-structured observation questionnaire form was used by research team members to observe and take notes.
- 41 semi-structured interviews with REF members, REF TF members, CRRF Secretariat/CRRF SG members, and the refugee community were conducted between November 2020 – February 2021.[10] Most interviews took place online or via the phone,

[6] Uganda National Plan of Action, p.15. https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Uganda%20National%20Action%20Plan%20for%20GCR%20implementation%20%282019%20revision%29.pdf
[7] Inter-Agency Standing Committee – Collective Accountability to Affected People https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/p2p-support-collective-aap-note.pdf
[8] Link to ToR, methodology and data collection tools: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1B5GZWlxzMJNFJWNYRCGoJh5hn6yAkYUd?usp=sharing
[9] The 9th REF Attendance Excel Sheet.
[10] Interviewees were selected according to quota sampling to collect answers from a variety of actors involved with the REF, taking into consideration country of origin, gender, age, leadership role and PSNs. Both REF members and the refugee community in settlements were interviewed. The full research methods are available as a separate document: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1B5GZWlxzMJNFJWNYRCGoJh5hn6yAkYUd?usp=sharing

with the exception of refugee community interviews, which took place in-person (respecting COVID-19 guidelines and SOPs).

- Participation of the REF members in the analysis of the results at the at the 10th REF meeting, March 9 - 11, 2021, and review of results and draft report by REF TF members.

The data was analysed qualitatively and synthesized into the study report. REF Taskforce members, who support the organisation of the quarterly REF meetings, resource mobilisation, coordination with partners, and information sharing, reviewed results and report drafts.

Image from the 3rd REF meeting, 26 - 27 June 2019. (Photo credit: UNHCR Uganda)

2. REF Structure and Functioning

The REF since its Inception

> "Uganda is Africa's largest refugee hosting country and one of the three largest refugee hosting countries in the world. Indeed, Uganda is ranked among the least developed countries, and together with other sub-Saharan African countries is hosting almost one-third of the global total (6.3 million refugees)." - Uganda's revised CRRF Road Map – 2018-2020

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees and asylum seekers. Since 2016, Uganda has seen a large influx of refugees following conflict in neighbouring countries. In June of 2021, Uganda hosts more than 1.4 million refugees, with the majority of refugees coming from South Sudan (61,5%), the DRC (29,1%), Burundi (3.4%) and Somalia (3.1%).[11]

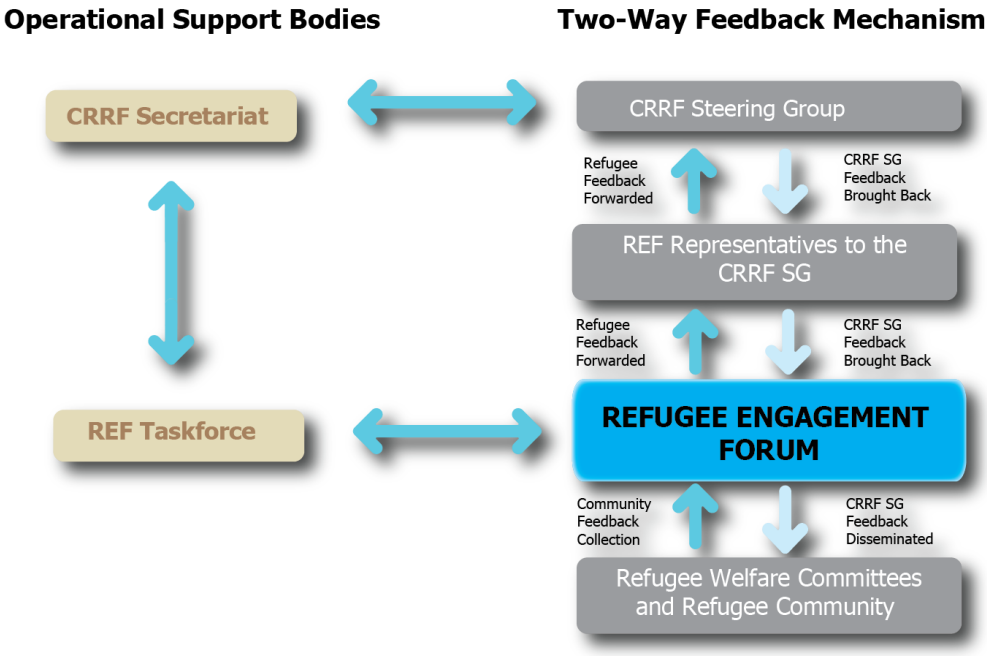
At Uganda's first CRRF SG meeting in October 2017, the OPM's Department of Refugees and UNHCR were tasked to ensure refugee representation and participation in CRRF SG meetings. In early 2018, OPM and UNHCR conducted a field consultation to understand how the national level refugee leadership structure could be established most effectively by building upon the existing leadership structure. Following the field consultation, OPM and UNHCR developed the concept note for the REF and a first version of the REF, the Refugee Advisory Forum (RAF), was established in October 2018 to represent refugee voices at a national level.[12]

The first meeting of the RAF was held in October 2018 and attended by 75 refugee leaders. The RAF subsequently became the REF and members agreed to streamline the number of refugee participants to its current 37 members due to funding constraints to support a big number of representatives and also to allow for a more manageable discussion group size while at the same time balancing representation. The REF ToR was finalised in mid-2019.

Since inception, there has been 4 meetings per year, mirroring the CRRF SG calendar. As of May 2021, there has been 10 REF meetings.

[11] UNHCR, Global Compact on Refugees, Digital Platform: https://globalcompactrefugees.org/article/uganda
[12] CRRF Uganda, RAF ToR: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64520

Uganda's Comprehensive Refugee Response Coordination Structure and the REF



Roles and interaction of the REF structure component groups

- **CRRF Steering Group (CRRF SG):** consists of 38 members that meet to coordinate the refugee response. Chaired by the Government, it represents the views of key stakeholders involved in the refugee response in Uganda. It guides and oversees the work of the CRRF Secretariat and ensures that it can function effectively. The CRRF Steering Group is the policy and decision-making body for the implementation of the CRRF according to the CRRF National Plan of Action[13]. From October 2018 onwards, two elected RAF members (now REF members) were included in the CRRF SG quarterly meetings to inform response policy development and improvement.
- **The CRRF Secretariat:** is the technical body that supports the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees and the CRRF in Uganda. The Secretariat is responsible for providing support to the CRRF SG by coordinated planning, programming and resourcing of the CRRF roll-out in Uganda and ensuring cross-pillar information flow and linkages. For instance, it coordinates the planning of the CRRF SG meetings 4 times a year; these are preceded by REF meetings. The CRRF Secretariat is anchored in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). It plays a catalytic role in stakeholder engagement and coordination, knowledge management of a comprehensive response, ensuring beneficiary participation, financial tracking for efficiency, highlighting issues for refugees and host communities, and enhancing local responders' capacities.
- **REF Taskforce:** consists of 6 organisations at the time of writing (June 2021); it has an open membership. The REF Taskforce is co-chaired by OPM Department of Refugees and

[13] Uganda National Plan of Action. https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Uganda%20National%20Action%20Plan%20for%20GCR%20implementation%20%282019%20revision%29.pdf

UNHCR. The REF Taskforce has a mandate to support the REF as a meaningful platform for the refugee leaders to discuss issues to raise at relevant fora (including the CRRF SG) and to receive feedback from actors in the refugee response. It supports the organisation of the quarterly REF meetings, resource mobilisation, coordination with partners, information sharing, and the provision of other support to the REF.

- **Refugee Engagement Forum (REF):** consists of 37 representatives from the existing refugee leadership structure - Refugee Welfare Committees III in settlements and refugee community leaders in Kampala - that collect responses from their refugee community through inclusive consultation. They discuss the most important issues at the quarterly REF meetings which are then presented by the 2 elected members at the CRRF SG for consideration.
- **Refugee Representatives to the CRRF SG:** these are 2 elected REF members (one woman and one man) that represent the refugee community at the CRRF SG meetings.[14] They present the key feedback raised during quarterly REF meeting discussions to the CRRF SG quarterly meetings, and also convey the responses from the CRRF SG to the REF, who in turn inform their refugee communities. They carry feedback both ways between the REF members and the CRRF SG, by presentations or by sharing summary reports with the REF.
- **Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC)**: Refugee Welfare Committees are the three-tiered local leadership structures of refugee communities - they mirror Local Councils, the local administrative structure in Uganda. They were put into place independently of the REF and act as a link/contact point between the refugee community and refugee programs/organisations at a local level. In principle, RWC IIIs represent a settlement, RWC IIs operate at the sub-settlement level and RWC Is operate at a lower sub-settlement level (village or block). RWC Is and IIs share refugee concerns to RWC IIIs. More details on the RWC system are included in lesson learned 1 ('Building upon existing structures') in section 3 below. Aside from a few exceptions, REF members are generally chosen from RWC IIIs. REF members have therefore been first elected through the RWCs before being selected as REF members.

REF Composition

The REF comprises of the following 37 members:

- One woman and man settlement-level elected refugee leader (Refugee Welfare Committee – RWC III leader) from 13 settlements (26)
- Two representatives from Kampala, (the positions are assigned to refugee community leaders of two different nationalities) (2)
- Two settlements (Bidibidi and Adjumani settlements) each have two additional representatives to reflect their larger refugee population (4)
- A youth member from each of the 5 refugee desk regions following the OPM/GoU established structure (5)

[14] Substitute representatives are elected from candidates having received the 2nd most votes during the election to sit in case of absentia.

	Geographic locations	Settlement Representation	Additional Youth Representatives
I	**Arua Regional Refugee Desk**		1
1	Bidibidi Settlement	4	
2	Lobule Settlement	2	
3	Rhino Camp Settlement	2	
4	Imvepi Settlement	2	
II	**Adjumani Regional Refugee Desk**		1
5	Adjumani Settlements	4	
6	Palorinya Settlement	2	
7	Palabek Settlement	2	
III	**Mbarara Regional Refugee Desk**		1
8	Kyaka II Settlement	2	
9	Rwamwanja Settlement	2	
10	Nakivale Settlement	2	
11	Oruchinga Settlement	2	
IV	**Hoima Regional Refugee Desk**		1
12	Kiryandongo settlement	2	
13	Kyangwali Settlement	2	
V	**Kampala Urban**		1
	Kampala	2	
	Total (37)	32	5

Current distribution of REF members

The REF composition assures fair representation of gender, youth and nationality; the latter reflecting the complex nature of the refugee settlements in Uganda, with around 10 nationalities spread out in different districts; more details are included in lesson learned 2. ('A diverse and inclusive REF') in section 3 below.

REF members work on a voluntary basis; they are given limited resources to participate in the REF and carry out the tasks that come with their role.

How do the REF information flows work?

In the context of the REF, information flows between the refugee response ecosystem represented by the CRRF SG (refugee hosting districts, Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies, donors, humanitarian / development agencies, and national and international responders) and refugee communities themselves through the REF.

REF Two-Way Feedback Loop

The REF members work to include refugee voices through the following steps:

STEP 1: Gathering reactions and important information from communities: REF members collect concerns and priorities from the community they represent through community meetings, as well as feedback from the RWC Is, IIs and IIIs.[15]

STEP 2: Assembling and discussion: The REF quarterly meeting brings together the 37 REF members and REF TF member organisations to discuss the matters that were put forward by the communities, as well as agenda points from the upcoming CRRF SG meeting or any additional ones brought forward by the REF TF. The selection of which matters to bring to the CRRF SG is collectively made by the REF.

STEP 3: Putting refugee matters on the table in the refugee response: Two REF representatives bring selected issues and priorities discussed at the REF meeting to the concurrent CRRF SG meeting for consideration, discussion and comments before policy proposition and adoption. The same two REF representatives then report back on the CRRF SG meeting outcomes to the other REF members through a short report or through a presentation.

STEP 4: Sharing responses with communities: To close the feedback loop, each REF member discusses the outcomes of the REF quarterly meetings and the CRRF SG meeting with their refugee communities. They also circulate messages from the CRRF SG that were shared with them by the two REF representatives.

"… our community has that need to hear from us what is coming from the REF [meetings]. It is a need and […] a must, whenever we are coming from the REF [meetings], we have to give them the feedback." – REF member

STEP 5: Sharing the refugee feedback more widely: The CRRF SG minutes capture the feedback provided by the 2 REF members; they are circulated to refugee response actors through coordination group mailing lists (UN, NGO and government agencies). The REF reports (drafted by the REF TF) capture the full discussion and feedback provided during the REF meeting and are available online to refugee response actors.[16]

[15] Specific REF TF supported REF consultative meetings were started in December 2020, but regular community meetings for RWCs supported by OPM and UNHCR existed already.
[16] Uganda Refugee Engagement Forum documents on the Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response portal, REF page: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/working-group/286?sv=0&geo=220

3. Successes of the REF in Uganda

Several clear successes of the REF have been identified, which encourage further perseverance and support for the development of the refugee engagement structure.

Informing policy-making & programme design through two-way feedback

The main success of the REF structure is that the positive correlative effect between the feedback brought forward from the REF to the CRRF SG and the devised, approved CRRF National Plan of Action response (see blue box for examples). This suggests that the goal of increasing the refugee community's engagement and agency in national-level decision making is achieved to a certain degree.

"… we have seen the integration of refugee [consultation] in government planning in the National [Action] Plan […] Within this response plan, […] I see some of the concerns addressed" – REF member

REF contribution to policy and programme design:

- Cash assistance dispensed in Kampala during the COVID-19 pandemic as advocated for
- Quick response to the request for the construction of more schools and classrooms in settlements
- Two consultations for the newest National Plan of Action (2021-2022)
- Policy changes affecting refugee settlements in the National Plan of Action in line with refugee feedback
- Previous concerns raised by urban refugees are to be included in the new NPA 2021-2022

These positive policy changes encourage and empower refugee leaders to continue to advise on refugee matters at the national level and to disseminate information back according to the two-way flow as explained above in section 2. A REF member highlights: *"With the establishment of the REF, the attention paid to refugees has improved tremendously. If you take for example during the time of COVID-19 where most people were under lockdown and urban refugees lost their jobs, became redundant or lost their business, we addressed on behalf of the community leaders to the UNHCR and OPM asking for some kind of assistance. That has been answered by UNHCR, OPM and WFP who [gave] cash assistance to all refugees or asylum seekers in Kampala. When you look at this, it is quite positive."* – REF Member

Furthermore, the Kampala urban REF members strive for accountability and feedback flow to their refugee community by producing yearly reports on their own initiative. A uniform template is in production for use by all settlements.

Finally, the greater agency the REF gives to refugee leaders and its centralised nature position it as a useful additional channel for feedback collection for implementing NGOs. The views gathered by REF members can provide field insights for monitoring and evaluation to improve programming

and response delivery. In addition, the REF provides a space for the discussion and advocacy of refugee participation and needs by refugee leaders.

Wider relevance of the REF nationally, and to regional and global fora

Since its inception, the REF has been able to feed into other global and regional discussions and fora. REF members have been invited to speak at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum where they put forward refugee resilience, even adopting pledges on behalf of the refugee community in Uganda to show their determination to positively contribute to the host country.[17] This has cemented the REF as a legitimate refugee representation structure by showing its potential for amplifying refugee voices both regionally and globally. In addition, the REF in Uganda received an entry into the UNHCR Good Practice Compendium.[18]

The REF has inspired others to adopt similar accountability mechanisms. For instance, hosting districts in Uganda have looked into structures similar to the REF for capturing the voices and feedback of the local Ugandan communities to convey at the CRRF SG. By inspiring others to follow suit, the REF's position has become more firmly established as its value becomes more widely recognised.

[17] UNHCR, Global Compact on Refugees, Digital Platform, Pledges dashboard: https://globalcompactrefugees.org/channel/pledges-contributions

[18] Charles Mballa, Josephine Ngebeh, Machtelt De Vriese, Katie Drew, Abigayil Parr, Chi-Chi Undie. 2020. UNHCR and Partner Practices of Community-Based Protection across Sectors in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. UNHCR and Population Council. p.45. https://svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2020-11-05/Protection%20across%20sectors%20EHA%20GLR.pdf

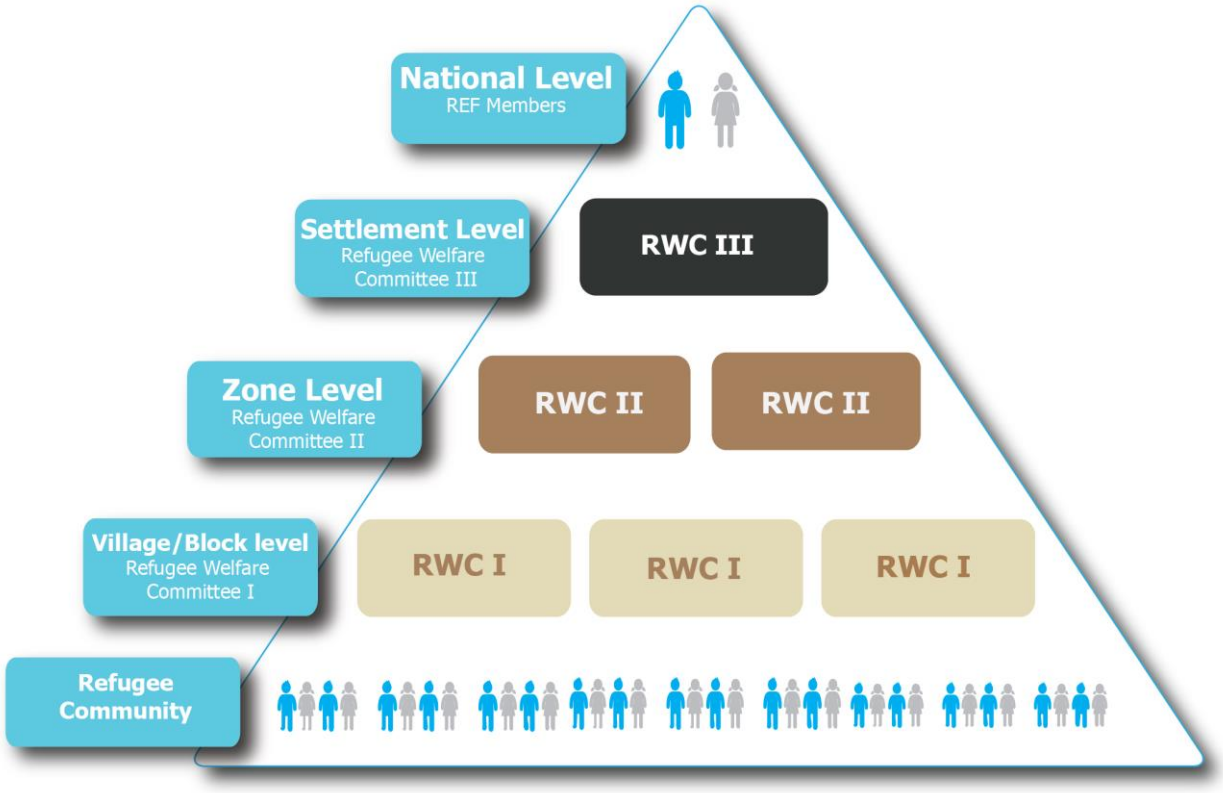
4. Six Lessons Learned from the REF in Uganda

The REF has proven to be a successful model for sustained refugee participation in national decision-making. During discussions with the different stakeholder groups, it became clear that the following six lessons have been crucial to making the REF a success. These lessons might inspire other refugee contexts to develop similar participation mechanisms to include refugees in the highest-level refugee response coordination mechanisms, and to strengthen AAP.

I. Building upon existing structures

The REF draws its legitimacy from pre-existing democratic structures.

The REF's success as a centralized national-level forum is based upon the existing refugee leadership structure. In the refugee settlements, the Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC) structure was already in place. The RWC structure is a system of hierarchical representation per settlement which mirrors local government structures, specifically host community Local Councils.



Refugee Welfare Committee structure

RWC IIIs represent a settlement, RWC IIs operate at the sub-settlement or zone level, and RWC Is operate at village or block level. RWC members are elected by their communities, or by lower RWCs. Aside from a few exceptions, REF members are generally appointed by RWC IIIs. The refugee representatives to the CRRF SG are elected among 37 REF members.
The legitimacy of the REF structure and its members is thus secured by the democratic character of the RWC leadership structure which composes it, and its quota structure which considers the

balance of the different settlements by settlement size, gender and age.[19] Furthermore, this legitimacy of REF members leads to general buy-in by national level actors and the government which see the REF as representing the voices of more than 1.4 million refugees.

"I'm a representative of the people, when I speak, […] I'm empowered. I'm given the means and supported to take in the opinions of my community, […] the voices of over 50,000." - REF Member

REF-specific consultative meetings were started in November 2020; these complement the already existing RWCs community meetings.[20] The RWCs engagement with informal community leadership - such as traditional leaders, community leaders, and religious/spiritual leaders - as well as individual refugees, allows for streamlined feedback flow to the REF and CRRF SG when funnelled upward through the centralising RWC tiers. It also serves the reach of the REF as a representative body, feeding back concerns raised through the RWC and other leadership structures. In times when large in-person consultative gatherings are not possible, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of the REF as an extension of the existing RWC structure in empowering the voices of refugees is emphasised.

Finally, the selection of RWC and REF members by election promotes the capacity for community leadership, representation and mobilisation. Should a similar mechanism be set-up in a context where an electoral representational system for refugees - such as the RWCs - does not exist, it will be important to promote the membership of promising refugees to a diverse and inclusive representative body of the refugee community and to encourage their development.

II. A diverse and inclusive REF

Intentionally inclusive structures and reserving leadership positions for specific minority groups allow the REF to represent a heterogeneous population.

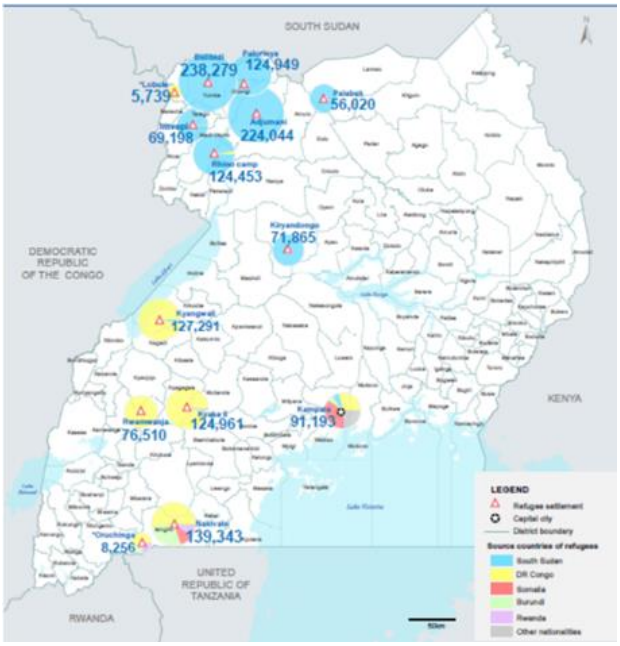
The refugee population in Uganda is extremely diverse, with people coming from different countries of origin (South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda and Eritrea amongst others), and a large number of different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups within these countries.

Geographically, refugees are spread across the country in different settlements, with the majority of settlements located in the North-West, West, Central, and South (see map of Uganda on the next page).[21]

The refugee governance structures (the RWC and REF systems) reflect this diversity because of the unique combination of a peer appointment process of REF members from refugee leadership structures per settlement (mainly from the RWC III) and membership quota criteria adjusting for the size of settlement, age and gender. Thus, allowing for *"…South Sudanese refugees that have been here for 25 years [to] engage with Congolese refugees who arrived 6 months ago, [while]*

[19] CRRF Uganda, RAF ToR: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64520
[20] CARE in partnership with UNHCR, OPM, U-Learn and IRC introduced quarterly feedback and consultation meetings with refugees. At the most recent pre-REF consultative meetings in February 2021 (ahead of the March 2021 REF), a total of 259 community members participated (of which 86 women) from 11 refugee settlements and Kampala participated.
[21] See map on page 17 showing refugee settlements and countries of origin – source OPM and UNHCR, Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Uganda, Uganda Refugee Response, 30/04/2021. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/86495

also discussing with Burundi refugees."[22] This has led to a carefully balanced, diverse and inclusive representation of various refugee social groups.[23]



Map of Uganda showing refugee settlements and countries of origin

Needs (PSNs), Secretaries for youth and sports, Secretaries for women and children affairs, and the refugee leadership community-at-large, such as traditional leaders or religious leaders.

As a result, around half of the REF members are women, and 5 out of 37 member positions are reserved for youth.[24] The members drive advocacy not only for themselves but also for other vulnerable people: *"I operate within the community. I have a team I deploy [for] door to door visits [to] try to assess cases based on the vulnerability they find themselves in. It can be related to GBV, physical disabilities, can be elderly conditions, […] I want my work to address the challenges for finding a long-time solution for the pressing needs and issues."*

The REF members bring forward the voices of minorities and persons of concern through their dedicated representatives in the RWC system, such as Secretaries of Persons with Specific

"Our REF representatives being refugee themselves […] makes it easy for them to present or forward issues that affect us due to the fact that they experience the same problems too." – RWC II Member

III. Fostering interpersonal relationships

Close working relationships keep people motivated and ease consensus building and decision making.

The REF thus brings together a diverse community of refugees from across all refugee settlements and Kampala, either in person or on-line - as during the COVID-19 pandemic - to discuss, exchange, communicate and learn from each other's experiences. As was highlighted by a REF member: *"Members of communities are able to communicate, bringing leaders from different desks and settlements together, talking and sharing concerns; […] to know that in northern Uganda and in Palabek, challenges aren't unique to us. Other people are going through [the same]."*

[22] Interview with an INGO Staff involved in the refugee response.
[23] Interpretation services have always been provided at the REF meetings to facilitate the discussions among members who speak different languages.
[24] See Table showing the 'Current distribution of REF members' on page 11 for detailed breakdown.

Having made initial contact thanks to the REF meetings, REF members then often keep in contact with one another outside of the quarterly REF meetings to continue discussions, exchanges and coordination efforts. They use phone calls, social media and messaging application groups to communicate and organise with each other as well as with their constituents.

"They have developed communication between them and between the settlements. They have created a sense of community of common interest and challenges that I think is important." – INGO staff involved in the refugee response

They are in constant engagement and dialogue with the refugee community through their roles in refugee leadership structures (e.g. - RWCs) and the REF, while also interacting with the REF TF, CRRF SG, CRRF Secretariat and partners external to the REF. One REF member explains *"Currently, I'm handling a team with WhatsApp: [I'm using different] approaches to make sure I'm in contact with the community. I'm the administrator of 18 WhatsApp groups because I can't meet every day with the community. […] With platforms, I share information I ensure I get from the source: UNHCR, OPM, refugee agencies and refugee led initiatives."*

Through the quarterly meetings, in addition to personal bonds, a sense of togetherness and camaraderie is created. This is important in forwarding unified, clear, actionable feedback, and stands out in contrast to traditional feedback & complaint mechanisms which might individually receive comments from different segments of the refugee community in an isolated manner. It is otherwise difficult to ascertain the extent of consensus on the feedback and complaints. They also tend to be more localised and settlement-oriented, addressing gaps in the response activities compared to the REF's vision of long-term influence on national policy. The quarterly meetings provide the space for consensus-drawing by facilitating the finding of compromise or middle ground during debates; as one REF member said: *"When we are together, we discuss, we interact and we get some resolution when we know each other."*

IV. Operationally flexible structures

Adaptable structures and systems are essential in a changing context.

The adaptability and flexibility of the REF itself, as well as the wider structures (REF TF, CRRF Secretariat and RWC system), are crucial to ensuring the continued functioning of the REF when faced with different or changing operating conditions.

"The TF has evolved over time. The CRRF Secretariat played a heavy role to have the UNHCR and the Department of Refugees (DoR) activated. Slowly, over time, over resource constraints, a few INGOs offered support and UNHCR and the DoR welcomed them to the Taskforce. Additional financial resources were mobilised as needed, building up the structures. TF members [also] participate in the REF as observers and listen to the conversations." – CRRF Secretariat Member

For example, the election of substitute representatives to the CRRF SG allows for seamless operation in case of member absence, for instance due to health-related reasons, move to another settlement, or

resettlement to another country.[25] The REF TF composition fluctuates depending on the time and resource availability of new members. Additionally, both REF TF and REF members do their utmost to fulfil their responsibilities despite limited resources and adapt to short dead-lines for the organisation of REF meetings in line with the CRRF SG quarterly meeting.

Equally, the REF structure and partners have been operationally flexible in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. The switch was made to online virtual meetings with a plan for assisting the participation of REF members via Internet access at UNHCR field offices connecting over 12 locations. Indeed, three REF meetings were held online in 2020, matching with the CRRF SG meeting schedule, which might not have happened otherwise.

As an unexpected result of this adaptation to the COVID-19 context, social distancing and online meetings have increased the technology familiarity of REF leaders, and thus their ability to connect with response coordination structures as well as each other at a distance.[26] The responsive transition to online virtual meetings has also rendered the REF meetings more accessible than ever for interested parties in Uganda or internationally to attend and potentially get involved. As one INGO member told us: "*The opening of the meetings through online systems has allowed for more visibility and for more people to follow [the REF].*"

V. Ongoing learning and adaptation

An ongoing learning and adaptation process allows continuous improvement and innovation.

Since inception, the REF mechanism - with hands on support by the REF TF members and the co-chairs, OPM and UNHCR – has gone through a continuous learning and adaptation process. Incremental improvements are noticeable every quarter as illustrated by the journey from the first REF meetings to the current online meetings; one REF TF member says: "*We have come far from not having the REF 2-3 years ago to having regular quarterly meetings.*"

> "I had the chance to interact with them in the NPA consultation and it's very impressive to see the evolution from the first REF meeting to the 9th REF meeting, to see the ways refugees are really organising themselves and engaging in the REF with each other, as well as with external partners standing by to talk about issues." – CRRF Secretariat member

Examples of ongoing improvements:

- OPM, UNHCR and the REF TF strengthened efforts to keep REF members better informed by making some meeting reports openly accessible online through the Uganda CRRF Portal and by updating an older REF WhatsApp messaging group for current use.[27]
- The REF TF strengthened administrative support - such as the writing of notes, meeting minutes and reports of the REF meetings - and has disseminated feedback surveys in between REF meetings.

[25] Substitute representatives are elected from candidates having received the 2nd most votes during the election to sit in case of absentia.
[26] Based on observation data and interview analysis.
[27] Per 9th REF Meeting Report: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85117

- Apart from this report, the REF Good Practice Study will also lead to the development of a presenter's guide, a tool to be used by REF members to support awareness-raising and outreach activities amongst their constituents.
- Technical recommendations from this study were summarized and discussed by the REF TF in order to further improve the REF meetings, communication with the REF members and the logistical management of the REF TF.

Adaptations and improvements are fostered through built-in learning moments that ensure regular stakeholder feedback flows to the REF. Recent learning has focussed on the identification and application of strategies for wider, more comprehensive representation, communication and outreach by REF members among the refugee community. As a result of this, REF-specific consultative meetings were started in November 2020 to complement the already existing RWCs community meetings. Learning moments strengthen the REF by taking advantage of opportunities for reaching the REF's goal of systematic refugee participation in the refugee response decision-making.

As the study was being carried out, new opportunities for strengthening awareness and systematization of consultations at the community level were started:

- In 2019, pre-REF refugee community consultations assistance was started by CARE International with the objective of systematically supporting REF members in all settlements to formally consult with their communities before REF meetings. These consultations were implemented before the 9th and 10th REF meetings and proved to be great support as the REF members were able to successfully hold formal consultations before the REF meetings, which was previously not always possible.

- Consultations with the REF members were held on the use of newly allocated funding from a partner for increased assistance to REF members' representation activities, such as for transportation or phone communication. This would allow for REF leaders' more active and systematic engagement in refugee outreach activities, especially towards harder to reach groups of refugees such as Persons with Specific Needs (PSNs).

VI. Support across stakeholder groups

Wide-ranging cross-stakeholder support from the outset - including staff time and financial support – is key for sustained growth and development of the mechanism.

Uganda is a global forerunner in the CRRF and is widely recognised for its progressive policy on refugee hosting.[28] This positive attitude towards refugees was a strong enabling factor for the set-up of the REF.

[28] Interviewees mentioned that cultural and historical contexts predispose Ugandans to welcome those in need.

Beyond this favourable environment, there was a general climate of willingness and optimism across stakeholder groups from the start, with high-level CRRF SG members supporting the establishment of the REF.

The cross-stakeholder support for the REF and the belief in its mission is demonstrated by the continued in-kind and financial co-resourcing committed by REF TF member INGOs, and co-chairs OPM and UNHCR, for ensuring the operation of the REF. The REF TF offers crucial logistic support by sharing their field capacities; the UNHCR network of regional field offices is especially indispensable for directly communicating with REF members in all settlements in spite of weak cellular signal coverage. Support is provided in the form of refreshments for meetings and consultations, materials, stationary, transportation, communication support (since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic), documentation for reporting, Internet access, and awareness-raising and trainings on topics such as COVID-19, SGBV and the Feedback, Referral & Resolution Mechanism. As an REF TF staff member puts it: *"At the national level, we have been supporting to make sure that REF TF sessions take place and follow up with OPM and UNHCR for partners to participate in meetings. At settlement level, we support REF members to conduct consultation meetings, [such as] in the form of transport, refreshments, and writing materials."*

"You feel that you want to work for your community even if you can't gain anything. You want to see any change from the community, you want to see them to be well, feeling comfortable in the area where they are." – REF Member

The cross-stakeholder support for the REF is also felt at the community level. There is also much enthusiasm around the REF from the refugee leaders' side. While REF members are partially reimbursed for transportation and communication, the role is voluntary. During the interviews, REF members shared that they take on this role out of their concern for better refugee conditions, despite being refugees themselves and dedicating a substantial part of their time to the REF in order to carry out leadership responsibilities. The goodwill and enthusiasm of refugee communities also contributes to the functioning of the REF. *"[We] are now happy. Before, we weren't involved, we didn't get information. By the time we get information through the channels of information like OPM, UNHCR, it gets stuck somewhere. […] [It is an] improvement in our communities and for […] leaders."*

5. The way forward for the REF

The REF Good Practice Study seeks to document and learn from the REF, rather than generate a comprehensive set of recommendations. However, in the process of the study, several broad areas were highlighted as potential avenues for the REF to continue to grow and improve: widening engagement with the REF across the refugee response, strengthening communication with communities, supporting inclusivity and representation of REF members, embedding documentation and information sharing to support accountability, and continuing the active support of the REF. These areas are outlined below.

Evolving and learning as a global trailblazer. The REF is a landmark initiative to be followed as the first of its kind, a national-level refugee engagement and feedback mechanism. While Uganda is one of more than a dozen countries pioneering the implementation of the CRRF, there is currently no similar national level refugee consultative body elsewhere. As it grows and matures by the application of lessons learned through self-assessment (such as the current study), the REF's successes and achievements will pave the way for modelling similar solutions in other countries and contexts. The REF should therefore continue to share its best practices and lessons.

> "One huge success is that the [REF] platform exists. […] Stronger and [more] empowered voices […], including […] dissent, [are] a measure of success: people are comfortable to voice their concerns and opinions, even about their own leadership." – CRRF Secretariat Member

Ongoing innovation and improvement. Incremental improvements are noticeable every quarter as illustrated by the journey from the first REF meetings to the current online meetings. The REF TF continues to work with REF members to find ways to strengthen the accountability function of the REF and innovate as an AAP testbed. To constantly improve over time while promoting refugee voices, plans for sustained growth and resourcing over the course of the years are a must.

Widening engagement with the REF across the refugee response will help key refugee response coordination actors to understand and act on the REF's feedback, in addition to supporting the REF technically and financially. This will need to be done in a concerted manner, under the auspices of the REF TF. Increasingly, NGO partners and donors active in Uganda are realising the potential and importance of the REF in accessing centralised feedback. The refugee community has emphasised that it also "*facilitates refugee buy-in of refugee response projects and participation through the influence of the extensive network of refugee leaders*". Raising awareness of the REF will allow refugee response actors to engage with and support the REF.

Potential areas of increased engagement

The following are potential areas of increased engagement at national and district/settlement level.

Strengthening communication with communities. A key strength of the REF is its members' direct links with affected communities. That said, not all refugee communities are aware of the REF and able share their views with their REF representative. The REF TF has

recently been supporting REF members to engage in more regular and inclusive consultative meetings with their communities. REF members could continue to be supported to better consult with communities in an inclusive way ahead of the REF, and to share the information back with them. This support could consist in capacity building, financial support for the meetings, or toolkits/resources.

Supporting inclusivity and representation of REF members. A best practice of the REF is its diverse membership, which includes women and youth while spanning all settlements and Kampala. To continue in this vein, measures could be taken to support the inclusion of REF members who have disabilities or who come from less educated backgrounds, and to ensure outreach to vulnerable community members.

Embedding documentation and information sharing to support accountability. One of the REF's main successes has been its accountability function in the refugee response, ensuring that refugee views are considered in CRRF policies, and that CRRF policies are disseminated to refugee communities. This accountability function could be further embedded by establishing additional low-cost information sharing practices with the REF members: for example, establishing regular updates to the REF on how the REF's feedback has been taken on by the refugee response, or by communicating the REF agenda in advance to REF members, as well as by streamlining knowledge management in the REF and REF TF.

Continuing the active support of the REF members. The CRRF Secretariat, OPM, UNHCR and the REF TF have played leading roles in supporting the REF to develop and become embedded into the refugee response structures in Uganda. Raising awareness to maintain this support and secure further financial support to hold REF meetings and realise some of the areas for growth outlined above will be key to the REF's continued success and evolution.

"Apart from being a leader, I'm a refugee myself. I need to contribute to what affects me when I have the platform. I need to talk when I can; it will affect the wellbeing of my wife, my children, my parents, and the entire community. Whether the concerns are taken in or not, I take the opportunity to talk. Someday someone will listen. I feel it is a gift, that I must utilise it." – REF Member.

For further discussion on the way forward for the REF, please get in touch with Yoko Iwasa, UNHCR Senior Community-Based Protection Officer at iwasa@unhcr.org or with U-Learn on info@ulearn-uganda.org. A one-pager with practical tips for engaging with the REF is being discussed.

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