



▶ Closing the gap: Labour rights, documentation and decent work for refugee and host community youth in Uganda

International Labour Organization
ILO PROSPECTS Programme | Uganda Country Office

Based on findings from the ILO PROSPECTS stakeholder consultations for adapting the Work Wise Youth: A Guide to Youth Rights at Work (WWY) to the Uganda context, involving 152 participants from 45 organisations across Nakivale, Rhino Camp, Imvepi, and Kampala | April 2026

▶ Key findings at a glance

▶ Rights Awareness Gap	▶ Documentation Exclusion Cycle	▶ Weak Justice Pathways
52% of refugee youth are unaware of their legal right to work. 80% have never received labour rights training. Youth conceptualise rights as moral obligations, not legal entitlements, leaving them unable to identify violations or seek remedies.	63% of youth and 73% of employers cite documentation as the top barrier. Gaps in clear, accessible administrative procedures for work permits, TINs, and qualification recognition remain a major barrier to formal employment.	67% of labour-related complaints go unresolved, while fear of retaliation discourages reporting. Labour offices remain critically under-resourced, operating on as little as USD 1,200 per year .

▶ Context

Uganda hosts close to **2 million refugees** — one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Under its progressive open-door policy, refugees have the legal right to work, move freely, and access public services. Yet for the vast majority of refugee and host community youth, this legal framework remains far removed from daily economic reality.

The ILO through the PROSPECTS Programme commissioned a mixed-methods consultation to generate evidence for adapting the Work Wise Youth: A Guide to Youth Rights at Work (WWY) to Uganda's context. Conducted across **Nakivale, Rhino Camp, Imvepi, and Kampala**, the study engaged **152 participants** through key informant interviews (n=47), focus group discussions (n=95; refugee=62, host community=33), structured digital surveys (n=47), and desk review.

This executive summary synthesises the study's core findings across three analytical pillars — **rights awareness, employment barriers, and complaint mechanisms** — and translates them into actionable recommendations for government, development actors, and programme implementers.

▶ Pillar 1 Rights awareness

52%

of refugee youth unaware of their legal right to work

80%

have never received any rights-at-work training

67%

of female respondents report unawareness of the right to work

Fifty-two per cent of refugee youth surveyed do not know their legal right to work in Uganda. Among female respondents, unawareness rises to 67%. An overwhelming 80% have never received any rights at work training — including all female survey respondents.

A deeper qualitative engagement found that youth do not simply lack information — they hold a fundamentally different conceptual model of what rights are. Across all nine focus group discussions, youth described "rights" as behavioural obligations: respecting supervisors, maintaining good conduct, and avoiding conflict. The core Fundamental principles and rights work as derived from the ILO conventions and recommendations, including legal protections — written contracts, minimum wage, overtime pay, occupational safety and Health in workspaces, conflict management, and grievance pathways, were unfamiliar to almost all youth who were part of the consultation.

This gap extends up the institutional chain. Community trainers — the front-line intermediaries for rights information — were rated no higher than "somewhat familiar" with labour law of Uganda. Two-thirds of frontline labour officers have received no refugee-specific training. Some of the government respondents described information flow as "inconsistent," "indirect," and "not readily available."

Information inequality is not distributed evenly. Female youth, youth with disabilities, settlement-based populations, and non-English speakers face compounded exclusion. Thirty-seven per cent of refugee youth cited language barriers as an employment challenge. Dedicated FGDs with persons with disabilities at Imvepi and Nakivale documented inaccessible training venues, lack of adapted materials, and persistent stigma.

► Pillar 2 Employment awareness

62%

refugee youth cite documentation issues

38%

reported wage theft

29%

experienced harassment or violence

Documentation constitutes the one of the key barrier to decent work — a finding that converges across all four survey instruments. Sixty-three per cent of refugee youth cite documentation issues as their primary challenge. On the demand side, 73% of employer organisations identify documentation and work permits as their top hiring barrier. This rare convergence of supply-side and demand-side evidence points to the same administrative challenge.

In practice, the work permit system is opaque, centralised, and not easy to access. Although work permits are legally free, refugees are frequently required to obtain a Conventional Travel Document (CTD) first — a process costing approximately USD 60 plus travel to Kampala, prohibitive for settlement-based youth. Many reported reliance on brokers or middlemen who charge informal fees without guaranteeing results.[BK1] [BK2] The absence of clear and accessible procedures for engaging refugees in formal employment undermines the practical realisation of the right to work.

In addition, the findings highlighted that limitations in certification and qualification recognition significantly undermine refugee youth employability. KIIs with labour officers and education actors emphasised that refugee professionals face substantial barriers in having foreign qualifications recognised. The equivalency process was described as "complex," "costly," and "time-consuming," with some respondents noting that recognition procedures are "difficult to navigate" and inaccessible for most refugees.

Tax Identification Numbers (TINs) compound the exclusion cycle. Several respondents reported that Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) offices require documentation that refugees do not possess, such as National IDs or work permits. Although URA policy accepts refugee attestation letters and CTDs, this information is not consistently communicated or applied[BK3] by URA, resulting in refugees being turned away or informally advised to obtain work permits first.

Beyond legal barriers, structural market failures deepen precarity. Skills training programmes are poorly aligned with actual labour demand, generating "training fatigue" while access to capital remains acutely constrained.

Sixty-two per cent of refugee youth surveyed reported facing discrimination or challenges at work, specifically due to their refugee status. Workplace violations are widespread: 38% reported wage theft, 29% harassment or violence, and 19% unsafe working conditions.

► **Pillar 3 Complaint mechanisms****48%**

youth turn to community leaders

67%

complaints go unaddressed

24%

approach government officials

Uganda's legal framework, such as the Employment Act, Labour Disputes (Arbitration and Settlement) Act, and Refugees Act, provides comprehensive protections and clear complaint pathways. In practice, these mechanisms are largely inaccessible to refugee and host community youth.

Forty-eight per cent of youth turn to community leaders who have no statutory labour mandate as their primary source of help with work conflicts. Only 24% approach government officials. When complaints are lodged, 67% go unaddressed. Labour offices operate on budgets as low as USD 1,200 per year, lack transport, and in some cases lack even printed copies of the Employment Act.

Fear of retaliation is reported as one of the dominant deterrents. Across all nine FGDs, youth consistently reported that complaints about unpaid wages, harassment, or unsafe conditions frequently result in dismissal and blacklisting. In this environment, silence becomes the rational survival strategy — even in cases of serious abuse.

► **Cross-Cutting Priority: Reach the Most Excluded**

All interventions must specifically address the four dimensions of information inequality identified by this consultation:

- **Gender:** 67% of female respondents report being unaware of the refugee's legal right to work or having received training on rights at work. Training delivery should guarantee gender-segregated sessions, flexible timing that accommodates caregiving responsibilities, and community-based venues to address mobility restrictions.
- **Disability:** FGDs documented inaccessible training venues, lack of adapted materials, and, in the case of persons with albinism, targeted exploitation. Mandatory accessibility standards and dedicated PWD sessions must accompany any training rollout.
- **Location:** Settlement-based youth face information scarcity and institutional distance. Any reform of documentation, TIN registration, or complaint pathways must prioritise settlement-level decentralisation.
- **Language:** 37% of refugee youth cited language barriers as an employment challenge. Rights information delivered only in English excludes the majority of refugees. Interpretation and translation must be funded as a core programme cost, not an add-on.

► **Policy recommendations****For the Government of Uganda**

Recommendation	Action Required
Ministry of Internal Affairs	Publish and decentralise standardised, refugee-specific work permit procedures — including requirements, fees, timelines, responsible offices, and appeal mechanisms.
OPM	Advocate for refugee ID to be recognised for employment and TIN registration, and access to other national services such as NSSF.
MoGLSD / District Labour Offices	Invest in labour administration capacity in refugee-hosting districts: dedicated budgets for inspections, transport, and settlement-level outreach; mandatory induction training incorporating refugee-specific guidance.
Uganda Revenue Authority	Roll out the refugee TIN programme with settlement-based mobile registration clinics, multilingual support, and partnerships with implementing partners to provide in-person guided registration.
OPM / Local Governments	Establish clear referral pathways from RWC and community leader level to statutory labour institutions, with clear protocols for cases involving employment violations.

For Development and Humanitarian Actors

Actor	Action required
NGOs and CSOs	• Mainstream rights at work and support to formalisation into existing livelihoods, protection, and vocational training programmes. • Replace ad hoc rights messaging with standardised content treating rights as legal entitlements. Implement demand-driven skilling programmes combining classroom learning with structured work-based learning, supported by certification and employer partnerships. • Prioritise multilingual and accessible formats for female youth, persons with disabilities, and low-literacy participants. • Track longitudinal labour rights outcomes including awareness rates, formalisation, and complaint resolution. • Integrate decent work indicators into programme frameworks to strengthen the measurement and promotion of quality employment outcomes.
Employers' and Workers' Organisations	• Increase awareness among employers of refugee employment opportunities and legal rights. • Develop targeted outreach to extend collective representation to informal and refugee workers, starting with high-risk sectors: agriculture, construction, domestic work, and services.
Donors	• Prioritise long-term investment in multi-pillar approaches like the PROSPECTS Programme that address the causes of informality through coordinated delivery of skills, jobs, enterprise development, market linkages, and social protection. • Promote decent job creation in line with ILO Decent Work principles. Make the integration of decent work indicators a mandatory requirement within funding frameworks for livelihoods programmes to ensure accountability for quality employment outcomes and sustainable economic inclusion.

► Conclusion

Uganda's legal architecture is not the problem. What remains missing is the connective tissue: standardised and accessible information, trained and trusted intermediaries, adequately resourced labour institutions, and enforceable accountability mechanisms that link rights-holders to duty-bearers.

The Refugees Act, Employment Act, and Constitution collectively guarantee the right to work, equal treatment, and access to justice. Uganda's open-door refugee policy represents a progressive institutional foundation that few countries can match.

Realising this potential requires coordinated action across documentation reform, sustained investment in labour administration, and integrated programme delivery. Uganda has both the legal framework and the institutional commitment to close the gap; what is now required is deliberate, system-wide action to scale refugee rights to work into lived economic inclusion.

Methodological Note

This executive summary is based on findings from a PROSPECTS-commissioned mixed-methods consultation conducted in 2025–2026, engaging stakeholders across Nakivale, Rhino Camp, Imvepi, and Kampala. For the full study report, contact the ILO Uganda Country Office.

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