

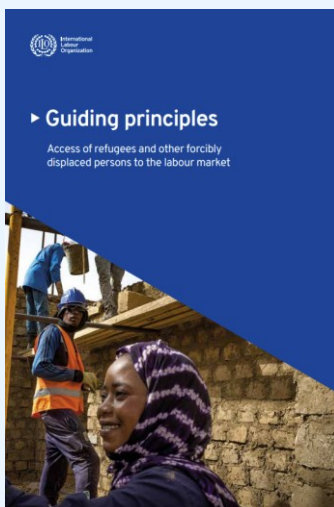
► Labour market inclusion for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

Uganda: Governance frameworks for inclusive access to labour markets

June 2026

The ILO Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market, adopted in 2016 by a tripartite technical meeting, provide a basis for the formulation of policy responses and national tripartite dialogue applicable to responses to forced displacement.

The Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market



The Guiding Principles (GPs) support efforts to improve labour market functioning and ensure the protection of nationals, as well as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons (FDPs), in accessing decent work. The GPs are a set of voluntary, non-binding principles rooted in relevant international labour standards and universal human rights instruments, and inspired by good practices implemented in the field.

The Guiding Principles are structured around six core pillars:

- **A. Governance frameworks on access to labour markets;**
- B. Economic and employment policies for inclusive labour markets;
- C. Labour rights and equality of opportunity and treatment;
- D. Partnership, coordination and coherence;
- E. Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of returnees; and
- F. Additional pathways for labour mobility.

This knowledge product focuses on section A of the GPs, with specific emphasis on Principles 12 and 13. Using Uganda as a case study, it illustrates how to ensure effective access to formal labour markets and decent work for refugees and other FDPs, while ensuring their protection in the labour market in line with international labour standards.

Unpacking the Guiding Principles

What does Section A on Governance frameworks on access to labour markets mean in practice?

Guiding Principle 12 – National policies and action plans: ILO Member States are encouraged to develop and adopt national policies or action plans that enable refugees and other FDPs to safely and lawfully participate in the labour market, including by facilitating access to decent work and livelihood opportunities.

Guiding Principle 13 – Alignment with international standards: National policies and action plans should be formulated in consultation with tripartite partners, meaning representatives of government, employers' and workers' organizations and in conformity with:

- International labour standards, referring to relevant ILO Conventions and Recommendations;
- Decent work principles, including access to productive employment, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue;
- Humanitarian principles, notably humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence; and
- Obligations under international law, including human rights law and refugee law.

Case study: Granting access to the labour market and supporting self-reliance in Uganda

Key points



Members of Oli B Cell - Storm Water Drainage Maintenance Group, a beneficiary of the Urban Cash For Work Programme (UCWP) under ILO PROSPECTS cleans drainages and clears bushes in Oli B Cell in Arua City, 2022 © Adam Walusimbi/ILO

Key issues:

- How to ensure effective access to formal labour markets and decent work for refugees and other FDPs, while safeguarding their protection in the labour market in line with international labour standards.

Key takeaways:

- Uganda has built a rights-based model for refugee self-reliance by embedding refugees into domestic law, and national development planning, enabling formal labour market access, freedom of movement, and shared infrastructure gains for refugees and host communities.
- By integrating refugee hosting into national systems – from documentation and work permit exemptions to land allocation and service delivery – Uganda demonstrates how self-reliance frameworks can generate economic multipliers, strengthen local economies, and reduce tensions, in a time when humanitarian funding declines.

1. Profile of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

Uganda hosts Africa's largest refugee population, with close to two million as of March 2026, primarily from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Women and children comprise 77 per cent of the refugee population,

and 51 per cent are under the age of 18. The large majority of refugees live in 42 settlements integrated alongside host communities, while the remainder reside in urban areas. Almost half of the population is of working age.¹

2. Major developments: Towards inclusive labour markets

Over the past two decades, Uganda has progressively established a comprehensive legislative and policy framework that promotes refugee self-reliance by granting substantive rights, including access to documentation for employment, services and freedom of movement.

By embedding refugee protection into domestic law, operational policies, and national development planning, Uganda demonstrates how national systems can facilitate access to decent work for refugees and other FDPs. Central to this approach is a rights-based framework, closely aligned with international labour standards, the [1951 Refugee Convention](#),² the [1969 OAU Convention](#)³ and broader international human rights law. This framework enables refugees' effective participation in the labour market through the Refugees Act⁴ and the Refugees Regulations,⁵ providing for:

- access to legal identity documentation;
- exemption from standard work permit requirements for both wage and self-employment;
- access to land for cultivation within settlements;
- freedom of movement across the country; and
- access to education, health care, and social services, alongside guarantees of non-discrimination, fair treatment, and the right to organize, including joining trade unions.

Importantly, Uganda has also integrated refugee inclusion into its national development agenda. Through the Fourth National Development Plan (NDPIV),⁶ refugee-hosting district development plans are aligned with national priorities, and ILO and the National Planning Authority finalized an Employment Mainstreaming Action Plan to monitor job creation interventions across all 18 NDPIV programmes in March 2025, with the employment impact of the NDPIV to be assessed. This whole-of-government approach reinforces the inclusion of refugees not as a parallel system, but as part of broader socio-economic development strategies.

3. Outcomes and key lessons

Uganda's progressive legislative and policy framework has fostered refugee self-reliance amid declining humanitarian funding and growing economic pressures,⁷ enabling formal labour market access that unlocks refugees' diverse skills and entrepreneurial potential while generating economic benefits for host communities.⁸ Integrated settlements have improved service delivery in health, education, water and sanitation, and infrastructure across hosting districts,⁹ with employment outcomes converging toward host levels after 10 years¹⁰ – reducing aid dependency and enhancing social cohesion.

These experiences point to several key lessons:

- **First**, a coherent legislative and policy framework – aligned with international labour standards and obligations under international law – is essential to protect refugees and enable access to decent work, freedom of movement, settlement land, and basic services.
- **Second**, promoting self-reliance succeeds when policies integrate refugees into national development planning rather than parallel aid systems, delivering shared infrastructure gains that benefit both refugees and host communities while mitigating resource competition.

¹ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "[Uganda – Refugee Statistics March 2026](#)".

² Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137.

³ OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, adopted 10 September 1969, entered into force 20 June 1974, Organization of African Unity, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1001, p. 45.

⁴ Republic of Uganda, [Refugees Act, 2006](#), secs 28–36.

⁵ Republic of Uganda, [Refugees Regulations, 2010](#), S.I. 2010 No. 9, regs 64–65.

⁶ National Planning Authority, "[Fourth National Development Plan \(NDP IV\) 2025/26–2029/30](#)" (2025).

⁷ Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development, "[Refugee Mobility and Livelihoods in Uganda](#)" (2025).

⁸ World Bank, "[Informing the Refugee Policy Response in Uganda: Results from the Uganda Refugee and Host Communities 2018 Household Survey](#)" (2019).

⁹ World Bank, "[Inclusive Refugee-Hosting in Uganda Improves Local Development and Prevents Public Backlash](#)" (2022).

¹⁰ UNHCR, "[Uganda Knowledge Brief: Using Socioeconomic Data to Promote Employment Solutions for Refugees in Uganda](#)" (2021).

- **Third**, such integration generates economic multiplier effects, as refugees' participation in the labour market boosts local jobs, incomes, and trade for nationals, enhancing overall development gains and helping to reduce social tensions.

4. Actionable steps: Roadmap based on experience from Uganda

- **Establish reliable refugee documentation systems:** Uganda issues Refugee Identity Cards and Convention Travel Documents, a passport-like document issued to refugees under article 28 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, enabling international travel while protecting against refoulement. These documents clearly confirm refugee status and enable employers, service providers, and public authorities to verify eligibility without additional bureaucratic requirements.¹¹
- **Remove financial and administrative barriers to formal employment:** Refugees are exempt from pre-employment fees that apply to other foreign nationals, with work permits processed through a centralized online Immigration Portal and stamped directly on Convention Travel Documents.¹²
- **Guarantee freedom of movement and access to settlement land:** Free land allocation within designated settlements for cultivation, combined with nationwide freedom of movement, enables refugees to pursue both agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods.¹³
- **Integrate refugees into national development planning:** District development plans in six refugee-hosting districts are aligned with priorities of the Fourth National Development Plan.

5. Way forward

Some barriers to inclusive labour market access remain and should be addressed through coherent, rights-based policy design. Work permits remain inaccessible for most refugees, driving their concentration in the informal sector, with documentation constituting one of the key barriers to decent work, according to both refugee workers and employers.¹⁴ Low employer awareness of refugee rights, discriminatory practices and opaque rules further deter formal hiring,¹⁵ while persistent employment gaps affect youth and women particularly hard, with new arrivals facing a 62-point employment rate gap, and skills downgrading impacting 32-50 per cent of high-skilled refugees.¹⁶

To address these constraints, the way forward should prioritize labour market information systems providing disaggregated data and assessments to prevent skills downgrading and better integrate refugees – especially youth and women – into national employment strategies. Tripartite consultation and monitoring mechanisms can ensure policy coherence, simplify work permit procedures, and align access to labour markets with promoting labour rights and equality of opportunity and treatment (see section C of the GPs). Awareness-raising campaigns for employers, alongside streamlined administrative processes, and the promotion of fair recruitment practices, are essential to boost formal hiring, while governance frameworks should link refugee inclusion to holistic employment policies that build resilience for both displaced persons and host communities (see section B of the GPs).

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¹¹ Uganda, Refugees Act, 2006, sec. 29(1)(a).

¹² Uganda, Refugees Regulations, 2010, reg. 64.

¹³ Uganda, Refugees Act, 2006, sec. 30; Uganda, Refugees Regulations, 2010, reg. 65.

¹⁴ ILO, “[Closing the Gap: Labour Rights, Documentation and Decent Work for Refugee and Host Community Youth in Uganda](#)” (2026), which, based on stakeholder consultations, highlights that 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.

¹⁵ International Growth Centre, “[Improving Access to Labour Markets for Refugees: Evidence from Uganda](#)” (2019); ILO, “[Review of National Policy, Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks and Practice: A Baseline Study on the Right to Work and Rights at Work for Refugees](#)” (2023).

¹⁶ UNHCR, “Uganda Knowledge Brief” (2021).