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The Impact of Volunteer Employment on Migrant Outcomes: Ugandan Perspective

Formal employment opportunities are limited in Uganda's economy, especially for migrants and refugees (referred to here collectively as "migrants"). First-hand accounts and economic surveys confirm this, and it's estimated that 80% of Uganda's population is employed in the informal economy.¹ Migrants tend towards employment in culturally-specific informal sectors. Sudanese women tend to hawk ground-nuts and other foodstuffs, while Congolese women hawk jewelry and sew clothing. Men tend to work as day laborers or '*boda boda*' drivers. These forms of employment typically produce very low margins, and migrants struggle to purchase basic needs and inputs for their businesses, much less build capital to invest in their businesses or in their families' human capital. With limited exceptions, migrants are also locked out of formal financial services due to KYC² and Customer Due Diligence restrictions. Furthermore, these forms of employment present very limited opportunities for advancement. Considering these barriers, "volunteer" jobs represent a crucial vehicle for migrants to gain new skills, build their networks, gain access to future opportunities, and even earn reasonable wages. This essay seeks to show the importance of volunteer positions for migrants, how these opportunities differ between Kampala and the Bidi Bidi Refugee Camp, and whether these volunteer opportunities are privileging specific demographic groups.

The academic literature on "volunteerism" in development focuses on two narrow aspects of volunteerism. First, much of the literature analyzes the role of external

¹ Rugasira, Andrew. "Unpacking Uganda's Informal Sector." The Independent Uganda. The Independent Uganda, May 23, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.ug/unpacking-ugandas-informal-sector/>.

² KYC or Know Your Customer policies represent the regulatory requirements placed on banks and other financial institutions who are obligated to know essential information about each and every customer.

volunteers on development. This perspective does not tell us much about the impact of local volunteers on development efforts and their own outcomes and is therefore superfluous to this discussion. The second aspect considered in the literature is the development of social capital through volunteering. A 2009 United Nations Development Program study on the impact of volunteerism found that higher levels of volunteer activity in a community results in lower levels of violent crime and better educational and economic outcomes.³ Volunteers are actively engaged in their communities, and as such, they become more active stakeholders in the community's development. Furthermore, many of those served by volunteers, or who witness volunteerism, seem to gain a sense of responsibility to replicate volunteers' actions. While the literature supports our qualitative findings collected through migrant interviews, it fails to consider the individual economic impact of volunteerism or the determinants of who tends to become a volunteer.

Non-governmental Organizations appear to be the primary employer of migrant volunteers in Uganda. Organizations like International Rescue Committee (IRC), Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID), Jesuit Relief Services, and American Refugee Council employ volunteers, as well as both financial service providers (notably UGAFODE MDI) and community organizations (especially the local Burundian organization in Kampala). The terms of the volunteer opportunity vary significantly from employer to employer and job to job. Large NGOs like IRC usually contribute "stipends" for their volunteers to cover some or all of their business expenses. IRC's Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) Coordinators in Kampala receive a token sum of tens of thousands of Ugandan shillings per month (roughly 10 USD) – not enough to survive on as a primary source of income, but still significant. Smaller NGOs like YARID recruit and train English-language teachers from Kampala. Though they promise stipends to employee-volunteers, they do not always follow through on these commitments due to funding shortages. UGAFODE's refugee internship program provided 10-15 interns with intensive training, a path to formal employment, and 10,000 UGX per week. Interestingly, UGAFODE's refugee internship

program was the only such program I found among private or for-profit organizations in Uganda. Regardless, the program is a boon to UGAFODE: the refugee interns operate as salespeople within their communities, marketing the benefits of UGAFODE's migrant savings and loans products.

Volunteer compensation and responsibilities also vary significantly between locations. Volunteer jobs in Kampala typically receive lower compensation than those in Bidi Bidi Camp, even though the cost of living in Kampala far exceeds that of Bidi Bidi. Many of the opportunities in Bidi Bidi require greater responsibilities than those in Kampala. One Bidi Bidi respondent, Mohammed, worked for three different NGOs in the camp since he arrived in 2016. Mohammed first volunteered for American Refugee Council and received a bicycle for his troubles, then proceeded to work with IRC's Sexual and Gender Violence team and received 300,000 UGX (81.37 USD) as a stipend. At the time of our conversation, Mohammed was working as a security guard, protecting World Vision's food distribution centers for 200,000 UGX (54.24 USD) per month salary, less than he was making as a volunteer for IRC. Another respondent, Safiyah's husband, volunteered with IRC's village health teams, and he earned 60,000 UGX (16.27 USD) per month. A third respondent, Rahim, worked as a hygiene promotion volunteer for CEFORD, an Oxfam-funded project, and received 250,000 UGX (67.81 USD) per month. The interviews conducted in Bidi Bidi Camp revealed that no volunteer position was compensated for less than 100,000 UGX (27.14 USD) per month – a significant sum given a context where the daily wages refugees earn from working on local Ugandan farms is 5,000 UGX (about 1.35 USD).

Do these volunteer opportunities provide any benefits beyond their stipends? Interviews in Kampala and Bidi Bidi Camp suggest that their greatest benefits are the opportunities to network and build skills. Two Congolese brothers who proved to be effective recruiters and interpreters in Kampala demonstrate how crucial networking and skill acquisition are to volunteers. Jacques and Josue both worked intermittently as English-language instructors at YARID, and rarely received compensation for their efforts. How-

³ UN Volunteers, ed. "Guidance Note." Bonn, Germany, n.d.

ever, the brothers work hard and network easily, and both have parlayed their experience at YARID into paid jobs as interpreters with Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). Jacques is transitioning from a refugee internship into a full-time role at UGAFODE due in part to the expansive network he developed within Kampala's Congolese community. Similarly, each of the three IRC VSLA coordinators I worked with in Kampala operated informal businesses that utilized the networks and skills they developed while recruiting for and training members of VSLAs. One coordinator owned and operated a general store in a predominantly Congolese neighborhood, while another helped her VSLA members sell handmade bags and clothes to a broader clientele than they would have been able to access on their own.

Volunteer positions in Bidi Bidi Camp had two advantages over those in Kampala. The first and most important benefit was early access to information. Information about new volunteer opportunities, scholarships, or sponsorships can make or break a migrant's livelihood in a new country. In Bidi Bidi, such information was disseminated through the decentralized village/cluster/zone leadership hierarchy. Leaders occupying different levels of the hierarchy tended to hoard information on new opportunities, using the information for their own benefit or sharing with friends and allies. NGO volunteers also collected this information, thanks to their interactions with NGO staff and time spent both in the NGO offices and various locations in Bidi Bidi. These volunteers could use this information for their own benefit or share it as they saw fit. On more than one occasion our interpreter in Bidi Bidi, Chapo, shared crucial information about jobs and scholarships with respondents whose village or cluster-level leaders had denied them the same information. Chapo was also able to convert his early access into a string of consistent, and occasionally simultaneous, volunteer positions. The second crucial benefit of volunteer opportunities in Bidi Bidi was the geographic access that often coincided with the position's responsibilities. Travel between clusters in Bidi Bidi Camp is rare, and travel between the disparate zones even rarer. NGO volunteers tend to travel frequently across diverse areas of the camp, gathering information and expanding their networks. Another Bidi Bidi interpreter converted his wide-ranging network

into a valuable business opportunity: moonshining maize liquor, one of the few income-generating activities in Bidi Bidi. This man acted as a wholesaler, collecting liquor brewed by women across various zones and selling it via a distributed network and a stall in one of the zone's markets.

While volunteer opportunities appear to be an important component of a migrant's economic mobility, two challenges must be addressed when considering the total impact of these opportunities. First, even experienced and highly skilled volunteers require a degree of training and oversight from the full-time employees of these organizations. NGO staff in Kampala and Bidi Bidi Camp are stretched thin and the added task of training volunteers could prove an unhelpful distraction from other, more essential duties. This challenge becomes especially relevant when organizations hire volunteers on short contracts, typically month to month or in three-month increments. The challenge of training new volunteers somewhat impacts the second challenge, which is more fundamental to the volunteer model and difficult to address. Interviews with migrants and NGO staff suggest that migrants who successfully achieve access to these volunteer opportunities are already well-positioned to succeed in Uganda. Many volunteers, especially in Bidi Bidi Camp, possess significant language skills, some degree of secondary or post-secondary education, and may be employed simultaneously by multiple NGOs. This trend suggests that volunteer opportunities are supporting the professional development of the least-vulnerable migrants. Volunteers in Bidi Bidi Camp typically possessed some prior experience working with NGOs in Sudan or South Sudan, and those who didn't had prior formal employment experience as teachers, government officials, or nurses.

In Kampala, language skills are more crucial to success than prior experience. Working within the development and/or migrant services industry requires fluency in *at least* two languages, usually English and a local language like Luganda, Juba Arabic, or Kiswahili. The general requirement of prior professional experience and/or language skills significantly restricts access to volunteer positions for less-privileged migrants. Subsistence farmers rarely possess the formal skills necessary to obtain a volunteer position or succeed in the position if they're lucky to gain one.

While organizations should not be punished for seeking the most-qualified candidates, we should also recognize that these positions bias themselves towards a population already primed to succeed (relative to their migrant peers) in Uganda. Such bias explains why, especially in Bidi Bidi Camp, the same set of highly qualified candidates win most of the volunteer positions. More effort could be made to include more segments of the migrant population in volunteer positions. Positions such as security guards or community liaisons offer low barriers to entry, with good potential for upskilling and networking.

The role of unpaid and stipended volunteer positions in establishing migrants in their new communities could be better researched. Our research team recommends further study of the effect of these volunteer opportunities on employee outcomes. Future studies might focus on quantifying the outcomes for volunteers and whether these outcomes are worth the time and resources invested by sponsoring organizations.

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