AL for governance

At the African Leadership Academy

Enhancing Labour Mobility for Internally Displaced Youth & Refugees in Africa

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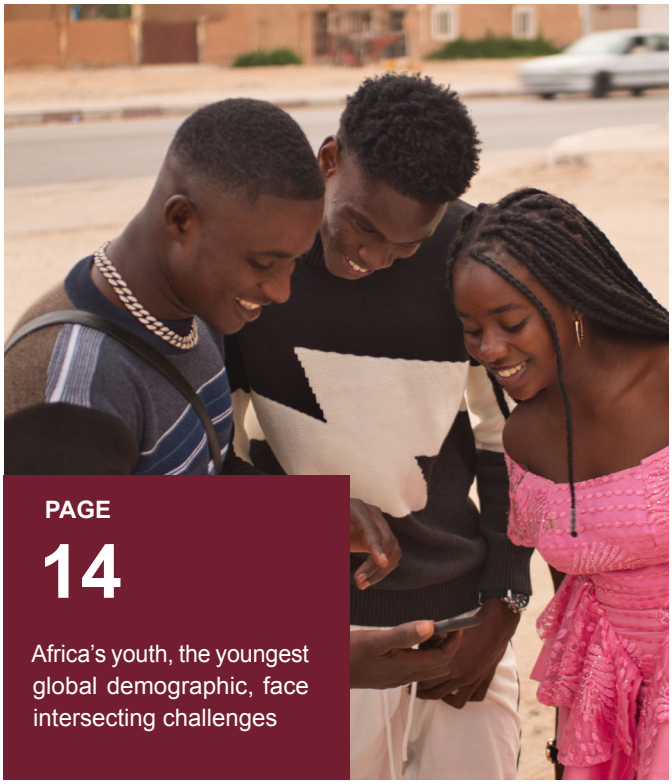
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Table of Contents



PAGE
14

Africa's youth, the youngest global demographic, face intersecting challenges



PAGE
40

Child Labour used in Cobalt Mining in the DRC (Democratic Republic

Foreword 6

Executive Summary 7

Partner's Note 9

Who is AL for Governance? 10

Our Team 11

Contributors 12

Bridging Borders, Building Futures: Strengthening Youth-Centric Migration and Displacement Governance in Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa

Executive Summary 14

Introduction 14

Problem Statement 14

Methodology 14

Analysis and Findings 15

Policy Recommendations 16

Conclusion 17

Leaving No African Youth Behind: Advancing Economic Inclusion for Internally Displaced Youth and Refugees

Executive Summary 19

Introduction 19

The Challenge: Youth Exclusion from Labour Markets 19

Why It Matters Now 19

Methodology 19

Case Studies: Successful Models of Economic Inclusion 20

Key Barriers to Economic Inclusion 20

Policy Recommendations, Implementation & Impact 20

Conclusion 21

Unlocking Opportunities: Labour Mobility for Displaced Youth and Refugees in Africa

Executive Summary 23

Context and Problem 23

Methodology 23

Comparative Findings 23
Opportunities and Good Practice 25
Recommendations 25

Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Refugee Labour Mobility in Uganda.

Executive Summary 28
Introduction 28
Methodology 28
Policy Recommendations 30

SmartAfrika Works: A Policy Playbook for Unlocking Labour Mobility for Displaced Youth in Africa through SMART and Innovative Solutions for the Future

Executive Summary 31
Introduction 31
Methodology 31
Analysis and Findings 31
Opportunities for Intervention 32
Policy Recommendations 32
Conclusion 33

Redesigning the Future of Refugee Work and Inclusion in SADC by 2030

Executive Summary 36
Introduction 36
Methodology 36
Analysis and Findings 36
Recommendations and implementation plans 37
Conclusion 39

Tackling Tunisia's Management of Sub-Saharan Immigration under Kais Saied's Administration.

Executive Summary 41
Analysis of the Issue 41
Causes and Consequences 42
Existing Strategies and Identified Gaps 43
Policy Recommendations 45

Article References 48



PAGE

35

The SADC region, home to nearly one million refugees



PAGE

31

Africa hosts over 44 million forcibly displaced persons, nearly 60% of whom are under 35

Forward



From SADC to DRC, these policy briefs examine governance gaps and propose practical solutions to empower Africa's displaced and refugee youth.

"Enhancing Labour Mobility for Internally Displaced Youth and Refugees in Africa".

It is with immense pride that I introduce this special edition of our Governance Journal, curated under the timely and important theme: "Enhancing Labour Mobility for Internally Displaced Youth and Refugees in Africa."

This edition brings together a collection of policy briefs authored by emerging governance leaders, participants in our program under the Africa Leadership (AL) for Governance Sector Challenge, who have worked under the dedicated mentorship of experts from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These contributions not only reflect rigorous research and policy analysis, but also embody a bold vision for inclusive and youth-centered governance across the continent.

From SADC to DRC, these policy briefs examine governance gaps and propose practical solutions to empower Africa's displaced and refugee youth. Covering Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, the authors advocate for youth-centered, harmonized migration policies. Topics include economic exclusion, labour market reforms, and innovative mobility frameworks. Country-specific briefs explore Uganda's refugee labour model and North Africa's restrictive policies. Others highlight digital innovation and regional cooperation as tools for enhancing youth mobility and employability across the continent.

What unites these contributions is a shared conviction: that the governance of displacement and mobility must be inclusive, innovative, and attuned to the voices of youth. Labour mobility, when properly governed, is not just a tool for economic integration, it is a cornerstone of dignity, self-reliance, and peacebuilding.

Our collaboration with IOM has demonstrated the power of inter-institutional and inter-generational partnerships in equipping young African leaders to shape meaningful policy change. I commend the authors for their clarity of vision, our mentors for their dedication, and our partners for their steadfast support.

As you engage with the ideas in this journal, may you find not only policy recommendations, but also inspiration for reshaping governance systems that work for all, especially those too often left on the margins.

Val Wiggett

Senior Director of Career Programs
African Leadership Academy

Executive Summary

Africa's most urgent challenges and opportunities: enhancing labour mobility for displaced refugees and youth.

The 2025 edition of the AL for Governance Migration Policy Journal focuses on one of Africa's most urgent challenges and opportunities: enhancing labour mobility for displaced refugees and youth. With over 60 percent of the continent's population under 25 and more than 44 million forcibly displaced people, Africa's future prosperity depends on transforming this demographic reality into inclusive growth and stability.

Across the continent, young refugees and internally displaced persons remain systematically excluded from formal labour markets. Restrictive quotas, fragmented governance, and the lack of recognition for foreign qualifications force many into precarious work, stifling their potential. High unemployment rates among youth compound this exclusion, threatening both social cohesion and economic progress.

Yet, as the journal demonstrates, promising solutions are emerging. Uganda's progressive refugee regime has opened pathways for integration, South African incubators are turning migrant skills into viable enterprises, and Nigeria's vocational training models are reconnecting displaced youth to local economies. Digital credentialing pilots further show how technology can help young people carry their skills across borders. These examples prove that when legal rights, skills recognition, and financial access align, displaced youth not only survive but actively drive development.

This edition also features a guest contribution by current African Leadership Academy students, titled Global Green Transition: 2005 – 2025: Addressing the Economic and Environmental Exploitation of Local Communities in Kolwezi and Surrounding Areas in the DRC. This contribution discusses the critical role of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), particularly Kolwezi, in the global green transition due to its vast cobalt reserves, essential for renewable energy technologies.

Building on these diverse perspectives, the journal advances five priorities: integrating displaced youth into national labour strategies, embedding skills recognition within AfCFTA protocols, financing mobility and entrepreneurship

While distinct from the journal's core theme of labour mobility, the article interrogates the intersection of resource extraction, environmental justice, and local governance in the context of the global green transition. It highlights how cobalt mining, central to renewable energy supply chains, has left Congolese communities trapped in cycles of poverty, displacement, and ecological harm, despite powering the world's shift to clean energy. By connecting labour rights, displacement, and environmental justice, this student-led work reinforces the journal's broader aim: to position young voices at the centre of Africa's governance debates.

Building on these diverse perspectives, the journal advances five priorities: integrating displaced youth into national labour strategies, embedding skills recognition within AfCFTA protocols, financing mobility and entrepreneurship through dedicated funds, leveraging digital systems for skills portability, and ensuring youth voices are mainstreamed in regional governance frameworks.

The message is clear: displaced youth are not a burden but a resource. By investing in their inclusion, Africa can transform displacement into an engine for growth, resilience, and dignity. Governments, regional bodies, international partners, civil society, and the private sector all have a role to play in shaping this future. The time to act is now, before another generation is left behind.



Lesego Otlhabanye

AL for Governance Manager

African Leadership Academy



Partner's Note

Displacement continues to reshape societies across the African continent. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, most of whom are women and young people, face significant barriers to economic participation.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is honored to contribute this foreword to the 2025 AL for Governance Journal under the theme "Enhancing Labour Mobility for Internally Displaced Youth and Refugees in Africa." This publication serves as a testament to the creativity and determination of Africa's young leaders. It also underscores the significant achievement that can be realized through collaborative mentorship, rigorous research, and evidence-driven policymaking.

Displacement continues to reshape societies across the African continent. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, most of whom are women and young people, face significant barriers to economic participation. They often encounter legal and institutional restrictions, lack of skills recognition, xenophobia, and inadequate access to decent work. Yet, as the policy briefs in this volume compellingly demonstrate, displaced youth are not passive recipients of aid but critical agents of development and resilience. With the right policies and investments, their mobility can fuel inclusive growth, strengthen regional integration, and contribute to peace and stability.

IOM's partnership with the African Leadership Academy (ALA) in the AL for Governance Sector Challenge exemplifies the power of co-creation. Through this initiative, IOM experts have closely collaborated with young scholars, by mentoring, guiding, and challenging them to identify policy gaps and propose innovative solutions. The briefs featured in this journal offer concrete pathways forward: harmonizing labour rights across borders, mainstreaming youth migration priorities into regional frameworks, advancing financial inclusion models, leveraging digital skills credentials, and fostering private sector partnerships. Together, they contribute to a shared vision: ensuring that displaced youth are not left behind.

This vision resonates deeply with the IOM Strategic Plan 2024–2028, which prioritizes three overarching objectives: saving lives and protecting people on the move; driving solutions to displacement; and facilitating pathways for regular migration. It also aligns with the Pact for the Future adopted in 2024, which calls on the international community to eradicate poverty, invest in young people, uphold human rights, and strengthen inclusive societies. These global commitments remind us that the challenges of displacement are inseparable from the broader quest for sustainable development, climate action, and social justice in this decade of action in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The policy briefs in this journal reflect both urgency and hope. They remind us that enhancing labour mobility for displaced youth is not only about economic inclusion; it is also about dignity, equity, and unlocking human potential. By situating labour mobility within Africa's continental frameworks, such as the African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA), the Free Movement Protocol under the AfCFTA, and regional labour migration action plans, these contributions place African youth at the center of shaping Africa's future.

As we look ahead, IOM remains committed to working with governments, youth-led organizations, academia, and the private sector to translate these insights into action. Building on initiatives such as the Migration Governance Indicators, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), and the Global Compact on Refugees, we will continue to support coherent, youth-centered migration governance that strengthens resilience and creates opportunities across borders.

Finally, we commend the ALA and its talented participants for their outstanding contributions. We reaffirm IOM's commitment to nurturing the next generation of African leaders in migration and governance. May this journal serve as a catalyst for policy innovation, regional solidarity, and global partnerships that place displaced youth at the heart of Africa's transformation.



Frantz Celestin
Regional Director
IOM's Regional Office in Nairobi

Who is AL for Governance?

Introduction

AL for Governance is a network of impact-driven public leaders who share a commitment to address Africa's most pressing governance and development challenges. We believe that lasting peace and shared prosperity on the African continent is only possible if we build and sustain accountable institutions together. Our network aims to develop a new generation of ethical public leaders who work together to address the public leadership crisis in Africa. The network facilitates diverse career pathways for our young leaders into the governance sector, catalyse connections between members, and foster powerful intergenerational mentorship relationships to drive lasting change.

Why we Exist

We exist to address a gap of the voice of the youth in the public sector and civil society on the African continent. There are problems and contradictions in the domestic and international political economy of African States, which may significantly undermine the "democracy-good-governance" AU Agenda2063 project in Africa. Thus, evolving democracy and good governance in African governments will require the discipline of the state, the reconstitution of politics and the animation of the civil society and its democratic potential.

Mission

Promoting the public sector and civil society as an impactful career pathway for young people.

Objectives

The objectives of the AL for Governance Network are to influence:

- Young people with leadership potential to pursue a career path in the public sector and civil society field.
- Intergenerational dialogues to happen between experienced sector leaders in the network and young people entering the policy and public service space.
- Decision makers who can facilitate more youth public-service fellowships in their countries.

Journal Principles

We value the voice of the youth in our network, dialogue, and pan-African knowledge.

- Open Access
- High quality
- Evidence-based
- Non-partisan
- Support early career researchers



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Bridging Borders, Building Futures: Strengthening Youth-Centric Migration and Displacement Governance in Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa

Article by



Rodgers Kawooya



Loice Jobando



Executive Summary

Africa's youth, the youngest global demographic, face intersecting challenges of displacement, unemployment, and exclusion from labour mobility frameworks, especially in key economies like Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Despite their economic influence and roles in regional blocs (MENA, EAC, ECOWAS, SADC), these countries exhibit fragmented migration governance and limited integration of displaced youth into formal labour markets. This policy brief highlights systemic gaps including exclusionary labour regimes, poor alignment with AfCFTA, and weak data systems. It recommends five scalable actions: integrated labour migration strategies, domestication of AfCFTA protocols, youth mobility funds, digital skills credentialing, and mainstreaming youth priorities into regional frameworks. These steps can transform displacement into opportunity, enhancing employment, regional integration, and alignment with Agenda 2063 and the SDGs.

Introduction

Contextual Background

Africa, home to the world's youngest population—over 60% under age 25 (UN DESA, 2024)—and more than 44 million forcibly displaced persons (IOM, 2024), faces major youth employment and mobility challenges. In Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt, which collectively contribute over 50% of Africa's GDP (ILO, 2023), migration governance remains fragmented and youth integration into formal labour markets limited. Despite frameworks like AfCFTA and the SDGs (UNECA, 2021; UN, 2023), legal pathways for displaced youth remain underdeveloped. Bridging policy gaps via inclusive governance and skills partnerships is essential to realize Africa's Agenda 2063 and the Global Compact for Migration (IOM, 2023).

Problem Statement

Africa's youth, over 60% under 25, hold immense economic potential, yet millions remain excluded from work and mobility due to displacement and restrictive migration systems (UN DESA, 2024; IOM, 2024). In Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt, this disconnect is acute despite their regional and economic significance. Fragmented labour policies undermine SDG 8.5, SDG 10.7, Agenda 2063, and AfCFTA's goals for youth-driven development and regional integration. Bridging these gaps is not optional—it's vital for inclusive growth, stability, and human rights advancement.

Methodology

Research Approach

This brief used a mixed-method comparative approach, combining desk-based research and content analysis. Over 25 key national, continental, and global policy documents were reviewed, including migration frameworks from Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt, as well as the AU's MPFA, Agenda 2063, AfCFTA protocols, the GCM, SDGs, and the UN Pact for the Future.

Data Sources

The brief draws on migration data from UN DESA, KNOMAD, IOM, and UNHCR to analyze youth displacement and labour migration. Country-level reports from IOM, UNECA, and the World Bank were used to assess governance practices, gaps, and regional trends. Data triangulation ensured alignment with ALA and IOM priorities on youth inclusion, mobility, and governance.

Analysis and Findings

Key Insights

Labour mobility and displacement governance across Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt reflect both innovation and systemic gaps. While each country has distinct migration patterns influenced by regional and economic contexts, all reveal insufficient youth-focused mobility frameworks

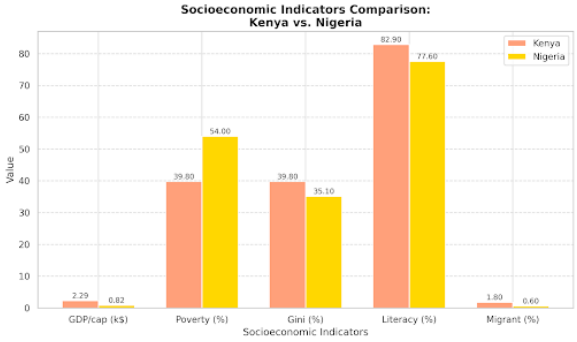


Figure 1 compares Kenya and Nigeria, showing Kenya's advantage in GDP per capita (USD 2.29k vs. 0.82k), literacy (82.88% vs. 77.62%), and migrant stock (1.8% vs. 0.6%), suggesting stronger conditions for skilled migration. Nigeria, facing higher poverty (54%) and lower output, struggles with youth displacement, underemployment, and integration, highlighting the need for tailored, cooperative policy reforms.

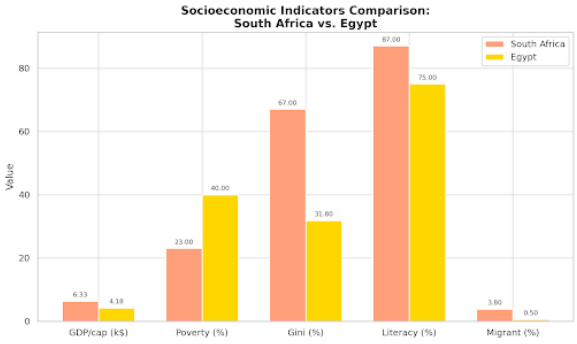


Figure 2 presents South Africa and Egypt. South Africa has a higher GDP per capita (USD 6.33k vs. 4.18k) but suffers greater inequality (Gini 67 vs. 31) and youth employment exclusion. Egypt shows stronger literacy (87% vs. 75%) and lower inward

Country Highlights:

- **Nigeria:** Progressive policies (e.g., 2015 Migration Policy), high remittances (USD 20.9B), and a large diaspora, yet youth reintegration is hindered by insecurity and policy gaps for IDPs.
- **Kenya:** Hosts 650,000 refugees and has introduced the 2021 Refugees Act, but suffers from fragmented labour governance and weak oversight of external migration.
- **Egypt:** Strong remittance economy (USD 31.5B), migration policy aligned with Vision 2030, yet lacks structured labour pathways for refugee youth.
- **South Afica:** Hosts 4M migrants but emphasizes restrictive labour quotas, limited access for regional youth, and has not ratified the AU Free Movement Protocol.

These dynamics underline the need for more inclusive, coordinated, and youth-responsive migration governance across Africa's key economies.

Barriers Identified

1. Legal and Institutional Fragmentation: Kenya and South Africa face fragmented governance due to overlapping mandates among labour, immigration, and youth ministries, leading to disjointed responses and poor data integration (IOM, 2023). Egypt and Nigeria have more streamlined institutions, but youth-specific labour mobility for displaced populations remains under-addressed.

2. Exclusionary Labour Policies: South Africa enforces restrictive employment quotas and permit regimes that marginalize migrant youth. In Egypt, while many refugees find work in the informal sector, they are left without labour protections, increasing their vulnerability.

3. Skills Recognition Gaps: None of the four countries has robust systems to recognize skills of displaced or returning youth migrants. The African Qualifications Framework (AU, 2019) is largely undomesticated, while promising regional initiatives like ECOWAS and IGAD lack enforcement mechanisms.

4. Youth Employment Pressures: Youth unemployment remains high: 35% in South Africa, 14% in Egypt, 19% in Kenya, and 13% in Nigeria (ILO, 2023), deterring policy reforms that would open formal labour markets to migrants and displaced youth.

5. Data System Gaps: Migration-specific labour data is lacking in Kenya and South Africa, hampering efforts to track SDG 10.7. Nigeria's data strategy exists but suffers from limited funding and implementation.

6. AfCFTA Misalignment: All four countries have signed AfCFTA, but none have fully integrated labour migration provisions—such as mutual recognition of qualifications—into their national implementation plans.

Opportunities

Regional frameworks like ECOWAS, IGAD, and EAC offer a path for aligning labour mobility and credential recognition to

better integrate displaced youth. South Africa's digital ID systems present a scalable model for cross-border work history and skills portability. Egypt and Nigeria's ra engagement and returnee reintegration strategies offer valuable regional lessons in youth entrepreneurship and skills transfer.

Pilot programmes such as IGAD's Migration Fund and IOM's Migration Program demonstrate scalable labour mobility pathways for displaced youth. Aligning these efforts with SDG 8.5, SDG 10.7, and Agenda 2063 aspirations can unlock global financing. Kenya and Nigeria can also champion youth inclusion in AfCFTA labour mobility frameworks.

These insights form the foundation for designing policy recommendations that embed rights-based, youth-responsive, and development-oriented labour mobility pathways within broader regional integration and displacement governance frameworks.

Policy Recommendations

Proposed Solutions

1. **Youth-Centric Labour Migration Strategies:** Align labour policies with displacement realities by integrating provisions for IDPs and refugee youth. Nigeria can expand its 2015 policy; Kenya can build on its Refugees Act to support transitional employment.

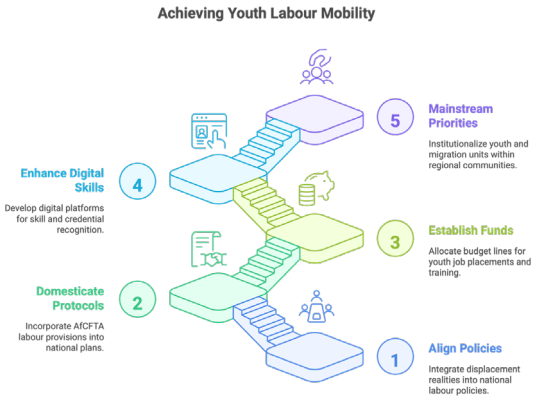
2. **Operationalize AfCFTA Protocols:** Embed AfCFTA's labour mobility and skills recognition into national plans. Inter-ministerial working groups should align migration, trade, and education.

3. **Youth Mobility Funds:** Establish dedicated funding to support training, job placements, and credential recognition for displaced youth, co-financed with diaspora and private partners.

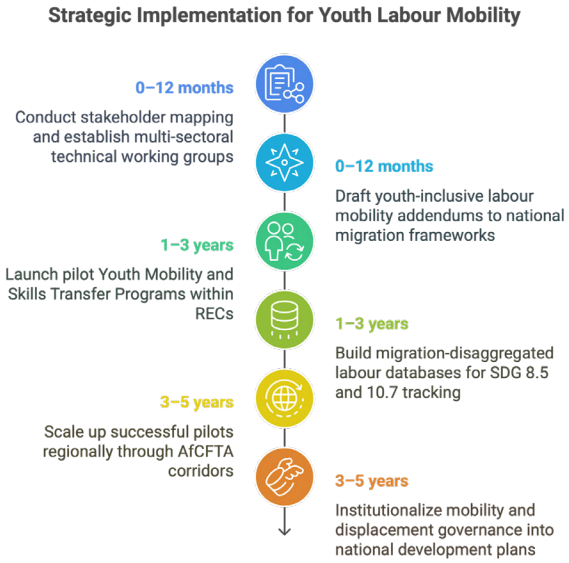
4. **Digital Skills Portability:** Use platforms like South Africa's e-Government and Egypt's National ID for portable labour credentials; pilot blockchain solutions regionally.

5. **Mainstream Youth in RECs:** Institutionalize migration and youth units in RECs (EAC, SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA); share best practices across regions.

Implementation Strategy



- **Short-term (0–12 months):** Form technical working groups; draft youth-inclusive migration addendums.
- **Medium-term (1–3years):** Pilot youth mobility programs; develop migration-disaggregated labour databases.
- **Long-term (3–5years):** Scale pilots regionally; integrate mobility governance into national development plans.



Stakeholder Roles

1. Governments: Policy alignment, budget allocation, regulatory reform.

2. RECs: Harmonization, inter-country mobility dialogues, data sharing.

3. IOM and UN Agencies: Technical support, capacity building, monitoring.

4. CSOs and Youth Networks: Policy advocacy, grassroots mobilisation, skills audits.

Private Sector and Diaspora: Co-investment, mentorship, digital innovation

Potential Challenges and Mitigation

Key barriers include political resistance, poor inter-ministerial coordination, limited financing, and exclusion of displaced persons. These can be mitigated through inclusive stakeholder engagement, establishing statutory coordination bodies, leveraging climate/displacement funds, and enacting legal reforms to enable IDPs and refugees access to formal labour markets. Aligning reforms with global frameworks such as the SDGs, AU Agenda 2063, GCM, and the Pact for the Future will help

Conclusion

Summary

Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt—Africa's economic anchors—face critical labour mobility and displacement governance gaps. Despite their economic weight and strategic position in regional blocs, they struggle to integrate displaced youth into national labour markets due to exclusionary policies, fragmented institutions, and under-implementation of key frameworks like the AfCFTA and Agenda 2063. This brief proposes five scalable, youth-centered solutions: national labour strategies, AfCFTA protocol implementation, youth mobility financing, digital skills recognition, and institutional mainstreaming—aligned with SDGs and global migration commitments.

Call to Action

Governments, RECs, and partners must act now to connect youth displacement to labour mobility—unlocking Africa's demographic potential through inclusive, cross-border employment systems.



Leaving No African Youth Behind: Advancing Economic Inclusion for Internally Displaced Youth and Refugees

Article by



Dossiya Dakou



Hillary Anyomi



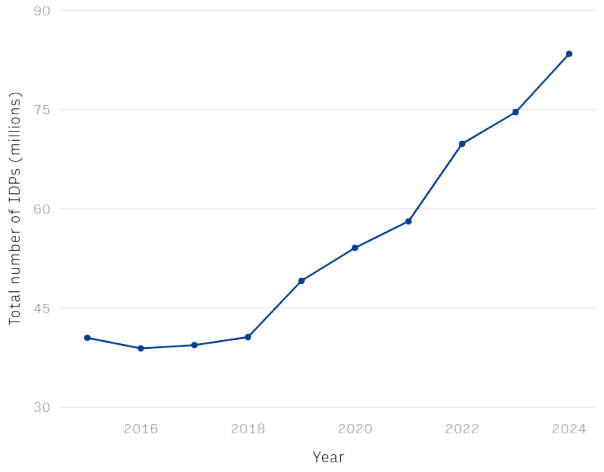
Millicent Bonsu

Executive Summary

Labour mobility offers a critical pathway for displaced African youth to achieve economic integration. However, legal, institutional, and socio-economic barriers hinder their inclusion in labour markets. This policy brief proposes a three-part solution: harmonizing legal work rights across countries, establishing a regional system for recognizing skills and credentials and creating open-data dashboards to track employment outcomes. Despite some progress, challenges like discrimination and unrecognized qualifications persist. Coordinated reforms and youth-centered interventions are essential to turn displacement into an opportunity for inclusive growth.

Introduction

By the end of 2024, 122.1 million people were forcibly displaced globally. This includes 83.4 million internally displaced persons, up from 40.5 million in 2015, as shown in Figure 1 (IDMC 2025 Report). Africa carries a large share of this burden. In 2022 alone, the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region hosted 5 million refugees, representing one in every five refugees worldwide. Conflict, violence, and climate-related disasters continue to drive displacement which disrupts access to education, housing and livelihoods. Displaced African youth are among the hardest hit. Although they have the potential to contribute to host communities, many are pushed into low-paying informal jobs. Employment policies in many countries fail to address their specific needs, leading to widespread exclusion from formal labour markets.



The Challenge:

Youth Exclusion from Labour Markets

Forcibly displaced youth across Africa especially in high-displacement countries like Sudan and DRC face persistent barriers to labour market inclusion. Despite their potential, they are often excluded from formal employment due to limited recognition of skills and qualifications, language barriers, restrictive work rights, and employers' lack of awareness about refugee documentation. National and regional policy frameworks remain fragmented or poorly implemented which leaves many youth confined to informal or low-paying work such as subsistence farming that offer little security or stability. These barriers make it difficult for young people's ability to rebuild their lives and contribute to their host economies.

Why It Matters Now

Sub-Saharan Africa remains one of the most affected regions by internal displacement and forced migration, with over 44 million displaced people. Given that 70% of Africa's population is under the age of 30, every displacement issue is a youth issue.The exclusion of youth aged from labour markets creates long cycles of poverty and dependence on humanitarian aid. By 2050, one in four people globally will be African, making the youth an important driver of the continent's future. Without properly implemented interventions, millions of displaced young people will struggle to rebuild their lives. This brief addresses the urgent need for harmonized, youth-focused policies that support the economic integration of IDPs and refugees in Africa. It offers policy makers evidence-based solutions that incorporate

Methodology

This policy brief used a mixed-methods approach to explore labour mobility challenges faced by displaced youth in Africa. It involved reviewing key policy reports such as the UNHCR Youth Report (2020–2022) and the 2023 Global Survey on Livelihoods and studying successful case models. The Ajira Digital program in Kenya and Inkomoko's entrepreneurship model in Rwanda were reviewed to highlight effective strategies for economic inclusion through public-private partnerships.

Legal Access Is Not Enough

While 67% of refugees globally have legal rights to work, only 45% access formal employment. Displaced youth in Africa face even greater barriers, including administrative restrictions, lack of recognition for qualifications, and workplace discrimination. Despite policy commitments, many are confined to insecure or exploitative jobs, revealing a gap between legal frameworks and real-world inclusion.

Lack of Disaggregated Labour Market Data

There is a critical shortage of reliable, disaggregated data on displaced youth. This makes them statistically invisible and undermines efforts to design targeted employment policies. The absence of accurate data weakens evidence-based programming and leads to poor planning that fails to meet the specific needs of displaced young people.

Case Studies:

Successful Models of Economic Inclusion

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

AJIRA
ajiradigital.go.ke

Ajira Digital - Kenya

The Ajira Digital programme demonstrates how public-private partnerships can enhance labour mobility for displaced youth. Operating in Nairobi, Kakuma, and Dadaab, it connects urban refugees and IDPs aged 18-30 to job opportunities across sectors. With over 5,000 youth placed and a 60% retention rate after one year, it shows the value of coordinated efforts between government, international agencies, and private employers in promoting youth employment.

INKOMOKO

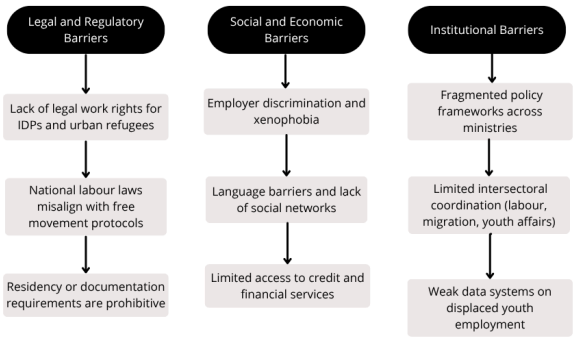
Inkomoko - Multi-Country Initiative

Inkomoko provides a scalable model for supporting displaced youth entrepreneurs. Active in Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Chad, it offers business training, financing, and market access. The program has supported over 90,000 entrepreneurs, created 56,000 jobs, and achieved a 97% loan repayment rate. It highlights how inclusive entrepreneurship development can build self-reliance and long-term economic resilience for displaced youth.

Key Barriers to Economic Inclusion

Displaced youth face three major categories of barriers that hinder their access to formal employment and sustainable livelihoods. These include legal and regulatory challenges, social and economic exclusion and weak institutional coordination. Together, these barriers limit their ability to secure decent work, access financial services or benefit from national employment policies.

Figure 2 outlines the specific factors within each category that contribute to the exclusion of displaced youth from economic opportunities.



Amid the challenges, several high-impact opportunities can be harnessed to improve labour market access for displaced youth. The African Union's Protocol on Free Movement of Persons offers a strong policy foundation to harmonize work rights across borders. Private sector actors, particularly in the digital and green economies, are increasingly open to engaging displaced talent. Emerging technologies such as portable ID systems and blockchain-based credentialing can facilitate cross-border job matching and skills verification. Additionally, displaced youth have shown strong entrepreneurial potential, especially in the informal sector, when given the right support and resources.

Policy Recommendations

Implementation & Impact

To promote the economic inclusion of displaced youth across Africa, this policy brief recommends a three-part framework focused on legal reform, skills recognition and data accountability.

Harmonize Legal Work Rights Across African Countries

African governments should align their national labour laws with regional and international frameworks such as the African Union Free Movement Protocol, the Kampala Convention, and the Global Compact on Refugees. This alignment will ensure that internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, particularly youth, have clear and enforceable legal rights to access formal

employment. The African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should lead bi-annual legal harmonization dialogues while member states incorporate inclusive employment clauses into national labour laws and refugee acts. This will reduce legal uncertainty, expand formal labour access and protect displaced youth from exploitation.



Develop a Regional Credential and Skills Recognition System

A continent-wide mechanism should be established to recognize displaced youths prior learning, informal training, and foreign credentials. This system should be mobile-accessible and enable both employers and displaced youth to verify qualifications. Implementation should be led by a regional task force under the AU–ILO Youth Employment Strategy (YES-Africa), in partnership with UNESCO and other education and labour institutions. This approach will support labour mobility and reduce reliance on informal or low-skilled work. This will improve employability and allow displaced youth to match their skills with real market opportunities.

Create Regional Open-Data Dashboards for Refugee Youth Employment

To improve policymaking, regional open-data dashboards should be developed to track employment outcomes for displaced youth. These dashboards should consolidate data from governments, NGOs, international agencies and community-based organizations. The system should be managed collaboratively by regional bodies such as the AU and IGAD, and include youth-led organizations and private sector partners. A standardized set of employment indicators should guide monitoring and all organizations receiving funding for refugee employment programs should be required to submit regular data. Grassroots participation should be encouraged and supported through training and donor funding. This will enable evidence-based programming, accountability and ensure that progress can be measured and scaled effectively.

Supporting Measures

To strengthen the effectiveness of this policy framework, training and digital tools should be provided to local organizations to support data collection and reporting. Donors and UN agencies should invest in localized infrastructure and capacity building to ensure equitable participation in employment initiatives.

Conclusion

Forcibly displaced youth across Africa remain sidelined from formal labour markets due to a combination of legal, institutional, and socio-economic barriers despite their potential to contribute meaningfully to host economies. This policy brief has outlined a 3-part framework to tackle these issues: harmonizing legal work rights, recognizing displaced youth skills through a regional credential system, and building open-data dashboards to support evidence-based policymaking. For African governments and partners, well-coordinated actions are essential to strengthen the long-term economic integration of displaced youth across the continent.

Unlocking Opportunities: Labour Mobility for Displaced Youth and Refugees in Africa

Article by



Benjamin Oyebode



Tony Oche



Siphosethu Nguta

Executive Summary

African countries currently shelter millions of forcibly displaced young people, yet legal, economic and social obstacles keep most of them on the margins of labour markets. This brief compares Uganda, South Africa and Nigeria; it illustrates that, despite their very different displacement profiles, three barriers consistently undermine youth mobility: the right to work is either legally restricted or poorly implemented; education is interrupted and foreign qualifications are seldom recognised; and xenophobia or stigma forces newcomers into informal, low-return niches. Still, each country offers a template that could be scaled: Uganda's open legal regime has enabled digital freelancing pilots, South African civil-society incubators turn migrant skill into viable businesses, and Nigeria's post-conflict TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) plus cash-for-work package is reconnecting young IDPs to local economies. If governments guarantee fast documentation, invest in market-relevant skills and extend finance to refugee and IDP entrepreneurs, displaced youth can move from dependency to driving inclusive growth.

Context and Problem

Sub-Saharan Africa is facing an historic displacement surge: more than thirty million people have fled conflict or catastrophe, and the largest share are between fifteen (15) and thirty-five (35) (UNHCR, 2024). Uganda hosts roughly 1.5 million refugees, Nigeria records 3.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and South Africa remains a magnet for continental asylum-seekers, with about 250 000 currently in process. Although the contexts differ, Uganda prizes integration, South Africa wrestles with high unemployment, and Nigeria's crisis is internal - the core problem is identical: systemic barriers prevent displaced youth from accessing decent work, moving to where jobs existor converting their skills into enterprises.

Legal frameworks set the outer limits of opportunity. Uganda's 2006 Refugee Act grants wide-ranging freedoms, yet delays in issuing identity cards prevent many young refugees from opening bank account or securing decent jobs. South Africa rescinded automatic work permission for new asylum-seekers in 2020, effectively stranding tens of thousands new asylum seekers (Republic of South Africa, 2019). Nigeria adopted an IDP policy in 2021, but implementation remains patchy and many youths who fled without papers still struggle to replace them (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021).

Even when the law allows employment, socio-economic deficits limit opportunities. Only 29% of working-age refugees in Uganda report an income, compared with almost two-thirds of nationals (UNHCR, 2021). In the insurgency-hit north-east of Nigeria, fewer than one in three displacedyouths participates in the labour force (Pape & Sharma, 2019). Xenophobia further narrows options: migrant-run shops in South African townships have been torched during repeated outbreaks of violence (Ferraro & Weideman, 2020), while Nigerian IDPs who relocate to new towns frequently recount suspicion from local leaders (Anene-Maidoh, 2021). The result is a haemorrhage of human capital at precisely the moment when African economies need productive young workers.

Methodology

To address the above problem, we adopted a comparative case study methodology, focusing on Uganda, South Africa, and Nigeria as illustrative contexts. These countries were selected for their diverse displacement dynamics, Uganda as a longstanding refugee host, South Africa as an economic hub attracting asylum-seekers, and Nigeria as a country with massive internal displacement. We conducted an extensive literature review encompassing academic studies, policy reports, legal documents, and program evaluations related to labour mobility and displacement. Key frameworks (such as the Migration Governance Framework and the Kampala Convention on IDPs) guided our analysis of national policies.

We drew on primary data from interviews and secondary data from credible sources: e.g. United Nations agencies (UNHCR, IOM) for refugee and IDP statistics, World Bank and ILO reports for labour market indicators, and national laws/policies (Refugee Acts, IDP policy documents) for the legal context (Pape & Sharma, 2019; World Bank, 2020). In addition, stakeholder insights were incorporated through reviewing qualitative studies and statements, including refugee youth testimonies and expert interviews documented by NGOs (e.g. the Scalabrini Institute study in South Africa (Ferraro & Weideman, 2020)). This triangulation of sources enhances the rigour of findings. Where possible, cross-country data were compared to identify patterns. The research process emphasised credibility (using validated data and peer-reviewed research) and relevance (focusing on recent developments up to 2025). The analysis that follows synthesises these diverse sources to form an integrated understanding of the challenges and opportunities for displaced youth labour mobility in the three case contexts, with figures and data representation in the appendices.

(Note: Primary fieldwork was conducted with interviews which can be viewed in the appendixes; however, the use of up-to-date reports and policy briefs ensures that the conclusions are grounded in current realities.)

Comparative Findings

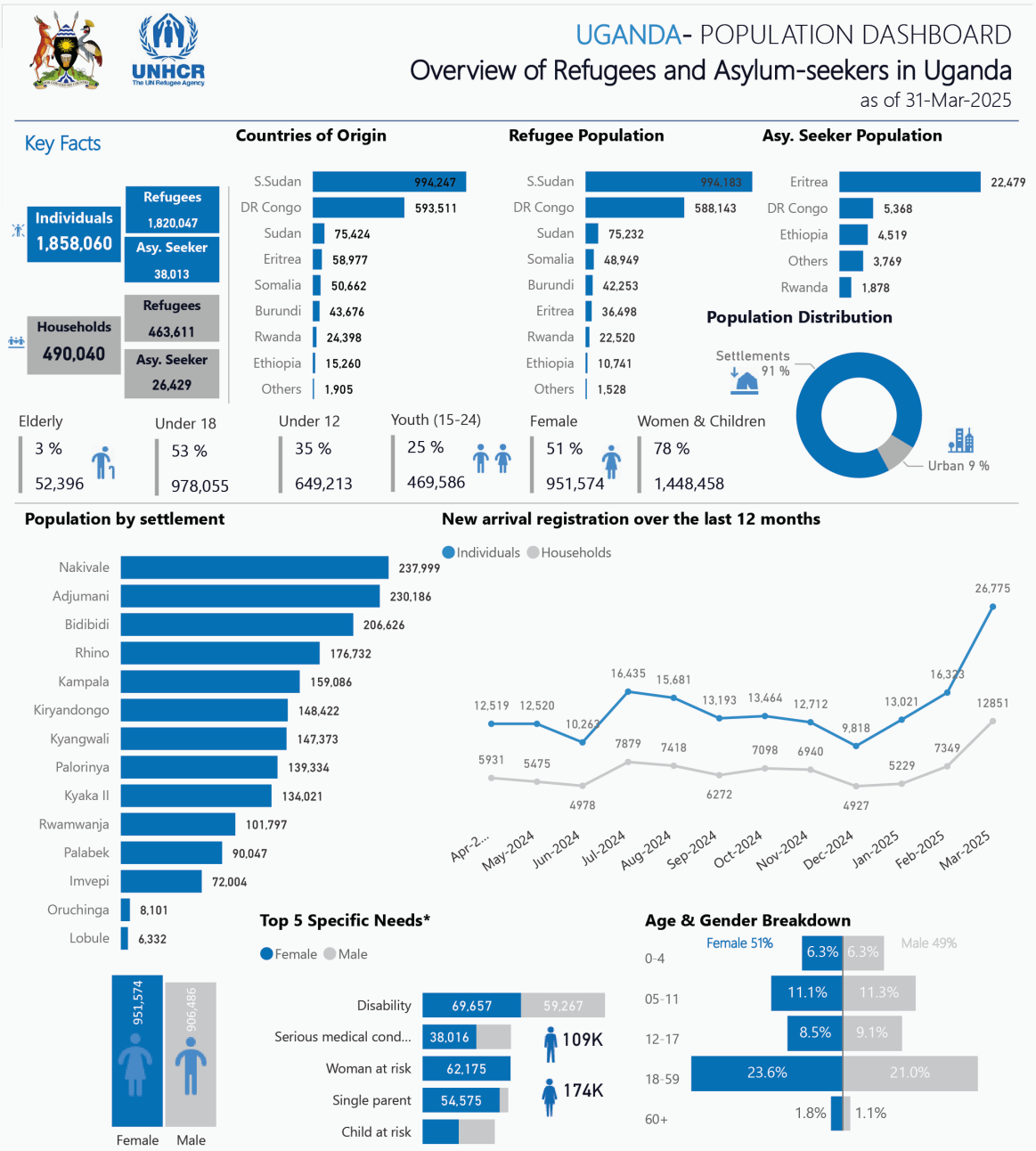
Legal Hurdles

Across the three cases, the legal gateway to employment narrows in different ways. Uganda appears most progressive on paper: refugees may live where they choose and accept any job without a special permit. Yet those advantages are blunted whenever biometric IDs are delayed or employers remain unaware of refugee rights. In South Africa, the hurdle is explicit. Since the 2020 regulations, a newcomer must prove both identity and a lack of alternative support before the Department of Home Affairs will endorse the right to work, a process

IDPs, by contrast, are citizens and theoretically enjoy the same labour rights as anyone else; but their displacement often severs civil-registration links, so that a young mechanic from Borno can arrive in Abuja only to find he lacks the national identity number required to enrol in a government apprenticeship scheme. In every setting, therefore, documentation challenges draw the real boundary around mobility.

Skills and Credential Gap

Prolonged flight disrupts education at critical junctures. In Uganda, only a minority of refugee adolescents progress beyond primary education, which leaves them ill-prepared for the salaried economy. South Africa attracts many youths who completed some tertiary education in the Democratic Republic of Congo or Zimbabwe, but the South African Qualifications Authority charges fees and demands original transcripts that are often lost in transit; by the time verification is complete, opportunities have become obsolete. Nigeria's public training centres have begun to admit IDPs, yet capacity is limited by demand and courses rarely align with growth sectors such as renewable energy or



Since the start of the year, 56,119 individuals seeking asylum, including 28,826 from the DR Congo, 15,706 from South Sudan, and 9,878 from Sudan have been registered in Uganda. 6,758 new births were also registered during the year. In total the population increased by 28,454 individuals (1.6%) from last month. Since the start of the conflict in Sudan in Mid-April 2023, 71,959 Sudanese fleeing the conflict have been registered in Uganda. Similarly, the situation in the DR Congo has resulted in increased arrivals into Uganda. There are currently 593,511 registered DR Congolese in Uganda, up 31,631 since end 2024.

digital services. The collective outcome is a mismatch: displaced youths are both over-qualified for the petty trade they end up in and under-qualified on paper, at least, for formal skilled posts.

Discrimination and Informality

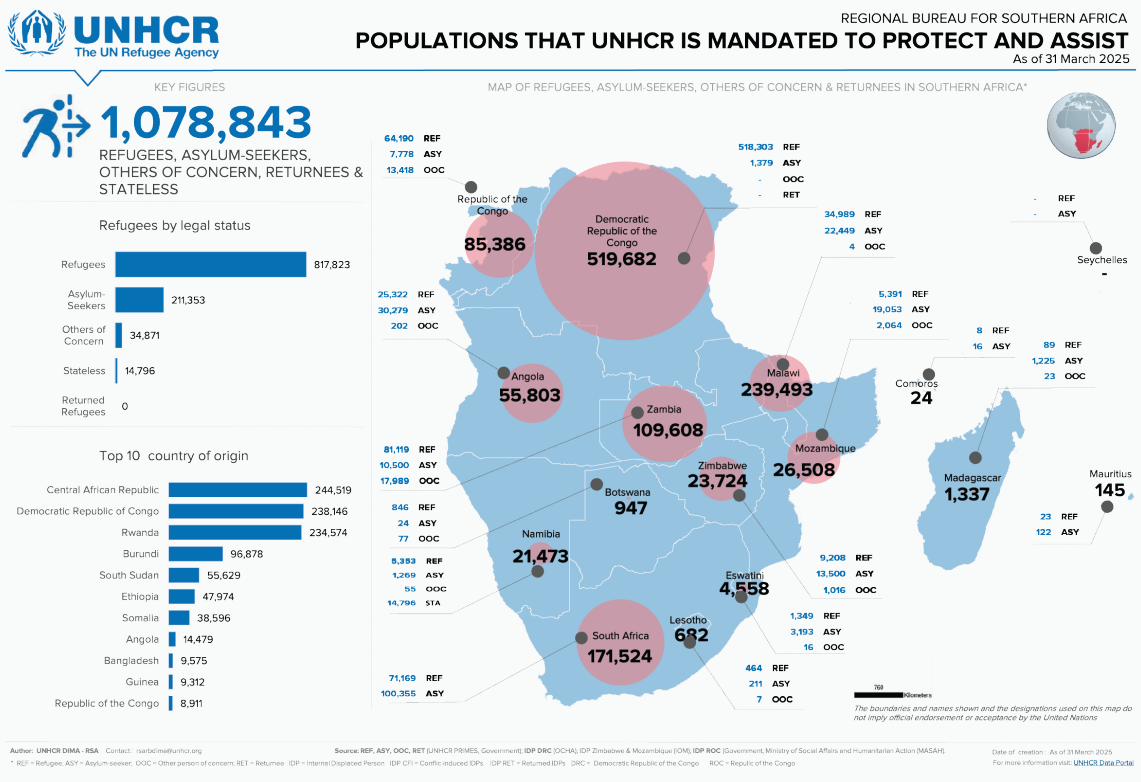
Even with papers and skills, social attitudes can limit opportunities. Surveys in Cape Town record widespread employer reluctance to risk community backlash by hiring foreigners, and waves of xenophobic violence periodically destroy migrant-owned micro-enterprises. Uganda's longer history of hosting has fostered more amicable relations, yet focus-group discussions reveal that tensions spike whenever refugees compete for scarce land or casual labour. In Nigeria, the label 'IDP' itself can attract stigma, signalling destitution and possible security risk; displaced youths report being last in line for apprenticeships or micro-loans. Pushed away from mainstream channels, many young people opt for informal trading, day labour or survival sex work occupations with little social protection and scant upward mobility.

Opportunities and Good Practice

The bleak picture is not the full story. Uganda's open policy has nurtured a laboratory for market-based experiments. Under the government-UN ReHoPE framework, an International Labour Organisation pilot in 2024 trained refugee and host youths to bid for online freelance contracts; within six months, participants reported average monthly earnings of roughly US$120, often from rural settlements where local wages rarely reach half that figure. In South Africa, the non-profit Scalabrini Centre has paired entrepreneurship coaching with micro-loans of under US$1 000, helping migrant youths formalise catering, tailoring and digital-design ventures; follow-up surveys show a seventy-per-cent (70%) survival rate after the first year. Nigeria's so-called Borno Model, meanwhile, blends vocational toolkits with cash-for-work in infrastructure repair; solar-installation graduates have begun servicing mini-grids that power clinics and markets, knitting displaced and host economies together. These vignettes demonstrate that when rights, skills and finance line up, young people quickly create value for themselves and their communities.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Guarantee work rights and documentation:** By 2026, each government should ensure that at least ninety per cent (90%) of displaced youths can secure a valid identity card and, where required, a work permit within six months of application. Achieving this target will demand executive directives that simplify procedures, mobile biometric teams in camps and urban hotspots, and public campaigns that reassure employers about the legality of hiring refugees or IDPs. Interior ministries can draw on UNHCR and IOM technical support, while refugee-led associations monitor turnaround times and flag delays.



UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | Nigeria

Forcibly Displaced Populations
1 May 2025

SITUATION OVERVIEW

- *Nigerians make up 3% of the world's 122 million forcibly displaced persons, including both internally displaced individuals and Nigerian refugees, primarily in the Lake Chad Basin.*
- *Conflict, insurgency, and communal violence have displaced millions, with the North-East experiencing the highest displacement.*

KEY FIGURES

138,154

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS IN NIGERIA

- *Nigeria hosts refugees & asylum-seekers from over 45 countries, with majority from Cameroon*
- *Most refugees are concentrated in border states across the North East (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe), North Central (Benue), and South South (Cross River) regions of Nigeria.*
- *32,746 individuals are awaiting registration.*

3,575,114

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

- *2,252,348 individuals displaced in the North East, primarily due to insurgency (92%) and communal clashes (6%).*
- *In the North West, 718,126 individuals are displaced, while the North Central region has 604,640, driven by various conflict dynamics.*

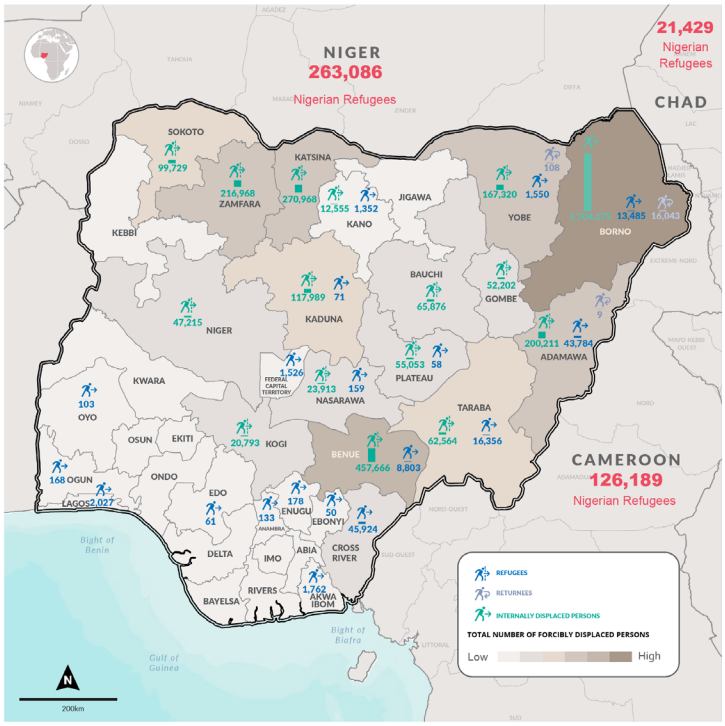
16,215

REFUGEE RETURNEES

Since the beginning of 2025, 1,395 refugees returned spontaneously from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Sudan. Additionally, 14,820 refugees were repatriated bilaterally by the Nigerian Government from Chad (Feb 2025) and Niger (Apr 2025)

410,704

NIGERIAN REFUGEES REGISTERED IN CAMEROON, CHAD, AND NIGER



Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Published: May 2025 **Source:** UNHCR, IOM DTM R49, IOM DTM R16, NIS, NCFRMI **Feedback:** nigabim@unhcr.org **Website:** unhcr.org/ng

2 **Scale skills, education and credential recognition:** A realistic objective is for half of all displaced youths to complete an accredited training or bridging course by 2028 and for at least sixty percent (60%) of graduates to enter wage or self-employment. Governments should embed refugees and IDPs within national TVET strategies, mandate swift and affordable foreign-qualification assessment, and co-design curricula with the private sector so that courses match labour-market growth nodes such as agri-processing, construction and digital services. Scholarship schemes, for example, the Mastercard Foundation partnership in South Africa, provide a tested funding channel, while digital platforms can streamline course content into remote settlements at low cost.

3 **Expand financial inclusion and youth enterprise funds:** By 2027, every displaced young person should be able to open a basic bank or mobile-money account, and at least one thousand new youth-led micro-enterprises should launch in each focus country. The IOM and UNHCR should propose a clearer and seamless know-your-customer checks convention to reduce barriers displaced people encounter while seeking micro-finance facilities. In addition, there is a dire need to develop or strengthen extant donor-backed credit guarantees to reduce the barrier to credit facilities. Enterprise competitions in settlements and towns can unearth viable ideas, and chambers of commerce can pair winners with mentors who understand local supply chains. Coupling capital with coaching is essential: evidence from Uganda and South Africa shows that loans alone rarely boost incomes unless accompanied by market advice.

Conclusion

Africa's displaced youth represent both a humanitarian imperative and an economic opportunity. By aligning legal protection, relevant skills and inclusive finance, states can unlock a demographic dividend that benefits hosts and newcomers alike. Delay risks losing an entire generation to under-employment; decisive action before 2028 can instead channel their energy into building resilient, vibrant economies.

Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Refugee Labour Mobility in Uganda.

Article by



Jacinta Amoawah Esi Badu



Candace Hunzwi Tairo



Godwin Abugatwin Abugbilla

Executive Summary

Despite progressive policies, the policy brief addressed challenges refugees face when integrating into the Ugandan labour market. Approximately 1.8 million refugees reside in Uganda, mainly from South Sudan and the DR Congo. Despite Uganda refugees being allowed to work, they face significant barriers. The brief recommends an increased investment in education and vocational training centred on refugees, addressing the gender gaps, and fostering youth employment through private sector partnership and developing a structured refugee labour mobility framework allowing skilled refugees in Uganda to migrate to other developing countries for better employment prospects through regional and bilateral agreements. Measures like integrating refugee students into education systems, exposing them to scholarship platforms, providing apprenticeships, and facilitating networking events with employers. When these barriers are tackled, the expected outcomes will be improved refugee labour market participation, reduced unemployment, and a boost to Uganda's economy. The anticipated impact is a more inclusive and economically vibrant Uganda, effectively utilizing its skills and potential. Refer to Appendix 1 for the summary of the policy recommendations.

Introduction

Forced displacement across sub-Saharan Africa has been escalated dramatically in recent years, with Uganda emerging as the biggest host country for refugees in the region. In 2024, about 1.7 million refugees relocated to Uganda, mainly from South Sudan and the DR Congo (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2025; CARE, 2024). After the 2006 Refugee Act was passed, refugees gained the right to travel, work, and access land. This is a win-win pathway, as displaced people find employment that aligns with their skills and achieve self-sufficiency, whereas the host country boosts its economy. Despite the protection in law, real life shows that refugees in Uganda encounter numerous barriers when joining the workforce. As a result of interrupted education, trauma, discrimination, language barrier, and being treated as outsiders, they find it hard to enter stable jobs and adult life (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023).

This policy brief examines how Uganda's progressive policies for refugees coexist with the social and institutional obstacles that prevent refugees, especially youth, from working freely by performing a comprehensive analysis of refugees and host labor market performance. It keenly reviews how existing laws and systems hinder or support refugees getting jobs in Uganda, and it also investigates the economic and social forces hindering integration. To generate practical recommendations for this study, analysis and evidence were used to back these recommendations.

Methodology

The study made use of *quantitative and qualitative techniques*. The qualitative approach uses literature reviews, case studies, and interviews to focus on non-numerical data like concepts, narratives, and opinions. The quantitative approach focused on referenced numerical data, statistics, and measurable results. The analysis was based on data collected by UNHCR and Uganda Bureau of Statistics, especially the national labour force survey, Uganda Unemployment Survey, and cross-sectional household data from Uganda Refugee and Host communities 2018 Household Survey from across 13 districts in the primary refugee-hosting regions in Uganda (World Bank, 2019), including interviews conducted with Ugandan students from Ashesi University.

Analysis and Findings

A comparison of refugees' employment outcomes to nationals, even though existing policies grant refugees the right to work, statistics and evidence (Fig. 1) show that refugees have worse employment outcomes than nationals. These differences show as proof when considering the labour force participation rate. Not only are refugees less likely than host communities to participate in the labour market, but they also fall into unemployment.

Figure 1: Unemployment by refugee and Youth status

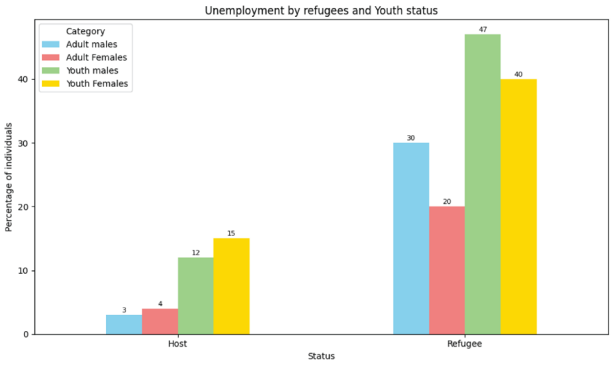
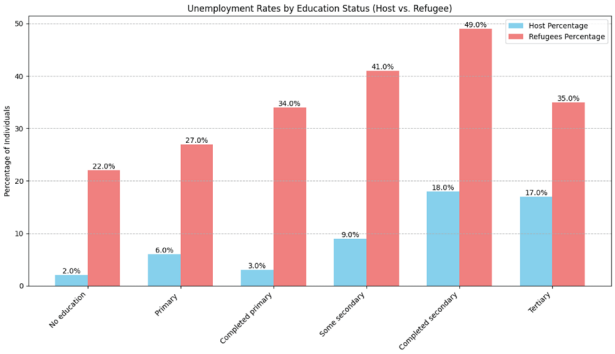


Figure 1 shows that refugee youth have a higher average unemployment rate than refugee adults by 44%. Figure 2 shows how education level influences the labour market, as it shows that unemployment is highest for both host and refugees for those with higher secondary education. In contrast, those with lower education have a lower unemployment rate. This reverse relationship between education and employment is common in developing African countries.

Figure 2: Unemployment and Education between refugees and host communities



Refugees are systematically underemployed based on skills and work history, with higher-skilled workers experiencing the most significant professional downgrade. Downgrading means taking jobs that one is overqualified for to escape unemployment. This shows the inherent inequity in the labour market between refugees and hosts. Research gathered by UNHCR stated that most first-entry refugees experience professional downgrading, with intermediate and high-skilled refugees experiencing the most considerable downgrading based on the Four ISCO-08 skills level. This can result from a lack of recognition of refugees' qualifications and poor transferability of refugees' skills and professional experience in Uganda. Another cause of these issues is language barriers and limited proficiency in English and local dialects, especially for those from Francophone and other countries.



Table 1: Comparison of ISCO-08 skills before and after displacement

Before Displacement	After Displacement				
	Not working	Very skilled	Low skilled	Intermediate skilled	High skilled
Not working	67	6.4	24.6	0.7	1.3
Very skilled	69	19	12.0	0.0	0.0
Low skilled	59	7.3	33.3	0.1	0.2
Intermediate skilled	83	0	2.4	8.0	6.4
High skilled	46	8.4	21.6	2.3	21.3

Labour Mobility beyond Uganda for refugees

Finally, as Uganda's refugee population is now about 1.8 million (Appendix 3), it makes it hard for refugees to have a comfortable life because of the competitive labour market and limited resources. With these laws, they still face issues emphasized above in the paper. Therefore, to maximize refugee mobility, regional and international cooperation could allow refugees to be relocated to other developing countries with better economic opportunities, like the Canadian refugee settlement, or the Australian Humanitarian Visa programme that includes labour-linked resettlement initiatives .

Policy Recommendations

Implementation, Key stakeholders, Obstacles and Mitigations

a. More investment in education and training

The above graphs and data suggest that the level of education required differs across economic sectors and job categories; yet, few adolescents complete secondary school. As part of the ongoing curriculum review, include learning core skills like languages and provide an auxiliary introduction to vocational courses to ease the transition to vocational training for students who may not finish secondary education. Encourage vocational training institutions to introduce a mix of short and long-term courses to meet the needs of older students who are ready to join the labour market and younger students who need a combination of general schooling and vocational training.

b. Diverting more attention towards the youth labour market

Foster youth employment by partnering with private sector industries to create internships and apprenticeship programs.

Based on the above analysis, it showed that youth in both refugee and host communities have difficulties finding jobs, leading to most being unemployed and inactive. As most of these youth leave school early and have no qualifications, second chance programmes can help individuals increase their formal education and obtain recognized certification based on their preference in the job market. This can be done by establishing government-subsided apprenticeships where youth gain work experience, facilitate networking events connecting refugees and employers, and provide career guidance and entrepreneurship support for self-employment options.

These will need intervention from the private sector by offering employment placements, refugee organizations like IOM and UNHCR, to help with refugees, and educational institutions to provide certification and skills validations. However, employers can be reluctant to hire refugees due to lacking soft skills training. These can be mitigated by developing incentives like tax breaks for companies employing refugees and integrating communication and workplace etiquette training.

c. More focus on the gender gap in employment

Create a specialized vocational training program tailored for refugees, focusing on closing gender gaps and equipping youth with marketable skills. The analysis reconfirms that women face more difficulties than men in accessing education and finding jobs. It has been evidenced that reducing barriers to women in the workplace significantly boosts welfare and growth. Where the government, which includes the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development, helps with the policy implementation and funding, including UNHCR and IOM, helping with technical guidance, and with data tracking to keep progress of improvement of the policy and how it is evolving, and advocacy for inclusion as well. However, limited access for female refugees due to cultural constraints can be an obstacle. However, it can be mitigated by engaging community leaders and conducting an awareness campaign to shift perceptions. The mismatch between training and market demands can also be an issue; however, regular employer consultation can be conducted to adjust the training focus.

d. Diverting focus on the regional refugee Labour mobility framework

Developing a structured refugee labour mobility policy will enable skilled refugees in Uganda who cannot find sustainable opportunities to move to other developing countries with better employment prospects. These can be implemented by creating a bilateral and regional refugee labour agreement where Uganda can partner with African and developing nations to facilitate a refugee employment program. However, these will be based on skill-based migration pathways using refugees who meet the specific skills requirements in partner countries. The key stakeholders to help facilitate these will be the Ugandan government, helping with the labour migration agreement, IOM, and UNHCR to oversee refugee relocation and labour data tracking, and a regional international organization to help facilitate the policy dialogue and labour migration programs. However, in cases where there are limited financial resources for relocation and political resistance from host countries, one can secure international funding and development grants to support migration processes, engage in diplomatic negotiations, and allow refugees to participate in a proficiency test to prove their skills to others.

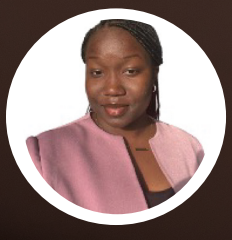
To sum up, Uganda hosts about 1.8 million refugees, granting them the right to work and free movement. However, they still face some barriers like discrimination, language difficulties, and a lack of recognized qualifications, hindering their full integration and economic participation. Some proposed solutions include increased investment in education and vocational training, primarily for refugees, to address these issues. Therefore, all stakeholders, including the Ugandan government, UNHCR, IOM, TBB, other private sectors, community leaders, and others, are strongly encouraged to implement these recommendations. By doing so, Uganda can maximize the potential of its refugee population, leading to improved refugee livelihoods, economic growth, and a more inclusive and thriving society, which is a win-win situation.

SmartAfrika Works: A Policy Playbook for Unlocking Labour Mobility for Displaced Youth in Africa through SMART and Innovative Solutions for the Future

Article by



Lincoln Odhiambo



Ingrid Bouma



Juliet Mukamani

Executive Summary

Africa hosts over 44 million forcibly displaced persons, nearly 60% of whom are under 35, yet most face exclusion from formal labour markets due to legal, financial, and social barriers. This policy brief identifies five key obstacles to safe and humane labour mobility for displaced youth: legal bottlenecks, gaps in skills recognition, economic exclusion, weak regional mobility frameworks, and social discrimination. To address these, SmartAfrika Works proposes an integrated policy framework with reforms including expanded work rights, Digital Skills Passports, a Displaced Youth Entrepreneurship Fund, Regional Labour Mobility Compacts, and social inclusion programmes. Full implementation could enable at least one million displaced youth to access dignified work by 2030, contributing to Africa's development goals and reducing reliance on humanitarian aid.

Introduction

Over 44 million people across Africa have been forcibly displaced, with nearly 60% under 35 years old. Despite their potential to drive inclusive economic growth, young displaced Africans face systemic barriers including legal restrictions, lack of credential recognition, xenophobia, and financial exclusion. This structural exclusion undermines the Global Compact for Migration's objectives on regular pathways, decent work, and skills recognition, as well as the Kampala Convention's mandate for IDP economic integration. There is an urgent need for transformational policy to guide labour mobility for displaced youth, enhancing economic integration while creating strategic imperatives for stability, inclusion, and regional development.

Research Question

How can policy frameworks promote safe, regular, and well-managed labour migration pathways for internally displaced youth and refugees in Africa?

Problem Statement

Young refugees and IDPs in Africa face systemic exclusion from formal labour markets due to legal, institutional, and socio-economic barriers compounded by the absence of coherent labour mobility frameworks, which further deepen poverty and drive unsafe, irregular migration.

Methodology

This brief employs a mixed-methods approach combining systematic literature review with semi-structured interviews. The literature review analysed key frameworks including the Global Compact for Migration, Kampala Convention, AU Migration Policy Framework, and national case studies from South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda. Primary data was collected through interviews with 15 key informants across five African countries: eight displaced youth, four implementation officers, and three policy experts. Data was analysed using cross-case analysis with triangulation to ensure rigour.

Analysis and Findings

Insights

The research revealed a stark disconnect between policy frameworks, such as the Kampala Convention, GCM, and MGI, and the lived realities of displaced youth navigating African labour markets. Despite their progressive intentions, these frameworks remain poorly localised, fragmented, and largely unenforced. As one REC official noted, "We have mutual recognition of skills on the agenda, but border officials and employers don't know how to apply it to refugees or IDPs." Both interviews and literature consistently highlighted the lack of coordination between employment services and refugee agencies, with national labour programs often excluding displaced youth and pushing many into informal or exploitative work. Social exclusion and xenophobia were recurring themes, exemplified by a South African refugee who remarked, "The locals say we steal jobs even when we try to do the jobs they don't want." These findings emphasize the structural and systemic barriers that persist despite the existence of comprehensive policy frameworks.

Barriers

- **Legal and Institutional Bottlenecks:** National legal frameworks remain restrictive despite progressive regional policies. While South Africa's Refugees Act grants work rights, administrative barriers limit access. Kenya's new Refugees Act includes employment provisions, but encampment policies restrict movement. Regional frameworks like SADC's Migration Policy face implementation challenges.

- **Skill Recognition Gap:** Displaced youth with informal or vocational training lack recognised certification, excluding them from skilled opportunities. The absence of mutual recognition agreements between African countries renders even formal qualifications invalid across borders.

- **Economic and Financial Exclusion:** Identity documentation gaps prevent displaced youth from meeting KYC requirements for financial services. Only 30% of Sub-Saharan African refugees have formal banking access, violating the Kampala Convention's economic participation mandate.

- **Weak Implementation of Regional Compacts:** While frameworks like ECOWAS's Free Movement Protocol exist, implementation remains inconsistent. Only half of ECOWAS states have operational monitoring committees, and border officials lack awareness of provisions.

- **Social Exclusion:** Displaced youth face intersecting discrimination based on xenophobia, gender, ethnicity, and disability. In South Africa, xenophobic sentiments lead to exclusionary hiring practices, while LGBTQ+ youth face systematic violence in countries where same-sex relations are criminalised.

Opportunities for Intervention



The identified barriers highlight tangible entry points for reform. Regional frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement provide a strong foundation that can be activated through REC-level coordination and targeted implementation support.

Furthermore, technological advances in digital finance and mobile ID systems offer scalable ways to bypass KYC-related exclusion by integrating UNHCR cards and digital credentials. Meanwhile, youth-led refugee networks and civil society actors are piloting informal skills recognition and peer-based training models, which offer practical templates for national adoption. With greater political will, donor alignment, and grassroots participation, these opportunities can transform displacement into a driver of inclusive economic growth.

Policy Recommendations

These recommendations have been formulated using the Situation-Opportunity-Action-Results-Smart Implementation (SOARS) method.

1 Legal and Institutional Reforms for Work Rights

THE ACTION: The AU should coordinate drafting Refugee and IDP Economic Inclusion Acts in three pilot countries (Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria) granting displaced youth formal work rights and freedom of residence. Timeline: January-June 2026 for drafting; mid-2026 to mid-2027 for issuing 1,000 work permits per country. Impact: Reduced legal barriers, decreased informal employment, unlocked economic potential.

RISK AND MITIGATION: Legislative resistance and nationalist backlash may emerge in pilot countries, particularly South Africa, where anti-immigrant sentiment could drive opposition to reforms seen as "favouring foreigners." To counter this, the AU and governments should frame the Act as economic opportunity, emphasizing tax revenue, labour formalization, and growth. Rwanda's 2019 Migration Policy demonstrates effective messaging that generated jobs and refugee businesses. A targeted communication strategy with impact modelling, stakeholder engagement, and media outreach can shift perceptions, while early engagement with legislators, unions, and private sector will build cross-party support.

2 Digital Skills Passport to Recognise Prior Learning

THE ACTION: Develop a Digital Skills Passport validating vocational and informal skills, building on UNESCO's pilot in Uganda and Zambia with UNHCR ID integration. Timeline: 1,000 passports issued by 2027; full REC adoption by 2030. Impact: 70% of recipients securing employment within six months; enhanced cross-border skill mobility.

RISK AND MITIGATION: Data sovereignty concerns and digital mistrust may arise, leading to reluctance from Uganda's government and local displaced populations. Fears over external data control, national security, or political backlash against refugee initiatives may delay adoption or restrict interoperability with local labour systems. The AU and UNESCO should ensure full government ownership and data governance transparency from the outset, including co-developing data protection protocols aligned with Uganda's NITA Act and housing data on sovereign or hybrid cloud systems with shared access. Embedding local institutions in implementation will boost legitimacy.

3 Displaced Youth Enterprise Fund

THE ACTION: Establish a fund providing microloans, seed grants, and savings accounts using alternative identification, piloting in Somalia and South Sudan. Timeline: 2026-2027 pilot; expansion to three RECs by 2028. Impact: 250 microloans, 250 seed grants, 1,000 savings accounts, and 1,000 financial literacy graduates.

RISK AND MITIGATION: Political instability in pilot countries may hinder the smooth implementation of financial services, as weak governance, lack of centralised financial oversight, or sudden changes in policy could disrupt fintech operations, delay disbursements, or expose the fund to misuse or political interference. To reduce exposure to state-level disruptions, the AfCFTA Secretariat should adopt a dual-track implementation approach by partnering directly with licensed fintech operators and trusted local NGOs, while also securing memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with national financial regulators to ensure political buy-in. Risk-sharing mechanisms, such as third-party escrow systems and blockchain-based audit trails, can enhance transparency and limit fund diversion.

4 Regional Labour Mobility Compacts

THE ACTION: Negotiate Regional Labour Mobility Compacts through ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC for mutual qualification recognition and fast-tracked work permits. Timeline: Task forces by 2026; ratification by 2027; implementation by 2028. Impact: 10,000 displaced youth in formal cross-border employment by 2030.

RISK AND MITIGATION: National sovereignty concerns and uneven political will across REC member states may delay ratification and implementation of RLMCs, as governments resist harmonising labour policies or granting work permits to displaced populations due to fears of job competition, xenophobia, or political backlash. The RECs Secretariats should embed flexible implementation allowing phased or modular adoption tailored to each state's context, while AU leadership advocates for economic benefits and regional integration goals to build consensus. Leveraging peer pressure, intergovernmental dialogues, and economic incentives like African Development Bank funding can encourage adoption, alongside public campaigns that counter xenophobic narratives and reframe displaced youth as economic contributors.

5 Anti-Xenophobia and Social Inclusion Programming

THE ACTION: Develop Continental Framework on Social Cohesion with school-based anti-xenophobia curriculum, piloting in South Africa by 2026-2027 pilot in 50 schools; national integration by 2030.

IMPACT: Improved attitudes in 70% of pilot schools; reduced xenophobic incidents.

RISK AND MITIGATION: Public backlash and political resistance may emerge, particularly in South Africa, where xenophobic sentiment is often politicised, with framing the curriculum as favouring non-nationals



potentially sparking opposition from nationalist groups, parents, or educators. The AUC and South African government should frame the curriculum as a civic education initiative promoting Ubuntu, social cohesion and peaceful communities rather than a refugee-focused intervention, co-branding it with national education goals like "building safer schools" or "promoting unity." Stakeholder engagement with school governing bodies, teachers' unions, and parent associations, alongside media partnerships to counter misinformation and inclusion of South African student voices in development, will localise ownership and reduce resistance.

Conclusion

Displaced youth across Africa face systemic barriers to labour mobility, including legal restrictions, financial exclusion, and social discrimination. The SmartAfrika Works policy brief proposes a coordinated response centred on inclusive finance, skills recognition, regional mobility compacts, and social inclusion to unlock the economic potential of displaced youth and advance dignified, humane migration.

Call to Action

SmartAfrika Works urges AU Member States, particularly high-host countries like Sudan, DRC, Uganda, Somalia, Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, to integrate its recommendations into national development and migration strategies by 2026. The AU, in partnership with RECs, UNHCR, IOM, the African Capacity Network (ACN), Mastercard Foundation, and the World Bank, should lead the coordination and rollout of the proposed pilot programs on labour mobility, financial inclusion, and social cohesion for displaced youth.

Finally, philanthropic partners, especially the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, are called upon to commit $50 million over the next three years to support localised implementation and empower youth-led movements to drive grassroots mobilisation, monitor progress, and shape inclusive migration policy across Africa.

Redesigning the Future of Refugee Work and Inclusion in SADC by 2030

Article by



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Mercy Mulenga

Executive Summary

The SADC region, home to nearly one million refugees, continues to restrict their access to formal employment due to legal barriers, unrecognized qualifications, limited digital access, and minimal private sector engagement. These challenges hinder labour mobility, self-reliance, and regional development. To address this, the brief proposes a regional refugee work visa targeting sectors with labour shortages, market-driven skills training designed with employers, and the inclusion of refugees in climate adaptation plans, particularly in green sectors. While digital platforms and private sector interest offer new opportunities, xenophobia and political resistance remain major obstacles. Transformative policy reforms, advocacy, and cross-border cooperation are essential. By 2030, the aim is to make it easier for refugees in the SADC region to find jobs across borders, build stronger and more inclusive labour markets, and ensure the private sector plays a bigger role in supporting this inclusion. Refugees can also contribute meaningfully to climate resilience efforts, especially in green industries.

Introduction

Globally there are 117.3 million forcibly displaced people, and approximately 43.4 million are refugees, according to UNHCR global trends report 2023. Africa represents almost one-third of the world's refugee population, many of whom face significant challenges accessing formal labour markets due to legal, institutional, and social barriers (UNHCR, 2023). Despite the adoption of progressive frameworks such as the Kampala Convention and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), and others, implementation gaps persist both at national and regional levels. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) region hosts nearly 1 million refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from conflict-affected countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, and Mozambique. Despite regional commitments to integration and human rights, most SADC countries maintain restrictive policies that limit refugees' access to formal employment and economic inclusion (Botswana Refugee Act 2024 & Crush et al., 2017). Labour mobility for refugees is constrained by bureaucratic hurdles, limited recognition of foreign qualifications, work permit restrictions, and a general lack of awareness among employers (IOM, 2020). This exclusion fosters dependency, economic marginalization, and heightened social tensions between refugee and host populations. It will be a missed opportunity if we continue to exclude refugees instead of harness their potential towards socio-economic, political, environmental transformation in SADC. This paper aims to analyse the root causes, unlock barriers and propose solutions which can bring quick-wins.

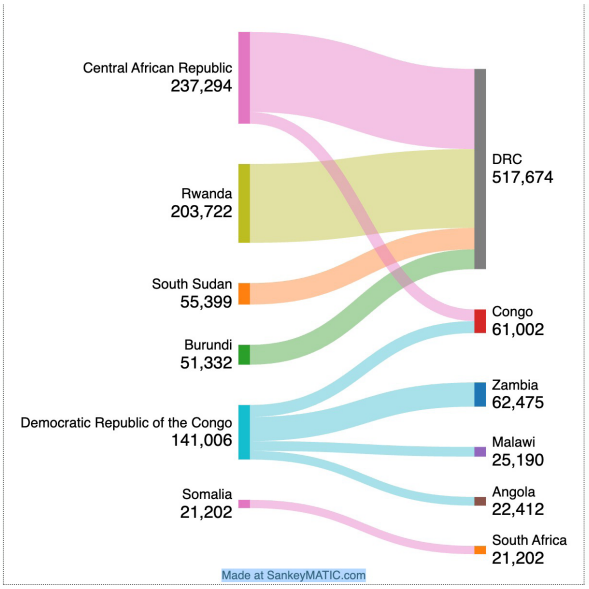
Methodology

This policy brief was developed using qualitative design research methods. A key informant interview with Audrey Hickcox, a project officer in charge of refugee complementary pathways at IOM HQ in Geneva. We asked open-ended questions to get more insights on factors affecting refugees labour mobility in Africa. The interview focused on sustainable refugee integration, donor dependency and national ownership, gaps in skills and data management, to name a few. Secondary research involved a comprehensive desktop review of peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports (e.g., UNHCR, IOM, SAMP), and relevant SADC and national legal documents. Quantitative data on refugee populations and labour force participation were mainly drawn from UNHCR, IOM, and national statistical offices.

Analysis and Findings

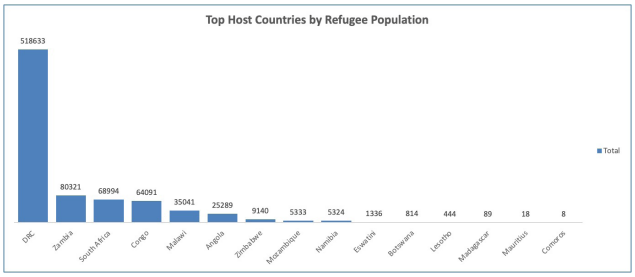
This section explains the critical barriers that make it difficult for refugees in the SADC states to find safe, legal work. Although there are some regional efforts towards building an inclusive environment for refugees and migrants, there are still a lot of gaps and barriers.

Figure 1: Top Host Countries by Refugee Population



As a result, refugee youth remain in a state of limbo, unable to fully integrate or relocate to less burdened states with labour shortages, such as Namibia and Botswana. In these contexts, the informal labour sector becomes the default alternative, exposing young refugees, especially women, to exploitation and poor working conditions. Although three-quarters of refugees may legally work in some form, real-world barriers like documentation gaps, discrimination, and sector restrictions render these rights largely ineffective (UNHCR, 2024b).

Figure 2: Refugee Flow network for SADC countries





Barriers Identified

Several structural and policy-related barriers hinder refugee access to formal employment in the SADC region (see Table 1 for a summary; for a detailed list, follow the link provided in the table).

Table 1: Structural and policy-related barriers

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION
Economic barrier	Although around **67%** of refugees in low- and middle-income countries, including many SADC states, have formal legal rights to work, only 45% actually enjoy unrestricted access in practice, meaning 55%
Legal barrier	Most SADC states haven't ratified the 2005 SADC Protocol. 6 out 15 have ratified this protocol (See attached). Refugees face exclusion from land use or natural resource access. Many green jobs (e.g., agroforestry, reforestation) require land or community-based resource rights, which refugees
Social obstacles	Xenophobia and stigma hinder refugee integration in SADC. e.g. Over 60% of South Africans believe immigrants take local jobs (SAMP, 2017). Language and cultural barriers also limit access to education and employment, with only 30% of refugee youth in Africa accessing secondary education (UNHCR, 2022).
Systematic barrier	Fragmented asylum systems, lack of refugee skills data , lack of political participation, and absence of regional qualification recognition hinder labour market integration in SADC. Only 3 SADC countries have systems recognizing foreign qualifications (IOM, 2020). A lack of incentives for private employers to hire refugees limits their access to formal jobs and

Policy Recommendations

The key recommendations below are accompanied by an implementation plan and proposed budget

Recommendation 1

Establish a pilot refugee work visa program targeting the agriculture, hospitality, energy, and green jobs sectors. In partnership with UNHCR and IOM, the program should aim to issue 5,000 visas in the first year of implementation to eligible refugees legally residing in SADC. The visa should enable regional mobility and employment across member states.

Implementation plan:

- **Secure Policy Endorsement & Develop a Regional Framework:** Gain buy-in from key stakeholders, regional bodies (e.g. SADC Secretariat), national governments, and refugee agencies to formally support a refugee labor mobility mechanism aligned with national development and climate priorities.

- **Sector Mapping and Country Identification:** Identify countries with both (a) labor shortages in, for instance, environmentally sustainable sectors, and (b) capacity and willingness to host refugee labor. Map labor-intensive green sectors (e.g., renewable energy, land restoration, waste management).

- **Design the Selection and Matching Process:** Collaborate with agencies like UNHCR, IOM, and national authorities to create transparent selection procedures based on labor demand and refugee profiles.

- **Define Eligibility Criteria:** Establish clear, non-discriminatory criteria: physical fitness, mental health, basic literacy/numeracy, and trainability. No exclusion based on formal education level.

- **Integrate the Visa Program with Digital Identity Systems:** (National Databases): national databases to ensure refugee profiles are digitized, verifiable, and portable across borders. The long-term goal is a Digital Skills Passport that tracks competencies and work history.

Recommendation 2 (Tied to Principle 3 of IOM Migration Framework):

Launch co-designed vocational training programs in at least 3 refugee-hosting regions by 2027, targeting the green energy (solar installation), digital services (IT support/data entry), and sustainable agriculture sectors. Partner with a minimum of 15 employers per sector and 3 refugee-serving NGOs to develop curricula, aiming to enroll 1,200 refugees within 18 months (by 2028), with 70% achieving industry-recognized certification and 60% securing related employment within 6 months of program completion. Program effectiveness will be evaluated by 2029.

Implementation plan:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Form a multi-stakeholder Steering Committee (SADC Secretariat, UNHCR, host country Ministries of Labour/Education/Interior, National Refugee Agencies, leading Chambers of Commerce/Industry Associations, relevant NGOs like IOM, key training providers). Define roles, responsibilities, and decision-making protocols.

- **Conduct Market Scans & Refugee Profiling:** Identify specific high-demand occupations. Survey and interview private sector companies in target sectors to identify precise skill gaps and hiring bottlenecks.

- **Develop Incentive Framework & Secure Commitments:** Finalize concrete incentives (e.g., 10-15% tax credit on training costs; wage subsidies for hiring program graduates; simplified work permit processes for graduates; subsidized training equipment/materials). Ensure alignment with national policies.

- **Co-Design & Program Development:** Jointly design modular curricula integrating technical skills, soft skills (communication, workplace etiquette), and sector-specific language training. Prioritize practical, hands-on training (apprenticeships, simulations, on-site learning). Integrate digital literacy where applicable. Ensure certification aligns with national standards and is recognized by employers across SADC.

- **Pilot Program Launch & Implementation:** Choose 2-3 strategic locations within 1-2 SADC countries with high refugee density and strong sectoral opportunities for project pilots. If successful, launch. If not, redesigning and more research are needed.

- Monitoring and evaluation to access to measure effectiveness, relevance and impact.



Recommendation 3 (related to principle 2):

Integrate refugee participation into SADC's Climate Adaptation Strategy by 2026 through co-designed reforestation, renewable energy, and climate-smart agriculture initiatives in 5 high-settlement districts. Target 40% refugee inclusion (minimum 1,000 refugees, 50% women) in green jobs, achieving 500 hectares of rehabilitated land and 75% certified skills retention by 2027. Leverage Uganda's URRI model and SADC's fragility-response platform for implementation, with quarterly progress reviews via the AfDB-UNHCR Regional Community of Practice (i.e. Uganda - good practices).

- Partnership building: Amend SADC Climate Change Strategy (refresh) to explicitly include refugees in adaptation projects, labor schemes, and disaster frameworks.

- Green Labor Market Assessment.

- Pilot Implementation.

Risks / Challenges	Risks (high, middle, low)	Mitigation measures
Slow implementation of SADC free movement protocols	**High**	Advocate for harmonized regional visas using SADC's Climate Change Strategy.
Host Community Resistance: xenophobic violence (e.g., attacks on Zimbabwean migrants in SA (Chekenya, 2024))	**High**	Launch "Shared Prosperity" campaigns showcasing refugee contributions (e.g.,
Exploitation by employers (wage theft)	**Medium**	Require wage parity audits and anonymous hotlines
Political resistance	**High**	SADC Tribunal rulings to challenge non-compliant countries

Conclusion

Heping refugees find work isn't just about doing the right thing; it's a transformative, innovative and sustainable way to support SADC's economic prosperity, peace and security, and green transition. The exclusion of nearly one million refugees from formal labor markets represents a profound economic and social loss for the SADC region. Restrictive policies stifle productivity and perpetuate aid dependency. Implementation of the proposed measures will position SADC as a global innovator in transforming displacement from a humanitarian crisis into an engine for climate-resilient and sustainable development.

CONTRIBUTION BY ALA STUDENTS

Addressing the Economic and Environmental Exploitation of Local Communities in Kolwezi and Surrounding Areas in the DRC

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Executive Summary

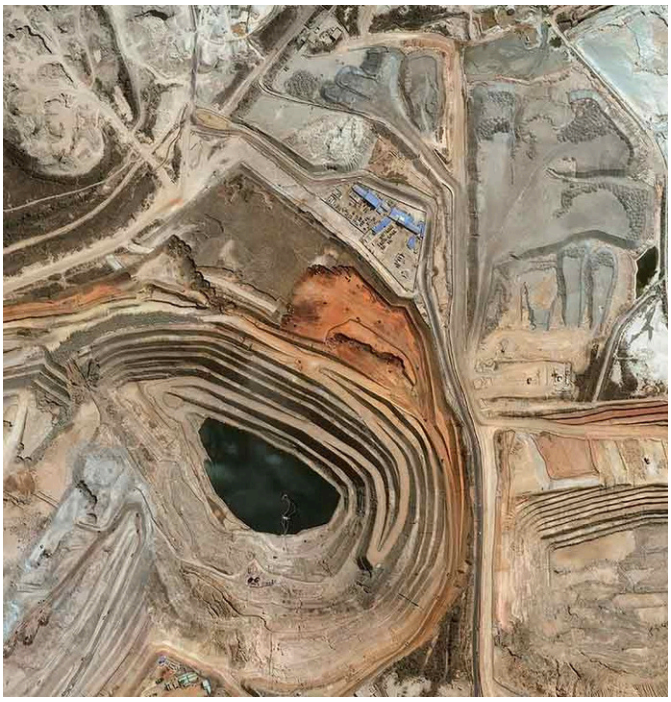
The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is crucial inthe global green transition, producing around 70% of theworld's cobalt, which is vital for lithium-ion batteriesthat power electric vehicles, smartphones, and renewableenergy technologies (McLaren). Kolwezi, the capital ofLualaba Province in the DRC, is central to this movementdue to its rich reserves of cobalt and copper. With apopulation of over 573,000, Kolwezi serves as asignificant hub for the DRC's mining sector, driven by theconcentration of resources and human capital (AmnestyInternational).

However, despite its mineral wealth, Kolwezi struggles with serious environmental challenges, including heavy metalsand toxic chemical contamination of water sources. Thisdisrupts local ecosystems and agriculture, causing healthproblems such as respiratory issues and waterborne diseasesamong nearby residents. The environmental challengesdisrupt children's access to education and trap entirefamilies in cycles of poverty. The policy brief aims to addressthe environmental impacts of mining in Kolwezi, DRC,including land degradation, water contamination, andhealth issues that affect local communities. It proposesstrategic solutions such as enhancing mining companies'cooperate accountability and enforcing existing laws to promote sustainable mining practices, ensuring that the Global Green Transition respects environmental justice for affected residents.

Analysis of the Issue

The Global Green Transition refers to the worldwide shift from fossil fuels and polluting energy sources to cleaner, renewable energy like solar, wind, and hydro power. Its goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, fight climate change, and create a more sustainable future for the planet. While the global North accelerates its transition to clean energy, the DRC has become a "sacrifice zone" for the mining of cobalt (RAID and AFREWATCH 1). Cobalt is essential for powering electric vehicles, smartphones, laptops, and countless other portable electronic devices. The extraction of cobalt is driven by a long history of underdevelopment linked to colonial exploitation. Kolwezi is situated in the resource-rich Katanga region, which, as economist Samir Amin puts it, exemplifies "Africa of the concession-owning companies" (Amin 504). These areas were primarily developed by colonial powers to supply cheap labor and resources to enrich the global capitalist center instead of fostering self-sustaining local economies (Amin 506). This exploitation entailed the designation of vast lands for extraction, displacing and marginalizing local populations while systematically impoverishing them - an enduring pattern reflected in the 'Resource Curse,' as seen in Kolwezi, where cobalt wealth fuels the global green economy while local

communities remain trapped in poverty, environmental harm, and weak governance. During Belgian colonial rule, the focus in Katanga was almost exclusively on serving European interests. In 1938, the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK), a powerful Belgian mining corporation, established infrastructure such as



roads and power lines solely to facilitate mineral extraction, not for the benefit of the public (Mthembu-Salter 4). Local Congolese laborers were forced into labor camps, lacking access to the social services enjoyed by white settlers. As Amin notes, colonialism in places like Kolwezi was designed to produce "cheap exports" while taking advantage of local labor "at the lowest possible cost," without investing in the well-being of the local population (Amin 518). After independence, little changed in terms of these structures. The nationalization of the mines under Gécamines in the 1960s failed to lead to equitable wealth distribution; instead, it maintained colonial hierarchies under a new elite management. Communities surrounding Kolwezi continued to face underdevelopment, echoing Amin's argument that African economies became structurally dependent on global markets, relegated to the role of peripheral suppliers without achieving autonomy (Amin 524).

Between 2005 and 2025, Kolwezi has seen a surge in mining activities by foreign multinational companies, positioning itself as a hub for the global pursuit of green energy and exploitation and a "sacrificial zone" for the Green Global Transition (RAID and AFREWATCH 1). Today, in the midst of the cobalt boom, DRC, which provides 70% of the world's cobalt, is again central to global supply chains but remains marginalized in terms of development. Mining companies, largely owned by Chinese interests now, perpetuate the extractive model established during colonial times, controlling energy and infrastructure privately, polluting local waterways, and displacing rural communities without compensation. This exploitation reinforces Amin's theory that underdevelopment is not a lack of development, but a "result of development carried out in the interest of external powers", rather than the people of the region themselves (Amin 507). The historical journey of Kolwezi, marked by forced labor under colonial companies and leading up to today's industrial mining, reflects the broader pattern of "dependent development" described by Amin (Amin 515). While infrastructure is present, it is not designed for the benefit of the local populace.

Causes and Consequences

Impact of Ineffective laws

One major cause of the current crisis is the lack of strict enforcement of environmental and human rights regulations. "The DRC government has failed to enforce its own laws designed to protect the rights of people affected by mining operations" (Amnesty International), which enables companies to operate with minimal accountability. Amnesty International researchers documented "repeated breaches of legal safeguards prescribed in international human rights law and standards and national legislation, as well as blatant disregard for the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights" across mining operations in Kolwezi (Amnesty International). This regulatory vacuum has created a situation where "people are being forcibly evicted, or threatened or intimidated into leaving their homes, or misled into consenting to derisory settlements. Often there was no grievance mechanism, accountability, or access to justice" (Amnesty International). The absence of effective legal frameworks means that when communities are displaced for mining expansion, they have no recourse or protection under the law. Additionally, the global race among major economies to secure critical minerals for their own energy transitions has intensified competition and often sidelines the needs and rights of local populations. The weakness of regulatory oversight allows multinational companies to exploit legal loopholes and operate in an environment where human rights violations go unpunished, perpetuating a cycle where "climate justice demands a just transition," but instead "decarbonizing the global economy must not lead to further human rights violations" (Amnesty International).

Impact of mining on the rise of evictions

The expansion for the extraction of cobalt and copper has seen the forceful evictions of the people of Kolwezi from their homes and farmlands, human rights violations, economic marginalization, and environmental degradation. "Thousands of people have been forcibly evicted from their homes and farmland, often without fair compensation, to make way for the expansion oftrial mines (Amnesty International). In the Cité Gécamines community, over 39,000 people were evicted from their homes, without sufficient compensation to secure safer living conditions, by the company COMMUS (Compagnie Minière de Musonoïe), a Chinese company, and the DRC's state-owned Gécamines company. In 2022, approximately 40% of the Gécamines district was taken over by a mining quarry, leading to the relocation of 209 households under controversial circumstances. In addition, the Mukunbi settlement in 2016 was destroyed by the Dubaibased Chemaf Resources' mining operation. Residents' homes were burned, and they were subjected to physical assault. With no shelter and finances, families are forced by circumstances to earn a small living working in the mines.

Impact on mining on the rise of child labor

In Kolwezi, small-scale mining includes a diverse range of ages, including children, who represent 40,000 of the 255,000 Congolese workers (Wilson Center). These child laborers often work alongside family members out of economic necessity, as families struggle to survive on less than $1.90 per day. Children work in precarious environments and harsh conditions without a proper safety environment, exposing them to respiratory and digestive diseases and spinal deformities due to carrying heavy loads and prolonged sun exposure (Save The Children). The mines lack basic protective equipment, first aid facilities, or adult supervision, leaving children vulnerable to tunnel collapses, toxic dust inhalation, and cuts from sharp tools. "Children from 6 years old spend the entire day in the cobalt mines of Congo bent over, digging with a small shovel or bare hands to gather cobalt-containing heterogenite stones, often in searing heat, which eventually end up in our mobile phones." (Byline Times). Many of these children should be in school, but instead spend 10-12 hours daily in the mines, perpetuating cycles of poverty and illiteracy. Aside from not being paid properly, they treat them as slaves who "earn less than $2 per day" (Wilson Center).





Impact of mining on children's education

Women and girls in Kolwezi are facing a severe public health crisis. A study of 1,000 women revealed that 56%reported an increase in gynecological and reproductive issues since industrial mining began, including "irregular menstruation, urogenital infections, infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects" (RAID and AFREWATCH 32). These health issues are strongly linked to chronic exposure to polluted surface and well water contaminated by copper-cobalt mining waste. In Kolwezi, water collection and usage are primarily the responsibilities of women and girls, which makes them disproportionately vulnerable to toxic substances, including cobalt, arsenic, and sulfuric acid(RAID and AFREWATCH 31–33). Women report symptoms such as "itching, infections, and irregular menstrual cycles," with some experiencing menstruation as frequently as three times a month. Teenage girls are particularly affected, facing early onset of vaginal infections, hemorrhagic periods, pelvic pain, and swelling, while birth defects like limb malformations are increasingly noted (RAID and AFREWATCH 35). Doctors in Kolweziconfirm a rise in urinary tract infections, infertility, miscarriages, and congenital malformations butacknowledge their limitations due to a lack of proper laboratories and resources for long-term treatment or research. One physician observed a troubling paradox: "It's a vicious cycle - women are advised to clean with water, yetthe water they use is contaminated" (RAID and AFREWATCH 34). While studies in Lubumbashi indicate that birth defect rates are 1.6 times higher near mining areas, similar research in Kolwezi remains unfunded(RAID and AFREWATCH 35).

Impact on mining on the women's health

The devastating environmental effects of cobalt mining in theDRC have created a crisis that extends far beyond the mines themselves, severely disrupting children's access to education and trapping entire families in cycles of poverty. Water contamination from mining operations has destroyed local livelihoods, forcing families to make impossible choices about their children's futures.According to a RAID and AFREWATCH study, "Nearly 60% of the parents interviewed reported that the loss of income meant they had to reduce the education of their children – a decision with serious long-term impacts" (RAID 61). . The financial burden has become overwhelming for families like Antoine's, who explained, "I am now living in great misery; it is a calamity. My children don't go to school because I can't afford to pay for their schooling. The school costs 15,000 francs ($7.5) a month, but I don't have that money to pay for it." Even when parents desperately want to educate their children, the reality of mining-induced poverty makes it impossible, as one parent shared,"Before, I could send my children to school and pay their tuition fees, but I had to withdraw them in 2017. They stay at home alone" (RAID 40). This educational crisis has created a generation of children with limited prospects, as a local teacher observed: "The future of the children here is not good because we are surrounded by mines. There are children under the age of 10who go to get ore crumbs, run after trucks, and earn a little money like that."

Ecological Effects

Copper and cobalt mining in the DRC has resulted in serious water pollution, heavily impacting local agriculture and fishing industries. Mining companies release heavy metals such as copper, cobalt, arsenic, and lead, along with acidic wastewater, straight into rivers like Dipeta and Kalenge. According to RAID, the scientific datareveals that these rivers have alarmingly low pH levels - Katapula and Kalenge rivers have pH values under 3.8, classified as "hyper-acidic,"while the Dipeta and Dilala rivers measure below 4.5, making them"very acidic" (RAID and AFREWATCH 15–21). The high acidity and heavy metal contamination render the water toxic to fish, leading to a significant decline in local fish populations.Consequently, more than 99% of local fishers have lost their meansof livelihood, unable to catch fish in the polluted waters (RAID and AFREWATCH 19). Fishing, which once played a crucial role in providing food and income, has become unfeasible, decimating community nutrition and local economies. The contamination has dire consequences for agriculture. Toxic metals build up in river banks and floodplain soils, significantly reducing soil fertility (RAID and AFREWATCH 20). This accumulation of heavy metals taints crops, poses health threats to consumers, and pushes farmers to move away from traditional methods. Consequently, food production decreases, agricultural earnings dwindle, and issues like food insecurity and poverty rise. Additionally, the discharge of acidic, metal-laden water from mining operations has wreaked havoc on aquatic ecosystem sand polluted farmland, making fishing and farming unsustainable for communities living near these rivers (RAID and AFREWATCH 57).

Existing Strategies and Identified Gaps

1. Corporate Commitments to International Frameworks

Several mining companies operating in the DRC claim to align their operations with global standards such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, the

OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals, and the Chinese Due Diligence Guidelines. These frameworks outline ethical expectations for business conduct, including environmental protections, labor rights, and supply chain transparency.

However, these instruments are non-binding and voluntary. Companies self-report their compliance, often without independent verification or community consultation. As a result, there is little to no accountability when guidelines are ignored or violated. Many companies continue harmful practices with impunity under the cover of "adhering to international principles."

2. Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) and Management Plans

Under Congolese law, mining companies must submit updated Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) every five years. These are meant to identify the environmental risks of a project and outline mitigation strategies in a legally required Environmental and Social Management Plan (PGES).

However, the implementation and transparency of this process are deeply flawed. Many companies fail to publish their ESIAs online or make them accessible to the communities directly affected by mining. The Ministry of Mines' website rarely hosts current ESIAs, and residents often remain unaware of the environmental risks. Even when plans are submitted, there is little evidence they are enforced or independently monitored.

3. "Closed-Circuit" Water Management Systems

Major industrial mining companies such as Glencore, TFM, and ERG report using closed-circuit water systems, which are designed to recycle water internally and prevent the discharge of pollutants into the environment. Some have built "event ponds" to contain wastewater in case of accidental overflows.

However, scientific testing and local reports tell a different story. According to RAID's research, rivers near mining sites such as Dipeta and Kalenge remain hyper-acidic, with pH levels far below safety standards. This suggests that despite claims of containment, toxic effluents continue to be discharged into the environment. The lack of third-party environmental testing and public data creates a credibility gap between company reports and on-the-ground realities.

4. International Regulatory Developments

Globally, several legislative initiatives aim to regulate corporate behavior in mineral supply chains. The European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), currently being finalized, will require large companies to identify and mitigate human rights and environmental risks throughout their supply chains. Similarly, France's Duty of Vigilance Law (2017) obligates French companies to develop risk mitigation plans for overseas operations. In the United States, the Dodd-Frank Act (Section 1502) mandates conflict mineral disclosure but only for tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold (3TG), not cobalt.

However, these regulations either lack global reach, exclude cobalt, or are still in draft stages. Furthermore, enforcement depends on the home country's regulatory capacity, meaning companies operating in weak governance zones like the DRC often face no real consequences for non-compliance

5. Certification and Industry Initiatives

Some companies participate in voluntary initiatives, including:

- The Global Battery Alliance
- The Cobalt Industry Responsible Assessment Framework (CIRAF)
- The Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI)
- The International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) standards

These frameworks aim to set industry best practices around responsible sourcing, worker safety, and environmental protection. However, these too are voluntary and lack enforcement. Independent audits are rare, community participation is minimal, and certifications are often granted without transparent investigation. As a result, these programs are often criticized as "greenwashing" tools used more for PR than accountability.

6. Congolese Government Oversight Mechanisms

The DRC's Mining Code and Environmental Protection Law require companies to comply with environmental standards, publish ESIAs, and conduct regular monitoring. Agencies such as the Congolese Environment Agency (ACE), the Directorate of Mining Environment (DPEM), and the National Fund for Social Service (FNPSS) are legally tasked with reviewing reports, enforcing standards, and protecting community health.

However, these agencies are severely underfunded and understaffed. RAID's investigation found that officials lack vehicles, testing kits, and digital infrastructure to carry out site inspections. Without adequate resources, environmental regulation in the cobalt belt remains theoretical rather than operational.

7. Environmental Responsibility in Site Transfers

Under current DRC law, companies are only held accountable for environmental damage if an audit is carried out when a mining permit is transferred from one company to another. If no audit takes place which is often the case the new company is not liable for past pollution,

allowing damage to go unaddressed and communities to remain uncompensated. This legal loophole has allowed multinational firms to acquire heavily polluted sites with no responsibility to clean them up. It also incentivizes informal transfers and further erodes corporate accountability.

Policy Recommendations

1. National-Level Policy Actions (Democratic Republic of Congo Government)

1.1 **Strengthen Environmental Oversight and Enforcement** To address chronic pollution and regulatory gaps, the DRC government should invest significantly in environmental oversight capacity. This includes equipping agencies such as the ACE, DPEM, and FNPSS with laboratories, mobile testing kits, transport vehicles, and digital reporting tools to ensure independent monitoring of water, air, and soil quality across mining regions. Additionally, the Ministry of Mines must enforce the publication of Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) and Environmental and Social Management Plans (PGES) on official websites, as mandated by national law. Crucially, permit renewals for mining companies should be made conditional on verified compliance.

1.2 **Integrate Health and Gender Surveillance** Pollution-linked health issues, particularly affecting women and children, demand a cross-sectoral response. A joint taskforce comprising the Ministries of Health, Gender, and Mines should be established to conduct regular audits on reproductive health outcomes in mining zones. Data collected should feed into a National Toxicology Surveillance Program hosted at the University of Lubumbashi. This program would monitor pollutant concentrations in human samples and environmental sources and guide responsive interventions.

1.3 **Establish Environmental Justice Tribunals** The DRC should create regional environmental courts with the authority to adjudicate pollution cases, sanction violators, and award community reparations. These tribunals should draw from existing models like Kenya's National Environmental Tribunal or India's Green Courts. Their mandates would ensure access to justice for affected communities and address systemic delays in pollution accountability.

2. Corporate Accountability (Mining Companies)

2.1 **Guarantee Community Water Rights** Guarantee Community Water Access Mining companies operating in the copper-cobalt belt must guarantee access to clean water for nearby communities in line with WHO standards-50 liters per person per day. Water should be tested monthly and results displayed in French and local languages on community noticeboards. These provisions are urgent given that many communities currently Policy Recommendations: Environmental Justice in the DRC's Cobalt Belt rely on toxic sources for daily consumption.

2.2 **Legacy Pollution Compensation Fund** A joint pollution remediation fund of at least $100 million should be created, financed by leading mining corporations in Kolwezi like Glencore, CMOC, and Zijin. This independently managed trust, with civil society oversight, would support river rehabilitation, mobile health clinics, and food and education subsidies for displaced and affected communities. This fund should be financed through a percentage of annual profits and adhere to transparent reporting guidelines.

2.3 **Implement Gender-Specific Health and Safety Plans** Mining companies must include gender-disaggregated data in their ESIAs and develop standalone Gendered Environmental Risk Assessments (GERAs). These assessments should be backed by real-world action, including the construction of free gynecological clinics in mining hubs such as Kolwezi and the training of local healthcare workers on pollution-related reproductive risks. These steps ensure that women's and girls' specific vulnerabilities

3. Supply Chain and Global Regulation (EU, US, China, Investors)

3.1 **Adopt Binding Due Diligence Laws** Importing countries, such as those in the EU, the United States, and China, should enact mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence laws. These regulations must require supply chain traceability to the mine of origin, legal accountability for environmental harm, and independent third-party audits. Doing so will close the loopholes that currently allow companies to profit from exploitative or polluting practices in countries like the DRC.

3.2 **Establish an Africa-Led Clean Cobalt Certification Scheme** A regional certification program, led by the African Union, should be introduced to promote ethically sourced cobalt. This "Clean Cobalt" label would verify that operations are pollution-free and uphold gender and child safety standards. Companies that meet certification standards could receive preferential treatment through tax incentives or access to premium international markets, ensuring sustainability translates into both justice and economic benefit.

3.3 **Invest in Low-Cobalt and Alternative Technologies** To reduce long-term pressure on Congolese ecosystems, international stakeholders must fund and accelerate the development of low-cobalt or cobalt-free battery technologies. These investments should be made through climate finance initiatives and public-private partnerships, helping to transition away from environmentally harmful supply chains without sacrificing progress in renewable energy.

4. Community-Centered Governance

4.1 **Establish Community Oversight Councils** Every mining site in the cobalt belt should be monitored by a Community Oversight Council composed of fence line residents, youth, and women representatives. These councils must have legal access to ESIA documentation and be involved in all environmental and health-related decision making. This inclusion will ensure that communities are no longer voiceless victims but empowered stakeholders in the governance of mining operations.

4.2 **Reform Grievance Mechanisms** Current grievance systems are inaccessible, under publicized, and ineffective. Companies must overhaul these systems to include SMS-based platforms in local languages, toll-free hotlines, and mechanisms for anonymous complaints. An independent oversight board should monitor complaint resolution, and all data should be published annually with breakdowns by gender, issue type, and outcome. This would restore trust in corporate accountability and allow communities to seek redress

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