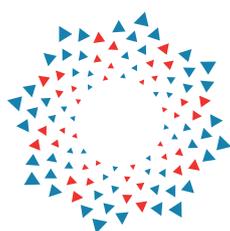


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

“A Poor Man Cannot Volunteer”

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The title of this provocation is taken from an interview with a government employee as part of our large interdisciplinary research project 'Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda' ([RYVU](#)). Interviews with stakeholders in the first phase of the research captured views on the role of youth volunteering in Uganda. This striking quote speaks to issues of inclusion as well as to who decides what kinds of volunteering count. Our analysis reveals how volunteering for skills acquisition and livelihoods is promoted by various actors, but the opportunity to volunteer (and the form it takes) is shaped by wider inequalities. Our research also highlights how some actors and policy makers view volunteering as the preserve of the well-off, excluding the ways vulnerable communities practice care, solidarity and self-interest through volunteering.

Our research has identified how volunteering has diverse and often contradictory meanings in Uganda. These include: its role in community and volunteer wellbeing; its role in enhancing livelihoods and securing work; as a mechanism for service delivery. But different forms of volunteering are not valued and recognised equally, with everyday forms rooted in Ugandan histories of community action often sidelined in favour of forms that fit the norms of aid and development organisations.

Policy making for volunteering in Uganda and globally strongly emphasises its impacts on youth skills and youth empowerment. But despite this, there has been a lack of robust and systematic evidence in Uganda backing this claim up. It is clear from our research that how volunteering impacts skills is related to existing socio-economic inequalities. Different vulnerabilities impact who can access different kinds of volunteering opportunities, and what benefits they might get from those, shaped by wider power dynamics.

Although the focus in youth volunteering policy is that it helps skills and employability to ultimately reduce inequalities, inequalities exist in accessing volunteering opportunities and in areas such as remuneration. For example, in Uganda many young refugees are motivated to volunteer not only to help the community and learn new skills, but also to receive a small remuneration as a valuable income stream.¹ However, it is clear from our project that there are differences in who can access these opportunities, with often only professionals able to access remunerated forms of volunteering. A skilled refugee may use volunteering to gain qualifications that are recognised in Uganda, improving their employability but not necessarily their skills. A refugee without professional skills may wish to volunteer to build their skills yet may struggle to access the opportunities that allow for this. Ultimately, opportunities and experiences of volunteering are shaped by poverty, geography, and existing vulnerabilities.

Despite the assumptions from some policy makers, our survey data shows that the 'poor man' definitely is volunteering, as nearly half of the current volunteers in our sample come from households reporting a monthly income of less than 100,000 Ugandan Shilling.² But the format and potential benefits of that volunteering is shaped by their poverty and vulnerability.

¹ In our extensive survey of over 3000 young refugees (aged 15-24 years old), the motivations of current volunteers included 'help the community' (53%), learn or gain new skills (40.4%) and 'make friends' (35%), but then strikingly 'get money (33.5%)', even ahead of 'get a job' (27.5%) and other recognised motivations to volunteer. For more details of our survey and wider project, visit www.ryvu.org

² For comparison, the average minimum monthly wage is 130,000 Ugandan Shilling.

Research as part of RYVU suggests that better evidence is needed on who benefits from what kinds of volunteering in particular contexts to ensure volunteering does not reinforce and further entrench skills, employability and other inequalities. The research raises three questions that are particularly relevant to the theme of the conference, "Inclusive Volunteering for Global Equality":

- Do volunteer engaging organisations understand and address how vulnerability shapes access to and experiences of their volunteering opportunities?
- Does being more inclusive in volunteering help address the inequalities and vulnerabilities that shape the lives of groups such as young refugees, whose voluntary labour is sought?
- Does the spread of ideas of volunteering originating in the Global North undermine efforts for more inclusive volunteering that tackle inequality within the Global South?

Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda (RYVU)

RYVU is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (ES/S005439/1). It aims to understand whether volunteering by refugee youth in Uganda helps their skills acquisition and employability and reduces the inequalities they experience. The project is a collaboration between Northumbria University (UK), Mbarara University of Science and Technology (Uganda), Uganda Martyrs University (Uganda) and Loughborough University (UK). For more information on the project and the full team, visit www.ryvu.org