

Pathways to Employment

Rwanda Report

About the Authors

About the RLRH

The Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) is an initiative of the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) at the University of Oxford. The RLRH is based in the UK and Kenya, with a research office located in Nairobi at the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA). We create opportunities for researchers with a displacement background to lead primary and secondary research studies in the field of forced migration, from start to finish. Our main thematic interests in Refugee Studies relate to 1) livelihoods and self-reliance; and 2) leadership and participation of displaced populations in humanitarian response and policymaking. RLRH also offers a series of academic programmes which support graduate access and professional development for students with lived experiences of displacement. Visit [our website](#) for more information.

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Mohamed Hassan is the lead author of the Rwanda report. Egide Niyongira collected the data in Rwanda, and contributed significantly to the development of the report.

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About the Research Assistant

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Introduction

Executive Summary

- Rwanda's legal framework is highly progressive and guarantees equal access to the labour market for refugees and Rwandan citizens. Under the 'Law No. 13 ter/2014 of 21/05/2014 relating to refugees', refugees have the right to work without seeking a work permit or further authorisation, can apply for business licences under the same requirements as Rwandans, and can open bank accounts and access loans. Refugees can also pursue citizenship if they can demonstrate that they have been self-reliant for five years.
- There is no reported gap between policy and practice in Rwanda, and the right of refugees to access the labour market is being realised. However, despite progressive policies, refugees continue to struggle to achieve self-reliance through access to the labour market or entrepreneurial success.
- In Rwanda, refugees have the choice to live in refugee camps or to settle in cities. The large majority of refugees (91%) reside in refugee camps where they have better access to humanitarian services, compared to cities, where they may lack networks and skills to successfully enter the formal labour market. There are few private sector opportunities in camps, and qualified refugees often work as volunteers or incentive workers for lower wages than Rwandan nationals.
- Few refugees are competitive in the labour market in Kigali. Employment opportunities are primarily available to young, urban-based refugees who have received formal education, often up to university level in Rwanda.
- From an administrative point of view, employers who wish to hire refugees rather than Rwandan nationals do not face any particular challenges. However, they may be reluctant to hire refugees over locals because they do not see the benefits of doing so and may see them as a flight risk.
- There are several initiatives in Rwanda to engage the private sector and create employment opportunities for refugees, and private sector engagement is a priority for Rwandan authorities. However, engagement remains limited and lacks coherence. Significant resources and continuous follow-up are needed to engage potential employers and get them interested in employing refugees when their focus is on making a profit. Direct collaboration between educational institutions and private actors to place refugees in internships with companies and organisations is promising and should be scaled up in Rwanda and regionally, with financial support provided to employers during trial periods.
- The report recommends improving refugees' access to universities to help them compete in the labour market. This could be achieved by providing them with student loans from the Development Bank of Rwanda and by expanding initiatives offering online and blended university degree programmes. This could be done by setting up satellite campuses and enrolling more refugees and Rwandans.
- UNHCR and its implementing partners should cease incentive work practices and limit volunteer work in the camp. As refugees have the right to work, there is no ethical justification for incentive work, which does not enable self-reliance and does not support refugees' career development.

Acronyms

BRD	Development Bank of Rwanda
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
GEM	Global Education Movement
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
ID	Identity Document
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MIFOTRA	Ministry of Public Service and Labour
MINEMA	Ministry in charge of Emergency Management
NIDA	National Identification Agency
NISR	National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda
NST1	National Strategy for Transformation
PoR	Proof of Registration
PSF	Private Sector Federation of Rwanda
RDB	Rwanda Development Board
RLOs	Refugee-led organisations
RRA	Rwanda Revenue Authority
RSSB	Rwanda Social Security Board
SNHU	Southern New Hampshire University
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Rwanda Situation Snapshot

Country assessment:

- Highly open legal environment, but structural challenges limit access to the job market
- Significant gaps in the literature on refugee employment, good public information on how to access legal employment

As of May 2024, Rwanda hosted over 135,809 refugees and asylum seekers.¹ 62% of refugees in Rwanda come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and 38% come from Burundi.² Many refugees in Rwanda are in situations of protracted displacement, and arrived in the 1990s.³ Since October 2023, Rwanda also hosts over 12,000 new Congolese arrivals from eastern DRC, due to continued instability in the Great Lake region.⁴

The large majority of refugees in Rwanda (91%) live across five refugee camps with only 8% living in the urban areas.⁵ Refugees typically choose to reside in refugee camps because they have better access to humanitarian services, compared to cities.⁶ In urban areas, refugees have to be self-reliant and receive only basic protection, health services, and financial support in rare cases.⁷ The UNHCR offers financial assistance to refugees who are forced to return to the camp due to a lack of funds.⁸ This support aims to promote self-reliance and the transition to urban areas for refugees in Rwanda.⁹



Photo by Aboodi

1. UNHCR. "Rwanda: Operational Data Portal." Accessed on 1 July 2024. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/rwa>

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. UNHCR. "Rwanda: Operational Data Portal." Accessed on 1 July 2024. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/rwa>; UNHCR. "Rwanda Refugee Response Plan 2023." September 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103375>

6. UNHCR. "Rwanda Refugee Response Plan 2023." September 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103375>

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

Objectives

While Rwanda's policy and legal frameworks towards refugees is open and progressive, significant non-legal challenges remain.

Refugees have the right to work in Rwanda without the need for additional work permits and only with the refugee identity document (ID). Despite progressive policies, refugees continue to struggle to become self-reliant by accessing the labour market or achieving entrepreneurial success. This study aims to examine the process of hiring refugees in Rwanda, with a focus on the gaps that exist between policy and practice, and on how the private sector can be meaningfully engaged in this process, by asking:

1. What policies and legal frameworks govern refugees' access to employment in Rwanda?
2. What processes do refugees need to follow to find employment in Rwanda? What challenges do refugees face in following the required steps to employment in Rwanda?
3. What are the challenges private sector actors face in order to employ refugees in the different countries in Rwanda?
4. How can collaboration and partnerships between stakeholders be improved to create a more enabling environment for refugee employment in Rwanda?

This study, conducted in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, supports the Amahoro Coalition's mission to promote dignified and fulfilling livelihoods for refugees and displaced persons across Africa through multi-sectoral collaboration. It aligns with the Foundation's strategic objective of enabling 2.5 million young refugees and displaced individuals to access meaningful employment by 2030.

The research examines current policies, challenges, and opportunities affecting refugees' access to formal employment in host countries, identifying key barriers and recommending strategies to strengthen employment pathways and promote socio-economic integration into host communities. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the Mastercard Foundation, its staff, or its Board of Directors.

Research Methods

This Rwanda report is part of a 15-country study on hiring refugees, conducted by the Refugee-Led Research Hub, on behalf of the Amahoro Coalition. Data was collected in-person and remotely in May 2024.

Data collection mainly focused on Kigali, where refugees have more opportunities to access the formal labour market. The team conducted sixteen (16) interviews with refugees and stakeholders in Rwanda, including:

- **Two (2) remote interviews with government representatives** from the Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA) and the Ministry of Public Service and Labour (MIFOTRA);
- **Seven (7) refugees** - all of them were working in the formal sector, based in and around Kigali, largely in the non-profit sector;
- **One (1) remote interview with the United Nations** High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR);
- **Four (4) INGOs** who support refugees' access to the labour market in Rwanda;
- **Two (2) private sector actors.**

We acknowledge that due to the limited scope and budget of the study, the sampling strategy is neither systematic nor representative of the refugee population in Rwanda. To reduce bias, we have triangulated the data with the literature as much as possible. This report does not provide a complete picture of refugee employment across Rwanda, but is intended to be useful as a basis for discussion and advocacy, and for further research (e.g. on the specific challenges faced by women in accessing work).

1. Policies and Legal Frameworks That Govern Refugees' Access to Employment

Overview of Policies and Legal Frameworks in Rwanda

The Government of Rwanda is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Additional Protocol, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention.¹⁰ Refugee issues in Rwanda are regulated by the 'Law No. 13 ter/2014 of 21/05/2014 relating to refugees.'¹¹

Most refugees in Rwanda enjoy freedom of movement. While the government has made a reservation to the 1951 Convention on determining the place of residence and the freedom of movement of refugees,¹² there is little restriction to the movement of refugees in Rwandese laws. In practice, refugees can leave camps, and choose where they reside. Refugees in most camps are allowed to leave the camp without a movement pass, but if they do for over three months, they lose their residency in the camp and the access to assistance that comes with it.¹³ The main exception is the case of the Mahama refugee camp, home to about half of refugees in Rwanda. Refugees in Mahama must obtain a movement pass if they want to leave the camp. The movement pass expires every three months. If a refugee leaves Mahama for more than three months without renewing their pass, they risk losing their residency in the camp and access to the assistance that comes with it.

There are no challenges associated with getting the movement pass.

Refugees have the right to work without seeking an additional work permit or further authorisation. Rwanda's legal framework is highly progressive and guarantees equal access to the work market for refugees and Rwandan citizens. The 2014 law also grants refugees the "same employment rights as Rwandan citizens, including labour protections, private-sector salary protections, and the right to self-employment."¹⁴ Article 18 of the 2014 law states: "without prejudice to other laws, any person having obtained refugee status in Rwanda shall enjoy the rights and liberties provided for by international instruments on refugees ratified by Rwanda." While there are no restrictions on specific positions, some public sector jobs and government posts may have a requirement that only Rwandans can apply.

Refugees can apply for business licences, and follow the same procedures as Rwandan nationals through the [Rwanda Development Board \(RDB\) website](#).¹⁵ Individual business registration is free of charge. Refugees can apply with a Refugee ID on the platform.

10. Ginn, Thomas, Reva Resstack, Helen Dempster, Emily Arnold-Fernández, Sarah Miller, Martha Guerrero Ble, and Bahati Kanyamanza. "Global Refugee Work Rights Report." Center for Global Development, 2022.

<https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/2022-global-refugee-work-rights-report.pdf>.

11. Rwanda: Law No. 13 Ter/2014 of 21/05/2014 Relating to Refugees: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53fb08cd4.html>

12. Ginn, Thomas, Reva Resstack, Helen Dempster, Emily Arnold-Fernández, Sarah Miller, Martha Guerrero Ble, and Bahati Kanyamanza. "Global Refugee Work Rights Report." Center for Global Development, 2022.

<https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/2022-global-refugee-work-rights-report.pdf>.

13. UNHCR. "Rwanda Refugee Response Plan 2023." September 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103375>

14. Ginn, Thomas, Reva Resstack, Helen Dempster, Emily Arnold-Fernández, Sarah Miller, Martha Guerrero Ble, and Bahati Kanyamanza. "Global Refugee Work Rights Report." Center for Global Development, 2022.

<https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/2022-global-refugee-work-rights-report.pdf>.

15. See: <https://rdb.rw/neworg1/business-registration>

Overview of Policies and Legal Frameworks in Rwanda

Refugees can pursue citizenship if they can demonstrate that they have been self-reliant for five years.¹⁶ Self-reliance is one of the avenues through which refugees can pursue citizenship. Rwanda citizenship law provides three pathways for refugees to obtain citizenship in Rwanda:

1. Refugees who have been married to Rwandan citizens for at least five years;
2. Refugees who have demonstrated self-reliance through property ownership or economic/commercial activity for at least five years;
3. Refugees who have lived in the country for at least 25 years, (without necessarily meeting a specific economic criteria).

To apply for citizenship, refugees must submit a range of documents to the District Immigration Office (Box 1). Proof of self-reliance is established through documentation of property, business or records of economic, and commercial activities.¹⁷

The processing time for citizenship is approximately six months. After submitting the documents, refugees typically wait for up to six months to receive notification via the email address and phone numbers they provided on the application. If no feedback is received within this period, refugees can follow up with the immigration office to check on the status of their application.

Each applicant is given a dossier number up document submission. This number allows them to track the progress of their application through the [Irembo platform](#), eliminating the need for

in-person visits to the immigration. If a follow up is necessary, presenting the dossier number at the immigration office provides the most efficient way to obtain updates on application status.

Box 1. Documents to apply for citizenship for refugees¹⁸

- Birth certificate (when available)
- Refugee ID
- PoR (with date of registration)
- Passport (if available)
- Certificate that he/ she has not been sentenced to imprisonment for a period of 6 months (criminal record, when he/ she is in position to get it)
- Proof of properties in the country or his/her activities / occupation
- Birth certificates of his/her children under 18 years of age at the time of application
- One recently taken colored passport photo with white background
- Payment slip of 10,000Frw [about 8 USD] or its equivalent non-refundable
- Detailed CV
- The application form available on the Rwanda Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration website

16. Ginn, Thomas, Reva Resstack, Helen Dempster, Emily Arnold-Fernández, Sarah Miller, Martha Guerrero Ble, and Bahati Kanyamanza. "Global Refugee Work Rights Report." Center for Global Development, 2022.

<https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/2022-global-refugee-work-rights-report.pdf>.

17. See: Rwanda Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration website, <https://www.migration.gov.rw/our-services/citizenships>. Accessed on 1 July 2024.

18. Ibid.

Overview of Policies and Legal Frameworks in Rwanda

UNHCR reports that 286 refugees obtained citizenship in 2023, although 95% of them were cases of “confirmation of nationality, as they were legally entitled to Rwandan nationality (mainly through parental descent), while the rest were naturalised owing to marriage with Rwandan nationals.”¹⁹

There is a high degree of financial inclusion of refugees. Refugees in Rwanda have the right to open bank accounts, which allow them to receive salaries, make payments directly, and withdraw money. Some of the refugees we spoke to highlighted how financial institutions like Equity bank were accepting refugee documents. Others use mobile payment. Refugees can open a bank account either with the Proof Of Registration (PoR) or with a Refugee ID.²⁰ UNHCR reports that, by the end of 2022, 93% of refugees “have transactional accounts with formal financial service providers [...] or mobile money.”²¹

Box 2. Perspectives on policy implementation

“Refugees have the right to work in Rwanda and they can compete on the job market.”
(MIFOTRA staff member)

“My experience has been so good because I have not encountered any challenges. When I was applying, I just presented my refugee documents, and I was given a chance to compete with others.” – 27-year old Congolese refugee who works in Kigali

Policy implementation

Sources and informants (including refugees) do not report a gap between policy and practice in Rwanda. In practice, refugees have the right to choose their place of residence, obtain necessary documentation, register their businesses, and apply for jobs – all of which are granted to them by Rwandan law. There is no plan to restrict refugees’ access to the labour market by changing policy.

→ To conclude section 1, policies in Rwanda promote the integration of refugees into the labour market and into the host community, and there are no major gaps in implementation.

Picture 1. Sign-up form for the Umutanguha Finance Company²²

Standard accounts

Open a UFC Plc account with the help of our friendly customer service staff and step into the world of convenience that comes with owning a UFC Plc account.

COMMON PERSONAL ACCOUNT	+
PAYMENT ACCOUNT	+
IZHIRWE'S LOW INCOME AND YOUTH ACCOUNT	+
ACCOUNT FOR REFUGEES	—

Accounts on refugees received by Rwanda. It offers high daily profits and low withdrawal and delivery fees.

19. UNHCR (2024). “Rwanda 2023 Annual Report.” June 2024.

https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/EHGL%20-%20Rwanda%20ARR%202023_1.pdf

20. AFR (2020). “Championing Refugees’ Financial Inclusion in Rwanda Refugees’ finance in the COVID-19 pandemic period and beyond.”
https://afr.rw/old/IMG/pdf/refugee_article_18.06.20_.pdf

21. UNHCR (2024). “Rwanda 2023 Annual Report.” June 2024.

https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/EHGL%20-%20Rwanda%20ARR%202023_1.pdf

22. See: <https://www.ufinance.co.rw/personal-banking/bank-accounts/index.html>

2. Processes to Access Formal Work in Rwanda

Requirements

Refugees do not need to obtain additional permits to work and only need a valid refugee ID. Unlike other countries in East Africa (e.g. Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya), there are no additional documents required to access the formal labour market in Rwanda. Refugees in Rwanda are allowed to work by following the same recruitment procedures as nationals, the main difference being the use of a refugee card instead of a national identity card. Employers are not required to register with the Immigration Department or any other government agency when hiring a refugee.²³

While previous UNHCR guidelines stated that refugees could work with a Proof of Registration (PoR),²⁴ which is automatically issued to all refugees in Rwanda, this is no longer the case. Refugees must apply for a refugee ID before seeking work. This change or shift is in line with Rwanda's National Strategy for Transformation (NST1),²⁵ which began in 2017 and will continue until 2024. This strategy emphasises the digitisation of services and data integration, with the aim of minimising the number of documents that refugees and Rwandans need to carry. By presenting a refugee card, all personal information, including health insurance, can be accessed.

This integration is intended to promote efficiency and ease of service delivery, but it also means that a refugee ID, rather than just a PoR, is now required to obtain employment.

Picture 2. Example of a Refugee ID²⁶



23. UNHCR. "Guide for employing refugees in Rwanda," 2017.

<https://www.unhcr.org/rw/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/07/Guide-to-employment-of-refugees-in-Rwanda.pdf>.

24. Ibid.

25. See Rwanda's National Strategy for Transformation (NST1), 2017: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/rwa206814.pdf>.

26. Photo by Egide Niyongira

Requirements

Obtaining a refugee ID

To obtain a refugee ID card, registered refugees aged 16 and above must go to the MINEMA office at Kigali, and submit the documents outlined in Box 3. MINEMA applies to the National Identification Agency (NIDA) on behalf of refugees, who are then notified by NIDA when they need to go for biometric enrolment. The process usually takes between 3 and 6 weeks. The refugee card needs to be renewed every five years.²⁷ Obtention rates in Rwanda are commendable: by the end of 2023, 96.2% of eligible refugees had a Refugee ID.²⁸

→ **To conclude section 2, there are no barriers to accessing work documents in Rwanda. The procedures for obtaining the refugee card are well designed and effectively supported by MINEMA and UNHCR.**

Box 3. Documents required to obtain a Refugee ID

- Proof of Registration (automatically issued to recognised refugees)
- Application form (available in person at the MINEMA offices)
- Birth certificate (if available)
- Passport (if available)

Although the UNHCR website states that refugees are required to submit an "Individual Summary (Short Version) from UNHCR," in practice, interviewed refugees said they were not required to submit this when applying for a Refugee ID.



Worker at the Kitabi Tea Processing Facility in Rwanda. Photo by A'Melody Lee/World Bank

27. UNHCR website, Documentation page. Accessed on 1 July 2024.

<https://help.unhcr.org/rwanda/services/documentation/#:~:text=Refugee%20Identity%20Document,to%20fill%20the%20application%20form>

28. UNHCR (2024). "Rwanda 2023 Annual Report." June 2024.

https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/EHGL%20-%20Rwanda%20ARR%202023_1.pdf

3. Challenges Faced by Refugees and Private Sector Actors

Structural and Employer Challenges

Structural Challenges

There is no publicly available data on the number of refugees who are currently employed in Rwanda. The UNHCR reported that it was engaging with the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) to “include refugees in the national statistical systems.”²⁹ However, anecdotal evidence from interviews and the low rate of urban-based refugees in Rwanda confirm that a minority of refugees are competitive in the formal labour market.

In Kigali, a major challenge for refugees is the competitive nature of the labour market.

Refugees are required to meet the same qualifications as Rwandan citizens, often requiring advanced degrees and skills. While they may be given the opportunity to participate in practical tests and interviews, they are in direct competition with Rwandans who may have had educational opportunities and developed better skills and networks as a result.³⁰ Due to their experience of displacement, many refugees lack access to formal education, skills development and social capital. The government clearly recognises these constraints. As one government official from MINEMA explained: “It would not make sense to simply say that refugees are allowed to compete on the job market if we don’t enable them as well.”

Refugees who have better awareness and manage to be competitive are often those

who have accessed university in Rwanda.

Employment opportunities are primarily available to young, urban-based refugees who have received formal education, often up to university level in Rwanda (Box 4). Educated refugees have better networks with the host community, are considered more competitive to employers, and have more awareness about the process to access jobs and its associated rights.³¹ As stated by a refugee employed in an NGO, “the ones attending formal education have access to different communications and sources of information. But those who are mostly indoors, they might not know.”

Despite the importance of higher education to gain employment, refugees in Rwanda face several obstacles to accessing university.

According to the UNHCR, only 4% of refugees in Rwanda pursue higher education - this accounts for about 350 refugees.³² Out of that group, about 40% are supported by UNHCR’s DAFI program, while others are supported by “Mondiant Initiative, Kepler, Impact Hope, Maison Shalom, GIZ and Mastercard Foundation.”³³ Refugees rely on these scholarships as they are not eligible for Development Bank of Rwanda (BRD) student loans, which are available to Rwandan students to study at public, government-subsidised or foreign higher education institutions. This exclusion presents a significant barrier for refugee students who have good prospects but cannot afford higher education on their own.³⁴

29. “Rwanda Refugee Response Plan 2023.” September 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103375>

30. Leghtas, Izza and David Kitege, “Turning Policy into Reality: Refugees’ Access to Work in Rwanda.” Refugees International. 14 September 2023. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/turning-policy-into-reality-refugees-access-to-work-in-rwanda/>

31. MINEMA-World Bank. “Rwanda - Economic Activity and Opportunity for Refugee Inclusion - 2019.” 1 August 2019. <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/details/70595>

32. Karinganire, Didier (2024). “Refugee students in Rwanda need more support to strive for a better future.” UNHCR, 24 January 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/rw/19717-refugee-students-in-rwanda-need-more-support-to-strive-for-a-better-future.html#:~:text=Most%20come%20from%20families%20who,in%20higher%20education%20in%20Rwanda>

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

Structural and Employer Challenges

In refugee camps, there are few private sector opportunities.³⁵ Although about 92% of refugees in Rwanda live in refugee camps, a reported majority of formally employed refugees live in urban areas. Refugees are reluctant to leave the camps and seek employment in urban areas such as Kigali, in the absence of formal

and informal safety nets. Refugees are often reluctant to leave their social networks and the assistance they receive in camps to find jobs in cities where they have no networks,³⁶ and may be demotivated after being in the camp for extended periods of time.³⁷

Box 4. Examples of interviewed employed refugees

1. Clarisse is a 25-year-old Congolese refugee who has lived in Rwanda for over 20 years. She holds a BA in Communications from Southern New Hampshire University and currently works as an Academic Facilitator at Astria Learning. This is her second role since graduating. In her role, she supports students with their coursework from admission to graduation, and her job enables her to pay for her siblings' school fees. Higher education through Kepler allowed her to compete in the job market.
2. Ella, a 29-year-old Burundian refugee, has been with Kepler for six years as Senior Manager of Humanitarian Initiatives. She completed her BA in Healthcare Management at Southern New Hampshire University after arriving in Rwanda in 2015. Her current role, which is her first formal employment since graduating in 2018, allows her to support her family and siblings. Ella's role entails providing support to refugee students, assisting them in enhancing their academic performance, addressing their logistical requirements and overseeing programmes.
3. Jackson is a 30-year-old Congolese refugee who has lived in Rwanda for over 20 years. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Management from Southern New Hampshire University and has been employed by the Global Education Movement (GEM) for four years. This is his second formal position since graduating in 2018. As an IT Help Desk, Jackson provides technical assistance to students and staff, addressing issues related to learning platforms, computers, emails, login credentials, and system updates. His role enables him to provide financial support to his family in Bugesera, on the outskirts of Kigali.

35. Loschmann, Craig, Özge Bilgili, and Melissa Siegel, "Considering the Benefits of Hosting Refugees: Evidence of Refugee Camps Influencing Local Labour Market Activity and Economic Welfare in Rwanda." IZA Journal of Development and Migration 9, no. 1. February 27, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40176-018-0138-2>; Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge. "Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda: Turning Policy Into Reality." Refugees International. September 2023. <https://d3jwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rwanda-Report-September-2023.pdf>

36. For instance, a refugee incentive worker reported earning "RWF 24,000 [about U.S. \$20] per month, as [volunteer]." See: Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge, "Turning Policy into Reality: Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda." Refugees International. 14 September 2023. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/turning-policy-into-reality-refugees-access-to-work-in-rwanda/pdf>

37. "Rwanda Refugee Response Plan 2023." September 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103375>

Structural and Employer Challenges

Incentive work practices persist in camps.

Some find employment with NGOs working in the camps, mainly as incentive workers, where they earn low wages.³⁸ While UNHCR policy is to hire refugees when allowed,³⁹ incentive work continues in the camp, limiting refugees' ability to earn a decent living and become self-reliant.⁴⁰

The situation is challenging for entrepreneurs as well.

Infrastructure plays a critical role for refugee entrepreneurs in cities and camps. With low road quality and limited public transport, it is expensive for entrepreneurs to access local markets and sell their goods.⁴¹ Irregular access to electricity also puts a strain on production, and on their ability to access remote job opportunities (e.g. translation work).⁴² Access to capital is also a significant barrier to growing businesses. Refugees, like Rwandans, need capital to start and grow their businesses. However, they struggle to access capital as they often lack collateral, and might be considered a flight risk by banks.⁴³ There are fintech solutions

currently in place to support refugees' access to loans. UNHCR has partnered with KIVA to "catalyse lending through crowdfunding loans to refugees and their host communities."⁴⁴ Through these crowdfunding platforms, UNHCR/KIVA, have provided \$13M to over 15,000 refugee entrepreneurs.⁴⁵

Employer Challenges

From an administrative perspective, employers who want to hire refugees do not face specific challenges.

The steps taken to hire and onboard refugees are the same as those taken to hire locals. Employers are not required to register with the Immigration Department or any other government agency when hiring a refugee.⁴⁶ As per Rwandans, employers are required to register refugee employees for taxes, social security, and pensions with the Rwanda Revenue Authority (RRA) and Rwanda Social Security Board (RSSB)⁴⁷, through the same online procedure as nationals.⁴⁸

38. Loschmann, Craig, Özge Bilgili, and Melissa Siegel, "Considering the Benefits of Hosting Refugees: Evidence of Refugee Camps Influencing Local Labour Market Activity and Economic Welfare in Rwanda." IZA Journal of Development and Migration 9, no. 1. February 27, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40176-018-0138-2>; Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge. "Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda: Turning Policy Into Reality." Refugees International. September 2023.

<https://d3iwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rwanda-Report-September-2023.pdf>

39. UNHCR. (2017) "Standard Operational Procedures (SOPs) for Hiring Refugees as Either Staff or Incentive Workers by UNHCR and Partners in Rwanda." <https://www.unhcr.org/rw/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/07/SOP-for-hiring-refugees-Final-Version.pdf>

40. Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge, "Turning Policy into Reality: Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda." Refugees International. 14 September 2023. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/turning-policy-into-reality-refugees-access-to-work-in-rwanda/>

41. Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge. "Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda: Turning Policy Into Reality." Refugees International. September 2023. <https://d3iwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rwanda-Report-September-2023.pdf>

42. Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge. "Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda: Turning Policy Into Reality." Refugees International. September 2023. <https://d3iwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rwanda-Report-September-2023.pdf>

43. Ibid.

44. UNHCR, "Best Practices from the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region of Successful Cooperation with the Private Sector" October 2023.

<https://globalcompactrefugees.org/media/best-practices-east-and-horn-africa-and-great-lakes-region-successful-cooperation-private>

45. Ibid.

46. UNHCR. "Guide for employing refugees in Rwanda," 2017.

<https://www.unhcr.org/rw/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/07/Guide-to-employment-of-refugees-in-Rwanda.pdf>

47. UNHCR. "Working in Rwanda." Accessed on 1 July 2024. <https://help.unhcr.org/rwanda/services/work/>

48. UNHCR. "Guide for employing refugees in Rwanda," 2017.

<https://www.unhcr.org/rw/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/07/Guide-to-employment-of-refugees-in-Rwanda.pdf>

Structural and Employer Challenges

Employment opportunities are mainly in the non-profit and education sectors, with a few exceptions. The nonprofit sector appears to be the largest employer of refugees in Rwanda, with leading organisations such as Kepler, Inkomoko, Prison Fellowship Rwanda, Delagua, and Harambee providing significant employment opportunities, as stated by a refugee informant employed in an NGO, “I think in my experience that NGOs usually hire refugees more compared to the public sector and private sector.” In the education sector, Burundians working as French teachers are employed in private schools where French remains part of the curriculum. Outside the non-profit and education sectors, few companies offer employment or internship opportunities to refugees. One example is DP World, a logistics company that has a partnership with Kepler, which offers internships to refugees, giving them valuable work experience (see section 4 for more details on the programme).

Overall, the main issue is that employers do not seem to see the advantages of hiring refugees over locals and lack incentives to hire refugees. As developed in the previous sub-section, few refugees are competitive in the labour market. If they have the same qualifications as Rwandan applicants, employers may be reluctant to hire them because of discriminatory perceptions (Box 5). In some cases, refugees may not even be able to apply for jobs for which they are qualified because the job advertisement states that only nationals may apply.

Box 5. Employers’ perceived reluctance to hire refugees

“One major challenge refugees face is distrust, as some employers still doubt their abilities and believe they lack qualifications. And that is the worst part” – A 27-year old Congolese refugee who works in Kigali

‘I think, in terms of the other challenges, they sometimes tend to evaluate refugee applications more [closely] than those of nationals.’ – Key informant from a refugee-serving organisation



Barista in Ruhengeri, Rwanda. Photo by Norf Cre8ions

Structural and Employer Challenges

Continued perceptions of refugees as a flight risk is another barrier to hiring. While there is no data to support this view and although less than 1% of refugees get resettlement globally, there is a perception among employers in Rwanda that refugees may not be committed to longer-term engagement in the workplace. As stated by a 31-year Congolese refugee who works in Kigali: “nowadays employers are worried to employ refugees since when they hire refugees, they don’t stay at the work for a long period of time...and if they train you and leave the job like in two months or three months.”

There may be a perception among some employers that hiring a refugee is a favour rather than a recognition of their qualifications. Some refugees regretted that employers who do hire refugees do so as a favour rather than a recognition of their capabilities, as illustrated by a 27-year Congolese refugee in Kigali: “First of all, it is a belief or mindset they have. When they hire a refugee, they feel like they have given a favour. This may hinder progress, your career radar, so I believe they need to improve this understanding and make sure that they are treating people equally without considering their status.” As a result of these perspectives, this may lead to discriminatory practices and negative power dynamics in the working relationship,⁴⁹ and undermine the potential and rights of refugees in the workplace.

It appears that awareness of refugee rights among employers has improved. While several studies have found that employers are often

unaware that refugees can work with an ID,⁵⁰ emerging evidence suggests that concerted efforts to coordinate with the private sector (described in section 4) have improved general awareness (Box 6). However, there is no definitive number to prove this, and the team did not conduct a survey of employers to make a definitive conclusion.

→ To conclude section 3, challenges related to competitiveness and the nature of the labour market limit refugees’ ability to join the labour market, become self-reliant, integrate with the host community, and to eventually obtain citizenship.

Box 6. Awareness among employers

“There has been an improvement in helping the employers and the private sector to understand that refugees have the right to work, so I think over the years when it started I think employers were hesitant to hire refugees. I think sometimes someone who is hiring needs to justify a little bit why they are hiring refugees.” – Key informant from a refugee-serving organisation

“In recent years people have gotten so much information about the climate in Rwanda so I think many people, especially the refugee youth know that they are eligible to work here in Rwanda.” – 31-year old Congolese refugee who works in Kigali

49. This reflects findings from Refugees International that “two refugees living in Kigali who had been employed in the past told Refugees International that they had faced threats and intimidation from co-workers.” Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge. “Refugees’ Access to Work in Rwanda: Turning Policy Into Reality.” Refugees International. September 2023. <https://d3iwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rwanda-Report-September-2023.pdf>;

50. Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge. “Refugees’ Access to Work in Rwanda: Turning Policy Into Reality.” Refugees International. September 2023. <https://d3iwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rwanda-Report-September-2023.pdf>; MINEMA-World Bank. “Rwanda - Economic Activity and Opportunity for Refugee Inclusion - 2019.” 1 August 2019. <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/details/70595>.

4. Collaborations and Partnerships

Collaborations and Partnerships

There are several initiatives in Rwanda to engage the private sector and create job opportunities for refugees. Rwanda has adopted the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in 2018. The Rwandan Government pledged to “increase formal access to employment for 60,000 refugees by mid-2018,”⁵¹ although there are no figures to prove that this goal has been achieved. In the joint strategy of the Ministry in charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA) and the UNHCR on economic inclusion of refugees and host community in Rwanda (2021-2024), one of the key stated objectives is to work with “private sector companies, employers, their apex body (PSF) at district and national level.”⁵² In the strategy, the main sectors of focus are agriculture, “[Information and communications technology] opportunities; the hospitality and culinary sector, and craft artisans.”⁵³

There is also an emphasis on training refugees as a way to overcome non-legal barriers to accessing jobs. Development partners support technical training is provided in vocational training institutes and schools, where both host communities and refugees are enrolled.⁵⁴ Many NGOs are also investing in entrepreneurial training. For instance, the African Entrepreneur Collective (AEC) has partnered with refugees and Rwandan entrepreneurs to address significant growth barriers and provide them with the necessary tools to expand their small businesses.⁵⁵

Initiatives to link higher education and the private sector are promising and should be expanded. The leading example in Rwanda is the partnership between Kepler University and Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) Global Education Movement (GEM). Through this partnership, they deliver SNHU's online degrees and Kepler's bachelor degree in Kigali and the Kiziba Refugee Camp.⁵⁶

Those degrees are offered to both Rwandans and refugees. In 2022, 13% of 709 Kigali students were refugees and 95% of Kiziba camp students were refugees.⁵⁷ Kepler/SNHU, has facilitated the graduation of over 100 refugees who are now working full-time in various companies and organisations in Rwanda, and some remotely with international companies.

51. Carciotto, Sergio and Filippo Ferraro, “Building Blocks and Challenges for the Implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees in Africa,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 8, no. 1. March 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502420908247>

52. UNHCR, “MINEMA and UNHCR - Joint Strategy on Economic Inclusion of Refugees and Host Communities in Rwanda 2021-2024.” October 2021. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/89117>

53. UNHCR. “Economic Inclusion of Refugees in Rwanda: a Joint Strategy by The Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs and The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for Furthering Economic Development in Host Communities through Refugee Self-Reliance (2016-2020)”, 2017.

<https://www.unhcr.org/rw/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/02/Economic-Inclusion-of-Refugees-in-Rwanda-Final-Version.pdf>

54. UNHCR, Global Compact on Refugees, “An overview of how the Global Compact on Refugees is being turned into action in Rwanda.” Accessed on March 21. <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/gcr-action/countries/rwanda>

55. Center for Inclusive Growth. “Opening Doors, Unlocking Opportunity: How Refugee-Led Micro and Small Businesses Are Creating Economic Growth in Rwanda.” 27 June 2018.

<https://www.mastercardcenter.org/insights/opening-doors-unlocking-opportunity-how-refugee-led-micro-and-small-businesses-are-creating-economic-growth-in-rwanda>

56. See: <https://kepler.org/refugee-education/>

57. Kepler (2023). “2022 Annual Report.” <https://kepler.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Kepler-Annual-Report-2022-1.pdf>

Collaborations and Partnerships

On the student side, refugees are coached on application processes and interview skills. On the employer side, Kepler has signed Memoranda of Understanding with a number of organisations and companies to recruit students. DP World, for example, is one such partner. Kepler selects candidates for interested employers. Most of the refugees interviewed for this study who had jobs in the formal sector had benefited from Kepler's university programme, which enabled them to obtain a bachelor's degree and become competitive in the labour market. Kepler reports that while companies may be reluctant to hire refugee graduates, positive experiences are likely to improve refugees' employment opportunities, as "a successful refugee employee is a testimony to all other employers."

In 2023, UNHCR reported that engagement with the private sector remains limited and lacks coherence, despite progress.⁵⁸ Several forums have been organised to improve engagement with the private sector. The UNHCR has initiated consultations between the Private Sector Federation of Rwanda (PSF), and individual companies to include refugee-hosting areas in value chains.⁵⁹ In May 2024, a Private Sector forum was organised by MINEMA, UNHCR, GIZ and the Private Sector Federation in the Eastern province to "discuss how to further refugee employment and inclusion in private sector economic opportunities."⁶⁰ While these forums have a positive role to play, they are no guarantee of sustained private sector engagement. Significant resources and continuous follow-up are needed to engage potential employers and get them interested in employing refugees when their focus is on making a profit.



Teacher and student in Rwanda. Photo by Chris del Santo

58. UNHCR. "Rwanda 2022 Annual Report." June 2023. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/files/2023-06/EHGL%20Rwanda.pdf>

59. UNHCR. "Economic Inclusion of Refugees in Rwanda: a Joint Strategy by The Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs and The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for Furthering Economic Development in Host Communities through Refugee Self-Reliance (2016-2020)", 2017.

<https://www.unhcr.org/rw/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/02/Economic-Inclusion-of-Refugees-in-Rwanda-Final-Version.pdf>

60. UNHCR (2014). "Operational Update, May 2024." <https://reporting.unhcr.org/rwanda-operational-update-8834>; UNHCR (2023). "Best Practices from the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region of Successful Cooperation with the Private Sector" October 2023.

<https://globalcompactrefugees.org/media/best-practices-east-and-horn-africa-and-great-lakes-region-successful-cooperation-private>

5. Recommendations

Recommendations

In conclusion, while policies in Rwanda allow refugees to work, there is still a significant need for additional support to make them competitive in the labour market. Employers are often reluctant to hire refugees due to concerns about their stability and lack of skills. Some initiatives exist, but without significant investment in skills development and professional certification, and greater access to higher education, these measures will fall short. More robust support systems and incentives for both refugees and employers are needed to ensure that refugees can compete on an equal footing with nationals.

Recommendations

1. **Improve access to higher education for refugees.** To make refugees more competitive in the job market, access to local and global universities should be increased. While vocational training is valuable, higher education provides refugees with the skills needed to compete for a wider range of job opportunities. At the moment, only 4% of refugees in Rwanda access university. There are several ways to increase access to education access in Rwanda: 1) the government should allow refugees to access student loans management by the BRD; 2) donors should support Kepler/SNHU or other similar initiatives to scale up their online and blended degree programmes by setting up satellite campuses and onboarding more refugees and Rwandans.
2. **Provide tangible incentives to the private sector to recruit refugees.** Hiring refugees can be framed as a mutually beneficial endeavour that can bring diverse skills and perspectives to the workforce, and good experiences will increase employers' interest in hiring refugees. Incentivising companies through financial support can lower the barriers to hiring refugees. For example, donors and stakeholders could create a fund or scheme that pays 3-6 months of a refugee's salary, allowing them to gain on-the-job skills and experience while minimising financial risks for employers. This could be part of a placement programme led by universities and vocational training centres to match students with private sector companies. In this way, the private sector can be encouraged to see the value in hiring refugees, making it a low-risk, high-reward proposition. These schemes could also be made available to refugees in camps who are unable to take the risk of leaving the camp to look for work. Refugees International recommended piloting a project to support refugees to work outside the camp for a "trial period, after which they can choose to return to the camp and receive the assistance for which they were eligible,"⁶¹ along with housing support for participants in the programme.

61. Leghtas, Izza and David Kitenge, "Turning Policy into Reality: Refugees' Access to Work in Rwanda." Refugees International. 14 September 2023. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/turning-policy-into-reality-refugees-access-to-work-in-rwanda/>

Recommendations

3. Formalise the employment of incentive workers and volunteers in camps.

Incentive work is often practised in countries where organisations are not allowed to formally employ refugees. This is not the case in Rwanda, where refugees have the right to work. Restricting refugees to low-paid incentive work without adequate pay or labour protection has a negative impact on refugee workers. This practice has been widely criticised and documented, particularly in refugee camps in Kenya and Malawi. According to a study by Oxfam,⁶² NGOs often do not provide opportunities for formal training or career progression for incentive workers, which particularly affects young people who are already constrained by limited mobility and employment rights. Instead, there should be a push to formalise refugee employment, ensuring fair wages and career development opportunities. International donors can support this shift by prioritising funding to organisations that facilitate the transition from incentive work to formal employment, ensuring that refugees have access to fair and sustainable employment.

4. To promote remote work and digital opportunities for refugees facing barriers to formal employment, stakeholders must prioritise comprehensive digital skills training and improve access to technology.

Many refugees are prevented from entering local labour markets by restrictive policies in countries such as Malawi, or face intense competition in open markets

such as Rwanda. Organisations such as Na'amal are demonstrating best practice by providing targeted technical and soft skills training, mentorship and remote work placements. Collaborations with platforms such as MIT ReACT further enhance these initiatives, equipping refugees for the global workforce. In addition, initiatives like Remote for Refugees provide essential global employment solutions, encouraging companies to engage with refugee talent and diversify their workforce. Access to technology is critical to enabling refugees to work remotely; providing devices and internet connectivity through community centres can significantly improve their employment prospects. However, documentation challenges - such as UNHCR-issued IDs not being recognised by digital platforms - highlight the urgent need for advocacy to facilitate remote work. Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) are crucial last mile connectors, reskilling and equipping refugees with digital skills. Donors should prioritise funding for RLOs to build their capacity and ensure fair wages and protections for refugees. Partnering with remote work platforms and organisations like Techfugees, and addressing systemic barriers through comprehensive training, can help bridge the gap to dignified employment. Creating a supportive ecosystem involving businesses, NGOs and educational institutions will create sustainable pathways for refugees to thrive economically while positively contributing to their host communities.

62. Oxfam (2023). "Advocating for Refugee Incentive Workers: A Qualitative Research Study in Three Refugee Contexts in Africa." <https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/advocating-refugee-incentive-workers-qualitative-research-study-three-refugee-contexts-africa>