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An insider account of lies and corruption within a humanitarian refugee agency in Uganda

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When humanitarian projects are shown to benefit staff more than their beneficiaries, whose interests are being protected by their continuation? Reflecting on personal experience, a Ugandan researcher working for a large international organisation discusses how activities to promote well-being purposefully sidelined the needs of refugees. The author wishes to remain anonymous.

This article is based on research at the [Safety of Strangers](#) project at the LSE Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa.

Corruption, fraud and other forms of institutionalised theft are not new either **within Uganda generally** or the Ugandan **refugee industry specifically**. Indeed, Uganda has been rated “highly corrupt” by

Transparency International every year since 1996, and there have been **high-profile scandals involving aid money** for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2005 and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation in 2006, the misappropriation of funds within **post-conflict reconstruction** and among governmental Ministries during 2012 and, most recently, within the **country's refugee response in 2017-18**.

My recent experience working for an international NGO in a Ugandan refugee settlement made me aware of the ongoing, everyday nature of systemic problems within Uganda's humanitarian industry. I was engaged in two separate projects – with durations of one year and three years, respectively – whose broad goals were to improve mental health and increase economic and psychosocial well-being among refugee and Ugandan host community youth.

Experience from working on two projects in Uganda

The one-year project I worked on was a response to the challenges of COVID-19, with activities including providing COVID-19 prevention messages, livelihoods support and psychosocial care, including play. The three-year project focused on improving psychosocial well-being and mental health for over 10,000 vulnerable refugees and hosting community youth initiatives.



Photo 1. Signposts of humanitarian and development agencies.

In the latter project, though the first cohort of almost 700 participants were recruited in October 2020, the implementation did not start until March 2021. Immediately after enrolment, the youth were grouped in 28 groups of 25, trained in the principles of Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLA), whereby people meet regularly to save money and take loans from those savings, and promised opportunities for vocational training.

During enrolment, the offer to provide all programme participants with such training was a key reason why so many youth willingly enrolled. Yet only 50 of 686 youth were ultimately selected to take part.

This deception resulted in a 14% dropout rate. Many explained that they felt lied to and denied promised opportunities. Accordingly, many quit the programme. Some who missed the opportunity demanded that their chairperson (an individual voted to lead a VSLA group) dissolve their group and return to them the money they saved in the VSLA. Collectively, group members also pressured their chairperson to inform their organisational coach (who facilitates the youths' activities) about their desire to dissolve the group.

In one such case, a coach requested a mediation meeting. As well as myself, this meeting was organised and attended by the senior coach (who supervises other coaches), the group chairperson and 20 group members. During this meeting the chairperson said:

“the group members demand to dissolve the group because they were never selected for apprenticeship. In fact, the participation of group members has reduced immensely because firstly the youth felt lied to and secondly the group does not have playing equipment which should bring youth together. Therefore, to mobilise and keep youth busy, we request the organisation to give us football at least.”

In response to the youths' concerns, the organisation promised vocational opportunities in the next quarter. However, these opportunities never came – a second lie to the same cohort. Further, despite these broken promises,

the international development NGO leading the project abandoned the initial youth group cohort in January 2022, and instead enrolled an entirely new cohort of participants for the next project phase.

Internally, the organisation said the decision was due to their focus on achieving the total number of youth targeted in their original proposal. Instead of being given further opportunities or resources, participants enrolled in the first phase were left to be managed by peer leaders never trained or equipped with the knowledge, skills or materials needed to successfully keep the group together beyond the initial phase.

Inexperienced staff and the need for adaptive programming

In my experience, youth need flexibility and adaptive programming. But during the implementation of these projects there was little scope for learning and no effort at adaptation. For example, when it emerged that the most severely traumatised refugee youth did not want to engage with the programme, the primary focus on total numbers “helped” meant the solution was simply to enrol non-traumatised people to work with, rather than looking at how the programme could be adapted to make it more useful to the traumatised youth who it was supposed to support. This is partly because funding is usually given in restrictive ways by donors, but also because senior staff lack the skills and understanding to adapt programmes or engage with junior staff to improve them.

The problem of unqualified and inexperienced staff is partly driven by a national culture of nepotism and Ugandan ideas about the necessity of family loyalty, as well as the wider lack of jobs and general poverty in the country. In this context, influential local INGO officials seek to keep their relatives employed, and when their contracts end, such individuals are transferred from one project to another irrespective of qualifications and experience. The primary focus seems to be keeping relatives employed rather than on quality of services delivered. In the case discussed above,

staff in Kampala, as well as the camp, were all inexperienced in using games and sports to improve mental health and psychosocial well-being.

Further, coaches never received much support, despite what the organisation's initial proposal and subsequent communications claimed. Instead, coaches were bullied during work, with the mistreatment and discrimination inflicted by senior staff causing one coach to resign in May 2021. In another case, during a phone call, a Coordinator confessed to me and the Senior Coach that he had no knowledge, skills or experience around games and sport and that this affected his performance. After the project review in November 2021, he was transferred to another project within same organisation.

The effects of distant management

Scholars have well **documented** that NGOs – even large international ones – are caught between fulfilling the needs of beneficiaries and the reporting standards of donors. Once lauded as a **“magic bullet”**, it is now apparent that the activities of NGOs are highly constrained by funding needs. The more optimistic **scholars** suggest that organisations work with reporting requirements to continue to provide much needed services. Yet, in northern Uganda, NGO projects appear pulled into a supply chain whereby activities on the ground are divorced from the needs of refugee populations entirely.

Indeed, in the context of the projects within which I worked, the issues I have described on the ground were entirely disconnected from the distant management of the project. As the deception unfolded, managers sat in national offices in Kampala rather than interacting with people in a project's implementation location. Yet, this did not stop new projects from being funded and new schemes being developed, without consulting refugees about their needs. After securing funding, activities were simply imposed on refugee populations.

Despite the obvious dissonance between refugees needs and project activities, refugees nonetheless feel compelled to become involved in

programmes that are often not beneficial to their lives. During enrolment and implementation, the lies of staff at INGOs are convincing to ensure they enrol the required numbers of beneficiaries proposed to donors.

Through these lies, a cycle of participation evolves. Yet, as it emerges that refugees have become involved in yet another project that does not help them plan for their future, as early as the implementation phase, many dropout while others lose focus. One is left wondering whether refugees needs are considered at all, or whether activities are meant to pay the salaries of management staff in the capital.

Once a project is less impactful to the alleged beneficiaries than the staff running it, this functionally means that humanitarian staff are just running projects for the purposes of earning salaries which positively impact their lives rather than benefitting – or perhaps sometimes even at the expense of – the refugees who are supposed to be the focus. One is left contemplating whose needs are being protected by the continuation of these initiatives.

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