



Professor Matt Baillie Smith and Dr Bianca Fadel help install the RYVU exhibition at Gallery North.

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New research highlights young refugees' voices and experiences

Experts from Northumbria University have revealed findings from a research study which examines the links between volunteer opportunities and the livelihoods of young refugees.

After conducting what is believed to be the largest survey of its kind involving more than 3,600 young refugees in Uganda, most of whom were displaced by conflict in neighbouring countries, researchers discovered that 50 per cent relied on income from some form of voluntary labour as a means

of survival.

Outcomes from the [Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda](#)(RYVU) project, which is funded by the [Global Challenges Research Fund](#)(GCRF) and the [Economic and Social Research Council](#)(ESRC), have been revealed by researchers from Northumbria's Centre for International Development – a team of academics who work to highlight and help tackle the issues of global poverty and inequality.

Professor Matt Baillie Smith, Dr Bianca Fadel and Dr Owen Boyle from Northumbria have collaborated with experts from Loughborough University, Uganda Martyrs University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology on the project. They established teams of Youth Advisory Boards made up of young refugees in four areas of Uganda - Kampala city and the refugee settlements of Bidibidi, Nakivale and Rwamwanja - in order to guide and inform the research since its inception.

“What we found is incredibly high rates of participation in different forms of volunteering work among communities of young people who are facing considerable daily challenges themselves,” said Professor Matt Baillie Smith, who is currently in Uganda supporting the completion of the project. “For many of them, volunteering also becomes a source of livelihood because of the precarious living conditions, where any small stipends or remuneration are then perceived as a job. If large humanitarian and development organisations give these opportunities and then take them away, it can have a very devastating impact.”

Members of the research team in Nakivale, Uganda, supporting Photovoice activity. Photo by Robert Turyamureeba

While volunteering and supporting one another through COVID-19 lockdowns was celebrated in the UK, in many other parts of the world including Uganda, the pandemic and the restrictions which came with it saw voluntary labour opportunities diminish. Organisations reduced volunteer engagement, and community-led volunteering has dropped due to reduced trust amongst community members. The research shows that 85 per cent of current youth refugee volunteers who took part in the survey have reported a decrease in volunteering activities due to COVID-19.

Uganda is a host country to over 1.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers in

total, mainly fleeing from conflicts in the East and Central African countries of South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Somalia.

Dr Bianca Fadel said: “The majority of these refugees are aged under 24 years, so building the skills and employability of young people caught up by crises is critical not only to their own future prospects in their journeys to adapt, overcome and start again, but also to the long-term stability of their host country and region.”

Other key findings from the survey include:

- 70 per cent of young refugees surveyed were involved in volunteering activity, either currently or since they became refugees
- 73 per cent of survey respondents were volunteering within their own villages
- And 85 per cent of the young refugees spoken to were dedicating as much as 10 hours a week to volunteering activities

Research methods also include participatory photography – known as Photovoice – which equipped young refugee volunteers with cameras to help capture their day-to-day experiences. The images were turned into a travelling exhibition which has already been staged at universities and refugee settlements in Uganda. To coincide with [Refugee Week 2022](#), the exhibit is now on display at Gallery North, a space to showcase interdisciplinary research and artwork in the heart of Northumbria’s Newcastle City Campus.

Photographs taken by young refugees were turned into a travelling exhibition which has already been staged at universities and refugee settlements in Uganda.

The information collected will feed into one of the key research objectives to build a set of resources, tool kits and policy briefings to help inform the ways volunteering is understood and promoted, ensuring it is not exploitative and doesn’t exacerbate inequalities.

Dr Cuthbert Tukundane, Uganda Martyrs University, said: “This research challenges traditional thinking about volunteering and skills acquisition. It

shows that often young refugees in Uganda need to have particular skills to take advantage of volunteering opportunities. This means that volunteering should not be seen as an alternative to providing proper training and education for young refugees.”

Dr Frank Ahimbisibwe, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, said: “Our research shows how important volunteering is to young refugees. It helps them build connections and friendships, and contribute to their community.”

A short video about the project is being produced in collaboration with Jet Films, an enterprise for film-making founded by young refugees in the Nakivale settlement in Uganda. Additional filming documenting the project’s activities and resources for policy-makers, will be released in the coming months. Discover more about the RYVU research and follow the updates on the project website, www.ryvuu.org

The RYVU Photovoice exhibition, which has been staged with support from Newcastle-based design company [Roots and Wings](#), will be open from 20th June at Gallery North, Sandyford Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8QE, will be available to view until 29th July.

Opening times:

- 20th June - 5th July (Monday to Saturday): 10am-2pm
- 6th - 23rd July (Monday to Saturday): 10am-6pm
- 25th - 29th July (Monday to Friday): 2pm-6pm

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