

Ensuring effective teacher management in refugee settings in the COVID-19 era: A Ugandan case study of policy and practice



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Abstract

Uganda has been considered a model for progressive and inclusive refugee policies. In 2017, the country adopted the Djibouti Declaration. The Plan of Action accompanying the declaration recognises the role of teachers in achieving inclusive and quality education. It proposes key actions to support the inclusion of refugee teachers in national education systems. Together, the Djibouti Declaration and the Action Plan represent a promising holistic model of teacher management. Drawing on findings from a larger research study, this article explores the progress made in implementing the Plan of Action, factoring in the impact of COVID-19, and discusses the conditions under which a holistic approach to teacher management can lead to improved motivation, well-being, teaching quality and retention of teachers.

Key Words

Refugee teachers, Uganda, teacher management, policy

Introduction

Home to the largest refugee population in Africa, Uganda has been considered a model for progressive and inclusive refugee policies, which are firmly anchored in international and regional agreements. However, the country faces a burgeoning refugee crisis, compounded by the COVID-19 crisis, which has had a dire impact on education. In displacement situations, the role of teachers is particularly significant, as they are a source of continuity in students' disrupted lives (Kirk and Winthrop, 2007). However, there is a severe shortage of qualified teachers, meaning that nearly half the refugee children in Uganda remained out of school in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). Efforts to increase the number of teachers and teaching quality have tended to view teachers simply as service providers, but teachers are members of affected communities, rights holders, and potential agents of positive societal change (Rubagiza *et al.*, 2016).

The Djibouti Declaration Plan of Action builds on this idea by promoting equal rights for refugee teachers and ensuring that their working conditions are aligned with those of national teachers. This plan aligns with the Incheon Declaration, the framework for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), for 'ensur[ing] inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all'. More specifically, the Incheon Declaration calls on the international community to 'ensure that teachers and educators are empowered, adequately recruited, well-trained, professionally qualified, motivated and supported' (UNESCO *et al.*, 2015, p. 8) The Djibouti Declaration

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Plan of Action and the Incheon Declaration call for a holistic approach to teacher management that considers multiple dimensions of teacher management to ensure quality education, while also recognising refugee teachers' rights.

Drawing from the results of a study on teacher management in refugee settings in Uganda, this article examines the progress made to date by Ugandan authorities in implementing the Djibouti Declaration Action Plan¹. Factoring in the impact of COVID-19, it demonstrates that a holistic approach to teacher management is a key policy lever for building and maintaining inclusive, quality education systems that enhance refugee self-reliance and resilience, and promote safe and sustainable integration, resettlement, or return, as per global agreements. The case study adopted a collaborative and iterative multi-phased approach. The research methodology included a review of international, regional, and national policies. While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of 'policy', for the purposes of this article, policy refers to laws, regulations, guidelines, procedures, and administrative actions as set out by governments and other institutions and organisations. A teacher survey constituted part of the study which sought to gain a better understanding of who the teachers are who are deployed in refugee settings. It was answered by 979 teachers, of which 828 were nationals and 151 were refugees. We also conducted 49 semi-structured interviews with central-level stakeholders, including government representatives and development partners and key representatives from the districts, as well as 80 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key actors at the school level in four settlements. Given the timing of our research, we had the opportunity to build in questions about the impact of COVID-19.

Teacher management in the literature

A global shortage of qualified teachers in refugee settings

While teachers and teaching practices in refugee settings have received increasing attention in research agendas, most data is limited to numbers, qualifications, and compensation (Richardson *et al.*, 2018). In their review of the literature, Ring and West (2015a) argue that it is difficult to attract and recruit high-quality teachers in refugee settings. Mononye and Penson *et al.* (2012) identify the lack of cross-border recognition of teaching qualifications as one obstacle to recruitment and retention. Indeed, refugee teaching credentials are often not recognised by the host country, which excludes refugee teachers from the pool of candidates (Ring and West, 2015a). Ring and West (2015b) therefore assert that the governments and agencies in charge of refugees should advocate for regional strategies and policies, and for standardised mechanisms to recognise qualifications.

In terms of professional development, the literature has stressed the need for teachers to be adequately prepared to meet the complex needs of refugee learners (Dryden-Peterson and Adelman, 2016; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; Ring and West, 2015b). However, it also has highlighted the difficulties in addressing those needs and the possible adverse consequences, such as problematic classroom management practices and high levels of demotivation and disempowerment among teachers (Dryden-Peterson and Adelman, 2016; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; Ring and West, 2015b). Finally, when available, professional development is often episodic, and the remoteness of refugee camps makes it challenging to provide regular opportunities for continuous professional development (Burns and Lawrie, 2015; Ring and West, 2015a).

¹ Although it is difficult to establish a causal relationship, there was consistent mention in our interviews of policy-makers' concerted efforts to follow up on the Djibouti Declaration, as evidenced by an understanding of what it entails, and to implement these policies.

Recognising the rights of teachers in refugee settings

In the recent literature, the focus has shifted to seeing teachers as members of affected communities and, more importantly, as rights holders. Penson *et al.* (2012) assert that the state has to realise refugees’ rights and, thus, highlight the need for greater preparation and for the establishment of national and international frameworks for supporting refugee teachers. In particular, guaranteeing refugees’ right to work can reduce their vulnerability, strengthen their resilience, and protect their dignity (Zetter and Ruauadel, 2016).

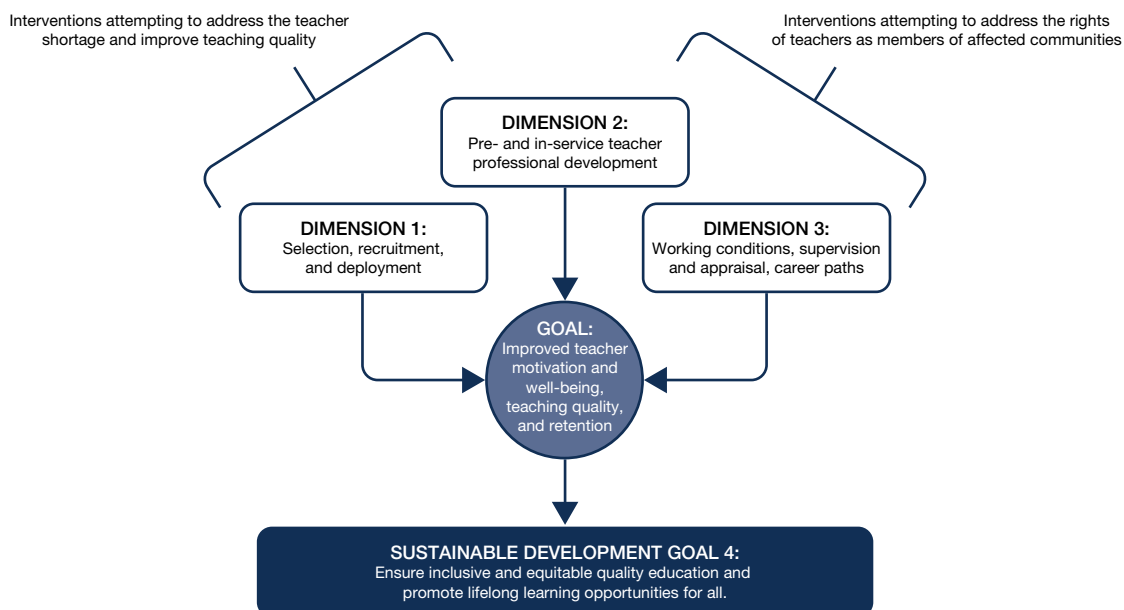
Research has also shown that education systems with functioning administrative and remuneration mechanisms are supportive of teacher recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and morale (Dolan *et al.*, 2012). However, establishing an effective remuneration system remains challenging in fragile countries (Dolan *et al.*, 2012).

A new model for understanding teacher management in refugee settings

As highlighted by the literature, interventions that target teachers not merely as service providers but

as members of affected communities and rights holders are more likely to have positive implications for their well-being, motivation, teaching quality, and retention. This will subsequently lead to more inclusive, quality education systems. Based on this idea, and on a review of international guidelines and standards on the teaching profession, we have developed a conceptual model for understanding teacher management as a policy lever in meeting SDG 4. This model, which is presented in Figure 1, differentiates between the means (labelled ‘dimensions’) and ends of teacher management (labelled ‘goal’). It also demonstrates the importance of undertaking interventions that address teacher shortages, improve teaching quality, improve working conditions, and provide meaningful career paths. Consequently, strengthening teacher management processes in the three dimensions—namely, in the selection, recruitment, and deployment of teachers; in pre- and in-service teacher professional development; and in terms of working conditions, supervision and appraisal, and career paths—leads to improved motivation, well-being, teaching quality, and retention, which in turn helps to ensure quality, inclusive education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for understanding teacher management as a policy lever for achieving SDG4. Adapted from Teacher management in refugee settings: Uganda by IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust, forthcoming.



Findings

A promising policy framework for a holistic approach to teacher management

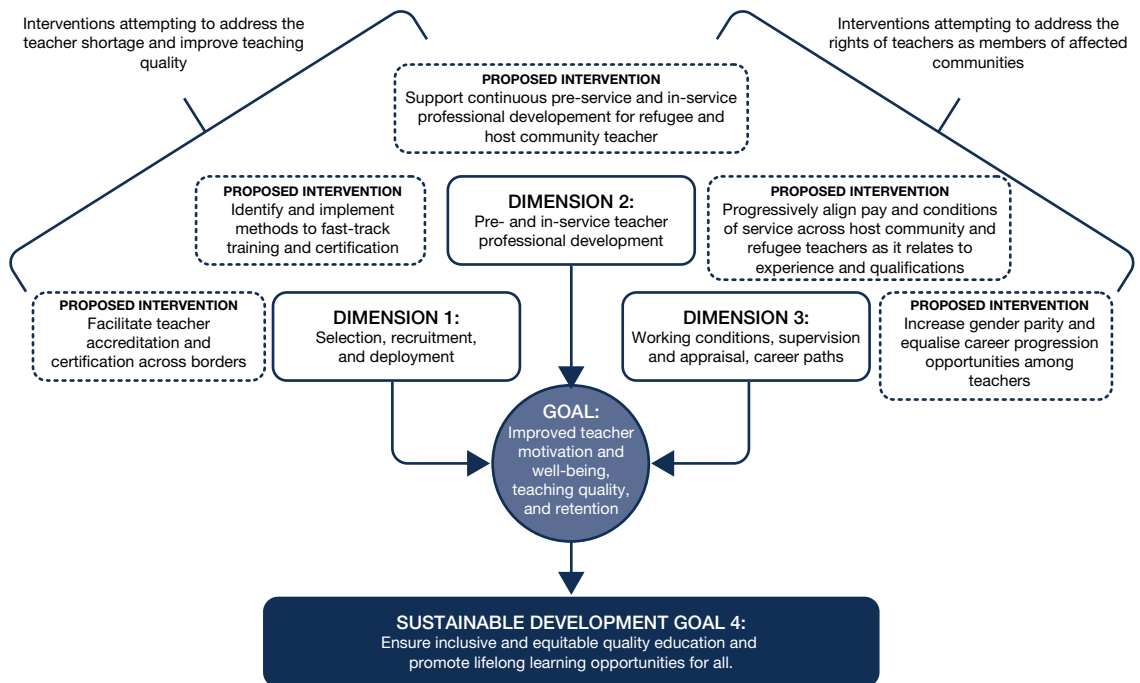
In 2016, at a leader summit held to formulate a more equitable and predictable response to the global refugee crisis, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and agreed to the core elements of a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), including supporting integration and building self-reliance in refugee-hosting communities (United Nations, 2016; UNHCR, 2018). According to an interview with a senior representative from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), Uganda's commitment to the inclusion of refugees in national education systems predates the CRRF. The country has long been recognised as having one of the most progressive policy environments for refugees in the world, with refugees being granted the right to work and to access public services, including education, and the ability to obtain key official documentation, including identity cards and education certificates (Refugee Act, 2006; REF, 2019).

A UNHCR representative from Uganda noted that, with the CRRF vision in mind, efforts to include and integrate refugees in education has accelerated since 2016, and that all policies in the sector are now 'anchored' in the global and regional CRRF agenda. This commitment to implementing the CRRF in the education sector is also evident in the region as a whole. In 2017, Uganda played a

leading role in developing the Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education, a non-binding legal instrument promoting quality, inclusive education for refugees, returnees, and host communities in the eight East African countries that make up the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). As with the CRRF, the Djibouti Declaration has acted as a mechanism for codifying Uganda's commitment to refugee inclusion, which is evidenced by the mainstreaming of refugee education into national education sector plans through the development, implementation, and review of a national costed education response plan (ERP) to guide the refugee response as an annex to the country's national education sector strategic plan. Uganda's progress in the implementation of the ERP was recently reviewed at a consultation meeting between IGAD and the Government of Uganda (IGAD, 2022).

The Djibouti Declaration Plan of Action explicitly mentions teacher management, calling for 'strengthening regional frameworks to promote the inclusion of refugee teachers' and setting out five proposed actions for governments to achieve this end. We argue that, when taken together, these actions represent a promising regional policy development because they not only address qualified teacher shortages and the quality of service provision, they also pay attention to teachers' rights as members of affected communities. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which maps the five proposed actions to the different dimensions of our conceptual framework.

Figure 2: Alignment between the conceptual framework and the Djibouti Declaration Action Plan. Adapted from Teacher management in refugee settings: Uganda, by IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust, forthcoming.



As previously noted, Uganda’s progressive refugee policy landscape includes the right to work. From a legal and policy perspective, refugees have the right to work as teachers, provided they have the relevant qualifications. This means that the new National Teacher Policy (NTP) applies to all teachers working in refugee settings, whether they are Ugandan nationals or refugees (MoES, 2019). Uganda’s NTP is research-based and aims to streamline the training, management, and development of teachers in order to restore the status of the teaching profession in Uganda and professionalise teaching through three key mechanisms: (1) a teacher management information system; (2) a national institute for teacher education; and (3) a teacher council. The outbreak of COVID-19 occurred only a few months after the launch of the NTP, which means that several critical initiatives outlined in the policy were stalled, and that it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the policy, given the challenges posed by school closures and dwindling resources for education.

The MoES ended the world’s most prolonged COVID-19 school closures in January 2022, after almost two years of disrupted education threatened

progress toward implementing policies and programmes that targeted refugee teachers. And yet, several promising practices in Uganda point to the country’s strong commitment to the multiple dimensions of the Djibouti Declaration Action Plan, which will be discussed below.

Interventions attempting to address the teacher shortage and improve teaching quality

There is evidence of progress in Uganda regarding the proposed action to support cross-border teacher accreditation and certification. Indeed, when appropriately qualified, refugees can work as teachers in all types of schools. Those without prior training or recognised teaching qualifications can be hired as classroom assistants, which is a common practice to ensure increased support for over-crowded and multi-lingual classes. However, our survey shows that, while there are a high number of refugee teachers in other countries in the region, only about 15 percent of teaching posts in Uganda are held by refugees, mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Among

the 15 percent, approximately half obtained their qualifications in Uganda. The other half qualified in another country and were able to have their qualifications formally recognised through the Uganda Higher Education Qualifications Framework (UHEQF). However, most refugee teachers are unaware of the UHEQF, which partly explains the low percentage of refugees in the workforce. Refugee teachers from non-English-speaking countries face additional barriers, according to interviews with central-level UN and MoES representatives, who noted a mis-match between the anglophone system and the francophone system. Nonetheless, head-teachers and other partners aim to raise awareness and encourage their classroom assistants whose qualifications are as yet unrecognised to apply to the UHEQF.

Furthermore, to ensure that refugee classroom assistants have the opportunity to progress to teaching positions, development partners have been implementing fast-tracking training programmes for refugee classroom assistants who lack qualifications. For example, according to a UNHCR official, Windle International is working with the MoES and teacher training colleges to implement a teaching qualification programme for refugee classroom assistants. However, it should be noted that fast-tracking training initiatives have mainly been done on an ad-hoc basis with support from NGOs and development partners, as explained by an MoES representative, who noted the absence of a formal structure for refugee teacher training. Indeed, while our survey data revealed that 66 of 79 refugee classroom assistant respondents were currently participating in training through development partner initiatives, interviews with staff members from teacher training institutes revealed that relatively few refugees were accessing the training opportunities.

Refugees seeking pre-service teacher education can access teacher training institutes, provided they meet specific key requirements. In fact, according to the ERP steering committee chairperson, 'Uganda is one of the few countries in the world where refugees are integrated into the national education system'. The chairperson said this extends to refugees who wish to become teachers: 'Even as I speak there are refugee students studying education within the country'. However, as mentioned above, the absence of a formal structure to manage refugee teacher training continues to present a barrier to

ensuring their equal access to training opportunities. Furthermore, one key aspect of the NTP is to raise the status of the teaching profession and improve the quality of teaching by requiring primary school teachers to hold a degree rather than a diploma. Many Ugandan teachers who participated in our study expressed concern about how they would find the time and money to upgrade their qualifications to meet these requirements, particularly as the establishment of national bodies aimed at supporting the upgrade process was delayed due to COVID-19. For refugees, pursuing a degree-level programme seems ever more out of reach, especially in the current climate of dwindling resources for education aid.

Uganda has been actively engaged in providing in-service professional development to teachers working in refugee settings, which was made possible through effective coordination mechanisms, such as the ERP. In this light, there is a clear attribution of roles and responsibilities as highlighted hereafter: district authorities, in partnership with education partners and schools, identify and report training needs to the central level, which then liaise with UNHCR which, in turn, provides funding to implementing partners who are in charge of delivering training activities. These robust mechanisms proved critical in the context of COVID-19 in helping teachers to ensure education continuity. For example, teachers were given training on how to deliver distance learning, as described by one head teacher interviewed for the study. When it comes to psycho-social support, however, while COVID-19 highlighted the critical need for psycho-social training to meet the needs of vulnerable children more effectively, our survey suggested that only a handful of teachers had access to psycho-social training. As with pre-service training opportunities for refugees, in-service psycho-social support training for all teachers in refugee-hosting areas is highly localised, ad-hoc, and facilitated by development partners.

Interventions attempting to address the rights of teachers to lifelong learning and decent working conditions

Ensuring that teachers have access to pre- and in-service professional development is essential to providing quality education and a prerequisite for

ensuring teachers' access to lifelong learning and career progression, thereby respecting their rights. The examples above and data from our survey indicate that, while there are no specific official barriers to participation in lifelong learning associated with refugee status, refugee teachers are prevented from participating for several reasons, including the high cost, lack of employer support, long distances between schools and training locations, and scheduling conflicts.

On a more positive note, promising efforts have been made to align the salaries and working conditions of refugee and national teachers. During our research, our survey indeed showed that Ugandan and refugee teachers received comparable salaries. This suggests that there is alignment between government and development partners' salaries, as we found that refugee teachers are more likely to be employed by the latter. Furthermore, according to our data, teachers continued to receive their salaries during COVID-19, which likely prevented massive teacher attrition. In fact, most teachers returned to work when schools re-opened, which aligns with the literature demonstrating that a functioning remuneration mechanism is closely linked with teacher retention and satisfaction. One interviewee also provided promising examples of teachers going door-to-door to support students' learning during the school closures. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, despite salary alignment and continuity, teachers employed on the development partner payroll face greater job insecurity, due to the precariousness of their contracts. Indeed, as mentioned by an interviewee from UNHCR, these teachers are hired on annually renewable contracts, subject to good performance and the availability of funds.

In terms of gender parity in the teaching workforce, the ERP highlights that men make up the majority of teachers, particularly in leadership roles (MoES Uganda, 2018). Although our research suggests that female participation in recruitment processes is strongly encouraged—for instance, through the implementation framework of the NTP, which assigns head teachers responsibility for checking gender imbalances in staffing—female participation in recruitment processes remains low. This imbalance can be explained in part by lower enrolment rates among girls in secondary education and, therefore, in higher education.

Finally, during interviews, central-level MoES representatives explained that they had served as teachers before taking up roles in school and district leadership, and then finally taking up their roles within the MoES, which indicates a promising career path for teachers. However, it was unclear if this career pathway is open to refugees. Furthermore, meaningful career progression is also a challenge for teachers on development partner payrolls, due to the one-year contract mechanisms. In fact, one interviewee indicated that career progression is not included in their terms of service. In addition, according to our survey, 38 percent of the 151 refugee teachers surveyed indicated that one of their reasons for not participating in training was that they had no incentive to do so, since training is not linked directly to career progression. While an incentive framework for teachers has been introduced as part of the NTP, it is unclear the extent to which refugee teachers will benefit in the absence of a formal structure for refugee training, which could help to overcome some of the pervasive challenges to participation in lifelong learning as identified above.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the holistic policy framework in Uganda has enabled significant progress in the implementation of the Djibouti Declaration. These results reflect the key role the states play in realising the rights of refugees and the importance of having well-established and trusted development partners to complement this work. This relationship has proved particularly successful in the context of COVID-19. However, the research also highlighted some challenges in accreditation, access to pre- and in-service training, and job security and career path.

To tackle these challenges, system-level preconditions need to be met. Introducing a formal structure for managing refugee teachers, which is focused on their professional development and career paths, could help ensure that promising developments related to the NTP also benefit teachers working in refugee contexts. Additionally, building on the strengths of the existing ERP mechanism at the central and district levels, it is essential to ensure that school-level actors are actively involved in policy development processes and implementation. In this regard, Uganda's

reputable teachers union and teacher training institutions have a pivotal role to play in ensuring that communication is not just top down and that teachers' rights to lifelong learning and decent work are not forgotten in efforts to address teacher shortages and improve the quality of education in refugee settings.

These findings reveal that only a holistic approach to teacher management that considers the interdependent nature of teacher management's multiple dimensions can improve teacher motivation and well-being, teaching quality and retention, and contribute to ultimately achieving SDG4. Finally, in reflecting on the impact of COVID-19, we saw the importance of having development-oriented initiatives that support the integration of refugee teachers over the long run through improved working conditions and career paths, while ensuring the resilience of education systems.

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