

Policymakers' perceptions of Uganda's progressive approach to refugee education



Kennedy Monari, Country Focal point Kenya, Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)



Email: kennedy.monari@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper presents a grounded theory study of policymakers' perceptions of Uganda's progressive educational approach to refugee educational outcomes. The study involved interviews with key stakeholders, including the Parliamentary Committee on Education, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) - policy desks, key staff from the development sector (UNICEF, and Finn Church Aid (FCA). Using qualitative methods, the analysis generated two broad themes: perceptions of the inclusivity, and appropriateness of framework for secondary education. The findings revealed varied views. Some policymakers saw the framework as adequate for integrating refugee children into the national education system, while others criticized citing limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher training to handle refugee children. The study highlights that improving infrastructure, teacher training, resource mobilisation, and community engagement can strengthen a more inclusive and equitable education system for all children, including refugees.

Key Words:

Refugee education, policy perceptions, progressive education, Uganda

Introduction

The continuous crisis in Eastern Africa and recently escalating conflicts have caused massive displacement of people across the borders, forcing neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Kenya to take in significant numbers of refugees. Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees (UNHCR, 2021). Most recently, throughout 2016-2018, Uganda was hit by three simultaneous crises; in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Burundi. Today, Uganda houses close to 1.7 million refugees concentrated in urban areas and refugee camps predominantly in the northwest, northeast, and central districts (UNHCR, 2024). The majority are clustered in small communities. Most South Sudanese live in northern Uganda, while Congolese and Burundian refugees live in small settlements throughout the country's west and south regions (Ahimbisibwe, 2018). Refugees in the country include both protracted refugee populations and new arrivals.

Uganda is widely praised for its open-door policy and progressive legislation for refugees (Crawford and Callaghan, 2019). The high influx of refugees necessitated the development of a progressive education approach founded on the principle of non-discrimination, outlined in Uganda's education policy (Bates, 2019). A progressive education approach in this context refers to a policy and programmatic approach to education that emphasises inclusive and equitable education for all children, particularly those affected by conflict and displacement (UNESCO, 2015). A practical and workable plan for education was the formulation of Uganda's Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities (ERP) to guarantee better educational outcomes for the growing number of refugee children and host communities throughout

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Uganda (Brown, *et al.*, 2020; MoES, 2021). The approach includes a range of policy measures, such as consolidating the efforts of all stakeholders engaged in refugee education, integrated education delivery, and improved access to educational resources, including textbooks, technology, and teacher training. This policy is consistent with global commitments that prioritise providing quality education to all children, regardless of their diverse backgrounds (Ainscow, 2020). Despite this advancement, challenges persist in integrating refugee students into secondary education.

Much research has been done on the experience of conflict-affected children and youth in secondary schooling contexts, however, there is limited understanding of how policymakers perceive the effectiveness of Uganda's progressive education approach to students with refugee backgrounds. Very little research focuses on policymakers' response to Uganda's progressive education approach to conflict-affected children in secondary education. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) for refugee students in secondary education in Uganda dropped to 10% in 2023, down from 11.5 percent in 2022. This indicates that the percentage of refugees enrolled in secondary education is still lower than the global average of 24% and the national context of 34% (UNHCR, 2024). Given that secondary school is the gateway to further education and improved employment opportunities, this deals a crushing blow to a young refugee's dreams of a brighter future (Save the Children, 2021). Progress in this area has been painfully slow.

This paper aims to better understand how the progressive education approach is perceived and implemented by those responsible for shaping education policy in Uganda. The findings of the study are expected to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of Uganda's progressive approach to refugee education and to inform future policy and programming decisions in Uganda and other countries hosting refugees. In addition, the study is expected to contribute to the larger body of knowledge in Political Economy Analysis (PEA) of education that hopes to help national, regional, and global level policymakers make socially just decisions about investments in education particularly in the areas of policy, programming, and research in Uganda, Sub-Saharan Africa, and beyond.

Methodology

This study employed a grounded theory approach, which involved collecting and analysing relevant data to develop a theory rather than testing the existing theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 1; Glaser, 1992, p. 16). Key informant interviews (KIIs) with policymakers, and document reviews provided multiple data triangulation perspectives that generated codes, categories, and a conceptual framework. Using an inductive investigative approach, the grounded theory approach starts with a general area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data.

Data collection

The data collection procedure for this study involved theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling assumes that the researcher cannot determine the sample size for the study before actual data collection. The sample size is determined when a collection of additional data no longer adds any new information. The data was collected in the form of qualitative interviews and document review.

- Key informant interviews were used to collect data from nine respondents. The individual interview participants included the parliamentary committee on education policy and planning, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) – policy desks, and key staff from UNICEF and Finn Church Aid Uganda.
- Document review provided secondary data related to education for refugee children in Uganda. These included a combination of administrative datasets from the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports and non-governmental organisations implementing educational projects in Uganda.

The document review offered a contextual policy analysis while interviews provided a direct perspective from policymakers, each contributing unique insights.

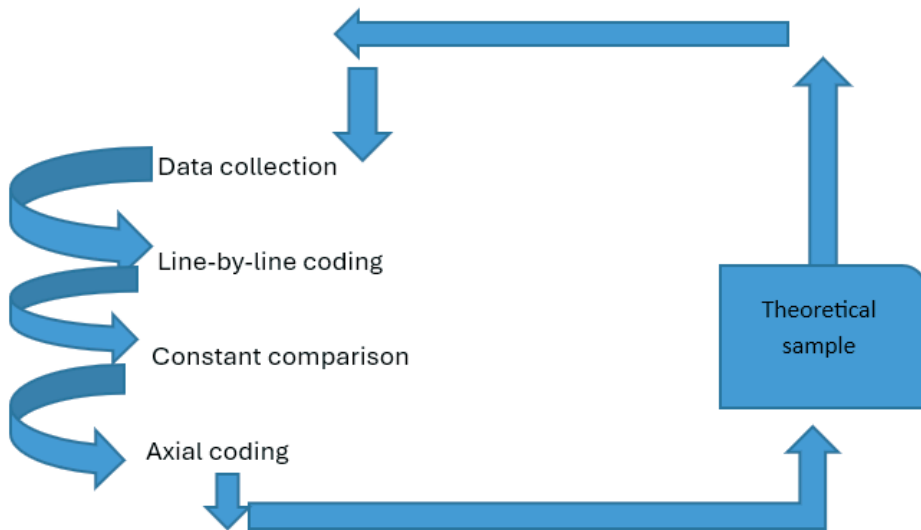
Statistical techniques

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. The analysis process included the creation of codes and categories grounded in the data. Constant comparisons were made among different aspects of the data such as comparing data with data,

data with codes, codes with codes, and data with categories. Memo writing was also utilised which involved recording the theoretical insights and reflections that came to mind during coding as well

as comparing and sorting memos. These were the main grounded theory approaches employed in this study. The detailed grounded theory procedure used in this study is described in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Data collection procedure



Source: Author

Limitations of the study

The study was limited by a small interview pool which may not represent the broader population of policymakers in Uganda and may have missed some variations in their views. However, the qualitative nature of the interviews provided rich and specific findings on the views of policymakers, rather than statistical generalisation.

Findings and discussions

The following results were obtained based on the key informant interviews and document analysis, highlighting the main themes and sub-themes related to policymakers' perceptions of the effectiveness of Uganda's progressive approach to refugee education.

How do policymakers perceive the inclusivity of Uganda's progressive education approach?

Policymakers' viewpoints highlight the strengths and limitations of Uganda's progressive education

approach to refugee inclusion in education. While the approach successfully ensures that refugee children have access to primary education, there are significant gaps in the provision of inclusive secondary education. The partial inclusivity has profound implications for refugees' future opportunities and negatively impacts their overall lives. Based on policymakers' perceptions, a key component of the progressive education approach is to ensure that all children and adolescents, both inside and outside of host communities, have access to quality education at all levels, regardless of their place of origin or residence within Uganda. Several respondents supported the view that Uganda's inclusive education ensures access for refugee children. One of the respondents highlighted:

'the inclusivity of Uganda's progressive education approach for refugee children in secondary education is commendable, as evidenced by high enrolment rates in areas where refugees reside, such as Adjumani district' (Policy Analyst 'B', MoES).

This was emphasised by a Finn Church Aid respondent who claimed that:

'Refugee children have the same access to education services as nationals under Uganda's progressive education approach, with no specific policies barring them' (Education Technical Lead, FCA).

While Uganda's education policy is commendable, the policymaker acknowledged that refugee access to secondary alone is inadequate if it does not translate into meaningful educational outcomes. This viewpoint is consistent with the broader literature on inclusive education, which contends that inclusivity must extend beyond mere access to guarantee opportunities for social and economic development (Ainscow, 2020). Although Uganda's education response plan has successfully integrated refugee children into primary education (MoES, 2021), it struggles to extend this success into secondary schooling. Theoretically, the educational policies support access to secondary education for refugees, but significant barriers exist to the completion of secondary school such as limited funding, resource constraints, and lack of direct support from government initiatives such as Universal Secondary Education.

Without sufficient support for secondary school, refugees are likely to have diminished job prospects and more limited opportunities than their peers who completed secondary education and transitioned to a higher level of education. Evidence suggests that secondary education is an important step toward better long-term employment outcomes and socioeconomic integration (Henderson *et al.*, 2023). This view is reflective of the study conducted by Tikly (2019), who argued that equitable social and economic opportunities are integral parts of a progressive education model that ideally addresses both long-term and short-term development needs. This perspective supports the notion that inclusive education should not only provide access to education but also address systemic barriers that hinder the socioeconomic integration of refugee students. One of the respondents noted:

'A refugee in Uganda can pursue education to any level he or she can afford. However, secondary education for refugees is financed by NGOs and international organisations, who pay tuition fees and academic supplies' (Senior Education Officer 'A', MoES).

The majority of policymakers reported that whereas the Ugandan education policy provides access,

meeting the cost of refugee secondary education relies on international support and partnership rather than direct funding from the government. This underscores a broader systemic issue of inadequate domestic support for refugee education, in line with research by Dryden-Peterson (2016) and Novelli *et al.* (2014), who emphasise the risk of over-reliance on international aid. Achieving sustainable inclusive education policies requires strong financial and political commitments at a national level to reduce dependency on short-term international aid.

Conversely, Uganda's education policy, though progressive in its intentions, remains limited in practice. The tension between policy ambition and practical limitations complicates Uganda's standing model of progressive education for refugees. Despite the support from international organisations, such as the European Union and UNHCR, there have been consistent delays and insufficient responses to meet the needs of secondary education for refugees. This has resulted in a system of educational inclusion that is only partially suitable for primary education and is inept at providing secondary education for refugees. Furthermore, the policymakers believe that closing the inclusion gap requires a shift to a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to financing, ensuring educational support to refugees at all levels.

What approaches are being used to support the inclusivity of refugee education?

According to policymakers, several key strategic initiatives contributed to the successful integration of refugees into the mainstream educational system. These include:

Sub-category 1: Teacher training: Most policymakers commented that specialised teacher training has facilitated refugee access to secondary education. This is an intentional and systemic effort to give teachers appropriate knowledge and abilities to deal with refugees while also ensuring that refugees receive the necessary support from teachers to continue and complete their education.

'another approach is the continuous involvement of teachers – we call it Continuous Professional Development (CPD) – to ensure during their training, skilling or upgrading they are taught how to handle refugees, these are foreigners, not to abandon schooling... you give them the

skills so they also see how to adapt by involving the pedagogy methods to accommodate those people who have not been part of the system' (Senior Policy Analyst, MoES).

This was further emphasised by the education response plan officer, who stated

'There are several trainings which are being done and support given to these schools to ensure that all refugees are in school' (Education Response Plan Officer).

According to the findings of the study, policymakers believe that efforts to improve teacher training and capacity building have enhanced the quality of education, further supporting retention and progression resulting in lower dropout rates and higher completion rates. Quality education for refugees relies on effective teacher preparation, particularly in developing an inclusive learning environment that addresses their diverse needs. This perspective is consistent with Ainscow (2020), who holds that teachers are key stakeholders in development of inclusive education approaches for marginalised learners. Thus, contextually embedded training models focused on teacher agency and adaptability are very crucial in enhancing educational outcomes for refugee students.

However, while the focus on CPD is beneficial in many respects, reliance upon it as the main mechanism for preparing teachers with the relevant skills to support refugee students may fail to capture the systemic challenge. For instance, short-term training courses often fail to address the complex socio-cultural dynamics that refugee students bring to the classroom. Short training sessions typically provide minimal or no follow-up support for the teachers after initial training, undermining their long-term effectiveness. Moreover, this training usually follows a top-down approach, treating local educators as passive recipients rather than active contributors to the knowledge on effective teaching of refugee learners. According to policymakers, refugee education policy needs a more collaborative and context-specific approach that empowers the local stakeholders to create culturally relevant and pedagogically sound solutions. However, the heavy reliance on international organisations for refugee teacher training raises questions about the longer-term sustainability of the programmes as external funding declines.

Sub-category 2: continuous tracking support:

The policymakers observed that efficient record-keeping of students' academic history and special needs, facilitated by systems such as Uganda's Education Management Information System (EMIS) and UNHCR's ProGres Database, has been critical in supporting refugees' transition between schools, maintaining educational continuity, and supporting enrolment, retention, and completion of school. A coordinated plan allows for the identification of any potential educational gaps, such as missing curriculum or language barriers, as well as the provision of the resources required to catch up and succeed.

'so once you enter a school, whether you transfer from one school to another, you go in and they were able to know whether you are a doctor, whether you are an educator, whether you are a teacher, you can see through the world, but then you can be tracked' (Information Management Officer, MoES).

Evidence suggests that effective tracking mechanisms are critical in monitoring learning pathways among refugee learners, ensuring that no one falls behind due to a loss of learning (UNICEF, 2017). However, a significant gap exists between data collection and the ability to make timely decisions that could impact the experiences of refugee students. When the tracking systems are not well managed, they may reinforce existing inequities in education. For example, reliance on a digital tracking system can disadvantage learners from rural or poorly resourced areas due to limited technological access. As Verma (2022) highlights, effective education policy, combined with an effective Education Management Information System (EMIS), are critical in addressing educational disparities. By integrating support mechanisms, this system ensures all students, particularly those in underserved areas, benefit equally from tracking and monitoring processes

Sub-category 3: Social integration beyond education:

Beyond the school system, the policymakers perceived refugees' participation in the community as a key component in enhancing their educational success. This is believed to increase their safety and provide additional learning opportunities, such as improving language abilities, developing social networks, fostering social

cohesiveness, and providing a constructively safe environment in which to study, grow, and thrive.

'a refugee should be someone who is incapacitated in several areas, including social services. In Uganda refugees, you see them enjoying like Ugandans, they play football, they move with us, and I have not seen anybody harassing them, no' (MP, Parliamentary Education Committee).

A significant number of policymakers emphasised that the progressive approach towards refugee education is noted for its aim to meet the needs of refugees of various ages, including those who are over age. Although the perceptions of policymakers emphasise the importance of the importance of social integration, there is a need to explore how it is perceived by the refugees and implemented within Uganda. The assumption that social integration leads to educational success may overlook the challenges experienced by refugees when integrated into communities already struggling with resource constraints or socially divided. This resonates with the findings of Dryden-Peterson (2021), who points out that social integration by itself can do little to mitigate entrenched inequalities, many of which require concurrent structural support in the forms of mitigating resource shortages and changing community attitudes.

How appropriate is the current framework for secondary education enrolment of refugee children?

Policymakers' perceptions of the suitability of a progressive education approach for refugee secondary education enrolment vary significantly. Some saw the framework as adequate for integrating refugee children into the national education system, while others criticised it, claiming that it is insufficient to meet the needs of refugee students in secondary school due to limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher training to meet the needs of refugee children. This section divides policymakers' responses into two main categories: supporters and critics of the framework for refugee children's secondary education enrolment. The framework's critics' responses addressed the policy challenges that impede effective refugee enrolment, retention, and completion in secondary education.

Category 1: Supporters of the framework

Five policymakers supported the view that the Government of Uganda implemented various policy measures to shape the reality of secondary education for refugees. These initiatives have increased access to secondary education per the global, regional, and domestic obligations. These include hiring and training teachers, reforming the curriculum, and expanding school infrastructure. As one respondent explained:

'The 2010 Refugee Regulations and the 2006 Refugee Act are the cornerstones of Uganda's progressive approach toward refugees. This legal framework grants refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, the right to start a business, the ability to own property, and access to national services such as secondary and primary education. Refugees, nearly sixty percent of whom are under the age of 18, can access primary and secondary education.' (MP, Parliamentary Committee on Education)

The supporters of the framework believe that this framework guarantees the right to education for all children in Uganda, regardless of their nationality. Refugees are also covered by this provision. The goal of the Education Act was to lower financial obstacles to education and improve access to education. Policymakers noted that the overall access to secondary school expanded considerably in the years following the establishment of the education response plan. However, even though refugee enrolment, retention, and completion rates in secondary education have grown significantly, ongoing concerns including resource allocation and sustainability must be addressed. The finding is consistent with Tomlinson's (2014) assertion that fair resource allocation across all groups of children guarantees increased enrolment and completion of education. While these supportive views emphasise the inclusiveness of Uganda's progressive framework for refugee education, it is essential to explore whether these policies translate to equitable access on the ground and whether the increase in access is uniform across refugee populations.

Category 2: Critics of the framework

Most of the policymakers interviewed noted that in the past ten years, there has been an increasing commitment to providing secondary education to

refugee children in Uganda. However, both global and national refugee policies do not reflect the commitment to expanding access to secondary education. Policymakers believed that developments toward universal primary education have increased the need for secondary education. As more refugee children complete primary school, a larger cohort of students emerges with increasing expectations and aspirations for further education and subsequent career opportunities. Hence, the growing emphasis on primary education should be matched with investments in secondary education to facilitate a smoother transition from primary to secondary school. This is in line with calls for 'pathway-oriented policies' by scholars like Dryden-Peterson (2016) and Mendenhall (2019), who insist on the need to have policies that guarantee access to education at all levels and for all people, including the most marginalised ones like refugees. The gap between primary and secondary education reflects the limitation of universal primary education policies that, up until now, have failed to address the broader spectrum of educational pathways needed for the attainment of long-term educational equity.

Sub-category 1: delays in the policy approval process. A majority of policymakers (seven out of nine) pointed out that the framework has failed to achieve its full objectives due to the delays in the policy approval process which frequently stall the implementation of programmes such as the construction of school infrastructure, teacher training and capacity development, and refugee learners' integration into the national education system.

'The delay in policy approval processes and perceptions related to inclusivity pose significant obstacles to addressing the educational needs of refugee children... These policy challenges have adverse effects on the educational outcomes of conflict-affected children, particularly refugee children' (Information Management Officer, MoES).

Based on the views of the policymakers, the bureaucratic procedures entailed in developing, approving, and implementing new educational policies cause delays in critical improvements aimed at improving the educational outcomes for refugee children. The finding builds on the work of Kirk and Winthrop (2019), who emphasise that policy delays impede progress and exacerbate pre-existing inequities by preventing timely access to vital

educational resources and support mechanisms

Sub-category 2: Insufficient financial support. According to policymakers, financial resources are one of the most significant barriers to the successful implementation of educational programmes. As observed by Novelli *et al.* (2014), stable financial resources managed locally can effectively support progressive education policy initiatives. Such an approach would lessen funding delays while improving responsiveness to the refugee student population's needs. This includes funding for curriculum reform, teacher preparation, infrastructure development, and technology integration. The inertia of the budgetary process hinders the overall policy aim of prioritising educational programmes targeted at ensuring fair access to education for refugee learners.

The rigidity of the funding process may make it more difficult for a government to implement a policy prioritising the education of marginalised children. Limited funding, resource allocation disparities, and gaps in teacher well-being hinder the effective achievement of the progressive education approach for conflict-affected children in Uganda' (Education Technical Lead FC).

Although policymakers emphasise the issue of financial resources, there is a need to address deeper systemic concerns that have contributed to funding challenges. The reliance on foreign donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to plug financial gaps in Ugandan educational systems is a more serious concern than sustainability and ownership. This financial dependency raises significant concerns about the long-term viability of refugee education initiatives. Refugee education progress is at risk if donor priorities shift or global events divert resources elsewhere.

Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to assess policymakers' perception of Uganda's progressive approach to conflict-affected children. The findings show that policymakers' perceptions of the suitability of a progressive education approach for refugee secondary education enrolment vary significantly. Some saw the framework as adequate for integrating refugee children into the national education system, while others criticised it, claiming

that it is insufficient to meet the needs of refugee students in secondary school due to limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher training to cater for refugee children. While Uganda's progressive education approach has made strides in promoting inclusivity and addressing social inequality, there are still challenges in fully closing the gap for refugee secondary education. The insufficient funding, lack of direct government support, and delay in policy approval dedicated to refugee education hinder targeted interventions and support mechanisms for this vulnerable population. Initiatives such as the Education Response Plan and the 2006 Refugee Act demonstrate the government's commitment to refugee education. Continued efforts to strengthen policy frameworks and implement targeted programmes are essential for ensuring that refugee children have equal opportunities to access quality education.

Author bio

Kennedy Monari is the INEE Country Focal Point for Kenya. He is a dedicated EiE specialist, researcher, peacebuilder, and teacher with extensive experience in refugee education, conflict resolution, and policy advocacy. With over 8 years' experience in the education sector, particularly in refugee settings and in arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) regions, he has gained a deep understanding of the intersection between education, conflict, and crisis, using a critical political economy of education lens.

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