



Advocating for Refugee Incentive Workers:

A Qualitative Research Study in Three Refugee Contexts in Africa

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Africa Refugee Network (ARN) and OXFAM



OXFAM



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Contents

Executive summary	1
<hr/>	
1. Introduction	5
<hr/>	
2. Methodology	7
Participatory research with refugee incentive workers	7
Interviews with NGO managers/supervisors and government representatives in settlements	9
<hr/>	
3. Findings	11
Theme 1: Incentive workers/volunteers are essential to the delivery of services	11
Theme 2: Incentive workers/volunteers experience exploitation	15
Theme 3: Incentive work/volunteering can create increased vulnerability	26
Theme 4: Incentive work/volunteering can build agency and psychological wellbeing	32
Theme 5: Independence and refugee-led organisations	38
<hr/>	
4. Conclusion	43
<hr/>	
Appendix 1: Research workshop for incentive workers	44
<hr/>	



Executive Summary



In refugee settlements in Africa refugees engaged by NGOs (implementing partners) play a central role in the delivery of services. These workers, sometimes called ‘volunteer’s or ‘incentive workers’ are usually paid a small stipend by the NGO who engages them. What the research made clear is that without them there would be almost no face-to-face contact with the refugee community around livelihood, child protection, GBV prevention, human rights protection, para-legal advice, and community primary health, for example.

In theory, working for the incentive payment given by NGO implementing partners could make a significant contribution to the objectives of supporting refugee self-reliance and encouraging refugee participation

and empowerment as outlined in the key Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). There have, however, been concerns around the treatment of refugee incentive workers, and the effectiveness of incentive work to achieve the goals laid out in the GCR. Given this concern, in early 2022 the Africa Refugee Network and OXFAM conducted qualitative research to find out more about the lives and roles of ‘incentive workers’ with a view to advocating on their behalf.

In-depth participatory research workshops were conducted with 66 refugee incentive workers and interviews with 10 NGO managers of incentive workers in five sites in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda which included camp and urban settings.

Some key findings

- Refugee incentive workers (or ‘volunteers’) are essential to the provision of services by NGO implementing partners to refugee communities in camp and urban contexts. Without them there would be almost no face-to-face contact with refugee households around issues of survival, rights and wellbeing.
- This contribution is largely unacknowledged by NGOs. Incentive workers report that they feel exploited, often tasked with heavy responsibilities beyond the training and support they are given by NGOs, and many work for long hours.
- The incentive is usually not enough to supplement limited food rations or buy basic needs and the demands of, what is essentially full-time work, often affects refugees’ ability to add to their income via other livelihood sources like farming or small businesses.
- Engagement as an incentive worker or volunteer can have a positive impact on psychosocial wellbeing. It gives people a sense of purpose, of agency and gives opportunities for them to express their need to help others. It also builds skills and confidence.
- Many incentive workers are tasked with, often complex, psychosocial work that has a significant psychological impact on them as individuals. Training is often inadequate and many receive no psychosocial support or regular supervision from the NGOs they work with.
- Because Incentive workers are seen as connected to NGOs, they can be put at risk within their communities. For example, they can be blamed by community members who are frustrated with their access to services or targeted for reporting child or other human rights abuses. Very few NGOs have protection plans to mitigate this risk.
- Incentive work can offer internal empowerment but NGOs do not often create opportunities for furthering formal education or ‘building a career’ within the organisation. This is of particular significance for young people (a population group highly represented among incentive workers) who are limited by the restrictions on refugee mobility and the right to work in particular countries.
- Refugees can and do, organise to support their communities through volunteer work without the support of external NGOs. Their unique understanding of the context can make their work more appropriate and effective than that of outside organisations.

“
Through our research with refugee incentive workers and NGO staff we have found that, on the whole, incentive work does not contribute significantly towards the three GCR goals of self-reliance, participation, and sustainability.
”

Advocacy messages

The report outlines some key areas of advocacy to improve the lives and contribution of refugee incentive workers and ultimately to improve the services provided to refugee communities. These include actions from different stakeholders:

■ Donors¹

Donors need to promote and monitor program proposals to ensure that they provide fair compensation and fair labour practices for incentive workers/volunteers that take into account the time, skills, and level of responsibility required, as well as the market and risk context.

■ Decision-makers

National government entities as well as international entities such as UNHCR need to engage in fair labour practices with incentive worker/volunteers themselves. They should also be promoting refugee self-reliance by actively moving towards or advocating for the recognition of refugee rights to employment and freedom of movement.

■ Designers and implementers

NGO implementing partners working with incentive workers need to think at design stage about fair work and compensation, which could include engaging incentive workers in livelihood programmes alongside their service work.

Awareness-raising among managers to change perceptions as well as codes of conduct to institutionalise human rights approaches to management are a necessity.

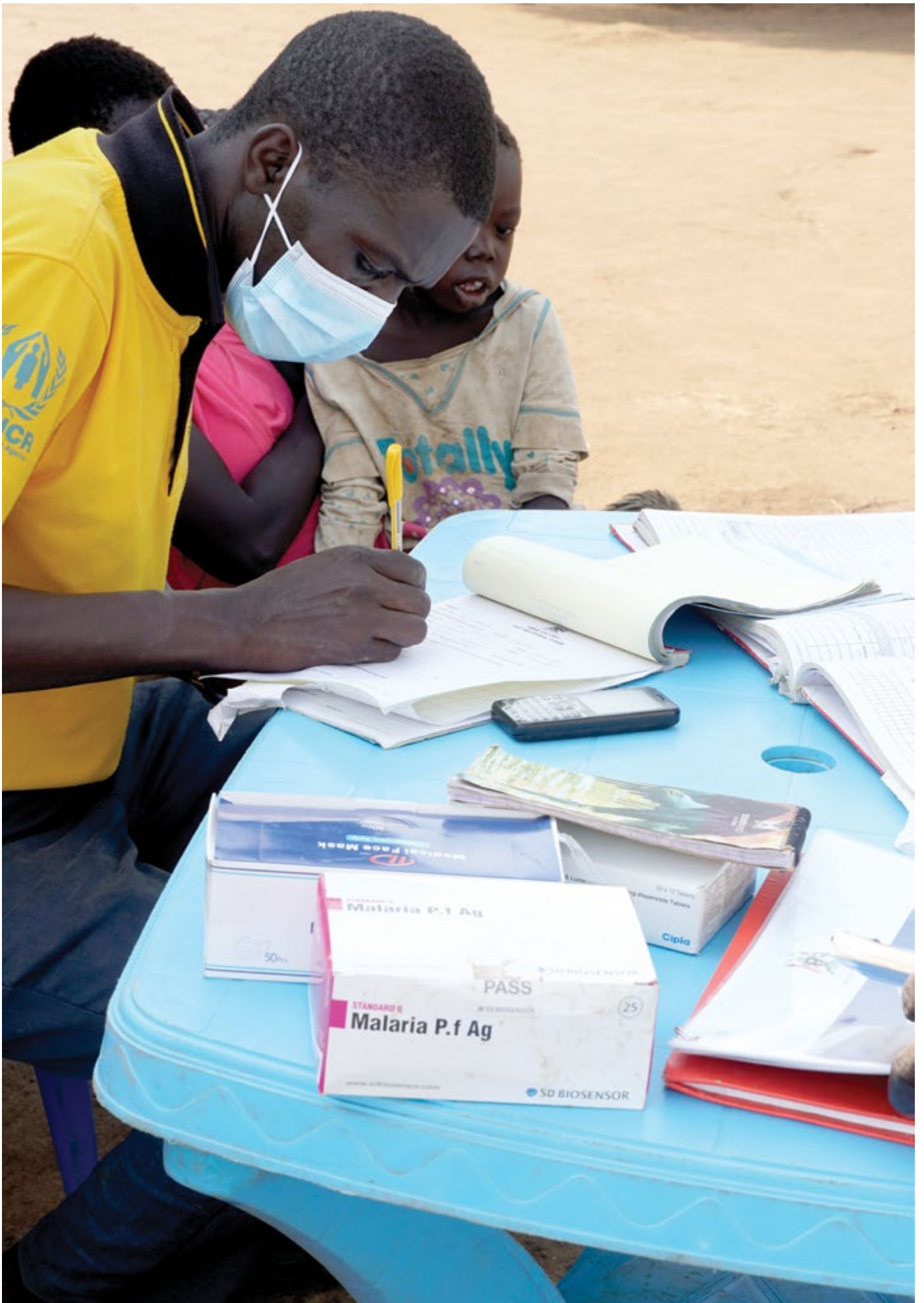
Risk mitigation strategies and psychosocial support for incentive workers as well as adequate supervision must be built into budgets and programme schedules.

“

While acknowledging that NGOs are often restricted by national and UNHCR policies around payment of incentive workers it is important for individual NGOs to make sure that incentive workers are treated fairly, protected from exploitation, and given opportunities to be self-sufficient, develop sustainable careers, and participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them. This needs to be done alongside advocacy the right to free mobility and a right to work for refugees.

”

¹ This use of the 3D's to describe stakeholders comes from: Chekaraou, R.D., Oprea, M. 2022. *It Takes Behaviour Science to End Violence against Children. A guide for advocating towards social and behavior change for ending violence against children (SBC4EVAC)*, World Vision International.



1. Introduction

In many refugee contexts refugees are engaged by UNHCR and partners as ‘incentive workers’ to undertake jobs in connection with the provision of assistance and services to other refugees. In theory, incentive work could make significant contributions to the objectives of supporting refugee self-reliance, encouraging refugee participation, and empowerment outlined in the key Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). The Africa Refugee-led Network (ARN), working with Oxfam, commissioned research to collect views and experiences of refugee incentive workers and to provide an assessment of the extent to which current incentive worker practices further refugee self-reliance and participation. This report summarises the findings of qualitative research conducted with refugee incentive workers in five sites in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda. Given that the research will be used by ARN in advocacy engagements around incentive workers, key advocacy messages are integrated with the findings.

This report uses the combined term ‘incentive workers/volunteers’ to describe the research participants. There are two reasons for combining the two terms: first, some of the participants in this research received no incentive and so were in fact volunteers, and second, because many NGOs refer to the refugees they engage in community work as ‘volunteers’ even though they receive a small payment or ‘incentive’ for the work they do. The need for this combined term is indicative of the complexities attached to the role of incentive workers/

volunteers. As previous work² shows, the concept of ‘voluntariness’ within the work of humanitarian organisations is complex and increasingly linked to questions of what rights should apply to incentive workers and what obligations and standards should apply to organisations who engage incentive workers. There is a small but growing concern within UNHCR and other INGOs, as well as in refugee organisations such as ARN, about the present engagement conditions for incentive workers/volunteers and the need to move toward the development of a more coherent and ethical approach to engaging refugees in community work.³ This report will, we hope, contribute refugee voices to this discussion.

The report begins by describing the methodology used in the research to capture the perspectives of refugee incentive workers/volunteers. This is followed by the findings which are presented as they emerged from participants. The findings are interwoven with excerpts from the focus group discussions. This places the voices of refugee participants within the context of the broader discussion around refugee rights and the engagement of incentive workers/volunteers by UNHCR and other INGOs. Finally, the report summarises these contextual discussions and the emergent themes into a set of key messages for ARN to use in advocacy around incentive workers/volunteers.

2 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, (2021). *Community volunteers and their role in case management processes in humanitarian contexts: A comparative study of research and practice*. <https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/report-community-engagement-case-management>; Morris, H., & Voon, F. (2014). *Which side are you on? Discussion paper on UNHCR's policy and practice of incentive payments to refugees*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5491577c9.pdf>

3 Ibid.



2. Methodology

The research had two key components:

- Participatory research with refugee incentive workers/volunteers
- Interviews with NGO managers or supervisors of incentive workers/volunteers

Participatory research with refugee incentive workers

The research methodology sought to capture the *emergent* views of research participants. In other words, all discussion began with open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their own personal experiences and views of incentive work.

Research sites and participants

The table below outlines the different sites and the numbers of participants in each research workshop.

Sites	Number of Incentive worker research group participants	Interviews with NGO managers
Dzaleka Refugee Settlement, Malawi	24	6
Nairobi urban refugees, Kenya	12	3
Mombasa urban refugees, Kenya	11	1
Rhino refugee settlement, Uganda	10	3
Imvepi refugee settlement, Uganda	10	2

Total number of incentive worker participants:

67 (24 women and 43 men)⁴

Total number of NGO managers:

15 (each from a different NGO)

Participants were selected through a process where NGOs that were known to engage incentive workers in the selected sites were contacted and asked if they would ask for volunteers to participate in a research workshop. We ensured that participation was voluntary and a formal consent process was applied. Steps were taken to ensure anonymity of all participants and the NGOs they worked for at all stages of the research. OXFAM's guidelines on undertaking ethical research⁵ were applied throughout.

Workshop approach

A set of interactive research tools based on approaches such as participatory rural appraisal,⁶ art-based approaches to research⁷ and theatre for development⁸ were developed (see Appendix 1). The key research questions were embedded in the activities allowing for deeper understanding of the lived realities of participants over the time of the workshops.

4 In the absence of research on the issue it is difficult to say with any certainty that this gender imbalance represents the norm. Discussions with managers of NGOs during this research did suggest thought that generally more men were engaged as incentive workers/volunteers in the refugee settings where the research took place than women, even in traditionally female dominated services such as Child Protection.

5 <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/253032/ml-guideline-undertaking-research-ethics-221112-en.pdf;jsessionid=BE2C-29614EB992E6F1967F3D2FEACAAE?sequence=1>

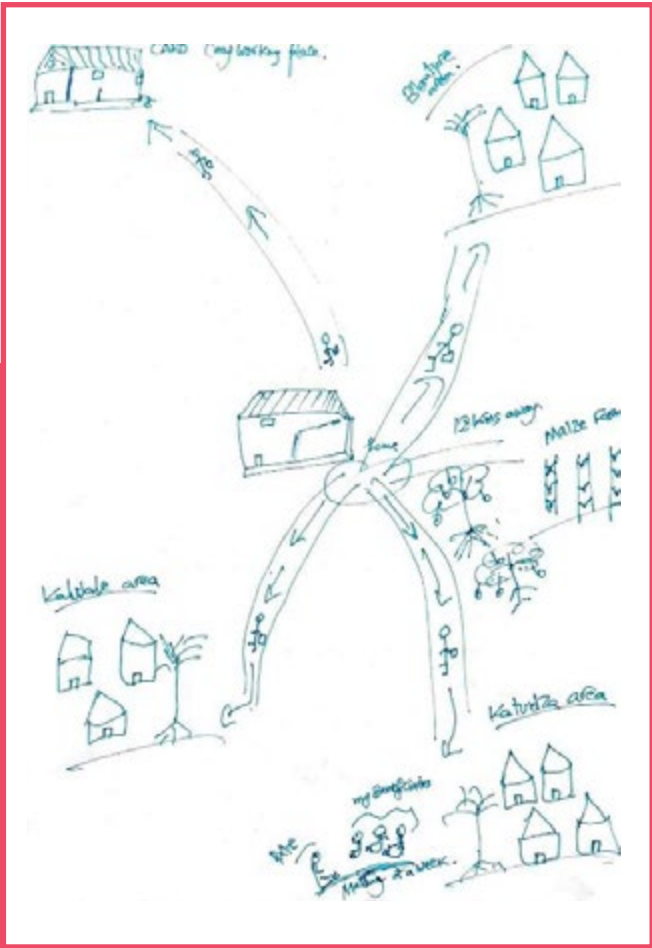
6 Srinivassan, L (1990). *Tools for Community Participation: A manual for training trainers in participatory techniques*. PROWESS/UNDP.

7 D'Amico, M., Denov, M., Khan, F., Linds, W., & Akesson, B. (2016). Research as intervention? Exploring the health and well-being of children and youth facing global adversity through participatory visual methods. *Global Public Health*, 11(5–6), 528–545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2016.1165719>

8 Sliep, Y., Weingarten, K., & Gilbert, A. (2004). Narrative Theatre as an Interactive Community Approach to Mobilizing Collective Action in Northern Uganda. *Families, Systems, & Health*, 22(3), 306–320. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1091-7527.22.3.306>

The photographs below illustrate the participatory activities and the kind of data that each sought to elicit.

A map of 'what I do in my work as an incentive worker/volunteer'. This mapping activity allowed the participants to show what they did, (this volunteer works as a community mobiliser on an agricultural livelihood programme) but also many of the issues linked to their work. For example, in this map from Dzaleka Refugee Settlement in Malawi we see the extent of the incentive worker/volunteer's responsibilities. They are expected to support refugees in three different areas which are far apart from each other, usually walking to each area at least once a week.



Using cut-out figures to explore power dynamics between incentive workers and NGO staff. The use of cut-out figures created a safe way for participants to talk about management without naming anyone. In this photograph the group is discussing if the incentive worker/volunteer has the same power as their manager, represented by a figure of the same size as the manager, or if they have less power, the small figure.



Clay sculptures that show ‘me before I became a volunteer/incentive worker’ and ‘me after I became a volunteer/incentive worker’. This arts-based approach, which relied on symbolic representation, allowed participants to express deeper, emotionally resonant understandings of what being an incentive worker/volunteer meant to them.

Analysis of data

Each participatory workshop took place in the participants’ home language through a translator. The discussion was recorded and later transcribed. Notes were taken in our discussions with the NGO managers of incentive workers. The transcripts and notes were then used as data for analysis. *NVivo* software was used to organise the data and a thematic analysis was conducted, using the widely accepted ‘content’ approach.⁹ The findings are presented under the emergent themes. Using the emergent themes as the foundation we developed a set of key messages for advocacy that also consider “the extent to which current incentive worker practices further refugee self-reliance and participation”¹⁰. These advocacy messages are presented under each theme. Given that the report will be used for advocacy purposes we have chosen to use a number of quotes to illustrate each point rather than select one or two as this will support the use of ‘refugee voices’ in the advocacy work.

Interviews with NGO managers/ supervisors and government representatives in settlements

In each research site we interviewed managers and supervisors of the incentive workers using a set of simple questions to find out how they engaged incentive workers, their perceptions of the volunteers’ work, and the incentives they were paid. Camp commanders and managers were also interviewed in three of the four settlements where we worked.

9 Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. p. 381
10 TOR Research on Incentive Workers in Africa. OXFAM and ARN



3. Findings

The findings are presented under the following emergent themes:

- Incentive workers/volunteers are essential to the delivery of services
- Incentive workers/volunteers experience exploitation
- Incentive work/volunteering can create increased vulnerability
- Incentive work/volunteering can build a sense of agency and independence
- Independence and self sufficiency

Theme 1: Incentive workers/volunteers are essential to the delivery of services

One dominant theme that emerged from all the groups with incentive workers/volunteers and the interviews with NGO managers and government representatives in the areas where we worked was that incentive workers/volunteers are key to the delivery of services in refugee settings.

“They are essential workers, in their absence it would compromise service delivery in the camp (Government representative)”

One way of illustrating this is to list the roles played by the different participants in the groups we ran. There were school teachers, mentors for tertiary students, child protection outreach workers, gender-based violence outreach workers, human rights outreach workers, livelihood outreach workers, banking and savings programme officers, primary health service providers, water and sanitation promoters, those who provided psychosocial support for individuals as well as groups, education assistants in child friendly spaces, translators for many different contexts, paralegal advisors, caretakers, cleaners, security guards, construction workers, distribution clerks, sexual and reproductive health educators, COVID-19 educators, and outreach workers who supported children and adults with disabilities.

There is a lack of data on how many incentive workers are engaged in UNHCR operations,¹¹ but a 2014 discussion document does give some indication of the scale of the practice by looking at two cases: “in Dadaab, Kenya – a large and established camp situation – there are approximately 6,000 incentive workers, comprising about 3.5% of the population of working age (18-59 years) out of a total population of almost 450,000. In the Bangladesh operation, there are over 650 incentive workers, representing around 5% of the working age population out of a total camp population of approximately 30,000.”¹²

One of our recommendations for further research, particularly for advocacy purposes is for OXFAM and ARN to undertake a count of refugee incentive workers engaged in at least the three settlements where this research was done. An info-graphic of this data, for example, would make a powerful advocacy statement about how UNHCR and their implementing partners rely on incentive workers to deliver social services.

11 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, (2021). *Community volunteers and their role in case management processes in humanitarian contexts: A comparative study of research and practice*. p. 20 <https://alliancecpa.org/en/child-protection-online-library/report-community-engagement-case-management>

12. *ibid.*

NGO managers interviewed in this study described how incentive workers/volunteers were essential to their work:

“Because they understand the language, they are also cultural mediators, they understand the different groups and dynamics in the groups. We can't even talk to refugees as we do not have the language but they are the interfacers.”

Participants in the research workshops all saw themselves as indispensable to the work of the NGOs that engaged them.

“It is very difficult for some of the people who are coming from outside to understand the setting of refugees. One of the challenges we have seen from them is that when they come here, they are unable to fulfil the service needed by the community.

They (NGOs) normally trust in you because without you they cannot penetrate the community.

And remember without the community worker they (NGOs) cannot work because we are like the bridge between the refugees and the organisations. Let me give you a small example. Many times I went to home visit with the staff from the organisation. We went to visit the client, for two years in the same house. One day the staff member phoned me to come do a home visit but I was sick.”

They said “we can't go alone, we can't remember the house”, and I went with them even ten times. They say “all the houses are the same, we cannot remember where that one stays”. They will wait until I am better and can go back with them.”

The metaphor of being a “bridge” (as in the quote above) was often used. For the research participants their role went beyond being language interpreters because they had a first-hand socio-cultural understanding of the community that outsiders did not have.

“You also understand the issues that the communities are facing. For example, they will invite ‘leaders’ but they do not always know who they are. We use an approach deep from the ground whereby we include the leaders from each and every tribe, we know we need a representative from every one.”

Though NGO staff working at field level generally recognise the contribution of incentive workers/volunteers, this recognition is not seen higher up the hierarchy in NGOs. The indispensability of incentive workers/volunteers and the unique contribution they make to service delivery as community members is seldom acknowledged by humanitarian organisations.

An example of this is the fact that a recent comprehensive global study on the roles of incentive workers/volunteers in child protection programmes¹³ makes the point that their work is largely invisible in programme literature. Although field staff identify volunteers as:

This lack of acknowledgement of the essential role that incentive workers/volunteers play in the delivery of services influences how they are treated by NGOs. In theme two the incentive workers/volunteers who participated in this research describe that though their work may be essential and important this is not reflected in the way they are engaged by NGOs.

“*‘Cultural mediators,’ this is rarely acknowledged in Child Protection program materials ... The unique role of being the “eyes on the ground” and always available for children is absent from many proposals, guidelines, SOPs and trainings.*”



13 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, (2021). *Community volunteers and their role in case management processes in humanitarian contexts: A comparative study of research and practice*. p. 20 <https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/report-community-engagement-case-management>



Agnes' Story

Agnes is talkative and energetic. She is a grandmother many times over, but you would never guess it by looking at her. She jokes that her neighbours call her 'Young Abuba' (young grandmother). Agnes is the head of a large family that includes two orphan girls that Agnes took in when she arrived in the refugee settlement where she lives. Agnes has had to run away from her country of origin more than once because of conflict and wherever she has gone she has got involved in refugee leadership and volunteering to help her community.

In this settlement Agnes is part of the Village Health Team (VHT). Her job is to provide frontline healthcare and referrals to the households in her village. Agnes visits 10 households a day to check up on pregnant women, sick children or adults, and to conduct monitoring and awareness raising on key health issues. In total Agnes is responsible for 154 households in her village. "I am also a birth attendant", Agnes tells me, "when a mother is in labour they come and knock on your door. Then you respond and if the woman is in labour you call the ambulance or the doctor. Even if you don't have airtime you have to struggle to get the airtime. But last month two women, when they came to me it was already too late and by the time I came to them I had to deliver the baby. Last week the same thing, I was called when they were already pushing the child. This is just the work that we are doing".

In addition to her work as part of the VHT Agnes is also the chairperson of her village. This is a formal position that forms part of the refugee welfare committee in her settlement. As the chairperson, Agnes represents her community in meetings with the camp commander and also reports back to her community on decisions made in these meetings and how these will affect them. Agnes was elected as a village chairperson when she arrived in the settlement and served as the general secretary for women affairs at the camp level. In this position she travelled to the host country's capital city to participate in a number of meetings at the national level.

"This is my block here of 15 households. You have to monitor them and check on them. Quarrelling is there, fighting is there. They showed me a panga one time and I went straight to the police because if blood comes out that cannot be handled by me. You go direct to the police. Maybe you sleep for three hours only because they come to your door and knock. You will not keep quiet, you will answer them because when you are a leader you love your people. You be transparent with them. We do not discriminate between the tribes. We are mixed up. We are carrying a big burden." All of the work that Agnes does as a village chairperson is unpaid and in addition to her responsibilities as a member of the VHT.

The little that Agnes earns from her work with the VHT is supplemented by a small vegetable garden. Land is limited in the settlement and so each household has only ten square metres available to them to cultivate. “I came here with a family size of 7. Now my family size is 17 after my children got married. We live all together. The land that

was given to us was very small”. Agnes’ vegetable garden is full of young plants when she shows it to me, but she says she struggles to make time to tend to it. “When it is time for cultivation I have to make a time table. Because I want to do something for my own family as well”.

Advocacy message

- In refugee settlements in Africa refugees engaged by NGOs (implementing partners) play a central role in the delivery of services. Without them there would be almost no community contact with the refugee community around livelihood, child protection, GBV prevention and response, human rights protection, household hygiene, para-legal advice, and community primary health, for example.
- This contribution is largely unacknowledged by NGOs.

Theme 2: Incentive workers/volunteers experience exploitation

Shortly after describing the maps that they drew of their daily work, participants in all the groups began a spontaneous discussion about how they felt exploited by the NGOs that engaged them. This exploitation happened in a number of different ways, each of which is discussed below.

Burden of time and responsibility

Alongside the descriptions of the work they did, participants described the long hours that they worked. One part of this issue was the high expectations that NGOs had of their time, and another part was because of the community members’ ongoing access to them due to their being ‘in’ the community

“My boss can call me on a Sunday and tell me to open the centre, even though it was not planned. Even my pastor asks me why I am so busy because sometimes I am at church and I will be called away and I have to go to save my job so that my children can get some things. In my drawing you can see that if I am at home I have a big head because it is full! And I am tired. (Caretaker of a community centre)

”

“On the issue of contracts there are some duties assigned to you in the contract and when you start working there are things that aren’t in the contract that you are still expected to do. The extra work should be done by someone else, usually a national, who is the manager, and if you do not do it then you get fired. (Cash transfer outreach officer)

”

“There are many stresses that I face. It is because we are working in a place that we serve so many customers. Even the time that you are off work you receive so many calls and you meet so many people asking about the work. (Cash transfer outreach officer)

”

“
The work I do is in child protection. It is very hard because we work to take care of children. To keep children out from violence is very big. So we need to report every week. Because of that work we do this is the reason why I came with this drawing that has so many children. CP is very hard because we work during the day and during the night. Like late at night they will call you because there are some missing children.
(Child protection volunteer)

”

“
Last night at 23:00 someone sent me a Whatsapp message with a prescription. Then I tried to explain that I cannot send the prescription this late and he told me that it is my job and I am supposed to do it. At [NGO] we close the office at 3 or 4 and we close the phone, but the community workers are there [in the community] all the time – from Monday to Sunday. But remember that the managers and the higher-ups don't know that.
(Village health team worker)

”

Their descriptions of the work they did also illustrated the heavy responsibility they carried. Though the first woman quoted above works under a supervisor, the extent of her responsibility is a lot to expect from a lay person who has received minimal training. The second quote is from a young woman of twenty-two, who received two weeks training and last met a supervisor three months ago.

“
When I start the job that I do I first have to check on my family. I am married and have six children. I first have to make sure they are all right before I go to work. I work for [NGO]. We have an office there. When I arrive at the office I have to identify cases and if there are cases that are in the community I have to handle them. The cases are GBV cases, all of the categories, violence, rape, etc. So we check the forms where we see where they stay. We visit. There are cases of rape that will need to be taken to the hospital and police. And then we have the big work of follow up on the client. We have to follow up on the cases and what is going on. We talk about how they feel about the case and what [the NGO] can be doing to help or if it needs to be referred.

”

“
I am a volunteer. After being trained under suicide prevention they told me how to carry out suicide prevention in the community. We have a very high rate in this camp compared to other places. So the community did not know that suicide was not a good thing to do. So we are fighting hard to reduce the rate of suicide We educate them on identifying someone with suicidal intentions, we talk about stress management. Because people feel that maybe suicide is just a way out. And if we see someone with a mental health problem we can refer them to [a local NGO]. Sometimes they can take three months before they see them though because they have few staff. Then after referring we follow up the survivor to make sure they are attended to. Continued on the next page.

”

You also follow up to see if they are coping with life. Especially the people who attempted suicide. We talk about the key issues, maybe they have too much stress in their life or they have no hope. The area I cover is very large and the work is too much. There is only one me and the people are many.

Another issue that was raised in all of the groups was the absence of basic rights such as sick leave.

When someone signs a contract there are benefits that they get, but when I saw my contract it just said this is your duties and this is what you will be paid. Nothing else. In addition to that when someone gets sick they give you one week sick leave. And if you haven't recovered after one week they fire you. Yes, they just say there are many people looking for work, you can go.

This type of treatment by NGOs was mentioned by most participants in all of the groups we ran.

Inadequate payment for full-time work

While research participants did mention long hours and heavy responsibility this was not what concerned them the most. What they emphasised was the sense of exploitation related to the small payments they received as incentives for the work.

I work full time so I have to be there all the time but I am not paid for a full time role.

The work that we are doing is more heavy than what we are earning.

What upset people was the difference in payments between them and nationals who did the same job

I was working for [NGO]. I was paid 30 dollars a month. And then my junior, a Kenyan, was getting 1500 USD per month. And then at work time, I was there the full day and he was coming with the car, working 2 hours, and then leaving. I started as an interpreter at [NGO], then I worked for [NGO], then [NGO] that is when I was transferred to Kakuma at the hospital. Then I got a salary which was 30 USD and the security guard was getting 750 USD and then I said no, I do not want to do this job so I left.

The perception of exploitation and powerlessness created by the small payment given was related to people's motivations to volunteer.

I feel small in front of our bosses because we don't have salary, we just have incentive. We do such work that is 24/7 and it yields under 100 USD monthly. That means what you are being paid is not humanly possible (to survive on). But when you do not have a second choice you agree anyway. Another point that gives us courage even when we are considered smaller, smaller (in power) is that it is volunteer work in which we engage our heart for serving the community.

The underlined part of the above quote is important because it characterises the complexity of motivations behind why people engage in incentive/volunteer work. The first issue raised by the quote is that volunteer work 'comes from the heart'.

The quote below is typical of what all but a few participants said: they describe being motivated by their desire to help their community, that the need to help was part of their identity, and that they helped because they wanted life to be better for others than it had been for them.

To be honest that is my nature since I was born. Helping is in my blood. There are many things that have been motivating me to work for all those places that I mentioned. I want children in the next generation to grow in a different manner to the situation that I grew up in in the past. Because I grew up in a certain environment where I couldn't even be given something that I needed. I didn't meet all my rights. So now I want to support the children. I have seen a good thing and know what the other children deserve.

The volunteers most of the time they do this work with a clean heart. Most of the time you start your day without even a cup of tea but you do it willingly. You see [the community's] struggles are mostly the same as yours, so you do it from your heart.

The perception that a personal motivation is exploited is one reason behind the deep emotion we observed when research participants talked about their feeling of being exploited. But as the underlined quote above illustrates, another reason that refugees take on incentive/volunteer work is because 'they have no second choice'. There are no other economic opportunities in the refugee settlement context.

I would say it is from my heart but the money was also why I applied. I like to help people but the money was something I could use to buy something like food for my children, or soap.

The concept of being a volunteer who is paid an 'incentive' intended to reimburse them for work-related expenses is the predominant understanding amongst NGOs of the function of incentive payments in refugee contexts.¹⁴ Yet, given the fact that there are no other choices for refugees, particularly for those living in settlements,¹⁵ one has to question the 'voluntary' nature of the work.¹⁶ Criticism of the 'volunteerism' expected of refugees includes the argument that "expecting refugees to work without pay, which is premised on a communitarian spirit that would be hard to find even in affluent and well-established neighbourhoods, [is] not only against human rights law but also ill-advised." For the participants in this research knowing that their right to decent conditions of work were violated¹⁷ has placed in a context where "exercise of choice and, hence, voluntary action is compromised for individuals who are faced with severe material needs and limited or absent livelihood options."¹⁸ This is surely what lies behind the strong feeling of 'being exploited' that incentive workers/volunteers expressed in the research workshops: the combination of lack of choice and the abuse of their 'clean hearts'.

14 Morris, H., & Voon, F. (2014). *Which side are you on? Discussion paper on UNHCR's policy and practice of incentive payments to refugees*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5491577c9.pdf> p. 5.

15 Betts, A. et al (2019), *Refugee Economies in Uganda: What Difference Does the Self-Reliance Model Make?* (Oxford: RSC).

16 Guglielmo V, & Harrell-Bond, B. (2005) *Rights in Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism*, Berghahn Books: New York & Oxford, 2005, p221.

17 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), (2021) *UNHCR Guidelines on International Legal Standards Relating to Decent Work for Refugees*, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/60e5cfd74.html>

18 Population Council. 2013. *Motivations for entering volunteer service and factors affecting productivity: A mixed method survey of STEPS-OVC volunteer HIV caregivers in Zambia*. Population Council. p.

Remuneration policies

The payments received by research participants for full-time work (which was often more than eight hours a day and five days a week in reality) ranged from USD24 to USD68 across the settlements and urban areas where this research took place. Only one NGO paid health benefits to incentive workers/volunteers. None of the other NGOs paid any kind of benefits and most made no provision for basic rights such as sick leave.

The participants in this research were mostly engaged by UNHCR implementing partners. UNHCR has no formal guidance on approaches to and standards for incentive work.¹⁹ In most cases guidelines for the engagement of incentive workers/volunteers is decided for each operational context, sometimes with the involvement of NGO implementing partners, but seldom with the participation of refugees themselves. In the UNHCR, “such work is often characterised as volunteering rather than employment and the compensation described as an “incentive”, which is generally lower than a wage and is intended to acknowledge the volunteer’s effort but not provide full compensation for their labour”²⁰. As mentioned in the introduction to this report there is some concern within UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations about the engagement of refugees as incentive workers/volunteers. There is a call to adopt a rights-based approach to work with refugees, which includes the need to “advocate for the recognition and promotion of refugees’ right to work”²¹. This last point is important because a common argument given by NGOs (and in fact expressed by many of the NGO managers we interviewed) is that in contexts where refugees lack the right to work, framing incentive work as volunteering is seen as necessary and a way to allow refugees to earn an income without formally breaking the law.

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If UNHCR is to take a rights-based approach to refugee incentives, the use of incentive payments must be consistent with respect for refugees’ right to work. In contexts where refugees are not formally granted the right to work under national legislation, UNHCR offices should advocate for the recognition and enjoyment of refugees’ right to work. This is consistent with Objective 1 of the Global Livelihoods Strategy, which lists specific activities that can be undertaken to promote the right to work.²² Key activities in the pursuit of this goal include engaging in advocacy and policy dialogue to build a favourable policy environment for refugee self-reliance, including recognition of rights to employment and freedom of movement. In addition to being an important aspect of promoting refugee rights and protection, such activities may serve to counter the perception that UNHCR and partners are taking advantage of refugees’ lack of employment rights.²³

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What emerged from interviews with managers of incentive workers/volunteers in this research was the difference in how managers interpreted any policy about incentive workers.

19 Morris, H., & Voon, F. (2014). *Which side are you on? Discussion paper on UNHCR’s policy and practice of incentive payments to refugees*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5491577c9.pdf>

20 Ibid p. 3.

21 Ibid p. 18

22 See UNHCR Global Livelihoods Strategy 2014-2018, p19-21, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/530f107b6.pdf>

23 Morris, H., & Voon, F. (2014). *Which side are you on? Discussion paper on UNHCR’s policy and practice of incentive payments to refugees*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5491577c9.pdf> p. 18.

Some expressed the view that they felt incentive workers/volunteers were exploited and looked for ways to supplement the ‘incentive’ at every turn—giving extra payment for involvement in COVID-19 awareness activities, for example. Others merely said, “the amount is set by UNHCR and the government, there is nothing we can do.”

Another issue mentioned by NGO managers of incentive workers/volunteers was the need to educate technical staff within their own organisations about the actual costs of the service programmes they ran.

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“I manage 512 Village Health Workers in these two camps and the budget I need is huge, there is never enough. It is not only incentives, we need bicycles so workers can move easily, we need gumboots, safety items, refresher trainings. They earn UGX50 000 a month. I would like to pay them more as their work is heavy. I have organised for another implementing partner to supplement what we can pay as they do some work for them with malaria prevention. It is the budgets that need to go up, it is the donors who need to understand what we need on the ground.”

”

Samuel's²⁴ Story

I join Samuel as he walks around the refugee settlement conducting home visits. Samuel works as an outreach worker on a project that promotes education inclusion for children with mental illnesses. We arrive at the first house on his list for the day and a group of children greet him energetically. He has come to visit Victoria, a young girl with cerebral palsy and severe quadriplegia. She is sitting in the shade next to her house with her mother. Victoria smiles brightly when Samuel sits down next to her. Samuel chats to her and they spend some time doing a few reading and numeracy exercises. Before we get up to leave Victoria proudly shows Samuel how much progress she has made in learning to walk. Samuel and Victoria's mother applaud her with excitement.

Samuel's dream is to do a master's degree in social work and social administration and then continue working in the development sector. “The work that I want to do is the one that I have started, these charitable activities. I am really interested in them. I like working with people who are more vulnerable. I have the zeal to restore hope in them ... When I have finished my education I really want to look into that and do more to make sure those people are helped”.

Samuel has faced a number of setbacks to his dream. Despite having finished his secondary schooling in his country of origin, the host country does not recognise his senior certificate and he had to redo four years of secondary school. His next aim is to save up enough money to do a certificate in social work with the hope that this will allow him to earn more and eventually fund

24 All names changed

further studies. “I have a plan to upgrade but because of limited resources I could not go for that ... That is why I am doing voluntary work to make sure that I can mobilise some resources”.

Samuel is still in his mid-twenties but has already achieved a lot. Because of his performance as an outreach worker, he was appointed as a team leader and now manages six other refugee volunteers. Outside of his work as a volunteer Samuel is also a leader in the Refugee Welfare Council (RWC) where he is the youth representative for the whole of his settlement. “I oversee all the youth activities in the settlement, plan recreational activities for the youth, lobby for partners to come and support the youth, and also help those who are in need”. After being elected as a member of the RWC Samuel was also selected as the youth representative for his district at the Refugee Engagement Forum. This is a forum that meets at a national level to address issues faced by refugees from across the host country.

Samuel is a passionate, talented young man who has dreams of building his skills to help those around him. “I even don’t mind going back to [my home country] because if I stay here for even 5 more good years I will be even someone who can take a great impact in [my home country]. Because here I came with nothing, but I will not go there with nothing. I will go with something that will transform the community that I will be staying around with”. The little that Samuel earns from his volunteer work is barely enough to supplement the already insufficient food rations provided to him and his family, and yet he still hopes to save some of this money to fund his education. People like Samuel need significantly more support from the organisations that employ them to live independent lives and pursue sustainable livelihoods and careers.



Demands of work affect incentive workers/ volunteers ability to supplement inadequate payments

The other issue related to inadequate payment is that, particularly for urban refugees who receive no aid from UNHCR, volunteer work can get in the way of incentive workers'/volunteers' ability to earn the money they need for rent, food and school fees for children. To give one example, the quote below describes an incentive worker/volunteer having to get up at 3am every morning to make the product she sells, because her day is taken up with volunteer work.

“*For us who have children, what they are giving us is not enough so you have to sacrifice. So for us [as an incentive worker] we work from 8.30 up to three so we have to plan our lives. I wake up at 3 am because I have to do my other work. I sew and I make peanut butter. With the peanut butter I put it in my bag and I walk around with it and sell it because what I am getting (from the NGO) is not enough. You have to supplement. It is very stressful. You do not sleep enough.*”

Alfred's Story

When I arrive at Alfred's house in the refugee settlement where he lives he is sitting at a plastic table outside his thatched room talking to a woman and her young child. The desk is covered in boxes of medication and a large book where Alfred records the details of the child's case. Alfred is a member of the Village Health Team (VHT) in this settlement and has been trained to offer frontline healthcare to the members of his community. “In this zone I am the VHT in this village. At the same time I am the VHT coordinator who sees all VHTs under my control. There are 60 VHTs that I coordinate” Alfred explains.

In this role as a VHT member Alfred identifies cases, conducts monitoring and follow up visits, and reports monthly on the cases of his own village as well as the work of the other 60 VHT workers that he coordinates. “In our work we are responsible, like when you are doing home visits you are going to see those people and you need to dig deep with that person. Because people are stressed, someone might go on treatment. They might stop taking their drugs”.

As we sit and talk about his work with the VHT a couple walks up to Alfred's table and asks him for help to correct an error that has been made in one of their UNHCR identity documents. In

addition to being part of the VHT, Alfred is also a village chairperson in the refugee welfare council (RWC). In this capacity Alfred is responsible for assisting the residents in his village, presenting their issues to the settlement management, and mediating conflicts that occur within his village. “As part of the RWC we always mediate cases in the community like SGBV cases, theft cases, there are some which are not big crime cases. If there are big cases then we refer to the police ... So we have meetings in the community, dialoguing with the community, knowing the issues in the community. The same time we have meetings with the villages so that we know the issues and feedback from there and knowing how the services are being rendered to the community”.

These combined roles put a lot of pressure on Alfred and his family. He is paid less than 10USD per quarter for the VHT work and not at all for his work in the RWC. “Your wife may cook food and if there is an emergency you have to leave the food and she has to reheat it for you later. But then when it comes time to support them there is no money because we are paid late”. The workload of the volunteer work also impacts on Alfred's ability to provide for his family. “Your standard of living will be poor. You will not get time if you are not so strong. And you don't have money that can support your home”.

Volunteers and incentive workers do vital work. People like Alfred have a deep-felt sense of commitment to their communities and have a genuine desire to support them. The quantity

of work and the level of responsibility that they carry makes it difficult for passionate people like Alfred to support their families while continuing to provide essential services to their communities.



Disrespectful treatment

Not only do refugee incentive workers/volunteers have to work long hours, often carrying heavy responsibility for very little pay, some also describe disrespectful treatment by managers.

“ We see our bosses as dictators. Whenever you raise an issue they will not even regard that issue. Since they are dictators it makes us also fear that we will lose that small thing that we get. So we never mind how much they pain us we just continue. ”

“ To our supervisors we are nothing ... We have to report to someone who is looking down on us [the manager], we do not have any power. That is the root of our challenge. ”

Much of the discussion about the disrespect of managers or supervisors came up in the activity where cut-out figures of different sizes were used to discuss power imbalances.

“ I wanted to talk about these two [cut-outs of different sizes]. You feel, volunteers often feel very small [she points to the small cut-out figure] because they are very afraid of losing that work that they have. So even though the work seems impossible, they fear losing it and so they will push themselves very hard. So instead of doing the work in a proper way you are begging to be kept. So the only thing that they [managers] tell you is that a lot of people need this job and you know that. So you will do whatever work. That is why I will not even encourage people to be a volunteer in this camp. I will encourage people to make a business and make their own money. To be a volunteer is a very tough thing. If you are still feeling small it is because we have not been given a chance to get out of this. So when you tell them a complaint they say you can leave and someone will replace you immediately. So we feel small in front of our supervisors.”

In two of the groups this discussion of power imbalance led to a discussion about the fact that the disrespect was rooted in discriminatory attitudes of local staff towards refugees—almost all managers or supervisors in the NGOs were local nationals:

“ I think the deterrent factor is that most of the organisations are run by [national staff]. Some of these people are advocating for a stipend cut even.”

There also seemed to be a lack of understanding of the situation in which refugee workers lived:

“ I had an experience. A certain client called me and I didn't answer so he went to the boss directly and then the boss called me. I was on the way to charge my phone and I saw the missed calls. So the boss asked me why is the client calling me on the weekend when I am at home. I told him that I was going to charge my phone and he asked me why I don't have electricity at home. This is a funny question as I don't have electricity at home. But I was afraid to say this to him because of fearing to lose my job.”

Not everyone had this experience, however. It is worth noting that the situation seemed to differ from site to site and from NGO to NGO depending on the organisational culture in the particular NGO and also the national context.

“ We [the manager and I] are the same level because we work together. She is there because of me and I am here because of her.”

“ Even us as refugee-led organization when we work with NGO partners we are the same level. There are things that we report to them and they understand because they get the feedback from us as the local initiatives. No one is superior because we are serving the same community.”

Advocacy messages

- Across refugee settlements in Africa refugee incentive workers/volunteers are often tasked with heavy responsibilities beyond the training and support they are given by NGOs, and many work for long hours. Most are paid a small stipend or incentive that in no way reflects the work they do. This is not only a violation of basic rights, and against UNHCR Guidelines on International Legal Standards Relating to Decent Work for Refugees,²⁵ but it also creates a work environment where incentive workers/volunteers feel exploited, particularly because their motivations to volunteer include a wish to care for fellow community members. This can only affect the quality of service delivery of NGOs.
- In addition to engaging in fair labour practices with incentive worker/volunteers themselves, UNHCR and other NGOs working with refugees need to promote refugee self-reliance by actively advocating for the recognition of refugee rights to employment and freedom of movement.
- Donors and NGO staff working on programme proposals need to develop a clear understanding, based on field realities, of the need to provide compensation that is fair, taking into account the time, skills, and level of responsibility required, as well as the market context.
- NGOs engaging incentive workers/volunteers should have clear employment contracts that include the right to conditions of ‘decent work’ as outlined in common labour practice.²⁶
- NGOs need to look at including self-reliance strategies such as savings and loan groups, income generation projects etc. into incentive worker/volunteer packages if incentive work/volunteering is to build self-reliance. Small incentives do not build self-reliance.
- Awareness-raising among managers to change perceptions as well as codes of conduct to institutionalise human rights approaches to management are a necessity. Useful examples of this can be found in the [Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Settings Training Manual for Volunteers](#).²⁷

25 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), (2021) *UNHCR Guidelines on International Legal Standards Relating to Decent Work for Refugees*, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/60e5cfd74.html>

26 Ibid

27 https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/training_manual_for_community_cp_volunteers.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=47483

Theme 3: Incentive work/volunteering can create increased vulnerability

What emerged from the research with refugee incentive workers was the fact that being an incentive worker/volunteer can increase the vulnerability of people who are already made vulnerable through displacement and its multiple concomitant impacts.

Psychological impact of the work

One of the issues raised by all the groups in this research was that their work often had negative psychological impacts on them.

“After that you walk out from their places [the homes of families they have visited as part of their work], as you can see here I put on a frowning face. This means you also absorb their problems. You don't just listen, but you are also affected. By listening to the same problem always you are drawn into that problem, but you feel helpless. You compile a report and submit. Sometimes you are receiving phone calls and then you go to do an assessment or just translate but that is it, you cannot do more than that.”

“Stress management is something we need. Because remember we are refugees ourselves and when someone tells you their issues it can reduce you to nothing.”

What was striking was the almost complete lack of emotional support given to the incentive workers/volunteers by the NGOs that engaged them. There were examples of good support and supervision with case workers accompanying volunteers to visit families, or space to debrief about a difficult case. The majority of workers though had cursory supervision which usually took place when they handed over their reports on work they had done either weekly or monthly.

“Researcher: When you are feeling sad do you have someone to talk to?

Respondent: No. I have a supervisor and we work together but we don't talk about things.”

The last quote was from a young woman who works on a 'suicide prevention' programme.

Maurine's Story



Maurine sits on a bench under a tree in the middle of her compound where she lives with her husband, her new-born child, and a few members of her extended family. Maurine is young and talks quietly while rocking her baby in her arms. Maurine is a volunteer in a suicide prevention programme in the refugee settlement where she lives. “We have a very high suicide rate in [the settlement] compared to other places ... we are fighting hard to reduce the rate of suicide. We educate them on identifying someone with suicidal intentions, we talk about stress management. Because people feel that maybe suicide is just a way out. And if we see someone with a mental health problem we can refer them to [our partner] (an organisation that provides psychosocial support and mental health services in humanitarian contexts) ... You also follow up to see if they are coping with life. Especially the people who attempted suicide. We talk about the key issues, maybe they have too much stress in their life, or they have no hope.

Maurine describes two burdens that she experiences doing this work. The first burden is the amount of work that she is expected to do. There are only a few suicide prevention volunteers in the

settlement and the area that Maurine is expected to cover is big. She handles many cases and often has to walk long distances to reach the homes of her clients. “The area is very broad and the work is too much. There is only one volunteer in my zone and the people are many.” The other burden is the psychological burden of listening to the sad stories that her clients tell her and having to spend her days supporting people with severe depression and other mental health issues. “Sometimes when you are talking to someone you feel their stress. You first need to give space for that person.”

In addition to the stress and pressure from work, Maurine also has to struggle to provide for her family. What little Maurine earns she uses to supplement the food rations provided by the WFP and, when there is anything left over, she helps pay for her siblings school fees. “There is no one to support them. They were all eyeing at me. As I talk even they are still calling me and demanding for some support from me but I don’t have anything to give them”. Because Maurine is the only one of her siblings to have finished secondary school there is a lot of pressure on her to provide for her extended family. “I told them if I get little money I support them. So life is very hard. I grew in a miserable lifestyle. I lost my hope. I don’t know if I will have life in future like others. But I am just praying”.

Maurine has dreams of continuing her education and changing the situation for herself and her family. But because she was not able to pay the school fees from her last year in secondary school, the school has refused to release her senior certificate. Without this certificate she cannot enrol in any further education. “I just decided to marry because I felt now life is useless and if I stay [with my family] there is no one to pay for me to go to school”.

Maurine plays a vital role providing mental health services to members of her community. But she is also vulnerable and has her own trauma from past experiences, and stresses from everyday life in the refugee settlement. The work she does puts her at risk of increased psychological stress that may cause long term harm.

Risk related to being a community member linked to an NGO

Apart from the emotional impact of the work they do, and the lack of support they receive, participants also talked about how their roles as workers for NGOs made them vulnerable to verbal and sometimes physical abuse from community members. This was most often related to misunderstandings about the roles the incentive workers/volunteers played. Community members linked incentive workers/volunteers to NGO implementing partners and therefore blamed them for things like late delivery of food rations, or slow access to appointments after referral.

“When there is delay with the food distribution then they think you work for the organisation that distributes the food and so they will blame you. This community here, they say to you ‘you are happy because you are working. We are struggling’. They feel that we do not have burdens any longer. And then they have expectations from you that you can help them. But they do not know that we are earning very little.”

“Some volunteers are being apprehended in the community. Because they are thinking that [the NGOs they work for] are the reason why they are not getting what we need. It is all of us, those who work for [names three very different NGOs] all of us that are working with the community in general. It creates an environment of insecurity and when you are walking they are pointing and saying ‘that guy feels he is already at a higher level’. And then the stress comes bigger and bigger.”

There was a strong sense of risk and physical vulnerability related to this situation. Refugee incentive workers/volunteers often felt unsafe. The NGOs they worked for did not always understand this issue, and usually the incentive workers/volunteers had not talked about it. Most often because no one had asked. The research participants talked about the fact that there were few opportunities for debriefing, or even simply describing their daily work to their managers.

This problem is linked to the fundamental issue that once a refugee becomes an incentive worker/volunteer they become what one could call an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’ at the same time.²⁸ Volunteers are ‘insiders’ in that they are working within their own communities. At the same time their alignment with NGOs makes them an ‘outsider’ in these communities. The two quotes below express this dilemma clearly by describing how, though they are linked to the NGO, they are still essentially outsiders there too.

“It is as if I am a candle in the middle of thick darkness. I am a candle but I am also melting at the same time. We are helping others but we are stretching ourselves. The community looks up to us and the organisations look down on us and there is no one who supports us.”

“On the side of the community they look at us as if we have a certain good thing. We are in a level that is better than them. Then to our supervisors we are nothing. So the community sees us at a high level and we have to report to someone who is looking down on us [the manger]. So it creates conflict between the community because we are coming from the community and they think we have some power but where we are going to report we do not have any power. That is the root of our challenge.”

28 Mlotshwa, L. et al. 2015. “Exploring the perceptions and experiences of community health workers using role identity theory.” *Global Health Action* 8 (1): 28045.

Frustrated futures

One of the strongest themes that emerged in all of the groups, mostly from younger participants, was the deep frustration with the lack of opportunities for them to create any kind of future career. Many young participants described how they had completed secondary school, either in their home country or in the settlement, but could not find work. Some had even completed (mostly online) tertiary level education, but had similarly limited work prospects—either they could not leave the settlement, or they had no right to work. Many young people in this situation turn to volunteer work as, at least, it gives them experience and something to do. What they really longed to do was to study further and then come back to work in the settlement, but this was not possible. This was clearly a cause of significant psychological stress for young people.

“One thing that is limiting us is our status as refugees. So no matter what our dream is we are limited. So you can have certain experience around here [as a volunteer] but it doesn't mean the experience is enough because you feel like you are in prison. Normal life is that when you get experience you can do more, apply for more jobs, or university maybe do a PHD or a Masters or something like that.”

They also expressed frustration that they could not develop within the organisations for which they worked.

“Us as refugees we are very limited. Not just as refugees but also as volunteers. I have been working with [NGO] since 2014. Up to now I am still moving in the same circle. If you were to think of getting another job or improving yourself with another organisation it will cause problems. If you are working with one organisation it is like you do not have the right to work with another organisation but in that organization you cannot move up. I have been 10 years with [NGO] but with the same salary.”

A few of the NGO managers we interviewed talked about the possibility of some incentive workers/volunteers moving up into salaried positions, they felt that this was preferable to hiring outsiders, but it was not possible because of the legal prohibition against work for refugees.

“We upgraded three incentive workers to head office in town, but we had such a problem to get UNHCR approval, it took such a long time as they had to prove they had a place to stay in town. Our managers say it is easier to employ nationals.”

This was backed up by refugee participants who told similar stories.

“I have got experience now with the volunteer work in [NGO] they wanted me to go to (the city) to work but I could not get a work permit so I could not take the salaried position.”

This theme grows out of the broader issue of refugee rights, particularly the rights to movement and to work, and is one of the reasons why advocacy around incentive workers needs to be linked to advocacy around the right to free movement and work. It is also related to the fact that NGO implementing partners do not generally see their engagement with incentive workers/volunteers through a self-reliance lens, with incentive work as a step towards independence, but rather with the perception that volunteers are there to be ‘used’ to further the aims of the NGO programme. This issue, which is linked to building career paths within NGO work is discussed further in theme four below.

Other useful commentary²⁹ points out that using volunteerism as the basis for service delivery in refugee settings is based on the idea of “help-giving volunteers and ... help-needing beneficiaries.” In fact, this is not

the case with refugee incentive workers/volunteers who have the same needs as the people they serve, “food, livelihoods, jobs and education for their children”.³⁰ The shift in perception that once a refugee becomes an incentive worker/volunteer they are no longer vulnerable was a thread that ran through all the group discussions. For example, it lies behind the idea that incentive workers/volunteers don’t need to be part of livelihood programmes because they are ‘already paid’, though the NGO managers must have some understanding of the fact that the payment cannot make any real difference to the volunteers’ self-reliance. It appears that there is a need to shift perceptions amongst NGO staff: from global and national technical advisors who write proposals, budgets, and guidelines for the work on incentive workers/volunteers, to local management staff about the reality of being a refugee incentive worker/volunteer.

Paula’s Story



Paula has been a refugee her entire life. She was born outside of her home country because her family fled a conflict there before she was born. When she was seventeen years old she arrived in the refugee settlement where she now lives with her mother, siblings and a few members of her extended family. Although Paula has been living here with her family for a number of years, none of them have been granted refugee status. The family has applied for refugee status a number of times, but their applications are repeatedly rejected despite the fact that they have had to flee from two different countries, two different wars, and are not able to return to their country of origin.

Because Paula has not been granted refugee status in her new country of residence, she has very limited access to services. “I remember when I was trying to move on with my education and life, I wasn’t able to apply for other stuff because I didn’t have a [refugee] status.” Paula has finished her secondary education and wants to go on to study. “I dream of studying more ... I want to be a social worker”.

29 Topp, S. M. et al. 2015. “Motivations for entering and remaining in volunteer service: Findings from a mixed-method survey among HIV caregivers in Zambia.” *Human Resources for Health* 13 (1): 13.

30 *Ibid*, p. 56

Because Paula is not able to attend any local universities, she participated in a social work diploma course with Jesuit World Learning. She now works as a facilitator with JWL helping other students complete their online programmes. Paula says that she enjoys working as a facilitator and that the work has given her more confidence. “I also discovered that I can be a good facilitator ... I really had loss of confidence and thought that I cannot do it, I saw the job was big. But as I went by it was fine”.

Despite the training that Paula received through JWL, there are very few opportunities for her to build a career. The law in her host country limits refugees right to freedom of movement and so Paula cannot go and find work outside of the refugee settlement or pursue further studies. “I did my diploma, 3 years social work, and I am thinking of furthering my studies like a degree ... I will study hard because I want to work in refugee camps because ... I know

how these camps operate. I know how it feels ... Life here is hard, as a refugee you feel insecure and in prison because you don't have rights like other people. Though you can have a dream of exploring the world you cannot because you're limited. Sometimes it's also sad to see that though you can have the potential to shine out, but due to what you have to go through as a refugee you get limited.”

Paula is one of many young, talented refugees who want to learn, work, and support their families and communities. Incentive work/volunteering offers a small opportunity for young refugees to use the talents and passion that they have. National laws and NGO policies, however, limit the opportunities these young people have for further education and professional growth as well as the potential for real refugee self-sufficiency. As Paula says: “hopefully when I study I will bring change”.

Advocacy messages

- NGOs need to acknowledge that refugee incentive workers/volunteers are as vulnerable as the people they serve and that the work they do is psychologically demanding. NGOs engaging refugee incentive workers/volunteers must include psychosocial support for the workers/volunteers as well as regular supervision that includes monitoring emotional wellbeing.
- Incentive workers/volunteers can face physical risk in the community because of their link with NGOs. NGOs that engage them need to assess these risks through participatory work with the incentive workers/volunteers and develop and apply risk management procedures to protect them.
- NGOs need to create opportunities for incentive workers/volunteers to create ‘careers’ within their work. Trainings should be externally accredited, and salaried positions that are within incentive worker’s/volunteer’s skills area need to be made open to them. Just as with salaried staff, a personal development framework should be part of their job package.
- Particular care should be taken to understand and meet the needs of young people who do incentive/volunteer work and their need to grow through tertiary education and experience in salaried work.

Theme 4: Incentive work/volunteering can build agency and psychological wellbeing

It was clear from all of the groups that becoming an incentive worker/volunteer had a positive impact at many levels. The most commonly mentioned was the sense of agency and confidence it gave people. Participants spoke, in particular, about how the traumatic experiences that led to them becoming refugees had affected them psychologically, making them feel hopeless, useless, and powerless. They reported that the work they did had begun to restore their sense of agency and even humanity. Most of the quotes below are referring to the two clay sculptures people made to represent 'me before I became a volunteer' and 'me after I became a volunteer'.

“ Before I became a volunteer I had my hands down, stressed. After struggling for a life in my home country my future came down because of the war that broke out in the country. I lost hope that I will have a future. No school. Everything was hard. At least in the reception centre I was a little bit happy because there were some shelters, but when we were relocated... you see reaching there that everything was bush. The first day that we were relocated it rained and we did not have a house, we sat in the rain me with my siblings with nothing... When I became a volunteer I applied for some position and I went to interviews and I passed. The day I came for training I started getting some skills on GBV. From there I thought that things would become fine for the future. And I see a great change in me. Physically I look now like someone. I am so happy and I am praying to god to open more doors to me and I can enrol back in school and I can achieve my goal. I still have goals. ”

“ I made two hearts, one is small and one is big. The small one is me before I started volunteering. And the big one is now. Before I was crying. But now I am not crying, I am becoming strong. This big heart does not show love, it is a strong heart. And before it was a weak heart. ”

“ So now I feel that I am able to face any problems in my life. The way I was before being volunteer it was for me very easy to cry when I face even a small problem. I was crying. But as of now I understood that there is no more time to cry because of a particular problem, what I need to do is to face that problem and keep on trying until I solve that problem ”

“ Now even if we do not get that much of a salary that we expected, at least we are different from that group in the community who do not have anything to do. That is why I came up with this image to show that I am a big man now, I have work to do. ”

“ This is [me] before and this is me now. Before my head was small and now it has become big because of experience, what I know now, the authority I have now. It was not easy because of our culture it is difficult as a female. But now I can stand and what I know now you can put me in front of a thousand people and I can give a speech without failing or feeling scared and I can do it in different languages because I speak 8 languages. Continued on next page. ”

“ Before I was closed somewhere in the kitchen. Cooking, washing, bathing children. An African woman, but now I am like a European or a white woman. I know my rights and I know how I can defend myself. Before it was just don't, don't, don't. All negative things. ”

It gave them a sense of status in their community.

“ I did two people. One is short and miserable. The other one is a bit ok. The reason why I put these two is because at the time when we were brought in 2017 before I became a volunteer. I went to school, but now even if you went to school you are just in the bush together. I thought how I am going to stand out in the community. So after some time I was selected as a volunteer and now I have some power in the community. I feel big, I feel ok. Even though the incentive is not much I am glad to serve my community. ”

Volunteering had also given them new knowledge which contributed to the sense that they had something to offer the community, that they were useful.

“ Now when I got this volunteer work I started getting knowledge and I started to be somebody. I started to notice that I am also useful to the community. I can teach the community. Before I couldn't even stand in front of my community and talk to them. But now I can stand with them and advise them and do things for myself. I can even buy things for myself, like this skirt I am wearing now. If they call me to the partner office I can come here looking smart. ”

Others talked about how being part of a group of incentive workers/volunteers had given them a social support system that they did not have before.

“ I was this sad face because I had a lot of anxiety and stress. But now that I am a volunteer I am a heart because I am now happier. I see my friends [who work with me]. ”

They recognised that though the work may not immediately allow them to earn a living wage, it gave them experience they could build on in the future and even take back to their countries of origin.

“ Experience lasts forever. We are not being paid much but ... the experience that we get today will help you tomorrow. ”

“ I came here when I was very young and because things are so bad in my country I need to start learning which is why I have acquired knowledge in Uganda and am practising it now so that when I go back to my country I will be able to change and transform the people from bad to good. ”

Many of the older volunteers talked about the skills they brought with them from their home countries. There were qualified nurses, teachers, psychologists, public health officers, and lawyers in the research groups who could not use their professional skills because of their status as refugees in their respective countries of asylum. Though they did express frustration at their inability to use their skills formally they also talked about working as incentive workers/volunteers as one way of using their skills.

“ I am interested in the education sector. I was in the army but then I had to run to [another country]. There I did some training and I worked as a teacher. Before I joined the army I had two offers. One was to go to the military cadets and the other was going to teacher college. I gave up my passion for education for the money I could earn in the army. But now I am able to go back to my passion. Now I am facilitating for the e-commerce training. I am not doing it for the money, I am doing it for the passion. ”

“ I am trained. I am a nurse and a psychologist. But I can't work. I tried to communicate with the medical school, and they said I must go back to school. I have to go back to the beginning. But I do not have fees. I have children so I have to make a small business. I also volunteer. If you have a skill you can offer then you should get involved. If you know something and can help then you step in. ”

What is interesting is that for the research participants the benefits of volunteering were always personal and did not relate to self-reliance or livelihood improvement. Yet amongst NGOs and others there is some thinking that paying an incentive helps at an economic level. For example, a study³¹ comparing refugee economies in Nakivale refugee camp in Uganda and Kakuma in Kenya makes the following point:

“ The comparison between outcomes for Congolese refugees in Nakivale and for those in Kakuma is striking. Congolese in Nakivale mainly work in agriculture and those in Kakuma are mainly employed as incentive workers by NGOs. The latter have far better welfare indicators across the board. Although incentive work may well be less sustainable than sources of employment that can be supported by local and national demand, it appears to offer a stable and secure source of employment to many refugees in Kakuma. For refugees in Uganda who are unable to make an adequate livelihood from cultivating small, low-fertility plots of land, it may be worthwhile for international organisations to consider a structured programme of incentive work. ”

While the results of the above research study show that incentives can make some difference to livelihoods and the local economy, what the refugees who participated in this research (who received very similar payments to those in Kakuma³²) told us was different. Many who were involved in livelihood programmes in fact talked about how the beneficiaries were more likely to achieve self-reliance support than they were.

“ We all know that in life we learn that in order to be able to help ourselves you find that as a volunteer you find that the beneficiaries are developing more than you. We are helping people with a chicken project. One participant has maybe [USD975] or maybe [USD1220] in a year and they also have the knowledge to help themselves even when they are out of the project. Continued on next page. ”

31 Betts, A. et al, Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions, Humanitarian Innovation Project, Oxford, 2014. p 36

32 Ibid

“ You will find that you who helped the participant does not even have a bicycle. That is why am supporting the point of refugees to get higher wages. ”

“ The other thing now is that the opportunities are there and you are supposed to carry a basket of bread to the other refugees and you are not supposed to take even one orange from that basket. ”

One issue that research participants could not understand was why the NGOs they worked for would often not let them participate in livelihood projects, they were told, “you are already getting help” or “it would be favouring you if you became part of the livelihood project”.

“ Community volunteers are a link. They are not refugees as such but they are also not staff as such. I cannot just go and ask for help. I work so I can't go for help but because I am a refugee I can't also be paid properly. ”

From the point of view of the incentive workers/volunteers, the stipend they received was often used for work expenses such as transport, airtime and supplies. It certainly did not allow for any development of self-reliance because it simply wasn't enough. In fact, for urban refugees their incentive/volunteer work often took them away from the work they were doing to try and make a living as described in theme two.

“ Another thing about our condition: they send us for meetings and we go to the meeting. But we shut our business to go to the meeting and we need that for income because the incentive is not enough to live. ”

A UNHCR discussion document on incentive work makes the important point that training and skill development for incentive workers is “designed with reference to the programming concerns of humanitarian agencies rather than the capacities of refugees”³³. If the perspective shifted and incentive work could be seen as a component of broader efforts to promote self-reliance, training for the work could develop skills that may help to support more sustainable livelihoods. For example, instituting savings and loan schemes, financial literacy, and life skills into incentive worker/volunteer training.

Linked to this would be shifting the almost universal practice of engaging (and keeping) refugees in lower skilled ‘volunteer’ work rather than creating opportunities for refugees (including those who bring existing professional skills) to become part of the regular employed NGO work force. Recent research and advocacy³⁴ on incentive workers/volunteers in the social service sector emphasises the need to engage community-based workers with a career trajectory in mind. Trainings should be linked to national certification and there should be the possibility for incentive workers/volunteers to move up into skilled and salaried positions. Of course, this practice would need to be accompanied by advocacy around refugees right to work, but there are examples given in the aforementioned study of the successful piloting of such practices in India, suggesting that it is a possible approach.

33 Morris, H., & Voon, F. (2014). *Which side are you on? Discussion paper on UNHCR's policy and practice of incentive payments to refugees*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5491577c9.pdf>

34 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, (2021). *Community volunteers and their role in case management processes in humanitarian contexts: A comparative study of research and practice*. <https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/report-community-engagement-case-management>; Global Social Service WorkForce Alliance. <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/blog/preventing-and-addressing-violence-against-children-important-role-community->

Using this livelihoods perspective of incentive work would “ground incentive work in the broader legal and institutional framework relating to refugee employment, and the realities of refugees’ access to work in practice”. It would also place NGO programming

one step closer to the aims of the UN Global Compact on Refugees³⁵ (2018) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)³⁶ which seeks to promote self-reliance.

Nelson’s Story



Nelson leads me through the streets of the refugee settlement where he lives, past the market and through some alleyways between his neighbours’ houses. Children greet him as we walk, shouting ‘teacher’ and waving as they pass us in the streets. Nelson used to work as a teacher in a school just outside the settlement and is popular amongst his former students.

Before having to flee from his own country, Nelson was an officer in the national military. He had always wanted to be a teacher but chose to go to a military academy instead of going to a teaching college because he thought he could earn more money in the army. After seeking asylum in a neighbouring country Nelson decided to pursue his dream to be a teacher again. He registered for a number of distance

learning courses while in the refugee settlement and was soon qualified as a teacher and teaching at the settlement’s secondary school.

Due to a change in the political situation in his new country of refuge, Nelson had to leave again. This time, however, he left as a qualified, experienced teacher. “I am happy that some of my students I taught in English made it to university, they had failed at some point and were repeating the year, but under my tutorship they excelled and made it to university.”

As we talk Nelson pulls out a bag full of papers. He pulls each document out of the bag and lays it on the floor for me to see. He has his high-school leavers certificate as well as a large collection

35 United Nations, (2018). Global Compact on Refugees. UN.

36 UNHCR, (2016) Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)

of other qualifications. Amongst the various certificates there are copies of contracts for work he did as a tutor, as an education officer with the Red Cross, notes from a primary school programme he facilitated, and copies of proposals he wrote while working with a child protection NGO in his second country of refuge. “I am very good at proposals, in [that country] I made lots of powerful proposals that were all successful”, he tells me proudly.

Nelson now works as a facilitator at the Jesuit World Learning (JWL) centre in the settlement. He earns a small incentive that is not even enough to cover the food he needs for the month. He is, however, happy to be teaching: “I am able to go back to my passion ... I am not doing it for the money, I am doing it for the passion.”

Nelson is not alone in his ability to offer his skills to the refugee community in which he now lives. There are many other refugees who have a broad range of skills and qualifications. There are nurses, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, judges, radio engineers, and public health officers. Yet, like Nelson, many of these people cannot work as professionals in the refugee settlements where they live. Some volunteer for NGOs who often justify engaging professionals such as Nelson for small stipends by referring to national laws that make it illegal for refugees to work. Many refugees are forced to make a living in informal trading or farming and are not able to use their professional skills at all.



Malek's Story

Malek is a quiet, polite man who lives on the corner of two dusty roads in the middle of a refugee settlement. We sit in the shade of a small tree that grows in the middle of his compound and talk about the work he does as a volunteer in the Village Health Team (VHT) while his children play on the swept earth around us. “From my arrival in

[the settlement] it was a bit difficult ... Then later I was selected as an interpreter in my community. When an implementing partner approached me I connected them to the community. That is how I came on board as a VHT. It is the community that came together and said that I would be suited to that position ... The community elected me

because it is from their observation of how I live in the community with them here. That is why they came to pick me into that position”.

Malek plays two roles in his community. He is a member of the VHT as well as the secretary for the Refugee Welfare Council (RWC) in his village. He was elected to both of these positions by his neighbours in his village. He tells me that he is proud of his positions in the community. “I am so confident now that I am working as a volunteer because the knowledge that I have it is really helpful to my own community and to my life. I am also glad that I am able now to achieve a goal of even treating my own children, managing my own family and the community at large”.

Malek is paid a small stipend of less than 10USD a month for his work with the VHT and even this small incentive is not paid out regularly. Malek is not bitter about the little pay that he gets for all the work that he does, however. “As for now I can progress little by little. As you can see in my compound, I have some houses, and even my room. I can access to buy something a little for my children. I can afford

even to buy school uniform for my children”. Malek is grateful for the extra little bit of flexibility that his incentive provides even if it is just to help him pay for the most basic necessities.

Malek also acknowledges the amount of work that he does in his position explaining that “we have a very big roll to be a community person. We do home visits. We register each household to know the population in my catchment area. We do monitoring house-to-house to look out for some cases ... even if the workload is there, I am so proud that I am able to make something”.

Malek’s work in the VHT and the RWC makes him proud. It provides him with knowledge to care for his own family and a way to express the care he has for his community. It also gives him additional status in the community as he is seen as a source of care and support. “Love is something that you are blessed with by god. This love is why my community members convinced me to be the leader. In that love I came to stand as a leader in my community. And now I have the respect of my community”.

Advocacy messages

- Engagement as an incentive worker/volunteer can have a positive impact on psychosocial wellbeing. It gives people a sense of purpose, of agency, and gives opportunities for them to express their need to help others. It also builds skills and confidence. This positive impact can be counteracted by the feeling of ‘being exploited’ by NGOs who do not provide them with appropriate psychosocial or economic support.

Theme 5: Independence and refugee-led organisations

This final theme emerged both from discussion and from observation of those who attended the research workshops. In each workshop there were refugees who had worked as incentive workers/volunteers for organisations previously and had decided to stop this work to undertake their own volunteer work either as an individual or within a refugee-led organisation. One reason for this was the stress related to working

within an organisation that saw them as “not valuable,” and the other was that they felt they could serve their community more effectively without the constraints of an NGO programme. They talked about being able to develop programmes that they felt met the real needs of their communities rather than implementing something that was inappropriate.

“ For example in our area of the camp most of the people say that it is a conflict zone where people fight because there are many tribes and people have different culture backgrounds. So the youth from that area saw a need to come up with the CBO because we are the cause and the solution to our problems. Many [NGO] partners intervened and there was no change. Many partners came to us to create awareness but there is no change, people are still fighting. Right now I think we are doing something important. People are trying to change, like for example in our CBO there are many tribes and we all work as a group. We are a peace building and environmental organization. First, we called the community leaders who came from different cultural backgrounds. We the youth called them and they came. The setup of a community is made up of leaders and that is why we involve them in the plan that we have. We told them the objectives, the vision and the mission of our plans so they really understand. ”

“ We formed drama groups which always tell the importance of peaceful coexistence amongst ourselves. We do drama because it will change many people since drama contains a lot of messages. We also have cultural galas whereby we call all the groups together and they see the value of each culture. At the end of the day we could see people mixing and laughing together and enjoying and that is what also made us different from other partners. ”

In the group run in urban Mombasa what emerged was that many of the research participants were in fact volunteers working alone, many as leaders to represent their particular language-group or origin community, or in a small organization they had created as refugees. This was mostly because there were very few national or international NGOs working in Mombasa. Though it was clear that there was room for support with programming, fund raising, finances, and governance for such individual or group efforts, it was also clear that they were providing an important service. In particular, these groups linked refugees to local services such as the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) for documentation and legalisation, health services, and legal services, as well as providing emergency food and basic needs using their own and other fellow refugees' resources.

“ All of us are just volunteers. We are not linked to an organisation. You help people from your country. We just help each other. They will call you if they find someone from your community. They will call you to come and pick them up and take care of them. ”

“ Every day I come from home, I go and arrange my business and then I go to the office [CBO]. I started volunteering in 2018. There is no salary and there are many problems. You have to provide your own money to take the new refugees coming into the office to get papers. Some they came here from the camp and they have nowhere to sleep. They want to go to the office to get papers but you have to host them until they can go. ”

In Uganda the groups were mostly created and led by young people. What stood out was the wide range of programme approaches they used and the issues they sought to address. Two interesting characteristics of their programming are that they responded to needs

that they had identified themselves, and they used the resources (such as adults with particular skills) already available within their communities.

“ We knew that what was needed was peace building. We had a man in our area who was good in drama and he helped us to make dramas about peace for our discussions in schools. ”

In Uganda and Kenya some of the participants in each group were from refugee-led organisations that were affiliated to their country branch of the Refugee-led Organization Network (RELON). These are the local country arms of the ARN. These participants clearly had a sense of identity linked to RELON who had interacted with them around capacity building trainings and help with the process of registration needed for fund raising. While this process is clearly in its early stages it is clear that this spontaneous movement towards refugee-led initiatives is important. Recent work on refugee economies in Uganda³⁷ makes the point that:

“ Community structures and personal networks offer an extremely important supplementary source of social protection [to UNHCR support]. A large range of refugee-led community-based organisations operate in Kampala and Nakivale. Some have considerable capacity and others are based on small networks. In Kampala, refugee-led organisations such as YARID, Bondeko, and HOCW are operating at such a significant scale that they should merit both international recognition and opportunities to apply for funding. Furthermore, refugees’ own institutions often provide ways to address market imperfections through providing culturally specific sources of insurance and finance. ”

“ International donors should consider piloting direct funding to refugee-led community-based organisations. Meanwhile, organisations such as UNHCR should consider ways to offer more refugee-led organisations in Uganda implementing or operating partner status. Priority should be given to organisations that address identifiable gaps in social protection, for example in relation to access to education. ”

Perhaps the last word in this thematic discussion should go to a young woman who described what she had learned about her own agency as a refugee from her involvement in volunteer work.

“ I have got trainings and skills that have gone ahead to impact the community that is an inspiration even to myself. As I am growing I am also supporting other people and this means we are growing. It is not just me who is growing but also helping other people to grow. There is more to being a refugee than someone who needs humanitarian relief. ”

37 Betts, A. et al (2019), Refugee Economies in Uganda: What Difference Does the Self-Reliance Model Make? (Oxford: RSC). p. 37



Boniface's Story

Boniface is an energetic young man with an athletic build and a warm smile. He lives in a refugee settlement where he spends most of his time volunteering with a range of youth groups and support programmes. Boniface loves playing football and started a small sports academy where he offers training to youth from the refugee settlement. The academy has football teams, netball teams and volleyball teams. Boniface used his own limited savings to buy equipment for the sports teams. "When I started we had a lot of people because they loved it, but after running out of material like balls get broken, numbers went down ... I was feeling pity and didn't want to let them down. I kept trying to train them and play. Up to now I have 76 kids that I'm training".

In addition to the football, Boniface runs a yoga studio with three of his friends. "We found yoga to be nice so we learnt it online and we thought we can help our community ... Anyone can come and we encourage everyone even kids". Boniface completed a yoga trainer certificate and, together with his friends, gathered enough resources to build their own yoga studio on a hill overlooking the settlement.

When Boniface is not coaching football or leading yoga classes, he spends his time participating in a number of youth advocacy groups. In 2020 Boniface started a peer educator group that runs

independently and aims to find solutions to the problems that youth face in the settlement. Plan International has since identified this project as a success and started replicating it. Through this work Boniface also started volunteering as an advisor to the Youth Parliament. In this role he hosts events, designs awareness campaigns, and offers guidance to the members of the parliament.

Boniface does all of this work for free and so, after completing a diploma in social work through Jesuit World Learning in 2022, he started working as a centre manager where he supports students participating in online courses. He receives a small salary from this work that he uses to support his mother and his many siblings. He is the only person in his household who earns any money.

When asked what motivates him to do so much work even though most of it is unpaid, he responds: "To be honest that is my nature since I was born. Helping is in my blood. There are many things that have been motivating me to work for all those places that I mentioned. I want children in the next generation to grow in a different manner to the situation that I grew up in in the past. Because I grew up in a certain environment where I couldn't even be given something that I needed. I didn't meet all my rights. So now I want to support the children. I have seen a good thing and know what the other children deserve."

Advocacy messages

“There is more to a refugee than someone who needs humanitarian relief.”

- Refugees can, and do, organise to support their communities through volunteer work without the support of external NGOs. Their unique understanding of the context can make their work more appropriate and effective than that of outside organisations.
- Humanitarian organisations need to change the perception that they are needed to bring social and other services to refugee communities. Their role should be, from the start, to plan for their own withdrawal by building the capacity of local organisations to take over their work once their project timeframe is over (which it inevitably will be).
- Organisations such as UNHCR should consider ways to offer more refugee-led organisations implementing or operating partner status.

4. Conclusion

Incentive work/volunteering could make significant contributions to the objectives of supporting refugee self-reliance and encouraging refugee participation and empowerment outlined in the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). What this research shows us is that the potential for contribution is restricted by a lack of critical thought from NGOs and donors into *how* refugee incentive workers/volunteers are engaged. They are seen as a resource to be used, rather than a resource that can bring greater effectiveness to the work because they come from within the community, and their deep commitment to the work they do. Their agency, resilience, creativity, inventiveness, existing skills, education, and personal internal power need to be recognised and built on alongside their vulnerability

as part of a population that has experienced traumatic events. It is also clear that if being part of incentive work/volunteering within an NGO is to really make a difference in refugee's lives there will need to be ongoing advocacy and political will to change the legal context in the countries where this research took place.

This report sought to bring the voices of refugees to the development of a more coherent and ethical approach to engaging refugees in community work. ARN has both the expertise and political will to listen to these voices and to advocate for both the incentive workers/volunteers that participated in this work as well as the thousands who did not. The hope is that this report has captured some of the voices needed for this task.

Appendix 1

Research workshop for incentive workers

Note: We used Activity 5 and 7 in the first workshop but realised that the discussion made participants feel sad and hopeless so we made the decision to leave the activities out and explore these topics more generally in other discussions.

Programme

Introductory games – these will be fun and help participants get to know each other and the facilitator and create an informal atmosphere.

Activity 1: What do you do as an incentive worker?

Hand out A4 size paper and crayons

Say: *“Draw/make a picture of the work you do as (use local term for incentive worker) and all the places you go to do it. It does not have to be a beautiful drawing – we often think drawing is for children but as grown-ups it can help us to think about things differently. Start by drawing your house and show me your family and then show the work you do in the area.”*

When they have drawn they each tell the group about their drawing. You can ask questions. For example, if they mention they go to the Save the Children/UNHCR/WFP office for a meeting – ask what they discuss at the meeting or what they do at a training.

Questions to find out more:

- Tell me about what you do in a day – explore balance between work and home and community life.
 - Distances between homes, time spent on work?
 - What kind of work do you do? Roles and level of responsibility and decision-making and leadership.
 - How were you selected?
 - Tell me about any training you had?
 - Who do you work with? Explore supervisors, support, peers
 - How does the work make you feel?
 - What emotional support do you get?
 - Explore reporting and recording that they may have to do
 - How are you seen by people in the community? Do they say anything about you? What and why?
 - Are you ever at risk with the work you do?
 - How does your family feel about the work you do?
-

Activity 2: Storytelling

Tell me a story about a time you felt worried as an incentive worker

Start by telling them not to mention names at all.

After they have told the story ask:

How could you have been helped? Or What would have helped you?

Tell me a story about a day you were happy as an incentive worker

Start by telling them not to mention names at all.

After they have told the story ask:

What could be done to give you more happy days? By you, the organization employing you?

Activity 3: Exploring power dynamics

Use the cut-out figures of different sizes.

Introduce the figures by saying “*You know sometimes people think they are bigger than us, better than us – like this person here thinks they are bigger than this one*” Show two figures of different sizes.

“*This is you as a volunteer (show a small figure). Tell me is your manager/supervisor/like this (show the figure that is bigger than the one of the incentive worker) when she works with you or like this (show the one that is the same size)? How does this make you feel?*”

Go on to explore other levels of the hierarchy within the organization with the collection of figures. Eventually build a whole picture going up to country managers and donors etc. – asking ‘*do these people know what is happening on the ground? Do they understand?*’

Activity 5: Livelihood needs met?

Draw a family in the middle of a large piece of paper, leaving lots of space around the drawing.

Say: “*This family can meet all their needs. They have:*

- *Enough food for everyone to feel satisfied (i.e. they have had enough to eat) each day*
- *Money for school needs for children*
- *Dignified and safe housing*
- *Can get basic needs like water, power to cook, sanitation*
- *Some time for rest and recreation*

How close do you feel your family is to being like this family? Take a pen and put an X on the paper to show how similar or different you feel your family is from this family. If you are similar make the X close to them. If you think you are very different put your X far away from them.”

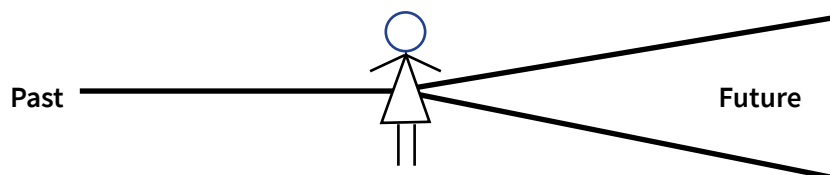
Activity 6: Recording payment and time

Hand out pieces of paper.

Say: I want you to write down 2 things on the paper. What you are paid each month, or if you are paid daily what you are paid daily or weekly. Say if it is weekly, monthly daily. Then write how many hours you spend every day doing the work. No one will see the paper. Fold it over and I will look at it later – don't put your names on it.

Activity 7: Does incentive work contribute to long-term sustainable livelihoods of refugees or have any long-term effect?

Put the figure of Johanna on a long piece of paper. Then draw lines like this.



Say: This is Johanna now, this is her past and in front of her is her future – does her work as an incentive worker make any difference for her future? How?

Activity 8: Being an incentive worker

This activity looks at people's inner motivations and the impact of being an incentive worker. It will bring up positive things so is a good way to end the workshop. We don't want to end on a negative note as people then go home feeling sad. We will celebrate each person as they present their objects and praise them for their contribution to their community as an incentive worker, even though it can sometimes be difficult.

“Make two pictures/objects from the clay. One will tell me

- How I was before I became an incentive worker
 - How I am now I am an incentive worker
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Inside back cover

Africa Refugee Network (ARN) and OXFAM **Contact details?**



OXFAM

