



Refugee E-nclusion

The Barriers and Opportunities for Integrating Refugees in Bidibidi, Uganda, into the Digital Economy



<https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/promotion-inclusion-and-protection-refugees-and-host-communities-gig>

Executive Summary

This report examines the challenges and opportunities in integrating refugees from Bidibidi, Uganda, into the digital economy, focusing on expanding access to digital employment. While the digital economy offers the potential for refugees to participate in remote work and build self-reliance, significant obstacles remain. These include limited digital literacy, inadequate connectivity and device access, regulatory restrictions, and energy shortages that hinder meaningful digital engagement.

The report explores these barriers in detail and proposes actionable solutions, such as implementing tailored digital skills training, improving internet and device accessibility through infrastructure upgrades, advocating for supportive policy reforms, and fostering connections between refugees and potential employers. In addressing these areas, Bidibidi can ensure the digital inclusion of refugees, illustrating how displaced populations can contribute to and benefit from the digital economy. These initiatives can transform digital access into a realistic avenue for economic resilience, social inclusion, and sustainable development for refugees in Uganda and beyond.

Introduction:

Bidibidi is one of the refugee settlements in Uganda, where nearly 200,000 refugees have found their homes (NRC, 2024). With Uganda and the global economy embracing technological advancements comes an opportunity for refugees to join the digital economy. This could open doors to jobs and self-sufficiency. Providing refugees with the opportunity of decent work while in transitory situations. Challenges such as digital literacy and limited internet access reduce their full participation. The need for training programmes, IT infrastructure, and employment opportunities will be discussed. This report aims to tackle these obstacles head-on by offering suggestions to ensure equitable opportunities for refugees in the Bidibidi refugee camp.

Background:

Uganda hosts over 1.5 million refugees, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting nations globally. Most of these refugees come from neighbouring South Sudan, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with smaller populations from Burundi, Somalia, and other countries (Statista, 2023; UNHCR, 2023a).

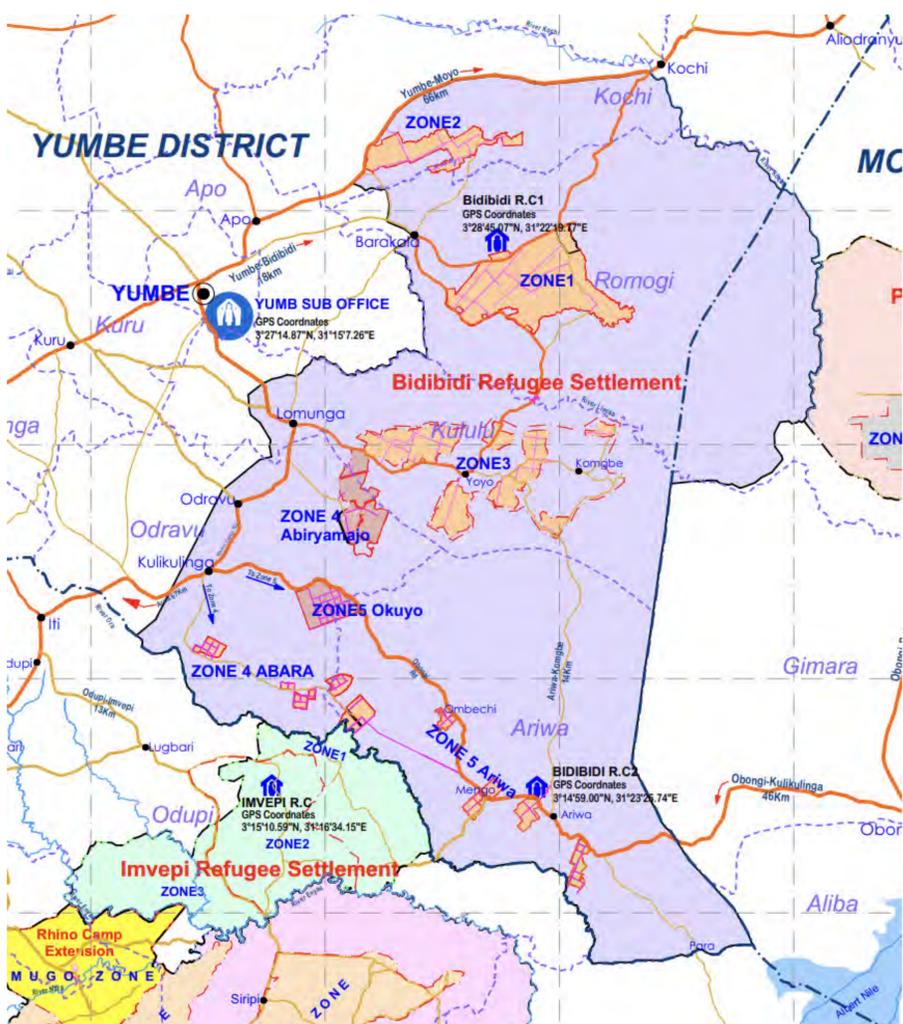
Bidibidi, one of the largest refugee settlements globally, consists primarily of South Sudanese refugees who fled conflict and instability in their home country (UNHCR, 2023b). Uganda's refugee policy, known for being one of the most progressive in the world, provides refugees with the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to social services (European Commission, 2024). However, despite these rights, refugees in Uganda face significant challenges related to economic inclusion, particularly in accessing opportunities within the digital economy.



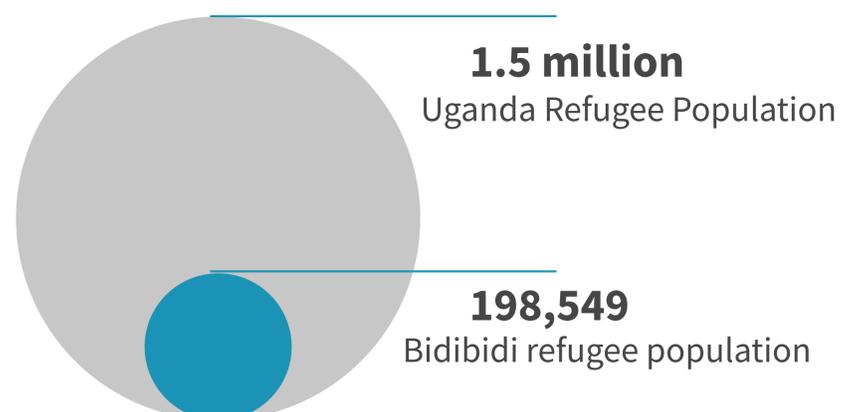
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-map-of-Uganda-showing-the-location-of-Bidibidi-refugee-settlement-Source-https_fig1_352722712

Globally, the role of digitalisation in migration and displacement has expanded, as mobile phones and internet connectivity have become vital tools for communication, access to information, and economic activities. Digital connectivity offers refugees a pathway to remote work, educational resources, and social support networks. However, digital divides persist due to a lack of access to devices, limited internet connectivity, and skills gaps, which prevent many refugees from fully participating in the digital economy (GSMA, 2020; Bastaki and Charles, 2022).

The specific context of Bidi Bidi highlights these challenges, with limited internet infrastructure and high costs for devices and data plans creating barriers to digital inclusion. Addressing these issues is critical to enabling refugees in Bidibidi to access digital livelihoods, achieve self-reliance, and contribute to the local economy (Samuel Hall, 2018; Avanti Communications, 2020).



<https://data.unhcr.org/es/documents/details/64539>



The Problems

Digital Skills Gap

Many refugees in Bidibidi lack basic digital literacy, limiting their ability to access remote work and digital platforms (ILO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

Connectivity & Device Issues

High costs and limited infrastructure prevent many refugees from accessing reliable internet and affordable devices, essential for digital inclusion (GSMA, 2020; AEDIB, 2024).

Regulatory & Policy Barriers

Although Uganda's policies are progressive, refugees still face bureaucratic and legal obstacles that restrict access to digital work (Samuel Hall, 2018; IOM, 2021).

Energy & Infrastructure Constraints

Inconsistent electricity supply in Bidibidi hampers refugees' ability to charge devices and engage in online activities, limiting their digital engagement (UNHCR, 2024).



The Problems:

1. Digital Skills Gap

A lack of digital literacy and technical skills is a critical barrier preventing refugees in Bidibidi from accessing digital work. Many refugees entering training programs must gain foundational digital skills, limiting their ability to navigate online platforms and engage in basic digital tasks. These skills are necessary for remote work opportunities and access to digital resources to be within reach for refugees within the camp (ILO, 2024; Digitally Powered, 2024).

Research shows that entry-level roles in the digital economy require a basic understanding of digital tools, which many refugees lack (Bastaki and Charles, 2022). This issue is particularly concerning given the educational barriers within refugee communities, where limited formal schooling and language constraints further complicate digital skills acquisition (UNHCR, 2023b). Training programs must account for diverse educational backgrounds and cultural contexts within refugee communities. Addressing these needs is critical to fostering essential skills that can open doors to digital employment.

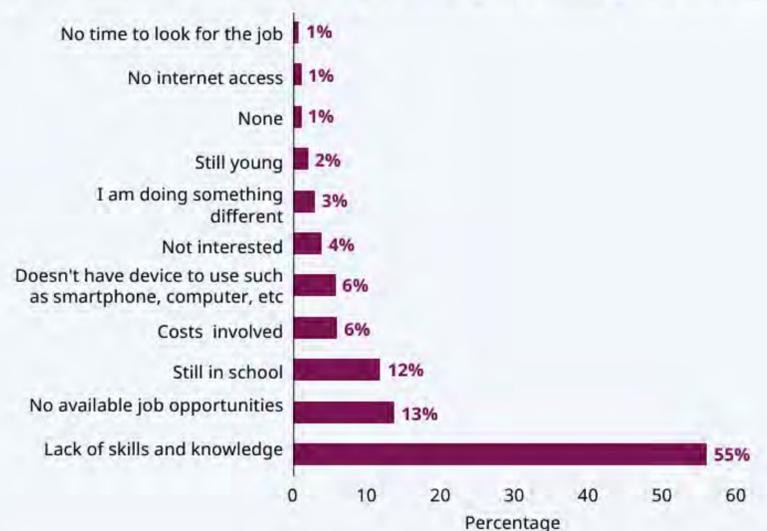
2. Connectivity & Device Access

Reliable internet connectivity and access to affordable devices are essential for digital participation, yet these resources are hard to come by in Bidibidi. Refugees here face limited infrastructure, high device costs, and expensive data plans that hinder their ability to connect online. The GSMA (2020) report, *The Digital Lives of Refugees*, highlights that limited connectivity prevents many displaced populations from fully engaging with digital resources. Rural settlements like Bidibidi face additional obstacles where the necessary infrastructure is often lacking (AEDIB, 2024). Efforts to improve connectivity and device access have progressed, but internet access remains a privilege for only a small segment of the refugee population (Avanti Communications, 2020; ILO, 2024).

The cost of devices and data plans is exclusionary for many, reinforcing the digital divide. Public-private partnerships, such as those between GSMA, telecom providers, and humanitarian organisations, have shown promise in other regions. For example, a pilot project will occur in Mahama Camp in Rwanda under Innovation Norway. This will ensure sustainable solutions to ensure internet access for the refugees in the camp (Innovation Norway, 2024). Implementing similar partnerships in Bidi Bidi could help bridge the connectivity gap.

Affordable device programs could also increase accessibility, as observed in Canada's Digital Inclusion of Refugees Resettling to Canada report, which showed that limited access to devices significantly hampers refugee digital engagement (IOM, 2021). Enabling affordable device access would allow refugees to utilise digital tools more effectively, further supporting their inclusion in the digital economy.

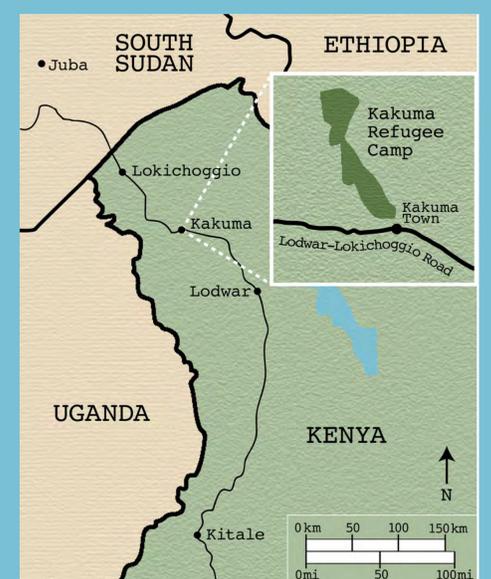
► Figure 4. Reasons for not looking for digital work, by legal status, gender and district



<https://www.ilo.org/publications/rapid-assessment-digital-skills-gaps-and-feasibility-microwork-employment>

Case Study Spotlight: Digital Inclusion in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, home to over 200,000 refugees, faces challenges similar to those faced by Bidibidi in terms of digital inclusion. Organisations like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) have introduced targeted digital skills training programs, improving refugees' employability and digital literacy (IRC, 2021; NRC, 2022). Public-private partnerships, such as GSMA and Safaricom's affordable mobile data initiative, have expanded connectivity, demonstrating the potential impact of infrastructure improvements (GSMA, 2020; Safaricom, 2020). Additionally, renewable energy solutions from UNHCR and the IKEA Foundation, like solar-powered charging stations, provide reliable power for digital devices (IKEA Foundation, 2021; UNHCR, 2024). Kakuma's experiences offer a model for Bidi Bidi, highlighting the value of coordinated efforts in digital skills training, connectivity, and sustainable energy.



https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Kakuma-Town-and-Kakuma-Refugee-Camp-Courtesy-of-Rahul-Oka_fig1_340160437

The Problems:

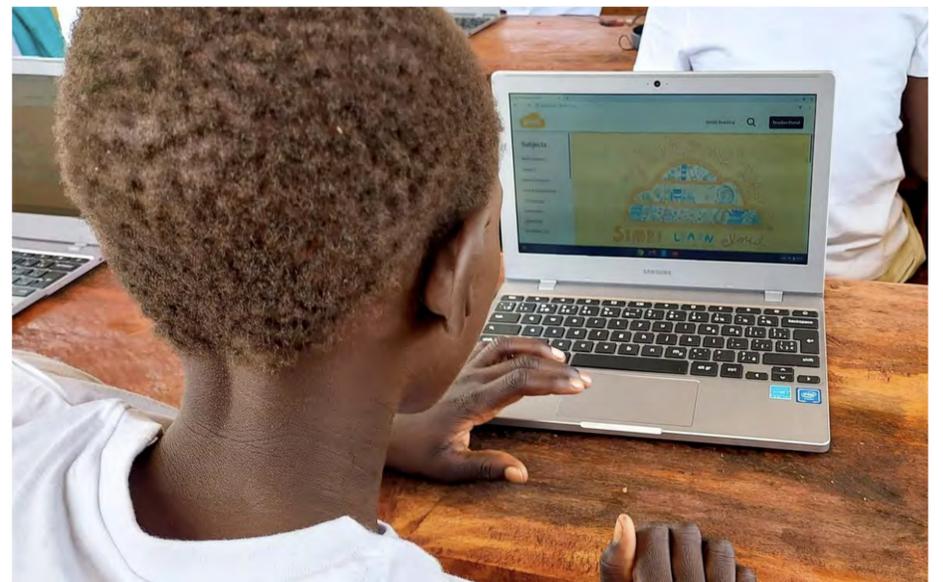
3. Regulatory & Policy Barriers

Although Uganda's refugee policies are widely regarded as progressive, gaps remain in frameworks that support remote digital work. Regulatory barriers, such as SIM card registration requirements and limited legal support for online work, restrict digital access and economic participation for refugees (Samuel Hall, 2018). For instance, government-issued IDs are often required for SIM registration, posing a significant barrier for refugees who lack such documentation (Digital Inclusion of Refugees Resettling to Canada, 2021).

Advocacy for policy adjustments, such as creating digital work permits or waiving ID requirements for SIM access, could greatly enhance digital access. The OECD and UNHCR's multi-stakeholder action plan underscores the importance of regulatory reforms to empower refugees by reducing bureaucratic hurdles and opening pathways to economic self-reliance (OECD and UNHCR, 2018). Uganda's adoption of supportive policies for digital work could serve as a model for other host nations, benefiting both the refugees and the country's economy.

4. Energy & Infrastructure Constraints

A reliable power supply is essential for digital engagement, yet Bidibidi faces frequent energy shortages that make it difficult for refugees to charge devices and stay connected. Without consistent energy access, refugees are often cut off from digital resources, which limits their ability to engage in online learning or work. UNHCR's Powering Up the Bidibidi Settlement report emphasises the role of renewable energy solutions, such as solar power, in addressing energy needs in refugee settlements (UNHCR, 2024).



<https://simbifoundation.org/learncloud/>

For example, in Kakuma Refugee Camp, the IKEA Foundation's solar energy project has provided consistent power for charging devices, enabling greater participation in digital activities (IKEA Foundation, 2021). Expanding similar renewable energy solutions in Bidibidi could reduce dependency on limited local resources and support the community's digital needs. Collaborations between governments, private sectors, and international organisations are critical for establishing sustainable energy infrastructure in Bidibidi. Reliable access to power would not only empower refugees but also enhance the sustainability of Uganda's refugee support model, creating a resilient system aligned with global sustainability goals.



<https://summit.cardano.org/community-led-events/uganda-bidibidi->

Recommendations & Opportunities for Digital Inclusion:

1. Expand Community-Based Digital Skills Training Programs

Addressing the digital skills gap among refugees in Bidibidi is essential for meaningful participation in the digital economy. Community digital skills training can be highly effective, particularly when programs are tailored to the specific needs of the refugee population. Various organisations, such as the Simbi Foundation, have introduced initiatives like *LearnCloud*, which provides offline digital learning resources for remote communities (Simbi Foundation, 2024). Na'amal has been training refugees in soft/human skills for remote work (Na'amal, 2024); additionally, the *Learning to Earning* program by UNICEF has demonstrated the impact of digital skills training for young refugees, improving their employability and economic resilience (UNICEF, 2024). NGOs, local organisations, and international partners could collaborate to scale similar community-centred training programs in Bidibidi. (ILO, 2024).

2. Improve Connectivity and Access to Affordable Devices

Ensuring that refugees have reliable access to the internet and affordable devices is crucial for digital inclusion. Public-private partnerships can help bridge this gap by working with telecom companies to improve connectivity infrastructure and offer affordable data plans within the settlement. For example, Avanti Communications has partnered with UNHCR to provide satellite broadband connectivity to refugee settlements across East Africa, addressing the connectivity challenges that hinder digital learning and work opportunities (Avanti Communications, 2020). Expanding such initiatives in Bidibidi could significantly enhance internet access. The AEDIB project, which focuses on bridging digital gaps between refugee settlements and urban areas like Arua City, Uganda, could be a model for similar efforts in Bidibidi (AEDIB, 2024). Additionally, providing affordable or subsidised digital devices would enable refugees to access digital tools, further supporting digital skills training and online work opportunities (GSMA, 2020).

3. Strengthen Policy Advocacy to Enable Digital Work for Refugees

Advocating for policy reforms is essential to remove barriers that prevent refugees from fully participating in the digital economy. While Uganda's refugee policies are relatively progressive, additional policy adaptations could support remote and digital work opportunities for refugees (IOM, 2021). Regulatory adjustments, such as waiving ID requirements for SIM registration or providing digital work permits, can improve refugee access to remote work opportunities. Engaging policymakers through platforms like the OECD-UNHCR action plan could further support these changes, helping Uganda become a leader in refugee digital inclusion (OECD and UNHCR, 2018).

4. Expand Renewable Energy Solutions for Reliable Power Access

Consistent power supply is a major challenge in Bidibidi, affecting refugees' ability to charge devices and stay connected. The *Powering Up the Bidi Bidi Settlement* report underscores the importance of renewable energy solutions to address these needs. Without reliable power, refugees are cut off from online learning and work opportunities, which hinders their economic participation (UNHCR, 2024). Partnering with renewable energy providers would ensure sustainable power sources, allowing refugees to keep devices charged, engage in digital learning, and work consistently.



Solar pumping water scheme - Geneva Solutions



https://grameenfoundation.org/images/1140xAUTO_crop_center-center_none/blog-201908-denise-bidibidi_200129_183212.jpg

5. Foster private sector partnerships in displacement settings

Creating direct connections between refugees and the private sector is key to expanding digital employment opportunities, investing in digital infrastructure and capacity building. Partnerships with private sector can help refugees in Bidibidi access digital skills trainings and remote jobs. Initiatives like the *Guide on Redesigning the Tech Hiring Process to Include Displaced Talent* emphasise the need for inclusive hiring practices (Tent et al., 2021). Developing private sector partnerships in displacement settings would facilitate pathways to dignified work and economic self-sufficiency for refugees and the wider community.

Concluding Remarks:

This report has highlighted the key barriers and limitations of integrating refugees in Bidibidi into the digital economy, including digital competencies, connectivity challenges, regulatory restrictions, and energy shortages. These areas prevent refugees from fully participating in the digital economy.

Targeted digital skills training that considers refugees' diverse educational backgrounds is crucial for empowering individuals to engage meaningfully in the digital world. Improving connectivity and making devices more affordable through partnerships with telecom providers will enable broader access to digital tools and services. Policy reform, such as adjusting ID requirements for SIM access, can further open pathways for remote work and digital engagement. Finally, expanding renewable energy solutions, like solar-powered charging stations, ensures that refugees have consistent access to power for digital employment and online training. Together, these measures can support the development of digital access, empowering refugees in Bidibidi to pursue connected, resilient employment opportunities.



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