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URRI

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UGANDA REFUGEE RESILIENCE INITIATIVE

Taking Root

Building resilience in Uganda's refugee-hosting communities

Annual Report | 2025

Adjumani · Lamwo · Kyegegwa · Yumbe · Obongi · Moyo · Koboko · Terego · Madi Okollo



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A WORD FROM THE URRI SECRETARIAT

This is what a great beginning looks like

Every lasting change begins much like a seed placed in the soil. At first, there is little to see. Beneath the surface, however, the seed is putting down roots and building the foundation it needs, before it can emerge into the light.

Our first year of implementing the Uganda Refugee Resilience Initiative (URRI) has, in many ways, been like planting a seed. We have focused on creating the right conditions and laying the foundations for full scale implementation. Farmer groups have been established and trained, soils prepared, savings mobilised, seeds multiplied, and women's voices heard in spaces where they were too often absent.

While this was technically the programme's first year, URRI builds on more than a decade of Danish support in Northern Uganda, refining and strengthening approaches alongside local governments and civil society partners. URRI's predecessor, the Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative (NURI), demonstrated what is possible when development programming takes the refugee-host nexus seriously and invests in communities.

Under URRI, we carry that commitment forward. Where NURI planted the seeds of climate-smart agriculture, URRI is cultivating a more integrated system: ensuring agriculture works *with* (not against) nature, linking livelihoods to markets, connecting environmental restoration with governance, and embedding gender equality and social inclusion across everything we do.

This report covers January to December 2025: five months of inception followed by seven months of implementation across nine districts and two consortia. We plan to make this the first in a series of annual reports. The goal is to bring you along on our journey of honest reflection, continuous learning, and steady improvement.

We are grateful to the Government of Uganda and to the Royal Danish Embassy/Danida for the partnership and support that make this initiative possible.

We are equally grateful to our twelve amazing implementing partners, led by the Danish Refugee Council and Save the Children International. Their commitment to collaboration demonstrates what can be achieved when organisations work together to deliver the best possible support to refugees and the communities that host them.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank the local governments, OPM officials working in the refugee settlements, and communities of Adjumani, Lamwo, Kyegegwa, Yumbe, Obongi, Moyo, Koboko, Terego, and Madi Okollo. Their leadership, trust, participation, and willingness to embark on this journey with us have laid the foundation for everything that follows.



Cecilie Gundersen

Head of Secretariat

Uganda Refugee Resilience Initiative (URRI)

URRI AT A GLANCE

URRI contributes to enhanced climate resilience of women, men and youth in refugee and host communities and promote inclusive, cohesive, and environmentally sustainable development in refugee-affected areas in line with local priorities.

Outcome 1: Enhanced climate adaptation and resilience through inclusive climate-smart agriculture

Outcome 2: Sustainable management of the environment

Outcome 3: Enhanced gender equality and women's empowerment

Duration: 2024–2028

Total Budget: DKK 295 million (approx. USD 45 million)

Target Reach: 50,000 smallholder farmers and their families
(~250,000 people)

Geographic Coverage: 9 refugee-hosting districts across Northern and Western Uganda (Madi-Okollo, Terego, Koboko, Yumbe, Obongi, Moyo, Adjumani, Lamwo and Kyegegwa)

Delivery Model: Two consortia with 12 partner organisations:

Danish Refugee Council with partners
DanChurchAid, CEFORD, PICOT, and Palm Corps

Save the Children with partners
World Vision, AVSI, KRC, UGANET, YSAT, and U-RIL

SECTION 01

The place, and the people who call it home

Uganda hosts more refugees than any other country on the African continent. More than 2 million people (the vast majority from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo) have found safety here, welcomed under one of the world's most progressive refugee policies. Uganda allows refugees to move freely, to work, to cultivate land, to send their children to school and to access public health facilities alongside Ugandan nationals.

While Uganda's refugee model has rightly been hailed as an example for the world, it is facing growing pressure. Humanitarian needs continue to rise while humanitarian funding is declining. At the same time, refugee-hosting communities are carrying the cumulative burden of sharing land, natural resources, and public services in locations already affected by poverty, environmental degradation, and climate change.

The nine districts where URRI works (Adjumani, Lamwo Yumbe, Obongi, Moyo, Koboko, Terego, Madi Okollo and Kyegegwa) are among Uganda's most environmentally and economically stressed. Rainfall is increasingly erratic. Dry spells are longer and floods are more severe. In many areas, soils are showing the effects of decades of unsustainable farming and rapid deforestation driven by need for firewood and charcoal.

And yet, these communities are not defined by their challenges. They are defined by their resourcefulness. By the farmer groups that have been saving together for years, pooling shillings every week in a box kept in someone's house. By the older women who know exactly which trees can survive a drought, and which soils hold water longest. By the young people who are actively trying to build their own futures.

URRI works with both refugee and host communities, because their lives are already intertwined. They farm the same land. They use the same markets. They share the same climate. They face the same dry spells. In communities where challenges are shared, resilience must be built together.

This report is a story about what happens when partners come together to invest in both refugees and the communities that host them. In women, men, girls and boys. And in the land, the water, and the ecosystems that sustain them.



SECTION 02

Standing on solid ground: the NURI legacy

URRI did not begin with a blank sheet of paper. It is the latest chapter in more than two decades of Danish investment in resilience, livelihoods, and local development in Northern Uganda.

Since the late 1990s, Denmark has supported communities across Northern Uganda through successive programmes aimed at strengthening self-reliance, rebuilding livelihoods, and promoting equitable development in areas affected by conflict, displacement, and poverty. This long-term engagement evolved through the Self-Reliance Strategy (1999–2003), the DAR and RALNUC programmes (2004–2014), and the Recovery and Development in Northern Uganda programme (2014–2018), each contributing lessons, relationships, and approaches that informed what came next.

Most recently, the Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative (NURI) served as Denmark's flagship resilience programme in the region. Implemented between 2018 and 2023, NURI sought to improve the livelihoods of farming households by increasing resilience to climate change through climate-smart agriculture, water resource management, and rural infrastructure. The programme worked across 13 districts in West Nile and Acholi and aimed to increase agricultural production, improve household incomes, strengthen food security, and create the conditions for more resilient rural economies.

The results were substantial. NURI reached more than 115,000 people, constructed nearly 800 community access roads, established over 500 food forests, and completed more than 400 water resource management projects. Female refugees participating in the programme more than doubled their incomes. And many of the farmer groups, extension workers, savings associations, and local government structures strengthened through NURI remain active today and continue to form the foundation on which URRI is building.

“After applying climate-smart agriculture practices such as mulching, pruning, staking, weed control, and pest management, my vegetable harvest improved significantly. Last season, I earned between UGX 500,000 and UGX 800,000 from selling tomatoes and okra. With the money, I purchased a solar system, which I use to light my home and earn additional income by charging phones for neighbours. I also invested in a small produce buying and selling business, which is picking up well. Most importantly, I am now able to provide food for my children every day and meet their school requirements.”

- Marcelina Everistos is a South Sudanese refugee, living in Lamwo, who participated in the NURI programme.

In 2021, the Mid-Term Review of the Denmark-Uganda Country Programme concluded that the NURI programme was highly relevant and strongly aligned with the needs expressed by participating communities. At the same time, the review also highlighted the growing importance of climate adaptation and environmental sustainability, recommending further investments in climate resilience, ecosystem restoration, and the testing of new approaches that could inform a future programme. These recommendations helped shape the thinking that would eventually become URRI.

A feasibility study commissioned to design URRI found that NURI's greatest strength laid not only in its results, but in its approach. It highlighted the importance of strong government alignment, investment in local capacities, close collaboration with local organisations, farmer-centred programming, community participation, and adaptive management. These principles remain at the heart of URRI today.

At the same time, the study recognised that the context had evolved. Refugee populations had grown. Pressure on land and natural resources had intensified. Climate impacts were becoming more visible. And persistent inequalities, particularly for women and young people, continued to constrain opportunities for resilience and self-reliance. The study therefore recommended moving beyond a primarily agriculture-focused model towards a more holistic approach that integrates livelihoods, ecosystem restoration, social cohesion, gender equality, and durable solutions for both refugee and host communities.

From NURI to URRI: what changed, and why.

URRI is not simply NURI with a new name. It represents a deliberate evolution in ambition, design, and approach, shaped by evidence, community feedback, and a deeper understanding of the interconnected challenges facing refugee-hosting areas.

NURI focused on...	URRI goes further by...
Climate-smart agriculture	Integrating livelihoods, ecosystems, and gender equality
Strengthening resilient farms	Strengthening resilient farming systems
Refugees and hosts as programme participants	Positioning the refugee-host nexus as the foundation for resilience
Gender integration through partnerships and synergies	Making gender transformation a core programme objective
Environmental sustainability as a complementary theme	Embedding ecosystem restoration and natural resource governance throughout the programme
Infrastructure and production outcomes	Driving systems change and learning

SECTION 03

One programme, two consortia, twelve partners

URRI brings together twelve organisations (international NGOs, Ugandan civil society organisations, and a dedicated innovation and learning unit) under a single strategic framework.

This architecture is unusual. Two consortia implementing the same programme across different geographies and using different approaches. It creates complexity, but it also creates something rare: the scale to test ideas in multiple contexts simultaneously, and the shared infrastructure to turn those tests into system-level learning.

The DRC-led consortium

Led by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) with partners DCA, CEFORD, PICOT, and PALM Corps.

Operating in Yumbe, Obongi, Moyo, Koboko, Terego, and Madi Okollo districts in the West Nile region.

The consortium expects to reach close to 30,000 smallholder farmers and their families (approximately 150,000 individuals).

The SCI-led consortium

Led by Save the Children International (SCI) with partners AVSI, YSAT, UGANET, KRC, World Vision, and U-RIL.

Operating in Adjumani, Lamwo, and Kyegegwa districts.

The consortium expects to reach 20,000 smallholder farmers and their families (approximately 100,000 individuals).

The URRI Secretariat and U-RIL

The URRI Secretariat is the custodian of the “URRI as One” Strategy. The team supports all partners with strategic guidance, cross-consortia alignment and coordination.

The Uganda Response Innovation Lab (U-RIL) serves as the programme's learning and innovation engine, facilitating joint reflection, and ensuring that URRI learns from and contributes to the broader knowledge base of the refugee response sector.

Together, the Secretariat and U-RIL make sure that the programme operates as a single platform for learning, collaboration, and collective impact.

2025 IN NUMBERS

What we achieved in year one

Across nine districts, two consortia, and twelve implementing partners, URRI's first year reached thousands of people, while laying the foundations for long-term resilience.

During the inception period, the partners put in place the operational foundations that make implementation possible: recruiting staff, procuring equipment and services, establishing systems and signing partnership agreements. The two consortia further worked together to establish the core evidence base for URRI, including baselines, Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (CVCAs), Gender and Power Analyses, and market assessments.

As the programme moved from inception into implementation, the focus was on establishing structures and building capacity. Consequently, Year 1 results are primarily reflected through outputs. These investments create the conditions for the livelihood, environmental, and social outcomes that are expected to become increasingly visible over the coming years.

CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE

14,000+ Farmers trained in CSA practices	11,000+ Farmers saved part of their income in URRI supported VSLAs
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ENVIRONMENT & RESTORATION

200 local governance structures trained in eco-system restoration and management	10,000+ farmers trained on farmer managed natural regeneration
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GENDER & INCLUSION

7,500 households trained on gender roles and joint decision making	117 Acres of land secured for women and youth
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SECTION 04 | THEME: CLIMATE ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE

Growing more than crops

The land is the foundation of everything. For refugee and host community farmers in URRI's nine districts, land is their livelihood, their source of food, and often their most important asset. It can mean the difference between having enough to eat and going hungry, between stability and uncertainty. Yet climate change is making that foundation less reliable. Rains come later, or not at all. Dry spells last longer. Floods arrive without warning and wash away crops that families depend on.

URRI's first pillar, climate-resilient livelihoods, is built on the simple idea that resilience grows when people can produce more, earn more, and invest more, without depleting the natural resources on which their future depends.

That journey begins in the field. Farmers first need access to the knowledge, skills, and technologies that allow them to increase production while restoring soils, conserving water, and adapting to a changing climate. They then need access to markets that allow them to turn increased production into increased income. Finally, they need opportunities to save and invest those earnings, building the assets and financial resilience needed to withstand shocks and seize new opportunities.

The first year of URRI focused on laying the foundations for this cycle: Building a smarter farming base, preparing farmer groups for stronger market participation, and strengthening community finance systems that enable households to reinvest in their futures. Together, these investments are helping create livelihood systems that are more productive, more profitable, and more resilient.

Figure 1 Nen Anyim Women's Group showing their vision





Building a smarter farming base.

During the first year of implementation, URRI trained more than 14,000 farmers in climate-smart and regenerative agriculture across nine districts.

URRI also invested in the local systems that enable knowledge, innovation, and support to continue long after formal training has ended. A total of 475 extension workers, community-based facilitators, local government staff, and private service providers were trained to provide ongoing support to farmers. Across the programme, 271 community-managed demonstration plots and Centres of Excellence were established, creating spaces where farmers can see new practices in action, test them, and learn from one another.

These sites quickly became hubs for experimentation and peer learning. In West Nile, farmer groups use demonstration plots to apply Resilience Design principles, exploring how soil, water, vegetation, and agricultural production interact across the landscape. In Northern and Western Uganda, Centres of Excellence provide practical learning on climate-smart agriculture, post-harvest handling, and value addition. While the approaches differ, they share a common principle: farmers are far more likely to adopt new practices when they can see them working under conditions similar to their own.

The programme also strengthened the systems that farmers rely on beyond knowledge alone. Thirty-seven groups were supported to engage in seed multiplication and local seed businesses, helping ensure access to quality, locally adapted seed varieties in the years ahead. Strong local seed systems reduce dependence on external support while improving long-term access to agricultural inputs.

Together, these investments are creating the foundations of a more productive and climate-resilient farming system: stronger extension services, local learning platforms, farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange, and improved access to quality inputs. These are the building blocks of a locally owned adaptation system that can continue to evolve long after the programme has ended.

Growing through the dry season

Every morning, members of the Ayee Ki Rwot Farmers Group in Lamwo assemble their solar-powered irrigation system before heading into the fields. Water is pumped from a nearby pond and distributed across rows of vegetables that, until recently, would have struggled to survive the long dry season.

For chairperson Molly Achan, the change has transformed the way the group farms.

"We used to rely entirely on rain-fed agriculture. But nowadays the rains are no longer reliable. Now we have vegetables throughout the year, and our children are eating better because we have food available even when there is no rain."

Through URRI, the group has gained access to solar-powered irrigation, enabling them to continue producing food during prolonged dry spells and reducing their dependence on increasingly unpredictable rainfall. Year-round production has improved household nutrition while creating surplus vegetables that can be sold in local markets, providing families with a more reliable source of income.

As climate change continues to alter rainfall patterns across northern Uganda, investments in technologies such as solar irrigation are helping refugee and host community farmers adapt, strengthen their food security, protect their livelihoods, and build resilience for the future.



Getting to market.

Producing more is only half the equation. For farmers to truly benefit from improved production, they also need to sell more, and secure fair prices for their produce.

That journey takes time. Before farmer groups can engage successfully with buyers, they first need to produce consistently. Then they need to reduce post-harvest losses, improve quality, understand prices, plan together, and aggregate enough produce to negotiate from a stronger position. Only then can market linkages become a pathway to higher and more reliable income.

This is why URRI's work on market participation begins long before the point of sale. In the first year, the programme invested in understanding which value chains offer the strongest potential in each context. Local government, private sector actors, and farmer groups were engaged to assess and validate priority crops and enterprises, ensuring that farmers are not only growing more, but growing in ways that respond to local demand, climate realities, and market opportunities.

Then, work started on preparing farmer groups for future market engagement through training in post-harvest handling, value addition, business skills, enterprise development, and market planning. Community-based facilitators worked with groups to develop practical plans for aggregation, storage, value addition, and coordinated sales.

This area is still at an early stage. In the first year, most of the groups we support were focused on strengthening production, building group cohesion, improving quality, and preparing for collective marketing. In year two, we plan to deepen this work by strengthening farmer-buyer relationships, expanding aggregation, improving access to market information, and supporting farmers to negotiate better prices.

Our ambition is not simply to help farmers reach the market. It is to help them reach the market with better products and stronger bargaining power, so that increased production can translate into increased and more stable income.



Josephine, a member of the Kazeruku Savings Group in Adjumani, now supplies soya beans to local food processors, generating a reliable income that allows her to keep her four children in school and provide food for her family.

Putting money to work

Increased production only creates resilience if it translates into income. And income only creates lasting change if households are able to manage and invest it wisely.

A farmer may know how to improve soil fertility, conserve water, and increase yields through climate-smart agriculture. But turning knowledge into action often requires investment. Seeds must be purchased. Land rented. Labour hired. And sometimes the best financial decision is simply being able to wait a few weeks before selling produce at a better price.

For many refugee and host community households, that is easier said than done. Formal financial institutions are often distant, expensive, or inaccessible, particularly for women, young people, and refugees. Without access to savings or credit, households can struggle to invest in opportunities, recover from shocks, or plan beyond the next season.

This is where Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) come in. At their core, VSLAs are a simple idea: communities pool their own resources so that members can save, borrow, and invest. But the impact goes far beyond the money itself. VSLAs allow households to smooth income across seasons, manage unexpected expenses, and make the small investments that may determine whether a livelihood grows or stagnates.

URRI's first year focused on building these foundations. More than 11,000 participants saved part of their income through URRI-supported VSLAs, creating a growing pool of locally managed capital that communities can draw on when opportunities or challenges arise. And of these, close to 9,000 VSLA members have already received training in financial literacy, helping strengthen the skills needed to plan, budget and invest effectively.

In West Nile alone, URRI savings groups mobilised more than UGX 286 million in savings and issued over UGX 149 million in loans during the first year of implementation. Behind these figures are thousands of individual decisions: purchasing agricultural inputs, starting small businesses, paying school fees, investing in livestock, or expanding farm production.



"My dream this year was to buy two cows. With my income and savings, I have already been able to buy one cow."

- Driciru Milika, URRI Participant, Moyo District

We also began strengthening the systems around community finance. While VSLAs provide an important source of locally managed savings and credit, they can also be the first step in a broader financial journey. As groups mature and their ambitions grow, access to additional financial services becomes increasingly important. During the first year, URRI therefore began linking savings groups to formal financial institutions, creating pathways through which successful VSLAs can access a broader range of financial services over time.

The ambition is to help households progress from informal savings and lending towards larger investments in agriculture, enterprise development, and income generation, while ensuring that financial services remain accessible to refugees, women, and other groups that are often excluded from traditional banking systems.

The benefits extend beyond finance alone. VSLAs create regular spaces for people to come together, share experiences, discuss challenges, and support one another in pursuing their goals. Through regular meetings, members build trust, accountability, and confidence in managing money. They learn from one another's successes and setbacks, exchange ideas about farming and business, and develop the habit of planning ahead rather than reacting to immediate needs. In communities facing uncertainty and displacement, these social connections can be just as valuable as the financial resources themselves. They strengthen networks of mutual support, encourage collective problem-solving, and help households move beyond day-to-day survival towards longer-term thinking about their farms, businesses, and futures.

In this way, financial inclusion becomes about more than access to savings and credit. It becomes about expanding choice; giving families the resources, networks, and flexibility to invest, adapt, and seize opportunities as they emerge.





From a 30 × 30 garden to a growing livelihood

"Through the water conservation method, my small garden has become a source of income, hope, and learning, not only helping me work toward my dream of buying cows, but also inspiring other women in my community to grow vegetables and improve their lives."

– Driciru Milika, Kaluma Widows' Savings Group, Moyo District

Driciru Milika, a member of the Kaluma Widows' Savings Group in Okucele Village, Moyo District, has turned a 30 x 30 plot into a productive kitchen garden using the water conservation techniques introduced by URRI.

Between February and May alone, she earned approximately UGX 750,000 from the sale of vegetables, including cowpeas, okra, nakati, tomatoes, green pepper, and dodo, while also producing food for her household.

The additional income is helping Driciru achieve longer-term goals. This year, she set out to buy two cows and has already purchased the first. At the same time, she is sharing the techniques she has learned with other women in her community.

"URRI has made me a teacher in my community because people now know me for growing vegetables. Neighbours come to learn about water conservation and how they can establish productive gardens of their own."

Driciru's story demonstrates how practical climate-smart agriculture can strengthen household resilience while enabling participants to share knowledge that benefits the wider community.

SECTION 04 | THEME: SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

Restoring the environment that sustains us.

The productivity of a farm depends on healthy soils, reliable water sources, functioning watersheds, vegetation that protects against erosion, and ecosystems capable of withstanding increasingly extreme weather. When those systems begin to break down, farming becomes harder, yields become less reliable, and communities become more vulnerable to climate shocks.

In Uganda's refugee-hosting districts, these pressures are particularly acute. For decades, communities have shown extraordinary generosity in welcoming successive waves of refugees. But population growth, expanding demand for land, firewood, and water, and the cumulative effects of climate change have placed increasing pressure on the natural resources that refugees and host communities depend on.

This is why URRI's second pillar focuses on environmental sustainability and ecosystem restoration. While climate-smart agriculture helps farmers adapt within their fields, ecosystem restoration works at a larger scale, protecting and restoring the natural systems that make sustainable farming possible in the first place.

The relationship is simple on paper. Healthy landscapes retain water. Healthy watersheds reduce flooding and erosion. Healthy soils support agricultural production. Healthy ecosystems sustain biodiversity, regulate local climate conditions, and create the conditions for livelihoods to thrive over the long term.

The first year of URRI focused on laying the foundations for this work; understanding landscapes, strengthening local stewardship, and preparing communities to restore and protect the natural resources on which their futures depend.

Working with the Landscape

Environmental restoration begins with understanding.

Before a watershed can be restored or a water source protected, we first need to understand how the landscape functions. Where does water flow during the rainy season? Which areas are most vulnerable to erosion? Which ecosystems are under the greatest pressure? And where can restoration efforts generate the greatest benefits for both people and nature?

For this reason, much of URRI's first year focused on assessment, mapping, and planning. Across West Nile, degraded landscapes and priority restoration sites were identified through a combination of GIS analysis, climate vulnerability assessments, local environmental data, and community consultations. Twenty-two restoration sites were assessed across six districts, creating the evidence base needed to prioritise future investments. Nine of these sites have already progressed into early implementation. Similar assessments were undertaken in Lamwo, Adjumani and Kyegegwa, where ecosystem vulnerability analyses helped identify key drivers of degradation, including deforestation, wetland encroachment, bush burning, soil erosion, and declining vegetation cover.

With this understanding in place, the programme began investing in the people and institutions responsible for managing natural resources. Across both consortia, we trained more than 10,300 farmers in Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) and other environmental restoration approaches. At the same time, close to 200 local governance structures were trained and strengthened to support ecosystem restoration and natural resource management, creating a foundation for local stewardship and collective action.

Restoring what sustains us

Successful ecosystem restoration is about so much more than just planting trees.

Ecosystems recover over years rather than months, and restoration activities must be aligned with ecological realities rather than donor reporting cycles.

This was a defining feature of URRI's first year. Rather than prioritising short-term tree planting numbers, the programme focused on creating the conditions that allow restoration efforts to succeed. Restoration sites were identified and mapped. Community action plans were developed. Partnerships and agreements were established with nurseries and technical actors. Demonstration sites were established. Governance structures were trained. And restoration activities were carefully aligned with seasonal conditions to maximise long-term survival and impact.

Across the programme, communities were introduced to practical restoration approaches through demonstration sites. These included food forests, agroforestry systems, FMNR, hydrological stabilization, passive water harvesting, and soil conservation measures. These activities allowed farmers, local leaders, and technical staff to see restoration in practice and begin building the skills needed for larger-scale implementation in the years ahead.

A Landscape in Transition

Perhaps the clearest example of this approach can be found in Obongi District.

Here, URRI supported the construction of a 20-million-litre hydrological stabilisation dam as part of a broader landscape restoration effort. The site serves as a practical demonstration of how environmental restoration, water management, and livelihood resilience can reinforce one another.

By slowing, sinking, and spreading water within the landscape, the intervention helps reduce vulnerability to drought, improves water availability for surrounding farming communities, and creates opportunities for ecosystem recovery. At the same time, it functions as a learning site where communities, local governments, and technical actors can explore resilience design principles and observe how landscape-level investments can generate benefits across multiple sectors.

The Obongi site captures the essence of URRI's environmental approach. The goal is not simply to rehabilitate a single piece of infrastructure. It is to demonstrate how restoring natural systems can strengthen livelihoods, improve water security, enhance ecosystem health, and build resilience to climate change at the same time.



Stewardship that lasts

Ultimately, ecosystem restoration succeeds or fails based on whether communities sustain it. This is why URRI invests in the people and institutions responsible for restoring, protecting and managing landscapes.

Communities were engaged directly in identifying restoration priorities and developing action plans for their landscapes. This participatory approach helps ensure that restoration efforts respond to locally identified challenges and opportunities, while building the ownership needed to sustain investments long after project support ends.

Across the programme, close to 200 local governance structures were trained and strengthened in ecosystem restoration and environmental management during the first year. These included local government structures, environmental committees, and community-based groups responsible for overseeing natural resource management at local level.

The programme also worked to strengthen the rules and institutions that support sustainable resource management. In several districts, environmental governance structures reviewed and strengthened local by-laws, helping communities establish clearer frameworks for protecting natural resources and managing restoration efforts over time.

The emphasis on stewardship reflects a simple reality: ecosystems do not recover because projects restore them. They recover because people protect and manage them.

From a rocky abandoned land to a living landscape

For generations, a rocky 0.8-acre plot in Kamala Village, Yumbe District, was considered impossible to farm. Used only for grazing, the land had produced nothing for more than 80 years.

When URRI proposed using the site as a Resilience Design demonstration plot, few believed it could succeed, including the landowner, Waku Iddi.

"We all said this land has never produced anything. You can't make miracles here", Waku Iddi recalls telling the URRI team.

Using simple regenerative techniques, including water-harvesting trenches, contouring, mulching with organic matter, mixed cropping and tree planting, the once-barren plot was transformed into a productive, climate-resilient farm.

The changes extended far beyond crop production. Water that previously ran off the rocky surface is now captured and retained in the soil, allowing vegetables and trees to survive even during prolonged dry spells. Organic material that was once burned is now used to restore soil fertility, while the diversified farm provides both food for the household and regular income from surplus produce.

Today, Waku's demonstration plot has become a learning site for neighbouring farmers, challenging long-held assumptions about what degraded land can achieve. It illustrates one of URRI's central lessons from its first year: environmental restoration goes beyond simply planting trees. It is about redesigning landscapes, so they once again support productive livelihoods, strengthen resilience to climate change, and inspire wider adoption across the community.

In the words of Waku Iddi: *"Even rocky land can become useful with the right design."*



SECTION 04 | THEME: GENDER EQUALITY

Resilience only works, when everyone has a voice.

Climate change does not affect everyone equally.

Women and men often have different responsibilities, different access to resources, and different influence over decisions at household and community levels. Young people face their own barriers, particularly when it comes to accessing land, finance, and opportunities. In refugee-hosting communities, these challenges can be further compounded by displacement, poverty, disability, and other socio-demographic factors.

Yet women are often at the centre of the very systems that URRI seeks to strengthen. They cultivate crops, collect water and fuel, care for children, and play a critical role in adapting to climate shocks. When women and young people are excluded from decisions about land, livelihoods, and natural resources, resilience efforts are less effective. When they are included, households and communities are better positioned to adapt and thrive.

This is why URRI's third pillar focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment. Not as a standalone objective, but as a foundation for building stronger livelihoods, healthier ecosystems, and more resilient communities.

The first year of URRI focused on starting conversations, strengthening shared decision-making, and creating opportunities for women and young people to participate more fully in the decisions that shape their futures.

Changing the conversations

Changing social norms rarely begins with policies or programmes. It begins with conversations.

In many households, decisions about farming, income, land, and natural resources are shaped by longstanding expectations about the roles of women and men. These norms influence who participates in decision-making, who controls resources, and who benefits from opportunities.

URRI therefore began by creating spaces for reflection and dialogue. Across the programme, more than 7,500 households participated in training on gender roles and joint decision-making in agriculture and natural resource management. A further 2,850 farmers were trained and mentored on social norm change, encouraging households and communities to reflect on how decisions are made and how responsibilities are shared.

“In the past, family pressures would often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Now we plan together, work together, and make decisions as a family”

- URRI Programme Participant from the Ayee Ki Rwot Farmers Group in Adjumani

A central tool in this process was the Gender Action Learning System (GALS), which uses practical exercises and household visioning to help families plan together, identify shared goals, and discuss the obstacles preventing them from achieving those goals. Rather than focusing only on women, the approach actively engages men, recognising that lasting change depends on bringing households along together. Across Northern and Western Uganda alone, the SCI-led consortium reached more than 1,900 participants through GALS and related household dialogue processes during the first year.

These conversations may seem simple, but they lay the groundwork for broader change. A household that plans together is often better able to invest together, adapt together, and respond to shocks together.



“Before, I didn’t know that a man and a woman could work together on everything. Through the training, we learned to support one another, and now we work together.”

- Queen Harriet, URRI
Participant, Rhino Camp
Refugee Settlement

Access to resources.

For many women and young people, the challenge is not a lack of ambition or ability. It is a lack of access. And access to land is perhaps one of the most determinant constraints.

Across refugee-hosting districts, access to productive land remains one of the most significant barriers to participation in both agriculture and environmental restoration. Without land, it becomes difficult (or impossible!) to apply new farming techniques, invest in production, or engage in long-term stewardship of natural resources.

Recognising this, URRI supported women and youth to engage directly with the Office of the Prime Minister, landlords, cultural leaders, and local authorities on issues of land access. During the first year, more than 500 women and youth participated in these processes, helping strengthen their voice in negotiations that have traditionally excluded them. Seventy-four percent of participants were women, while young people and persons with disabilities were also represented.

In Northern and Western Uganda, these efforts contributed to the allocation of 117 acres of land for women and youth, enabling greater participation in agricultural production and environmental restoration activities.

The significance extends beyond the land itself. Access to productive resources creates opportunities to participate, invest, and benefit from the wider resilience-building activities supported through the programme.

Change that spreads.

Social norms change when people see alternatives working around them.

This is why URRI combines household-level engagement with broader community dialogue, leadership development, and awareness raising. During the first year, women, men, and youth participated in community discussions on gender equality, leadership, rights awareness, gender-based violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Women and adolescent girls received training in leadership and negotiation skills, helping strengthen their confidence and participation in community processes. At the same time, community facilitators, local leaders, and peer champions helped carry messages beyond formal training sessions and into everyday interactions.

Gender Safety Audits conducted across programme areas provided an important opportunity for communities to identify barriers to participation and safety. Through close to 100 dialogue sessions involving nearly 900 participants, communities highlighted challenges ranging from gender-based violence and land-related conflict to unsafe mobility and barriers to accessing services. The findings are helping shape future interventions and ensure that resilience-building efforts are responsive to the realities faced by women, men, and young people.

The first year also highlighted an important lesson: changing social norms takes time. While training can be delivered in a matter of days, trust, relationships, and behaviour change develop over months and years. The objective is not simply to increase participation in activities, but to create lasting shifts in how decisions are made, opportunities are shared, and resources are managed.

In many ways, Outcome 3 underpins the other two outcomes. Climate-smart agriculture works best when everyone has equal access to resources, and households work together. Financial inclusion is more effective when families can plan and make decisions together about savings and investments. And environmental restoration is more sustainable when women and young people participate in stewardship decisions.

No more waiting for money to buy vegetables

"As a breastfeeding mother, I used to struggle to get vegetables for myself and my household. I would wait until I got money or sometimes borrow from others. Now, whenever I need vegetables, I simply pick them from the garden."

– Queen Harriet, Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement

A few steps from her home in Zone 8 of Rhino Camp, rows of cowpeas, tomatoes, eggplants, collard greens, and okra now grow where Queen Harriet, 22, once struggled to feed her family. When she and her family arrived from South Sudan in 2025, they were allocated rocky, bush-covered land. Markets were distant and food was costly. "We could buy only three tomatoes for UGX 1,000" she recalls.

Her story reflects a common challenge across Uganda's refugee-hosting districts, where climate change and limited access to productive resources make food security precarious.

Through URRI, Queen joined a group supported by CEFORD, learning climate-smart techniques such as composting, mulching, double-dug beds, and water harvesting. With seeds and technical support, she built a kitchen garden beside her home. "Before, I simply cleared the land and planted," she says. "Now I know how to prepare the garden properly... so the crops grow better."

The programme's Gender Action Learning System (GALS) also reshaped her household: "I didn't know that a man and a woman could work together on everything... now we work together."

Neighbours now visit to learn her methods, and Queen shares what CEFORD taught her, spreading the practice further.



SECTION 05

What we learned and how we will change.

There is no such thing as a perfect blueprint for resilience. If we want to be successful, we need to be open to continuously learn and adapt our approaches.

Over the past year, communities, partners, and local governments have helped us better understand what works, what does not, and where we need to adapt. Some of the most valuable lessons have come from challenges, delays, and approaches that did not unfold exactly as expected.

Rather than treating these experiences as setbacks, we see them as part of the process. The lessons below are helping us refine our approach, strengthen implementation, and ensure that URRI becomes more effective with each passing year.

What we learned in 2025.

In the long run, correct sequencing beats fast implementation

The first year of URRI reinforced an important lesson: in resilience programming, doing things at the right time and in the right order is often more important than doing them quickly.

There is often pressure in development programmes to demonstrate visible results as early as possible. More trees planted. More inputs distributed. More VSLAs linked with financial institutions. Yet, experience has repeatedly shown that lasting results depend on the foundations that come before them.

Our first year of implementation showed us that mindset change, gender empowerment, and joint household planning are essential first steps. They enable women and men to agree on priorities, make decisions together, and share responsibilities and benefits more equitably. Without this foundation, new livelihood opportunities may reinforce existing inequalities rather than strengthen the resilience of the household as a whole.

The next step is to restore and strengthen the natural resource base on which agricultural livelihoods depend. Hydrological stabilisation, environmental restoration, and soil enhancement help improve water availability, reduce erosion, rebuild soil fertility, and create the conditions for more reliable production. This requires careful preparation, which takes time. Restoration sites must be identified, communities mobilised, governance arrangements established, and agreements reached with nurseries and local stakeholders.

In several locations, these preparations took longer than we first anticipated, limiting planting during the reporting period. Seedlings could of course have been planted later, once the programme was ready, but in URRI, we measure the success of restoration not just by how many trees were planted, but by how many survive. URRI therefore prioritised sound preparation and appropriate seasonal timing over the pursuit of short-term planting figures.

Once these environmental and social foundations are in place, households are better positioned to adopt climate-smart agricultural practices and increase the quantity, quality, and reliability of their production. This requires more than just trainings in climate-smart agricultural practices. Farmers also need access to appropriate inputs and technologies, practical and sustained extension support, and opportunities to test and adapt new practices to their specific conditions. Diversification, improving pest and disease control, and post-harvest handling can further reduce losses, and make production more resilient to climate shocks.

Once households can produce sufficient volumes with reasonable consistency and quality, they are better positioned to deepen their engagement with markets. Effective collective marketing requires strong farmer groups, reliable and aggregated production volumes, and a shared understanding of quality standards, production costs, buyer requirements, and market opportunities.

Financial inclusion follows a similar logic. Savings groups can be established early, helping households build financial discipline, strengthen social cohesion, and manage small or unexpected expenses. As production and income begin to increase, households are better able to save regularly, access appropriate credit, and invest in productive assets and livelihood activities. Over time, stronger and more mature groups can be linked to formal financial services. However, access to finance should be carefully sequenced with households' capacity to manage financial resources: promoting larger loans before livelihoods generate reliable returns can increase rather than reduce vulnerability.

The importance of strategic integration, layering, and sequencing is one of the reasons why multi-year programming matters. It creates the time and space to build resilience progressively: beginning with empowered households, strengthening the ecosystems and soils on which they depend, improving climate-smart production, and ultimately enabling farmers to engage with markets and financial services on stronger and more sustainable terms.

Seeing is more powerful than telling but households still need support to replicate

One of the most encouraging lessons from URRI's first year was the power of demonstration and peer learning.

Across all three programme outcomes, participants responded most strongly when they could see new approaches working in practice. Farmers were more willing to experiment with climate-smart agriculture after observing improvements in crop performance. Communities became more engaged in ecosystem restoration when they saw tangible improvements in landscape management. Discussions on gender equality and joint decision-making gained momentum when participants heard directly from households already experiencing positive change.

The lesson was clear: people are more likely to adopt new practices when they can observe the benefits, test the approaches themselves, and learn from trusted peers who have already taken the first step.

However, the first year also demonstrated that exposure and knowledge do not automatically translate into household-level adoption. Replication often requires continued coaching, follow-up support, and access to basic inputs, particularly for the most vulnerable households.

URRI's original design assumed that participants would retain some capacity to invest in adopting new practices, partly because refugee households were receiving general food assistance. Two rounds of food-assistance prioritisation, combined with the wider unpredictability of humanitarian funding, challenged this assumption. As assistance declined or became less predictable, the most vulnerable households were increasingly compelled to use their limited resources to meet immediate needs. Even when they understood the value of the practices demonstrated, many could not afford the inputs required to replicate them at household level.

This experience underlined an important distinction: demonstration can build interest, confidence, and knowledge, but it cannot overcome severe resource constraints on its own. For the most vulnerable households, targeted and time-bound input support may be necessary to enable initial adoption and ensure that they are not excluded from the programme's benefits.

In its second year, URRI will therefore continue investing in demonstration sites, peer-to-peer learning, and practical examples, while strengthening coaching and household-level follow-up. The programme will also provide appropriately targeted input support where financial constraints would otherwise prevent vulnerable households from putting their learning into practice.

Land access is a bigger barrier than we initially assumed.

When we designed URRI, we recognized access to land as an important issue in refugee-hosting areas. However, during our first year of implementation, it became increasingly clear that land is not simply one constraint among many. It shapes whether investments across climate-smart agriculture, ecosystem restoration, financial inclusion, and gender equality can translate into lasting resilience.

Many of our participating households cultivated plots that were too small, degraded, poorly drained, or otherwise unsuitable for meaningful production. Others relied on supplementary land accessed through informal arrangements with host-community landowners. These arrangements were sometimes short-term, verbal, or based on terms that were not fully understood by all parties.

This affects agricultural livelihoods programmes in several ways. Farmers cannot apply new climate-smart agriculture practices at a meaningful scale without sufficient productive land. Small plots limit crop rotation, intercropping, mulching, and adequate plant spacing. Where households are uncertain whether they will retain access beyond the current season, they are understandably reluctant to invest in soil improvement, water-harvesting structures, agroforestry, perennial crops, or other measures whose benefits take time to materialise. Land constraints therefore affect not only immediate production but also the programme's ability to restore the natural resource base on which longer-term resilience depends.

Access is also shaped by gender, age, disability, and household status. Women may depend on male relatives or customary authorities to negotiate access and are not always equally represented in the forums where land and natural-resource decisions are made. Young adults who are not recognised as independent household heads may have to rely on already-small family plots. Persons with disabilities may face assumptions about their ability to cultivate land or may be offered plots that are difficult to access and work. These barriers influence who can participate fully in URRI's activities and who can translate programme support into tangible results.

URRI's experience nevertheless demonstrated that progress is possible when land access is actively facilitated. Engagement between participating households, the Office of the Prime

Minister, landowners, customary authorities, and district officials helped unlock access in some locations and created space to address concerns before they escalated.

At the same time, we now know that facilitating physical access is not enough. Agreements need to be clear about boundaries, duration, permitted land uses, responsibilities for maintaining or restoring the land, and what happens when the arrangement ends. These terms are particularly important where URRI is supporting long-term investments such as soil and water conservation, agroforestry, or restoration. Written and witnessed agreements can provide greater predictability, but they must be accompanied by accessible mediation and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

The lesson is not that every resilience programme should become a land programme. Rather, that land must be treated as a foundational condition of resilience programming. It affects who can participate, which practices they can adopt, whether they are willing to invest, and whether results can be sustained.

In its second year, URRI will therefore invest more deliberately in learning how to become better at facilitating safe, secure, productive, and equitable access to land. This will include stronger engagement with the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, district local governments, customary authorities, landowners, and organisations with specialised housing, land, and property expertise.

Particular attention will be given to ensuring that women, young people, and persons with disabilities can participate meaningfully in land negotiations and benefit equitably from resulting agreements.

Priorities for 2026: Scaling what works

As implementation matures, the programme will in 2026 shift its emphasis from establishing systems to expanding impact.

Additional funding that will be made available by the Royal Danish Embassy / DANIDA to URRI provides an opportunity not only to reach more households, but also to strengthen the quality, sustainability and long-term effectiveness of URRI's approach. Both consortia will deepen investments within existing implementation locations, building on the systems, relationships and lessons established during the first year.

Scaling household adoption of proven approaches.

Year one demonstrated that farmer field schools and demonstration sites are powerful learning platforms, but that wider household adoption requires continued technical support (and, in some cases, targeted input support) to overcome barriers. Future implementation will therefore place greater emphasis on helping households replicate climate-smart agriculture, resilience design and environmental restoration practices at household level.

Strengthening pathways to sustainable livelihoods.

Building on the beneficiary journey developed during the first year, URRI will place greater emphasis on financial inclusion, private sector engagement, market systems, value addition and youth economic opportunities. New investments will strengthen links between production, enterprise development and markets, helping households translate improved agricultural practices into more resilient incomes.

Deepening climate resilience and environmental restoration.

Environmental interventions will increasingly move towards landscape restoration, sustainable natural resource management and water management solutions that improve productivity while strengthening ecosystem resilience. Additional investments in climate adaptation, irrigation, climate information and green livelihoods will reinforce the programme's integrated approach.

Strengthening inclusion through targeted approaches.

The programme will expand implementation of the Gender Action Plan while strengthening opportunities for women, youth, refugees and persons with disabilities to participate meaningfully in economic and community life. This includes greater attention to youth aspirations, disability inclusion, women's leadership and equitable access to productive resources, especially land.

Investing in sustainability and continuous learning.

Greater emphasis will be placed on strengthening local government systems, community institutions and national partners so that programme benefits can continue beyond URRI. At the same time, enhanced monitoring, learning and evidence generation will allow implementation to become increasingly adaptive, ensuring that lessons are translated into improved programme design throughout the remaining implementation period.

Beyond the first year

The coming years will increasingly test the conditions under which integrated resilience programming can deliver lasting change at scale. Success will not be measured simply by the number of farmers trained, trees planted or savings groups established, but by whether refugee and host community households become more resilient, more self-reliant and better equipped to adapt to a changing climate.

At the same time, URRI is about more than delivering results in nine districts. Through comparative learning across two consortia, continuous evidence generation and close collaboration with government and development partners, the programme aims to strengthen the broader evidence base for integrated resilience programming in displacement contexts.

If the first year established the foundations, the years ahead will demonstrate what those foundations can achieve, both for the communities participating in URRI and for the wider effort to rethink how refugee resilience is best supported in Uganda and beyond.



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