



LAND ACCESS AND USE IN UGANDA'S REFUGEE-HOSTING DISTRICTS

What the evidence shows about Environmental and Natural Resources Management

Context

Uganda hosts nearly 2 million refugees across thirteen settlements in twelve districts. Over 78% rely on agriculture as their main livelihood, with land quantity and quality the key constraints to self-reliance.

Settlement land access follows two systems: in Western and South-Western Uganda, sites are on gazetted government land; in Northern and West Nile, they are on customary land negotiated with communities, though ownership remains local.

Climate change, rising populations, and continuous refugee influx are intensifying pressure on natural resources. How land is accessed, allocated, and used directly shapes environmental conditions and the ability of refugees and hosts to withstand climate shocks.

Factors affecting Environmental and Natural Resources Management (ENRM) in refugee-hosting districts



Demand for biomass

Continuous demand for firewood and charcoal — particularly in northern settlements — is accelerating woodland loss, depleting soils and degrading land.



Intensive use of land

With median holdings of just 0.5 acres, households cultivate without rotation or fallow periods. Soil fertility is depleted within a few seasons of continuous cropping.



Rapid settlement allocation

Rapid settlement establishment has contributed to removal of vegetation that would otherwise stabilise soils, retain moisture, and support biodiversity.



Land access uncertainty

Refugee farmers face uncertainty of access to a plot in subsequent seasons and thus invest less in soil conservation, water harvesting, or perennial crop systems

Implications of land-related ENRM in refugee-hosting districts



Economic productivity

Degraded soils and shrinking plots limit agricultural returns, leaving households dependent on low-value subsistence farming rather than higher-yield livelihood options.



Food security and nutrition

Environmental strain reduces both the quantity and diversity of food produced, leaving households more vulnerable when rations are cut or harvests fail.



Graduation to self-reliance

Land scarcity and declining quality block the transition from subsistence to commercial farming, exposing the structural limits of Uganda's land-based self-reliance model.



Tension among refugees and hosts

Competition over a fixed and degraded land base fuels disputes, rising rental costs, and host-refugee conflict, while climate stress intensifies pressure on water and farmland.

Emerging approaches to improving ENRM in refugee-hosting districts



Improved seed varieties

Climate-resilient, fast-maturing seeds are being introduced to raise yields on small or degraded plots. These varieties help households adapt to limited land and shifting weather patterns.



Resilient design

A participatory, site-specific methodology that integrates water-harvesting earthworks, soil regeneration, and biodiversity restoration. Originally tested under NURI, resilience design is being adapted under URRI for Uganda's refugee-hosting districts.



Optimised Land Use (OLUM)

Multi-story cultivation, intercropping, mulching, composting, and efficient water use maximise nutritional yields from small allocations without increasing land pressure or requiring additional area to be brought into cultivation.

Recommendations for improving ENRM in refugee-hosting districts

1

Integrate climate resilience into programming: Land-based initiatives should embed agroecology as standard components. These practices generate compound benefits across food security, household income, and ecological stability.

2

Secure tenure for environmental investment: Land agreements must protect long-term improvements from eviction risks. Without such safeguards, households are discouraged from investing in land health.

3

Scale proven ENRM practices: Approaches such as resilience design, agroforestry, FMNR, and OLUM should move beyond project pilots. Embedding them within government extension systems ensures continuity after donor funding ends.