



# Uneven geographies of youth volunteering in Uganda: Multi-scalar discourses and practices

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## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Volunteering  
Youth  
Uganda  
Refugees  
Skills  
Policy

## ABSTRACT

This paper develops a multi-scalar geography of youth volunteering in Uganda. A growing body of research has explored the geographies of volunteering in the global North and international volunteering and development. However, despite the mainstreaming of volunteers as development actors, less attention has been paid to the unique local and national geographies of volunteering in global South settings. This paper explores how and why different ideas and practices of volunteering take shape and prominence in Uganda and how this impacts patterns of youth inclusion, inequality and opportunity. Analysing data on volunteering by young refugees in Uganda, we develop a multi-scalar geography to situate volunteering at the interface of ‘global’ volunteering policy and knowledges, aid and development architectures, youth unemployment, community institutions and local socio-economic inequalities. Through this, we reveal how programmed and audited forms of youth volunteering oriented to youth skills and employability are privileged. We show how this articulates with local inequalities to create uneven access to volunteering opportunities and practices. Through our approach, we show how a multi-scalar geography of volunteering enables us to build richer, more nuanced conceptualisations of volunteering in the global South that address the different ways global discourses, local histories, community organisations and social inequalities come together across space and time to produce uneven geographies of volunteering in particular places.

## 1. Introduction

Volunteering is an increasingly ubiquitous feature of state, civil society and corporate strategies for service delivery, building citizenship and the development of skills and employability, across the global South and North (Mills and Waite, 2017; Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011). These practices have been subject to significant debate, especially from geographers, who have located them within critical understandings of the institutional geographies and politics that have mobilised volunteers to meet diverse state and other needs (Smith et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2009). However, there remain significant silences and gaps in these debates. Volunteering scholarship is still characterised by disciplinary and geographical silos which often separate volunteering in the global South and North (Laurie and Baillie Smith, 2018), with scalar geographies of volunteering tending to focus on the unidirectional mobilities surrounding international volunteering. These silos and the emphasis on

international volunteer mobility can obscure how complex multi-scalar geographies shape historic and contemporary discourses and practices of volunteering within global South settings.

In this paper we develop an account of the multi-scalar geographies of youth volunteering in Uganda. We situate the privileging of particular forms of youth volunteering in Uganda and their associated exclusion of vulnerable groups at the interface of ‘global’ volunteering policy and knowledges, aid and development architectures, youth unemployment, community institutions and local socio-economic inequalities. We place ‘global’ in parentheses here to highlight that claims to the universality of volunteering with their associated policy making and advocacy, in reality reflect the histories and experiences of volunteering in Europe and North America (Baillie Smith et al., 2019). The power that comes with this, linked to the mainstreaming of volunteers as development actors, is an important feature of the ways volunteering is mobilised within state and other strategies for youth engagement, skills enhancement and

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.05.006>

Received 16 July 2021; Received in revised form 24 March 2022; Accepted 11 May 2022

Available online 17 June 2022

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meeting development needs. This underlines the importance of developing multi-scalar geographies of volunteering in the global South which are attentive to interlocking inequalities within and between settings within countries, as well as the particular challenges of living through (and against) displacement. By highlighting inequalities between ideas and practices of volunteering as they land and operate in Uganda, we also demonstrate the importance of developing conceptualisations of volunteering that *start from* histories, ideas and experiences in global South settings, especially among refugee youth.

Uganda hosts significant numbers of refugees across both settlement and urban settings, with latest figures indicating over 1.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers in total, which places it among the top five countries in the world hosting the highest numbers of individuals displaced across borders (UNHCR, 2021a; 2021b). Uganda has also been recognised as having a more open approach to refugees than most countries (Ahimbisibwe and Belloni, 2020), reflected for example in the infrastructure of the settlements, as well as in the provision of citizenship rights through its ‘self-reliance model’ (Betts et al., 2019). Most refugees in Uganda have fled from conflicts in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Somalia and the majority of them are aged under 24 years (UNHCR, 2020). Given the widespread vulnerabilities that affect the transitions to adulthood of the many young people caught up in this crisis (Shand et al., 2021), understanding skills acquisition and employability are critical not only to their own future prospects, but to the long-term stability of their host country and region (Zetter and Ruadel, 2018; Jacobsen and Fratzk, 2016). Analysing volunteer roles and experiences in this context provides an important counter to global North dominated thinking, policy and practice in this area. However, as our multi-scalar approach shows, to conceptualise volunteering in Uganda means recognising the ways it is characterised by the unequal coming together of multiple ideas and practices of volunteering rooted in diverse histories, institutions and political visions. This is particularly important in global South contexts with development trajectories that have been shaped by unequal global North/South power relations.

The paper proceeds in four main sections. In section one, we identify critical gaps in volunteering scholarship and outline how we build a multi-scalar account of the uneven geographies of youth volunteering in Uganda. In section two, we highlight the methodology used in data collection, processing and analysis. Section three explores how global geographies of volunteering policy making and knowledge production shape discourses and practices of youth volunteering in Uganda. We particularly focus on policy mobilities around volunteering, youth skills and employability to analyse how framings of youth volunteering in Uganda reproduce and re-work norms and institutional approaches from the global North. In section four we develop an account of the overlapping and complex geographies of volunteering in Uganda, highlighting how multiple understandings and practices compete and clash within and between different volunteering spaces. These geographies are infused with, and shaped by, power dynamics, not least in the construction and maintenance of particular ideas about volunteering and its practices. In this section, we show how forms of volunteering that articulate with and promise a pathway to a ‘proper job’ (Ferguson and Li, 2018) are dominant. Through this, forms of volunteering that conform to particular ideas of professionalisation, citizenship and subjectivity, and state strategies for youth and work, name and shape volunteering in ways that exclude and silence the histories and present practices of other forms of voluntary action. This creates space for dissonance and provokes some limited yet noteworthy acts of resistance. In section five, we show how this complex geography articulates with local inequalities to produce uneven access to volunteering opportunities and practices.

In conclusion, we argue that multi-scalar geographies of volunteering can challenge silos in current research and practice and build richer, more nuanced conceptualisations of volunteering in the global South and North by: becoming more attentive to the distinct histories and

presents of ideas and practices of volunteering that circulate within and between places; acknowledging how these circulations are shaped by power imbalances and social inequalities; building relational conceptualisations of volunteering that *start from* experiences in global South, neither essentialising them to counteract the dominance of global North experiences and thinking, nor parochializing them in ways that write out how they exist alongside and in relation to wider histories and practices of volunteering.

## 2. Volunteering and multi-scalar geographies

In this section we outline relevant existing research on geographies of volunteering and identify critical gaps in volunteering scholarship. We locate the contributions of this paper within academic debates primarily located in disciplinary human geography, but also draw on relevant research and discussions on volunteering from various scholarly fields. Having mapped this landscape, we then outline how we use a multi-scalar geography to develop an account of the uneven geographies of youth volunteering in Uganda.

A vibrant body of work has emerged in the last decade or so that critically examines the geographies of volunteering. This has included research on the relationship between volunteering and citizenship, particularly in the context of young people (Cheung Judge, 2017; Mills and Waite, 2017), the embodied, everyday dynamics of volunteering (Smith et al., 2010) and scholarship on international volunteering and development (Baillie Smith et al., 2013; Schech et al., 2015). Despite the contributions of this insightful work and its critical engagements with volunteering, geographical scholarship in this area has largely focused on volunteering in the global North (Mills, 2015; Holdsworth, 2017) or international volunteering to the global South and related mobilities (Laurie and Baillie Smith, 2018; Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Jones, 2011). With some exceptions (e.g. Jenkins, 2009; Prince and Brown, 2016; Barford et al., 2021; Baillie Smith et al., 2018; Baillie Smith et al., 2019), the unique local and national geographies of volunteering in the global South, and how volunteering relates to mobilities beyond a North-South lens, remain relatively under-researched. While this reflects North-South silos in geographical scholarship, interdisciplinary work on volunteering beyond geography has also tended to focus on separate global North contexts or international volunteering mobilities. Also significant is the often uncritical focus on measurement indicators in relation to voluntary action. Since such measurement is often not undertaken in global South settings, and that much voluntary labour in such settings sits outside formally recognised and auditable structures and organisations (Salamon et al., 2017), this further limits scholarship on volunteering in the global South.

More recently, important bodies of work on youth and labour geographies in the global South have started to engage with the role of voluntary action. Voluntary labour has been identified as part of the ways young people navigate saturated labour markets (Barford et al., 2021: 167). Gough et al. (2016) identify the ways urban Zambian youth often volunteer in the hope of securing permanent paid work with limited success, while Barford et al.’s research (2021) identifies how volunteering by young educated but unemployed Africans to gain work experience or employability can benefit communities. Literatures addressing diverse forms of activism, community action and citizenship in the global South also engage with experiences of voluntary labour, although these are not always framed as ‘volunteering’. We could argue that it either does not matter whether such practices should be understood as volunteering, or that exploring them through such a lens is problematic since it imposes a label and meanings on those practices that often derives from discourses and practices in the global North. But ‘volunteering’ as a frame of reference is both ubiquitous and powerful, with strong effects on policy-making, popular discourse and livelihoods. This includes processes whereby historically rooted social practices of care, community action, work and activism are being understood either through or at least in relation to particular understandings of

‘volunteering’. Consequently, it is important to start building conceptualisations of volunteering that ‘start from’ experiences in the global South. In this paper, we particularly foreground the relationship in Uganda between volunteering, livelihoods and precarious work. This helps de-stabilise established thinking on volunteering and work rooted in global North experiences of CV enhancement and professionalisation. However, given the ubiquity of volunteering discourses and their circulation through diverse global, national and local policy frameworks and institutions, any new conceptualisation needs to be relational. Given this, it is important to locate young people’s voluntary labour in the context of the multi-scalar geographies that come to shape what volunteering means in a particular place and time and how different meanings articulate with young people’s particular vulnerabilities and contexts.

We employ the term ‘multi-scalar geographies’ in this context to capture these dynamics and articulate how ideas about youth volunteering operate across, and between, spatial scales: namely, the local, regional, national and global. Scale is one of the key concepts within disciplinary human geography (Herod, 2010) and the idea of a multi-scalar geography, or geographies, has been utilised by researchers to provide analytical purchase on diverse topics, for example the multi-scalar geographies of gender and migration (McIlwaine, 2010), inequality and mobility (Parsons, 2017), citizenship (Desforges et al., 2005; Mills and Waite, 2017), disability and activism (Kitchin and Wilton, 2003) and young people (Hopkins and Alexander, 2010). However, studies on youth volunteering have tended to overwhelmingly focus on the scale-limited contexts of either the global North or global South (mostly the former), or on singular linear patterns of international volunteer mobility, as outlined earlier. Indeed, our focus in this paper is not on international volunteers travelling from the global North to participate in activity within Uganda, or on the dynamics of Ugandan volunteering in and of itself as a spatially fixed container. Rather, it is on the multi-scalar geographies that shape and frame the wider landscape of ‘global’ youth volunteering and how those discourses and tensions then translate into uneven practices and opportunities. Although geographers have proposed considering the relational geographies of the voluntary sector (DeVerteuil et al., 2019), here we focus on the actual dynamics of volunteering itself, and importantly young people’s place within that landscape.

By developing a multi-scalar geography of volunteering, we therefore add to recent scholarship on young people’s participation in voluntary labour in the global South by exploring how and why different ideas and practices of volunteering take shape and prominence in Uganda and how this impacts patterns of youth inclusion, inequality and opportunity. It is only through this approach, we propose, that we can fully understand “why it is landing as it is”. Overall, through foregrounding the multiple scales (and interactions between those scales) that shape discourses and understandings of volunteering, we can trace how these tensions spill over into uneven practices that shape lived experiences.

### 3. Methodology and data

The data presented here were collected as part of interdisciplinary research aiming to understand whether volunteering by refugee youth in Uganda helps their skills acquisition and employability and reduces the inequalities they experience. This is particularly important for young refugees who may not have access to other skills development opportunities, and who may have reduced opportunities for employment. However, it is also important for wider youth who are encouraged to volunteer in their searches for work.

Here, we draw upon data collected through stakeholder workshops and qualitative interviews in the city of Kampala and the refugee settlements of Bidibidi, Nakivale and Rwamwanja which were undertaken during late 2019. In total, 107 participants joined five stakeholder workshops (one workshop per settlement and two held in different

locations in Kampala), and 27 participants were interviewed across all locations (four interviewees in Bidibidi, five in Nakivale, five in Rwamwanja and 13 in Kampala). These individual and group activities aimed to explore how different stakeholders in Uganda understand volunteering and its roles in young refugees’ lives and livelihoods. Diverse organisations and individuals with interests in refugee youth, volunteer engagement, skills and employability were engaged, including government officials, in-country staff from UN agencies and international NGOs, and young refugees representing refugee-led organisations. In these activities, our engagement with refugee youth themselves was with those acting as representatives of civil society and other organisations, given our focus on broader volunteering discourses and practices. Wider participatory work with young refugees was also conducted in the project, but this is not discussed here. Interviewees were identified via both the workshops, which were advertised widely and open to all who wished to participate with an interest in the project goals, as well as through snowball sampling and identification of key actors via the project’s network of NGO partners. Full ethical clearance was obtained from Northumbria [removed for anonymisation] University Ethics Committee for conducting this research. In Uganda, written approval was received from the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), as the primary custodian of refugees and refugee response programmes in the country, and further ethical approvals were also obtained from the Mildmay Research Ethics Committee (MUREC) and the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). In line with the ethical practices, the names and identities of all participants have been anonymised, and we have concealed further information about participants where factors such as their location or work position might reveal their identity. This was important to ensure participants felt able to speak freely about volunteering, which can often produce celebratory or valedictory discourses out of fear of critiquing something that is assumed to be intrinsically positive. The positions of participants across power relations within the settings we were working, with potential influences over others’ work through funding and other decisions, also underlined our commitment to anonymisation. Data were analysed using NVivo software, with a coding frame developed collaboratively by the project team focused on: how volunteering is understood by different stakeholders; the relationship between volunteering and being a refugee; volunteering and skills acquisition and employability. All interviews were conducted in English and therefore quotes in this paper are verbatim.

We explored the breadth of ways volunteering is understood across and between settings and social groups in Uganda. To remain open to more diverse histories and presents of voluntary labour, we define volunteering as any time spent or expertise provided with the purpose of contributing to the refugee youth’s community or other communities. This can happen occasionally or regularly, through their own initiative or with organisations (such as community groups, NGOs or UN agencies), and it can be unpaid or for a per diem or other incentive. This is the definition we have used in our field research, based on dialogue with stakeholders and refugee youth themselves and is particularly oriented to de-stabilising the often used ‘formal’/‘informal’ volunteering distinction. This categorisation can risk classifying and recognising forms of organisation, audit and behaviour that fit neoliberal and development norms as ‘formal’, with ‘informal’ capturing things that sit outside these norms. This has a number of risks, including rendering as informal, social institutions with long histories and systems of organising voluntary labour that are not necessarily recognised or registered as ‘formal’ institutions within established humanitarian and development thinking. It also risks characterising all forms of volunteering outside more recognisable ones as not formal, but ‘other’. Our data also show that the distinctions between different organisational forms reflect institutional and measurement interests more than they do the experiences of volunteers. Instead, we make a distinction between programmed volunteering – by which we mean structured, planned and audited activities – and more everyday forms – by which we mean more

ad-hoc activities that emerge through and from individual and community needs and lived experiences.

#### 4. Global geographies of Ugandan volunteering policies

In this section we identify and explore how global geographies of volunteering policy making and knowledge production shape discourses and practices of volunteering in Uganda. As volunteering has been mainstreamed and increasingly recognised in global development policy discourses, there have been significant efforts to build national level frameworks oriented to creating enabling environments for volunteering in the global South. We explore how these geographies articulate with Uganda's particular demographics and development agendas; one of the most youthful populations in the world, with young people (understood as those under 25) making up over 77 percent of the population (PAI, 2013). Although the Ugandan constitution defines young people (youth) as those below 35, within the project we adopted the United Nations international definition of those aged between 15 and 24.

The voluntary labour of citizens in the global South is increasingly situated as part of multiple shifting and often overlapping humanitarian and development policy making agendas. Volunteers can represent a form of cheap labour for low-cost service delivery for donors and governments unwilling or unable to spend on critical public services (Boesten et al., 2011). There is growing global recognition of the importance of volunteers in crisis settings where international actors and donors have withdrawn (Cadesky et al., 2019). In these contexts, volunteers are often seen as having knowledge and networks within settings that can support more effective humanitarian and development interventions (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015). During COVID-19, volunteers have been celebrated globally in terms of their leadership of community response to the pandemic, as well as in the context of state efforts to mobilise emergency public health capacities (Baillie Smith, 2020). At the same time as being recognised as development actors (Laurie and Baillie Smith, 2018), volunteers are increasingly seen as delivering development through participation in itself. Volunteer engaging organisations and policy makers have long promoted the benefits of volunteering to participants in terms of enhancing skills and employability, improving wellbeing and supporting professionalisation (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011). These diverse geographies and agendas do not sit in isolation meaning volunteering can be framed as delivering on multiple fronts, benefitting volunteers, the communities they work with, and donors and governments through access to labour and, potentially, a workforce with enhanced skills and employability. This apparent win-win may be attractive to policy makers and organisations. But by developing a multi-scalar geography of how this works in the context of Uganda, we can see how particular forms of volunteering come to be privileged and others are marginalised.

To do this, we analyse three policy frameworks working at different scales that govern and shape volunteering in Uganda: the African Union (AU) Youth Volunteer Corps approach to volunteering, which sets out how the AU understands volunteering and relationship to young people and development in Africa; the framework governing volunteering approaches and policies of the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV), the branch of the UN which supports peace and development through volunteerism; and the National Volunteer Policy Framework established by the Ugandan parliamentary Forum on Youth Affairs.

The different geographies of the UNV, African Union and Ugandan Government frameworks produce different scalar approaches to volunteering and its relationship to development. Across and between these frameworks, we can identify three interlocking and overlapping framings of youth, skills and volunteering: 1) the engagement of already skilled young people to deliver and contribute to development outcomes; 2) skills being developed by young people to support their participation in service of delivering global, regional and national development agendas; 3) young people's skills being developed to address the problems of youth unemployment by enhancing their

employability. These framings work within and between different policy geographies, reinforcing each other to shape a multi-layered focus on volunteering as important for youth skills and participation in development.

The Uganda National Volunteer Policy Framework highlights one of its objectives as being “to provide an appropriate framework for enabling youth to develop social, economic, cultural and political skills so as to enhance their participation in the overall development process and improve their quality of life” (GoU, 2013:12). This approach echoes key elements of the ways the African Union promotes youth volunteering as an avenue for placing African youth at the forefront of the global development agenda. The AU Youth Volunteer Corps was modelled around the perceived success of other initiatives such as the African military peace missions that were largely credited for securing peace and security on the continent. The objective was to replicate this momentum and have African youth deployed to tackle developmental challenges on the continent and key to this was the acquisition of requisite skills and experience. Accordingly, the AU Youth Volunteer Corps mandate includes not only enhancing opportunities for young Africans, but instilling competencies, promoting shared values and Pan Africanism. Through this, volunteering is mobilised and promoted within the context and scale of the AU's approach to young people and development in Africa. The AU observes that youth volunteering can “deepen the status of young people in Africa as key participants in the delivery of Africa's human development targets” (Mpungose and Monyae 2018).

Across the three frameworks, volunteering is framed as supporting and enabling participation in particular kinds of development centred on citizen governance and public management, with associated assumptions around the skills required for such forms of development. The UNV policy in Uganda includes a focus not only on support to vulnerable populations but also capacity building of selected government institutions and civil society on good governance and human rights initiatives (UNV, 2021) in line with wider global development goals. The AU Youth Volunteer Corps programme focuses on youth participation in development through their potential contributions as business entrepreneurs, peace-keepers, and stakeholders in the ‘African Development’ agenda (Mpungose and Monyae, 2018). The Ugandan government's volunteer framework focuses more on addressing youth unemployment through vocational training, youth political representation and youth counselling services to remove attitudinal barriers (Ewertson, 2014). In these ways, volunteering is constructed within the frame of the possibility of the ‘proper job’ (Ferguson and Li, 2018; Kampen et al., 2013), working within established norms of governance, representation and development. Youth volunteering then comes to reflect a triple agenda of promoting particular forms of development, doing so in a way that addresses potential governance problems arising from youth unemployment, and providing skills for employability.

These ideas are reflected in some stakeholders' views about priorities to create an enabling environment for volunteering in Uganda. As an interviewee stated:

“I think it is also if you're building a community it is useful to invest in making sure that these volunteers get the skills and the support necessary.” (International NGO staff 4, Kampala)

This suggests supporting and structuring volunteering to prioritise volunteers' future capacities to access employment opportunities; volunteering is linked to career pathways, levels of skills development and education. This aligns with global discourses around youth and development that emphasise youth skills as a means to gain competitive edge in the labour market (Ewertson, 2014) even as the ‘proper jobs’ promised and aspired to simply do not exist (Li, 2016:1249). Volunteering ideas across the geographies of the above frameworks reflect this in different ways, with UNV recognising how volunteering brings perceived benefit to the volunteer and how this acts in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goal number 8b which states “...by



2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization” (UN, 2015:20), the AU “providing opportunities to Young Africans to serve and gain crucial professional experience, soft skills, social competence, international exposure and leadership skills” (Mpungose and Monyae, 2018:6) and the Ugandan policy explicitly identifying internships as a form of volunteering.

The above policy frameworks tend to prioritise what is often termed ‘formal’ volunteering (Lee and Brudney, 2012), linked to formal qualifications, vetting processes and professional roles. This is seen most explicitly in the case of UNV, which specifies degree qualifications and a minimum of two years post-experience as requirements for participation. This sidelines or obscures forms of volunteering that sit outside of it, and are often embedded in, shape and are shaped by the lives and livelihoods of young people in Uganda. Langseth et al. (1997) explore such variants of volunteering known as ‘bulungi bwansi’ or ‘work for the good of the nation’ that were commonly practiced in Buganda<sup>1</sup> whereby young people would be introduced to the concept of benevolent communal work. In contrast, the UN, AU and Ugandan volunteer policies explored above tend to deploy very similar languages and framings of volunteering oriented to particular global discourses around skills, youth and work, and reflect ideas and experiences of volunteering that emerge from the experiences of the global North, as well as priorities and approaches of development actors rooted in the global North dominated aid and humanitarian industries.

The frameworks we discuss here are clearly not the only ones that shape volunteering. The approaches of large volunteer engaging actors such as the Red Cross are clearly influential at local and global scales. Policies unrelated to volunteering are also important. In the context of Uganda, the focus on refugee self-reliance provides an important context for understanding volunteering by young refugees. But the frameworks we analyse here are critically important to the ways ideas and practices of volunteering circulate across and between multi-scalar geographies. We have shown how framings of volunteering in terms of skills and professional development come together with youth strategies for employability and work to set up a powerful framing of volunteering as linked to the search for the ‘proper job’ (Ferguson and Li, 2018). This then extends beyond understanding volunteering in terms of neoliberal professionalisation (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011), situating it within the “the illusion that development is unfolding, and with sufficient growth and some tinkering around the edges, a decent life for all is on the horizon” (Li, 2016: 1253).

It is clear that global volunteering rhetoric has become entrenched, and it is worth stressing at this point in the paper that there is something troubling and discomfiting about youth empowerment ‘writ large’. These dynamics are infused with power and are shaped by multi-scalar geographies. Indeed, as certain discourses circulate and are ‘picked up’ and then ‘dropped down’, they are translated into lived experiences and are performed in different spaces; these ideas become expressed and reinforced by state and other actors. The reason that this entrenchment of ‘global’ volunteering rhetoric matters, is how that plays out, is expressed, and then politicised within specific contexts. We now demonstrate this argument through turning to a detailed examination of the complex and overlapping geographies of volunteering in Uganda, highlighting how multiple understandings and practices compete within and between different volunteering spaces.

## 5. Overlapping geographies of Ugandan volunteering

Our data show that different stakeholders – whether government,

<sup>1</sup> Buganda is the official name for the Central Region in Uganda, comprising Kampala and other neighbouring districts inhabited by the Baganda ethnic group. It is considered the most dominant region and the nucleus around which the state of Uganda was created.

civil society, private sector or volunteers – often express different views about what volunteering is for and how it should be managed. Such diversity is not unusual, and as Millora (2020) highlights, there are multiple meanings of volunteering, in his case identifying five main categories that can also overlap: mutual aid; service; campaigning; participation; and leisure. We found recognition of this diversity amongst the stakeholders we interviewed.

“It really depends on the kind of volunteering they do. If they join the private sector company and they are assigned a mentor that they have to follow and support they can learn about business management etcetera. If they do what I would call social volunteering, you know, just helping each other; they learn very good social skills for interactions, they get to know more about the values of work and also how we can join hands together to preserve every member of the community.” (UN staff 1, Kampala).

However, we can also see a stretching of volunteering definitions that reach beyond academic and policy classifications, with the Ugandan government framework including unpaid internship opportunities, and one interviewee including working for free for a small business. Overall, our data highlight a range of views about whether volunteering should mostly benefit communities, volunteers themselves or governmental, non-governmental (NGO) or private actors. These are not always mutually exclusive:

“I think there are two aspects to it; there is one in which it is about an individual feeling compelled as a member of their community to give some time back on a non-contractual basis. There is a second element which is an individual seeking a route into more formal paid employment and is prepared to accept an incentive whilst at the same time developing their competence and experience.” (International NGO staff 1, Kampala).

Which understandings are emphasised or prioritised in particular places and in a particular moment in time, is an important part of understanding volunteering in that setting. Our data show that the dominant idea of volunteering is one focused on programmed volunteering and its role as a route to work, often through professional development and skills. This means that some forms of voluntary labour are marginalised and not recognised as volunteering, as we will go on to demonstrate.

This framing of volunteering needs to be seen in the context of how ideas of volunteering that originated in the West, have been realised and repurposed in Uganda. The celebration of volunteering approaches linked to graduate employability does not exist in a vacuum, and we need to better understand how particular ideas of volunteering, or key features of them, are reworked and redefined, and what impacts this has on other understandings, including more locally rooted ones. These dynamics reveal the wider contours of how the governance of volunteering operates, illustrating our wider argument on the multi-scalar geographies of ‘global’ volunteering policy. In the remainder of this section, we identify and discuss three principal ways that stakeholders in Uganda spoke about volunteering and what its focus should be:

### 5.1. Livelihoods and work

Our first set of understandings emphasises how volunteering can provide a pathway to employability and access to resources. For example:

“...they [volunteers] hope that after volunteering they will be able to get jobs, especially for those who are qualified, it is a way of getting into institutions and be employed [...] they target to get some skills to add on to their training so that they can fit in the labour market in Uganda and within the communities here.” (Local stakeholder, Nakivale)

Aligned with volunteering’s position within narratives promising the

‘proper job’, volunteering can be seen as a pathway to work, and this comes not just from skills enhancement, but an expectation that undertaking voluntary work should lead to a more permanent salaried position. Volunteering’s impact on employability then comes partly through the networks and contacts it brings. Rather than emphasise participation, the focus may be more on learning, as this development worker outlines:

“I think the other motivational factor is the learning opportunity that they receive that is in form of training and orientation that they receive. Sometimes unfortunately that is driven by the hope for financial reimbursement and I think in the refugee response in Uganda we are faced with the very unsustainable system where a lot of refugee volunteers receive regular stipends and as a result continue to be volunteers and don’t always do it out of pure motivation and that is something we are struggling with here”. (UN staff 2, Kampala).

In both of these examples, remuneration is a significant factor, and other research has shown how this can create hierarchies between volunteers (Baillie Smith et al., 2020). For the second stakeholder, remuneration is a problem since it distorts what they think should motivate people to volunteer. However, others see this as part of the ways volunteering provides an “opportunity for them [volunteers] to earn something that helps them go on and also keeps their families” (International NGO staff 5, Kampala). Volunteering is therefore connected to refugee livelihoods and work both in terms of setting pathways towards work and payment, as well as being a means of accessing income and resources itself. This produces a critically important paradox; volunteering is promoted as key to achieving the ‘proper job’, yet the importance of its remuneration provides evidence that such promise is often illusory and reveals how volunteering forms part of youth strategies to improvise current, not promised, livelihoods.

However, the struggle with the unsustainable costs of remuneration alongside dilemmas about whether volunteering itself should be paid raises questions about volunteering as the most efficient route to building skills and employment. A stakeholder outlines these dilemmas:

“Why spend money on volunteering and why not spend money to promoting employment right away. Why do we need to go to a non-paid person? It could take as much money for us to build the skill, engage and create a non-paid scheme of volunteering with specific organizations. Like if I want to engage with the private sector organizations for instance create a volunteering scheme, I would rather engage with the private sector to create a scheme that will lead to sustainable employment.” (UN staff 1, Kampala).

If volunteering cannot be justified as an employment and skills strategy in and of itself, then this dimension needs to be critically evaluated and explained alongside the other dimensions that are claimed for it. We need to understand the volunteering ecosystem, rather than simply individual benefits and impacts, and outlining a multi-scalar geography of ‘global’ youth volunteering helps map this complex landscape.

## 5.2. Service delivery

A second set of understandings sees the main value of volunteering in its provision of services at low cost. This is an approach to volunteering that is both widespread across the world, as well as extensively critiqued (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015; Jenkins, 2009). Volunteering is then mainly seen as “filling in the human resource gap” (Government Official 1, Kampala) and helping reduce wage bills and address labour shortages, and is less about the livelihoods of the volunteer themselves:

“But given the wage bill and probably also sometimes the lack of willingness for people to be deployed in certain areas; that would

offer a very good opportunity for people willing to volunteer to provide the services.” (Government Official 1, Kampala).

Volunteering as service delivery is then not only about cost; it is also about addressing uneven geographies of skills and labour availability. This is likely to be particularly relevant in the context of refugee settlements, and has already been documented in other research on the roles of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies (Cadesky et al., 2019). In Uganda, the dynamics of supply and demand shape voluntary labour, as this NGO worker from a refugee settlement explains:

“As a matter of experience, ... sometimes we are overwhelmed with work and therefore we need to clear the work and then the volunteer is like a short term or an easy way of doing the work at a low cost and maybe no tax. So I think over time it has not changed significantly, there is still a lot of fixing to do, to redefine and contextualize what actually volunteering means.” (International NGO staff 2, Rwamwanja).

Volunteering then provides several advantages in particular places, including financially for donors and other organisations with insufficient resources to fund the labour they need. This may extend, as has been shown elsewhere (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015), to providing a means to navigate around tax and other labour regulations, since volunteers are often not subject to the usual protections on workers’ rights.

For some stakeholders, there is a risk that relying on volunteers for professional roles “may not provide the necessary services to the concerned persons” (UN staff 2, Kampala). For others, there are moral and ethical issues at stake:

“I often think it is immoral to get volunteers and get them operating like paid staff. There should be a cap on certain things that volunteers shouldn’t be doing. We should not be bringing volunteers to fill a gap; that’s a wrong reason for bringing in a volunteer. It is even worse if you bring them on and they are not supervised, they should be supervised properly.” (International NGO staff 1, Kampala).

Volunteering seen as service delivery might support training and provide pathways to work. But if it is work that would normally attract a salary, and which is structured like a job, with associated demands around reporting, absenteeism and accountability, then for some, this raises questions about volunteers’ livelihoods, experiences of work, and the very meaning of volunteering.

## 5.3. Community and volunteer well-being

Finally, a number of stakeholders, particularly volunteers themselves, emphasised how volunteering derives from emotional responses and is mainly oriented to caring for others. A male refugee volunteer from Bidibidi identified absence of payment and the importance of feeling a commitment to fellow humans, as critically important:

“Volunteering to me means doing things without payment. It is something that is in one’s heart to help others who are in need but with no payment. That is my simple understanding.” (Refugee Volunteer representing refugee-led organisation, Bidibidi).

Stakeholders also identified the importance of volunteering as service, but recognised the particular ways these activities can help volunteers themselves:

“It’s a good way to initiate to inculcate the culture of service but also emotionally it engages them so that they can be more thinking on the positive side than remembering their losses and troubles that they went through, so it’s ... it’s a healing process it builds resilience.” (International NGO staff 2, Rwamwanja).

Emotional dimensions of volunteering come to the fore here, with it also being identified as helping refugees cope with past trauma and

building their own capacities to cope. Other stakeholders identified how volunteering can help refugees navigate the spaces and places they arrive in when they reach Uganda. In these examples, rather than being couched in terms of building skills, volunteering is seen as contributing to better futures for volunteers, but through participation itself, rather than seeing volunteering as being purposefully structured to build skills. This analytical observation is important, because these understandings create space for dissonance and provoke some limited yet noteworthy acts of resistance. The views by some workshop participants that volunteering is about ‘giving without reward’ can be read, effectively, as critical comments on the professionalisation of volunteering and the wider ‘global’ discourses outlined thus far in the paper. These community-based responses, although implicit, hint at the wider power dynamics at play within the multi-scalar geographies of youth volunteering. Accounts of everyday solidarities within this space, and the belief that the focus of volunteering should be on individual and community well-being, reveal some degrees of contention. Our argument here is that the competing ideas reflected in the three principal ways stakeholders discussed volunteering, reflects wider tensions and a tussle between state and civil society. Indeed, the governance of ‘global’ volunteering policy means that different ideas and understandings push and pull, and this creates winners and losers in this landscape, as our final section demonstrates.

Thus far, we have illustrated that the ‘global’ volunteering policies underpinning this landscape are multi-scalar, operating across and between the Ugandan government, African Union, UN, and within civil society. These discourses and understandings create tensions, as this section’s discussion has outlined, through the three principal ways that stakeholders and young refugees in Uganda understand volunteering. Ultimately, these are shaped by power dynamics which have led to the privileging of certain ideas and practices of youth volunteering, marginalising others. We have seen how volunteering not only fits established ideas of service delivery, care and pathways to work, but is also entangled with precarious employment and young people’s livelihood strategies. While the latter offers a challenge to established conceptualisations of volunteering, we also find resonances with established thinking, with multiple understandings, histories and visions interweaving and colliding. We argue that, rather than offering a new conceptualisation of volunteering which foregrounds livelihoods and precarious work, it is more important to develop an account which explains how the articulations of different discourses and practices interact in a place. In global South settings, this means developing accounts of volunteering that acknowledge particular histories of voluntary labour and the precariousness of work, but also how labour, productivity and care, and subjectivities such as ‘youth’, have been shaped by the particular versions of development that have been imposed by the global North in that place. Our next section demonstrates how ideas of volunteering take place in Uganda, influencing inequalities on the ground through the uneven nature of voluntary work in this space. This analysis shows why mapping those earlier discourses was so important, as it is those ideas that come to shape and influence the forms of voluntary labour available and accessible to young people, and young refugees in particular, in Uganda.

## 6. ‘A poor man cannot volunteer’: Uneven geographies of access to volunteering in Uganda

This section illustrates how the complex geographies detailed in this paper articulate with local inequalities to produce highly uneven access to particular volunteering opportunities. As well as identifying diverse discourses and practices of volunteering in Uganda, stakeholders also revealed that not all forms of volunteering are equally valued, understood and supported, and that this shapes who is able to volunteer. As one stakeholder expressed:

“... for us we don’t believe a poor man can volunteer... A poor man is actually looking for a way of survival.” (Government Official 1, Kampala).

This belief then raises questions about some of the claims for volunteering’s impact on skills and employability, suggesting that these benefits – and volunteering itself – do not apply to the most vulnerable. In essence, such viewpoints reflect Erni and Leung’s assessment of ‘voluntourism’, a variant of voluntary labour, as a “problematic reproduction of the precariat caught in the problematic of mobility” (Erni and Leung, 2019: 937) or indeed, “the precariat’s quest for existential authenticity” (ibid). Furthermore, this understanding reinforces ideas about what volunteering is, in some ways echoing the UNV requirement that their volunteers have university qualifications and work experience. This definitional dilemma is not to say that volunteering is not seen as applying to people with some level of vulnerability or disadvantage, and there are important connections here to wider geographies of education. As one stakeholder noted:

“...because of the lack of education [of refugees] for many they volunteer mainly around the education institutions or other establishments maybe within the settlement where there is need for additional support.” (Government Official 2, Kampala)

At one level, engagement in volunteering presents opportunities which reduce demands on the state and other actors; it is intended to, or is seen as, having scope to build capabilities and livelihoods for some, but perhaps not the most vulnerable. However, there are important qualifications in this. Volunteering to improve livelihoods is seen as more acceptable than volunteering as livelihood by some:

“...we have a volunteering scheme here, and who are applying? It’s not people who are having jobs, it’s people who are unemployed. So what does that tell you, if they had something to do they would not come for this. So then it loses the whole context of what we call volunteer scheme.” (Government Official 1, Kampala).

Moreover, what kinds of volunteering are available, who is able to access them, and how they benefit from engaging, is bound up with existing patterns of inequality and skills acquisition:

“Administrative work, teaching in community schools, supporting programme implementation as community paralegals, as community-based facilitators, in terms of remunerations those are some of the volunteering opportunities I have seen them [young refugees] getting involved in. The ones without remuneration per se have not been very evident, I have seen them get involved in construction for the more vulnerable individuals in their communities where they are not actually given anything apart from food.” (International NGO staff 1, Kampala).

In this example, more vulnerable community members are only able to access less well remunerated volunteering tasks. As an interviewee explains:

“...for a youth to volunteer there is a certain level of qualification they may want for you. For a Ugandan you may be having that qualification, for a refugee because you cannot prove it because of conflict or whatever reason you ran and left the papers behind, so maybe because they Ugandans have qualifications, they can prove it and they are given a better volunteering position than a refugee who cannot prove that.” (International NGO staff 7, Kampala)

Earlier lack of access to skills development is likely to then undermine the benefits volunteering might offer in enhancing skills and employability. But it has a double effect since it then also undermines access to volunteering as a livelihood strategy in itself; a means to accessing resources via remunerated volunteering. Therefore, some forms of volunteering work to benefit some groups and not others, revealing the uneven and complex geographies of youth volunteering.

Other factors of inequality can also be significant, and volunteering may intersect with them in complex ways. While at one level, supporting skilled volunteering opportunities may increase some inequalities, it may have benefits for others:

“...there are instances for example where the ... volunteers work in our protection programme and then they go often and get employed by schools as teachers, and actually they may have a teaching degree from South Sudan let's say, and they start working with facilitators as they enter volunteering and longer term employment, they may have been able to network with nearby schools telling them about the programme they are engaged in, and they get employed as teachers.” (UN staff 2, Kampala)

Volunteering may then provide routes to employability for a skilled refugee who has arrived in Uganda, although as noted earlier, it might make better sense for most young refugees if the Government of Uganda and other development agencies invest what resources are available to get a person's degree accredited or recognised so they can seek work. Importantly then, a refugee doctor volunteering in a hospital is not likely to be doing so to gain skills, but is doing so to build their employability and address inequalities they experience. This highlights the importance of avoiding assumptions about how skills, employability and inequality are linked through volunteering. The specific configurations of prior qualifications and skills, and specific inequalities someone experiences, are critical to how volunteering may shape their livelihoods. This means that a situation may be very different to someone with limited experience, as this stakeholder outlined in stark terms:

“So I can understand for the case where people have no experience then it makes sense to have volunteering schemes so that they gain experience and then be more competitive. We have to be honest that [the] refugee will never be as competitive as a Ugandan. If volunteering can bring that refugee more experience to compete and to be in the local market that could make sense.” (UN staff 1, Kampala).

This then adds further weight to the argument that the alignment of volunteering to the promises of the ‘proper job’ can be illusory in multiple ways. The universal framings of volunteering explored earlier fail to address whether and how different people can work and re-work volunteering opportunities in different ways. Furthermore, there is a geography to how these opportunities work differently in different places, for example between the different refugee settlements and urban Kampala. Across our study. The multi-scalar geographies outlined throughout this paper combine with and entrench local inequalities to exclude some young refugees from particular kinds of volunteering opportunities. This uneven landscape is striking, as are the implications for conceptualisations of volunteering, to which we now turn in a series of concluding reflections.

## 7. Conclusion: who and what is missing?

In this paper, we have argued for the importance of developing multi-scalar geographies of volunteering that challenge silos in current research and practice. We suggest that these allow more complex accounts of volunteering in the global South that acknowledge how global discourses, local histories, community organisations and social inequalities come together across space and time to produce uneven geographies of volunteering. We have demonstrated how these geographies are shaped by power dynamics, such that some ideas and practices of youth volunteering are privileged and others are marginalised. We have shown this is particularly shaped by volunteering's association with ideas of the ‘proper job’ (Ferguson and Li, 2018), despite this being largely illusory.

Our data show that, in Uganda, volunteering is seen as having important relationships to strategies and approaches to building skills, training, employability and livelihoods. This is particularly important for young refugees, who may not have access to other skills development

opportunities, and who may have reduced opportunities for employment. But it is also important for wider youth who are encouraged to volunteer in their searches for work. It is significant for vulnerable groups who struggle for their livelihoods and who may be engaged in volunteering to deliver services for states and donors, as well as communities who are supported through volunteering.

However, we have seen that understandings of volunteering differ widely, across livelihoods and work, service delivery and community and volunteer well-being. These beliefs underpin different accounts of the relationships between volunteering, skills and employability in Uganda. A critical factor in this is inequality, and how the opportunities and effects of volunteering impact groups differently. But there is also inequality between types and understandings of volunteering.

In this paper, we have largely focused on forms of volunteering that are organised and managed by state and civil society actors. This reflects the coming together of our focus on refugee youth skills and employability and the Ugandan government policy focus on volunteering in the context of youth empowerment. It also reflects our engagement with organisations engaged in mobilising and working with volunteers, and wider academic and policy emphases on volunteering and volunteer skills.

However, a focus on programmed volunteering reflects a popular and policy understanding of volunteering in Uganda that derives from the ways Western organisations approach volunteering and have promoted it in the context of development activities:

“I would say if you talk about volunteering, it is something that is associated with foreigners, that is people from USA, Europe, that is, a foreigner because I think mostly in civil society where the word volunteer, maybe we have been doing it here in different ways, if you look at culture, the informal setting but when it comes to the word volunteer people begin to think it's what the ‘whites’ do; that they come to get experience may be because they are in their summer vacation to learn about Africa so it is a bit biased.” (International NGO staff 3, Kampala).

Stakeholders often identified volunteering as a practice associated with organisations such as NGOs and ministries, and that everyday forms of voluntary labour cannot really be understood as volunteering. This means that historical forms of volunteering in Uganda and the region may be being sidelined and silenced by a focus on forms that fit with global North norms and expectations. This is particularly significant if these forms of volunteering are more important to vulnerable communities outside urban settings, unable to access more programmed approaches.

We found limited evidence from Uganda, or Africa more widely in our mapping of the multi-scalar geographies of ‘global’ youth volunteering policies, that explains how diverse forms of volunteering impact skills and employability for particular groups, despite the claims made for it. Global North derived models of volunteering dominate policy making and associated programming, research and evidence.

This paper highlights the importance of a research agenda that is not contained or limited by existing research on volunteering, but which builds from an understanding of the historical and contemporary experiences of voluntary labour in Uganda. This includes understanding how it has changed over time and its (often unequal) relations to wider volunteering discourses and practices. Our research suggests a need to build knowledge and evidence which details and analyses diverse forms of volunteering in Uganda, and the degree to which they challenge existing models of volunteering, explaining how volunteering sits in relation to different inequalities and vulnerabilities in Uganda. There is a stark need to further understand how different forms of volunteering contribute to livelihoods for different groups, within Uganda and beyond, to develop evidence on which kinds of volunteering in the global South improve whose skills and under what circumstances. As we have shown, in Uganda, the relationship between volunteering, livelihoods and precarious work is particularly important, something that



challenges much established thinking on volunteering and locates it firmly in struggles against inequality and vulnerability in ways that differ from traditional ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’ dichotomies. However, as we have also shown, this sits alongside and articulates with other discourses and practices of volunteering. While it is important to *start from* experiences of volunteering in the global South, it is important not to parochialise them or essentialise them. Our multi-scalar approach has analysed how different ideas and experiences of volunteering collide in the context of particular inequalities within a specific place. This provides a new conceptual lens on volunteering in global South settings, since it draws attention to the ways power shapes what counts as volunteering in a particular place. In the context of the history of unequal global North/South relations and development interventions, and the ubiquity of ideas of volunteering rooted in experiences in the global North, such an approach is essential if we are to develop critical geographies of volunteering in the global South.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Matt Baillie Smith:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Sarah Mills:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Moses Okech:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration. **Bianca Fadel:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Project administration.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the ESRC/GCRF who funded this research through grant ES/S005439/1. We would also like to thank all our research participants for their engagement, through interviews and in workshops in Kampala, Bidibidi, Nakivale and Rwamwanja. Thanks also to our partner NGOs and youth advisory board members, made up of young refugees, who have helped shape the research. Finally, thanks go to the rest of the project research team whose feedback and contributions to the project have shaped the ideas we present here.

This study was supported by the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [Grant number: ES/S005439/1, “Skills acquisition and employability through volunteering by displaced youth in Uganda”]. All data supporting the research are provided as supplementary information accompanying this paper at <https://www.doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.19780078> under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence.

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