

Social Protection Systems

For Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities in Africa's Great Lakes Region

Christopher Gabelle, Jordi Gallego-Ayala, Rodolfo Beazley,
Ewen Macleod, and Scovia Aweko



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Great Lakes Region**

CHRISTOPHER GABELLE, JORDI GALLEGU-AYALA, RODOLFO BEAZLEY,
EWEN MACLEOD, AND SCOVIA AWEKO



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Telephone: 202-473-1000; Internet: www.worldbank.org

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ISBN: 978-1-4648-2344-2

e-ISBN: 978-1-4648-2345-9

DOI: 10.1596/978-1-4648-2344-2

Artificial intelligence: If AI tools were used in the development of this work, page ii of this work will have further information.

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Cover design: Debra Naylor / Naylor Design Inc.

The manufacturer's authorized representative in the European Union for product safety is Mare Nostrum Group B.V., Doelen 72, 4831 GR Breda, The Netherlands. E-mail: gpsr@mare-nostrum.co.uk.

Contents

Foreword ix

Acknowledgments xi

About the Authors xv

Executive Summary xvii

Glossary xxi

Abbreviations xxvii

CHAPTER 1 Introduction 1

Internally displaced persons and refugees in the
Great Lakes Region 1

Response systems and social protection for forcibly
displaced populations 4

Notes 7

References 7

CHAPTER 2 Conceptual Framework 9

Adaptive Social Protection Framework 10

Customization of the Adaptive Social Protection
Framework 12

Notes 21

References 22

CHAPTER 3 Displacement and Return Trends: Profile of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees, and Host Communities in the Great Lakes Region 23

Return and repatriation dynamics 28

Socioeconomic profile of forcibly displaced populations 32

Key vulnerabilities during displacement, return, and
reintegration 35

Notes 41

References 42

CHAPTER 4 Social Protection Support to Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities 45

Building block 1: Policies and legal rights 45

Building block 2: Institutional arrangements and partnerships	62
Building block 3: Programs and delivery systems	72
Building block 4: Data and information systems	82
Building block 5: Finance	87
Overall assessment of social protection support to forcibly displaced populations and host communities	93
Notes	96
References	98
CHAPTER 5 Challenges and Opportunities for Social Protection Assistance to Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities	103
Challenges	103
Opportunities	106
Note	109
References	109
CHAPTER 6 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations	111
Recommendations	114
Notes	122
References	123
Appendix Social Protection Programs in the Great Lakes Region	125

Boxes

2.1	Building blocks of the Adaptive Social Protection Framework	11
2.2	The four phases of the humanitarian–social protection continuum	16
4.1	Citizenship eligibility criteria for refugees residing in Great Lakes Region countries	50
4.2	Uganda’s refugee policy frameworks and relationship with social protection	53
4.3	Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Rwandese refugees: Process, support, and safeguards	70
4.4	Window for Host Communities and Refugees strategy notes for Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo	90
4.5	Summary of collective Great Lakes Region progress to support forcibly displaced populations and host communities	95

Figures

2.1	How social protection and humanitarian approaches differ: Where the synergies lie	10
2.2	Adaptation of the adaptive social protection building blocks to protracted forced displacement contexts	12
2.3	Coverage of each adjusted building block	13
2.4	Humanitarian–social protection continuum, from no integration and parallel systems to full integration	16
2.5	Potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities	17

3.1	Incidents of conflict and violence and number of refugees, 1997–2023	24
3.2	Settlement breakdown of refugee populations, 2024	28
3.3	Refugee returns	30
3.4	Risks experienced by forcibly displaced populations during displacement	37
3.5	Key vulnerabilities for refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities in the GLR	39
4.1	Social protection laws, policies, and strategies	46
4.2	Main legal frameworks for refugee rights	48
4.3	Policies and legal rights progress for refugees	54
4.4	Policies and legal rights progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities	61
4.5	BB1: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities	62
4.6	Institutional arrangements and partnerships progress for refugees	66
4.7	Institutional arrangements and partnerships progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities	71
4.8	BB2: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities	72
4.9	Coverage of main cash transfer programs	74
4.10	Programs and delivery systems progress for refugees	76
4.11	Programs and delivery systems progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities	81
4.12	BB3: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities	81
4.13	Data and information systems progress for refugees	84
4.14	Data and information systems progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities	86
4.15	BB4: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities	86
4.16	Finance progress for refugees	90
4.17	Finance progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities	93
4.18	BB5: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities	94
4.19	Collective progress in the Great Lakes Region toward the inclusion of FDPs in social protection systems and the provision of targeted support to host communities	94
6.1	Responses to FDP flows: Barriers to host countries using social protection systems as a primary development response	112

Maps

1.1	Refugee-affected countries in and around the Great Lakes Region	2
3.1	Snapshot of displacement dynamics, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, June 2025	26
3.2	Total number of refugees, 2013 and 2024	27

3.3	Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo with the highest number of IDPs	31
4.1	Social protection spending, 2020 (percentage of GDP)	87

Tables

2.1	Application of refugee, IDP, returnee, and host community filters to each building block	14
3.1	Forced displacement population per country, 2024	25
3.2	Demographic breakdown of refugee populations	32
4.1	Freedom-of-movement regulations	51
A.1	Services provided by social protection programs in the Great Lakes Region	126

Foreword

For too long, the reality of millions of people forcibly driven from their homes by conflict and instability has been confined to the margins of development policy. The time has come to see forced displacement as a structural, generational issue that requires serious attention if we hope to achieve the World Bank Group's goal to end poverty on a livable planet.

Nowhere is this issue more crucial than in Africa's Great Lakes Region, home to more than 7.9 million internally displaced people and approximately 2.5 million refugees. For the majority of these populations—around 75 percent of the people, to be precise—this life of dislocation has already lasted a decade or more. These individuals, and the host communities that have embraced them with remarkable resilience, deserve to move beyond navigating crisis to building a better future. Key to that endeavor is the urgent need to connect displaced populations and their host communities to skills, jobs, socioeconomic inclusion, and the conditions for lasting self-reliance.

Across the globe, we have seen how well-designed and adequately financed social protection programs, layered with interventions for economic inclusion, can generate sustained income gains, build human capital, and unlock pathways to productive employment, even among the poorest and most marginalized households. In protracted situations, social protection has shown time and time again that it is the foundation of a broader development pathway.

The opportunity in Africa's Great Lakes Region is to bring that same ambition to bear for forcibly displaced populations and their host communities, treating vulnerability as a basis for inclusion rather than legal status as a basis for exclusion. This approach will require a fundamental shift in how social protection systems are designed, financed, and governed across the region:

- National systems must be supported, strengthened, and expanded to reach displacement-affected areas.

- Targeting frameworks must begin by harmonizing poverty-based approaches that apply equitably to refugees, internally displaced people, and host community members.
- Digital identification and social registries must be extended so that forcibly displaced populations are no longer statistically invisible to the governments and institutions able to serve them.
- Legal frameworks for social protection should be aligned with international standards to ensure that these populations have legal access to labor markets and necessary protections.

Social Protection Systems for Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities in Africa's Great Lakes Region arrives at a pivotal moment. For forcibly displaced populations, who are too often locked out of formal labor markets by policy barriers, limited documentation, and restricted mobility, being able to connect to economic opportunity is the basis for restored dignity, a development imperative, and a targeted protection strategy. Social protection systems that are designed to serve as platforms for economic inclusion—linking income support with skills development, market access, and financial services—can transform displaced people from aid recipients into active contributors to local and regional economies.

Achieving this vision requires robust national and regional systems. Forced displacement in Africa's Great Lakes Region is a cross-border phenomenon that must be addressed with a regional approach. Harmonized data, mutual recognition of IDs, and coordinated labor mobility are essential, not just aspirational, given displaced populations' frequent movement across borders and administrative boundaries. International commitments on refugees should lead to regional cooperation on social protection systems, with governments, development partners, and humanitarian actors coordinating sustainable financing that matches the scale and duration of the challenge.

This book offers a rigorous, evidence-based process for building social protection systems based on inclusion. It draws on the experiences of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda, each at a different stage on the path toward inclusion, and it distills lessons that are as instructive for their differences as for their commonalities. The content is the product of deep analytical work and genuine partnership with governments, communities, and the humanitarian and development organizations working alongside them.

The World Bank is committed to supporting this transformation. We believe that strong national social protection systems—adaptive, inclusive, and connected to economic opportunity—are not only the right response to forced displacement but also the foundation for more peaceful, prosperous, and resilient times in Africa's Great Lakes Region.

Iffath Sharif

Director for Social Policy
World Bank Group

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful for the invaluable comments, constructive advice, and clear guidance for this book, as well as the underlying background working papers to several colleagues from the World Bank and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Their comments have been critical to the finalization of this analytical work. We especially thank Afrah Alawi Al-Ahmadi (Senior Social Protection Specialist), Daniel Kiernan Balke (Senior Social Development Specialist), Martina Caterina (Global Lead on Law and Policy on Internal Displacement, UNHCR), Aline Coudouel (Lead Economist), Aissata Coulibaly (Economist), Vickram Cuttaree (Lead Strategy Officer), Xavier Devictor (Adviser, Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Group), Ugo Gentilini (Lead Economist), Anna Kalashyan (Social Development Specialist), Jacqueline Manisabwe (Senior Social Protection Specialist), Edmundo Murrugarra (Senior Social Protection Specialist), Fatima Naqvi (Senior Social Protection Specialist), Yaye Ngouye Ndao (Senior Operations Officer), Mona Niebuhr (Senior Social Protection Specialist), Mattia Polvanesi (Senior Social Protection Officer, UNHCR headquarters), Benjamin Christopher Reese (Senior Operations Officer), Mba Minko Djekombe Rony (Social Protection Specialist), Christabel Sefa (Senior Social Protection Specialist), Prashant Singh (Senior Partnerships Specialist), Viktoriia Siriachenko (Senior Operations Officer), Matthew Stevens (Lead Social Development Specialist), Siv Tockle (Senior Operations Officer), Silas Udahemuka (Senior Human Development Specialist), Sifa Uwera (Social Protection Specialist), Edon Vrenezi (Senior Operations Officer), Davina Vusia (Independent Consultant), and Eric Zapatero Larrio (Senior Social Protection Specialist).

We also acknowledge the important contributions of our independent consultants, Andrea Balbin, Dieudonne Doma, Patrick Lembo, Alfred Odera, and Marcienne Umubyeyi, whose work during the initial phase of country-level data collection and analysis was essential to completing the necessary baseline reports.

We are equally thankful to our United Nations (UN) counterparts for their insights and clarifications. In particular, we appreciate the contributions of Yasmine Bannaga (Programme and Policy Officer, World Food Programme [WFP] Democratic Republic of Congo), Mahamoudou Guimbayara (Head of Emergency Section, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo), Nicole Iafolla (Head of Partnerships, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo), Paterné Irahaye (Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UN OCHA]), Nafiou Issiaka (Head of School Feeding Programme, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo), Josiah Kiiza (Programme and Policy Officer, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo), Brian Kiswii (Budget and Programme Officer, WFP Uganda), Boncana Maiga (Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UN OCHA), Giovanni Quacquarella (Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UN OCHA), Lawan Tahirou (Head of Research, Assessment, and Monitoring, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo), Moustapha Toure (Head of Programme, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo), and Rina Uchida (Government Partnership Officer, WFP Democratic Republic of Congo).

We extend our sincere thanks to Catherine Ahimbisibwe, Acting Commissioner for Disaster Risk Management in the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda, for her guidance on internal displacement and host communities in Uganda.

We are especially indebted to our colleagues at the UNHCR, through the Regional Bureau for the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes (EHAGL) and the Regional Bureau for Southern Africa, for their critical input, data support, and verification. Our thanks go to Jedediah Rooney Fix (Senior Economist, UNHCR EHAGL), Dina Puspita Hapsari (Associate Protection Officer, UNHCR Rwanda), Dania Kattan (Senior Development Officer, UNHCR Rwanda), Anna Gesine Kneifel (Senior Development Officer, UNHCR Rwanda), Anna Maria Leichtfried (Senior Development Officer, UNHCR EHAGL), Caroline Kanana Mbui (Protection Officer, UNHCR Rwanda), Gloria Muhoro (Senior Development Officer, UNHCR Southern Africa), Aurthur Mutambikwa (Livelihood and Economic Inclusion Officer, UNHCR Uganda), Ndeye Penda Ndiaye (Reintegration Officer, UNHCR Burundi), Katie Ogwang (Senior Community-Based Protection Officer, UNHCR EHAGL), Patricia Aloo Olesi Otiato-Zang Owono (Protection Cluster Coordination Officer, UNHCR Burundi), Yamini Pande (Senior Registration and Identity Management Officer, UNHCR EHAGL), Md. Arifur Rahman (Senior Development Officer, UNHCR Uganda), Chubaka Innocent Sangara (Senior Durable Solutions Officer, UNHCR Burundi), and Danielle Trotter (Senior Social Protection Officer, UNHCR EHAGL).

This work was made possible through the generous financial support of the World Bank-administered Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Forced Displacement and the State and Peacebuilding Fund. The State and Peacebuilding Umbrella Trust Fund is a global multidonor fund that works with partners to address the drivers and impacts of fragility, conflict, and

violence and strengthen the resilience of countries and affected populations, communities, and institutions. The State and Peacebuilding Umbrella Trust Fund is kindly supported by Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

We are grateful for the coordination and oversight provided by Sara Agostini (Operations Officer), Abdelqader Hamed Bakir (Program Officer), Sara Craig (Operations Officer), Irina Galimova (Program Officer), Jade Ndiaye (Senior Operations Officer), and Jeannette Ramirez (Operations Officer).

We also thank Consuella Andrianjakanava (Team Assistant) for her logistical and editorial support during the preparation of this book. The team authors are especially grateful to Anna Anossovitch, Emma Haines, and James Cannell for their tireless work on the book graphics, visuals, and diagrams. Thanks to Caroline Polk for her support during the production of the book.

Finally, we appreciate the leadership and unwavering support of Daniel Dulitzky (Regional Director), Mohammed Dalil Essakali (Operations Manager), Boutheina Guermazi (Director of Strategy and Operations), and Suleiman Namara (Practice Manager), who helped steer this work to completion.

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Executive Summary

Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR) continues to experience some of the most complex and protracted situations of forced displacement globally. Africa, particularly the GLR, accounts for a disproportionate share of displaced people: 46 percent of the world's internally displaced persons (IDPs) (34.1 million) and 25 percent of the world's refugees (9.5 million) reside on the continent. As of the end of 2024, there were 123.2 million forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) worldwide, with the GLR contributing 7.9 million IDPs and 2.5 million refugees. Notably, since 2015, the number of refugees hosted in the GLR has quadrupled from 600,000 to 2.5 million, reflecting both new and ongoing displacement crises.

Forced displacement in the GLR is a structurally regional phenomenon that optimally would benefit from nationally led but regionally coordinated development responses. Cyclical cross-border movements, protracted exile, and recurrent returns have created a displacement landscape that cannot comprehensively be addressed through country-specific actions alone. Although national social protection systems would remain as the preferred primary delivery channels, durable inclusion and effective crisis preparedness depend on strengthened regional cooperation on policy responses, data, identification, mobility, and cross-border shock response.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the epicenter of forced displacement within the GLR, producing over 1.1 million refugees as a result of sustained conflict, instability, and insecurity, especially in its eastern provinces. The country also hosts significant numbers of refugees from neighboring states and has one of the largest populations of protracted IDPs globally. Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda also confront periodic and complex displacement challenges, but with differing dynamics and population flows. The GLR is

The GLR groups 10 countries bordering the Great Lakes—Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. This book focuses on four: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.

marked by cycles of displacement and return, shaped by ongoing conflict, political instability, natural disasters, and the historical legacies of violence and long-term exile.

National social protection schemes in the GLR are increasingly recognized as crucial instruments for supporting both FDPs (consisting of IDPs, refugees, and returnees) and host communities. Social protection encompasses a broad array of measures, including social assistance, social safety nets, and social registries, often funded through a mix of national and international resources. These systems are designed to reduce poverty, protect vulnerable groups from shocks, and promote long-term development. Despite progress, the coverage and effectiveness of social protection measures for FDPs remain uneven. The majority of refugees and IDPs in the region still depend heavily on humanitarian assistance, particularly in protracted situations where integration into national systems is limited or absent. This also extends to support provided to returnees (be they former refugees or IDPs trying to return to their areas of origin). Many GLR countries face challenges related to financial constraints, limited administrative capacity, and policy gaps that hinder the full inclusion of FDPs in national social protection systems.

In this era of increased financing challenges, finding new solutions to protracted displacement situations has taken on a new urgency, as refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities face distinct vulnerabilities at each stage of the displacement cycle. In fact, as humanitarian financing continues to contract sharply and protracted displacement becomes the norm, social protection systems provide a reliable long-term platform for resilience and socioeconomic inclusion. Humanitarian assistance will remain indispensable during acute emergencies, but it is neither designed nor structured to sustain multidecade displacement. Strengthening national social protection systems offers one of the entry points for inclusion of displaced populations in development programs. In the GLR, prolonged and repeated displacement has compounded socioeconomic hardship, undermined social cohesion, and strained local resources. Refugees from outside the region now represent a majority of recent arrivals in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, shifting the demographic landscape and intensifying the need for responsive policies.

Return movements, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are often cyclical and localized because of ongoing insecurity and lack of sustainable solutions. The reintegration of returnees is hampered by persistent instability, inadequate housing, and lack of employment opportunities. In Burundi and Rwanda, the legacy of political and ethnic conflict has produced deep-rooted barriers to refugee return and reintegration. Uganda's main challenge centers on managing large-scale, long-term refugee settlements and their impact on host communities. Natural disasters, although accounting for fewer displaced people than conflict, exacerbate social and economic vulnerabilities and complicate recovery for those already affected by displacement.

This book examines these challenges and proposed policy and operational recommendations through a revised Adaptive Social Protection Framework, encompassing five building blocks: (1) policies and legal rights, (2) institutional arrangements and partnerships, (3) programs and delivery systems, (4) data and information systems, and (5) finance. The approach is to encourage national governments, regional bodies, and external partners to transition toward development financing, away from costly humanitarian financing, and consider social protection systems as a primary development response to protracted forced displacement in the GLR. Some key avenues that are put forward include the following:

- *Enhance national social protection systems.* Governments should integrate refugees, IDPs, and returnees more fully into national social protection systems, with tailored measures to address their unique needs. This requires policy reforms, expansion of social registries to include FDPs, and enhanced targeting mechanisms to be FDP sensitive.
- *Transition from humanitarian to development responses.* A coordinated and managed transition from emergency humanitarian aid to longer-term, government-led solutions is critical. Development actors should prioritize building national capacity and providing flexible financing to national systems.
- *Foster inclusive and stronger policy dialogue.* Platforms such as the Refugee Policy Review Framework could be used to systematically assess and adjust refugee and social protection policies, ensuring they are responsive to the realities of displacement.
- *Address root causes and enhance resilience.* Investments in conflict prevention, peace building, and disaster risk reduction are necessary to address the drivers of displacement. Supporting FDPs and host communities through targeted social assistance can mitigate tensions and promote social cohesion.
- *Promote sustainable reintegration.* Return and reintegration policies must go beyond physical return to ensure durable solutions, including access to livelihoods, housing, and basic services.
- *Improve data and coordination.* Robust social registries and interoperable information systems are vital for identifying needs, targeting assistance, and monitoring outcomes across different population groups.

The GLR's displacement context is marked by persistent challenges and some positive opportunities. National social protection systems, if expanded and made more inclusive, can play a pivotal role in meeting the immediate needs of FDPs while supporting long-term development and resilience. Achieving this requires strong political will, coordinated action among governments and humanitarian and development actors, and ongoing investment in systems and capacities. By prioritizing integrated, sustainable, and equitable responses, the region can make meaningful progress toward solutions for displaced persons and host communities alike.

Glossary

Adaptive social protection: A framework designed to build the resilience of poor and vulnerable households by investing in their capacity to prepare for, cope with, and adapt to covariate shocks (including displacement); protecting their well-being; and preventing their falling into poverty traps. Adaptive social protection integrates disaster risk, crisis response, and climate change measures to strengthen households' resilience.

Asylum seeker: A person seeking international protection. In some countries, this is a legal term for a person who has applied for refugee status or complementary protection and awaits a final decision. It can also refer to a person who has not yet applied but may intend to or may need protection. Not every asylum seeker is recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker. An asylum seeker may not be returned to their country of origin until a fair procedure examines their claim and is entitled to minimum standards of treatment pending status determination.

Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework: The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016, tasked the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) with applying the framework in major refugee movements. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework is a global, multistakeholder approach that addresses both the immediate needs of refugees and the longer-term development needs of host communities, moving beyond humanitarian aid alone.

Development-oriented approach: Strategies addressing medium- to long-term socioeconomic challenges faced by forcibly displaced populations—including refugees, internally displaced persons, and returnees—and their host communities. This approach operates through government systems, aligns with national development objectives, and prioritizes capacity building and sustainability to foster self-reliance, resilience, and inclusion, transitioning beyond subsistence support toward sustainable economic

empowerment, job creation, opportunity, and social integration. This methodology complements humanitarian approaches focused on immediate life-saving assistance and protection during acute displacement.

Durable solutions: Sustainable pathways that allow refugees and internally displaced persons to rebuild their lives and live in safety and dignity. For refugees, the UNHCR promotes three traditional durable solutions: voluntary repatriation to their country of origin, local inclusion in the host country, and third-country resettlement. For internally displaced persons, solutions typically include returning to their place of origin, integrating into the local community, or settling elsewhere within their country.

Forced displacement: When individuals and communities are forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence to avoid, or as a result of, armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses, natural or human-made disasters, or development projects (UNHCR 2007).

Global Compact on Refugees: A nonbinding framework adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018 for more predictable and equitable responsibility sharing for refugees, recognizing that sustainable solutions require international cooperation. It provides a blueprint for governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to support host communities and enable refugees to lead productive lives (Global Compact on Refugees 2026).

Great Lakes Region (Africa): Composed of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. This book focuses on Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.

Host community: A community including the people, local structures, and systems within a specific geographical area that receives and supports newcomers who have additional needs. Newcomers can include refugees, immigrants, internally displaced persons, or other individuals (UNHCR 2011). The term also encompasses the community's role in providing support and services to these population influxes.

Humanitarian assistance: Assistance provided by nongovernmental or international actors to support displacement-affected populations, as opposed to the host government's expenditure on displacement response. Gentilini, Laughton, and O'Brien (2018) examine three definitions of humanitarian assistance—actor oriented, purpose oriented, and conflict centered—and their links to social protection. Because this study aims to help Great Lakes Region governments improve social protection for forcibly displaced populations by adapting social safety net programs for refugees, we adopt an actor-oriented definition.

Integration: For this book, *integration* (which can be misleading or politically sensitive) means full inclusion or equitable access for refugees in social protection systems, with tailored measures for specific needs.

Internally displaced person: A person forced or obliged to flee their home or place of habitual residence to avoid, or as a result of, armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, or natural or human-made disasters who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

International Development Association 18 Regional Sub-Window for Refugees and Host Communities: The International Development Association 18 Regional Sub-Window for Refugees and Host Communities provided \$2 billion in dedicated funding to help low-income countries hosting large numbers of refugees. It recognized the challenge of pursuing national development goals while accommodating refugees, often in areas where local communities lack basic services and resources (IDA 2021a).

International Development Association 19 Window for Host Communities and Refugees: The Window for Host Communities and Refugees provides grants and concessional loans to IDA-eligible countries to foster medium- to long-term development for refugees and host communities, recognizing the challenges of pursuing development goals while accommodating refugees, often where local communities lack basic services and resources (IDA 2021b).

Refugee: Any person who meets the eligibility criteria under an applicable refugee definition in international, regional, or national law. Under international law, refugees are persons outside their countries of origin who need international protection because of feared persecution or serious threat to their life, physical integrity, or freedom in their country of origin.

Refugee Policy Review Framework: A tool developed by the World Bank Group with the UNHCR to systematically review refugee policies across multiple dimensions in hosting countries. It informs World Bank Group policy dialogue by focusing on critical country policies that may need adjustment to improve socioeconomic opportunities for host communities and refugees (World Bank 2021).

Returnee: A former refugee who has returned from a host country to their country of origin or former habitual residence—spontaneously or in an organized fashion—with the intention of remaining permanently but who is not yet fully integrated. This includes those returning following the application of the cessation clauses in the 1951 Refugee Convention and regional equivalents (Article 1C, clauses [5] and [6], of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees—known as the “ceased circumstances” cessation clauses—specify when a person is no longer a refugee and the convention no longer applies). The UNHCR has a protection and solutions mandate for returnees as former refugees.

Social protection: Systems designed to help poor and vulnerable people cope with crises and shocks, find jobs, invest in children’s health and education, and protect the aging population. Governments provide social

protection to vulnerable members of their population, often with external financial and operational support. This study focuses on social assistance—the main instrument supporting forcibly displaced populations. Social assistance includes policies that reduce poverty and support poor and vulnerable households, typically financed through general taxation or donor assistance, unlike social insurance, which is usually financed through employer and employee contributions.

Social registries: Information systems that support outreach, registration, and assessment of needs and conditions to determine potential eligibility of individuals, families, or households for one or multiple programs (Lindert et al. 2017).

Social safety net: Noncontributory transfer programs (conditional or unconditional, cash or in kind) targeted to poor or vulnerable persons (Grosh et al. 2008). Social protection includes both contributory and noncontributory programs.

For additional information on these terms and the topics they cover, refer to the UNHCR glossary and its definition of *refugee*: <https://www.unhcr.org/glossary>.

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Abbreviations

ASP	adaptive social protection
BB	building block
CNR	National Commission for Refugees (Democratic Republic of Congo)
DRDIP	Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project
FDP	forcibly displaced population
FoSoD	Forum for Sustainable Solutions to Population Displacement
GBV	gender-based violence
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
GDP	gross domestic product
GLR	Great Lakes Region (Africa)
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICGLR	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region
ID	identification
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	internally displaced person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JRRRP	Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan
LIPW	labor-intensive public works
MIDIMAR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs (Rwanda)
MINALOC	Ministry of Local Government (Rwanda)
MINAS	Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Actions, and National Solidarity (Democratic Republic of Congo)
MINEMA	Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management (Rwanda)
MIS	management information system

NDP	National Development Plan (Uganda)
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NIDA	National Identification Agency (Rwanda)
NUSAF	Northern Uganda Social Action Fund
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (United Nations)
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister (Uganda)
PIU	project implementation unit
PMT	proxy means test
RSW	Refugee Sub-Window
SAGE	Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment Program
SCG	Senior Citizens Grant (Uganda)
SEIRHC	Socio-Economic Inclusion of Refugees and Host Communities
SGBV	sexual gender-based violence
SNR	National Strategy for the Socio-Economic Reintegration of People Affected by Conflict (Burundi)
STEP	Projet de Stabilisation de l'Est de la RDC pour la Paix (Eastern Recovery Project)
THIMO	travaux à haute intensité en main d'œuvre (labor-intensive public works)
TMI	transferts monétaires inconditionnels (unconditional cash transfer)
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees / UN Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VUP	Vision 2020 Umurenge Program (Rwanda)
WFP	World Food Programme
WHR	Window for Host Communities and Refugees

All dollar amounts are US dollars unless otherwise noted.

1 Introduction

This book analyzes the role of social protection as a key development response to the needs of forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) in Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR)—in specific, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees (both IDPs and refugees), and affected host communities in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. It studies how national social protection systems in the GLR address the needs of displaced groups and host communities and argues that development-oriented approaches should become the cornerstone of protracted displacement assistance. The book assesses the unique challenges faced by refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities throughout the displacement cycle; examines how national systems address their vulnerabilities; and considers future adaptations. It also identifies policy and operational opportunities for national governments, development partners, and humanitarian actors to coordinate responses and enable a transition to sustainable, government-owned development systems.

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS AND REFUGEES IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

Africa accounts for 46 percent of the world's IDPs and 25 percent of its refugees—34.1 million and 9.5 million, respectively. Globally, FDPs totaled 123.2 million at the end of 2024, including 73.5 million IDPs and 45.1 million refugees, asylum seekers, and others needing international protection (UNHCR 2024). Africa is facing three of the world's largest internal displacement crises: (1) Sudan (about 11.5 million), (2) the Democratic Republic of Congo (about 6.8 million), and (3) the Sahel (about 4 million).¹ Africa has also seen some of the world's most protracted refugee situations, most notably in the Horn of Africa and the GLR.²

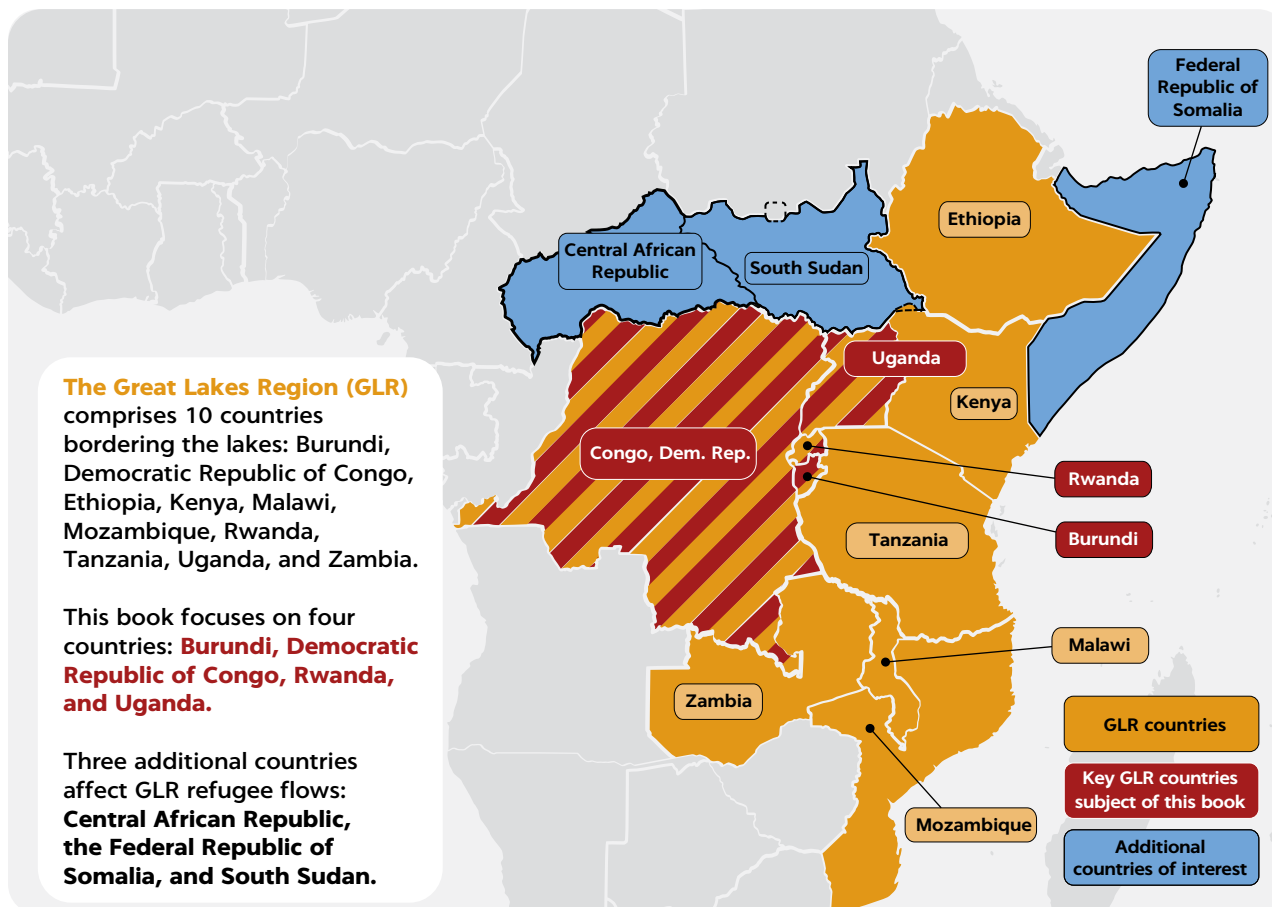
Since 2015, the number of refugees hosted in the GLR has more than quadrupled, from 600,000 to 2.5 million, made up of populations from

previous and ongoing displacements within and beyond the region.³ Three countries—Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda—are the source of more than 1.7 million refugees in more than 15 countries across central and southern Africa (refer to map 1.1). Most of the recent GLR refugee arrivals (56 percent) originate outside the region. Protracted conflicts in the Central African Republic, the Horn of Africa, and South Sudan have driven more than 1.3 million refugees into the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, accounting for 50 percent and 66 percent, respectively, of these countries' total refugee populations—up from just 19 percent a decade earlier.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the largest source of the 1.1 million refugees originating within the GLR, a result of conflict and insecurity in its eastern provinces. The current conflict—initially triggered by the arrival of an estimated 900,000 Rwandese refugees in 1995–96—has lasted more than two decades. The country accounts for 30 percent of the 2.5 million refugees in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda,

MAP 1.1

Refugee-affected countries in and around the Great Lakes Region



Source: Original map for this publication.

and Uganda. Another 380,000 Congolese refugees reside outside the GLR, as do 172,000 Burundi and 13,000 Rwandese.

Significant conflict-driven internal displacement in the GLR is largely confined to the Democratic Republic of Congo; Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda face periodic internal displacement primarily from natural disasters (for example, flooding and landslides). The return trends of refugees and IDPs reflect ongoing conflict, economic uncertainty that undermines sustainable reintegration (especially land, housing, and employment), and the effects of long-term exile. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, IDP returns are localized and often cyclical because of recurring displacement.⁴ With the current instability, durable return is extremely difficult. Similar barriers explain low refugee repatriation to the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Burundi and Rwanda, impediments to refugee return stem from histories of political and ethnic conflict and prolonged exile. Repeated cycles of displacement and return have varied effects on hosting and receiving communities, depending on numbers, prevailing socioeconomic conditions, and government policies (World Bank 2017).

The GLR presents complex forced displacement challenges for refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities across the four countries analyzed. Unresolved tensions—continuous instability with respect to power sharing and political participation of ethnic minorities—lie at the center of ongoing displacement. These tensions sustain high internal displacement and impede solutions, leaving more than 7 million IDPs and about 1.1 million refugees in a state of protracted vulnerability. Key trends include persistently high internal displacement and mobility within and from the Democratic Republic of Congo and inconsistent progress in return and reintegration among IDPs and protracted refugee situations (GDI n.d.). The Democratic Republic of Congo is among five countries globally hosting the largest numbers of IDPs in protracted situations for more than a decade.⁵ It also hosts a substantial number of refugees from neighboring countries and produces refugees to them, compounding assistance challenges.⁶

In Burundi and Rwanda, the legacy of past conflicts and long-term exile underpins the current decline in returning refugees. Neither country currently faces internal displacement driven by active conflict, although some IDPs from earlier violence remain without permanent solutions. Present repatriation trends reflect the socioeconomic consequences of long-term exile and lingering distrust of political and security conditions among refugees in neighboring countries.⁷ Uganda's principal challenge is managing large refugee populations and their socioeconomic impacts on host communities; it has neither a returning refugee population to support nor conflict-driven IDPs to assist.⁸ Natural disasters in the GLR account for a comparatively lower level of internal displacement—an estimated

270,000 in 2023—but they can aggravate economic, social, and environmental factors that fuel conflict and hinder sustainable return and reintegration (UNDRR 2020).

RESPONSE SYSTEMS AND SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR FORCIBLY DISPLACED POPULATIONS

A strengthened regional lens is critical to understanding displacement dynamics and the policy space available to GLR governments. Refugee displacement in the region is inherently cross-border, involving cyclical movements, protracted exile, and shared pressures on national systems. This creates a strong rationale for expanding regional cooperation on data exchange, forecasting of cross-border flows, harmonization of identification and registration systems, and coordinated planning for returns and local solutions. Regional public goods—including interoperable social registries, mutually recognized identification credentials, and aligned labor and legal frameworks—would substantially reduce transaction costs, strengthen inclusion pathways, and improve the continuity of service delivery for highly mobile populations. These aspects are analyzed in this book through a regional outlook.

The international aid system faces mounting operational and financial challenges as global needs reach record levels. Protracted crises, active conflict, climate-related disasters, and forced displacement place unprecedented demands on humanitarian and development actors while many countries reduce contributions, redirect resources to domestic priorities, or adopt more inward-looking policies (Gulrajani and Pudusseri 2025). This funding contraction coincides with broader concerns about the future of multilateralism, including the relevance and legitimacy of multilateral institutions (Eisentraut 2024; *Le Monde* 2024).

The global FDP response system is facing an unprecedented financing crisis in line with the overall constraints to financial aid. Humanitarian budgets have contracted sharply across regions, and development financing is under severe pressure, reducing the predictability of support to countries hosting FDPs. These structural shifts require development actors to recalibrate expectations: humanitarian assistance will remain essential for acute phases and protection functions, but it is unlikely to sustain multiyear caseloads at current levels. The analysis presented in this book therefore responds to a fundamentally changed environment compared with previous decades, highlighting the need to strengthen nationally led and managed systems while acknowledging the limits of both humanitarian and development financing in the medium term.

As the aid architecture strains under political and financial pressures, development-oriented approaches that strengthen local government

capacity are increasingly critical. Short-term humanitarian cycles cannot meet the long-term needs of FDPs and host communities in protracted displacement. Even before recent aid cuts, international efforts sought more sustainable development-led approaches, including integration into national social protection systems. With shrinking donor commitments raising doubts about continued multilateral engagement, investing in sustainable, nationally owned systems and moving beyond costly short-term responses is urgent. In this context, modifying policy and institutional arrangements and reinforcing local governance, service delivery, and financing should be central to international cooperation.

Adaptive social protection (ASP) enhances social protection systems' ability to address large-scale shocks such as forced displacement (Bowen et al. 2020). While traditional social protection primarily responds to individual shocks, ASP is designed to address large-scale crises by combining immediate relief with long-term preparedness and adaptive capacity for displaced populations and host communities across the displacement cycle. In fragile and conflict-affected situations, ASP helps create socioeconomic opportunities, mitigate tensions, and strengthen social cohesion and inclusion. In contexts of weak governance, insecurity, and limited capacity, social protection programs can stabilize communities by rebuilding trust in government institutions, reinforcing the social contract, and promoting resilience.

Globally, the convergence of social protection and humanitarian responses has gained momentum, driven by cash-based assistance and rising government investment in adaptive systems (SPIAC-B 2022; UNHCR 2021). Research on this nexus has expanded, highlighting potential synergies (Holmes and Lowe 2023; Kreidler et al. 2022; Seyfert et al. 2019). However, practical progress and documentation remain limited because of policy obstacles, resource constraints, low investment and capacity in low-income countries, and political economy factors that hinder coordination and intragovernment cooperation.

Integrating FDPs into national social protection systems is increasingly viewed as the key strategy for resilience. Humanitarian assistance targets immediate, life-saving needs, and although it has adapted somewhat to protracted displacement, it is not designed for sustained support or national inclusion. Its funding remains short term and unpredictable. Building resilience and reducing reliance on humanitarian aid require structural investments that expand local development opportunities for both FDPs and host communities. There is growing consensus that a durable, government-led response lies in including FDPs in long-term national social protection systems grounded in national social contracts and collective agreements.

The integration of FDPs into national social protection requires a clear distinction between crisis-specific programs and long-term inclusion in

regular social protection programs. The book differentiates two complementary pathways. First, ASP instruments—such as shock-responsive cash transfers, temporary expansion of beneficiary lists, and emergency payment mechanisms—can support FDPs during acute crises or population inflows. Second, systematic inclusion in regular national programs allows displaced populations to be covered through mainstream eligibility and delivery systems, supported by tailored adjustments to address specific access barriers. This dual-track approach reconciles the need for specialized interventions in high-risk contexts with the broader objective of embedding FDPs within national, equitable, and sustainable development systems as displacement becomes protracted. This book focuses on the regular inclusion of FDPs in national programs and the adaptations needed to those programs to move in that direction.

The book frames social protection not as the primary response to forced displacement crises but rather as a core component of a broader development strategy that supports self-reliance and resilience in protracted displacement contexts. Humanitarian assistance remains central for life-saving support and protection, especially during the early phases of displacement. Rather, the book emphasizes that in protracted displacement scenarios and a context of shrinking external assistance, supporting self-reliance and socioeconomic inclusion represents a more realistic and sustainable starting point for long-term solutions. Social protection should therefore be understood as a complementary, medium- to long-term platform that strengthens household resilience, supports recovery, and expands opportunities for self-reliance, not as a substitute for humanitarian action or a single comprehensive solution to displacement.

This book has two objectives: to document and evaluate social protection responses addressing the needs of refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities in the GLR and to explore how to adapt social protection systems to be more inclusive and accessible to FDPs and host communities. It assesses past and present responses of national systems and identifies areas for adaptation to address specific policy and operational obstacles. It examines how policies, laws, and programs treat refugees as foreign citizens versus national populations and how institutional arrangements reflect these distinctions. It also considers how social protection can leverage the convergence between humanitarian and development practices in protracted displacement settings, advocating a gradual phase-out of humanitarian assistance in favor of government-led development responses where feasible.

The book is structured as follows: chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework, chapter 3 examines FDP trends and challenges, chapter 4 analyzes the role of social protection systems, chapter 5 presents the main support challenges, and chapter 6 offers concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

NOTES

1. The others are República Bolivariana de Venezuela (7.7 million), Afghanistan (6 million), and the Syrian Arab Republic (4 million) (Refugee Population Statistics Database, United Nations Refugee Agency [UNHCR]; <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>).
2. The GLR groups 10 countries bordering the Great Lakes—Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. This book focuses on four—Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.
3. Data in this and the following two paragraphs were obtained from the UNHCR's Operational Data Portal (accessed September 2024), <https://data.unhcr.org>.
4. Refer to Displacement Tracking Matrix, International Organization for Migration, <https://dtm.iom.int/democratic-republic-congo>.
5. The five countries are Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, the Federal Republic of Somalia, and Syria.
6. Data from the Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/drc>. As of February 25, 2025, there were 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of Congo and 6.7 million IDPs.
7. Refer to the Refugee Data Finder, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.
8. Refer to the Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>.

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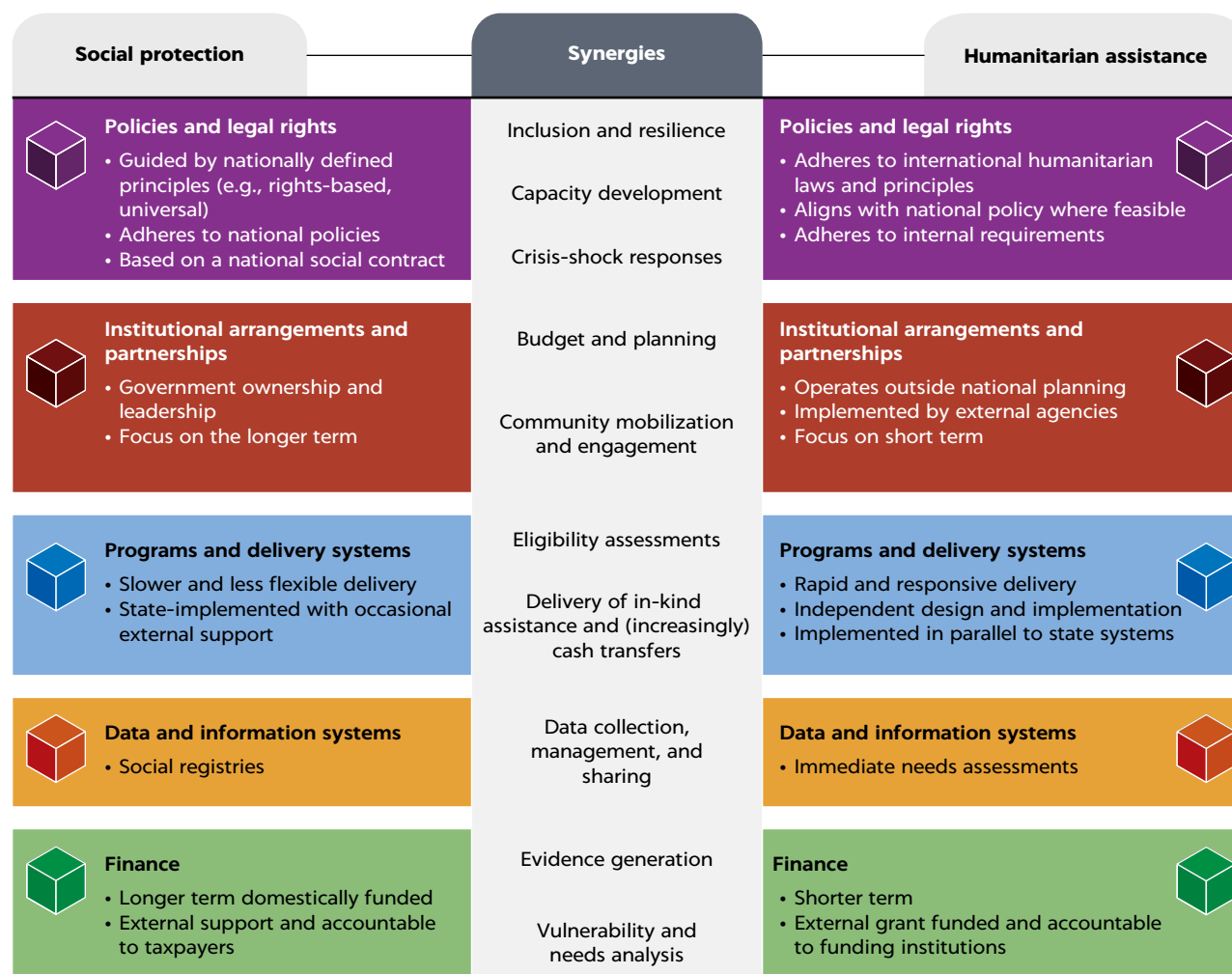
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2 Conceptual Framework

This book's central premise is that prolonged displacement crises in Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR) require a development-led approach driven by government authorities as part of national social contracts—the only long-term sustainable solution (examined in chapter 4). Accordingly, the conceptual framework assesses the capacity of government social protection systems to support forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) and host communities. In fact, this book distinguishes between adaptive social protection (ASP) systems that respond to shocks at scale and the broader process of adapting existing national systems to displacement. Although ASP provides the overarching architecture for shock responsiveness, the operational agenda in the GLR centers on modifying social protection policies, eligibility rules, delivery systems, and financing models to recognize displacement-specific vulnerabilities. This distinction ensures that displacement inclusion is understood as a systemwide adaptation, not only as an emergency response function.

Social protection and humanitarian assistance differ in core ways. Social protection is government led: programs are designed and implemented by government in line with national policies and principles. External funding and operational support may supplement these efforts, but social protection remains rooted in a national framework that dictates resource allocation and beneficiary selection and is ultimately accountable to domestic taxpayers. By contrast, humanitarian assistance is primarily delivered by nongovernmental actors; guided by international humanitarian laws, principles, and conventions; and almost entirely funded by external sources with accountability to donors. It is designed for rapid crisis response and often operates parallel to or in coordination with government systems, with greater flexibility and urgency. In protracted crises, humanitarian assistance often substitutes for state responsibilities when government systems cannot deliver adequate support, creating opportunities to advance convergence and synergies with social protection, particularly in postconflict contexts. Figure 2.1 summarizes these differences and synergies for supporting FDPs.

FIGURE 2.1**How social protection and humanitarian approaches differ: Where the synergies lie**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

ADAPTIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

The book adapts the World Bank's ASP Framework (Bowen et al. 2020) to the specific nuances of FDPs and host communities. The ASP Framework consists of four building blocks (refer to box 2.1) that are used to evaluate the flexibility and preparedness of social protection systems (Bowen et al. 2020). The World Bank has used the framework extensively to assess system readiness and scalability, inform policy discussions, and guide investments. Applications across shocks—including climate events and COVID-19—underscore its practical value. A key strength is its adaptability to diverse contexts and shock types. It also takes a holistic, systemic view of ASP, covering high-level elements such as legislation, coordination, and financing and operational aspects of program delivery on the ground.

Box 2.1**Building blocks of the Adaptive Social Protection Framework**

Building block 1: institutional arrangements and partnerships. Clear institutional arrangements and governance structures, policies and regulations, coordination mechanisms, institutional capacity, and partnerships to manage and coordinate adaptive social protection programs effectively

Building block 2: programs and delivery systems. The design, scale, and delivery capacity of social protection programs, including outreach, enrollment, registration, targeting, payments, grievance redress, and monitoring and evaluation systems, that are

flexible and adaptive to scale up or adjust when needed

Building block 3: data and information systems. Availability of robust data collection and management information systems, high-quality beneficiary and social registries, the capacity to conduct postshock needs assessments and vulnerability analyses, and the ability to exchange data readily for shock responses

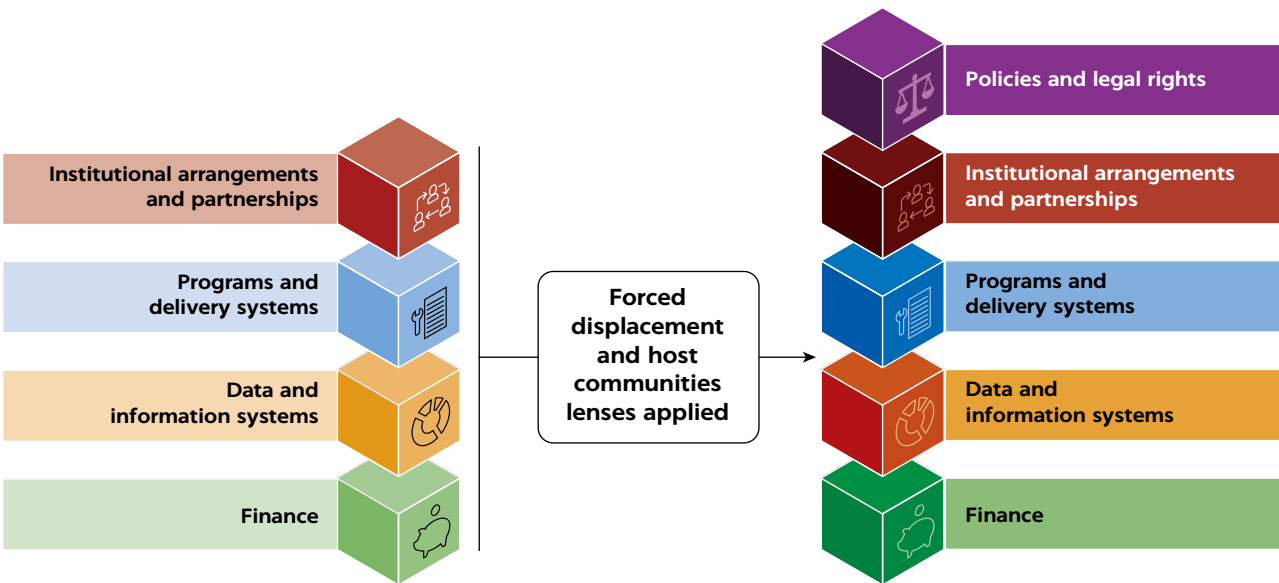
Building block 4: finance. The ability to secure adequate and reliable financial resources to support adaptive social protection programs.

This book's revised framework adds a new building block—policies and legal rights—and an FDP-specific filter across all building blocks to address unique vulnerabilities. The new building block evaluates national policies and laws governing FDP rights and opportunities in host countries, which often enable or constrain access to social protection (refer to figure 2.2). It is particularly relevant for refugees, who are not citizens of the host country. Tailored filters are applied across all building blocks to account for FDP vulnerabilities, differentiated for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, and host communities.

The original ASP Framework addresses covariate shocks, with a primary emphasis on natural hazards. Tools such as the Stress Test Tool¹ explore links among social protection, disaster risk management and financing, early warning systems, and the characteristics of sudden and slow-onset hazards. The World Bank has used the framework extensively to assess readiness to respond to natural shocks in Africa and Latin America and to evaluate COVID-19 responses across countries, including in the GLR.²

Forced displacement differs from natural disasters in nature, scale, and response, so the ASP Framework has been modified. Sudden inflows or movements of displaced people, along with protracted displacement, create demographic and socioeconomic shocks that unfold over time as communities and displaced populations adapt. In conflict settings, populations may be displaced repeatedly. Rapid population increases in limited geographic areas can disrupt labor markets, raise prices, strain services, intensify resource use, and heighten tensions, weakening social cohesion (World Bank 2017).

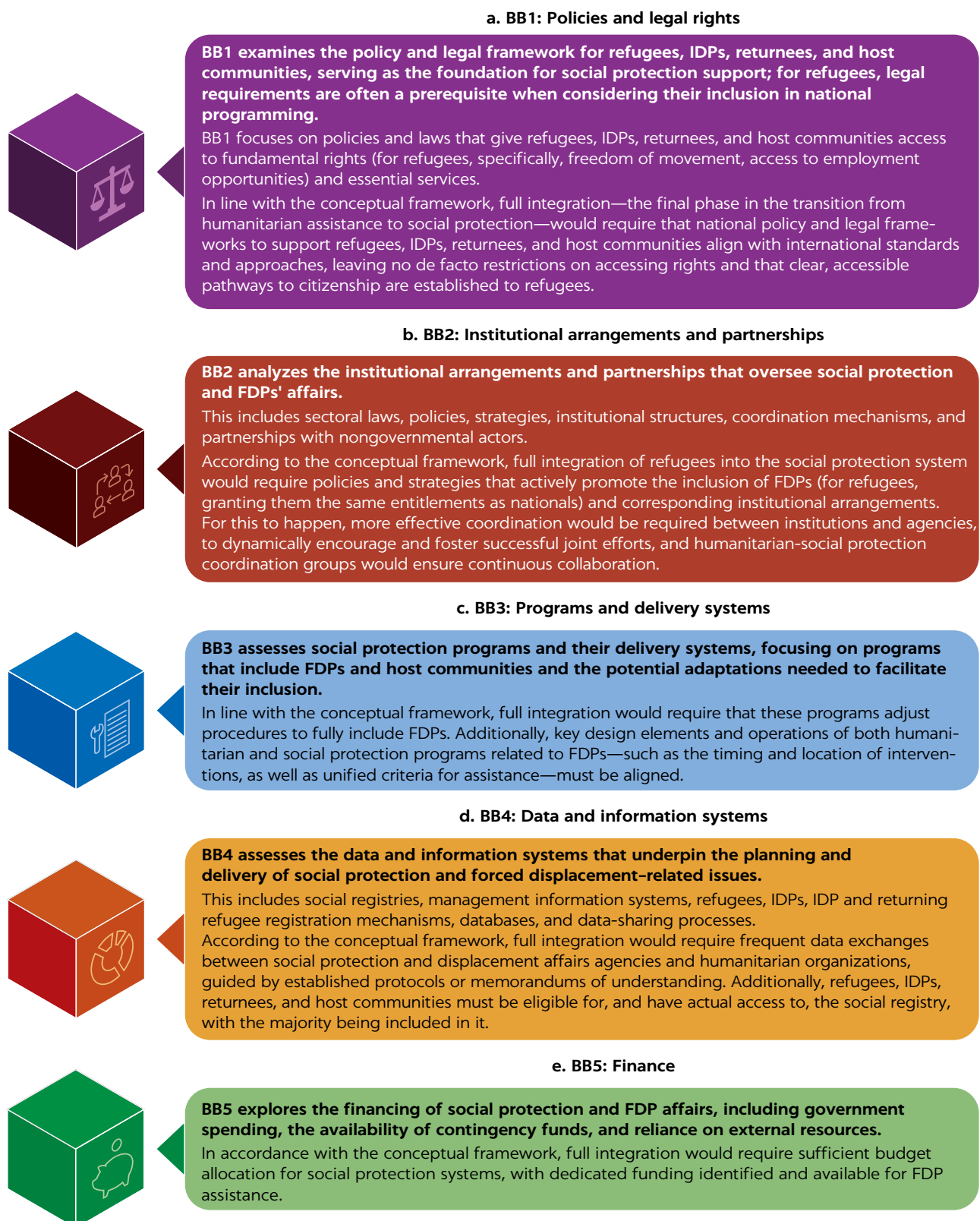
FIGURE 2.2
Adaptation of the adaptive social protection building blocks to protracted forced displacement contexts



Source: Original figure for this publication.

CUSTOMIZATION OF THE ADAPTIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

Customization includes adding a new building block—policies and legal rights—and applying filters within each building block. These filters tailor research questions to refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities. Figure 2.3 shows the coverage of each building block, and table 2.1 shows the filters applied.

FIGURE 2.3**Coverage of each adjusted building block**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB = building block; FDPs = forcibly displaced populations; IDPs = internally displaced persons.

TABLE 2.1 Application of refugee, IDP, returnee, and host community filters to each building block

BUILDING BLOCK	REFUGEES	IDPs AND RETURNEES	HOST COMMUNITIES
1: Policies and legal rights	What is the legal definition of <i>refugee(s)</i>? Are there specific policies for refugees? What is required to grant refugee status? Do refugees have freedom of movement, right to work, and access to public services? What are the GLR regional policies regarding refugee rights? Are there differences between de jure and de facto rights?	Has the government articulated a policy for the inclusion of IDPs and returnees in its national development strategy and planning and budgeting process? What are the legal definitions of <i>IDPs</i> and <i>returnees</i>? Are IDPs and returnees granted a special status or eligible for specific government assistance? What are the rights of IDPs and returnees, and how do they differ from those of other nationals (host communities)? Where do IDPs and returnees reside? Do they lose assistance when moving back to areas of origin? Do they have freedom of movement? Are there differences between de jure and de facto rights?	Has the government articulated an official policy on host communities that receive numbers of displaced persons? Does the government's national development policy make additional provisions in its planning and budgeting for affected host areas?
2: Institutional arrangements and partnerships	Who manages the institutional mandate for refugees within the government? What legislation governs social protection and refugees? Are there government-led coordination mechanisms to support refugees? Are there strategic partnerships to support refugees? How are they created and formalized? What are the key technical constraints to delivering social protection to refugees?	Who has the institutional mandates for IDPs and returnees? What legislation governs IDPs and returnees? Are there nationally led coordination mechanisms to support IDPs and returnees? Are there strategic partnerships to support IDPs and returnees? How are they created and formalized? Does the national social protection policy framework envision assistance to IDPs and returnees?	Does the national social protection policy framework envision specific assistance to host communities? Are there nationally led coordination mechanisms to support host communities?
3: Programs and delivery systems	Have any social protection programs been designed specifically for refugee support? Are refugees eligible for the national livelihood programs? Do programs have protocols to support refugees? Have humanitarian responses been coordinated or aligned with social protection? Are accountability, management, and monitoring mechanisms adapted to refugee needs?	Are IDPs and returnees eligible for the main safety nets and livelihood programs in the country? Do programs have plans and protocols in place to reach and support IDPs and returnees? Are service delivery mechanisms adapted to the needs of IDPs and returnees? Have any social protection programs been designed specifically to support IDPs and returnees? Have humanitarian responses been coordinated or aligned with SP?	Do the main safety net and livelihood programs target host communities specifically? What kind of support do these programs provide?

continued

TABLE 2.1 Application of refugee, IDP, returnee, and host community filters to each building block (continued)

BUILDING BLOCK	REFUGEES	IDPs AND RETURNEES	HOST COMMUNITIES
4: Data and information systems	Does the social registry cover refugees? Does the social registry collect data to measure the vulnerability of displaced populations? Is the social registry interoperable with other databases? Are data shared between SP and humanitarian actors? Are there agreements across the GLR for data sharing about refugees or social protection?	Does the social registry cover IDPs and returnees? Does the social registry collect data to measure the vulnerability of displaced populations? Is the social registry interoperable with other databases? Are data shared between SP and humanitarian actors? Are there agreements across the GLR for data sharing about IDPs and returnees?	Are there special surveys or data sources about the conditions of host communities? Who collects these data? Who has access to the data?
5: Finance	What are the differences between social protection and humanitarian spending? Are there any specific financing mechanisms for social protection to support refugees? Are there financing mechanisms in place for channeling humanitarian support through social protection? Are there regional funding mechanisms in the GLR designed to provide SP assistance to refugees?	How does social protection spending compare with humanitarian spending with regard to IDPs and returnees? Are there any specific financing mechanisms for social protection to support IDPs and returnees? Are there financing mechanisms in place for channeling humanitarian support through social protection? Are there regional funding mechanisms in the GLR to provide SP assistance to IDPs and returnees?	Is funding allocated to social protection programs supporting host communities?

Source: Original table for this publication.

Note: The filters for IDPs and returnees have been bundled together because they share similar characteristics (both are national citizens who have been displaced). GLR = Great Lakes Region; IDPs = internally displaced persons; SP = social protection.

Beyond modifying the ASP Framework, this book builds on the adapted ASP Framework and established models of the humanitarian–social protection nexus, notably those of O’Brien et al. (2018), Seyfert et al. (2019), and Lowe et al. (2022). The adapted framework sets out four progressive phases (refer to box 2.2) of integration between humanitarian assistance and social protection for FDPs and host communities, emphasizing government leadership in transitioning from parallel systems to fully integrated, government-led approaches (refer to figure 2.4).

Box 2.2

The four phases of the humanitarian-social protection continuum

1. *No role.* National social protection systems do not support forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) or host communities. Humanitarian actors provide stand-alone responses. Social protection programs do not specifically target host communities.

2. *Coordination and dialogue.* Social protection and humanitarian actors coordinate on timing, geographic targeting, transfer harmonization, and data sharing. National systems remain uninvolved, so humanitarian actors continue as the primary providers to FDPs and host communities.

3. *Inclusion.* National systems begin including FDPs under specific eligibility criteria or through temporary government initiatives.

Programs may prioritize areas with large host community populations. Adaptations to national systems are limited, and humanitarian actors still deliver most assistance, often with the social protection sector.

4. *Integration.* FDPs are fully incorporated into national social protection systems, with programs tailored for their circumstances. Host communities are prioritized, and social protection is combined with broader socioeconomic initiatives. Challenges like limited coverage or inefficiencies may persist, but displaced populations are no longer excluded because of status and are supported within national frameworks.

FIGURE 2.4
Humanitarian-social protection continuum, from no integration and parallel systems to full integration

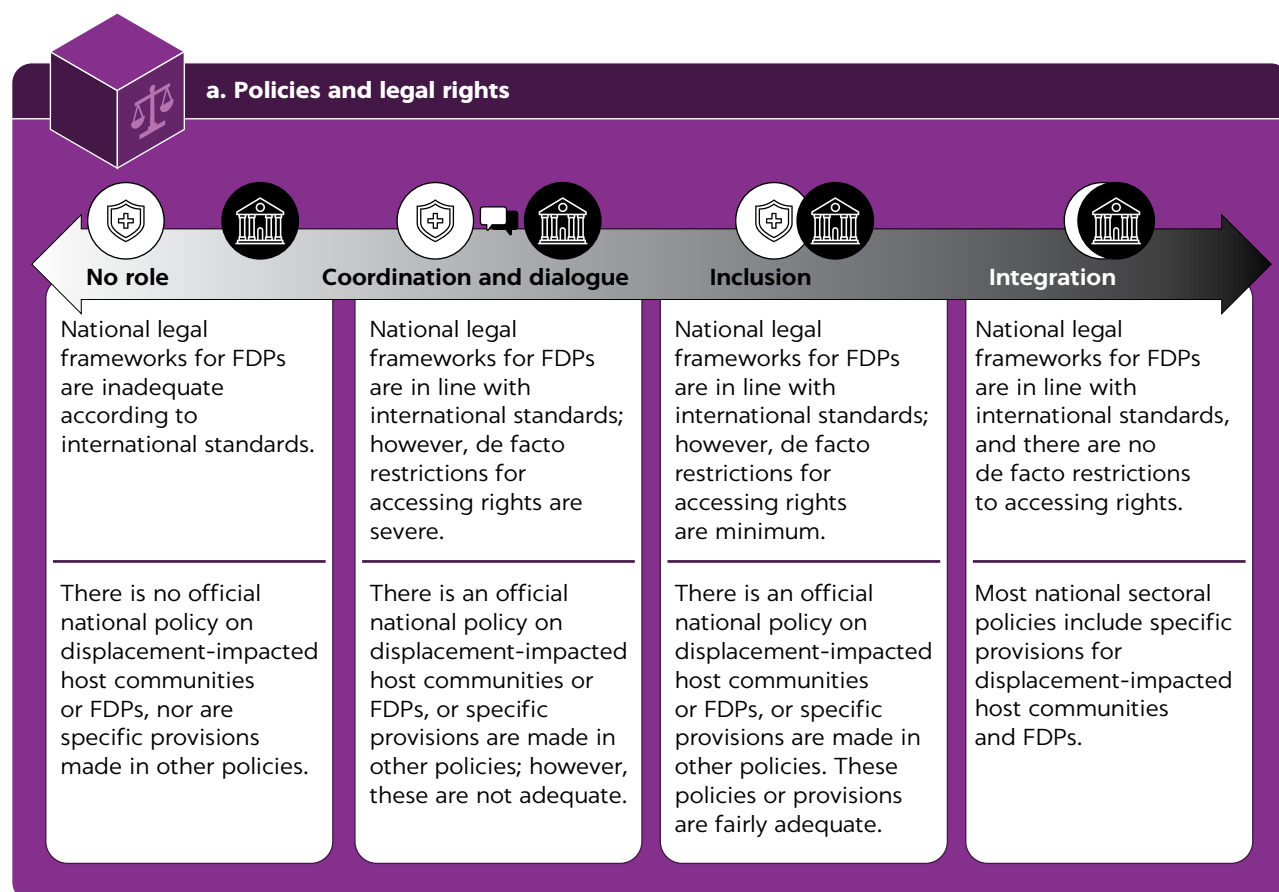
The diagram illustrates the humanitarian-social protection continuum, progressing from 'No integration' to 'Full integration'.

No integration	Coordination and dialogue		Inclusion	Full integration
No role				Integration
SP systems do not extend to FDP, and humanitarian responses are stand-alone.	SP authorities and humanitarian actors coordinate, but the primary source of FDP assistance remains humanitarian.		Some SP programs begin to include FDP based on specific targeting criteria, but the bulk of assistance continues to be humanitarian.	FDPs are provided with the same access to social protection systems as host populations.
FDP	FDP	FDP	FDP	Hosting population + FDP
Hosting population	Hosting population	Hosting population	Hosting population + some FDP	

Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: FDP = forcibly displaced population; SP = social protection.

The building blocks are adapted to align with the four humanitarian–social protection continuum phases, enabling concrete measures in each phase. This approach, used in similar studies, supports implementation across the continuum. Figure 2.5 outlines potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities for each building block in each phase and shows the expected government-led integration along the continuum.

FIGURE 2.5
Potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities



continued

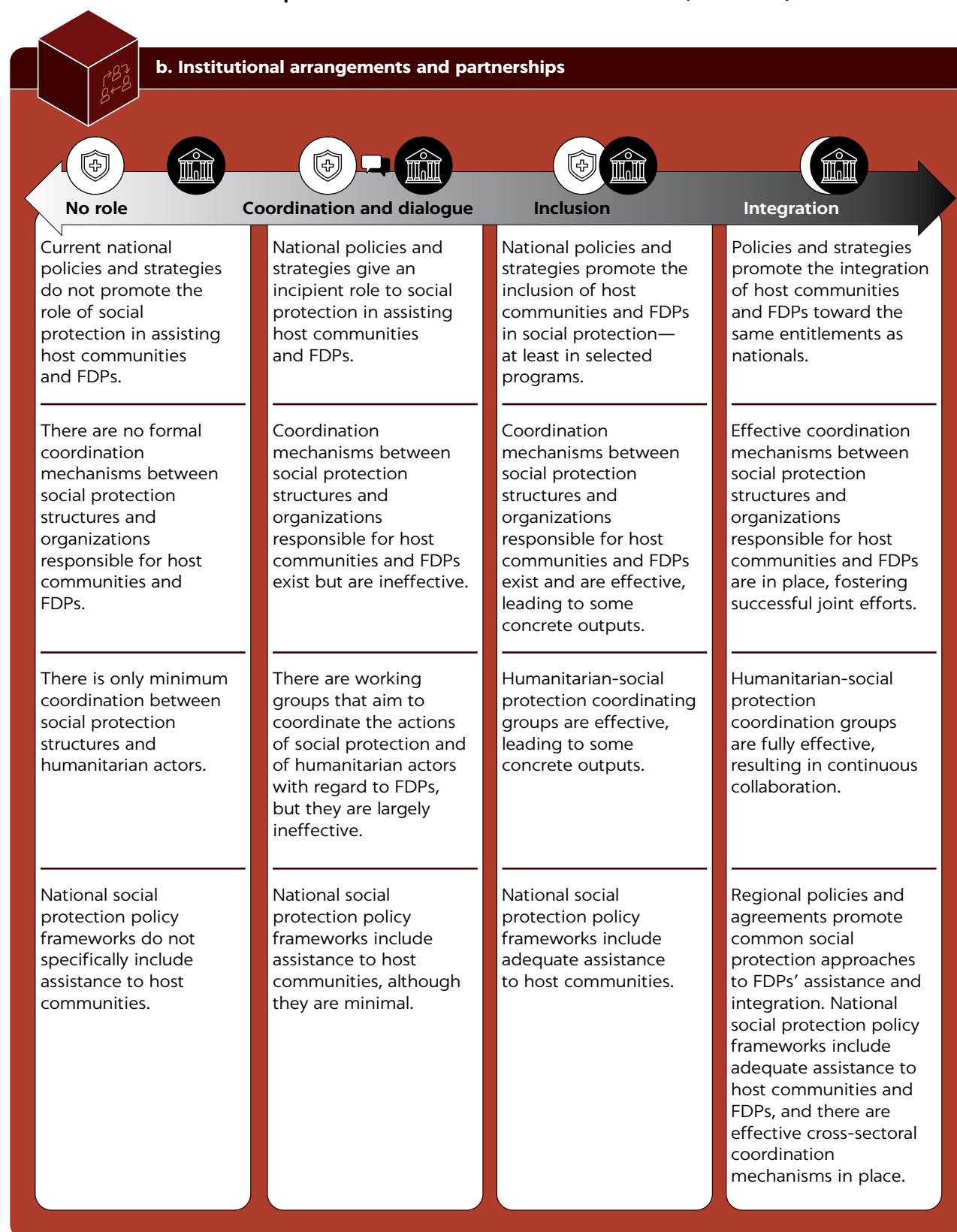
FIGURE 2.5 Potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities (*continued*)*continued*

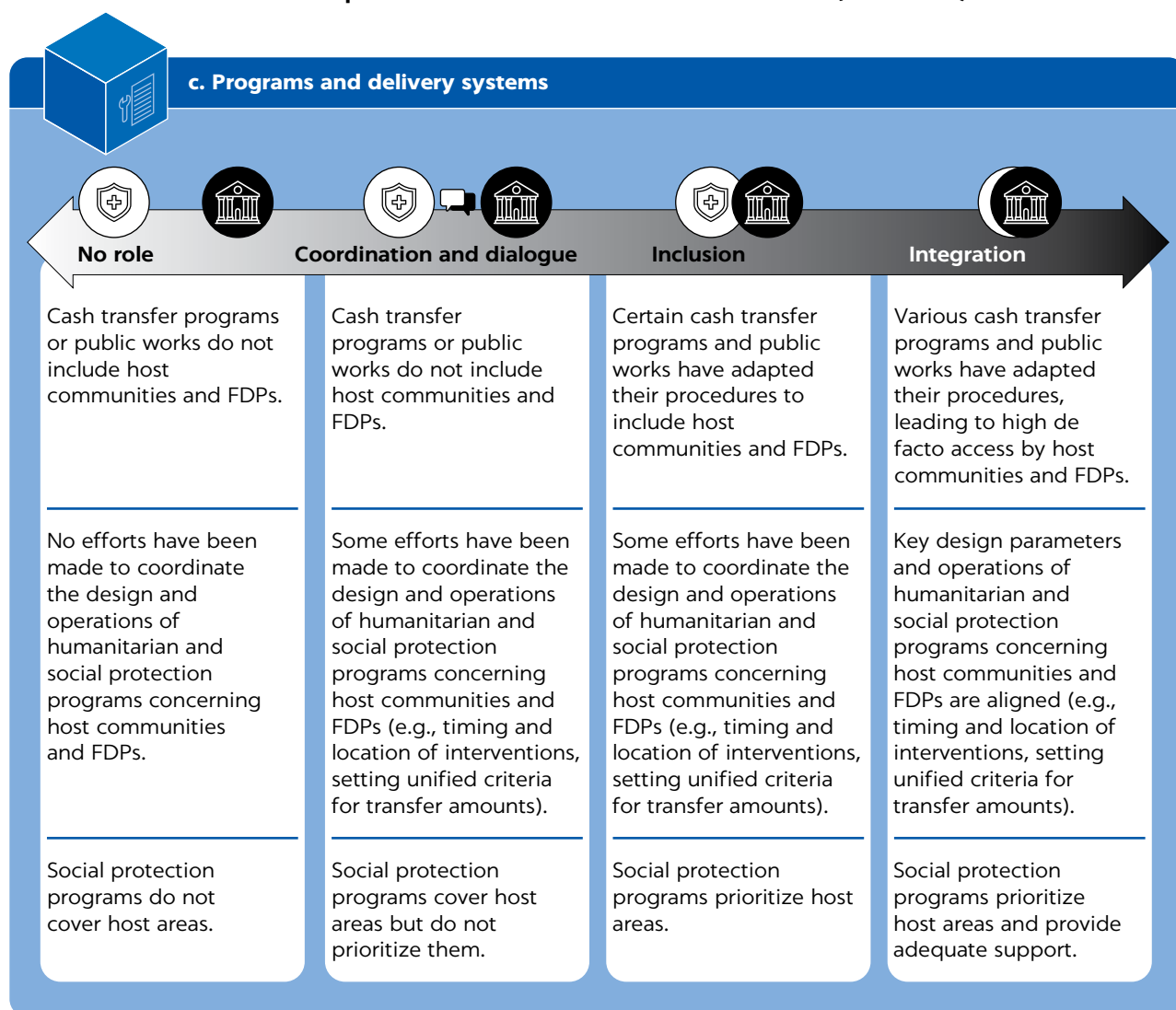
FIGURE 2.5 Potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities (*continued*)*continued*

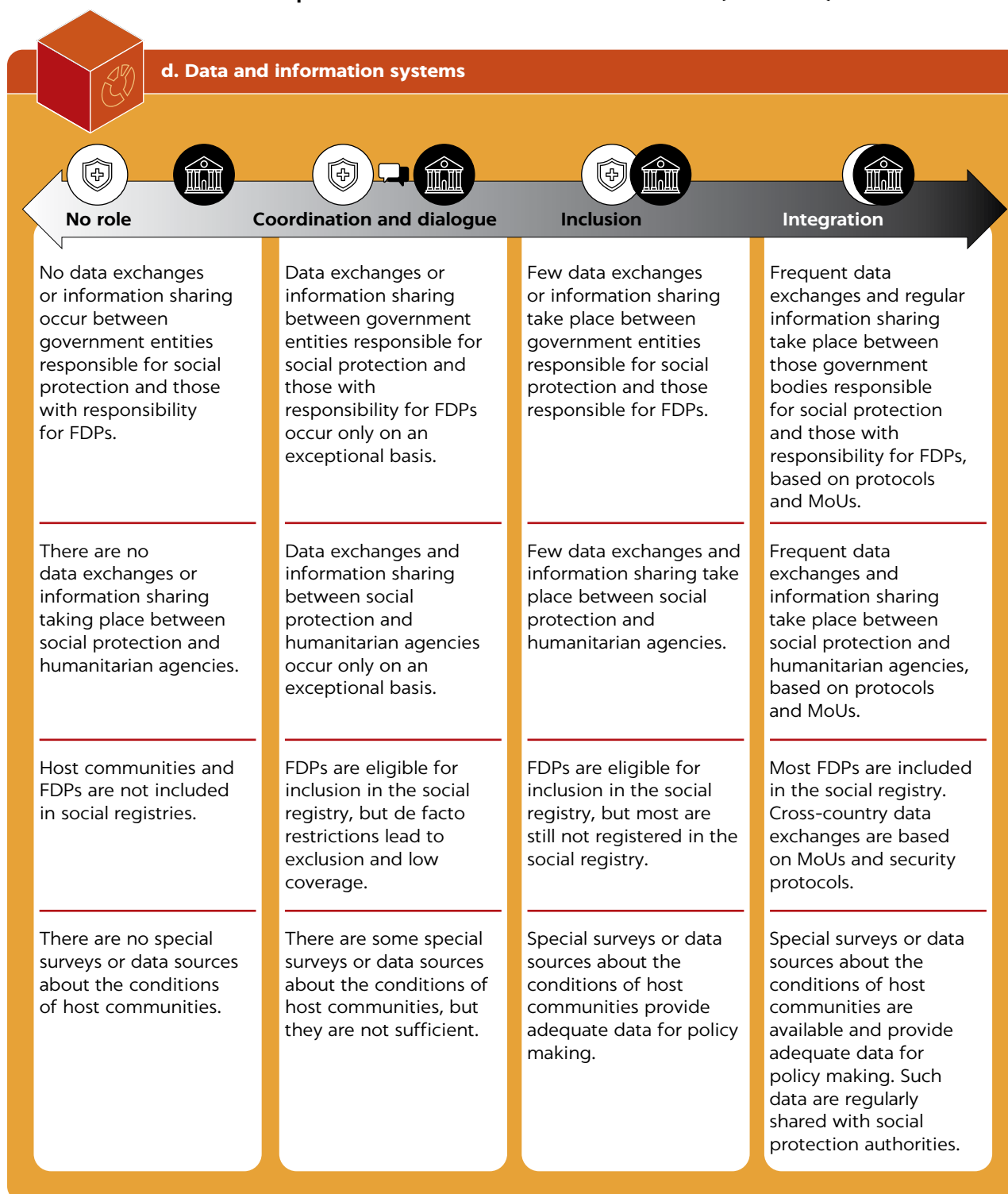
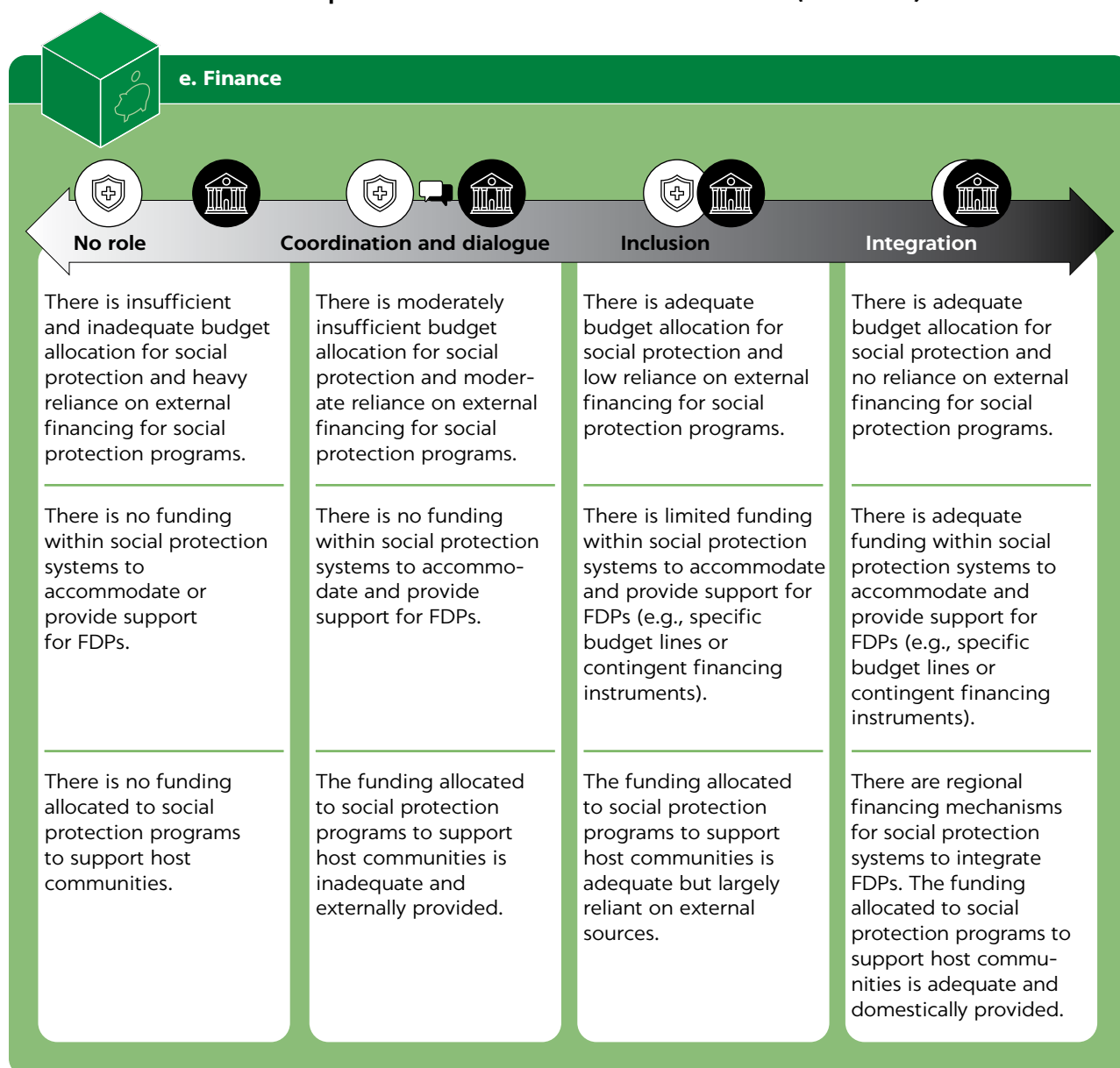
FIGURE 2.5 Potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities (*continued*)*continued*

FIGURE 2.5 Potential national provisions for FDPs and host communities (*continued*)

Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: FDPs = forcibly displaced populations; MoUs = memorandums of understanding.

NOTES

1. The World Bank's Stress Test Tool follows the ASP Framework, and it is organized along the same four building blocks. It consists of a rapid appraisal tool to measure the adaptability of social protection systems and their readiness to scale up after a shock.
2. The ASP Framework has been used to assess the readiness of social protection systems in different countries and regions, for example, countries in Southern Africa (Bowen et al. 2020); Southeast Asia, such as in Timor-Leste (Beazley et al. 2023); South Asia (World Bank 2022); Latin America and the Caribbean (Tisei and Malin 2024); and the Sahel (Coudouel, Fuselli, and Saidi 2023).

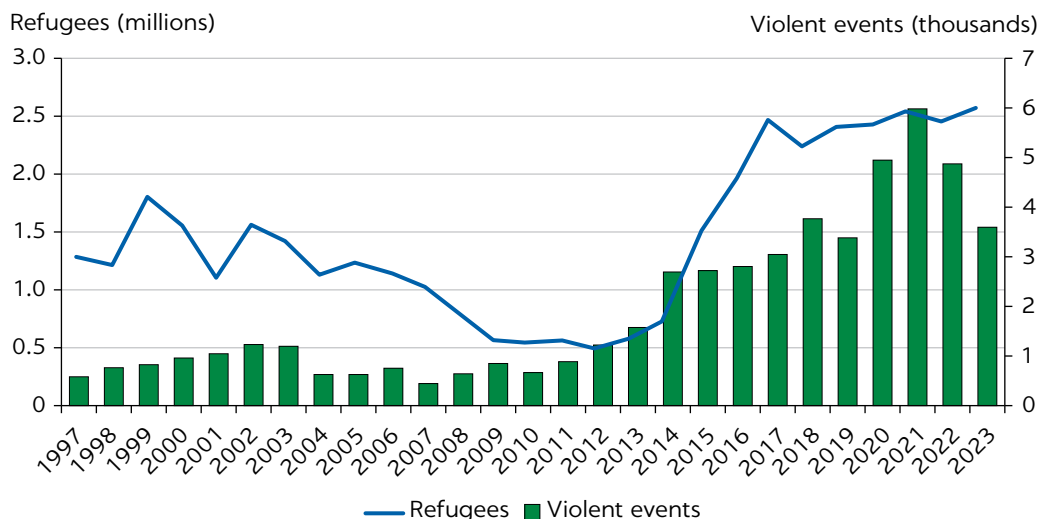
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3 Displacement and Return Trends: Profile of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees, and Host Communities in the Great Lakes Region

This chapter summarizes key regional, country-level, and local trends and characteristics of forced displacement in Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR) over the past three decades, along with the socioeconomic conditions and vulnerabilities of and impacts on affected populations. Analysis of available data and evidence highlights opportunities for social protection to play a greater role in supporting these populations and informs the policy, institutional, and operational changes needed to advance development-led approaches as the default response to protracted displacement. It also underscores specific vulnerabilities that distinguish displacement-affected groups from other poor households. The aim is to indicate where inclusive national social protection efforts could focus most effectively.

Interconnected political, security, and conflict-related events have driven forced displacement in the GLR for over three decades (Omeje and Hepner 2013). The scale and cyclical nature of displacement make the GLR one of the world's most complex and protracted displacement situations, with each country hosting or producing refugees within and beyond the region.¹ Its roots lie in decades-old unresolved conflicts over political and ethnic identity, exploitative access to natural resources and minerals, and inequitable power and influence. These factors culminated in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, when over 3 million refugees fled to neighboring countries—one of the four largest refugee movements of the past three decades. The consequences persist, notably in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where conflict and instability have driven one of Africa's largest internally displaced persons (IDP) crises, with an estimated 5.4 million deaths directly or indirectly the result of its impacts (Moszynski 2008). Most GLR refugee movements occur before and during outbursts of intense violence, followed by regular but smaller movements amid ongoing insecurity and conflict (refer to figure 3.1).

FIGURE 3.1**Incidents of conflict and violence and number of refugees, 1997–2023**

Source: Original figure for this publication. Data for political violence event counts come from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (<https://acleddata.com/>), and the total number of refugees comes from the United Nations Refugee Agency (<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/>).

Note: In addition to the Great Lakes Region countries (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda), the violence event counts include incidents reported in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, which are the top two refugee-sending countries from outside the region.

There are over 10.4 million displaced persons in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda, consisting of 7.9 million IDPs and 2.5 million refugees.² Forced displacement has directly and indirectly affected more than 44.5 million people in host communities across the GLR.³ Most IDPs (97 percent) are linked to ongoing conflicts in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, with smaller numbers because of natural disasters in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda (refer to table 3.1 and map 3.1).⁴ Refugee populations include both recent arrivals and older populations from past and ongoing events within and beyond the region. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda also account for over 1.7 million refugees in more than 15 countries in central and southern Africa (Gabelle et al. 2026b). Conflict-driven internal displacement is now largely confined to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where numbers rose to 6.9 million in 2025 from 1.5 million in 2015.⁵ In Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, periodic internal displacement from natural disasters (mainly flooding and landslides) has surpassed conflict as the leading cause, affecting about 270,000 people in 2023.⁶

TABLE 3.1 Forced displacement population per country, 2024

COUNTRY	MILLIONS				
	NATIONAL POPULATION (ESTIMATED)	NO. AFFECTED HOST COMMUNITIES (%)	IDPs	RETURNEES	REFUGEES
Burundi	14	4.3 (30)	0.255	0.307	0.089
Congo, Dem. Rep.	114	31.5 (27)	6.9	0.067	0.517
Rwanda	14	2.7 (19)	0.174	0.042	0.135
Uganda	46	6.0 (13)	0.554	n.a.	1.8
Total	188	44.5	7.9	0.416	2.5

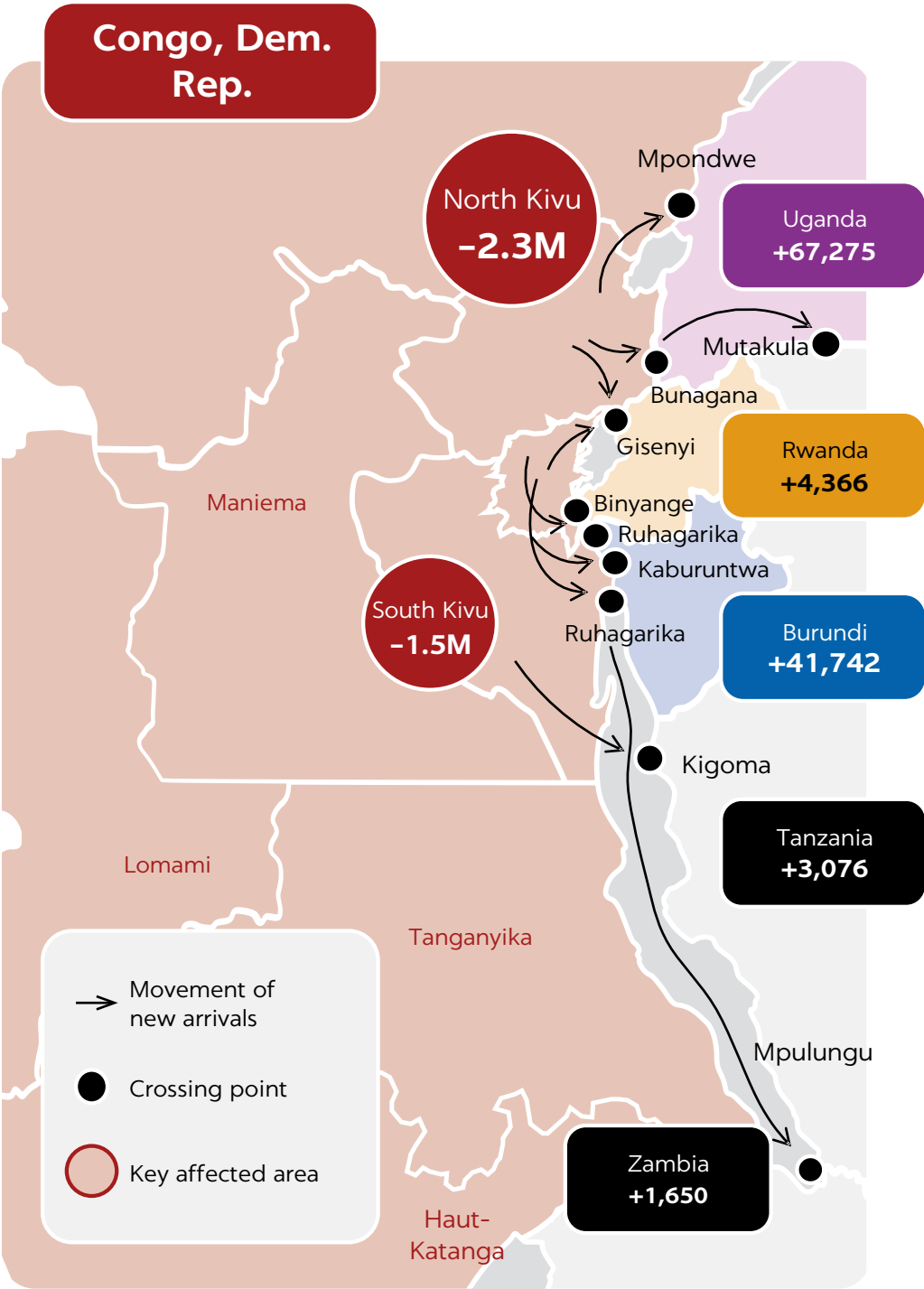
Source: Original table for this publication.

Note: Percentages represent the percentage of the country's total national population that is affected by forced displacement and therefore are labeled host communities. IDPs = internally displaced persons; n.a. = not applicable.

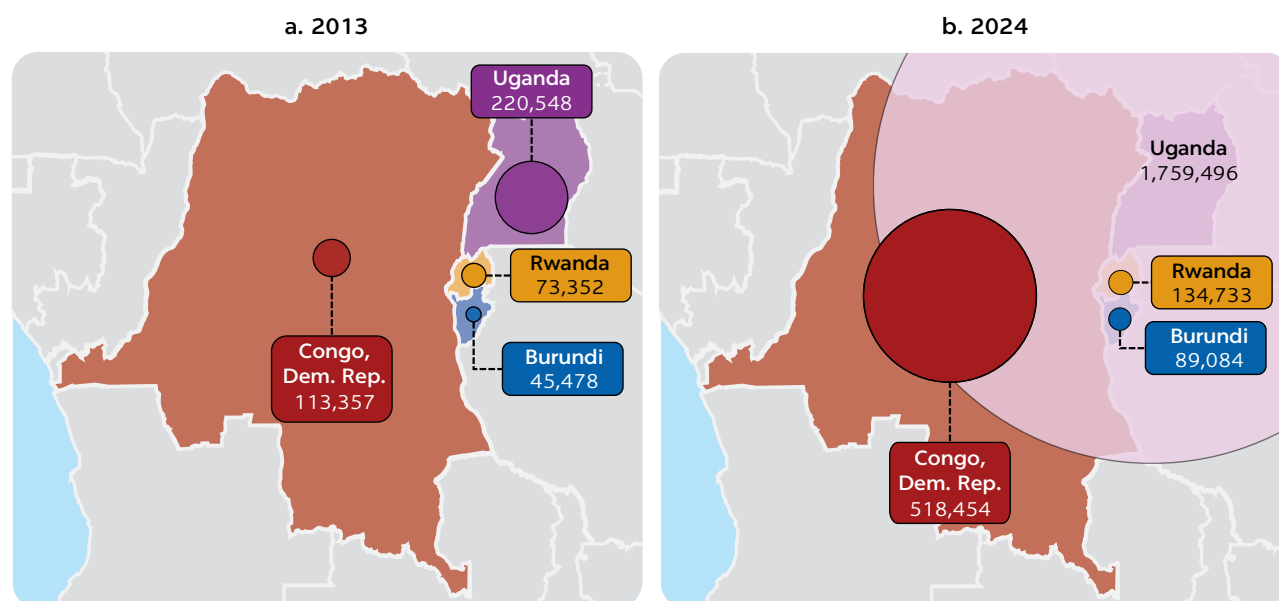
The number of refugees hosted in the GLR has quadrupled since 2013, from 600,000 to 2.5 million. Refugee inflows have also shifted: 56 percent now originate from outside the region, up from 19 percent a decade earlier. Uganda's refugee population alone rose from 220,548 in 2013 to nearly 1.8 million by the end of 2024 (refer to map 3.2). Although 1.2 million Burundi, Congolese, and Rwandese refugees remain in the GLR, conflicts in the Central African Republic, the Horn of Africa, South Sudan, and Sudan have driven over 1.7 million refugees into Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, accounting for 63 percent and 50 percent, respectively, of their total refugee population. Over the same period, refugees originating within the GLR increased from 540,000 to 1.2 million by May 2025, primarily because of continuing violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the resurgence of political instability in Burundi in 2015.⁷

The GLR has a large share (75 percent) of refugees and IDPs in prolonged displacement. Refugee populations arrived in different waves over the past three decades, and recurring cycles have led to 542,000 births in exile—about 22 percent of all refugees. Proportions are lower in the Democratic Republic of Congo (19 percent) and Uganda (20 percent) because of large recent inflows from the Central African Republic and South Sudan. In Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, refugees have remained in exile for an average of 17 years. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, an estimated 79 percent have been in exile for five years or more.⁸ Data on IDP duration are limited, although displacement above 1.5 million—mostly in the Democratic Republic of Congo—has been recorded since 2009.⁹

MAP 3.1
Snapshot of displacement dynamics, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,
June 2025



Source: Original map for this publication, based on UNHCR 2025.
Note: M = million.

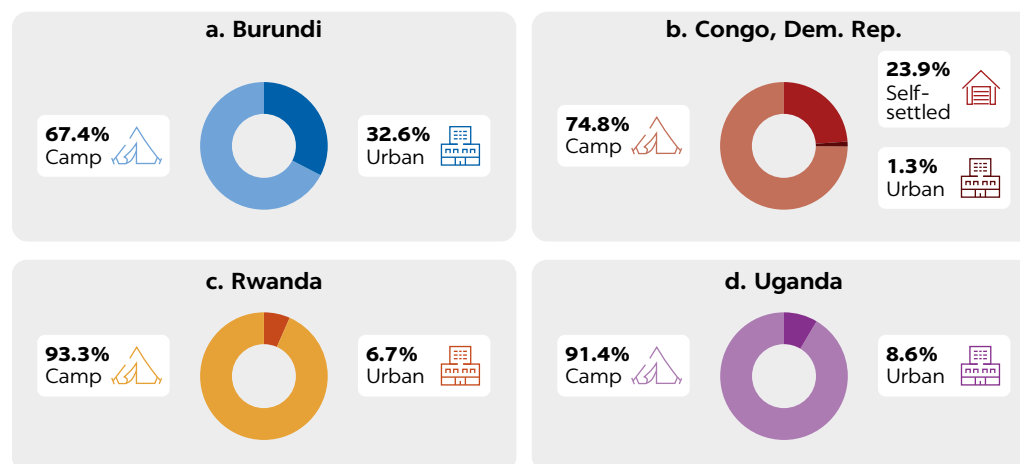
MAP 3.2**Total number of refugees, 2013 and 2024**

Source: Original map for this publication, based on data from the Operational Data Portal, United Nations Refugee Agency, <https://data.unhcr.org/> (accessed December 2024).

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the largest source of refugees within the GLR because of conflict and insecurity in its eastern provinces. The conflict, initially triggered by the arrival of an estimated 900,000 Rwandese refugees in 1995–96, has lasted more than two decades. The country accounts for an estimated 858,000 (34 percent) of the current 2.5 million refugees in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, with a further 309,000 Congolese refugees in countries outside the GLR.¹⁰

Displaced populations vary widely across GLR countries. The Democratic Republic of Congo has the largest combined refugee and IDP population (7.4 million). Uganda hosts the largest and most heterogeneous refugee population (1.8 million), with significant numbers from inside and outside the GLR.¹¹ Together, these two countries host 88 percent of GLR refugees. Burundi and Rwanda host smaller refugee populations, predominantly intra-GLR populations.

About 90 percent of the forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) in the GLR live in rural areas near borders. Over 60 percent of the 2.5 million refugees and 7.9 million IDPs in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda reside in assisted camps and self-organized settlements (refer to figure 3.2).¹² About 58 percent of IDPs in the Democratic Republic of Congo live close to or within villages; 75 percent live in camps, 24 percent in self-settled rural sites, and 1 percent in urban areas, mainly Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. Uganda hosts the largest share in managed settlements (91 percent).

FIGURE 3.2**Settlement breakdown of refugee populations, 2024**

Source: Original figure for this publication, based on 2024 data on the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region, United Nations Refugee Agency, <https://data.unhcr.org/>.

The smaller refugee and IDP presence in cities reflects policy and higher urban costs and broadly mirrors national rural-urban divides.¹³ In Burundi, 32.6 percent of refugees live in urban areas. Uganda has the largest number living in cities (about 150,000 in Kampala), although they represent less than 10 percent of its total refugee population.¹⁴ The high proportion of refugees and IDPs residing in camps likely reflects poverty, reliance on humanitarian aid, and constraints on mobility and freedom of movement. Urban refugees may be a self-selecting group with greater skills, assets, and resources; employment rates are correspondingly higher in cities than in camps.

Security and logistics drive GLR governments to accommodate refugees in camps near border entry points. Concentrating refugees in specific locations allows early administrative control and rapid setup of infrastructure and aid delivery. Most refugees initially choose to stay near borders in hopes of an early return, a preference host governments share. For security reasons, governments typically restrict movements out of camps. With appropriate documentation, refugees may later reside in urban areas but generally forfeit the humanitarian support available in camps.

RETURN AND REPATRIATION DYNAMICS

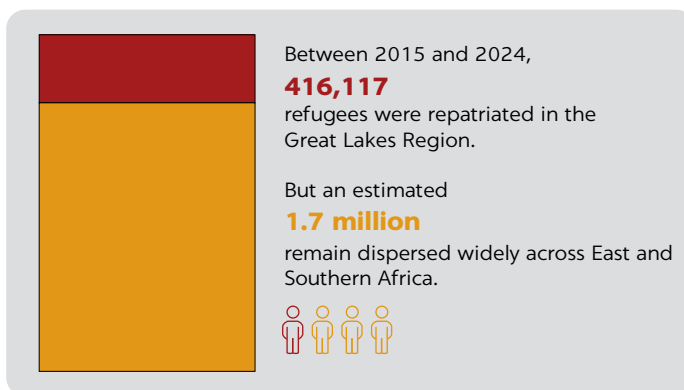
Over 5.6 million GLR refugees have returned to Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda since the mid-1990s, composed predominantly of the mass return of 3.4 million to Rwanda from the

Democratic Republic of Congo in the two years following the 1994 genocide. Repatriation to Burundi from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania totaled 1.5 million over three decades, and those to the Democratic Republic of Congo totaled about 700,000 over the same period. Many returns occur outside official frameworks, complicating accurate data collection and likely including cyclical movements to and from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Actual return figures are therefore likely substantially higher than official documentation indicates.¹⁵

GLR return movements mirror the global trend of arrivals outpacing returns during 2015–24. In that period, 416,117 refugees repatriated within the GLR, mostly to Burundi (307,159), followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (66,555) and Rwanda (42,403), whereas 1,490,407 left those countries (Gabelle et al. 2026b). These statistics show positive repatriation but at much lower levels than before. The slowdown underscores persistent political, security, and economic challenges and the long-term effects of exile. In Burundi and Rwanda, impediments to return have deep roots in histories of political and ethnic conflict, reflected in long periods in exile. An estimated 1.7 million refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda remain dispersed across East and Southern Africa (refer to figure 3.3). At current repatriation rates, resolving these protracted situations would take eight years for Burundi, 169 years for the Democratic Republic of Congo, and 60 years for Rwanda. Return levels in the Democratic Republic of Congo are overshadowed by larger outflows over two decades and natural population growth within refugee populations in exile.¹⁶ As in similarly complex contexts elsewhere, GLR refugees often remain outside their countries of origin for very long periods, even when political changes occur.¹⁷

Refugee repatriation and IDP returns in the GLR closely track regional political and security developments. Returns can signal improved stability in countries of origin (for example, returns to Burundi since 2017).¹⁸ The most substantive—although episodic—returns occur in peripheral regions of two poorer GLR countries, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, through organized government-United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) repatriation, unassisted returns, and sometimes pressured returns because of unfavorable host country policies. Modest refugee returns continue to Rwanda, the only country of the four that has graduated from recent fragility classifications (OECD 2025). There are no longer significant IDP or refugee returns to Rwanda and Uganda. Return volumes rarely match departures because of ongoing conflict, political and economic uncertainties, difficult reintegration (especially land, housing, and employment), and the effects of long-term exile.

FIGURE 3.3
Refugee returns



Source: Original figure for this publication, based on United Nations Refugee Agency refugee statistics, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics> (accessed February 2025).

Note: These figures do not include refugees who chose to return outside official repatriation movements. The total number of returns could be higher.

Since 2015, refugee returns to Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda have been modest and do not strain national absorption capacities, equating to 0.05 percent, 2.1 percent, and 0.3 percent of their respective populations.¹⁹ Their quantitative impact is more significant locally: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, returning refugees amount to 0.2 percent of district-level host communities; in Burundi and Rwanda, the figures are 7 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively.²⁰

If village-level data were available and included refugees, these proportions would likely be higher. Returnees face major challenges integrating into often poor local communities, with tensions over recovering lost land, housing, and property and competition for scarce economic and employment opportunities.

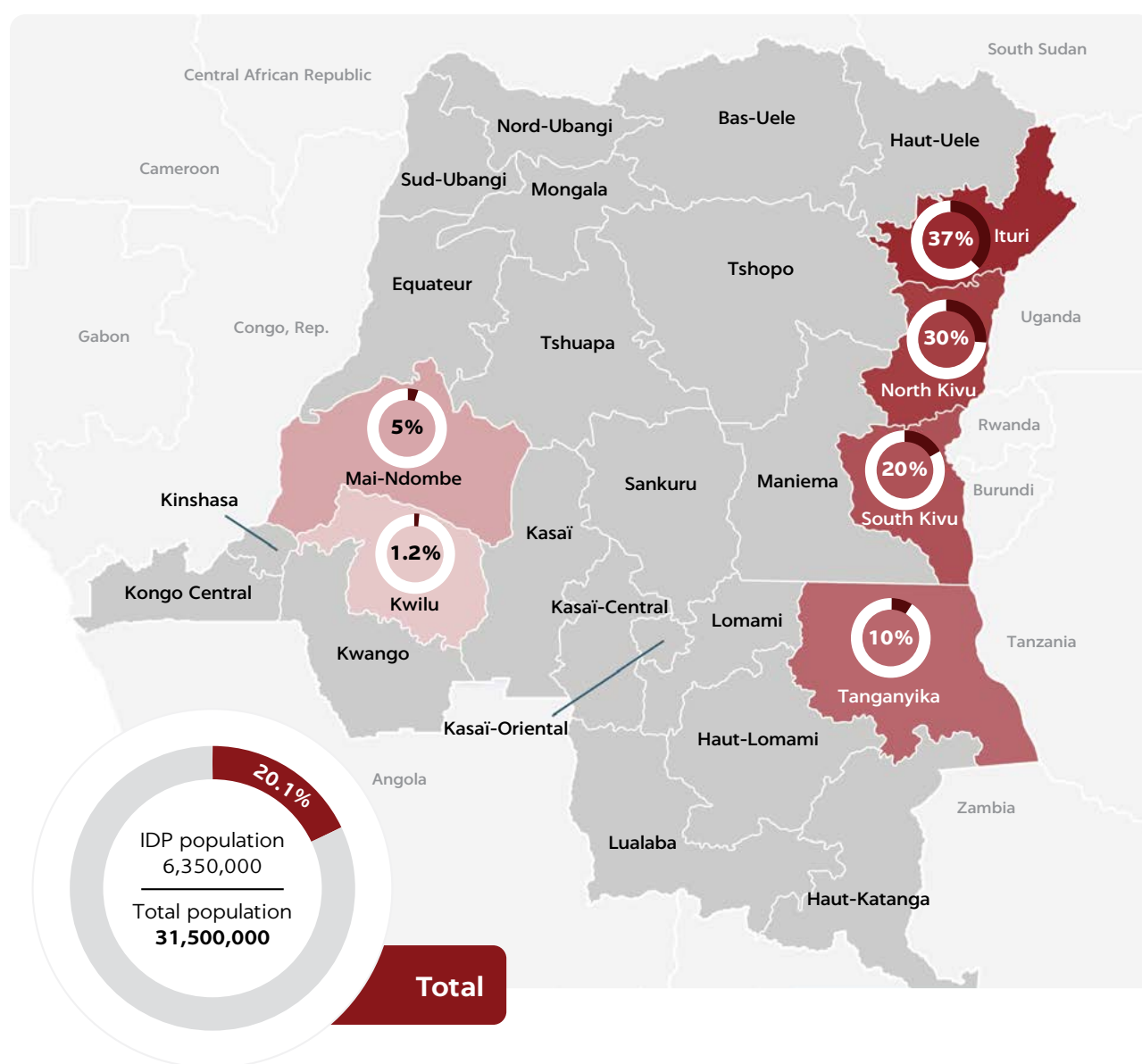
IDP return trends are difficult to capture and analyze, mainly because of security issues. Political and security sensitivities have limited consistent access to IDPs in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda during past and current internal conflicts. In the Democratic Republic of Congo—the only current site of mass internal displacement—the unpredictability of violence, wide spatial dispersal, and limited access to IDP sites hinder consistent data collection. In the eastern part of the country, frequent displacement, driven by widespread, unpredictable conflict, makes detailed analysis beyond the main trends very challenging.

With the current instability, the environment in the Democratic Republic of Congo discourages IDPs from permanently returning to areas of origin. Available data capture major displacement patterns but not the extent or

duration of secondary and cyclical movements. Between 2020 and 2023, IDPs rose from 4.2 million to 5.4 million, and IDP returns increased from 2.7 million to 3.2 million. North Kivu recorded the largest increases in both displacement (1.4 million) and returns (750,000) (refer to map 3.3). Most displacement and returns occur within individual provinces, reflecting localized conflict and IDPs' desire to stay near places of origin to preserve land, assets, property, and family networks.²¹

MAP 3.3

Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo with the highest number of IDPs



Source: Original map for this publication, based on IOM 2024.

Note: The six most affected provinces are shaded in red. Percentages are the share of the provincial population. Returning IDPs not included in calculations. IDPs = internally displaced persons.

IDP returns in the Democratic Republic of Congo are irregular, short term, and localized, often involving repeated, cyclical visits to assess security; inspect housing, land, and property; and reconnect with family and social networks. These patterns mirror IDP residence across host communities, informal settlements, and organized camps. Many displaced people seek safety as near to their origin as possible to facilitate visits to check land and property and continue farming, where possible. Others remain in assisted settlements and move far less, primarily because of security and protection concerns. Repeated displacement and return cycles deplete the limited resources of already poor and vulnerable populations and weaken resilience.

SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF FORCIBLY DISPLACED POPULATIONS

Socioeconomic profile of refugees

In the GLR, substantial socioeconomic data exist on refugee populations. Women and children account for 75 percent of refugees; about 1.35 million (over 54 percent) are under age 18, and 320,000 are under age five (refer to table 3.2) (Fix and Rahman 2024). These figures have major implications for providing key human capital services such as education and health. Adult men constitute 25 percent of refugees, and adult women constitute 24 percent. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, men (31 percent) outnumber women (19 percent), the only GLR country where this occurs. Dependency ratios vary, with higher levels in countries with many female-headed households (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement 2019). Disability statistics exceed those among local populations (refer to Kidd and Kabare 2019), with about 3 percent classified as older persons and 1 percent as persons with disabilities (UNHCR 2023).

TABLE 3.2 Demographic breakdown of refugee populations

COUNTRY	ADULT MEN (%)	ADULT WOMEN (%)	CHILDREN <18 YEARS (%)
Burundi	22.5	24.3	53.3
Congo, Dem. Rep.	31.1	19.2	49.8
Rwanda	24.7	26.8	48.4
Uganda	20.9	24.5	54.5

Source: Original table for this publication, based on United Nations Refugee Agency data, <https://data.unhcr.org/> (accessed August 2024).

Key social development indicators for camp-based GLR refugee populations are broadly similar across countries. In education, enrollment differs between camp and public schools and between boys and girls. Across the four GLR countries, primary enrollment is higher in Burundi and Rwanda (90 percent) and lower in the Democratic Republic of Congo (66 percent) and Uganda (50 percent), reflecting the greater heterogeneity and size of refugee populations. In some cases, enrollment compares favorably with host communities, largely because of international humanitarian assistance.²² Camp-based enclave economies and markets show incremental growth over time (Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru 2016).

Most GLR refugees come from rural backgrounds (Fix and Rahman 2024). International and government registration data and surveys show that most refugees in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda are skilled or semiskilled workers in agriculture, fishing, or forestry. Refugees with professional backgrounds, entrepreneurs, and traders are fewer. In Rwanda, a higher share of refugees (50 percent) currently work in nonagricultural employment compared with the other countries.²³

Limited productive land near camps significantly constrains refugees' ability to pursue previous livelihoods because of land scarcity and high population density in the four countries' border regions. Consequently, camp-based refugees often face suboptimal employment or become self-employed as petty traders. The share of refugees in urban settings remains low because of higher living costs and ongoing policy (no assistance to urban dwellers and barriers to business licenses) and legal restrictions on out-of-camp movement. Some evidence suggests urban refugee enterprises outperform those in camps (Betts et al. 2014).

Socioeconomic profile of IDPs, returning populations, and host communities

Far fewer socioeconomic data exist on IDPs, returnees, and host communities beyond basic quantitative information (Cantor and Woolley 2020). For IDPs in the Democratic Republic of Congo, knowledge is limited to 2024 demographic indicators: 51 percent are adult females, 49 percent are adult males, and 58 percent of the entire IDP population are children (under age 18).²⁴ This scarcity of data stems from security conditions, political concerns, and methodological challenges and definitions (JIPS 2026). Quantitative data on returning refugees are available because repatriation occurs within official legal and operational frameworks. By contrast, IDP returns resemble unofficial refugee movements—largely self-organized and unrecorded. Beyond specific social cohesion studies, little systematic data collection occurs on communities hosting returning refugees and IDPs.

Political and security sensitivities have precluded consistent access to IDPs in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda during past and current internal conflicts. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the only current site of mass internal displacement, unpredictable violence, wide dispersal, and poor access to IDP sites impede consistent data collection. Consequently, no detailed socioeconomic data sets exist for IDPs, returnees, and host communities to enable comparisons with the general population. High volatility in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo also prevents timely and accurate data collection on the duration of IDP displacement and limits insights on the profile and impact of returning IDPs on host communities. National statistical offices in the GLR have not prioritized or resourced data collection on these populations in insecure areas, and including IDPs in national or household surveys typically requires supplementary international funding.²⁵

IDPs are particularly vulnerable because of interrupted and lost employment and livelihoods. Regular assistance by international and local humanitarian agencies and civil society organizations is challenged by distance, dispersal across sites, poor infrastructure, and limited access (because of insecurity). Coverage is typically greater near secure areas around major towns with better connectivity, transport, infrastructure, and logistics hubs. In North Kivu, the reemergence of the M23 rebel group drove a rapid increase between 2012 and 2024 to 540,000 IDPs across 98 informal settlement sites around Goma, a provincial capital (Uebersax 2024).

The absence of these data sets on IDPs, returnees, and host communities hinders comparative welfare and vulnerability analysis and the design of projects tailored to their challenges (Verme and Schuettler 2021). Most humanitarian assistance focuses on immediate essential sectors (food, water, nutrition, shelter, health, and education). Improving the availability of socioeconomic data on host populations and IDPs, returning IDPs, and refugees will facilitate inclusion in national social protection programs and refine policy and targeting over the medium to longer term.

Systematic statistical inclusion of refugees, IDPs, returnees, and affected host communities is foundational for evidence-based policy design and credible planning in the GLR. Yet, national censuses, household budget surveys, demographic and health surveys, living standards measurement studies, and most administrative registries rarely capture displacement-relevant variables, such as displacement status, duration of displacement, prior location, mobility constraints, or documentation gaps. As a result, large segments of the displaced population remain statistically invisible in national data sets, limiting governments' ability to diagnose poverty accurately, understand spatial and demographic pressures, and allocate resources equitably. Embedding displacement identifiers across national statistical and administrative systems is therefore a prerequisite

for designing social protection policies that reflect the distinct vulnerabilities created by displacement, ensure parity between displaced and host households facing similar deprivations, and enable national systems to plan, budget, and deliver support on a predictable and transparent basis.

KEY VULNERABILITIES DURING DISPLACEMENT, RETURN, AND REINTEGRATION

Initial displacement: Refugees and IDPs

The most consequential vulnerabilities during displacement—for refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities—arise at the outset of conflict or disaster. Recovery from trauma, loss, and shock depends on three variables: (1) evolving socioeconomic conditions, (2) the scale of demographic and economic shocks, and (3) policy responses adopted by assistance providers (DFID 2011; World Bank 2017). Women, children, and elderly people face heightened risks of exploitation and abuse, including gender-based violence (GBV); young men are vulnerable to militia recruitment. FDPs in the GLR—both refugees and IDP households—are highly dependent on humanitarian assistance and lose extended family and social networks that otherwise provide informal safety nets. Refugees and IDPs living in or near host communities increase pressure on limited social services and labor markets and, depending on host wealth and natural endowments, may negatively affect natural resource consumption and household resilience (Maystadt et al. 2024).

Available data indicate refugees and IDPs in the GLR share similar socioeconomic vulnerabilities: high stress and trauma linked to violence and abuse, including death or loss of family members; sharp income declines resulting from lost livelihoods, assets, property, and employment; and typically poor health, education, food security, and nutrition indicators among IDPs. Evidence from other countries shows IDPs in camps consistently experience higher poverty than those in informal settlements or local communities (World Bank 2015).²⁶ Inadequate, makeshift shelters in overcrowded camps with poor sanitation and hygiene increase exposure to illness and disease. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, substantial numbers of IDPs have relocated to urban centers such as Kinshasa and Goma, accumulating in informal settlements on the periphery (Uebersax 2024).

Evidence from Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda shows refugees in camps have lower self-reliance than nationals in the same districts (Atamanov, Hoogeveen, and Reese 2024; World Bank 2025). Income, labor, and food security indicators are consistently lower for refugees, although in some sectors (health and education) refugee outcomes may be slightly higher

because of services funded by international humanitarian assistance. Refugees living in cities reportedly have higher welfare and self-reliance than those in camps.

IDPs' and refugees' specific vulnerabilities in the GLR create different risks for men, boys, women, and girls across the displacement cycle. Women and girls face GBV while fleeing and again in camps and informal settlements (refer to figure 3.4). Boys and men risk abduction and recruitment by armed groups. Vulnerability peaks during the initial flight from life-threatening danger. Beyond physical trauma before and during flight, refugees suffer the sudden loss of family, networks, assets, and capital, and their initial health, nutrition, and psychosocial indicators typically require immediate assistance (World Bank 2017).

Local communities lose human, financial, economic, and social capital as families leave to seek safety. During conflict, they often share housing, food, assets, services, and natural resources with nearby or embedded displaced populations.²² Reintegration of returning IDPs and former refugees can also pressure local communities, depending on numbers, socioeconomic profiles, and living conditions. Impacts vary by household: some benefit from increased trade and commerce, whereas poorer families face higher prices and fewer jobs (World Bank 2017).

Protracted displacement: Refugees and IDPs

After the initial shock, adaptation in exile depends on refugees' and IDPs' capacity to cope in changed circumstances. Outcomes vary by context and population, influenced by individual capabilities and the assets, skills, and family and social networks they retain. External variables also shape adaptation, including the size and socioeconomic profile of the refugee population relative to hosts, the socioeconomic conditions in exile, and the policy environment.

Protracted displacement in the GLR creates structural vulnerabilities that trap refugees and IDPs in low-development conditions, especially in camps, where location and national policy largely determine opportunity. Early expectations of quick return lead host governments to prioritize short-term humanitarian assistance. Given precarious circumstances, reliance on food aid and other essential support remains important and is reinforced by restrictions on mobility, employment, and economic opportunities (Macrae 2019). Refugee household welfare can improve incrementally but often remains insufficient to graduate from aid dependency (World Bank 2021). Limited access to cultivable land on viable terms is a major constraint for populations from rural backgrounds. These dynamics drive medium- to longer-term intergenerational poverty that obstructs refugees' ability to lead normal, productive lives in exile or upon return.

FIGURE 3.4**Risks experienced by forcibly displaced populations during displacement**

 Early childhood	• Poor immunization coverage, higher morbidity • Reduced cognitive development • Limited access to antenatal and postnatal care • Reduced parental care • Poor nutrition • Stunting • Abduction and human trafficking	 Gender-based risks • High risk of boys and men being recruited by armed groups • Intimate partner violence • High risk of sexual-based violence in crowded refugee camps
 School age	• Limited opportunities for recreation • Limited access to primary education • Heightened risk of child labor • Psychosocial trauma • Poor diet and nutrition • Abduction and human trafficking • People smuggling	
 Youth	• Low level of skill development • Limited access to secondary education and training • Discrimination • Unemployment and alienation • Early marriage and motherhood • Gender-based violence • People smuggling • Human trafficking	
 Working age	• Exploitative working conditions • Underemployment and unemployment • Skills deficit • Reduced social capital • Limited access to credit, indebtedness • Domestic violence • Discrimination and exclusion (race, gender, status) • Family and child care responsibilities, split households • People smuggling • Human trafficking	
 Old age	• Diminished family coping capacities • Inability to work, frailty • Heightened dependency	

Source: Original figure for this publication.

These vulnerability patterns—encampment, limited land access, and intergenerational poverty—appear at the outset and throughout displacement across the GLR. At least 90 percent of refugees initially sought safety from sudden violent conflict in camps or self-settled sites near borders or home villages; a smaller share (8 percent) relocated informally to urban centers, where conditions are generally better but more costly (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement 2023).

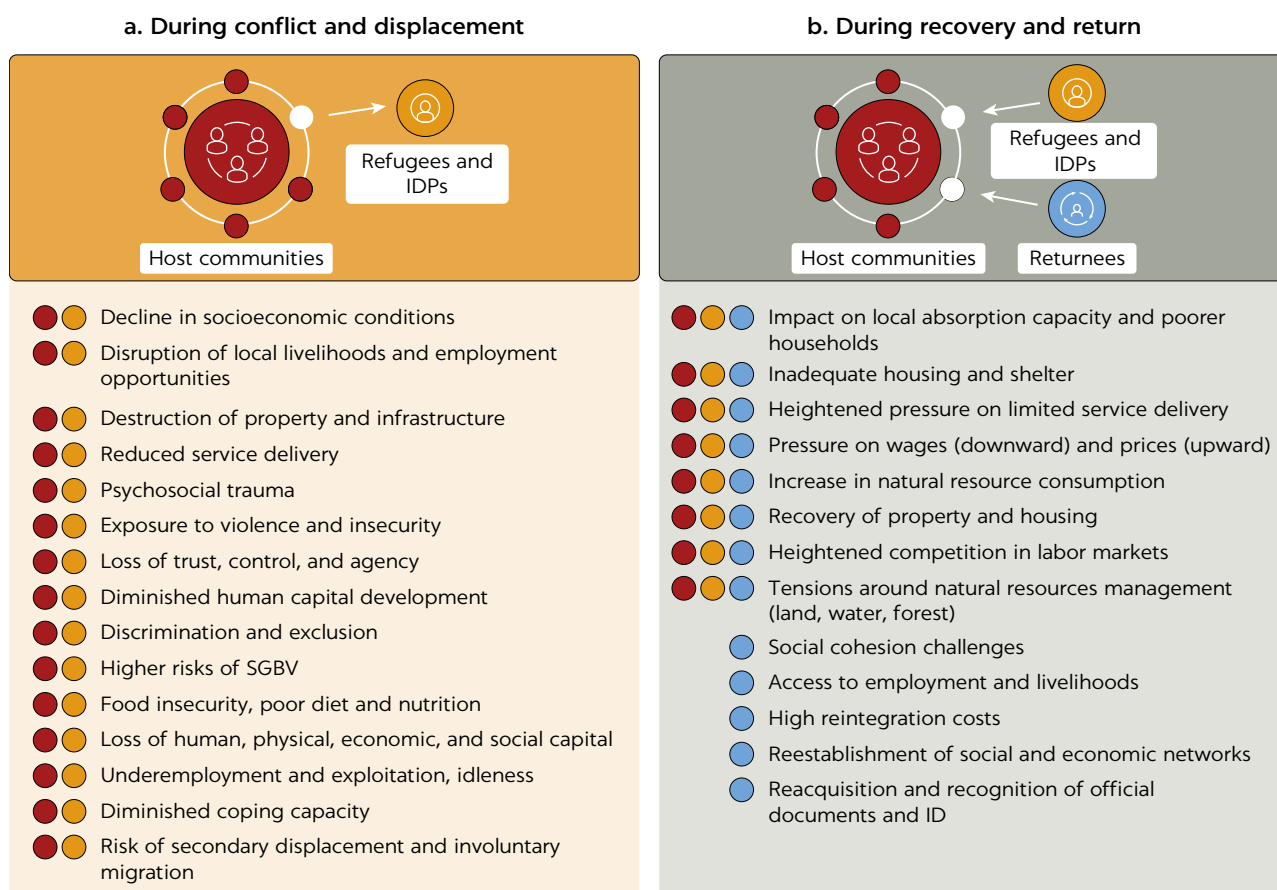
Consistent with global experience, refugees and IDPs in the GLR struggle to recover from violent disruption of their lives and livelihoods. Consequences can be irreversible for those least resourced to manage a descent into long-term poverty and destitution. Dislocation has significant impacts on women and children, who comprise most refugees.²⁸ Children and youth suffer from lack of early childhood health care and prolonged educational disruption, with potential lifelong effects on human development. Women and girls face heightened insecurity and abuse when uprooted from protective family and social networks (World Bank 2024). The immediate loss of status and dignity associated with lack of employment and livelihoods affects all adult refugees to varying degrees.

Long-established refugee populations tend to show gains in household asset accumulation compared with recent arrivals (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement 2023). Even where assets improve, high food insecurity, low labor market participation, and high unemployment persist. Overall, welfare indicators of long-established refugees are comparable with those of poorer local households.²⁹ Negative coping strategies (selling productive assets, child labor, transactional sex, and early marriage) can ease household budgets but directly reduce human capital, especially when humanitarian assistance declines. Evidence shows livelihood and employment support, such as vocational training, only modestly advances self-reliance in restrictive policy environments.

Socioeconomic impact on host communities

Although refugees and IDPs represent a small share of national populations in the GLR, their sudden arrival challenges economic and social cohesion with local communities, especially where development progress is already constrained. In some rural Ugandan districts, the refugee-to-host ratio—1.8 million refugees to 6.6 million hosts—reaches 36 percent, posing substantial socioeconomic challenges for the government and partners.³⁰

Host communities are affected by displacement and returnees directly and indirectly. At the outset of conflict-driven displacement, insecurity, violence, and destruction push part of the population to leave. Not all households or family members depart because of limited resources and capacities. Those who stay may face direct trauma, loss of family members, human rights abuses, destruction of physical and social capital, degradation of livelihoods, and disruption of social services (refer to figure 3.5).

FIGURE 3.5**Key vulnerabilities for refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities in the GLR**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: GLR = Great Lakes Region; ID = identification; IDPs = internally displaced persons; SGBV = sexual and gender-based violence.

The impact of returning refugees and IDPs also depends on whether returns are voluntary or forced. Organized, voluntary returns occur over longer periods, allow anticipatory planning, and may attract additional resources to the receiving community. Forced or involuntary returns, as in IDP situations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, resemble the initial shock because they involve sudden, substantial demographic increases. They can temporarily overwhelm official administrative systems and socioeconomic absorption capacities at the community and household levels and may require longer adaptation periods before local conditions adjust (World Bank 2017, chapter 3).

Local capacities to deliver urgent housing, health, water, sanitation, and food services to refugees are usually very limited, with gaps typically filled by government and international aid. Indicators in key sectors—water and sanitation, food security, education, and health and nutrition—stabilize and

improve over time with immediate humanitarian assistance. Yet, these often remain precarious because essential services depend on continued external support. Progress toward economic self-reliance for most refugee households is severely constrained by limited local employment, resulting in prolonged dependence on humanitarian aid (World Bank 2017).

Return and reintegration

Refugee and IDP households and individuals experience return differently. Those with more assets and skills face fewer problems; disadvantaged groups (women, children, elderly persons, disabled people) face greater challenges adapting to changed circumstances. Similar dynamics apply to the absorption capacities of receiving communities and households (World Bank 2017).³¹

Data and evidence on reintegration impacts in the GLR are limited. Generally, return and reintegration outcomes depend on the speed and scale of returns, experiences during displacement, and socioeconomic conditions at a destination. In Burundi, the three major return episodes occurred amid ongoing political and ethnic tensions. Repatriation to the Democratic Republic of Congo also took place during active conflict. These factors affected reintegration and social cohesion among returnees, IDPs, and host communities. The World Bank-UNHCR socioeconomic profile of refugees in Burundi notes differing policy and legal frameworks for refugees, IDPs, and returnees but emphasizes that displacement heightened socioeconomic needs across these groups (Jarotschkin et al. 2023; Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement 2023; UNHCR 2019; World Bank 2017). It highlights limited access to land and many female-headed households, both associated with high poverty. Despite efforts by the government of Burundi in collaboration with humanitarian and development partners, limited access to basic social services remains a key barrier to sustainable reintegration.

Evidence shows strained relations between those who left and returned and those who stayed, impeding trust and social cohesion at the community level (Schwartz 2019). Poor intercommunal relations were more pronounced among host populations and IDPs than among returning refugees and their hosts. Refugees and IDPs often lose identity and other documentation, hindering access to services. Land claims and counterclaims—over property occupied, sold, or expropriated during exile—have sparked violent disputes during large repatriations. Efforts to restore land to refugees who returned in the 1970s through official tenure policies clashed with inheritance practices, ethnic divisions, and land scarcity driven by rapid population growth. Some studies indicate that refugees unable to reclaim or obtain land contributed to the 2015 departures and to the reluctance of the remaining Burundians to return (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2024).

NOTES

1. The Democratic Republic of Congo is the only country currently hosting a large internally displaced population (IDP).
2. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org> (accessed May 2025) and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), www.internal-displacement.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo (accessed May 2025).
3. Authors' estimates from Gabelle et al. 2026a.
4. Authors' estimates from Gabelle et al. 2026a.
5. Data from IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo> (accessed May 2025).
6. Data from IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/>.
7. Data from Refugee Data Finder, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.
8. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org>.
9. Data from IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo> (accessed May 2025).
10. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/drc>, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/tza>, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/zmb>, and <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/ken>.
11. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org> (accessed May 2025).
12. Data from World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.
13. Data from World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.
14. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org> (accessed May 2025).
15. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org>.
16. At an estimated 4 percent population growth, the total refugee population in the GLR could grow by a further 670,000 by 2030 (original calculations for this publication).
17. In the GLR, refugees still in exile within the region total over 1 million, a significant portion of whom have been in exile for almost two decades.
18. Data from Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/burundi>.
19. Data from UNHCR and the national office of statistics for each country (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda).
20. Data from UNHCR and the national office of statistics for each country (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda).
21. Given the frequency of movements and the unpredictable episodes of violence, it is probable that multiple displacements, returns, and instances of secondary displacement are not fully captured through current tracking mechanisms (Displacement Tracking Matrix, Global Data Institute, International Organization for Migration (IOM), <https://dtm.iom.int/democratic-republic-congo>).
22. Country data for Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda, Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org>.
23. Data sourced from individual UNHCR country data portals for Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, <https://data.unhcr.org>, and NISR (2023).
24. Data from Displacement Tracking Matrix, Global Data Institute, IOM, <https://dtm.iom.int/democratic-republic-congo>.
25. In October 2023, the World Bank published its poverty assessment for the Central African Republic that included data on IDPs (World Bank 2023); a similar exercise is planned for the Democratic Republic of Congo.
26. World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Centre on Forced Displacement, <https://www.jointdatacenter.org/resources/publications-and-reports/>. See reports on Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, and the Federal Republic of Somalia.
27. Displacement Tracking Matrix, Global Data Institute, IOM, <https://dtm.iom.int/democratic-republic-congo>.
28. Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org>.
29. Currently, no specific survey has been carried out to compare the welfare of households benefiting from national social protection programs and refugees assisted by similar humanitarian assistance interventions. Assessing the potential integration of refugees into national social protection programs would require a comprehensive vulnerability assessment of refugee and local households based on comparable socioeconomic indicators. It would also require an analysis of the different policy

measures and structural barriers that affect the relative welfare of refugee and local households and their access to social protection programs, including financial services, land, employment, service delivery, transport, infrastructure, and energy.

30. Data from Refugee Data Finder, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics> (accessed February 2025), and Uganda Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.ubos.org>.
31. The impact of forced displacement depends on three key variables: the socioeconomic conditions in which refugees and IDPs find themselves, the dimensions of the demographic and economic shocks experienced, and the policy responses adopted by assistance providers.

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4 Social Protection Support to Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities

This chapter analyzes the support to forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) and host communities through social protection systems, using the World Bank's Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) Framework as adapted in chapter 2. The first part of each section presents findings by ASP building block and population group (refugees, internally displaced persons [IDPs], returnees, host communities), bundling groups when relevant. The second part reviews the overall social protection support to FDPs and host communities in Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR).

BUILDING BLOCK 1: POLICIES AND LEGAL RIGHTS

Before assessing each displacement-affected group, an outline of the existing social protection legal frameworks in the GLR will provide context on whether and how they extend coverage and support to FDPs and host communities.

Many social protection policies and strategies in the region have recently been developed with development partner support. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda have social protection legal and policy frameworks, with country policies and strategies developed over the last decade with partner support. Figure 4.1 summarizes the main laws, policies, and strategies currently governing the social protection sector in each GLR country.

Although the four GLR countries have established legal protections for displaced populations, a persistent gap remains between de jure commitments and their de facto realization. Movement restrictions, delays in the issuance or renewal of documentation, inconsistent recognition of refugee and returnee identity credentials, and limited administrative capacity in many displacement-affected districts continue to impede

FIGURE 4.1
Social protection laws, policies, and strategies



Source: Original figure for this publication.

effective access to social protection, labor markets, and essential services. Bridging this gap requires more than legal alignment: it demands practical administrative reforms, strengthened subnational delivery systems, and investments in identification, case management, and grievance mechanisms. Without these operational improvements, legal provisions cannot translate into meaningful inclusion for IDPs, returnees, refugees, and their host communities.

Despite national legal, policy, and strategy frameworks for social protection, practical benefits remain limited. Burundi’s social protection law seeks to ensure minimum income security, facilitate access to essential services, and help households manage risks. The Democratic Republic of Congo’s draft bill, national policy, and strategy from the National Fund for Social Protection set ambitious universal social protection targets. Rwanda’s Social Protection Strategic Plan (2018–24) and Social Protection Policy (2020) call for more ambitious, inclusive approaches to protect all citizens from a range of risks. Uganda’s Third National Development Plan (NDPIII) 2020/21–2024/25 provides a framework to gradually expand coverage. However, objectives such as universal coverage and guaranteed minimum income security are not yet feasible given current system limitations and scarce country resources.

Refugees

All GLR countries have ratified major international conventions and established national policy and legal frameworks for refugees, signaling

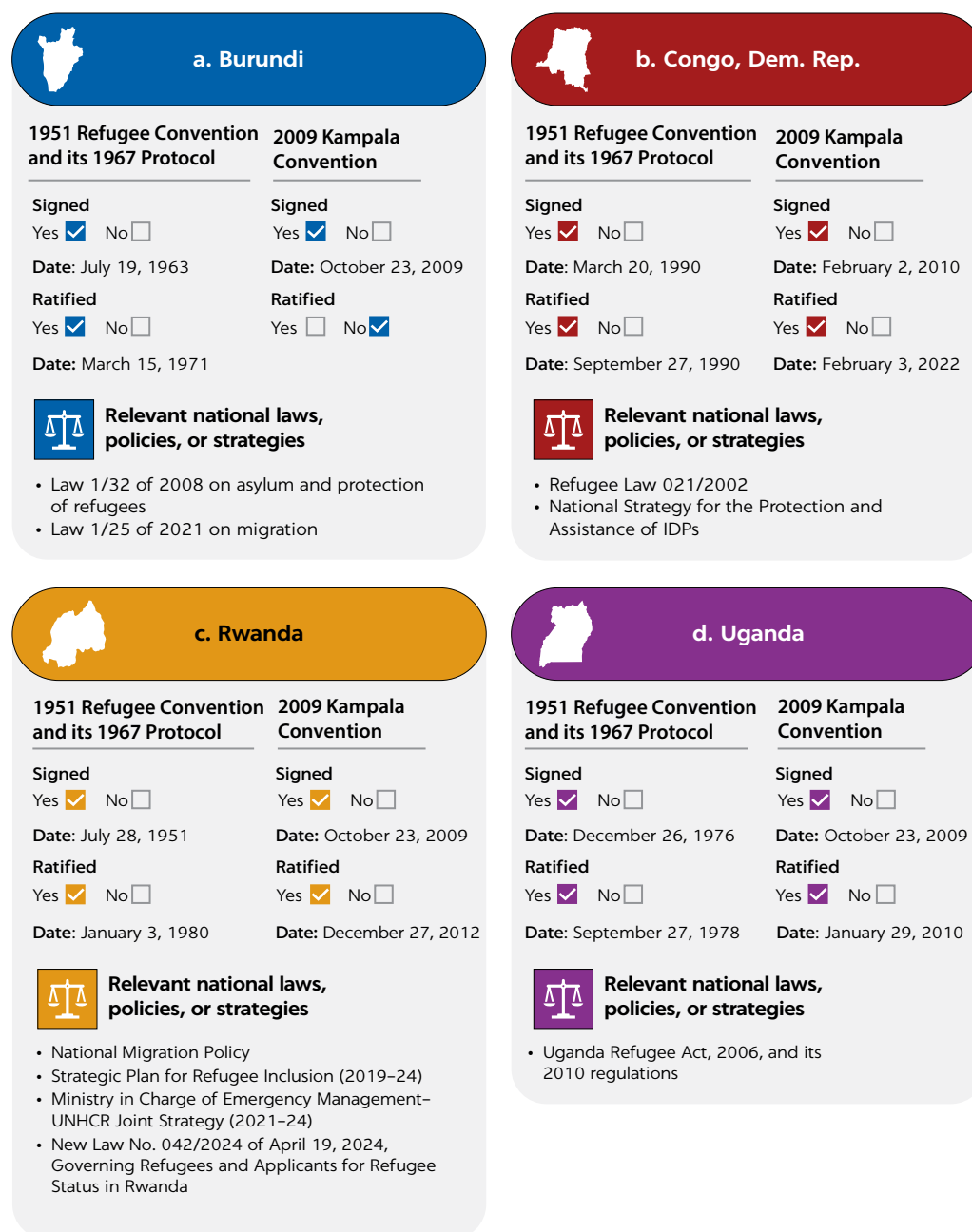
commitment to international humanitarian and refugee law and openness to longer-term support. Yet, institutional, programmatic, and financing arrangements still reflect short-term planning, limited inclusion, and reliance on humanitarian assistance in protracted situations. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention (UN 1954) and its 1967 Protocol. National laws reflect these principles and other commitments, including the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention and the 2009 Kampala Convention (African Union 2012), ensuring basic rights such as legal recognition, freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to education and health care (refer to figure 4.2).

Of the four GLR countries, three also lodged reservations to articles of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Burundi's reservations concern employment (Article 17), public education (Article 22), and freedom of movement (Article 26), meaning it is not bound by these articles. Rwanda's reservation relates to Article IV of the 1967 Protocol on settlement of disputes between state parties. Uganda's reservations interpret Articles 7 and 16 as nonbinding or discretionary, reserve the right to limit or withhold specific rights (including public interest protections under Articles 13 and 15), do not commit to covering assistance costs without United Nations (UN) reimbursement (Article 25), and maintain the right to expel refugees when necessary (Article 32), prioritizing national security and economic needs.

On the policy side, all GLR governments have endorsed the main objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). As long-standing hosts and advocates of greater international responsibility sharing, they have taken steps to advance refugee self-reliance, reflected in the pledges at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019 and 2022.¹ Most of the 64 pledges since 2019 have focused on self-reliance, education and training, health, environmental management, registration, and documentation.² Several have addressed long-term support by strengthening national systems, including registration and documentation. Together, the pledges show governments' interest in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of refugee assistance. Examples include Burundi's pledge to partially include refugees in health and education programs; the Democratic Republic of Congo's pledges on inclusion in economic and social protection programs; Rwanda's pledge to provide jobs under its National Strategy for Transformation, emphasizing livelihoods and graduation from humanitarian assistance, and to improve documentation and birth registration; and Uganda's pledge to include refugees in national development plans and statistical systems and to transition to inclusion in education, health, and water programs.

Financing through the World Bank's Refugee Sub-Window (RSW) and Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR) has helped advance these and other policy commitments to address GLR refugee

FIGURE 4.2
Main legal frameworks for refugee rights



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: IDPs = internally displaced persons; UNHCR = United Nations Refugee Agency.

needs. As a prerequisite for receiving the 18th replenishment of the International Development Association (IDA) RSW or the 19th and 20th replenishment of the IDA WHR financing, recipient GLR countries must submit revised Strategy Notes or Work Plans highlighting progress on measures to enhance socioeconomic development and inclusion of refugee and host communities. Burundi's Strategy Note (2018, updated

in 2019 and 2021) outlines commitments to empower refugees in camps, support local communities, harmonize education curricula, and integrate refugee health facilities into national systems.³ The Democratic Republic of Congo's note, updated in 2021 to access the 19th replenishment of the IDA WHR, reaffirms its intent to institutionalize refugee inclusion and include refugees in the building blocks of its nascent social protection system, starting with the social registry under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Actions, and National Solidarity (MINAS). The Democratic Republic of Congo also plans to strengthen capacity in key sector ministries—health and education—at the national, provincial, and local levels and include refugees in planning and fund allocations.

The World Bank's Refugee Policy Review Framework has been completed and updated for Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.⁴ The latest reviews show progress in policy and legal areas that enhance GLR refugee self-reliance. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo explicitly reference inclusion of refugees or hosting communities in national social protection policies. Uganda's NDPIII incorporates refugees and host communities into national development strategies, although the 2015 Social Protection Policy does not specifically address them (refer to the "Building block 2: Institutional arrangements and partnerships" section later in this chapter). Rwanda's national health policy includes health insurance coverage for refugees, including those in urban areas. However, most advances at the national policy level remain under formulation with limited implementation and coverage.⁵

Obtaining legal refugee status in all GLR countries involves registration, asylum application, interview and screening, and status determination. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) supports these processes, including biometric registration, in all four countries. Once recognized, refugees receive identity cards or certificates.

Despite legal protections, displaced populations face significant challenges in status determination. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the 2002 Refugee Law mandates completion of Refugee Status Determination within six months, but this time frame is rarely met because of insufficient resources for legal and administrative processes. Notifications of negative decisions are inconsistent, and the appeals commission has not convened for many years. Backlogs span over 5 years, delaying documents for asylum seekers. In Uganda, although the application process is meant to last 3 to 6 months, it can take up to a year (Ryan, Aero, and de Medina Rosales 2018).

GLR countries offer pathways to naturalization, but these are often inaccessible because of complex procedures, legal costs, and time requirements. Requirements vary (refer to box 4.1) but typically

demand time, legal representation, and administrative formalities beyond most refugees' resources. The advantages of citizenship in terms of economic and social opportunities are not always apparent compared with immediate humanitarian assistance.

GLR governments typically accommodate refugees in camps or settlements for security and logistical reasons during initial emergencies. New arrivals are registered and processed at transit centers before relocation. In principle, refugees living outside camps forfeit regular humanitarian

Box 4.1

Citizenship eligibility criteria for refugees residing in Great Lakes Region countries

Burundi

According to the Code de la Nationalité (2000) and the 2005 Constitution (amended in 2018), applicants must

- Be at least age 21;
- Exhibit good behavior, life, and character without criminal offenses;
- Demonstrate ties to the Burundi nation and assimilation among citizens; and
- Have lived in Burundi for at least 10 years (5 years for those who provided remarkable services or are married to Burundi women).

Democratic Republic of Congo

Article 10 of the 2006 Constitution stipulates that Congolese nationality is singular and exclusive. To qualify for naturalization, an applicant must

- Be of legal age (18 years) and submit a written declaration to renounce other nationalities;
- Speak one of the Congolese languages and be of good moral standing;
- Have been a permanent resident for seven years and not engaged in activities prejudicial to the Democratic Republic of Congo; and
- Never have been convicted of serious crimes, including high treason, war crimes,

crimes against humanity, terrorism, assassination, or economic crimes.

Rwanda

Under Organic Law No. 002/2021.OL of July 16, 2021, refugees can apply for naturalization if they meet the following criteria:

- Immigrated for social, political, or economic reasons or are descended from someone who did;
- Lived in Rwanda for at least 25 years and lost ties to their home country;
- Possess integrity, good character, and awareness of Rwandese customs and culture; and
- Demonstrate social integration and have sufficient means.

Uganda

Under Article 16 of the Constitution, refugees can be naturalized if they

- Have lived in Uganda for a total of 20 years, including the 24 months before application;
- Have sufficient knowledge of English or a prescribed vernacular language; and
- Are of good character and intend to remain permanently in Uganda.

Note: Children born to refugees are not eligible for citizenship by registration at birth.

assistance, although many split families between camps and host communities to spread risk. In Burundi, 63 percent of refugees reside in six camps; in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 98 percent live in informal settlements and camps; in Rwanda, 93 percent live in camps; and in Uganda, 91 percent live in settlements.⁶

National laws in the four countries ensure refugee rights—legal recognition, freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to education and health care (refer to table 4.1). The four countries adhere to the 1951 Refugee Convention and other commitments guaranteeing these basic rights. However, gaps between national laws and subsequent policies, along with administrative and regulatory measures, often impede implementation at the local level.⁷

TABLE 4.1 Freedom-of-movement regulations

LEGAL PROVISIONS	CURRENT STATUS	OBSERVATIONS
Burundi		
Law 1/32 of 2008 on Asylum and Protection of Refugees was replaced by Law No. 1/25 of November 2021 on Migration. Burundi has signed but not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and entered a reservation on freedom of movement.	Updated Article 9 of Law 1/25 of November 2021 on regulating migration to Burundi permits the government to restrict freedom of movement when political, security, or public health concerns justify it.	Camp-based refugees are required to obtain an exit permit to move outside the municipality (commune) where the camp is located. The government of Burundi has previously suspended the issuance of exit permits for refugees living in camps, significantly restricting freedom of movement because of security concerns. These measures affected refugees' economic opportunities and increased dependency on in-camp assistance. Currently, exit permits are issued on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the authorities and involve a lengthy process.
Democratic Republic of Congo		
Article 32 of the Refugee Law allows recognized refugees to move freely within the country on the same basis as nationals, subject to the administrative restrictions applicable to foreigners residing in the country.	Article 5 of Ordinance-Law No. 1983-033 grants all foreigners the right to freedom of movement and choice of residence but mandates them to produce documents when requested by law enforcement officials.	Recognized refugees and registered asylum seekers in the Democratic Republic of Congo must obtain administrative authorization to travel beyond a certain distance from the camp for an extended period. Refugees wanting to change their residence in urban areas must first obtain authorization. This control measure is primarily administrative, although in some regions, particularly in the east (South Kivu and North Kivu), it carries security implications.
Rwanda		
Article 18 of the national 2014 Refugee Law provides for freedom of movement and residence.	Camp-based refugees need to request permission to leave the camp temporarily if they want to maintain their residence in camps and access to assistance, in line with Article 25(2) of the 2014 Refugee Law.	A permit to leave the camp for a period of three months is issued at the discretion of the Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management camp management. It is readily accessible to refugees but must be renewed at the camp. If not renewed, refugees lose their entitlement to camp-based assistance, except access to health care and legal support.

continued

TABLE 4.1 Freedom-of-movement regulations (continued)

LEGAL PROVISIONS	CURRENT STATUS	OBSERVATIONS
Uganda		
Section 30(1) of the Refugee Act permits recognized refugees to enjoy freedom of movement in Uganda.	Under Section 30(2) of the Refugee Act freedom of movement is subject to reasonable restrictions as specified in Ugandan laws or directions, applicable to aliens, generally, in similar circumstances.	The Refugee Act does not provide refugees the right to choose their place of residence. In practice, refugees and asylum seekers enjoy effective freedom of movement and can choose their place of residence. They can opt to reside in a refugee settlement or elsewhere. Refugees choosing to reside outside the refugee settlements forfeit access to regular humanitarian assistance programs.

Source: Original table for this publication.

Legal commitments often do not translate into actual enjoyment of rights or inclusion. Across GLR countries, a significant gap persists between de jure provisions and de facto practice. Employment opportunities are scarce, financial barriers are high, vocational training is limited, and restricted access to land undermines self-employment. In Burundi, UNHCR’s 2023 monitoring found only 3.3 percent of refugee households in camps had a member employed, highlighting the lack of access to paid work (UNHCR 2023a). Refugees in camps also depend heavily on aid: in Burundi, 63.6 percent relied solely on humanitarian assistance and social donations (UNHCR 2023a).

GLR laws granting the right to work, pursue professions, and open businesses have limited practical effect. All four countries share similar legal frameworks and implementation constraints. Laws typically target the formal sector,⁸ yet most refugees work informally, and formal jobs are scarce even for nationals, particularly in poorer rural areas where most refugees live. Many employers are also unaware of refugees’ right to work. With appropriate documentation, refugees can access financial services and hold bank accounts. Uganda’s Refugee Act and Regulations (Article 64) exempt refugees from work permit fees and guarantee key workplace protections, including equal pay for equal work, protection against dismissal for pregnant women, and prohibitions on discrimination. Refugees may also engage in productive commercial and industrial activities, employment, or professional practice.

In Burundi, restrictions on freedom of movement persist. In 2023, the National Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons and UNHCR developed a protocol to authorize temporary exits from camps, but reports indicate it is not followed; exit permits are still required even for travel within the commune.

Legal and policy frameworks for social protection do not explicitly include refugees among eligible vulnerable populations. Because refugees are noncitizens, governments generally make no specific financial provisions for them.⁹ Refugees may access social security if they meet formal employment requirements, but they are not explicitly included in social assistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo (per draft strategy and policy), Rwanda, or Uganda. In Burundi, the law does not name refugees as a target group, but the newly approved national social protection strategy identifies them as vulnerable,¹⁰ listing “disaster victims, composed of IDPs, refugees, returnees, ex-combatants, and expelled migrants” as beneficiaries (UNHCR 2021, 12). Uganda’s refugee policy frameworks include several social protection provisions absent in other GLR countries.

All GLR countries are at a similar stage in the humanitarian–social protection continuum, having taken initial steps toward policy and legal transitions for refugees (refer to box 4.2). They have ratified key international conventions and established national frameworks ensuring basic rights—legal recognition, freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to education and health care—with UNHCR supporting fairly uniform status determination processes. However, legal commitments do not always yield full realization of rights or equitable access. Persisting nonlegal restrictions on freedom of movement in Burundi notably slow transition progress (refer to figure 4.3).

Box 4.2

Uganda’s refugee policy frameworks and relationship with social protection

In Uganda, several policy frameworks include specific provisions for refugees. Collectively, these frameworks aim to enhance the inclusion, resilience, and well-being of refugees within host communities through coordinated and comprehensive approaches:

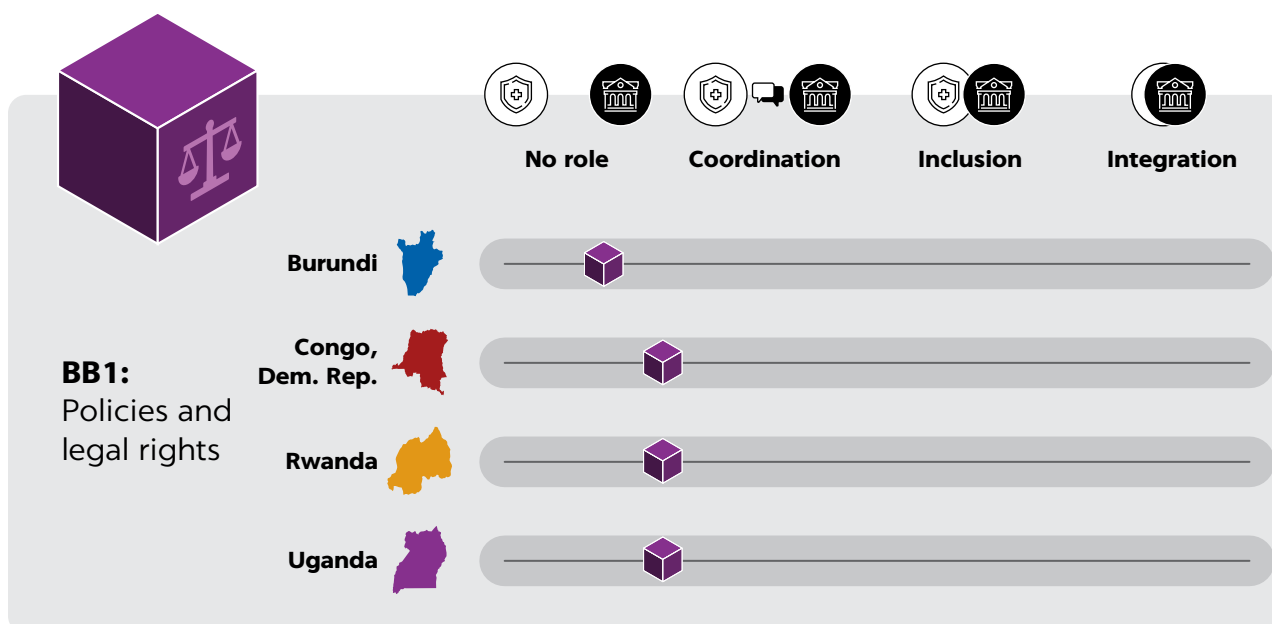
- The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Action Plan (updated in December 2023) has four principal goals: (1) ease pressure on host communities, (2) enhance refugee self-reliance, (3) expand access to third-country solutions, and (4) support conditions for safe and dignified return to countries of origin.
- The Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities aims to achieve sustainable social, economic, and financial inclusion in local development by 2025 through
 - Building social cohesion by fostering trust, cooperation, and social bonding to handle conflicts, economic shocks, and market stresses;
 - Promoting entrepreneur-led development and market growth by enhancing labor market programs and increasing demand for financial services;
 - Strengthening food, nutrition, and income security by promoting public-private

continued

Box 4.2 Uganda's refugee policy frameworks and relationship with social protection (continued)

- partnerships and improving agricultural standards, quantity, quality, diversity, and income;
- Increasing access to market-relevant skills to create job opportunities and enhance livelihoods for refugees and host communities; and
 - Providing social protection through direct income support, social insurance, and social care services to reduce vulnerability and improve resilience.
- The Social Development Sector Plan, themed “empowering communities, particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups, for wealth creation and inclusive development,” specifically recognizes refugees as a vulnerable group. Key focuses include
 - Promoting and strengthening policies, systems, and structures for social protection;
 - Expanding coverage of existing social protection programs;
 - Providing direct income support and expanding holistic social care services to vulnerable individuals and households; and
 - Expanding the scope and coverage of contributory social security to include both formal and informal sectors.

FIGURE 4.3
Policies and legal rights progress for refugees



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: *Integration* (which has the potential to be misleading or politically sensitive) refers to full inclusion or equitable access for refugees in social protection systems, with tailored measures addressing specific needs. BB1 = building block 1.

IDPs, returnees, and host communities

IDPs

Unlike the 1951 Refugee Convention,¹¹ no binding global treaty governs IDPs (IDMC n.d.-b). Governments largely manage internal displacement under their own terms. The number of internal displacements driven by conflict, human rights abuses, and natural disasters rose steadily in the 1980s, prompting international attention and the creation of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (later renamed the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA]) after reviews of humanitarian needs linked to internal displacement.

The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (OCHA 2004), developed over several years and approved by the Human Rights Commission in 1998, align with other human rights instruments but are not legally binding.¹² Grounded in international human rights and humanitarian law, they provide the most comprehensive international framework for IDP protection across all phases of displacement—“providing protection against arbitrary displacement, access to protection and assistance during displacement and guarantees during return or alternative settlement and reintegration” (ECOSOC 1998, 3). Although nonbinding, they affirm that IDPs have the same rights as other citizens and emphasize state responsibility for their specific needs (ECOSOC 1998). The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*¹³ did provide the basis for two treaties: the 2005 International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) protocols¹⁴ and the *African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention)*, signed in 2009 (African Union 2012).

The IDP guiding principles and the Kampala Convention adopt rights-based humanitarian concepts from the 1951 Refugee Convention to define solutions to internal displacement: voluntary, sustainable reintegration at the place of origin; sustainable local integration where IDPs sought safety; and sustainable integration in another part of the country. In 2010, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) approved the *IASC Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons*, detailing how to operationalize these three solutions.¹⁵ Responding to rising global IDP numbers, the UN Secretary-General convened a Special Panel on Internal Displacement in 2019, which produced a 2022 action agenda that, for the first time, included protection and assistance for both IDPs and host communities (UN 2022).¹⁶

The Kampala Convention, adopted by African Union member states, is the first legally binding regional framework for IDP protection and assistance. It obligates states to assess and address the needs of IDPs and host communities, establish national IDP registries, and coordinate with

humanitarian and development actors. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and Rwanda have ratified the convention; Burundi has signed but not yet ratified it. However, ratification has not yet led to incorporation of its provisions into national legislation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, or Rwanda.

The ICGLR Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons (ICGLR 2006b) is a regional agreement that integrates the UN guiding principles into national frameworks. The ICGLR, an intergovernmental organization of 12 member states—Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia—has developed two key legal instruments on internal displacement:

1. The *Protocol on the Property Rights of Returning Persons* (ICGLR 2006a)
 - Provides legal protection for refugees and IDPs reclaiming property in their home countries;
 - Facilitates property recovery with local authorities;
 - Establishes mechanisms to resolve property disputes;
 - Ensures special protections for vulnerable groups, including women and children; and
 - Guarantees compensation for property loss or destruction resulting from state actions or development projects.
2. The *Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons* (ICGLR 2006b) in the GLR
 - Incorporates and implements the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (ECOSOC 1998) within national legal frameworks;
 - Requires member states to register and assist IDPs, maintain national databases, and develop emergency preparedness plans;
 - Prevents arbitrary displacement and ensures IDPs' safety during displacement, return, and resettlement; and
 - Mandates social protection mechanisms for IDPs and host communities.

The ICGLR *Protocol on the Property Rights of Returning Persons* safeguards the housing, land, and property rights of refugees, IDPs, and other returnees in the GLR. Adopted under the 2006 Pact on Security, Stability and Development, it affirms returnees' rights to reclaim property or receive fair compensation when restitution is not possible. It calls on member states to legally recognize property claims, establish accessible dispute resolution mechanisms, and protect returnees from secondary occupation. It also supports reintegration through housing, land access, and livelihoods. Implementation remains limited because of weak land governance,

overlapping legal frameworks, and administrative constraints, especially in conflict-affected and rural areas. Despite these constraints, the protocol remains an important tool for durable solutions and safe, dignified return.

Burundi

Burundi's social protection system, governed by Law No. 1/12 of 2020, provides no specific measures for IDPs. The law defines social protection as public or private measures to reduce poverty and vulnerability but does not explicitly list IDPs as a target population. However, the draft social protection strategy identifies them as a vulnerable group, citing “disaster victims, composed of internally displaced people, refugees, returnees, ex-combatants and associated adults, and expelled migrants” as beneficiaries. It ensures minimum income security, facilitates access to basic services, and helps households manage risks. The law mandates that social assistance be granted without discrimination on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, sex, age, disability, religion, social origin, or political convictions.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo's 2017 National Social Protection Strategy was updated in May 2025, with revisions focusing on its noncontributory component following technical validation with multiple stakeholders. The revised strategy aims to extend social protection to vulnerable populations, including IDPs, and explicitly incorporates IDP protection into national development and social protection frameworks. Strengthening implementation and enforcement mechanisms will be essential to enhance protection and assistance for the IDPs.

The MINAS and some provincial governors address IDP needs and have established coordination offices for humanitarian assistance. In principle, these measures should ensure that displaced populations are included in national development and social protection strategies; in practice, they lack a national policy, strategy, and resources (Zeender and Rothing 2010). Strengthening implementation and enforcement mechanisms is necessary to improve protection and assistance for IDPs in the country.

Rwanda

Rwanda has ratified the Kampala Convention but lacks a formal policy or strategy specifically for IDPs and returning populations. The 2015 Constitution (revised in 2023) defines social protection; guarantees it for all citizens; and mandates special actions for persons with disabilities, needy persons, elderly individuals, and other vulnerable groups within the state's means. The National Strategy for Transformation (2017–24), which has been succeeded by the Second National Strategy for Transformation (2024–29) and the Social Protection Strategic Plan (2018–24), address vulnerabilities such as disability, old age, and socioeconomic shocks. The National Strategy for Transformation's pillars—economic transformation, social transformation, and transformational governance—include a

commitment under social transformation to pro-poor, inclusive social protection that prioritizes resilience to shocks and graduation from poverty through scaling up core and complementary programs.

Uganda

Uganda's 2004 National Policy for IDPs commits to protecting IDPs' rights and ensuring humanitarian assistance from national and district authorities but does not promote inclusion in social protection schemes (Office of the Prime Minister 2004). Key commitments include (1) preventing arbitrary displacement, addressing root causes, and promoting durable solutions; (2) facilitating voluntary return, resettlement, and integration; and (3) providing access to policy-related information.

The policy guarantees that IDPs, as citizens, enjoy the same rights as all Ugandans—security, freedom of movement, and nondiscrimination. It prohibits forced displacement, including through ethnic manipulation or large-scale development projects, and ensures safe return with support for family reunification and property rights protection. It introduces special measures to prevent exploitation, sexual violence, and early marriage. IDPs are entitled to essential services—food, shelter, health care, education, and sanitation—with government and humanitarian agencies coordinating assistance. Local authorities help secure legal documentation and land for resettlement. The policy promotes IDP participation in decisions on return and reintegration, ensuring equal access to public services and civic engagement.

Returning populations (refugees and IDPs)

GLR social protection frameworks do not explicitly define measures for returning refugees and IDPs. These populations are implicitly eligible for national social protection programs as citizens facing poverty or vulnerability. In principle, responsibilities are divided: UNHCR provides legal and operational support for repatriation logistics and short-term assistance to meet basic needs, and GLR governments address longer-term administrative, economic, and social aspects of reintegration. With respect to IDPs, national legislative and policy frameworks include them within broader vulnerable groups but offer limited measures specifically for return and reintegration. IDPs are more often included in social protection strategies when displacement stems from natural disasters, as in Uganda's National Social Protection Policy (2015) and Rwanda's Social Protection Policy (2020).

Burundi

In 2010, Burundi adopted the National Strategy for the Socio-Economic Reintegration of People Affected by Conflict (SNR) to support returning populations, displaced persons, and ex-combatants. The strategy does not promote their inclusion in national social protection programs. It centers on three pillars: (1) geographic stability in host communities, (2) economic

subsistence through market access, and (3) social and political participation. It underscores the need for a clear legal framework and advocates ratifying the Kampala Convention to strengthen protection for displaced populations. Key initiatives include land access for vulnerable families, livelihood diversification beyond agriculture, disaster risk reduction, and health care support. Scaling proven reintegration programs will depend on resources and feasibility studies.

Burundi has signed tripartite agreements with the governments of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda and UNHCR to facilitate voluntary refugee returns. Returning refugees receive a certificate of repatriation that, although not a civil status document, grants access to basic social services similar to a national identity card, including child registration and access to health care through a national health insurance card. To obtain a national identity card, returnees must present a certificate of repatriation or birth certificate, a household notebook, proof of payment for the processing fee, and two photos at the local commune office.

In 2021, the government of Burundi, with UNHCR and other humanitarian partners, developed the Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan (JRRRP). This externally financed initiative integrates humanitarian and development efforts to ensure safe, dignified return and sustainable reintegration of Burundi refugees. The JRRRP addresses immediate needs and long-term resilience, aiming to enhance regional security and support progressive development in Burundi. Although most returnees reintegrate into communities of origin, about 8 percent are unable to do so and instead settle in IDP camps, becoming part of the IDP population.¹⁷

Democratic Republic of Congo

The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo has signed several tripartite agreements with UNHCR and countries in central and southern Africa—Angola, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia—for voluntary refugee repatriation. Under these agreements, returning refugees receive transportation and initial reintegration support for basic needs. Finance Law No. 22/071 of December 28, 2022, budgeted for the National Commission for Refugees (CNR) to provide aid, relief, compensation, and legal assistance and support reintegration of returning refugees. However, up to mid-2023, UNHCR funded the entire CNR budget, including operational expenses related to refugee self-determination.¹⁸

There are no comparable legal or operational agreements for the official return of IDPs. Local initiatives have supported IDP solutions, notably a 2016 North Kivu provincial strategy focused on village regrouping to improve security, access to social infrastructure, and rural modernization. It targeted affected populations in original villages, IDP sites, and host families to ensure sustainable, long-term solutions. As with refugee

assistance, IDP support relies heavily on external financing. The scale and complexity of IDP movements and ongoing violence hinder coherent programming for return and reintegration.

Rwanda

The government of Rwanda established the National Council of Refugees within the Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs (MIDIMAR, now the Ministry in Charge of Emergency Management, or MINEMA) to manage returnee affairs and support refugee reintegration with international partners. It created programs such as the Sustainable Return and Reintegration of Rwandan Returnees (MIDIMAR 2017) and joint UN processes for voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees.

Returnees are received at transit centers in Gicumbi (Northern Province) and Nkamira and Nyagatare (Western Province), where they receive 3 months of food assistance from the World Food Programme (WFP) and nonfood items from UNHCR, with additional shelter support as needed. To promote long-term integration, they are assisted in enrolling in mainstream development programs such as the Vision 2020 Umurenge Program (VUP) public works and financial services; eligible households can also receive direct support cash transfers.

Uganda

Forced displacement in Uganda has largely remained within its borders and has not generated significant refugee spillovers. Measures to assist returning populations therefore focus on IDPs displaced by conflict—notably during the Lord’s Resistance Army insurgency (1986–2008)—and more recently by natural disasters. Uganda’s National Policy for IDPs provides for voluntary return, relocation, and reintegration; supports family reunification and restitution of property rights; and promotes IDP participation in decisions on return and reintegration.

Host communities

Social protection policies and legal frameworks in GLR countries¹⁹ make no specific provisions for host communities affected by internal or refugee-related displacement. Consequently, assistance decisions for affected host communities have been ad hoc, agreed on locally between aid agencies, authorities, and communities, and guided by community-based rather than individual assessments and by considerations of social cohesion among affected populations.

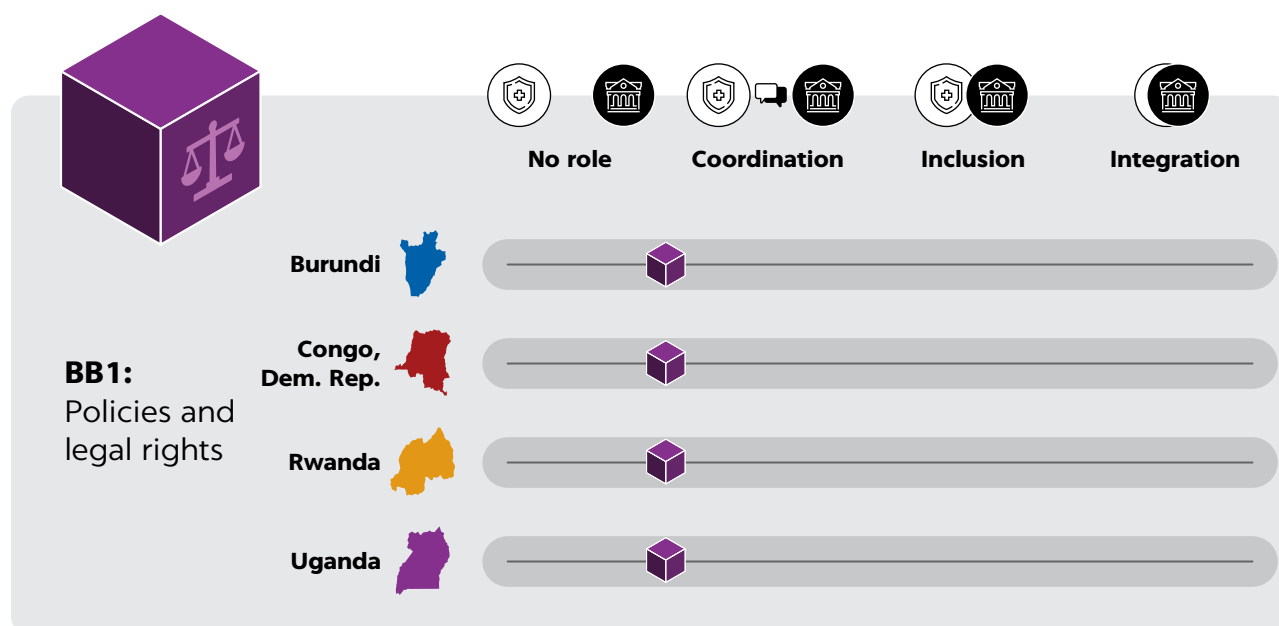
National social protection policies—both contributory and noncontributory—reference vulnerable categories within national populations and include criteria for eligibility in national programs. They cover local households and individuals in communities affected by forced displacement that meet national requirements.

Development of social protection policies for IDPs, returnees, and host communities in GLR countries remains a work in progress. Individual policies and programs signal willingness to include these groups, but none are fully inclusive. All GLR countries are signatories to tripartite agreements on refugee repatriation and reintegration. Burundi adopted the SNR and participates in the JRRRP, and Rwanda established national programs and cooperates on international return and reintegration operations. However, these commitments have yielded only partial realization of rights and equitable access for IDPs and returning populations to national social protection programs, particularly amid massive, prolonged displacement in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. As with national populations, IDPs and returning populations are not systematically covered by national social protection measures (refer to figure 4.4).

GLR countries remain in the early stages of developing social protection policy for refugees, IDPs, returnees, and affected host communities. Existing policy and legal frameworks are insufficient to enable effective inclusion of FDPs in national systems. Although countries have ratified key international conventions and adopted social protection strategies, these commitments have not consistently translated into enforceable rights or the institutional foundations needed for inclusive ASP. Figure 4.5 shows GLR countries' collective progress on building block 1 for all FDP categories and host communities.

FIGURE 4.4

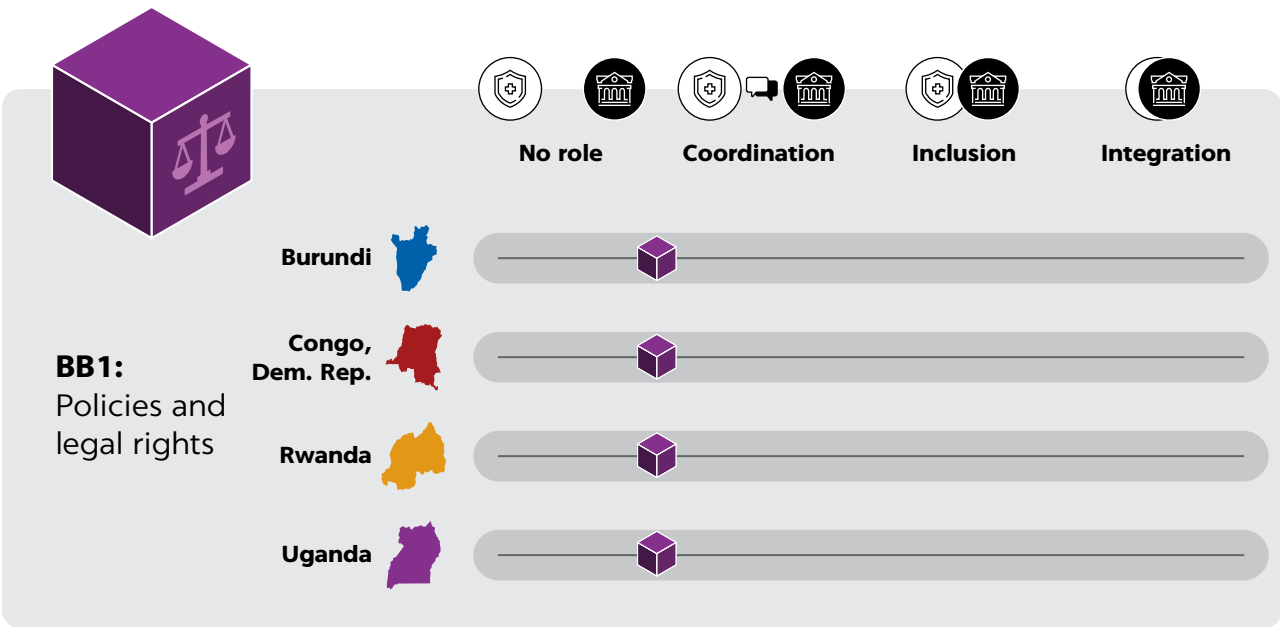
Policies and legal rights progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB1 = building block 1; IDPs = internally displaced persons.

FIGURE 4.5
BB1: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: BB1 = building block 1; FDPs = forcibly displaced populations.

BUILDING BLOCK 2: INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Refugees

The separation of responsible and mandated institutions also applies to most of the other thematic sectors supported by national development programs and stems from parallel systems established inside and outside government to assist refugees. Refugee-focused agencies usually operate outside national planning and budgeting procedures and depend on external financing for operational and investment costs, with policies and systems often modeled on those of their humanitarian financiers.

Burundi

Refugee affairs

The National Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Community Development, and Public Security, manages registration, status determination, protection, and assistance.

Social protection

The National Commission for Social Protection, a multisectoral body coordinated by the Permanent Executive Secretariat, governs policy

development, regulation, and sector coordination. The commission reports to the Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights and Gender, the main ministry implementing noncontributory social protection.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Refugee affairs

CNR, under the Ministry of the Interior, Security, Decentralization, and Customary Affairs, was established by Article 7 of Law No. 021/2002 (October 16, 2002) and became operational in 2004. It provides the legal framework for refugee status regulation and improved conditions, with eligibility and appeals commissions overseeing status determinations. CNR upholds refugees' rights, ensures their protection in line with international and national law, and works with UNHCR and other agencies on repatriation and reintegration projects.

Social protection

MINAS holds the mandate for social protection and humanitarian assistance, focusing on IDPs and those affected by climatic or natural disasters. It operates through two general secretariats for social affairs and humanitarian action and leads noncontributory social protection through the flagship cash transfer programs.

Rwanda

Refugee affairs

MINEMA coordinates and oversees refugee affairs, working closely with UNHCR through high-level strategic platforms, sector-specific groups, and camp-level coordination. The Refugee Coordination Meeting is a quarterly forum for strategic and policy discussions. Monthly sector-specific working groups cover protection, gender-based violence, education, and health, and camp-level meetings address localized needs.

MINEMA also manages disaster reduction and refugee support, including socioeconomic projects for disaster-vulnerable populations, risk education, and financial and material aid. For refugees, programs include constructing school and vocational training infrastructure, developing health facilities in districts hosting refugees, and supporting reintegration.

Social protection

The Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC) leads implementation of the national social protection strategy in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, which oversee programs like the National Early Childhood Development Program. MINALOC also leads noncontributory social protection programs, including the VUP.

The Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning mobilizes financing and ensures financial accountability. The Ministry of Agriculture and Animal

Resources, through the Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board, aligns agricultural support with social protection programs. Agencies such as the Local Administrative Entities Development Agency, the Genocide Survivors Assistance Fund, and the National Council of Persons with Disabilities translate policy into operational guidelines. Districts play a key role in program delivery and beneficiary selection.

Uganda

In Uganda, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) leads policy development, planning, and management of refugee affairs—including registration, protection, and service provision—and implements programs with social protection components, such as the Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project (DRDIP) and Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF).

The Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development implements noncontributory social protection for vulnerable groups, including elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, and orphans, such as the Senior Citizens Grant (SCG).

Coordination and engagement

The separation of policy and institutional arrangements for refugees and citizens also affects coordination and engagement. Institutional responsibilities overlap in some areas where approaches to forced displacement and social protection could better align, especially operationally and technically. Many social protection programs share self-reliance objectives with refugee assistance, but formal coordination mechanisms between social protection and refugee affairs remain underdeveloped in the GLR, even when individual ministries engage in both.

Social protection ministries in the GLR do not oversee or coordinate international humanitarian support for refugees. This holds in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where MINAS's humanitarian department primarily manages national resources for IDPs or natural disaster situations. In practice, institutional arrangements and incentives in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda result in minimal social protection ministerial engagement in international humanitarian assistance for refugees.

Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda lack legally established national coordination committees to integrate refugee support and social protection. In Burundi, project-level coordination occurs at the national and subnational levels, primarily through the Merankabandi

program that includes refugees. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite MINAS's mandate for social protection and humanitarian assistance, it focuses mainly on IDPs and those affected by climatic or natural disasters, operating through two general secretariats for social affairs and humanitarian action. MINAS holds the primary mandate for noncontributory social protection through the flagship cash transfer programs; however, the Ministry of Finance currently manages and implements the unconditional cash transfer (transferts monétaires inconditionnels [TMI]) in rural areas and the labor-intensive public works (LIPW) program in urban areas (travaux à haute intensité en main d'œuvre [THIMO]) implemented through the Eastern Recovery Project (Projet de Stabilisation de l'Est de la RDC pour la Paix [STEP]) financed by the World Bank.²⁰

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, STEP directly supported both MINAS and CNR through signed conventions. For CNR, it provided technical and financial assistance to build capacity and train staff to assume management of the UNHCR ProGres IV database. This support also enabled CNR to provide data on refugees within host populations, informing the geographical targeting of social protection programs (through TMI and THIMO) implemented through STEP.

Across the region, operational coordination platforms focus on specific initiatives such as humanitarian cash transfers. Examples include the Democratic Republic of Congo's Groupe Thématique Sectorial, Burundi's Cash Working Group, Rwanda's Social Cluster Meetings and Social Protection Sector Working Group, and Uganda's Social Protection Development Partners Working Group, as well as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Action Plan steering group and technical sector working groups. However, development partners, donors, or international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) typically lead these platforms and have not advanced the role of social protection ministries in refugee support. International partners have created and led coordination bodies to strengthen collaboration between social protection and humanitarian actors (Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda), limiting national ownership and leadership. Country ministries and agencies sometimes participate, but this falls short of nationally led, owned, and managed responses.

Partnerships

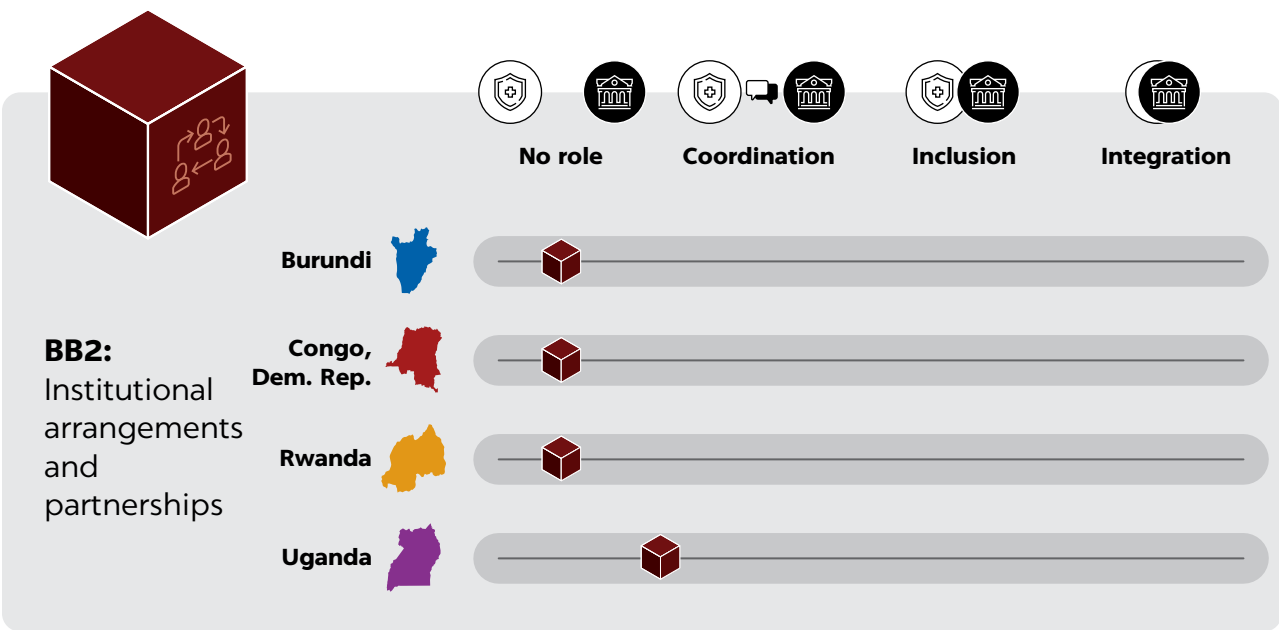
Separate policy and institutional arrangements for refugees in GLR countries shape the type and range of partnerships, heavily influenced by UNHCR's global mandate covering policy development; camp management; and provision of health, education, legal, and general assistance. UNHCR primarily works with a designated government counterpart and with national institutions responsible for humanitarian assistance, social protection, and refugee coordination. Formally, the

government counterpart coordinates with other ministries; in practice, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies often work directly with line ministries, especially when the official counterpart is underresourced. At the operational level, these partnerships are often less consequential than those with external agencies and NGOs because of governments’ resource limitations.

Humanitarian and development partners and donors generally support parallel models for refugee assistance but attempt to align them with government policies. To date, the World Bank is the only aid actor to finance GLR governments to expand and strengthen social protection delivery systems to include refugees. This government-led approach has advanced the inclusion of refugees and host communities in key government programs such as Merankabandi through STEP in the Democratic Republic of Congo and DRDIP in Uganda. Other social protection actors, including UN agencies and donors, provide technical and operational support and fund small-scale programs implemented by themselves, third-party providers, or NGOs, with limited coordination and government ownership.

In summary, the GLR countries remain in the no-role phase of the humanitarian–social protection continuum, with Uganda slightly more advanced than the other three. Figure 4.6 presents the continuum for building block 2 (progress of institutional arrangements and partnerships in GLR countries for refugees).

FIGURE 4.6
Institutional arrangements and partnerships progress for refugees



Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: BB2 = building block 2.

IDPs, returnees, and host communities

IDPs

GLR governments have generally not established specific institutional arrangements to deliver social protection to IDPs. Assistance is typically provided through ministries responsible for humanitarian assistance. In some major emergencies and natural disasters, the same ministry oversees support to both refugees and IDPs. Ministries formally responsible for social protection have had minor involvement with IDPs through distinct program components, partly because of resource constraints.

Social protection ministries currently play a limited role in managing and coordinating international humanitarian aid for IDPs. Coordination mechanisms largely reflect arrangements introduced by external partners and their supported government counterparts, limiting social protection ministries' involvement in delivering support and services to IDPs and returnees. Relevant ministries and agencies may join discussions but do not exercise full control over planning, implementation, and management.

As with refugees, humanitarian and development actors generally deliver support to IDPs and returnees through parallel systems, with limited practical partnerships with national social protection systems. Although some donor-funded social protection programs have begun to include IDPs and returnees (refer to the “Building block 3: Programs and delivery systems” section), alignment or coordination with broader systems remains limited.

Returning populations (refugees and IDPs)

Institutional arrangements for returning populations follow the legal and policy responsibilities defined for refugees and IDPs. Returning refugees and IDPs are implicitly eligible for inclusion in national social protection programs as citizens experiencing poverty or vulnerability. In principle, UNHCR provides legal and operational support for repatriation logistics and some short-term assistance to meet basic needs, and the GLR governments address longer-term administrative, economic, and social aspects of reintegration. For returning IDPs, national legislative and policy frameworks provide for inclusion within broader categories of vulnerable populations, but measures to support return and reintegration are limited.

For returnees, national partnership arrangements for refugees are more complex, reflecting both international and national roles. Typically, the responsible government counterpart to UNHCR handles the return phase, whereas reintegration may involve other government ministries and departments at the national and local levels.

Host communities

National social protection policy frameworks in all four countries do not explicitly include provisions for host communities. Although host populations may receive assistance based on general vulnerability criteria, this support is not linked to their role in hosting displaced persons. Consequently, social protection systems have not been specifically designed or adapted to address host communities' needs. Similarly, the GLR governments have not established specific institutional arrangements to assist host communities affected by forced displacement or returning IDPs and refugees.

Burundi

Management of IDPs is shared between two ministries, including the lead social protection ministry. The Ministry of the Interior, Community Development, and Public Security oversees repatriation, resettlement, and reintegration, ensuring returnees relocate to their areas of origin. Once resettled, the Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights, and Gender assumes responsibility for socioeconomic reintegration. Other ministries are involved; for example, Burundi's National Strategy for the Socioeconomic Reintegration of Disaster Victims includes many sectoral ministries along with the two mentioned here.

The government of Burundi receives critical support from UN agencies and development partners for policy implementation, humanitarian aid, and reintegration. A key example is the 2021 JRRRP, developed with UNHCR. A consultation framework coordinates institutions through a steering committee, working groups, and sectoral clusters at the national and provincial levels. The Directorate General for Returning Populations, Repatriates, and Reintegration oversees coordination to align with national policies and international best practices. The government also set up a multisectoral National Platform for Risk Prevention and Disaster Management, which interacts with decentralized entities and development partners under Presidential Décret 100/292 of October 16, 2007.

Democratic Republic of Congo

MINAS is the primary government body supporting vulnerable populations in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It operates through the Minister's Office, two general secretariats, the National Fund for Promotion and Social Service, and the Solidarity and Disaster Management Fund. Its Social Affairs Administration has three divisions:

1. Directorates overseeing human resources, social action, planning, child protection, disability rehabilitation, senior citizen welfare, and national solidarity programs
2. Support services or specialized social units providing targeted assistance
3. Promotional organizations of a social nature fostering community-based initiatives.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has allocated institutional responsibilities for returning refugees and IDPs according to government mandates. CNR, under the Ministry of the Interior, Security, Decentralization, and Customary Affairs, is responsible for returning Congolese refugees and works closely with UNHCR.

Rwanda

Rwanda's National Contingency Plan for Population Influx manages large-scale displacement. The plan activates when disasters displace over 30,000 people or early warnings signal a risk requiring evacuation of 5,000 or more individuals. Upon activation, the National Disaster Management Committee leads the response, the National Platform for Disaster Management coordinates, and the Internally Displaced Persons Coordination Committee oversees execution. Displaced rural populations typically construct traditional shelters, anticipating land access, particularly for livestock owners. Rwanda's humanitarian response follows the National Disaster Management Policy and Law (MIDIMAR 2012). In the event of an expellee influx, the Joint Inter-Ministerial Committee coordinates the response.

- For mass expulsion of Rwandese nationals from neighboring countries, the plan triggers if more than 500 individuals arrive within a week or early warnings indicate significant risk. The National Disaster Management Committee then convenes the National Disaster Management Technical Committee and Joint Inter-Ministerial Committee to oversee the response, establishes the Emergency Coordination Committee for implementation, ensures only short-term transit arrangements before relocation, and prioritizes reintegration as a long-term solution with MINALOC and district authorities.

MINEMA, supported by the UN resident coordinator and UNHCR, leads initial assessments, fundraising, and response planning. When activated, MINEMA works with MINALOC—the lead agency for noncontributory social protection (refer to box 4.3)—and the Rwanda National Police to convene priority sectoral groups and develop a joint response plan.

Uganda

In Uganda, OPM leads refugee and IDP affairs, including policy development, planning, and coordination. It also implements programs with social protection components, such as DRDIP and NUSAF. Through the Department of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, OPM oversees IDP activities, with the Commissioner for Disaster Management and Refugees managing operations at the national and district levels. Although the government holds primary responsibility for IDP support, it relies on UN agencies and development partners when displacement reaches critical levels. These entities have historically provided technical and financial assistance to Uganda's disaster management framework.

Box 4.3**Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Rwandese refugees: Process, support, and safeguards**

The government of Rwanda and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Rwandese refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo through organized convoys departing from transit centers in North and South Kivu. Upon arrival in Rwanda, returning populations are received at Kijote and Nyarushishi transit centers, where they undergo screening by the Rwanda Immigration Department and the National Identification Agency (NIDA).

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs (MIDIMAR) provides an orientation session on available services and administrative structures. After identity

verification by NIDA, returning populations receive a reintegration package, including cash assistance via mobile money accounts linked to SIM cards provided on arrival. The average transit center stay lasts 8 to 10 days for registration, processing, and assistance. Those arriving by air or land are received in Kigali, where UNHCR and MIDIMAR facilitate their onward transportation and reintegration.

To ensure the integrity of the repatriation process, UNHCR and its partners implement rigorous verification mechanisms, including biometric registration, multiagency screening, interviews, and official documentation, to confirm returnee status and prevent fraud.

National-level IDP management involves three committees:

1. *Inter-Ministerial Policy Committee*. Chaired by the Minister for Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, it oversees policy formulation and coordination with ministries, UN agencies, and donors.
2. *Inter-Agency Technical Committee*. Led by the Permanent Secretary of OPM, it aligns IDP assistance with national development plans, mobilizes resources, and oversees disaster preparedness.
3. *Human Rights Promotion and Protection Sub-Committee*. It works with the Uganda Human Rights Commission to safeguard IDP rights, facilitate legal aid, and integrate human rights into policies.

At the district level, the District Disaster Management Committee, chaired by the Chief Administrative Officer, leads IDP protection and assistance. The district disaster preparedness coordinator manages IDP welfare, resettlement, and reintegration. The District Human Rights Promotion and Protection Sub-Committee ensures IDP rights are upheld.

OPM also implements programs with social protection components for host communities. Currently, the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development oversees noncontributory social protection programs for vulnerable groups—including elderly individuals, persons with disabilities,

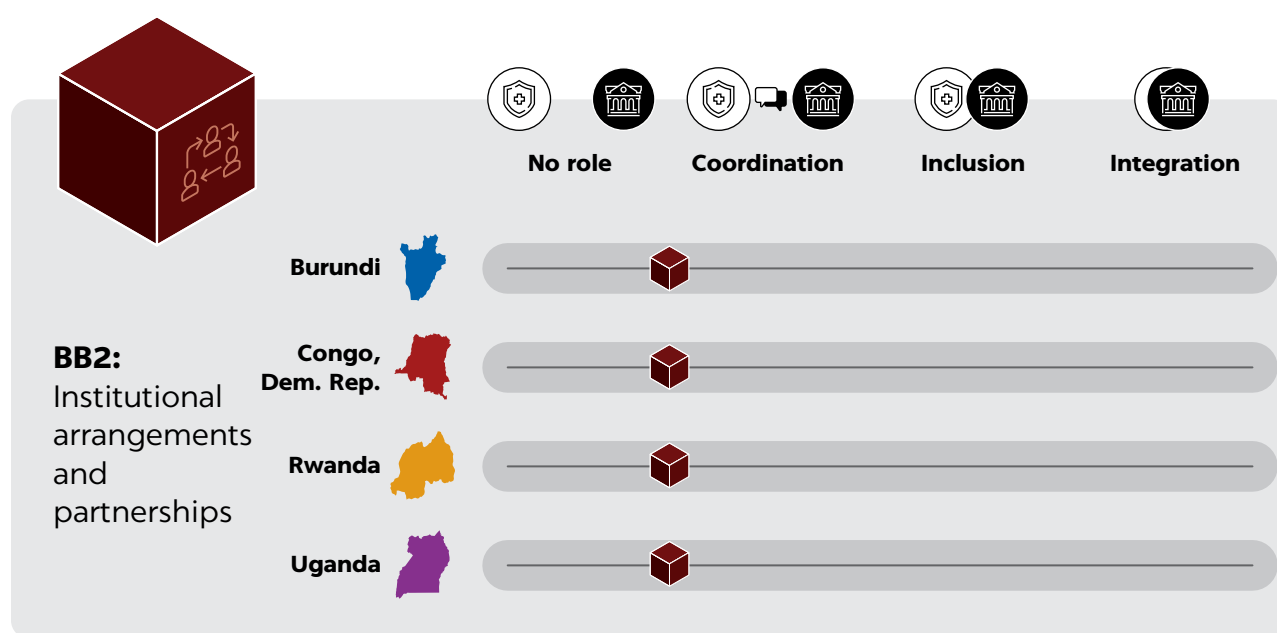
and orphans (for example, SCG). There is scope to increase coordination with OPM on social protection policy and programs for displaced populations. Uganda's limited institutional arrangements for return and reintegration reflect that it has not generated refugee movements to neighbors or experienced significant conflict-driven internal displacement for almost two decades.

Overview

GLR countries have social protection policies and programs that do not systematically include IDPs, returnees, and host communities. This is largely because ministries that previously worked closely with humanitarian agencies now hold responsibility for these groups and because they are regarded as citizens like other poor and vulnerable households. In Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, there is some evidence of greater coordination between social protection and humanitarian ministries and increased cooperation with external agencies. These initial steps may enhance prospects for national social protection programs to play a more prominent role in supporting displaced and returning populations. Figure 4.7 presents the humanitarian–social protection continuum in the GLR for building block 2 for IDPs, returnees, and host communities.

FIGURE 4.7

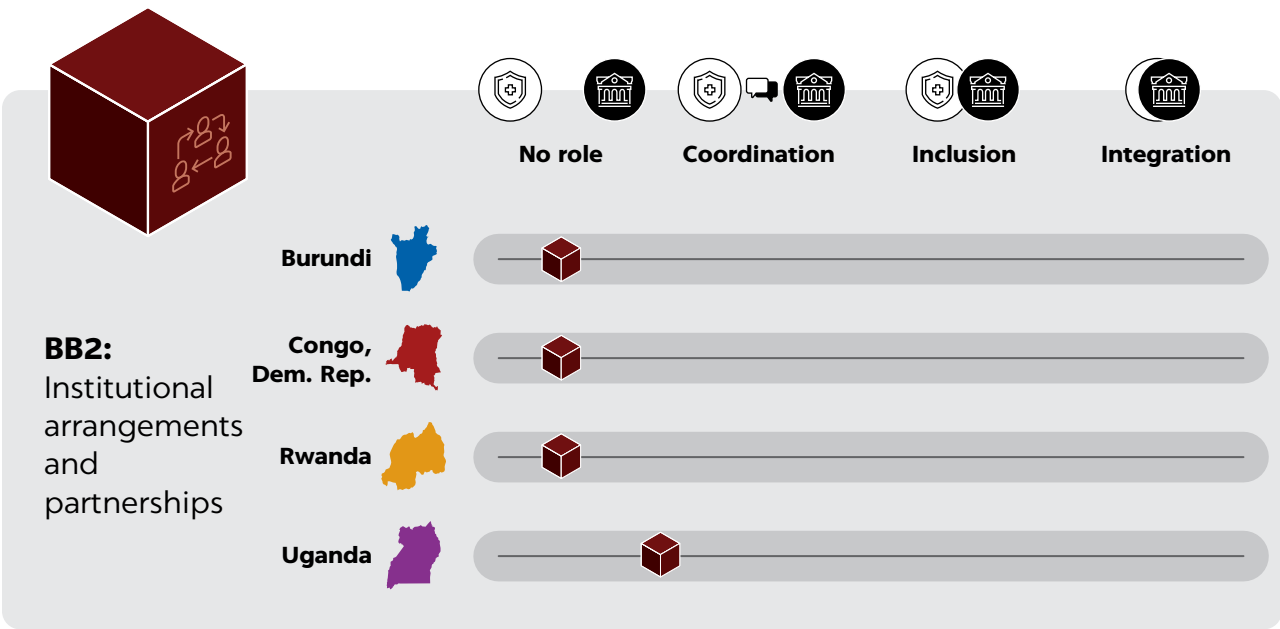
Institutional arrangements and partnerships progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB2 = building block 2; IDPs = internally displaced persons.

FIGURE 4.8
BB2: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: BB2 = building block 2; FDPs = forcibly displaced populations.

In summary, GLR countries remain in the no-role phase of the humanitarian–social protection continuum, with Uganda slightly more advanced because several of its policy frameworks include provisions for refugees. Although all GLR countries have social protection policies and programs that could, in principle, include IDPs, returnees, and host communities as national citizens, they are rarely explicitly included. Responsibility for displaced populations typically lies with ministries aligned with humanitarian actors, and these groups are often viewed as not requiring tailored provisions beyond general poverty and vulnerability programs. Where explicit provisions exist, they are often outdated or not implemented. Refugees are particularly excluded because of their noncitizen status and the lack of formal coordination between national social protection systems and refugee assistance structures, which operate in parallel. Recent signs of greater collaboration between social protection institutions and humanitarian actors offer a pathway to change. Figure 4.8, which shows overall progress toward inclusive social protection systems for all types of FDPs and host communities, indicates that countries remain in the no-role phase, with Uganda slightly more advanced.

BUILDING BLOCK 3: PROGRAMS AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Before analyzing each forced displacement–affected population group, it is useful to outline common features of GLR social protection programs and delivery systems to assess how they extend coverage to different FDPs and host communities.

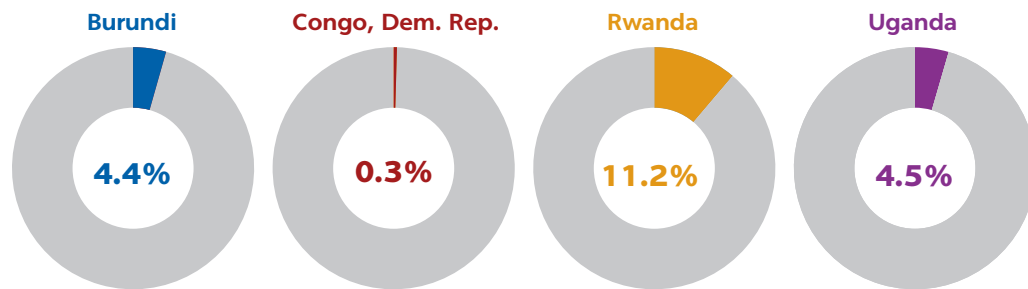
Most GLR programs are not designed with a forced displacement lens and do not explicitly target refugees, IDPs, returnees, or host communities. Inclusion typically occurs when individuals qualify as vulnerable under national criteria. Capacity constraints—especially in remote areas—further limit support.

The effectiveness of social protection for FDPs increases substantially when linked to jobs, livelihoods, and financial inclusion initiatives. Cash transfers and public works can stabilize consumption, but sustained self-reliance depends on social protection systems connecting displaced populations to skills, employment services, agricultural value chains, and credit. Embedding economic inclusion pathways across social protection programs aligns with national jobs platforms and supports both displaced and host communities.

The four GLR countries have developed national social protection systems that vary widely in maturity, coverage, financing, and administrative reach. Although each has made notable progress—often supported by development partners—these systems remain limited in their capacity to reach populations in displacement-affected border regions, where administrative presence is thin and delivery systems are weak. In several displacement hot spots, national programs are either absent or operate at minimal scale. Clarifying these system constraints is essential to avoid unrealistic expectations, particularly among donors exploring national systems for long-term support.

ASP is gaining traction programmatically and may increase capacity to support populations affected by forced displacement. In 2023, Burundi's Merankabandi expanded support to food-insecure households via the World Bank's Contingent Emergency Response Component activation in six provinces, reaching 50,000 households. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, STEP was leveraged for the COVID-19 response, with STEP-Kinshasa cash transfers reaching over 275,000 beneficiaries. Rwanda's VUP added a shock-responsive component to assist those affected by unexpected events, primarily climatic shocks. In Uganda, NUSAF's third phase piloted a \$12 million disaster risk financing subcomponent to strengthen response capacity.

Service delivery capacity relies heavily on external support and faces security and logistical challenges. Core delivery systems—targeting, payments, management information systems (MISs), and grievance mechanisms—were developed with significant partner support. Government-led Project Implementation Units (PIUs) implementing programs such as Merankabandi and STEP depend on consultants, NGOs, and UN agencies for field operations. Logistical constraints and insecurity impede access, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where vast distances, weak infrastructure, and escalating insecurity restrict operations in remote and conflict-affected areas, limiting effective service delivery (Gabelle et al. 2026).

FIGURE 4.9**Coverage of main cash transfer programs (percentage of national population)**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: For Burundi, the percentage includes the target population of Merankabandi. For the Democratic Republic of Congo, it includes transferts monétaires inconditionnels (TMI) and travaux à haute intensité en main d'œuvre (THIMO). For Rwanda, it encompasses the Vision 2020 Umurenge Program. For Uganda, it includes the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment Program, also referred to as the Senior Citizens Grant. Emergency support, under the Contingent Emergency Response Component, is not included in any case.

Coverage of GLR social safety nets is generally low. Rwanda's VUP has the highest coverage—more than double that of others. Merankabandi and Uganda's SCG each reach slightly over 4 percent of their populations, and STEP covers under 1 percent. Figure 4.9 illustrates the main program coverage in each country.

Capacity to deliver cash transfers electronically to refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities varies by context. In Burundi, Merankabandi pays via mobile phones provided free of charge to recipients. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, TMI delivers benefits in cash, and THIMO uses a mix of cash and digital payments (with 45,000 beneficiaries in eastern provinces). In Uganda, DRDIP releases funds to community accounts managed by community leaders.

Refugees

Social protection programs and delivery systems in GLR countries prioritize vulnerable national populations, reflecting existing policy priorities and institutional arrangements. National systems are not designed with a refugee lens and do not explicitly include refugees as a primary target group; most refugee support is delivered through external humanitarian assistance.

A few programs address refugee vulnerabilities while incorporating social protection elements. Refugees are eligible for Merankabandi (Burundi), STEP (the Democratic Republic of Congo), and DRDIP (Uganda) but not for VUP (Rwanda) or SCG and NUSAF (Uganda).²¹

Merankabandi and STEP were not designed to target refugees but were adapted to include them and host communities when IDA WHR resources became available. Merankabandi provides cash transfers and complementary activities to build resilience against economic shocks, natural disasters, and other crises, targeting extremely poor households with children under age five in 18 provinces and aiming to reach 8,000 refugee households—about 6 percent of its caseload. WFP adjusted the proxy means test to better identify vulnerable refugee households. STEP offers LIPW in urban areas and unconditional cash transfers in rural areas, with measures to boost productive inclusion and human capital. It does not operate in camps but prioritizes host communities with large refugee populations, with outreach encouraging refugee participation.

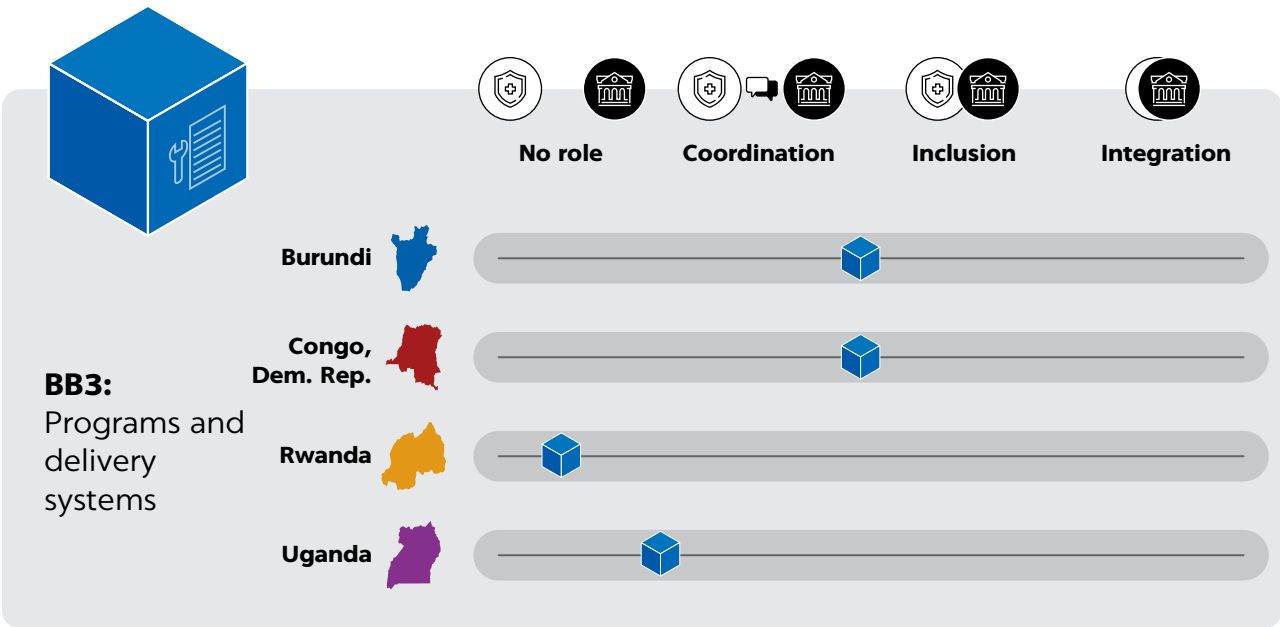
Both programs adapted service delivery to reach refugees and host communities. Merankabandi modified its targeting with WFP and adjusted the proxy means test to include criteria for refugee households. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, economic inclusion studies informed refugee-sensitive measures for TMI beneficiaries starting in December 2022, with pilots in Kumbu (North Ubangi), Ituri, and South Kivu.

Refugee participation remains limited. Merankabandi's 8,000 refugee households represent 6 percent of beneficiaries. By late 2024, STEP had about 25,000 refugees in cash transfers and 1,000 in public works, roughly 6 percent of total beneficiaries.

Rwanda's Socio-Economic Inclusion of Refugees and Host Community (SEIRHC, or Jya Mbere) project, although not a social protection program, aims to reduce dependence on humanitarian assistance through investments in infrastructure, health services, economic inclusion, and employment. MINEMA developed a Graduation Strategy to empower refugee households and equip them with tools for sustainable livelihoods, transitioning them from humanitarian aid dependency to self-reliance.

Uganda's DRDIP embeds social protection within a community-driven development framework, investing in socioeconomic infrastructure, institutional capacity, and service delivery to address gaps and promote self-reliance. Interventions include sustainable environmental management through LIPW, household livelihood support for microenterprises, and community engagement to build capacity and cohesion between refugees and host communities. DRDIP allocates 70 percent of resources to host communities and 30 percent to refugees, recognizing stronger humanitarian support for refugees and greater disadvantage among hosts. It also established a Displacement Crisis Response Mechanism to help the government of Uganda address displacement shocks systematically.

FIGURE 4.10
Programs and delivery systems progress for refugees



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB3 = building block 3.

In summary, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda are moving from coordination to inclusion along the humanitarian–social protection continuum, but Rwanda is not. The three countries now incorporate refugees into cash transfer programs, whereas Rwanda’s largest program, VUP, excludes them. Service delivery capacity remains limited and often depends on external support; programs such as Merankabandi, STEP, and DRDIP have adjusted procedures to reach both refugees and hosts. ASP could strengthen capacity to support populations affected by other shocks, including refugee crises. Although the inclusion of refugees in Merankabandi, STEP, and DRDIP is promising, fully reaching the inclusion phase will require expanding refugee participation across these and other programs. Figure 4.10 shows the GLR countries’ progress on building block 3 (programs and delivery systems) for refugees.

IDPs, returnees, and host communities

IDPs

Social protection programs in the GLR generally lack specific measures for IDPs. As national citizens, IDPs can enroll if they meet eligibility criteria, but their unique vulnerabilities reveal a major gap: the absence of tailored strategies to identify and support them within programs. Given the complex, multidimensional challenges displaced populations face, cross-sectoral support is essential.

Some GLR programs are building ASP to respond to shocks, including internal displacement. Although these initiatives do not systematically target displaced populations, they are promising and could eventually support people affected by various shocks, including IDPs. In Rwanda, VUP introduced a shock-responsive component to provide financial aid to people hit by unexpected events, primarily climate-related disasters. Under this program, those affected by disasters such as floods immediately become eligible for cash assistance. Guidelines were established in 2023, and 114,506 households were assisted in the first year. Merankabandi expanded in 2023 through a Contingent Emergency Response Component to support food-insecure households across six provinces in Burundi, benefiting 50,000 households. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, STEP was adapted for COVID-19, with STEP-Kinshasa reaching over 275,000 beneficiaries in Kinshasa. Uganda's third phase of NUSAF piloted a \$12 million disaster risk financing subcomponent to strengthen response capacity.

Returning populations (refugees and IDPs)

Burundi

In 2010, Burundi adopted the SNR, targeting returnees, IDPs, and ex-combatants. Although it does not promote inclusion in national social protection programs, it focuses on geographic stability, economic subsistence, and social participation and advocates ratifying the Kampala Convention. Priorities include land access, livelihood diversification, disaster risk reduction, and health care. In 2021, Burundi, with UNHCR and partners, launched JRRRP, an externally funded initiative aligning humanitarian and development efforts for safe, dignified return and long-term reintegration. Although most refugees return to home communities, about 8 percent cannot and settle in IDP camps.

Merankabandi does not explicitly target returning IDPs and refugees, although they can enroll as community members. Authorities recognized that returning populations were initially excluded despite meeting vulnerability criteria. Returning refugees receive a one-off UNHCR package (\$150 per adult, \$75 per child, plus food and nonfood items). Previously, Merankabandi's questionnaire disqualified those benefiting from similar interventions, and the return package was assumed to qualify, unintentionally excluding returnees. The next phase strengthens communication on eligibility via community-based targeting, emphasizing that returnees face vulnerabilities from loss of property and livelihoods and prolonged reintegration. Returning populations will be explicitly recognized as eligible. A new question in the Merankabandi questionnaire identifies returnee status to avoid inadvertent exclusion.

Democratic Republic of Congo

In 2024, STEP reached nearly 46,000 IDPs and returning refugees—about 14 percent of all beneficiaries—through safety nets such as LIPW in urban

areas (THIMO) and unconditional cash transfers in rural areas (TMI), complemented by productive inclusion and human capital initiatives. Both cash transfers target areas with displaced populations and host communities, and the program uses targeted communication and community engagement to encourage participation among vulnerable groups. As of September 2024, 23,097 IDPs participated in THIMO and 17,430 benefited from TMI; 2,731 returning refugees took part in THIMO and 2,550 received TMI support.²²

In 2016, North Kivu developed, with external support, a provincial strategy for sustainable solutions for IDPs (IDMC n.d.-a)²³ to phase out accommodation sites and improve security in return areas. It focused on village regrouping to improve security, access to social infrastructure, and rural modernization. The Forum for Sustainable Solutions to Population Displacement (FoSoD) for North Kivu, under the provincial governor, coordinated multilateral efforts to ensure security and human rights-based solutions. Ongoing conflict and displacement necessitated new approaches. Key measures included:

- Village grouping to facilitate infrastructure development and security;
- Development poles in each FoSoD village (serving about 20,000 people) with health centers, schools, civil registry offices, police stations, markets, and playgrounds; and
- Biometric registration of IDPs and Rwandese refugees by the CNR with UNHCR support to facilitate durable solutions.

For returning IDPs, solutions included:

- Returning to their land of origin, with the option to sell or stay;
- Sharecropping or similar agreements with local landowners; and
- Relocating to FoSoD villages or secure areas if original homes were inaccessible.

The initiative targeted all affected populations—those in original villages, IDP sites, and host families—and aimed for sustainable, long-term solutions in North Kivu.

Rwanda

In 2012, the government of Rwanda and One UN launched the Sustainable Return and Reintegration of Rwandan Returning Populations in response to the planned June 30, 2013, cessation clause (UNDP 2022) ending international protection for specific refugee groups.²⁴ Initially scheduled for November 2012–December 2014, the program focused on five pillars: governance; health, nutrition, and HIV/AIDS; education; housing and environment; and food security and economic growth. It involved six Rwandese ministries—led by MIDIMAR—and six UN agencies, with UNHCR coordinating on behalf of One UN. Its three objectives were as follows:

1. Ensuring peaceful, safe, and sustainable reintegration;
2. Enhancing access to essential services, including health care, education, and livelihood support, with attention to peacebuilding, gender equality, land access, and justice; and
3. Facilitating social cohesion between returning populations and host communities.

Rwanda's Sustainable Return and Reintegration of Rwandan Returning Populations program provided social protection support to returning populations. It supported livelihoods through vocational training in tailoring, welding, carpentry, and hairdressing, providing trainees \$100 in start-up capital plus machines and accessories upon completion. It also delivered agricultural inputs (pesticides and fertilizers), livestock, housing materials, and homes and built or rehabilitated schools in return areas (MINEMA and UNHCR 2021).

Uganda

In 2005, Uganda developed a three-phase strategy to support the return and resettlement of IDPs following the decades-long Lord's Resistance Army conflict. The plan assessed conditions in return areas, prepared IDPs and host communities, and rehabilitated essential social and economic infrastructure. Initial assessments ensured clean water, health care, education, and infrastructure such as roads, schools, and health centers. It included special provisions for vulnerable groups—elderly people, disabled individuals, households headed by women, or orphans—requiring targeted support for transportation and resettlement.

Because of prolonged displacement, returning families needed immediate support: bush-clearing tools, shelter materials, food aid, and farming inputs to restart agriculture. Food assistance was phased out over six months to prevent food insecurity. Emergency shelter (tarpaulins) and health interventions, including treated mosquito nets, addressed high malaria risk.

Restoring community access roads was a priority to facilitate mobility and service delivery. Existing government road programs offered some support, but further district- and community-level interventions were needed. Success depended on timely implementation to help displaced people rebuild with dignity, stability, and sustainable livelihoods.

Under the first NUSAF, the Vulnerable Groups Support Unit reintegrated IDP returnees, ex-combatants, and former insurgents through targeted, sustainable interventions, engaging local authorities and civil society to enhance livelihoods and social cohesion. NUSAF reached 87,023 IDPs.

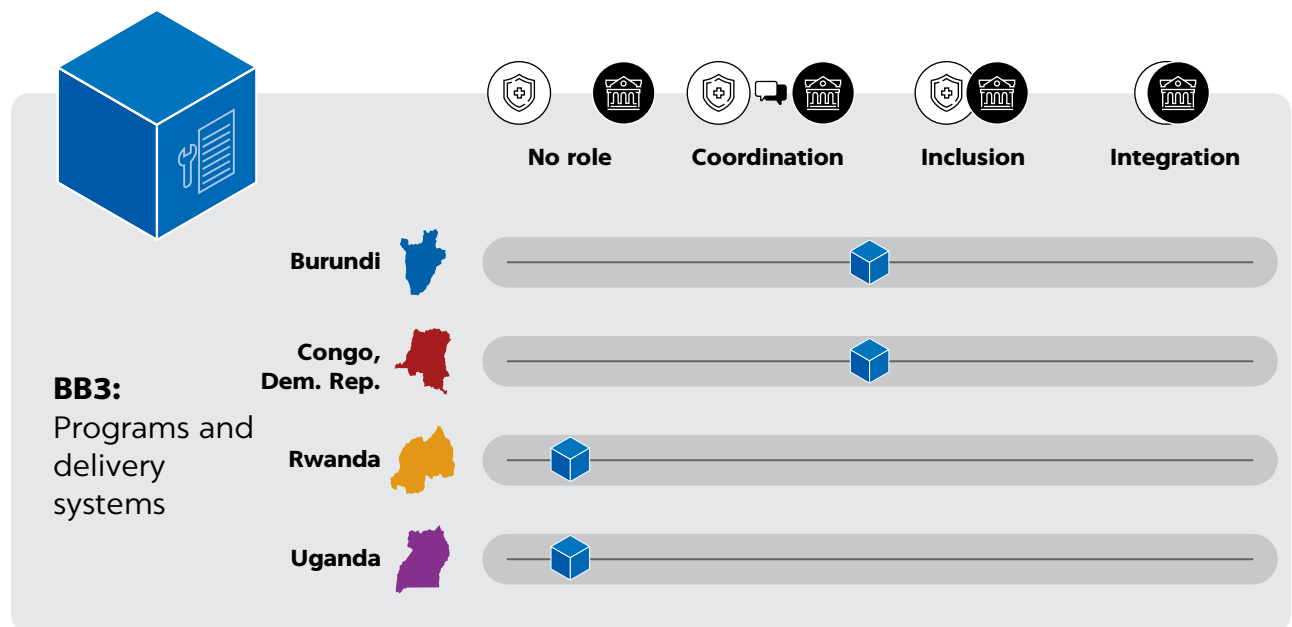
The second NUSAF community infrastructure component allocated \$30 million (30 percent of the budget) to restore and upgrade community infrastructure as Northern Uganda transitioned from camps to villages, funding schools, water points, roads, health centers, skills training facilities, and education infrastructure (teachers' housing, classrooms, sanitation, solar lighting, and furniture) in line with sector standards.

Host communities

Some programs include design features for host communities. Uganda's DRDIP integrates social protection within a community-driven development framework, including socioeconomic infrastructure, institutional capacity building, and service delivery improvements. It allocates 70 percent of resources to host communities and 30 percent to refugees, recognizing that humanitarian organizations provide substantial assistance to refugees, whereas host communities often face greater disadvantages. Merankabandi and STEP prioritize areas affected by displacement, ensuring host communities receive social protection support. In Rwanda, the WHR-financed SEIRHC (Jya Mbere) project eases pressure on host communities by strengthening service delivery (education, health, and water), investing in infrastructure, and supporting economic opportunities.

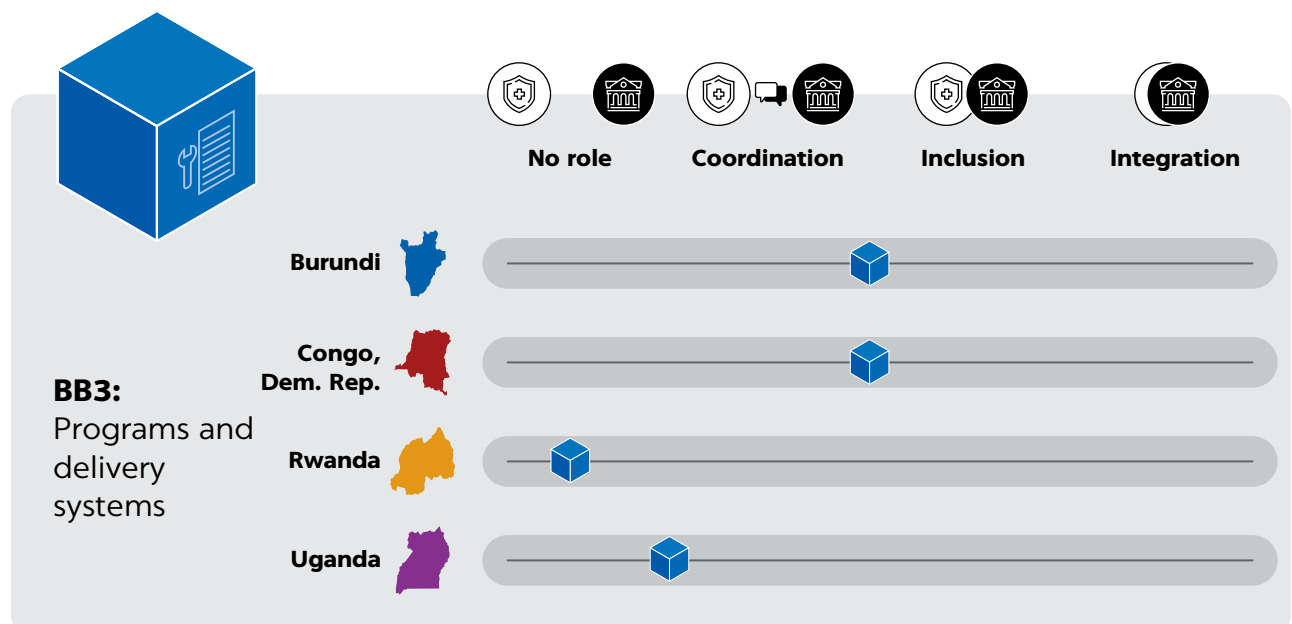
Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo are moving from the coordination to the inclusion phase of the humanitarian–social protection continuum through the main social safety nets (cash transfer programs) supporting IDPs, returning refugees, and host communities. This progress is not mirrored in Rwanda and Uganda. Service delivery capacity across the region remains limited and often depends on external support. ASP could eventually strengthen capacity to support populations affected by other shocks, including displacement. Although inclusion of IDPs and returning populations in programs like Merankabandi and STEP is promising, a full shift to inclusion will require expanded participation across these and other programs. Figure 4.11 shows GLR countries' progress on building block 3 programs and delivery systems for IDPs, returnees, and host communities.

Figure 4.12 shows the GLR countries' progress on building block 3, for all categories of FDPs and host communities.

FIGURE 4.11**Programs and delivery systems progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB3 = building block 3; IDPs = internally displaced persons.

FIGURE 4.12**BB3: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB3 = building block 3; FDPs = forcibly displaced populations.

BUILDING BLOCK 4: DATA AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Before analyzing each population group, it is useful to outline common features of GLR social protection information systems to assess how they extend coverage to different FDPs and host communities.

GLR information systems reflect differing policies toward citizens and refugees. Governments periodically collect citizen data to inform national development and budgeting, including censuses and household surveys, and run registration systems to update vital events such as births, deaths, and marriages.

Social registries in the GLR are nascent. These national centralized databases of vulnerable households support identification and targeting for social assistance. Ongoing initiatives, supported by development partners, aim to leverage flagship cash transfer program MISs for social protection objectives. Cash transfer programs in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda have MISs to store beneficiary data and integrate operations—Merankabandi (Burundi); VUP (Rwanda); and NUSAF, SAGE (Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment Program), and DRDIP (Uganda). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, beyond STEP's MIS, MINAS recently used STEP funding to develop a parallel MIS.

Progress on social registries varies. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo are building registries on existing MIS frameworks. Rwanda relied on community-based Ubudehe categorization for targeting from 2008 to 2018, but it proved ineffective: only 19 percent of poor households were classified in category 1, excluding many eligible beneficiaries. In 2018, Rwanda introduced household profiling, creating a Household Welfare Scorecard based on econometric evidence, which evolved into the Imibereho Dynamic Social Registry, launched in February 2024. It uses objectively measurable variables to identify poor and vulnerable households and serves as a centralized database for social protection services. Uganda launched a National Single Registry in 2021, currently housing data from SCG and NUSAF 3 beneficiaries, laying the groundwork for a coordinated national social registry system.

Data sharing between social protection and humanitarian sectors is limited, similar to emergency assistance for natural shocks and hazards. Barriers include institutional divides, differing actors and interests, data-sharing policies, and nascent social registries, as well as, in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, lack of a widely accepted, high-coverage ID document (Aparo 2023; Buhamizo 2025).

Refugees

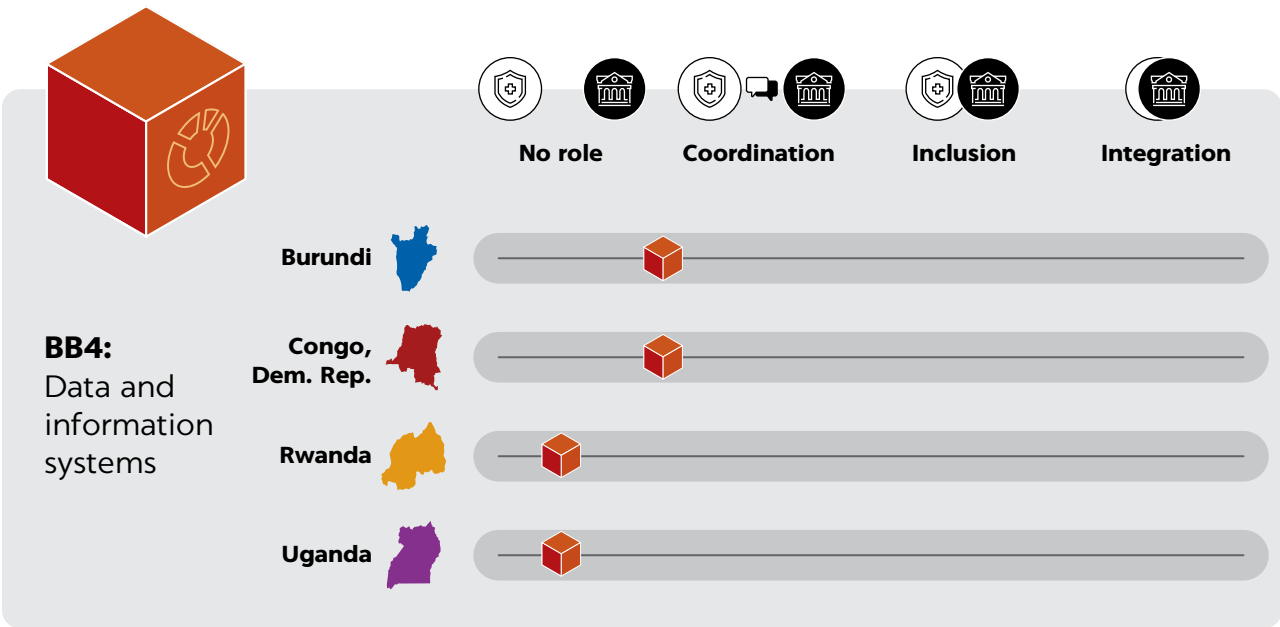
Refugees are generally not fully included in national GLR data collection. Refugee data systems primarily capture quantitative and qualitative information to inform humanitarian responses during emergencies and the immediate aftermath. As these collect sensitive information, UNHCR typically establishes data-sharing protocols to protect confidentiality when implementing with governments. As displacement evolves, more detailed data on longer-term socioeconomic issues emerge and inform both humanitarian and development programming. This vulnerability information is highly relevant to national social protection objectives, programming, and interventions.

Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo plan to include refugees in forthcoming social registries; Rwanda does not. Refugees participating in Merankabandi and STEP will initially be automatically included, with plans to add data from humanitarian actors. Rwanda has no initiatives to include refugees in its registry because of institutional arrangements and a clear division between social protection and refugee affairs. To improve data sharing and build a comprehensive social registry in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MINAS created a standard questionnaire used by MINAS, UNHCR, the World Bank-funded Multisectoral Child Health and Nutrition Program, and UN Children’s Fund. It has gathered data on about 95,000 households and 500,000 individuals across five provinces, including roughly 1,300 refugees, and expanded to three more provinces in 2025.

GLR countries rely heavily on UNHCR for refugee registration and data management. Refugee data are stored in UNHCR’s ProGres v4, a centralized web-based application for managing cases. It collects biodata (names, ages, marital status, and vulnerabilities) and, depending on scope, key information on education, employment, and disability to inform socioeconomic programming. This has supported increased analytical work and surveys of refugee and local households.²⁵ However, Rwanda and Uganda have well-developed government capacity; Rwanda also stores refugee data in its own databases. Figure 4.13 shows that all countries remain in early stages of the humanitarian–social protection continuum for building block 4 regarding refugees.

Interoperability between refugee registration systems and government-led foundational ID systems is an essential interim step, but long-term inclusion requires issuance of nationally recognized digital identification credentials to refugees. Such credentials—anchored in a unique national identifier—enable equitable access to social protection programs, banking, financial services, mobile money, education, and employment opportunities while reducing parallel ID ecosystems that impede integration.

FIGURE 4.13
Data and information systems progress for refugees



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB4 = building block 4.

IDPs, returnees, and host communities

IDPs

Limited social registries in the GLR and weak data sharing between social protection and humanitarian sectors hinder identification and support for vulnerable groups—refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities. The absence of integrated data systems restricts coordination and efficient assistance delivery, reducing the effectiveness of both social protection and humanitarian responses. All GLR governments rely extensively on UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and other agencies for registering, tracking, and managing IDP data, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where large-scale displacement poses major challenges.

Despite global advances, accurately tracking IDP mobility remains difficult because of security constraints, evolving conflicts, and dispersed populations. Registering IDPs across multiple locations creates consistency issues, and return movements—driven by individual decisions—often occur outside formal monitoring. Displacement duration varies significantly with security conditions. By contrast, refugee data collection is more structured: border crossings offer fixed enumeration points, and the relative stability of asylum contexts enables more comprehensive socioeconomic data gathering.

Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo are developing social registries to incorporate IDP data. To support this, Burundi's data collection

questionnaire has been updated to identify these groups; the registry is being developed with UNHCR and builds on Merankabandi's MIS. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, STEP's MIS already identifies IDPs and returning refugees and will underpin the social registry. Rwanda's Imibereho Dynamic Social Registry does not yet disaggregate data on IDPs and returnees; discussions on disaggregation are ongoing but not confirmed.

Returning populations (refugees and IDPs)

UNHCR systematically collects quantitative information on returning refugees and shares it with governments through organized repatriation operations, providing demographic data to support planning and budgeting for reintegration. Government ministries responsible for returning refugees maintain separate systems for identity verification and documentation. However, data on refugee returns are not yet systematically incorporated into national statistical and social registry systems because of ambiguities over international and national operational responsibilities and limited resources in national agencies. MISs embedded in social protection programs in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo improve prospects for consistent incorporation into national social registries.

Data on returning IDPs are more limited, given unpredictable movements, wide dispersion, and restricted access to displacement sites. National statistical offices often prioritize other areas; collecting IDP data typically requires donor funding. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix is the most reliable source on IDP return movements.

Host communities

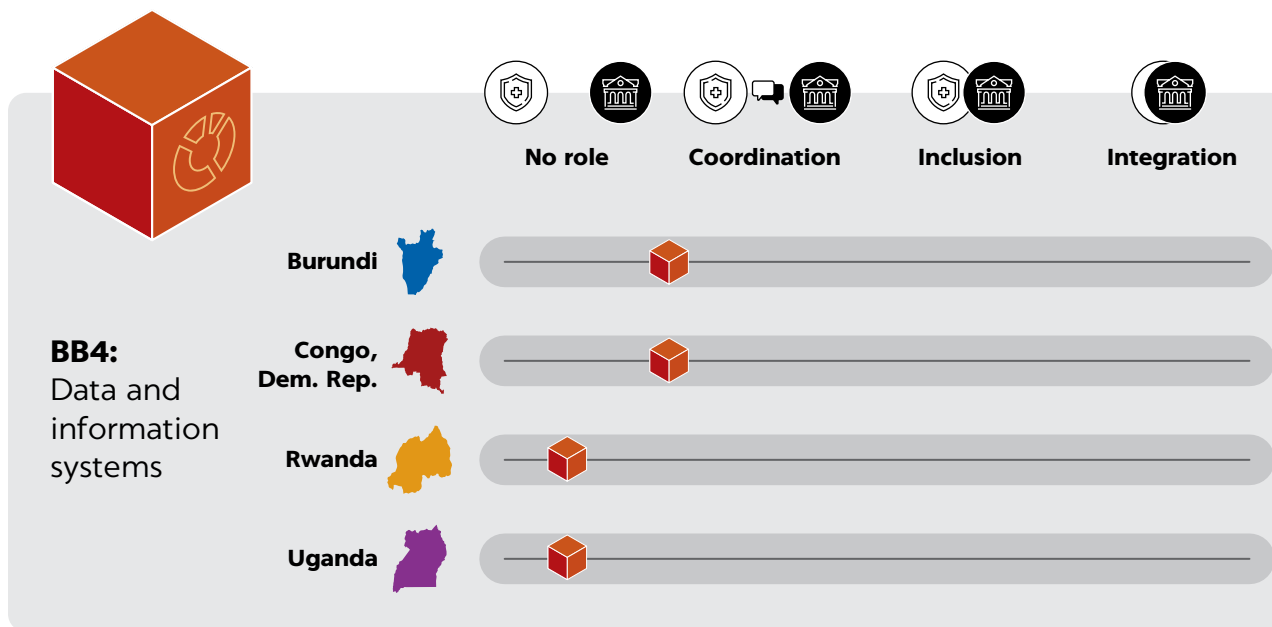
Host communities are not treated as distinct entities in national information, planning, or budgeting. Operational and project actors increasingly recognize the socioeconomic impacts of forced displacement and returns on host communities, but countries need stronger data and evidence to capture these impacts consistently and support inclusion in national social registries. This first requires broader consensus and clearer definitions of host communities, both spatially and economically.

In summary, GLR social registries remain in early development, as does the inclusion of IDPs and returnees. The MISs of social protection projects in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo already include these populations, a promising basis for national registries. All GLR countries still rely heavily on international agencies for IDP and returning refugee data, with limited data sharing between social protection and humanitarian sectors. Figure 4.14 indicates all countries remain in the early stages of the humanitarian–social protection continuum for building block 4 for IDPs, returnees, and host communities.

Figure 4.15 indicates all countries remain in the early stages of the humanitarian–social protection continuum for building block 4 (data and information systems) for all types of FDPs and host communities.

FIGURE 4.14

Data and information systems progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities

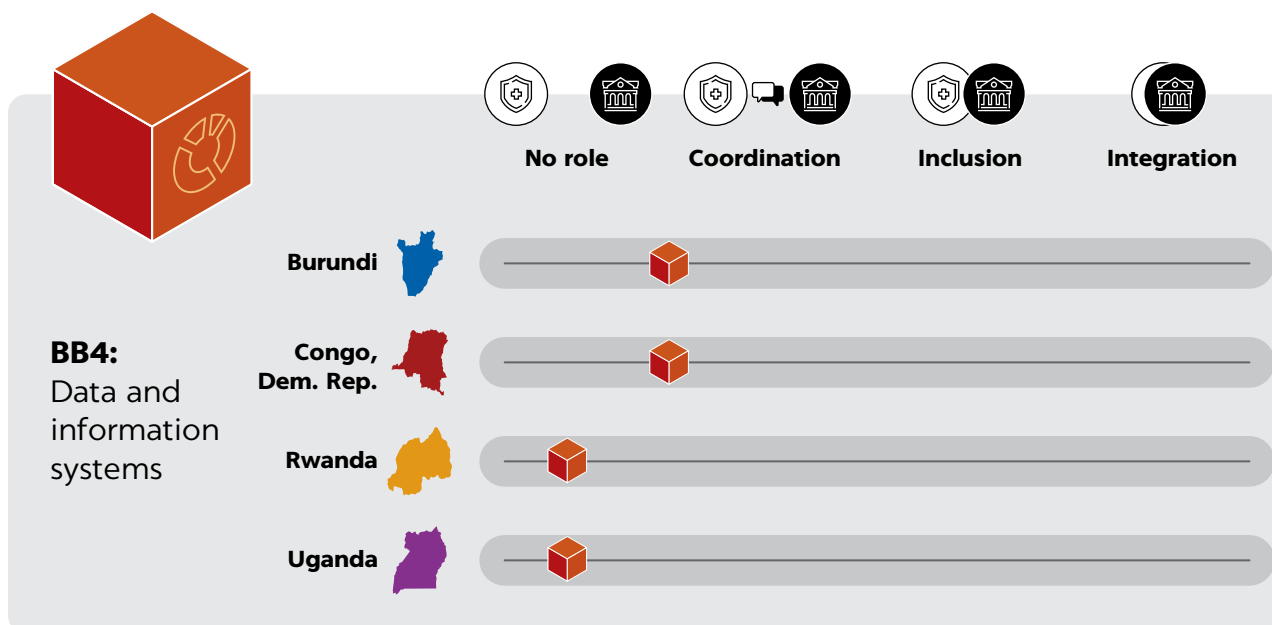


Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB4 = building block 4; IDPs = internally displaced persons.

FIGURE 4.15

BB4: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.

Note: BB4 = building block 4; FDPs = forcibly displaced populations.

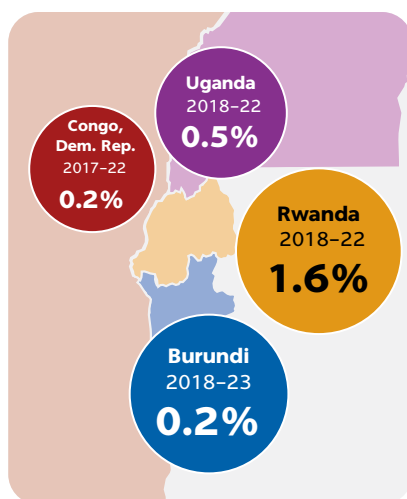
BUILDING BLOCK 5: FINANCE

Social protection is relatively new to development, planning, and budgeting in the GLR. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda established formal policy and institutions for social protection only in the past decade, which may help explain low spending across the GLR, except in Rwanda. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo spend slightly below 0.2 percent of gross domestic product, and Uganda spends 0.5 percent (refer to map 4.1); Rwanda reached 1.6 percent in 2020. Spending in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda is similar to that in neighboring Kenya (0.24 percent in 2021) and Tanzania (0.29 percent in 2021).

Social protection in the GLR relies heavily on external development partner funding. Rwanda's VUP is the only domestically funded cash transfer program. Burundi's Merankabandi and the Democratic Republic of Congo's STEP—both World Bank-funded with WHR financing for refugees and host communities—are the only social safety nets with extensive coverage and significant expenditure. In Uganda, NUSAF and DRDIP are World Bank funded, whereas SCG receives UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and Irish Aid funding.

MAP 4.1

Social protection spending, 2020 (percentage of GDP)



Source: Original map for this publication, based on social protection data for Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda from the East African Community data portal, <https://www.eac.int/>. The Democratic Republic of Congo data come from the Ministry of Finance. GDP data are from the World Bank.

Note: GDP = gross domestic product.

Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo have created social protection funds, but these have not increased resource allocation. The Burundi Social Protection Fund (created in 2015 and revised in 2017)²⁶ was intended to be supported by government and external resources; however, per the Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights and Gender, resources remain very low, and no external funding has been channeled through it. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, several social funds intended to support social protection and humanitarian assistance—the Caisse de Solidarité Nationale et de Gestion Humanitaire des Catastrophes, the Fonds National de Promotion et de Service Social, and the Fond Social de la RDC—depend heavily on external financing; these agencies have effectively operated as PIUs for multilateral donor-financed projects.

Globally, humanitarian assistance budgets provide most support for refugees, IDPs, and host communities, although resources fluctuate because of competing, increasing crises. Of the four GLR countries, only the Democratic Republic of Congo ranks among the top 10 global recipients of emergency aid in 2024, reflecting the rise of new crises (Sudan, Ukraine, and West Bank and Gaza) alongside protracted ones (Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and the Republic of Yemen).²⁷ Funding typically falls after the emergency phase in protracted displacement situations, but repeated cycles of conflict, displacement, and occasional large-scale repatriation in the GLR over the past 20 to 30 years periodically increase funding.

The dominance of international humanitarian assistance underscores the challenge of strengthening national social protection programs. Social protection spending remains low relative to humanitarian assistance. From 2015 to 2023, government social protection expenditure in the three GLR countries most affected by IDPs and returnees (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda) totaled an estimated \$1.5 billion, versus \$7.9 billion from external sources. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the government mobilized \$477 million, and international humanitarian assistance provided \$6.8 billion; moreover, most government allocations for social protection were donor funded (IMF 2024). In Burundi, spending was \$333 million against \$1.6 billion. Only in Rwanda did social protection expenditure (\$639 million) exceed humanitarian assistance (\$438 million), reflecting the lower level of displacement and return during the period.

External support provides most social protection assistance for internal displacement, returnees, and host populations in the GLR. From 2015 to 2023, nonrefugee humanitarian assistance totaled \$9.8 billion, with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi—those most affected by

internal displacement and returns—receiving \$8.8 billion and \$696 million, respectively. By December 2024, the Democratic Republic of Congo Humanitarian Response Plan mobilized over \$1.42 billion (51 percent of the request). The WFP, UN Children’s Fund, and UNHCR received 57 percent (\$810 million) of the Democratic Republic of Congo’s total. UN agency programs for internally displaced and returning populations covering key social protection areas—food aid, multisectoral assistance, cash transfers, health, and nutrition—together account for 65 percent of funding; food assistance alone is 43 percent. A similar sectoral breakdown characterizes Burundi and Rwanda, with food aid at 34 percent and 25 percent, respectively.²⁸ Between 2018 and 2023, the Democratic Republic of Congo government allocated an estimated \$477.7 million to national social protection, and international humanitarian assistance reached \$6.2 billion, mostly for vulnerable IDPs. This excludes \$618 million for refugees, part of which supported returnee movements from neighboring countries.²⁹

Refugees

External support provides the vast majority of GLR refugee assistance. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, UN agency programs for refugees and displaced populations cover food aid, multisectoral assistance, cash transfers, health, and nutrition—together, 65 percent of funding. The same pattern exists in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. UNHCR’s 2024 appeal for refugee support across the four GLR countries totals \$782 million (UNHCR 2024). By mid-2024, UNHCR mobilized \$285 million (36 percent of the request); Burundi raised \$28.9 million; the Democratic Republic of Congo, \$92.8 million; Rwanda, \$33.68 million; and Uganda, \$130.5 million, comparable with previous years except the 2021 COVID-19 peak.

Limited development funding for national GLR social protection programs that include refugees impedes longer-term responses. Apart from the World Bank’s WHR mechanism, no other development actors fund government social protection programs supporting refugees in the GLR. Some donors and UN agencies run their own initiatives, coordinating with authorities to varying degrees, but do not transfer resources to the government. Other stakeholders fund programs that exclude refugees, such as Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and Irish Aid support to SCG in Uganda.

The World Bank RSW and WHR financing has been key to advancing refugee inclusion in national policies and programs (refer to box 4.4). Access requires governments to submit Strategy Notes or Work Plans outlining progress toward refugee socioeconomic inclusion.

Box 4.4

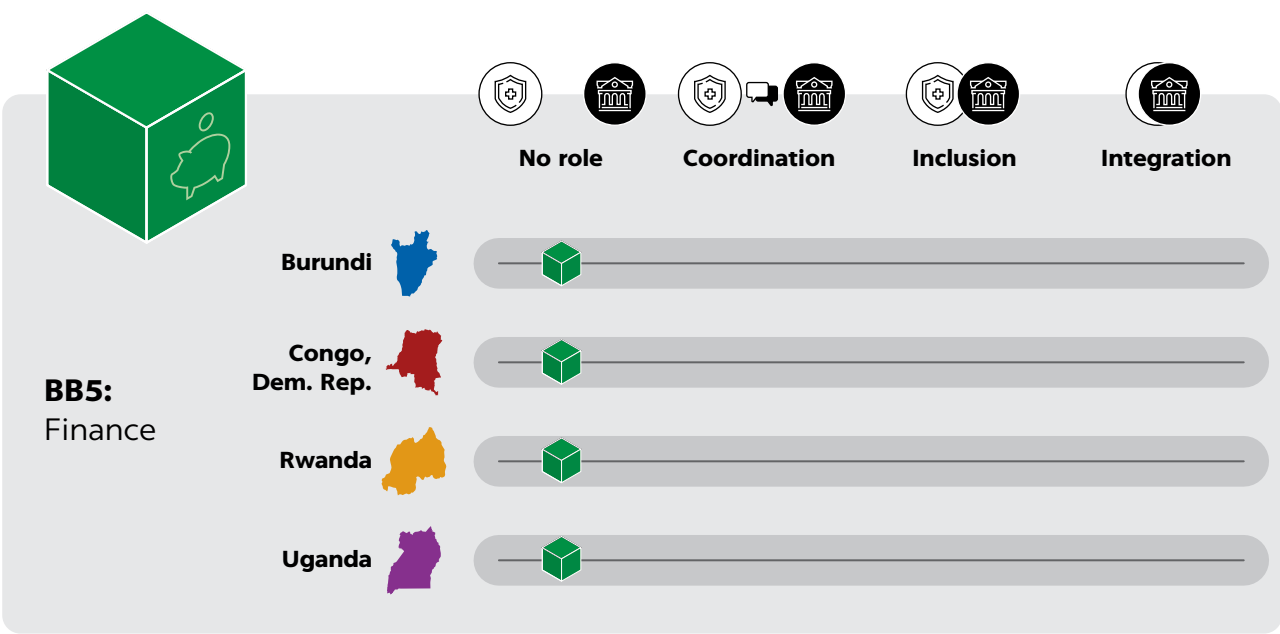
Window for Host Communities and Refugees strategy notes for Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo

Burundi’s Strategy Note (2018, updated in 2019 and 2021) commits to empowering refugees in camps, supporting host communities, harmonizing education curricula, and integrating refugee health services into national systems.

In its 2021 Strategy Note for IDA19 Window for Host Communities and Refugees financing, the

Democratic Republic of Congo reaffirmed plans to institutionalize refugee inclusion by integrating refugees into the emerging national social protection system—starting with the social registry under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Actions, and National Solidarity—and by strengthening sectoral capacities in health and education at all administrative levels.

FIGURE 4.16
Finance progress for refugees



Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: BB5 = building block 5.

All four GLR countries are in the early stages of financing social protection for refugee assistance and inclusion. Regional social protection spending remains low, except in Rwanda, and systems rely on external development partner funding. Refugee assistance is almost entirely externally financed, with no domestic funding for refugee social protection in any country. Figure 4.16 shows all GLR countries at the initial stage of the humanitarian–social protection continuum for building block 5 (finance) for refugees.

IDPs, returnees, and host communities

IDPs

International humanitarian support for protracted internal displacement typically fluctuates with conflict intensity and natural disasters.³⁰ In the Democratic Republic of Congo, humanitarian funding has averaged over \$1 billion annually since 2018, more than double the 2015–18 average of \$430 million. In Burundi, funding between 2018 and 2023 doubled to an average of \$177 million from \$63 million (2015–18) as returns peaked. With no significant internal displacement and modest refugee returns since 2015, Rwanda’s humanitarian assistance remained steady, averaging \$68 million.³¹

Financing for social protection in the GLR does not yet include regular provisions for IDPs. Low domestic resources, unclear institutional responsibilities for social protection, and ongoing international engagement sustain reliance on external financing for IDPs. The only large-scale internal displacement in the GLR is in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

GLR countries have designated disaster response and preparedness ministries that mobilize domestic resources and receive external support. Part of humanitarian assistance in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda responds to natural disasters (mostly floods and landslides), especially in areas already affected by IDPs and returnees, although these amounts cannot be disaggregated.

Returning populations (refugees and IDPs)

For returning populations, international agencies fund most return and reintegration, providing cash and in-kind support. Constrained fiscal space and ongoing humanitarian engagement reflect critical needs and legacy issues tied to unresolved refugee situations. External funding generally covers the initial reintegration phase with one-off support for immediate consumption. Reintegration—whether of IDPs or refugees—requires multisectoral support. In theory, returnees should transition into national programs after the return phase, but reintegration challenges for former IDPs, refugees, and host communities are not systematically reflected in national planning and budgets. Responsibilities span multiple ministries, complicating program design and resource allocation.

Returnees were previously excluded from Burundi’s Merankabandi despite meeting vulnerability criteria; measures are under way to rectify this. The program’s earlier position was that returnees—who receive a one-off UNHCR return package (\$150 per adult, \$75 per child, and food and nonfood items)—were already covered by similar interventions, leading the questionnaire to disqualify them. The upcoming phase will clarify

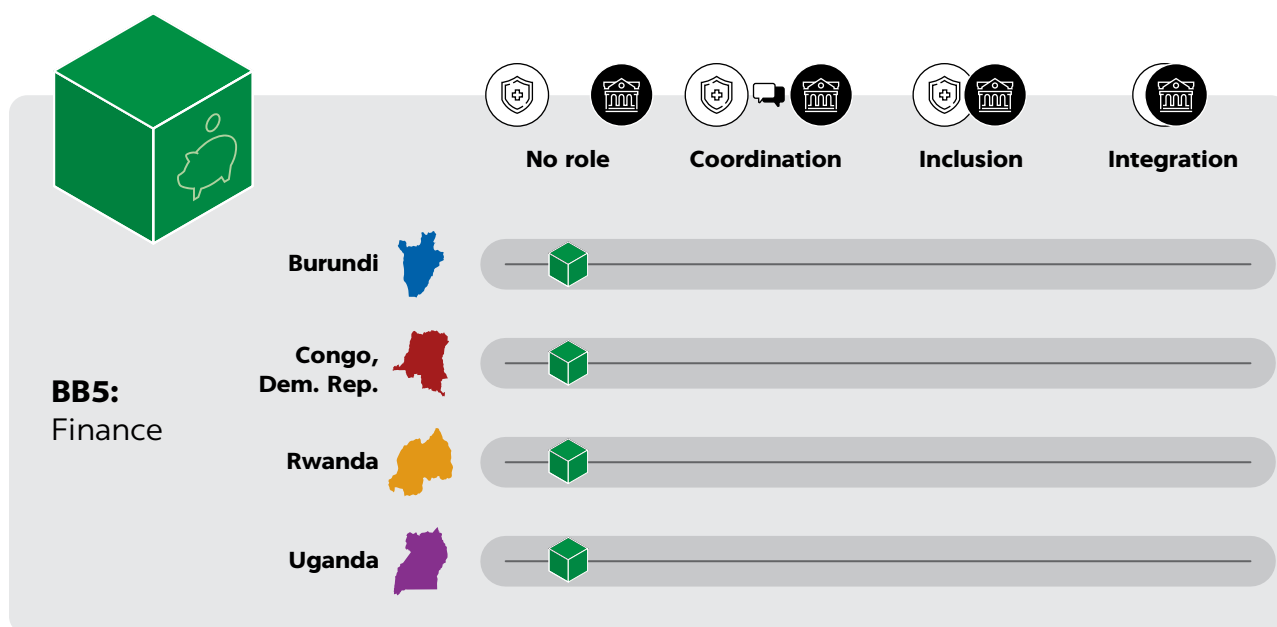
eligibility, particularly through community-based targeting. New messaging will emphasize that displacement creates long-term vulnerabilities—such as loss of property and livelihoods—justifying continued support. A new question has been added to the Merankabandi questionnaire to identify returnee status and ensure inclusion.

Host communities

Some programs include design features to support host communities. Uganda's DRDIP integrates social protection within a community development framework that also finances socioeconomic infrastructure, institutional capacity building, and service delivery. DRDIP allocates 70 percent of resources to host communities and 30 percent to refugees, recognizing that humanitarian organizations substantially assist refugees, whereas host communities often face greater disadvantages. Similarly, Merankabandi and STEP prioritize areas affected by displacement to ensure host communities receive support. In Rwanda, the WHR-financed SEIRHC (Jya Mbere) project (\$84.4 million) aimed to enhance access to basic services, economic opportunities, and environmental management in districts hosting refugees.

Including host communities in policy and program design has reduced government reluctance to use national (internal and external) development resources for citizens of another country and improved relations between displaced populations and local residents. World Bank-financed interventions in the GLR through the RSW and WHR have incorporated social protection components for both groups. Notable examples include Merankabandi in Burundi (\$20 million); STEP in the Democratic Republic of Congo (\$355 million); and three integrated community development projects in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda (\$165 million). Designed with equitable, participatory approaches, these projects offer replicable models for longer-term support by combining social protection with broader development efforts. Uganda's DRDIP, launched in 2016, exemplifies this by delivering income support, improving basic services, expanding economic opportunities, and promoting environmental management (Office of the Prime Minister n.d.).

In summary, all four GLR countries are in the early stages of financing social protection for their populations, of which three (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda) could include IDPs and returning displaced populations as citizens within national programs. Overall social protection spending remains low, except in Rwanda, and systems still rely extensively on external development partner funding. Figure 4.17 shows all GLR countries at the initial stage of the humanitarian–social protection continuum in financing for IDPs, returnees, and host communities.

FIGURE 4.17**Finance progress for IDPs, returnees, and host communities**

Source: Original figure for this publication.

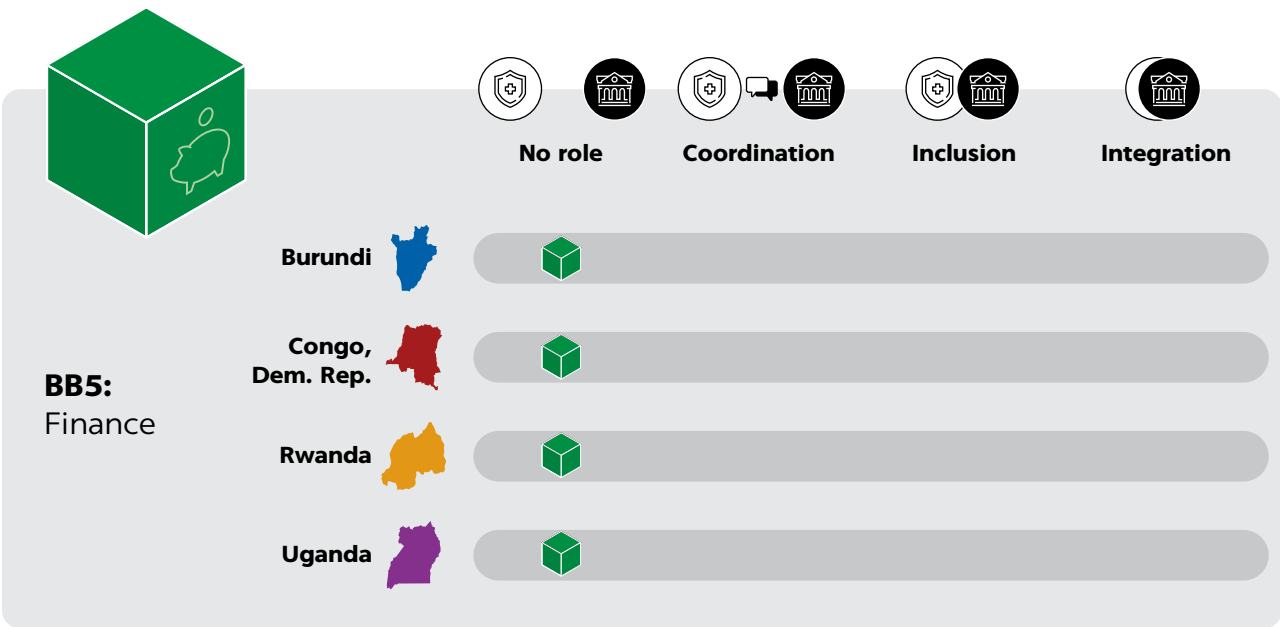
Note: BB5 = building block 5; IDPs = internally displaced persons.

All four GLR countries are in early stages of financing social protection for FDP assistance and inclusion and remain in the no-role phase for integrating predictable, long-term financing for displacement-affected populations into national systems. FDP assistance is almost entirely externally financed, with no domestic funding allocated for FDP social protection in any country. Figure 4.18 shows all GLR countries at the initial stage of the humanitarian–social protection continuum for building block 5 across all FDP types and host communities.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION SUPPORT TO FORCIBLY DISPLACED POPULATIONS AND HOST COMMUNITIES

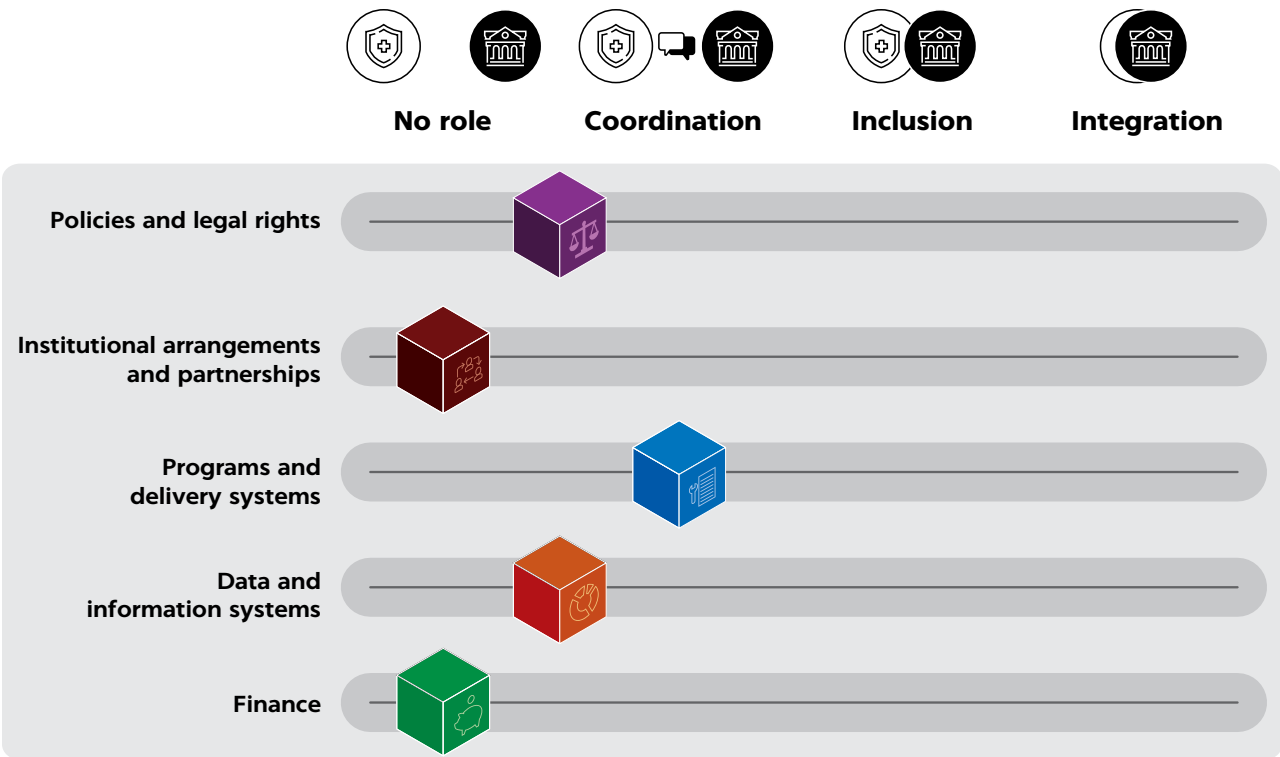
All GLR countries are at an early stage in developing social protection policy for refugees, IDPs, returning populations, and affected host communities. Policies and programs show openness to including refugees in national social protection (refer to figure 4.19), but noncitizen status remains a barrier. Although policy and legal frameworks grant certain rights and inclusion in national identification systems,³² implementation gaps persist, and many protections remain unrealized. Coverage of vulnerable groups—including IDPs, returning populations, and host communities—within national programs is limited by resource constraints. Institutional and operational arrangements for FDPs remain

FIGURE 4.18
BB5: Progress toward inclusive social protection systems for FDPs and host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: BB5 = building block 5; FDPs = forcibly displaced populations.

FIGURE 4.19
Collective progress in the Great Lakes Region toward the inclusion of FDPs in social protection systems and the provision of targeted support to host communities



Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: FDPs = forcibly displaced populations.

separate from national policy, planning, and budgeting and depend largely on external financing. Transitioning from external humanitarian assistance to national social protection for FDPs has potential but is currently impeded by political and financial constraints (refer to box 4.5 for a summary of collective progress).

Box 4.5

Summary of collective Great Lakes Region progress to support forcibly displaced populations and host communities

Building block 1: Policies and legal rights

All four Great Lakes Region (GLR) countries have developed social protection policies and legal frameworks over the past decade, largely with support from development partners. Although these frameworks reflect ambitious goals, including inclusive coverage and income security, their implementation remains limited because of fragmented institutional arrangements, inadequate staffing, and underfunding. Although internally displaced persons (IDPs), returning populations, and host communities are eligible for inclusion in national social protection programs as citizens, most policy frameworks lack specific measures for their participation. Refugees face persistent challenges in status determination, documentation, and access rights in practice. Legal and procedural barriers, weak enforcement, limited formal employment opportunities, and lack of land access constrain their self-reliance.

Building block 2: Institutional arrangements and partnerships

The GLR countries are at an early stage in developing social protection policies that address the needs of refugees, IDPs, returning populations, and affected host communities. Despite all GLR countries being party to tripartite agreements for refugee repatriation and reintegration, access to national social protection remains partial, particularly in protracted displacement settings such as the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Moreover, the GLR governments have established institutional arrangements for refugees that operate largely in parallel to national social protection systems. Responsibilities for providing assistance to IDPs, returnees, and host communities are fragmented, with occasional overlap with humanitarian actors. Coordination mechanisms are ad hoc and insufficient to ensure systematic integration or the development of tailored social protection responses for these population groups.

Building block 3: Programs and delivery systems

Across the region, social protection systems remain in the early stages of adapting to the needs of forcibly displaced populations (FDPs). Most social protection programs in the GLR are not explicitly designed with a forced displacement lens, and refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities are typically included only through vulnerability-based eligibility criteria. Although adaptive social protection (ASP) is gaining traction as a framework to improve responsiveness to shocks, including displacement, its operationalization remains uneven across the region.

Building block 4: Data and information systems

Data and information systems in the GLR are in a transitional phase, with social registries still in the early stages of development and varying levels of progress across countries. Across the region, data

continued

Box 4.5 Summary of collective Great Lakes Region progress to support forcibly displaced populations and host communities (*continued*)

collection and management for FDPs continue to rely predominantly on international agencies. Institutional silos, restrictive data-sharing policies, and the absence of robust national identification systems further constrain integration and collaboration between humanitarian and social protection actors.

Building block 5: Finance

Financing remains the weakest aspect of ASP in the GLR, exposing systemic gaps across both social protection and humanitarian assistance. Social protection spending is consistently low and heavily

reliant on external development partners, with no regular budgetary provisions for FDPs or their host communities. Currently, humanitarian assistance continues to provide the bulk of support to refugees, IDPs, and host populations in the region. However, this model is increasingly unsustainable because of rising global demands, competing crises, and declining donor commitments. Incentives across both sectors often do not align with long-term, sustainable solutions, particularly in contexts where humanitarian and development financing compete rather than converge.

NOTES

1. The Global Refugee Forum is held every four years to review progress toward the GCR objectives.
2. Only the Democratic Republic of Congo made a specific commitment to include refugees in its social protection programs.
3. The RSW (former) and WHR (current) support countries that host significant refugee populations to create medium- to long-term development opportunities for both the refugees and their host communities. To date, the Democratic Republic of Congo has accessed \$220 million under the IDA18 RSW and \$135 million under the IDA 18 and IDA 19 WHR. This was processed as additional funding (AF2 and AF3) to the Democratic Republic of Congo Eastern Recovery Project (P145196).
4. The Refugee Policy Review Framework is a systematic review of refugee policy and institutional environments that is undertaken in all countries eligible for the WHR. The World Bank has made a formal policy commitment that by the end of the IDA20 cycle in 2025, “at least 60 percent of the countries eligible for the WHR will have implemented significant policy reforms related to the WHR purposes, as identified through the Refugee Policy Review Framework” (IDA 2022, 116). The review, which is carried out jointly by UNHCR and the World Bank, aims to gauge progress on refugee policies and institutional environments since countries became eligible for the WHR, identify further reform opportunities and inform further WHR support, and shed light on the extent to which the WHR has helped shift policies and their implementation in WHR countries.
5. For Uganda, refer to National Planning Authority (2020); for Rwanda, refer to GCR (2026).
6. Background country reports for Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, based on data from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), <https://data.unhcr.org/> (accessed in the first months of 2024).
7. All GLR countries provide for freedom of movement and choice of residence in their domestic refugee legislation, although Burundi entered a reservation on this issue when it ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, in conformity with administrative requirements, formal camp-based refugees in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo require official permission from the local administering authorities to relocate or to travel outside for protracted periods. Permission is readily accessible to refugees and can be renewed but remains at the discretion of the administration responsible for the camps.

In Burundi, the authorities exercise close control over and occasionally suspend the issuance of exit permits from camps. In addition, the permits restrict refugee movements to the immediate areas within the municipalities where the camps are located. In Uganda and Rwanda, refugees are free to move or relocate within the country but forfeit access to humanitarian assistance if they choose to relocate permanently outside the camps.

8. Uganda has exempted refugees from paying fees to obtain a work permit.
9. As a principle of responsibility sharing, refugee hosting states expect the provision of external support for refugees as part of the GCR in exchange for the global public good of hosting refugees in their territory.
10. In May 2024, both a national policy and a strategy on social protection received Cabinet approval.
11. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines the term *refugee* and outlines refugees' rights and the international standards of treatment for their protection (UNHCR 1951).
12. In recognition of the extent of internal displacement but in deference to state sovereignty, in 1998, the UN General Assembly approved the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (OCHA 2004), prepared by the Secretary-General's Special Representative as a nonbinding framework.
13. The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (OCHA 2004) serve as an important international framework for protecting IDPs. Consisting of 30 principles, it addresses the protection and assistance needs of IDPs throughout displacement, return, resettlement, and reintegration. Although not legally binding, the principles emphasize that IDPs have the same rights and obligations as other citizens and aim to identify their specific needs and vulnerabilities.
14. The ICGLR (<https://icglr.org/>) is an intergovernmental body focused on promoting peace and sustainable development in the GLR of Africa.
15. IASC is the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system. Under the durable solutions of sustainable reintegration at the place of origin, sustainable local integration in areas of refuge, and sustainable integration in areas of resettlement, IASC proposes nine principles to guide the efforts of governments and their partners to meet the integration needs of IDPs.
16. The *Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement* builds on the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* and the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement's report, focusing on three key goals: achieving durable solutions for IDPs, preventing new displacement crises, and ensuring effective protection and assistance for those affected. To operationalize these goals, the UN has committed to developing institutional plans, enabling agencies to define their strategies and actions for prevention, response, and long-term solutions to internal displacement.
17. Burundi Stability Index, International Organization for Migration, https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/reports/BDI_Stability_index_EN_ROUND5_Final.pdf.
18. Refugee Status Determination is the legal or administrative process used to decide whether a person seeking international protection is a refugee according to international, regional, or national law. This process involves collecting information through interviews to assess whether the individual meets the criteria for refugee status, thereby providing formal recognition of their rights.
19. In Burundi, the national social protection policy includes pregnant women and children under five, children under 12 in poor households, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the national social protection policy covers various vulnerable groups but lacks targeted measures for communities affected by forced displacement or regions hosting refugees. Without a national social protection system, interventions remain limited. Social safety nets, mainly supported by international organizations, reach only a small portion of the population because of funding, accessibility, and infrastructure challenges. In Rwanda, the policy supports vulnerable groups such as poor households, orphans, people with disabilities, elderly people, female-headed households, survivors of genocide and conflict, and those with chronic illnesses, but it does not specifically address host communities or allocate resources for areas affected by displacement. In Uganda, the National Social Protection Policy 2015 and NDPIII guide social protection for vulnerable citizens but exclude local communities affected by displacement or returning refugees or IDPs. The policy follows a life cycle approach and sets six objectives, namely expanding coverage, improving services, strengthening frameworks, ensuring shock responsiveness, generating evidence, and linking social protection with livelihood services.

20. On April 27, 2023, a presidential decree dissolved the project's former implementation entity, the Social Funds of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Fonds Social de la République Démocratique du Congo), which had been the implementing agency since the project's inception in 2014. Consequently, the Ministry of Finance, through its Project Implementation Unit (PIU) (Cellule de Suivi des Projets et Programmes), has assumed responsibility for the implementation of STEP. The unit is staffed with consultants rather than civil servants.
21. NUSAF is a World Bank–supported safety net program targeting households in Northern and Eastern Uganda.
22. Data were reported by program authorities.
23. Refer to p. 54 of <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/6401d5624.pdf>.
24. Several countries—including Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Malawi, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and Zambia—invoked the cessation clause for Rwandese refugees who fled before December 31, 1998.
25. Refer to <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/building-the-evidence-on-forced-displacement> and <https://www.jointdatacenter.org>.
26. The Burundi Social Protection Fund was established in 2015 by Decree No. 1001/63 and revised in 2017 by Decree No. 100/145.
27. Refugee Data Finder, <https://www.unhcr.org>.
28. OCHA Financial Tracking Service, <https://fts.unocha.org>.
29. Data on the Democratic Republic of Congo social protection expenditure are from the East African Community Data Portal, <https://eac.opendataforafrica.org/vuvrage/annual-public-expenditure-by-functions-of-government-cogog-by-financial-year>; data on its humanitarian expenditure are from the OCHA Financial Tracking Service, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <https://fts.unocha.org>.
30. Humanitarian financing in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda 2015–23 is characterized by peaks during crises; in Burundi and Rwanda, the level of financing has been more even.
31. All data sourced from OCHA Financial Tracking Service 2015–24 and UNHCR Global Reports 2015–24.
32. National ID systems vary significantly across Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda, as does the degree of refugee inclusion in these systems. Uganda and Rwanda have well-established, technologically advanced, and mandatory biometric systems, whereas the Democratic Republic of Congo has faced historical challenges and relied on voter cards, although it is now attempting a digital ID rollout. In Uganda, refugees are registered in a stand-alone refugee ID system managed by OPM, with support from UNHCR. The system is not interoperable with the national ID system managed by the Ugandan National Identification and Registration Authority, but the latter does provide civil registration services to refugees and asylum seekers. Refugees in Rwanda are issued government-recognized refugee identification (ID) cards by the National Identification Agency. These cards are distinct from the national ID cards issued to citizens but are intended to confer similar access to services, freedom of movement, and economic opportunities. There is a category for refugees in the foundational ID system of Rwanda. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, refugee IDs are issued by the government (often in partnership with UNHCR) and are increasingly recognized for access to services, including banking and employment matching services. Burundi is also modernizing its system with new biometric IDs but is still largely reliant on paper-based IDs. Refugees in Burundi are primarily registered and issued identity documents by UNHCR, not by the national ID system, and these documents are recognized by the Burundi government for access to services and movement.

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5 Challenges and Opportunities for Social Protection Assistance to Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities

Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR) faces significant challenges in providing social protection to forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) and host communities, but emerging opportunities offer a foundation to strengthen and expand support.

CHALLENGES

Political economy challenges

Political economy challenges are rooted in governance dynamics, competing institutional interests, and perceptions of legitimacy, and they strongly shape policy design and implementation.

Political economy incentives fundamentally shape governments' willingness and capacity to include FDPs in national systems. In the GLR, decisions about expanding access to social protection are conditioned by long histories of conflict, contested state-citizen relations, and persistent perceptions of unfairness vis-à-vis impoverished host communities who often face similar or greater vulnerabilities. Concerns about long-term fiscal obligations—particularly in settings where national budgets are already under significant strain—further constrain political space for extending entitlements to nonnationals. These realities mean that inclusion strategies must be grounded in vulnerability-based approaches rather than status-based entitlements and framed as investments that reduce inequalities and strengthen risk management for hosting communities. Evidence from displacement-affected regions shows that reinforcing social protection delivery systems—such as registries, payments, and grievance mechanisms—generates tangible benefits for both hosts and displaced populations by improving service equity, reducing social tensions, and enhancing state legitimacy. Positioning inclusion through this risk management lens, rather than a rights- or status-based framing, is essential

for advancing feasible reforms, mobilizing sustained external financing, and building long-term solutions for social protection in fragility, conflict, and violence contexts.

A primary challenge is encouraging governments to prioritize social protection for forced displacement within national poverty reduction and socioeconomic development. This requires building a strong evidence base, communicating findings to justify prioritization in a fiscally constrained context, and engaging external stakeholders to support government-led efforts and an implementable plan.

Another challenge is prioritizing internally displaced persons (IDPs), returning populations, and host communities. IDPs are often viewed as transient, reducing political will for their long-term inclusion. Policy makers may regard displacement as a humanitarian issue suited to temporary relief rather than permanent, government-led programs.

Prioritizing refugees is even more difficult. As noncitizens, they face greater resistance to long-term inclusion and may not be seen as equally deserving of support, limiting resource allocation, inclusive policies, and access to services.

Including FDPs in national systems can trigger social tensions, especially where host communities are vulnerable and have limited access to services. Perceived competition for scarce resources can provoke resistance to extending services to displaced populations.

Displaced populations and their advocates are often excluded from national policy discussions and decision-making. Without participation mechanisms, their needs and rights may be absent from reforms and budget allocations.

Humanitarian organizations, although essential for relief, may have incentives to prolong displacement-related aid rather than support transitions to government-led systems. Reliance on crisis-linked funding can create resistance—intentional or structural—to transferring responsibilities or aligning with national systems, perpetuating parallel structures and hindering state ownership and capacity development. As a result, transitioning from humanitarian to development-oriented support may be delayed or deprioritized.

Institutional and administrative challenges

A key institutional challenge is expanding social protection's role in displacement affairs across the GLR. Humanitarian assistance currently substitutes for national systems, creating parallel structures for refugees and other displaced populations. Distinct institutions and delivery

practices—and the absence of formal coordination—reinforce separation, resulting in systems that operate largely independently.

Social protection systems are fragmented. Some countries treat social protection as part of a broader social sector that includes health and education. Multiple ministries and departments implement different aspects, complicating resource allocation and intensifying competition (IMF 2024). As a result, programming is fragmented and hampers a coherent approach (ILO 2022).

Institutional arrangements and capacity constraints hinder coordination on displacement. Limited resources, fragmented responsibilities, and ambiguous classification of FDPs and affected host communities within broader vulnerability categories weaken national systems' ability to address specific needs. Consequently, social protection ministries often lack the capacity to engage and coordinate effectively with development and humanitarian partners.

Weak administrative systems undermine delivery. Despite some progress, service capacity remains limited and frequently depends on external assistance. Beyond structural weaknesses, systems lack the adaptability needed for high mobility and displacement—particularly acute in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Security and logistics frequently impede access, disrupting service delivery. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, long distances, poor infrastructure, and escalating insecurity, rooted in prolonged instability, restrict support to remote and conflict-affected areas, limiting assistance to vulnerable populations, especially in zones affected by armed conflict or threatened by violence.

Data challenges

Inadequate data remain a major obstacle to planning and delivery. Tracking IDPs' movements is especially difficult because of political, security, and methodological constraints. Unlike refugees recorded at border crossings, IDPs often move outside formal oversight, making comprehensive data collection elusive. Ongoing conflicts cause temporary, secondary, or repeated movements that blur the concept of sustainable return. Modern technology (mobile phones) has improved data collection in insecure contexts and enabled tracking via cell towers. However, including FDPs in national or household surveys typically requires supplementary funding from international donors.

Funding challenges

Current global financing pressures sharply heighten the imperative to strengthen nationally led systems capable of managing displacement in a

sustainable manner. Humanitarian budgets are contracting and becoming increasingly volatile, and development finance is simultaneously under strain as countries confront multiple overlapping crises. This dual pressure reduces the predictability of cross-border assistance and undermines the sustainability of protracted humanitarian caseloads.

The international aid system faces a deepening crisis, with shrinking humanitarian and development funding that further strains an already overstretched system. Humanitarian assistance for refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities, although substantial, remains inconsistent and unreliable. By design, it prioritizes short-term relief over long-term solutions, leaving gaps in sustainable support and recovery.

A key challenge is mobilizing adequate, reliable domestic financing to widen coverage and strengthen administrative capacity. Social protection in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda remains heavily dependent on external support, with government spending low relative to international humanitarian assistance. Current financing mechanisms also do not systematically include refugees, IDPs, or host communities. An initial way forward is to emphasize distributional policies that allocate increased or supplementary development resources to areas most affected by forced displacement.

The absence of direct funding from most development partners to government social protection systems supporting FDPs limits capacity building and perpetuates no-role approaches. Donors and UN agencies often implement their own initiatives in coordination with authorities but without transferring resources to national programs. Although pragmatic in the short term, this hinders the development of a robust, integrated social protection system with a long-term vision that includes FDPs.

OPPORTUNITIES

Political economy opportunities

Aid agencies and development partners increasingly agree on shifting from more expensive, short-term humanitarian aid to long-term, development-oriented approaches led by national stakeholders in protracted displacement contexts. Stakeholders recognize that durable solutions and reduced reliance on short-term financing require sustained development investment and approaches that integrate and assimilate displaced populations where possible, especially when return is unlikely. This shift hinges on strong policy dialogue with governments and national ownership to prioritize, resource, and strengthen capacities and bodies to deliver effective social protection outcomes for citizens.

The successful implementation of the Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR) offers pointers for future policy, emphasizing support for host communities as well as refugees. Access to WHR financing should enable deeper policy dialogue on balancing development needs in areas affected by protracted displacement with appropriate integration and inclusion efforts for refugees, IDPs, and returnees. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and other contexts where these groups overlap territorially, WHR has adopted a nondiscriminatory approach, treating IDPs as local households where social protection interventions have been rolled out. Their inclusion and the integration of social protection components into community development projects demonstrate how this can be achieved.¹

Institutional and administrative responsibilities

The global expansion of social safety nets and interventions for displaced populations and other vulnerable groups—particularly under adaptive social protection and crisis prevention and response—creates collaboration opportunities. Beyond cash transfers, programs such as economic inclusion, food and nonfood distributions, productive asset building, and labor-intensive public works can be scaled. Key technical areas include common standards, data sharing, and coordinated beneficiary distribution. More important, stronger institutional arrangements for FDPs can emerge as ministries and agencies lead government-run targeting and responsiveness, enabling a transition from humanitarian aid to development-oriented approaches for vulnerable populations and host communities. This also opens opportunities to engage regional bodies (for example, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region) for more coherent regional approaches spanning humanitarian, development, peace, stabilization, resilience, and durable solutions for displaced populations.

Data and information-sharing opportunities

Enhanced data sharing between social protection and humanitarian actors can improve coordination and equip authorities with information for evidence-based decisions. Expanding social registries across the region provides a foundation for government-led systems that capture the socioeconomic profiles of vulnerable populations. Prioritizing inclusion of displaced populations in these registries—and systematic data exchange between humanitarian and social protection stakeholders—will build more responsive, inclusive support mechanisms. This requires assurances and protocols on data sharing, protection, privacy, and confidentiality, alongside dialogue and agreement on interoperability parameters between the sectors. There is also an opportunity to enhance national refugee commissions' capabilities and management information systems so integration with social registries is seamless. The result will be clearer

planning and programming of social protection support for protracted displacement-affected areas and host communities, enabling full integration of FDPs in national development programs.

Interoperability between refugee registration systems and government-led foundational identification (ID) systems is an essential interim step, but long-term inclusion requires issuance of nationally recognized digital ID credentials to refugees. Such credentials—anchored in a unique national identifier—enable equitable access to social protection programs, banking, financial services, mobile money, education, and employment opportunities while reducing parallel ID ecosystems that impede integration.

Funding opportunities

The ongoing changes to the international aid system bring uncertainty and reduce global resources, but they also create an opportunity to shift toward development-oriented approaches that strengthen national and local leadership, ownership, and capacity. Although some immediate impacts are well documented—such as reduced humanitarian assistance (food and nonfood) in new and protracted displacement (Chemam 2025; UNHCR 2025)—it is too early to judge longer-term implications, although the outlook is not positive. This financing challenge can spur governments to explore alternative ways to manage displaced populations and their impacts through deeper policy dialogue with external and regional partners, including assessing the costs of maintaining camps versus fully integrating populations into host communities. This underscores the need to prioritize investment in sustainable, nationally owned systems over short-term, parallel structures.

In the current financing scenario, there is a need for financing arrangements that combine domestic fiscal commitment with predictable, multiyear external development resources. Rather than suggesting that full inclusion should rely exclusively on domestic financing, the analysis promotes a layered financing model, where humanitarian resources continue to address acute and life-saving needs, and development financing supports long-term system strengthening, delivery system investments, and locally owned mechanisms in displacement-affected areas. This integrated approach reflects the financial realism required in fragility, violence, and conflict contexts and positions social protection as a scalable development platform that complements, rather than replaces, humanitarian action.

At the national level, integrating a deferred drawdown option into social protection projects can ensure immediate fund availability, offering flexibility and scalability to adapt to dynamic refugee situations. In protracted displacement contexts, a flexible, scalable social protection project could be prepared with predefined triggers and conditions for activation—for instance, a significant rise in refugee numbers, worsening

socioeconomic indicators in host communities, or a government or international emergency declaration. Clear guidelines and procedures could be established for fund access to ensure timely, efficient responses. Including a deferred drawdown option mechanism would reduce response delays and impacts on refugees and host communities while allowing rapid adjustment of social protection measures based on crisis severity.

NOTE

1. The Refugee Sub-Window and WHR have financed 25 projects in the GLR: six in Burundi, two in the Democratic Republic of Congo, three in Rwanda, and 14 in Uganda, to a total value of \$1.74 billion.

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6 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR) will likely continue to experience forced displacement driven by persistent structural and cyclical factors, including protracted conflicts, political instability, unresolved governance challenges, and competition over natural resources—particularly in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Intensifying climate shocks—floods, droughts, and environmental degradation—are also causing new and secondary displacements. Given fragile security dynamics and limited state capacity to prevent or respond to crises, large-scale displacement will remain a defining feature of the GLR for the foreseeable future.

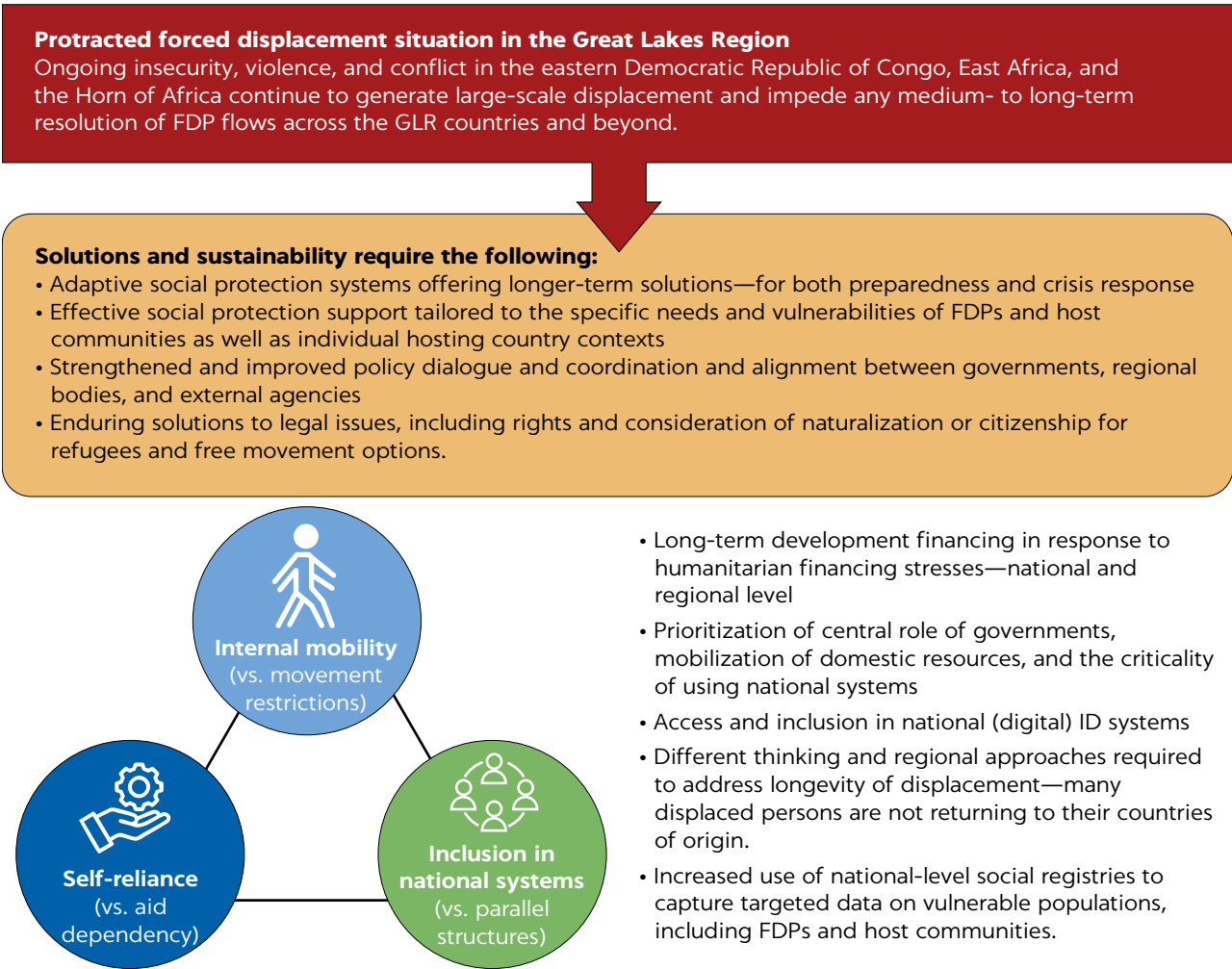
The benefits of social protection for poor and extremely vulnerable populations are well recognized globally. As the *World Development Report 2023* (World Bank 2023) notes, there is an urgent need to expand longer-term, sustainable support to refugees, especially for protracted caseloads, made more pressing by shifts in global funding for humanitarian (and some development) aid. Figure 6.1 illustrates the role and applicability of social protection systems in the GLR's protracted displacement context, highlighting country-level challenges and opportunities and entry points for medium- to long-term support that address mobility, enhance self-reliance, and include forcibly displaced populations (FDPs) in national systems. It also points to areas for policy dialogue to help governments strengthen planning and preparation for institutional, programmatic, data-sharing, and financial solutions in protracted refugee settings.

Regular, predictable social protection programs reduce poverty, stabilize and build resilience, and increase access to services for poor and shock-affected populations. They boost local economies by enhancing incomes and enable extremely vulnerable populations to accumulate productive assets and rebuild their lives. Although they go beyond humanitarian cash transfers during crises, their objectives dovetail with targeted assistance

and solutions for FDPs and host communities. Including displaced populations in social protection systems can increase efficiencies and promote social cohesion by reducing tensions between displaced and host communities and fostering acceptance and productive dynamics (Holmes and Lowe 2023).

Long-term solutions to protracted GLR displacement must prioritize government leadership and national systems. Although international humanitarian assistance remains crucial in high-risk, volatile contexts, maintaining parallel responses hinders government ownership and solutions. Stakeholders need active dialogue and workable agreements on how and when to transition to more sustainable funding.

FIGURE 6.1
Responses to FDP flows: Barriers to host countries using social protection systems as a primary development response



Source: Adapted from World Bank 2023 (p. 216).
Note: FDPs = forcibly displaced populations; GLR = Great Lakes Region; ID = identification.

Political, security, and fiscal realities in the GLR complicate transitions to government-led social protection. Volatility and state capacity will determine the scope and pace of change. In areas of ongoing conflict and insecurity, such as the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where state reach is limited, prospects for delivering government-led social protection to displaced populations are constrained. Given limited presence and overwhelming needs, humanitarian and development assistance should coordinate critical responses and strengthen local capacities where feasible.

In the GLR, the humanitarian-development nexus should be a joint, complementary approach and an integral component of development assistance. Traditionally viewed as sequential, it should operate together from the outset when state capacities are limited and needs are immense. Transitioning from humanitarian dependence to longer-term structural support will take time, and national and regional policy and operational contexts will determine the pace. Earlier social protection engagement in protracted displacement can lessen dependence on humanitarian support, reduce costs, and accelerate development responses.

The GLR's social protection systems are not sufficiently equipped or resourced to absorb FDPs and host communities. Reluctance to fully include FDPs—particularly refugees—in national development planning remains a key obstacle. The need to expand social protection coverage for refugees and address risks and vulnerabilities is clear. Expanding geographic coverage would improve preparedness and response to shocks but entails costs. Central governments' ability to deliver expanded social protection for citizens and refugees depends on mobilizing greater resources. Strengthening capacities to design and implement programs will take time, and overcoming institutional barriers requires significant political will and clear incentives.

In addition to expanding coverage and enhancing capacities, social protection will have to be tailored to specific FDPs' and host communities' needs and vulnerabilities. FDPs—particularly those experiencing multiple displacements—face unique challenges: severe asset losses, trauma, gender-based violence, discrimination, and extreme vulnerability. They typically lack land and social networks in host countries. Combined with restrictive host country policies on documentation and employability, these factors hinder access to economic empowerment and can trap people in poverty. Because these vulnerabilities differ from those of other poor people, broad poverty reduction efforts may be insufficient, necessitating specialized social protection interventions.

Economic empowerment of FDPs in the GLR's protracted displacement presents urgent challenges and significant opportunities. Traditional camp-based models reinforce dependency and limit economic access, whereas out-of-camp, settlement, or area-based approaches can foster

self-reliance, social cohesion, and resilience for FDPs and host communities. Integrated approaches that prioritize access to jobs, education, financial services, and markets can help transform FDPs from aid recipients into active contributors to local economies.¹

The World Bank's support to GLR host communities and refugees through the Refugee Sub-Window (RSW) and Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR) has advanced development financing for refugees. The policy architecture emphasizes support to host communities as well as refugees, highlighting to GLR governments the importance of assisting marginalized regions impacted by displacement. The 25 WHR-financed projects in the GLR have opened space for policy dialogue and advanced refugee inclusion across sectors and interventions. Inclusion of refugees in national social protection programs and social protection components in community development projects offers promising examples.²

From a methodological perspective, the key contribution of this analysis is the adaptation of the existing social protection diagnostic tools to the specific realities and challenges of FDPs. The tool allows for an increased ability to more deeply analyze the role of social protection systems for FDPs, and the application of the tool will be essential as displacement contexts diversify and operational needs grow. The present framework should be understood as a first step in a new analytical domain, providing a structured lens for examining how social protection systems can better respond to the needs of refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities. Future iterations will continue to refine and expand the tool—potentially adding additional filters, strengthening its operational modules, and adapting it for use in other regions—to ensure it remains a practical and globally relevant instrument for governments and development partners working toward inclusive, nationally led social protection systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in this book are organized and sequenced into short-, medium-, and long-term actions to align with system maturity and political feasibility. To enable social protection to serve as a transformative instrument in the GLR's protracted displacement context, the book presents a coherent set of actions across four core areas: (1) policy, (2) institutions, (3) data, and (4) financing. Although the four GLR countries face common structural constraints—limited coverage, administrative bottlenecks, and persistent humanitarian dependence—the uptake and pace of reforms will necessarily vary by national context. System readiness, political incentives, fiscal space, and degree of displacement exposure shape feasible entry points for each country. The proposed sequencing provides a pragmatic pathway that supports early “no-regrets” measures,

enables progressive system strengthening, and lays the foundation for more ambitious reforms as institutions mature and risks diminish.

Policy initiatives

Encourage governments to prioritize social protection in national poverty reduction and development strategies by building a strong evidence base for its effectiveness in promoting socioeconomic resilience.³ Pair this with strategic communication that frames social protection as a long-term development investment, especially in resource-constrained environments. Three key policy objectives are to (1) identify whether target populations require eligibility criteria different from those used for other individuals and households in national social protection, (2) demonstrate where national programs better address reintegration and social cohesion and inclusion than humanitarian actors, and (3) build the case for a reconfigured division of labor between national governments and development and humanitarian actors. Several strategies can enhance the evidence base in the GLR, varying by country context:

- *Strengthen partnerships (short term)*. Multistakeholder collaborations can leverage resources and expertise to generate more robust evidence.
- *Integrate policies (short term)*. Advocate for strengthening social protection in national development plans and budgets, ensuring that the needs of displaced populations and host communities are systematically considered.
- *Shape policy through research (medium term)*. Conduct studies on the vulnerabilities of displaced populations and host communities, including political economy and conflict analysis as well as the costs of encampment versus integrated settlements, within broader risk and poverty assessments.
- *Pilot targeted programs (long term)*. Implement social protection initiatives for FDPs and host communities to assess impact and cost-effectiveness relative to humanitarian aid. Successful pilots can inform policy and scale up efforts.

Maximize the impact of country-level and regional economic empowerment strategies and link them to individual country-level jobs platforms. Success requires moving beyond parallel humanitarian systems and aligning FDP support with national development strategies and labor market needs. The private sector can drive this process by creating pathways through employment, entrepreneurship, finance, and market access. Experiences from Uganda, Chad, and Kenya show that legal reforms, inclusive infrastructure investments, and targeted support for women and youth are critical to overcoming barriers such as limited documentation, restricted mobility, and low levels of education and financial inclusion. Options include the following:

- Expand and adapt national jobs platforms (short term) to deliberately target FDPs and host populations through quotas, tailored vocational training, and business development programs.
- Strengthen partnerships with the private sector and financial institutions (short and medium term) to develop products and opportunities for FDPs, including access to start-up capital and support for microentrepreneurship.
- Harmonize national policies (medium term) to recognize and accredit FDP skills and qualifications, facilitating integration into national labor markets and enabling transferable skills for cross-border mobility.
- Enhance data systems and collaborative monitoring to track FDP inclusion (long term), assess outcomes, and inform adaptive programming—ensuring labor platforms remain responsive to the needs and potential of displaced populations.

Enhance policy frameworks (medium term). External partner dialogue with GLR governments should support and review the flexibility of national social protection programs for FDPs. This would enable revisions to social protection policies to better assess and potentially integrate displacement-affected areas into national development, planning, and budgeting processes. Explicitly targeting displaced populations and host communities should reflect their unique vulnerabilities and the broader economic and demographic impacts on already impoverished regions.

Strengthen legal frameworks for FDP protection and integration into social protection. GLR governments should review and enhance legal frameworks to strengthen FDP policy implementation, align with international standards, and integrate FDPs into national social protection systems by

- *Building government capacity (short term)*. Provide technical assistance to draft, implement, and enforce legislation that protects displaced populations and promotes inclusion.
- *Enhancing legal support (short term)*. Expand access to legal aid and advocacy to help FDPs claim rights under national and international frameworks.
- *Harmonizing national policies with international frameworks (medium term)*. Align FDP-related laws with international standards where necessary.
- *Integrating FDPs into national legal frameworks (medium and long term)*. Amend social protection laws to explicitly include FDPs, ensuring entitlement to national programs.
- *Strengthening enforcement (medium and long term)*. Establish independent oversight bodies or dedicated units to monitor implementation and ensure accountability.

Ensure refugee access to national digital identification (ID) systems (short term). Enable access by ensuring interoperability between national registration and identification systems and refugee registration and ID systems. National ID numbers are prerequisites for inclusion in government social registries, social protection programs, and basic services.

Promote structured, increased dialogue and close collaboration between governments and external partners to align on social protection as a primary development response in protracted displacement contexts (short term). Cocreate implementable, government-led plans that reflect shared priorities and are supported by coordinated technical and financial assistance.

Promote leadership and ownership by social protection ministries in planning, design, and oversight of displacement emergency responses throughout the GLR displacement cycle (short term). Most social protection ministries have minimal involvement in humanitarian actions; strengthening their participation will support a more inclusive and comprehensive approach.

Conduct practical policy discussions and make decisions to narrow the gap between legal (de jure) provisions and actual (de facto) refugee rights and access to services (medium term). Although national laws in the four GLR countries align with international principles—legal recognition; freedom of movement; and access to work, education, and health care—refugees face practical barriers because of specific and arbitrary national restrictions and concerns (for example, freedom of movement vs. security considerations).

Strengthen evidence and knowledge to support social protection (medium term). Expand research and data on the benefits and efficiency of national programs. Insights into comparative vulnerabilities of FDPs and host communities can inform policy and intervention design.

Given new financing challenges, proactively encourage humanitarian actors to align programming with national social protection systems (medium term). Donors and agencies should incentivize collaboration and integration by tying funding to joint planning, shared data systems, and capacity building to strengthen government ownership and sustainability.

Where appropriate, establish mechanisms for greater participation of displaced populations and their representatives in national policy making (long term). Ensuring that their voices and experiences are heard can lead to more responsive and equitable social protection reforms and increase the legitimacy and accountability of government efforts.

A regional approach must become a central pillar of the GLR agenda (long term). Durable solutions will remain challenging without interoperable ID systems, harmonized social protection data protocols, joint return-planning

frameworks, and aligned labor mobility rules that reflect the fundamentally cross-border nature of displacement in the region. The GLR should adopt a regional compact that mandates

- Mutual recognition of foundational and functional IDs to ensure displaced persons retain access to services as they move;
- A harmonized regional social protection data architecture, including shared vulnerability metrics and cross-border data exchange protocols;
- A coordinated return and reintegration mechanism, with regional standards for information-sharing, social registries, and assistance packages; and
- A regional labor mobility framework enabling refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host community members to access jobs across borders in displacement-affected economic corridors.

To operationalize this, governments should elevate International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, East African Community, and African Union bodies into formal delivery platforms—not just dialogue forums. These institutions should be empowered to drive convergence of ID systems, align social protection eligibility rules for cross-border households, and coordinate financing strategies, including pooled instruments for displacement-affected areas.

Institutional and administrative and programs recommendations

A core short-term priority is to reinforce and adapt national social protection systems to enable the effective inclusion of FDPs (short term). Across the GLR, low coverage, limited delivery capacity, and chronic financing constraints restrict governments' ability to extend social protection support to poor and vulnerable citizens and refugees alike. Strengthening system foundations—expanding the geographic reach of core social protection programs and improving outreach, registration, targeting, payments, and grievance redress—remains essential for any sustainable inclusion strategy, with delivery capacity requiring targeted reinforcement in FDP-affected areas where administrative bottlenecks are most acute. In parallel, social protection systems must incorporate displacement-sensitive operational adjustments that allow FDPs to enter national programs without compromising overall system performance. This includes clarifying eligibility rules, adapting operational procedures, and ensuring that core delivery functions can process nonnationals efficiently and transparently. Progressive investments in these system adaptations will enable governments to expand coverage through national programs; reduce reliance on parallel humanitarian channels; and build scalable, government-led mechanisms capable of functioning in protracted displacement settings.

Promote a shared understanding of social protection among government actors to reduce fragmentation and support a coherent, inclusive approach (short term). Clearly define social protection roles relative to health and education, and align institutional mandates to avoid duplication.

Expand social protection coverage and services (short term). Current programs do not systematically cover FDPs and affected host communities. Expand these programs using a shared vulnerability assessment system to eliminate parallel systems. Harmonize assistance across interventions—from livelihood support to integrated cash transfers with productive inclusion—and refine program design, including ID, enrollment, registration, and payment processes.

Encourage early community participation in affected host areas (short term). Incorporate local engagement from the onset of displacement. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo's *Projet de Stabilisation de l'Est de la RDC pour la Paix* formed inclusive local development committees involving host communities and displaced populations in decision-making and income-generating activities (Minko et al. 2025). Similar approaches in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda link social protection with broader development efforts.

Design and implement adaptive delivery models for insecurity, poor infrastructure, and logistical challenges (short term). In contexts like the Democratic Republic of Congo, use mobile services, community outreach, and partnerships with local actors to reach remote or conflict-affected populations.

GLR governments should progressively transition from status-based eligibility (refugee or IDP labels) toward harmonized, poverty- and vulnerability-based targeting criteria that apply equally to refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities in protracted displacement settings (short and medium term). This shift ensures that individuals with comparable needs access national social protection programs on equal terms—reducing tensions, reinforcing fairness, and strengthening the legitimacy and equity of service delivery.

As displacement becomes long term, social protection inclusion strategies must prioritize vulnerability over legal status, anchoring support in objective, transparent measures of need rather than categorical entitlements. This evolution should be framed as a risk management investment for hosting countries, helping governments better manage the socioeconomic pressures generated by large, persistent displaced populations. A vulnerability-based approach enables

- Integrated service delivery (short and medium term), reducing fragmentation between humanitarian safety nets and national social protection programs;

- Equitable benefit allocation (short and medium term), ensuring that hosts and displaced households facing similar poverty and exposure to risks receive comparable assistance;
- Stronger social cohesion (short and medium term), by removing perceived preferential treatment linked solely to refugee or IDP status; and
- Scalable national systems (short and medium term), simplifying eligibility rules and aligning program design with existing social registries and social protection delivery mechanisms.

Establish a unified institutional framework for assisting FDPs and host communities by aligning mandates, policies, and operational responsibilities across relevant entities (medium term). Create or strengthen interministerial coordination, integrate displacement-related responsibilities into national social protection systems, and designate lead agencies with clear accountability. A harmonized framework will foster consistent, efficient, and inclusive responses; reduce overlaps and gaps; and ensure FDP and host community needs are reflected in national planning and resource allocation.

Strengthen coordination between social protection and humanitarian agencies (medium term). Establish mechanisms to align humanitarian aid with national programs to enable a gradual transition to government-led responses after crises subside.

Enhance the capacity of social protection agencies (medium term). Increase GLR institutions' ability to engage in and coordinate humanitarian planning and budgeting. Stronger collaboration with humanitarian partners will enable more effective, long-term responses to protracted internal displacement and return situations.

Leverage cross-sectoral links to improve inclusion (medium term). Strengthen connections between social protection and health, education, housing, and land access to provide comprehensive support for FDPs and host communities. A coordinated, multisectoral approach will bridge gaps and promote sustainable inclusion.

Promote decentralized social protection through local initiatives for host communities (medium term). Support community development projects that integrate social protection with local infrastructure, service delivery, and capacity building. Regional models include

- Burundi's Merankabandi, which evolved into a cash transfer initiative integrated with community-driven development efforts;
- The Democratic Republic of Congo's Projet de Stabilisation de l'Est de la RDC pour la Paix, combining social safety nets with economic inclusion and investments in schools and health centers; and

- Uganda's Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project, which supports host communities and displaced populations.

Data and information recommendations

Ensure systematic inclusion of FDPs in national data systems (short term). Integrate refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities into national censuses, household welfare surveys, and cost-benefit analyses of program options. The GLR precedents show that including these populations in national planning and resource allocation strengthens the case for transitioning from external aid to national social protection programs.

Enhance data management and interoperability for displaced populations (medium term). For populations managed by national humanitarian bodies and refugee commissions, improve data systems to align with national ID frameworks. Invest in modernization to enhance data collection, safeguards, and timely issuance of essential documentation. Establish data-sharing protocols between humanitarian agencies and government counterparts to ensure data protection and privacy.

Promote inclusion of FDPs and host communities in national social registries and establish systematic data-sharing protocols, including privacy rules and procedures, between humanitarian and social protection actors (medium term). This will enable more accurate needs identification, improve targeting, and support responsive and inclusive mechanisms.

Financing recommendations

Promote engagement with national governments to allocate more resources for social protection across the GLR (short term). Policy dialogue should prioritize strengthening state presence and state-people relations through effective, locally designed and implemented programs. Given future foreign aid prospects, emphasize local sustainability. Development partners, donors, and agencies should provide sustained, long-term support and encourage governments to prioritize funding, and better coordination among external providers improves efficiency. Governments should also seek supplementary financing for displacement-affected areas through national planning and budgeting and local implementation arrangements.

Use external financial support to enhance national ownership of social protection institutions (short term). A sustainable transition requires placing the government at the center of future programming. Donors and international agencies should (1) agree on a process to shift resources to governments, (2) build capacity of counterparts at the central and local levels, and (3) develop a communications strategy to accompany and validate reform. Donors could also offer grants or concessional financing that match government contributions to mobilize a social protection fund. Although national governments hold primary responsibility for crisis

response and preparedness, capacity varies across the GLR, with the Democratic Republic of Congo most in need of strengthening.

Support research on reallocating portions of humanitarian funding to strengthen national social protection systems for host communities and FDPs (medium term). Studies should assess how different forms of social protection affect target populations and host communities and evaluate the long-term cost-effectiveness and sustainability of a social protection-led approach. This could include impact evaluations comparing social safety nets, economic inclusion, productive asset building, and food and nonfood support in advancing integration, social cohesion and inclusion, and state-citizen relations.

This book addresses key regional and national challenges for FDPs and host communities in the GLR. The revised building block framework calls for a multifaceted approach to social protection that centers national leadership and ownership as the primary driver of humanitarian assistance and development strategies.

It advocates integrating FDPs into national systems to ensure sustainability, inclusivity, and integration, underpinned by improved data collection and information sharing to inform policy dialogue and program effectiveness. Across the GLR, investment in host communities, streamlined documentation, expanded social protection, and private sector engagement can unlock FDPs' economic potential and foster resilience and social cohesion, enabling displaced and host populations to rebuild their lives and contribute to socioeconomic development.

NOTES

1. Burundi faces significant challenges as both a country of origin and a host for FDPs, with over 630,000 people displaced as of early 2025. The government has increasingly shifted from a camp-based model—which limits autonomy and economic opportunity—to integrated, community-based approaches that emphasize access to social services, institutional development, sociocultural inclusion, and private sector integration. Despite progress in legal frameworks, such as the 2021 migration law granting refugees the right to work and move freely, practical barriers remain: only 10 percent of camp-based adults are engaged in income-generating activities, access to financial services is extremely limited, and women and camp residents face particular disadvantages. In terms of potential for future expansion of economic empowerment initiatives for FDPs, Burundi's way forward lies in out-of-camp, area-based solutions, which are more conducive to self-reliance (World Bank, "Strengthening the Economic Empowerment of Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities in Burundi," unpublished paper).
2. The RSW and WHR have financed 25 projects in the GLR: six in Burundi, two in the Democratic Republic of Congo, three in Rwanda, and 14 in Uganda, to a total value of \$1.74 billion.
3. For specific policy proposals for refugees, refer to Gabelle and Gallego-Ayala (2026).

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APPENDIX

Social Protection Programs in the Great Lakes Region

TABLE A.1 Services provided by social protection programs in the Great Lakes Region

TARGETING METHOD	BENEFICIARIES (% OF POPULATION)	KEY SERVICES
Merankabandi—Burundi (2025)		
Extremely poor households, including refugees and host communities		
1. Geographic (based on poverty, hazardous exposure, and climate change vulnerability maps)	<i>Cash transfers:</i> 53,114 HH (260,572 ppl; 1.9%), 7,852 ppl (6% ^a refugee population) are refugees, and 2,322 HH (11,611 ppl) are in host communities.	<i>Cash transfers:</i> Bimonthly transfers of \$18 over a duration of 30 months
2. PMT		<i>Access to jobs:</i> Boosts income-generating capacity of women and youth by supporting productive inclusion in rural areas and access to jobs in urban areas through training, coaching, savings groups, start-up capital, links to markets, and employment opportunities.
3. Community validation	<i>Access to jobs:</i> 4,602 HH (23,008 ppl; 0.16%); 467 HH (2,335 ppl) are in host communities. <i>Agricultural assets or services:</i> 12,148 HH (60,738 farmers; 0.43%)	
STEP—Democratic Republic of Congo (2025)		
Poor and vulnerable households, including host communities and refugees		
1. Geographic (poor and conflict-affected communities in the eastern provinces)	<i>Improved access to livelihoods:</i> TMI (unconditional cash transfers), 76,083 HH (403,242 ppl; 0.37% ^b) + 52,308 HH (277,232 ppl; 0.25%) (STEP Kinshasa); THIMO (LIPW) 39,552 HH (209,624 ppl; 0.19%)	<i>Social and economic infrastructure:</i> Strengthens community resilience by improving social and economic infrastructure, promoting inclusive participation, and enhancing local conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, with tailored support for vulnerable groups, including women and displaced persons.
2. Vulnerability assessment	<i>Asset distribution:</i> 8,128 HH (43,080 ppl; 0.04%) <i>Social and economic infrastructure:</i> 14,331 communities <i>Vulnerable communities reached:</i> 1,507 ^c communities benefiting	<i>Livelihoods and employment generation:</i> Creates both short-term jobs through LIPW and sustainable livelihoods by strengthening agricultural value chains, providing training, and supporting small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs to boost food security, incomes, and community stability. TMI component provides unconditional cash transfers, and THIMO provides short-term jobs.

continued

TABLE A.1 Services provided by social protection programs in the Great Lakes Region (continued)

TARGETING METHOD	BENEFICIARIES (% OF POPULATION)	KEY SERVICES
SAGE—Uganda (2025)		
80+ years with ID, not on other pensions		
Universal categorical (80+ years)	Cash transfers: 79,649 HH (358,420 ppl; 0.78% ^d)	Cash transfers: \$7 per month but receive a combined payment of \$14 every two months to reduce logistical challenges.
DRDIP—Uganda (2024)		
Refugees and poor host communities		
1. Geographic (three districts hosting refugees: Arua, Adjumani, and Isingiro)	Direct beneficiaries: 413,632 HH (1.86 million ppl; 4% ^d); 378,790 were refugees (21% ^e of refugee population).	Social and economic infrastructure: Expands access to socioeconomic infrastructure through community investments and strengthening the capacity of local authorities for decentralized service delivery.
2. Categorical		
3. Community validation	Livelihoods: 77,593 ppl Social and economic infrastructure: 674,540 HH (3,035,432 ppl; 6.6%) Sustainable environmental management: 5,110 ha of land, 22,294 HH (100,323 ppl; 0.22%) with access to improved energy sources	Livelihoods: Improves livelihoods and incomes through support for traditional and nontraditional livelihoods, skills training, market access, and capacity building of community-based organizations. Sustainable environmental management: Focuses on mitigating the environmental impacts of refugee inflows by promoting natural resource management through LIPW and access to efficient energy technologies.

continued

TABLE A.1 Services provided by social protection programs in the Great Lakes Region (continued)

TARGETING METHOD	BENEFICIARIES (% OF POPULATION)	KEY SERVICES
VUP—Rwanda (2023)		
Universal coverage: Extremely poor and vulnerable households		
1. Community-based targeting	<i>Direct support, expanded public works, and classic public works:</i> 491,234 HH (2,112,306 ppl; 16.17% ^f)	<i>Direct support:</i> Cash transfers; provided monthly cash transfers to the most vulnerable households; nutrition support.
2. PMT	<i>Nutrition-sensitive direct support:</i> 200,000 HH (860,000 ppl; 6.6%)	<i>Nutrition-sensitive direct support:</i> Provided health and cash transfers to extremely poor pregnant women, new mothers, and young children while promoting antenatal and postnatal care to reduce malnutrition risks. <i>Expanded public works:</i> Offered part-time, multiyear employment to moderately labor-constrained households to meet basic needs, boost productivity, diversify livelihoods, and support sustained graduation from extreme poverty. <i>Classic public works:</i> Offered short-term employment on community infrastructure projects to extremely poor households with labor capacity, helping to meet basic needs and support livelihoods while creating long-term community assets. <i>Asset transfers:</i> Provided livestock, agricultural inputs, and small-scale business equipment to extremely poor households that have participated in public works and have potential for sustainable livelihoods. <i>Skills development:</i> Provided technical and vocational training to members of extremely poor households. <i>Financial services:</i> Offered low-interest loans, financial literacy training, and business support.

Source: Original table for this publication.

Note: DRDIP = Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project; ha = hectares; HH = households; ID = identification; LIPW = labor-intensive public works; PMT = proxy means test; ppl = people; SAGE = Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment Program; STEP = Projet de Stabilisation de l'Est de la RDC pour la Paix; THIMO = travaux à haute intensité en main d'œuvre; TMI = transferts monétaires inconditionnels; VUP = Vision 2020 Umurenge Program.

a. The current number of refugees in Burundi is 128,000 (UNICEF 2025).

b. The population of the Democratic Republic of Congo at the end of 2024 was 109,076,000 (Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-population/>).

c. The vulnerable communities are distributed as follows: (1) 250 in Kasai Central, (2) 170 in Nord Ubangi, (3) 159 in South Kivu, (4) 150 in Ituri, (5) 98 in North Kivu, (6) 126 in Sud Ubangi, (7) 6 in Kongo Central, (8) 118 in Kinshasa, and (9) 430 under the first additional financing. Of these, 164 communities in Nord Ubangi, 152 in South Kivu, 143 in Ituri, 92 in North Kivu, and 117 in Sud Ubangi are hosting refugees.

d. The population of Uganda at the end of 2024 was 45,905,417 (UBOS 2024).

e. The population of refugees in Uganda at the end of 2024 was 1.8 million (Refugee Response Portal, United Nations Refugee Agency, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>).

f. The population of Rwanda at the end of 2022 was 13,065,837 (Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/rwanda-population/>).

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Africa's Great Lakes Region (GLR) faces some of the world's most complex and protracted forced displacement situations, driven by recurrent conflict and political instability. Refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, and host communities coexist amid repeated cycles of displacement and return, placing sustained pressure on national systems and local service delivery. As displacement becomes increasingly protracted and humanitarian financing declines, there is growing urgency to identify development-oriented responses that can deliver predictable, scalable, and sustainable support.

Social Protection Systems for Forcibly Displaced Populations and Host Communities in Africa's Great Lakes Region examines the role of national social protection systems as a core development response to forced displacement in the GLR, focusing on Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. It assesses how social protection systems currently support forcibly displaced populations and host communities, using a revised Adaptive Social Protection Framework that incorporates displacement-specific vulnerabilities. The framework extends beyond traditional system diagnostics to include policies and legal rights, institutional arrangements and partnerships, programs and delivery systems, data and information systems, and finance.

Drawing on country-level analysis and a regional perspective, the book finds that although GLR countries have made important policy and legal commitments, social protection systems remain at an early stage of adapting to displacement. Coverage of forcibly displaced populations is limited, institutional responsibilities are fragmented, data systems often operate in parallel to humanitarian structures, and financing for inclusion relies heavily on external support. Refugees, in particular, face persistent barriers related to legal status, documentation, employment, freedom of movement, and access to national systems.

Social Protection Systems argues that strengthening national social protection systems—while preserving humanitarian assistance for acute needs—offers a viable pathway to enhance resilience, reduce long-term dependency, and support social cohesion by linking displaced populations and host communities to skills, jobs, and economic opportunities in protracted displacement settings. It proposes sequenced, pragmatic recommendations to help governments and partners transition toward more inclusive, development-led responses, anchored in vulnerability-based approaches, strengthened data systems, and coordinated financing. The findings aim to inform policy dialogue and operational design in the GLR and other regions confronting prolonged forced displacement.



ISBN 978-1-4648-2344-2



SKU 212344