

Disability and displacement: The unmet rights of refugees in Technical Vocational Education and Training

David Monk, [0000-0002-9178-6576](#)

Roda Madziva, [0000-0003-2485-787X](#)

Robert Jjuuko, [0000-0002-1628-7080](#)

Aine Byoona Desire, 0009-0006-3529-3984

Salome Awidi, [0000-0002-0597-0001](#)

George Ladaah Openjuru, [0000-0001-6802-8729](#)

Abstract

This chapter examines the unmet education needs of refugees with disabilities in accessing Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Using research conducted in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, it focuses on education experiences of refugees in Uganda to highlight the significant lack of provision in policy and practice. This situation is particularly alarming in the context of limited education and training opportunities and low school attendance in primary school despite increasing TVET policy and development interventions. The chapter uses critical capabilities theory and lifelong to reinforce the dual need to address the compounded barriers faced by refugees with disabilities in TVET and the need to develop learning pathways and educational transitions that support their life goals. In this narrative, we argue that the refugee policy has inherent structural limitations that limit education transition. We propose practical policy adaptations that promote inclusion and lifelong learning.

Keywords

Inclusive TVET, learning pathways, refugees, critical capabilities

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education (United Nations, 2025) seeks to: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. This chapter is very concerned with the application and implications of this goal regarding vocational education and training opportunities for refugees with disabilities in Uganda. It pays attention particularly to Target 4.5: *to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations*. The chapter highlights the gap in opportunities for refugees with disabilities in vocational education and training. Using northern Uganda as a case study, we illustrate these disparities and advocate for greater recognition of refugees with disabilities rights. Our main goal is to explicitly demonstrate how policy and practice exclude people with disabilities from learning and livelihood opportunities. By highlighting these inadequacies, we aim to underscore the urgent need for development practitioners and education actors to take action. The chapter engages with discourses on the compounded and interconnected exclusions in education (and, by extension, in society) that refugees with disabilities experience in Africa (Awidi, 2021; Walton et al., 2019, 2023).

We begin by framing our perspective on how critical capabilities and lifelong learning approaches are useful because they emphasise systemic learning opportunities and individual aspirations (Van der Linden, 2016; Monk et al., 2024; Powell & McGrath, 2019). It is our hope that this will help the reader understand our position throughout the chapter. We then provide some context to refugees with disabilities education, drawing on Vocational Education and Training (VET) discourse on inclusivity and learning pathways (McGrath et al., 2023) before sharing insights from our research. We conclude with an appeal to policy makers and VET educationists to design learning programs and pathways from using a

critical capability and lifelong learning approach. Our hope is that in developing awareness we will generate some action.

Critical capabilities, Lifelong learning, and pathways

Critical capabilities theory (Dejaeghere, 2021; Powell & McGrath, 2019) emerged from the capabilities theory of Amartya Sen (1990) and Martha Nussbaum (1997). Capabilities theory is connected to human rights with a focus on capabilities as freedoms to perform functions in society, which could be construed as rights in that everyone should have certain capabilities. Emphasis is placed on the freedom to choose. For example, Nussbaum (1997) gives the example of fasting versus starving. Someone may have food, but they have the freedom to choose if they eat or not. Critical capabilities theory gives attention to systemic structures that reduce realisation of capabilities. It also argues that capabilities are deeply intertwined with the perceptions that one has of their particular capabilities, and thus it introduces aspirations and the capacity to aspire or dream as fundamental to understanding capabilities. The capability to dream depends on actual opportunities as well as on the perceived opportunities and the capacity to imagine oneself achieving one's dreams. Critical capabilities theory suggests that societal structures often diminish people's capacities to see themselves as successful in an endeavour, and as a result they may not exercise their freedom to participate. In the African context this requires also being able to make a contribution to society. In the context of this chapter then, a refugee with a disability needs to not only be able to attend a VET program, but they also need to envision their success in or through this program.

The PhD Thesis of the current UNESCO Co-Chair in Lifelong Learning Youth and Work, Josje Van Der Linden (2016), *Ensuring meaningful lifelong learning opportunities for Groups at Risk*, provides a nice framework to conceptualise success through the field of lifelong learning. Her thesis shows that lifelong learning takes us beyond mediocre conceptions of learning aimed at employability and developing human capital to focus first

and foremost on empowerment and opportunity. In this, she firmly ensconced her vision of meaningful learning in the conscientization tradition of Paulo Freire and the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum. In doing so, she calls attention to developing the capacity for self-efficacy, agency and hope in learners who are often told they are incapable both explicitly and implicitly through societal and educational experiences. Van der Linden demonstrates through numerous case studies of education in war impacted areas that building such capabilities requires working together with the learners to help them understand themselves, their power to control their lives and impact others, and challenge systems and structures that hold them back and oppress them. There is considerable research examining the connection between the psychosocial well-being of refugees with disabilities and their ability to contribute to the community, both in and out of school (Werner et al., 2021; Pearce, 2015; Crea et al., 2022, Jjuuko, 2021; Monk et. al, 2023) that suggests participative approaches to learning are essential for accomplishing this. What is essential here is the connections between school and society. For Van der Linden, and the field of lifelong learning, consideration of broader learning pathways are essential for people to understand that they can transition to another step in their life. When one can see that their learning leads to another step, another opportunity, then they find meaning in their learning, and in terms of critical capabilities is concerned, they are able to aspire and dream. Recent discourse in Vocational Education and Training, helps to deepen the importance of creating learning pathways which is helpful for this chapter.

Drawing on their research in Uganda and South Africa, the VET Africa 4.0 Collective (McGrath et al., 2023) calls for transforming vocational education and training in Africa. They develop a theory of a social skills ecosystem that moves beyond linear, social capital conceptions of learning to work to focus on strengthening learning ecosystems inclusive of youth life aspirations, social and economic contexts, and pathways for life-wide and lifelong

learning to support the transitions. Importantly for our considerations in this chapter, the social ecosystem model calls attention to the life aspirations of young people, as well as the diverse influences and inhibitors on young people's decisions to pursue learning opportunities and realise life dreams. In doing so, they focus on the relationships between policies, actors, and environment over time, emphasising uncertainty and vulnerability, particularly regarding transitions. They suggest a need to support differentiated learning pathways in spaces of vulnerability, build capacity for lifelong learning that accounts for the complex interrelations between work, learning and life, and support transitions throughout and across life amidst a fast-changing and unstable world. They argue for an “expanded view of transitions that considers interinstitutional boundary crossing... including the informal sector” (Ramsarup & Russon, 2023, p. 119). Within this context, there is an interplay between structure and agency that plays out in individuals' life events. Transition experiences are thus shaped by socio-historical, political, and economic contexts, as well as agency and perceived capacity to shape one's life (Jjuuko, 2021). This is an important break from traditional linear perspectives of transitions and pathways because it forces us to look into the cracks between the formal educational structures.

Context of education for refugees with disabilities in Uganda

According to the UNHCR (2025), Uganda hosts 1,858,060 refugees and asylum seekers, of which 109,000 men and 174,000 women have disabilities. Uganda has adopted a refugee policy of local integration as a durable solution (Uganda gazette, 2006; UNHCR, 2023). What this means is that refugees have the same rights to public services as Ugandans and they can move and work freely within the country if they choose. As a result, there is a significant urban population of refugees who have moved to seek out education and work opportunities. However, the majority of the refugee population remains in designated

resettlement areas which are in rural communities across the country (UNHCR, 2023). In terms of the provision for education, refugees fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Education and Sports.

While people with disabilities face many challenges with access to education, for refugees with disabilities, the challenges are compounded (Walton et. al 2020; Monk et al. 2022). Building on Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, Bacakova (2023) has shown that refugees invariably face intersectional discrimination when accessing education. They experience both the discriminatory practices directed at people with disabilities and refugees, as well as specific oppression arising from the interplay of these two characteristics. Bacakova uses Tomasevski's (2001) human rights based approach of 4A's to observe that inclusive educational transitions for refugees with disabilities are hindered by numerous intersecting factors, including accessibility (both physical and economic), acceptability (such as non-exclusion policies, the availability of both material and human resources, including trained staff, teaching methods and appropriate curriculum), and adaptability (the extent to which educational institutions are prepared to accommodate the complex needs of people with disabilities through reasonable accommodations or adjustments). To give some context for this chapter, a 2020 vulnerability and essential needs assessment of refugee populations in Uganda conducted by UNHCR, WFP and REACH (2020) found 91% of households in refugee settlements to be highly vulnerable economically (measured by income and food security), highly protection-specific vulnerable (measured by water, sanitation and hygiene, health, shelter, non-food items, education, energy), 81% faced both economic and protection-specific vulnerability. Within these there were overlapping dimensions of increased vulnerability in households with children who have disabilities, child headed households, and female headed households. The assessment demonstrates the complex

intersectional and compounded challenges faced by disabled refugees that education systems must take into account.

In our own DRIVE research (Monk et. al, 2022) we identified that refugees with disabilities (and especially girls) faced a broad number of compounding barriers that prevented them from accessing learning at the primary school level. Barriers such as poor roads, lack of gadgets, poor infrastructure, large class sizes and unprepared teachers were compounded by trauma (including caregivers and family members trauma), poverty (exacerbated by lack of livelihoods for family), school fees, and access to health facilities. Social exclusion was mutually reinforcing as refugees were excluded from social activities but also from foundational skills that limit their capacity to participate in society, which in turn led to social stigma and stereotypes (Monk et. al, 2023). We further found that policy structures in Uganda (which also apply to refugees) and NGO programs are focused on promoting pathways to livelihood development through short VET programs, which are, in many cases, not meeting the needs of disadvantaged children and youth due to their short duration and poor quality (Metelerkamp & Monk, 2023; Walton et al., 2024). Towards the end of the research, we began to observe in Uganda a general lack of pathway provisions for young people leaving primary school, with expectations for them to move into vocational education and training.

This learning context is problematic when thought of in terms of critical capabilities and lifelong learning. The absence of systemic provision for refugees with disabilities pathways is demoralising because it tacitly tells people that they do not matter in society. Their education journey appears to be oriented in ticking off boxes for human rights, rather than driven by a need for them to contribute to society. This in turn is compounded by a lack of inclusivity in VET programs.

Inclusivity in VET

Drawing on a comprehensive literature review of inclusivity in VET, McGrath et al. (2019) call attention to the remarkable gap in the literature related to the inclusion of people with disabilities in VET. McGrath et al. (2019) suggest that international discourse on inclusive education has largely evaded engagement in the VET field and vice versa. UNESCO documents related to TVET (i.e. UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020) or in education (i.e. International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021), and African Union TVET documents (i.e. AUC 2018 continental strategy) do not have specific reference to people with disability beyond basic and general rhetoric of including vulnerable people in learning. McGrath et al. (2019) suggest that this is based in historical contexts that have excluded TVET from broader educational discourse. They point out for example that the Salamanca statement has no mention of TVET. In Uganda, The Persons with Disabilities Act of 2020 mandates the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream education institutions with appropriate learning and accessibility supports. However, there is no specific mention of learning pathways or Vocational Education and Training in the act, nor is there mention of provision for students with disabilities in the Uganda BTVET policy 2019. Likewise, as Walton et al. (2024) highlight, there is no provision for refugees in either the persons with disabilities act or the BTVET policy. Here critical capabilities approach focus on structures could be useful in thinking about how policies could be better designed and implemented. In the next section, we turn to some stories that we have gathered from experiences in the VET sector.

Research context

Our concern and urgency about this growing and critical issue emerged from the Disabled Refugees Included and Visible in Education (DRIVE) research project. This study primarily examined the educational experiences of refugees with disabilities living in and out of

primary school in parts of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda. In this chapter we are referring to the case of Uganda where we held interviews and focus group discussions with 103 people including 43 refugee students with disabilities and their families both in and out of school, 14 of the participants were families from Ugandan communities. The participants were spread over three settlements in Northern Uganda and their environs, with the majority from one larger settlement. We worked with NGO partners and a disability parent's association in the field to identify translators and participants. We brought key stakeholders together with some of the participants in a regional forum in Northern Uganda on inclusive education, and used the research results and regional forum to develop a university bachelors program at a public university in the north in inclusive education. We also sought out impact funding to host a follow up workshop with education officials, teachers and directors of Vocational Training Institutions (VTIs) and NGO vocational programs to address the lack of inclusivity in VET. Based on the forum results, we have again received some funding to follow up with VTI's and to engage with caregivers. At the time of writing, we have not conducted this latter workshop, however we rely on the initial research and the outputs of the first workshop in this chapter. A full account of the research and ongoing activities, as well as resources for teachers is available in our DRIVE portfolio (Monk et. al., 2025). Funding for the research was provided by the British Academy, Education and Learning in Crises Programme. The principal investigator was Elizabeth Walton at the University of Nottingham. Roda Madziva (University of Nottingham), and David Monk (Gulu University) were the co-investigators in the Ugandan Case. They worked closely with an active advisory committee composed of University administrators, NGO leaders, students, and Ugandan education officials.

Insights from the field

The interviews we had with young people in and out of school highlight significant challenges and barriers faced by refugees with disabilities in accessing and benefiting from vocational education and training (VET). These challenges span multiple areas, including financial constraints, accessibility issues, and social stigmas. Stories of financial difficulties demonstrate the compounded challenges that impact access to learning. For example, one girl dropped out of primary school due to a lack of school fees. Her aunt was paying her school fees and pushed her to an apprenticeship in hairdressing, but even there, money was a concern, as her aunt had to pay someone to teach her. Despite receiving some money, posho, and beans from a food program in the settlement, it was not enough to support her and her family, so she was at home. We also found many issues related to physical accessibility. A participant noted that dormitories were not wheelchair accessible, requiring some to crawl. She also explained that toilets were often squat-type without supporting handrails, and not clean, posing difficulties for those with mobility issues who often had to crawl through the disgusting floors, because the doors were not wide enough for wheelchairs, or where there were no ramps or rails. Access to kitchens and water points was also problematic, with some having to go outside the school fence to fetch water, which was difficult for wheelchair users. Additionally, we were told of workshops or meetings held in hotels which often lacked lifts, preventing people with disabilities from attending. In terms of communication, some participants noted the absence of sign language interpreters, hindering the ability of deaf individuals to understand the training. Stigmatization by teachers and classmates was another issue reported. Some participants felt they were treated as slow learners and one participant gave the advice to trainers: *“You know those people who train the disabled should be friendly people. Sometimes they bring people without disabilities and they don’t know how to deal with people with disabilities which demoralize people with disabilities. So if there’s any kind of training they should bring people with disabilities so that it motivates others to work hard*

and be like their trainers. Some of the trainers have no disability and they talk rudely to those with disabilities and sometimes they abuse you which demoralizes you and makes someone give up.” Participants who had experienced war faced psychological challenges that required a more considerate and patient approach from instructors, which was often lacking. One participant was unable to complete a tailoring course because of several traumatic events and was unable to rejoin the course. Another core issue reported was a general lack of career guidance or support. Everyone we spoke to felt that they were thrown in and out of courses without a lot of consideration for their future. The stories here demonstrate a number of compounding barriers that are in the way of refugees with disabilities capability to be successful within the VET sector. Taken from a critical capabilities framework capacity to aspire in relation to perceived opportunities and developing self-efficacy, there is a grave danger emerging from these stories, which is the possibility that the participant in the course perceives that there was a real opportunity for success through the training, and in the event that they are not successful as a result of the training they blame themselves rather than the program. At an individual level this is devastating for the development of self-efficacy, and capacity to aspire.

Teachers and directors of training programs also were upfront in their unpreparedness for teaching people with disabilities. Several directors admitted that they had not thought about it in the past. Others had thought about it, but generally relied on their own provisions, and felt that they did not have resources and readiness to assist refugees with disabilities in vocational education and training adequately. Instructors and lecturers expressed that they felt unprepared to meet the various needs of this student body. The lack of specialised knowledge and abilities in inclusive pedagogy was one of the main issues brought to light, yet quite a few learners need it. Many practitioners said they knew "very little and needed more information" or "a bit about it but would like to know more" about basic inclusive pedagogies

like differential teaching and assessment, peer and collaborative learning, reasonable accommodations, and Universal Design for Learning to be able to make the learning environments more inclusive. This lack of training is a systemic issue that makes it more challenging to modify the curriculum and instructional strategies to accommodate different learning styles and skill levels, yet they are expected to deliver results.

The director of a large private vocational training school revealed several problems related to NGO sponsored students. The director explained that they often receive refugees for their training programs, but that the programs are too short and as a result expectations are too high for the students. This places unfair pressure on students who are already dealing with significant trauma and disruption of their lives and education. The director also elaborated that there is no screening for disabilities when they receive students in such programs. The director shared one story that demonstrates her personal screening process with the students they take on:

When I collected all the students... I asked them to write their names and I gave them papers and pens.... That was really something striking and I noticed that one girl was unable to write her name, she took longer time than everybody and that really caught my attention and I asked her do you have any problem and she said (my eyes are not good) and I told her can you show me what you have written and she had not written things that could be read.

She summarised in terms of curriculum, *“There is no real curriculum addressing the needs of these children who are living with disabilities... we are lacking in real terms what to do with people living with disabilities.”*

Our workshops with providers of vocational education and training programs reinforces the hidden systemic issues in VET that the critical capabilities approach is wary of and which need to be addressed. On a hopeful note, the workshop generated a significant concern related

to the situation. We co created an agenda of action items, most of which rely on finding funding for training and training materials, however it was also clear that at least those in the workshops took back to their institutions a clear idea of a problem and a heart to address it.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to highlight the gap in opportunities for refugees with disabilities in vocational education and training. Using Uganda as a case study and drawing insights from our research, we have sought to illustrate the complex and interconnected obstacles faced by refugee students with disabilities, while also suggesting practical ways to address these exclusions as a step towards creating more inclusive opportunities. This chapter has underscored the critical importance of lifelong learning and vocational education and training (VET) as vital avenues for refugees with disabilities to secure sustainable livelihoods and participate fully in society. However, our examination of the situation in northern Uganda has starkly illustrated the profound gaps in the provision of meaningful transitions and pathways in both learning and livelihood opportunities for this particularly vulnerable group. The absence of clear learning pathways from primary school into appropriate VET programs, coupled with the unpreparedness of training institutions and the lack of tailored support, leaves refugees with disabilities firmly lodged in the "cracks" between the formal educational structures.

Drawing on Bacakova's application of intersectionality, we have seen how refugees with disabilities face compounded disadvantages, experiencing discrimination based both on their refugee status and their disability. This reality stands in stark contrast to the principles underpinning United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the rights enshrined in international law, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Applying the spirit of Tomasevski's 4As, we find significant deficits across the board.

Availability of inclusive VET is limited, accessibility is hindered by physical, economic, and communicative barriers, acceptability is undermined by stigma and a lack of appropriately trained teachers and relevant curricula, and adaptability is lacking in educational institutions that are ill-equipped to provide reasonable accommodations and adjustments.

Despite these formidable barriers and the clear absence of adequate support and the upholding of their rights, the voices of the refugees with disabilities in our research reveal a strong determination to pursue learning and build successful lives. Their aspirations and their active engagement with thoughts about their future pathways demonstrate an inherent agency that persists in the face of systemic exclusion. It is therefore incumbent upon development practitioners and education policymakers to recognise the urgent need for transformative action. A critical capabilities approach should be a starting point for the development of learning systems and programs. Addressing the identified inadequacies and developing inclusive policies and practices within VET is not merely a matter of equitable access; it is a fundamental obligation to ensure that the rights and aspirations of refugees with disabilities are finally met, enabling them to participate fully and meaningfully in both learning and livelihood opportunities within a lifelong learning framework.

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