

# GRF PROGRESS REVIEW 2025 REPORT

Linked Side Event Summary  
**Beyond Refugee Camps: Advancing Freedom of Movement  
as a Foundation for Refugee  
Self-Reliance**

Date: 16 December 2025

Duration: 1 hour 45 minutes

Location: Geneva (Hybrid – In-person and Online)

**Organized by:**

Refugee Led Organization Network (RELON) Uganda

Oxfam

UNHCR

Woord en Daad

**Prepared by:**

RELON Uganda



## 1. Introduction and Rationale

The discussion brought together representatives from refugee-led organizations, UN agencies, international NGOs, faith-based organizations, and government-adjacent institutions, including RELON Uganda, Oxfam, UNHCR, Woord en Daad, YARID, TCRS, Refugee Self Reliance Initiative, AGHI, Ethio Friends Foundation, Lutheran World Federation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and other regional and international stakeholders.

The side event on **Freedom of Movement** was convened to examine a central proposition that emerged repeatedly throughout the discussion: **refugees cannot achieve meaningful self-reliance unless they are able to move, work, and study in conditions comparable to those of host community members.**

While global, regional, and national policy frameworks increasingly emphasize refugee self-reliance, participants stressed that these objectives remain unattainable where refugees' mobility is restricted, documentation is inaccessible, or rights exist only on paper. The event deliberately centered refugee-led perspectives to ground policy debates in lived experience and to move beyond abstract commitments toward practical, implementable solutions.

RELON Uganda opened the session by framing freedom of movement not as a peripheral protection issue, but as a **structural enabler** of dignity, opportunity, and autonomy. The discussion underscored that self-reliance strategies that ignore mobility, access to work, and access to education risk becoming rhetorical rather than transformative.

## 2. Framing by RELON Uganda: Linking Mobility and Self-Reliance

In the opening remarks, RELON Uganda emphasized that freedom of movement is inseparable from self-reliance. Refugees who cannot move freely—within a country or across borders—are structurally prevented from accessing education, employment, markets, networks, and services that underpin independence and social contribution.

Speakers noted that while some host countries, such as Uganda, are often cited as progressive, closer examination reveals persistent gaps between policy intent and everyday practice. Even where refugees are legally allowed to work or move, barriers related to documentation, employer practices, centralized systems, and regulatory ambiguity continue to undermine real access.





The session was therefore framed around a core question: **How can self-reliance be realized if refugees are denied the same functional freedoms that enable host communities to pursue education, employment, and livelihoods?**

### 3. Key Themes and Insights

#### 3.1 Freedom of Movement as a Precondition for Dignity and Agency

Across interventions, speakers stressed that freedom of movement is first and foremost a matter of **human dignity and agency**. Restrictions on movement were described as producing psychological distress, dependency, and demotivation, particularly when refugees are confined to camps or specific geographic areas for prolonged periods.

Participants emphasized that movement enables refugees to make choices—where to live, where to study, where to work—and that without such choices, self-reliance remains unattainable regardless of skills or motivation.

#### 3.2 Legal Identity and Documentation: The Gateway to Rights

A recurring theme was the critical role of **legal identity, registration, and documentation**. Without recognized IDs and travel documents, refugees face compounded exclusion from services, education, employment, and mobility.





Speakers highlighted situations in which registration suspensions, delayed issuance of IDs, or centralized bureaucratic processes effectively immobilize refugees. In this context, documentation was described not as an administrative formality, but as a **gateway right**—one that enables access to all other rights.

### 3.3 Travel Documents and Unequal Mobility Across Contexts

Uganda's transition to machine-readable Convention Travel Documents was presented as an important positive example, enabling refugees to travel with greater confidence and reduced discrimination at borders. However, stark contrasts were drawn with other contexts, including Ethiopia and Tanzania, where refugees face handwritten documents, restrictive conditions, or an absence of travel documentation altogether.

Participants shared concrete examples of refugees losing scholarships, professional opportunities, and advocacy spaces simply because they lacked the documents required to travel. These cases illustrated how mobility restrictions directly undermine investments in education, skills development, and leadership.



### 3.4 Access to Education and Employment: Rights Versus Reality

The discussion strongly emphasized that **the right to work and study is meaningless without the freedom to move**. Refugees may be legally permitted to work yet excluded in practice when employers require work permits that refugees cannot realistically obtain. Similarly, access to higher education is constrained when travel documents are unavailable or delayed.

Speakers argued that host communities can move freely to pursue jobs, education, and training, while refugees—despite having similar qualifications—are often immobilized by policy and administrative barriers. This structural inequality undermines both refugee self-reliance and host community development.



### 3.5 Refugee-Led Organizations and the Right of Association

Participants highlighted growing challenges facing refugee-led organizations, particularly restrictions affecting their legal registration and recognition as local actors. Reclassification of RLOs as regional or international organizations was noted to have serious implications for funding access, partnership eligibility, and sustainability.

Speakers stressed that refugee-led organizations are often the closest and most trusted actors within refugee communities and play a vital role in service delivery, coordination, and accountability. Limiting their legal space ultimately weakens self-reliance efforts.



### 3.6 Regional Perspectives and the Need for Harmonization

Contributions from Ethiopia and Tanzania illustrated the uneven application of freedom of movement across the region. While Ethiopia has made progress through inclusive national ID systems, mobility restrictions remain. In Tanzania, stalled registration processes and limited documentation continue to severely constrain refugee movement and livelihoods.

Participants agreed that freedom of movement must be advanced as a **regional agenda**, building on existing frameworks but moving decisively from policy commitments to harmonized practice.





## 4. Roles of Key Stakeholders

The discussion underscored that advancing freedom of movement requires coordinated action:

- **Governments** must translate policy commitments into accessible, decentralized systems.
- **UN agencies**, including UNHCR, play a critical role in supporting documentation, protection, and policy dialogue.
- **Donors** were urged to invest in registration systems, documentation infrastructure, and refugee-led organizations.
- **Refugee-led organizations** must be recognized as partners with expertise, data, and legitimacy—not merely as beneficiaries.

## 5. Key Recommendations

Participants collectively proposed the following actions:

1. Decentralize ID and travel document issuance to reduce cost and access barriers.
2. Harmonize refugee mobility frameworks across East Africa.
3. Link travel documents to concrete opportunities in education, employment, and skills mobility.
4. Clarify and reform work authorization requirements to remove de facto exclusion.
5. Legally recognize refugee-led organizations as local actors.
6. Invest in refugee-led data generation for evidence-based advocacy.
7. Sustain multi-stakeholder engagement beyond one-off convenings.

## 6. Conclusion and Way Forward

The side event concluded with a shared recognition that **self-reliance cannot exist in the absence of freedom of movement, access to work, and access to education**. Refugees cannot be expected to become self-reliant while being denied the same functional freedoms enjoyed by host communities.

RELON Uganda and its partners emphasized the need to ensure that this dialogue translates into sustained advocacy, regional coordination, and practical reforms. The event marked not an endpoint, but a foundation for continued collective action to ensure that freedom of movement becomes a lived reality rather than a conditional promise.

## 7. Translating Policy Commitments into Practice Gap Matrix





To clearly illustrate the gap between **policy commitments** and **everyday realities** identified throughout the discussion. This section consolidates the report’s core finding that while policy frameworks increasingly recognize refugee rights, gaps in implementation continue to undermine freedom of movement, access to work, and access to education. It reinforces the need to move from commitments and pledges to practical, coordinated, and measurable action.

Policy Commitment	Practical Reality Observed	Impact on Refugees
<b>Freedom of movement</b>	Centralized and delayed documentation	Missed jobs, scholarships, advocacy opportunities
<b>Right to work</b>	Work permit requirements not accessible	De facto exclusion from labor markets
<b>Access to education</b>	Lack of travel documents	Inability to take up higher education opportunities
<b>Recognition of RLOs</b>	Legal and regulatory barriers	Reduced funding access and sustainability

*This matrix operationalizes insights from Sections 3 and 4 and supports the recommendations in Section 5.*

**Prepared by:**

RELON Uganda

On behalf of the organizers: RELON Uganda, Oxfam, UNHCR, and Woord en Daad

