



Sustainability Challenges in Refugee Projects

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Abstract

Despite substantial investments in refugee-focused interventions by governments, NGOs, and international partners in Rwanda, many projects struggle to remain viable beyond the initial donor support phase. Rwanda hosts over 135,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. While the country has implemented progressive policies emphasizing self-reliance, socio-economic inclusion, and access to national systems, sustaining refugee-focused development interventions remains a persistent challenge. This study examines the factors influencing the long-term sustainability of three refugee-focused initiatives in Rwanda: the Misizi Marshland Project, the Mushishito Agricultural Initiative, and Refugee Entrepreneurship Programs. Using a qualitative multi-case study approach, data were collected through key informant interviews, document analysis, and field observations. A five-dimensional analytical framework community ownership, financial viability, capacity development, adaptive monitoring, and institutional integration—guided thematic content analysis. Findings indicate that participatory governance, diversified financing, structured capacity transfer, and alignment with national policies significantly enhance project sustainability. Entrepreneurship programs demonstrated stronger financial resilience, while agricultural initiatives fostered social cohesion but remained vulnerable to donor dependency. The study concludes that embedding sustainability from project design, integrating interventions into local institutions and markets, and promoting community ownership are critical to ensuring lasting social and economic benefits for refugees and host communities. These insights provide practical guidance for policymakers, development partners, and practitioners seeking to strengthen the resilience and impact of humanitarian-development interventions.

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1. Introduction

Rwanda currently hosts more than 135,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi (UNHCR, 2024). Despite its small geographic size and limited natural resources, the country has gained international recognition for its progressive refugee integration framework, which emphasizes self-reliance, socio-economic inclusion, and access to national systems rather than long-term encampment dependency. Refugees are permitted to work, move freely, access education and health services, and engage in entrepreneurship policies that align humanitarian response with national development priorities and contribute to both refugee welfare and local economic growth.

The Government of Rwanda has adopted a forward-looking approach that integrates refugee programming into broader national strategies, in collaboration with international partners and development agencies. This model shifts away from traditional, aid-based assistance toward resilience-building and economic participation. Consequently, significant investments have been made in sectors such as agriculture, vocational training, microfinance, infrastructure development, and small enterprise support. These interventions aim not only to improve refugee livelihoods but also to strengthen social cohesion between refugee and host communities.

However, despite these efforts and substantial donor support, many humanitarian-development interventions face challenges in sustaining their impact beyond initial funding cycles. While projects often achieve short-term outputs such as increased agricultural yields, improved school enrollment, or expanded micro-enterprises, their long-term continuity frequently relies on external financial and technical support. When donor funding declines or project timelines end, interventions may stagnate, experience reduced operational capacity, or even collapse. This raises important questions about institutional ownership, financial resilience, capacity transfer, and integration with local systems.

Sustainability, therefore, remains a persistent challenge in humanitarian-development programming. True sustainability extends beyond immediate project outputs to encompass financial independence, local institutional strengthening, community ownership, and alignment with national economic and social systems. In Rwanda, where refugee integration is framed as both a humanitarian and development opportunity, understanding the determinants of project sustainability is crucial. Without durable structures that persist beyond donor timelines, even well-conceived initiatives risk being temporary solutions.

This paper examines the sustainability of refugee-focused development interventions in Rwanda. It explores how integration models promote long-term economic resilience, identifies structural and contextual constraints that undermine continuity, and evaluates the roles of government, international agencies, and private sector partners in sustaining outcomes. By combining theoretical insights with empirical evidence from case studies, the study seeks to answer the central question: Why do promising, well-funded refugee-related projects fail to sustain themselves beyond the initial support phase? Addressing this question is critical for ensuring that refugee inclusion becomes a lasting driver of inclusive growth rather than a cycle of externally financed interventions.

1.1. Problem Statement

Despite Rwanda's internationally acclaimed commitment to refugee inclusion, signified by policies that grant freedom of movement, equal access to services and the right to work, the country's refugee-focused development projects still falter once initial donor grants expire. Rwanda currently shelters roughly 135 000 refugees, most of whom fled protracted conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. Yet UNHCR financing has met barely a third of its annual requirements since 2023, forcing deep cuts in food, health-care and education subsidies and leaving many refugee households contemplating return to unsafe homelands (AP, 2020). Parallel multilateral initiatives—such as the World Bank's 2025 "Jya Mbere II" program that earmarks US \$66.7 million

for socio-economic inclusion—underscore both the scale of external spending and the conviction that market-based integration can produce durable livelihoods (FMV, 2025). Yet a growing body of empirical evidence, including the collapse or stagnation of the Misizi and Mushishito marshland cooperatives once agricultural input subsidies were withdrawn, reveals a structural sustainability gap: projects celebrated as models of resilience during the grant phase struggle to finance operations, transfer technical competencies, or embed governance mechanisms capable of weathering market or climatic shocks.

This paradox exposes a deeper philosophical and analytical concern. Human-centered development presumes that refugees possess intrinsic dignity, latent capabilities and moral claims to justice; however, programs conceived within short donor cycles frequently reproduce dependency by privileging external capital over endogenous resource mobilization and by treating beneficiaries as labor inputs, not as co-owners of economic assets. The fragility of project outcomes therefore reflects not simply budget constraints but an epistemic misalignment between the humanitarian ethos of solidarity and the political-economy logic of temporary relief. Without intentional mechanisms for diversified revenue generation, iterative capacity transfer, adaptive monitoring and full institutional integration into Rwanda's cooperative and local-government structures, well-funded interventions risk becoming cyclical humanitarian expenditures rather than foundations for genuine socio-economic transformation.

Accordingly, this study confronts the central problem: Why do refugee-focused development projects in Rwanda, despite substantial external investment and a progressive integration framework, fail to achieve self-sustaining financial, institutional and social resilience once donor support recedes? Addressing this question is imperative for scholars and practitioners seeking to reconcile the moral imperative of protecting displaced persons with the pragmatic goal of fostering durable, locally-owned development pathways.

1. 2. Research Questions

1. How does community ownership influence long-term sustainability?
2. To what extent do financial models affect post-donor viability?
3. How does capacity transfer shape institutional continuity?
4. What role does contextual and policy integration plays in project resilience?

This study seeks to answer these questions through a structured comparative analysis of three refugee-focused initiatives in Rwanda.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1. Sustainability in Humanitarian Contexts

Sustainability in development interventions has been widely examined through participatory development theory (Chambers, 1997), capacity development frameworks (Morgan, 2006), and resilience-based approaches (Bennett et al., 2018). Betts and Collier (2017) argue that refugee policy must shift from relief dependence toward economic inclusion and market integration.

However, empirical studies show persistent structural weaknesses including donor dependency, weak institutional transfer, and limited adaptive governance (Omata, 2017).

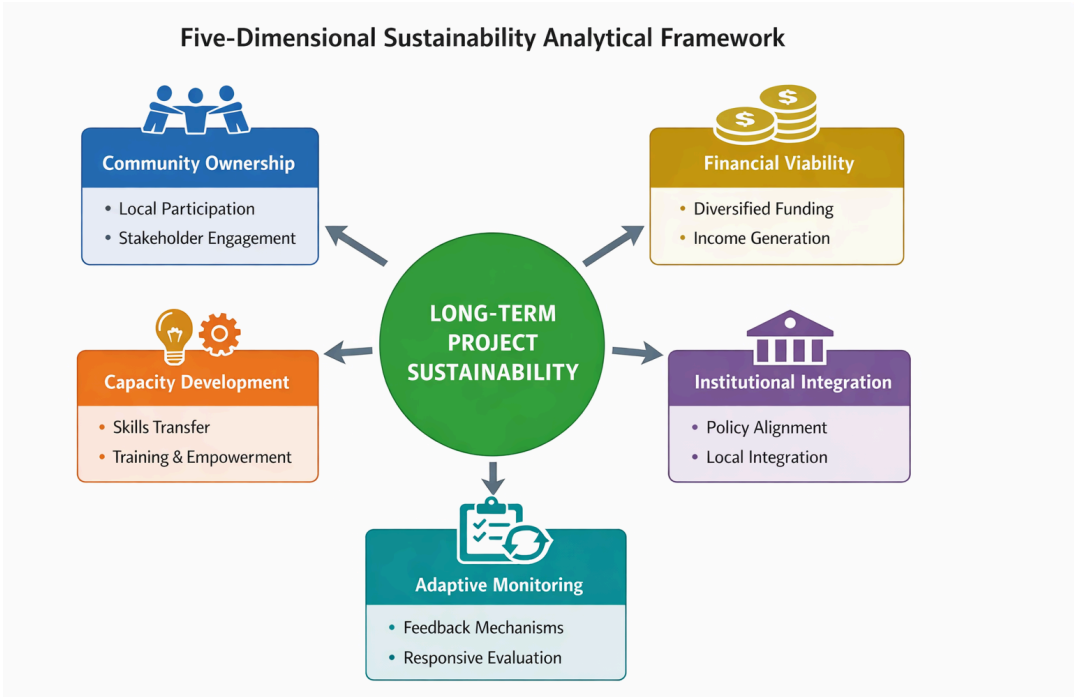
2.2. Sustainability Analytical Framework

The investigation operationalises sustainability through an integrated five-dimensional framework that informed each stage of the research design. Community ownership serves as the primary lens, assessing how far intended beneficiaries shape project conception, decision-making, and day-to-day governance. Financial viability interrogates whether initiatives cultivate diverse, locally controlled revenue streams capable of underwriting recurrent costs once donor assistance recedes. Capacity development evaluates the depth and durability of technical, managerial, and organisational knowledge transferred to refugee and host actors so that essential functions remain locally anchored. Adaptive monitoring examines the presence of feedback mechanisms that convert

real-time learning into timely adjustments, ensuring responsiveness to market shifts and policy changes. Finally, institutional integration gauges the degree to which project structures align with, and are

embedded in, national systems and regulatory frameworks, thereby securing legal recognition and policy support.

Figure 1. Five-Dimensional Sustainability Analytical Framework



Together, these five dimensions structured data gathering, guided the coding scheme, and enabled systematic cross-case comparison, ultimately revealing the causal pathways that distinguish short-lived interventions from those that endure.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative multi-case study design was employed to examine sustainability challenges across three refugee-focused interventions.

3.2. Study Area

The study was conducted in selected refugee-hosting districts in Rwanda’s Southern and Eastern Provinces, including areas associated with Mugombwa, Kigeme, and Mahama camps.

3.3. Case Selection

Three cases were purposively selected:

- **Misizi Marshland Project** : cooperative agricultural initiative
- **Mushishito Agricultural Initiative** : marshland cultivation program
- **Refugee Entrepreneurship Programs** :microenterprise support initiatives

These represent sectorial diversity (agriculture and business development) and varying sustainability outcomes.

3.4. Participants and Sampling

Purposive and criterion sampling were used.

Participants included:

Category	Number
Refugee beneficiaries	10
Host community members	6
Project managers	5
Government officials	3
Total Interviews	24

Additionally:

- 32 project and policy documents analyzed
- 6 field observation visits conducted
- Average interview duration: 45–60 minutes.

3.5. Data Collection

- Document analysis
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)
- Field observations

All interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and anonymized.

3.6. Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was conducted. Coding combined:

- Deductive codes (derived from sustainability theory)
- Inductive codes (emerging from field data)

Themes were compared across cases. Triangulation strengthened validity.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. Participants were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. No identifying personal data are disclosed. Access to project sites was authorized by relevant authorities. Data was securely stored for academic use only.

4. Results

4.1. Community Ownership

Projects involving beneficiaries in cooperative governance demonstrated stronger sustainability. A refugee farmer from Misizi stated:

“When we were involved in deciding what to grow and how to sell, we felt responsible for the results.”

In contrast, projects where beneficiaries were only informed of decisions showed weaker commitment.

4.2. Financial Dependence

Agricultural projects reliant on input subsidies struggled once donor support declined. Entrepreneurship programs demonstrated stronger resilience due to revolving loan systems and reinvestment structures.

4.3. Capacity Development

Entrepreneurship programs institutionalized business coaching and financial literacy training. Agricultural initiatives relied more heavily on

external agronomists, limiting long-term skill transfer.

4.4. Adaptive Monitoring

Projects lacking structured beneficiary feedback mechanisms were slower to respond to market changes and environmental shocks.

4.5. Institutional Integration

Interventions aligned with Rwanda’s cooperative governance systems and market frameworks exhibited greater continuity.

5. Comparative Discussion

The cross-case comparison reveals three recurring patterns:

1. Participatory governance correlates with stronger ownership and resilience.
2. Diversified financing enhances post-donor sustainability.
3. Institutional integration strengthens continuity.

Entrepreneurship initiatives outperformed agricultural projects in financial sustainability due to embedded revenue cycles. However, agricultural cooperatives demonstrated stronger social cohesion.

Sustainability therefore requires multidimensional integration rather than isolated sectorial intervention.

6. Limitations

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on three cases within Rwanda, restricting generalizability. Data rely partly on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce bias. Future research should incorporate longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to measure sustainability outcomes quantitatively.

7. Conclusion

Sustainability in refugee-focused interventions requires structural integration of participatory governance, financial diversification, capacity institutionalization, adaptive monitoring systems, and policy alignment.

The Rwandan experience demonstrates that when projects are co-designed with beneficiaries, linked to markets, and embedded within national frameworks, long-term viability improves significantly. Sustainability must be embedded from

the design phase rather than treated as a post-implementation objective. A shift from donor dependency toward resilience-based development is essential to ensure lasting social and economic benefits for refugees and host communities.

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About the Author

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Author's profile.

The author is an experienced academic and project management professional specializing in economic development and humanitarian studies, with a strong focus on entrepreneurship and livelihoods within emergency and host community contexts. Combining rigorous research skills with practical project management and planning expertise, the author adeptly integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze income patterns, expenditure behaviors, and socio-economic challenges faced by vulnerable populations such as refugees and displaced persons. With extensive experience in humanitarian program design and implementation, the author contributes to advancing self-reliance, economic inclusion, and poverty alleviation through evidence-based interventions. Their work informs policy formulation and project planning aimed at sustainable livelihoods, capacity building, and enhanced market access. By bridging research and operational practice, the author supports resilience-building and empowerment initiatives in fragile and crisis-affected settings .

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