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RESEARCH

"They Have So Much in Themselves": Recognising the Strengths and Resilience of Youth in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda

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Abstract

The everyday interactions between humanitarian workers and refugee youth represent an overlooked dimension of humanitarian research. Although humanitarian workers play a growing role in refugee settlements and camps, their contribution to fostering resilience among young refugees remains understudied. Existing studies on humanitarian interventions have largely concentrated on institutional policies, logistics, and service delivery, while research on refugee youth resilience has focused on individual coping mechanisms. What remains missing is an understanding of how external support systems, particularly frontline humanitarian workers, shape resilience in daily life. This study addresses that gap by examining how humanitarian workers in Uganda's Nakivale refugee settlement support refugee youth through a strengths-based approach, highlighting how they actively nurture agency, hope, and psychological strength rather than reproducing vulnerability-centred narratives. It reframes resilience not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process co-created through everyday relationships between humanitarian workers and youth. Using micro-ethnographic fieldwork, including 16 in-depth interviews, one focus group, and participant observations, the study identifies three key findings: humanitarian workers challenge vulnerability-centred identities, mobilise youth strengths, and construct affirmative narratives that foster hope and agency, while vulnerability-focused and strengths-based practices coexist in everyday humanitarian worker–youth relationships. The study's contribution lies in bringing humanitarian workers' perspectives to the forefront and demonstrating how their practices can enhance refugee youths' sense of agency and wellbeing. A deliberate integration of strengths-based approach into humanitarian social work can enhance the agency and wellbeing of refugee youth, challenging prevailing narratives of victimhood and dependency.

Keywords Humanitarian workers · Social work · Strengths-based approach · Resilience · Refugee youth · Refugee camp · Uganda

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Introduction

The everyday practices through which humanitarian workers engage with refugee youth remain a largely overlooked dimension of humanitarian research. While extensive work has examined organisational management, logistical challenges, and policy frameworks in refugee assistance (Besiou et al., 2014; Bollettino et al., 2024; Derderian & Schockaert, 2011; Spiegel, 2017; Whittall, 2015), far less attention has been given to the relational dynamics that shape how support is experienced and enacted.

This paper examines how humanitarian workers in Uganda's Nakivale refugee settlement use a strengths-based approach (SBA) in their work with refugee youth, and how resilience is co-created through these worker–youth relationships. It asks how humanitarian actors recognise, mobilise, and reinforce young people's capacities and, in doing so,

transform deficit-oriented humanitarian narratives into those of agency and possibility.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its focus on the micro-level, relational spaces through which youth resilience is cultivated. Uganda currently hosts Africa's largest refugee population, with children and youth[1] constituting over half of the residents in Nakivale (UNHCR, 2018, 2025b). Within this context, humanitarian practitioners must navigate complex ethical, cultural, and material constraints, often with limited institutional resources. Yet, amid such challenges, humanitarian workers continue to exercise creativity and compassion in their daily interactions with young people. These findings draw attention to informal, relational micro-practices that are often overlooked in formal organisational or psychometric analyses of resilience (Sadeghi et al., 2025). In contrast to approaches that conceptualise resilience as a stable individual trait, the strategies identified here illustrate resilience as an interactional process co-constituted through everyday worker–youth relationships. This relational framing supports Richards and Shrayer's (2024) concept of compassion resilience, while challenging deficit-oriented and victimhood narratives documented in humanitarian contexts across Africa and Europe.

Moreover, the voices of practitioners based in refugee settlements across the Global South are often marginalised in the literature, which has predominantly concentrated on post-resettlement contexts in Western settings (Diaków, 2022; Tachtler et al., 2020). There are thus important gaps in our knowledge of how humanitarian workers providing social support to refugee youth in settlements such as Nakivale understand and enact resilience in practice.

Guided by the theoretical frameworks of the SBA and resilience in social work (Saleebey, 2012; Ife et al., 2022; Karlsson & Jönsson, 2020; Payne, 2007, 2014), this paper situates humanitarian practice within a human rights and social justice lens. The SBA shifts attention from victimisation and vulnerability to recognising and activating young people's strengths and resilience (Saleebey, 2012). Trust and empathy, central to this approach, enable adaptation and wellbeing despite trauma (Masten, 2001; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Potocky, 2002; Rutter, 2000). Building on these principles, the study uses the term "humanitarian workers" broadly to include practitioners providing psychosocial support in refugee settlements, whose work is anchored in social work, humanitarian, and human rights values.

[1] Individuals aged 15–24 years, as defined by the United Nations (n.d.)

Methodologically, the study is based on micro-ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nakivale refugee settlement, Uganda, the African country hosting the largest refugee population (UNHCR, 2025a). The research predates major developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, reductions of humanitarian funding (UNHCR, 2025c), and escalating poverty and regional conflict pressures (Mukuku & Govender, 2025; UNHCR, 2025c), yet the findings remain highly relevant, as they present approaches to practice that are especially critical under intensified constraints and continue to inform humanitarian practice today. Data were generated through sixteen in-depth semi-structured interviews, one focus group discussion, and participant observation. The study explores humanitarian workers' perceptions of SBA and resilience and examines how they contribute—or fail to contribute—to promoting resilience among refugee youth.

The analysis identifies three key, interconnected strategies through which humanitarian workers support refugee youth: (i) deconstructing vulnerability-centred identities, (ii) recognising and mobilising youths' existing strengths, and (iii) constructing affirmative narratives to foster hope and agency. Together, these strategies reveal an often-overlooked dimension of humanitarian practice, that is, the informal, everyday ways through which workers help shift refugee support from deficit-based to resilience-oriented approaches. At the same time, the findings point to the coexistence of a vulnerability focus and strengths-based practice in Nakivale, with workers drawing on both deficit-oriented and resilience-oriented framings in their daily interactions. Each theme corresponds to a dedicated subsection of the paper: theme (i) is discussed in '"You Can Do Something": Deconstruction of the Refugee's Vulnerable Image'; theme (ii) in '"The Youth Are Very Strong People, They Have So Much in Themselves": Recognising and Working with Refugees' Strengths and Resilience'; and theme (iii) in '"If You Speak Their Own Language": Constructive Narratives and Hope'. Within each of these strategies, the analysis identifies multiple sub-strategies derived from the accounts of experienced humanitarian professionals interviewed in the study. A key outcome of these practices lies in the quality of relationships that develop between humanitarian workers and refugee youth—relationships that foster participation, skill acquisition, and a sense of autonomy.

By centring these relational strategies, the study contributes to scholarship and practice by amplifying humanitarian workers' perspectives and reconceptualising resilience as relational and socially embedded. It shows that while some workers deliberately apply strengths-based principles, others recognise these ideas only when they are explicitly articulated. The study further demonstrates that intentionally embedding a SBA in humanitarian social work can deepen refugee youths' sense of agency

and wellbeing, while challenging dominant narratives of victimhood and dependency. In doing so, it moves beyond portrayals of refugees solely as victims and highlights humanitarian workers' often implicit use of strengths-based practices to support resilience.

The Context: Uganda's Nakivale Refugee Settlement

While humanitarian responses have traditionally prioritised emergency aid, recent literature stresses longer-term resilience-building approaches and highlights the limits of Uganda's self-reliance strategy (SRS) (Besiou et al., 2014; Mastrorillo et al., 2024; Spiegel, 2017; Svedberg, 2014; Walther et al., 2021). Nakivale is a critical site for analysing these shifts, as the SRS there aims to reduce aid dependency through subsistence agriculture, income-generating activities, education, and community development (Svedberg, 2014). Evidence from Uganda's settlements shows that, despite formal rights to move and work, refugee livelihoods remain precarious, informal, and survival-oriented, and localisation often shifts risk onto refugee actors (Gidron, 2025; Gidron & Easton-Calabria, 2025; UNHCR, 2025c).

Although promoted as a model of sustainable assistance, the SRS is criticised as insufficient without social and psychological support that strengthens refugees' agency, dignity, and resilience, and it is increasingly constrained by structural barriers and declining funding (Ilcan et al., 2015; Mastrorillo et al., 2024; Omata, 2022; U-Learn Uganda, 2025). In this context, and despite Nakivale's large youth population, research has largely focused on individual resilience, overlooking how humanitarian workers shape adaptation. Existing international interventions in crisis-affected settings remain predominantly top-down and deficit-focused, paying limited attention to the potential of SBA to foster resilience.

These limitations extend beyond programme design to the wider political economy of humanitarian assistance. Constraints are mirrored in refugee-led organisations, where localisation often shifts risk onto refugee actors through short-term funding, compliance demands, and power asymmetries, reinforcing precarity rather than enabling meaningful participation or organisational sustainability (Gidron & Easton-Calabria, 2025). Similarly, in settlements such as Nakivale, limited access to land, labour markets, and services constrains sustainable livelihoods (UNHCR, 2025c), raising questions about the feasibility of self-reliance and underscoring the importance of strengths-based and psychosocial approaches in humanitarian practice.

Beyond Risk and Vulnerability: Humanitarian Workers' Role in Recognising Youth Strengths

This section reviews literature on humanitarian practice, social work frameworks, and resilience-building with refugee youth. It examines studies on the SBA and resilience among humanitarian workers, highlighting their relevance for psychosocial support in displacement settings. The review also considers research on refugee populations in Uganda's Nakivale settlement to contextualise existing knowledge of youth resilience and support systems. Building on this background, the paper focuses on humanitarian workers as a broad category of experienced, social work–related practitioners providing psychosocial support in refugee settlements, guided by principles of social work and humanitarianism.

Research shows that humanitarian workers can both support and strain refugee youth resilience, underscoring the need for culturally responsive and better-coordinated interventions (Diaków, 2022; Tachtler et al., 2020). Social work has increasingly adopted human rights and humanitarian values to address disasters, migration, and displacement, yet practice in Africa remains shaped by colonial legacies, limited welfare systems, and reliance on NGOs (Chitereka, 2009; Hare, 2004; Kreitzer, 2012; Noble et al., 2011; Payne, 2007, 2014; Spitzer et al., 2014). Humanitarian psychosocial work in refugee settings is closely intertwined with African social work and warrants further exploration (Olido et al., 2023).

Given blurred professional boundaries in refugee settings, this paper uses the broad category of "humanitarian workers" to capture social work–related practitioners providing psychosocial support anchored in social work, humanitarianism, and human rights. Global studies identify coordination problems, security risks, and operational challenges, but also resilience strategies, while noting that frontline perspectives remain underexplored (Bolletino et al., 2024; Koehn et al., 2023).

Most resilience research centres on refugee youth themselves (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Kuru & Ungar, 2022), with limited attention to how workers implement resilience-oriented strategies, despite calls for long-term, strengths-based, empowerment-focused models (Saleebey, 2012; Spiegel, 2017). Work on humanitarian professionalisation stresses knowledge-sharing, participatory methods, and workforce development (Downham, 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2020; Salem et al., 2018).

In Nakivale, scholarship addresses sexual vulnerability, precarious youth livelihoods, ethical participation in research, host–refugee relations, and themes such as self-reliance, health, education, and power dynamics

(Bjørkhaug, 2020; Ilcan et al., 2015; Mwenyango, 2021; Pincock & Bakunzi, 2021; Ruzibiza & Berckmoes, 2022; Shand et al., 2021; Svedberg, 2014). This paper extends this work by foregrounding professional humanitarian workers in Nakivale and identifying how their practices recognise and strengthen the resilience of refugee youth.

The Strengths-Based Approach (SBA) and Resilience in Humanitarian Work

This paper examines how humanitarian workers use a strengths-based approach (SBA) and focus on resilience in their practice (McCashen, 2005; Saleebey, 2012). The SBA was operationalised by analysing how workers understood and applied it, together with observations of everyday interactions with refugee youth. Although closely related, the SBA and resilience are treated in this paper as analytically distinct: the former shapes both the analytical framework and the practices observed in the field, while resilience is conceptualised as a dynamic process that may be supported through strengths-based practice rather than treated as interchangeable with it.

Research suggests that, given the hardships faced by displaced populations, work with refugees, especially youth, should rely on empathetic, strengths-based interventions that prioritise trust, dignity, and acceptance while avoiding re-victimisation (Block et al., 2018; Crooks et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Potocky, 2002). This caution points to a key worry: refugees are too often framed mainly as helpless victims, both in public debate and in aid work, which hides their strengths, agency, and capabilities.

Critical scholarship conceptualises vulnerability not as an inherent individual deficit but as a politically produced and unevenly distributed condition shaped by social, legal, and institutional arrangements (Ferrarese, 2016; Fineman, 2008). In refugee, human rights, and humanitarian contexts, vulnerability operates as a relational and discursive category that structures access to rights, protection, and recognition through legal frameworks and institutional practices (Agier, 2011; Malkki, 1995; Pupavac, 2002; Sachseder et al., 2024; Soultatou, 2022). While such framings can enable claims to assistance, feminist and social work scholars caution that vulnerability may be instrumentalised in ways that individualise harm, obscure structural and historical causes of precarity, and reproduce power inequalities and paternalistic narratives, particularly along intersecting axes of gender and race (Sachseder et al., 2024; Soultatou, 2022).

It is this recognition of refugee strengths, capacity, and agency that underpins the strengths-based approach (SBA) as a counterpoint to deficit-oriented practice. As articulated by Saleebey (1996, 2012), the SBA emphasises individuals' and groups' capacities, resources, and aspirations, framing adversity as a potential site of growth and situating care within collaborative, resource-rich social contexts. In humanitarian settings, practitioners employ constructive narratives that acknowledge hardship while highlighting strengths and possibilities, thereby fostering hope and supporting autonomy (Hughes, 2014).

Resilience is commonly defined as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity (Rutter, 2000; Luthar et al., 2000). Contemporary scholarship conceptualises resilience as embedded within interconnected individual, relational, communal, and structural systems, shaped by access to supportive relationships, cultural belonging, meaningful social roles, and institutional resources (Masten, 2014; Ungar et al., 2013). From this perspective, individual coping capacities, communal networks, and institutional conditions interact to shape adaptive processes in displacement contexts (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Kuru & Ungar, 2022).

The resilience literature therefore advances two key implications for humanitarian practice: greater attention to refugees' existing strengths and capacities and stronger recognition of communal and cultural dimensions of resilience (Pendley et al., 2021; Walther et al., 2021). By integrating these insights, strengths-based practice offers a means of supporting well-being and positive change without reinforcing narratives of victimisation, while promoting dignity, agency, and empowerment among refugee and youth populations.

Methodology: Micro-ethnographic Fieldwork

This study draws on micro-ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nakivale refugee settlement as part of a master's dissertation.[2] Data collection took place between February and April 2017 and involved three techniques: (i) semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 humanitarian workers, (ii) a focus group discussion (FGD) with nine humanitarian workers, and (iii) participant observation.

Micro-ethnography, as defined by Wolcott (1990), focuses on specific aspects of everyday life rather than an entire cultural system. In this study, it takes the form of a focused ethnography, centring on the daily routines and perspectives of humanitarian workers. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of how they engage with refugee youth, particularly through the SBA.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on professionals working directly with refugee

[2] Data collection was conducted by the first author. All authors contributed to the research design, analytic decisions, and writing the paper.

youth. A total of twenty-two humanitarian workers participated in the study through interviews and FGD. These organisations spanned diverse sectors, including community services, psychosocial support, and education linked with psychosocial support.[3] Recruitment involved direct engagement with NGOs operating in Nakivale. The interview and FGD participants offered complementary forms of insight: in-depth individual accounts and collective reflections. This composition ensured diversity across organisational roles and was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation and highlight a wide range of humanitarian workers' perspectives.

Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

The interviews followed a flexible guide, allowing for fluid discussions and clarifications (Bryman, 2012). Participation was voluntary, with signed informed consent obtained from all participants. Interviews were conducted in the settlement, each lasting between 50 and 90 min. Sixteen humanitarian workers (nine women, seven men) from six different organisations participated. The in-depth interviews explored humanitarian professionals' experiences of working in the refugee settlement, focusing on their everyday practices, engagement with refugee youth, challenges, good practices, and the ways in which SBA informed their understanding of vulnerability, resilience, and support in practice.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The FGD facilitated a shared reflection among humanitarian workers, revealing collective themes in their engagement with youth. It was conducted with nine humanitarian workers from HIJIRA, the primary organisation providing psychosocial and community support in Nakivale at the time of the study. Three focus group participants had also taken part in individual interviews. The discussion, lasting one hour, took place in shared space outside the refugee settlement and was centred on participants' experiences, their perceptions of refugee youth's strengths, and the applicability of SBA in practice.

Participant Observations

Over three weeks of participant observation, the researcher was embedded in the daily routines of humanitarian workers, engaging in various activities to gain a deeper understanding of their interactions with refugee youth. This involved observing and assisting with workshops and training sessions at a youth centre, where humanitarian workers facilitated learning and skill-building activities. Additionally, the researcher accompanied humanitarian workers on home and school visits, contributing to activity planning and office work, including reviewing case notes. Beyond these formal engagements, the researcher resided with humanitarian workers, fostering informal conversations that provided valuable insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of strengths and resilience in refugee youth. The participant observation provided insights beyond the self-reported narratives of interviews, capturing the nuances of daily interactions between humanitarian workers and refugee youth.

Analysis

Interviews and the focus group discussion were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied across interview transcripts, FGD data, and field notes, with themes constructed through triangulation of all three data sources to capture both individual and collective perspectives in humanitarian practice.

Reflexivity and Insider–Outsider Perspectives

The first author, who conducted the fieldwork, had a similar professional background to the participants (social work with refugees and vulnerable groups) and was of a similar age to some of the professionals. However, as a foreigner and non-native speaker of local languages, the researcher maintained critical distance, mitigating potential biases. Not being affiliated with any NGO or Ugandan institution provided a unique advantage—humanitarian workers felt comfortable sharing both positive and critical reflections without fear of professional repercussions or peer judgment. This "outsider" stance facilitated a broader analytical perspective, allowing for a critical distance to how humanitarian workers perceive refugee youth's strengths and resilience.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed established ethical guidance and standards for research design and data collection and received ethical approval from the School of Social Sciences Higher Degrees and Research Committee, Makerere University, as well as formal approval from the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister[4] and HIJIRA, all of which reviewed the research proposal and ethical considerations prior to granting field access. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits. They provided signed consent for interviews and the focus group. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process.

[3] The organisations were as follows: (1) Humanitarian Initiative Just Relief Aid (HIJRA), (2) War Child Canada, (3) American Refugee Committee (ARC), (4) Finnish Refugee Council (FRC), (5) Tutapona, and (6) Windle Trust Uganda.

[4] Office of the Prime Minister, 9th February, No. OPM/R/41/1

Table 1 Socio-demographic profile of the humanitarian workers interviewed, Nakivale settlement

No.	Age	Sex	Education and training	Role in NGO	Experience
A	30–39	M	Bachelor—Law	Youth Community Leader *refugee	7 years
B	50–59	M	Master—Counselling, Psychology	Community Services Manager Religious Leader	3 years
C	20–29	M	Bachelor—Social Work & Social Administration	Assistant Community Services Youth Department	2 years
D	50–59	M	Master—Conflict Resolution and Mitigation	Community Worker *refugee	2 years
E	20–29	M	Master—Clinical Psychology	Psychosocial Officer/Counsellor	1,5 years
F	20–29	F	Bachelor—Social Work & Social Administration	Child Protection Officer	4 years
G	30–39	F	Bachelor—Social & Gender Studies	Youth Field Supervisor	3 years
H	20–29	F	Bachelor—Development Studies	Youth Field Supervisor	2 years
I	20–29	F	Bachelor – Counselling, Psychology	Field Coordinator—Trauma Rehabilitation	4 years
J	30–39	F	Bachelor—Counselling, Psychology	Field Facilitator—Counsellor	3 years
K	30–39	F	Bachelor—Adult Education & Community Development	Community Development Officer	9 years
L	30–39	F	Master—Project Management and Planning	Youth Coordinator	5 years
M	20–29	M	Bachelor—Social Work and Counselling	Protection Officer	3 years
N	30–39	F	Master—Public Health	Protection Manager—Youth	4 years
O	30–39	F	Bachelor of Social Development	Educational Officer	4 years
P	30–39	M	Bachelor – Education & Special Needs Education	Education Project Assistant	2 years

Limitations

The social desirability bias could arise, as participants may have aligned their accounts with strengths-based principles to present their practice positively; this was mitigated through participant observation, which enabled independent assessment of everyday interactions with refugee youth. A further limitation relates to the short duration of fieldwork observations (three weeks); however, the combination of interviews, FGD, and participant observation strengthened the reliability of the findings by enabling triangulation across multiple perspectives.

Finally, the temporal distance of the data collection should be acknowledged. While core features of humanitarian practice remain relevant, contextual conditions have evolved, and the findings should therefore be understood as reflecting the period in which the data were collected. Nonetheless, the study's theoretical framing supports the continued relevance of the analysis, offering a useful baseline against which current shifts in practice, funding, and organisational priorities can be examined. In this sense, the findings provide insight into how strengths-based elements may be adapted or replicated in contemporary humanitarian settings, particularly in contexts of funding constraints and ongoing refugee influxes.

Findings: Profile and Affiliations of the Humanitarian Workers

Humanitarian workers in Nakivale had diverse academic backgrounds (Tables 1 and 2), including Social Work, Community Development, Psychology, Education, Law and Social Sciences, with some holding postgraduate qualifications in Conflict Resolution and Project Management. Their interdisciplinary training supported their roles with refugee youth as Community Leaders, Youth Workers, or Child Protection Officers. Most had worked in humanitarian settings between two and nine years and were aged 20–39 (Tables 1 and 2), with most participants being Ugandan, and two from the DRC and Somalia.

Coexistence of Vulnerability Focus and Strengths-Based Practice in Nakivale

Analysis across interviews, FGD, and participant observations revealed varying levels of familiarity with the SBA among humanitarian workers in Nakivale. While some participants demonstrated understanding and intentional application of

Table 2 Focus group participants: demographics

No.	Age groups	Sex	Position in the organisation
A2	30–39	F	Child Protection Officer
B2	20–29	F	Child Protection Assistant
C2	20–29	F	Child Protection Assistant
D2	20–29	F	Community Services Assistant
E2	20–29	F	Child Protection Assistant
F2	20–29	F	Child Protection Assistant
G2	20–29	M	Community Services Assistant
H2	30–39	M	Psychosocial Officer/Counsellor
I2	30–39	M	Legal Assistant

SBA principles, others appeared surprised when these concepts were explicitly introduced during data collection. This variation was evident not only in formal research settings but also in casual interactions and everyday practice, indicating uneven awareness of strength-based practice.

Two patterns stood out. First, participants were accustomed to focusing on refugee needs and vulnerabilities rather than strengths and resilience. Second, familiarity with the SBA varied: some participants were unfamiliar with it, others practised it without recognising the concept, and only a few had explicit knowledge of the framework. Regardless, all the humanitarian workers welcomed the topics with a "sense of curiosity and big smiles on their faces" (field notes). Awareness of the approach grew throughout the FGD and interviewing process as participants were asked to reflect on their practice.

The data-collection researcher observed different perceptions and principles of SBA in practice. Some participants implemented principles that were consistent with SBA, while others tended to lack awareness of the approach and simultaneously manifested paternalistic attitudes. A common example of paternalistic attitudes and language included references to refugees as "our refugees" and "our people of concern", with a sense of pity, superiority, and otherness in casual discussions. In the implementation of agricultural training, some humanitarian workers did not seem to recognise or value the existing skills and knowledge of refugees who had farming experience in their countries of origin. Observations and informal discussions with refugees also pointed to wider issues within the humanitarian environment, including corruption within NGOs and government agencies, as well as corruption scandals reported in Nakivale during 2017–2018. These issues formed part of the broader context shaping humanitarian work.

During the FGD, most participants described experiences of exhaustion, burnout, and physical strain. At the same time, they highlighted that, despite challenges, working with refugee youth gave them a strong sense of meaning and motivation. They frequently described their work as personally fulfilling and life-changing and stressed the importance of "supporting others" and "being there", even under difficult conditions, which were consistently framed as less severe than those faced by refugees themselves. One participant noted: "I am inspired myself and motivated when I see some of them, how hard they work" (Participant K). The FGD concluded on a positive note, with participants emphasising their capacity to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable problems. As participants put it:

> I have endurance and resilience. Always to try, never lose hope and keep going. (F2, FGD)
> People think that challenges are all bad, but on the other hand they are good because whenever you have one, you always think how to overcome it. So you become a great thinker and you develop so many new ideas and skills. (H2, FGD)

Overall, the data depicted a practice environment in which structural constraints, organisational tensions, and individual pressures coexisted with positive experiences, sources of inspiration, and ongoing efforts to sustain commitment to work with refugee youth.

"You Can Do Something": Deconstruction of the Refugee's Vulnerable Image

Strategy 1: Deconstructing Vulnerability-Centred Identities

The findings highlight three key strategies employed by humanitarian workers in their work with refugee youth: (i) deconstructing vulnerability-centred identities, (ii) recognising and mobilising youths' existing strengths, and (iii) constructing affirmative narratives to foster hope and agency. Strategy 1 corresponds to the theme "Deconstruction of the refugee's vulnerable image" and is illustrated through three interrelated sub-strategies.

Participants described deliberate efforts to shift refugee youths' focus away from victimisation and vulnerability towards recognition of their skills, capacities, and strengths. Youth were understood as a heterogeneous group, with varying degrees of identification with vulnerability, which required humanitarian workers to adapt their approaches. A key part of this work involved addressing self-attributed identities of vulnerability that some refugee youth adopted upon arrival in Nakivale and that could intensify over time.

Sub-strategy 1a: Voicing Hardships and Acknowledging Loss

All participants first emphasised the importance of listening to the hardships of being a refugee. For both workers and youth, the term "refugee" was closely associated with difficulty and loss, especially in the early stages after arrival in the settlement. Some of the terms used by participants to convey what it is to be a refugee included "pain", "hopelessness", and "the worst thing that can happen to anyone". As one participant reflected on life in the settlement: *Who are you?! You are just like a straw getting blown into the air. You are nothing* (Participant D).

Another participant explained the kind of message they tried to convey to youth:

> We need this spirit, "I can do this", leave self-pity and victimisation and make use of what we have

and what we are. I always tell the youth: you can do something. Going there, take the chance, the risk, and you learn – if something bad happens, you've learned your lesson and how to do it better; if something good, awesome, go ahead and make it bigger. (Participant L)

Sub-strategy 1b: Recognising Strengths to Challenge Vulnerability

Participants also described efforts to challenge youths' self-images of vulnerability by recognising and naming their strengths. They distinguished between what young people did themselves, seeking purpose, redefining identity, mobilising peers, and the encouragement provided by workers. Over time, these interactions contributed to shifts in how youth saw themselves, as illustrated below:

I see many youths here are just wandering only and don't have anyone who can mobilise them. Sometimes they think you have no power because you are a refugee. But I want to show people that you are a refugee, but you are also a man. (Participant A)
... it's not the end to be a refugee. In time, this feeling of hopelessness is transformed. (Participant I)

Sub-strategy 1c: Providing Meaningful Activities to Foster Purpose, Agency, and Resilience

Finally, most participants underlined the importance of providing meaningful activities for youth in a context with limited access to education and employment. Engagement in activities was seen as essential to "use their energy in good ways", prevent idleness and associated risks, and support a sense of usefulness and purpose. Many participants described the provision of activities as the most urgent need in the settlement, particularly for youth who lacked viable pathways to formal schooling or work. As participants stated:

They have running blood through their veins, and you can't let them like that. We need to explore and work with that. They can easily become restless. We can understand them and don't limit them to such a place. We need to make them feel useful, and ensure their energy is used in good ways. To keep on building their dreams because they are a source of change. (Participant A)
They need someone close to them, able to regenerate their hope, so they don't lose direction and get into destructive behaviours because now everything seems dark. (Participant B)

Across these sub-strategies, humanitarian workers presented youth as active, energetic, and capable of change, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulties that continued to shape their lives in the settlement.

"The Youth Are Very Strong People, They Have So Much in Themselves": Recognising and Working with Refugees' Strengths and Resilience

Strategy 2: Recognising and Mobilising Youths' Existing Strengths

This theme corresponds to Strategy 2 and examines how humanitarian workers engage with and support both individual and communal resilience among refugee youth, as illustrated through two sub-strategies.

Sub-strategy 2a: Supporting Individual Resilience

Participants described refugee youth as having a wide range of personal qualities that helped them adapt to life in the settlement. This included creativity, attentiveness, energy, openness, curiosity, flexibility, motivation to learn, faith, self-motivation, perseverance, courage, hope, and strength. One participant reflected:

We talk about success and resilience, but we must remember how hurt these people were—left with nothing and forced to start again in a new place. They rebuild themselves and start new lives. The environment, laws, and services support them, but there is also something that comes from within. We have seen progress: many studied, found work, and succeeded, sometimes even more than nationals. (Participant N)

Participants also described several external dimensions that supported resilience. At the macro level, they mentioned national policies and institutional frameworks in Uganda that they perceived as providing a relatively safe and enabling environment. At the meso level, they emphasised the importance of NGOs, local organisations, and friends. At the micro level, they highlighted the role of supportive family members, whether present in the settlement or elsewhere.

Sub-strategy 2b: Supporting Communal Resilience

Humanitarian workers stressed the strength of collective and community-based resources. They noted that belonging to groups organised around nationality, culture, faith, or shared interests contributed to a sense of integration and mutual support. Participation in group activities such as sports,

dance, and arts was described as particularly important for refugee youth. One worker gave the example of a youth-organised basketball initiative:

> The youth are very strong people; they have so much in themselves… They have ideas to promote their talents but often need little support. For example, they organised their own basketball team [girls and boys], trained independently, and only asked us for transport to Mbarara [city outside the camp], where they won first place. (Participant L)

In this and other examples, humanitarian workers described their role as providing limited but targeted assistance, such as transport or access to spaces, so that youth could realise their own ideas. Some participants also reported that refugee youth sometimes drew on narratives of vulnerability when interacting with institutions or seeking support, particularly in situations of scarcity and competition for resources. They did not see this as incompatible with the presence of strengths and resilience and instead described a context where narratives of vulnerability and resilience coexisted and were mobilised in different ways depending on circumstances.

"If You Speak Their Own Language": Constructive Narratives and Hope

Strategy 3: Constructing Affirmative Narratives to Foster Hope and Agency

Corresponding to the theme "Constructive narratives and hope", this strategy examines how humanitarian workers use language, stories, and hope-related practices in their work with refugee youth and is illustrated through two sub-strategies.

Sub-strategy 3a: Using Constructive Narratives in Everyday Communication

Participants frequently described adapting their language to be closer to that of the youth. They emphasised simplicity, humility, and relational closeness, sometimes describing this as "trying to be like their peer" (Participant C). As one participant explained:

> It's easier to approach them if you speak their own language… they will be more interested. You have to like them and know them. (Participant L)

Participants also highlighted the importance of speaking in a way that showed encouragement, respect, and care. They reported that their communication with adults and youth differed: with adults, they tended to build on what people were already doing, whereas with youth they provided more guidance and information because "they are still exploring" (Participant M). These communicative practices were often accompanied by an easy-going manner and humour and were described as helping to build relationships of trust and acceptance.

Participants further stressed the role of success stories in their conversations with youth. They cited examples of individuals who had left the settlement through resettlement, scholarships, or work, gained stability, or achieved recognition. These stories were used to demonstrate that different futures were possible and to show pathways out of hardship.

Sub-strategy 3b: Cultivating Hope Through Strengths, Education, and Faith

Hope appeared as a recurrent theme in everyday conversations and formal interviews. Participants noted that, although youth were safer than in the situations they had fled, life in the settlement brought new uncertainties and limited opportunities, making hope both fragile and essential. Humanitarian workers described hope in several ways: as something they tried to cultivate in youth, as a resource that youth already possessed, and as an outcome of their interactions.

Hope was often linked to recognition of strengths. One participant said, "I see so much humanity and hope in them" (Participant C2, FGD), while another emphasised youths' energy and creativity: "I have seen brilliant people out there using the minimum resources to make the best out of it. So, this is hope" (Participant M). Education, both formal and informal, was repeatedly described as central to sustaining hope, even when structural barriers limited access:

> Their dreams are still on; they are still persuading them. And education is the most important as it keeps the dream on. The elderly lost hope, but the youth move on. (Participant A)

Faith emerged as another key source of hope. Participants mentioned God, prayer, churches, and mosques as elements that shaped how both workers and refugees coped with adversity. As the following examples show:

> For me, God and spiritual teachings are one of the most important sources of strength. It's a good way to pass it [strength] to someone when there is nothing else to pass. To put some light and hope. You just tell them that "God is here". (Participant O)
> … if you look around, there is so much misery and suffering.… but we are strong because we know we are created, and the creator knows your place. When

every aspect of you fails, you still know the purpose of life and why you are here. (Participant D)

These accounts show that, for many participants, hope, education, and faith were closely connected in their everyday work with refugee youth.

Discussion

The findings show that humanitarian workers in Nakivale support refugee youth through three interconnected strategies: deconstructing vulnerability-centred identities, recognising and mobilising existing strengths, and constructing affirmative narratives that foster hope and agency. Across these strategies, practice is fundamentally relational and grounded in everyday interaction, even when not explicitly framed as SBA. This section discusses how these empirical patterns relate to the literature on SBA, resilience and vulnerability.

Deconstructing Vulnerability-Centred Identities

The first strategy, deconstructing vulnerability-centred identities, shows humanitarian workers listening to hardship, challenging self-images of "only" being refugees, and creating opportunities for meaningful activity. These practices connect directly to scholarship that documents the profound material, psychological, and existential disruptions associated with refugeehood and the centrality of narratives of loss and dispossession in refugee identity (Agier, 2011; Malkki, 1995). At the same time, the deliberate move from "you are nothing" towards messages such as "you can do something" resonates with strengths-based and resilience-oriented work that calls for actively challenging victimising narratives and emphasising agency, risk-taking, and learning as pathways to empowerment (Lenette et al., 2013; Saleebey, 1996; Ungar et al., 2013).

The sub-strategies identified, voicing hardship, recognising strengths, and providing activities, also align with social norms perspectives that understand humanitarian interventions as embedded in local expectations and dense social relations. In refugee settlements where resources are scarce and social control is high, norms can either reinforce passivity and dependency or be reworked to support participation and responsibility (Schultz et al., 2007). The findings suggest that humanitarian workers in Nakivale are engaged in subtle norm-work: they acknowledge pain and loss, but they also re-signal what is expected and possible for youth by affirming capacities and insisting on engagement in purposeful activity. For instance, as Ritchie (2018) shows, women in refugee settings often assume increased economic and social responsibility, while men may experience marginalisation and a loss of traditional roles. These shifts shape the relational terrain in which humanitarian workers operate, influencing both the challenges they encounter and the strategies they adopt. Within this context, the emphasis on mobilising "wandering" youth and encouraging them to see themselves as capable and agentic subjects speaks directly to these altered household and community dynamics. Rather than relying on formalised messaging or behavioural correction, the practices identified in this study illustrate how practitioners try to engage sensitively with evolving power relations and household tensions, subtly reworking prevailing norms through everyday relational work. In doing so, they support agency and resilience while avoiding the reinforcement of deficit-based narratives and victimisation.

At the same time, the presence of paternalistic language ("our refugees") and the tendency to overlook existing skills in settings such as agricultural training echo critiques of humanitarian governance that highlight how vulnerability can become a governing logic that justifies intervention while diminishing agency (Agier, 2011; Fineman, 2008; Pupavac, 2002). The findings therefore sit in tension with both deficit- and strengths-oriented traditions: some workers are pushing against vulnerability-centred identities in their day-to-day interactions, while organisational cultures, funding logics, and institutional discourses continue to reward vulnerability narratives and position refugees primarily as recipients rather than contributors. This supports the argument that implementing SBA requires more than individual attitude change; it requires institutional transformation in how power, expertise, and decision-making authority are conceptualised and distributed within humanitarian contexts (Agier, 2011; Pupavac, 2002).

Recognising and Mobilising Youths' Existing Strengths

The second strategy, recognising and mobilising individual and communal strengths, confirms and extends existing resilience literature on refugee youth. Participants' descriptions of creativity, perseverance, faith and "something that comes from within" mirror theoretical accounts of internal resilience factors among refugee children and youth (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Kuru & Ungar, 2022). By highlighting that many young people succeeded, some humanitarian workers challenged deficit-oriented framings and aligned with the SBA's emphasis on capacities, agency, and future possibilities rather than vulnerability and deficit (Saleebey, 2012).

Simultaneously, most workers' attention to macro-, meso- and micro-level supports, refugee-friendly national policies in Uganda, NGO and friendship networks, and supportive families, reflects multi-systemic models of resilience that conceptualise adaptation as emerging from the interplay

between individuals and their environments (Masten, 2001; Raniga & Mthembu, 2017). In this sense, the Nakivale case empirically supports arguments that resilience is not solely an individual trait but is built and sustained through institutional frameworks, community ties, and family relationships (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Kuru & Ungar, 2022). The example of the youth-organised basketball team illustrates this clearly: young people initiate and organise the activity; humanitarian workers contribute minimal but crucial resources (transport); and success in competition feeds back into collective pride and belonging.

This collaborative pattern challenges top-down, programmatic images of humanitarian intervention and aligns with relational conceptualisations of resilience that emphasise recognition, participation and shared practice (Lenette et al., 2013; Ungar et al., 2013). It also shows how vulnerability and resilience discourse can coexist in a strategic and pragmatic way: refugee youth sometimes draw on vulnerability narratives to access scarce resources, but this does not negate the presence of strengths or agency. Rather, the findings support emerging work on "compassion resilience" and other relational forms of resilience, which highlight how recognition by practitioners is constitutive of resilience, enabling youth to sustain self-worth under conditions of structural constraint (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Richards & Shrayer, 2024).

Constructive Narratives and Hope

Constructing affirmative narratives and fostering hope connect closely with strengths-based and narrative approaches in social work and psychosocial support. Participants' deliberate adaptation of language, their efforts "to speak their own language", and their use of encouragement and humour align with the SBA's emphasis on relationship-building, mutual respect, and collaborative meaning-making (Saleebey, 2012). The distinction they draw between addressing adults and youth is a developmental sensitivity consistent with youth-focused resilience programmes (Crooks et al., 2020; Kuru & Ungar, 2022).

The use of success narratives and role models who have "moved out of the camp" also echoes narrative interventions that help refugee children and youth reclaim voice, reframe their identities, and imagine alternative futures (Hughes, 2014). In these approaches, stories of others' trajectories function as both symbolic resources and practical scripts for navigation and problem-solving (Yoon & Fisseha, 2019). The findings from Nakivale fit this pattern: workers mobilise examples of educational achievement, resettlement or economic stability to show that hardship is not the end point and that different paths are possible.

Hope occupies a central position in this strategy and is treated by workers, as in the literature, as a strategy, a psychosocial resource, and an outcome (Lenette et al., 2013; Saleebey, 2012; Ungar et al., 2013). Evidence from other refugee settings shows that hope is closely tied to agency and resilience, not simply as a feeling but as a driver of action and future-oriented planning (Hughes, 2014; Yoon & Fisseha, 2019). In Nakivale, hope is repeatedly linked to strengths, to education and to spiritual beliefs.

The strong emphasis on faith in the findings reinforces research showing that religious worldviews and spiritual practices are key resources in displacement, shaping understandings of wellbeing, moral responsibility, and resilience (Ager & Ager, 2015; Ferris, 2011; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Lenette et al., 2013; Ungar et al., 2013). References to God, prayer, and hope position faith as a transcendent source of meaning that helps youth and workers cope with suffering, uncertainty, and lack of formal opportunities. In this sense, spiritual practices are not peripheral but integral to how SBA-consistent work is enacted in this setting, and they underscore the need for culturally and religiously grounded understandings of resilience in humanitarian social work.

SBA and Resilience: Implications for Practice

Across all three strategies, the study finds that humanitarian workers in Nakivale showed uneven familiarity with the SBA: some deliberately applied its principles, while others only recognised these ideas when they were explicitly discussed during data collection. This pattern echoes wider evidence that strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches are often practised implicitly but remain undertheorised and inconsistently supported at organisational level (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Saleebey, 2012). It also resonates with studies on humanitarian worker perspectives and professionalisation, which highlight tensions between institutional demands, vulnerability-driven funding logics, and relational engagement on the ground (Diaków, 2022; Downham, 2021; Salem et al., 2018).

At the structural level, paternalism, corruption, and governance constraints are consistent with critiques of humanitarian systems that highlight hierarchies of power and accountability gaps, and the political uses of vulnerability (Agier, 2011; Mwenyango, 2021; Pupavac, 2002; Tegenbos, 2024). The coexistence of strengths-based and deficit-oriented framings in practice therefore appears less as inconsistency and more as a reflection of the contradictory demands placed on humanitarian workers. They are expected to document vulnerability and manage scarcity, while at the same time fostering participation, self-reliance, and resilience.

The findings thus support calls for a more deliberate and structurally informed integration of SBA into humanitarian social work. This would involve moving beyond individual enthusiasm or implicit practice towards explicit training,

reflective supervision, and organisational frameworks that recognise relational work, hope-building, and recognition of strengths as core professional tasks rather than informal "extras" (Ife et al., 2022; Karlsson & Jönsson, 2020; Payne, 2007, 2014). It also requires re-examining indicators and funding criteria that privilege deficit-based narratives and hinder the full expression of resilience-oriented practice (Dalrymple et al. 2020; Spiegel, 2017).

By focusing on humanitarians in a large settlement in the Global South, the study extends a literature that has often centred refugee youth themselves or professionals in Western resettlement contexts (Diaków, 2022; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Kuru & Ungar, 2022; Tachtler et al., 2020). It demonstrates that most humanitarian workers actively engage in strategies aligned with key theoretical recommendations for strengthening resilience: they focus on refugees' resilience, even when unaware of doing so, and they emphasise the communal dimension of resilience, primarily through attention to cultural heterogeneity and group integration rather than through explicit references to collective trauma (Pendley et al., 2021; Walther et al., 2021).

Conceptually, the study reinforces relational and interactional understandings of resilience and supports emerging notions such as "compassion resilience", where mutual recognition, shared effort, and emotional connection between workers and youth are central (Ghodsi et al., 2019; Richards & Shrayer, 2024; Sadeghi et al., 2025). Practically, it suggests that humanitarian and social work practice with refugee youth should adopt a more nuanced and holistic understanding of young people's experiences, one that integrates structural analysis of vulnerability with systematic recognition of strengths, communal resources, hope, and faith.

Conclusions

This empirical investigation examines how humanitarian workers in Uganda's Nakivale refugee settlement operationalise a strengths-based approach in their daily work with refugee youth, establishing that resilience emerges not from deficit-focused interventions but through deliberate relational practice. Rather than asking whether such approaches exist, we examine the specific mechanisms through which workers recognise, mobilise, and reinforce young people's capacities. Critically, we investigate how these everyday practices systematically challenge and reshape deficit-oriented humanitarian narratives towards frameworks centred on agency and empowerment, aligning strengths-based practice with a human rights perspective that emphasises dignity, participation, and the right of refugee youth to shape their own lives.

Humanitarian research has largely focused on policy, governance, and operational delivery, while the practices and perspectives of frontline humanitarian workers, particularly in refugee settlements in the Global South, remain insufficiently examined. This study addresses that gap by showing how practitioners navigate institutional vulnerability frameworks while simultaneously recognising refugee youth as capable, motivated, and resourceful actors. These findings highlight that vulnerability and strength are not opposing categories in practice but coexist and are continuously negotiated in humanitarian work.

Drawing on interviews, FGD, and participant observation, the study documents a central tension in humanitarian practice: workers operate within institutionalised narratives of vulnerability and victimisation while simultaneously recognising refugee youth's creativity, problem-solving abilities, motivation, and potential for wellbeing. This dual positioning reflects the situated realities of humanitarian work rather than ideological inconsistency.

Three interconnected strategies emerged as central to how humanitarian workers support refugee youth: challenging vulnerability-centred identities, recognising and mobilising existing strengths, and constructing affirmative narratives that anchor hope and agency in lived experience. These strategies operate primarily through relational practice, with trust, recognition, and participation serving as the key mechanisms through which resilience is sustained and deepened.

By examining how practitioners actively recognise and support resilience through everyday relational practice, this study fills a critical gap in the literature. One stream has extensively documented refugee vulnerability and trauma; a second has examined individual resilience among children and youth. Yet both have largely overlooked how resilience emerges and is sustained through relationships with external actors (e.g. humanitarian workers, family networks, and institutions). This study demonstrates that humanitarian workers function not as interventionists imposing resilience but as recognisers and enablers of resilience that young people themselves generate and sustain.

A key contribution of this paper lies in making visible the often-unrecognised strengths-based strategies embedded in humanitarian practice. Although some participants explicitly identified their work as strengths-based, many engaged in comparable practices without using this terminology, suggesting that such approaches may be more widespread than acknowledged. Making these practices explicit and integrating them into training and supervision could strengthen their impact on youth agency and wellbeing. Moreover, this research was conducted prior to humanitarian funding contractions (2023–2025), COVID-19's global impacts, and intensified pressures of regional conflict now facing Uganda's refugee settlements. However, rather than diminishing relevance, these contextual shifts underscore

the urgent necessity of the approaches documented here. When resources contract and displacement becomes protracted, the capacity to recognise and mobilise young people's strengths becomes a critical survival strategy for both refugee youth and humanitarian systems.

Building on this insight, future research should pursue two complementary directions: exploring the organisational conditions that support or undermine relational, strengths-based practice, and investigating how refugee youth themselves perceive and interpret these strategies across camps and settlement contexts. Such work would deepen understanding of how to embed strengths-based, resilience-oriented approaches in contextually grounded humanitarian systems.

By centring humanitarian workers' voices and strategies, this paper contributes to reframing resilience in refugee contexts as relational, socially embedded, and co-created through everyday interactions between workers and young people. Rather than treating resilience as an individual trait to be developed through programmatic intervention, the findings highlight how strengths-based practice operates in contextually grounded ways, shaped by relationships, constraints, and lived experience. The study demonstrates that deliberately embedding a strengths-based approach within humanitarian social work can strengthen refugee youths' agency and wellbeing while challenging narratives of victimhood and dependency. In this sense, the most transformative humanitarian practice emerges not from formal programmes alone, but from sustained relational work that recognises strengths, affirms capacity, and supports young people in shaping their own futures.

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Declarations

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