

# Participatory Arts: Bridging Refugee Settlements and Urban Areas

## A Case Study from Refugees in Towns Kampala, Uganda

Nyende Keith Mark



*Figure 1. Ugandan and Swedish facilitators pose for a photograph at the end of Speak, open the conversation training activities in Nakivale Refugee Settlement.*

**All report photos by: Oscar Hanska and Abbas Amin**

Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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## About the Author

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## Introduction

Personal relationships and understanding between refugees and their hosts can often be the basis for sustainable integration of refugees. Relationships that build understanding between refugees and their hosts are both an end and a means to refugee integration.

This case report is based on an arts-oriented pilot project I was involved in, from its development through to its implementation. The main idea was to have refugee artists from Nakivale refugee settlement work under the guidance of experienced Ugandan artists, with the goal of sharing skills, building relationships, and hopefully influencing integration between refugees and hosts. From my experience in the project, the arts offer a good opportunity for dialogue between refugees and their hosts, enhancing understanding and facilitating refugees' access to opportunities and services beyond the cultural sector.

## Refugees in Uganda

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees and is today one of largest refugee hosting countries in the world. Currently, UNHCR estimates suggest that Uganda hosts 1.5 million refugees. The majority of the refugees in the country are from South Sudan with others originating from Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. Most live in refugee settlements spread across different districts (UNHCR 2020 A). Refugee settlements are areas allocated by the government of Uganda where refugees receive plots of land for subsistence farming and other livelihood activities. Today there are 13 refugee settlements, jointly administered by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR. The settlements permit freedom of movement for refugees, albeit with restrictions under certain circumstances (Refugee Act 2006, section 29 and The Refugees Regulations 2010, section 47).

This case report focuses on the refugees who came from Nakivale Settlement to Kampala. Nakivale covers about 185 square km and is in Isingiro District in Southwestern Uganda. It houses 132,700 refugees, about 8% of the refugee population in Uganda. Most refugees in the settlement are from the Democratic Republic of Congo with others from Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, South Sudan and Eritrea (UNHCR 2020 A). Nakivale is divided into three administrative areas and 79 villages, where refugees live according to their nationalities. Most refugees live in Base Camp, which also houses the offices of UN agencies, NGOs and the Ugandan government. There is a market, churches, event spaces, mosques, a health center and other social amenities. Refugees refer to it as "Naki-City." Project activities carried out by the Cultural Avenue

were concentrated in Base camp. Some of the project participants have since moved out of the settlement to nearby Mbarara town and Kampala.

Urban refugees in Kampala are required to register at the Refugees Desk of the office of the Prime Minister. But unlike refugees living in refugee settlements, those living in Kampala don't receive humanitarian assistance and have to fend for themselves. However, some programs and projects target urban refugees such as those of [Inter Aid Uganda](#).

Kampala was estimated to have 1.5 million inhabitants in 2016, representing 4% of the total population of Uganda (UBOS 2017, UBOS 2018). There are now over 80,000 refugees in Kampala (UNHCR 2020 A) with the largest refugee population from Somalia, found in Kisenyi, Rubaga division. Other groups include Ethiopians and Eritreans located in Mengo and Kabusu; Congolese located in Katwe, Nsambya and Makindye; South Sudanese in Kansanga, Kabalagala and Seeta; and Burundians in Namungoona and Nabulagala.



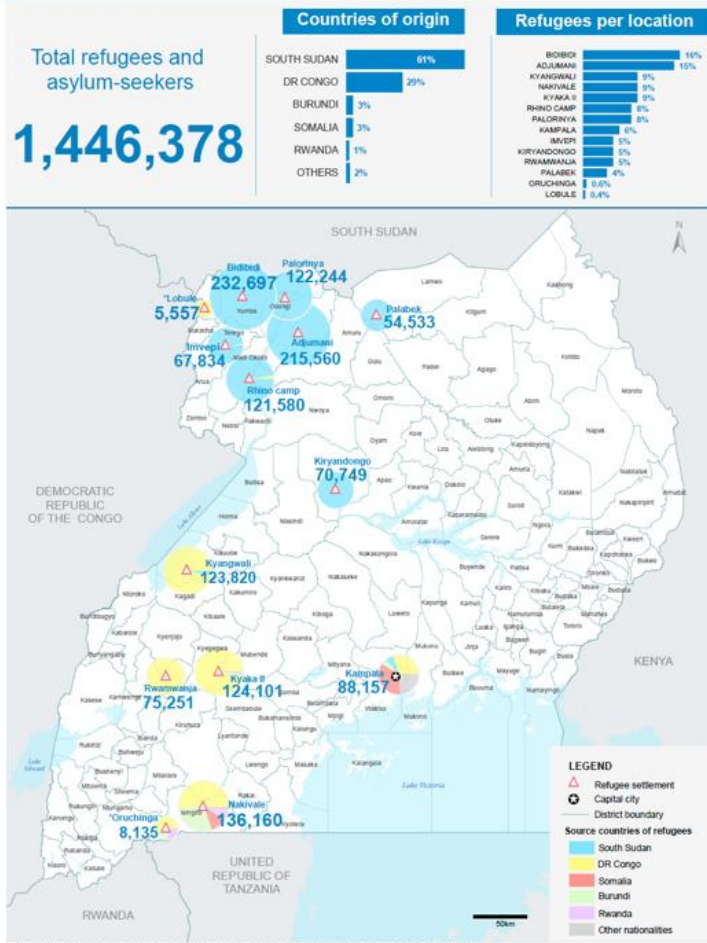


Figure 2. Map displaying the main refugee settlements across Uganda according to the source countries of the refugees. Source: UNHCR, 2020.

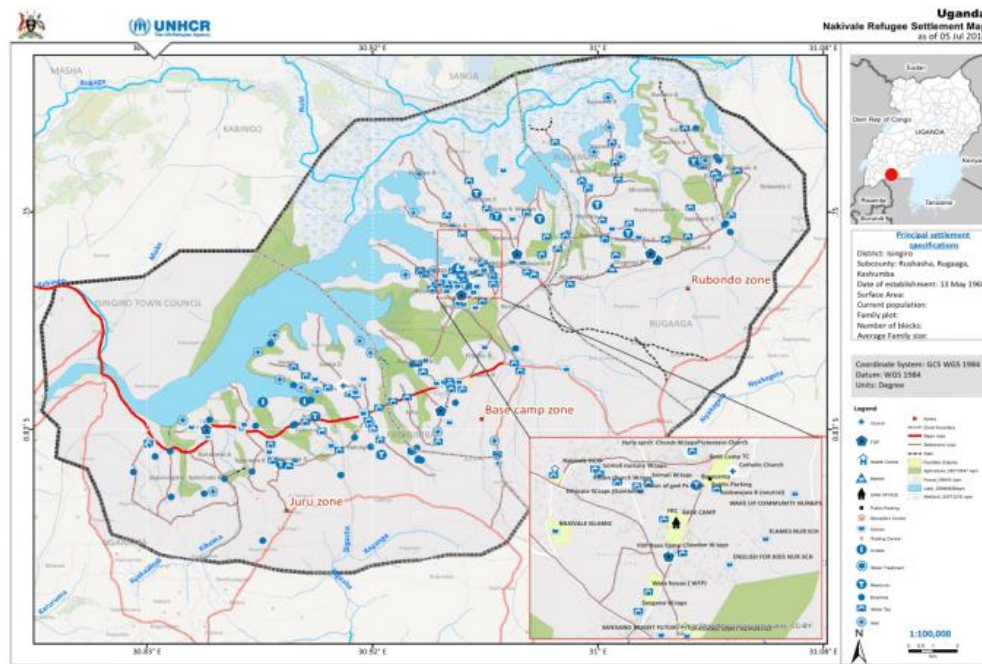


Figure 3. Map of Nakivale Refugee Settlement. Source: UNHCR, 2018.

## The Author's Position in Uppsala:

I was born in Uganda and lived most of my adult life in Kampala. In late 2015, I moved to Sweden and later enrolled in university studies. Around this time, there was heated public debate about the “European refugee crisis.” Yesser, a university friend from Syria, and I wrote a course paper on Swedish government employment policies aimed at integrating newly arrived migrants in the Swedish labor market. For the course paper, we interviewed recently arrived Syrian refugees on their experiences with Swedish employment and searching for employment. One thing that struck me, from which I drew mental parallels with my home country Uganda, was the importance of contact and interaction between refugees and the host community for integration opportunities.

In my earlier attempts to find work, one of my Swedish friends had connected me to a theatre. I didn't get work there but later used my contact to pitch the idea of using the arts for integration to the Artistic Director, Maria Björk. In collaboration with Regina Theatre, Uppsala and with support from the Swedish Institute, colleagues and I started small artistic projects that brought refugees with an interest in art and Ugandan artists together. In 2017, these small projects evolved into the creation of the Cultural Avenue, a Ugandan local organization that leverages cultural arts for peacebuilding and sustaining peace. Since then, I have divided my time between studies and family in Sweden, and my voluntary engagement with the Cultural Avenue and family and friends in Uganda. Speak Open the Conversation, the art project on which I base this case report, was the pilot that

gave way to the larger initiative, [Refugees Across Spaces](#), aimed at “breaking the isolation of refugees and stimulating integration mechanisms in their surroundings and societies through cultural arts expression.”

This case report affords me an opportunity to reflect on the project without the constraints of evaluation tools and methods that focus on quantifiable inputs and outputs. Small as it was, I believe the project contributed to refugee integration for some participants in Kampala because of its focus on and use of participatory methods.

## Methods

To gather material, I relied on my experience working on the project. I also spoke to two colleagues from the project and two refugees who participated in the project. I also had conversations with the InterAid Uganda Youth Liaison officer for the Urban Refugee Project as well as a psychosocial counsellor and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) social worker with the American Refugee Committee. Originally, I planned to carry out fieldwork between May and August 2020. However, travel restrictions due to COVID-19 made this impossible. Consequently, the discussions with interviewees took place virtually.

## The Art Project

Speak Open the Conversation was carried out in collaboration with [Regina Theatre](#), Uppsala, Sweden. Designing the pilot together with the Theatre’s Director, Maria Björk, enabled us to access funding from the Swedish Institute, [Creative Force](#). My aim was to tap into Regina’s artistic resources and good practices that could be reworked to suit the Ugandan refugee settlement context. Regina had programs where they trained refugee youths in poetry. Swedish poets connected to Regina were also at the forefront of poetry slams in predominantly migrant neighborhoods like Gottsunda, Uppsala.

The idea was to have refugee artists of all nationalities in Nakivale refugee settlement work together under the guidance of experienced Ugandan artists and Swedish poets. Ugandan artists facilitated Speak Open the Conversation activities in Nakivale in 2017, and were later joined by four Swedish poets, [Oskar Hanska](#), [Olivia Bergdahl](#), [Nils Nelson aka Henry Bowers](#), and Sam Kassel. The project aimed at linking refugee youths to the creative economy of Uganda. Therefore, Ugandan artists, with a better grasp of Uganda’s creative economy, led the project activities. Four Ugandan artists joined the facilitating team: Peter Kagayi (poet and founder of an arts organization promoting poetry in Uganda called [Kitara Nation](#)), Rashida Namulondo (actress, performance poet and founder of [The Sophie Muwanika Institute of Art for Change](#)), Lilian Nabaggalaa (dancer and



choreographer with [Batalo East](#)), and Abass Amin (spoken word artist and founder of Bonfire Uganda). For this case report, I spoke to Peter and Rashida.

Through another Ugandan artist, Kaz Kasozi, I made contact with the [Finnish Refugee Council](#), which agreed to support the project. Kaz Kasozi had previously worked with the Finnish Refugee Council to carry out music workshops in refugee settlements in Uganda. The Finnish Refugee Council, with its ground presence in the Nakivale refugee settlement, advertised for refugee artists to participate in the project. Participants had to represent the different refugee nationalities within Nakivale and also have an equal number of males and females. Unfortunately, we were not able to achieve this. We ended up with some talented refugee artists, though not all participants were artistically skilled.

We selected 25 refugee youths of different talent levels from a group of 50 refugees who auditioned. The 25 included 17 male and 8 females from 4 different nationalities (14 Congolese, 1 Ethiopians, 10 Burundians). The selected participants took part in artistic training workshops in poetry and dance that lasted for two weeks. Because the refugee participants were of diverse skill sets and different talent levels, we had to devise different ways of getting all of them to participate in the activities. Instead of attempting to teach new things, we asked them to share and present what they knew. Those that already had composed poems or ideas of poems were shown how to improve them. They were later guided to team up with other participants that were not exposed to poetry. Most of the poems were performed by groups of more than five people. At first, it was a challenge to get those that were skilled and talented to work together with those that were not. As a matter of fact, some left the training because they didn't feel that they gained from it. But as time went on, this would change. It was interesting to see refugees that didn't know each other and hadn't worked together share light conversations during breaks and come up with new performance ideas. Ugandan trainers sometimes joined different groups during the breakout sessions. Many personal and informal conversations, including those about Uganda's art sector, took place during these breaks. For example, refugees shared personal stories, asked what they could do to better their craft, and talked about where to find performance opportunities in Kampala.

Most of the refugee participants interested in dance were not skilled enough for dance performance. But artistic excellence was secondary to the intentions of the project: our focus was getting participants to work together. The dance trainer came up with simple choreography to include dancers of different skills. Most refugee participants knew movements of traditional dances of their home countries. They received training in dance movements of some traditional Ugandan dances that shared some attributes with refugees' traditional dances making them easy to learn. For example, Burundian dance movements share some similarities with dance movements of people from western

Uganda where Nakivale is located. Dance motifs from traditional dances were jointly interpreted, reworked with a contemporary touch, and integrated to create a coherent piece.

The joint performance was held at the Youth center in Nakivale refugee settlement. Refugees and Ugandans living and or working in Nakivale attended the show. Some Ugandans from Mbarara and Kampala were also invited. This whole process captures the essence of participatory art methods. Participatory art “focuses on participation of people as the central artistic medium and material, as opposed to production by a single artist, and on the artistic process, as opposed to a definite final product” (Shefik 2018: 314).



*Figure 4. Two Burundian refugee participants presenting a traditional Burundian dance to the rest of the participants.*

The project reawakened cultural connections between the refugees and the Ugandans, but also presented an opportunity to create new art and for future interactions and collaborations between the refugees and the Ugandan facilitators. Refugees also shared their talents with an audience that potentially opened opportunities for collaboration outside the settlement, particularly in Mbarara and Kampala.



*Figure 5. Students practicing dance movements in preparation for their final performance.*

## Speak Open the Conversation: Generating Relationships

While I had some experience on the refugee situation in Uganda from my studies and project conceptualizing, my colleagues did not have much information about the refugee settlements, nor had they been there in person. For example, Peter did not know much about the refugee situation in Uganda prior to Speak Open the Conversation, and what he did know was informed by news or social media that often portrayed negative stereotypes about refugees. His image of the refugee settlement and its inhabitants was that of “a disorganized slum full of dangerous criminals.” Taking part in project activities in the settlement challenged this image and got him interested in refugees.

Peter’s understanding of the refugee experience further deepened as he formed relationships with the participants of the project, something that could explain his continued engagement with refugees. For example, he says he developed a mentor-mentee relationship with Songa, one of the refugees. Through this relationship, Songa has performed at a couple of Kitara Nations events and will soon publish a poetry collection through Kitara Nation. Peter connected French-speaking Congolese Songa to Alliance Francaise, a francophone cultural exchange organization between Uganda and France based in Kampala.





Figure 6. Peter ([left](#)) is sharing his expertise with Songa ([right](#)) and another refugee participant during an informal breakout poetry session.

As part of his continued engagement with refugees, Peter recruited Acha, an urban Congolese refugee, into Kitara Nation. Acha is a budding poet mentored at Kitara Nation who wrote an impressive poetry collection that illuminates her refugee experience and was later published. Moreover, her poetry explores and adds voice to other important universal themes including feminism, religion, and democracy. In my discussions with Peter, he suggested that Acha's perspectives on these themes magnifies the value she brings to Kitara Nation and by extension, the host country, Uganda. This value has an influence on the host communities' perspectives on refugees, potentially making them more accepting.

This is one of the reasons Peter encouraged and facilitated the publication of Acha's poetry collection. Peter envisages that Acha's value, projected through her poetry book, will be shared in different spaces including performance venues, schools, and universities, empowering the host community to see the value refugees bring, which furthers refugee integration. Acha, too, felt her refugee status negatively affected her interactions with classmates at the secondary school she attended, but her engagement with her church and Kitara Nation brought her into contact with people with whom she felt connected and comfortable. By including young people of refugee backgrounds in Kitara Nation, Peter affords the members of Kitara Nation an opportunity to access firsthand information about the refugee situation. Appreciation of the refugee situation then helps

hosts to be more receptive. With this new attitude, they potentially influence other people outside Kitara Nation to do the same, such as their relatives, fellow students, or coworkers.

Like Peter, Rashida's first engagement with refugees from refugee settlements was through Speak Open the Conversation. Rashida has mentioned to me that her interaction with refugees not only contributed to her individual personal growth, but also her craft as an artist. Rashida's image of the refugee situation in Uganda, previously informed by TV, was that of helpless and suffering people. In contrast, she observed that the base camp where activities of Speak Open the Conversation took place could easily pass for a trading center in any village in Uganda. Refugee artists in the settlement are not just "suffering and helpless people" but are talented as artists. However, the lack of means to access art spaces compounded by the distance between Kampala and Nakivale limits their engagement in the arts. That being said, firsthand information about the art market could support access to opportunities. When Rashida organized the Schools Theatre Festival in Kampala, an event at which four refugees who participated in Speak Open the Conversation were invited to participate, she exposed these refugee participants to some of her artistic circles. It's from these circles that these refugees gained access to information about other spaces and opportunities in Kampala. For example, one of the refugees got an exhibition space for his artwork in Kampala, and two others were recruited to participate in a talent singing competition.

Songa is one of the refugee artists who benefitted from participating in Rashida's school's theatre festival. Songa was not among the young people originally contacted to participate in Speak Open the Conversation, but his curiosity led him to the venue where auditions for the refugee participants were held. There he met other artists from Nakivale, the majority of whom he didn't know before. Even when they all lived in the same settlement, some of the refugees participating in the project were not known to each other given the set-up of refugee Nakivale refugee settlement (see "Location" section). The art project brought refugees of different nationalities, most of whom were not known to each other, to collaborate and work together.

## Right Contacts, Conducive Environment

From my experience of the project, some of the refugee participants had previously not come into contact with Ugandan nationals apart from those who worked exclusively with refugees or in the settlement. This limited refugees' chances of getting connected to opportunities outside the settlement. Of course, mere contact with hosts does not guarantee that connections turn into opportunities. Rather, contact with the *right* people in a *conducive environment* is necessary. Refugee participants acknowledge that



Kampala's art scene offers a larger artistic market for them in comparison to nearby smaller urban areas. Though not originally deliberate, the fact that the Ugandan trainers were artists from Kampala and that project activities employed participatory methods created a combination of *right* contacts and *conducive environment* for interactions to support refugee integration. I can confidently suggest that refugee participants were able to access firsthand information and opportunities in Kampala's art scene because of their interactions with Ugandan trainers during the project.

The Ugandan artists have continued to engage with refugee artists beyond the project, albeit with challenges emanating from resource constraints and the distance between Nakivale refugee settlement and Kampala. Luckily, through social media, some of the friendly and artistic relations established through interaction during the project continue to flourish. Through these relationships, some of the refugee artists were able to access artistic platforms like performance venues, performance events and cultural organizations in Kampala. For example, two female and two male refugee artists from Speak Open the Conversation were selected to participate in the Schools Theatre Festival in Kampala. The Schools Theatre Festival, a week-long peace-building camp organized by Rashida, one of the Ugandan trainers, offered cultural exchange exercises where students and youth of different backgrounds worked with professional artists to adapt personal stories into plays for the festival theatre production.

## Nakivale to Kampala

A couple of months after Speak Open the Conversation activities in Nakivale, chance struck when Alliance Francaise put out a call for poets. Songa and three of his colleagues who attended project activities applied to perform. They successfully made the cut but were informed that there was no money to facilitate their transport from Nakivale to Kampala to perform. Counting on his friendship with Peter, Songa felt comfortable enough to request for some money from Peter to travel to Kampala. Peter gave him the money. It's common practice for budding artists to be paid through "exposure" but Songa received a modest payment at Alliance Francaise. He also made some connections during his first performance there that he later exploited and shared with colleagues in Nakivale.

For example, in 2018 he performed at the "Kampala Geopolitics Conference," in part organized by the French Embassy. He also got a six-month contract to hold bi-monthly poetry sessions with French language students at Alliance Francaise. Songa travelled between Nakivale and Kampala to hold these sessions. Rather than fully settling in Kampala, Songa continues to live in Nakivale and continuously engages in the Kampala art scene through the connections and artistic relationships he has established there. These connections not only provide him with access to information about artistic

opportunities, but also overnight accommodation in Kampala when needed. Songa is reluctant to settle in Kampala because of the challenges of self-settlement in Uganda (see “Location” section). He also says that he is engaged in many other entrepreneurial activities in Nakivale that he does not want to abandon. Among the activities he is involved in in Nakivale is a poetry performance group that includes some of the colleagues he worked with in Speak Open the Conversation.

When Songa hears of artistic opportunities that he is unable to take up, he recommends them to colleagues from the camp or Congolese refugees in Kampala. For example, in 2019 he was asked to perform at the Kampala Geopolitics Conference. Unfortunately, he was scheduled to be away in Kenya. He subsequently recommended another Congolese refugee to perform at the event. One of his colleagues, now self-settled in Kampala, has facilitated some of the bi-monthly poetry sessions at Alliance. He has put some urban self-settled refugees that he knew through the Congolese community in Kampala in touch with Peter. Songa’s relation with Peter that started in Nakivale is a channel through which other urban refugees ended up gaining access to the arts market in Kampala. One might argue that Songa is the exception, but the point here is simply that Speak Open the Conversation afforded Songa an environment to generate relations that he harnessed to access opportunities in Kampala. Other refugees, both from Nakivale and Kampala, have also indirectly gained access to opportunities on the basis of Songa’s participation Speak Open the Conversation.



*Figure 7. Songa performing at the Kampala Schools Theatre Festival.*

## Conclusion

Refugee integration interventions are predominantly driven by the understanding that integration is about access to rights, resources, and opportunities for refugees. Active mixing between refugees and hosts is also put forward as an essential element of integration. As Rashida points out, however, simply “mixing” people does not necessarily support integration, especially where this mixing does little to bring interaction that generates understanding and good relations between refugees and hosts.

This case illustrates that participatory artistic practice offers a conducive environment for interactions that generate relations supportive of refugee integration. In the context of refugee settlements, this environment connects refugee settlements and urban areas. These connections support urban refugee integration through the multiplier effect of new, strong relationships. Connecting refugees in refugee settlements to artists in urban areas opens a window for refugees in the settlements to access opportunities in urban settings that self-settled refugees can also tap into. Host country artists can also harness opportunities through artistic collaborations with refugees in the settlement. This will generate more relationships that will support sustainable refugee integration hinged on understanding between the refugees and the host community.

Fine tuning and streamlining the approach employed by the Cultural Avenue into refugee integration policy will allow refugees like Songa and Acha to gain access to artistic circles, positively impacting sustainable refugee integration through the multiplier effect their involvement in the arts markets brings.

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## About the RIT Project

The Refugees in Towns (RIT) project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop a deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

## Our goals are twofold

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Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

## For more on RIT

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On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.