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Female refugees from South Sudan in the Palabek Refugee Settlement make chip stones for construction and to earn a living, in northern Uganda. The majority of these women have received training in making chip stones as a means of becoming self-reliant. (Tonny Onyulo)

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Palabek Refugee Camp, Uganda — October 4, 2024

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Inside the wriggly tin walls of a small, smoke-filled kiosk, Joseph Deng Chol and his wife scoop beans onto plates warmed with freshly baked flatbreads, grateful to now have the resources to run their own business.

Chol, a South Sudanese refugee, opened his food stall in August 2020 after enrolling in a training course sponsored by Finn Church Aid, a Finnish nonprofit formed out of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland that now operates independently and receives funding from UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency.

"With the profits I generate, I can now provide for my family, pay for my children's education, and even set aside savings for unforeseen emergencies such as illness," said Chol, 38, who fled his country's civil war with his wife and three kids in 2018 after their village was attacked by rebel and government soldiers.

Chol is one of more than [125,000](#) displaced people living in the Palorinya Refugee Settlement in remote northern Uganda. The camp was established in 2016 when many of its residents began fleeing violence in South Sudan. Another nearby settlement, called Palabek, has hosted more than 69,000 refugees since 2017.

Uganda hosts the highest number of refugees in Africa and the third largest globally, according to UNHCR. Most of the over 1.6 million refugees are fleeing South Sudan, while others arrive from Congo, Somalia and Burundi. They grapple with significant challenges, including limited access to quality education, restricted employment prospects and inadequate access to health care. Many find meeting basic needs, including obtaining food and water, a daily struggle.

Responding to the crisis, a coalition of church-linked organizations is providing education, skills training and farming equipment to help refugees at the camps participate in the local economy and become self-reliant.

Nancy Machot, a 35-year-old mother of four who also fled South Sudan in 2018, credits the support of Catholic Salesian missionaries for helping her cultivate and harvest tomatoes, vegetables and groundnuts, which she sells to a local grocer.

"I no longer depend on donations to survive as a refugee. Instead, I can sell the food I harvest to provide for my family and educate my children," Machot said.

The Salesians of Don Bosco, a Catholic order founded in Italy and funded by the church, run a handful of schools in the Palabek camp that educate more than a thousand children, including Machot's.

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The Rev. Lazar Arasu, director of Don Bosco Palabek Refugee Services and a missionary from India, has led the organization's effort to build schools and vocational training centers. In 2020, the Salesians started a farming program that provides funds and resources for refugees to start small businesses, including planting and tending small vegetable and fruit gardens on land leased from local Ugandans. The program includes agricultural training to help farmers improve their techniques for planting, irrigation, crop rotation and harvesting. Equipment, from hoes to fertilizers, is also provided.

In addition to generating income, the project has helped refugees grow their own food, complementing donations from the World Food Program.

"We are implementing these projects to improve the livelihoods of refugees so that they are not solely reliant on donations," Arasu said.

Don Bosco also offers spiritual and psychosocial support to those who have experienced the trauma of war.

Finn Church Aid encourages entrepreneurship through its vocational training in hairdressing, construction, sandal making, carpentry and tailoring. The business program includes how to develop a business plan, negotiate with suppliers, market goods and provide customer service, along with leadership training and financial and business management.

For younger refugees, Finn Church Aid offers scholarships for high school, college and university education.

Michael Tayebwa, a local Finn Church Aid staffer, said many scholarship recipients become competitive for job opportunities, and just as importantly, avoid getting involved in criminal activities in the camp, entering early marriages and having unplanned pregnancies.

Pastor John Deng of Christ Ministry Church, who ministers at the Palorinya settlement, estimated that thousands of refugees have become fully independent from aid because of the programs.

"They are living their lives normally, just like locals," he said.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. [View the full series](#).