

BEHIND THE RYVU SURVEY: A PROJECT OFFICER'S PERSPECTIVE

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1 survey

12 languages

184 questions

3,133 answers

The RYVU project has set ambitious goals from its inception and one of the most ambitious has certainly been to carry out a large-scale survey to map the volunteering experiences of youth refugees in Uganda. I became involved in the RYVU project in November 2020, in the role of Project Officer, working mostly in a project management role.

The challenge for me therefore was understanding how and why the team were going to carry out such a large-scale survey. How were we going to do it and why was there a need to do so? This survey, to my knowledge, was the first of its kind in terms of the context where it was developed, its targeted participants and its scale. My previous research focused on human rights law, meaning this fell far beyond the research methods I had utilised previously.

The process of creating the survey pushed myself and, to an extent, the whole team out of our comfort zones to really think about what we hoped to get out of the project and how to develop the most appropriate survey tool to help in this process.

It was a great way for me to gain an in-depth understanding of the RYVU project as I really had to comprehend the kind of questions we needed to come up with in order to have the best chance of creating a rich dataset not only about the experiences of youth refugee volunteers in Uganda, but also more broadly about local volunteering experiences in the Global South.

The whole RYVU team was involved in different elements of the survey design, but the survey was conducted in-person in our case-study locations by the project's two Ugandan researchers, Dr Robert Turyamureeba, Dr Moses Okech, and a team of 71 enumerators.

Preparing the Pilot

In September 2020, to prepare for the full survey, the research team visited the Youth Advisory groups we had established in each field site to discuss how the survey might work and the challenges presented by the Covid19 pandemic. Our young advisors provided fantastic input about people's lives, livelihoods and volunteering during the pandemic, as well as helping us think through how to design the survey.

The Pilot Survey

The team carried out a pilot survey from November to December 2020, giving us a crucial opportunity to reflect on the survey before we began the larger undertaking. In terms of logistics and planning, it gave the research team an insight into what they could expect once the full survey was rolled out. Simple lessons were learned through the pilot that led to an improved survey flow reflecting concerns raised by respondents.

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In terms of field experiences, it also allowed the Ugandan team to strengthen capacities of the fantastic team of enumerators (most of them young refugees themselves) – and it highlighted simple, practical issues such as the need to provide umbrellas as one particularly rainy day brought proceedings to a complete standstill.

The pilot was particularly relevant given that the project had been conceptualised long before the COVID-19 pandemic arose. It provided a critically important opportunity to understand the impact the pandemic could have on our ability to engage with enumerators and those taking part in the survey.

It wasn't all about process though. The pilot helped us to identify questions that worked and those that were confusing or that perhaps didn't capture the data that we intended them to. It also gave an opportunity to address issues of language. The final survey was translated into 12 languages (English, French, Swahili, Somali, Arabic, Luo, Dinka, Bari, Nuer, Runyakitara, Kinyabwisha, Kirundi) and the pilot allowed us to understand the questions that translated well from English, and those that did not and which could cause confusion or ambiguity.

On the right terms

From the outset, one of the aspects that I struggled to grasp the most was how to ensure that the terminology we used was understandable in the context of the survey. What do we really mean when we say 'volunteering'? What does it mean to volunteer? And what forms of volunteering are we hoping to find out about? Do we only want to find out about formal forms of volunteering? Or are we hoping to find out about other forms of volunteering? And how can we capture these informalities through a survey?

Similarly, regarding skills, what do we mean by 'skills'? The challenge with many of the survey questions was understanding both what options respondents should have to each question but also to know when there were so many options that it could become confusing or counterproductive.

The survey required us all to think much harder about the contexts in which volunteering is taking place and how these differ from those where it has been researched before. Providing a list of occupations that reflected the contextual realities of Uganda was more challenging than first thought as existing occupation categories simply didn't seem to capture the realities of young refugees' lives.

A focus on youth volunteering

The survey was aimed at people between the ages of 15 and 24 and one of the main challenges was how to ensure that we can interview enough people within this age range when the enumerators would travel to households at random. How could we make sure we reached our target group and were there particular times of the day when we were more likely to find our survey subjects at home?

The challenge differed between urban setting and settlements, and we needed to be attentive to how spaces are organised and where young people are in those spaces. Prior to working on the survey, I had not really contemplated how recruiting participants in a particular public setting might exclude young people that aren't in those spaces and how this could potentially impact the gender balance of survey respondents.

Moving forward

The full survey took place between February and March 2021 and we were able to record over 3,100 answers. With the survey data collection now complete we are excited to start processing and analysing the data to find out what it will tell us. For me, the survey has provided a great avenue through which to become immersed in the RYVU project and to gain an oversight in what we are hoping to achieve through our research.

The survey is the result of hours and hours of work across the RYVU team. We are hopeful that time spent agonising over a particular question or word will have paid off and that the incredible effort of the research team in Uganda and of the enumerators will have provided us with rich data capable of truly furthering research into the role that volunteering plays in young refugees' livelihoods and employability.

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