

24 February 2026



**FINAL**

**EVALUATION REPORT**

**EXTERNAL IMPACT EVALUATION**



**SUBMITTED BY**

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Full meaning
AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HINGO	Humanitarian International Non Governmental Platform
KII	Key informant interviews
LH	Learning Hub
IRC	International Rescue Committee
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
REF	Refugee Engagement Forum
SCI	Save the Children International in Uganda
U-Learn	Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability, and Research Network
U-RIL	Uganda Response Innovation Lab
VIG	Vashi Impact Group

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of an independent external impact evaluation of the **U-Learn Programme**, a multi-year, consortium-led initiative designed to strengthen Uganda's refugee response through learning, applied research, and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP). Implemented from 2020–2025 under the leadership of **Save the Children**, in partnership with the International Rescue Committee and IMPACT Initiatives, U-Learn operates as a system-level public good rather than a direct service delivery programme. Its core objective is to improve outcomes for refugees and host communities by enabling humanitarian and development actors to make more evidence-based, accountable, and coordinated decisions.

### Purpose and Scope

The evaluation examined U-Learn's relevance, effectiveness, localisation, inclusion, value for money, sustainability, and contribution to system-level change across national and settlement levels. It covered the full implementation period and focused on priority refugee settlements and national coordination spaces. The evaluation drew on systematic desk review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, outcome harvesting, and contribution pathway analysis, with particular attention to last-mile effects and decision-making influence.

### Key Findings

#### Relevance and Positioning

The evaluation found that U-Learn is widely perceived as highly relevant to Uganda's refugee response architecture. Stakeholders consistently described U-Learn as filling a critical system gap by providing neutral convening, credible evidence, and structured learning across sectors and actors. Its positioning outside direct implementation enabled it to build trust and legitimacy among donors, government, UN agencies, INGOs, local organisations, and refugee representatives.

#### Effectiveness and Evidence Uptake

U-Learn's learning, research, and AAP products are widely trusted and largely demand-driven, responding to information gaps identified by actors at national and settlement levels. Uptake was strongest where evidence aligned with formal decision points such as strategy reviews, funding discussions, or coordination processes, and where learning was accompanied by facilitated interpretation. Dissemination without follow-up was less likely to translate into concrete decisions, highlighting the importance of sense-making and signalling alongside evidence generation.

#### Accountability to Affected Populations

AAP was identified as one of U-Learn's most distinctive contributions, particularly through support to the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF), feedback mechanisms, and partner capacity building. However, the evaluation found that accountability outcomes were most meaningful where feedback loops were visibly closed and where community input was linked to settlement and national-level decisions. In several contexts, AAP practices remained reliant on external facilitation, raising sustainability considerations.

## Localisation and Inclusion

U-Learn has expanded participation of refugee-led and community-based actors in learning and coordination spaces. Nevertheless, participation has not always translated into agenda-setting power or influence. Structural barriers including funding constraints, compliance requirements, and power asymmetries continue to limit equitable localisation. Inclusion efforts were most effective where practical design choices (timing, accessibility, facilitation, language) were intentionally embedded rather than treated as logistical add-ons.

## Value for Money

The evaluation found that U-Learn demonstrates strong value for money as a lean, system-oriented platform that leverages partnerships, shared infrastructure, and co-funding. Value was maximised when activities focused on clear system needs and adapted to changing contexts, and was diluted when new initiatives risked duplicating existing tools.

## Sustainability and Future Readiness

While U-Learn has generated substantial system assets—including learning products, evidence repositories, accountability mechanisms, and convening models—long-term impact depends on how these functions are sustained, transitioned, or embedded beyond the current funding cycle. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of proactive transition planning, protection of institutional memory, and careful stewardship of the U-Learn brand to avoid fragmentation or loss of trust.

## Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation concludes that U-Learn has made a significant and credible contribution to strengthening Uganda's refugee response at a system level. Its greatest value lies not in individual products, but in its ability to connect evidence, learning, and accountability to decision-making across actors and levels. As funding environments tighten and coordination demands increase, U-Learn's role as a trusted learning, evidence, and accountability infrastructure becomes even more critical.

## Recommendations

The report presents ten forward-looking recommendations that focus on:

- Strengthening pathways from learning to decision-making
- Enhancing prioritisation, synthesis, and signalling of needs-based evidence
- Deepening localisation beyond participation toward influence and shared decision-making
- Embedding equity and inclusion through practical design choices
- Protecting and institutionalising AAP as a system function
- Enhancing value for money through focus, leverage, and adaptability
- Actively managing sustainability, transition, and closure readiness
- Safeguarding the U-Learn brand as a system asset
- Informing adaptation rather than replication in other contexts
- Positioning learning and accountability as cost-saving, risk-reducing investments

Together, these recommendations are intended to support U-Learn and its partners in consolidating gains, managing transition responsibly, and informing future system-level learning and accountability initiatives in Uganda and comparable humanitarian contexts.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background

Uganda hosts one of the largest refugee populations globally, with closer to 2 million refugees living across multiple settlements. This protracted and large-scale displacement places sustained pressure on humanitarian systems to deliver coordinated, accountable, and evidence-based responses over the long term. In this context, the effectiveness of the refugee response increasingly depends not only on the scale and quality of services delivered, but also on the strength of systems that generate learning, use evidence, and meaningfully integrate refugee and host community perspectives into decision-making, particularly as needs diversify and resources become more constrained.

U-Learn was established in 2020 to respond to these system-level challenges by strengthening learning, research, and accountability across Uganda’s refugee response. This evaluation, commissioned by Save the Children International and conducted by the Vashi Impact Group, assesses the relevance and contribution of U-Learn within this complex humanitarian context.

## 1.2. Project Summary

Type of study	External Impact Evaluation
Name of the project	U-LEARN
Project Start and End dates	2020-2025
Project duration	5.5 years
Project locations:	National level and all refugee-hosting districts
Thematic areas	Self-reliance, Participation, Climate and energy, Humanitarian Development Nexus.
Sub themes	Research, learning, AAP
Donor	UKaid
Estimated beneficiaries	Humanitarian response actors and Refugees
Overall objective of the project	To improve outcomes for refugees and host communities by promoting evidence-based approaches, fostering learning, and amplifying refugee voices, distinguishing itself through a strategic focus on transformation at the response level.

## 1.3. Brief description of the U-Learn Project

The Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability, and Research Network (U-Learn) was launched in 2020 as a multi-year initiative funded primarily by UKaid to strengthen the effectiveness and responsiveness of Uganda’s refugee response. Rather than delivering services directly, U-Learn was designed as a system-level intervention to improve how evidence is generated, shared, and used, and how refugee and host community perspectives inform decision-making across the response. To address persistent gaps in

evidence use, learning, and accountability, U-Learn operates through three closely coordinated components, each led by a specialised consortium partner. The Learning Hub, implemented by the Uganda Refugee Response Innovation Lab (U-RIL), facilitates cross-sectoral learning through the curation, convening, and dissemination of evidence. The Research component, led by IMPACT Initiatives, conducts annual mixed-methods assessments to generate timely and actionable analysis on refugee needs, programme effectiveness, and systemic barriers, with research priorities identified collaboratively with key stakeholders. The Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) component, coordinated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), strengthens two-way communication and accountability through support to the Refugee Engagement Forum, capacity-building initiatives, community feedback processes, and, since 2025, increased attention to Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (PSEAH). The Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) is a response-level platform supported by the U-Learn programme to strengthen meaningful refugee participation within Uganda's refugee response. It brings together refugee representatives from different settlements to engage with humanitarian actors, government stakeholders, and coordination bodies, enabling two-way dialogue on policy, programming, and service delivery. Supported under U-Learn's Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) component, the REF functions as a bridge between settlement-level experiences and system-level learning and decision-making, ensuring that refugee perspectives are consolidated, elevated, and reflected within broader coordination and accountability processes.

U-Learn operates nationally across all 13 major refugee settlements in Uganda, hosting refugees primarily from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Rwanda, and Burundi. While maintaining a national footprint, more intensive engagement has been concentrated at national level in Kampala and in Palabek, Adjumani (Nuyamanzi), and Nakivale. Certain activities fell outside U-Learn's core design and are excluded from this evaluation, including support provided to the Humanitarian INGO Forum (HINGO), IMPACT's 2024 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA), and the discontinued Independent Verification component. As U-Learn approached the conclusion of its fifth year in December 2025, alongside discussions on a short-costed extension to March 2026, an independent external evaluation was commissioned to assess the programme's relevance, effectiveness, and impact across its full implementation lifecycle. Drawing on programme documentation, including quarterly and annual reviews and U-Learn's recent self-assessment, complemented by primary data, the evaluation examined whether and how U-Learn's three components have influenced policy and programmatic decisions, strengthened humanitarian practice, and benefitted refugees and host communities.

## **1.4. Overview of the evaluation**

### **1.4.1. Purpose and Objectives of the Evaluation**

The purpose of the external impact evaluation of the U-Learn programme was to thoroughly examine and document the influence and impact of U-Learn's interventions on the refugee response in Uganda through its research, learning, and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) activities. The specific objectives of the impact evaluation were:

- i. To trace and illustrate the influence and impact of U-Learn's interventions through the identification and documentation of examples of adaptations in the humanitarian response, including last-mile stories.

- ii. To generate forward-looking recommendations for improvement and scale, both for the Uganda refugee response and potential other humanitarian contexts.
- iii. To support advocacy efforts of stakeholders on learning, research and AAP in humanitarian responses ensuring the voices and needs of crisis-affected communities are consistently integrated into policy, practice, and program design.

### **1.4.2. Scope**

The scope of the evaluation covered the entire five-year implementation period from 2020 to 2025. The evaluation reviewed U-Learn’s performance and influence at multiple levels; from national institutional stakeholders to refugee settlement level actors and affected communities. It assessed the combined effects of the three consortium components: Learning Hub, Research, and AAP. The evaluation excludes activities that fell outside the core U-Learn design, such as the Multisectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA), Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) due to their recent inclusion, and other contractually supported workstreams, such as support provided to HINGO. Furthermore, the evaluation took into consideration the outcomes of the internally conducted evaluation, ensuring that there were no repetitions. The data collection prioritised collecting diverse stakeholder perspectives at settlement levels in districts where multiple U-Learn components have been active, specifically Palabek, Adjumani (Nuyamanzi), Nakivale, and Rhino Camp, as well as at the national level. This enabled a multidimensional assessment that complemented prior self-evaluation findings with an independent perspective and externally validated.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Evaluation Approach

VIG applied a participatory, technically rigorous, and contextually grounded qualitative evaluation approach to assess the impact of the U-Learn programme in Uganda. The evaluation was designed to examine system-level influence, learning uptake, and accountability practices through qualitative inquiry, rather than through measurement of quantitative outputs or outcomes. Data generation and analysis drew on systematic desk review, key informant interviews, and group consultations with national- and settlement-level stakeholders. The approach integrated outcome harvesting and contribution pathway mapping to identify and assess observable changes linked to U-Learn’s learning, research, and accountability functions, alongside retrospective reflection on how evidence was generated, shared, and used over time. “Last-mile” stories were incorporated to illustrate how U-Learn-supported evidence and platforms contributed to decision-making, coordination, and participation within the refugee response. All the data went through triangulation to ensure alignment with donor expectations and the programme’s learning objectives.

The evaluation is guided by a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates the [OECD DAC criteria](#)<sup>1</sup> alongside GESI and [intersectionality](#)<sup>2</sup> frameworks. This combination ensures that relevance, effectiveness, equity, sustainability, and inclusivity underpin every phase of the evaluation. Additionally, the [localisation assessment framework](#)<sup>3</sup> was applied to assess the programme’s implementation pathway, enabling a nuanced analysis of how U-Learn’s interventions have influenced diverse groups, particularly refugees, host communities, women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

[Outcome Harvesting](#)<sup>4</sup> (OH) was conducted to capture outcomes across three levels: policy, programming, and community. The process was explicitly informed by criteria of effectiveness, equity, and inclusion. Data collection methods for OH included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, field level verification of findings against documented sources and validation workshops with key stakeholders. Findings generated through OH directly informed [Contribution Pathway Mapping](#)<sup>5</sup>. This qualitative process engaged government representatives, programme staff, community leaders, and last mile project participants to examine causal pathways linking U-Learn activities to observed changes. Through this lens, the evaluation unpacked the mechanisms of influence and contextual factors shaping outcomes. “[Stories of Change](#)<sup>6</sup>” or “last-mile” stories were also identified using Outcome Harvesting and the [Most Significant Change methodology](#)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (n.d.). *DAC Criteria for Evaluating Development Assistance*.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women. (2022). *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit*.

<sup>3</sup> [Contribution analysis | Better Evaluation](#)

<sup>4</sup> Wilson-Grau, R., & Britt, H. (2013). *Outcome harvesting*. Ford Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Mayne, J. (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect* (ILAC Brief No. 16). Institutional Learning and Change Initiative.

<sup>6</sup> [Stories of change | Better Evaluation](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Most significant change | Better Evaluation](#)

A Value for Money (VfM) assessment, based on the OPM VfM framework, which builds on [FCDO's Four E's](#)<sup>8</sup> was conducted. This was embedded within the overall evaluation framework by combining quantitative, qualitative, and secondary data. Quantitative analysis assessed cost-efficiency ratios and unit costs across activities and locations, while qualitative insights from key informant interviews from internal stakeholders captured perceptions of value, fairness, and effectiveness. Secondary financial and programme records provided contextual grounding, enabled benchmarking, and supported trend analysis over time. Together, this integrated approach ensured that the VfM analysis reflected both financial performance and the sustainability of inclusive outcomes.

## **2.2. Data Sources and Data Collection Methods**

### **Secondary desk review**

A secondary desk review was undertaken to triangulate findings from the primary qualitative data, strengthening analytical rigour and contextual accuracy. This involved a systematic review of U-Learn programme documentation, including programme design documents, annual reports, learning briefs, case studies and success stories, and monitoring reports. These materials were reviewed alongside external literature such as policy frameworks, and sectoral studies on refugee responses in Uganda from sources such as UNHCR, REACH, ALNAP, and the World Bank. The desk review was structured to align with OECD DAC criteria and GESI principles, and it provided baseline and trend data to validate, complement, or challenge evidence generated through the primary data collection.

### **Sampling Approach**

The evaluation employed purposive sampling to identify information-rich participants with direct knowledge of, or engagement with, the U-Learn programme. Participants were selected based on their roles, level of involvement, and ability to provide insight into U-Learn's learning, research, and accountability functions across strategic, operational, and community levels. Stakeholder categories were defined in advance, drawing on the stakeholder mapping undertaken during the inception phase, to ensure representation across consortium partners, donors, government actors, humanitarian organisations, coordination bodies, private sector actors, and refugee and community-level representatives. Mobilisation and identification of participants were facilitated through U-Learn partners and consortium members, who supported access to relevant stakeholders at national and settlement levels while adhering to the predefined sampling criteria. For focus group discussions, participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling, with mobilisation similarly supported by U-Learn partners and local counterparts. This ensured appropriate inclusion across gender, age groups, and community roles, while enabling safe and contextually appropriate engagement at settlement level. This approach was appropriate given the evaluation's qualitative design and its focus on understanding contribution, influence, and system-level change rather than statistical representativeness.

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford Policy Management (OPM) & UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). (2017). *DFID's Approach to Value for Money*.

## Key Informant Interviews

A total of 37 KIIs were conducted to reflect the diverse actors involved in or influencing the U-Learn programme. Informants included consortium partners, donors, international NGOs and UN agencies, private sector actors, and representatives from government ministries and coordination bodies. Community-level perspectives were captured through interviews with community-based organisations and local NGOs. In addition, KIIs with Refugee Engagement Forum members and technical working groups provided insight into coordination, evidence uptake, and policy alignment. All KIIs were conducted using semi-structured interview guides aligned with the evaluation framework. With informed consent, interviews were audio recorded where possible to ensure accuracy, and detailed notes were taken in all cases. In instances where recording was not feasible or appropriate, comprehensive contemporaneous notes were used. These materials formed the primary qualitative dataset for subsequent analysis.

**Table 1: Number of interviewed community-level key informants**

Stakeholders	Number interviewed
Consortium partner	6
Donors	4
Local NGOs, CBOs, RLOs	7
INGO	8
National NGO	5
Coordination Bodies & Sector Working Groups	4
Private sector	2
Government	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>

## Focus Group Discussions

FGDs were used to capture shared experiences, collective perspectives, and community-level dynamics that were less likely to emerge through individual interviews. Separate FGDs were conducted with distinct participant groups to promote comfort, openness, and inclusion, including men and women, and youth. Gender-segregated and age-appropriate FGDs enabled participants to speak freely about sensitive issues, particularly those related to access to services, community decision-making, and barriers to inclusion. Key areas of discussion included the relevance of the programme to community priorities, perceived changes in the quality and accessibility of services, shifts in community leadership and participation, and perceptions of sustainability. All the planned FGDs (8) were held across the 3 settlements.

**Table 2: Number of FGDs conducted in the settlements**

District	Target KIIs	Achieved
Nakivale	2	2
Rhino Camp	2	2
Adjumani	2	2
Palabek	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>

### **2.3. Logistics and Fieldwork**

VIG engaged experienced National Researchers to lead field-level implementation of the U-Learn evaluation in close coordination with the Principal Investigator, supported by an Operations Manager with expertise in managing data collection in refugee-hosting settlements. Together, they ensured that data collection tools were adapted to settlement-level realities and administered ethically in line with Save the Children and U-Learn safeguarding protocols. Fieldwork was conducted by trained VIG National Researchers (NRs) and VIG internal team under the supervision of the Operations Manager. During the recruitment process, priority was given to individuals familiar with Palabek, Rhino Camp, Nakivale, and Adjumani, fluent in relevant local languages, and experienced in refugee response and qualitative data collection. Save the Children and other U-Learn consortium field staff supported access and mobilisation throughout the fieldwork process.

#### **Data Analysis Approaches**

Qualitative data generated through KIIs and FGDs were analysed using a structured, thematic approach consistent with the evaluation's qualitative and contribution-focused design. Interview recordings were transcribed where available, and all interview and FGD notes were cleaned and consolidated into an analysis dataset. The analysis combined deductive coding, informed by the evaluation framework (including relevance, effectiveness, localisation, accountability, and learning uptake), with inductive coding to capture emergent themes arising from stakeholder experiences. Outcome harvesting principles were applied to identify observable changes in practices, coordination, decision-making, and participation that could be plausibly linked to U-Learn's interventions. Contribution pathway mapping was then used to examine how U-Learn's learning platforms, research outputs, and accountability mechanisms contributed to these changes across national and settlement levels. "Last-mile" stories were drawn from the qualitative data to illustrate how evidence and learning translated into action in specific contexts. Triangulation across stakeholder groups and data sources strengthened the credibility and validity of the findings.

### **2.4. Ethical Considerations**

VIG upheld the highest standards of ethics, inclusion, and cultural respect throughout participant engagement, in line with Save the Children's ethics and safeguarding policies. All participant selection and sampling processes were conducted fairly and sensitively, with participation entirely voluntary and based on informed willingness and availability. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through clear explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and intended use of data, provided in languages participants understood. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Where literacy barriers existed, consent was provided via thumbprint in the presence of an independent witness. Signed consent forms were securely stored and accessible only to authorised research personnel. Confidentiality and data protection were strictly maintained. No personal identifiers were recorded; participants were assigned unique codes, with code keys stored securely and separately.

KIIs and FGDs were conducted in private settings to safeguard privacy. Cultural sensitivity and non-discrimination were ensured through gender-appropriate facilitation and consideration of participants' mobility, caregiving responsibilities, and work constraints. Flexible scheduling, travel support, and interpretation services were provided

where required, including for participants from remote locations. Physical data (consent forms and notes) were stored in locked cabinets, while electronic data (audio files, transcripts, and datasets) were stored on password-protected, encrypted devices with restricted access. Shared datasets excluded identifying information, and findings were reported only in aggregated or anonymised form. All data will be retained for one year in accordance with institutional and legal requirements and subsequently securely deleted or destroyed. The evaluation fully complied with Uganda's Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019) and relevant ethics committee standards.

## 2.5. Challenges and Limitations

### Challenges

Several cross-cutting challenges were encountered during the feasibility study, and more specifically during the data collection phase. These are outlined below.

- **Mobilisation challenges** - Mobilisation challenges were reported across all the settlements but were more pronounced in Nakivale and Palabek. In Nakivale, some settlement leaders were initially reluctant to participate in FGDs due to a lack of financial incentives. In Palabek, the designated focal person was not available to assist. These challenges were addressed through additional follow-up, direct engagement, and coordination with alternative settlement-level contacts, supported by U-Learn partners and consortium members. The evaluation team clarified the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the non-incentivised ethical approach to engagement, which helped build trust and secure participation. Where initial focal points were unavailable, alternative community leaders and partner contacts were identified to support mobilisation. As a result, all planned FGDs were ultimately conducted, albeit with minor scheduling adjustments.
- **Settlement leaders were busy with other activities** - Settlement leaders and other key informants in Nakivale and Palabek were engaged in parallel activities with multiple organisations, making it difficult to schedule interviews and focus group discussions. This was attributed to the timing considering that data collection was done towards the end of the year, when many stakeholders were managing competing commitments. Missed appointments and repeated rescheduling were common as a result.
- **Language barriers** - Language barriers were most evident in Rhino Camp, where multiple languages are spoken, including Arabic, Kakwa, Bari, Kuku, and Pojulu. This diversity posed challenges to effective communication during interviews and FGDs, requiring the involvement of third-party translators to ensure mutual understanding. The need for translation for languages such as Kakwa and Bari increased the duration and logistical complexity of data collection activities.
- **Long distances between key informants** - Long distances between key informants and targeted groups posed a challenge in Palabek and Rhino Camp, where settlements are geographically expansive and infrastructure is limited. The wide dispersion of zones increased travel time and constrained daily interview schedules. To address this, researchers often arranged full-day transport, such as motorbikes, to facilitate movement within the settlements.
- **Inability to record some interviews:** Some interviews were not recorded as the respondents did not consent to be recorded and also due to electricity challenge.

The facilitators took down notes but this limits the details that can be captured during a discussion.

- **Reduced real-time supervision and quality monitoring:** The reliance on remote supervision for data collection activities meant that comprehensive feedback to NRs could only be provided during the end-of-day debriefing sessions. This limited the ability to correct interviewing approaches in real time, which may have affected the consistency of data collection across the settlements.
- **Inaccuracies introduced during translations:** Although translation procedures were applied, the use of multiple local languages introduced especially a risk of meaning distortion or loss of nuance. Subtle expressions, technical terms, or culturally specific concepts may not have been translated with full precision, potentially affecting the accuracy and comparability of qualitative data.

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

### 3.1. Relevance

This section assesses the relevance of U-Learn’s design and core components in relation to the needs and operational realities of Uganda’s refugee response. It examines whether the programme is appropriately designed to address identified system gaps and stakeholder priorities within a complex and evolving humanitarian context.

#### 3.1.1 Relevance of U-Learn’s Overall Design

The overall design of U-Learn was widely perceived by stakeholders as highly relevant to the humanitarian and refugee response system in Uganda, particularly in addressing long-standing gaps in coordination, shared learning, and evidence use. Across donors, government actors, UN agencies, INGOs, and local actors, respondents consistently described U-Learn as filling a critical “system-level” function rather than duplicating operational programming. This perception of system-level relevance is consistent with findings from the U-Learn Self-Evaluation (2020–2024), which identified U-Learn’s core value as addressing coordination, learning, and evidence-use gaps that fall outside the remit of most operational actors.

Stakeholders emphasised that U-Learn’s positioning as a neutral learning and evidence platform, rather than an implementing agency, aligned well with the complexity and fragmentation of the refugee response. This design was seen as especially relevant in a context characterised by multiple actors, parallel initiatives, and high information demands at national and settlement levels. As one donor representative noted:

*"U-Learn has produced a tremendous repository of learning and evidence that did not exist before. From a system perspective, this is exactly what was missing, a place where learning, research and accountability could come together." (Stakeholder, National level)*

The self-evaluation similarly noted that U-Learn’s perceived neutrality enhanced its legitimacy as a convening and learning platform, particularly in environments characterised by multiple actors and competing institutional mandates. This positioning was found to support trust and engagement across a wide range of stakeholders, reinforcing the relevance of U-Learn’s design as a shared public good.

At the settlement and district levels, relevance was articulated less in abstract system terms and more in relation to practical coordination challenges and access to usable information. Settlement-level actors described U-Learn as relevant because it helped make sense of a crowded operational environment by improving visibility of who was doing what, where, and based on which evidence. In several settlements, stakeholders noted that U-Learn-supported platforms and learning products reduced duplication and supported more informed engagement in coordination forums.

*"Before, we were working almost blindly, many organisations, many activities, but little shared learning. U-Learn helped bring things together so we could see what others were doing and why." (Stakeholder, Settlement level, Nakivale)*

Local NGOs and refugee-led organisations (RLOs) also highlighted the relevance of U-Learn’s design in lowering barriers to participation in learning and coordination spaces

that are often dominated by larger actors. The emphasis on accessible learning products, shared platforms, and accountability mechanisms was seen as particularly relevant in settlements where smaller organisations struggle to access evidence and coordination structures.

At the strategic level, U-Learn's integrated design, combining learning, research, and accountability to affected populations (AAP), was seen as appropriate for addressing both immediate operational learning needs and longer-term system improvement. Several respondents noted that these elements are often treated separately in humanitarian programmes, reducing their collective impact. In contrast, U-Learn's design was perceived as intentionally holistic:

*"What makes U-Learn relevant is that it doesn't treat research, learning and accountability as silos. The design recognises that these things need to speak to each other if you want better outcomes." (Stakeholder, National level)*

However, stakeholders also pointed to contextual and structural constraints that moderated the extent to which the design could fully realise its relevance. These included limitations related to decision-making authority, competing priorities among actors, and uneven uptake of learning outputs at sub-national levels. As one donor reflected:

*"The design is right, but relevance also depends on how much space there is in the system to actually absorb and act on learning. That's not always within U-Learn's control." (Donor, National level)*

These constraints echo reflections in the self-evaluation, which noted that the uptake and application of learning were uneven across levels, shaped by variations in decision-making authority, capacity, and operational pressures rather than by the relevance of U-Learn's design itself.

Despite these constraints, the consensus across respondent groups was that U-Learn's overall design was well aligned with system needs, particularly in strengthening coherence, evidence-informed coordination, and collective learning in Uganda's refugee response. The programme's relevance was therefore seen not only in terms of its individual outputs, but in its strategic contribution to improving how the system functions as a whole.

### **3.1.2 Relevance of the Three Core Components The Learning Hub (LH)**

The design of the Learning Hub (LH), implemented by the Uganda Response Innovation Lab (U-RIL), is widely regarded by stakeholders as highly relevant to the operational realities of Uganda's refugee response. Respondents consistently highlighted that the LH addresses a critical gap in the system: the absence of dedicated, facilitated spaces where actors can collectively reflect on practice, share experience, and translate learning into action.

Unlike formal coordination or reporting forums, the LH was designed as a practice-oriented learning space, prioritising dialogue, peer exchange, and experimentation. Stakeholders emphasised that this design choice responds well to the complexity and

pace of humanitarian operations, where learning often gets deprioritised due to time pressures and compliance-driven meetings:

*"What makes the Learning Hub relevant is that it creates space to actually think. Most coordination meetings are about updates - this is about learning from what we're doing." (INGO, National level)*

The LH's emphasis on facilitated learning processes, rather than one-way dissemination of information, was seen as particularly appropriate in a context where evidence already exists but is not always absorbed or applied. Participants noted that the design encourages deeper engagement with challenges, assumptions, and trade-offs, making learning more actionable:

*"It's not someone presenting a report and then everyone leaves. The Hub is designed to help people unpack issues together and see things differently." (UN agency, National level)*

The self-evaluation similarly observed that facilitated reflection and peer exchange were more likely to result in changes in practice than one-way dissemination of reports or guidance.

Stakeholders also highlighted the relevance of the LH's inclusive and cross-sectoral design, which brings together actors who do not always interact meaningfully within existing structures. By convening UN agencies, NGOs, government actors, and innovators in a less hierarchical setting, the LH was seen as enabling more open dialogue and shared problem-solving:

*"You hear perspectives in the Hub that you don't normally hear in sector meetings. That mix is what makes the learning valuable." (NGO, National level)*

The LH's innovation-oriented approach was another design feature viewed as contextually relevant. Respondents noted that the Hub creates a safe space to test ideas, reflect on failure, and surface emerging practices — a function that is often missing in risk-averse humanitarian environments:

*"The Hub gives people permission to experiment and be honest about what's not working. That's incredibly important in this kind of response." (Donor, National level)*

This mirrors self-evaluation findings that highlighted the Learning Hub's role in legitimising experimentation and learning from failure, functions that were largely absent from existing coordination and accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged that the relevance of the LH's design is influenced by external constraints, including heavy workloads and competing priorities among response actors. While these factors sometimes limited participation, respondents generally viewed them as reinforcing rather than undermining the need for a dedicated learning space:

*"The fact that people struggle to make time for learning shows why a space like the Hub is needed in the first place." (INGO, Sub-national level)*

Therefore, the Learning Hub's design is perceived as well suited to the context and needs of Uganda's refugee response. By prioritising facilitated, inclusive, and practice-oriented learning, the LH offers a relevant mechanism for strengthening collective reflection, collaboration, and adaptive practice across the response system.

### **Relevance of the Research Component Design**

The design of the Research component, managed by Impact Initiatives, is widely perceived by stakeholders as highly relevant to the evidence needs of Uganda's refugee response. Respondents consistently noted that the component responds to a long-standing gap in the system: the need for credible, independent, and methodologically rigorous research that speaks directly to operational and policy questions.

A central design feature highlighted as particularly relevant is the component's emphasis on independence and technical credibility. Stakeholders across UN agencies, donors, government, and NGOs emphasised that Impact Initiatives' role as an external research actor enhances the legitimacy and acceptance of findings, especially in sensitive or politically complex areas:

*"The strength of the research is that it's seen as independent. That gives it weight, people are more willing to engage with the findings, even when they're uncomfortable." (UN agency, National level)*

The research component's design also prioritises decision-oriented analysis, focusing on questions that matter for planning, prioritisation, and coordination rather than purely academic outputs. Respondents noted that this makes the research more usable in a fast-moving humanitarian context, where time and attention are limited:

*"What Impact Initiatives produces is not research for the sake of research. It's designed to inform real decisions." (Donor, National level)*

Consistent with this, the self-evaluation found that research framed around operational and policy questions was more likely to be referenced in planning, coordination discussions, and strategic reflection than descriptive assessments alone. Stakeholders further emphasised the relevance of the component's mixed-methods and multi-level approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative data and engages both national and sub-national perspectives. This design was seen as particularly well suited to Uganda's diverse refugee settlements and policy environment, where aggregated data alone often obscures local variation:

*"The research captures nuance, it shows what's happening across the system but also what's different at settlement level." (INGO, National level)*

Another design feature viewed as relevant is the component's close engagement with coordination and policy actors throughout the research cycle, from question formulation to dissemination. Respondents highlighted that this approach increases ownership and uptake, while still maintaining analytical independence:

*"They involve the right people early on, so the research speaks to actual needs but they don't compromise the analysis." (Government stakeholder, National level)*

At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged that the relevance of the research design is shaped by external constraints, including data fatigue, competing information products, and limited capacity among some actors to engage deeply with complex analysis. However, these constraints were generally seen as contextual challenges rather than flaws in the design itself:

*"There is a lot of data in the system, but high-quality analysis is still rare. That's why this kind of research remains very relevant." (INGO, National level)*

Therefore, the Research component's design is considered well aligned with the complexity and information demands of the refugee response in Uganda. By combining technical rigour, independence, and a clear focus on usability, the component provides a relevant and trusted evidence base to support reflection, coordination, and informed decision-making across the response system.

### **Relevance of the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Component Design**

The design of the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) component, coordinated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), is widely regarded by stakeholders as highly relevant to the realities and accountability gaps within Uganda's refugee response. Respondents consistently highlighted that, despite strong policy commitments to accountability, meaningful and systematic incorporation of refugee and host community perspectives into decision-making remains uneven. The AAP component was therefore seen as addressing a clear and persistent system-level need. The self-evaluation echoed this assessment, noting that accountability commitments were stronger at policy level than in practice, reinforcing the relevance of a response-level AAP mechanism.

A key design feature identified as particularly relevant is the component's focus on collective accountability, rather than organisation-specific feedback mechanisms. Stakeholders noted that while many agencies operate their own AAP systems, these are often fragmented, duplicative, and limited in their influence beyond individual programmes. By design, the AAP component provides a shared platform for analysing and elevating community perspectives across actors, making feedback more visible and harder to ignore:

*"Everyone has their own feedback mechanisms, but they sit in silos. What the AAP component does is pull those voices together so they can actually inform the wider response. (INGO, National level)*

The design emphasis on closing the feedback loop was also viewed as particularly relevant. Respondents noted that communities are frequently consulted but rarely see how their input influences decisions, which can undermine trust and participation. The AAP component's intentional focus on synthesising feedback and supporting response-level reflection was therefore seen as addressing a long-standing accountability weakness:

*"Refugees give feedback all the time, but they don't often see change. The strength of this design is that it tries to make feedback meaningful, not just collected." (NGO, Sub-national level)*

Stakeholders further highlighted the relevance of the AAP component's independent coordination role, noting that IRC's leadership provides both technical expertise and credibility. This design feature was seen as enabling more honest engagement with sensitive issues, including service quality, inclusion, and power dynamics:

*"Because it's coordinated independently, there's more space to surface uncomfortable feedback. It's not about defending one organisation." (UN agency, National level)*

The component's design also prioritises system-level analysis of community feedback, rather than isolated complaint handling. Respondents noted that this approach allows recurring issues, trends, and cross-cutting concerns to be identified and discussed at coordination and policy levels:

*"The value is not one complaint here or there, it's the patterns that emerge. That's where you start to see what needs to change in the system." (Donor, National level)*

The self-evaluation further observed that perceptions of accountability improved when communities could see how feedback was synthesised and discussed at response level, even where change was gradual.

At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged that the relevance of the AAP component is shaped by broader contextual constraints, including varying organisational commitment to accountability and limited authority to enforce changes. However, these challenges were seen as reinforcing the appropriateness of a collective, system-focused AAP design:

*"Accountability is always difficult because it challenges power. That's exactly why having a shared AAP mechanism like this is so important." (INGO, National level)*

Overall, the AAP component's design is perceived as well suited to strengthening meaningful accountability within Uganda's refugee response. By moving beyond fragmented, organisation-level mechanisms towards collective analysis and response-level reflection, the component provides a relevant and necessary platform for ensuring that the perspectives of refugees and host communities are more consistently heard, understood, and acted upon.

### **3.2 Effectiveness**

This section assesses the effectiveness of U-Learn in achieving its intended objectives and contributing to improved learning, coordination, and evidence use within Uganda's refugee response. It examines the extent to which U-Learn's design and core components have translated into meaningful changes in stakeholder behaviour, decision-making processes, and system-level practices, taking into account the complex and constrained humanitarian operating environment.

### 3.2.1. Influence on Decision-Making and Coordination

Across stakeholder groups, U-Learn was frequently described as influencing both *how* coordination is conducted and *what* types of evidence are considered legitimate within decision-making spaces. Respondents did not frame this influence primarily through isolated products, but through U-Learn's contribution to more structured engagement particularly where coordination platforms moved beyond information-sharing toward joint problem definition, prioritisation, and follow-up. Several donors and coordination actors noted that this "system-level" function was most visible in settings where multiple actors needed a shared reference point to reduce fragmentation and recurring duplication.

*"U Learn has had a positive impact in trying to bring these actors on board in a much more structured, systematic, consistent and continuous way than I've seen anywhere else." (Donor, National level)*

A consistent mechanism underpinning perceived influence was U-Learn's credibility and neutrality, which many stakeholders viewed as enabling evidence to travel across organisational and sectoral boundaries. Respondents suggested that evidence originating from or curated through U-Learn was more likely to be referenced in coordination discussions because it was seen as technically sound and not tied to a specific agency agenda. This mattered not only for routine planning, but also for discussions that can be sensitive such as quality of services, allocation trade-offs, and inclusion gaps where stakeholders may otherwise avoid engaging openly. In this sense, neutrality was described as an enabling condition for collective learning: evidence could be placed "on the table" without immediately triggering institutional defensiveness.

*"All of their work has been of technical quality and integrity." (Donor, National level)*

*"We have a trusted position where we can say these kinds of things, because it's not project-specific and not putting anyone in an awkward position." (Consortium member, National level)*

*"It's different if somebody independent, as U-Learn, puts the same evidence on the table... [it] made it easier for us to be bolder..." (INGO, National level)*

The self-evaluation likewise identified perceived neutrality and technical credibility as enabling conditions that allowed evidence to circulate across institutional and sectoral boundaries, particularly in sensitive coordination discussions.

At the same time, several respondents implied an important practical learning for U-Learn's approach: credibility is most effective when paired with facilitation that helps actors interpret evidence together. Stakeholders described U-Learn's role not just as producing analysis, but as convening actors to translate findings into a shared agenda through learning events, learning agenda exercises, and documentation that could be circulated and referenced later. This suggests that U-Learn's influence is strengthened when it combines credible content, convening power, and structured processes that generate concrete next steps, rather than treating dissemination as an endpoint.

*"U LEARN supported us in a learning agenda exercise... they facilitated a workshop to set the learning agenda for the Cash Working Group... we then held a training, so that was, like, a very concrete outcome." (Working group, National level)*

*"We had, a working group on learning together, and they served as, like, a secretariat to move the partners together." (Working group, National level)*

From a decision-making perspective, respondents provided examples where evidence contributed to programme design choices and funding-related decisions, particularly when learning products were directly usable within proposal processes or strategic planning. Donors and UN/working group actors highlighted evidence being used to shape programmes and strategies, while INGOs and local actors gave more practice-oriented examples such as adapting programme duration, or strengthening logframes through inclusion of accountability indicators.

*"The learning materials were extremely instrumental in how we developed the U-RIL programme." (Donor, National level)*

*"In 2025, ACF also secured funding from Sida after integrating AAP indicators into the proposal logframe and implementation logic." (INGO, National level)*

*"We were able to change the components from 3 to 6 months... That is a decision that we did out of engagement..." (INGO, Settlement level)*

The self-evaluation similarly noted that U-Learn-supported evidence was most influential when it aligned with concrete decision moments such as proposal development, strategy revisions, and sector planning cycles.

Several stakeholders also described U-Learn's influence through reducing duplication and helping coordination actors establish shared baselines. This was particularly evident in sector contexts where repeated assessments and parallel evidence consume time and resources. In these cases, U-Learn's role was seen as helping actors recognise when "enough evidence" existed to shift from assessment to action and enabling coordinators and donors to legitimise that shift. This points to a practical learning for system effectiveness: U-Learn's contribution is not only to generate new research, but also to improve decision discipline—supporting the system to use what is already known, identify remaining gaps, and avoid cyclical information gathering.

*"We were able to stop partners from doing further market assessments for about three years... donors were able to say no, first focus on the available knowledge." (INGO / Working group chair, National level)*

*"We realised organisations were duplicating market assessments... U-Learn helped consolidate this and align partners." (INGO / Working group chair, National level)*

Influence was also framed in terms of cross-sector dialogue and coordination quality specifically, U-Learn's role in helping actors align around a shared evidence base rather than "competing narratives." Respondents referenced platforms and processes that enabled multi-sector engagement across humanitarian, development, government, and

private sector actors, including around livelihoods, financial inclusion, energy, and value chains. A key learning emerging from these accounts is that cross-sector engagement becomes more than representation when discussions are anchored in evidence that different actors recognise as legitimate, and when convening is designed to surface complementarities and trade-offs rather than to simply share updates.

*"U-Learn evidence helped frame conversations in coordination spaces rather than partners coming with competing narratives." (Consortium member, National level)*

*"It allowed actors from protection, livelihoods and education to engage around the same evidence base." (Consortium member, National level)*

*"We brought in government, private sector, financial service providers... that shifted how the sector approached value chains." (INGO / Working group chair, National level)*

At settlement level, many local actors described influence primarily through capacity strengthening especially training linked to AAP which then affected how they planned, consulted communities, and positioned themselves for partnerships and funding. Several respondents described shifting from consultation as a formality to consultation as an input into programme design and proposals. This reflects a specific pathway of influence: U-Learn's role in strengthening organisational practice at the local level can indirectly shape system-level decision-making by improving the quality and credibility of proposals and engagement from refugee-led and community-based organisations.

*"After the practice we were able to practice for example project proposal writing... but now after the training whenever we are looking to put practice into paper, we converge with the target audience and we discuss with them, we learn from them and see the need be through needs assessments..." (Local actor, Settlement level)*

*"we are receiving more projects as a result of us having that AAP component in our work... it has really helped us" (Local actor, Settlement level)*

However, stakeholders also highlighted constraints that moderated influence. In some cases, respondents could describe U-Learn's participation in working groups or events without identifying a clear decision outcome or a specific instance of evidence shaping coordination priorities. This suggests that while engagement is valued, influence is not automatic: it depends on whether evidence is integrated into the actual moments where choices are made (prioritisation, funding decisions, strategy revisions, or agreed action points). In addition, while U-Learn's neutrality was widely cited as a strength, at least one donor noted that being careful "not to get muddled into implementation" can reduce U-Learn's ability to push beyond evidence-sharing into sustained follow-through particularly where decision authority sits with coordination leads, donors, or implementing agencies.

*"They are very keen not to get muddled into implementation." (Donor, National level)*

Another moderating factor concerned uneven awareness and uptake across member organisations and networks. Some respondents suggested that even when evidence is considered credible, its practical influence depends on how consistently it is accessed,

communicated, and “pulled into” routine planning cycles. This points to a constructive learning for U-Learn’s effectiveness: strengthening influence may require more intentional embedding of outputs into the rhythms of coordination—such as sector planning processes, strategy refresh points, proposal calendars, and settlement-level review forums—so that evidence is easier to apply at the time decisions are taken.

*"U-LEARN is quite highly relevant... they struggle a little bit to promote the entire relevance... but I think for individual members... still don't use them." (Working group, National level)*

Overall, evidence across donors, consortium members, working groups, INGOs, local actors, and community discussions indicates that U-Learn has contributed to more structured coordination and a stronger shared basis for decision-oriented dialogue particularly through its perceived credibility, convening role, and ability to consolidate and translate evidence for collective use. Influence appears strongest where stakeholders can clearly trace how U-Learn-enabled evidence informed concrete decisions (e.g., proposal/logframe changes, programme adaptations, reduced duplication, or agreed coordination priorities), and more limited where engagement remains general, where follow-through depends on other actors’ authority and resourcing, or where evidence has not been consistently embedded into decision points across the system.

### **3.2.2. Effectiveness of Learning and Evidence Uptake**

Across stakeholder groups, U-Learn’s emphasis on synthesis and packaging was consistently identified as a key enabler of uptake, particularly for decision-makers and busy practitioners who may not have the time to engage with full reports. Several respondents described briefs and synthesis products as reducing the technical burden of evidence and making findings easier to apply in real-time planning and discussions.

*"The briefs helped donors quickly understand the evidence without going through full reports." (Stakeholder, National level)*

*"The products are digestible enough that busy practitioners actually read them." (Stakeholder, National level)*

This perceived usability translated into concrete instances of evidence being incorporated into proposals, log frames, and advocacy. Consortium and INGO stakeholders described partners “lifting” figures directly into concept notes, using findings to triangulate assessments, and relying on desk reviews and annotated bibliographies as quick-reference tools for planning. For example, UNHCR sector coordination actors noted that synthesized products supported both strategic planning cycles and external engagement with donors, including evidence being used to strengthen funding narratives and justify programmatic choices.

*"We've seen partners lift figures and findings directly into concept notes and donor discussions." (Stakeholder, National level)*

*"An overall desk review... annotated bibliography. To me, that was the most useful thing." (Working group, National level)*

Uptake pathways were also evident through specific, traceable uses of learning products and AAP support. Action Against Hunger described adopting AAP indicators into internal planning documents and integrating mentorship learning into both proposals and implementation, indicating uptake that extends beyond awareness into organisational systems and practice.

*"Compendium of Key AAP Indicators – Adopted and integrated several indicators into ACF proposals, logframes, and project implementation plans." (INGO, National level)*

*"The knowledge and materials acquired through the AAP mentorship have been actively utilized and integrated into ACF's proposals and project implementations..." (INGO, National level)*

Donor perspectives similarly pointed to tangible uptake, though with variation in how directly evidence influenced funding decisions. DANIDA provided examples where U-Learn's studies were actively used, and where uptake was reinforced through donor mechanisms and programme development processes suggesting that in some cases, "use" was enabled not only by product quality, but also by incentives and accountability structures within funding relationships.

*"The studies on markets and livelihoods were widely shared and used." (Donor, National level)*

*"We basically made partners take these learnings on board when developing the new programme." (Donor, National level)*

At the working-group level, evidence uptake was described as translating into shared standards and collective tools. In the Cash Working Group, collaboration with U-Learn and other actors was linked to the development of minimum standards for financial literacy trainings, an example of uptake that is both institutional (standards) and practical (guidance for programming).

*"[There was] a collaboration with the Cash Working Group, the Bank of Uganda, and U-Learn to develop minimum standards for financial literacy trainings." (Working group, National level)*

Among local and refugee-led actors, uptake was frequently framed through capacity-strengthening pathways: trainings, webinars, reporting tools, and AAP mechanisms that were then applied to proposal development, community feedback processes, and internal governance. Several local organisations described using learning from U-Learn engagements to strengthen documentation systems, develop board or governance manuals, and build clearer referral pathways within settlements indicating uptake that is operational and organisational, not only conceptual. The self-evaluation echoed this pattern, noting that capacity-focused uptake pathways were particularly important for local and refugee-led organisations, where learning translated into governance, documentation, and internal systems rather than formal policy change.

*"U learn came in a time where we were in their need in when it comes to issue of documentations... we got to be equipped on how... develop our own board manual."  
(Local actor, Settlement level)*

*"We have been able to design a referral pathway within the settlement." (Local actor, Settlement level)*

In a smaller set of cases, refugee-led organisations described direct links between research products and funding outcomes such as using reports to apply for competitive financing or citing publications that donors adopted in their decision-making. These examples suggest that where evidence is well-aligned to donor requirements and timed to proposal cycles, uptake can extend into resource mobilisation and organisational growth.

*"We used the report to apply for the Refugee Innovation Fund and reached the final pitching stage." (Local actor, Settlement level)*

*"Some of those publications have been adopted by donors. Currently we have two donors funding us based on those research." (Local actor, Settlement level)*

However, the data also points to persistent constraints that limit equitable and consistent uptake particularly for stakeholders operating in low-connectivity settings or with limited staff time. A recurring concern was the volume of materials produced, with some respondents describing navigation challenges and the risk that evidence becomes diffuse rather than actionable without clearer prioritisation and stronger "sense-making" support.

*"They have produced a tremendous amount of material... maybe too much material that is difficult to navigate." (Donor, National level)*

Relatedly, several stakeholders emphasised that the existence of evidence does not automatically translate into use, especially when institutions lack capacity to absorb findings or when recommendations require system-level decisions outside U-Learn's control. This was framed less as a critique of product quality and more as a reminder that uptake depends on time, incentives, and follow-through mechanisms.

*"We are generating a lot... but unless there is significant uptake, it becomes another good report on a shelf." (INGO, National level)*

*"Time constraints and capacity issues meant not everyone could fully engage with the products." (Stakeholder, National level)*

Barriers were particularly pronounced for local actors and community-level uptake, where language, bandwidth, and dissemination modalities shaped who could access and apply evidence. While there were positive references to multilingual formats and interpretation in community engagements, multiple respondents noted that English-only materials and weak digital access constrained the ability to bring learning products "back to the settlements" in a usable form.

*"All the materials... are in English... [this] limits the use... [and]... regular dissemination... brought back to the settlements..." (INGO, National + Settlement level)*

*"Some local actors struggled with language and bandwidth constraints." (Stakeholder, National level)*

In addition to access constraints, stakeholders highlighted gaps related to reach and inclusion. This included concerns that research or engagement focused on specific locations can miss key voices, and that engagement structures sometimes privilege established representation channels over more direct participation by refugee-led organisations. From this perspective, uneven uptake is also shaped by who is meaningfully involved in shaping questions, interpreting findings, and deciding what gets prioritised.

*"If they have focused their research on a specific location... you're not... able to get all the stakeholders... key voices are missing." (INGO, National level)*

*"They mostly engage refugee welfare councils; refugee-led organisations should be engaged more." (Local actor, Settlement level)*

Finally, donors raised questions about whether learning is consistently framed in ways that meet their decision constraints particularly around efficiency, value for money, and implementable recommendations. This aligns with broader concerns about translation: even when evidence is trusted and used for convening or reflection, there may be less visibility on recommendations being implemented at scale, beyond the immediate learning space.

*"I find the link between learning and change in funding and policy being weak." (Donor, National level)*

*"There's less evidence of recommendations being implemented beyond convening." (Donor, National level)*

Overall, the evidence suggests that U-Learn has enabled meaningful uptake through strong synthesis products, practical tools, and clearly identifiable pathways into proposals, standards, planning processes, and organisational systems. At the same time, uptake is uneven across stakeholder types and geographies, shaped by capacity, connectivity, language, awareness of U-Learn's offer, and the broader incentive environment for acting on evidence. Strengthening prioritisation of products, supporting more targeted dissemination (including offline and multilingual formats), and clarifying pathways from evidence to implementable decisions were the most consistent areas implied for further improvement.

### **3.2.3. Effectiveness of AAP and Community Engagement**

Across stakeholder groups, AAP and community engagement were consistently described as one of the more effective dimensions of U-Learn's work, particularly where engagement was embedded in routine practice rather than treated as a stand-alone activity. Donors and national-level actors often framed this effectiveness in system terms, noting that U-Learn-supported processes have contributed to strengthening participation

and accountability across the refugee response. At settlement level, local actors and community members tended to assess effectiveness through practical experience: whether communities are involved early, whether there are accessible channels to raise concerns, and whether engagement leads to visible responses.

*"Accountability to beneficiaries in Uganda is stronger than any other refugee situation I've seen." (Donor, National level)*

In contexts where participation was experienced as meaningful, respondents described engagement that went beyond consultation and influenced priorities, learning agendas, and programme adjustments. Consortium members and U-Learn partners highlighted the role of REF in enabling affected communities to shape what evidence was collected and discussed, rather than simply responding to pre-defined questions. This was viewed as an important shift in power dynamics, reinforcing the credibility of engagement and increasing trust in learning and accountability processes.

*"Communities were actively engaged through REF, not just consulted." (Consortium member, Settlement level)*

*"REF allowed affected communities to shape what evidence was prioritised." (U-Learn, Settlement level)*

Effectiveness was also associated with the degree to which organisations embedded participation and feedback mechanisms into everyday programming. INGOs described integrating AAP into assessments, sharing contact information consistently, and discussing feedback internally to inform adaptations. These practices were seen as enabling clearer pathways from community input to programme change, particularly where responsibilities for responding to feedback were well defined. In addition, consultations were conducted with several organisations that had participated in U-Learn-supported AAP trainings and mentorship activities. These organisations reflected on how AAP concepts and tools were subsequently integrated into their operational practices, including the standardisation of AAP questions in assessments, incorporation of accountability indicators into logframes, clearer documentation of feedback handling processes, and more deliberate engagement with communities during programme design. For these actors, AAP training was described as moving accountability from a compliance requirement to an operational consideration shaping how programmes are planned, implemented, and reviewed.

*"After the AAP training, we stopped treating accountability as just a donor requirement. It became part of how we design activities, consult communities, and justify changes internally."*

*(INGO, National level – AAP-trained organisation)*

*"Every community activity begins with the ACF team sharing toll-free contact information with participants and the organisation values community input." (INGO, National and multi-site)*

*"All assessments contain standard AAP questions and findings are discussed and key adaptations undertaken to improve service delivery." (INGO, National and multi-site)*

At the same time, stakeholders highlighted limits to effectiveness linked to uneven responsiveness. FGDs and settlement-based actors frequently noted that while feedback is often collected, responses can be delayed, inconsistent, or absent. This uneven loop closure was described as undermining trust and reducing willingness to engage over time. The data suggests that communities place greater weight on follow-up and communication than on the mere presence of feedback channels.

*"We have ever shared feedbacks but the responses usually delay. Sometimes nothing is done." (FGD participant, Settlement level)*

REF participants described the AAP component as strengthening the visibility and articulation of community concerns beyond the settlement level. Refugee representatives noted that through REF discussions, recurring issues raised by communities could be consolidated and presented in collective forums, rather than remaining as isolated feedback at settlement level. From their perspective, the effectiveness of AAP was closely linked to whether these issues were acknowledged and discussed by coordination actors, even where responses were not always immediate.

Variation across contexts further shaped perceptions of effectiveness. Donors and national actors pointed to the persistent challenge of connecting settlement, district, and national levels in ways that ensure issues raised locally inform decision-making and that decisions are communicated back clearly. Community discussions also highlighted perceived differences across groups, including nationals and refugees, new arrivals and longer-term caseloads, and vulnerable populations, which influenced how fair and inclusive engagement felt in practice.

*"Bringing together settlement, district and national levels is always a challenge." (Donor, National level)*

Across the evidence, a consistent pattern emerges: AAP and community engagement are most effective where participation is accessible, feedback is acted upon, and responses are communicated in ways communities can understand. Where these conditions are not met, engagement risks becoming procedural rather than meaningful, even when formal mechanisms exist. Overall, U-Learn's contribution to strengthening AAP is evident in improved participation structures and clearer pathways for feedback, while remaining uneven in terms of responsiveness and consistency across locations and governance levels.

## Last-mile Story: Speaking, but Still Waiting to Be Heard

### Refugee Women Leaders, Nyumanzi Settlement (Adjumani)

Women leaders in Nyumanzi Refugee Settlement described increased opportunities to participate in meetings, dialogues, and awareness sessions, alongside persistent frustrations about responsiveness. As members of the Refugee Welfare Committee explained, “we are usually invited for meetings, community dialogues,” and “the women are usually called for awareness raising sessions like on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse.” Through these engagements, women reported that “community dialogues have open our minds in discussing our needs,” and that they feel “well informed about sexual reproductive rights, where we get knowledge about our rights.”

Information shared through these processes was described as accessible, with women noting that it was “clear and easy to understand” due to “interpretation during community meetings, dialogues, training, information sessions” and “simple example and explanations, cultural sensitive communication.” As a result, many women reported increased confidence. “We can now speak freely as women in this community about needs,” one participant explained, adding that there is now “self-representation by women in this community in matters that concern us.”

At the same time, women highlighted a persistent gap between participation and response. While feedback mechanisms exist, “through suggestion box, community gatherings, radio stations”, outcomes were often limited. “Yes, because responses were received but the actions were not taken,” one leader noted. Despite this, women reported feeling safer and more confident than before. “Most women have been elected as community leaders in our settlement,” participants shared, explaining that “women are being trained and informed about their rights as equal to men.”

Looking ahead, women emphasised the need to strengthen feedback systems and inclusion. “Need more suggestion boxes in the community at least each per cluster and should be checked regularly and responding to concerns in time,” they added, alongside calls for “more inclusivity for women, children and persons with disabilities in the different community engagements.”

### 3.3 Localisation and Inclusion (Cross-Cutting Finding)

This section examines localisation and inclusion as cross-cutting dimensions of U-Learn’s design and implementation, focusing on the extent to which refugee-led organisations, community-based organisations, and host community actors are meaningfully engaged in learning, evidence generation, and coordination processes. Rather than treating localisation as a standalone component, the analysis considers how principles of local leadership, participation, and inclusion are embedded across U-Learn’s learning, research, and accountability functions.

#### 3.3.1. Participation and Voice of Refugees and Host Communities

Across KIIs and FGDs, participation was most consistently assessed as meaningful where refugees and host community members were engaged through structured, repeat platforms that enabled influence over agendas, learning priorities, and follow up actions, rather than one off consultation. Stakeholders emphasised that participation is strongest when it creates a predictable interface between settlement level realities and national

coordination spaces, allowing lived experience to inform decision making beyond individual projects.

*"REF is one of the main mechanisms for refugee participation in coordination and decision-making. We have about 40 refugee representatives from all the settlements who come to Kampala every 3 months to meet with humanitarian and development partners, government, donors." (Consortium, National)*

REF was widely cited as the clearest example of such a mechanism. Consortium members, donors, and national actors described REF as effective because it institutionalises continuity, representation, and cross level dialogue. Unlike ad hoc consultations, the repeated nature of REF meetings was seen as enabling trust building, agenda shaping, and cumulative learning over time. Donors in particular viewed REF as a system level shift that embeds refugee voice within coordination structures, rather than positioning participation as an external or symbolic add on.

*"The REF and the DEF is another unique system transformation that has happened in Uganda that I haven't seen anywhere else." (Donor, National)*

The self-evaluation likewise identified REF as a key institutional mechanism for embedding refugee voice within coordination structures, noting its role in sustaining dialogue across settlements and national-level actors over time. At settlement level, refugees and host community participants assessed participation primarily through its practical outcomes. Participation was described as meaningful when representatives were able to take community concerns to higher level forums and return with information, plans, or commitments that could be communicated locally. RWCs, REF membership, community dialogues, and joint monitoring activities were cited as important channels for ensuring that engagement translated into tangible coordination and programme adjustments.

*"For Palabek settlement me and my youth leader here are members of the REF and we have participated in the REF forum in Kampala." (FGD participant, Palabek settlement)*

Evidence from FGDs also suggests that participation has supported greater confidence and agency among certain groups, particularly where dialogue spaces were sustained over time. Women and youth in some settlements described increased willingness to speak in meetings and engage with partners as a result of repeated community dialogues and exposure to coordination processes. However, these experiences were not uniform, with other groups reporting limited access or inconsistent follow up.

*"Community dialogues have opened our minds in discussing our needs." (FGD participant, Adjumani settlement)*

A consistent finding across stakeholder groups is that participation becomes more effective when it is paired with targeted capacity support for representatives. Training, mentoring, accompaniment, and certification were described as enabling refugees and local actors to engage more confidently in coordination spaces, navigate technical discussions, and strengthen internal governance within refugee led and community based organisations. Capacity support related to AAP, leadership, advocacy, public

speaking, governance, safeguarding, and data collection was frequently cited as particularly valuable.

*"We provide a lot of support for the refugee representatives to be able to participate, including accompaniment, training, and mentoring." (Consortium, National)*

Settlement level actors further highlighted that such capacity investments often have spill over effects, enabling trained representatives to cascade knowledge to community leaders, staff, and volunteers. In these cases, participation was not limited to individual representatives but contributed to broader organisational strengthening and community level accountability practices.

*"We were able to go through components like integrating AAP into proposal writing and strengthening community feedback mechanisms." (Local actor, Settlement)*

Despite these positive contributions, power dynamics remain a persistent constraint on participation. Across consortium members, UN agencies, INGOs, local actors, and FGDs, respondents described coordination spaces where international actors dominate discussions, control technical language, or shape agendas in ways that limit the influence of refugees and local organisations. Feelings of intimidation, lack of confidence, and limited responsiveness were commonly reported, particularly at national level forums. These power asymmetries were also highlighted in the self-evaluation, which noted that formal inclusion does not automatically translate into influence where agendas, language, and decision authority remain concentrated among international actors.

*"There are power dynamics. Sometimes the refugees feel intimidated or not listened to in coordination spaces." (Consortium, National)*

At settlement level, participation was also constrained by practical and structural barriers. These included lack of facilitation or transport support to attend meetings, digital connectivity challenges, selective invitations, rotation systems that disrupt continuity of representation, and unequal access for women, youth, persons with disabilities, and host community members. Several FGD participants noted that when participation requires personal resources or unpaid time, engagement becomes unsustainable and exclusionary.

*"Some of us don't go there since we are not provided with any support when we attend meetings." (FGD participant, Nakivale settlement)*

Gender and age-based power imbalances further shaped experiences of participation. Women and older community members in some contexts reported that opportunities were disproportionately accessed by men or youth, while others highlighted improvements where facilitation was intentional and inclusive. These variations suggest that participation outcomes depend heavily on how engagement processes are designed and supported in practice.

*"Most opportunities in the programme are grabbed by men." (FGD participant, Adjumani settlement)*

Taken together, the evidence highlights several learning points for the programme. First, structured platforms such as REF are most effective when they are complemented by strong feedback loops that ensure issues raised lead to visible responses and communication back to communities. Second, capacity support should be understood as a continuous investment rather than a one off input, particularly for representatives navigating complex coordination environments. Third, addressing power dynamics requires active facilitation, resourcing, and reflection within coordination spaces, rather than assuming that inclusion alone will equalise influence.

Overall, U Learn has made a substantive contribution to strengthening participation and voice by creating repeat engagement platforms, supporting representative capacity, and legitimising refugee and host community perspectives within coordination systems. At the same time, participation remains uneven across locations and groups, shaped by structural constraints, resource limitations, and entrenched hierarchies. Deepening the quality and consistency of participation will require sustained attention to these dynamics to ensure that voice translates into influence and accountability across the refugee response system.

### **Last-mile Story: From Consultation to Confidence**

Female settlement leaders in Palabek described a clear shift from top-down project delivery to more consultative approaches. “In the old time they used to bring the project. They just bring the project and implement but now before implementing a project they first consult the community,” leaders explained. Participation in consultations, feedback meetings, and REF engagements was described as common, with leaders noting that “we participated in community consultation meeting, feedback activity, REF meeting in Kampala.”

Women reported increased confidence and leadership. “Even if there is fear at least women are coming up even in leadership,” one leader said, adding that “women can represent them self with confidence.” Youth engagement was also highlighted. “Our youth where very idle, but now through different skill training they have changed and working hard,” participants explained.

Accountability mechanisms were present, including “suggestion box, community meeting and hotline,” though leaders noted gaps in process. “Most of the time when they want to open suggestions box they always don’t call community leaders that is where the gap is,” one participant said. Despite this, women felt their voices were respected: “For us women we don’t fear anything. Our opinion is respected.”

Reflecting on U-Learn’s contribution, leaders emphasised personal change. “We feel there is changes in our self-esteem after the training that have been given to us by U-Learn on consultative meeting, feedback meeting gave us courage to interact properly when in a community.” They stressed the importance of sustaining these gains through continued coordination and support.

### **3.3.2. Engagement of Local Actors, RLOs, and CBOs**

Across the data, engagement of local actors was strongest where U Learn created repeated entry points into learning and coordination that local organisations could practically use. Respondents described a mix of access routes, including national level learning agenda workshops, settlement level trainings (especially on AAP), webinars, podcasts, and the online repository. When these pathways were paired with facilitation and follow up, local actors were able to translate learning into concrete organisational

improvements, such as integrating community feedback into proposal development, strengthening governance systems, and refining programme approaches. This suggests that engagement is not only about inviting local actors into spaces but about reducing the practical and informational barriers that prevent them from staying engaged over time.

*"ULEARN supported us in a learning agenda exercise, so basically where we, they facilitated a workshop to set the learning agenda for the Cash Working Group."  
(Working Group, National)*

A consistent learning from stakeholders is that local actors influence becomes more visible when engagement mechanisms move beyond attendance to shaping priorities. Several accounts pointed to agenda setting functions, such as localisation roadmap processes, stakeholder mapping, and learning agenda development, as moments where local perspectives affected what evidence was prioritised and how discussions were structured. At settlement level, engagement was often experienced through more applied channels, where training and accompaniment enabled organisations to adjust how they consult communities and document needs. Where local actors used these skills to converge with the people they serve, engagement became more meaningful because it fed directly into design choices and funding narratives, rather than remaining an extractive data collection exercise.

*"After the training whenever we are looking to put practice into paper, we converge with the target audience and we discuss with them." (Local actor, Settlement)*

At the same time, the data indicates that engagement remains uneven due to structural constraints that sit outside the programme's immediate control. Funding ceilings for refugee led organisations, indirect funding routes through intermediaries, and compliance and legitimacy requirements continue to shape who can participate consistently and who can influence decisions. Digital access barriers also came through strongly, not only in terms of internet connectivity in remote settlement contexts, but also smartphone requirements and broader digital enablement gaps. These constraints interact with social barriers, including distance between community centres, gendered household responsibilities that restrict time for meetings, and resource limitations that prevent small organisations from sustaining engagement beyond short training cycles. These constraints echo self-evaluation reflections that funding modalities, compliance requirements, and intermediary arrangements continue to shape which local and refugee-led organisations can participate consistently and exert influence.

*"UNHCR still cannot give more than 4,000 USD to a refugee led organisation." (Donor, National)*

A further learning is that engagement strengthens when learning products and convening roles are positioned as shared assets for local actors, rather than as outputs owned by the programme. Several respondents valued evidence products such as annotated desk reviews, reports shared through email, and podcasts that helped organisations reflect on interventions and justify proposals. However, there were also examples where intended products did not materialise due to time and capacity constraints, suggesting that co creation processes need realistic resourcing, clear ownership, and follow through so

engagement does not become frustrating for partners. Similarly, where visibility and communication about what U Learn does was perceived as limited, respondents linked this to reduced uptake and weaker engagement, especially among actors outside established networks.

*"There was maybe a little bit of a gap in sort of what came out of that as a product, it never really materialized into, like, a product, capacity, time." (Working Group, National)*

Looking ahead, the evidence suggests three practical implications for the programme. First, sustain engagement by combining national level agenda setting with settlement level accompaniment, so that local actors have both a seat at priority setting tables and the operational support to act on learning. Second, treat inclusion barriers as design constraints, by budgeting for facilitation and access costs where possible, strengthening offline and low bandwidth options, and continuing to use translation and visual communication approaches that increase comprehension. Third, where structural constraints are dominant, the programme can add value by making them visible and actionable through evidence, mapping, and convening, for example documenting how funding shifts affect local actors, supporting partner mapping that helps donors and large agencies identify credible local organisations, and clarifying pathways that reduce reliance on intermediaries.

*"Better use of resources to have some sort of continued engagement, it might be difficult if you're, like, three people." (Working Group, National)*

*"If government and UN agencies continue funding, because learning doesn't end. Research will be outdated if it stops." (Local actor, Settlement)*

Overall, engagement of local actors is clearly present and, in several instances, substantively linked to improved practice and stronger participation in decision making spaces. The main learning is that engagement deepens when it is designed as a supported pathway from access to confidence and capacity, to influence over agendas, while being honest about the structural limits that still need system level action beyond the programme.

## Last-mile Story: From Community Feedback to Credible Local Leadership (Rhino District)

In Rhino Camp, local organisations are increasingly positioned at the frontline of service delivery, coordination, and accountability. Community Empowerment Network (CENET), a refugee-led organisation established in 2022, works across protection, education, livelihoods, advocacy, and peacebuilding in multiple zones of the settlement. As one of its senior members of staff explained, “our main vision in the organisation is that everyone in this context deserves dignity,” and the organisation serves “both the refugees and the host communities.” CENET’s engagement with U-Learn began through a call for Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) training. Reflecting on this moment, the respondent noted that “the U-Learn team were able to come on ground here, conducted a one-week training on AAP,” which fundamentally shifted how the organisation designed and implemented programmes. “It opened our minds, scaled our implementation and programming,” the respondent explained, describing how CENET moved away from top-down design. “Previously we could write projects without bringing the clients... but now after the training whenever we are looking to put practice into paper, we converge with the target audience and we discuss with them, we learn from them.” Following the training, CENET introduced concrete accountability structures. “We got the component of strengthening community feedback mechanism or communication and feedback mechanism (CFMs),” the respondent explained, alongside the development of safeguarding systems. “Previously, we didn’t have a focal person who monitors the operation of the projects but now we have someone who monitors AAP in the institution.” Feedback began to flow through multiple channels, including “walk to the office,” phone contact, and organised feedback sessions. “The clients are open they can even come to the office and give us feedback,” the respondent said, noting that this openness “has built trust.” These practices reshaped how CENET interacted with both communities and authorities. “When we organise feedback sessions the turn up is massive because people feel if I inform CENET, it will make CENET to sit down and write programmes that will benefit,” the respondent explained. In moments of tension, such as food ration changes, CENET consolidated feedback and escalated it. “Others were able to bring their feedbacks here to us we consolidate them and shared with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and other stakeholders they gave feedback.”

A similar trajectory was described by Global Rehabilitation and Transformation Response (GRTR), a community-based organisation operating in Rhino, Imvepi, and Bidibidi. GRTR began engaging with U-Learn “two years back,” initially through assessments and sustained on-ground engagement. “They gave us trainings especially about Accountability for the Affected Population (AAP) in the communities,” the Executive Director recalled. This engagement prompted changes in language, practice, and structure. “Before we engaged with U-Learn we used to call the people we work with as our beneficiaries but... these are our clients,” the respondent explained. GRTR established practical accountability tools following the training. “We engage with the communities and they report to us... by walking to our office, in the suggestion boxes also by consulting our focal person in the communities across all the services that we do as GRTR.” Referral pathways were clarified, particularly for protection and safeguarding. “If we have issues of gender then they are brought to us... PSEA, they are brought to us then we can be able to take it ahead,” the respondent explained, adding that “GRTR is now part of the reporting mechanism for UNHCR in this site.” Both organisations described how U-Learn’s capacity building strengthened their legitimacy within the humanitarian system. For GRTR, certification played a critical role. “U-Learn has provided us with certificates and these certificates are key,” the respondent explained, noting that “when they call for proposals... it adds value to us as an organisation.” This visibility translated into participation. “Whenever there’s a meeting we are never left out,” the respondent said. For CENET, similar gains were visible in coordination. “Our coordination with stakeholders like other partners... builds trust and improves coordination,” the respondent explained.

### **3.4. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)**

This section examines Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) as a cross-cutting dimension of U Learn’s work, drawing on evidence from KIIs and FGDs to assess how gender, age, disability, and other social factors shape participation, influence, and perceived outcomes. Rather than treating GESI as a standalone theme, the analysis explores how inclusion is embedded across learning, participation, and accountability processes, and how these processes are experienced by different groups within refugee and host communities.

#### **3.4.1. Inclusion of Women, Youth, and Marginalised Groups**

Evidence across KIIs and FGDs indicates that women, youth, and other marginalised groups are increasingly present within learning, participation, and coordination spaces supported or influenced by U Learn. Participation most commonly takes place through community meetings, trainings, peer groups, REF related engagements, and sector level learning activities. In several settlement contexts, respondents described growing confidence among women and youth to attend meetings, speak about needs, and engage with community leaders and organisations. However, the data consistently distinguishes between participation and influence, with inclusion often stronger at the level of presence than at the level of decision-making power.

At national and consortium levels, inclusion of women and youth was most visible through representative mechanisms, such as refugee participation in the REF and targeted engagement with women led and youth focused organisations. These mechanisms were seen as creating regular entry points for marginalised voices into higher level discussions. At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged that representation does not automatically translate into influence, particularly where agendas, technical language, and decision-making authority remain concentrated among international actors or coordination leads.

*"We have about 40 refugee representatives from all the settlements who come to Kampala every 3 months to meet with humanitarian and development partners, government, donors." (Consortium, National)*

At settlement level, women and youth frequently described participation as meaningful when their opinions were acknowledged within community dialogues, peer groups, and leadership structures. In some locations, youth were seen as particularly influential due to their numbers and their role in information sharing and mobilisation. Women in several FGDs reported increased ability to speak freely about community needs and household concerns, suggesting that repeated engagement and familiar platforms can reduce fear and hesitation over time. Consistent with this, the self-evaluation found that repeated engagement through familiar community-level platforms was associated with increased confidence among women and youth to speak, though not always with expanded decision authority.

*"Youths opinions are taken so much into consideration since they hold the biggest number." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

*"We can now speak freely as women in this community about needs." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

Despite these positive shifts, gendered and age-related barriers remain a persistent constraint on inclusive engagement. Women across multiple settlements highlighted household and caregiving responsibilities as a major limitation on their ability to attend meetings consistently or engage in longer processes. Distance to community centres and timing of activities further compounded these challenges. For youth, barriers were often linked to resource constraints, including limited funding to scale training opportunities, lack of tools or kits after vocational training, and weak linkages between learning and livelihood opportunities. These gaps were frequently described as undermining the longer term value of participation. These constraints were similarly highlighted in the self-evaluation, which identified unpaid care work, time poverty, and limited livelihood pathways as key factors shaping who can sustain engagement over time.

*"Women are the best in attending meetings this is where they get most of the information despite the barriers of household work." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

*"Youths are learning but there are no jobs." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

This perspective reflects broader structural constraints within the refugee response labour market rather than shortcomings in U-Learn's design. While U-Learn-supported learning and engagement activities contributed to skills development, confidence, and participation, employment outcomes for youth are shaped by factors largely outside the programme's mandate, including restricted labour market access, limited private sector absorption in settlement contexts, and funding constraints on livelihood pathways. These findings highlight a persistent gap between learning opportunities and economic opportunities, reflecting the importance of alignment between evidence, coordination, and system-level livelihood investments.

Inclusion of persons with disabilities emerged as a weaker area across the data. While several respondents explicitly called for greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in coordination forums such as the REF, there was limited evidence of systematic accessibility measures or targeted support. Disability inclusion was more often framed as an unmet need rather than a consistently implemented practice, indicating a gap between policy aspirations and lived experience at settlement level.

*"Inclusiveness of the disability in the REF forum." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

Power dynamics within coordination and learning spaces further shaped who influences outcomes. Both national and settlement level respondents described situations where refugees, women, and local actors felt intimidated or sidelined, particularly in mixed forums dominated by international organisations. Knowledge concentration, control over agendas, and technical framing were cited as factors that can limit the ability of marginalised participants to shape discussions, even when they are present.

*"There are power dynamics, sometimes the refugees feel intimidated or not listened to in coordination spaces." (Consortium, National)*

Overall, the evidence suggests that inclusion of women, youth, and marginalised groups is uneven and context dependent. Participation has expanded across multiple platforms, and in some settings, this has translated into greater voice and confidence. However, influence remains constrained by gendered norms, age related resource barriers, limited disability accessibility, and persistent power imbalances within coordination structures. Strengthening inclusion therefore requires not only maintaining representative spaces but also addressing the practical and structural conditions that determine who can consistently participate, who feels able to speak, and whose perspectives ultimately shape decisions.

### **Last-mile Story: Confidence Without Capital**

#### Women and Youth, Rhino District

Women and youth in Rhino District reported clear improvements in confidence, voice, and participation, alongside ongoing material constraints that limit the sustainability of change. Participants noted that “the refugees and nationals attend the meetings together,” describing this as a source of peace and cohesion. Skills trainings were widely referenced, with women explaining that “they train them with shoe making others are mechanics,” and that “some were given sewing machines in groups.”

For some, these opportunities led to tangible improvements. “I did a training with mission foundation and I gained skills like hair dressing and catering... they offered us start up kits it is very good and me personally am interested and am using them to help myself,” one woman shared. Others, however, described stalled outcomes. “We are now staying home its useless because there’s no money and no way to get money,” another participant explained, noting that “we thought after them training us they would bring for us the materials.”

Women and youth reported increased confidence in speaking up. “When there is a meeting, I go there and am eager to speak,” one woman said, while another added, “I don’t fear when they pose questions if there is answer I can give.” Young people echoed this sentiment, explaining that “the youth, they do give us that opportunity to give our views.”

Participants reported that feedback mechanisms existed but were inconsistent. “For us the refugees, we use a place called complain desk. Sometimes they respond sometimes they don’t”. Despite these gaps, many felt that engagement had shifted organisational behaviour. “They also listen to us more than before,” one woman noted, even as she emphasised the need for “start up kits for better sustainability.”

### **3.4.2. Perceived Changes in Confidence, Agency, and Safety**

Across KIIs and FGDs, stakeholders described a range of perceived changes in confidence and agency linked to participation in U-Learn supported learning, accountability, and coordination processes. These changes were most consistently articulated at the individual and organisational level, rather than as system wide shifts, and were often described as gradual, uneven, and closely shaped by context. While respondents did not attribute all changes directly to U-Learn alone, many noted that repeated exposure to learning spaces, feedback mechanisms, and facilitation contributed to increased willingness to speak, act, and engage with others.

At settlement level, women and youth frequently described increased confidence to raise concerns, participate in discussions, and stand up for themselves or their communities. Community dialogues, trainings, and peer group activities were highlighted as particularly important in building familiarity and reducing fear over time. Several respondents linked confidence not only to speaking in public forums, but also to feeling more secure in articulating needs within households and community structures.

*"The meetings and the community dialogues have made me to be very strong to stand for the family." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

For local actors and refugee led organisations, confidence was often framed in organisational terms, including greater clarity about roles, improved credibility with communities and partners, and increased trust resulting from more structured accountability practices. Respondents described how learning around AAP, governance, and documentation strengthened their ability to engage with communities more systematically and to present themselves as reliable actors within the response.

*"It has put us up there even in terms of accountability and in terms of trust that people are trusting us." (Local actor, Settlement)*

Perceived changes in agency were most evident where learning translated into concrete actions or decisions. At national and consortium levels, respondents pointed to refugee representatives influencing priorities within REF meetings and contributing to agenda setting processes. At settlement level, agency was described through examples such as involving communities from the inception of interventions, adjusting recruitment criteria, forming peer groups, and transferring knowledge to other organisations. These accounts suggest that agency was strongest when learning was applied directly to practice, rather than remaining at the level of information sharing.

*"Refugee representatives are influencing priorities in REF meetings, shaping the agenda for discussions." (Consortium, National)*

*"Involving the community in any intervention, include the community from the inception time." (Local actor, Settlement)*

Among youth, agency was often linked to collective action rather than individual leadership, including formation of peer groups and having decisions respected within community processes. However, several FGDs also highlighted the fragility of these gains, particularly where learning was not followed by resources, employment opportunities, or sustained engagement, limiting the extent to which agency could be exercised in practice.

*"Their decisions are taken seriously and respected. They have formed the peer groups." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

Perceived changes in safety were less consistently reported across the data. While some respondents associated closer community engagement and dialogue with reduced tensions or GBV related risks, most accounts of safety were indirect and framed as aspirations rather than concrete outcomes. Several FGDs referenced improved openness

and communication as factors that could contribute to safer environments, but explicit evidence of sustained changes in physical or psychosocial safety remained limited.

*"Let them be close with the community in order to reduce issues to do with GBV and SGBV." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

Overall, the data suggests that U-Learn supported processes have contributed to incremental and context specific shifts in confidence and agency, particularly among women, youth, and local actors who engaged repeatedly in learning and accountability spaces. These shifts appear strongest where learning is accompanied by facilitation, follow up, and opportunities to apply new knowledge. At the same time, changes in safety are less clearly articulated and remain shaped by broader structural and social factors beyond the programme's direct influence. This highlights the importance of sustaining engagement pathways and linking learning to tangible opportunities if gains in confidence and agency are to be maintained and deepened over time.

### **Last-mile Story: Participation Without Predictability**

Women, Nakivale Settlement

Women in Nakivale described active participation in consultations, feedback meetings, and REF engagements, alongside frustration about uneven access to support. "Some of us have participated in community consultations, feedback activities, REF meetings," participants explained, noting that these processes helped connect them to partners offering vocational training and livelihood support.

However, access was perceived as uneven. "Most of the support is going to some new arrivals and now we wonder why some receive and others don't," women said, describing tensions that emerged when selection criteria were unclear. While some received training, "we don't get start up kits from some organisations," limiting the usefulness of skills acquired.

Information access was generally strong. "The information provided is always very easy since it's in our local languages and its also according to the culture of the people," participants explained. Feedback channels existed through "help desk, hotline, meetings in the community," but responses varied. "Yes, UNHCR hotline I got feedback," one woman said, while another noted that "partners offer but I was chased away so I never got feedback."

Despite these challenges, women observed changes in how organisations engage communities. "They listen to us more than before," participants said, particularly on issues affecting children and vulnerable groups. However, they emphasised the need for better transparency: "Organisations should first consult us before bringing their support to the community," women urged, adding that "share feedback on the data collected from the villages" would help rebuild trust.

### **3.5. Value for Money (VfM): Assessment Using the Four E's**

This section assesses U-Learn's value for money using the Four E's framework: economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. Rather than focusing solely on cost minimisation, the analysis considers whether resources have been used appropriately and strategically to generate system-level benefits within Uganda's refugee response, in line with U-Learn's role as a learning, evidence, and coordination platform.

### 3.5.1. Economy

Across stakeholder groups, there was broad agreement that U-Learn's overall economic rationale is sound, particularly given its non-implementing role and system-level mandate. Several respondents emphasised that, in a context of shrinking humanitarian budgets, investing in shared learning, research, and coordination functions is more economical than having multiple actors independently generate similar evidence or convene parallel processes. From this perspective, U-Learn was seen as reducing duplication and spreading fixed costs across the system, rather than adding an additional layer of expenditure.

*"With the shrinking budgets, what we do in the end will be much cheaper than having different actors do the same thing separately." (Consortium, National)*

UN agency stakeholders reinforced this view, highlighting the value of U-Learn's ability to rapidly synthesise and present a broad picture of what exists in the system. This function was perceived as economically efficient because it supports coordination and decision-making without requiring large, stand-alone data collection or analytical investments by individual agencies.

*"As a coordinator you can't coordinate what you don't know. When you have a project like U-Learn which can give you very quickly a whole spectrum of what is there, that is the information you need." (UN agency, National)*

At the same time, donors and some consortium members raised questions about the **appropriateness of the organisational cost structure** in light of future funding realities. While there was no indication of wasteful spending in programme activities, several respondents suggested that U-Learn may need to continue adapting towards an even leaner core structure, with greater flexibility to scale technical inputs up or down through short-term expertise. These reflections were framed as forward-looking concerns rather than critiques of past spending, and were closely linked to uncertainty about long-term donor support.

*"They need to get a leaner, even leaner setup where they can really be very flexible, very tight, small core team, and then bring on consultants as needed." (Donor, National)*

Explicit references to co-funding were largely confined to consortium stakeholders, while other respondents tended to frame efficiency in terms of reduced duplication and shared learning functions rather than financing arrangements. This distinction is consistent with reflections in the U-Learn Self-Evaluation report which highlights shared infrastructure and collective learning as primary efficiency gains, with co-funding described as an enabling feature rather than a central driver of value for money.

Beyond the core consortium, coordination bodies, INGOs, and local actors provided numerous examples of how U-Learn has acted as a connector, enabling partnerships that unlocked additional resources or extended the reach of activities without direct programme funding. These included joint data collection with network members, shared working groups, and linkages to government and UN-led initiatives at settlement level. For local actors, these partnerships were often experienced as indirect but tangible

economic benefits, allowing them to access opportunities and support that would not have been available independently.

*"We've partnered with U-Learn to produce data around community priorities, using our members to collect that data." (Coordination body, National)*

*"U-Learn was able to link us with other partners like UNICEF and government." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

Despite these strengths, several donors highlighted the current **concentration of funding** as an economic risk. Reliance on a limited number of funders was seen as constraining long-term sustainability and reducing flexibility, even where the programme demonstrates strong leverage in practice. Suggestions such as diversifying the donor base, exploring light fee-for-service elements, or adapting user-contribution models were raised as potential ways to strengthen the economic foundation without undermining U-Learn's public good mandate.

*"We cannot carry them on our own. It's really key that they get more funders on board." (Donor, National)*

Overall, the evidence suggests that U-Learn demonstrates strong economic logic through shared functions, partnership leverage, and avoidance of duplication, making its core activities broadly appropriate for a public good platform. At the same time, maintaining economy over the next phase will depend on continued adaptation towards lean structures and diversified funding, particularly as humanitarian financing tightens and expectations around cost efficiency increase.

### **3.5.2. Efficiency**

Respondents across stakeholder groups perceived U-Learn as highly efficient in reducing duplication and improving coordination, particularly through its role in convening partners, supporting working groups, and producing shared products that turn discussions into actionable learning. Coordination bodies and UN agencies repeatedly described U-Learn's contribution as helping actors "scan" what is happening across the system, align priorities, and reduce repetitive or fragmented efforts.

*"We planned a workshop together... to do a quick scan of what everybody else is doing... trying to pick out some of the emerging practices." (UN agency, National)*

*"Work alongside the different working groups... to ensure that we don't duplicate, and we give support where necessary." (INGO, Settlement)*

This perceived efficiency was also reflected in examples where U-Learn provided backbone support to coordination processes such as acting as a secretariat function, supporting evidence-based harmonisation, and producing structured outputs (e.g., readouts, learning documents, mappings) that can be used by multiple actors rather than recreated separately.

*"We invited U-Learn to do a comprehensive report of our panel discussion... it becomes a learning document." (Coordination body, National)*

*"The idea is to harmonize interventions... we're coordinating with each other, using evidence-based information." (Coordination body, National)*

Consortium design features were frequently cited as a key driver of efficiency—particularly the creation of a shared consortium management function intended to generate synergies, reduce duplication, and streamline collaboration across partners.

*"We created a multi-organization consortium management unit... responsible for synergies and collaboration." (Consortium, National)*

Several consortium and donor stakeholders noted that sustaining joint efficiencies over time requires continuous investment in coordination and leadership, particularly within multi-partner arrangements. Respondents reflected that periods of staffing transition, shifts in partner engagement, and changes in consortium coordination roles influenced how consistently shared working and joint decision-making could be maintained. These reflections point less to a failure of the model itself, and more to the importance of stable coordination capacity in realising the full potential of consortium-based learning and collaboration.

A donor perspective similarly framed efficiency as partly contingent on the willingness of partners to engage in shared learning systems (including M&E), noting that where partners remain disconnected from the programme's learning and accountability processes, potential efficiencies are lost.

*"If they don't try and get involved in the M&E... there are opportunities lost there." (Donor, National)*

In relation to timeliness, perceptions were largely positive where U-Learn outputs directly enabled adaptation, decision-making, or partner response. Local actors and FGDs linked U-Learn-supported trainings, dialogues, and evidence to faster partner responsiveness and quicker access to information that supports program improvement.

*"The surveys have been very useful... they help us to improve." (Local actor, Settlement)*

*"When U-Learn came... now we are able to go to partners... and they are able to respond." (FGD, Settlement)*

At the same time, a coordination body perspective highlighted that timeliness can still be constrained by limited resources to translate discussions into action suggesting that while U-Learn contributes to efficient convening and evidence provision, follow-through can depend on whether dedicated capacity exists to operationalise next steps.

*"We have good discussions... but sometimes we struggle... we don't have the resources to take those discussions forward into action." (Coordination body, National)*

Finally, respondents pointed to the value of digital and light-touch delivery models in enabling efficient knowledge sharing and reducing the costs of engagement particularly

through online sessions, the use of platforms for summarisation and dissemination, and the ability to reach actors without heavy logistical requirements.

*"We were doing knowledge sharing sessions... it can be online." (Local actor, National)*

*"We use U-Learn... to summarize our program activities... on our YouTube channel there is a lot of our work." (Local actor, Settlement)*

Overall, the evidence suggests that U-Learn has delivered strong efficiency gains through reduced duplication, improved coordination, and low-overhead knowledge sharing, with particularly strong perceptions from coordination bodies, UN actors, and settlement-level stakeholders who benefit from shared products and convening spaces. Where efficiency appears weaker, it is largely linked to inconsistent consortium coordination over time and resource constraints for translating dialogue into action, rather than inefficiency in core delivery mechanisms.

### **3.5.3. Effectiveness (VfM Lens)**

Across stakeholder groups, there was strong and consistent evidence that U-Learn's investments have translated into meaningful system-level outcomes, particularly through the generation, synthesis, and uptake of learning that informs programme design, coordination practices, and accountability mechanisms. Donors highlighted concrete examples where U-Learn-supported learning directly shaped new programme architectures, demonstrating a clear line between investment and use.

*"Those have been extremely instrumental. We've kind of pushed them strongly with new partners and said, you have to take these things on board." (Donor, National)*

Similarly, several respondents emphasised that the effectiveness of U-Learn lies not only in producing evidence, but in ensuring that learning is retained, reused, and applied over time. In a context where evaluations and studies are often produced but shelved, U-Learn was widely perceived as addressing a critical inefficiency in the system by keeping evidence visible and actionable.

*"We are very good at producing baselines, midlines, and endlines, but once these evaluations are done, they are shelved. This was the challenge that U-Learn has been trying to address." (Consortium, National)*

From a VfM perspective, this sustained use of evidence was frequently described as high return relative to cost, particularly because much of the impact comes from synthesising existing data, facilitating dialogue, and providing advisory support rather than commissioning large, standalone studies. Former consortium staff and partners described this as "high-impact, low-cost" work, where relatively modest investments unlocked broader influence across actors and sectors. This perception is consistent with self-evaluation reflections that U-Learn's advisory, convening, and synthesis functions generated disproportionate system influence relative to their cost, particularly when compared to standalone research or programme-specific investments.

*"The high-impact, low money work is where we are directly advising stakeholders. Often the data already exists." (Consortium, National)*

Effectiveness was also assessed in terms of observable system changes, most notably in accountability to affected populations (AAP), coordination practices, and agenda-setting. Donors and UN agencies explicitly attributed shifts in how accountability is discussed and operationalised in Uganda's refugee response to U-Learn's convening and evidence roles.

*"On accountability, that agenda has been driven very competently, and it resulted in a system change. U-Learn was instrumental in that." (Donor, National)*

In comparative terms, several stakeholders positioned Uganda's learning and coordination ecosystem as stronger and more structured than other refugee contexts they had worked in, citing mechanisms such as REF and DEF and the availability of curated evidence as distinguishing features. While U-Learn was not seen as the sole contributor to these strengths, it was consistently recognised as a key enabling actor within this broader system.

*"I haven't seen anywhere else being so strong and structured and systematic." (Donor, National)*

Consortium partners and UN agencies also highlighted the accessibility and audience-orientation of U-Learn products as a comparative advantage. Learning outputs were described as more usable for national NGOs, refugee-led organisations, and coordination actors than more technical or donor-facing research products produced elsewhere, enhancing their effectiveness and reach.

*"Our products are more audience-friendly, less technical, and more uptake-oriented, especially for national NGOs and RLOs." (Consortium, National)*

At settlement level, local actors and community participants described effectiveness in terms of practical changes resulting from U-Learn-supported learning and capacity strengthening. These included improved proposal quality, stronger governance and accountability practices, increased trust from communities and donors, and expanded access to partnerships and funding. Many local actors emphasised the durability of these gains, noting that the knowledge and tools acquired continue to be used beyond the life of specific engagements.

*"This knowledge is a tool we shall be using for a long time. It will continue to support our progress." (Local actor, Settlement)*

*"We were trained on accountability, and immediately our proposals changed and we were incorporated." (Local actor, Settlement)*

However, the VfM effectiveness analysis also surfaced important caveats. Some donors and partners raised concerns about the sheer volume of outputs, noting that while technical quality is high, navigability and prioritisation can affect uptake and therefore dilute effective value. In a small number of cases, specific products were perceived as duplicative of existing systems, raising questions about marginal value relative to cost.

*"There's maybe been too much quantity. It is difficult to navigate that massive body of knowledge." (Donor, National)*

*"That looked like duplication. I didn't really understand the purpose and I haven't seen the impact." (Donor, National)*

These critiques were not dominant, but they highlight an important VfM learning: effectiveness is maximised not by volume alone, but by strategic focus, clarity of purpose, and alignment with existing system tools.

Overall, the evidence suggests that U-Learn demonstrates strong effectiveness from a VfM perspective, with widespread perception that the system-level changes enabled through learning uptake, coordination, and accountability justify the investment made. Where effectiveness risks being diluted, this is largely linked to issues of prioritisation and usability rather than the core value proposition of the platform. Strengthening curation, signalling of "what matters most," and sharper differentiation from existing tools would further enhance the VfM case in future phases.

#### **3.5.4. Equity**

Across donor and consortium perspectives, U-Learn was widely recognised as a constructive contributor to the localisation agenda, particularly through its role in facilitating localisation discussions, supporting strategy development, and strengthening the capacity of local and refugee-led actors. Donors and coordination bodies described U-Learn as playing a meaningful system role in advancing localisation within the Uganda refugee response, including through convening workshops, supporting government-facing processes, and embedding localisation considerations into learning and evidence platforms. From a value for money perspective, these contributions were seen as generating equity benefits by intentionally directing learning resources towards actors that are often under-represented in system-level spaces.

*"U-Learn has been a very key player in advancing the localisation agenda within the response." (Donor, National)*

At the same time, stakeholders consistently emphasised that equity gains between international and local organisations remain uneven and constrained by broader system dynamics. Several consortium and UN agency respondents highlighted that, while U-Learn has increased access to learning and capacity support for national NGOs, RLOs, and CBOs, there are still unresolved challenges around shifting power, resources, and technical ownership in a way that is both meaningful and sustainable. Consistent with this, the self-evaluation noted that while access to learning has expanded, equity in influence and resourcing remains constrained by broader system dynamics beyond the programme's control. Concerns were raised that localisation risks becoming tokenistic if local actors are included without sufficient investment in long-term capacity or if quality standards are not adequately supported.

*"We had not fully figured out how to do localisation in a way that was meaningful and not tokenistic." (Consortium, National)*

Local actors reinforced this perspective by calling for more direct funding, deeper engagement at grassroots level, and clearer pathways for refugee-led and community-based organisations to take on leadership roles. While many local organisations valued

the skills, visibility, and legitimacy gained through U-Learn engagement, they also noted that equity in access to learning does not always translate into equity in decision-making authority or financial resources.

With regard to national versus settlement-level distribution, respondents described U-Learn's equity contribution as mixed. On one hand, coordination bodies and local actors highlighted U-Learn's deliberate focus on refugee settlements through community-level data collection, settlement-based learning activities, and support to actors operating in marginalised locations. These efforts were seen as important in ensuring that evidence and learning are grounded in settlement realities rather than remaining concentrated at national level.

*"It's looking at refugee settlements, plans that are considered as marginalized. In that sense, it has been inclusive in nature." (Coordination body, National)*

On the other hand, several stakeholders noted that coverage at settlement level remains partial and uneven, with some locations benefiting more consistently than others. Funding constraints and shifting priorities were described as exacerbating these disparities, particularly for settlement actors who are more dependent on external facilitation to access national platforms and learning opportunities. From a VfM perspective, this uneven distribution was seen as limiting the equity of returns, even where overall programme value is perceived as high.

Equity considerations related to refugees and other marginalised groups featured prominently across stakeholder groups. Many respondents highlighted U-Learn-supported mechanisms that enable refugee participation in learning, accountability, and evidence generation, including continuous engagement with communities and structured forums for refugee voice. These approaches were widely viewed as strengthening equity by ensuring that refugee perspectives inform system-level discussions rather than remaining confined to project-level feedback.

*"There was continuous direct contact with refugees, and their perspectives were feeding into the work." (Consortium, National)*

Settlement-level stakeholders and FGDs further emphasised perceived benefits for women, youth, and persons with disabilities, particularly where learning and AAP-related activities increased awareness of rights, improved access to services, or strengthened community dialogue. However, these same groups also identified ongoing gaps, such as inconsistent youth representation, limited disability inclusion in some coordination spaces, and tensions arising from perceived inequities in targeting among different community groups.

Overall, the evidence suggests that U-Learn has generated meaningful equity gains relative to its investment by expanding access to learning, strengthening local and refugee-led capacities, and directing attention towards marginalised contexts and voices. At the same time, these gains are moderated by structural constraints related to funding, localisation pathways, and uneven settlement-level reach. As a result, equity under a VfM lens is best understood as an area of clear progress, but one that requires continued

intentionality to ensure that benefits are not only broadly distributed, but also equitably translated into influence, resources, and sustained system participation.

### **3.6. Sustainability and Legacy**

This section examines the sustainability of U-Learn's contributions beyond the life of the programme, focusing on whether its learning, research, and accountability functions are likely to endure within Uganda's refugee response system. It considers sustainability not only in financial or institutional terms, but also in relation to practices, relationships, capacities, and norms that have been established or influenced through U-Learn's work. The analysis therefore looks at both formal and informal pathways through which learning and accountability may be sustained over time.

#### **3.6.1. Institutionalisation of Learning and AAP Functions**

Across stakeholder groups, there is strong evidence that U-Learn's learning and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) functions have moved beyond discrete project outputs and become embedded within organisational routines, coordination mechanisms, and community-level practices. Institutionalisation is most visible where learning is routinely drawn upon for programme design, accountability systems are maintained independently, and evidence continues to shape decision-making without direct programme facilitation.

At the national level, donors and UN agencies described clear pathways through which U-Learn learning has been taken up within formal policy and coordination processes. Learning products were not framed as optional references, but as inputs that actively shaped programme expectations, donor requirements, and strategic design. This reflects a shift from knowledge generation to knowledge governance, where learning becomes a required part of how programmes are conceived and justified.

*"Those have been extremely instrumental... you have to take these things on board."  
(Donor, National)*

In parallel, AAP functions supported through U-Learn were described as having contributed to durable system-level change, particularly through coordination platforms and accountability forums. Stakeholders noted that accountability practices introduced through learning initiatives have continued to influence how agencies engage affected populations, indicating that these functions are no longer dependent on the programme's presence.

*"That work resulted in a system change... and U-Learn was instrumental in that."  
(Donor, National)*

Within consortium organisations and sector coordination bodies, learning functions appear to be institutionalised through ongoing dissemination, advisory practices, and the routine use of existing data. Rather than relying on new studies, respondents emphasised the continued value of synthesis, interpretation, and targeted advice, suggesting that learning has been embedded as a low-cost, high-utility function within organisational workflows.

*"All it takes is the person, the data in theory already exists."  
(Consortium member, National)*

Several stakeholders highlighted that learning products were deliberately designed to enable sustained uptake, particularly by national NGOs, refugee-led organisations, and community-based actors. Audience-focused formats and accessible reporting were seen as key to ensuring learning remains usable over time, rather than being archived once a project cycle ends.

*"The way it is reported is less technical and more uptake-oriented."  
(Consortium member, National)*

At settlement level, institutionalisation was most strongly evidenced through the continued use of AAP mechanisms and learning practices by local and refugee-led organisations. Many respondents described accountability systems, surveys, feedback channels, and community dialogues as now forming part of their standard operating practices. These mechanisms were no longer perceived as externally imposed requirements, but as tools that organisations actively value and maintain.

*"We engage with the communities and they report to us on issues of accountability."  
(Local actor, Settlement)*

Learning functions were also described as being embedded through organisational policies, governance systems, and staff capacities. Local actors frequently noted that training and capacity support resulted in new policies, manuals, and routines that continue to guide organisational behaviour. This suggests that institutionalisation has occurred not only at the level of practice, but also within formal organisational structures.

*"The system and the new policy developed and already in place will forever be beneficial to the organization."  
(Local actor, Settlement)*

Community-level evidence further reinforces this pattern. Participants in FGDs described ongoing dialogues, feedback processes, and training activities that continue to shape relationships with partners and authorities. Learning and accountability were framed as iterative processes through which communities negotiate change, rather than one-off interventions.

*"We are having community dialogues... we come up with resolutions and then the partners respond."  
(Community members, Settlement)*

At the same time, some respondents highlighted that institutionalisation remains uneven in certain areas. Feedback loops were occasionally described as incomplete, with calls for stronger closure and more consistent communication back to communities. Others noted that while learning functions are widely used, deeper formalisation within government systems and long-term coordination frameworks would further strengthen sustainability.

Overall, the evidence suggests a high degree of institutionalisation of learning and AAP functions across multiple levels of the system. Where institutionalisation is strongest, it is characterised by routine use of evidence in decision-making, sustained accountability practices embedded within organisational systems, and the capacity of actors to replicate and adapt these functions independently.

## Last-mile Story: From Learning to Accountability on the Ground (Adjumani)

At settlement level in Adjumani district, Alliance Forum for Development (AFOD), a national NGO working with refugees and host communities, has been grappling with the practical challenge of strengthening accountability and safeguarding in a complex humanitarian environment. As a team member explained, their work spans “coordination of protection and safeguarding activities, support to case management and referrals, conducting risk analyses, and ensuring gender-responsive, accountable programme delivery across refugee settlements.”

Engagement with U-Learn came at a time when AFOD was seeking to strengthen its Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) systems and staff capacity. Through U-Learn’s Learning Hub and targeted AAP and PSEAH support, the organisation began translating learning into concrete operational changes. Reflecting on this engagement, the respondent noted that “U-Learn’s work has been highly relevant and complementary to AFOD’s priorities, particularly in strengthening APP and safeguarding systems.”

The most significant shift occurred when learning moved beyond individual trainings into organisational practice. Following U-Learn’s AAP support and PSEAH Training of Trainers, AFOD developed and institutionalised an internal AAP policy. As the respondent described, “Following U-Learn’s AAP support and PSEAH capacity-building activities, AFOD strengthened its feedback and complaints mechanisms, clarified referral pathways, improved staff coordination, and enhanced community trust and participation, resulting in more transparent, responsive, and survivor-centred programming within refugee operations.”

These changes were not limited to internal processes. U-Learn’s guidance and learning outputs also began to influence how AFOD engaged in planning, reporting, and coordination. According to the respondent,

“U-Learn’s outputs have contributed to improved decision-making and service delivery at AFOD by informing programme planning, proposal development, and sector coordination.” Evidence and learning generated through U-Learn were used “to strengthen accountability components in work plans and reports, improve feedback mechanisms, and support evidence-based discussions in inter-agency coordination forums.”

At the community level, the intervention increased awareness of accountability mechanisms initially created new challenges. As feedback systems improved, expectations around response timelines rose. However, these tensions were addressed through clearer communication, ultimately reinforcing trust rather than undermining it. As the respondent explained, “While community awareness activities initially raised expectations around response timelines, these were managed through clearer communication and ultimately contributed to improved trust, accountability, and collaboration across the humanitarian response.”

For AFOD, the value of U-Learn’s engagement lies in its ability to translate evidence into action that is meaningful at the last mile. As the respondent summarised, “U-Learn’s most important contribution to the refugee response is strengthening accountability and learning by translating evidence into practical, context-appropriate action.” In Adjumani, this translation has taken the form of strengthened systems, clearer accountability, and more responsive services delivered by a national actor operating closest to refugee communities.

### 3.6.2. Risks to Sustainability

Despite strong evidence of institutionalisation and perceived long-term value, stakeholders consistently identified a set of interconnected risks that threaten the sustainability of U-Learn's learning, research, and accountability functions. These risks are primarily structural rather than programmatic and relate to funding dependence, system ownership, human resource continuity, and the broader political and financing environment of the humanitarian response. While many stakeholders expressed a desire for U-Learn's functions to continue, there was less confidence that the current enabling conditions would reliably support this without deliberate mitigation.

A dominant and cross-cutting risk identified across donor, consortium, coordination, and settlement-level actors was heavy reliance on a limited number of funding sources. Donors were explicit that current levels of dependence were not viable in the medium to long term, particularly in an environment of shrinking humanitarian budgets and increasing pressure to prioritise life-saving assistance over learning and systems strengthening. This dependence was viewed as exposing U-Learn to abrupt scale-downs, reduced scope, or complete discontinuation, regardless of demonstrated value.

At the coordination and consortium level, funding uncertainty was linked not only to the risk of programme closure but also to more subtle erosion of effectiveness. Stakeholders described how funding-driven pressures had contributed to dilution of structures, reduced staffing continuity, and an emphasis on volume of outputs over usability. This raised concerns that learning products could become harder to navigate, less targeted, and therefore less likely to be used in practice, undermining their long-term relevance.

*"There's maybe been too much quantity... too much material that is difficult... I can navigate that massive body of knowledge... not easily." (Donor, National)*

Another significant risk relates to system ownership and leadership following the end of the programme. While many stakeholders recognised that U-Learn's functions could, in theory, be absorbed into existing coordination mechanisms or institutions, there was limited clarity on who would ultimately hold responsibility for stewarding learning, maintaining evidence repositories, or convening accountability processes. Respondents most commonly pointed to national coordination bodies such as the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), sector working groups, and refugee coordination platforms as potential institutional homes for different elements of U-Learn's work. However, these actors were also described as operating under heavy mandates, limited resourcing, and varying levels of technical capacity for learning facilitation and evidence synthesis. Several stakeholders therefore cautioned that without a clearly defined post-programme ownership model—including agreed roles, resourcing, and leadership where U-Learn's core functions risk fragmentation or neglect rather than sustained institutionalisation.

*"There's a need now to think of different ways to do that... unclear mandate." (Donor, National)*

Human resource continuity emerged as a reinforcing risk, particularly within the consortium and coordination structures. Stakeholders highlighted that much of U-Learn's effectiveness and institutional memory had been carried by a relatively small number of highly engaged individuals. This institutional memory was described as encompassing

not only relationships and convening know-how, but also practical knowledge of U-Learn's learning infrastructure, analytical frameworks, evidence synthesis approaches, and the curation and use of shared knowledge repositories. Turnover, reduced staff time, or loss of key roles was therefore seen as weakening coordination efficiency and risking erosion of these assets, including the informal relationships and facilitation practices that supported learning uptake across organisations.

At settlement level, risks were often framed in more immediate and practical terms. Refugee-led organisations and community representatives linked sustainability directly to the availability of resources that enabled participation, training, and feedback mechanisms. Funding cuts were reported to have already reduced access to learning opportunities, limited facilitation of forums, and narrowed the reach of capacity-building activities. For these actors, sustainability was not an abstract concept but closely tied to whether learning and accountability could continue to be practiced in daily operations.

*"Some of us were taken to learn but since the funding ended, they only take ToTs."  
(FGD Participant, Settlement)*

Finally, stakeholders pointed to broader external risks that sit beyond U-Learn's direct control, including shifts in global donor priorities, political changes in donor countries, and declining humanitarian financing overall. These external dynamics were seen as compounding internal sustainability challenges and underscored the vulnerability of learning and research functions in times of crisis, despite widespread recognition of their long-term importance.

*"Life is still hard in the refugee settlements as food rations have been greatly reduced or cut due to donor cuts." (FGD Participant, Settlement)*

Taken together, these findings suggest that while U-Learn's sustainability is strongly supported at the level of practice, value, and intent, it remains fragile in structural terms. Addressing these risks will require deliberate strategies to diversify funding, clarify post-programme ownership, safeguard institutional memory, and protect learning and accountability functions from being deprioritised during funding contractions.

### **3.6.3. Perceived Value of the "U-Learn Brand"**

Across stakeholder groups, U-Learn was consistently described not only as a programme or platform, but as a trusted reference point within Uganda's refugee response. The U-Learn brand was associated with credibility, neutrality, and technical quality, and these attributes were widely perceived as contributing to its lasting influence beyond individual activities or funding cycles. Stakeholders frequently linked the brand's value to the confidence it generated among donors, coordination bodies, and local actors to engage with evidence, participate in learning processes, and apply findings in practice.

*"U LEARN has produced a tremendous repository of learning... all of their work has been of high technical quality and integrity." (Donor, National)*

For donors and national-level actors, the brand's value was closely tied to its perceived independence and system-level orientation. U-Learn was seen as distinct from implementing agencies, allowing it to convene diverse actors, surface sensitive issues,

and support learning without being perceived as advancing organisational agendas. This neutrality was viewed as a key factor enabling its influence on policy discussions, coordination mechanisms, and strategic frameworks, including localisation and accountability processes.

*"Stronger than any other refugee situation I've seen... I haven't seen anywhere else being so strong and structured and systematic." (Donor, National)*

Within the consortium and coordination spaces, the U-Learn brand was described as a marker of continuity in a fragmented humanitarian environment. Stakeholders highlighted the value of having a recognised entity that curates, synthesises, and preserves learning over time, particularly in a context characterised by staff turnover, short funding cycles, and repeated reinvention. The brand was therefore associated not only with individual products, but with safeguarding institutional memory and preventing the loss of accumulated evidence.

*"They've created an incredible body of work... not everything is irrelevant after three years." (Consortium, National)*

At settlement level, the brand's value was often expressed in more relational and practical terms. Local actors and refugee-led organisations associated U-Learn with empowerment, legitimacy, and increased visibility. Being linked to U-Learn, or having participated in its learning and AAP processes, was perceived as enhancing organisational credibility with donors and partners, strengthening trust, and opening opportunities for collaboration and funding. In this sense, the brand functioned as an enabling asset for local actors navigating unequal power dynamics.

*"It has made us to be more trusted, we are receiving more projects as a result of us having that AAP component in our work." (Local actor, Settlement)*

Community members and FGD participants also articulated the brand's legacy in terms of personal and collective change. U-Learn was remembered as an initiative that created safe spaces for dialogue, increased confidence to engage with organisations, and legitimised community voices within coordination and feedback mechanisms. These perceived changes in confidence, self-esteem, and participation were described as enduring outcomes that would continue as long as organisations and forums remain active.

*"As long as the organisations are still existing, I will continue to learn and I will continue to change." (FGD participant, Settlement)*

At the same time, some stakeholders cautioned that the strength of the U-Learn brand also creates expectations that require careful management. Several respondents emphasised the importance of protecting the brand's credibility by ensuring continuity, clarity of mandate, and thoughtful transition planning. Without this, there is a risk that the brand's value could diminish if learning functions are fragmented or if responsibility for sustaining them becomes unclear.

*"I think we are at a very critical moment now that we don't want to lose everything that we've been able to learn." (Consortium, National)*

Overall, the findings suggest that the U-Learn brand itself constitutes a significant element of the programme's sustainability and legacy. It is widely recognised, trusted, and associated with quality, neutrality, and system-level learning. This reputational capital represents a strong foundation for future institutionalisation or adaptation, provided that the transition beyond the programme is managed in ways that preserve the integrity, accessibility, and inclusive ethos that stakeholders associate with U-Learn.

## **CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This chapter interprets the findings to reflect on how U-Learn has functioned within Uganda's refugee response as a learning, research, and accountability platform. Rather than re-stating results, the discussion focuses on understanding how and why influence occurred, where it was strongest or constrained, and what this implies for system-level learning, value for money, and sustainability in a complex humanitarian environment. The discussion draws across relevance, effectiveness, localisation, GESI, value for money, and sustainability findings to surface broader patterns and lessons that extend beyond individual activities or components.

### **4.1. Interpreting U-Learn's system-level influence in Uganda's refugee response**

The findings suggest that U-Learn's influence is best understood as systemic rather than programmatic. Stakeholders consistently described U-Learn not as an actor delivering change directly, but as an enabling platform that shaped how learning, evidence, and accountability circulate within the refugee response system. This aligns with perceptions of relevance in Section 3.1, where U-Learn's design was seen as filling a long-standing coordination and evidence gap rather than duplicating implementation functions. Influence emerged most clearly where U-Learn helped structure collective engagement around shared problems. Rather than driving decisions through authority or funding, U-Learn influenced the conditions under which decisions were made by providing trusted evidence, convening diverse actors, and facilitating interpretation of findings. This explains why stakeholders often struggled to point to single causal moments, yet consistently described shifts in coordination quality, decision discipline, and learning culture. Influence in this sense was cumulative, relational, and mediated through existing decision-making structures. The discussion therefore reframes influence as a property of the system rather than a direct outcome of individual outputs. Where U-Learn enabled shared reference points, reduced fragmentation, and legitimised difficult conversations, its influence was most visible. Where engagement remained peripheral to decision moments, influence was correspondingly weaker.

## Last-mile Story: When Learning Becomes Coordination Practice (Cash Working Group)

The Cash Working Group operates as a technical coordination platform bringing together UN agencies, international and local NGOs, financial service providers, government entities, and regulators involved in cash-based assistance for refugees. As the Chair of the group explained, “the cash working group is... a technical working group... it’s not a sector working group as the same way as health, or education, or protection,” but rather “a platform that brings together different stakeholders that have an interest in cash programs.” U-Learn’s engagement with the Cash Working Group began during a period when the group was seeking to strengthen evidence use, harmonisation, and shared learning across actors. Reflecting on earlier collaboration, the respondent recalled that “there was a range of products and activities that was related to that,” including “different assessments on user preferences, on financial service capacity, on different settlements,” and support to “the first step of developing our strategy, our harmonized cash approach.” One of the most tangible outcomes of this engagement emerged through collaboration between the Cash Working Group, the Bank of Uganda, and U-Learn to address inconsistencies in financial literacy programming. As the respondent explained, “one of the findings from the assessments that U-Learn did was that while there were a lot of different actors doing financial literacy trainings... there were a lot of variants in how different actors defined what that was.” In response, “there was a decision to develop these minimum standards,” which were “done together with the Bank of Uganda based on the national curriculum,” formally approved in 2023 and launched through a jointly supported event. U-Learn’s role extended beyond research into active coordination support. “They were supporting us in all aspects of the event,” the respondent recalled, including “developing materials to support the panelists,” “marketing the event through their networks,” and ensuring “videography, the streaming, and all of that.” This collaboration created momentum for follow-up engagement, including a subsequent deep-dive workshop focused on implementation and monitoring of the standards. The Cash Working Group also engaged with U-Learn to clarify its learning priorities. In 2023, “U-Learn supported us in a learning agenda exercise,” facilitating a workshop to define the group’s “learning, research, and training agenda.” While the respondent acknowledged that “it never really materialized into, like, a product,” the process revealed concrete gaps. “One of the main things that came out of it was that it demonstrated a need to have some sort of training for the cash working group members,” which was subsequently delivered.

Evidence generated through U-Learn also informed programmatic decisions with downstream implications for refugees. Citing a 2022 user preference assessment, the respondent noted that the findings were “instrumental for us, when we rolled out our own cash program, to say that mobile money is what refugees prefer,” adding that “had we not had any kind of data to back up why we wanted to use a certain delivery method, then that might have not been as easy to sell.” The same evidence highlighted barriers, such as phone access, which was then “used as a source... to actually be providing... to overcome that barrier.” At the same time, the story reflects the constraints of coordination work. The respondent described how “the coordination is... not a full-time job,” meaning that follow-up and product development can be deprioritised, and noted that funding reductions meant that “financial literacy was one of those things that suffered a lot that people had to cut.” Despite this, the collaboration helped solidify relationships that extended beyond the immediate project. “Since that event... we have a very strong relationship with the Bank of Uganda,” the respondent explained, describing the launch as “the entry point really to solidify that relationship.” For the Cash Working Group, U-Learn’s contribution lay in strengthening evidence-based coordination and creating shared reference points that influenced how cash assistance was designed and justified. As the respondent reflected, “wherever we can actually have learning and evidence is a really positive thing,” noting that these products “made us have stronger programs, stronger interventions that ultimately then affect refugees and their well-being.”

## **4.2. How learning, research, and AAP interacted to shape decision-making and coordination**

A central insight from the findings is that U-Learn's influence did not stem from its components operating independently, but from the interaction between learning, research, and AAP. Evidence from Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 shows that research alone was rarely sufficient to shape decisions unless it was accompanied by facilitation, synthesis, and spaces for collective sense-making. Similarly, learning activities were most effective when anchored in credible analysis rather than abstract discussion. AAP played a distinct but complementary role by grounding system-level discussions in lived experience. Where community feedback was synthesised and elevated through coordination platforms, it strengthened the legitimacy of learning and research outputs and reduced the risk of technocratic decision-making detached from settlement realities. This interaction helps explain why accountability-related changes were among the clearest system-level shifts identified by donors and coordination actors. Where learning agendas, research questions, and feedback loops reinforced one another, evidence travelled more easily across organisational and sectoral boundaries. Conversely, where these elements were disconnected, uptake depended more heavily on individual champions or external incentives, limiting consistency.

## **4.3. Influence at the last mile: confidence, agency, and limits of individual-level change**

Findings from Sections 3.3 and 3.4 show that U-Learn's influence was experienced differently at settlement and community levels. While system-level actors emphasised coordination and decision-making, community members and local actors described changes primarily in terms of confidence, agency, and organisational practice. These changes were incremental and uneven, but nonetheless meaningful. The discussion suggests that last-mile influence operated through indirect pathways. Capacity strengthening, repeated participation, and exposure to coordination processes increased confidence to speak, negotiate, and engage with authorities and partners. Where this confidence translated into concrete actions such as proposal adaptation, improved feedback mechanisms, or community mobilisation, agency was more durable. However, where learning was not followed by resources, opportunities, or sustained engagement, gains in agency were fragile. Importantly, perceived changes in safety were less clearly articulated, reflecting both the limits of U-Learn's mandate and the structural nature of protection risks. This reinforces the need to interpret last-mile outcomes cautiously, recognising that learning platforms can contribute to enabling conditions for change without directly producing measurable improvements in wellbeing or protection.

## **4.4. Localisation, inclusion, and power: what shifted and what remains constrained**

Localisation and inclusion findings point to a mixed but instructive picture. U-Learn demonstrably expanded access to learning, evidence, and coordination for local and refugee-led actors, particularly through structured platforms such as REF and settlement-level capacity support. This contributed to greater visibility, confidence, and legitimacy for some actors, aligning with equity considerations under the VfM framework. At the same time, the discussion highlights persistent structural constraints that limited how far inclusion translated into influence. Power asymmetries within coordination spaces,

funding ceilings for refugee-led organisations, digital access barriers, and gendered norms all shaped who could consistently participate and whose voices carried weight. These constraints were largely external to the programme, but they shaped the boundaries of what U-Learn could realistically achieve. U-Learn's contribution lay in making localisation more visible, discussable, and operational through evidence and convening, even where deeper shifts in power and resources remained out of reach. This interpretation aligns with findings that localisation gains were real but partial, and that expectations of handover or replacement need to be grounded in system realities.

#### **4.5. Value for money as a system property under constrained humanitarian financing**

The VfM findings suggest that U-Learn's value for money is best understood at system level rather than through activity-level cost comparisons. Economy and efficiency gains were realised primarily through reduced duplication, shared functions, and light-touch delivery models, particularly in learning and coordination. Effectiveness under a VfM lens was strongest where relatively modest investments enabled widespread reuse of evidence and sustained learning uptake. Equity considerations further complicate VfM interpretation. While U-Learn directed learning resources towards marginalised actors and contexts, uneven settlement coverage and persistent power imbalances moderated the equity of returns. From a discussion perspective, this highlights that VfM in learning platforms is inseparable from inclusion and access. High aggregate value can coexist with uneven distribution of benefits. As funding tightens, VfM will increasingly depend on strategic focus, clarity of purpose, and alignment with existing system tools, rather than expansion of activities or products.

#### **4.6. Sustainability and legacy beyond programme funding**

Sustainability findings indicate that U-Learn's strongest legacy lies in practices, norms, and relationships rather than in formal institutional arrangements alone. Learning and AAP functions appear to be institutionalised within organisational routines, coordination processes, and community practices, suggesting a degree of durability beyond programme funding. The perceived strength of the U-Learn brand reinforces this legacy by maintaining trust, credibility, and recall even as funding uncertainty increases. However, the discussion also displays that sustainability remains fragile at structural level. Heavy funding dependence, unclear post-programme ownership, and reliance on individual champions create vulnerabilities that could erode gains over time. This tension between strong perceived value and weak structural anchoring is a defining feature of U-Learn's sustainability profile. What endures most readily are learning practices and accountability norms that actors have internalised and can replicate independently. What remains at risk are convening functions, system-wide synthesis, and stewardship of collective learning, which require resources, mandate, and coordination authority beyond individual organisations.

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

Overall, the evaluation finds that U-Learn has largely achieved its purpose of strengthening learning, evidence use, and accountability within Uganda's refugee response, particularly at system and organisational levels. In relation to its core objectives, the programme performed strongest in improving the generation, synthesis, and circulation of credible evidence, and in creating structured spaces for collective

learning and dialogue across actors who do not typically engage beyond formal coordination. Stakeholders consistently described U-Learn as filling a critical system gap by reducing fragmentation, improving decision discipline, and legitimising the use of shared evidence in coordination and programme design.

U-Learn also performed well in advancing accountability to affected populations, especially where AAP learning and support translated into concrete organisational practices. Evidence from national NGOs, refugee-led organisations, and community-based actors shows that U-Learn-supported AAP processes strengthened feedback mechanisms, improved proposal quality, and increased organisational credibility and trust with communities and partners. These outcomes align closely with U-Learn's objective of embedding accountability and learning into routine practice rather than treating them as compliance activities.

Performance was more uneven in relation to inclusion, localisation, and last-mile influence. While U-Learn expanded access to learning and coordination for refugee and local actors and strengthened confidence, agency, and organisational capacity, these gains did not consistently translate into sustained influence over decision-making or access to resources. Structural constraints including power asymmetries in coordination spaces, funding ceilings for refugee-led organisations, uneven settlement-level coverage, and limited livelihood pathways—continued to shape who could act on learning and whose voices carried weight. These limitations reflect broader system dynamics rather than weaknesses in programme design, but they moderated the depth and consistency of outcomes at community and settlement levels.

Similarly, while U-Learn demonstrated strong value for money through reduced duplication, shared infrastructure, and high reuse of evidence, efficiencies were not always sustained over time. Variability in consortium coordination, staff continuity, and prioritisation of outputs affected how consistently learning translated into action. This underscores that the effectiveness of a system-level learning platform depends not only on product quality, but on stable stewardship, facilitation, and alignment with decision-making cycles.

In terms of sustainability, the evaluation finds that U-Learn's most durable contributions lie in practices, norms, and capacities rather than in formal institutional arrangements alone. Learning and AAP functions have been institutionalised within many organisations and coordination processes, and the U-Learn brand retains strong credibility and recall. However, sustainability remains fragile at a structural level due to funding concentration, unclear post-programme ownership, and reliance on individual champions to steward learning and accountability functions.

In conclusion, U-Learn has performed well against its system-level objectives by strengthening learning culture, evidence use, and accountability practices across Uganda's refugee response. Where outcomes were weaker, this was largely due to structural constraints beyond the programme's control rather than misalignment with purpose. The programme's legacy therefore rests on whether its core functions including facilitated learning, evidence synthesis, and collective accountability are intentionally carried forward, resourced, and embedded within existing coordination and governance structures. Doing so will be critical if learning and accountability are to remain central to

the refugee response, rather than being deprioritised in an increasingly constrained humanitarian landscape.

## CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

### Key Pointers for Recommendations

The evaluation found that U-Learn’s learning and evidence products were widely trusted across donors, coordination bodies, and implementing partners, but their influence on decision-making varied by actor and context. Donors and national coordination bodies reported strongest uptake where evidence aligned with formal planning, funding, or strategy review moments. INGOs and local actors were more likely to apply learning where it was accompanied by facilitated interpretation and practical guidance. Across all groups, dissemination without follow-up was less likely to translate into concrete decisions, highlighting a gap between evidence availability and use at key decision points.

#### Recommendation 1: Strengthen pathways from learning to decision-making

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Prioritise a smaller number of decision-critical learning products and clearly articulate intended use pathways at design stage (who, when, where evidence should be used).
<b>Coordination bodies / Sector working groups</b>	Integrate U-Learn evidence into routine coordination cycles (e.g. sector reviews, annual planning discussions) and invite facilitated sense-making where needed.
<b>Donors</b>	Signal priority decision points where learning is most valuable (e.g. strategy refreshes, proposal reviews) and encourage partners to draw on shared evidence rather than commissioning parallel studies.
<b>Implementing partners (INGOs, NGOs)</b>	Actively pull relevant learning into programme design, proposals, and internal reviews, rather than treating learning products as reference material only.

The evaluation found that U-Learn’s learning, research, and accountability products are widely trusted and valued because they are largely demand-driven, responding to information gaps identified by humanitarian actors across sectors and settlements. The volume and diversity of outputs reflect the complexity and dynamism of Uganda’s refugee response rather than a proliferation of parallel or unnecessary products. At the same time, stakeholders noted that as the evidence base has expanded, clearer prioritisation, synthesis, and signalling are increasingly important to ensure that needs-based outputs translate into sustained system-level learning and decision-making.

#### Recommendation 2: Strengthen U-Learn’s system role through strategic prioritisation, synthesis, and signalling of needs-based evidence.

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Continue to generate learning, research, and accountability products in response to clearly articulated system and settlement-level information needs, while making the rationale and intended use of outputs explicit at the design stage.
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Complement needs-based production with stronger synthesis, cross-cutting analysis, and signalling of priority insights to support sense-making across a growing evidence base.
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Maintain and strengthen editorial, knowledge management, and archiving functions to improve navigability and preserve institutional memory without constraining responsiveness to emerging gaps.

<b>Coordination bodies / Sector working groups</b>	Use U-Learn’s synthesised evidence and learning as a reference point for identifying priority gaps and reducing duplication across sector-specific assessments and studies.
<b>Donors</b>	Continue to value responsiveness to evolving information needs while supporting investments in synthesis, knowledge management, and system-level learning functions that enhance overall coherence.
<b>Implementing partners (INGOs, NGOs, local actors)</b>	Engage with U-Learn not only as a source of products, but as a partner in interpreting, prioritising, and applying evidence to programme design and adaptation.

The evaluation found that U-Learn has made meaningful contributions to participation and representation of refugee and host community actors, particularly through the REF and learning platforms. However, evidence suggests that participation has not consistently translated into influence, agenda-setting, or equitable access to resources. Refugee-led and community-based organisations continue to face structural barriers related to funding, compliance requirements, and unequal power dynamics within coordination spaces. Stakeholders highlighted the need to move beyond inclusion as presence towards localisation as sustained capacity, influence, and shared decision-making.

### Recommendation 3: Deepen and equalise localisation pathways beyond participation

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Invest in sustained accompaniment models for refugee-led and community-based organisations, moving beyond one-off trainings toward longer-term capacity, confidence, and peer learning support.
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Use U-Learn’s evidence and convening power to surface and document structural barriers to localisation (e.g. funding ceilings, intermediary dependence, compliance burdens), making these visible to donors and coordination bodies.
<b>Coordination bodies / Sector working groups</b>	Strengthen mechanisms that enable agenda-setting by local actors, not only attendance or representation, including co-chairing roles, agenda co-development, and follow-up accountability.
<b>Donors</b>	Review funding and reporting expectations that unintentionally exclude refugee-led and local organisations, and support flexible, intermediary-light models where appropriate.
<b>Implementing partners (INGOs, NGOs)</b>	Shift from representational inclusion toward shared decision-making by actively supporting local actors to shape priorities, strategies, and learning agendas.

The evaluation also found that while equity and inclusion are widely recognised as core principles within the U-Learn programme, practical barriers related to gender, age, disability, language, and access continue to shape who participates meaningfully in learning and coordination spaces. Inclusion efforts were most effective where they were intentionally designed into processes, rather than treated as logistical adjustments or optional add-ons. Stakeholders emphasised that small, practical design choices often determined whether participation translated into voice and influence.

#### Recommendation 4: Strengthen equity and inclusion through practical design choices

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Systematically address gendered, age-related, and disability-related barriers through practical design choices such as session timing, facilitation support, language options, and accessibility considerations.
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Treat inclusion-related costs (transport, facilitation, translation, offline access, assistive formats) as essential design elements rather than optional or discretionary add-ons.
<b>Coordination bodies / Sector working groups</b>	Apply consistent accessibility and inclusion standards across learning and coordination spaces, including hybrid participation options and accessible documentation formats.
<b>Donors</b>	Explicitly recognise and resource inclusion costs within programme budgets and reporting frameworks, reinforcing equity as a core quality dimension rather than an efficiency trade-off.
<b>Implementing partners (INGOs, NGOs, local actors)</b>	Improve disability inclusion through intentional representation and by adapting internal learning, coordination, and consultation processes to be accessible and inclusive by design.

The evaluation found that U-Learn’s AAP work is widely recognised as a critical system function, particularly through support to REF, feedback mechanisms, and partner capacity building. However, evidence suggests that accountability outcomes are strongest where feedback loops are visibly closed and where community inputs are clearly connected to decision-making at settlement and national levels. In several contexts, AAP practices remain dependent on external facilitation, raising questions about long-term institutionalisation beyond U-Learn’s direct involvement.

#### Recommendation 5: Protect and deepen Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) as a system function

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Prioritise closure of feedback loops as a core performance indicator for AAP-related work, particularly at settlement level, ensuring communities can see how feedback informs decisions or constraints.
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Strengthen vertical linkages between community-level feedback, settlement coordination forums, and national decision-making processes to improve responsiveness and coherence.
<b>Coordination bodies / Sector working groups</b>	Systematically integrate community feedback insights into coordination discussions, planning reviews, and action points, rather than treating feedback as a parallel process.
<b>Implementing partners (INGOs, NGOs, local actors)</b>	Institutionalise accountability practices within internal systems and routines, reducing long-term reliance on external facilitation or project-specific support.
<b>Donors</b>	Reinforce accountability as a quality and effectiveness criterion by valuing evidence of closed feedback loops and institutionalised AAP practices in funding and reporting frameworks.

The evaluation also found that U-Learn has demonstrated strong value for money by operating as a lean, system-oriented platform that leverages partnerships, shared infrastructure, and co-funding arrangements. Stakeholders highlighted that this value is maximised when activities remain focused on clear system gaps and adaptive to changing needs and is diluted when new initiatives risk duplicating existing tools or structures.

### Recommendation 6: Enhance Value for Money through focus, leverage, and adaptability

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Maintain lean core structures with flexible access to short-term technical expertise, aligned to clearly defined learning, advisory, and convening needs.
<b>U-Learn / Successor Learning Platform</b>	Regularly assess the marginal value of proposed new activities against existing system tools and platforms to avoid duplication and fragmentation.
<b>Donors</b>	Continue to support adaptive management approaches that allow resources to shift in response to emerging evidence and system priorities, rather than fixed activity plans.
<b>Consortium partners / Host institutions</b>	Maximise leverage through partnerships, co-funding, and shared systems, particularly for research, learning, and digital infrastructure.
<b>Coordination bodies</b>	Use shared learning and evidence platforms as common reference points, reducing parallel investments in overlapping products or processes.

Finally, the evaluation found that while U-Learn has generated substantial system-level assets including learning products, evidence repositories, coordination practices, and accountability mechanisms with long-term impact will depend on how these functions are sustained, transferred, or embedded beyond the current funding cycle. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of proactive transition planning to avoid loss of institutional memory and fragmentation of learning functions.

### Recommendation 7: Actively manage sustainability and closure readiness

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Develop a clear sustainability and transition plan that defines future stewardship of learning, evidence repositories, digital platforms, and accountability functions post-funding.
<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Identify which functions should be absorbed by existing coordination structures, institutions, or partners, and clarify the support required to enable this transition.
<b>Coordination bodies / Host institutions</b>	Prepare to assume stewardship roles where appropriate, including hosting, updating, or convening around shared learning and evidence assets.
<b>Donors</b>	Support transition and exit planning as a legitimate and necessary investment, rather than viewing sustainability activities as administrative overhead.
<b>All system actors</b>	Protect institutional memory by documenting processes, learning agendas, convening models, and decision pathways—not only outputs and products.

The evaluation found that the U-Learn brand has accrued significant trust, credibility, and recognition across donors, coordination bodies, and implementing partners, closely associated with neutrality, quality, and system-level value. Stakeholders cautioned that poorly managed transitions whether institutional, financial, or programmatic could risk fragmentation, confusion, or erosion of this trust. Clear stewardship and communication were seen as essential to preserving U-Learn’s role as a trusted system asset.

### Recommendation 8: Safeguard and intentionally transition the U-Learn brand

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Treat the U-Learn brand as a shared system asset and actively manage any transition to avoid fragmentation, duplication, or dilution of trust.

<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Ensure continuity of core principles including credibility, neutrality, and inclusivity even if institutional arrangements, hosting models, or funding structures evolve.
<b>Donors</b>	Support clear brand stewardship arrangements and avoid parallel branding that could undermine coherence or perceived neutrality.
<b>Coordination bodies / Stakeholders</b>	Recognise and reference U-Learn as a trusted learning and accountability platform during any transition period, reinforcing continuity.
<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Communicate clearly and early with stakeholders regarding future direction, ownership, scope, and timelines to manage expectations and reduce uncertainty.

The evaluation found strong interest among stakeholders in learning from the U-Learn experience beyond Uganda. However, evidence also suggests that U-Learn’s effectiveness is closely linked to specific contextual conditions, including a relatively mature coordination architecture, diverse actor engagement, and donor tolerance for system-level learning that does not always yield immediate operational outputs.

### Recommendation 9: Inform replication and adaptation through clarity of preconditions

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Clearly articulate the contextual preconditions required for U-Learn-like models to function effectively, including coordination maturity, actor diversity, and space for system-level learning.
<b>U-Learn / Consortium</b>	Document and communicate transferable principles (e.g. neutrality, convening power, evidence curation, accountability pathways) rather than fixed structures or institutional forms.
<b>Donors</b>	Emphasise adaptation over replication when supporting learning platforms in other contexts, recognising political, institutional, and coordination differences.
<b>Implementing partners / Host institutions</b>	Use the Uganda experience as a reference point to inform locally grounded design choices, rather than a blueprint for replication.
<b>Global coordination actors</b>	Integrate lessons from U-Learn into global guidance and learning on system-level humanitarian learning and accountability models.

Finally, the evaluation found that future iterations of U-Learn-like platforms will need to operate in increasingly constrained funding environments. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of positioning learning, evidence, and accountability not as discretionary or “nice-to-have” functions, but as cost-saving, risk-reducing investments that improve system efficiency, coherence, and effectiveness.

### Recommendation 10: Prepare for future iterations in a shrinking funding landscape

Actor	Targeted actions
<b>U-Learn / Consortium / Successor Platform</b>	Explore hybrid funding models that protect core public-good functions while diversifying income streams (e.g. pooled funding, advisory services, strategic partnerships).
<b>U-Learn / Consortium / Successor Platform</b>	Align future iterations more explicitly with donor priorities around efficiency, evidence use, and accountability, without compromising independence or neutrality.
<b>Donors</b>	Recognise learning and accountability as cost-saving and risk-reducing investments, and reflect this in funding, reporting, and value-for-money expectations.

<b>Coordination bodies</b>	Use shared learning and evidence platforms to reduce duplication, inefficiency, and parallel investments across the response.
<b>All system actors</b>	Reframe learning, evidence, and accountability as core infrastructure for effective humanitarian response, rather than optional programme components.

# ANNEXES

## Annex 1: Risks and Mitigation

Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Instability due to the forthcoming campaigns and elections	High	Medium	Fast track activities that have field operations or require Physical engagements to ensure that all necessary information is collected as soon as possible before any breaks or closures are instituted.
Low availability of key stakeholders	LOW	High	Schedule early, coordinate with Save the Children and settlement authorities, and offer hybrid participation.
Limited representation of marginalised groups	Medium	Low	Use intersectional purposive sampling with refugee-led, disability, and youth/women's networks.
Connectivity or digital access constraints	Low	High	Share accessible materials in advance, offer call-in/asynchronous options, and hold in-person sessions in low-connectivity areas.
Overlap with school closures or community events	High	Low	Align with settlement and education calendars; build contingency time.
Coordination challenges across settlements	LOW	Low	Maintain weekly check-ins, use central communication protocols, and define escalation channels.
Communication barriers with participants with disabilities	Low	Low	Include two researchers with lived disability experience to enhance accessibility and trust.

## Annex 2: Data collection tools

The data collection tools are attached separately to this report.

### Annex 3: List of documents consulted

#	Document	Document Type/Level
1	2nd AAP Learning Event report 11th.March.2025	Implementation
2	Notes of the Learning event 11 <sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2024	Implementation
3	U-LEARN Terms of Reference June 2019	Programme Design
4	U-Learn Strategy Update May 2022 Submit	Programme Design
5	U-Learn Redesign - Narrative June 2021 Final	Programme Design
6	2024_Q3_U-Learn_perception survey analysis	Outcome
7	BRAER 24-25 Annual Review	Programme Design
8	Consolidated-Learn Self-Assessment report_FinalV_28.4.2025	Evaluation
9	Delivery Chain Map_U-LEARN_revised	Programme Design
10	FCDO Annual Review Self-Assessment Template - 2022 U-Learn Final	Evaluation
11	Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP) 2022-2025	Strategic Policy document
12	Organogramme_U-LEARN_revised	Programme Design
13	ToR-Consultancy services to Conduct U-LEARN IMPACT EVALUATION	TOR
14	UCRRP_Detailed planning 2024-2025_FINAL	Programme Design
15	U-Learn external impact evaluation guide_10.10.2025	Evaluation Guide
16	UGA2406_Climate report Final	Evaluation
17	U-Learn Logframe 2021-22 Jan-Mar Consolidated Final	Programme Design
18	U-Learn Logframe FY21 Final	Programme Design
19	Annual review Logframe_Consolidated_15.04.25	Programme Design
20	U-Learn Self-Evaluation 2020-2024_Report April 2024	Evaluation
21	U-Learn Y5 Ext Logframe_Consolidated 18.3.2025	Programme Design

22	22. U-Learn Narrative Q4 2020 Consolidated Final	Implementation report
23	U-Learn Y5 Ext Workplan_Consolidated_Final_13.2.2025	Implementation report
24	24. U-Learn Y5 Logframe_Final_excl HINGO	Programme Design
25	Learn Y5 Narrative Proposal Final	Programme Design
26	U-Learn Yr5 - Risk Matrix	Programme Design
27	U-Learn Quarterly Narrative Jan-Mar 21 Final	Implementation report
28	Feedback interviews	MEAL Tools

#### Annex 4: List of stakeholders interviewed

No	Name	Designation	Organization
1	Ted Jasper	Country Coordinator	IMPACT Initiatives Uganda
2	Brian Mastiko	Senior AAPA Programme Manager	IRC
3	Patience Kyomugisha	Consortium Manager	Save the Children
4	Katuramu Abel	Head of MEAL	Save the Children
5	Senkumba Hassan	MEAL Coordinator	U-RIL
6	Odada Francis	National Meal Coordinator	Save the children

#### Annex 5: References

- 1) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (n.d.). *DAC criteria for evaluating development assistance*. OECD.
- 2) Oxford Policy Management (OPM) & UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). (2017). *DFID's approach to value for money*. OPM and FCDO.
- 3) UN Women. (2022). *Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit*. UN Women.
- 4) Wilson-Grau, R. & Britt, H. (2013). *Outcome harvesting*. Ford Foundation.
- 5) Mayne, J. (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect* (ILAC Brief No. 16). Institutional Learning and Change Initiative.
- 6) Better Evaluation. (n.d.). *Contribution analysis*. Better Evaluation.
- 7) Better Evaluation. (n.d.). *Outcome harvesting*. Better Evaluation.
- 8) Better Evaluation. (n.d.). *Most significant change*. Better Evaluation.
- 9) Better Evaluation. (n.d.). *Stories of change*. Better Evaluation.

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