



# Debt, Danger and Despair

## The unseen harm of Uganda's underfunded refugee response

### Recommendations

- The refugee response in Uganda is critically underfunded and is forcing already vulnerable people to adopt dangerous practices to survive. The international community must provide more funding for Uganda to cope with the large numbers of refugees arriving from conflict-ridden countries.
- The Ugandan government needs more support to be able to commit to the agreements laid out in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF).
- The global failure to adequately share the responsibility for hosting and supporting refugees must be reversed. Uganda's open-door policy is positive and needs to be supported. With the current situation, the host community is carrying the burden and this is causing tension between them and refugees.

### Background

Uganda is one of the most generous nations towards refugees in the world, hosting over 1.3 million refugees and asylum seekers<sup>1</sup>. Most have fled conflict in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi<sup>2</sup>. And as a result of ongoing instability and political uncertainty across the Great Lakes region, vulnerable people are continuing to arrive into Uganda every year.

Despite this, the refugee response plan (RRP) for Uganda is only 39 per cent funded<sup>3</sup> as of December 2019. Uganda should be praised for its generous open-door policy for refugees and its commitment to initiatives such as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). The country's progressive refugee policies allow freedom of movement and freedom to work, but most refugees still live in extreme poverty and food insecurity. Studies show that 80 per cent of refugees live below the international poverty line of

<sup>1</sup> As of August 2019, Uganda is hosting 1,331,565 refugees, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR reports 854,859 South Sudanese, 389,276 from DR Congo, and 44,611 from Burundi.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR Operational Update, September 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/uganda-unhcr-operational-update-september-2019>.

\$1.90/day<sup>4</sup> and 89 per cent of refugee households have recently experienced food insecurity<sup>5</sup>. The government's strained capacity to undertake refugee status determination means delays in accessing important documentation such as refugee IDs, or birth certificates further limits access to services. The sheer scale of the refugee crisis in Uganda is also impacting host communities. With limited resources and support, tensions are increasing between large refugee populations and the local community. Access to services such as water and sanitation, education, shelter and livelihood opportunities are limited for both refugees and host communities. Against this backdrop, the response capacity of international aid agencies is limited, putting increased pressure on host communities to sustain the influx.

### Consequences of an underfunded response

Lack of funding has a direct impact on the lives of refugees and host communities. NRC works with all refugee communities and through ongoing assessments, interviews and engagement, it is evident conditions are deteriorating due to a lack of funding. Parents, young people and women all revealed how they are adopting harmful and dangerous coping practices to survive. The information in this briefing note has been collated through a combination of secondary data and NRC's Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programmes. Focus group discussions with refugees and asylum seekers from DRC were also conducted in Kyangwali, a poverty-stricken settlement area along the Uganda/Congolese border. The following concerns were identified as most relevant:

#### Refugee status determination

Asylum-seekers are still arriving in large numbers into Uganda. The current capacity to determine an individual's refugee status is limited – and this means the wait for an interview can stretch up to two years. There are currently 25,264 people waiting for this process to be completed. The consequences of delays in determining refugee

status are significant. As they wait for their cases to be heard, asylum seekers **live in limbo with limited rights**. The generous refugee laws of Uganda that gives refugees the right to work and access to education and healthcare do not apply to asylum seekers. In this context, asylum seekers are forced into **increasingly risky coping mechanisms** that range from taking informal jobs in the local community, to begging and engaging in 'survival sex'.

#### Starving to survive

Research undertaken by REACH<sup>6</sup> found that refugees typically run out of food assistance around two weeks after receiving it. Some new arrivals depend on limited food from the World Food Programme (WFP), but it is usually gone within seven days. The overwhelming majority of new arrivals, existing refugees and asylum seekers interviewed all said they **reduce their meals to one per day and reduce their portion sizes** to make their food last longer. Parents often **forego meals** to ensure their children get enough food. Newly arrived refugees reported that they **skipped meals altogether for an average of two days per week**. Refugees also told how they sell part of their food distribution to cover other needs. When maize is distributed, they often sell half of their distributed food to get transport to town and pay someone to grind the pellet maize into flour. Others sell part of their rations to buy firewood or charcoal to cook their meals. Selling food is also used as a coping mechanism to pay for medicine for family members, or to buy other essential items. For example, 20 per cent of households surveyed in Kyangwali, had sold food assistance as a coping mechanism in the previous 30 days.

#### Spiralling debt

Taking loans is a commonly employed coping mechanism among refugees and asylum seekers and are usually granted by village saving and loan associations (VSLAs) and private lenders. The interest rate on loans from VSLAs ranges from 10 to 20 per cent, while **private lenders commonly charge 50 per cent interest**.

<sup>4</sup> FAO and OPM, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Development Pathways, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> REACH, 2019, <https://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/uganda/>

For asylum seekers, taking **a loan is particularly risky** as they do not have land (or assets) to use as collateral, compared to refugees who have been allocated small plots to cultivate. As a result, asylum seekers often incur interest rates of 50 per cent and often **rely on second loans to repay the first**, or the support of family and friends – who themselves are relying on high interest loans.

#### **Shortage of housing causes protection risks**

Due to a critical shortfall of temporary shelters and secure emergency shelters, refugees, particularly women, have concerns about their safety and security. **Theft is common in refugee settlements** as there is no way to lock up items or food. Many refugees make sure one household member is in the shelter at all times to avoid food or items being stolen. In addition, single-headed female households are at increased risk of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) due to the lack of security their shelter provides.

One of the more tragic coping mechanisms families have adopted is arranging **early marriages** for their female children. According to focus group interviews, this was particularly true for asylum seekers, who commonly had poor housing security. Parents marry off their children in order to reduce the mouths to feed and to receive a dowry to improve their food, home security and protection needs.

#### **Stretched humanitarian response**

With limited resources, the humanitarian response is focused on the larger settlement and refugee groups, with limited assistance available for urban refugees and smaller groups. Assistance tends to focus on food security, yet other important areas such as protection, livelihoods, and education get less funding and attention.

As such, there remains large groups of people not receiving aid because of a stretched response in the refugee settlements, and since aid is focused to settlements, people outside these areas cannot access it.

#### **What's next for Uganda's refugee response?**

**Uganda's refugee response is stretched** and is unable to meet the needs of the people it is intended to assist. This has significant implications for refugees and asylum seekers who are being pushed to make difficult decisions that place them at even greater risk and accentuate their vulnerability. In addition to the protection dimensions, the underfunding of the refugee response also has implications for the government's ability and willingness to constructively engage in global initiatives such as the CRRF.

At the heart of the Global Compact on Refugees, and the CRRF, is the belief that **greater financing for refugee hosting countries** eases the pressure on host countries, and ultimately works to enhance refugee self-reliance and integration. Yet that ambition of broader burden-sharing between national and international partners is not being realised at a scale that is necessary – both to meet the needs of the country's growing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as the complementary investments in host communities.

If funding gaps of this magnitude continue, we could see Uganda following in the footsteps of neighbouring countries like Tanzania and Kenya and take regressive steps towards its open-door policy and undo years of positive work in welcoming refugees.

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