Asylum seekers and refugees in Arua: legal challenges and opportunities

December 2024

NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

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Cover photo: Dixon Odur/NRC

Caption for cover photo. Alice Annan, a refugee from South Sudan in Uganda, serves customers at her grocery shop in Arua.

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1 Executive Summary

A growing number of refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda are relocating to urban centres to pursue better opportunities. This urbanisation trend underscores the need to understand the unique legal and protection challenges faced by these populations. Building on earlier research conducted in four other secondary cities by NRC,[1] this report focuses on Arua, where an estimated 25,000 refugees and asylum seekers have self-settled. The study provides critical insights into their mobility patterns, legal documentation challenges, housing security, employment barriers, and coping mechanisms.

By applying a mixed-methods approach, including surveys of 380 households, focus group discussions, and stakeholder interviews, the report identifies key challenges and opportunities for refugees in Arua, including newly arrived refugees from Sudan, who face additional complexities. These findings aim to inform policymakers, humanitarian and development actors, civil society, the private sector and local authorities to address gaps and improve urban refugee protection while fostering self-reliance and inclusion.

Urban Refugee Profile and Mobility

The displaced population in Arua primarily comprises South Sudanese (68.9 per cent), followed by smaller groups from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and other countries. Among survey respondents, 91.6 per cent identified as refugees, 4.6 per cent as migrants, and 3.7 per cent as asylum seekers. Urban mobility in Arua reflects a broader national trend, with many citing a desire for better work, reduced humanitarian assistance in settlements and housing opportunities as primary reasons for relocation. Similar to trends reported among others who have self-settled in urban areas, almost half of those who moved to Arua (46.1 per cent) did so with their entire family. Although significant numbers remain separated, they maintain ties with settlements for access to humanitarian aid or with relatives in their country of origin. Refugees and asylum seekers perceive Arua as a safe environment, with 92.4 per cent of respondents planning to remain in the city in the near future.

Legal Stay and Refugee Status Determination

Unlike settlement-based refugees, urban refugees in Arua face legal barriers due to the lack of local refugee registration services. Refugees must register in settlements and return periodically to update records or participate in verification exercises,

[1] NRC, (March 2024) *Legal Protection Needs of Refugees Self-Settled in Secondary Cities in Uganda*, Accessed 18 November 2024. https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/legal-protection-needs-of-refugees-self-settled-in-secondary-cities-in-uganda/

imposing logistical and financial burdens. Although most surveyed refugees held valid refugee identity cards, some barriers persist for new arrivals, leaving them vulnerable to arrest, detention, and challenges in accessing services.

Access to Legal Documentation

Civil documentation, including birth, marriage, and death certificates, is crucial for refugees to access education, healthcare, employment, inheritance and other rights. However, levels of possession among refugees in Arua is limited. Only around a third of households possess certificates for key life events, such as birth certificates for all dependents or death certificates for all deceased family members. At the same time, nearly three-quarters of married couples currently lack a marriage certificate. Key barriers include high costs, lack of information, and complex procedures, which disproportionately affect women. The lack of necessary documentation significantly restricts refugees' access to essential services, education, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance while increasing their vulnerability to harassment and arrest.

Housing, Land, and Property

Housing insecurity is a significant concern for refugees in Arua, with over 94 per cent living in rented houses or single rooms, primarily without written tenancy agreements. This lack of formal contracts leaves refugees vulnerable to arbitrary rent increases and forced evictions. Female-headed households face additional challenges negotiating tenancy arrangements, often exacerbated by unequal power dynamics with male landlords. Disputes over rent and tenure are common, with many refugees relying on local authorities and community leaders for mediation.

Employment and Livelihoods

Despite Uganda’s progressive policies allowing refugees to work, employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers in Arua remain limited, with only one-third of refugees engaged in work. Gender disparities are pronounced, with women less likely to find employment and more vulnerable to harassment and exploitation. Informal work dominates, with only 38.9 per cent of employed refugees holding written work contracts. Discrimination, lack of professional networks, and language barriers further hinder access to decent jobs. Refugees also face significant obstacles in establishing businesses, often due to regulatory complexities and discrimination in local markets.

Coping Mechanisms and Consequences

Economic insecurity remains a significant challenge, with only one in three currently engaged in work and a quarter reporting no income. Most refugees have exhausted their savings, relying instead on family support. The lack of stable employment traps many in a cycle of poverty, severely limiting their ability to achieve self-reliance. The limited presence of humanitarian organisations in Arua exacerbates these challenges, with refugees citing inadequate access to livelihood support.

As a result, many families resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as reducing meals, withdrawing children from school, or taking on precarious work. Reports also highlight a dependence on child labour and a rise in prostitution among young

refugee girls, driven by extreme poverty and vulnerability. These survival strategies expose refugees to exploitation, abuse, and psychological trauma, further entrenching cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

Conclusions

Despite significant challenges, refugees in Arua demonstrate resilience and agency, viewing self-settlement as a pathway to reducing dependency on aid and achieving self-reliance. However, key barriers that require attention to fully support their integration into urban systems remain. This report's findings align with previous research on secondary cities, highlighting the need for tailored, collaborative responses to address gaps in access to legal documentation, strengthen housing security, and expand inclusive livelihood opportunities.

Access to legal documentation, such as birth, marriage and death certificates, remains a critical challenge. Reliance on settlement-based registration systems imposes logistical and financial burdens, limiting refugees' ability to maintain updated records, underscoring the importance of improving access to these documents for full participation in urban systems.

Housing insecurity is another major concern. Promoting written tenancy agreements can reduce the risks of exploitation and eviction. Local authorities and community leaders play an important role in mediating disputes over housing and tenure, and strengthening their capacity is key to improving housing stability.

Employment opportunities remain limited despite refugees' legal right to work. Supporting qualified refugees, particularly those newly arrived from Sudan, through recognising academic documents, supporting registration with professional bodies, and addressing language barriers can help open access to employment. Encouraging written work agreements can contribute to job stability and foster greater self-reliance.

Strategic investments in capacity building, technical support and resources for cities and municipalities are critical to meeting the evolving needs of urban populations. Supporting local authorities and community leaders to mediate disputes, particularly in housing and employment, can help reduce exploitation and vulnerability. Promoting dialogue and cooperation between refugees and host communities will be vital for sustaining social cohesion and ensuring equitable urban development that benefits all residents.

By addressing these systemic barriers, Uganda can strengthen its leadership in urban refugee integration while promoting equitable development and shared opportunities for all residents.

2 Introduction

Uganda is home to over 1.7 million refugees and asylum seekers,[2] with South Sudanese refugees constituting the largest group, numbering 967,843[3] and constituting more than half of the total refugee population. Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) make up about a third of the total, with 552,103 individuals,[4] followed by 59,978[5] refugees from Sudan. Other significant refugee groups include those from Eritrea and Somalia, as well as smaller populations from Burundi, Rwanda, and Ethiopia.[6]

As the overall number of refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda continues to grow, so does the trend of refugees relocating to urban areas. Increasingly, refugees are settling in cities often referred to as 'secondary cities' or 'transition cities,' which has brought greater attention to the dynamics of settlement-urban mobility. This trend was explored in a report published by NRC in March 2024,[7] focusing on four secondary cities—Koboko, Adjumani, Mbarara, and Hoima.

Figure 1: Map of Uganda highlighting Arua

This report extends that research by examining a fifth city, Arua, a city chosen for its strategic location in the West Nile region and proximity to large settlements such as Bidibidi. It provides valuable insights into the experiences of refugees who have self-settled in this emerging urban

[2] Figure as of 31 October 2024, UNHCR Uganda- Population Dashboard, Accessed 18 November 2024, https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Figure 1 from, Rowley, E., Burnham, G. & Drabe, R., 2006. Protracted Refugee Situations: Parallel Health Systems and Planning for the Integration of Services. Journal of Refugee Studies, 19(2), p.164. Protracted_Refugee_Situations_Parallel_Health_Systems_and_Planning_for_the_Integration_of_Services Accessed 4 December 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31252841
[7] NRC, (March 2024) *Legal Protection Needs of Refugees Self-Settled in Secondary Cities in Uganda*, Accessed 18 November 2024. https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/legal-protection-needs-of-refugees-self-settled-in-secondary-cities-in-uganda/

centre. As of August 2024, the city estimated Arua's refugee and asylum seeker population to be 25,000.[8] This figure includes individuals who have relocated from settlements and those who have settled directly in the city, contributing to the growing urban refugee and asylum seeker community.

The primary objective of this report is to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of refugees in Arua, focusing on their legal protection needs and challenges. By examining the specific circumstances of refugees in this additional urban context, the report seeks to deepen the understanding of the barriers they face, particularly around legal status, access to identity documentation, housing, land and property (HLP) rights, and employment. The report also draws comparisons with the other four cities (i.e. Koboko, Adjumani, Mbarara, and Hoima), highlighting similarities and differences in the challenges and opportunities refugees face in these urban settings.

The findings complement the first report[9] and further inform the work of humanitarian and development actors in Uganda. They can contribute to ongoing discussions and strategies to support refugees in urban settings and enhance their self-reliance and protection.

[8] KII1, KII3, KII5
[9] NRC, (2024)

3 Methodology and Validity

This mixed-methods research project collected quantitative and qualitative data, complemented by a desk review of existing literature and insights from NRC Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programmes. Although the exact number of refugees and asylum seekers in Arua is unknown, the municipality estimate of 25,000 refugees and asylum seekers was used to calculate the sample size.[10] In total, 380 households were sampled. Households were randomly selected to participate in the study with a 95 per cent confidence level and a five per cent margin of error. Additional fieldwork included six focus group discussions (FGDs) with male and female refugee community members involving over 110 refugees and eight key stakeholder interviews (KIIs) with government agencies, municipal officials and other stakeholders. Qualitative data collection targeted all refugee nationalities in Arua with a specific focus on engaging Sudanese refugees in separate FGDs. The data collection took place between August and October 2024 and was carried out by a team of research enumerators and NRC staff.

The research team employed triangulation, comparing findings across multiple data sources. This involved comparing quantitative findings with qualitative data and crosschecking the data with previous assessments and research conducted by other organisations in Arua.

Box 1: Demographic Profile of Quantitative Survey Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents included in the household survey offers a first contextual dimension to the research findings. Most respondents were refugees (91.6 per cent), while 4.6 identified as migrants and 3.7 per cent as asylum seekers. No respondents self-identified as stateless.[11] Regarding gender, two-thirds were female (69.7 per cent), and one-third (30.3 per cent) were male. Half of the respondents were between 18 and 35 years old (51.1 per cent),

[10] KII1, KII3, KII5.

[11] The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines statelessness as "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law." Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/1954-Convention-relating-to-the-Status-of-Stateless-Persons_ENG.pdf

followed by respondents aged between 36 and 59 years old (42.9 per cent), minors accounted for just 3.2 per cent, followed by those over 60 years old (2.9 per cent).

Two-thirds of respondents were married (57.6 per cent), 19.2 per cent were single, 11.1 per cent were separated, and 1.8 per cent were divorced. Women were more likely to report being divorced/separated than men (6.6 per cent compared to 4.5 per cent). This discrepancy underscores the impact of armed conflicts and violence on the demographic of the displaced population. One-third of female respondents (35 per cent) reported having a lactating or pregnant woman in their household. Eighty-three per cent of the respondents reported being the head of the household.

NRC included the Washington Group Questions[12] in the survey to identify and report disability data. The questions focus on difficulties in seeing, hearing, mobility, communication, cognition and self-care, allowing for self-reporting of functioning at the individual level. The evidence indicates varying degrees of disabilities across all seven functions. Specifically, 84.3 per cent of respondents reported no difficulties, 11 per cent reported some difficulties, 4.7 per cent reported experiencing a lot of difficulties, and no respondents reported not being able to perform these functions at all.[13]

Box 1: Demographic Profile of Quantitative Survey Respondents

[12] Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability, Accessed 18 March 2024, https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/

[13] The response options were 1. No difficulties; 2. Some difficulties; 3. A lot of difficulties; and 4. Cannot do it at all.

4 Key Results and Findings

4.1 Refugees' profile and mobility

This section provides an overview of refugee profiles and outlines the trends and factors influencing self-settlement in urban areas.

The displaced population in Arua reflects the broader trends observed across the country, yet there are notable distinctions compared to the four other secondary cities previously profiled by NRC. A significant proportion of refugees in Arua are from South Sudan (68.9 per cent), markedly higher than the 47.8 per cent average in the other cities. In contrast, refugees from DR Congo constitute a smaller portion (14.7 per cent) in Arua than other profiled cities, where they comprise 36.3 per cent of the displaced population. Arua also hosts a distinct population from Sudan (13.9 per cent), a much higher proportion than the 0.9 per cent observed elsewhere. Sudanese refugees represent a newly arrived group in Arua, bringing specific challenges highlighted in Box 2. Refugees from Somalia, Burundi, Eritrea, and Ethiopia represent only a small fraction, with percentages slightly lower than in other cities.

The trend of urban-settlement mobility among refugees in Arua is relatively recent, aligning closely with patterns observed in other profiled cities.[14] It is also one that has not been documented before 2024 as the focus has been primarily in the settlements. Between 2016 and 2020, 36.1 per cent of refugees self-settled in Arua, slightly lower than the 40.3 per cent seen in other locations - with only 11.6 per cent having settled before 2016. Movement into Arua has continued steadily, with just over 16 per cent arriving in 2021, followed by a consistent average of around 12 per cent in the subsequent two years. This shift towards urban areas reflects a pattern of secondary movement, similar to trends observed in other cities. It suggests that refugees are making active choices to relocate and establish themselves in urban settings.

[14] FGD3

"Arua is a vibrant city drawing refugees from many settlements."

- Local Authority[15]

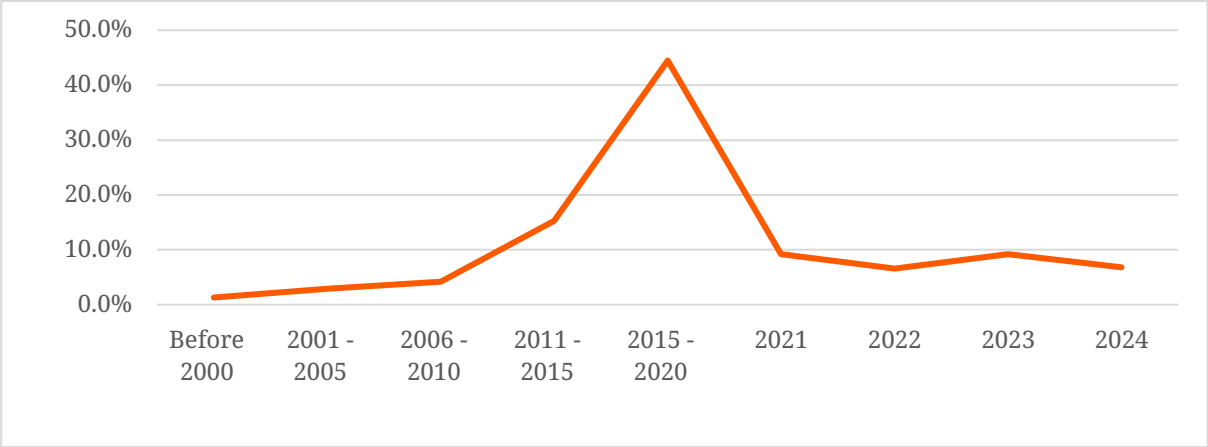

Figure 2: Year of Arrival in Uganda

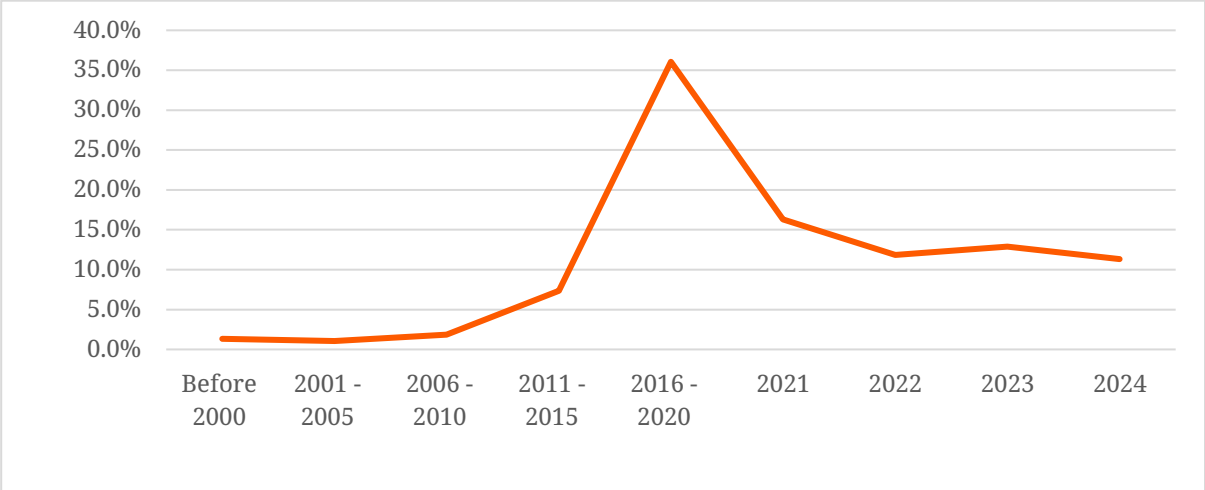

Figure 3: Year of Relocation to Arua

The primary factors driving refugees to self-settle in Arua include perceived better work and livelihood opportunities, cited by over half (55.8 per cent) of respondents—compared to 20.2 per cent in other surveyed cities. Similarly, 44.9 per cent pointed to reductions in humanitarian assistance in settlements as a key reason for moving to urban areas. Housing considerations also played an important role, with 37.2 per cent seeking improved housing options and 15 per cent mentioning the availability of cheaper housing. Family connections motivated 27.4 per cent, while another 4 per

[15] KII7

cent cited various other factors, highlighting the diverse motivations influencing refugees' decisions to settle in Arua.

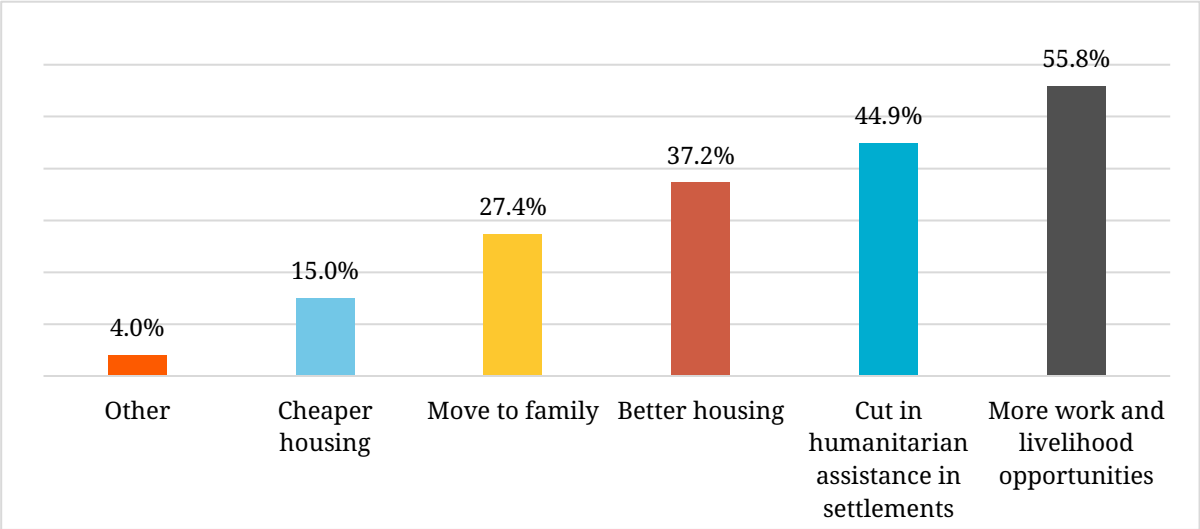

Figure 4: Reasons for Relocating and Self-settling in Arua

Opting to relocate from a settlement to a secondary city can imply forfeiting access to humanitarian assistance, particularly for refugees who do not have family ties in the settlement they are leaving.[16]

Similar to trends reported among others who have self-settled in urban areas, almost half of those who moved to Arua (46.1 per cent) did so with their entire family. Among those separated from family, multiple responses indicate that 89.8 per cent have family members still in their country of origin—a substantially higher proportion compared to 35.5 per cent in previously profiled populations. Additionally, 41.5 per cent have family members in the original settlement often to ensure continued access to humanitarian assistance,[17] closely aligning with the 46.2 per cent previously reported. Smaller proportions of respondents have family in another city or town in Uganda (8.3 per cent) or a third country (2.4 per cent). These findings underscore the widespread separation of families and the similarities in settlement patterns across locations.

[16] FGD2, FGD6, KII5 and KII7
[17] KII2

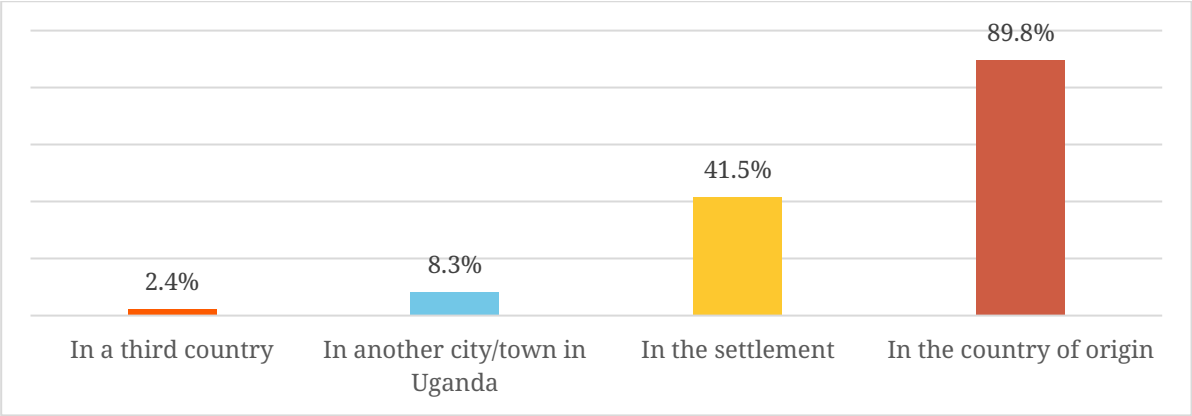

Figure 5: Location of Urban Self-Settled Refugees' Family Members

When asked about their future plans, the responses for the next three months and the next twelve months were essentially the same for refugees in Arua. The vast majority (92.4 per cent) plan to stay in their current location. This sentiment was echoed in FGDs, where participants described Uganda - Arua in particular- as a "*safe haven*" and expressed their intention to remain there for the foreseeable future.[18] Other responses included moving to another urban area (1.6 per cent), going to the settlement (2.1 per cent), and a small percentage expressing uncertainty (1.3 per cent) or having no plan (1.8 per cent).

Box 2: Sudanese Refugees in Arua

According to the authorities, since mid-2023, Arua has received an estimated influx of around 4,000 Sudanese refugees, with the majority arriving in 2024.[19] Most of these refugees are registered in Rhino Camp settlement, having arrived in Uganda via the Nimule-Elegu border, while a smaller group are registered in Kiryandongo settlement. During FGDs, some refugees reported maintaining a presence in these settlements to "*keep options open*" and retain access to humanitarian assistance. Sudanese refugees highlighted challenges such as the distance and associated costs of travelling between these settlements and Arua. Pull factors attracting refugees to Arua included stable security, a lower cost of living, access to specialised healthcare, proximity to their country of origin via South Sudan, access to employment and better education options including the presence of universities. For example, the Islamic University in Uganda located in Arua city has reportedly fast-tracked the recognition of Sudanese academic certifications and diplomas, attracting a number of Sudanese students. Additionally, many Sudanese households expressed a preference for living in an urban area, leading to their decision to self-settle in Arua.

Box 2: Sudanese Refugees in Arua

[18] FDG1, FGD3, FGD6
[19] FGD6, KII8

4.2 Legal stay and refugee status determination

In this section, the report examines legal stay and refugee status determination, emphasising the registration challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in Arua.

Arua is not a 'refugee-gazetted area,' therefore, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) does not provide refugee registration services within the city. Consequently, asylum seekers and refugees must first register in designated settlements before relocating to Arua. Refugees residing in Arua must also return to their settlement of registration for any verification exercise and to update their registration details.[20] This travel is costly and time-consuming, and refugees consulted expressed frustration about the lack of refugee registration services in Arua.[21] Local authorities noted that, in some instances, the African Initiative for Relief and Development (AIRD) assists vulnerable refugees by providing transport back to the settlements.[22] Additionally, OPM organises transportation for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers to the reception centre at Rhino Camp Settlement.[23]

The data shows that most respondents were refugees (96.1 per cent, n=348), with 4.5 per cent identified as migrants and 3.7 per cent (n=14) as asylum seekers. No respondents identified as stateless. Nearly all refugees surveyed (99.7 per cent) held an OPM-issued Refugee Family Attestation card or Refugee Identity Card, with only one woman lacking either form of identification. This reflects a slightly higher registration rate than in other surveyed cities, where nearly 9 per cent reported lacking documentation.

Most asylum seekers (85.7 per cent) had been in Uganda for over 12 months. Of these, almost three-quarters (71.4 per cent, n=10) held an OPM-issued Asylum Seeker Certificate, while 28.6 per cent (n=4) reported not having this form of registration. These trends are similar to those found in the other four cities.

City authorities and organisations working in Arua emphasised the proximity of the city to the border and the challenges posed by its permeability, which facilitates informal and unregistered border movements. This has resulted in the presence of unregistered refugees in Arua – particularly among new arrivals. Refugees reported that family members often join them directly from their country of origin through porous borders, settling in Arua without passing through settlements and, therefore, without registration.[24] Refugees also expressed frustration over the "*extra costs*" they incur when registration is not completed upon arrival in Uganda.[25] It was also

[20] KII2
[21] FGD2, FGD3, FGD4
[22] KII2, KII4
[23] KII1, FGD3, FGD4, FGD5, FGD6
[24] FDG1, FGD2
[25] FGD3, FGD4

mentioned that, in such cases, refugee leaders often accompany unregistered refugees to the OPM to facilitate their registration.[26]

4.2.1 Legal identity documentation, including civil registration

This section offers an overview of the current state of access to civil documentation, including birth, marriage and death registration and the consequences of being unable to obtain these essential documents. Access to civil and other legal identity documentation is a fundamental human right, critical for realising other rights, such as nationality, education, family life, and freedom of movement.[27]

> *"Refugees need documents for their daily life, yet so many of them do not have them."*
>
> - Male refugee[28]

Access to identification documents in Arua closely mirrors trends in other areas, where around 40 per cent of respondents reported having access. In Arua, respondents identified various authorities for obtaining documentation, with the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) as the primary source (44.2 per cent), followed by religious institutions, including churches (23.4 per cent) and mosques (8.3 per cent), as well as the OPM (20.1 per cent) and Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) (4 per cent). Currently, 39.5 per cent of respondents in Arua report having access to documents issued by these authorities, while 38.7 per cent lack access, reflecting a substantial accessibility gap—barriers to obtaining essential identification affect nearly as many individuals as those with access. An additional 21.8 per cent were uncertain, with this uncertainty more pronounced among women (16.1 per cent of women versus 5.8 per cent of men), highlighting notable gender-based disparities. This lack of accessibility is exacerbated by limited awareness of application procedures and requirements.[29]

Overall, respondents demonstrate a clear awareness of the practical necessity of documentation for securing essential services, mobility, and stability within Uganda. The most common reasons cited include obtaining a SIM card (17.8 per cent),

[26] FGD5, FGD6
[27] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014, Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3. See also UN Human Rights Council (HRC), 2017, Birth registration and the right of everyone to recognition everywhere as a person before the law: resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/RES/34/15; HRC, 2016, The right to a nationality: women's equal nationality rights in law and in practice: resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/RES/32/7; ¶ HRC, 2016, Strengthening policies and programmes for universal birth registration and vital statistics development, A/HRC/33/22.
[28] FGD3
[29] KII2, KII4, FGD1, FGD2, FGD6, KII8

accessing humanitarian assistance (17.3 per cent), and healthcare services (14.8 per cent). Education is also a priority, with 13.9 per cent indicating that documents are required to enrol children in school. In addition, documentation was reported necessary for movement within Uganda (10.8 per cent) and for financial and housing stability, with respondents citing the requirement of documents to open bank accounts (8.3 per cent), rent property (8.7 per cent), and secure employment (7.1 per cent).

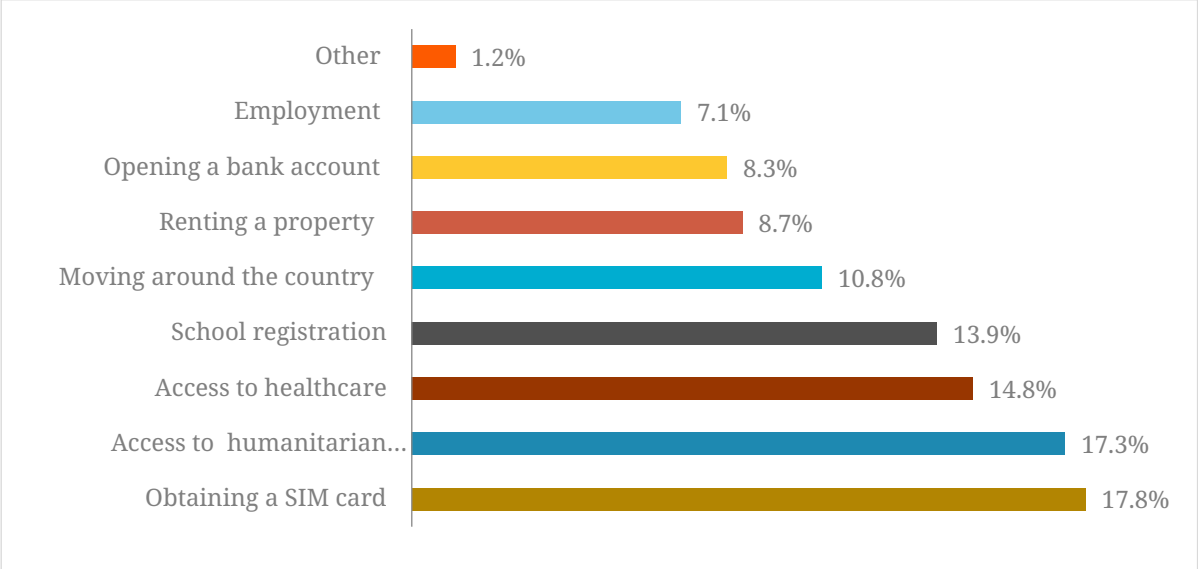

Figure 6: Reason for Acquiring Documentation/Registration

Overall, documentation needs are similar across genders, with both men and women prioritising healthcare, education, and humanitarian assistance. Women, however, place a slightly greater emphasis on obtaining a SIM card (19 per cent) than men (15.6 per cent). In contrast, men show a modestly higher priority for opening a bank account (10.1 per cent compared with 7.4 per cent).

4.2.2 Birth, marriage and death registration

The evidence highlights a concerning lack of access to birth, marriage, and death certificates among refugees, with several common barriers impacting the ability to obtain documents.

Regarding birth registration, most refugees surveyed in Arua reported having children and other minor dependents living within their households (88.2 per cent). However, there is considerable variation in the possession of birth certificates. Less than a third (28.4 per cent) of households have certificates for all dependents, while more than half (55.5 per cent) reported having no certificates for any dependents—significantly higher than the more evenly split distribution seen in other areas, where possession is typically divided between those with all, some, or none. The remaining 16.1 per cent of households have certificates for only some dependents, highlighting the challenges refugees face in securing vital documentation.

Almost half of respondents (49.6 per cent) cited a lack of information on obtaining birth certificates as the primary reason for the lack of documents. Authorities,

humanitarian organisations, and refugees acknowledged that many refugees are unaware of the importance of civil registration or the procedures and requirements involved, emphasising the need for improved awareness and capacity-building efforts. Furthermore, language barriers exacerbate communication challenges and increase the risk of exploitation[30] – especially for newly arrived refugees from Sudan.[31] Other barriers include certificates being left behind (16.3 per cent), difficulties in accessing registration services (9.6 per cent), high costs (6.3 per cent), and the loss of documents (7.5 per cent). It was also reported that some hospitals and clinics do not issue birth notifications to refugees or provide them at a cost, creating obstacles in the NIRA application process.[32] Refugees highlighted the high costs of documents during qualitative data collection, with some stating they were asked to pay in USD.[33] Misinformation about costs was also common, with some refugees unaware that NIRA does not charge a fee for birth certificates.[34] Additional challenges arise from discrepancies in names or incorrect dates of birth recorded in OPM and NIRA issued documents, creating further barriers to obtaining, updating or correcting documentation.[35]

> *"Refugees do not notify OPM about death because it leads to [a] reduction in family size and food/non-food items rations".*
>
> - Local authority[36]

For death registration, 11.3 per cent of respondents reported that someone in their family had died in Uganda during displacement. Among these, more than half (58.5 per cent) of households reported not having death certificates for any deceased family members. Similar to other profiled areas, of those with certificates, only a third (30.8 per cent) reported having death certificates for all deceased family members, while 10.8 per cent had certificates for some. Mirroring the challenges in birth registration, refugees cited several barriers to obtaining death certificates. The most common reason was lack of information (42.2 per cent), with respondents unsure how to obtain the certificates. Difficulty accessing documents was also a significant barrier, with 17.8 per cent mentioning that there was nowhere in Arua to obtain them. Other reasons included a perceived lack of necessity, high costs, and lost or left behind certificates. Refugees highlighted the need to expedite the death

[30] KII3, KII4 FGD1, FDG2, FGD4, KII6
[31] FGD5, FG6, KII78
[32] KII1, FGD3, FGD4, FG6, KII8
[33] FGD2
[34] KII2, KII4, FGD5
[35] FDG2, FGD4, FGD5, FGD6
[36] KII2, KII5

registration process, particularly for those wishing to repatriate the bodies of deceased family members to South Sudan.[37]

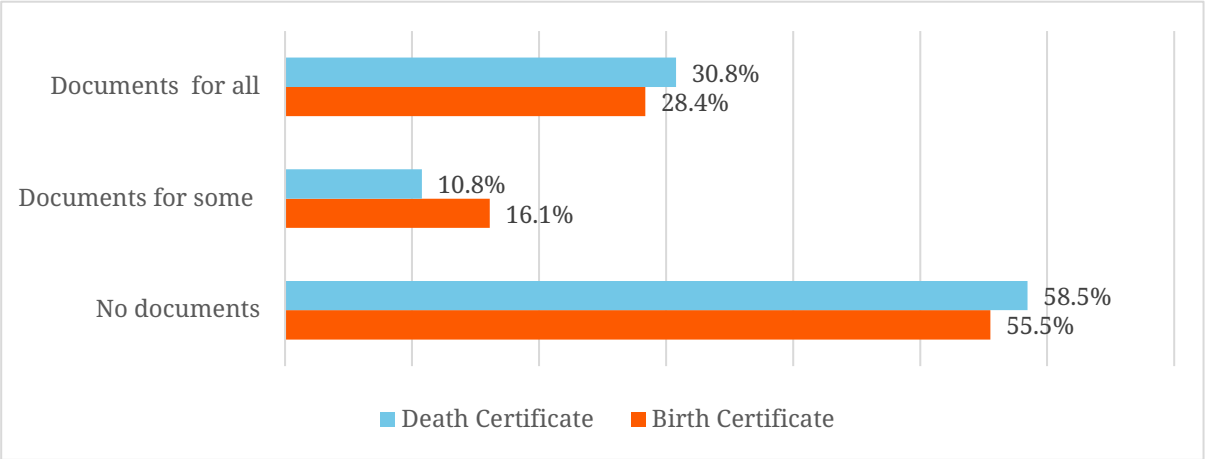

Figure 7: Level Possession of Birth and Death Documentation

Concerning marital status, a significant proportion of respondents in Arua (67.9 per cent) are either officially or traditionally married, while the remaining 32.1 per cent are single, widowed, separated, or divorced. Of those who reported being married, 47.7 per cent reported that they received a marriage certificate from a customary process, 10.1 per cent from a church, and 8.9 per cent from a mosque. Notably, a third (32.9 per cent) of respondents stated they never received a marriage certificate. Many Sudanese refugees reported having lost their marriage certificates during their journey to Uganda.[38]

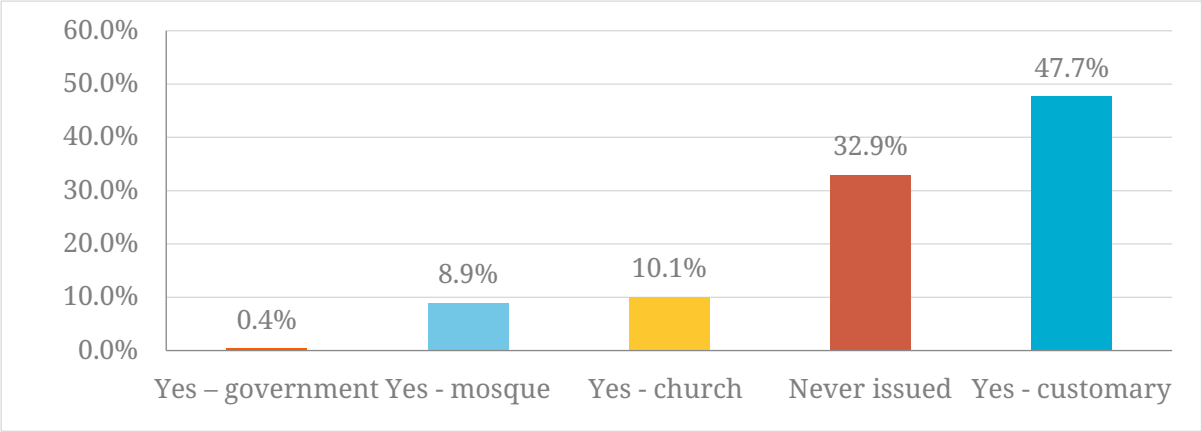

Figure 8: Level of Marriage Certificates Issued

The data highlights the barriers refugees face in obtaining or retaining marriage certificates, primarily due to logistical challenges, lack of awareness, and cultural factors associated with traditional marriage processes.[39] Of the 73.3 per cent that reported currently not having a marriage certificate, 35.8 per cent cited a traditional

[37] FGD1,FGD2
[38] FGD5, FGD6
[39] KII1, FGD1, FGD2

marriage, 16.5 per cent mentioned unofficial church ceremonies, and 15.0 per cent had left theirs behind. Other reasons included certificate being destroyed (10.6 per cent), lost (9.7 per cent), or attributed to an unpaid dowry or a lack of awareness.

These challenges highlight the widespread difficulties refugees face in securing and retaining official documentation for birth, marriage, and death, which significantly affects their legal status and access to services in Uganda, and has long-term negative repercussions.

4.2.3 Consequences of lacking documentation

Respondents identified significant challenges resulting from a lack of documentation, with almost a third (28.5 per cent) noting restricted access to essential services such as healthcare, education, banking, and telecommunications.

In Arua, public and private schools previously required birth registration for all students. However, due to advocacy efforts, many primary schools now accept refugee children without birth certificates, instead using a copy of the OPM Refugee Family Attestation. Despite this progress, challenges persist in accessing secondary education.[40] Refugees reported being denied access to public hospitals and healthcare facilities due to their refugee registration card listing them as residents in the settlement.[41] Additionally, 26.7 per cent cited difficulty receiving humanitarian assistance, while 16.8 per cent expressed concern over the risk of arrest or harassment. Two authorities consulted reported an increased risk of arrest and detention for unregistered refugees, who are classified as "*illegal migrants*".[42] Employment opportunities (11.6 per cent) and the ability to obtain other necessary documents (16.4 per cent) are also limited, showing how the absence of documentation can create cascading restrictions that affect many aspects of life.

Both genders face similar documentation-related barriers, with slight variations in specific concerns. The risk of arrest or harassment is slightly more pronounced among men (18.7 per cent) compared to women (15.8 per cent), while access to employment is cited more often by men (13.4 per cent) than women (10.6 per cent).

4.3 Housing, land and property

This section provides an overview of key challenges related to housing, land, and property (HLP) faced by refugees who self-settled in Arua. According to the data, just over half (54.5 per cent) of respondents reported living in permanent houses, while the remaining 45.5 per cent reside in temporary structures. This distribution is

[40] KII2, KII4, KII5, FGD4
[41] FGD1, FGD3
[42] KII5, KII6

consistent with patterns observed among profiled populations in other cities, reflecting similar housing dynamics and challenges.[43]

Box 3: HLP rights

In humanitarian responses, HLP rights are commonly understood as having a home free from the fear of forced eviction and a place that offers shelter, safety and the ability to secure a livelihood. The concept of HLP includes the full spectrum of rights, held according to statutory or customary law or informally, to public and private housing, land and property assets.[44] HLP rights are referenced and defined in several international and regional human rights instruments, and national legal frameworks.[45]

Land tenure refers to the relationship of individuals and groups to land and housing, which can be defined legally, through custom or informally. Tenure can take many forms, including ownership, lease, occupation, cooperative housing, emergency housing and informal settlements. In Uganda, land tenure is multifaceted, bringing social, cultural, economic, institutional and political dimensions into play, often key considerations in secondary cities. Tenure security involves protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats to residents and users, irrespective of the type of tenure.

Box 3: HLP rights

4.3.1 Tenure vulnerability

In Arua, most respondents (58.9 per cent) live in rented homes, while 35.8 per cent rent a single room. This highlights the vast majority of the population's reliance on rented accommodation, with only 2.1 per cent reporting ownership of their houses and 3.2 per cent staying with distant family, a pattern consistent with housing trends observed in other urban areas. The municipality reported having to intervene when unregistered refugees or asylum seekers face difficulties renting, as landowners are often reluctant to lease their property to them.[46]

[43] For a more detailed analysis of protection and gender issues in urban and settlement contexts, see NRC, (May 2024), *Towards Inclusive Protection: The Gender Dimensions of Humanitarian Action and Protection Programming*, Accessed 18 November 2024, https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/towards-inclusive-protection/.

[44] This is the definition of HLP commonly used by NRC in reports and studies and by the Global Protection Cluster, Accessed 18 November 2024, https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/AoR/HLP

[45] Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), for example, recognises "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing". More information on the scope of HLP can be sourced from the Global Protection Cluster https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/AoR/HLP and NRC's 2011 HLP training manual available online https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/tools-and-guidance/essential-protection-guidance-and-tools/hlp-essential-guidance-and-tools/

[46] KII4, KII6 and FGD4

A lack of security in housing tenure is evident, with most respondents (57.1 per cent) reporting no written agreement for their current accommodation. The data shows that 88.5 per cent of respondents have a clear verbal agreement, including those with written contracts, 11.5 per cent lack any clear agreement. This reliance on informal arrangements leaves a subset of the population vulnerable to housing insecurity. The lack of written tenancy agreements leads to several reported issues, including difficulties in enforcing terms, uncertainty and misunderstandings, a lack of legal protection against arbitrary rent increases, and a heightened risk of unlawful evictions.[47] Many refugees, renting for the first time in their lives, are unaware of the importance of having a written agreement.[48] Additionally, many landowners were reported to be unwilling to formalise tenancy agreements in writing, as their land or property is often not properly registered.[49] Confidence in housing stability reflects patterns in other areas - 47.6 per cent feel confident (*"sure"*) about remaining in their accommodation for the next three months, 34.7 per cent are only "*somewhat sure,"* and 16.1 per cent are "*not sure at all*," underscoring significant uncertainty for many households.

"Rent is often increased and with no notice."

- Male refugee[50]

The data shows that just over a third of households (35.3 per cent) pay 100,000–200,000 UGX[51] per month, followed by 26.6 per cent paying 200,001–400,000 UGX.[52] Low-cost rentals under 100,000 UGX are also common, accounting for 22.6 per cent, while only 7.6 per cent pay above 400,001 UGX.[53] A small proportion (1.8 per cent) report paying nothing for their accommodation, potentially reflecting reliance on external support.[54] It was reported that many Sudanese refugees are depleting their savings and, while they initially rented houses, they are increasingly relocating to smaller and cheaper accommodations.[55]

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[47] KII2, FGD2, FGD3, FGD6
[48] FGD3, KII7
[49] KII6
[50] FGD3
[51] The equivalent of USD 27.25 – 54.50 based on exchange rates in November 2024.
[52] The equivalent of USD 54.50 – 109 based on exchange rates in November 2024.
[53] The equivalent of USD 109.00 – 190.75 based on exchange rates in November 2024.
[54] KII2, FGD3
[55] FGD6, KII8

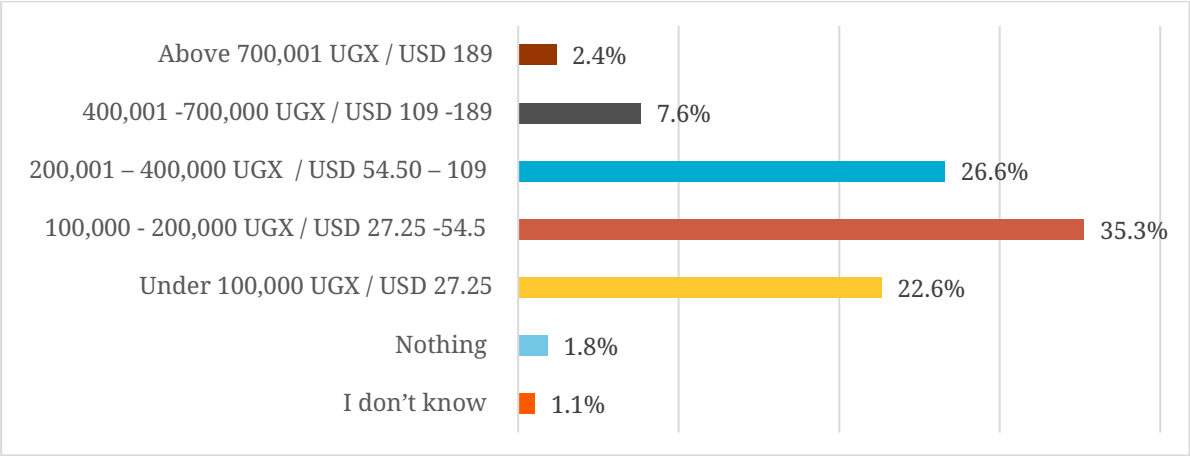

Figure 9: Monthly Rental Fees

4.3.2 Common HLP issues

In Arua, the most frequently reported HLP disputes are linked to the inability to pay rent (32.8 per cent) and forced evictions (23.9 per cent). These challenges indicate significant financial insecurity, with women slightly more likely than men (34.2 per cent compared to 30 per cent) to report rent-related issues. The inability to pay rent can have serious consequences, including the risk of eviction, increased financial strain, difficulties in securing new accommodation—potentially leading to homelessness—and significant emotional and psychological stress.[56] Ownership and rental disputes, which account for 12.3 per cent of cases overall, are reported more often by women than men (14.2 per cent compared to 8.5 per cent), reflecting a higher exposure among women to tenancy challenges. Forced evictions, however, affect both genders at comparable rates, with 23.9 per cent of all respondents reporting such incidents. Local authorities reported a rise in evictions, noting that affected refugees often have to move to cheaper accommodation, which is frequently of lower quality. In some cases, refugees had no choice but to return to Rhino Camp Settlement.[57] Authorities requested support in implementing and promoting the use of tenancy agreements.[58]

Boundary disputes (8.2 per cent), land access issues (7.5 per cent), and expropriation without compensation (4.1 per cent) are additional concerns, with men more frequently reporting these issues. Boundary disputes, often related to gardens and small agricultural areas, arise from unclear boundaries and miscommunication between refugees and host communities.[59] Similarly, inheritance disputes, though less common overall (3.6 per cent), are reported by men at nearly double the rate of women, highlighting gendered differences in property-related challenges. Authorities warned that unresolved disputes could escalate into broader social

[56] FDG2, FGD6
[57] KII7, FGD4
[58] KII1, KII3, KII6
[59] FG4, KII7

tensions between refugees and host communities, potentially leading to hostility and violence.[60] Reported instances of violence are typically referred to the police.[61]

The trends observed in previous surveys of urban areas align with the current findings, emphasising that financial insecurity, eviction risks, and inadequate housing conditions are common challenges for self-settled populations in urban areas.

> *"Every week, I am called to mediate a property dispute; there are too many"*
>
> - Local authority[62]

The resolution of disputes often relies on local leaders (31.4 per cent), underlining their important role in community-based dispute resolution. Local authorities, who confirmed their increased role in mediation sessions, also recognised this importance. Authorities further emphasised the need for training in alternative dispute resolution skills and techniques to enhance their effectiveness in addressing disputes.[63] Many respondents also resolve disputes between the parties themselves (24.0 per cent) or involve the police (12.7 per cent).[64] Family mediation (8.3 per cent) is another commonly used approach. Formal mechanisms, such as courts (4.2 per cent), the Office of the Prime Minister (4.7 per cent), or customary committees (3.8 per cent), are less frequently used. A smaller group (2.3 per cent) seeks help from municipality officials, while 8.0 per cent remain uncertain about resolving disputes, highlighting a need for increased awareness of available options.

4.3.3 Reported incidents of HLP disputes since moving to Arua

Building on these general observations, the following section focuses on specific experiences reported by respondents since moving to Arua. About a third of respondents (31.6 per cent) reported having a dispute related to their accommodation. The most commonly reported disputes were inability to pay rent (42.2 per cent) and eviction or risk of eviction (31.3 per cent), followed by utility bills (12.6 per cent), accommodation conditions (7 per cent), and neighbour conflicts (7 per cent). Some of these issues are linked to the lack of a written tenancy agreement.[65]

[60] KII1, FGD3, FGD4
[61] FG4
[62] KII5
[63] KII1, KII3, KII6
[64] FGD4
[65] KII2, KII6, KII7

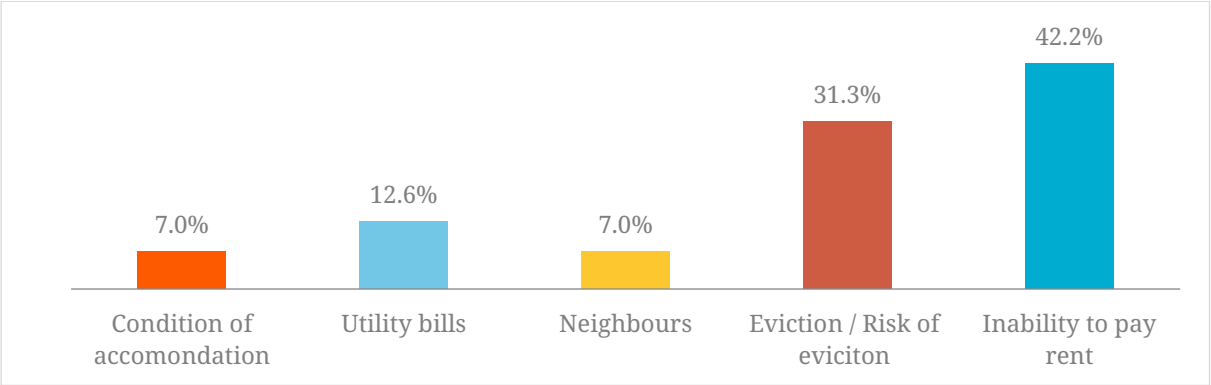

Figure 10: Type of HLP Disputes since Moving to Arua

To resolve these disputes, most respondents sought to address the issue between the parties themselves (43.8 per cent), through local chiefs (25.4 per cent), or with family support (14.1 per cent). Formal mechanisms, such as courts or municipality intervention, were rarely used – they were perceived as expensive and ineffective.[66] Among those who sought resolution, 80.8 per cent reported their disputes were resolved. However, challenges remained for some respondents, mainly when disputes involved unpaid rent or financial constraints. Nearly two-thirds (62.9 per cent) reported the decisions were enforced for those whose disputes were resolved, while a third (33 per cent) indicated partial enforcement.

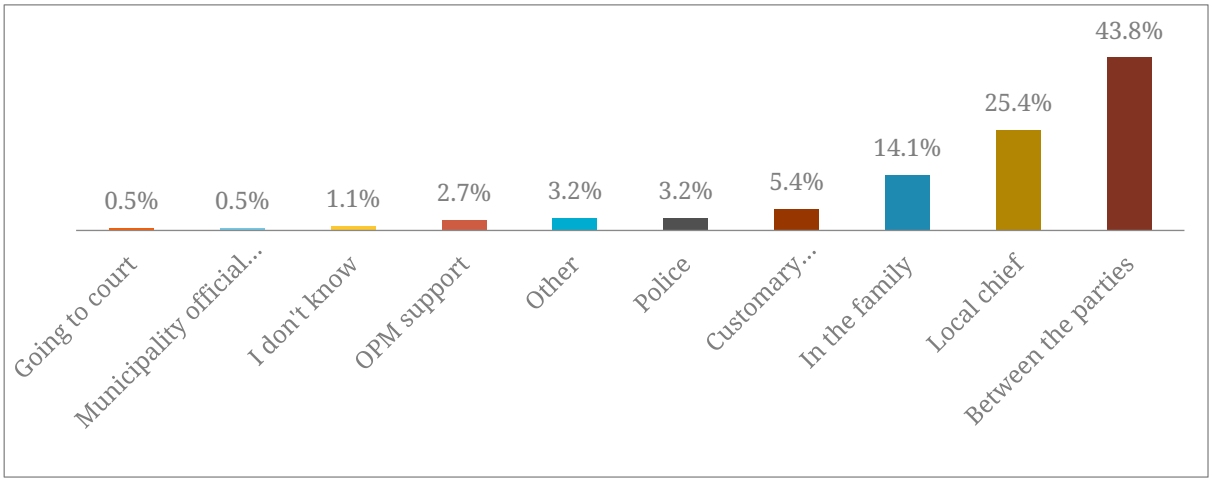

Figure 11: Methods of Resolving HLP Disputes

The enforcement of settlement agreements, particularly those involving the payment of outstanding rent and the return of security deposits, is a significant challenge in Arua. Both local authorities and refugees confirmed that these processes are often time-consuming, causing financial and emotional stress for those involved.[67]

The findings emphasise the prevalence of financial insecurity, the importance of community-based resolution mechanisms, and the need for accessible, targeted

[66] KII5, KII6, FGD4
[67] KII6, KII7, FGD2, FGD3, FGD4, FGD6

support to address systemic challenges and individual vulnerabilities in housing and land disputes.[68]

4.4 Business and Employment

This section details refugees' challenges in accessing employment and business opportunities and provides insights into discrimination and disputes.

4.4.1 Under-employment and informal employment

Despite Uganda's progressive policies granting refugees the right to work, employment rates show regional and gender disparities. In Arua, only one-third of refugees were employed, with women less likely to work (1 in 3) compared to men (1 in 2).

> *"Refugees are always perceived as unskilled."*
>
> - Female refugee[69]

This contrasts with other urban areas, where half of the refugees interviewed were employed, and no notable gender disparities were reported. In Arua, nearly three-quarters of working refugees are self-employed, with the remainder employed by others. In other areas, employment is evenly split between self-employment and working for others, indicating a broader range of opportunities compared to those available in Arua. Authorities and refugees expressed concerns over the intense competition for limited job opportunities in the city. This competition between refugees and nationals can foster resentment and tensions, leading to social friction, discrimination, and barriers to integration. Additionally, refugees are often at a disadvantage as they may lack the necessary skills, professional networks, or resources, making it difficult for them to achieve self-reliance.[70] Many Sudanese refugees in Arua are qualified professionals, such as nurses, doctors and lawyers, however the limited recognition of academic documents written in Arabic create delays and barriers to accessing employment.[71]

Among the one-third of refugees who are employed, written work contracts are more common in Arua, with 38.9 per cent holding such agreements, compared to around 25 per cent in other areas. Men are slightly more likely to hold such contracts (44.4 per cent) than women (33.4 per cent). Verbal agreements, however, remain the

[68] KII2, KII4, KII5
[69] FGD2
[70] FGD2, KII3, KII5 KII6, FGD6
[71] FGD6, KII8

norm, with 77.3 per cent of workers relying on them. Women are more likely to have clear verbal agreements (92 per cent) than men (60 per cent). Among refugees, almost three-quarters (73.8 per cent) feel somewhat sure they could continue their current employment for the next three months, showing little gender disparity.

4.4.2 Discrimination and disputes at the place of employment

Refugees reported significant challenges in finding employment in Arua, particularly for positions where they compete with Ugandans. Ugandan-run businesses are often reluctant to hire refugees, with tribal and family ties playing a crucial role in employment decisions.[72] Language barriers further complicate access to work, as refugees frequently struggle to communicate effectively with potential employers, colleagues and in everyday work-related interactions.[73] This was specifically raised by Sudanese refugees who are often more qualified than other refugees, but face language barriers.[74] In FGDs, refugees highlighted experiences of discrimination and poor working conditions, with women facing additional challenges that negatively affect their physical, mental, and economic well-being. Refugees also reported that some employers exploit their lack of knowledge about where to report such mistreatment.[75]

Common employment-related disputes include the absence of benefits (15.4 per cent), a lack of job security (11.3 per cent), poor working conditions (10.6 per cent), lower wages compared to Ugandans (10.1 per cent), and late payment of salaries (9.1 per cent). Gender disparities are evident in the absence of benefits, with women (18.9 per cent) significantly more likely than men (9.3 per cent) to report this issue. Late or reduced salary payments have severe consequences for individuals and their families, including financial instability, heightened vulnerability to exploitation, mental and emotional strain, difficulties in integration, and strained family dynamics.[76] For other disputes, such as job security, poor working conditions, and late payment of salaries, men and women report reasonably comparable experiences. The lack of job security often compels refugees to accept precarious, low-wage work in unsafe conditions, further exacerbating their vulnerability and dependence on humanitarian aid. During FGDs, refugees expressed the need for greater awareness of their labour rights and access to legal support to address issues such as delayed or unpaid wages.[77] Sudanese refugees requested support with tenancy agreements for commercial properties such as small shops.[78]

Refugees reported instances of sexual harassment against female refugees in the workplace, highlighting it as a serious and pervasive issue that undermines the

[72] KII4, FGD2, FGD6
[73] KII1, KII6, KII7
[74] FGD5, FGD6, KII8
[75] FGD3, FGD4
[76] FGD2, KII4, FGD6
[77] FGD1, FGD2. FGD5
[78] FGD6

safety, dignity, and well-being of refugee women in Arua. The power imbalance between female refugees and their Ugandan employers makes it particularly challenging for them to report harassment or assert their rights, leaving them vulnerable to continued exploitation.[79]

> *"Fear of retaliation, such as job loss, wage cuts, or further abuse, can silence victims."*
>
> - Female refugee[80]

Similar to HLP conflicts, the most common way for respondents to resolve employment and business disputes overall is through local leaders (26.9 per cent), followed by resolving disputes directly between the parties (17.9 per cent) and involving the police (14.8 per cent). During KIIs, authorities reported being increasingly involved in resolving disputes involving refugees, particularly in supporting and ensuring that salaries are paid in cases of dismissal without notice.[81]

4.4.3 Limited business registration

Refugees reported challenges in establishing and running businesses. Many lack awareness of business registration requirements and how to comply with Ugandan laws, particularly regarding tax regulations.[82] For instance, refugees providing "*boda-boda*" (transportation) services shared instances where the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) or the police impounded their motorbikes due to non-compliance with registration and other legal requirements.[83] Additionally, refugees reported experiencing discrimination in the marketplace, with nationals often refusing to buy refugee-made products. As a result, they frequently resort to selling their goods within settlements or back in their countries of origin, leading to social isolation, reduced economic mobility, and the perpetuation of stereotypes and discrimination.[84] During FGDs, refugees highlighted the need for support through microfinance, business training, and legal assistance to register businesses and comply with Ugandan laws and regulations.[85] They also emphasised the need for help establishing and managing Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies (SACCOs).[86]

[79] FGD4, KII2, KII6, KII7
[80] FGD4
[81] FGD2, FGD3, KII5, KII6, FGD4, FGD6
[82] KII1, FGD3, FGD4, KII6, KII7
[83] KII1, KII7, FGD4, KII7
[84] KII1, FGD2
[85] FGD1, FGD3, FGD4, KII7
[86] FGD4

Box 4: Relationship between host and refugee communities

Compared with previously surveyed areas, Arua shows a similar positive relationship between refugees and the host community. In Arua, nearly half of respondents describe the relationship as "*good*" (43.7 per cent), with a further third rating it as "*very good*" (30.5 per cent), reflecting a generally positive sentiment similar to other areas.

The main issues causing tensions between Arua's refugee and host communities are similar to those observed in other areas. Cultural differences (26.9 per cent) and language barriers (25.7 per cent) are key points of contention, along with disputes over land and housing (23.9 per cent) and work opportunities (23.5 per cent).

Box 4: Relationship between host and refugee communities

5 Consequences and coping mechanisms

> *"Without job security, refugees struggle to stand on their feet and remain at risk."*
>
> - Local authority [87]

With only one in three refugees currently engaged in work and a quarter (26.6 per cent) reporting having no income at all, refugees in Arua face significant financial vulnerability which negatively impacts their lives. More than one-third of women (31.3 per cent) and 15.5 per cent of men reported no income, highlighting the more significant financial strain faced by women refugees in the area. Most have exhausted their savings, with only 2.4 per cent reporting reliance on them.

The inability to secure stable, long-term employment traps refugees in Arua in a cycle of poverty, hindering their ability to build independent, sustainable livelihoods and achieve self-reliance.[88] Refugees depend on various income sources, with business income being the most significant, reported by a third of refugees, followed by family support, relied upon by 28.7per cent. For some refugees and asylum seekers working informally or without the required licenses, the lack of registration, identity documentation and/or work permits leaves them vulnerable to (arbitrary) arrest and detention.[89] Immigration operations targeting refugees and migrants in Arua and other cities have led to numerous arrests, leaving detainees without legal recourse and representation.[90] This is exacerbated by a limited understanding of refugees' rights and obligations among law enforcement, police and other authorities in Arua.[91]

[87] KII2
[88] FGD1, FGD2
[89] KII7
[90] Immigration Uganda (2024) *In two separate operations, our enforcement team apprehended 6 irregular immigrants in Gulu and 7 in Arua cities* [Twitter] 20 September 2024, Accessed 4 December 2024, https://x.com/dcicug/status/1837118300372836411?s=46
[91] KII4, KII7

Refugees have complained about the lack of humanitarian services, including access to livelihood opportunities in Arua, as few organisations are present to offer support.[92]

In this challenging situation, many refugees adopt coping mechanisms such as reducing food rations and skipping meals.[93] Some cannot send their children to school, whether private or public, due to the inability to afford school fees, which impacts children's future opportunities and development.[94] Reports from KIIs and FGDs indicate that child labour is more prevalent among refugee families compared to Ugandan families.[95] Authorities have also reported an increase in prostitution, with young refugee girls turning to this as a desperate survival mechanism driven by extreme poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities, and heightened vulnerability.[96] Additionally, some households have sent family members back to the settlement and/or to the country of origin in search of livelihood opportunities, leading to family separation across different locations and countries.[97] All these coping mechanisms further expose refugees to exploitation and abuse, health risks and psychological trauma and perpetuate the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

[92] FGD3, FGD5
[93] FGD1, FGD5
[94] KII2, FDG1
[95] KII1, FGD1, FGD2
[96] KII2, KII7
[97] FGD3, FGD5

6 Conclusions

The experiences of self-settled refugees in Arua provide critical insights into the challenges and opportunities of urban refugee integration within Uganda's progressive asylum framework, building on evidence from previous studies. While Uganda's policies afford refugees the right to work, access services, and move freely, the practical barriers in Arua -which mirror challenges in Koboko, Mbarara, Hoima and Adjumani - highlight ongoing issues that must be addressed to fully realise these rights.

Key challenges include difficulties in obtaining and maintaining legal documentation, such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, which are essential for accessing education, healthcare, employment, inheritance and other rights. While refugees are generally aware of the importance of these documents for navigating urban systems, they often face significant barriers due to complex procedures and a lack of information about their relevance and how to obtain them. Reliance on settlement-based registration systems further compounds these challenges, introducing logistical and financial burdens, limiting recognition of urban residence, and complicating access to services.

Housing insecurity, often linked to the lack of legal identity documentation is another critical issue. Most refugees live in rented accommodation without formal tenancy agreements, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and eviction. Disputes over rent or tenure are common, requiring intervention by local authorities and community leaders, who play a crucial role in mediating and resolving conflicts.

Employment opportunities remain limited, despite the legal right to work – even for qualified refugees. The employment landscape is dominated by informal labour arrangements, characterised by low wages and precarious conditions, with women facing additional barriers to participation and a greater risk of exploitation. Many refugees remain reliant on family support and other forms of assistance, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Refugees also face significant obstacles to starting businesses, including navigating complex regulations and facing discrimination in local markets.

Despite these challenges, refugees in Arua demonstrate resilience and agency, viewing self-settlement as a step toward reducing dependency on aid and achieving self-reliance.[98] The findings from Arua align with those of the previous report on secondary cities, underscoring the need for tailored, joint responses to address the

[98] KII2, KII3, KII7, FGD2, FGD6

challenges faced by refugees who are increasingly choosing to self-settle in urban areas.

This will require expanding access to legal documentation by increasing awareness and reducing logistical and financial burdens, improving housing security and reducing vulnerability by promoting the use of written agreements, and creating inclusive livelihood opportunities with a greater focus on formalising work arrangements. Specific attention should be given to qualified refugees, particularly the newly arrived Sudanese population, by supporting processes for recognising academic documents, registration with professional bodies, and addressing language barriers, which together will contribute to increasing livelihood opportunities.

Strategic investments in capacity building, technical support and resources for cities and are critical to addressing the diverse and evolving needs of all urban residents. Strengthening local authorities and community leaders' capacity to mediate disputes - particularly in housing and employment - is vital to enhancing protection and reducing exploitation and vulnerability. Promoting dialogue and cooperation between refugees and host populations is also vital for building and sustaining social cohesion and ensuring that urban systems work for everyone.

By addressing these systemic barriers, Uganda can strengthen its leadership in refugee integration, advancing equitable urban development that benefits both refugees and host communities. This will require coordinated efforts among policymakers, humanitarian and development actors, civil society, the private sector and local authorities to ensure inclusion and shared progress for all urban residents

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