

How Effective is the Self-Reliance Agenda in Uganda's Refugee Response?

Executive Statement

The 2006 Uganda's Refugee Act has been widely commended for being progressive and exemplary. Some of the distinctive provisions of the law include allocation of arable land to refugee households, access to public social services and the freedom to seek employment and operate businesses. These generous provisions were expected to empower refugees to sustain themselves overtime. The recent surge in refugee arrivals and the increasing protracted nature of refugee situations, coupled with undependable and inadequate refugee assistance, sustainable solutions like promotion of self-reliance among refugees become imperative. This policy brief highlights the extent of self-reliance among refugees, identifies factors promoting or hindering self-reliance among refugees and proposes policy options. The brief is based on the 2017 EPRC refugee survey that was conducted in the rural settlements of Nakivale, Rwamwanja, Bidibidi, Rhino camp, Pagirinya and urban refugees in Kampala (Kisenyi, Katwe and Nsyambya).

Introduction

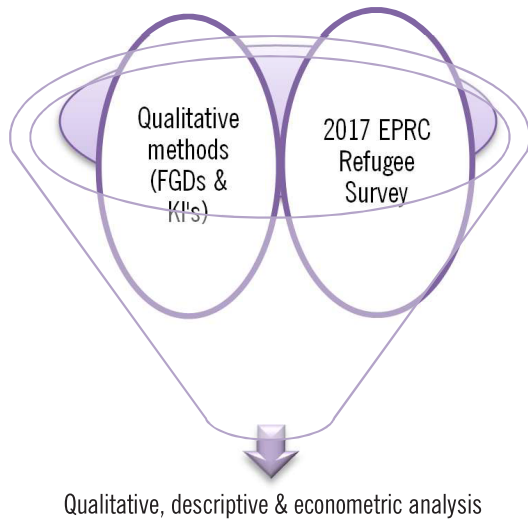
Against the common belief that forced displacement is a temporary phenomenon, refugees in Uganda are increasingly living under prolonged situations i.e. living in exile for more than five years. While durable solutions exist for all refugees (e.g. through voluntary repatriation to country of origin, local integration in country of first asylum, or resettlement into a third country), repatriation remains unpredictable and opportunities for resettlement to western countries are limited. For instance, according to the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), since 2011, only 65 percent of 23,927 submissions for resettlement have resulted into positive outcome and majority of these successful cases (about 40 percent) happened in 2016 alone.¹ On the other hand, whereas repatriation remains the desired goal, local integration gives refugees some certainty about what to do with their lives in the short to medium term (Dyden-Peterson 2004). Furthermore, in an environment of declining funding—even for humanitarian interventions, sustainable solutions aimed at empowering refugees to become self-reliant are deemed fundamental.

To this end, Uganda has been implementing a Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) with an aim of empowering refugees to sustain their own livelihoods. One of the key features upon which SRS is anchored is the provision of arable land to refugees to develop a livelihood based on subsistence agriculture (GoU and UNHCR, 2004). More recently in 2017, the Government launched the comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and one of the pillars relates to resilience and self-reliance. With the increased number of refugees – standing at over 1.3 million as of June 2019 and nearly 60 percent resident in the West Nile sub region, an inquiry into the extent of self-reliance among refugees in Uganda is timely. The key questions answered in this brief are: what is the extent of self-reliance, who is likely to be self-reliant, challenges that may hinder the pursuit of self-reliance and alternative livelihood strategies.

Data and Methods

The brief is based on analysis of the 2017 EPRC refugee household survey and is complimented by findings from focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Figure 1: Source of data



Findings

1. Refugee livelihood strategies

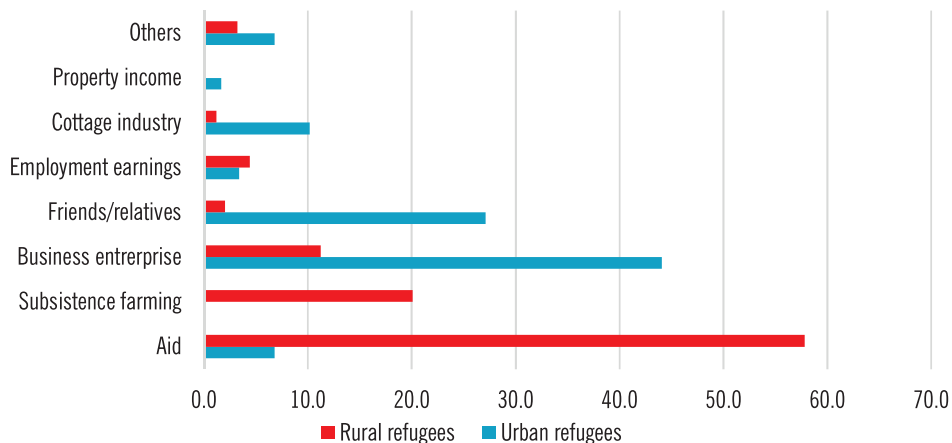
Refugees in rural settlements are heavily dependent on humanitarian assistance: Uganda has taken a development-centered approach to refugee support by providing refugees considerable freedom to manage their own lives. Refugees (at household level) are allocated a piece of land for homestead and another to cultivate and improve their food sufficiency. With time, food rations/cash grants to refugees are reduced depending on the length of stay in the settlement, save for extremely vulnerable households. Ideally, the land provided is meant to support households to supplement food rations through agricultural production as humanitarian support is reduced. However, our survey findings show that about 58 percent of rural based refugees depend on aid from humanitarian agencies and the percent is even higher in West

Nile at about 80 percent. Subsistence farming is the second most important source of livelihood (20 percent) followed by business enterprises at 11 percent and employment earnings at 4 percent (see figure 2).

On the contrary, urban refugees are depending more on business enterprise for survival (44 percent) and support from friends and relatives (27 percent). The limited reliance on humanitarian aid by urban refugees has more to do with policy than need. Residence in urban areas is equated to ability to be self-reliant and hence urban refugees do not qualify for food rations or cash grants unless they are registered and attached to one of the designated rural settlements. Whilst some urban refugees are self-reliant, there exists a category of urban refugees that are indigent. These findings reveal that self-reliance remains an unattained goal and food/cash aid are still essential for survival of a substantial proportion of refugees regardless of residence.

Land access, gender of household head, household size, period of stay and place of residence are correlated with dependence on aid: To better understand the characteristics of refugees who are less likely to depend on aid, we ran an econometric model – probit model. The results show that refugees who have access to land for agriculture, either allocated by OPM or through borrowing from the host community are less likely to depend on aid. However, issues of land size do matter, those with access to bigger plots tend to have larger agricultural outputs and are more food sufficient. Male-headed households, households with smaller household sizes, urban refugees and refugees who have stayed longer are less likely to depend on aid (see figure 3). It is worth noting that by design, refugees who have stayed longer than

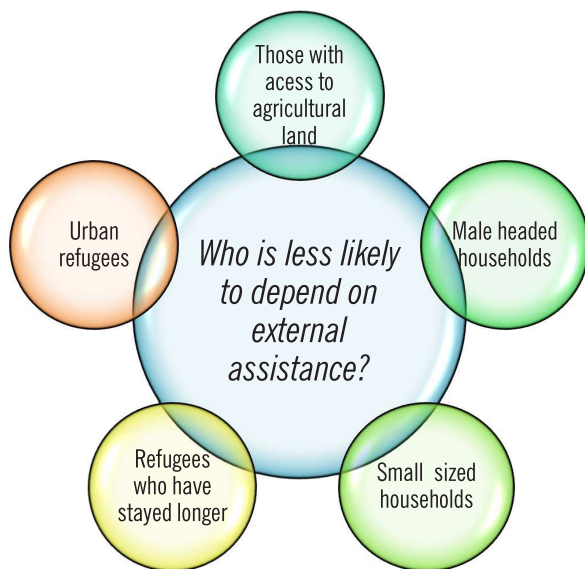
Figure 2: Main source of livelihood for refugee households (%)



Source: EPRC Refugee Survey 2017

5 years in designated refugee settlements receive only about 25 percent of the food aid, hence the negative correlation with aid dependency is expected. However, an inquiry into whether older refugee settlers are successfully coping without aid revealed mixed findings. A sizeable proportion reported having taken up negative coping strategies, such as reduction in the quantity and number of meals taken per day. Our estimates included other variables such as age of household head, education stock of household members and household labour force (number of people aged 14-64 years) but their effects were not significant.

Figure 3: Who is less likely to depend on humanitarian aid? – Only significant variables reported



Source: Author's computations (Probit model results) based on EPRC Refugee Survey 2017

2. Challenges hindering self-reliance

Land related challenges: Whereas land provision is the cornerstone of the self-reliance policy, the land provided to refugees is inadequate in many aspects. It is often very small, and in some cases marginal and unproductive. Survey findings showed that about 72 percent of refugees in South West Uganda and only 4 percent of refugees in West Nile had access to agricultural land. Yet, West Nile hosts about 60 percent of refugees in Uganda as earlier noted. The average land holding among those who had access to agricultural land was about 0.5 acres. This size of land cannot sufficiently support refugee food needs given the average household size of about five members. Worse still, due to the unprecedented number of refugees that Uganda has received since 2016, land that was initially allocated to refugee households is being further subdivided to accommodate new arrivals.

Furthermore, because refugees are in some cases allocated unproductive land, they can hardly make good use of it to support food production. For instance some refugees in Adjumani and Yumbe have been settled on rocky and unproductive land while places like Nakivale are almost semi-arid. These challenges coupled with other weather vagaries and climatic shocks further dampen self-reliance efforts among refugees.

Limited livelihood options: Though a number of implementing partners are supporting refugees through skilling, provision of small grants for business set up and support to community livelihood groups, their outreach remains inadequate and fragmented. Indeed, some refugees have ventured into off farm activities such as carpentry, brick laying, and retail trade, among others but are constrained by limited capital and lack of requisite collateral to access credit from formal financial institutions to expand their business ventures. Other challenges relate to limited market due to the location of the settlements; isolation with limited connection to the more urbanized areas that would essentially expand market for their goods and services.

Labour market constraints: Although the refugee policy grants refugees the freedom to seek employment, the rate of employment outside subsistence agriculture remains low. Only 4 percent reported employment earnings as a major source of livelihood in the rural settlements. This is not surprising because in a country like Uganda where unemployment and underemployment rates are already high, it would be more difficult for refugees—with low education attainment and limited networks—to secure employment. For refugees, this is exacerbated by language barrier and in some cases the otherwise educated refugees are not regarded professional enough when academic qualifications from their home countries are equated to Ugandan standards. In Kampala—the area with most non-agricultural employment opportunities, refugees also reported discrimination as barrier for entry into the labour market.

Mindset: A section of refugees have developed a negative attitude towards work and are not interested in diversifying their sources of livelihood beyond the monthly food rations and cash grants from World Food Programme. Others are optimistic about prospects of being resettled in western countries and therefore look forwards to starting a new life rather than working towards improving their livelihoods in the present Ugandan settlements. Unfortunately, as earlier mentioned, the rate of resettlement is still low and the process

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About the Authors

Gemma Ahaibwe is a Research Fellow at the Economic Policy Research Centre, Kampala, Uganda.

Sheila Depio is a Research Analyst at the Economic Policy Research Centre, Kampala, Uganda.

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was described by the refugees as lengthy, bureaucratic and not clear to all despite the various sensitization programs.

3. What can be done to enhance refugee self-reliance?

The research demonstrates that while some degree of self-reliance has been attained among a section of refugees, a higher proportion remains aid dependent and is yet to achieve self-sufficiency in food. Moreover, there are still deficiencies in efforts to provide alternative livelihood opportunities to compliment agriculture. To realize self-reliance as envisaged in both National Development Plans—I and II—through a Refugee Settlement Transformative Agenda, there is a need to:

- a) Support agricultural livelihoods: While land is allocated as the immediate means to facilitate agricultural production, currently, issues such as quality of land, location and demographics of households are not considered. While this is understandable given the huge numbers of recent refugees arrivals, more can be done to enhance production and productivity of the small pieces of land that refugees are utilizing for food production. Adoption of improved agricultural technologies such as use of improved seeds, fertilizer, and irrigation and other sustainable land management practices for example crop rotation and mulching should be promoted by the relevant stakeholders.
- b) Vigorously promote alternative non-farm livelihood strategies: Even in settlements where refugees have access to arable land and are considered relatively self-reliant in terms of food production, farming alone is insufficient to enable them achieve economic sustainability. Beyond provision of food for their families, refugee households must meet their non-food, education and health care needs, which cannot be realized without income generation. As such, the role of non-farm options remains critical in improving refugee livelihoods and setting them on a path to self-sufficiency. Skilling refugees, provision of startup capital and mentorship are examples of interventions that could be strengthened.
- c) Facilitate integration between refugees and hosts: In places where refugees have integrated well with hosts, social services and communal resources have been shared amicably. For example, in the district of Adjumani, hosts and refugees engage jointly in some livelihoods activities. In so doing, they draw from different competences, experiences and derive social capital. In places where host communities own big chunks of land such as Northern Uganda, promotion of joint farmer group formation among refugees and hosts may improve refugee access to land and better agricultural technologies. Our findings reveal that in cases where host and refugees have teamed up, there are more likely to farm bigger pieces of land and also to produce to earn some revenues.

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Endnotes

1 (Office of the Prime Minister, 2017)

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Address:

Economic Policy Research Centre
51, Pool Road, Makerere University Campus,
P. O. Box 7841 Kampala, Uganda
Tel: +256414541023/4 Fax: +256414541022
Email: eprc@eprcug.org, Website: www.eprc.or.ug