Refugee Protection and Food Security in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

This study proposes strategies to better recognize and protect the food security needs of Kampala's refugee population. Uganda is Africa's largest refugee host, with a policy approach that has been widely lauded for its flexible settlement provisions and commitment to durable solutions. However, growing refugee populations and underfunding have led to serious pressures, severely exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Food insecurity in designated refugee settlements is at critical levels: 75% of residents are food insecure. One unique aspect of Uganda's refugee governance approach is the allowance of refugee populations to self-settle outside of designated camps, in the capital city, Kampala. This research takes a governance approach to explore what is being done to support the food security of this group, by who, and how this could be improved. Interviews with refugees living in two of Kampala's large informal settlements (Kisenyi II and Namuwongo) and with a range of policy stakeholders were carried out in May 2023. Overlapping formal and informal services and programs are offered by multiple levels of government and the NGO sector, accessible to different populations living in settlements. This paper points to gaps and limitations, linked to resources, coordination, difficulties identifying vulnerable populations, locating political responsibility, and weak policy implementation, and suggests governance strategies to better respond to refugee and asylum seeker's food security needs. Key recommended responses are to overhaul the refugee registration system, recognize and protect urban food security, and improve policy actor coordination through collaborative strategies which move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines to address it.

Keywords

refugees, urban food security, self-settlement, Kampala, Uganda

Suggested Citation

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Cover Photo

Cooking area inside the informal-settlement shack of Congolese migrants in Kampala. Credit: Andrea Brown

Introduction

Uganda is the largest refugee hosting country in Africa with an estimated 1.6 million refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR 2023). This number has tripled in the last decade and actual numbers are certainly much higher; the refugee registration system is backlogged, with years-long wait times, and many of those who qualify to register as refugees do not do so. The 2006 Refugee Act and 2010 Refugee Regulations grant refugees rights to the same social services as Ugandans, including health care and free primary education, and well as rights to live and work in designated areas. Because they are not legally recognized as refugees if they live in cities other than Kampala, the capital has become the central destination outside of camps, and most self-settled refugees live in one of the city's 57 informal settlements. Uganda's refugee policies offer opportunities not available in most other countries, yet refugees' access to employment, housing, and social services remains difficult, and most face overlapping barriers related to communication (culture and language), health (physical and psychological), and discrimination, and have needs which are more complex than most other informal settlement residents. High levels of food insecurity result from and further exacerbate these barriers and needs. Conditions have worsened due to underfunding, rising numbers of urban poor, and pandemic-related factors. Uganda's COVID-19 response was amongst the most restrictive in the world, and the economic and social burdens of this fell most heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable residents.

There are an estimated 137,000 refugees living in Kampala (UNHCR, 2024). This population is growing, diverse and mobile. Refugee numbers have increased sharply over the past decade, but Uganda has a long history of forced migrant settlement, given several neighbouring countries have had protracted and/or sequential conflicts since the 1960s. Most asylum seekers come from South Sudan and the DRC, and there are also substantial populations from the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia) as well as Burundi, Rwanda, and Sudan. Uganda, like Kenya and Tanzania, is a destination for asylum seekers from East and Central Africa due to its geographical proximity and relative political and economic stability. But Uganda is often the preferred destination because of its more flexible settlement policies.

Asylum seekers regularly move across borders, for work or temporary residence, between Uganda and their origin nations and between Uganda and neighbouring states. There is also frequent transit inside the nation, between refugee camps and urban centres, including Kampala. Households are often split among multiple locations, inside and outside of Uganda. As noted, many forced migrants never seek or receive official refugee status. There is also variation in asylum seekers' wealth and networks providing access to employment and other elements of security, which translates directly into how well people can manage, as self-settled refugees do not qualify for protection or assistance from the government or the UNHCR. Many refugees migrate to urban areas across the nation, and although this is not officially allowed hospitals and schools do not turn them away.

International asylum seekers are just one demographic contributing to rapid urban growth: other drivers include internal migration from rural climate-impacted regions and Uganda's high birthrate. Like many low-income countries, Uganda is experiencing "urbanizing without industrializing" (Gollin et al. 2016), accompanied by growing inequality. Poverty is straining resources and services with few avenues for citizens or migrants to economically advance. In informal settlements, migrants are disproportionately exposed to a cycle of risks and vulnerabilities: homelessness, illness, violence, poor water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and unemployment. All of these contribute to food insecurity, which in turn reinforces the other vulnerabilities.

Based on interviews with policy stakeholders and refugees and asylum seekers in Kampala, held in May 2023, this paper reviews existing governance supports, refugees' experiences accessing them, and proposes how food security could be better addressed through policy, stakeholder coordination, and more focused attention to recognizing and protecting urban food security.

Research Methods

This research is part of a larger project conducted to understand the policy environment and experiences for mixed migrants – including but not limited to refugees – living in Kampala. This research relied on a qualitative research design, which involved a stakeholder workshop, surveys, interviews, and a review of literature, including legislation and policy documents from government and non-government governance stakeholders.

A stakeholder research workshop with 11 participants was held at Makerere University on May 15, 2023. This brought together three groups of stakeholders: academic researchers, government representatives from national, local, and municipal offices, and NGO leaders. The workshop provided an overview of the research project and its goals, followed by discussions on food security in Kampala (drivers, barriers, needs, opportunities and supports for different populations in informal settlements) and on mixed migrant populations in Kampala (identifying and responding to changing needs). Participants reviewed the proposed research tools (interview questions for migrants in particular), offered input, and made suggestions of additional stakeholders to survey and/or interview. Details were shared for how interested participants could collaborate in research outputs and future projects.

A survey was sent to individuals with academic, policy, donor, and NGO positions, with 20 responses. The survey asked respondents for details, assessments of, and priorities relating to (1) what programing and supports they are aware of and are involved with to support migrants living in Kampala, (2) what they viewed as the main barriers faced by migrants for reaching food security, and (3) what suggestions they had for improving migrant populations' food security.

Fifteen policy stakeholder interviews of approximately one hour were held with individuals or with small groups from the same office or organization. Interviews expanded on the same topics as the surveys. Three were held on Zoom due to scheduling difficulties, the other 12 were conducted in-person. Draft transcripts of interviews were later shared, and participants had opportunity to edit content. Four of those interviews included refugees currently working for NGOs.

Open ended semi-structured interviews were held with 11 migrants living in two of Kampala's largest informal settlements, Kisenyi II and Namuwongo. The five in Kisenyi II were attended and facilitated by a social worker from the NGO *Slum Aid Project*, the six in Namuwongo with a social worker from the NGO *Hands for Hope Uganda*. Two Ugandan research assistants aided in translation during interviews.[1] Interview questions were focused around when and why migrants came to Kampala and their experiences with accessing adequate nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and knowledge and access to different government and non-governmental services and supports. Roughly half of migrants interviewed were international forced migrants, although only two were registered as refugees.

Governance Responses

This research explores what is being done to support food security for urban refugees in Kampala, by who, and how this could be improved. A governance approach is used to identify formal and informal processes by which government and non-government entities act. This approach follows from Smit's (2018) observation that "understanding actual urban governance processes, which are essentially about how different actors interact to make and operationalise decisions, is vitally important." Overlapping formal and informal services and programs are provided by multiple levels of government and the NGO sector, accessible to different populations living in informal settlements. Some temporary (restrictive and supportive) actions were taken by the government during the pandemic, with lasting repercussions, and these are also assessed. Effective responses are hampered first and foremost by a lack of resources. Widespread and growing poverty means there are multiple demands for scarce resources. Effective responses are also difficult due to a lack of data on the refugee population, and weak recognition of urban food security as a policy priority. The policies and actions reviewed here include: the regulatory environment for refugee settlement and rights; local governance; COVID-19 policies; and settlement upgrading, including investments in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). NGOs support refugee populations through programing linked to rights, information and legal protection, and an array of organisations provide a patchwork of supports including food provisions, vocational training, health care, credit, and childcare and education. Some collaboration exists with government and NGO actors, but despite official commitments to participatory practices most planning is top-down. Few policies, programs, or services specifically address or recognize food insecurity, but many are relevant to how the urban poor can better consistently access safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant food. Explicit recognition of urban food security needs would facilitate better coordination and targeting of related interventions.

Food insecurity in urban settings is largely an issue of access. The most immediate contributor to poor food security in urban informal settlements is poverty, as food must be regularly and predicably purchased on the open market. Safe food preparation and retail are reliant on access to clean water and sanitary environments. The conditions to enable work, safety, skills training, healthcare, and childcare, are also necessary. Food is the biggest expenditure for the poor, and informal food markets are essential for both employment and food access for the city's most vulnerable. Refugees have fewer networks for securing employment, housing, and credit, all means to access needed income and space to purchase and prepare adequate amounts of nutritious food. The lack of access to familiar foods further contributes to food insecurity. In Uganda there is little recognition of urban hunger as a policy problem, and food security is treated primarily as a rural food production issue. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns the sharp spike in food insecurity prompted several temporary interventions to directly respond to urban hunger.

Uganda had one of the world's most restrictive lockdown responses during the pandemic, and this accelerated and deepened poverty and food insecurity for refugees. The food retail sector was particularly impacted during lockdown, reducing food security for lower income populations from two directions: income generation and direct food accessibility. The food retail sector has fewer barriers to entry than other employment options for newcomers, particularly for women. Refugees working with cross-border trade networks, most often connected to food, also lost their livelihoods during COVID-19. Compared to Ugandans, refugees were far more challenged to access food during the pandemic (Atamanov et al., 2021). Restarting these businesses after the pandemic has not been possible for many, who have instead spiraled into debt and, in many cases, homelessness.

Uganda's refugee approach has been viewed as a progressive model by many (The Economist, 2016; UNDP, 2017; World Bank, 2016), because it seeks to create more inclusive opportunities for durable solutions than found in more widespread refugee responses. Its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF, 2018) has a coordinating committee that includes both refugees and local representatives and is applauded as an example of participatory governance (Zapata, 2023). Uganda's strategy is designed to increase political, economic, and social rights for asylum seekers as well as balance socio-economic opportunities for citizens and refugees. The definition of who qualifies for refugee status is also comparatively expansive, going beyond the International Refugees Convention to also include those granted protection in the Organization of African Union Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Convention) and those who fear harm based on gender discrimination. This progressive approach

is a source of both national pride and regional leadership status. However, it is no longer achieving its goals, due to under-resourcing and the steep rise in numbers of asylum seekers (Betts, 2021; NRC, 2023).

Because in practice many refugees do not return to their countries of origin in months or even after a few years, but stay for decades or generations, economic self-sufficiency benefits refugees, host communities, and funders like the UNHCR and the many NGOs working in camps. Ideally, self-reliance not only reduces support costs but contributes to economic growth. Goals of cultural assimilation are also part of this strategy. The deterrent to granting full rights for land ownership and employment is competition, real or perceived, with local populations of citizens. Manifestations of resentment towards migrants are remarkably low in Uganda, but stakeholders surveyed for this research expressed concern that animosities are dangerously close to bubbling over into violence. Poverty pushes both sides of the equation: there are limited resources to support refugees in designated settlements, but widespread local poverty makes unrestricted opportunities and rights politically untenable. Uganda's set of wide-ranging but limited opportunities for refugees seek to find a balance for asylum seekers and Ugandans. But, as noted by Addaney (2016), "refugee rights [are] of secondary importance [to] promoting the socioeconomic welfare of the locals".

In rural areas, where possible, refugees who are residents in one of Uganda's 28 designated settlements (the preferred nomenclature to camps) are given a plot of land to cultivate, and they can also lease land and start businesses. In practice, this is not straightforward as land is not available in all locations and what is available may not be arable. Many encampments are provisional, basic, and without infrastructure. Some refugees do go into farming or engage in small businesses, but most are unemployed and dependent on support from the government and the UNHCR, NGOs, family, and friends (Addaney, 2016). As settlement populations have grown, and international funding has been slashed, life has grown increasingly difficult. Conditions have been steadily worsening for the last decade, due to flooding, overcrowding, and severe underfunding. The COVID-19 pandemic and needs from other global emergencies in Syria, Ukraine, and Palestine have also reduced available resources. Educational services are collapsing as there is not enough money to pay teachers. In 2023 the budget for Uganda's UNHCR programmes was cut to 39% of its needs (Alfani and Eggers, 2023). Three-quarters of designated settlement residents cannot access the minimum requirements to be food secure. Thousands of children are severely undernourished.

Self-settlement in Kampala is the alternative legal option, and while this means waiving camp supports, public schools are better than in camps and refugees also have access to the same health-care services as citizens. One NGO representative explained, "they can go hungry in the camps, or they can be hungry in Kampala, but here [in Kampala] they have more agency" (May 18, 2024 interview, Kampala). They are free to work, including starting their own business.

Further, refugees can participate in civic life, with rights to vote and stand for office at the local level. Urban self-settlement works as a pressure valve for under-resourced and overpopulated camps: refugees have the option to leave and try their luck in the capital. Many new arrivals head directly for Kampala from the border, without stopping at reception centres. Refugees from some locations, particularly in the Horn of Africa but also from the DRC, may have the economic assets and connections to thrive in Kampala, and there are many successful business enterprises that attest to this. Those who have some combination of economic assets, marketable skills, support networks, and who can speak Luganda do significantly better than in camps. For these individuals, self-settlement is clearly a better option than being restricted to a camp, but even for skilled refugees there is widespread confusion around what kinds of work permits are needed, barring refugees from access to formal sector employment (Tshimba, 2022).

Most asylum seekers are from South Sudan, with a combination of compounding barriers, which include no or limited education or skills, physical and/or mental trauma and disability, responsibilities to care for others, language barriers, and lack of community and social networks of support. Most are women and children. Asylum-seekers in Kampala are struggling, and their growing numbers are stretching the capacity of the public services and income generation options that support all low-income residents. Because most are never registered with the government or the UNHCR, their numbers, locations, and the forms of protection they need are difficult to know, and plan for. What is certain is that Uganda's refugee protection system is broken, both in the designated rural settlements and, increasingly, in Kampala's informal settlements.

When asylum-seekers arrive, they are required to register. Despite a set of procedures in place, there are years-long backlogs and significant irregularities in the processes. Registration falls under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), through the Department of Refugees. Refugees coming from some locations, including South Sudan, are awarded prima facie refugee status, which should speed up the recognition process. The time frame in the legal framework, both for initial registration and appeal, is short (two weeks), but has rarely if ever been met and the pre-pandemic wait-times of up to two years are now becoming even longer as numbers of claimants rise, and administrators struggle with the backlog of new registrants and appeals.

For those wishing to self-settle in Kampala, there is a two-step process: asylum registration followed by an application for refugee status. Prima facie recognized applicants must register at the border and are not permitted to start the process in Kampala. All applicants must start the process within 30 days of arrival in the country. As part of COVID-19 restrictions, the OPM temporarily closed its offices in Kampala and was not processing any new registrations or issuing, renewing, or replacing expired or missing identification documents. The backlog that increased during this period has only grown since. There are many reasons to explain the

bottlenecks in the system and why most forced migrants never even start the registration process. These include: porous borders; onerous requirements at every stage of application and appeal; the necessity of renewing asylum certification every three months; difficultly accessing necessary interpreters; fear and lack of knowledge; the time and expertise needed to navigate the process over months and years; lack of necessary documentation; changes and uncertainties around which nationalities have prima facie recognition and where they can and cannot register; reliance on unscrupulous brokers taking advantage of refugees; and officials prioritizing and fast tracking applications for those who pay extra. Consequently, most forced migrants in Kampala remain unregistered and vulnerable to arrest, adding to their barriers accessing employment and services and limited data available to policy makers and NGOs that could be used to better understand and support their needs.

Because most forced migrants are unregistered, government, the international community, and NGOs do not have accurate data to fully recognize, plan for, or respond to their needs. This also creates variability and unpredictability for migrants regarding whether or not they can access schools, health care, housing, and employment. This absence of documentation gets passed down to children and becomes an intergenerational burden and barrier to economic advancement. Arrests of undocumented migrants are frequent and fear of this restricts mobility, especially at night, and income generation options.

A patchwork of NGOs, international and local, operate in Kampala's settlements and many advocate for refugees' rights and try to address some of these registration-related challenges. For example, the United South Sudanese Refugee Committee, which operates in ten different communities in Kampala, estimates there are more than 30,000 refugees from South Sudan in the city. They keep a roster of those they are in contact with and when people on this list are detained by police, organization volunteers go to the police station to vouch for them. This organization and others, like the Refugee Law Project, also assist claimants with navigating the registration bureaucracy, including the appeals process.

Local Governance

The Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area (GKMA) is made up of different and overlapping administrative jurisdictions. The city's central area is managed by the KCCA, a national Ministry. Within it there are five divisions, each with their own elected mayor and council. This research included interviews with forced migrants in Kisenji II, part of the Kampala Central Division, and Namuwongo, in Makindye Division. Some informal settlements in the GKMA fall outside of KCCA jurisdictions and are administratively governed by elected local councils with oversight and direction from the Ministry of Local Government. This research draws on interviews and survey responses from representatives from the Ministry of Local Government, the KCCA, the OPM, and the MLHUD.

Elected local councils are responsible for implementing much of the nationally determined policy for all residents of informal settlements in Kampala, which increasingly includes the needs of growing populations of refugees. Uganda's decentralized political system has been criticized as a tool of patronage rather than a genuine institutionalisation of democracy (Green, 2010; Meyers, 2014) and most decision-making is centralized and top-down. The creation of the KCCA in 2011 was in part motivated by a desire to circumvent opposition leaders gaining more traction in urban areas and was thus a move away from the limited autonomy of decentralized governance that had existed to more top-down control. Low voter participation in local elections indicate that communities are minimally invested. Nonetheless, local government is involved in many of the services directly related to living conditions in settlements, including WASH, and zoning, and the wide variation in quality of district level governance is evidence good leadership here matters. There is also variation and informality in how leaders in areas governed by the Ministry of Local Government cooperate with the KCCA for waste removal, electricity, and other services, and these arrangements are not formalized (Richmond, 2018). Local leaders regularly interact with NGOs operating in their areas and are key players in coordinated program planning and implementation. Collaboration between local government and NGOs can also be important. Whereas some NGOs described this relationship as one of government surveillance, with the need to constantly inform them about activities burdensome, others found the relationship more of a partnership, welcoming local government support.

Uganda's Local Government Development Plan, initiated in 2000, was explicitly designed to address poverty through a participatory approach (Lwasa, 2015). The updated Local Government Development Planning Guidelines (RoU, 2020), now refer to the importance of recognizing the needs of refugees and the role of local government in supporting the CRRF. This document draws attention to the influx of refugees but notes that local government lacks the resources and technical capacity to initiate appropriate actions. Guidelines advocate for a centrally led and resourced integrative approach, whereby refugee populations are planned for, in line with planning for other vulnerable people. The KCCA similarly recognizes the urgency of planning for refugee as well as citizen populations but is also at a preliminary stage of policy development: there is awareness of the need to plan, some steps have been taken towards consultation, but without concrete proposals on how to do so. In 2018 KCCA worked with several NGOs to identify refugee needs in Kampala, the most pressing identified was food (AGORA, 2018), but there has not been follow up to respond to these findings.

There is considerable variation in the impact and trust local leaders have in their communities. This variability was evident in the two districts studied in this research. In Kisenyi II there is a visible presence of community development outreach workers, whereas in Namuwongo residents interviewed reported they had little to no contact with KCCA or local council members and were unaware of their roles

or activities. NGOs operating in these areas made similar observations. Public hospitals are near both districts and accessed by settlement residents; these were strongly and positively associated with the KCCA. Those interviewed, several with serious medical conditions, all noted that they go to the hospital when necessary and that there are never asked to show documentation; consultations are provided for free to all. Treatment is more of a problem because hospitals rarely have drugs, even paracetamol, and filling prescriptions for medication is unaffordable. Some community NGOs can provide medical consultations and treatments to a very limited number of vulnerable community members, but most illnesses among poor settlement residents go untreated.

In different districts, there is also variation in how strictly restrictions around informal vending are enforced. In most areas where traffic is not being obstructed, informal food venders are active, despite official restrictions and goals of formalizing the sector. With 60 percent of Kampala's residents living in informal settlements there is widespread understanding that informal retail is necessary for survival. Many NGOs offer microcredit and skills training to targeted groups, such as women, youth, and/or refugees, enabling upgrading or entry into informal sector employment. Typically funding for this comes from international donors. As NGOs regularly inform local government on their activities, there is tacit approval for enabling these strategies, even as sporadic enforcement of regulations by police keep informal retailers vulnerable to harassment, fines, and having their wares confiscated.

Respondents in this research noted favourably the ability of refugees to vote and to run for local office. In areas where there are large populations of South Sudanese or Somali migrants, refugees from these groups have been elected and are important advocates and support for their communities. Employment with the KCCA was also cited as highly desirable. One migrant interviewed has worked, without pay, for the KCCA for over a year as a street sweeper. Despite not being paid she continues to do her job every morning and believes payments will resume once the hardships of the pandemic have passed.

COVID-19 Responses

Uganda had one of the world's longest lockdowns and most restrictive set of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government acted quickly, in early March 2020, before any cases were identified in the country. Steps taken over the next two years included a 30-day night curfew from 7pm-5:30am, suspension of some public transit (leading to increases in transit fares charged for remaining transit), the longest school closure in the world (22 months), restrictions on movement and public gatherings, and the closure of international borders (for 42 days in 2021). In Kampala, food availability and food access were both negatively impacted. Disrupted and blocked supply chains from rural and international production areas increased food shortages and spoilage, resulting in high consumer prices. Restrictions on

mobility and operating hours of markets were devastating for both income generation and consumer access.

During the 61-day transit ban, which overlapped with the night curfew, fresh food vendors had to sleep in the marketplaces, something not an option for women with children. Many in the food industry lost employment with the closure of restaurants, cafes, bars, and hotels. While it is impossible to know what the impacts of a less restrictive response for public health would have been, emerging data shows that the aggressive lockdown restrictions negatively impacted health, particularly for women and children (Musoke et al, 2023) and refugee populations. The UNHCR found that in February 2021 64 percent of refugees were food insecure, compared with 9 percent of Ugandans (Atamanov, 2021). Refugees were less able to rely on friends and family, the most frequent coping response during the pandemic (Acayo, 2020), and were more reliant on government food packages.

Residents of urban settlements were especially vulnerable as not only were risks of illness high, as social distancing and staying at home are not possible in overcrowded neighbourhoods where food must be accessed daily, but policing of restrictions was often harsh, with confusion about the rules and fear of the risks. In informal settlements the impacts of COVID-19 was experienced less as a health crisis and more in terms of its "devastating socioeconomic, political, and violent impacts" (Sverdlik et al., 2022). Kampala's urban settlements are the centre of political opposition to Museveni's NRM regime, and COVID-19 restrictions were manipulated to crack down on opposition neighbourhoods during the election campaign. Numerous media outlets as well as Human Rights Watch (2021) reported on the rise of violence, mostly carried out by police but also vigilante groups. Gender based violence also increased during this period.

Social protection in Uganda is limited. A major initiative involving two targeted cash transfers (the Senior Citizens Grant (SNG) and the Vulnerable Family Grant (VNG)) was piloted between 2010 and 2014, and VNG was to be scaled up in 2020. This plan was abandoned with the outbreak of COVID-19, and it is unlikely this initiative will be restarted. Uganda has suspended spending in multiple areas that were donor supported, following the funding freeze by the World Bank in protest to the passing of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act. However, during the pandemic lockdowns, when food prices and unemployment soared and many food retail locations were closed or open on very restricted schedules, steps were taken to provide food to vulnerable populations nation-wide, including in Kampala.

Food was distributed in informal settlements, and in designated areas for registered refugee households. Both the lockdown measures and the food distribution have been widely criticized as politically motivated, during a presidential election year (Macdonald and Owor, 2020; Bukenya et al., 2022) and poorly managed, but this food distribution was necessary for the survival of many. One interview respondent stated she had better food security during the

pandemic when social protection measures were in place, because her business selling bananas was now gone and she was in too much debt to restart it. Others were unable to access rations because they were unable to line up at the designated times or because they did not have cooking facilities for beans or posho, but were reliant on purchasing prepared food. In the second set of COVID-19 restrictions, cash transfers were provided rather than food, which addressed some of these concerns, but distribution remained problematic, and was widely seen as influenced by political favouritism and being diverted from those most in preference of politically connected households (Sverdlik et al,, 2022).

Community-based organizations struggled with COVID-restrictions as well, as many of their programs were halted. These organizations were crucial during this time, especially those with capacity to provide some food to members. In collaboration with KCCA, the NGO WaterAid installed 75 handwashing stations. KCCA also suspended requirements for trading licenses for informal businesses, and the National Government suspended tax collection. Food delivery from NGOs supplemented that from the government, and by many accounts was better organized and more impactful for refugees and other vulnerable groups.

Settlement Upgrading

Urban planning falls under the mandates of several ministries, where competition rather than collaboration is the norm (Bukenya and Muhumuza, 2017). Often key decisions and actions come directly from the President's Office, circumventing relevant ministries entirely. The key ministries involved with the GKMA's informal settlements are the OPM, the Ministry for Lands Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), the KCCA, and the Ministry of Local Government. A lack of action, and of clarity around where urban planning responsibility, leadership, and resource control should lie, is a source of frustration for many government employees and for NGO actors who interact with them. One key example is the Uganda National Urban Plan (UNUP), due for renewal but stalled amid disagreement around which Ministry should be tasked with taking the lead on updating it. The now expired 2017 UNUP had few of its recommendations implemented and did not include funding responsibility or timelines. The UNUP, like many of Uganda's national policy documents, recognizes important issues and makes a commitment to participatory responses, but is largely aspirational and does not include specific actions or timelines to achieve goals.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda was partnering with Slum Dwellers International (SDI) to identify priority areas in informal settlements and invest in targeted community led upgrading efforts. SDI has also helped organize settlement residents, through their affiliate organization AcTogether and the formation of Urban Councils, participate in upgrading projects and to advocate for tenancy rights. Many of the homes in both areas leak and are prone to flooding. One forced migrant interviewed had been evicted, and a neighbour was allowing her two children to sleep in her house. However, during the day she and her two children

were staying in an abandoned structure with a dirt floor and a partial roof, infested with fleas and mosquitos. She had no furniture, not even a bed mat, or cooking facilities and her family was reliant on charity for food. For families such as this, local NGOs are essential for survival. After the COVID-19 outbreak, MLHUD issued a moratorium on evictions, which included eviction orders. However, this was poorly enforced and several of those interviewed for this study had been evicted during the pandemic and remained unhoused. Refugees are particularly vulnerable to evictions if they are not registered. This moratorium has been lifted, and not only are settlement residents vulnerable to evictions from landlords but also to destruction of large, occupied areas with little advance notice.

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) are crucial for overall health and food security, and deficits here are widespread in Kampala's informal settlements. There have been major investments in water access over the past decade, and in both settlements visited for this study water was readily available from nearby standpipes and all migrants interviewed stated they had no problems accessing water as needed. However, settlement residents did not have access to toilets, as limited paid units installed were rarely used due to their cost. The health risks in Namuwongo are particularly severe. The settlement runs between a railway line and the Nakivubo channel; this drainage channel serves as the main disposal area for human and other waste.

The collaborative work being done by SDI in Uganda is impressive, but the magnitude of the need is immense. SDI, working with KCCA, has added targeted programing specifically for refugees, for example involving language and skills training for newcomers. Success collaborating with government is mixed, and one refugee-led organization interviewed has stopped attending participatory workshops they see as purely performative and a waste of donor money, which could be better spent supporting grassroots initiatives rather than providing lunch for discussions that do not result in meaningful action.

Challenges, Gaps, and Recommendations

The primary barrier to effectively meeting the needs of refugees in Uganda is resources. International organizations, donors, and government actors are all struggling to meet commitments and goals, and the numbers of refugees have grown beyond the capacity of available resources. There are important gaps relating to which groups and which areas of need are supported, despite widespread awareness of the growing population of vulnerable and food insecure forced migrants in the city. While these gaps in part result from inadequate funds to support policy development and programming, there are spaces where responses could be improved, involving identifying vulnerable populations, recognition of urban food security as an area in need of urgent policy response, clearer political responsibility for policy implementation, measures to reduce corruption, and stronger stakeholder coordination and collaboration.

The current registration system is not effective. The OPM has the power to streamline this process, removing steps and bureaucracy and making it easier for asylum seekers to navigate. Many forced migrants settle in cities other than Kampala. They are already accessing health and education services; allowing them to register and self-settle in more areas would take some pressure off border reception areas and the Kampala office. Additional registration locations, in informal settlements where asylum seekers live and work and have connections with local organizations, could help move through the backlog of cases and appeals. The costs of this would be offset by the benefits of having better data on populations, which would help planning for all governance actors, including the global donor community. SDI's existing practices of community-led settlement mapping and enumerations could assist in identifying where forced migrants are living, and what specific challenges they face. Decentralizing control of this, with fewer and clearer rules, might address some of the irregularities associated with corruption.

Understanding that urban food security is distinct from rural food production is gaining traction globally (Haysom and Battersby, 2023). Municipal governments are well situated to take the initiative on this policy area, and recognition of the challenges urban populations face in accessing sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food would improve a range of policy interventions, including those related to slum upgrading, WASH, and regulating the informal sector. Kampala has a policy framework for urban agriculture, but control and employment in this sector is dominated by middle class Ugandans. Targeted cash transfers have been shown to directly improve food security, particularly for refugee populations, and the government should prioritize the resumption of the VNG, as was planned before COVID-19.

In all of Uganda's recent guiding policy documents, there is clear attention to the growing refugee population. Similarly, many community-based organizations are creating programs and supports to include or target this group. The steps between understanding that there is a problem and setting specific goals and initiatives, with timelines and funding plans, still need to be taken. There must be clear political responsibility associated with targets. Stronger stakeholder coordination and collaboration – between ministries, levels of government, and with NGO partners – is needed to do this effectively. While some NGOs have rightly expressed frustration at the cost of meetings to allow for participatory input, this is a necessary process and is achievable if the OPM and KCCA were genuinely open to changing entrenched top-down practices.

Conclusion

Uganda's approach to refugee settlement is a model for extending rights and opportunities to forced migrants in ways that recognize they may not be able to return to their homes and can contribute to Uganda, economically and culturally. Uganda's open borders have been crucial for the survival of thousands of people for decades and are rightly

seen as a source of national pride. Under-resourcing and growing numbers are threatening this approach, and there are real risks it will be abandoned, borders closed, or that xenophobic sentiments will grow, resulting in the kinds of violence seen in some other African nations with large migrant populations.

Renewed support from the international community for this humanitarian crisis is desperately needed. Immediate steps to improve conditions internally include overhauling the registration system to make it more efficient and accessible, explicit attention to urban food security and strategies to address it, and greater policy actor coordination, particularly connected to collaborative strategies to move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines.

Endnote

1   Two research assistants, Derrick Kirabo and Irene Nantalaga, translated during the interviews with migrants and refugees. Peter Kasaija assisted in planning and moderating the stakeholder workshop.

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