Refugee Protection and Food Security in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

This study reviews the governance of Kampala's food system and refugee protection approach in order to propose strategies to recognize and protect the food security needs of Kampala's refugee population more effectively. 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. 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 uses a governance lens to explore what is being done to support the food security of this group, by whom, and how this could be improved. The researcher conducted interviews with asylum seekers and refugees living in two of Kampala's large informal settlements (Kisenyi II and Namuwongo) and with a range of policy stakeholders during May 2023. Multiple levels of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offer overlapping formal and informal services and programs accessible to different populations living in settlements. This paper points to gaps and limitations linked to resources, as well as difficulties identifying vulnerable populations, locating political responsibility, coordination, and weak policy implementation, and suggests governance strategies to respond better to refugee and asylum seekers' 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 that move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines to address it.

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

INTRODUCTION

Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa with an estimated 1.6 million refugees and asylum seekers (UN-Habitat, 2023). This number has tripled in the last decade and actual numbers are certainly much higher. 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, as well as rights to live

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and work in designated areas. Refugees are not recognized legally if they live in cities other than Kampala, which has become the central destination outside of camps. There are an estimated 137,000 refugees living in Kampala (UNHCR, 2024).

Like many low-income countries, Uganda is experiencing "urbanization without industrialization" (Gollin et al., 2016: 38), accompanied by growing inequality. Poverty is straining resources and services with few avenues for citizens or migrants to advance economically. In informal settlements migrants are disproportionately exposed to a cycle of risks and vulnerabilities: homelessness, illness, violence, poor-quality water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and unemployment. All of these contribute to food insecurity, which in turn reinforces the other vulnerabilities (Frayne et al., 2010). Conditions have worsened as the result of underfunding, rising numbers of urban poor, and pandemic-related factors. Uganda's COVID-19 response was among the most restrictive in the world (Datzberger et al., 2022; Khisa and Rwengabo, 2023), and the economic and social burdens of this fell most heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable residents, leading to heightened food insecurity (Atamanov et al., 2022).

Based on interviews with policy stakeholders, 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 addressed better through reformed policy, stakeholder coordination, and more focused attention to recognizing and protecting urban food security. After an overview of research methods, followed by a literature review, this analysis turns to a discussion of government and non-governmental organization- (NGO) led governance responses, including those linked to local governance and COVID-19 responses. It concludes by pointing to challenges and gaps and proposing recommendations.

Multiple levels of government and NGO-sector actors offer overlapping formal and informal services and programs accessible to different populations living in urban settlements. Despite these numerous governance strategies in place, gaps and limitations linked to resources, difficulties in identifying vulnerable populations, coordination, locating political responsibility, and weak policy implementation limit effectiveness. This research study suggests several governance strategies to respond more effectively to refugee and asylum seekers' food security needs. These responses include an overhaul of the refugee registration system, targeted policy to recognize and protect urban food security, and improved policy actor coordination through collaborative strategies that move beyond awareness of the crisis to setting specific targets and timelines to address it.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study seeks to understand current efforts to recognize and protect the food security needs of Kampala's international forced migrant population and propose ways of improvement. It employed a qualitative research design, which included several tools to gather insights from experienced stakeholders through an intentional

strategy of co-productive and community-engaged research. These tools included a stakeholder workshop, Qualtrics (an online survey tool) surveys, and in-person interviews. In addition, the researcher undertook a review of the relevant literature, including legislation and policy documents from government and non-governmental governance stakeholders prior to conducting fieldwork in Kampala. The literature used in this study is accessible in a document shared with interested stakeholders who participated in this study and who also have the authority to add to this document.

A stakeholder research workshop with 11 participants was held at Makerere University on 15 May 2023. This brought together three groups: academic researchers, government representatives from national, local, and municipal offices, and NGO leaders. All these individuals are directly engaged with research, policy and advocacy related to asylum-seeker and refugee settlement in Kampala. 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 support 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 (in particular, the interview questions for migrants), offered inputs, and made suggestions of additional stakeholders to survey or interview. All participants were later provided with a report summarizing the central points, conclusions, and key questions that emerged at this workshop, and were encouraged to add additional information to the document. The researcher shared details of how interested participants could collaborate in research outputs and future projects. This workshop was facilitated and organized with the support of Peter Kasaija, a PhD candidate at Makerere University. He also assisted with setting up many of the stakeholder interviews and hiring two additional research assistants (Derrick Kirabo and Irene Nantalaga), who translated during migrant interviews.

The researcher disseminated a Qualtrics survey to individuals in academic, policy, donor, and NGO positions connected with the governance and policies related to food security and migrant populations in Kampala and received 20 responses. The survey asked respondents for details, assessments of, and priorities relating to (1) their insights of the programs and support mechanisms available to migrants living in Kampala; (2) their views of the main barriers faced by migrants for attaining food security; and (3) their suggestions for improving migrant populations' food security.

The research team held 15 policy stakeholder interviews of approximately one hour each with individuals or small groups from the same office or organization. These participants work in government (local or national) or with NGOs in positions related directly to forced migrant populations, food security, and urban settlement governance. Interviews expanded on the same topics as the surveys, seeking to understand the existing – as well as the required – strategies, programs and support mechanisms available to food insecure migrant populations in Kampala. Three interviews were held on Zoom rather than in person because of scheduling difficulties. The researcher later shared draft transcripts of interviews with participants, who

had the opportunity to edit the content, where necessary. Four of the participants in the stakeholder interviews are refugees themselves, employed by NGOs supporting refugee populations in Kampala.

An additional set of interviews took place with migrants living in Kampala. The research team conducted these open-ended semi-structured interviews with 11 migrants living in two of the largest informal settlements, Kisenyi II and Namuwongo. A social worker from the NGO, Slum Aid Project facilitated five interviews in Kisenyi II, while a social worker from the local NGO, Hands for Hope Uganda facilitated the remaining six in Namuwongo; two Ugandan research assistants aided in translation during interviews. Interview questions focused on when and why migrants came to Kampala and their experiences with accessing adequate nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and knowledge of and access to different government and non-governmental services and support. Six of the 11 migrants interviewed were international forced migrants, although only two had registered officially as refugees.

The researcher selected this research design to meet specific goals. While there is extensive literature detailing the formal governance – legislation and programs provided by the government, donors, and NGO partners – related to refugee protection in Uganda, there is a dearth of studies focused on food security. In this study, discussions, surveys, and interviews with stakeholders involved directly in the research topic – including migrants themselves – provided a deeper understanding of governance priorities and effectiveness, and an opportunity to emphasize the centrality of food security to urban governance actors. Migrant interviews were central for learning about the lived experiences and priorities of the group this research seeks to support. The initial workshop, the shared documents (interview transcripts, workshop report, and scoping literature), and the invitations to co-author research outputs were motivated by a desire for inputs from those intimately familiar with the practice of governance in this area of research. Additionally, there was keen interest to expand research collaboration opportunities within, between, and outside existing academic, government, and NGO networks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review serves to identify the value of adopting a governance lens for this case study and also to review existing research on and to contextualize the importance of the governance of urban food security and Uganda's refugee protection approach.

Governance

This research poses three governance-related questions: What is being done to support food security for refugees in Kampala? Who supports this endeavor? How can it be improved? The COVID-19 pandemic worsened food security for low-income

residents of Kampala, but especially for refugees and asylum seekers (Atamanov et al., 2022; Squarcina, 2023), rendering this research focus even more pressing.

This study used a governance approach to identify formal and informal processes by which government and non-governmental entities act. This approach was adopted because "understanding actual urban governance processes, which are essentially about how different actors interact to make and operationalize decisions, is vitally important" (Smit, 2018). Governance is the practice of governing, whether by the government or other formal and informal institutions and actors (Rhodes, 2007). These actors include stakeholders not directly connected to any government institutions, for example, global governance actors (such as the United Nations, World Bank, and bilateral donors) and NGOs (Boas, 1998). Governance facets include efficiency, authority, accountability, networks, process and outcomes, all of which can be assessed independently.

Governance operates with coordinated, autonomous, and sometimes competing actors and institutions working in networks characterized by power imbalances and is thus inherently political, rather than simply technical (Rakodi, 2001). Different levels and networks of governance interact formally and informally, mediated by structural factors such as entrenched norms and behaviors. A focus on how governance actors can partner, cooperate, and share mutual learning opens possibilities for more effective governance, particularly when resources are limited. A governance approach is also attuned to how political barriers can restrict effective governance and inclusive outcomes.

The expanded use of a governance approach has led to specific types of governance analyses, for example, health governance (Dodgson et al., 2009), environmental governance (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006), and food governance (Candel, 2014). Governance decisions and practices have a direct impact on refugees' access to rights, services, and food in Kampala, and this study considers the intersection of urban food governance and refugee protection governance, with particular attention to policy, programming, coordination, and outcomes.

Urban food security

In Africa, food insecurity in urban settings is largely an issue of access (Maxwell, 1996; Frayne et al., 2010; Hemerijckx et al., 2022). The most immediate contributor to food insecurity in urban informal settlements is poverty, as food must be purchased regularly and predicably on the open market (Smit, 2016). Food is the biggest expenditure for the poor (World Bank, 2022), and informal food markets are essential for both employment and food access for the city's most vulnerable (Glatzel, 2017). Urban food system governance – relating to food retail, food production, and food safety – has a direct impact on food security (Smit, 2016).

Urban food security is further dependent on a range of less direct and overlapping variables. Safe food preparation and retail are reliant on access to clean water and sanitary environments (Momberg et al., 2021). Conditions to enable

work, housing, credit, security, skills training, health care, and childcare are all essential for food security to be achieved, especially for women (Lokuruka, 2021; Dinku et al., 2023). A lack of access to familiar foods further contributes to food insecurity (Chikanda et al., 2020). In all these related areas, refugees face greater hurdles than citizens (WFP, 2020). In Africa, including 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 (Crush and Riley, 2017). However, during the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns, the sharp spike in food insecurity prompted some temporary social protection interventions to respond directly to urban hunger (D'Errico et al., 2024).

Neither Uganda in general nor Kampala in particular has a clear policy framework to address urban hunger. Food security is addressed through a productivist agricultural supply lens focused on availability (Brown, 2014). In line with this focus, there are policy provisions for urban agriculture (Merino et al., 2021). However, the impacts of urban agriculture for improving urban food security for the poor in African cities have been shown to be limited (Crush et al., 2011; White and Hamm, 2014; Frayne et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2020). Food systems governance thus primarily occurs indirectly, with many of the government's policy priorities informed by modernist urban planning biases (Lawhon et al., 2022), rather than the need to tackle urban hunger (Kamara and Renzaho, 2014), or to recognize the important contributions of informal retail (Young, 2018) and informal housing (McCordic and Frayne, 2017) to food security. NGOs play an important role advocating for and supporting Kampala's vulnerable food-insecure populations (Richmond et al., 2018; Kyohairwe and Karyeija, 2024), including asylum seekers (Larsson, 2022). This research seeks to integrate some of their contributions and insights into this governance analysis.

Uganda's refugee protection approach

Uganda's refugee approach has been viewed as a progressive model by many (The Economist, 2016; World Bank, 2016; UNDP, 2017), 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 been 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 (Mastrorillo et al., 2024). This progressive approach is a source of both national pride and regional leadership status (Betts, 2021). However, it is no longer achieving its goals, due to under-resourcing and the steep rise in numbers of asylum seekers (Betts, 2021; Grzeskowiak 2023; NRC, 2023).

Central to Uganda's approach is the promotion of refugee self-reliance, whether refugees are in rural camps or self-settled in Kampala. Where possible, refugees who are residents in one of Uganda's 28 designated rural settlements (the

preferred nomenclature to camps) are given a plot of land to cultivate, and they can also lease land and start businesses. Because in practice many refugees do not return to their countries of origin within months or even after a few years but stay for decades or generations (Kadigo and Maystadt, 2023), economic self-sufficiency benefits refugees, host communities, and funders. Ideally, self-reliance not only reduces support costs but contributes to economic growth. Goals of cultural assimilation are also part of this strategy (Kalu et al., 2021).

In practice, this is not straightforward, as land is not available in all locations, and what is available may not be arable (Grzeskowiak, 2023; REACH, 2023). Many encampments are provisional, basic, and without infrastructure (Grzeskowiak, 2023). While some refugees resort to farming or engage in small businesses, most are unemployed and dependent on support from the government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), NGOs, family, and friends (Addaney, 2016). As settlement populations have grown, and international funding has been slashed (UNHCR, 2022a), life has grown increasingly difficult, and conditions have been steadily worsening for the last decade, as the result of flooding, overcrowding, and severe underfunding (Mastrorillo et al., 2024). In 2023 the budget for Uganda's UNHCR programs 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 and thousands of children are severely undernourished (Guyson, 2024).

Self-settlement in Kampala is the alternative legal option, but this means waiving camp supports, including food rations. In Kampala refugees 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. One NGO leader interviewed in this study explained, "They can go hungry in the camps, or they can be hungry in Kampala, but here [in Kampala] they have more agency" (Interview on 18 May 2024, Kampala). Many new arrivals head directly for Kampala from the border, without stopping at reception centers (Dombio and Namara, 2024). Refugees from some locations, particularly the Horn of Africa but also from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), may have the economic assets and connections to thrive in Kampala, and there are many successful business enterprises that attest to this (Monteith and Lwasa, 2017). 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). This study reviews the challenges international forced migrants experience

in Kampala, with attention to the impacts of government and NGO governance practices linked to food insecurity.

GOVERNANCE RESPONSES

Different levels of government and the NGO sector provide overlapping formal and informal services and programs that are accessible to different populations living in informal settlements. This urban governance has an impact on food security because regular access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food is dependent on entitlements derived from secure access to income, housing, health, education, and credit (Frayne et al., 2010). Overlapping with government (national, local, and municipal) frameworks and services, NGOs operating in Kampala support refugee populations through a patchwork of supports linked to rights, information, legal protection, food provisions, vocational training, health care, credit, childcare, and education. Many of these NGOs target specific demographics that include refugees, such as youth or women, and others support refugees from specific countries of origin. Some collaboration exists among government and NGO actors, but despite official commitments to participatory practices, most planning was reported by both government and NGO participants in this study to be top-down. Few government or NGO policies, programs, or services specifically address or recognize food insecurity, but many are relevant to how the urban poor can consistently access safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant food in improved ways. A key recommendation of this study is that explicit recognition of urban food security needs would facilitate better coordination and targeting of related interventions.

Effective urban governance is hampered primarily by a lack of resources. Widespread and growing poverty means that there are multiple demands for scarce resources. Without exception, every academic-, government-, and NGO-affiliated participant involved in this research cited inadequate resourcing as the biggest barrier to responding effectively to refugee needs. This research study starts from an understanding that resource constraints are unlikely to change soon and that underfunding in refugee camps will continue to push refugees to Kampala, which also struggles to adequately provide essential services due to resource constraints.

The second most cited obstacle to effective government and NGO responses for refugee populations from research participants was a lack of usable data. Because refugees in Kampala are not eligible for any government support, they are largely indistinguishable from others in low-income urban settlements. Furthermore, many of Kampala's forced migrants and asylum seekers do not have identity documents and are not registered with any government office (Dawa, 2020). Policy stakeholders interviewed in this study indicated that while there are reasonably robust statistics on how many and what categories of migrants are in Kampala, there is scant accurate information on where they are, or how their needs differ from other urban residents. Furthermore, when data is available, it is quickly out of date due to the rapid urbanization underway.

One NGO, Slum Dwellers International (SDI), had plans to address this gap, in cooperation with Uganda's national government. In several informal settlements, SDI has coordinated with local communities on neighborhood slum profile mapping withs three sets of profiles in a growing number of Kampala's slums completed in 2003, 2011, and 2014 (SDI, 2022). Planned survey updates intend to collect data on country of origin as well as refugee status. At the time of this field research, however, leaders with SDI reported that the funding from the government to conduct this survey had been canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there was no certainty if or when it would resume. Rather than relying on periodic surveys and enumerations by different organizations and researchers (IOM, 2017; AGORA, 2018; Mixed Migration Centre, 2022), regular surveys as part of a government census or with collaboration with NGO partners experienced with this kind of data collection would ensure accurate data was available to multiple governance stakeholders to determine needs and facilitate support. Partnering with NGOs would lower costs and offer scope to build on baseline data to both measure policy impact and recognize need. More efficient and widespread registration of refugees would also improve data.

In addition to insufficient resources and accurate usable data, respondents in this research identified the additional governance challenges of political responsibility, weak policy implementation, uneven and informal service delivery coverage, and ineffective mechanisms to support coordination among stakeholders. These points are elaborated with examples related to the regulatory environment for refugee settlement and rights and local urban governance, and COVID-19 policies.

Refugee settlement

When asylum seekers arrive in Uganda, they are required to register. Despite a set of procedures in place, there are years-long backlogs (UNHCR, 2022a; Reliefweb, 2024) and significant irregularities in the processes (Titeca, 2022, 2023). 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 (Ahimbisibwe and Belloni, 2024).

The high numbers of claimants are an important factor in the slow processing, but the procedures in place are also cumbersome. 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 numerous reasons to explain the bottlenecks in the system and why many 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 (Rebuild, 2022; Titeca 2022; NRC, 2024). NGO leaders interviewed for this study, who work directly with forced migrants in Kampala, claim that most international forced migrants never register. This leaves them vulnerable to arrest, adding to their barriers accessing employment and services and limiting data available to policymakers and NGOs that could be used to comprehend and support their needs more effectively. Five of the migrants interviewed for this study were unregistered. Reasons given were that they could not afford the registration process, they were afraid they would be denied refugee status and forced to leave because they had waited too long, and that they did not understand the process.

Because so many forced migrants are unregistered, the government, the international community, and NGOs do not have accurate data to fully recognize, plan for, or respond to needs. This also creates variability and unpredictability for migrants regarding whether 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. A migrant from the DRC interviewed for this study has no documentation, having fled the DRC as a child out of fear of being recruited as a soldier. His children are similarly undocumented. Arrests of undocumented migrants are frequent and fear of this restricts income-generation options, and in particular mobility, especially at night. This same migrant told me that "I never leaves my shack after dark, even if I have not yet eaten and am hungry." (Interview with Victor Juba on 23 May 2023, Namuwongo).

Many of the NGOs that operate in Kampala's settlements 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 10 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.

An effective registration system would be one means to address the data gap impeding effective governance mechanisms to support vulnerable populations more effectively. Had this been in place during the COVID-19 lockdown, more migrants would have had access to food rations. While registration as a self-settled refugee does not entitle refugees to rights or benefits beyond what Ugandan nationals can access, it does facilitate greater accessibility to employment, education, health care, legal protection, and housing, all essential to food security.

Urban governance

The central government actors in the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area (GKMA) include the Ministry of Local Government, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD). Representatives from all of these entities participated in this research. The city's central area is managed by the KCCA, a national ministry. Within this area, there are five divisions, each with its own elected mayor and council. This research included interviews with forced migrants in Kisenyi 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. Elected local councils are responsible for implementing much of the nationally determined policy for all residents of informal settlements in Kampala, which increasingly include growing populations of refugees.

The KCCA is involved in many of the services related directly to living conditions in settlements, including WASH and zoning. In areas governed by the Ministry of Local Government, there is a need to cooperate with the KCCA for waste removal, electricity, and other services, and these arrangements are not formalized (Richmond et al., 2018), resulting in variable and uneven service provision. There are also formal and informal governance coordination practices with NGOs and local government. NGO leaders surveyed and interviewed for this study all agreed that they were obligated to report on and seek permission for their community activities and that it was expected that city representatives be invited to public outreach events. Some described this relationship as one of government surveillance, with the need to constantly inform them about burdensome activities, whereas others found the relationship more of a partnership, welcoming local government support. The group stakeholder discussion at the research workshop indicated that local government participation styles varied considerably and were dependent on individual office holders rather than formally institutionalized practices.

There is also variation in the impact and trust local leaders have in their communities. This was evident in the two districts studied in this research. On the two days spent in Kisenyi II, there was a visible presence of community development outreach workers. The social worker present during migrant interviews there noted that KCCA outreach provided wellness checks on children and was well established

and effective. In contrast, Namuwongo residents interviewed reported they had little to no contact with KCCA or local council members and were unaware of any outreach services in place. Public hospitals are near both districts and accessed by settlement residents; these were strongly and positively associated with the KCCA. Migrants interviewed, several with serious medical conditions, all noted that they go to the hospital when necessary and that they 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. One unhoused migrant from Rwanda, a mother to a 3-month old, said she went to the hospital regularly and her daughter had been delivered there. Both she and her daughter were ill with tuberculosis and were HIV positive and when they were very ill, they went to the hospital "hoping for treatment." (Interview with Becky on 24 May 2023, Namuwongo). Some community NGOs can provide medical consultations and treatment to a very limited number of vulnerable community members, but most illnesses among poor settlement residents go untreated. This was one strong example of the direct impacts of under-resourced government services.

In different districts, there are also variations in how strictly restrictions around informal vending are enforced. As noted, the informal food sector is crucial for food security, providing low-barrier employment opportunities and affordable nutritious food. In most areas where traffic is not obstructed, informal food venders are active, despite official restrictions and goals of formalizing the sector. With 60% of Kampala's residents living in informal settlements, there is widespread understanding that informal retail is necessary for survival. For example, many NGOs offer microcredit and skills training to targeted groups, such as women, youth, and 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 keeps informal retailers vulnerable to harassment, fines, and having wares confiscated. The official urban plans to eliminate this sector, with sporadic and unpredictable restrictions on it, have a negative impact on urban food security for all low-income urban residents. Migrants with uncertain legal status are particularly at risk, as the implications of arrest are more severe.

Respondents in this research commented favorably on 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 continued to do her job every morning and believed payments would resume "once the hardships of the pandemic had passed," despite it being more than a year since the lockdown.

Uganda's updated Local Government Development Planning Guidelines (RoU, 2020), 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, instead, for a centrally-led and resourced integrative approach, whereby refugee populations are planned for, in line with planning for other vulnerable people, but to date, there are no resource allocations, nor timeline or targets associated with these goals. The KCCA similarly recognizes the urgency of planning for refugees as well as citizen populations, but it is also at a preliminary stage of policy development: there is awareness of the need to plan, take some steps toward consultation, but without concrete proposals of how to do so. In 2018, KCCA worked with several NGOs to identify refugee needs in Kampala, and the most pressing need identified was food (AGORA, 2018), but there has not been follow up to respond to these findings.

A lack of action, and of clarity around where urban planning responsibility, leadership, and resource control should lie, are sources 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 (raised in interviews with representatives from KCCA, MLHUD, and OPM). The now-expired 2017 UNUP had few of its recommendations implemented and did not include funding responsibility or timelines.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda was partnering with 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, to 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 neighbor allowed her two children to sleep in her house. However, during the day she and her two children stayed in an abandoned structure with a dirt floor and a partial roof, infested with fleas and mosquitoes. 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 these, local NGOs are essential for survival. After the COVID-19 outbreak, MLHUD issued a temporary moratorium on evictions. This was poorly enforced, however, 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.

Water, sanitation, and hygiene 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. Settlement

residents did not have access to toilets, however, 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. Victor, a migrant from the DRC, has his shack next to the channel and reported that he and his family routinely dump their waste there, although he pays for the public toilets about once a week, adding, "If you don't eat much, that's as often as you need to go." (Interview with Victor Juba on 23 May 2023, Namuwongo).

There is considerable collaborative work already taking place among NGOs and with government actors in Uganda. Success collaborating with government is mixed. For example, one refugee-led organization interviewed has stopped attending participatory workshops they see as purely performative and a waste of donor money, which could instead be spent supporting grassroots initiatives rather than providing lunch for discussions that do not result in meaningful action. As one NGO leader remarked, "Why is it necessary to have a meeting at the Hilton? Why not come to our compound here, with some tents, and save some money … We need to meet, but not to just gather for good food. This money could change someone's life." (Interview on 19 May 2023 (name withheld)). Recurrent themes in interviews and survey data with both government actors and NGO leaders were that effective governance was hampered by unclear political jurisdiction and responsibility, weak policy implementation, uneven and informal service delivery coverage, and ineffective mechanisms for coordination and genuine partnership among stakeholders.

COVID-19 responses

Uganda had one of the world's most restrictive lockdown responses during the pandemic, and this accelerated and deepened poverty and food insecurity for the urban poor, and for refugees in particular (Ahmed et al., 2023). Uganda's government response was complicated by the 2020 national election, where opposition was centered in urban settlements. There was a mixed governance response of restrictions, at times enforced with violence, with some new measures to alleviate hardships also introduced. For example, KCCA temporarily suspended requirements for trading licenses for informal businesses, and the national government suspended tax collection. Steps taken over a two-year period included a 30-day night curfew from 7:00 p.m. to 5:30 a.m., 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 affected negatively (Kasiime et al., 2021). Disrupted and blocked supply chains from rural and international production areas increased food shortages and spoilage, resulting in high consumer prices (Rauschendorfer and Spray, 2020). Restrictions on mobility and operating hours of markets were devastating for both income generation and

consumer access. The food retail sector was highly impacted by the 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 (Metelerkamp, 2023). Refugees working with cross-border trade networks, most often connected to food, also lost their livelihoods due to COVID-19 border closures (Moyo et al., 2021). Compared to Ugandans, refugees were far more challenged to access food during the pandemic (Atamanov et al., 2021; Squarcina, 2023).

During the 61-day transit ban, which overlapped with the night curfew, fresh food vendors had to sleep in the marketplaces, something that is not an option for women with children. Many in the food industry lost employment with the closure of restaurants, cafés, 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 had a negative impact on health, particularly for women and children (Musoke et al., 2023) as well as refugee populations. The UNHCR found that in February 2021, 64% of refugees were food insecure, compared with 9% of Ugandans (Atamanov et al., 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 were not possible in overcrowded neighborhoods 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 were experienced less as a health crisis and more in terms of its "devastating socioeconomic, political, and violent impacts" (Sverdlik et al., 2022: 4). Numerous media outlets as well as Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2021) reported on the rise of violence, mostly carried out by police but also vigilante groups. Gender-based violence also increased during this period (Bukuluki et al., 2023).

At the same time, 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 nationwide, including in Kampala. Food was distributed in informal settlements and in designated areas for registered refugee households. Although this food distribution has been widely criticized as politically motivated – especially during a presidential election year (Macdonald and Owor, 2020; Bukenya et al., 2022) – and poorly managed, it was necessary for the survival of many. One interview respondent stated she had better food security during the pandemic when these social protection measures were in place, because her business selling bananas had closed down and she was in too much debt to restart it. Other migrants interviewed 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, and thus were reliant on

purchasing prepared food. During 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 favoritism and being diverted from those most in preference of politically connected households (Sverdlik et al., 2022).

Community-based organizations struggled with COVID-19 restrictions as well, because many of their programs were halted. All the NGOs that participated in this research had to suspend or severely curtail their activities. Those organizations who were able to continue operations during this time were crucial, especially those with capacity to provide some food to members. NGO leaders reported that they continued their activities without government authority, taking steps to conceal their operations. Some 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 (Nathan and Benon, 2024).

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. 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. An easy and affordable outcome of a clear municipal food policy would be recognition of and support for informal food retail, eliminating the vulnerability food retailers currently experience.

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 forms of support 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 – are 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 they 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 will be 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. However, there are governance actions that can be improved immediately. These include overhauling the registration system to make it more efficient and accessible, explicit attention to urban food security together with 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.

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