

Vulnerability, resilience, and integration of elderly South Sudanese refugees in Uganda: A case study of Pagirinya settlement in Adjumani district



Lessons

Lesson 1: The availability of social services tailored towards the needs of the elderly refugees make them resilient and less vulnerable and positively influence their interest to integrate in the host community.

Lesson 2: Intra-elderly refugee interactions in sharing and providing company to each other help them to cope well with social and economic life in the camp and reduces their susceptibility to vulnerability.

Lesson 3: Limited information flow concerning humanitarian projects remain an issue that needs to be addressed for a more transparent delivery of humanitarian projects in camps and settlements. Elderly refugees are more affected due to difficulty in movements which affects their interactions with the wider refugee community.

Lesson 4: The major challenge to the success of humanitarian services is lack of funding.

Background of the Research Project

This policy brief is based on the research project financed as part of a grant from the Flemish Interuniversity council (VLIR-UOS) under the broad theme: “Making Refugee Integration Sustainable: In Search of Durable Relations with Host Populations In Uganda”. This is a collaborative research project between the Department of Planning and Governance, Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), Uganda and the Institute of Development Policy (IOB), University of Antwerp, Belgium. Researchers involved in the project conducted research under different topics that fall within the wider research theme that aimed to establish a durable relationship between hosts and refugees as essential ingredient to guarantee the social and political stability of countries and regions hosting refugees. It is well-known that Uganda is the highest refugee hosting country in Africa and one of the largest refugee hosting countries globally, hosting about 1,722,378 refugees by 31st July 2024 (Office of the Prime Minister [OPM] & UNHCR 2024). The project envisions making a contribution that will help in better understanding and facilitation of policy interventions that can ameliorate social relations between hosts and refugees, and the findings are translated to policy makers through participation in different policy platforms. Therefore, this particular policy brief aims to bring to light the conditions of one of the neglected groups of

refugees - elderly refugees. It analyses the vulnerability of elderly refugees and identifies areas of resilience and opportunities for integrating them in the host societies.

About the Study

The fieldwork took place in Pagirinya Refugee Settlement in Adjumani district in Northern Uganda. It focused on refugee elders and leaders of Pagirinya Settlement with administrative units structured into blocks and clusters. We conducted individual interviews with Assistant Settlement Commandant and Block leaders; personal interview with Refugee Welfare Council II; Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with all the cluster leaders and selected refugee women and men. We also personally interviewed 50 elderly refugees (25 women and 25 men) who answered questions on issues of integration, including the obstacles and opportunities, refugee-host relations, protection and assistance. We further interfaced with the available Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) who were working with refugees in Pagirinya Settlement; they were Lutheran World Federation (LWF) - the implementing partner of UNHCR in Pagirinya settlement - and Medical Teams International (MTI) which was in charge of providing healthcare to refugees. There were also respondents from the host community that included three local chairpersons of villages surrounding Pagirinya settlement, and the chairperson of Dzaipi sub-county where Pagirinya settlement is located. These leaders from host communities assisted us in understanding refugee-host relations and refugee integration. The fieldwork took place between 15th September to 5th October 2020, and 4th April to 25th April 2022. In total, 144 respondents participated in this research.

Project activities in Pagirinya Settlement

There are NGOs providing different services to refugees in Pagirinya Settlement. They include among others, War Child, Tutapona, Terror, Lutheran World Federation (LWF) which is UNHCR implementing partner in the settlement. Besides NGOs, Rehope programme that benefit both the refugees and the host communities is also available. These organizations offer various services to refugees generally, but with tailored services to Persons with Special Needs (PSNs), including elderly refugees. The common activities that elderly refugees benefitted from were counselling, semi-permanent houses for PSNs, latrine construction for PSNs, conditional and unconditional cash grants provided directly to PSNs or to their caretakers.

The major challenge to the success of humanitarian services is lack of funding. According to our respondents, some do the needs assessment and never come back to provide the promised services, which was noted to be very frustrating to the elderly. It also makes subsequent mobilization in case of other projects, very difficult. The failure to return after the assessment, it is suggested, is due to failure to secure funding. For example, LWF's staff mentioned in our interviews that the UNHCR livelihood programs were no longer available due to reduced funding.

The other challenge registered was lack of information to the elders. It was mentioned by refugees that those who have information do not share it widely; they mainly share it with close relatives and friends. For example, a respondent highlighted lack of transparency in the dissemination of information by some leaders: "there is lack



of transparency in giving the information. Some people receive information and do not pass it on to everybody; they pass the information to their close relatives" (FGD with Cluster Leaders of Block F on 24/09/2020). Elders are affected more by this lack of information due to their physical weakness, which affect their interactions and movements.

We further established that apart from emergency assistance that are provided to all refugees and some particularly to PSNs, humanitarian organizations pay more attention to the long-term integration needs of minors than older refugees. There are established children centers within the settlement, community schools, some have scholarships, but very little attention is paid to specific activities for integration of the elderly refugees. In the case of Pagirinya Settlement, the idea of engaging elders in handicrafts was momentarily introduced, but it stopped, despite it being engaging to the elderly refugees. However, it was suggested during fieldwork that innovative projects specifically tailored towards elderly refugees could greatly help in their integration in the host society.

Key findings

Vulnerabilities of elderly refugees are greatly manifested in their health conditions: physical and emotional conditions, dietary habits, coping means, and living conditions.

Vulnerability of elderly refugees

Vulnerable groups such as women and children are usually prioritized in a crisis, yet elderly persons are usually neglected despite being categorized as vulnerable by humanitarian agencies (Lupieri 2022). Vulnerability of older people and particularly older refugees stem from practices and approaches that neither take into consideration the potential of the elderly nor integrate their needs and put them

in vulnerable situations. These vulnerabilities further emanate from shortage of opportunities, services and exclusion of the elderly (HelpAge International nd:2).

Whereas most challenges faced by elderly refugees are also faced by other refugees, for example 'water storage, collection of firewood and limited opportunities for livelihoods, the implications of these challenges can be much greater for older men and women, due to age-related vulnerabilities' (HelpAge International nd:2). Older people in migration situations face the danger of being neglected, which can prolong vulnerabilities and inequalities (Migration Data Portal 2022).

The high frequency of depression among the elderly refugees is arguably because of mental attachment to their country of origin, loss of social support and social status in the refugee community and having no hope for future prospects, on top of other stressors like poverty, improper housing, inadequate food and family split up (Burton and Breen 2002 & Abdalla and Musa 2010). Additionally, older refugees face difficulty in accessing existing health services because of physical barriers such as non-age-friendly healthcare establishments, and nonphysical barrier such as negative attitude towards elderly refugees, with their wellbeing less prioritized unlike their younger counterparts (Hutton 2008 & International Centre for Evidence in Disability and HelpAge International 2018).

Older people's vulnerabilities are further compounded by the physical and attitudinal barriers which negatively affect the wellbeing of elderly refugees, and these are connected to ageism - discrimination and stereotype against old people because they are old - and compound the hard situation of elderly refugees as it causes social exclusion and lack of participation of elderly refugees (World Health Organization 2021).

Resilience of elderly refugees/opportunities for integration



Resilience is 'the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors' (Richardson 2002:308, cited in Kiteki 2016:7), and it is 'a

dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma' (Luthar & Cicchetti 2000:858, cited in Kiteki 2016:7). In the case of this brief, resilience is used as the ability of elderly refugees to recover from the damage/vulnerabilities experienced as a result of displacement.

Social support is one of the principal sources of resilience among

UNHCR		OFM		LWF alliance	
PROJECT	Construction of Pagirinya Community Centre- Adjumani District				
FACILITIES CONSTRUCTED	1 Block of community centre . 1 block of distribution centre 10stances of latrines and chainlink fencing of the holding centre				
IMPLEMENTED BY	THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION (LWF) Department for World Service- Uganda Program				
FUNDED BY	THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)				
2016					

African refugees generally, and positively helps them to adapt to life in the displacement. This can be from the immediate and extended family members and the wider refugee communities, who provide emotional and material support (Weine et al. 2014) and connections. Our primary finding in Pagirinya settlement shows that intra-elderly refugee interactions in sharing and providing company to each other help them to cope well with social and economic life in the camp and reduces their susceptibility to vulnerability. Apart from providing the necessary social company, visiting each other, drinking, and passing time, chatting and laughing together; they also share basic frequent goods like salt, maize flour when a neighbor is lacking, or even food. For those without family members especially the feeble, some neighbors volunteer to help them with house chores, including fetching water, collecting firewood, harvesting crops, among others.

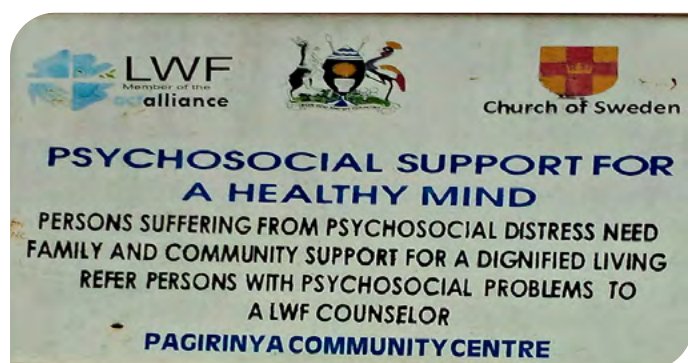
Apart from refugee-to-refugee sharing elderly refugees, as part of the PSNs, are assisted by humanitarian organizations. These tailored assistances make them resilient and less vulnerable as they are built semi-permanent residential houses and latrines in the refugee settlement, are provided with conditional and unconditional cash grants, and are distributed non-food items such as blankets and containers for fetching and keeping water. The availability of social services tailored towards the needs of the elderly refugees make them resilient and less vulnerable and positively influence their interest to integrate in the host community as represented in this extract: as long as others are staying and UN is still supporting us, I will stay...' (Interview with an elderly woman on 21/09/2020).

In terms of integration, our research in Pagirinya settlement found that social gatherings within the settlement were avenues where refugees, including the elderly, had opportunity to refresh their minds and integrate. These gatherings include religious gatherings in places of worship such as churches and mosques, and cultural events where older people actively participate in more than the younger refugees. Our respondents revealed that some elderly refugees were religious leaders such as Pastors and Catechists. Some needs of these elderly religious leaders are met by their congregations in form of small financial assistance, housework, among others. Some refugees also receive psychological support

from places of worship, as an elderly Pastor of African Inland Church (AIC) located in the settlement stated that church members including younger and older refugees seek counseling from church leaders, implying that places of worship are sources of solace for the followers which make them less vulnerable to stress and depression. Places of worship are thus sources and avenues for care and integration for both younger and elderly refugees, as they receive counseling from religious leaders and make friendship with other refugees and some members of the host communities who come to pray in the settlement.

Besides places of worship, older refugees who double as the vanguards of culture, actively participate in cultural events organized within the settlement. This helps them to remain physically active and it is a source of solace to some as they actively participate or watch participants sing and dance. Research participants stated that cultural dances were normally performed when humanitarian officials were coming over to the settlement for visits. In an interview with LWF official, the importance of cultural events such as cultural dances were underscored. Before COVID lock down, LWF used to organize cultural gala where refugees from different settlements participated, and the winning groups were given prizes. Citizens from the surrounding villages also go and watch cultural gala in the settlement, therefore, it is important for these social gatherings (religious and cultural) in the settlements to be encouraged and organized as a way of socializing and integrating with the citizens and alleviating psychological pain as refugees participate or watch.

In terms of leadership potential and opportunity for integrating elderly refugees, our research found that both older and younger refugees occupy leadership positions in the settlement. Moreover, the younger leaders sometimes seek advice from the older people, as stated in an interview: “even the leaders here sometimes get advice from these elderly people. They say these are their cultural leaders, so they listen to them” (Interview with Leaders of Block D on 17/09/2020). The younger refugees still respect their elders – some of whom are formally educated – and value their wisdom especially in leadership and dispute resolution. The active occupation of leadership roles by the elderly refugees is important and provides an opportunity for their integration with the host



communities, as refugee leaders occasionally meet with leaders of the host communities and discuss issues of refugee-host relations and mutual benefits. In these regular meetings, both young and older refugees regularly interact with their counterparts in the host

communities and, in the long run, get acquainted with each other, trade and gradually blend into each other's communities and live harmoniously. Therefore, despite the vulnerabilities that older refugees have, it is important to acknowledge that older refugees are not homogeneous and are not uniformly vulnerable (Strong et al. 2015); elderly refugees have the ability to develop resilience, cope, thrive and live normally in the host environments. Therefore, when researching elderly displaced populations and their vulnerability, it is important to consider their 'capacity for resilience, community contributions, and protective coping strategies' (Böcker and Hunter 2022:16) and ultimately potential to integrate in the host society.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the vulnerability of elderly refugees, while concurrently attempting to identify opportunities for resilience and their integration in the host societies. Our research finds that elderly refugees in Pagirinya Settlement are vulnerable but the prevailing conditions in the settlements help them to curtail vulnerabilities, develop resilience and integrate. It can thus be concluded that providing elderly refugees with the right socio-economic support helps them to build resilience, curb vulnerabilities, and live a reasonably decent life and integrate in the host communities.

Recommendation 1: Elderly refugees should not be neglected, but their needs should be mainstreamed in the humanitarian programs and assistance. The availability of social services tailored towards the needs of the elderly refugees make them less vulnerable, less dependent, more resilient and positively influence their interest to integrate in the host community.

Recommendation 2: It is important for the social gatherings (religious and cultural) in the settlements to be encouraged and organized in the refugee settlements as a way of socializing and integrating with the citizens and alleviating psychological pain as refugees participate or watch.

Recommendation 3: Despite the vulnerabilities of older refugees, it is important to acknowledge that older refugees are not homogeneous and are not uniformly vulnerable. Older refugees have the ability to develop resilience, cope, thrive and live normally in the host environments. Therefore, it is important to consider their 'capacity for resilience, community contributions, and protective coping strategies' (Böcker and Hunter 2022:16) and appoint/elect them into refugee leadership to help them build resilience and integrate in the host society.

Recommendation 4: Needs assessments are a vital starting point in making sure elderly persons are included in humanitarian efforts. In the absence of meaningful needs assessments and getting firsthand knowledge on the conditions of displaced elderly persons, it is impossible to design appropriate and sufficient interventions. Assessments entail knowing the number of elderly persons, their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic and employment standing, their living conditions (MacDonald, 2002) and their health status.

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