



# REPORT ON THE REFUGEE ENGAGEMENT FORUM (REF) AND DISTRICT ENGAGEMENT FORUM (DEF) INTERFACE.



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**2024**

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## **Background of the REF-DEF Interface:**

The District Engagement Forum (DEF) and the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) have played pivotal roles in fostering dialogue and addressing concerns arising from the refugee communities, as well as between the refugees and the host community. However, recognizing the interdependent relationship between the hosting and refugee communities, there is a critical need to enhance collaboration between these two groups. In line with this recognition and following a resolution from the 16th SG meeting that called for regular interactions between DEF and REF as part of national arrangements, this interface was organized.

As refugees increasingly engage in shared social concerns and service delivery locations, it became necessary to minimize the potential for conflicts stemming from these interactions. This initiative aims to foster social cohesiveness and harmonious coexistence by holding both groups accountable under the leadership of the two forums. The CRRF SG introduced the concept of the REF-DEF interface to emphasize the importance of collaboration between host and refugee leaders, in order to address challenges related to service delivery while ensuring accountability to both communities.

## **Objectives of the REF and DEF Interface.**

### **The three major objectives for the interface were;**

- i. To promote peaceful co-existence between refugees and host communities, by mapping projects, service delivery points or ventures jointly run/used by refugees and host communities, identifying and addressing challenges that hinder operation and existence, and drawing actionable policy decisions for better operations.
- ii. Enhancing Refugees Inclusion in district planning and participation in decision making: to amplify their voices to be heard and needs factored in district and national development plans.
- iii. Facilitating dialogues on joint implementation of GRF 2023 Pledges and commitments by REF and DEF on addressing Environment, Climate change and Energy challenge and Localization Agenda:

#### iv. **Methodologies of the interface:**

Two (2) regional Interfaces/engagements were conducted in Yumbe and Kamwenge Districts punctuated with field activities in Obongi (Palorinya R/S), Yumbe (Bidibidi R/S), Kyegegwa (Kyaka R/S) and Kamwenge (Rwamwanja R/S) districts with two teams one in each district and the teams interacted with over 10 Projects promoting peaceful coexistence and integration.

- **Preparatory field visit**, by UNHCR, OPM and Partners to identify specific best practices and hotspots for learning. This was done in Four Pilot Districts were selected and included (Obongi, Yumbe, Kamwenge and Kyegegwa).
- **Joint physical monitoring of** businesses, social centers, innovation labs and service delivery points by the DEF, REF, OPM, UNHCR and DLG technical staff during the interface: Mapping out challenges and documenting lessons and best practices.
- **Focus Group Discussion** on key issues identified between the refugees and host community leaders, drawing recommendations, and making considerations for policy related issues for the Steering Group.
- **Cross learning** among the RHDs REF and DEF leaders by sharing lessons and best practices through presentations.

#### **Field Exercise Schedule:**

Considering the distinct diversities, challenges and potentials of the refugee hosting regions and paying attention to the distinct geographical regions within the country response, the CRRF Secretariat, UNCHR and Partners organized the two REF and DEF interfaces, the first regional interface focused on the **North/West Nile region** and was hosted by Yumbe and Obongi districts on 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> September. The second phase targeted the **Southwestern & Mid-Western regions** and was hosted by Kyegegwa and Kamwenge districts on 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> December. This was with the aim of recognizing the need to address local and regional issues while fostering cross-regional dialogue, to support efficient preparation and planning, the

selection of the four pilot districts was strategically done to represent diverse regions with varying needs and dynamics.

A task force was formed at the National level comprising of the REF and DEF task forces in Kampala. Additionally, 04 field level task forces were established in Obongi, Yumbe, Kyegegwa and Kamwenge for effective planning and coordination of the REF and DEF task force meetings. The task forces at both the national and field levels worked closely throughout the planning and execution phases. The National level task force was responsible for the mobilization of resources and provision of guidance to the field level teams. The field-level task forces took on the critical role of local coordination, preparing the logistics, engaging with stakeholders, and ensuring the smooth execution of the regional interface events. The synergy between the national and field task forces was crucial in ensuring that the regional interfaces were successful.

The interface was marked with 2 activities, field visit and actual interface. During the field visit, over 30 projects implemented by refugees, host communities and humanitarian organizations were visited. The projects showcased existing interventions in the areas of peaceful coexistence, livelihood and self-reliance, climate action and localization of the refugee response in line with the Government of Uganda GRF pledges. This enabled participant to gain firsthand experience of the initiatives already underway in each district. These interactions allowed stakeholders to identify synergies, share lessons learned, and discuss actionable strategies for reinforcing the positive impact of these projects. By fostering cross-project dialogue and collaboration, the regional interfaces not only enhanced community-level engagement but also contributed to strengthening relationships between various local and national stakeholders, promoting greater alignment of goals towards sustainable peace and integration.

### **Key Observations from the Interface:**

#### **Objective one (Peaceful co-existence)**

1. Land encroachment by nationals who normally graze their cattle within settlements leading to destruction of their crops (cattle keepers and the farmers) resulting in unexpected community conflicts.
2. Pressure on public services and resource sharing for example schools, HC's, water points, energy resources like fire- woods among others,

major challenge being staffing in some of the already coded health centers, especially from government.

3. Inadequate infrastructure and staffing for both health, education and water supply
4. Social factors like high fertility rate standing at an average of 7.8 and 7.3% population growth rate in refugee and host communities.
5. Urban migration of refugees from settlement to the trading centers
6. Denial of justice to refugees resulting into more conflicts for example loss of over 300 million savings belonging to Refugees that disappeared from a Sacco in Kyaka Refugee Settlement
7. Marginalization of refugee labor
8. Unequal economic opportunity
9. Shortage of food resulting into a rise in number of theft cases within the communities (Ratio cuts by WFP)

**Objective two: Integrated participatory planning for inclusive service delivery by the refugee hosting local governments: (Existing mechanisms for refugees Integration and Inclusion in decision making)**

1. The **District Local Governments** have made considerable progress in integrating refugees into their **Development Plans** through a participatory approach. The planning tools have been redesigned to ensure that refugees can actively contribute to the planning processes, fostering inclusivity and reflecting their needs and priorities in local development strategies. However, these participatory mechanisms have not been uniformly implemented across all refugee-hosting local governments.
2. **Master Plans for Institutions:** Most health facilities and schools in the settlements lack master plans to guide infrastructure development. It is necessary to collaborate with district local governments to ensure that all structural developments align with pre-approved master plans.

3. Refugees through the RWCs are participating in the Planning processes and their concerns and issues are incorporated in the DDPs and national plans. However, refugees' statistics are not reflected in the financial allocation to districts despite some districts like **Obongi having more refugees** than nationals. MoFPED needs to factor the refugee population in the budgetary allocations to RHDs.
4. There is increased urbanization of the refugees and population of refugees, with some districts and administrative units having more refugee population compared to the nationals/citizens. Other refugees particularly those from Sudan are highly qualified and resourceful and require integration into the workforce

**Examples:**

- **Yayari Health Centre III** serves **14,875 refugees** and **5,818 members of the host community**, is only supported by a team of only 24 staff members.
- Rwamwanja Primary School is **government-aided institution** with a total enrollment of **3,847 learners**, comprising **1,917 males** and **1,930 females**. Of these, **3,805 learners are refugees**, while **42 are nationals**. Additionally, the school accommodates **112 learners with special needs**, reflecting its commitment to inclusivity. The school employs a total of **60 teachers**, of whom only **11** are on the **government payroll**, while the remaining **49 teachers** are supported by the partner organization **FCA (Finn Church Aid)**. The pupil to teacher ratio stands at 1:200 learners as opposed to 1:53 education policy while pupil book ratio is at 1: 5.

**Objective Three (GRF pledge implementation by the REF and DEF)**

During the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, the REF and DEF made key commitments in alignment with the Government of Uganda's pledges. The REF members, representing refugees, committed to continuing advocacy efforts aimed at encouraging all refugee parents to enroll their children of school-going age in Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs, as well as primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions. This pledge

emphasizes the importance of education in empowering future generations of refugees.

In addition, the REF pledged to support actions and interventions focused on environmental protection and restoration for both refugees and host communities, underscoring the shared responsibility for safeguarding the environment. They committed to fostering initiatives that promote self-reliance, enabling refugees to build sustainable livelihoods and contribute to the local economy.

On the other hand, the refugee-hosting districts made an important commitment to integrating refugees into their development plans, ensuring that refugees are included in the broader socio-economic development of the host regions. This commitment highlights the importance of inclusive, community-driven development that benefits both refugees and host communities. Together, these commitments demonstrate a collective effort to create an environment where refugees can thrive and contribute meaningfully to society. Considering this background, the following were the observations during the REF and DEF interface.

### **Tree planting and growing:**

1. The Yumbe Interface agreed on allocating 15 million trees among the Refugee Hosting Districts (RHDs) and settlements, on average each of the settlement/district is to plant and grow 600,000 trees, a key commitment to promoting environmental sustainability. Progress on this initiative has been gradual, with over 1 million trees planted, primarily in the Northern and West Nile regions by the time of the interface. This initiative is being closely tracked to ensure its success and sustainability.
2. **Mechanism of tree planting and growing:** Government, private and faith-based institutions have been identified as the primary target for this tree planting effort, with a focus on leveraging their resources and influence to scale up the initiative. By involving these institutions, the program aims to foster a collaborative approach to environmental restoration and protection, benefiting both refugees and host communities while contributing to long-term ecological health.
3. The **Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)**, in collaboration with the **Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement**, allocated approximately **300 acres of land** for tree planting as part of efforts to fulfill the **REF pledge on**



**tree planting**. However, during the two interfaces, **land acquisition for tree planting** was identified as a significant challenge, highlighting the need for more collaborative strategies to secure adequate land resources for such initiatives.

4. Another key challenge observed was the **limited availability of tree seedlings** during the appropriate planting seasons, which affected the success of tree planting efforts in many local governments. To address this, the **Kamwenge District Local Government** has committed to providing **pine** and **Graviera** tree seedlings through the **UNHCR/NFA budget**, ensuring that the necessary resources are available to support and sustain tree planting initiatives in the region.

#### **Self-Reliance of refugees:**

5. **Inclusion of Refugees in Socio-Economic Activities:** Significant strides have been made in fostering the inclusion of refugees in socio-economic activities through collaborative initiatives between local governments, refugee leaders, host communities, and implementing partners. A key achievement is the establishment of **joint block farms (mostly in west Nile)** that enhance access to farmland for both refugees and host communities.
6. Through these efforts, 502 acres of land have been provided by host communities, with 198 acres already cultivated with crops such as cassava, beans, and banana plants, primarily in Yumbe and other parts of the West Nile region. These block farms not only promote food security but also strengthen cooperation and social cohesion between refugees and host communities.
7. Additionally, skills development initiatives, such as the creation of social centers like Sinaloketa in the Bidibidi Settlement, have been instrumental in enhancing self-reliance and equipping refugees with the tools needed to contribute to local economies effectively.

8. **Kyaka II Settlement for Industrial Park:** The President has gazetted part of the Kyaka II settlement for the establishment of an industrial park. While this presents an opportunity to increase employment, there are concerns regarding land availability to accommodate refugees. A discussion is needed on how to address potential impacts.
  
9. **Certification of Products by UNBS:** It was noted that both refugees and host community members have initiated several self-reliance projects, such as the mushroom project in Rwamwanja. However, absence and delays in obtaining certification from the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) are impacting the marketability and value of these products.
  
10. **Power Fluctuations Affecting Livelihood Initiatives:** The settlements experience frequent power outages, with an average of four days of power loss, which negatively impacts livelihood initiatives reliant on electricity.
  
11. **On 2023 GRF Pledges,** there are ongoing interventions in addressing Climate, Environment, and energy challenges in the settlements. For example, UNHCR, NFA and some partners are in partnership to provide seedlings to DLGs for planting. In Some are reported as GRF Pledges while others are ongoing. There is, therefore, a need to communicate their pledges for clarity.
  - . Livelihood. Interventions observed during the visits, but these need to be scalable. Some further support from livelihood sector to better align livelihood activities with market needs (ensuring products are indeed marketable/scalable). An example of a Ref livelihoods project - the re-usable sanitary pads - and “incorrect fabric” used in their production raised by the DEF.
  - . Critical issues raised around reduced funding or sustainability of programs was mentioned frequently, CRRF underlined the

importance of developing a defined and responsible transition plan for localization services (through district planning), and a plan that can be further communicated and advocated with humanitarian and development actors. Note that CRRF are drafting an overall localization plan and this, most obtusely, is referred to here.

- . That with the emphasis on co-existence. Interface should articulate a plan for Kampala (KCAA) to join the interface in the next year
- . Protection / district services extended for both settlement and host communities should be examined in future REF/DEFS – not just ED/livelihoods, environment etc

### **Other Observations**

12. The poor state of roads within the settlements with some having major bridges connecting settlements which of late has been worsened by heavy rains. These roads need major works to ensure accessibility and communication within settlements. More so the Koboko -Yumbe-Moyo road which was launched in May 2024 to date no physical works have started, with different uncoordinated explanations for the delays from the different agencies involved. We call upon the GoU and World Bank to come clear on this road and FastTrack processes towards its execution.
13. Land issues remain matters of great concern for both production and settlement. There is need for the Government to negotiate more land for block farming with involvement of DLGs/local authorities in negotiation and witnessing the agreement to safeguard both parties
14. LGs in RHDs have limited capacity to monitor and supervise partners. This is compounded by the fact that the political leaders who are key in the management of refugees (RDCs and District Chairpersons) are not facilitated to carryout monitoring. This needs urgent intervention from UNHCR.

15. The definition of “host community” remains a challenge for integration in all districts and limits partner’s contributions to other sub counties that do not host refugees. The proposal for partners to consider the whole district as refugees hosting since refugees have free movement and impacts the whole district.
16. Feedback on SG and DEF decisions to the lower local government and with partners. We note the gap between the DEF members in sharing information with other structures including sub counties and partners despite existing mechanisms.
17. Overcrowding in health centers, schools, and water points, this is coupled with dependency on partner funding and staffing for most of the service delivery points. There are also cases of withdrawal of non-governmental staff without replacement in most of the service delivery points.

### **General Recommendations.**

1. Mediation and dialogue, strengthen shared developmental projects, Regular Peaceful coexistence meetings (Awareness and sensitization), Equal economic opportunity sharing between refugees and the nationals, carrying out activities that promote peaceful coexistence e.g. Football tournaments/matches, Cultural Galas among others.
2. There is need to Involve both host and refugee community leaders for them to create more awareness to Community members about the GRF pledges made
3. Provision of transport to DLG and REF members to foster monitoring and evaluation plan.
4. Treys’ need for timely provision of climate/soil friendly tree seedlings
5. Information sharing on the GRF Pledges with districts and partners across. The team notes the inadequate information and understanding on GRF Pledges including with UNHCR Field offices and Partners. This should be improved using established coordination platforms.

6. This highlights the need for broader adoption and standardization of inclusive planning practices to ensure that all refugee-hosting districts benefit from enhanced participation and representation in their development planning processes.
7. Partners need to support refugee block farmers with Agriculture inputs to increase commercial production, provide water for irrigation and water as well as mechanization equipment's for host communities to promote social cohesion.
8. **Financial Support for DEF-REF Interface:** Development partners should provide financial support to the CRRF Secretariat to facilitate regular DEF-REF Interface. This funding will enable the interface to address key issues affecting refugees and host communities, support the development of holistic plans, and facilitate follow-up interventions.
9. **Resolution of Inter-District Border Conflicts:** The Government should prioritize resolving ongoing inter-district border conflicts, particularly those affecting refugee-hosting districts like Terego and Madi-Okollo, Yumbe and Obongi, and Yumbe and Koboko. These conflicts create an environment of animosity that complicates the management of refugee issues, including resource allocation, safety, and service delivery. Addressing these disputes is essential for ensuring the peace and safety of both refugees and host communities. It will also help streamline governance and improve the overall refugee management framework in these districts.
10. **Upgrade Status of Large Town Councils to Municipalities:** The Ministry of Local Government should consider upgrading large town councils within Refugee Hosting Districts to municipal status. Municipalities generally have more resources, administrative capacity, and governance structures that can handle the complexity of managing large refugee populations. This upgrade will facilitate better planning, improve infrastructure, and enhance service delivery to both refugees and the host community.
11. **Quarterly DEF and REF Meetings:** Regular quarterly interface meetings between the DEF and REF should be organized, strategically scheduled before the SG meetings. These meetings provide an opportunity for REF and DEF members to consolidate a single position to be presented to the steering group.
12. **Allocation of Flexible Funds to Support Monitoring:** UNHCR should allocate flexible funds to enable Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs),

Resident District Commissioners (RDCs), and District Chairpersons to effectively monitor refugee-related programs. This will enhance local ownership and accountability, ensuring that the needs of both refugees and host communities are met in a timely and responsive manner.

13. **Support for Rwamwanja Rice Project:** There is a pressing need for partners and donors to support the rice project in Rwamwanja, which is currently facing significant power challenges. This project lacks an alternative power source. Providing a generator would allow the project to function more effectively, increasing its productivity and sustainability.
14. **Sharing of Implementation Matrix for GRF 2023 Pledges:** Need to share the Implementation Matrix for the GRF 2023 Pledges with districts to enhance a common understanding of the commitments made and their progress.
15. **District-Specific Interfaces on Thematic Topics:** It is recommended that district-specific interfaces be organized on key thematic topics to allow local governments, refugee leaders, and other stakeholders to discuss and address issues that are specific to their district or settlement.
16. **Environmental Conservation and Tree Planting Initiatives:** Strong emphasis should be placed on environmental conservation, particularly through tree planting initiatives. Expertise should be provided to guide the selection of appropriate tree species for planting in different areas, based on local environmental conditions. Moreover, labor provision should be made available for tree planting activities, and there should be follow-ups to ensure that the trees are growing well.
17. **Support for UNBS Trademarks for Local Enterprises:** There is a need to support refugees and host community enterprises in obtaining UNBS trademarks, which would enable them to sell their products nationwide. This support would empower local entrepreneurs to expand their markets, increase their income, and contribute to the economic integration of refugees.



**Figure 1 UNHCR Deputy Rep, Ag. Commissioner District Inspection MOLG and LCV Chairperson Yumbe During the REF and DEF interface meeting**



**Figure 2 A section of the stakeholders during the REF and DEF interface in Kamwenge**



**Figure 3 Enhancing household incomes through the production of liquid soap and reusable sanitary pads by Women at the Bukere Women Development Centre in Kyaka II settlement, Kyegegwa District. The project is supported by Peace Winds Japan**



**Figure 4** The CAO Yumbe and OPM staff buying reusable sanitary pads from the Rising Star Women Group, the Women's group is majorly engaged in tailoring.



**Figure 5** Sina Loketa, Barakala T. C, Zone 2, Bidibidi, the centre engages over 400 youth in various economic activities, like MDD, among other things and is helping to restore hope, happiness and unity among Refugees and Host community.



**Figure 6** Group Discussion Session in Kamwenge



**Figure 7** Group discussion during the REF and DEF interface meeting in Yumbe





*Figure 8 stakeholder's group photo after the interface in Southwest*